

Festive Formalism

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Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically.¹

The salient characteristic that sets the paradox apart from more regular modes of thinking is that the paradox makes it possible, for a brief moment, to perceive the world as disorder. In the paradox, our familiar understanding of space and time is being confronted with another fundamental logic, whose surplus of information does not lend itself to being arranged under the rubric of the well known. The paradox's disorder, however, should not immediately be likened to chaos. What we have instead is rather a special form of parallel logic, whose premises do not correspond to the familiar and whose essential structure will always remain in shadow to a certain extent. The logic might resemble what we already know, indeed, but on certain crucial points it operates in a very different way. The upshot of this can be that the paradoxical often situates itself on the verge of understanding. Paradoxicality, in this vein, can appear to be irrationality. However, we are then speaking about an irrationality that also stands as a kind of systematic, which merely follows a hitherto unknown and untried logic. The world contains the possibility of orders other than those that are governed by reason. The construction of parallel logical systems can play a role in rendering these orders visible.

Sometimes, the paradox is juxtaposed with irony. However, in an expanded understanding of the concept, it can also be connected with humor on the whole. It can be said that like laughter, the paradox assumes the form of a spontaneous and abrupt change of style. In other words, the paradoxical reveals itself as a rupture (an inversion, a displacement) in the familiar space. For a short time, the rupture pushes us out onto the other side of understanding and to the other side of language, as humor also can do. The effect of the displacement can be one of dizziness, where you might feel like you are standing on shaky ground. The irrational logic can generally lead us out into a field where the ground is unstable and gives cause for further deliberation and might even just as well be situated on the wall instead of beneath our feet. Here, double entendre is acknowledged as a positive attribute. The opposing antitheses are intensified instead of being diminished and what delineate themselves here are contrasts that do not neutralize each other but, on the contrary, remain standing as disparities. What is established in this fashion is an asymmetrical systematic which, in fact, does not always lend itself to being figured out so neatly and which, in the final

analysis, lays down a gauntlet before the rational order and the customary categorizations with which we comprehend the real world. A cardboard box that is folded together in what is logically an incorrect manner can potentially open up for new and strange aspects of the space.



"objects in mirrors" 2003

Martin Erik Andersen's sculptures can be described as re-organizations of objects and materials that are characterized by the fact that despite their immediately apparent mutual diversity, they are all related to the familiar sphere of experience. Among the various kinds of spaces that can be enumerated offhand in his works are the home, the room and the workshop as well as more specifically cultural spaces like the laboratory and the sanctuary. Above and beyond the register of these more or less familiar connections, there is also an ongoing schematization of individual objects that takes place. In this connection, mention can be made of the bed, the table, the lamp, the shelf, the wall, the door, the drying rack and the parasol. That what we have before us are registrations or schematizations rather than direct representations of reality is borne out by the fact that the references are always being made merely in a generally casual manner and by way of suggestion: a chipboard placed on top of a steel support serves to delineate a bed, a fluorescent light tube covered with colored knitted swatches of acrylic material can serve as the sketch for a lamp. The open schematization of familiar spaces and objects seems to confine the real within our reach as a kind of underlying grammar that the works can play up against.

The presence of the real can also be traced in the artwork's striking and distinctive materiality. A registration of recurrent

articles and materials includes steel supports comprised of iron fittings, iron profiles, mounting brackets, chipboards, laths, floor carpets, Persian carpets, rugs of hide, glass plates, mirrors, video monitors, computers and loudspeakers, cameras (including cables and cable-end boxes), knitted swatches of acrylic material, tissue paper, foil, printed matter (newspapers and comic strips), protective packing cardboard, underfelt, music, fluorescent/neon tubes, colored electric light bulbs, silk-, acrylic- and latex-cushions, incense sticks, hotplates, record players, decorative articles (crocheted swatches of acrylic fiber, pompons, tassels, *cotillions*), graphic prints (silk screens, painted silk screens, offset prints, lithographs), plaster, wax, stearin, polyester, papier mâché, bronze, paper, concrete, plastic, marble and cardboard. All materials awaken different sensibilities and come to be linked into different complexes of meaning. What arises in the couplings between them, however, is a form of order spanning across them, which does not resemble the rational order but appears nonetheless to be manifesting itself as a kind of progressive systematic. Here, a record player and a hotplate are not only contrary terms; they are also reflections of each other.



"The Baptistry" 2003

That is to say, then, that the sculptures function as schemes related to well known contexts while, at the very same time, they transgress these contexts through a sequence of restructurings or processes that set aside and override the things' customary constructions and connecting lines for the sake of establishing new and different ones. Here is a list of some of the processes that recur again and again as we examine the gamut of works: inversions, reflections, transference, overlappings, conversions, rebuildings, joinings and overstatements. What is opened up through these processes is some kind of uncertain and many-colored world that is parallel to the existing one. In this connection, it might be worth repeating that the parallel processes never cease to address themselves to the well-known experiential world. However, the artworks somehow render the back sides of the real world concrete, giving definite form to facets of reality where the objects, as substance and significance, stand forth in a more fluid and undefined way in relation to each other and still have not settled into taking on stable definitions. The transport between objects and materials, though, never transpires in a completely fluid manner. One could maintain, for example, that, by and large, organizations everywhere are oriented according to a grid structure composed of straight lines. Individual work elements, for the most part, are placed serially, in parallel or perpendicularly in relation to other elements and also with respect to the surrounding architecture. The grid here might serve to suggest the general condition that the works' very open form is being established in exchange with an equally fundamental structural interest.

The first of the work process that I would like to examine is the inversion of things and materials. Entering in as constituent elements from one artwork to another, we find, among other things, carpets that have been turned upside down, cardboard boxes turned inside out, laterally-reversed and upside-down articles of printed matter, music that is played backwards, inverted lathwork boards and protective screens and video monitors that have been turned upside down. The sculpture, *Cire perdue med projection* (1998), for example, consists of a casting mold that has been everted: the interior surface is actually on the outside of the form. In the casting process, the mold has subsequently been subject to yet another inversion, with the result that the finished work makes its appearance as a rather paradoxical inversion of an inversion. The sculpture, *Gulvophæng* [Floor Hanging] (1998) works out from the very same logic. It has been created from a floor rug that has been turned upside down: the carpet's sole reverse side has been severed half-way up into shards, which have then been everted in such a way that, in this case, the inversion also comes to be redoubled, at least. The inversions can also entail that the room almost comes to stand upside down, as in the Malmö version of

Ingen anden nåde end dette dit dørtrin [No Other Mercy than Your Doorstep] (1999–2004), where neon tubes were placed on the floor instead of being mounted to the ceiling. Alongside this example, the inversion of the soundtrack in works like *Af alle disse værelser er ingen blevet til* [Of all these rooms, none have come into existence] (2004) elicits the effect that the sculpture's time basically comes to unfold in reverse *through* the substance. One of the byproducts of the inversion process might be, if we may venture to put it more precisely, that it overlays non-inverted and familiar space and progressively advancing time onto different kinds of spaces and times that one generally does not have access to through the senses of sight and hearing.

What is the salient characteristic of the reflections' role in the sculptures is that they are unfolded not only inside the mirror's impossible spaces but are also being given definite form in fully tangible elements; in this way, they come to attain physical existence. If you start out by confining your examination to the visual reflections, you will find that they make their appearance in the mirror-like surfaces, the mirrored/reflective boxes, the mirror rooms and the plates of finely polished steel and foil. On the surfaces of all of these elements, a difference is established between real space and a reflecting space that cannot be accessed by the body. In addition, the reflecting process is present in the transport between video cameras and video monitors that typically appear, also, in connection with mirror-like surfaces. Similar to what happens with the mirrored boxes, what these spatial arrangements bring about is a kind of vertiginous infinity projection, where the gaze becomes immersed, consumed, vacant and ultimately lost. The recurrent bewilderment of sensory orientation seems to be a crucial link in the encirclement of irrational spaces that the sculptures are working around. The reflection's elongation out into the physical substance entails here that the mirror-like surface itself comes to be invisible or, conversely, becomes incorporated right into the viewer's gaze. A list of the specific kinds of reflections in the works would have to include, among other things, redoubled stippling apparatus, redoubled pedestals, redoubled blocks of beeswax, redoubled squares of tissue paper, redoubled carpets, iron rods, and crocheted swatches of acrylic fibers. When you've finally managed to catch sight of the reflection's physicalization, the sculptures' materials cave in and tumble down into a series of peculiar redoublings of themselves. Following this logic to its consequence, a sequence of sensationally colored *cotillions* actually becomes a displaced reflection rendered tangible, right where the boundary between the visible and the invisible starts to become fluid and vague.

Perhaps the processes of transference are especially conspicuous in the transport of forms through different materials. Cardboard

boxes are transferred to steel boxes, pieces of cardboard are transferred to bronze, marble is transferred to stones in polyester, modeling stands in wood are transferred to modeling stands in iron, paper and pencil markings are transferred to Cortén steel, pieces of driftwood are transferred to bronze, mirror-like surfaces to glass surfaces, the plug tap to wood, tissue paper to printed matter, and so on and so forth. The transference generates a merging of different materials' qualities and meanings, which simultaneously dislocates the objects out beyond the frontiers of real space. Some of the transferences appear to be downright absurd, such as an iron modeling stand locked firmly into position, which would certainly have to be labeled an intractable and unserviceable implement for working with. Another paradoxical example would be the transference of an ornamental carpet onto wood shavings, where the carpet's ornaments are transposed into sawed out interstices. In both these instances, what we have before us is an odd form of obstruction and simultaneously the preservation or securing of the object's identity, which can presumably be understood, in fact, as a distant reflection on one of sculpture's fundamental functions, historically speaking: its inherent capacity to serve as a monumentalization of the transitory. But at the same time, these monumentalizations seem to be intrinsically equipped with a vulnerability and a missing function that, if anything, turns them somehow into a defense for whatever might fall outside the compass of the gaze.

The processes of overlapping and covering are primarily connected to the many material layers in the sculptures that are interposed on top of each other. The primary layers, generally speaking, include tissue paper, comic strips, newspapers and knitted swatches of acrylic fibers. These can be conjoined with more fluid and undefined layers of material like polyester, stearin, papier mâché, beeswax and plaster. The layers are often placed around iron rods, on top of different kinds of boards and surfaces, directly onto the floor, on the walls, on the windows and on pedestals as well as being draped sometimes over objects like loudspeakers, computers, screen monitors and neon tubes. The more fluid layers make their appearance especially prominently around - and also down inside - cardboard boxes and plastic tubs as well as on top of electric wires, cable-end boxes and joinings. In this connection, there is often a matter of comminglings, where articles of printed matter and/or tissue paper also enter into the arrangements. The overlappings seem to function as a kind of veil or as translucent boundaries that conceal, safeguard or shield the work elements from a more direct visual reading. In their capacity as layers, they enter in between the sculpture elements and the gaze. In this manner, they keep the work halfway at bay. In a number of the silkscreen prints, covered and blurred faces come

into view and in the sculpture entitled *Hoved med klud* [Head with Cloth] (2002) knitted swatches of acrylic fiber are wrapped around a bronze head. In the aforementioned silkscreen printings and in the sculpture cited as an example, what we have before us are shelters protected from the vision and frame-constructions implicating some sort of masking around the personal space. Similarly, rugs, foil and wooden boards can be organized according to this covering process. Maybe in the final analysis, even the artworks' occasional soundtracks and occasional use of incense sticks can be interpreted as forms of overlappings of the materials, overlappings that serve to secure and sustain the substance's requisite distance from the social and media-affected zones.

In most cases, the conversion/rebuilding of things and materials transpires on the background of a foregoing decomposition. A *cotillion* of paper is boiled, for example, so that its structure disintegrates; an apartment is split up into an incalculable series of photographs; a block of marble is carved out into fragments; an easy chair is stripped of its upholstery; carpets and cardboard boxes are split up and scattered about. After this, the elements are somehow reconstituted again. The reconstruction is characterized not by the addition of substance but, on the contrary, through the realization of a parallel structuring of the substance. That which is consequently being tampered with here, after all is said and done, is presumably the understanding of the object as a finished and definitive entity for the sake of making room for an accentuation of the object as work and as genesis within the context of a more open space. In the video piece, *Home Is Where The Buffalo Roam* (1996), the apartment photographs are presented with such rapid-fire pace in the editing, and projected to the accompanying soundtrack of a rather upsetting polka played backwards that the intimate space is evaginated and simply caves in on the screen. Everyday space's continuous familiarity is being transformed here to a split-up condition-form of colors and velocity, which can call to mind something like a magical hallucinating ritual aimed at getting the inner and outer - as well as the near and far - to collapse. The rebuilding process not only refers back to the working body situated behind the objects, but also points ahead toward the greater metaphysical space outside the subject.



"Cotillion" 1992

The next to last process I want to review is the process of joining. The sculptures can be characterized by the fact that things and materials are being joined in every which way. Wax is put together with cardboard and carpets; neon tubes are coupled with silk cushions; crocheted swatches of acrylic fiber are united with slender iron rods; wooden boards are connected to tissue paper, foil and mirrors; mounting brackets are screwed right into polyester and comic strips. As a jumping off point, we might start by saying that the joinings are working with the categorizing gaze and directed toward complexity and diversity. Right there, where the sight is inclined to spot contrasts, for example, between analysis and intimacy, between low and high technology, between surface and space, what interpolates itself is a more fundamental asymmetry, where these differences function as aspects of each other. This can also be seen in relation to the works' spatial schematization, as is the case in *We Are Free - Electricity* (2000), where a domestic space, a scientific space and a metaphysical space are braided into one another. In the same sculpture, the work's space is coupled via video monitors and photographs to spaces situated elsewhere in the exhibition building. The totality of inner and outer spaces is being engrafted together, thus establishing a place that is devoid of center or unique focus but is full of transitions and blind angles.

Overstatement as process, in my opinion, is conjoined with the materials' terse presence in the sculptures. Perhaps it is the works' decorative visuality that serves as the most salient example of this: the decorative overstatement is carried into effect especially by the use of tissue paper in pink, light-yellow

and light-blue shades, gaudily colored knittings, paper cotillions, pink pompons, comic strip clippings, colored electric light bulbs, colored neon tubes and mirrored rooms. Furthermore, the decorative element is represented in different forms of serigraphies, offset prints and videos. What emerges here is a diffuse gray zone between amusement parks and metaphysics. The visual overstatement elicits the effect of something that is all at once funny and destabilizing, maybe because, on the basis of a logical rationale, the decorative objects and colors appear to be so completely unmotivated. Above all, they actually happen to be wildly beautiful. Another process of overstatement in the sculptures is linked to the more unorganized mass. There is a recurrent deployment of too much plaster, too much stearin and beeswax, too much glue, too much joint sealant and too much tape that are used in setting up and laying out the wooden boards, the glass plates, the mirrored/reflective boxes, the cardboard boxes and the electric wires. On this micro-level, the surplus of materiality also appears to operate as a kind of punctuation in the material. It can actually be experienced as a kind of generosity or curiosity in relation to looking at what the material as such does and what it can do when one, as a form-giving consciousness, steps aside for a moment.

Without the recognizable and familiar experiential world as the omnipresent frame, the works would not have anything to emerge in relation to and the parallel logic would presumably become unreadable, engendering a veritable chaos of differences. The same thing can be said about many of the exhibition titles. Their nutty and peculiar wording also comes into being on the basis of a reliance on language's logic, which is being transgressed or short-circuited. The titles can take their marks in a number of different cultural contexts but are perhaps especially centered on obscure and metaphysical formulations about the world lying behind ordinary space's vulnerable facades. In this way, the titles point out toward - and they secure and contain - parallel worlds which, for the most part, are just as *far out there* as the artworks themselves. However, even though the titles are comparable, in a certain sense, with the sculptures' makeover of reality's space, the palpably material actually functions in the space on a more minimal and sensuous level. Naturally, you move your way through the sculptures with your urge to read meanings and make interpretations in a highly attuned state of receptivity. But at the same time, the works are open to a fundamentally bodily and sensory reading, which is undoubtedly connected to the sketch-like allusions that refer back to the recognizable room's architecture. As a viewer, you can spend some time inside the sculptures, lodge yourself in beneath their span or walk right through them; several of them seem to be shelters of some sort or even screenings from the surrounding world. It might be possible to apprehend the

sculptures as micro-utopias or micro-spaces of some kind or other, which minimally rearrange the normal proportional relationships among space, body and language. In a different context, the author, Peter Seeberg, has written about the perspectives for this kind of micro-work: "Nobody can generate all the material. The prepositions are basically fixed in their meanings, the adverbs are already more exchangeable, but nobody can alter a given language's meaning all at once without making himself incomprehensible and nobody experiences so much that it is necessary to do this without it being over everybody's head, including his own. A little bit is sufficient. (...) Change the meaning of 'on' and well, you see, then the world is really sliding down toward renewal."ⁱⁱ

translated by DAN A. MARMORSTEIN

ⁱ Sol Le Witt: "Sentences on Conceptual Art" in, Øivind Nygård and Morten Stræde (editors): *BIAS: 33 artist's views on sculpture*. Det Kongelige Danske Kunstakademi, 2000, p. 42.

ⁱⁱ Peter Seeberg: "Fem afsnit om en realistisk roman" in, *Kritik* 47/1979, Fremad, pp. 26-27.