

Mousse Magazine



In the Belly of the Beast: Tori Wrånes

CONVERSATIONS

Tori Wrånes and Wendy Vogel in Conversation

Wendy Vogel: On my way to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Oslo for the opening of your solo exhibition *Hot Pocket*, I saw a beautiful appetizer to your show on the street. There was a man performing dressed all in gold, like Gilbert and George, with a golden troll mask on. He was a living tableau reaching out to touch people in slow motion as they walked by.

Tori Wrånes: Wow!

WV: Trolls are part of the Norwegian cultural mythos. You use them often in your work, too. But the way that you use the troll isn't as a symbol for national character or folklore. The troll is almost a pretext for sculptural possibilities.

TW: The materials that I work with, the masks and everything, are very sculptural. But I think about the troll as a way to free identity, to play with

characters. I think we're all trolls. Do you know the troll only comes out when it's dark? It's the same for us. We only show the light side. We hide our darkness and secrets and everything that we feel is wrong. I'm interested in the troll because it represents the whole spectrum of being human.

WV: Let's talk about the process of putting this exhibition together. Almost a year ago, on May 2, 2016, you performed *Solveigs Sang* from *Peer Gynt* on Oslo's western waterfront, at the future site for the Nasjonalmuseet (National Museum), which will open in 2019. You tucked the cornerstone of the new building into a backpack and were hoisted from a crane to sing. I would call this action a construction opera. How did that performance inform this exhibition?

TW: They are connected because they both were for the Nasjonalmuseet, but the *Solveig Sang* performance I did to put down the cornerstone points toward the future. This exhibition is toward an end. I wanted this show to be a celebration of the space itself, to work with architecture that's here and to make it breathe on its own premises. I made a mold of the columns in the main gallery space. We got rid of the gold bases, but made a new skin for them out of silicone. We dressed the building up for its last song. When the museum moves out from this building, we will still have those columns with us, because we have the molds.

Normally, the rooms on the museum's ground floor have very distinct characters. I needed to change the architecture so that it felt like one space. That's where the brown, hairy carpet on the walls comes in. It's like the "hot pocket," the pocket or the stomach of an animal. So the fur envelops you and the wind is stuck in the fur. You hear the sounds of the outside throughout the exhibition. You can hear the sound from the lighthouse where I grew up. When I fell asleep as a kid, the sound and light from the lighthouse came through my window.

WV: I want to mention these velvet appendages coming out of round portals near the ceiling of the central gallery. I look at them and think about digestion and reproduction—I don't know whether something is being born out of the portals or whether it's an animal being sucked into them.

TW: I like the idea that the portals are hiding something. I imagined them as troll teeth and the ceiling with the flickering lights as the mouth.

WV: Speaking of lights, another thing that interests me about this show is the way it's staged to be about absence and presence. This show's entire

scenography plays with the idea of performance: in the way that the lights go up and down, in the soundtrack of outdoor noises, in all your sculptures including casts of body parts, or in your kinetic sculptures of everyday materials that breathe. And of course, your performances with voice and props.

TW: I feel a lot of freedom with different materials. I love to weld hard-core metal things or stitch small textiles. Because the material is so physical, I try to make the objects breathe or become alive. It's almost like a performance, but there's no blood circulating.

WV: Some of the works are really subtle. Like the sculpture *Nomaden* (2017), with the handbags. I didn't realize that they were breathing until I got up close to examine the rack on which they are hung, which almost looks like it's overgrown with crystals. You discover the details by spending time with the work.

TW: The lighting design is sculpture, too. I wanted to create something that gave me the freedom to make any world that I want. I can chop the body in half, and the sun can go up and down many times a day instead of one.

WV: Do you consider each round of lighting as the course of a day?

TW: Yes. And then as you change the rhythm of the day, it's like creating another world where you can set your own rules, and then you can have people without heads. It's like rearranging the world to create more freedom.

WV: You spoke about objects coming alive, but so much of your work also includes materials that extend the body in some way and invest it with new potential. There's the wheelchair spinning endlessly, with the wheels going in different directions [*Possibilities* (2017)], or the oars crossed in an X "dressed" in a bodysuit and a leather jacket [*Storm* (2017)].

TW: It's about all the possibilities in the unknown. The oars with the X are about the war within one body, which you also see in the wheelchair going in opposite directions and in the halved bodies. It's like death, for instance. We think about death as something dark, but we know nothing about it. So why can't it be like a disco ball? The characters in the performances try to expand reality so that we can have more freedom to behave as we want.

WV: The three-channel video piece *YOUR NEXT VACATION IS CALLING* (2014–16) is the most spectacular presentation in this exhibition. It's

almost a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, bringing together painting, sculpture, and vocal performance. How did you go about creating the work?

TW: It was at Lilith Performance Studio in Malmö, Sweden. I created this work after a sculpture of mine, called *Fantasihjelman* (Fantasy Helmet), was censored in the south of Norway. I made a bronze of an astronaut girl and she was sitting on a ceiling, dreaming. There were toys floating out of her helmet as a fantasy cloud. It was mounted in a kindergarten in 2012, during the trial of the terrorist Anders Behring Breivik [who killed seventy-seven people in 2011]. Someone said that at a certain angle and in a certain light, the fantasy cloud could remind them of a weapon. The municipality of Kristiansand and KORO (Public Art Norway) censored the sculpture, and then it got very complicated. They wrapped up the work in a plastic bag and took it down without my permission. But then the SKMU Sørlandets Kunstmuseum bought it and put it in the children's museum, so it ended up well. But at the same time, the sculpture is no longer in the public space. It is interesting how fear affects our fantasy.

The conflict caused a lot of mental stress, so when I went to Lilith Performance Studio in 2014, I felt like I needed to take out my brain and just work physically hard with the body. I brought some friends and we went crazy on the walls. We painted this abstract space and made the furniture fly up and into the walls. It was so liberating to work without censorship.

WV: And you're singing in this invented troll language.

TW: Yes, for the first time in that performance. The preparation for the performance was like circuit training; the performers and I went from station to station. I thought about the physical possibilities of the voice. How does it change when you're running and getting physically exhausted when you climb and sing? I wasn't hunting for perfection, but more like physical limits. I wasn't supposed to be in the performance but then I jumped in. And then I didn't know what to sing!

Tori Wrånes' work has been shown at Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos, Nigeria; SculptureCenter, New York; Dhaka Art Seminars, Bangladesh; Colombo Art Biennale, Sri Lanka; De Appel Arts Centre, Amsterdam; Grand Palais, Paris; Carl Freedman Gallery, London, and elsewhere. She has completed commissions for, among others, the Sydney Biennial, Performa in New York, the Bergen International Festival, and Lilith Performance Studio, Malmö.