

Gregory Volk

Intimations of Impermanence: Several Thoughts on the Work of Natalia Stachon

I vividly recall the first time I encountered a work by Natalia Stachon, which was also the first time that I heard about this young Polish artist who emigrated to Germany with her family in 1987 at the age of eleven, grew up in Bavaria and now lives in Berlin. Just about a year and a half ago I traveled to Berlin to see quite a number of exhibitions, and write about several for *Art in America*. During that trip, I visited Look Galerie, and after seeing the main exhibition (a very good one, by the way, by José Lerma, comprising large scale drawings made on area rugs), I wandered into the back space to see a group show of works by gallery artists. Among the works in that exhibition was Stachon's ZONING 02 (2009), and I was immediately captivated, even enthralled. A clear plexiglass case rests atop a wood pedestal painted jet black, in this elemental sculpture that juxtaposes darkness and lightness, opacity and transparency. Although made of a tough substance, this plexiglass case seems evanescent and ethereal, especially when contrasted with the black pedestal: a ghost structure you look at, but also into and through; a vibrant presence that verges on absence and disappearance. Stachon, as I've since learned, excels at subtly, yet decisively, transforming basic geometric forms like cubes, squares, rectangular planes, and lines, so that they become irregular, idiosyncratic, and oftentimes deeply evocative. The largest part of this plexiglass case is absolutely precise, like a perfect cube, yet one side is willfully askew, with an outer section tilting a bit as if about to snap off and possibly collapse, making the whole structure seem at once intact and precarious. The more you spend time with this sculpture, the more nuanced and compelling it really seems, and even though it is not expressive in any recognizable sense, it still seems mysteriously human and close to the bone, imbued with fragility and vitality, ungainliness and grace.

This sculpture also reminds you of familiar and functional things that you've encountered many times before, like display cases in shops and glass vitrines in museums that present and protect all sorts of valuable treasures, such as rare or expensive jewelry, antique china, small sculptures, or archaeological artifacts. However, Stachon's plexiglass case is also eccentric, askew, quietly marvelous, and has multiple connotations. It's a display case of sorts but also a sculpture, an architectural model, a miniature room, a translucent miniature building which is simultaneously pristine and in disarray. Also, rather than enclosing an object, it encloses sheer air, changing light, and emptiness too. It is a material container for what is fundamentally immaterial, a vessel "full" of emptiness, and while this emptiness comes with intimations of impermanence and loss, ephemeral things and ephemeral lives, it also implies a certain freedom: a letting go of attachments, fixity, desire. Moreover, rather than solely concentrating attention on itself and its contents (which, of course, is the role of display cases and museum vitrines), this striking work seems exceptionally open, sensitive, and alert to its surroundings. It is in the world, but the world is also in it, and flowing through it.

Natalia Stachon, who has a keen feel for materials and an interest in austerities, has clearly learned a great deal from Minimalism, as well from various forms of Constructivism. She is a sympathetic friend, so to speak, of Donald Judd (with his many cases and containers) and Carl Andre (with his many floor pieces). She is also an expatriate Polish heir to the Lodz, Poland-based visionary Constructivists Wladislaw Strzeminski and Katarzyna Kobro, among others, but especially Kobro, whose *Spatial Compositions* from the 1920's, with rectangles, bows and arcs made of painted steel, involve a complex interplay between sculpture and architectural space, and this is one of Stachon's principle issues as well. However, what is perhaps even more pertinent for Stachon is how her pared down, minimal works reference functional and familiar (to the point of banal) objects, especially really basic architectural elements like walls, floors, windows, stacks of boards, and even metal studs on which sheetrock is hung, and then subject these quotidian things to thorough transformation. Always, these familiar objects are in transition; they move into new—indeed oftentimes startlingly new—conditions, where they assume fresh roles and identities, and where they are governed by an alternative logic. Windows become walls that jut into the space. Stacks of boards become transparent and are also inscribed with poetry. Sculptures on the floor resemble slightly elevated sections of floor, as with RECENT (FIELD OF RESEARCH) (2009), made of 135 graphite tiles on a wooden base. With multiple lines and gray tones ranging from very light to quite dark (these different tones result from how the graphite was

cut), this austere work has a pronounced optical and textural complexity. As you walk around it, approaching it from different perspectives, it seems especially active and protean, and this includes how it responds to available light in the space.

On one level Stachon's BLINDING 01 (2009) suggests a completely unremarkable situation: metal studs casually deposited on the floor in front of a wall. Eight gleaming, polished copper profiles are in a seemingly haphazard (yet actually precisely arranged) pile. They almost successfully mimic construction materials at a work site, but ambiguously so, because they equally connote renovation and demolition; they could be materials ready to be used for architectural renewal, or the remnants of some whopping destruction. In this ambiguous, in-between state, Stachon's casual pile of thin, copper sections seems both mundane and magical. These smooth, coppery, reddish-orange pieces of metal are unexpectedly sensual and luminous. They catch and reflect light on their surfaces and they become bedazzling and incandescent. Typically, Natalia Stachon's spare and thoughtful works invite close perception and analysis, while they also deal in wonderment and visual pleasure. BLINDING 02 (2010) is a related work, but with a significant twist. Nine copper profiles, polished to a luminous sheen, nestle against the base of a wall. However, two of the metal pieces are turned to reveal all over patinas resulting from oxidation, including ragged green streaks and abundant dark blotches, which contrast with the sleek surfaces nearby. Stachon allowed for a process to occur, for a change to occur with her chosen metal, which makes the sculpture all the more combinatory and complex. It is orderly, but also ragged, raw and chaotic. It is luminous, but its brilliance is interrupted and undermined by the two dark patinas. It is shiny, new and full of potential, but also marked by visible signs of corrosion and decay. This relatively modest and unobtrusive work uses minimal means for maximal effect, as it suggests cycles of regeneration and entropy, creation and destruction.

Such cycles are also apparent in Natalia Stachon's drawings and screenprints, which function in league, and are oftentimes exhibited together, with her sculptures. The screenprints RENDERING 01-03, all from 2010, feature aerial views of urban architecture so far below that it resembles geometric abstraction, a network of small rectangles, squares and lines dispersed across a white field. Some buildings are upright and intact while others are mere shells; some have roofs and others do not; some geometric shapes are formed by buildings while others are mere traces of what used to be buildings, making for fluctuating rhythms of plenitude and emptiness. Composed entirely of white, soft gray and darker gray tones, these works are both lovely and searing. The views are of Warsaw in 1945, after the city had been pummeled by warfare, as captured in historical aerial photographs: a time when architecture, no matter how hefty, proved shockingly changeable and ephemeral. A cloudy whiteness predominates in each work, obscuring many buildings and making them seem shadowy and apparitional, while other buildings remain clearly visible. Presence and absence course through these works, what abides and what disappears. The whiteness is both quiescent and powerful. You think of clouds, mists, fog or snow rolling in to cover the broken city. You think of potent experiences that turn into memories, which later falter and fade. You think of erasure. What occurred down there, among those distant buildings, once upon a time, was real suffering and unimaginable violence, but Stachon leaves all of that implicit as she focuses on structural ruins and what they might mean for us now.

CLUSTER 01 (2008), seven pencil on paper drawings exhibited as a wall installation, features different renditions of seemingly three dimensional white squares in a grid delineated by dark lines. These drawings are partly abstract and partly representational, obliquely suggesting worn kitchen or floor tiles, some of which display jagged cracks. Here, Stachon's meticulous precision allows for palpable upheaval and convulsion; in a peculiar way, you look at these drawings but you also feel their implicit materiality and tension. While these tile-like forms are aligned in an orderly grid, they also seem to be buckling, fissuring, cracking and pulling apart. The drawings in the series TERRITORIES (2009–10) also suggest an aerial view of architecture far below, in which buildings form elaborate patterns and constellations. These detailed and precise drawings also call to mind computer graphics. They are like analog versions of virtual environments that offer limitless possibilities for architectural and spatial arrangement. All of the buildings are uniformly white, and this whiteness is only interrupted by cast shadows. As a result, Stachon's cityscapes seem vaguely realistic and plausible, but

also imaginary, speculative and fantastical: hypothetical inquiries into how diverse architecture could combine into endlessly variable systems.

It makes sense that such drawings and screenprints, dealing with permutations of architecture, occur in conjunction with Stachon's sculptures, for instance AJAR (2010). Six copper profiles, attached by magnets, form a simple grid that leans against a wall. This sculpture is quite large, but it seems flimsy and, once again, precarious, and while it is technically made of polished metal, equally important are the three rectangular spaces between the copper sections. Stachon's work humorously suggests a painting's supports casually leaning in an artist's studio: an incipient artwork, the initial infrastructure for an artwork waiting to happen. It also unnervingly suggests a falling wall or teetering façade: a ruin waiting to happen. VERTIGO (2008) is one of many times when Stachon forthrightly displays the logic and processes that went into a work, although the results are anything but matter of fact. A 75 x 75 x 75 cm wood cube was constructed and painted white. A triangular section was cut out and then slightly separated; it seems awkward and off balance as it leans against a freestanding plexiglass panel which Stachon inserted between the two parts of the bisected cube. This sculpture, which involves an extreme economy of materials, is perfectly and exquisitely arranged yet also irregular and unbalanced, and it makes for a particularly unsteady viewing experience. The upright plexiglass panel functions as a barrier, a sharp force slicing through the wood, a window, and, more implicitly, as a funhouse mirror reflecting an object as a gross distortion. Meanwhile, the geometric purity of the white cube, with its straight lines and even, planar surfaces, abuts gaps, jutting diagonals, and abrupt shifts in scale. Basic materials and geometric forms which should connote immaculate order instead connote orderliness mixed with unruliness and agitation, and this also is one of numerous times when Stachon's physical and material works suggest complex psychological states: combinations of tension and repose, trepidation and reverie.

Probably one of the more difficult things to discuss, these days, is what, if anything, is "poetic" about contemporary art, because this term can mean so many things to so many people, but when it comes to Natalia Stachon I'll still hazard a guess, because her work seems very poetic to me. I'm not referring to sentiment or overt emotionalism, but instead to compactness and concision which release an array of possible meaning; to how, in poetry, a short phrase, image, or at times a single word can be a transportive and cathartic force charged with mystery and discovery. Throughout Stachon's work, compact objects have precisely such an evocative power, as well as an ability to affect the viewer visually but also psychologically, and profoundly so. One part of ROAMER (2010) features seven plexiglass boards stacked in a neat pile on the floor, and they have a powerful effect: ethereal lumber; a dissolving barrier; a low, transparent wall; an enchanting play of surfaces, depths, and reflections. The other part is a wooden cart on wheels that loosely resembles both an easel and a wagon used for transport; this cart holds a vertical stack of plexiglass sections, tethered by a belt. Two of these plexiglass sections are engraved with a line from the British poet Robert Graves' *Through Nightmare*: "In your sleepy eyes I read the journey of which disjointedly you tell." As you look at these upright plexiglass sections, reading and absorbing their cryptic words, you also look through them and beyond them, for while they are solid objects they also function as conduits. This sculpture is all surfaces, but also depths (both literal and psychological) and distances. The speaker in Graves' poem addresses a dear person of "sleepy eyes" who has traveled far in and been staggered by an especially convulsive dream. This excellent poem is all about voyaging, and so too is Stachon's work, which evokes mobility, transition, changing perception and shifting mental states.

Now I know quite a bit more about Natalia Stachon and her work. I know, for instance, that she tends to proceed not really in terms of series, but rather via related works that successively investigate, research and extend a shared idea. While these works retain a roughly similar appearance, what's really important is their development, all the changes Stachon has initiated, all that she has explored. I mentioned I was captivated and enthralled when I first encountered Stachon's ZONING 02, and the same goes for its successor, ZONING 03 (2010), which also features a transparent plexiglass case on a pedestal. Now the pedestal is a small, dark steel platform on four elongated legs, and the transparent case on top is cut into two uneven parts which fit together, but not exactly, as they tentatively balance on a jagged incision. The top part, bending, leaning or sagging toward the right, is especially

touching. This gesture, this posture, resonates: a faltering, yet still upright building; a wounded person carried to safety on someone's back; a sleepy child slumped and leaning on a parent's back and shoulders. However understated, there is something very soulful about this spare sculpture, made of nothing more than plexiglass and steel, and that's a quality you find throughout Stachon's work.

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