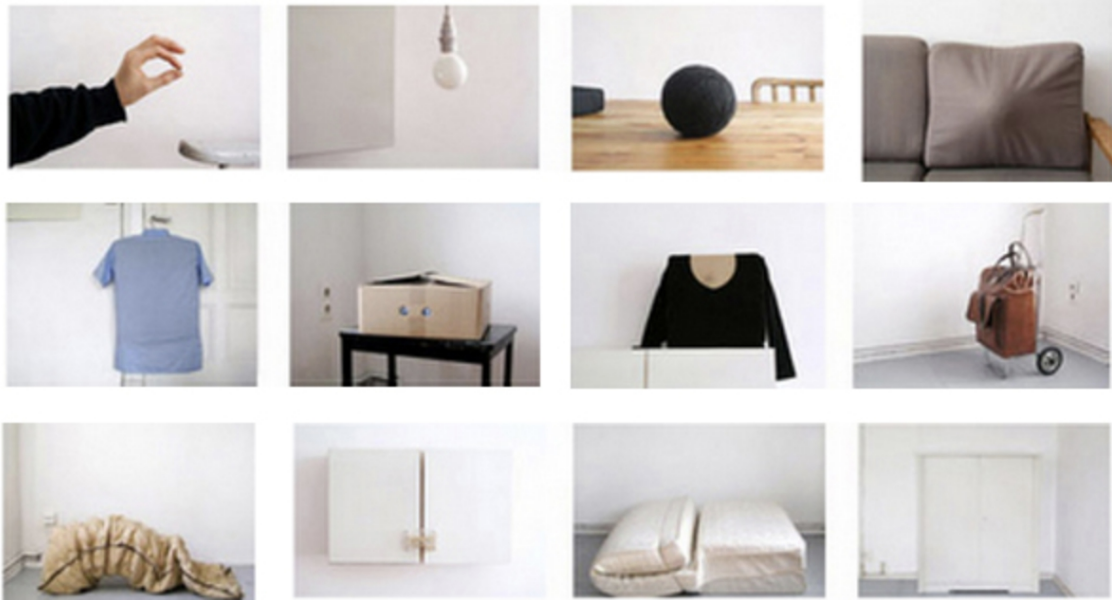


Interview : Sofia HULTEN



© Sofia Hultén, *Points in a Room Condensing*, (2006) Objects of increasing size are placed inside one another, beginning with a ball bearing (2 x 2 x 2mm) and ending with a cupboard (120 x 110 x 50 cm) which then contains all the objects. Copyright and courtesy of the artist, Konrad Fischer Galerie and VG Bildkunst.

Studied sculpture in the UK in early 1990s, Sofia Hultén (*1972, Stockholm) has been influenced by the idea of sculpture as an expandable media with a performative potential. Instead of producing objects, Sofia is interested in changing the state of existence of her ready-made material. Her work is therefore four dimensional where time becomes an intelligible element. What's important to her is not to reach the final destination – object of art – through the shortest route, but to circle around in the labyrinth of possibilities which is to her, a process of unpredictability.

In the interview, the artist talked to us about her sculptural action works and her passion for the trinity of material, energy and action.

The latest work of Sofia Hultén is on view in her solo show *99 Problems* in gallery Meessen De Clercq (Brussels) until 4th December 2010.

SH – Sofia Hultén

ST – Selina Ting for initiArt Magazine

On Sculptural Action

ST: What brought you to Berlin?

SH: I came for a one-year postgraduate scholarship from the D.A.A.D, the German Academic Exchange Service. I studied with Rebecca Horn at the Universität der Künste in Berlin for a year.

ST: Before Berlin, you studied sculpture in England?

SH: Yes, I studied at Sheffield University, in the sculpture department, where I became very interested in the performative side of sculptural practice. That was when I encountered the idea that sculpture can be something expandable, that there is a potential for movement and a performative aspect. So I was interested in exploring these ideas. I made installations which used the spatial experience in the room.

ST: Was it influenced by Gilbert and George's Living Sculpture and/or the concept of Sculptural Action?

SH: I was influenced by developments within sculptural practice in general at that time, which did have a lot to do with an opening up of the definition of sculpture, that it could encompass time-based practices, process and movement.



Sofia Hultén, *Fuck It Up and Start Again*, (2001) An acoustic guitar is repeatedly smashed and repaired. It becomes increasingly easy to destroy and more difficult to mend. Copyright and courtesy of the artist, Konrad Fischer Galerie and VG Bildkunst

ST: In some of your video works, such as *Fuck it up and Start Again* (2001), where you repeatedly smash and repair a guitar, and *Grey Area* (2001), where you visually disappeared into the office environment, do you see them as sculptural actions or performances? Why?

SH: I do see the work from a sculptural standpoint, as work often begins with a question about an object, based on mass, weight or balance, qualities which I tend to associate with this kind of approach.



Sofia Hultén, *Grey Area*, (2001), Twelve attempts to hide in office spaces. Copyright and courtesy of the artist, Konrad Fischer Galerie and VG Bildkunst.

On Time and Matter

ST: Another crucial aspect in your work is the idea of the ready-made. Trained in sculpture, you tended not to produce objects, instead, you changed the state-of-existence of found objects.

SH: The found object is the catalyst, it sets the ball rolling. Very often, an object can contain a question for me, such as "What was I?"

ST: What happened to me? Why did I end up here?

SH: Yes. And some other object would be "What could I be?"

ST: And here you come into the scene and interfere with the life path of the object you found.

SH: I am really interested in the question of origin – where something starts, something ends, what the starting point of an action is, for example. I am interested in the fact that at the point when I come in with the object, it already has a history. That gives me something to work with.

ST: But sometimes it's just impossible to locate the origin. You go deeper and deeper into the story and it might just lead you to yet another story.

SH: Yes, that's another level of complexity.

ST: It's almost circular.

SH: That's an idea I use a lot in my work. Often the processes I perform on an object are looped, so you end up where you started. For example, in *Mutual Annihilation* (2008), I found a used cupboard with lots of marks on it and I restored it. The idea of restoration of old furniture is interesting to me because you restore to an *imagined* original point, but of course, it's not the "original" origin. So after restoring the cupboard, I turned the process around and re-did everything until the cupboard seemed to be back to the state when I found it.



Sofia Hultén, *Mutual Annihilation*, (2008). Chest of drawers, 95x73x50cm. Video (4 monitors) 85:22mins. Copyright and courtesy of the artist, Konrad Fischer Galerie and VG Bildkunst

(An old and battered chest of drawers is restored to its presumed original state. Paint is removed, broken parts are repaired, the chest is polished and handles are added. The process is then reversed; actions are performed which could have caused the found state. The chest is painted, then treated with various tools, paint is splashed on, it is scraped and hammered, until it as closely resembles the found old state as possible. The process of restoration and aging is recorded on video, and presented with the object.)

ST: The idea of the project is about destruction and restoration and re-destruction. Let's say the aim of restoration is to give it a new life. But your restoration has two-fold meanings. It also means going back to the status when you first found it, which is the origin *for you*.

SF: Well, I am interested in the idea that things change but that they also stay the same. There is a parallel in the piece *Artificial Conglomerate*, it's rearranged, everything changed but at the same time, it's the same, has the same form, the same materials, they are just in a different position. I am really interested in that as a philosophy, that although we may be changing constantly, we are still essentially the same.



Sofia Hultén, *Artificial Conglomerate*, (2010) A latex mould is made of a rock found at a street building site. The rock is then pulverized, and the mould and the rock material used to recast the stone in its found form but with the material within rearranged. Copyright and courtesy of the artist, Konrad Fischer Galerie and VG Bildkunst

ST: Yes, but the context changes and different possibilities come up as well.

SH: It was frustrating because with this one, I could only show one possibility. And I had an idea of showing lots of possibilities.

ST: Do you believe in destiny?

SH: I want to believe that everything is in flux and that change is always possible. One of the terrible things about completing a piece of work is exactly the feeling that it is completed, over. So in general I don't believe in destiny, that future events are set in any way, although there are some theories within quantum physics which could seem to suggest this.

ST: Do you have precise ideas of what you want to work with or is it by pure chance that you come across an object?

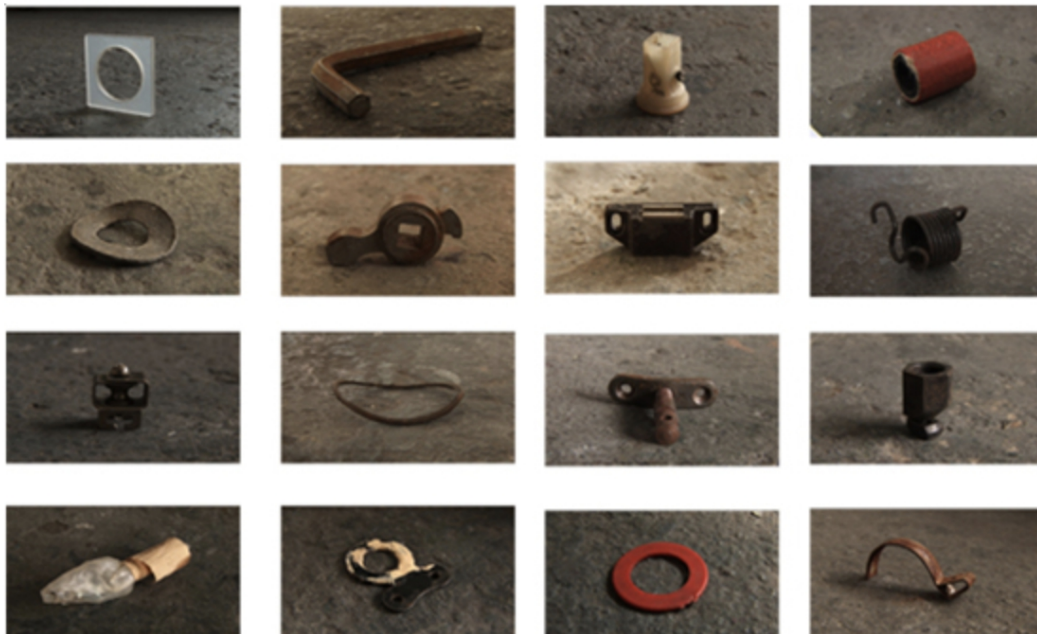
SH: Well, I know what I am looking for but sometimes things surprise me. Sometimes, I keep things for a long time before I use them. I had the tool box for a long time before I got to know it.

ST: Is it a normal second-hand tool box?

SH: Yes, I was fascinated by the amount of different small objects I found inside when I bought it. In the past, I often worked on just one object at a time. Here I had over a thousand things inside this one object. I like the idea of extremity, the extremity of purpose.



Sofia Hultén *Past Particles*, (2010) Over one thousand diverse small objects from a found toolbox (old scraps of wood, bent nails, used metal parts of unknown purpose) are recorded individually on video and presented on a single monitor. Copyright and courtesy of the artist, Konrad Fischer Galerie and VG Bildkunst



ST: They are collectively the same thing as well... they are tools.

SH: Exactly and for me, they represent a multitude of possibilities. Again it relates to quantum physics, i.e. the potential energy in matter, which is enormous. Matter, action and energy are all equivalent in some way. So at the quantum level, at the very small particle level, you can't distinguish a thing from what it does. This is very relevant to me and the way I have been thinking about things that I have been working with. I am interested in extending the particles out in time and to see what they could do.

ST: In some of your works, such as *Auflösung* (2008), you showed the kind of "before and after" photographs alongside with a video recording the working process. Why did you feel the need for this?

SH: This piece has actually been shown in several different ways. Originally it was shown as a video on the site where it was commissioned, Skulpturenpark Berlin Zentrum, and viewers could find the shredded pieces on the site. The video showed each object going through an enormous shredding machine. When I showed the piece again in an institution, I wanted to document the context of the original piece.



© Sofia Hultén *Auflösung*, (2008) An area of waste ground in Berlin is searched for objects discarded by residents of the area, such as an old armchair, bicycle, and more. The objects are collected and then shredded at an industrial waste disposal plant. The resulting dismembered pieces are replaced at the spot where each object was found. Copyright and courtesy of the artist, Konrad Fischer Galerie and VG Bildkunst

ST: As what you said, your work is about the origin of things, the formation, the coming into being of things, but it's also about disappearance, about destruction. How do you see the paradox?

SH: It's about the mixture of what would happen anyway. When you have a mattress that you want to throw away, you bring it to the garbage collecting point and they would shred it. But usually you just leave it somewhere on the sidewalk, or in a park. Then eventually it also breaks down. What I am interested in is changing a time structure, making something speed up or slow down, for example. I know it's a bit like playing God! It's also a kind of absurdity.

ST: A humor as well.

SH: That's a big part of my work. You know, when I moved to England with my mother in the 1970s, it was through some British sitcoms like *Fawlty Towers* and the *Young Ones* that I started to feel part of English culture. They often used objects as the catalyst for an absurd or terrible situation. Often the plots contained some kind of absurdity of circularity. The protagonists were also very physical with their environment, like they smashed walls and broke things. So these things have an influence on me. I am always interested in finding extremity and failure, I think.

ST: Because nothing is pre-fixed? Like in your improvised work, there is no guarantee for success?

SH: Well, it's more about an inbuilt failure within the success, or a success within a failure, that one part succeeds, and the other part may not.

ST: So we are going back to the circularity of things.

SH: There is a serious intent. I am interested in the idea of progress, the idea that you can always improve yourself, to advance. But there is also something telling us that maybe you don't need to change.

On Artist's Labour

SH: Now people have been asking me quite often about Marxism though it's not something that I am consciously working on.

ST: Because in your work, there is an obvious negation of the capitalist concept of time plus labour means productivity, that kind of cost-effectiveness in all sort of investment.

SH: I think there is also the parallel idea of everything you do should have a certain kind of effect. For example, in many pieces, a repeated action would have a progression, but there is a progressive loss. So you have the idea of exchange value.

ST: For example, the windows that you keep covering up layer by layer.

SH: ...and they are all inside the wall.



© Sofia Hultén *Consequences*, (2010) A found smashed window is successively covered and repaired using various materials. Eleven layers are photographed at each stage. The complete window with layers is mounted into the wall in the gallery. Copyright and courtesy of the artist, Konrad Fischer Galerie and VG Bildkunst

ST: I asked myself what's the purpose of this series of actions? They didn't make the window stronger, or more functional, it's a waste of labour to produce things without an exchange value.

SH: Yes, it's absurd to see how someone attempts to cover a broken window with all these unnecessary layers. It's the absurdity of excess, but at the same time, it's also a material investigation. I found it fascinating to see all these layers, so I wanted to see how they would be like all together. Many pieces in that show have to do with the idea of expansion and contraction of matter. So here, you know, everything is compressed together, and here it is expanded. It doesn't have a purpose in the exterior world, but within.

ST: The procedure is very important to you work. How do you conceive it? Where do your ideas come from and how do you work it out step by step to have the correct procedures, development?

SH: It's complicated. Sometimes, you have a vague idea of what you want to do, then you have to work all the way through to have it, it's like with your first love. The desirable object is always beyond your grasp. Very often, I do it by brainstorming with friends, with my family. And I write on the tube. Movement is very important. I can't just sit and think. I need movement, stimulation. This is my way to think clearly. Because when you are making something new, you need to have the mixture of intense concentration and lightness. It's a balancing act. You need this tricky combination.

ST: Thank you!

Sofia Hultén

Sofia Hultén was born 1972 in Sweden. Lives and works in Berlin.

Recent solo exhibitions include 2010 – *Ninetv-Nine Problems* Meessendeclercq, Brussels; *Past Particles*, Konrad Fischer Galerie, Berlin; *Test/Tat*, Galerie Für Gegenwartskunst, Bremen; *Sofia Hultén (with Wolfgang Plöger)*, Galerie Nelson Freeman, Paris. 2009 – *Back to Back*, Konrad Fischer Oben, Berlin; *Drawn Onward*, Perrot's Folly Birmingham UK Ikon Gallery Offsite. 2008 – *Mutual Annihilation*, Künstlerhaus Bremen; *Auflösung*, Skulpturenpark Berlin_Zentrum; Group Exhibitions include 2010 - *The Moderna Exhibition* Moderna Museet Stockholm; *Documents 10* Today Art Museum Beijing; *Objects are like they appear* Meessendeclercq Brussels; *Anticipation Time* Museums of Bat Yam Israel; *Fische Hinterlassen Keine Spuren* Künstlerhaus Bremen