

REVIEW

THE CONCEPTUAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF DANISH ARTIST JOHANNES WIEDEWELT

ELSE MARIE BUKDAHL, JOHANNES WIEDEWELT – TRADITION OG NYBRUD
[JOHANNES WIEDEWELT—TRADITION AND BREAKTHROUGH]

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Tradition og nybrud is Else Marie Bukdahl's fifth publication on Johannes Wiedewelt. A comparative and historical method, which does not let itself get caught up in sweeping questions of the *Nachahmung* [the imitation] of antiquity, remains one of the distinguishing features of her work, as it has been since 1993 and the publication of *Wiedewelt—From Winckelmann's Vision of Antiquity to Sculptural Concepts of the 1980s*. The many and various layers of interpretation and historical retrospect, which have, despite their many ambiguities, put J.J. Winckelmann firmly at the centre of art history, are, in Bukdahl's work, governed instead by an interest for what we might call the morphogenetic effects that can be ascertained in Danish art in particular, though she also has a great deal to say about the development of abstract sculpture in the West more generally, from Brancusi to Land Art as well. Thanks to almost twenty years of intense cooperation with the three artists associated with Skalkunst [*Scale Art*] (Stig Brøgger, Hein Heinsen and Mogens Møller), Bukdahl has been able to focus on the formal effects and interplay between Wiedewelt and contemporary art. Her analysis proceeds chiefly by way of interpretive analogies in which historical and contemporary sculptural compositions are juxtaposed, though exceptions do, however, occur, notably in the analyses of Heinesen's and Brancusi's sculptures, which are interrogated both conceptually and via semiotics. These works can be related to the morphogenetic situations which, for example, Wiedewelt's memorials have occasioned in the park and forest at Jægerspris. Morphogenesis has to do with the dynamic transformation of forms; it concerns the slip that occurs when a possibility, latent to substances or materials, is released and finds fulfillment, can begin the transformation from matter to form. Such transformation can follow the contours of classicism, of a certain aesthetic order, where

such norms are themselves questioned and explored, but it can also combine routes and rules in pursuit of a more transversal coherence, i.e. one that is more dramatic. Such combinations can be governed by something beyond rules, namely narrative, as in Wiedewelt's sculptures in the gardens of Fredensborg Palace (discussed below), or rounded by conceptual exploration. In the latter, a more stylized exposition of formal decisions extorts meaning or semiosis. A mutual relation between form and content is, in other words, incorporated without narrative motif and is made a condition for the coherence of "plastic" choice. Here, it makes sense to speak of "open significance" [*significato aperto*] as in Umberto Eco's *The Open Work*. Within the visual arts, coherence without motif can seem minimal, indeed "blunt" and accidental, though it can also extort an aesthetic charge from material and form, or suggest that such charge can be experienced through the senses, as long as one looks closely enough. This, indeed, is what Merleau-Ponty describes as the "primacy of perceptual experience", which grounds, or founds, "intersubjective being", whereby artistic labour is able to include its spectator, to drag them in, indeed even make itself dependent on the viewer's approach to the work. This minimal, blunt abstraction can easily be to the cost of the intention of artistic endeavour. In such efforts at a condensed mutuality between form and content, the artist has to count on gesture and confidence in gesture: the particular freedom to be found in autonomous labour is turned, so to speak, inside out. Thanks to Jean-François Lyotard's detailed analysis of gesture we can speak of a *libidinal* twist, as in a Möbius strip, or a *supine* turn, as in Artaud's mime and uses of voice. While a Möbius strip recalls the dialectic between the concave and convex, the supine turn consists in a shift, or break, which also comprises the difference between recto and verso. It can be seen not only in Artaud's performances, but also in twelve-note composition. Indeed, it is just such a break that Bukdahl has been trying to hunt down in her writing on Wiedewelt, not least in the investigation of the formal permutations of modern sculpture in Denmark and the West. I have also tried to analyse a forgotten masterpiece in this connection, namely *Fredens port* (The Gates of Peace) myself. Bukdahl's *Oplysningsfilosofi og filosofisk oprud* [Enlightenment Philosophy and Philosophical Departures] has also to be mentioned within this reading of the conceptual structuring of the visual arts. However, if everything grows so principle, philosophical even, in these frames, supports, sculptures, then this is because they appear as something exemplary, which can thus

be understood and commented on both discursively and via the derivation of forms, which is to say, once more, via morphogenesis. So, throughout this work on Wiedewelt, through *Scale Art* to Bukdahl's work, a dispute with the question of the avant-garde, or "breakthrough" as Bukdahl calls it, is also interposed.

In Wiedewelt's two chief installations *in situ*, the sculptures in the gardens at Fredensborg (1760-69) and the memorials at Jægerspris (1777-84), artistic creation enters into dialogue with its basis in nature, and, at times, between work and origin too. Since the aesthetic analysis of Immanuel Kant's third critique, *The Critique of Judgement* (1790), such dialogue has served as the basis for various understandings of art: in the third critique, experience of forms of art takes place in analogy with the experience of forms of nature, impossible experiences—when phenomena are not beautiful, but colossal or horrifying, as Kant writes—included. In the latter, either the more exalted effects of sublimity are present, or low sublimities, i.e. impressions of something abominable, reprehensible, or which fills us with loathing. Regardless of whether it is exalted or "abject", experience is deferred such that it becomes an instrument of thought. For, instead of thinking as a consequence of a stimulated sense of vitality, as with experience of the forms of the beautiful, experience of the formless requires a shift, a break: we replace the absence of the expected experience of plenitude with an explanation for its failure to turn up, with disgust and loathing, such that some thought or idea, of the impracticality of some subjects of cognition perhaps, can appear from what seemed a state of nihilism. Instead of bringing about heaviness of heart, hindrance to experience can thus produce insight into the conditions of humans in the world. This, however, requires us to be convinced that states of mind always imply openings, so that we are not thrown back into "brooding", which Kant found "laughable". "Resoluteness" is a positive term in Kant's aesthetics, signalling a deep connection to the ethical. It is this ethical exigency and enjoyment that has governed avant-garde art between its two non-exigent, "apathetic" extremes, Dada and Pop Art.

Nevertheless, a discrete shift takes place between the first and third critiques, i.e., 1781-1790: phantasy, or the powers of imagination, have become freer and more obstreperous or creative, while the regulatory has retreated into the background. In the "General Remarks" inserted at the end of the *Analytic of the Beautiful* (and very late in the process of composing the third critique), Kant writes thus of the relationship between plantations ("pepper gardens") and untrammelled nature:

By contrast, that with which the imagination can play in an unstudied and purposive way is always new for us, and we are never tired of looking at it. In his description of Sumatra, Marsden remarks that the free beauties of nature everywhere surround the observer there and hence have little attraction for him any more; by contrast, a pepper garden where the stakes in which the plants were trained form parallel rows had much charm for him when he encountered it in the middle of a forest; and from this he infers that wild, to all appearances irregular beauty is pleasing only as a change for one who has had enough of the regular kind. But he needed only to have made the experiment of spending one day in his pepper garden to realize that once the understanding has been disposed by means of the regularity to the order that it always requires the object would no longer entertain him, but would rather impose upon the imagination a burdensome constraint, whereas nature, which is there extravagant in its varieties to the point of opulence, subject to no coercion from artificial rules, could provide his taste with lasting nourishment.¹

Here, Kant is beginning to give some content in terms of the theory of aesthetics to the various connections that arose during the second half of the eighteenth century between the various genres art could express and artists use in their work: in 1750, Piranesi published his book of graphic renderings "*i grotteschi*" of Roman antiquity; in 1756 Edmund Burke's treatise on the sublime and beautiful appeared (which Bukdahl mentions in connection with Wiedewelt, who had a copy in his library); in 1764 Horace Walpole published *The Castle of Otranto*, and by so doing beginning the "gothic" genre. It is thus from the ruins of antiquity and the Middle Ages, and the fracture between the beautiful and the sublime, that what has later been called "the expanded field" of sculptural meaning (Rosalind Krauss) could arise, a field which has, so to speak, not stopped expanding since the memorials at Jægerspris, as the interstices between the beautiful, the exalted or sublime [*erhaben*] and the "abject" are not unambiguous and can always be further divided up.

In *Tradition and Breakthrough*, Bukdahl uses the alloy baroque classicism to describe this ambiguity of genre and gesture, inscribing it in several analyses of the sculptures in the gardens at Fredensborg. Behind all these breakthroughs, Kant's thesis on a "purposiveness of nature" remains nevertheless standing, regardless of whether art twists in or out of nature

as material or circumambient landscape. The same happens for Michel Serres, who, in his great work in the theory of aesthetics, *The Five Senses*, indicates that there is not merely an etymological, but also a phenomenological connection between order and ornament. Bukdahl underlines several places that Wiedewelt made use of the term “decorations”, to be placed in a theatre, in his remarks on the Fredensborg commission, such that “composition and symbolic properties speak for and explain themselves”; Jardin’s design of the park at Fredensborg seems to have created a situation for art that provoked Wiedewelt to meditate on the relationship between *autonomy* and *exhibition* long before these two concepts became staples of curatorial and artistic practice. Later in *Tradition*, in the discussion of Wiedewelt’s role as a Professor and Director of the Art Academy, Bukdahl highlights Wiedewelt’s interest in such “artisan” and therefore presentational aesthetic relations: as director of the academy Wiedewelt founded a School of Ornament, which included, among other things, instruction in drawing for the more humble practitioners of the visual arts.

Allegory, as Bukdahl emphasizes time and again, is a recurring question of the sculptures in the palace gardens; we are confronted with it in both the large monuments “about” or “of” Denmark and Norway. As can be seen in Thomas Rahbek’s panorama (which Bukdahl reproduces, and which makes up the logo for the palace’s homepage, [Fig.1](#)), it forms a kind of historical portal, indicating thereby passage to Brede Allé, the great avenue; without forcing the interpretation too much we can say that before egress to the avenue, allegorical compositions, including sculptures of the four seasons, dominate, while mythological sculptures are arranged along the avenue itself. There are also significant differences among the allegories themselves, ranging from geographical or historical narrative to the deepest psychology. The monuments to Denmark and Norway ([Fig.2](#)) contain reliefs that form a kind of image sentence, enumerating what being Danish or Norwegian “is all about”. In *Allegories*, Karin Gundersen calls such image sentences “figural discourse”, without, however, reference to Lyotard’s understanding of how such “figural discourse” ought to be evident from the order of the exhibited or cited themes and create some transfer and slippage between language and the powers of imagination: we have to do here, perhaps, with a logic or explanation of images that is natural to humans. Wiedewelt’s sculptures of the four seasons in the palace gardens are, on the other hand, probably thought in more abstract, psychological terms, concentrated theoretically in embodied mental states: to be able



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Fig. 1
N.H. Jardin and J. Wiedewelt, Panorama of the Gardens of Fredensborg with the Monuments for Denmark (to the left) and for Norway (to the right). In the foreground: Statue of the Summer to the left and of the Spring to the right.
Photo: Thomas Rahbek. © Slots- og Kulturstyrelsen

Fig. 2
Johannes Wiedewelt, *Monument for Norway*, 1767.
© Slots- og Kulturstyrelsen

Fig. 3
Johannes Wiedewelt, *Winter or Hyems*, 1762.
© Slots- og Kulturstyrelsen

Fig. 4
Johannes Wiedewelt, *Summer or Ceres*, 1757.
© Art critique Lisbeth Bonde



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Fig. 5
Johannes Wiedewelt, *Enigmatic Antique*
[*Forblømt Antique*], 1764.
© Slots- og Kulturstyrelsen

Fig. 6
Johannes Wiedewelt, *Memorial to Hans and
Peder Colbiernsen and Anna Colbiernsen*, 1779.
© Else Marie Bukdahl

Fig. 7
Johannes Wiedewelt, *Memorial to the Famous
Danish Astronomer Tycho Brahe*, 1777.
© Else Marie Bukdahl

Fig. 8
Constantin Brancusi, *Milo Pogany (Version II)*, 1919.
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Fig. 9
Hein Heinsen, *Sculpture 1985, 1985*.
© Else Marie Bukdahl

to comment on Wiedewelt's plastic interpretation of these states (Fig. 3 and 4), Bukdahl draws on his possible influences, outlining an entire genealogy including the likes of François Girardon, Charles Le Brun, Pierre Huet, Thomas Regnaudin, Philippe Magnier, who Wiedewelt was either shaped by or roughly contemporaneous with, but whom he continuously breaks with, adds to, rounds off, leaves out, etcetera, all of which Bukdahl describes most thoroughly and which, in many ways, is the pillar of her analysis of the palace gardens.

Bukdahl continues along the same path in her reading of the large sculptures along the great avenue, a path she has, however, to expand, as these sculptures "disseminate" "narratives" of mythological but mutually divergent character. And the great problem of interpretation facing the visual arts is, after all, that while some "figures" are highly allusive, others are less so, and others still eschew allusion altogether; while there is quite a bit to say about it, whether about representation, from portraits that are "true to nature" to the most stylized symbolism, getting into "pure" images is far more demanding, i.e. since Turner's paintings of materials which were themselves images, light and water, for example, and colludes with them, affirming them as a mirror does. Pure images are also those which exclusively ornament some place or object to highlight that which frames it and thereby makes them more or less radiant "splendours".

When sculptures, however, are placed in a large and well-thought-out park, as we know them, for example, from the grounds of French baroque palaces, a certain order governs even the most autonomous artwork. For such grounds must let themselves be surveyed from the king's panoptic position inside the castle, must, in other words, satisfy the princely view, which ought only be limited or framed by natural phenomena, as is the case at Fredensborg with water and forest (further south it might be ranges of hills, as at Würzburg or Kassel, for example, or mountains). And, as a sign of these substances mystique and power, between the water and the forest, Wiedewelt even erected a mixture of grotesque and monument with two tall plinths bearing two heads, one a "new", inauthentic antique, the other appropriated from antiquity (Fig. 5). This sculptural monument, entitled *Enigmatic Antique* [Forblommet Antik], was completed in 1764; between the monument's stone, granite and marble a little chamber almost forms, a "burial chamber", as Bukdahl writes, quite in accord with the hypotheses of Serres' *Statues* (see also Kasper Nefer Olsen's *Offer og objekt* [Sacrifice and Object]),

included in the bibliography). Perhaps a reorganization of the libidinal and supine is at stake in such artistic movement, inspired by the double intersection of water and forest, nature and culture. Or, perhaps, the connection between primitivism and ruinology, which permeates art history itself (on ruinology see Simmen, 1980), is at stake, making *the fragment* the art historical nucleus or germ cell.

While analogy with nature in the experience of the beautiful and the sublime appears intertwined for Kant, only to be separated by analyzing experience, quite another kind of entanglement occurs in Martin Heidegger's analogy with nature in "The Origin of the Work of Art". Here, it is the *clearing* and thereby revelation and clarity, material and intimacy which provides impression and disclosure. It is this presence, *Anwesen*, that characterizes the apparitions the wanderer meets when they stand before a memorial erected in one of the clearings in Jägerspris (Fig. 67). And, for Heidegger, such a meeting has to do with insight and the modes of truth. Such an emergent and "originating" mode of art is endowed with a most interesting modality: neither merely necessary, free or contingent nor their opposites, unnecessary, unfree and non-contingent. It might be said that the material's existence has its power, or potential, affirmed by virtue of its presence in the clearing. The material's potential is affirmed, in other words, by something else, also very powerful, namely light, which contrives to cut through the "night and fog". In the middle of the 1930s there was a lot of sinister romanticism in such a mode of truth; fortunately we can escape this in Jägerspris, where sinisterness is replaced by the melancholy characteristic of remembrance, not least when a memorial sustains an opening between material and time as here.

Bukdahl's English book on Wiedewelt has already gone a long way towards an analysis of the memorials in Jägerspris, for it is truly paradoxical that we, in the middle of all this intensive presence all the same intuit an opening in the space where material and time sustain a kind of conflict or disagreement. This paradox was given synthesis through the inclusion of Stig Brøgger's *Platformsprojekt* (1970) in the 1993 book on Wiedewelt. I do not think there is another work of contemporary sculpture that manages to sublimate the aforementioned modal oppositions between freedom, necessity and contingency to the same extent. If this is possible, it is because Brøgger changes medium and lets the pallet become a motif in a purely iconic morphogenesis. No one will mistake the photographic documentation of the difficulties

of the pallet as being symbolically charged. All the transformations of form therefore become "pure" images!

In terms of influence from Wiedewelt to today we might, taking the Jægerspris memorials, divide spheres of influence into three plus one: 1) A conceptual part, where the concepts of form and gesture cohere by virtue of abstract exploration; Hein Heinsen and Brancusi's work in particular can be placed here (no. 8 and 9). 2) An analogue part, where points of similarity between forms is strict and coherent, even though these similarities do not emit any particular meaning, but rather are plastic prototypes, i.e. quite unique and exemplary; Mogens Møller's work, in particular, can be placed here (indeed, Møller's fountain in the garden of the Royal Library was even dedicated to Wiedewelt). 3) An iconic part, without plastic form and with pretty much no possibility of symbolizing; it is here, Brøgger's *Platformprojekt* can be located. A fourth must be added to deal with space and analogies with nature, and to expand the three others, insofar as what is already open can be "opened further"; here we return to Smithson's version of Land Art, and his *Spiral Jetty*, which Bukdahl rightly returns to in both monographs (for more on the reception of Smithson's work in Denmark, see Brøgger and Erik Thygesen, listed in the bibliography below). In the new book, too, occasion to discuss Smithson is provided by Wiedewelt's *Julianhøj* (1776); lying just outside of the memorial grove Jægerspris, it makes up a kind of landscaped signal of the beginning the fifty-four memorials in the clearings in the grove are shaped by. Despite the spiral access to *Julianhøj*, its grounds are very clearly structured; things are, as already suggested, very different when it comes to the memorials. They are far more melancholic and bear the marks of having to embody times past, of having to symbolize the deeds and knowledge of bygone days, deeds and knowledge attached to the names of memorable people from Denmark, Norway and the duchies...

Bukdahl is masterfully attentive, not least to formal modifications, and her descriptions and analyses are governed by "the little narratives", which she is aware of, among other places, from Lyotard (see Bukdahl 2016). In connection with analysis of several of the memorials, then, we are let off the generalizing suspicion of decay and historical fate, which has so often haunted understanding of the visual arts from Winckelmann to Hegel. There is, however, another interpretative tradition that ascribes the shift from antiquarian description of objects to a critical, modern art history, attentive to the aesthetics of taste, to Winckelmann.

Among the new readers of Winckelmann, both Pommier and Wallenstein are preoccupied with this epistemological break and the new foundations for philosophy and art history connected to it. Into the bargain, Pommier throws what, for Winckelmann, was a most complicated entity, namely grace, to which a possible, but rare connection between the aesthetic and the ethical in the becoming and appearance of the art work is ascribed.

Bukdahl is clearly highly sympathetic to, and full of understanding for, Wiedewelt, and her description of his arduous final years are compassionate and, precisely, full of grace and mercy. Bukdahl's basic grasp and view of artistic talent is, however, first and foremost *democratic*. Behind the analysis of art under absolutism there is, at most, one remark on Wiedewelt's loyalty to the monarchy and its authorities. For, when it comes down to it, we are dealing with an author who is a scholar of Diderot's political conception of art; without being weighed down by the despondency of the history of philosophy, Diderot remained a pithy critic of the eighteenth century's despotic regimes. On this latter, the reader need only consult Bukdahl's text on his poetry of ruins.

Carsten Juhl

(Translated from Danish by James Day)

NOTES

- 1 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 126.

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