

Piper Keys Exhibitions

Per Kirkeby Brick Sculpture

7th June 2014 to 22nd March 2015

Text by Jonathan P Watts, May 2014

By coincidence, London last hosted an outdoor Per Kirkeby brick work 28 years ago in the spot occupied by Martin Creed's brick wall these last five months, on the Hayward gallery's sculpture terrace, overlooking the Thames. Creed's sheer 3.5 meter tall wall is of 'facing' coloured brick bands — yellow, blue, red, and brown; the patterning runs through its structure. Creed enjoys its seriality, while amusing at the gesture of screening out the view beyond.

Kirkeby's work, exhibited in the 1986 Hayward Annual titled *Falls the Shadow*, was of a different seismic order. Uniformly red brick, four shallow arches span outwards from the centre of a low, broad cross-shaped base, joining four squat split-columns at its ends. The arches divide the cross along its two axis to create four apportioned quarters. It appears artless, a Barrett homes bricky's accomplished take on ornamental seating, and might have been easily overlooked. In both, there is something incontrovertible about the mortar bond that cements structural form to architecture — as if these things obdurately will remain. But the presence of Creed's brick wall disproves this, and it too has already disappeared.

Today Kirkeby is primarily known for his 'lyrical expressionist' paintings. A trained geologist who writes extensively on his art, he began using brick in 1965, exhibiting a mortarless block, ten bricks high and one and a half wide. A year later, in 1966, Carl Andre began exhibiting his *Equivalent*s series. *Equivalent VIII* (acquired by Tate in 1972, only becoming contentious in 1976) consists of 120 fire bricks stacked evenly in two layers. The astringency of these works, devoid of artistic dexterity or graphic quality, are an attempt to strip narrative. Bodily connotations are rendered inappropriate to emphasise the act of pure visual perception.

Although aware of Minimalism, Kirkeby did not identify with its aspiration to pure form or pure materiality. The brick had too much history. From its use to build dwellings along the prehistoric Nile delta, to the first towns of the Euphrates and Indus, the brick is a perfectly formed geometric unit that, when placed end to end, synthesizes into something greater than the sum of its parts. Arrangement introduces rhythm and texture, organises space, produces *culture*. Since its technological discovery in the 14th millennium BC — an elemental combination of earth, water, fire, and air — the brick has deviated little from its anthropomorphic proportions. Its 'handiness' is an expression of transversal human history. (Kirkeby also arrived at elementary forms through Kazimir Malevich's 'absolute zero' of form, and its application to architecture, which he called 'Archi-tectonics'.)

By the early 1970s Kirkeby had begun mortaring the brick seams, initially realising an architectural sculpture of a house in miniature, followed by a functional sculpture for smoking fish. Both were sited outside: the former in a Danish housing development, and the latter in a coastal garden. Into the '80s and '90s the brick works developed alongside Kirkeby's painting and drawing practice, varying in siting (in the gallery, but mostly outside), scale, form, and function, while maintaining a resolutely conceptual logic. Many of his larger, later public commissions — throughout urban and rural Europe — share a monumental uncanny sense of incomplete architecture. Yet they shrug off any conventional language of architecture: windowless windows look into inaccessible spaces; 'shadow joints' create pockets of blackened air; interior space is irreconcilable with exterior volume.

In an age of Pop, an experiment in mass-marketed surfaces — an extension of the Modernists' moral imperative of flatness into advertising and taste, Kirkeby found material history. But his influences also belonged to more recent personal history. Writing in 1984, two years prior to the Hayward Annual, on the occasion of his solo exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery, Kirkeby wrote of his childhood memories of the Grundtvigs Church in the Bispebjerg district of Copenhagen. Designed by P.V. Jensen-Klint and constructed of Danish red brick between 1921 and 1940, the Grundtvigs is an extraordinary Neo-Gothic wedge of brooding solidity. For Kirkeby the Grundtvigs transcends architecture. 'Later,' he writes:

I saw the clear, modern brick ornamentation... The church's monolithic and dismissive shapes are more difficult to fit into history. Here, I think I have had inculcated in me some structures which are to be found in all my pictures. Both the paintings and the sculptures. Perhaps that it is my own fiction. But it is at least obvious that in its dimensions and proportions the church frees itself entirely from historical illustration material. 1

Piper Keys, Whitechapel, is a productively anxious siting for Kirkeby's never-before constructed work, *Stenalt* (2012). It was originally designed by Kirkeby to partially wrap a mature tree in the garden of his friend and former assistant Arne

Fremmich. Fremmich has been present throughout the build of *Stenalt*, initially rescaling the work to find commensurability with its new setting. Kirkeby and Fremmich have given permission for *Stenalt* to remain in place, occupying the gallery's communal space until the building is vacated. As such it might achieve a certain freedom from historical illustration material.

¹ Per Kirkeby (1991), *Haandbog*, p.39.

Stenalt exhibited courtesy Per Kirkeby and Arne Fremmich
With thanks to Per Kirkeby, Mari Anne Duus, and Arne Fremmich

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info@piperkeys.com
www.piperkeys.com