

Mette Ussing's oeuvre is divided into two distinct groups, with regards to materials, form and expression. Whereas the late sculptures - those predominantly fashioned in wood - are formally stringent, the earlier works tend to have an organic and oftentimes temporary nature.

Mette Ussing (1943) made her debut in 1966 at *Kunstnernes Efterårsudstilling* (The Artists' Fall Show) with a so-called "free-weave". Around the same time, she creates *Hvid knude* (White Knot), woven in such a way as to give the *impression* that the fabric has been cut.

The following year, she participates in Charlottenborg's Fall Show with a series of rugs with interjecting circles as a motif. In 1969 she exhibits at The Danish Museum of Art & Design. These works are made of threads of glass that, as it were, formed figures in space. The glass suspends the hovering drawing for a brief moment in time, but seeing as Mette Ussing was also preoccupied with the ephemeral nature of her works, a number of her early pieces no longer exist.

Around 1970, Mette Ussing weaves a series of mural carpets, where cascades of spherical shapes seem to emanate from the walls. She uses a similar idea to cover a chair, and under the title *Blød ubrugelig stol* (Soft Useless Chair) it is exhibited in the sculpture section of Charlottenborg's Fall Show in 1971. The categorization is pivotal. The object is a sculpture and not a decorated chair.

It is around this time - in 1971 - that Mette Ussing, together with Jette Gemzøe and Naja Salto exhibits at *La Fondation Danoise* in Paris and immediately thereafter - together with Naja Salto, Kirsten Ortved, Grete Balle, Kirsten Dehlholm and Alice Kalsø - at *Rådskælderen* at Charlottenborg. It is a particularly interesting exhibition, where Mette Ussing and her colleagues persuasively argue that textiles can be just as relevant and pertinent a material for the creation of works of art as granite, steel and paint. It may seem like a given today - but it wasn't so at the time.

One could utter a bromide like "she paints with textiles", or that she creates sculptures and objects out of textile, but one could also say, that with her works, she argues for the materials' inherent qualities and potential, which have nothing whatsoever to do with decoration, or for that

matter, applied art. Furthermore, one could contend that with those works, she anticipates some of the experiments made later on in which weaving, sewing and knitting lengths of string becomes an integral part of a work in the same way as other elements of a sculpture are. As would later be seen in the works, a generation later, of for instance, Martin Erik Andersen.

Mette Ussing wove sculptures, formed them without cutting and sewing and by a process of continuous simplification, they reach a point where the string itself creates the form.

In writing this text, I have predominantly studied Mette Ussing's early works through photographs, but I would nevertheless like to emphasize how fascinating and artistically ahead of their time I believe they were. As can be witnessed in the photographs in this book, there is not only a complete dissolution of the conventions of textile art, but of an entirely unique artistic expression. Some of her sculptures are, for instance, one or more long rope-like braids with different knots and various thicknesses and textures, seemingly strewn on the floor. In the exhibition in *Rådskælderen*, some of the same rope-like elements are tied around pipes just below the ceiling, and in one particular work, *Sølvsnore-skulptur* (Silverstring Sculpture), the very same rope-like structures are suspended from a pin in the wall and cascade down onto the floor space. She even intends for the audience to work with the placement of the strings in relation to one another, allowing the sculpture to constantly change with every interaction. In other works from the same year, the knots have grown or seem to evolve from the fabric like a virus, so that the sculpture seems to take on the character of plaster of Paris. In still others, she intersperses ball-like elements on an arrangement of colored fabric. It is at once a very raw and very sensual form of sculpture.

For the pivotal *Rådskælderen* exhibition, Mette Ussing creates an almost forest-like space in which the ropes are suspended from the ceiling in structures one can walk through, and beneath ones feet, she lays out a lush weave that resembles a garden. It is as though, inherent in the work, is a longing to be thrust back into nature, a longing characteristic of the time, and which also made its mark on the rethinking of cityscapes, both in terms of adherence to a collective conscience and to the way some enclaves of houses were enriched with flowers and plants.

Seeing the photographs of the piece, I am reminded of the vertical garden Patrick Blanc created in 2008 for Herzon & de Meuron's museum, CaixaForum, in Madrid. Ussing's carpet was acquired for Dall & Lindhardt's University building project in Aalborg.

Mette Ussing was immersed in art from early childhood on. Several significant artists of her parents' generation, such as Robert Filliou, Poul Gadegaard, Arthur Köpcke, Albert Mertz and Gunnar Aagaard Andersen frequented the family home, and she found herself moved by the influence of some of the great exhibitions of the time, such as *Hommage à Jackson Pollock*, which she saw in Venice, and *Bewegung - Bewegung* with artists such as Jean Tinguely, which she saw at Stedelijk in Amsterdam. She was particularly inspired and absorbed by the illusion of moving and/or ephemeral sculpture, and both the works themselves and the thinking behind them, and in particular her meeting with the Fluxus movement - and the 60's avant-garde in general - has a great impact on the way she perceives art. All this heightens her distaste for the institutionalization of art and its exploitation of art for production and financial gain. Mette Ussing moved in the uplifting and vibrant milieu that defined the avant-garde of the time. The interesting thing about Mette Ussing's early work cycle is, however, that she isn't only in collusion on the issues of what art can mean for its time, but that she, with her works, was decidedly a step ahead of her time.

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After a long self-imposed hiatus from the art world, Mette Ussing returned with a series of works that used fabrics and weaving as their point of departure. Of particular interest is her contribution to the group show *Tråden* (The String) in the Ministry of Culture's exhibition hall in 1998.

The exhibition chronicled a series of unrealized projects between a number of Danish architectural firms and various artists. Mette Ussing was invited to the exhibition based on a past collaboration between her and an architect, but she surprised everyone with a new and distinctive work, a proposal for The Danish National Bank, created in collaboration with Dissing & Weitling who were commissioned to build a gym inside Arne Jacobsen's building. These were works that could have been realized

if the ideal conditions had existed for partnerships between architecture and the other plastic arts.

Despite various attempts at fusing the art forms, there remains a gulf between architecture and the other arts. Many architects find, when all is said and done, that the work of artists incorporated into their projects often disrupts their work's clean lines and large planes and surfaces. Many artists, on the other hand, feel that their works humanize the rigidity of modernist architecture. Mette Ussing's project (for The National Bank) is a rhythmic relief made up of various painted types of wood.

Mette Ussing subsequently found a new direction in her oeuvre, one that nevertheless traces its roots all the way back to the drawings she made in childhood. Among the motifs are a series of wooden boats drawn up on land. The slat structure of their hulls finds its way into Mette Ussing's sculptures. It is a kind constructivist, or perhaps rather, a minimalist sculpture. Not minimalist in the sense used to describe the work of Carl André, Donald Judd or other ground-breaking artists of the 1960s, but rather a sculptural expression that has its roots in the work of Constantin Brancusi and - as Mette Ussing expresses it - is characterized by a series of predominantly soft and flowing shapes or geometric sculptures that investigate the center of gravity of objects and a sculpture's almost corporal presence in a given space.

These could be "wall objects" like *Masken* (The Mask), that has a closed and oftentimes building-like structure characterized by a massive and powerful body, like half a universe compressed into the potent shapes, or inversely - and this is also a recurrent theme - sculptures that spread themselves in a given space like a fan, indirectly defining the space. Sometimes they seem to resemble familiar objects - fans, klopotecs, Mikado games, a certain type of wood, a flower, a cactus - but at the same time their ambiguity affords them a distance to any given figurative form. Most of them are white, simple, cool and ascetic in their expression, but occasionally Mette Ussing also paints the slats so the work takes on the characteristics of a bird or butterfly wing unfurling before one's eyes.

In 1992, Mette Ussing exhibits a series of sculptural investigations at Gentofte Public Library, and in her subsequent review in *Politiken*, critic Helle Lassen wrote

that "never before has the exhibition space appeared so spacious and fragile as it does with Mette Ussing's three large free standing objects made of delicate interweaved rods, spreading out like stylized fans, making the elegant rooms seem to levitate. One of the painted wall reliefs has an almost cultish quality, like a totem pole or the altarpiece of a modern church. But most impressive of all is a white double wing shape that, like a frail creature, unfolds its wide span in the room."

Mette Ussing's land art projects are also noteworthy, among them works shown at the exhibition *Atlantis 2* that took place in *Fælledparken* in Copenhagen in 1986. Land art is temporary in nature and involves more or less drastic encroachments on the landscape. For *Atlantis 2*, Mette Ussing created a gentle work in the shape of a conical hole in the ground with a flowering apple tree at its bottom, hidden by a wreath-like, grass covered embankment.

For the exhibition *Sculpture by the sea* in Sydney in 1999, Mette Ussing created *Empty Room*, in which a glass plate formed the floor and a hut-like structure of copper wires formed walls and a roof of what had the appearance of a transparent building. This type of empty space recurs in Mette Ussing's contribution to the touring exhibition *Looking for Jerry* in 2006, which saw a series of female artists interpret the notion of the male muse. The name Jerry refers to the successful, French artist Louise Bourgeois' personal assistant. But the male muse? Does such a being really exist? Not according to Mette Ussing's *Tomt rum - tomrum* (Empty Room - Void), which was made up of a cage-like structure with a narcissistic mirror as its floor. Jerry has left the building. The sculpture challenges the existence of a male muse or even the relevance of the idea of a muse in today's terms. Perhaps there is, in Mette Ussing's work, like in most of us, a longing for community. This longing was indeed strong in Mette Ussing's formative years when the notion of community and the collective were among the ideals of the progressives in the Danish art world. Today, a sculpture like *Tomt rum - tomrum* seems to posit that these structures and frameworks are weak and are merely suggested through the copper mesh work and its supporting rods. The rest is air and void. But if one instead peers into the sculpture, one looks into the mirror on the bottom, thereby looking into oneself. It is possible that there's an empty space, but one is nevertheless looking into one's own eyes.

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*Translation: Oliver Ussing*