

Vital Formalism

Notes on Stach Szumski's recent installation at Foksal Gallery, Warsaw

Henri Focillon's seminal work, *The Life of Forms in Art* (1934), represents a groundbreaking reevaluation of the concept of "form." Rather than treating form as a static, purely technical, or aesthetic category, Focillon elevates it to the status of a central axis that organizes both artistic and natural existence. His philosophy positions forms as living entities, endowed with autonomy, transformative potential, and intrinsic vitality. Through careful examination of their cycles of growth, decay, and renewal, Focillon situates forms as vital participants in the broader creative and existential processes of the world. This expansive view suggests that forms are not merely containers of meaning or representations of function but are themselves dynamic and generative forces, alive with possibility and resistant to simplistic categorization.

When juxtaposed with contemporary speculative theories such as palæhauntology, Focillon's framework resonates with striking profundity. Palæhauntology, a term that evokes the spectral entanglement of archaeology, philosophy, and speculative temporalities, investigates the liminal spaces where past, present, and future converge. This haunting exploration of material transformations—such as those depicted in Stach Szumski's *Calcium Carbonate*—complements and expands Focillon's insights by illustrating the complex, cyclic nature of form as it operates within both organic and synthetic domains. In this light, Focillon's concept of form as a living phenomenon intersects meaningfully with Hegel's provocative declaration that "spirit is a bone," which challenges traditional binaries by suggesting an intimate connection between the material

and the metaphysical, the physicality of the bone and the abstraction of the spirit it carries.

At the core of Focillon's philosophy is his assertion that forms possess their own vitality and agency. He rejects the notion that form is a passive vessel, subordinate to function or the imposition of meaning. Instead, he argues that forms are dynamic entities capable of growth, adaptation, and evolution. Much like living organisms, forms embody an intrinsic vitality that allows them to transcend their immediate environment and any narrow utility assigned to them. By decoupling form from its functional and representational roles, Focillon liberates it to become an active participant in the processes of artistic creation and natural transformation. This reconceptualization of form challenges the static and reductionist interpretations that have often dominated discussions of art and nature, positioning form instead as a central force that animates existence itself.

For Focillon, forms cannot be understood simply by tracing their origins or examining their functions. Forms are governed by their own internal logic, which operates independently of external influences and evolves in ways that defy linear causality. This autonomy allows forms to exceed the boundaries of their representational or utilitarian roles, achieving new aesthetic and conceptual dimensions. In the realm of art, forms possess the power to escape the confines of content and instead assert their vitality as creative entities in their own right. This dynamic understanding of form finds a contemporary echo in Szumski's *Calcium Carbonate*, which delves into the perpetual transformation of material forms. Szumski's exploration of calcium carbonate—the substance that underpins bones, limestone, and stalactites—serves as a vivid illustration of Focillon's philosophy. The geological and cultural recycling of this substance highlights

the ways in which forms persist and evolve across time, carrying traces of their past even as they take on new meanings and functions.

The resonance of Focillon's ideas with Szumski's work becomes even more profound when viewed through the lens of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's enigmatic claim that "Der Geist ist ein Knochen". In *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Hegel makes the provocative claim that "spirit is a bone." This statement, found in the "Phrenology" section of the work, has become one of Hegel's most enigmatic and oft-debated assertions. On its surface, the phrase seems absurd, suggesting an incongruous equivalence between the spiritual essence of human beings and a physical entity as inert and lifeless as a bone. However, when examined in the broader context of Hegel's critique of phrenology and his dialectical philosophy, this statement takes on profound meaning, revealing his skepticism of reductive materialism and his exploration of the interplay between spirit and materiality.

The statement "spirit is a bone" emerges in Hegel's critique of phrenology, a pseudoscience popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Phrenologists claimed to discern a person's character, intellect, and spiritual essence by analyzing the shape and structure of their skull. This empirical method sought to locate the intangible qualities of human spirit within tangible, physical forms. Hegel critiques this approach as emblematic of the Enlightenment's tendency to reduce complex metaphysical phenomena to mechanistic and material explanations. For Hegel, such reductionism represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of spirit (Geist), which he defines as the dynamic, self-conscious essence of human beings.

In this context, the phrase “spirit is a bone” is intended as a dialectical satire. Hegel does not seriously propose that the essence of spirit can be reduced to a physical bone. Instead, he parodies the absurdity of phrenological claims by pushing them to their logical extreme: if spirit is equated with the material, then it must be nothing more than the most lifeless and static form of materiality—a bone. This ironical assertion exposes the philosophical limitations of attempting to explain the spiritual entirely in terms of the physical.

Hegel’s critique of phrenology is not a wholesale rejection of the relationship between spirit and matter. Instead, it underscores the dialectical relationship between the two. For Hegel, spirit cannot exist independently of materiality; it must manifest itself through the material world, including the human body, language, and culture. However, spirit is not reducible to any specific material form. The reductionist view of phrenology fails to grasp this nuanced relationship. By locating spirit solely within the skull, phrenology denies the dynamic and self-transcending nature of spirit, which constantly mediates between the physical and metaphysical realms.

The phrase “spirit is a bone” thus serves as a critical pivot in Hegel’s argument. It highlights the inadequacy of materialist accounts of spirit while also affirming the necessity of material mediation. In Hegelian terms, spirit achieves self-consciousness not by retreating from the material world but by engaging with it and transcending it through dialectical development. The interplay of opposites—spirit and matter, abstract and concrete—is central to Hegel’s philosophy, and the statement “spirit is a bone” exemplifies this dialectical tension.

The phrase “spirit is a bone” carries significant implications for understanding Hegel’s broader philosophical project. First, it illustrates his critique of Enlightenment empiricism, which often seeks to explain human existence in purely materialist terms. For Hegel, such explanations neglect the richness and complexity of human self-consciousness, which cannot be fully understood through empirical observation alone. Second, the statement exemplifies Hegel’s dialectical method, which seeks to reconcile apparent contradictions by integrating them into a higher unity. In this case, the opposition between spirit and bone—between the metaphysical and the physical—points toward a more comprehensive understanding of how spirit operates in and through materiality.

Finally, Hegel’s critique of phrenology serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of oversimplification in any attempt to understand human nature. By reducing the spiritual to the physical, phrenology not only diminishes the complexity of spirit but also reveals the limitations of purely materialist approaches to philosophy and science. For Hegel, the essence of spirit lies in its dynamic and self-reflective character, which cannot be contained within the static and inert confines of a bone.

Hegel’s assertion that “spirit is a bone” is a deliberately provocative and ironic critique of phrenology’s reductive materialism. By parodying the notion that spirit can be located in the physical form of the skull, Hegel exposes the limitations of materialist accounts of human self-consciousness while affirming the dialectical relationship between spirit and matter. The phrase encapsulates a key theme of Hegel’s philosophy: the necessity of mediating opposites to achieve a deeper understanding. In doing so, it challenges readers to reflect on the complexity of spirit as a self-transcending and dynamic essence that cannot be reduced to any one of its manifestations. Thus, “spirit is

a bone” stands as a testament to Hegel’s philosophical ingenuity and his enduring critique of simplistic explanations of human nature.

This assertion, which has confounded interpreters for centuries, underscores the paradoxical relationship between the tangible and the intangible, the inert and the vital. The bone, as both a material object and a carrier of spirit, becomes a powerful metaphor for the interpenetration of physical and metaphysical dimensions. In Szumski’s installations, this idea takes on tangible form. Bones, repurposed as artistic materials, embody a duality that is both haunting and generative, serving as bridges between the living and the dead, the natural and the artificial. Focillon’s philosophy further bridges the worlds of art and nature, emphasizing the shared rhythms of transformation and renewal that animate both. In nature, forms arise through organic processes shaped by the interplay of environmental and physical forces. The spirals of seashells, the veins of leaves, and the contours of mountains are all testaments to this inherent vitality. Art, on the other hand, arises from human imagination and intentionality, manifesting cultural, historical, and personal significance. Yet, for Focillon, art does not simply mimic nature; it operates within a parallel framework of invention and evolution. Like natural forms, artistic forms are governed by cycles of growth, decay, and renewal, revealing the universality of these processes.

Szumski’s concept of osteomorphism provides a compelling example of this interconnectedness. His speculative sculptures, crafted from bones and limestone, evoke both prehistoric and futuristic aesthetics. In this process, bones—repositories of biological, cultural, and historical information—undergo cycles of compression, mineralization, and dissolution. These transformations mirror the evolutionary rhythms that Focillon identifies in both art and nature, underscoring the interconnectedness of

material and temporal processes. Through Szumski's work, Hegel's paradoxical vision of the bone as a vessel of spirit gains renewed significance, highlighting the ways in which even the most solid and inert forms are imbued with the potential for transformation and vitality.

Focillon's philosophy introduces a framework for understanding form that incorporates spatial, material, temporal, and spiritual dimensions. Forms exist not in isolation but in relation to their surroundings, shaped by the dynamic interplay of internal and external forces. The materiality of a form influences its character and expression, while its evolution over time reflects the temporal nature of existence. Beyond these physical attributes, forms embody an intangible essence—a creative vitality that animates their existence and connects them to larger processes of growth and renewal.

Szumski's sculptures illustrate this multidimensional framework by merging organic and synthetic materials into hybrid forms. By combining bones, polymers, and ceramics, Szumski creates speculative entities that evoke both ancient traditions and posthuman futures. These hybrid forms capture the spiritual and temporal dimensions of Focillon's framework, while also reflecting Hegel's notion of the bone as a paradoxical embodiment of spirit. In Szumski's hands, the bone becomes more than a relic of the past; it is a dynamic participant in the ongoing cycles of transformation that define existence.

Palæhauntology, as a speculative practice, extends Focillon's philosophy into new realms by synthesizing Derrida's concept of hauntology with an engagement with deep ancestral time. This approach positions humanity within a spectral continuum, shaped by the material and cultural residues of prehuman and posthuman histories. Szumski's Calcium Carbonate exemplifies this hauntological perspective, transforming bones into

archaeological and metaphysical artifacts that evoke a sense of spectral continuity. Bones, as Szumski presents them, are not merely remnants of the past; they are living traces, bridging the gaps between life and death, nature and artifice, past and future.

In both Focillon's theories and Szumski's practices, the rhythms of transformation emerge as a central theme. Forms are never static but are constantly in flux, shaped by the dynamic interplay of natural and cultural forces. Szumski's exploration of material cyclicality mirrors this rhythm, as he repurposes discarded animal bones and synthetic materials into sculptures that embody the perpetual transformation of matter. These works remind us that form is not an inert artifact of the past but a dynamic force that continues to shape and be shaped by the world around it.

Through the lens of Focillon's philosophy and Hegel's provocative insight, Szumski's work invites us to reconsider the boundaries between the organic and the synthetic, the living and the inert, the material and the spiritual. Together, these ideas reveal a universal vitality that transcends cultural and temporal boundaries, connecting humanity's creative impulse with the dynamic processes of the natural world.

In conclusion, Henri Focillon's *The Life of Forms in Art* offers a profound lens through which to explore the intersections of art, nature, and materiality. By presenting form as a living, autonomous, and dynamic entity, Focillon challenges conventional notions of creativity and existence, opening new pathways for understanding the vitality of form. His insights find resonance in the speculative practices of contemporary artists like Stach Szumski, whose work extends these ideas into realms of haunting materiality and spectral transformation. In the interplay of Focillon's philosophy, Szumski's practice, and Hegel's enigmatic assertion that "spirit is a bone," we find a shared vision of form as

a universal vitality—a dynamic force that transcends boundaries and connects all aspects of existence.

(Zsolt Miklósvölgyi)