

THE OBJECT OF PERFORMANCE

BMPT is an acronym for the Paris-based minimalist art collective that formed in 1967, of which Daniel Buren was a member along with Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier and Niele Toroni. It was the point of departure for a unique happening at Dubai's JPNF foundation coinciding with the exhibition, *Olivier Mosset: Abstraction* (7 November–28 February). **Nadine Khalil** speaks to the curator, Flounder Lee, to learn more.

Jean-Paul Najar Foundation. On February 19th, for the first time, something will happen performance. 2018. Photography by Hanna Orlowski



On February 19th, for the first time, something will happen was the name of a performance which recalled the moment BMPT invited the public to attend an intervention at the 18th Salon de la Jeune Peinture, stating: "For the first time on January 3, 1967, something will happen." This is the first of what would become a series of "manifestations" in Paris that criticized the institutionalization of art. Within the framework of their anti-expressionist, anti-individualist attitude, Olivier Mosset in particular focused on materiality and surface in his work, and on painting as an object rather than a medium. His chromatic, geometric compositions formed the backdrop of the performance curated by Flounder Lee for JPNF, unexpectedly resonating with Lee's interest in the objects of performance, or in action as object. "I'm interested in things that are made during a performance, and in what is left over—the kind of documentation that goes beyond photography," explained Lee, an American artist and curator who works primarily with installation and photography. His fascination with performance art developed when he

ran a project space, SpaceCamp MicroGallery, in the US (2010-13) before coming to the UAE to teach at AUD.

The JPNF performance had a lot to do with participant observation, and saw Sarra'a Alshehhi frantically try to squeeze her body into laundry baskets, nets and boxes and then discard them (as an audio loop played in Arabic on women's duties), Areej Kaoud sing an old Arabic lullaby over and over, louder and louder, until it caused a kind of collective disturbance, and Noush Anand authoritatively hand out papers to the audience with instructions, delineating the possibilities of performing certain gestures, and of not taking part at all.

This play in three acts was very culturally specific in the way it enacted themes of gender roles, oral tradition, collective engagement/disobedience, thus the link with BMPT's manifesto appeared only loosely connected. But the notion of repetition, inspired by Mosset (known to have made 200 paintings of monochrome circles at the centre of his

Jean-Paul Najar Foundation. *On February 19th, for the first time, something will happen*. Artists' manifesto. 2018.

ARTISTS' MANIFESTO

Anxious Practices

Once, only once, I arrived to a place. When I tried to return, it wasn't the same.

I tried to fit into spaces, but the spaces were too tight.

I tried to make my arms smaller, my legs shorter.

Once, I broke the space, I tore the place. I grew out of my boxes.

I tried to be like all of them, I failed.

I moved again.

Place within space and above presence
when a voice reflects a space inside the chest

Room to invite forms to reside within

Room to send out a call for the uneasy

Unsettled, imagination of a space between the arm and the chest

That space of another self to be placed

Another self to be transmitting the sound to

The vibration of the voice in tonality will always be warm
Soothing, censored, words upon words came to be in this moment

I close my ears I hear the sound of my joints
my heart beating not as I anticipated
my voice foreign yet familiar

Just like the mother tongue, called so as it is the language the mother spoke first to us
The mother listening, maybe the moment to receive an urgent sonority has come

I can touch you with my sound.
I can touch you with my gaze.

Even if I just stand here, you can do the same.

canvases) was a well-executed extrapolation. "If you look back at what BMPT did, it was their actions that made their work, much more than the paintings," Lee said. "It made me think about what happens if you repeat an action more than once; how does this impact the nature of a performance? Are both actions then considered originals?"

The repetition was of a sonorous quality too, used by the performers to heighten the feeling of disruption and uncertainty, both in the continually failing attempts of Alshehhi in 'fitting in' and in Kaoud's unnerving chanting and swaying that reached a fever pitch. At some point, in a nod to a BMPT performance that never occurred, where their paintings served as silent props, Anand declared: "The performance ends when a bell rings...it is possible to be a bell. It is possible that the performance never ends." Lee echoed, "I wanted it to feel like one continuous performance."

If there was something to take away from the manifesto the all-female cast presented, *Anxious Practices*, it was that although

this time-based work of transformation and uncertainty, or entrapment and freedom, had very little to do with another time of sociopolitical change and radicalization in France, when BMPT arose to prompt new modes of engagement, it has very much to do with our time – of no great art movements, of no grand narratives and no manifestos. But it does indicate a form of cultural resistance that's simmering under the surface of art happenings such as these. "I was also looking at Duchamp's notion of the *infrathin*, something that is hard to define and denotes an in-betweenness, something that's not quite tangible or that you cannot touch." Lee couldn't have summarized it better. □

On February 19th, for the first time, something will happen took place at the JPNF foundation on 19 February and at the American University of Dubai on 27 February.