

Oscar Wiggli. Body – Space – Sound A Creative Output Overview

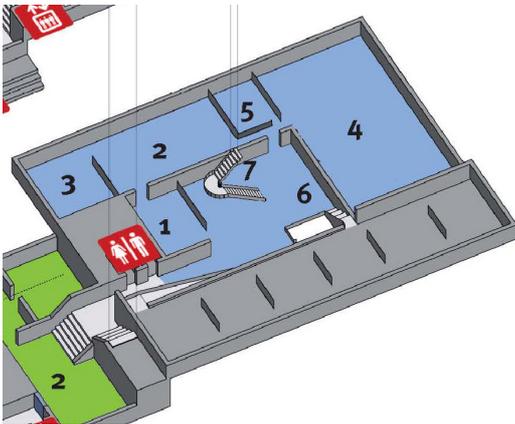
February 16 to May 13, 2007

Kunstmuseum Bern and Zentrum Paul Klee

Body – Space – Sound

The title of the exhibition in the Kunstmuseum Bern and in the Zentrum Paul Klee is indicative of the diversity of Oscar Wiggli's artistic activity as sculptor, draughtsman, graphic artist, photographer and composer of electro-acoustic music. He often avails himself of materials and techniques that one equates at times with the avant-garde: the use of iron in the fifties, the experimental use of photography in the sixties and the computer-generated production of sounds in the eighties. In addition to this, Oscar Wiggli finds that the title of the exhibition conveys the insight that a three-dimensional sculpture lives in space the same way as music does, the sculpture as a solid phenomenon, the music as an acoustic phenomenon, both in ephemeral space. The artist loves the analogies between categories of art that fertilize each other. He forges musical notes, draws sounds - the resonance of hammer blows is heard in his compositions. In forging, material is displaced, and in the metamorphosis of sound structures in the sound studio the body of notes is also changed. In his compositions, metallic noises from factory work floors can be heard. Musical ideas are suggested in the sculptures and works on paper. The parallelism of the materials – movement, rhythm, caesura – pertains to the sculpture as well as to the works on paper and the music.

In the Kunstmuseum Bern



1. Early works
2. The “dancing” figures
3. The eventful eighties
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7. Crystal shapes

1. Early works

In the early 1950s, the human figure is the theme of Oscar Wiggli's works. Based on plaster figures, wire armatures are made, then wrapped around with paper soaked in plaster. From 1956, fragile bud and larvae shaped sculptures are developed that are made of fine sheet metal shaped with the cutting torch, hammered and then welded. The metal shapes protect an imaginary core with a skin-like shell. By baking linseed oil into the surface of these figures, a dark shine is produced. The inimitable form of the torso characteristic of this period remains intrinsic to the style of Oscar Wiggli's later work. The works appear light, their centre of gravity is in the upper third and they seem to float in balance.

The curves, expressed by the rounded tin shapes, are accentuated with wash in *Drawings* and the sketched thin legs correspond to the slim supports of the iron sculptures made at this time. While the fundamental musical mood in the sculptures is expressed with reserve to begin with, the *genre* of the dance in the early drawings and etchings represents an

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important element. Some sheets show a round-dance of dancing figures or moving, interlaced bodies.

2. The “dancing” figures

At the beginning of the 1960s, **Bronze sculptures** are created based on wax models which the artist cut out of rolled sheets of wax. These works represent the transition from the fragile tin sculptures to the more massive, forged **Plate sculptures**. The leitmotif for these sculptures is the torso. As is the case with the metal sculptures, they stand on tall slim supports. Until the end of the decade, the iron plates were in contact with the floor. The works from these years are remarkable for their subtle and velvety surfaces, created by the matt gleam and milky reflection of light on the metal. Towards the end of the sixties, the enveloped and self-contained figures open themselves up to their surroundings. At the beginning of the seventies, Oscar Wiggli creates a series of bronze sculptures that are compact and bulky, made of several wax sheets or plaster casts of metal sculptures. These mark the transition to the block-like metal sculptures consisting of shaped, massive iron bars made at a later date. In the second half of the decade of the sixties, the rhythmic essence inherent in the sculptures becomes more marked. The immobile works make visual with increasing clarity the snap-shot character of “dancing” figures. Towards 1970, sculptures of figure couples with bodies placed parallel to one another appear on the scene. The space between both parts - the gap - corresponds to the pauses in a piece of music, the interval between the graphic ciphers and the future musical scores. Shells, placed over and behind one another, convey the idea of fragments of bodies that can be interpreted as breasts, abdomens or thighs and thus as a simultaneous visualization of elemental femininity. The same movement towards more mobility is also recognizable in **Works on paper**. Over the course of the 1960s, the gracile, sketchy human figures are given markedly opulent curves. In certain collages, Oscar Wiggli has cut drawings into pieces and reassembled them. This method is related to a later procedure in his electro-acoustic music where he organizes sounds stored on the computer into pieces of music. A high point of terpsichorean movement is made by the parades of the figures in the prints that are reminiscent of the interweaving of figures in the *danse macabre* of the late Middle Ages.

At the beginning of the seventies, the figures are no longer made up of several iron pieces placed in relation to one another, but consist of one or two iron plates joined parallel to one another. In **Works on paper** also, the bodies are increasingly solid. The **Iron sculptures** with their convex pieces have been reduced to perfect harmony or they evoke connotations to “rhythmicized” dancing figures. During the seventies, the terpsichorean dynamic decreases. The disposition of the figures is executed by means of iron plates placed parallel to one another with the frontal, shaped element conveying the curves of the body.

At the end of the seventies, sculptures made of iron plates showing incisions made with the cutting torch increasingly appear. The antecedents of this phenomenon were the irregular forms of the almost cubistic **Charcoal drawings** of the seventies. Their facets are limited by sharp contours

acting as separating fissures. This separation of the bodies by means of the cutting torch leaves gaps which serve on the one hand for the rhythmicizing of the sculpture and the placement of the individual parts and, on the other, which are to be set as a parallel to music. In music, the fissure corresponds to the caesura between the individual notes. The placement of the individual metal parts in relation to one another has its parallel in the relationship between the notes following on from one another. In the second half of the eighties, the arrangement of the metal plates gains artistic weight with the use of incisions. From the eighties onward, especially in the case of the monumental sculptures, these incisions serve as a structural element of the figurative bodies. Their vitality stems from the parts that have been separated from the surface of the iron plate and from the surface tension caused by the process of forging which creates skin out of metal.

3. The eventful eighties

What was inherent in the plate sculptures – the depiction of “dancing” figures – is now presented to the public in the form of a round-dance: **Sculpture 81 L, PARTITION FORGÉE**. Here, Oscar Wiggli reconnects with his early drawings, which had already broached the issue of arranging parallel groups of figures. To the sound of unheard music, six figures dance past the viewers in various sequences of movement. Their bodies are lightly turned, slits in the iron plates give additional rhythm to the group dance. It is as if the individual figures are the embodied musical notes of a composition, the blitheness of which is expressed in the terpsichorean attitudes of the individual sculptures.

The **Super positions** are created by the double exposure of one and the same negative. First of all, Oscar Wiggli photographs a detail of a metal sculpture or a drawing over which, in the second exposure, he lays the photograph of a female nude. As is the case with the later musical scores, made up of parts of sculptures or works on paper, details are laid over each other during the photographic superimposing. The group of works **Mouvements** comprises photographs entitled **Nuages** and **Paysages**. The title is the programme: movement and tempo characterize the tree-filled landscapes and clouds photographed from a train window, and which are blurred and distorted sideways. Oscar Wiggli sees an analogy between the clouds and music, “because for both, time plays an important role. A note disappears forever, a cloud changes its shape continually, both are subject to a constant progression of events.” For him, these photographs have sound: the trees rustle, the clouds rumble. The cirrus clouds, distorted by the wind, are related to the “dancing” iron figures. The fleecy clouds remind one of the gradated forging blows of the iron sculptures made at the same time. And in his musical **Compositions GUAREC, TARIEL and RADALVAR**, the wheels of the train beat time as regular as clockwork when they clatter over the rail joints.

4. Abstract rhythms

Between 1988 and 1994, Oscar Wiggli was able to forge massive **Block sculptures** using the large mechanical

hammers in the free-form department of the firm Von Roll in Gerlafingen. The musical sensitivity inherent in his work is no longer illustrated via the movement *motif* of the figures – instead, parallel blows of forge hammers indicate the musical *gestalt* principle of rhythm. The temporal expansion of the musical event – cascades of notes in the form of blows of the forge hammer – becomes visible in the gradations of the iron. The graded blows allow the sound to resonate outwards into the surrounding space. The works have the effect of torsos whose movements have been frozen. A particular kind of aloofness emanates from the forged blocks. Some sculptures are forged to high, flat tongues, others are reminiscent of idol-like figures of great suggestivity. The group of works ***Fleurs Forgées***, on the other hand, has not been forged from blanks. Rather, small openings have been cut out of 13cm-thick plates with the cutting torch. It is not until this has taken place, that the dimensions are formed using finely gradated strikes with a hammer.

With ***Situation sonore***, the artist paraphrases lithographs from the eighties in which depictions of sound waves in space take the place of kinetic bodies. Analogous to the sculptures, abstract rhythms are represented that visualize sounds in space. Acoustic processes are graphically converted. Staccato-like sequences of notes emerge, fade away again and are overlaid by turbulent and agitated tempi. In recent years, Oscar Wiggli has transposed these vibrations in spatiality to charcoal drawings. Slow waves, still spreading, cover the picture surface, are dammed up or slide off the edge of the drawing. Although abstract in their appearance, these drawings are similar to broad landscapes over which a brisk wind is gusting: one can almost hear the music of nature. The spatiality of the picture, of time and of sound have become one.

Oscar Wiggli sees the ***Sound-Lavis***, which have been made from 2004 onwards, as graphic symbols of sound. The pictorial representation follows directly on from personal cipher-like signs. The wash drawings thus created are composed of broad, patchy areas; of quickly placed splotches; of thin lines; and parallel, narrow, longish shapes. With each *Sound-Lavis*, Oscar Wiggli visualizes a specific sound, whereby the allocation is subjective. On individual sheets, underneath each picture, the ciphers are accompanied by the concepts describing them. In this way it becomes apparent which sensations of the artist are being depicted. At the same time it is obvious that here we are not dealing with a single tone in the case of the *Sound-Lavis* but with a diversity of sounds.

Oscar Wiggli's ***Musical scores*** represent visualized tone sequences that no longer follow the traditional notation of a composition. The music is not played by a musician, it is played from a recording. A graphic score serves the artist for the development of a piece, for constructing a dramaturgy and a temporal progress. The score represents a sort of script for the tones. The x-axis portrays the temporal progress of the sounds, on the y-axis the spatial distribution is reproduced in the form of tone traces. In the 1980s, as a paradigm for the signs, the artist uses videos of sculptures that he prints, cuts out and glues onto paper. In a figurative sense, by arranging the parts of his works on a score, he thus makes his sculpture resonate. In the nineties, the artist substituted the details of

his iron sculptures with delicate, more sensual parts of his lithographs. In the musical scores with *Sound-Lavis* and *Crystal forms*, the artist no longer keeps to tone traces, but rather spreads the individual graphic ciphers and rotating forms onto sound areas over the picture. Sometimes he allows visual ciphers on the traces of the tones as well as linguistic circumlocutions to coexist. Parallel to this, purely verbal scores develop.

5. The film for the sound reliefs

Towards the end of the eighties, as a compensation for the physically strenuous forging activity on the work floors of Von Roll in Gerlafingen, Oscar Wiggli developed ***Crystal forms*** for the first time (see 6 on the floor plan). He availed himself of a computer program developed by the well-known crystallographer Erich Offermann. On a playful impulse, the artist designs various forms of crystals that are not to be found in nature, plays with them and has them rotate.

In 2004, Oscar Wiggli's first ***Sound-Reliefs*** were made (see 7 on the floor plan). In these cardboard pressings, forms made of wood or plaster were pressed into the back of the wet card. The sound waves, which the artist depicts in his works on paper, are expanded into the third dimension. The rhythm of the fine drawings is clearly structured in the elevations and depressions of the reliefs, solid works with block-like elevations emerge from their floating character. In 2006, together with Benno Hofer from Ton-Art in Basle, Oscar Wiggli created the film ***Video-Sound-Relief-SIO***, which is being presented to the public for the first time ever in the Kunstmuseum Bern in a specially prepared room. A camera pans over the two *Sound-Reliefs 120 L* and *121 B*, the originals of which can both be seen at the exhibition. The film works with cross-fading and parallelizations. The accompanying music with the composition S/O by the artists evokes memories of organ music and string orchestras, but also of alienated everyday noises. Due to the continual changing of the lighting, a play of shadows and shapes is created. The virtual movement of the relief becomes real in the film. Further ***Films*** will be played on monitors.

Im Zentrum Paul Klee



The Sculptures

To complete and amplify the current exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Bern, the Zentrum Paul Klee is presenting a series of large and medium-sized sculptures by Oscar Wiggli, created largely between 1987 and 1994 in the industrial forges of the Von Roll works in Gerlafingen. Part of these sculptures are owned by the Oscar and Janine Wiggli Foundation in Muriaux.

The Von Roll sculptures are characterized by an elementary simplicity; for the most part, they consist of one single shape. The use of a mechanical hammer weighing two tons and of a 3000-ton-powered press allowed the artist to work on steel bars and plates weighing up to 800 kilograms. In the process, the blank glowing steel was placed underneath the hammer with the help of a transportation vehicle equipped with tongs, and the hammer then released to bear down on it with varying intensity and rhythm, depending on the shape the artist intended to create. This demanded extreme concentration and great rapidity of work, as the piece taken white-hot from the oven remained malleable only for a very short time. His increasing mastery of this technique and his profound knowledge of the material enabled Wiggli to transform the raw steel into gracile, fragile or even organic-seeming structures. The artist himself has named some of his sculptures "fleur forgée", forged bloom or flower.

The huge capacity of the Von Roll works' press also allowed the artist another way of shaping the steel: the plates were cut or opened up first with the help of an oxy-acetylene cutter and then heated in the furnace. Using self-made "tools", as he called the varying convex or concave metal moulds which he fitted onto the press, Wiggli was able to shape the steel piece in the way he intended in one single operation. In order to achieve this complex process with the utmost precision, he constructed models on a scale of 1:10 on which he could test the final shaping of the steel plate beforehand. Some of these impressive large sculptures are on view in the exterior area, besides works from Wiggli's former creative period. In spite of the hardness of their material and their monumental size, they present soft, delicately shaped curves, hollows and openings, reaching outward in a kind of dialogue with the space surrounding them.

Two short films illustrate the work process of the artist in the industrial forges of the Von Roll firm.

In his graphic work and his musical creations, Oscar Wiggli follows this same aim of exploring and transforming spaces and volumes. His "dessins musicaux" – musical drawings – are reflections and visualizations of his musical ideas. Lighter and darker shadings ripple over the paper like sound waves. They are broken, thrown back, or follow one on the other in varying rhythms. It is in this same way that his electroacoustic music is born. Sounds and noises are recorded in workshops and natural surroundings or constructed on a synthesizer and transformed so as to appear unfamiliar. Then, they are combined into virtual sound structures, creating a new acoustic universe.

Samples of the artist's compositions can be heard and reproductions of two charcoal drawings representing music are exhibited on the "museum street" in visual contact with the sculptures to illustrate the close interrelation between the two creative domains.

Exhibition Catalogue (in German / French)

Oscar Wiggli. Körper – Raum – Klang. Corps – Espace – Son

Hrsg. von Matthias Frehner und Jochen Hesse. Mit Beiträgen von Michael Baumgartner, Peter Bratschi, Matthias Frehner, Margrit Hahnloser-Ingold, Jochen Hesse, Kjell Keller und François Lachat. Benteli Verlag, Bern und Zürich. 304 Seiten, 252 Abb. ISBN-978-3-7165-1466-5. CHF 68.-

Special Events: see Flyer

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Donnerstag 10h – 21h
Montag geschlossen