

Trackwork – Site Specificity in the Integrated Art of Signe Guttormsen

by Camilla Jalving, curator, ARKEN Museum og Modern Art

When the Danish Arts Foundation commissioned the artist Kasper Heiberg to create the artwork for Skjoldhøj Residence Hall in Aarhus in 1972, he moved there from Copenhagen with his family. Doing the assignment long-distance was apparently not an option. The end result was also an artistic intervention that spread radically beyond the confines of the residence hall, taking the architecture itself as its subject. He based his work on the distinctive gables of the buildings, using them as a leitmotif – mirroring, simplifying and repeating their shapes, as well as painting them with the shadows cast by the sun with great precision. The architecture and the site of the architecture merged. Heiberg thus turned the idea of an isolated artwork in a specific space upside down by making the space itself into an artwork. An open painting – just waiting to be walked into and walked around. A work *integrated* in the architecture.

'Free' and 'Unfree' Art

It is this tradition of integrated art that Signe Guttormsen's rapidly expanding portfolio of architecturally integrated works continues. Danish pioneers in the field include the artist Paul Gadegaard, who from 1957-1960 decorated the entire Angli shirt factory in the town of Herning, redesigning and repainting all the furniture, walls, ceilings and floors, and Poul Gernes, who from 1968-1976 painted Herlev Hospital on a scale that has hardly been surpassed in Denmark since – from the foyer and wards, to the signs and plug sockets. As these examples show, integrated art is an art form that has traditionally been used in public spaces and institutions or private corporations, rather than traditional art spaces like galleries or art museums. Which is perhaps why integrated art is sometimes – more or less openly – seen as being secondary to the other work done by artists. As something that makes their 'real' art possible. This division is often based on an implicit distinction between 'free' and 'unfree' art: Between art that is created outside of any framework, and art that is created for a specific framework. Integrated art is certainly conditional upon a whole range of considerations: Financing, scheduling, the preferences of the architect, the needs and preferences of the users or clients, the expectations of the commissioner, and the ideas of backers are just some of the factors that play a role in the artistic process. But these conditions also apply in allegedly 'free' art. Which is also contingent on financing, scheduling and the expectation of sales, exhibitions and reviews, as well as a less visible yet no less real art discourse that to some extent creates the framework for what can be done, created, thought and said in an art context. All art, in other words, is conditional to some extent or another, which is why it makes little sense to maintain any sharp distinction between 'free' and 'unfree' art.

If we apply this reasoning to the art of Signe Guttormsen, it is equally impossible to separate her architecturally integrated commissions from the rest of her art. On the contrary, Guttormsen's commissions are clear extensions of her long-standing experiments with painting and photography. Neither can the commissions be seen as a less 'unfree'

part of her oeuvre. The difference between the two tracks is first and foremost a difference in context. The integrated work is obviously created for a specific place. As such it is site-specific. But this is a statement that immediately generates a new question. Because what is a place? Or what can it be?

A Discursive Site

In her book *One Place After Another* (2002), the American art historian Miwon Kwon distinguishes between three different kinds of site specificity located within, but also traversing historical periods. In the late 1960s, when the very concept of site specificity emerged, a *phenomenological* understanding of the concept dominated contemporary art. Here, site specificity relates to the actual and physical conditions of a particular location: Scale, texture, light conditions and topography. In the 1970s, with the advent of institutional critique in art, the site became more of an *ideological* location, defined as a network of specific, interrelated places – the studio, the museum, the art market, art criticism. Today the 'site' of art has become even more transient. It can be a public space or a specific community, but also an art genre, an institutional framework, or a specific discourse of art or politics. According to Miwon Kwon, it has become a *discursive* site. Such clear distinctions can be more difficult to make in practice than in theory, since the phenomenological site – understood as the physical space – often spills over into the other two categories. Still, the argument here would be that in the art of Signe Guttormsen, the location of the work is a primarily *discursive* site, whether it be a hidden historical place or a form of treatment.

Navigation as Method

In the Danish town of Vejle, Arkitema Architects have designed a new psychiatric hospital housing a psychiatric casualty department, an outpatient clinic for children and adolescents, as well as 100 hospital beds. Guttormsen has created a colour scheme for the communal areas, conference rooms, treatment rooms and wards. The colour scheme is based on the idea of being on a journey and finding your bearings – the metaphor the staff use in the treatment of mentally ill children and adolescents. In the large foyer, the overhead light source is a large compass that establishes the direction of the art project. On the basis of a colour circle superimposed on a compass, the colours of the walls and glass in the building indicate the directions of north, south, east and west. In some areas, parts of the compass hang from the ceiling as lamps – referring discretely back to the compass in the foyer, whereas the cafeteria has a complete colour circle inlaid in the floor, making the navigation theme apparent to everyone. This is, in other words, a building that helps everyone – patients, staff and visitors – find their way.

Regardless of the fact that this need for 'wayfinding' is pronounced in many modern buildings – especially buildings like this, where it is easy to lose your bearings in identical corridors and wards – and regardless of the fact that it is often the job of art to meet this need, which is not always met by the architect, Guttormsen's project extends far beyond the installation of visual waypoints. Instead, Guttormsen's project intervenes in the actual situation of patients in a similar way to the treatment that takes place in the small treat-

ment rooms where tables and chairs in minimalist designs represent the attempt to create a controlled and rational framework for what is presumably anything but controlled and rational. The wayfinding the project invites is thus not limited to the actual navigation of the architecture: Where am I in the building? Ideally it also supports – and this is where art goes beyond the physical space, into the body – the patient’s mental navigation: Where am I in my life? A series of reliefs on the walls with embedded sneakers, mobile covers and suitcases aid navigation, but also allude to the theme of travel. Being a patient on a psychiatric ward is not a destination, but a step on a longer journey. This is the message of the staff – here embodied in the art. If the entire project is viewed in terms of concepts of site specificity, it is clear that the ‘site’ of Vejle Hospital is more a method of treatment or discourse than a physical location.

Function as Site

According to Google Maps, the distance between the town of Vejle and the town of Fredericia is only 23.7 km. Yet artistically, the psychiatric hospital in Vejle and Guttormsen’s contribution to Tranberg Architects’ traffic control tower for Rail Net Denmark are miles apart. Whereas in Vejle it is the mind as well as the physical body that navigates the light, multiple corridors of the building using colour codes, in Fredericia it is the entire rail network of Western Denmark the staff have to control and monitor from a solid tower of dark brick. And whereas the project in Vejle lies on surfaces as colour on walls or windows, in Fredericia it is heavily embedded. Literally. In railway tracks inlaid in the oak cladding of the walls, the brass revolving platform inlaid in the floor, or the strips of LED lighting in the ceiling that form threads like a cobweb.

The name of the project, *Spor og spind* [‘Tracks and Webs’], is closely linked to the function of the building, where the control tower is at the heart of a spider’s web of tracks. This way of relating to the function of the building is simultaneously elegant and very solid, in the sense that the building and the art are so intertwined it is difficult to imagine the one without the other. One particularly fine detail is the handrail on the central spiral staircase that rises up through the atrium of the building. This handrail is in the shape of a rail, a thematic reference to the primary element of Rail Net Denmark. But it also provides a way for the body to interact with function and history. Take hold of the handrail and actually feel the railways beyond the digital graphics of the computer screen that have replaced the human eyes of the past. Trace the sharp, inlaid tracks in the oak panelling of the atrium with your fingers, and let the grid get under your skin. Signe Guttormsen brings the function of the building to life: The actual job of controlling and monitoring the tracks and trains, its materiality and visuality. The railway grid, revolving platform and tracks extending across the country. All of this comprises the ‘site’ of the work – more than the barrel-shaped, dark brick building, let alone the rail network in Fredericia. It thus belongs, like the project at Vejle Hospital, to the category of *discursive* sites. Here a site that is conspicuous by its absence, precisely because it is out of sight and beyond the reach of the people physically inside the brick tower.

Archaeological Excavations

The third and last project included here is Signe Guttormsen's *Opbrud* ('Rupture') at MT Højgaard's headquarters in Søborg, designed by Design Group Architects. Like so many contemporary modern buildings, it is architecturally anonymous from the outside, suddenly appearing in the apparent no-man's land of a wind-swept industrial estate. You could be forgiven for thinking you had taken a wrong turn, until you go inside. Through the revolving door and into the large foyer where the character of the building is suddenly revealed. A patterned floor of subtly coloured marble unfolds before you. Overwhelming. Absorbing. It is difficult to establish any kind of distance – you are instantly in the midst of the motif, the midst of the work, the midst of tonnes of luxurious, polished marble. And above it all, a large, circular luminaire of elegant white light and powerful steel constructions soars.

Neither the pattern on the floor nor the shape of the luminaire has been chosen at random. On the contrary, to connect the building to its location, Guttormsen has dug deep into the archaeology of the site and found traces of its history. From the 1950s to the 1980s, on the exact spot where MT Højgaard's new headquarters have been built, there was a 'gasometer' here that supplied the surrounding area with gas. The gasometer no longer exists, but it is resurrected in Guttormsen's floor, which mirrors the roof construction of the gas tower on a scale of 1:1. The piston that moved up and down as gas consumption in local homes rose and fell is reinstated in the vast, circular light fitting. From the atrium you are led through the canteen by inlaid metal strips, which not only show the way, but also repeat the lines of the current roof construction, thus taking visitors from the past to the present. This track ends in a central quad, where Guttormsen's project continues. Here she has constructed a stylised garden with organically shaped paving. The quad is a reminder of the sustainability of the building, an insistence on the nature that would otherwise be absent. But it is also a futuristic scenario, displaying its own artificiality. It is more of an imitation of the shapes of nature – the leaf-like lamps, the organically shaped paving stones – than nature itself.

In this project Signe Guttormsen uses an archaeological approach also evident elsewhere in contemporary art. It consists of a gradual excavation of the patterns and functions of the past, in order to embed a site and therefore make it into a *place* rather than just a set of coordinates. Again, the project does not primarily revolve around the site as a physical location, but rather everything that is *not* physical. Everything that is absent. The ghost of history. The vanished gasometer. Just like the principle of treatment in Vejle, and the imagery of the railway network in Fredericia. Like those 'sites', according to the categories of Miwon Kwon this one is more discursive than phenomenological. More a story, a source, absent imagery brought to life and made present in the present – as in here and now.

What also becomes clear is the reciprocity of the relationship. Signe Guttormsen's integrated art might depend on its architectural framework, but that framework is also dependent on the art. So whilst integrated works are made in relationship to a place, they also create it. They give meaning to what would otherwise have been meaningless. As

such, sites can become *places* through the intervention of art. And in return they offer art the opportunity to expand its territory, both physically when the space itself becomes a work of art, and in principle when it goes beyond all understandings of 'free' and 'unfree' art and becomes applied art in the very best sense of the word: Art that applies, that has relevance, that can be used, and that creates spaces to be used.