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The World of Reenchantment

New pictorial strategies and spatial formations with associations to Islamic art and new site-specific projects

In the beginning of the 80s, a number of young Danish artists left the preferred forms of expression of the 70s in favor of painting.

Inspired by the renewal of this genre, which took place in the international art scene at the end of the 70s, they created new pictorial expressions and figurations. The central artists behind this breakthrough were Anette Abrahamsson, Peter Bonde, Peter S. Carlsen, Claus Carstensen, Torben Christensen, Dorte Dahlin, Erik A. Frandsen, Berit Jensen, Kehnet Nielsen, Jens Nørregaard, Nina Sten-Knudsen. They inscribed figures and pictorial signs on the canvas with quick, dynamic brushwork. Most of their works may be regarded as registrations and exposures of the loss of meaning and the effacement of subtleties created by the compact flow of images in the media world.

As early as the mid-eighties one could observe that most of these artists began to stop registering the fragmented world of information society and to leave behind the quick brush strokes in order to create instead unique counterparts to the immaterial world of information society and the

labyrinthine mirror room of the world of television.

This is particularly true for Dorte Dahlin. To her the artistic creative process is a way of apprehending reality. Art is not merely mirror images of the surrounding world we know so well.

Inspired by Chinese artists, in 1985 she departed from the traditional Western European conception of space in a very distinct manner, creating a new, often enigmatic space constructed out of a multiplicity of directions of the gaze. Chinese painting, which had a good deal of importance in the breakthrough in her artistic development, is described by her in the following way:

“It was a traditional Chinese landscape painting with mountains and streams, done in Indian ink on a light, shaded scale that made the painting almost invisible. After having looked at the picture and let my eyes sink down into the almost unlit universe, I found an opening in it that became a kind of key to another conception of time, space, and body – and that put me on the track of spatial formations that may be described as “lost distance” and “rubber geometry” – in an attempt to attain breadth of view. For at the bottom of the picture, where one could follow – as though from a birds-eye view – a little path winding in and out between projecting rocks and thus wind one’s way upwards in

the picture, the recognizable landscape disintegrated in the middle of the picture into a kind of “cloud”; technically, this was achieved by a delicate change in the soft and light brush strokes to small “chops” with the tip of the brush. Thus the cloud could also be regarded as an enlarged area of bacteria. And this membrane, this field of oscillation or this enlarged vanishing point – which might also bring to mind a flicker-ing television screen caught between two channels – functioned like a time machine in which the journey through the landscape was accomplished without one’s body. Like a thought, the body – transparent and weightless – had crossed a great distance in one slow moment. Above the cloud the little path reappeared, only seen from below, but of the same breadth, as though nothing had happened.” (26)

The art historian Mikkel Bogh defines “rubber geometry” as follows: “rubber geometry is characterized by – as the name implies – its soft form, but also by not limiting its domain to lines and forms. “Rubber geometry” encompasses the space as well as the choice of color, the light and shade as well as the figure and the scale. It simply makes it possible, as part of one and the same geometry, to elaborate the painting’s vague spaces, soft figures, shifts in color, transitions between loose and tight forms, the coincidence between foreground and background, and all the other conditions that split and spread the gaze. And the fact that this geometry is soft means in truth that it is not fixed on one single level – like in constructivism – nor on one single space – like in the linear perspective – but precisely becomes a geometry for the more or less chaotic gaps and intermediate dimensions.” (27)

This complex geometry, which also visualizes a concept as elusive as memory, is developed through a kind of double gaze whereby one, as Dorte Dahlin remarks, “zooms one’s eyes into the picture” and “looks closely with one eye and with the other achieves a distant general view.”

Hence, Dorte Dahlin creates a new reality in her pictures that always juxtaposes in unexpected ways conceptions of space and ideas normally separated in time and space, thus establishing openings into a wonderful world previously outside our field of vision. In a series of light paintings from the 90s, there are reminiscences of Chinese and Muslim gardens, romantic mountain ridges, vast desert-like stretches or the blue firmament in the many disparate, fluid, and folded spaces behind the lace-like veil or gossamer haze of the fog. But upon shifting one’s gaze, these allusions suddenly lose their recognizability through a drop or a dab of paint, becoming dim mirages in a lost understanding of distance. In the later paintings, where the vast and yet intense “blue desert space,” which is painted in different techniques that give “the travelling eyes” different possibilities for immersion, the spaces are broken by white ovals. These ovals are gathered in chain formations that sometimes resemble microorganisms or distant constellations, sometimes appear as single elements – beads or holes – that twist space and time on invisible axes. This is certainly a visualization of the ambiguity and the unforeseeable developments characterizing our world and an allusion to the fact that history does not proceed in a pre-determined and certain way.

In Dorte Dahlin's works in public spaces, a multiplicity of disparate spaces and times appears in a new shape, giving overlooked aspects of our world a new value, such as in the works placed in the windblown fishing town of Hirtshals, in northern Jutland: The Green Square (1993) and the big staircase, Monument and Stairs (1997), which she created in cooperation with the sculptor Mogens Møller.

In The Green Square, the square itself is covered with a light grid reminiscent of a geometric sand bottom and a seaside beach. The "garden medallion" with its three stripes of fragrant thyme and other colorful plants from the surrounding dunes is like a lush island that has emerged from the sea and positioned itself somewhat obliquely on the grid. The stripes in the big oval point towards a little niche in the sheltering wall where one finds a weather station that registers the velocity of the wind. This weather station regulates the water supply of the two four-meter long basins pointing directly east-west and gazing like two small eyes towards the sea and up towards the heavens, just as so many of the town inhabitants do. The water follows the shifting movements of the sea, sounding like swells rolling in under the square, while atomized clouds of water spray out of the basins like white wings in the high wind. The lyme grass in the "Heart of the Square", with its finely intertwined steel latticework, bends in the strong westerly wind or in sand storms and may be viewed as a symbol of the harsh life of the population up here on the northern west coast, where both the sand and the violent, capricious sea have again and again threatened its conditions of existence. But the "Heart of the Square" also contains a key to understanding "the lost distance". As small as it is in respect to the square, it renders visible the condition of the square as a point of presence for the gaze that, on the one hand, is sent out to a barely visible vessel on the curved horizon line of the sea and, on the other, to the dot on the radar screen that sends electronic messages from "invisible satellite eyes." Thus, the "lost distance" is sensed and apprehended both through the overall gaze and the journey through time and space.

The Green Square has not one but many centers and hence several poetic spaces joined together, each creating a unique link to the town, the sea, and the sand dunes. The visitors who walk around the square meet a visualization of the present-day endless, interwoven spaces, but it is shaped in profound harmony with the place it frames. Likewise, the poetic Arabic gardens are not just a symbol of heavenly paradise, but they also contain relations to their natural surroundings. For the many murmuring brooks or the dead-calm bassins, the profusion of flowers, and the stylized flower motifs on the brilliant mosaics refer to the brief fertility brought about by the heavy spring showers that cause the deserts and oases to "explode into colors."⁽¹⁾ A typical example of an Arabic garden is Dar Si Said in Marrakech, Morocco. In addition to this, both the Islamic garden and Dorte Dahlin's square offer an integrated experience of sounds, scents, and visual impressions. But the medley of rich colors and the scents of the exotic flowers, the bright mosaics, and the rhythmic sound of the murmuring brooks in the Islamic gardens are in Dorte Dahlin's square replaced not just by the sound of the often violent sea swells and of the murmur of the basins, but also by the strong scent of the small red and white flowers from the dunes. Finally, in Dorte Dahlin's square, the inscriptions often interwoven in Arabic ornament are replaced by a poem by the prominent Danish poet Søren Ulrik Thomsen. This poem is inserted in the sheltering wall and contains an interpretation of the special atmosphere of the square, while at the same time directing the gaze in another direction:

*“The trawlers - blacked-out, hushed
lolling upon the sea.
With closed eyes and throbbing gills
the shoal of herrings pauses askew in the depths.
The fields are burning, tended by men
leaning gently up against the tall pitchforks.
Yesterday was yesterday
each one comes to halt in his own space.”*
(New Poems, 1987)
Translated by Dan A. Marmorstein.

The Green Square - as Dorte Dahlin puts it herself - is “constructed as a horizontally outstretched and open work in which the different single parts are only conceived as coherent in a soft network of sensing, memory and knowledge.” Monument and Stairs, on the other hand, is a compact and tightly knit monument. In its outer form it resembles a big wave crashing down on The Green Square around a narrow, sharply profiled bastion, where it either seems to be divided into two parts or where two dashes of waves meet. Precisely because the stairway is shaped like one big wave, the sea and the square are linked through an impressive technique whose register is inspired by, indeed actually visualizes, the violent rhythm of the sea. The different sequences of the stairway create a series of spaces and different viewpoints, and these points visualize the relationship between the smallest entities and the greatest scales in nature, while at the same time directing attention toward cosmic space. This perspective is illustrated through the sculpturally shaped sequence of abstract forms in different sizes that “move” down towards the point at the harbour square where the two stair sequences meet. Between the two stair sequences a monumental ramp has been constructed on whose extreme edge is placed a group of mosaics and sculpture that has received the name Scott. The brilliantly colored cluster of mosaics is made of glass and resembles a tartan plaid with its red, green, yellow, and blue shades. The sculpture, which is modelled by Mogens Møller, is a snow-man cast in bronze and silverplated. The complicated network of structures covering its radiant surfaces alludes to that which we often overlook, the smallest entities in nature - snow flakes, ice crystals, and drops of water. But in the other spaces in this monumental installation the grand perspectives in the world and the firmament itself above us are visualized or exposed. The viewer thus does not only confront an illustration of the patterns inside the chaotic, rolling waves, but also allusions to the stars and the infinite distances in space.

(26) Cited from an unpublished text from 1999.

(27) Mikkel Bogh: *Dorte Dahlin* (Copenhagen, 1993), p. 17

(1) Steen Estvad Petersen, op.cit., p.5

“The Garden of Paradise and the Desert”, Cph. 1995.

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