American Connections: The early works of Thomas Bang[1]

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Abstract
The Danish artist Thomas Bang spent his early years in the USA. The works he created in this formative period were thus profoundly shaped by the contemporary movements in American art of the 1960s and 1970s when sculpture, or to be more precise, three-dimensional work became a hotbed of expansive experiments. This article traces how Bang made a radical move from painting to sculpture, which was characteristic of that time, and how he developed his artistic idiom by taking an active part in some of the seminal new departures in American art, in particular process art and post-minimalism. By leaping forward to Bang's later works produced after his return to Denmark, the article also demonstrates how the sculptural syntax and working principles developed in the early works still underlie and structure the artist's more allegorical sculptures and installations from the 2000s, thus testifying to the lasting impact of Bang's American period, which remains the key to understanding his works.

Contents

The outlandishness of a returning migrant artist

[1] The story of the Danish-born artist Thomas Bang's career has its beginnings far from Denmark. His breakthrough as a painter and later as a sculptor occurred not on the Danish art scene but at the centre of where art was happening, at that time on the other side of the Atlantic. In the 1960s and 1970s Thomas Bang was part of the American – and thus the world – art scene. It was not until 1978 that he exhibited in Denmark, and it was only in the 1980s that he achieved greater recognition in Danish art circles. This coincided with his move back to Denmark while at the same time he continued to exhibit in the USA and occupied posts in the art departments of universities in California and New York State.

[1] This article is based on material previously published in Danish with supplementary illustrations. See: "Amerikanske forbindelser. Om Thomas Bangs tidlige værker," in: *Thomas Bang. Apparatur til en ustabil verden*, ed. Anna Schram Vejlby, Flemmig Friborg and Anne Marie Nielsen, Copenhagen: Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek 2009, 12-89. The present article reworks a never published translation of the Danish text into English by Neil Stanford.

[2] This sequence of events suggests that the Danish art audience of the late 1970s did not take much interest in what was happening in vanguard art outside this country. As a matter of fact, such introversion was typical of the Nordic art scenes at large until the 1980s and 1990s.[2]

[3] The lack of international outlook meant that the majority of Danes were without the necessary frames for understanding what Bang was working with. Moreover, his works have always made great demands on the beholder. Even though today Bang occupies an unquestioned position as one of Denmark's most important sculptors and installation artists, there are thus two good reasons why recognition was a long time coming.

[4] One of the first people who "discovered" Bang on Danish soil was the artist and art critic Hellen Lassen, who faithfully, and with considerable insight, wrote about his exhibitions from 1980 onwards. When, in the context of a major retrospective presentation of his works in 1995, she looked back on what she had written about Bang's works through the years, she openly admitted that they had always demanded a "penetrating exegesis and sympathetic insight", "offering fresh challenges every time." As the years have passed, she added, Bang's oeuvre has constructed its own frames of reference in constant expansion and dialogue with itself and the surrounding world: "As one becomes acquainted with the work over a period of years, more and more doors imperceptively spring open, shedding light into labyrinthine layers of meaning – which, just as imperceptively, multiply."[3]

[5] The reason why Bang's works were perceived as outlandish and challenging in the beginning was probably that, after his being reconnected with Denmark, Bang's works came to involve two sets of cultural experiences, contexts and languages, two ways in which the artist could articulate his experiences and his thoughts about art. Hence, the works became more complex. It is significant that in the 1980s Bang created a series of non-figurative objects entitled "Kuffertobjekter" – suitcase objects. They were given this name because they were small enough for him to transport them in suitcases when commuting across the Atlantic. During the same period he was deeply preoccupied with the transfer and translation of information as a formal theme in sculpture.[4] Both

[2] Hanna Johansson, "Nature in Nordic Contemporary Art: From the Environment to a Common, Shared World," in: *Nordic Contemporary: Art from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden* ed. Hossein Amirsadeghi, London 2014, 20-25, here 21. Patricia G. Berman, "The Nordic Model and the Complex Topography of Paradise," in: *Nordic Contemporary: Art from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden,* ed. Hossein Amirsadeghi, London 2014, 26-33, here 28-29, 32.

[3] Hellen Lassen, "Cultural Malaise: Main Currents in Thomas Bang's work," in: *Thomas Bang. Et udvalg af tidlige arbejder 1968-1974*, ex.cat., Roskilde: Museet for Samtidskunst 1995, 32-39, here 32. The quotation is re-translated from Danish into English by Thomas Bang.

[4] Mikkel Bogh, "Thomas Bang and the Instrument: Reflections on the Worldliness of Sculpture," in: *Thomas Bang. Retrospektiv*, ex.cat., Copenhagen, Esbjerg, Herning: Nikolaj Udstillingsbygning, Esbjerg Kunstmuseum, Herning Kunstmuseum 1995, 55-66, here 52, 66.

factors indicate that works of art are, on one hand, never purely aesthetic exercises in form, executed in a vacuum outside of history and unaffected by the artist's experiences in life and living conditions, but on the other hand neither can works of art be explained purely in terms of biographical and historical circumstances. It is precisely because art has dimensions which transgress the historical, the biographical and the culturally specific that it can speak to people across time and space.

[6] However, one gets a better understanding of Thomas Bang's works through an acquaintance with both the language and the contexts on which he draws. The aim of this article is thus twofold. Firstly, it seeks to trace how Bang developed the basic components of his artistic language as he moved from painting into the expanded field of sculpture during his "American period"; and secondly, it aims to show how themes and principles of construction developed in this early phase re-emerge in new, altered forms in later works such as *Man havde gennem længere tid* […] ("For some time people had […]") (2003). Here they are, so to speak, translated into the more direct pictorial and allegorical language of forms Bang has developed since the 1980s. This happened in tandem with the revival and revitalisation of allegory and figuration within the international framework of a postmodern aesthetic. Postmodernism's predilection for doubling and twisting existing images is something Bang does not share. Instead, his allegories and images develop out of the interpretations that the formal relations between the work's components and materials call forth in the viewer. This characteristic is probably the clearest evidence that Bang's starting-point in the American sixties' sculpture has had a crucial and lasting significance for *his* method of working – and thus *our*, the public's experience of the works.

Variations on abstract painting: between "free-hand hard edge" and "abstract pop art"

[7] Thomas Bang's first three-dimensional objects were made in the summer of 1967.[5] It would soon become clear that they marked the crucial turning point in his work, a movement into a field of experimental sculpture which was then transforming sculpture into a field of spatial expansion as well as material and conceptual innovation. At the same time, it was a move away from the area of non-figurative painting of which, through the 1960s, Bang had established himself as a talented upcoming representative. It was indeed a radical movement out of and away from painting as a medium, but, as we shall subsequently see, Bang's leave-taking of painting was in no sense a farewell to *the image*. On the contrary, the image understood as "the pictorial" in the discipline of sculpture, and the opposing processes of building up and breaking down of "the pictorial"

[5] The biographical information on Thomas Bang's work, exhibition activity etc. in the years in the USA comes partly from conversations with the artist in 2008, partly from the comprehensive notes on his own career which Mr Bang wrote down prior to the publication of the monograph *Thomas Bang. Apparatur til en ustabil verden*.

in a sculpture have remained central in Bang's artistic production.[6] There are, however, more of the features which have since come to characterize Bang's sculptural works to be found in embryonic form in his paintings. Also for this reason it is worth examining this group of works, which has remained almost unknown because only a small number have been preserved.[7]

[8] When he was eighteen Thomas Bang moved with his parents to the USA. These biographical circumstances were to become crucial since he received his art education and training in design and painting in the art departments of various American universities during the years of 1956 through 1964. The last two years were spent acquiring a master's degree at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles. Next, Bang was appointed assistant professor at the University of California with responsibility for teaching painting and drawing. Parallel with this he vitalised his own career by increasing his exhibition activities in Los Angeles and participating in a number of drawing and painting exhibitions at museums and other art institutions in other parts of the USA.

[9] California marked a turning point for Bang. At the end of 1962 he had arrived at a clear idea of what he wanted to do with his painting. The field in which Bang positioned himself in this period he has described as "free-hand hard edge" and "abstract pop art", fully aware that both terms are mutually contradictory, and so much the better able to encapsulate the specific character of his endeavour.[8] Strictly speaking, hard edge painting by such artists as Frank Stella is characterised by its extremely simplified geometrical forms, its precisely calculated use of line and its smooth areas of colour which make the painting appear as if purged of free-hand brush-strokes, and the associated myths concerning the work's unmediated origin in the artist's consciousness. Bang's paintings have hard edge painting's razor-sharp contours and the anti-illusionist accentuation of the painted surface as a physical object. But he has not cultivated its formal asceticism. His compositions are massively complex, detailed and display considerable variation from one work to the next. Bang is, quite certainly, a constructor in the manner in which he builds up his paintings, but he is not a builder of systems. His paintings seem, on the contrary, to aim at dissolving any tendency toward the rigidly systematic. In the coupling of hard edge painting's precision and an interest in creating

[6] The significance of the pictorial in Bang's works was first emphasised by the American art historian Kenneth Baker, with whom Bang had contact in the early 1970s. See Kenneth Baker, "Thomas Bang", in: *Artforum* X.4 (1971), 45-47. Later the discussion was taken up by Robert C. Morgan and Mikkel Bogh. See Robert C. Morgan, "Thomas Bang's Ironic Inwardness," in: *Thomas Bang – Retrospektiv*, Copenhagen: Nikolaj, Københavns Kommunes Udstillingsbygning 1995, 25-32. Bogh, "Thomas Bang and the Instrument," 39-52.

[7] Some of the paintings are in the artist's possession, others in that of unknown American private owners. A large amount of work was destroyed by Bang himself in connection with his, in many ways difficult, transition from painting to sculpture.

[8] Conversation with the artist, 19 January 2008.

complex abstract structures out of highly stylised signs one can also detect a kinship with the American painter Al Held. Like Bang, Held had a predilection for coupling geometric abstractions based on familiar signs, such as circles, triangles and letters with a surprising cropping by the frame which transforms the familiar forms into ones which appear new or unfamiliar.

[10] Bang has an equally mixed relation to pop art as to hard edge painting. American pop art is characterised above all by its recognisable subjects from the modern media and consumer society. As such, the term "abstract pop art" contains a contradiction. Nevertheless there exists an abstract pop art whose principal American figure was Nicholas Krushenick. In the 1960s before Roy Lichtenstein created his first cartoon-style brushstroke paintings, Krushenick painted large cartoon-style parodies of abstract expressionism and subtle compositions in strong colours in which he combined the abstract structure of hard edge painting with graphic elements. Bang's paintings are non-figurative like Krushenick's and in the strong colours of pop art. In addition he shared the figurative pop artists' interest in the multitude of signs of the modern urban milieu. Bang's *Variations on a Theme – Band C* (1962) (fig. 1) is an uncompromising flat painting where bright red, yellow and blue forms combine against a background of neutral grey. Running along the left edge of the painting is a white band with a series of round dials which recall both clock faces and speedometers with the hands in various positions. Regardless of their derivation, the diagram-like dials look simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, prompting associations of time, speed, and change. This impression is reinforced by the picture's central figure: an angular form with an inner pattern which – not unlike the swinging arrow on a traffic sign – directs the viewer's gaze from the top to the bottom of the picture, where the "arrow ornament" is confronted by a counter-movement in the form of a broader, yellowish "arrowhead". This too has numerous detailed segments in less contrasting colours built into it, which emphasise the arrowhead's upward direction and multiplicity of meanings. Even though *Variations on a Theme – Band C* is an abstract painting, it evokes associations to Robert Rauschenberg's figurative silk-screen paintings from the 1960s, particularly to the manner in which Rauschenberg (e.g. in *Overdrive* (1963) and *Express* (1963)) thematises movement, counter-movement and arrest of movement by using stop signs and traffic signs with arrows, as well as the chronophotograph's repetition of a subject in locomotion, so that it appear slightly transformed in every frame of print. But the viewer may also recall Rauschenberg's use of clock-like diagrams to indicate changes in time and condition, as can be seen in *Overdraw* (1963) and *Tideline* (1963). The paintings of both Bang and Rauschenberg convey a fascination with the big city's sensory overload, diversity and contrasts which may inspire a mixture of attraction and repulsion. In the 1960s Rauschenberg commented on the distance to the world imposed on us when we – in a media-saturated society – observe the world indirectly through photographs and other

representations of it. Bang's abstract pop art deals rather with the city as a place where the most diverse elements merge in a heterogeneous system with built-in incompatibilities and inconsistencies, expressed through the contrasts of colours and the collision of forms. In Bang's paintings one also notices the artist's enthusiasm for jazz: the distribution of the shapes on the surface is rhythmically syncopated, and here and there a divergent colour strikes a "false" note, like a musical improvisation.

1 Thomas Bang, *Variations on a Theme – Band C*, 1962, oil on canvas, 150 x 122 cm. Destroyed (Photo: Thomas Bang)

[11] In Bang's work, to a greater degree than with pop artists and hard edge painters, concerns are focused on *space*, dynamic space. In *Windows No. 3* (1963) the picture's contrasting colours, together with quarter-circle strokes and the dotted arrow shapes create an inner dynamic, almost an internal circulation system, where a movement in one direction is counterbalanced by a movement in an opposite one, and where the static system which the symmetry of forms could have resulted in is effectively deconstructed by asymmetrical distribution of colours. A similar play between symmetry of form and asymmetry of colour, which seems to work against the composition's stability from the inside, is to be found in a series of tempera pictures from the same year, among them *Tempera Painting No. 3* (1963) (fig. 2) and *Tempera Painting No. 7* (1963). Here Bang has cultivated free-hand hard-edged abstraction. *Tempera Painting No. 3* is rigidly organised around a stable upright form that evokes a container and a horizontal axis of symmetry around which triangular and arched forms in various colours unfold with an explosive force and a radiant luminosity which break down the stability of the upright form and the axis of symmetry. In *Tempera Painting No. 7* the opposite applies: two static vertical axes seem to block the horizontal axis's cleaving of the pictorial space like a projectile. In both cases Bang stages a tensional exchange between form and colour

which suffuses the entire composition with a dynamic ambiguity. The geometric forms are pressed so tightly together that there is no real background. Exactly which fields of paint belong to which forms, where one form ends and another begins is impossible to determine. Therefore the tempera paintings also leave the impression that the forms are not merely forced closely together; they are also adapted to each other to make them interlock. Taken all together these features make Bang's tempera compositions as difficult to apprehend in a single glance as puzzle pictures.

2 Thomas Bang, *Tempera Painting No. 3*, 1963, tempera on cardboard, 38 x 50.8 cm. Private collection (Photo: Thomas Bang)

3 Thomas Bang, *Evening Painting No. 1*, 1962, oil on canvas, 152.5 x 127 cm. The artist's collection (Photo: Thomas Bang)

[12] There is a corresponding optical indeterminacy in Bang's larger paintings. Here it is seldom possible to label the expanses of colour unequivocally as either "figure" or "ground" as many of the forms seem to change roles constantly. It is precisely this

quality of indeterminacy in the relation between figure and ground which activates the fields of colour and infuses Bang's paintings with an extraordinary dynamism. *Gulf No. 3* (1964) and *Evening Painting No. 1* (1962) (fig. 3) both evoke cartographical associations of a town seen from above, as in a map. In *Gulf No. 3* it is, above all, the black field with the yellow striping that brings the town map to mind. However, unlike the map's authorised symbols for streets and squares, the irregular field of colour in Bang's painting can be interpreted in multiple ways. It can be perceived in the bird's-eye view of a cartographer, levelling all the differences in height of a town by transferring them unto a diagram; it can be perceived as an abstract figure which moves first diagonally, then vertically from the surface like a chimney rising up over the town's roofs; it can be seen as a background for the surrounding landscape of red, orange and purple colour fields, and, finally, with support from the metaphor of the title (*gulf*, or bay) it can be interpreted either psychologically as a dark chasm which opens out, or geographically as a bay whose contours are not dissimilar to the coastline of the Gulf of Mexico or the Caribbean Sea as represented in an atlas.

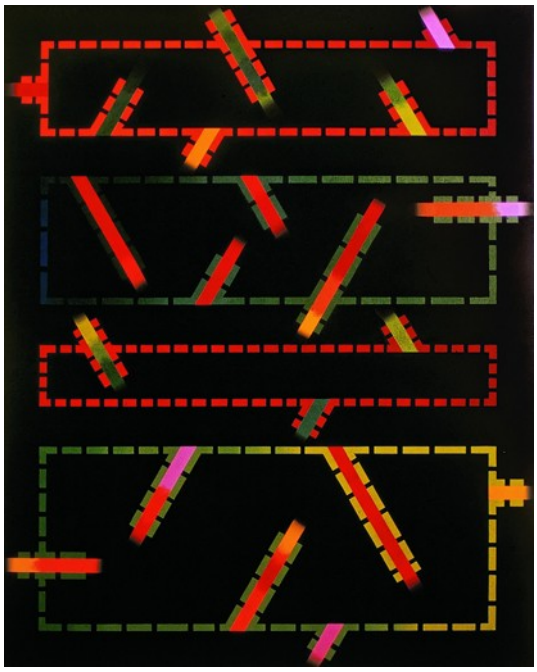
[13] In *Evening Painting No. 1* we encounter again the dynamics and multiplicity of meaning, but something different happens with the space. The forms are drawn together in three informal clusters which seem to move slowly in relation to each other, sliding as if they were not, in fact, anchored to the light ground. The clusters are close to each other and have a – in this case colouristic – interdependence, while not being in direct contact with each other. We shall return to this method of establishing spatial and semantic relations by distributing elements with a mutual interdependence over a larger field, for it is precisely this approach to space which Bang employs in his later three-dimensional works.

[14] It is an indication of increasing public recognition that from 1964 through 1968 Bang participated in various exhibitions at museums and other art institutions in the USA, and in both painting and drawing he received numerous prizes, the so-called *Purchase Awards,* which are modest awards to help serious artists keep working. In 1964 Bang was also awarded a Fulbright Grant for a year's study in Germany. On returning to the USA in 1965 he exhibited his new paintings and drawings in the Esther Bear Gallery in Santa Barbara. Even though Bang himself did not regard his stay in Germany as having been particularly fruitful, Harriette von Breton of the magazine Artforum was in no doubt: "This present exhibition displays a remarkable capacity for growth and maturity that is impressive in one brief year."[9] Referring to *IBM Tube No. 4* (1964-1965) the reviewer identified the factor which would remain an important source of inspiration for Bang's painting, right up to when he abandoned the discipline in 1967: the electronic world of computer technology. As the son of an engineer specialising in television

[9] Hariette von Breton, "Thomas Bang, Esther Bear Gallery, Santa Barbara," in: *Artforum* IV.5 (1966), 47.

technology, Bang, even while still a young boy, was initiated into the world of electronics, printed circuitry, and diagrams. But it was not until his stay in Germany that he began to use this knowledge to develop a vocabulary of images which emphasises the circulation of such a circuit and contains a form of visual kinetic movement which is pictorial rather than real. Kinetic motion and computer technology connotations are particularly pronounced in the series of Bang's final paintings which have been named after the computer and office machinery company IBM, including *IBM Flow No. 4* and *IBM Flow No. 7* (1967). Here it is as if the colours are pumped weightlessly round the smooth "tubes" Bang sends them through, as if he wants to relate to the transport and treatment of intangible data in data sequencing equipment.

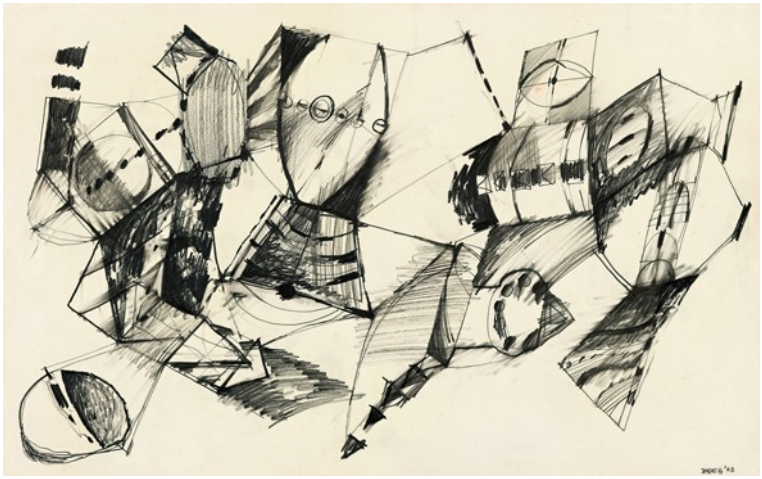
[15] In *Graph* (1967) (fig. 4) four rectangles are stacked one on top of each other as per the serial principle of minimalism. This picture is, however, not minimalist – the level of visual activity and complexity is too high. Furthermore, the title, *Graph*, seems to imply that the painting has an actual motif, even if this is reduced to an abstraction from the reality which the diagram refers to with its stylised, graphic symbols. The outline of the rectangles is punctured, charging them up with pulsating "electricity". Entering and leaving the fields are the oblique staves which light up in red, yellow and green. Some point to the left, others to the right, some up, some down. Still others touch the edges of the canvas like contacts to the world outside. Like the arrow in *Variation on a Theme – Band C* (fig. 1), the staves indicate directions, but because there are so many vectors they do not attract attention around a central point in the pictorial space like the arrow in the 1962 painting. Instead they endeavour to *distribute* attention so that the gaze must reconnoitre every inch of the pictorial space. But the four rectangles are also open to other interpretations. They draw attention to the materiality of the painting, its existence as a physical object by, so to speak, taking the picture frame into it as a motif.



4 Thomas Bang, *Graph*, 1967, oil on canvas, 160 x 127 cm.
The artist's collection (Photo: Thomas Bang)

Early drawings: intimations of Bang's move into space

[16] Parallel with painting – and later sculpture – Thomas Bang also worked with drawing. Apart from actual preliminary studies and sketches, his drawings constitute an independent reserve, although certain forms recur in his paintings and sculptures, for instance the oval, the triangle, the arrow, the frame motif, and form repetitions with mutations. It is, however, difficult to give a general description of Bang's draughtsmanship as it contains an unusual wealth of variation. At one end of the spectrum one finds improvisational and free-hand compositions such as *Waxing and Waning* (1963) where one form seems to grow spontaneously out of the other in a sequence of expansion or contraction, like music fading in and out; at the other end is the stringently controlled geometric expression with echoes of precisely detailed technical drawings of machine parts as in *IBM Waterworks No. 3* (1967) and *Burrow Diagram* (1967). The two last-mentioned drawings are part of a larger group with the character of sectional diagrams which lay bare the inner structure of a piece of machinery which is given no further identification nor any details as to its functions. As such they correspond with late paintings such as *Graph* and the *IBM Flow* series.



5 Thomas Bang, *Unfolding*, 1963, pencil on paper, 36 x 58.5 cm. The artist's collection (Photo: Anders Sune Berg)

[17] *Unfolding* (1963) (fig. 5) is particularly interesting in the present context. It seems to herald Thomas Bang's venture into three-dimensional space several years later. The drawing belongs among Bang's free-hand improvisations. In a narrow pictorial space without any actual depth, squares and ovals, triangles and rhombi unfold expansively in various directions. Every unfolding marks an opportunity for transformation. In unfolding, the original form is displaced and gives birth to another form: a new variant becomes visible, an unknown direction is attempted, and with every new plane unfolded a larger area of the surrounding space is taken over. *Unfolding* thus seem to establish a spatial condition in which all forms find themselves in a process of transformation whose finishing point is just as uncertain as the origin and cause of the process. In these drawings as well as in paintings from the same period such as *Evening Painting No. 1* (fig. 3) it is as if elements are dispersed or *cast out* over an image-field in an apparently fortuitous manner, which creates an informal and expansive spatial order prefiguring Bang's sculptures and installations.

Breaking away from painting

[18] Clearly Thomas Bang's career as a painter was definitely moving along in the latter half of the 1960s. This makes the question of why he decided to abandon painting in 1967 poignant. Bang himself has emphasised that the shift to sculpture was motivated by "a desire to investigate other approaches to the area of art in general, approaches which were quite definitely not restricted to developing images on a flat surface."[10] The explanation is interesting; firstly because it reveals that it was not the pictorial aspect of painting which was the problem, but the limitations of the two-dimensional surface; and secondly because the explanation, together with Bang's *timing* of the decision raised the choice of sculpture above the idiosyncratic level of the merely personal decision. The decision reflects the fact that Bang was an integrated part of the

[10] Thomas Bang's biographical notes, cf. Note 5.

American art scene and in touch with the exsperimental movements in contemporary American art. The most important example for Bang in the late 1960s was Frank Stella, who in his anti-psychological paintings from the 1950s had travelled far in his elimination of the illusionism which characterises Western painting. It was Stella's transformation of images into "image-objects" which interested Bang, as it was something he could use in his sculptural endeavours to make the sculptural object behave in a pictorial manner while *simultaneously* preventing the object from acting like a body in space, i.e. turning into a traditional sculpture, a statue.

[19] Since the mid-1950s American and European painters had questioned the illusionistic qualities of painting. It was, first and foremost, the continuity between figure and ground which was under fire, the "fact" that, as a general rule, a painted figure cannot be torn free from the painted surroundings, the illusionistic space in which it is positioned. This brings the painted figure into a conflicting position vis-à-vis the figure in sculpture which, so to speak, has the physical and social space as "ground" and thus is materially present in the surroundings, sharing these with the body of the viewer. Accordingly, a sculpture does not invite the viewer to "step into" the work's illusionistic and subjective space, it steps forward to meet the viewer in a concrete space which is neutral ground inasmuch as it "belongs" to both the work-object and the viewer-subject. Up through the 1950s and 1960s American painters such as Frank Stella, Jasper Johns, Robert Ryman, Kenneth Noland and Robert Rauschenberg sought for exits from the illusionism of painting by creating surface-oriented semi- or entirely abstract motifs in which the boundary of the "figure" was that of the canvas: Johns had an unfurled flag fill the whole surface so that there was a perfect merging of the figure and the concrete picture-plane; Stella shaped the edges of the painting after the geometrical forms depicted on the canvas; Ryman, with his pastose monochrome painting almost transformed the canvas into being the figure itself; and Rauschenberg made the ultimate symbolic gesture: he took his bed, smeared paint all over the pillow and the quilt and then placed the body's normally horizontal resting place vertically up against the wall as a painting, taking the object's name *Bed* (1955) as its title, pure and simple. As the art historian Mikkel Bogh has observed, one side-effect of these kinds of painting was that they approached sculpture.[11] The paintings became object-like, notably Stella's, which set out new standards for the sculptor of the sixties who wanted to emphasise the physicality of the art object.[12] Stella's black-striped paintings from 1958-1960 – e.g. *Die Fahne Hoch* (1959) and *Tomlinson Court* (1959) – emphasise explicitly the non-illusionistic and build on an anti-psychological view which Stella summed up in his famous remark "What you see is what you see,"[13] which became almost a credo for the minimalists of the 1960s.

[11] Bogh, "Thomas Bang and the Instrument," 42.

[12] Irving Sandler, *American Art of the 1960s*, New York 1988, 26.

[20] In this way the ground was already fertilised with scepticism as regards painting and a desire to cultivate a more object-like pictorial expression, before the general revitalisation of sculpture and object-art which took place in the 1960s. On American soil this was initiated with neo-dadaism's rediscovery of the potential in Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades at the end of the 1950s, for example within the frames of Fluxus; it was intensified and given a crucial new direction by sculptural minimalism in the early and middle 1960s; and it was expanded with a more pluralist range of approaches in reaction to minimalism and modernism's common Achilles heel, formalism, which set in with land art, conceptual art and the so-called post-minimalism in the second half of the 1960s.

[21] Thomas Bang's earliest attempt in three-dimensions resulted in a series of objects which can best be described as a subspecies of minimalism. Bang was preoccupied with the theoretical underpinning of minimalism, which had made possible a new understanding that a work of art exists in an interplay with its surroundings and viewers, and that, by the same token, it is not eternal, nor is its meaning stable, but, on the contrary, is subordinate to time, chance occurrences and the shifting conditions of circumstance. On the other hand Bang considered the formal language of minimalism to be too restrictive with its rigid geometric grid and serial modules. Minimalism took aim at "externalising" sculpture and eliminating the traces of the artist's subjectivity and act of creation as well as the internal relations and differences in the sculpture, i.e. all the differences between materials and individual components, which could induce one to believe that sculpture contained a stable innate meaning. In their endeavour to purge away the internal, meaning-producing relations, the minimalists had come close to nullifying the possibilities for sculpture to communicate as sign and symbol.

[22] In the second half of the 1960s there were more and more artists who, like Bang, felt that the latent formalism which was inherent in minimalism's penchant for objectivity, systems and "a priori" predetermined structures, such as the grid and the simple geometric figure, could lead no further. The static character of minimalist sculpture destroyed the possibilities for letting the work appear as the result of a process that raised fundamental questions about the significance of the very act of creating a work of art. Thus, it is not surprising that Bang's first attempt with three-dimensional objects are not only inspired by but also deviate from minimalism. Some of them assumed the character of reliefs and thus presented themselves as a logical step on the way to sculpture. The relief makes use of sculpture's plasticity, while at the same time incorporating aspects of painting. It develops outwards from a planar surface, and, as a rule, is shown according to the same conditions: hung on the wall so that the viewer

[13] Frank Stella quoted from: Bruce Glaser," Questions to Stella and Judd," in: *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 1995 [originally in a radio programme on WBAI-FM, New York, 1964], 148-164, here 158.

encounters the work frontally and in a vertical position. *Enclosed Field* (1967) points forward in time. Here a square box is positioned on the floor in the same manner as Bang's later floor sculptures. Rising up from the edges of its grey-blue surface are posts linked by rope so that there emerges a regular fencing-in around a regiment of smaller rods distributed in a minimalist grid. The sculpture thus appears as self-enclosed as a game of solitaire. The exaggeration of minimalist regularity in *Enclosed Field* reveals the artist's scepticism about the language of forms he is in the process of investigating. However, at the same time, *Enclosed Field* also anticipates Bang's later installations and their conquest of space because the railing does not, in fact, simply fence something in. In principle it also transforms the sculpture from an object to being also a "field", a delimited zone or a demarcated space for sculptural activity.

The sculptural breakthrough: "post-minimalism", "anti-form" and "process art"

[23] That Bang himself at the beginning briefly engaged with minimalism is probably due to two factors: firstly, that minimalism reigned supreme in the contemporary American art scene, and secondly, that it doubled as both the great enemy against which post-minimalists fought, as well as the master who provided them with a new syntax for the organisation of sculpture and a corresponding phenomenological theory about the connections between the work, the space and the viewer's experience, together with a heightened consciousness that the *installation* of the work in the exhibition space was the alpha and omega for the viewer's experience of it.

[24] "Post-minimalism" is actually a term which was employed retrospectively. The art historian Robert Pincus-Witten launched it in his eponymous book from 1977 as a term to cover a broad and multifaceted schism within art between, on one hand, the early systemic minimalism and the later process-oriented art. With this umbrella term Pincus-Witten could point to the links between a wide variety of artists, e.g. Eva Hesse, Richard Serra, Bruce Nauman, Lynda Benglis and others, by purely terminologically emphasising that they all took minimalism as their point of departure, but also diverged from it on crucial points.[14] "Process art" and "anti-form" were two of the terms which contemporary American art critics used about post-minimalist trends of the 1960s. However imprecise such abstract and general terms can appear when they are intended to describe an artist's work in its individuality, they are in fact completely on target regarding vital aspects of the art of Thomas Bang. As far as "anti-form" is concerned, Bang's highly developed sense of the aesthetic effects of materials and forms eliminates every suspicion that it should be art as such he surrounds with suspicion. It is rather certain aspects of art, more specifically everything having to do with the perfect, the classic and the eternal. As a sculptor, Bang exhibits a strong interest in the fragile and

[14] Robert Pincus-Witten, *Postminimalism*, New York 1977. See also: Ulrik Schmidt, *Minimalismens æstetik*, Copenhagen 2007, 256.

the apparently un-composed and fortuitously organised, in materials which have been subjected to disintegration, and constructions which are consciously balanced on the border of the compositionally unsuccessful – at all events, evaluated according to the traditional criteria for harmonious proportioning and flawless joining-together of the work's components to bring about a perfect synthesis. With Bang one detects what the art historian Rosalind Krauss has described as "the free fall of the material into formlessness", [15] although he never goes all the way to renouncing every form and structure like the artist to whom Krauss's remark is directed: Robert Morris, who, in the late 1960s, moved away from minimalism and became one of the leading figures in post-minimalism, even theorising about "anti-form"[16] and creating works such as *Untitled (Steam)* (1968-69) where a momentary accumulation of steam was exhibited as – a completely material – evaporation process.

[25] Bang took his materials from the everyday world. In *Hang # 1* (1968) there is wood, fibreglass and rope; in *Network # 3* (1968) there is foam rubber and fishing net, in *GLR 3* (1979) glass is brought together in an interplay with burnt wood, while *Wind # 4* (1968) is a combination of carpet, carpet felt and string. Soft materials were explored in the late 1960s, and it is in no way fortuitous that in 1969, Bang could exhibit *Double Bar Wind* (1968) (fig. 6) and the related *Single Bar Wind* (1968) at the exhibition *Soft Art* at the New Jersey State Museum.[17] *Double Bar Wind* – where long, narrow strips of felt and carpet padding in nuances of grey and blue were "transported" between two wooden holders on the same principle as the audio tape loop – was shown in the exhibition together with related soft, non-figurative works such as John Chamberlain's *Heng* (1967) – pieces of foam-rubber mattress pressed together to form a "strained" bundle of curves – and Richard Serra's *To Lift* (1967) – a plate of vulcanised rubber which resembled a soft version of one of Serra's Corten steel plates which with a simple "lift" on one side had been transformed into a protective shielding.

[15] Rosalind Krauss, "The Mind/Body Problem: Robert Morris in Series," in: *Robert Morris. The Mind/body Problem*, ex.cat., New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation 1994, 2-17. P.13.

[16] Robert Morris: "Anti-Form," in: *Artforum* 6.8 (1968), 33-35. Reprinted in: Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, Cambridge, Mass. and London 1993, 41-50.

[17] Ralph Pomeroy, ed., *Soft Art*, ex.cat., Trenton: New Jersey State Museum 1969.

6 Thomas Bang, *Double Bar Wind*, 1968, wood, carpet padding, felt , 96 x 168 cm. Installation shot from the exhibition *Soft Art*, New Jersey State Museum, 1969. Destroyed (Photo: Thomas Bang)

[26] *Soft Art* presented a chance to experience *Double Bar Wind* in the company of one of Robert Morris's famous works in felt from the late 1960s, *Untitled* (1968) where a number of layers of rectangular pieces of felt in various colours were laid on top of each other, cut through with long horizontal cuts and then fastened to the wall in the two upper corners, so that the brutal unstitching of the surfaces – à la Lucio Fontana's slashed paintings – resulted in an irregular, but still serial, sequence of strips which were so pulled down by the force of gravity that the lowest arc of felt just barely touched the floor. As we shall see later on, there is a relation both in the use of material and in the sculptural syntax between Bang and the artists with whom he exhibited in *Soft Art*. The aim of emphasising these family resemblances is not to determine which artist influenced the other. The point is that such kinship demonstrates that during these years Thomas Bang moved in the same sculptural territory as Morris, Serra and others. He was preoccupied with some of the same sculptural questions as they, and worked from some of the same sculptural syntactic principles, but produced completely different results and reached different conclusions, partly thanks to his interest in the theatre of the absurd. Thus there is, purely in terms of expression, a world of difference between the felt folders' elegant and unencumbered fall in Morris's felt work and Bang's *Double Bar Wind*, where the frictionless transport of tape is threatened with obstruction by the tape's tendency to unwind. It says much about Bang's close affiliation with the American art scene that even in the mid-1980s, when he was in the process of moving to Denmark, he was still regarded in the USA as an artist who expressed himself "in American". For, as the American art theoretician David Carrier wrote in a review of the glass objects Bang had created at the New York Experimental Glass Workshop, his "language" was different from that of the sculptor Anthony Caro: "If Caro spoke elegant British-style English, Bang uses a gruffer, New York dialect, the language of a rougher, less sheltered world."[18]

[18] David Carrier, "Thomas Bang at New York Experimental Glass Workshop," *Art In America* vol. 72.9 (1984), 207-209.

[27] Over the years Bang has extended the spectrum of materials with modelling wax, steel, textiles, clothes, kitchen utensils, newspapers, model aeroplanes and much more, even including fresh fruit. It is, however, not just by means of the varied spectrum of everyday materials that Bang expresses his dislike for tradition, but also in the manner in which he manipulates them. He uses production methods familiar from the manufacture of articles for everyday use: coiling, sewing, stacking, repairing – and reproducing a prototype, the fundamental principle in all industrial production. In other words, methods that are closer to the everyday and to everyman's physical experience. 'Canvas', sometimes substituted by other types of textile, is a material he has brought with him from painting. But it is, characteristically enough, torn and shredded, deprived of its form and unity. In works such as *Untitled No. 3* (1969), *Lean 1* (1969) and *Lean 2* (1969) (fig. 7) the torn cotton cloth is bundled tightly and irregularly on a "soft", underlying grid of felt as if in some unhelpful attempt to mitigate a total loss. Because of their physical scale and their clearly reworked state, the constructions look as if they have accumulated the entire mass of manual energy – the "work force" – which has been expended to produce them. In the encounter with the viewer they seem to radiate at one and the same time the destructive and constructive energy that has been used to rip and tear, to lash together and tighten up but also for the gentler work of joining together, bandaging and repairing. Many of Bang's later works feature damage, loss and destruction as necessary stages in the processes of transformation with which the individual works are concerned, but nowhere in the same violently destructive manner as in the early works where a disruptive action is followed by a clearly vain attempt to repair the breakages, patch up the holes and remake what has been destroyed. Works such as these acknowledge that they are shaped by a mutable world, "the turbulent, material world, the place where we – vulnerable, opaque and incomplete beings – have always been."[19] Even when the means are more subtle, Bang's works still bear the stamp of the passage of time. It may be traces of a manufacturing process, in the form of fragile or perishable materials or as an imprint of spiral-shaped metal spools. Tracing the linearity of the wire as well as the spiral shape of the spool, the imprint symbolically links a cyclical understanding of time's tendency to draw circles together with an evolutionary notion of time as linear and irreversible. Bang's works from the 1960s thus move through themes such as division, damage, vulnerability, lack and 'the perishable'. Even in this early phase, we see the foundation of Bang's recurrent formal and existential leitmotifs: the work never constitutes a perfect form, but tempts life as a fragment or damaged unity, fragile, defective and inextricably bound up with the human condition and the relentless advance of time.

[19] John Yau, "Making sculpture in a world of flux: An introduction to Thomas Bang," in: *Thomas Bang. Et udvalg af tidlige arbejder 1968-1974*, ex.cat., Roskilde: Museet for Samtidskunst 1995, 16-22, here 16.

7 Thomas Bang, *Lean 2*, 1969, wood, carpeting, carpet padding, cotton cloth, string, bolts, 299 x 155 cm. The artist's collection (Photo: Thomas Bang)

[28] With the fragment we are back with art as a process or as "process art." In all its incompleteness the fragment makes visible a change. It shifts thereby the interest from the form to the creative process preceding it, and it causes a change in the "work's time" from the timeless to that which is anchored in time. As remote as it was for Bang to dissolve the fragment and the partially dismantled object in a radical formlessness as attempted by Robert Morris, was it remote for him to have the physical work disappear as a consequence of the work's processes. Thus, unlike actual process artists, he used materials which did not rapidly break down, as was quite the opposite with the Puerto-Rican American artist Rafael Ferrer, for example, at one of process art's breakthrough exhibitions, "Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials" at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1969. There Ferrer exhibited *Ice*, a group of minimalist cubes of ice, which, melting in the summer heat were slowly transformed into a formless state. Bang's three-dimensional works often point to the concrete processes and actions through which a given work is brought into being, and many of his works have "process" and "transformation" as their theme while his works are not about putting processes of perishing on stage in the same manner as Ferrer's and Morris's works. In *Four Bag Hang* (1969)[20] the long hanging shreds of fabric for instance seem to refer to the action whereby the fishing net has been lifted dripping from the water with its catch of foam rubber, which the tension in the net has pressed together into dense lumps; in *V 22* (1969) the metal-wire spools and rubber tubes point back to the action of winding itself;

[20] Bang exhibited the work the same year at another of the 1960s important exhibitions, "Between Object and Environment. Sculpture in an Extended Format," at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania.

and in *GLR 3 - Intruder* and *GLR 5 – Intruder,* both from 1979, it is clear that the incinerations which have transformed the colour of the wooden moulds into a burnt black, happened at the moment the glowing mass of glass was poured in.

[29] As the examples demonstrate, Bang did, however, make common cause with Morris and the other process artists when it came to the demand for consensus between the physical act of creation and the concrete material. The process artists, with Morris as their most important theoretical spokesman, demanded a stringent combination of a specific action and a specific material in a closely cooperative process where the character of both the form-producing action and the material being shaped should be clearly readable in the work as traces of the process as a *physical* act.[21] In this manner the "compositional" process to a great extent was replaced by the concrete physical manufacturing process. A clearer signal of this new process-orientation than Richard Serra's *Verb List* (1962-1968) could hardly be found. The work, which must be characterised as a piece of concept art, and, in itself is an expression of the fluid boundaries between concept art and sculpture, consists of a list with a little more than one hundred suggestions as to how, in Serra's own words one can, "relate to oneself, material, place and process."[22] The list begins with, "to roll, to crease, to fold, to store, to bend, to shorten, to twist…"[23] and runs in a random sequence, interrupted by terms for circumstances and forces of which these actions may be a part – "of tension, of gravity, […] of location, of context, of time."[24] That the list of verbs concludes with "to continue"[25] is consistent with process art's fondness for an open and unfinished process and its fundamental teaching that the only lasting thing is transformation which itself never ceases. Serra himself contributed to process art with works such as *Splashing*, executed in the Castelli Warehouse in New York in 1968. He produced the work *in situ* by hurling molten lead into the zone of the room where wall and floor meet. The mass of lead which emerged as the solidified moment of contact with the surfaces, bore clear traces of the *physical* action "to hurl" whereby it had become "installed" in the room, as well as demonstrated that Serra had thrown it with sufficient muscle-power for the lead to spurt up off the wall and thereby defied another factor: the force of gravity. The splashes of lead presented an appearance with an almost Tachist expressivity, but – and this is crucial – the expressivity was held under control by a sober-mindedness and factuality which must be attributed to the prosaic nature of lead.

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[21] Schmidt, *Minimalismens æstetik*, 164.

[22] Serra, quoted in: Schmidt, *Minimalismens æstetik*, 163.

[23] Serra's *Verb List* is reproduced, among other places, in Richard Serra, "Rigging" (1980), in: Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds.*, Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artist's Writings*, Berkely 1996, 600-603, here 602.

[24] Serra, "Rigging," 602.

[25] Serra, "Rigging," 602.

[30] It has been shown that Thomas Bang took an active part in the newly emerging American artists' experiments in the late 1960s, and that he acted from the same general aesthetic orientation parameters as they did. It became rapidly clear that this former painter was not only a talented sculptor but that he also understood how to invest his aptitude in creating something truly ground-breaking. Back in 1968 – i.e. the year after Bang had begun to explore the sphere of sculpture – he was invited by the art historian and curator Harald Szeemann to participate in the seminal exhibition entitled *Live In Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* (usually shortened to *When Attitudes Become Form*), which was presented in Bern, London and Krefeld in 1969-1970. The exhibition was one of the earliest surveys of the anti-formalist tendencies in the late 1960s. Besides American Conceptual art, Arte Povera from Italy and Joseph Beuys with supporters from Germany, the exhibition also shed light on the process-oriented tendencies in American art. *When Attitudes Become Form* has thus gone down in the history of art as the exhibition which marked the turning away from minimalism towards post-minimalism and process art with a presentation of significant process-oriented artists such as Eva Hesse, Bruce Nauman, Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Robert Smithson, Keith Sonnier, Richard Tuttle – and Thomas Bang. As Benjamin H.D. Buchloh has observed:

> When Szeemann visited young and seemingly unknown artists in New York in 1968, his desire – if not his dream – must have been to initiate a paradigm shift in artistic production, one which would manifest a differently structured object experience: a morphology of works signalling pure materials, process and procedures as opposition to mass culture and corporate technology, yielding a dialectics of extreme objective alienation and bodily anamnesis as a radical utopian potential of resistance.[26]

The return of the human being

[31] Of works by Bang, Szeemann chose *Three Bag Hang – One Bag Lie* (1968) (fig. 8). This work was also included in Germano Celant's illuminating reconstruction of Szeemann's show, *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013*. As Jens Hoffmann notes in the book accompanying the 2013 Venice exhibition, Szeemann intended his show to signal a new approach to understanding a world that had by then been changed by new technologies, new politics and the social movements of the 1960s. This meant that, while none of the works were explicitly political by today's standards, the exhibition itself created "a sense of a moment of change – one that would have been palpable in the post-1968 context."[27]

[26] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "The Thresholds of 1969," in: *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013*, ed. Germano Celant, Milano 2013, 495-504, here 497-98.

[27] Jens Hoffmann, "Attitude Problems," in: *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013*, ed. Germano Celant, Milano 2013, 491-94, here 494.

8 Thomas Bang, *Three Bag Hang…One Bag Lie*, 1968, wood, fibreglass, polyester resin, rope, netting, polyurethane foam, 244 x 210 x 240 cm. Installation view from *When Attitudes Become Form*, Kunsthalle Bern; Institute of Contemporary Art, London, 1969. Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen (Photo: Thomas Bang)

[32] The long pole that constitutes the 'spine' of *Three Bag Hang – One Bag Lie* leans diagonally up against the wall from a point a good distance out in the space of the gallery. Only the tip of the pole touches the wall. Closer examination reveals that, in reality, the pole is not "supporting itself" but is "hanging" on a rope fastened slightly higher up the wall. In four places rope is wrapped tightly around the pole as if aiming to reinforce it so as to be able to withstand the force of gravity pulling at the three nets hanging from the pole, each suspended on its own rope, stretched out to almost breaking point by the hard compressed bundles of polyurethane foam, which they have, visibly, the task of holding together. Each of the bundles seems to be containing an outwardly directed energy, an accumulated expansion drive pressing against the net's distended mesh. The length of the ropes holds them hovering above the floor and this placement is striking. They assume neither a painting's vertical position on the wall nor the anchoring of a sculpture to the floor. They find themselves rather in a transitional position in between. The hanging position is in contrast to the placing of a fourth net which the force of gravity seems to have pulled down onto the floor in a "sculptural position" and also further from the wall in the manner of a free-standing sculpture. Like an umbilical cord, the rope ensures the bundle's connection back to the wall while at the same time the longer rope permits the work to reach out into physical and social space. This gives *Three Bag Hang – One Bag Lie* an installation character which in general terms is present in Bang's three-dimensional works from the earliest days. The work is charged with a

latent tension between the hard and the soft: between the sensualism in the supple curves of the ropes and nets and the hardness in the pole's sharp, black, solid, firmly drawn diagonal. The state of tension and the interplay of contrasts reappear in related works such as *Two dark net drop* (1968-1969) and *Network # 3* (1968). One feature which makes these early three-dimensional wall-mounted works special for Bang and untypical for process art as such is Bang's evocation of psychological states of mind, more specifically discordant feelings of pressure, limitation, conflict, pain, and an urge to break away. Here it is important to be aware that in Bang's case this does not lead to introspection and sentimentality. Paradoxically, the expressivity comes across as objectified and externalised , or, with Buchloh, as "extreme objective alienation." It does this because it is expressed through materials and processes which are eloquent in themselves without further super-positions of symbols. And the works actually speak precisely because they are in accordance with the ideals of process art: the ideal of rendering visible the processual act as a purely physical, "exterior" act; and the ideal of stringency in the combination of concrete preparatory work methods (in this case: compressing, suspension, winding, unravelling and stretching out) with everyday materials (in this instance: fishing net, rope and polyurethane foam), i.e. materials which are not usually regarded as possessing the capabilities of noble art materials to carry a deeper symbolism.

[33] Bang's ambiguous insider–outsider position in relation to post-minimalism becomes even clearer when compared to the ways Eva Hesse and Richard Serra worked during the same period with sculpture in transition between wall and floor. Like Bang, Eva Hesse worked in the late 1960s with nets as sculptural material. Like Bang's *Three Bag Hang – One Bag Lie*, Hesse's *Untitled ("Three Nets")* (1966) contains three nets suspended on ropes.[28] Hesse's nets, however, hang on the wall. Like entangled branches they enclose the black-painted papier-mâché lumps which are at rest, loose in their husks. With their underplayed expressivity Hesse's string-bags seem to be free of the dramatic associations with conflict and internment on which Bang's work plays. In Hesse's *Accretion* (1968) we rediscover the leaning pole which at once both supports itself against the wall and reaches out into the space. In this respect too there are crucial differences between Hesse's work and *Three Bag Hang – One Bag Lie*. It takes a considerable leap of the imagination to uncover traces of minimalism in Bang's works – however with good will it is possible to see the use of the large-meshed net as a critical commentary on, and brutal "contortion" of, the minimalists' grid. The situation is quite the reverse in Hesse's *Accretion* where fifty almost identical light, translucent fibreglass tubes are lined up the entire length of the wall. Hesse's *Accretion* continues to be faithful to the minimalists' struggle to reduce the internal relations and differences in sculpture to a minimum; Bang, on the other hand, consciously increases them. In *Three Bag Hang –*

[28] Bill Barette, *Eva Hesse: Sculpture. Catalogue Raisonné*, New York 1989, 80-81.

One Bag Lie there is a play on the formal differences between the hard and the soft and between the diagonal axis and the vertical and horizontal coordinates across which they cut. On the level of signs the work exists by means of the tension between what is suspended in the air and what is lying on the floor, the shut in and the shutting in, that which encloses and that which breaks out. With Hesse we see minimalism's geometric basic module in the form of fibreglass tubes together with minimalism's seriality, although "broken": the row wobbles a little irregularly, the tubes display minor variations in texture, colour and thickness,[29] and there is a lightness about them that seems to extend beyond the purely physical toward something transcendent. Richard Serra's *Prop* (1968) is, on the other hand the very definition of weight. *Prop* consists of a lead plate supported on a wall as if it were a substitute for a painting, by the prop which gives the work its name. The prop is a solid pole of rolled-up lead, which supports itself on the floor and therefore supports the plate by leaning diagonally against it. The heavy plate, held in place by the beam alone, is subject to the force of gravity. In this way it renders visible the potential energy which is held back by the prop with an inner, but totally and absolutely natural and objective, tension as the result: a tension between the plate and the pole's form and weight and between the weight and force each of them represents: the plate's vertical with the direction towards the floor and the pole's diagonal directed towards the wall.[30] The "content" of the work is thus partly the interacting relations between "painting" and "sculpture" and partly the physical actions "hanging" and "supporting", continually in operation. Bang's *Three Bag Hang – One Bag Lie* establishes a field of meaning which, in a corresponding manner, couples "telling" physical states with a testimony of ideas. With Bang, the theme of gravity is almost as prominent as in Serra's *Prop*, but in Bang's work there is, additionally – as will be seen below – a very subtle unfolding of questions of transition and the pictorial.

[34] It is tempting to explain the dissonant expressivity in Bang's works from the late 1960s with a well-known trope which asserts that this expressivity is part of the same context as Bang's national origin, i.e. to explain it by Scandinavian artists' presumed inborn association with a particular melancholic and ragged Scandinavian expressionism. I would maintain, however, that it is impossible to tell that these works were made by "a Danish artist." Their expressivity should rather be linked with a lifelong interest in the theatre of the absurd, an interest which Bang developed in the first half of the 1960s. As he himself notes, the theatre of the absurd, with such playwrights as the Irish Samuel Beckett, the Rumanian Eugène Ionesco, the French Jean Genet and the American Edward Albee became an important reference point when he began to work as a sculptor and to consider *space* in all of its aspects. What really made an indelible impression on Bang was, "the entire arsenal of communication barriers, languidness,

[29] Barette, *Eva Hesse*, 182-83.

[30] Schmidt, *Minimalismens æstetik*, 175-176.

violent confrontation contexts, mixtures of levels of reality, pain, coal-black humour, and all the other good things in this genre."[31]

[35] Just as the theatre of the absurd belongs to a language-sceptical "anti-literary" current in modern drama and literature, Bang's works belong to an "anti-artistic" current which devalues the conventions of art and attempts to devise new forms of expression. Take one of Ionesco's plays, for example *The Chairs* (1952). This follows an elderly isolated couple's hectic placing of chairs for a number of invisible guests who are supposed to come and hear a speaker reveal the old man's discovery of the meaning of life itself. That the guests presumably include "everybody" in the world, is one of many post-apocalyptic features in this drama from a period oppressed by the Cold War fear of an atomic war which would wipe out the entire planet. As the "guests" arrive one by one the old man and woman greet them with a mixture of sociable small-talk and cryptic fragments of memories from earlier in their lives. The poetry of the play, which is the poetry of absurdity, does not lie in the actual wording of the lines, but in the irrational clash which occurs when these are addressed to the growing number of chairs on a stage which is otherwise completely devoid of people. [32] The play's poetic images are, in other words, a product of a collision between the visual and the textual – what, in fact Bang calls the theatre of the absurd's "confrontation contexts" and "mixture of levels of reality."

[36] Bang's early three-dimensional works contain corresponding expressions of the irrational and communication breakdown. As we shall see, he also works with another kind of confrontation: that between different means of expression. At the beginning of the 1970s it is the confrontation between painting and sculpture which is at centre stage; around the year 2000, when Bang's work has moved closer to that of the theatre, a confrontation between the textual and the scenic-visual becomes important. The relation to the theatre acquires an overwhelming significance for Bang's artistic outlook, besides being an orientation which links him to American art. It is generally acknowledged that a new orientation towards theatrical was crucial for the development of new notions of sculpture within American minimalism, post-minimalism and land art.[33] Inspiration was principally drawn from theatre projects which developed new ways of addressing and involving the public. Representatives of the new sculptural trends such as Robert Morris and Bruce Nauman were not merely interested in the burgeoning genre of performance art, they were also passionately preoccupied with the absurdity of Samuel Beckett.[34] As the American art historian Rosalind Krauss remarked in 1977, the artists of the 1960s

[31] Thomas Bang's biographical notes, cf. Note 5.

[32] Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, revised and enlarged edition, London 1987, 20.

[33] See, for instance, Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in: *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 1995, 116-147. Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Cambridge Mass. and London 1990, 201-242. Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance. The American Avant-Garde since 1970*, Chicago and London 1989.

and up through the1970s used theatre and its relation to the viewer to explore what a sculpture *is*, or what it can be. In the hands of a visual artist, the theatre thus became, "a tool to destroy, to investigate, and to reconstruct" sculpture as a medium.[35]

The transition from wall-plane to floor-plane

[37] In the course of 1968 and 1969 Thomas Bang felt increasingly alien on the Californian art scene, where there was no interest in his new three-dimensional works. With his usual focus he began to work on building a network of contacts and getting a regular gallery in New York, which was then the center of post-minimalism. This succeeded beyond all expectations when Ivan C. Karp, head of the respected Castelli Gallery, invited him to exhibit in his own coming gallery, O.K. Harris, in the year of opening. The same year Bang was given the opportunity to pull out and leave the American West Coast when a professorship in sculpture at the art department of the University of Rochester in New York State made it possible for him to move much closer to New York City.

[38] In the years 1968-69 Bang produced a series of wall objects which, like reliefs, reflect on the relationship between painting and sculpture. As such, they represent transitional works which continue his painting's exploration of the relations between figure and ground with new means and are located on the threshold of the "actual" free-standing works of sculpture. Even though they are not paintings, Bang's wall objects exploit the surface of the wall as a ground for forms created in materials such as fabric, sacking, carpet felt, charred plastic tubes, string and wood. If, formerly, "figure" and "ground" were parts of the imaginary space of paintings, they now appeared distinctly real; the "figures" of the wall objects are characterised by a pronounced materiality in terms of texture and tactility; the wall surface's "ground" is physical and concrete. These early works are to a great extent concerned with establishing a connection between the imaginary space of the painting, the wall surface, the floor and the physical space in which the viewer also finds himself.[36] The theme of interrelations is introduced in net and foam rubber works from 1968, among them the previously discussed *Three Bag Hang – One Bag Lie* (fig. 8), and the way in which it is expressed is intensified in a number of works, primarily from 1969, which either seem to unfold around the rudiments of the stretcher of the canvas, e.g. *Four Strap Hang* (1969) and *Untitled No. 3* (1969), or introduce an actual frame motif, as can be seen in *Two* (1968), *Lean and Lie* (1969) (fig. 9), *Lean 1* (1969) and *Lean 2* (1969) (fig. 7). These works

[34] The interest also manifests itself on the work level, with Bruce Nauman, e.g. in the video-documented performance *Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)* (1968); with Robert Morris in *Waterman Switch* (1965), a performance which drew inspiration from Beckett's novella *Watt*, and which Morris executed together with Carolee Schneemann.

[35] Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 242.

[36] Bogh, "Thomas Bang and the Instrument," 44.

make even Lucio Fontana's slashed canvases appear over-cultivated. In *Four Strap Hang* four straps secure what resembles the remaining lower edge of a stretcher, to a place on the wall. Hanging below the edge are formless, unidentifiable forms, swathed in interim bandages made of sackcloth. They seem to beg the interpretation that they are the temporarily and inadequately repaired fragments of a ripped-up painting. However, they also awaken bodily and psychological associations with bound-up crippled limbs twisted in pain. Their physical weight pulls them down to earth, and thereby displaces the work's centre of gravity down below the painting's normal height of suspension to the transitional zone between the wall and the floor. At the same time that *Four Strap Hang* exploits the wall as a background for the work's "figures", the activity is thus drawn in the direction of the floor which is, of course, the zone proper of sculpture.

9 Thomas Bang, *Lean and Lie,* 1969, wood, carpeting, carpet padding, sackcloth, canvas, string, 114 x 244 x 127 cm. Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen (Photo: Thomas Bang)

[39] In the works which make use of the basic form of the picture frame, the frame stands on the floor and leans up against the wall, creating a kind of continuity between the domains of painting and sculpture. *Lean and Lie* attracts special attention on account of its complexity. In terms of construction this is an incomplete frame where the top horizontal bar is secured to two legs as on a boom, and where the lower horizontal bar of the "frame" is defined by the horizontal line of the floor. In *Lean and Lie* the function of the frame is doubled, for the same reason. As a portal it makes possible the transition from wall-plane to floor-plane by opening out the picture-plane to the physical space of both sculpture and the viewer. Thereby the canvas-wrapped frame comes to function as a connecting link between the two- and three-dimensional image.[37] At the same time the frame marks out a field of action, an area where the soft masses of carpet, felt and sacking suspended from it can move down from the frame, "step

[37] Bogh, "Thomas Bang and the Instrument," 48.

forward" and act as active forms which wind down onto the floor. In this way they transcend the two-dimensionality and frame-dictated limitation represented by the frame, and claim part of the surrounding space.

[40] The soft forms in *Lean and Lie* constitute an irregularly pieced together, yet cohesive cable which is thrown out like a hawser as if to ensure the work a solid anchoring in space. *Lean and Lie* is thus constructed according to the same principle as another major post-minimalist work, Eva Hesse's *Hang Up* (1966). *Hang Up* consists of a large stretcher frame wrapped with strips of sheets as if they were a substitute for a shredded canvas. A steel cable wrapped with string and fastened to the upper edge of the frame reaches out into space in a curve that just touches the floor before it swings back to the lower edge of the frame to which it is fastened.[38] Like Bang, Hesse has worked with the relation between wall and floor, and with the translation from surface to depth and space; as in Bang's work, frame and cable constitute a circuit which unites apparently extreme opposites: painting and sculpture, illusory space and physical space, limitation and expansion. Their works are, however, as different as night and day. Hesse's frame adheres to the wall and remains in a painting context, whereas Bang's construction is a free-standing object positioned to lean against the wall. And where Hesse's frame and cable are painted in shades of light and dark grey, which give the whole construction a restraint immaterial and graphic appearance, Bang's work is, on the other hand, dissonant and confrontational. Hesse's *Hang Up* is the embodiment of weightlessness and elasticity; Bang's *Lean and Lie* the embodiment of fragility and consciously provoked collapse. Where Hesse's cable executes a *loop* out into space, only to return to the two-dimensional surface, Bang's cable seems to have discovered a firm anchorage out there. Like all his wall objects from that period *Lean and Lie* performs a movement from the pictorial and wall-oriented to the sculptural and floor-oriented, but it is characteristically a movement that is never completed. On the contrary, it is halted at the aesthetically interesting stage where neither dominates the other, and where the pictorial and the sculptural, colour and form, surface and volume stand in a dynamic relationship of tension to each other and the surrounding space.

The pictorial sculpture

[41] As far as the pictorial is concerned, it is clear that Bang is involved in a double confrontation, partly with the illusionism of 'the pictorial' in painting, partly with the notion of anti-pictorial sculpture which developed around 1900 and remained predominant right up to the end of the 1960s, when it reached its zenith. An important turning-point in the theoretical modernist discourse on sculpture around 1960 was the question of how far one could isolate any constituent features which set sculpture apart from other artistic disciplines: there was a broad consensus that sculpture was

[38] Barette, *Eva Hesse*, 66-67.

particularly distinguished by its plastic physicality, its objecthood and its presence. In this context the referential and illusionistic aspects of the pictorial were increasingly subject to criticism and regarded as alien elements because they prevented sculpture from cultivating the characteristics which were emphasised as essentially sculptural and set in contrast to sculpture as an illusionistic image and emblematic figuration, which was now regarded with suspicion. As a result, the discussions from the 1950s to the mid-1970s about the true nature of sculpture became stretched between the poles of objecthood and the pictorial. The polarisation which followed from a revaluation of objecthood and the subsequent de-valorisation of the pictorial, was clearly articulated in Robert Morris's writings on sculpture, while on Danish soil it found expression in the sculptor Willy Ørskov's ideal of an "objective sculpture" ("tingslig skulptur"), an art object with a minimal radiance of pictorial energy.[39] In the article "Den tingslige skulptur" ("The Objecthood of Sculpture") from 1966, Ørskov made himself the spokesman for a concept of sculpture as a physical object on the same lines as other physical objects, an object which was supposed to act, "directly on the sensory organs without having to take the detour around images and associations."[40] In other words, the pictorial was not allowed to steal attention from sculpture as plastic form. The same year, Morris formulated similar thoughts in "Notes on Sculpture." Morris denied the relief, which he regarded as a hybrid between painting and sculpture, any legitimacy, justifying himself as follows: "The autonomous and literal character of sculpture demands that it have its own, equally literal space – not a surface shared with painting."[41] A corresponding denunciation was directed by Morris against the use of painting's means of expression *par excellence*: colour. Because colour emphasises the optical in sculpture's surface, Morris believed it undermined sculpture's physicality.[42]

[42] I would assert that one can read Thomas Bang's works from the late 1960s and 1970s as a polemical contribution to the international discussion. When Bang, as described above, strove to obtain a hybrid state between painting and sculpture, it was because he would advocate a "third way" between the referentiality of the pictorial which was associated with painting, and the non-referring objecthood which late modernists and minimalists ascribed to sculpture. Bang's works are at once thing and image. By subjecting material objects to various transformation processes he moves them into a

[39] For a thorough discussion of this sculpture-theoretical dispute see: Magnus Thorø Clausen, "Billedstrid i nyere dansk skulptur," MA thesis (Research Degree) from the University of Copenhagen, 2007.

[40] Willy Ørskov, "Den tingslige skulptur," in: *Aflæsning af objekter og andre essays*, Copenhagen 1966, 11-26, here 22. Printed in: Willy Ørskov, *Samlet. Aflæsning af objekter, Objekterne, Den åbne skulptur*, Copenhagen 1999.

[41] Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 1," published first in *Artforum*, vol. 4, no. 6, 1966. Printed in: Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, Cambridge Mass. and London 1993, 1-10, here 4.

[42] Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 1," 9.

virtual space and thus endows his objects with a pictorial effect; and by making use of the objects he takes the pictorial out into physical space and thus makes the image sculptural and concrete. As the American art historian Kenneth Baker observed as far back as 1971, Bang's works exploit and clarify the fact that sculpture's strength in terms of expression and difference from painting consists precisely in its "literal continuity between real and virtual space."[43]

[43] A significant and recurrent aspect of the early wall works is the fact that only the work's hanging on the wall or mounting on a supporting bar prevents its collapse. Besides reinforcing associations of psychic disharmony and bodily decay, the act of hanging is also an early example of Bang's introduction of a "dependency factor" in the building-up of his works. The works are dependent on their circumstances in the sense that each must be installed in a specific way to attain their existence as a work. This dependency, or installation character, becomes more pronounced in Bang's later works, specifically in a group of multi-component works from the 1970s, such as *F7* (1970) and *E6* (1971), and in the actual installations from more recent years, such as *Attempting to make sense of many things* (1995) and *Man havde gennem længere tid* […] (2003) (fig. 14-15).

[44] That Bang began early to work with the "dependency factor" and an installational consciousness, is substantiated by the photographic documentation of his first exhibition at O.K. Harris in 1970, the year the gallery opened (fig. 10). The photograph shows how Bang has consciously placed the works so they create an intense dialogue with the surroundings. It is not enough that the works are involved in a meticulously choreographed interplay with each other with a focus on similarities and differences in form. Bang has also sharpened the feeling of spatial activity by having the quiet and seemingly screened-off space between the venue's two white columns disrupted by a low construction, *S7* (1970), where two crooked nylon belts like parentheses "frame" the spool and spiral which bind them mutually to a full sculptural sequence. The rounded form appears again in *V2* (1969), but there it is in a dialogue with the wall, in that Bang has mounted the work so that the viewer is invariably led to imagine that the construction has bent itself into a quarter-circle shape in an attempt to adapt itself to the narrow wall the sculpture is fastened to. That Ivan C. Karp had great expectations of Bang and that the latter also honoured them is apparent if one leafs through the *Arts Magazine* "Special Issue on New York Galleries" (April 1971). In a theme section the heads of 88 of New York's leading galleries are given column space to present their galleries in words and pictures, among them the new O.K. Harris. As one might have expected of the head of a new gallery, Ivan C. Karp did not write a longer report on the gallery's exhibitions; instead he contributed a brief forward-looking statement, indeed

[43] Baker, "Thomas Bang," 47.

almost a manifesto, in which he defined the gallery's aims as follows: "O.K. Harris will change the climate of art because it expects to measure the consequences of all the prevailing issues of the arts in manifold and complex exhibitions, and to identify major new creative energies in the furthest ranges of artistic ideologies."[44] As a visual signal of how he expects to honour the expansive promises, Karp used an illustration of Thomas Bang's *S 9* (1970), a floor sculpture with a close affinity to the piece in the exhibition mentioned above.

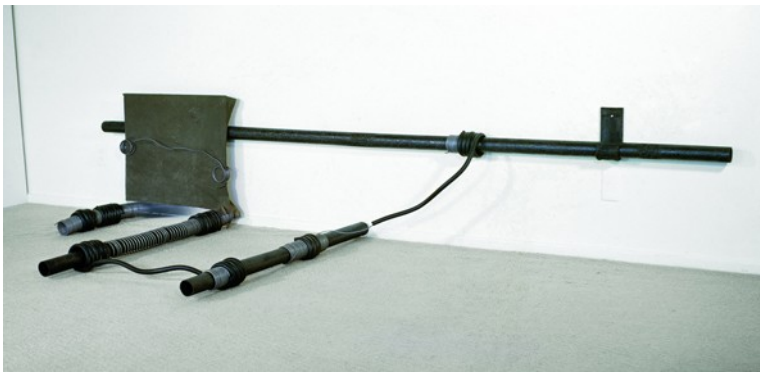
10 Installation view from Thomas Bang's solo show at O.K. Harris, New York, 1970 (Photo: Thomas Bang)

Circuit between image and sculpture

[45] In the documentary photograph from Thomas Bang's first exhibition at O.K. Harris (fig. 10) there are also two works which take up the theme of movement from wall to floor in a new manner. Here the dissonance, the torn quality and expressivity which characterised Bang's interpretation of this theme in the early wall objects from 1968 to 1969 makes way for a more *cool*, almost technological expression. Like Bang's later paintings, the two three-dimensional works allude to electric circuits, electronics and the way in which these technologies participate in, and via their massive presence and extended use in everyday life, shape the use of the senses, thought, culture – and art. The sculptural syntactic spine in both works is a long charred PVC tube mounted on the wall approximately 60 cms above the floor. From the tubes, one or more wires reach out into space and form a bridge from the wall to the floor in that each one "opens out" in a spool-like object placed directly on the floor. Visible in the left side of the photograph are parts of *F 2* (1969) (fig. 11), behind the pillar to the right, *V 22* (1969). They form part of a group of works in which spools and spirals dominate and in which the actions to wrap and be wrapped, to establish connections and create interruptions between spools, function as important processes and representational elements. In *F 2* a section of the tube is wrapped with an iron wire which, at one end, is covered with black rubber hose. The end of the iron wire runs on from this spool-wrapping to a PVC tube on the floor

[44] Ivan C. Karp, "O.K. Harris," in: *Arts Magazine* 45.6 (1971), 58.

where the wrapping continues for a short distance and is interrupted before being taken up again at the other end of the tube. Here the system repeats itself: the end of the wire, again covered with rubber hose, runs on and creates a connection to the other PVC tube where the wrapping continues, this time for most of the tube's length. A third spool, without a tube, lies parallel to the first two, but has no connecting wire to them. Here the connection is established by an indirect route via an intermediary link, a vertically-positioned aluminium plate secured firmly between the windings in the two spools. It is important to note that *F 2* not only incorporates movement from wall to floor, but also takes up once again the image problematic from the early wall objects. The aluminium plate is almost covered with a piece of fabric of the type used on camouflage-green military tents. Even though it is not genuine painter's canvas, the fabric still connotates a stretched canvas as it is stretched tightly over the plate, covering almost all of its mirror-like surface and leaving only a narrow border of metal visible at the lower edge. These associations are reinforced by the fact that the fabric-covered part of the plate rises up above the bar and thus gesticulates in the direction of painting's traditional hanging zone on the wall. At the same time, however, the plate retains a direct physical connection to the two sculptural elements on the floor and thereby marks the plate's dual attachment to the symbolic zones of wall and floor The two spool halves with connecting wire which Bang has attached to the sides of the aluminium plate emphasise the plate's role as both a connector and a conductor in the work's inner circuit, as the wire seems to "draw" and thus make visible an invisible current of energy passing through the plate.



11 Thomas Bang, *F 2*, 1969, burnt PVC tube, rubber hose, iron wire, aluminium plate, cotton cloth, 56 x 305 x 95 cm. The artist's collection (Photo: Thomas Bang)

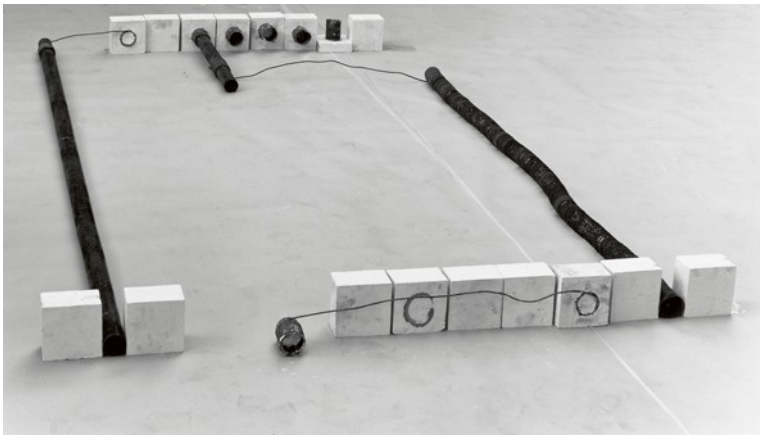
[46] On closer inspection one discovers that the almost-covered plate has a double role. The aluminium plate does not only have a sculptural function as a metal link in the circuit for production, compression and distribution of activity which the work seems to build up. The aluminium surface also functions as a mirror that extends the spools situated in front in an imaginary space, an image space. Paradoxically enough, that which curbs its image-creating activity is the "canvas" which covers all imagery going on above spool-level: the aluminium plate, the sculptural element which also poses

as the picture plane, has a picture-function which in an almost irrational way is cut off by the work's material element, the "canvas". To derive an unequivocal message from this situation seems almost impossible, an irreducible paradox. Nevertheless it makes sense to see *F 2* as a link in Thomas Bang's constant reflections with respect to how one can work with the pictorial when one does not want to restrict oneself to developing images on a surface. In *F 2* the image is transferred from the domain of painting to sculpture in that it is the aluminium plate which creates the reflection, and the iron wire which does the drawing, whereas it is the "canvas's" function to negate and cover.

[47] In *F 2* and related spool works such as *No. V 18* (1969) and *F 7* (1970) electric and electronic technology seems thus to have functioned as a parallel system with which Bang was able to think through sculpture's language and relation to the pictorial. From the circuit structure Bang derived new ways of articulating the internal relations between parts which resulted in another, more dynamic understanding of sculpture as a product of a series of *events*. Thus it is in the abstract organisation of sculpture that the work's semantic connections to the technological evolution and the surrounding culture are established. With Bang, sculpture is not defined as a static object, but as a circuit full of activity; sculpture, in other words, is to be understood as an area where actions, interventions, transport, exchange and the sequence of change, irregularities and displacements of meaning which these events bring with them actively take place. In this sense Bang's sculptures are rather productive "machines" than aesthetic products.

[48] This idea of the work as a productive agency is also present on the conceptual level. In the 1970s Bang was deeply involved with trying to find expression for "the possible" in the sense of the potential and that which is to come. The possible, obviously, contains a problem of presentation, for how can one show what is not yet manifest? Bang solved the problem by having his works form unfinished narratives which stimulate the beholder to imagine what might happen later on. Thus, in *F 2* one might imagine the camouflage removed from the aluminium so that it, by being exposed, could draw the surrounding space into the work as a reflection; in *V 22* (1969) it is possible to imagine several of the windings of the iron wire spirals pulled out so they would reach far into the space of the room. "The possible" which Bang wanted to stimulate the beholder to imagine, was not a new and different work but, on the contrary, the destruction of the work in its present form. His intention with these works was thus far from the challenge to be "co-creative" and participate in 'building up' the work on site so central in the relational aesthetic and interactive art which has won such wide dissemination since the 1990s. It is however worth noting that the imagined transformation in both *F 2* and *V 22* could also change the work's status in the beholder's eyes from being a work which articulated the transformation from wall to floor to being a work delimiting and activating

a larger area in the spatial zone. In both cases "the possible" thus potentially embodies a spatial expansion. It is, thus, not surprising that among Bang's works of the subsequent years one finds several with an actual installation character, e.g. *E 2* (1971) and *E 6* (1971) (fig. 12) which both continue the circuit motif. The larger of the two, *E 2,* thus measures over 4 metres in length and over 2 metres in width, while its height, on the other hand is only 15 centimetres, which is unusually low for a sculpture of such otherwise large dimensions – even if there is some precedent such as Carl André's flat minimalist sculptures of metal plates laid directly on the floor. Bang's works come across almost as a type of floor relief, i.e. a type of sculpture which – typical for Bang – retains a connection to the plane of painting.



12 Thomas Bang, *E 6*, 1971, plaster, iron wire, PVC pipe, 15 x 193 x 305 cm. The artist's collection (Photo: Thomas Bang)

[49] *E 2* creates, by means of its zigzag structure of aluminium plates, plaster blocks, metal wire spools and connecting metal wire, a dynamic physical sequence of change on the floor, where the surrounding space seems to cut like wedges into the work's zone and becomes a part of it. *E 6*, on the other hand, creates a more closed structure, or rather: it hints with its beginnings at a "possible" closed structure. Like the foundations for a house which is not yet built, or is almost levelled to the ground, the work, with its PVC tubes, spools and plaster blocks with and without cast spools, delimits a place separated from its surroundings. The two works seem, however, to have less to do with the capability of a house to screen off and give stability than with the capability of electric and electronic systems *to transport* energy and information. That in the year of their creation, 1971, the American critic, Marjorie Wellish, described these works as an uneasy cross between materialised drawings and non-functional electric installations is, in a sense, telling.[45] In contrast to an unshakable foundation, the two works give, in fact, an impression of being able to be easily dismantled, indeed of being made to be taken apart,

[45] Marjorie Wellish, "Material Extensions in New Sculpture", in: *Arts Magazine* 45.8 (1971), 24-26, here 26.

packed away, transported to a new venue and becoming part of new work combinations, new circuits.

[50] The provisional character for which Bang strives in several of the works from the early 1970s also qualifies them as installations. A fair number of them, amongst others *E 2* and *E 6*, only existed for the duration of the exhibition in question, in which the often numerous elements that made up the works were assembled and installed. After the exhibitions closed the works were dismantled and the parts went back into storage from which new constellations could arise. During this period, "sculpture" became almost an archive, a flexible store of half-fabricated pieces and "prefabricated" components, a store which never appeared in its entirety, but solely presented its partial aspects and came into view as fragments when the parts were temporarily incorporated in variable constellations.

[51] The unusual quality in this working method is not to be found in the transitoriness of the constellations, since the 1970s saw the making of masses of temporary installations. What is special was that the recycling of concrete parts of a realised physical work were elevated from the level of the pragmatic *ad hoc* solutions to a systematic conceptual principle which had as its purpose the attack on the notion of the work of art as a unique object, i.e. its originality and integrity in terms of its objecthood. Within the parameters of Bang's store-and-recycle principle, elements which had appeared once in a temporary work could turn up again in new "original" work contexts. This practice was not unlike the way in which Rauschenberg had the same photograph of a glass of water, President Kennedy, a moon landing, road signs, measuring instruments etc., appear in ever new contexts in his silkscreen paintings. In this way Bang broke down the contradiction between "original" and "repetition" – solo appearance and reappearance. For the public who followed Bang's exhibitions during these years, it must, moreover, have been striking how the new works contained fragment-references to previous works. It must also have been clear that the stockpile Bang drew on was of such an incomplete character that it would have been impossible to create a meaningful totality of the components. Any particular realisation was always only a fragment of greater, but no less fragmentary holdings and as such the individual realisations were vague in terms of significance and demanded genuine interpretation rather than a superficial reading.

The transformation of the image

[52] So much for "objecthood" in the circuit-like works from the 1970s, but what about "the pictorial"? It is characteristic for many of these horizontally-oriented works that they introduce one or other type of physical frame motif. This can be in the form of a "boundary-marking" which marks the end-points in long sculptural sequences as seen in *No. V 18* (1969), *F 7* (1970) and *S 12* (1970). Or it can be in the form of the framing of a

rectangular field by sculptural elements in *E 6* (fig. 12) or the coupling of the spool and circuit motif with an explicit frame motif in *S 1* (1970). The presence of the frames, together with their character of floor relief can make these works recall pictures with a horizontal orientation, but their imagery is, nonetheless, very minimal and rudimentary, as they explore how few elements one can lay out and still make them form "a sculpture" capable of yielding image associations to the viewer.

[53] In 1972 the American art historian Leo Steinberg, in the periodical *Artforum*, published a polemic against the formalist, modernist art criticism which had dominated the American art discussions for decades. What Steinberg actually thought about Clement Greenberg and like-minded critics need not be dealt with here, for in the present context what is interesting is Steinberg's thought about contemporary painting. In the course of the 1950s and 1960s, Steinberg explained, some painters had deserted modernism's position and formulated an approach to art which re-thought the orientation of the picture plane in relation to the viewer's body, and thus changed its appearance, content and communication with the viewer. According to Steinberg this change was clearest in the flat figurative painting developed in the same period by Jean Dubuffet and Robert Rauschenberg. Steinberg thought that Dubuffet and Rauschenberg broke with the tenacious understanding of the picture which had been valid for hundreds of years and which was still in effect in large parts of the abstract modernist painting, e.g. cubism and abstract expressionism. According to this understanding the picture plane was an upright surface on which the artist depicted a world or "some sort of worldspace" which was transferred to the picture plane so that it corresponded with the position of the standing body, a relation which displayed itself clearest in landscape painting with its invitation to wander right into the picture's countryside. Because of this correspondence, the viewer would automatically relate to the picture purely visually, "from the top of a columnar body" as Steinberg expressed it.[46] With an artist such as Rauschenberg the conventional picture plane became, however, redefined as a *flatbed*-picture-plane, according to Steinberg's thesis. The term *flatbed* has industrial overtones, and Steinberg also took it directly from the printing industry: a *flatbed printing press* is a press where the printing surface rests on a horizontal plate. According to Steinberg, Rauschenberg's assemblage-like *combine paintings* and his silk-screen paintings – which actually use a horizontal printing technique – set forward a new understanding of the picture because they do not simulate vertical planes, using instead a horizontal *flatbed*-plane. Such pictures "no more depend on a head-to-toe correspondence with the human posture than a newspaper does," argued Steinberg as he continued presenting the general validity of his thesis:

> The pictures of the last fifteen to twenty years insist on a radically new orientation, in which the painted surface is no longer the analogue of a visual experience of

[46] Leo Steinberg, "Reflections on the State of Criticism", in: *Robert Rauschenberg*, ed. Branden W. Joseph, Cambridge, Mass. and London 2002, 7-37, here 27.

> nature but of operational processes. To repeat: it is not the actual physical placement of the image that counts. There is no law against hanging a rug on a wall, or reproducing a narrative picture as a mosaic floor. What I have in mind is the psychic address of the image, its special mode of imaginative confrontation [...].[47]
>
> What I have called the flatbed is more than a surface distinction if it is understood as a change within painting that changed the relationship between artist and image, image and viewer.[48]

[54] The "picture plane" Bang works with in the 1970s is not the conventional vertical, since that addresses the viewer from another angle, a *flatbed* angle, which confronts the body and the senses in a different sculptural manner. This change can be most clearly perceived if one compares with the way in which Bang evokes the circulation motif in the late IBM paintings. There the picture is still composed so that it can be seen "from the top of a columnar body." In the circuit-like works from the 1970s it is the same motif fitted together by manual operations, and they are not related to a static body, but a mobile one which can stride the length of the work, compare how it appears from a variety of angles, bend down to closely examine the details and apprehend the tactile differences of the materials with the fingers. Where the IBM paintings invite the beholder to take in the large forms of the composition in a single glance, the works from the 1970s are an invitation to a completely different form of reading which includes the "operational processes" which have given them form. Many of them are indeed to be read according to the logic of a process, or "backwards" as Bang has expressed it. It should be carefully noted which changes have taken place during the building-up of the work, so that one can read and grasp the work in the apparently temporary end-point which occurs in a given installation.

[55] A good example of this is the installation *F 5* (1973) (fig. 13) whose narrative of a sequence of substitutions should be read "backwards" from its present finishing point.[49] Two rectangular plaster blocks are placed at a distance of approximately 4 metres apart so that they frame a long series of thin iron rods. The rods activate the floor surface and seem almost to form a path or a passage between the two blocks. In each block is a small shelf with a number of black rubber rectangles. Someone or something seems however to have intervened in this almost symmetrical and tendentially static order, as some of the rubber rectangles are missing or have been "pulled" from the shelves and, instead, added to a number of the rods. They seem thereby to receive a dynamic function as transporters of material between the stations of the two white blocks. Thus when one moves step by step "backwards" through the series of operations

[47] Steinberg, "Reflections on the State of Criticism," 28.

[48] Steinberg, "Reflections on the State of Criticism," 36.

[49] See Mikkel Bogh, "Diagrammer over en ustabil verden," in: *Thomas Bang. Apparatur til en ustabil verden,* ed. Anna Schram Vejlby, Flemmig Friborg and Anne Marie Nielsen, Copenhagen: Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek 2009, 90-173, for a deeper examination of the substitution theme in Bang's works from the 1970s.

of which the installation is a result, *F 5* becomes an entire small narrative about the transformation of a static situation into a dynamic event, the coming into existence of an active circuit. It must thus be clear that the conception of the image from which Bang worked in the 1970s is related to Steinberg's thoughts about the *flatbed* picture plane. One can only read Bang's image-formations if one is interested in which operative processes they are a result of, for Bang makes the manufacturing process an important part of the picture. Doubtless this was on Hellen Lassen's mind when she stated that Bang's works have always demanded a penetrating reading and empathic insight.

13 Thomas Bang, *F 5*, 1973, plaster, iron wire, rubber, 18 x 61 x 305 cm. The artist's collection (Photo: Thomas Bang)

Narrative installations and textual expansion

[56] The principle that the manufacturing processes are an important link in the works' formation of meaning still holds, even though Bang's formal language in recent decades has moved more in the direction of the metaphorical and, in numerous cases, has experienced a textual extension in the form of titles which in themselves are a complete narrative.[50] Take one of the main works, the large installation *Man havde gennem længere tid* […] ("For some time people had [...]") (2003) (fig. 14-15) which Bang made specifically for the exhibition *Med kærlig hilsen* ("With Love") which was shown by Kunsthal Charlottenborg in Copenhagen on the 250th anniversary of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 2004. The installation was low in elevation like the circuit installations from the 1970s, but also marked by the more allegorical and explicitly narrative direction which Bang's works have gradually assumed since the 1990s. It appeared most of all to resemble some curious elevated railway system of wood with large, heavy iron balls as bridge supports and smaller spherical bodies spread at points on the cut sections of the track. The balls seemed to be on a shuttle trip between a series of disturbing stations consisting of metal stands bearing mysterious black screens or

[50] See Anders Troelsen, "Gådefuldt grej og underlige gerninger," in: *Thomas Bang. Apparatur til en ustabil verden*, ed. Anna Schram Vejlby, Flemmig Friborg and Anne Marie Nielsen, Copenhagen: Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek 2009, 197-263, for an overall examination of the meaning of the titles in Bang's works.

weird metal plumb bobs hung in tangled bunches of string. The installation had structural features in common with the 1970s circuit installations, and the motif itself with the winding tracks was referring right back to one of Bang's early paintings, *Nine Views* (1966), where a winding band billows out around a strictly symmetrical structure of bars, as well as to one of the early drawings of sectional diagrams, *IBM Waterworks No. 3* (1967), in which the winding tracks are combined with (almost) spherical forms. The circuit and the diagram are thus motifs which connect the whole of Bang's production. They create continuity, but the different treatment of them over time also reveals where the breaks occur and how his visual language is relentlessly transformed.

14 Thomas Bang, *Man havde gennem længere tid…* ("For some time people had… "), 2003, mixed-media, dimensions variable. Installation view from *Med kærlig hilsen* ("With love") at Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Copenhagen. The artist's collection (Photo: Anders Sune Berg)

15 Thomas Bang, *Man havde gennem længere tid…* ("For some time people had… "), 2003, mixed-media, dimensions variable. Installation view (detail) from *Med kærlig hilsen* ("With love") at Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Copenhagen. The artist's collection (Photo: Anders Sune Berg)

[57] Part of this transformation is the transformation of the titles of his works. Bang's early paintings and drawings were titled in a way which indicated the theme with one or few words and, like a metaphor, opened the work to sequences of associations. The titles of the works from the 1970s, on the other hand, are drained of metaphor and reduced to identification numbers. The titles of the works from the most recent years have, in many cases, been lengthened to become short pieces of prose. The installation at Charlottenborg was, thus, provided with a page-long title which recounted the history of how excavations in an unnamed, impoverished area populated by unimaginative inhabitants brought to light curious objects, including heavy iron balls which were left behind at their sites of discovery. The text's mould-breaking main character, a young girl who attentively observes and reflects on her surroundings, notices, however, that someone had begun to join up the points made by the spheres into, "an irregularly meandering network of path- or road-like configurations, which summoned up unmistakable cartographic associations. Where all the balls had previously been in a condition of potential mobility, they were now to a considerable extent held motionless by being placed in depressions in a series of cut pieces of track."

[58] The work is thus a mapping-out, a diagram of the actions and movements which have led to the transformation of a place: a fixing of time in space. What the title text does here is to interpret the work "backwards" in that the text recapitulates the series of operational processes which have apparently given the location described its present form. However, there is an important difference in relation to the way Bang, in

the 1970s, made visible the processes which brought forth the work, with the aid of sculptural means. The processes mentioned in the text – excavations, taking of measurements, the establishment of connections between the points of the spheres, the moving of the spheres and the subsequent demarcation of their original positions – take place in a fictive universe. We cannot see the excavations, the measurements, or the movements outlined as visible traces of a process in the work. To discover that the fiction can be interpreted as an allegorical description of how the artist has thought out and built up the work through several stages, demands therefore an extra act of abstraction on the part of the viewer. The text, however, contains more than an artist's commentary on his own work, on the relation between the work and the world, and on the radical displacements and transformations which an experience of the world can undergo in the creative process where it is crystallised into artistic representation. The title text also constitutes a coherent narrative, in which, however, absurd communication breakdowns arise because many relations are not thoroughly explained. For example, we do not find out why the spheres were dug up, and the observation that the tracks remind the girl of the routes of her own journeys outside the district offers us no certainty as to which reality or experience the mapping out will show us apart from "path- and road-like figurations." The only meaningful way to treat such a "title" is as an integrated part of the work's materiality, narrative and creation of meaning. Just like the work's plastic components the text sets out a number of clues, which are instrumental in expanding the work's field of association and possible interpretations.

The American connections

[59] Thomas Bang's sculptural vision and concept of the image, indeed his whole manner of making his work speak is rooted in his many years of artistic activity in America and is suffused with his close contacts with the experimental area of the American art scene. With his works and as a person, not least as a teacher of junior artists, Bang participated in discussions on the purpose and means of sculpture and in the artistic work by developing new sculptural practices on equal footing with his American colleagues. The circumstance that Bang reached conclusions totally different from theirs, places him as a loner both in the American and the Danish context. As Bang's works from recent years demonstrate, elements from the American period still occupy a place in his basic sculptural syntax, just as themes and motifs from the early phase resurface transformed.

[60] When one thinks of the changes which Bang's formal language has undergone repeatedly since the 1980s, there is nothing to suggest that the migration from New York's large art scene to the modest Danish one has put a brake on his artistic development or curbed his desire to experiment. Quite the reverse: Bang seems to have been stimulated to move in new directions and to seek other angles of approach to areas

which he had previously explored but not exhausted all possibilities in. Even though Bang has always gone his own way, his later works follow the development within European sculpture and installation art since the 1980s in the direction of more sensual, image-suffused and stage-conscious sculpture with a more complex, narrative or allegorical content. Another crucial factor is that theatre and other forms of stage art have, in recent years constituted just as vital a reservoir of possible expressions and structural principles for Bang as painting and sculpture.[51]

[61] The changes in Bang's language of forms do, however, leave us with the question: Where is Bang situated today? Where, in artistic terms, does he feel at home? Among American artists? Hardly. Among Danish artists? To place him in that circle does not seem right either, especially when one thinks of how large a role the American connections and international outlook have always played in his art. Perhaps it is possible – thinking of Bang's suitcase objects – to call him a *transatlantic* artist. For what words capture better the cultural exchange between the American and the European which Thomas Bang's works from the last thirty odd years thrive on?

[51] For an in-depth analysis of the theatricality of one of Bang's major works from the 2000s, the installation group *Syv forsøg på at skabe en passende udsigt* ("Seven attempts at creating a suitable view") (2002), see "Thomas Bang and the scenography of objects" in my book, *Installation Art: Between Image and Stage*, Copenhagen 2015, 276-283.