

Fold, Unfold, Refold

The original idea for the exhibition *Fold, Unfold, Refold* was to get some more grip on the expression of the fold in contemporary sculpture. What is it about? How can we look at it; can we discuss it without getting lost in theoretical language? Ironically, the philosopher most often associated with the fold in art is Gilles Deleuze – notoriously difficult to read. In one of his books, appropriately called *The fold*, he thinks together with Baroque philosopher Gottfried Leibniz about reality as a concurrent unfolding of matter and soul. Along with Michel Foucault, Deleuze thinks about history and subjectivity in terms of fold in Foucault. The innovative and thought-provoking concepts he developed continue to resonate strongly across the arts and humanities. No wonder that Deleuze pops up at every other turn in this quick reconnaissance of the fold in sculpture. Although the exhibition failed to materialise in the eleventh hour, those questions continued to intrigue me. They grew into a wide-ranging research of the sculptural fold. Nanne op t Ende.

With Sonia Kacem, Stéphanie Baechler, Mathilde Dumont, Maartje Folkeringa

Dutch artist Maartje Folkeringa sees her sculptures as stories. She can tell you what sparked her imagination, show you the newspaper clippings and the photographs – and she can tell you what the sculptures represent to her once they are finished. The *Premium* series (2017), with its dangling snakelike objects, its fetishes and arabesques, is a reflection on fashion, luxury, ostentatious display and the desire to belong. For the viewers, many of the sculptures may come across as enigmatic but to Folkeringa, they all make perfect sense.

When she heard the exhibition would be about the fold, Maartje was immediately reminded of a book by Dutch writer Charlotte Mutsaers: *Rachels' Skirt*. The skirt, with its many folds and its constant movement, represents the elusiveness of our lives and a dynamic, fragmented approach to storytelling. In Mutsaers' book, the folds express the realisation that there is no inside or outside, no straight way from A to B, no clear-cut version of reality, only endlessly meandering stories instead, digressions, diversions and detours. Meaning comes about through associations, coincidences, references and unexpected analogies – and this is where Maartje fits right in. This is how she works. Her sculptures are stories.

She will describe a mural of jumbled letters spelling *Chrisdien Deny* (found on a Christian Dior knock-off) as 'a woman in a pink jogging suit on a scooter, smoking a cigarette, on her way to the beach' – and to her this woman represents a disarmingly honest desire to be associated with luxury and wealth in order to 'fit in'. The stories provide a direct insight in her creative process. It would be wonderful just to listen to her go from work to work and explain where it originated from and how it came about, transforming from photographs and personal observations to a more formal visual language. Instead, we discuss why it would be good to talk about her work without referring to its origins and sources.

MF

There is need, in art, to talk about the formal qualities and the underlying concepts but, quite honestly, I am more comfortable talking about the way I arrived a particular image than to discuss what it means in the context of my artistic vision. However, it has become increasingly important to be able to offer convincing interpretations and readings.

NE

I met quite a lot of artists who don't like to investigate the deeper personal significance of their work. As if once, you identify your own motives, the themes and the drives underlying your work, you lose the ability to surprise yourself – as if the magic would be gone.

MF

It's a dilemma: how to allow yourself enough leeway to let things come about spontaneously while sticking to some kind of frame at the same time prevents the work from becoming completely random?

NE

But you already have this wonderful frame of reference; visual and personal clues, a collection of images and stories and impressions that eventually relate to important questions: what drives us, how we present ourselves, the image we project, pretences, appearances. Could it be that some of the newer works are more abstract, or less easy to relate to the things you made before?

MF

Hold on, there is a passage in Rachel's Skirt that appealed to me. About not knowing what you will find in the folds. *Now to suddenly poke your nose in all sorts of complicated folds. You might come across flowers in those pleats, but they might just as well be loaded with rusty nails or scissors. For all you know your nose may never come back. No more indication, no more orientation. Is it really necessary to take such risks, isn't that too much to ask?*

NE

I think the danger of explication is overestimated. Imagination – or visual intelligence – has its own sources, methods and goals; it usually isn't so easily scared or silenced. There's an elusive element to creativity. Talking about art and its meaning is always provisional. On another, physical level it is much more enduring: gestures, movements, memories and experiences are stored in the body.

MF

I used to do gymnastics, when I was a girl. I was quite good – regional competition – and I loved the exercise. We had a very tough coach. Don't cry, just try again. I like it when people push me to give it my best. The colours in some of the works remind me of our gymnastic suits. The bright colours might have their origins there: in the gym suits, the funny ski wear, the flashy jogging outfits from my childhood.

NE

Another reason why artists are reluctant to interpret their own work is that it would limit the possible readings. There is a notion in modern art that meaning, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Any relationship the viewer may have with an artwork is fine – if there is a reaction, something that might trigger a reflection or an experience. It's a democratic tendency: every vote counts. At the same time, additional information might open a whole new perspective that would be lost on many viewers if the artist doesn't bring it up themselves.

MF

People always like it when I show them my newspaper clippings and photographs. They suddenly see the work in a completely different light. But I feel I shouldn't do that anymore. Sometimes, I created something and I am not sure where it came from or what it represents. And rather than to talk about what it means to me, I would like to discuss its inherent qualities. Why it is a good work and how it relates to other pieces or the work of other artists, without discussing its personal grounds.

NE

That is something that comes with practice, isn't it? To look at a piece, take in its formal qualities and the context and the associations with works you've seen before – or made before. It's mainly a matter of creating some space in your head for things to connect. Even when the work is very formal, somehow meaning lies in experience and imagination.

MF

Let's talk about the works. Take this one for example [a ceramic panel of about 30 x 50 cm]. I have no idea what it means, but I'm pleased with it, with the gradient from mint green to flesh/pink and its surface texture from grainy to smooth. And I love the wholes – it wouldn't be finished without the holes.

NE

What strikes me most, apart from the fascinating way the colours differentiate around the holes, is the fact that they have all been made by pushing the clay from the front to the back – except that one over there.

MF

I think that is a coincidence.

NE

It might be if there were five holes one way and nine holes the other. But there is only one hole where the clay has been pushed outwards. You even left a little disc of clay on the surface.

MF

That is true, I was making the holes, my fingers came up from underneath, and I thought that this would be the front, with the clay protruding into space. And then I turned it and I made this one hole the other way around and I knew the back had to be the front.

NE

Somehow, that decision is visible and it makes the piece special – it reminds me of Fontana's *Concetto Spaziale*, except that he never turns his piece around or punctures the canvas from the other side, or does he? I can see you handle the work, deciding what is the front and what is the back; the whole idea of this mystical space behind the artwork is gone. And still, it projects its presence inward and outwards.

MF

In the concept of the exhibition, you mentioned Deleuze?

NE

It was so nice that you immediately mentioned Mutsaers. She refers to Leibniz and Deleuze in her book, she salutes them. I'm trying to make sense of *The Fold* but quite honestly, I find it extremely hard to read. What I get from it now – I've only read a few chapters – is that there is a single world that might unfold in infinite ways, even though only one world is actually realised: the best of all possible worlds. There is no single perspective that gives everything meaning. Everything gets its meaning in relationship to the things that surround it. And all the different beings that contribute to the unfolding of this world represent limited, individual points of view that together create constantly shifting fields of meaning.

MF

That sounds beautiful!

NE

I'm probably off by a couple of miles but it does sound nice...