

B E R N D L O H A U S

“Nur der Stumme spricht die Sprache deutlich.”

(Bernd Lohaus)

Rope-Wood-Word

On the work of Bernd Lohaus

In Bernd Lohaus's work, material becomes language. The chosen material for his sculptures may be wood, rope, stone and bronze, which the artist modifies only minimally, thereby allowing it to express itself, to speak its own intrinsic, physical language. In many cases, the works are also endowed with linguistic speech: words written ephemerally in chalk or carved into the sculpture elevate them to a semantic sphere. In this way, the material and its language correlate these works closely with time, space and humanity.

From a historic perspective, Lohaus's works were produced against a background of Fluxus, social sculpture, Arte Povera and material art, occupying their own distinctive place within this historic configuration. Art historians have consistently focused their investigations on the works he made from wood—or more specifically, azobe. Also known as red iron-wood, azobe is one of the heaviest and hardest woods from West Africa and is particularly resistant to sea water, which is why it was widely found in port and harbour constructions, including notably those along the River Scheldt. Initially, Lohaus found it easy to source pieces of used azobe wood—boards, blocks and cubes—from wood dealers in Antwerp. He was thus able to amass vast repositories of this material at his storage spaces on the VlaamseKaai and in Deurne.

Essays on Lohaus also frequently explore the use of written texts in his work. Yet by contrast, relatively little attention has been paid to his use of rope, even though this material played a prominent role in his oeuvre between 1965 and 1970. During this time, the sculptor repeatedly combined wood with woven hemp and sisal ropes, with thinner cords and occasionally with darker lengths of tarred jute. In his early pieces, rope was almost as important as wood in terms of the work's impact, with the wide, brown lengths glued to the wall to create virtual, "flat" beams.

Ropes are lines given physical form, creating a counterpart to the block of the wood. Here the physical conception of his early work clearly still bears the impression of Martin Heidegger's ontology, a prevalent influence in aesthetic discourse at that time. This conceptual proximity is evident in Heidegger's treatise *The Origin of the Work of Art*, in which the philosopher explores in detail the nature of materiality, as he writes: "That which gives things their constancy and pith [...]—coloured, resonant, hard, massive—is the matter in things. In this analysis of the thing as matter (*hule*), form (*morphe*) is already coposited."¹ Rope therefore brings another physical language into being in the work alongside wood, and together they determine its form. Bernd Lohaus's oeuvre includes serpentine coils of rope lying on the floor in a huge, primeval tangle; in other works, rope is wound around pieces of wood or ties them together; open wooden crates also appear to be woven together with rope. Wooden planks hang from or lean against the wall on ropes; sometimes the tangled cords are gathered into surreal forms—into a kind of trunk or proboscis, for example.

In terms of their historical origin, ropes also belong to the harbour landscape: we see coiled ropes on the quayside, ready to moor incoming vessels. Bernd Lohaus both re-used old rope—sometimes rope he found drifting in the Scheldt—and also purchased new rope from traders. Rope expresses a flexible power, the power of traction; it binds, connects and secures. These early works by Lohaus—the works with rope, along with the "coudrages", pieces made from fabric and paper which were then embroidered in colour—were exhibited for the first time at the New Smith Gallery in Brussels in 1967.

In 1963, Lohaus encountered Joseph Beuys—indirectly, via reports from the sculptor Ewald Mataré and in person, at the Fluxus performance festival at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art in the same year—and enrolled in his sculpture class. When considering the question of materials, it is worth recalling a Beuys sculpture created in 1961 for the playground of Düsseldorf's newly-built Rolandschule and withdrawn by the artist in 1964 following a contretemps, in which the work was branded as potentially dangerous. The figurative, floor-standing sculpture *Puppe* [Doll] was composed of nine teak blocks with rounded edges. These figurative segments were drilled through and joined together with hemp ropes which functioned as joints. The ropes were omitted when the sculpture was moved to the Beuys Block (in the Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt), where it has stood since 1970. It now comprises individual upright sections, with none of the potential mobility afforded by the rope joints. At this stage, the work was renamed *Jungfrau* [Virgin]; it also featured in the Brennpunkt Düsseldorf exhibition in 1987-88, where it stood directly next to four of Lohaus's wood sculptures.² Its original Doll version—which Lohaus had been able to see in its intact state—therefore also combined ropes with wood, albeit in a figurative context rather than a dialogue of materials as in Lohaus's work, which eliminated all of the figurative expressivity handed down from Mataré.

A new kind of figuration comes into play at a later stage in Bernd Lohaus's work, through words written or carved on the sculptures. But before turning to these works, it is worth taking a last look at the wider artistic context: Miró's outstanding collage *Rope and People* from 1935 (Museum of Modern Art, New York) already featured a dynamic rope figure, mounted vertically on the picture, that gives the work its distinctive presence—and is a continuation of the experiments in material language

conducted by Constructivism, Dadaism and Surrealism. Finally an early performance by Bernd Lohaus, *El Nacimiento del Huevo* [The Birth of an Egg], presented at his first solo exhibition in Madrid in 1965, revisited such early modernist absurdities: the table for the reading stood on four fresh eggs, and the alphabet was recited simultaneously in four different languages³, thereby reducing language to its primeval state. This was the first work in Bernd Lohaus's oeuvre to create conceptual space made of both material and language.

At the *Prospect* exhibition in the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf in 1968, Bernd Lohaus presented a large mural work that combined wood and rope in an expansive spatial configuration: a wooden beam hanging in the exhibition space, high up on the wall, with heavy ropes creating a gable area and two intrados. Here, rope and wood appeared to mark out a window on the wall. This work was also Lohaus's contribution to the catalogue for the Bern exhibition *When Attitude Becomes Form* in 1969; he was not able to contribute to the exhibition itself. This installation still had the potential flexibility of the Fluxus period, whilst bringing the materials of rope and wood into a state of sculptural tension.

After this came a paradigmatic shift, its theoretical underpinning perhaps inspired by a move away from Martin Heidegger's philosophy of being (*Being and Time*), coinciding with a move towards Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*). Configurations of diverse materials, particularly rope and wood, which presented the language of the material and its intrinsic characteristics—flexibility/rigidity, pliability/solidity, softness/hardness—were now replaced by pieces made solely from wood: wood as a material was now viewed from a semiotic rather than an ontological perspective. At the same time, the work was often directly endowed with language by having texts written on it. The wood sculptures—mostly comprising several different parts—became the equivalent of verbal figuration, correlated with the sphere of human language and sensibility. Bernd Lohaus was constantly producing poems, i.e. sculptures made solely of words, pure poetry. At this point, these poetic forms of expression also entered the sculptural work.

Henceforward, relationships became the pre-eminent artistic theme—the "atomic fact" (Wittgenstein) of the wood elements corresponding more or less to a semantic fact: "A proposition is the description of a fact."⁴ An early wood-only installation was the wall of wooden beams standing like a palisade with more pieces of wood in layers on the ground in front of it, for the 1970 exhibition *JETZT* [Now] (Kunsthalle, Cologne). Early, highly concise wood-word elements include the wooden beam *ICH* [I] from 1970, a short plank inscribed with chalk leaning against the wall, its side and lower edges straight and even, its top end irregular, as if in the process of growing; then the cube *ICH DU* [I You] from 1972 (chalk on wood), and in 1973 the *ICH DU* [I You] comprising two tall beams placed with their edges touching, positioned diagonally (wood, chalk). In addition to first names and personal pronouns, Lohaus mainly used prepositions, rarely verbs or nouns, and the words never formed whole sentences but established the relationship between the words within a space. Examples include such pared-down works as *WEGEN ODER* [Because Or], 1980 (wooden beam, chalk); *FÜR GEGEN ALS ZWISCHEN* [For Against As Between], 1979 (four upright conical wood blocks, chalk); and *NEIN* [No], 1978 (four logs—with significant weathering—standing next to each other, with letters carved into them). Alongside these works are many multi-part works with longer word combinations (as well as some without the addition of linguistic elements), for example *UND ALS DAS WÄHREND DU/WIR SCHRIFTEN ALS GEGANGEN VERLOREN NEIN GEFUNDEN ZWISCHEN DEM WAS* [And As That While You/We Writings As Went Lost No Found Between The What]: 89 poles, 1981 (Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf). On the one hand, this reduction of language is reminiscent of the extreme linguistic abbreviation in Samuel Beckett's work. On the other, the relationship of the abstract beam arrangement within the space points to the engagement with Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and also to the structuralist semiotics that were much discussed at the time: image, writing and reality can become equivalents, of equal value. "The proposition is a picture of reality."⁵

Even the placing of the wood is language, forming a bond that says something to us: the wooden beams, for example, lie close together, side by side on the floor; they stand vertically, upright; they lean precariously against each other and against the wall; they are laid on top of each other, crosswise; they are set on wedges that tip them at an angle, or piled up, forming walls and spatial compartments, or intrude into open space. The beams also have their own stories to tell, about their harbour origins: many of them are pointed because they were driven into the river bed; here and there they bear old inscriptions; they are often weathered and damaged. Linguistic and spatial relations are combined with history in new contexts—in museum spaces, but also in the open air: on the river bank, for example. An early example of this is *Bernds Terrasse* [Bernd's Terrace], on the banks of the Scheldt in Antwerp since 1987 (currently dismantled for restoration). *Temse*, created for the *Ponton Temse* exhibition in the municipality of Temse on the Scheldt in 1990, is now part of the MACs collection at Grand-Hornu; the beams, once set in the river, now form sculptural squares, reminiscent perhaps of a ship's open hull or a raft. A free poetic space is opened up, drawing in the spectator. A similar effect is created by the beam sculpture *Middelheim* (with carved letters), located in the Middelheim sculpture park in Antwerp since 1993.

In his ensuing work, Lohaus once again expanded the repertoire of beam sculptures, making models using opened cardboard boxes—creating more compacted spaces, now confined by walls. The models were then cast in bronze. Thus the path from rope and wood to word led onwards, first from wood to word, and then to space.

Stephan von Wiese

Translated from German by Susan Mackervoy

¹ Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, edited by D. Preziosi, OUP, Oxford, 1998, p. 419

² *Brennpunkt Düsseldorf. Joseph Beuys – Die Akademie – Der allgemeine Aufbruch 1962 – 1987*, Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf exhibition catalogue, 1987

³ Hans Theys, Bernd Lohaus, in *“Cadeaux d’amis”, een hommage aan Jan Hoet*, Universiteit Hasselt, Hasselt, 2007

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 4.023, translated by C.K. Ogden, London, 1922, p. 41

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 4.021, *ibid*, p. 40

October 12th 1964

On the 12th of October, 1964, the day he turned 24, I met Bernd Lohaus at the home of friends in Madrid. We immediately had countless things to talk about and discovered that, although living 200 kilometres apart, we had experienced many of the same things. He had been in Brussels for Expo 58, and of course so had I. A couple of years earlier, he had visited the *Masterpieces from the São Paulo Museum* exhibition in Düsseldorf. I had seen the same exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-arts in Brussels. In 1964, still not knowing each another, seen the major Swiss national exhibition in Lausanne, with a gigantic moving construction by Tinguely. We had also been at *documenta III* in Kassel. We did not know each other, but we were fascinated by the same images. We had both found Giacometti's *L'Homme qui marche* the most beautiful drawing at the *documenta*. Was all that a good starting point for a great love affair?

Bernd spoke passionately about his teacher Joseph Beuys and his extraordinary drawings, as well as about how Beuys mercilessly corrected his students at the Düsseldorf Academy, then organized huge parties, where his devilish laugh would resound through the corridors. He also talked about the Zero group, whose members could frequently be found at Düsseldorf's Café Creamcheese, where performances were regularly held. As a student, he had earned some money by working as an assistant to Günther Uecker.

At the Schmela Gallery, also in Düsseldorf, Bernd had seen the exhibitions of all the *nouveaux-réalistes*, and he spoke with emotion about Yves Klein, who had died just two years before. He liked artists who had a great sense of theatricality, such as Yves Klein, or Beuys. In the autumn of 1964, he had even gone to visit Salvador Dalí in Cadaqués, and had stayed for a few days, attending the famous Dalí dinners. At these events, a guest would regularly be sent away if, in the eyes of Dalí, or Gala, his great muse, he dared say something wrong.

Thanks to Beuys, who in 1963 had organized the *Festum Fluxorum* Fluxus Festival at the Academy, Bernd had observed such people as Georges Maciunas, John Cage, Emmett Williams and Daniel Spoerri at work. He was not only fascinated by visual artists, but by writers as well. He owned the complete works of the poet Gottfried Benn and Bertolt Brecht. Most of all, he loved Marcel Proust and Albertine, the unreliable girlfriend.

Bernd stayed in Madrid for about six months, in those years still utterly under the yoke of the Franco regime, which completely silenced artists. There, he had become good friends with an Argentinean poet, Julio Campal, who gave him an opportunity to organize a happening at the Asociación cultural ibero-americana. The title was *El Nacimiento del Huevo*. A part of that happening was the simultaneous recitation of the alphabet by four people of different nationalities: German, Spanish, English and French.

Six months after our meeting in Madrid, in the spring of 1965, Bernd came to Antwerp and rented a room. I brought him into contact with Wout Vercammen, Panamarenko and Hugo Heyrman, who were deeply involved with their magazine, *Happening News*, and were turning the city on its head with strange happenings on the Meir and the Groenplaats. This little group of artists wanted to work in complete freedom, in a comprehensible language, quite averse to the style that was in fashion at the time, which tended towards abstraction. The best-known artists in Antwerp then were Vic Gentils and Paul Van Hoeydonck. Jef Verheyen also enjoyed great prestige amongst collectors, in part thanks to his relationships with Fontana and Rothraut Klein, Yves' widow and Gunther Uecker's sister.

Bernd immediately began working on the magazine, which was printed entirely on a large Rank Xerox photocopier. He also wanted to make sculpture and was searching for appropriate materials. In Weert, a small village on the Scheldt where I had bought a little fisherman's house just behind the dike, he found what he was looking for: sections of dismantled ships, big pieces of metal, strangely-shaped wooden

parts and ropes. He dragged them all to the little house and transformed it into a ghostly studio. He took three wooden beams up to the attic and laid them out in a kind of perspective arrangement. This was the first of his austere, monumental works with long beams, one of the materials with which he would continue to work for the rest of his life.

In the meantime, I had rented another space in Antwerp, in what was then a neglected part of the city, just behind the Royal Museum of Fine Arts. The idea was to provide a place for the new artists I had met, so that they could perform their happenings without the police interfering and their having to spend nights in jail. Our gallery activities began in March, 1966. We called it the Wide White Space. A broad, white space, a place where everything was possible. "Space" was taken from Hugo Heyrman, who called himself the "Happy Spacemaker", and also because we were impressed by the achievements of space travel. The idea of the alliteration came from Bernd, and I was the one who suddenly called out, "Wide White Space". It should be mentioned here that the gallery was anything but huge.

Bernd was good friends with many people from the Düsseldorf Academy, so we were immediately able to organize exhibitions with Graubner, Richter, Ruthenbeck and Palermo. Beuys as well was talked into presenting his *Aktion Eurasienstab*. It was through Konrad Fischer, also a student at Düsseldorf, that we met Carl Andre.

In Brussels, Bernd got to know Marcel Broodthaers, and an intense friendship quickly developed between the two. Where Panamarenko was more of a comrade-in-arms, full of pranks and ingenuity, Broodthaers resembled an older brother with whom Bernd shared his love for literature. Broodthaers always encouraged him to continue working with language. Sympathy for Germans was at that time by no means self-evident, but Bernd, born in 1940, could not really be held responsible for the crimes of the Nazis. It was touching to see how Isi Fiszman, a friend of Marcel's, embraced Bernd, and how Bernd was perceived by all of these Francophones as *le gentil Allemand*.

In the gallery, where all the choices and decisions were made by the two of us, Bernd was mainly responsible for the transport and installation of the works. "Where is the German teenager?" James Lee Byars would ask every time he needed help, to then welcome Bernd with a string of basic German buzzwords (*Stein, Wein, Schwein, kein*, etc.). The first time Carl Andre was in Antwerp, he gave Bernd a large bottle of whisky after having seen the stacks of wood in Bernd's atelier, arrangements that had a great deal in common with works that Andre had made himself, but had had to burn because of financial problems. In connection with the famous *When Attitudes Become Form* exhibition in Bern, together with Daniel Buren – who had not been invited – Bernd clandestinely installed striped posters in the streets, and the two of them ended up in a Swiss police station.

His devotion to other artists was exceptional. Personally, he stopped showing his own work in the gallery after Alfred Schmela, an older, highly esteemed gallery owner from Düsseldorf, made it clear to us that it was not a good idea to show Bernd's work in our own gallery once we were married. Visitors would not take it seriously and Bernd would find himself in an ambiguous situation. He then began showing his work in other galleries, such as the New Smith Gallery in Brussels and René Block in Berlin. As a "Belgian artist", he also frequently took part in group exhibitions, including the Eindhoven Triennial (1972), *7 Artists from Belgium* at the Palais des Beaux-arts in Brussels (1973) and *Six Artists in Belgium* at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, with the young Nick Serota as its director (1974).

After the end of the gallery's first year, we began another great adventure. We had a baby, and 16 months later, a second. It was in 1968, and in addition to politics and art, we immersed ourselves in anti-authoritative child-rearing: Summerhill, Cuernavaca, the Berlin Kinderläden, Beuys and Filliou, with their "teaching and learning as performing arts". The world was changing and we were enthralled by all these new ideas.

Bernd was, I think, an atypical father. Conscious of the conflicts that he had had with his own father, and of the long battle that he had waged in order to attend the Academy, he wanted to raise his own children as freely as possible, so that they would be able to express themselves fully and to their hearts' content. He was the firebird, the flying flame monster who leapt through the house with a red pullover drawn over his shoulders, in order to teach them not to be afraid of anything. Another thing that was very important was that he taught them – and me as well – the German language.

After ten years of the gallery, and 100 exhibitions, a kind of weariness set in. We did not want to continue in this way. Bernd wanted more time to work in his studio and became increasingly irritated by the gallery audiences. If a collector behaved too arrogantly, or wanted too big a discount on a price, he would grab him by the collar and push him back out on the street. This was of course no way to run a business. It was time for something different. For Bernd, most of all, it was time to devote himself to his own work. His first museum exhibitions would take place a couple of years later.

Anny De Decker

Translated from Dutch by Mari Shields

***Ibant obscuri sola sub nocte per umbram,
Perque domos Ditis vacuas et inania regna:
Quale per incertam lunam sub luce maligna
Est iter in silvis, ubi caelum condidit umbra
Iuppiter, et rebus nox abstulit atra colorem.***

(Virgil, *Aeneid*, Ch.VI, 268-272)

Alone, the Mute Speaks Openly

Sculpture is a solitary occupation, which is probably why Bernd Lohaus readily devotes himself to it, for he knows that it has to speak of what has happened in the studio and the hangar, where his only interlocutors—mutes, of course—are the blocks of wood that have been amassed and placed in a certain order, perhaps at random, but grouped like a meeting, in front of which the sculptor finds himself.

These blocks are imbued with a past which they gradually reveal, a history which they partially unveil through the traces that break their surfaces: an existence of blocks, beams, girders, masts and piles (but well before this, trees with exotic names) (and earlier still, networks furrowed by sap and trunks bearing limbs, branches, leaves and even blossoms and fruit), (as well as distant climes formed by burning suns, violent storms, heavy rains and dry winds) (and probably vicissitudes, to grow, to set down roots in an arid, hostile soil or in a lush, moisture-laden forest, where the battle for space is intense, teeming with strange, wild animals); now immobile, calm—in appearance, at least—placed on the ground in the shelter, where the negotiation takes place between them and the man who looks at and feels them, pats them with his hand, assessing their dimensions, estimating their weight, searching for eyes to understand their presence, the space they occupy; for he—the sculptor—knows how much this presence is also the result of all the memory accumulated by the squared, long, rough-hewn trees and his own memory (his birth, his family, his apprenticeships, his encounters, his fortunes good and bad) in his body, which he opposes vertically to these recumbent giants.

I do not know what it was—at a certain point—that dictated the choice of one piece, something unexpected in a gesture repeated a hundred times, when his eyes scanned the surface and volume of that tree (the one that established itself as a precise image), when the sculptor's steps in the studio echoed the comings and goings of a surveyor and the progression of a geographer.

We can be sure however that this sudden decision defines the territory where the sculpture will be situated and is followed by another and yet another, which in turn find their justification and necessity through the first block that was chosen, but also justify why it was the first and create the embryo of an entire landscape (a series of calm forms, traceries and superimpositions sometimes accompanied by single words), where the battles that rain down on the man subside and where the history of the tree, the pile and the beam and the history of the man, the sculptor, Bernd Lohaus are given concrete expression in a knot, as they encounter and discover one another in a slow, mute, open dialogue that shapes the completed work.

On they went, dark shadows, under the solitude of night,

Like forlorn souls in the depths of hell, for ever more, felled wood - formerly sacred trees - now profane; what I mean is that humans are grouped in the solitude of the halls; one day, they were positioned by the sculptor in order to preserve intact the loving relationships that used to unite them.

Through the empty homes of Dis and its lifeless realm:

The blocks and beams form clear, human architectures which build homes with doors and windows opening onto the emptiness; they enclose certain secrets hidden in the ordered labyrinth that broadly connects them.

As travellers roam, by the malignant light of the uncertain moon,

Thus interlaced, the beams and blocks appear to advance towards an impassive destiny. In the silence of the elongated forms, sliding across the ground, they occupy the entire space where they lie like giants that have ceremoniously fallen.

In forests, where Jupiter has buried the sky in gloom,

No word is superfluous in the speeches, during which a single word at times gives mankind a brief hope of dialogue that is swiftly kindled and just as swiftly extinguished: a cry, a call, a voice in the desert of human solitude.

And the dark night has leached substance of colour.

The colours are those of ancient trees, whose variety of species, ages and few chance appearances remind us, like regret, of what once was in daylight.

Laurent Busine
Translated from French by Laura Austrums

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