

## Why Sculpture Is Not Tiresome

In his famous critique of the Paris Salon of 1846, Charles Baudelaire entitled one chapter “Why Sculpture Is Tiresome.” It begins, “The origin of sculpture is lost in the mists of time; thus it is a Carib art.”<sup>1</sup> In what follows, Baudelaire bemoans the lack of a vital historical consciousness among the sculptors of his time, whom he considered wild, that is, uncivilized, retrograde, and hence boring. He dismisses them as *sculptiers*, a word that could best be translated as ‘sculptorists’. What would Baudelaire, who clearly considered painting the more appropriate artistic form of expression for the time, think of the works of Paolo Chiasera in general and of the two acts in *Rotes Schauspielhaus* in particular?

These works undoubtedly exhibit an acute awareness of historical sources. Chiasera approached the task of creating a public sculpture for Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz in Berlin-Mitte in a primarily analogical fashion. He became engrossed in studying the work of the architect Hans Poelzig, whose residential apartment blocks surround the square, and then began to create objects in the grandiose shape of the light columns from Poelzig’s demolished Großes Schauspielhaus in wood, cardboard, and Styrofoam for the small green plot at the corner of Altmstadtstraße and Rosa-Luxemburg-Straße. Like an element of archaeological spolia, it emerges in the midst of the architect’s far less ambitious residential housing estate and lies there as part of a temple ruin among the trees on the small green plot. In the course of just three months of its existence, it decayed rapidly due to the influence of wind, weather and mere vandalism. Several times, the local police officer relayed nearby residents’ misgivings that this art was a public nuisance.

This kind of nuisance is naturally not very productive if the goal was to understand an experimental arrangement that sees sculpture as a temporary condition and whose goal is the delateralization of image and object. For following its first phase as sculpture, Chiasera planned a second phase for the *Rotes Schauspielhaus*, as a picture. Under these changing conditions, it is difficult to discern the aesthetic orientation, and even more difficult to understand how these works navigate their own historicity in terms of object form and artistic heroes. In other words, what are the sculptural qualities of eight-meter-long column stumps of wood, cardboard, and Styrofoam? What notion of (art) object is concealed behind a work that is subjected to almost immediate decay and is melted down after three months? And what can one make of the artist’s declared intention to make a picture out of a site-specific exterior project?

First of all, Chiasera’s works require a beholder who is extraordinarily flexible and mentally agile, someone who can live with the fact that the aggregate state of a work is not fixed, that it can be sculpture, image, ash, toxic waste, or immaterial projection; someone who is not satisfied with decoding linearly according to syntactic and lexical rules, but who recognizes structures and intermediate spaces and interrogates them. This beholder needs to reconstruct contexts and relations and be able to read connotations, for only in this way can the critical potential of these works be activated. *Rotes Schauspielhaus* is simply not a work that is seen, understood and dismissed as a settled matter.

If the work needs to be accepted as transitory and thus cannot be described definitively, without losing something essential, this impossibility can be used as a vehicle for understanding Chiasera’s work gestures. For example, it seems significant that Chiasera repeatedly returns to the picture. Perhaps this is due to an attitude that is similar to that of Marcel Duchamp, who in a 1963 film documentary recalled how after a long journey to the art centers and museums of Europe he made the decision in 1912—during a period when he himself was still exclusively painting—that painting, or at least painting for its own sake, must be abandoned. Instead he began to introduce highly different and non-painterly

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1 This notion can already be found in Diderot, who also uses it referring to sculpture. Charles Baudelaire, “The Salon of 1846” (trans. J. Mayne), *The Mirror of Art: Critical Studies*, New York: Phaidon, 1955, p. 119.

elements to the process. Here he saw the only possibility of leaving worn out paths and again charging images linguistically and to make them intellectual surfaces for projection.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, Chiasera shares Duchamp's conviction that linguistic metaphor and image—representation and object—can no longer be conceived together and that their differentiation in various media is required. Not least for biographical reasons, Duchamp concentrated on working with suitcases that take up the essence of his thought and composition. In contrast, 100 years later Chiasera lives out his tendency towards a playful aesthetic in large formats that seem like models of a scientific-philosophical experimental arrangement whose respective phases of mutation are captured in film and photography. They can be read as symbolic acts or a series of scenes that Chiasera uses to address the artistic question of how iconic forms are handed down within history, as well as different aggregate states of objects in non-Euclidean space—that is, as states of meta-academic experiments. But to interpret them as destructive or chauvinistic gestures would be nonsense, for their significance consists precisely in the consistency of changeable form.

The great proximity of Chiasera's approach to models of thinking from mathematics and the natural sciences can be seen by looking at the example of Henri Poincaré, whose works have been shown to have decisively influenced Marcel Duchamp.<sup>3</sup> In 1913, the French mathematician published *Dernières Pensées*, one of the most important writings on qualitative geometry. Fascinating for Duchamp was above all the idea that dimensions and sizes in n-dimension worlds were relatively insignificant. According to Poincaré, in this discipline two figures are each time the same if one can be replaced by the other by means of a continuous deformation—regardless of what laws might apply and presuming that the deformation takes place in a continuous context. This definition seems to describe Paolo Chiasera's way of working. If we consider that Poincaré already published his book *Les méthodes nouvelles de la mécanique céleste* in 1892, we might think that we had found the instructions for carrying out the two acts of *Rotes Schauspielhaus*. For the relatively small picture that was gained from the immense Styrofoam masses of the columns with turpentine is the red, iron-oxide version of a photograph of a bright, slightly cloudy sky.

In a free analogy to Einstein's theory of relativity, which would have been unthinkable without Poincaré's considerations, Chiasera sums up the process of his works' emergence in a formula that introduces the moment of acceleration. In the case of the deformation from the first to the second act of *Rotes Schauspielhaus*, turpentine takes on this role, while in *Condensed Heidegger's Hut* and *Archivio Zarathustra* this role is played by fire. Whether Chiasera is actually influenced by Poincaré's mathematics or whether his considerations move on parallels is ultimately unimportant in this context. Decisive is the parallelism between the notions. For Chiasera, whose cosmos is strongly influenced by the thought of Aby Warburg, there is no real necessity to distinguish between art and science as long as the conceptual and visual similarity is great enough. For this reason, his works are basically experiments and at the same time models and images of experiments.

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2 See Herbert Molderings, *Duchamp and the Aesthetics of Chance*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, pp. 7–8 and especially footnote 2 on p. 147, that includes the original quote.

3 Molderings, *Duchamp and the Aesthetics of Chance*, pp. 83–98.