

SOFIA HULTÉN: ENGAGING SITUATIONS AND EVERYDAY NONSENSE LOGIC

One of the more familiar art quotations is Michelangelo's (1475–1564): "In every block of marble I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me, shaped and perfect in attitude and action. I have only to hew away the rough walls that imprison the lovely apparition to reveal it to the other eyes as mine see it." The Renaissance genius was born. The artist saw and gave shape to something that was a privilege of the few. Since then, this idea has permeated what we call art.

In 2001, Sofia Hultén made a video in which she smashed and repaired a guitar a total of seven times, under the title *Fuck It Up and Start Again (One guitar smashed and mended 7 times)*. She exhibited both the video and a photograph of the repaired guitar (on another occasion, the guitar was exhibited on its own). We can interpret the work as a lesson in learning – trial and error. A both violent and humble lesson in daring to fail, and yet still not give up.

I find myself thinking about the quotation from Michelangelo. What has happened to the Renaissance longing for beauty and harmony, which was supposed to enhance our sense of being alive and to create an order that we can relate to? Why break a guitar and then repair it? Seven times! Why not buy a new one!? Better and neater... It seems as if Hultén wants to play a different tune than Michelangelo and his Renaissance buddies.

If we translate *Fuck It Up and Start Again* as a moralizing exhortation, Hultén in her own way still picks up on the Renaissance idea of getting us to see something that we might not have expected to see. This also applies to her other works. There is an overarching ambition to expose or liberate something. *Mutual Annihilation* from 2008 consists of four videos, a slide transparency, along with an object – a found, battered chest of drawers. The piece of furniture plays the main role. In a video we see how the chest of drawers is restored to its original condition. In another it is re-restored to the state in which she found it. The slide transparency shows the chest of drawers fully restored. Two opposing time lines collide. Something is begun, something comes to an end, only to be begun again... The circle is completed, dissolved, completed again etc.

It is like a melancholy meditation on life in itself. But also a tender depiction of the relationship between objects and human beings, which can be interpreted as a quiet questioning of society's prevailing wear-it-out-and-throw-it-away attitude. Hultén is also interested in the concept of time. The flow of time is literally visible through the actual handicraft process. But the process

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(time) leads nowhere. Rather, it is imprisoned in a short-circuited circular motion. It is as though time has ceased to exist or has taken on a new form. Instead, what emerges is a diffuse state, rather than a specific denunciation.

Unlike the Renaissance and Michelangelo, Sofia Hultén does not transform a fragment of nature into a cultural revelation. On the contrary, the starting points for her processes are cultural artefacts or human situations. In the novel *À rebours* (*Against the Grain*, 1884) J.K. Huysmans reverses his fellow author Emile Zola's pretensions to naturalism by describing a reality that, to begin with, seems naturally unexceptional, but which is in actual fact the opposite – culturally and artificially refined. She thus also creates a link to Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) and his crucial influence on the (post-)modern concept of art. Meaning is not generated in the form of the thing or through divine significances. Instead, it comes from significances given by the artist, by the thing in itself and the viewer in intricate interplay.

Then, not least in the context of the Friends of Moderna Museet's Sculpture Prize 2011, we can also ask ourselves whether it is at all possible nowadays to talk about sculpture as a clear-cut concept? No, at least not if by sculpture we mean a statue hewn out of a block of marble. Just as art's meanings are relative, so, for a long time, the concept of sculpture has been relative, too. Symptomatically Sofia Hultén switches freely between different techniques, albeit often presented as installations of a three-dimensional kind.

But it is not, in the first place, the meta-artistic significances of the meanings in her work that interest me most. She succeeds convincingly in giving a credible form to a content that is based on processes and ideas, something that is not always the case when so-called process-oriented art meets the public. At The Moderna Exhibition 2010 (Moderna Museet) she showed, for example, *In Between the Possibilities* (2010), a found stepladder, battered and commonplace. At first, perhaps, it was perceived as a provocation directed at visitors who might have expected something astounding and beyond their own everyday experience. But if we looked more closely at the steps, we noticed that the proportions were subtly wrong. She had meticulously made thirteen steps. A time-consuming, clever piece of handiwork that, in principle, made the stepladder of little value for practical purposes.

I write "in principle" since Hultén in actual fact uses Duchamp's assertion, soon to be one hundred years old, about the concept of art as a self-explanatory starting point. It is not the transformation of the meaning of the object that

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is the main point. Certainly, the steps are now worth experiencing. They can now be described as a three-dimensional artwork, indeed, as a sculpture, if you will. With her meticulous handiwork she has also laid bare the actual time dimension of the process. She has quite simply frozen time. This is an intriguing thought experiment that opens up a series of questions about how time can be conceived. But it is also in itself a quite meaningless action. In other works she, for instance, imitates everyday chores or carries out methodical investigations of ordinary objects in her surroundings. The repetitions come across as empty and trivial. What is it that is actually being added or taken away in these actions? What is their subject matter?

She herself says: "What interests me most is the tension between change and sameness within different objects – that something can be transformed radically – but apparently unnoticed. So that the transformation will be perceptible in some way, it has been necessary (so far – I might perhaps find another way!) to use objects that we recognize – for which we have a kind of pattern." Thus, it is not surprising that "situation comedies" have inspired her. In order, for example, to see how absurd a convention can be, there has to be something very familiar in or about the actual situation.

In his plays Samuel Beckett (1906–1989) returned to questions about the meaninglessness of human actions and our futile attempts to communicate with one another. There is undeniably something Beckettian in Hultén's artistic work. What is it all leading to? In the end, such a question is absurd, since there is actually no answer to it. Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881) claimed, for example, that "We are all happy, if we only knew it." That is true. But it is tough knowing that I don't know...

Sofia Hultén's artistic actions are absurd. There is no real motive for them. I have to accept that. When I do so, her artistic work reveals itself to be both magnificent and profoundly thought-provoking. Live and let live, she seems to urge. You do not need to understand the work, action or situation, simply experience it. It feels liberating to know that.

Consequences, from 2010, consists of eleven photographs documenting the way that a broken window is repaired in eleven stages, and this is presented together with the actual, restored window, mounted on a wall. Apart from the liberating absurdity of the action, one further aspect becomes evident. Of course, it is impossible to restore the window to its original condition. To be sure, it does resemble a window. But it is incapable of functioning. It is

impossible to see through it.

The transformation from something potent to something impotent recurs frequently in Hultén's processes. The repaired guitar hangs on the wall – useless. The chest of drawers and the stepladder can perhaps be used, but as when Duchamp signed a bottle dryer or snow shovel, the thing has been given another meaning, and points conceptually to sequential chains such as cause and effect, action and consequence.

In an early film documentation Bruce Nauman (b 1941) charted his own body, furniture or his room from unusual and even absurd angles or perspectives. He got us to understand that both the image of my self and my image of my surroundings are governed by conventions that are used as a power language to oppress and imprison me (the individual). Hultén is not as specific in this respect as Nauman, but she does occupy similar territory.

On the one hand, her works are liberating commentaries on life's absurdities, created with humour and self-effacing affection. With a kind of laughing equanimity she dissolves sadnesses and trivialities. On the other hand, we have the acute intellectual investigations of the concept of art. What is it I am looking at? In a sense, the works refer to nothing other than to themselves. She gives us an account of a short-circuited process seen in terms of rules that she herself has drawn up. In Hultén's studio all original meanings implode, and become art.

Her work is thus both everyday and conceptual. Both nonsensical and logical. But in the same way as a proton collides with an electron and releases energies that alter the original directions of motion, something amazing happens: I cannot tear myself away from her works, for a long time. They seem to carry a strange mystery. The recognizable and the domesticated are transformed through the traces of repetitions and retakes into peculiar artefacts, like ancient remains or anthropological objects about which no one has any exact information.

Suddenly then, the present also collides with the past and evokes an uncomfortably uncanny feeling. Through the repetitions and retakes a new time dimension arises. The works become literally mysterious. I even believe that Sofia Hultén herself may feel herself to be something of an outsider when faced with her own works.

I write this last as a compliment. There should be dimensions of something incomprehensible in art, even for the artist herself. (At the least, we can see

CURRICULUM VITAE
SOFIA HULTÉN

this as a definition of the difference between art and illustration.) Hultén points to a difference between what I see and what I experience, and in this way creates a feeling of defamiliarization.

Karl Marx (1818–1883) described people's alienation from commodities, from their fellow human beings and from society by criticizing wage labour, and the way that the profits end up in the pockets of people other than those who produce the goods: What I do and what I get back do not match.

The absurd aspect of Hultén's meaningless actions has links with Marx's concept of alienation, perhaps above all through the way that the valuelessness or the incomprehensibility of the actions can be translated into the injustices of waged work. By making visible something strange, we can also see the stranger within ourselves, something that Julia Kristeva called attention to in *Strangers to Ourselves* (1988): If I become aware of an alien aspect of myself, I can better accept others. I would claim that Hultén defamiliarizes the familiar in her works. This is particularly tangible in the video *Familiars* (2007), in which her family members create peculiar situations that go beyond the normal, something that creates unease and threatens their relationships.

Conceptually then, Sofia Hultén dissolves linguistic structures. By giving an account of the processes and of their nonsense logic, an unfamiliar atmosphere, something alien that I cannot properly grasp, is created in her works. Perception is no longer guided by a normal chain of causality. Can I accept this situation, which feels familiar and yet is not, can I possibly also see the absurdity of disguising myself as something I am not?

JOHN PETER NILSSON

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