

Scale matters: an artist's journey

‘There are small large things, and large small things.’

Of the remarks Francis Pellerin made the first time we broached the topic of scale, this is one that has stayed with me.

We went on to talk about size, about the relationship between one thing and another, about everything the environment imposes, about everything, ultimately, that justifies the choice of a work, which is to say, for him, the transition of a maquette pre-existing the finished work to its execution as a work or completed piece of sculpture displaying a form perceptible to the person who ‘sees’ it, who ‘perceives’ it.

I recalled an anecdote, an experience I had had in a museum in Paris. A ‘little fellow’ was contemplating a little statute (probably a maquette made by a renowned artist). The diminutive piece represented a seven-headed hydra. Obviously, made to scale, it could have terrified him! This not being the case, our little fellow, by way of appreciation, dismissed it with an eloquent shrug. Unaware of it at the time, I had just had my very first lesson on scale.

My discussions with Pellerin shed light on this experience.

As a teacher at the Rennes École d’Architecture, he had read and thought about Le Corbusier’s *Modulor*. He took from it, of course, the idea of proportion applied to all self-respecting architecture. Yet he seemed to disregard any notion of mathematics in his artistic practice. Even in a work as rigorous as a geometric painting, it was the perception of the eye of the beholder that took precedence.

His use of scale figures also dates from his contact with architectural circles.

For the artist-creator, these figures were a potential tool. As an artist, he felt that the scale of his work – an intensely demanding and solitary endeavour – was incumbent on him; he fully embraced his responsibility as creator of a nascent form and/or the gaze that would fall upon it.

His work for the *1% artistique* scheme perhaps remained most present in his own evolving thoughts on scale, apart, that is, from what was aptly called ‘the atelier of forms’ (cf. Laurence Imbernon, curator, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rennes). It was, after all, in this ‘atelier’ where a potential work could pass from the state of maquette to that of finished work.

But let us return to the *1% artistique*. It involved producing a work of art in a given architectural context that brought with it a number of constraints. What does a ‘context’ mean here? A set of data already present or likely to become so: architectural data, the materials used for the structure, its function, its frequentation, and so on: all constraints to be taken into account by he or she who seeks to create a work which brings the whole into harmony, while making perceptible the form for which they have taken responsibility.

It is out of the question, in such a ‘context’, to consider the scale of a work of art in terms of relationship or proportion: relationship with which of these data? Proportion of what? (Let us not forget that a relationship is presumed as being between two things and no more, that a proportion presupposes an encounter between two pieces of quantifiable, calculable data. For Pellerin, this was two good reasons to reject them!) Could the scale of a work of art be of a different nature then?

Such a scale does not seem to be objectively calculable. It seems to depend on the eye of its creator, their talent, their commitment to defending it despite the constraints. (Think of Michelangelo, painting a fresco that would only be seen from a hundred metres below!)

Pellerin cleaved to the idea that the scale of a work of art is experienced and is about the feeling of the person doing the creating (indeed this is the reason he could speak of solitude). In any place, a way of interacting between compatible and often complex elements can reveal itself. But it is important to make a distinction particularly between architecture and artwork, between making and creating, what is rational and objective on the one hand, and on the other, what takes for granted a gaze, a subjective ‘eye’, enriched by individual talent. Surely objective and subjective do not necessarily cancel one another out.

In one of his quatrains, Pellerin wrote:

*Little nest in the world
simply relinquish your pride
to the not knowing
that the knowing does not know*

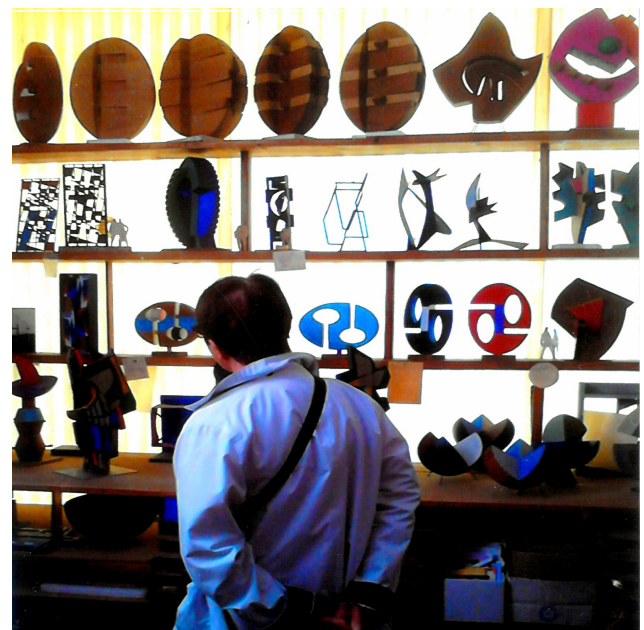
“Forgetting to mention scale is like being a musician and forgetting the note A!” he exclaimed to fellow artists in 1983 (cf. the sculptors’ association meeting regarding a contribution towards the Ninth Plan, France’s economic, social and cultural development plan of 1984–88).

M. Merly

At the end (7:09) of the video [Francis Pellerin’s atelier](#), March 2005, view the extract from the TV Rennes report (9 May 1989).



A view of « The atelier of forms » -
© Patrick Merret



Monique Merly in the atelier - © Haude Pellerin