

The Place

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While thinking about Renata Bünter's more recent sculptures I have not ignored the fact that she has produced a large body of drawings, and that texts, which she writes on an old electric typewriter or by hand, are likewise part of her oeuvre. Sometimes she adds texts and drawings to bits of materials that can then be pieced into a sculptural construction. At the same time her sculptures have a graphic quality akin to the drawings and texts. Rods that transect the space, flat pieces of material that are inserted into the room like sections of a wall, ceiling or floor, and thin sheets of foil that separate inner from outer zones like collapsed cell walls – these are all salient features. One may find in the various sculptural forms she creates the equivalents to strokes, filled-in areas and chaotically curved scribbles on paper – although remarkably Bünter's actual drawings do not derive from this repertoire; often the means she employs in her drawings are far simpler, and frequently her mostly small drawings are made up of dots that she places – patiently and lost to the world – side by side until a figure appears. Talking of the sculptures as inscriptions in space underlines the fact that these are not bodies that impinge on space. Some have such a filigree form that they look like materialisations of energy.

Even if the idea of a general graphicism that is embodied by various realisations helps give the backdrop to her oeuvre and pinpoints a particular characteristic in the way she formulates her sculptures, I shall nevertheless focus on the sculptures themselves and thus try to avoid any risk of neglecting their specific quality and subtlety. For all their fragility, delicacy and spatial permeability, Renata Bünter's sculptures exist in their own right – they do not join up with the landscape or the architecture¹ but are clearly demarcated from the other things in the space. Whereby the building itself is the most important of these “things in the space”. The demarcation from the architecture is so decisive that it is difficult to imagine the “right place” for any one sculpture, let alone a suite of them. Put rather loosely, one could say they could find their place anywhere and nowhere. And with that they meet the criterion of the nomadic condition that applies to works of modernist sculpture.² Neither the fact that the sculptures are pieced together from diverse materials in flat, incorporeal shapes, nor that colours are of outstanding importance, raises particular problems in categorising them. Just as they do not mingle with the things in the space, we find no overlap here with painting.

In the following I shall examine the question as to what position Renata Bünter's sculptures occupy within the category “modernist sculpture,” and what in fact is their place if they can be anywhere and nowhere.

Although the sculptures have this nomadic quality, the majority distinguish themselves by their closeness to the floor. Only a few, smaller pieces are presented on pedestals. The others not only rest directly on the ground, but actually emphasise this position, this contact in a particular manner; the insistence of the sculptures' relation to the floor can be seen to indicate that the floor is no longer an unquestionable given, but has become uncertain. Some sculptures stand on a large numbers of rods, or

1 Cf. the much-quoted article by Rosalind Krauss, in which she conceives of an “expanded field” for sculpture that offers room not only to the autonomous works found in modernism, but also to (postmodernist) works which are determined by the connections they establish with and through landscape and architecture, Rosalind Krauss, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, October No. 8, 1979.

2 Cf. *ibid.*

four somewhat wider planks that touch the ground just at one point, for they have been set at an angle. Or long, slightly springy strips of wood bend out from a red painted block of foam rubber and lie at their distant tips on the ground. The relationship to the floor becomes totally explicit in a number of Bünter's horizontal pieces, which seem to be driven by the question of how something can be made to rise up from the ground – in direct contrast to the grip that horizontal sculptures like Carl Andre's have on the ground. How can five and yet another five recumbent, blue-painted rods arranged in a fan be raised up, how can a hula-hoop be teased from the floor? In one case the sculpturally implemented response is: tying the ends of the battens to a pair of square timbers. In another case: by placing rolls of wrapping paper at regular intervals around a hoop and tying them on with string, so that the hoop seems to be dancing on eighteen pairs of puny legs set in a circle. In both instances the central elements in the sculptural constellations come from Bünter's answer to the question she has set herself: how to counter the attachment to the ground. Put another way, the sculptures are constructed as if their form were determined and legitimated by the urge to defy gravity.

Bünter's sculptures achieve their nomadic condition through their halting search for a floor space and their simultaneous endeavour to leave the ground. Perhaps *Meer [Sea]* from 1997 provides the clearest embodiment of the twofold nature of the nomadic sculpture, its movement towards the floor, as if searching for a place, and its aerophilic release from it – an expression of the modernist anywhere and nowhere. The work consists of a thin blue plastic sheet which has been whirled apart only then to become embedded as a crumpled motile volume full of trapped air in a rectangular grid that was waiting for it. Since this pneumatic body begins to droop with time, the foil has to be given a fresh shake every day. The sculpture sways between the regions of the earth and the sky. In terms of colour the sea belongs to the sky, through its materiality to the earth – this ambivalence in locational ties runs through all of Renata Bünter's works.

The concept of bricolage is helpful for establishing the principle behind Bünter's use of materials. According to the famous explanation given by Claude Lévy-Strauss, the bricoleur envisages a particular project which he realises by using all the means and materials at his disposal.³ To this end he pays no heed to aesthetics, nor does he bother about the original purpose of his resources. Bünter likewise enlists heterogeneous materials in functions that may deviate widely from their initial use: paper is rolled so as to support a metal hoop, foam rubber is coated with paint or affixed to wooden blocks, or felt-like, absorbent household paper is stiffened with plaster so as to construct a kind of house of cards. But what is missing is an underlying plan for an overall project that can be realised purposively. Instead, the task of the sculpture that is to be realised is to manifest properties of the materials that mean something to Bünter, and which may well deviate far from the normal expectations of functionality. The sculptural construction brings special properties of the materials to light – on the condition that these help the sculpture come into being. This nexus of mutual dependence liberates the work from the surrounding conditions – its nomadism and its autonomy are interconnected criteria of modernity.

This seemingly wilful use of the materials has a logic of its own, an oneiric sense of correctness. Bünter collects things in her studio that might prove suitable for later. Before she sets about creating a sculpture, she makes sure her stocks are full. If she does not have enough material she goes and finds what she needs. There must be a lot of wood there, and a lot of foam rubber. Wherever Bünter stocks



3 Cf. Claude Lévy-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, Chicago, 1966, p. 19 ff.

up, it is more than possible that she will chance upon things that unexpectedly catch her eye and will also take them with her. Friends sometimes bring her things which they think she might need. So her main activity in the studio can be pictured as taking out materials – which may also include attempts to make a sculpture which till now has remained a failure – placing or spreading out these materials at a suitable spot, looking at them, moving them about, clearing them away, fetching others, piecing them together, working individual parts, such as by coating a piece of foam rubber with red paint, or writing or doing a drawing on a piece of wood, without any plan or aim. And all the while in a state of “evenly-suspended attention,” as Sigmund Freud designated the requisite mental state required by an analyst during the process of psychoanalysis. If (s)he is too quick to focus his or her attention and choose and arrange the material at hand, “he is in danger of never finding anything but what he already knows. (...) The rule for the doctor may be expressed: He should withhold all conscious influences from his capacity to attend, and give himself over completely to his ‘unconscious memory’. Or, to put it purely in terms of technique: He should simply listen, and not bother about whether he is keeping anything in mind.”⁴ Bünter looks, but perhaps also listens, or recalls. She for her part describes herself in this process as circling the material. At some point the actual making of a sculpture may happen very quickly, but it may also misfire.

She does not actually use that many different materials, and rarely things that have been worked into proper objects. It is the exception when, for instance, one of her works from 2003 includes a wooden foot, a mould from an orthopaedic shoe-maker’s. But those materials in which she is really interested come in various qualities, colours and dimensions: wood, foam rubber, plastic foil, paper, plaster, paint, cords and tapes. Apart from their tactile qualities, their chromatic properties are important – above all the thin blue plastic sheeting is like a length of mobile colour. Bünter makes sure she can take her materials apart, colour them and put them back together without too much effort. The bonds are normally only as strong as is necessary to lend stability to a construction. Often the objects are tied together or inserted into each other, sometimes simply piled up. Occasionally Bünter creates special devices to hold an element in place, one that doesn’t involve any permanent connection. In such cases the need to fix the elements determines the formal cast of a sculpture. With the individual sculptures, the impression of an ephemeral construction complements the fragility of the materials from which it is made.

Usually the sculptures develop correlative relationships, which Bünter sees as a tendency in the materials themselves. She abides in her constructions by “the way the materials find each other”⁵. Diverse things are linked up in a unitary context, without obeying any claim to totalisation. The materials need each other, but their new sense of cohesion must nevertheless remain open. A number of works are symmetrical or have in one way or another a serial organisation. By observing principles of repetition and balance, the sculptures assume a presence marked by inner repose. This does not disallow irregularities and deviations, but on the contrary, makes every shade of difference from the ideal state seem worthy of attention. Even when works include a greater irregularity in their structures, they can normally be perceived as a “gestalt”, as a differentiated whole. Bünter has spoken of her desire to create a counterpart, and some of the pieces do indeed have anthropomorphic traits. Not that she aims at all

4 Sigmund Freud, *Recommendations to Physicians Practising Psycho-Analysis* (1912), The Standard Edition, vol. XII, trans J. Strachey, 1958, Hogarth Press, London, pp. 111–112

5 Conversation with the author on 14 May 2012.

to depict a human form; rather, the general shape and proportions of a person's physique provide a matrix that allows the chaos of the heterogeneous materials to be arranged and links to be created between disparate materials.

Equilibrium is sought on every level of the sculpture. Bünter juxtaposes wood – as a warm, natural material – with synthetic foam; the open form of a filigree construction of fine rods is linked with the closed form of a cloud-like hood made of thin plastic sheeting; the contrast between warm and cold informs the red-painted wooden blocks with their blue stripes made of foam rubber; foam rubber is covered with a coat of paint, and relations between materials are married with those between colours. Bünter finds a balance for the sculptural-chromatic constellations as a whole in texts that she combines with the individual sculptures. On a batten that is part of an exceptionally complex work we find the sentence: “The woman with the light blue scarf shouts come the dog will certainly not walk away they go off to the red flag which”. The missing words “flutters in the wind” can no longer be read because the batten has been inserted at that end into a supporting block of foam rubber. Another work – a wall made of foam rubber drenched in red, with arcs of slender battens done in the same colour – has as its title the phrase “the four-leaf clover grows here as well”. In this case, the mental image of green, the colour of clover, balances the powerful red. Or the words “the noise lingers on gently” adds the image of a gradually fading sound to the sculpture. The texts open up a further dimension to the sculptures. They are never documentary, but provide instead an additional image and lead on to another scene. But not every work requires a title or a text dedicated specially to it.

Bünter's works all evince an inner differentiation and are pieced together from several parts; they do not have a uniform configuration. But often the sculptures encompass two poles. Only a few of the works consist of more than two main elements. Yet the contrasts that are created by the balanced connection between different elements are not polar in nature, nor are they of equal value across the levels of material, form and colour. All the differences that Bünter uses to create a unity are balanced out with enormous finesse. The sculptures receive their special quality as reflections of an idiosyncratic, unregulated aesthetic sensibility. Although this sensibility does not permit any violent break with the mutual attraction of the various elements in a sculpture, it does allow moments of controlled violence.

The observation that the contrasts in the sculptures are determined outside of any rule book, and balanced out on the individual level according to an aesthetic of equipoise, must be thought of in connection with Freud's “evenly-suspended attention”. By “circling” the material and integrating it into ephemeral and fragile sculptures, Bünter not only manages to tease out special qualities from the individual elements, but also to access hidden matters in her own psyche. This has less to do with the facets of a personal trauma, such as psychoanalysis deals with, and more with childhood memories – not even particularly unusual or problematic memories, but rather simple and general memories which thus allow themselves to be conveyed: the memory of growing up in a joiner's shop, where lengths of wood were marked with pencil, just as she does when she adds drawings and texts to pieces of wood; the memory of animals and the open expanses of the countryside. The way she handles the materials with “evenly-suspended attention” gives memories of this kind a place, they cling to the materials and are encountered together with them. With that there is no contradiction between the autonomy of the sculptures mentioned earlier, which is to say the circular reasoning linking material qualities and sculptural form, and their referentiality. The references are not formed mimetically but are brought about rather through the acts of tying together and placing in contact.

This simultaneous presence of materials and memory does not disturb our contemplation of the figural aspect of individual works. Made up of five identical, red-painted planks, *Rotes Tier* [Red Animal] from 1997 shows precisely what the title says. In the piece with the text “the noise lingers on gently,” the sheet of foam rubber transfixed by five staves can be seen as a landscape, with the tatters of blue plastic at the end of the staves as the clouds above. Or one is reminded of a hiding place, of a dress. Recently Bünter made a film which traces out an exact image of a childhood memory. As regards the sculptures, the memory of an inner state and frame of mind that shaped Renata Bünter’s childhood is more important than the specific details. She says that during the first seven years of her life she saw almost nothing whatsoever, until one day she was given a pair of glasses and all at once it was clear to her that things act quite differently to the way she had assumed. She must already have had memories of a preceding time at an early age – memories that could not immediately be connected with her perceptions of the present. She got up to odd things, observed people, took in animals and places not so much visually as physically, with her feelings. Manifested in her sculptures is the memory of a state of suspension and of a halfway world, of surrendered control and a goalless orientation.⁶

A memory emerges of a simple childhood in the country and a happiness that has never quite forsaken Bünter. And these memories by turn constitute the place for her sculptures.



6 Conversation with the author on 4 July 2012.