

Different Random

Charlotte von Poehl and Andrew Renton in conversation

Andrew: I think we should start with the *Harlequin Drawings*. They compress a lot of the history of your work, and for me they feel very familiar and very true to your practice. Art history, particularly modernism, is full of attempts at pattern-making. They feel very much part of that history. There are obvious references and we can sort of tease out some of these. But I am interested in this ‘system’ that goes to make the Harlequin Drawings. Can you talk about that ?

Charlotte: The system is based on a grid, there is always the same grid formation, one by two centimetres, and there are five colours, a light blue colour that is always constant in the series. The way that I put each colour in each shape is different in each five, so there is a basic system with the lines and the crayon. The way that I place each colour or the combination of each colour is different in each piece.

Andrew: Different random or..?

Charlotte : Different random. There is a constant in all my pieces which is this idea of a paradox between a system and the random, which you can find in the piece *Newton* or in the series *Arrow Drawings*. In a way for me this piece is related to Newton because of the colour combinations and the nuances that I work with.

Andrew : I have always been interested in artists who try to work with systems, because the system speaks against what we might presume is essential to art, which is a creative moment, the expressive moment, a moment of truth. It seems to me that the most interesting thing about making art that is structured like this is that the truth comes out of the making, comes out of the process, comes out of the patterning, comes perhaps out of the difficulty of covering the surface. The saying is done through the process.

This is a legacy of art that is under-represented and it is under-narrated in the history of modernism. For me this feels like a very true practice. Practice is actually quite a good word because it is the *doing*, the regular doing. There are some constants, there are some rules within this structure, and then there is a lot of random activity. How do you find those rules? So, for example, the blue is a constant?

Charlotte: The blue is related to this idea of a window looking out towards reality. I am trying to push the pieces as close to reality, to real life, as possible.

Andrew: You can think of patterning in art that is absolutely about colour but it does not have a resonance beyond itself. But you see that in terms of spaces and perception ?

Charlotte: Yes.

Andrew : Someone like Bridget Riley would narrate through the relationships of one colour adjacent to another, and she would always talk through that as if they are characters on the

canvas, that there are relationships going on. Then you have the other extreme, such as Damien Hirst, whose spot painting are sort of about relationships, where the only rule is that there is no relationship between one colour and another. Then the elephant in the room I think for me is definitely Sol LeWitt. In a sense he seems to me to be your closest ally. He is a big reference point for this project I guess ?

Charlotte: Absolutely. When I was invited to the Henry Moore Institute I did a research project on Sol Le Witt, Eva Hesse and Robert Smithson.

It came out as the work the *Notepiece*, which from 2006, where I wrote by hand citations that I found, combined with my own thoughts. That was the first approach to Sol LeWitt.

Charlotte: During my research I found the *Sentences on Conceptual Art* by Sol LeWitt, from that moment when I found them, they have been a constant reference point, especially the phrase, "Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically."

The piece *Sol LeWitt Says*, where the sentence, "Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically" is handwritten on hand-cut stickers is a piece on the border between reality and art. In the exhibitions or art festivals, people can take the stickers, put them on cars or their fridge or place them in other locations in the city.

Andrew: There is a structure there that hovers between being recognisable as a work of art or or a kind of social intervention. There is no distance between the viewer and the work.

Charlotte: Absolutely. For me the viewer is the most important. I am making the work for the viewer. I want the work to be open on one level to any viewer.

Andrew : If we were to go through the history of your work, the visual language is consistently accessible either through form or colour, occasionally through language. I am thinking about your earliest sculptures, both the large pieces and the tiny pieces. These are forms that are within my mental grasp but also within my physical grasp. I can see how they are done. There is no mystery there: there is a process. The *Harlequin Drawings* take me right back to the early sculptures. Even the pieces at Goldsmiths, with their substantial scale, there was a clarity of form and colour. Was that 1995? The kind of visual 'disappointment' that is set up by them - the greek term *bathos* is quite good. A kind of anti-monumentality, which is a great achievement in sculpture, trying to react to a generation that was producing substantial, monumental, sculptures. There is an unsteadiness to these works. They probably should not hold together but they just about stay standing. A little tragic, bathetic, but not pathetic.

That is what makes them very beautiful and heroic for me - a model of what sculpture can be. The accessibility of what you are doing is going all the way back to that. It is a kind of ideological accessibility. Then there is a very small step to the plasticine sculptures. As tiny as they are, they are absolutely sculptures, and in the history of three-dimensional work. Trying to establish a vocabulary of making gives you a practice, it gives you continuity. When you look back you also realise that the common language is both visual and embodied. I understand them not only visually but formally in terms of my body in relationship to them. A very strange relationship, it is all about embodied, bodily intervention. It is interesting when you

look at Antony Gormley's *Field*, which I think is one of the most successful projects that the artist attempted in terms of social sculpture, you realise there is something intuitive and fundamental about the act of making, in the way that he set up the process to make these figures. I think that you have been doing that with your sculptures for a long time. That feels to me very consistent, very readable and accessible to the viewer. The fact that the material is colourful plasticine - kids' material - is not the point. It is about basic stuff. The material instability, the fact that they are not solid, that they could be changed. Each one has that handmade quality, which is very exciting for the viewer. We can't quite assimilate that whole process, yet you very quickly know what it is. The question and the immediate understanding combined produce what we call experience. Then there is a legacy there that comes out of the battle that was fought in minimalism and in post-minimalism. What sits on the ground does not only occupy the few inches above the ground, it occupies all the airspace above, and all the space around - something that Carl Andre was very particular to articulate, for example.

Charlotte: The way I choose the materials is quite consistent and specific, it is every day materials, where the viewer can have an instant relation to the material of the piece.

Andrew: So the Sol LeWitt text piece are on post-its?

Charlotte: No, they are hand-cut by me. When I put them up the grid is not perfect, they are handwritten and hand-cut. The *16 Sticks* piece is made out of ordinary sticks of wood from an ordinary store. The *Sticks* are the size of the windows in each space where I show them.

Andrew : What is it about those *Sentences*..?

Charlotte : "Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically", a sentence by Sol LeWitt, is a sentence on the creative process. In the piece *16 Sticks*, it is about the materiality of the text. I am measuring as exactly as possible, it takes me some time. I measure each distance and I fill in the letters with gouache. For me writing them down in that way makes them material. It is like excavating the texts, making them accessible for the viewer. I think those sentences are important. I am showing them in a different way, I am borrowing them.

Andrew : Just thinking about the LeWitt sentences alone, I can think of several artists who have appropriated them for themselves. John Baldessari sings them, and there is a wonderful piece by João Onofre that in turn references Baldessari singing them, mixed through a Madonna song. It becomes more material within a tradition.

One of the other things that I really wanted to talk about is that from time to time - but very rarely - you produce a photographic image, and this image [*Balloons*] is definitely your signature image. But there are very few of them in the body of your work. You got lucky when you took this photograph but it tells the story of what you do. I guess that is why you selected it and why it becomes a signature for your work.

When you look through your work over nearly 20 years, there are very few moments like that, but from time to time there is a kind of instantaneous moment...

Charlotte : That specific photograph was taken from a car in Bogotá with one of those cameras that you throw away. I take a photograph when I see something in reality that could be my sculpture. When I saw the island Blue Jungfrun, featured in the film of the same name, it could have been a piece that I had made, a piece of land art. The photographs and films function in that way. They need to be very specific, that is why there are not that many.

Andrew: It connects back to the piece *Cuac*. Is that reality ?

Charlotte: Yes *Cuac* is reality, The photographs are all found objects in reality.

Andrew: When we are talking about *Cuac* installed with *Whale*, these forms are specific. I want to compare them to these recent sculptures, *Suspended time*. They are deflated, they have a flatness to them, and we are back to Carl Andre. They *could* be inflated. You are working on a another series of them ? *Whale* is a whale but these are not 'figurative', are they?

Charlotte: I think they connect to my earlier sculptures like the red box. When making the red box, I was thinking of a person but I made the sculpture a bit smaller. There is an oscillation, you are not sure about the reference.

Andrew: Those sculptures are about human scale. Is that the same with these ?

Charlotte: Not as clearly. They are larger, the reference to the human body is not so specific.

Andrew: Is there a hint of a function ?

Charlotte: There is a zipper. You could use them, maybe you could also inflate them, you could change the shape. For me it is important that the shape is in itself changeable, with all my references to minimalism, I am working with them in a different way.

Andrew: These are objects that momentarily attract your attention, and they come to inhabit the space without any ambiguity, because the seriality of the object is in the construction. It makes it clear something else is going on here. Like an object that feels as if it hasn't asserted itself in the space. It feels a bit incomplete, abandoned.

We are back to the idea of *bathos*, but I don't think it is that, it is much more complex.

Charlotte: I think there is this idea of being abandoned, something being left. There is a certain darkness about them.

Andrew: There is this reflective surface which is interesting in the history of sculpture. But also this surface has creases.

Charlotte: The creases are about the imperfectness of the piece. The reflectiveness is about this idea that the piece can disappear with the light. If the light shines in a certain way they are not so present.

Andrew: They are very strange because they hover between an object you can contemplate and an object that only one day in the future you might be able to contemplate. Because of the flatness, because of the reflection. Reflection in modern sculpture. It takes me back to Jeff Koons' *Rabbit*. You can't believe no-one did that before.

I am very excited to see a series of them. It starts to make me wonder what each one of them is. Do you have any decisions that you make in relation to each one ?

Charlotte: I am in the process of making a new one. They are going to be within the same size, they will all have a zipper. Trying to figure out the shape takes me a long time, it is very precise.

Andrew: So what is consistent is their organic quality, they do not have any clear edges to them, and they resist being anthropomorphised. If a sculpture can be abstract, these are more abstract.

Charlotte: Maybe it is more about each viewer's memory. I am keeping them as open as possible. It is an oval shape, organic. For that series is it very important that they are not recognisable.

Andrew: Each one is unique, referencing only themselves. They are incredible important objects for me, I love them the more I think about them. They extend the language of what sculpture might be able to do today. They fit in very beautifully into what they are talking about. So let's talk about the big canvas that you are making that almost synthesises the *Harlequin Drawings* and these sculptures. There are other connections - these could even reference *Blue Jungfrun* island. Could you talk about this large canvas you are working on ? It could be completed a lot more easily, instead the surface is filled through extensive process.

Charlotte: With this work I build in time in the piece. I been working on it for more than a year now. The process is that I have a map with islands, I copy them randomly and then I fill them in with blue acrylic paint. The piece is quite large, but you feel that it is made over time. Sometimes it is lighter, there is more water in the paint, which comes through process. The viewer can lose her or himself in that piece because it is so large. It will be part of a series too. I am planning to produce several of them.

Andrew: You could do it for the rest of your life! If I was being a psychoanalyst, I would ask what is it about Islands ?

Charlotte: I have no idea.

Andrew; This work seems to be about isolated moments of information, discrete objects that inform something much bigger than themselves. Not informed by the grid but rather informed by how they fit on the canvas.

Charlotte: They are isolated, they do not touch.

Andrew: That makes a lot of sense in relation to the *Harlequin Drawings*. One of the things we have been talking about is process, and much of the work that you produce looks beyond the possibility of one individual producing it. There is a sense that it could be much more easily done through a ‘hands-off’ fabrication process. Today in contemporary art when we fetishise the handmade, your gestures are very small, but through accumulation powerful. Is it important that it is always ‘hands-on’ ?

Charlotte: For the Newton piece it is very important that it is handmade.

Andrew: The legacy we are negotiating is something like minimalism, it is not about the factory - we are more in Eva Hesse territory. And again there is a legacy there, the person that hovers between is Sol LeWitt, where there is something striking in how the hand is present in his work. The sentences on conceptual art were published handwritten, and that was no accident. Maybe because the object which was fetishised at that time was the typewriter.

You’ve produced a body of work that is peculiarly human and peculiarly not descriptive; the Harlequin drawings are descriptive of no more or less than their obligation to be drawn, to be painted. When they teach about the history of art the history of art at school, it is *approximately* a confrontation with reality - art that looks like something. And then a movement from that into a form of abstraction. Modern art, they tell us, begins with Manet, it starts going abstract with Kandinsky and you end up logically with the white-out of Robert Ryman. But I think that there is a different story that’s never told. Looking at Hilma af Klint’s paintings prove something else to me. There is a consistent methodology and ideology of abstraction that has been consistently present long before modernism and has really profound historical precedents. A form of graphic pattern making that is at the heart of art practice that has never been really recognised as part of art history but has always been there. Hilma is important, way ahead of her time. That is where we are with this. That is what the *Harlequin Drawings* say: there is a job to do and you have to keep doing it.