

Natacha Pugnet:

The Promise of Gesture

The work can be summarily described as follows: a block of ordinary clay, still in its original packaging, set on end, into which has been stuck a Neolithic axe made of dark, polished stone. Sculpture could hardly be made any simpler. In this respect, it may seem unexpected in the corpus of Hubert Duprat. It nevertheless echoes other creations by the artist, notably in its exceptionally dense historical connotation.

The block of clay is as it was in the shop: Duprat has not even bothered to remove its protective wrapping. Thus both container and content constitute a particular species of ready-made, comprehending from the outset the promises of nature and artifice. The block declares its literalness while presenting itself as a raw material destined for an unspecified future form. On the formal plane, the parallelepiped in which the commercial clay is presented is already geometrically deformed. The fine skin of plastic conserves, however provisionally, the humidity of the clay, its 'original' state. If once the skin were removed, the malleable material would quickly attain an irreversible state, frozen into irremediable sterility. Thus on the conceptual and material levels, the object embodies the ideas of both potential and its opposite.

This block of solid matter clearly refers to the history of sculpture as it was at least until the advent of modernity. More precisely, it designates the activity preparatory to sculpture and its first and earliest state, a provisional and underestimated state preceding its translation into bronze or reproduction in marble. Today, such blocks of clay are intended not so much for the sculptor as for the artisanal potter or amateur and their use evokes the derived, utilitarian or decorative forms of a very ancient and universal tradition. They are also

available in teaching studios of all kinds; Duprat found and borrowed one from the Musée archéologique de Lattes.

Stuck into the block, the axe itself is of uncertain status: the matter of which it is made is both stone and form since its crafting into a tool has respected the original volume of the stone and imparted a smooth surface. This is a Neolithic ‘simple blade’ in terms of the categorisation established by Leroi-Gourhan to distinguish the different kinds of axe and bears witness to human ingenuity in its earliest beginnings. If we put its function aside, the axe can be perceived as a small abstract sculpture of perfect finish that offers clear plastic qualities for any lover of modern art. In this context the oblong block becomes, at least visually, a plinth, though Duprat follows his own conventions in reversing the expected relations of rigidity and ductility. In fact, the base becomes the receptacle of the axe. Though axes are the very image of the transformative tool, it can hardly be claimed that Duprat has used this axe as such (or only to a minimal extent), since its penetration has caused only the slightest deformation of the parallelepiped. But thus planted in the block of clay, causing a partial tear in its wrapping, the axe may also be thought of as a weapon.¹ The ensemble brings physically together the formed and the unformed, the hardness of completed sculpture and malleability of sculpture to be.

Paradoxically, though almost unchanged in themselves, the axe and the clay constitute metaphors of transformational activity in general. Combining gesture, matter and tool, this precarious assemblage condenses all the possibilities of making and sculpture. Itself acting as a tool, the hand that fixed the axe in the clay remains anonymous. Devoid of craft knowledge, lacking particularity, its gesture then appears as a ‘passage to the act’ – the decisive act, as one might say of the photographic moment. It self-evidently determines a before and an after, since it ‘makes’ sculpture by producing an unprecedented configuration from which there emerges an anthropomorphic figure. Born of the axe’s penetration

and presenting themselves according to their own logic, the folds of the malleable material now suggest some garment or drappeggio. They catch the light, animating the otherwise inert surface of the clay and imparting a carnal aspect. The stone becomes a head on a neck and thus confers human proportions on the block. The figure as a whole might evoke Cycladic idols or the polished marbles of Brancusi but we know its creation was triggered by the memory of a Neolithic statue from the site at Dimini.²

Elementary in its anthropomorphism, the sculpture also presents itself as a figure reduced to head and body without limbs, in which we rediscover our own earliest attempts to represent a human being. The tension between geometry and the organic, between abstraction and figuration that underpins some of Duprat's productions is flagrant here. And it is the simple gesture, the simple (or brutal) act, wholly devoid of sentiment, that here operates the transmutation.

Earth is ageless and sends us back to numerous creation myths. Here the block of clay is not even roughed out; it locates itself before illusion and mimesis, prior even to the inaugural myth of Butades. The origins of technique come face-to-face with a primitive conception of the world in which art cannot easily be distinguished from its magical and ritual functions.³ As always, Duprat inscribes his work into a historical continuum; he works on the basis of what already exists (however deeply buried in memory), which he reinvents by blurring aesthetic categories. Discrete borrowings from periods and practices remote from one another in time and space allow the artist deliberately to fuse art and craft, major and minor, the purely conceptual and the trivially material. Particularly obvious precedents here are the inversion of function and form along with the reinterpretation of archaic figures by some artists of the twentieth century and the memory of childish activities and schemata.

Many of the very diverse aspects of Duprat's practice are united in this sculpture, including his interest in the history of techniques and materials and the recurrence of certain procedures, in particular that which consists of implanting an object in a material or the act of combining two constituents that simultaneously pertain to the raw and the processed, the natural and the artificial. The artist has accustomed us to all of that. What seems more unexpected here is the immediacy of this 'conflagration'. It is rare enough to be remarkable that the manufacture of this work is not overdetermined by repetition, fragmentation or addition. A single act is sufficient to signify all such acts and the result functions as a perfect synecdoche. By lodging the lithic blade at the heart of the malleable paste, Duprat makes sculpture a single act and the single act of sculpture. This very radical decision/declaration goes to the heart of the matter. Quite exceptional in the field of contemporary art, this sketch of a sketch⁴ thus functions as a manifesto. A rejection in equal parts of virtuosity and wilful clumsiness, it similarly rejects the surface of the image and the muteness of matter. Thus the degree zero of creation flips into its absolute and latency into completion. And one can therefore see in it equally a funerary stele or a fragile monument to the eternity of sculpture.

¹ According to André Leroi-Gourhan, there is no way of determining whether these simple blades were adzes or axes since that distinction lies in the form of the handle attached. See *Milieu et technique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1973), 44–5.

² Duprat saw this figure at the Athanasakeion Archaeological Museum of Volos, Thessaly.

³ The Hebrew Golem (meaning *cocoon, mad, stupid*), a raw creature of clay, will only become human when it is named and seen by other humans, since it is

animated by rabbinical magic. We might also think of ‘nail fetishes’ (to which Duprat has previously referred), figures in which the animist who has sculpted it fixes nails and other pieces of iron in order to activate or animate it.

⁴ One comparison might be the mass of white modelling clay animated by the gestures of kneading or pugging but not in fact modelling anything other than an enormous block of matter (Duprat, *Untitled*, 2008).