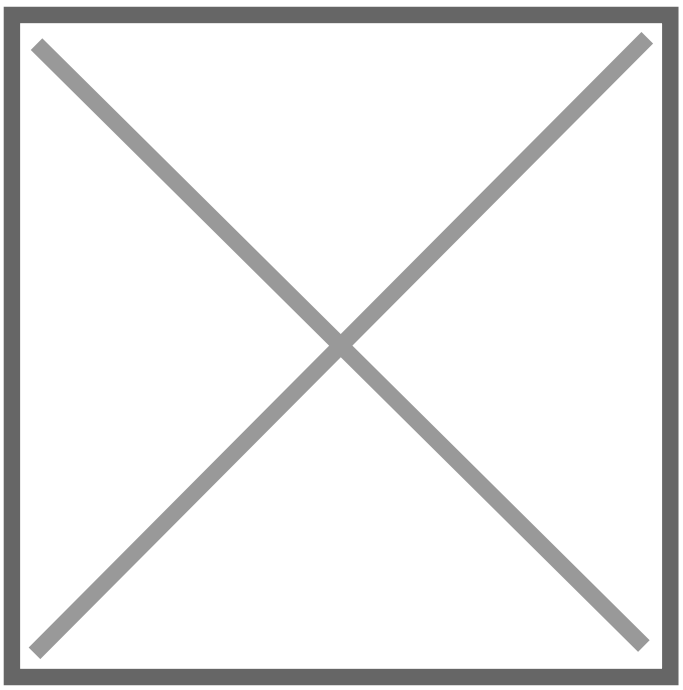
VAN DER GRINTEN GALERIE



Wolfgang Flad

Marc Wellmann: Everything Grows. Wolfgang Flad's Sculptural Work

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Wolfgang Flad's organic vocabulary of forms—as found in wallpieces as well is in three-dimensional ones—is made up of motifs of growth, proliferation and interlinkage. The smooth, geometric shapes of lacquered plinths are an ever-recurring element that function as an integral component of the sculptures. What is striking about his entwined and thrusting, dynamized configurations, which can expand into entire environments, is the large format attuned to the human body. His works are neither understood as miniatures nor as existing in the medium of photographic images. A crucial aspect of their effect is a physically-determined confrontation with viewers that is actualized as a space-related

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experience. The process of the viewers' physical approach and walk-around movements mirror certain stylistic characteristics of the sculptures themselves, whose complexities and size are staged as a mild form of aesthetic submersion. Also the viewers' engagement with the originals inevitably ends in questions as to the material itself and its production process as a first step toward intellectual comprehension. But it is at this point that Wolfgang Flad's work holds several surprises in store.

Very often an impression arises that the sculptures have been carved from a single block. An impression reinforced, among other things, by monochrome borders and the geometrically-curbed edges at the end of tentacle-like outcroppings that prohibit or restrain the sculptures' gesticulating qualities. In fact all the works are constructed from inside out and the large volumes turn out to be a scenario of hollow figures. Flad builds his configurations from commercially available wooden panels and slats, which he composes to a spatial constellation using angle brackets and screw connectors. In a second step, the wood pieces are whittled down and rounded into slim stalks. Flad, however, achieves this organic lightness above all by the following, additive process: with papier maché he coats and smoothes out the transitions and connecting joints. In conclusion, Flad's original training as a painter becomes manifest in the polychrome exterior he then applies, often with metallic effects. In several places he chooses to display the materiality of the wood by partially rubbing off this outer skin. The colored coating conceals the physicality of the papier maché, but occurs intermittently. The process of deceiving and undeceiving in what is a present-day conceptual way has namely been factored in. Thus in this context the artist communicates the fact that the papier maché is not the usual standard material, but has been attained from shredding texts written by art critics. Wolfgang Flad recycles the thinking and the writing on art by incorporating it as concrete material into his artworks! If you will, you may detect here a good proportion of humor. But a closer look allows you also to read this material statement as commentary on a retrospective look back at the abstract formal world of the 1950s and 60s, which Wolfgang Flad, a postborn descendent of the same, reacts to and openly avows. In this sense the textual material takes up a communicative posture toward modernism, whose appropriation in the form of neo-modernism cannot be seamlessly generated. As an autonomous cover version, Wolfgang Flad consciously plays with an ambivalent semblance, whose demystification is part of the

program. This is the way the boney structure of Flad's sculptures means to be understood, which the artist himself describes as "gnawed skeletons", that is, as the reflected glory of the sated fleshiness of an early organic abstraction as found, for example, in the works of Hans Arp. In morbid pathos, Flad's sculptures thus rear up, fragile and unprotected, against history's force.

His new series of bronze casts continue to implement this idea in a further innovation. They have been produced from molds of the wood and papier maché originals and therefore possess the ontological status of copies that have preserved the above-noted conceptual breaches in the form of a trace, quasi as a vessel. Yet, at the same time, they signal a return to the original or intrinsic material of the majority of modern sculptures that have come down to us. The up-to-dateness of Flad's works is evidenced not least of all by the color accents on some of the cast material's planes, in part also as lacquer from a spray gun, a shimmery and calculated taboo breach.

Similar deceptive and redeployed structures can also be seen in Wolfgang Flad's wallpieces. As early as his student days at the Art Academy in Stuttgart, he initiated the technique of working the multi-lacquered plywood boards with drill and molding cutter so interspersedly that the breaks in the material looked like gestural paint drippings. This scenario of dynamic movement is the product of a highly mastered, handcrafted and transforming process that renders the seeming flow of paint into the fixity of industrially prefabricated materials. This process that he still deploys today borrows analogies from the perforated photographs of Daniele Buetti, an artist for whom Flad long worked as an assistant. In a current series of aluminum reliefs, Flad further developed the formal concept of the wallpieces. At first glance these too recall paint splatters like those produced on canvas during a painting act. But this time, these come about from cauterizing blocks of Styrofoam that the artist then has cast in aluminum in a process of lost casting; the one-of-a-kind piece is then given a color-nuanced polish.

Wolfgang Flad's oeuvre, by means of quotations and ironic distance, supersedes the formal problem that is contained in the title of this article. Which in turn is based on the biologistic use of the dictum "panta rhei" that is said to go back to the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus and means "everything flows" in regards to the idea of an eternal transformation

of being.

What appears to be a firmly established form, such as the serpentine meanderings of a river, is subject to an inner dynamism that, in this case, constantly renews the water. From which idea another famous Heraclitus quote resulted: you can never step into the same river twice. As a sculptural theme, these questions revolve around the eternal paradox between the constancy of the sculptural material and its relationship to transience and, in the end, to the intangibility of the living. The motifs of growth in the tradition of organic abstraction in Flad's works doubtlessly assert themselves as forms in space. But beyond this, they are catalysts in a quite involved conceptual game that is played solely in the mind and which, as a feature of thinking, reshapes the three-dimensional figures animistically.

Marc Wellmann, 2013
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