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Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański: Translocations – Temporary Structures – Topographies – Mantras

“[...] a luthier, who must foresee the acoustic values of the instrument’s sound, recognises the expressive properties (in the audial sense) of different types of wood, skillfully composing them – such ineffable knowledge, or certain kind of imagination, testifies to their mastery”¹. Mariusz Konorowski

Truth as an unstable value, having neither time-space nor physical boundaries, does not concern predictable experiences; and this reflexion may to some extent define the outstanding, internationally recognised work of Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański. The artist is a personality of contemporary sculpture, introducing unique poetics – characteristic only of him – his own language resounding strongly during collective exhibitions, individual shows as well as realisations in open spaces. He enters a dialogue with the existing qualities of a given space each time, building mantric, meditative, systemic, structural installations which can also be described as “interventional” – marked by a dramatic element. The fragility of some solutions inspires respect, encourages a pause, a state of listening, or even vigilance. His intricate constructions oftentimes remind one of ancient proto-architectural solutions (or of Lucio Fontana’s spatialism postulating a closer connexion between artworks and their surroundings – breaking down boundaries “between the place occupied by a work of art and external reality”)². An arrangement of tree trunk slices in a doorway can become a barrier, a sort of blockade in a happening, as well as an experimental, synesthetic composition – a visual score for improvised music, choreography, or intermedia performances³.

¹ Mariusz Konorowski in a conversation with Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański, in: *Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański. Objawienia w drewnie [Revelations in Wood]*, exhibition cat., curators: Leszek Golec, Jan Stanisław Wojciechowski, ed. Halina Gajewska, coordination: Jarosław Pajek, translation into German: Urszula Usakowska-Wolff, Polish Sculpture Centre in Oronsko 2006, pp. 3-10. See also: Leszek Golec, the author of the film, documenting this exhibition: <https://youtu.be/usu3-r8WiJE>.

² Marcin Giżycki, *Słownik kierunków, ruchów i kluczowych pojęć sztuki drugiej połowy XX wieku*, Gdańsk 2002, p. 148.

³ It is worth mentioning the 2009 exhibition *Tabularium: Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański*, at the Gdańsk City Gallery, whose opening featured an expressive performance by Krzysztof Leon Dziemaskiewicz; (catalogue texts: Iwona Bigos, Katarzyna Rogacka-Michels, Grażyna Tomaszewska; translation: Agnieszka Gregorczuk, Katarzyna Rogacka-Michels, GGM 2009).

Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański carefully works through and develops concepts of marking out space by creating specific environments that enthrall, emanate warmth along with authentic scents of the wooden medium. As if the artist was referring to migrating birds building multi-shaped nests – finding in himself some instinct to produce emanations of supporting energy with the elements of earth, air, and, at the same time, symbolic forms referring to fire and water. The artist once said: “What I find significant in my work is [...] the very fact of continuing to search. [...] with each new space I encounter, and it seems a constant journey [...]. [...] in this case, it is about my sincerest attempts to define the secrets of nature”⁴.

The non-obvious beauty of the artist’s compositions seems to be mixed with nostalgia and touched by a distinct aleatoric quality – a laboratory, experimental and interdisciplinary element.

His spatial realisations seem to bear discreet echoes of Georges Seurat’s pulsating, unprecedently consistent paintings and drawings – masterpieces of Neo-Impressionism – flickering, with no regard for conventional artistic paradigms. Here, ‘in place’ of Seurat’s misty strokes of graphite, or pointillist multi-coloured dots vibrating in the eyes of the viewers, we have wood from various species of trees as well as rocks, twigs and dried flower bunches. Some seem to symbolically evoke medicinal herbs, as if echoing medieval gardens in monastery cloisters. There are also the essential drawings (anamorphic, floral and corporeal – with aspects of uncanniness affecting one’s nervous system directly) that Weryha-Wysoczański has been creating since the 1970s, whose power was recognised and presented by Jan Wiktor Sienkiewicz, during the acclaimed exhibition entitled *Directions – Poland*, curated by Sienkiewicz and organised as part of the international project “NordArt 2025”⁵.

Weryha-Wysoczański’s installations attract viewers with their lightness, their alliance with air and perceptible dialogues with the laws of gravitation and tectonics, as well as anti-form [according to Robert Morris’s idea, anti-form defies common tastes], anarchitecture, and Arte Povera, it also remains related to Jerzy Grotowski’s concepts of laboratory. The artist’s works emanate the enormous expenditure of time that he puts into creating their intensified expression.

⁴ Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański in conversation with M. Knorowski, 2006, op. cit., p. 10.

⁵ Drawings from 1984 were exhibited, cf. Jan Wiktor Sienkiewicz, *Directions – Poland. Special Project at NordArt 2025*, Kunstwerk Carlshütte, Büdelsdorf 2025, p. 113.

In 2006, I wrote in one of my texts: “In his horizontal arrangements Weryha-Wysoczański transfers to the present day the entropy of land art and the concreteness of minimal art: the phenomenological spirit [...] of ephemeral actions by such artists as Richard Long, Robert Smithson and other thinkers – wanderers of the past century. On the other hand, he refers to the oldest traditions of human cultures: building mandalas or marking out monastic contemplation zones. [...] in cross-sections of tree rings [he reveals] the natural images of the visualists. [...] he alternately integrates and disintegrates, he revokes power of the trees that are already dead, broken by the wind, or destined for cutting [...]. Young trees smell beautifully, [...] making us think about the important role they play in the closed complex of the ecological clock, we realise that their absence will mark the end of all beings”⁶.

“Uncanny Valleys”

“Modern physics has done away with the solidity even of atoms and elementary particles, they are just states of fields under a certain perspective. [...] Yet this is completely implausible to us in everyday experience. The fact that a rock consists to 99.99999 percent of nothing, is completely counterintuitive when your foot accidentally hits the rock and is hurt”⁷. Wolfgang Welsch

In his structural, horizontal, multi-element site-specific or in situ works Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański often softens architectural corners, e.g. with intricate groupings of tree bark, arranged organically, as if signalling femininity, reminding of rock motifs drawn with ink in old Chinese graphic art. Environmental projects realised by the artist – at times in a participatory manner (in open woodland, with the use of a huge collection of conifer cones, inviting people to co-arrange compositions) seem to remind us of the scholar’s gardens in China – gradually developed since the second millennium BCE, and shaped basically in one style: “mountains and water” where “the atmosphere of wandering [...] has been recreated. Designed by excellent painters, they refer to traditional Chinese styles of ink painting”⁸. The sculptor’s work also subtly echoes Zen gardens and some aspects of Japanese

⁶ Dorota Grubba, *When an Approach Becomes a Form. Jan de Weryha Wysoczański [...]*, translated by Małgorzata Korolko-Zipper, “Exit” 2006/2(66), pp. 4112-4115, the title of the article referred to Harald Szeemann’s exhibition “When Attitudes Become Form [...]”, organised in 1969 at the Kunsthalle in Bern.

⁷ Wolfgang Welsch, *Spaces for Humans?*, in: *What is Architecture?*, ed. Adam Budak, Kraków 2002, p. 165.

⁸ Anna Iwona Wójcik, *Ogrody chińskie [Chinese Gardens]*, in: *Wschód. Ogrody zwierciadła kultury [East. Gardens Mirroring Culture]*, ed. Leszek Sosnowski, Anna Iwona Wójcik, Universitas, Kraków 2004, p. 64.

culture, including the “never fully furnished” space of living that remains open to transformations. Direct relations with nature, so important to him, are embedded as key meanings in Zen practice and art, where “a human is not at all distinguished as a being in the world [...]. Both Japanese painting and poetry often evoke elements that are devoid of beauty to our collective consciousness – frogs or mosquitoes are eagerly presented creatures, favourite landscape elements include trees twisted by the wind, an empty winter field, a decaying hut lost somewhere in the mountains. The task of an artist involves presenting things as they are by their very nature, in their ‘suchness’, with no alterations or improvements”⁹.

Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański’s art is perceptually driven by a non-literal kinetics present in all his explorations; micro- and macro-elements are in contact with each other, expressively “struggling for space”, or subjected to the rigours of unyielding composition. In his mysterious “solitary” forms one can particularly sense connections with archetypes and proto-symbols, with the motif of the axis mundi (the centre of the world) as well as a river, a road, a window, a gate, etc. The artist introduces, for example, enigmatic forms made of thousands of twigs, evoking associations with a tent, a symbolic mountain, a human figure spinning, or with Shakespearean motifs which came to be uniquely interpreted by A. Kurosawa in his films.

The metaphor of the Uncanny Valley – used in the title to this part of the text – originally comes from Ernst Jentsch who created the ‘Unheimlich’ [the uncanny] theory. He noted, among other things, that “the effect of the uncanny can easily be achieved when one undertakes to reinterpret some kind of lifeless thing [...], in a poetic or fantastic way [...]. Fantasy, which is indeed always a poet, is able now and then to conjure up the most detailed terrifying visions out of the most harmless and indifferent phenomena [...]”¹⁰.

Jan Wiktor Sienkiewicz, a renowned art historian and distinguished researcher of Polish art created by migrants, frequently visited Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański’s studio located in a former warehouse of the Hamburg-Bergedorf Castle Museum. It was in this city that Jan, who moved there with his

⁹ Beata Romanowicz, *Ogrody zen* [Zen Gardens], in: *Wschód...* [East...], op. cit., p. 155.

¹⁰ Ernst Jentsch, *On the Psychology of the Uncanny* (1906), translated by Roy Sellars, in: *Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties*, eds Jo Collins, John Jervis, London 2008, p. 225. Cf. Ernst Jentsch, *Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen*, Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift 1906, 8.22 (25 Aug. 1906), pp. 195-198, and 8.23 (1 Sept. 1906), pp. 203-205.

family – a wife, Maria Danuta née Fiedorowicz (a humanist) and a son, Rafael Hugo de Weryha-Wysoczański (now a doctor of philosophy, writer, garden historian, etc.), began his career in 1981, winning numerous awards, and creating expressively distinctive, semantically powerful monumental projects in open public spaces, inspiring pause and contemplation. Since then the artist has won numerous awards at important events, such as the Prix du Jury of the '98 Luxembourg Spring Salon, funded by the Luxembourg Minister of Culture. Weryha-Wysoczański developed his innate talent at the Gdańsk Academy of Fine Arts, studying in the studios of such Professors as Alfred Wiśniewski and Adam Smolana, and receiving his diploma in 1976, while simultaneously being involved in the second stage reconstruction works of the Gdańsk Historical Town. Weryha-Wysoczański's oceanic, impressive, and totally abstract pieces seem to have been produced along a strategy of oxygenation and resistance towards the outstanding, yet figurative, works created by both of his influential mentors. Jerzy Malinowski wrote: “Sculpture [...]. From busts, funeral compositions, tombs and monuments, it evolved to be independent, and in the 20th century – the era of the avant-garde – it freed itself from the need to represent, taking over the space around and itself rejecting traditional techniques in favour of new, unconventional ones [...]”¹¹.

Jan Wiktor Sienkiewicz, impressed by the artist's work – including the stunning arrangement in the permanent exhibition “Sammlung de Weryha” in Hamburg – wrote that it was spectacular in its expression, which was why it had gained resonance in the field. He also emphasised the structural concepts of memorial compositions realised by Jan de Weryha in open spaces. These include the 1999 monument commemorating Polish women and men deported to the Neuengamme concentration camp in Hamburg after the fall of the Warsaw Uprising in 1944. It echoes 20th century ideas which revolutionised the concept of a monument as a ground-based, horizontal space. The monument's semantics are created by thirty hand-shaped granite elements (arranged on a perfectly polished, square surface consisting of thirty-six slabs, each measuring 90 by 90 cm) – “indicating the individuality of each human being. The road leading to the monument, laid out with granite gravel, is to remind one of the ordeal endured by the concentration camp inmates, condemned to extermination”¹². Sienkiewicz outlines the semantics of the monument which “in its compact –

¹¹ J. Malinowski, Posłowie [Afterword], in: Yuri Biriulow, *Rzeźba lwowska od połowy XVIII wieku do 1939 roku: od zapowiedzi klasycyzmu do awangardy* [Lviv Sculpture Since the Mid-18th Century Until 1939: From the Presage of Classicism to the Avant-Garde], Warsaw-Toruń 2007.

¹² Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański, description of the monument's concept given in 2004 to Paweł Giergoń – the editor of the sztuka.net portal, [c.f. http://www.sztuka.net/paliol.html?_Instance=sztuka&_PageID=850&_cms=newser&newsId=2100&callingPageId=851&_CheckSum=-2130716124].

thoroughly architectural arrangement/order, in a separate ascetical zone of memory, [evokes] the anonymous, doomed insurgents”¹³.

The categories identified by psychoanalysts, such as uncanniness and trauma [affecting a mind degraded by continuous psychological pressure] can be observed in the monument commemorating the victims of the Third Reich deported to Hamburg for forced labour, situated on the Schleusengraben promenade in Hamburg-Bergedorf. Weryha-Wysoczański, again, created it as an ascetical form. As Jan Wiktor Sienkiewicz emphasised, the enormous stainless steel hole in a concrete block brings to mind “a “peephole” in the door to a prison cell, [affecting] thousands of passers-by. [...] In this monument-sculpture, apart from the content code and the profound message, one can see how the Polish artist applied sculptural techniques and his experience to extremely diverse materials”¹⁴.

“Dried Flowers” – the delicate essence of phenomena

“Sammlung de Weryha” in Hamburg possesses the qualities of an “internal” exhibition, continuously and consciously transformed by the artist. For example, openwork elements with diagonal poetics were introduced, like anti-structures driven by a hurricane-force. In one of his texts Roland Barthes wrote: “Western art transforms impressions into descriptions. Haiku never describes; [...] every state of affairs is directly, steadfastly, triumphantly transformed into the most delicate essence of the phenomenon: the moment becomes literally *elusive*”¹⁵. Some of Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański’s compositions seem to carry within them the memory of Joseph Beuys’s process project – *7000 Oaks* which this legendary pacifist and intertextual artist realised within the public space of Kassel between 1982 and 1987. Beuys inaugurated the project as part of documenta 7 in 1982, successively planting the “7000 Oaks” in various locations around Kassel, the number of the trees was matched by the number of basalt “steles” laid on Friedrichsplatz in front of the Fridericianum, forming a vast triangle (of expressive “texture”). Eventually, the more trees got planted and the bigger they grew,

¹³ Jan Wiktor Sienkiewicz, *Objawienia – nie tylko w drewnie* [Revelations – Not Only in Wood], <https://www.cultureave.com/tag/jan-de-weryha-wysoczanski/?print=print-search>.

¹⁴ Jan Wiktor Sienkiewicz, *ibid.*

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, *Ukłony* [Bows], in: *Antropologia widowisk* [Anthropology of Spectacles], ed. L. Kolankiewicz, Warszawa 2005, p. 231.

the smaller the stone structure seemed. This work of process landscape art was completed in 1987 for the documenta 8 exhibition, yet its process continues¹⁶.

In the case of some of his works, Weryha-Wysoczański is open to other people's participation in the creation of aleatoric structures; thus, even those unfamiliar with art are able to experience direct contact with contemporary artistic practices that transcend conventional techniques and traditional genres. The existing photographic documentation of such creative processes evokes the beneficial energy shared by the varied communities of those gathered around the artist's most recent works, co-creating them. Here contexts include: Beuys's concept of social sculpture, as well as the "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" by Rosalind Krauss, John Dewey's "Art as Experience", and, among others, the affirmative strategies of participatory art. Mieczysław Szewczuk, while analysing the series of "Cubics" by Weryha-Wysoczański – cubical pieces intricately constructed of small elements and emanating smell of wood, found an analogy to some progressive concepts of Goethe, who, in his Weimar garden, set up a stone sphere on a stone cube to form his *Altar of Good Fortune*¹⁷. Directly experiencing the art of the Polish-German artist results in such an intense experience that it comes as an antidote to our world – oversaturated with media-constructed realities, virtual relationships, excessive stimuli, cyber-sociological strategies, etc. In her book "Art Playing Games with Architecture", Gabriela Świtek suggested bridging the gap between the physically experienced world and that of media, as they are not separate, but rather interconnected. However, while analysing the unquestionable values of experiencing the world at first hand, she mentioned several books edited by Juhani Pallasmaa, including *The Eyes of the Skin*, "a poetic essay on the significance of the sense of touch and the modality of sensual experience. Pallasmaa does not so much favour touch as she emphasises the importance of our bodies' sensual spatiality, which allows

¹⁶ Ines Seumel, *Zum Beispiel: Joseph Beuys – 7000 Eichen*, Forum Analyse und Interpretation, Kunst + Unterricht 1992, Heft 159, p. 14.

¹⁷ Mieczysław Szewczuk, *Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański – wobec minimalizmu* [Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański – Towards Minimalism], Kwartalnik Rzeźby Orońsko 2005, no. 1-2, pp. 10-13. See also: Krystyna Wilkoszewska, *Sztuka jako rytm życia. Rekonstrukcja filozofii sztuki Johna Deweya* [Art as the Rhythm of Life. Reconstruction of John Dewey's Philosophy of Art], Universitas, Kraków 2003; Rosalind Krauss, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, October 1979 no. 8; Magdalena Howorus-Czajka, *Tropami wielokrotności. Strategie powtórzenia w sztuce polskiej lat 60. i 70. XX wieku* [Tracing Multitude. Strategies of Repetition in Polish Art of the 1960s and 1970s], Gdańsk 2019; Alfred Wiśniewski (1916-2011). *Orphic Forces*, ex. cat., director Zbigniew Buski, texts: Alfred Wiśniewski, Katarzyna Wiśniewska-Kępińska, Dorota Grubba-Thiede, Małgorzata Dąbrowska, graphic design Miłosz Thiede, translation to English Katarzyna Podpora, State Art Gallery in Sopot, 28 October 2016 - 11 December 2016; *O aspektach pozornego chłodu sztuki i minimalności* [On the Apparent Coldness of Art and Minimalism] in: Witold Czerwonka. *O braku symetrii*. [Witold Czerwonka. On the Lack of Symmetry], ex. cat. curators and editors Jolanta Ciesielska, Danuta Ćwirk-Godycka, graphic design Wojciech Zamiara PGS Sopot 1999; Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, New York 2012.

us to experience the coolness of shade, the warmth of a city square bathed in sunlight, the acoustics of architecture, the silence of solitude, the spaces of scent, the shape of touch, the taste of stone, or the space of memory and imagination”¹⁸.

In recent years, a clear parallel, a shift even, can be observed in the work of Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański, whose precise thinking and construction skills result in captivating effects, e.g. in a series where light is treated subjectively, reminding one of star maps and electro-magnetic fields, while at the same time discreetly alluding to the legendary achievements of the Zero Group, founded in the late 1950s in Düsseldorf by Heinz Mack and Otto Piene, later joined by Günther Uecker. This was mentioned in 2018 by Axel Feuß in his impressive text *Jan de Weryha – Modern Abstract Art in Wood*¹⁹. Some of the artist’s latest projects call game fields to mind, potentially inspiring competition; thus, they evoke associations with post-conceptual art, but also, for example, with the ancient Chinese game of GO – extremely complex and obliging neither of the sides to actually win, simply inspiring concentration, focus, self-development and a sense of purpose in the undertaken actions.

[Translation from Polish to English by Katarzyna Podpora]

¹⁸ Gabriela Świtak, *Gry sztuki z architekturą: nowoczesne powinowactwa i współczesne integracje* [Art Playing Games with Architecture: Modern Affinities and Contemporary Integrations], Toruń 2013, pp. 75-76. Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin. Architecture and the Senses*, Wiley & Sons, London 2005, pp. 46-72.

¹⁹ See Axel Feuß, *Jan de Weryha – Modern Abstract Art in Wood*, Porta-Polonica 2018: <https://www.porta-polonica.de/en/atlas-of-remembrance-places/jan-de-weryha-wysoczanski?singlepage=yes>.