

A labyrinth of intersecting tracks

By Ann Lumbye Sørensen

Before the early 20th century, there was no doubt as to what visual artists were engaged in: they created drawings and graphic art, paintings and sculpture. This took place in studios, and the result of the exercise was often without a predetermined recipient. There was broad agreement as to how the concept of the work was to be defined, so there was a clearly determined framework.

Then, however, a whole series of avant-garde movements set to work and radically changed everything – in both a literal and metaphorical sense. Artistic personalities such as Marcel Duchamp in France and El Lissitzky in Russia undermined the unambiguity. As the father-figure of concept art, Duchamp launches the actual idea as the bearing, meaning-conveying element of the work of art. Lissitzky takes a different path in his clash with the autonomous easel-painting and the artist's position as the genius who solely and alone is capable of completing the work. He therefore invents his *prouns* – abstractions of geometrical shapes in few selected colours – with the underlying idea that anyone can continue working with them. With his *Proun-Room* (1923), made for an exhibition in Berlin, Lissitzky creates the first temporarily functioning work of art as an *installation*.

Jytte Høy's latest exhibitions have followed an idea-based main track that has as their point of departure these and other innovative figures – and therefore also unavoidable pioneers from the avant-garde. In stringent fashion, she devises a concrete issue that can gather up the strands to form a new exhibition project which – despite the openness of the details to many possibilities of interpretation – convinces by virtue of its overall coherence of form. The nature and extent of the exhibition venue is allowed to influence the design and mutual interaction of the works in such a way that the entire organisation has the feeling of a venue-determined installation. This also applies to the present exhibition *A Historical Alphabet for You* at ARKEN Museum of Modern Art, as it did for *tankens_museum* (2003), which consisted of three colour-sectioned scenarios, conceived for the upper gallery at Nikolaj Udstillingsbygning, Copenhagen¹. The last-mentioned was a large, complex exhibition that examined such varying topics as 'Lenin's Brain in Denmark' (grey area), 'The Structure of Peace' (green area) and 'The Lost and The Forgotten' (blue area) in an artistic analysis as a piece of 'pure research' to which not a small amount of irrationality – and humour! – was added in the transformation from concept to form. A form comprising various types of materials and structures, from drawings and photographs to sculptures and objects, depending on the nature of the statements. As a thought-provoking and sensory experiment, the exhibition constituted a subtle, very special offer of an artist's orientation in the world.

Systems and constructions widely differing in appearance and ranging from the ingenious to the intangible have commanded Jytte Høy's attention for some time. Her recurring question could be this: How does it all hang together – and why? She herself names *sculpture* as her artistic mode of expression when the question is to be visualised and put into perspective. But this is sculpture understood in so broad and expansive a way that in most instances it goes beyond a traditional classification of the genre, placing it in the extended field that since the 1960s can include almost any activity that involves visual-art treatment of a given material.

In its extension and labyrinthine layout, *A Historical Alphabet for You* is an installation-like space which the observer enters and moves around in. Selected from words and designations that contain an individual, meaning-conveying letter, Jytte Høy has created ten body-sized sculptures out of precisely these letters and placed them in two rows that receive the observer and point the way into the space, whilst also forming a boundary between the other areas of the museum and this special, temporary universe. It is a rigorously composed universe in the colours red, blue and yellow as well as black and white that concludes with two large constructions, made up of sculpturally composed partitions. On these, words and texts are mixed in a montage, with black & white serigraphs of images from high- and low-brow culture as well as historic events, such as the dropping of the A bomb and Winston Churchill's V sign. Diagonals, squares and rectangles give an overall impression of a renegotiation with Russian constructivism, the montage strategy indicating a fascination for sections of the early European avant-garde. But the connections are not unambiguous, nor are they carried out as a 'style' – we are dealing here more with an appropriated practice.

A very simplified, abstract painting with the title *Composition A* (1932) by the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian plays a special role in *A Historical Alphabet for You*. Its composition forms the underlying

¹ The exhibition was later shown at Esbjerg Kunstmuseum with the same scenarios, adapted to the rooms of the museum. See the exhibition catalogue *Jytte Høy tankens_museum*, Copenhagen 2003.

structure for the entire exhibition space, drawn as black lines on the floor, but also determines the positioning and colour of the partitions. And among the photo prints on display a large reproduction of a photograph of Charley Toorop's living room can be seen, with *Composition A* hanging on the wall. Mondrian justifies his preference for abstraction over naturalistic painting by stating that his aim was to be as clear and precise as possible: 'to express relationships and connections visually with the aid of contrasts between colour and line'². A number of factors are involved in Jytte Høy's choice of precisely this painting: the title works perfectly in his play on letters; the composition was highly suitable as guidelines for the composition of her alphabet; and finally – at a more fundamental and ideal level – the painting represents a visualisation of pure reality, a way or method of reducing the world to a formula. By allowing Mondrian's painting to be the bearing construction in *her* topical look at the world, Jytte Høy takes a step back in art history in order, from that point, to articulate the present. With *A Historical Alphabet for You*, Jytte Høy reveals that her working method can be compared to a certain extent with that of the allegorist, since such a person does not invent images but includes already existing ones, adding a different meaning to the now appropriated material³. Basically, allegory is anchored in death and the transitoriness of everything, which is why the fragmentary and incomplete gain the undivided attention of the allegorist in a salvage operation to rescue from inevitable disintegration and oblivion. Formerly, allegory was seen as most fully expressed in the ruin, which is why it is also interesting in this context to learn that in 2001 Jytte Høy created a series of photoengravings with the title *The modern ruin*⁴. If one looks at her work over a more extended period of time, it shows a recurring preoccupation with the fragment and constant renegotiations with ideas and images of earlier periods. *A Historical Alphabet for You* can entice one to indulge in a puzzle-inspired decoding attempt, one like that which classical allegory could inspire because of its juxtaposition of the literal and of metaphorical transcriptions, but the many paradoxes and intersecting tracks of the work probably furnish no definitive solution. The thoughtfulness of the artist is far too tongue-in-cheek for that.

² 'Dialogue on the New Plastic' (1919) in: *The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, Boston, 1986. (FIND ORIGINAL QUOTATION!)

³ Allegory as a highly interesting model for analysing postmodernist image formation is introduced by the American art historian Craig Owens with his article 'The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism' I & II (1980) in: *Craig Owens: Beyond Recognition; Representation, Power, and Culture*, Berkeley, 1992.

⁴ the series comprises six prints in limited edition of eight copies, one set of which is in the ARKEN collection.