Relational Sculpture

The work more *than anything,* which has the same title as Maud Cotter's exhibition in the Model Arts Gallery in Sligo, is central to the artist's current practice. This is situated at the interface between sculpture and architecture and embraces a range of forms, running from sculpture's spatial appropriation to the shaping of new spatial relationships. Within this Cotter transfers objects and sculptures into structural systems with a direct relationship to the place in which they are exhibited. In addition to their aesthetic dimension, the works open up a space, which, whilst constituting a social space, can simultaneously be experienced in physical terms. This space describes the relationship between the artistic work's appearance and its interaction with exhibition visitors. On various levels of artistic intervention Cotter also extends this mesh of relations beyond the limits of the exhibition context.

Even in the smallest unit of her work Cotter puts this extended notion of plasticity into practice. The building blocks and initial fundamental forms of her installations *more than anything, In other circumstances* and *amalgam* are flat, square plywood and laminated cardboard elements, developed by the artist and manufactured industrially.

References to the vocabulary of Minimal Art emerge in her recourse to serially manufactured units, whose modular character can be compared with Carl Andre's reduced geometric floor tiles or Sol LeWitt's cubes. There are also similarities between Cotter's oeuvre and the *House of Cards* by Charles and Ray Eames (1), an interlocking system in which the basic parts can be joined together from all sides, opening up into a serial structure. Here just four of the basic units fitted one into another reveal the third, i.e. the spatial, dimension. The elements of *More than anything* thus multiply themselves in a horizontal and vertical grid of varied heights and gradations. Along the gallery walls, over doorways and in front of windows they form transparent wall modules or lie on the gallery's wooden floorboards like a second, fragile floor. The structure permeates the inner rooms as fine threads reminiscent of a nervous system, appropriating the space, whilst at the same time describing autonomous ramifications and formations. The tentative fragmentation and dissolving of the existing situation means that the structure is not purely a negative print or representation of the locus but instead makes sensitised perception and unexpected readings of the spatial structure possible. The work develops its own dynamic, with the courses it takes becoming an expression of a non-hierarchical ordering of space. *more than anything* does indeed have architectonic aspects, but in the exhibition these do not pursue a goal or have a particular function.

In bringing the architecture of the museum and the artistic work into play, Cotter does not adopt Minimal Art's reductionist gesture of actuality and pure material. She does not seek to assert objectivity and neutrality with the surface and the material. Cotter creates not merely visual but rather actual transparency here. Whilst many of her earlier works were of glass, plastic or silicon, in other words, materials associated with ideas of permeability or semi-transparency, her current tissue structure, made of plywood squares, La Farge plaster and cardboard, forms completely permeable systems. Air, light and shadows are filtered through the grid of these materials and can pass into, through and out of the structure virtually unimpeded. The works also exist in this open relationship vis-á-vis the physical presence of visitors. The latter move along, into and through the sculptures and become an immanent component of the complex structure of relations.

Cotter understands *more than anything* and all the other works represented in the exhibition as a changeable element of the overall context. The individual sculptures and larger installations can be perceived differently over and over again, through both the altering charge of the environment and via their interactions. However, the very structure of the works allows viewers to identify their openness and tendency towards immaterialisation. Although the basic building blocks of card or plywood are a functional feature of the works, their arrangement and multiplication within the structure simultaneously entails their dissolution.

A symbiosis of colour and form between the structure and the gallery space is to be found above all in Cotter's installation *in other circumstance.* The work is similar to a monochrome triptych. Hundreds of laminated cardboard modules form a thickly woven net structure, which at the same time appears both fragile and permeable. Its flat courses and borders convey an impression of white projection surfaces rather than of a taking-into-use of the third dimension. Hanging from the ceiling, *in other*

circumstances discreetly structures the gallery space, as was also the case for *in absence* from 1998, and enters into a close correspondence with the white walls and the emptiness of the rest of the gallery. Like intricate blinds or 'curtain walls', the work becomes a locus of the immaterial play of light falling through the window and its shadings. The appearance of the work thus undergoes constant changes, fluctuating between being visible and dissolving away.

in other circumstances does not fill up the space but instead accentuates its inherent translucent potential. Cotter's withdrawing of this gesture gives visitors sufficient scope for their own placing-in-relation to the sculpture and the space. *in other circumstances* can hence be read precisely as a conceptual rather than a materialised statement by the artist concerning the transparent and partly ephemeral character of her works.

In *amalgam* viewers can, through participation, clearly experience the subtle placing of the components, namely the interplay with the works and spatial discovery by the visitors, which were already present in *more than anything* and *In other circumstances*. The grid structure of birch ply basic building blocks mounted on the gallery walls becomes a locus of direct action in the exhibition. As Cotter invites exhibition visitors to bring along used or everyday objects and to ascribe a place to them in the space matrix of *amalgam,* the structure is lifted out of its purely aesthetic dimension, creating a short-circuit to individual traces of the most diverse experiential, conceptual and life spaces. Thus we find here not just that the individual perspective and the artistic object come together, but also that exterior space is integrated into the exhibition location. Two realities interpenetrate, the aesthetic and the everyday.

In her installation *The cat's pyjamas* Cotter also continues to grapple with the relation between subject and object. The most unspectacular relics of material everyday life, such as pudding bowls, doilies, discarded chairs and tables, bedside and standard lamps, cutlery trays or clothes-horses, serve as objects here. Cotter allows these once functional objects to merge with abstract grid-like sculptures made of cardboard and resin. The sculptural objects are appended to, placed or hung upon the relics of everyday life and in the process become a playful or even anatomical counter-image of the predetermined forms, whilst at the same time growing rampantly out of these. The volumes of the individual objects are filled up in a manner that reflects and visualises their qualities, and in parallel describe unconventional spaces, becoming space themselves.Both the smallest ensemble and the installation *the cat's pyjamas* become a hybrid of *Objects trouvés* with the corresponding traces of individual use and wear, with residues of energy and allusions to everyday reference points on the one hand and to the sculptural intervention on the other hand. The narration of the everyday objects is reinforced by being brought together with the aesthetic context, whilst at the same time the artist's gesture of asserting authorship is withdrawn and the autonomy of the artistic elements is broken. *the cat's pyjamas* switches, as was already the case for *things of no fixed meaning* from 1999, between the two poles of aesthetic form and symbolic charge. The sculptures are situated in a transitional phase without a definitive form and meaning.In using everyday objects and materials Cotter selects unfamiliar interfaces. She gives visual form to fragments of small, intimate narratives and does not employ abstract materialism or formalism. *the cat's pyjamas* is in some respects similar to the language of Arte Povera. This encompasses in particular the simple artistic gesture, the use of frugal materials and the open combination of diverse fragments. Added to this are ordinary everyday objects, which bring their own history with them. Whilst Cotter still carries out the final spatial placement for *the cat's pyjamas* as an ensemble, in *amalgam* the objects brought along by the visitors to the exhibition determine the growth and character of the matrix affixed to the wall. The work is changed continuously throughout the duration of the exhibition although intervention by the artist is excluded. Thus we are no longer looking at simply the conceptual possibility of the sculpture being developed further, as is the case in *more than anything*. In *amalgam* there is genuine conversion of the work via the direct participation of exhibition visitors.

The transportable boxes, which constitute a further element of *amalgam,* are consistent with Cotter's advancement of the notion of the sculptures' spatial growth and way in which the exhibition space becomes permeable. Reduced to their most elementary unit and form, 594 of the card modules are stored in boxes as a potential structure and await their chance to become space outside the exhibition site. Whilst in *lung* from 1998 it was still the artist herself who could simply transport both net structures and construct them anew elsewhere with the aid of plaster, *amalgam* corresponds to the idea of entirely handing over the work to the visitors. Without any further instructions from Cotter, visitors can determine the formations of the structure as if playing a game where they make up the rules and construct in other non-art-specific places. Intervention by the artist is here clawed back to the most

radical degree. Whilst in the matrix installation of *amalgam* and in *the cat's pyjamas* Cotter enabled everyday life and reality to penetrate, she hands over the process of grappling with the relationship between space and place, object and subject to the exhibition visitors entirely with the structures stored in the boxes. In so doing, Cotter intends on the one hand to render her work autonomous, and on the other hand to foster direct intervention by visitors.

The sculpture can thus extend itself infinitely, at the same time experiencing a transcription into a subjective system outside the artistic framework. *amalgam* thereby becomes a social space, opened up in the exhibition, transported to the exterior where it undergoes practical implementation.

Similar assertions apply to *i don't know about that,* which is both a spatial installation and a set of tools for *Game*. The latter is a game specially devised by Irish mathematician David Korowicz. *i don't know about that* is composed of a large-format wall with an ordered structure of elements in La Farge plaster, card, acrylic and timber. These are distributed over the wall at regular intervals like minimalist pieces in a game. In a small-format copy of the installation, visitors to the exhibition can move individual figures upwards, downward, diagonally or laterally or remove them entirely from the field. If the elements are pushed out of the left or right edge, then they vanish. However, if they are moved up or down, the figures reappear on the other side and describe an abstract space with their movement. If only a third of the figures are left on the 'board', all the elements are reintroduced and the game begins again. The rules serve to (pre)-structure the work to an extent that makes it accessible and allows it to be played. However, as a component of a non-determined system *Game* assumes its own dynamic and takes on a panoply of formations, which are decided and influenced by the players.

Like *more than anything* or *amalgam, i don't know about that* can be conceived as a visible excerpt from an infinite and complex spatial and intellectual system. In the works shown in the exhibition Cotter depicts the behaviour of elements and structures in time and place, which she describes as *Choreography within infinity*.

In Cotter's artistic practice it becomes clear that the questions: *Which formal and aesthetic changes do the works describe during the timeframe of the exhibition and beyond? What emotional and intellectual spaces can the artistic systems open up in an interaction with the perceptions and interventions of visitors to the exhibition?* are central in motivating the works. Her structures and installations disclose social and artistic contexts; these are constantly in transition and describe processes of change. Whilst sculpture is structured as a spatial experiment and moves through new forms, it responds to the actions and interventions of visitors. The sculpture is thus relational.

All of Cotter's works become an experience of space that can be moved into and through. At the same time the mobile and changeable basic building blocks suggest flexible uses of the structures, as hinted at by the bench, a further detail in *amalgam*.Calculations and drawings by Christopher Southgate and Associates, Consulting Engineers, Civil and Structural Design Project Management, also comprised in the exhibition, confirm the modules' great load-bearing capacity. The elements can be used to construct architectonic units and indeed even entire houses.

References to interfaces between sculptural and architectonic interests also emerge in Cotter's photographs *two by two,* which include depictions of the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast and the National Sculpture Factory in Cork, where she worked for many years as a sculptor. In 2002 Cotter built the eight-metre-high sculpture *of air and everything,* which is simultaneously an architectonic element integrated into the building complex of the hospital.

When Cotter refers to criticism of Modernism in architecture and cites as a model the *Endless House* (1947-1965) by Austrian architect Friedrich Kiesler, the intention underpinning her conception of sculpture and architecture becomes clear: to create spaces that behave symbiotically towards those who visit and live in them and that change accordingly. Kiesler, who worked in the era of Modernism and knew Modernists such as Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, contradicts the dictum of the era, namely *Form follows function*. The shape and form of the artificial skin of *Endless House* are not determined primarily by building legislation but rather by users' lifestyles. A continuous and at the same time social space develops out of this.Current artistic projects tackling specific social, political and economic living conditions are, for example, Marjetica Potrc's reconstructions of innovative housing designs for the destitute in the American South, *Homeless Vehicles* by Krysztof Wodiczko and *ParaSite* by Michael Rakowitz, a living unit to meet the basic needs of marginal social groups in the

urban context, or *On or off Earth* by Florian Pumhösl who in his installation presents a critical analysis of the aesthetics and rhetoric of Modernity. (2) These examples are listed here to suggest the range of contemporary practices dealing with the idea of living space. However the box houses and light spaces of the German artists Wolfgang Winter and Berthold Hörbelt display particular parallels with Cotter's works. The installations, composed mainly of plastic drinks crates or light screens (gridded slats), exist on the boundaries between architecture, sculpture and urban planning. Their *Lichtspielhaus Berlin* from 1998 served as a temporary cinema, meeting place and walk-in sculpture, with the topics of transparency and reflections of light very much in the foreground. Through their pavilions the artists create new spaces for cultural and social life.

In *more than anything* one leaves the exhibition with a box full of building blocks as if with an *other attachments* (3). With it one takes the idea of space and construction away too, in order to perhaps build a shelf, a small stool or a bench by the stove later. Objects that are not simply present, but to which one is particularly attached and which slowly begin to bear traces of everyday life and wear-and-tear. Or one might like to take the box away, to have the option of playing the game together - a game, then, for the 'whole family'.

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Endnotes

1) Each playing card from the set designed in 1952 shows familiar images from the world of flora, fauna and minerals. Six slits in each card enable a *House of Cards* with an individual design to be built.

2) The cited works, which deal with designing living spaces, were displayed in various exhibitions including *Designs für die wirkliche Welt,* 2002 in the Generali Foundation, Vienna and in *Xtreme Houses* in Hall 14, Baumwollspinnerei, Leipzig in 2004.

(3) *Other Attachments* is a work by Cotter, made up of several inconspicuous paper units, which appear to be simple address tags for suitcases and bags. The words *lost, also, same, into* are printed on them.