

Like the Soundtrack of a Film – Torben Sangild interviews Signe Guttormsen

'Integrated art' has been a major aspect of your art practice in recent years. You still make art for exhibitions, but are also becoming a specialist in making art integrated in new buildings. Where does your interest and engagement come from?

I think it comes from the need to work with something that can benefit more people, and that can hopefully also contribute to the creation of *shared* spaces or experiences – in both the short and long term.

I worked in my studio for years. I lived in Cologne and was part of the local art scene there, as well as in Copenhagen. I only made works for exhibitions that could then move into the wider art circuit from there. I'm part of a generation of artists who stuck together when we were studying, but then went our separate ways. The opposite of today, when a lot of young artists organise and work in groups. There seems to be a different culture today, because people draw on group dynamics and create constructive collaborations rather than taking individualism as their starting point.

Before I started studying at the art academy, I was part of the leftist Copenhagen squatting movement, which in terms of community and solidarity was a really disappointing experience for me. Maybe that's why I developed such a strong need to be in control and do everything on my own. But I'm still drawn to the idea of collaborating and developing things as a joint effort.

Over the years, I've become increasingly interested in how spaces and buildings function. I envy architects the restraints they have to work under, the restraints imposed by reality and by how accessible buildings are to everyone. I find that really appealing. So being in an art/architecture set-up suits me really well.

How did you start?

It was actually the Danish gallerist Mikael Andersen, who I later started to work with, who first saw the potential in the way I worked. He called me one day back in 2008, and asked if I would be interested in making a proposal for the paving of the roof terrace of the crown prince and princess at Amalienborg Palace. And that was how I started working with integrated art.

The next project was a commission by the Danish Building and Property Agency for the University of Southern Denmark in Odense, where they've decided to incorporate art in each new building on the campus. It works really well. Each department has its own art. In the beginning they bought paintings and sculptures and installed them. But putting works of art in a large space that functions as a passageway doesn't always work, so now artists are asked to join construction projects at the planning stage. Which of course means that a lot of different kinds of art have been developed in public space.

Integrated Art is like a Soundtrack

You deliberately use the term 'integrated art' instead of 'decoration' – a literal translation of the Danish word 'udsmykning'. Can you explain the difference between the two?

I find the Danish word for 'decoration' inaccurate. I actually think the whole concept of beautification or ornamentation trivialises art, as if artists have been invited to come and decorate somewhere for a party. It also expresses a really outmoded view of the role of art as a feel-good factor.

Personally I think this idea of 'decoration', with its associations of embellishment and enhancement, is like something imposed from the outside. It communicates nothing of how crucial the building's function and specific characteristics – the entire situation – are to the art and how it's integrated both aesthetically and socially. For me the place and the people who use the place where the art is integrated are decisive in how it develops. Which is why I prefer the term 'integrated art', which was introduced in Denmark by the artist Kasper Heiberg back in the 1970s.

What are the qualities of integrated art as opposed to exhibition art?

In some ways, integrated art can be compared to the soundtrack of a film. It lies between the images and the plot (the building and its function) as an interactive yet independent element. So you can choose where to focus. Does the art take command of the building, or is it the other way round? Or is it somewhere in between? Everyone that uses the building has access to integrated art, and there's no expectation that the audience is an art audience. Funnily enough, for me there's a sense of freedom in it being a daily presence that lasts for years, rather than an event like an exhibition people can choose to spend a couple of hours at.

Does the fact that it has to be accessible to everyone and that some people live with it every day influence how your integrated works develop? What qualities do you work with in relationship to the audience, if that's the right term to use?

When I was growing up, I saw a lot of sculptures on the squares and streets of Danish towns. And I've always felt they shut people out. They don't touch me at all. They seem to have an agenda that has nothing to do with the reality they're located in.

Having had that experience, I'm really aware of the need for a level of dialogue – an inbuilt communication if you like – in works that could, after all, occupy a space for decades. This is something I think works well in my project for the construction group MT Højgaard, where the concept emerged out of the need to anchor the art on the terms of the site and the building.

The building is one of an increasing number of sustainable constructions being built today, which are changing the way projects are developed in terms of design, planning

and execution. At a practical level, this means considering the environment in the choice of materials, the size of the building, using rainwater for flushing toilets, etc.

I've interpreted this intention as a development, a rupture with the age of technology to an era where we protect and coexist with nature. So as an image of technology, I use the gasometer that used to be on the site. One example is the large, round luminaire shaped like the piston that moved up and down inside the gasometer according to the level of gas consumption in the area. This I juxtaposed with a stylised garden.

So the in-built story of the building becomes the mainstay of the art, which is something people using the building can easily relate to. They might question the way it's expressed or the materials that have been used, but there has to be more to explore than just the story. The way it's told can be experienced very differently, and that's important.

Another example was my competition proposal for a work for Middelfart Town Hall. Here I tried to grasp what the municipality was aiming for, and discovered that openness and what's called *Willkommenskultur* in German – that everyone should feel welcome – were at the top of the list. So the role of the new town hall was to remove the boundary between the municipality and the citizen, to be what community centres were in the past.

One of the things I proposed was a drinking well in a central location where the town hall staff and citizens of the town could meet across boundaries and cultures and be united in a kind of 'community of thirst'. But they didn't identify with the idea, and I didn't win the competition.

Restrictions and Compromises

I can imagine there being endless practical restrictions and compromises. What's your experience of accommodating the needs of architects, engineers and staff?

There are, of course, restrictions, but as long as I don't feel limited in pursuing my *ideas*, I consider them a gift. That some of the terms are fixed makes it possible for me to test out my ideas against part of reality. And regardless of what materials you work with, there'll always be limitations in the materials or techniques you choose to use. Those are the conditions of making art.

Compromises are something else. Bad compromises are no good, but good compromises can actually make art work – you just need to make sure that the *main* idea doesn't get compromised. Sometimes the input of more people can make the end result more stringent. It's something that's impossible to predict. The entire process with the architects, clients, builders and craftsmen is very dynamic. I really value not having to come up with all the solutions myself – that they're something we work on together.

Can you give an example of a restriction and of a compromise?

An example of a *restriction* was the commission to make acoustic panels at Ringsted High School. The area was fixed, and the materials were also pre-defined – wood with a minimum of 30% perforations on top of acoustic fabric. So my job was to get as much as possible out of these limitations, something I did by working with layers. First the print on the acoustic fabric that's visible through the perforations, then the serigraphy on the actual wooden boards, and finally the superimposed lettering. Zooming in and out of the different layers of colours and lettering was a good match for what students at a high school do – getting absorbed by large quantities of material and focusing on details. The further the students get in their syllabus, the more knowledge and experience they gain and the more the world opens up for them. The panels symbolise that. You can capture a single word or read disconnected sentences, sensing that they're part of something linguistically familiar – either texts from the high school curriculum, or the students' text messages.

I can give you an example of a *compromise* from Rail Net Denmark's control tower. My proposal had five different interventions in the building, focused on the atrium. The staff in the tower sit at screens all day and night, so it was important for me to relate the artwork to the material and practical dimensions of railways. Several of the staff were train enthusiasts, and told me about their passion for model railways. As a result, the five interventions were all images from the physical world of trains, tracks and signals controlled from the tower, focused on the ceiling and floor, walls, spiral staircase and balustrade in the four-storey building.

Four of the interventions went ahead, but the fifth ended with a compromise. It wasn't seen as being in harmony with the other materials in the building – was apparently too alien. I had wanted to stretch coloured cables above the staircase, so they were suspended high above people's heads like the cable rods in stations. But the architect and client didn't like the idea, so I had to come up with something else. I thought that was such a shame, but because the proposal consisted of several independent elements I was able to find another way to inject colour into the space.

My next suggestion, which I thought was even better, was spray painting the abbreviations used by track workers directly on the floor of each gallery as a kind of artist's signature. When I presented the idea everyone around the table cringed – you could feel it. Because it looked like graffiti, and graffiti is simply a no go in a train and station context. Spray paint is also not a hit in an ultra-modern, designer building. I have to admit that after that I got a bit despondent, and after a prolonged process we ended up with 25 doors in different colours along the large wall. It looked good, but lacked something. It had lost meaning and ended up being solely aesthetic.

A Work Comes into Being

When and how do you get involved in the process when a new building is constructed?

Luckily I've always been involved almost at the very beginning. Which is key in terms of being able to incorporate structural elements and channelling money from various contracts into the art project. For most of my commissions, I've been asked to make a proposal when the building was on the drawing board or during the initial stages of construction. Some of the commissions have been the result of being invited to submit an entry for a competition, others have come about because people wanted to work specifically with me.

Is there a hierarchy between you and the architect, or are you equals during the planning process?

I really feel there's a lot of mutual respect. The architect isn't always that involved in my work, because that is an expense the client has to cover. Not all architects like my ideas, but I've also seen them be pleasantly surprised. Overall I think there's a fine balance.

Your work is always highly site-specific – using elements that relate to the function, content or previous history of the building. How do you translate your research from content/knowledge, to concept, to integrated artistic elements? Do you think visually from the beginning? Do you brainstorm? Do you mindmap?

It's difficult to say what comes first. The visual and conceptual coexist in my mind. For the roof terrace at Amalienborg Palace I was looking through Hanne Raabymagle's book on the Danish architect Nicolai Eigtved – who designed the palace – and came across some photographs of the sketches Eigtved made for the stonemason. And instantly saw the paving before me. At Ringsted High School it was also clear at an early stage that text – or lettering – would shape the perforations in the acoustic panels, and that it should be in several layers. The art committee said they wanted a colourful work. They were maybe imagining large areas in different colours, but what I saw was a flood of different colours in a swarm of letters. Both of these were assignments with fixed parameters, i.e. the surface, function and area were predefined.

The process is different when I can define what and where in the building the art should be. I usually use several structural elements, and the connection between them plays a key role. It can take some time to find the right balance between the elements, and I always spend time getting to know the building, especially if it hasn't been built yet.

But not everything can be easily drawn. I rarely draw by hand – it's not something I'm good at. I'm also no expert in the computer programmes people use. So it's a weird mixture of my primitive imaging and the work of my assistants and collaborative partners to understand and translate what I want.

For the psychiatric hospital in Vejle, I used the metaphor of being on a journey and finding your bearings. That's a metaphor the staff use in their treatment of children and adolescents with psychiatric disorders, and it became my map in developing the idea. I made a conceptual ring around the hospital, which consists of different buildings angled in

relationship to a north-south axis. This ring was a compass with the cardinal directions, as well as a colour circle. Joining the two means that the walls in the building that face east, for example, go from yellow to green, whereas the walls facing west go from red to purple, etc. Which means no matter where you are in the building, you can use the perfect geometry of the universe to get your bearings. That experience isn't something you can just draw, which is what I mean by the co-existence of the visual and the conceptual.

The Effect of the Art

Some of your tracks and signs can be quite subtle, like the reference to the former gasometer at MT Højgaard, or the enlargement of individual pebbles in the floor of the building at the University of Southern Denmark. How important is it for you that the people who use or visit the building can decipher the meaning?

I hope my works emerge clearly in context – that they're palpable. They are, after all, generated by my knowledge of the building and its functions. If, for example, a school was going to be built where the gasometer used to be, I wouldn't have linked the art to that. The gasometer was built by the now defunct machine factory Vølund, but today it would be a job for a contractor like MT Højgaard, the company who have their headquarters in the building. Same thing with the magnified pebbles at the university. They're enlarged because magnification is part of the daily life of the scientists there. For the people who use the building, the art brings identifiable imagery and action into play.

How would you like people to experience integrated art?

I see there being several ways to live with integrated art. One day you might catch a glimpse of it out of the corner of your eye, and the next you might approach it, think about the context and connections, the materials and what they express. I think it's important that the integrated art that surrounds the everyday life of a group of people can give a quick impression, but also provide an opportunity to go deeper. Which is why it needs to be visually and conceptually integrated into the architecture and create a connection with the purpose of the space. In my eyes, that's what makes it an independent work of art.

I hope the art becomes an inextricable part of the building, so people can't imagine the building without it. Art is never only decorative or entertaining. It's made up of layers of meaning. That's key. Without that it could be many things, but not art.

How much of a difference do you think integrated art makes in the workplace? Does it actually improve people's workday? Does it create a better work environment?

There are checklists of what's required to create a good work environment. Well-being is key. This can be seen in interior design, healthy food in the canteen, and access to fitness

facilities. I'm sure being surrounded by good architecture and beautifully crafted buildings makes us happier, but I think art does something different. Art can provide a contrast to an efficient working life – it challenges what's considered rational and right.

Art takes a long time to digest. It also always has its own context – the context of art history and other contemporary art. In that sense, I think art stands in contrast to the architecture it's integrated in. It generates images for the viewer that lead somewhere else. Art can provoke ideas and feelings about human existence and our capacity to act in a community.

Welcoming

Would you say that integrated art functions as a 'counterpoint' to the architecture, like a harmonising countermelody that interacts with it, but at the same time goes in its own direction?

That sounds too dogmatic to me. The term 'counterpoint' implies a strict logic that doesn't really appeal to me. There's never only one way to approach an assignment. Even though the *method* might be similar from project to project, the different points of departure and layers in the works are always unpredictable. I never know where I'll end up. Also because integrated art doesn't usually create a focus point like an isolated work of art. Rather than drawing attention to itself, the art unfolds as partial elements in different places, or extends over a huge area. There's no direct confrontation, no drama – just tenacious insistence. *That* could be what you describe as harmonic.

The title of this publication is 'Welcoming'. Is that something you work with specifically, i.e. that art should welcome people? How do you actually do that? And who is 'welcomed'?

I think integrated art should basically be welcoming. For a work to function beyond the art institution or an art context – for people who don't necessarily see themselves as an 'art audience' – it has to be welcoming without being ingratiating or selling out. The starting point is integrity. Extending a welcome is key to meeting strangers, and only by being welcoming can we create a common basis for navigating a shared space. It's this interaction, the mutual respect of courtesy, listening, empathy and tuning our radars that I find interesting in the concept of welcoming as a metaphor for the encounter with integrated art.

Can you give one or two examples of working consciously with this concept of welcoming in your works? Or is it more of an underlying principle?

One example is the handrail on the stairs in Rail Net Denmark's control tower, which could stand as a kind of meta-symbol of welcoming for all the other interventions there. I see the

act of creating a shared frame of reference that is integrated and site-specific as the welcoming function of art. So it's both an underlying principle, and a mindset.

What do you find most fulfilling about working with this kind of art?

Integrated art can do something art exhibitions can't. Exhibitions only exist for a limited period of time. In integrated art, the art encounter exists day in, day out, and is made to last for many years. The German-Swiss artist Meret Oppenheim once said that it's artists who do the dreaming for society. I think that's very precise. We could elaborate by saying that art creates spaces where wonder and empathy are allowed, something I find really interesting to develop in the confrontation with the rationale of a specific building or function. Working with life's opposites – doubt and constancy.