

Ulrich Rückriem's sculpture certainly can be seen as Minimal, Process, and even Conceptual Art; as such, it must be included in the complex history of work made since the mid-1960s. This, however, does not mean that the work can be limited to these categories.

From Minimalism, Rückriem's work has effectively retained the capacity to organize space by visibly reducing forms to an extreme simplicity. But, contrary to the almost axiomatic demands that are clearly expressed in the works and writings of Donald Judd and Robert Morris, Rückriem's Minimal forms, precisely because of their raw physicality and frequently different surfaces, do not demand to be installed in the euclidian, neutral, white spaces of the museum or art gallery. The open-air environment, the garden, or even the natural park work just as well for Rückriem's sculpture, which is not to say that the work appears in any way traditional.

Rückriem is fully conscious of that side of his work that has to do with process. Certain earlier works, like the square piece of steel from 1971, hammered from its centre so as to mark a rough circle and lift up the edges, clearly shows this consciousness, which is further confirmed by the sculptor's use of video to record this action in which he explained, "the process is more important than the result." Even in the many more numerous cases where the completed object is itself more important, it still bears witness to a process that the viewer can reconstruct. One can imagine the sculptor choosing the block of granite or limestone which he will split, cut, polish and then put back together. This temporal dimension, in addition to the physical and permanent presence of the finished object, is very much a part of the sculpture placed before our eyes. As Rückriem has confirmed:

*Material, relationships of size and colour, the siting of the piece, and, of course, the process of working, are today, as in the past, all part of my work. The "what" and the "how" stand there like the two towers of the Cologne Cathedral...*

This statement, however, contains an essential double meaning: the process, that is to say, the how of coming into being, is also an aspect of the sculpture's physical reality.

But now let us look at Rückriem's sculpture for what it is – purely and simply – for what it is seen to give, independent of any attempt to establish a possibly arbitrary historical context. Standing upright like most sculpture and monuments left to us through thousands of years of sculptural practice, or lying on the ground, breaking with the tradition of verticality but perhaps relating to another sculptural antecedent, that of the stele or, better yet, that of the funeral stone, Rückriem's works can simultaneously appear both archaic and modernist. This ambiguity explains itself if we understand that Rückriem's work subjects sculpture to a shift of perception as extraordinary as it is fundamental: he sculpts not the surface, but the interior of the volume. Although perfectly comprehensible, this basic principle of Rückriem's work has been expressed clearly only by the artist himself: "*I work on the inside of the volume.*" Furthermore, this shift in perception carries with it critical consequences: Rückriem's sculpture is removed from the classical definition of sculpture that opposes the subtraction of material (extolled by Michelangelo) to the additive nature of modeling. It also makes inappropriate any attempt to explain the work in terms of the antitheses – surface/narration, figuration/abstraction, material/dematerial, object/concept, etc. – that often are used to interpret contemporary sculpture.

Rückriem's drawings map the cuts that afterwards will divide the material. The cuts are subject to the stone's inherent characteristics but, more importantly, they depend on the interior organization that the artist wishes to achieve. The cut is first shown on paper – the plan – then carried out by different techniques (saw, chisel, etc.) on the surface of the actual stone, and finally visually redrawn when the parts are once again put back together to reconstruct the original block. Such a process is obviously as much Conceptual as it is Minimalist or Process. In fact, when he talks of his work, Rückriem shows himself to be perfectly conscious of his nature, his "*cosa mentale*":

*Most often the sculptures are made by professional workers at the quarry. My work is to watch over the process in order to obtain exactly what I want. Making drawings, organizing, negotiating, deciding, rejecting has become my real work...*

Excerpts from 'Sculpting the Interior of the Volume' by Daniel Soutif, 2004