

A Rough Vision: The Picturesque in the Art of Jan de Weryha

When Jan de Weryha states in an interview for his solo exhibition in the Museum of Contemporary Sculpture in Orońsko, Poland, in 2006 that one of his most important artistic actions is the act of splitting wood he is without a doubt a Process artist standing next to the likes of Richard Serra or Ulrich Rückriem.¹ Underlining the process and leaving its mark in the end result of the sculpture, also the aspect of the materiality of the wood is emphasised, so how can we label de Weryha's love for materiality of which he makes a ritual?

Previous interpretations of his art named his mosaic bark works as "Anti-Rustika",² which is a misunderstanding in itself taking into account de Weryha's affinity, as we will see, for everything rural and rustic or taking everything a step further by calling his art archaic by the Chief Curator of the Paintings Department and Deputy Director of the Hamburger Kunsthalle Professor Leppien.³ Interestingly he was placed already in a Romantic climate.⁴ Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*⁵ is not sufficient to describe Father's art with Sublime meaning vastness and greatness and the Beautiful small size and regularity. It is only with the introduction of the term Picturesque in garden design at the end of the 18th century by the Picturesque theoreticians William Gilpin and Sir Uvedale Price, 1st Baronet that we get an idea of Jan de Weryha's art and his understanding of his art. Not only, as Professor Watkin writes, "the theory and practice of the Picturesque constitute the major English contribution to European aesthetics",⁶ it is first and foremost a

¹ Interview with Jan de Weryha by Mariusz Knorowski, *Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański – Offenbarungen in Holz*, exhibition catalogue, Orońsko: Museum of Contemporary Sculpture, Polish Sculpture Centre 2006, p. 10.

² Daniel Spanke, *Anti-Rustika*, in: *Strenges Holz. Heiner Szamida, Helga Weihs, Jan de Weryha*, exhibition catalogue Kunsthalle Wilhelmshaven, Bielefeld: Kerber 2004, p. 55.

³ Helmut R. Leppien, *Der Natur gleich nah und fern*, in: *Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański – Holzobjekte 1999-2000*, exhibition catalogue, Hamburg: Ehemaliges Ausbesserungswerk der DB Hamburg 2000, p. 3.

⁴ Jan Stanisław Wojciechowski, *Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański – Epiphanies of Nature in Late-Modern World*, exhibition catalogue, Katowice: Galeria Szyb Wilson 2005, p. 11.

⁵ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, London 1759.

⁶ David Watkin, *The English Vision, The Picturesque in Architecture, Landscape & Garden Design*, London: John Murray 1982, p. vii.

contribution stemming from the theory and practice of the country house and the country house garden.⁷ In architecture the Picturesque house was opposed to the functional house.⁸ Picturesque architecture was guided by the idea of how a building looked like and not by its functionality, the Picturesque house was for example based upon an asymmetrical plan. A complementing term is rusticity, which was a main characteristic of the nobility, which carried the idea of the Picturesque.⁹ The nobility was never over-refined of course staying always refined, which is an essential of aristocratic behaviour.¹⁰ According to Gilpin roughness and ruggedness are ensigns of the Picturesque¹¹ and are to be found for example in the bark of a tree.¹² What Gilpin meant with natural wildness¹³ culminated on the other hand according to Humphry Repton in a modish sensibility for “scene of horror, well calculated for the residence of Banditti”.¹⁴ Roughness and ruggedness are also to be found in the sculptures of Jan de Weryha be it through its bark elements or through his splitting¹⁵ and breaking of wood and are also present in his works in the split, broken or cut slender wood elements called Weryhaski, a term coined by Grażyna Szapołowska. Price adds the terms of variety and intricacy, sudden variation and irregularity as ensigns of the Picturesque,¹⁶ which can be summarised in de Weryha’s term of controlled chaos, which he applies to his works.¹⁷ Then wood is a Picturesque material in itself. De Weryha’s preference for his bas-reliefs can be also traced back to the pictorial quality of the Picturesque.¹⁸

⁷ Ibid., pp. vii-viii.

⁸ Mark Girouard, *The Victorian Country House*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1979, pp. 46-47.

⁹ Gregor von Rezzori, *Idiotenführer durch die deutsche Gesellschaft 2 Adel*, Reinbek: Rowohlt 1962, p. 72.

¹⁰ Mark Bence-Jones, Hugh Montgomery-Massingberd, *The British Aristocracy*, London: Constable 1979, pp. 204-205.

¹¹ Clemens Alexander Wimmer, *Geschichte der Gartentheorie*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1989, p. 192.

¹² Ibid., p. 192.

¹³ Ibid., p. 199.

¹⁴ After Rafael de Weryha-Wysoczański, *Strategien des Privaten. Zum Landschaftspark von Humphry Repton und Fürst Pückler*, Berlin: Tenea 2004, p. 17.

¹⁵ Knorowski, p. 10.

¹⁶ Wimmer, p. 218.

¹⁷ Knorowski, p. 8.

¹⁸ Yve-Alain Bois, *A Picturesque Stroll around Clara-Clara, October*, vol. 29, MIT Press Summer 1984, p. 32.

De Weryha stands in a long line of followers of the Picturesque movement, which was instigated in 18th century England and which had an impact also on other artists of the 20th century such as the land art artist Robert Smithson, who was of the opinion that “land art was a continuation of a discourse that dated back at least to the British garden movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries”.¹⁹ Yve-Alain Bois, furthermore, called the art of Richard Serra Sublime Picturesque as opposed to Beautiful Picturesque.²⁰ When Smithson went to see Serra’s *Shift* he spoke of its Picturesque quality but Serra was not sure what Smithson was talking about.²¹

¹⁹ Timothy D. Martin, *Robert Smithson and the Anglo-American Picturesque*, in: *Anglo-American Exchange in Postwar Sculpture, 1945-1975*, Getty 2011, pp. 164-166.

²⁰ Bois, p. 62.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.