

## WHICH OVER A DISTANCE GENTLY MADE AWARE

A conversation between artist and poet Jacob Juhl and art critic and writer Trine Rytter Andersen in connection with Jacob Juhl's preparations for the exhibition *THE GENESIS* at Galleri Grundstof in Aarhus, April 2018.

Text: Trine Rytter Andersen (TRA) and Jacob Juhl (JJ)

*TRA: I have spent the last couple of days thinking about our conversation the other day at your studio. Through that process I have felt the need to ask you to consider whether your art – with its balance on a knife's edge between everything and nothing – its attempt to lay bare the 'creation' as figure and concept – is informed by your particular experience with death? That is, can we say that your art at the same time contains a 'memento mori' and a celebration of life itself? AND – is it important to you?*

JJ: You can definitely say that my (heightened) awareness of death's inevitability affects my way of being human, an insistence on looking for light, to celebrate life, and to come to an agreement with the darkness. And since my daily life influences my art, consciously as well as unconsciously, it is probably evident in my practice. My private experiences with loss have pushed it to extremes, and it has strongly intensified a tendency I have always had to look for answers in order to understand this existence and to learn how to live a meaningful life knowing that it can end with a snap. Or that everything you regularly take for granted might look fundamentally different tomorrow. How do I live with that? It does not mean that my art deals with my existential search and doubt, it is rather that working with art is a way of giving it an expression well knowing that no definite answer can be given. In this line of work and through this interest I have become acquainted with many philosophical, religious, scientific and linguistic subjects that all inform my pictures.

*TRA: Existential crisis can be an admission ticket to great personal transformation. I reckon that maybe in reality you are using art to channel your life energy to give it direction and purpose? Meaningfulness emerges when you succeed in gaining access to a terrain beyond your individual horizon of realization, when you tap into a collective consciousness, which is multidimensional, and therefore in every way larger than you as an individual. In continuation of this I come to think of a conversation we once had about 'emergence', what do you think it is and what significance does it have in your art?*

JJ: Aesthetic work is a special way of gaining a kind of existential understanding that cannot really be transferred to a verbal understanding. And this is where the term 'emergence' or 'emergence theory' is relevant: In philosophical terms 'emergence' is the principle where particular characteristics emerge from a unified whole, which cannot be explained solely by the characteristics of the individual parts. For example some scientists believe that the term 'consciousness' is an emergent quality in a sufficiently complex brain. Likewise one can imagine that religiousness is an emergent tendency in a highly developed brain. Or you might say that 'God' is an emergent quality in a sufficiently complex world, regardless of whether this 'God phenomenon' occurs in the inner or outer world.

When I am working aesthetically I am looking for emergent phenomena – for things to add up in different ways. When a composer declares that a piece of music is finished it is not certain that he can verbally explain why it is more finished now than it was yesterday. It is rather as if – because of its emergent qualities – it has 'fallen into place'. It simply works, when the complexity of a material or situation is so great that it brings about emergent qualities. Why does it affect our feelings when two specific chords are played in succession? It's unexplainable, but we can feel it because it is emergent.

If you take it a step further and combine different types of 'languages' such as verbal language, visual language and math, that I am working with, you have an even greater (and more challenging!) vocabulary that you need to unite, and you thereby have a potential for a new type of perception and understanding. This is where I hope that my existential and inquiring approach, my focused work with the aesthetic characteristics of the different languages, as well as my interest in science and philosophy, can all end up in artworks that can be both reflexively interesting, aesthetically compelling AND have this emergent quality: a new way of perceiving and understanding all the inscrutable parts of our existence.

*TRA: That is highly ambitious, which leads me to my next question, about the 'gap' between language and perception – between language and artwork. I experience this gap myself as an eternally titillating paradox and the reason that we as artists (and critics) always seem to be looking for the 'invisible'. And we cherish the point where verbal language ceases to exist – because that 'point' is the most latent and potent: it is at the limit of our own comprehension - where we have the opportunity to 'stretch' our own consciousness in order to obtain new knowledge. During this process, in which we are closing in on 'the new' and asking for 'access' to these new perceptions, it occurs to me that we often step into a porous and mysterious space – and that that in itself is desirable. I wonder if people seeking answers are experiencing aesthetic enjoyment from seeking and exploring these remote areas of consciousness and perception – and if we reap some kind of mental and emotional reward by seeking it out? I think the same can be said when we experience the pleasure of looking at art.*

JJ: I agree that it lies in this field of mystery, it touches upon some of the same subjects as religion, as for example in the sacred use of language. But art also has a lot of other errands, and can therefore not only rely on creating mystery. There is definitely some sort of reward for the artist in seeking the remote areas of perception, a kind of fundamental research into virgin territory. But as far as I am concerned I do not do it for the sake of a reward, it is rather that I cannot help myself. And when it sometimes turns out well, the joy is usually short lived as I must proceed in my endless search. But I guess it is also about being conscious of your own artistic devices, to develop them and curiously explore their options?

*TRA: The way I understand it is that the more mysterious part of the process of creation invites and seeks out unknown aesthetic agents, whose appearance is highly determined by the situation and our own energy and consciousness – AND our understanding and openness in relation to 'emergence'.*

*I am not inclined to linger at the same place – to me, the 'reward' is also an incentive, as moving forward is the main principle. But there is no shame in saying that the aesthetic curiosity brings about many desirable emotions such as happiness, and its ability to lure us into a porous 'space' of our expanded consciousness IS a great incentive – is it not a 'blind spot', that you cannot see that you are also getting a reward in terms of something desirable: an insight, engagement, and a greater consciousness from the process? If you were not rewarded you probably would not feel as if you 'just could not help yourself'?*

JJ: Yeah, sure there is a personal reward in the process both emotionally and in terms of new insight, which is a great daily motivation, otherwise I would not be up for it in the long run, but it cannot be the only factor if you want to create Art. It is also about engaging in a conversation with art history and contemporary art, and to be conscious of your own position in relation to other artworks and realize that when you create art, you directly address people and the institution that art is, it is not just a self-centered occupation. But of course there are a lot of nuances here. Danish author Per Højholt has said something along the lines that many people think that art is based on life, but the sad truth is that art is based on art! I do not see it quite as black-and-white, as I believe that the exact point where our culture-making consciousness and our biological nature meet is the most interesting point for art to explore. There are a lot of existential themes right there. And if you want to explore this, you surely need to get your hands dirty once in a while and not just visit art museums!

*TRA: The last point you are making is especially important from my point of view! In light of this, can you say something about the presence of nature in your art? Especially in 'The Genesis' which we are talking about here?*

JJ: Nature is probably a kind of hostage in my art works; I do not depict nature as such, but I use pictures of nature with a specific purpose. It is all about our view of nature and how our perception of the world is somehow always a second hand experience. We believe that we can gain a direct sensual perception, that we can become one with nature, but our entire way of perceiving and being present in the world consists of projections – Danish writer Tor Nørretranders calls it a 'sketch' in his new book 'Se Frem' ('Look Ahead'). It is not solely an idealistic notion, it is not like a 'brain in a vat' scenario where everything is pure consciousness or something like that. It is a question of an eternal exchange between our expectations of what we experience, which as a projection is always present in our perception of the world – and then our biological sensory organs. Our sensual perception is always mediated through our way of perceiving, which

in my world corresponds to how the camera 'views' the world in a very particular way, mediated through all of its limitations and selection of information.

That is why I use nature as a motive in my photographs. I am not 'registering' and I do not attempt to give a first-hand sensory experience. In the finished works in my new series '*The Genesis*' the plants are picked out as a motive, then limited through the camera's optics, colour reduced and further cropped in Photoshop to match the composition of the series, and finally they are placed behind a coloured surface. And I view this entire process as an analogy to our process of sensory experience and perception: I know what to do with the photographs of the plants before I take the pictures (my 'sketch') and therefore I see the plants as a means integrated in the work and not as how they really are.

I have an endless fascination with this grey area between our biological apparatus in constant dialogue with our surroundings, and our very complex brain (which is also biological), that somehow unexplainably contains our consciousness, which only registers a very small fraction of the world – according to neurologists, perhaps only as a kind of spectator. We have an enormous unconscious knowledge that the brain generates and stores for later use, for example all automated actions like driving a car or doing something intuitively. Our usage of language is a determining factor in relation to this – for example we talk about 'nature' as something separate from our 'self'. In a biological sense that is actually nonsense.

Consciousness is a stranger to nature, in a way, although it is both created by and contained in a biological organism, which is inextricably connected to the rest of the world. We rarely think about that because the linguistic comprehension of our consciousness has built-in definitive limitations. That is what I am trying to show when I invent a system and use the number 29, where the 29 characters of our verbal language (in the Danish alphabet) can produce an infinite amount of statements, while at the same time it is a finite and well-defined domain.

*TRA: You talk about the paradox that we feel separated from biology, which is in all living things including of course us as human beings. Can you explain how the aesthetic of your art emphasizes exactly that?*

JJ: I do that by photographing humble plants in a way where the photograph becomes a distorted image of them; a 'sketch', in relation to what I said earlier about how our experience is based on our projections of the world. We look at nature as a bystander, because we simply cannot be at one with nature, because our consciousness is by principle unfamiliar to nature, even though it is born from nature. Hence the blurry and reduced photos and the 'which...' sentences that function as the linguistic lens through which we experience nature. I am also making the point that we can benefit from looking at the tiny, humble growths that are usually thought of as weeds. If we focus our attention on them we can see beauty in humility, and the miraculous in the unimpressive. That probably leads to a completely different conversation which we might come back to in the future; about beauty, about the aesthetic and intuitive choices: finding beauty in repetition, in the composition of the material, and in all the errors that occur when you want your hands to create perfection but have to settle for the possible.

*TRA: In a note to me you write that science and mathematics cannot create a deeper meaning – can you expand on that thought and connect it to the ability of art and spirituality to create meaning for people, who apparently are the only creatures who need just that?*

JJ: Since the dawn of man there has been religion as a mythological framework for explanation and as an institution for the meaningful. Over a period of a few centuries natural science has won (legitimately so) a monopoly on explaining the world's phenomena and predicting certain events with great probability. Since the Age of Enlightenment we therefore have not really needed religion as a moral compass as we also invented moral philosophy and humanism so that we could organize functioning and just societies.

However, it turns out that a lot of people – if not everyone – have a natural need for their existence to be meaningful. That is, a need that exceeds the need to just comply with a function in the family, in a workplace or in a community. All these fundamental functions are in play in great parts of the world and for that reason there is less hunger, poverty, illiteracy and violence than ever before. Apparently this works well when the goal is to create stable societies and as much wealth as possible for the world population. However, it cannot fulfil the innate need for life to feel meaningful. There is also no comfort in saying that we are just animals, and as with other animals the meaning of life is reproduction, when we also experience that life can seem meaningless – an experience that other animals probably do not have.

This feeling of meaninglessness is possibly just an illusion, if you ask an atheistic neurologist, but it is no more of an illusion than falling in love or the feeling of being connected to family, nature or a deity. Our consciousness – or perhaps our way of perception – contributes to a gap between how we scientifically and mathematically DESCRIBE the world's phenomena and how we actually EXPERIENCE the world.

In order to not just become robots that serve society we have to take this need for a deeper meaning seriously! For some people this happens through religion or spirituality, which is fine even in a secular society, as long as other people are not forced to share this faith. But there is also a potential for meaningfulness in a common dialogue through art which does not require a belief in something otherworldly or divine. '*Det umuliges kunst*' ('*The Art of the Impossible*'), as Danish author Solvej Balle calls it in her book of the same name, deals with art as 'the place of the impossible'; the only place where we can occupy ourselves physically and aesthetically with spiritual and metaphysical phenomena. All the things we do not seem to quite comprehend, yet have to come to terms with; our mortality, the passage of time, to have a 'self' without being able to explain it, mental life, spiritual experience, the feeling of being connected to other people, the conscious and the unconscious, genesis and annihilation. We can also deal with these matters in a religious and philosophical realm but only through art can we give it shape, whether in pictures, sculpture, music, poetry or theatre. In this understanding 'art' means: to create aesthetic statements about something you cannot express!