

The forces of things are not immanent, but accumulations in eternal currents that we, with hands and techniques, attempt to lead certain places

by Kristine Annabell Torp, 2018

“We have learned nothing in twelve thousand years,” said Picasso after having visited the caves in Altamira, where he, spellbound, had seen the cave wall’s paintings, made by people who were living many thousands of years ago. Or, that’s how the story goes, although there’s nothing to suggest that Picasso ever visited the caves at all or that he would have expressed any special fascination about the phenomenon.¹ A closer examination of this favorite quote that, moreover, is found in several quick-witted variants, including *“after Altamira, everything is decadence”*, supports the assumption that it is most likely an aphorism that has not only arisen from Picasso’s fascination for the bull as a motive but also testifies to some sort of collective and astounding realization in the meeting with prehistoric art. Because upon beholding the animal groups that have been drawn with charcoal on the undulating walls of the caves in Altamira, in Lascaux and in Chauvet, it really becomes clear to us that art is in possession of an existential dimension, a human sounding board that we share across millennia. Often, we are fascinated by art’s creative aspect: by art as the faculty that propels evolution, that gives rise to ruptures, change and movement, and which is an implement for overcoming limitations in our way of thinking. But when we see the animal paintings and all the handprints, which, as red-colored positives and negatives, offer testimony about an attempt to immortalize the individual human being’s presence inside the cave – and on the earth, we come to realize that art also possesses a material and transcending aspect. Art is also a tool for sharing the experience of what it means to be human, and an implement for being in the body, enabling us to bear the certainty of death by justifying our limited lifetime through the poetic and through the fact that one, as a human being, is part of a chain – part of a larger community.

Maybe the prehistorian and cave expert, Jean Clottes, who has been studying prehistoric art for nothing less than an epoch, has been tempted to puff red paint across his hands onto the cave wall in Chauvet, in order to make his presence immortal, along with the other *homo spiritualis*, which he proposes as a more humble alternative for all of us, rather than the more cocksure *homo sapiens*, the rational man.² If we discount science's categorization and look at the language that has been growing forth through centuries of usage, then we can see – through etymological migrations – that the word for human being, *man* is connected to the word *hand*, e.g. via the Sanskrit word *manus*, for human being, and the Latin word *manus*, for hand.³ The question about which connections lie farthest back in time and the question of how the cave dwellers' words have arisen are riddles that we will never come to answer but when the linguists have set out to make a deep exploration of all our words, they've found their way to a certain few words that seem to have outlived fifteen thousand years of sedimentary deposits and changes.⁴ Among these words we find, precisely, *hand* and *man*. As the mammals and gregarious animals we are, it seems obvious that words like *mother*, *hear*, *you*, *I* and *we* would also be included in this exclusive set of primeval-words. What is equally obvious, however, is that the words *fire*, *bark* and *ashes* are also enumerated among these primeval-words, since these point toward a fundamental self-understanding that we can still recognize and that have to do with the hand and its accomplishments. For the hand is not only an important surface of contact between our bodies and the surrounding world, and therefore the point we choose to portray and perpetuate on the cave walls: the hand's capability, its transformational relationship with the world, has enabled us to take fate into our own hands. We are also *homo faber* – the creating human being.

Through technique, with unobtrusive drama, all the quivering interspaces between wood forces, geological forces and human forces are brought forth

With the hands, we use tools to create fire. And with the ash and the charcoal from whatever's left behind after the bonfires, we drew pictures that disclosed a cosmology. The fire and the charcoal and the depictions of oxen inside the cave were the results of a technical investigation, where meaning was brought forth, encountering a material with its own premises. "Technique is a probe oriented toward the material's differences and it

is developed only through the concrete surface of contact,”⁵ writes architect Peter Bertram in his book, *Frembringelse*. It wouldn't be too much to say that the human being's forms of thinking arise in dialogue with the material, through technique. In our meeting with the cave paintings, we get a sense of how art, science and philosophy are conjoined on a deeper level, and we also come to sense how our modern urges toward creating order and toward fragmenting are carrying us away from an interconnectedness between body and world. The same sensation arises in the encounter with Rex's works, wherein this primeval order delineates itself as a complex and nonetheless simple synthesis between human being, material, technique and meaning. The works seem to have come into being as intuitive explorations, where earlier processes and experiences with technique and materials fashion the foundations and where meaning arises in parallel with the actual appearance. The works, taken together, can be regarded as a study in the relationship between *making* and *thinking* and as a study of how meaning arises in the oscillation between the two – with technique as the mitigating element.

In this way, Rex's works can be seen as results, not only of investigations into what technique can bring forth, but also of how technique itself is developed when body and material are assigned equal weight in the investigation; this serves to further underscores an important analogous dimension of Rex's explorations. For the same reason, some of the tools take on the character of being art works, and the decision about when an object is finished is, apparently, rarely predetermined. In Rex's work, the templates, the shapes, the steam-, the bending- and the splitting-contraptions are all in possession of their own meanings, and the workshop constitutes a hidden, almost mythical, sensuous bottom in the works, which play a part in giving them *aura*.

The formation of space that the workshop contributes toward bringing forth in Rex's art works is both very concrete and very abstract, and in the gallery's white rooms, the object-like works of art turn into small satellites from a tactile laboratory, about which we do not know the exact circumstances. The situation is somewhat different with the piece, *Drawing Machine*, where workshop, process and artwork are amalgamated, and the piece becomes a clear example indicating that Rex's activity can be described through words

that have their source in the ancient Greek *tekhne*,⁶ words like ‘architecture’, the Danish ‘*tegne*’ (for drawing), and ‘technique’. The room-sized drawing machine stands as an analogous technical marvel and unites a centuries old, finely-embossed pendulum technique with the humblest of present day’s writing implements – the cheapest ballpoint pen, in order to generate something that comes close to magic maps, which – among other things – manage to reveal one of nature’s fundamental codes: The Fibonacci Series. The piece stands forth as one moment’s balance in the story of mankind and machine, and confirms to us that human being’s techniques are also nature’s and that what is being unfurled between the large pendulums and the little bitty ballpoint pen’s ballpoint is a powerful connection between geological forces and human forces.

The same forces are on the move, only in a quieter way, in the art works where hand-sized wooden pieces have been turned on a lathe, have had magnets inserted and have then been sanded down – or finished with a spokeshave – into tactually attractive objects, which belong together in pairs that are facing each other with a vibrating gap, inasmuch as a thin string fastened to the floor holds the one object at some distance from the other object, which is anchored to the ceiling. In the pieces with the unfolded planks, there are similarly silent power exchanges. But despite these wooden pieces’ and the magnet works’ hushed characters, they are also the results of negotiations between nature’s different forces, where the human being, with its intentions and implements stands across from the wood’s tensions and from geology’s gravity, in meetings where violence is never practiced but where the outer poles in the relations are being investigated, anyway. To what extent can the individual planks be bent, stretched out and steamed? And how can the magnets’ distance and strength be controlled in relation to the wooden objects’ sizes and shapes? Only by developing the technique in the meeting with the materials does Rex find the interspaces that enable the objects’ magical quivering and charge them with potentiality. As is the case with seeds, with stretched archery bows and with new encounters, we are not in doubt about the powers that Rex’s artworks possess. At the same time, there is a sensibility about the relative, insofar as the jump in scale in the investigation of the unfolded wood affects not only the relationship between wood forces and human forces but also bears on how these forces can be controlled differently,

according to what the objects are going to be used for: the very large unfolded pieces of wood could be bearing pillars or oars, while the small and thin ones are set together in egg-shaped rings which, in the composition, become sufficiently splendid and safe enough for being able to protect that which we cherish the most.

Material monuments, pocket monuments and the magic of sensation: architecture is not about space but about interspace

When we talk about oars, eggs and pillars in the meeting with Rex's works, this is because, in parallel with the art work's weighting of workmanship and technique, as such, there always seems to be an object at the end of the process. The works are never pure process studies, but engender associations to objects of utility without necessarily having, on that account, an actual program. This serves to impart an interspatial character to them because they evade the categories while simultaneously pointing toward something familiar, just like those few objects in the national history collections that, inside the exhibition's vitrines, are labeled "unknown use areas". Just like these undefined, albeit recognizable, prehistoric museum objects, Rex's works are silent, while at the same time they are pervaded with hundreds of generations of voices and techniques which, as a polyphonic choir, chime in according the same fundamental rhythm, following the actual primeval melody. We come to think of the Inuit people's sunglasses, kayaks and coastal maps, which have been carved right into the edge, on pieces of bone or wood. We see baskets and containers that are interwoven, cut and shaped in way that runs across human history. Through the art works, we understand that it is possible for an object to carry our aggregate experience in itself. In this undefined and consequently liberated accumulation of echoes in the works, there is a monumentality that arises, a monumentality that folds substance and meaning together – quite unlike much of the picture monumentality and image cultivation by which we are surrounded today, and which represents a simulated world, now most recently through *deep fake*, about which we can never have any certainty.

This form of authentic monumentality is also present in the room-sized piece, *Retrium*, in Koldinghus, which, in all its simplicity, activates all the senses: inside the circular shaped

room, encircled by thin vertical pieces of spruce wood, Rex lets the overhead light descend over the circle's scorched interior side, where aromatic particles from the charred pieces of wood collide with the sound waves that are being absorbed by the many small, coal-black fissures in the burnt wood that, upon being touched, would deposit soot on the skin, like a small gift from the art work. We remember that one of the primeval words was ash, and in glimpses of the great collective memory, we see prettified torsos, ash decorations, bonfires and ceremonies. Like others of Rex's works, *Retrium* contains an inherent duration, which awakens resonances inside our bodies, that still are incontestably formed by environments characterized by trees, winds, stones, fire, snow and plants – to put it succinctly, by that which – in the popular jargon – is called 'nature'. In Rex's decoration in the foyer of the International Criminal Court in The Hague, the piece that is titled *Linear Volume*, the circle appears again, and when you think of these two works in connection with each other – *Retrium* and *Linear Volume* – it becomes clear that there is a connection between the circular ring around the bonfire and the highest of all institutions – the law. In one way, the two circular meeting rooms – the bonfire circle and the *thing* [the legislature] – embody the most fundamental institutions in our civilization, and it is as if Rex, through *Linear Volume*, were embracing the seriousness of the place by refining the technique to its utmost expression. With great precision in the approach, in the construction, and in the formation of space, the work consists of a series of long linear sequences of wooden pieces which, from two diametrically different directions, meet, intermesh and then come to form a circular and focused volume before returning to their starting points. The piece, in this way, reflects the building's axes and program, where prosecutors and defense attorneys hold forth on their own respective sides of the foyer's longitudinal axis, and where the volume forms a central point in relation to the meeting between these respective sides, the courtroom's entrance, and the room's vertical axis.

Unpretentious in a different kind of way, but equally site specific, are the small architectonic works from Sejerø, where existing and found materials are assembled into small spaces that carry on a poetic dialogue with their surroundings. It does not seem unthinkable that spending an afternoon inside the little house, which stands buckled

firmly atop a stone at the water's edge, with one of the *Drawing Machine's* maps in the hands, could teach somebody more about life and the world than a whole year spent in front of a computer ever could. This and Rex's other works incite us, in any event, to reflect on the meanings of actual substance and things, at a time when digital realities are taking up more and more space. The pieces disclose, through their conserving materialism, where we are coming from – and what we are going to need to hold onto, firmly, as long as we've got a body. In the same round, they point out a way leading around the material over-consumption, because we are being reminded that things can have a spirituality, that they can be much-needed monuments at a time when friction-less networks are threatening to pare down any meaning and difference. Monuments, which have between them large palpitating interspaces, and which bear within themselves the story of the body and culture. Genuine architecture is perhaps to be found in an egg-shaped basket, in the nomad's pocket monument, the space of which is dreaming and extensive, or inside a bowl that mirrors the sky or is made of earth. Inside the spacious Grundtvig Church in Copenhagen, every single one of the bricks has been struck and laid in place by human hands, and it is this alluring and simultaneously present and impalpable layer that infuses spirituality into the lofty ecclesiastical space, because without this layer of meaning, of human exchange, the room merely consists of quantitative coordinates. The cave in Chauvet went from being cave to being architecture because we ascribed meaning to the cave's space and because we decorated its walls with representations about a certain cosmology.

Spaces can be measured in light years, in millimeters, in strings and in steps, while the measuring unit of the interspaces is the individual's dream

Between some of the cave paintings, five thousand years have passed. However, this fact can only be detected through carbon analyses. From this, we can deduce that our ancestors were living in some other form of temporality, where five thousand years did not appreciably represent visible epochs and changing expressions and cultures. Their world was characterized by a continuity that we, as modern people, can almost not comprehend. Our temporality is progressive and accelerating. And for us, the future is opaque and unpredictable: we only know that it's going to be different than the present.

We cannot even know with any degree of certainty where we, as a species, are headed for, whether evolution is transpiring in our favor or whether other forms of intelligence, which we have orchestrated ourselves, are going to be the next stage in the development. Perhaps some of us will come to make their marks in history as evolution's winners, in the form of *homo deus*, as historian Yuval Noah Harari predicts will be the next possible stage of development for mankind; this presumably presupposes a shift from humanism to dataism.⁷ The ruminations might appear to be vast and distant, but we also know for sure that our bodies are in a completely different situation than they were just fifty years ago. Not only because of the digital space, but also in the biotechnological and medical respects. From here, the question about art's conserving material aspect arises, because the human body, as frontier outpost and as identity in an increasingly boundless world, might be situated in the midst of a paradigm shift. One could raise the objection that placing a question mark alongside the digitalization of man and space is conservative. But as long as we have a body, we have a need to relate to a sensuous world, where the spaces are filled with interspace and where they mean something. The *Drawing Machine* piece serves as a confirmation to us that this is indeed the case. For who would be fascinated to the same extent by a digital version of the same machine that printed exactly the same result, purely graphically? In the large analogue drawing machine, physics, poetry and technique are being fused together in the quest for *something* that we do not know the answer to. And when the large map is delineated, we can – spellbound – admire the patterns that, as variations on a code, appear to touch upon art, science and philosophy. In this way, the large pendulum, pushed into motion by a human hand, is in itself in possession of the question about which of these three faculties came first and about whether they are anchored one and the same foundation. Exactly the same thought that the cave paintings give rise to. After twelve thousand years, maybe *we have learned nothing*. But at least there's somebody who remembers what we knew at that time.

Translated by DAN A. MARMORSTEIN

¹ Paul Bahn, 'A Lot of Bull? Pablo Picasso and Ice Age cave art', *Homenaje a Jesús Altna* (San Sebastian: MUNIBE,

² Jean Clottes, *What Is Paleolithic Art? Cave Paintings and the Dawn of Human Creativity*, (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2016) 29

³ George Hempel, 'Etymologies', *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (The John Hopkins University Press, 1901) 426-431, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/288335>

⁴ Mark Pagel, Quentin D. Atkinson, Andreea S. Calude, and Andrew Meade, 'Ultraconserved words point to deep language ancestry across Eurasia', *PNAS* May 6, 2013. Edited by Colin Renfrew, (University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom, and approved April 15, 2013) <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1218726110>

⁵ Peter Bertram, *Frembringelse, Den arkitektoniske proces* (Kunstakademiets Arkitektskoles Forlag, Copenhagen, 2011) 22

⁶ www.etymonline.com: 'tekhne': art, skill, craft in work; method, system, an art, a system or method of making or doing.

⁷ Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus, A Brief History of Tomorrow* (Harvill Secker, London, 2015)