

*The Artist and the Nature – History of a Collaboration*

At least since the Bauhaus the cuboid gained acceptance as the epitome of the rational form. Whether Tetra Pak, container or flat everywhere is to be found the block, consisting of rectangles. The cuboid could prevail against other forms, as it has one advantage: It can be lined up or stacked without loss of space. An ideal module to form grid structures, it enables to use space economically.

In his series of works consisting of wood objects plainly called Opus Jan de Weryha takes up this rational moment of the cuboid and confronts it with the unpredictable nature. This can be seen already in the creation of the sculptures. Weryha takes a tree log and cuts with the power saw across the growth direction at a distance of about four to five centimetres evenly into the log. Subsequently, he removes successively the crosspieces with a gouge, which he applies constantly across the grain until the wood is spilt over the entire width. In doing so, a rectangular area is formed, which is textured by the concave gouge traces. This process is repeated four times, until a cuboid is obtained. Because Weryha ensures that as little material as possible is removed, the fringe area of the log is marked by the four edges of the sculpture, which run parallel to the grain.

For a carpenter the procedure of an artist is not very elegant. To achieve a surface as smooth as possible, beams are hewn traditionally with axes, which in contrast to a saw do not cut the wood fibres, but run along them. In the course of this the wood is split in layers over the total length. In contrast to this mimetic procedure, the process of which follows the natural course of the fibres, stands the industrial production in the sawmill, which obtains the form out of the wood without regard to the material, exactly to the given measurements.

Whilst Weryha uses cutting and splitting tools, in the wooden block the traces of a calculated technique interfere with the work of a mimetic work on the material. The power saw cuts a straight line into the wood, the process of which is previously determined; the ruling which runs through the block appears as a rational setting. In contrast, the form of the notches created by the gouge is only roughly predictable. Because the iron leads along the grains, the appearance of the notch is impacted by the wood structure.

This meeting of natural presets and rational shaping determines also the creation of the form. The aim to create a cuboid from a tree log is defined from the outset. The proportions, however, derive, after the first cut is made, from the form and size of the log cross-section. Each side of the sculpture, which goes parallel to the growth direction, extends from two rims to the surface of the log.

Using simple forms which free the attention for the spacial impact, Minimal Art demonstrated that a sculpture has not necessarily to be understood as a positive mould. It can just as well be treated as a geometrical body with a certain volume, which fills a negative form. In this case the sculpture does not stand simply in a space, which serves as a container. Instead, this space as a complementary form turns into a sculpture. The visible sculpture acts only as a placeholder. This explains why the standardised modules used, for example, by Carl Andre are exchangeable against each other.

Precisely this possibility is not given in the works of Weryha. His cuboids operate as reduced forms in a similar extensive way as the sculptures of the Minimal Art. But through the fully differentiated surface, which gives rise to the suspicion that the format of the cuboid derives from the form of the log, the format

and the size of the body are taken over as individual traits. The underlying abstract geometrical primary form, which is cut by the cuboid into the space and which can be filled out by other objects, concretises itself in the given sculpture as its specific hallmark. Because size and proportions of the cuboids are no longer the result of a random setting, but go back to the natural specification of the log form, there is missing a standard, which would make the interchangeability possible.

A free standing solitaire like *Opus 32* appears initially like a Minimal sculpture as a geometrical body, which occupies a given volume of the space. In contrast to the Minimal Art, however, the surface bears obvious tool marks, which individualise the wooden block. As a result, the attention is drawn to the production. On closer inspection, it becomes apparent that the form of the cuboid follows the log cross-section. Because each log is formed differently, the cuboid has no substitute function. Unlike a randomly set spacial standard, which can be represented by every object with the same measurements, the proportions of a sculpture which derive from the process of growth appear to have the ability of being filled out by the concrete wooden block. Where the interchangeable object of the Minimal Art is marked by its surfaces at its boundary, to which extends the sculpture created by the surrounding space, begins in Weryha's works the actual sculpture. The public, accessible surrounding space steps back behind the private, inaccessible interior space.

After Weryha managed to individualise a form from an interchangeable anonymous geometrical body, through the derivation from natural standards, we have a sort of complicity between artist and nature. Since Weryha takes on a certain order in all works, which consist of several cuboids, to proceed and place the individual objects in the space at whim.

Thus, the impulse of his activity is moved from the intellect to intuition. Firstly, it is all about meeting the rational self-imposed requirements in the production of the cuboids. The non-rational factor finds its way into the form through the nature. Thereafter, this part is assumed by the artist, determining the allocation of the individual sculptures against the background of a rational order.

This is reflected particularly evident in the work *Opus 76*. Twelve vertical cuboids with various measurements are positioned in regular intervals in three rows with four elements respectively on a rectangular area. The resulting grid structure between the cuboids has a connecting character. It is the joint framework, which makes the difference between the objects noticeable. And through this difference the artistic intuition comes into play. Because there are no previously determined rules for the allocation of the individual objects. Following his aesthetic ad hoc feeling, it is, in fact, the artist who decides how the wooden blocks correspond with each other. So gains again in importance what was completely rejected as a composition criterion by the Minimal artists – the relation of the parts to one another. Because the elements used in the Minimal Art are interchangeable modules, which are merged in a previously determined grid, there can be no balance between them. Weryha, however, makes use deliberately of the individuality of the particular wooden blocks, to assert himself again as an artist-subject in contrast to a rational order.

In a series of other works the grid is substituted by the architecture as a neutral framework. For *Opus 72*, for example, Weryha laid next to each other four beams in nearly the same height but clearly of different length on the edge of a room on the floor, so that each end of the beams comes to rest at the wall. The floor and the wall serve, thus, as neutral planes, which bring the sculptures, with the two sides respectively, on the same height. Only by this the differences between the varying wood objects become apparent. With the help of the wall Weryha demonstrates the difference in length between the beams. By

doing this, is ensured that the horizontal area of the entire constellation can dissolve without difficulties into the surface of the particular elements. This allows to keep their height differences small. Especially the minimal difference of one or two centimetres emphasises the individuality of the beams, because the beholder is encouraged to pay attention to the refined distinctions in the texture of the surface of the different timbers. Whilst the planes created by the wall and the floor are instrumentalised in this manner for reasons of accentuation, the space obtains a helpful function. As a result, the relationship between the space and the sculptural intervention is reversed. When the Minimal sculpture was chiefly designed to underline the features of the space, the space is used now, to stress the idiosyncrasies of the sculpture. Also in this work the artist takes over the acting part, because the lineup of the beams is the consequence of his aesthetic decision.

A further possibility to arrange the wooden elements, lies in using them to fill up a wall opening. In *Opus 59* Weryha plays through this variant and reduces, therefore, at the same time to absurdity the capability of using the space in an optimal way, which is intrinsic to the cuboid form. Because the eleven timbers fill only approximately the door opening. At different spots gaps open up. Owing to the different formats, it is not possible to pile the cuboids up without leaving spaces. But exactly this is, what makes them convincing in economical terms as modules for wrapping, transport and construction purposes.

Although the build-up of the work does not make it necessary, some of the elements are arranged lying. Therefore, the weight of some of the cuboids lies on the long sides and more textured sides are hidden than necessary. Here becomes apparent, that Weryha treats the planes of the cuboids equally in spite of the different processing effort. By doing so, he disappoints deliberately the expectations of the beholder, who is used to prefer the processed sides of a sculpture in comparison to the supposedly unprocessed base. It becomes clear that the premature opinion of the manifestation of artistic formation processes in structured planes is misleading. Since, as we have seen, the progress of the side planes follows the natural standards and the bas-relief emerges from the chosen process by necessity. Whereas the length of the elements is defined only by the artist. The spot, where he applies the power saw to cut the tree log is set as he sees fit. In this respect the bases mark the real artistic setting, because their distance to one another is deliberate.

Evidently distinct from the so far regarded works are two works on the ground, which consist of areas which are filled with wood parts fallen off in the cuboid production. *Opus 68* fills the rectangular area of a room on three sides up to the edges, so that only on one side remains a pathway, from which the work can be viewed. The particular wooden pieces stand on a rectangular section of the area, which formed the outer area on the log. The format derives from the parallel cuts of the power saw and the grain flow, which leads across them. Because the depth of the cuts slightly varies and, therefore, also the height, according to the application of the gouge, the log fragments differ in size. Their appearance also deviates, because the splitting of the material as a manual process is uneven and, furthermore, because the cleavage surface is dependent from the grain flow. In its mass accumulation the resulting plane is, thus, much more lively in contrast to the even floor surface. It would seem that the forms grow out of the ground.

The second work on the ground, *Opus 79*, consists of the same wood pieces laid out in form of a rectangle. This time the log fragments, in contrast, are arranged not standing, like in *Opus 68*, but lying on the side. Not the depth of the cut is relevant in this case, but the distance between the cuts. Because also this varies, the breadth of the wood pieces differs. In this way, the rectangular plane consists of countless levels shifted against each other.

Also in these two works Weryha orientates himself at a geometrical form and contrasts it with the irregular internal structure of the surface. In this way, he documents in the way of a résumé the finding process of the form in the cuboids. It becomes apparent that, through the differences in the material and based on the technical treatment, a predefined production process leads to different results. The complicity between nature and artist consists not only in determining formations, but also in generating chaos. Form and informe are only two sides of the same coin. Because the artist directs his attention mainly on liberating a geometrical body from the tree log by means of a gouge, the shape of the created sculpture is more regular than the shape of the wooden pieces, which fall off at the same time. The abandonment of the saw when splitting of the material leads to the paradox result, that the disorder in the wood waste increases, the more the artist realises a rational order in the sculpture. But also in this respect the decision does not turn out one-sided in favour of the geometrical target. In fact, Weryha keeps up the tension between culture and nature, reintroducing into the art context the amorphous log fragments as modules for a geometrical figure. The artist and the nature, history of a collaboration.

(Translation from German to English by Rafael de Weryha-Wysoczański)