

Letter from Hans Martens to Bernd Lohaus

Dear Bernd,

I wonder whether you are aware that I have known your work for more than twenty years? The things one experiences at the start of something (such as life, or new studies, an adventure or a discovery) always play a determining role in the rest of the still uncharted course. Your work *ICH/DU*, for example, will always be linked to the memory of my first visits to what was then called the Museum of Contemporary Art. This work took up a prominent position in my mental frame of reference, in my stock of images, in the data stored in my art 'directory'. The fact that it is anchored in my memory relies on the impression made by the first encounter: the impression of wonder, but also some astonishment. Astonishment at the apparent simplicity of the work. A simplicity which, however, had an ostensibly great complexity. Five curved concrete blocks stacked one on top of the other. The empty space created by the doorways of those attractive corner rooms in Charles Van Rysselberghe's building, as if cast in concrete and shifted slightly into the room, leaving just enough space for you to enter. On one side 'I', on the other 'you'. Inside and outside, positive and negative, convex and concave, together and apart, open and closed, male and female, the image of the as yet undivided human in Plato's myth of the creation.

I remember your story about the British artist Richard Long (or do I? Now that I'm typing it in black-and-white, I'm no longer so sure if it's really one of your stories or whether I made up part of it. In any case, I still find it worthwhile and it stays with me). The two of you were out looking for driftwood on the banks of the Scheldt near Temse and Weert. The washed-up wood you gathered together was the raw material for sculptures. In the specific arrangements of Richard Long's sculptures, meaningless pieces of wood were suddenly charged with poetry. The transport and transformation of the material from the natural to the *cultural* environment gave rise to numerous connotations and metaphors. Which is what happens in your work too.

Beauty is often produced by the combination of strictness and chance. Jan Hoet once demonstrated to me how to install your work *Bretter*, which is in the SMAK collection. It consists of three planks of at least 250 x 50 centimetres and a hand thick. Two of them are set on their sides while the third lies on top of them to create a sort of tunnel. You then have to kick the side of the construction so that the three planks fall on the floor on top of each other. Chance determines the

ultimate appearance of the sculpture. The singular thing was that this procedure was more satisfying than 'carefully' reconstructing the work on the basis of a photo. The form was determined by gravity (in combination with speed and energy). Sometimes you can put your trust in nature's destiny (But here too I'm overcome by doubts. Was this 'installation technique' your intention, or was it one of Jan's inventions?). After all, your work is all a matter of precision.

My first encounter with your work is also connected to the overwhelming feeling I experienced when I saw Joseph Beuys' *Wirtschaftswerte*. I was then not yet aware that you had been a 'pupil' of Beuys. A fact that is now sufficiently well known. You certainly share Beuys' animistic belief in matter (though perhaps you do not like hearing this). You do not see wood as a dead material. Wood in itself has something to say, it speaks, it bears traces of the past, it has its own history. And you give this material a second life, letting it participate in a new story.

What struck me on a visit to your studio was the numerous rough blocks of wood lying there waiting to be worked on, like wine maturing in oak barrels. Time does most of the work. I suspect that you listen patiently to the wood. Decisions only come slowly. What you do to the wood is usually quite minimal. Sometimes a piece is shortened, but in most cases it is combined with a second piece or several pieces to form a new composition. Relationships and tensions materialise. Sometimes a word is written on it or chiselled out. There is something divine about the 'marking' of the material: the creator giving it a name. Simple words suggest greater stories in which that which is withheld (or is not expressed) is more important than what is visible. It is this breathtaking relationship with what is there and what is evoked that is in fact the quality of your sculptures. I see them as sculptures in the most traditional sense of the word. They slice through space as both positive and negative, form and non-form, solid and avoid. They redefine the space, the floor area and the relationship between the object and the viewer. Several sculptures combined in a single space are related to each other like punctuation in a text, notes in a score or stepping stones in a Japanese garden. Monumental but never insistently imposing. Your work is always an invitation, a gesture.

I see invitation as the essence of your work. The work invites me to look at it as freely as I like, to probe it with my eyes. Something, almost nothing, and yet so much. A small addi-

tion to the universe, a minor shift, something no one asked for, nor was waiting for, and so valuable precisely for that reason (being defenceless). Work which again and again brings me face-to-face with myself, that makes me conscious, more acute, as a viewing and thinking subject, that teaches me to deal with doubts, put things into perspective, that includes me, encloses me.

I know that most of the beams are terribly heavy, but I see a lightness, a naturalness, a melodiousness. Sometimes they look like matchsticks or Mikado sticks. In all their seeming unwieldiness I find them vulnerable, like your watercolours of flowers. Are they complementary to your sculptural work or an extension of it? I am aware of your penchant for Piet Mondriaan. He too had secret archives of watercolours of flowers – as if he needed them to make possible his paintings with their straight lines and planes in primary colours. Culture and nature again.

Dear Bernd, I remember when we met near the work called *Bernd's Terrasse* on the Scheldt quayside in Antwerp. For a long time we stood looking at the river flowing by. At 'your' Scheldt, or was it still in part 'your' version of your Rhine in Dusseldorf? I also remember clearly how we found the perfect place for this work on the banks of the Shannon in Limerick, just where the current picked up speed. There too we spent a long time looking at the water. And the work accompanied us to Barcelona too, where it became a terrace on a terrace at the Macba.

I think your work is about an encounter, and I venture to hope that many others do too. *Ich und Du, Du und Ich*.

Kind regards (to Anny too),  
Hans