On Per Kirkeby

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The following considerations do not amount to an introduction of the kind that would, so to speak, guide you by the hand through the next Kirkeby show. Instead, I wish to point out a few idiosyncracies and qualities of Kirkeby’s art which may not be immediately apparent to the eye. I shall discuss “Kirkeby’s house”—not, of course, his studio in Copenhagen, where he lives and works, but a structural element in his work that relates to the concept of “house” in a fundamental sense.

When viewing Kirkeby’s paintings, especially the recent ones, we often have an impression that might be called a suspended animation of vision. Looking into the space of the picture and looking onto the flattish relief of the paint surface take place simultaneously, and together they determine the effect of the images. The painter projects spaces, landscapes with cabins, houses, and trees, flowing water, and sky and clouds displaying their transitory play of form and light. Yet in the midst of this world, evoked with often seductively beautiful color, the eye repeatedly and unexpectedly runs up against sheer planes that appear as compact and dense as walls—comparable to the stucco of a fresco, which remains visually present in the finished painting and reminds viewers that they are standing in front of the painted wall of a solid building. At such points in Kirkeby’s paintings one has the sense of being able to touch the wall behind the illusion of color. The physical presence of the colored surface is further emphasized by how the artist handled paint—the use of a palette knife, for instance, or a brittle, apparently laborious paint application, scratched, incised, engraved like an oversized etching plate. All of this, rather than letting the physical act of painting disappear in the illusion of the picture, is factored into its effect.

Seen in this light, Kirkeby’s visual conception occupies the borderline between inside and outside, interior and exterior. In a certain sense, the picture format assumes the function of a section of wall, yet this impression is in turn negated by
Kirkeby’s House

New Trees V 1984
Oil on canvas
252 x 90 cm

New Trees I 1984
Oil on canvas
252 x 90 cm
the appearance of the picture as picture. A basically paradoxical situation, which could cause the intrinsic structure of a work of art to collapse—unless this borderline situation is itself revealed to be a motive, intention, in fact the artist’s true message.

Once we have noticed that the picture format can stand in for a section of wall, we begin to find paintings of definitely unusual proportions in Kirkeby’s oeuvre. For instance, there are very narrow vertical formats which can accept trees and might occupy the wall areas next to the windows in Kirkeby’s imaginary house. The motifs of houses and cabins appear especially in the large formats, which would be suitable for the house’s main walls. Sometimes the cabins are reminiscent of illustrations of the ur-shelters which eighteenth-century architectural theoreticians projected as the origin of all building. The houses in Kirkeby’s paintings do not rise like castles, nor are they closed off from the surrounding space. Rather, they have the look of nodes in a complex visual event, points of anchorage in a space in flux.

This treatment of the house motif in the painting medium sheds light on Kirkeby’s oeuvre as a whole. The handling of line, color, and plane developed by the artist especially in recent years, can be understood as a precise strategy, with the aid of which an object, such as a house, like the picture it occupies, can be rendered permeable to the aggregate states of space. Thanks to the treatment of color, line, and plane as separate elements of the picture, its internal constitution—the moment of its emergence and intrinsic character—are subjected to an analysis whose results reassemble these factors on a level different from that of conventional painting.

Our awareness is expanded by the various, sometimes devious paths and the always scrupulous control of individual steps through which the artist takes the elements of the composition on the way to completion.

Kirkeby’s house, as it results from the sum of his paintings and as it stands within them, continually raises the question of the borders a house establishes or overcomes in an imagined world of color, plane, and line. Based on the model of the house, this investigation explores the connections between rationality and inscrutability, between nature and art, between living and thinking, which every generation of artists must redefine anew. In this discourse, which Kirkeby makes no attempt to conclude by apodictic or aggressive statements, familiar figures and things appear, as do the times of day and the seasons of the year, most compellingly in the works on the theme of evening or winter—which, by the same token, likewise inquire into certain transitions or borders. The artist permits nature and his experience of its changes to enter his work, yet without representing nature as something absolute, given, and immutable, as in a static world view. Instead, he presents nature as a source of ever-fresh experiences, reflections, and interpretations. Painting as an epistemological process is indispensable and irreplaceable to create this form of image that exists between inside and outside, because their interrelationship must be continually rediscovered anew. The image as given fact would fall short of this position of a modern aesthetic awareness that relinquished or lost its immediate connection to the ego, to nature, to the vital world, about two hundred years ago. The analytic structure of Kirkeby’s imagery corresponds to the composite nature of human knowledge, and this in turn finds its visual counterpart in the house. This multiple, composite character is woven into the artist’s entire visual universe.

If we inquire further into his relationship to the house as structure, it becomes apparent that Kirkeby’s handling of the elements of composition corresponds to the fundamental fact of architecture: that it consists of interconnected parts and functions which, rather than forming a whole a priori, must be carefully investigated and determined by the architect with regard to the building’s purpose. Ground plan, room proportions, façade design, integration in the urban space or location in the landscape, require various analytical procedures which remain visible in the interior and exterior articulation of the building and are determined, apart from function, by iconography, that is, by architecture as a vehicle of meaning.

Kirkeby himself has investigated and represented these relationships in his brick sculptures that show a great affinity with architecture. These works employ architectural forms in a plastic, spatial sense without actually serving a purpose or end. While they might be interpreted as a special form of minimalistic structure, they remain more closely related to built structures on account of their material. If this represents the rational, as it were “cold” aspect of these works, a further factor in their emergence suggests more far-reaching implications—the fact that almost every brick work is accompanied by a small-scale design version, shaped of clay and cast in bronze, which directly reflects the activity of the artist’s hand, an underlying connection with human dimensions and proportions. In this way, Kirkeby infuses his brick sculptures with a physical sensation that remains present in the finished structure. Accordingly, even in those brick sculptures which initially appear so closed and hermetic we find the principle of an assembly into a unity of elements that were previously obtained by means of analytic separation. Viewing the brick sculptures, this method of subverting everything illustrative—which the paintings, too, demonstrate—has the effect of adumbrating and designating that intermediate zone in which amorphous space reveals the rhythm that makes a random location into a true place—with its individual magic and unique light.

In the present context, the concepts of “place” and “house” designate the same spatial category of a fundamental character which is ultimately integrated...