

April 2025

Reiner Ruthenbeck

Shortly before Easter, an exhibition of Reiner Ruthenbeck's work opened at the Skulpturenhalle in Neuss, seventeen years after the last exhibition devoted to the sculptor at a German museum. The Skulpturenhalle has often exhibited artists who had hitherto received little attention for some time, thus helping to prevent them being forgotten. Ruthenbeck belongs to that generation of artists who began to question prevailing forms of sculpture in the 1960s and to develop new ways of working. This was the generation of Arte povera in Italy and Postminimalism in the USA. What distinguishes Ruthenbeck's work is its originality and the fact that he counts as one of the inventors of a new formal idiom, not as an epigone. As a qualified photographer, he travelled to Paris in the 1950s, where he came into contact with Surrealism. Ruthenbeck's view through the lens was focussed on normal everyday things, which in the stillness can take on a life of their own. This magic emanates from Ruthenbeck's first objects, in which one encounters something strange emerging from the familiar.



The exhibition is not conceived as a retrospective. It brings together different works from three decades, which enable the potential of the materials, the tension between contrasting elements, and the processual aspects of his sculpture to be experienced. Some of the earlier works still marginally share in the strangeness of Surrealism, such as the staggered arrangements of wooden bars or the metal framework over which crimson fabric strips have been spread, concealing the interior. Aloof, being reduced to a minimum, these works abjure any narrative, allowing formal aspects to come to the fore.



Ruthenbeck's most unusual works are the ash heaps which made his name around 1970. The coarsely-grained slag is poured to form a heap, criss-crossed by steel ducts. This creates a state of subtle tension between the heaps formed by gravity and the angular metal. Ruthenbeck pursued these thoughts further in paper piles: fragile volumes in space. It was not the handling of the material as such that interested him: action is frozen in his art practice to become a picture.



Ruthenbeck was fascinated by the sensual features of modest materials. He liked to work with black painted wooden bars, cotton fabric and metal plates. His handling was simple and at the same time refined: decisions are reduced to a minimum, form and tension are shaped by the weight of material and the manner of suspension, as in the white square piece of fabric attached to the wall. Thus, the appearance, impression and impact vary. Sculptural forms are not imposed on the material, but arise as if by themselves. The titles of the works describe what is to be seen. By ordering the materials into pairs of opposites – black/white, blue/red, hard/soft, open/concealed – Ruthenbeck creates a kind of abstraction negating the material and hence a feeling of unity, wholeness, and quietness. “Not being full up, but fullness!” was his motto.

The Reiner Ruthenbeck exhibition lasts until December 7, 2025.

Dieter Schwarz