

THE OAK TREE

Katrine Køster Holst

At the moment, I am working on a new round of experimentation on the clay slabs. - I cut through the ceramic slabs, made of many layers of clay, with a diamond saw blade. Working with the saw last week, I got the feeling that I had done the same thing before, and when I thought about it, I recognized the “rhythm” from a previous project that I called the “Timber log project”, which I worked on from 2009–2013. I sawed and sawed in discarded wood, shredded it into tiny pieces and assembled it again. The project started at a sawmill where I worked for a month, because I wanted to investigate the tree’s internal structures. What I am getting at, is that I could potentially, because of the saw – or the action of sawing – see connections to how trees grow and how one can, by delving into the core of the tree, map out the whole form’s history, I mean, read it in the growth rings. The ceramic slab suddenly became a piece of wood ... and when I saw this connection, another thing fell into place; to talk about a form that grows – grows according to systems or something similar ...

The following paragraph is from an e-mail exchange I had with Anne Gry Haugland¹ in March 2018, where we touch upon ideas and thoughts about «to grow a form». Haugland replies:

Your thoughts on clay layers as being synonymous with growth rings in wood make very good sense. I also thought that when I talked about your slabs as deposits that encapsulate time as form. I remember that at one point you had been told that you should consider the performative element of your slabs - that is, the work that your own body does as an integral part of the work. I think rather, that it is this element of time, this balance between the routine thing you do every day that makes the shape grow – and the unpredictable element that lies in the material you use. It is the tension between the set pattern of action and the unpredictable formation that is so interesting. It is the same thing that happens when a tree grows: a tree can only grow by adding layer upon layer of wood outside of its “old” shape – i.e. the structure of the growth itself is constant and actually quite simple. But the constant variations in growth conditions and events over time (branches that break, a particularly dry summer, etc.) make the shape unique and complex.

So yes, you “grow form” - and you are both creator and observer at the same time during

the process. And when you saw into your
(ceramic) slabs, you see the time that has
elapsed and the form's growth along the way.

The trunk of a well-grown tree is lying on a concrete floor in a workshop. The bark is dark and coarse, and the diameter of the tree must be close to two metres. A large square hole has been carved in the trunk. An empty folding chair faces the hole in the tree and an adult man in work clothes: brown trousers, a dusty grey-blue shirt and black shoes, appears to be crawling into the hollow of the tree, which is larger than his own body. His face disappears. He hollows out the tree with hand tools. Cuttings lie where they have fallen. The floor is covered in sand-coloured wood in sizes ranging from logs, building blocks, shavings, to piles of dust. Manually and carefully, he digs out the inner core of the tree. He goes back in time as if he were performing an autopsy on the tree's life.²

Giuseppe Penone was born in 1947 in Italy. He graduated from the *Accademia di Belle Arti* in Turin in the late 1960s.

Arte Povera, which translates directly to 'poor art', is an art movement that developed in Italy in the late 1960s. This art movement, often considered a type of *avant-garde* art, arose as a reaction against contemporary technological and material development, as well as being a reaction against the established state institutions. The term '*arte povera*' was introduced in 1967 by the art theorist Germano Celant and typically refers to three-dimensional works made from materials

that have traditionally been without artistic value. For example, materials such as neon lights, rags, text and natural materials could be used. The artists wanted to give the human subject a central role in the artistic expression and emphasized the artistic process. [...]³

My first encounter with Penone's work was in 2005 in the Tate Modern collection in London. I was a student at the Bergen Academy of the Arts; we were on a study trip, and after several days with an intense schedule, I was almost unable to take any more in; neither art nor city life generally. In the museum, I walk alone, unfocused. I stand still on the museum's escalator; I go up and down through the building's many floors. It is a labyrinth of rooms. At a time when I was least expecting it, my attention was caught. I stop at four large sculptures. They are trees entitled "Tree of 12 Metres"⁴ They are appealing and there is something liberating in noticing how I respond to the trees without the feeling of having to interpret, justify or expect anything. They appeal directly. The gut feeling is never wrong.

After visiting the museum, I stop at an antique book store. When I open the door, I enter a narrow, oblong room. A man close to retirement age is behind a table. He is preoccupied with sorting out books that are lying in front of him in high stacks. He looks up; nods without saying anything. I go inside. The floor is covered with a dark red carpet and the walls are tightly packed with books like striped wallpaper. It's quiet, and I barely hear my own steps as I walk around on the soft carpet. It is echo free – like a scene from a film. It smells of tobacco smoke here. I walk towards an old pull-out table

with solid legs. It is covered with opened books, but it is the boxes on the floor underneath the table that I want to see. They are filled with exhibition catalogues and I squat down and look at them without really knowing what I am looking for. I pay for three publications before I leave. One book that is in a long, high format, is a collection of Penone's poetry written between the period from 1968–1995. I can still read some pages over and over again:

Capturing the green of the forest.

Running through the green of the forest with a gesture.

Rubbing the green of the forest.

Overlaying the green of the forest.

Imagining the thickness of the green of the forest.

Working with the splendor and density of the green of the forest.

Consuming the green of the forest against the forest.

Repeating the forest with the green of the forest.⁵

Frijnsborg forest, autumn 2010: I walk away from the forest road towards the clearing and follow a fenced in area of meadow where the grass has grown high. There are many pheasants here. They hide in the tall grass, until something disturbs them and then they run around in a state of confusion. Their screams are so penetrating and sudden. I always get so startled by them. Then, I see the trees I am looking for. There are only a few left: old giants. They are half alive and half dead with their deep cracks and incurable wounds. Mossy bark in a zigzag pattern in deep joints organically follows the tree's growth, like a wrinkled skin. The oaks are so enormous that they even make large trees seem small. It is true that it would take ten to twelve people joining

hands to reach around the largest old oak tree.

It is now a few years since I last saw the old oak trees, but they often spring to mind; lately because of my work with twelve large ceramic slabs that are built up of thin layers of liquid clay that are laid one on top of the other repetitive times. My working method shares common features with the tree's growth. I date stamp the layers of the ceramic slabs and they can be counted in the same way that the tree's growth rings can. But it is not just that. As the layers of clay build up, the rough surface of the clay slabs becomes like bark. I can recognize the feeling in my hand from how it was to lay my hand on the bark of the old oak tree in Frijsenborg forest. I thought the tree was like a warm mountain; that time had stood still.

Denmark's oldest oak is estimated to be just about two thousand years old⁶. That is, it began to grow in the middle of the Iron Age and before the Viking Age. I am curious about the history of the oak trees in Frijsenborg forest and try to find out if their age has been accurately determined, but I am not able to find any information about these trees in particular. However, based on the size, one can estimate that they are about a thousand years old. Frijsenborg Estate⁷ was first described in the 15th century when it belonged to the families Kalf or Kalle. In the 16th century, the estate belonged to the King and then to a number of titled barons, nobles and counts. In 1815, it was Denmark's largest estate and consisted of 12 main farms and 42 churches⁸. I think of the oak trees that have outlived all these important people's lives.

If one says that a human life span is a hundred years, then a tree's is thousands and a rock's, millions. Layer upon layer, humans' lives, the trunks of trees and the forms of the landscape are built up over time.

¹ Anne Gry Haugland (1971), Ph.D. from the University of Copenhagen and the thesis *Naturen i ånden – om naturfilosofien i Inger Christensens forfatterskab* [*Nature in mind – on the philosophy of nature in Inger Christensen's writing*] (2012). Associate Professor in Research Methods at the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen.

² The photograph was taken in the artist's studio in Turin, where Penone himself is working on the art work, Cedro di Versailles (Cedar of Versailles) during the period 2000–2003. Celant, Gerlando, Bentley Mays, John, Semin, Didier (2013). Penone, Giuseppe: *The Hidden Life Within*. Edited by Teitelbaum, Matthew. London: Black dog publishing. p. 204.

³ The quote continues: «The theme of the art was often the relationship between nature and culture. Arte povera is often seen as an opposite of futurism and minimalism. Among the top artists in arte povera are Giovanni Anselmo, Alighiero e Boetti, Luciano Fabro, Jannis Kounellis, Mario Merz, Giulio Paolini, Giuseppe Penone, Michelangelo Pistoletto and Gilberto Zorio.» https://snl.no/arte_povera (read on 23rd November, 2018).

⁴ Albero di 12 metri, (Tree of 12 Metres) 1987–1991, size 600x50x50 cm. The sculptures belong to the Tate Modern collection in London and were purchased in 1989.

⁵ Catalogue, Galleria Civica di Arte Contemporane [Catalogue, Civic Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art], Trento, (1997) Giuseppe Penone. Translation from Italian by Lucian Henry Comoy. Torino: Hopefulmonster Editore. p. 109.

⁶ Denmark's oldest oak is Kongeegen [The King's Oak] in Jægerspris. It is estimated to be 1600–2000 years old.

⁷ Frijsenborg estate and castle are located in Jutland, 25 kilometres northwest of Aarhus.

⁸ <https://snl.no/Frijsenborg>

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