

Question: What's a Coat Hanger when it's not a Coat Hanger?

Answer: Perhaps it is an atom, a molecule, or a cell. A unit, a component, or a building block.

Gordon Froud creates sculpture through the strategies of modular construction and repetition. Or to put it another way: the sculptural form expands by virtue of his obsessive repetition of constructed modules until the final piece becomes the sum of its parts. So the *raison d'être* of Froud's artistic production resides not in what the work narrates or represents but rather in the visual record of its making. Art works of this nature are self-referential or self-reflexive, they operate out of a system of circular logic and, to a large extent, are neither impacted on by their surroundings, nor do they seek to comment on their surroundings. They just are. Or so it would seem.

It is interesting that this mode of sculptural construction, which can (perhaps) be considered to have had its earliest manifestation in Andy Warhol's multiples of the 1960s but more realistically in Tony Cragg's work of the late 70s is now considered to be a Postmodern strategy. It could be argued that its loyalties lie more comfortably within the Modernist idiom that sought to create a pure, universal language that spoke of nothing outside of itself 'art for art's sake'. The Postmodern notion that an art work's meaning is contingent on the associations brought to bear on it by both artist and viewer seems to have little place here. And yet it is more complex than that. Contemporary American artist Tom Friedman, one of the greatest proponents of this type of work, describes his approach as a process of scrutinising his proposed material to decide what it may stand for and what his experience of it is, before devising a way of breaking this material down in such a way that the viewer is obliged to look at each piece in isolation in order to construct the total image meaningfully (2001:11) . So even while the final object may remain mute by virtue of its self-reflexivity, the creation thereof becomes a metaphor for the artist's thoughts or intentions.

Froud is fully aware that his work, like Friedman's, whether deliberately or inadvertently, triggers an extrinsic response but he is at pains to keep this kind of metaphorical assessment of his work to a minimum. So although the objects used to construct the basic building blocks cannot but retain an element of their original signification, especially in view of the fact that Froud makes no attempt to disguise them, Froud subverts or attenuates this meaning in the act of the sculpture's making. Obsessive repetition of the module allows for the transformation and reclassification of the original elements, as does the selection of 'unusual' materials. Coat hangers, plastic buckets and cheap plastic dinner plates are stacked, joined and clustered in ways that alter their usual context and re-present them as disinterested building blocks.

This process of obfuscation is further intensified in the act of looking: as the viewer plumbs the endoskeleton of the work, units are dismembered, reduced to their basest elements, even atomised in the process of understanding and appreciating the sculpture's structure. Only then does an intellectual reassembly of the work take place; by which time the original context of the component parts has been sabotaged. Furthermore, as these seemingly commonplace building blocks are placed within the context of a commercially available artwork in a bona fide gallery space, their meaning and worth are altered and elevated irrevocably so that both the overall sculpture and its component parts begin to resonate on multiple levels.



On modularity:

Artists who work with modular construction do not conceive of their materials as something pliable from which form can be coaxed through the techniques of modelling, casting or carving. Instead they are struck by the potential of already extant objects with which to build new forms. In so doing, the pioneers of modular construction ensured that not only did the surface cease to be the be all and end all of art, but that individual modules visible in the core of the work become the conceptual elements on which meaning hinges.



Sol Le Witt wrote in reference to the building blocks of modular sculpture that "The form itself is of very limited importance, it becomes the grammar for the total work" (2005:181). What he was getting at was that the individual modules should be both physically and intellectually integral to the final sculpture, just as grammar is integral to the coherence of language. When this ideal is achieved, modular sculpture is able to 'speak' independently; it does not have to rely on external factors for validation or explication. Essentially, its condition of self-reflexivity imbues it with intrinsic meaning.



Generally speaking, modular construction is also not concerned with the shape of the final form achieved. In fact Richard Storr (2001:118) suggests that the success of a work thus constructed relies less on overall shape which is often impossible to hold in mind because one's eye penetrates the interior than on the principle of construction visible within, which is much easier to grasp. Therefore a typical modular approach suggests that once the material and structure of the building block has been determined by the artist, it is 'left to its own devices' to direct and dictate the eventual form by virtue of its physical properties. Artistic indifference such as this further contributes to the intrinsic significance of the work in that it ensures the development of a self-reflexive text within the work.



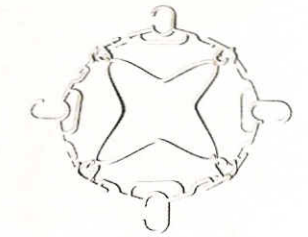
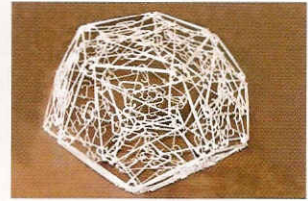
Froud has chosen to adopt a different tack however. Instead of allowing individual modules to dictate the final sculpture's form, he has set himself up to create only circular and spherical structures. Why? One might ask. Froud is adamant that he wants his work to be read primarily in terms of its modularity, its repetition of forms, and the material chosen. He has specifically shied away from narrative or figurative content and states that if there is to be any extrinsic interpretation of the work, then this must be secondary. He has based his choice of sculptural form on an idea offered by Tony Cragg who writes that "In some sense a sphere is the most useless of all forms, due to its super symmetry and extreme economy of surface it has the tendency not to react with other forms around it" (2006:192). In response to this, Froud contends that he finds that the sphere's symmetry and surface economy underpin the 'neutrality' or lack of signification of a sphere, therefore suggesting it as the ideal form with which to work.

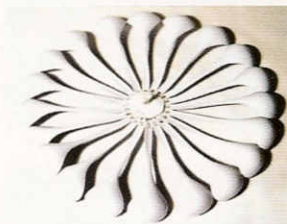
On repetition:

Repetition is necessarily an integral part of modularity since without it, the new form could not grow. But repetition becomes a more interesting strategy when analysed from the point of view of what it might signify. It could be about the artist's closer and closer scrutiny of something, rather like looking at the molecular structure of the object. Or as Mel Bochner (2005:162) suggests, the repetition of modules could be a type of ordering, and types of ordering imply forms of thought. In both these suggestions repetition can be understood in terms of the laying down of letters and words to generate the internal, autonomous text of the work.

South African artist Paul Edmonds has always relied on modularity in the creation of his work. In his 2001 work entitled Reef he carved myriad minute, directional arrow into hundreds of Styrofoam cups before stacking them in columns which he placed side by side in a long row. The work is essentially abstract and non-referential but, by virtue of the carved arrows that lend a porosity to the cups, the form of the columns determined by the roughly conical shape of each cup and the title of the work, the modules suggest the piece as a treatise on the principles of construction of a coral reef.

Early on in his experimentation with the potential of plastic coat hangers as modules, Froud created a spherical structure with radiating projections. Ignoring the obvious external associations between the star-like shape of the piece and a hugely magnified snowflake for a moment, this is an important example with which to gain a further understanding of how the repetition of modules contributes to a self-reflexive text and intrinsic meaning. Coat hangers are triangular and flat, which allows them to be joined together to form pyramidal forms, which can then be joined to form two-dimensional lattices or three-dimensional crystal lattices. Ice, the basic building block of a snowflake, also follows a crystal lattice structure. So rather than interpreting this piece solely in terms of the direct representation of a snowflake, one is able to go a step further and read the work as a text for the snowflake's internal structure.





On material choice:

Since Froud has opted to create only circular or spherical sculptures in this body of work, his endeavours become inescapably more complicated. He can no longer rely on the inherent physical properties of his units and must instead 'artificially' manipulate them, forcing them to conform to his preconceived vision. He can approach this problem in two ways: either he must confine his choice of objects to those that tend towards a circular curve or form, or he must construct original modules that will do the same. He has had success with many disparate objects such as kitchen utensils, audio cassette tapes and plastic champagne glasses in the former quest but it is his modules constructed from plastic coat hangers that have offered the greatest technical challenge and, possibly as a consequence, present the greatest potential for success.

Coat hangers pose a number of problems: for one they are basically flat and therefore do not naturally lend themselves to three-dimensional construction. Secondly they are light and flimsy with low tensile strength but quickly become astoundingly heavy when massed. On the upside however is their roughly triangular shape which allows them to be joined together to imitate patterns found in nature. In addition to the snowflake example cited above, Froud has also explored hexagonal and pentagonal modules. When joined together, these more complex modules begin to describe a curve, and hence the beginnings of a sphere.

Froud is well versed with the challenges of modular sculpture and admits to having been tempted to resort to an internal armature to hold the bigger structures together. But he has avoided this as far as possible since had he not, the internal language of signification of the units would have been disrupted. The module should be both physically and intellectually integral to the structure and not "the repetitive attaching of many objects to a surface to create texture or skin."

In conclusion:

In a Post-modern environment one might expect the solipsistic nature of modularly constructed art to be rather hurriedly passed over in favour of something more conceptually or metaphorically meaningful, after all, the objectives of Modernism seem rather idealistic and irrelevant now. And yet this is most certainly not the case, so what is it about this kind of work that still holds our attention?

I would argue that in an age where mass production and convenience dictate our every material desire, we nevertheless have not lost our appreciation, and indeed our need, to be motivated by something 'greater than ourselves'. We still need to feel a sense of awe when we contemplate the tenacity, single-minded purpose and skill characteristic of much modular sculpture. Also, most modular works are built up from new or used found objects, so, on some level at least, the art making process could be interpreted as a reaction to the obsessive mass production of things that, when their uselessness becomes apparent, are wastefully discarded.

Ultimately though, it is my contention that the obsessive processes involved in modular sculpture resonate on the level of our eternal questing to understand the structure and meaning of things. As the material assumes a new form through the act of making, both sculptor and viewer discover new contents and suggestions. We adopt the stance of scientist or anthropologist as the specimen before us is dissected down to its most elemental parts; atom, molecule, cell, unit, component and building block. All are examined minutely, before the object is rebuilt and considered in its entirety. It becomes clear that these works, whilst generally not representational or metaphorical, brim over with meaning. It may be intrinsically locked into the process of its making, or released in the extrinsic appraisal of the work. This is immaterial. These objects are never mute.

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