

Installations in space and landscape.  
Eva Kun: Works 1999-2003

In *Eva Kun; Works 1993-1998*, Ingvill Henmo writes that “A recurring material in Eva Kun’s previous works has been light”. In addition to light, the space where the light takes effect has played a central role in her production. The same can be said of her works from 1999 to 2003, with the exception of *Top, Front, Side* from 2001 and *Hill. Traces in Landscape 2* from 2003.

#### *Top, Front, Side*

In an old, log storehouse (from the old Høvik farm which was converted into an art gallery) she covers the wooden walls of two rooms on the ground floor with pictogram figures, modern figures collected from the net, which immediately contrast tradition and the old-fashioned we associate with the log cabin. Another contrast lay in the small scale of the images on the large logs, which was enhanced by the activity of the small figures running in different directions, and who could all be read as one figure in perpetual flight.

It was not just the figures themselves; the multiple repetitions of them were a clear indication of modern image culture, the anonymous mass-production. This was an especially striking feature in the room, with the familiar figure from the door of ladies toilets laminated in plastic. The provision of anonymity in the repetitive representation became a striking characteristic. The seeming regularity in the figurative pattern was nevertheless not thorough, and became a conscious play on the relationship between an overwhelming structure and the minimal variations within. This did not only establish a rhythm, but also made the work far more complex than it seemed at first glance. The rhythm in this room of running figures was clearly significant, and achieved by simple means.

The second floor of the loft was covered in icing sugar, into which were imprinted larger pictogram figures in low relief. These figures, in contrast to the figures on the ground floor, were far more subtle, and became more one with the floor. They were clearly not applied in contrast to the building as were the previous figures, and seen in relation to the building the icing sugar became a very special material, providing no reference to the modern. The stylized and unnatural repetition could now indicate folk art and post-modern cultures, and consequently provided association to the folk art tradition we would normally connect with a loft.

Nevertheless this was rather ambiguous. As the observer we know we face a modern artwork that has sucked nutrition from the net and the mass-produced image. The duplicity that lies in the building – old loft and modern gallery – has found its equilibrium, in simplicity and originality.

*Top, front, side* stands apart from the main body of Kun’s works, but has nevertheless that same quality that characterizes her production; simplicity, the belief in the formula of the great architect Mies van der Rohe: “Less is more”.

#### *Hill. Traces in landscape 2*

Kun has previously worked on land-art projects, but they did not display the same character as her landscape project *Hill. Traces in landscape 2*. This project was a co-operation with Arne Ingvaldsen, and was part of a larger group project on the island of

Tyssøy outside Bergen. But if *Hill* lacks striking connections to her earlier landscape projects, it is nevertheless clearly related to her installation *One day in May* in Hordaland Kunstsenter (Hordaland Art Centre) 1995. Both projects dealt with working extremely horizontal. In 1995 long segmented wooden forms opened out onto the floor and redefined the gallery space, in the 2003 project long, white plates united in lines which ran over the ground's surface. They constantly changed direction, entering into dialogue with the landscape, which was not redefined and dominated, but clarified.

### **Light- and space installations**

#### Installation in Palacio Dom Manuel in Evora, Portugal 1999

In *Evora forms* she used three floor objects, painted white and formed from thin, pliable plates. One form was primarily convex, the second concave, and the third form more vague in relation to the first and second. By contrasting them as forms, they played against each other and provided each other with each its own identity. Also very important in this context was the light, which secured to the white surface of the object, and flowed over the object's bending forms to create light variations over the surface.

But the forms did not only relate to each other. Through colour, the white surface of the forms related to the walls and the ceiling, and became a light play on the space as a whole. The thin lines of shadow created by the relief surface of the forms, divided them and entered into dialogue with the floor, while the bending forms of the objects bound them to beams on the ceiling's arch. By simple means, space and object were integrated in a new work. A "Gesamtkunstwerk", where architecture, light and sculpture, in so far as we can term Kun's objects such, are beautifully bound together in a subtle play. "Less is more".

#### Lock, Light-cube and Light forms

In 2000 Kun had three projects where light and space played a very central role; *Lock* in Christiansands Kunstforening,<sup>1</sup> *Light forms* in Bomuldsfabrikken in Arendal, and *Light cube* in the large exhibition "Kvit akse" ("White axis"), which Kun curated (12 participants). The latter was shown in Bergens Kunstforening (presently Bergen Kunsthall) and in Bomuldsfabrikken in Arendal.

*Lock* and *Light cube* are related installations. In both, a labyrinthine space was created from rectangular walls formed in thin, transparent white textile (voile), which holds considerable amounts of light when lit from above, as it was in this installation. Had the light source come from the side, this material would have been far more transparent; however Kun consciously used this over-light quality to provide the space with a diffused light. The immaterial becomes material.

In *Lock* the spaces were formed to allow the observer to move around inside them, to experience the light and labyrinthine space visually and physically. In *Light cube* the installation followed the whole room. Four cubic spaces were created within a cubic gallery room. We could enter three of them; the fourth was closed and only available for visual exploration. The space between the gallery walls and the walls of the

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<sup>1</sup>The installation was also presented in The Peace Centre in Bethlehem the same year.

installation were deliberately made narrow to make panorama impossible. The observer could only experience the installation by active use of the body and the gaze.

In *Light forms* Kun also used a white, elastic material that becomes transparent when stretched. Here she introduced more organic forms, four in total, to construct a light passage. The forms undulated, and each individual form was created by the stretch of the fabric between two different steel profiles, a Z-form above and an S-form below, which provided the space with an element of unpredictability. It is those small, unexpected variations within a seemingly simple and familiar pattern which we also find again in the forming of the spaces and passages in *Lock* and *Light cube*.

### Light tunnel

In the installation *Light tunnel*, perhaps her main work to present, she created an almost independent construction of textile tunnels. Each tunnel was composed of trap-like forms supported by rings. Light was inserted into the tunnels through wall hatches. In earlier light installations she primarily worked with vertical forms in space. In *Light tunnel* Kun occupied the whole room with horizontal forms, and provided the work with a three-dimensional quality that distinguishes it from her other light-installations. There were three openings in this installation through which observers could insert the top half of their bodies into the light stream and, dependent on the location of the light, could change the character of the installation – near or far, relative to the light source. The quality of light changed as the eye wandered from the areas of light where the tunnels met, into the “hollows” created where the tunnels narrowed. However the light perpetually changed, dependent on the quality brought into the tunnels from outside.

Kun had made space for light before, but had never given it such a closed form. This made the light much more present, but also soft, mainly due to the transparent textile which created an even more velvety light in the room by its direct insertion. It is a rare work that displays light’s magic to the degree displayed in this installation.

Light has often been used to provide art with religious associations, and not only within visual art. We find it in literature as well as in daily language. But Kun avoids the religious because there are no other elements in her installations to indicate any religious connotations of the light. There is however a slight opportunity in *Light tunnel*, and even although we should be careful not to linger there too long, this installation provides a pure beauty rarely found in art, and which clearly belongs to the modern. In visual art, beauty has largely been localized in proportion and the relationship between proportions, or in line, or form and colour. In *Light tunnel* beauty is manifested through the light alone.

### **Eva Kun’s installations as neo-modernism**

In the introduction of the “Kvit akse” (“White axis”) exhibition catalogue, Eva Kun writes that “Behind the project lies a desire to clarify parallel positions within Nordic contemporary art”. Then she quotes Ingvill Henmo, who also wrote in the catalogue: “This exhibition will present “neo-modernism” as a parallel, and contrast to “neo-pop” [i.e. the art which finds reference in mass culture and the entertainment industry]<sup>2</sup> According to Henmo, the emphasis on neo-modernism will prove it to be a

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<sup>2</sup>*Kvit akse*, “White axis”, catalogue of the exhibition in Bergens kunstforening, Gunnarshaug printers 2000, p. 3.

vigorous art, even although it could easily be overseen due to its subtlety when seen in comparison to the garishness of neo-pop.<sup>3</sup>

Since Kun sees her works in the context of modernism, it can be worthwhile dwelling a little on modernism as a term, and to look at how her works relate to some central tendencies within early modernist sculpture. I do this, not only because such art historical excursions can often be interesting in themselves, especially for the art historian, but because it can be a way of clarifying some central aspects of her work. It is good, old dialectic to decide on a phenomenon by looking at it in relation to other phenomenon.

### Clement Greenberg and modernist sculpture

The term modernism is no simple term in history of art. However over recent years the term has largely been connected to the American critic Clement Greenberg and his definition, which feels most relevant here. A very central characteristic of modernism, says Greenberg, is media specialization. That each, individual medium should concentrate on those characteristics peculiar to that media, essentially, those qualities that the medium did not share with other media. For painting it meant the flatness, for sculpture it was the *spatial* dimension. But since sculpture, similar to painting, is a *visual* medium: created to be looked at, then the modernist sculpture lends itself primarily to the eye: it directs itself towards the visual, not the tangible - that which invites touch. To possess three-dimensional form as a mass was to be avoided. "Manipulating two-dimensional forms in three-dimensional space" became for Greenberg something that characterised the modernist sculpture.<sup>4</sup> Therefore a typical property became the integration of space, the so-called "negative space" or the "negative volume" as an element of the work. Picasso's guitar sculptures from 1912 were the first works where this became clearly expressed. The modernistic sculpture therefore put an end to not only the traditional sculptural form, but also the traditional methods of making sculpture; modelling in plaster or clay, and sculpting in stone and wood. The modernist sculptor became a constructor, and the new sculpture, says Greenberg, became more "constructed, built, assembled, arranged", than "sculpted".<sup>5</sup>

The conscious integration of light, mostly due to the use of transparent material, was also a characteristic of modernist sculpture. This we can see, earliest and clearest, within the modernist sculpture of the 1920s and 30s, and especially in the works of the Russian constructivists Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner.<sup>6</sup> About this sculpture Pevsner writes:

"In old sculpture light had no dwelling in the work, but in the work of Gabo and myself light and shadow penetrate to the interior of the sculpture, absorbing it like a sponge."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Same as above, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup>"Collage", in Clement Greenberg: *Art and culture. Critical essays*, Boston: Beacon Press 1969 (1961), p. 79.

<sup>5</sup>"Sculpture in our time", in O'Brian, John (ed.): *Clement Greenberg. The collected essays and criticism*, vol. 4, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press 1995 (1993), p. 58. Originally published in *Arts Magazine*, June 1958.

<sup>6</sup>E.g. in Gabo's *Column* in wood, metal, glass and plexiglass and Pevsner's *Sketch for the fountains in plastic* from 1925.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted from Ruhrberg, Karl et al.: *Art of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Painting. Sculpture. New Media. Photography*, Köln, Lisboa, London, New York, Paris, Tokyo: Bendict Taschen Verlag, 1998, p. 450.

### Eva Kun and the relationship to modernist sculpture

The modernistic sculpture (ca.1910-70) can roughly be divided into two traditions, that which “draws in space”, to use a formula from the modernist sculptor Julio Gonzales, and what one could call the plane/space-tradition. The former refers to sculpture as line in space. Picasso’s well-known *Sketch for a monument of Guillaume Apollinaire* from 1828-29 (in enlarged version from 1962 in MOMA) and Anthony Caros *Prairie* from 1962 are classic examples of this tradition. Naum Gabo’s famous *Head of a woman* from 1917, and *Column* from 1923 are very typical representations of the second tradition.

Most of Eva Kun’s light-installations are pure examples of the plane/space-tradition, while *Hill. Traces in landscape 2*, and the installation *One day in May* from 1995, are clearly representative of the tradition of lines in space. Seen as such, many of her works can clearly be placed inside of both the main traditions of modernist sculpture. However it can be interesting to go a little deeper into the question of how Kun’s works relate to modernism, as understood from Greenberg’s definition.

Modernism, as manipulation of a two-dimensional form in a three-dimensional space, as previously stated, is clearly valid for a large percentage of Kun’s production over the last ten years, with a few exceptions such as *Evora forms*, *Light forms*, and *Light tunnel* (*Top, front, side* falls a little outside this context). The sculptures in *Evora forms* are clearly three-dimensional, but they are nevertheless removed from being distinctive and material objects, from the thing- and all object-character, which many of the American minimalists aimed at with their objects from the 1960’s. White, the most light-sensitive colour, reduces the materiality and leans towards Greenberg’s presentation of the modernist sculpture as a “weightless” work. Although in “Collage” (1961), he defined modernist sculpture as a development of two-dimensional forms in three-dimensional space, he is nevertheless open to the three-dimensional form’s ability to satisfy the criteria with the best of modern sculpture. For Greenberg, this is modernism. Greenberg says the traditional sculpture created illusions of things, the new, (which is abstract) provides us with illusions of modalities, namely that matter is incorporeal and weightless.<sup>8</sup> David Smith’s *Cubii XII* from 1963 is an example of this, both through the way three-dimensional forms such as rectangles and cubes are placed on top of each other (they are set on edge and have minimal contact to reduce the visual impression of weight), and due to the steel reflecting the light, directing attention towards the surface, and not towards the cube as a three-dimensional form. When Kun paints her objects white and includes light as an active element, as in *Evora forms*, she achieves the same.

The organic forms in *Light forms* can be seen as three-dimensional, but they can also be understood as basic two-dimensional forms which are constantly present, but which bend and stretch to build a passage in the gallery space. In *Light tunnel* on the other hand we deal with pure three-dimensional forms. However the thin textile and the transparent material, plus the feeling that the whole sculpture floats in space, makes the sculpture appear virtually weightless. (Plus, we know the weight is limited.) Although the outer form is a strong, exciting form in space, we find the artistic focus

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<sup>8</sup>Same as note 5, p. 60.

on the inside of the sculpture. It is here the light materialises and develops in strength, awareness and in a magic that is so very special.

In relation to modernist sculpture Kun uses light, natural light, with a consequence and intensity which far surpasses earlier modernist art. Here she further develops an important characteristic of large sections of modernist sculpture. In addition to making light the point of visual concentration, she also uses the thin, transparent material in her light- and space installations. The results are works that are visually very strong. Nevertheless they do not, as Greenberg would say regarding pure modernist sculpture, address the “eyesight alone”. We also experience them physically, through our movement within the spaces and passages created by the transparent walls.

Movement towards the abstract is also a central aspect of the development of modernist sculpture. But to call Kun’s works abstract is problematic, I’m thinking particularly about her light installations.<sup>9</sup> It is problematic mostly because the authentic light is so concretely present in her works, but also because the large surfaces she uses are walls in space, and passages, more than abstract forms. At this point we touch on an area where Kun’s works distance themselves from classic modernism, according to both Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried: a prominent American critic, art historian and modernist theorist in the 1960s. For them it was only a concentration on the specific medium that could guarantee artistic quality. To create work that lay and hovered in areas between the different media was, for dogmatists like Greenberg and Fried, clearly negative. Robert Rauschenberg’s multi-media works from the end of the 1950s and throughout the 1960s were, for Fried, examples of works that existed in the interstices. It was at this time that the clear boundaries between different media began to gradually break down and gave origin to new genre such as performance and installation.

When Eva Kun works in the bordering areas between sculpture and architecture, i.e. in what lies between the arts, as defined by Greenberg and Fried, she breaks from the central dogma of the Greenbergian and Friedian comprehension of modernism. There is also another area where she makes this break. When she constructs space, she creates not only bodies to house light, but also space where we, the observers, should enter, with our imaginations and our bodies. In other words she introduces a time-dimension to her works, a fundamental difference from Greenberg’s and Fried’s understanding of the modernist artwork, as something that gives rise to *momentary experience*. Fried especially stresses this special time-dimension as an important aspect of modernism. Work which enters into dialogue with space, or *is* itself the space in which the observer moves as presupposition for experience, has duration as its modality.<sup>10</sup>

These differences aside, there are some central aspects of earlier modernism which are further developed in Kun’s installations. Seen as such, “neo-modernism” can perhaps be an appropriate term to characterise her installations. But a “neo-style”, such as the

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<sup>9</sup> Also concerning works of Russian Constructivism, it can be misleading to term them as abstract, because many of them through material use (use of iron, steel and plastic) and form provide conscience references to modern technology and industry, i.e. to modernity. It was first with David Smith’s and Anthony Caro’s works from the 1960s that we can talk about abstract work in a more absolute form.

<sup>10</sup>This is most clearly expressed in the famous article "Art and objecthood", printed in *Art Forum* June 1967, reproduced in Dickie, George and Sclafani, R. S.: *Aesthetics. A critical anthology*, New York 1977, p. 438-460.

1920s classicism in architecture, and any “neo-direction” within visual art, includes of course no form of repetition of an original style or direction. Old forms take on new meaning in a new context, and a new time provides new insights and methods. Eva Kun’s “neo-modernism” has taken on many of post-modernism’s experiences, especially when she establishes her art so clearly in the “interstices”, as far as one can use such a term in today’s art institution. Because these borderlands has after all established their own, independent spaces. Kun’s light- and space-installations can be seen as just such a space, and they offer potential for the same high level of cultivated competence that traditional media like painting and sculpture already provide.

One characteristic of a large proportion of modernist art was moderation of method. Eva Kun shares Greenberg’s and Fried’s belief that artistic force can lie in simplicity, and give rise to deep emotions. As she wrote about the exhibition “Kvit akse” (“White axis”): “Despite its subtle appearance it has – I hope – the potential to evoke strong feelings”.<sup>11</sup> Traditional art also used light to inspire strong feelings in the observer, but this was an *illusion* of light. In Kun’s work it is the magical presence of *real* light that grasps the observer.

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Text translated from Norwegian by Gillian Carson.

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<sup>11</sup> Same as note 2.