

## 4. CONCEPTUAL MATERIALITY AND SCULPTURAL CRITIQUE

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**Abstract:** *Based on the recent sculptural projects of Mihai Vereștiuc, we will establish a conceptual connection of with the practice of post-minimalist sculpture, using as argument certain lines developed by artists such as Joseph Beuys and Rachel Whiteread in their works analysed in this article. The course of the works, in itself, offers us the opportunity to reflect on the assumed responsibility towards the formative impact that any artistic object offers in relation to the environment in which it is produced (social, cultural, economic or political) and that starts from the artist through all the elements implicit of his approach - the concept, the specificity of the material and the space, the socio-cultural reality.*

**Key words:** *aesthetics, Post-Minimalism, sculpture, visual arts, exhibitions.*

### 1. Introduction

In this article, we will present artistic projects that have a direct connection with the concept and practice of post-minimalist sculpture. We will also use as an argument certain line developed by artists such as Joseph Beuys and Rachel Whiteread in the works analysed in the following pages, specifying that, without attributing these examples to us for free, we consider them more relevant than a stereotyped or generalized argumentative text. The course of the works, in itself, offers us the opportunity to reflect on the assumed responsibility towards the formative impact that any artistic object offers in relation to the environment in which it is produced (social, cultural, economic or political) and that starts from the artist through all the elements implicit of his approach - the concept, the specificity of the material and the space, the socio-cultural reality (Foster 1996).

### 2. First Beuys, then Whiteread

A first line developed by Mihai Vereștiuc brings over the importance of Joseph Beuys' projects, specifically his action to plant the oaks in March 1982 in Kassell before the opening of Documenta VII, this was continued by his son up to seven thousand oaks (Documenta 2022), ending—not coincidentally—at the opening of Documenta VIII in 1987 (about a year and a half after the death of his father). Beuys always considered this project as a perpetual beginning and not an end: “I think the tree is an element of regeneration which in itself is a concept of time. The oak is especially so because it is a slowly growing tree with a kind of really solid heartwood. It has always been a form of sculpture, a symbol for this planet...”<sup>163</sup>.

“I believe that planting these oaks is necessary. Not only in biospheric terms... but in that it will raise ecological consciousness—raise it increasingly, in the course of the years to come, because we shall never stop planting” (Strauss 2010, 33) said the author about his “7,000 Oaks” work from 1982. This was the most far-reaching

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<sup>163</sup> David Levi Strauss, *From Head to Hand. Art and the Manual*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2010

and successful work of *social sculpture* by Joseph Beuys, conceived especially as a process of activating society through the specific creative will of each individual. Beuys was engaged in many movements, some even political, having as his concern the environment and the influences of human society on it, being even one of the founders of the Green Political Party in 1979. Beuys' vision of art as a process, a deep understanding of work itself, of effort as a creative process, insisting on this creative work as an essential part of human life, not only for artists, is defining for Beuys' works in general and most concretely punctuated by "7000 Oaks" (Weibel 2016).

His belief was that if this creative work could be better understood and socially applied, it could transform the world. Beuys' concept of "social sculpture" evolved from his own empirical recognition of the core of sculpture as the transformation of the immaterial into the material and at the same time the transformation of matter or substance. And if we include in this definition of material "the actual substance of thought or expression, then the transformation of matter can also include thought, speech, and society". Besides, Beuys insisted on the idea of "social sculpture" as "a sculptural form which could comprehend both physical and spiritual material".<sup>164</sup>

In the work "7000 Oaks", this form of sculpture was applied simply, including in addition to the social side an inert but perennial marker element, the stone. At Kassel, the stones were basalt columns/stars about one and a half meters high from the ground. According to the theory of D. L. Strauss, at first the basalt columns will somehow prevent the growth of the young oak seeds, but in time they will gain parity with the stone and surpass them. For Beuys, this process illustrates one of his essential sculptural principles, namely the transition from the crystal coldness of the basaltic form to the warmth of the organic form, a principle that was continuously activated and reactivated in his works. This principle is alchemical in nature, coming from the relationship between the plant and the crystal: "The will within a seed determines the outer form of the plant; a crystal possesses an *intellect* that creates its ordered geometric shapes. Man too must will form and order and with eye and hand try to recreate those two truths in his work".<sup>165</sup>

In addition to Joseph Beuys and the case study presented above, returning to the relatively contemporary period on the same line of *social sculpture*, an eloquent example is Rachel Whiteread. Whiteread began to gain visibility in the 90s, especially thanks to the Young British Artists (MoMA 2022), a group of artists with different stylistic orientations, being one of the most famous contemporary British sculptors. From the beginning, Rachel Whiteread resonates with minimalist accumulations, continuing this legacy, even if the terms in which the works can be described are quite different.<sup>166</sup> The imprints or the molds of negative spaces or, better said, the void, taken from common objects but with strong human associations, such as bathtubs, sinks, have a precursor in Bruce Nauman, especially through the work "A Cast of the Space Under My Chair / Molding of the space under my chair", 1966-68. However, Rachel Whiteread pushes the affective connotations of these prints, through the multitude of variations of material,

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<sup>164</sup> Joseph Beuys, *Mapping the Legacy*, p.96

<sup>165</sup> Otto Reicher, *Tauernreise* cited by David Levi Strauss, *From Head to Hand. Art and the Manual* (Strauss 2010, 35), and Daniel Sofron (Sofron 2015)

<sup>166</sup> <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rachelwhiteread> (accessed 10.14.2022)

substance and color, towards the material, palpable record of this dialectic found between presence and absence.

The work “House” created in 1993 in London, represents a cast taken of the interior of a house in London, from which the exterior has been “peeled”. To clarify this type of approach, we should say that that house represented, somehow, the only survivor of a line of Victorian houses, proposed for demolition, which symbolized a last “vestige” of the working-class community, now dispersed by certain schemes of urban and social planning (German 2018). However, without claiming to be a permanently fixed monument, this work, a ghostly monument of those who inhabited it, says a lot about the erasure of social and human memory at the same time, a fact for which it raised intense public controversies before the work was demolished by the local administration.<sup>167</sup> Another defining work for Rachel Whiteread, on a post-minimalist line, is “Untitled (one hundred pieces)” from 1997, a serial work consisting of one hundred resin molds of the void, respectively of the space under different chairs, a project directly correlated with Nauman's, but exponentially developed, being also perceived as a tribute to Bruce Nauman.

### 3. A recyclable space for sculptural critique

In his statement of the exhibition “NEW? Recyclable” by Mihai Vereștiuc (figure 1), the author developed a sense of understanding of the sculptural form along the sidelines traced to Beuys and Whiteread. In his own words, “...among the multiple types of *recyclable* elements of the current environment, at this moment there is also *new!*. This logo is already inherent in every promotion system (or advertising), every promoted product or that needs promotion. But this *new!* it is in turn surpassed by another *new!*, to which the previous *new* is assimilated, at least partially. Thus, overbid, the *new!* element becomes almost synonymous with used. Used, *new!* is it *new?*. At least. Without promoting a meaning or concept, this manifestation aims to interrogate this situation of the *new!*, the bearer, however, of previous recyclings.”

The “NEW? Recyclable” project materialized through the exhibition at Galeria Rotonda, Iasi, in 2003, based on the idea of recycling, but not of recycled art, as social awareness and responsibility towards the environment, on the one hand, but, on the other another part and of questioning facing the artistic process with all its implications, be they formal or meaningful. The way of approaching the form has as its starting point a previous work of this project, entitled “American Dream”, in turn with an ironic character, at least from the point of view of the chosen material, the idea itself satirizing expanded consumerism and its false nature as a method of physiological satisfaction of certain social classes (Soreanu, German, et al. 2021).

The structure of wire covered in plastic material and filled with sawdust - with *the remains* that remained after the processing of *the essence* - appeal to the perception of the deformations of the essence substance, of the matter itself. The exhibition frame “NEW? Recyclable”, on the other hand, is much simpler, being focused on a minimalist line, as a space-relationship between material and immaterial, but also between form and the space to be exhibited. The shape of the works is rectangular, being serial in this aspect, without affective “accidents”, the

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<sup>167</sup> As explained by David Hopkins in his book *After Modern Art 1945-2000*. (Hopkins 2000, 157)

emphasis being on the content as material or better said on the reminiscence of the material enhancing the given structure, not by the massiveness of the wood but by the accumulation of residues left over from its industrial processing. Highlighting the idea of recycling in the ecological sense is punctuated by the ironic application of specific logos (Verestiuc 2022).

On the other hand, another important aspect in this project/exhibition is the fact that, without having similar claims to the social sculpture of Joseph Beuys, these remains of a primary substance such as wood, no matter how recycled they are, cannot return in the initial organic, living stage and, from here, the attention of this project is not towards recyclable, but towards ecological.

A similar project by Mihai Vereștiuc was “...my space” (figure 2), which took place in a different context, both affectively and as a message and continuity, offering an approach inclined towards the creative interior of the artist related to the social, economic, cultural and affective context of the environment<sup>168</sup>. Developed on approximately the same technical platform as “NEW? Recyclable”, respectively with materials such as plastic, sawdust, metal skeleton, with the difference that the interior of the forms is no longer filled, but only contains a surface film, the works in “... my space“ depart from the minimalism of the material structure towards a personal affective imprint.

The visible imprint of structure and pattern somehow explains the general *empty* forms to which they are related. The thinness and fragility of the chosen materials are mainly related to the idea of insecurity and emptiness of the environment *outside* the work space with which an artist relates or relates. The contextualization with the local space, quite inert at that time, with obvious peripheral influences, is as important as the proximity to the interior space. In this environment, Mihai Vereștiuc expands the sculpture in the installation, simultaneously minimizing the constitutive volume of the sculpture in the drawing. The author responds through “an assumed parasitism of the ready-made structures“, using the cultural corpus of the exhibition as a space for contextual intervention. (Nae 2009, 163).

The series of works from the exhibition “The big great sculpture”, Iași, from 2008 (figure 3), stand out from most of my works up until then, especially through the ironic, protestant content, with direct reference to the inability of traditionalist monumental sculpture to activate public feedback of the viewer (regardless of the level of education) and, above all, to the insensitivity of this public to the poor “quality” of many of these monuments. From this perspective, the author chose silicone as the execution material, a substance that imitates the organic, but, at the same time, is not natural organic, the applied bronze tints emphasizing the pseudo-quality vis-à-vis the nobility of the bronze. Thus, the mockery of history caused by the “small anonymous monuments” is reflected in the series of 12 pieces of the work “The big great sculpture”, representing lion heads with hooks, which try to transform into a human (self)portrait. This deliberately unfinished deformation and the small size of the works try to translate the lack of perspective still specific to the peripheral cultural, artistic and social space, but also Romanian in general (Verestiuc, Object and objecthood in post-minimal sculpture 2022).

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<sup>168</sup> Discussed by Cătălin Soreanu in his article “From Media to Mediums of Expression. Visual Art Communication and Meaning”. (Soreanu 2020)

#### 4. Conclusions

The artistic research based on the projects directly connected with the practices of post-minimalist sculpture brings over new directions of understanding the works of Joseph Beuys or Rachel Whiteread, which are considered by Mihai Vereștiuc to be eloquent examples of how the conceptual approach gathers materiality and a sense of temporal understanding of the art. While reflecting on the impact that the artistic objectual provides in relation to the environment in which it is produced, we notice how social, cultural, economic or political factors and elements affects the auctorial approach reflected to the creation in terms of concept, material specificity, and – moreover – to a specific socio-cultural reality which defines post-minimalism understanding of art. Dealing with the refined understanding of inner and outer space, perceived as extensions of human being corporality, and the imprint this presence leaves in today's (an)organic artistic context, we question the peripheral influences over the contemporary creative sculptural space.

##### List of figures



Fig. 1. Mihai Vereștiuc, *New? Recyclable*, 2003 (view from the exhibition)



Fig. 2. Mihai Vereștiuc, *... my space*, 2005 (view from the exhibition)



Fig. 3. Mihai Vereștiuc, *The big great sculpture*, Zagreb, 2009

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