

Dr Volker Probst, Reinbek Castle Culture Centre, Sunday, 26 January 2025, 11:30 a.m., main extracts from the opening speech *On the banks of the Purple River: Approaches to the 'Endless Paths Across the Wooden Fields'* by Jan de Weryha of the exhibition *Jan de Weryha: 'Endless Paths Across the Wooden Fields'*.

*Reflections on Process Art*

[...] Wood has been an indispensable material for thousands of years and has played an essential role in the development of human history. This natural material, wood, nowadays also classified as a renewable raw material, which is so familiar to us in its manifold forms in our everyday lives, this is the material de Weryha almost exclusively works with. Although the artist limits himself to this basic material, his work is of great complexity. Anyone who has ever had the opportunity to visit de Weryha's studio at Reinbeker Redder will be surprised by the wealth of formal inventions and their wide range of variation. There are segments of tree trunks worked with chisels, spatial installations made of light-coloured spruce, arrangements of pieces of wood laid out on the floor, which point to outdoor LAND ART formations, square frames with fillings in their centre which look like extra-planetary settlements, wall-filling grids with logs whose barks resemble those ancient tomes from the utopian story *'Library of Babel'* by Jorge Luis Borges and many more. Today, however, I am only talking about the works that are shown here in Reinbek Castle, where you will also meet a surprising variety of material, form and shape in his seventy-three works of art.

Jan de Weryha works with wood, one of the most important natural materials for man. With his non-figurative, one could say constructive-abstract art, he works with these natural elements in a figurative sense with natural constants. In our time of changes, including the destruction of nature and natural spaces on a global scale, de Weryha returns to the originality of wood and reminds us that our livelihoods are at stake when we think, for example, of the rainforest and its man-made destruction.

In the current exhibition, Jan de Weryha is showing a series of wooden fields created in the last decade. All show the basic geometric shape of a square and measure 1.08 by 1.08 metres, plus seven smaller fields measuring 50 by 50 cm. Four early pencil drawings from 1984 come as a surprise, non-representational in their figuration, yet reminiscent of organic forms. It is not unreasonable to recognise here some of the design elements that characterise the artist's subsequent sculptural work. Although the artist will celebrate his 75th birthday in 2025 and a representative overview of his entire oeuvre would normally have been shown on such an occasion, de Weryha has opted for current works from the past ten years. These fields truly provide an insight not only into the artist's working process, but also into his genuine concerns.

De Weryha is usually referred to as a sculptor, i.e. an artist who creates a new form from a workpiece – stone or wood – by removing layers of substance. The idea that the form is embedded in the unworked workpiece can be traced back to Michelangelo. This outstanding sculptor of the Italian Renaissance freed his figures from the captivity of stone, so to speak. Then there are the sculptors who traditionally work mostly in clay, i.e. the form is created here by the successive addition of material.

Jan de Weryha is certainly a sculptor, because his works are creations in the third dimension, i.e. artefacts created in and for space. However, I would like to specify and call him a wood-worker, i.e. someone who, with his hands and a few tools knows how to work wood with virtuosity. The fact that craftsmanship skills are an indispensable prerequisite in order to emancipate oneself from the conditionality of the material, virtually overcoming it and transforming it into autonomous creations, may be mentioned here.

De Weryha's decision to place his wooden settings on a field, or figuratively speaking, to cultivate his field, indicates the beginning of the work. The base plate defines the precisely outlined area of the field. For this, the artist selects chipboard laminated with sheets of veneer. We, therefore, do not see the annual rings of a tree, which could provide information about its age, but rather the surfaces created by peeling the tree trunk. This results in random shapes and patterns of different shades of brown. On the one hand, they form the base for the settings, but at the same time form the background against which de Weryha makes his settings. These are by no means arbitrary, but are calculated exactly, precisely and accurately to the millimetre, usually pre-drawn with graphite. De Weryha initially uses a small panel to test out a new pictorial idea, forms and arrangements as if in a three-dimensional sketch. Once the surface has been given an initial order through its natural grain with the structural drawing, further steps such as cutting, breaking and splitting the wood will follow. This usually results in small pieces of roughly similar shape, which find their arrangement, their integration, in the pre-drawn basic structure. Sometimes the assembly of the small pieces of wood is extremely difficult and demands the full attention of the wood-worker. In order to hold the sometimes fragile pieces, such as small bundles of bamboo sticks, de Weryha uses thin wire, wraps the wooden pieces and twists the end together, but always aligns the end of the wire in the same position, another detail that shows the directionality of his art.

And a further aspect needs to be noted here: the subtitle of the exhibition mentions the term 'Process Art'. In fact, Process Art sees itself as an independent artistic movement in which the finished work is not the centre of attention, but rather the process in the course of time is the essential part of artistic production, indeed the actual work of art itself. Whether this applies in such a comprehensive sense to de Weryha's work, I cannot finally decide. It is true that essential working stages such as collecting, sorting, collating, associating and scrutinising of the material are certainly elements of his work process. But still de Weryha's aim is always to realise the pictorial idea in a completed work.

As viewers, we usually approach a work of art associatively; only further on do we recognise forms, ask questions and understand aspects of form, and, in the best case, gradually approach what the artist's intention might have been. This process certainly remains mostly subjective, due to the freedom of art and the inherent openness of the artwork. In the process, the viewer sometimes finds himself in the position of the archaeologist. For some years now, de Weryha left the individual work steps visible in the work itself, as I indicated above. The viewer now carries out the work process in reverse chronological order and then finds himself back at the starting point. At this moment we find ourselves in an open field. However, it is hardly possible for him, the viewer, to take the decisive step of asking: how exactly does de Weryha arrive at this pictorial invention, which stands at the beginning of the concrete work process? This fundamental question usually remains unanswered, not only in de Weryha's creations, because it touches on areas of intuition, fantasy and imagination. Even such concrete art as that of de Weryha's cannot be fully interpreted. A final enigma remains, not threatening or disturbing, but rather as a mysterious something that we can process further in our imagination.

In the following, I will give you some examples of features that you can see on de Weryha's wooden fields during your subsequent walk. In the exhibition, the fields are arranged in a variety of ways, with the artist himself being the curator. The sequence of the hanging creates a rhythm of its own, and it is always worth lingering over every single work.

The motif of the INVITATION CARD resembles a secret writing, similar to the Babylonian

cuneiform script that has yet to be deciphered. Who could decipher it? What message do these signs contain? And: what is the artist telling us?

Some fields open up a view of a megapolis when viewed at an angle. One is lost in the maze of buildings, streets and squares that seem to stretch out endlessly. These grids are reminiscent of the extensive structures of urban spaces, as we recognise them in the layout of streets in Manhattan or in the centre of Mannheim.

The shape of de Weryha's wooden fields is essential for their understanding. Colour as a means of artistic design is absent here – although there are coloured wooden sculptures in the sculpture of the 20th century, for example in the work of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938) or Erich Heckel (1883-1970). The artist favours working with the natural colouring of the different types of wood. Through charring, he blackens the field, but breaks it with punched holes that appear light in contrast.

His poplar wood panels, blackened by charring, refer to the *'Black Square'* by Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935) from 1915, which is considered an icon of 20th century painting and marks a radical position in the early avant-garde. De Weryha's charred plate is a reference, perhaps even a silent homage to Malevich, who with this black gesture signalled the beginning of a revolt against all conventions and all traditional viewing habits at the beginning of classical modernism in painting. It should be noted that the Polish painter, in 1923, created another version of his *'Black Square'* in the format of 1.06 by 1.06 metres. De Weryha chose an almost identical size for his wooden squares: 1.08 by 1.08 metres, as I mentioned before.

Into another black field, he artist punches small stars which are visible as bright dots. I was immediately reminded of the famous gouache by Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781-1841) with the title *'Hall of Stars in the Palace of the Queen of the Night'* from 1815 which he designed as a stage set for Mozart's opera *'The Magic Flute'*; there the sky is midnight blue, de Weryha's is black, with only the stars twinkling in it.

De Weryha also evokes obvious associations in many other fields. This is an opportunity for him to enter into a dialogue with the viewer, because here there can be consensus in the artistic intention and in the viewer's recognition. The viewer becomes a kind of resonance chamber for de Weryha, in which his work finds a resonance, an echo. In addition to the strictly composed works with the serial arrangement of elements, the wooden fields are also set in motion. Here de Weryha once again refers us directly to natural phenomena such as clouds, winds that gently sweep across fields or swirls of water.

If one also considers that in some fields de Weryha places thousands of the same wooden elements, for instance bamboo toothpicks, on one square metre, the artist's wood-work of the last decade is certainly a Sisyphean labour, particularly if one considers the works in their variety of forms and abundance of materials in their entirety. Although the artist – like Sisyphus – starts anew with each work, he, nevertheless, brings it to a happy conclusion, unlike in the ancient myth, where Sisyphus is condemned to push the stone up the mountain again and again.

Despite the cutting, breaking and splitting of wood, i.e. the dismantling of grown organic structures, de Weryha's art reveals a respect for nature, for creation, especially as he opposes disorder with order in his work and thus also endeavours to balance the elements. This can be understood as a longing for harmony, the elements having been established in a balanced relationship with one another.

Jan de Weryha's pictorial ideas require a larger format, as they can hardly be developed in such intensity and effect on smaller surfaces. In most of the works we recognise a serial arrangement of an element that is used like a module, but his uniformity is by no means to be confused with boredom. De

Weryha's minimalism can be recognised in the music of the 20th and 21st centuries, for example in the compositions by John Cage (1912-1992) or Steve Reich (\*1936). But de Weryha does not simply tread endless paths, through transformation he creates endless variations with the material wood, whereby the individual workpiece can function as a serial module. This minimalism in its reduction to a few elements is not a shortcoming but a deliberate design principle and, through perspectives from different angles, opens up new impressions of de Weryha's 'endless paths across the wooden fields'. De Weryha's explorations in the fields show, when looking at the works in the chronology of their creation, that the artist varies motifs one after the other, condenses them, and then all at once begins another exploration with a completely new pictorial idea. De Weryha's wooden fields open up various layers of meaning with a broad horizon, which we may uncover; by all means, such an attempt is worthwhile.

The word field has an inherent ambiguity. By field, the artist does not mean a grain or potato field or even a football pitch. He uses the word field to refer to the square surface on which his woodwork is based and on which his art happens; the field worked as a relief becomes an event space. In addition to the strictly grid-like arrangements of the wooden elements of the relief, we see circles, segments, bars or wedges that open up new paths through the wooden fields. In our perception, pictorial elements on the surface now begin to vibrate, graphic or built structures are set in motion, although in reality they are not movable, but firmly mounted or drawn on the field. Here the artist breaks through his serial arrangement of the respective basic element and opens corridors through his fields. In this way, he sometimes makes energies visible, because de Weryha is also interested in sounding out what a material can withstand, what it means for the working process to push it to the limits of its flexibility. From the rattan, which he has recently come to appreciate, he forms small arches under tension in different arrangements or with duplications of arches that overlap, even suggesting archaic architecture. On a small scale, they seem to be echoes of large structures, while the question of the relationship between micro- to macrocosm can hardly be decided in the field.

What is always surprising, even astonishing, is the precision with which de Weryha works even with very small pieces of wood such as bamboo toothpicks or fragments of oak. This requires not only years of practical craftsmanship, but above all discipline and a special inner attitude towards one's own artistic work. I am referring here to de Weryha's concentration, perseverance, patience and attentiveness that he brings to the material and his work. In other words, qualities that we recognise from the meditative practice of the Far East, such as Zen-Buddhism or the Satipatthana exercises of mindfulness practised in Hinayana Buddhism. However, I am far from suggesting that Jan de Weryha is a Buddhist, though his mindset at work points towards a spiritual sphere, which unfolded in Western mysticism, especially with Meister Eckhart in the 14th century. For the artist, the work on the piece is to a certain extent a spiritual exercise as the essential basis of his work to populate the wooden fields with forms and shapes. Thus, de Weryha's work requires a close and concentrated look in order to recognise its subtle aesthetic appeal.

Jan de Weryha is one of those creative personalities in the broad field of the arts who want to, if not eliminate, then at least mitigate the disorder and chaos of the world by transforming matter into artistic form. The serial colonisation with identical formal elements in strict order, which is concretised in de Weryha's fields, offers protection from the impending intrusion of excessiveness, disorder, thus offering protection from the rule of chaos. Thus Jan de Weryha's works, which can be seen here in the castle in Reinbek, are also manifestations of hope in a current world situation of wars, violence, outbreaks of irrational brutality, deliberate disinformation and disorder in the broadest sense. His wooden fields give hope, as they

materialise a counter-world of order and clarity in space. [...]

But now let me invite you to follow the '*Endless Paths Across the Wooden Fields*' by Jan de Weryha. You will certainly make some discoveries!

(Translation by V.H. Ernst)