

Tools for New Insights

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*There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.*¹

We can begin with an opening. A marking of an opening at any rate, in the form of a window that is slightly ajar and allows the light to stream in. The work *Window* is from 2002 and is a drawing of an open window. The drawing is on paper that has later been mounted on canvas and placed in a frame. A humble pencilled *trompe l'oeil* that points out beyond the limiting walls of the exhibition room. Perhaps a dream of openness, of vista, metaphorically of air and light inside our heads. The work is a paradox, since at the same time as it shows an opening, it also emphasizes the existence of the wall – that we are in a closed space, the space of art. There is no window, there is only a picture of a window, a representation, an idea, and now, in the viewer's consciousness, a mental picture that in turn remains as physical sensations, memories of opening windows round about in the world, the feeling of the fresh air that pours in, the expectation of and pleasure from being able to look out.

Window connects with all the other windows in art history, windows that in the course of time have symbolised so many different things: The Divine Light, artistic inspiration, the rule of enlightenment, the idea that behind the world of things there is a spirituality, that there are cracks in reality that art can point to and perhaps keep open for us. The windows in Johannes Vermeer, through which the light is poured almost like a physical substance, like the milk from the milkmaid's jug. Painted 102 years before Tine Bay Lührssen's *Window* we find *Dust Motes Dancing in Sunlight* by the Danish artist Vilhelm Hammershøi, painted on the basis of a photograph that sharpened Hammershøi's eye for the many intermediate nuances between black and white.² Tine Bay Lührssen's works have much affinity with Hammershøi's paintings. One could perhaps say, using an analogy from music, that they play in the same key. Like Hammershøi Tine Bay Lührssen is concerned with the creation of spaces, but also with the movements of light and the formation of shadow. She works with a muted palette that brings out the small vibrating difference, and there is a hushed quality, a turning of the back, that we also find in Hammershøi. They are preserved moments that paradoxically take on a certain character of eternity or timelessness.

A large part of Tine Bay Lührssen's works combine draughtsmanship, that is the traditional handicraft of the artist, the most direct sort of notation, with the far more recent and immaterial medium of video. The works have the same basic structure: a scene is set, sketched simply in the form of drawings, either directly on the wall, or on completely, flat unframed boards that have the same texture as the wall. Live pictures are then projected onto this slender, but direction- and perspective-giving scenography, showing persons who appear, perform an action and disappear. Most of them have their backs to us, so there are no disturbing individual features and the colours are toned down, so that they are close to being transparent. The persons seem to be looking straight ahead towards a distant point. As if they are situated in a larger room than the observer is. They carry out quite short actions, mini-performances, as it were, that are shown in an endless loop. Lührssen's use of video is very

much underplayed so that the medium itself almost becomes invisible. It is not a film, but persons liberated from the film that move into the static picture.

Springboard, 2001, consists of a drawn landscape, perhaps a beach, divided by an architectonic element. Now a woman comes walking into the picture; she follows the architectonic element, which makes the picture's perspective change. What was previously almost unlimited is now a room with a springboard, on which the woman stands, bends down, takes off, dives and disappears. As if she were diving into an invisible space in the wall. In *Carpet*, 2005, the point of departure is a horizontal line, on which a black crow is perched. The logic of our sight makes us see it as a telephone wire. But then a woman steps into the picture; she rolls out a carpet, and the perspective changes; now the line is no longer a wire in the air; now it has been transformed into the horizon, a point of disappearance for the bridge or road into the imaginary space indicated by the unrolled carpet. Until the carpet is rolled up again. There is an element of conjuring in the quiet challenge these works offer to perspective and perception.

The carpet is a room one can roll up and take with one to unroll in another place. The idea of the portable room is one that occupies Tine Bay Lührssen. Through her works she shows that mentally man, like a snail, carries his space with him and can unroll it and settle down.

Amount of Space, 2009, is a perspective drawing (on paper) of a carpet, on which there stand two glasses. No more is needed for the story to begin. A meeting has taken place on a Persian carpet. From this many yarns can be spun about flying carpets and great prospects, about dream trips for two people. Now the carpet is empty and together with the two glasses constitutes a stage where something has been enacted. It is a very beautiful and meticulous drawing, a piece of handicraft that it has taken time and care to execute, just as it takes time and care to weave a carpet. Over this carpet and at its edge a rake now appears. A live picture of a rake that, a little clumsily and imprecisely, is pushed in and pulled back. The combination is not logical. A rake is a tool that is used for working the soil, a way of extending and optimising the human hand and arm. It is a big comb that can arrange the earth, give it order, a pattern and symmetry. But an oriental carpet, something that belongs indoors and for that matter in upper-middle-class homes, and then a rake – these things don't fit together. The carpet feels soft, comfortable, like soft skin, the sharp teeth of the rake, tear at our eyes. This is a disturbing work, one that questions whether our ways of structuring and bringing order into the world are just as imprecise and clumsy as the dance of the rake is here.

In the series *Tools* Tine Bay Lührssen has translated the idea of the mobile room into five different three-dimensional modules. The series of works consists of small units that may remind one of houses or cars. One can move into them mentally and imagine what, since they have been designated as tools, they can be used for. A tool is defined as something that is designed to fulfil a specific function. But how and for what should one use these *Tools*, which the artist has placed at the disposal of our thoughts? The works give rise to many associations, for instance the sacred whiteness of church walls, a black shed, a shiny boat, a rocking chair, a balcony, a garden gate, a confessional. Thanks to their size these works attract one, because it is easy to form an overview of them, mentally to move one's body into them, as into the playhouses of one's childhood. The human figures in the combined drawing

and video works are in a scale that harmonises with the viewer's body. Art is just as much a physical as a mental experience, and when the woman in *Springboard* dives out over the ramp or when the woman in *Panel* pulls the blind down, it is also the viewer's body that does it. The viewer's body that enters the represented bodies, takes their place and goes with them. In the same way the viewer's body takes up residence directly in Lührssen's cars, feels them on and around it, explores them and the possibilities each of them seems to point to. In this way one can say that the viewer in fact directly sets about testing the tools and their functionality.

I imagine these *Tools* as models of how one can be in the world. In *Tool I* one steps into the neat living-room-like shell, where one is protected by tradition and middle-class culture and can regard the world from one's balcony. *Tool II* is a place for exchange, a garden gate, a threshold, which not only separates, marks a difference between you and me, but also opens a space for negotiation. *Tool III* is like a ship. A little red-painted sailboat, which can drop anchor, put out the gangway, invite others aboard or go ashore oneself. But the gangplank can also be drawn up so that the work can close itself in, without the possibility of intruding eyes. *Tool IV* is a passage and an opening. A memory of the secret garden with the green-stained shed that one has to pass in order to reach a clearing. Both literally and figuratively. *Tool V* is for conversation. A room for contemplation or love. A common feature of all five tools is that they are mobile. That they, so to speak, can move around freely, that they offer possibilities of both insight and changing vistas. *Tools I-V* can be seen as the visual expression of a desire to invent quite new tools for human being and cognition.

We re-encounter the rostrum or balcony as a figure in the (video-drawing) work *Remove*, 2007, in which a woman builds up a balcony out of a heap of old fences. Something that was intended to fence something in, close off, is in this way rebuilt to make something that establishes itself as an opening towards the world, a place for communication. A vantage point, a privileged place. A balcony that of course faces the wall, so the woman can stand with her back to us and address the space that is apparently in front of her, but which for us is a limit.

Tine Bay Lührssen's works often refer to German Romantic art with Caspar David Friedrich as an emblematic figure. In the work *Ladder* from 2000 a pencil drawing of a slightly hazy sea hangs high up on the wall. An aluminium ladder has been set up to give access to the view. Ascending the ladder would bring one to eye level with the work. One is invited, visually, to climb up, fight one's way to art (as one often does to see a view, where a fantastic vista is the reward for a laborious physical feat) and in a paradoxical way register oneself as another little *Monk by the Sea*.³ But in contrast to the little monk's view Lührssen's sea does not mirror an internal state. There are no threatening black clouds on the horizon or promising light in the distance that can give the viewer the both fearful and joyful sense of the sublime that was Friedrich's ideal. In Lührssen the sea is a gentle registration of the play of the light across a largely undifferentiated sea, a space drained of strong feeling, the diametric opposite of Friedrich's stormy vista. For me Lührssen's works comes closer to something meditative, almost Zen-like. This is partly because of the time and concentration invested in the draughtsmanship, but not least because of the simple ladder, which almost has the effect of a

slap or blow from a Zen master, a preparation for the duality that art embodies, and which Lührssen underlines here: that the work is both an illusion and material, both an idea, a mental space and an entirely concrete limit, a banal wooden board that one can lean a ladder up against. Neither in this work nor in the many combinations of video and drawing, does Lührssen give us pictures of the view. Instead she shows us the expanse of finitude, the limit of our sight, along with a teasing opening to seeing “Beyond the Reach of my Eyes”.

¹ Leonard Cohen: From the song *Anthem*, album *The Future*, 1992, Columbia Records

² Vilhelm Hammershøi: The painting *Dust Motes Dancing in Sunlight*, 1900.
Ordrupgaard, Denmark.

³ Caspar David Friedrich: The painting *Monk by the Sea*, 1808-09. Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Germany.