

THE SOCLE AND THE VITRINE



STATUES OF VESTAL VIRGINS
ON PEDESTALS IN THE
ATRIUM VESTAE, ROME,
ROMAN FORUM

The apparent symbiosis between classical sculpture and the pedestal has not been questioned for over 20 centuries now...

In fact, classical sculpture has remained exempt from modernism's questioning and redefinition of the socle—such as Brancusi's extreme integration of sculpture and pedestal, or the incorporation of internal supports that enabled works to establish a direct relationship with the ground (Calder, Serra).

Maybe the only “renewal”—perhaps equivalent of the spatial stripping of the ‘white cube’—is the plain orthogonal plinth stripped of any detail or iconography—a modernist device to establish an efficient and total separation between context and work of art, which has been the long standing ambition of the modern art system.

Perhaps the millennia that now separates us from antiquity—its very aura of eternity—contribute to a sense that our possible relationship with its artifacts has been defined once and for all, and is beyond rethinking...

Blessed with a classical education, and through voracious reading and a constantly growing preoccupation with antiquity,



YOUNG BIRD, 1928
BY CONSTANTIN BRĂNCUȘI
ON A TWO-PART PEDESTAL
OF LIMESTONE AND OAK
CARVED BY THE ARTIST.
NEW YORK, THE MUSEUM
OF MODERN ART



STATUE OF THE *DISCOBOLUS*
ON PEDESTAL. VATICAN CITY,
MUSEI VATICANI

it never occurred to me that I might ever be in a position to act on the seemingly permanent relationship between sculpture and pedestal as established since antiquity.

CLASSICAL STATUE

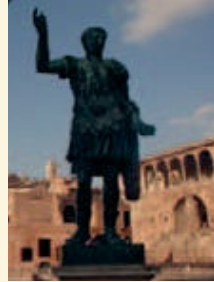
What is the difference between statue and sculpture? Is it fundamental, and if so, why does it not play a role in its discussion or classification?

Looking precisely, and at this issue only, the classical socle clearly reinforces the stasis depicted by certain statues... vertical, columnar, erect, one arm raised, at most, in a vague gesture of greeting or blessing. But for any sculptures that depict movement, the classical pedestal is not a reinforcement, a plausible extension, but an inhibition. The sculpture is inevitably a freeze frame of a moment of evident movement—forwards, sideways, or even backwards—but that movement is denied, sabotaged, deflated, aborted, and even contradicted by the pedestal. For many sculptures, the separation from the ground that the socle performs kills the energy of the work and subverts or undermines its meaning.

For a statue in repose, the socle works as a dignified confirmation; for the sculpture that “moves,” the socle becomes an unwanted corrective: the sculpture suggests there will be further life, but the socle guarantees this is the final position.

Separating sculptures from their supports and imagining them simply standing, striding, falling, dying—on the ground—each work gains in eloquence and immediacy, simply because their ‘drama’ is allocated more space, not condemned to unfold on the scale of a chess board.

*The pedestal reinforces
the erect position*



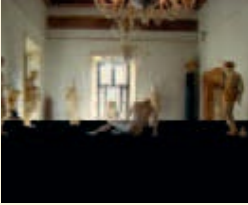
STATUE OF EMPEROR TRAJAN
ON PEDESTAL.
ROME, IMPERIAL FORA

*The vertical pedestal denies
the movement*



THE *LAOCOON*
ON PEDESTAL. VATICAN CITY,
MUSEO PIO-CLEMENTINO

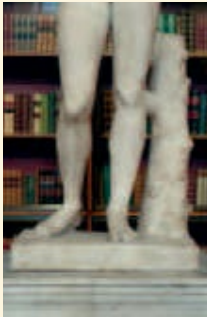
*As soon as the socle disappears,
the sculptures are released*



RENDERING OF THE HALL OF THE GALATIAN IN PALAZZO NUOVO, ROME, WITH STATUES EXHIBITED WITHOUT PEDESTALS

Obviously, the socle individualizes. It implies the end of movement, initiative, or communication. It suggests complete indifference to relationships. A socle implies a frontal perception; it dictates the distribution of attention, privileges the front, discourages the back, ignores the sides, denies the oblique—so that of a possible 360 degrees of exposure only a meager 60 degrees remain—and it permits the absurdity of aligning “rows” of sculptures, ranged along the wall or the insulting but common arrangement of sculptures in a corridor.

What the pinprick is for the butterfly, the socle is for the animation of classical sculpture—it fixes it, apparently forever, so it can undergo the operations, classifications, judgments and tests that are the hermetic domain of the expert... inaccessible to both artist and public.



DETAIL OF *POURING SATYR* ON PEDESTAL. LONDON, BRITISH MUSEUM

On closer inspection, the relationship between classical sculpture and classic socle is even more fraught—the marble statue almost always stands on a small weirdly undefined clump—often shaped to absorb the sculpture’s combined imprint, which may consist of the feet, often leaning on a trunk-like device that channels the forces generated by the sculptures’ movement into a structurally complex connection back to the socle—e.g. an equestrian statue resting on three feet, leaning against a leafless tree trunk.

The ambition of our intervention is to innovate on the level of the pedestal and single vitrine. By imagining the pedestal not as a support point, but as a plane, we want to release the energies of classical sculpture that have until now been drained and absorbed by its unavoidable fixation on the pedestal. By creating a landscape



BUTTERFLY SPECIMENS COLLECTED BY ALFRED RUSSELL WALLACE. LONDON, NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM



STATUES DISPLAY BY BERNARD TSCHUMI. ATHENS, ACROPOLIS MUSEUM

of these larger pedestal planes, we wanted to orchestrate a more intimate and meaningful encounter between the viewer and object—almost as equals.

By sinking the entire base of the sculpture into the enlarged territory of our extended “socle,” we can make the tenuous patches on which most sculptures stand, disappear, so the focus is entirely directed to the work, and away from how it acts as structure.

“SERIAL CLASSIC” – MILAN

The Milan exhibition design tests the hypothesis that we can establish a new relationship with the classical world by questioning the inevitability of the pedestal... The dark travertine floorplates of the room (145 × 290 cm) become the module of display.

Lifting and lowering the travertine on acrylic slabs creates a display landscape in which the territory of each sculpture is extended, groupings can be formed, relationships suggested, sequences implied... The visitors move through the landscape, the fragility of the sculptures is respected by the shaping of the terrain...

THE VITRINE

Like the socle, the vitrine is a device that we have allowed to become the unique, undisputed territory of the specialist—rather than a dynamic tool for the museographer. In the vitrine, we tolerate absurd compositions, groupings, scale conflicts, awkward and disturbing labeling systems, redundant, trivial information—“pot-fired clay, between 11th and 6th century B.C.”. The fundamental paradox of the vitrine is that it permits the assembly of numbers of vul-

The floor tile absorbs the base of the statue bringing it to the same level



STUDY MODELS FOR THE PEDESTALS OF THE EXHIBITION “SERIAL CLASSIC”

The landscape is created by lifting the existing dark travertine floorplates



STUDY MODEL OF THE INSTALLATION DESIGN FOR THE EXHIBITION “SERIAL CLASSIC”

nerable, fragile objects or fragments—typically in series—that the environment of the vitrine then denies the individuality of the same fragile and vulnerable objects. The vitrine becomes a tool of quantities and classification, ideal for coins and rings, but already problematic for small sculptures like Egyptian scarabs.

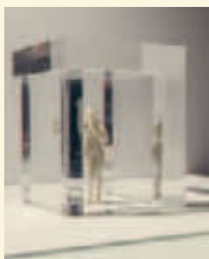
Like the pedestal, the vitrine privileges the frontal view of objects at the expense of their obvious three-dimensionality. But where the socle precludes relationships between individual works, the vitrine does the opposite: it casually imposes coexistence between artifacts that are robbed, by the vitrine, of their vitality.

The perfect vitrine



STUDY MODEL FOR AN ACRYLIC SOLID BLOCK VITRINE WITH EMBEDDED SCULPTURE

The thick acrylic plates form an architecture for each of the objects



STUDY MODEL FOR THE VITRINES OF THE EXHIBITION "PORTABLE CLASSIC"



"DISPLAY OF DISPLAYS"
EXHIBITION IN THE MANÈGE HALL,
SAINT PETERSBURG,
THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM

In an ongoing exhibition project for the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, we have worked on a "Display of Displays," based on the full inventory of the Hermitage's vitrines, from the Tsar's to the Soviets, to the present. Early vitrines are very often superb works of art themselves—their contents chosen to enhance the aura of the whole, sometimes according to a now largely lost art of miniature monumentality.

Vitrines then became more scientific and categorical, their displays more like matrices or series, before succumbing to a twentieth century aspiration of neutrality.

In its current condition, the vitrine is not interpreted as a device that can add... only as a necessary evil that can diminish the impact of the works they are supposed to protect...

My ideal vitrine would be a solid block of acrylic in which the artwork has seemingly been cast, forever, completely absorbing it... The acrylic protects the work, it actu-

ally preserves it... The properties of the acrylic fracture the light in many directions, multiplying views—front, side and top visible in one “cubistic” view—and at the same time focusing its qualities, restoring an immediacy that the frame, materiality, scale and collectivism of the vitrine typically compromise.

By turning the vitrine into an object, not into a piece of furniture, it is released to become emancipated as a fully-fledged part of an exhibition mise-en-scène.

In the version we eventually produced, the acrylic plates form a particular architecture for each of the objects, an architecture that introduces special, unpredictable optical effects that we consider a welcome surprise in the typically over-controlled environment of high value objects...

“PORTABLE CLASSIC” – VENICE

In Venice, the individual rooms of Ca’ Corner are reduced to the scale of the Renaissance studiolo for greater concentration on the Renaissance’s reduced copies of antiquity... The studiolos are constructed in contemporary materials, exploiting the capacity of polycarbonate to filter the strong iconography of the Palazzo, and the clarity and reflectivity of acrylic to highlight the objects in the vitrines...

The studiolo as furniture



THE FARNESE WOODEN CABINET (c. 1578) BY FLAMINIO BOUNGLANGER. ECOUEN, MUSÉE NATIONAL DE LA RENAISSANCE

The studiolo as room



THE STUDIULO OF FEDERICO DA MONTEFELTRO WITH THE ILLUSTRIOUS MEN PORTRAITS. URBINO, PALAZZO DUCALE, EXHIBITION “LO STUDIULO DEL DUCA” (2015).

Room in a room – Studiolo



RENDERING OF THE INSTALLATION DESIGN FOR THE EXHIBITION “PORTABLE CLASSIC”

