

Cartographic Tones of a Monstrous Age - a conversation with Ferdinand Ahm Krag
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Anna Holm: In the first room of your exhibition at Overgaden you show a series of works based on a grid of lines that are a stylistic continuation of your earlier practice. This line structure is something you have described before as a 'virtual map' that comprises a field of potential for image formations. Here it forms the basis for abstract figures that generate associations with heads. What is it all about?

Ferdinand Ahm Krag: Yes, in the first room I show some more detailed works. The intention is to draw the viewer into a focused and intensified space where the surface of the image stands out as a force field. They are built up around an interplay or oscillation between red and blue. But as you mention, the works are also about heads. Or about head formations, face formations and planet formations. They are about the binding and constriction of a mental space and about the relationship between a geography and a person that is installed in that geography. I use the word geography for want of better, because I actually think of it more as a force field or a geography comprised of force fields. In traditional painting there is a clear figure/ground distinction, which of course belongs to the past art historically, yet as a culture we continue to think using this division. Although it's not unequivocal, because there are currently some very fundamental changes taking place simultaneously in our perception of time, place and life. The combination of deep, ecological upheaval and accelerated technological development has collapsed the distinction between the local and the global and the inner and the outer. This influences how the psyche is configured and bound. My works deal at an entirely personal, bodily and perceptive level with how we can remain open yet shield ourselves in relationship to this new geography. Accordingly there are many landscapes in the works, but instead of depicting a head in front of a landscape in the traditional way, the contour of a cheek, for example, forms a landscape you can enter. There is something psychotic or schizophrenic about it. I've always been fascinated by schizophrenic art, where the boundaries between the subject and the object are unclear, like when Carl Fredrik Hill draws an arm that grows into a table and reappears in a piano where it plays music. There are some highly extreme mixes of subject-object spaces, and to me it seems that at so many levels we live in a world of tangled, network-like structures. I see my own works as a kind of psychological cartography that tries to open up the head and refold it, so the imaginary can connect to matter and forms of energy anew.

AH I would like to return to your description of geography as a landscape of force fields, because alongside these 'head formations' you also have some drawings of what look like energy fields. How do the two relate?

FAK The physicist James Clerk Maxwell's illustrations of his field equations – which describe how electromagnetism works – have provided a direct model for the drawings. What interests me about his drawings is that they illustrate force fields that are present, but which we cannot access with our senses alone. Although the borders of perception are pretty elastic – a common experience of taking psychedelic mushrooms is being able to see electromagnetic radiation that is beyond the visible spectrum. It is the essence of drawing to explore borders.

AH What makes drawing as a medium work so well here?

FAK I see all the works in the first room as drawn paintings or painted drawings – somewhere midway between. But what makes drawing work well in general, is that it can be simultaneously analytically diagrammatic as well as expressive. The very nature of drawing is that it draws borders, that is to say it produces order, and we need borders to be drawn to produce subjectivity. We would normally say that the border of the body is the skin, but what is interesting is that the electromagnetic field surrounding the body goes so much further, and that it interacts with the force fields of other entities. To a large extent the black-and-white drawings in Force-Field-Notes shown

in the next room represent an attempt to register and imagine the body's pre-personal force levels, whereas the heads are more like cartographic rationalisations of psychological layers. Here painting works well, because it is a slower process.

AH Can you elaborate on the drawings, which you call Force-Field-Notes?

FAK The drawings in the middle room were made much faster and come from some sketchbooks I draw in every day. I try to have them with me everywhere I go, so the drawings are made in lots of different places in lots of different states of mind and have a different kind of immediacy. I have always been interested in the anthropological method of making field notes, and I see these works as a kind of 'force field notes'.

AH You talk about us living in an age that needs new image formations. Can you explain what you mean by this?

FAK I can, but it is difficult to describe because we do not have a very developed language for it. But if you look at the world of art, for example, you can meet artists that float around in an international zone from residency to residency. Yet despite the massive amount of travelling, there is not necessarily anything in their language that indicates that they have moved at all. This does not mean that journeys that transform a subject are not possible, and I am not trying to argue that people should stay at home. I am just saying that there is an entire logic that has collapsed in relationship to the centre and the periphery, home and away, the local and the global. And that means we have the possibility to invent new forms of travelling, which might not even be geographical in any traditional sense. You can travel into a plant, for example – there are shamanist traditions for doing that. Geographically, it is not a long journey, but you cross the border of species. On the other hand, I can travel to a lot of places on the planet and be connected with a smartphone and computer and therefore carry my sociality with me everywhere I go. The philosopher Peter Sloterdijk talks about it as 'an electro medial skin that constitutes a new immune system'. I really like seeing these digital media and structures as a kind of skin or immune system that forms a membrane around you and creates a new inner/outer figure. But it is incredibly difficult to draw, because it is mobile and constantly forms new connections.

AH So should the works in the exhibition be seen as an attempt to approach this new geography and its potential travel forms?

FAK There is nothing in the world I want to avoid more than some kind of pedagogical role. I think if you are lucky enough to make a good image, then it has to land in the holes in our language. Not because the image should celebrate a form of mysticism, but it has to have something that evades language. Things that do not collide with language make me think about the distance between my conceptualisation, my language and what is before me. But yes, it is an attempt at approximation, although it is also about transcendence. The problem with monotheist religions is that God, eternity and paradise – all the goodies – are on the other side, and you can only get to them through a moral code, the priesthood, or after death. I think that is wrong, because the eternal, the divine, is right here, immanent in our bodies. We are within the breath of God. This is not synonymous with me thinking we should celebrate 'holistic universes', which is why it is important that there is also the destruction and chaos as in some of the drawings. It is not only about us trying to get in touch with ourselves and slow down. Well we can do that, but on that basis we also need to see the how devastated the reality we find ourselves in is.

AH Devastated in what sense?

FAK Well, on almost every level the space we find ourselves in is completely contaminated, but that is also what makes it exciting. Here I am thinking, among other things, about the Anthropocene thesis that we have entered a new manmade geological age, but also about the social realms that have been destroyed by our obsession with cultural identity. A good example is the recent terrorist shooting in Copenhagen, which has affirmed and reinforced everything associated with thinking in

terms of cultural identity, and where nobody can see a way out of the whole wretched business because all the figures are virtually set in stone. But I believe there is something we all have in common.

AH But it is difficult to just cancel cultural identity or identity in general, because the idea of identity is so deeply rooted in our way of thinking and acting in the world ...

FAK Exactly – agency is a key word. You cannot, for example, insert agency in a Jackson Pollock painting, and therefore it is a peak and an ending. If you give up the figure, you also give up agency, but if you insert it in a figure/ground relationship, you are lying. Here I would like to return to painting or drawing as a place for conceiving of the world. Thinking is not restricted to academia: the aborigines' patterns in the sand are a way of thinking – something Asger Jorn understood – and Viking ornamentation is an interpretation of how space/time folds. In some ways I think what I am doing is totally hopeless – to insist on something as old-fashioned and unspectacular as painting and drawing as a way of thinking anything at all in our world. If you want to have a heavy impact you can paint Mohammed as a dog on a roundabout. That makes a hell of a lot of noise, but it generates absolutely no awareness of anything beyond human cultures, and that is the awareness we need.

AH Does that awareness have anything to do with the enormous wave animation you show in the rear room?

FAK That is clearly the most monumental and most meditative work in the exhibition. It is more like an infinite ornament. And yes, it is about generating awareness of something silent in the world, silent but shared by everyone and what makes it possible for us to have voices at all and to be able to shout. But as mentioned before I am a staunch opponent of any kind of holism that presents a complete schedule for human existence. Attempting to create a bubble of being and tranquillity is like peeing in your pants to stay warm. The point is that you cannot suspend the issue of agency. If you do that, you end up with nothing but meditative practices or Buddhism where you are present in the world by rejecting it, and that is not something I believe in. It makes art a sham, because it ignores that the world is destroyed on so many levels – ecologically, culturally, etc. The point is to develop a way of being where it is still possible to produce dreams, ideas, thoughts. Otherwise you are just a symptom of the destruction and then everything really is destroyed.

AH We have talked about subjectivity, culture and technology, but there are also references to natural history. Why are they included, and how do they connect to the subject?

FAK As I said earlier, I believe that we currently find ourselves in a fragmented, floating space, also in relationship to natural history. Theis Ørntoft has written some poems that I think express this brilliantly. You can suddenly experience a feeling of deep identification with, for example, the Cretaceous Period. We are not only the product of an inferiority complex caused by losing the war in 1864, and we are more than the sum of our 'likes' on Facebook and Instagram. We are connected to something much deeper. If you look at the mapping of human migration by DNA researchers, you can see how organically we once moved. So why have we started to bind our identities so tightly and rigidly since? There have been repeated waves of immigration to Europe and Scandinavia, and we are all a big genetic mix, so the idea that we have grown out of a specific territory that defines our cultural identity is not only wrong, it is also definitively destructive. I am not sure how we can get beyond it, but I humbly believe that things like art, poetry and science can generate openness, and that is where natural history comes in. It contests the rigidity and narcissism of cultural identity formations, and makes it possible to see the evolution of the species as a continuum that can be traced back to the pre-human, as for instance in J.G. Ballard's novel *The Drowned World*, which describes a consciousness that sinks to the level of reptiles. Or a film like *Altered States*, where the main character is in a pressure tank and reverts to the ape stage. Time is suddenly no longer irreversible. At the level of consciousness, you can also move back through the evolution of the species.

AH Despite your catastrophic observations, there are some very positive aspects to your project and view of the world ...

FAK True. I see the time we are living in as one where we have cause to be absolutely optimistic and absolutely pessimistic. In our age, space and cosmology are more open to us than ever before, at the same time as everything is totally destroyed and catastrophic, and that invites a boundless exploration of what the living is. It is neither utopian nor dystopian – it is monstrous.