

Borobudur The Energy of Spaces

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The sculptural concept that Benedikt Birckenbach has now been pursuing for six years transforms volume into space, mass into energy, materiality into atmospheric colour, and states into sequences. The material with which Benedikt Birckenbach mainly operates is wood, which he mostly obtains direct from the trunk. He cuts the grown tree into what are at first functional planks or boards, such as would also be used in architecture and utility structures. Even at this first stage, it is important that the planks, obtained by the use of a chain-saw, retain the naturalness and randomness of the material. At this point, hypothetically, the original trunk from which they were obtained could be re-created from the planks at any time. This is important, for the potential derivation from the solid, compact body of the tree-trunk is of consequence when we consider the ensuing process. From the wooden planks, Birckenbach now develops new sculptural volumes, which however, no less potentially than the tree-trunk itself, exist in their ultimate form first and foremost “virtually”, lighting up so-to-speak as the idea behind the design and composition of the sculptural installation.

In the present catalogue, the works in this series, alongside the two other groups of works, are summarized under the superordinate term Borobudur. The Borobudur project, which Benedikt Birckenbach executed in 2004, came about as an installation in the Octagon Room of the “Biologikum” in the GSF Research Centre for Environment and Health in Neuherberg, near Munich.

All the works in this group are derived from trees. Birckenbach divides the trunks into planks, which he then puts together in various ways to create new sculptures. The starting point was the 1999 work “Rotation”, in which a propeller-like rotor, formed from ten planks, is arranged in space in different ways. Laid out in the form of a circle, the planks, cut to follow the growth of the tree, turned in on themselves and slightly staggered, develop a dynamic form, which bears within itself the potential for actual rotation. In this work, Birckenbach took up the internal structure of the organically grown tree, following this with the chain-saw, so as to obtain in turn a structure in which change and movement is captured in every component: the energy which, proceeding from the rotor blades, is exerted upon the surrounding space is physically palpable.

The element of energy has been accentuated more and more clearly in his works in the following years. At first, however, via the 2001 work “Regale” (“Shelves”), there was a further development of the “modular principle”, from which spaces and spatial volumes arise. From the naturally cut planks, Birckenbach puts together constructs, which are at the same time in themselves both sculpture and seemingly functional elements. In this process, siting in space can be identified with a movement in situ, articulating a dynamic shift in space from the static

concept of the shelf, a shift that relates to the surrounding space and rejects any seemingly functional attribution.

This principle takes on concrete form even more clearly in the work “Raum für Kagel”. Benedikt Birckenbach takes two “room-corners” to build a “dialogue space” (or “dialogue room”, the German means both), which he here for the first time paints partly in the colour yellow. The planks, which naturally taper as a result of the shape of the tree, are placed alternately with the broad ends to the left and right, dovetailed so-to-speak, so that the individually asymmetric parts create a holistically symmetric wall. This is countered in the uppermost quarter with planks extending beyond the end of the wall, so that the room (space) itself takes on a dynamic face with projections and indentations. The other two corners of the room have no physical existence; rather there is a convergence on a virtual external point. The room, which is at the same time walk-in but not enclosed, becomes an idealized idea of space. The openness of the body presupposes a questioning of the concept of room/space, and allows the two corner elements to qualify in the long term as sculptural rather than structural elements.

The 2003 work “Pendant” takes this principle further by abandoning the room-corners entirely and placing some of the planks freely in the room/space. The “modular system” is increasingly lost sight of, forming as it were virtual spatial configurations, which beholders can only reconstruct associatively, and in which they have to spatially orient themselves. The use of the colour yellow provides a further element in the de-materialization of wood as construction-material to produce a space-creating quality which discards its material aspects to a certain degree and focuses on space above all as being energetic and mentally present.

The energetic process with which Benedikt Birckenbach is concerned in these works is reflected again in one interior and one exterior sculpture, whereby the exterior sculpture transfers the interior exhibition space to the site in front of the museum in Lyons, where a square of eight plane-tree segments is surrounded with a willow fence, so that what becomes perceptible here are interior and exterior spaces which are not created by walls or architectural boundaries but by direction signs and the palpable electrical energy flow from rod to rod.

This principle of the linkage of concrete sculptural elements with virtual energetic force fields is also pursued by Benedikt Birckenbach in the execution of the work “Pendant später”, where he places the interior exhibition space at the same time on a second level in front of the Kurfürstliches Gärtnerhaus in Bonn. This principle of virtual space-formation and concrete sculptural installation allows him extended dealings with the concept of space and volumes. While the space-placements which the sculptor pursues in his sculptural installations are, as in other well-known room installations, related to architecture and specific premises, in a second dimension they pursue a transfer to an ideal space, which decontextualizes itself from the actual

concrete definition of space. This ideal space-placement has very much more to do with ideas and perceptions of one's own corporeality and one's own mental forces. In this context, it is understandable why, in works like "Raum für Kagel" or the later "Versuch über eine Begrenzung", space is understood not only as a factual volume of an architecture or a sculptural dimension, but confronts a mental idea, be it philosophical, historical, or existential.

In "Versuch über eine Begrenzung" Birckenbach takes up the themes of "Raum für Kagel", but works much more strongly with the shift of spatial planes and premises into an openness of legibility and a layering of planes. The spatial elements, themselves tilted, reach into each other without touching, conveying the impression of an almost labyrinthine network of spatial forces and spatial elements. The interior space, coloured yellow, differs clearly from the exterior, which has been left in its natural state, and allows a tension-field in the sculpture itself between interior and exterior. Important in the context of this group of works also is that the works, depending on the individual exhibition situation, can be set up so that sometimes the interior space can be walked into, while in other cases it is closed and remains inaccessible.

A comparable set of themes is pursued by the work "Inside out", which at first comes across differently. Birckenbach created this at the Kunstverein Rhein-Sieg. In a narrow staircase, four planks, coloured yellow on one side, are wedged between the walls and thus fixed in two directions of view. Here too, as in the earlier works, the result is a pairing. One side depicts an interior, while the other points to exterior space, while the light striking the yellow surfaces reflects space, so to speak, in its coloration.

The Borobudur project now takes up the theme of energy in a different way. Originally conceived for an octagonal space in the Research Centre for Environment and Health near Munich, it has undergone a transformation in its concept. The site itself, a bunker for experiments with ionizing radiation, totally devoid of daylight, had a silent, meditative character. In addition, the access route takes the form of a helix leading around the exterior walls into the interior, which has certain similarities with the pilgrimage route taken by those ascending Borobudur. The room is dominated by four bell-shaped sculptures, constructed of wooden planks, which in their proportions relate to the temple of Borobudur in Java. Benedikt Birckenbach has now interpreted that Buddhist shrine with the eyes of a sculptor.

The temple of Borobudur is the largest Buddhist building in the world. It is made of soot-black andesite, a relatively recent volcanic igneous rock. It is a huge, flattened step-pyramid, embodying an image of the cosmos as understood by Buddhists in the late 8th century CE. It symbolizes both heaven and earth, and their unification through the teaching of the Buddha. Seen from above, this pyramid comes across as a mandala, in other words as a book of teaching, in stone, on the path to perfection and harmony.^[1] The monument is crowned by a stupa 11

metres in diameter.^[2] This crowning stupa gives the total structure its deeper meaning. The (literally) gradual ascent to the inaccessible focus provides us with the final key to this mandala in stone. It is the metaphysical void which symbolizes the sole and fundamental reality of all realities, all creations and all energies, which, by their nature, are transitory. Borobudur is thus at the same time a physical and metaphysical image. It is in this sense not a temple or sanctuary. People never came here to pray, but ultimately to plunge into a spiritual universe. Borobudur is a magic place, which absorbs forces and thoughts. In design, it is a spiral or helix with the stupa at its apex. The pilgrim and seeker-after-truth ascends step by step of this spiral as it leads to enlightenment. One climbs from level to level, experiencing the narrative structure of the reliefs, the abstract form of the stupa, the narrow lanes of the galleries and the broad, open terraces with distant views of the landscape.

The number system and immanent spirituality of Borobudur are reflected indirectly in Birckenbach's sculptures. The essential element of the religious aspect of Borobudur is invisible from the outside. The sacred content of the monument is concealed behind its façade. Its summit is formed by three concentric circles. Seated majestically on them are 72 Buddhas covered with open stupas, resembling our bells. Through lozenge-shaped openings, the stupas of the first two round terraces allow views of the everywhere identical statues of the Buddha Vairocana, which are barely perceptible through the square openings of the third terrace. The topmost and largest stupa is empty and shows the invisible and nameless Buddha. The central stupa, whose impressive form rises into the heavens, dominates the whole structure. It is the consummation of Borobudur, the culmination to which everything leads.

In Benedikt Birckenbach's work, concrete, ideal and virtual spaces combine to create a symbol of spirituality. Birckenbach here reworks those bell-like stupas as conical sculptures. At 1.70 to 1.80 metres, these objects are man-sized and thus allow no insight from above into their interior. The upper quarter of the planks is coloured yellow, allowing us to forget the structure of the wood. The (as it were, dissolving) materiality is matched by the tapering form, which potentially, extrapolated upwards, leads to a closing off of the interior space. Depending on the presentation, Birckenbach closes off this interior space, leaves it open as an insight, or lays the whole object on the floor – once again reflecting the modular system – thus closing off space as a factually walk-in element and opening it up so to speak as a virtual idea. The fascination of the principle, which can be traced through his work, aims at that special nature of the power of the interior, which can neither be named, nor measured, nor even experienced. Reflexion on those bell-modules, in which the figure of a Buddha statuette is comprehensible as a memory element, here becomes a virtual space, whose contentuality and energy become comprehensible solely through the non-presence of this virtual space or, to put it another way, the rejection of any concrete delimitation. The space which Birckenbach confronts in his sculptural installations,

while taking shape time and again in concrete dimensions and architectures, cannot be attributed to such a relationship alone; rather, in the interaction of forces and dimensions, it plays time and again above all with those energetic volumes which can be pinned down more easily in the world of ideas than in the concrete world.

In this process, the particular charm of the works of Benedikt Birckenbach can be seen to lie in the concrete composition of his elements, the craft which likewise inheres in the works. The sensual material of the wood, the expressive working of the material, the monumental composition of the dimensions, the risky interplay of weakness and strength – always taken to the limit of the stress to which they are exposed – and the conscious integration of colour, all give the works, alongside their conceptual quality, the strength and effectiveness of sculptural art. Birckenbach thematizes the relationship of the beholder to the sculpture in a special way. Beholders experience themselves and their own corporeality in looking at the works. The beholders become part of the sculpture. They do not perceive it as an image, but experience it as an element in which their own bodies are reflected and in which their experience of life and existence is captured.

^[1] Originally a mandala was a diagram drawn on the floor or on a wall-hanging, sometimes however a sculpture, which combined the earth and the whole of earthly creation with the vault of the visible heavens: the circle, the symbol of the all-divine.

^[2] A stupa is a monument in memory of the death of the Buddha, which in the course of time has come to assume various symbolic meanings. Originally a stupa was simply a burial mound. Later it assumed more sophisticated forms and became the symbol of the Buddhist faith.