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Moulded physical thought

Anders Rönnlund at Galleri Enkehuset

On a photograph taken in Brancusi's studio in 1917 there can be seen among the sculptures on the floor, an empty plinth, made of wood. Two rhomboid shapes placed one on top of the other. A year later the height has increased. The plinth is a work in its own right that Brancusi calls "La Colonne sans fin" [The column without end]. Some people consider it to be the most radical sculpture that Brancusi has ever produced. A great number of variations saw the light of day. For Edward Steichen's garden in Voulangis, Brancusi made a seven metre high "Column without end" which, in turn, resulted in a photomontage of Steichen.

It is a remarkable juxtaposition, but I have difficulty in imagining that it was approved by the master. For it demonstrates a principle that is in open conflict with Brancusi's ideas. The feeling of emphasising the physical, of a weightless rise towards the eternal presupposes that the series of rhomboids has a limitation, and end. Without an end the rhythmic balance is lost.

Steichen's photomontage breaks up a fundamental striving on the part of Brancusi: the work as body and rhythm, as spiritual energy. It is a concept that is deeply inherent in the actual craftsmanship, in the ancient Rumanian and Asian traditions that Brancusi continued. For the classical European sculpture it involves a move towards the East. Towards the sealed, unborn and meditative. Towards an inner pulsating shape.

For America Brancusi had a different effect: a strengthening of the sculpture's exterior form, "the shape". A sculpture should be "a thing", to quote Donald Judd. Nothing "spiritual".

To be confronted by Anders Rönnlund's sculpture as it appears just now at Enkehuset, is to find oneself in the borderland between European and American culture. How shall I approach this gigantic object? Brancusi filtered through Carl Andre? At least, I thought so.

I enquired about Rönnlund's possible relationship with Carl Andre's minimalism, but he was unsympathetic and replies "I do not make art of art. It is initiated by other things, in my case by political anger." That was tit for tat. But, I wonder calmly. Would Carl Andre have answered otherwise.. when he got round to it.

I have previously seen works by Anders Rönnlund outdoors. Ingenious and playful constructions where the location and its spirit played a decisive role. It has been a disused limestone quarry on Gotland (Hide 1966) or a romantic mid-Swedish industrial environment. At Ekeby mill near Uppsala in the summer, he built – together with Arne Berg – in the middle of a torrential river channel, four paddling bucket wheels and, right next to them, in a rapids channel, a series of organ pipes that played.

It was a voyage of discovery in the world of childhood, in Rönnlund's own Mississippi where everything was still possible. But Rönnlund has preserved one facet of this curiosity. The water has always been a recurrent source of inspiration and it is to be seen again in the project in question, which he calls "To cultivate rice".

In contrast with earlier works, this is formally greatly reduced, "minimal" is the expression. It does not open itself up to the visitor, which does not mean that its sensual potential should be any less. It simply works with other means. It directs the attention at the "elementary", at the material and the language.

On the long wooden foundation placed in the room's longitudinal axis there rest two basins of water and three boxes of earth. The water is black, the earth dry, full of cracks. Along the one long wall there is a section of glass fixed, 20 cm. from the wall. A corridor of "air". Otherwise there are four small "paintings" printed out by a computer, representing rice grains.

Wood, water, earth, plate and glass are parts of a syntax. What Anders Rönnlund has produced is something as unusual and refined as a physical thought. A room charged with meaning, an alloy between the "outer" and the "inner" where the hand's intimacy with the material constitutes the connecting link. A listening with the ear against the stone that the world has discarded and that shows itself to be ever more fateful.

I perceive "To grow rice" as a metaphor for fecundity, for everything that the earth gives to Man. The use of the earth and the sculptor's work meet at this point: both generate life. The political content of this utopian rice cultivation must, in that case, be: Solidarity. The whole of this work is, I would dare to postulate, an incitement to this. Solidarity with all those who have been deprived of the right to live. To grow rice.

Summer 1970, following the killing of four American students by the military during a protest march against the USA's invasion of Kampuchea, Artform asked a number of artists in New York what political action they thought was possible. Carl Andre was one of those who responded. He wrote, among other things:

We must farm to sustain life.

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Life is the link between politics and art.

Jan Håfström