

## Ulrich Loock Circumventing the self



untitled.chewed, Installation View, Fri-Art, 2006

“My central concern is with sculpture [... At the same time] I try to pursue ideas that seem physically strange or unique to me. Strangeness is a source of astonishment” Markus Schwander defines himself as someone who deals with sculptures – who makes sculptures, relocates sculptures to specific sites, creates environments for sculptures... He does not define himself as an artist, sculptor or the like. He evades self-identification. In point of fact, isn't a questioning of identity the very subject of his artistic work? The identity of the self, of things... “I have always considered my exploration of space as an act of thought. That is why, to me, every sculpture is a model of thought”. A person who thinkingly evades self-identification? Whose thinking is an evasion of self-definition? The twentieth century is full of declarations that link artistic creation (the production of images, work of the imagination) to thought, that tie together the formerly distinctly separate

realms of imagination and cognition. In this light, Schwander's explanation may come as no surprise, yet the idea of sculpture as a model of thought remains puzzling. A model for thinking? A model to help us think? To think about what?

Schwander makes it clear that his sculptures contain an explicit reflection on the nature of sculpture -a reflection that comes close to setting a norm (“Sculpture is...”). He sees chewing gum as a metaphor for sculpture: just as a sculpture is the result of a modeling process, so the chewed gum attests to the shape-producing exertion of pressure and counter-pressure, and retains the exerted pressure with the help of first soft and, later, hardened materials. The subject matter of Schwander's reflection is “traditional” sculpture – sculpture as form (cf. Carl Andre on the evolution of 20-century art: sculpture as form/structure/place). However, by choosing such a grotesque metaphor for sculp-

ture, by the same token Schwander brings us to understand that its determination in terms of form (that is, in connection with contemporary art) is problematic, if not downright obsolete... He soon came up with a difference: chewing gum owes its shape to barely-controlled bodily movements that are repetitive, exceedingly limited and lacking precision. The chewed gum is an imprint – an “index” in semiotics – whereas in the case of “traditional” sculpture, the shaping pressure on the material is exerted in order to produce a plastic image



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(icon). An imprint like that of teeth in the mass of chewing gum is no representation bringing to mind an object, an idea or a phenomenon, with the proviso of a specific artistic approach, or stand, or orientation, or “outlook”. Failure to convey anything (metaphor: to convey – still today, Greek freight vehicles, or conveyances, bear the word “metaphor”) denotes sculpture that is the outcome of an immediate and physical connection between the malleable object and the “tools” of its production... Forget about “consciousness”, interpretation, culture. This immediacy fascinates the twentieth century (cf. also the 20<sup>th</sup> century rise of photography, ready-mades and so forth in art). Reality is expected to reveal itself “on its own” in the immediacy of its signs... resulting, among other things, in an act of liberation from the domination to which objects are subjected by the “creative” (God-like?) artist.

Actually, it’s not all that simple: Schwander’s sculpture pieces are more than some well-chewed gum removed from the mouth and somehow set on display; they are objects that he refashions by translating them onto a larger scale and changing their color and material. The outcome is an image of an imprint, whose end stage is the result of a renewed process of impression: the image, as modeled in clay, is mechanically molded and then cast in plaster, cement or polyurethane. Such sculpture pieces traverse different categories of production processes in their distancing from their initial form or “origin” (imprint/image), whilst the sculpture’s origin in turn encompasses different contributing factors (chewing tools / chewing tools’ imprint). Hence the sculpture is the result of various shifts that.. up until a specific stage... extensively... supplant its „origin“ to the point of rendering it unrecognizable. “Through their scale and material, the chewing gum pieces become sculpturally autonomous...”

Schwander uses changes in scale for other aspects of his sculptural work as well, for instance in a piece where he accompanies the enlarged (by comparison with the familiar size of the real-life object) reproduction of a banana with several smaller versions, or when he sets small



First Love, 1998

(that is, “life-size”) apples atop a “giant” apple. Not only does the same object come in different sizes, but this shift in size obliges it to become self-referential. Why is it necessary, from an artistic point of view, to add a perfectly recognizable object from our everyday life to a self-referential banana? It is because an object thrown back

upon itself loses its connection to anything besides itself, becomes unbearably alien and no longer fits in anywhere.

Then again, having the banana – together with smaller versions of itself – sit upon a park bench, is just as grotesque a notion as making chewing gum into a metaphor for sculpture. *First Love*: a young, somewhat chubby and dumb-looking girl waiting for her date to show up, or else an abandoned “dumb thing...” This combining with a “familiar” situation endows what is self-referential and self-contained with a narrative. At first, the chewing gum sculptures seem devoid of any story (lest we consider the series of shifts they have undergone as a narrative): it has often been observed (mainly with respect to photography) that “lack of meaning” is part and parcel of a print’s nature. Precisely because nothing is “conveyed” (metaphor), because



Die Verwandlung, 1999

the index is immediately and physically linked to its “origin” and thus no more than a precipitate, leading to nothing. Photographs require captions. Schwander has inserted his chewing gum pieces into models of landscapes, thus re-contextualizing them and, in the process, rendering them “legible”. Such a position is less grotesque than that of an apple on a stool or the like: it creates a situation that, already thanks

to the dimension the model, takes on a distinctive character, underpinned by its own rules and at a remove from the banality of reality.

A topographical model made of chewed pieces of gum, chewing gum as a meta-



Kautsch, 2002

phor for sculpture, sculpture as a passage through a whole series of reproduction practices, shifts in size, feedback connections. All this as a model of thought. A model for thinking: To think about what? If this sculpture is a model for thinking, then it has to do with thinking focused on circumventing itself and its subject, without losing either. And what, besides itself, would its subject be? The answer to this can only be given in terms of further feedback. Chewing gum is a portrait of the self (of the artist one assumes, whereby the individual in question is not seen as an “artist” but as an “everyman” – which, in turn, implies a statement on the idea of the artist). A self-portrait in the form of an imprint of the chewing tools – that is, an exceedingly limited portrait of immediate, physical contact, a portrait of the self through the nothingness which it deals... A portrait of the self, in which thought is embodied: and whereby – through and together with this embodiment – the self is circumvented. Schwander’s sculpture is a form of circumvention that can be used to evade self-identification.

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