

INTERVIEW

Kasper Hesselbjerg's work is centered on three fundamentals: sculpture, text and – last but not least – food. In this publication, Hesselbjerg connects the dots between sculpture, collage, language, and the *umami* in his art. The artist Søren Andreassen joins the conversation to discuss their common passion and interest, China.

The interview was conducted as an email conversation during the summer of 2021.

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The Interview series is based on conversations with artists who have been residents at Art Hub Copenhagen. Together with an interviewer and guests, the artists present their work in words and images: not just one work or one show, but their current processes, thoughts, and daily challenges.



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KASPER HESSELBJERG

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PROLOGUE

JACOB FABRICIUS:

You've already finished your residency at AHC. What are you working on and thinking about these days?

KASPER HESSELBJERG:

I used to spend my holidays working on projects I didn't have time for in my everyday life. Now I'm drinking tea and wine, cooking and taking bike rides, while trying to forget that I have a job. Even so, I can't stop associating holiday activities with work because I'm shaped by Protestant work ethics. Flaubert called it marinating, when he was lying on the couch getting ready to write. Perhaps that's a good place to start?



Art Hub Copenhagen

INTERVIEW

JF:

I love Flaubert and your summer-marinating theory. Did you or Flaubert write about that theory?

KH:

Flaubert mentions his self-marinating in a letter. He doesn't go in depth with it, and I probably elaborated and moulded it in my head. Such a concept is practical. It makes rest periods a necessity, so I can relax with a clear conscience.

JF:

Traditionally, marinating means soaking chicken, meat or fish in a brine or dressing. A marinade – be it a summer or winter marinade – will typically consist of a base of oil, wine, beer, yoghurt, lemon juice or vinegar (something acidic), to which various herbs, spices and salt are added. Salt keeps the meat juicy, while the acid (in alcohol or fruit juice) breaks down the proteins in the meat, changing the meat's structure and tenderizing it. So, the advantage is both tenderness and flavor from the acid, herbs and spices. Also, marinated meat keeps longer because of the pickling process. Your marinade is tea, wine, food and bike rides?

KH:

If you picture yourself or the material you're working on as a grillade or another piece of meat, there's no rushing the marinating. It can't be rushed. The marinade needs time to penetrate and do its work. It's an anti-

efficiency remedy. It provides a break and perhaps a maturation before the active phase of the preparation takes place, when the chef shouldn't space out.

JF:

Your result is two publications, one by the French philosopher and historian of ideas Michel Foucault (1926–1984) and one by the Chinese writer Ji Kang (223–262), on your own imprint, emancipa(t/ss)ionsfrugten, correct?

KH:

The marinating isn't result-oriented in the sense of leading to an end product. More accurately, it produces change, so that things look different afterwards.

JF:

All the same, you've published those two books. They are very different publications. When did you start emancipa(t/ss)ionsfrugten, and how do you choose what to publish?

KH:

I started the publishing project emancipa(t/ss)ionsfrugten with my colleague Absalon Kirkeby in 2008, when we had both just started at The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. It was an attempt to establish an institution of learning for ourselves that we could continue and run, independent of the school we were attending. Broadly speaking, we do two types of publications. One is collaborations with living writers or artists that we want to learn from. Making books with them is an opportunity to get up close and personal

with their practices. The other type of publications is 'research-based', if you can call them that. The principle is the same. It's material we want to look at more closely. Publishing something like Foucault's "What Is an Author?" requires reading the text many times, more times than I'd otherwise be able to make myself do. It stays in my system because publishing is such a slow process. The decision to publish that particular text comes from an interest in issues of subjectivity and identity.

JF:

Can you elaborate on the Foucault publication? He's still a hot commodity, but this is of course not the first book by or about him in the 21st century. What's special about your publication? And what fascinates you about poet, Daoist philosopher, musician and alchemist Ji Kang?

KH:

Right off the bat, it's the differences that spring to mind when comparing Michel Foucault and Ji Kang. The idea is for the two publications to kick off a series, where the theme is established and developed as the publications come out. In terms of the first two, the theme might be something like the relationship of the individual to the society that they are in. In particular, the individual's potential agency. What's possible and what's not possible, and what can you do to increase your agency? Moreover, the Ji Kang publication speaks to a general interest in Chinese thought and cosmology, including Daoism and traditional Chinese medicine.

In that regard, it was also inspiring to read the French philosopher and sinologist François Jullien – though you

should bear in mind that, in his eagerness to highlight a categorical opposition between Western philosophy and Chinese thought, he ignores a number of subtleties. He doesn't write books on Chinese thought to say something about China. The point, instead, is to deconstruct his own Eurocentric biases and inclinations of thought by exposing himself to a language and a way of thinking that were shaped and developed relatively independently, and without contact to Indo-European languages and Western metaphysics. Engaging with Ji Kang and Daoism serves roughly the same narcissistic function. It's an escape route from my own way of thinking.

JF:

How do you use that escape route in your work?

KH:

I call it an escape because I find my own dogmatism oppressive. Conversely, I find it exhilarating when something I thought was unequivocal and clear-cut turns out to be ambiguous. Engaging with Chinese thought illuminates certain tendencies in my own thinking. It makes me aware of certain ways in which I think, not necessarily of specific 'Chinese' ways of thinking. It allows me to get away from a predetermined way of doing things. Let me give an example: In my work, I'm interested in the formation of meaning. How do things we encounter mean something to us? A traditional and eternal question when confronted with something is, "What is it?" It's the same in science and metaphysics. The important thing is what's at the root of things, what's behind them and what things are in their essence. In the Daoist tradition, it makes no sense to ask that question, because things are always becoming something else. Instead,

you should be interested in how things work and what their effects are. That has prompted me to do some things differently, both in my art-making and how I live my life.

JF:

What have you been doing differently?

KH:

That's a difficult question, and one I often ask myself. What, specifically, have I succeeded in changing in my practice and my life? I certainly feel a change in how I think about certain aspects of my work. I realize there are questions I've to ask about it. My earlier works don't answer the right questions anymore. It may sound a bit "self-helpy", but Daoism has helped me curb my need to plan everything. I tend to make a plan and then try my hardest to execute it – an abstract plan or idea about how things should go that I try to impose on my existence. A Daoist would find that inane. Instead, I should follow the propensity of things and ease up on my self-importance as being responsible for how things go. I'm trying to do that.

Daoism is also a remedy against the desire for completion. The metaphysics that comes from Greek thought would encourage us to operate with units and wholes. "It isn't right for what is to be incomplete," Parmenides (c. 515-470 BCE) says. Zhuangzi, a Chinese philosopher who lived in the 4th century CE, for his part would encourage us not to sacrifice ourselves for completion. In his eponymous *Zhuangzi*, the Chinese character for 'completion' (成, *cheng*) is juxtaposed with 生, *sheng*, which means life, coming to life, being born, etc. That

makes sense if we consider thermodynamics and entropy. A system with complete order – that is, entropy equals zero – is dead. Everything is familiar, but there are no possibilities. When Daoism speaks of balance, we should forget about equilibrium and instead envisage a situation that has yet to be actualized. It's about preserving the potential of the situation to become something as yet undecided. Metaphysical thought, not just German idealism, but as a tendency embedded in everyday life, can be regarded as a phantasmagorical defence against our existence 'in the midst of the flow of life'. It's important to point out here that Daoism doesn't equate to 'going with the flow'. On the contrary, it's our obsession with completing, achieving, performing and fulfilling that prevents us from experiencing the 'flow of life', or *sheng*, while coasting along imperviously.

Perhaps you could say that Chinese thought helps me ask new questions. Asking 'Chinese-inspired' questions can help me unfold my work in new ways, for instance by shifting the focus from what things are to how they work. That makes sense in terms of art, which isn't particularly exact, but is very much about the 'knowledge' we create based on our own experiences. Letting go of a purely epistemological relationship to that kind of knowledge opens up possibilities. It's my impression that Chinese philosophy never had a Cartesian moment, in the Foucaultian sense, that is, where the knowledge produced by the subject themselves is disqualified, and only the knowledge that's the same for everyone is valid. For Foucault, broadly speaking, it's about whether the subject has to change themselves to access the truth. He calls this transformation of one's self "aesthetic experience". In China, officials were traditionally required to also be skilled calligraphers and poets. I find that very inspiring. Severing aesthetics from decision-making

is horrifying, or at the very least disheartening, to me. Imagine if all politicians were concerned with not making unaesthetic decisions?

I may have strayed a bit from your question. In brief, I aspire to lead an aesthetic existence, even at the expense of a functional or 'meaningful' one. I consult the *I Ching*, whose answers are much more Daoist and very different from those I'd be inclined to propose.

JF:

I eat Chinese, handle Chinese-made objects in everyday life, read about China in the newspapers, view an increasing number of Chinese ads and so on, but I regrettably have to admit that I don't know enough about Chinese history and traditions, especially considering China's influence on the global economy, geopolitics and the international power game in general. Can you tell me about your fascination with China?

KH:

I feel the same way. While I'm interested in a lot of Chinese things and matters, I don't feel that I know enough. China is many different and conflicting things. I try to stay current as best as I can. It's exciting that China and Chinese matters in many ways are very close to us, yet are often portrayed as strange and almost inscrutable. Perhaps there's a tendency to perpetuate the image of China as the Other, on the opposite side of the world, and a certain blindness about Sinophobia, despite important current movements like Black Lives Matter.

I should hasten to say that I'm not interested in China per se, no more than I'm interested in the rest of the

global situation. But I'm interested in certain Chinese thoughts that can serve as an alternative to the thinking I know and take for granted. I hope this interest in Chinese thoughts can be an opportunity to confront my own biases, what I implicitly take for granted, without making China 'the exotic Other'.

JF:

When did your interest in Chinese thought begin?

KH:

My interest in Chinese matters originates from my interest in tea. I started drinking Japanese tea and became interested in Japanese tea culture. Both originated in China, so the idea was to start chronologically. In 2019, when I received a travel grant, I planned a trip with a friend who was studying to become a sinologist. We drank tea together, and he was going to research his thesis on Chinese tea culture. Together we visited tea farmers, tea dealers, looked for old tea trees, etc. I learned a lot about tea on that trip, but not at all what I had expected. I actually wanted to write a book about tea. Nothing ever came of it. Instead, I became aware of a lot of other topics from China that I wanted to study. I think that's where my interest in China-related subjects began, but it has been building slowly.

JF:

During your residency at Art Hub Copenhagen, you had weekly meetings with a fellow artist who shares your interest. "Can you lift the veil", so to speak, on your meetings with Søren Andreasen?

KH:

Haha, it sounds all cultish when phrased as 'veiled'. We're trying to learn *hanzi*, Chinese characters. Alongside our language studies, we've an ongoing dialogue that's just as important. It's a lot like my publishing work. Learning hanzi is a chance to discuss a bunch of questions and topics with Søren. He's a terrific conversation partner and an astute analyst, and it's a great privilege to get to ponder questions of practice and work with him every week.

JF:

How about if I get Søren to ask you a couple of guest questions?

KH:

Sure, that would be great, if he's up for it.

SØREN ANDREASEN:

Considering that you have been to China four times for extended periods, there must really be something there that attracts you. For one, what's the attraction of living in a hutong?

KH:

When I lived in a hutong in Beijing, the housing structure gave me an extremely 'local' feel. I knew my neighbours and so on. When I was home, it didn't at all feel like living in a city of millions. Each hutong was originally built to house three generations sharing a courtyard. Today, it's different. Additions have been made over the

years, beehive-style. It was a really labyrinthine place to navigate, but the shared courtyards and the seamless transitions between indoors and outdoors still worked. Now the government is reverting several of the neighbourhoods to the 'original' form.

SA:

The beehive aspect is precisely what fascinates me, because it's hard for me to envisage a place to live that has no outer or precise demarcations. When there is no way to determine where or when something begins or ends, yourself included, it must affect how you perceive yourself and the world, I'd imagine?

KH:

Initially, it did cause some confusion, for sure. On one of my first days there, I walked down an alley that kept narrowing, as the concentration of private possessions increased: more potted plants, buckets, shoes, bok choy and laundry on the line. Every time I turned a corner, I thought, "Now the alley is going to end. Here's the house it's supposed to lead me to." But that never happened and at some point I just turned around. I felt like I had walked into someone's home without being able to say exactly where that happened. I had very clearly crossed the boundary of what I was accustomed to.

I think you're right to connect the perception of space to self-perception. The difference in demarcation seems to be related to a different way of organizing existence. When I returned to Denmark, several people asked me if I had felt surveilled and dictated to. They were referring to the Party, of course. But on a personal level, regarding the relationship between the self and the world, I

had to answer, "No, on the contrary." I felt relief at being rid of the obsessive need to demarcate and define.

SA:

Could this relief have been caused by life in a hutong and surveillance by WeChat giving you an experience of disappearing?

KH:

I certainly had a sense of the regularity I was accustomed to disappearing. And if you believe that your self is, in part, predicated on regularity, you could say that I had an experience of disappearing.

SA:

The experience of regularity disappearing, isn't that a bit like trying to learn Chinese characters and having to relate to the fact that the characters can appear arbitrarily and have multiple meanings that, correspondingly, can be expressed by other characters?

KH:

Sure, I think there's a comparison. At least, I've an experience of having to discard or unlearn certain assumptions about how a system of characters should and can behave. If I didn't do that, trying to learn the language would be very frustrating. Moreover, the experience of having to think differently in order to navigate this roughly four-millennia-old 'cosmos of characters' is hugely exhilarating. After a lesson, you can physically feel how the inside of your head has been remodelled.

SA:

A cosmos of characters?

KH:

Yes, a cosmos in the sense that it's ordered and controlled by principles entirely separate from and not (necessarily) compatible with the systems of characters that control the space I inhabit in everyday life. We are trying to learn one system of characters through another, but we're not just faced with learning a new language. It's more like learning a whole new concept of the world, a new cosmology.

SA:

Can you give me an example of how the cosmos of Chinese characters works separately from the one you inhabit?

KH:

In a number of ways, the characters reveal a different relationship to concepts like progress. The characters are not conjugated by tense like our verbs. In Chinese, there is no categorical distinction between the active and the passive forms. In most instances, it's left undecided whether it's one or the other. No two statements exclude each other, and what is 'done' is described by the doing, not the doer.

In Danish, we mainly use the active form. Generally, the noun performs the action expressed by the verb. The passive form, in which the subject is the one at whom the action is directed and not the one performing

the action, is rarely used. This speaks to the subject's need to be active and at the centre of things. It seems almost like an assault on agency itself to say, "The tea is being drunk by me" instead of "I'm drinking the tea." Moreover, a sentence can be perfectly okay, complete and whole without a subject, which is actually really hard for me to imagine. Action without a subject!

SA:

"The tea is being drunk by me." That's beautiful. Which takes us back to the experience of disappearing, doesn't it?

KH:

Or losing yourself in such a way that you have to put yourself back together again in a new way?

SA:

As a way, perhaps, of eluding the social regularities that otherwise already identify us?

KH:

If the constitution of the subject takes place in a different way than you expect, it awakens a desire or even a need to rethink your relationship to yourself.

SA:

It's funny how your reflections seem both speculative and everyday at once – a lot like the things you make.

KH:

The connection between the speculative and the everyday, between concepts and the concrete, continues to interest me. We are talking about self-transformation, but what does that look like, specifically? What methods and techniques, if any, are available?

SA:

Good question. For starters, I don't associate self-transformation with method or technique but with affect, if that makes sense?

KH:

It does. I'm thinking about the work that comes before self-transformation. So, even if the transformation involves an affective state, there may be certain techniques for arriving at it. This isn't something that can be repeated with the same result (because you're a different person afterwards), but something that comes before and is longer lasting or at least temporal?

SA:

What you might call aesthetic experience?

KH:

Inspired by Foucault, yes. Aesthetic experience as a transformation of your self through knowledge you yourself have developed. Knowledge that affects you. In an interview, he asks rhetorically, "Why would a painter work if he were not transformed by his painting?" Perhaps it's not initially a question of method or

technique, but of practice, within which methods and techniques are developed. I'm thinking about practice in the broad sense of the word: Japanese tea rituals and the affiliated satori is another good example. That's a very elaborate set of techniques to achieve a loss of self. Perhaps a method of achieving affect?

JF:

Your conversation is sparking a huge amount of images, and it seems as if it could go on forever, regardless of whether you were sitting on a rock by the sea or with a cup of tea on the carpet of an abandoned office building. How are you best marinated by China? Or worst marinated by China? Are we all being marinated by China these days? In other words, what impact do you think China is having geopolitically?

KH:

I don't feel I'm in a position to speak about China in terms of geopolitics, but the Communist Party's increasing global influence should perhaps be an occasion to become acquainted with Chinese culture and thought. Chinese culture and thought are many things. It's problematic to say "China" followed by a general statement. In a global society, nations impact one another. Instead of clinging to a national or cultural identity, it seems more productive and appealing to me to think about culture as fluid, changing and ever nascent. And then think about what Chinese ideas and trends might be beneficial to confront in order to better grasp your own position and that of others. In my case, I think it would benefit me to live a year or so in Guangzhou.

JF:

Why Guangzhou, on the South China Sea?

KH:

Guangzhou is a city I know very little about. I just checked on Wikipedia, and three times as many people live there as in Denmark. Yet I know next to nothing about the place. It's big enough to be a cosmos in and of itself. That appeals to me a lot. I was there once for a couple of days and only saw a few parts of the city. I'd appreciate lingering dim sum breakfasts and the climate, but my chief interest is the idea of a new cosmos.

JF:

How does your interest in China and Asia influence your work?

KH:

On the surface, a lot of Chinese and Asian forms and figures appear in my work. Already-assimilated figures are a category that has preoccupied me, such as stepping-stones appearing under businesspeople's feet and miniature Zen gardens on the desk next to the computer. Several of my works that include ceramics clearly refer to Japanese teaware. Likewise, my exhibition *Kaffehave* (Coffee Garden) explicitly referred to Chinese gardening, while the entire exhibition was set inside a picture of a Japanese rock garden. Overall, the exhibition was inspired by Chinese gardening, which views the garden as a microcosm. I felt it made sense to incorporate certain principles from there into my work. Such gardens are often designed so that points

within look different depending on where you view them from. This may be neither here nor there, but it makes me think of Chinese paintings, which can easily include several different perspectives at once. Instead of linear perspective, in which everything makes sense, the foreground is seen from one place, the cabin in the middle ground from another and the mountains from yet another. The design of a painting or garden is bound up with a certain way of thinking. In Europe, you could say that we appreciate clarity and enlightenment. It's great to be able to survey everything at once. It's not like that with the Chinese garden or Chinese landscape painting. There, it's wonderful that things change along the way, that a cloud drifts by blocking your view and so on.

Another thing about Chinese gardens that I stumbled on is their relationship to signs and representation. The Chinese character for 'mountain' is 山 (*shan*), which looks like a mountain with one high peak flanked by two lower peaks. In the Emperor Yang's garden of the Sui Dynasty, a mountain was built that resembled this character. You might say that they 'wrote' the garden, in the same way that calligraphers signed their paintings "written by", not "painted by". The mountain is a mountain, but it also 'wrote' mountain. The traditional character *yuan* (園), meaning 'garden' (which features in several garden-related characters), can be divided into meaningful units symbolizing the components and organization of the garden. When you write 'garden', you're also plotting a garden.

JF:

I've been noticing the bulletin board in your studio. It's mixing advertising images, characters and the many faces of pop culture, am I right? Can you describe how



Mountain View (figure 2), painted XPS foam, 35 × 40 × 35 cm, back and rake, part of the exhibition *Kaffehave*, 2020. The coffee garden was raked after each visitor. Photo: Kasper Hesselbjerg

you use your mood board, and perhaps highlight five images that are on it right now?

KH:

Elements of the bulletin board do approach the status of artwork. Something similar is going on in my collage series *Chocolate Chip Sea Cucumber Atlas*. That series is an attempt to structure different objects and the effects they have, both on each other and on us. They are more about the connections between things than about the thing itself – that is, not what the things are, but what they become by dint of their connection to other things. On my bulletin board, I use the same method as in my collages, though I might include other things, as well, such as excerpts of texts or my own works. The collages only include images from the internet – that is, from a shared and freely accessible world of images. In a way, I see it as a sociological method. The collages merely point out phenomena that already exist. I'm not making anything up, I'm not the creator of the images, but you see the power of combining and connecting what already exists.

The bulletin board includes several postulates and theories. I try out different connections but also how things are affected by different distances between them. When I think about mood boards, I think about something that's supposed to represent an overall idea, something that creates unity. My bulletin board isn't intended to be cohesive. It gives me an overview, but I'm more interested in the distances and connections between heterogeneous entities. I just took down my bulletin board, actually, but I recall that it had a Coco Pops 'A', a sketch of a serving of snails, a lot of text in dialogue balloons, and a series of drawings of pigs dressed as chefs

presenting different pork dishes like barbecue sausages, ham and chops. There was also a picture of Bashful from *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs*. I collect pictures of characters that are limited to one mood or temperament. Their name is their only option. Bashful is bashful, which is the only way the character can be. Eeyore from *Winnie the Pooh* is 'eeyorish', gloomy or glum. He can only be sad, like Droopy, who can only be hangdog. On the bulletin board, the characters represent personified emotional states.

JF:

Can you share examples of the relationships in *Chocolate Chip Sea Cucumber Atlas*?

KH:

I just sent you one of the first atlas-like collages I made. It's from a series that was in the show *Menu (Consistency and Assimilation)*, Nanna Stjernholm, the curator, invited me to do an exhibition in her apartment, which she was running an art space, Værelset (The Room), out of at the time. Because there was a kitchen available, I could do a show that was a menu. Apart from the central pieces, the servings, I put energy into the staging. I bought cutlery, tableware and stools, made ceramics for the different courses and a dining table for the guests. The collages served both as a menu of sorts and an atlas of associations. The idea was to strike certain themes while providing a reading guide to the exhibition.

In the collage I sent you is a sea cucumber, both in its living and prepared states. In shape and texture, it looks like a pickled cucumber, which is presumably why they



No Title, from the exhibition *Menu (Konsistens og assimiliation)*, collage, 46 x 64 cm, 2015. Photo: David Stjernholm.



Bashful from *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs*, Walt Disney, 1937.

have the same name. Difference and similarity are a requirement for something to have meaning. The collage continues with a painted plaster sculpture of a hot dog, which looks a bit like the sea cucumber, and a fibre-glass sculpture of John Tenniel's mock turtle from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Again, the surface of the turtle's fins resembles a pickle. Mock turtle is a dish that's contrived to look like something it's not. Like the dogs dressed up in different costumes. In the pictures of the dog wearing a shrimp costume and the character from *Alice in Wonderland* there's a seamless transition to another understanding of consistency. Consistency interests me, because it can refer both to the degree of hardness and softness of things and to whether they are logically connected and free of internal contradiction. Sea cucumbers are pretty rubbery, even if you boil them for a long time. Alive, they are a bit softer. Pickles, on the other hand, should be crunchy. *Chocolate Chip Sea Cucumber Atlas* is an extension of that. It's an ongoing series. The latest collages thematize different representations of Zen Buddhism, especially in marketing but also in lifestyles and *Star Wars*. Assimilation, digestion and cultural appropriation have been recurrent themes.

JF:

What do you find so fascinating about *Alice in Wonderland*, and Alice falling down the rabbit hole, finding herself in a strange land?

KH:

I've used *Alice in Wonderland* as a reference because it's a well-known sign. It's definitely a great children's book, which I've enjoyed reading myself, but the utility



Soft Shell Crab Sandwich, soft shell crab with garnish, soft rolls, beetroot juice and stoneware, dimensions variable, 2015. The work was part of the exhibition *Menu (Konsistens og assimilation)*, a dinner comprised of edible sculptures. Photo: David Stjernholm

of the story is that it's so iconic – everybody knows it. In other words, the signs work really well. It only takes a rabbit running late or someone falling down a hole for us to know what it's about. When I use references from *Alice in Wonderland*, the main thing isn't that she's pointing out holes in the familiar and rational world that we only have to dive into to discover an underlying mysterious world without consistency or logical coherence. That idea is pretty open and general, even banal, which may also be why Alice is such a common reference. The main thing for me here is that the sign works so well. The odd turtle indicates a whole mythology. It reaches beyond itself, evoking a slew of conceptual associations. If the turtle has that effect, the images around it might, too. The turtle looks like the pickle, which looks like the sea cucumber, etc. The character of the turtle is, in a way, included in a reading guide. The sea cucumber may work like the turtle, too, if we follow the connections and associations it evokes.

JF:

I had a seat at your dinner and exhibition *Menu (Consistency and Assimilation)* in 2015, an experience I shared with three other random visitors. It was a very special and incredibly intimate experience, and quite transgressive. Are you concerned with pushing people's boundaries in the experience of social settings and the consumption of food?

KH:

This was the first show I did that was also a dinner, featuring a whole deep-fried soft-shell crab in a spice bun, a cast of my feet in a courgette cake, as the main course, and a few other breakfast-related dishes. Before

that, I had only served a few dishes as artworks, so I was testing out a lot of things for the first time. One thing I learned, and probably could have told myself, was that the dynamic and the mood varied widely from one evening to the next, depending on who was taking part. There were six guests at the other dinners, but unfortunately a couple had cancelled the night you were there, which may have made things extra intimate.

I've no interest in transgressing people's social boundaries. If an unfamiliar feeling arises, it should ideally come from the works. I was hoping the works would spark conversation – a conversation revolving around the setting of the works and the exhibition, so that you were at an art show dealing with certain themes more than at a dinner with other people. Perhaps that's what sets my work apart from relational aesthetics. Participation was free, which, as several people pointed out, was generous. For me, it was a great privilege that someone would spend an hour and a half with my work. I conceived it as a format that made it possible to look at the works for a longer time, discuss and 'consume' them. At each dinner, once I had finished preparing the works, I greeted the visitors, thanked them for coming and so on. In several cases, the guests were very chatty, which ended up being an aspect of the show I really appreciated.

JF:

Why is it exciting for you to work with 'servings' as artworks?

KH:

When you experience an object, that experience is determined by several different things. On the one hand,



Squashkagefødder med muskatnød (Zucchini Feet with Nutmeg), squash cake, soft rolls, whipped cream and galvanized steel, c. 18 × 20 × 27 cm, 2015. The work was part of the exhibition *Menu (Konsistens og assimilation)*, a dinner comprised of edible sculptures. Photo: David Stjernholm



Tang Yuan, boiled rice flour dessert, Frosties, whole milk, stoneware, wooden spoon and children's chopsticks, dimensions variable, 2015. The work was part of the exhibition *Menu (Konsistens og assimilation)*, a dinner comprised of edible sculptures. Photo: David Stjernholm

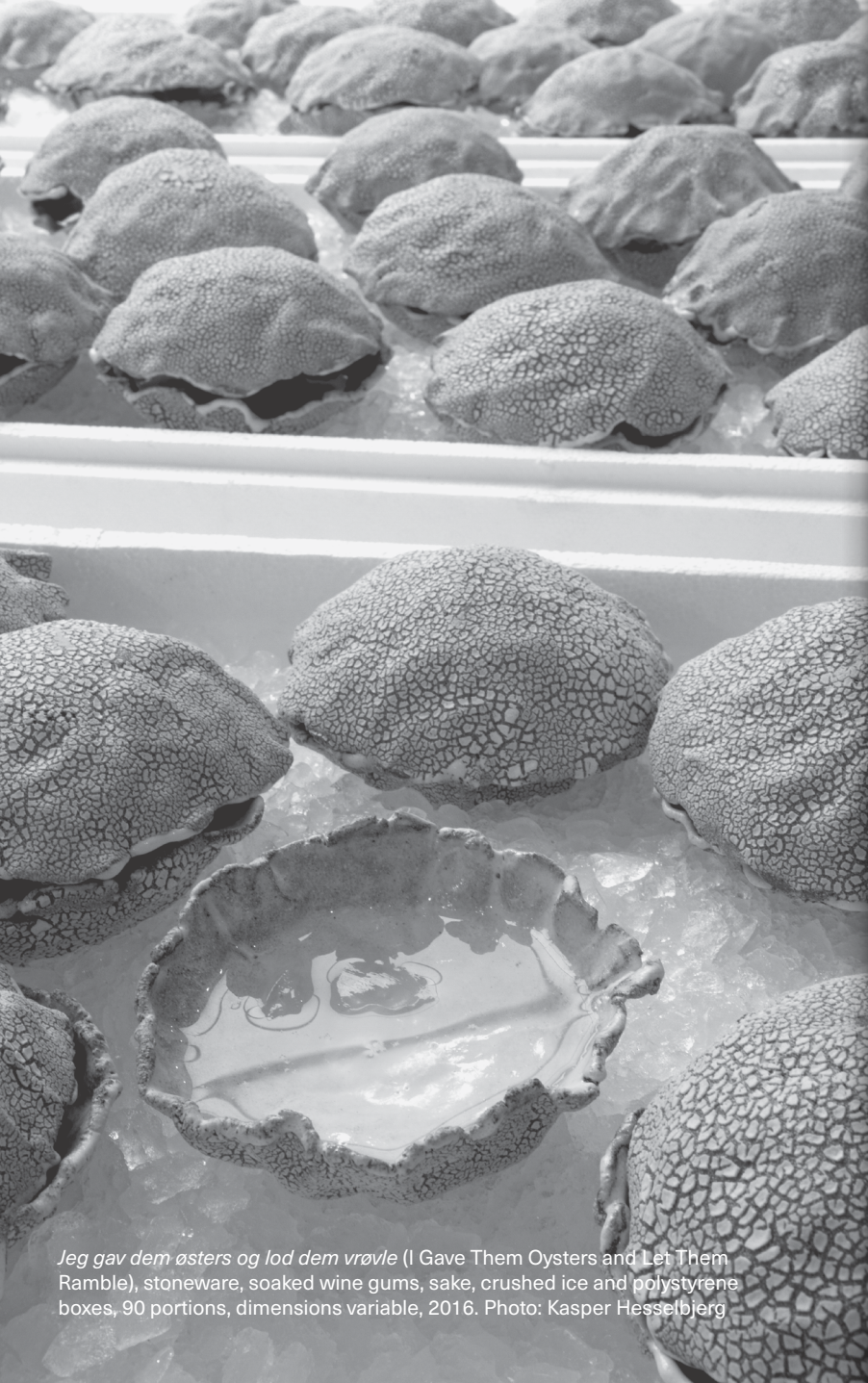
a dish is always part of a cultural order. It has a specific meaning, because it's part of a specific order at a given time. At a different time or in a different place, the dish would be something completely different. An incredibly spicy noodle soup with a whole pig's brain is a common lunch dish in Chengdu. In Denmark, the same dish is something else entirely. Oysters were once poor man's food. Not any longer. And the person who eats the noodle soup or the oysters isn't the same subject in different places and times. On the other hand, the physical experience is the same regardless of time and place (even though it may be evaluated differently, and so is experienced very differently physically). If you want to know what a specific dish is, you have to bring your own senses into play. No one else can taste it for you. This applies to all objects, but food brings it into play in exemplary fashion.

JF:

If you had to describe your own dishes, would you describe them as sculptures or as food?

KH:

I definitely consider my dishes to be sculptures, but they have to adhere to certain conventions for food, or only transgress them as little as possible. It's okay if they are strange, palpably making you aware of the expectations and conventions that surround them – and, in turn, what they then are. It's important that my servings are not subordinate to the social situation. And I never wanted to make food that was art. I've worked with food solely because I could use it to investigate or shed light on certain themes that were interesting to me.



Jeg gav dem østers og lod dem vrøvle (I Gave Them Oysters and Let Them Ramble), stoneware, soaked wine gums, sake, crushed ice and polystyrene boxes, 90 portions, dimensions variable, 2016. Photo: Kasper Hesselbjerg



Jeg gav dem østers og lod dem vrøvle (I Gave Them Oysters and Let Them Ramble), stoneware, soaked wine gums, sake, crushed ice and polystyrene boxes, 90 portions, dimensions variable, 2016. Photo: Philipp Loeken

JF:

Would you be interested in working with professional chefs?

KH:

Definitely, but we would all have to agree on what our aims were. Several of my works include spice buns, but the works would not be improved by replacing those mass-produced, sweet buns with a sourdough version baked from organic, stone-ground flour. Chefs seek to construct a meaningful narrative. I focus on disintegration.

JF:

Your thesis project in 2013 was divided into multiple elements. Would you care to describe it?

KH:

My thesis project consisted of three elements. The first element you encountered in the exhibition was a vending machine I had rented. It was situated between Kunsthal Charlottenborg's café and bookstore. During the exhibition, it functioned as an ordinary vending machine with candy bars and soda, but I got permission to replace some of the usual products with books from my imprint. People could buy one of those in the machine or choose a cola, if that's what they felt like.

The second element was a serving titled *I håb om assimilation* (Hoping for Assimilation). Each serving consisted of a small, spherical ceramic cup of pu-erh tea with a marshmallow stuck in the mouth of the cup like

a cork and a pickle pinned to the top of the marshmallow with a toothpick. The glaze on the cup was inspired by a Japanese tea-bowl glaze that looks like melted marshmallow. The idea was for the sculpture to include several different consistencies: the liquid tea, the gooey marshmallow melting at the end facing the hot tea, the crunchy pickle and the rock-hard glaze which looked soft. Another principle it adhered to was the French cookbook axiom that sweet (marshmallow), bitter (tea), sour and salt (pickle) constitute a complete and tasty dish. The work observed an authoritative axiom but was clearly out of sync with what is normally combined. The cup was almost spherical with a small opening at the top, which made it difficult to drink the tea without turning the cup upside down. Also, the rim was sticky from the melted marshmallow. That way, the sculpture involved some physical exertion. It was a sticky business but also a proposal for a sculptural experience. Moreover, this tea is supposed to be particularly good for your digestion, which was also apt, I thought, as an intro to a group show with so many works.

The third element was a very big sofa and a magazine printed on a rotary press. The sofa was a combination of a type of Uzbek sofa we saw on our study trip and a sofa I had seen in a number of airports. The Uzbek one was by and large what I think of as a hard bed. It had no back or seating direction. It was completely 'undirected' that way. You had to figure out yourself how, and how many, to sit in it. You could even place a table on it and have a dinner party. We saw that a few times. The airport sofa was an octagonal sofa with all the seats facing away from each other. Eight people could sit in it and 'see as little as possible of each other', if you followed the sight line dictated by the sofa. The magazine featured a collection of pictures of different positions you can assume



I håb om assimilation (Hoping for Assimilation), pickled cucumber, marshmallow, puer shu cha (a Chinese tea reputedly good for digestion), toothpick and stone-ware, c. 8 × 5 × 5 cm, 2013. Photo: Anders Sune Berg

in a sofa, mainly people sleeping in sofas but also a few yoga poses and a single sofa ad. One of the pictures was from an Albert Mertz collage, which also provided the title for the piece. He included a sofa ad with the caption “Årets idé: Design din egen sofa i stedet for at lade andre gøre det” (Idea of the year: design your own sofa instead of having someone else do it). My thesis sofa was simply called *Årets idé* (Idea of the Year).

I liked the idea of giving visitors a sculptural experience, in *I håb om assimilation*, and some discourse or a snack, depending on what you were looking for, in *Salg af forskellige objekter* (Sale of Various Objects), along with the opportunity to rest on the sofa sculpture. The works were made specifically for the big annual group show that most years I find overwhelming and exhausting.

JF:

So Albert Mertz is an artist that inspires you?

KH:

I've been very into Mertz. In 2013, with Absalon Kirkeby, I made a book, *Døren er åben – Tekster af Albert Mertz* (The Door Is Open: Texts by Albert Mertz). There was a text by him I wanted to publish, but before doing so I felt I should familiarize myself properly with his other writings. I started collecting texts and found that many of them were hard to locate, including newspaper articles. It felt like I was in the Royal Library for months scanning microfiche, though it probably wasn't that long. In turn, I got in touch with his ex-wife, Lone Mertz, who let me look through her archive.

Studying his notebooks, texts and works gave me a close-up look at his practice. His curiosity and inquisitiveness were inspiring. He strove to set up tests and proceed discursively. The fact that he kept changing his mind and couldn't make it up was just as inspiring. I knew of him at the time, before 2013, but I knew little of his work. He didn't have the same kind of exposure back then as he does now after several big books on his art have been published. I certainly had the experience of personally being able to explore and 'read' his practice. Either it had passed me by or a lot less had been said about his work at the time. It was there for the taking, and I was able to form my own impressions – also, perhaps, because I went through back channels, via Lone's archives, with no wall texts to guide me.

JF:

What other artists do you relate to? Are you inspired by any of the artists who work with food, like Rirkrit Tiravanija?

KH:

The first ones I can think of are two Russian artists, Yuri Shabelnikov and Yuri Fesenko, who made a life-size Lenin cake in 1998. That's a suitably ambiguous gesture that I find irresistible. It's an homage, but you also cut him up. Someone must have eaten Lenin's feet, face and crotch. It reminds me of an anecdote about the Swiss writer Robert Walser, who reportedly stood up at a Communist conference in Berlin attended by Lenin and asked him what he thought about German sausage. Or, asked him "So you, too, like fruitcake?" The wording depends on who you read, but the point is the same. I'm a big fan of Martha Rosler's 1975 film *Semiotics*

of the Kitchen. First, there's a really long intro with a didactic title card. Then 'A' for 'apron' and 'B' for 'bowl'. Already at 'C' for 'chopper', as she unenthusiastically chops into the steel bowl, things start going awry. That's not how you do it. Don't chop a sharp knife into a metal bowl. Then she takes a dish ('D') and puts the knife and the bowl into it, as if making a dish. Demonstrating how to use a fork ('F'), she looks more like she's trying to kill someone than eat a meal.

The other day I saw a small exhibition that among other things dealt with food. It included a work by Pia Arke, *Jord til Scoresbysund* (Soil for Scoresby Sound), consisting of 151 used coffee filters (two people's coffee consumption for a year). The room smelled strongly of coffee but also of mildew. Another work in the show was the so-called *Europäische Fleischsteine*. Both works are quite simple and go extremely well together by pointing out cultural and historical circumstances. It's just coffee and rocks that look like meat, but both function discursively, at least if you can be bothered.

I've also been into Marcel Broodthaers because of his relationship to language and signs, though he also uses food in a way that I like. The way I see it, his things carry a symbolic meaning but also a collapse. If he can be said to work conceptually, he does so in a different way than the American conceptual artists who, as I see it, believe that things can be made to coalesce, make sense. The canonical artists who work with food, like Rirkrit Tiravanija and Gordon Matta-Clark, have been very important to the field I work in. So I've informed myself about their work, and can relate to it. Some of their works I really like, but because some of their works superficially resemble mine, generally, I've

looked at them to find out how what I do is different from what they do.

JF:

How do you view the concept of Esthétique relationnelle, as described by Nicolas Bourriaud back in 1998?

KH:

It's been a long time since I read his text, but now that you mention it, I feel like reading it again. When I read it, I thought the social relationships created by the works were central. What was important were the human interactions produced by the works. When Rirkrit Tiravanija served pad thai, it didn't matter what kind of pad thai it was. And it didn't matter if the noodles were undercooked or overcooked. In brief, the material properties of the service didn't matter. It could have been any other mainstream Thai dish, and the work would not have changed significantly. That may be an overly broad generalization, but I think it's true to say that I'm interested in a different set of relationships. My edible works do not aspire to be a catalyst for dialogue or relationships, but to be sculptures that create experiences based on sensation and discourse. I'm interested in how the cultural signs around a pad thai blend with the feeling of overcooked noodles. Something relational and social is going on when I serve my works, but that's just one aspect. There are other aspects that I think should not be overlooked.

JF:

How do you specifically use language in your work? Have you considered using words and sentences, like Lawrence Weiner, Barbara Kruger, Marcel Broodthaers and Jenny Holzer do?

KH:

While language does, of course, feature directly or indirectly in my texts and titles, my work usually relates to language in one or several other ways, as well. The sculptures are intended to be contemplated in language, even if language isn't directly present in them. The language part of the sculptures is mainly their syntax, and how they relate to the language and dialogue around them. *C'est une pipe*, a pipe carved after my foot, thematizes an affective state – that is, what it's like to have a big toe (or an image of a big toe) in your mouth. The sculpture is pretty heavy and there is something strange about putting the toe in your mouth, even though the stem is made of ebonite and the bowl is made of wood just like a regular pipe. There is language around the corporeal experience of the sculpture. Most obviously, the title alludes to René Magritte's *La Trahison des images*, a painting of a pipe captioned "Ceci n'est pas une pipe". A representation of a pipe isn't a pipe. You can't smoke it. That's the standard explanation. *C'est une pipe* is a pipe you can actually smoke. The next step, according to Magritte's logic, would be that this isn't a foot. But here, I think it's important that there is something foot-like about the pipe, that it seems kind of like a foot, in the sense that it feels wrong or stimulating, according to preference, to put it in your mouth. My colleague Signe Frederiksen made me aware that 'pipe' in French is slang for a blowjob,



C'est une pipe, bubinga and ebonite (pipe modelled on the artist's foot),
c. 26 × 10 × 15 cm, 2017. Photo: Kasper Hesselbjerg

which makes sense in terms of the work. There's an erotic aspect that has to do with both sensation and signs.

Of the artists you mention, I've mainly looked at Marcel Broodthaers, since I can best identify with his relationship to language, though I'd like to be as resolved as Barbara Kruger. If I was going to use text in such a direct way, it would probably require some material that was pulling in another direction, something that said, "on the other hand", like the surface and material aspects of the Coco Pops 'A'. It's the character 'A'. We agree on what it means, but it's also a Coco Pop, a breakfast cereal made of different materials with different effects, like sugar.

At the moment, I'm into Chinese *shanshui* (literally mountain and water) or landscape painting. Apart from the fact, as mentioned, that they are written instead of painted, Chinese *shanshui* paintings also commonly include writing. Both calligraphy (typically poetry) and painting appear in the same picture. Calligraphy is a merger of writing and image that we are not familiar with in the same way in a European context. Because of our relationship to text, it's not possible to use writing like that. But I fantasize about doing work where I don't know if I'm writing a picture or drawing a text.

EPILOGUE

JF:

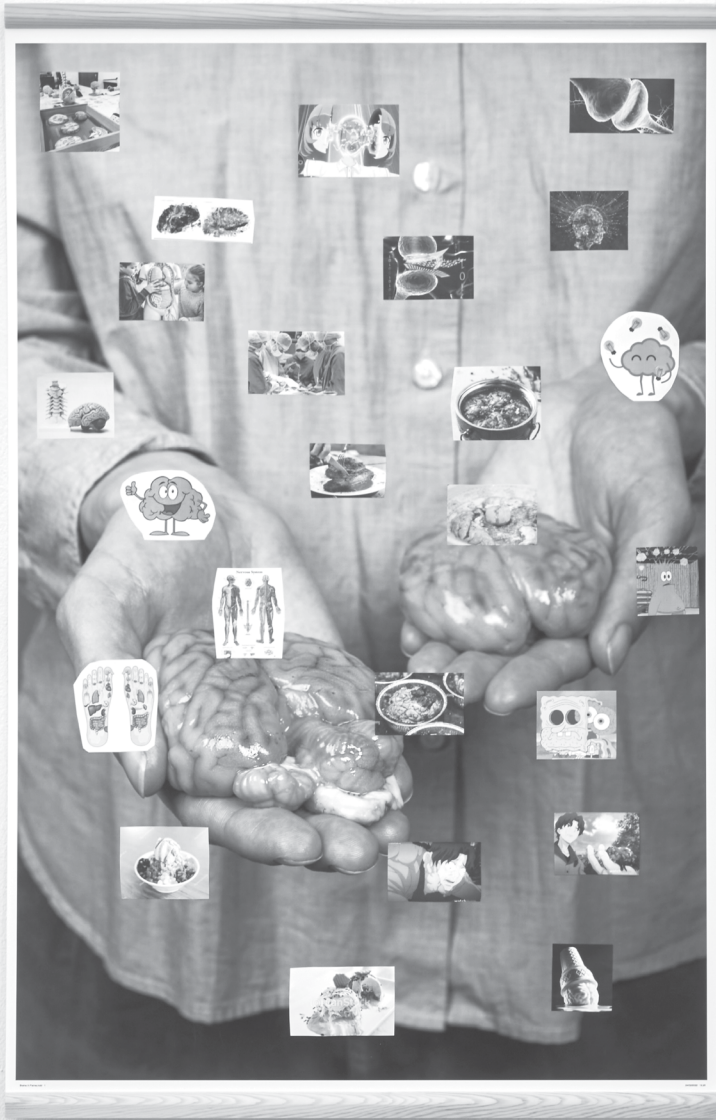
This epilogue is intended as a dessert of sorts. As a fitting conclusion to this interview, can you describe a dessert you have made or would like to make? Which one of your works might ideally be eaten by the reader to cap this off?

KH:

The last dessert I made was a box of pig-shaped baozi. All you have to do is steam these little frozen, cream-filled buns and they're ready. The texture is excellent, chewy and mushy at the same time. And I like that they are shaped like pigs. They may be vegetarian, but I still associate them with the opportunistic or cannibalistic cartoon pigs from the bulletin board that I mentioned earlier, which are dressed as chefs ready to serve themselves, their friends or at least pork. They represent a convenient notion of how animals feel about being eaten. Almost the opposite of Schopenhauer's pessimism. If you want to test the hypothesis that enjoyment trumps suffering in this world, you can compare one animal's enjoyment at eating another animal to the other animal's suffering at being eaten by the first animal. The servile pigs, in their way, are both symptoms of a construct and little helpers that sustain it.

The baozi pigs also appear in a new series of collages, *February Specials*, which is an attempt to apply the abstract mapping and associations of the *Chocolate Chip Sea Cucumber Atlas* series to specific dishes or 'foodscapes' – dishes and scenes from my intimate reality, objects I've been in close contact with. The way the

characters appear in the photos is partly inspired by the augmented-reality game Pokémon GO, where Pokémon characters appear at your geographical location, as if they were part of your real-world location. The game is free but ad-based. Drawing on the user's algorithm, Pokémons are located close to the shops that the user is most likely to visit. In other words, there is a very clear connection between the virtual world and our behaviour IRL. The collages are about the same thing. Entering the landscape, we've to navigate according to both our real-world location and concepts and characters from the different cosmologies we inhabit. Perhaps this is a good place to stop?



February Specials (Brains In Palms), collage series, 2021.
Photo: Euirock Lee, Art Sonje Center



February Specials (Steamed Buns Looking Like Pigs), collage series, 2021.
Photo: Euirock Lee, Art Sonje Center



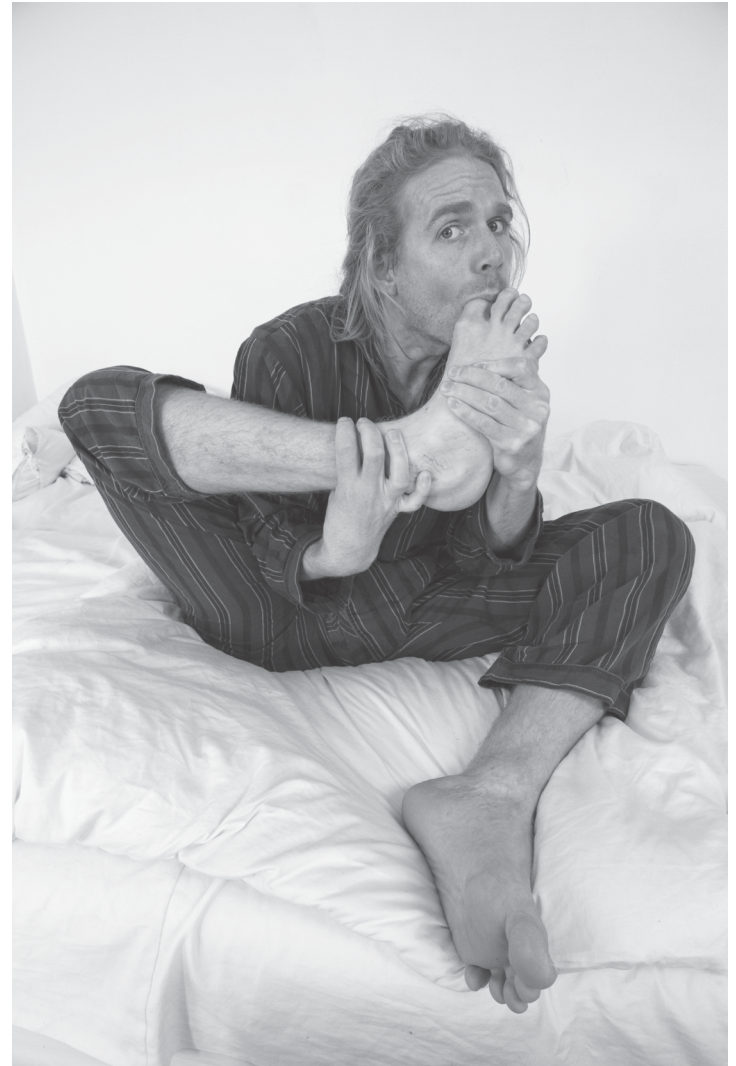
Sketch for *February Specials (Sea Cucumber Millet Congee)*, collage series, 2021. Photo: Kasper Hesselbjerg



Sketch for *February Specials (Snail Sandwiches)*, collage series, 2021. Photo: Kasper Hesselbjerg



Cookie A, print on cardboard, c. 140 × 100 cm, 2015.
Photo: David Stjernholm



Affektion (Fod) (Affection (Foot)), print on paper, 90 × 135 cm, 2017.



Opportunistic pig, iStock image



Tortoise Soup, print on paper, 90 × 135 cm, 2019.



Sausage Abundance,
meat of ant, bison, chicken, com-
mon wood pigeon, crocodile, duck, fallow deer, goat,
goose, grasshopper, guinea fowl, hare, horse, kangaroo, lamb, ox,
partridge, pheasant, pork, poussin, rabbit, red deer, roe deer, sika deer, tur-
key, wild boar and zebra, pepper, oxen sausage casing and wooden stand,
c. 20 × 30 × 50 cm, 2018. The sausage was served during the exhibition
Lunacy. Photo: Kasper Hesselbjerg



Walrus Pug, print on cardboard, c. 100 × 140 cm, 2015.
Photo: Kasper Hesselbjerg



Irreverence (Portrait of the Aunt That Lacks Respect for What the Rest of the Family Think Is Important), print on paper, 80 × 110 cm, 2018.



Affektion (Fluesvamp), (Affection (Fly Agaric)), print on paper,
90 × 135 cm, 2017.



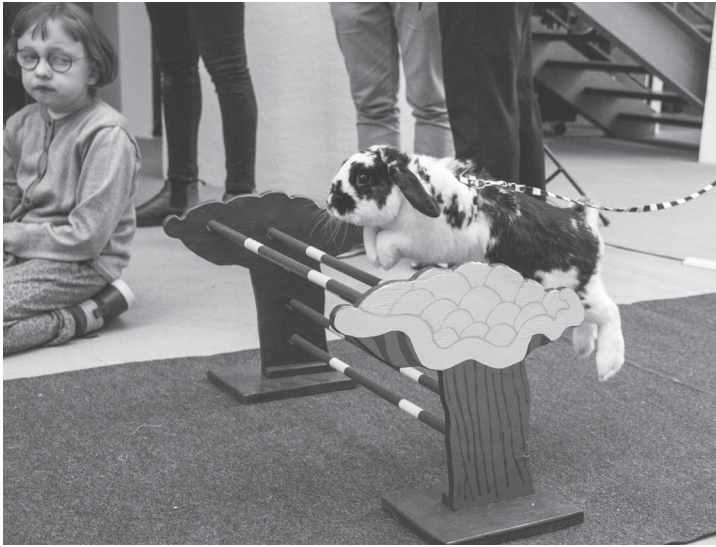
Oh Dear! Oh Dear! I Shall Be Too Late!, plywood, plastic tubing, paint and rabbits, dimensions variable, 2019. Work made in collaboration with a local pet rabbit association who held rabbit shows and jumping competitions at the museum during the exhibition. The series consisted of eight jumps. The motifs were taken either from *Alice in Wonderland* or from earlier works by the artist. Photo: Kasper Hesselbjerg



Oh Dear! Oh Dear! I Shall Be Too Late!, plywood, plastic tubing, paint and rabbits, dimensions variable, 2019. Photo: Kasper Hesselbjerg



Oh Dear! Oh Dear! I Shall Be Too Late!, plywood, plastic tubing, paint and rabbits, dimensions variable, 2019. Photo: Kasper Hesselbjerg



Oh Dear! Oh Dear! I Shall Be Too Late!, plywood, plastic tubing, paint and rabbits, dimensions variable, 2019. Photo: Kasper Hesselbjerg



Prosperity Coffee, ceramics, oak, PLA plastic, coffee and chocolate Euros, dimensions variable. Served for visitors as part of the exhibition *Kaffehave*, 2020. Photo: Kasper Hesselbjerg



Prosperity Coffee, ceramics, oak, PLA plastic, coffee and chocolate Euros, dimensions variable. Served for visitors as part of the exhibition *Kaffehave*, 2020. Photo: Kasper Hesselbjerg



Mountain View (figure 2), painted XPS foam, 35 × 40 × 35 cm, 2020. Photo: Kasper Hesselbjerg



Rake and marble gravel, Dimensions variable, The coffee garden was raked after each visitor. Photo: Kasper Hesselbjerg