

***Sculpture as an exercise
in attention***

**a conversation with Tove Storch
by Thomas Caron**

In your artistic practice you carry out in-depth research into the complex relationships between material, form and colour within the medium of sculpture. Do you feel any one of these characteristics is dominant in the development of specific works?

If I have to choose one, I think material is the most important factor. A work often develops as an answer to the question of how to use a specific material. I look at how the materials want to be used, but also at how I can stretch them to their limits. I like using materials that everybody knows and yet at the same time have something unfamiliar about them.

I use silk in many of my sculptures, but the kind of silk I use doesn't look or feel like how you would expect silk to be. It's sheer, matt like cotton, and woven in a rectangular grid like a thin net. I have also made works consisting of big sheets of black see-through cloth scraped with transparent silicone. Although both materials are well known in everyday life, people can't quite tell what they are looking at, whether it is a hard glass surface or a moveable membrane. This short state of uncertainty adds a small delay to the speed in which you decipher the work.

I also think about technique as a material at some level. There are always rules for how to use something, whether it's classic arts and craft materials or more industrial ones. Breaking or approaching these rules differently can also be a major factor in a work.

For example I was doing work in a print workshop, where I became very aware of what was actually possible in printmaking, and how different colour systems worked within different techniques. I developed a complete analogue method that was mainly focusing on how the paint or ink was pressed onto the paper and on minor changes in one category of colour. It actually ended up as a project that was very much about painting, even though it took the shape of books and was produced with printing materials. The thoughts I had while working on this dealt with the difficulty of mixing the same colour twice. It also made me think of the naturalist painter trying to transform the actual world into the matter of paint. Through experiments with material, I confronted some very basic facts about art making, and I found this really interesting.

Do you think that certain materials have a historical connotation?

Yes, for me materials contain a lot of historical meaning and knowledge. I learn about architecture and structuring by making a small cardboard model, as the principles of volume and strength are the same. When I use soft materials to create solid looking objects it's like an examination of sculpture in general. I analyze through materials, and this is how I drift around art history.

Your work is embedded in (modernist) art historic references, from Donald Judd's "Specific Objects" to Lygia Pape's "Tecelares". How exactly do you position yourself in relation to this canon?

There are a lot of expectations as to how artists are supposed to position themselves in relation to art history, but to me it feels staged to act as if it's all an intellectual process. I do think it's essential to have an understanding of the issues in contemporary art and to know where one is on the map of knowledge and past artistic experiences. But I don't think that artistic research develops linearly, or that references necessarily must clearly lead back to specific works. For me it's more like a cloud of common understanding.

My artistic practice is a constant search, a search that deals with a lot of classic rules and ideas about volume, form, shaping, constructing, etc. In that sense I often follow a similar path to a lot of minimalist artists. These artists allowed basic structuring and industrial materials to dictate what was possible and how a work could look. So do I. This similar approach inevitably leads to similar forms and aesthetics. But for historic minimalism, this meant a break with a conviction: a rebellious new way of thinking, an objective way of making art as opposed to the earlier notion of art as self-expression.

But opposed to a historic minimalistic language, your work has a clear emotional component.

Yes, it's very different. For me my work is a tool to look at a lot of emotional things. To look at sculpture is to look at the world around me. It's a way of ordering things and a way of sharpening my eye and my attention. What I find so interesting about engineering and structuring, is how they make me sensitive to how elements of my everyday life are put together; how my kitchen is built, how my apartment is arranged, how it feels to wear clothes.

So you use your work as a mental tool to look at the world?

Yes, very much. I use my artistic practice to deal with the issue of being present in fantasy and reality.

The way I became interested in sculpture had a lot to do with being taken somewhere else. I remember as a child I went into this big yellow installation and it was obvious to me that the artist was trying to seduce me and make me forget where I was. But what I really experienced was screws and freshly painted plywood covered with footprints. I was not taken somewhere else, I only became more aware of where I actually was. You don't necessarily seduce someone or touch their emotions by overwhelming them. I try to think about what engenders one's attention to presence. It might be something very small, it might not be something impressive or something that blocks your view of everyday life.

What I'm really interested in is trying to look at what is actually there, and to sharpen the view of this. This mostly happens without language, as a pure bodily experience. It's this recognition and the search for the non-verbal experience that in a non-verbal language that drives me.

Could you explain this non-verbal language?

I find it interesting when you can be precise in whatever language you use. There is a constant need of translating what *objects* mean. But *the object* is not a sentence it's something spatial. The good thing about *the object* is that it will never become just words. You can project a lot of words onto it, but you will never be able to explain the core of what really makes it special and interesting. You cannot grasp it completely, and that's what makes it different from speaking and writing.

There is always a shortcoming when you try to translate a bodily experience into words. Everybody agrees on this, yet people still ask each other to do this all the time.

The way I know if a work has something special is if I can keep looking at it in some kind of loop, without it fixating itself as something defined on my retina.

These thoughts share important characteristics with the artist books you have been making since last year. Could you explain this concept to us?

Yes, to continue what I was talking about in the beginning, the first books I made were developed during a residency in a print workshop in 2011. The project grew out of a group of sculptures I made earlier that year. The sculptures had been surrounded by a lot of words even though my feeling was that their strength was very silent. I watched people around them, and they also seemed silent, though very attentive. So I decided to give myself the impossible task to communicate the essence of this group of works in printed matter.

The project ended up as fifty books, in which each page was hand printed. I mixed all the colours myself and applied the paint with a squeegee, the tool usually used in silkscreen printing, but leaving out the screen, the motif. This technique left each page as a random individual pattern, and allowed me to work with colours in a way other to that which an industrial method would allow. Each book was done in one tone of blue all the way through, and each of the books was printed in a different tone of blue.

The blue came from the many colour variations in the blue sculptures. The transparent sheets of silk formed layers as you looked through one sculpture onto another, and created new variations of blue. The colours were hard to describe, both in photographs and with words. The few available words for all the different blues didn't correspond with the never-ending options of the actual colour tones that could be mixed.

The books consist of monochromes, yet you speak of them as "alternative texts"?

The pulling movement from top to bottom shared the direction of how a text would be read, as if the ink shaping the words on these pages has just been smudged out. The books were also a lot about how two materials had been put together. The paint was soaked into the structure of the paper as a reminder of how printed words are also a form of physical material applied onto another. Then there was the whole reading experience of browsing through the books, touching the pages, being alone looking at these repeated colours and changing patterns.

It is as if the books can somehow focus me. I found this interesting because focus is always something I search for when I work with space and sculpture. Maybe the books didn't catch the actual essence of these works in a more precise way than the works do themselves, but they made me think a lot about how meaning is contained and sensed, and therefore I sometimes call them alternative texts.

When you think of these books as alternative texts on your work, would you say they function as an introduction - either to the sculptures or to the act of looking?

They could be some kind of introduction, but they don't function in a less abstract way than the sculptures themselves. The books are independent works in their own right. They arose as answers to questions that occurred in other works. At the same time they also have some parallel analytic purpose. I use them to gather my thoughts about other works I make, or to focus on a certain space, as with the book I made for my recent exhibition at S.M.A.K. in which all the colours I used originated from the exhibition space.

Basically I use a lot of subtle changes in colour tones to reach something that flickers between the book itself and what the book examines. The colours refer back to the space, or to certain sculptures, and the colour changes provoke a fine-tuning of the eye. The eye is constantly pushed back and forward, trying to perceive something that is never final. The gaze is circling around something but never actually nailing it. I like this movement in gaze and in thought, it keeps things vibrating.

I am also interested in the very act of reading, how one physically deals with an object and at the same time is present in fantasy. I feel like a lot of what I am looking for when I work with sculpture and space, is captured in what happens when you read a book. It's about the gathering of the mind, the concentration and the special awareness you can have while holding a book in your hands. When a book appears in an exhibition space, this intimacy often disappears. You are no longer private with it, the book is displayed as an example of itself, and you have no physical access to it. I am interested in looking at this change from private to public.

Is this what you tried to do with the performance you did at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in 2012 and more recently at Residency Unlimited in New York?

Yes, the performance was my first attempt to give a possible answer to that question of how the intimacy of the book could be maintained in a museum situation. I gathered a group of people and made them sit and browse through a blue book, each in their own pace. It was a way for me to literally show the full 100 pages of each book to the audience, to keep them at a physical distance to the objects, though close in mind, and also a way of exhibiting all those missing words. The whole thing became very much about looking at someone else looking, or looking at someone else concentrating.

Earlier on you talked about how material and structure dictate use, but where does colour come in?

Colour is an example of something that is important in all my works, namely the flickering and the focusing. The colours keep dancing around a certain point, and keep the definition of something open and variable.

I use colour to describe space and matter. It's a little bit similar to what happens to the sculptures when they vary in sizes. The different colour tones are just a clearer and more direct way to do this. Repetition is a way to lead the eye, make it aware of what is actually around.

So is repetition an important aspect of your work?

Yes, I think it's interesting to see how different one sculpture is from another, even though they are built within the same system and with the same materials. Repeating something gives me the opportunity to intensify my attention to it. It allows me to spend time and go deeper into details, seeing how everything changes by varying only a minor detail, be it size or colour. It allows me to abstractly and emotionally decide right and wrong. While making works I constantly decide what functions and what doesn't, and when I repeat something I can get closer to why one decision is better than another. I can live out the insecurity of making a choice by trying out many options.

Your sculptures have a very specific relationship to the space in which they are being exhibited. Do you conceive them as site specific sculptures?

Some sculptures are made specifically for a place, such as the grey silk boxes displayed at Overgaden or the most recent sculptures exhibited at S.M.A.K.. These works take their colour from the exhibition space, as if all the colours in the space were mixed together and taken apart again. Still it's very important to me that they're completely moveable, independent works, only relating to the space, not physically fixed to it with screws or straps. If they're moved somewhere else they will just have a different focus. Relating them to the space is just how I conceive an exhibition as a whole.

Are the materials used in your works also a means to relate to the space?

Often my sculptures are semi-transparent, you can look at the space through them. I have worked for several years with fragile and soft materials: thin silk satin, paper or rubber membranes stretched on frames and other kinds of structures. That these materials are not firm like classic sculptural materials such as bronze or concrete is very important. It gives them some kind of distance to the usual rules of space, something solid.

How important is that juxtaposition between the hard structure and the fragile membrane?

The hard and the soft is something very essential to me. It all stems from an interest in what objects or shapes consist of, how they are structurally put together. When I studied I spend a lot of time looking at simple 3D programs, and how they picture and compose volumes. Everything was possible in this world, and I liked all the slips that happened when I moved these abstract geometries into reality by building them with cardboard and glue. The issues in real space were so different from those in theoretical abstract space. It made me very aware of how shapes in 3D are made of many areas of flat surfaces, as a geometric translation of amorphous irregular objects. I tried to make this translation from the 3D program back into reality using flat material to compose rounded objects. This made me focus much more on how the shape was made rather than on the shape I intended to make. It allowed me to work metaphorically around the act of sculpting.

This interest has gone through different phases over time, but I think that the use of fragile materials versus hard structures keeps my attention on the sculpture as an experiment instead of a perfect shape. Often a sculpture is a solution to how these two elements can be composed in new ways. I stretch the soft material in different directions but always keep it as a plane surface in space. I like these thin cuts that I can make in the air when I stretch something, it's like a definition of a place in space that is hard to touch otherwise.

The sculptures I showed at S.M.A.K. have many of these thin cuts in the air. When you pass by the sculptures from the side, the membranes become invisible for a short moment, then visible from the other side. I think this is an interesting place to dwell. The sculptures are very tense. The silk is stretched from top to bottom with thin wires holding up kilos of iron floating in the middle of a bearing structure. All the elements depend on each other. The tension is like a frozen moment.

Other sculptures deal with the surface defining a volume, like the blue sculptures I was talking about in relation to the blue books for example. These sculptures have two layers of silk running in two directions around a rhombus, overlapping each other like a bridge over a road. There is a big space of air inside that you can't enter, even though there are open sides where you can stick your hands in; the blocking of the air outside and the air inside the sculpture and the thin definition of the difference between those two spaces is really interesting to me.

Colophon

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