



Photo of Ann Iren Buan © Anne Valeur

OSL series presents: In conversation

The following is an edited version of a conversation between Norwegian artist Ann Iren Buan and British writer Thomas Phongsathorn, which took place by email in the months leading up to *Around Us Surround Us*, Buan's 2018 exhibition at the Vigeland Museum. The original purpose of the exchange was to inform Phongsathorn's essay for the catalogue that accompanies the exhibition.

Can you recall when you first became aware of art, and how your understanding of art began to develop?

Growing up, I don't think I was even aware that being an artist was an occupation one could have, but I slowly became aware of art during high school. I had been drawing for my whole life and I knew I had some skills, but I just didn't know what to do with those skills. After high school I went to a 'folk' high school, which is a one-year boarding school where you can focus on subjects that interest you. I studied art and design, and we had great teachers who took us to museums and galleries around Norway, and we also went to Paris. All of this blew me away, it was a totally new landscape that I did not understand but I so wanted to. I acted like a sponge and just wanted to see more, learn more and develop my own skills and understanding.

Can you recall the point in your life at which you felt comfortable defining yourself as an artist?

During the last semester of my master's programme I finally found a way of working with art that I felt was my own and I had some confidence in. I had been working with figurative drawing for years, but at a point it stopped being interesting. I attempted to go in a completely different direction, trying video and performance, but that didn't really work out, so after a long while I started experimenting with the drawings, kneading them and tearing them and making them into sculptures. In this process I found enough confidence to start defining myself as an artist.

Are there artists whose work has remained important to you over the course of your career? If so, could you explain why, and the ways in which that influence is apparent in your practice?

A lot of the minimalist and post-minimalist artists have been important to me; they were especially influential when my interest in sculpture started to develop. I read *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, and his writings on antiformal and process-orientated art resonated so well with me – how the sculpture could take shape after the inherent qualities of materials, and letting the materials have their own will in the making. He also talks about size, and how we use our bodies as measuring tools. Both his felt sculptures and L-beam sculptures have been important to me, and I think it was his work that helped me go from figurative drawing towards sculpture. I must also mention Eva Hesse, an artist that I think has been immensely important to my generation. Her way of working with sculpture has always been inspiring. I like that

I can't pinpoint her sculptures, that I am not sure what they are. Also, the fact that a lot of her sculptures do not exist anymore, or are too fragile to be shown, is an important part of them. It is the same with my work. The attitude that not all art needs to exist forever is something I agree with.

Can you tell me a bit about how your relationship with nature has evolved, perhaps beginning with your childhood memories, and thinking about the ways in which the natural world has remained significant into your adulthood?

I grew up in a small town, and our house was right next to the forest. That's where I played, built huts, ran around exploring and made up imaginary worlds. The view from my bedroom was towards the ocean, as my town was situated in the corner of a fjord. When I moved away to study, I also moved away from these surroundings, and it took me many years to understand the importance the environment has in my work, and how my interest in nature has been with me all the way. I couldn't live in a place that is not close to the ocean.

Is there an aspect of making sculptural work in response to a room or space of some sort that you find especially compelling and enjoyable? If so, can you pinpoint what it is that you value in the process?

What is always enjoyable is getting to know the room my sculptures will have a relation to: the size of the room, where the light comes from, how I enter it, what I first feel, walking around trying to find the natural way of moving in the room and thinking about how I can change the movement, colours, angles, etc. This first encounter is always exciting because it is when I start shaping the sculptures in my mind, and later in my sketchbook. In this process it is also important to remember that the sculptures need to work on their own – that they don't need the room, but my thinking is more that the room needs the sculptures in order to tell a story. The process of making the sculptures is not always enjoyable. There is a lot of frustration because the process is so loose and chance is such a big part of it, but at the point where can I see that I have found the right direction I can breathe again. I value this whole process, of course, but it is really demanding at times, as I let it swallow me. Making my work is very physical, so it is both mind and body being 100% involved. The most enjoyable part of it all is the mounting process – moving a sculpture 15cm and seeing that that makes a great difference, that is actually a kick at times.

There's a great deal of texture in your work. Could you explain the motives behind creating these textures? Could you also tell me about the main techniques you use in the creation of textural qualities?

During my master's degree I realised that there is so much potential in the surface of paper. I have also always been interested in decay – how skin changes over time or food decaying, for example. There are actually a lot of different techniques that I have used, which are all related. With the first sculptures that I made I crumbled paper over and over, then I started gluing the drawings together and using a sanding tool and also tearing the paper to reveal different layers and colours. Another technique is gluing torn paper, bits of it, together again – “mending” it. What I have done recently, as with the drawings from my solo show, 'Along the Folds', at OSL Contemporary, and the larger ones that I am working with now, is soaking the paper with water and using a kitchen sponge to rub the paper, and in that way revealing the fibres and the fragility in the paper. I have also dipped drawings in water and glue, like how you make papier-mâché, layering it around a casting form. When it is dry the surface has the movement of the paper when it was layered on, like it has frozen. With the plaster it is a bit different, I don't have that much control over how it turns out, as I just lay the paper on top of the wet plaster and it takes the shape of the material when it dries. Sometimes I need to remove plaster, which I do with a hammer, or I need to add more plaster in some areas, so that creates a new surface.

You mentioned your consideration of how your works will be perceived in relation to the spaces in which they are exhibited, and the process of placement being quite delicate and highly deliberate. Are there other areas of your practice that are affected by how they might be viewed? I think the size I choose for the sculptures also has an impact. For example, with the work *Lodgers* (2015) I wanted the size to approximately be the size of a human body. In the work *The Wait* (2015), from the same exhibition, the height of the sculpture is 180cm, and I wanted that height because one can barely see over it. The space in which it was shown is known for its beautiful view, so one had to walk around the sculpture to see that view, manoeuvring your body along the sculpture in the process.

Are there any non-visual influences in your work? Perhaps books, theory or music that have in some way informed or inspired how you think and what you make?

I like reading interviews with artists and writings by artists, but I don't think they influence my work directly, except maybe the writings I mentioned by Robert Morris. I like to hear or read artists talking about their own

work. One book that has been really important, or was important at one time, is *Regarding the Pain of Others* by Susan Sontag. Movies have played a significant role. I have always liked horror and psychological thrillers, especially classics such as *The Shining*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Night of the Hunter*, *Psycho*, *American Psycho*, plus everything by David Lynch. During my bachelor's I did a study of movies like these to see and learn how they worked with scenography, colour and light, which was extremely interesting, and still is something I find interesting, and probably has had some impact on my work.

Can you describe your feelings and the thoughts that immediately entered your mind when you first visited the exhibition spaces that you have worked in at the Vigeland?

I have always found the rooms intriguing and challenging, and also hard to get a grip on. The architecture is a neoclassical power-structure, and is also of course weighted with Gustav Vigeland's work, so walking in there one can feel pretty small.

How do you feel about people writing about your work?

I like it – at least most of the time I do. It gives me an opportunity to get some insight into other people's thoughts about my work and the way I make it. I am so much in my own head when I am working, so it's of great value to read the perceptions of others.

Ann Iren Buan (b. Stjørdal, Norway, 1984) lives and works in Oslo. She holds an MFA in Visual Art from The Academy of Fine Arts, Oslo (2011). Recent solo shows include The Vigeland Museum, Oslo; OSL contemporary, Oslo; Bazament Art Space, Tirana, Albania (2018); Prosjektrom Normanns, Stavanger (2017); Trafo Kunsthall, Asker (2015); Noplace, Oslo (2015); Gallery F15, Moss (2015); Nord-Trøndelag Art Museum, Namsos (2015); Kunstnerforbundet, Oslo (2015); Trøndelag Center of Contemporary Art, Trondheim (2014); and Akershus Kunstsenter, Lillestrøm (2013). Buan has participated in a number of group shows, including at Apalazzo gallery, Brescia (2016) and The Astrup Fearnley Museum, Oslo (2015); and Stavanger Art Museum, Stavanger (2015).

Thomas Phongsathorn is an editor, writer and publishing professional from London. He was editor of V&A Magazine at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, from 2011 to 2016, and was editor for the 2011 Venice Biennale, 'ILLUMInations'. Phongsathorn is a participating writer in Ann Iren Buan's new publication 'Around us, Surround Us'.

OSL series is an on-going project with an aim to create artistic dialogues, as well as function as an interactive tool. With the purpose to reach a wider audience, series wish to be a platform, or meeting point. Series is site and time specific, varying from one night to one, two or three weeks long projects. Series is presented throughout the year and is sidelined- and in between, the OSL contemporary exhibition program.