

Interview

A conversation between Peter Callesen and Natalia Gutman

Natalia Gutman: The focus of this book is on your work in paper, but would you like to say something about your performance *Castle*, from 1999, which was perhaps pioneering for your work in paper?

Peter Callesen: Yes, you might say that it was. *Castle* was a performance that I made when I was studying at Goldsmiths College in London, where I built a castle of tape and paper. I built it over the course of ten stormy and rainy days. It was something of a Sisyphean work, because when I arrived in the morning it had collapsed—and then I had to start all over again. It kept on going wrong, there was a sort of fiasco about it, which was a theme I worked with a lot in my early performances. But it was also about the fact that I've always liked to build and construct things. It was probably also about space—about creating a space for myself, both physically and mentally. I had just moved to London and was living in a very small seven-metre-square room, and I was attending a very big school. Perhaps I needed to be noticed; it was probably a kind of manifestation. At the time I was interested in fairy tales and the impossibility, as an adult, of returning to one's childhood. So the topic was also lost childhood. I am certain that this topic, as well as the fragility of the material and the act of building, were fundamental elements that I took with me to the work in paper.

NG: The white paper is so fragile and so humble, and all the same it found its way into your hands—how did that happen?

PC: It started with my interest in the impossible and the performance *Palace of Dreams*. This was in 2003, when I was invited to take part in a performance festival in Helsinki. I wanted to make an interactive work and built a sort of floating castle in polystyrene measuring three by four by three metres. The interactive element was that people could call me, and then I would row them out to it in a little dinghy, and leave them on their own for half an hour. So then they could explore, dream themselves to a different place, be the king or queen of their own castle, or do whatever they felt like. When we had to decide what would be in the catalogue, I made a similar castle, but in paper and very small, which people could cut out and glue together themselves, with lots of details and some incorporated impossibilities, so that it actually wasn't possible to fold it. One day about six months later, I was sitting in my studio thinking that maybe I should try to make it after all, and see how far I could get with it. And then it turned out that it actually was possible to make the castle—and the paper I made it of was A4. This was the start of a long series of works in A4, which I have continued to make since then.

NG: What is it about the A4 sheet that is so appealing?

PC: First and foremost, I think it's a very beautiful and harmonious format. You can keep on folding it and it will continue to have the same proportions. It has a sort of mathematical beauty at the same time as it is so much a part of everyday life and common in so many places around the world. We know it so well from school, from the letter in the window envelope, and the photocopier at work. But it is more or less without value as a material, and this gives me greater room to manoeuvre, a freedom to work with large existential themes in a material which is on the face of it so bashful. It seems less postulated and grandiloquent than if the work were huge and made of bronze, for example. I also think that the paper's fragility combined with the small-scale contributes to making the experience of the works more intense.

NG: Some artists describe a battle with the canvas or clay—do you also have such battles with paper?

PC: No, I wouldn't call it a battle. But I'm not done with paper. I am still very interested in how I can transform the flat sheet into new three-dimensional forms and narratives. I find it interesting to push the fashioning of the work to its limits: What's possible? Where are the limits and how far can I go with the paper? How do I get something to rise from the paper and how do I get the flat paper to take on the shape of a fly, a knocked over pot of paint, or a dangling man. It's also a bit of a play with the infeasible, for example when I made an egg out of a flat piece of paper, which in principle shouldn't be possible. But once the idea has manifested itself, I try to find new methods and make various tools myself that make it possible. Many people say that my works contain a sort of magic. I don't know whether this is true, perhaps it's more like a sort of illusionism. There is a before and an after; something is cut away and transformed into a three-dimensional figure, but often it isn't immediately possible to see how it has happened. But there is always a relation, a contradiction, or a story between the silhouette which the cutout leaves, and the three-dimensional form which it is transformed into. So the transformation from the flat paper to the three-dimensional recurs in many of my works.

NG: The sheet of A4 and the miniatures are a type of image-making which stimulates the imagination. But what is at play in the large installations?

PC: The larger installations are of course experienced physically to a greater degree, as something we relate to with our bodies. There are also architectonic elements in several of them, which refer to the human scale. In the large works there is furthermore often a power play with the audience. They should wonder about where the work starts, where it ends, where they can move around it and whether they can step on it, for example when snowflakes were spread on the floor from wall to wall in *Walking on Snow* (2003), or when almost the entire floor was occupied by the moat in *Big Paper Castle* at Charlottenborg back in 2003. Many of the site-specific installations I have made are quite big, for example the work I made for Nikolaj Kunsthal, *White Window* (2010), which was an eight-metre-tall, full-size mock-up of the large wall with windows in the church, where I also used old A4 sketches as glass in the panes. I am interested in illusion, and in copying the real world in a completely different material. In this case, I copied the heavy and massive brick walls using thin and almost translucent paper. Via the almost transparent wall, a contrast arose between the weightiness and the light and bright paper. I often work with the copy, mirroring, and repetition. I have several times experienced that people have walked on my paper stairs, that they have actually confused the work with the surroundings. But perhaps I bring that on myself...because I am interested in creating little deceptions. For me, the stairs are first and foremost images of something else: of the attempt to move or strive upwards—they belong in *the world of ideas*, for they are not real stairs, they are an image of stairs. But the stairs are simultaneously placed in the real world, in *the world of phenomena*, where they on the other hand are entirely useless. In this they are related to Plato's dualism of the *ideal* and the *real*. This double character and impossibility recurs in many of my works.

NG: There are many falls and fiascos in your work, but also a reminder of the *memento vita*—to remember life. Can you speak about this dualism in your works?

PC: There is a clear vertical movement in many of my works, something that strives upwards and something that falls down. The ladder, the staircase, the ruin that is rebuilt, the bird that flies, the egg that falls, and the dying poppies that fall out of the frame, all encompass this movement. For example, it is only in the fall from the ideal image of them that the poppies become fragile and perishable—but for me also most beautiful. In general, there is a lot of transitoriness and death in my art, for example in my skeleton works, which I see as an extension of the tradition of making *memento mori* works, which is to say works that remind us of our mortality. *Looking Back* (2006) and *Half Way Through* (2006) are in both cases a skeleton that looks back on the life it once had. It is of course very basic and banal, my interest in skeletons and death remind me that I won't live forever and that we must therefore remember to live during the time we have. This is of course a serious matter, but often in my work death and the fall become almost tragicomic, for example in *Cowboy* (2006) in which his lasso becomes a gallows. Humour is not a conscious strategy as such, but it is present simply because that's also how I am. Good humour usually stems from something serious. You can't really make a joke out of something which is of no consequence.

NG: You save cuttings, cut-offs, sketches, drawings, and shelved ideas by the dozen—why?

PC: In 2021 my family and I moved from Copenhagen to the island of Mors. After having a workshop in the same place for more than twenty years, everything had to be packed. This afforded me the opportunity to reflect on what I should take with me, and what I should leave behind, both literally and metaphorically—and in fact it ended up being an exhibition, *Belonging*, at Galleri Specta, where the moving box became a recurring motif. I'm not very good at throwing things out. I save everything. It's both a blessing and a curse. For many years I have saved all my A4 sketches, copies, and drawings, because imagine if one should have need of them. And I also happen to think that a sketch can express something which the finished work can't, sketches have a spontaneity about them. At some point I realised that it was interesting to use them as material in other works, for example in *Under Overfladen (Under the Surface)* (2021) and the *White Window* (2010) for Nikolaj Kunsthal. In *White Window* one can't see out of the window, but an illusion of there being something on the other side is created. In reality my windows are a way of looking within instead of out. All of the sketches I used in the windows are in fact evidence of earlier ideas, thoughts and quotations which have accompanied me. And, of course, it is also a window onto me, telling my story and showing my process—and making me into the paper man, which I have also paraphrased in several works. I have, for example, made a work titled *Paperman* (2008) in which I have cut myself out of a sheet of A4, which I am at the same time holding.

NG: You have portrayed yourself in several of your works, but is it you or the artist Peter Callesen or is it just a man who looks like you?

PC: Often it's just easiest to use myself as a model, but there is also an element of it being about me or my role as an artist. Or in any case I use various situations, sensations, and feelings I have experienced myself as a starting point.

Broken Image (2008), for example, is a self-portrait which literally cracks and turns into shards and is probably about the contrast between how I would like to see myself and how I experience myself. I also see another, much larger work, *White Diary* (2008), as a sort of self-portrait. It is a diary/notebook in which everything is cut out and spreads in a jumble of three-dimensional figures and branches filling about four metres square. I'm pretty good at losing myself in details, and now and again it's difficult to gain an overview. In the same way, you can lose yourself in all the details of the work without noticing that the silhouette of the whole represents a face. You only see it by stepping back and looking at the work from a certain perspective.

NG: You have also made a series of shirts—are these your various disguises?

PC: I perhaps rather see the shirts as bodies and the paper as a sort of thin skin. But perhaps they are also a kind of self-portrait. The shirts are sewn of thin Japanese Zairei paper and are cut into in various ways: texts in one, doors and windows in another, and in a third shirt the back has become a three-dimensional vertebra. Where do we actually find our identity? Is it on the outside of the body, in the way we act, the way we dress, or is it to be found deep inside? It is an investigation of the inner versus the outer. It is also a sort of illustration of “thin skin,” which is to say being particularly emotional and sensitive. Looking behind the exterior requires patience and sensibility. But one can perhaps also say that the shirts pose a fundamental question: What does a human being consist of? About 100 butterflies are cut out of one of the shirts, titled *The Weight of My Soul* (2018); they tear themselves free of the shirt and fly away in a swarm up towards the light. Perhaps we have a soul which lives on when our bodies disappear. In this way, there is perhaps also an aspect of the shroud about the shirts.

NG: You are often asked about your relationship to God—where does this show itself in your works?

PC: I have made several works that take theological themes as their starting point. Among other things, I'm interested in how God is represented today. What I find interesting is the attempt to give God or Christ a body or another kind of physical presence because this is precisely one of the points in Christianity—that God became flesh, and that he became living and took the shape of something more than an abstract form. I think that previously there has been a reluctance to depict the divine in a more concrete way. I have myself made a decorative site-specific work, *Light of Man*, for the Margrethekirken church in Valby in 2017, where Jesus takes the form and body of an ordinary person. But he also shines and appears as a figure from the spheres. The idea was that he should be both God and human being. It was interesting to enter the space of a church where my art had to contribute to a liturgical function. But I don't otherwise have the intention of being missionary in my art related to the religious. What has been interesting for me is when I have had questions, doubts, or a matter of discussion with God, which I have taken as a starting point. But I consider myself a believer, and this contributes to the formation of my pictorial language and my world of symbols.

NG: In several works, cut-out letters and sentences become images and sculptural works. Can you say something about your relationship to language, and language as a material in your works?

PC: Yes, I've been interested in this in recent years. For example, in the decorative work *White Words* (2016), made for the multifunctional hall at the University of Copenhagen in Amager, I used letters and words, and materialised them in sort of concrete poetry. I thought it was interesting to explore language as the bearer of meaning, especially at the university. The work *No Title, Too Many Words in My Head* (2014) consists of texts cut out of my diary and glued together as a shell that looks like my own head. In a way it is my head. I have at several different times in my life been in therapy, and I have spoken for many hours to many different people about many different topics—but I don't always feel that it has helped. I have experienced that words sometimes aren't sufficient for creating understanding between people. The words certainly do form a head, but it is also very fragile, and is in fact a hollow shell. Perhaps that little head doesn't have space for all those words.

NG: Why has the topic of water been so urgent for you in your latest exhibition?

PC: The idea arose because Ribe has several times been subject to a storm surge, and the exhibition will be shown at Ribe Art Museum, after which it will travel to Sophienholm and Skive Museum. In extension of that drama, the current rise in sea levels, climate change, and rising temperatures are also making themselves apparent. And, in fact, I have worked with the topic of water in many earlier works—I have in several of my performances fought a heroic and one-sided battle with the forces of water. I am also very inspired by the Romantic painters, where a recurring theme was the battle of human beings with the forces of nature. This issue has gained new currency due to the climate crisis. Perhaps we can't overcome nature. In any case, the forces of nature affect our lives to a great degree at the moment. Water is, furthermore, fundamental: we consist of sixty per cent water, we water our trees, flowers, and plants, we can't live without water. But water can also lead to catastrophes, death, and destruction. This schism interests me. It was also important for me that it become not solely a political exhibition, but that I go deeper into the topic and work with existential themes. The entire climate crisis is at bottom existential, it is about life and death and the choices we make.