

## Act and pose and act and...

### From paper to space to performance in potentia

In her artistic practice, Sidsel Ladegaard creates sculptural placements that take up and generate space while indicating social interaction. She achieves this by working with familiar objects—things such as chairs, carpets, funnels, or stones, which she arranges so they appear both ordinary and alien. The installation *Verlegungen (Interieur)*,<sup>1</sup> for example, includes a series of metal objects that suggest functionality—they could be stools, storage boxes, or perhaps doorstoppers—but this cannot be said with any certainty. The arrangement of these items is somewhat peculiar, as is the combination of materials used. A bent rod towers from a stack of weights that look like conventional cast iron weight plates, but are, in fact, ceramic. A rectangular metal tube, partially encased in velvet, lies inexplicitly on the ground. Woven carpets adorning the walls and floor feature vertical slits in the fabric, incorporating the background into the piece itself. Plastic pallets are covered with glass tiles. Sidsel Ladegaard arguably tests the boundary between directional and situational verbs: to lay down, to lie; to place, to stand; to sit down, to sit (*ger: legen, liegen; stellen, stehen; setzen, sitzen*). In short: act and pose. For although the arrangement might at first glance seem arbitrary, it is clear that the positioning of the pieces has been carefully considered. The objects interact with one another; each one either enters into a relationship with or evokes a sense of distance to the objects it shares the space with. What's more, the objects seem to have a purpose: To weigh something down, to separate, to accommodate. In their spatial expansion, objects do more than just share the space with humans. Chairs invite people to sit on them, and containers offer up their space for storage. Aesthetic properties aside, carpets store heat and absorb noise and so also play a functional, utilitarian role.

I would like to use the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to illustrate how connections are forged between human and non-human actors. A central premise of ANT is that humans are not alone in being capable of making an impact, producing knowledge, and having experiences. Other life forms and objects, including bacteria, technical apparatus, work tools, and musical instruments share this capability. The most prominent representative of the theory, Bruno Latour, describes the symbiotic relationship between humans and non-humans as follows: “Humans, for millions of years, have extended their social relations to other actants with which, with whom, they have swapped many properties, and with which, with whom, they form *collectives*.”<sup>2</sup> It is this very process of exchange between actors, whether these be subjects or objects, that Sidsel Ladegaard stages in her work.

The artist creates and arranges items that remind us of a function. Their proximity to everyday life gives them an appellative character, inviting people to use them as picnic blankets or chairs, perhaps. The objects thus invoke an immanent program: “Each artifact has its script, its 'affordance,' its potential to take hold of passers-by and force them to play roles in its story.”<sup>3</sup> The artist's installations set the stage for this, forging spaces that can be shared by people and objects thanks to the way in which they influence one another. The objects are created and spatially placed by a human actor aptly reliant on networks such as higher education institutions, residencies, and artistic apparatus to create her work. The resultant non-human actants—carpets, for example—structure the exhibition space and speak to the visitors, suggesting how they might be used. At this point, Sidsel Ladegaard's practice, sculptural in the first instance, installation-based in the second, becomes performative. Ultimately, the artist's work aims to generate social interactions, for which it requires an audience.

Motifs such as bread and funnels recur throughout Sidsel Ladegaard's practice. A funnel is a practical household object used to transport liquids or pourable solids through a narrow opening into a vessel.

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1 In the original German “die Verlegung” can mean to lay (pipes/cables etc.), relocate, transfer, or shift.

2 Bruno Latour, “On Technical Mediation. Philosophy, Sociology, Genealogy,” *Common Knowledge*, Vol. 3, Nr. 2 (Fall 1994), 53.

3 *Ibid.*, 31.

Metaphorically speaking, the funnel (“Trichter” in German) functions as a translator or facilitator. The German figure of speech “Jemandem etwas eintrichtern” means, literally translated: “To funnel something into someone.” The image here describes a swift and potentially unreflective transfer of knowledge. Another German figure of speech, “Auf den Trichter kommen,” means to finally understand something. The funnel as actant, to run further with ANT terminology, is subject to several material shifts in Sidsel Ladegaard’s work. It appears, perhaps coincidentally, as an ornament on a tile that is part of a floor sculpture. As a graphic print that dispenses with perspective, it becomes an abstract shape reminiscent of the letter Y as well as a stylized representation of the female sex. Elsewhere, as a ceramic sculptural object turned on its head and produced in series, the funnel gains a stark materiality and a strong spatial presence, only to appear again on silk as a floating two-dimensional pattern. What is described here as a seemingly autonomous wandering through various media in fact reflects the various manual techniques that Sidsel Ladegaard uses. I regard this manual experimentation and learning as the central artistic and social practice of the artist.

Writing about cooperation, Richard Sennett clarifies the connection between community on the one hand and learning and practicing a craft on the other. The intersections are manifold. He begins by describing a visual perception of a body—essential for learning a craft—as a mode of thinking. “Though visual thinking often can't be translated into words, it is indeed thinking—as when we rotate objects mentally, judging the importance of near and far bodies or assessing a volume.”<sup>4</sup> Sidsel Ladegaard puts precisely this into effect when she allows objects to migrate across media, when she tests different formats and placements, and when she creates a certain motif using a range of materials. A further trait of craftsmanship—a term that, for Sennett, includes playing an instrument—is the repetitive crafting process. The rhythm of physical work and the consistent, constantly recurring hand movements that are part of this are prerequisites for professionalism and trust: “In the craftsman's workshop... bodily gestures take the place of words in establishing authority, trust and cooperation. Skills like muscular control are required to make bodily gestures communicate, but gesture matters socially for another reason as well: Physical gesture makes social relationships feel informal.”<sup>5</sup> The crafts used by Sidsel Ladegaard are somewhat contentious in the artistic field: Plaster molding and drawing are often regarded as preparatory assistive techniques for sculpture or painting. Like silk painting and weaving, they are not classed among the traditional artistic genres—and yet it seems that the artist is most interested in precisely these practices. Each technique and material have their own potential, not to mention limitations that generate difference. Material constraints, or what Sennett calls “resistance,”<sup>6</sup> can lead to revelations in the social realm. We learn to work with, to understand, and to integrate these limitations instead of struggling against them.

Sidsel Ladegaard uses everyday objects, a variety of techniques, and a range of materials to lend visibility to the social connections that occur between actors sharing a space. A hanging carpet exists in relation to a rod, to a stack of chairs, to a staircase, to a pallet... This network of relations inevitably undergoes a shift when humans move within this setting. Even the object itself migrates, wandering through the artist’s work. A funnel may become a drawing, a letter, a sculpture, a womb. Through her focus on particularities the artist succeeds in creating variations, opening up associative spaces in which the basics of community become visible.

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4 Richard Sennett, *Together. The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*, London: Penguin, 2012), 207.

5 Ibid., 205.

6 Ibid., 209.