

## CREATION FROM UNCERTAINTY AND LOOSING CONTROL

### "Automatic" Art by Rudolf Polanszky

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Portrait of Rudolf Polanszky © Rudolf Polanszky - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech / Photo: Xandra M. Linsin

When we think of the history of Austrian art and the post-war art movement, it reminds us of the Viennese Actionists, who emerged briefly in Vienna in the 1960s. In order to reflect on the violence act of World War II, and to criticize and repent for the Austrian Catholic Church and Nazism, they often tried to uncover the forbidden wounds of Austrian society and the black history of Nazi support in an unforgiving way. However, their performances often involve human beings, animals, blood, and various fluids, and they use violent and extreme forms of performance, such as animal sacrifice and artificial punishment, and are therefore highly controversial.

The Viennese artist Rudolf Polanszky, who is showing his second solo exhibition "*Apeiron*" at Almine Rech Shanghai, was born and raised in such a context.

However, it would be a misunderstanding if we think that Polanszky's work with its "action" nature is a kind of response and inheritance. Regardless of the methods he uses, mainly painting, sculpture, photography, film, installation, and collage, Polanszky's work is centered on the pursuit of "unconscious control".



Rudolf Polanszky, *Reconstructions / Choros*, 2021, Copper foil, cardboard, mirror foil, aluminium, resin, silicone, acrylic glass, pigments mounted on cardboard, in artist frame, 151.1 x 171.5 cm © Rudolf Polanszky - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech / Photo: Alessandro Wang

In order to achieve "unconsciousness", he has developed various strategies to avoid the control of consciousness on his creative behavior at the moment. Polanszky once said, "What is free in a work of art, is only the moment in which it is not yet comprehended." Because once a work is understood, it must have a definite knowledge and interpretation, and once this single, fixed framework of understanding is formed, it loses its freedom. Therefore, for Polanszky, the background and history of the Viennese Actionists are certainly present in his subconscious,



Rudolf Polanszky, *Reconstructions / Rorschach Transformations*, 2010, Aluminium, resin, silicone, acrylic glass, pigments, acrylic mounted on wood, in artist frame 123.4 x 142 cm © Rudolf Polanszky - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech / Photo: Alessandro Wang

but for him, it is quite abhorrent to merely adapt and rewrite. Even in his early works, we can see him attempting to respond to the movement with his own personal satire: in the 1980s, Polanszky attached brushes, sponges dipped in paint, and various color brushes to himself, and then filmed himself walking and rolling around on the floor of a paper-lined room to document the process of producing his paintings. Polanszky's meaningless rolling and smearing is reminiscent of the Viennese activists who were constantly smearing blood and paint on their bodies, although for Polanszky, his early works



Rudolf Polanszky, *Apeiron*, Almine Rech Shanghai, Dec 10, 2021 - Jan 27, 2022 © Rudolf Polanszky - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech / Photo: Alessandro Wang

were more about understanding himself in the present through documentation.

## Explore the maximum possibilities of free will

When thinking about Polanszky's work, it is natural to wonder whether there is "pure freedom of decision". Especially when it is a work that is still executed under a set plan. In a meeting with curator Hans-Ulrich Wirth, Polanszky mentions that he became involved or interested in art because when he finally settled in Vienna in an unprecedented way after independence, from moving from place to place, he met a group of friends who were interested in literature, philosophy and art, among which the concept of art impressed him the most and attracted him the most. Among them, the concept of art impressed and attracted him the most. Because one of the main ideas at the time was that "art cannot be defined" and that anyone could claim something to be art, no one wanted to define it, or at least say that it had no legal meaning. It was also the realization that art and the questions surrounding it would be the only way to clarify one's thinking. Art seems to maximize what he feels deprived of - the idea of freedom. However he does not deny that he is using the idea of freedom in a limited sense. The way it is made, what we can do and what we can believe, has its limits. "Freedom" is a sense of illusion, but it is an illusion that can be realized as much as possible in art. Thus, he states: I became an artist not because I had faith in the possibilities of art, but because by removing as much control as possible, it was possible to maximize my attempts to find the concept we call freedom.

Polanszky's "*Lard Drawings*", painted in the dark in 1976, were his earliest attempts. He painted in lard in the dark to minimize the control of visual judgment over the composition of the painting, and to produce changes over time that were beyond the artist's control because the



Rudolf Polanszky, *Coil Spring drawing*, 1983, Acrylic on paper, photographs mounted on wood, in artist frame, 109.8 x 189.6 cm © Rudolf Polanszky - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech / Photo: Alessandro Wang



Rudolf Polanszky, *Reconstructions*, 2018 - 2021, Aluminium, resin, silicone, cardboard, acrylic glass, pigments, acrylic mounted on canvas, in artist frame, 165.7 x 151.6 cm © Rudolf Polanszky - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech / Photo: Alessandro Wang

lard did not adhere to the canvas. Later, when the artist began to study quantum mechanics and physics, Polanszky, attracted by his language and method, began to work on how to build evasion into the game itself, resulting in "*Coil Spring Pictures*" (1983-1985). In this work, the artist uses a large metal spring to propel himself in the studio space, while each hand wields a long, thin brush, leaving traces of uncontrolled movement in the painting because of the unpredictable and uncontrollable jumping. The 1990s marked a turning point in Polanszky's





Rudolf Polanszky, Studio of Rudolf Polanszky © Rudolf Polanszky - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech / Photo: Jorit Aust

art. He began to "liberate" recycled industrial materials (such as acrylic, glass, aluminum, mirror foil, resin, silicone, wire, etc.) from their original context and use by composing them into new aesthetic forms. He often places them on the canvas or in space under certain rules of play through what he calls "ad hoc synthesis". This series, called "*Reconstructions*", has been his ongoing experiment to date. Different sub-categories, such as "*Drifting and Sliding Pictures*" and "*Deformed Symmetries*", demonstrate his abiding interest in combining conscious artistic strategies with the manipulation of random events to generate new meanings.

## From Quantum Mechanics to Apeiron

Science and philosophy have always been important aspect while looking at Polanszky's work. From the scientific terms introduced in his work, such as transformation, non-linearity, symmetries, topology, quantum mechanics, to his understanding of the history and nature of science. For this exhibition in Shanghai, Polanszky has titled his work "*Apeiron*". Anaximandros was a Greek nature philosopher who coined the term Apeiron, defining it as the source of everything, thereupon and the result of all cosmic creation. Polanszky pointed out in an interview that this was the first philosophical premise in which he defined phenomena purely in abstract terms, rather than derivative of matter by nature



Rudolf Polanszky, *Chimera*, Almine Rech Brussels, Oct 24, 2019 - Dec 21, 2019 © Rudolf Polanszky - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech / Photo: Hugard & Vanoverschelde

or God. In other words, Apéiron is the origin of everything, an infinite force that comes from nothingness. It is easy to understand why Polanszky chose such a title if we look at the "first cause," that is, the first cause, the initial cause of the creation of a thing. The point of the "first cause" is not to find out what the starting point is, because it is inexplicable, but rather what it opens up to, which is the state we now see and must feel. Such a point of departure is related to quantum mechanics, which is the subject of much attention. This is because quantum mechanics deals with the difference in the understanding of an object that arises from the perspective of the observer. Therefore, it is easy to understand why it is important to Polanszky how to structure his works in the exhibition and how the viewer can wander through his works and relate to them. Because unlike classical painting, Polanszky's work is about how you feel and what you observe, and it is in facing it that it makes sense.

"*Apeiron*" presents the artist's recent practice in the "*Reconstruction*" series and demonstrates the maternal grandiosity that has enabled him to carry the content of over 20 years of work. Polanszky states: "The idea of the 'Reconstructions' began over 20 years ago. My preference for free materials offered a new way of reconstruction without the slavery of function or utility. The Reconstructions can be seen as mental structures, rather

than structures dependent on rules or stringent conditions; like a map without any final aim. The paradox of that, is I am working towards a cerebral structure that is always unstable, and in flux, which can neither be deemed right or wrong. My process is to separate elements from their former identity and to avoid any predicted projections. In my work I am searching for fundamentally basic structures, which can be found in symmetry, geometric fragments or fractals and mirrored doublets. Adaption, by way of my personal system of art, is to be avoided as the antithesis of creative free will. My idea of art as a philosophical system in which one can derive answers without corrections or control, favors a highly individualistic strata of thought. I am working according to a system, which can never be tested like mathematics or scientific theories. With this work, concepts of space and time have similar patterns to quantum mechanic theories, like translinarity of deformed space. Principal to my process, are the changing role of the observer and the law of probability.”

In the long history of art creation, the free will and self-directed state of artists have always been the essence of creation. They consciously control the picture, structure, texture, and so on. However, Polanszky’s creations are closer to the state of automatic technique, where he "accepts" and "responds" to the results of the creation process without being dominated by himself. "I accept" what is not dominated by me, and it becomes a choice of his own creative free will. By "accepting", he has changed his previous state of artistic "dominance" in creation. Perhaps we can better understand this Zen-conscious philosophical perspective by looking at the words "it's not about you" spoken by Ancient one to Dr. Strange in the movie “Dr. Strange”. Unlike the Western rationalist system, where "I think therefore I am" is the main philosophy that starts with the establishment of the self, Dr. Strange chooses to sacrifice himself after realizing that "it's not about me". In Polanszky's works, it is after accepting

different "edges" that are not controlled by the ego that different responses are made.

### **Facing the strangeness of the same thing with new vision**

Looking back at the discussion of "loss of control" in art history, we can trace it back to Surrealism, where they used to make a poem by randomly cutting out a text and then cutting out each word of it by shaking the randomly dropped words. How does Polanszky see the difference between his loss of control and the automatic technique of the surrealist period, which also uses "loss of control" as part of his work? According to Polanszky, Surrealistic automatic techniques were utilized as a way to escape from the control of consciousness, apart from ordinary reality. As a result, it was a flat, linear one-dimensional structure: a sensibility limited by a rational relation of purpose. In contrast, genuine loss of control offers the possibility of boundless freedom. For Polanszky, surrealism's randomness remains in a restricted realm, clipping content that corresponds directly, one-to-one, to the random results produced.

Artist John Cage once said, "I'm trying not to be familiar with what I'm doing." This attempt to confront the strangeness of the same thing with new vision seems to coincide with Polanszky's work. In response, Polanszky says, "Changing perspectives are essential in all artistic practices. This seems very similar to my view." Although the work is always deeply connected to science, Polanszky believes that, unlike science, his work cannot be tested in the same way that mathematics and scientific theories are, and that his own creative practice is not an experiment on a specific problem because: “It is maybe an experiment in reverse, because I am not looking for evidence, but rather for other aspects in an open process, which could show a new way of development.” Perhaps the greatest pleasure of looking at Polanszky's work, is the moment of not knowing how to understand it.