

SOFT ARCHAEOLOGIES. OPERATIONS, TRANSFORMATIONS, INVENTORIES

Exhibition review: *Bilderfahrzeuge (Image Vehicles)*.
A Peter Jacobi Retrospective, National Museum of Contemporary Art
(MNAC), Bucharest, 11 December 2020 – 28 March 2021



Reviewed by
Celia Ghyka

Bilderfahrzeuge. A Peter Jacobi Retrospective is the first major exhibition that the MNAC (the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest) has dedicated to the Romanian-German artist.¹ Although this is not the first time we have seen his work since he left Romania in 1970, or since the post-socialist 1990s (in 1993 and 1994 he exhibited in Bucharest, Craiova, Braşov, Sibiu, and Timișoara, and in 2002 the National Museum of Art of Bucharest mounted the retrospective *Palimpsest*), this was a refreshing contextualization of his work within a broader reading of art histories.

Featuring 105 works covering a variety of mediums, the show tracked Jacobi's production over a period of six decades: from the early years and collaborative works made with his then wife and partner Ritzi Jacobi in the 1960s and 1970s, through the conceptual and Minimalist explorations into the sculptural and his growing interest in photography as medium, method and strategy in the 1980s, to the later reflections on memorials and public monuments.²

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Born in 1936 in Ploiești, Romania; currently lives and works in Wurmberg, Germany.

2

Curator: Sandra Demetrescu, Assistant Curator: Alexandru Oberländer-Târnoveanu,
Architecture: Attila Kim Architects.

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The selection illustrated, in a befitting spatial arrangement, some of the major themes that drove Jacobi throughout his career, combining a chronological and thematic approach. The careful display and grouping of works called for visual and metaphorical associations that uncovered the multifarious artistic and intellectual preoccupations apparent in his work: a strenuous, concentrated concern for the *bodily*,³ a constant translation between and within different mediums, and an overarching obsession with time and memory.

As announced by the exhibition's title, the entry point to Jacobi's work explicitly situates him within Warburg's concept of image vehicles (*Bilderfahrzeuge*): migrating through cultural history, visual motifs – just like automobiles – seem to be able to travel across time and space. And in order to perform this wandering, images are endowed with a certain internal energy, a vitality of their own that makes them reappear when and where one least expects them. It is in this optics of the wandering image that the curatorial decisions gain a historical perspective pertinent both to Jacobi's personal development and to his filiations with international art.

The exhibition design used a series of continuous and uneven plinths that elevate and lower the display of objects, allowing for long, transversal views from the entrance through the gallery situated on the third floor of the MNAC [Fig. 1a, Fig. 1b]. It is an inspired formula that the architect Attila Kim has used successfully for other shows that involved sculpture and objects.

Through a permanent visual connection to the entire space, the visitor was carefully guided to closer views of each section of the exhibition through a play of visually open yet physically inaccessible spaces that continued into two semi-closed adjacent rooms displaying Jacobi's series of modular columns and bidimensional works (drawings, photographs, photomontages – [Fig. 2]). At the back of the gallery, a smaller room played the role of an alcove, a hidden space which offered a view only to those curious enough to walk through the exhibition. Like a boudoir, this space usually hosts the most delicate or materially sensitive works, and this is where the curator chose to show Jacobi's series of studio nudes (drawings, photos): a discreet glimpse into the artist's privacy. The dark gray color of the walls and plinths provided a continuous spatial environment that enhanced the association with the funerary/memorial recurrent in Jacobi's works.

Already present since his formal training as a sculptor at the Bucharest Art Academy in the early 1960s, Jacobi's preoccupations with the body continued in his collaborative works with Ritzi Jacobi: explorations into the textile and hybrid installations of fiber sculpture that are at the same time a dive into the possibilities of the medium and a resolute quest for the monumental. The imaginative, almost improbable use of materials resonates with some of the experiments of *Arte povera*: horsehair cables, goat hair, sisal, coconut fibers assem-

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I use here the term *bodily* following James Meyer's accurate distinction between *bodily* and anthropomorphism. James Meyer, *The Bodily and the Anthropomorphic*, in: Karen Lang (ed.), *Field Notes on the Visual Arts*, Bristol/Chicago 2019, 32–39.



[Fig. 1a]

General views of the exhibition on the 3rd floor of the MNAC. The continuous plinths of uneven heights enhance the visual associations between the works as well as the permanent view of the entire gallery space © Dan Vezentan, courtesy of the MNAC.



[Fig. 1b]

General views of the exhibition on the 3rd floor of the MNAC. The continuous plinths of uneven heights enhance the visual associations between the works as well as the permanent view of the entire gallery space © Dan Vezentan, courtesy of the MNAC.



[Fig. 2]

Series of modular geometric columns: left, variations on Peter Jacobi's Hexahedron Transylvanian Column, bronze, Serpent Transylvanian Column, bronze or wood, Double Sided Perforated Column, 1992–2002, bronze; right, Ceramic Ensemble, 2010–2020, glazed ceramics © Dan Vezentan, courtesy of the MNAC.

bled into works that might remind us of Piero Manzoni's *Achromes* made of cotton wool, rabbit skin, feathers etc. These *Soft Sculptures* [Fig. 3a, Fig. 3b], as Jacobi calls them, are paired with the *Used-Drawings* (paper models used in the weaving process), at the same time a by-product of the former and autonomous works in their own.

These investigations into the possibilities of matter and medium convey in his oeuvre a consistency that the curators have grasped thoroughly in the choice of connecting clusters of works and giving visibility to their inner structuring processes. These operations – relentless investigations into the generative possibilities of form – become apparent in the strategies of display and associations of works.

Some of these operations are blatant, such as the fabrication of columns (through geometric rotations, modular growth, or organic stratification); some are less obvious: body fragments from the 1973–1976 period (marble torsos, drapings, hands, ossuaries – [Fig. 4, Fig. 5, Fig. 6]) resonate with the earlier hybrid textile-sculptures or later photographs of the traumatized bodies of the war veterans; tombal stones from the series *Enclosed* or *Pools* (stone, marble, granite – [Fig. 7a, Fig. 7b]) take a monumental perspective in the locational slate reliefs, and the photographical survey of war ruins is further reflected in fragments that evoke funerary architectural ruins (*Eight Cupolas* – [Fig. 8]). The associations with Constantin Brancusi (somehow inescapable for all recent Romanian sculptors) are evident in the work on the generation of columns as quintessential, abstracted memorials [Fig. 2].

We may even draw an inventory of operations, not far from Richard Serra's famous verb list: rotation, elevation, translation, carving, modeling, glazing, scratching, slitting, folding, widening, flattening, weaving, sewing.

This persistent interest in technology is perhaps not entirely independent of Jacobi's biography, as he grew up in a family context deeply influenced by technical innovation: his father was a mechanical engineer and director of the former Malaxa factories (among the most advanced technological industries in inter-war Romania). Thus, what I call operations are almost consubstantial to the medium, in the sense not only of a search for medium specificity – which, we have seen, applies only partly here – but in the sense that operations are both generative (of the work) and transgressive (of the medium):

In our textile work we have made a series of technical inventions which do not exist on their own, but as part of the whole. Even though we redefine the basic qualities of the materials and processes we use, this is not the primary intention of our work. For instance, incorporating a textile cable in the weaving occurs in a single action and allows for extraordinary growth; the surface develops in a manner quite different from the usual meticulous, slow method of weaving. The cable is like a drawn gesture in weaving; sometimes



[Fig. 3a]

From the series of fiber sculptures: left, Peter Jacobi, *Draped Torso*, 1965 (remade 2020), oak and textiles; right, Peter Jacobi & Ritzi Jacobi, *Pair of Bowl Shaped Sculptures*, 1968–1969 (remade 2020 by Peter Jacobi), wood and sisal © Dan Vezentan, courtesy of the MNAC.



[Fig. 3b]

Left: Peter Jacobi, *Draped Torso*, 1965 (remade 2020), oak and textiles; right: Peter Jacobi & Ritzi Jacobi, *Installation with Five Textile Elements (Textile Relief - White Fragments in a Room)*, 1973–1978 (adaptation Peter Jacobi 2020), site-specific installation: woven fragments with textile cables, goat hair, coconut fibres, sisal, cotton
© Dan Vezentan, courtesy of the MNAC.



[Fig. 4]
Peter Jacobi, Fall of the Folds – Antropomorph, 1974–1978, Carrara marble/ Rosso Portogallo
© Dan Vezentan, courtesy of the MNAC.



[Fig. 5]
Left: Peter Jacobi, Study for Cornet Relief, 1973–1976, wrapped fiber cables, Japanese rice paper, watercolor; right: Cornet Relief, 1973–1976, Carrara marble © Dan Vezentan, courtesy of the MNAC.



[Fig. 6]
Peter Jacobi, Relief, Moving Female Hands of a Female Body, 1976–1977, Knossos marble
© Dan Vezentan, courtesy of the MNAC.



[Fig. 7a]
Peter Jacobi, Enclosed, 1980, marble, intarsia
© Dan Vezentan, courtesy of the MNAC.



[Fig. 7b]

Peter Jacobi, Pool Placement on a Hill, 1968–1972, Carrara marble
© Dan Vezentan, courtesy of the MNAC.



[Fig. 8]
Peter Jacobi, Eight Cupolas, 1976–1983, Carrara marble
© Celia Ghyka.

an actual drawing even becomes part of the whole textile composition.⁴

This fragment resumes, I think quite brilliantly, Jacobi's methods and preoccupations: works are not a simple product of using materials and techniques, but the sophisticated result of a deep meditation upon technology and material.

Part of this method is working with series. We know that seriality occupies an important place in the strategies of contemporary art. What is less discussed and was masterfully tackled by the *Serial Classic* exhibition (Fondazione Prada, 2015)⁵ is the serial, repetitive production of antique sculpture: an entire culture of multiples that resides on the recurrence and reproduction of prototypes. Seriality and inventory are constituent also of Jacobi's operations. A work is never singular, or alone, it is always part and result of a multitude of experiments, trials and retrials, multiples and series. There is never just one column, one torso, or one photograph – and the curatorial difficulty of this show was to make choices that would also ensure that the viewer's experience is consistent with this permanent effort of transformation.

Jacobi resonates both with antiquity and with the conceptual artistic strategies of the 1960s. His archaeological interest in the antique is evident in many of his works from the mid-1970s and early 1980s – in the series of marble and granite ossuaries, cornets, torsos – but this preoccupation goes much deeper than just the visual associations: the transformations of form from one medium to another as well as the generative operations mentioned earlier expose a permanent oscillation between the optical and the tactile, almost like in a reading of Alois Riegl. Spreading out the wood, twisting the cables, “folding” the marble, are followed by the flattening of reliefs, by subtle cartographies in granite, and by the exploitation of photography's optical lessons:

Although the tactile quality of the works is immediately inviting, the purely visual sensation remains primary. One does not have to touch it to understand the piece; touch is merely a starting point.⁶

Jacobi's turn to photography would later match his antiquarian impulse: in the 1990s he started collecting scraps of images, old photographs that he could find in flea markets. These would become a

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Peter Jacobi explaining the collaborative methods he used with Ritzi Jacobi, in *Peter Jacobi. Columns Memorials*, (exh. cat. Orońsko, Center of Polish Sculpture/ Regensburg, Museum Ostdeutsche Galerie), Krakow 1999, 124.

⁵
Curated by Salvatore Settis, two splendid exhibitions mounted in 2015 mirrored the question of the seriality and the portability of classical sculpture: *Serial Classic* and *Portable Classic*, Fondazione Prada, Milan and Venice.

⁶
Jacobi, 124.

resource for his work, as would photography become yet another operation to be translated and distilled into sculpture.

To Jacobi the traces of World War II are a *discovery* almost in an archaeological sense. Just like Paul Virilio's sudden realization of the colossal presence of war architecture all over Europe⁷ when leaning against a bunker at the shore of the Atlantic, in the early 1980s Jacobi started to document the traces of the Siegfried Line or Westwall, the German defensive line built during the war.

And again, the medium is essential to this *discovery*: photography is not only a way to document, to elevate the traces, but also a way to meditate upon (the lessons of) the medium and to translate these lessons into the expanded field of his works: drawing, (photo)montage, collage, sculpture, monument, memorial architecture, land art.

Water tanks for the construction of bunkers, training fields, bunkers and tank barriers, military roads, rail stations and locomotive maintenance pits, trenches, mountains made of rubble (Monte Scherbelino or Wallberg, close to Pforzheim) are carefully inventoried and generate the *Westwall / Siegfried Line* series of photographs and the later camouflage-paintings [Fig. 9a, Fig. 9b].

In fact, Jacobi explicitly affirms that his photography provides an intellectual background for his sculpture. The exhibition captured the generative power of this photographic survey of ruins by inviting the visitor to follow a path that observed the visual and operational transitions toward his explorations into the monumental.

In discussing ruin and photography, Charles Merewether reflects on the double-edged relationship between photography and war: “[P]hotographs are both instruments of war and a witness to its effects.”⁸

For Jacobi, recording improbable images of the Westwall prompts an opening up to this cautionary tale, almost like a remote echo of Virilio's perplexity in front of these relics: “Why this analogy between the funeral archetype and military architecture?”⁹ How come these war architectures already contain, in their structure, the image of death?

Used as a method for elevating its own distant traces, photography enters a loop, a sort of *mise en abîme*: what was once an instrument for destruction (as in the use of aerial images in order to draw war cartographies) has now become a distant witness to the landscape it created. History is discreetly recovered, from obscured but still tangible traces on the ground.

The transfiguration of methods is present also when it comes to the use of photography: aerial cartographies are not just war instruments but become here an allusion to antiquity and a way of dealing with the complicated issues of memory. Thus, photographs of

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Paul Virilio, *Bunker Archéologie*, Paris 1994 (New York 1994 for the English translation), 11.

8

Charles Merewether, *Traces of Loss*, in: Michael Roth, Claire Lyons, and Charles Merewether (eds.), *Irresistible Decay*, Los Angeles 1997, 25–41.

9

Virilio, *Bunker Archéologie*, 11.



[Fig. 9a]
Peter Jacobi, Maintenance pit for locomotives in Anhalterbahnhof Berlin, 1983,
photograph, diptych © Dan Vezentan, courtesy of the MNAC.



[Fig. 9b]
Peter Jacobi, Water tanks for the construction of bunkers, 1983, b/w photograph
© Celia Ghyka.

multicultural graveyards generate the Minimalist slate reliefs from 1981–1982 [Fig. 10]. This methodology of elevating traces used in the Westwall series is perhaps most visible as a reenactment in Jacobi's project for the Holocaust Memorial in Bucharest:¹⁰ here, traces are re-inscribed in the ground (as if rediscovered and transported from elsewhere), bunkers reconstructed as memory activators, fragments act as metonymies (the Roma Wheel, the Star of David, the Column of Remembrance).

Not just between photography and memorials, but within all of Jacobi's work, it becomes apparent that motifs leap from one another, resurge again, bringing together matter and its ruin, medium variability and technical innovation, recurrence and transformation.

Having shown how works and techniques shape one another and how forms and images circulate back and forth throughout art history, just like vehicles or – why not? – flying carpets (as in Warburg),¹¹ the Jacobi retrospective will be followed by a comprehensive catalog that will only expand these vast cultural ramifications and hopefully give the exhibition the posterity it deserves.

¹⁰

Winner of an international competition initiated in 2005, Jacobi's project for the Holocaust Memorial was inaugurated in 2009. An excellent virtual tour of the memorial can be found here: <http://inshr-ew.ro/memorial/> (30.05.2021).

¹¹

Warburg develops his idea of image vehicles in discussing tapestries, textile works that are literally endowed with mobile characteristics: unattached to the wall, they are "a mobile support for the image". Aby Warburg, Peasants at Work in Burgundian Tapestries, in: Kurt Forster (ed.), *Aby Warburg. The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, Los Angeles 1999, 484. The association between woven wall decorations and the flying carpet (mobile) becomes evident.



[Fig. 10]
Peter Jacobi, *Seen Falling (Vu tomber)*, 1981–1984, slate, intarsia
© Dan Vezentan, courtesy of the MNAC.