



# Mette Tommerup: *Love, Ur*

NOVEMBER 29, 2019 - JANUARY 18, 2020







# Waking the Ur Experience

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We like to imagine that the digital revolution has thrust us into an entirely new reality. We are told that social relationships, political hierarchies and even human consciousness have been remade by the switch from analog to digital. But while these formats represent dramatically different ways of encoding and presenting information, have the basic structures of human experience really changed so completely? Consider a few examples:

Long before Minecraft, the hugely popular virtual game that allows users to manipulate a world made of blocks, there were Froebel gifts. Created in 1840 by Friedrich Fröbel for the first kindergarten, they comprised a set of cubes and balls that encouraged structured play. (Today's digital immigrants - those born before 1985 - may remember playing with such Froebel descendants as Lego and Tinkertoys.) Similarly, long before algorithms were being written to determine everything from stock prices to police profiles, conceptualists were making artworks according to sets of predetermined rules. Before social media there were social clubs designed to connect people with similar interests. Digital programs derive from desires, needs and systems that preexist them in the "real" world. In





fact one might even argue that the analog version of computer code is the human brain.

Mette Tommerup explores this paradox in works that use simple, low tech materials and techniques to get at the deeper structures beneath our experiences of the digital, connected world. Her 2018 installation *Ocean Loop* presented a myriad of ocean themed paintings, some actually created by the shifting movement of seawater. Arrayed in irregular arrangements across a gallery's walls they suggested the sea as a metaphor for the layered complexity of contemporary consciousness.

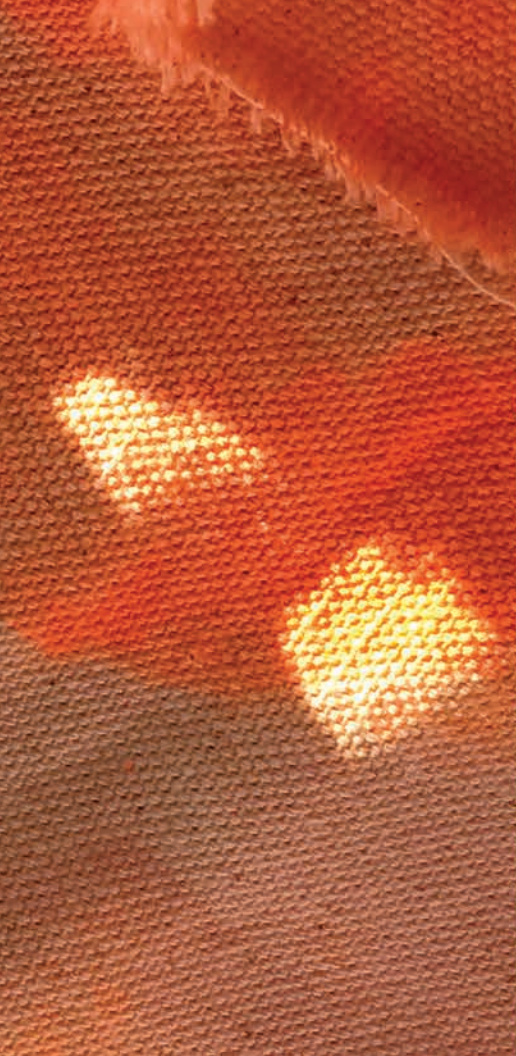
Now, only half facetiously, she notes that her works have washed ashore and, stranded on land, are trying out life on earth. For this exhibition, titled *Love, Ur*, she has created an immersive environment shaped by massive canvases that are stretched, wrapped around columns or cascading from the walls. The blues and greens of *Ocean Loop* have given way to earthtones – magenta, rust, chartreuse and brown - that evoke both the ocher of soil and the inner recesses of the human body.

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The installation's title refers to Ur. Originally the name of an ancient Sumerian city, Ur has evolved to encompass the idea of the primal stage of any phenomenon. In Tommerup's native Denmark, the word is often used to refer to the pre Christian Nordic world and its more essential connection to nature. In this installation Tommerup makes use of this association. But she also references “The Urmaterial Urge,” a 2004 essay by the art historian Johanna Burton that explores the idea of art as a kind of psychic space. Provocatively, Burton suggests many of the most prominent exemplars of this idea are male artists whose construction of womb-like spaces actually leave no room for female experience. Tommerup aims to change that.

The confluence of these ideas has produced an installation designed to create a kind of enveloping, unbounded and psychologically charged space that





evokes the primal and often inchoate sensations that linger just beneath our rational consciousness. Participants (the word viewer no longer seems appropriate) are free to wander through a chaotic world, making their own path between elements whose effects veer from the intimate to the overwhelming. The work is designed to imbue a sense of release that is at once unsettling, liberating and connective.

*Love, Ur* evokes both the boundary breaking capacity of the internet and the tradition smashing experiments pursued by the free-wheeling, anti-establishment avant-garde of the 1960s and 70s. Many of these interactive performances and immersive environments sought to create a new and transformative relationship between art and society. This vein of art included Brazilian artists Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark and other members of the Neo-concrete movement who explored ways for art audiences to interact with artworks, Alan Kaprow's participatory "Happenings" and Fluxus "actions" which endeavored to replace product with process. Particularly relevant to *Love, Ur* is the groundbreaking 1965 installation *La Menesunda* by the Argentinian artist Marta Minujin. This work, recently recreated

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at the New Museum in New York, presented a series of interactive situations designed to create intensely disorienting and transformative experiences.

While such experiments could (and in the hands of a number of contemporary artists too often do) devolve into mere entertainment and spectacle, the original intention was to shake participants out of ossified habits of thought and into a new and more pro-active awareness of themselves in the world. With its deliberately low-tech format and non-directive agenda, *Love, Ur* takes up this challenge for contemporary audiences. Tommerup blends the impulses of the 1960s avant-garde with today's virtual experience, noting, “The wrapped canvas unfolding becomes the unfolding algorithm - akin to space found in Computer games.” In particular, Tommerup invokes the virtual game Minecraft, which endows its players with





creative agency. They create their own objectives and build their own worlds. And, in further evocation of the space of the virtual world, Tommerup has arranged the elements of the installation so that one end is dense and cave-like while the other evolves into a more grid-like space, akin to the effect of a pixelated screen.

In this immersive environment, Tommerup playfully considers her paintings as actors in their own right. She has simplified the variety of painting styles that characterized *Ocean Loop*. Here the large raw canvases are left outside to interact with nature. Pigment is applied through soaking, staining, folding and crushing, followed by immersion in tubs of paint. The results recall Color Field paintings from the 1950s and 60s. Again, the reference is telling. Color Field evolved as a counter to the macho excesses of the Abstract Expressionists, whose canvases were famously characterized by critic Harold Rosenberg as “an arena in which to act.” This aggressive characterization of the act of painting conjures the image of boxers duking it out in a ring. Color Field, in which paint soaks into the canvas, evokes gentler metaphors. The result is not an attack but a

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melding. For Tommerup, this approach seems ideal for the creation of an Ur-space.

*Love, Ur* is thus a marriage of multiple realities. It bridges the past of the experimental avant-garde and the present of the Internet, the ephemerality of virtual experience and the embodied materiality of the analog world. It suggests that the primal Ur is at once our origin and our destination.





# About Mette Tommerup

Mette Tommerup (born Denmark 1969) is a painter and storyteller who creates simultaneously earnest and satirical narratives to frame her production of objects, whether they are digital or made from canvas and paint. Tommerup relocated to Miami in the late 1990's after living and studying in New York City for many years. Tommerup has exhibited at The Chelsea Art Museum, Exit Art, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York City. In Miami, Tommerup has exhibited at The Bass, Perez Art Museum Miami (PAMM) and The FIU Frost Museum of Art and has work in many public and private collections, including work in the permanent collection of Wilmer Hale in Washington DC, the Lowe Art Museum, and Perez Art Museum Miami. *Love, Ur* will be Tommerup's 4th solo show at Emerson Dorsch. She will have a solo show at Locust Projects in November 2020. Honors include acquisition of work through the Art Purchase Program at The American Academy of Arts and Letters in NYC. Publications include *Miami Contemporary Artists*, *Miami Arts Explosion*, *100 Degrees in the Shade* and *Man as Object: Reversing the Gaze* and exhibitions have been reviewed in *Art in America*, *Artnet.com* and the *Miami Herald* among other journals. Tommerup received an MFA at School of Visual Arts in New York City in 1995.





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