

Vessels - About the floating body and space for the abstract darkness

by Nina Wöhlk, 2018

Two truths approach each other. One comes from inside, the other from outside, and where they meet we have a chance to catch sight of ourselves. - Tomas Tranströmer, excerpt from *Preludes II*. That's what the Swedish poet and psychologist Tomas Tranströmer (1931-2015) writes about the complex in presences that arises in a shift from a singular to a multi-faceted understanding. A displacement in established views that an emergence of the complex can engender, nourishing movability and fluidity, conjoining polar positions, and loosening up for static praxes and categorical thinking. It is in the light of these thoughts, which Tranströmer sets in motion, that I see Eske Rex's genre-displacing praxis. The methodological transgression of customary approaches can be found in his work, and seems to be nurtured by a presence of movability in his works, which are perpetually rotating and turning. With the naked eye, some are perceived as quivering, through the means of which an inner tension emits a sense of the actual material's potential. Accordingly, the series of works has been titled *Unfolded plank*, where roughly sawn planks of oak wood have been cut up on the narrow segments and subsequently steamed, after which the open – and now bisected – ends are being twisted apart from each other. While the opposite end continues as it had originally extended, this is now visibly altered, in the spot where the twist in the plank's length manifests this inherent tension in the wood. Movement is being pursued in work-series like *Divided Self* and *Measuring Space*, where horizontally cut circular objects are being held vertically stretched by thin lines that are pulling them apart from each other, while magnets placed in the wood are pulling them toward each other. There is a continuous dialogue existing between the art works and the force of gravity, and the kinetic objects become easily influenced by the visitors' presence close to them, by small tremors and by wind that causes them to rotate and vibrate. There is a simplicity and a contemplative tranquility over these works as well as an apparent uniformity that, upon closer inspection, discloses itself as covering over a genuine diversity among the individual objects, where no one of them proves to be identical to any other. An understanding of what is unproductive about

genre definitions is pursued as one circles her/his way into the artist's practice. Since the work-object has a central position in Rex's work, it would be imprecise to call him an 'installation artist', notwithstanding the fact that in works like *Udtræk* [Extraction], there is a high degree of dispersion and behaving in relation of the surrounding space. Likewise, it would not be appropriate to call Rex a 'conceptual artist', because he would never transfer the process of creation to somebody else, because he is sensitive to the material's inherent properties and because he assesses the tactile form of appearance as being very important. His interdisciplinary work, on the other hand, seems to be inquiring into what the objects actually are and is to be regarded as a kind of unfolded thinking in and through sculpture. Not in the manner of philosophical illustration, on a par with conceptual art, but rather as an exploration of material, form and space.

Balancing towards an openness

Even more challenging it is to unfold, instead, the themes and interdisciplinary research that run like a red thread through the art works and are characteristic of Rex's praxis. In the *Divided Self* series, red lines are being used that vertically, within the space, distend the two head-shaped wooden shells of which the work consists, in order to delineate the connection between a positive and negative space and also in order to connect and give form to the space around the individual objects. In the dialogue with the encircling spatiality, the art works are wrested free from their autonomous and absolute status. Even the object-oriented work series, *Vessel*, couples the works, in a similar way, with the circumjacent space, through the means of the palpable veil of almost translucent wood of steamed lamellae and its thin skeleton structures. Thus, the immediate experience of movement is not inherent in the works' physical change or in the material's quivering but also in the transgressions of the independent object in contact with the circumjacent space. It is in the spatially present that Rex frames in the human action in relation to the gaps – in relation to the air and in relation to physical structures that frame in our world. The art works become implements in the visualization of the relation between them, body and space. In addition to the visualization of the 'gap', Rex makes use of the objects in order to physically enter and contrast the lightness or the weight inside a space, through the means of which he – moreover – often balances against a preferred openness. In this way,

the works are not isolated but are rather situated within their way of responding to a scale, a material or a historicity.

The bodily darkness

What is simultaneously distinctive about Rex's site-specific works is that one finds a concentration of layers of meaning, which – through the lens of philosophical and physical thinking – provide access to existential considerations about the relationship between light and darkness. This can be experienced in his work *Retrium's* connection to darkness, to transitional rites and death. Created specifically for Koldinghus, the spatial installation has been built up of charred wood, following the Japanese conserving *Shou-Sugi Ban* technique, and forms a silo that is held together by rods of steel and sturdy iron fastenings, which, as rebuffing barbed wire encircling the rotunda, contributes toward underscoring the securing of the dark enclosure. The wood has been charred on one side and darkens the rotunda's inner side, while the outer side is in possession of the spruce battens original light-colored nuances, and the art work accordingly refers both to Koldinghus's past as a fortification and the conflagration in 1808 that served to alter the place by laying the castle in ruins. The exterior makes its appearance as an entrenchment and as a defense while the enclosure of the rotunda is in possession of a present and intimate character, through the means of which the experience of *Retrium's* interior and the traces of the artisanship in the materials come to contextualize the symbolic layers of the work. An analogy can be set up for the relationship between the bright outer side and the dark inner side in the thought around the intellect, reason, and the rational light as symbols that were established during the Enlightenment, standing opposite to the bodily and formless darkness, which draws on concepts like sensations and feelings. Rex actually trains a special gaze on the play between the light and the darkness and on the sensitivity and realization that can be found in the twilight, where the light and the darkness converge. It is actually through this means that there lies an experiential potential which is different from reason, and it is right here, in the transgressive space, that rationality converges with the formless darkness; it is here that the abstract and the transformative are to be found.

Everything that lives, not vegetative life alone, emerges from darkness and, however strong its natural tendency to thrust itself into the light, it nevertheless needs the security of darkness to grow at all. Hannah Arendt

The metaphorical meanings of darkness in Western culture are, generally speaking, predominately something negative. On the contrary, an awareness of its embedded transformative potential irrigates the understanding of darkness as being something threatening. Our understanding of darkness as something threatening is bound up with the irrational and the non-controllable, and we often forget that our experiences with darkness tell us that things can be different. For example, in order for us to be able to sleep and to step into the recreational and creative darkness, we've got to shut off the intellect and place our rationality on hold. During sleep, darkness is a blessing. In the recreative darkness, there is a sensibility that places us in connection with the creative and embodies the abstraction we know from art. Upon approaching the abstraction with its transformative power, we've got to put the intellect and rationality on 'pause' and move our way, through art, toward a sensibility. In order to get closer to a way of thinking that takes the experiences seriously, we need to bring darkness into the world we are in now and we need to restore a greater balance between light and darkness in such a way that we are not attempting to dominate this. In the direction of a greater diversity, we need to modulate our way of thinking by making the idea of the exalted light a little bit more porous.

The container and the morphological potential of darkness

Nature contains, as does darkness, the unpredictable and morphological potential and fashions a counterpart to culture's Enlightenment. In ancient times and during medieval times, nature's forms were perceived as ramifications of Spirit: as celestial prototypes that held matter and spiritual weight together. This links up to another aspect of Rex's praxis, which has to do with the fact that several of his works enter into dialogue with universal primary spaces, in their reminiscences about primitive containers or dwellings, which the English term *nest* so tellingly encapsulates, with its embrace of the animal's crib and the human being's private place for retreat. Rex's series of works with the

collective title, *Doko*, is a protective enclosure, which forms an egg-shaped crib or a uterus, and serves as a fine example of this. *Vessel* is another series of ‘individuals’, which one is tempted to call the distinctive full-body-sized works that, in different ways – with their skeleton-like structures or the refined re-working of wood – are miming the Egyptian sarcophagus’s dark place of rest, a futuristic container or the butterfly’s larvae out in nature. Some of the ‘individuals’, like *Retrium* and *Retræterum* [Retreat Room], have a slit or a crack that conjoins the enclosure with the encircling bright room, by means of which the twilight, which lays claim to the (re)creative, abstract and transformative, is brought forth. In Rex’s universe there is order – never chaos. However, there is an active tension to be found in the works that dominate their surroundings with a quivering silence. Even in the embracing *Doko*, each and every strip is an expanded plank. Never does it become stagnant.

In addition to the fact that Rex is working methodically in order to achieve a multifaceted expression that does not get locked into one or more categories but rather contributes to a greater porosity among them, the reading of the works effectuates – in the works’ presence in the gap and in what is complex – a movement toward a more open way of thinking. In reference to the analogy of darkness and its significance today, this would suggest taking the experiences we have of its transformative potential and Rex’s presence in the genre-displacing – in between polar positions – more seriously.

Translated by DAN A. MARMORSTEIN
