

Jesper Carlsen
Surface Encounters

11.11 2017 – 07.01 2018



CV

Jesper Carlsen (b. 1977) graduated from the Funen Art Academy in 2006. He has exhibited widely internationally, including at Sierra Metro in Edinburgh, The Lab in San Francisco, Wedding in Berlin, Espai Ubú in Barcelona, and Uppsala Konstmuseum. In Denmark he has exhibited at Brandts, Trapholt, Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Den Frie Centre of Contemporary Art, Koh-i-Noor, Toves, Galleri Image, and Martin Asbæk Gallery.

EVENTS

Thursday 4 January 6–7.30pm

LECTURE & CONVERSATION: *3D PRINTING IN ART – A NEW FORM OF SCULPTURE?*

This evening, Overgaden invites you to a lecture by Lise Skytte Jakobsen, Associate Professor in Art History at Aarhus University. Based on her research, she will talk about how 3D printing is used in an artistic context as the framework for a subsequent conversation with Jesper Carlsen that will focus on his exhibition and experiences within the field.

Image: Jesper Carlsen, 2017. 3D rendering of the exhibition *Surface Encounters*.

This exhibition folder can be downloaded from: overgaden.org

The exhibition is supported by:



DANISH ARTS FOUNDATION CITY OF COPENHAGEN

Overgaden is supported by the Danish Arts Foundation and the Obel Family Foundation

OVERGADEN.

Institute of Contemporary Art, Overgaden neden Vandet 17, 1414 Copenhagen K, Denmark, overgaden.org, +45 32577273

Design: Anni's

What is that Algorithm Doing in a Fishing Boat?

By Lotte Philipsen

The small, plastic fishing boats look like children's toys. At first glance they really do not seem to belong in the strictly composed structure – the sculptural work *Boat Joint Icosphere, global alignment* – comprised of plastic rods joined in triangles to form a sphere. The sphere is a so-called icosphere, the geometrical principle used in computer programmes to construct three-dimensional spherical bodies. In *Boat Joint Icosphere, global alignment* we cannot twist and turn this icosphere on a screen by moving a mouse, but since it is a physical object we can walk around it, and on closer inspection discover that the joints between the plastic rods are small, childish boats – that the boats are what are holding the stringent mathematics together. You might ask what a fishing boat is doing in a geometric algorithm, but after talking to Jesper Carlsen I understand that the question needs turning around: we should be more interested in what algorithms are doing in fishing boats – and everywhere else.

Jesper Carlsen works with digital images. Today it is actually difficult not to work with digital images in one way or another, whether you are an artist or not. Digital images are, for example, the interface of a smartphone app when we buy a bus ticket; the selfie we send in a text message; the ad we see on TV; the urban developer's plan of what a future city district looks like; the live broadcast of a football match played a thousand kilometres away; the smile of the Mona Lisa in the mind of someone who has never stood in front of the original work; and the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park*. The vast majority of images we see today are digital, and their omnipresence makes them paradoxically invisible in the sense that we do not see them as the images they are – we see and use them as something else: 'bus tickets', 'future homes', 'goal scored in extra time', 'dinosaurs', etc.

But Jesper Carlsen does not work with digital images as a practical tool to generate new meanings. Instead he takes the images apart, investigates how they are constructed, then shows them to us in a new way, giving us the opportunity to see them as digital images. For example in the eight-screen work *Substance*. On each screen an object is suspended in a dark, virtual space where it rotates on imaginary axes, is folded, dissolves and changes its shape and surface. On one screen a stone turns as its rough surface is gradually smoothed out, making its angular form increasingly round until it is no longer a stone but an unidentifiable object. On another screen a wooden cube rotates, transmuting from a square box to a round sphere as the grain of the wood disappears. On yet another screen a white cube explodes in a cloud of particles. These small computer

animations investigate the creation of objects in a world of digital imagery: how much or how little does it take before we recognise something as a specific material and/or form? When and how does the inarticulate matter of pixels on a screen form 'glass', 'paper', or 'a donut' – i.e. the cultural images we understand and use to communicate with? It is precisely this boundary Jesper Carlsen explores in his works, making his oeuvre an extension of the classical modernist school of art's investigation of the way images are created.

A famous example: in 1890–1891 the French artist Claude Monet painted 25 pictures of a haystack in a field. If the point was to paint a haystack in a field he could have stopped after the first one, but by insisting on repeating the same subject again and again Monet was investigating not the haystack, but the creation of the image. A picture of a haystack can have many purposes rhetorically, and thereby many different meanings (for example as a tribute to country life or a critique of hard, manual labour). Images are thus powerful co-creators of our reality, to such an extent that it is difficult to differentiate between visual images and mental convictions.

In Denmark the Ex-School (The Experimental Art School) of the 1960s developed this modernist tradition through a kind of primary artistic research in which its members investigated materials and forms instead of immediately using them to represent something else. At the Ex-School clay was not used to make a model of a bust. Instead it was kneaded, thrown, poured and dried to investigate the *premise* on which powerful images were made. By stripping the traditional layers of culture and meaning away, the artists of the Ex-School both caught sight of and grabbed hold of image-generating matter, discovering new ways to use it and thereby to generate new meanings.

Jesper Carlsen conducts the same kind of primary research in his investigation of digital image construction – and thereby of the mental and social image practises prevalent in society today. Carlsen makes his experiments in computer programmes, for example 3D design software with its apparently endless potential to create any shape and combine it with any kind of illusionary surface. Everything is possible, but nothing is real. Or is it? Is the computer-generated stone on the screen any less real (or unreal) than the stone we pick up on the beach and can hold in our hand? One is comprised of bits, algorithms and light in an electronic appliance, whereas the other is the result of geothermic forces and consists of a specific molecular structure – another kind of algorithm. In both cases we sense only

a tiny fraction of the object before us. So in that sense they are both 'stones' to the same extent, as long as we treat them as 'stones' within the different structural frameworks in which they make sense as stones. The stone on the beach can tell us something about the geology of a place, we can use it as a doorstep, but it is useless as a 'stone' in a game of *Minecraft*. A virtual stone surface can show us what a new kitchen top would look like in a simulation on Ikea's website, but we cannot use it to press flowers. So both are equally (un)real, but in different situations, and it is precisely because of how real, powerful and influential digital images are in our lives today that Jesper Carlsen is intent upon subjecting them to critical scrutiny.

In the work *Supporting Objects*, small 3D prints are displayed in acrylic glass cubes. Among the small dinosaurs, drone parts, teacups and partially unidentifiable objects like those in the screen animations, we find the small fishing boat again. The small boat plays a simple, practical yet key role in the world of 3D printing, because it is often used as a test print to calibrate 3D printers. An advanced, abstract form could, of course, also be used as a test print, but the reason the small fishing boat is so common is that the company Creative Tools published a free file called *#3DBenchy* complete with instructions, making an easily accessible tool for 3D print calibration available to amateurs.

That a childish fishing boat is key to the advanced translation process between virtual and physical forms is a prime example of how digital images, despite their mathematical dimensions, remain primarily cultural and social. The fishing boat also exemplifies that it does not make sense to draw any sharp distinctions between a digital, virtual dimension on the one hand, and a physical, concrete dimension on the other. The two states literally fuse in a warm mass, which coalesces layer by layer into a detached, solidified manifestation of a dynamic object that otherwise unfolds unimpeded across platforms, and can easily be transformed with a couple of clicks on the keyboard. Jesper Carlsen's works are not images that depict something (else), but rather performative emergences in which materials like electrical currents, algorithms and hardware are transformed into materials like 'stones', 'ships' or 'dinosaurs', balancing on the line between medium and image.

So what are algorithms doing in a fishing boat, and what are they doing in the vast majority of images today? Algorithms determine how images look, where and how we see them, and what we use them for. In short, they have a vast influence on how we perceive the world we live in. Only by insisting that digital images –

like all other images – really *are* images can we begin to address the impact they have on us as individuals and societies. And if we are aware of and can actually see the underlying mechanisms involved, maybe we have a better chance of playing an active role in forming society through our use of digital images. Jesper Carlsen's art investigates the algorithms of our images, and thereby of ourselves.

Lotte Philipsen, PhD in Art History, is Associate Professor at the School of Communication and Culture of Aarhus University.

Translation: Jane Rowley