

The illusion of reality

We have invited Tarjei Bodin Larsen, James Brooks and Anders Ruhwald, three artists who work with a Minimalist approach, albeit with different materials. We asked them: what kinds of interaction arise at this juncture, where different aesthetic practices are challenged?

Monochrome painting - Tarjei Bodin Larsen

Tarjei Bodin Larsen (b. 1974 in Arendal, Norway) was educated at the Oslo Academy of Fine Art (1996-2001) and at Chelsea College of Art and Design (2003-04). It is the process itself that is important in Bodin Larsen's mechanical and monochrome paintings. He uses a specially devised machine consisting of a base with a track construction and a long nave. When the nave is drawn straight over a flat surface it creates an almost perfect machine pattern. Larsen has previously used Plexiglas, aluminium and industrial lacquer, which were combined with dark hues to create a shiny and impenetrable finish. His current working method requires utmost precision, as a single speck of paint in the wrong place will sabotage the tight pattern. This working method is both demanding and unpredictable. We can see references to action painting (without its tactile imprint), Pop Art and Minimalism in Bodin Larsen's approach. In relation to this mechanical aspect, the star of Pop Art, Andy Warhol, argued that the "ideal painting" was created by a machine. In an interview in 1985, Warhol stated: "I really think you could have a machine that paints all day long for you and do it really well, and you could do something else instead..."¹

Minimalism

Minimalism arose in the 1960s as a counter to the emotive approach of the Abstract Expressionist painters. The basic aim of Minimalism was to arrive a point where the painting did not refer to reality or to any kind of metaphor. We could say that it only refers to its own authenticity. Simplicity, strictness, repetition typify the specific, impersonal Minimalist object. Art historical references to Donald Judd (1928-1994) have been drawn from Bodin Larsen's paintings. In his *Untitled* series, Judd displayed a penchant for a cool industrial finish and geometric forms alluding to mechanical painting, which informed Judd's preference for Plexiglas and steel. His work was based on pure geometry and a formal structure, which allowed colour to dominate. As Judd commented: "It is best to consider everything as colour."²

Drawing - James Brooks

There is an overlap between the minimal language of Bodin Larsen and James Brooks's practice. Both artists are interested in monochrome painting and the interpretative potential of mechanical processes. James Brooks's multifaceted practice incorporates music, drawing and monochrome paintings - with the overall aim of challenging aesthetic practices. James Brooks (b. 1974 in Exeter, UK) graduated with a BA in Fine Art from the University of Plymouth in 1996 and completed an MA, specialising in drawing, at Chelsea College of Art and Design in London in 2004. Within contemporary art, drawing is no longer considered a preliminary study for a final work of art, but has found its own position within the art field. In our digital

¹ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Three Conversations in 1985: Claes Oldenburg, Andy Warhol, Robert Morris", *October*, Vol. 70, *The Duchamp Effect* (Autumn, 1994), pp. 44-45

² Donald Judd, quoted on www.colourjournal.org

image culture, the “hands on” approach of drawing can be seen as a liberating.³ Brooks’s work employs references to contemporary popular culture and gives a stylised and computerised impression. The illusion of an impersonal or mechanical visual expression alludes to the Pop artists, in particular to Warhol’s mechanical silkscreen prints (which, unlike Brooks’ work, sought to erase any traces of personality) and to Roy Lichtenstein, who wanted his paintings to look programmed so that his “hand” was invisible.

A review of Brooks’s solo exhibition at the Monika Bobinska Gallery on Cambridge Heath Road in London stated: “Drawing, in its broadest sense, forms the backbone to Brooks practise.”⁴ Popular culture references from classic films, iconic LP covers of bands such as the Beatles, Morse code and scenographic approaches all feature in Brooks’s work. His project aims to translate, or insert new meanings into, existing signs so as to transform recognisable references into a new and more humanistic expression. This approach can be seen as analogous to recent art trends exploring the loss of individuality that accompanies the democratising effect of the Internet.

“‘The monotonization of the world’, as the writer Stefan Zweig described it, was accompanied by a lack of exposure to and cultivation of unique and highly personal creative work. Yet, while the fictionalized world of cyberspace flourished and popular media resigned itself to the slickness of MTV, a growing number of artists and designers began to rebel against the ubiquity and singularity of mass production and technology.”⁵

James Brooks is inspired by post-modern thinkers such as Kittler and Lyotard, which is reflected in his stated aim for the project: “the work attempts to analyse the loss of the (analogue) individual, and calls into question our apparent drift towards standardisation.”⁶

Form and function - Anders Ruhwald

Anders Ruhwald’s black and sexy tableau⁷ challenges the notion of form and function. He describes his project as being set: “among utilitarian objects at a conceptual level without committing to them practically.” Anders Ruhwald (b. 1974 in Randers, Denmark) is an artist who defines himself as someone who gives form to useful things. Ruhwald investigates and reconstructs functional everyday objects like furniture or interiors. In this way, he challenges our understanding of the concept of form and function. He belongs to a new generation of ceramicists who have gained much international attention and acclaim. He was educated at the Glass and Ceramic School on Bornholm and at the Royal College of Art in London. Ruhwald works with clay in combination with other materials reworking commonplace objects, albeit non-functional ones without a “pure” aesthetic status. In 2001, Ruhwald moved from functional ceramics to exploring the potential of functional form as a thematic. Ruhwald describes himself as “an artist who came from a studio tradition that generates carefully laboured utilitarian objects.”

³ “The idea for *By Hand* came from noticing that a growing number of contemporary artists are producing work with their hands, using methods and materials traditionally associated with craft.” From *By Hand, the use of craft in contemporary art*, Shu Hung and Joseph Magliaro (Princeton Architectural Press, 2007)

⁴ www.lounge-gallery.com

⁵ *By Hand, the use of craft in contemporary art*, Shu Hung and Joseph Magliaro (Princeton Architectural Press, 2007)

⁶ www.lounge-gallery.com

⁷ A *tableau* is the primary object or the content that dictates the word’s semantic *gehalt* or content. *Tableau* also has connotations to “disposition” and “positioning” referring to a sense of order or arrangement.

Ruhwald's work alludes to the readymade and to the avant-garde artist Marcel Duchamp, who was a pioneer within Conceptual Art. There are almost as many definitions of Conceptual Art as there are conceptual artists, but Sol LeWitt provided a succinct description when he said: "in conceptual art the idea or the concept is the most important aspect of the work.... The idea becomes the machine that makes the art."⁸ Ruhwald's conceptually based practice epitomises a tension between object/thing, art/life, and autonomy/avant-garde. His sculptures are not autonomous and static, but mobile, inviting dialogue.

"His work is thus conceptual, yet Anders Ruhwald is very firm about his status as a ceramist. 'I have never worked in any other material, but clay. I have never painted, never drawn – I am a ceramist. The history and the context of ceramics are my main frame of reference. Other things may influence me, but the clay continues to be my focal point.'"⁹

Anders Ruhwald is interested in perception, how people receive and proceed to decode their impressions of objects. He is concerned with objects/*tableaux* that contain references to everyday furniture or interiors; objects we see that are both familiar and unknown.

"Ceci n'est pas une pipe" and perception

Without making direct comparisons, it is interesting to draw on the 1926 work *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (*This is not a pipe*) by renowned Belgian, surrealist artist René Magritte in relation to the role of perception in Anders Ruhwald's work. Magritte (1889-1967) painted everyday objects so detailed that they appeared almost real. In the work in question, the text "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" is written below a painting of a pipe generating a visual paradox that, at the time, broke with established modes of reading and perceiving. The traditional interpretation of the painting is that one should not conflate image and reality. For Plato, for example, the work of art was seen as an inferior copy of an idea.¹⁰ Today, we can see that Magritte expelled the notion that art has anything to do with reality. Ruhwald's objects can be seen as complex associations to our material world (for example IKEA) in the form of negation, as they simultaneously refuse to be engulfed by the conformist and conventional connotations of a traditional "IKEA-society".

What you see is what you see

Minimalism plays a significant role in *The Illusion of Reality* exhibition. The installations, drawings and paintings presented by these three artists challenge conventional notions of perception. In relation to the content of the work, what the painter Frank Stella said about his own Minimalist style in the 1964 is fitting: "what you see is what you see."¹¹

⁸ Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art", *Artforum* (June, 1967)

⁹ Quoted on www.ruhwald.net

¹⁰ An example Plato gives of simulacra are Greek columns, which are curved in order to give the impression of being straight. This means that they are beautiful, but false, because their beauty does not stem from conforming to a true original. Their beauty is the product of the fact that the form takes into consideration the perspective of the viewer and uses it to create an impression of resemblance (Michel Foucault, quoted in *Artes*, no. 4, Pax Forlag AS, 2001, translated for this text)

¹¹ Quoted on the SFMOMA website at www.sfmoma.org/exhibitions/160