

## RULES OF THE GAME

At a meeting at the Académie des Science in Paris on 12 April 1898, the physicist Marie Curie announces that she has made a discovery. In the mineral known as pitchblende, she has localised a quantity of radioactive matter that cannot be explained solely by its uranium content. There must be some other explanation for the high radiation. She goes on to order a ton of pitchblende from the uranium mines in Bohemia, and its delivery heralds the beginning of the difficult task of dissolving, filtering, and refining the black mineral with its glass-like surface and structure like a cluster of grapes.

Only few photographs of Curie working in the laboratory exist. The ones we do know depict her with her hair up, wearing a full-length black dress, long-sleeved and high-collared. She is either shown at her work desk in front of an experiment. Or she is seen in a classic laboratory pose, holding a glass jar up in front of her eyes in order to inspect the state of its contents – has the substance in question been dissolved, have deposits formed, etc. Curie carried out her work under modest conditions, working as she did in what was formerly a stable. Even so, a quite distinct atmosphere permeates the images – the unique feel evoked by a laboratory, a place where nature's most complex interrelations and reactions are examined. A place where experimental thinking is put to the test by means of concrete, physical investigations, and where, more than 100 years ago, a scientist in a black dress pursued a thought and went on to identify a new radioactive element, Polonium, by working with a black mineral.

### Sculptural test setups

A red rubber band, of the type used in households everywhere, is stretched out between two awls whose shiny steel points are buried at either end of a green-painted board. These three elements form a small, oblong entity which does not take up much room on the table on which it is placed. This sculpture by Jytte Høy bears the title *Skitse til Fredens Struktur* [*Sketch for the Structure of Peace*], 2006<sup>1</sup>. Its dimensions are precisely determined by the rubber band's capacity and length when stretched to its limit. Standing there on the otherwise empty table, the arrangement of these elements is reminiscent of an experimental setup. But what is being examined?

A sense of exploring something akin to a laboratory has sometimes been evoked in me when wandering around one of Høy's exhibitions, particularly in the installations and exhibitions where tables or desks – whether many or few in number – are used as a recurring feature, which was the case at the exhibition *Skitse til Fredens Struktur* [*Sketch for the Structure of Peace*], 2006. Here, the tables were placed in formations that allowed spectators to move among them, drawing close to the elements and tableaux positioned on, beneath, or even through the table tops – for example, one tableau included the denuded trunk of a Christmas tree, entirely free of jutting branches (but including its Christmas tree stand!) and poking up through the desk through a perfectly circular hole bored for that very purpose.

Even if Høy's sculptural setups may not be decipherable at first glance, they nevertheless seem to have been rounded out of a special clarity and logical necessity. The effect is not far removed from the sense you might get when you, as

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<sup>1</sup> From the exhibition sharing the same title: *Skitse til Fredens Struktur* [*Sketch for the Structure of Peace*], Overgaden – Institute of Contemporary Art, Copenhagen 2006.

a layman, watch an ingenious test setup in a laboratory where glass flasks alembics on stands are hooked up to rubber tubes and pipettes. One might not immediately understand what is being proven or examined, but one is tantalised by the sense of carefully targeted, dedicated intentions and by the awareness that there is a specific meaning to each element in the arrangement. In *Skitse til Fredens Struktur* the sense of sober study is borne out by the identical, simple trestle tables and identical titles (most of the works bear the same title as the exhibition).

From an art historical perspective, the tables do, of course, also represent Høy's reflections on a classic feature within sculpture: The base. On the one hand, the table acts as a practical foundation bringing the work up to a suitable working height; it becomes an informal base or a kind of glassless display case where elements – large or small – can be arranged for perusal. On the other hand, however, the tables also constitute an important part of each sculpture; they are crucial, far from neutral devices in the overall installation context. For example, the way in which the tables are arranged helps determine how spectators move around within the exhibition. Høy herself points to how the parade of tables also help evoke an atmosphere reminiscent of a market; of a place where things are put on display and where you might make a lucky find<sup>2</sup>.

Just as the tables have in themselves gradually become a hallmark of Høy's work<sup>3</sup>, one can also see something characteristic of her entire way of working in this dual approach where the tables are posited inside and outside of the sculpture's space at one and the same time. Things often appear clear-cut and logical at first glance, but in reality they rarely are. Or, as the artist herself puts it: "My works have an inclination to pose as something they are not. They appear "pure", but, to borrow a term from the realm of geology, they are in fact conglomerates – complex medleys"<sup>4</sup>.

Some of the sculptures shown in *Skitse til Fredens Struktur* play very deliberately on this "inclination" by almost miming the models familiar to all of us from school physics laboratories; one example of such miming would be a sculpture made from three industrially shaped wooden balls, linked together by natural wooden branches to form a simple spatial structure that evokes associations of a molecular structure or a model depicting one of the elements. And yet the balls are, crucially, not linked by smoothly finished poles; the connecting rods are natural branches, crooked and of varying thickness, two branches are joined in the middle, and all of them clearly show where knots have been cut off. There is a subtle humour inherent in the perfectly executed, yet obvious joining of the two unevenly thick branches – as if the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak; they want to join, to merge, or, to repeat Høy's own words, to "pose as something they are not".

But if Høy's sculptures are not what they pretend to be – what, then, are they? How should they be decoded? Of course, no single formula can be applied to provide definite answers to this question, but there is certainly something about the deliberate play on associations and references on all levels which serves to conjure up a field of options where one's initial focus will be the quite concrete clashes and juxtapositions of dimensions, materials, or forms –

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<sup>2</sup> Conversation in the artist's studio, 5 October, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Høy first used tables as a sculptural base in 1998 at the exhibition *huse og fotografier og tegninger og landskaber* [houses and photos and drawings and landscapes], Gallery Rhizom, Aarhus.

<sup>4</sup> Email, 13 October, 2009

encounters which, in a practically Willy Ørskovian<sup>5</sup> sense, constitute a kind of fundamental research to determine what an object is. A pure research which is, it must be noted, both intellectual and sensuous in scope<sup>6</sup>.

If we turn once again to the sculpture featuring a red rubber band stretched out between two awls, the matter at hand does not revolve around the awl as a tool, as a metaphor for craftsmanship, or as a potential murder weapon. Similarly, there would be little to be gathered by reflecting on the rubber band's original association with the kitchen drawer, the packed lunch, or the like. While all the parts used in this sculpture, from the rubber band to the table, can be said to belong to the sphere of everyday life, every single element has been arranged and worked on so that their individual points of reference are displaced. First and foremost, then, the investigation or experiment has to do with the sculpture in the concrete sense – with how the awl penetrates the base, the stretching of the rubber band, the framing of the green board, and the juxtapositions and collisions of the elements in general<sup>7</sup>. In the wider sense, the work concerns an investigation of a minimal approach in which the rubber band is not the only thing that is being stretched. The same applies to the wider concept of materials, (complementary) colours, and space – the red rubber, the green wood, and the shiny steel with the red, ball-shaped plastic handles, almost opulent within this stringent, minimal context. Overall, the space created is tense, stretched, quivering – and a result of thoughts, ideas, concepts, forms, and materials being thrust up against each other in a continual study of sculpture and visuality.

#### Game Rules

I have rarely met an artist who has adopted a systematic, logical approach to their own work to the extent that Jytte Høy does. A simple question about a specific sculpture – for example about the thoughts behind the work or about the choice of material – will usually trigger a lengthy account of the piece which may take its point of departure in a work or exhibition dating back years and then go on to follow a trail as if governed by external laws, making detours around several other works before ending in the sculpture under consideration.

One might, for example, take the artist as guide and follow the trail that ends up in the sculpture *Det Ternede Fællesskab* [*Chequered United*], 2006<sup>8</sup> – a table onto which Høy has constructed a three-dimensional grid consisting of painted bars, placed across each other in multiple layers. When viewed from above, the bars form a deep, three-dimensional grid. According to the artist, this work takes its point of departure in an earlier table sculpture that shares

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<sup>5</sup> Willy Ørskov (1920-1990), Danish sculptor and professor at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen 1978-84.

<sup>6</sup> On several occasions Jytte Høy has noted that she prefers to refer to her own profession by using the slightly old-fashioned Danish term for a sculptor, “billedhugger”, as if to underline that the visual and bodily reading of space and the world is her primary mode of cognition. In the present text, I have elected to focus on those aspects of her practice that fall within this area: object, sculpture, and installation. It follows, then, that the laboratory analogy should not evoke scenes of highly evolved technology, e.g. a nanotechnology lab; rather, the parallel has a more traditional quality, reminiscent of a place featuring liquids in flask, Bunsen burners, Petri dishes, etc.

<sup>7</sup> Translated into Ørskov's terminology, these would be: the *penetration* effected by the awl, the *extroversion* of the rubber band, the *framing* of the green board, the *juxtaposition* and *linking* of the elements, etc.; cf. his concept of the functional principles behind the organisation of objects as described in *Aflæsning af objekter og andre essays* [*Decoding Objects and other essays*], Copenhagen, Borgens Forlag, 1966

<sup>8</sup> The sculpture is one of two works entitled *Det Ternede Fællesskab* and featured at the exhibition *Skitse til Fredens Struktur*, Overgaden – Institute of Contemporary Art, Copenhagen, 2006.

the title *Det Ternede Fællesskab, 2003*<sup>9</sup>. In that sculpture, ten boxes have been affixed to the table, each box containing a pile of copied photographs. All the motifs of these photographs feature a chequered pattern (in the form of a chequered shirt, scaffolding, marks made on asphalt, etc.). Spectators who wear or carry something chequered, and are thereby part of the united community, are welcome to take a copy home. The idea of using chequers or grids – which also appear in the form of a black grid painted onto the otherwise white sculpture – has its roots in a document housed at the Imperial War Museum in London. The document in question is a pencil drawing, a kind of doodle executed on a piece of blotting paper by the English emissary Lloyd George during the peace negotiations following World War I, held at Versailles in 1918. Much of these idle scribbling looks like a grid, and Høy translates this structure and inherent logic into a spatial figure in the sculpture *Det Ternede Fællesskab, 2003*<sup>10</sup>.

When Høy transports information, knowledge, or structure from one work to another in this fashion, she does so as the result of internalised logics, methods, and rules that may well be invented anew from one work to the next, but to which the artist nevertheless adheres very specifically. For example, the notion of effecting a translation from a two-dimensional drawing to a three-dimensional sculpture should be viewed as something highly concrete, for Høy actually translates “the length of a line made when the hand rests on the desk and the pencil just moves back and forth”<sup>11</sup> into a length which relates to the arm that can be said to be “drawing the line” in space. After careful calculations she has determined this length to be around 80cm, a measurement used as the starting point for the various dimensions of the sculpture *Fredens Struktur [The Structure of Peace], 2003*, creating kind of fundamental module applied in the various dimensions.

Only few will immediately pick up on the internal mechanics and relationships within the overall body of work. When Høy nevertheless makes a point of highlighting the links and the inherent logic, this is because it says something crucial about her artistic method. In a manner of speaking, her entire oeuvre constitutes a bank of material and knowledge from which she can pick and choose whenever she embarks on a new work. It is a little like baking a loaf of rye bread by adding a small amount of leaven kept aside from the last time you made bread. This is not to say that her art represents a kind of academism where the work simply emerges on its own accord as determined by a pre-existing plan. Methods and rules are invented anew every time. But perhaps the repeated returns to her back catalogue are also about insisting on the opportunities and freedoms offered to artists in terms of investing the world with new meaning. If you insist long enough, a new space, a new reality arises.

The artists that attract Høy’s own interest are precisely those who seek to build their own space by means of logic and rules, such as the writers Inger Christensen (1935-2009) and Raymond Roussel (1869-1937). One anecdote about the latter even claims that he wrote his novel epos *Impressions d’Afrique* (1910) after a prolonged journey in Africa

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<sup>9</sup> *Tankens Museum [The Museum of Thought]*, Kunsthallen Nikolaj, Copenhagen 2003

<sup>10</sup> The blotting paper doodles also form the starting point of three other works at the same exhibition: the sculptures *Skitse til Fredens Struktur, 2003* and *Fredens Struktur, 2003*, as well as the photographic work *Jeg tænker på Fredens Struktur [I Think of the Structure of Peace], 2003*. *Skitse til Fredens Struktur* is also the title of the artist’s solo show at Overgaden in 2006. The many reappearances of the same titles used for different works and exhibitions accentuates the internal, complex web of connections in the oeuvre – and also point to how the works are reminiscent of experiments, of pure research.

<sup>11</sup> “Elisabeth Delin Hansen interviewing Jytte Høy”, *Tankens Museum*, catalogue, pp.27-28

during which he barely set foot upon the continent and would only leave his hotel room or train compartment when compelled by unavoidable circumstances. Roussel insisted that a piece of fiction should exclusively be the product of pure imagination, unaffected by experiences from the real world. The point is borne out by his use of complex plays on words and of rules for how his texts were constructed<sup>12</sup>.

Like Roussel, who elected to have his poetic method revealed only after his death<sup>13</sup>, I sense that Høy, too, has no real need to have the spectators know all the calculations involved, nor to have them capable of reading the inner logic of the work. For both artists, logic and rules are primarily tools, and using them does not necessarily mean that the end result, the final work, appears more clear or logical than any other work. Rather, logic and rules are devices that act as catalysts and help establish a new, autonomous space. As Høy puts it: "If you consistently pursue something logical, you have a tool capable of leading you far beyond the limits of the imagination."<sup>14</sup>

## White lemon

If Høy's basic research into the realm of sculpture can be said to have traits reminiscent of Ørskov's concept of the syntax of sculpture, her use of logic as an engine capable of generating unexpected and "far out" results has little in common with Ørskov's notions concerning the inherent laws of sculpture. I am certain that Høy should not be called an existentialist, but nevertheless the way in which she constantly makes herself accountable in relation to her entire oeuvre is reminiscent of a kind of existentialist accountability where everything can be referred back to choices made at an earlier point in time and where you always fulfil yourself (and your works) through your actions.

Perhaps this consistent pursuit of her own rules and the logic derived from that pursuit is what causes some of Høy's work to have a certain absurdity to them. This is evident in e.g. the recent work *Lemonisque*, 2009<sup>15</sup> – a clean-cut figure composed out of pieces of wood that have been painted green and joined to a wooden model hand, which has been painted black and is holding a white lemon<sup>16</sup>. Something about this clash between formal sculpture, lemon, and hand – all placed on a lemon-yellow base – creates a humorous play on connotations, evoking a classic absurd or surreal universe such as the one familiar from Meret Oppenheim's *Objet (Le Déjeuner en fourrure)*, the fur-clad cup created in 1936.

The undercurrent of absurdity also makes itself felt in the collection of small objects entitled *Touch*. First created in 1998, the work is installed in varying ways, but in all cases several objects are presented together. As is typical of Høy,

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<sup>12</sup> The sculpture *Jeg drømmer om bjerge [I Dream of Mountains]*, 2008 is related to Høy's reading of Roussel: "In fact, Raymond Roussel provided inspiration for the work, albeit in a roundabout way. As you know, he believed that what he wrote should never describe the reality that surrounded him. Everything had to arise out of the pure imagination. That is why I chose the title 'I Dream of Mountains' and presented the mountains as if I did not know what a mountain looks like; as if I had only heard about them." Email, 19 December, 2009

<sup>13</sup> Raymond Roussel, "How I Wrote Certain of My Books", 1935, in *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*. Ed. Trevor Winkfield. Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 1995.

<sup>14</sup> Conversation in the artist's studio, 13 October, 2009

<sup>15</sup> *Den Frie*, Den Frie Centre of Contemporary Art, Copenhagen 2009

<sup>16</sup> The lemon is made by means of a technology known as SLS, Selective Laser Sintering. First, an actual lemon is scanned and the information about its shape translated into a 3D file format fed into a so-called P385i machine. The machine then uses the information to direct a laser beam to melt a nylon powder that builds the lemon layer by layer, essentially "printing" the lemon. Each layer is 0.1 mm thick. The technology is also known as Rapid Prototyping.

the effects and materials used are simple: for example, one object involves a round cotton swab and a self-adhesive hook of the kind used to hang plates on the wall, both sharing the same circular shape. The two objects are combined to form a kind of miniature relief that is attached to the wall. Another example would be a cracker that has been pierced by small nails inserted through the surface holes appearing on industrially baked crackers. The object was subsequently placed on a small shelf specifically created for the purpose.

Most of the objects appearing in *Touch* mime something logical: It is only logical for a work of art to be hanging from a hook and for nails to enter holes, but this hardly assists our decoding of the objects; rather, the result is a kind of short-circuit scenario where meaning constantly evades us. Even though Høy's objects very much seek to establish a kind of humorous, meaningless state akin to the meaninglessness familiar from Samuel Beckett's theatre of the absurd, they are not meaningless in any depressive sense. Høy's works are not about the meaninglessness experienced by individuals or the meaninglessness of the world, but of the potential meaninglessness of concepts: "To me, the creation of a work of art is always about hunting for cracks and fissures in concepts and ideas, and about staying in seemingly meaningless places. That is where I will then place my work. When the work is truly successful, I have [...] made it encompass the often contradictory concepts it holds within."<sup>17</sup>

This space of contradictions is Høy's field of study. It is a space where references unravel, the usual apparatus of perception is inadequate, and where the work stands quivering because the amount of meaning produced exceeds the explanations available.

### **Holes in the laboratory**

By roundabout ways I recently came across an article with the tantalising title *Scientists create black hole-like state in laboratory*<sup>18</sup>. The piece described how a group of international scientists at a Japanese laboratory had succeeded in recreating the special kind of x-ray radiation emitted by a black hole; radiation which is one of the ways of discovering black holes at all. Apparently, the scientists had done so by directing a large number of powerful lasers onto a small plastic shell, transforming it into a kind of plasma that emits the x-ray radiation described. It all sounds both very hands-on and insanely complex at the same time. Even though plasma-physical experiments of this kind are not exclusively the product of sheer imagination, they nevertheless represent the kind of research that confirms the notion that the most advanced science occupies a realm bordering on the wildest poetry. One can only imagine what such a test setup would look like. Perhaps it is something involving a tall stick, the main trunk of a Christmas tree, still perched on its stand, its length passing through a circle-shaped bored-out hole in a tabletop ...

Pernille Albrethsen

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<sup>17</sup> Jytte Høy interviewed by Rolf Heitman. "Jeg er til det selvfølgelig", *Virkelighed, Virkelighed. Avantgardens realisme*. Eds. Karin Petersen and Mette Sandbye. Copenhagen: Tiderne Skifter 2003.

<sup>18</sup> <http://newz.dk>, 8 December, 2009