

IMAGES OF A CHANGING WORLD

ASPECTS OF THE ARTISTIC

BREAKTHROUGH OF THE 80'S AND 90'S

In the 1980s and in the present decade, visual artists have been confronted with a constantly changing world. They have thus continually been motivated to create a new vocabulary of form and uncover hitherto unknown perspectives in the complex, surrounding world.

Numerous different sources have inspired the radical changes our world has undergone during this period. Two developments in particular have had a great impact: the rapid growth of the information society and the breakthrough in natural science, known as the 'chaos theory'.

During the latter half of the 70s, the changes caused by new communication technologies were already beginning to have a marked effect on science, culture and everyday living. Not until the beginning of the 80s, however, did these changes bring about an understanding of life that was shaped by the mirror images of television screens and the codes and signs of computers.

Everything that cannot be expressed by these media stands in danger of being forgotten. The philosopher Jean-François Lyotard has named this 'the postmodern condition'. Two other distinguished philosophers of the 80s, the Frenchman Jean Baudrillard and the Italian Mario Perniola, describe it as 'the order of simulacra' but interpret it differently. Although their points of view differ, all three philosophers agree that the dream of unity and general ideas about the liberation of man are no longer viable. But what is this unity or coherent whole that has been shattered? It is primarily what Lyotard calls 'the large narrative' ('grand récit') of knowledge and power, particularly the philosophies of Hegel and Marx. But because these large unities and ideologies have lost credibility, attention has been directed to multiplicity and diversity, while at the same time the creative power of art has been placed in a central position. For it is through art that the unexpected and the unpredictable leave new imprints on our familiar reality and create new signs and meanings.

In the early eighties, after the ideas on 'the postmodern condition' and on the effects of the information society on culture and everyday life had become widely influential, a breakthrough, which had been in preparation for some time, oc-

curred in European and American art. This new development, rather than constituting a comprehensive, international trend, was composed of a variety of different, national currents, all focusing on painting, which had led a shadowy existence since the late 60s. This renewal of painting resulted in a loosening of the ties that had bound art to ideologies and utopias. In Italy it was called *Transavanguardia*, in the U.S.A. *New Image Painting*, in Germany *heftige Malerei*, and in France *la figuration libre*. A revival of the highly emotive formal language of expressionism was clearly evident, especially in the *heftige Malerei*, while the *New Image Painting* was unmistakably influenced by American 'Conceptual Art'. In the early 80s, a restatement of artistic strategies in painting was quite suddenly formulated by a number of young Copenhagen artists. Their first collective manifestation was an exhibition characteristically entitled 'Knife on Head', shown at Tranegården in Copenhagen. The participating artists included Claus Carstensen, Dorte Dahlin, Peter Bonde, Anette Abrahamsson, Peter Carlsen, Kehnet Nielsen, Berit Jensen and Nina Sten-Knudsen. This event triggered a veritable flood of exhibitions. These young artists never considered themselves a group, however. Each in his own way, and through his own visual language, was concerned with interpreting the movements within 'the postmodern condition'. Their faith in the liberating power of art had crumbled. The majority of them disassociated themselves from the *heftige* painters' revival of German expressionism and its cultivation of authenticity and originality. Although they used a powerful and seductive artistic idiom to diagnose or comment ironically on the mirror effects of the fragmented image of the surrounding world projected by the information society, their aim was not to 'reveal the essence or the natural order hidden beneath the artificial surface(...)'. They knew that there was no original to be imitated and that language and images constitute our reality'.¹

Claus Carstensen and Dorte Dahlin were, in different ways, at the center of this new development, but before long their interest turned from exposing the simulacra and the loss of meaning in 'the postmodern condition' to interpreting what either has not yet been seen or else has been obscured by the mirror images of the media world.

During the past fifteen years, Claus Carstensen's artistic work has resulted in numerous exhibitions, as well as books of poetry and theoretical texts on art. Movement, contrast, and innovation are stable components of his art, always marked by ten-

sions between the local and the universal, or the national and the international. His work displays a distinct profile but is always - as in the case of Joseph Beuys - inscribed within a specific complex process, which it interprets through an endless variety of movements. In his own words, 'all incisions open the way to new incisions. Something else will always lie behind. Ad infinitum'.²

By using foam-rubber and various waste materials in the work he started doing in 1984, he focuses on the extravagance and waste found in all systems, a subject which has interested several philosophers, in particular Georges Bataille. In his sculptures, paintings and installations - at times marked by complex confrontations, at other times by the subtle fusion of materials, objects, artistic strategies, and various waste products - he gives visual expression to the 'radical reification of art' and uncovers the different layers and problems of image making. In other words, his themes are those which preoccupied especially phenomenologists. His later works are in countless different ways rooted in social relations, biography and given contexts and thus reveal the inspiration from Walter Benjamin, which he himself describes thus:

*The question is whether one chooses to emphasize one's work or the method behind it. Benjamin emphasizes analogies. His way of approach is always a detail, always a historical-biographical case and not just history in general. He can be said to take the detail as his point of departure in order to be able to lay bare the structure via the detail.*³

In 1985, a radical change took place in Dorte Dahlin's artistic universe. The mirror effects and closed labyrinthian spaces of the information society gave way to multi-dimensional, open spaces. She undoubtedly found a source of inspiration in such old Chinese painters as Wen Cheng-ming, who constructed a multiple-perspective space which, unlike the organization of space in western European painting, is based on shifting points of view. The composite and artistically forceful spaces in Dorte Dahlin's paintings correspond to what she has called 'a widened gaze' and express 'a lost distance'.

*The "lost distance" aesthetic releases the eye from its prison, so that it no longer identifies itself with the picture, or the object of vision. Instead it enables the eye to move according to the ever changing conditions of the picture.*⁴

In these paintings Dorte Dahlin offers a visual interpretation of a mode of experience which is typical of the postmodern media society and can also be found in chaos theory and in the

unfolding of the complex dynamic systems called fractals. None of these theories describe a preconceived order but concern unpredictable systems. The premises of science and art are always completely different. 'Chaos research' shows, however, that common areas of cognition exist: preoccupation with time, change, and the specific event, lines of demarcation and, last but not least, the concept of form. This concept she has interpreted visually in 'A Chequered Painting', part of the 'Soul Project' which she executed together with the sculptor Mogens Møller. Here the chaos theory is given visual expression, seen in the light of Niels Bohr's efforts to clarify the complementary features of quantum mechanics.⁵ In her cosmic pictures, dating from 1995-96 and characterized by an intense power of expression, the spectator at one turn meets a distant blue space built up in acrylics, and, at another, a mysterious, tight space done in tempera, in which different figurations or grids of delicately spun cobwebs continuously form new spatial relationships and unexpected points of view.

Jesper Christiansen has always kept an ironic distance to the changing artistic currents and at an early stage broke away from the kind of modernism in which the driving force is the memory and lamentation of the lost unity of meaning. Indeed, irony is the key to his creative universe, clearly evident in the choice of motifs in his paintings dating from the 80s. In these, his motifs are the familiar objects of our everyday life: brief-cases, sofas or beds. But for the very reason that they are in themselves common objects, the intense and precise artistic interpretation they receive stands out sharply. His paintings dating from this period always express a new and powerful visual experience, reveal new orientations in a known world, and form a contrast to the media world's great stream of non-material images. In the 90s, a new development occurred in his work. In the series of paintings entitled 'SignPaintings' (1992-1993), for instance, 'recognizable forms from his earlier pictures - walls, coat hangers, stairways and chairs - were replaced by words. 'NotePaintings' (1994) continue this development, but are more concentrated and systematic in their composition and exploration of the pictorial possibilities offered by word-painting.⁶ The words are never pretexts for the making of the painting. For - as Raphael Rubinstein has phrased it,

There is too much oblique poetry in Jesper Christiansen's lists, the words' meanings are too crucial to our visual reading of the painting for them to be mere armatures. It's more illuminating to

see them as verbal/visual hybrids. Amid the geometrical structure of the painting, these barely controlled, highly individual units of meaning zoom everywhere. Christensen is not the first artist to rely equally on the paintbrush and the dictionary, but he has found a subtle new way of integrating these two tools of expression.⁷

In the 80s and in the present decade, a profitable dialogue between Danish and South African art and culture was established in Doris Bloom's paintings. She is also linked to the Italian *Transavanguardia*, seeking inspiration for her work in places far removed in time and space from the present decade.

*She has no hesitation in calling herself a semi-nomad, because only through regularly leaving Denmark does she feel that she can get sufficient artistic nourishment. At the same time, travel helps her preserve attention to what she experiences. All this, of course, in full accord with her project: to search for a universal artistic language.*⁸

She has always been fascinated by termites, the oldest organized biological society in the world. For more than a hundred million years they have built the same hierarchical social structures. As the child of a South African farmer, she encountered them already while she was quite young. They have inspired her to paint pictures organized as complex, labyrinthine networks of structures which also function as hidden codes to the understanding of the origin of our own civilisation. Her primary aim is to expose and interpret visually the Jungian archetypes structuring the collective memory. She finds her inspiration for this project in the most diverse cultures. Her pictures are, as Jacob Wamberg has said,

*...governed by a subtle geometric order, just as a strategically placed excrescence could practically transform a human figure into a hieroglyph. The signs seem to be subjected to an invisible pulse, which intervenes unpredictably in the graphic structures.*⁹

As early as 1983, the year following the manifestation of 'the new painting', a new generation of sculptors broke through in Danish art, particularly Øivind Nygård, Morten Stræde, Henrik B. Andersen, Søren Jensen and Elisabeth Toubro. The analyses by Perniola, Lyotard and Baudrillard of 'the postmodern condition' contributed to the sharpness with which these artists broke with not only the ideologies of the avant-garde, but also with the faith of the 70s in absolute truths and utopias. But the conclusions which these five sculptors drew from the confrontation were quite different than those of the painters. They were, each in his own way, concerned with discovering new

sculptural strategies capable of warding off the increasing loss of meaning in the information society. During the past fifteen years, they have in different ways added stringency to the sculptural concept and the idea of form. They have succeeded in maintaining sculpture as an independent means of acquiring knowledge and understanding, capable of leaving new imprints on reality, opening up new perspectives, and establishing a network of meanings within the closed and non-material systems of the information society. They have abandoned both the classical and the modernistic stands. For, as Mikkel Bogh has said,

*...where classical and modernistic sculpture often contains a clear and comprehensive framework of interpretation, these sculptures contain riddles which reach far out into the future, deep into the layers of consciousness and out to where the universe bends; the super strings become visible and anti-matter takes shape.*¹⁰

Søren Jensen and Øivind Nygård are two very different representatives of the new current in Danish sculpture of the 80s, which has developed in new and unexpected ways in the course of the present decade, creating new challenges for the beholder.

In his book on *The Statues* (1978), the French philosopher Michel Serres emphasises that 'statues precede languages, whereas the latter have ploughed them under (...) Statues emerge before languages and form humanity before languages can re-found it'.¹¹ The development in Øivind Nygård's sculptural work is determined by his acute perception of the fact that though sculpture may contain layers of meaning, above all it contains formal and spatial relationships which verbal languages cannot capture. Or as he puts it, 'sculpture creates a space, or a place, from which to observe.' His own sculptures convincingly demonstrate that it is through its form that a sculpture takes up a position in space and creates a complex presence that can be difficult to describe in words. To Øivind Nygård it is therefore

*...a basic fact that sculpture is about visibility, and that it actually does not manifest itself through the visible but in the visible. When the demand of sculpture does not refer to willing (i.e. meaning, feeling, conveying etc), but rather to being, potentialities and visions are realised in several directions within which the observer is free to adopt alternating points of view and interpretations. Functioning in the visible instead of through the visible becomes the differentiation in the sculpture's relationship to its references.*¹²

Øivind Nygård's sculptures from the 90s are often built up of

unexpected combinations of figurative and abstract forms that produce a sculptural complexity. These works have no fixed inner core, and consequently their surfaces take on an important structuring function. Form becomes a manifestation of surface, and a strong tension is created between the comprehensive form of the sculpture and the many points and fractures of its surface. In this way new relationships are continually established between the work of art, the viewer, and the constantly changing surrounding world.

In an article treating 'The Poetic Loss of Memory' (1970), the Danish philosopher and theologian K.E.Løgstrup states that when we experience art, we lose the memory which in our daily lives forms a closed space around us.¹³ He calls this aspect of experiencing art 'the poetic loss of memory'. In the meeting with Søren Jensen's sculptures it is this closed space which bursts open. His sculptures express a poetics of silence and forgetfulness. They rise almost like new creations from their site, determined by a logic which constitutes the inner secret of the sculpture. They do not appear against a background of previous knowledge, since a fine network of formal sequences cuts off all known points of reference. They thus appear as sharply delineated, silent figures that pull us out of our habitual thinking and our everyday reality with its many obligations. We lose, as Løgstrup has said, the memory which ordinarily forms a closed space around us. And this state of forgetfulness is a precondition for seeing and experiencing the world around us in a new way. But it also confronts us with a world that evades our efforts to manipulate it, and that cannot be captured by institutions of power or by the stream of mass-culture images. Sculpture creates openings in the cultural space, or, as Søren Jensen himself says,

*The forms of sculpture are on the move, on the road in a rhythm. This rhythm of proportioning exists in a state of ever becoming, never being. He who sees must see in openness to add his signature to the work that has been created by another self. For, as opposed to the cultural signs which can be pointed at and understood collectively by the subjects of our society, the meaning of sculpture exists only in the state of openness. It is openness and it requires openness to become visible, to become sculpture. A sculpture must be created and re-created: it has opted for delimitation, but never for limitation.*¹⁴

The works of the above-mentioned artists offer different interpretations and reflections of our constantly changing time. But they also show that visual art occupies an inde-

pendent place in our culture. Finally they reveal, as Gombrich has said, that

*the way the language of art refers to the visible world is both so obvious and so mysterious that it is still largely unknown except to the artists themselves who can use it as we use languages - without needing to know its grammar and semantics*¹⁵.

ELSE MARIE BUKDAHL, DR. PHIL.

Rector of The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts,
Copenhagen

NOTES:

1. Lennart Gottlieb, introduction to catalogue for the exhibition *Det nye danske Maleri*, Århus Kunstmuseum, September 1983, pp.18-19.
2. Claus Carstensen, *Det ophobede*, (Accumulation), Copenhagen, 1986/87, II, p.53
3. Catalogue by Vibeke Petersen *Claus Carstensen: The Sao Paolo Project and Related Works* (1992-94), 1994
4. Poul Erik Tøjner, "Lost Distance", exhibition catalogue for Dorte Dahlin. *Mi Yüan: Lost Distance*, Stalke edition Copenhagen, 1988, p.31
5. Catalogue for the exhibition *Soul*, Vestsjællands Kunstmuseum, 1990. Contains texts in English by Vibeke Petersen and Else Marie Bukdahl
6. Anette Østerby, "The Word in Painting - Painting the Word", catalogue for the exhibition *Jesper Christiansen: NotePaintings*, 1994-95, DCA Gallery, New York
7. Raphael Rubenstein, "Jesper Christiansen at DCA", *Art in America* January, 1996, p.102
8. Jacob Wamberg, *The Labyrinthine Nest: The Art of Doris Bloom* Johannesburg, 1991
9. Jacob Wamberg, op. cit., p.5
10. Mikkel Bøgh, "Towards the 21st Century: On the Parasculptural", catalogue for the exhibition *New Danish Sculpture*, organized by Karsten Ohrt, Kunsthallen Brandts Klædefabrik, Odense, January 18th - February 18th, 1990, p.2
11. Michel Serres, *Statues: Le second livre des fondations* (1987), Danish trans. Carsten Juhl, Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Academy, 1990, p.44
12. Øivind Nygård, "Some Reflections on the Artificial and the Dispassionate Sculpture", catalogue for the exhibition *Ytkraft: Young Danish Sculpture*, Malmö Konsthall, August 19th - October 8th, 1989, pp.74-75
13. K.E. Løgstrup, *Kunst og erkendelse: Metafysik II* (Art and Cognition: Metaphysics II), Copenhagen, 1983, pp. 18-26
14. Søren Jensen, "To Forget Baudrillard", catalogue for the exhibition *Ytkraft: Young Danish Sculpture*, Malmö Konsthall, August 19th - October 8, 1989, p.43
15. E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, London, 1960, p.7