

## Interview

Meisenthal, June 1994

Stephan Balkenhol's works are divided between seemingly realist sculpture and a sculptural practice that is at once masterful and self-reflexive. What emerges from this de facto dichotomy is a singularity that oscillates between a meaningful intention and the insignificance of an illusory convention. From his teacher, Ulrich Rückriem, Stephan Balkenhol inherited minimalist conceptions of the object and of space. His single-block, polychrome wooden sculptures are apprehended in their totality as three-dimensional geometric forms incorporating Rückriem's highly symbolic motifs, while the figurative image surges forth at their summit like an outgrowth, an excrescence. The work continually employs this double language, at the same time drawing on the substrate of an ancient artistic tradition.

Alexandra Midal: The faces of your figures express neither joy, nor fear, nor anger – their inexpressiveness is at the antipodes of the academic description of the passions as codified by Charles Le Brun. Can your adoption of such an approach be read as a radical critique of the entire German expressionist tradition?

Stephan Balkenhol: I'm not looking for the acme of expression. A crying or laughing person is petrified in that expression. I prefer to leave an open space for the imaginary; that gives force to the sculpture. I don't much care for the violence imposed by expressionism.

AM: This inexpressiveness gives your statuary the possibility of existing as a thing-in-itself, but also of opening up to each person's subjective projections. Paradoxically, the subjective only exists in your work as a function of an initial objectivity. The viewer is all the more able to identify with your immobile figures because their universality helps them meld into the anonymous individual. Clothed or unclothed, they become abstract; no social reading can be decoded or justified.

SB: There is a form of objectivity in my work but it is more general, the possibilities for identification are multiple. It's a little as though you found a private photo in the street: you don't know the person or persons in the picture and yet at the same time, it's something very personal. My sculptures can represent a definite person or whoever, a "Mr. Everyman."

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AM: With very rare exceptions, your works are all in wood. Why wood?

SB: Wood is my material of predilection because it requires a rhythm of work that I find agreeable. What's more, its connotations are not so strong as those of stone or bronze. It's more neutral, somewhat related to paper.

AM: In the series of watercolors called *Ponds*, from 1985 to 1987, Ludger Gerdes makes explicit use of the metaphor of the tree, the linden tree, as a representation of man. Thus the use of wood in an anthropomorphic sculpture is not anodyne; like this work by Gerdes, it seems to mark the resurgence of a process which is connected to the nineteenth century. Can one speak of such symbolics in your work?

SB: No, I don't work with symbolics. Sometimes I use images that refer to certain things and can have a symbolic function for that reason, but I wouldn't like them to only be seen in their symbolic aspect. Another dimension exists in the images, more dependent on interpretations that each person can make.

AM: It's a conception of abstraction that emphasizes both the connections and the differences with Ulrich Rückriem, your former teacher at the Hamburg Kunstakademie...

SB: Rückriem began with figurative sculptures and finally arrived at a completely "non-figurative" kind of work.

During my studies I took the exact opposite path. I began with conceptual works, to arrive at a kind of work that allows the figurative

image to appear once again; but I don't know if I would have reached this point without Rückriem, because as his student it was necessary to ask myself these very fundamental questions.

AM: You seek realism in your works, to the point of making your sculptures polychrome. And yet in the classical tradition this recourse to "eloquent color" (as Jacqueline Lichtenstein defines it) remains an exclusively pictorial practice. Do you conceive painting and sculpture as two specific domains of expression?

**SB:** Painting is always more conceptual, it creates an imaginary reality in the image being represented.

Sculpture retains a concrete physical character.

In my work as a sculptor, I try to use this physical presence to evoke a reality in the viewer's imagination. In this way, the reality is embodied.

AM: What role do your drawings play in this sense?

**SB:** They are preparatory sketches and at the same time they are autonomous. Paper allows you to treat subjects that would be impossible to handle otherwise.

AM: Does this mean that wood is a limitation?

**SB:** Yes, but sculpture adds something irreplaceable: presence. It can be a kind of strength and beauty, which in itself can make the physical presence very violent, even

disturbing, according to a classical conception of culture.

AM: Yet your reliefs are hybrid works, between painting and sculpture.

**SB:** Work in wood is identical with drawing, to the extent that it too is predetermined by the format of its support, the size of the plank in which it is inscribed.

AM: Your figures are painted in lively, realistic colors; only their skin is left raw. The similarities between wood and skin are not limited to a proximity of color. Even when cut, wood remains alive: it cracks or expands, it remains subject to the climatic conditions of its environment.

How do you deal with the incidental factors like the knots in the wood, the way it changes under the weather?

**SB:** I don't use them but I do pay attention to them. The changes brought about by time are part of the life of the sculpture.

AM: This systematic exploitation of the various properties of wood betrays a veritable mastery of the craft, both on a theoretical and a formal level. In its roughness, the wood of your sculptures retains the traces of the different chisels. In fact, it's with this insistence on the fabricated object – and all the more so since it remains a single block – that the break with mimesis is consummated.

**SB:** I'm more a sculptor than a plastic artist. Plastic artists begin with nothing, whereas the sculptor always has a volume in front of him to work on. The block-like aspect that the

## Grande tête

installation Blackfriars Bridge, Londres

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monoxylité à la sculpture, apporte une densité et une unité singulière.

AM : Une statue monoxyle permet d'intégrer totalement le socle à la sculpture. De Brancusi aux minimalistes, de Rückriem à Steinbach, la réflexion sur la nature et la fonction du socle demeure un thème récurrent au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. De présentoir, Le socle est devenu, en fait, l'indice même de la sculpture : en la surhaussant, il la sépare de l'espace du spectateur et souligne sa nature d'objet. Lui assignes-tu une fonction similaire dans tes œuvres ?

SB : J'utilise le socle pour créer une certaine distance, pour établir une relation entre le volume et l'espace. Bien sûr, le socle peut également avoir la qualité d'une sculpture mais cette qualité sera toujours subordonnée à la sculpture qu'elle porte. Plus que le socle, c'est le volume qui pour moi est essentiel. Je respecte le volume tel qu'il se présente et je vois les possibles utilisations de cette forme donnée par la nature. Le socle me rappelle la situation de l'œuvre dans l'atelier.

AM : Dans la grande tête de Londres, tu présentes une tête d'homme monumentale sur un socle/tabouret et tu places cet ensemble sur un des piliers qui servait autrefois à soutenir un pont qui enjambait la Tamise. Ce dédoublement du socle (socle/tabouret, sur socle/colonne) semble l'illustration de ton propos précédent. Il dénote aussi une réflexion sur la mise en espace de la sculpture.

use of a single piece of wood confers on a sculpture produces an unusual density and unity.

AM: A single-block statue allows for the total integration of the pedestal to the sculpture. From Brancusi to the minimalists, from Rückriem to Steinbach, a reflection on the nature and function of the pedestal remains a recurring theme of the twentieth century. From a simple presentation device, it has in fact become the very index of sculpture: by elevating the piece, the pedestal separates it from the space of the viewer and emphasizes its nature as an object. Do you give the pedestal a similar function in your works?

SB: I use the pedestal to create a certain distance, to establish a relation to the volume of the space. Of course the pedestal can also have a sculptural quality, but this will always be subordinated to the sculpture it supports. The volume is what's essential to me, much more than the pedestal. I respect the volume as it presents itself, and I see the possible uses of this form that is given by nature. For me, the pedestal recalls the situation of the work in the studio.

AM: With the great head in London, you presented a monumental human head on a pedestal/stool and you placed this ensemble on one of the pilings that formerly served to support a bridge crossing the Thames. This doubling of the pedestal (pedestal/stool, on pedestal/column)

**SB** : Il est souvent difficile de trouver une adéquation parfaite entre la sculpture et le lieu, l'intuition prédomine dans mes choix. L'eau était ici un espace vierge mais il est aussi intéressant d'être confronté à des lieux déjà très connotés. C'est la situation, l'environnement qui présuppose la sculpture.

**AM** : Avec le climat, la lumière, la pluie, l'appréhension de l'œuvre est-elle différente pour le spectateur ?

**SB** : Le contexte teste la validité du travail, le bien-fondé de son existence, l'affirmation de sa présence. Il est toujours plus intéressant d'exposer une sculpture à l'extérieur pour la confronter à une situation difficile.

**AM** : Dans la définition d'espaces soumis à une déréglementation de la taille réelle, développes-tu une esthétique des dimensions ?

**SB** : Je ne recherche pas une esthétique mais une expérience. Réaliser une œuvre à l'échelle humaine n'offre qu'une satisfaction réduite. Une sculpture disproportionnée possède une force plus grande car elle ouvre à l'imaginaire des espaces nouveaux. Les petites sculptures paraissent, d'ailleurs, souvent plus monumentales que les œuvres de taille importante dans la complexité des relations qu'elles entretiennent avec leur environnement.

**AM** : Un parallèle avec le cinéma pourrait être ici évoqué. Comme les visages en gros plan occupent la totalité de l'écran, les Grosse Köpfe investissent la globalité du lieu d'exposition, les ensembles de

personnages en pied rappellent le cadrage des plans larges. Ce décalage d'échelle n'est-il pas le propre de l'artefact et plus précisément de toute sculpture, du buste monumental à l'objet sacré ?

**SB** : Oui, j'essaie de donner aussi cette expérience au spectateur, mais l'essentiel est qu'il appréhende chaque sculpture dans le contexte qui est celui de l'œuvre.

**AM** : Mais en décrivant l'installation d'une exposition dans l'institution (musées ou galeries) tu parles d'une joie, voire d'une célébration ; tu te réfères au spirituel, un concept sous-jacent dans ton œuvre...

**SB** : Je crois que mes sculptures sont objectives, mais il est indéniable que la somme des expériences que j'ai vécues se répercutent sur l'ensemble de mon travail.

**AM** : L'aspect singulier de chacune de tes sculptures renvoie à la typification d'un individu. Tes œuvres s'inscrivent pourtant fréquemment dans une série et le déclinement d'un motif. Avec la colonie des 57 pingouins, tu investis l'espace social et tu confrontes le spectateur à un discours, une réalité formelle qui se constitue en rupture avec tes œuvres précédentes. Comment éviter, dès lors, l'écueil de la narration ?

**SB** : Je l'évite ou le recherche au cas par cas. J'essayais auparavant d'éliminer de mes œuvres tout aspect narratif. Aujourd'hui, je refuse encore la narration lorsque j'omets volontairement le geste et l'expression, mais parfois, et peut-être de plus en plus, je m'intéresse aux problèmes qui lui sont liés, à la

seems to be the illustration of your previous comment. It also denotes a reflection on the process of putting sculpture into a spatial context.

**SB:** **It is often difficult to find a perfect fit between the sculpture and the site. Intuition predominates in my choices. Here, the water was a blank space, free of all connotations; but it's also interesting to be confronted by spaces that are already very connoted. The situation, the environment, is what presupposes the sculpture.**

**AM:** Does the viewer apprehend the work differently with the weather, the light, the rain?

**SB:** **The context tests the validity of the work, the well-foundedness of its existence, the affirmation of its presence. It's always more interesting to exhibit a sculpture outside, to confront it with a more difficult situation.**

**AM:** By defining spaces that at variance with a life-size format, do you develop an aesthetic of dimensions?

**SB:** **I do not seek an aesthetic but an experience. Creating a work at human scale offers a reduced satisfaction. A disproportionate sculpture has greater force, because it opens up new spaces for the imaginary. Often the smallest sculptures appear more monumental than large-scale works, through the complexity of their relations with the environment..**

**AM:** A parallel with cinema could be evoked here. Just as close-up shots of faces occupy the totality

of the screen, so the *Grosse Köpfe* fill the entirety of the exhibition space; the standing figures recall the framing of long shots. Isn't this off-scale effect an inherent characteristic of the artifact and more precisely of sculpture, from the monumental bust to the sacred object?

**SB:** **Yes, I try to give that experience to the viewer, but the essential thing is to apprehend each sculpture in the context of the work.**

**AM:** When you describe the installation of an exhibition in an institution (galleries, museums), you speak of a feeling of joy, even of celebration; you refer to spirituality, an underlying concept in your work...

**SB:** **I believe that my sculptures are objective, but it's undeniable that the sum total of my lived experiences has repercussions throughout my work.**

**AM:** The singular aspect of each of your sculptures has to do with the typification of an individual. And yet your works are frequently inscribed in series and variations on a motif. With the colony of fifty-seven penguins, you occupy social space and confront the viewer with a discourse – a formal reality that constitutes a break with your previous works. At that point, how do you avoid the pitfall of narration?

**SB:** **I either avoid it or seek it out, case by case. I used to attempt to eliminate any narrative aspect whatsoever from my works. Today I still refuse narration when I voluntarily omit gesture and expression, but sometimes, and increasingly perhaps, I take an interest in the**

problems connected with it, and in the question of the subject. But one must remain vigilant about what is to be told. Up till now I have only evoked little folk-tales, or relations between animals and people.

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AM: You seem to have been very impressed by Egyptian sculpture during a visit to the British Museum. Don't you think that this attraction to a frozen, hieratic code of representation could finally culminate in a form of incommunicability?

**SB: No, I don't refer to a code of representation in my works, and if my images retain an abstract character it is because I seek to represent only the reality that I perceive. The absence of gesture doesn't necessarily imply an absence of communication.**

AM: How do you situate yourself with respect to the sculptural tradition?

**SB: The beginning of this century constituted a definitive break with the tradition of figurative sculpture. Reconnecting with the figure today involves very different problematics. The only terms in which the notion of tradition could be reintroduced are intrinsically linked to the fact that human beings limit themselves to reproducing images of their inexistence.**

AM: From the retinal point of view your work nonetheless remains very seductive, and in a most traditional way. How do you justify this seductiveness?

**SB: I'm not sufficiently up front with myself concerning seduction. It's a fact that the visual or the aesthetic sometimes has a power we cannot master. In a sense it is a moral responsibility to use it to good ends, but I don't want to be a moralist!**

**Maybe we must accept that the seductive aspect of beauty is a force in itself, and that this seduction is not always limited to the domain of the advertising image.**

AM: But don't you make use of the viewer's strange desire to be fooled?

**SB: I try not to fool the viewer, but sometimes I observe that people are so used to lies that they automatically feel duped.**

Translated by Brian Holmes

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## Stephan Balkenhol

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