

Henrik B. Andersen

“The Morphogenesis of Mass”

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“Henrik B. Andersen: Emerging Landscapes”

By **Mikkel Bogh**

We stand in the middle of a landscape, surrounded by rolling grass-clad hills. Not in front of it; it extends to all sides around us in smooth, sliding motion without interruption, a movement we follow while we ourselves are in motion, walking, driving, scanning it with our eyes. Where should we go? We decide, the landscape decides; we adapt to each other, find a way.

First picture: In front of us, to one side, is a small wooden shed close to a small peaked mound covered in short, dense grass. The shed and the hill belong together. Behind them the terrain expands, trees shoot up from a valley, behind which the ground rises up again, even more steeply in the background; perhaps it is the foot of a mountain, shrouded in early-morning fog. Power lines, scattered buildings and a road can be glimpsed between the trees. *Second picture:* The wooden shed is now on the edge of our field of vision, we have moved away and time has passed during our movement; from this point of view we perceive the curves of the landscape from a different perspective – same curves, same landscape, same cabin, but different.

Third picture: A narrow two-lane path cuts into the curved course of a slope, cutting across it; perhaps the wooden shed from before is behind us now, perhaps it is just around the corner, or perhaps a new event is about to open up in the landscape here, clusters of trees, steep declines or other soft curves with other small wooden buildings, each of which has found its place, embedded in and somehow fused with the terrain. The landscape has no centre, only extent. It has no culmination, only protrusions, transitions, surfaces and infinite variations, moved by morphogenetic forces over millions of years or in recent times – geological, human and meteorological forces. The landscape is not an image or a delimited piece of the physical world: it is the surfaces, edges and textures that we see and feel as we move through it. And it is also something we cannot see: that which is always on the way.

This series of photographs from the chilly alpine landscape have their origins in Henrik B. Andersen’s concrete, actual encounter with a spatial and temporal world to which we can all relate, even without having been there ourselves. It is a landscape that makes immediate sense to us because we have repeatedly orientated ourselves in areas that have unfolded around us, areas that we know how to read and understand, both physically and cognitively. But Henrik B. Andersen’s photographs are not just images of beautiful and tamed mountain regions occupying a position somewhere between cultivated land and wild nature. First and foremost, they testify to the artist’s interest in landscape understood as a formative principle, model and framework for our experience. They show the landscape as an always-preliminary and complex interplay of dynamic forces.

At the exhibition in the VARTAI Gallery, two pairs of sculptures are placed on low plinths in two rooms, the walls adorned by with landscape photographs on one side and large drawings done in elongated formats on the other side and on the end wall. The sculptures themselves form a sequence or series. Each object constitutes a complete, continuous whole, one which, like the alpine landscapes, has soft curves, depressions and curvatures, but also, in some places, rather more abrupt markings in the surfaces, the total effect characterised by a multidirectionality emphasised by their simultaneously elongated and rounded shapes. The reclining sculptural objects protrude into space and seem to point towards the next object in the series as if they were variations on the same infinite motion, with no prototype, no linear progression, but full of different speeds and possibilities for further development. At the same time, they describe a rotating motion about their own axes. All in all, these traits make them both rounded and open, unstable or, more accurately, multi-stable objects whose identity becomes a function of the interaction with the viewer and the surrounding space.

As abstract sculptural objects, they offer few references for us to navigate by. They do not resemble or remind us of objects from our world of tangible experience. The white, smooth surfaces, devoid of any breaks or discontinuities, reject most attempts to place them within a well-defined domain. However, one cannot completely avoid being reminded of something biological, perhaps of large models of cells or simple organisms. They might well be inspired by scientific images. But they also have a distinctly technological feel. On top of their abstract properties, which unite the static and the dynamic, the open and the rounded, we find such references to technical and organic realms alike, making it impossible to draw the line between the non-living and the living, the organic and the inorganic. If there is a certain aesthetic ‘vitalism’ to be found in Henrik B. Andersen's works, a conviction that all things living have independent properties that cannot be reduced to the sum of the components of a given organism, it surely takes the form of a belief in the living as a collective, emergent behaviour in complex nonlinear systems, as has been described in recent mathematical, neuroscientific and biological research.

In almost diagrammatic form, the large drawings demonstrate some of the same dynamic principles as the landscape photographs and objects. Despite their elongated, horizontal format that might invite us to read them as musical scores from left to right, it seems to me that it is perfectly possible to step in and ‘begin’ anywhere in them. They are fields rather than sequences or traces of developments and do not point towards a single, dominant direction. In principle, they unfold in all directions and on several levels at the same time. Not unlike an expansive landscape with wide vistas, rock formations, springs, valleys, plateaus, meadows and deserts. But whereas the primary perceptual modus of the extensive landscape is associated with the body’s movement through space, the drawings are inherently of a more abstract and cerebral nature, although they also possess a delicate material appeal.

One may well ask oneself why Henrik B. Andersen uses an elongated format rather than any of the many other possible formats for these drawings. I believe this choice to be underpinned by a number of interconnected reasons. His interest in landscape and in wide expanses plays a significant role; without specifically wanting to make images of scientific theories, knowledge and insights, he nevertheless bases his work with sculpture, drawing

and photography on imagery and models derived from research into non-linear systems. In doing so, he can achieve a different approach to morphogenesis, composition, spatiality and the perception of time than the one that has informed dominant positions in classical and modern sculpture. The horizontal format makes it clear that the drawing does not constitute a closed composition. It does not add up, it does not fall neatly into place as a harmonious and balanced system in which all parts obey the same underlying formal programme. On the contrary, the drawings – and the reclining sculptural objects, too – can make visible the idea of a mass, a substance that gives rise to the most diverse forms through a ceaseless movement. Now we see vortices rising like geysers above the horizon, now flickering, coalescing particle-like points or surfaces, now wave-like fans that appear to radiate out from the continuous horizon, the invisible zero point of the drawing around which these forms dance and multiply in soft curves and sudden jumps. The format and the progression of forms in the drawings more than suggest that the movement is, in principle, infinite, pointing to a vast potential for new events to occur in the material. They visualise series or sequences of ‘events’ in a substance caused by underlying forces of which we can only see the effects.

One senses that the drawings, objects and photographs in Henrik B. Andersen’s exhibition describe or observe the world – not an imagined fantasy world, but our world, the man-made and natural, physical world – so that it can no longer be understood as being composed of well-defined and fully finished individuals; they describe a world that does not consist of forms and organisms closed up around their own core of meaning, their own separate identities, but one which rather consists of matter in motion, of matter that creates folds in infinity, of fluid boundaries and of fields within which series of events and morphogenesis take place as a result of complex or chaotically interacting forces in matter. If the world is described in this way – not as an interaction between already created individuals with their own essence, but as forces and movements that affect each other and which are therefore fundamentally unstable and changeable – then a dynamic worldview emerges, one that cannot, in either social, political or scientific contexts, be reduced to (personal, national, cultural, physical) identities or to constant and fixed boundaries, but instead consists of dynamic relationships that take place and change over time.

It takes a good deal of imagination, richness of association, compositional ingenuity and a keen sense of the possibilities of a given medium and material to create new two- and three-dimensional images that capture ‘events’ and folds in the material the way we see here. But Henrik B. Andersen’s work does not express a personally experienced or subjective universe. The photographs do not show social events (although they could have done so, for there are also forces at play where people meet); they are devoid of people and chilly in more than one sense; the sculptural objects have a simultaneously mechanical/technological and organic/biological feel and very pointedly do not give off any signals suggestive of the gesture of subjective creation. However seductive they may seem, they also appear foreign to human communication in all their anonymity and indeterminacy. The drawings – precise, technical, and diagrammatic – do not reaffirm the idea of sensitive artistic freehand drawing, but rather bring to mind experimental architectural drawings, scientific models or advanced musical scores in alternative kinds of notation. But do these types of images not also share the trait of enabling us to think about and understand complex contexts with them, to create

something new with them – buildings, theories, music – and to see parts of the world which we might not otherwise have been able to see? Henrik B. Andersen's drawings are artistically reflected approaches to a world in which forms are incessantly formed, transformed and reformed in infinite variations. They show a world in which events replace events without any underlying plan, goal or programme, but which simultaneously surprise and make sense in the same way that a landscape we walk through for the first time can seem alien and fully understandable at the very same time.

With the work presented at this exhibition and at his two previous exhibitions in Copenhagen and Stavanger, Henrik B. Andersen inscribes himself in a tradition of artistic studies of the physical world which found its first expression in early Russian avant-garde art, and which has, since the 1960s, brought together a broader group of artists residing in New York. Artists such as Robert Smithson, Carl André, Bruce Nauman and Agnes Denes, but also architects such as John Hejduk and Daniel Liebeskind have, each in their own way, influenced this field with their interest in time, seriality, entropy, natural processes, formal dynamics, curves and complex spaces. Henrik B. Andersen brings his own preoccupation with scientific models and natural philosophical theories about the relations between the human and the non-human to bear on this broad field of study, creating images, spaces and experiences that show little resemblance to most current contemporary art.

Installed as a totality in the two rooms, but also individually, the works shown at Gallery VARTAI insist on the topicality of what might be termed an ecological concept of space and time. According to this view, landscape – be it natural landscapes, cityscapes, soundscapes or other extended ‘-scapes’ - can be seen as an expression of the fact that forms and events in our surrounding and ambient world are formed through complex and dynamic interactions greater than the individual event. The landscape we stand in and which surrounds us, stretching out in all directions and infinite within its own, never sharply defined boundaries, is not a fully finished, fully formed object that lies at our feet; it is not an image we have before us. Like those of us who move through the landscape, it is itself on its way, moving and becoming – in geological time, in humanly perceived and experienced time. But it can hardly be a surprise for us when it turns out that as we make our way through the landscape, we are ourselves one of the forces that change its shape. For we live in the world, walk in it, leave traces in it. Find and make roads in it. We are part of it. That realisation brings obligations.

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