

## Peter Callesen: Existence

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Paper, as everyone knows, is made from wood. And wood comes from trees. Somehow I get the feeling that all of Peter Callesen's work comes from one tree in particular, the one that set the course for human history: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Callesen gamely confronts existential dilemmas of the self-consciousness of fallen humanity, including those connected to the awareness of death and the vexing entanglement of right and wrong, pleasure and pain, perception and illusion, catastrophe and miracle. And while he probes these quandaries through the production of images both two- and three-dimensional, his work is as much about its material—paper—as it is about its imagery. Perhaps this can be better conveyed by way of the question: Does Callesen use paper as a means for presenting an image, or does he use images as a way of showing what can be done with paper? His whole oeuvre amounts to what the title of a recent work of his calls an *Ocean of Papers and Thoughts* (2020)—an ocean in which we should beware of distinguishing paper and thought too hastily.

That the second possibility—the way of material—is a valid way of understanding Callesen's work suggests that, perhaps surprisingly, his art's deep affinities are as much with conceptual as with pictorial art. This is something that Callesen has acknowledged: "Basically," he has said, "I probably work quite conceptually," although he equally emphasizes his work's visual dimension (and, I would add, its tactile one).<sup>1</sup> His dedicated use of paper connects his work, specifically, to that branch of post-minimalist artistic activity that art historian and critic Robert Pincus-Witten identified, circa 1970, as "epistemological" in its concerns—exemplified by the work of the New York-based artists Mel Bochner, Sol LeWitt, and Dorothea Rockburne, among others, and distinguished from another branch, ontological in its concerns, according to Pincus-Witten, and rooted in the body and the self: the work of Vito Acconci, Lynda Benglis, and others.<sup>2</sup>

Among those whom Pincus-Witten championed as protagonists of the epistemic trend was the Israeli artist Joshua Neustein. In particular, Pincus-Witten saw Neustein's predilection for paper as exemplifying something he shared with other epistemologically oriented artists, who often "use paper bluntly and apologetically as the essential material," showing "a certain sensitization toward the tactile experience of drawing itself, let alone to the sheerly physical properties of paper—its fibre, pulp, and strand." Thus, "The ascendance of paper as the substance of greatest authority is accompanied by an appreciation of many other of its features—its absence of aesthetic pretentiousness, its ordinariness, its cheapness, its ubiquitousness, its signification of studio and art life, and so on."<sup>3</sup> Callesen understands all these aspects of paper and emphasizes, further, "its frailty and impermanence," which "lends intensity, presence, and tactility."<sup>4</sup> It's notable that, according to the logic of Pincus-Witten's account, the epistemological concerns that led artists such as Joshua Neustein and the others to favour paper as a material led almost immediately to ontological ones. As Bochner emphasized, "No thought exists without a sustaining support."<sup>5</sup> Paper is a support we often take for granted, but Callesen—like Neustein and Bochner before him—shows how essential it can be to think deeply about both knowledge and being.

One might go further and say: Thoughts emerge from their sustaining support. This emergence is possibly best allegorized in the two versions of *Half Way Through/Looking Back* that Callesen made in 2006 and 2007: the skeleton starting to sit up from the matrix of its existence, a sheet of A4 paper. But even where the connection of the *almost*-detached

figure to its support becomes most tentative, most precarious, most in danger, the ontological identity—image and matrix are of one substance—holds. Consider *Fall* (2008), which would directly evoke the biblical tree of the knowledge of good and evil, as well as *Cowboy* (2006), *Not as Fast as His Shadow* (2008), or *Holding on to Myself* (2006). Figures emerge from the two-dimensional realm (but it's not really two dimensional, since we see for ourselves that the paper has a certain thickness, no matter how little) to become volumetric, but in doing so, they fall down.

In other works, certainly, things become completely detached from the matrix—*Two in One II* (2010), for instance. But the viewer always remains conscious of the source. Paper cut from paper is still paper, and while it may take the shape of a butterfly, it can't fly away from what it is. It's true that a previous travelling exhibition of Callesen's work was called *Out of Nothing*—but what I get from his art is a reminder that (as King Lear said, but did not understand) "nothing will come of nothing." Nothing comes from elsewhere. Many of Callesen's works are made from a single sheet, and while something may be subtracted from the sheet—lost—he does not typically add any extra material in order to construct his work.

As Callesen builds three-dimensional volumes representing people and things from the flat shapes he excises from paper, he simultaneously creates an absence, where whatever has been cut out used to be. Nothing comes of nothing, it's true, but here, nothing *has* come out of nothing. And that nothing still shows something—a silhouette, an outline, that we can read as a figure or object. A sort of Icarus skeleton hangs from the empty shadow of a bird in flight in *Like a Bird I* (2012). We don't need any of the fine internal details (which we find in the hanging skeleton figure) to immediately understand what we're seeing. The non-existence of this bird-image turns out to be the specific form of its existence.

I've been emphasizing Callesen's works using single sheets of paper—works that present his art at its most concise and direct in effect, no matter how time-consuming and painstaking the process of making them might have been. I don't mean to sideline his more elaborate sculptures and room-filling installations, but in this context, the question they raise is this: Do they simply elaborate (at times to an extreme) the method of Callesen's smaller, more self-contained pieces? Or are they something quite distinct? One immediate difference comes from size itself—the difference between works keyed to the scale of the human body (more ontological) and ones whose scale is, instead, that of the head: implicitly, mental images (more epistemological). And that's not the only distinction. Speaking of one of the first of the larger, more complex works, *White Diary* (2008), Callesen himself observed, "The relation between positive and negative is not as direct as in the former paper works. Having created a logic for my things in which positive and negative correspond to each other, I felt like breaking with this logic."<sup>6</sup>

But wanting to break with one's own logic and actually doing so are two different things. Often, the inner structure of an artist's work is more durable than his or her conscious intention. One wants to make a break and instead succeeds in finding a different perspective on what one was already doing. Callesen explains that in *White Diary* the viewer's changing perspective is key to understanding. There is no single matrix from which everything derives (and to which the viewer's mind always returns each thing). Instead, there is a dialectic of totality and detail, such that, as Callesen put it, "things can refuse to be seen at a glance."<sup>7</sup> Here, perception and cognition form the matrix from which discrete entities emerge and to which they return—one is tempted to say, from which they are born and back to which

they die. This brings us back, evidently, to the knowledge of good and evil, for it was after eating from the tree of knowledge that Eve and Adam learned their fate: "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."<sup>8</sup> Whether the ground of a thing's existence is its material substrate or its perceptibility, that existence is time-bound and finite. This finitude appears to be Callesen's deep subject.

Notes

1. Anni Nørskov & Gerd Rathje: "Interview with Peter Callesen" in *Peter Callesen: Ud ad Intet/Out of Nothing*, Museet for Religios Kunst, Trapholt, Mjellby Konstmuseum, Haugar kunstmuseum, 2009, 103.
2. Robert Pincus-Witten: *Postminimalism*, New York, NY: Out of London Press, 1977.
3. Robert Pincus-Witten: "The Neustein Essay" in *Eye to Eye: Twenty Years of Art Criticism*, Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1984, 136-37 (originally published in the catalogue for *Neustein*, The Tel Aviv Museum, 1977).
4. Anni Nørskov & Gerd Rathje: *Op.cit.*, 100.
5. Mel Bochner: "Notecards" in *Solar System & Rest Rooms. Writings and Interviews, 1965-2007*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008, 69.
6. Quoted in Anni Nørskov & Gerd Rathje: *Op.cit.*, 41.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Gen 3:19.



*Not as Fast as his Shadow II*  
2007