

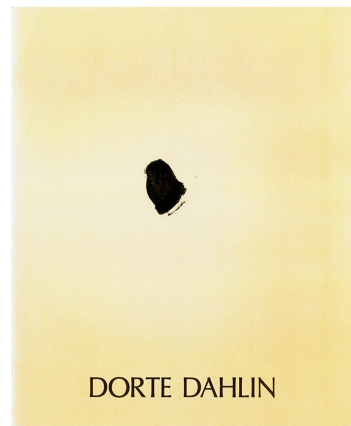
MI YÜAN

TABT AFSTAND

DORTE DAHLIN

ARTIKLER
VIBEKE PETERSEN
POUL ERIK TØJNER

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Lost Distance

»As far as I am a physical being, I am always present one place and only one place in space. Yet my »sensation« is not dependent upon this specific space. Nor is my »sensation« bound to my physical presence; in fact, it is capable of being elsewhere. In my perceptual space, far away from my actual physical presence, my »sensation« is free to roam at large. The omnipresent state of my »sensation« is in decided contrast to the specific space inhabited by my physical presence«.

»During the state of »sensation« the universe has absolute priority over the subject. Identification with the universe occurs during the state of »sensation« so that no trace of the individual remains; there is only universe. In the state of »sensation« we exist as devoid of individuality as regards the universe«.

These are the words of K.E. Løgstrup, concerning »sensation«. His concern is of a metaphysical nature or should I say theological. Whether or not one shares his specific concern it is obvious that Løgstrup is dealing with one of the major experiences, perhaps *the* major experience behind modern art. Modern art has retained, and at times even emphasized the suspension of the basic ideas and concepts with which we orient ourselves in our daily existence.

The modernist work of art - (and I know I am generalizing here to the point of absurdity) - regards as its possibility or rather as its function the sense of infinity, a sort of radical alienation, a principle of indecidability, the boundary shattering volume, which enlarges the idea of the possible, while, at the same time, revealing its limitations. Since the philosopher *Edmund Burke* wrote his treatise, »A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful« (1759) the concept of »the sublime« has been employed to characterize the transcendental power that since *Kant*, has been invoked regarding the work of art. However much agreement there has been about the description of the sublime, so much disagreement there has been about where the sublime is actually located. Is it the universe itself (as according to Løgstrup) that makes itself present when sensation breaks down the barriers of symbolic order? Or is it the individual that suddenly is able to break through to a new perception? As different as these two questions are, they both could point from the work of art itself.

Not everything that we regard as art contains a sense of the sublime; the sense of suspension when objects burst upon our subjectivity. Not all art permits reality to turn itself inside out in the belief that it is the »break« that creates knowledge. There are types of art which do not intend to push back the boundaries of the possible, but prefer to dwell with that which is. This type of art, all things being equal, is realistic. Its ideal was fulfilled with the invention of photography. Its method is the linear perspective.

Perspective and familiarization are closely related. Perspective organizes the world according to laws; space is structured so that the eye can orient itself in regard to distance, priorities, time, and hierarchy. »The effect of linear perspective's invention was no less

to convince a whole civilization that it now possessed an infallible means of representation. This system revealed itself as an automatic and mechanical producer of axioms concerning the material and spiritual world«.

Employing linear perspective as a weapon, the landscape painter was able to conquer nature that previously had been virtually impregnable in its majesty. In such paintings we orient ourselves as we normally do in our everyday existence: right is to the right, left is to the left, and by God, there is a ruined castle over there. The perfect illusion of this type of painting invites the viewer in without further ado. There is no distance between the viewer and the painting; »it is just like being there«, we say. If there is no distance regarding the painting, then it is mainly due to the fact that the painting is a *mirror image* of the world which the viewer inhabits. Yet, this is a world that is totally structured through its use of distance. First and foremost, the distance between subject and object.

In modernity this familiarization of space came to be regarded as dubious. It reveals a disastrous, paradoxically self-destructive principle seemingly rooted in »Aufklärung« itself: realization ends in unreality. Using human means to perfect the human we end up with a result that is inhuman. That is when art is forced into exile. Art regards itself as a contradiction of rationality and must therefore necessarily use its distinctive aesthetic nature with the language of knowledge. The key word, then, becomes: *suspension*. Only suspension can cause a crack in the wall of convention, thus revealing something entirely different.

In a linear perspective painting the pictorial space consists of a constant measurement of distances. No matter how chaotic the motive, order is always re-established through the sublimated distance that linear perspective makes feasible. Through the use of linear perspective we are literally able to look down into oblivion at a safe distance. How then is it possible to avoid the deadly self-assured combination of distance and identification on the part of the viewer? There are two possible means: one is »*emphatic distance*« and the other is »*lost distance*«. Even though »distance« has a different connotation in the two terms, its intention is the same.

»Emphatic distance« attempts to eradicate the relationship between the art work and the viewer. That distance is »emphasized« means that any attitude of identification and understanding is made impossible by the radical nature of the artwork itself. The artwork emphasizes its distance to the world of the viewer via its objective of suspending this world and presenting itself as a legitimate »alternative« to it. This distance makes the artwork seem reserved or unresponsive to the viewer. It becomes unknowable, non-communicative. The experience of such a work is essentially of a negative nature since there is no coping with the artwork. The eye of the viewer is never free when confronting such a work. It is constantly blinded by the selfinclusiveness of the

work, its is cut through as in the »Andalusian Dog« - by aesthetic terrorism. »Emphatic distance« is not especially well suited to painting as such. There are too many representational elements connotated by the picture; and representation defuses any form of radical alienation.

»Lost distance« is better suited to pictorial means since it is not primarily concerned with the relationship between the viewer and the work of art, but the relationships within the work itself. Lost distance means essentially that the orientation provided by linear perspective is no longer present. This does not sound especially earth-shaking and neither would it be if it were just a case of linear perspective itself disappearing from the artwork. What has actually disappeared is the possibility of an overall view-point to which linear perspective contributed. Any synthesis remains localized and thus becomes nearly a »*contradictio in adjecto*«.

This notion of »lost distance« is a well known technique in Oriental art, especially in Chinese painting (see illustration no. 2). Here it is seen not merely as a dismissal of linear perspective and recognizability, but as a *simultaneous* assertion of nearly every form of perspective. The painting's pictorial space seems from the onset easily taken in at a glance. However, a closer study reveals that this pictorial space contains a variety of spaces, a variety of perspectives in various orders. The consequence of this discovery is not merely the fact that the eye must shift its angle of vision if the glance is shifted just a millimeter. Rather the important thing is that the eye is forced to abandon its customary reference point and its own point of view. Thus it is no longer necessary to construct a pictorial universe by measuring the distance from the eye to the perceived object. Distance is lost in so far that it no longer projects itself onto the consciousness of the viewer, but enacts itself within the picture. Thus »lost distance« is able to affect the relationship between the viewer and the work of art.

Whereas »emphatic distance« resisted the glance of the viewer, »lost distance« invites the eye into the picture. However, this invitation is similar to the sirens Odysseus met on his voyage: beauty has its price. Each presence excludes, of necessity, the presence of something else. This is the paradox of concentration: only by looking away from something is it possible to see something. Standing in front of a picture, we do not wish to look away from a part of it, in order to see the whole of it. We wish to see all of it, and, as far as possible, to see it as a whole. How then is it possible to see the variety of order and visual worlds that the »lost distance« aesthetic invokes? How can one free one's vision so that the eye can dwell in between the local and the universal? Is it at all possible to see in such a state? If it is possible it requires a qualified form of *distraction*; a nearly literal ability to temporarily see with each eye separately. It requires a sense of »*vulnerability*«, an emphatic feeling of being able to exist under conditions which are not created by oneself.

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.

But is »lost distance« then really a loss of all distance or is it instead a transformation of distance in space to a distance in time? The question then is, is it possible to let distance in time be lost in a picture? It requires that in the distracted state, there is a sensibility for simultaneity. Is it possible to see more than one of a picture's visual conditions at one time?

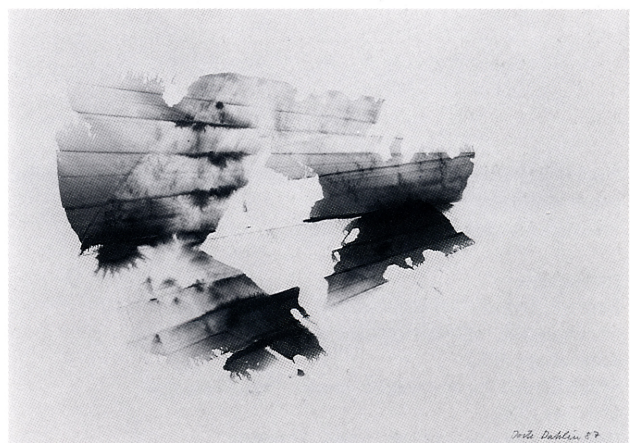
It is important to maintain that the aesthetic of »lost distance« must retain distance as a basis for its deconstruction. Spacing and timing (space and time) are our only modes of perception even in regard to that which intends to abolish them. Total suspension is impossible since it must include the very medium in which it is formulated. The condition of pure »sensation« and lack of distance eludes us as soon as we attempt to grasp hold of it, since in this very attempt a distance is created.

Yet, there is a possibility to work along the edge of this: to elongate time, initiate gaps, point towards porousness, occasionally reveal an evanescence. To leave a fact in a state of meaninglessness is the opposite of what *Roland Barthes* considers the development of a fable (that is, to learn a lesson or glean some sort of meaning from each fragment of reality). Furthermore, Barthes claims in this deconstruction of the modern King Midas syndrome: that all that we touch turns into time, space and meaning: »One can imagine a backwards book, one which refuses at any time to elaborate a single meaningful sentence; it would be a book of »haiku« poetry«.

The desire for a total lack of meaning to be replaced instead by being itself is in its intensity and presumption similar to the »*unio mystica*« of ancient mystics. The limitations of this desire and its possibility of ever forming an aesthetic basis are most obvious in the fact that the experience of total loss eludes any statement, presentation or representation. Absence in its pure form can not be described in a painting. Nor can »lost distance« be painted. »Sensation« own lack of distance can not be perceived.

To work with »lost distance« is to work *in* »loss« and *in* the space where it is lost. Loss of distance, loss of orientation, loss of synthesis and symbolizing, are established *through* loss itself. In the work of *Dorte Dahlin* this functions in a dual manner: first, in what we can call the *historicity of vision*; and secondly in the *phenomenology of vision*.

Even though the eye has retained the same anatomical basis since man began seeing, vision itself, has a history. This is what *Gombrich* meant when he remarked that »the innocent eye is blind«. The strategy, where distance can be lost, can be grounded in the history



Ink on paper. 1987. (29,7 x 42).

of vision. It is a strategy combining the notion of the romantic landscape, suprematist construction or expressionist discharge. The whole thing is assembled in a picture which disregards the law of never dividing the picture in two halves.

Even though vision has its own history, there seem to be certain phenomenological principles involved in order to see at all. One of these is referred to in perceptual psychology, when it is said that to see is always involved with seeing a figure against some sort of ground or background. The strategy where distance can be lost can thereby be incorporated in the phenomenology of vision. It is a sort of play between ground and figure. It can be seen as the play in an apparently monochrome texture where tiny accents in the quickly glanced grayness beat representation at its own game while noting the emergence of affection.

The duality consists in the fact that the two strategies are not separate from each other. There is an inter-play between phenomenology and history and this is precisely what prevents the picture from self-destruction. This means that the picture does not refute its own activity. It does not attempt to say the unspeakable, to paint pictures of absence or to describe the »lost distance«. What Dorte Dahlin's paintings attempt to do is to make it possible for distance to be lost.

It responds to any conventional concentration with disappearance or loss. It challenges the viewer to be more than just a viewer and to participate in a space that displaces itself whenever it is caught by the eye.

Poul Erik Tøjner, Ph. D. on Danish Literature and Artcritic at the paper »Information«.

Translated by John Richard Towle

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