

# A derisory *poiesis* of decline

Concerning  
Eric Schumacher's  
exhibition

## FINDERS KEEPERS SURFACE SWEEPERS

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### **Is Eric Schumacher a sculptor in the classic sense of the term ?**

Stroll down the street, gather, pick up, choose, find, seek out elements for a future sculpture. Bring them into his studio, work with them with the goal of fashioning a composition, arrange the fragments until they result in a form. Sculpt, sand, paint, modify, adapt the materials depending on the concept for this form. Let rest, compose, add, ponder, select, reduce, eliminate, and then finally reach the form corresponding to the initial concept. The final arrangement imitates nothing, represents nothing and yet, even so, at a given moment, it is finished: it then becomes a sculpture.

The mastery of materials, their meticulous treatment, the knowledge (or intuition) of forms and their relationship to space, the daring and subtle playing with space, the manipulation of elements and the sensation of totality, of (open-ended) completion that characterise the work of Eric Schumacher – his methods and what comes to life – would lead one to say that he is an artist-sculptor in the classic sense of the term. However, the traditional sculptors for whom he made pedestals while he was a student in Edinburgh for the purpose of earning some pocket money and whose sculptures (or what remained of them) he borrowed in the evenings when they had left so that he could configure his own compositions, never considered him as such... probably rightly so.

This is precisely what the artist announces with his exhibition's title, one that could also be sung – because it resembles a children's homeoteleuton<sup>1</sup> – and serves as an invitation for discussion – because it is also a play on words and meanings. In a way that is both humble and strong, and after having let the imagination loose, this title in fact affirms an artistic position: find, keep, eradicate. *Finders keepers surface sweepers* therefore indicates above all how the artist defines his approach. His work is indeed born within this dialectic of selection and elimination – in the world of art and in society in general – because he finds the elements with which he composes his works in what others abandon.

This artistic approach poses in a direct way the question of *what makes works of art* – both during the process of their creation and their entry, or non-entry, into the world of art. After having reiterated Duchamp's postulate, the artist inserts his approach into a perspective that could also be interpreted as a political position.

By way of his work, which pertains to architecture, contemporary furniture and materials, but also to what society discards, to new objects and their historicity (to what they imitate), to their temporary use and to their dubious conditions of manufacture, the artist in fact reacts above all to the conditions of contemporary life: sterility, kitsch, poor materials massively produced in 'developing' countries, oppressive architecture that results in standardised living spaces and an isolated lifestyle; but also absurd monumentality intended to represent power, superficial sophistication of contemporary interiors that ever more frequently resemble each other, aesthetisations of wealth and false comfort, settling down, habit and widespread acceptance of banality and of the prefabricated, which is both cheap and of poor quality. Commenting on this "absence of cultural integrity and the eradication of the past (artisans) in favour of mass production", Eric Schumacher reacts in his own words to the triviality of current everyday life through his use of materials. He does so by reinserting them in the context of globalisation (because the materials he uses are produced and/or consumed almost everywhere on the planet in an identical manner) and by recalling how generalised consumerism is an aberration (because he is interested in the richness of waste). In this way the artist formulates a critique of today's aesthetic forms. And he does it with humour...

“And so he goes, he runs, he seeks. What does he seek?  
Assuredly, this man, such as I have described him,  
this recluse gifted with an active imagination,  
always travelling through *the great desert of men*,  
has a nobler aim than that of the mere stroller,  
a more general aim, other than the fleeting pleasure of circumstance.  
He seeks this elusive something that we could call *modernity*  
for want of a better term to express the idea in question.  
The aim for him is to extract from trends  
that which is poetic in their history, to draw forth the eternal from the transitory.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Or 'near rhyme'.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, « IV. La modernité », p. 10 du livre numérique disponible en ligne sur le portail de la littérature française [www.litteratura.com](http://www.litteratura.com) : [http://www.litteratura.com/ressources/pdf/oeu\\_29.pdf](http://www.litteratura.com/ressources/pdf/oeu_29.pdf), translated by Robert Frankle.

### **“The act of modernising, rather than modernism”<sup>3</sup>**

Eric Schumacher’s interest in the decline that accompanies the idea of progress evokes Adorno’s critique when he introduces together with Max Horkheimer the interdisciplinary concept of the *cultural industry* (*Kulturindustrie*) in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.<sup>4</sup> The most representative work of Critical Theory and one of the twentieth century’s principal philosophical documents, renders clear the historical and logical process that leads from the Enlightenment to its opposite – the myths or the barbarism (from which it sought emancipation) – which threaten civilisation on a planetary scale. Simultaneously, the artist asks questions concerning culture (the aesthetics of contemporary life’s systems) and art, which are equally important to the Frankfurt School: What does an object reveal? And what provides an artwork with its value?

The artist’s work goes beyond the context of modernism that he evokes by way of his aesthetic codes, referring as well to conceptual minimalism and then to urbanism, public art, historical monuments and classic symbols of art history. He further references contemporary furniture, interior decoration and trinkets found in places like the windows of village houses, museum shops or a doctor’s waiting room. In practice, the artist’s sculptural arrangements form a commentary about these spatial arrangements, decorations and ‘creations’ of places of life in all of their banality. As a result, through his sculptural language, his reflections on modernism become a *meta* position – beyond this, in the current moment while bearing in mind everything that precedes it. Since what interests the artist are the dynamics, the processes, the desire to renew, modernise, invent spaces for living; and what the aesthetic models chosen for these evolutions reveal about society. A questioning which, when transposed to the level of art, is interested in the way things (or works) are organised in space, in the movements that this allows or suggests, and in what these situations reveal concerning the essence of the exhibition space and the concept of the artwork in a broad sense of the term.

### **SURFACE SWEEPERS – the society of waste**

The important evolutions of the modern era have been accompanied by the domination of what is immediately usable, exploitable, sellable. The result is a contemporary society, where everything very quickly becomes waste and where, rather than being the result of a responsible awareness of the natural and cultural environment, ecological awareness becomes a trend – that is consumerist as well. We furthermore live in a society where unbridled consumption has become the false refuge par excellence, the most accessible escape hatch: thoughtlessly it produces trash. The artist therefore chooses to use the verb ‘to reuse’ rather than the term ‘to recycle’ in order to distance himself from this ecological trend. His approach, which is neither aggressive nor disillusioned, results in a creative joy – while remaining critical: a *poiëtic*<sup>5</sup> derision of decline.

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<sup>3</sup> In the artist’s own words.

<sup>4</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford University Press, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> From the Greek verb *poiēn*, *poiēsis*’ objective is the study of the potentialities inscribed in a given situation leading to a new creation. A life of *poiēsis* is a life of *praxis*, of manufacture, of material production, of work. In Plato, *poiēsis* is defined as "the activity in which a person brings something into being that did not exist before." (The Symposium, 205 b). See also, René Passeron, *Pour une philosophie de la création*, Paris, Klincksieck, “Esthétique”, 1989.

This interest in what becomes waste, what is rejected, refused, unselected also becomes for Eric Schumacher a way of talking about art. His project for the fourth *Triennale de la Jeune Création*<sup>6</sup> for which he chose with humour (and *solidarity*) to make use of the works of artists not selected for the exhibition and to create his sculptural installation from their *mise en scène* functioned as a conceptualisation of curatorial work, but especially of the world of art, which can only exhibit by rejecting. Critical and humorous reference to the authoritarian, yet necessary, selections made by the art world establishment – from curators, to art critics, galleries and directors of institutions – who decide whether or not to let an artist enter in their world. This work – both an act of solidarity and camaraderie towards other artists, and consciously at the edge of exploiting others' work – revealed by way of this subtle dialectic the dynamics inherent in any selection process. The rather provocative reuse of the 'waste' of other artists continues to form one of the important elements of Schumacher's work, who, when passing by the studios of his friends, selects what they do not intend to use in order to later possibly incorporate it into his work.

### **FINDERS KEEPERS – the method of a minimalist collector**

The dilemma of the minimalist hoarder, who paradoxically must eliminate in order to arrive at a final form that he has been composing while hoarding is one of this work's most significant challenges. This reuse of others' leftovers also brings to mind the use of indirect references and the manual reproduction of elements characteristic of art history, architecture and manufactured production, since the artist collects and then reuses the refuse of other citizens. The use of furniture abandoned in the street that he decomposes or deconstructs and then recomposes explains why, without truly being able to identify them, we recognise forms or even objects that are part of his sculptures: we all have similar furniture at home. And the artist also makes use of his own waste – for example, a sheet of A3 paper that he used to protect his studio floor from spray paint is part of the exhibition. Likewise, the exhibition invitation card that he used to protect a sculpture during its installation. "Evidence of artistic execution", he says smiling. A way as well of revealing the contrast between what must be beautiful, or practical, useful, and its hidden aspects that become visible by way of sculptural work. As soon as someone pays attention to anything, even the slat of a blind, it becomes mysterious, fascinating, a world in itself, indescribably magnificent. The interest in simple, poor, materials, sublimated by the very sophisticated work that the artist realises, reshapes the materials and objects. Eric Schumacher spends days reworking, cutting, painting, transfiguring poor materials into ... something else.

### **Deconstruction of the work of art during the meta-age of its mechanical reproducibility**

It is also possible to imagine the artist creating exquisite corpses based on Ikea instruction guides, to which he adds his own elements and then executes them sculpturally. His work of composition based on isolated elements, out of context, the act of disassembly, constitutes as well a deconstruction-reconstruction that, to a certain extent, can be considered in further depth in Derridian terms. In the context of textual analysis, Jacques Derrida<sup>7</sup> proposes a

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<sup>6</sup> *jet lag/out of sync*, Triennale Jeune Création Luxembourg et Grande Région, Rotondes, Luxembourg (LU), 2017, curator, Anouk Wies.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, 1978.

different interpretation of the terms *Destruktion* and *Abbau* as they are defined in Heidegger's *Being and Time*: rather than their classical translation using the term 'destruction', he proposes the use of the term *deconstruction* (metaphysics); rather than reducing ontology to nothingness and arriving at annihilation or at a negative reduction and Heideggerian demolition, Derrida chooses, by way of the method of deconstruction, to demonstrate how thought is built. He then proposes an intervention applied to the structure or architecture of the concepts of ontology and Western metaphysics. This act of deconstruction that the French philosopher employs as a philosophical exercise with text can help arrive at a better understanding of Eric Schumacher's approach, because Derrida's method of deconstruction enables discrepancies to be revealed, making visible implied postulates, omissions or osculations that are then disclosed in the text itself. The artist's work with the most common and trivial of objects resembles this approach.

However, this exercise at analogy with Derrida must end here because the abstract universe of Eric Schumacher opposes any attempt at narrative or narration. Even though there is deconstruction (disassembly) and reconstruction, by way of the gaps it produces, it liberates itself from any reductive interpretations, which would aim to assign a precise meaning. If each element of the composition contributes to the formal development of a concept, for which a story-line could be imagined (with words replaced by objects and materials); if this universe could simply be understood as a rearrangement of the furniture of our daily lives (of what we have or are going to dispose of and which he chooses to keep by rearranging them); if even the process could nearly be inversed, recreating based on his work living spaces as they are built today... There is something in the work of the artist that eludes any form of reductive explanation. There is a scheme that infiltrates the interstices of the work's precision – the control of the artist who masters each element of his arrangements – and the *objective chance* that led to his initial lucky find.

The quasi-mathematical abstraction of the arrangements, their strange visual equilibrium, the absence of a clearly identifiable subject, the freedom of the forms that unfurl in a self-sufficient, efficacious and absolute manner, this face to face encounter to which the artist invites us (both the sculpture and us, our head, our eyes, our imagination/interpretation) require time to be fully grasped. It is necessary to dive deeply into each proposal, to follow its unexpected forms and complementary elements, to try to understand the basis of the equilibrium found within disequilibrium, which suggests a geometry whose rules are specific to the artist – and open to those who let themselves be carried away by work. This dive is nothing less than a *phenomenological experience* of the work – it is necessary to let the work give of itself and only in this way can it be received and understood.

Schumacher makes models of the forms that he develops. He then operates a reduction (which inevitably resembles the philosophical pursuit of phenomenology) which aspires to question form. Why does a work function at a given moment? These structures, these arrangements in space of objects fragmented, agglomerated, composed, recomposed, this arrayal of unexpected forms that are familiar to us (known intuitively, yet unrecognised and which nonetheless are neither indices nor bearings, but rather materials that become starting points for reflections that can become very profound) constitute the singularity of this work.

As a result of these rearranged fragments, this deconstruction of the 'beautiful appearance' of the trivial with the objective of grasping a truth, Eric Schumacher's work inevitably brings to

mind Walter Benjamin's<sup>8</sup> reflections. An unclassifiable thinker very close to the Frankfurt school, Benjamin embarks on his aesthetic reflections starting with the postulate that *the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction* can only be considered in terms of its relation to the technique. His reflections on the loss of the aura (of authenticity) can thus accompany a reflection concerning Schumacher's work. Van Gogh's sunflowers are not the same when printed on a postcard; it is necessary to conclude, says Benjamin, that the aura (the uniqueness of a work, characteristic of art tradition) has been eliminated. This ambiguity characteristic of Benjamin's thought, its modernist way of accepting what is new, despite its 'poverty', and to express at the same time nostalgia for an era wiped out by contemporaneity, this combination of two assertions – neither pure modernity nor Proustian nostalgia – and his phenomenological approach to the world on display before him are reminiscent in fact of the artist's approach. Benjamin also writes about the splintering, the division, the fragmentation of the world that innovation causes, and draws the following conclusion for art works: their inevitable fragmentation. The 'remains' preciously collected by the artist (like the child who seeks to save debris by gathering it), the collection of obliterated things in order to save them, constitute a dialectical manner of siding with the lost aura – bringing a little nostalgia to bear, to (perhaps as well) bring an end to nostalgia.

This position also reveals a character, a presence of mind – being in his time – the ability to comprehend his age and transform what could have been a disaster (a waste) into a possibility. The interruption of the catastrophic course of things by nurturing their intuitive state and poïesis, the necessary and fertile coexistence of two contradictory dynamics characterise both the fragmentary thinking of Walter Benjamin and the sculptural arrangements of Eric Schumacher. We find ourselves here between realistic instrumentality and the fascination of art.

### **Space, reduction and truth**

The sculptural gesture, fully assumed and mastered by the artist who dares to create based on what he finds, culminates in an unexpected result: Schumacher does not let the works inhabit space but, on the contrary, he conceptualises and thinks about space in order to *inhabit it with his works*, responding to it and making it dependent on what he presents. A difficult inversion to execute, a repeated reversal of the powers normally at work in an exhibition space. The *meta* position of the artist, his critical relationship to space, to the world of art, to architecture, to sculpture, to monumentalism, makes this possible because he gives himself the means – artistic and aesthetic.

### **To ask the question what art can do**

In *Finders keepers surface sweepers* (though this is true for Eric Schumacher's work in general), we do not know whether we are in the corner of a city, on a broad avenue, before an interpretation of minimalism or an imposing reduction of a monument, on a shelf with knick-knacks, in front of a house fence, on the plinth of a sculpture in a traditional museum, or immersed in the depths of contemporary art... Indeed, Eric Schumacher proposes fragments of thoughts, both complete and open, a suggestion – how to look at the world – shaped, fully assumed, mastered and freed from forms of the banal, though emerging from them. And because he does so by ceaselessly

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<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Œuvres I, II et III*, Paris, Gallimard, "Folio essays", 2000.

paying attention to the world around him, Eric Schumacher brings to mind the notion that Adorno develops in his *Aesthetic Theory*<sup>9</sup> concerning radical art as a form of both social resistance and truth.

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<sup>9</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, “Aesthetics”, 2013.