

## Thought Formations

### Observations on the Sculptures displayed by Olaf Holzapfel in *3 wie 1, 2 in 3, 2, 1, 1 über 1*

The sculptures displayed by Holzapfel in the current exhibition puzzle and bemuse the beholder because, at first sight, they reveal a contrariness which in the realm of art is possible only in sculpture. The works are volume forms which at the same time negate their spatial content since they consist of a working material that likewise optically negates its own materiality. The transparent or semi-transparent plexiglass foils out of which the works are shaped are aesthetically so designed as to express their immateriality. So what message do these sculptures convey? Do they want to be seen as an encased hollow space, or do they represent a skin-like integument that encloses emptiness, summoning up the concealed volume as a supposition? Does the material serve to assert itself in the eye of the beholder or is it annulled by means of the transparency of its materiality?

Actually, everything appears very simple: one can scan the forms with one's eyes and so follow their development right back to their essential, basic form. The starting material for Olaf Holzapfel's sculptures are surfaces, two-dimensional slabs of plexiglass, which are turned into three-dimensionality by means of folding and so allow the observer to trace the emergence of volume. They thus take up a sculptural tradition that became conceivable only in the time after 1920 and can here be assigned, in the broadest sense, to the age of Constructivism. In the architecture of those years, space is radically re-defined as a shape made up of surfaces. It is from this architecture that the sculpture of the period derives its innovations, which also manifest themselves in the discovery and use of new materials. Vladimir Tatlin still employs iron sheeting for his constructions, which have their origins in Cubism. Only a few years later, however, we find plexiglass being used for comparable forms – as introduced by Naum Gabo and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. And sculpture, on the other hand, is to be seen as a model for the utmost in utopian architecture, which foregrounds a new feeling for space, all conceivable functionality being subordinated to this message. In the post-war years, it was above all the Dutch artist Constant with his assemblages of plexiglass surfaces who arrived at sculptures which represent an openness between a putative sculpture and utopian urbanity. The material alone constitutes a material iconology particular to itself and continues to be used in this understanding in the Sixties, both in the British sculpture of Tim Scott and in the American minimalism of Larry Bell, so as to deploy precisely this transparency, which, as a transcendence immanent to art, always sets out to express the contradiction of material and idea.

With these findings we arrive at the point where we can mark out the border beyond which Olaf Holzapfel puts distance between himself and the above-mentioned prior directions. His works are not to be understood as a model for something else: in their size and in their created form they are to be seen as a self-enclosed formation. A process of folding has been brought to a logical end, as the closed quality of the encasing form expresses. There is an inside and an outside: there is this surface as a skin and thus as a boundary between the space of the sculpture – the space which it claims for itself – and the realm outside it. The size of the works corresponds to the requirement that the forms be folded with the hands of the sculptor and his assistants: thus the outstretch of the arms is pre-determined as a measure of extension, endowing the sculptures in a natural manner with anthropometric proportions. The works are created on the scale of a human figure who has, so to say, entered the process of production by osmosis. Thus, both irregular protuberances in the broad-surfaced areas and solutions for the corner sections can be viewed as the result of chance and happenstance grounded in this craftsmanlike coming to terms with the material employed. The relatively short period of time

in which the material is available in its warmed state – in which it is stretchable and transformable – can be visibly grasped in the work's surfaces. As the plexiglass material becomes firm during the process of cooling, the non-calculable chance occurrences harden into those parts of the work produced by the interaction of man and material. Each folding and each combination of subsequent foldings has been thought through and tested out by Holzapfel on the easily handled model of a sheet of paper. Each sculpture is based on a rational sequence of actions which accepts the unplanned influences of the particular moment and allows them to take their effect as an expression of an action-based, and hence human, process. It is here that the contradiction which set these thoughts in train at the opening of this essay can be clearly observed. For the material chosen not only suggests a technical perfection, which the works clearly exhibit – the unevennesses also make our observations of the details all the more necessary, so that we can construe the influence of the craftsmanship. Here Holzapfel's works set themselves apart from the points of reference mentioned above. They body forth a tension-creating simultaneity – the equi-temporality and equi-valency of perfection and chance, the interaction of organically arched sequences of edges and their tectonic statics, by means of which the foldings become possible at all as formations reposing in themselves.

Each of the works is allocated to a pedestal, mostly tables, on which the sculpture is removed from reality like a still life arrangement. There is something there in front of us in real form – set on show even – and yet it stands aloof, distancing itself via the sculptor's techniques of transformation. The pedestal raises the work to eye-level, giving an additional confirmation of the reference to human proportions which underlies all of Holzapfel's works. And here the metaphorical aspect essential to all works of art sets in: the work is the trigger of thoughts and associations which take on a life of their own, creating their own spaces, in which the dialogue is played out between the seen – the object that can be viewed in manifold ways – and the repeated, ongoing scrutiny of the viewer's gaze. In this way, Olaf Holzapfel's sculptures become objects of a transformation of surface into space – space which, in a second transfer, becomes embedded in the imaginary mental world of the beholder.

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