Barry Le Va, *Accumulated Vision*, 2005. Installation view. Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania.

Black Whole: The Art of Barry Le Va

Barry Le Va's art of the late 1960s so perfectly typified the advanced aesthetic strategies of that turbulent moment that one almost feels he would have to have been invented if he didn't already exist. His sculptures represented a heightened, take-no-prisoners distillation of ideas drifting in the air, which in relative isolation and with almost telepathic clairvoyance he synthesized in an extremely original way. In November 1968, the completely unknown, twenty-seven-year-old California artist appeared on the cover of *Artforum,* with an image of a large stretch of wooden floor, scattered with apparently random strips and little scraps of gray felt. Inside the magazine were pictures of various installations with myriad fragments of cloth, ranging from large bolts to ribbons and tiny cuttings, dispersed across the floor in enormous and otherwise empty rooms. With their emphatically horizontal spatial development, lack of internal armatures, and embrace of empty space as a physical platform, these works were clearly connected to those of approximate peers such as Richard Serra, Keith Sonnier, and Bill Bollinger, and to European artists, particu-

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larly those associated with Arte Povera, such as Luciano Fabro and Mario Merz.

Yet as much as Le Va's early work was seen to be representative of its art-historical context, with hindsight it seems that the materialist or structuralist readings predominant in the late '60s failed to account for the deeper, metaphorical content of the work. Jane Livingston's *Artforum* cover story, for example, described Le Va's art only in terms of the physical embodiment of organized procedures. Livingston invokes the concept of "chaos," but its emotional correlates are never explored. While Le Va did carefully plan and organize his early felt pieces according to operations such as cutting, rolling, and folding, they nevertheless feel as though they could have been made in the absence of any witnessing consciousness. Following Le Va's conceptual pathways, in fact, yields only dead ends and blank walls—not larger networks of thought. This opacity, a fundamental darkness, has been increasingly foregrounded in the work as its physical presence has grown dramatically over the last forty years. The odd and remarkable thing is that, during this time, Le Va's obscurity has risen to the level of content.

All this is made abundantly clear by the exhibition *Accumulated Vision, Barry Le Va*, on view at the Philadelphia ICA through April 3 [2005]. This survey isn't an exhaustive retrospective of Le Va's sprawling output, which is, in any case, partly ephemeral in nature and so vast in quantity that it would require the space of the Louvre to do it justice. Instead, the ICA has mounted a kind of mega-one-person show, where earlier and more recent sculptures, drawings, and installations achieve a simultaneity of impact: To enter this four-dimensional lattice is to feel thrust across a threshold into Le Va's brain, where dreams, schemes, and obsessions mingle and coexist.

Among the early works on view at the ICA is a large sculpture from 1967/1990 made of long rolls of burgundy-colored felt, sprinkled with little scraps of the same material and overlaid with a sheet of glass, which was shattered on the center of the pile. The entire arrangement exudes a peculiar bipolarity owing to the mutual presence of the soft, warmly colored felt and the cold, clear, and dangerously jagged glass. It has the formal contours of a geological event or a random pile of garbage, characteristics that, along with its attitude to materials, might link it to Robert Smithson's *Mirror Displacements*.

But the absence of a nameable subject other than the story of its own making belies any sociological or archaeological interpretation. The insistent abstraction of Le Va's subsequent work was already firmly in place.

Set somewhat against this tendency and quite unlike the mundane manual/conceptual operations he employed at the time was a fascination with violent and destructive behavior as a generative process. The aggressive (not-so-sub) subtext of smashed sheets of glass became garishly theatrical in installations where the artist buried a row of meat cleavers in the wall or had a police sharpshooter fire at an unfinished artwork that Le Va had begun—works that call to mind his California contemporaries Bruce Nauman and Chris Burden. Although this performative dimension soon became submerged within more apparently rational sculptural methods, from today's vantage point we can interpret the process-derived pieces of Le Va's anti-form period as perfect models of confusion, frustration, blocked desires, and random impulses.

When Le Va moved to New York in the early '70s, he entered more deeply into an investigation of the kind of systematic, philosophical thinking characteristic of one branch of post-Minimalism. The increasing centrality of systems in his art forced a progressive dematerialization of physical form, as a mind-bending crush and density of systems superseded the casual and relatively lush physicality of the earlier work. This trajectory is evident in installations ranging from the walking stick projects of 1972–73 (in which the pathways of spatial navigation are traced by little wooden cylinders dispersed on the floor like toadstools after a rain shower), through the *Center Points* series of the mid-1970s (whose eponymous location systems are implied by dots and dashes of lumber covering the surfaces of a given space), to the climactic *Accumulated Vision* projects later in the decade, where agitated infestations of wooden angles, lines, and planes mark the intersection of otherwise invisible perspectival systems projected from points of view both inside and outside the physical edges of the gallery space. The installations resulting from this research have a spareness and purity reminiscent of the much earlier modernism of Rodchenko and Lissitzky. They manage to convey that important and unalterable decisions have been made while thwarting our attempts to reconstruct what these decisions actually were.

The early '70s was probably the period of greatest overlap with the concerns of Mel Bochner, with whom Le Va has had many common interests and approaches. Bochner's *Theory of Painting*, 1969–70, and *Theory of Sculpture*, 1970, like Le Va's work of the time, display an aesthetic of emptiness, in which modest, unartful, or diminutive elements are used as analogues for mental processes. Le Va's installations also share the self-generating strategies and pared-down, almost constructivist presence of Dorothea Rockburne's *Drawing Which Makes Itself* series, 1972–73, and there is a clear affinity with her (and Richard Long's) exploration of physical movement as a mapping system and source of abstract structures. Yet compared to these artists, Le Va's underlying systems are more difficult to retrieve in the final object. His structures are self-referential and self-complicating and have no apparent connection to outside areas of thought.

Accumulated Vision: Series II, 1977/2005, provides a good case in point. Shown in Philadelphia in a room by itself, the installation captures the feeling of one of Le Va's exhibitions from the late '70s. One feels suspended in a three-dimensional grid of opaque code, which might potentially reveal deep truths beneath the surface appearance of things if one could only excavate the byzantine mechanics of the piece's generation. The work seems to represent a tipping point in Le Va's development, a shift in the ratio of mental to physical, of process to plan, of intellect to feeling. In hindsight, his art seems to have reached a point of minimum explicitness and maximum latency, from which it was necessary to turn a corner or accept the logical evaporation of the body that had always grounded his interests. Beginning around 1980 and continuing to the present, there has been a steady increase in the mass, variety, and eccentricity of his art's visible manifestations, progressing hand in hand with an increasing acceptance of the irretrievability and subjective nature of background systems, and a journey to the wilder shores of drawing.

Drawing had always been important to Le Va, who like other artists of his generation tried to make his works on paper become specific pictorial objects not subsidiary to sculpture or painting. And it is in his drawings that the mind-numbing, attention deficit-catalyzing complexity of his approach has been most transparently evident. In every group of his drawings, Le Va has found an appropriate device

to lend specificity to a particular set of thoughts. Each new investigation can only be pursued with new materials and procedures, and each group of drawings becomes an investigation into what a drawing might be. The earliest ones were primarily diagrammatic plans, but they always had, for lack of a better word, a sensitivity, which has evolved to include a complicated network of diverse materials and approaches. At the ICA there are examples from the early '70s, graphic equivalents of the installations he was doing at the time but rendered on drafting paper whose medicinal green color is utterly alien to any function as working drawings. These large sheets have a presence analogous to the sculptures' empty dryness. In the *Accumulated Vision* phase, Le Va began employing vellum overlays and multiple, interlocking perspectival systems to represent the complicated mental landscape he was exploring. Following this series, the feedback between sculpture and drawing has encouraged both practices to find increasingly specific and self-actualizing manifestations.

By the time Le Va appeared on the cover of *Artforum* for a second time, in 1983, the generational synergy and critical consensus of fifteen years prior had dissipated. Klaus Kertess's article outlined a new way of considering Le Va's art as a visual and intuitive set of decisions determined within a fully internalized system. The role of perception—its locus, mobility, orientation, and ability to collate fragments into some semblance of coherence—became a key aspect of the work's content. Le Va seems to have set out to literalize the notion of obstacles by physically demonstrating their effect on space and our relationship to it.

The 1981 installation series *Twisted Chain (of events): Sketching a Possibility* marked a new level of spatial intrusiveness and sculptural physicality. Le Va deployed an expanded material array of wooden blocks, elliptical planes of chipboard, and rows of cardboard shipping tubes standing shoulder to shoulder in low, fence-like arrangements. Where the conceptual elements of his generating systems had previously been invisible, here Le Va began to attribute various material equivalents to the systemic components. In the related series of drawings, *Drawing Interruptions: Blocked Structures*, 1981–82, he embedded groupings of ellipses and cylinders reminiscent of Duchamp's *Malic Moulds* within impossible perspectival constructions that echo the mind space of Matta.

As the decade progressed, Le Va's work gained new traction and began to reveal the intransigent weirdness that still characterizes it today. His sculpture underwent strange developments, with the addition of new abstract elements, most notably basketball-size metal spheres (metastasized points, like the bloated cousins of his earlier ball bearings) and hydrastone blocks, which introduced a new kind of mass to the idea of a generic placeholder. His second *Artforum* cover, for example, pictured a work representative of many others: a nutty, sinister-looking network of boards and blocks supporting metal spheres that encouraged readings more poetic than had previously seemed appropriate. These works resemble a game of marbles played in some incomprehensible chutes-and-ladders structure by absent giants or a subatomic universe pictured as an endless billiards game. The lines of projection and boundaries from his drawings have become actual barriers and trough-like structures in these sculptures. And the complex multiple approaches of earlier series have turned into physical networks that spread around and through space and provide no stable viewing location.

By the late '80s, the environmentally overwhelming aspect of these pieces had receded and Le Va was ready to focus on the more localized, centered formats that occupy him to the present. *Quartet*, 1987, is composed of the spheres and blocks of the previous installations, juxtaposed with simplified boxlike troughs and accompanied by a new element—a kind of empty, zigzag-shaped frame, the wooden equivalent of a very fat line. Part of this work sits clustered on the floor before a second section that hangs in extreme relief on the wall behind it. Le Va has found great use for this bilateral arrangement of elements, which simultaneously occupies pictorial and actual space and gives the sense that the two parts are aspects of each other, with what is on the wall perhaps acting as a plan and what is on the floor as a model. The placement on the wall of these extremely clunky elements also lends an underlying feeling of instability to what taken individually are rather stable, even stolid objects.

During the early '90s Le Va eliminated the spheres from his vocabulary and moved toward a more homogeneous array of sculptural elements, focusing on the fabrication of cast hydrocal and rubber units and painted frameworks. The stocky, black assortment of drum-shaped cylinders, rectilinear blocks, and massive, chunky

chevrons populating series such as *Dissected Situations—Institutional Templates, 1991*, raise associations ranging from the oil tanks of the modern industrial landscape to giant refrigerator magnets. The elements make reference to furniture as well as to architecture—a scale shift that contributes to a quivery, animated quality, underscored by the presence of the odd chevrons, which look like their companion blocks stretched in a wind tunnel.

These works and those since yield very few clues about the thought patterns that organize them, but the general outlines may be hiding in plain sight. These strange sculptural clusters contain layers of reference ranging from the impersonality of natural law through the social space of environmental design down to the most intimate considerations of human social behavior. The tendency to anthropomorphize, to think in terms of characters and stories, puts one in mind of issues of group behavior like inclusion and exclusion, togetherness and alienation, or dominance and submission. Looked at this way, it is possible to see all of Le Va's recent sculptures as ruminations on the coherence and dissolution of groups and the patterns by which things can be sorted and organized. They thus connect back strongly to his earliest works in felt but are realized in a more monumental idiom, where abstract mental categories supersede actual physical operations in the world.

Le Va has worked with combinations of black, white, and even yellow blocks, but the predominance of black has perceptual and metaphorical implications, turning the forms back on themselves and increasing their graphic punch while imparting an air of morbidity, a slightly nocturnal vibration that undermines any interpretation of them as ideal forms. Black lends them a dark gravity that turns one's thoughts away from logic toward states like fear and loneliness. The effect is probably most similar to Tony Smith's use of black, which gave his forms a personality and animated quality quite surprising for the morphological zone in which he was operating.

The sculptural works of the '80s and '90s are largely bypassed at the ICA in favor of more recent sculptures comprising groups of diverse black objects, some cylindrical, some rectilinear or vaguely prism shaped. All seem massive and none rises above knee height. They gather self-protectively on the floor like stored munitions or small, featureless buildings, or in the case of the expansive *9g–Wag-*

ner, 2005, in front of a wall element that gives the impression of some uninterruptable artifact of alien signage. These works are relentlessly abstract while conveying all sorts of attitude about their own physical and conceptual density. The sculptures are expressive of a bunker mentality, defended and vigilant, and, indeed, one of the inspirations for their belligerent presence is the architecture of the military bunker. They seem to have come from a shadow realm. And while one knows that these elements from the dark side have been fabricated out of fairly straightforward materials, they feel as if they were forged at the heart of a collapsed supernova and have arrived in their present configurations according to ancient and organic rules of order. The presence of related drawings nearby makes clear that a great deal of thought has gone into the elements' placement and location, but the approach remains ultimately intuitive. Le Va has never gone in for the large individual object that declared itself sculpture with a capital S, so in his work there is always the question of internal structure to be teased out. Relationships, both among the elements and between them and the architecture, are always lurking, giving the pieces a kind of soul or at least a life as a mental construct just off register from their physical presence.

The items being assembled and categorized in these recent sculptures could be bodies, bombs, treasure, or ideas. It is noteworthy that in this period of metapositions and ironic distance Le Va feels no particular need to be helpful or clear. There has been a relentlessness to his growth and productivity that reminds one of an artist like Dieter Roth. Although he would appear to inhabit a very different artistic universe, Roth's obsessive pursuit of premises to their conclusions and his wide spectrum of activities, from offhand drawings to monumental sculptures, links him to Le Va in spirit. This connection highlights how Le Va has imported into geometric abstraction a scruffy, pessimistic point of view that skews his work away from any heroic or meditative readings.

I imagine Le Va operating at the quiet center of a raging storm of data, but emphatically not the digital kind. His work isn't so much predigital as it is part of another continuum: artifacts of an imaginary society where people send rockets to the moon using the abacus rather than the computer. There is a very particular sensibility at work: elegant, skeptical, truculent, at once obscurantist and fright-

eningly clear. As physical density has increased, visual compression has forced systems to the background. One can imagine some future point where Le Va's work will approach infinite physical density, visual simplicity, and conceptual complexity under a pressure so great that appearance and understanding will finally and totally exclude one another. This picture of artistic heat death is only this observer's fantasy, but it opens a pathway of interpretation into the domain of Thanatos, which has become the central subject of Le Va's work.