

THE ART OF COMPOSING IN DIALOGUE

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It was a chance happening, and yet it didn't happen completely by chance. Claus Carstensen borrowed Nils Erik Gjerdevik's studio over a weekend to make paintings for an exhibition in Randers. Carstensen works quickly and in the course of two days the studio filled up with his paintings. But all around were the paintings by Gjerdevik. Two very different expressions in terms of colour, line and attitude. Two very different expressions to put into play.

Carstensen works rapidly and with precision, whereas Gjerdevik is careful and meticulous. While Carstensen's works have an expressive, improvised attitude, Gjerdevik's paintings appear well thought out and detailed. Carstensen integrates figuration, writing and fragments from a media reality, whereas Gjerdevik confines himself to experiments with colours and shapes that only vaguely lead associations to narratives. In contrast, Gjerdevik's works are a cornucopia of clear bright hues and pastel colours, whereas Carstensen prefers dark shades and the black line.

The two artists can be said to represent different artistic traditions, the one expressive and socially reflective, the other formalist and media specific. Opposites, pure and simple, yet not completely so. Both artists have consistently confronted their work with alien things as an integrated part of their practice; both have put their images to play with the unexpected, as with these joint paintings.

Carstensen has literally done this in former collaborative works. For instance, he has produced images with his uncle, Alfred Friis, who is also a trained artist, with his daughter Zoe, with the colleague Peter Bonde and with his students at The Royal Danish Art Academy. In Gjerdevik's case, the confrontation has been at the level of painterly formalism; he has continually challenged his foundation in formal abstraction with expressive and figurative traditions. His vibrant colours, for example, are a deliberate step away from the classically subdued colours of formal abstraction.

In the joint compositions of this exhibition, however, they both go a step further. Gjerdevik confronts his formal vocabulary not only with another tradition, but with the figurative and expressive idiom of a specific artist. Carstensen, on the other hand, for the first time plays the game of joint compositions with a representative of formal abstraction.

THE RULES OF THE GAME

For every game rules are necessary, and for these joint compositions they were simple. Some canvases were split down the middle, with one half reserved for each player. Other canvases were first drawn up by one player and then handed over to the other. And then there was an agreement from the start: the compositions were finished only when both players were satisfied with the result.

Gjerdevik sets out with a geometrical form filled with a striped pattern in light pastel hues. It is free standing against a white background. Carstensen responds to the pastels with a cheeky black line that draws two words across the canvas: "Diatribes", time wasted, as a comment to the intellectual pastime of abstraction, and "(Tri)balect", a

marker for the Western claim to universality. We think that abstract art is international, but it is only understood in a Western context. It is our particular trialect or tribal dialect. The contrasts are, however, not just sharply confrontative, for the graffiti line shows respect for the abstract figure by being drawn around it instead of across it.

Carstensen goes for the top half of another canvas with his theme of the hanged man. A well-known media motif with existential dimensions, it is sketched in black and contrasting a dark green background that turns into a sharp clear yellow. As always in Carstensen's work, the colours are superfluously transparent as if from a hasty touch. Gjerdevik responds on the bottom half with a warm characteristic yellow. Opaque. On top, black curvy strokes trace the line that Carstensen introduced with his hanged man. It all adds an enticing cabaret atmosphere to the hanged man, which transforms into the rhythmic symphony of a nocturnal scene – and a woman's leg poised to the dynamics of dance.

THE RULES OF COMPOSITION

The rules of the joint compositions might have been simple, but the execution was as complicated as an improvised modern dance. It entailed the surrendering of control over each composition and allowing one's motifs to be taken in new directions by the other's brushstrokes. At the same time, it entailed taking control when such was required, and about leading the composition on toward new paths. It is this play between control and openness that is reflected on the canvases. If the dance is too feminine a metaphor, think instead of fencing, a rap battle or one of the favourites of modernism: the bullfight! But think only of the execution and not of the outcome, for these works have not ended with a winner and a loser. They have ended with the creation of a new composition that is the work neither of Carstensen nor Gjerdevik, but is invented by their dialogue.

Gjerdevik covers a canvas with a warm yellow background and tops it with a chequered semicircle in turquoise blue and orange red: a well-known element from his formal vocabulary. Carstensen replies with a circus-mutation of the hanged man. The existential dimension disappears in the meeting with Gjerdevik's colours, and four horses are stacked on top of each other in what appears to be the show's grand finale. But Carstensen's contribution is also an adolescent interference with the neat surface of formal abstraction; it turns the refined aesthetics of the abstract composition into a clown's outfit and a circus tent. Perhaps, however, Gjerdevik has already made this revolt possible? He finalizes the composition with a twist of the treetop on the peak of the tent.

Carstensen chalks up another canvas with black speed-stripes that draws his daughter Zoe's foot and remarks on the sweat of her Converse sneakers. Gjerdevik responds with a pattern of balloon ornaments. Not as simplicity in contrast to the graffiti-flickering background, but as a complicated, improvised response to Carstensen's formal complexity. Carstensen's fast lane brushstrokes are not just emphasised, then, in terms of their formal qualities. The balloon ornament also underscores the delicate and loving dimension in the verbal ping-pong between father and daughter.

HISTORICALLY CONSIDERED

A game like that which emerges from these joint compositions has a relatively brief historical genealogy. It was not until the 20th century that a deliberate loss of control was considered artistically productive. In other words, only then was it artistically creative to improvise and to negotiate something unintended or unexpected. The main catalysts for

these ideas were the artists known today as Dadaists and Surrealists. They developed a range of artistic strategies to produce new, unexpected meanings or to draw out suppressed fantasies otherwise blocked by self-censorship.

For them, it was about resisting the supposed normality of the social and experiential orders that existed. Some aspired to a political revolt against the status quo, others were inspired by psychoanalysis and sought to bring forth suppressed sexual desires. All of them, however, were interested in creating new artistic strategies that challenged the individual's control of the artistic process and forced new ways of thinking. Collages, for instance, made it possible to put things together that normally were unrelated to create new, unexpected meanings. "Beautiful as the coincidental encounter on an operating table between a sewing machine and an umbrella," was the parole. Other techniques such as automatic writing and drawing made it possible to unleash expressions unchecked by the well-behaving censorship of thoughts.

They too experimented with joint works. A prominent example was "Cadavre Exquis" or in English The Exquisite Corpse. It was originally a social game where you wrote or drew without being able to see what the first participant had scribbled down. According to some sources, the name "Cadavre Exquis" originates from one of the first sentences that were created with the technique: "The exquisite corpse will drink the young wine". Another explanation links the name to the hybrid creatures that might appear when head, body and legs were drawn by different artists, independently of each other. For the Surrealists the method was yet another strategy for creative thinking, in this case by overstepping the boundaries of the individual's own creativity.

THE RISE OF A NEW COMPOSITION

Gjerdevik and Carstensen's joint compositions are part of that tradition. Contrary to the Surrealists, however, they have no ambitions to bring forth something from a suppressed inner fantasy world. There is nothing personal or suppressed in these works. Neither is the ambition a social revolution. For Carstensen and Gjerdevik the ambition is purely artistic. It is about inventing new artistic compositions, about provoking forth compositions that transgress, surprise and challenge both of them.

So what is the result of this improvised meeting? How are we to read the dialogue between these two artists? One approach, of course, is to see this as a meeting between two different artistic vocabularies that Carstensen and Gjerdevik have each introduced, varied, nuanced and developed into a consistent composition over time. An inherent attraction in these works, then, is to look for the impact of one artist or the other, to recognize their vocabulary and to recognize how the game of these two artistic vocabularies unfolds from composition to composition.

But it is also possible to look at the works as the new independent entities that they are. Two different attitudes, colours and lines meet in these works, yet the result is more than just Gjerdevik + Carstensen. Perhaps they do not present a singular consistent expression, but each in their own way the individual painting creates independent paths towards new compositional shapes. Both Gjerdevik and Carstensen derive their compositions from the flatness of the canvas, Gjerdevik with his formal variations, Carstensen with his hasty brushstrokes. In the meeting between the two a new space appears and completely new stories develop.

See the circus tent is opening a new stage for Carstensen's boyish tricks and

Gjerdevik's chequers. See the hanged man transformed into an erotic show or a clown act. See abstraction and graffiti empower each other's forceful acrobatics. See content transformed into formal experiments and formal experiments turn into stories. See how the game between the two artists has created a space of mutual respect in the joint challenge: to allow the composition to take on a life of its own in the dance with someone other. It was a chance happening, and yet it didn't happen completely by chance.

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