

Joe Scanlan

SolongSolSolong

21 June – 19 August 2007

Born in Stoutsville (Ohio, USA) in 1961, Joe Scanlan lives and works in New York. An artist with an international reputation, Joe Scanlan has had numerous solo exhibitions, and in particular at Galerie Chez Valentin, Paris, 2007; Gallery Micheline Szwajcer, Antwerp, 2005; IKON Gallery, Birmingham, 2003; Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2003; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1998.

After a project completed in 2003 (*Do It Yourself Dead On Arrival Pay For Your Pleasure (reprise)*), the Institut d'art contemporain has invited Joe Scanlan again for a solo show of recent works not previously exhibited.

Joe Scanlan first became known in the 1990s for his very special appropriation of conceptual art. Preoccupied by the production of objects related to everyday life



Institut d'art contemporain, Villeurbanne
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and by affirming an organisation of production in which do-it-yourself and crafts play an important role because they imply individual work, Joe Scanlan seeks to exercise his creative subjectivity and critical independence via objects in transit. This is why he asserts that he makes his pieces cross the artistic field rather than locking them up within the status of art objects. He is thus working on gaining a position on the art market without bending towards the position of the artist as an 'art entrepreneur'. He favours what is practically domestic art production while basing his approach on the work of the

economist Joseph Schumpeter who, in the 1940s, described the dynamics of the capitalist system as a process of changing the world by 'creative destruction'. His works are therefore adaptable or even reversible but also functional. Set half-way between utilitarian furniture and an object providing pure aesthetic delight, they describe a relation with a non-idealised world and are carriers of existential issues. Finally, Joe Scanlan's research reveals constant reflection on the transitory state of objects and the process of their passage through different stages from making to reception.

Joe Scanlan would like the exhibition in Villeurbanne to be a tribute to the late Sol LeWitt, the American artist who had been part of the two most important American artistic movements of the 1960s and 1970s, that is to say minimalism and conceptual art.

Sol LeWitt became known for his plastic vocabulary reduced to the bare minimum — what he called ‘primary structures’ (squares, cubes and forms derived from these) that he set out in serial form, playing on the contrast between the repetition and differentiation of the same form in order to build up rhythmic variations. He was also known for his wall drawings devised using a system of mathematical permutations that rigorously avoided any expression of a subjective singularity and whose execution he delegated to another person.

The title of Joe Scanlan’s exhibition at the Institut d’art contemporain plays on ‘Sol’ and ‘So long’, making the result, *SoLongSol/SoLong*, seemingly constructed in LeWitt fashion and thus strictly impersonal, whereas it

does in fact contain nostalgia and an emotional loading rejected by the precepts of minimal art.

This poetic treatment of LeWitt’s forename is also seen in the work entitled *SOLONGSOLSOLONG* [4], where it is obviously amplified by the monumental treatment, the rhythm generated by alternating colours and the combination of different typographical handling. In contrast with minimalism, the colours used here are less primary colours than ‘impure’ colours chosen by the artist according to their degree of ‘chemical attraction’, clearly a subjective feature and consisting of dark grey, pistachio green, lavender mauve, poppy red and orange-brown. Furthermore, the system has intentional irregularities as each of the four variations of the piece has one out of five colours missing and replaced by white. This makes it easy to see that the three letters of ‘Sol’ and the five colours form the mathematical foundation of the composition ($3 \times 5 = 15$): indeed, each of the four occurrences is constructed on the basis of 15 modules arranged four times in a different way. In addition, the one facing the work entitled *Long Slo Song Solo* (*Quartet*) has a sound dimension

imitating an insistent manner of saying 'So long': 'SSOOOOLLLONNGG'.

Long Slo Song Solo (Quartet) [3] is a white wall covered with pencilled traces depicting different growths of geometrical forms correlated with no superimposition. Using the production method used by Sol LeWitt in his time, Joe Scanlan asked four people to start at four different points on the wall and to perform four expansions of the same geometrical patterns to cover as much distance as possible without crossing each other. In this experimental exercise, the artist sets distance between himself and the objectivity and determinism claimed by minimalist and conceptual artists, replacing it with collaboration with an uncertain end and whose serpentine result is imbued with a musical essence.

Reference to Sol LeWitt is also seen in the series of the four **Snowflakes [2]**; these seem once again to have been composed according to a strictly abstract logico-mathematical pattern whereas they are the abstracted modelling of a snowflake, whose geometrical structure is known by everybody, and in which the progression of colours is a metaphor

for the transitory state. Some result in what Scanlan calls 'mutations' as their rhythmic regularity and spatial organisation are subjected to a form of expansion and a deregulating principle. The idea of a work envisaged as a passage takes firmer form with **SOLOGSOLSOLONG (forsythias) [1]**, the installation set out in the first room of the institute. This work is under the auspices of the Latin epigram *Sic transit gloria mundi* ('Thus passes the glory of the world') and its main motif is the forsythia, a flower that shares an ephemeral, transitory nature with snowflakes as the forsythia blossoms only during the very short period of time that marks the passage from winter to spring. So countless forsythias planted in the ground echo the passage of visitors, as much as the supposedly ephemeral nature of the exhibition and the supposed resulting glory (vanity) and bring to mind Sol LeWitt statements on the death of the author.

Circulation Drawing [6] is in the form of both a sculpture and a display structure with circular shelves whose visual and functional vocations are explicitly distributive. It highlights the deliberate intent of a

serial design, for want of mass-manufactured parts, with production assumed without the obsession with productivity associated with the furniture design industry (Ikea fashion), contributing to the creation of tension between dissemination and circulation.

***Shipping Cartons* [5]** consists of boxes used for packing and transporting works. The way in which they are presented generates a projection and transition relation between container and content and also between plane and volume. These boxes thus serve as the basis of movement between different production, sale and showing sites of the works, that is to say between the different states associated with them, stressing the qualitative and non-intrinsic character of works of art that are not works of art everywhere and always.

In ***Store A* [7]**, a kind of opened up white cube — the 'white cube' being a typical formal component of the vocabulary of minimal art — whose title indicates the original (alpha), modular (assembly of components) and functional (a store), form carries a set of possibilities

constituting its both formal and social openness. To a certain degree, *Circulation Drawing*, *Shipping Cartons* and *Store A* are a closely related part of the tribute to Sol LeWitt through the affirmation of the dissemination and activation that they give rise to in the same way as LeWitt's statements.

In all the works shown at the Institut d'art contemporain, Joe Scanlan thus puts forward plastic rationality that is not without emotional loading in the context of his tribute to Sol LeWitt and even socioeconomic implications while minimalist and conceptual artists based their work almost only on a formal vocabulary of logico-mathematical inspiration supporting an approach that is more mystical than truly rational, as confirmed in the first phrase of Sol LeWitt's *Sentences on Conceptual Art* (1969): '1. Conceptual artists are more like mystics than rationalists.' It should be remembered that the areligious dimension of mysticism limits one to silence — the etymology of 'mysticism' is related to mysteries but possibly to silence as well — as was the case of minimal or conceptual works whose subjects were often tautological, with the

works showing nothing other than their own forms and structures.

In contrast, Joe Scanlan goes back into the language of minimalist art at a time when design and marketing have taken it over. Scanlan concentrates on highlighting both the aesthetic and social implications of these forms by setting out in his work a true celebration of the transitory. Thus, minimalist vocabulary is cleared of the objective of 'pure' form by the sceptical attitude released by his work. The artist has

partially updated the language by relating it to current issues as the act of consuming now designates both a mass activity and a desire for subjective conspicuousness. Finally, contemporary 'directed consumer society' (in Henri Lefebvre's words) in which consumption and creation are superposed, seems to be the perfect context for the deployment of the 'avant-gardisme' as defined and claimed by the artist with regard to his work — an economic niche to be occupied or, better still, a tactical zone used to create the value of existence.

[1] *SOLONGSOLSOLONG*, 2007

[2] *Snowflake No 64545*, 2007

Snowflake No 6768, 2007

Snowflake No 64333333, 2007

Snowflake No 665, 2007

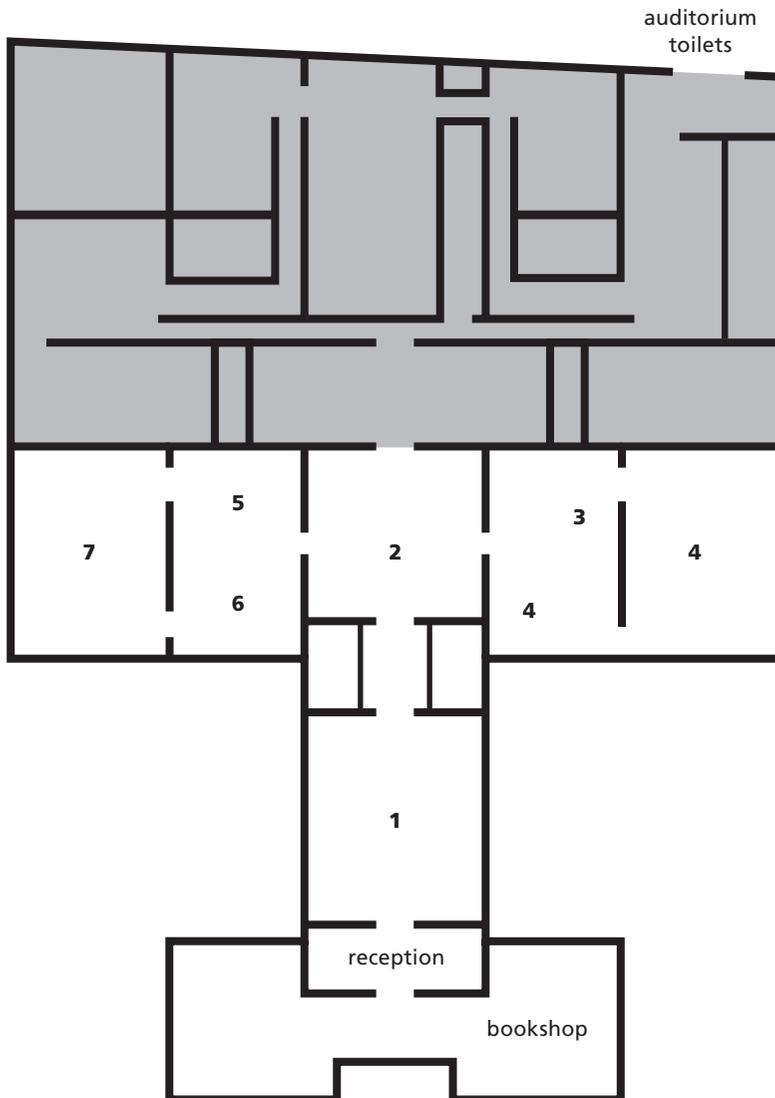
[3] *Long Slo Song Solo (Quartet)*, 2007

[4] *SOLONGSOLSOLONG*, 2007

[5] *Shipping Cartons*, 1998

[6] *Circulation Drawing*, 2005

[7] *Store A*, 2003



Information

Joe Scanlan *SoLongSo/SoLong*
Exhibition June 21 to August 19 2007

Institut d'art contemporain

11 rue Docteur Dolard
69100 Villeurbanne

Getting there Bus number 1

(Cité-Nouveau Musée stop)

Metro line A (République stop)

Close to the Lyon Part-Dieu TGV station

Bicycle loan rack (vélo'v) one minute on foot

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1 pm to 6 pm

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Thursday, 1 pm to 8 pm

Free guided tours 3 pm Saturday and Sunday or by appointment

Entrance fee Full rate € 4, reduced rate € 2,50

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11 rue Docteur Dolard
69100 Villeurbanne

T. 0033 (0)4 78 03 47 00

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