

Digging Into Poetic Holes - An Interview with A Kassen

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A Kassen, Ponds, 2017

Copenhagen Contemporary, Copenhagen, Denmark, 2017

The members of A Kassen met while studying together at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen and have been working together ever since. “Togetherness” is a key aspect of their practice, and as they say, every decision is taken collectively while “no one has a certain specific role”.

Spanning from monumental outdoor interventions to almost imperceptible gestures in various exhibition spaces, the work of A Kassen brings art, architecture, and design into a new realm in which a conceptual, playful approach is paired with a subtle critique of various kinds of display systems.

Publishing is another key channel of their practice, and they have experimented with various book formats. They are currently finalizing their first comprehensive monograph, while also working on a book focused on their site-specific works. Nicola Trezzi interviewed the collective about their versatile practice.

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Nicola Trezzi:

Can you tell us about the meaning of your name and why you chose it?

A Kassen:

The Danish meaning of A Kassen is a concept that we adopted very early on, even before we were a group and needed a name. It occurred very organically and intuitively, just like almost everything else in our collaboration. Another thing that is common for our group is that we have four different views on the same matter, and therefore the meaning of and the reason why we chose the name A Kassen could be answered in multiple ways. One would be that it starts with an A, which comes in quite handy sometimes. Another is that, for people outside of Denmark, it is not understood, but you could try to imagine what it is — for instance, the initials of a person's first name.

Furthermore, although the concept of A Kassen is originally positive, it is a thing you don't want to be associated with. For all these reasons, we thought that it was the right name for the group. Additionally, the meaning of A Kassen — which defines the unemployment benefit system in Denmark — is not the most important thing about our name. Very similar to our artworks, such a choice reflects the desire to apply new meaning, social meaning, to things we are familiar with, that have a context and a function.



(Left): A Kassen, Bronze Pour, 2020.

Liquid bronze poured into water. The instant solidified material is subsequently enlarged and made as bronze sculptures.

Bronze, 138 x 126 x 136 cm, Courtesy of the artists and Galleri Nicolai Wallner, Copenhagen



(Right): A Kassen, Bronze Pour, 2020.

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Nicola Trezzini:

Do you think the Danish context and its social fabric have influenced your way of working?

A Kassen:

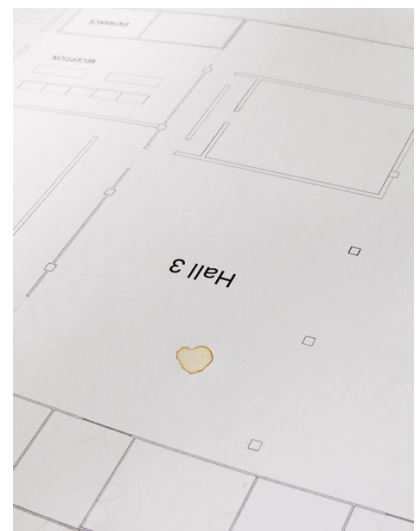
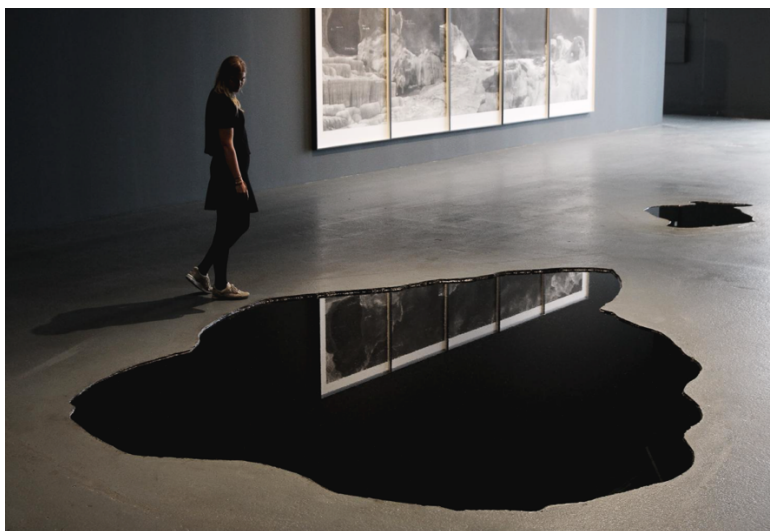
It probably has, since working together and togetherness is very present in the Danish school system. Our government is mostly a minority government. We are a small country, and we learn early on that we should work together.

Nicola Trezzini:

Your work is very playful, and the notion of scale often plays a pivotal role in the way you create your work. Do you see any connection between these two elements?

A Kassen:

We are not so sure if scale plays a central role in our work, but then again, our upcoming book, which we are currently finalizing with Mousse Publishing, is named Dimensions Variable. So of course, size, either small or large, is something that needs to be considered when developing new projects. But since we often work with objects from the 'real world', size is already a given — unless the idea is based on skewing the perception of the object.



A Kassen, Ponds, 2017.

Coffee is spilled on the floor plan of the exhibition space. The stains are subsequently made as coffee ponds in the exhibition space at the same location, size and shape as the floor plan dictates.

Copenhagen Contemporary, Copenhagen, Denmark, 2017

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Nicola Trezzini:

Can you give an example? What would be a work by A Kassen that is “skewing the perception of the object”?

A Kassen:

For our graduate exhibition, we added a plaster rosette to the ceiling of the exhibition space of GL STRAND — located in an old historic building from the 1700s in Copenhagen. We had chosen a chocolate biscuit to constitute the shape, and then enlarged it in white plaster so it would blend in with the rest of the stucco decorating the building. Two so very different things — a rosette and a chocolate biscuit — intertwined in the same object and yet with an obvious overlap of forms.



A Kassen, Rosette, 2007.

Stucco, installation view at GL STRAND, Copenhagen. Courtesy of the artists.

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Nicola Trezzzi:

What is the most extreme project you have done and why?

A Kassen:

That is a funny question. “Extreme” is normally not a notion we define with any of our projects. On the other hand, it is understandable to be asked this. Extreme could probably be seen in the same way as being playful... and it could go in two directions... Here, scale or size could be the question, again.

For the work Drip, we hired an 80-year-old stand to catch drips from a ‘wine leakage’ coming from the ceiling. Could we define this act as extreme? We also copied 200 works of art by 17 artists who were supposed to participate in the exhibition for the Carnegie Art Award, which was cancelled. We presented them in some of the venues where the exhibition was supposed to take place; by doing that, we confused guests and critics.



A Kassen, Drip, 2006.

White wine drips from the ceiling in the gallery. A stand-in with a wine glass catches the drops.

Mixed media, installation and performance view at Galleri Nicolai Wallner, Copenhagen.

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Nicola Trezzini:

How many are you? What is the division of labor? Do you decide everything collectively or split projects between yourselves?

A Kassen:

We are four guys who met each other at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen and have been working together for about 17 years. We decide everything collectively, so no one has a certain specific role except Tommy, who makes the salad for lunch.

Nicola Trezzini:

Site-specificity often comes with your work, and yet it comes in a new way that is less connected to the history of art, land art, and more as a new understanding of institutional critique. Would you agree with such an association, and if so, what would be the artwork that encapsulates such association the best?

A Kassen:

Window to the World, which we did in MUSAC, might be such a type of work. Here, we took out six large window panes from the facade of the museum and replaced them with plywood boards. Inside the museum, the window panes were installed as three sets of automatic sliding doors connected at their center. The sculpture was activated by the movement of the audience and itself. We have never associated ourselves with institutional critique, but as you say, it might be a new understanding of institutional critique, because it has been so integrated in the works of the artists we have been looking at and inspired by since our studies.



A Kassen, Window to the World, 2009.

Six window panes are taken out of the facade of the museum and replaced by plywood boards. The window panes are installed into three sets of automatic sliding doors connected at their centre. The sculpture is activated by the movement of the audience and itself. Mixed media, installation view [outside] at MUSAC, León (Spain). Courtesy of the artists, Galleri Nicolai Wallner, Copenhagen, and Maisterravalbuena, Madrid.

Nicola Trezzi:

It would be interesting to hear who the artists are whose works inspired you back then and if those works still inspire you today.

A Kassen:

Elmgreen & Dragset and Superflex have been sources of inspiration for us since they started as emerging artists in Denmark, and also because they showed us that it would be possible to work together, either as a duo or a group. We could also mention, randomly, Olafur Eliasson, Roman Signer, Pipilotti Rist, Kishio Suga, Roman Ondak, Michael Asher, Chris Burden, and Sofie Calle... But we could probably come up with another 20 artists; this is what comes to mind right now.

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Being four individuals working together leads to openness and generates interest going in many directions. Almost all the time we have a common intuition or idea of what is interesting, and yet each of us react and contribute to this same idea in very different ways, coming to it from different perspectives. The result is always idiosyncratic, even when it doesn't seem to be!



A Kassen, Atlas, 2016.

A statue of Atlas is cut up into units corresponding with the dimensions of cobbles.

Foundation CAB, Brussels, Belgium, 2016

Nicola Trezzi:

Although your works always have a degree of aesthetic power, the process is often what really matters. At the same time, that process is not always disclosed. Does this bother you?

A Kassen:

We believe that even though artworks don't always disclose what led to their existence, they often radiate the underlying process or energy that has been put into them. Such understanding can be seen as another aspect to the work in which an important role is given to storytelling. When we 'dig in' and explore the full range of a project — taking time to understand all the different aspects related to it and the thoughts behind its making — the appreciation is often greater.

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A Kassen, Mirrors, 2013.

Scans of antique mirrors up for auction are taken from the Sotheby's catalogue, they are then printed at actual size, framed and put for auction again at Sotheby's.
Sotheby's New York, US, 2013

Nicola Trezzi:

This last thought makes me think of some of your books that clearly reveal a mechanism behind your work, which could be seen, at times, as a rumination on the metalinguistic nature of art making. In other words, making art is, ultimately and simply, about making art. Would you agree?

A Kassen:

Not totally. Making art is about inspiring the ones experiencing it. It serves several goals. We see it as a personal way of expressing what we have on our minds and at the same time empowering the viewer, who has the possibility of getting new input, new ideas, new perspectives. It makes you start thinking about things you hadn't given a thought. There are so many unexplored 'poetic holes' in society and in life in general, and artists are good at shedding light on these holes. Revealing a mechanism behind a work is to set focus on a given system.

Nicola Trezzi:

I have two questions regarding the aforementioned monograph you are currently finalizing: What have you understood through this process? Any surprising threads going from work to work, any leitmotiv you did not consider?

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A Kassen:

We didn't learn a thing! [laughs] We are privileged to have done and still be doing lots of projects. Everyday things are fascinating and yet they can be easily overlooked. So this publication will emphasize things we know but sort of forgot. For instance: How do puddles look? They are really beautiful, no matter which shape they take. No big new meaning surfaced during the process — although after finalizing the selection of works to be included, we all feel like making another monograph with works that didn't make the final cut.

Another book that might give new insights would probably be one focused on site-specific works and works integrated with architecture, published by Arkitektens Forlag. For this book, we are working with an architect who is making technical drawings for each work, and such decisions will probably generate new understandings of this side of our practice. Translating our work into the language of architectural drawing will undoubtedly unfold different perspectives.



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Nicola Trezzi:

In my view, your practice goes against the two most important parameters associated with the creation of art since The Lives of Giorgio Vasari: There is no ‘real’ signature — in fact, the signature can be considered a work of art in itself. And there is no individual — you say “We are four guys”, but you could be 400. While this is what brought me to your work in the first place, it does not fit the contemporary art market, which still heavily relies on romanticized clichés such as uniqueness, originality... art as the creation of a demiurge. At the same time, you have a continuous relationship with private galleries such as Galleri Nicolai Wallner in Copenhagen. Can you share some thoughts about this side of your work?

A Kassen:

Apropos, we are currently working on a solo exhibition for Maisterravalbuena, the gallery in Madrid we have been working with since 2009. They are moving to a new location and asked us to present their final exhibition in the space they have had for the last ten years. Considering the fact that our work often asks to physically alter the exhibition space, they probably thought since they are giving up the space, which will most probably be ripped apart and renovated, that this is a good opportunity to let us do whatever we like.



A Kassen, *Permanent Reflection*, 2013.

Two photographs depicting the reflections of their own framing glass.

Inkjet print, 185 × 145 cm (each); installation view at Lund Konsthall (Sweden) [in the foreground: work by Rolf Nowotny]. Courtesy of the artists, Galleri Nicolai Wallner, Copenhagen, and Maisterravalbuena, Madrid. Photo: Terje Östling. Lund Konsthall, Lund, Sweden, 2015

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Nicola Trezzini:

You also do a lot of commissions... Would you like to mention one or two you are particularly excited by?

A Kassen:

Yes! Making art for a city or a bank is super interesting. How can you make people relate to an artwork presented in an unusual context? How do you make sure the artwork won't become invisible due to the context in which it is presented? These are good challenges. We just finished a commission for the Danish Police at their new academy in Vejle, Denmark. It took four years to complete, but it has been a positive process. Indeed, over the last several years, we have put a lot of energy into doing public commissions.

As talked about earlier, our works often deal with site-specificity, so public commissions have been a natural development of our practice. It gives us the opportunity to react to a certain setting, whether that be the architecture, social constructions, or anything else that captures our interest in that specific place. Endless Lamppost is a project like that. It is a public commission for a train station in Denmark where we are going to exchange an existing lamppost with a 30-meter-high lamppost... OK, you got us there! Scale and playfulness are, sometimes, pivotal aspects of our works.



A Kassen, Foundation, 2021.

In the double height canteen a circle is cut out of the wall, revealing the first floor structure of the building and creating connections between the different spaces and floors. The circular cut-out is placed leaning against the wall in the canteen. Mixed media, installation view at the Police Academy in West Denmark for the Danish National Police (UVC). Police academy, Vejle, Denmark, 2021 Courtesy of the artists.

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