

Katharina Wendler in conversation with Claudia Mann

E-Mail: Reykjavik – Düsseldorf – Berlin – Cologne, March/April 2018

CM: *Isn't the beginning of sculpture the centre of the earth? Isn't it outer space? There, where anything is possible. The magnetic field as a motor for all occurrences.*

KW: I would like to begin our conversation with a little story, in fact with Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864). In this tale the mineralogist and geologist Professor Otto Lidenbrock from Hamburg and his nephew Axel discover in a runic text written by the Icelander Snorri Sturluson references to the volcano Snæfellsjökull. According to him if one crosses the crater on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July one can succeed in reaching the centre of the earth. Via Copenhagen, the professor and his nephew travel to Iceland. Here they climb the volcano and find a cave inside the crater, which they enter and penetrate ever deeper towards the centre of the earth. They run out of water, they lose each other in the labyrinth of subterranean passageways and the expedition threatens to fail several times. Finally, however, they manage to reach the banks of a subterranean sea where they construct a raft which they use to cross it. During their travels they stumble on giant mushrooms and then prehistoric extinct plants and animals, and molluscs from the 'first period' as well as the remnants of prehistoric man. In their raft they get caught in a storm and are carried further and further across the sea until they finally reach a lava filled crater of an erupting volcano and are thus catapulted back up to the surface of the earth by the force of the eruption. The earth spat them out again just north of Sicily on the island of Stromboli.

CM: *I haven't read Jules Verne for a long time but through your literary start I picked up the book again and found the following: In order to determine the exact point of descent a riddle firstly had to be solved. Axel started fanning his face with the document. The strangely arranged characters and letters written on the front and the back suddenly yielded complete words and the message became decipherable. That is exactly the point, that the two sides of the page result in one. We are not always permanently aware of this oneness because we create references through 'above' and 'below'. We are self-centred and in perpetual motion and thus the things around us often appear to be fixed. The sheet of paper is a good metaphor for this; it does not exist in two dimensions – it is three dimensional. In fact, around the centre of the earth there are said to be iron crystals standing there like a forest of spiky giants. Under very high pressure there is an extremely hot world with temperature in the range of 3000 degrees. That is where space is.*

KW: In your work you often orientate yourself downwards penetrating the earth, there is excavation and then finally a form resulting therefrom. In his novels, Verne not only orientated himself downwards but also upwards as in his *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865), thus incorporating outer space within the literary space of possibilities. And here again I see literary parallels as your sculptural work incorporates the space of possibilities in much the same way by penetrating horizontal planes of the ground either upwards or downwards.

CM: *Outer space is just as relevant for me as the centre of the earth. We are space. In order to comprehend the dimensions of space right up to the centre of the earth one should be fully aware of the fact that the ground only seems to be an impenetrable surface. However, it consists of air as well as material. Ground is a very self-centred version of what in fact is only material. That is why it is a*

*component of the definition of 'horizon'. It stretches to the horizon. This is where a triangle appears. Everything is always about the triangle. One's location starting with the feet, eye level and then what one sees is all physically dependent on this. The triangle is synonymous with stability and becomes apparent with its three points of support in statics – three-point-logic. Aero has a triangular layout. I am a triangle when spread out but also a circle.*

KW: *Aero (2016) consists of a hollow, paper-thin, diaphanous funnel made of resin, it is defined by its space and downward tapering with a height of 207 cm. This corresponds to your body measurements with your arms stretched upwards and that was the depth of the hole you dug for the mould. Solid Aero (2018) is higher and narrower. In the approx. 1-2 cm thick bronze casting there are indentations where your feet found a foothold while digging. Likewise, the bronze itself has recorded everything – grass, soil, stones – which previously remained imbedded in the wax. You excavate your holes on your own without any help and remove the equivalent volume of soil to your body measurements which is then transferred to the surface. You render the space corresponding to yourself visible.*

CM: *Both works delve into the question of the primeval form of sculpture, they are skin, they are vessels, defining space, describing air; they are my body, my imprint in the ground. The ground is the starting of sculpture and the sculpture itself. But the human entity is and remains the reference. In the past I used to move and work above this 'surface'. By means of various processes the necessity arose to break through it and to perceive it. What exactly is the ground? Where does it begin and where does it end? To perceive something and then to clearly accept it for what it is a form of appropriation. Not merely the wish to hold onto a thought but to own its equivalent made of matter. Air is just as much matter, we are matter. Perception means using the senses. However most of the time we use our senses unconsciously. It is interesting to become aware of one's own senses. I am looking for the beginning.*

KW: How do you decide where to begin digging?

CM: *All the trivia which accumulate around a project are just a matter of logistics. But it is almost irrelevant where I begin my work; because it is always the same planet. That is a very important consideration since for me the fundamental questions on sculpture are always associated with this planet and its gravitation and inhabitants. That is all that we have and that is the one and only assumption.*

KW: Your interest in the ground under your feet is evident in your work *model for Sculptures Inside (studio cast from 26.04.16)* (2016), in which you shaped the soil in your former studio, an old barn.

CM: *The work looks at the inwardness of sculpture on the basis of here and now. That is my basic premise; ground equals sculpture. It goes without saying that people are never uninvolved, but rather implicated to the same degree in the situation.*

KW: For your work the location of a piece of ground does not matter; it possesses universal validity, it defines the borderline to the inside and maintains the potential from which everything then results. Nevertheless, you create a record by removing something; you hold onto a state, you quite literally document a unique piece of land. The marks left on the floor of your studio document the traces of all that has taken place there on day X, and thus the natural story of this patch of earth.

CM: *The work does not only deal with a state, but also the remnants of numerous previous works which arose in this studio. While I was completing this work, various threads converged and I above all*

*understood what makes the soil so special and what it contains and how I am but an insignificant part of all this. Millions of years precede me which made the ground which I am working on today. Temporal considerations therefore play a vital role, although I do not attach importance to dating anything exactly. What mattered to me was to capture my studio, that was my first thought, but everything kept on getting bigger; the longer I worked on it the smaller I became.*

KW: Your role or your position as an artist is the one of a **Urheberin** [German for an initiator, creator, or author, with the syllables “Ur-“ meaning ancient or primal and “heben” meaning to elevate, to lift, or to raise]. In terms of mass our earth is a closed system; the sum remains constant, just as the energy does. The principle of the conservation of energy as the most important rule in science describes the total energy in this system as constant, however transmutations of the form of energy are possible within the system. With your work you intervene in this system by raising, lowering, and shaping mass. You transfer or transform that which is there and always was there into a different energetic dimension, into visuality, into material.

Bronze, wax, plaster, wood, resin, silicone – what significance do you ascribe to these materials?

CM: *There are certain considerations which precede and follow the choice of any material I use. I experiment with the material and tend to go with it to its limits. I have confidence in the material and know what it can do and what it can take. But at the same time, I don't know either. I ask myself whether the material firstly exists when it assumes shape. I usually don't begin by taking something in my hands and modelling it, but rather I concern myself with thoughts, theories and questions which form the starting point – questions about a material, shape or general questions about sculpture.*

*Constructing a mould, carving, the chamotte, the preparation of the kiln, cleaning the casts... is all very traditional and a fascinating way of producing sculptures. I am pretty sure however that there are many more possibilities in this process than were originally imagined in the classical production of sculpture. I ask myself what the first sculpture was? Where is the beginning? I don't think the answers are to be found in a foundry but I use the techniques and the characteristics of the material used there.*

*In the case of Solid Aero, it is not only the bronze that is important but also the process involved up to the current state. The lost wax technique is crucial; the transformation i.e. the complete conversion of wax and earth – heat, solidification, heat, solidification.*

*I have stopped distinguishing between positive moulds and negative moulds. Negative becomes positive and positive becomes negative. I address myself to the material even during the inclusion of the layer of soil. It is actually here that three 'materials' fuse together; the soil, the wax, and myself. I make decisions and execute movements but at no point can I really influence how the bronze will turn out. Metal is honest.*

*With Solid Aero I am especially interested in keeping the pure cast skin. The material is alive and reacts, it absorbs and it repels. It looks like a skin of a newly born child.*

*Inside the fleshy wax has made its way downwards like a string of pearls; whereas on the outside, stones and sand have become an inherent component of the form and material. Form and material unite. The supposed casing was in actual fact space all the time. It redefines space and creates an entity. This entity is physical, almost capturing something representational and is, as you pointed out, part of an already existing energy system.*

KW: Your thoughts on positive and negative, process and form, become especially evident in your works where you cast specific natural forms, for example a desert rose for the work *horizon* (2016). Desert roses are bizarre crystalline structures made of gypsum which are formed by extremely rapid evaporation of water in very hot desert regions and the crystallization of the salts dissolved in that

water. Your reproduction of this form and its transformation into a different material, in this case bronze, is what I would describe as transmutation of energy – transferring to a different materiality, to a substance with altered attributes, and yet at the same time maintains the original shape.

CM: *These forms are fascinating – how can anything so fractal proliferate and be so extrovert? It is pure mathematics. Furthermore, they can be developed endlessly.*

*When reproducing the desert rose, two half-moulds were made and these were joined together using three wedges. I opened the inside so that it is possible to see inside and also look through it. The interconnection of eyelevel-head-body-ground-horizon-plaster-extrovert-introvert and even the line of vision looking inside have all been captured as the bronze solidified. The sculpture's interior has the same volume as that of the human head, whereby we must ask ourselves whether human bodily measurements were in fact the starting point.*

KW: Do you always take your own body measurements for the initial size or have you ever used other proportions?

CM: *In the past, I have made use of other dimensions as a starting point, but the more I think about it the more I realize that all these measurements always had something to do with me. The cinematographic sculpture Silver Lining for Adam (2017) for instance is gauged to my father's eye level. It consists of black charred wooden lamellae arranged in a circle and joined together with aluminium leaf. Another work corresponding to the height of my line of sight is Horizon (2015), a plaster slab for a shop window in Cologne which was placed on the raised floor so that I could only see it from below. That was really strange but important for all the components of this exhibition, a few centimetres higher or lower would have been wrong. But I myself am not of primary importance, rather, the fundamental question is: What is sculpture? Sculpture and the human condition are apparently inseparable. This question cannot be examined from one direction otherwise you can't see anything.*

KW: In the same exhibition you showed two cones one of which subjectively corresponds to the weight of your German shepherd which died in your arms: *Cone (the day my dog melted in my arms)* (2015).

CM: *I still felt his volume many hours later. Outside the snow lay on the ground and so I made a cone of snow in the same volume and then cast it in plaster. Volume vs. feelings. The snow disappeared and left in its place materialized feelings. That was one of the cones. It was hardly visible because it was incorporated into a larger cone. Together they floated above the shop window's floor and it was possible to look inside when squatting. All in all, an exciting place since the 'floor' itself was already elevated. Cone was a kind of personal floating portrait of physical as well as psychological stress.*

KW: Do you regard your work in the context of Land Art?

CM: *Yes, of course. I would however like to point out that it is not Land Art in the strictest sense of the term. But it has something to do with it. I have spent a lot of time thinking about Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer und Robert Morris to name but a few. Not to mention Carl Andre – after Andre the ground is sculpture for me.*

*Land Art had and still has its own sense of time and I ask myself whether this term is currently emerging once more. I find myself very often noticing works which have those kinds of origins. I work a lot in the open and nearly always with the immediately available land but less with the landscape which is normally the focus of attention in the case of Land Art. It is a question of size and scale which are in fact not the same thing at all. Outside in the open, spatial questions get a different*

*slant. This space which we touched on at the beginning embraces everything from the centre of the earth to outer space. Is our planet Earth itself a sculpture? We ourselves and everything around us take up space and define space and therefore are sculpture.*

KW: How important are performative aspects to you in your work?

CM: *My body is my set of tools. I work with my entire body. It is a truly physical confrontation and therefore the performative act is the starting point, although normally without an audience. My actions are my language and are recognisable. The traces and that which was brought into motion are that which remain. Then the situation arises where the sculpture no longer requires me and a certain neutralisation takes place. That is to say I often keep records of myself but the videos or pictures which arise have only a partial relevance. The more I use myself as a vehicle and the more I become aware that that is the way sculpture begins, the more insignificant I become.*

KW: Your exhibition at Fuhrwerkswaage bears the title *SOLID AERO*. This charged relationship, this all-inclusive liaison between supposed mutually exclusive opposites, illustrates still further your complex idea of sculpture. Solid physicality encounters fleeting invisibility.

CM: *The title also exemplifies how strongly process and form are interlinked with one another. I impart air with form and regard both Aero-sculptures as shell and body at the same time. 'Solid' is not meant in the sense of compactness but as a solid body. That is a nice idea since it implies that there must also be bodies which are not solid.*

KW: Plato assigned the air to the octahedron a very specific form; a shape with six corners and eight faces and twelve edges, which looks like two pyramids pressed together. This Platonic figure consisting of nothing but triangles (we talked of the stability of triangles!) not only stands for the four points of the compass but also for two spatial directions: Up and down.

Our atmosphere marks, as it were, the only place where the mixture of gases known as 'air' in its very specific composition occurs, the borderline between that which is above and that which is below. It is the space of possibilities in which we humans operate and where we attempt to break through the two vertical directions; towards the centre of the earth and into outer space.

CM: *The totality of things and everything that surrounds us – that means solid substances, seemingly solid substances as well as the spaces between them, also the air – constitute everything that is potential space. Within it is negative space as well as positive space; both are equal constants. Also, within the notions of sculpture; sculpture is material, sculpture is air, sculpture is light, sculpture is space, sculpture is ground, sculpture is human.*

KW: In the exhibition there are also three photographs: *first sculpture is grave* and two works from the series *en face* (all 2017). In what way is photography an important medium for you as a sculptor?

CM: *Photography acts as a kind of back-up; it is a way of seeing, exposing, focussing, and meditating. Of course, it has something to do with sculpture. Two photographic works are inverted to the negative and only one shows a positive version. All three comprise the sculpture in space.*

KW: They are pictures of Neolithic graves, dolmen and megaliths which you photographed along the coast of Brittany. The two works with the title *en face* show the same motif; one in original and one as a negative. The interior of the tomb appears in one as a dark black hole and in the other a space of radiant light. Both of them have their own individual connotation. Positive and negative, but also

interior and exterior come as equal elements; themes which we have also encountered when looking at *Aero*. *First sculpture is grave* shows a section of another tomb. The photograph focuses on a lintel which by the reversal of the lighting appears to be magically illuminated from below, defying gravity and totally detached from its surroundings it appears to be floating. The black background evokes the impression that the photograph was not taken on planet Earth but some other heavenly body in our universe, directly looking into space.

CM: *The photographs are portraits of tombs; they depict specific segments of the human body with their hollow spaces in the piles of stones. They put sculpture in a different perspective but at the same time the locations that were photographed. I had to visit these places in Brittany to gain my own personal impression of dolmen and megaliths. It is something else to actually encounter them life sized. To exhibit them alters the view of the other components of this exhibition i.e. the sculptures. Under the title SOLID AERO, the white components of the photographic works appear to be air. They are however made of granite and display mass and lightness of form simultaneously.*

KW: All the works in the exhibition are based on the assumption that man, through his encroachment in the ground – in the material which surrounds him – and his interaction with the already existing, could be sculptural. *SOLID AERO* outlines your thoughts about the Earth, the ground, outer space, air, and coagulates these to your central question as to the origins of sculpture.

**From: „Claudia Mann – Solid Aero“, edited by Jochen Heufelder, published by Kunstraum Fuhrwerkswaage / Stefan Schuelke Fine Books, Cologne 2018**

---

*Claudia Mann (b. 1982 in Wuppertal, Germany) studied with Didier Vermeiren at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf as well as at Bergischen Universität, Wuppertal. Exhibitions include V8, Karlsruhe, Kunstverein Krefeld, KIT – Kunst im Tunnel, Düsseldorf, Kunstraum Düsseldorf, Lehbruck Museum, Duisburg, Kunsthaus NRW, Aachen, Stadtmuseum Düsseldorf, AKKU, Stuttgart. In 2016 she was awarded with the prestigious Förderpreis für Bildende Kunst der Stadt Düsseldorf.*

<http://claudiamann.net/>

Katharina Wendler (b. 1988 in Hamburg, Germany) is an art historian and exhibition maker, based in Berlin. She studied Cultural Sciences, Arts Management, and Psychology at Leuphana Universität Lüneburg and Art History at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. From 2013-2017 she directed Safn, a project space based in Berlin and Reykjavik. Currently, she works as Head of Studio for Karin Sander in Berlin, as well as a freelance curator and writer.

<https://www.katharinawendler.com/>

*exhibition*

Claudia Mann  
Solid Aero  
April 30 – May 13, 2018  
Opening: Sunday, April 29, 2018, 11am – 4pm  
Kunstraum Fuhrwerkswaage, Bergstrasse 79, 50999 Cologne