

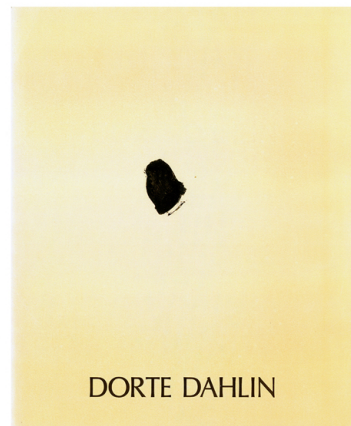
MI YÜAN

TABT AFSTAND

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Pictures of Distraction

A short history of perspective and the paintings of Dorte Dahlin in the late 1980s

Throughout history artists have been challenged by the use of perspective. This has also been the case in much of the work of Dorte Dahlin in recent years. Perspective can be regarded as a form of projection of the self in a painting. Through the choice of a particular form of perspective the artist reveals his attitude towards the time in which he lives and the role of art in this time. This is possible since perspective creates a specially formed pictorial space in which a pictorial vision is developed as well as creating a world in which the viewer becomes involved.

The greatest mathematician of the Hellenistic age, *Euclid*, who lived in Alexandria around the year 300 B.C. wrote the first fundamental ideas concerning perspective. After this, especially in Roman painting, came the development of linear perspective in order to construct pictorial space. This pictorial space employs guide lines that follow the direction of a central vanishing point so that visual reality can be reproduced with a three dimensional effect.

The end of the classical period witnesses a decline of the use of perspective. After the fall of the Roman Empire, Constantinople becomes the artistic center of Christianity. It also becomes the repository of classical ideas concerning drawing for more than a thousand years afterwards. These theories, however, are retained in more or less schematic form. Throughout the Western world a tendency towards abstraction and ornament leads to the transformation of the classical ideal and the demise of linear perspective.

Byzantine painting is never conceived as a sort of window looking out onto the world as was the case in the illusionistic style of Hellenistic manuscripts or later perfected in the Renaissance. It only goes as far as to create a sort of box-like space which serves as an extension of the space inhabited by the artist or the viewer.

In the medieval period the representation of three dimensional space all but disappeared from Western painting. This is especially so in Celtic, Persian and Romanesque illuminated manuscripts. Throughout the Middle Ages the relationship to linear perspective is, generally speaking, rather blurred. There is no general agreement as to the creation of a »realistic« pictorial space in painting. This can be seen as evidence that medieval culture emphasized spiritual rather than material values in its artforms.

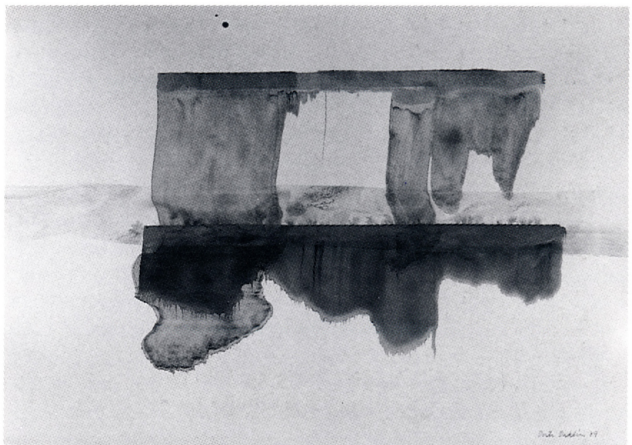
The use of linear perspective begins to re-appear around the year 1200 in connection with the decoration of several churches in Rome. Around the year 1300 the first convincing use of linear

perspective can be seen in *Giotto's* decoration of the church in Assisi and the Arena chapel in Padua.

In the following centuries linear perspective is again perfected. No doubt this is due to a renewed cultural interest in the study of nature and a growing belief in the value of mathematics and experimental science. On the background of these developments there was a growing desire to represent reality as it was seen with one's own eyes.

With the advent of the Renaissance a pictorial space was introduced that was based on a central vanishing point towards which all the guidelines of the foreground converged. In this manner a naturalistic pictorial space was created in which the proportions of objects are seen realistically as regards their distance from the viewer. With a focal point seen as the tip of a pyramid, the picture from the base of the pyramid can be seen in an all embracing, sublime moment of vision. Through the basis of mathematical calculation, a secure, harmonious and unambiguous pictorial space is created. It is symbolic of a divine ideal and a unambiguous subject.

It was first in the middle of the 19th century, that this notion of an ideal space was challenged by the likes of the French painter *Edouard Manet*. *Manet* was inspired by Japanese woodcuts and chose to use the flat surface of the painting and contour (cloissonisme) as a means of creating space in the picture. At the same time (the 1860s) *Charles Darwin* published his theories



Sepia on paper. 1987. (42 x 59,4).

concerning »The Origin of Species« and »The Survival of the Fittest«. On the basis of these ideas the Book of Genesis and the belief in divine harmony (the Garden of Eden) are seen as intellectual constructions.

The Chinese have never exhibited a scientific interest for perspective and its rules as has been the case in the West. Instead, the Chinese developed the »bird's eye view« where-by the landscape is spread out and the whole picture can be read at once. The eye is escorted carefully around the picture. (See page 5). This movement gathers both near and far; and by dwelling equally on each object in the picture, each object is given equal importance and meaning.

In the beginning of this century *Albert Einstein* publishes his theory of relativity; *Max Planck* reveals that heat is actually waves of molecules and *Sigmund Freud* ds that every individual is more or less neurotic. All traditional ideas and norms seem to dissolve in the beginning of the century. It is also around this time (1906-07) that *Pablo Picasso* and *Georges Braque*, during the development of Cubism, make a radical break with the Renaissance's idea of linear perspective. The clearly defined space of the Renaissance is crumpled up and then smoothed out again. It is then re-made into numerous prisms and planes that twist and turn and circulate around an oval form in the foreground of the picture. A degree of three dimensionality, as a reference to visual reality, is still present. The dream of a pristine harmonious »ego« is also present in the pictures despite *Freud's* theories and despite social inequality and poverty and the outbreak of World War I. This contradiction creates the »crisis of modernism«. Despite the alienation of the individual and society, the artist still seeks harmony, a perfect composition and a perfect sense of balance. This, of course, is based on the premises of alienation.

In the course of the 1950s this typical Western attitude is finally abandoned. The American composer, *John Cage*, among others, leads the way towards Oriental philosophy, and especially with an interest in Zen Buddhism notion »to be«. A new attitude towards life is established in which the old pyramidal structure (over and under) is abandoned. Instead the pyramid is tipped over and spread out in a horizontal »field of totality« which symbolizes all the events of existence. Each element in the field of totality is of equal value; and its value only consists of its inclusion in the situation of which it is a part. There are numerous focal points in a field of totality and each of them is vital in the constant flux of situations and actions. The ego is no longer considered as an unambiguous fundament. The ego varies from situation to situation; attitudes change and are relative to each situation.

When an individual awakens after a period of unconsciousness, the first words that are usually uttered are: Where am I? It is obvious then that the ego and its relationship to its surroundings are of utmost importance in our consciousness. The ego can be of more or less importance, as in the case when one says »I have completely forgotten myself«. However, a glimpse of the ego will always be present. The ego can be defined as the sum of the impulses and experiences that it has accumulated. Furthermore, the ego is not conceived of as being a given size or shape, but rather it is in constant movement and ever-changing. The ego

then, always is bound to one or another form of space depending upon the cultural norms in which it inhabits. Generally speaking, then, if the emphasis of cultural values is based on spiritual or metaphysically abstract ideas, then the ego is likely to be located or defined by a space in which perspective is blurred or vague. If the emphasis is on the concret or tangible that each individual can register, then the ego will attempt to define itself in a space dictated by the laws of linear perspective.

In Dorte Dahlin's art there is an attempt to combine classical Western and classical Chinese space. Each of these has measurable dimensions; yet they have totally different notions as to where the viewer is situated. Through these different means of experiencing space Dorte Dahlin is able to define the space of our mass media culture with the concept of »lost distance«.

The Space of »Lost Distance«

In 1983 Dorte Dahlin wrote in a periodical from the Royal Art Academy the following: »I grew up with television and this phenomenon is a part of my consciousness. I do not differentiate between nature and culture, since both of them are combined in reality and have lost their original meaning. You can no longer tell a story without it being altered through its medium of expression whether it be the mass media or other individuals«.

This acutely conscious relationship to reality is the basis for Dorte Dahlin's painting. The distinction between art and life is abolished. In this she follows the lead of *John Cage*, whose artistic works have their basis in Eastern philosophy and especially Zen Buddhism. According to *Fritjof Capra* in the book »The Tao of Physics«, Zen is not equivalent with a renunciation of the world. On the contrary, Zen requires an active participation in daily existence. This is exactly the basis of *John Cage's* ideas when he advocated in the 1950s, that artists erase the distinction between art and life. *Cage* no longer wished to differentiate between the noisy life of the street and the works composed inside the institutions of art which are isolated from everyday life. *Cage* was interested in proclaiming the importance of each moment's independent value in a parallel system of values. He was not interested in dramatic situations since they created different hierarchy of value and thereby deprived the single moment of its individual value. *Cage* was interested in dismantling the mode of vision based on linear perspective. All things should be regarded as containing equal values since regardless of whether we wish to frame the moment or not, time continues to flow. *John Cage* formulated this idea in the following manner: »New art and music do not communicate an individual conception in ordered structures, but they implement processes which are, as our daily lives, opportunities for perception (observation and listening)«.

Dorte Dahlin's pictures express the conditions of our existence in the 1980s. They are concerned with »being«; a fundamental condition where there exist various conceptions of time rather than a single one. In her work she employs dislocations of perspective and illogical shifts of plane. Through these devices she is able to express her concern with the conditions of our existence in the 80s. With a prosaic attitude towards reality, these dislocations and shifts provide a connection between art and life.

Distraction is the key word in attempting to define Dorte Dahlin's art. As an individual born in the mass media culture and as a product of the beeping sounds, telephones, and blinking neon, where everything happens at once, she reacts as any human being in this chaos of sound, light and signs. She intends to describe this state of distraction, which is an existential condition, through the employment of »lost distance« type of space.

By implementing this classical moment of »perceptual distance« Dorte Dahlin distances herself from the »labyrinthian space« that characterized the »wild« painting of the early 1980s.

»The eye gets lost, and the ear is disturbed,
intelligence disappears in the diversity«.

Michel Serres

The painting »Mnemosyne« (see page 6) that was created in 1984, belongs to a series of pictures that Dorte Dahlin entitled »disappearance pictures«. In the middle of the picture there is a large dark form behind the dripping veil of gray paint. It is an amorphous form that rises up from the bottom of the painting and as it rises to the top of the picture plane seems to resemble the form of an eagle or the mythological figure of the Phoenix.

Dorte Dahlin's painting is a painting of a state of mind; it is existential instead of representational. Distraction is transformed to an open system with an infinite number of entrances. Distraction is chaos. It is a form of positive chaos out of which states of mind arise which we do not recognize since it is impossible to classify or define them. The dark form that forces itself out of the picture »Mnemosyne« is not a form in the traditional sense of the word. The picture is an entrance to a space where form and content are dissolved; as well as exterior and interior. Instead of attempting to grasp the whole painting at once, Dorte Dahlin attempts to be present in its space through a state of distraction. There is movement from a position of defining chaos to actually becoming a part of the chaos itself.

In 1984 Dorte Dahlin worked on a series of pictures that she entitled »sculptural holes« (see page 7). In these paintings there is a dark field placed in the center of the picture. This dark field spreads over the picture plane and assumes an amorphous form. This amorphous form is supported by a base and thereby serves as a reference to sculptural forms. The movement of the dark forms in the pictorial space create confusion as to what is near and far. The light background color and the light sculptural base outweighs the gravity of the sculptural forms. There begins to be some doubt about the actual existence of the dark forms. The titles of the paintings make it obvious that there is reference to non-existent forms.

In the painting »Edmund: The Planet« (see page 8) from 1985-86, the dark form reappears. It now appears in the picture so that the picture plane is divided in nearly two horizontal panels. The form itself is the beginning of a spiral. In J.E. Cirlot's book, »A Dictionary of Symbols« from 1962 the spiral form is described in this way:

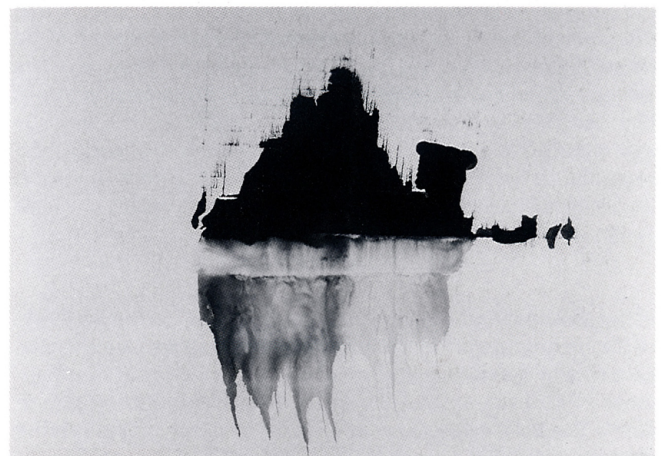
»A schematic image of the evolution of the universe. It is also a classical form symbolizing the orbit of the moon; and

a symbol for growth, related to the »Golden Number«, arising (so Housay maintains) out of the concept of the rotation of the earth... Going right back to the most ancient traditions, we find the distinction being made between the creative spiral (rising in a clockwise direction, and attributed to Pallas Athene) and the destructive spiral like a whirlwind (which twirls round to the left and is an attribute of Poseidon)«.

The beginning spiral form in Dorte Dahlin's painting, moves counter-clockwise and thereby comes to symbolize negative energy. It seems to form the foreground of the painting; yet at the same time it appears to disappear into pictorial space. It is a negative shape whose fathomless darkness contains a depth and a sense of time that cannot be measured or registered unambiguously.

The painting »Ocean Song« (see page 9) from 1986/87 is composed of three horizontal layers. The upper level is dark, then comes a grey, hazy layer, and finally a spotted layer with black. The collapse of »positive« and »negative« is emphasized here by the equal importance of each layer of the painting. What is positive and what is negative is no longer viable; since nothing is clearly delineated. The painting is not divided up into a series of levels but is comprised of a constant stream of beginnings, attempts, rises and falls, that are interwoven. The painting is seeded with meanings, thoughts and messages.

The space in Dorte Dahlin's art is inspired by both Western and Eastern spatial ideas and philosophy. The starting point of her paintings and the end of 1987-88 have been the Italian architect *Filippo Brunelleschi* (1377-1446) who in the early Renaissance perfected the use of linear perspective and Chinese painting which utilizes parallel perspective and the bird's eye point of view. By the beginning of the year 1000 A.D. Chinese artists were able to employ parallel perspective in which the picture's planes and lines have their own independence and equality of value. Each of these spaces has their own importance as in the case of a continuous narrative. There is not just one single highpoint in the narrative or



Ink on paper. 1987. (70 x 100).

one focal point, as is the case in linear perspective painting. It is not the climax of a narrative that is described in the painting but its chain or network of episodes. Horizontal planes cut across the picture creating a series of parallel planes. Through the description of nature and by concentrating on rocks, flowers, trees, etc., the Chinese attempt to depict the essence of the reality that surrounds them. Their goal is to reveal how the mystery of life or the »Tao« infuses all of nature and can be found in the smallest detail.

Brunelleschi's point of departure was the vision of an ideal world. In the Renaissance, architecture was an aesthetic totality comprised of self-sufficient parts. A composition involving planes or spatial elements was created by organizing each part in accordance a static system. The central church is the perfect symbol of this view of humanity and religion in the Renaissance. The central church achieved its utmost effect when it was seen from a particular point of view. In this way man became the measure of all things. Man became the center of all beauty which in itself was part of a grander reality. Man then put himself in the place of God. Human endeavor was then glorified and could be employed as a counterweight to the power of religion, that until then had exercised a disastrous effect upon practical knowledge. Brunelleschi designed the first central church of the Renaissance, Santa Maria degli Angeli, which however, was never completed. Yet, Brunelleschi designed the cupola to the cathedral of Florence where he had won a competition with this extremely complex architectural form. The viewer can actually climb Brunelleschi's cupola and there experience a dislocation of the linear perspective viewpoint since this perspective is turned upside down illustrated by the geometrical perspective of the tilefloor (see page 4).

The difference between these two divergent means of observing reality, the one represented by Brunelleschi's linear perspective and the other by Chinese paintings use of parallel perspective and the »bird's eye« viewpoint, have inspired Dorte Dahlin to employ both Eastern and Western perspective in her paintings. She integrates both these forms of perspective in her work. Firmly rooted in material reality, she uses both types of perspective in order to reveal new points of view, thus enabling her to interpret the diversity and distraction of our everyday existence. When discussing her work it is possible to regard the phenomenon of the »travelling eye«, this effect is similar to a graduated process where the ego shifts in accordance with gradual shifts of feeling almost like that on a chromatic scale. The painting can not be apprehended in a single glance that would result in one particular sensation or motion. Rather, the eye is led in various directions across the canvas in a gliding sort of motion that results in a wide variety of impressions and feelings.

In the painting »Santa Maria del Fiore« (see page 11) the two halves of the picture plane are markedly distinct from one another. An Eastern and Western spatial conception are set up against each other in this painting. The title refers to the cathedral in Florence. Dorte Dahlin's experience of a striking sense of perspective distortion in the cupola of the cathedral, as seen from a contemporary viewpoint, emphasizes the feeling of one

combined horizontal shift which brings together and separates Eastern and Western spatial states of mind. The painting's two separate halves confront each other. Initially the two sections seem to represent an irrational space as compared to a rational space. The round blue form in the white space can be interpreted as either a hole or a body; a field of energy which exists as one among many other fields of energy in constant flux. The apparently clearly defined white space exists both as surface and as representing depth. It is a sort of space of forgetfulness which is also hidden in the upper dark space's structural level. The painting is a state of mind painting in which its apparent division actually exists as a single tremulous state of mind where the rational and the irrational shift constantly back and forth. In each separate space there are hidden pictorial levels that are transformed into a simple and essential form of expression.

The painting »Walking On The Wild Side« (see page 15) from 1988 is composed of three pictorial spaces that are arranged vertically. To the left in the blue space of the picture, one eye is able to register colour broken up into vague traces, stains and spots. The fathomless distance and spiritual quality of the deep blue colour which is traditionally linked to the medieval christian concept of spiritual values, as well as the colour blue's symbolic attribute as representing the ideal and the unattainable, is broken up by Dorte Dahlin's employment of so called »bacteria patches«. The intrusion of these »patches of bacteria« reveals a state of momentary connections where they are dispersed as quickly as they rise to the surface. The notion of an ideal state is then to contaminate and the ego is relegated to these »patches of bacteria« where it is linked to »things without any connection«. Religious and spiritual values are confronted with the materialism of our contemporary Mass Media Culture.

In the large pictorial space to the right, the other eye wanders over a small shining central section that disappears vertically out of the picture field and alludes to the structure of the eye ball as seen in a cross-section. The eyes that wander over these pictorial spaces create a chaotic state of complex and contradictory bits of information. The eye is split and the ego is forced to join in the state of distraction. There is absolutely no intention of repairing this split condition; rather it is utilized as the basis of the painting.

»We live and think in a state of variety: striped, spotted, spattered, shaded, flaming, multi-coloured, bright, that is all mixed together. This is perception's heavy shower: our turbulent surroundings, conditions and coincidences, the unexpected intuitions and whims; information and dangers that whistle like arrows in the light of day, awakening us«.

Michel Serres

The painting »Mi Yüan« (see page 23) from 1988, whose title means »Lost distance« is composed of three parts; a large central section and two panels whose small width makes them appear as two vertical lines that surround the central section. In one of the vertical panels there is a distant landscape placed upright in the picture. In the opposite panel a blue colour is again used together with several brightly lit sections that disappear into nothingness. The large central section is cut diagonally across by a yellow line surrounded by hazy masses that, if the eye is focused in a certain

way, seem to resemble the folded canyons of the Rocky Mountains as if seen from a high flying point of view. The yellow diagonal is both concrete and intangible. It is comprised of a time which does not lead to one or the other specific place but to different places and different times simultaneously.

»Time is ragged and sporadic. It can be hard and clear as crystal or it can be dissolved like the mist«.

Michel Serres

The painting »I forgot to remember to forget« (see page 19) also from 1988, is composed of four horizontal planes with two smaller horizontal sections in the center, there is a fata morgana landscape. The other small central horizontal section contains no figuration at all. Everything is spread out in the section; all meaning is open and exposed.

Together with the painting »Mi Yüan« this painting describes »Lost distance«. In 1986 Dorte Dahlin travelled across continental America where she experienced the vast expanses of the land and felt virtually transported out of time and space.

»I think and I become lost. I think and I disappear into diversity. I am I and I am the only one and I am just such a multiplicity. I neither think nor exist in any other way than the pulsating reality around me. I can not perceive in any other way than this. I run all the risks involved in the game between logos and chaos«.

Michel Serres

In the upper section of the painting whose colour creates associations with the infinite vistas of the desert, there is the pinnacle and the interior of a cupola. This cupola seems to whirl away into the vague space of a fundamental existential condition which is a mixture of amnesia, sky, cramped space and wide open spaces.

In the painting's largest panel at the bottom, there is a little black hole which creates a disturbing sensation of something unpredictable and unknown which is both attractive and repulsive. Through this tiny irregular hole Dorte Dahlin emphasizes the necessity of understanding the importance of the imperfect in order not to fall prey to some sort of ideal. The hole, a negative form, becomes in this case something elusive and intangible. The hole is so tangible that it is impossible to get hold of it. This irregular hole becomes, then, the manifestation of distraction. By entering this tiny, unimportant hole, one becomes part of distraction. Distraction, then, is nothing less than the multiple relationship to reality in which there are no closed boundaries.

Dorte Dahlin's major concern is with the conditions of our Mass Media Culture and the role of the ego in such a society. It is distraction as a lifestyle. It includes »my vision«, various moments of time, various pictorial spaces, a multiple ego, and thus, a distracted ego. Dorte Dahlin employs Chinese painting and Brunelleschi's linear perspective to formulate this distraction. Judgement of distance and the perception of space and time are then transformed into something quite different. Nothing is as it is expected to be.

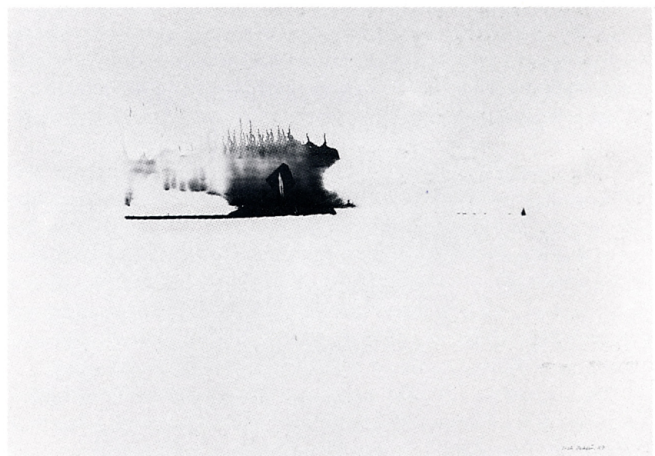
»For the time being the world continues to exist under meteorite showers; and living creatures breed in various types of foul weather; history about in all of this I can still hear some sort of meaning in this roaring whirlwind of »Tohu - Bohu« (which means »wild disturbances« and »chaos« in Hebrew).

Michel Serres

by Vibeke Petersen, Art historian
Translated by John Richard Towle.

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Ink on paper. 1987. (70 x 100).