

BRITTA TØNDBORG

Kirsten Ortved Full Length

ON LARGE SCALE SCULPTURES DESTINED FOR ART MUSEUMS



The Sculpture Street

When the extension of Statens Museum for Kunst was completed in 1998, the Museum had gained a large street area connecting the two parts of the building – the new and the old. The Sculpture Street is intended for art on a very large scale.

Naturally enough, the Museum did not possess many works which demanded so much room. Even those works on a large scale that were in the collection looked tiny in the room.

According to architect Anna Maria Indrio, the Sculpture Street is a sort of urban space, a museum street. Here old and new meet, brownstone historicism collides with light marble modernism and lots of glass.

Since 1998, the Museum has had various exhibitions of its own sculptures in the Sculpture Street, as well as those of invited artists. Kirsten Ortved is the first artist who has created a sculpture which as regards size takes up the challenge presented by the Sculpture Street.

Full Length

Kirsten Ortved has modelled 13 tons of clay into a 12-meter-long sculpture. Nothing has been left to chance. All the surfaces of the sculpture have been worked on, beaten or modelled by the artist. The clay sculpture has thereafter been cast in bronze and been given the title *Full Length*. The sculpture is specific as regards place: it has been created for the Sculpture Street as an architectural environment, and thereby also to the location, the Museum's room. Traditionally, sculpture relates to the human body as a scale model, but in this instance it is the architectural space which has determined the dimensions, and not primarily the human body.

The sculpture is a calm, dark lump reaching along the long axis in the western half of the Sculpture Street. Colour is an essential part of the expression of the work. The possibilities of patination for bronze sculptures are many; one can achieve a range going from completely black patination, through brown to the verdigris green variations known from copper roofs. Kirsten Ortved has chosen a dark, almost black patina for *Full Length*. "The patination must not be completely black, otherwise the large sculpture will seem too overwhelming, or gloomy and withdrawn".¹ At the same time, the dark patination is well-chosen because it makes the plinthless sculpture float on the light marble floor, and the dark tone outlines the contours of the sculpture against the many different surfaces in its surroundings.



General view of the Sculpture Street

The sculpture is an entity, but it has been made in two parts for practical reasons. The studio in Pietrasanta had only room for one half at a time. A good overview was necessary to carry the two halves in the mind over the ten months it took to create the work – from October 2006 to July 2007.

The many tons of clay were deposited in the studio, and then Kirsten Ortwed worked and struggled alone with the mountain of clay. The cool winter months meant that the temperature in the studio was low enough to keep the clay moderately damp and thus workable. It is cold and physically hard work beating, shaping and modelling such a large clay sculpture.

The bronze founder had to further subdivide the work so as to be able to cast it; at the same time, the artist insisted on the joins being as invisible as possible. The dark patination was similarly discussed in detail and finally approved by the artist. When the parts are joined at Statens Museum for Kunst, it is the first time the work is seen in its entirety.

Breaking down and building up

The sculpture has two different expressions. At first sight it seems as though it is one. *Length* consists of finished and unfinished parts. This is intentional, for Kirsten Ortwed's idea has been "to represent the breaking-down and building-up of a form at one and the same time, and both stages have the same status in the sculpture".²

In the marble works of Michelangelo and Rodin, the sculptors let the figures grow out of the stone, and the material seemed to function either as a midwife or as an opponent. The sculptors consciously demonstrated that as far as they were concerned, the motif was immanent in the material, just waiting for the master's hand in delivery. Nothing originates from the matter or has been caught in the material in *Length*. Everything has potentiality and can be delivered by the person who sees. *Length* is an investigation into matter and the possibilities of creation of form.

If one compares this with another work by Kirsten Ortwed, Statens Museum for Kunst's new acquisition *Tons of Circumstance* (1997), this work is the complete opposite of *Full Length* (page 108-111). *Tons of Circumstance* is not a lump but a number of scattered insular formations of equal rank spreading out on the floor. There is no privileged classical lump of sculpture as in *Full Length*.

Breaking down and building up constitute a new theme in Kirsten Ortwed's art. She has earlier employed opposites in her art, e.g. the mould has participated as a part of the work, together with the sculpture – i.e. negative with posi-



or the negative form alone. It is the procedural expression which is the final work in the “negative works”, and not a documentation of a process. In these works, the process is on the same footing as what is traditionally regarded as the final work. In the case of *Full Length*, it is different. *Full Length* is situated in the borderlands between sculpture as a potential and a finished work, because it is built up and broken down at the same time.

According to Kirsten Ortved, all aspects of sculpture as an art form are contained in *Full Length*: the tradition, genesis, the material *per se*, the fundamental principles of form, the abstract expression, the formal – and even scraps of the history of sculpture: “During work on *Full Length*, I recognised fragments which reminded me of the drapes of an antique sculpture, but only in flashes, and probably something which only I could recognise.”³

Building up and breaking down, the sculpture as process and an investigation of sculpture as an art form – all these aspects are contained in *Full Length*; however, what the observers notice first and foremost is how the human scale is exceeded.

The large formats

Traditionally, bronze is a material used for sculptures to be placed outside. Both size and material of *Full Length* suggest that here we have an “outside work”, planned for an indoors location.

Kirsten Ortved has made several large sculptural works for outdoor stone or bronze, for example for the Northern Jutland town of Aars (1995) and



memorial in Stockholm (2001) for Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish hero of the Second World War (page 82-83). One of the latest bronze works is Platform, which is also included in the exhibition, and which was created for the newly built East Jutland State Prison in Horsens (2006) (page 98-99).

What they all have in common is a certain size so that they can take up the challenge of the outside space; Kirsten Ortved has employed the same strategy in Full Length. 13 tons of clay and a 12-meter-long sculpture were necessary to create a work which could be a match for the Sculpture Street.

It is not a question of size – but scale

Statens Museum for Kunst is not the only art museum which has got a grandiose exhibition room dedicated to art on a really large scale. It is not unusual to meet sculptures in exhibition rooms on a scale normally reserved for outside space or public places. The conception of museum building over the past decades has been that museums should be able to house everything from an intimate scale to the gigantic. Has museum architecture changed art? It is tempting to believe that the desire of museum builders to make their mark by way of spectacular architecture has created a new market for large, spectacular works of art intended for the museum as both frame and destination.⁴

As museum guests then, we are more and more frequently confronted by sculptures which exceed the scale of the human body and instead confess to grandiose frames. Perhaps the best-known example is Tate Modern in London, where different exhibitions in the Turbine Hall have offered all sorts of things ranging from French-born artist Louise Bourgeois' giant spiders (2000) to Olafur Eliasson's Weather Project (2003-04). Enormous rooms are built and gigantic works of art are purchased in Denmark, too. The newly-built ARoS museum in Århus acquired Australian sculptor Ron Mueck's hyper-naturalistic, five-meter tall Boy (2000), which reduces the observer to a little ant, and which has become the giant mascot of ARoS.

These enormous works are often figurative and have a touch of melodrama. There is yet another common trait, when one looks more closely: it is not just a question of size, but of scale. To be more exact, an increment of scale of the well-known. Nothing is more disturbing than the well-known in a gigantic format. The danger of this simple approach is that one risks the work of art being nothing other than a large, noisy gesture, empty of weight and content. An empty, quick message. It should be easy to reveal whether something is just large for its own

sake: one only has to puncture the giant to see whether it can function as a dw but it is not that simple every time. The quality of the work does not just dep on whether it can manage a down-scaling. It is true that Louise Bourgeois' g bronze spiders would have a different effect if they were small, but Ron Mue naked human figures are just as disturbing regardless of whether they are on a g scale like *Boy*, or are scaled in the manner traditional for sculpture – in propor to the human body.

The minimalistic large work

At first sight it could appear that this focusing on the melodramatic and the size its impact has displaced the phenomenological and critical discourses which ea typified art. Almost, but not completely. *Full Length* is a large work of a quite dif ent character. Kirsten Ortved's sculpture is a bid at a phenomenological investiga in a huge format.

Kirsten Ortved's sculpture is the response of the classical modern sculp to the figurative and more narrative approach of contemporary art. The poin departure is thoroughly different. It is the phenomenological discussion which pride of place here. It is about the body and sensing as the fundamental approach the world and the work. *Full Length* is about establishing a direct meeting betw the sculpture and the observer. The sculpture has been created from just as dire point of departure. There is no built-in Wagner effect here to overpower us. For th with eyes to see, *Full Length* is a sober investigation of the traditions of the art of sc ture, and the genesis of the work.

Full Length is a reply to the notion of sculpture employed as the illustra of a given historical or cultural idea. There is no memorial here, no portrait, and vertical lump maintaining the idea of the well-known motif: the erect human b The matter has not even assumed a final form yet (neither abstract nor figurative). is frozen in bronze somewhere between creation and collapse. Everything that tr tionally constitutes the art of sculpture is problematised or omitted in *Full Leng* and that is saying quite a lot.

Kirsten Ortved's relationship to the art of sculpture is investigative. It life-long project for her as sculptor, a necessary project, to adhere to the investiga of matter and the possibilities of creation of form. As observers, we gain the poss ility of participating in an unprejudiced and direct meeting with the sculpture. In *Length* we are invited to take part in the investigation.

NOTES

¹ Conversation with Kirsten Ortved at Galleri Susanne Ottesen, February 7, 2008.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Meyer, James. "No more scale: the experience of size in contemporary sculpture". Artforum. Summer, 2004. Meyer traces this development 50 years back in time.