

Concerning the splitting of and the living with wood or:

OF A SCULPTOR'S CALCULATED RISK _____

The title of the catalogue obviously raises ambivalent associations. One could initially think of a radioactive nuclide mixture set free by nuclear fission or for that matter caused by reactor casualties ending up uncontrollably in our environment. Cleavage products is what Peter Helmstetter calls a more recent series of sculptures in which he decided to use the most original and atavistic way of wood processing. Astounding and most peculiar is that by means of the splitting technique the sculptor is able to express a holistic approach.

His resource is always good for a surprise. Felled timber is able to change in volume and shape and to emit scent and noises, even after centuries. While sculptors in former times strove after an unchangeable appearance, the 20th century capitalized on the vivacity of wood for its esthetics.

In modern tradition derived directly from the principal form, totemic wood sculptures were already those steles, Helmstetter created before his cleavage products. It is in these sculptures that he realized a vast spectrum of abstract ideas with impressive consistency. In part these works carried some of the geometric aspects of early historic Megalith, yet all of his sculptures were constructed of organic material immediately responding to climatic conditions as stone does.

Helmstetter relied on the internal dynamics of wood in his line of works called *twist, spring, bow*. For that he cut vertically erected beams lengthwise with a chainsaw and waited for the laths to gradually incline out of their original position. His filigreed fanned out erected steles were like his windowed fresh twists, symbols for the relentless force of nature, simultaneously for the arbitrary act of man in dealing with nature.

With his sculpture *Lebensbaum* (Tree of Life) Helmstetter explored nature's reaction to an egregious invasion. He allowed a triangular profiled steel bar, notched as a precisely fitted negative form, to grow into the longitudinal furrow of the living trunk. The artificially injured tree wasn't able to do anything but accept the "Prosthesis", with the times even enclosed at the edges there-with incorporating foreign matter.

Though Helmstetter visualized processes of change and non-compliance in his earlier works by means of kinetic wood sculptures which quasi moved as if in an endless slow motion, his cleavage products are metaphors of its in entire ambivalence plain entity.

The beginning was set by the *Eichensäulen* (Oak Columns) of 2006 (Ill. p. 9). The posts of the imaginary gate were made up by a trunk which was split, its halves erected in parallel. Are both half columns respectively positive and negative form, the theme repeats itself in the metal plate in between the columns. The metal plate is in one piece yet is not perceived as such. Associations are manifold. The sculptor intended to depict the silhouettes of six halves of oak leaves, the edges touching. The plain steel could evoke the image of a saw blade or of the serrated inside of a razor blade. In any case it is the laser cut stylized leafage which is in contrast to the fibrous surface of the knobbier oak. The contrast between the warmth of the wood and the cold of the metal is being abrogated the moment nature mirrors itself in the coarsely brushed steel and in doing so has the colors of the different materials start to adapt.

Whatever it is he has busted and disrupted violently, Helmstetter connects in his series *Kreuzbalken* (Crossbeams) (Ill. p. 19 - 20) by means of metal. In order to get a beam as strong as the trunk diameter he makes use of an old method known by carpenters. The tree is quartered lengthwise after which

the segments are being put together wrong way around so that a vacant square appears in the middle. That which obeys pragmatic laws in the world of crafts and trades, proves to be a noticeable exchange and seductive manoeuver in the world of the arts. The hidden becomes the visible side, it is turned inside out. By means of four longitudinal stripes of corroded iron, the sculptor is able to restore the closed form of a crossbeam and allows the fiery colored rust to harmonize with the radiant wood tone of the freshly split pine (III. p. 19). This exterior homogeneity is deceptive since the play of volume and illusion is being dealt with at a non direct visible level. It is not until after having thrown a second glance at the nearly two meter-tall steles, which have an outward effect of being massive, that the beholder is able to understand the constructed bluff (III. p. 20).

Whereas in the crossbeams vegetable and technical construct have been organized into an exciting synthesis, the steles of the series *Kubikmeter* (Cubic-meters) obtain their effect from the comparison of the overt and closed form. This being especially so with an oak sculpture whereby a cube, consisting of interlocking pieces of wood, is wedged onto a blocky body (III. p. 13). It is not without reason that the uneven, brittle wood kindlings at the “head” of the near anthropomorphic sculpture radially aim at all directions; signaling that thinking follows non-linear laws and therefore is free. The interpretation doesn't necessarily have to be taken to that extent. One is permitted though to simply enjoy the interplay of the surface qualities thereby allowing one's glance to wander between the regular and the dismantled, the natural and the artificial. With Helmstetter's steles one notices a rare horizontal caesura evoked by a metal band which separates the massive base from the cube compartment over that.

All the more in *DataMatrixCode* two worlds collide (Ill. p. 10). In this relief the contrast between the smooth high tech perfection and the rough unaltered material has been taken to an extreme. Helmstetter arranges his cleavage products to a computer-readable pattern which by means of a binary decoding of a mobile camera leads directly to his Matrix coded homepage. Of suggestive meditative charisma is the *DataMatrixCode*, intended for the laser scanner equally as for the human eye, comparable to the works of Op Art. Starting point of this development were the assemblages *Holzlandschaften* (Wood Landscapes). Helmstetter split pieces of wood and arranged them mostly into a square array on a black subsurface (Ill. p. 6, 36 - 41).

Peter Helmstetter is a sculptor with abandon. With constantly new variations he questions what is it the insubordinate material allows? What does it have all the makings for? How much processing does it need in order to still allow artistic intervention to appear? His nonchalant, striking unpretentiousness in practicing his sculptural grasp stands for long term searching of and experience with wood. Helmstetter's approach is dialectical: on the one hand he is committed to sparse treatment, with which he allows the material to be – on the other hand it is the artist's radical intervention which is made visible by means of the splitting technique. Helmstetter is an inquiring mind par excellence to that extent that splitting is the method of analysis and the ensuing assembly corresponds with the synthesis. The sculptor is full of avidity for new things, realizes though that at the same time mankind exploring his environment has started its destruction.

The artist seems to be obliged to the romantic subject of the woods. The calculated risk, which escapes the wood splitter's notice when getting involved with the minimal composition of his idiosyncratic material he understands

as a reflection on the way mankind deals with its environment. Since we think that we have everything under control we are utterly surprised about the resistance nature confronts a seemingly totally controllable civilization with. The sculptor's ecological impetus isn't in any way linked to esoterically washed romanticism at all. On the contrary raising awareness of the essential difference between nature and art is a leitmotiv in Helmstetter's work. Despite medial accents, the polarity between the natural and the shaped, between geometry and coincidence is unmissable. The grown and produced are in no way seamless.

The cleavage gapes like an open wound in Helmstetter's products.

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