

Jan Verwoert

Think (Like) Things

On the works of Michal Budny

Kompozycja miejska (4), 2007
tektura, farba akrylowa
30,5 x 35 x 35

Urban composition (4), 2007
cardboard, acrylic paint
30,5 x 35 x 35 cm

It's this thing. Not that one. This one. It has to be this one. I like it like it is. I like it like this. But not just like this. There is more to it than just that. There always is.

Let me try and explain: What I like about certain things is that in what they are they show that they may too be something else. Not anything else. But *something* else. Something else that, while maybe only being possible, not quite actual, is still real enough. This is philosophical: it's an old debate. What is a thing? Some say it is what it is, *actually* (a rock is a rock). Others say it is what it can be, due to its inherent capacity to become something, *potentially* (if a tree didn't have to grow first to one day become a tree, it wouldn't be a tree to begin with). What I am trying to argue here that in certain moments, in regard to certain things, both may be true. With certain things we feel what they can potentially be, when we realize what they actually are – just as we grasp what they actually are by realizing what they can potentially be. The experience of seeing the actual potential of a thing is an experience of *real virtuality*.

Yet, I would insist that the experience of *real virtuality* is special. We won't have it just like that with any thing. It is an experience related to a thing that means something to us, a thing we cannot take our eyes off, a thing that we want to touch because we desire to feel what it can be and experience its potential. Driven by curiosity we unfold, unravel and unpack this thing (unpacking is the process of *analysis*). Often enough – alas!

– the thing disappears when we unpack it. All that we are left with is the packaging material itself. The only way to get back to the thing then is to take the packaging and stick it together again to create something that is like the thing but like the thing with its potential unpacked and restored (restoring the unpacked is the process of *synthesis*).

When the unpacked is restored, what is restored to the thing is its secret. But now that secret is an open secret: people can now see that it is there, the secret of the potential of the thing. They might not know how to spell out what it means. But this is perhaps because there is nothing there to be disclosed BUT the *presence of a potential*, that is: a real virtuality. And you need to be open enough to experience such a potential to take it for what it is.

It is for this reason that I like the things that Michal Budny makes: I like the way in which they make me see what he likes about things – how he looks at them, how he unpacks them, takes the packaging and folds and glues it together so that it takes on its own shape and becomes a thing with a secret, a thing that makes me feel the presence of a potential and thereby gives me the very real experience of a moment of virtuality: an insight into what a thing is by virtue of what it can be.

One of these insights is: any geometrical object could become a building, no matter how weirdly it is shaped. But it doesn't have to. Still it has the potential to. Budny

makes you see this potential as a potential. He does so by creating things that could be models without purposefully building models. The things he makes are not designed to serve a purpose, as models are, to demonstrate how something will work, function and look like at some point in the future, once it's built. As they *serve* no purpose his works are *no servants* to any master(-plan). They are free to be what they are. And since they are no representations, stand-ins or placeholders for something else, they are what they are, here and now. You can indeed see how and out of what material they are made. Unlike digital simulations or standard slick architecture presentation models, they do not hide the reality of their materiality. It's cardboard. That's what it is.

But then again, it's not that simple either. Because by virtue of being what they are and looking like they do, they will remind you of something: something like a building, for instance, or something like a monument, something like a space in the city... This is a fact then, it is a material property of Budny's works that, while they *represent* nothing, they are still *reminiscent* of something. This is why they are like models without being models. But this is not merely a mind game. The effect, and the affect, that the indeterminacy of their identity produces is the sensation that things do not have to be just what they are. They bear the potential in themselves to be something different – to be different as such. To grasp the implications of this experience of

difference quite simply means to realize that world doesn't have to be the way it actually happens to be. Like those things, it could be different. It was different. It is going to be different. As a sphere of real virtuality and actual potentiality the space of reminiscence that Budny opens up in his works therefore make you feel – and think through – the possibility of difference.

In a social and political situation where a new form of capitalism asserts its power by reshaping entire cities according to its logic of consumption and office administration so forcefully that we are forced to believe that there is no alternative, that this is how things must be from now on, the simple realization, that, no, they don't have to be, and, yes, they can, were and will be different, is truly liberating. The gesture of abstraction that Budny performs by translating and transforming architectural shapes into things that are not models but could be, is an act of breaking with the realities imposed by the powers that be and an act of pointing to the existence of the actual potential of difference.

Yet, even though it very often is, Budny's work does not have to be (understood to be) primarily about architecture. Via the form of the architectural Budny touches on something sensual and existential, something sensually existential, existentially sensual, if you will. He touches on something like *skin*. First of all this is because the material he uses is in a way a bit like skin, it is the packaging, the wrapping, the outside that contains what's

Bez tytułu, z serii Origami, 2007
tektura, farba akrylowa
18 x 22 x 26 cm

Untitled, from the Origami series, 2007
cardboard, acrylic paint
18 x 22 x 26 cm

inside. But skin is also not just skin. Clothes are the second skin just like façades are the skin of a building. Creating things from cardboard, *the* material for wrapping things, in this sense is a little reminiscent of creating an architecture of skin, of clothes, of surfaces, of façades.

The Lloyd's building in London and the Twin Towers in New York are(were) exemplary pieces of modern architecture precisely because, unlike most other office towers, that have a central structural support at their centre (mostly the staircases) the structure that supports(ed) the building is(was) built into the façade. It is their skin that holds this kind of building up. The benefit of this technique is that the interior space of the building is undivided and uninterrupted by structures. Between floors, the inside of the building is one large *empty volume*.*

It is precisely this sense of an empty volume being created through a structure held up by their own skin (i.e. packaging) that so many of Budny's work create. An empty volume, or a negative volume, if you will, is an inside turned outside, filled with nothing but a sense of potentiality of how it could be – but doesn't have to be filled. To grasp the potentials of negative volumes is one of the key challenges in the medium of sculpture. It's a material as well as philosophical challenge, because it makes us see that the question of what actual potentials and real virtualities are is also the question of interiority and exteriority: What is inside?

How do we grasp the existence of things inside the mind and the soul – those strange empty volumes that fill with thoughts and feelings, empty out when we forget and refill when we remember – when what we are faced with is always the outside of the mind: the exterior body, the bodily exterior?

This is the thing then maybe about the things that Budny makes: by virtue of the fact that they radiate a sense of actual potentiality and real virtuality, by virtue of the fact that they are models without being models and by virtue of the fact that they evoke the experience of empty volume through structures made of surfaces, like skin – it is by virtue of all these aspects that these things have something like a soul and a mind of their own. They might not move. But when you look at them closely and grasp that they are more than just themselves while being themselves will see that (just like the tree in the philosopher's example that is what it is because it has to grow into what it will be) these things are growing on you. As things they have some life on their own. They seem sentient. They seem to think. They seem to be thinking things. What can you do then? Sense them. And think with them. Think like these things.

Bez tytułu (nad talerzem 1), 2008
tektura, farba akrylowa
2 części, 5,5 x 35 cm, 29 x 35 cm

Untitled (Over the Plate 1), 2008
cardboard, acrylic paint
2 parts, 5,5 x 35 cm, 29 x 35 cm

▷▷

Teren, 2005
tektura, papier, taśma klejąca
100 x 70 x 10 cm
kolekcja prywatna, Berno, Szwajcaria

Area, 2005
cardboard, paper, adhesive tape
100 x 70 x 10 cm
private collection, Berne, Switzerland

* I thank Celine Condorelli for teaching me this.

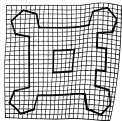
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