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## ***Per Kirkeby***

### **La Città di Riga**

*Dear Mario Merz*  
*Diary letter from Pearly Land,*  
*Summer 1979*

#### *The didactic drawing*

Back again to the land of my youth's science. The diary filled with maps and diagrams, graphic hypotheses with pointed Indian ink pen, entered up in the tent after the day's roamings on the fells in the great waste, preserved in a plastic bag all the time as protection against the white unpredictability and the danger of the river passages, almost eaten by a polar bear.

Field book, sketch-book of the roamings, filled with pencil drafts of the Indian ink hypotheses impaled in the diary - drawn with cold fingers, sun-glasses, watering eyes - never Landscape, but the geologist's idea of the view. And then the attempts to paint the Landscapes. The conception of an artist at the side of the scientist. It was a false conception that led to the despair of the 'romantic' artist. The didactic drawing.

Back 16 years later. As artist. And helpless without The Didactic Drawing.

The didactic drawing - examples being the geologist's profiles and the sailor's land lines. They are drawings that set out an idea - a purpose - and, at the same time, resemble historical reality. 'Naturalism', not pure schema. Layfolk can recognise them and experts read them. Experts read the idea or preconception: that there is an idea in the external form, that behind it lies a structure. A structure which the preconception-filled draughtsman can see in the external naturalistic and chaotic form. On the strength of his trained insight. And the naturalistic chaos will be arranged, dimensions extended and over-accentuated so that the idea can be seen (geologists would rather talk of structure than idea because they think that they are more naturally correct than others). Mariners overheighten their land lines as seen from the sea because they want to survive, to reach land safely - this is a pure idea.

Rough art history: the Bauhaus attitude is pure idealism, lacking (seen idealistically) the naturalistic surface. It is structure 'an sich' without material tension. Geological structure always blooms in naturalistic materiality: a naive demand for a truer picture of 'reality'. That reality ought to be more than one sees. The land line is practical, innocent naturalism, because it is in the service of survival and guidance.

(Note: a land line is the mariner's term for the ornament of the coastline as it appears when one approaches the coast from the sea. A drawing of this picture by people who know the locality can serve others as a guide. But it is only a guide if it is made for the 'subjective' reading of all mariners: so that characteristic points are emphasised and differences altogether exaggerated. Perhaps it the nature of the human eye - one can see it when one comes home with a photo of the living coastline as one observed it under sail. On the photograph it is a fairly flat stripe).

Figures that are swallowed up by the landscape.

*Vertical and horizontal poetry*

The camp by Hellefisk Fjord.

Up and down over the slopes of talus. The eternal movement, the dangerous and necessary friction of stone. These stones in eternal movement (which can be heard only now and then, filled with terror in the high polar stillness) are made into little landslides by the geologist (little, but dangerous to him). The geologist is on the way up over these slopes to get a sample of the firm fell before it begins the unavoidable migration downwards. It is vertical poetry. Both in nature, in geological history and geological field work.

The geologist turns back home to the camp.

Now he is walking over the large terraces, the surfaces of large blocks of the melt water plains. They go into the Landscape. Figures in the Landscape are always swallowed up by Nature. They wander into it - dots, stones, patches of snow - all is without size, crystal-clearly divided up, the terror cannot be located. Or the geologist becomes a repoussoir, a sitting figure in the foreground - thinking, sleeping, looking through binoculars, writing in a field book, looking at aerial photos. From the top of the fell we can see out over the ice field towards the North Pole. This is horizontal poetry. Writing down and looking out.

*Knuth*

Eigil was in fine form. Song. Blue Sky. Think he is ripe for the film: places in North-East Greenland, a journey - the diary - the row of sphinxes - the sculptor - Schubert - the young count - the ruins.

*Geology assumptions*

The camp by Fastelavn Sea.

Geology is the doctrine of the forces behind the forms, both the building-up and the breaking-down. And this means pure assumptions. (The simplest thoughts are always the most illuminating). For none of these forces can be observed. One can observe small forces, right up to earthquakes, and presume that they are exemplars. But it is still an assumption that the huge forces that the landscapes talk of are a multiplication in size and time of the presumed exemplars. Life is short.

*The white colour*

The white colour roams by the Poles. For me it is eternal disquiet and horror. It has been after me several times. It cannot be described. When the white moves. Like a feather the polar bear approaches, dancing over stones and distances. It is suddenly conjured up out of the spotted landscape. I hardly dare remember it. But I have taken up many hours in working out by what unbelievable combinations of accidents (?) it did not get me. Accidents exist only for those who survive. This is not by chance. Melville writes about the white colours in *Moby Dick* (which naturally I read here), 'But in spite of all those association of this colour with something beautiful and good, there remains, however, an inexplicable mystery to white, which exceeds even the colour red, which terrifies because it is the colour of blood'.

The white stillness makes my blood beat faster. Is it the white colour or the white beast? Isn't it all

one - is it not just Anxiety here by the patches of snow, by the coagulating coast, the white stillness, the all-too-clear view?

(Later I read Harold Rosenberg on Newman, 'The American vanguard painter took to the white expanse of the canvas as Melville's Ishmael took to the sea').