

JAN de WERYHA-WYSOCZAŃSKI

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Catalogue text:

Epiphanies of nature in late-modern world.

Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański's objects in wood.

Works of Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański have appeared again, after many years of absence, in the circle of Polish culture of fine arts and are inspiring numerous reflections of personal, social, a little political and first of all artistic/aesthetic character.

I can't help starting with a personal remark – my first meeting with Jan in July 2004 from the first moment was unusually friendly and sincere, like with an old friend who once had had to go away, to return suddenly and continue the then broken conversations on the subject of perspectives of contemporary art, on the state of Polish artistic culture, the situation of artists in the new cultural space which has now spread ... thanks to a new configuration of countries, societies and cultures in the united Europe and global economy. And yet, I had not met Jan before – he was growing as an artist at the same time – in the seventies, but as a student of the Gdańsk art academy he was learning in a little different artistic environment from mine which was Warsaw. Besides he spent a major part of his mature artistic life in Germany, whereas I was experiencing the changing historical fate of Poland. Leaving Poland did not break the cultural bond, as proved our friendly meeting so full of common themes.

The story of his life and then my analysis of his works allowed me to notice another aspect connected with the artist – the knowledge and abilities gained in Poland were not and are not contrary to the practice and expectations of German public and critics. Jan's professional practice and especially the artistic productions developed in his own atelier, *Ausbesserungswerk* in Hamburg and presented in the last years in the circle of German art institutions, favorably commented by the authorities of German artistic life, meets with a very good reception in Poland. Now, apart from a large exhibition at the Wilson Shaft Gallery, Jan has several others in prospect, among them one at the institution canonical for contemporary Polish art – at the Centre of Polish Sculpture. This parallel interest in Germany and in Poland does not surprise me; the political barriers, which influenced Jan's departure from Poland, were not cultural barriers, at least in the seventies. Modern art, closely rationed in Poland back in the fifties and even the sixties, became widely common in some galleries and departments of Polish academies in the seventies. There was a very interesting episode in the Polish cultural life of the seventies. Artists, especially the youngest generation – Wysoczański's peers - without any inhibitions adopted for their own needs various trends that dominated all 'art world' of those times: conceptualism, minimal art, performance, new media. They were exploring the best examples of late neo-avant-garde according to the zeitgeist - weakening the speculative, purely notional character of conceptualism, either introducing personalistic elements or turning to political, anthropological contexts, to the material substance of art, to nature. Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański left Poland with a baggage of European intellectual and artistic values.

For some years Jan de Weryha Wysoczański has been making objects of wood and showing them to the German audience. What matters for the character and development of this work is the artist's monumental studio in Hamburg – an old industrial site (a part of the closed rolling-stock repair and maintenance works), which according to a good European practice of the last tens of years in many cities was adapted with the help of the city authorities for artistic purposes and offered for the use... of two artists, Jan Wysoczański being one of them. A 3000m² workshop, huge post-industrial space has become a place of cultural re-vitalization... The very fact of giving the old industrial room to the possession of artists has got a tremendous potential of meaning. It is a sign of a certain 'turn of things' characteristic for the contemporary developed Western societies where a strained modernization reached its late stage; technical and engineering activities and accompanying intensive transformation of the natural surrounding encounter some resistance and are radically questioned. What gains a greater significance for

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development is an intellectual effort and a spiritual space, shaped and furnished by the symbolic culture, especially art. The work of Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański fits this process very well.

His new works started to appear a few years ago – in accordance with the conditions dictated by the place - first he had to make the floor of the giant workshop, which used to be the old warehouse of spare rolling-stock parts. It was accompanied by a clear decision about the material – he chose wood, material so different in its 'climate' and inner structure from the steel machine constructions that had filled the space before. This material, so often used by sculptors, possesses a certain polemic potential against metal – a symbol of industrialization, but it also has huge inherent capacities for gaining monumental scale, capacities for using various technologies of processing, unusual richness of species, colours, and textures. These preliminary, initial decisions transcribe into certain artistic results; in the first stage of Jan's production we obtained very large wooden objects of significant weight, strongly attributed to the surface we tread on. It may evoke certain associations with the, so characteristic for land art, works of R.Long, who made his wanderings on land an original rule of his art; he made stones – the objects of nature he met – the 'witnesses' of this journey, and the spiral forms that he assembled from them expressed and enhanced this earthly gravity. Jan de Weryha's works share a similar - at first sight – gravitational rule of building forms. It is especially visible in objects ("Wooden Column" 2003, "Wooden Cube") and circles ("No Title" 2003) built of loosely stacked wooden chips and cuttings. However, they are not – as Long did - 'a document' of a journey but rather a trace of a certain process of looking at the wood itself, a consequence of 'going into' this material. They are first of all a first stage of the artist's odyssey, which will be followed by other forms, slightly different in their statics and tectonics. Thus, they are not a final trace of a fulfilled journey, but actually its beginning. Another thing that radically differs Long from Wysoczański is the landscape; there are no open spaces of natural landscape, but – contrary- there is a closed interior, an unnatural space, world created by sophisticated, modern economy, by the railways- the canonical means of transport of 'primary modernity'. The route is not marked out by the nature-scape but by 'the landscape of industrial culture' – the inner space of a factory. The walls followed the floor. This new – vertical- environment required a new slightly different form of works. The inner matter – the insides of various species of wood is more deeply uncovered. This matter must resign from a free gravity which sufficed for the floor, it must be made vertical and this in a most natural way is related to some kind of a construction – a kind of base to which you attach things and a certain frame which will hold it. In the years 2001-2003 numerous numbered "Wooden Boards" were made.

On the so marked out 'route', defined by the inner space of a magnificent edifice, one can probably expect objects that in the future would use the construction of the roof. We have to wait for this moment, because Jan's tour around his own territory has got its own rhythm and duration, measured by the way artistic ideas take shape in his head.

The works that appeared at the stage of exploiting the walls bring to mind some associations with *minimal art*. Such associations are present in the statements of some of the people writing about his objects. They are probably guided by the impulse originating from the fact that they are non-figural, abstract, geometric, i.e. ordered in the form of square, rectangle and cube figures. What supports those comparisons is the fact that some vertical objects order wood assembling it like books and making powerful, mysterious 'libraries'. Let's add that to be honest the critics also notice a number of features that disprove the associations with minimalism. Jan de Weryha's geometric objects are extraordinarily vital and emphatic in revealing forms of wood infinite in their richness. It appears geometrically ordered, but inside it is rough, 'natural' in its biological and not rational or geometrical form. It is rather the infinite and spontaneous nature of wood that is limited into the geometrical frame in order to enable its perception. Thus associations with minimalism are superficial. I see the sense of Jan de Weryha's objects in philosophical foundations quite different from *minimal art*. *Minimal art* in alliance with conceptualism is an impressive phase of dematerialization and de-naturalization of art. The objects of Andre, Judd, Morris or Serra are spatial images of linguistic devices and mental figures. The stress is laid here on tautologies, i.e. an escape from all metaphors, symbols and 'illuminations' in pursuit of achieving the foundations of abstract language and defining its

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starting points of meaning. Minimal objects are devised in such a way that they 'say' only what is seen in the geometric, indifferent material-wise and space-wise surface or solid. The art of the seventies, and especially the decade of the eighties came into a sharp clash with these tendencies, stressing the power of individual expression, materiality and especially carnality of artistic acts. This turn is characteristic for late modernity (to avoid the slightly de-valued notion of 'post-modernism'). And isn't Jan ostentatiously 'carnal'? Carnal in a special sense, because it is wood in its raw form that is the object of his artistic exploitation. Minimalist tautologies are the reverse of artistic epiphanies, and de Weryha's art is – in my opinion - epiphanic not tautological. To avoid misunderstandings, epiphanic art is a way of revealing what is 'deeper', it is releasing 'the light', and it is creating conditions for those 'perforations' and insights.

Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański rises from this late-modern opposition to dematerialization of art; his art is a celebration of materiality, 'carnality' of wood. It could be said that Weryha's art – according to his biography; after all he made his debut in the seventies – is a continuation of that expressivist turning that occurred after minimalism and conceptualism. Jan de Weryha remains as much as possible Modern and just like *minimal art* he is situated in a certain canonical modernist discourse, but he appears to be at its different stage. At the source of his works we will find the always-recurring dispute, present in European culture for a long time. It is in the 18th century that this argument became especially articulate - the echoes of it clearly reach the present times – when a fundamental breakthrough in the perception of relations between man and nature took place. In brief, what happened was that the opposition between 'the naturalistic' and 'romantic' perception of nature clarified. The divine powers are transferred onto nature. In the naturalistic concepts of Enlightenment it also had regulatory functions accepted on the grounds of usefulness. These concepts are also the foundation of our contemporary technical civilization and progress understood first of all in material terms.

Simultaneously, at that time nature was perceived in closer and closer relationship with human cognitive capabilities. Access to nature is also perceived more and more often as an act of man's inner voice; we can recognize it fully only if we articulate what we find inside us. Since then nature appears in the prism of human articulations, manifests itself in the forms of human expression. Expression i.e. showing something with the help of a medium; man becomes this 'medium', first of all a sensitive man, that is an artist. These ideas were usually referred to by the opponents of the pragmatism and utilitarianism of technological civilization. This side was usually taken by the supporters of the creative powers of human mind/spirit in its form not reduced to practical reason. The philosophical theory of nature as a source from which we can draw as if through ourselves, proved conclusive for the great ferment of ideas and sensitivity that is also given the name of 'romanticism'. This sensitivity captivated all European culture, and never ceased to be the reference point for radical criticism and polemics from 'all kinds of naturalists and scientists' fully questioning or closely limiting the extent of the human mediation of nature.

In the 20th century this dispute enters a new phase. It was not done at the time of the 20th century modernism to fall back on romanticism. At best it happened in an ironic or critical mode. Many modernists described themselves as anti-romanticists. In the 20th century, nature in its strong naturalistic cognitive approaches will have been placed within linguistic rules, and the criteria for correctness of reasoning were formulated by English analysts or neopositivists – logicians, mathematicians, and theoreticians of language. These intellectual fashions are artistically reflected in minimalism, described here, and conceptualism. Romanticism appeared in a rather trivial form of pop-cultural, mawkish visualizations. However, that idea which was vividly present in 19th century Britain, was later taken up and developed in Germany by, among others, Herder or Holderlin, and in philosophically elaborated way it will strongly reappear with Heidegger. Isaiah Berlin attempted to bring the philosophical decline of romanticism to back to contemporary European culture in his famous Mellonian lectures in fine arts. These ideas regain an important position in many trends of the French post-structuralism and American neo-pragmatism, and also in contemporary German philosophers and sociologists; apart from that they have found their place in the intellectual and political debate carried out in the nineties

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around the idea of 'the third way'. The latest efforts to adapt certain, newly interpreted, aspects of romantic spirituality to Polish philosophy of culture seem very interesting as well.

Within the orbit of this dispute remains of course the 19th and especially 20th century art spanning between the 'objectivist' works of constructivist avant-garde and various forms of individual expression. The art of the last three decades of the 20th century and the latest art is a reflection of this 'expressivist turn'; in its main stream it is definitely contextual, exploiting body, earth, matter, and also critical of the claims of practical reason and its civilization products.

Jan de Weryha's objects are not notional figures, nor are they a purely conceptual position in the debate on the way notional creations exist. Jan de Weryha's objects are material, concrete, anchored deeply in the 'nature' of wood. His efforts at capturing wood in geometrical structures are not motivated by the willingness to achieve a purely intellectual rigour; geometry is auxiliary, it is a kind of grammar thanks to which 'nature' can speak out more clearly. And maybe they are only a way of encouraging 'nature' to speak out, to reveal its own features, unnoticeable in the common expression.

His works in wood appear in the conditions of late modernism- that is in the world of globalization, accelerated consumption, advertising, in the world of algorithms in which we are caught any time we visit the computer cyberspace. In such world, the artist makes a revolt, reverses our perception, and offers another insight into Nature in its raw form. Perforations, illuminations, insights into nature – epiphanies of nature in the conditions of late modernism.

Placing his work and its results in the form of objects in old factories and mines, Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański re-enters the old polemics, as old as the history of modernism. He takes a stand in the debate on the role and place of human spirituality in the creation of contemporary world. He argues from 'romantic' positions, according to which the world cannot be created in any other way but from the position of man, only after being elaborated by human sensitivity. He starts this work as if in disagreement with those who would like to model it only in the 'technological' mode, which now means an emphasis on the development of digital media and anthropo-technology, and also means preferring the ruthless, global economic rules whose human roots are limited to 'instincts' and egoism.

What is worth noticing is the fact that he undertakes this activity without the help of other people who care for such direction of changes in our reality and who are able to design and finance new functions of old industrial sites, which make a 'natural environment' for de Weryha. In the German society it is public authorities - the city councils that have initiative in such matters, in Poland – it is a very positive phenomenon worth highlighting – it is business people who revitalize old industrial spaces for artistic purposes. This is a very interesting background for the Wilson Shaft Gallery. The gallery is situated in a great hall of an ex-mine on the border of Janów and Niszowiec, old Silesian district full of family blocks. It was founded by people who are not indifferent to the life of Silesian people and their culture. Unfortunately, it is a place which seems to have focused all the ailments and problems connected with civilization changes.

Romantic ideas have brought back to life German literature and philosophy, but it is generally thought that Polish culture arises from Romanticism, and is always quarrelling with this heritage. It assumes surprising meanings nowadays, at the age of late modernism and on the new map of European spirituality where Poland and Germany are no longer divided by an 'iron curtain'. Let's add to this a completely real dimension of this community. Works conceived in the deserted industrial plant in Hamburg are proudly presented in the rooms of the old mine in the Upper Silesia and simultaneously they will appear in Orońsko, in an old manorial chapel, where the entirely Polish cultural climate will give an additional spiritual framework to the epiphanies of nature. Just like a certain historical fact, namely Yalta, influenced Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański's continuity of life and artistic career, a new historical fact - now a new stage of the unification of Europe – may give his artistic works a doubled power gained thanks to the presence of aspects characteristic for both German and Polish art, present in both cultures for ages but again up-to-date and alive.

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The 'Romantic' voice of nature appears highly resonant in his works not only as a balance for the 'voice of cyberspace' dominating global media. Wysoczański's works bring back the imperative of introducing the human spirituality into the process of recognizing reality and creating it according to human needs. Such is the social dimension of his work. Deep down at the source of Jan's work I can notice the idea that we are not governed by powers that are indifferent ethically and ruthless for the weaker, predestined to be excluded, powers whose economic paraphrase is 'an invisible hand'. We always act in the world conditioned by human decisions, by our will to pursue in a chosen direction. Sometimes – as in Jan de Weryha-Wysoczański- we are wandering inside an old workshop, in a landscape where a forced modernization left deep scars on nature, a paradox effect of this 'wandering' is 'nature' returning to prominence through the forms of wood that remain not fully recognized; in consequence human psyche is also touched (and maybe even healed at the same time).

Translation from Polish to English by Maria Apanowicz