

In the Western historical narrative we usually categorize as modern, we can discern faith in the history of art as a line of development progressing with a certain logic. Artistic movements follow one upon the other in accordance with a rational belief in progress towards a higher goal. It is a permanent avant-garde esthetic, in which one school of art trumps its predecessors by means of more sophisticated solutions and more radical approaches. Faith in this progress never seems to end.

During the 1960s, the notion of history's perpetual forward motion falls into disrepute as more and more of the ideas about "progress" lose their legitimacy. Optimism about development is replaced by a more regressive phase in which industrialism's negative effects on the environment become more obvious. In the field of art, more artists begin to question permanent avantgarde progression, and instead the past becomes a safe haven from the constant search for renewal. Many artists return to the pre-modern era and affirm the influence of history by means of stylistic borrowings but without the historical ideologies associated with these borrowings. The result is an eclectic, noncommittal relationship.

In the current state of art, there are no longer any traces of the idea of progress with its stylistic logic. Borrowings from one artist to another are no longer considered eclecticism. Rather, deeper relational links between two artists now form the basis for what used to be called "influence". This hints at the idea of "tradition", but it is now not so easy to define. We might turn to Goethe's old concept of "elective affinities" to define this more subtle and complex relational connection.

Cosima von Bonin and Poul Gernes' artistic relationship is difficult to define as anything besides an elective affinity because the artists were not active during the same period, and thus we can assume that they never met. Even so, their story is an exciting and vital part of contemporary history that illuminates the complexity in which contemporary artistic life operates. Cosima von Bonin was the first to make a move in this relationship with her exhibit in 2001 at the Kunstverein in Hamburg.

She included Poul Gernes' works in this exhibit, which she called "Brother Poul sticht in See". It is a title with a double meaning that is characteristic for many of von Bonin's works. One could translate it as "Brother Poul sets sail", which can be interpreted as Gernes "asea", far away from the normal world of perception in his artistic endeavors. But it can also be seen as a greeting to a friend who has left the earthly world and sailed far off into eternity in keeping with the iconography that already appears in Caspar David Friedrich's painting, with which both von Bonin and Gernes were well acquainted.

The relationship between the two artists is meanwhile not easy to define in formal terms. They work

within different fields that, at first glance, may not seem to be related. However, if we examine the artistic oeuvre of each, we can find a similar perspective on the conceptual level. Perhaps it is to oversimplify to say that both have a limitless experimental curiosity in terms of their range of artistic means of expression. They both work in painting, sculpture, objects, installations, video, performance and the interfaces between these media. In other words, they do not pay particular attention to the purity of the media and their specific identities. On the contrary, the boundaries between the media appear to be fluid. This suggests that neither of the artists acknowledge any hierarchy among the media. They are on an equal footing. This applies to the work of both artists with textile media, which in art circles has been considered to be an inferior medium because of its connection to handicrafts. But this does not seem to bother Gernes or von Bonin, who instead seem to see it as a challenge to rehabilitate a medium that suffers low status.

The basis of their respective artistic attitudes is a means of distancing themselves from art as an expression of ego. The point of art is no longer an exploration of the boundaries of the self and its drama. Instead, they seem to have in common an idea that art has a role in society as a communicative dialog between different individuals and groups. Poul Gernes' creation of the Eks School [Eks-skolen] in 1961 featured collective work methods where boundaries between teachers and students were dissolved in favor of a communal work procedure which became an alternative scene in the Danish art world.

In Festival 200, the artistic stage was expanded to include all kinds of media that did not have solely artistic status. The purpose of this expansion was to transgress the boundaries of the social space where relationships were more important than art. This has since become a central thought in relational esthetics. Cosima von Bonin has also been interested in collective events which undermine the authority of the individual artist. In 1995 she created The First Graz Fan Fest where she invited her friends to an exhibit that included not only traditional artistic media but also theater, music and performances. In von Bonin's works, links can be found to both fashion and the music world. Here there is a similarity both in the artists' desire to dismantle the barrier between high culture and mass culture and to remove art from the museum space and out into the urban public. The purpose of art is not to create a product, but to see art as a reflection of the society in which the artist lives and works. In an interview, Gernes said that being an artist means to be conscious of societal conditions and to feel social responsibility.

Responsibility for the world around us has been expressed as a global consciousness that not least of all seeks to reach out past a Eurocentric conception of the world to cultures in developing countries. Cosima von Bonin's childhood in Kenya resulted in a multi-culturalism that can feel particularly

contemporary in our time of cultural boundary crossings, but despite the global references, these never become exotic but rather an integrated part of her artistry which sometimes comes close to absurdist culture clashes between culture and nature.

In Poul Gernes, this encounter between nature and culture is also central, but his meeting between nature's metaphysical dimension and art's formal codes may not be as absurd as in the case of Cosima von Bonin. Despite this, I dare to suggest that Cosima von Bonin and Poul Gernes are in the middle of an intense elective affinity; we have only seen the beginning of it.

Cosima+Poul=Love !

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