

Earthbound ascension

Eva Kun`s memorial at Stavne cemetery

by Solveig Lønmo

A glass and steel composition rests in a circular place. Both the structure and the place bear an atmosphere of peace and dignity. Eva Kun`s Memorial in Stavne cemetery in Trondheim is architecture, sculpture and landscape. It is a new type of memorial and a different kind of art in public space.

While the memorial vertically reaches for the sky and hovers in transparent lightness, it`s steel circular form anchors it to the earth. It encompasses life and death. There are no individual gravestones. A memorial holds and honours the names of many deceased. In 2007 Eva Kun was awarded the commission by Trondheim Municipality and the Trondheim Church Council to complete such a memorial at Stavne cemetery.¹ The construction had to comply with both the established cultural atmosphere of the cemetery and a series of specific requirements.² Completed in 2008, the result is a peaceful place to remember the dead. It is a magnetic force in the cemetery and yet appears to have always been there.

Eastern harmony

In artistic expression Kun`s memorial has roots in both eastern and western art and architecture. For a Norwegian, used to more traditional strategies for art in public space, the eastern influence dominates the impression. Both the visual and atmospheric character of Kun`s construction are actually found in principles of Japanese architecture.

The triad aesthetic foundation of *emptiness – interval – shade*, which encompasses philosophy, religion and belief, was formulated in ancient times, but is still practiced in Japanese architecture.³ The triad is essentially applied to understanding space, the consciousness of place and the organization of elements into a harmonic whole. Emptiness is understood as an essence or substance and not a vacuum. Everything in the world comes from this emptiness. The intervals are between the elements and they are also a kind of emptiness. Here is the idea of *ma* – a provider of rhythm to the intervals – essential. *Ma* doesn`t separate objects but binds them together. The third category of *shade* relates to the Japanese preference for harmony over contrast. Grey tones are neither white nor black and shade binds light and dark.

Eva Kun`s memorial at Stavne is magnificent in the twilight. The semi-opaque glass surfaces within steel frames reflect the trees and the sky. In the evening, LED-lights illuminate the memorial and demonstrate the semi-transparency of the material. During the day the screen walls cast shadows on the ground. Seen through the diffuse glass the surroundings take on a soft, misty, almost fairytale character. Due to the balance between positive and negative space, the airspace in between the screens becomes part of the composition and the split structure appears as a whole. The outer ring encircles the inner form of the monument; a series of higher glass surfaces composed together with air space into a circular structure. The rhythm, which in fact reflects something akin to Japanese *ma*, clearly provides the composition with much of its harmonic radiance and the expression is enhanced by the emptiness between the stilts of steel.

The west from then till now

The materials also display much of our western history from 1900s Modernism. The organization of glass and steel in Kun's memorial may refer to Mies van der Rohe's *Crown Hall* (1950-56) and Philip Johnson's *Glass House* (1949-50), with qualities such as repeated symmetry and transparency. Both buildings display vertical construction resting on horizontal repetition. Also Frank Lloyd Wright's earlier *Prairie Houses* (ca. 1900-1910), which are clearly inspired by Japanese house proportions and relations to natural surroundings,⁴ can be detected in the sober lines of Eva Kun's structure. Likewise, the geometrical patterns on the windows of the *Prairie Houses* and perhaps especially in the structure of the memorial's name plates.

As a sculpture, immediate associations don't go so far back in art history but indicate contemporary artists such as Dan Graham and Anish Kapoor, who both work with the geometrical in transparent or reflective materials. However, Eva Kun's memorial displays a character not evident in Graham's and Kapoor's more exhibitionistic work. This character should be easier to find if one looks back through Kun's own oeuvre.

Eva Kun often works with light and much of her work concerns the effect of light meeting fixed form, as with her installation 'Light space' from 1998.⁵ 'Light space' displays some of the same form structure as the Stavne Memorial. Suspended screens, each with three vertical panels of rice paper within thin, wooden laths, collect and direct light via their various positions. While they veritably float over the floor like weightless reflections of each other, their variety of direction create different lines and passages. In the sister installation 'Lock' (2000),⁶ Kun takes the weightless even further, using thin voile in suspended vertical panels. Daylight from above is trapped by the florescent fabric in such a way that the textile veils become almost luminous. They overlap each other in the eye of the viewer. The milk whites of the voile are mirrored in the opaque glass surfaces of the Stavne Memorial.

Ceremonial structure

In the Stavne Memorial Kun uses experience from works such as 'Lock' and allows semi-opaque glass trap the light; the inner form's LED-lights emphasize the qualities of the glass. Users of the memorial, who are first and foremost relatives and friends of the deceased, can place candles into the steel structure, which functions as a receptacle. This creates a special atmosphere for contemplation and spiritual guidance, especially at night fall. With the river Nidelven at the foot of the hill, behind the rowan trees that surround the grove, associations indicate the eastern tradition of candles placed on the water surface to remember the dead. Kun's design emphasizes these associations.

Emptiness is what's left when a loved one has passed away. However this emptiness is not a total absence or vacuum; memories and history remain as almost a substance in the body of the bereaved. The round room created by Kun's screens is a room for personal reflection and mourning. It's filled and charged by everything the user carries inside. The encircled air-space is simultaneously energetic and peaceful, like an interval where death meets life.

English translation by Gillian Carson.

¹ Three other artists were commissioned for similar projects in other Trondheim cemeteries, as parts of the same pilot project: Lise Stang Lund in Moholt cemetery, Oddvar I. N. Daren in Tilfredshet cemetery and Lars Traegde in Heimdal cemetery.

²Amongst others, an area for placing 60-90 urns, placing of equivalent number of name plates for the deceased, facilities for placing flowers, wreaths, candles and benches. It was also important that the memorial could function multi-culturally; there were to be no symbols specific to any particular religion or belief.

³ Like Tadao Ando, the contemporary Japanese architect who is perhaps closest to Kun's artistic expression. Both play on light's ability to appear physically when meeting a variety of materials.

⁴The first of Lloyd Wright's nine principles for the Prairie House are as follows: "To reduce the number of necessary parts of the house and rooms to a minimum, and make all come together as enclosed space so divided that light, air and vista permeated the whole with a sense of unity." The architect consequently valued emptiness as an essence in the same way Japanese architects have always done. Reduction was also considered an important principle in western functionalist architecture, a movement which Lloyd Wright must be seen in connection with.

⁵ "Light space" was exhibited in Buskerud Art Centre in Drammen, 1998.

⁶ "Lock" (dedicated to Vibeke Homaa), was exhibited in Christiansand Art Association in 2000.