

Christoph Weber
Jan Wenzel
Clemens von Wedemeyer

**im Gespräch
2009**

**Translation:
Jeanne Haunschild**

Jan Wenzel

Modernism's avant-garde artists were inspired by the idea of a *tabula rasa*, of an aesthetic production that starts at square one. Present-day art, meanwhile, dreams of incorporating the past. In many artworks from more recent years we find historical allusions, references, quotes or formal appropriations. In the journal *Texte zur Kunst*, this tendency was not so long ago dubbed "referentialism". A term that to me seems somewhat sweeping, for it does not allow any differentiation between the various motifs and forms of appropriation. Which is why to begin with I would like to ask about the chain of reference in your work: The First Minutes of October refers to Sergei Eisenstein's first film frames in his movie October, which in turn refers to a world-shaking historical event—the October Revolution. What point of reference did you start with in your work: Eisenstein's cinematic language or "Red October" as an historical event?

276

Christoph Weber

With Eisenstein, since to him Red October begins—historically false—with the pulling down of the statue of the penultimate Czar. The immediate stimulus behind this present work was the discovery that Eisenstein had set up the scene around the insignia of power.

277



Jan Wenzel

Your work makes clear how much Eisenstein's focus was fixed on this monument. The eye of the camera can't tear itself away from it. Although the beginning sequence shows the destruction of the monument, the concentration on this symbolic act appears to be more a retarding tactic. How do you interpret this sequence?

278

Christoph Weber

Direct hit, sunk! Potemkin. You mention the crucial concentration on the monument. In contrast to the Potemkin when a peripheral revolt breaks out on the battleship because of maggoty meat, everything at the very beginning of October focuses on the heart of the matter, the center of power. I am fascinated by how Eisenstein leads the audience ever more dramatically around the statue and lets viewers participate in the actions of the people who bring it down. To our present-day eyes, the sequence may seem overly didactic, as if Eisenstein were trying to bring the insignia of the scepter and orb, as well as the symbol of the eagle, closer to Russia's rural population. What in the end emerges is an ingenious film scene that takes many historical facets into account. For one, the statue is not simply torn down, but dismantled piece by piece, which is meant to mimic the course of history from the February to the October Revolution. On the other hand, the woodcut-like didactics may also be an expression of the compulsions under which Eisenstein had to work. But even without any historical background analysis, the cinematic transformation of this concentration on the center is, by means of very small "shots", a very powerful gesture.

279

From a film in which a sculpture is destroyed, you develop a new sculptural work. Eisenstein wanted to free himself from a fixed and conventional concept of art and create a new form of representation. Eisenstein co-developed the “glue” in film montage and put it into practice: by means of the cut, two images are combined into something new. A new concept is born. Is there in your work on conceptual sculptures any kind of similar theory?

280



I once called my way of working a methodological re-tracing. I look for a specific technique of transformation or for certain material that takes the work to a point where two things can fuse into a unit—similar to the phenomenon of film montage that you speak of. A simple example of this is the wall-slits by which the image at the outset—the photo of demolished architecture—mimes the technique of drawing, namely, the carving of lines into the wall that becomes a destructive act. Slitting a drawing into a wall that is based on an architecture that is still intact would make no sense to me. With The First Minutes of October there are several such fusions: the reconstruction of the various angles of Eisenstein’s camera is, methodologically speaking, a retracing of the Constructivist era. When I end by manufacturing the work out of simple steel, I am referring to Tatlin; and my decision to pass off the whole as flat—although modeled in 3D—in turn reflects the connection to film as an imaging medium. But it is not always the case that the material from the outset turns into something completely new. On the other hand, “gluey” links between components of my way of working are frequent. The mentality behind this would then perhaps be: to add glue or to burn away any existing glue in order to generate something new that, also with an object-like work, is capable of conveying thematic content that makes do without too much additional information.



281

I would like to go back to the monument again. My impression is that Eisenstein shot his film October on the 10th anniversary of the October Revolution with the intention—thanks to an at-the-time gigantic budget—of creating a new monument. In this respect it was thus not the destruction of the monument in the opening scenes that was the theme, but the shift in the medium to a more contemporary form for a monument. We find a description by the French urbanist Henri Lefebvre that very precisely sets down the dialectics for a monument. In his 1970 book *La révolution urbaine* he writes:

“Contra the Monument. The monument is repressive in its nature. It is the seat of an institution (church, state, university). When it organizes its environs, it does so in order to colonize and to suppress them. All great monuments were raised to enhance the fame of conquerors, to celebrate the powerful. More rarely to honor the dead or deceased beauty (the Taj Mahal ...). They were palaces or tombs. [...] The magnificence of the monuments is a formal magnificence. And since a monument is consequently symbolically inclined, it offers these symbols up to our social consciousness and our (passive) consideration. And it does so at a point in time in which these are not only already dated, but have even lost all meaning. Only think of the revolutionary symbols displayed on Napoleon’s Arc de Triomphe.

Pro Monument. It is the one and only place for a collective (social) life that is imaginable. Although it dominates, it is in order to gather together. The large monuments go above and beyond their function (cathedrals) and even beyond their culture (tombs). Which is the root of their ethical and aesthetic power. Monuments project a world picture on the ground, just as the city projected and projects a social order (totality) on planet earth. At the center of a stage where the characteristics of a society come together and turn banal, monuments engender a transcendence, a somewhere else. They have always been utopian.”

”Contra the Monument. The monument is repressive in its nature. It is the seat of an institution (church, state, university). When it organizes its environs, it does so in order to colonize and to suppress them. All great monuments were raised to enhance the fame of conquerors, to celebrate the powerful. More rarely to honor the dead or deceased beauty (the Taj Mahal ...). They were palaces or tombs. [...] The magnificence of the monuments is a formal magnificence. And since a monument is consequently symbolically inclined, it offers these symbols up to our social consciousness and our (passive) consideration. And it does so at a point in time in which these are not only already dated, but have even lost all meaning. Only think of the revolutionary symbols displayed on Napoleon’s Arc de Triomphe.

Pro Monument. It is the one and only place for a collective (social) life that is imaginable. Although it dominates, it is in order to gather together. The large monuments go above and beyond their function (cathedrals) and even beyond their culture (tombs). Which is the root of their ethical and aesthetic power. Monuments project a world picture on the ground, just as the city projected and projects a social order (totality) on planet earth. At the center of a stage where the characteristics of a society come together and turn banal, monuments engender a transcendence, a somewhere else. They have always been utopian.”

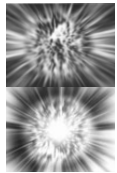
Christoph Weber

Sergei Eisenstein didn't deliver the film monument that Stalin expected: the thing was all too complicated for the masses. Nevertheless, the film is monumental. For the cinema is also a site of collective life. What can be said against October is that the symbols of the October Revolution had, even as early as 1927, lost their meaning. What speaks for this film monument is that the political iconography of a cathedral is also difficult to decipher. And perhaps what is implicit in the characteristics of a monument is that it is first and foremost simply present.

It is there to mark an event. With a great historical event like a revolution you have to distinguish the inherent virtual element from its fulfillment, according to Gilles Deleuze. In other words: you have to make a distinction between the reality of the revolution, namely its ultimate catastrophic consequences, and that magical emancipatory outbreak of collective freedom, namely its virtual dimension. My thesis is that your work touches on exactly this virtual dimension that Deleuze cited. Anyone who doesn't know the genesis of your work would nonetheless understand the form that you have generated from the analysis of Eisenstein's camera angles as a visual metaphor, which Tonio Negri and Michael Hardt call a multitude. The mass many must—driven by their distinctions—first discover communality, which is the prerequisite for any political action. But for Negri/Hardt, this communality is nothing more than the intersection between individual perspectives. What do you think of such an interpretation? Does it still have anything to do with your own intention in this work? Would you call The First Minutes of October a visual metaphor for a utopian political act? Or does such an interpretation relegate the methodological retracing of Eisenstein's camera angles too much to the background?

Both interpretations are relevant. The methodological retracing is perhaps only the road that leads to the visual metaphor of the virtual dimension. I find your association of the multitude very interesting, because we could really understand the eye-pyramids as "singularities acting in common" that rebel creatively, simultaneously and uncontrollably against the Empire. Perhaps it is a question that can be answered with difficulty from this distance in time, but I would be interested in knowing your impression of the form in my work on first seeing it.

Up to now, I only knew The First Minutes of October from pictures. My first associations were: ironclad and martial. In medieval armories there are knight's helmets with a strange beak-like form. A form whose function is probably meant more to intimidate the enemy than to protect the head. And when I saw your sculpture for the first time I thought of a multiplication of this effect. Heiner Müller had a formulation that is very apt in this context: "The terror at the first appearance of the new." The terror that your sculpture expresses is that of a comic strip—naïve-fantastical (such as knights or bird figures) and yet uncannily violence-sated. This association has a second one superposed on it, motivated by the title. I tried to read the form not as a diagram of space, but of time. It really functions like a reversal of the form used to depict the big bang or an explosion. In your sculpture the physical force does not start from a central point and tears off in all directions, but is compressed into a center. It is not a star that sends out light, but one that sucks in every bit of light via its enormous gravitation. Which takes us back to the question of why Eisenstein put so much film energy into this monumental colossus.



Isn't it true that the central concept towards which this sculpture is heading is the whole mental point of the Eisenstein era? All your effort, to analyse the creation of the first minutes of October leads to a retelling of Eisenstein's idea—the big bang. As film makers, we can imagine that a director has a drawing made before the scene is shot in order to make understandable to his cameraman what will later be visually produced via the montage: a cubist view from many different directions. The angles of the perspectives are penciled in; the cameraman then looks for these different viewpoints circumventing the sculpture. In this sense your sculpture is perhaps a mental sculpture, namely a concept of film energy, amalgamation, change, montage, etc. Thus my question about your thoughts in regard to your works in contrast to Eisenstein. The martial material, the energy of the 20th century noted by Jan, here becomes a quotation since, a century after Eisenstein, you of course work differently. In this sense, the metallic, many-pointed star seems like something out of another era and its form reminds us today of price tags, among other things. Or am I off-target and you want to call up Eisenstein's energy?

Seen temporally, my work process is a consolidation that bundles the energy already available. That the form that emerged would have this oscillating effect between explosion and implosion was hardly foreseeable at the time the idea occurred to me. But that it would turn into a strange, irregular star is what appeared in my mind's eye when looking at the film scene. What crossed my mind was the formal violence able to induce such a form and its potential to illustrate revolutionary events: uncontrollability, sudden action, radical change and an outbreak of civic rage. But I didn't want to call up Eisenstein's energy, for even if the scene is symbolically highly charged, the symbol of the tipped-over statue—in reference to your quote, Jan, about the virtual dimension of a revolution—remains very real: the people destroy a monument of the former regime quite literally. The beginning of the Revolution is rung in. The revolution's bang effect is in fact much more fully portrayed in my sculpture. Which reminds me that in one of your works, you used Antonioni's cuts. Was that in Silberhöhe „a housing project in Halle“? Can you perhaps tell us a bit about it? And do you see parallels?

For Silberhöhe I used Antonioni's way of cutting the scenes for L'éclisse, a way of mounting the material as it was "modern" in the 1960s. I believe you can use certain techniques in art as a time machine, since when you try to understand another way of working and use it differently, you can immerse yourself and perhaps understand the difference between the eras better. That's the way it was for me when looking for a technique to best depict a ghost town. At the time I watched a lot of Antonioni. I found a film technique for tristesse that is different from that in Italy. When doing a remake, the contexts become all the more present. By taking over the technique without the contents, you quasi put on another body and other eyes. As such, I see parallels, since with you the statue of the Czar emerges just as little as does the 1960s in Rome with me ... But Eisenstein's vision is still present. You, however, change to another medium, to another materiality. But back to your question about the form: you already knew before the remake that a strangely irregular star would be the result of the reconstruction. How, in your opinion, do you explain such a form iconographically?

That the irregular star is used in two such contrary political contexts, as an anarchic and a capitalist symbol, makes me wonder. The simplest explanation would be: is this star not first of all the expression of a violent impact, e.g., of a fist on a table, a hammer on a piece of wood, a bullet into a wall? Don't all the uses go back to an impact? Indeed, it is not an anarchic, but a leftist symbol: namely the logo of the NGBK in Berlin (Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst) and of the magazine *Stern* and its platform "Courage in the face of rightist force". There is, along with the well-known A-symbol, also an anarchic star symbol, but it is black and has five regular points. Since I began my work, my perception has repeatedly played tricks on me. Perhaps because the form is anarchic? Or because regular-formed stars are often used on flags and the irregular ones stand, so to speak, in opposition to them? Capitalist iconography is, however, quite clear: if a product is "on sale", its price or "Sale!" is shown in an irregular star—often in garish red and yellow. It can be meant as a sensational offer or as loud hype.



Jan Wenzel

Is the irregular star not always associated with something extremely dynamic: that is, with a heavenly object like the headlong rush of a shooting star or a collapsing star scattered in all directions, in the language of astronomy, a red giant?

294

Christoph Weber

Yes, and along with the dynamic there is a connotation of short-lived. In contrast, the regular star stands for stability and, perhaps for this reason, is so often used on flags. Just a few days ago I was at an opening of Iranian art at the Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac in Paris. One of the artists, Ramin Haerizadeh, presented a series of large-scale collages entitled Today's Woman (2008), in which he uses an irregular star taken from an Iranian ad for women's shoes—which in Farsi includes the word "surprise" or "gift"—superimposed over Iranian revolutionary symbols, among others, a flag with Iran's current coat of arms, which embodies Islam and was introduced one year after the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

295



Here a few more speculations: a sham star is a cross that has only four points. Then there are five, which is, funnily enough, a star with an uneven number of points; a star with 6 and 8 points is also easy enough to imagine. After that it only gets confusing. But how did the star get onto the flag in the first place? Surely a misunderstanding, since it is supposed to be in the sky! But it's so good as a pattern because it has no meaning, but with regular points it is quickly recognizable and distinguishable, even for children. And since the star in the sky is actually round, it is therefore a misunderstanding that people have even drawn it with points. Only the Japanese understood it and draw it as a circle, incidentally just like the East German citizens who challenged their state and symbolically cut the insignia of power out of their flag in a round circle.



Since you mention German reunification: there is a movie Technik des Glücks that reflects on the time after reunification, and its final sequence seems like the paradoxical return of Eisenstein's opening scene in October. The film is about the power station Zschornowitz, once the biggest power station in the world.

During the Second World War the British bombers could not destroy it, but already ten years after reunification almost nothing recalled this monument to the industrial age. When at the end of the 1990s the towers of the power station were blown up, many of the former power station workers came to see it and record it on video.

In the movie, the found-footage material is cut together in such a way that the collapse of the towers is shown again and again from different angles. A graphical analysis of the camera standpoints of the workers who positioned themselves around the power station would show a similar form such as you worked out in the Eisenstein sequence. Explosion and implosion actually converge in this sequence. The scene is a fleeting monument. The destruction of the power station marks—metaphorically speaking—the end of Eisenstein's October: the shooting star has plunged to earth. All that is left are craters.

