

“Verwachsen” is Brazilian Swiss artist Pedro Wirz’s first solo exhibition at Galerie Nagel Draxler. The title could be translated as “Grow into One Another,” and it indicates Wirz’s interest in ecology. The entwining it describes accounts for both human and non-human agents, while also thinking in terms of milieu. Wirz’s primarily sculptural practice is based on associations with forms and materials. He creates eggs and coils and bulbous protrusions with holes in them or mounds and towers and sinuous branches. Writers have commented that the work calls forth a sense of primordial or mystical origins. The artist has responded by offering his biography as a frame of reference, a kind of personal mythology—his upbringing in rural Brazil, the child of a biologist and an agronomist. But Wirz’s vocabulary draws equally from organic matter, consumer culture, contemporary artistic conventions, and experimentation with material. “Verwachsen” features three bodies of work: “Entsprechung IV” (Correspondence I–V), the wall-mounted assemblages in round-edged, wooden frames, which continue a series begun by the artist earlier this year. The new, standing, glass-steel-and-textile sculptures that Wirz refers to as “Wet Transistors.” And the “Heaters,” or spheres of Styrofoam and soil, each with an electrical cord that plugs into the wall.

From early on in his artistic work, Wirz’s thinking has been relational. Several years ago, I suggested that “Wirz’s work toys with the principles of social interaction.” By ‘social,’ I meant interpersonal, but I was also alluding to the fact that the artist’s work was specifically relation building. He used his practice as a means to connect and to maintain connections that were to an extent professional. His focus wasn’t yet the materials that serve as a mediating, perhaps determining, factor in humans’ experience of our environment; the materials that form the medium for our interactions as well as for the impact we have in the world.

The work Wirz has been making recently focuses on relations by way of materials. It deals with processing and its means, processing and its products, processing and waste. So alongside materials that are raw and others that were processed, just not by human hands, we find steel, glass, and mass-produced garments. We see beeswax that was bleached artificially and text and image fragments from newspapers repurposed via papier mâché. These materials have history, but it’s abstract. We don’t see industry represented or critiqued; we see the results of its infrastructure set within a broader context. The work consistently frames contemporary culture in terms of environment and nature in terms of a shifting timeline. Wirz’s work is research-driven, but in a general way—into naturally occurring and widely distributed forms that might thus seem originary or universal. Of course, this raises questions about that nature, those origins, that universalism. If these sound like familiar questions, it could nevertheless be argued that, lately, ‘nature’ has been pressing on or prompting a shift in our understanding of ‘culture,’ once again highlighting how unreliable that distinction is.

The relations-forward discourse on materials from recent years seems to represent a logical context for Wirz's practice. That discourse would also seem to offer a welcome contrast to technophilic narratives of pure information, pure materials, and frictionless circulation. When I looked into Bruno Latour's already 15-year-old introduction to actor-network theory, I was struck by the indirect aspect of it, in that it's actually about materials such as speed bumps and how they can determine human behavior. Since seemingly incidental objects or structures can have a leveling effect on subject responses, for example leading all drivers to slow down, we should perhaps understand the role they play as active or at least substantial. Wirz has an ongoing interest in framing devices. Already as a student, he was making work dealing with pedestals. Now those white, soberly rectilinear, standard versions are packed with a layer of humus or have swollen in places with a kind of body. All the works in this show have frames, too. The pieces on the wall have their wooden edges with rounded corners inherited by way of contemporary tech. The leg-like cilia of the standing sculptures are themselves frames. By plugging the Styrofoam-and-soil "Heaters" into the wall, Wirz implicates the gallery architecture as a container, thus emphasizing context and connectivity. He has elsewhere created his own environments by laying carpet, clothes, or soil from wall to wall or formed backdrops by draping a given wall with fabric.

The heart of this work is almost certainly what happens to the means themselves, what binds them together, and—in a kind of parallel movement—what associations viewers then draw from them. The title "Verwachsen" could describe that connective force. Wirz would probably also talk about it in terms of energy or magic, whereas I would tend to think in terms of a sociocultural frame of reference or in terms of infrastructure, like clothing manufacturing. I have questions about creating myths for the contemporary everyday. Are narratives of transformation and extension not just euphemisms for optimization and economic growth? Does the emphasis on non-human agency and intelligence not deflect from urgent questions about how human agency is currently being both exercised as well as restricted? Do materials allow us to speak in terms of structure? Does adaptation promise too rosy a future? This said, an insistent cultural frame might occlude thinking about the non-human or prohibit alternative ways of thinking and forms of life. Wirz's material language invites this kind of speculation.

– John Beeson

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