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Talking with the ancestors, or connecting the poles

"Talking with the ancestors" is the title of a small sculpture by Rainer Fest. He made it from the wood of the wild service tree, a honey-coloured type of pearwood from Switzerland. The artist loves unusual materials. He takes pleasure in showing their beauty. "Talking with the ancestors" consists of two parts. The first object represents a chair and table, as positive forms. The viewer's imagination can settle down on these miniature items of furniture. The second object is more difficult to approach. It shows the same furniture in negative form. Any utilisation of these objects seems doubtful if not impossible, at least for us. The negative space is a visualisation of the other side, the opposite, the beyond. The object constitutes an invitation to the ancestors, to sit down at it and to enter into conversation together. This imagined conversation has little of a frightening spirit-world. It is rather a humorous view of an encounter with the realms beyond, with the spiritual, with cognition. The dialogue creates a connection between these worlds, which may also include laughter. Opposite poles are brought together. Anything threatening gives way to dialogue. Art creates reassurance. It takes away the fear.

The central idea around which Rainer Fest's work revolves is connection. This theme is carried through the whole of his oeuvre. He works with the ostensibly incompatible and searches for the spaces between opposites, for representations of the not-visible, for hidden unities, since opposite poles do always belong together somehow, such as negative and positive, matter and spirit, the here-and-now and the world beyond, life and death. For this, the artist has a wide range of skills at his disposal. He draws on his consummate ability as a cabinet maker, a skill he acquired at a college of applied arts in Finland, and on two courses of study at art colleges in Madrid and in Bremen. Rainer Fest loves to be able to fall back on all of these techniques, and draws a parallel to the organist who has the privilege of being able to play his instrument with many different registers. The realisation that beside working with stone, he also has access to a precise handling of wood, paper and other materials, came to him long after his training as a cabinet maker. About 20 years later. Since then, he has always worked in wood alongside his work with stone. His artistic languages are manifold.

The work entitled "Schreibe den Wunsch" ("write the wish") is encountered as playful, but also as a search for insight. A tall desk for use while standing, this time not furniture in miniature, but a desk of actual size. The desk can be opened on two levels. It contains the complete alphabet, in positive and in negative. The viewer is invited to lay out a (still absent) wish in negative letters. Thereby, its absence is expressed and visualised at the same time. The negative form is then completed with positive letters. This step-by-step process is part of a realisation. The wish emerges into consciousness. Rainer Fest is convinced that this process already forms a part of the fulfilment of the wish. The material, too, is permeated by a play on opposites, a consciousness of unity that lies just behind the facts. The desk is made from the wood of one single ebony tree. The wood of this tree always has two colours; the inside, the core, is black, and its outside is pale yellow. The negative letters were made from black ebony, the positive letters from the pale yellow outer wood. The

idea of connecting opposite poles is here treated as a game, a puzzle, and at the same time a material and very precise form of creating awareness.

A bridge between the poles, a connection between opposites, the artist is convinced, is always created by human perception, human consciousness.

To understand the art of Rainer Fests, a dissertation by Wilhelm Worringer is helpful. This art historian published his first work entitled "Abstraction and Empathy" in 1908. In it, he was the first to distinguish between two basic directions in art which are very familiar to us today, but at the time gave rise to the beginnings of classical modernity: abstraction and naturalism. Naturalism is "empathy", "feeling at one with creation". The representational, the organic; secure, well-tempered; harmony, Greek antiquity, the later Renaissance, and the predominant art form of the turn of the century. Abstraction defines the opposite, is based on a perception of opposites, of what is not reconcilable. Illustrative examples of early abstract art are found in ancient Egypt and in primitive societies. This realisation came to Worringer during a visit to the ethnological museum in Paris.

The centre of human existence is not the unity of nature, but the threat posed by nature.

The human being is defined by a kind of "anxiety", a "spiritual agoraphobia".

Abstraction is the quest for universal laws, a universal language of form. It transforms the "alarming" influences, and puts them into a universally valid language. Naturalism is individual. Abstraction is universal. For Worringer, the "urge towards abstraction" is at the origin of every culture.

The influences on human life have changed, but the elementary questions have remained and also the "anxiety" is still there. Worringer's theory is still valid now, and the need for a reduction of anxiety is certain. The search for a universal language of form is a necessity of cultural history, an anthropological imperative. Parallels to this are found in Rainer Fests's work. When the artist extends an invitation to talk with the ancestors, this situation has a fear-reducing effect. His handling of the material is determined by universal laws which he has sought out. He is on a quest for connections between opposite poles, always within the consciousness of a fundamental unity. In his thematic alignments Rainer Fest is not only temporarily sitting around a table with the ancestors, but is in fact permanently in their company. The influences are different, the fundamental questions of being human are the same. In his seemingly archaic works using boulders, the artist is particularly close to his forefathers. "Umarmung" ("embrace") is what he calls one of his numerous works in stone. It consists of two boulders. One is recumbent, the other stands upright. He has carved a groove into the recumbent stone, which winds horizontally around the stone. Its surface is smoothly polished and can also serve as a seat. The direction of the groove has an upward tendency and points towards the second, standing boulder, in which it continues skywards. It creates a connection between the heaviness of the earth, and a lightness, the rising upward motion towards the sky. The furrow continues an imaginary movement which rises even higher. Rainer Fest uses symbols as links between the material and spiritual worlds, and invests them with significances:

"I like to use symbols which are concerned with human life, such as for example the form of the house (protection, home, body), the bridge (link to another world, to the beyond), or the staircase (development, progression)."

The small architectural elements on his works appear almost a little strange, foreign, as if set on top, but these too conceal a wholeness. Rainer Fest does not apply his architectural miniatures to the surface like building blocks, he carves them out of the solid stone. The surrounding matter is cut away until the desired symbol is left standing. Sometimes they are miniatures of human habitations, which jut out from the raw unworked granite like little statues, or bridges, their arc linking to other worlds, or stairways which lead into and out of the stone, like the entry to Egyptian tomb chambers.

The "metaphysical landscape" in the park of Schloss Hohen Luckow contains all of these symbols. It consists of three large boulders, set beside one another. At the tip of the outermost, menhir-like boulder, there is a stairway, at a height of 3.80 m, which comes directly out of the sky and points towards the stone at the middle of the arrangement. On a plateau in this stone, the artist has chiselled miniature versions of a house, a bridge, and a stairway, each in positive and negative form, out of the stone. The negative stairway creates a connection to the third boulder, which has been half submerged in the earth. The symbolic stairway leads into the stone through an opening like that of a burial chamber, and both disappear into the soil together. Here too, in this 12 m long work, a connection is made between heaven and earth, the material and spiritual worlds, the here and the beyond. The architectural signs of human presence radiate a geometric clarity and harmony. They are culture. Calming perceptual oases, atop the beautiful but always unquiet surface of the unworked boulder.

Rainer Fest uses water as a further element, in his water-stones. It creates a connection between negative forms, from which the water emerges and whose form it adopts, and positive forms, towards which the water flows. Thus further connections are made; between architectural elements, smoothly ground planes, and unworked stone. To hark back to Worringer, the "alarming influences" of uncontrollable nature are here banished on a number of multi-layered levels.

The artist's symbols have also been cast in concrete. Staircases, for example, which wind their way upwards in successively positive and negative form. Objects with an outer cylindrical shape, which bear reference to the material and the spiritual world on their way up, towards other levels of development. Rainer Fest believes that there is always something which connects opposites. His formal language as well as the possibilities of artistic expression have changed and developed in the more than 30 years of his artistic activity. This idea has remained. It permeates Fest's handling of all forms and materials.

Again and again, Rainer Fest approaches the elementary questions of human existence with a twinkle in his eye. For example, during the long days of last winter in his adopted home in West Pomerania, he made his so-called "Go On's" out of wood. Small boosters of courage, as he says, which can comfortably be carried in your pocket. These are hinged wooden boxes, the imprint of a stairway held within, of course represented in positive and negative form. The here and now, and the beyond, *en miniature*. These "Go On's" allow you to carry symbols of development and progression with you through everyday life, easily and without encumbrance. There is no reason to fear anything, because, according to the artist:

"Everything that happens, and everything that can be created, contributes to produce insight. Isn't that wonderful?"