

Straight Letters

Sarah Lowndes, 2008

Yesterday, we went for a spin up the Haight - came across this homeless guy who wasn't begging – don't know how to explain it, but he had all his coppers and coins laid out on the ground in a perfect heart shaped peace sign.

—Camilla Løw, email from San Francisco, 7th August 2005.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the work of Camilla Løw is the way in which she uses 'fixed' prefabricated materials such as wood and metal to articulate something about the heterogeneous quality of social life. Løw's work is articulated through an industrial and minimalist rubric, yet she molds, joins and positions materials such as oak blocks, cast concrete, beaten brass, Plexiglas and mild-steel rod in forms that are recognisably human. Løw's work revisits the disciplined formalism of Russian Constructivism, De Stijl and Minimalism but the underlying impulse of her work lies in a consideration of the anthropometric qualities of sculpture. Her work can be seen as models of experienced action, witnessed on the street or at a bar or nightclub. Spelling out a heart shaped peace sign using coins is an act in some way similar to Løw's sculptural rearrangements of everyday materials into symbolic forms.

The titles of her works orient the viewer away from the industrial resonances of the materials, towards a consideration of the social implications of architecture and design. A low slanting fence of brightly painted wooden spurs jutting upwards from the gallery floor is entitled Rum and Coke (2003). An arrangement of two interconnected painted rectangular wooden frames balanced on a stack of three concrete blocks is named after the current retro fashion trend for Tight Jeans (2007). Often her sculptures have female names: Viva, Donna, Annalisa. Løw explains that these names are derived from various influences,

Sometimes it's a colour reference. Sometimes it's the shape or the attitude of the piece. I like to use names that suggest strong female characters. I think this has a lot to do with my sculptures often being minimal and maybe even masculine. It's also a direct link to the idea of the human scale in relation to architecture and the figure as the historical origin of sculpture.

Løw's brand of Constructivism is not rigidly industrial, but closer to that of the playful rediscovery of those tropes by designers connected to the punk and post-punk scene in Manchester, such as Neville Brody and Peter Saville and Hacienda designer Ben Kelly. The interrelationship of performance and Constructivism found in Brody and Saville's record sleeves and Kelly's bar and nightclub environments can be traced back to the roots of Russian Constructivism, and Varvara Stepanova and Liubov Popova's spindly geometric stage sets for Vsevolod Meyerhold's plays: respectively The Death of Tarelkin (1922) and The Magnanimous Cuckold (1922). These sets echoed the anatomy of the performers, demonstrating correspondences between human limbs and material as translated into model. The squares of Popova's framework, for example, are reinforced by X-shaped wooden batons, akin to arms that are crossed. The effect of the scaffold-like set rests not only on the particular material properties of the object (faktura) but also on the spatial presence of the object (tektonika): in other words, what material can become.

But although Løw's work evokes the human form, it does so in an abstract fashion – Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler's description of a Picasso sculpture of a free-floating arm could be applied here (Kahnweiler observed that the sculpture did not represent an arm but instead 'it represents armness'). Løw's work is not conventionally representational but instead articulates something of underlying reality. Løw's stylised 'figures' include Donna (2007), a slender painted wooden frame with a square, arm-like extension resting on two concrete blocks, and Viva (2004), which consists of lengths of wood threaded onto cord and hung up on the gallery wall like a collapsed marionette awaiting a puppeteer. The stylization of Løw's figure surrogates generates a dialogue in her work between abstraction and representation. The attempt to depict figures as they were perceived was a major preoccupation of Alberto Giacometti, who considered that stylising the

figure was the only way in which it was possible to 'grasp the ungraspable essence or core of human encounter'. As John Paul Sartre noted in his famous essay on Giacometti, "The Quest for the Absolute" (1948) this meant expressing a vision of the human as one who is seen by others: who exists in a social world.

The life-like quality of Løw's sculptures is partially due to the way in which they are positioned. Rather than fix pieces with nails or glue, Løw's installs her work as a balancing act.

Hanging, standing or leaning against the wall, the works investigate what might be seen as traditional sculptural or architectonic concerns with form, space, rhythm, tension, balance and the properties of materials.

These properties are demonstrated by a series of works including Seven (2004) and Sister (2006) made by threading coloured Plexiglas onto mild-steel rod to create jagged multi-coloured 'heads' on a spare and elongated stem. These top-heavy stylised figures are propped against gallery walls as witnesses to the action that unfolds within the exhibition space. Suspended works such as Viva (2004), Soledada Red (2004) and Diva (2006) dangle from a single nail. Other works result from various components that are linked and balanced, such as Crossover (2007), which consists of two interconnected painted wooden frames, one of which rests on a single concrete cube.

This piece brings back the idea of making the piece less autonomous - I mean, it has the function of being able to be placed either way on the concrete cube. I guess this is a way of trying to make the piece more mobile, yet it's definitely 'unmovable'. The piece is only placed on top of the cube, and not fastened to it - like all my work.

Løw imbues her installations with a palpable kinetic edge, as the viewer must not only look at the work but also navigate around the pieces, physically discovering the space with their body. In this too, Løw's work returns to the performative aspect of De Stijl reference points – such as El Lissitzky's Proun Room (1923) which was intended to jolt the viewer out of their sense of separation from the work. Lissitzky commented that 'if on previous occasions in his march-past in front of the picture-walls, he was lulled by the painting into a certain passivity, now our design

should make the man active. This should be the purpose of the room.'

Recently, Løw has begun working with cast concrete, to produce cube forms, which are then arranged in the space in humanlike columns, such as *Stela* (2007), an industrial totem pole composed from five stacked concrete cubes. Again a 'corrupted' Minimalism is applied, to allow the corporeal aspect of an industrial material to speak. Discussing these works Løw explains, The concrete cubes are (30 x 30 x 30) cm - a size that relates to the industrial use of concrete, but at the same time, designed and made specifically for an art purpose. I started including the concrete cubes quite recently. I think I was looking for a new material where it made sense to repeat the form over and over again. I was looking for a way of making modules that could be placed in direct relation to the space itself. The wooden pieces I make in my studio are more autonomous in the way that they are difficult to alter after they've been made. They are also labour intensive. By using the concrete, I felt I could be more playful on-site.

These recent works made using concrete cubes are 'figure surrogates' in the manner of Robert Morris's *Two Columns* (1961). Morris's mandate for the development of sculpture "Notes on Sculpture: Part I and II" (1966) and Michael Fried's famous counter-attack "Art & Objecthood" (1967), are so well-known they hardly need to be discussed in detail here, except to make the point that the qualities that Fried identified as so problematic in the work of Morris and Donald Judd (site-specificity, temporality, 'theatricality') are precisely those that have shaped what might be called the performative sculpture of Løw and other artists who have emerged since the late 80s from the Sculpture & Environmental Art department at Glasgow School of Art including Claire Barclay, Martin Boyce and Jim Lambie. The Department, until recently run by David Harding, adopted the unofficial motto 'Context is half the work' drawn from John Latham and Barbara Stevini's 1965 Artists' Placement Group and supported the growth of site-specific and installation work, encouraging students to make work 'with and through people'.

The way in which the meanings of cultural reference points shift through time and use is a constant theme in Camilla Løw's work, which makes her choice of title for this exhibition particularly resonant. *Straight Letters* is a reference to the distinctive etiolated *Pichação*

letterforms, which cover the exteriors of many of the buildings in Sao Paulo. As François Chastanet has described

The São Paulo milieu is unique because, unlike most other American, European and even Asian graffiti scenes, which reproduce New York letterforms more or less faithfully, the Pichacões have developed a totally different imaginary calligraphy.

The Pichação script contains elements of Nordic and Celtic runes and Germanic black letter type as these were the inspiration for the heavy metal graphics of 1970s and 80s Heavy Metal bands such as Iron Maiden and Slayer. These, rather than Hip-hop, were the music of the street culture in São Paulo in the 1980s. There is an obvious correlation between the spare lines of Camilla's Løw's 'figure surrogates' and these segmented, rune-like vertical letters.

In the last year Løw has returned to live in her home city of Oslo, after periods spent living and working in Glasgow, and then San Francisco. It seems no coincidence that after returning to Scandinavia, she has developed a body of work partially inspired by ancient runic inscriptions. A peculiarity of the runic alphabet as compared to the Old Italic family is the relative absence of horizontal strokes – the angular shape of the 24 runic letters was designed for ease of carving against the grain of narrow pieces of wood (the “scrap paper” of forested Europe). The rune-like Pichação letters share this vertical characteristic, as curves and horizontal lines are also difficult to render with a paint roller while balancing on a window ledge of a tower block. The thinness and verticality of Pichação letterforms also gives them a formal resemblance to the stick-like figures of Giacometti. David Sylvester observed of Giacometti's sculptures: 'They are figures without physical superfluousness [...] their thinness a 'condensation'. Runes and Pichação similarly represent a condensation of meaning into figure, an expression of significant form. The carved wood and the quickly applied paint are made to speak something of the underlying reality of existence. The significant form they evoke reappears constantly in Camilla Løw's work: not the human figure, but the shadow that it casts.

References

Camilla Løw, in response to questions sent by the author, December 17th 2007.

Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, The Sculptures of Picasso (London: 1949), quoted in Andrew Causey, Sculpture Since 1945 (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.34.

This interpretation of the work appears in Dan Fox, “Camilla Low”, Frieze Yearbook 2005/6 (London: Frieze Publications, 2005).

Christian Klemm, Notes to accompany the exhibition “Alberto Giacometti” (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2001), p.7.

John Paul Sartre, “The Quest for the Absolute” (1948), in English translation Essays in Esthetics, Wade Baskin, ed., (London: 1964), p.101.

Camilla Løw, in response to questions sent by the author, 8th November 2007.

Camilla Løw, in response to questions sent by the author, 17th December 2007.

The phrase ‘discovering the space with their body’ is a paraphrase of a statement by the American artist George Trakas, made in relationship to his seminal works The Piece That Went Through the Floor (1970) and The Piece That Went Through the Window (1970), both of which were installed at 112 Greene Street in New York. Trakas said, ‘In my work I wanted to confront the spectators directly and draw them in physically to discover space with their bodies.’ George Trakas interviewed by Hugh M. Davis and Sally E. Yard in Davies and Yard, George Trakas Log Mass: Mass Culture (Amhearst: University Gallery, University of Massachusetts, 1980) quoted in Julie H. Reiss, From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999), p.120.

El Lissitzky quoted in Nancy J. Troy, The De Stijl Environment (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1983), p.126, quoted in Julie H. Reiss, From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation, op. cit., p.120.

Camilla Løw, in response to questions sent by the author, December 17th 2007

‘In the perception of relative size, the human body enters into the total continuum of sizes and establishes itself as a constant on that scale. One knows immediately what is smaller and larger than the self and the two are seen differently because of the different qualities of intimacy in

relation to its size'. Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture: Part II", Artforum, October 1966.

'The better new work takes the relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light and the viewer's field of vision. The object is but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic. It is in some ways more reflexive because one's awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work is stronger than in previous work, with its many internal relationships.'

Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture: Part II", *Ibid.*

François Chastanet, "The Architecture of Sao Paulo, Brazil is covered by a unique form of calligraphic graffiti" (2001) <http://eyemagazine.com/feature.php?id=123&fid=540> accessed November 8th, 2007.

'About 5,000 [runic] inscriptions survive, mainly memorial stone carvings and owner declarations scratched onto metal objects, dating from about A.D. 100 to 1600. The majority come from Sweden: 1,000 from Norway; about 700 from Denmark; and the rest mainly from Germany, the British Isles, and Ireland.' David Sacks, The Alphabet (London: Hutchinson, 2003), p.150.

David Sacks, The Alphabet, *Ibid.*, p.149.

David Sylvester, "Perpetuating the Transient" (London: Arts Council Gallery, 1955), reprinted in David Sylvester, About Modern Art (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), p.52-53.

'Significant form' is a term that first appeared in Clive Bell, Art (London: Chatto & Windus, 1914).