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## **Deconstructing Instrumental Reason New Notes on the Work of Allan Wexler**

Upon my first encounter with the works of Allan Wexler some five years ago I characterized them as 'Structures for Reflection'. Looking back, and at Wexler's more recent works I feel that I do not have to revise this term but should take this opportunity to note some of its implications instead.

In his famous book 'The Eclipse of Reason' (1947) Max Horkheimer developed a fundamental critique of Pragmatism and Pragmatic Philosophy, as represented especially by the writings of John Dewey. One of the main arguments Horkheimer unfolds against this form of philosophy is that by instrumentalizing reason for practical tasks, tasks to be proved true by experiments only, Pragmatism has no means whether to question nor reflect if the tasks themselves are reasonable at all: By reducing philosophical efforts to check if a 'sketch of reality' one sets up and pursues in order to solve a certain problem will match according facts one may find in reality, one abandons any form of transcendent objectivity. In consequence thinking and reflecting become mere formal acts, and reason their function: Real is what can be verified by experiment, and all which can not be verified does not exist or is a matter related to a subject, that is, a more or less private issue.

I do not have to argue that Pragmatism has not been affected too much by this form of critique but has proved to be an extremely effective tool in developing modern science as well as in solving all kinds of social problems. However, this success could only be achieved at a high price. Past had to be eliminated and any utopian thought as well as any general idea of the fundamentals and whereabouts of our lives - not to speak of those of society or mankind - had to be categorized as obsolete: life itself became some kind of a 'sketch', and only inexplicable experiences like illness or the loss of a beloved person, and maybe the experience of natural catastrophes reminds us that not all can be controlled or conceived by humans. Moreover, in a world in which Pragmatism is the sole form of explanation and orientation, there seems to be no reasonable way to establish any other form of epistemology either: Since in relation to Pragmatism all concepts that recur to some form of transient objectivity or carry some content will appear as ideological systems--systems which were revised and overcome just by Pragmatism itself.

Nevertheless there is a way out of this apologia, or at least to screen the functioning and ideological character of Pragmatism, a way paved not by philosophy but by beating it with its own means, such as the ironic practice developed by Allan Wexler.

Irony, clearly, in its usual form is not a practice but a rhetorical technique which - in a structural sense - allows to make a statement and, at the same time, to withdraw its meaning or reframe it in a wider context, thus giving it a new accent. Ironic technique often uses two rhetorical tools, metonymy and synecdoche, which - in different ways - substitute a term or an idea by its parts or aspects thus narrowing or widening its meaning. Yet another effective ironic technique is the explicit affirmation of facts or means, an affirmation so intensive that it loses plausibility as much as it sets its own rules. However by which tools or means, irony always is a form to address with or in 'one' word or action more than one fact: that is, for example, a word's meaning and its (different) meaning in a wider context, the literal and, at the same time, metaphorical understanding of a given fact, or the conjunction of two different contexts by a single term.

These techniques, usually bound to language and speech, Allan Wexler not only manages to transpose into the field of practical experience but to utilize for artistic purposes as well: his work is about reification, that is the appearance of things as if given by nature, or, in other words, their ready-made character: the common fact that things are

not dealt with in the knowledge or in the awareness that they have been made by humans, and are products of a certain purpose or interest. This reification of things Wexler breaks up and opens for a critical reflection by his ironic technique, a double-strategy: by treating things not as matters but like individuals, and, seemingly quite different, by more or less ignoring their normal function, taking them instead as mere forms. In which way and in which combination of ways, however, Wexler's approach toward things always is well-directed inappropriate regarding the practical rules they prescribe or are made for. Since treated like individuals things recollect somewhat of their factura and history: that they have been made or at least conceived by an individual to serve a certain purpose, that they could have been designed differently, and that they did not exist at a certain time and will not last forever; whereas ignoring their function or defunctionalizing them by an inept use also quite necessarily will lead to the appearance of their factura as much as they will start to 'behave' specifically while 'resisting' their utilization for new purposes, and inevitably will 'call' for at least a virtual reconstruction of their normative function.

What makes Wexler's work important and a full delight for any observer of western civilization is the fact that he does not just deconstruct or alienate objects but reifies his specific perception and re-conception of them by working with them practically, or by creating new objects - which in any case leave perceivable that and how they have been dealt with, or, what they have been made of. In doing this he has the logic of Pragmatism fight itself to the extent that his objects usually appear as a combination of at least two practical functions or purposes normally reified one by one in single specialized forms: Perceiving and analyzing the making of Wexler's objects thus one goes through a more or less determined passage of perception at the end of which - and that is, I believe the most important aspect connected to Wexler's work - one is inevitably established as an observer of oneself, as a reflecting individual. This passage one is seduced to go through by Wexler's objects has at least these three typical steps to it: First, as Wexler's objects have the appearance and the character of practical devices, one will ask for their purpose or possible function. The way one gets involved with the objects on this level is comparable with the perception of surrealistic paintings which catch the eye by their realistic or naturalistic way of depiction. This examination usually will end with the detection of certain practical contradictions, and at least will lead to the conclusion that the objects would withstand any common use or application. The second step includes that the objects will be examined again, now based on their own terms, which will lead to the insight that they do have a logic, and a (practical) sense, but as such do demand a specific reaction or behavior of their possible clients. At this point, inducing the third step, perceiving changes into observing since the spectator has to reflect whether he himself would be able to perform a reaction or behavior suggested by the object. This shift includes the experience that one's own possibilities to cope with the object are limited, in other words, that the observer himself is bound to specific behavior or practice - and a numbered form of related objects. At this point the spectator has become an observer of himself or the cultural community he belongs to, and the object has been used as what I termed as a 'structure for reflection'.

To concretize what I describe here in a somewhat dry and elaborate manner and what I believe to be immediately intelligible for any individual familiar with western civilization I like to recall three works by Allan Wexler, his *Sets* (1989), his proposals for *The Mattress Factory* (1988) and his "Cell" (1995) at the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia. These works, made within a range of ten years, show that Wexler's artistic method is open to all kinds of subjects and never ends up in formalistic exercises but allows him to lure out a sense of objects so common that we usually neglect them as meaningful items: The *Sets*, a series of 19 panels, focus on one single item of common life, the table, and demonstrate how a familiar object can be made quite unfamiliar by very simple yet systematically applied means. As Wexler explained it himself best: "I've explored a range of issues, from material, scale, language and memory. The horizontal surface of the table/building can be alternatively understood as ground, table top, roof or sky. In "Set T" for example, the image of the table takes on mythological dimension.

In one block in the sequence the horizontal plane of the building's roof is ripped apart, becomes sky and earth. In "Set Q" the table/building undergoes a series of transformations; ghost images hover over, pieces of the table separate and float away, the table is eliminated leaving only its shadow, and the shadow becomes a table." Similar systematic conceived but even more reduced were Wexler's "*Proposals for The Typical House*" (1985) for which he cut up a ground plan of a typical American Home and re-arranged the elements in about fifty different ways thus creating fifty new ground plans on some of which he constructed model-houses from cardboard which visualize that deconstructivism can be a constructive method to refresh conventions even within extremely limited terms. Looking at these systematic research and development works, works that make quite obvious that Wexler was trained as an architect, one may easily encounter on more complex projects like the *Proposals for an "Artist's Residence"* at the Mattress-Factory in Pittsburgh and the final realization of one of the numerous plans: Not only that Wexler turned the commission to create a site specific sculpture for this art gallery into the proposal to construct a living space for an artist, moreover he designed a living space which is variable to such an extent that using it would turn out to a permanent performance about being an artist alive: Feeding seriously the presumption that an artist will seek for an integration of art and life at any time, even in private life, and as such is an individual of public interest especially when invited to stay on residence, he created a space which interprets freedom of conventions as a compulsion to total flexibility. Thus exhibiting the bourgeois projections of an artist's way of living this space called for a reflection of the conditions of creativity - which in a very different way were the issue of Wexler's "Cell" at the Eastern State Penitentiary as well. Here again Wexler turned over the commission to create a site specific sculpture, and created a living space instead: his own cell within the prison-cell. The most important aspect of this project to me was the fact that Wexler by building a cell within this cell created his own space, that is by setting his own conditions against the conditions of the prison - even at the price that the space left for living would be quite a bit smaller - had a door to be opened from inside as a symbol for his intellectual overcome of being lock in. Thus visualizing very clearly that freedom is, at first hand, the freedom to draw one's own horizon, he furnished this space to an artist's studio by his creativity: Examining very closely the few items he could expect to have at hand being isolated like a prisoner he developed a whole set of tools and devices to establish himself as an artist even under these extremely restricted conditions, and by this demonstrated that his profession does not rely on material preconditions at all. Regarding these aspects Wexler's "Cell" at the Eastern State Penitentiary refers quite obviously to Thoreau's retreat to Walden Pond just as one of his earlier major works, the "Crate House" (1991), did already, not least with respect to the fact that here again he created an art space independent from its conventional form, the museum.