

JAN BROKOF

East German concrete slab architecture recently experienced a renaissance as a theme in contemporary art – a renaissance that came as something of a surprise to all those who once saw such residential buildings as the epitome of prescribed uniformity and architectural unimaginativeness. All of a sudden, whole hosts of artists and theorists are working over this phenomenon – in the context of impending demolition and dramatic urban shrinking in “underdeveloped” regions, but also as part of a differentiated assessment of the long-unrecognized legacy of Bauhaus and International Style.

Jan Brokof's long-term project P2 is thus perfectly in tune with current issues, P2 being the name given to the type of concrete slab building that characterized the face of his native Schwedt, a town on the Polish border. Much as it may appear part of this latest trend, however, Brokof's artistic analysis also rejects it – for several reasons.

One of these lies in his personal roots: born in Schwedt in 1977, Jan Brokof spent most of his childhood and teenage years in a new housing development that was built in the 1970s as part of the development of a showcase refinery commissioned in East Germany at the time. After reunification, the region underwent a process of structural change that is certainly typical of socio-economic upheavals in the former East Germany. But Brokof does not make these changes the easily digested theme of P2. On the contrary, he sticks closely and meticulously to biographic detail, surveying and literally measuring his own past, leaving any critical interpretation to us, his viewers. Moreover, Jan Brokof has chosen an unusual medium – woodcuts. In this way, he establishes a highly original tension between his contemporary subject (which, logically enough, frequently alludes to the formal idiom of Modernism) and the traditional connotations of the printing technique. Brokof's approach to his former home town began logically with the facade of the apartment block – in scaled down form, but still monumental, the modules repeated themselves on paper and combined as prefabricated parts to form this familiar sight. The printing of the facade was done in two steps. First, the separate windows with their individual features – patterned curtains, blinds, embroidered net curtains, flowerpots and the like – were reproduced, and then the plate with the standardized openings in the concrete was added. Here, the artist used the “lost cut” technique where details that are no longer needed are removed from the original plate. The grey tones of the individual concrete surfaces were created in several steps – each specially mixed out of transparent white and black pigments. A customized, essentially unrepeatable process. In any case, the small print run represents an irreversible decision.

As a result, an installation like the one recreating the artist's teenage bedroom becomes just as much of a unique work as any comparable assemblage of material. Woodcuts as practiced by Jan Brokof are therefore only reproductive in a limited sense, although the technique evokes pre-technological recording mechanisms.

Constructive woodcuts, which Brokof also refers to as reconstructions, start allegorically with the individual characteristics of memory, before finally leading to the general. The true-to-scale recreation of the room is based – like that of the building's outer shell – on empirical research carried out by Jan Brokof in the abandoned concrete slab housing project where he used to live that has now been prepared for demolition. Everything had to be correct: radiator ribs, power sockets, window latches. The conceptual procedure of measuring reflects the supposed objectivity of the resulting parameters and thus a deceptive stability. In the context of the impending demolition, this gesture appears both futile and ironic.

Still with his finger on the pulse of his own self-imposed theme, Brokof is currently making single woodcuts which, like the view from the window, record a panorama of the Schwedt area and allow the viewer to consider its step-by-step transformation: on the horizon, the outline of the refinery, with a firewall blocking off one last look over the roofs. These too, although less monumental than P2, are woodcuts in the classical sense: the technique of the above-mentioned "lost cut" corresponds with the real loss of the object.

In his most recent picture objects, however, the artist is not prepared to accept the gradual obliteration of the printing block, experimenting instead with wooden boards that are no longer printed. Although these supports consisting of ordinary plywood have the same layered structure as the printing plate, they emancipate themselves from it like deliberately unpolished intarsia. But for all their independence, they refer to the printing process and to the unwieldy visual idiom of the woodcut – and to the fact that Jan Brokof is unlikely to lose his fascination with either this technique or this theme anytime soon.

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