Conversation with Tomas Kominis Endresen

We take a walk through Tomas Kominis Endresen’s Master exhibition, *6 Minutes of Freshness*, at Gallery Mejan at the end of September. We look without talking. Later he will describe the exhibition as very personal even though it may seem aloof on first impressions. A dialogue takes place in terms of colour and material. It is a body of cells referring to one another; elements are repeated, subtracted and added.

Tomas guides me through the exhibition. We stand in the entrance hall with our backs to the door. He shows me the angles which he wants us to keep in mind. In front of us the stairs lead down into the gallery, another Master exhibition is underway in the space to the left. The visual contrast between them is already obvious here. Along the left side of the wall traces of wall filler have been left behind whereas the right side, which is Tomas’, reflects the impossible task of trying to achieve the perfect surface. Here, the crispness of the white cube is more intense and is reinforced by the well-polished surfaces, a feeling of good taste, and pureness.

– We often have a very superficial way of relating to the world, so it feels natural to point out the obvious instead of exposing what lies beneath. There are also so many ways of interpreting the surface. Then there is already something about contemporary art that points specifically to the surface, or rather a return to it.

**What are you referring to specifically?**

This idea that the material itself should be able to tell a story, or that it is in itself complete. I wonder why this has become so exciting today. I have not disclosed anything in particular but it’s interesting to work both with and against. That has been one of the starting points in this exhibition. How to assemble a space that makes people feel productively challenged by what they are experiencing. When I started working with art I was very much caught up in the discussion and conversation around art, what art can and can’t do. This developed into an enquiry into the discussion, or the chit chat in-between, where the exhibition acts as a set of parameters. Where even idle chatter acts as exchangeable commodities of theoretical elaborations. I think I’m somewhere in the middle because I’m still very interested in what emerges from the murmurings that hover around it. This is maybe connected to my thinking that there are limits to what art can and can’t do.

**What do you think this limitation looks like?**

It seems as though art today is very much about how we negotiate numerous appearances while at the same time we have certain expectations that it should be able to unveil something more. I have a hard time believing that all art can support the weight that we aspire for it.

There is a container of disposable blue shoe covers in the entrance to the gallery space. Tomas hasn’t put up any kind of sign encouraging visitors to put them on but is anyway annoyed when people don’t.

The first thing that we come across once we have taken a step into the room is a kind of room divider in three parts. The first part is a white wall. There is a transparent blue line in the middle of it, about a centimeter thick and thirty centimeters wide.

– I imagined this as a painting. Really it’s the back of a shelf that you can see from the other side. You could see the next wall as speaking about abstract painting as well. It consists of a wooden frame made of walnut that encases double silicone «glazed» acrylic
glass. A pattern has been built up between the panes with Kiehl’s Pour Homme shower gel. It has a very typically masculine fragrance reminiscent of what would always be in your father’s bathroom locker. I chose the wooden frame because it hints at something fancy or up-scale, and I wanted something that clearly pointed to it’s natural origin. The third wall has more of a practical function and makes it so that the arrangement can stand up at all, but it constructs the space in the manner I was looking for.

What is it with fragrances in contemporary art? It feels like they’ve popped up all over the place.
I’ve been wondering that as well. Maybe it’s because you have to be there in order to experience it. Regardless of how many cooking shows you watch you are never going to smell that Moroccan tagine. Or 3-d glasses at the movies as another example that demands your participating.

At two points within the exhibition Tomas has incorporated bannisters (handrails kanske?) which, at first glance, appear to be a part of the original architecture.

– They have a symbolical spatial specificity. School has acted as a reassuring point for me to lean on. Now that I’ve reached this point in my trajectory, this exhibition serves as part of my entering into a new dimension in my work. With this in mind, I figured that the handrails should blend into the surroundings and be constant as opposed to the more fleeting elements. The hand wash in the film gives a sort of momentary guise of freshness but the handrails appear fresh however you look at them.

At the same time handrails can be one of the most frightening things for people with germaphobia.
Yeah that’s addressed in the film a bit as well. I myself have a few phobias.

That was the first thing I thought about when I started watching your video. Washing your hands in such a focused way is an extremely overt visualization of germaphobia.
Every time I am on an elevator or an airplane there is always someone right behind me, or beside me, that is coughing or sneezing. That is implied in the film with the use of, among other sounds, a sneeze, that speaks about the uncontrollable. So there are definitely contradictions with these railings, as they are an idea of a support structure that in practice doesn’t really work. And this recurs in the video work where you’re trying to clean a piece of acrylic glass which, in itself, is an impossible task. As soon as you try to clean it you get marks on it. It’s an unprotected surface as soon as you pull off the plastic film and even if you leave it on when the pane is scratched marks build up under it.

Tomas takes out his phone and points out the screen protector.

– I’ve though a lot about this here as well. How you try and get out the air bubbles that get between the film and the screen. The colour and the air bubbles are obvious references to Pamela Rosenkranz’s work from the last Venice Biennale. For me it’s about the fascination with why certain trends come about in the art world. To seize upon the trend as something meaningful.

Have you thought about all this with trends over a longer period of time?
When you do something and are the least fascinated by contemporary art, or of what’s going on around you then you are influenced by some sort of trend regardless. It’s going to express itself to some extent. When you think about trends it’s quite often that you belittle
them. I believe one truth, if there are any about art, and that is that it says something about it’s time.

**Isn’t it because it feels fragile and fleeting?**
Yeah it is. Nowadays we’ve taken on something more artificial, something that is more fresh. Something short-lived. If you look at fashion for example, it’s a forum of the culture industry where people talk about trends without it being something negative. A new trend is created once every six months and lasts for two years. There’s an idea of progression but at the same time you’re always looking back at what has already been done. And then it feels like art has become fashionable.

**Do you think it’s common to think about what is art in 2015?**
Maybe not in Stockholm, that feels pretty localized. The galleries and other institutions seem to look more inwards or at what has already been established. For instance, what I think is missing is a discussion around ways of eschewing authorship as well as «the market».

We are standing on the other side of the screen. We now see the blue shelf that we saw the back of when we first entered the room. On the perspex shelf there is an aluminium object that anyone would recognize straight away as a MacBook Pro but stripped of all it’s capacities.

**How did it happen that you wanted to use this particular form?**
It started out with me wanting a rectangular form with details that could possibly allude to that kind of form but then I thought – why not go right to the core of what I want to address? I found a model online, and started scaling down most features, whilst amplifying one. It’s really quite a trite gesture. More and more people have one of these now and nearly all other computers look like this. Apple are particularly good at appealing to our desires. You want to touch it. When you have the cable in static electricity builds up and it’s a completely different materiality to that which other computers have. In that way they have set the standard that there needs to be more than what’s inside. I on the other hand have focused solely on the outside, it’s completely unusable.

**When did this project get started?**
It started as a piece for my Masters exhibition together with the mandatory essay that any student enrolled in an MFA program has to write. I planned to approach the essay without typing anything down. While I have used text a lot in my work I wanted to do something that talks about something that is related to text without using text. But it turned out that you need a text to go with it because it doesn’t explicitly talk about something.

**Did you feel forced to have a text to accompany the exhibition?**
To me this process says so much about my myself anyway, but at the same time I can see that the exhibition begs some explanation, and there were those that wanted to know more. I’ve seen it as a theoretical starting point that leads into the exhibition. When I talk about works I tend to start talking about a lot of different stuff at the same time and in some way I wanted to emphasize this critical inclination. In order to mimic and make obvious this interest I let three different people write the texts to underline this heterogeneity and uncertainty – what is it that we are actually talking about? What should we look at and emphasize? How should we digest this peculiar system of things?

Both the works and the idea with the three different texts reflect some kind of need for control.
Maybe it does but I haven’t thought about it that much. When I start a new project I often want to control myself. So in one way it’s been a method for relinquishing control. To open up for interpretations. Most of the time the thoughts that arise in-between the different readings are really interesting. A neither/nor. It’s also connected to the film, which carry a lot of obvious references to specific things. But it’s also a way to understand the video essay without there being a crass anthropological definition of the form. I’m not trying to expose anything other than different types of surfaces. Showing what is there, because we do engage with the world through a multitude of surfaces. I keep returning to this in my works lately.

**Could you consider going into a tighter collaboration with another artist?**
Yeah I could. I already work a lot with Gabriel Säll in the fact that we talk a lot, bounce ideas off each other. So in some way we have a collaboration where we work individually in our respective studios. I see it as sort of a collaborative effort but I don’t know how he sees it. He was quite surprised when I wanted to include him in the text about who had done the exhibition. But it was just because we have had a dialogue over four years and it has culminated in something that I think he should get credit for.

**What’s next?**
I’m going to do something for the spring show. I’ll probably continue working with certain things from this exhibition. Like this Mac form that I’ll modify in different ways as a further investigation of a commercial industrial technique that is new to me. I am also working with water on various water repellent fabrics. This moment when water hits the surface and creates pearls that usually slide of, or evaporate. I am trying to make what is fleeting permanent.

The conversation between Tomas Kominis Endresen and Ulrika Pilo took place in Stockholm on September 27, 2015.
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