

REFLECTIONS

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Translated by Arlyne Moi

In the vestibule there is a mirror, which faithfully duplicates appearances.

Men often infer from this mirror that the Library [the universe] is not infinite – if it were, what need would there be for that illusory replication?

I prefer to dream that burnished surfaces are a figuration and promise of the infinite...

Jorge Luis Borges¹

In Roald Kyllingstad's pastel *Ekko* (*Echo*, 2001, cat. no. 47), we see two mannequins in a clothing store. They stand in exactly the same pose with their backs turned towards us. They wear two-piece suits of the same design but in different colours, one magenta, the other black. Three spotlights hang over the figures. They cast a blinding white light that creates distance between the mannequins and those of us who view the work. Our vantage point is from the back of the store, amongst racks of dark clothing. Distanced from the floodlit scene, it is as if we only have an echo. A reverberation from the room. Just as sound is thrown back, so also light: an echo is the aural counterpart to a visual reflection. Both are sensory phenomena, but in Kyllingstad's art, they can also be understood figuratively.

While the title *Echo* is ambiguous, it creates associations to Classical mythology and the story of the Greek nymph Echo who fell in love with the youth Narcissus. Echo had previously been sentenced to repeat only the utterances of others. She had received this punishment from Hera, wife of Zeus. The myth of Echo and Narcissus – its most familiar version can be read in *Metamorphoses* (about 8 AD) by Ovid (43 BC – 17 AD) – is about unrequited love. When Narcissus does not return Echo's feelings, he is punished by falling in love with himself, with his own reflection. Narcissus is unable to involve himself in anything other than the reflection he sees of himself in the water. In the end, he falls in and drowns. Echo's sorrow is too heavy to bear. Slowly but surely, she withers away until all that is left of her is her voice.

The tragic myth of Echo and Narcissus is reflected in different contexts in Western art and cultural history, and the concept of narcissism is readily used to characterize self-centred people or cultures. Encountering Kyllingstad's art, the idea of a narcissist culture seems particularly relevant. The artist's motifs of hair salons, storefront windows with designer clothing, designer goods, exclusive furniture, fragmented pictures from televised lottery drawings and highly polished cars all invite interpretation from a cultural-critical perspective. Such criticism is however not explicit. Kyllingstad does not raise a wagging finger, but by depicting these motifs, he points to aspects of our culture which many would claim are superficial, focused on luxury and lacking in real substance. This is a culture more concerned about its own reflection than the world in which it is situated.

In addition to reading Kyllingstad's art from the perspective of cultural criticism, it is relevant to see it as a registration of our everyday surroundings; as reflecting the urban landscape of our everyday reality. From a more formally aesthetic angle, his art studies how colour behaves in combination with the vagaries of light; it explores how mirrors and reflections affect the relation between pictorial space and a flat pictorial

surface. A genuine interest in the visible world has always undergirded Kyllingstad's art. This we have seen in the solo exhibitions he has held at regular intervals in Oslo and Stavanger for almost forty years. We also find it in the exhibition *Reflections*, which consists of works produced between the late 1990s and 2012. This exhibition can be seen as a continuation of the retrospective the museum mounted in 1998. Then, as now, Kyllingstad found his motifs in shop windows and along the stretch of train tracks leading south from Stavanger city centre. Over the last fifteen years new motifs have also been added – shopping centres, parking lots and lottery balls.

Development and inspiration

Aside from one early abstract painting entitled *Påske* (*Easter*, 1966), Kyllingstad's entire oeuvre refers to an empirical reality. His preliminary preparations for paintings have consisted of carefully observing a motif and making a multitude of pencil sketches. Over time, the camera has become one of his most important tools. This work-method may seem conventional today, but it was downright unusual when he attended Oslo's art academy in 1971-73.

At the academy, most people were interested in expressionistic abstract pictures. Despite American artists such as James Rosenquist (b. 1933) and Roy Lichtenstein (1923-97) making international breakthroughs, there was little interest in Pop Art in Norway at the time. When this artistic direction emerged in the early 1960s in the USA, it largely focused on trivial culture. Yet in response to American international politics, particularly the Vietnam War, Pop Art also started functioning as a critique of the society to which it referred. This approach was adopted by the few Norwegian artists who assimilated ideas from Pop Art. Kjartan Slettemark's (1932-2008) controversial painting *Av rapport fra Vietnam* (*Report from Vietnam*, 1965) is an early example of this, and in the early 1970s the Norwegian artists' group GRAS (1970-74) also displayed clear inspiration from Pop Art and radical leftist political currents.

These artists and tendencies were nevertheless peripheral to the world in which Kyllingstad moved in the early 1970s. For art academy teachers and the upper echelon of artists and art collectors, abstract painting was still the reigning paradigm. Pictures were supposed to be expressive and have impasto brushstrokes. Composition, rhythm and innovative forms were more important than any particular subject matter. But this form of expression held little meaning for Kyllingstad. It was only by coincidence that he came across a magazine article about the American artist Richard Estes (b. 1932) and Photorealism. He then saw a direction in which his own artistic practice could develop. 'Seeing Richard Estes's art ignited me', Kyllingstad recalls.² He had never seen anything like it, partly because Photorealism had not yet been introduced in Norway, and partly because artistic directions containing an element of realism lay outside the main artistic currents at the time.

Richard Estes was a main proponent for Photorealism, along with the Americans Chuck Close (b. 1940), Ralph Goings (b. 1928), Audrey Flack (b. 1931) and the Englishman John Salt (b. 1937). The genre, which has also been called Hyperrealism and Superrealism, emerged in the USA in the mid-1960s. These artists used photos of mundane urban environments and mass-produced products as starting points for creating paintings that looked like photos. Questions about perception – for instance, how shop windows or the highly polished surfaces of cars reflect light – were the spur for their research. They claimed, however, that

the contents of their pictures, with scenes of apparently neutral urban places, were subordinate to the formal challenges of reproducing a photographic image. Not unexpectedly, the Photorealists were heavily criticized by art critics at the time. Their style was discredited for being reactionary. It undermined High Modernism's principle of researching the painting's surface, and it courted the public by playing cupid to three-dimensional illusionism.

Yet it was not Photorealism's focus on empirical reality that inspired Kyllingstad. For him, it felt liberating to turn away from the subjective and expressive visual idiom. Early in his career he concentrated on the area around Hillevåg train station, on the outskirts of Stavanger. He fell for the mood and range of colours in the gravel between the railroad tracks, the colours of parked freight- and passenger cars. For several years he made pencil sketches on site and produced watercolours in his home studio. In the early 1980s he began using photographs more consistently in this preliminary phase – a practice which also affected a change in his method and final results. When producing pencil studies directly in front of a motif and using them as the starting point for a watercolour, the finished work invariably contains simplifications and stylisation. Photos, by contrast, do not exclude details. By using the camera, he began making a more direct transition from the motif to the final work.

Due to Kyllingstad's Photorealist inspiration, it should come as no surprise that he would use photographs as source material. The similarities between works by Estes and Kyllingstad are not difficult to trace. In Estes's *The Candy Store* (1968-69) the copious details, the motif's cropping and the interaction between the shop interior and the window's reflection of the outdoor environment are strikingly similar to that found in many of Kyllingstad's shop windows. Yet despite the many similarities between the two artists' works, there are clear differences, not least because Kyllingstad's artistic development is marked by an increasingly complex treatment of the relation between pictorial space and the flat surface on which it is made. Further, we could say that while Estes paints in a major key, Kyllingstad's art is in minor.

Kyllingstad's pictures are often produced in an evening or nocturnal light, when shops are closed and streets are empty. This conjures a melancholy mood that places his pictures in the tradition of American Realism as represented by Edward Hopper (1882-1967). Hopper's paintings show the loneliness of modern people. The figures are seen from a distance such that the viewer is also kept at a distance. A sense of emptiness is conveyed through lifeless, often artificially lit rooms. In Kyllingstad's works, emptiness is expressed with a kind of hardness. This is the case for the neon lighting we find in many of the pastels. But this hardness is mingled with softness through the sensitive use of pastel chalk. The works thus rise above the everyday themes from which they spring.

This refined materiality might also remind us of the slurred photographic paintings of Gerhard Richter (b. 1932). 'Richter is probably the world's most interesting painter', Kyllingstad says.³ He has, since the late 1960s, followed the German's career with great enthusiasm. Throughout Richter's entire artistic practice, he has explored the possibilities of painting by using a number of styles. In one respect, his production can be understood as a scientific study of the grounds for the existence of painting as an art form. Kyllingstad has drawn inspiration from Richter's photo-based paintings as well as from his alternation between

abstract and figurative elements. The interplay between abstraction and figuration has become even more marked over the last fifteen years. Like Richter, Kyllingstad playfully explores the possibilities of painting. He continues the photorealistic style whilst using Modernism's visual languages and rich range of compositions. The pastels *Acne* (2012, cat. no. 1) and *Uten tittel* (*Untitled*, 2009, cat. no. 14) are examples of this.

Examining *Acne's* lower half, it looks almost abstract. Our gaze orbits around the neon tubes forming the letters A C N E. We follow the wires looping between the letters and glide over the light reflected off of glass and steel. At the same time we notice, through the storefront window, a checkerboard floor pattern. The playful and easy rhythm contrasts with the picture's upper half, which is a still life with shoes, clothing, a vase and a pyramidal form. The linear perspective drawing our gaze into the pictorial room is reinforced by the checkerboard floor. It is as if Kyllingstad is collecting fragments of visual language from Western art history, from the Renaissance to today, in one and the same picture – to create harmonious polyphony.

Kyllingstad relates that once on an evening ramble, he was entranced by the beautiful neon lighting in Acne Studio's storefront window. It caused him to think of the Abstract Expressionistic painting *Number 20* (1949) by the American Bradley Walker Tomlin (1899-1953). *Number 20* contains abstract elements in beige, brown and black. On top of these, Tomlin painted white signs that look a bit like rib bones or letters. Although able to identify specific letters – E, X and Z – *Number 20* gives the impression of presenting a secret alphabet.

Another example of how Kyllingstad is leaning towards a modernistic visual language is the small pastel *Uten tittel* (*Untitled*, 2009, cat. no. 14). Here the motif is no longer recognizable, nor is the photo-collage on which it is based. It gives no clearly comprehensible information other than that we recognize fragments of a chair and materials such as steel and glass. Rather than pointing directly to an external reality, the pastel has become a fascinating and complex composition of form, colour, space and flatness. *Untitled* testifies that Kyllingstad has not relinquished one of his foremost sources of inspiration: George Braque (1882-1963), co-founder of Cubism. For the Cubists, the study of external reality was based on geometric models. A picture could be seen as both an advanced study of external reality but also as a completely new object, an autonomous product.

'Braque stands in a distinct light for me because when I was sixteen, my father gave me a book about him', Kyllingstad says while making special mention of Braque's studio works. The book 'made a tremendous impression on me. (...) The only colour photos I'd seen up to that point were Norwegian 'Golden Age' paintings and landscape paintings. I eventually came to see Braque's melancholy grey and beige colours – colours I'd never before seen in a painting – as extremely interesting.'⁴ Kyllingstad's pastel with the most direct reference to Braque is *Natur Morte. Hyllest til George Braque* (*Still Life. Homage to George Braque*, 1997), which was on show at Stavanger Art Museum in 1998. The preliminary study for this work is a collage made with two photos of the same shop window, but where the one is turned ninety degrees. The first time Kyllingstad worked in this way was five years earlier, with the pastel *P.S. Elektro* (1992). This pastel was based on several photos of a shop window on Løkkeveien (street) in Stavanger. The window, Kyllingstad recalls, was 'lovely on the one half, with delectable and enticing colours, but there was something wrong on

the other half.⁵ To achieve balance and rhythm and make the picture function as a composition, he turned the 'bad' half on its side.

From photo collage to pastel

In the rich archive of material Kyllingstad has given to Stavanger Art Museum, it is possible to study the artistic process – from photo and photo-collage to finished work. For example, when he photographs shop windows and hair salons, he positions himself close to the window in order to achieve a wide range of reflections. From the many photos taken, he selects one, or creates a collage, and frames it with a passepartout. He then draws with the aid of a square grid, a tool that helps him translate the sketch into a pastel painting.

As an example; to create a work such as *Lotto* (2011, cat. no. 7), Kyllingstad combines fragments of photographs and then divides the resulting collage into 60 squares. Next he takes a sheet of watercolour paper, 70 x 109 cm, and draws a similar 60-square grid. Each square he conceives as an abstract painting. Filling the squares with fine gradations of pastel is a painstaking process often lasting several months. Kyllingstad is almost the only contemporary Norwegian artist to specialize in this technique. The decision to do so came about through a coincidence. A box of pastels was lying about the studio and on a whim he tried it out. The result was inspiring. Kyllingstad sees the pastel technique as a synthesis of drawing and painting. He mixes the colours on the paper and uses his fingers to blend them together. In sum, it is the colour nuances and the paper's 'tooth' that constitute the technical aspects of each work.

By comparing the preliminary stages with the finished works, two aspects become clear. First is the transition from the somewhat hard, pallid surface in the 'amateur photo' to the pastel's delicate expression. Secondly, small changes such as distortions, displacements and sometimes retouchings appear in the finished works. In the preliminary stage of *Svarte stoler* (*Black Chairs*, cat. no. 19), we see the mirror image of the artist photographing his motif. In the final pastel he has removed all traces of himself. In another work, *Vindu i Sloane Street* (*Window in Sloan Street*, 2011, cat. no. 4), the artist's hand is visible outside the shop window. The picture is nevertheless so full of details and reflections that the hand is difficult to notice unless someone points it out.

Mirroring and melancholy

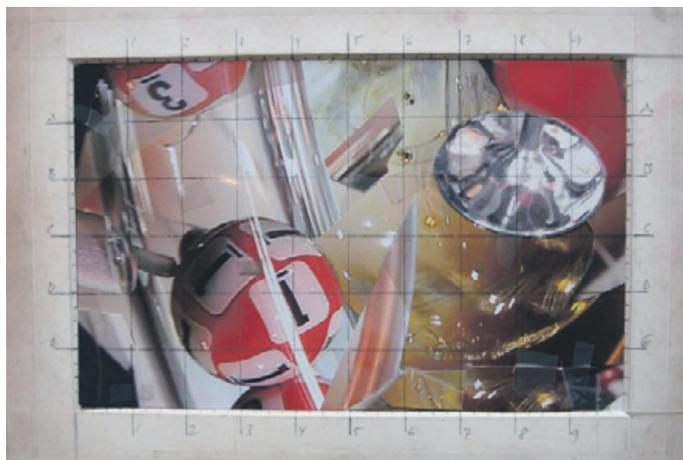
The mirror is central to Kyllingstad's art, both as a compositional element and as a metaphor. A good example is *Reflektor* (*Reflector*, cat. no. 43). The sense of sight and the mirror are both themed in this motif of the display window of Stavanger Optik. In an optician's line of work, mirrors are essential, not least because they are components in many optical instruments. *Reflektor*, like many of Kyllingstad's pastels, is not composed with one-point perspective. No elements immediately command our gaze, so we as viewers are bereft of an obvious means for reading the picture. We struggle to organize its multifarious parts. Being able to organize them would help us determine which objects are inside the window, which are reflections from the street, and which are being mirrored or multiplied in the exhibition mirrors.

Two orange lamps appear repeatedly and establish a natural rhythm. Reading from left to right, we can follow them as they create a diagonal in towards the stairway in the building's interior, thereafter along another diagonal from the handrail out to the picture's right edge. The mirrors and display-window architecture divide *Reflektor* into a series of vertical

fields. This composition seems rather like a piece of paper folded into an accordion and then re-stretched. It is like a game played with space, flatness and displacement – and we amuse our eyes and frustrate our sense of order when we cannot solve the pictorial riddle.

Examining the photo-collage on which *Reflektor* is based, we see that it is composed of two photographs of the shop window. We also notice several details the artist has deleted from the finished work. But this does not really help us distinguish the different parts of the picture from one another. Neither is this the clue to Kyllingstad's art. Rather, his pictures function on at least two levels. First, they invite us to see initially familiar places with renewed sight. Using the pastels as filters for vision, we can discover new aspects of reality – aspects that have been there all along but of which we perhaps have been unaware. Secondly, the pastel chalk creates new pictures that are the result of artistic choices – these were initially made with the camera's aperture but the artist transforms them with pastel chalk on watercolour paper.

Given how Kyllingstad accords the mirror a central position in his artistic universe, he 'writes himself into' a long tradition of art and cultural history. We already know the story about the mirror from the myth of Echo and Narcissus, and we know, through archaeological findings, that hand-held mirrors existed in Antiquity. It is part of human nature to reflect oneself. Superficially, we can understand the mirror as a symbol of vanity, egotism and unreality, but on a deeper level, it helps form our identity. Look in the mirror and see who you are! Or: Look at mirror images to see who you will become! It is a commonplace that reflections of our external selves do not necessarily coincide with our inner selves; a mirror's highly polished surface can only give limited knowledge of the world. This idea is subtly expressed by Tor Ulven in the poem 'Utstilling I



Photocollage for *Lotto*



Photocollage for *Svarte stoler*

(utkast til minnesmerke)', here translated as 'The Exhibition I (First Draft for a Commemorative Monument):

The monument is a monument over its own forgetting. And gains meaning only when there is no one who can give it meaning. It is the stone you hold in the hand. The centre of which you never can reach. Only the mirror always shows the correct time. When the stone reflect itself it is not out of vanity. The mirror divulges everything, the stone nothing. Like stone and mirror, it is what you most of all want to know.⁶

Authors, architects and artists have been fascinated by mirrors ever since they became more commonly available in the fifteenth century. In art history we can see how Jan van Eyck (about 1390-1441) in *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride* (1434), Diego Velázquez (1599-1660) in *Las Meninas* (*The Maids-in-waiting* 1656), and Edouard Manet (1832-83) in *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882), created complex paintings with the help of mirrors. In the small mirror hanging behind the newlyweds in van Eyck's picture, there is a miniature self portrait of the artist, and in *Las Meninas*, Velázquez includes the idea of the king and queen's presence in the room by showing them reflected in a mirror on the back wall. Manet uses a mirror to create two viewpoints in the painting, thus breaking with three-dimensional illusionism and the idea of a painting as a window on the world.

Perhaps we could say that Kyllingstad's pastels of shop windows and hair salons represent windows *into* the world, but it is a world of light and mirrors that hits back. It is a place where we can contemplate ourselves; a place crowded with products and objects, a world of deserted rooms and stillness, portrayed after the day's activities have ended and evening lays its dark hand on the earth.

This melancholic atmosphere is a basic cord in Kyllingstad's art. Like the mirror, it has been a theme for artistic expression throughout Western cultural history. The concept of melancholy has been understood in many different ways since the Greek doctor Hippocrates (about 460 BC) first described it. His understanding was that a person suffering melancholia had too much black bile, a body fluid causing gloominess and depression. The concept was further elaborated by the Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433-99), who was concerned about a kind of duality in the melancholic temperament; cold bile (*melan-chole* means 'black bile') caused sadness, while warm bile (*choleric* means 'fiery') promoted clarity and creativity.

The two factors affecting melancholy have also been fundamental for the German philosopher Walter Benjamin's (1892-1940) ideas on art,



Photocollage for *Reflektor*

interpretation and the critique of modernity.⁷ According to Benjamin, the melancholic condition is not solely negative because a feeling of light sorrow can be good soil for digging deeper into things. When left to ourselves, when feeling empty and stagnant, the conditions are right for concentration. By delving deeper, says Benjamin, we are able to turn a destructive feeling of meaninglessness into something constructive. This happens through reflection. Thinking deeply about things requires that we pause from the fast pace and practical tasks of daily life. The pause allows us to contemplate and fill the world with new meaning. In the context of Kyllingstad's pastels, then, we can imagine that the space for reflection is created when the shops are closed and day turns to night.

'Change your look', says the advertisement slogan in Stavanger Optik's window; moving from day to night, it acquires a double meaning. 'You are a 'Very Important Customer', the VIC store's name asserts (cf. cat. no. 22). And 'you can be a step closer to your wildest dream...' says the smiling lottery winner on Saturday evening prime-time television.⁸ It is easy to be seduced, or, as the Norwegian art historian Gunnar Danbolt puts it: 'We humans have a unique ability to conceal a hard, capitalistic, industrial reality by giving it a beautiful external appearance.'⁹

With pastel chalk, Kyllingstad presents beautiful things, but through his complex pictorial structures, distortions and displacements, we gain an opportunity to see more than an immediate reflection. In the essay 'Rekviem og varemesse' ('Requiem and Public Trade Fair'), Kjartan Fløgstad gives insight into how Kyllingstad's art can be understood in light of cultural criticism: 'The external façade has no emblematic or visual power to reveal a seductive interior. The shopping centre shuts out the external world and reflects itself, thus also ourselves. (...) Who or what has put us here, north of the equator, in the rich West, put us in front of abundance and exhibitions, like consumers and kings of the hill? With the historical and geographical winning lottery ticket that enables us to pick and choose?'¹⁰

The artworks communicate on many levels. When presenting the new millennium's urban landscape or the rolling balls from televised lottery drawings, they illuminate our own era. The motifs of shopping centres, parking lots, empty industrial sites and railroad tracks reflect an entire society marked by gentrification. Locations lose their unique characteristics because capitalist forces are given free reign, low-income groups are priced out of attractive areas and the remaining population becomes more homogeneous. Kyllingstad shows us all this in his works. But precisely because he painstakingly paints the pictures with pastel chalk rather than holding up an ordinary mirror to the motifs, the art is raised to a timeless level. Classic themes such as mirroring and melancholia are illuminated at the same time as the pastel medium and visual language reveal a rich compositional register. In this way, Kyllingstad's art invites us to have many long bouts of reflection.

1 Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Library of Babel'. In *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley. London: Penguin 1998:19.

2 Conversation between Roald Kyllingstad and Inger M.L. Gudmundson, March 2012.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Tor Ulven, *Stein og spill – Mixtum Compositum*, Oslo, 1995, p. 5. Our translation.

7 Cf. Inger M. Renberg, *Stanse tiden – Temporale aspekter i Lars Hertervigs landskapsmalerier Gamle furutrær og Borgoya belyst med Walter Benjamins allegoribegrep*, [Stop time – Temporal aspects in Lars Hertervig's landscape paintings *Old Pine Trees* and *Borgoye*, in light of Walter Benjamin's concept of allegory] hovedfag thesis in art history, University of Oslo, UiO, 2002, p. 31-51.

8 Cf. Norsk tippings lottotrekning 28.04.2012.

9 Gunnar Danbolt, *Norsk kunsthistorie – Bilde og skulptur frå vikingtida til i dag* [Norwegian Art History – Pictorial Art and Sculpture from the Viking Era to Today], Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget, 2009, p. 350.

10 Kjartan Fløgstad, 'Rekviem og varemesse' [Requiem and Public Trade Fair], *Roald Kyllingstad*, exhibition catalogue, Galleri Dobloug, 2006, unpaginated.