

Concrete Seeing

On Max Bühlmann's Walk-on Sculptures

Jacques Rancière once said that the sublime is wholly contained in personal experience – in an experience determined by the balance of power between reason and imagination, thinking and fantasy. This concept of the sublime applies to my perception of Max Bühlmann's walk-on sculptures.

Our approach to things always involves a process of resolving a predetermined distance. And there is no possibility of reducing this situation solely to something that can be dealt with rationally. Concrete things cannot be placed in perspective. And they also escape pure abstraction.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Max Bühlmann has extended his concrete work in painting to work in three-dimensional space. He calls this series of works *Begehbar – Betretbar*, ('Walk-on / Step-on'). As in his work as a painter, these objects deal with the tonal values of perception and the awareness of the distance of the step between the concrete world and visual thinking. Bühlmann's object-boxes, panelled grid constructions, abstract board architecture (often made of materials from the building industry), trellis-ways and net-bracing usually stand outdoors, although they are sometimes also found in the *white spaces* of the art business. Often they have rhetorical titles: *Der Mähdrescher* ('The Combine Harvester'), *Die Malerkapelle* ('The Painter's Chapel'), *Hothouse Y*.

Bühlmann indicates that, by using these elements, he is not concerned with an abstract reductionist representation of spatial relationships, but rather with a matrix, which is based on a more comprehensive system of relations than a systematic minimalist one.

One of the intentions of Bühlmann's walk-on objects is to conceive of the relationship of the picture to architecture as a broad one, constructing new frameworks in order to counteract that short-circuiting of the perception of architectural objects and sculptures which reduces the surroundings to the background and favours the structure of the surface.

As in the figure of the sublime described by Rancière, these abstracting objects constitute the interface between the observer as one who is always interpreting, who sees his place as being the centre of perception, and the concrete world which he continually has to

reconstruct within himself. They are, so to speak, figures in which this separation is expressed and presented as a form. They are figures which both represent this separation and are placed within it, they are placed and place themselves, construct themselves and in doing so leave, as it were, their pictorial nature and cross over to real space as perceptual images.

Seen from this point of view, Max Bühlmann's sculptures are 'inventions of site' in both meanings of the word 'invention', as something discovered and as something fantastical, invented spaces and spatial fantasies, which turn towards both the viewer and the surrounding space. As sculptures they explore how a temporary object influences spatial perception and restructures a place. This critical function is in particular fulfilled by the walk-on boxes, which Bühlmann has placed outdoors in natural surroundings, on landscape borders. Through the fact that the place is designated and named by what is placed there and that the act of placing the objects there gives new order to the space, the form of the objects makes the viewer aware of the work of perception and of the exclusion that is part of the process. The separation of construction and nature is presented as being something rather fragile.

Bühlmann developed these works from a way of painting which involves balancing the values of colour and surface in a picture, a process that often lasts for years. This research work on the surface and on colour perception formed the basis for the walk-on sculptures and made it possible for Bühlmann to exactly balance the problem of the context, of the relationship of his objects to the surrounding space and to the site and the material conditions. In doing so, he proceeds from a notion of sculpture which conceives of the site as a context that is also changed by the sculpture and regards the sculpture, the surrounding space and perception as realities that determine and change one another. This approach not only extends the notion of sculpture to the possibility of spatial utilisation, but also relates to the knowledge that the work constructs, as it were, its surroundings. Max Bühlmann's walk-on sculptures can only be understood in this context; to interpret them as abstract, post-minimalist objects is to go down a wrong track which has been marked out by art history. It is precisely the perceptual structure which inscribes itself in and on the objects. Very much like the work of the sublime as mentioned by Rancière.

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