

**CLAIREGASTAUD**

**VLADIMIR SKODA**

*Texts*

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«As soon as I became interested in art», says Vladimir Skoda, «I focused my attention mainly on the accuracy and precision of observing nature and the cosmos. I first described the volume of the model with the line, then by the wire. Until I realized, first unconsciously and then consciously, that the line is a fiction. What really exists is mass, matter. The head is above all a sphere." Let's look at Vladimir Skoda drawing: in the infernal noise of the workshop, on a corner of a workbench, he is leaning, concentrated in his silence. His fingers lead the pencil or ballpoint pen that transcribes and translates the effervescence of his thought. The artist maintains a constant practice of drawing. This is his "way of seeing form", to use a formula by Edgar Degas. And, when the volume comes, beyond presenting itself as the prefigured completion of its drawing, by the transformation of the material, by the gesture of the craftsman whose strength is multiplied by the technique, it becomes creation in its own right, autonomous. The material, the form, its location, its presence in space, the reflections on its surface, the presence and vision of the spectator bring a part of the universe to the sculpted work. Trained as a milling machine, Vladimir Skoda left Czechoslovakia in 1968 to come to France to study drawing, painting and sculpture. Gradually, he devoted himself to sculpture. He is definitely attracted by iron and all metal materials; he likes the physical confrontation with these ductile and malleable materials. Cut, grind, screw, weld, it plays with the substance to which it gives shape. Magnetism and polarity are the principles that guide his research towards increasingly abstract and refined forms. Reconciling skill and technical gestures, the curiosity of the alchemist and the reflection of the astronomer, the work on the sphere opens an inexhaustible field of investigation. Atoms, pearls, bubbles, drops, planets... in one way or another, the spheres are omnipresent around us. A symbol of universal perfection, they have fascinated scholars since ancient times. Both alchemist and scholar, Vladimir Skoda has been testing and shaping them for decades. It is thus, that with his defensive body, he is unquestionably the artist associated with the sphere. However, his research concerns all forms. They question surfaces and spaces. Either it uses them in tiny formats, or it summons an unlimited number of static or mobile modules. Sometimes some works reach monumental dimensions. Then extremely heavy, yet we perceive them dense and heavenly. Sometimes, by the effect of polishing, concave or convex forms become mirrors. The viewer then sees the blurring of reality, the whole environment and his own image. The viewer is invited to experience the work in a dynamic movement of body and mind, to mentally redo the process and the path of its advent in the place. The essence of the artist's approach lies in his search for a point of balance that can give figures in space an autonomous and absolute existence. Designed in situ, without any visible base or hanging, these works resonate with the location of their exhibition. They do not try to compete with or blend into architecture. Through the mirror effect, they borrow from the decor its strength to increase their own expressiveness. Conversely, his works act as revelators of the latent magic of the places that contain them. They reflect the effects of perspective, roundness and relief. The distortions contained in certain works, contrasts, the minimalist economy

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of means, materials and their colors, textures - more or less worked - are all elements that contribute to produce tensions and energies. Escaping the decorative and codified aspect, Vladimir Skoda's work is part of an unprecedented radical process. Through the gesture that acts on forms, the sculptor encourages us to become aware of space and our perception. By overcoming our tendency to criss-cross the field of vision, the poetry of the world can be born from our gaze.

Karin Graff, September 2020  
Opale Foundation

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## *On the edge of the world*

### Mobilis in mobile

Light as a bubble, riddled as the surface of a planet, the steel sphere of Vladimir Skoda entitled Aboriginal Dotted landed in Lens. It subtly plays the balance on the slope of the terrain that welcomes it, it accompanies the gyratory swing of a roundabout, coming to disturb it almost. It indicates no direction, no path, it has no meaning. It is a ball: it concentrates. Its raw and sophisticated silhouette, its vibrating immobility, tease the laws of gravity. Its skin dotted with holes and its discreet metamorphoses, those of perception. It literally arises in the public space and its singular presence in the continuum of the real activates something in us. A shift occurs in our gaze, a shift in our thinking as we contemplate it. Caught up with the telluric and celestial forces of the place, the sphere borders and caresses the world with its roundness. It reveals all the layers of beauty. Dotted aborigines belongs to the family of the Spheres of heaven - sky of spheres that Vladimir Skoda does not cease to enrich since 2002. Of all, it is the greatest he has ever achieved. More than monumentality - his temperament hardly brings him to excess - it is the right scale, the right relationship that the artist wishes to find. A ladder, a little larger than his, which allows light and the eye to easily penetrate the structure and walk around. To the bodies (and head) to oscillate between infinitely large and infinitely small. Here, the incidence of emptiness and the intermittence of the lace-up steel strike us. By hollowing out matter at this point, Skoda does not intend to push it to its limits, nor to weaken it. Above all, he wants to find a new common ground between different physical laws and different reactions. The work of sculpture is basically to catch the light and redistribute it. Skoda radicalizes this idea by trying to make manifest its action, its unsuspected impacts. Over the hours and according to the climatic conditions, Aboriginal dotted changes appearance and like a star its brightness varies. At night it becomes a silent hive with familiar alveoli lit from the inside. Through the dotted system, Vladimir Skoda manages to circumscribe an ambiguous but tangible space in which visible and invisible entities swirl. The sphere makes enigma in this landscape and, a few steps from the Opale Foundation, it enters into a secret conversation with Aboriginal creators. It is a tribute to the sun and the moon and the meticulousness of this landscape. The territory she explores is alive, mobile, filled with the same vital plasticity as water, air, earth and fire. Like the Time of the Dream, we must recapture its essence and constantly remodel it.

### Faults and cavities

The problem of the invisible and inaccessible court of matter, whether at rest or in fusion, has long plagued Skoda. Many pieces testify to these fumbles around the impenetrability of the object and doubt about what really inhabits its confines. From small spherical incised volumes, all in dull and

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irregular surfaces, which he placed directly on the ground in the 1980s, to ultra-polished and reflective objects imagined thereafter, Skoda experimented through different means the possibility of an exchange between the inside and the outside of the bodies. Without signifying a real rupture, the principle of the hollow work reverses this thorny question of corporeality. The surface becomes a skin, a porous membrane reacting to a multitude of presences in and beyond itself.

In 1973-1974, Skoda realized a series of works in which he manipulated metal threads, braiding them in skeins to give them human form. Perhaps there are the premises of his «claire-voie» sculptures. Already there the light crossed the bodies while colliding with it. These «clothes» as he calls them, if they refer clearly to the vernacular gestures of basketry, announce the irreversible slide of Skoda towards the non-figurative and towards conceptual forms. Enclosed, the void takes the consistency of a presence/ absence. Strangely, it is also by letting everything appear of itself, its constitution and its construction around the void, that Aboriginal dotted is adorned with virtuality, It is also an exoskeleton. The austerity of the sheet metal plates, mechanically pierced once riveted according to a precise orientation, turns into a ballet of stars and the delicate patterns they give rise by overlapping delight the eye. In its nudite the sphere is made arch and manufactures the waking dream.

## Community of minds

The affinities that emerge between the work of Vladimir Skoda and the Aboriginal arts are - it will be well understood - cosmic. The different sequences of the exhibition organized in the walls of the Foundation, with regard to the Australian collections and from Aboriginal Dotted, make it possible to understand the fundamental place of spherical forms in Skoda's work as well as the way in which the gap, the piercing gradually integrates his vocabulary. These sequences, giving pride of place to pieces involving a certain frontality, a relationship with the wall and the window, to the detriment of the round-hump, also emphasize the way in which the Aboriginal arts, in particular by their appetite for simultaneous contrast, nourish it and intervene from close to distant in its artistic design.

Of course, the materials that Vladimir Skoda likes are the opposite of those, fragile and perishable, that the Aborigines love. Certainly, the techniques used, the contexts of creation and the pantheons diverge deeply. But in paintings and objects, the graphic works and volumes of the sculptor and many Aboriginal, ancient and contemporary creators, some visual connections make sense. Common aesthetic interests, plastic solutions and related motifs emerge. All: points, circles, lines, hatching, curves converge towards what we would commonly call abstraction. Abstractions, by nature divine and mathematical, like epiphanies, models and symbols that it is neither artificial nor whimsical to want to meet. There is also this palpable desire to work not against but with the elements: matter, sky, alignment of planets... These artists share a particular sensitivity to infra and supra-worlds.

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They are attracted to what is beyond them, and their aerial and microscopic visions involve several levels of consciousness. As if everyone, in his own way, knew that in the smooth surface of metal or bark hides the memory of a fight, of a distant chaos, the works become the substrate of these liminal and agitated worlds. This is why they attach much more importance to the making, the time of creation and the appearance of the work, than to the becoming and the posterity of the objects.

Here intervenes the providential figure of Karel Kupka who, by reaffirming that subjectivity is consubstantial to any creative act, stands out from his ethnologist peers and reconciles souls. Because it is a question of making manifest an impalpable phenomenon, but nevertheless there, and which André Breton calls very nicely «the intimate resonance». The resonance of the world in us. Almost the opposite of universality. In works its manifestation extends.

## Dissolutions of the eye

The sphere is indeed Skoda's preferred form/concept. And it can be said without exaggeration that he has visited almost every state. In her hands and under the action of fire, she becomes a ball, spinning top, ball, pendulum, star.. In the nebula of the figures he likes to mention are as many artists as scientists summoning this mental object. Mathematics, physics and astronomy, but also their «human» and philosophical history feed all his approach. He uses his total freedom, cultivates a kind of nomadism in his intellectual affinities. He knows how to move from the geocentric and Euclidean world of the ancients to the Theory of all, from the Man ball of Aristophanes to the electron, to conduct his own intuitions and serendipity. In a certain way, like Aboriginal artists, he is inspired by the achievements of his ancestors, and reinterprets the founding and heroic moments of his own cosmogony. It is in the solitude of drawing, in the automatism of the hand that the mind develops. Far from the collective and hyper-organized work of workshops and factories, drawing by its speed of execution, by its part of non-intentionality and by the intimacy of its scale becomes the place of a fruitful reverie. On paper are thrown ideas and doubts. Of course the sketches chosen for the exhibition echo the sculptural work of the artist and testify to the incessant back and forth between the forms inscribed on the sheet and their potential spatial transpositions. This graphic work is preliminary, but not only. As if backwards, they make us understand that in all the little things are read all the big ones.

The point is the nodal element, first. It is the origin of all plastic language. It becomes the starting point, the point of contact. To initiate this imaginary dialogue between Skoda and Aboriginal painting. Grouped in a cloud floating on the wall, impure spots and spots, unstable prints and spirals retract and dilate like pupils. Repeated, taken with imperceptible movements, the point sometimes pierces the blank page, sometimes the cut. The dish becomes cavity or relief, the haptic power of the eye is stimulated by these retinal contrasts. Like the sphere, the point is open enough to support any speculation, any mental projection.

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In the evanescence of the spray and the intrinsic reversibility of the stencil, the dialectic between material and immaterial that underlies Skoda's research is even better perceived. The point becomes hole, puls transparency. It is still a question of the eye of its concentration, of if possible crossing the matter. Black halos are the marks of a burn as well as a sublimation. They recall eclipses, by the strangeness of their texture and even black holes: these objects that feed on gas, from which neither matter nor light can escape. We can only imagine them by contrast, by deduction, since they do not yet have representation. The networks of superimposed and shifted points obtained by the use of fragments of plates pierced regularly suggest the same rhythmic as in Aboriginal Dotted. Skoda does not seek here to make image but to deregulate the pattern. By the extreme lightness of the subjectile the grids become sieves, vaporous screens, in the process of erasure, rendered almost in the gaseous state. Skoda's mirror works push to their climax the effect of light and the excitement of the eye. Their surfaces are sensitive. The object, despite its strong materiality, seems to dissolve in itself. The world also dissolves and recomposes there as its reflection is fragmented and distorted. As if it were liquefied, the sculpture becomes an eye that grabs everything that is offered to him. Silent and as if coming from far away, the meteorites of Skoda hung on the wall like small paintings. In their opaque darkness cavities glow like stars in the night. Fragment of a much larger body, a sample of an immeasurable landscape, where the ingredients of the world float in the pure state.

Vladimir Skoda's works are imperfect hypotheses that materialize in our contact. Cosmic, playful, they constitute only tiny points in the immensity of the universe, but by the optical and metaphysical experiences they generate, by the discrete instability they instil around, they invite us to an intuitive and subjective reconfiguration of the world.

Géraldine Bloch , October 2020

Opale Foundation

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## *Dialogue on space and time*

A place of creation, the studio never escapes the revelation of an artist's identity. In the abandoned factory, perched high in the mountains of Thiers, carefully chosen by Vladimir Skoda for its immediate readability, the sequence of rooms and their light, everything reflects what he intuitively sought since his youth where, Escaping an engineer future he didn't want, he discovered the living world of factories. «In one of them, there were machines, lathes, milling machines.... I understood-he said-that this was what I wanted to do». How? Become an artist... why not? Sculptor, surely!... dominate a material, give to see the space, the weather...

Here, in these expanses of work dominated by the full range of rigorously ordered works, everything revives the history of Skoda and reveals the path traveled for decades. The questions and singularity of his research in this world of sculpture, always difficult, often arid, draw their source in this Central Europe which saw it born. From its homeland, the Czech Republic, also the birthplace of Kafka or Kupka, everything expresses the complexity of a culture that imposes a new look at modernity. Two sides of his work, opposite and complementary, express the truth of Skoda's work. Initially, his sculpture oscillates between heavy, powerful materials, made of iron or steel, forged by the hand of a man who brings his ideas to the essential. It is the conceptual, rough and collected part that seems to come from the dawn of time: the one that reads in other ways, without reference to reality. On the other, on the contrary, but marked by the natural outcome of his reflection and the playful or poetic questioning of the artist on the universe that constitutes us and surrounds us. This opening to another less perceptible world is made of smoother materials, polished by the hand of man, which the sculptor wants to make at all costs palpable. Different images of what we see arise from another reality. They always confirm this essential quest that Skoda has been pursuing for many years between Earth and Cosmos. His intuition joins his deep knowledge of a distant world that he now wants close. Hence, the fascination of this atypical work marked by the sense of infinite questioning that, according to him, arises between the man of today and his commitment to modernity.

« L'art n'est pas une soumission mais une conquête » écrivait André Malraux. Ainsi Vladimir Skoda ouvre de nouvelles voies à la représentation dans la sculpture, trop souvent asservie à des réalités auxquelles il a toujours voulu échapper. Il ouvre ainsi un dialogue neuf savant entre les matériaux et les rêves du sculpteur. Un monde qui s'inscrit dans un dialogue sur l'espace et le temps.

Jean-Louis Prat