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How I Came to Jam with the Angels of the Dirty South: A Journey Into Art and Art Education

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

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The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts
Bachelor of Arts in Art, 2019

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract

This paper dives into my personal journey from a far-left activist youth into becoming an artist. It explains how a poet saw artistic potential within me, introduced me to the world of art and eventually art education. I reflect on the art education I have received from several different art schools and how they try to adapt to the demands of the contemporary art world that has been in a constant condition of reshaping itself since Marcel Duchamp's readymade. As an artist who is less focused on the techniques of traditional artistic mediums, I investigate how the state of art and my own background coalesce, in order to understand how I contribute to it through comparative analyses of my own work, works of other artists, work of curators, and exhibitions. I explore the consequences of commercial success, seemingly absurd teaching situations, collaborative work, and exhibitions as art work using a combination of personal experiences, observations, and theoretical framework.

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Introduction

And here we are, art has become what it is now, I became entangled in it, and fate brought me to Arkansas to eventually write this. I first started to develop a relationship to art through my friendship with the Danish poet Jesper Elving. Before our friendship and collaborations, I had served him countless cortados through my job at a coffee shop which happened to be a place he came every day to write. A turning point in my understanding of art was when he invited me to the reception for his new book of poetry *Dumme Dorte* which happened on a Tuesday morning, 6AM at the 7-Eleven in Copenhagen Airport. The airport is about a half hour train ride out of the city, and even though I really wanted to go, I was opening the coffee shop that morning. Later that day when he came in to get a cortado and write, I asked him about his reception and his response baffled me. He told me that he read aloud a couple of his poems from the book for no one but himself and some random travelers that walked by, had a coffee, and then stood there for a while until he returned to the city. He said that it was a big success, without elaborating on why. His genuine excitement about this reception opened my eyes towards an alternative to my preconceived understanding of success.

At this point in my life I had struggled with racism and addiction for years, I had dropped out of navigation school, media studies, and photography school. I felt pretty pessimistic about myself, the world, and especially my career, which in hindsight probably made me very ready for a radical new perspective. In tandem with his poetry practice, Elving was curating as well as collaborating with visual and musical artists, in which he had a method of “making stuff happen” that was not too far from how I used to work in activist groups years before that. As a teenager I got involved in the far left Danish punk/DIY scene known as *Ungdomshuset* doing music shows,

television, demonstrations, pop-ups, house squatting, publications, happenings, etc.

Collaborating with Elving gave me a chance to repurpose those skills I had learned in my youth into something fresh and exciting, I have held on to and developed that approach towards art since then. Together we curated a bunch of “low-to-no-budget” art shows, concerts, and happenings as well as one art show that was just the two of us. Before meeting Elving I had never stepped foot in a gallery and thought of art as an exclusive hobby for the bourgeoisie similar to how I thought of golf or opera, doubting whether I would ever truly understand it. Luckily for me, he showed me that art could be exciting, easy, fun, and beautiful, paving the way for him to eventually convince me to apply to an art school.

Picnic School of Art

Fast forward to my initial semesters at the U of A, Juliette Walker (ceramics student at the time) and I created the Picnic School of Art which was a platform for events and publications such as our jewelry workshop, a community bike race/biking choir, a radio listening party, an exhibition, a book release, a vinyl record release, an elevator choir, and more. Somehow having a named organization to put stuff like this under made it easier to engage in those activities. Looking back, I realize that my contributions and engagement in the project were heavily inspired by my involvement with *Amager Ny Kunstscole* (Amager New School of Art, trans.) and *Bananskolen* (The Banana School, trans.)

Amager Ny Kunstscole

Amager Ny Kunstscole was a school founded and single-handedly run by Jesper Elving (mentioned in the introduction). I attended a handful of classes in the mid to late 2010’s, and they

were fundamentally just casual hangouts. Sometimes we would have a sodapop on a bench, sometimes a cheap kebab from a corner store and other times we would just go for a walk. Most of the classes I attended were just me and him, sometimes other friends of ours would join in. We would catch up on our personal lives, talk about local art gossip and the weather. I never heard any real explanation of his reasoning to call these meetups a school of art, but I do know that it became part of grant applications that he submitted later on.

Most of Elving's poetry is best described as pure gibberish, here's a sample from his website:

"pennot nibo kronot mek tani grest fente slentok ogi"

- Excerpt from *Pokkel*, Jesper Elving, 2021, <https://www.jesperelving.net/>

It makes as little sense in Danish as it does in English. His poetry in relation to his art school leads me to believe that he thrives in the kind of activities that can easily be seen as a joke by outsiders¹. However, knowing him for many years, I have no doubt in my mind that all of his endeavors, including this one, are not meant as jokes. He takes his work very seriously; this was a real art school to him and to me. There was no schedule, no agenda, no teacher, no student, no permanent location², no online presence³, just fellow artists hanging out with each other.

¹ Meant in a sense similar to work such as Maurizio Cattelan's banana taped to a wall that is an easy target for mockery of the current state of art.

² Most of the classes I attended were not even taking place on the island of Amager that gave name to the school, but rather in Central and North Copenhagen.

³ Classes were usually announced via text-message.

Bananskolen

Bananskolen emerged from the music, art, and activist group GP&PLS, and is mostly run by the Danish/Faroese artist Goodiepal. The activities of Bananskolen and GP&PLS are sometimes classical lectures by members of the school as well as invited guests. There, I have attended classes on eloptic energy, milk from the breast of Jesus Christ, shortwave radio, mushroom-based synthesizers, modern dance, and much more. The lectures are only the tip of the iceberg though, as it has offered activities such as creating art exhibitions in galleries and major art museums, recording and performing music, manual vinyl record pressing, human trafficking⁴, attending protests, and humanitarian activism. As a rule of thumb every student of the school will be a teacher of the school as well, which in practice means that every student attending is encouraged or even pushed to teach a class or classes themselves.

Mr. Nowotny's class at The Royal Academy

While I was getting my BFA at The Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Denmark⁵, I took a seminar taught by artist Rolf Nowotny in which we went camouflaging in the forest, winter bathing, hiking, and attended a lecture about the exoskeletons of insects at the Zoological Museum, in which our lecturer asked why a group of artists were getting an in depth lecture about insects. Our initial response as a class was a good laugh and then we all turned to Mr. Nowotny as we were curious about his answer as well. He made a metaphor of artists being like crabs crawling around on the ocean floor watching all kinds of things raining down from above⁶.

⁴ This was in order to help refugees escape the deadly living conditions around the borders of the European Union. More info can be found in the article *Will Future Artists Come From the Banana School?* by Pernille Albrethsen <https://kunstkritikk.com/will-the-artists-of-the-future-come-from-the-banana-school/>

⁵ The oldest, biggest, and most prestigious art school in Denmark and arguably Scandinavia - for perspective, it's older than the USA.

⁶ Things being a metaphor for impressions, experiences, theories, etc.

Some things could be interesting, delicious, or useful right away, others left and forgotten. Importantly, there could also be things vaguely remembered and dug back up for future projects. I thought this to be a good attempt at describing contemporary art practices, which is not an easy task, and through that, also explaining to some extent why it makes sense for contemporary art schools to throw pretty much anything at their students and leave them to sort it out themselves in order to develop their practice.

What and How Should Art Schools Teach?

Marcel Duchamp's readymades radically challenged the structures of Western art school through their influence on the role of the artist. The skills or knowledge it takes to make good art is more debatable than ever and many art schools are doing their best to try and make their programs relevant to a wide spectrum of artistic practices, which in my experience can lead into absurd and/or comical teaching situations⁷. Amager Ny Kunstkole and Bananskolen can be interpreted as parodies of these kinds of attempts, but I would argue that understanding them as serious contemporary art schools is more rewarding in both theory and practice. In the book *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)* Boris Groys explained a similar kind of artistic practice to the one proposed by Nowotny. Groys described the art student as a kind of petri dish that cultivates the culture surrounding them as contemporary artists commonly respond, not only to the past and present of the art world, but also the past and present of broader society⁸. This

⁷ This can be through intentional self-irony or unintentional realizations as with the situation in Rolf Nowotny's class where we all suddenly reflected on how absurd our teaching situation was perceived from the outside.

⁸ His analogy works especially well with his description of how artists in art school need some amount of isolation to let their practice grow while also letting themselves get infected by outside influences as well as influences from within the academic institution (other students, faculty, readings, etc.) The question of who controls what the artists are infected by and how it is controlled emerges and remains open.

ultimately expands the areas of possible artistic studies to a point where it seems to be impossible to make one curriculum that fits all. Reminding us of Nina Simone's famous quote:

*"An artist's duty, as far as I'm concerned, is to reflect the times."*⁹

The Picnic School of Art, Amager Ny Kunstscole, and Bananskolen, leaned into challenging the classical understanding of art education through their care-free approaches to what art education can be. Their teaching philosophies include artists getting together and doing stuff in order to create foundations for growing and developing artistic practices. Their approaches are both similar to and completely opposite of concepts such as Mladen Stilinović's *laziness*, Walter Benjamin's *boredom* and Marcel Duchamp's *refusal of work*¹⁰. The abovementioned schools avoided traditional training of art skills, but like Nowotny's seminar, chose more or less arbitrary activity over idleness.

Signature Fadez 7"

Through The Picnic School of Art's publishing platform, I collaborated with the musician *Regan the Rapper* to create the 7" music record *Signature Fadez* in 2021. I first met Regan at 7 *Brew Drive-Thru Coffee* on *M.L.K. Jr. Boulevard*, where I was hanging out with a colleague. Regan was sitting at the only table available with his big military green duffle bag holding his belongings while rapping to hip hop beats playing from his phone. I asked if we could sit with

⁹ The reflection can in this quote be understood as an infection of the outside world after it has been cultivated, grown, and reintroduced to an audience by the artist.

¹⁰ According to Stilinović in his essay *In Praise of Laziness*, artists or art should be completely isolated from capitalism in order to even exist. Benjamin's idea of boredom is not too far from Groys' infection theory as the boredom is a tool for unpacking experience, but the idleness needed for boredom sets them apart. Duchamp's refusal of work is comparable to Stilinović's laziness except for an emphasis on artistic work being part of the capitalist system that can therefore also be subject to avoidance or refusal (See Works Cited).

him, he agreed, and continued performing his music. He caught wind of the fact that I was a musician and as he was interested in beats for his lyrics, we exchanged contact information.

I contacted the Danish musician Villads Posselt Mikkelsen, whom I know from Bananskolen, and he gave us an original hip hop beat for the project. Using that, Regan the Rapper and I recorded our single “*I Put My Trust in You*” that can be found on the record, together with a hip hop track that I repurposed from a recording that I made when I was about 8 years old with the help of teachers of my grade school. Since that original track is in Danish, I recorded English translations of the lyrics with the help of my colleague Jonny Jonny (Jonathan Virginia Green). The concept of the original song was for us children to express our visions for our municipality *Græsted Gilleleje Kommune* which Jonny Jonny and I changed to Picnic School of Art to fit the thematics of the record. The lyrics of the song are of a playful and utopian nature that fit quite well with our vision for the Picnic School of Art, so I decided to name the new translated version “*The Picnic School of Art Manifesto*”.

The record was released in a brown paper envelope with a drawing I did of the angel Ophanim in the form of spinning wheels full of eyes (see fig. 1). This design was based on my first impressions of life in Northwest Arkansas, such as the presence of cars, grind culture, and Christian rap music. In addition to the actual vinyl record, I put a variety of items inside the record sleeve such as numbered Walmart playing cards¹¹, a RISO printed advertisement for a book by Devin Shepherd and Juliette Walker, PSOA pins and stickers, sometimes a bit of cash money (meant as instant hidden discounts or cashback), handwritten lyrics, and other knick knacks.

¹¹ This was meant as an alternative way of numbering this limited edition record.



Fig. 1. Signature Fadez vinyl record and record sleeve.
Source: Personal photograph

Gap of Privilege

I am going to take a step back in order to compare Regan's background to my own. I do not know much about Regan's past, but every time I have seen him he has been carrying his big green duffle bag with all of his belongings. He told me that he did not have a permanent place to live and that he had trouble with the different places he slept, such as excessive drug use and drama when he stayed on a family member's couch. I, on the other hand, have an apartment here in Fayetteville, as well as a studio at the university, and even some cellar space from friends and family in Denmark. In terms of transportation, I had two bikes when I collaborated with Regan, and to my knowledge, walking was his only mode of transportation. Even though I had limited knowledge on Regan's belongings, living situation, and family, it was easy for me to deduce that there was a big gap of privilege between us.

I had some experience with comparable collaborations through my activities with Bananskolen in which we collaborated with refugees during vulnerable times in their lives. Collaborations always have a degree of transactionality. In my experience, gaps of privilege (as well as gaps of culture) can be very rewarding for the parties involved if adequate attention is paid to the transactionality of the collaboration.

To fund the pressing of “*Signature Fadez*”, I received a student project grant. I decided to give all proceeds of the record sales directly to Regan since he was saving up for a deposit to get a proper place to live. Initially our collaboration did not have a financial incentive for him, but as I learned about the grant and his situation, I presented the idea of pressing and selling the record and we agreed. When I presented the idea to my colleagues at the university, some concerns were raised about the nature of the collaboration because of possible differences in privileges and motives. The project was not pure philanthropy as it served as valuable work for my portfolio and university classes. It is a project that I am proud of, and I truly believe that Regan the Rapper feels the same. We did occasionally hangout as friends and I do believe that he understood where I was coming from, what the project meant to me, and how that differed from what it meant to him. After we sold the records and I gave him his money, we eventually lost contact.

The Readymade’s Effect on Art and Curation

Very few argue against the enormous impact that *Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp had on the art world, but there are diverse opinions on what the precise impact was. Duchamp pushed many boundaries, but I would like to focus on the blurring of the lines between the role of the artist and the role of the curator.

Before *Fountain* was analyzed and canonized, the understanding of the word “artist” was closer to its etymological roots which related to the crafting of mediums such as paint, word, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry. The readymade broke open the constrictions of these traditional mediums. The artist no longer needed to use craftsmanship to produce the art, as they could now curate found objects for the gallery in order to create an art-experience. The word “curate” has its roots in the curator’s responsibilities of caring for and protecting the physical artwork. These responsibilities gradually expanded to include the presentation of the work such as how it relates to; the physical space, neighboring artwork, society, audiences, accompanying language, and the history of the artist.

Duchamp was a founding member and director of *Society of Independent Artists* which was the association that curated the exhibition that *Fountain* was created for, but I doubt that an artist doing curatorial work at that time would be considered a radical act in itself. In order to better understand what Duchamp did, we can distill the role of the curator to someone that cures artwork from its inability to be functional entities of art¹², noting however, that his readymades were not works of art until he started treating them as such. He “cured” several everyday objects from their inability to exist as art objects, which is to say that he transferred objects outside of the art world into the art world. This functioned as an invitation for future artists to bring store-bought items, music, snacks, people, pretty much anything into the art world in order for it to function as art. The radicality of *Fountain* lies in its aftermath that practically stripped western art of any restrictive traditions of artistic mediums.

¹² “Functional” in the sense that they are seen, interpreted, exhibited, talked about, and sold as art. This idea of “functionality as existence” is inspired by Danto’s and Dickie’s definitions of art.

As an example of these new artistic possibilities, I created the song *I Put My Trust in You* from *Signature Fadez* combining Regan the Rapper's lyrics and vocal performance with Mikkelsen's instrumentals. I acted as a sort of a curator (or arguably as an artist considering the analysis of the previous chapter) bringing the work of these two artists together to create the final piece. I used no craftsmanship to create the music in the traditional sense, but I am nonetheless responsible for the initiation and production of the piece and feel comfortable having it in my portfolio of artwork and taking credit for it.

A Certain Kind of Exhibition

A common definition of art is that whatever is perceived or dealt with as art, can be defined as art¹³. There is a certain kind of exhibition created by a certain type of curator that is becoming increasingly common. I started thinking about this kind of exhibition when I saw a show called *Japanomania in the North* at The National Gallery of Denmark in 2017, that focused on how Japanese art and visual culture had influenced European art, design, and architecture. I was excited to see my first original Hokusai woodblock print in person, but when I eventually found the piece at the exhibition, I felt sad to see it cramped in between Western design objects that had some visual similarities to the print. The Hokusai did not have any space to breathe; it was curated as an illustration of the story of cultural exchange without leaving much space for the story that Hokusai originally had intended¹⁴. The works in the exhibition were juxtaposed in a way to emphasize connections across time and space, telling the story of cross-continental

¹³ Initially from philosophers such as Arthur Danto and George Dickie (see the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy under Works Cited)

¹⁴ This was one of his 36 views of the Fuji mountain and I am not going to attempt getting into what Hokusai intended to convey with that series. I am still in the process of trying to understand them and it is besides the point that I am trying to make.

cultural and visual influence. The layout (or curation) of the exhibition did not invite me to experience the objects as individual works of art, but rather as puzzle pieces that together form a coherent experience that is meant to be seen and judged as a single piece of art¹⁵.

Last year (2022), there was a show at Crystal Bridges called *The Dirty South* which I did not see, but heard about from several friends and colleagues. I did not witness a single opinion on any individual work in the exhibition, but did hear several opinions on the exhibition as a whole. Through an overly literalist understanding of Danto's and Dickie's definitions of art and my limited second-hand experience of *The Dirty South*, the individual objects from the exhibition have not functioned as art to me as they have not been treated as such by my peers. However, the exhibition as a whole is treated and discussed as a work of art that is judged by its execution, ethics, and coherence. It seems clear to me that the people who shared their thoughts on the show were judging their experience on the curation as artistic work and the exhibition as a work of art.

Another example of this tendency was the ninth Berlin Biennale curated by DIS in 2016, in which a rooftop was inhabited by fitness equipment and scheduled workout sessions (see fig. 2). Before entering the rooftop area, I read the plaque placed by the curators on the glass door which described the artist, Nik Kosmas, as a person who had abandoned the art world after receiving his MFA in favor of a career in fitness and nutrition. I do not have any background knowledge on how this piece came to be, but it seems to me like a clever curatorial move to invite a person that has left the art world to exhibit at one of the most important and influential

¹⁵ Seen and judged as art in practice and not in discourse, meaning that the audience uses the word "exhibition", but talks about it as if it was a single art piece.

art exhibitions in Europe. The fitness aspect of the work does not excite me much, but the curatorial blurring of who (and what) is inside and outside of the art world caught my attention. Having an “ex-artist” doing “non-art” in what is arguably one of the most artistic contexts possible, is the core of the work for me. If it came to be as I imagine, then the credit for the artistic experience goes to the curation.

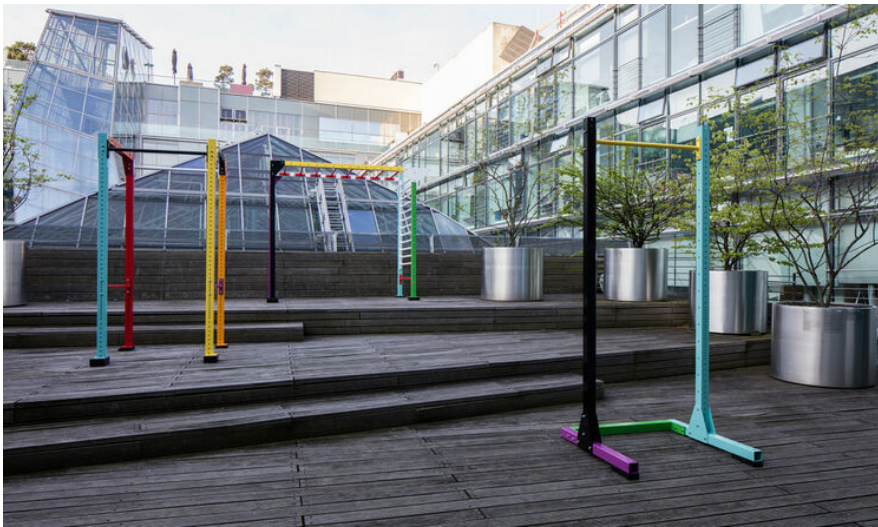


Fig. 2. Timo Ohler. *Power Rack* by Nik Kosmas for the ninth Berlin Biennale, 2016, <https://www.berlinbiennale.de/en/personen/1856/nik-kosmas>

Curation and Representation

There are consequences of this tendency that are worth paying attention to. The art world has taken giant positive leaps in terms of representing previously underrepresented groups such as women, people of color, LGBTQ+, indigenous people, and disabled people. This is an undeniably positive direction. However, paired with the changes in how exhibitions are experienced (discussed in the previous chapter), some concerning tendencies emerge. Institutions and curators are actively being held responsible by the public for their representations of the above mentioned groups. In my experience, this results in curators aiming to represent broadly,

not only on paper, but also visually or artistically. As an example, if an exhibition needs indigenous Greenlandic representation, the curator looks for not only a Greenlandic artist, but also work that visibly looks Greenlandic¹⁶. Because of the law of supply and demand, artists then start creating in a way that overtly signals their culture as it will make their work more attractive to curators through its representational value.

Since contemporary artwork often serves as illustration of a curatorial vision or as representation of a culture, there is less space for deeper readings of individual pieces, paired with an expectation for the artists to focus on the underrepresented side(s) of their identity (if they have any) to create pieces that work as easily recognizable tokens of representation. This distillation of the identity of the artist simplifies the perception of their practice and work. The art experience is not necessarily compromised for the audience because of this, it actually seems to work well with today's "scrolling mentality", since the depth of the art experience is formed through the juxtaposition of several works to present a bigger picture, which can subsequently mean that less time and attention is given to singular pieces¹⁷.

Determining the Artist

The way that I use the word *artist*, relates to the person that can rightfully take credit for the artistic experience of the audience. Even though it can always be understood as a collective effort created by the host institution, the curator, peers, mentors, teachers, circumstances, environment, and of course the audience, it does make sense to pinpoint the main source as *the*

¹⁶ This can for example be art work using traditionally Greenlandic materials such as seal skin or whale bone or work that visually or conceptually represents Greenlandic culture.

¹⁷ I realize that I make this sound like a bad thing and that is not my intention. I do have my opinions on how art is created, curated and received, but in this part I am trying to analyze, understand, and not judge.

artist. Take for example Duchamp's *Fountain*. For a long time, the photograph of *Fountain* taken by Alfred Stieglitz (a prolific artist in his own right) was the physical object representing the work. Stieglitz is not considered the artist behind *Fountain* though, the photograph merely works to illustrate the actions of Duchamp. Similar to how the Hokusai woodblock print functioned as an illustration of the story of cross continental influence told by the curators of *Japanomania in the North*.

In the case of my thesis exhibition, including work made by other artists and/or non-artists does not shift the attention away from myself. I aim to convey a holistic understanding of my artistic practice in the sense that my work is not only what I create with my hands, but also the relations that I partake in, my decisions in life, the environment in which I live, and maybe even how I eat and sleep.



Fig. 3, Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Framework Houses of the Siegen Industrial Region, Slated Gable Sides, Germany*, 1961-1978,
https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/849260?&exhibitionId=0&oid=849260&pk_gids=780

Consider the work of artists Bernd and Hilla Becher and how it is experienced (see fig. 3). Their photographs looked at individually are purposely dull, gray, and unassuming. Their work is rarely talked about from a purely formal perspective. A big part of experiencing it comes from the performative, historical, and conceptual aspects of their practice. For several decades, they took pictures methodologically, dead-pan, in overcast conditions, and with no people in the frame. They had a huge influence on Kunstakademie Düsseldorf and the generation of artists they mentored there. *How* they worked is detrimental in the reading of their art.

In a similar sense, I believe that a big part of experiencing my art is through understanding where it comes from and how it was made. As an example, I would not disagree that the music on *Signature Fadez* sounds amateurish and may not be a pleasant listening experience, but the beauty lies in the way that it was conceived. It uses an unlikely collaboration as a statement and appreciates a voice that is easily ignored or dismissed.

Knots

Before moving to the USA I had developed a semi-abstract style of recognizable paintings that were usually referred to as “knots” or “knot paintings” (see fig. 4.) They were rooted in my interest in esoteric science studies, meditation, street art, and automatic drawing. The paintings started to gain some recognition and at some point I found myself kind of stuck as “that artist who paints knots”. I would paint other stuff simultaneously, but it felt overshadowed by that one particular style. Even though I enjoyed making and looking at them, it started to feel like some sort of curse in the sense that they became the only pieces selling and being exhibited. I had accidentally created something like a visual brand identity for my artistic practice.

In my experience, major art museums around the world usually have at least: a Pollock drip painting, a flower painting by van Gogh, a cubist figure by Picasso, a dark portrait by Rembrandt, a landscape by Cezanne, a color field by Rothko, and so on. Each of these, usually being very recognizable to anyone with some interest or education in western art history. In a similar way, many product brands make their products recognizable, such as the three stripes that can be recognized as Adidas even as the shoes, jackets, and pants change size, color, and form. I do not mind my work being recognizable, but the “knot” paintings I did in Denmark began to limit my expression and overshadow my other work. I like to think of architect Alvar Aalto’s work as an oeuvre that is recognizable across furniture and buildings even though they vary wildly in form and appearance. The recognizability comes from his unique sensibility to form, material, and light. I’m hoping to stay in a position in which I feel free to create and experiment without consciously having to worry about my work being recognizable.

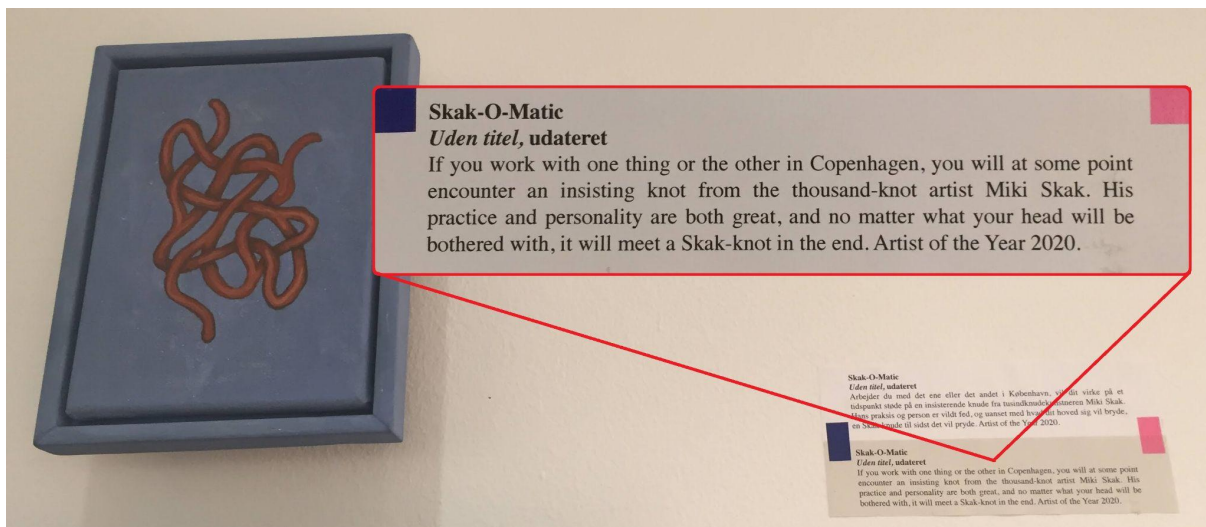


Fig. 4. Knot painting exhibited at The Danish National Gallery with curatorial text by art historian and curator Nanna Friis, September 2020.
Source: Personal photograph (edited).

I am challenged to find my balance between “playing the game” of the art market and taking care of my own joy and integrity. Around 2013-2014 I was working full time as a professional photographer after years of being a happy amateur. Before I started relying on photography to pay my bills, I thought that having my hobby become my job would be total bliss. Unfortunately, I quickly realized how much I had to adapt my practice in order to make a living, and eventually I lost my joy in photography and opted for a job as a barista. I fear to exhaust my joy in mediums such as painting and music in the process of trying to monetize the work.

In Practice

Moving from my home country Denmark to the USA for three years has given me a unique opportunity to develop my artistic practice with peers and audiences that do not have a preconceived notion of what my “style” is. The “knots” got put aside to make room for new figurative explorations in paint, ceramics, and sculptures.

Together with the artist Sofie Arildsen, I have developed imagery and ways of telling stories in paintings. We have painted together while studying and discussing artists such as Henry Heerup, Tove Jansson, Sister Gertrude Morgan, Henry Darger, Odilon Redon, Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and Asger Jorn. Our collaborations usually circle around love and care in nature scenes with anthropomorphic animals and plants. Her approach to painting is centered around storytelling which has inspired me to focus more on intuitive aspects of image making and less on conceptual aspects.

Ceramicist Gnat Nicholson and I have done ceramic work together with several colleagues in a way that reminds me of Jesper Elving's methodology and my youth in Danish leftist communities. Our collaborations were anarchistic structurally and we were mainly trying to have fun with clay and enjoy each other's company. We would jokingly imitate each other's styles of art, create caricature portraits of each other, work on pieces simultaneously, and sometimes rotate several pieces between us (see fig. 5). Like Duchamp's urinal, Elving's gibberish poetry and his art school, these ceramic pieces would be easy to disregard as internal jokes without much artistic value. However, by curating them into an exhibition space the audience is encouraged to experience them as serious art pieces, which I did for my thesis exhibition. The work does not signal much time spent nor showcase technical proficiency of the medium, its quality rather lies in its lightheartedness and liberating careless joy of creation.



Fig. 5. Glazed ceramic platter by Miki Skak, Gnat NicholSEN, and Ianna Williams exhibited at *Miki Skak's Thesis Show*, November 2023.

Source: Personal photograph

I did not bother coming up with a title for my thesis show. Jesper Elving had a very particular ability to spend his energy wisely during our collaborations which I try to apply to my own practice. I rarely title my work as I enjoy the casual names that they are given in absence of an official title such as: “the carrot field one”, “the one with trees singing”, and so on. Naming my pieces or my exhibition would be spending energy on something that in my opinion would not add to the experience of the art. Caring for the experience also means caring about the energy of my audience which guided the curatorial choices that I took for my thesis exhibition. Inspired by Federico García Lorca’s descriptions of the *Duende*, which describes how unstable environments can radically enhance the experience of art, I chose to put effort into finding destabilizing snacks for the reception of my exhibition. I bought a large amount of 16 oz Monster Energy cans to invite my audience to have a jittery and sleepless Monday night, paired with foul smelling edible insects, chewable roots, and candy cigarettes. I translated Dan Turèll’s poem *Mine Damer og Herrer* which served as the reception’s welcoming gesture to creeps, prostitutes, cops, horny, and heartbroken people. Furthermore, I invited my friend “BB on the Street”, who can be described (rudely) as a jittery and loud street salesman, to recite my poem *Flooded by What?* which revolves around death, alcoholism, dysfunctional family, and ego death. The inclusion of “BB on the Street” for the reception is a curatorial move inspired by my project with Regan the Rapper. According to Lorca, feelings of danger and instability open up the emotional receptors of artists and audiences required for art to flourish.

Conclusion

Upon reflecting on my own artistic journey, I am realizing the complexity of the art world and how I can contribute to it. Jesper Elving showed me that I had something of value within the

art world, and after years of reflecting and experimenting, I feel like I am getting closer to understanding what that is. Without the radical liberation from artistic restrictions ushered in by Marcel Duchamp and his critics, I can't imagine myself having much luck pursuing arts in the way that I do now. Through Goodiepal's mentorship, I found a path within the arts that lets me do work I enjoy, while staying connected to my humanitarian values and activist past. My time in the USA and University of Arkansas has given me an opportunity to rethink my practice and break the trajectory it had taken in Europe. My collaboration with Juliette Walker and my time as a student, teaching assistant, and teacher at the University of Arkansas has given me valuable insight and experience in what art education is and can be. My journey into the arts was long, windy, and full of important crossroads and surprises, so has my journey been within the world of art education. I have no reason to expect the future to be any less windy and surprising, but I feel better prepared than ever to take it on.

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