



HANS STOFER : STRING THEORY

"String was precious when I was young: collected for a myriad of reuses. Pieces of string could be used for measuring, as plumb-lines, or to bind knife handles against slippage; papers and letters archived in yellowing string-bound piles; skin-rustling onions tail-twisted onto long, hanging strings for autumn storage; luggage secured on bicycles or roof-racks. Brown paper parcels would arrive precisely tied in criss-crossing patterns of string, which instead of casually cutting through we would laboriously unravel, fingernails and teeth picking at the tight knots, and then wind into coiled bundles to carry in our pockets, ready to be pressed into service. Lengths of string were knotted into loops for cat's cradle or Jacob's ladder, or tied onto bamboo sticks for makeshift fishing rods; wobbly milk teeth agonisingly pulled by string fastened to door handles; cowrie shells strung into fragile necklaces; precarious string ladders dropped down from branches. We'd bore string through smooth conkers extracted from their spiky, pale-green, horse-chestnut casings and savagely try to shatter our opponent's glossy rival; play mute cardboard and string guitars; lash dolls to trees or toy railway lines in emulation of cowboy films. A length of string could always come in useful.

String was both functional and imaginative: the discursive connector between the ideas we had in our heads and their realisation in practice."

In String Theory's three-dimensional collages, string takes on the same role. It is the physical manifestation of thought in the act of making. For each sculpture, a single length of string is used to bind together its disparate objects, but the expected order of construction is inverted: the string starts from the top – the head – and is worked downwards in a symbiotic intertwining of gravity's pull and the grounding of airy idea in function. Fundamental to the form of Hans Stofer's practice is this union of concept and material, improvisation and knowledge, intuition and learned skills. Creativity is germinated in the mind but achieved in the act, filled with quixotic inventiveness and motile energy but also directed and connective.

As in a detective story, the objects collaged together in Stofer's sculptures become clues that can be read and interpreted through their connections and juxtapositions. An elliptic self-portrait is strung together out of seemingly unrelated

objects: a present from a student of a pink silk-covered presentation box with a pearl necklace, is allusive of the opening up of the subject of jewellery to others as the process of teaching; caught underneath lies a squeezed paint tube, indicative of the tension of accommodating different modes of practice; mind and body is figured through a furry hat formerly used for warmth in a wintry studio, and a pair of faithful trainers worn over the years into acquiescent curves; the domestic home is metonymically represented by the ubiquitous red and yellow bricks of London houses; a crushed Union Jack-decorated paper cup picked up on the homeward walk becomes expressive of the ambivalence of nation for the foreign-born. And holding them together: the string of commonality – the psychic links between objects that time and spatial proximity build into our lives.

The collaged accumulation of the bric-à-brac of the everyday – the once useful, the almost discarded, the previously loved – carries emanations of the lived past into a new existence, adding the fourth dimension of time to the three spatial dimensions of sculpture. From the already existing emerges something unique, but the mundane pre-used materials used are not subjected to a process of modification or metamorphosis; instead, retaining their materiality, their identity as object, they become part of an alternative narrative that is defined by the significance they have acquired. The formation of something new from what pre-exists is aeons old, fundamental to humankind's creative urgency, and thus to art, since our remote ancestor, homo habilis, picked up a stone and without altering its essential form turned it into a tool, in the same way that, as children, we re-imagined pieces of string.

In Stofer's sculptures there is an obdurate materiality of the object, a refusal to dissolve into the unified whole, akin to what Sartre called "the rebelliousness of a fragment or a detail,"¹ which brings an edge of violence that continually threatens any sense of containment. Each piece is constructed as an act of balance, reminiscent of the ancient art of carrying vessels or belongings on the head, or stacking luggage or equipment on vehicle roofs. But balance is always precarious – a stumble, a blow, an unfurling knot can cause the whole edifice to succumb to gravity: the earthenware vessel shattering on the hard ground; the suitcase disappearing into the wind as the car accelerates down the motorway; the sculpture flying apart, destroying its own theoretical model of self-containment, its unique equilibrium.

¹ Jean Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire*, 1947, Paris; quoted in Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, translated A. Hamilton, 2012, Penguin, London, p.27

The narratives of these pieces oscillate between presence and absence, coherence and incoherence, order and chaos. The mouth of a defiantly yellow plastic chicken gapes in appalled muteness, its voice removed to the photographic sequence strapped like a placard to its neck, its eyes bulging away from the threat of the enamelled blue funnel that sits alongside, its red claws clutching at a pair of dummy, wordless books, their empty pages expectant. A pair of towering-heeled, black-patent shoes stands on top of a child's chair and a book, whose title 'Wonderland' we have to read upside down, mythologising the missing owner who seems to have disappeared in a leap beyond gravity. A black-eyed skull-shaped fragment of torn newspaper, bearing the words "I have plenty of angst, believe me, but I don't really shine a light there," is string-bound to a London A-Z. These are stories told both through the belongings of others and the words of others, collected from books, labels, newspaper phrases, rewritten in the personal tense.

But these are stories that can also be unwritten. With a snip of the scissors, or a careful unfurling of knots, their condensed, explosive action can be diffused. The string that connects is innately violable, so that these sculptures are left poised in the act of becoming, caught up in the tension generated by their tenuous fragility set against their obdurate strength.

Caroline Morpeth
January 2014