

Welcome to the Other Side

Mikael Jalving. Interview with Rane Willerslev, social anthropologist

The ceramic objects in the exhibition offer a glimpse of the invisible and challenge what we normally and naively call the real world.

Warning: Find a chair or a bench, and sit down. What follows may cause dizziness.

VERSUS asked social anthropologist Rane Willerslev, Professor of Anthropology at Aarhus University, who specialises in hunter-gatherer societies, to appraise the exhibited magic objects. Not with regard to the aesthetic qualities of the works, but rather to explore which anthropological layers of meaning they might contain. What do the works have to say about what we know about the world of talismans?

Rane Willerslev points out that a common denominator is magic, and the power of magic, as it is known in animistic cultures all over the world from Greenland to the Siberian Far East. Another common feature is the relationship between the visible and the invisible. Rane Willerslev speaks at one and the same time about anthropology, the theory of knowledge, popular culture, and ceramics. For the choice of materials in the exhibition in his opinion underlines the exhibition's theme. Talismans are something one must protect and cherish, or else they break, and then it's worst for oneself.

The exhibited works shed light, each in their own way, on the talisman's value, function, and power among people. The aspect of power is important, Rane Willerslev emphasises, and he finds evidence for this idea the exhibited works. It is not a power that stops with death, however, but in fact gives the dead the ability to influence things in the world of the living. In his research Rane Willerslev has engaged with the idea that the dead from their own perspective understand themselves to be the living, while we others might as well be dead — we can't be sure. This uncertainty can be crushing, the anthropologist admits with reference to the American thriller *The Other* (2001), which features Nicole Kidman playing a role which turns out to be that of a ghost. But he reminds us that people in traditional hunter-gatherer societies think about life and death largely in these terms, and that this is the oldest and possibly still the most common conception in the world in spite of globalisation and modernity.

From 2D to 3D

When Rane Willerslev looks at the 37 works, he becomes interested in the tension between what we see and what we don't. The tension lies in the works themselves. The work *Vov at se det hele (Dare to See It All)*, for example, uses the eye as the focal point and throws the discussion of perspective into relief. The large, spider-like eye is namely the eye we humans don't have. Our sight includes blind spots, in that it is corporeally embedded. We see from a particular angle, a particular height, a particular point, and it is among other things this that can make it difficult to make oneself understood. "We think we see in three dimensions, but we actually only see in two dimensions, and already there we have the problem," Rane Willerslev says, drawing on his knowledge of the warriors of the spirit world, the so-called

shamans. “A gaze that can see everything is precisely what doesn’t exist; for want of something better we say that God is all-seeing. In indigenous societies and so-called primitive religions, on the other hand, shamans have been worshipped who have the ability to travel in time and consciousness, and might for example be entirely covered with mirrors precisely in order to be able to see everything. *Dare to See It All* plays with the shaman’s attempt to see everything from innumerable angles and catch precisely the invisible which humans cannot see.

Also addressed in the western tradition

The question of knowledge arises out of anthropology, Rane Willerslev explains. In order to become who we are, we have to internalise what is alien to us. This occurs for the first time in relation to our biological mothers, of whom we are born. She is the other, and in the first years she is our external gaze. With time this distance grows into self-consciousness, reflexivity, and the unique human ability to see oneself from the outside. The price of this other gaze is, however, that we don’t know ourselves one hundred percent. “We aren’t transparent to ourselves, we are not self-identical. From time to time we feel alien to ourselves, just as we far from master the ability to be rational in the way that economic science otherwise assumes human beings do. But it’s a lie, we are all sorts of other things, and this possibility and that darkness must be reined in.” Here the anthropologist again draws on his knowledge of the earliest societies, but he also thinks that the problem has been addressed in western culture, among others by the ancient poet Homer in his epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

“Invisibility is paradoxically enough the precondition for being able to see and sense anything,” says the anthropologist and continues, “We fill in what we cannot see, for example the back of an object in front of us, with the third dimension, or that which in anthropology is called the *view from everywhere*. Invisibility is the precondition for something being visible to us.”

In our part of the world we have spoken about three-dimensionality as a scientific problem, Rane Willerslev notes, because we haven’t been able to explain how our vision really works. In anthropology we have discovered, however, that animistic cultures have found a way to solve the problem — with talismans, amulets and other magic objects.

What magic objects can do

The talisman thus represents an invisibility, and in Rane Willerslev’s opinion the work *Bjørn (Bear)* clarifies this insight by displaying in stoneware a bear head without eyes. The bear, an archetype of protection as well as threat, doesn’t need eyes in order to see. “It stems from another world, an invisible world, just as the same world materialises in the works *Empati (Empathy)* and *Vinger (Wings)*. Here the hidden forces are given form and figure.”

“The talisman is a mediator, a bridge, a connection, often in a distorted, twisted form, or in what we might call a mythical form,” Rane Willerslev says. The talisman doesn’t have to be realistic — or rather, it is precisely unrealistic. It’s logic is magical, not scientific, and its

abilities extend beyond physical reality, such as in the work *Drøvtygning (Rumination)*, which embodies the interconnectedness of the many parts or existences. Magic thus also encompasses a “gaze which we can’t access with the naked eye, but can try to take up in the same way as Pablo Picasso did in some of his distorted paintings, where an eye is placed where there from a naturalistic point of view should be an ear, or vice versa.” In this way Picasso tries, in Rane Willerslev’s analysis, to capture the aforementioned *view from everywhere*, which is to say, the invisibility which allows us to see, and in the words of the anthropologist attests “that sight is made up of a sea of connected eyes”.

Disruption

In order to understand the universe of the talisman, we have to utilise a different logic and terminology than we usually do. Here left is right and right left, inner is outer, up down, and young old, Rane Willerslev explains. The essence of the body is bones and organs, which can even hang on the outside. The exterior becomes the interior, while our western categories and sciences are turned on their heads. *Disruption*, one might say.

According to Rane Willerslev, the talisman is the third eye, but we mistake the talisman’s nature if we automatically associate it with something exotic. It can in fact be very concrete, as in the work *Rødt organ (Red Organ)*. The talisman often has a mouth, which must be fed so that it doesn’t eat you — which is clear in the work *Favn din indre dæmon (Embrace Your Inner Demon)*. “The invisible doesn’t answer to our understanding of the soul. Spiritualism is very different from Christianity, in which we differentiate between a physical body and a spiritual soul. According to spiritualism the invisible side is just as physical as our physical bodies. The spirit has a physique; it must live, be fed, and can itself eat other spirits. The invisible side mustn’t be confused with an airy, ghostly side — it has a concrete manifestation.

Not a realistic representation

To this extent the talisman becomes a necessary evil. It isn’t a pet or a hobby, it certainly isn’t something you choose but rather something that chooses you. The roles are reversed, Rane Willerslev points out. “In the work *Stå imod (Resist)*, for example, it isn’t clear who should resist what. The bodies are distorted because it is the world’s invisible side we are looking at, not a realistic representation. Who is the subject, who is the object? No matter how abstract it sounds, it is the invisible basis of the visible which is reproduced in these exemplary works.”

Rane Willerslev singles out the work *Mørke hemmeligheder (Dark Secrets)*, where the figures are tied and bound in a way we can’t help noticing. “The way in which we usually understand dark secrets often refers to the repressed, or what psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud would categorise as repressed sexual desires,” says the anthropologist. But in the universe of the talisman secrets are present in the visible world, and not something that must be hidden away. According to the anthropologist, it is rare that we experience anything similar in our part of the world, but he recalls the popular TV series *Twin Peaks* created by David Lynch and Mark Frost in 1990, and points to its use of parallel universes, for example with the

doppelgänger figure Bob, who is part father part monster. Similarly the talisman functions in a double world. Its task is to represent and at the same time tame the darkness.

Exemplary elucidation

When Rane Willerslev looks at these ceramic talismans, he sees in the classic talisman objects and amulets an exemplary elucidation of cosmology. The artworks offer a pedagogical translation of themes which may lie more hidden in the objects themselves. “I see these works as a lens through which the viewer can better understand the classic objects.”

They are at the same time inviting to look at, Rane Willerslev adds. “The senses almost overlap. In the images you almost feel that you touch them with your eyes, and when you stand in front of them in the exhibition, you actually feel that you touch their spirituality.”

Physical presence is an important element of magic objects, Rane Willerslev explains, and makes a comparison with the metaphysical spirituality of Christianity. “It is only in Christianity and other world religions that one believes in spirit without manifestation, this isn’t the case in animistic religions.”

Not belief, but power

When we conclude that the ceramic works embody the invisible, we must not forget, according to the anthropologist, that physical spirituality encompasses the potential to be destructive. “The talisman is certainly also power. It doesn’t just express protection or a route to self-knowledge. The talisman can be used to manipulate the invisible and in this way bring effects or status with them into the visible world. Talismans are not primarily about belief as in Christianity, but rather about power.”

In this light he again points to the large mouth in *Embrace Your Inner Demon*, and draws a parallel to the cannibalistic tradition in indigenous societies. “Talismans can quite simply consume you, they can be extremely dangerous!” says Rane Willerslev and highlights the work *Visionært skjold (Visionary Shield)* as being congenial to the theme through its similarity to armour, even having painted eyes. As one can see for oneself in the National Museum in Copenhagen, shamanic dress is often armour, full of metal plates and with the organs on the outside, designed for protection in a dangerous world.

Where the dangerous world begins, and where it ends, the talisman cannot answer unequivocally. Nor can the exhibition. Welcome to the other side.