

Theis Wendt

JPEG Praxis

I have mainly observed Asbjørn Skou's works on a screen. Watching the works as simple JPEG images may be a bad substitute for the actual experience of the work, but there are qualities found in the JPEG that corresponds with the content- and formal investigations of Skou's works.

A JPEG is a lossy, compressed sample of an image, and when you make a copy of a JPEG, the copy has more holes in it than the original, so each JPEG copy becomes increasingly degraded. When a JPEG is made, optically sensitive electronics on a chip are bombarded with photons, some of which are translated into visible information in pixels on a screen.

The image material gathered and shaping Asbjørn's collages shows modernist architecture, urban landscapes and collapsed structures – but cut out and replaced in attempts to unfold new meanings. The landscapes and scenarios in Asbjørn Skou's collages criticize the modernistic fundamental idea by showing dreamlike alternatives. Asbjørn Skou does not limit his praxis to the borders of his collages and the walls of his studio – he treats his work as a medium with the “potential of changing societal structures” - thus unfolding his oeuvre directly in life. In myriads of morphological attempts his works all relate to the same investigation, namely how relations of space, time, and image merges and repeals each other. Within this spectrum, his works relates to social, political, urban and historical structures, and either collapse or unfold these structures in new ways.

Skou treats the city (field), the studio (laboratory) and the gallery (display) equally – as one big surface. In his collages, city wanderings and public interventions, he share agendas with the surrealists and the Situationists and their attempts to re-mythologize life.

According to the surrealists, the modern society desperately tried to limit the irrational, while the surrealists strove to unfold it and thereby exposing the dark sides of the modern society. By showing the imagination, the mythological and the irrational - the surrealists aimed to dig a way out of the imprisoning modern.

Even though related to the surrealists' thinking and doing, Asbjørn Skou distances himself from them in many ways, for instance with his various image-accumulating processes. In his collage works realized through layers of black translucent prints; in which landscapes and modernist structures collapse on top of each other – the accumulated layers becomes so dense they almost transgresses into monochrome black surfaces. By doing so Skou provides a critique of modernism that breaks the reference point to surrealism, because they almost end up as modernist and minimal works of art in themselves. Then again, with a closer look at the works they are filthy and trashy. Leftovers and traces of rasterized dots and low-res pixel renderings form an aesthetic that you normally do not want present in an image. Asbjørn Skou on the other hand enhances these flaws through various printing methods and thereby re-evaluates the power relations of a normative aesthetic.

Taking Timothy Morton's notion from his book *Hyperobjects* into consideration - the City can be understood, as a photograph of it's past. When walking through the streets, you are actually walking through history. The dirt on the buildings is part of the buildings' form, which John Ruskin called the stain of time. Exactly like a hard-drive is a surface on which data is inscribed, so is the city a series of surfaces on which causality has been inscribed.

The idea of the city as a photograph reveals itself between Asbjørn Skou's public interventions and his work with images. Like in his re-evaluation of normative aesthetics found in his collages - similarities unfold through his interactions with the city; in which he points out the gutter, demolished buildings, deserted areas and other forms of in-betweenness - as sites with the potential to rearrange existing relations of power.

In some of Asbjørn Skou's works in the public space, images of doorways and holes are projected

onto concrete and stone. The projected images proportionally fit to the selected sites. This gives way for a poetic ambience: the image subdued by the site and the site enchanted by the image.

In other urban experiments – bricks from pavements or squares of dirt from demolished sites are relocated and displaced as if he was using the entire city as one gigantic image – transforming it pixel after pixel. His collage works becomes continuations of these site-specific works, where pictorial information is either compressed, overlapped or perforated, as if by stretching and excavating the visual information he might be able to penetrate the image of the city, the veneer of reason, (and) thus entering (into) another kind of urbanity.

In his book *Den Sidste Avantgarde* (The Last Avantgarde) Mikkel Bolt argues that the Avantgarde ended with the final breakup of the movement *Internationale Situationniste* in 1972. According to the Situationists it was no longer possible to create critical art, because art was consumed by the capitalistic society. In attempts to establish new critical potentialities, the Situationists confronted the art world with the critical concept of art works as situations realized directly in life - rather than object oriented art works displayed in art institutions. But as Capitalism needs to do, it expanded its capabilities of capital accumulation potentials – using critique as a fuel for innovation. One might ask: did the Situationists lead the way to the financial strategy: the experience economy?

Maybe the Avantgarde did suffer its final blow with the ending of the *Internationale Situationniste*, but tints of avantgardistic appearances shows itself within recent years of technological developments relating to the Internet and the screen technology. The combination of both (the acceleration of speed and omnipresent accessibility) collapses virtual spatialities onto former phenomenological approaches regarding space and materiality. One might argue that the avantgardistic potential is exactly what the Internet offers – a way around the art institution, a way around the market etc. – a sort of post-institutional era perhaps. Yet again, it seems that the factory simultaneously expanded its spatial and material limitations infinitely.

“(…) changes of perception are intertwined with the technological architecture surrounding the perceptive organism. (...) Human behavior tends more and more to resemble the behavior of a swarm. The swarm may be similar to a group of people who run toward a train station in order to catch the last train before it’s too late. But a crowd is more aleatory and unpredictable than a swarm; the components of a swarm are not conscious, or are not fully conscious that their behaviors are driven by inbuilt automatism.”¹

Supposedly we can all agree that the image documentation of an artwork has never been more powerful than it is today. We are all simultaneously looking in the same virtual abyss-like art catalogue. It is a catalogue overloaded with Photoshop manipulated installation views, in which exhibition spaces have been retouched to a point as if it resembled an image of a fashion model. These super slick images of art works in super white galleries are being uploaded globally in vast numbers and float in the circuits of the social brain. Interesting potentialities appears when regarding the oeuvre of Asbjørn Skou, in the context of the surface of the virtual industry of contemporary art representation.

Workers of contemporary art are forced to acknowledge tendencies and trends distributed online - they shape an invisible Death Star² that either drags you in or keeps you out. Asbjørn Skou still hovers in the tractor beam – responding to the tendencies by not cooperating. It seems as if he is digging a timeless tunnel perforating our post future era. His continuous production of grimy timeless black and white image bombardment is simultaneously pointing backward and forward. Stepping mentally inside the oeuvre of Asbjørn Skou is like having a panic attack while being trapped in a maze, not knowing what direction to go – therefore spinning around one self until drilling downwards.

Like the rest of us, Asbjørn Skou (a member of the swarm) finds himself unwillingly paralyzed by virtuality, which shape and homogenize our behavioral patterns. But instead of reflecting the

¹ Franco “BIFO” Berardi. After The Future. Page 56. 2011. AK Press Edinburgh, Oakland, Baltimore)

² A Death Star is a fictional space station and superweapon appearing in the Star Wars science-fiction franchise, by George Lucas

structure of the hive, he tries to dig a way out of it.

No matter what morphological appearance a work from Asbjørn Skou is taking and regardless of the virtual or physical way you experience it in, it will always show perforated versions of our time, space and history – exactly like JPEGs show perforated versions of images.