Divided Crucifix

An Artistic Exploration of Cross/Crucifix Form in Relation to Contemporary Theological Knowledge

Introduction

This paper looks retrospectively at an art development project on cross/crucifix form as an example of how theoretical studies and art practice may be combined to yield new insights.

Between 1986 and 1995, I explored the theme of the cross/crucifix theoretically and artistically. To this day, I am uncertain how to categorize this work: was it research, a development project, or merely my normal way of artistic working? This conference offers an occasion for rethinking the question. The initial phase of the project was accepted as a *hovedfag* degree in 1991. The second phase, 1992-1995, was intended to be a *post hovedfag* that might result in a doctoral degree. It did not, an amputated version, however, ended in an appendix of my doctoral thesis "proper" that was purely theoretical (Refsum 2000).

An art development project is defined as a project that produces art works and a documentation of the process. It is expected to have some component of exploration that is documented, which has relevance for the artistic practice. In my case, I systematically sought knowledge about the cross/crucifix topic from different fields and perspectives. My aim was to obtain a deepened understanding of the theme that I believed would be reflected in the art works to be made. The information was compiled through literary studies from known sources. From the documentation of the process, it becomes evident how the knowledge gained was incorporated in my thinking throughout the art producing process. Without the theoretical studies undertaken, the result undoubtedly would have become another. When I review my own artistic processes, it has nothing to do with evaluating the artistic quality of the outcome. It is a matter of heightening my awareness of the methods applied and the choices taken, both of which may be expressed and evaluated by the person who is responsible for them. In the case of working on the cross/crucifix theme, it was important to point out how knowledge and artistic outcome are interlinked, especially so, because my art works deviate from traditional solutions. Most artworks embody and express new understanding. Sometimes, art or design results may even be regarded as original contribution to new knowledge, given that the process is accounted for by rational means, in words and images, so that it becomes transparent to others, can be criticized and discussed. If so, it may be considered research and count in a scientific context.

First, the paper locates the problem of interpreting the cross/crucifix symbol that initiated my interest and art development project.² Second, it accounts for the historical evidence concerning crucifixion. Third, my cross/crucifix project is presented with a few references to previous cross/crucifix formal interpretations. And fourth, the project is discussed at a general level as an example of how theoretical study and art practice may be combined to yield new knowledge.

See the *Nasjonalt program for kunstnerisk utviklingsarbeid*, available online at: <<u>http://sofie.khib.no/stipend/</u>>.

² The project is one of art for use, and places itself in the interface between art and design. At the time it was done, it fell in the category of art, and might perhaps be categorized as autonomous applied art. Today, it may be seen closer to design, representing an example of unique design. In this context, this discussion will not be elaborated further.

Grete Refsum

- 1 - 21.10.2004

I THE PROBLEM OF INTERPRETING THE CRUCIFIX

Cross and crucifix forms are main visual symbols in the Western world. Formally, the cross may refer to the death penalty of any enemy of the Roman state, and specifically of the crucifixion of the Jew Jesus from Galilee, around the year 30.³ Crosses and crucifixes came to symbolize Christianity and Christian faith, which means salvation from evil and everlasting life. All crosses and crucifixes in Christian contexts are symbols of resurrection, salvation and joy, including the blood dripping crucifixes of late medieval times (figure 1).

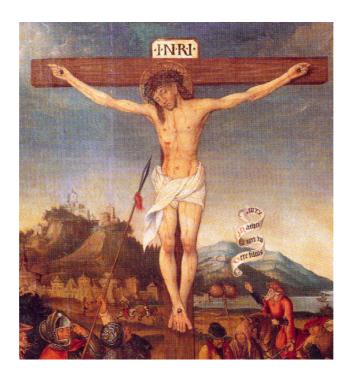


Figure 1 Section of *Calvary*, Balthasar Berger 1532, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart (Merback, 1999: plate 105).

But how can a scene of torture become a positive symbol? The crucifix visually communicates the opposite of its symbolic content. It is an extremely conceptual object, which presupposes that the onlooker knows the Gospel story and understands its symbolic meaning regardless of the visual sign. In our time, most people are not particularly familiar with the New Testament. How, then, can the cross/crucifix work as a symbol of Christianity for contemporary secularized people? In any Christian church there will be a cross or a crucifix, most often both, and several of them. When people drop by, especially children, youth and non-Christians, how do they interpret the cross and crucifix objects they see? Do the cross and crucifix help them understand Christian thinking?

When raising my children within the Christian tradition, I began to question the recurrent cross and crucifix forms, including many new or contemporary interpretations. It struck me that they induced repulse and contempt for the ideology they were to serve. The questions I would like to pursue

Grete Refsum - 2 - 21.10.2004

³ The cross is a symbol of good luck and happiness much older than Christianity. These aspects will not be considered in this paper (see Refsum 1991).

became: how can the intentional Christian message of freedom and love visually be passed on? What are relevant Christian symbols today? And what may a contemporary crucifix look like?

II THE HISTORICAL REALITY OF CRUCIFIXION

The Roman Empire was based on terror, and the capital punishment by crucifixion was considered the most horrible death. Outside the walls of Roman towns, execution places were established. Poles for crucifixion stood permanently grounded nearby main roads so that everyone could see what would happen to the disobedient (figure 2).



Figure 2 Cross in the historical park of Jerusalem (photo: odd Hagen published in Aftenposten 11.09.95).

The generalities of crucifixion are well documented by early historians. Variations were the rule, and although the most common cross type probably was the T-form, little can be said for certain (The New E. B. mic. Vol III: 266). Archaeological material is almost non-existing because part of the punishment was to throw the dead bodies of the crucified into open ditches to let animals pray on the corpses (Zias 1998: last page). The only known remains of a crucified person were found in 1968, in a funeral chest in Jerusalem at Giv'at ha-Mivtar. From the bones one can tell that the dead has been crucified. The victim was a male about 24-28 years old, 167 cm in height; both his heal bones were transfixed by a large iron nail, and his shins were found intentionally broken (Haas 1970; Tzaferis 1970 and 1985). From this material evidence the position of a crucified body has been reconstructed in three different ways (figure 3 a, b, c)

Grete Refsum - 3 - 21.10.2004

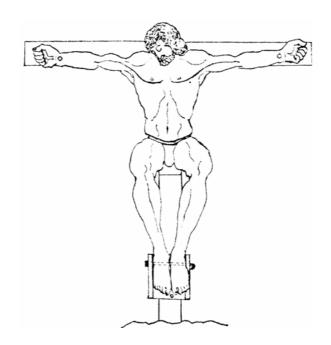


Figure 3 a Reconstruction of crucifixion (Møller-Christensen 1976: 37)



Figure 3 b Reconstruction of crucifixion (Tzaferis 1985: 53)

Grete Refsum - 4 - 21.10.2004

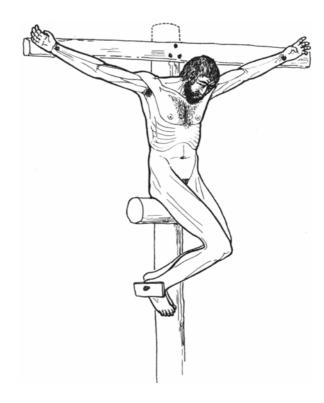


Figure 3 c Reconstruction of crucifixion (Kuhn 1979: 315)



Figure 3 d Reconstruction of crucifixion combining evidence (drawing: Jørgen Jensenius 2000) (Refsum 2000: 218)

The explorations of the Turin Shroud during the 1980s revealed that the crucified man imprinted on the cloth, had been nailed through the wrists, not through the palms as previously presupposed and depicted (figure 4 a, b).

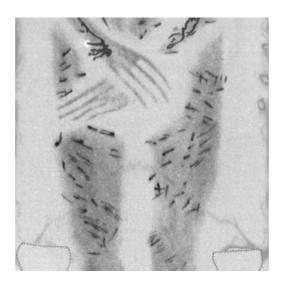


Figure 4 a Detail from the Turin Shroud (Weaver 1980: 746)

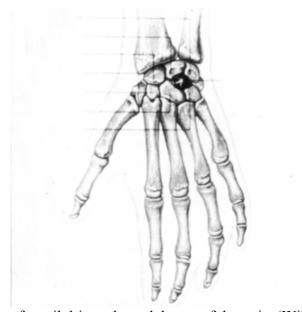


Figure 4 b Reconstruction of a nail driven through bones of the wrist (Wilson 1986: 23)

Likewise, the feet of a crucified may have been fastened in positions deviant from traditional representations; according to the Jerusalem evidence, probably through the ankle bones onto the beam (figure 4 c).

Grete Refsum - 6 - 21.10.2004

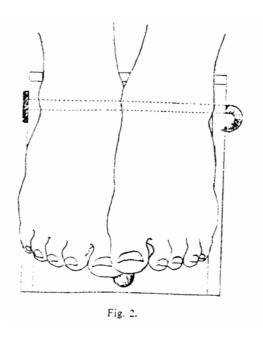


Figure 4 c Detail of crucifix reconstruction (Møller-Christensen 1976: 37)

Crucifixion was a method of torture intended to torment the victim slowly until he, very seldom she, died, it could be days. In order to hasten death, the calf bones might be broken so that the victim fell down unable to move upwards and breathe. It is supposed that Jesus died quickly because of his hemorrhage caused by extensive whipping. The death cause may have been a combination of shock and suffocation (Edwards et al. 1986: 1461).

III PERSONAL ARTISTIC PROCESS ON CROSS/CRUCIFIX FORM Phase One, 1986-1991, hovedfag

The historical realities concerning crucifixion are gruesome, and the earliest Christians did not use the cross or crucifix as symbols of their faith. Not before this execution method was abolished in the 4th century, did the naked cross become a symbol of resurrection (Dinkler 1965: 19).⁴ And only long after, when all memories of Roman torture were forgotten, did the crucifix become a symbol of Christian faith. But since medieval times, artists have dealt with the crucifix and its suffering, not least, modernist artists (Merback 1999). The crucifix may be regarded the Western parallel to the Eastern yin-yang symbol. It combines the worst and the best, black and white, showing the uttermost torture and humiliation, and simultaneously promising the hope of righteousness. This duality invites the individual to reflect on the human condition of unjust tragedy constructively. The crucifix attracts artists regardless of pronounced Christian belief. It has inspired numerous modern artists who have given their contribution to its visual interpretation. The question, however, is whether the newly made varieties have transcended the pain and communicate a meaning behind, which is positive and life-giving, or whether they contemplate misery itself (Rombold and Schwebel

Grete Refsum - 7 - 21.10.2004

⁴ Actually, the cross development seems to stem from the Greek letter *X*, Latin ch, the first letter in Christ; the cross thus meaning Christ, not the cross pole (see Thomas 1971).

1983; Mennekes and Røhrig 1994). I came to doubt that, and needed to find an interpretation that I personally could accept and live with.

My artistic work on cross/crucifix form started spontaneously, triggered by an article on Norwegian, wooden 12th century crucifixes. The piece from the church of Leikanger in Sogn attracted me the most. I felt that this was a crucifix type that I would like to deepen my acquaintance with (figure 5 a) (Blindheim 1980: 45).



Figure 5 a Crucifix from Leikanger (photo: Ann-Mari Olsen, Bergen Museum, University of Bergen)

Basically, there are two principal types of crucifixes: victorious and suffering. The Leikanger crucifix belongs to the victorious type, depicting Christ alive, standing on the cross, crowned with eyes open, as opposed to the suffering type that shows the tortured, dying or dead man, hanging on the cross. In response to my experience of the Leikanger crucifix, I made a paraphrase in metal thread, changing details in accordance with contemporary knowledge on crucifixion, like the nailing in the wrists (figure 5 b, c)

Grete Refsum - 8 - 21.10.2004

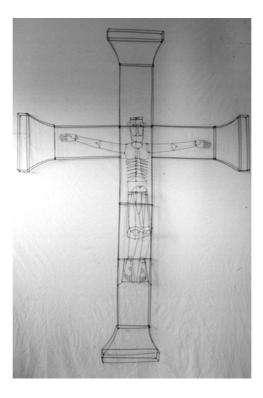


Figure 5 b Crucifix from Leikanger 1986, length of body ca. 75 cm

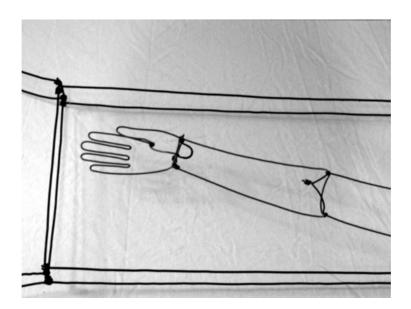


Figure 5 c Detail of wrist, Crucifix from Leikanger 1986

My next crucifix work was a visual reflection of the new knowledge that I had gained through examining research reports. It had become clear to me that very little was known for certain about the crucifixion of Jesus, but for a male body and some pole. I choose to draw the outlines of a cross

Grete Refsum - 9 - 21.10.2004

around the fragments of a body, since the cross symbol arose from the crucifixion episode. Resurrection was indicated by the crack in the wooden base (Figure 6)

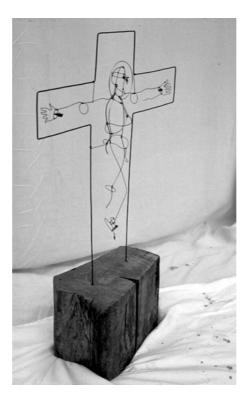


Figure 6 Fragments, 1987, height ca. 70 cm

The initial phase of my cross/crucifix work was not very systematic. Every now and then, something inspired me and made me produce a new variety. For example the cross from Gloppen, its monumentality and wonderful stone spotted with clods of garnets, made a strong impact upon me. I found the little hole in the middle of the cross arms particularly challenging, was it made for a practical purpose, was it symbolic or both (figure 7 a)?



Figure 7 a Cross from Gloppen (photo: Nordfjordeid museum)

Grete Refsum - 10 - 21.10.2004

It took three years before this impression was transformed and came forward as a *Feminine Cross* of my own height that I identified as an abstracted full-figure self-portrait (figure 7 b).



Figure 7 b Feminine Cross, 1979, height 170 cm

At the time I made *Feminine Cross*, I had no vision of the Gloppen cross. Only later, when documenting my inspirational sources and systematizing my cross/crucifix work, I became aware of the likenesses between the two. Today, I fully realize the importance of the small hole as an inspiration in my work. The circular, open mid-point of the cross, mysterious and poignant, seems to have followed me ever since. To me, it evokes associations to Buddhist understanding of the world. In this cross then, Christian and Buddhist understanding of life's mystery may be seen as intertwining. Besides, the body mass of the Gloppen cross with its rounded forms, adds something to feminist perspectives in the interpretation of Christ. Interestingly, this aspect has followed the Christian iconography from its very beginning (Mathews 1995: 135).

The cross from Gloppen is one of rather few early Christian Norwegian stone crosses. It led me to the British remnants and especially the Irish high crosses (see Harbinson 2000). Through literature and travels in Britain and Ireland, I became aware of the endless variety and freedom of form in the cross/crucifix formal heritage (Refsum 2003) (figure 8 a).

Grete Refsum - 11 - 21.10.2004



Figure 8 a Irish high cross from Kilmalkedar, county Kerry

Gradually, I began to grasp the breadth of cross and crucifix formal interpretation through history. It was relieving, and I felt free to sculpt or represent the cross and crucifix form in any way I choose, no solution being better or worse than another. *Standing Cross* shows an example in which the cross is drawn on the ground, and from this basis an extension is built to form an abstracted male figure of average male height. On top, is placed a ball in the size of the Eucharist, so that the total expression associates to a priest during consecration (figure 8 b).



Figure 8 b Standing Cross 1990, height ca. 180 cm

Grete Refsum - 12 - 21.10.2004

Another fact that dawned upon me was the awareness that through Christian history, the abstraction of the crucifixion theme was more the rule than the exception, the naked cross being the supreme symbol of resurrection, proving that Christ is gone, i. e. risen. I ploughed through cross/crucifix history and iconography (Schiller 1968), old and new, as well as artistic solutions of modernist and our own times. This work resulted in a *hovedfag* at Oslo National College of Art and Design that comprised a written thesis in three parts and sculptures. Part one of the thesis accounted for the historical development and variety of the cross and crucifix; par two traced contemporary solutions, analyzing the forms, it also included ecclesial attitudes towards the topic; and part three documented the production of sculptures for ecclesial use, intentions for the work, inspirational sources, choice of materials, development of techniques, and the working process (Refsum 1991). The *Hovedfag* work culminated in *Risen Cross*, which I defined as a victorious crucifix in which Christ was abstracted to a shining copper ball inside the middle of the cross arms. Inspirations from the previous work is evident in the work that has my height in a standing meditative position with the knees slightly bowed, 165 cm (figure 9 a, b)



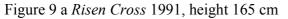




Figure 9 b Risen Cross, profile

When the work was finished, I reflected on the process and found that underlying my artistic cross/crucifix work lay a continuous interest in meditation. It seemed to me that the driving force in the process had been one of making meditation objects for different bodily positions (figure 10).

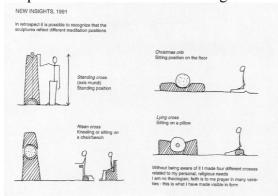


Figure 10 New insights 1991

Grete Refsum - 13 - 21.10.2004

Phase Two, 1992-1995 post hovedfag

The *hovedfag* process had been rewarding and I wished to continue this way of working, combining theoretical studies and art practice, and to explore the question of cross/crucifix form further. To me, the obligation of working in an institutional context was different from standing alone in my studio. I wanted a situation parallel to the university system in which research fellows were allowed to continue their *hovedfag* work.⁵ During the *hovedfag* process I had taken iconography, old and new, into consideration, the next perspective to be explored concerning the cross/crucifix topic was that of theology. Consequently, I started a systematic reading of Biblical historical research and texts on theology and aesthetics. The Biblical scholar at University of Chicago, John Dominic Crossan, I found especially interesting. Crossan is persistently arguing that anything written within the field of theology – the Gospels included – is interpretations that has little to do with historical realities. In a chapter called *The Passion as Narrative*, he deconstructs the complete story of the Passion from a historical point of view, and suggests an explanation for why the Gospel narrative became what it did (Crossan 1991: 367). To me, this was fascinating reading!

The *hovedfag* insights (figure 9) revealed that I had made no sculpture for moving meditation. Reading Crossan made me combine two threads: narrative and movement. In my *hovedfag* work, I had focused on the victorious aspect of the crucifix. Reading theological texts, however, I realized that the glad tidings could not be given without the sad aspect as a contrast. But how could the complete story of the passion be told? Crossan became the key, the narrative that consisted of several parts the answer. I got the idea to split the cross form into parts, and let each part represent one aspect of the story. The cross/crucifix was deconstructed into five parts, four cross arms and one middle part that also might represent the Christ figure. These parts would together represent the complete Gospel story; the cross/crucifix symbol had been changed into a process. I was somewhat uncertain about which incidents of the Gospel that were the most important and should be represented by the cross parts, but finally choose: Lent, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Morning (figure 11 a, b, c).

⁵ Years back, I was offered a position as research fellow; therefore, such a possibility was natural to me.

Grete Refsum

- 14 - 21.10.2004

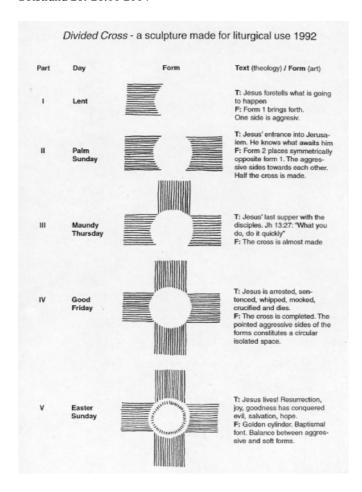


Figure 11 a Overview of Divided Cross 1993

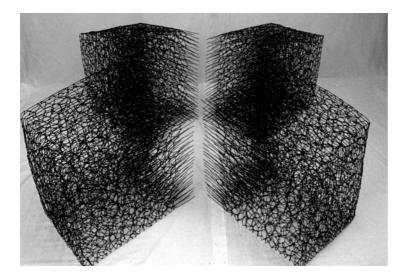


Figure 11 b Divided Cross, cross arms joined

Grete Refsum - 15 - 21.10.2004

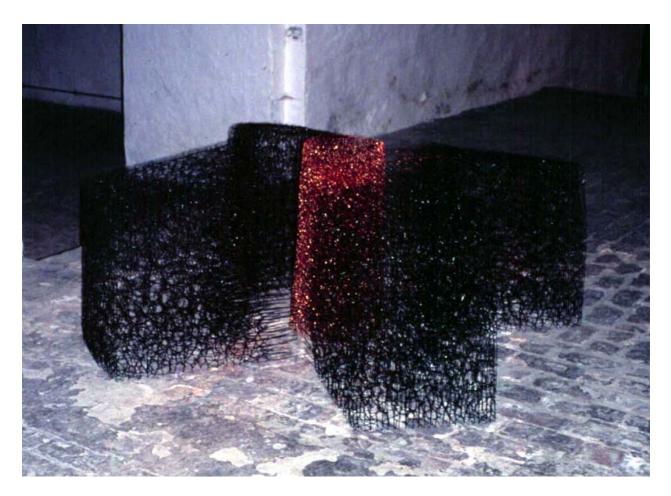


Figure 11 c Divided Cross, complete

The division of the cross felt significant. I was sure I had made an invention that added something new to the cross/crucifix theme. *Divided Cross* was not a new Stations of the Cross, which deals with Good Friday only, but a work that visually told the whole story in separate steps. *Divided Cross* was intended to be used liturgically, puzzled together from Lent to Easter Morning when it would be completed. The work is very abstract, concentrated on the horror of Good Friday and the joy of Easter morning. The next artistic step was to be more accurate in the narrative, to make a divided crucifix (figure 12 a, b).



Figure 12 a Model of divided cross 1992

Grete Refsum - 16 - 21.10.2004

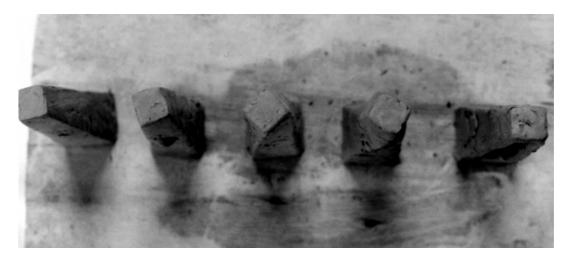


Figure 12 b Model from above

It took two years full time to make *Divided Crucifix*. This work is a culmination of my cross/crucifix process in which several threads are mingled together: the overall abstraction of the crucifix scene (*Standing Cross*), the identity of cross form and body (*Feminine Cross*), the narration by deconstruction (*Divided Cross*) and the ball in the cross centre (*Risen Cross*). In *Divided Crucifix* the following events were chosen to be represented by the elements: Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Gethsemane Garden, Good Friday and Easter Morning. The cross part has the size of an abstracted male, height 180 cm. The narrative is visually told by the gradual twisting of the main form, and the changes in the middle of the forms by the ball being present, moved, absent and returning (figure 12 c, d).

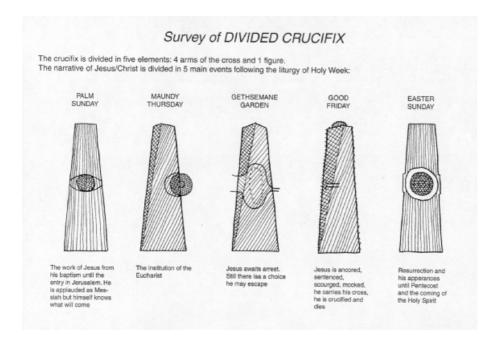


Figure 12 c Drawn overview of *Divided Crucifix*

Grete Refsum - 17 - 21.10.2004

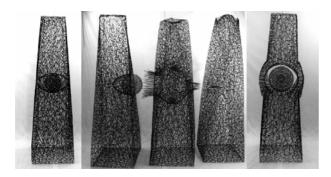


Figure 12 d Divided Crucifix, completed 1994

Divided Crucifix was exhibited in a solo show in the Cathedral of Oslo, Easter 1994. Thereafter it has been used for catechesis and liturgically at several occasions (figure 12 e, f, g).



Figure 12 e Divided Crucifix in Løken Parish Church, Aurskog-Høland, 1998

Grete Refsum - 18 - 21.10.2004





Figure 12 f and g Divided Crucifix in St. Nikolai Church, Gran, Hadeland, 2003

Every time *Divided Crucifix* is shown in public, new aspects appear as the onlookers respond differently. Basically, *Divided Crucifix* tells a story of transformation through extreme pain, terror and panic that associates with being born or giving birth, and which ends in relief and joy. It is a crucifix based on female experience and psychological thinking that women easily grasp. My aim was to provide a crucifix that visualized the complete Gospel story and ended in a convincing Grete Refsum

- 19 - 21.10.2004

resurrection. A more or less conscious motivation has been to get rid of my Lutheran upbringing in which I never experienced that Christ actually was resurrected and became victorious. To me, the production of the *Divided Crucifix* worked! I am through with the cross/crucifix theme and have moved on to work with the after-Easter events, liturgy, sacraments and prayer.

IV TOWARDS A MODEL FOR THEORETICAL STUDY AND ART PRACTICE

What kind of theory and knowledge do the field of art and artists need and who is to tell? In my opinion, art works that reflect knowledge and profound understanding of their themes are more interesting than those which are shallower in their thematic aspirations, given that the formal solutions are equally good. Personally, I desired to know more about the cross/crucifix theme. But knowledge does not create good art, nor does ignorance. To what extent, then, knowledge should be sought in artistic processes, will have to depend on the individual artists, their projects, interests and talents. In artistic processes the personal motivation is the supreme driving force and artists alone are to decide when their thirst for information and knowledge is fulfilled. In this respect, art development projects that primarily aim at providing new works of art, and secondarily to account for the process, deviate from research projects that have other aims and standards.

Dependent on the artistic theme chosen various methods for explorations must be applied. Treating a well-known subject like the cross/crucifix with a long tradition and strong connotations, I felt that knowledge was called for. If artists build onto the established iconography alone, inventions hardly will occur. If they go too far beyond, the result easily falls outside present ecclesial frames (see Rombold and Schwebel 1983). Such an outcome may be positive culturally and artistically, my premise, however, was to work within ecclesial frames in order to contribute to the establishment of a visual theology, in dialogue with theologians, the field of theology and the faithful. Theologians are focused on words. They are generally more oriented towards the auditive than the visual, more interested in music than in visual art. 'Image' in a theological context means imaginations arising from visions in the mind that are expressed in words. According to my experience, personal and literary, to get in touch with theologians, you have to communicate by words; in my professional career it has been essential to be able to speak and argue for my artistic solutions.

When in 1994 *Divided Crucifix* was finished, I presented my material in lectures and held a solo show in the Cathedral of Oslo, supported by the Norwegian Council of Culture. My *post hovedfag* project was coming to an end left was to write a thesis. In accordance with the *hovedfag* practice, the basic outline for the thesis would have three main factors:⁶

- background of the theme
- documentation of the artistic process
- reflections on the process

The intended outline was:

- I General background
 - Introduction: statement of problem, state of art, choice of theory and methods
 - Definitions of terminology

Grete Refsum - 20 - 21.10.2004

⁶ I suggest these elements should follow art practice from the simplest to the most advanced, through the school system from first to last grade. It is a question of evaluation by peers where the limits should be set for the various categories of preparatory, BA, MA, and *post*-MA. To what extent the factors are developed, the artist alone has to decide.

- Historical realities on crucifixion
- The development of the cross/crucifix as a Christian symbol
- Survey of historical cross/crucifix iconography
- Survey of modern cross/crucifix interpretation
- Ecclesial demands on art for ecclesial use today
- Survey of personal exploration of cross/crucifix form

II Documentation of the artistic process

- Premises and personal intentions explained
- Visual ideas clarified
- Artistic ideas: composition, materials and techniques discussed
- Implementation, working process, documented in photo and text
- Art works shown in public, documented in photo and text
- Function and use suggested

III Reflections on the process

- Evaluation of the project related to its intentions
- Experiences, insights, new knowledge gained
- Future work suggested
- Discussion of art development work versus research in a scientific sense

Due to circumstances, this thesis was left unwritten.⁷ I guess that the juxtaposition of existing knowledge on the cross/crucifix theme seen from the artistic perspective, along with the production of new art pieces, would have contributed to new insights, understanding and knowledge. For instance, is the combination of the reconstruction of a crucifixion and the tree in the Jerusalem Park entirely my idea (figure 3 d).

If an art development work is carried out in a way that yields original new knowledge that is satisfactorily documented in an academic sense, it may become regarded research. At the moment, there exists an uncertain interface between art development work and research. According to Nigel Cross, design activity – it might be art related activities – that aims at counting as research valid in the context of doctoral thesis, has to incorporate characteristics that are normal features of good research in any discipline. The research project should be:

- Purposive, based on identification of an issue or problem worthy and capable of investigation
- Inquisitive, seeking to acquire new knowledge
- Informed, conducted from an awareness of previous, related research
- Methodical, planned and carried out in a disciplined manner
- Communicable, generating and reporting results which are testable and accessible by others (Cross 2000: 98).

These terms are broad and have to be interpreted. In a *hovedfag* context, practice in the National College of the Arts in Oslo has been the following: the candidate should set a well-defined problem,

Grete Refsum - 21 - 21.10.2004

⁷ In 1995, I entered the doctoral program of Oslo School of Architecture. My intended thesis was not regarded scientific, and "Ecclesial demands on art for ecclesial use today" (see outline) became the thesis "proper", only an amputated version of the art development project was included in an appendix (Refsum 2000).

seek broad and relevant information about the topic, create art and write a thesis that in a rational way accounts for the artistic process. The thesis should give reference to inspirational sources, role models, relevant theory, and include personal reflections. A *post hovedfag* level will have to go beyond these expectations, but how far and where, is for the candidate to say.

Every topic has a context that has to be understood in order to deal with it seriously. In the cross/crucifix theme, there are several points of departure for a deepened understanding, and many ways of working. Personally I have oscillated between intuitive and systematic work, and I think this is characteristic for most artists. There cannot be final ends or solutions in art making processes, this parallels the academic fields of the humanities in which there are endless ways of discussing a topic. Still, there are rules and levels of quality that are set within the fields themselves by peers. According to my experience, the outcome of art development projects may be seen as two-fold: through studies, information seeking and reflections knowledge is compiled that may be shared if written down; through the artistic work personal thinking is revealed. The art development work at best gives: written knowledge and personal insights articulated in the artworks.

In 1999, the Norwegian University Council suggested established a new degree, *Dr. Aestheticum* (Ph. D.), that combines research and art production (Dr. kunst 1999). This degree is now available within the field of music (Forskrift 2002). I think my *post hovedfag* project represent such a degree, even the appendix in my doctoral thesis along with *Divided Cross* and *Divided Crucifix* might suffice. Consequently, I advocate for the establishment of a *Dr. Aestheticum* within the fields of art and design. Such a degree will offer an opportunity for those talents who like to go between scientific thinking and art or design production. The educational institutions of art and design will soon be included as academic (scientific) institutions in the Norwegian university law. In accordance to this categorization, I recommend that art and design educational institutions aspire at providing a platform from which their candidates may work on professionally (Refsum 2004):

- producing art or design
- executing art or design development projects without claims of being scientific
- doing scientific research and art or design production in combination
- doing scientific research specialising in theory production without producing art or design⁸

To answer the question I posed in the beginning of this paper: is my *post hovedfag* project a research project, a development project, or merely a normal way of artistic working, I think it is all! It was my natural way of working artistically, it was a development work, and it was intended to be carried out at an academic level in which the text would become transparent, open to be criticized and discussed by others, as in its reduced appendix form.

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Grete Refsum - 22 - 21.10.2004

⁸ The mentioned possibilities are seen as equivalent alternatives.

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Grete Refsum - 23 - 21.10.2004

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Grete Refsum - 24 - 21.10.2004