Interview

In your artistic practice you carry out in-depth research into the relationship between matter and void. Would you give us a brief explanation of this?

It's true that in my research I try to reflect on matter and void, to reinvent the relationship between the two, as it were.
Creating a void is a generous gesture. There is an undeniable need for space. Today's world is full: full of impulses, images and people. At the start of the last century the total population of the world amounted to about one and a half billion people. By the end of the fifties it had grown to about three billion, at the start of the nineties to five billion and today there are more than seven billion of us. All sorts of interesting analyses are being done of how the population will continue to grow and what the consequences will be for how we handle space. I refuse to take a negative approach to this evolution, but at the same time I am convinced that we shall have to adapt our way of thinking in many areas and make it keep pace with developments.

So in my artistic practice I try to reflect on the relationship between solid and void and to fit these findings into a changing world. This theme is of course not new, but every era deals with it in its very own way. This research has led me to the premise that one can only make the void, or emptiness, visible by contrasting it with the solid, or matter. In theory this is of course a contradiction, but in practice I see that I can make a void appear by using a lot of solid matter. I worked as an architect for several years and I still feel like a builder. But I believe that it is least of all by erecting a lot of buildings that one can make a contribution to thinking in this area. When you look at such great names as Louis Kahn and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe you notice that their greatest contributions to thinking on architecture were often not even built, but are known from drawings, writings and models.

This realisation and the desire to work both intellectually as well as physically on research led me to withdraw to the tranquillity of a studio – also a void – where I can experiment with materials and test their relationship with space in a more immediate way.

So how do your works relate to architecture?

My works are a contribution to thinking on architecture. In architecture you create a new void that is integrated into the surroundings. In sculpture you can at best introduce more void into an existing environment. I like to refer to the Japanese architectural office SANAA. In their work they also make a completely new contribution to thinking on space, though in a way that's completely different from my research. In simple terms, they remove solid matter to make the void visible, whereas I add solid matter. Their practice had existed for many years before they were able to build their first project. In that study period one of their main jobs was to make mock-ups, and that practice still goes on today. They are full-scale models, prototypes so to speak, which may even have greater autonomy than the things that are actually built.

Do you find that sort of autonomy important in your own work too?

Autonomy is absolutely essential to me! Richard Serra said he chose not to go into architecture because he didn't want to become a plumber, referring to his friend Frank Gehry. And in fact I agree with him. But of course at the same time I don't fully agree with him, because there are great architects who have effectively demonstrated the opposite. For example I would like to mention the office in Barcelona where I was a trainee in 2003, Arriolafiol. It was there I saw that it is possible for architecture to be only about 'space', which is created for people's well-being. So space – and void – is often public and not private. Mario Merz once said something interesting in this regard too. He said that architecture is the most important art because, if one puts two stones together, one is designing a refuge.

But to return to the question… yes, autonomy is the basis on which one can work purely, impetuously and seriously. To me, autonomy also means eliminating function. As an artist you have to be able to work like a scientist. Starting from something (or nothing), looking for something (or nothing) and ending up with something (or nothing). When you work like that, things appear that never previously existed.

How do you actually work in your studio? How do your sculptures appear?

What I actually do is to go into my studio and look around me at what is already there. Not so much at the works already completed, but at the remnants of previous works: bits of wood, aluminium, lead, rubber etc. Then I look for a place where I can try to put some of these elements together. It's not so much a matter of bringing the various elements together as about the 'space' or 'void' that I thereby try to mark out. As soon as I get a notion of the boundary, I try to close it – make it airtight, you might even say – so that a cavity takes shape. This 'empty' cavity is then reinforced. During this initial stage the only thing I decide myself is this specific position of the boundary, the spatial delineation of the void.

In the second phase I fill the bounded space with pigmented plaster. Just like marking off the void, this mixing of plaster and pigment is entirely intuitive. I make the plaster, pick colours at random and pour one bucketful after another into the mould. Sometimes I leave long intervals between pouring the plaster, and sometimes it's very impetuous and agitated. Things often go wrong while I'm pouring the plaster. Usually something bursts open, and although it's very frustrating at the moment it happens, the power of the result actually often lies in these unpredictable events.

After casting, everything has to dry. That normally takes several hours, depending on the size of the work. But due to curiosity I often can't wait that long. The third phase is breaking open the mould. This is the moment I have in mind from when I start spatially marking off the void. Breaking open the mould requires a lot of concentration, but it always takes place in a state of extreme nervousness. It's all or nothing, a moment of euphoria or a serious setback. I decide almost immediately whether the result is a step in the right direction. This is very intuitive, just like the spatial boundary and the choice of colours.

What is the importance of colour in making the void visible?

Without layering, you can't make the casting process visible. And without the visibility of the process you end up with a clumsy, isolated 'formal' object. Colour and light have always been very important to me, which is why I love painting so much. Painting is often purely about the soul, whereas sculpture is about the body and the soul.

Actually, I consider the use of colour to make clear how my works take shape to be painting too. But at the same time this is of course quite dubious, because the support for the paint adopts a position in space. It is difficult to talk about this, but one thing I know for sure is that on the one hand the colour contributes to the emptiness the work radiates to its surroundings, and on the other that partly as a result of this the work enters into a very subjective relationship with the viewer.

How do you see the relationship between your work and the viewer? Do you aim for a particular ideal perception or experience?

The works are always the result of making an existing void visible. This void is marked off and then cast in pigmented plaster that solidifies layer by layer. You could call the result a stance adopted by matter. It is this position that the visitor is able to experience. So the viewer does not contemplate an object, but experiences a stance. Experiencing something is very dynamic and depends on one's own previous experiences. By contrast, observing or contemplating an object is very static. So the perception or experience a viewer has of a work remains very open. I find this an important nuance. It may make the viewer himself think about his posture for a few moments, so that he feels this immateriality himself. In any case, you can't aim for any set experiences because the relationship with the work actually depends on the viewer's own experiences and the place where the work is shown. In the case of *Interval*, which I am making in situ at S.M.A.K., the viewer can never even experience the whole of the boundaries of the cast residual space at a single glance. It will require movement in space and time.

So in fact this stance of solid matter dictates movement in the void.

Exactly! The position the solid matter adopts is actually the stance of a bounded 'void'. So each work has an inherent inner void that is cast without any control over the way the solid matter will appear. And for this reason I suspect that the work, in addition to this inner void, also shows a void to the outside. Compare it with a tree… you can talk about the position of a tree, but you can also talk about the void around the tree – which is defined precisely by its specific position. You can move around in this void. So there is no stance without solid matter and thus no void without stance.

You call your works subjects (as opposed to objects). What makes a work a subject and not an object?

Let's assume that the subject is the observer, while the object refers to what is observed. It is generally

agreed that we cannot see people as objects. It's about time that we also stop labelling certain results of thinking and working processes solely as objects too. I am mainly talking about the way we deal with space these days. After all, apart from time, space is *the* condition for human well-being.

When we talk about architecture we cannot say that you can only observe it and that it is therefore an object. Architecture contains a space that appears as a result of an integrated stance of solid matter in an existing environment. So you can experience architecture, but not simply observe it. Architecture is something which itself enters into subjective relationships with both surroundings and visitor and can therefore never be confused with the term 'object'.

When it comes to sculptures that are the result of casting an empty residual space, this sculpture cannot simply be called an object either. You not only observe my sculptures, you enter into interaction with them and in this way your 'looking' becomes 'experiencing'.

All my work arises out of previous work. They are not static objects but subjects that grow out of an open and dynamic process; they are stances of solid matter that enable voids to solidify in time. My works transform and adapt in and to various contexts and try to achieve relationships with the surroundings and the viewer. This means they unequivocally cannot be labelled purely as objects.
In short: my artistic practice results in subjects that are a boundary in space and time and which are able to build up subjective relationships or experiences with another entity.

You opt to give these subjects a code as a title, one that refers to the moment they came into existence. What is the importance of this time registration?

As I pointed out earlier in this conversation, each work is born out of previous work. The boundaries I make in space and which ultimately act as a mould in the casting process are often made up of elements I recuperate from previous works. On top of that there is the fact that both this spatial boundary and the use of colour are highly intuitive processes, so the result is very much subject to the precise moment in time.

So the title is a place in time and in a series of works in which particular preoccupations can be disclosed. In addition to that, I naturally have a relationship with every work – though sometimes very aloof – and I know exactly how impetuous or calm I was when I was casting them. The titles indicate when the works were created and in that way they form a personal diary of what an intuition was like at a particular moment. Thinking about this, I once wrote that I sometimes have the impression I am casting time in layers. Perhaps that's a good notion with which to end.