Daniel Birnbaum and Håkan Rehnberg: Conversation

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DB: Let us begin with what we have in front of us: an exhibition of paintings and a number of sculptures. The paintings are all new, but not so the three-dimensional works. First the paintings: What kind of images are these?

HR: I have moved up to a slighter larger format – from 170 x 150 cm to 200 x 185 cm and 230 x 200 cm. It gives me more elbow room in the paintings and it also increases the challenge. As always, these are paintings made during a single session; the paint has been manipulated wet-on-wet. I always work on sandblasted acrylic glass with oil paint and a palette knife. First, I apply the paint in dabs and fragments, covering the surface with several layers. Then I use a small palette knife to reveal parts of the surface all the way down to the support. It's a subtractive painting technique, as it were. I can't change anything afterwards, so the process requires a great deal of concentration and attentiveness.

DB: You paint by removing paint?

HR: You could say that I move the paint around. Almost as a secondary activity. It's as if I am ploughing a half-unknown ground. It's a rather broken gesture that sort of cancels itself out. The gesture undermines the configuration. It's a bit like obliterating and extending the surface. Basically it's about transposing layers, visually and physically. I stop – often in a state of euphoria tinged with resignation – at the very moment when the painting has attained an ultimate expression of exactitude. Some of the paintings in this show are grouped under the working title "H on the Beach". The title is not a point of departure; it appeared after the work was done, so it has nothing to do with my intentions; rather it's something against which I test my work. Among other things, H refers to Carl Fredrik Hill and his late paintings of beaches, where seaweed and sludge glimmer in the shallow tide. It's like a surface that simultaneously reveals and conceals itself, appears and withdraws; everything ends up either under or over a lustrous surface of water, writhing in the tide, at once both exquisite and repulsive. There is such a painting in Gothenburg where Hill employed simple graphs to produce an improvised sky and a beach thick with paint. Heaven, Hell, Hill – H is an unstable consonant, sometimes just indicated by a marker for aspiration, a friction of breathing. H is also Homer and the rocky coast of the Sirens, and of course Hamlet, as well as the late Hölderlin, gazing out across an imaginary sea towards foreign archipelagos and continents. But don't forget that the paintings are abstract, not maritime.

DB: I recently looked in one of your books from the end of the 1980s, *Moira*, and was reminded of the austerity of your early paintings on metal, in this case sheets of lead. There was something archaic about these painted objects, which, time and time again, appeared to return to the same original boundary. In this book, which also contains a poetic text by Katarina Frostenson, you include some quotations from the *Odyssey*. At other times you have referred to early Greek philosophy. It is as if, in your painting, you visit the same place or the same boundary between places, perhaps searching for a possible beginning. The terseness and the indefatigable quest for some kind of origin appear to have evolved over the years into a more eventful painting. How to understand this transformation? Have you grown more frivolous?

HR: Fundamentally, my attitude is very much the same, but years of practice have brought on a richness of approaches and superpositions. I have also had periods of reappraisal. It's not really a quest for origins, but more that the "situation" has to be continuously re-established, re-written – I fall out of that which I have established. However, it's as though I spend more time on painting now, I don't just establish it, I actually implement it, albeit in a contradictory manner. That might be frivolous – or at least more sensual.

DB: I remember a little manifesto by the painter Joseph Marioni about "radical painting". Marioni was not concerned with political radicalness; he was looking for the roots of his practice, painting. The word *radical* goes back to the Latin *radix*, which means "root". Do you find these thoughts appealing?

HR: "Radical painting" has always appealed to me and challenged me, but I also find it problematic in terms of a practice. I am wary of the type of essentialism that leads to near-theological dimensions. Also it results in a rather monotonous expression and a forced practice, as if painting rested on axioms. Günter Umberg is one of the painters who has remained faithful to a radical painting and still been able to constantly enrich his work with a complex, generous attitude to the aesthetic context.

When you stay close to the root you realise how ramified it is and how it is nourished from something groundless, which cannot be brought under any rules, to paraphrase Schelling.

DB: How should one understand your interest in philosophical texts? It's not that common among painters to refer to a German speculative thinker like you just did. Do you feel that your close studies of, for example, Heraclitus have enriched your art, or are they two separate activities that sometimes overlap?

HR: I read like a painter. I am mainly concerned with a handful of authors. Heraclitus remains particularly close to my heart. Hans Ruin and I produced the first complete Swedish edition of his fragments. We weighed each word carefully during endless conversations. It took a long time and we let it take a long time. It was not just a matter of understanding the meaning of the Greek words but of the complete historical, archaic context. And then each fragment had to be expressed in a genuine Swedish idiom.

DB: Is this also the case for the poetry?

HR: Anders Olsson and I began translating Paul Celan in December 1986. My German is not the best but I think that I contributed to a good translation. It was first published in *Kris* magazine and then as a book by Norstedts under the title *Lila luft* (Purple Air). Translating is a delicate business, both impossible and necessary; the most intense form of reading. It is my reading and my obsession with language and words which, paradoxically, has lead to my thinking that painting is neither image nor language. I have always opposed all narrative tendencies. I feel attracted to a painting that *is not* a practice, an activity with which to say, express or do anything, but one which is rather a profoundly critical activity, an unravelling of the actual preconditions of the pursuit. One never perceives of a painting discursively, or rather, one should never do so, but one should be grabbed by it as by a whirlwind, dumbfounded and shattered. It's as if form and figuration were broken up against one another and in themselves. The gesture doesn't carry an expression; rather, it creeps about, unfathomable, as if marking its existence, or trying to shed its skin. Those who have seen Poussin's painting *Landscape with a Man killed by a Snake* may perhaps understand what I am talking about.

DB: I don't really remember. An archaic landscape with a snake crawling in the foreground, or right...?

HR: Exactly. The painting is the National Gallery in London. The motif of the man killed by a snake is in the foreground, but it is in shadow, as if it were unwittingly present. It's as if several motifs are being treated simultaneously, as if peripheral details were as important as centrally placed events, as if that which is hidden away almost pushes aside that which is pronounced. The painting is perceived as a whole, which is broken up into fragments and, at the same time, is reconstituted in an incomprehensible movement. It is reminiscent of the snake's crawling movements, which are both forming and unformable, both fascinating and blinding.

DB: We have included a number of your texts in this volume. They are all short and in some strange way both concrete and abstract. What happens when you write? You said that you read like a painter. But do you write like a painter or rather, like a viewer?

HR: I have tried to develop something of a genre of my own, which kind of curves around its own construction. Something that makes it difficult to decide what the texts are and what they do. I have always found it difficult to write. The sentences sort of clog together into something illegible as soon as I try to write them down. A bit like nocturnal notes, which, in the morning, have lost their aura and become completely meaningless.

The need to write alongside painting has never really let go of me, even if I haven't written that much. There are some different kinds of texts. Some are commentaries on Homer, some deal with mythology, some with my own experiences, some are commentaries to classic painters such as Poussin and others. Sometimes I comment on my own practice. But I also want the texts to have an intrinsic quality. They help me along the way, to cancel out positions.

DB: Have you read any texts about your art that have given you a new perspective on your work? Or, to put it differently, have you been involved in a critical dialogue that has been central to your development?

HR: Certainly, there are some thought-provoking texts but I can't say they have changed my view of my activities. However, I conduct critical dialogues with various people who follow my work. These conversations, or their gazes rather, are important to my work. Sometimes there is no need for words; another person's reliable gaze is sufficient. For long periods of time the daily work in the studio is like an ongoing agitation, disinclination and openness. This is what makes painting such a stimulating but also difficult thing – that each and every moment calls for a decisive and, in a way, irreversible decision. I can never rest in the comfort of the craft, in the prearranged intentions or routines. Instead, it is an invalidating and somewhat eerie transition from the active to the intensely passive voice – painting is being done.

DB: Which contemporary thinker have you studied most thoroughly?

HR: Maurice Blanchot, without a doubt. His views on writing have affected me in ways that cannot be summarised in a few simple concepts. It was via Mallarmé's preoccupation with the catastrophe as a trope for writing that I began to read Blanchot.

DB: Obviously it is difficult to translate a literary tendency into painting and sculpture, but nevertheless, I understand this spiritual affinity. Tell me about the sculptures in the exhibition. Which is the oldest one?

HR: *The Sealed Studio* was produced in 1999 for the exhibition *On the Sublime* at Rooseum, Malmö. It is my largest sculpture and for me it's a key work. It was incorporated into the collection of Moderna Museet in the early 2000s. It hasn't been displayed for a long time, so it feels particularly important to show it now. It's the only work in the exhibition that is not new. I have also produced a larger sculpture in aluminium for the exhibition, a kind of double stage – a stage within a stage. The working title is *Skenscenen*.

DB: It may be helpful to shed some light on how the sculptures emerged. Would it be correct to say that they are a development of movements in your painting, or do they represent a completely different vein in your art?

HR: They are kind of the anatomy of the place in which the paintings are actualised. I used to say: "I am not a painter; I become a painter in the moment when I paint. When I step back, it is as if I lose that role." This was a reaction to a then predominant view about the inherent ability of an artist. To me, the artistic act is intimately related to a form of theatricality, like entering a stage, as if I was disconnected from myself. In my studio, near the wall where I work, there is a little ledge. Stepping on it is an active reminder.

DB: In some way your studio feels like a part of your art. Its proportions, are they present in your images and objects, or is it just my imagination?

HR: My studio was originally a dairy. The architecture is pure Functionalism and designed by Hakon Ahlberg in the 1930s. It's small but eminently suitable. I have worked there since 1990. And of course there is a connection: the place haunts my works. I have a predilection for reducing the mid-range in favour of details and the total form. Perhaps it is the Functionalism coming to the surface: large, pure surfaces and a concern for transitions, joints and details. And in works like *The Sealed Studio*, my point of departure has been my actual studio of which I have made a hyperbolical version, a sculpture bordering on architecture which is extremely open and accessible and at the same time closed and separative, like a body that steps out of itself.

DB: Some of the sculptures remind me of rudimentary buildings, and perhaps even of some kind of puzzling furniture. Are there any artistic models outside of your own imaginary and physical work situation? Is there a relationship here to Minimalism?

HR: Of course there are models and objects of comparison. In my work I always try to be aware of the tradition, the contemporary tradition as well as the historical one. Minimalism has always been essential to me. It was decisive to me as a budding artist in the early 1970s. It was something radically repellent yet physically present. What used to appeal to me was the view of how the object related to the place. But also the use of prefabricated materials and the reduced process. I was looking for something that was neither representation nor construction, but more of an elementary action that would transform an item or a material into an art object. One could call it art's ambivalent imperative.

DB: The Swedish art scene has been partly oriented towards the United States, which is very much apparent at Moderna Museet. It's certainly interesting that we may have the best collection of Pop Art outside of the United States, as well as central works by Donald Judd and other Minimalists. But it has been at the expense of other things, such as Continental European art from these decades onwards. I imagine that your approach breaks with this emphasis on the American. I'm thinking of your philosophical interests, which I know are mainly centred on German and French currents of thought, from Martin

Heidegger to Maurice Blanchot. And perhaps also in art. Are there still impulses in your art from Gerhard Richter and Blinky Palermo? From Günter Umberg?

HR: The Swedish artists whom I contacted as a very young man, at the age of 17, were Jan Håfström and Ola Billgren. They took me seriously which meant a lot for my self-confidence. I made some works in the spirit of their art. It was a brief phase but they have remained important discussion partners for me.

I saw the Joseph Beuys exhibition at Moderna Museet in 1971. It made a deep impression, especially because I was totally unprepared for it. It was something entirely different to what I had ever seen in Gothenburg. I was very receptive at this time. His works had an impact on what I did in my first years at the Royal Institute of Art in the mid-1970s. However, I soon moved on in a much more abstract direction. It was as if I knew what I wanted to do, but couldn't really get there. A decisive moment was a visit to Barnett Newman's widow in New York in the company of Jan Håfström and Margaretha Åsberg. At her house I saw the painting *Onement*. A crystallisation process began at this point and it is still going on. Here I encountered an existential approach and an anti-formalist formalism coupled with an approach to painting with material and reappraising overtones.

I also discovered the painting of Brice Marden and Robert Ryman. I saw a couple of wooden boxes by Donald Judd that were installed with such wonderful precision. Blinky Palermo was another early discovery. I was working on a form of hybrid of object and painting. Objects that were more oriented towards frontality. My painting had a distinct materiality and I painted on heavy iron objects.

A painter such as Gerhard Richter did not interest me at all. His preoccupation with medial images and figuration did not appeal to me. Moreover, Pop Art was never very important for me and at the time I regarded him as a European representative of it. I met Günter Umberg at the end of the 1980s through Claes Nordenhake. At that point I was already on my way. He visited my studio and looked at what I was doing. Even though the American impulses were crucial, my gaze was entirely Continental European. I imagine that American artists often saw themselves as innovative, but for me it has been more important to see oneself as critical.

DB: I remember that you spent quite a lot of time in Paris. What has it meant for your art?

HR: Between 1984 and 1986 I lived in Paris with my partner Anna. I went to Paris in order to deepen and radicalise my art and to be able to work in peace. It was not the activities of its contemporary art scene that attracted me. I didn't find them particularly dynamic. There were many exciting exhibitions but they didn't have their origin there. Still, it was a vital and intellectual climate which I could take part in. Somehow I had already got an inkling of where I wanted to go with my art and Paris with its museums and bookshops was the perfect city.

DB: Tell me about your first exhibitions: you were one of three artists who were invited to exhibit at the Thielska Gallery in 1978. Shortly thereafter you were one of the artists who participated in the *Ibid.* exhibition, which was documented in an issue of *Kris* magazine.

HR: During my years at the Royal Institute of Art I collaborated with Gregor Wroblevski and Johan Scott. In the absence of any meaningful teaching, we created our own school. The result of the collaboration was presented as art objects at the Thielska Gallery. We studied Wittgenstein, Mallarmé, Valery and Ad Reinhardt, produced objects that related to them but at the same time were artworks in their own right. In 1980 we produced a follow-

up of a somewhat different nature, at Moderna Museet. At the time it was seen as very provocative to create artworks that had three people as their authors.

The *Ibid.* exhibition grew out of a discussion with a core group of artists comprising Jan Håfström, Alf Linder, Johan Scott and me. We managed to get access to the abandoned linseed factory in Danviken, Stockholm. Jan Håfström knew of the place because he and Anders Wahlgren had shot a film there about [Carl] Graffman. Soon we included more artists. It turned out to be a very important exhibition in the Swedish art scene. For us it was an opportunity – almost a necessity at the time – to define the meaning of a site-specific practice and installation. As you mentioned, the exhibition was documented in *Kris* magazine.

DB: One often hears that it is important for the art scene that different disciplines encounter one another. In this group there were writers, critics and artists, as well as practitioners of dance and choreography, including Margaretha Åsberg for whom you have produced stage design on several occasions. What are your memories of working with *Kris* magazine?

HR: Jan Håfström and I became part of the magazine's editorial team after the 1982 *Ibid.* exhibition. In 1990 the editors of Kris moved on to running the book series *Kykeon*. It is still going on, but the publication rate has stalled. For me, working with people across genres is incredibly important – it provides breathing space.

DB: The editorial office was here on the Island of Skeppsholmen in Stockholm, in a cubby hole on the top floor of the Moderna Dansteatern. This environment became my most important entry to contemporary art. One reason was dance. My sister Anja was part of Margaretha Åsberg's dance company so I saw all these often austere and theoretically ambitious performances, which also involved important artists. Later I became one of the new editors of *Kris* magazine, and was also involved in other magazines that dealt more directly with visual art, such as *Material*. I remember your tremendously exacting way of designing our first issue, about Lévinas. I think that building, with its natural mix of dance, art and literature, came to define my view of an exciting space for the arts. In fact, that's what I'm trying to achieve with Moderna Museet, with our Literature Festival and our programme of music, dance and film – indeed, all forms of art. What is your opinion today of your monochrome cover for the Lévinas issue? You have designed a great many books, not just the *Kykeon* series, but also, for example, all of Katarina Frostenson's collections of poetry.

HR: Actually, I don't remember if I did the Lévinas issue. When we handed over *Kris* magazine to your generation, we let go of it completely. But at that time, the only possible thing for me was the monochrome. The forbidding should be inviting in an unholy alliance. I have produced some book designs but only for friends or for publications in which I have been involved. Most recently for Aris Fioretos' translation of Hölderlin, *Kom nu, eld!* (Now come, fire!) and for Anders Olsson's essay on Erik Johan Stagnelius, *Vad är en suck?* (What is a sigh?). The design of *Kykeon* has worked well over the years despite its stringent form – so terse and distinct.

DB: Perhaps the grey magazine cover and the monochrome pages were only inspired by you. What is the story behind your long collaboration with Katarina Frostenson?

HR: It's like an extended dialogue. She has always let me read the almost-finished manuscript for each new collection of poetry and given me complete freedom to make a proposal for a cover. It has never been a matter of depicting or illustrating the text; it's

more like trying to grasp her tone in the air and make something from the position in which I find myself. We energise and provoke one another. The initiative is always with Katarina, except on those occasions when I have asked her to write a text for a book of mine. I guess we have moved forward on parallel tracks and appreciated each other's moves.

DB: Perhaps we should return to the intentions of this exhibition. It will be quite tight, I think. How do you envisage the new paintings to work in these galleries? Should we give the exhibition a name, a title?

HR: I envisage an installation that provides ample space for each work, so that they don't eat into one another. Because all the works are untested. Only *The Sealed Studio* has been displayed before. I'm not aiming for the exhibition to be a narrative or an account of anything, but rather a precarious situation. In such a state it is difficult to think of names and titles. Here I'm at a loss for an answer. And that's perhaps why it would be very fitting to call the exhibition something – *Double Stage*.

DB: I am interested in the small paintings on acrylic glass. Are they preliminary studies or some kind of small-scale variations?

HR: The small paintings are works in their own right, but I'm not sure if I'm going to show them now. Every format has its optimal form and makes its specific demands. It's often impossible to transform a small painting into a large one. They are different worlds. Neither are they sketches. I hate to work with models. One ends up in a treacherous state of mimetic dependency; as if one was imitating oneself. Perhaps that's what one does; perhaps the gesture is such a type of wrestling or dance, in which the hand both guides and is guided, leads and is led.

DB: During your career as a painter, the medium of painting has constantly been called into question. Other disciplines and expressions have at times been perceived as more central at institutions and by critics: conceptual art, the photographic image, installation art. Painting has even been pronounced dead; frequently by arguments from the writing and works of Marcel Duchamp. I remember that you created a peculiar three-dimensional version of the lower part of *The Large Glass*, "The Bachelor Machine". But you never got stuck on Duchamp. How do you regard him today and what's your view on questioning the optical, or the "retinal", to which there have been so many appeals in recent criticism of painting?

HR: I was very interested in Duchamp in the 1970s. For the major exhibition at Beaubourg in 1977 they produced a three-dimensional reconstruction, after Ulf Linde's blueprint, in a scale of 1:1. In the beginning of the 1980s I asked Olle Granath if Moderna Museet would be interested in a similar model of the Bachelor Machine. I received a positive reply and in agreement with Ulf we decided that I should build a model in a scale of 1:2. Aided by Ulf's reconstructions of the Bachelors and Duchamp's own drawings, it went fairly smoothly, but it required precision and much patience. It's not an artwork as such but more an object of study. To me this was a tangible way of penetrating the world that Duchamp projected onto *The Large Glass*. I never saw the exhibition in Paris, but I saw the original works that remained in Philadelphia in 1977. The department was closed and desolate because of all the works that had been loaned. Reluctantly they let us in. *The Large Glass*, some smaller wall works and, above all, *Étant donnés* remained. There was a prohibition against photographing *Étant donnés*, which had recently been transgressed. However, I had never seen the work in reproduction, only the doors. With the guard hanging on our coat-tails it was an embarrassing and shocking experience to see the almost sexist, voyeuristic and fusty expression of the entire scene, with grease spots around the peep

holes after all the greasy noses that had been pressed up against the door – in fact, I haven't really got over it yet.

DB: But the position of the eye is a theme that you work with in slightly different ways?

HR: The retinal has a very complex history. I remember Lucy R Lippard's now classic book *The Dematerialization of the Art Object*. I was more into the materialisation of the art object. Instead of conceptual art, I was more interested in the bridgeable field between thinking and materiality. Early on I was introduced to semiotics where everything is organised into an over-all theory of signs. What I brought with me was the fundamental idea of the arbitrariness of the signifier. I disliked all perception-based theories of painting, such as those developed by Kandinsky or proposed by the art historian Rudolf Arnheim. To me, the work of art stands for an action of resistance, not an immediately perceptual reading, no languafying, no understanding, no usefulness, but a sense of wonder and a vertiginous questioning and a devastation. Something historically decisive took place when the painting was removed from its frame and the sculpture lifted from its pedestal. This was a process that went on in Mondrian, a care for the painting and paint as an object, how the work was finished along the edges, how the paint was interwoven in layers. We can also see this in Barnett Newman. How his early paintings were a battlefield for metaphors, before transforming at a crucial moment into material events of paint. The painting *Onement* is an example of such a drama, a cosmic story of the creation which suddenly ends up as an existential drama. Here there is a farewell to the retinal in a different way than Duchamp imagined. Something more congenial to my sentiments. To me, this is the transition from the arcane to the inscrutable.

DB: *Obegripligheten* (The Inscrutable) was the title of a volume in the *Kykeon* series. Is this a description of that which keeps you moving forward?

HR: Yes, art is not something you learn, own, or even practise – it is the compulsion in every situation to seek the point where you fall off the stage.