

What Is at Hand

Ilona Kálnoky's Sculptural Encyclopedia

Folding, mixing, pouring, squeezing, rolling, layering, rolling, stacking—these are the acts that Ilona Kálnoky has repeatedly performed over the last few years. For these acts, she used the simplest materials: sand and salt, clay and concrete, foam rubber and Plexiglas. Taken by themselves, some of her objects are not very spectacular, and some of them don't even exist anymore, such as the lump of plaster that she threw against the wall with some force so that it burst apart and stuck there. There it is emblazoned, evidence of a highly emotional act. Other objects show traces of the passage of time: in the case of the roll of foam rubber which Kálnoky folded almost in the middle and stuffed into a Plexiglas box open at the top, the ends (of different lengths) sticking out have yellowed, whereas the center remains immaculate. And the white balloon, finally, which the artist forced into a screw terminal, will not always remain as taut and strain with its surface tension against the terminal. Slowly, it will lose air, and at some point it will be an empty tube lying between the open ends of the screw terminal.

Casualness instead of eternization

Of course, this has little to do with classic sculpture, which after all was meant to ensure the permanence of the image and thus the eternization of the person portrayed: images of rulers, saints, and allegories were therefore hewn from marble or poured in bronze to keep their memory awake for as long a possible. Thus, Franz Joseph I and Wilhelm II, Mozart and Wagner, Grillparzer and Goethe still populate public parks and remind us of a greatness that in some cases is definitely past. For the art of the twentieth century, which celebrated qualities such as dynamism and metamorphoses, sculpture was for the reasons mentioned above more of a changeling than a beloved child. Path-breaking innovations seemed to take place more in painting and drawing anyway, if not just in new media like photography and film, and in the more ephemeral genres like performance and conceptual art. Only after World War Two did sculpture catch up with the other genres by adapting everyday materials such as industrially produced materials, and new forms of presentation such as kinetics. This is a point of departure for Ilona Kálnoky when she uses materials such as foam rubber or cement that originate from the production of objects for everyday use, and had been introduced to art by art trends such as Pop Art precisely because of their banality. The materials are easily and cheaply available, easily at hand, and thus transport very directly the conceptual character of the usually small-format works. The special crafts and skills required for hewing stones or pouring bronze sculptures are obviously not the point of Kálnoky's works. Rather, they aim at experimenting and exploring the artistic possibilities of sculpture, an art form that is principally based on piling, adding, and shaping (usually soft) matter.

Body instead of fixed shape

The everyday, non-masterful, sculptural gesture that produced the changed form is to remain as visible as the corporeal character of the works: like a living body, the sculptures should stand upright and stretch, but also be cramped and sink down, disintegrate and degenerate. Here we might ask whether there is such a thing as typically Austrian sculpture, that—with a good portion of humor—is interested above all in the conditions of the body, ranging from Franz Xaver Messerschmidt's physiognomic experiments and the performances of the Vienna Actionists and Franz West's "adaptives" to Erwin Wurm's One-Minute-Sculptures, a tradition which Ilona Kálnoky's sculptures might be part of.

The link of conceptualism and corporeality that Kálnoky creates in her work reveals itself furthermore in the exhibition when she has an actor read the encyclopedia of sculptural terms with which her works can be described and which also encompass phenomena of the human body and its psyche, such as laughing, so that the voice and sound also become parts of the sculptural process.

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