

Fragments, Emptiness and Density

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Introduction

During the last three years, my practice has mainly consisted of installation works; compositions of images, texts, video, constructions, produced and found objects, drawings etcetera. This thesis serves to present an overview of my practice during these three years, to contextualize my work and work method and to discuss my future artistic intentions.

As a starting point I will give brief descriptions of selected works in a chronological order and continue by reading up on my experience of recurring subject matters. I will then discuss my work and presentational method and its relations to semiotic theory and the literary form of the short story. Lastly, I will implement a general review of how I wish to continue to develop my work and interests.

A Brief Chronological Description

Over the last three years, my work has gone through quite a dramatic yet natural and seamless development. After being educated at two different preparatory art schools for two years, 2003-2005, learning the classical techniques of croquis and oil painting, I thought that painting was to be my *true* method of expression and communication. After having worked with the application to the National Academy of Fine Arts in Oslo, I had a period of serious doubts concerning both my skills as a painter and also painting as an artistic method in a historical context. I started to experiment with other media, such as sculpture, text, found objects and also combinations of them.

Since I had been interested in literature and fictional narratives for a long time, I wanted to create an environmental installation piece, a story, made up and told by myself. Therefore started to work on the piece *The Unfamiliar (I Hear You, Feel You, Taste You, Smell You And Imagine You. I Just Can't Meet You)*. As the work was finished, it turned out to function as a physical *cut out* from the home of the main character in my story. It became almost like a portrait of this gender and nameless person, or this persons psyche. The work consisted of a wooden desk in front of a wall made from planks. Drawings, texts, photographs, objects and small constructions covered the desk and the wall behind it. To me, it was a fragmented map over the thoughts and experiences of the Unfamiliar. By working with this fragmented display of information I aimed to open up the narrative to the viewer, making it possible to find your own path in the reading of it.

After finishing this scenographic project, which from the beginning was an experiment, I found that I had reached a new work sphere where new, and to me unexplored, ways of communication had become visible.

The process of making *The Unfamiliar* was consciously made slow. I wanted to carve out the character (or its psyche), putting a great effort into making every detail a potential carrier of a narrative track. So, when I had finished the work after several months, I felt a need to letting myself to do a piece in a contrasting pace, to embody an idea without knowing the exact meaning and purpose of it. I then made the installation work *Multiple Reasons, Various Methods*, 2009.

Multiple Reasons, Various Methods is an installation piece and consists of a chrome-plated shelf containing cans of non-receipted medicines, ginger, spearmint, a kettle, liquor, a nylon string, a plastic bag and a scale. The collection of items is a mixture of ingredients taken from different *suicide-recipes*, found at various suicide Internet forums.

The idea of the work originally sprang out of a medial debate, which at the time was affecting me on several levels. The debate concerned the fact that suicide forums existed on the Internet but also the complex moral issues of assisted suicide. By presenting a selection of the actual substances and equipment required to commit suicide (according to these forums), but presenting it in a clean and correct, almost kitchen-like setting, I wanted to make the subject tangible, both to myself and to the viewer. To me, the main interest was bisectional; rising questions both regarding the complex and existential nature of suicide as a phenomenon and also about the moral aspects of the assistance of it.

By working with this installation, another possible work method was made visible to me. I realized that what I had done was to search information regarding a certain subject, altering its meaning by using it in an artwork.

The following work that I made was an installation piece titled *Remember Me When the Sun Sets*, 2010. This project was somewhat a combination of the two different work methods used in the earlier works. The main subject of the work was C or COBRA, the culprit of the biggest black mail tangle in Swedish history. By appropriating documentary material of the case and combining it with my own interpretations of C's experiences, emotions and motifs I created a semi-fictional, fragmented story of his world.

By presenting my own rewritings of the diary along with an identical typewriter that C used, the police's actual footage, 1200 empty C5 envelopes and a fragmented sunset, I invited the viewer to be part of my reading and understanding of C's world. To me, the core concept of the work was to use the story about C as a distinct yet universal example of a human being's desperate wish to be a producer of an individual and alternative reality, a reality where he himself could set up the rules and be in the position of a director in the story of his own life. The

title of the work is composed by C's own words. He wanted his gravestone to be inscribed with the sentence *Remember me When the Sun Sets*.

In the spring of 2010 I was invited to participate in the exhibition *Precious Periphery* at *Linnéanum*, a neo-classicistic orangery situated in the botanic gardens of Uppsala amidst a number of scientific institutions. Since the setting was far from being a *white cube*, I felt a strong need to connect my work to the building itself; its history and context. The *Linnéanum* was designed by Olof Tempelman and Louis-Jean Desprez and erected as a tribute to Carl Linnaeus. It was opened in 1807 at the celebration of Linnaeus's 100th birthday. Today, Linnaeus is seen as one of Sweden's greatest scientists, being part of the Swedish enlightenment, when rationality and reason, empirical and evidence-based methods drove away superstition and faith. As such, the *Linnéanum* can be viewed as a monument to Sweden's secularized and scientific identity.

With this background information, I formulated a number of questions of whom I felt an interest of dealing with; how does science influence our perceptions of what is true and false, real and unreal, right and wrong? Has science awarded itself and thereby large parts of society a sort of scientific patent on explanations of how the world is put together? Has it taken over the dogmatic role once played by the Church in Sweden regarding questions about true and false, right and wrong, etc? Can science in fact be described as a sort of religion, a model that we place over the world to be able to grasp it? And how, then, do we deal with phenomena, experiences and perceptions that do not fit into the model?

Rather than addressing the discussion between science and religion I chose to focus on other tendencies, experiences and phenomena that are in conflict with scientific models and explanations, such as parapsychology, spiritism and astrology. The sentiment of these *alternative sciences* towards traditional science seemed to be contempt at their narrowness and conservative attitude and aversion to openly exploring the phenomena that we call *paranormal*. In the sciences, similarly, there is vigorous work going on to give rational explanations to and expose the *quackery* and delusions that the other side is seen as trying to spread.

With the pieces that I made for the show, I wanted to embody various paranormal phenomena and the methods used to explore them. It was important to me that the

works did not function as evidence for one side or the other. By taking the opportunity given to me, letting this quackery enter the scientific environment, I hoped to be able to create a dialogue or a meeting between the two essentially different viewpoints. I wanted to create room for discussion about the identity of society, about tolerance, lateral thinking and subjective perception.

In the piece *Ganzfeld Experiment*, I conducted a parapsychological experiment used to investigate telepathic communication. At the opening of the show, I placed two twin brothers in two different sealed rooms. During half an hour, one of them, the sender, tried to telepathically communicate an image to his brother, the receiver. For the rest of the show, the piece functioned as an interactive installation where the viewers themselves could try the experiment.

I also showed four paintings that constituted the *RSPK Series*. The paintings, which all of them measured 150x200 cm, consisted of enlarged written texts and drawings acclaimed to be made by spirits and poltergeists, referred to as *recurring spontaneous psychokinesis*, or RSPK in parapsychology.

Recurring Subject Matters

Even though the visual aesthetics of my works have shifted during the last three years, I experience that the content of many of the pieces have circled around a relatively well-defined group of issues. The most observable tracks of interests have been constituted of questions regarding a number of related concepts: the idea and construction of *truth*, the relation between *rational* and *irrational* perceptions and experiences, the concept of *objectivity* (consensus) versus *subjectivity* and the concept of *imagination*. Originally, my interest in these topics sprang out of a need to try to understand my own experiences and perceptions of them. Hence, there is always one or more personal layers or aspects incorporated in each work. This, however, does not mean that it is important to me that the personal layers are visible to the viewer. Instead, they function as a personal force of drive to discuss, to investigate and to portray.

Quite soon after I was able to link my interest in these subjects to my own personal experiences, I found out that I was more interested in examining them in a wider perspective than keeping the focus to my own identity. Thus, I have searched to find ways to deal with these subjects on a more universal basis, creating possibilities, both for the viewer and myself to take part in broader discourses. In doing so, I have turned to several different fields of information searching for aspects, viewpoints, statements etc; psychology, science, pseudo-science, mysticism, literature, art etc. My intention is never to present statements regarding a certain question or belief myself, but rather to emphasize contradictory opinions in order to open up the work for subjective readings of it. To me, this way of working resembles the functions of a prism, which connects information (light) from a wide spectrum of sources, concentrates it in a specific point and then distributes it further.

Examples of how I have chosen to approach these topics can be seen in works like *Remember Me When the Sun Sets*, 2010, *Obey Apophenia*, 2010 and the most recent work I made, which was a collaboration piece with Erik Larsson, *A Flight to the Land Beyond the North Pole I & II*, 2010. In the first example, I focused on portraying my subjective analysis of the main characters *needs* to establish an *alternative reality* through the act of imagination and creativity. In *Obey*

Apophenia, I myself stepped into the *role* of the main character, permitting myself to connect my personal background to information about Greek mythology, astrology, astronomy et cetera, altogether creating an irrational ordering of symbols and meanings standing in bright contrast to sober scientific realism.

In the collaborative installation work, Erik Larsson and myself merged two different historical writings of the same person together, enabling a third story to emerge. The main character in this work was the American aviator and war hero Admiral Richard E. Byrd who was the first man to cross the North Pole by airplane. The historical writings about this event are of essentially different character; one official and one that one might call imaginative. Through merging these two viewpoints, we sought to establish a non-hierarchical relationship between them. In effect, we emphasized the equalization of the information in terms of real and unreal, true and false et cetera.

Fragmentation – An Enclasped Work Method

As makers and thinkers of new things, many artists today consider part of their responsibility to be the disorganization of knowledge and information. In the traditional diagram of information theory, for instance, a transmitter sends a signal – information – over a channel to a receiver. On its way, however, it encounters ‘noise’, or ‘entropy’, which is considered a natural inevitability. Communication science is essentially an exercise in noise-management, and engineers strive to design transmission channels that prevent noise from obstructing the messages. In the field of information disorganization, however, noise is a friend, not a foe. Art that inserts noise into a system of knowledge will, hopefully, succeed in breaking up its ready-made ideas and in reshuffling its pieces. What emerges is a noisy kind of knowledge, one that embraces the playful unruliness of the world.¹

- Anthony Huberman

¹ Anthony Huberman, 2009. *For the Blind Man In the Dark Room Looking For the Cat That Isn't There*. Contemporary Art Museum, St Louis, USA.

Today, visualization and multimodality are matters of facts from which we have to presuppose. Texts of today are visually miscellaneous and fragmented. It becomes obvious that different formations are tied to different advantages and disadvantages. One distinct benefit of a fragmented, non-moderated composition is that it is more flexible. It can be read in different ways, through different goals of reading. The reader is able to become a co-creator, having the possibility to riddle, based on its own interests...²

- Jana Holsanova & Andreas Nord

As expressed in the quotation of Anthony Huberman, the interest in –and act of– fragmentation of information is a common approach to artistic practice today. Since the emerge of conceptual art and post modernism and works by Joseph Kosuth, Andy Warhol, Richard Prince, Sherrie Levine and Barbara Kruger to name a few, the *act* of appropriating already existing information is an obviously accepted part of artistic production. To me, the question of *how* the appropriated material is being dealt with is of bigger interest.

In the field of *social semiotic theory* (amongst other fields) the term *modality* (originally used in linguistics) is often used when referring to the truth-value or credibility of statements about the world. In *Reading Images – The Grammar of Visual Design*, by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, the authors argues that modality should be conceived as *interpersonal*, meaning that information (of all sorts) doesn't *express* absolute truths or falsehoods itself; it *produces* shared truths based on values and beliefs belonging to the specific social group that we live, work and/or interact within. Thus, by interpreting the modality *markers* (collectively developed out by each social group), we are able to decide whether the information is reliable and true or if it should be treated with circumspection.³

As Holsanova and Nord suggests through the quotation on the previous page, the act of reading and interpreting information today is more characterized by *multi-modality*, rather than a singular modality. As the prefix implies, both information

² Jana Holsanova & Andreas Nord, 2009. *Svensson och svenskan*, p. 120. Lunds universitet, Sweden.

³ Gunther Kress & Theo van Leeuwen, 2006. *Reading Images – The Grammar of Visual Design*, p. 155.

as such and the way we assimilates it has become more and more scattered and is highly dependent on recipients own models of reading and interpreting. The rapidly increased possibilities of access to information through the Internet via laptops, mobile phones and other media have dramatically changed the speed and the nature of how we consume information. Hence, the way in which we browse through different types of information has made the consumption of it a more individual activity, creating greater allowance and acceptance towards more subjective interpretations and opinions of it.

To me, the theory of multi-modality is a correlative reference to my own work method. Reading about this theory made it clear to me that even if not formulated in terms of semiotic concepts, the development of my work during the last three years have been grounded in the scattered way of assimilating knowledge and information. Referring to the theory of multi-modality does not mean that I am focusing on how this development or view is affecting society in general but instead it enables me to understand my own work method and way of presenting my work.

As already mentioned, in many of the works the purpose of using this model of composition have been to create potentialities for individual and subjective readings of the content. The model of multi-modality is also an applicable parable to my practice as a whole. By consciously permitting my self to deal with different media and temporarily defined work methods linked to the specific subject in question (experimenting), the body of work does not follow a distinct *singular* style, but seeks to compose a broader path consisting of *multiple* styles.

As Halsanova and Nord points out, though, the multi-modal and fragmented representation of information also brings about potential problems. By disorganizing and fragmenting the information I, as producer of the work, *force* the viewer/reader to become activated, to accept the role as a co-creator of meaning and personal experience. On one hand, this involuntary position of responsibility might possibly lead to a total loss of the viewer's interest and attention, which is not a desired reaction for me. But on the other hand, my opinion is that art should be able to demand a great amount of attention and engagement from the viewer. I think of the reception of multi-modal information

as a commonly recognized, although sometimes unconscious, way of assimilating information through social media. My intention is to mirror this kind of understanding of information, transferring it into my artistic practice.

Since I experience the point of where my practice stands today as at the beginning of this broadened multi-styled path, my own references emanates from various directions. Obviously I see my practice as part of the field of mixed media installation art, in an aesthetic and presentational-methodical way referring to contemporary artists like Nate Lowman, Matts Leiderstam, Josephine Meckseper, Simon Fujiwara et al. But I also see that my work is related to artists like Ilya Kabakov, Cristoph Büchel, Gregor Schneider and Mike Nelson. To me, parts of my interests and works connects to the works of these artists in the way that they use narrative, fictional and spatial methods to portray events, social movements or psychological states. My first important encounter with narrative and fictional installation art, however, was that of the work *Kullahusets hemlighet*, dated to the 1970's, by Sten Eklund. The way Eklund distanced himself from the role of the creator of the work by using a fictional character (a scientist named J. M. G. Palléen) as the narrator of the *plot* had a great impact on me.

In the work *Amnesiac Shrine*, Mike Nelson through a similar method have created an installation consisting of a labyrinth built up by metal fences, containing large abstracted sculptures made of plaster. The work functions a remnant from a fictional collaboration between the artist and a war veteran motorcycle gang that he helps in order to treat war traumas. To me, the way that Nelson uses a fictional story as a backdrop to the physical piece corresponds to some of my own works that are based on remnants of fictional or semi-fictional narratives or characters. I also find connections from a content point of view in the way Nelson investigates psychological phenomena through physical representations.

A Collection Of Short Stories

As mentioned earlier, I seek to develop my practice as openly and experimentally allowing as possible. In the interview book *Broken Screen* by Doug Aitken, the Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone gives an inspiring description of his own practice:

I have wanted to give myself as much ground as possible and as many different viewpoints as possible, but I don't force myself to come up with new forms. Using formal and material contradictions is about broadening how you perceive the work. Of course, there are similarities that run between my works, like the recurrence of certain objects, but I hope that they can refuse to be weighed down by their own self-resemblance.

Every medium has a specific energy and that's the starting point. The medium is just a tool, and its aesthetic is an open field. Sometimes I make landscapes; sometimes I make rainbows, sometimes windows, sometimes labyrinths, sometimes blurred paintings, sometimes rubber masks. It feels satisfying to be working on different formal fronts, but I'm not trying to make a point of it. I'm not engaged in a formalistic practice of using different styles for their own sake.⁴

Rondinone's approach to his practice correlates with an idea I have concerning the totality of my artistry, namely the form – and collection – of short stories. A collection of short stories consisting of several different narratives that perhaps have no obvious relation to one another becomes, if it's good, a sort of whole composed of many layers of meaning, ambience, portrayals, etcetera. I try to think about my work in a similar way; as short narratives that, even if they are not distinct, still reflect or contradict one another.

My most important literary references so far are the German author Judith Hermann and the Norwegian author Kjell Askildsen. The authorships of Hermann and Askildsen are in many ways different, and in some ways clearly related. The most striking resemblances are those of the emptiness, yet density, in their dramaturgies and use of the language, and of course that both in a large extent are

⁴ Interview with Ugo Rondinone in *Broken Screen*, Doug Aitken, 2006.

exploring the form of the short story. Even if *emptiness and density in language* is a rather *dilettantish* and loose expression, this is how I experience it and also what I have come to appropriate from them. By emptiness and density I simply mean the ways in which both of them are able to load their works with a great complexity and ambiguity and still keep the content of the narrative and the composition of the language very simple. By distilling the fragmented and appropriated information in my works, I try, in a similar way as the ones of Hermann and Askildsen, to compose dense yet multi-layered and non-linear narratives.

Future Approaches

By observing and analyzing the totality of my practice I see that one thoroughgoing tendency has been to find a sense of security by articulating the *purpose* or the *function* of each work before or meanwhile the work is being made. This tendency is probably due to multiple reasons and does also at some occasions work as a conscious part of the work process. However, my intention is to direct parts of my practice towards a more spontaneous and allowing structure where concepts and purposes are not necessarily formulated in advance. Instead I want to give myself permission to actualize projects and ideas that *pops up*, embracing the state of uncertainty that accompanies such an attitude. By doing so I wish to broaden my way of working, creating possibilities for unexpected meanings to unfold in direct relations to the viewer.

Since large parts of my practice are based on already existing material I also intend to deepen my research process. In order to enable a deeper understanding of my core interests (*truth, reality, subjectivity/objectivity, imagination* etcetera.) and to be able to take part in the discourses around them, I want to assimilate broader knowledge in fields like philosophy, history of ideas, psychology, popular culture et al.

In a way, both these above-mentioned approaches are being applied in my current collaboration work with Erik Larsson. The foundation of the work, which is presently situated at a very early stage, grew out from our collective work with A

Flight to the Land Beyond the North Pole. As described earlier, the story of Richard E. Byrd can be viewed as linked to the theory of *Hollow Earth*, a connection that we consciously chose not to emphasize in our work.

However, dealing with the concept of an inner Earth raised a number of questions regarding a wide spectra of ideas and conceptions of *parallel worlds* in general; how does conceptions of parallel worlds and realities appear through the history of man kind: in literary history, film, astrophysics, psychology, popular culture, art etcetera? Could the idea of – and search for- parallel/other worlds be described as an ancient human need, and if so, how is this need portrayed and expressed? Is there an *objective/collective* hierarchical structure classifying different representations of parallel worlds into more and less significant?

The idea of tracing both the historical origins and contemporary expressions of conceptions of parallel worlds functions as an inspiring challenge to us. Fully aware of the complexity in working with such a wide subject field, we seek to assimilate and transform this enormous body of information in order to create a subjective and non-hierarchal narrative structure. Our way of approaching this loosely hedged subject field resembles the method described in *Theory Of the Dérive*, formulated by the French writer and filmmaker Guy Debord in 1958. As expressed by Debord, the *dérive* (literally *drifting*) is an experimental method used in order to reach alternative physical and mental experiences of ones accustomed architectural ambiances. By hastily *dériving* through the city either alone or in small groups, one enables the possibilities of discovering alternative psycho-geographical structures.⁵ In a similar way, Erik Larsson and I, seeks to drift through the field of information constituting the conceptions of parallel worlds and realities. Through this *dérive*-like method, we hope to be able to stimulate our imaginative capabilities, creating modes of open and subjective-associative linking.

⁵ Guy Debord, *Theory of the Dérive*, 1958.

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