ALMINE RECH

Rudolf Polanszky
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The Art of Overcoming: The Unthinkable in the Thinkable

For this world in its present form is passing away.

–1 Corinthians 7:31

As there is only a *logical* necessity, so there is only a *logical* impossibility.

–Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus,* 6.375

"On occasion, Munch quite simply fought with his pictures. He would jump at them, tear them apart, kick them."[1] Munch understood this "damage" as an integral part of his way of working, and in so doing included the constant possibility of the failure of his "kill-or-cure treatment"[2] on a conceptual level.[3] "Just wait until a few rain showers have passed over it, or it gets a few tears from nails and whatnot and has been transported in all kinds of miserable boxes . . . yes, with time, it might turn out to be quite good."[4]

Munch's physical attack against the painting and the destruction of its surface were as unorthodox as his application of paint and his radical experiments with the material and the impact of the wind and weather on his works. He is a key link in what Monika Wagner has described as a material-based "other history of modernism,"[5] a line of development leading from William Turner, Gustave Courbet, through Van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, and Georges Braque, to Jean Fautrier, Jean Dubuffet, Emil Schumacher, and Jackson Pollock. The importance of material in art has shifted profoundly in the twentieth century. Not only was the decisive importance of materiality recognized by modernist art, the physical properties of the works themselves were now assigned a significance. Although Munch never abandoned figuration during any of his many phases of development, he was the first artist to attack the material integrity of the artwork with such radicalness, not only by "damaging" his works, but also allowing nature to create with his "kill-or-cure treatment," even at the risk of the destruction of the works themselves.

Rudolf Polanszky's works are also part of this other history of modernism. With great tenacity, he works with industrially made materials like Plexiglas, foam rubber, Styrofoam, tin, foil, and duplex boards. He finds all his materials as refuse or remains, at scrap metal dealers, construction sites, or in public space, and the traces of prior use and manipulation are always inscribed in the work. Some materials, like duplex boards, the artist allows to age outdoors, like Munch subjecting them to the wind and weather until the effects of nature create the right patina and curvature of the board. In Munch's sense, he allows nature to do its work, "to summon quasi-random elements."[6] As of the 1890s, Munch consciously began subjecting his paintings to the wind and weather, and understood the traces of the elements as part of his art. But the process of weathering is only controllable to a certain extent. Chance, just like the handling and transport damage that Munch also accepted, was part of these changes to the works that are independent of his will and consciousness.[7] In Polanszky's *Tierstempelbildern* (Animal Stamp Paintings), animals like birds, foxes, or martens that the artist consciously attracted with bait left their traces on the pseudo-geometrical compositions and materials placed on the floor of his outdoor studio. In this way, nature's creation and the traces inscribed in the material become the DNA of his process-based works.

Traces of Memory between the Fragment and Totality

Polanszky sees the treatment as a refinement of materials that in our economic system are usually seen as cheap, damaged goods from the hardware store. The works seem like a parody of "refined" materials, while at the same time the formerly used materials are now *free* of use. The artist literally frees them from their previously intended relations of constraint and use. Polanszky thus seeks a value-free resistance to the adaptive. The artist creates assemblages in both a pictorial and a sculptural format that always bear the traces of the past of the materials used. The traces of everyday life, use, and wear and tear always link Polanszky's works to the history of the object-like materials used that he transforms into something new, a "pseudo-geometric arrangement,"[8] and that reflects the aesthetics of use. In the process, he transforms traces of histories into a new field of association and a new construction of meaning for these apparently artistically worthless materials. The creation of nature remains in the form of its traces, for example the leaves or other natural materials that are seemingly integrated by chance, lending the works a rather coincidental character. They also represent a contrast to the synthetic materials like Plexiglas, Styrofoam, foils, or foam rubber that form the main ingredients of Polanszky's art.

The artist preserves time and life experience in the sense of duration by linking several events within the course of his process with one another: on the one hand, the point in time and the duration of use, and on the other hand his own treatment of the materials. This storage of time in Polanszky's work evokes the notion of duration, *la durée*, a central concept in the philosophy of Henri Bergson. In his 1896 work *Matter and Memory.* [9] Bergson claims that the past, as far as we are dealing with duration, never ceases to exist entirely. He conceives duration as essentially a product of memory.[10] Duration as memory is first of all preserving, since the moments that become past are not extinguished in their existence like the traces of Polanszky's fragment assemblages. The past survives today both as a trace in memory and in its essence, so that duration for Bergson is conceived, like Polanszky's artistic practice, less as fugacity, but more as perpetuity. Secondly, duration as memory is also cumulative, for the weight of the past that everyone drags along becomes ever greater.[11]

In Polanszky's works, the past always survives in the now as a trace of memory. Both in his assemblages, that attest to the lasting quality of endurance with the maintenance of weathered surfaces and broken materials and maintain the memory of how things once were, as well as in his sculptures and spaces in which the traces of the past are never deleted, but always preserved. Duration is preserved by Polanszky to continue memory and individual consciousness and to preserve it in a present with freed material. He considers the accidentally found, apparently worthless material and its form and texture as the material that culminates in his and our memory. The artist then brings together freed materials "that do not go together at all."[12] In his artistic practice, he combines these "quasi random elements," but he emphasizes, "There is no design aspect involved to make it a little better."[13] In other words, he not only frees the material from its corset of use, but also liberates art from its traditional constraints.

But all the same, the material fragments are always connected via the traces of work to the totality of the starting material. Like the process of decay initiated by Munch, "these confusing objects"[14] recall the "beauty of the ruin."[15] "Munch . . . appears consciously to have sought to conserve some of the beauty of the ruin."[16] Arne Eggum is here probably referring to the beauty discussed as an aesthetic of ruins:[17] "The ruin is a sign of something that once was an intact structure, but a beauty is added, a surplus of meaning that is not absorbed in the semantics of pastness. The ruin shows a precarious balance of maintained form and decay, nature and history, violence and peace, remembrance and presence, mourning and a longing for salvation, that is achieved by no intact building or art object . . . The ruin is always the useless, the destruction that has infiltrated it is the absence of the original purpose. Destruction first opens the ruin's space of beauty."[18] The destruction of an intact structure is accordingly the prerequisite for the formation of a ruin and its "specific charm"[19] that can only be received by the beholder after a prior process of decay or its simulation. The emergence of a ruin is thus always linked to a process of fragmentation of a whole that once existed or that was conceived, in the sense of Bazon Brock's understanding of the "ruin as a form of mediating fragment and totality."[20] The restorer Heinz Althöfer in contrast sees in "ruinosity" as an aesthetic appearance an unavoidable result of all artistic creation, since aging in the sense of a fragmentary quality is always a component of every artwork, "that is subject to constant change and permanent decay from the moment of its creation."[21] Polanszky goes beyond that ruinosity, in that by accelerating the material based aging process, he consciously seeks out ruins and/or creates them, "where the relationship of lust and aggression, of creative and destructive action is materialized."[22] Polanszky's traces of memory thus mark the distinction between fragment and totality, healing and failure, construction and decay, and appearance and disappearance.

Art and the "Disputable Sphere of Natural Science"[23]

The provisional, seemingly temporary character of the works is, however, deceiving, for the artist bases his "reconstructions" on a system that evokes the natural sciences and mathematics. Here, the artist assigns the system of prime numbers a special significance, and, using this basis, works out his own system consisting of symmetries, spaces, structures, and multi-dimensionality. In his "reconstructions," using transparent materials like broken Plexiglas, he seeks to reconstruct pseudo-geometric arrangements. He robs the materials of their actual purpose to redefine the sculptural space in his work. His sculptures are like floating flying objects that seem to balance on filigreed metal stands. The thin metal supports are by no means plinths, but rather give the objects the feel of flying objects. Following Polanszky's intention, they are supposed to defy gravity by flying and thus overcome one of the fundamental conditions of unfreedom. For the natural law of gravity forces us to the ground. The transparent materials and the airy, filigreed supports mark probable limits that are also questioned using the mirror constructions and thus open new dimensions. Polanszky accepts nothing as a given, sees the world as only very vaguely defined, the borders as questionable and only apparent. Polanszky leaves nothing unreflected: he thus questions with his "half-objects" the concept of space, and poses the question of why spaces should be "whole."

The spaces, borrowing from Louis Marin's definition of the space of Jackson Pollock,[24] are defined as space of the painting/object and its surroundings; first, the space between the "canvas and the foundation," second the space between the "foundation and the surface," and third the space between the work and the beholder, the surrounding space between the "border and margin,"[25] whose atmosphere, lighting, and location influence the work. The analysis of his object-foundation-space shows that the artist understands it as an autonomous pictorial element and uses it in a targeted fashion in his compositions, both in terms of its materiality, texture, as well as its color. "The canvas stops being substance, accomplice, and support of the work, to reach by way of the interstice a materiality that is mirroring, vibrant, punctuated, an immaterial materiality of interlaced traces."[26] In this way, Polanszky achieves spaces of memory in his work that link the fragment and totality: ultimately, "to leave the space of the panel [or object] to return to the space of the panel [or object],"[27] to that space between the work and the beholder. The space between the artist and the artwork during the process of working becomes a haptic site of experience for the beholder.

Although the artist builds his “reconstructions” on systems that evoke mathematics, he is critical of natural laws that in the obsession for objectivizing characteristic of our times and the honored experimental approach have become a general law. Against this shift in meaning in the post-industrial consumer society, his artworks should be seen as engaging with the given and its laws in a decidedly critical fashion. In so doing, he acts both from an academic and a pseudo-scientific and aesthetic context, where he seeks to subvert all conventions. Polanszky describes the “laws of nature” as his greatest “enemy” and thus directs himself against the apparently natural system, by creating a new, anarchic system.[28] The artist does not believe in what is generally understood as reality, since it is shaped by our apparatuses of perception. He attacks not only our system of thought based in objectivation and laws of nature, but rebels against life itself. As in his *Coma*works and *Ad Hoc Syntheses*, he seeks the complete dissolution of conditions to liberate from the dictate of apparently naturally-given laws. Accordingly, his half objects, half-spaces, and multi-dimensional hyperbolic symmetries generate borders and new spaces of association.

His art is like the conflict between philosophy and the natural sciences. According to Ludwig Wittgenstein philosophy “limits the disputable sphere of natural science.”[29] Like hardly any other artist, Polanszky shifts the meaning and the reading of materials and thought systems by way of their transformation.

The Unthinkable Thinkable: The Freed Material

In his engagement with material and memory, Polanszky transfers and conserves his own physicality and his life and work duration in his assemblages, but the physical presence of the materials and their historicity are the focus.

And yet, the choice of materials in his assemblages that reflect the physicality of traces of everyday life bears within it the subject of destruction and the processual. In the process, Polanszky chooses synthetic materials like Styrofoam, and Plexiglas as well as adhesives, resins, lacquers, and polyester, to approach the great problems like those of abstract expressionism or tachism in an ironic fashion. In these investigations using artistic means, however, Polanszky is always interested in the development of new methods. His *Coma Works*are thus without any dynamism and the results are always controlled by the method that results from his system. His artistic engagement revolves much less around color and form, as it revolves around the material and its historicity per se that the artist already addresses in his early works. For example, in his *Sprungfederbildern* (Spring Pictures) and drawings from 1980, the spring is the actual artistic means that defines the aesthetic of the apparently tachist image. He argues with the materials and, with his idiosyncratic and unique use of materials foreign to art in works like his *Schweinsfettbildern*(Pig Fat Paintings) from 1976, helps to anchor their materiality as means of modernism and to break the dominance of color and form as well as artistic conventions. In reference to Joseph Beuys, Monika Wagner comments on the lacking tradition of fat and felt as means of aesthetic design for artworks, although they are “familiar and useful” in everyday life and are fixed in their function and significance.[30] These considerations can also be expanded to Polanszky’s materials. In comparison to Beuys, works like the *Wechselstromaggregat* from 1968, which has been subject to a natural process of change of the substance of fat ever since its creation, the aesthetic of Polanszky’s *Fettbilder*is based on the reactions of fat with paper and other materials. While in Beuys *Wechselstromaggregat* fat’s sensitivity to warmth, which becomes an amorphous material with only a slight rise in temperature, refers to the fragility of the work that, if not hardened with stearin to preserve the work, largely disappears as form and as material, the disappearance of the paint-ersatz material fat in Polanszky’s works is the piece itself. Like the water and mold stains in Munch’s paintings, the remains of fat in Polanszky’s works as well as the fat-soaked cardboard in Beuys remain as traces of the work of nature. In these works, Polanszky does not attack nature, but, like Beuys, the tradition. He removes the materials from their usual surroundings and transforms them into an artistic material.

In his assemblages, Polanszky resists both the natural and “poor” materials of arte povera by countering them in the form of works that despite aesthetic parallels mobilize synthetic, used, often broken materials. His works are shaped by a strikingly haptic feel, and seem virtually to invite the beholder to touch them in the beholder-work-space. By freeing the materials of their function and intended purpose, the artist opens new perspectives on the expected.

Polanszky works against the disappearance of the apparently useless, by lending the unnoticed, the unintended a new physicality in the field of tension with naturally-given gravity and the wind and weather. He creates monuments against forgetting, but without seeking to create new dogmas with his systems. Here, the artist creates a paradox. For he works against life in the knowledge that no final reality exists and thus at the same time blocks the disappearance of things that are apparently worthless, abandoned for destruction by our consumer society. Even if Polanszky insists that he is not making any social or political statements, his art raises important questions of our time, such as wasting resources, the consumer society, and the capitalist economic system. In Polanszky's perspective, which does not seek meaning in the purpose, it is, however, decisive that he is able to show various possibilities in his art by creating new systems, but without having to prove anything. In the process, he seeks an intuitive way of approaching the apparent reality of the laws of nature and always gives freedom preference over logical structure. His unconventional take on and skeptical approach to what is usually taken for granted as reality opens new perspectives on art and our world and shows that the potential of art can go far beyond its own discipline. For art can question our knowledge system, including what we consider givens, and thus present new, innovative approaches to solutions. Who knows that our world view is the right one, did we not once believe that the world is a disc? Perhaps art, like that of Polanszky's freed of the ballast of one-sided knowledge-based views of being, can reveal new findings in a pioneering way. His skepticism seems to evoke the words of Wittgenstein: "My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them . . . He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."[31]

Polanszky's artistic practice expands on the one hand the concept of the material of contemporary art, by limiting the "unthinkable from within through the thinkable" and "mean the unspeakable by clearly displaying the speakable."[32] On the other hand, his art is an overcoming of a worldview that apparently incidentally seems to open new spaces of thought for the beholder. Roland Barthes' comments on Cy Twombly's art seem also to apply to Polanszky, for his art "does not want to take anything; it hangs together, it floats, it drifts between desire and politeness . . . if we required some reference for this art, we could go looking for it . . . in Tao Tê Ching:

He produces, without taking for himself,

He acts without expectation,

His work done, he is not attached to it,

And since he is not attached to it,

His work will remain."[33]

- Dieter Buchhart

[1] Rolf E. Stenersen, *Edvard Munch: Nærbilde av et geni* (Oslo: Gyldendal 1946), 152.

[2] According to the statements of contemporaries, the "kill-or-cure treatment" can be defined as the radical handling of his work that Munch used to attack the physical intactness both of the illusionistic application of color and the pictorial support of the artworks as three-dimensional objects by the calculated inclusion or forcing of natural decay, thus even risking their total destruction. See Dieter Buchhart, *Edvard Munch: Zeichen der Moderne. Die Dualität einer materialbasierten Modernität*, *Edvard Munch: Zeichen der Moderne,* ed. Buchhart (Ostfildern: Hatje-Cantz, 2007), 14ff.

[3] See Dieter Buchhart, “Das Verschwinden im Werk Edvard Munchs. Experimente mit Materialisierung und Dematerialisierung,” Ph.D. thesis (Vienna, 2004), 69ff.

[4] Munch in a conversation with Christian Gierløff, quoted in Ragna Stang, *Edvard Munch: Mennesket og kunstneren*(Oslo: Nygard, 1977), 230.

[5] Monika Wagner, *Das Material der Kunst: Eine andere Geschichte der Moderne*(Munich: C. H. Beck Verlag, 2001).

[6] “Late Bloomer. A Discussion between Rudolf Polanszky and Hans Ulrich Obrist,” in: Art Basel Miami Magazine (December 2018), 184–185.

[7] Dieter Buchhart, *Das Verschwinden im Werk Edvard Munchs. Experimente mit Materialisierung und Dematerialisierung*, Ph.D. thesis, Universität Wien (2004), 41–104.

[8] A conversation with Rudolf Polanszky. February 11, 2015.

[9] Henri Bergson,*Matter and Memory,* trans. N. M. Paul, W. S. Palmer (New York: Zone, 1991).

[10] Ibid.

[11] See Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysis*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946).

[12] “Late Bloomer: A Discussion between Rudolf Polanszky and Hans Ulrich Obrist,” in: Art Basel Miami Magazine (December 2018), 184–185

[13] Ibid., 186.

[14] Ibid., 186.

[15] Arne Eggum, “Loslösung,”*Munch. Liebe. Angst. Tod*, ed. Ulrich Weisner (Bielefeld: Kunsthalle Bielefeld, 1980), 89, 89. See also Arne Eggum, *Edvard Munch: Malerier - skisser og studier*(Oslo: Sternensen, 1983), 114.

[16] Arne Eggum, *Edvard Munch: The Frieze of Life from Painting to Graphic Art* (Oslo: Stenersen 2000), 87

[17] On the theory and history of ruins, see Hartmut Böhme, “Die Ästhetik der Ruinen,”*Der Schein des Schönen*, eds. Dietmar Kamper and Christoph Wulf (Göttingen: Steidl, 1989); Robert Ginsberg, “The Aesthetic of Ruins,”in: *Bucknell Review*18 (1970), 89–102; Hartmann 1981; Georg Simmel, “Die Ruine,” *Philosophische Kultur*(Leipzig: Klinkhardt, 1919), 125–133; Reinhard Zimmermann, *Künstliche Ruinen. Studien zu ihrer Bedeutung und Form,*Ph.D. thesis, Philipps-Universität Marburg, 1984.

[18] Hartmut Böhme, “Die Ästhetik der Ruinen,” 187.

[19] Georg Simmel, “Die Ruine,”127.

[20] Bazon Brock, “Die Ruine als Form der Vermittlung von Fragment und Totalität,” *Fragment und Totalität*, eds. Lucien Dällenbach, and Christiaan L. Hart Nibbrig (Frankfurt a. M. 1984), 124ff.

[21] Heinz Althöfer, “Fragment und Ruine,” *Kunstforum International*19.1 (1977), 57ff.

[22] Bazon Brock, “Die Ruine als Form der Vermittlung,” 126.

[23] Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, 4.113.

[24] Louis Marin, “L’Espace Pollock,” *Parachute* 27(1982), 12–21.

[25] Ibid., 16 and 20.

[26] Ibid., 17.

[27] Ibid., 18.

[28] Conversation with Rudolf Polanszky, February 11, 2015.

[29] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*,
4.113, http://tractatus-online.appspot.com/Tractatus/jonathan/index.html, last accessed: September 26, 2019.

[30] Monika Wagner, *Das Material der Kunst.*

[31] Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Tractatus logico-philosophicus,* 6.54/7.

[32] Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Tractatus logico-philosophicus,* 4.114/4.115.

[33] Roland Barthes, “Cy Twombly: Works on Paper,” in *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), 175–76.