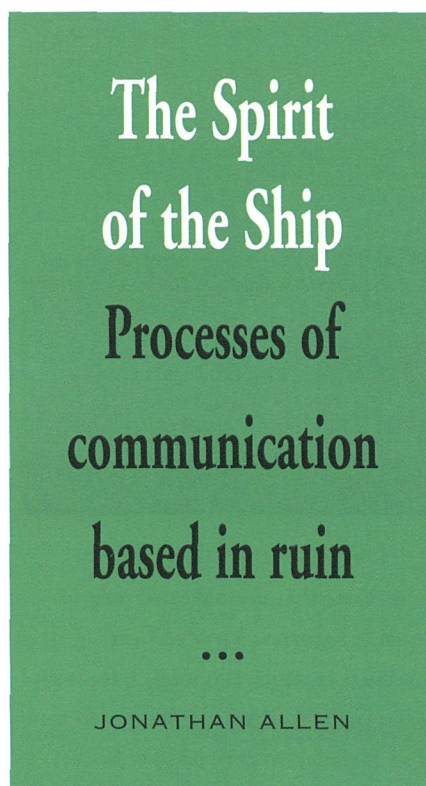


REVIEWS

The first notice to reach me about the exhibition "Renewal Parts" was when I received the news that a large ship had run aground on the Majovera coast. It was on its way to the Caribbean, where it was to be dismantled, when an Atlantic storm dangerously loosened its towrope and the ship was cast adrift. We in the islands have seen similar relics in the past, slowly being towed along and calling in at the archipelago, broken down or exhausted from use, now representing monetary value only as measured in cubic meters of scrap metal. At the same time, I was familiar with the solitary, Robinson Crusoe-like pursuit of Klaus Berends, which had led him to cross Fuerteventura to the beach at Cofete. One might mistake him for someone gathering amber along the Baltic coast, searching for treasures the sea tosses up onto the island's white shores; tangles of iron, blackened buoys, anchors, enormous trunks and rusted parts thrown into the water. For example, there was an enormous oak trunk on the beach at Cofete that lay in the sun for years; he contemplated it until one day he rented a crane and moved it to his studio in Tarajelejo. He cut it into large sections which he deposited with the rest of his collection of industrial garbage, scattered out in the open air where it rots and cracks under the sun. Out of this trunk he made his Rome Canoe, the vehicle-key in an exhibition that was on display in the Sala de San Antonio Abad, Las Palmas, before moving on to an exhibition in Rendsburg, Germany. The rough-hewn canoe was the romantic symbol for a lost, ideal relationship between Man and the Earth. In its lead version, it served as an allusion to the



radioactive wastes that have been dumped into the Atlantic for the last 50 years; in the version executed in gleaming white paper, it referred to the supreme vehicle for communication. It was a fantastical projection from beyond the edge of Europe where aged and broken machines acquire a supernatural presence. I can affirm that Berends is working with an idea: the spent, empty vehicle as conduit to collective memory and nostalgic lure.

The presence of the S.S. América, split in half and run aground, made an impact on all of us: this indeed is the great ship in question, constructed in 1939-40 in New York and belonging to the Greek company Chandris Lines.

It was the flagship of the Holland-America Lines and once crossed the Atlantic at upwards of 30 knots. It carried immigrants, who always occupied the ship's lower decks, as well

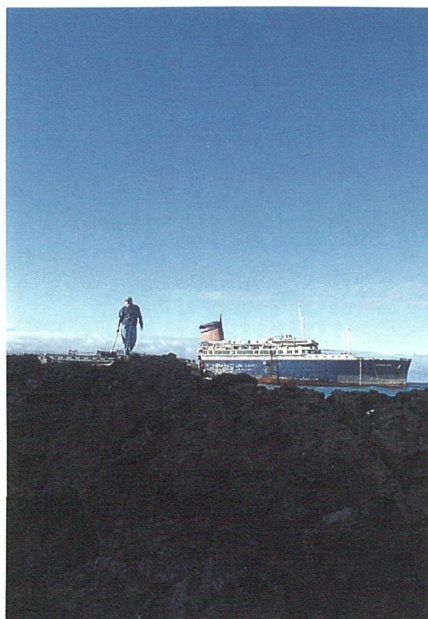
as wealthy travelers who enjoyed airy upper decks and spacious berths. In other words, a floating hierarchy, a society in miniature, a tradition of the Great European Voyage that continues today, although on a much smaller scale. I recall seeing the Italis, also of the Chandris Lines, docked in the pier of Las Palmas, attended by miller, since my father was the agent for the Greek shipbuilders. I saw it with its radiant blue shell and its blackened chimneys.

Abandoned to its fate, all parties concerned immersed in a dispute over responsibility, the ship remained in no-man's-land for months. And, in accordance with archaic customs, it was looted by the local inhabitants who made a junkyard of the most valuable pieces: decorative panels from the 40's, pianos, fine hardwoods. When Berends arrived "nothing was left". To the contrary, the most valuable remained: the rough material for an alchemical process. What did the artist take with him? Simply put, that which no one else wanted; kilograms of maps, manuals for the machinery on board, books that explained how to use the electrical devices in the kitchen where thousands were fed during decades of ocean crossings.

This useless collection slowly acquired meaning. To whom might it occur to read the log from the ship's infirmary, even perusing the list of the dead? Forgotten ailments, patients with minor aches and pains. The essence of biographies that, aside from other family members, no one would commit to memory. The possibility of re-creating transatlantic odysseys exists in all the material rescued by Berends, and this activity pertains to art from the 80's that continues into the 90's. Rosangela



Project by Klaus Berends for Atlántica.



Reno does the same, digging through the detritus of official archives in search of the cheap instant photographs that are used in official documents. Lutz Bacher does the same in basing an installation on the pitiful fragments of an ill woman's diary found in the garbage. Strategies for second settings of anonymous tragedies. In this way art carries out the crucial ethical and rectifying function of making us all remember, without moralising, each soul's place in societies that try to rationalise life statistically from birth until the last will and testament. Let us here forget about aesthetics, about notions of the canon and of harmony. They are not the issue, although aesthetics do come into play the material is transformed. When we receive these messages we are able to react fully, without the need of the "information" of symbols, styles and traditions.

The ruin on the bleak plain was part of the visual repertory of Romanticism, serving as a tangible symbol of a universal emotion, understood by one and all. Berends follows his instincts when aesthetically transforming ruins, reconstructing

habitations that are recorded only in invisible registers. The excellent condition in which the maps have been conserved is fortunate. It has given way to an installation derived specifically from the meticulous spatial division entailed in the construction of a floating vehicle. Passage through one of the ship's decks is recreated, following fixed directions and never crossing invisible walls if we desire to re-experience life on a ship; a transatlantic ship with its hermetic transfer that crossed so many surrealist canvases.

With the solemn music that is heard when coming aboard Berends's virtual ship — a recording of the sea breaking through the ship — we will enact a romantic adventure. In the sense of rescue of an adventure that transgresses the mere earthly voyage, that submerges us in the dark chambers of the past and forces us to confront something in the present, something which in daily life might appear banal, or which we might pass by without it triggering our consciousness. The Romantic movement haphazardly proposed restoring the soul's importance and self-knowledge to the individual

during the Industrial era. In order to attain this counter-proposition, it placed its heroes in time tunnels, creating disorientation and breaks between geography, location and character. The experience that Berends offers us is similar in scope, except that in this case we literally "climb on board". The installation is perhaps the nucleus of "Renewal Parts", although the presence of individual pieces in the show constitutes the other facet of reality.

The large, heavy panels — rectangles with iron perimeters that function as canvases — exemplify the difference between artifice and artefact. They are composed of entire sections of teak wood; in other words, what was once the surface of the deck itself. At times the artist's painting is a sort of forced meeting process with an organic, pre-existing image, which is in fact the state of the material being worked. The art simulates, it penetrates as if grafted onto a system that is both visual and organically textual. The hand of man, in this case, is apparent in a marble-like vermillion stain, a mineral deposit that crosses the hard, deteriorated surface and threatens to crystallise the wood itself. Berends unconsciously contrasts different measures of time: "natural" disintegration with an artificial geology.

Time is the invisible jewel of any art that transforms the shapeless material of refuse. The ship run aground, lost and adrift and beached in Fuerteventura, is in itself a link in the chain of its destiny, a section of time. Deterioration and ruin are eternal symbols of time, of the action taken by nature on man-made things. It is curious to note how César Manrique understood the supernatural message enclosed within the rusted remains that are found in the ports of the Canary Islands, or in the abandoned fields. Perhaps he was

following the lead of Jean Tinguely, who made playful machines, automobiles of rust. Manrique built mobiles, enhancing mechanical detritus into constructions that the wind moved and swayed. Now, out of a Beuysian tradition, Berends constructs new machines. Pierre Restany recently wrote with passion about the immense pyramid that César raised in the 1995 Venice Biennial. In this case, scrap metal from automobiles, cars crushed into iron bricks — Restany tells us of the real presence and not the “abstraction” of environmental art, since everyone receives César’s message, as was also the case with Cristo’s wrapping of the Reichstag.

A gigantic lightbulb, in perfect condition, rests on a blue velvet cushion, like a relic of a saint or a Dadistic gift. It is one of the renewable parts that has survived and whose only function is to be functionless, the majesty of serenity in space. Berends thus parodies the attributes of a precious gem, supplanting its aura for that of the beautiful circuit conserved within the protecting glass. A found object that requires only a majestic presentation and which commands the deepest respect for its integrity. We participate in the fascination with machinery, which taken suddenly out of context seems some beautiful suprahuman creation. It is the syndrome of the childhood visit to the Science Museum.

I will close with the ship-totem which is the image of the S.S. América, carved with a chain-saw and stained cobalt blue. Klaus’s model will now take its place beside archival documents, old Chandris postcards, a blurred memory and an indeterminate amount of cinematographic imagery. It is the guardian of the spirit of the ship. This is the procedure that he always carries out in his art and which must be some

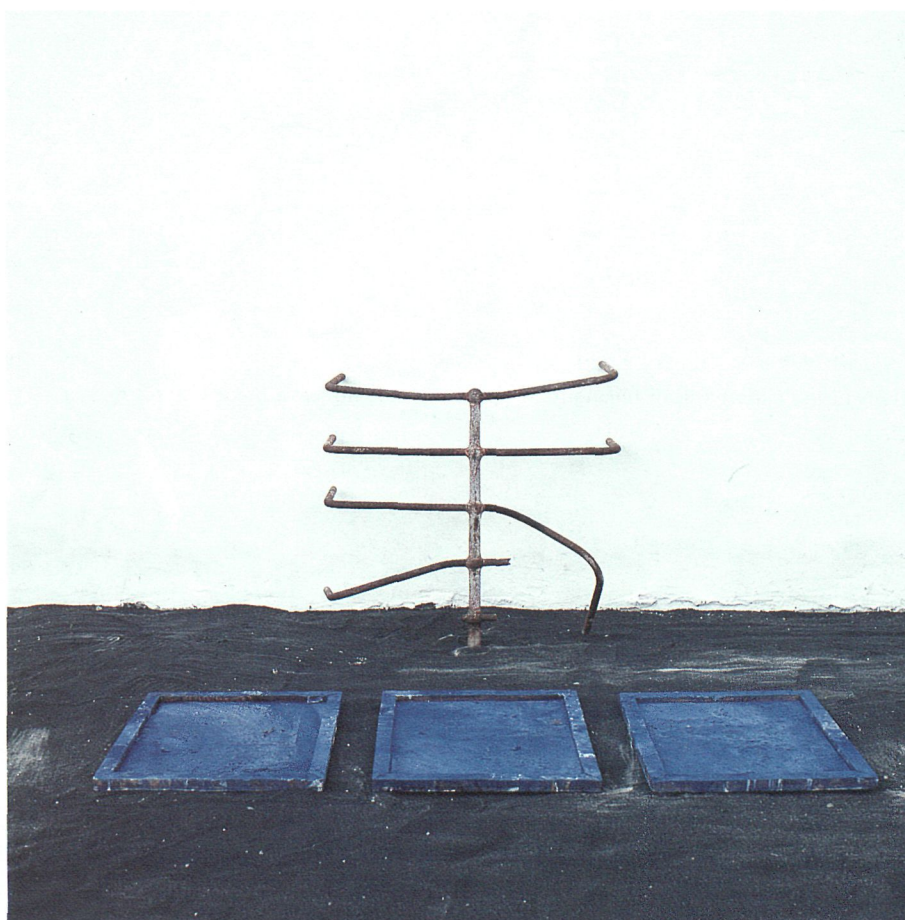
shamanistic reminiscence rising to the surface in this artist’s life. The same thing happened with the ancient church of Betancuria where he formed a model out of ruined iron. Or the pointless spear that rested against the walls of the Sajarra Castle in La Rioja. Or the canoe without oars, its efficiency as embarkation cut short. In all of Berends work potential and force no longer exist, and only the innocuous and inoffensive

form of the machine remains. The ship, for him as well as for me, is something that cannot be disassociated from childhood, and children build boats that are apparently useless, that would never set sail. Objects that let them seize reality are those that must harm nothing, and strangely, when the power of the complex and sophisticated adult machinery is extinguished, we rediscover the empty vessel.

Untitled, 1994-5. Sculpture, mixed media on goma espuma, marmolina, acrylic, 220 x 45 x 50 cm.



Untitled, 1994-5. Installation, mixed media on wood. Founded object, 150 x 150 x 100 cm.



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