

**ANDREAS ERIKSSON INTERVIEWED BY HANS ULRICH OBRIST AND
DANIEL BIRNBAUM AT MODERNA MUSEET ON 11 FEBRUARY, 2011**

HUO: How did it all begin, how did you come to art?

AE: Something special that happened, you mean?

HUO: Yes, some awakening.

AE: I actually have very early memories of that, but it's... I'll turn the light off, that's better,
Is this OK with you?

HUO: Yes.

AE: I have one very early memory. My first memory, actually, which wasn't an awakening
but something that is closely connected to what I am working on, I think. I am looking at a
pile of snow. Suddenly, I lose my sense of space, so it was kind of – “is this a mountain in
the distance or is it near me?”

HUO: What year would that have been?

AE: When I was about eight months old.

HUO: So that was a really early epiphany?

AE: Yes. But then I had others later.

HUO: When did art enter into the picture?

AE: That's a good question. I mean, it was a way of doing things. It was not so much
about making art in the beginning, of course. I wasn't aware of it, making art really, but
making drawings and making stuff in the garden and collecting things. I think I was quite
young because I really wanted to paint early. My parents were very encouraging. So they

sent me to courses. But they never pushed me; I found the courses and I wanted to go.

HUO: And they let you do it.

AE: I had a good hockey coach too. I was very ambitious in hockey and he said: “I don’t want to see you here on Tuesdays, because that’s when you have your painting course.”

HUO: Wow.

AE: Kind of unusual, I think.

HUO: And who were the artists who influenced you in the beginning?

AE: Edvard Munch. I think that was the biggest thing for me as a child. Because my mother is Norwegian and we went to Oslo a lot, and there was the Munch Museum. That was my first encounter with real art, that I was actually looking at. My parents never went to museums. It was something I did by myself. In the basement of the Munch Museum there was an exhibition about Munch as a child, his drawings from when he was growing up and so on. This was quite amazing to me because I felt a bit lonely with my interest in art, so Munch as a child became kind of a friend.

DB: Now that you speak about beginnings, I will mention another beginning but it’s actually several decades later. The first time we had anything to do with each other was with Susanne Pagé, when you (HUO) worked for her. You and Susanne invited several curators to suggest an artist, and I suggested Sergej Jensen and Andreas. But then you (AE) couldn’t travel back then, and that was the show *Urgent Painting* in 2000.

HUO: Yes, that was the exhibition at the Musée d’art moderne de la ville de Paris, curated by Lawrence Bosse and me. We wanted to say that we can’t talk about the death of painting as long as painting still exists. We thought: let’s invite different curators to nominate a

painter they are really obsessed with. Daniel was obsessed with you (AE) and Sergej Jensen.

DB: And Sergej was someone I knew very well because he was still a student back then, with Thomas Bayrle. And you (AE) I knew primarily through your books, because you kept sending me beautiful books.

HUO: You did books early on?

AE: Some of them are here. This was the first one [demonstrates], Tobias did the cover.

DB: I knew you through Tobias Rehberger.

AE: Yes, we met through Tobias.

HUO: That is interesting, we have the beginning, we have you eight months old, then we have Munch and your mother, and then we have *Urgent Painting* when you were already in Germany, which we should talk about in a minute. But is there anything in between that we need to mention?

AE: I did a lot of painting as a kid and as a teenager. Almost by accident, I applied to the Royal Institute of Art when I was 17. And then I started there, they accepted me. So it all happened very fast.

DB: Here in Stockholm?

AE: Yes. After three years I was very bored with school and moved to Berlin. This was in 1997. And then I met a lot of people.

HUO: And who were your heroes at that time? Was it Albert Oehlen?

AE: Albert Oehlen is still my hero, I think he is one of the best living painters. I love his paintings. Later on I also went to Tim and Burkhard at Neugerriemschneider, very early on,

when they had a gallery in Charlottenburg. And then I got introduced to, no, I didn't see Michel's (Majerus) work, but actually you (DB) wrote an article about Michel's work in 1998, I think.

DB: In 1997. In *Dagens Nyheter*.

AE: Then I went to see his exhibition in Lund, and I immediately sensed that this is something similar to what I am interested in and working on since I was doing the same size over and over again as a way of liberating myself and being able to accept the things coming through.

DB: I always wondered about that because I didn't even know if you had met them, or what you had seen, and then Michel died, but I knew how close you were to Tobias, and still I sensed somehow that you were closer to Michel Majerus, when it comes to sensibility.

AE: At that time I was very interested, but then it changed a lot. But I used a school grant to buy a painting by Michel.

DB: Could we talk about your books? Because it's not like I know them that well, I always thought they were very attractive so I just kept them. I see them as works of art.

When you work with them, is it different from when you paint? Is it a totally different process or is it closely linked to the painting groups? If you start a new series of paintings do you think about them almost like they would end up in a book, or is it a totally different logic?

AE: No, it's a different logic. When I am doing a book it's similar to a painting but I never think of a book when I do a painting or when I work. I only work with a book when I am

sitting in front of it, I don't plan it like this. This is just the decisions made. This was the idea, it's funny, because I wanted the cover to be a spread in the insert of the book, so I could do this [demonstrates] and wrap it around the book. That was the first idea.

HUO: So that is your first book?

AE: Yes. But the book binder thought that something was wrong so he changed it so the cover never came in the middle of the insert but at the beginning [laughs].

HUO: But it's interesting, what Daniel asks about the artists doing books. I thought of the painter Asger Jorn who conceived many books. I was wondering, was Asger Jorn important to you?

AE: I don't think so. I haven't seen much, I like the books where he collected the mediaeval things.

DB: He did books with found images. And he did books together with Guy Debord, famous books.

AE: Yes. I like the ones on Nordic folk art.

HUO: Dieter Roth, or who else in terms of books – Kippenberger?

AE: Kippenberger was an early favourite, but his books, I don't know, I just like books. It's not really connected with other artists. Right now I'm working on a book where I'm collecting birds. A bird book. It's a long tradition in Swedish art, bird books. So I'm collecting birds doing different things.

DB: What are the highlights in the Swedish tradition of bird books?

AE: Öyvind Fahlström maybe?

DB: *Birds in Sweden*, yes.

AE: Yes. So I am collecting birds that are doing things. It's kind of purely scientific, but it's stupid because it's collecting birds that like flying, so I have a chapter with flying birds, and a chapter with birds sitting in a tree, and so on. It will be a very thick book with only photographs, and you can hardly see the birds. It's very bad, it's a joke. This is what it looks like.

HUO: Was the green book your second book?

AE: Yes.

HUO: Can you tell us about this, because that's more a book of your abstract paintings.

AE: It's a book of watercolours photographed in one day outdoors. So you actually see the day, how the day passes. Not very much but... they are photographed outside, so if you look at the white surface around the photograph, that's also photographed. You see the shadow, do you see what I mean? It's darker sometimes.

HUO: That's the hours of the day.

AE: Yes, yes, yes.

DB: And is the book a good medium? Something happened to you after living in Frankfurt and Berlin and central Stockholm; you had this illness and couldn't be in cities basically.

AE: Yes, I suffered from electromagnetic hypersensitivity and couldn't travel.

DB: I just figured that maybe not just watercolours but actually books suddenly became a quite relevant medium then.

AE: Yes, it becomes something else, it becomes the show. That's why I wanted to do the books, because I couldn't go to the show.

DB: But now you're sitting here in the middle of Stockholm, so you feel better?

AE: It works, yes, a week is OK, if I keep away from cell phones and strip lighting, which are the biggest problem, and cars.

HUO: But let's talk about this. I grew up in Switzerland and the first museum I saw as a kid was the Stiftsbibliothek in St. Gallen, the famous monastery in St. Gallen, with all the mediaeval codices, you know, the mediaeval handwritten books, the Klosterplan. I studied the reclusive lifestyle of monks, when they were completely isolated from the world. When we showed *Urgent Painting* in Paris, we were hoping you could come for the opening, and it was just around at that time that Daniel suddenly called me and told me the bad news that you had this condition and couldn't come, and had to suddenly live like a recluse. How did you first notice it? Did it come suddenly, when you were in Berlin?

AE: No, I was on the fast train from Stockholm to southern Sweden, talking on the cell phone a lot. And suddenly I felt the radiation, and it came very fast like this [snaps with fingers] and it was like someone had stuck a needle in me.

DB: Like physical pain? Not nausea?

AE: It was a direct thing. From that moment I was able to tell if my cell phone was close to me. My girlfriend could hide it, and I could just say: Now I'm close to it. These symptoms disappeared after a month or so, and then the symptoms grew more vague; I just felt really bad.

DB: I get the sense that we probably all have this problem but we don't feel it, except that there is a constant serious influence.

AE: That is why they say that it's not an allergy, but a form of hypersensitivity because it concerns something that is dangerous from the beginning.

DB: Then later it wasn't just cell phones, but all kinds of electronic devices?

AE: After a while I couldn't be in the car, I couldn't turn on the light, and I couldn't sit by the computer, and so on. I went to my parents and stayed in their flat for a couple of weeks and then after a while I could hardly walk. So my parents put me in the car and drove me to the summerhouse and a friend who was out of work at the time helped me a lot. It took three months before I could walk properly again and then I bought a house in the country.

DB: And where was that?

AE: Near my parents' house. It's on Lake Vänern.

HUO: And how has this influenced your work? To what extent did it change? Because at the time of *Urgent Painting*, you had found your language. Did this change anything?

AE: Yes, of course, to begin with I had a small space so I only did watercolours and it was more like therapy, just sitting and doing it, and it was important to do it to get through the day. And the first time I made a sculpture it was the tree. I felled the tree in the woods and cut it in small pieces and took every other piece and put them back together so I got two trees that look exactly like the first one but half the size. And that was the first major work. The works we showed in Paris were much more formal and related to the art scene and... the process, and suddenly I needed therapy.

DB: So you were a 25-year-old assistant to one of the more fashionable artists in the big city in the middle of Europe and then you moved to a forest far away from any kind of electronic device, was it just the circumstances that changed. This is a silly question perhaps, but was it just the circumstance that changed or did your language change, did the subject matter change?

AE: It was getting in touch with another side of myself. I would say it was the subject matter changed.

DB: I was just wondering if the language or maybe your technique was still the same but now you were no longer painting in Berlin and Frankfurt but in Medelplana. I was just wondering if one can use the same language but paint trees instead of urban phenomena.

AE: Yes you can. But you don't really have any reason to do so.

DB: So things will change if you change...

AE: Things will change, of course. But I was 25, and from 25 to 30 you change a lot anyhow. So what is doing what to you? I found that I needed to say something about my life and my story, but of course in the same handwriting.

DB: Yes, I am just thinking it would be almost inconceivable to place Michel Majerus in the forest. You were not Michel Majerus, but you were close to him and certain other artists there, and you lived in the same context.

HUO: You were less pop than Michel Majerus, there was always something very pop-related in him, and I didn't see that in you?

AE: No, I think what Michel did was to transform everything into himself, through himself. Whereas I am much more about filtering myself through different things, so I put myself in different positions in painting. And he was just picking everything that he liked and did it in his economical way.

HUO: He appropriated stuff, no?

AE: Yes, anything, it could be ice-cream, or Schnabel, or Lawrence Wiener...

HUO: ...Koons and Rosenquist.

AE: Exactly, and he just turned it into himself. And I was much more into putting myself in different situations.

DB: So you put your own identity into the thing that you were painting, rather. Or your own self somehow?

AE: I think that when I became sick I came back to my first memory, the one about losing myself in a gaze, somehow.

HUO: At 8 months?

AE: Yes. And I came back to the point where you actually identify yourself with nature.

DB: Did you still need role models or sources of inspiration in art, or were you happy with that kind of working situation? Of course you weren't happy, because you had a problem, but still. To produce art, was it still relevant for you to ask who your sources of inspiration could be, or did you have an automatic way of working?

AE: I had a kind of automatic way. I still had my way of working, but I use nature in a way that I am not making sketches of nature or trying to do nature painting or nature pictures. I am using nature in my own way to a much greater extent. I found that in nature there was something extremely neutral, like how things were placed; there was no planning at all, and that was something ... I really liked.

HUO: But that also ties in with another question about nature. Just two or three years before *Urgent Painting*, we did this other show in Paris. It was an exhibition which looked at art in northern Europe and Susanne Pagé did this historic show with Strindberg and Gallen-Kallela and Munch, the visionary Nordic painters, and upstairs we had contemporary art and Daniel and I met at that time. Daniel curated the show. To cut a long

story short, that was when I began relating to Scandinavia and northern Europe, where I had seldomly been before, but I went there many many times. And what was interesting in that generation of the nineties, was that there was a very marked distance among all these artists to the cliché of northern light, to the cliché of Nordic nature romanticism. You were in Germany and Kippenberger was an inspiration to your work with Tobias; we were pretty far away from the romantic northern thing.

AE: Martin Kippenberger and Albert Oehlen, for example, they felt like irresponsible teenagers, and I was never interested in that. What I liked about Albert Oehlen was his fantastic ability to put paint on the canvas. I was never interested in their attitude. What did interest me was Kippenberger's way of implementing ideas. He only produced ideas, really. I never saw him as a painter, actually. I don't think that we in Scandinavia have the same belief in the avant-garde. My experience is that there isn't the same need for different generations to take a stand against each other, as there was in Berlin at the time.

HUO: So you see Oehlen as a painter and Kippenberger as a producer of ideas?

AE: He is a storyteller and Oehlen is a painter.

HUO: And then, now you know this is ten years later, or fifteen, and you are no longer a student. When we first made contact you were just about to finish. Now there are lots of new students who might read our interview, what is your advice to a young art student today?

AE: I have some students, I am teaching, but I try to avoid giving advice.

HUO: So how do you teach then?

AE: By listening and asking and encouraging a lot.

HUO: Please tell us about how shadows became important to you. I am fascinated by that, you photographing shadows from car headlights in your room. We saw one in the collection of Moderna Museet here before. It was a small painting. Was that the first series you did in the countryside?

AE: After the watercolours I started collecting shadows. I didn't plan the series. I started collecting shadows because I had no electric light and I had no TV and when you're lying on the sofa at night, what you see is what is happening outside, the light moving around in the room, and I started collecting it.

HUO: Like a shadow theatre?

AE: Yes.

DB: Do you still live without electric light?

AE: No. We have light now but with a system that takes away all the radiation, a very smart system.

HUO: So you are without electricity in your room, night falls, you can't read, you can't write, you can't watch TV, so you have a camera and you photograph shadows.

AE: Yes, and suddenly you see, ahh, that's the neighbour's car, but then this can't be the neighbour's car the light is different. It's a whole different world, you know, and I started collecting it. And I was sitting there with all these pictures, and remembered when I was an art student and took over an old studio from another guy; the floor was so dirty when I got the studio, so I painted it. And when I was sitting there, there were dots coming through the floor in the paint, and I repainted it, but the dots kept reappearing, and after a while I realised they were coffee stains.

HUO: Like ghosts?

AE: Yes, you paint it over and it comes back, and you paint it over again and it comes back again, and I thought it was beautiful so I found a paint that behaved the same way and I tried to make paintings with it but I couldn't find a way of doing it until maybe five years later. There I was with my new life-situation and started to collect shadows and I realised that I could paint shadows with those stains.

DB: Have you done shadow books?

AE: Yes, but they're impossible to print. They were painted with an airbrush pen with this paint and then I asked my friend to send them to a professional spray painter and he just sprayed them with grey and then you wait for a second and the shadow bleeds through.

HUO: That is why it has this ghostly quality.

AE: Yes, because it's a physical process, not a painting.

DB: I want to come back to that Scandinavian show, although not the one where you participated but a few years before, when you showed classical people, I mean, early pioneer modernists like Munch and Strindberg etc, and then a contemporary group of artists; Sophie Tottie, Olafur Eliasson, Ann-Sofi Sidén, that whole generation, and then in the middle I remember thinking that you should have had Fahlström, but Susanne had wanted Per Kirkeby. And he is also a fantastic artist but I wanted to come to Kirkeby, because he is of course a crucial figure in Nordic art if you want to understand what painting could be, and also the only serious bridge to Germany that we have. Do you have a relationship to him, or what are your thoughts on Per Kirkeby?

AE: I really liked him, and still do.

DB: But you feel close to it somehow?

AE: Yes, in a way, but not really either. I think I have a different approach to making art than he does. Kirkeby seems more interested in studying nature while I use it more for a painterly purpose...

HUO: And then, Kirkeby is obviously also a writer. And you write, so what purpose does writing have in your work? What are you writing about?

AE: Other art, other artists. Lately I have been writing about Evert Lundquist and Martin Thelander and now I've actually been asked to write a text about Michel (Majerus).

HUO: So you don't write about your own work?

AE: No, not yet.

HUO: Let's talk a little bit more about Venice, your show will be in the Sverre Fehn Pavilion. I interviewed Sverre Fehn about his pavilion. It's obviously a very concrete building but it's not brutalist, the concrete feels very humane. And also in touch with nature, so I suppose it's the perfect building for you? Besides the shadows you have developed lots of other series in your inner exile. The trees, for instance.

AE: Yes, that's right

HUO: But then during your sickness there were other series also, not just the trees, but portraits. What aspect will you focus on in Venice?

AE: I think I am going to focus on the outside/inside paintings and works. The starting point is that I am rebuilding the house where I live, the foundations will be placed on the floor and used to present the bird sculptures I have been doing. And also on the floor there will be molehills. That is the starting point.

HUO: Can you tell us about the birds?

AE: It was actually when I had just built the studio that a bird flew into the studio window and died. And I felt really sad for it and I put it in the freezer. Now and then a bird would die and I kept them in the freezer for six or seven years, until I had about 20. I didn't know what to do with them so I gave them to a founder and asked if he could cast one of them in bronze, just to see what it would look like. He cast it and I saw the whole mould construction, how he did it, where he poured in the bronze and where the air escapes, and the finished bird looks almost like it's sitting in the forest again, so it's a kind of happy ending for the bird.

DB: So they are life size?

AE: Yes. It's just a copy, it's the bird, in it's new state of being. What the bird had done was to actually believe in an illusion. And that is the perfect circumstance for a painter or someone who looks at painting, so I think that is why I was so touched by it, because it's the perfect circumstance for looking at art, really, to be able to walk into the room or to believe so much in the room that you accept the picture or the sculpture and you go into it. And that is what the bird did. So it's a kind of artist-kamikaze-thing.

DB: Do you feel that the Pavilion in Venice is a difficult venue, as we often hear, or do you feel it's a nice place for you to work with?

AE: Difficult, but super-nice, I really love the place.

DB: It seems very relevant to your themes.

AE: Yes. It is.

HUO: Which paintings will be next to the birds in Venice? Are you going to show

paintings too?

AE: I might do another five shadow paintings, I think, because I think they go very well with the birds and the story about the birds, and I also made some tree paintings but I'm not really sure if I'll include them, but I am also having the molehills. I've been making casts of all the molehills in the garden.

DB: So it will be a sculpture and painting project?

AE: Yes.

HUO: These tree paintings are multi-layered, stratified. Did they take long to paint?

AE: Yes. And it's kind of an impossible project, I feel, the tree paintings. And it's also a very naïve relationship for me to have, that I'm actually trying to paint something that I am trying to see.

HUO: You mean to represent?

AE: Yes. That was something new for me.

HUO: And what is the connection with photography? You take lots of photos of trees.

DB: The photographic medium is not in the painting.

AE: No, I really hate that, I am so bored with it, and it has to have an end, it's just an excuse. A drawing is something that really shows who you are. If you ask someone to make a drawing of, say, a dog, this dog will tell you so much about the person who did it. And people usually blush when you ask them to do something like that. It's a bit embarrassing, and I like that, this embarrassing quality in painting.

DB: The embarrassment that is deleted and destroyed when mediated by photography.

AE: Yes, destroyed, Photography is an excuse for painting to avoid embarrassment.

DB: You said that a readiness to be embarrassing was a starting point.

AE: Yes, and to be unsure and to show your weak sides, to not be a sort of product. And not to have a responsibility to an earlier picture, for example. To be free from that.

DB: Is it riskier to go directly from your inner painting without passing through technology?

AE: Yes, I think so, for me at least. And I think that the photographs are not photographs of nature, but little stories. I don't know if you have seen this, a loving couple and a guy standing outside with his dick almost hanging, so it's kind of a sensual erotic story. For example, this photo [demonstrates]. And this one, crossing her fingers, I mean the whole thing, the whole book, is a love story. And this one is about time, of course, and also about my painting again. This is the opposite of painting, I mean from the beginning, a week earlier, there was snow all over, the snow melted and the landscape came back – developed. The snow developed the landscape, like a white canvas for me, at least. I am telling you the story the way I feel it. And here is the loving couple again. It's not a strategy I have when I take the photos, this story, it's something that I find afterwards. I always photographed these two trees together.

HUO: Maybe one or two last questions; one thing I wanted to ask you concerns still-lives, I mean portraits and still-lives. We talked a lot about landscapes, about the shadow paintings, but what is the role of the portraits? Are there any self-portraits?

AE: I think so, yes, and they're the opposite of the projection from the cars from the outside to the inside. This is kind of a projection from the inside to the outside. Usually, I imagine myself standing in the window, looking out. I have candlelight at home, so you see

yourself in the window and what's behind and so on, it's a kind of play with that.

HUO: So, for example, the man from 2006, that would be a candle-light image.

AE: Sort of, for me it had a kind of renaissance feeling, with the background, almost like a landscape that is fading into the distance, you know those renaissance paintings when you see the roads leading away. It had that kind of feeling. And there you have all the candles.

HUO: This is like a still-life, so these are all the candles you had in the house?

AE: Yes, and flashlights.

DB: You must have used more candles than the average citizen in this country.

HUO: And do you also paint still-lives? I just thought of Morandi...

AE: Sort of, maybe. I'm a bit stuck with these window views again. They are kind of shapes, and actually, there has been a bit Morandi, now that you mention it. A Morandi feeling to them.

HUO: My very last question: Do you have any dreams, unrealised projects? Projects that have been too big to realise, utopias?

AE: Yes, I have one project that I am actually thinking of including in the catalogue. I was asked to make a proposal for a commissioned work for a canal in the area where I live, and it divides Sweden in two parts, Göta Kanal. It's man-made. They asked me to propose a work for this canal.

DB: For the whole thing?

AE: No, you just pass by, just somewhere. And I found a place where there are lots of trees next to the canal on one side but on the other side there are no trees. So I wanted to take one of the trees and move it to the other side. To dig it up and place it there. But it was

rejected. They didn't like the idea. They even did this [does a cut-throat gesture] at the presentation.

HUO: So that is an unrealised project?

AE: Yes, that is an unrealised project that I would really love to do. To move the tree across the canal dividing Sweden in two.

DB: Many people have wanted to remove a few trees from the centre of the Nordic Pavilion so I am sure it will be read in that context. Thank you so much.

HUO: Thank you very much.