

‘honeycombs’, which actually become a habitat for a diversity of organisms. To what extent would it be good for the sculpture be reconquered?

A crucial question is their vulnerability. I welcome it because it applies to all of us and this fragility ties in with my perception of the world. Do these sculptures really need a fragile, vulnerable side? And what about the technique? Does the use of an industrial product, the façade panel, take up too much space? Would more contemporary, additive procedures like 3D printing be more timely and appropriate?

I really welcome the wealth of associations that you come up with in your perception of the work. I want the spectrum to be as broad as possible and I also want people to be able to understand the content of the sculptures. How explicit, how legible should or must the content and the underlying thoughts be?

You have long been teaching at the Bern University of the Arts. Working with budding artists presupposes faith in what, ideally, art can achieve today. Given that your work has repeatedly been described in analogy to research, I ask you: what can fine art do that is more than the natural sciences and the humanities?

Fine art is distinguished from classical philosophy and exact sciences like mathematics and physics in that it fulfils a practical, sensual role. It offers immediate and subjective access. And it makes no claim to universality. The tendency to formulate binding generalizations and commonalities is therefore less marked. On the other hand, fine art can chart completely unexpected territory; it can stake out its own boundaries and produce a reality that is different from the ‘real’ world. There are no musts in art; it has no direct use and therefore no power. Its ‘impotence’ makes it a perfect playing ground, a free and open field of experimentation in which modes of conduct, ideas and questions of living together can be asked and practiced with different, new means and methods. There is no right or wrong; art is its own benchmark. Fine art is full of ambiguities, sometimes full of contradictions, but also full of potential. It is a wonderful vehicle for learning to take a loving, attentive approach to oneself and the world.

Jörg van den Berg

Relational modes between seeing and knowing

On (finding) form in two sculptures by Andrea Wolfensberger

before seeing I

A fundamental problem regarding art and our appreciation of it comes to a head in Andrea Wolfensberger’s work: the relationship between seeing and knowing or, to put it differently, between sensuous and rational perception (of world). The question whether one is possible without the other is quickly answered because we can engage separately in either. Can’t we?

But I can only acquire in-depth insight into Wolfensberger’s works if I am prepared to chart anew the territory that lies between seeing and thinking. Appreciation is challenged because, in this case, the relationship between knowledge and sculptural articulation is hardly obvious. And, in fact, it cannot be, for not even the artist can conceive of it in the process of developing her sculptures.

So how do references to extra pictorial prior knowledge relate to the pictoriality of the completed sculptures? This question calls for clarification, inasmuch as the very process of clarification itself becomes a parallel process that steadily accompanies appreciation of Wolfensberger’s works, contributing substantially to epistemological gain as it is a path of much productive perplexity.

In his book about Giotto’s Arena frescoes – a cycle of biblical events and scenes from the life of Mary and Christ and, in consequence, images underpinned by unambiguous texts that dominate because of their presumed certainty – Max Imdahl spoke of the “expressive might of pictoriality”. Its impact is measured by “the extent to which the respective referentiality is transcended by the semantic unity of the picture itself.”¹ What a challenge for the image.

In the case of Wolfensberger’s sculptures, one might speak of a paradox since their formal appearance, the form they have found, is inconceivable without substantial references while the “pictoriality” of many of her works becomes so self-contained that their “expressive might” not only transcends but even obliterates all prior knowledge. What is seen and what is known are separated but need to be mutually related again.

The attempt will here be made to trace the relationship of knowing and seeing specific to each of two, ultimately very different works, by Wolfensberger. Between 2018 and 2019, Wolfensberger was invited to create installations specific respectively to the location

¹ Max Imdahl: *Giotto Arenafresken. Ikonographie, Ikonologie, Ikonik.* Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1980, p. 52.

and to the site in the artist colony of Worpswede near Bremen, to be precise at the Große Kunstschau Museum. The two ‘commissions’ and the sculptural articulations could not have been more different.

before seeing II

In 2019 I invited Andrea Wolfensberger to inaugurate a new series of exhibitions, the *Worpsweder Rotunde*. The title of the series alludes to the actual rotunda, the architectural centre of the Kunstschau built by Bernhard Hoetger in the 1920s. A round suspended deep into the rotunda with a diameter of almost thirteen metres forms the bottom ring of a dome rising some four-and-a-half metres in height. A circle of windows tapers up and out from the bottom ring of the dome. Half of the dome is enclosed by the semi-circular grey wall of the rotunda; the other half is open with one massive, loadbearing column, the whole supporting a second slightly vaulted ceiling built above the dome. A long diagonal wall opposite the entrance closes off the room like a tangent, thus appearing more like a vector than a boundary. Hoetger’s rotunda is not only *the* main gallery in the Große Kunstschau; it is, above all, more than ‘ordinary’ architecture: the *Worpsweder Rotunde* is an expressive architectural sculpture.

Andrea Wolfensberger responded to this extremely dominant spatial given by selecting a second, entirely different Worpswede ‘subject matter’ – the call of two cranes that she found on the Internet – as her point of departure for *Eine Beziehungsweise. Duett-Rufe der Kraniche* [A Relational Mode. Duet Calls of Cranes]. In certain months while migrating, they settle as (formerly more numerous) guests in Hammeniederung or Teufelsmoor, the devil’s heath as it is also called, near Worpswede. The calls of the cranes, prosaically culled from the Internet and not from nature, are recorded by the computer as so-called soundwaves. Wolfensberger selected the curve of the soundwaves that corresponds to the ‘horizon line’. This curve shows volume and duration but not frequency; it lasts the length of a call. To convert the curve into three-dimensional space, it was repeated 250 times. This corresponds to 250 layers of corrugated cardboard in the finished sculpture. Wolfensberger shifted each repetition to the right at an angle of 45°, as if the wave were moving forward. She shortened the layers correspondingly, which yielded a tapering perspective. The result renders the call of only one crane. The second crane comes into play with wind turbulence. To this end, the second curve underlying the sculpture is translated into rotation. The rotation points run on a circle, with the rotation angles corresponding to the curve traced by the amplitude of the crane’s call. Single layers were then projected back onto the cardboard and cut to shape to obtain the cut plates. A nail was placed on the points of rotation and then layer after layer was

19.01 → pages 61 ff.

18.09 → pages 85 ff., 94

18.07 → pages 90 f.

18.08 → pages 92 f.

glued. The final step of the process involved removing the edges and sending down the surfaces until they are soft. So much for the origin and making of *Eine Beziehungsweise. Duett-Rufe der Kraniche*.

This description of the production process is unlikely to be easily followed by anyone who is not versed in basic maths and physics. And a nagging suspicion increasingly intrudes that knowing and understanding this production process may not be of significance in understanding the finished sculpture.

The preceding year Andrea Wolfensberger had been invited to create a site-specific installation as part of the exhibition project *Kaleidoskop Worpswede. Kunstwerk, Landschaft, Lebensort* [Kaleidoscope Worpswede. Artwork, Landscape, Location]. The theme specified for the exhibition was peat, a material that still defines the landscape around the artist colony on the moor.

In the resulting *Worpsweder Trilogie*, two rooms in the museum, dedicated to landscapes, were connected with the outdoors. Wolfensberger placed the first part, *Torfhocke*, outdoors directly in front of a brick wall of the new, 1970s museum building. It was a wall of peat built up in layers as traditionally done by peat farmers to dry the bricks. The freestanding wall was clearly visible through a window from inside the museum. Wolfensberger placed the second part, *Klimaproxy*, on a pedestal in the adjacent gallery. 250 circular discs of aircraft plywood, varying in diameter, each represent the CO₂ level in the atmosphere for a span of 1600 years in the Earth’s history. With one exception: the largest disk on top represents the concentration of CO₂ spanning the past 70 years. From the *Klimaproxy* sculpture, visitors had a view through the large plateglass window at one of the courtyards behind the Große Kunstschau bordered by terraced walls. *Sphagnum*, the third part of Wolfensberger’s *Worpsweder Trilogie*, could be seen on the lowest terrace: a large basin of poured concrete filled with peat moss (Lat. *sphagnum*). Peat mosses are small, inconspicuous plants that are phylogenetically old and primitive; they do not blossom. Only the top of an intact peat moss plant is alive and shows growth. Since no light reaches the plant underneath, it dies off and begins to decompose. This unusual characteristic is caused by the fact that peat moss has neither roots nor a proper vascular system to transport juices. Nourishment of the living part is independent of the dead section below. Only the topmost centimetres of the plant are above the water table. The small stems and leaves store so much water that they actively raise the water level. This unusual ability of peat moss to trap rainwater in the interstices of its stems and leaves is one of several prerequisites for the formation of moorland. No raised bog can exist and no turf can form without peat moss.

Peatlands emerged in Central Europe after the last Ice Age and store carbon more effectively than any other habitat. Peat is a product of the absence of oxygen in the waterlogged environment, which prevents dead plant debris from decomposing completely. Although peatlands account for only three percent of the land on planet Earth, they sequester one third of its carbon – twice as much as all of the world’s forests combined. Wolfensberger’s *Sphagnum* in its white concrete basin shows us the ‘little’ plant that makes a substantial contribution to the formation of peatlands and thus also to sequestering carbon.

Unlike *Eine Beziehungsweise*, this information on the background, point of departure and formal implementation of the *Worpsweder Trilogie* is crucial to our understanding of the sculptures.

So much for (possible) knowledge before seeing.

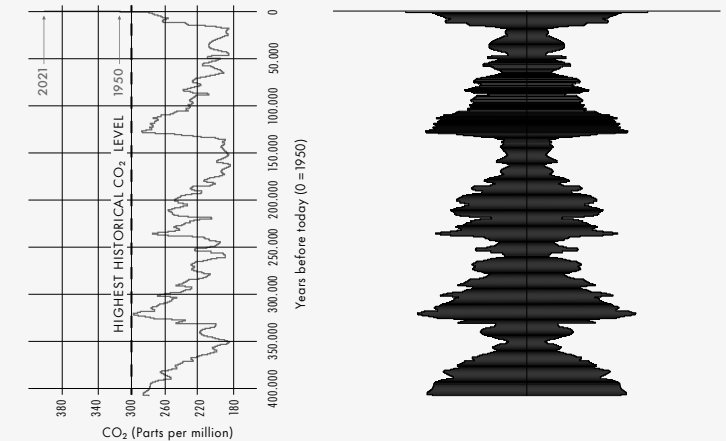
forming | placing

After gathering relevant knowledge, Wolfensberger begins her research, experimenting with forms and relating them to space. In the case of the *Worpsweder Trilogie*, her research led to three sculptural articulations that each take an extremely different and distinct approach to the proposed theme. Although peat is no longer cut with a hoe nowadays but scraped off by machine, Wolfensberger chose to use peat bricks to present the material to visitors. To do so she used a not inconsiderable number of bricks, layered these in the traditional fashion and put them up in a courtyard of the museum as a six-metre wide and two-and-a-half metre high wall of peat. She placed the peat wall very close to the brick wall of the museum, creating a narrow passage just large enough for visitors to walk through, which they wanted to do and could. On one hand, I experience the tectonics of the ‘walled-in’ bricks and, on the other, a narrow corridor that is always in the shade. Comparing that with fin-de-siècle photographs or paintings by the first Worpswede artists yields a historically fundamental insight. The photographs and the paintings show a landscape tectonically structured by the systematic harvesting of the peat and dark scenarios of confined and constricted spaces for human habitation.²

Moreover, Wolfensberger’s *Torfhocke* also foregrounds the ‘animate’ natural material of peat as opposed to the fired clay of the bricks. The *Torfhocke* is of questionable stability, vulnerable to both humidity and desiccation and most certainly incapable of being pressed into perfect, permanent shape. It bulges on all sides, does not stand firm and makes walking through the narrow corridor a precarious undertaking. It took only a few months for the constantly changing weather to bring about the collapse of the *Torfhocke*. Wolfensberger came and built a second articulation in

2 Fritz Overbeck’s *Moorkate hinter Torfstich* (c. 1898) was hanging directly next to the window through which one could see the *Torfhocke* (→ page 85); Rudolph Stickelmann’s black-and-white photograph *Torfstich* (c. 1906) was in the second landscape gallery near *Klimaproxy*.

The diagram, based on data from ice cores drilled in Antarctica, shows the concentration of CO₂ (ppm) in the Earth’s atmosphere over the past 400,000 years. (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, USA)



another interior courtyard, close to her *Sphagnum*. It was not as high and could – quite literally – be overseen by visitors. In this respect, it adapted to the surroundings with greater immediacy, responding to the distinctive play between outside walls and walled terraces. Most especially, the *Torfhocke* now related directly to the work of Rudolph Stickelmann, Fritz Overbeck and Carl Vinnen.³ Visitors standing in front of these late nineteenth-century pictures could look straight at the second *Torfhocke*, placed just outside the room’s wall-height window, thus blocking the view and markedly dimming the space inside.

The *Sphagnum* makes a very quiet appearance, positively retiring in comparison to the *Torfhocke* and thus very much the way it looks in its natural environs. The artist put the concrete basin with its ragged edge at the end of the bottom terrace of the lowest courtyard. It could easily be seen from the museum as well, although only by observant viewers. The lush bright green of the star-shaped moss clearly stood out against the light colour of the concrete, which in turn contrasted with the dark earth of the terrace. But it was still an unassuming articulation, a reserved and unobtrusive gesture of showing. It was up to viewers to take the initiative.⁴

The second part of Wolfensberger’s *Worpsweder Trilogie*, standing on a pedestal in the museum’s second landscape gallery, was the most impressive part of the trilogy for the majority of visitors. The perfection of form and material in *Klimaproxy* was perceived as pure beauty, luring visitors into the trap of gazing at the work with unadulterated pleasure, not unlike enjoying a coffee table decoration. However, a closer look produced disconcerting results. The sculpture is constructed so that the topmost layer of the 250 plywood discs, glued one above the other, uncomfortably invades the viewer’s personal space at neck, head or eye level. In addition, the top disc is entirely disproportionate to the remaining 249, which vary considerably in diameter and are all equally thick, in extreme contrast to the cantilevered disc on top, whose exaggerated size is heightened even more by being

3 Carl Vinnen, *Mondnacht* (1900), oil on wood, 100,5 × 79 cm.

4 The concrete basin rested on six peat bricks inserted flush with the terrace. The peat moss could not be watered with ordinary tap water but required water from the river Hamme, which drains the moors near Worpswede.

much thinner than the others below. That reaction was, of course, perfectly logical, triggered by knowing that this disc represents 70 years (as opposed to 1600 for each of the others) and that the atmospheric carbon levels produced by ‘us’ exceed those of all previous ages many times over. Nonetheless, the so carefully articulated whole is enduringly undermined. Although its formal beauty prevails, it does leave me with a lasting fright.

seeing | knowing

The formal articulation of *Eine Beziehungsweise. Duett-Rufe der Kraniche* (2019) in the Worpsweder Rotunde has so many angles of view, such fragility and vehemence, such playful lightness; it tumbles and climbs, in short, it comes as such an overpowering sensual onslaught that it is impossible to capture it in words. Even so, a few ‘takes’ are here ventured, which each alone and altogether can be little more than a few pieces in an elusive, indeterminable, multi-form puzzle.

First take (from the entrance and still at a distance; first view of the whole). The entire room can be seen from the entrance. A space of exceptionally unusual design, dominated by the suspended round of the central dome. I stand at the entrance, outside the dome. I am not centred. Under the dome, an elegant, agitated shape in brown rears up, towering in space. The sculpture *Eine Beziehungsweise* obviously consists of multitudinous layers. In front, from the base on which the sculpture rests – actually, an extremely narrow, pointed support in proportion to the size of the sculpture as a whole – rapidly undulating shapes draw the eye back to the left, then back further and up to the right, gliding along equally undulating contours and finally climbing steeply in flight up to the twisted tip of the sculpture. The impenetrable dynamic of the movement does not, however, come to rest at the top of the sculpture well above my body height; instead it tapers off and vanishes into the semicircle of the dome. Nowhere does the sculpture consolidate into a volume. Everything is in motion. I can look up at it, but into it as well. The sculpture twists, rotates, turns and moves, so much so that visitors pausing at the entrance are hard put to resist the impulse to start moving themselves. The impulse is reinforced, on one hand, by the architecture of the room, by my decentralized position with respect to both the room and the sculpture, and on the other hand, by the radiantly white, large-format, low-lying platform. The platform is triangular in shape and I stand facing the longest side while the second side obviously runs parallel to the wall opposite.

Second take (from close up, facing the round of the rotunda; a pointed soaring, a lunge). The second view of *Eine Beziehungsweise* presented here already surpasses all conceivable expectations.

First take → pages 52/53

Second take → pages 54/55

I have modified my distance and angle of view. From close up, I see the inner structure of the corrugated slices; they have obviously been glued together. Both the shape of a single slice and the shape of the interacting whole elude description. Vision is challenged. It is utterly impossible to arrest seeing because everything is undulating, swinging back and forth, ascending, descending, tapering off to one side, billowing to the other. I lose my footing, need support, just as *Beziehungsweise* does, because it could never stand on its own. From my perspective, the contour to the right runs uninterrupted from almost the bottommost point of the sculpture to the very tip. The entire undulating movement from the left meets up with this ‘cutting edge’. Here, the *Beziehungsweise* towers sharply upwards. The original impression of the whole has already evaporated. I would have to go back again to establish how the first two takes relate to each other. Instead:

Third take → pages 56/57

Third take (from close up, facing the round of the rotunda; an inside, and an outside, almost a volume). Now I am standing directly in front of the above described ‘cutting edge’, which has lost its sharpness. The undulations are irregular here as well, almost trembling. The edge recedes slightly and separates an illuminated outside from a shady inside. The eye is guided in and out, becomes accustomed to the darkness and wants to assign volume to the work after all, though unsuccessfully, because the coursing undulations still dominate. It is impossible for vision to come to rest. The contour, now in back and to the left, has changed completely. Expansive, cascading arches guide the eye from top to bottom. Here, Wolfensberger’s *Beziehungsweise* has formed a new relationship to the works seen from this vantage point on the wall of the rotunda behind the sculpture: Otto Modersohn’s *Elfenreigen* [*Dance of the Elves*] and four gently agitated drawings by the artist herself, their undulations suggesting a resemblance to those of the cardboard layers. In Modersohn’s twilight, bright spirited beings dance around a shadowy copse – that fits...

Fourth take → pages 58/59

Fourth take (view back to the entrance; a fanning, a flapping, a theatre, a dance). The fit between Modersohn’s painting and Wolfensberger’s sculpture does not wane from the next perspective. Once again, I have taken only a few steps, am now standing opposite the entrance. The soaring remains but its dominance yields to a sense of hovering, of prancing. Had this been our first view of the work, we would never have imagined how layers so loosely fanned out could possibly keep their footing. Height is rapidly gained to the left; the upper half remains quite slender, echoes my vertical stance. But to the right, the lower half billows like a garment caught by the wind. Recollection of the title and the cranes conjures a similar recollection of plumage fanning out. But any translated return to an extra-pictorial reality or factuality curtails the vehemence of this viewing experience. It has clearly

distilled into only one thing: how I relate to it. From here on, the sculpture becomes immeasurably light, positively floating out of the room in which I stand – much too heavily, weighted. But standing still is not a feasible option ...

Fifth take (facing the stage, rotunda-round behind me, no volume, a shining through). Unsurprisingly, the fifth take changes everything all over again, displaces previous experience. Very close up to the corrugated cardboard, I now stand in front of a really pointed, towering mountain. No more swaying, no more prancing. This vantage point tempts one to read the undulations as topographical contour lines. But that doesn't work because the volume disintegrates almost entirely in micro perspective. Gone the mountain massif, gone the volume, instead a shining through. My vision flits through the cardboard structure, which seems to dissolve before my very eyes. Nothing about this *Beziehungsweise* remains self-evident.

And now in the background, the stage that Bernhard Hoetger integrated into the exhibition space. Wolfensberger's *Partitur [Score]* mounted on the back of it: the flight call of a skylark translated into five drawings. Here directly before me the *Duett-Rufe der Kraniche*, there the call of the skylark and behind me in the round several drawings of sections from the crested lark's mimicry; the bird obviously takes pleasure in pretending to be someone else.

hearing | shaping

The works that Wolfensberger has assembled here in the *Worpsweder Rotunde* are all derived from sound. Does that mean that her undertaking is more about listening than about seeing? Can shapes that are visually so exuberantly stimulating also be heard? The artist has certainly succeeded in making me acutely conscious of perceiving with all of my senses, for she has drawn exquisitely subtle attention to the acoustic quality of Hoetger's exhibition architecture. Most especially (also) the sound of *Beziehungsweise*. It makes a difference whether I am under the dome and with the sculpture or outside and looking at it from a distance. My walking makes a sound; so does my breathing. And by the time the two *talk&show* events⁵ took place with solo concerts by Björn Meyer (6-string electric bass) and Marianne Schuppe (vocals), the unheard-of had become inescapable.

after seeing

But what is specific, unique about the works of Andrea Wolfensberger and my experience on studying them? For one thing, a quality most difficult to achieve: the insoluble question of whether

Fifth take → page 61

⁵ I have organized the *talk&show* series since 2004. The principle is simple: 1 work, 1 guest, 1 conversation. For the two evenings about the *Worpsweder Rotunde* by Andrea Wolfensberger, there were two additional guests, the musicians Björn Meyer and Marianne Schuppe, who presented a very idiosyncratic performance next to and about *Eine Beziehungsweise*. The conversations that followed clearly showed how intensely museum goers had listened to the play between Meyer's bass and Schuppe's voice and the sound of the corrugated cardboard sculpture.

⁶ Max Imdahl, op. cit., pp. 91f.

these formal articulations are actually still abstractions of something. Yes, in their making, they do refer to pre-knowledge and yes, the moment written information accompanies them, they do relate to this pre-knowledge. But the moment they come into view, it is impossible to read them as abstractions of something extra-pictorial. The thread between knowing and seeing is broken and can no longer be taken for granted. It has to be retied again and again.

A consequence of this utter absence of self-evidence in the relationship between knowing and seeing is that I must keep reassuring myself of my cognition. The only instance for this 'cognitive seeing' is the identity of the work itself. Or, to cite the words of Max Imdahl again: The visual achievement "exists ... when the experience of an autonomous, seeing seeing and a heteronymous, re-cognizing seeing of the object ... negotiate into a non-substitutable pictorial identity, when re-cognizing seeing and seeing seeing co-function to form the unsuspected or even inconceivable experiences of a cognitive seeing."⁶

Wolfensberger's sculptures chart new territory regarding issues that are all too familiar. Filtered through the media in bite-sized bits, these issues (climate) or natural phenomena (cranes) ordinarily penetrate our consciousness at a detached remove – unlike Wolfensberger's sculptures. These are a physical experience that would initially appear to transport us far away from their point of departure only to guide us back again in modified form. However, it is a form of abstraction that relates me, my thinking and my body directly to subject matters hitherto only partially seen and felt. These sculptures are not about graphic documentation of climate values; they are not about the local history of techniques of harvesting and drying peat; they are not about a nature trail to present peat moss; nor are they about the delectable sight of the mating ritual of two large winged creatures – invariably a sublime drama in reality. In these sculptures, in their meticulous, passionately articulated precision, Wolfensberger confronts me with abstract viewing events, both soft and loud. On initial impact, the immediacy of these events transcends any reference to pre-knowledge. I am forced to rethink what I thought I knew and – above all – to establish a relationship between myself and this abstract knowledge. Wolfensberger provokes our thinking; her sculptures challenge sense perception, but never do they dictate the substance of a response; nothing is formulated, nothing prescribed. Instead, they open up spaces of inconceivability and it is in these spaces that cognition can take place. (And: new discourse among viewers can take place in these spaces.)

AUSSTELLUNG / EXHIBITION

Worpsweder Rotunde, 2019
Museum Große Kunstschau Worpswede













19.01

Eine Beziehungsweise. Duett-Rufe der Kraniche. 2019
Wellkarton / corrugated board
300 × 150 × 200 cm



AUSSTELLUNG / EXHIBITION

Kaleidoskop Worpswede – Kunstwerk Landschaft Lebensort, 2018
Museum Große Kunstschau, Worpswede





18.09

Worpsweder Trilogie. Torfhocke. 2018
Sodentorf / sod peat
225 × 610 × 75 cm







18.08

Worpsweder Trilogie. Klimaproxy. 2018
Sperrholz / plywood
80 × 90 × 90 cm





18.07

Worpsweder Trilogie. Sphagnum. 2018
Torfmoos / peat moss
9 x 49 x 49 cm



