



IRONY AND THE POWER OF ARTISTIC PRODUCTION



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FOR MORE THAN 25 YEARS, QUIRKY AMERICAN ARTIST AND ARCHITECT ALLAN WEXLER HAS TESTED OUR UNDERSTANDING OF SPACE, STRUCTURE AND TIME. HIS INVENTIVE, OFTEN PROVOCATIVE, STRUCTURES AND INTERVENTIONS REFERENCE TECHNOLOGY, THE BODY, ART AND ARCHITECTURE. **MICHAEL FEHR** DESCRIBES HOW ONE OF HIS MOST RECENT WORKS – *IN THE SHADOW OF THE WIND* – MAY WELL BE HIS MOST IMPORTANT SCULPTURE TO DATE.



HYPAR ROOM, 1999. A FULL-SCALE PARTICIPATORY INSTALLATION COMMISSIONED TO DRAW MORE FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN TO THE CINCINNATI CONTEMPORARY ART CENTRE. THE ROOM IS SLICED HORIZONTALLY BY A RAISED UNDULATING FLOOR TO CREATE A HYPERBOLIC PARABOLOID (HENCE THE NAME, *HYPAR*). VISITORS CAN EXPLORE THE SPACE ABOVE AND BELOW THE FLOOR, EXPERIENCING INTERIOR ARCHITECTURAL SPACE AND FAMILIAR FUNCTIONAL FURNITURE FROM NEW PERSPECTIVES.



ABOVE & PREVIOUS PAGES: *GARDENING SUKKAH*, 2000. A SERIES OF EXPLORATIONS OF THE JEWISH HOLIDAY SUKKOTH. FOR SEVEN DAYS THE *GARDENING SUKKAH* SHELTERS THE FAMILY AS THEY GATHER SUKKOTH MEALS. FOR THE REMAINING 357 DAYS IT HOUSES THE TOOLS FOR GARDENING, ANOTHER KIND OF CELEBRATION OF THE BOUNTY OF THE EARTH

A GLOWING SUN SHORTLY BEFORE NOON on an open, treeless field in close proximity to an autobahn. About a hundred sweating people seek protection from the sun in the only existing shadow. But this shadow is very long and rather narrow and changes its position quickly over the earth's surface. Accordingly, those who seek its protection are not only forced to stand in line, but also to move slowly with the shadow. At the same time, this strange 'shadow society' approaches a large architectonic structure which lies flat in the field, a hybrid between a huge table and a footbridge. Gradually the crowd – following the shadow – approaches the strange construction. Some people sit on nearby tree trunks and use them as tables. Others start using the tree trunks as steps to climb onto the structure and help others up after them. It is not long before the whole crowd is assembled on the structure.

Everyone now stares at the grey-black surface on which they stand, observing (most of all) its borders. Then conversation ceases and soon one only hears the noise of the highway. Finally, when the sun is at its zenith, the whole crowd suddenly starts moving again. People show each other something on the ground. Laughing faces, bravo calls and applause, congratulations on both sides. The plan worked, an idea has become reality, one has seen and experienced the moment – the shadow has covered the structure precisely in its entirety. The shadow and contour of the shape are identical for a moment and the sculpture *In The Shadow Of The Wind* is born.

That event occurred on June 21, 2000, at 1.32pm in Barsinghausen, a village near Hannover, the result of two years' preparation. It was originally submitted as part of a competition sponsored by Windwärts Energie GmbH for the design of six different wind-power stations, for installation around Hannover as part of the satellite program, Art and Wind Energy for Expo 2000. Allan Wexler's proposal for the sculpture, *In The Shadow Of The Wind*, was selected and realised. But nobody knew whether the complicated calculations set out in the artist's design would work – whether the shadow of a 100 metre-high tower with its wind turbine on top and three 35 metre-long rotors would, on the day of the summer solstice, match exactly in size and form the surfaces laid out over the ground.

The exciting moment was not only shared by the builders of the wind turbine, the instigators and their employees, artists and various art lovers. There were also some local organisations, among them a group of former miners. The latter had delivered the chunks of coal that are embedded in the shadow's surface. The Kaiserstollen mine in Barsinghausen, abandoned 40 years ago and now a museum, was opened again and 4.5 tonnes of coal was extracted by hand – an amount whose equivalent calorific value exactly matches the energy which the wind-power station will generate on average each day. Carefully embedded into the shadow surface and then sealed, the material became not only the base of the



IN THE SHADOW OF THE WIND

construction and a formal expression of the shadow, but also a material equivalent of the function and potential energy of the installation.

In The Shadow Of The Wind is typical of the work of Allan Wexler and, because of its complexity and scale, is certainly one of his most important sculptures, not just as a work of art but as a 'social sculpture' in the same spirit as the work of Joseph Beuys.

All the details outlined above – position in the open field, specific siting on the earth's surface, form and various materials used, process of realisation as manifest in the behaviour and movement of people and, finally, the most important condition of our existence, the sun – encompass a productive element that is typical of Wexler. His irony affirms an unavoidable and otherwise insignificant side-effect of every high-rise building. Wexler has created a dynamic constellation with the shadow his construction casts over the earth.

The shadow is indeed the central moment. It reveals itself not only in the sculpture, but also through the function of the wind-power station: as a kind of important statement about the history of the harnessing of energy. The shadow literally lifts the huge construction off the ground and, in the form of an 80 metre-long, tabletop platform, makes it understandable. At the same time, it is the element between sun and earth, in which the installation can be placed. Since the frozen shadow emphasises a particular moment in the year's cycle, the sculpture can be seen as an

almanac. By its characterisation as a footbridge or table – depending on its height, it generates planes of shadow on the gently undulating ground – the planes of shadow become a communicative medium that interpret a specific experience of time within the communication.

Finally, as a shadow falling on coal, the sculpture relates two different energy sources – the black and dirty 'gold' (as it is called in this area), and the immaterial, clean energy of the wind. This makes the process of technology from both renewable and non-renewable sources of energy visible, both thanks to the sun's energy.

In every sense, *In The Shadow Of The Wind* retains an irrational moment that cannot be quite taken in, whether it is a practical or a metaphorical consideration. In the projection of the rotors on the earth – which gives rise to a completely irregular and absurd form for the structure – it reaches a conclusion. For here the sculpture avoids scrutiny from any rational point of view, quite simply because the rotors turn so quickly that their shadows cannot be related back to the form of the structure – and the spectators can only believe that everything is as it should be.

Therefore, a fictitious and human moment arises that breaks both its technical and aesthetic perfection and thereby makes obvious the fact that everything has been made by humans and that the perfection of nature cannot be replaced.

MHO

Translated by Rudi Krausmann