

## Reiner Ruthenbeck

Reiner Ruthenbeck belongs to that generation of artists who began to question prevailing forms of sculpture in the 1960s and to develop new ways of working. This was the generation of Arte Povera in Italy and Postminimalism in the USA. What distinguishes Ruthenbeck's work is its originality and the fact that he counts as one of the inventors of a new formal idiom, not as an epigone. This is also connected to the way Ruthenbeck's path clearly differed from those taken by his contemporaries in other countries. Arte Povera was based on the radical positions of Lucio Fontana and Piero Manzoni and was concerned with the metaphorical significance of a gesture, the material involved being only a means to an end. The American artists, in contrast, saw themselves as following on from Abstract Expressionism, meaning a painterly tradition, and were interested in the processes arising from the handling of materials. This was made explicit in the title of the influential exhibition at the Whitney Museum in 1969, which brought their works into the public eye: Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials.

The background to Ruthenbeck's work was quite different. For he had trained as a photographer and made numerous trips to Paris in the 1950s, where he came into contact with Surrealism. By his own admission, he was "very fascinated then"(1) by the way Surrealists treated objects. However, for Ruthenbeck, it was not a matter of giving form to dreams and fantasies but, on the contrary, a confrontation with hitherto overlooked reality, the profundity paradoxically lying close to the surface, which he had discovered in Surrealism. It is not necessary to intervene in the world, it is enough to regard it with fresh eyes. Surrealist photography had already demonstrated that the camera was a suitable instrument to achieve this end. Ruthenbeck's view through the lens does not seek out the bizarre, but is focussed on normal everyday things – bundles of laundry in a window, a curtain billowing in the wind, cables running over the floor – which, being relieved of their function, can take on a life of their own.

This life blossoms in silence, and what Ruthenbeck later said about his sculptural pieces was applicable earlier, "While working on my sculpture, I gradually became aware that I was particularly interested in the silence which surrounds certain things. This silence can vary in

character: dark, heavy, oppressive – bright, hovering – tense or relaxed, sometimes full of secret meaning, magical, suggestive but also empty, dead: deathly quiet.”(2)

The magic of silence emanates from Ruthenbeck's first objects, whereby he made slight alterations and presented things innocently, as if nothing had happened. There is the suitcase with large round holes offering a view inside, but failing to fulfil its purpose; there is the brick welded from sheet metal that loses its familiar feel on account of its weight and smooth surface; then there is the ladder, which at first glance appears to be in perfect order, until it transpires that the rungs are far too close together, making it almost impossible to climb. While something strange emerges from the familiar in these cases, the squat glass bottles on a rather restricted pedestal threatening to knock each other over the edge appear more unsettling. The same applies to the table with one leg resting on a large yellow ball, so that, standing on two legs only, it is literally tilted out of normal life and comes to a halt in this precarious state.

It was no coincidence that when, at a later date, Ruthenbeck turned to sculpture, he was attracted by the sensual features of the materials, out of which pictorial sculptural works emerged almost of their own accord. And yet the materials as such are thoroughly modest. Ruthenbeck liked to work with black-painted wooden bars, with white, black and crimson cotton fabric and black-lacquered metal plates. With what simplicity and at the same time ingenuity he knew how to handle these materials is demonstrated by three of his works with wooden bars. These can be arranged as a pyramid and appear to hold each other in place. Pairs of bars screwed together at one end can be placed splayed one behind the other in front of the wall or the bars can be connected together in a zigzag row all along the length of a wall. From one case to the next, the appearance, impression and impact can vary in terms of density, weight and blackness, as do the associations that are pictorially linked to them, the mystery that the bars conceal, and the unsettling air of the double row of larger-than-life double bars.

This strangeness, still indebted to Surrealism, is also common to the two works in which crimson fabric strips are spread out on metal frameworks. In Lamellenkasten (Lamella Box) the fabric is hung over steel rods, which are positioned on an open-topped steel cube. Rigid

steel and soft drapery meet for a moment; the red becoming visible on the exposed edges of the rods disappears into the darkness between them. In Möbel IV (Furniture IV) strips of cloth are draped over the upper edge of a metal scaffold; they offer an animated, soft-looking surface, and cover over the inside of the framework, which thus remains mysteriously inaccessible. In front of these objects, on account of their format, the viewer – who is searching for the familiar feel of furniture – finds himself compelled to draw a direct physical connection to them. At the same time, the works remain aloof, for they abjure any narrative, allowing formal aspects to come to the fore.

Regarding these works, Ruthenbeck spoke of conceptual sculpture, given that they are indebted to an idea that manifests itself in various ways. One such idea concerns the contrasting properties of materials, the polarities, which Ruthenbeck captured in his sculptures without any vacillations and avoiding any kind of distraction. In his practice, there is no revelling in the materials, no romantic attachment to them, unlike other assemblages and material images in the 1960s. By ordering the materials in his sculptures into pairs of opposites – black/white, blue/red, hard/soft, open/concealed and so on – Ruthenbeck relieved them of their own weight, their isolated meaning. Now that these aspects purely existed in relation to one another, their properties could cancel each other out within the respective polarity and thus succeeded in fulfilling Ruthenbeck's vision of an abstraction that negates materiality: "Every step further leads away from that which can be depicted. Without polarity there would be only pure unmanifested being. An artist can perhaps hint at this by bringing the polarities into balance to such an extent that a feeling of unity arises, of wholeness, quietness and equilibrium in the mind." (3)

The granular slag Ruthenbeck used for perhaps his most unusual works – the ash heaps at the end of the 1960s – is even more unassuming in appearance than the wood and fabric. The coarsely granular material is poured to form a conical heap. In one heap, six steel square ducts are inserted to form a star-shape; in the double ash heaps, thin steel tubes run through both cones, piercing and interconnecting them. In contrast to the American artists, who gave priority in their work to the processual aspect, and thus to the unexpected shape-shifting of the materials, Ruthenbeck was only concerned with the ultimate form, with "the line in space that penetrates the conical shape. The making of the work does not interest

me.” (4) In actual fact, in his ash heaps Ruthenbeck created a state of subtle tension between the heaps formed by gravity and the horizontal crosslinks, between the fine shifting grains and the rigidly shaped steel. He pursued these thoughts further in the two heaps of paper – one black and one white – made up of a pile of crumpled square paper sheets. In this most straightforward manner, Ruthenbeck created a volume in space that remained fragile, with the basic shape of the pile countered by the irregularly-shaped crumpled leaves of paper, which move at the slightest puff.

During his art studies in the early sixties, Ruthenbeck continued to take photographs and documentations of happenings which were causing a stir in Dusseldorf – among them the ZERO manifestations, the Fluxus concerts, and the actions of Joseph Beuys. In his work, Ruthenbeck characteristically distanced himself from these actions, freezing the activity in a picture. Beuys took note of this quality. When talking about Palermo, he was reminded of Ruthenbeck and drew surprising parallels between the work of the two artists, who had both studied in his class. Ruthenbeck was “also one of those who was quiet and didn’t take part in the actions, who had made his thing an object as a picture – sculpture. That was at exactly the same time, that was actually in parallel to Palermo. They were merely in different rooms. One was here and the other was there.” (5)

Ruthenbeck’s sculptural forms are not determined by the material, but arise as if by themselves. The title Weisses spitzes Banddreieck mit Metallstab (White Pointed Triangular Strip with Metal Rod) describes just what he used in his work and what is to be seen, without any embellishment. His decisions are reduced to a minimum, namely to determining the length of the strip of fabric and the length of the metal rod; when the latter is placed on the strip fixed to the wall, a long triangular shape is created by the weight of the metal. The strip hanging at right angles to the wall takes on a three-dimensional quality and by way of its own bulk partitions the wall and determines its character. Rotes Bandquadrat mit Metallstab (Red Square Strip with Metal Rod) functions in a similar manner, for here, the exact quadratic shape is fragile, dependent on the soft fabric strip, braced by the weight of the steel rod on the wall. The red colour of the strip only comes to the fore if the viewer steps to one side to appreciate the whole sculptural entity slightly protruding from the wall.

The tension arising from the material also determines the appearance of Weisses Tuch mit Kreuzverspannung, hängend (White Cloth with Cross-Bracing, Suspended) and Hängende Membrane/Quadrat (Suspended Membrane/Square). In the first piece, the crosswise tautening of the fabric expanse by two metal rods is turned towards the front, while the fabric is attached to the wall at its centre. With the lower half of the surface pressed against the wall, gravity causes the upper half to pull away from it. In the second work, the red surface of the fabric, being braced as a square by invisible metal rods and attached to the wall in the middle at the back, tilts forward. This manner of suspension turns the fabric into a sensitive membrane; in spite of the uniformity of the red surface, the powers exerting their influence on it are immediately evident.

The interventions in space that Ruthenbeck made using black-lacquered sheet metal are equally precise. While the man-high steel panel is displaced from its resting position on the wall by an angled corner, the Eckenraute (Corner Diamond) is set apart from the right angle where the walls meet on account of its 70-degree angle. Standing in front of Plattenbogen (Curved Plaque), one does not notice at first that the panel curves away from the wall for a few centimetres on the right; this feature is only visible from the side, bringing the distortion of the square into view. In these three works, Ruthenbeck succeeds in creating moments of irritation with a mere gentle shift. What at first seems to correspond to the features of the space deviates almost imperceptibly from it. And the reverse is also true, as if the space loses its assumed regularity when a gap unexpectedly appears between the wall and the object.

These works reveal that Ruthenbeck not only cultivated a strict formal idiom, but also had a fine sense of humour. He once let this be known in his *Schlaraffenland Manifesto*, which he presented in posters around Hamburg on the occasion of an exhibition in 1984, and in which he formulated his idea of paradise with irony. There was some truth in the joke: what Ruthenbeck aimed for in his sculpture he encapsulated in a few words, “Not being full up, but fullness!” (6)

1. Christoph Brockhaus/Ulrike Grohs, "Interview mit Reiner Ruthenbeck, 17. September 2008, Ratingen", in: Reiner Ruthenbeck: Werkverzeichnis der Installationen, Objekte und Konzeptarbeiten [Exhib. Cat.]. Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2008, p. 35.
2. Reiner Ruthenbeck, in: Rolf-Gunter Dienst, Deutsche Kunst: eine neue Generation. Cologne: Verlag M. DuMont Schauberg, 1970, no page number.
3. Christoph Brockhaus/Ulrike Grohs, "Interview mit Reiner Ruthenbeck, 17. September 2008, Ratingen", see footnote. 1, p. 20.
4. Christoph Brockhaus/Ulrike Grohs, "Interview mit Reiner Ruthenbeck, 17. September 2008, Ratingen", see footnote. 1, p. 39.
5. "Über Blinky Palermo: Gespräch zwischen Laszlo Glozer und Joseph Beuys", in: Palermo: Werke 1963–1977 [Exhib. Cat.]. Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1984, p. 104.
6. Reiner Ruthenbeck, "Schlaraffenland-Manifest", in: Reiner Ruthenbeck: Werkverzeichnis der Installationen, Objekte und Konzeptarbeiten, see footnote. 1, p. 19.