

OROŃSKO SCULPTURE QUARTERLY, 1-2/2005. Mieczysław Szewczuk, manager of Museum of Contemporary Art in Radom.

Translation from Polish to English by Maria Apanowicz.

Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański – towards minimalism. Exhibitions in Poland

Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański was born in 1950 in Gdańsk, studied sculpture at the Gdańsk Art Academy, graduated in 1976, left Poland in 1981 and settled down in Hamburg. Opened on October 16th 2004 at the Chapel Gallery in Orońsko, the exhibition titled '*Wooden Cube*.from the series *Cubes*'(its curator was Leszek Golec) was his first exhibition in Poland since the time he left over 20 years ago. Since that time he has never taken part in collective exhibitions in our country. His works have remained totally unknown so far, and the presentation in Orońsko opens a series of exhibitions which will allow us to get to know his art. Another exhibition opened on January 7th 2005 at the Patio Gallery at the Arts and Economy College in Łódź (the curator was Henryk Gac).

The title of the Orońsko exhibition is the title of the main work which was displayed; it was the *Wooden Cube* – a large, almost monumental form; placed inside the chapel was a cube with sides 230 centimetre long, whose surfaces were assembled from small sticks. The artist designed the work earlier, but he realised it with the exposition inside the chapel in mind (it is dated 2003). This first sculpture shown in Poland introduced us to his artistic production, indicated both the material and his working technique – wood, which is the material of his realisations, and the tools (these scraps of wood are made by sawing and then chipping with an axe or a chisel). A simple form becomes an important element of interior decoration, for which the hitherto existing architecture becomes a perfect setting.

With his work Weryha-Wysoczański revives the long tradition of placing a cube in space; possibly the most important of such works is Goethe's who placed a sphere and a cube in Weimar as '*An Altar to Propitious Fate*'. For Weryha-Wysoczański a cube is a neutral form, the idea of the form is not as important as its surface; the surface keeps changin in our eyes when we walk around it and during the day, with the daylight constantly moving around it, coming to the interior from three sides, from the widows on the sides and from the open door to the chapel. This daylight, always illuminating the rough surfaces from the sides (the cube was placed aslant to the walls) reveals the roughness (you could say that it sculpts it); we can see that each form building the surface of the walls (each chip) is unique, has its colour and softness. We can experience the surfaces of the walls, we can study them. The idea is impossible to grasp; the form of a cube is accessible to our senses only through the surface which is made by nature and revealed by light.

Placing of the cube in the building of an old chapel suggested a possibility of reading the idea of the work through a sacral context, to understand this rationally created art as symbolic objects.

A much larger Łódź exhibition was opened in the new rooms of the Patio Gallery, in the building of the school library (still unfinished). This interior did not allow for making the *Cube* the main work of the exhibition; the artist and the curator had to take a difficult decision; the four cube walls were placed on the floor and the sense of this unusual realisation got lost. They became similar to some objects from the series '*Wooden Tables*' which directly preceded the birth of the *Cube*.

The artist has been making the monumental, hanging '*Tables*' (since 2001) from various pieces of wood, of various size, species and thus structure and colour (there is oak, larch, birch; to obtain contrast and tension – he scorches pine wood to get the effect of charring, he uses bark). The scale and geometrical divisions within the frame of the tables in fact make the

compositions turn into elements of architecture; the author says 'modules'.

That exhibition presented the artist's works much more broadly, showing how important – the most important- for the ultimate sense of his actions is the technique of using tools and material. The artist transforms a trunk of a cut down tree into an object by means of a chain saw and axes. He obeys simple rules - respect for material, only necessary actions, use all the bits of wood; even the tiny waste may be used in subsequent works. Another sculptures-objects are made; the latest works shown in Łódź are vertical wooden blocks with visible cuts with an electric chain saw; the cuts allowed for chopping off the outer layers of the trunk with an axe and giving it the form of a perpendicular parallelepiped, but they also mark out the cardinal rhythm on the surface of the solids and within the set of forms making up a new entity. (Making a series of works is one of the consequences of such behaviour). The rhythm that is introduced consciously is always significant, special for every work. The artist more and more consistently subordinates himself to the rule of limiting his actions to what results from the technological necessities, to resigning from anything that only embellishes.

Weryha's works constantly refer to geometrical forms, but in many realisations the shapes are far from the precision with which other artists connected with the geometric art trend make their works. The artist talks of his fascination with minimalism 'for ages', first with the first works of Carl Andre, later with other artists, also with minimalist music. He accepted from minimalism many rules, which the great artists from that trend had set, but what happens in his art seems to be a fundamental argument with this trend, its contradiction. What is important is the large scale of his objects, simplicity and repetitiveness of forms, the relation with the surrounding space, yet the ease of using tools and the material itself cause that his sculptures lack the technical coldness of other minimalists' works, but have the softness of 'natural' wood, freely shaped by a working hand of a man.

The artist titled his exhibition in Łódź '*Wood-Archive*', and this entry is also used in his website. Again, he draws attention to the material; each piece of wood is a fragment of a tree which has grown for tens of years, and is for us an accessible 'document' of the past history, a record of time. In this way – paradoxically- Weryha transgresses one of the main minimalist rules, which demands to create works free from all content.

Like 'the Cube' in Orońsko, similarly in Łódź what seemed the most important, the best exposed were the large vertical trunks (220cm tall), sharp at the end like a stake or ant hills(both works '*No Title*' 2000) placed along the passage across the room. They had unpolished surface, on which remained various rough uneven patches, splinters and shavings. They differed in shape, the division of forms (horizontal cuts divide them into segments), colour (light willow, scorched oak); they reminded me of a totem pole.

What is the most unusual feature of these works, for which the reference point on the map of contemporary art is minimalism, is its relationship with art that is called tribal or primitive, most archaic among the known ones. Just like a creator of those sculptures, a little similarly, our contemporary sculptor places his objects in space in which they become monuments of ideas, they revive the time, the past, memory, as those artists were calling in their ancestors.

The mentioned website (<http://free.art.pl/deweryhawysoczanski>) lets us get to know the places and space where de Weryha has been working and exhibiting his works for years. In the ruins of a Hamburg district, already considered a historical monument, in Harburg he adapted a vast interior of an industrial shop (over 1500m², in the old repair shop of railroad cars, Ausbesserungswerk) and thus he created an excellent space for himself and for his works. He jokes that 'my works look here so much better'. His objects seem to be made for a large

architectural space; journalists and critics wrote that this interior makes the impression of a temple, a cathedral. (When Weryha faces the problem of arranging an interior he does not lack invention - he creates new objects, once referring to nature forms and other times to the traditional ways of stacking wood).

It is ironic that the exhibitions presenting his art in Poland started at a moment when Weryha had to leave that studio and take his works away (the building is getting modernised). The opening of another large exhibition in Poland was planned for March 18th at the Wilson Shaft Gallery in Katowice, in a huge hall with the exhibition room of over 2000², at an old mine in a district that is now an evidence of the disaster and degradation of the old industry and people connected with it. The exhibition titled *Epiphanies of Nature in the Late-Modern World* will be open until August 31st.

The artist brings into each of these interiors, the material whose structure - in a way intelligible for us - is a record of time. The appearance of wood indoors means that the recording of time has been broken; a man creates a new form and places in this interior as his work, together with an idea that was assigned to it; now it has sense again.

Contemplating the creativity of de Weryha-Wysoczański I may not have highlighted enough the meaning of one of his principles: using tools must be subordinated to revealing the unique structure of each piece of material. Such was his principle when he was designing the monument in Germany commemorating the Poles deported from the Warsaw Uprising 1944, which was erected at the Museum-Memory Place of the old concentration camp in Neuengamme near Hamburg in 1999. On the smooth stone plates laid at ground level, there are three rows of granite stone in the section of an equilateral triangle with rough surface - the work of a stone mason uncovered a texture different from the one you get during typical cutting; the artist suggested a technique for processing the stone similar to the one he uses while working with wood - chipping. The expected effect of expression different for each stone structure was reached and although the scale of the monument had to be diminished, the day of the opening must have been a moment of great satisfaction for the Polish artist living in Germany. Dr Christina Weiss, culture senator of Hamburg, said in her speech that 'he gave our city (...) a present of a valuable and multilayered work of art which makes a great impression. It is a spatial, dignified, metaphor for the indescribable cruelty, and immeasurable sufferings, a monument which creates space for thought and leaves us with space for thought.' He has the satisfaction that the Hamburg authorities notice his presence in the city. Among the sculptor's successes there is also the 1st prize, Prix de Jury, at the 1998 Spring Salon in Luxemburg at the European Contest of Contemporary Art.