

Gesa Lange: In the Semicircle Next to the Lamp

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The installation *In the Semicircle Next to the Lamp*, which brings together recent works by Gesa Lange, takes drawing and the canvas as the starting point of an exploratory journey whose course overreaches the margins of the flat surface and enters into a space - another -, conceived by Lange in a personal and deeply original way. This is a journey in which Lange is not alone: there are many artists who, since the 20th century, have transformed this search into the driving force of their work. Among them, the Italian painter Lucio Fontana, initiator of the artistic current known as *spazialismo*, who around 1966 declared: "I do not want to make a painting; I want to open up space, create a new dimension for art, tie in the cosmos, as it endlessly expands beyond the confining plane of the picture. With my innovation of the hole pierced through the canvas in repetitive formations, I have not attempted to decorate a surface, but on the contrary, I have tried to break its dimensional limitations".¹

Drawing and canvas are the technique and work surface with which Lange, for some time, has been developing her artistic practice, in which the exploration of space is a recurring theme. Proof of this are her works in the form of "tissues", made of strips of rattan hanging from the gallery ceiling, seen in a recent exhibition of her work,² or her incipient experimentation with the artist's book as a format, where the book is not just a vehicle for her drawings, but an alternative space in which to continue unfolding new facets of meaning. *In the Semicircle Next to the Lamp* follows in the wake of these and other earlier works of the artist, but goes a step further, incorporating new elements that enrich the semantic depth of Lange's practice.

At the Kunsthalle Ahrensburg, Lange voluntarily and consciously incorporates into her work the three-dimensional space of the room, treating it as one more element among those she brings into play. Thus, the exhibition room has a role in the dynamic relations that the pieces establish among themselves and also in the way they engage with the visitor, who must move among them as if navigating through a volume in which canvases become objects that can be observed from any point of view. When describing *In the Semicircle Next to the Lamp*, it is fitting to discard the term "exhibition" and use, instead, "installation": an installation consisting of around ten small and medium sized canvases onto which the artist has applied, in addition to her usual work tool - the drawing pencil -, a new technique: sewing.

Sewing offers Lange valuable expressive resources. As she points out, sewing is a kind of drawing that does not admit correction, deletion or amendment: once the canvas is perforated with a needle, it is not possible to disregard the resulting hole, which cannot be undone, since the primed canvas lacks the flexibility of other tissues and will not return to its original structure. Furthermore - Lange continues -, sewing allows her to work with space without necessarily having to build three-dimensional shapes: with each new stitch she makes, strokes and lines progressively "envelope" the canvas, which becomes "subsumed" by the resulting

¹ Lucio Fontana, quoted in *Lucio Fontana*, exh. cat. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1966.

² *Sammlung Minna Menz*. Hochschule für Bildende Kunst, Hamburg, 2016.

drawing - absorbed by it, as it were; and so it abandons its traditional role of mere supporting surface to integrate into the work and become an active part of its constellation of meanings. Thus, the traditional division between "front" and "back" disappears, leaving Lange free to position them as she wishes within the installation, which is conceived as a complex construction that invites the observer to reflect on the concepts of "the visible" and "the invisible".

The title of the exhibition explains this intention a little more. If we light a lamp in the dark, a scene will suddenly appear, sharply delimited by the semicircle of light cast by the lamp; and in this semi-circular landscape we will see things were hitherto in the dark. Similarly, with the works making up this installation, Lange has sought to bring to light, highlight or make visible that which was hidden in the darkness or that which, even when illuminated, is so seemingly insignificant that, even though we may see it, our conscience ignores it. At first glance, the canvases that make up *In the Semicircle Next to the Lamp* evoke the "three-dimensional drawings" of Gego. And yet, Lange points out that in this installation she has not tried to build three-dimensional spaces from the lines that make up the drawing, but rather to question and perhaps subvert, through gentle and delicate gestures, the visibility status of the elements shaping her work. Thus, the subtle difference between a line drawn and a sewn thread - barely perceptible if viewed from a distance - turns the front of the canvas into a new surface for drawing and modifies the way in which its materiality is perceived. Similarly, the appearance of "structural nodes" made from repeated stitches of brightly coloured thread impacts on the dynamism of the drawing, establishing anchoring points on which the visitor's gaze can rest during observation.

In turn, the anarchy of the lines made by the stitches, when superimposed on the perfectly regular grid of the fabric the canvas is made of, has the effect of focusing our attention on this regularity and highlighting its texture, which would otherwise go unnoticed. This perfectly regular texture finds its reflection in the grid that Lange draws with pencil and then uses as a guide to proceed with the needle and thread, creating a marked contrast between the rigorous regularity of the horizontal and vertical lines drawn in pencil and the relaxed anarchy of the stitches, which is further reinforced by the opposition between the black and white of the canvas and the pencil, on the one hand, and the brightly coloured thread on the other.

The incorporation of sewing operates not only on a formal level; it also yields associations on a symbolic level. Sewing is deemed an eminently feminine activity, linked in the collective imagination with intimacy and privacy - in a way, with that semicircle of light named in the title of this installation, where the exercise of making stitch after stitch becomes a meditative activity for which a certain inward concentration is essential. Given its status as a "woman's job", very much associated with the home, sewing is one of the "low arts", and in the West, few artists - and then, only women generally - have incorporated it into their practice. Sewing is a manual task, for which it is recognised that much skill and dexterity are needed, but it is almost never associated with the creative potential or imaginative force that are typical of "high art". In this installation, however, by adding onto her canvases alongside drawing a technique in which this type of associations resonate, Lange seems to be tearing it away from the invisibility of the private to give it a more dignified status, while at the same time claiming it as an expressional technique that is also valid in the context of fine arts and of contemporary and non-figurative representations of reality.

Sewing and weaving are powerful cultural symbols, and very present in the myths and stories that human civilization invents to explain itself. References to these two activities abound in the Western literary tradition of all periods, from Penelope's eternally unfinished work in the *Odyssey* to Mrs. Defarge's Machiavellian knitting in *A Tale of Two Cities*, in which she "encrypts" the names of those who are going to be executed by the guillotine, to mention just two examples. Certainly, the associative links connecting *textiles* and *textuality* are very close: etymologically, the word *text* comes from the Latin voice *textus*, participle of *texo*, voice of the verb *texere*, which means "to weave, braid, interweave".

Seen in this light, the canvases drawn and perforated by the needle of *In the Semicircle Next to the Lamp*, criss-crossed by countless lines traced in pencil and with thread, could be understood as a personal non-alphabetic writing in which the artist, without renouncing drawing, moves closer to textuality, to propose a map of sorts, where visitors are invited to travel along all possible kinds of unusual routes.