

Paper, metal and wood

Christine D. Hölzig in conversation with Dirk Richter

CDH: You studied sculpture at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste Dresden (Dresden Academy of Fine Arts) and graduated with a diploma. For your final year project you created tectonically built, wooden sculptures. It would be interesting to know how a classical trained sculptor comes to use paper as a material.

DR: Gradually. In the last months of my studies, I was engaged with the materials cardboard and paperboard. At that time I was developing space-studies as a basis for the sculptures I would then construct out of wood plate.

Immediately after my studies I lacked all basic equipment needed to continue my work with wood, clay and stone. That is; the materials, the tools and enough studio space. This situation necessitated a re-orientation of my practise. Thus paper and cardboard became the focus of my engagement with surface, space and shape, as these materials represented a cost effective medium, with no requirement for high tech equipment.

I especially liked the potential to create form out of two-dimensional materials, and the simplicity of working with these materials I found fascinating. Soon thoughts on durability and outdoor installation began to develop and I started to create some of my cardboard sculptures in sheet metal. The designs made of metal and paper developed from one another and led to new versions.

CDH: How did your work develop from figurative to geometric shape, despite a heavy focus on the human figure at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts?

DR: I always had a great fascination with shapes of an organic nature. However, I was rarely interested in the complete representation of a human body, animal or plant. To a greater extent I was enthused by the specific details of bodies. It was in these details I discovered interesting contours of shapes and remarkable configurations of mass and its opposing vacuity.

The direct citing of organic shapes became more and more discomforting to me. My sculptures remained to be fragments of the underlying shapes of nature that I was referring to. For this reason I started working with geometric shapes. I translated the organic archetype into a different stylistic language that corresponds to the character of the material I was working with. It was liberation. Now I was able to play with all shapes and materials without restraint and let all sorts of associations flow into my work.

CDH: Until today, it seems that the translation of structures of nature into an artistic form is one of the basic elements of your work.

DR: A reference to the shapes that I discover when studying nature is always present, although not always obvious, but more in an indirect way. The reference not only arises from seeing, absorbing and outlining nature, but also from the associations that emerge during the development process. The allusion to nature also evolves from the playful nature of constructing. Nevertheless, I do get significant inspiration from the structures present in nature. The organisation of its single parts, its configuration and proportions flow into my sculptures and objects.

CDH: What basically happens when you cut and fold paper? Is it the transformation of a plane into a corporal object?

DR: On the one hand there is that, on the other hand I have found this mode of working allows me to express ideas and references through the material spontaneously. Considering that my way of working very rarely allows for corrections – a crease or cut cannot be undone – it is important to be able to create a new version of an idea quickly. I find this possible when working in paper and cardboard.

CDH: Does it happen that an idea in the process of its realisation - that is developing from a sketched idea on paper, to its completed three-dimensional form – changes or turns out to be unachievable?

DR: An object drawn on paper is only ever a vision of a potential reality. The constructed three-dimensional object is then reality itself. In this process there is inevitably unforeseeable changes, but it is these divergences that makes the adventure of art so alluring. The realisation of an idea is not mandatory. Any result gives experiences that can be of use to me and continue to engage me.

CDH: What role does chance play?

DR: I embrace accidents or unpredicted happenings. Quite often I intentionally create circumstances that provoke the unpredictable.

CDH: In reference to the way you develop your shapes. Your works are characterised by precision and clarity, yet often they are accompanied by playful elements. What is it that is embodied in these elements?

DR: To allow both; precision and playfulness, provides a balance for me between the rational and emotional components within the process of my work. If I succeed to transfer this balance into my work, the resulting objects obtain a harmony, which is very important to me. The engagement with different materials and the simultaneous engagement with two-dimensional and three-dimensional composition, contribute to this balance. The arrangement of planes, or the volume of a material, for example, is the rational aspect. The associative play with single shapes, on the other hand, accounts for the emotive part of my work, which subsequently effects the observer's perception.

CDH: In your latest exhibitions you are showing not only works of paper, but more frequently objects made out of different materials like metal or wood. Are these materials an expansion on your practice?

DR: No, in retrospect paper was the first material I worked with. It has remained the dominant material for the last few years. Nowadays I choose a material, which corresponds to the concern that I want to express. Wood, paper and metal each have unique qualities, which I can use to express these concerns. Wood has the favourable properties of rigidity and resilience in relation to its weight. Metal, which I work with in the form of wire and sheet metal, appeals to me because of its malleability and its high tensile strength per volume. I appreciate paper as it is easily manipulated, either flat or when used in three-dimensional arrangements. Working with paper gives a variety of possibilities: bending, cutting, creasing, folding and crumpling, as well as simple gluing, clipping or even stitching. Characteristics like transparency, various shades and a choice of paper stock, increase its potential. In addition, abundant availability makes it easily accessed.

CDH: Do you have particular paragons or artists that have greatly influenced you?

DR: There are artists from many different epochs whose works have inspired me, but I cannot rank their influence on me. Coming across Minimal Art was an experience that influenced me strongly, as did my engagement with contemporary representatives of Constructivism, Concrete Art and of Arte Povera. These have all contributed to the development of my current approach. Presently I have a growing interest in concepts from the fields of Land Art, Architecture and Design. Thus many inspirations flow into one another and influence my work. To name them all would make a long list, but would include: Eduardo Chillida, Lucio Fontana, Ulrich Rückriem, Hermann Glöckner, Donald Judd, Franz Erhard Walther, Rudolf Wachter, Franz Bernhard, Claus Bury, Erwin Heerich, Sean Scully, Andy Goldsworthy and David Nash.

CDH: I know that you have, in your studio, a huge box containing 3D-sketches in their finished materials - your sketchbook so to speak. How do you work with these?

DR: I have to formalise my ideas in some way. The least of which is a sketch on paper, but even better is a three-dimensional sketch in the material it will be. There are phases in my work in which I play with the arrangement within a single plane, or the volume of a material without following a concrete idea. Using these 2D or 3D compositions, I search for new possibilities in a playful way. Each phase in the work process is an elaboration on the preceding phase. If all the options or ideas are explored and new ideas exhausted, then the existing state will be taken as the final result. If a sketch is not being developed upon, then it will disappear into my box of thoughts. This being a one hundred year old linen chest. From there I can restart the process of trial and error, without being directly influenced by the former results. Merely the memory of the method, the proportions and the finding of its shape, continue to have their effect. Freeing my thoughts to find new starting points so that directions and processes change. For me my 'chest of sketches' is a kind of 'fundamental research' that I draw on when searching for expressions in a certain context.

CDH: Do you work on several objects simultaneously?

DR: There are always numerous inchoate sculptures that are quasi in a waiting loop. For the sake of their material presence, they are exposed to all my associations, which means they are worked on even though they are just standing there. If I am working, and stagnate at a certain point, I just turn to a dormant sculpture and work on it for a while. This lets me achieve a constructive separation from the object I was working on. Soon I am able start working with it again.