

Firm Forms and Loose Silhouettes

Lasse Krog Møller and Nevet Yitzhak

Exhibited 3 — 25 October 2015

Curated by Iben Bach Elmstrøm and Nohar Ben-Asher

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Ceci n'est pas un mégot

When encountering Lasse Krog Møller's practice, it soon becomes clear that he has tapped the same fount of inspiration which for Michel Foucault famously 'arose out of a passage of Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought — *our* thought'.¹ For Krog Møller's interest in archives and the ordering of them is also an interest in the arbitrariness of both the collections themselves and their systems, and thus of our ways of seeing the world around us more generally. Foucault goes on to quote that passage from Borges, itself purporting to quote a 'certain Chinese encyclopaedia' in which 'animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies'.² As a method of classification this finds obvious parallels in the way Krog Møller categorises objects according to systems apparently of his own devising. His highly personalised methods can also be seen in relation to the cabinets of curiosities that became popular amongst the kings and dukes, merchants and learned men of Renaissance Europe, which aimed to collect everything deemed of interest from the known world, in order to demonstrate the owner's power through his mastery of the world. In these cabinets archaeological finds, religious relics, works of art, and entirely fanciful or fabricated objects happily appeared side by side, in what for us appears to be an odd mishmash in comparison with our methods of categorisation, which to us seem sensible, 'natural', and at first sight unquestionable.

But these two examples, invented encyclopaedia and inventory of phenomena, betray two diametrically opposed results of the act of classification, which are important in the context of Krog Møller's work. Cabinets of curiosities were mirror chambers of power which were ordered in ways that made sense at the time of their creation, yet lack sense to us simply because our systems classification have changed over time as western society has changed; whereas the 'shattering of landmarks' caused by Borges in his essay is a quite deliberate highlighting of the arbitrariness of our inherited systems, of what usually commands our attention, and how. It is in this second instance that Krog Møller would recognise himself, having stated that 'I'm interested

1. Foucault, Michel. The Order of Things, 'Preface', xvi, Routledge Classics 2002.

2. Ibid.

in the kinds of objects that surround us, the kinds of things we don't notice, mind you, but which are simply there: a cigarette, a shopping list, etc. In the exhibition [at Galleri Image, 2012] I want to point out that these objects are interesting when we choose to look at them as though they are meaningful - for example as a museum piece'.³ For just as the unspecified 'animals' may 'belong to the Emperor' or be 'stray dogs', may engage in banal everyday acts such as 'breaking the water pitcher' or become valued images through being 'drawn with a camelhair brush', so Krog Møller focuses on quotidian objects and asserts that the overlooked may be accorded great value.

To a certain extent then, in the question of according value, Krog Møller's methods of classification may be said to expose, like Borges' encyclopaedia, the contrivances of the human mind as it insists on finding meaning in the often capricious and haphazard world around it. And rather like Borges he approaches this existential entanglement with a healthy portion of dry wit. This becomes apparent, for example, in the texts which accompany the inventories of multiple objects, such as cigarette butts and hair scrunchies, in the small pamphlets published as 'Samlingen. Afd.:' (The Collection. Dpt.), here for example that cataloguing shopping lists: "Other lists, those lists found on the floor in the supermarket, or outside, on the street, can perhaps, in the case of some of them at least, be considered lost. Lost before they have fulfilled their function. One can imagine the furore this loss will have led to when the improvised purchases were subsequently brought home".⁴ It is also to be seen in the piece *Museum Abandon*, in which we are presented with dusty

3. Krog Møller, Lasse, quoted in 'Hvad gemmerne gemte', Kathrine S. Andersen, *Kunsten*. nu 2012, retrieved 10/10/2014. Original in Danish, own translation. <http://www.kunsten.nu/artikler/artikel.php?lasse+krog+moeller+en+samling+galleri+image>

4. In the original: Andre sedler, de sedler der er fundet på gulvet i supermarkedet, eller udenfor, på gaden, kan muligvis, for en dels vedkommende, anses som mistede. Tabt inden de har opfyldt deres funktion. Man kan gøre sig forestillinger om den furore dette tab har kunnet medføre når de improviserede indkøb efterfølgende er bragt hjem. Krog Møller, Lasse. *Samlingen Afd.:* iks. forlaget *, 2004.



Lasse Krog Møller, examples of pamphlets from 'Samlingen. Afd.:'

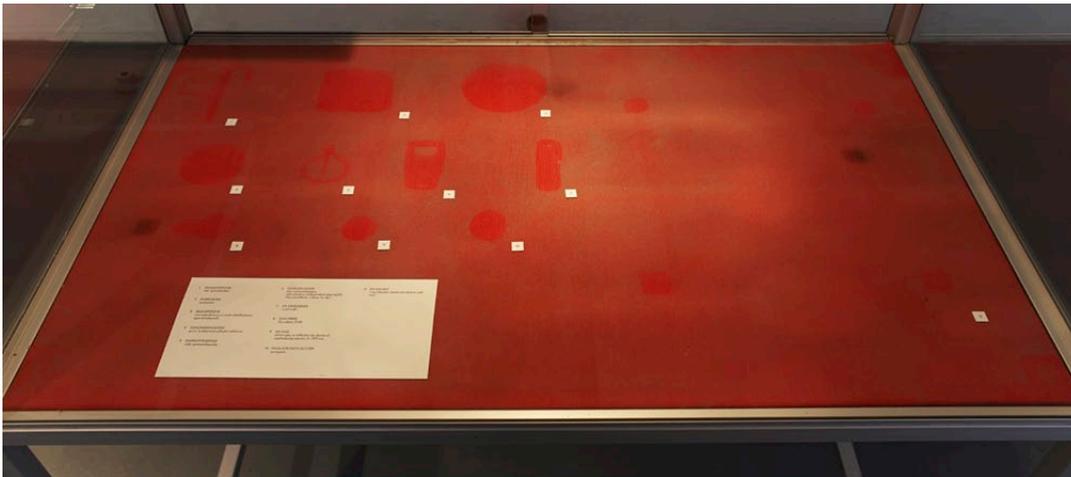
vitrines where the shapes left behind by absent objects are numbered in all earnestness — the description accompanying an anonymous, plain rectangle assures us, for example, that what we would have been looking at was '2. A POSTCARD with motif of a group of root vegetables with anthropomorphic characteristics and the inscription, "Greetings from Rübblingland"'.⁵ While Rübblingland presumably doesn't exist, and a Rübbling may be a type of mushroom, a Rübbe is also a beet, and figuratively 'eine freche Rübbe' is something like 'a cheeky lout' — you can't help wondering whether the postcard was in fact of an Archimboldo painting, or indeed a kitschy imitation. Another tells

5. In the original: 2. ET POSTKORT med motif af en gruppe rodfrugter med menneskelignende karaktertræk og påskriften, "Grüsse aus Rübblingland".

us that a long thin tapering line in the dust was left by '6. A CHOPSTICK of dark wood. The other accompanying chopstick fell down behind the stove'.⁶

6. In the original: 6. EN SPISEPIND i mørkt træ. Den anden tilhørende spisepind faldt ned bag komfuret.

In the sparks which are struck between absent image and eliciting text in the viewer's mind we encounter another dimension of the work *Museum Abandon*, and of Krog Møller's output more generally, namely the ability to make the overlooked and unassuming objects which he takes as his motifs tell a story. Very human and almost romantic stories in the case of *Museum Abandon*, where we can't help but begin imagining the lives of ordinary people whom, we suppose, would have owned and used the ordinary objects which



Lasse Krog Møller, *Museum Abandon*. Detail.

have disappeared. He says that he was inspired to produce the piece when looking at photographs of the world's fairs of the era of industrialisation, in which the latest inventions in science and technology from around the world were brought together, beginning with the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London and oscillating between the United States, London, and Paris until the early decades of the twentieth century. Specifically, Krog Møller was fascinated by photographs which showed the empty exhibition halls after the fairs were over. This fascination with the melancholy flip side of that which humanity claims as its greatest achievements, its trophies of 'progress', finds its way into *Museum Abandon* as a complex play with the flux of the permanent and the temporary. We see for example, outlined in the dust, what can only be a bottle opener, and object instantly recognisable, mass produced, and moreover made of a material, metal, capable of long outlasting the human lives that give it meaning. Then again, in the neighbouring vitrine, we see two oblong, rather indefinable shapes, which the label claims are those of a pair of espadrilles: in apparent denial of its highly constructed nature and its predication on absence, *Museum Abandon* seems here to want to offer us an almost indexical imprint of a human life, of mass produced items that become very personal, formed and moulded by the feet that wear them, in contrast to the bottle opener which can only have imposed its hard edges on the hands that briefly used it.

Yet the atmosphere of the piece and the stories it urges into temporary existence never becomes maudlin, for Krog Møller is careful to ensure that

the element of the absurd is lurking, ready to provoke the simultaneous release and attack which comedy exercises on logic. Near the absent bottle opener we fall upon four small rectangles that are supposedly the feet of a four-legged stool, which it on reflection becomes clear would be difficult to fit inside the vitrine. And with that Krog Møller is back with Borges as they, poker-faced, shuffle their infeasible index cards: if present the stool would explode the framework of its categorising entity; in its absence it shatters our conceptions rather than the glass, just as we can bamboozle ourselves trying to conceive of why on earth the 'certain Chinese encyclopaedia' should include the classification 'included in the present classification'.

East is east?

Nevet Yitzhak works with both archival material and found imagery, which she appropriates and reactivates in a number of related ways. In *Star Quality*, for example, we see a short, looped segment of grainy black and white archive footage of a woman on a stage, the curtain behind her, the hung microphone swaying a little in front of her, her face hidden in what appears to be a cloth of some sort. She is the legendary Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum (died 1975), who came from a humble background in a small village and rose to become a star, Hachlef tells us, due to her 'most exceptional voice, the flexibility and range of which is very seldom found'.⁷ Hachlef further comments that 'Not only did ŪM KALTSŪM never try to conceal the poor surroundings of her

7. Hachlef, A. Liner notes in Oum Kalsoum — Les Grands Compositeurs (vol. 1) — Arabian Masters. Published by EMI Music Arabia / 1999 Virgin France. Trans. M. Stoffel.



Nevet Yitzhak, *Star Quality* (left) and *Ya alby* (right). Installation view.

childhood but, on the contrary, she was proud of having achieved something unexpected considering her humble origin. ... Proud of her modest origin and convinced that beauty does not lie in artifice, she remained unsophisticated in her ways clothes and speech'.⁸ This character of humility is the one the archive clip presents us with: a figure who almost seems to want to hide

8. Ibid.

from her audience. But the accompanying element of Yitzhak's installation makes it clear that she has no reason to hide. In *Ya alby* a video recording of stage curtain is projected onto an actual curtain which portions off some of the space, next to it a naked bulb dangles, refiguring in the exhibition space the scene we see in *Star Quality*. Missing of course is the performer, instead an old live recording of her singing a song containing the refrain 'ya alby' ('my heart') emanates from behind the curtain. She repeats the phrase with variations (her concerts could last for three or four hours even though she would typically perform only two or three songs) and the various repetitions, with their differing inflections of the theme, cause the audience to explode in rapturous applause and roar in appreciation.

In the exhibition space, enticed by the light from the bulb, we give in to curiosity and take a peek behind the curtain, only to find that there is nothing there but the means to an end: electrical wiring and speakers. Perhaps the inference is that Umm Kulthum's person is not the important thing, rather her star quality is her voice which conveyed so much of her heart to so many. The way in which the archival material, visual and auditory, is configured around the viewer suggests that it is not the focus on her person, her face, but rather on her voice and its power of expression that does and should endure. In doing this, Yitzhak asks for a different view to be taken of this great figure than occurred in her own lifetime, when the composer Mohamed Abdelwahab composed four works for her at the request of the Egyptian President Nasser. This was to some degree a political move, Abdelwahab's compositions being less Westernised and more steeped in Koranic chant than that of his popular contemporaries: 'President Nasser expected their collaboration would give greater prestige to Arabic singing and he wanted the entire Arab World to enjoy the joined talents of those two almost mythical stars. He hoped to create, in the field of music, a symbolic union which the disunited Arab World had not attained in the field of politics'.⁹ If President Nasser is considered to have had a motive in making use of the mythical quality of the figure of Umm Kulthum, Yitzhak's use of the archival material has a very different aim. This illustrates the point Derrida makes when he writes, 'The archive has always been a *pledge*, and like every pledge, a token of the future. To put it more trivially: what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way. Archivable meaning is also and in advance codetermined by the structure that archives'.¹⁰ Yitzhak duplicates material from the structure of one archive, that of Egyptian musical movies and radio broadcasts (and its context: Kulthum's monthly concerts are said to have emptied the streets of entire cities as people rushed home to tune in), and, presenting it in a new constellation in the institutions of contemporary art, archives it within the structure of that archive, with all its contingencies of critical discourse — for example, that she is an Israeli artist of Syrian descent. Her archival pledge is perhaps that the great — almost mythical — singer be remembered for how she could touch the human heart.

That the memory of Umm Kulthum as a figure and of her performances might already in the common culture be politicised and/or apolitical, purely a ques-

9. Ibid.

10. Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: a Freudian impression*, p. 18. The University of Chicago Press, 1996. Translated by Eric Prenowitz.

tion of her song, is beside the point of the archive as a phenomenon. For as Derrida says again, the archive 'is not only the place for stocking and for conserving an archivable content *of the past*, which would exist in any case, such as, without the archive, one believes it was or will have been. No, the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event. This is also our political experience of the so-called news media'.¹¹ The archivable content regarding the performances of Umm Kulthum would seem to be the making of a myth, one way or the other, with or without a political reading. The archiving of her improvisatory technique, and of her emotive interaction with the audience, appears to produce, through the dislocation from the night in question, the myth of the great singer as much as it records actual song and response. Yitzhak seeks to reintroduce the shyness, the humility of the performer into her 'star quality'; we the viewers also perform as we peek behind the curtain, going backstage as it were, and find that there is nothing save the recording of actual song and response being played back, denuded of staging. The archiving structure and thus what it is possible to preserve are suddenly quite different.

11. Ibid, p. 16.

The video animation *Sun Before Sunset* is based on a found image of a Persian rug which has been drained of its colour, so that we are presented with a monochrome image most of all reminiscent of a bas-relief. The effect is striking: where we would expect to encounter a riot of colour, we are confronted with a shallow plane, white like marble. As a western viewer of contemporary art, which itself remains to date a markedly and predominantly 'western' tradition and practice, it is impossible to avoid reading this as a play on received



Nevet Yitzhak, *Sun Before Sunset*. Installation view.

ideas of purity (in general) and nobility (of ancient Greek and Roman statuary, regardless of whatever knowledge we may have of how was it in fact brightly painted, and of Renaissance works inspired by antiquity). A second striking effect is that this paled rug is not static: rather, parts of it begin to move, and not in any haphazard way. Visual elements and sound effects borrowed from video games associate to ballistics and armed conflict, as pieces of the abstract pattern break free of their context, rotate, and shoot across the rug before smashing into other elements and rearranging them, or sending them in turn pinging off to new positions. Violent acts of shooting and impact rearrange the base material — the fabric, if you like. This abstract conflict, doing violence to the carefully constructed, ornate, and symmetrical pattern of the material, fills the main field of the work. Occurring as an abstraction without context, it arrests our attention, fascinates us, and cannot help but make us reflect precisely on the context of the work's production by an artist who lives with the everyday reality of the Middle East conflict.

Along the bottom edge of the main field camel-like creatures appear on the right, and over the course of the ballistic developments in the central field move to the left, at times tentatively and alone, at times quickly in groups. There is great humour here in the running of the camels and the trotting hoof sounds that accompany them on the soundtrack. But we can also read them with the utmost seriousness, as symbolic of nomadism and flight, of the fate forced upon peoples caught in the crossfire of conflict, both historically and now. Furthermore, the incongruence of the confined space this human element is consigned to at the bottom of the field of vision, as opposed to the great central field of action in which the ballistic theatre moves abstract elements around, reflects how armed conflict pushes basic concerns for the individual to the periphery even as it causes immeasurable upheavals and shifts among populations. In this, *Sun Before Sunset* comments not just on the current Middle East conflict, but may be said to engage with the history of the Jews as a people forced to migrate, whether it be in the Biblical Exodus, in the expulsion of Sephardic Jews from Spain during the Inquisition, or in other and more recent diasporas.

As an Israeli of Syrian descent, we may also legitimately suppose that Yitzhak intends, through using a found image of Persian rug as the base structure for the critical unfolding of conflict, to show how the common and shared traits and aspects of Middle Eastern cultures are torn up in their very fabric by sectarian conflicts. In taking an archived image and reactivating it in a context which certain received opinions proclaim it should be antithetical to, Yitzhak takes critical part in what Derrida has called 'the archive fever or disorder we are experiencing today, concerning its lightest symptoms or the great holocaustic tragedies of our modern history and historiography: concerning all the detestable revisionisms, as well as the most legitimate, necessary, and courageous rewritings of history'.¹² For Derrida, 'the interpretation of the archive ... can only illuminate, read, interpret, establish its object, namely a given inheritance, by inscribing itself into it, that is to say by opening it and by enriching it enough to have a rightful place in it'.¹³ It is this process in which

12. Ibid, p. 90.

13. Ibid, p. 67.

Yitzhak engages, opening up the archive of received ideas about the cultures and the conflicts of the Middle East and enriching them with illuminating discussions of alternative points of view and competing histories, which expand and complicate what can often seem given and immutable.

If it seems a small and hopeless act to gain a place in the archive by interpreting it, Derrida reminds us that 'By incorporating the knowledge deployed in reference to it, the archive augments itself, engrosses itself, it gains in auctoritas. But in the same stroke it loses the absolute and meta-textual authority it might claim to have. One will never be able to objectivize it with no remainder. The archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed'.¹⁴ It is in exactly this ongoing problematisation and discussion of what appears given that the archival strategies, not only of Yitzhak in relation to the Middle East conflict, but indeed also of Krog Møller in relation to how humanity accords value to objects, unfold new and crucial ways of looking at the world and understanding how we perceive it — or perhaps more correctly: how we are asked and expected to perceive it — and how we might begin and come to see it.

14. Ibid, p. 68.

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