

DE · SCULPTURA

PHILIP VAN ISACKER

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*Reflections on
Sculpture*

MER. B&L

FOREWORD

*The artist as writer,
Philip Van Isacker on the history
of sculpture*

The very first time I saw Philip Van Isacker's work was when a fellow-student gave me the book *Monuments for the Right to Doubt*. I looked at the black-and-white photos and was immediately hooked: the austere, minimalist sculptures in clay, which slowly crumbled over time, perfectly reflected the paradox of the title. Without 'ifs' or 'buts', claiming the right to a permanent place in the public domain and then using that self-confidence and determination to exercise the right to doubt.

It was, in my view, what all great art should be like: a successful form out of which an attitude to life emerges. An artwork that says: you too could live like this. Silent, but self-confident. Self-conscious and yet filled with doubt. Abstract, almost mathematical and yet human. Rarely had I seen artworks that expressed such a combination of objectivity and melancholy.

The naturalness of combining two things that in any other constellation would be at odds with each other is something that also characterises Van Isacker's wider oeuvre. Rooted in the grammar of Minimalism with its geometric objects and the chair and table forms of postmodern sculpture, this sculptor later added the human, sculpted body. At first, these were fragments of a body placed on top of a rectangular shrine, later fully freestanding figures.

It is also from this background that this book on sculpture was written, with a selection of works that is not limited to a particular medium, a defined time or a specific culture. The publication covers sculptures by Michelangelo as well as works

by Marcel Duchamp, the Parthenon sculptures and 1,000-year-old examples from India, as well as work by the American artist Robert Morris and an installation by Honoré d'O. The last thing that you will see in this book is an irreconcilable difference between classical sculpture and the modernist object or artefact.

The abandonment of traditional chronological divisions and the vocabulary of art history are what makes this book so important. Here, an artist speaks about the work of other artists and how every maker possesses an arsenal of images in his or her mind's eye that forms the prehistory of each new creation. Or, as Robert Hughes puts it: 'every writer carries in his or her mind an invisible tribunal of dead writers... from [whose] unenforceable verdict there is no appeal.' (*The Culture of Complaint*, 1994, p.104).

The same, of course, applies to the visual artist who, disregarding conventional art historical classifications, selects those images as the precursors or judges of his own artistic practice. Rather than the line drawn by art history, what we have in this book of 3 x 3 x 3 parts is a grid of works, between which there is no hierarchical or chronological distinction, yet they all provide consummate expression to a specific essence of sculpture.

It is important to emphasise, once again, that we are dealing here with the artist as author, an artist as historiographer, since the importance of this genre for conventional art history can hardly be overestimated. Those who are often the first to write about a new art form, or to make the first connections between works that were previously unseen, are not, as one might expect, the critics or the art historians, but artists.

This was the case at the very beginning of modern European art history, when the artist Vasari decided to draw attention to the work of his colleagues with his *Vite* [Lives]. This was also the case four centuries later when the artist Michel Seuphor wrote the first biography of Mondrian and, in *De abstracte schilderkunst in Vlaanderen* [Abstract Painting in Flanders], provided an important survey of the abstract painters then active. This is still the case today. And who would have thought that *De*

tweede half, beeldende kunst na 45 [The Second Half, Visual Arts After 45], the only Dutch-language classical art historical survey of contemporary art, would have been written by an artist, Ad de Visser?

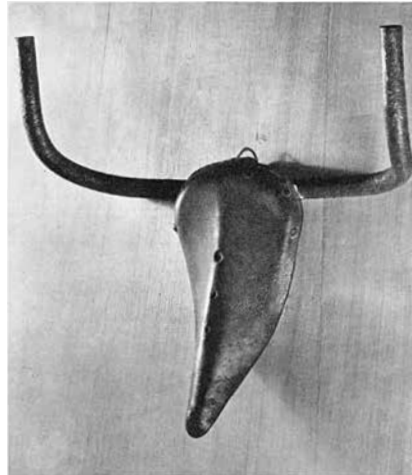
With this book, Philip Van Isacker follows in their footsteps and adds an invaluable publication to that long, rich and important tradition of artists who write about other artists.

Jeroen Laureyns

Sculpture, a dead language?

This book is a collection of twenty-seven reflections on sculpture, with the aim of exploring what is still meant by this term within the context of contemporary art. Does it make sense to link the history and tradition of sculpture with the art of today? Or are the various terms merely used to differentiate between techniques? And is a generalised approach towards the visual arts the only one that retains any relevance? In other words, and as a way of resurrecting the old *paragone* [comparison] between painting and sculpture: does the painter, and by extension any other type of artist, talk about reality differently, as does the sculptor, or is the question (now) obsolete?

The cause of the uncertainty surrounding the meaning of 'sculpture', a term that stems from the organisational structure of art schools, is inherently pedagogical. Whenever institutions are still divided into departments, the sculpture studio will almost always survive—albeit obscured beneath a succession of different names, each one more difficult and cumbersome than the next. Why this suspicion which, until a few decades ago, was almost non-existent? The answer is obvious and therefore universal: the term 'sculpture' is perceived as overly restrictive, especially when its most stringent interpretation excludes a host of new methods. And it is precisely these different ways of working that have almost entirely usurped the traditional techniques in contemporary practice. Whatever form a new definition of 'sculpture' might take, it must be broad if it is to escape being viewed as an historical anachronism. But there is an ontological and far more fundamental reason for collating these ideas,



namely the issue of defining the essence of sculpture, especially contemporary sculpture. This question is of vital importance to how educational structures and systems are established.

In 1986, the Centre Pompidou organised a large-scale exhibition entitled *Qu'est-ce que la sculpture moderne?* [What Is Modern Sculpture?] The exhibition covered the period between 1900 and 1970, the decades in which the traditional foundations of sculpture were called into question. The exhibition opened with works by Gauguin [Fig. 1], Picasso [Fig. 2] and Matisse [Fig. 3] (artists who were principally painters and whose open-mindedness towards sculptural traditions made them important protagonists of change) and concluded with the leading figures of 1970s minimalism: Morris, Andre, Judd, Flavin and LeWitt. The selection was ultimately extremely resonant. Interestingly, while all of the included artists questioned the traditions of sculpture to a greater or less extent, the overall image presented

Fig. 1 Paul Gauguin, *Oviri*, 1894. (h. 75 cm).

Fig. 2 Pablo Picasso, *Tête de taureau*, 1942. (h. 33,5 cm).



by the exhibition could not have been more homogeneous. The traditional display methods corresponded to the equally conventional materials and techniques of the works on view. The general impression was not radically different to how one might experience a sculpture exhibition in, for example, a belle époque salon. For all the questions raised by *Qu'est-ce que la sculpture moderne?*, the exhibition also upheld the traditions associated with the materials and techniques utilised, as well as the principles behind the presentation. As a result, the overall effect was not incongruous. Other than in one significant regard, the spatial organisation of the exhibition did not accord with the nature and function of the minimalist sculptures with which the exhibition concluded. These were arranged like all of the other pieces: side-by-side in a cavernous space. The exhibition curators appeared to have overlooked the fundamental differences between these particular sculptures and their forerunners. The minimalist works might have resembled traditional sculptural objects—albeit in a reduced and pared down form—but they represented a break with the past: they were not made to be seen in isolation but in relation to the surrounding space. The viewer's gaze is thus a critical factor in their appreciation, which

Fig. 3 Henri Matisse, *Étude de pied*, 1900. (h. 30 cm).

is why the works are so fascinating. This departure ushered in a range of new sculptural attitudes that swept traditional materials and techniques into an unstoppable maelstrom. Consequently, and in the light of developments within the last few decades, the question of how to define the essence of contemporary sculpture is constantly asked. Yet we are always faced with the same dilemma: is it better to use the terms photography, video art, performance, installations, digital art and so on when discussing the work of a sculptor who uses these mediums, or do we preserve the term 'sculpture'? In other words: if we continue to deploy the term 'sculpture', what distinguishes the practice from other art forms? What does the contemporary sculptor want to tell us and, more specifically, how is it communicated?

Many exhibitions have considered the phenomenon of new forms of sculpture, the titles of which are often clearly indicative of the issues at hand, such as *Op losse schroeven* (1969) and *When Attitudes Become Form* (1969). Several publications have also attempted to explain recent developments in sculpture but the majority of them, even when trying to avoid falling into the trap, do so by examining the conventions of modernism. Such authors inevitably make the same 'mistake' as the curators of *Qu'est-ce que la sculpture moderne?*

The English sculptor William Tucker was highly alert to the problem. When his book *The Language of Sculpture* was reissued in 1998, twenty-four years after the original publication, he admitted in his foreword that his once clear vision on sculpture had been overtaken by the facts. He began by explaining in the revised edition that he should have adopted a much broader approach to sculpture, both in terms of geographical span and chronology. In order to elucidate the art of today, he would also touch upon Donatello and Michelangelo, for example, discuss the Greek origins of the Western naturalist tradition, or examine the great non-European sculptural traditions. Secondly, he stated that sculpture can no longer be understood solely in

terms of composition, construction, gravity, materials and so on. In other words, the very same concepts upon which he had based the chapters of his book. To comprehend contemporary developments, he thought it vital to also consider the invention of photography, landscape art and performance art, to cite just a few examples: 'We must acknowledge', he says, 'that the evocation of what it means to be human has become the fundamental motive for making a sculpture.' This statement is perhaps too vague and difficult to apply exclusively to sculpture. One might wonder, indeed, if it is even possible to devise an alternative and more lucid description. Yet it demonstrates that William Tucker, who tried to explain 'the language of sculpture' from the 'foundations of modern sculpture' in 1974, as the subtitle to the Dutch edition reads, subsequently admits, in 1998, that it is only by looking beyond the borders of modernism that we can understand the art of today.

Fascinating studies on contemporary sculpture by Lucy Lippard, Rosalind Krauss, Jack Burnham and Alex Potts, amongst others, have steadfastly revealed the extent to which art-historical criticism and literature is indebted to modernism, and how many theories are still formulated from the perspective of modernist conventions, even—and perhaps especially—when it comes to the interpretation of later developments. It is particularly telling, perhaps, that William Tucker's insights, as stated in the preface to his book, are those of an artist rather than an art historian, the latter of whom is predisposed to reason within the pattern of a phenomenon's historical development. The artist, albeit partly out of naivety, or at any rate open-mindedness, is the person who dares to look in unexpected directions.

* * *

Yet should we choose to stray from the path of a rectilinear historical explanation, what kind of order is more useful? I alighted upon the one that forms the basis for my series of reflections in



a rather accidental and haphazard way, while reading the strangely titled essay *La scultura lingua morta* ('Sculpture, a Dead Language')¹ by the Italian sculptor Arturo Martini. This series of meditations was compiled in 1945, just a few years before the artist's death. A Dutch translation of Martini's writings was published under the auspices of fellow artist, Luciano Fabro [Fig. 4], to coincide with the latter's exhibition at the Middelheim Open-Air Museum, Antwerp, in 1994. When he first wrote the texts, in 1945, Martini was an important figure. Not for his renewal of the formal language of sculpture, however, but for his attempts to address new subjects. [Fig. 5] Yet this is precisely where he thought he had failed. After all, *La scultura lingua morta* is the honest, painful confession of an artist who, after forty years of endeavour, discovers that his art—sculpture—as become a dead language. One that, as he says himself, has not allowed him, and will no longer allow him, to perform a miracle. He wrote, 'For forty years, I too have assumed an unshakeable belief in every slavish dependence and powerlessness, which I now complain about and reject, whereby—and this is the clearest proof—I bid farewell to sculpture.'

The reflections that caused Arturo Martini to denounce sculpture are—how could it be otherwise—somewhat of their time.

Fig. 4 Luciano Fabro, *Bagnati*, 1994. (h. 200 cm).



And yet, if we penetrate to their very essence and consider them independently of their era, his remarks are both interesting and answerable. Whether or not one agrees with Martini's observations, it is clear that what he considers to be sculpture's negative characteristics, and which underpin his denunciations, are actually its unmistakable hallmarks. His arguments can be summarised in three key points. Firstly, he talks about the sculptural object, secondly about the subject, and finally about the way in which a sculpture relates to the notions of time and place.

Martini's initial pronouncements deal with the sculptural object which, because of its construction and representational methods, cannot escape its materiality. In this respect, sculpture will always be the slave of incidental circumstances and will forever be considered in relative terms, thus preventing it from becoming a universal language. The sculpture is always clay, or as Martini says: 'an amorphous mass'. Sculpture lacks the freedom that is present when words, musical notes or colours are transformed into essential values. The sculptor can only occupy himself with the superficial, instead of with the core, the construction, the only object of any permanence.

Fig. 5 Arturo Martini, *Chiaro di luna*, 1932. (h. 180 cm).

The ideas that Martini formulated about the sculptural object naturally stemmed from his opinions about the art of his own time. But they also have much wider significance. Whether it concerns an ‘amorphous mass’, or the more mobile and flexible objects and the means that followed, sculpture continues to distinguish itself from other art forms in one key respect: it is not a depiction of reality, it is a thing unto itself. A sculpture does not create an illusion of the physical world but, in one way or another, the end result is a reality: by creating an object, by using existing things, by assembling different items in a space, by introducing words, or a photograph, a moving image and so on. What this implies in terms of means and techniques makes sculpture a slow, if not static, artform. This unhurried language is the unique rhythm of sculpture and the source of Martini’s frustration. But above all, material acceptance provides an insight into reality. We are not enchanted by pure ideas; the means are not denied. Yet the affirmation of the material object does not prevent sculpture from addressing, through its own unique methods and unhurried representational possibilities, the doubt, uncertainty and inevitable movements of the times.

Martini’s second reproach concerns the connection between sculpture and a sole recurring subject: man and the human body. It thus appears to be an inherently repetitive art form. How can this one subject be a lasting source of inspiration? Sculpture thus becomes a routine discipline and, in a desperate quest for originality, artifice and skill cause the sculptor to lapse into grotesque deformations, into degeneration. Artists working in other fields are able to make their unique inner rhythm tangible within their artistic creations. The sculptor, on the other hand, cannot transmit these qualities to a sculpture whose rhythm is predetermined by this one recurrent subject. Independent creation, the quest for balance, is therefore impossible. The subject in question—mankind—ultimately disturbs the relationship between sculpture and nature. Sculpture is too *human* to be anonymous, and only the anonymous artist is part

of nature, just like the matter in which he spontaneously fertilises himself.

Once again, Martini’s conclusions are incontrovertible: the representation of man, of the human body, is an integral part of all sculptural traditions unless expressly prohibited. Although Martini views the endless return to the same subject as a slavish habit, it is indelibly linked to the fundamental need to compress thoughts and emotions into an image. In this regard, the human body is not only the elemental and most obvious subject due to its intrinsic rationality and how it expresses the sum total of what it means to be human. At the same time, the representational possibilities are as infinite and complex as man himself.

Finally, Martini’s disavowal of sculpture is linked to the discipline’s relationship with the concepts of place and time. Sculpture is surrounded by emptiness and therefore in a state of perpetual imbalance. In contrast to other art forms, a sculpture only ever finds itself in an accidental context, one that is alien to its creation. As for its relationship with time: Martini states that sculpture has failed to become a new language of communication because it is stuck in the past and has failed to discover fresh impulses in the wider world. In Martini’s words, it has fallen out of daily use and thus become a dead language.

As ever, Martini’s starting points are based on accurate observations. With regard to place, it is true that when compared to the art of painting, which entails working with an imaginary space, the sculptor is confronted with one that is real. And because the space is almost never related to the creation itself, it can never be under the sculptor’s unilateral and permanent control. Even when this was once the case, in the past, the sculpture often had to survive without the original spatial orchestration. This absent, or at best accidental context, means that the sculpture and its location enter into a precarious relationship, one that eventually renders the artwork ‘placeless’. But this is precisely why sculpture is an autonomous artform and has an inalienable right to speak: a fact that is overlooked by

Martini. Sculptures, therefore, are remote voices that must be cherished in the name of this independence and freedom. To return to Martini's final reproach about the relationship of sculpture to time, it can be said that all artforms are constantly discovering new impulses. It is only the language of sculpture that has died through falling into disuse. Indeed, sculptures are not only 'formless masses' that must survive without a space, but they also seem to be singularly unsuccessful in improvising a relationship with the ebb and flow of everyday life. Yet this strange relationship with time, which is similar to the one with space, is responsible for sculpture's unique position as a detached, and sometimes even isolated, witness. Sculptures extend no immediate answers, and nor do they expect a direct reaction from the viewer. Anyone seeking such a frank dialogue will find a far more amenable interlocutor in other artistic disciplines. And yet this strange temporal relationship has not precluded a wealth of sculptures from being eloquent witnesses to the era of their creation.

My anthology of reflections was not only guided by Martini's arguments but also by the (albeit implicit) order and structure of his essay. The first section of *De Sculptura* deals with the sculptural object, the second part with the recurring subject, the human body, and the third with the relationship of sculpture to place, time and, finally, with reality. Each part is based on nine actual artworks. *De Sculptura* has thus become a collection of twenty-seven reflections, always departing from a specific sculpture.

The works under discussion are not presented in chronological order but are drawn from disparate centuries and often from different cultural contexts. This means, first and foremost, that the sculpture is considered at face value, as opposed to being situated within its historical context. Although we now concede that it is a futile to divorce artworks from their spatial and temporal environments (a shift that was prompted by the pioneers of contemporary art historiography such as Panofsky, Hauser



and Wittkower), we cannot ignore the fact that certain historical sculptures have an innate power. One that is undiminished by a lack of knowledge about the time and circumstances of their creation. For example, to recount a simple but telling anecdote, I have personally witnessed the overwhelming impression made by Gianlorenzo Bernini's sculpture of the dying nun *La beata Ludovica Albertoni* in the Church of San Francesco a Ripa in Rome [Fig. 6], on a group of sculpture students who were almost entirely unaware of the complex political, social and religious climate of seventeenth-century Rome. This sculptural portrayal of the recumbent Blessed Ludovica Albertoni on her deathbed, who attains ecstasy in the final hours of her life due to her approaching union with God, was Bernini's final life-size work. It was intended as a tribute to the noble Ludovica who, in widowhood, had devoted her life to the poor inhabitants of Trastevere, on the opposite bank of the Tiber. She was venerated in the Church of San Francesco a Ripa, her burial place. Bernini allows her body to arch so that she is consumed, as it were, by the billowing folds of the marble and dramatic play of light and shade. The relationship between the virtuoso expression of

Fig. 6 Gianlorenzo Bernini, *La beata Ludovica Albertoni*, 1674. (life size).

movement within the marble and the profound religious sentiments of the elderly Bernini are evident, even to those who are unfamiliar with the sculptor and his time. The contemporary viewer will nevertheless be transported by the undeniable turbulence that lies at the heart of the interplay of unpredictable movements expressed in pure matter.

De Sculptura is a collection of ideas about sculpture that will hopefully inspire a range of insights into the discipline. They concern artworks that play on our minds and our imaginations in contemporary times, just like the countless other kinds of images with which we are surrounded. The fact that sculpture, more than any other artform, succeeds in captivating us beyond the boundaries of time and space is due to the slowness of a medium that eradicates all elaborations on content, so that the sculpture remains a summary of reality. I am convinced that this is what makes it possible to write about sculpture for a broad and unprejudiced audience in same spirit of openness, and without constantly resorting to the usual conventions that obfuscate artworks instead of making them accessible.

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[Part I.]

The object

1. *Material and technique* — 2. *The condensed object* — 3. *The expanded object*

Every creative act starts with an idea, a concept, and ends in some kind of materialisation. As a form of communication, art cannot exist without either of these things. Whatever type of materialisation occurs, the nature of sculpture is such that it does not create an illusion of reality but is, in itself, a form of reality. This literally and/or figuratively lends sculpture its weight and its slowness, the very qualities that disappointed Arturo Martini. And what is true of materials also applies to the techniques with which sculptures are shaped. *Stuhl mit Fett* (Fat Chair) by Joseph Beuys and *Black Kites* by Gabriel Orozco are two obvious examples of materiality and technique. Michelangelo's *Saint Matthew* demonstrates that material and technique are not isolated characteristics but intrinsic to the sculpture's significance, that they *are* the sculpture.

In the attempt to define sculpture, these observations are crucial because they allow us to move beyond the materials and techniques under consideration. Indeed, sculpture is not just about the creation of objects: it is a way of approaching reality. Works by Joseph Kosuth, Umberto Boccioni and Auguste Rodin all

clarify this in their own unique ways. The examples given by these three artists all involve a condensed form, one that can be read in a single glance. The work of Kosuth is a reflection of his personal views, Boccioni's sculpture reflects those of an entire generation, while Rodin's *L'homme qui marche* epitomises a universal humanity.

In recent developments, the sculptor's individual approach to reality has led to the emergence of disintegrated, scattered objects. But whether it concerns an expansion of the object through its dispersal in space, as in the case of Ann Veronica Janssens and Honoré d'O, or a development in time as per the exhibition *This is the show and the show in many things*, or as a distribution amongst the public as in the case of Jan De Cock, these too are the compressed reflections of a contemplative worldview.

‘Stuhl mit Fett’ Joseph Beuys

On 9 February 1968, Joseph Beuys performed *Eurasienstab* (Eurasia Staff) in Antwerp, in the Wide White Space gallery owned by Anny De Decker and Bernd Lohaus. It was an impressive performance, as those who were present testified, and Henning Christiansen composed organ music especially for the occasion. The action itself lasted 82 minutes and was recorded in a 20-minute film. In 1987, Anny De Decker published a book that documented the performance in words and images, the latter in the form of film stills. [Fig. 8]

Beuys unpacks the margarine and places it in a mound on the chimney. He picks up the iron sole of a shoe that is lying on the ground between the felt-clad pillars and ties it to his own footwear. The magnet attached to the sole is inserted into the breast pocket of his jacket. He takes the ladder and places it in a corner. He forms fat corners. He takes the first felt pillar and clamps it between floor and ceiling and does the same with the other three. He takes the ‘Eurasienstab’ out of its cover and moves it around the light. He goes over to a felt sole on the floor and holds the iron sole above and next to it for a few minutes. Making a quarter turn, he places the iron sole across the one made of felt. He takes a lump of fat and presses it into the hollow of the knee. He rubs the copper staff over the four felt corners, one after the other. He writes ‘Bildkopf - Bewegkopf ->’ in chalk on the floor. He makes strange hand gestures. Beuys returns to his place and relaxes. Then he turns to the wall with his hands on his back and continues to rest.²

Fig. 7 Joseph Beuys, *Stuhl mit Fett*, 1964 (h. 100 cm).





Fig. 8 Joseph Beuys, three stills from *Eurasienstab*, 1968.

A few years earlier, in 1964, Beuys had created his *Stuhl mit Fett* (Fat Chair), one of his assemblages from the ‘fat corners’ series. In his own words, he wanted to confront the energy of fat with the order and regularity of a right angle. This simple wooden chair with a lump of fat pressed into the join between seat and backrest subsequently inspired a theatrical elaboration in the form of a performance. As Anny De Decker recounted, it greatly affected everyone present, but—as with any theatrical event—only for the duration of the event. Every time-based art form has the potential to exert a profound influence and monopolise the viewer’s attention within a prescribed period, such as during a performance. The confrontation is immediate, the event is unique, and it will never be repeated in exactly the same way. The experience happens within the moment and it can never be recaptured. But when meaning is concentrated in a static object, as in the case of the chair—which simply exists, a sculpture instead of a performance—it no longer involves an immediate experience within a specific and usually predetermined time frame. The confrontation is replaced by a wholly different kind of experience. Because the static image is replete with meaning, the viewer stores his perceptions of it within his memory: an impression that he can always access. Of course, the initial encounter with the sculpture is also a direct experience, although its density is not immediately apparent. After all, the sculpture leads a material existence in a specific place, where it can be encountered time and time again. The location, which might be in this place or that, is irrelevant. An action, or a theatrical event, can only be experienced within the moment, whereas a sculpture opens other possibilities.

This becomes evident when we compare sculpture with its antithesis, dance, the most direct of all performing arts. A succession of fleeting movements, each one ending as the next begins, demands the viewer’s undivided attention. Stasis, a reversal of time, or even the memory of a dance, is futile. A sculpture can never command the viewer’s immediate focus in the same compelling way, but it will, on the contrary, be reflected

in the memory, as a perpetual virtual recollection. It thus lives on in the mind of the viewer, who can always return to the work.

Joseph Beuys' theatrical ambitions, which he strove to express in his actions, were probably linked to the fact that he did not want to be a sculptor who transmitted his ideas through the concentrated form of an object. A single sculpture could not communicate the extent and complexity of the insights that he wished to share. His principal objective was to contribute to a broader understanding of art and to stimulate the viewer to collaborate on a form of 'social sculpture', thereby paving the way to an improved society. Hence the idea of Eurasia, a recurrent theme that is not just confined to the *Eurasienstab* action. With this, Beuys is referencing the dream of uniting Western and Eastern approaches to reality, the former of which is rational and analytical while the latter is based on intuition. After all, it is art's job to uncover the essence and coherence of things. Joseph Beuys adopted the position of a pioneer who wanted to convince his audience. There was no satisfaction to be found in making sculptures whose meaning remained open-ended.

We may wonder whether the impact of the *Eurasienstab* action would have been the same without *Stuhl mit Fett*. The sculpture is the consummate expression of the idea that was later elaborated in the theatrical performance. The confrontation that occurs in the sculpture is unadorned. The materials employed, which make the image what it is, also assume the leading role in the artist's action. Beuys' performances may well have been dependent upon his sculptures. Unfortunately, this distinction between sculpture and action in Joseph Beuys' oeuvre often becomes confused when the materials used in the performances are subsequently presented as unequivocal, autonomous works. These half-decayed relics are usually displayed in relatively old-fashioned showcases with an accompanying explanation, one that never fails to mention the symbolic values that Beuys attached to the materials: felt stands for heat and insulation, fat for energy, copper conducts energy, and so on. But these

materials do not constitute the actual sculpture and are therefore 'orphaned'. They certainly refer to something—but they are not the thing itself, unlike the *real* sculptures.

Whether or not one is aware of the compelling significance of Beuys' material choices—and this is evidently the case for viewers who, for example, are unaware of his theatrical persona or who wilfully disregard it—*Stuhl mit Fett* is determined by matter. Because fat is simply fat, with its own density and mass, amorphous, imperishable and unstable, possessed of an ability to adhere to its surroundings and so on. The associations come thick and fast and veer in directions that Beuys would probably never have envisaged, nor have intended, but which are prompted by the work. This is where the potential of the artwork resides, and far more so than in the Joseph Beuys' own compelling statements. *Stuhl mit Fett* is an important work in the recent history of sculpture for this very reason: because it reveals how a sculpture acquires significance through its materiality, and not necessarily via the meaning imparted by the sculptor, but one that is open and free.

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Beuys' idiosyncratic use of fat, felt, copper and other similar mediums clearly shows that he rejected the traditional hierarchy of materials that was being perpetuated even beyond modernism. But the symbolic meaning that he attached to them, and with which they became charged, is difficult to call 'open'. Although Beuys is often associated with the Arte Povera movement, his approach towards materials was fundamentally different to the more open and agile stance of his Italian contemporaries. Marble, metal, paper, light, words, smells, heat, rags and rubbish: these were all equivalent means of creating sculptures, as the term Arte Povera suggests.

Giovanni Anselmo's *Struttura che mangia* (Structure that Eats) from 1968 [Fig. 9] is an emblematic work that epitomises the



Arte Povera movement's approach to materials: a head of lettuce sandwiched between two blocks of granite. A compression of two completely different types of matter: the rock-hard, amorphous stone and the soft and living vegetable. It is a simple story of two materials but, simultaneously, a narrative of decay, disappearance, perpetual renewal and the *nourishing* of the artwork. For the Arte Povera artists, it was imperative that their chosen materials had no predetermined meanings, with each element selected in function of its uniqueness, and not because of the personal meaning assigned by the artist.

This is possible today because material choices are less self-evident. Bronze or other metals, natural stone, wood, terracotta (in this hierarchical order) were once inviolate as sculptural materials, simply because of their durable nature. From the 1950s onwards, an almost endless range of plastics was added into the mix and the notion of longevity was turned on its head. Is it truly the case that artworks must exist in perpetuity?

The choice and use of these different materials—both traditional and new—can be endlessly determined by each artist for

fig. 9 Giovanni Anselmo, *Struttura che mangia*, 1968 (h. 65 cm).



every individual artwork. The material can be loaded with a symbolic meaning, as in the case of Joseph Beuys, or it can be used in an antithetical and extremely concrete way, as in *The New York Earth Room* by the American land art artist Walter de Maria. [Fig. 10] This was the third iteration of the original *Erdraum* that was created in Munich in 1968, and which can still be seen in Soho, New York. A description of the materials involved—197 cubic metres of earth in an area measuring 335 square metres, piled 56 centimetres high and weighing 127,000 kg—is unnecessary because the work speaks for itself. Of course, it will also trigger many different interpretations, not all of which can be controlled by the artist. This was unthinkable in the case of Beuys, or at least as far as his *Aktionen* (actions) are concerned.

Joseph Beuys was the first person to offer a commentary on his work by provoking audience interpretations through his teaching position at an art school and his guru-like lifestyle. This has

Fig. 10 Walter de Maria, *The New York Earth Room*, 1977. (h. 56 cm).



proved unnecessary decades later because a sculpture such as *Stuhl mit Fett* survives without the associated personal mythologies and prescribed interpretations. But it is hardly surprising that, ultimately, Beuys produced very few purely autonomous sculptures, or in other words, works that are not just memories of actions and performances. He needed something extra, a more elaborate programme through which to convince the audience of his message, and to transcend what can be achieved with the static, slow and patiently created material object that is a sculpture.

But whether the use of materials is symbolic or concrete there are few sculptors, after all, who consider the material aspect of their work to be irrelevant. This is even true of minimalists, such as Sol LeWitt, for example, who had his earlier wooden sculptures remade in lacquered aluminium as soon as his finances permitted. [Fig. 11] The detached attitude of the minimalists towards the object manifested itself in many domains, but especially in the choice of the materials and their treatment. They always selected industrial materials that, in the case of Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris and others, were assembled into works

of art in commercial construction workshops. Yet minimal artists were still sharing their stories via materials and it is precisely this sculptural attitude that made this dialogue possible. They wanted to make the object as plain as possible, stripping it of all symbolic meaning, in order to accommodate other factors, such as the surrounding space. Just as Sol LeWitt stated that he always worked with cubes because of their simplicity, his indifference towards materials was also deliberate. It was one of the sculptural strategies that the minimalists used to achieve their goal, as we will see below.

Although not all artworks owe their existence to materials in quite the same way as those by Joseph Beuys and the Arte Povera group, it is obvious that without these material considerations, in whatever form they take, there can be no sculpture.

Fig. 11 Sol Lewitt, *Incomplete Open Cube*, 1974. (h. 105,5 cm).