



**Dr Daniel Spanke, Director of Kunsthalle Wilhelmshaven; an excerpt from the catalogue text for the exhibition „Raw Wood“ (Strenges Holz)**

### **Anti-rusticity**

Jan de Weryha uses wood, the material he works with, in the state of incomparable roughness; cleft down to splinters, partially charred, assembled into layers or ordered (phot. page 61,63,64/65), in the form of cut planks, in constructions with shelves and pigeon holes (phot. pages 64/65) or as sliced bark stacked tightly together making the surface of spatial frames and boards (page 64/65). These multiple works made in such way possess a common distinct architectural character. His pictures- boards act as walls whose structure is close to an ornament, but in spite of it (photo. page 63) they make an impression as if the structure was not imposed externally and as such indispensable, but rather in this case from the essence of the creation rules and techniques.

De Weryha's cubes (phot. page 54) and his columns (photo. page 56) are close to architecture and because of the motif they are especially clearly noticeable. Here we have to do with an exceptional type of architecture, one that in Jan de Weryha's works possesses its own characteristics: the smooth, perfect, modern facades from steel and glass are much less visible than the traditional techniques, for example walls made of broken stone (phot. pages 54.56.59) traditional binding of the walls (phot. pages 61,63) or wooden skeleton constructions (photo. pages 64/65). The above-mentioned works evoke less urban and cosmopolitan atmosphere, but they seem to be more elevated by the so-called idyllic tradition of culture. Yet, Jan de Weryha is a real city-dweller of such cities as Gdańsk, where he was born and spent his youth,

and now he lives and works in Hamburg, one of the few truly world-class metropolises of the German-speaking countries. A brief glance at the history of “idyll in city” culture might become a key to this assumed asymmetry. In the ancient super metropolis like Rome or Alexandria, quite early there appeared a yearning for idyll as the essence of still functioning uncorrupted world. This urban need corresponded with a type of buildings known as villa rustica which enabled the inhabitants to experience as if the reverse of part of their urban lifestyle. This contrasting image naturally was not a reflection of the real idyllic life and work, but only an idyllic image of the Arcadian paradise. Here starts the history of weekend and holiday culture. The builders of the Italian Renaissance quite deliberately quoted so called idyllic forms in the palaces of new aristocracy i.e. in the center of urban life. The tiers of plinths of these buildings are often faced with idyllic, roughly working blocks, so called rustication. An example particularly striking is Palazzo Medici-Riccardi in Florence – an urban residence of one of the most splendid families in Renaissance times, the Medicis. Within palace architecture, rusticity remains a political symbol, an imaginary picture of bedrock of justice underlying a naturally founded power. It tells that the authority, which serves and entitles to exercising power does not originate from its illegal usurpation but it proves that true power is naturally rooted in historical development. Rusticity here is a symbol whose lack of trust in novelty with its imminent fall violently meets with the ruling order. As we can see rusticity is conservative and anti-modern. Bringing his rustical and analogical structures into the sphere of art, in that case concrete art, Jan de Weryha brings something new. Contrary to Donald Judd, Max Bill or Carl Andre and their likes, he tries not to use the perfect character of the material correlated with the reality and rationality of our lives. He introduces into his works the reality of the used material. Naturalness, the originality and unpredictability of wood are always ubiquitous in de Weryha’s works. He reaches it through the already mentioned radically limited ways of wood processing. He does not attempt to change its nature, as we can see in Heiner Szamida working with straining beams, material highly valued by artists, but otherwise devoid of significant value. We do not find here any attempts at refining the material, as it happens in the case of polished laminated wood when the beauty created by Helga Weihs assumes its own dimension of an achieved artistic idea. Contrary to them, the wood from Jan de Weryha objects remains only slightly formed. So far does de Weryha remain in the shadow of his own works, wood –the hero to show off, that he leaves to it a great part of the stage. Naturally what lies at the foundation of de Weryha’s ‘understatement’ is his artistic decision. “To let the nature of the material speak for itself” becomes even today a matter of major artistic thematic lines in contemporary art. Yet this ‘rightness of the material’ originates more from the expression of the work concept orientation, e.g. expressionism; let us consider the wooden sticks of Emil Nolde or informel where the use of paint as a substance by Emil Schumacher is a good example. De Weryha runs two kinds of ‘roughness’ in his work: the rightness of the material and rationality of constructive concepts. Swiss painter Richard Paul Lohse understood his rectangular paintings, divided according to mathematical formulas, as models, as individuals in a democratic society, free and able to exist according to any applicable law (phot.page 10). Each one of the surfaces refers to particular individuals and the whole and its structures refer to social equality of rights. Jan de Weryha treats individuality of particular elements even more seriously. Thus he does not decide about their form through easily penetratable rules, according to which the whole is formed, but he leaves it open, retaining a part of the unpredictable behaviour of the material. One of the chips seems a bit conical in shape so it must be complemented by others, but another one is slightly too long – so between these elements there is some open space which does not allow to create one clear surface of closed body (phot. pages 61,63). Jan de Weryha seems to probe in an artistic way to what extent something individual can remain a

subordinated element of a larger formation. To show this deep character of his idea of the world, the form of his works, object-like boards and spatial sculptures, is particularly useful. Here we have to do with a completely different justification for the primitivity that the artist assigns to his material- wood - different from the standpoint of rusticity. In spite of the monumentality of his works, partially of particularly great sizes (phot. pages 64/65), what matters here is not really the aesthetic justification of the 'familiarity' which has always been close to an idyll, and not a manifestation of this apparently naturally legitimate authority, but something completely different. What is decisive is the fact that Jan de Weryha gives his protagonists their own history: they had been something before they became a part of de Weryha's work. In this at first sight little cultivated, roughly acting wood there are to be read some signs of certain inviolability - insubordination to a pattern, introducing the resistance of its own nature in a higher dependence as tension, which would enliven the whole. The power of a highly impressive work, the power of its image is justified by the determination with which the elements are repeated and the necessity of their compactness on the basis of their similarity. This balance of forces distinguishes this type of pattern from anarchism and also from state ideology. In this way we can talk of anti-rusticity.