

## VCE ART: The Structural Framework with Mia Salsjö

**Siobhan:** Hi, I'm Siobhan, Gallery Coordinator at Gertrude Contemporary. I'm here today with Gertrude Studio Artist Mia Salsjö and we're going to take a look at her practice, particularly the body of work *Modes of Translation* in relation to the Structural Framework.

The Structural Framework is used to analyse how the style, symbolism and structural elements of artworks contribute to the meanings and messages conveyed.

So, Mia, tell me about you and your artistic practice?

**Mia Salsjö:** I've come into my practice with tertiary qualifications both in Music and Fine Art, so I would really describe myself in relation to these two things as a multimedia artist. In the last few years, I've travelled and lived in Havana, Cuba. Cuba was one of those major moments in my life. I was immersed in a totally different culture and I developed a new network of friends and contacts in an incredible city. It was a creative, stimulating and wonderful experience. It enabled me to research an important architectural site at the national School of Art in Havana. This has now been translated into the body of work *Modes of Translation*.

My practice is complex as it is built around a continuous process of interlinked steps, with each step forming the basis for the future process. For instance, I make drawings that may be read as maps, or instructions, or alternatively just looked at and enjoyed as finished artworks or seen as a component of a greater whole. Actually, the drawings are the beginnings of a larger manifestation of a multi-faceted body of work.

The content of my work stems from a feeling that I have inside of me that somewhere in the universe there are perfect 'ideal forms' but we never see them directly. Instead, it seems that we are always approaching some kind of approximation of what they might be like. This is an old idea that we can trace back to the ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, but it's also something that I think we sense intuitively. So, my work is an experiment in ways to approach or to give expression to these ideal forms.

That approach begins with me looking at different materials and structures, like architectural constructions, textiles, maps, plans, language, literature, film, science, and so on. Most of these are based around codes that lead back to mathematics and hence to geometries, which again express or approximate ideal forms.

For me, the drawing process – which I control, but only to a certain extent – prompts further research and provides outlets for a kind of 'organised chaos' that harmonizes through my self-devised and interlinked experimental processes.

That process includes the gleaning of data that I use to extract and construct musical notations. This 'gives voice' to the drawings and the particular site I may be working with. The music notes are then formalised as readable music scores that I compose for varying groups of instruments. They are then performed as live works, and accompanied by films, drawings, photographic documents and installation that extend from the step-by-step explorations surrounding the information gleaned from my process and the architecture. The whole body of work is then staged as a multi-media installation.

**S:** How have you used the art elements of line, colour, tone, texture, shape, form, sound, light and time and the art principles of emphasis (focal point), balance, movement, unity, variety, contrast, rhythm, repetition (pattern), scale, proportion and space?

**M:** This is what I would call the formal elements of my art practice. Line, colour and shape are prominent elements in my drawings. Sets of horizontal lines are first drawn providing space for many dotted points. The horizontals are then intersected with vertical and curved lines. The lines in the drawings are at times colour-coded, which highlights the particular passage of a line. This provides me with a guide through the drawing – for instance, when the drawings get denser in certain spots the colour helps to illuminate a pathway, which will lead me to the next part of the process. For instance, that next set might be the creation of music based on a particular line, and this would entail the marking of time, rhythm, form, and repetition.

Time is a factor in my work, but it is always changing and can express itself in many different forms. There is the idea that my work has a ‘timelessness’ to it as the conceptual side deals with something out of time, but at a mundane level tempos and rhythms are intrinsic to what I do. Time, repetition, rhythm, tone and form occur in my work by extracting and creating music notation out of the interlinking dots, lines and layers from the drawings. This notation is attended by a number system that sets the time, the shape and form to create a music composition. The process turns out to be a tonal layering of rhythmic sound, drawn directly from the layers within each drawing.

Once a professional and playable music score has been created the work becomes a live performance, usually within the space that was the source of inspiration, which most recently has been an architectural site. Once the moving image has also been composed the entire body of work is shown in a synchronized large-scale installation where all the elements and facets of the whole body of work speak to each other. This includes a video installation, the music composition, the drawings themselves, photographic studies, codes and structural frameworks.

**S:** How do you use these art elements and art principles to create meanings and messages in *Modes of Translation*?

**M:** The key meaning in my work is not an idea per se but a feeling. *Modes of Translation* stemmed from my personal curiosity about a crumbling building that also happened to be an architectural masterpiece, which also happened to be in a country with an unusual history; that country being Cuba. I wanted to find the language of this site through the natural symbols, markings and formations that persisted and occurred across many years of abandonment. I wanted to investigate the structural foundations, shapes, forms, light and the possible systems, both real and imagined, that informed the space. Other things occurred to me as well. For instance, studying the shapes, curves and shadows of the building, I recognised that the movement of light throughout the day provided clues to navigate the practical uses of the spaces. This was important as the buildings were intended to be used without the assistance of electric light, which in First World countries we take for granted. So, by studying the light throughout the day, I could speculate for instance when the students might have gathered in a specific spot, and I documented this in my process, all in order to later construct drawings and the music score.

At a deeper level the meaning arose out of a collision between myself and the building – out of being overcome by the beauty of the space, but also filled with sadness that it was falling apart. The tension between those perceptions of beauty and decay does lead to some kind of meaning or message. For instance, the building is in the country of Cuba, which has suffered a

lot of hardship. So, if you know the history of that country in the 20th Century then the situation of the building really reflects the difficult lives of the people there. The Cuban people are really artistic and creative but like the building they have had to deal with privation and difficulty.

**S:** Your body of work *Modes of Translation* exists across a variety of media, particularly as drawings and music performance. What are the instruments and tools you've used to realise these works? And how do you see the relationship is between these two forms of the one idea?

**M:** Ha, well my tools are a pencil and a sheet of paper. I work out everything in my head and on paper, with my brain as the computer. Now, the thing is, architecture is based on mathematics, which stems from nature, so if you devise a system from architecture then all the subsequent forms have to be harmonious, whether visually or in music. So the whole thing is about using a base code and building from there. In essence I am a conceptual artist because the real concern is at a conceptual level, with the various physical elements just being a reflection of those perceptions, feelings and ideas. I use live musicians and instruments to play the results of a vigorous process which transliterates, deconstructs and transforms any information that is mined from the particular site but also from an automatic process of discovery.

**S:** How would you classify your distinctive style?

I have no attachment to the idea of having a distinct style, that's not how I think. Instead, I am entirely focused on process. I just ask myself 'where am I up to and what is the next step?' Usually my process reveals messages and directions which leads me to fantastical places, visions and actions that further develop a language and place of its own. If a style emerges over time, well that's just fine and might be interesting to an art historian, but it's not my business. I guess you could say I have a coded, systems-based style; but really the codes are my own - my own Salsjö Codex or something like that. You'll have to work that out by experiencing my work.

Mia Salsjö is a current Gertrude Contemporary Studio Artist (2020 – 2022)  
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