

Beyond the Image

Ingo Ronkholz

by Susanne Wedewer

What motivates a young painter to turn his back on painting and apply his efforts to sculpture? In the case of Ingo Ronkholz, a growing feeling of the insufficiency of the “reality conveyed by painting” caused him to shift more and more to sculpture as the focus of his interest: sculpture as a placement rather than a depiction of reality. To track down the concept of factual reality was his aim, in a time when we seem to have lost control over a world consisting primarily of a collage of images. Sculpture for Ronkholz is “the key to come close to these fundamental propositions,” as sculpture is not easily translated into, barely able to be communicated through, the media of information.¹ Only in a face-to-face situation does sculpture let itself be experienced—directly and without any filter. “Sculpture is not a reproduction of anything, but is creation...Against the multiplication of images, the total reproducibility

Sculptur 2004—20, 2004. Cast bronze, 158 x 103 x 101 cm.

of the world, sculpture sets this act of creation. Sculpture’s previous role, the plastic form as mediator to the gods, the stars, the seasons, the elements, as mediator between life and death, is newly phrased in the sculpture of this century,” according to German sculptor Heinz-Günter Prager.²

In 1981, Ronkholz introduced the first elements of sculpture into his paintings: two pieces of wire of different lengths, which he used to “draw,” placing them between two sheets of paper, gluing the sheets together afterwards. Both the formation of rust on the wires and the warping of the paper caused by the process of gluing were employed by the young sculptor to structure the surface in the alternation of outside and inside, of front, back, and in between. His use of materials is a first link to the factual placement of the object—to sculpture. As Sepp Hiekisch-Picard describes the process, “To allow material and space to be acknowledged directly and simultaneously through the process of veiling and uncovering,

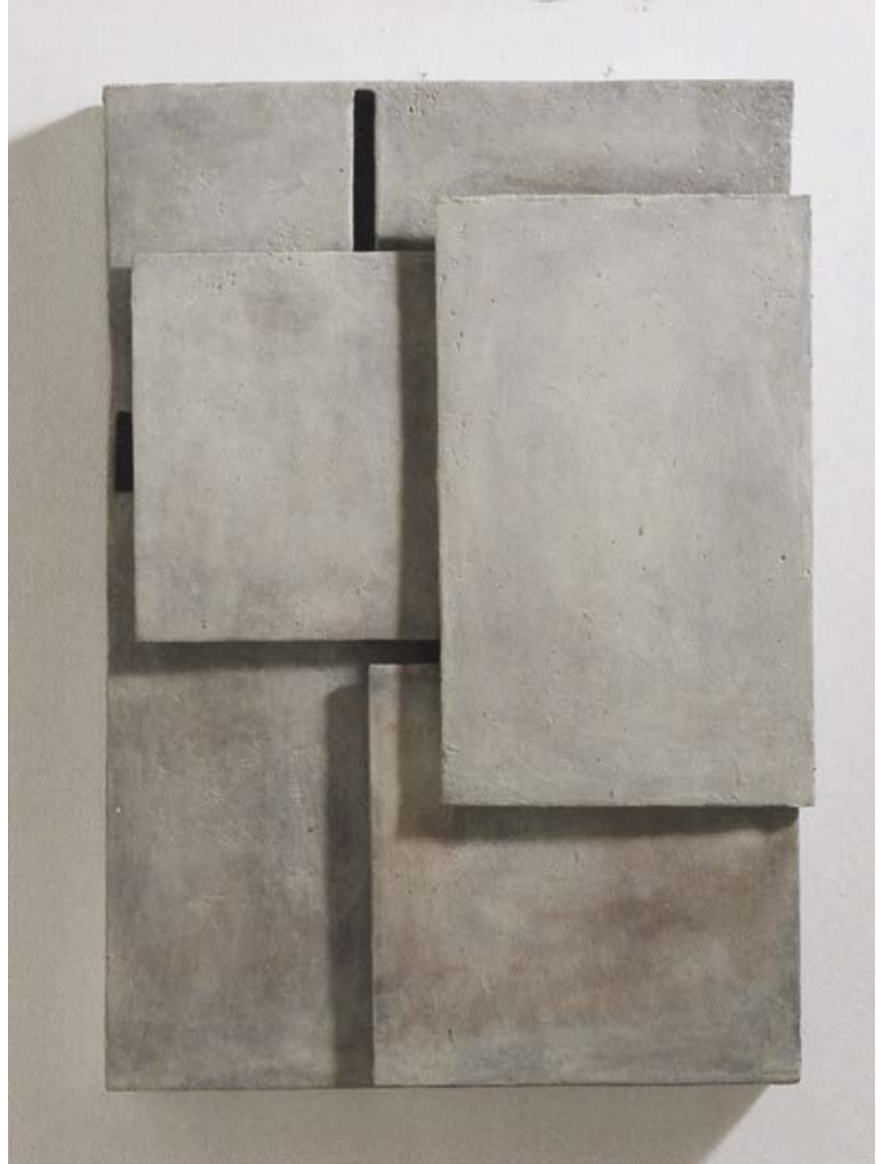
to encounter things without distance, is Ronkholz’s primary goal.”³

In the following years, Ronkholz’s works were made of steel sewn into fabric or of ferric oxide ashes applied to paper with a brush. The forms are cones, bold rectangles and cuboids, and circles on the surface of the paper or basic, readable “placements” of color and form that we are tempted to relate to machinery. For Ronkholz, objects are the source of “natural forces and tensions that seriously affect our thinking and feeling and thus our actions.” He considers machines and machine parts as belonging to this world of objects, as well as industrial buildings with their sculpturally appealing outer forms, but of whose inner structure we usually do not have any precise indication. But Ronkholz does not depict, does not remold. He translates what he sees, what he experiences. His perception re-appears in his vocabulary of elementary, basic forms—with a certain hint of architecture or of machinery. The sculptures of the 1980s are



made of rust-covered cast iron or iron filings bonded together by corrosion. They are provided with openings, blocked interiors, bulges, and notches. The works of this period appear to be accidentally placed here and there—either on the floor or on a table, as singular objects or perhaps one piece consisting of several discrete parts. They imply mobility and therefore variability of arrangement in space or over the table surface. At first they seem to correspond to the schematics of positive and negative, an assumed correspondence of inner and outer form, volume and cavity. With their rust-covered iron and porous ferric oxide surfaces, these works suggest an ongoing process, a transitoriness. They are perceived as objects that used to be functional in the past.

However, Ronkholz's objects are completely invented, not discovered. They are an independent, formal reality without any counterpart in our experience. They are neither the parts of a whole now broken apart, nor do they owe anything to any mechanical process. Parts that may be perceived initially as belonging together based on superficial formal correspondence do not actually belong together: no inside finds its outer form, no volume fits into a corresponding hollowness.



Left: *Black Box*, 1993. Wood, cardboard, and wax, installation view. Right: *Wandskulptur* 2002—15, 2002. Cast bronze, 68 x 47 x 9 cm.

Not one of these objects has ever had a purpose or function, though the early works as well as more recent ones, which in their scale seem easy to handle, suggest what Ronkholz typically considers his sculptures to be—tools. Tools to be worked with and to initiate the process so essential for him: the direct encounter between the beholder and the work.

The question of the interdependence of sculpture and surrounding space, the changing perception of space related to sculpture—these inherent topics of plastic art are of only minor interest to Ronkholz. As paradoxical as it may sound, his work is not about sculpture, not about the object, as he puts it. The individual piece is only a “vehicle” and not the artistic goal of self-sufficient formal investigations. His concern is

rather with something that only art is able to evoke—a unique process of cognition of the world.

Ronkholz puts his tools into the hands of the observer. In *Black Box* (1993), this is to be understood literally: two shelves, painted black inside, are positioned face to face. It is possible to step between them, to pick up one of the 20 sculptures made out of waxed black cardboard, and to put it on a table. One may pick pieces up to work with them, ask questions, check one's perceptions, and—step by step—connect the perceptions with one's thoughts. The formal vagueness of the sculptures corresponds to the vagueness of our relationship with the world of material objects, a world that we create but that increasingly denies us access.



Clockwise from above: View of exhibition at the Museum Bochum, Germany, 2003. *Wandskulptur 1998—11*, 1998. Cast bronze, 86 x 60 x 12 cm. *Skulptur 2000—15*, 2000. Cast bronze, 81 x 43 x 33 cm.

By placing many of his works on a base or table and thus creating a distance from the viewer, Ronkholz paradoxically provides us with an opportunity to regain access. Placed on a pedestal, the works are isolated from a world primarily perceived and defined through images. The “tools” are taken out of the reality surrounding us, out of the observer’s reality. The rust-covered forms made of cast iron and later, at the end of the ’90s, of patinated bronze, invite us to use them as tools for the alternate form of perception that Ronkholz has in mind.

Through the years, Ronkholz’s basic vocabulary has remained the same, although certain alterations in accent, such as a tendency toward archetypal forms, can be observed. As Gabriele Uelsberg states in an essay about Ronkholz’s drawings, “The forms...take on archetypal elements...and...in their simplicity and directness...become symbolic things.”⁴ This comment can be easily transferred to the sculptural work, since his drawing and sculpture are independent partners in dialogue, listening to each other, exchanging, but keeping their own voices. Ronkholz’s work in both is about the relation

between the individual part and the—finally not describable—whole.

In the drawings, Ronkholz cuts paper, assembles it into a collage, covers it with oil paint and graphite, uses both sides, stacks it partially in layers. Basic, elementary forms and volumes arise, here and there accompanied by phrases in graphite, by sketched possibilities of forms. Empty areas become part of these arrangements, allowing an outside and an inside to come into being. Just as the use of rust in previous drawings made the forms suggest objects, the later drawings—similar to the sculpture—make a three-dimensional space possible between the layers, shining through the overlappings and coverings. It is an immaterial space, despite the factual use of materials in the drawings, a space that seems to have no limits: “archetypal elements and symbolic signs,” as Uelsberg puts it, speaking of Ronkholz’s works on paper.

In the ferric oxide sculptures, however, this symbolic sign-character is still concealed by the material aspect. The rust, being so dominant a visual element, makes the sculptures “narrate” despite their autonomy as invented forms. They start to tell us about a



past of which they suggest themselves to be relics. But through his use of cast iron and patinated bronze, Ronkholz begins to create a separation between form and material, so that the form grows more and more independent of the material and the putative narrative is pushed to the background. This development could be described as a movement from found objects to archaic/architectural placements, from solid bodies to spaces constructed out of two-dimensional elements to space as enclosed areas.

For example, in *Skulptur 2002–3*, three regularly spaced board-like elements stand upright, connected by a transverse piece on top and bottom. From the front, one sees two elongated, funnel-like openings molded into the sides. Only in the side view does the

Two views of *Skulptur 2002–3*, 2002. Cast bronze, 65 x 35 x 23 cm.

viewer realize that the openings reveal an interior. The openings, however, are not aligned in any way that would allow an unrestricted view into or through the object. Ronkholz's sculptures withdraw themselves from the schematic of supposed correspondences, do not expose themselves completely to formal analysis.

A similar situation is found with his wall sculptures. In *Wandskulptur 2002–15*, two-dimensional elements of different sizes are stacked closely on top of each other in front of the wall. In a few spots, the view extends through the gaps into the darkness behind: space appears to open into depth. The imaginary play of possibilities, so characteristic of Ronkholz's

early work, once again appears through the implied movement—however, silence and concentration dominate here. And thus, thoughts also come to a rest, slowly letting go of their fixation, their striving to embed the perceived into the verifiable or well-known. The encounter with these sculptures, seemingly archetypal, basic structures, leads to a direct, immediate aspect of perception.

The spaces are constructed of two-dimensional pieces, in the overall size of architectural models, which Ronkholz still usually presents on tables. Depending on the viewpoint, these objects at first appear hermetically closed since they are only partially penetrated by openings, slots, and

gaps to peek through: they are never open to full view. Again and again the visual investigation fails, stopped by surfaces further inside, fails due to the increasing density of space.

During the development of these pieces, Ronkholz at first playfully puts together pieces of cardboard to create a model. In the final, complex casting process all of the fragments are bonded into a closed, definitive unit. The bronze casting process allows Ronkholz to complete his form in a singular casting, which supplies the form with a common skin defining it as whole, a concentration of energy within an enclosed plastic context. This isolation may also be seen as an exclusion of space from the larger surrounding space. In this sense, it makes us experience the fact that something infinite is only imaginable through boundaries—a truism that nevertheless deserves to be emphasized. These works are perceived as existing only in themselves and for their own purposes. Heinz-Günter Prager recently raised the question of “whether form without meaning can at all exist within sculpture. Whether works of art that up to now have been perceived as purely formal do not turn out to be deep conveyors of meaning, and we only have forgotten how to receive this.”⁵

Looking at Ronkholz’s sculptures with this question in mind, they appear to be definite, just what they are. They suggest permanence and thus timelessness and infinity. At this point a knowledge preceding logic comes into play—nothing conveyed or mediated, but a knowledge that is immediate, direct, and unfiltered. The perception of these sculptures changes: the experience of them is not of an interior as an aspect of form. It is a deep core that does not expose itself but remains concealed within the encapsulation of the work itself. Light, which normally chases away the shadows and the darkness, does not penetrate to the core. We are reminded of Asian temples or of tombs. In these places, the inaccessible interior secret is not revealed to the eye. The act of enclosing, locking away, hiding and concealing, has always been a cult strategy. Although we do not want to speak about Ronkholz in terms of a cult mentality, it is obvious



Skulptur 1999—4, 1999. Cast steel, 58 x 41 x 28.5 cm.

what this strategy enables him to do, as a sculptor of our time. As Hiekisch-Picard says, “With his wall and floor sculptures [he shows] in a restrained but thus even more intense way, the imaginary presence of the non-visible, in the end of the spiritual, perceptible by the senses.”⁶

Thus in the existential insufficiency of a secular world, in which even the last great secret, the creation of mankind, seems nearly to be unveiled, Ingo Ronkholz points us toward a

vocabulary of formal expression that has been used throughout the ages in seeking an approach to what is not understandable. Across cultures and eras, the meaning of the forms developed through this approach has changed. It appears, though, that the fundamental problem has remained over time: the cognition of a superior, ultimate reason.

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Notes

¹ All quotations from the artist, unless stated otherwise, are from a conversation with the author in January 2005.

² Heinz-Günter Prager, “Von der Ökonomie zur Aura. Die Bedeutung der afrikanischen Skulptur für die Skulptur des 20. Jahrhunderts” in *Vorträge zur zeitgenössischen Kunst*, edited by Dieter Ronte, (Kunstmuseum Bonn, 2004), p. 18.

³ Sepp Hiekisch-Picard, “Denkstücke, Zum plastischen Schaffen von Ingo Ronkholz” in *Ingo Ronkholz, Skulptur, Zeichnung 1995–2003*, exhibition catalogue, (Bochum, Mülheim 2003), p. 114.

⁴ Gabriele Uelsberg, “Ingo Ronkholz—Zeichnungen” in *Ingo Ronkholz, Skulptur, Zeichnung 1995–2003*, op. cit., p. 72.

⁵ Prager, op. cit., p. 19.

⁶ Hiekisch-Picard, op. cit., p. 117.