

Anna Viktoria Norberg

Thread of Thought

a lecture at the Rietveld symposium: Scratching the Surface - Matters of Perception

My artistic endeavor is to bring attention, to visualize, that which is invisible or in my opinion neglected.

Annie Dillard speaks of how seeing is a matter of "verbalization:"

"Unless I call my attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply won't see it."

Seeing is about being an active observer, to merely watch one will not notice. One has to look in order to see.

The End of The Line? A Timecapsule Installation, 2006

Blown glass, embroidered linen, stainless steel. Capsule w: 30 cm, ø 7 cm

In this piece I wanted to visualize a lineage of women in my own family. I spent hours interpreting old church records and found the names of my mother's, mother's, mother and so on - nine generations back - until the beginning of the 1700. I also found their husbands, their children (many which died), the farms they lived on and the dates of their death. Most of them were maids living in a poor parish in the western part of Sweden and their histories are, as most women's legacies, forgotten. Although women's craft can be found in museum collections, it is mostly anonymous, sometimes monogrammed with someone's initials.

With the intent to honor the lives and craft of these women, my mothers, I embroidered their monograms on linen cloth. The cloth was then sealed inside hot glass; However, the linen stopped burning when the oxygen was depleted. The embroidery is burned but leaves an ash image inside the glass.

The thread of thought is visualized by the process.

The title refers to my own place in the lineage and one of the time capsules is my own. I had recently become a mother, but I have a son, thus this specific lineage of women could end with me.

The installation was part of the anniversary exhibition *20 Years On* at the Glass Museum Ebeltoft, DK, and at the end of the show I was asked to donate the artwork to the museum. What better way to preserve my craft and be remembered for future generation, but who is to know?

Jelaluddin Rumi, a 13th Century Persian mystic and poet, used to tell his students to "break the wineglass and fall towards the glassblower's breath," when he wanted to encourage them to look beyond the already known and to go beneath the surface. In a lecture I attended, video installation artist Bill Viola analyzed this sentence word for word: While breaking the wineglass; one should break a glass, but in particular a glass used for holding wine. Rumi uses the metaphor of the drunken state to speak about the habitual, and he wanted people to break out from this "intoxication." He wanted them

to fall, using the metaphor of falling as losing the balance, and taking new steps. In falling they are not just moving towards the ground but towards the glassblower's breath. Breath, a metaphor for the source of life, implies the falling towards the beginning of creation, and one could interpret this as the beginning for both the glass and the life. Being at the source, "the spring of wisdom," is where one, without preconceptions, is able to really see.

In my installation work I use ephemeral or fragile materials which I believe endorse the visualization of the unseen.

I Do Not Know What It Looks Like When Someone Dies - Electric Chair

Performance, 1998

Glass, high resistance wire, 0-70 V electricity. 8 x 27 x 7 cm

The piece was originally a performance where the audience entered a small confined room with a little glass chair sitting on the floor. The chair was made of bent glass tubing and had a high resistance wire inside, connected with wires to a dimmer switch on the wall. The electricity was slowly turned up and the chair warmed up into a yellow glow. It moved a little while the wire expanded but then settled. After a few minutes the electricity was turned off, and because the wire contracted the thin glass tubing cracked with a little tingling sound. Finally the chair collapsed from the cracking and appeared to "die."

Glass is commonly used as an insulator for electricity, in order to protect us from something potentially lethal. However, after living in America for 6 months I found it hard to comprehend that a "civilized" society still uses the electric chair. I think it is wrong for anyone to take another person's life. The piece is thus a social/political statement as a criticism of capital punishment, in its demonstration of the fragility of life. The light emitted from the glowing chair is a signifier for life, as light is the source of life.

I Do Not Know What It Looks Like When Someone Dies - Electric Chair 2008

Glass tube, kanthal wire, electricity 26V/5A. Installation 320 x 30cm, each chair: 5 x 15 x 4 cm

For an exhibition at Bornholm Kunstmuseum, DK, 2008 I reworked the idea. I made one chair for each day of the show, 35 chairs in total, each left turned on for the whole day and turned off at night. Here I used thinner the glass tubes, which resulted in the chairs slowly slumping backwards by the heat.

I have worked with *memory* in several works of art. I am intrigued with how layers from the past accumulate and exist in proximity, as old and "newer" houses beside each other in the same neighborhood.

A custom from the early Greek and Roman period, called the *palimpsest*, was brought to my attention. Palimpsest, deriving from [palim; again] and [psen: rub smooth], is a

parchment that has text from earlier writing incompletely erased and visible. The parchment, made of animal skin, was scraped with a knife and reused probably because of economical reasons. However, the previous layer of text is forever inscribed and often legible behind the new writing. Old manuscripts, which otherwise would have been lost, are still preserved this way. For example, the "Archimedes Palimpsest" is now readable (since 1998-2008) using digital processing with UV light and X-ray amongst others.

The palimpsest is today used as a metaphorical expression to describe an object, place or an area, which bears marks of a previous use. George Orwell has said the "all history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and re-inscribed exactly as often as was necessary."

There is No Remembering Without Forgetting 2002

Blown glass, glass micropipettes. 15 x 18 x 25 cm (6" x 7" x 10")

My thread of thought also run in many layers. Inspiration for my sculpture "There is No Remembering Without Forgetting", came from findings during excavations of a Stone Age grave on the Baltic island of Gotland where I now live. They found a young girl, probably a very important person, wearing a hedgehog skin on her head. Headpieces are used traditionally by humans through history to create images of identity with wigs, hats or as shamans use parts from animals. I shaved my hair to make a mold from my scalp, donating the 17 inches long braids to an organization that made wigs for kids with cancer. A certain molding technique was used. Careful glassblowing needed in order to create a perfect impression in the glass of the skin.

As the title refers to, *memory* or what we actually remember could also be said to form our identity. We are not living video cameras that record our lives. During research into the science of memory, reading books by Oliver Sacks among others, I discovered how a person who loses their memory also loses their identity.

A few years earlier I came across a machine that created glass micropipettes used for scientific purposes inject a cells in neuro-science and in vitro fertilization.

The tip of each pipette, there are about 600, is tiny; 5 micrometer (0.005 mm) and invisible to the naked eye and very easily damaged. One could argue that each point possesses the notion of *now*, where memory exists, before getting lost in the trails of the brain.

In my investigations I often find myself trying to capture a passing moment, or the fleeting time in what is obviously an impossible task. As the Pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, who were observing the patterns of the natural world, has said:

You cannot step twice in the same river, for other waters are continually flowing on.

Das Glasperlenspiel - a Silent Instrument 2007

Room: 11 x 5 m. Glass pearls, IP converters, microphones

I created a site specific installation, called **Das Glasperlenspiel - a Silent Instrument**, for Smålands Museum, which holds the major Swedish glass collection. The title was taken from the German author Herman Hesse's famous novel about a ruling cultural elite.

I strung six strings with 30 000 tiny glass beads from wall to wall in a room located in the center of the museum. The 11 meter long strings hung above the heads of the visitors and were each connected to a microphone installed somewhere in the museum; for example the entry, the gift store and the permanent collection.

The microphones transmitted sound and motions back to the strings and made them vibrate, thus making the instrument play a visual, but silent, "composition of the museum". A few microphones were placed in the room and allowed visitors to discover and play the art work.

Here I question the roll of **The Museum** in society. Is it an empty place where only the cultural elite gather? Or is the Museum cultural safe-keeper of treasures hidden in the collections that we are not able to appreciate in today's "consume and dispose" culture?

I want to pause and explain a distinction I make between *sited* and *site-specific* works of art. Both the sited and the site-specific are inspired and "born" in a specific environment. They will inherit characteristics and respond to this unique environment. However, what differs is that the sited work can be moved to another location, whereas the site-specific would cease to exist. Richard Serra, for example, was in the mid 70s commissioned to create a public art piece called *Tilted Arc* that was constructed in Federal Plaza in NY 1981. In 1989, due to some complaints about inconvenience, it was dismantled and, according to Serra, destroyed.

In my final year for my bachelor degree at Edinburgh College of Art I created a hot glass performance called *The Man's Nest the Woman's Cage* in the school hot shop. A woman is spinning a crinoline while 3 male glassblowers were applying hot glass thus wrapping her in hot glass thread.

In 1996-97, during research for a postgraduate degree, I created a small portable furnace for using hot glass as a medium for works of art and not be confined to a hot shop environment.

This is another speaker at the conference; Jerome Harrington, a Czech glass artist Petr Stanicky and myself, during a workshop when we were blowing glass on the beach south of Edinburgh in 1997.

Seventeen Minutes Performance, 1997

Hot glass, bricks. House: 5 x 8 x 10 cm

This is a sited performance piece, called Seventeen Minutes, which I first performed in an abandoned market place building in the outskirts of Edinburgh. During the performance I poured hot glass into an iron mould and cast small glass houses, which were placed on a brick and handed out to the audience. After giving away the first house I declared; "this house will explode in seventeen minutes", setting up a tension by the fact that people were given a "time-bomb" to hold in their hands.

The houses first glowed bright yellow from the core of hot glass. Slowly the color changed from orange into a dark red and finally lost the glow and became clear. After 20 – 25 minutes the houses would explode with a loud crack, releasing some tension and anticipation in the audience. The performance lasted for about 40 minutes.

17 minutes - a Performance

A performance at HIDE KULTURBROTT, August 3, 4, 5 2007

In 2007 I rebuilt the furnace in order to recreate the performance in an old lime stone quarry on the northern coast of Gotland during 3 sunsets in August. The glass glowed brighter as the sun was setting and the Gotland sky went from light to dark blue.

I have since held the performance in various places including the grand opening of the new permanent exhibition of the history of Swedish studio glass at Smålands Museum, Sweden. A museum curator was given a house, which after it had exploded was included in the museum collection together with pictures taken by the museum photographer.

It also took place in oldest tower of the old medieval castle ruin of Kronoberg in Sweden. The castle has not been occupied since the mid 17th century but still lures with tales of ghosts. The performances were held for invited schoolchildren at sunset, about 15.30, in a cold and rainy November.

Seventeen Minutes speaks of how we rely on what seems to be safe factors in our life, such as our home. The explosions represent how "solid" things in our life can suddenly fall apart.

However, every statement also holds the notion of its opposite; as life speaks of death, the temporary will speak of the permanent and infinite. Many people that see my work make associations to the ultimate permanence, and bring up the discussion of mortality.

I still like how, despite such a mortal subject matter, people can make new discoveries.

Clandestines 2029? 2009

162 g/m² glass fabric, epoxy. Installation at Galleri Pokorná: 4 x 10 m

I was invited to take part in the "Prague Festival – PF 09", which commemorated 20 years of democracy in Czech Republic. In research I read Vaclav Havel's autobiography/diary "To the Castle and Back" (2007) and came across a page where he describes being presented with one of his text handwritten in Chinese and was told that people in China were imprisoned for possessing this. I emailed the Havel office and asked for a scan of the book, which they actually did!

I was thinking of projecting it onto this sited installation, which outlines a life-size fishing boat of the sort that transport African refugees to the "haven" of Europe. The shape of the boat is not complete but merely hinted at by cross-sections, enabling the viewers to walk inside and around the boat. The cross-sections are made from industrial boat building material; glass fiber weave. The weave is very thin and when coated with epoxy it becomes transparent.

Clandestines is what the Italian immigration officers call the arriving refugees, but it is also the feminine plural form of the French adjective *Clandestin* which means "secret" or "concealed". The artwork comments of the sacrifice, both in terms of the humane devastation but also the cultural loss, of a united, and sealed off, Europe. Where are the borders in 2029?

The Chinese text did not make it onto the boat. The projection did not work with the dreamlike light in this cool old vault. The boat still, of course, symbolizes freedom.