

Ways of the Compass and Ruler. Lines through the drawing practice of Jytte Høy

By Jacob Lillemose

In the film *De Fem Benspænd* (2004) Jørgen Leth remakes his 1967 film *Det Perfekte Menneske* in five different versions played out according to rules defined by Lars von Trier. When Leth fails to comply with a set of rules von Trier finds it necessary to punish him in the worst imaginable way: by ordering him to do a remake with no rules at all, to which Leth replies "That's evil, it can't be done." In 1969 George Perec decides to write the entire novel *La Disparition* without using the letter e - the commonest vowel in the French language. Three years later he reverses this method by writing another novel *Les Revenentes* using e as the only vowel.

It makes sense to begin a text on the drawing practice of Jytte Høy with these references to the use of rules in the production of art because she takes her cues from a number of practical and conceptual choices, which constitute formal limitations while generating a multitude of possibilities that almost allow the drawings to draw themselves. Deciding to exclusively draw lines exactly one centimetre wide or to let the reach of her hand determine the coloration, this is a practice that investigates and expands precisely defined fields and spaces within the framework of the paper. Acknowledging that unconditional freedom as a principle for the production of art is not only illusory, but aesthetically uninteresting because it lacks resistance and orientation, her drawings also play their creative energy out against the order of formal structures, giving form to the tension that arises in their meeting. One example of such formal structure are the Islamic ornamental patterns which provide the starting point for a series of drawings entitled *Letting a hundred flowers blossom* (2007-). Høy's approach is simple: She selects a pattern and uses the essence of its form as a template for a principally infinite number of variations. This method is experimental in the actual sense of the word. Høy is testing the potential of the pattern through specific examples with no ultimate goal by varying the structure and colour combinations from simple - almost minimalist - patterns to compact complex ones. The relationship between the drawings and the pattern is reminiscent of chess, where an entire match may be played out without exhausting the possibilities of the game. Høy describes the method as a machine running of its own accord. Once she has selected a pattern and puts pencil, compass and ruler to paper, an autopoietic process takes over in which each variation generates the next to form a flow. There is no hierarchy or development between the individual drawings. They all express the same continued variation and are as such the same because of their differences rather than in spite of them.

The drawings function in their own right: As stylized doodles and figures of dynamic motion. Sometimes the patterns spin like colourful propellers, while at other times they

seem more static - like the details of a rug. Yet although they contain such imagerial associations they signify only their own abstract combination of form and colour, lines and fields and the way they set eye and mind in motion to no particular end. They call for a kind of sensual reflection, a visually philosophical sensibility to that which is present on the paper.

Similar reflections are spurred by a series of untitled drawings from 2009 combining patterns and photographs. Here the patterns are self-invented and frequently somewhat coarser, while the photographs are selected from among Høy's many snapshots of everything from industrial landscapes and residential neighbourhoods to street life, panoramas and details, captured on her ever-attentive way around the world. All the drawings feature patterns surrounding the photos, which are always positioned in the middle of the paper. In some cases they appear to be caricatures of elements in the photos themselves, but the important thing is the challenge they present to the notion of photographs as indexical signs - physical imprints - of a time and place beyond themselves. The patterns block out this referentiality. They retain the focus of the photographs on the paper: focusing mind and vision like mandalas. Yet they are not targeting spiritual wisdom or psychological insight. Rather they attempt to relate to the world without interpretation in order to discover a new openness towards its various forms of appearance.

In the series *something closer than small* (1998-) Jytte Høy inverts this approach by developing partial elements from photographs and various magazine cuttings - usually structures or patterns - into drawn figures. The cables of a cable car are perspectively extended to meet the edge of the paper, a cowboy's lasso at his belt is reproduced as a messy collection of concentric circles and the facade of a skyscraper is reflected in the pattern of squared paper. In some cases she uses several partial elements as models for the drawn ones, while other works feature several copies of the same photograph on an single sheet of paper to let the drawn elements from one photograph cross over, interweave and create patterns with those of another. They are conscious caricatures, consistently carried out. Photographic space is simplified and exaggerated as it is expanded into drawings. Each photograph frames a specific section of the physical world, which is projected into the principally limitless space of abstraction. In this way the drawings manage to establish a close connection between existence and imagination which speculatively and humorously opens up a dualistic field to sensual and conceptual perception. Within this field that materializes on paper the world may be fixed and given, yet it has the potential to become something else - something that can neither be completed nor predetermined. The moment a connection is made between a photograph and a drawing, the possibilities are infinite. Whereas photographs are conditioned by the physical world, drawings are free to create worlds. The formal structuring of the world - constructed or casual - as witnessed by the photos is played out against the ability of fiction to transgress, connect, and create meanings across the boundaries of sense.

Jytte Høy spans a great range in her drawing practice through this duality between regulation and ambiguity. Yet in a sense the distance between the two is less than one might suppose since rules are almost always arbitrary. At least this is the case in that

most decisive structuring of humanity vis-à-vis the world that is language. Language is the "motif" in a fourth drawing type begun in 2009. Some of these drawings came into existence as an extension of the exhibition *Et Historisk Alfabet til dig* (2004) where she worked with the connections between different letters and phenomena in the world, such as Plan B, X-ray or C-major. In this context her drawings are manifested in sentences. Some of them are like rambling narratives based on a complex albeit logical system of her own invention, while others are poetic statements like the sentence "Think of something you really enjoy and something you really dislike. In your imagination let those two things touch." In both cases the objective is to experiment with the way in which language on paper - like drawings - can create phenomena and relations independently of the logic of the physical world - subject only to its own rules - rules without which language would make no sense. Wielding her pencil Jytte Høy creates a space for a curious, attentive and inventive relation to physical, mental and symbolic worlds and especially to the connections between them.