

# *What am I doing here?*

– AN EXHIBITION ON ART AND EXISTENCE

ESBJERG KUNSTMUSEUM 2013

## FOREWORD THE EXISTENTIAL STATUS OF AESTHETICS

*What am I doing here? – an exhibition on art and existence* concludes the research and exhibition series *Art in Context* at Esbjerg Art Museum. While the first three exhibitions of the series each focused on a theme from everyday life, religion and spirituality, language and communication, and man as a biological being, this fourth and last exhibition focuses specifically on man's psychological existence. The exhibition is curated by the Danish born English artist Nina Saunders and the English psychologist, Prof. Ernesto Spinelli. Both curators have enjoyed long professional careers and possess a vast insight in the area. The works by Nina Saunders, to be found at several art museums of international renown, deal with psychological and existentialist issues, while Ernesto Spinelli is one of the internationally most salient psychotherapists in the field of existentialist psychology.

The word *existence* in the exhibition title may have a deterring effect in itself, partly because it is often connected with the difficult writings of Søren Kierkegaard, partly because existence and existentialism are often tied to the more serious aspects of life, e.g. death, the meaninglessness of life, and the loneliness that may follow when the need for care and love is at its greatest. However, it does not have to be like that. Existence is also about involvement, creativity, love, and other encouraging aspects of life. The problem is that existence must be experienced. It ceases to exist as soon as we reflect on it. It is as if our attempt to understand hinders our possibilities of living life as it is. Most people know what it is like to immerse yourself in some sort of occupation – cooking for guests, playing chess, listening to a piano sonata by Franz Schubert, or whatever – to such a degree that you lose yourself in it. Images, memories, ideas – all flow

freely through your consciousness. At times it feels like something which is positive and delightful, while at other times it is about other aspects of life, such as grief, loss, irritation, or other things not immediately uplifting. Such moments of presence constitute human existence. As soon as we begin to reflect on these moments of pure being, they vanish. If we attempt to describe them with words, we rarely succeed. To make it short, existence is when we involve ourselves in the present moment of life.

The question is how existence relates to art. Nearly three hundred years ago, the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten introduced the concept of *aesthetics* in a dissertation about poetry. He not only points out a number of features that make a poem poetic and beautiful, he furthermore claims that we need a particular type of sensuous perception in order to be able to relate to a work of art. We need a kind of sensuous openness to experience the nuances that make up a work of art. This sensuous experience stands in contrast to philosophical and scientific cognition, and Baumgarten thus claims that analyses and interpretations of a work of art destroy the proper aesthetic experience. His distinction between aesthetic experience and rational cognition correlates perfectly with the nature of existence. On the one hand, human beings, like animals, live on the spur of the moment, while on the other, man, as opposed to animals, is capable of reflecting about life. We manage to adapt to changing circumstances because we learn from experience; our own as well as that of others. Works of art are distinguished by their capacity to promote presence and by encouraging us to involve ourselves, to live in the present moment. Through this sensuous experience our emotions are activated; these emotions are central to the aesthetic experience.

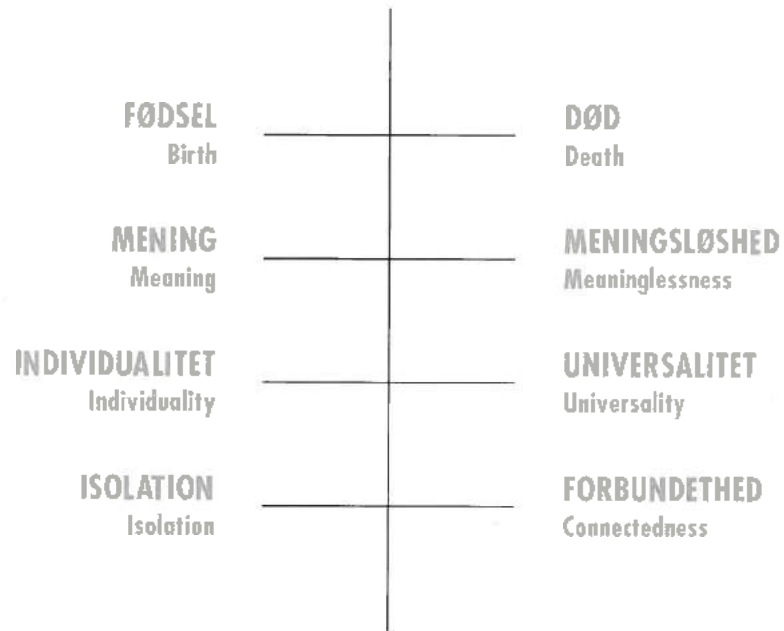
You may wonder what difference a couple of emotions in connection with art can make. Is it simply enjoyment for enjoyment's sake? Baumgarten does not answer this question. However, existential psychology makes it possible for us to presume that the emotions that occur when we look at a painting or listen to a piece of music are emotions that we have experienced previously. On the first occurrence they are created by important life conditions or a specific experience. Previously, we have never been able to retain them and tie them to the experiences that caused them. This means that they float around aimlessly in our consciousness, creating anxiety and frustration, causing us to react emotionally to a degree that does not correspond with the situation at hand. These are the emotions activated by a work of art through its artistic expression, and in certain circumstances such emotions connect with the artistic form, creating a sensuous relation. In other words a work of art may create a harmony between important life conditions and the emotions evoked by these conditions. In this way an aesthetic experience contributes to a larger degree of harmony in the existence of the individual.

This relationship between aesthetics and existence has been an underlying concept in the planning of all four exhibitions in the *Art in Context* series, but in this fourth and last exhibition it constitutes a pivotal point. The two curators have faced a tiresome and sometimes even nerve-racking job when selecting the works for the exhibition; not only because of a demand of distinctive works of high artistic standard, but also because the works were to promote a sensuous and emotional experience within existential themes that are relevant to everyone notwithstanding the differences that might keep them apart.

We thank the two curators for their admirable commitment and truly outstanding work in connection with the exhibition. Their successful cooperation resulted not only in this stimulating exhibition; rather unusually it led to a joint work that became iconic for the exhibition, *Existential Photo Booth*. However, without financial backing the project would never have become a reality; this is why we thank The Danish Ministry of Culture, Ribe Amt, The Danish Agency for Culture, The Novo Nordisk Foundation, The Esbjerg Foundation, The Lida and Oskar Nielsen Foundation, and The Claus Sørensen Foundation for their substantial support for the research work behind the exhibition series, and the Augustinus Foundation, The Danish Arts Councils Committee for Visual Arts, The Danish Arts Council Committee for International Visual Art, and The Claus Sørensen Foundation for their support for this exhibition and the publication at hand. Likewise we thank all the institutions, people and companies who generously lent us the works for the exhibition, and the involved artists who with no hesitation created works for the project or helped us in other ways. Last, but not least, we thank the companies that supported us, Anders Holm for technical development and the Esbjerg Red Cross for their keen involvement in making one of the installations come true.

*Research psychologist, Dr. Phil. Bjarne Sode Funch and  
Director of Esbjerg Art Museum, Inge Merete Kjeldgaard*

**EKSISTENS**  
Existence



**ILD**  
Fire

**LUFT**  
Air

**VAND**  
Water

**JORD**  
Earth

# **CURATORIAL CONCEPT**

The overall theme of the show is 'Art and Existence'. We have taken a predominantly existential focus on this theme since both curators are strongly drawn to this way of looking at existence. One of us, Ernesto Spinelli, is an internationally-recognised figure in this area as applied to psychology and psychotherapy. The other curator, Nina Saunders, is an artist whose work focuses on, and creatively reflects, a number of key existential concerns. Together, we have tried to put together a show that reflects key themes – or paradoxes – or polarities – surrounding the question of existence as presented from the viewpoint of the arts. Themes such as individuality-universality, isolation-community, life-death etc. Taken together, the themes (or paradoxes or polarities) try to capture the whole experience of what and how it is to be human.

Nina Saunders and Ernesto Spinelli

July 25, 2013



**Nina Saunders and Ernesto Spinelli**

# EXISTENTIAL PHOTO BOOTH

The Photo-Booth piece is an original and pivotal art piece designed for the 'Art and Existence' Show. It captures the essence of the whole Show in a single, interactive, piece.

The key idea behind The Photo Booth relies upon a key theme within existential philosophy and psychology: namely, the ever present inter-action and inter-creation between the individual and the universal.

Each human being is wholly unique and irreplaceable and holds within him/herself 'the key' to all that it is to exist as a human being. At the same time, each human being's very ability to stand out uniquely and irreplaceably, rests upon a 'universal grounding or foundation of Being'. To put it somewhat glibly, but accurately, as expressed in a recent advert: "I am who I am because of everyone". It is the universal that permits the existence and expression of the individual.

The Photo Booth Piece addresses this philosophical question in an exciting, enjoyable and original manner. Each person who participates in the Show will be invited to have his or her photo taken at the Entrance to the Show. That photo will then be projected, at a later point in time, on one of two screens that are located in the Museum. One screen will show each individual person's photo as an individual. The second screen 'meshes together' all of the existing individual photos so that it produces a combined, or "universal" image of all the beings who have had their photo taken. Each new individual photo booth image adds to the overall "universal" image being projected on the second screen.

By the end of the Show, a Universal Image made up of all the individual images taken during the show will be available.

Nina Saunders and Ernesto Spinelli  
July 25, 2013



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