*Unni Karoline Bakke*

*SPACES OF UNITY AND*

*MULTIPLICITY*

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*GALLERI LISTA FYR*

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*1 The unity of a controlled space*

Experiencing one of Unni Bakke’s rooms, be it her studio or an exhibition space, requires an initial period of acclimatization. The spectator needs time to adjust to the language, the rhythms and the demands of this artist’s repertoire. Traditionally an exhibition was seen as a collection of finished, labelled and priced objects that the critic and public viewed as separate, or recently departed, from the artist’s control. The gallery was thus a particular site in a series of departures, a series in which the artwork moved away from the artist. A challenging and erosion of this series has been one tendency within contemporary art since the early seventies. Therefore Unni Bakke’s work joins an established inventory of artists working and presenting art using an alternative scheme; an “expanded field” 1 of exhibition space. Bakke’s pieces exhibition space presents a combination of finished pieces and various works in progress. As inceptions, or starting points, the paintings provide a point of departure for sculptural expansions and assays out into the exhibition space. An overall unity is achieved by the controlled presentation of this space, which contains both the two- and- three dimensional elements of a continuing process.

*2 The contemporary cloud of visual images*

Contemporary life in mainstream western society is composed of a bombardment of multimedia sounds and images. Calvino wrote:

*Much of this cloud of visual images fade at once, like the dreams that leave no trace in the memory, but what does not fade is a feeling of alienation and discomfort.2*

Yet Calvino’s hypersensitivity to a careless or diluted use of man’s expressive capabilities, be it in pictures or in words, stemmed from his fear that genuinely exciting and invigorating possibilities may be lost in the gathering clouds of mass communication. This indeed a common fear, that the multiplicity of contemporary life in some way necessarily leads to a loss of order, a loss of exactitude.

*3 From chaos to order*

When experiencing the spaces constructed by Unni Karoline Bakke a series of connections and similarities are found running through the various elements composing the “exhibition”. The artist identifies and analyses a given geometrical form, or textural feature, and then amplifies the formal qualities of that geometry or texture through a variety of media. The artist acts as a ruminant; by contemplating, manipulating and extending the feature(s) under analysis, new and unexpected visual ideas result. The term ruminant is normally restricted to cattle, sheep and camels, those multi-stomached animals with the ability to re-chew their food. Yet the description is also appropriate to an artistic working method that involves repeated and concentrated attention upon a given detail, and, allows the overall view, the larger space, to be periodically lost from sight.3 By focusing upon the development of the details, rather than the overall view of the project, Bakke restrains the innate chaos of possibilities to allow an ordering of the details.

*4 Modernist vocabulary: the order*

The initial language of Bakke’s artistic process is primarily Modernist. Using the formal and media specific terms of the modernist vocabulary, the individual elements of the exhibition show many of the rational and self-reflective painterly and sculptural hallmarks of previous art. Using Sol LeWitt’s cubic structures, Abstract Expressionist painterliness and Rauschenberg’s assemblage techniques the exhibition space echoes many chapters of the well documented international modernist discourse. However, by combining these recognizable elements in a wholly unrestricted manner, Bakke loosens the formal constrains innate to the self-defining development that was modernism. By allowing paintings to expand into sculpture, by allowing colour nuances to overlap the various space elements, by restricting natural materials within wholly unnatural borders; modernistic order and unity is simultaneously proposed and denied. Bakke’s spatial elements present the viewer with the enlargement of various modernist art codas, whilst the overall unity of the space is given via communication and linkage between the details of the various elements. A re-unification of various disparate modernist forms is attempted, yet how is this attempt to be fully appreciated by the spectator?

*5 Movement: toward multiplicity*

In an introductory essay for an Arakawa and Gins installation, Jean-François Lyotard suggested movement as the spectator’s natural defence in the face of uncertainty, misunderstanding or spatial ambiguity.4 Whilst we move around an art-form, our eyes, and thus our brain, achieves a better understanding of volume, of surface, and, of the disparity between two and three dimensions. Rather than talking of Lyotard’s *defence,* there is a more fertile manner in which we can regard the spectator’s movement when viewing art. This positive attitude to motion around the artwork is best embodied when viewing a Rodin sculpture, one needs to circumnavigate his art in order to experience its inner, rather than surface, volume.

Similarly, to fully understand Bakke’s spaces the spectator’s movement should not be seen as defensive, but as an enriching experience leading to a productive synthesis. By moving through these spaces, by changing the angle of view and therefore the arrangement of elements, one creates connections and links between the various objects. The painted cube which forms a chess board of various simple colour combinations, expand into the surrounding space either via a thick tactile paint surface, or by actual folds upon the canvas. The cube is then repeated as a rigid hanging element, whose innate bordering capacity is further used to enclose and trap various natural forms, such as grass nests or phallic clay structures.

Rodin talked of the growth of his work being animated from within and radiating outward, and that a static beholder was unable to sense the dynamism of this growth. One hundred years later the same advice holds its truth. To gain a full and creative appreciation of these alternative and expanded exhibition spaces, to see the multiplicity of connections within Bakke’s room, we must include movement in our contemplative process.

*6 Conclusion: subjectivity-the central role of the observer*

The cold and austere forms of 1960’s American Minimalist sculpture, the alienating climax of the American modernist epoch, taught us a number of important aesthetic lessons. Amongst these was the fact that an active contemplation of the art object was, and still is, a requirement of subsequent aesthetic engagement. Faced with the detached and superficially boring sight of a Minimalist work it was the observer who was throw into the centre of the aesthetic process. A Donald Judd sculpture gave the viewer very little, rather than the work required that the viewer very little, rather the work required that the viewer exercised his/her contemplative powers to the maximum. Today, with Calvino’s visual media clouds even more intrusive and distracting, the requirements upon the viewer as centre of the aesthetic process are even more demanding. A fulfilling aesthetic experience in an extended exhibition space takes time, it takes movement, and it requires that the beholder study and produce the connections required by the installation’s elements. Bakke’s space presents a multiplicity of elements; a series of departures from the painted surface. Thus, the quadrangle evolves into disciplined cubic forms; order is then ventured over the potential tangle of dried grass within netting or hand. Each of these elements has a formal, sensual and metaphorical potential. It is the viewer’s subjectivity that is called into action, whilst the space itself remains a unified passive and peaceful interlude from today’s clouded horizon.

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1 Rosalind Krauss’ term, which she coined in the late seventies when attempting an analysis of the failures of modernism’s historic categories.

2 The notes of this is taken from Italo Calvino’s Charles Eliot Norton Lectures 85-86, *Six Memos for the next Millennium*, Lecture 3, p 57 Harvard Press 1998.

3 Whilst chewing the cud, the bovine is similarly lost to the world, seemingly in a contemplative trance.

4 Jean Francois Lyotard, *Reserves of Spatial events,* published in Art and Design Installation Art 1993.p53ff.

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