

## Falling apart together

by 3,14's text contributor **Johnny Herbert**

And what about *Afterglow* (2021) with its explicit depictions of Einar Gerhardsen og Farouk Al-Kasim? Capitalism seems to be self-destructing, but will its afterglow be a light for something else or just a pretty illumination we'll watch from outer space—extracted and removed, with a God's-eye view?

The strange thing about current global capitalism is that it seems to be destroying its own conditions for reproduction and persistence. There is a building sense of deflation and hopelessness, or, better put, *inagency* (non-agency). This should not be understood as passivity. Passivity denotes a more decided inactivity, whereas inagency states the ineffectivity of any activity undertaken. In light of this, I have been increasingly inclined to understand cultural production as a method and activity of sufficing—an aid to a sense of “making do” within the meshwork of current capitalism. Within this framework, a cultural object put out into the world can be understood as akin to a kind of flotation device, safety net, noise abatement, or counter-acoustics that makes life (more) bearable. I mention this very briefly here as I think this approach offers some traction on a perennially difficult topic to discuss succinctly within art. This is something I'd like to focus on in connection with Marianne Morild's work: abstraction.

Mention of abstraction can often produce anxiety, as if it always denotes a floating away into generality, the uptake of a dominating God's-eye view upon a given thing. However, as Peter Osborne has noted, philosopher G. W. F. Hegel already stated in the early 1800s that his “modernity [was] already that of a *culture* of abstraction—of the ‘abstract individual’ with its ‘abstract rights’ engaging in monetary exchanges determined by ‘the abstract value of goods’. (These are all phrases of Hegel's.)”<sup>i</sup> Today, in a world that is self-abstracting (e.g. the generation of profit solely from the rapid, ‘high-frequency’ trading of financial stocks) and increasingly incomprehensible to the organic entities populating it (e.g. the algorithmic “deep learning” of artificial intelligence that is largely impenetrable to us), we might understand abstraction in art as a way of coping with the saturation of abstractions within our lives.<sup>ii</sup>

Marianne Morild's exhibition *Septentrionalis* is a presentation of work within which the mode of abstraction seems to emphasise separation rather than what I regard as the previous tendency of extraction in her

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i Peter Osborne, ‘The Reproach of Abstraction’.

ii My extremely brief remarks here draw from but do a disservice to Louis Althusser's remarkable essay ‘Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract’.

iii Gilles Deleuze, lectures on Immanuel Kant.

iv John Berger, ‘The Infinity of Desire’, *The Guardian*, July 13, 2000. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2000/jul/13/artsfeatures.art>

v Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four essays on still life painting*, 104-105.

work. In this sense, “abstract” nears “discrete” here (“discrete”, as Gilles Deleuze has noted, actually being the more obvious opposite of the term “concrete”)<sup>iii</sup>. A sense of ground level perspective brings us into an encounter with something, yet the landscapes or forms before us have been separated out from the earth. The earth has been edited out, as if digitally removed in order to enable the remaining images of debris and refuse to be pasted onto other images, mobile and replicable. I am tempted to push the idea of separation-as-abstraction further still towards something like dissolution, disintegration, or decomposition, in which the discrete as individual, identifiable thing (partially) breaks down into a kind of greyed, browned ex-commodity matter.

Some objects are more resistant to decomposition, their general objecthood still looking for an owner within the wreckage of landfills; impulse purchases jostle up against necessary evils; greying generality a background, a home, for some absurdly persisting items to showcase their unique selling points. Entropy transforms all things; decomposition is also the temporary re-organising of things in their slide towards indistinction—falling apart together into a new fleeting constellation.

A sense of decomposition in *Septentrionalis* draws upon aspects of earlier still life painting whilst the increased dilapidation of subject matter renders inappropriate the intensive development of painterly technique in still life painting of the 1600s in which objects were depicted as tenderly as people. Work by Simone del Tintore (1630–1708), Balthasar van der Ast (1593/94–1657), and, even more acutely, Jacobus Biltius (1633–1681), show the fixation on object-depiction veering into something more hallucinatory and lurid, if not, as in Biltius, grotesque.

“The drama in a still life is the drama found in a juxtaposition, a placing, an encounter, within a protected space. Every still life is about safety, just as every landscape is about risk and adventure. Still lifes tell about how certain things have come together and, despite their evident ephemerality, will stay together. They are images

of residence, in every sense of the term. And so the painter is forced to study the neighbourliness of the things in front of him, how they adjust and live together, how they intersect, overlap and keep separate, and how they converse.”

The eerie stasis within early still life painting (e.g. from the Netherlands) is a nexus of affluence (via colonialism) and a sense of power over nature that invites a colonial power to bask, with only minor reflection, in its treasures. The objects brought together are rarely plucked locally from surroundings, but have been shipped in, or carefully cared for. As Norman Bryson notes: “Dutch flower paintings are non-pastoral and even anti-pastoral in that the flowers chosen for depiction are those which require for their existence a high level of horticultural sophistication. [...] The space of the vase draws on enormous distances.”

Seventeenth century Dutch still life painting also marks the advent of transnational capitalism. As the range of goods in Dutch marketplaces expanded, so too did their proclivity to view people as slaves/objects, as if the merchants’ recasting of people into commodities abroad enabled the painterly personification of things at home. There is a sickening tinge to the French and Italian terms for “still life”—*natures mortes* and *natura morta* (“dead nature”). The still life is perhaps, then, a memorial to this extraction and conferment of life from slave to object, its ambivalent “stillness” evincing the cancelling out of muffled screams by the charmed murmur of an exhibition. Maybe all still life is also a *vanitas* or memento mori of expendable, exploited life, rather than a gentle, ornamental reminder of life’s privilege and privileged living? In Marianne Morild’s work the possibility to get a sense of the power of objects through the lens of a particular period and place by considering the collection of objects showcased in still lifes is inverted—these things are not quasi-trophies, but painful reminders, just as, perhaps Dutch still lifes are. What does Morild’s intervention in still life painting speak of in terms of it being a nexus of social tensions?