

# SIMONE HOLLIGER

## Over the Edges On the Work of Simone Holliger

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When Simone Holliger was invited, a couple of years ago, to create an artwork for the glass showcase that can be viewed from outside the exhibition space at the Halle Nord in Geneva, she came up with one of her most stunning individual pieces to date. What she installed in this tall yet fairly shallow window was a large-scale work consisting of quite stiff paper, glued at the edges, and wrought with layers of graphite that gave the impression of a metal or bronze relief. The ever-modulating surface seemed to press forward and retract alternately, utilising the artificial lighting of the glass showcase in an attractive play of chiaroscuro. The highly informative title of the piece – *Carrying marks over the edge* – could be read as a manual of instruction. To me, it also indicated a dense concentration of energy, suggesting the potential of the work to escape its physical constraints. In my own view, the particular form taken by this narrowly confined and quite literally encapsulated presentation as a large-scale, stand-alone piece, could merely hint at what I see as a constitutive trait and even as a crucial characteristic of Simone Holliger's artistic approach. Yet at the same time, the potential it embodied was so stark as to be almost physically tangible; something that might be described as not just a tendency towards expansion into the surrounding space, but also towards communication with other works. That said, the stand-alone presentation of *Carrying marks over the edge* provided a tantalising insight into this artist's oeuvre.

As part of the Bourses de la Ville de Genève group exhibition at the city's Centre d'art contemporain in the autumn of 2016, Simone Holliger presented a complex installation with a similarly informative title *Et tout autour le vide se creuse* (And all around the void caves in). While the first title has associations with a dense, arrested and yet outward-pushing concentration, the second suggests a surrounding force penetrating from the outside into the in-between spaces within the constituent parts of the work, as though entering the stage on which the many individual works were presented.

The relationship between these two presentations might be equated with the twin concepts of concentration/expansion and inhalation/exhalation. *Et tout autour le vide se creuse* was a presentation that was both sovereign, and also quite literally an open work, or *opera aperta*, such as that described by Umberto Eco: there was an equal inclusion of both floor and wall, with large and small works that could be read either as sculptures – with and without plinths – or as wall pieces, while flat or folded or even torn lengths and strips of paper scattered amongst them posed the question of whether these might be works in their own right or simply elements harbouring the potential of becoming a sculpture or a relief. The impression of the presentation tended to switch somewhat. At times, visitors might feel they were viewing an installation based on the premise of modern sculpture and alluding to the full canon of classical modernism right through to, say, the *Passtücke* (Adaptives) of Franz West. At other times, the situation seemed more akin to visiting the studio of a sculptor in which pieces already primed for exhibition were juxtaposed with others that were far from finished. When asked about the relationship between exhibition and studio, the artist said, "The studio plays a central role for me. It is there that many of the spatial relationships between the works emerge, which are then extended into the exhibition space. I regard the studio as a mobile work space, whose contents are constantly adapting to specific needs; it is, in a certain sense, at once a work space, exhibition space, storage space and living space."

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This may give some insight into the carefully reflected contextual basis upon which Simone Holliger develops her artistic praxis, elucidating the openness of the situation and its fluid boundaries with considerable, well-founded precision. When she touches upon the concept of the *dispositif* in responding to a question of what plays a constitutive role in the presentation of her art, she uses the term judiciously, knowing full well the complexity of its meaning in the writings of Michel Foucault. While this concept generally proves to be a fruitful approach to her work, it is particularly apt where the discourse veers towards the simultaneity of expressly defined works on the one hand alongside supposedly random placements on the other – the latter at times involving the de-position rather than the ex-position of barely formed, ephemeral material. Simone Holliger's oeuvre as a whole exudes spirit and attitude evoking a stance more inclusive than exclusive, more "this as well as that" than "either this or that". One of the most striking and persuasive qualities of her work is that it is grounded with such firmness and stability on the one hand, yet so wonderfully light and seemingly casual on the other. It is also somehow unsecured, which is perhaps what she was alluding to in a statement she posted on her website about her work: "The whole floats precariously between foundation and destruction."

The two exhibitions described above, held in the autumn of 2016 – one being the presentation of a single large-scale piece in a glass showcase and the other the staging of a group of more than ten seemingly inter-communicative works – took place a good two years after her very first installation in the summer of 2014 at her art school graduation show. Even then, the two disparate forces that inform her work were clearly discernible: a distinctly drawing-based approach that nevertheless leaps from the two-dimensional page or wall to enter into the realm of the sculptural in actual three-dimensional space. Returning once more to the artist's statement on her website: "The installations are like drawings in the space...". At that time, the element of draughtsmanship seemed more explicit, even where it involved a three-dimensional transposition of line into form, with the sculptural aspect being flatter and more minimalistically pared-down, albeit interspersed with the occasional brightly coloured two-dimensional element, scaled against the wall and presented like a backdrop within the space. Between this initial presentation and the two subsequent exhibitions, there was a two-year hiatus that included a month in Marfa, Texas, during 2015, where Holliger encountered the works of Donald Judd, John Chamberlain and others. Their radical, clear-cut, concise approach may well have triggered a seminal development. While there, she produced an extensive group of small-format works – quite pragmatically, given that they had to be easy to transport back home – in her usual simple materials of paper and glue with added colour (wax crayon, watercolour or pigment). The works in the Marfa series are imbued with a wonderful levity that reminds me in principle of an *étude*. These simple paper objects with their deceptively light touch are sovereign and completely undidactic, yet they pose fundamental questions about sculpture and plasticity, while addressing those issues through, and by dint of, their basic constitutive elements. The specific combination of drawing and sculptural composition, as in such simple Marfa pieces as *Umriss* (Outline), *Sandwich*, and *ich über dir* (I above you) is redolent of the same unpretentious approach that we so admire in the works of, say, Richard Tuttle.

In 2016, back in her Geneva studio, she then set about creating works such as *Trajectoire*, *Détour* (Detour) and *Umschreibung* (Circumscription), as well as *Rundungen* (Curves) and *Faltbar* (Foldable), or *Dunkles Volumen* (Dark Volumes) and *Samtbild* (Velvet Image). The list is indicative of the multiple levels referenced by the titles, each proposing a premise that corresponds, in turn, to the multiple directions from which the artist approaches and hones in on questions of sculpturality and plasticity. The aforementioned works reprise the inspirational impact of Marfa on the artist's evolving process of condensation and reduction, now transposed to a somewhat larger format. These works are quite clearly related to the smaller pieces in the Marfa series. Moreover, the work of this period follows on from another group of works that more or less explicitly addresses the abstract sculpture of classical modernism. Here, too, we find

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precursors as early as 2015, such as the work *Durchstich* (Puncture) and the wall piece *Schriftstück* (Written Document) from the Marfa series, which inescapably remind us of Hans (Jean) Arp's plaster reliefs. Alongside *Konglomerat* (Conglomerate) and others, a group of works was now emerging, the largest of which, the above-mentioned *Carrying marks over the edge*, was presented this autumn. This same group also includes *absent (Consagra)*, with its acknowledgement of the modernist sculptures of the 1950s and 1960s, such as we might find in public spaces. Its title specifies, in brackets, a specific point of reference: namely, the Italian abstract sculptor Pietro Consagra, who was, in his day, famed for his participation in various biennials as well as in the international art exhibition documenta. Today, however, his name has been all but forgotten. The work displayed in the glass showcase in Geneva also gives a nod to this sculptor's oeuvre. Another piece in this group of works is the ceiling-high *Einschnitt (Plötzliche Skulptur)* (Incision (Sudden Sculpture)), which, in early 2016, was the first piece to be tailored towards a specific exhibition situation. In order to present it upright, the huge panel – in two-sided relievó – had to be fitted between floor and ceiling. As a wall-mounted relief, the one visible side of the work could be viewed in conjunction with *Et tout autour le vide se creuse*. That was months later, and was staged in dialogue with numerous other pieces.

What, we might ask ourselves, could possibly motivate any young artist – especially one so avowedly and expressly grounded in drawing and whose work has such an unmistakably contemporary slant – to devote herself to a form of sculpture that seems so irrelevant to the art world of today? It comes as no surprise to find publications in her studio about Eva Hesse or Robert Overby, nor particularly remarkable to find the conversation turning towards contemporary artists such as Katinka Bock. But to discover the influence of an artist such as Pietro Consagra in her artistic research does give pause for thought.

By way of conclusion, I would like to illustrate in a little more detail what it is that actually underlies this process and how it is that the appropriation of an art historical position with a recognised sculptural potential can be so productively transformed and deployed. In the spring of 2017, Simone Holliger had a solo exhibition called "Travelling light – between flatness and depth" at the Palais d'Athénée in Geneva. It featured her largest installation to date. On a footprint of six by three and a half metres, she arranged a group of uniformly white objects varying greatly in size. It recalled some kind of abstract experimental theatre, or perhaps Alberto Giacometti's *La Place or La Forêt* or even a video work by Bruce Nauman. The artist, however, simply titled the work *Eine Skulptur* and explained, in the subtitle, quite candidly, where she had found the source for this truly impressive visual orchestration: "(after the Stones series of drawings by Alberto Magnelli)". In July 1931, inspired by the marble quarries of Carrara, Alberto Magnelli had created a group of some thirty small ink drawings, a few of which he had used as studies for later oil paintings. Long undiscovered, his series of sketches was first exhibited and published about ten years ago. In his drawings, Magnelli abstracted the blocks of stone, transforming them into architectural and anthropomorphic figures. The entire series that he created might also be interpreted as a kind of theatre. Just as the painter transposed blocks of stone, inherently sculptural as they may be, into drawings that were, in turn, transformed into paintings, so too does Simone Holliger indirectly carry forward the sculptural energy that she discerns in Magnelli's sketches through her creations of three-dimensional objects that possess a highly sculptural quality. The upshot of all this is a broadly abstract production that undeniably juggles with precarious ambiguities. Although the protagonists no doubt resembled and clearly played the role of stones, they were not stable structures but rather fragile objects made of paper, some of them piled up to a hazardous height of five metres.

When Magnelli had an exhibition at the Stein gallery in Paris in 1934, the young critic Anatole Jankovsku wrote in *Cahiers d'Art* (no 5–8, 1934) "Il se sert aussi du passé qui doit servir pour l'avenir." These words haunt me when I stand before an object by

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Simone Holliger, created in 2017. I am inevitably reminded, for all their differences, of the sculptures by Zadkine and Lipchitz when I read a title such as *Broken for something* new to spring out. This almost dialectical turn could perhaps even stand for her oeuvre as a whole, for it compels us to thoroughly rethink certain supposedly self-evident concepts such as drawing and sculpture, particularly with a view to how they interrelate.