

IMPRINTS

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February 10th, 2018. I travel to Silkeborg in Denmark to see Alexandra Engelfriet's latest performance and installation *Skinned* in the exhibition *CLAY!* at Museum Jorn.¹

Inside the museum, I have passed through the large exhibition hall which, with its overhead lighting and rounded architecture, is reminiscent of a church. I walk over to the right and then stand in the middle of three interconnected rooms. A descriptive text written in Danish and English is hanging on the wall. First, there is a statement from the curator, then some quotes from the artist.

Alexandra Engelfriet was born in Holland in 1959 and lives and works in the Netherlands and France. Over the past 25 years, she has worked on huge projects in raw clay all over the world. The physical interaction with the clay is the focal point of her work, and her body, feet, knees, hands and elbows are the main tools. For the work *Skinned*, she has used 10 tons of clay.

The text continues with Engelfriet's own words:

I'm looking forward to working in an interior space where the walls will contain and strengthen the effect of the presence of a mass of clay, as well as the energy with which I'll shape it. Traces of my movements will not only appear in the clay but also on the walls. After I'm done, I hope there'll be a strong sense that something has happened here! And that the viewer will be somehow overwhelmed by the presence.

My intention is to make this experience even stronger by creating imprints of my action in the clay: one will be a 3D imprint, and others will be in 2D. They'll be hanging on the walls of the two connecting spaces and will provide different experiences of the material when viewers wander from one space to another.

It's an experience of being present. As soon as I'm in the clay, I'm aware of an intense concentration. It's give and take, so I'm not the only one forming, the material also forms me. I'm looking for the experience of not being in control, of being part of a larger whole and surrendering to that while, at the same time, being the one who forms. There's something special about clay. I think it's impossible to find the exact words. There's something about the material that makes it a very private, intimate, and still a very universal

experience – an experience of going back in time to the beginning of the world.

As I am standing there, silently, in the space between two rooms, reading the text, I hear, and notice, sounds and activity from both sides. On the right there is an audience in front of the entrance to a room filled with clay. The sound of squelching mud and splashing water emanates from the room; there is a break, and then new sounds from a body in the clay can be heard. From the left there are similar sounds, but they are more monotonous and emanate from a video recording. Two elderly ladies have sat down on the benches in front of the luminous projection that fills most of an end wall. They whisper to each other.

I think of the time that has passed since I first met Alexandra.

Guldagergård International Ceramic Research Centre, Denmark, spring 2007. I was on a three-month residency and coincidentally, Alexandra was there at the same time. When we had breaks from work, we went for walks, cycled in the head wind to the beach, and threw rocks into the sea. We talked about the work and quickly realized that there were commonalities in how we saw the landscape and how we experienced the need for physical contact with the clay we worked with.

Back in the museum, where you are at work, your back is leaning against the wall. You push your hips down while your feet sink deeper into the clay. The cleanliness of the small room has vanished. The wall was once white: a museum wall. Now the floor is covered with clay mixed with runny red

iron oxide dissolved in water. The contrast between what is clean and what is dirty is eye-catching, but not surprising. Associations with blood cannot be avoided. But I am not thinking of blood with fear and disgust, nor am I thinking of it as blood from a slaughterhouse with dead animals. I am thinking of the blood in the body; the hot fluid that pumps in our veins and keeps us alive and moving. The liquid that will always take the path of least resistance through the body just as liquid that flows in the landscape does. You look down into the clay and I think that it is as if the blood has been set free and you let it flow through ravines and valleys. And I am looking at you. I am holding my camera in my hand, and I lean against the door frame to look at you as you work. It is the first time that our roles are as different as they are today. There is something challenging in photographing and observing you this way. I am humbled, maybe because I see how close your contact with the clay is. This is a new thought for me, probably because we normally meet in contexts where we are both working. But that is not the case here; I am wearing clean trousers. A few minutes later, your entire body is in contact with the clay, and I recognize the sound of your knee moving clay in repetitive jabs. It squirts a little blob of red mud in my direction and hits my leg. I move back a little bit. Your movements, sounds and repetitions; the knee against the clay: the sound of your movements has been the same in all the years I have known you. Your movements are insistent, but also receptive. You look down into the clay that has taken shape after your imprint. Your gaze is focused and expectant, and you observe the indentations you have made before repeating the same jab - with the same knee - in the same place. Your rhythm is your own.

A few hours later I meet Alexandra in the museum's café. Her hair has been rinsed of clay and she is ready to go. We start driving and try to find a shortcut to the hotel where you are staying but end up on a bumpy dirt road through a garden allotment area. As we drive slowly between the gardens, which are closed for winter, we talk about Asger Jorn's ceramics and you tell me about the large relief on the wall at Aarhus State Gymnasium.²

Asger Jorn (1914–1973) was a Danish artist and author. He is considered to be one of Denmark's most important artists within abstract expressionism³. Jorn spent a great deal of his life in the Italian city of Albissola. The city is known for its ceramics, and many international artists went there to work with ceramic art, for example, Lucio Fontana, Wifredo Lam, Capogrossi and Picasso. Jorn met Picasso in the late 40s, and Picasso's pottery affected Jorn to such an extent that he himself began to work with the material. It was in Italy that Jorn created many of his large ceramic wall reliefs. Additionally, Jorn worked with ceramics with the potter Knut Jensen in Sorring outside Silkeborg.

After dinner at the hotel, we say goodbye, and I walk to the car, which is parked on a large, empty car park. It has started to snow, and the roads are covered with a thin white layer. Where cars have driven, the road has been decorated with black stripes. The visibility is poor, but I know the country roads along the forest, and after half an hour I drive into my parent's driveway. The next morning over breakfast we talk about the exhibition, and my mother tells me that grandad had studied at the same time as Asger Jorn at Silkeborg Seminarium. She explains that they hadn't known each other

well, but that Jorn was someone you noticed. She went on to say that grandad had always been very enthusiastic about Jorn's paintings, but he had also said that «Jorn's figurative ceramics were nothing to shout about!»⁴. I could hear the conviction in his voice. Grandad himself liked to make small expressive figures in ceramics. A black terrier and a round lamp base with human shapes glazed in bluish-green shades sits on the piano as a reminder of my creative grandfather. That story of my grandfather was a digression, but nevertheless it started a thought process about how I myself had experienced Jorn's pottery the first time when I saw it at Museum Jorn in Silkeborg. I was twelve, maybe thirteen years old. The thing I remember best is the museum's entrance, because there were some large blue ceramic stones lying on the grass. Both my mother and I stopped by the stones because we thought they were made by our former neighbour, who is a ceramicist⁵. In the museum itself Jorn's ceramics didn't catch my interest at all. I thought his ceramic work was sloppy, and like my grandfather, I liked his colourful paintings best.

I drive towards Hirtshals to catch the ferry to Larvik. As I am driving, I think about how the last few days had been filled with coincidences and surprises. It was strange how ceramics from my childhood suddenly merged with ceramics from today.

On this journey back to Larvik two images stood out in my mind: Alexandra Engelfriet photographed in clay up to her ankles in 20186 and Asger Jorn driving a scooter on top of a large plate of raw clay photographed in 19597. If you look at the photographs, there are obvious similarities. Two people

are intensely occupied in leaving imprints in clay. Yet, the two situations are so full of contrast that it is remarkable. She is working alone, he has company. He is using a motor vehicle, she is using her body. He is working outside, conversing with those he is with and there is obviously noise from the motor vehicle. She is working in silence. It makes me think of all the small and individual details hidden in a work and in the process of creation. What affects a process? What do we facilitate ourselves, and what do we, more or less consciously, take with us? When do we shut impressions out, and when are we receptive to letting them in?

What if we removed the clay from Engelfriet and Jorn, and look at their posture, faces and eyes? The similarity lies in the intensity of investigating something.

The work with the clay becomes a tangible reason, almost a tool that is used, to bring places, times and people together, both in an exhibition and work context. Engelfriet would not have come to Museum Jorn in Denmark, if it was not for the clay. Jorn would probably not have worked with clay if it had not been for Picasso's pottery. I would not have met Alexandra on a work placement if it had not been for the ceramic workshops.

As with many other materials, the clay can be explored on different levels. You can advance craft techniques, immerse yourself in particular expressions, develop unique material compositions, fire it in special kilns. But no matter how complicated it is, there is something thought provoking in that the first thing that happens when you touch clay is something so simple: you leave an imprint. That is something most people

notice: you have left a trace. You put your unique fingerprint into a material: mark that you have been there. And through an imprint, we feel ourselves and we feel our senses, and it confirms something so universal as the fact that we are alive.

¹ Museum Jorn, Silkeborg. LER! [CLAY] 10 February - 10 June 2018. Contemporary ceramics by eight European artists: Miquel Barceló (E), William Cobbing (UK), Alexandra Engelfriet (NL), Lawrence Epps (UK), Lillibeth Cuenca Rasmussen (DK), Marien Schouten (NL), Clare Twomey (UK) and Anne Wenzel (NL). The exhibition is curated by museum director Karen Friis.

² In the summer of 1959, Asger Jorn was working in Albissola on a 3-metre high and 27-metre-long relief in ceramics.

³ From 1948-1951, Jorn was a member of the group CoBrA (abbreviation for COpenhagen, BRuxelles Amsterdam). Spontaneity, fantasy paintings and folk art are key words associated with COBRA. Members of the group included Appel, Constant and Corneille. Other Danes in the group were Eiler Bille, Egill Jacobsen, Carl-Henning Pedersen and Henry Heerup.

⁴ I cannot imagine that my grandfather had seen Jorn's great reliefs, and I think he is referring to the small figures that were exhibited at Silkeborg Art Museum.

⁵ When I went to primary school the ceramicist Karin Grünberger occasionally looked after me. I have several childhood memories from her workshop, and I remember how I secretly picked up one of her blue-glazed plates from a waste container and took it home.

⁶ My own photograph of Alexandra in the enclosed space at Museum Jorn, 10 February 2018.

⁷ I saw the photograph at Jorn Museum in Silkeborg. The description was as follows: In 1959, Asger Jorn drove his scooter through the soft clay in a backyard in Albissola in Italy, making clear tyre prints in the clay which later became a part of the work. The huge ceramic relief can still be seen in the entrance hall of Aarhus State Gymnasium. Of the work, Jorn himself wrote: "I think it is a work that will renew interest in ceramics, I dare say." <https://www.facebook.com/museumjorn/photos/vi-varmer-op-tiludstillingen-ler-der-kan-opleves-fra-d-10-februar-d-10-juni-201/1790036401009442/> (read on 17th November, 2018)

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