

PAINTING AS A MODEL
In Conversation with Christiane Rekaide

CHRISTIANE REKAIDE: *Bart Van der Heide writes in the exhibition brochure for your show Endnote, pink (Munich Kunstverein, 2010) that painterly perceptions are at the core of your installations: they present an exceedingly clear, structured collection of colours, materials and compositions. Your way of working comes from your perception as well as your thinking on painting and the history of painting. Do you see yourself as a kind of painter?*

IAN KIAER: I'm not sure it is so helpful to think about identity in this way, or necessary to define myself in terms of a medium or approach. Yet, if I think about how my work has developed, and how I understand my relationship to other working practices, it has been through painting. In that sense, I'm more interested in painting as a body of knowledge, with its different concerns and histories, than as a medium, though obviously it is the medium that holds these differences together.

CR: *One of your earlier works, still made at college, was the installation Russian Project/ Irina (2000). It was dedicated to the Russian poet Irina Ratushinskaya. It consists of two watercolours – one of which is a portrait of the poet, a small piece of furniture combined with two monochrome canvasses, and finally, a cardboard model of a studio, similar to the one you had during your studies. You mentioned this work at the beginning of your talk at the Courtauld Institute – and it was also the first thing you saw when entering your exhibition at the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Turin (2009). Does this work hold a key position in your deliberations on painting and models?*

IK: A key perhaps because it is an early work that began to address some of the concerns and problems I had in thinking about making work. I was interested in the limit of an artwork to any longer convey a sustained narrative or set of ideas. I had been reading Ratushinskaya's poetry and thinking about her as a historical figure and feeling unable to convey anything of what I felt or thought about her in my work. In that sense, this work was about the work's limit, or rather, saying as much as my limit would allow before the work seemed to fall apart or seem unconvincing. I was left with a few motifs, a portrait of Irina, some monochromes, a modular structure and a model of my studio. It was a record of things I had made while thinking of Irina, that could fit together and be a work, while also being a testament to the work's failure to present a coherent narrative.

CR: *Your installations often have the character of models. A model is not the original, it is fragmentary and, especially in the case of architecture, it mostly represents something larger. What is your interest in models?*

IK: There are different kinds of models, some are representational descriptions of things that already exist in the world, but there are also experimental and projective/futural models. In that sense, a model can be an original, if it is the first material manifestation of an idea. I suppose I'm interested in their capacity to work between more clearly defined disciplines like architecture, painting, sculpture, and many types of design. They avoid the weight and demands of a particular tradition, not committing to a definitive result, remaining restless and incomplete. There is always a suggestion that there is an alternative, another one to come. They also tend to be quite specific, attending to some part of a larger whole, and so claim the status of a fragment, being autonomous on one hand, and open to a wider body of work on the other.

CR: *You realised several groups of works about the ideas and lives of great visionaries. In addition to the Bruegel project (1999–2008) there is also the Erdrindenbau project (2006) or the Grey Cloth project (2005), where you reflect upon the ideas of the German poet Paul Scheerbart. Scheerbart shared the vision of a future glass architecture with his friend, the architect Bruno Taut, and describes it both in his book Glasarchitektur and in his science fiction novel Das graue Tuch und zehn Prozent Weiss. The open, light and fragmentary character of your work seems, at first sight, to contradict the virtuosity of large visions and utopias. But perhaps those found, everyday materials, objects, and drawings are the most pertinent way to think about visions? Especially as you mostly talk about past utopias – those that we know have failed or were never realised. Why? What is it that interests you in these visionaries?*

IK: I wouldn't necessarily group them together under the banner of visionaries. They are so distinct and their differences are perhaps more significant than what they share. There is the relationship that you mentioned between Scheerbart and Taut, and one project naturally developed from the other. Though Scheerbart's voice is very different in tone to Taut, there is a tight irony in the novel *The Grey Cloth*, a self-awareness and a form of mockery that seems to be entirely absent in Taut's project, which seems more influenced by an esoteric mysticism. My interest in Bruegel has its roots in a particular kind of painting that is so expansive and no longer attainable. It seems to be a moment when knowledge of the new world was opening up – the printing press, navigation, maps, the religious and intellectual freedom of humanism – and painting seemed to be a technique that was appropriate for holding and representing this new awareness. Bruegel had an almost cinematic ability to hold together immense detail and the panoramic movement of the eye. His was a pre-Romantic moment, before fragmentation. Thomas Bernhard, in *Old Masters*, talks about our abhorrence now of any notion of the 'whole' or totality (and for political reasons this is very much preferable), but Bruegel represents a moment when it was still possible.

CR: *What does the difference in size and importance mean to you/for your work?*

IK: Scale, even when 1:1, is always active in a model. It asks the viewer to move beyond what is literal, but this process is usually so rooted in convention that the effect is hardly noticeable. The model can introduce monumentality while remaining fragile, it speaks to power from a position of weakness and in that way has the potential for critique. It has a way of undermining the supposedly important, it works in the realm of the minor, so even when proposing notions of utopia, or historical significance, it does so with qualification, and more questions.

CR: *You use usually 'poor' (light and fragile) materials like cardboard, paper, plastic. Where do you find them? How/why do you choose and combine them?*

IK: Implied in the status of the model is a certain provisional quality that suggests the need for revision, and is necessarily impermanent. For that reason, certain materials seem more appropriate than others when using the gesture of the model. To what extent the model functions as a gesture, rather than merely as a pragmatic solution, may vary depending on the work. For instance, when I make an inflatable, the material is working both pragmatically but also as a gesture. In terms of finding/choosing materials, the question of what is to hand is again important. It is not always clear how to begin

a project or how to resolve it, there may be initial ideas, thematic interests but no obvious material solution. There is an element of opportunity, where a piece of packaging in the street or a particular coloured plastic suggests a form, or at least a quality, that can contribute to a work. Materials carry with them certain qualities of association, fashions and histories, bringing different materials together is a way of working with different registers of tone. It may be necessary to counter the stains or smudges of a found object with something mint.

CR: Nowadays we have the technical abilities to create perfect computer-generated 3D models, very close to reality. But you prefer the hand-made, glued and cut-out models. Why? What makes the difference?

IK: It has something to do with the issue of production and thinking through making. In principle I like the idea of computer generated, very technical, synthetic models. Yet with technology comes the issue of distance. In painting, the question of the hand, to what extent it is present or removed in a work, often determines its tone. This can become over-coded – in late Titian, where traces of finger marks supposedly signify an artist at one with his material, or where Vermeer, with his use of an optical device, suggests a greater detachment. Yet such codes, even if the readings are exaggerated, can be interesting to work with. I heard an account of Rem Koolhaas, who continues to employ make-shift, to-hand models. He turned a previously abandoned design for a domestic house into an opera house. Whether ultimately true, the suggestion is that the idea came from turning this piece of styrofoam around in his hands, the relationship of hand/play/thought was very immediate and opened up a different way of thinking about the project. The implication of computer generation is a reduction of ambiguity and accident and an increase of precision and control which inevitably will effect how one thinks. Agamben speaks of the Greek distinction between poiesis and praxis. Poiesis is the space of thought before production, praxis is the implementation of the will. Technology in that sense is closely linked to praxis, possibly negating poiesis.

SPACE AND PERSPECTIVE

CR: *When looking at your works, I notice that the perspective or position from which one views your installations is important. British artist Paul McDevitt said in an interview: 'Ordinarily I associate looking at your work with being crouched down.'*¹ *And Christian Rattemeyer described your compositions in Parkett in 2007 as 'dramatic shifts in perspective, scale, and narrative.'*² *In your works, one can experience both the 'Close Up' and the view from afar – just as in the landscape or the model. They encompass an all-inclusive overview as much as the complete fragmentation of the experience. How do you place your installations in the exhibition space? How does the space influence the arrangements/the installation?*

IK: My intention isn't to present the work as landscape or a still life, in the sense of looking upon an uninterrupted pictorial field. There isn't a right perspective, or a correct position to look from. Photographing the work is problematic because immediately the issue of the frame puts too much emphasis on pictorial composition, which is not the case when one moves through the space. The placement of different models and motifs, their spatial relation and shifts of scale are all important, but so also are the different kinds of information each element holds. For instance, a piece of text demands an alternative reading from a representational model, which in turn speaks differently to a painting with marks. They have a relation but it is not simply pictorial – the shifts, interruptions, and varied languages resist such a reading. Certainly the exhibition space influences and adjusts the positioning of the work.

¹ 'Twenty Questions: Ian Kiaer and Sara MacKillop: A Project by Matthew Higgs', kunstaspekte.art/event/ian-kiaer-and-sara-mackillop-2008-03

² Christian Rattemeyer, 'Landscape and Model', *Parkett*, (Vol. 80, 2007).

CR: *At Kunstverein Munich you exclusively showed new works made for the space. With the positioning and installation of your works, objects and images, you managed to connect the oblong, consecutively constructed rooms of the Kunstverein, and keep them in suspense and equilibrium. You created invisible connections to the outside and between the individual rooms, from one end to the other. Did you develop the works in situ? How did you proceed?*

IK: I made a lot of the things in my studio, but I was trying to keep them as open as possible, to not close my options when I got to the space. Ultimately it was a question of roughly thinking about the room. But the larger work, the inflatable and the fragile aluminium rectangle for instance, I couldn't make in my studio, I had to realise them there. The Kunstverein was an opportunity to think how one walks through an exhibition. The galleries are designed in a very particular way, where you come up the steps, and are projected almost immediately into the main space. I wanted to work against the assumption that the main space should somehow be the most substantial, and spent much of my time concentrating on the smaller rooms at each end. In that way there was a contrast between the intimate experience of looking at works close up – that was also about a density of information, and the more spatial gesture of the inflatable and aluminium square.

CR: *When you develop your works in, for example, your studio, at which point do you decide that a piece is finished? When does a collection of things become a work that you show (and sell) – i.e. a white canvas, a black rectangle, and a circle made from wire? When is a work finished?*

IK: There is always a tension between what I want to include in a work and what the work ultimately allows me to hold. In that sense it is the work that tends to decide these things. Usually there tends to be much more a process of subtraction and editing after an initial play of forms and ideas. But this isn't so much a battle of form/content, as being conscious of how different elements hold different kinds of information, and being attentive to what is being said by groupings of things. Also how much a work might contain tends to be decided by the space that things are shown in; things that might work in the studio usually need to be adjusted in the space, either reduced or added to. This becomes more difficult when works are borrowed and represented. Contingency and flexibility are important principles, but that said, there is a moment when a work seems to settle and it makes no sense to keep fiddling.

CR: *From your exhibition in Turin I remember, for example, the inflatable, a sort of*

over-dimensional pillow, made from a white plastic bag with these funny Korean prints on it, and a small architectural model made out of a McDonald's fast-food box. These two works made me discover a very humorous, very 'pop', side of your work.

IK: Again, I think the question of tone is pertinent. Whether something is dead-pan or humorous, for instance, or has a quality of unease, is often determined not only by the image or figuration of an object, but also its materiality, as well as what it leaves unsaid. The work you mention relates to a project I was working on in Seoul, where each district had its own design of recycling bags. The idea of the banner as a form of expression is a contemporary phenomenon that has its roots in Chosun dynasty painting, where text and image held equal weight for the scholar poets. It's a pop[y] work that can be seen as a remnant of a previous history, it's also something necessarily ridiculous, both aspirational and unstable.

Conversation continued in 2017*

COLOUR(S)

CR: I would like to ask you about the use of colour in your work: Mostly, one colour appears to be very precisely positioned in a work, somehow like a ‘note’ or a ‘footnote’, such as the yellow circle in Endnote Ledoux (2016). It seems also to me, that the colour works as a connection between the single pieces of a work group: In Endnote Ledoux, the drawing with the yellow circle, the yellow inflatable, and the tube are connected through their yellow colour. Also, in the exhibition that you showed at Galerie Barbara Wien in Berlin (2017), I remember that there were two paintings with two roughly painted green parts, and that was defining the colour of the exhibition. I also noted that you have a quite precise ‘colour palette’ – colours that you continue to use – from pink, to yellow, to green, and most often, subdued (or pastel) colours.

IK: I find the question of chromatic colour problematic and equally the notion of a palette with its implied mixing of hues. I don’t feel I have an interest in a formal approach that, for instance, attempts to adjust ‘a red to a blue,’ nor do I think of colour in a symbolic sense. I suppose I’m concerned with the underlying timbre that a colour might convey, or the possibility of prompting particular associations or memories, like a feeling of decay – that something is somehow ‘off’. It can be why I’m interested in bringing together colours that are almost but not quite the same, as if they are jointly working to pin down a feeling that is quite precise in its monochromatic insistence.

I also want to avoid thinking of colour separately from the material that carries it. For me a pink isn’t just a colour. A plastic, dirty, material pink that has had a previous life brings one thing to the work while, alternatively, a completely fresh, shiny, cosmetic pink can speak of something more glamorous. This relation of colour to substance determines how colour is manifest. A block of blue Styrofoam can suggest something of nature, like sky or water, while also remaining resolutely synthetic.

ONGOING PROJECTS, 'endnotes'

CR: *Your recent exhibitions concentrated mostly on your ongoing research of Friedrich Kiesler's and Moshe Safdie's architectural projects. I think the first time you showed works relating to Kiesler's utopic project, Tooth House, was at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds (2014). It seems typical for your way of working that you follow a subject over years. What is important/interesting for you in these long-term projects? How do you divide/balance your research and the development of an artwork? The studio work and the research work, do they exist in parallel? Are there phases of reading, phases of working in the studio?*

IK: It is difficult to identify quite what the relation of research to making is. Most likely it's never the same. I don't follow a programmatic method; an approach that is controlled or somehow repeatable. I have already spoken about the question of the will in relation to the Greek notion of praxis. If the relationship between research and making, intention and solution, is too direct, then the work easily becomes over-determined. Rather, I read and think about the people or projects I'm interested in and, while doing so, I make work in the studio without necessarily applying too consciously what I've learnt. This might explain why I return to certain projects over a longer period, it's not so much that I have a pressing problem that I want to resolve, but simply that certain projects or propositions continue to provoke and prompt further work. In that way, I'm happy if there is a perceived gap between the project title and what is actually present, or if the connection isn't immediately obvious. Inevitably, there tends to be intense periods in the studio, and then times of less activity, more reading and looking, but this varies.

CR: *For the exhibition at Galerie Barbara Wien in Berlin you combined Kiesler's ideas with the projects of the Canadian-Israeli architect Moshe Safdie. What is interesting for you in the approach of these two architects?*

IK: I had made work on both architects in previous years and I wanted to think further about their different critical responses to what they perceived loosely as the modernist canon. With Safdie, this is exemplified by his critique of Johnson's high-rise minimalist solutions, and his provision of alternative, modular, hive-like structures that came from his childhood observation of bees.

Kiesler, having originally designed his *Space City* with rationalist horizontal and vertical planes, gradually moved towards Surrealism and a more biomorphic relation to form. His manuscript entitled *Magic Architecture* is filled with scrapbook illustrations of things like termite mounds presented alongside Roman ruins. I suppose I was interested in their shared interest with non-human solutions to building, and the visionary quality that this produced in their work.

CR: *Can you say what the starting point of the Tooth House project was? When and why did you start working on this never-realised project that Kiesler proposed in 1940? Kiesler's Tooth House shows the idea of a building in the form of a tooth, that unites the spaces for living, working, and leisure, and that was integrated totally into its environment. It is modelled on a tooth – that part of the body that grows twice and is a constant reminder of our primordial past.*

IK: I came across this project when preparing for my show at the Henry Moore Institute. I visited the Frederik Kiesler Foundation in Vienna with Lisa Le Feuvre and it was then I first became aware of how it fitted within his largely unpublished *Magic Architecture* volume. The Tooth House was a series of notional drawings of, as you say, a tooth. There was something about the idea of a dwelling, a cavity, that seemed to go back to a Bosch-like conception of how things get improvised, adapted and inhabited, which is both imaginary and very practical. Enamel is the hardest material we have in our bodies, why not turn to it for shelter? There is this sense of the centre once holding a nerve and soft tissue, as well as the idea of a Lilliputian reduction of scale to make it possible. Teeth are often used in fetish and magic objects and it seemed to have so many associations. Perhaps most of all, I felt the project stood for a non-academic, non-rational, more intuitive approach to form and architecture. It became a kind of figural image to think and make through, allowing me to bring back certain works that I hadn't seen for a while, and develop new work in response.

CR: *Often you use the addition Endnote, in your work titles. When does it appear/when do you use it? And when do you decide that a theme/project is closed?*

IK: I'm interested in the written fragment as a philosophical form. I first became conscious of it in the way the Jena Romantics set out their *Athenaeum Fragments*, which are beautifully composed, autonomous texts, that are also each relational to neighbouring propositions organised on the page. It's the moment where poetry and philosophy meet, with Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, all making use of the form in very different ways.

Benjamin, perhaps more than any other, pushed this kind of fragmentary writing to an extreme in his work on the arcades, his project developing into an immense collection of observations structured as footnotes. As a project, it presents an attempt at a new kind of historical method that resists advocating a particular theory of history, and instead looks closely at the material margins to reveal moments of significance. In that sense, I feel the endnote is still an appropriate way of approaching things, particularly if what I am looking at represents some kind of revision of material which has already received extensive attention. It might reflect something of the anxiety of being an artist at present, where any claim to a significant contribution tends to come across as unconvincing. The endnote in that sense is less about finishing something as presenting an invitation to look again, to go back into the margins in a way that keeps the question alive. Rather than closing a project it is a gesture towards openness.

CR: *Will there be any new works related to Tooth House at the Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris?*

IK: The show in Paris will most likely comprise of works from two projects one of which will come from *Endnote, tooth*. There is a sense of this body of work beginning to wind down, at least for now. I want to think about it in relation to a brutalist panoramic restaurant I came across in Lisbon, designed by Chaves da Costa in 1968 for the Estade Novo. In its present state it's a ruin, full of memories of the dictatorship, yet there is uncertainty in relation to how it should now be developed, whether as a monument or for some utilitarian purpose. At present it is impotent, a powerless structure used for parkour and graffiti, with an extraordinary view of the city.

The first part of this conversation was originally published in 2013 in *The Clever Object*.³
The conversation was later continued in 2017.*

³ Matthew C. Hunter and Francesco Lucchini (Eds.), *The Clever Object*, (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2013), p.186-197.