

# Introduction

*Aus Schatten und Bildern  
zur Wahrheit*

Numerous catalogue texts and books have been written about Per Kirkeby and his art, but very few of them attempt to interpret his art based on an analysis of his pictures.

Similarly, very few have dared to make an overall statement identifying the *Leitmotiv* in his work. When presenting "Per Kirkeby. 122 x 122. Painting on masonite", an exhibition at the Danish art museum Louisiana in May 2002, Poul Erik Tøjner told the press that the first part of Per Kirkeby's work deals with history, the second with nature. Not an unreasonable proposal for a hypothesis.

In this book I propose that the work of Per Kirkeby, taken in its entirety, unfolds within an epistemological space and concentrates on the relationship between science and art. Throughout his artistic career Kirkeby has adopted the approach of a scientist, documenting, storing, and constructing systems. His work generates meanings and insights through a continuous dialogue between art and science.

The word "polyhistor" is derived from the Greek *poly-istor*, which means "multi-learned". In other words, a

polyhistor is a person who is well versed in several different sciences. The phenomenon of the polyhistor exists in many ages and can be traced back to Antiquity.

Many would proclaim Aristotle to be the first, and uncontested, polyhistor. His writings show how he immersed himself in a large number of highly varied fields within the sciences, the social sciences, and the arts.

Aristotle was able to cultivate many fields, but in later times a polyhistor has been a person who masters two, three, or four different subjects. Combining multiple art forms or multiple senses can result in a synaesthesia, where an impression channelled through one sense produces an impression channelled through another. Combining multiple energies can result in a synergy, an extra energy that arises out of this particular meeting. This means that the elements create more together than on their own. Likewise, there must be polyhistorians whose multi-faceted work yields an extra bonus. On the contrary, some polyhistorians keep their individual fields rigidly separated.

A special group of polyhistorians have studied both science and art. The most famous was, of course, Leonardo

da Vinci, who was not only an artist, but also mastered several scientific and technical fields. This polyhistor came to embody the Renaissance ideal of the versatile human being.

Polyhistorians are often associated with the baroque period, even though, as noted, the phenomenon existed in many previous eras. Many famous baroque philosophers and scientists were polyhistorians, including Descartes and Denmark's Nicolaus Steno. Steno was simultaneously a geologist, a doctor, and a theologian. The baroque period also witnessed the birth of the "cabinet of curiosities", the manifestation of an intention to assemble all of Creation. It was not until the 1700s that the specialist museum and the new ideal of specialization were born.

Goethe was the last polyhistor and another of the great figures who worked with art as well as science. Besides his job as a civil servant and his poetry, he was occupied with scientific work. In fact, he regarded his chromatology as his actual *magnum opus*, and as more valuable than his works of fiction.

I have entitled this book *The Artist as Polyhistor* because it goes further than simply building on the hypothesis that Per Kirkeby's work contains a dialogue between art and science: His approach to science is that of a polyhistor. Per Kirkeby is not a painter who is also a fully qualified geologist, as one normally finds him described. His work relates to a wide range of fields.

This range has arisen out of the necessities that confront us during our lives. In his youth Kirkeby wanted to study either history or archaeology. He ultimately chose geology, however, which at the time was, in itself, a broad field consisting of botany, palaeontology, cultural geography, mineralogy, crystallography, and geology. This book could very well have included a chapter on palaeontology. When Per Kirkeby was young, the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein were all the rage. Now, later in life, Kirkeby has become increasingly interested in theology. Generally these are the origins of the subjects included in his polyhistoric scope. In my presentation they are arranged so that the reader begins with the general subjects and also ends on a fairly general note. Since the ninth song in the *Odyssey* is where Polyphemus the

Cyclops is blinded with a stake, my chapter on the eye and blindness is also ninth in this book.

As a geology student in the summer of 1963, Per Kirkeby took part in the Second Peary Land Expedition to northeastern Greenland. Upon his return he wrote a small piece of prose entitled "From the world's most northerly house", published in May 1964 in *Grains of Wheat*, a Danish journal for young authors. Kirkeby himself demonstrated the seminal nature of this text by having it reprinted in his first significant non-Danish catalogue *Fliegende Blätter* (1977, Bildauswahl I, note 49).

At the end of this text he formulated thoughts that have come to serve as a platform for his painting ever since: "I wage war on the colour when it is merely beautiful. I wage war on the picture when it is merely the dream of the autonomous abstraction. A picture without intellectual superstructure is nothing. Not necessarily literary in its straightforward meaning. But it must be responsible and not merely inoffensive" (*Grains of Wheat*, vol. 38, no 2). Here he presented a platform for his own painting that still holds true today, which is why I have given this book the subtitle "'The intellectual superstructure' in the work of Per Kirkeby".

This "intellectual superstructure" consists of the many references to well-known works in art history, to literature read by Kirkeby, and to things he has seen on his many travels, and which are found in virtually all his work. These are the references I have wished to take seriously and examine more closely.

Countless catalogues state that besides being a painter, Per Kirkeby also earned his master's degree in geology in 1964, specializing in Arctic Quaternary geology. These same catalogues generally mention that as a student he participated in five expeditions to Greenland. The information has been limited to these facts.

It is as though, even in our day, the romantic perception of art and the artist prevails. No one has felt compelled to investigate the actual scientific work that went on during these Greenland expeditions. Nor has anyone bothered to take Kirkeby's dual role as painter and scientist seriously and question whether indeed any valid

insights have grown out of this cross-disciplinary field. One has simply been told that "Per Kirkeby is a geologist, and so he paints layer upon layer" – but surely artists who are not geologists also paint "layer upon layer". Here the romantic perception of the artist shines through, for the statement is legitimized or justified on the basis of the artist's person. The argument is that if Per Kirkeby has done something, it has validity – in his universe. This book is not written on the basis of such a romantic perception. Here no thing automatically has validity because it has been done by Per Kirkeby. A thing is accorded validity if it is tenable based on a general, logical line of reasoning.

My aim has been to profoundly contemplate all references in Per Kirkeby's art based on the notion that only by making these references fully concrete can one investigate whether a fertile dialogue between art and science really has taken place in his work.

I have wished to free myself from referring to any current trend in philosophy or science. What I wrote ten to fifteen years ago was characterized by a wish to be at the cutting edge and to represent the intellectual *Zeitgeist*. By contrast, this book is intended to stand alone as something that could, theoretically, have been written fifty years ago, and it does not lean on philosophers and scientists introduced as a sign of the times. It is not modelled on a foreign example. I have sought to create something of my own.

However, one author has served as an inspiration. In July 1999, Per Kirkeby gave me a copy of *An Urchin in the Storm* by Stephen Jay Gould, and I was greatly inspired by Gould's treatment – based on the history of science, or the history of ideas – of how excellent scientific observations often occur in complex conditions where precise scientific methods and mythological notions coalesce. In Gould's words: "Creative science is always a mixture of facts and ideas. Great thinkers are not those who can free their minds from cultural baggage and think or observe objectively (for such a thing is impossible), but people who use their milieu creatively rather than as a constraint" (p. 103). I have sought to do the same here: to show how strange and circuitous connections can sometimes make

for intriguing insights. If one wished to use the distinction between "pure" and "impure", which was prevalent during Kirkeby's youth in the Danish art milieu of the 1960s, one could say that "pure" science has always suckled the breast of "impure" art and mythology – and vice versa. You only discover all these paradoxical connections if, like Gould, you "keep your nose to the ground" and track down the material in a concrete and literal sense.

There is a traditional academic distinction between monograph and biography, created by the New Criticism and structuralism. This book, however, is written based on the perception that life and art are linked. You lie on the beach minding your children; then you paint certain pictures that could only arise out of that particular situation (chapter nine). Art often springs from banalities. An ordinary swim at the beach can set off cosmological considerations (chapter eleven). Art, although born of marital relations or emotional blocks, can result in the sublime, transcending the private sphere to become universal.

A solely biographical reading can seem constraining, and yet a biographically oriented reading is necessary, since the point of departure is most often based on circumstances in the artist's own life – which is why we ourselves are touched: They correspond to the sore spots in our own lives. In this book I have therefore chosen to bridge the strict gap between monograph and biography and write a text that, at least to some degree, links life and work.

The writing of this book relies on a certain art theory. Art is about something. Art arises out of the need for expression, and this book approaches art by considering its content. Incidentally, this approach can, of course, be applied to other types of art than Per Kirkeby's, and perhaps especially to art that one has tended to approach in a strictly formal fashion.

The development of art comes about because there is a new content that can no longer be expressed in the old form. New generations arrive – with new experiences and a new vital sense – and only later do they discover that their own experiences agree with those of the older generations after all.

One of the first times I took a content-based approach to art was in writing the catalogue for the exhibition "Per Kirkeby. Zeichnungen des Bildhauers", held at Neuer Berliner Kunstverein in 2001. Rather than writing about the formal problematics of sculptural drawing (reproducing three-dimensional sculptures on two-dimensional pieces of paper), I wrote about the content seeking to express itself in Per Kirkeby's bronze sculptures.

One aspect of this approach to art is that the pictures that really are about something are rarely beautiful in formal terms. Because these pictures are filled with conflicts and things that do not really go together, but instead grate against each other, they are strangely angular and out of kilter. They do not live up to the ideal of formal beauty; they are not harmonious and homogeneous, but conflictual and skewed. When I began this book, looking for paintings to analyze in the individual chapters, this was the kind of work I sought out – assuming that this would be where things came to a head, so to speak.

Art has a content, and that is why it touches us – sometimes almost physically, although we are unable to explain why. It touches the gateway to our feelings, it loosens up what is shut away inside, it calls to mind a dream of something different and our pain at the way things are. It is this type of truth in the work that enables art to touch us. The truth is connected to the beauty, for it is precisely when art touches us that we sense its beauty.

That is why it takes more than a few words to clarify the concept of art in Per Kirkeby's work. The eleven chapters of this book do not combine to construct a cohesive, elementary conceptual quality. This is because his work is all about breaks, breaches, and things that cannot actually be reconciled. The best-known example of this is the tension between the pure and the impure in Kirkeby's paintings from the 1960s. There is a longing for the pure in art, but at the same time something impure is constantly surfacing – in the form of anecdotes, references, experiences. That is why virtually every chapter in this book deals with an integrative effort gone awry. In chapter six, it turns out that the symmetrical picture *Kristall* is not symmetrical after all. In chapter seven, the central theme is a small stone coming loose from a wall

(at the open university's Stone House at Vemb) and falling. In chapter eight, art finds inspiration in a simple theft. In chapter ten, the source of art is pure sexuality, and in chapter nine it is disease, more specifically an eye disease. The score is never really settled. Art envisions the pure, but there exists an ineradicable impurity – and vice versa: If one could eradicate all of one's faults, there would be no need at all for new paintings.

Poul Erik Tøjner began his book *Per Kirkeby. Painting* (2003) with a reference to Søren Kierkegaard, who he used to establish a distinction between being preoccupied with *oneself* and being preoccupied with *one's self*. He then interpreted Kirkeby's art based on this distinction.

However, the impact of Søren Kierkegaard on Per Kirkeby is fairly limited. The only book to influence him is *The Point of View for my Work as an Author* from 1848, in which Kierkegaard reviewed his entire body of work to investigate its coherence and whether it had a style that was not created consciously but arose of its own accord as an expression of the limits on one's capacity. Both are questions that every artist, including Per Kirkeby, has considered from time to time.

Apart from that, there is an essential difference between Kierkegaard and Kirkeby, just as there is between Wittgenstein and Kirkeby. Both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein refused to construct all-encompassing philosophical systems about life. (Although there is a system in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, it is extremely formal.)

Some have a system, others do not. Kirkeby takes the middle ground, in that he constructs large systems that occasionally collapse.

He greatly admires those who construct systems. We see this in chapter five in the shape of the *Objective Record Index for Danish Museums of Cultural History* and the person of Carl von Linné. It is also evident in chapter seven in the form of John Ruskin's numerous systems. It is present in chapter eight in Kirkeby's enthusiasm for his fellow painter Alexander Cozens, and actually also in chapter eleven in the reference to the art historian Aby Warburg, who built his intellectual constructions – and

then let everything go. With Kirkeby, all systems are temporary. They are constructions that never quite fit, and end up collapsing. In that sense his art rebels against the requirement that everything must be easy to grasp. The world is not so; one cannot manage to grasp everything. The grand effort is beautiful, and no less so for ending up shipwrecked, causing the monumental work to remain unfinished. Herein lies a recognition, and a truth, for there is always something that has to be left out. Something that does not fit.

This has affected the style and structure of the book. A thesis must normally contain a progression and a line of reasoning building from a point of departure and leading from chapter to chapter; asserting point and counterpoint and ending in a conclusion.

Not so the structure of this book. Its eleven chapters and one excursus on tents constitute a very formal system, comparable to the decimal classification system used in Danish public libraries. It is not a true system, but a way of formally coordinating the material. The chapters are actually placed next to each other. They are adjacent rather than interlocking, and in a sense each chapter contains its own conclusion. Obviously chapter eleven – dealing as it does with cosmology – is unifying, but since embarking on this task in December 1998, I have aimed to craft a good ending, akin to a new beginning. This is what I call a filmic ending, concretized as a person standing alone on the beach in an open world where a new drama prepares to unfold.

Per Kirkeby has read the finished manuscript, and he made a few comments that have been incorporated. We have had an ongoing dialogue that served, among other things, to clarify certain facts. Information given without a source generally stems from such conversations.

The existing texts about Per Kirkeby, mainly prefaces to catalogues, could fill a small library. These are usually written from an art-historical point of view. There are also a limited number of texts about his writings. Some may feel there is absolutely no need for another tome dealing with Per Kirkeby's work. And yet I have written this book, merging viewpoints from the history of ideas, art history, and pictorial analysis. I believe that it is only

by the means of "the intellectual superstructure" in Per Kirkeby's work that one can seriously crack open his pictures and thereby gain more accurate insights. If this enables people to see something in his pictures they were previously unable to perceive, then that must confirm my approach as meaningful.

