

Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts
Doctoral School

ÁDÁM SZABÓ

SCULPTURAL TIME

DLA Thesis

2007.

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Whilst working on the doctoral program in fine arts I began working on a new method. I became preoccupied with the processes involved in making sculptures, and sought a method through which I would be able to make the working process an organic part of the final work itself using photographic and film-based documentation. I began to photograph the different phases of the work process as I created certain works, and then compiled short animated films from the photographs with the help of a computer. I often exhibited the films using a projector or television alongside the sculptural objects themselves.

Thus, my work began with a sculpture-related hypothesis and the notion of including the work process in the work itself, but soon the bond between video and sculpture became an independent mode of expression in my work. In a number of later works it was not merely the introduction of the work process and its various phases that became important, but the introduction of a second, largely “natural” process as well: this process revealed the various stages of development that the sculpture *itself* underwent. These later works form a unified whole through their joint mode of exhibition, the materials used, and the techniques applied during their construction, but they do not necessarily form a series of works.

These works will form the point of departure for my doctoral thesis. By discussing a number of the works—which I will examine in chronological order—I will attempt to outline the intellectual background that led to their creation. Throughout my examination I will broach subjects related to fundamental problems, such as the role of “work” and “invention” in sculpture; I will also deal with questions of technique, and the sculptural practices that result from these considerations, including questions of how accessible a sculpture is in space, and what the nature of its materiality consists of. I will attempt to illustrate the various possible points of contact between sculpture—an inherently spatial medium—and time, with reference to temporality. In relation to this, I will also refer to the development of photography and film, as well as to the impact of these two genres on sculpture (in specific) and art (in a more general sense); I will also expand to a yet broader level and touch upon fundamental changes in our perception of time in the twentieth century.

In 2001, whilst attending an artists’ community for stone cutters in Slovakia, I made an “artificially natural” rock: I carved the object—which appeared natural from a distance but revealed the marks of detailed hand carving on closer inspection—from a roughly cubic piece of stone. Thus, I reversed the general process of artistic creation: from an artificial, regular form I arrived to a natural form. Different information is provided to the observer depending on whether s/he observes the work from a distance, from close-quarters, or walks around it.

There is no one main viewpoint, just as it would be unusual for a rock to have one, unless, for example, it leads our eyes to something else by revealing yet another form from a particular angle. To be more precise, I would say that the work has two main viewing angles: front and back. However, the two viewpoints provide contradictory information about the object to the viewer. From a distance it is not obvious that it was deliberately created and positioned for viewers to stumble across it by chance; also, when it is viewed from different perspectives, it provides different information (on one level it appears as either a body of rock or a shell, and on another level it appears as a natural object or an artificial creation, depending on the viewing angle).

The question of how easy it is to walk around a sculpture and how many viewpoints it has does not depend solely on the size of the work or the manner in which it is positioned, but also—and more importantly—on the chosen material, technique, and the artist's approach to the working process. Briefly remaining on the subject of stone sculpture as one of the most ancient and essentially unchanged traditions in the history of European arts and crafts, the difference between direct carving and techniques relying on point matching or other copying procedures using maquettes or models has always been a hot topic of debate.

The difference may be illustrated most poignantly by comparing the works of Rodin and Hildebrand. Even though both artists saw Michelangelo as an exemplary figure, Rodin—besides his sculptures carved from marble, which he often did not carve himself—based his sculptures on preliminary models, unlike Michelangelo, and his sculptures can only truly be grasped in their entirety when one walks around them and views them from different perspectives. On the other hand, Hildebrand, whose artistic legacy lies more in the field of theory than in sculpture, preferred direct carving, yet in following Michelangelo's example he saw sculptures as having one main viewpoint, and gradually carved them out from the rough stone as if carving a relief from a plane surface. In this sense Hildebrand was justified when remarking that one could tell from Rodin's sculptures that they were never carved directly, and that the unworked areas on his stone sculptures did not result from direct carving, but from aesthetic decisions made by the artist.

The techniques of direct carving and pointing up (the latter being a method with which the sculptor could entrust the realization of his work to specially trained craftsmen) are directly linked to the question of the social status of sculpture. Since the appearance of the modern concept of the “artist” in roughly the fifteenth century, it has become important for artists to define both the practical and intellectual aspects of their work. In order to be able to classify painting and sculpture amongst the liberal arts, the distinction between craftsman and artist

had to be made. Leonardo's insight, that painting is of a higher rank than sculpture because the latter is more akin to physical work and necessitates dust and sweat, is well known. In contrast, Cellini considered sculpture to be of a higher rank, as paintings only offer one single viewpoint, in comparison to the near-endless number of viewpoints that sculptures offer.

In the case of sculpture (and painting) the role of invention became increasingly important, as artists attempted to emphasize the intellectual side of art. The use of the *bozzetto* or small terracotta maquette soon became widespread in the second half of the sixteenth century: here the sculptural concept appeared readily in space, in contrast to the practice of using preliminary sketches. The sculptor—in keeping with studio practices—created maquettes, which were then carved out by apprentices or craftsmen (naturally, the artist would often become engaged in the final stages of the work after overseeing the overall work process). In this way we may see more readily how questions of direct carving, copying, the accessibility of a sculpture, and ideas about whether compositions were based on one or two main viewpoints were connected, from the time of Michelangelo up to Rodin; such questions were also related in the way they defined the work process and the final result in terms of the artist's physical and intellectual approach to the work.

Going back to *Rockr*, I feel it important to emphasize once more the way in which I reversed the work process: starting with a more or less regular, cuboid-shaped block of stone I worked my way towards an end result that looked like a natural form. Because of this I documented certain phases of the working process with photographs—such as when I tilted the stone back into its original position (in a subconscious way it was also important for me to show the scale of the work in question when documenting the work process.).

It is well-known that the invention of photography proved to be a revelation—not just in terms of the illustrative arts, but in terms of our everyday perceptions, too. During our childhood we learn about the visual appearance of various phenomena—including motions and transformations—that we would otherwise be incapable of seeing with the naked eye, and we often take them for granted. The human eye is rather slow in comparison to the lens of the camera, as we perceive a clear moving image from twenty-four frames per second, and the “snapshots” that we see are played out in tenths or fifteenths of a second.

Thus, photography provides a fine illustration of the way in which our perceptions have undergone a process of transformation. At the time when photography was first invented, slow shutter speeds prevented the camera from capturing instantaneous movements. However, after a short time it was possible to capture sequences of shots from moving objects. Eadward Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey's sequences that captured motion

almost directly led to the invention of film, and Marey's works led to the illustration of motion with graphic marks. Harold Edgerton's photograph of a bullet piercing an apple (*How to Make Applesauce at MIT*), shows an event so momentary that it is invisible to the naked eye, and in contrast, David Stephenson's photographs of stars reveal processes so slow that they, too, are invisible: time is represented in three different ways—during the long exposure the earth turns on its axis, the camera moves, and an image of distance and time which is almost imperceptible to the human brain is revealed in the image of the stars.

Whilst working on *The Rock*, however, I felt that the photographs I made were unsatisfactory (they were unable to give back the three-dimensional reality, mass, and weight of the one-and-a-half cubic metre block of stone), and as the process of creation became increasingly important for me, I began to make short video films by shooting certain phases of the sculpture's creation. Following this, I began to exhibit the finished sculptures alongside the film (in most cases I project the film in a darkened area whilst lighting the sculpture with a small lamp).

My work entitled *Surplus* (2002) refers back directly to problems related to the sculptor's working process and carving. The basic idea for the work was given by a sculptor's cliché which is attributed to Michelangelo: "the sculpture is inside the stone, you only have to set it free". I wanted to reverse this sentence: the stone is inside the sculpture. This means more or less the same thing—nothing too groundbreaking, it seems. I chiselled away at a copy of a figure of Moses made from artificial stone to look like a natural piece of rock, and I documented almost every blow of the hammer. I played back the film documentation in reverse. The stone does not shrink, but grows, and only very gradually does it become recognizable: first two eyes appear, then slowly a nose, a mouth, and the other parts of the face, followed by hair, a beard and a moustache, with some tiny horns right at the end.

High speed cameras are used to record high-speed motion images and transformations, and the recorded material is played back at normal speed afterwards. The opposite is true when it is necessary to film very slow processes. In this case shots are taken one frame at a time at set intervals. This method is often used when making natural history films (for example, when showing the development of a flower or plant). In feature films the technique may be used to illustrate the passing of time (night turns into day, or the opposite happens). Godfrey Reggio used this technique to monumental effect in creating an individual mode of expression in his film *Koyaanisqatsi – Life out of Balance*; in the film clouds form and pass over canyons, the moon rises between skyscrapers, and the pulsating traffic of the city is shown, all with time-lapse photography.

I wished to achieve a similar effect with my work entitled *Aura* (2003). I took the photographs from precisely above the stone so that only one of its surfaces would be visible, with no background imagery. In this way small towers of stone could be seen growing from the stone. The filmed surface appears completely abstract, and because of the lack of any information regarding the sculpture's environment, the size of the photographed object cannot be defined, and this enlarges the range of possible associations on seeing the work. However, the simultaneous exhibition of the object itself results in a kind of inner conflict within the viewer, as it confronts him or her with the original dimensions of the work. In order to make the transformations visible I also had to alter the lighting, as when viewed from above only the appearance of small circles and then larger circles (craters) was visible. For this reason I changed the position of the lamp when I took each shot, and the movement of the resulting shadows informed the viewer of the changes. This also gave the work an apparent time frame, as the small rods appear to grow out of the stone within "a day". I also attempted to define the length of the film in relation to this: the beginning and the end are more spectacular, as the first shapes appear when the shadows are longer, whilst towards the middle of the film the sense of continual transformation—and the resultant movements—become invisible to the viewer.

In *Aura* I worked on a piece of limestone used in lithography, as its surface is completely flat containing no bands or holes, and its different layers can only be discovered after careful observation (because of these qualities it appears just as likely to be a piece of plastic as it does a slab of stone). A chief consideration when choosing the material and technique for the work was to ensure that traces of man-made intervention be as inconspicuous as possible, both in the pictures and in the final work, despite the fact that I used images which documented the working process.

When appreciating sculptures a large role is played—subconsciously—by the scale of a completed work, as well as by the feeling of wonderment derived from the artist's technical skill and knowledge. In one of his tracts, Francisco da Hollanda quotes Michelangelo as saying: "I highly appreciate the work of a great master, even if it only took him a short time to complete. Works should not be judged by the amount of superfluous work they require, but by their creator's skill and ingenuity."

The perception of a work of fine art as a process unconsciously appears when viewing the occasional unfinished work, but following Michelangelo, this perception acquired a completely different quality in the *bozzetto* genre, which served to record the sculptor's fresh thoughts and innovations, and also give an account of the way in which the initial concept was

developed on comparison with the completed sculpture. Whilst the polished surface of a stone sculpture always somehow inspires the notion of timelessness in the viewer, Rodin raised “unfinished” sculptural fragments to the level of autonomous artistic works. Whilst during the twentieth century a number of genres appeared which did not view art as a static phenomenon, but as an occurrence changing through time (such as kinetic sculpture, and later performance art, with media-based arts and interactive works even further down the line), other artistic tendencies also made an appearance, and it was exactly the artistic process that they raised to the level of art. For example, we may think of Jackson Pollock’s action painting, and the *process art* movement which developed under the influence of abstract expressionism; there the artworks emphasize and draw attention to those events which played a part in the work’s creation, something that we may also see in the case of Richard Serra’s lead castings.

Although until now I have discussed the inclusion and the representation of working processes in works of art, I have to point out that with relation to my works—as I have already suggested—this is not quite the case, as most often the films do not portray the working process, but rather a different, more natural process. The conceptual origins of these works clearly signify that I do not represent the natural processes on an observational basis or through knowledge gained from experienced, but rather that I represent them on the basis of preconceived mental constructions, and that the resultant forms remind us of the original processes. In order to recognize this, the viewer must be in possession of a relevant body of experiences and knowledge, as without this shared knowledge the work of art in question will not work at all. In my work entitled *Canyon* (2004) I gouged out the surface of some stone in the same way that a river slowly carves out its bed. As the edges of the stone tablet are not visible in the pictures, the work resembles pictures taken by a satellite of a planet’s surface, perhaps every one hundred thousand years. At the same time, *Canyon* is a good example of how three independent time scales may be represented within one single work. The film is played out in objective, “real” time (i.e. the length of the film), but it also refers to the time-scale of the natural process (hundreds of thousands or millions of years); finally, it latently represents the time taken to create the work.

Time—in reality—cannot be seen, felt, heard, tasted, or even smelt, as we only experience it indirectly, and draw conclusions about it through the things that happen “in” it: we may establish the order of events that take place in a given situation, and may distinguish the different speeds of different transformations. According to Newton time is absolute, and flows by itself in accordance with its own rules, independently of any outside influence. In

keeping with this definition, influential thinkers of the 19th century, such as Hegel, Darwin, and even Marx, saw everything happening in time as a gradual process of progressive change. Time is considered by almost everyone to be objective, and many people strove to measure it as accurately as possible. Paradoxically, it was precisely this objectivity and the introduction of world time zones that led to the questioning of time's absolute nature: the precise measurement of time and the invention of technologies such as the telephone and later the radio and television made it possible to perceive events occurring in different places simultaneously. This discovery of simultaneity led to a complete reevaluation of space: besides the concepts of absolute past and absolute future evolved the concept of the absolute present.

It was this notion of the infinity of time and the expansion of the present that preoccupied me when working on *Beach* (2004). The work, as its title indicates, imitates a seashore, and was also created through a process of engraving: the calm waves wash up thin layers of sand onto the beach one by one, complementing earlier layers, and either partially or completely washing them away. Thus, water—as was the case in *Canyon*—is an invisible force shaping the stone, but to aid the viewers' recognition of this event I mixed the sound of crashing waves into the film's soundtrack. In this way the film differs from the earlier films, not just in the way it makes use of sound, but also in the way that it has no underlying narrative: it does not lead anywhere, and displays continuous change and movement.

The concept of time as being independent from space, observers, and human beings was attacked on many fronts in the early 20th century. Einstein's theory of relativity tied the notion of simultaneity to space, and thus the perception of time depended on the relative position of the observer. Also, to give an idea of the many highly influential theories that affected time in the 20th century, Freud—through his examinations of dreams—realized that the subconscious does not follow common time; Bergson set the scientific notion of objective time in opposition to the subjective time of the individual; Husserl propagated the absolute reality of the present, and Durkheim distinguished personal time from the common time of society. Thus, time in the 20th century became “modern”, and this became particularly obvious during the great flurry of hopes and expectations preceding the turn of the century.

It is of interest that in art—parallel to these immense changes in the perception of time—a number of contradictory transformations took place. In literature the novel was no longer built upon the consecutive sequencing of events, and mosaic-like organizational principles began to appear; this was an attempt to emphasize the simultaneity of events, but parallel to this—in the fine arts—works began to appear which incorporated temporality. At the same time,

whilst the spatial arts—in opposition to their self-definition—attempted to incorporate time, literature—which previously treated time as being linear—suddenly began to abolish temporally consecutive sequences, or at least force them into the background, in an attempt to replace the notion of things happening in temporal sequences with the idea of things happening simultaneously in space.

By exhibiting them simultaneously, I attempted to emphasize the relationship between the film—played out over time—and the “presence” of the sculpture which is derived from its materiality; this relationship is often complementary, explanatory, or even contradictory. This approach was based on the direct relationship between the exhibited object and the video: the exhibited object was the end result of the working process appearing in the given film.

I wished to analyze, question, and even overturn this earlier approach in my work entitled *Which First?* (2005), which refers to the kitchen philosopher’s conundrum which implies that one cannot tell which came first, the chicken or the egg. I thus exhibited a chicken and an egg carved from marble; in the film we see the chicken being gradually chiselled away to resemble a egg, and then the egg gradually growing back into the shape of a chicken. The earlier relationship between object and video is thus undone, as here I exhibit two objects: products of both the initial and the final stages of the work process. To paraphrase Michelangelo: the egg is in the chicken, you just have to set it free...

I also wish to illustrate the completion of another cycle: the need to raise painting and sculpture amongst the liberal arts occurred in what we now consider to be the period in the 15th century when art became conscious of itself. *Ut pictura poesis*, wrote Horatius, and the authors of many tracts quoted him when they likened painting (and sculpture) to poetry, a practice which always belonged amongst the seven liberal arts. Yet art and artists have now reached their goal: we now see artistic societies, schools, and academies where the title “doctor of liberal arts” may be awarded. In addition to the *poeta doctus*, today we may also find the *sculptor doctus*, as well.