

the traces TRØELS SANDEGARD



## Process and presence

JONAS JØRGENSEN

120 woodlice, 10 brown cardboard boxes, two chest freezers, 800 kg of cement, a video camera and monitor, two refrigeration devices connected in series, 20 bindweed plants, 3 wooden pallets, 7 m of electrical piping, coffee, tea and milk, a solution of the salt  $\text{NH}_2\text{PO}_4$ , two black latex balloons, and a dusty old pillow.

The above list could easily be of remedies implemented by eighties TV hero MacGyver in one of his many ingenious solutions to one of the life-or-death situations he encountered so often. It is, however, merely a list of some of the more interesting materials that have been included in Troels Sandegård's oeuvre over the past four years. For Sandegård, however, the use of such a diversity of materials is no gimmick; it is simply the natural consequence of his approach to creating art, for he is not satisfied with merely producing aesthetic objects. Rather, he constructs works that are concerned with processes in a broad sense (so far, however, these have never included the process of saving his own life like MacGyver), and his works include installations, small sculptural units as well as conceptually documentary works. Despite being done in different mediums, a common feature of these works is that they unfold in a concrete manner in time and space, either by indexing an event which has preceded the work, or by including a physical process in the work itself. In Sandegård's artistic universe, it is thus less a question of the beauty of the works than of what they can do, what they undergo, and how we perceive them and the concepts they invoke.

### The work as a staged process

Previously, Sandegård's works often took the form of separate self-sufficient units which were structured by processes that the observer could witness, but not directly influence. With themes centred on growth and impermanence, references to nature, and a focus on the potential of various materials for transformation, these works shared some features with the Land Art of the sixties and seventies. In contrast to this tradition, however, they were neither outdoor works nor represented a passive acceptance of the processes of nature – such processes were included in the works, but here controlled and used with a specific intent.

In *Environmental Harmony* (2005) for example, a cardboard landscape in an aquarium was covered in a snow-like blanket by means of the crystallisation of an evaporated saline solution, while in the series *Cardboard Greenhouse Box* a number of cardboard constructions were soaked and finally forced to collapse, by means of growing bindweed and water sprinklers. The works thus displayed a staging of the physical processes which clearly pointed beyond the works themselves towards themes which lie outside the realm of art, such as environmental issues, the nature/nurture dichotomy, and considerations of the relationship between the destructive and constructive efforts of human beings in general. The works were however simultaneously isolated from their surroundings, in the sense that their conditions of growth were determined at the time of their creation and the subsequent stages given solely by their construction and the laws of nature. This gave them a kind of self-sufficiency as closed biological and chemical systems into which only our vision could penetrate. Through this they can be seen as a critical commentary on modernist claims regarding the autonomy of the artwork. For here this assumption is distorted, since the works do not operate in an autonomous visual field, but instead just incorporate a temporal process that unfolds independently from the surroundings.

## Discovery and investigation

Since 2006 Sandegård has been producing conceptual works in the form of photographs and objects but has mainly operated through installations. This medium naturally involves a kind of "lived" exchange between the observer and the work, since the former is physically located within and surrounded by the latter. In Sandegård's installations however, this interplay is often further enhanced by an invitation from the work to actively explore and investigate a number of possibilities it provides.

In *Audio Air 01*, this was realised through the fact that the observer must move between two storeys of the exhibition hall, not only to gain a clear impression of the installation, but also to understand



the causal relations which lie behind the dripping of a small hose. In *Parallel Environment 02* instead enticed the observer to climb up a ladder in order to look up through a hole in the ceiling. In the same way the installation *ECHOES* displayed a large formation of a white material that was difficult to categorise visually. It resembled a kind of insulation foam, and was the only thing present on the otherwise white and bare rear wall of the gallery. It also looked like ice, which it was, but due to its location in an unusual context – growing out of a white wall with no visible sign of refrigerating equipment – the observer usually only realised this after touching the material. The same installation also gave the observer an opportunity to influence the work more directly, and thereby further explore it. In the middle of the room was a large concrete box in which small specks of dust moved around. The motion of this dust was filmed by a camera and reproduced in magnified form on a flat screen. The box had two holes in the sides, so when the door to the gallery room was opened, the draught entering these holes created turbulence inside the box, blowing the dust motes around. But the holes also made it possible for the observer to blow into the box and observe on the screen how this caused the dust to swirl past the camera in agitated patterns.

Investigating Sandegård's installations thus demands both physical participation and observation on the part of the spectator, undertaken in an interplay between sensory perception, thought and knowledge. Furthermore it involves a certain choreographing of the observer's behaviour, as the work's structure encourages particular actions to be carried out as part of the experience of the work – a performative aspect that is realised through the interaction with the observer.

## The unknown

As described above, Sandegård's installations cause the observer to do particular things in the process of exploration, but how do they succeed in persuading the observer to agree to this? And what does the observer get out of it – what is the reward?





The appeal to the observer to explore is often established by the fact that the works refer to something unknown. The unknown may take the form of something uncategorized, hidden or alien, of which the possibilities and limitations are not known. By giving the observer a glimpse of it, the work piques his or her curiosity and produces a desire to uncover what is hidden, and among other things this is what motivates the observer to enter into a physical dialogue with the work. Once it has been decided to try to reveal the unknown, however, there are two possible outcomes: in some cases the work allows this, and in others it does not. In *Parallel Environment 02* the observer finds a hidden world of ice above the ceiling by ascending a ladder and looking up. In this work, the observer thus succeeds in obtaining a glimpse of the unknown. In other works by Sandegård this is not the case – here the desire to visually and tactically explore the unknown is kept in suspense, in that the observer is only able to obtain a blurred and indirect view. An example of this is the work *Unknown Correspondence*. In this installation, an unclear and enigmatic screen image was seen on a television, giving the impression that something strange was going on somewhere close by. But there was no possibility for the observer to examine this further or inspect the items or the room shown on the TV screen. The only access to these premises was via the screen image, and the mysterious space thus remained hidden and only inadequately represented – both on the screen and in the mind of the observer.

### The limitations of vision

In Sandegård's art, certain things are thus kept hidden from the observer, and it is partly through this practice that vision itself is addressed as a theme. It is however through the use of refrigeration techniques and so-called dehumidifiers that vision and the transition between the visible and the invisible is explored in a quite distinctive manner in Sandegård's production. For in the works these technical means are used in order to condense water molecules from the air to form either ice or water. The water molecules hereby undergo a



physical transformation which brings them into the realm of the visible. This almost magical process thereby concretises microscopic elements that are normally invisible in a room and makes them tangible for the observer. The gesture may thus be viewed as an indication of the inadequacy of vision as a means of revealing reality, as it is only through the use of the technical aids that we can see the water molecules in the room. Doubt is thus sown concerning the capacity of vision, and towards its hitherto privileged status within art. Something similar occurs in Sandegård's use of motifs of equivalence. The *ECHOES* installation included a screen image which resembled a reproduction of snowy weather, but which was in fact, as previously mentioned, an image of tiny specks of dust moving around. This motif was also repeated in a number of printed photographs, where it instead resembled a starry sky. Through this technique, the observer is thus led to make an incorrect link between the visual impression and a concept. In the work *Balloon* we see a similar indication of the lack of information possessed by the sense of sight concerning reality. This work includes a number of balloons, all of which are black. It is thus impossible to distinguish between them, despite the fact that they each contain air collected on different geographical continents.

### Deceptive realism

On the basis of Sandegård's art it is possible to conclude that vision itself is an inadequate tool for revealing reality, or at any rate that part of reality which comprises Sandegård's art. But perhaps it is never reality that these works seek to represent?

Many of the works have a deceptively everyday character and appear realistic, partly because they are made up of materials which can be found in most buildings. However, on closer inspection there is always a twist which disturbs the otherwise lifelike environment and point towards a place where utilitarian thinking ceases and technical devices are not merely a functional aid in the various enterprises undertaken by human beings, but assigned its own life, a symbolic significance, or a monumental character. In *The Office*, for example,





one saw an ordinary office kitchenette, but it soon became clear that this was incomplete, and that a strange aluminium lump was growing forth from the back of the refrigerator, covered by a layer of ice. And in *Parallel Environment 02*, the arrangement with a ladder and a hole, which also revealed a hidden world of aluminium and ice, also seemed at once everyday and extraordinary. It was reminiscent of both a common visit by an electrician as well as a science fiction-like Antarctic tableau, inhabited by strange creatures who had formerly led an unobserved existence above the ceiling.

### The observer in the work of art and in the world

Through a kind of crack in the scenery, Sandegård's works are capable of generating a number of narratives, and in some works you can moreover almost sense a kind of unpronounced poetry in the at once concrete and symbolic scenes that unfold. However, in parallel with these understated features, there is often at the same time a far more concrete, but no less metaphorical process that enfolds, through which the observer comes to contribute to the work. This subtle involvement comes into being through the observer's mere presence – and even without the observer's collaboration. It occurs in the works which make use of refrigeration equipment or dehumidifiers. In these, the humidity in the room is condensed into either ice or water, which then forms part of the work. As the indoor humidity at an exhibition mainly stems from human perspiration and breath, the visitors become physically interwoven with the work, through this. A person automatically leaves a trace of water molecules in a room merely by being there, and it is this trace, that is incorporated into the work.

The relationship between the observer and the work which is hereby revealed could be seen as an expression of a wish to democratise art, as all observers of the work participate on an equal basis in its genesis and continuation. At the same time, however, it also contains an element of depersonalisation and control, as it is not possible to distinguish individual contributions to the work, and the individual is forced to take part in the work's machinery without having previously intended to do so or even consented to this. The participation is however not even perceptible to the observer, and there is no reason to oppose it – that is, unless you are antagonistic towards contemporary art and do not wish to contribute to it in any way whatsoever. Gloomy thoughts of force however harmonise

badly with the overall impression produced by Sandegård's installations. So perhaps the use of human perspiration and breath should instead be seen in a more optimistic light? If this is the case, it can be understood at the individual level as a concluding illustration of the existential conditions to which human beings are subject by virtue of their mere existence in the world.

Through their use of the observer's perspiration and breath, the works provide a physical illustration of the fact that we as individuals are always participants in the world, and that we can never separate ourselves from it and view it from the outside. This insight is normally associated with the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, and between Sandegård's art and Merleau-Ponty's philosophy one finds an interesting connection. In *Eye and Mind* (1960), Merleau-Ponty introduced a sharp distinction between art and science, which he saw as two essentially different an opposed areas. In his thinking some of the defining characteristics of art is that it shows forth the world of perception and also that it inhabits the world, and thus illustrates the aforementioned entanglement of the individual and the surroundings. Sandegård's art undoubtedly does this, although probably in a much different way than that envisaged by Merleau-Ponty. It is just paradoxical that this occurs precisely through its use of scientific technology and technical devices.