

The Repetition

By Marie Arleth Skov

But he who does not grasp that life is repetition and that this is the beauty of life, has condemned himself.

– Søren Kierkegaard –

From an art historical perspective, the horizontal line is often associated with tranquillity. The horizontal line is the surface of the sea, the foundation of a building, the ordering principle that establishes a fixed point and the point of view. In the works of Jesper Dyrehauge, however, the horizontal line is the point of crystallisation for another recurring theme in art: the relationship between chaos and order. All of Dyrehauge's paintings are slightly different in size, all are taller than they are wide, and the horizontal line, which otherwise creates balance, disappears in a wealth of disarranged dots.

In his current exhibition at Overgaden, Jesper Dyrehauge is presenting a series of compositions, which were created using the same method. On the rear side of a primed canvas, row upon row of dots have been placed rhythmically, as carrot prints. Like in an experiment, Dyrehauge lays down a predetermined set of rules that form the basis of his work. He begins in the lower left-hand corner and builds the canvas up from below, one horizontal line after the next, so that the composition arises in the movement from dot to dot. It is a slow and concentrated working method, in which the individual print is in focus, and the bigger picture is forgotten in certain phases. Human error occurs, and the simple, rhythmic compositions direct even more attention to the places in which a violation of the order has occurred. At the edges of the canvas, in particular, it can be seen how a displacement early on in the process acquires its own life and produces consequences later on somewhere else in the composition. To a certain extent, the artist must let go and allow things to happen by themselves. This unpredictable obliquity in the process results in an irregularly, moiré-like picture surface. Without following any classical painterly composition, the sequentially positioned dots create geometric spaces, lines and contours in and of themselves, and in a paradoxical manner, the forms are liberated precisely through the defined pattern.

Minimalist works often possess a strict and controlled expression, but the method of Jesper Dyrehauge allows room for movement and oscillation. The serial variations on the same theme reinforce this effect, as each image reveals another development, with a new irregularity, which in turn forms an alternative pattern. When we examine the works in relation to one another, the procedural aspect of the working method becomes clear. Jesper Dyrehauge himself speaks of entering a Zen-like state while creating the paintings, in which it can feel brutal to stop. It is a method that is implemented most precisely when the movement becomes a repetitive reflex. The repetition of a particular movement becomes an important element in the work, almost like an oriental calligraphic exercise in which the same character is repeated until it is inwardly absorbed.

The contemplative element in the creative process is repeated in the exhibition space. At Overgaden, Jesper Dyrehauge has built plaster walls in the full height of the room, so that an asymmetric space arises with no 90° angles, creating a liquid, timeless space which emphasises the meditative effect of the pictures. As an observer, you can lose yourself in focusing on a detail, or let your eyes glide across the full surface of the picture. If you walk up close to the painting, then back off, then move in close again, its expression alters several times. The reduction and the small displacements in the visual perception draw attention to the actual act of *seeing*.

Another important element and result of the working method is that the paintings are liberated from any representative function. Here it is not the artist who is in focus, but the work itself. An intimacy arises between the image and the viewer which is independent of artistic gesture or a particular motif. The pictures are not intrusive and even the title of the exhibition, 'Medium Large',

referring to the size of the canvas, could hardly be more neutral. The same applies to the muted, monochromatic colours – concrete blue, mustard ochre – which unlike primary colours are not charged with a specific signal value. The acrylic print on the coarse canvas has a light-absorbing quality, so that the colours appear subdued and peaceful, even in those parts of the composition where they almost completely cover the surface.

The resistance to representation can also be seen in the choice of materials, which emphasise the organic and unspectacular. The materiality – especially in the haptic qualities of the canvas and the sensuous element of the printing process – emphasises the bodily aspects, and can evoke associations with Arte Povera, the Italian avant-garde movement of the 1960s, in which the artists used ‘poor’ materials such as earth, glass shards, wood or string in their works. The carrot and potato prints that Jesper Dyrehauge has worked with for the past few years are also a most unpretentious approach that is often associated with the mundane or childish. In contrast to the regular expression that an industrially manufactured tool would enable, the marks of the carrot are uneven and diverging, and the use of the rough, untreated back of the canvas – the side that is usually unused and turned away from the viewer – reinforces this effect. In contrast to creating a single large, full-surface print, the elements of loneliness and time are prominent in this process and the humble aspects of the method and material endow Jesper Dyrhauge’s art with a kind of directness. It’s not about lines or shapes or surfaces, these are. The form is the content.

What, then, is the form? The fundamental pattern in Jesper Dyrehauge’s compositions is stretched out across the canvas like a holed grid or a raster. As Rosalind Krauss, one of the most important art theorists of recent decades, describes in her essay ‘The Originality of the Avant-Garde’ from 1981, the grid is one of the central and most frequently used structures in modern and contemporary art. In various artistic styles, from Bauhaus to Pop Art, and from Minimalism to Op Art, the grid has been employed as a purely formal/visual element, or as a symbol of a particular system. According to Krauss, the principal artistic qualities of the grid are its silence and impenetrability – the grid becomes a prison in which the artist can feel free. Instead of being driven by the eternal innovation dogma of the avant-garde, the artist finds liberation through repetition:

“The absolute stasis of the grid, its lack of hierarchy, of center, of inflection, emphasizes not only its antireferential character, but – more importantly – its hostility to narrative. This structure, impervious both to time and to incident, will not permit the projection of language into the domain of the visual, and the result is silence.”¹

As examples, she mentions Piet Mondrian, Josef Albers, Ad Reinhardt and Agnes Martin, all of whom try to avoid representation and action in their work.

Rosalind Krauss also describes repetition as an important element in the nature of the grid. In any new grid the original grid form is repeated, including the very idea of a grid, which many others have used before. For Jesper Dyrehauge – not unlike Agnes Martin’s delicate, fragile works with their non-hierarchical and decentralised fields of vision – it is first and foremost the aesthetic potential of the grid that is in focus. At the same time, it also concerns the vulnerable, the fault in the system. Here you can perceive a link with an artist like Esther Stocker, who is concerned with the grid as an architectural element, in which order and breach of that order belong inseparably together.

The interest in the non-hierarchical that is revealed in the grid motif is in line with Jesper Dyrhauge’s earlier works, including his interventions in the public space, such as in connection with the exhibition ‘Solidarity UNLIMITED?’ at rum46 in 2005. Together with the artists Nis Rømer and Marie Markman, Jesper Dyrehauge designed and produced ten wooden benches that were located around Aarhus city centre. The benches could be moved and used for whatever people wanted to do with them. The action questioned the kind of streamlined optimisation and

exclusionary modernisation that characterises urban development today – which, for example, means that benches are designed so that homeless people cannot sleep on them. This interest in the common space and the democratic principle is rooted in a fundamentally non-hierarchical way of looking at the context of things, which can be expressed in very different ways, in the big picture or in a detail, concretely or poetically. No dot is worth more than the next one.

The very simple method and minimalist expression of Jesper Dyrhauge's art provides the space to deal with fundamental questions. The contradiction between the flat geometrical order and the anarchy of the dots, the conceptual and the sensuous, impinges in a subtle and discreet manner on themes such as the common and the individual, regularity and randomness, perfection and error. "I keep making the same work over and over and over again," says Jesper Dyrhauge, and he is far from alone in that. The repetition of each movement is reflected in the repetition of the individual work, and again in the serial repetition; perhaps because it is only through repetition that certain aspects of art reveal themselves. You cannot quickly have done with them, but must return to try again and to fail again – just one more time.

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1. R. Krauss: *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 1981, p. 7 (Edition: MIT 1986).