

Poland Mönig

The Properties of a Place

Michał Budny Zywica,
Saarlandmuseum, Moderne Galerie,
Walther König, Köln, 2015

“Space is the place of the work of art, but it is not sufficient to say that it occupies it, because it really adapts it to its needs, defining it, and it even creates it to suit its needs.”
Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*¹

One of the works created by Michał Budny between the years of 2005 and 2008 is titled *Okruchy / Crumbs*. It is an ensemble of eight sculptures, though each one of them measures no more than 5 mm in height. They are made of brown paper folded or bent in such different ways that, despite their tininess, they constitute eight clearly distinct forms. There is more than enough room for all of them in the palm of one hand.

Michał Budny's *Okruchy / Crumbs* pays homage to the commonplace beauty of breadcrumbs. In its very modesty it symbolizes what makes Budny's art so unique: it testifies as much to the artist's amazing gift of observation as to his great ability to empathize with the supposedly insignificant, both of which unfold in an expression of tranquillity and sensuality. And just as *Okruchy / Crumbs* evidences Budny's absolute will to concentrate on the essential, so too does it make the unpretentiousness of this artist's approach comprehensible. His art is spectacular, not least because he pledges himself – in a disciplined and most uncommonly cultivated way – to all that is ephemeral, temporary and incidental.

Invited to exhibit in the Modern Gallery of the Saarland-museum, Michał Budny has created for the Temporary Exhibition Pavilion a sculptural intervention comprising six elements distributed over a considerably larger surface than that taken up by *Okruchy / Crumbs*, for over 500 m² were placed at his disposal for this sculptural piece. Despite the enormous difference in scale, however, the artist's approach is in both cases astonishingly identical. What was at all events decisive was that Budny felt a close affinity to the particular properties of the place. This is hardly surprising, as the Modern Gallery is, after all, not just any building. Built in three construction phases between the years of 1965 and 1976 from plans drawn by the St. Ingbert architect

¹ Henri Focillon, *Vie des formes*, 1934 – English-language source: *The Life of Forms in Art*, New York 1989, p. 65.

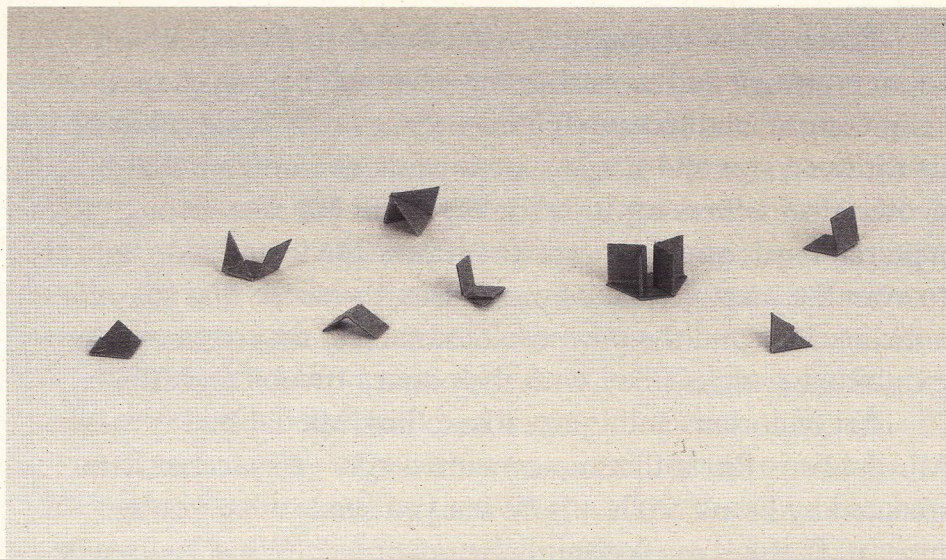
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Ausstellungsansicht
/ Installation view
(Ausschnitt / detail),
Saarlandmuseum,
Moderne Galerie, 2015

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Figure of Violence (Ausschnitt / detail), 2015,
Holz, MDF, Laminat,
Schnitte, Klebeband /
wood, MDF, laminate,
cuts, adhesive tape, 20
cm×600 cm×500 cm,
Installation Saarland-
museum, Moderne
Galerie, 2015

Hanns Schönecker (1928–2005), it counts among the outstanding museum buildings of the early years of the German Federal Republic and today enjoys the status of an architectural monument. The inauguration of the first construction phase in September 1968 – it took place on the same weekend as the opening of Mies van der Rohe's New National Gallery in Berlin – caused quite a stir, for the building was of extremely reserved design featuring the highest degree of functionality: "The building," says Schönecker, retrospectively formulating his intentions, "was meant to retreat into the background for art's sake."² To this day, Schönecker's architecture, with its echoes of the International Style, appeals through its lightness and openness and through the delicate choice of materials. Situated in parkland on the right bank of the Saar, the museum "unfolds" as a sequence of pavilions, the proportions of which are based on a square module (4×4 metres): cubes of varying size strung together one after the other, their individual storey configurations indicated by the continuous, horizontal frieze-like strips formed by the skylights – the Entrance Pavilion and the Temporary Exhibition Pavilion are single-storey, the three Collection Pavilions two-storey buildings. The hall of the Temporary Exhibition Pavilion was for many decades Germany's largest column-free museum gallery.

Michał Budny's initial description of his planned intervention in the Temporary Exhibition Pavilion had, it seemed, little or nothing to do with sculpture. It consisted of a short text accompanied by images of a scale model – albeit an extremely abstract one – fabricated from paper and cardboard, precisely those materials to which Budny has the strongest affinity as an artist and the materials that enable him to convey his ideas most directly. It was his wish, Budny writes, to create "something unique in the sense of something that cannot be restored". Moreover, the exhibition room must, he writes, be filled not with objects but with ideas. That is why he refused for the time being to say anything about the materials he would be using, speaking instead of "bodies" that should be "soft and warm", "egoistical" and "possessive", or "pleasant" and "seductive". The different elements of his installation are characterized by such terms as "temperature", "feeling" and "character", while the project itself, he stressed, must be seen "as an open one", such that

² Quoted, in translation, from: *Interview Architektur: Marlen Dittmann im Gespräch mit Hanns Schönecker*, edited by Jo Enzweiler, Saarbrücken 2002, p. 10.



Crumbs, 2005-2008, Papier/ paper, 8 Elemente / elements, je / each ca. 0,5 cm

changes may also be made. There was one thing, however, that must unite all works: they should all – and in their own specific way – “absorb and visualize the transformed properties of the place”.

Indeed, during the further preparations for the exhibition, and even during its actual installation, quite a few modifications were made and accents shifted. One thing, however, was never once up for discussion: the creation of a whole with “openness” as its most astonishing property. It was already clear from the photographs of the model that the sparsely placed objects would each lay claim to a considerable amount of surrounding space – their own realms of tranquillity, as it were – into which they would breathe, shaping it like a morphable mass. All the same, none of these objects would stand alone, isolated from the others; they would relate to one another, enter into a dialogue with one another. And Budny has in fact succeeded in realizing this concept. What simply could not be predicted, however, was that Budny’s sculptural landscape would merge with the museum’s architecture so completely that one can only speak of a symbiosis, a symbiosis in which the human being who enters the work, who moves about both with and within it, is also taken fully into account – both physically and mentally. In this respect, too, wholeness is here conceived openly and dynamically.

Every object placed by Michał Budny in the exhibition room is unique and unmistakable, each one having its own "temperature" and its own "character", not only on account of its different size and shape – some of them leaning towards the geometrical, others towards the organic – but also through the material used, its colour and its surface. The installation appeals to even the most archaic of our senses, the sense that stirs the subconscious and the preconscious, namely that of smell: the exhibition room is filled with the odour of wood and rubber.

Art historians and critics like to link Michał Budny with Minimalism. But if that movement's credo – so succinctly formulated by Frank Stella – is "What you see is what you see",³ it must in Budny's case certainly be reworded: "What you see is what you feel and what you think" – or vice versa: "What you feel and what you think is what you see". Like the works of the Minimalists, Budny's art is marked by radical simplification, but it is hardly retinal, just as it is hardly rational, or even industrial in terms of the materials used. Budny is not concerned with serial arrangements of forms, nor with the stubbornly physical presence of things. His raw materials are first and foremost thoughts and feelings and then come the paper and the wood, the metal and the rubber. The factual and the visual are fragile, sometimes transient manifestations of the imaginary. What he offers us are – to use his own words – "models for mental use".

Entering the Temporary Exhibition Pavilion of the Modern Gallery, the visitor is greeted by the *Passive Figure*, an object constructed from unfinished plywood – a "warm" material – standing to the left of the entrance and measuring over two metres in height. The complexity of its serene, seemingly natural form can be grasped only by walking around it. The *Curtain* – an open wooden batten structure painted in dark, almost black grey – divides the exhibition room along its central axis, making the visitor suddenly aware of the room's enormous dimensions and transparency. Space and light flow – like matter through a membrane – through this advancing and receding zig-zag structure. For its part, the *Figure of Violence* in the left-hand rear corner – which looks like a square when viewed at first glance from a distance but then turns out to be oblong as one approaches it – responds to the enormous breadth of the room's architecture. Seeming to hover over the floor, it echoes

³ "All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without any confusion.... What you see is what you see." "Questions To Stella And Judd." Interview by Bruce Glaser. Edited by Lucy R. Lippard. From: *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Gregory Battcock, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1995, p. 158.

the apparent weightlessness of the ceiling that hovers over the continuous frieze-band windows that circumvent the room. It consists of a board measuring five by six metres and featuring an array of straight lines, some deep, some shallow, cut into it with a circular saw. The lines reveal the MDF material beneath the board's light-grey laminated surface and invite a fascinating play of light and shadow. *Big Country*, a dramatic wooden corner structure in the right-hand rear corner of the room, seems to be hanging by nothing but a thin wire, thus bringing weight and heaviness – as a counterpoint to the weightlessness of the ceiling – into an interplay of precariousness and irritation, to which the *Tempting Figure*, standing to the right of the *Curtain*, responds with an air of rest and relaxation. While its form is reminiscent of a chaise longue, thus tempting the viewer to lie down on it and relax, its execution – rubber sheeting stretched over a metal frame and sagging under its own weight – actually performs the suggested act of relaxation on the viewer's behalf. For its part, *Afternoon (II)* on the opposite wall is a place of rest and recuperation for the light and its colours. Measuring three-and-a-half metres in height but only half a metre in width, it is a box-like or shelf-like structure finished entirely in white and subtly shifting the accent of the entire ensemble towards the vertical.

Just as the tiny pieces of paper of *Okruchy / Crumbs* are able to spread themselves out over such a limited area as the palm of one hand, the individual elements of Budny's installation for Saarbrücken are spaciouly distributed across the floor of the Temporary Exhibition Pavilion of the Modern Gallery – entirely as a matter of course and without making the slightest fuss about themselves. They are simply here, as though they have always been here. And they will soon be gone, as though they had never been. But for the duration of their presence they will create the room anew, so to speak, and draw Hanns Schönecker's so enchantingly precise architecture out of its functional passivity, making us aware of what we see, and what we have always seen: the building of the Modern Gallery is itself a sculpture.