

Inverted Interview # 3

Andrea Büttner and Lars Bang Larsen, Café am Dom, Frankfurt, 08.06.2008

(From a series of interviews, 2006 - ongoing)

Andrea Büttner: Maybe we start with the work you just have in a show in Copenhagen?¹
Maybe you can tell me about that?

Lars Bang Larsen: Ok, yes... apart from the brown walls I decided not to do anything with colour. So my woodcuts were black and white. So it was in way a very strict space. In a visual sense a very strict space. There was also audio recording of me reading a text by Dieter Roth from the Venice Biennial in ... I forgot now when it was, I think early 70s.

AB: 82.

LBL: 82. That's right. Thank you (laughter). It's good to have an art historian with you for these things (laughter). So all in all it was an experiment but I'm quite happy with it. I think it made for a kind of carousel of contemplation, which was a nice effect (laughs). Don't you agree?

AB: Ja, no, I liked it (laughs). I liked it. Maybe you could say a bit more about the brown space. I've seen it in several of your exhibitions now, it's a reoccurring motif, and also, maybe we could speak about medium a bit?

LBL: Yeah, hm, the brown colour is ... apart from the Copenhagen show I've done the brown walls for example in a show I did ... oh my God, where was it now ...in Karlsruhe.

AB: Ja.

LBL: And also at the Royal College of Art in London I think it was where I also painted the walls brown and called it a shit space and basically I painted the walls brown as high as my arm can reach and, you know, the reference to shit in the Royal College makes it very explicit ...you know, the whole abjectness of the endeavour of course, shame, if we are going to talk about that as well, that is also an abject feeling. Or can be. So, medium...in terms of medium...Yeah, I guess my use of woodcuts is kind of conspicuous because it's an unusual medium in the context of contemporary art.

¹ *The Soft Shields of Pleasure*, Den Frie Udstillingsbygning, Copenhagen, May-June 2008, curator: Søren Andreasen.

AB: Not any more though. I mean, if you think of Gert and Uwe Tobias. I think Tracey Emin started to do woodcuts recently. Tal R has these woodcuts. I mean, it's in a way a fashionable technique, don't you think?

LBL: Yeah, I think many started working with it from a point of view of an almost sub-cultural understanding of woodcuts which is a paradox in itself – namely that it is uncool. And of course it can be used to that effect. But I would say that some of the examples you mentioned, they are only effects. I think in a very symptomatic term in what the American management thinker Joseph Pine called the 'experience economy' is that he talks about 'authenticity effects' and he says that in the experience economy it's all about selling authenticity.

AB: Yes.

LBL: And since the commodity is the experience of the beholder it's about creating authenticity effects in the mind of the beholder. And of course such disregarded media as woodcut, which has this resonance of post war humanism – that can also be used to that effect. [...] If we talk about woodcut as a symptom of something contemporary we can talk about it in relation to folk of course and to metaphysics, because if anything, our time *is* post secular, I would argue. And I think it's the philosopher Kumar Ashwani who said that folklore is a spiritual adventure. So maybe that's another reason for woodcutting popping up now, as a folkloristic medium that touches upon the metaphysical and the individual (laughs). And of course that is something I try to make explicit and to work through consciously in my work because it's such a tricky intersection in our culture, such a tricky problem in contemporary culture. And also it's important – when you are working with woodcutting – I'm trying to say that it is actually a very tricky medium. It's not as simple and naïve and straightforward, as expressionist as it may seem. Because you take out a lot of history when you do this. That's also important to mention. It has this almost ethnographic quality of a relic from a vanished civilisation (laughs) when you work with versions of 50s woodcut.

AB: You were mentioning 'effects of authenticity' – maybe we can start to speak about shame a bit? That's a twofold question I have there: How your interest in shame is related to what you just explained about your concerns regarding medium – How this is connected? And how you see this concern with shame in relation to the contemporary moment – when you speak about individuality, metaphysics, authenticity – after the 90s maybe?!

LBL: Oh, that's a big one! To start with the intersection between subjectivity and culture and shame as a sort of interface for that: I think it's the trick of shame to make you think that it's

about individuality or the personal, because it's the individual who gets red cheeks and feels ashamed. It's sort of what indicates our desire and therefore it's shameful to *us* but I think shame has to be a cultural question because basically it's about the ability to represent, I would argue. Because to be shameful, is to be inexplicable to oneself; or to lack a covering explanation to oneself. I think you have this in Latin – you have this etymology that goes back to genitals and all that – speaking of shit and similar matters.

AB: Quite a dense area there – down there. (laughter)

LBL: Ja, it's a rich vein; and you know, if those are your connotations then you can see how shame is about lacking a literally covering explanation for oneself. But if you lack an explanation for yourself then it is a cultural question. It is necessarily cultural. Perhaps you can put it in this way: the uncultured individual is the shameless individual.

AB: Can I just ask one question in relation to criticism now: if we say art criticism is the culture of explanation, is it about making explicit and the same time covering up then?

LBL: Ja, but making explicit and covering up could arguably work against each other. There are artist colleagues of mine saying: "I don't want my art explained." "I don't want it explained to death." There could be the shamelessness of criticism or the vulgarity of criticism.

AB: But there's also shame-avoidance that criticism can bring to an artist? You are in the realm of culture then again, of language.

LBL: Yeah, definitely. But if we are talking about shame and culture then we can also talk about it in relation to politics of representation. Like gay subcultures...that song by the Pet Shop Boys called *Shame*, the old hit from the 80s, "Everything I've ever done, everything I'll ever be..."

AB: ... "it's a sin."

LBL: ... "it's a shame" – ah... it's a sin!

AB: It's a sin...

LBL: Oh, that's embarrassing. I thought I had a good example there (laughter). Well, but anyway (laughs), yeah, that's a bit off the mark then. But anyway, in relation to politics, you could also see it in relation to contemporary populisms. Who is able to represent the nation? It's definitely not you, you Muslim immigrant. And there you have populism as political pornography. That is again shameless, also because it's exceedingly hypocritical, because it

claims about German culture, Danish culture, and the protection of those cultures but effectively it doesn't give a shit about culture, in the bourgeois sense of the word more than in any other sense.

AB: But when I see a show of yours, I see the brown walls, I hear a reading piece, I see screen prints and woodcuts, I see *Little Works*, but I don't necessarily think of shame actually.² Or is it necessary that we don't see it, actually, that it deals with shame? I don't know... Or do you see that there is a visible relationship?

LBL: Oh, I would argue yes! (laughs) Now that the art historian wants, you know, the corpse. I would argue both in terms of visuality and in terms of audience response as well, which again comes down to emotion and the way it interacts with culture and upbringing. I give an example: When I had my exhibition in Karlsruhe I had some very strong audience responses which surprised me but definitely also the curator who had never experienced such strong audience response before.³ People came up, members of the Kunstverein came up to her and said that they were deeply disappointed and quite angry that the Kunstverein started showing religious art because to them that's not part of the project of a Kunstverein. They saw it as a major throwback to a post-war Germany. So they saw it as deeply reactionary.

AB: Yes.

LBL: And to me that makes it clear...I'm not sure how I feel about it; maybe I feel very shameful about it, and not only in a performative way in relation to my project I tell you; but I think that makes it apparent that there is an identification there in terms of medium and motif. And I would say in this case, in this example I just gave it's a wrong identification – and definitely to a, well, cultured audience as the Mitglieder of a German Kunstverein usually are. To me they are sort of – maybe I'm being too patriotic here – they are a world-class audience. They know what they are looking at. And I think you can also see in my works, in my displays, that there is a conceptual use of these media, of woodcutting and brown walls – conceptual use in the sense that Mike Kelley defines Conceptual Art of the 60s as 'pathetic visuality' by which he meant, you know, the conceptualists' use of, you know, the poor look of the academic text book and the bureaucratic formula, etc. You know, all this what definitely does not have the look of art. And I think that's actually a better definition of Conceptual Art than Benjamin Buchloh's 'Aesthetics of Administration' because it sort of makes conceptualism a more serious matter than it was for many 60s conceptualists. I think

² Andrea Büttner, *Little Works*, 2007, video, 10:45 min. Cf. the DVD in the appendix.

³ Andrea Büttner – *On the Spot # 1*, Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, October-November 2007.

that in a very active way it was what Marcuse called “the great refusal” and there was a lot of attitude and there was a lot of goofing around that as well. That’s present in my work. And then the fact that it’s autobiographically linked is a marker that it’s not the real thing. That it’s not the same as German religious art from the 50s. In the Karlsruhe-exhibition I had a photo of my parents for example.

AB: Has ‘Aesthetics of Administration’, as a look, become a *lingua franca*? Or a kind of normative language within contemporary art? That a Kunstverein audience would swallow easily?

LBL: (laughs) yeah.

AB: like there was a Greenbergian normativity in the 50s?

LBL: No, I don’t think so. I think a Kunstverein audience would be acquainted with it but I don’t feel that it’s normative. Of course it’s often when you art critics talk about contemporary art you often pull the easy one, you know: “It’s because it’s conceptual!” (laughs) and that explains it! Or that’s supposed to explain it. And of course it doesn’t explain anything, it just acknowledges that it has become a major point of contemporary art practice. I don’t think it’s normative – and definitely not in these years. Today *art* has become normative. But I think that Conceptual Art of the 60s and like-minded strategies today are located in a position in culture that sits between art’s otherness and art’s normativity. They can still make some uncomfortable questions in that place.

AB: What I mean is a feeling I get when reading Jan Verwoert’s texts for example – that he is writing up against a sense of normativity in the 90s articulated by magazines such as *Texte zur Kunst*.

LBL: It’s funny you bring that up coming from the outside to the German context (laughter). But still that’s also only just one interpretation of the heretics of conceptualism. The *Texte zur Kunst* take on it comes through institutional critique. So that is the rationalized version. It is ostensibly the rationalized version and I perceive first generation conceptualism to be something different.

AB: Why is it embarrassing for you to speak about your work?

LBL: Oh, well, I don’t know if it necessarily is so. It’s like, it depends on the day. (laughs)

AB: There is a nun passing by – so maybe we can speak about religion. What’s the relationship between shame and religion in your work? [...]

LBL: I did a collaborative piece with a group of English nuns from a convent close to where I live in London and I'm interviewing them about their 'little works', which is activities they do which are not an official part of the routines of the convent, so outside of their religious practice but with a sort of therapeutical character perhaps (laughs). Well, I think it has got to do with my upbringing, family background and ...

AB: What does it open up?

LBL: The question of religion in my art? (long pause) Hm. It opens up everything. I think of course it's got an intimacy in terms of this autobiographical dimension. When I say autobiographical, again, I'm talking about the subject's cultural location rather than me as an author. I don't mean to stand in front of my work by saying so. And as we've discussed I think it's also characteristic of culture at present; of all these forms of dissipated being.

AB: Dissipated?

LBL: Ja, sort of, you know, spread out subjectivity. Whether through this metaphysical revival of religion, confessing politicians and community leaders, or cultures of fear, which is also another version of dissipated being. All this mobilisations of subjectivity. And then of course I believe that to talk about shame and religion is applicable to art. To producing and showing art. So I think there's those three levels in it, for starters (laughs). Maybe I can ... One of my favourite quotes about shame is from a science fiction author, Ursula Le Guin, who writes in 1969 a book called *The Left Hand of Darkness* about this planet called Winter. All the inhabitants of Winter are hermaphrodites and they can choose their gender. And they only feel desire once a month when they are in Kemmer. At one point the main character ends up in a prison camp where the inmates are given chemicals to become sexless, to kill their sex drive, and the main character is looking at some of those inmates who had lost any kind of gender, any sex drive. He says that they were "without shame and without desire like the angels. But it's not human to be without shame and without desire."

AB: Ja...

LBL: So, having said that – to evoke religion in my practice has a lot to do with desire and its relation to culture. [...]

AB: Maybe you can say one more thing. I know you are interested in what you call 'Cocaine Conceptualism'. Or how do you call it? Factory Conceptualism? How does your apparent interest in manual labour and the hand sit with that research on industrialized conceptualism? Or maybe you have better words for it...

LBL: Well it's ... (laughs). Who am I answering as? I'm still Andrea?!

AB: Ja,

LBL: Jaja, I thought so. (Laughs). Well, I think if we talk about how art has become a norm today then it's unavoidable or at least relevant to look at how Pop Art and Conceptual Art in the 60s took apart the otherness, the heterogeneity of art that had prevailed in Modernism up till then. You could say that the heterogeneity of Modernism was also expressed in the idea that you could create a utopia, that you could create another space for culture that would kill culture and society, as we know it. But I think Pop and Conceptualism both deconstructed that and Conceptualism came up with 'pathetic visuality', while Pop Art came up with a set of different answers, which were also highly relevant at the time. They came up with a very energetic answer: Art doesn't have to be isolated. In this zoning off between high and low culture art does not have to be boring. And that of course had a huge appeal. Then we have Warhol and the factory and the way that he did away with manual labour in a very ostentatious way, in a very provocative way. Don't know, have you seen *Life of Brian* by Monty Python?

AB: I have seen it, but...

LBL: Ok, there is this, you know, Brian is being followed by these scores of disciples and he does not want to be the saviour but they are, you know, they follow him anyway. And one morning he addresses the crowd of unwanted disciples and says: "You are all individuals." And then the crowd says with one voice: "Yes, we are all individuals." And there's one guy who says: "Well, I'm not." And that's Andy Warhol (laughs). You know, he's the last romanticist in a way, the last romantic artist. He takes this threshold position and for a few years he really made some high calibre work; but of course that's also a position that became untenable eventually when he started making mouse pads and making a farce even of his own position, making a farce not only of all of Modernism but of his own projects as well. So I think that the factory style of leaving behind manual labour is something we can see in contemporary art in the way art is normative now and where you have a more entrepreneurial paradigm for art making. Which for some artists, like Olafur Eliasson it's quite explicit. [...]

AB: So is your work reactionary?

LBL: (laughs) That's a good question. (pause) I believe not. No, I sincerely believe not. At the same time it opens up a way of seeing how all art is potentially reactionary. (pause) I'm not sure about that last answer. Maybe we could get back to that. (laughs)

AB: Ok. Thank you.

AB: Use the microphone.

LBL: Ja – just an afterthought to your last question whether my art is reactionary and I would like to emphasize I believe it's not because I try to work within impossible spaces. That's the space for agency I'm trying to produce with my work and impossible space or dysfunctional space can't be reactionary, I would argue.