

SURPRICE

When the first encounter with some objects surprises us, and we judge it to be new, or very different from what we knew in the past or what we supposed it was going to be, this makes us wonder and be astonished by it. And since this can happen before we know in the least whether this object is suitable to us or not, it seems to me that wonder is the first of all the passions. It has no opposite, because if the object presented has nothing in it that surprises us, we are not in the least moved by it and regard it without passion.

René Descartes, *Passions of the Soul* (1649)¹

Going Metal – Harmonica depicts a daisy chain like the kind of garland cut from folded paper with a pair of scissors, held between two hands in suit sleeves. The sculpture has the same data icon-like style as the rest of the works in the *Going Metal* series, all of which are made of hand-shaped, welded steel tubing, painted in bright colors with two-component lacquer. Time is passing, the *Harmonica* sculpture says. Time is slipping through the two hands and yet is locked in a standardized and decorative form. Like other works in this series, the motif could just as well be a Windows icon: a symbol of endless waiting, of the fact that power has time on its side, and of decisions that can be put off time and time again.

Shrewd and effective use of contemporary symbols has long been a hallmark of Sara Korshøj Christensen's work, but in the *Going Metal* series her project is taken to a new level; in this series she refigures the motifs and gives them a sculptural form that mimics a kind of homogenous digital aesthetic. Despite their three-dimensionality, the sculptures have a pronounced flatness about them, exaggerated in some instances by the fact that they are mounted flat against the wall. Others are placed such that they protrude out into the room. The forms are unquestionably sculptures, but they can also function as icons. The clever manipulation of visual elements and references triggers that little feeling of wonder or astonishment Descartes refers to in the above quotation, when the familiar is suddenly, unexpectedly, new.

In *Going Metal – Even-handed I* and *Even-handed II*, the motif is crossed fingers, a gesture that can either be an invocation of good luck (“I’m crossing my fingers for you”) or, especially when placed behind one’s back, a sign of lying. The two contradictory meanings impart friction. The title, *Even-handed*, connotes just and impartial treatment or judgment, and thus refutes the visual denotation. When the fingers are then crossed multiple times, in version II, the confusion is absolute, and the meaning collapses. It is seemingly light and jocular, but on second thought, laughter feels inappropriate. For what is going on when a suit-clad hand shows crossed fingers, and who exactly is waiting in vain for “even-handed” treatment?

The critique of power is also obvious in *First Price Justice*, a textile work that replicates the budget brand’s design. At a time when the NAV² scandal manifests how entrenched class-based justice continues to be, Christensen’s work is an elegant critique of power; she shows us the real icons in NAV’s data systems.

Icon-like hands in suit sleeves recur in several of the works, a number of which allude to violence. The word “present” can refer to both a gift and the state of being in view; in *Going Metal – Present*, the extended hand offers a lit bomb. In *Going Metal – Baby hit me one more time* Christensen plays on the expression “to have an ace up one’s sleeve”. The phrase originated in the context of cheating at cards but has come to signify having some extra advantage or secret weapon at one’s disposal. When, in this case, the card is a broken-hearted ace of hearts, the title’s double entendre is underscored, and the effect is quite violent.

Christensen acts the part of a dramaturge, transforming the gallery’s space into a stage on which she attempts to demonstrate how elements of daily life are screwed tightly and brutally together by, first of all, getting us to laugh. As she does with the sculpture *Going Metal – Rabbiting on*, for example, where the same suit-clad hand is pulling a dead rabbit out of a top hat. The sculpture is simply executed, but it has the visual element of surprise and an intelligent interplay between motif and title: “to go rabbiting” means to find places where one can hunt rabbits, while “to be rabbiting on” means to ramble endlessly on about trivial things, to chatter; and “rabbited” is often used in contexts where someone is trying to evade or flee something. Or as she does in the textile work *You are Right You are Wrong*, which is practically a formula for rhetoric recognizable from many a political speech. Say-

ing both together, i.e., “talking out of both sides of your mouth”, renders the point meaningless.³

Untitled is mounted on the ceiling in the middle of the room, and the blue material settles softly along the floor, as stage curtains often do. The upper portion is white with black applique lettering that spells the words *Please help Yourself*. The transition between the white and blue areas creates a wave-like pattern, and so the statement is transformed from a polite and generous invitation to an expression of indifference. It tends toward the same callous disregard Per Sandberg, the Progress Party’s then vice-chairman, displayed when he wore his famous “Good journey” t-shirt (with an anchor and waves) to the party’s national congress meeting in 2015, at which the fate of boat people and 10,000 Syrian refugees was on the agenda.⁴

As I was looking at Sara Korshøj Christensen’s latest works, Cady Noland’s spring 2019 exhibition at Museum für Moderne Kunst (MMK) in Frankfurt am Main came to mind. Both artists employ ostensibly simple objects in their respective critiques of power, but where Christensen plays on double entendres and humor, Noland is brutal and merciless.

The exhibition at MMK presented completely stripped-down objects devoid of any trace of humanity, objects that manifest power and command total subordination. Even though the works were from 1984 to 1999, I experienced the exhibition as shockingly relevant. The American flag was included in several of the works, a symbol of the American government’s organized exploitation of violence, while hard and sharp objects punctured the naive myths of American freedom and opportunity. For the majority of Americans these myths are fallacies, a reality physically concretized through the experience of objects that function as barriers, fences or gateways in the exhibition space. The construct was almost unbearably effective: with this selection of objects, sharp material surfaces, and the psychopathic, oppressive atmosphere, one is forced to consider America as a place where exclusion has become part of the natural order.

Noland made the language of power visible through a rigorous staging of the objects of power, and the result, as Bob Nickas described it in his review, was

“Minimalism meets Punishment Park”.⁵ Sara Korshøj Christensen’s point of entry to critique of power, however, and as she would contend, has more in common with the renowned Italian dramatist, actor and author, Dario Fo (1926-2016), who also made use of laughter and the element of surprise.

The sculptures in the new *Going Metal* series quickly prompt a smile of genuine surprise because the icons they are based on are both familiar and most often experienced as innocuous. Yet Christensen’s versions diverge just enough, either by a shift in form or title, that one is ever so slightly taken aback – before the darkness sinks in. Allowing laughter to set the stage for reason is a classic Dario Fo maneuver. As he said in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in literature: “... when the theatre is ironic, grotesque, it’s above all then that you have to defend it, because the theatre that makes people laugh is the theatre of human reason.”⁶

The digital age has transformed the exercise of power; it has perhaps acquired a more abstract and all-encompassing form. The way Christensen makes it both visible and accessible here is thus quite an achievement. Most of us tend to let our guard down when something makes us laugh; humor is therefore often the ideal vehicle for effective criticism.

Marit Paasche,
translated by Katia Stieglitz

¹ René Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, translated and with annotations by Stephen H. Voss, Indianapolis/ Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997, p. 52.

² The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, NAV, is embroiled in an ongoing controversy after it incorrectly interpreted EU regulations, resulting in people being wrongly convicted of benefit fraud.

³ Consider, for example, Jens Stoltenberg’s 22nd of July speech in which, near the conclusion, he states: “We are a small nation, but we are a proud nation.” Available at <https://22juliseret.no/ressurs/1263/> Accessed on 08.01.2020.

⁴ The t-shirt also had a wave-like pattern. See, for example, the news article “Tilfeldig t-troye som ligger fremst i klesskapet (A random t-shirt on top of the pile in the closet)” by Kristian Skard and Tore Gjerstad in *Dagens Næringsliv*, 04.05.2015. Available at <https://www.dn.no/fremskrittspartiet/flyktninger/tilfeldig-t-troye-som-ligger-fremst-i-klesskapet/1-1-5369930> Last accessed 10.01.2020.

⁵ Bob Nickas, “Cady Noland at MMK” published in *Spike Art Quarterly* #58. Also available on Spike’s website at <https://www.spikeartmagazine.com/de/node/2801> Last accessed on 09.01.2020.

⁶ Dario Fo’s acceptance speech is available on the Nobel Prize’s website at <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1997/fo/speech/> Last accessed on 09.01.2020.