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Jessica Stockholder: 'Art changes, taking account of the present moment'
Jessica Stockholder talks about her work, which combines painting, sculpture, installation and language in a unique creation that calls for a close personal encounter with the viewer

Angled Tangle at Art Basel Miami Beach
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by Natasha Kurchanova

It was difficult not to notice Jessica Stockholder's Angled Tangle at Art Basel Miami Beach at the end of last year. A multicoloured, outdoor installation of triangles made of plastic bollards, steel and gravel was positioned in such a way that the viewer became caught up mentally and physically in an intricate play of formal relationships and informal sensuality. At 55, Stockholder is arguably one of the most well-known contemporary American artists. Her creations refresh and provoke, tirelessly questioning boundaries not only between traditional media, such as painting, sculpture, installation and architecture, but also between the human body and the world around it. Active since the mid-80s, Stockholder never tires of experimenting with colour, scale and material to create situations in which we may see the world from a different perspective. The boldness and resolve of her experiments are never monotonous, jolting us into action and making us aware of the degree to which we both participate in, and depend on, the environment in which we live. The artist spoke to Studio International on the occasion of her first public showing at Art Basel Miami Beach.

Natasha Kurchanova: You have been making art and exhibiting nationally and internationally since the mid-80s. In your work, you have always been concerned with materials, building things, the relationship between abstraction (of colour, thought, feeling) and concreteness (of things, experience) and a certain transformation of space in relation to the human body. Your work is site-specific, but its appearance changes with every site and every installation. Is there any fundamental way in which it has changed over the years?

Jessica Stockholder: These central concerns have not changed. When I first started making things, I was angry and frustrated with the way in which the art context removes things from a person: it puts art on a pedestal and separates it from the flow of everyday life. In those days, frustration drove some of the work. Now, I have more appreciation and respect for the separation between art and life than I did when I was younger. Whether this changed the work, I do not know – you may be the judge of that – because I do not know if work ever "gets better", mine and everybody else's. I am also not sure if there is progress in art. It certainly changes, taking account of the current moment. My work responds to the moment, to the passage of time, and to passage through time. It is sometimes site-specific. The studio work is specific to a particular kind of generic exhibition space – which is itself an invention and convention shared among humans. But I am also interested in different kinds of sites and ways in which a work may navigate its context formally and, perhaps, socially to some degree. Over time, I have taken on different and more complex ways to explore these questions. For example, in the exhibition The Jewel Thief at the Tang Museum, which I co-curated with Ian Berry, we questioned the boundaries between artists and curators. We questioned the limits, edges or boundaries of all the work in the show, and raised questions

about the degree to which all art participates in something past the edges of itself. Also, last summer I installed work from my studio in a bocce ball alley in Pianello, Italy. To do that, I first needed to create an exhibition circumstance that intersected the bocce ball alley. I designed a floor, or deck, and walls that contain the artwork. This designed support for the work hovered inside the bocce ball alley. As I began as a painter relying on minimalism, geometry and picture-making to structure the work, exploring these different ways to situate the work has broadened my thinking in relation to those initial premises. This "situation" was titled Erstwhile & Notwithstanding.

NK: Yes, I was thinking that painting is at the core of your work, because it really holds your work together, even though it also mixes media. Could you tell me what it is about painting that makes it so versatile, and why is it important for you?

JS: You might say painting or picture-making holds my work together. Paint as material is more plastic and mobile than most materials – you can do a lot with it very quickly. Painting also proposes a fictive, illusionistic space that I employ to bump up against more literal experience of things in the world. Exploring the ways in which paint evokes fictive experience segues into the question of what each of us brings to perceiving the world. There is a world out there – we are in agreement about that most of the time – but how we perceive and make sense of it comes through the frame of ourselves – physical, psychological and intellectual. I draw awareness to this fact of our apprehension by setting up collisions between two proposals – one that is invented and the other that is literal. In both cases, there are questions to be raised about the nature of reality.

NK: Your work attracts me personally, because I studied Vladimir Tatlin, a Russian avant-garde artist from the beginning of the last century. In my opinion, his creations have much in common with yours. He also started as a painter and then expanded into 3D. The question of painting and its role in constructing a 3D space brings me to my next question, which is that of abstraction as opposed to the concreteness of the material. The distinction is subtle and I wonder if you could explain it. How important is the difference for you between this concreteness and abstraction?

JS: Very important. Recently, I have been focusing on abstraction in a new way through some drawings in which I take the alphabet as a starting point. I find that language is utterly abstract: words refer to things in the world, but they are not those things. We are able to think of the world by virtue of inventing abstractions. Then, we make an effort to experience the world as something distinct from those abstractions – it is really an effort! So, yes, this distinction is very important, because the objects we make are organised by abstractions, while those same abstractions enable us to make things and to understand them. Walking into a room, you identify the things you see: there is a chair, a table, and here is another person … Those are all very quick, abstract ways to make sense of the room. If you were to make a drawing of this same room, there are all kinds of other ways to observe what's around you, which are quite separate from the very quick, categorical ways in which we make sense of the environment in order to function in it. Ironically, what I think is most interesting about abstraction is the reverse of what people usually think it means. Abstraction is our currency of being alive every day. It is not something divorced from the significance of things.

NK: In relation to abstraction, I also wanted to ask you about language. You repeatedly emphasised – and it is rather obvious – that your work is non-narrative. However, language is a pivotal force in it. Could you expand a bit on the relationship of your work to language?

JS: There are lots of ways to make sense of the world. I love fiction: I love watching films and reading novels. I read a certain amount of art criticism because it is a part of my world, but I do not get all excited and happy about it; it is often dry and convoluted. Philosophy, on the other hand, has mattered to me a great deal. When I was in school, reading philosophy changed my life. I wrote a piece about how I understand language in relation to art for the College Art Association Address, which I was invited to give last autumn. Obviously, language matters to me personally, and education matters to me. However, the essential meaningfulness of my work is not a verbal one. The essential meaningfulness is generated by virtue of the apprehension and experience of things. Attentiveness to this apprehension addresses intellectual and emotional life, and circles back to language as we use language to negotiate being alive.

NK: Are you concerned with the "naturalness" or "unnaturalness" of the materials you use – or, perhaps, their "organic" as opposed to "non-organic" qualities?

JS: I do not know what the distinction between the "natural" and the "unnatural" means. All the things we make come from the natural world. Plastic comes from oil. Wooden furniture comes from a tree. When I go home and buy dirt for my backyard, it is not quite "natural," because it made its way to me through a complex, perhaps "unnatural," humanly mediated process. So, yes, I am concerned about where materials come from and how they are resonant – like wood, shells, water, trees, wool as opposed to acrylic yarn – and I am interested in our feeling that some materials are somehow more "natural". I do not know if "natural" is the right word. Maybe our feelings about, and investment in, making this distinction between the natural and unnatural has to do with some materials being better for our health than others. I read something recently commenting on how interesting it is that people continue to use ceramic plates and cups as opposed to plastic ones, even though plastic doesn't shatter when dropped.

NK: On your website you divide your work into various categories – some of them familiar to us, such as painting, sculpture, drawing, photography – and some unfamiliar, such as "situations", for example. What are "situations" and how are they different from material things, or are they also material?

JS: My website is not as up-to-date as I would like it to be! The platform and walls I designed in Italy last autumn created a "situation". The circumstance I designed for The Jewel Thief show would be in that category. And a show I had some years ago, called Table Top Sculptures, would also be in that category.1 At the entry to that exhibition, there was a salon-style collection of artists' work, which I felt contributed to the context of my own – I called that a "situation". It did not have its own title; it was not for sale; and it did not have a boundary of its own delineating it. I do not like the word "installation" very much, although it is a category on my website anyway.

NK: It appears that in the creation of the work, improvisation and process are leading principles. You do not preconceptualise, you do not know what you are going to do before you start working. When do you consider a piece finished?

JS: Sometimes I preconceptualise, and sometimes I don't, depending on circumstances. In any event, the process of making something is equivalent to the process of thinking about something – and it's just not the case that process exists without any endpoint in mind. Activity is always goal-directed, though it is often the case that the endpoint is not yet available to words. The question of where ideas come from, and how they are developed, is always a poignant one whether the work in question is a piece of writing, a film, a social agreement, or an object.

NK: My next question is about influences, which you hear a lot, I am sure. Which artists are important for your work?

JS: Many artists influence my work: Edouard Manet, Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse, Judy Pfaff, Frank Stella, Gordon Matta-Clark, Kurt Schwitters, Richard Serra, Donald Judd, Emily Carr, Robert Davidson, Susan Point, Rebecca Morris … I also love Cheryl Donegan and Tauba Auerbach's work.

NK: In one of the early texts about you, the art critic Barry Schwabsky remarked that your work "dissolves aggression". He compared it to Happenings, which, as Susan Sontag described, played with aggression as a tool, setting up the audience as its object.2 I like this observation because I find that it may ring true. How do you interpret it?

JS: My work is aggressive in relation to the categories of understanding that we are all equipped with, but at the same time inviting, as it proposes that pleasure and sensuality are important. And it is aggressive in various concrete ways – when it cuts through walls or falls out of a frame, when it's in your way. The work is gentler in pictures and more challenging in person, because images don't capture the difficulty of making sense as one moves around the work – as it comes together and falls apart. There is some aggression in insisting on the discomfort of that experience, but it is also pleasurable and beautiful, depending on who you are, and what you need from artwork. The complexity of my work in relation to aggression is reflective of who I am. At a juncture such as this one, the personal and political certainly come together.

NK: My last question is about your installation Angled Tangle at Art Basel Miami 2014. You have done a lot of public works, and this is one of them. Could you tell me about your public commissions in general and your installation in Miami in particular?

JS: I welcome the opportunity to make things outside, though I haven't made anything in the woods or the mountains. The outdoor works are all made in relation to constructed spaces, to landscape that is equivalent to architecture, in which my work intersects the work of someone else who has already established a sense of scale and place. Some outdoor works happen very quickly, and some take a long time. I am working on a piece at Mission Bay Hospital in San Francisco that will open this month. That project has been in the works for three or four years. I have been working for many years on a piece in Washington DC, which bears some relation to the piece in Miami. And I've made a couple of works in France, engaging a very slow process. On the other hand, when I work with private companies, such as Credit Suisse in Switzerland, for example, things can happen very quickly; the piece I made with Credit Suisse took about six months from beginning to end. I do not have complete control over the timing of those projects, but I welcome these opportunities when they come my way.

Kavi Gupta Gallery, here in Chicago, was the driving force behind the Miami project; and the Mitchell-Innes & Nash Gallery also supported it. Kavi has a crew of people with whom I worked closely. He also has a warehouse here, which we used as a staging area. The installation happened very quickly – in only two days – though we had a few months to work on it in advance. I had never been to Miami, and it was good to experience firsthand the intensity of the occasion we all read about. It was challenging to make a piece that would hold together in that particular circumstance of organised chaos. When I began, I was thinking of making something that would be lower to the ground, and transgress the rectangular bounds of the grassy area on which it was to be installed, but after deliberating further and talking with people

more familiar with the circumstance, I realised the work would get lost if I were to go with my original plan, and that it would have to have a more coherent and taller aspect to it in order to have any presence in front of the Bass Museum. Each material in the work describes a triangle, both in plan and volumetrically. The triangle shape is self-contained, but also acts as an arrow pointing outside itself. I enjoyed using security bollards and security lights, as they are resonant with the nature of public space. Though I introduced them into the site, they are fixtures that belong in public. In the end the work is organised and beautiful, but also organised and about the controlled quality of public space, which requires that bollards be readily available to stop bombs from being driven into buildings.

References

1. http://jessicastockholder.info/projects/art/table-top-sculptures
2. The Magic of Sobriety by Barry Schwabsky. In: Jessica Stockholder by Barry Schwabsky, Lynne Tillman, Lynne Cooke, published by Phaidon Press, 1995, pages 44-78and page 54.