

The Ambiguity of Modern Sculpture

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In common art historical accounts, a polarised notion of European public sculpture of the post-war period dominates the narrative. On an ideological level, this notion contains the idea that avant-garde abstraction was the predominant strategy for sculpture in the West, as opposed to the traditional figurative style of the monuments in the Eastern bloc. This polarisation has aesthetic implications as well. In a well-known essay, published in the spring issue of the magazine *October* in 1979, the American art historian Rosalind E. Krauss defined modernist sculpture as the counterpoint of the logic of the traditional monument. She describes sculpture before modernism as follows:

The logic of sculpture, it would seem, is inseparable from the logic of the monument. By virtue of this logic a sculpture is a commemorative representation. It sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolical tongue about the meaning or use of that place. [---] Because they thus function in relation to the logic of representation and marking, sculptures are normally figurative and vertical, their pedestals an important part of the structure since they mediate between actual site and representational sign.¹

According to this concept of sculpture, Johan Tobias Sergel's statue of Gustav III in Stockholm (ill. 1) is a traditional monument, marking the actual site where the Swedish king landed when returning from peace negotiations in 1790. The sculpture is figurative, vertical and its base connects the representation with the particular site.

As opposed to this logic of the monument, Krauss defines the logic of modernism as:

its negative condition – a kind of sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place. Which is to say one enters modernism, since it is the modernist period of sculptural production that operates in relation to this loss of site, producing the monument as abstraction, the monument as pure marker or base, functionally placeless and largely self-referential.

¹ Rosalind E. Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", in *October*, no. 8, Spring, 1979, p. 33.

It is these two characteristics of modernist sculpture that declares its status, and therefore its meaning and function, as essentially nomadic. Through its fetishization of the base, the sculpture reaches downward to absorb the pedestal into itself and away from actual place; and through the representation of its own materials or the process of its construction, the sculpture depicts its own autonomy.²



Illustration 1: Johan Tobias Sergel, Gustav III, Stockholm 1808.

² Krauss, 1979, pp. 34.

This logic of modernist sculpture is to be found in *Grön eld* (*Green Fire / Green Flames*) of Vicke Lindstrand, erected in Umeå in 1970 (fig. 2). The sculpture consists of a large pile of glass plates, which have been cut into the forms of flames and glued together. The process of construction has been left clearly visible in the artwork and gives the surface of the sculpture its characteristic appearance. Moreover, the green coloured glass plates are in themselves a crucial part of the sculpture, as its expression concentrates on the reflection of light in the almost transparent material. Finally, there is no pedestal, just a very low base, which, in opposition to the more elaborate pedestal of the monument of Gustav III, does not act as a visual and physical mediation between the representational sign and the site.



Illustration 2: Vicke Lindstrand, *Grön eld* (*Green Fire*), Umeå 1970.

Rosalind E. Krauss' notion of modernist sculpture is more than a singular scholar's theoretical approach to a certain category of objects; it has become part of the canonical art historical concept of sculpture in the 20th century. And evidently, the logic of the monument and the logic of modernism indeed distinguish crucial aspects of the meaning production of sculpture, i.e. its referentiality and its relation to the site. However, the logic of the monument and of modernism respectively forms a highly polarised concept. Hence, in view of a representative selection of sculpture production in the post-war period it seems obvious that the predominant concept of modern sculpture is in need of critical revision.

In art history writing, this concept has resulted in an unmistakably avant-garde narrative, which, I would like to argue, ignores the 'traditional' aspects and the ambiguity of sculpture in post-war Europe. Figuration was, for example, still an important aspect of modern sculpture. Moreover, modernist formal abstraction is *not* to be equalled with avant-garde self-referentiality. The majority of sculpture, not at least public sculpture, cannot be described in accordance with these restricted categories.

On the contrary, most sculptures, even the sculpture defined as avant-garde, at least in the Swedish context, bear witness of a variety of form, content and meaning, which is more or less consistent with the polarised notion of sculpture in art history writing and theory. Instead of describing post-war public sculpture as modernist, i.e. avant-garde, I would like to present a somewhat different view, where the notion of modern sculpture is regarded as ambiguous and as characterised by a variety of expressions ranging from academic tradition to avant-garde radicalism. In the following, I will discuss the complex nature of the presupposed self-referentiality and sitelessness of modern sculpture by analysing some public sculptures in post-war Sweden.³

Modernism and the monument

The death of the monument has been a relatively frequent concept in 20th century art and cultural history writing, even though postmodernism seems to have contributed to its resurrection.⁴ It was therefore only logical when Walter

³ The arguments put forth in this essay are further elaborated in the author's PhD thesis: Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe, *Skulptur i folkhemmet. Den offentliga skulpturens institutionalisering, referentialitet och rumsliga situationer 1940–1975*, (diss.) Uppsala universitet, Göteborg & Stockholm: Makadam, 2007.

⁴ On the death of the monument, see Wolfgang Eberl, "Sind Denkmäler heute möglich?", in *Denkmal – Zeichen – Monument. Skulptur und öffentlicher Raum heute*, Ekkehard Mai & Gisela

Benjamin stated that a criterion for whether a city is modern is the absence of memorials.⁵ In addition, and following the same line of argument, the American cultural critic Lewis Mumford, asserted that a *modern* monument is a contradiction in terms.⁶ The heroic and figurative expression of the traditional monument as well as its monumental size has been questioned from both aesthetic and political perspectives.⁷ Defining modernist sculpture as just the exact opposite of the monument could be regarded as a way of carrying the consequences of this critique to extremes. But just how incompatible are the function of the monument or memorial and the logic of avant-garde modernism?

In 1955, a memorial to the Swedish early modernist artist Carl Fredrik Hill was unveiled in Lund. Arne Jones, an artist of the second generation of avant-garde modernists in Sweden, and perhaps *the* avant-garde sculptor of the immediate post-war period, was the creator of the sculpture, which should be interpreted as a radical alternative to the traditional memorial statue as described above. The sculpture of Jones, entitled *Fossil komposition* (*Fossil composition*), consisted of a vertical block of stone placed on the side of an irregularly shaped tub (ill. 3). The vertical form is a suggestive figure, which explicitly refers to fantasy animals in drawings of Carl Fredrik Hill.

In Swedish art history, Carl Fredrik Hill is regarded as one of the pioneers of modernist art, perhaps even as a personification of the avant-garde artist. In accordance with that, Arne Jones focused on the avant-garde status of Hill when conceptualising the memorial. As a modernist alternative to the mimetic focus of the figurative monument, Jones presented a sculpture, whose main reference is the ‘avant-gardness’ of Hill’s art. Instead of representing the apparition of Hill,

Schmirber (eds.), München: Prestel Verlag 1989, pp. 35–37; Rainer Volp, “Zeichen der Mahnung – Zeichen sind nötig, welche Zeichen sind möglich?”, in *Denkmal – Zeichen – Monument. Skulptur und öffentlicher Raum heute*, Ekkehard Mai & Gisela Schmirber (eds.), München: Prestel Verlag 1989, p. 19; Hans-Ernst Mittag, “Das Denkmal”, in *Funkkolleg Kunst. Eine Geschichte der Kunst im Wandel ihrer Funktionen*, Werner Busch (ed.), München: Piper, (1987) 1997, p. 553; Jean-Luc Daval, “Monumentality and new Techniques”, in *Sculpture. From Antiquity to the Present Day*, Georges Duby & Jean-Luc Daval (eds.), Köln: Taschen, 2002, p. 1037.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, London 1979, p. 487.

⁶ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company 1938, p. 438.

⁷ See Mittag (1987) 1997, p. 550; Peter Steiner, “Absage an die Monumentalität nach 1945”, in *Denkmal – Zeichen – Monument. Skulptur und öffentlicher Raum heute*, Ekkehard Mai & Gisela Schmirber (eds.), München: Prestel Verlag 1989, pp. 33–34; Reinhold Hohl, “Abstraction and Figuration”, in *Sculpture. From Antiquity to the Present Day*, Georges Duby & Jean-Luc Daval (eds.), Köln: Taschen, 2002, pp. 1020–1021.

Jones referred to his avant-garde work. Thus, the abstract quality of Jones' sculpture acts a referential sign of Hill's avant-garde modernism. The abstraction of the sculpture is turned into a symbol of Hill's dissociation from academic tradition.



Illustration 3: Arne Jones, *Fossil komposition* (*Fossil composition*), Lund 1955.

The memorial's emphasis on abstract form could be interpreted as a way of trying to liberate the genre of the memorial from literary references and allegory, replacing it with pure visual language and autonomous form. These are, obviously, the ambitions of the modernist avant-garde. But interestingly enough, in spite of these ambitions the logic of avant-garde modernism, as described by Krauss and others, is *not* compatible with this sculpture. *Fossil composition* is an abstract sculpture, but as it is also a memorial, it cannot be self-referential, or at least not mainly so. On the contrary, it is clearly a commemorative representation; it could even be regarded as an iconic sign, because of its intertextual reference to the drawings of Hill. Moreover, as the sculpture is located on the precise site where the house in which Hill grew up once was placed, this modernist memorial also speaks, with the words of Krauss, in a symbolical tongue about the meaning or use of that place.

In contrast to the narrative of mainstream art history writing, the sculpture of Arne Jones demonstrates that the logic of the monument did not fade away when artists entered the space of modernism. As I have shown, the logic of the monument is even compatible with what is commonly regarded as its antithesis, the formal abstraction of avant-garde modernism.

A differentiated site-specificity

The sculpture's relation to, or lack of relation to, a particular place or site is a topic that has been of some importance not only for the writing of the history of modernist sculpture, but also for the understanding of postmodern practices that are normally seen as counterpoints to the modernist paradigm. Hence, the notions of sitelessness and site-specificity have become buzzwords in the discourse of 20th century sculpture. There are, however, reasons to further analyse these concepts, both as actual artistic practices and as parts of an established art historical narrative and vocabulary.

Sitelessness has been regarded as an essential part of modernist sculpture; whereas site-specificity is a relational feature ascribed to the traditional monument as well as to some postmodern practices. The presupposed nomadic aspects of modernist public sculpture have contributed to the promotion of descriptive terms as *drop* (or *plop*) *sculpture*,⁸ metaphorically suggesting that

⁸ For a discussion of *drop* or *plop sculpture*, see Walter Grasskamp, "Warum wird Kunt im Außenraum zerstört?", in *Kunst im öffentlichen Raum. Skulpturenboulevard Kurfürstendamm Tauentzien Berlin 1987*, Berlin: Neuer Berliner Kunstverein & Dietrich Reimer, 1987, pp. 22–23; Hans Dickel & Uwe Fleckner (eds.), *Kunst in der Stadt. Skulpturen i Berlin 1980-2000*, Berlin: Nicolai, 2003, pp. 16–17; Jean-Cristophe Ammann, "Plädoyer für eine neue Kunst im

modernist sculpture in public space has arrived from above and landed in arbitrary places with no particular significance for the meaning production of the art work. I would like to propose that the relation between a sculpture and its spatial context is of a more ambivalent character.



Illustration 4: Ernst Nordin, *Norra skenet (The northern light/Aurora Borealis)*, Umeå 1970.

In 1969, a sculpture by Ernst Nordin was unveiled at the Campus area of the University of Umeå. The sculpture consists of square pipes of stainless steel put together in a tilted oval form. The cluster of prefabricated hollow pipes contributes to the dynamic character of the sculpture, which simultaneously seems to be taking off and about to crash to the ground (ill. 4). What is this

öffentlichen Raum”, in *Kunst im öffentlichen Raum. Skulpturenboulevard Kurfürstendamm Tauentzien Berlin 1987*, Berlin: Neuer Berliner Kunstverein & Dietrich Reimer, 1987, p. 8.

sculpture about? At first, it might appear as if the sculpture's only meaning is to represent its own construction, its own internal structure. That would be to say that it is consistent with the logic of modernism, i.e. a placeless and self-referential nomadic work.

However, when we learn that the title of this sculpture is *Norra skenet* (*The northern light/Aurora Borealis*), the question of the relation between the meaning production of the sculpture and its locality or site, becomes difficult to avoid. Furthermore, the fact that a strong light, coming from inside, originally illuminated the sculpture, makes it impossible to ignore the reference to the Aurora Borealis and its connection to northern Scandinavia. The sculpture is in fact an abstracted *representation of* the Aurora Borealis. Furthermore, the artist even had the ambition to create a connection between the sculpture glowing with light and the enlightened context of the university.⁹

The site of this sculpture clearly matters for its meaning production. But does this automatically turn the sculpture into a site-specific work? Or to be more precise, is the meaning of this sculpture so strongly related to its locality, that meaning would be lost or transformed, if the work were placed elsewhere? In my view that would be to push the notion of site-specificity, or more precisely the interpretation of this artwork, too far. In fact, the sculpture of Ernst Nordin could be placed in several locations without losing its references either to the Aurora Borealis or to intellectual enlightenment. For example, the Scandinavian university towns of Tromsø, Luleå and Oulu would be particularly suitable alternative locations for this sculpture.

The important point here is that the polarised notions of sitelessness and site-specificity, which we find in the established narrative of art history, simply are not complex enough for the analyses of modern sculpture, characterised by ambiguity rather than univocacy.

Base matters

According to Rosalind E. Krauss, and many other art historians, modernist sculpture's lack of a base or pedestal is a sign of the work's autonomy, as the sculpture is no longer attached to a specific site. I would like to argue that the exact opposite would be a description that is more proper, i.e. the loss of the pedestal anchors the sculpture even more to its site.

⁹ Ernst Nordin, "Att (re)konstruera ljuset", in *Statens konstråd*, no. 16, May 1987.



Illustration 5: Karin Norelius, *Akrobaterna* (*The acrobats*), Malmö 1966.

Initially, I would like to stress that the relation between sculpture and site is hardly interesting at all until you include the beholder as an important part of the situation. Only the beholder's experience of the relation between sculptural object and physical context makes this relation in some sense significant. With this in mind, I would like to argue that the loss of base or pedestal connects the sculptural object stronger to the site. This is not at least so because of such a trivial matter as the fact that the sculpture suddenly exists at the same level as the beholder, making the beholder more aware of the fact that he or she is literally sharing space with the sculptural object. This physical closeness between the sculptural body and the beholder's body might even imply not only a visual but also a tactile reception of the sculpture.

This has obviously been the reception of Karin Norelius' sculpture *Akrobaterna* (*The acrobats*) of 1966. This sculpture is located at the lawn of a housing area in Malmö. Its shape could be described as similar to a tree trunk, with cut off branches. The sculpture even casts shadows similar to the trees on the lawn (Ill. 5). In my eyes, the sculpture's lack of a pedestal does not detach the work from the site, lending it a nomadic character. On the contrary, the sculpture appears to be as firmly rooted in the ground as the trees around it.

According to the title, the work is an abstracted representation of a group of acrobats. Whether interpreted as a representation of a tree to climb in or people climbing on each other, the sculpture is in some sense about climbing. This makes a tactile experience of the work perhaps even more appropriate. The polished surface of the bronze witness that this has also been the case; people have literally used the sculpture as a climbing tree.

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The principal aim with the discussion presented above has been to argue that the notion of modernist or avant-garde sculpture as siteless and self-referential, or as the negative condition of the monument forms a theory of sculpture that is too narrow-minded, focusing on the formal aspects of the objects but ignoring the physical context as well as the presence of the beholder. I began this essay by attracting attention to the idea that avant-garde abstraction has been regarded as the predominant strategy for sculpture in the West, as opposed to the traditional figurative style of the monuments in the Eastern bloc. Today, after the fall of the Berlin wall and Soviet communism, it is slowly being recognised that this notion of sculptural production, at least in part, was an ideological construction of the post-war and cold war discourse. I would like to suggest, that in a similar way, the notion of modern sculpture as siteless, self-referential and as a counterpoint to the monument, is a construction of a postmodern aesthetic discourse. As much postmodern art have had a strong interest in site-specific practices, it is of course very convenient to reinforce the notion of modernist sculpture as siteless and nomadic. In this way, art historical writing has, once again, been able to create a linear narrative, where the modernist avant-garde defeats traditionalism, and where in turn the postmodern avant-garde defeats the not-any-longer-avant-garde modernism.

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