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Reaching for The World



Magnhild Oen Nordahl
Vika Sjóvar

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I have to admit I was not looking forward to it. Or, I was, in a sense, but only by virtue of its unappealingness, so to speak. A welcome challenge to my flaccid muscles, almost exotic in its evocation of the toil of past generations. I hadn't been in a rowing boat since I was a kid, and even then I was never the designated rower. (I was the introspective waif slumped over the bow, absent-mindedly throwing rocks at the ducks.) The task wasn't made any easier by the fact that there were two of us in the boat, operating two sets of oars. Not to begin with anyway. Once we made it into open sea, and the rain had soaked through all my clothes, I was thankful for the additional pull.

The idea for Magnhild Oen Nordahl's performance *Vika Sjóvar* – which is Old Norse and translates as 'a change of rowers' – springs from the artist's ongoing investigation into older units of measurement that involve the body: 'an arrow shot', 'a stone's throw', 'a day's walk', and so on. A change of rowers alludes to the distance you row a boat before you take a break. Six nautical miles (the equivalent of 11.112 kilometres) is the official distance. What becomes immediately clear when we compare these methods with today's more formalized and abstract measurement systems is that they speak of a different level of physical involvement with the machinery with which the measuring is carried out. A human body was always on hand, its constituent parts (alongside basic tools like bow-and-arrow and rowing boats) thus available as a means of obtaining knowledge about the size of objects or travelling distances. Archaeological findings suggest that the earliest units of measurement were, not surprisingly, the forearm, hand and finger. The process of formalization that later appended a standard metric value to these units would subsequently displace the body-referencing system altogether, gradually rendering the various capacities and attributes of our physical selves obsolete for the purpose of quantifying the world.

It is not only in transportation and measurement that we now rely less on ourselves as yardsticks than we used to. In numerous ways our body and its inherent cognitive powers have had to yield to the prostheses of science when it comes to dealing with our environments. Pending the modern enterprise of science, we were harnessed to an embodied point of view that made now-uncontroversial facts, like the way the earth moves around the sun, inconceivable; observing the sky from a position on the ground seems to provide incontrovertible evidence to the contrary. Unless you factor in the many ways in which your instrument of observation (you) neglects information that should have a bearing on your conclusion, you will, like Aristotle, assume geocentrism by default. Having no reason (or means) to question the astuteness of our observational skills, we remained unaware of how fallacy-prone we were. We did not evolve to gauge the true nature of things, but to make decisions beneficial to our survival, lacking definitive information on whatever phenomenon we were facing. An intuitive grasp of planetary physics would have had little bearing on the reproductive success of our ancestors.

The ability to construe the world and ourselves at a remove, to take a view not contingent on information gathered via our senses, is what underpins the shift from our default geo- and anthropocentrism to the thoroughly scientific worldview currently aspiring to replace it. Nonetheless, despite the prominence we give to our scientific institutions, as a species we are still very much in thrall to the fallacies that issue from our metacognitive shortcomings, our inability (and reluctance) to correct for the many ways we actively misinterpret and misconstrue sensory input. We are in other words no strangers to mistaking our own biased observations for an accurate and actionable model of the world.

To describe a particular distance as 'X changes of rowers' would make little sense today simply because we are too removed from the experience of rowing long distances to have any grasp of how far 'a change of rowers' would take us. Sea travel – outside the

field of leisure – is no longer a problem solved with muscle. But while our extremities have dwindled, the meat that remains has been introduced to a wilder range of imaginative possibilities; the high rate of improvement in the prosthetic technology that facilitates modern life suggests that an exemption of humanity (or parts of it anyway) from previously non-negotiable biological restrictions (both cognitive and physical) could very well become a reality in a not too distant future. The last two decades have seen a rehabilitation of discourses on trans- and posthumanism in scholarly circles. Musings on the cyborg are nothing new, of course; the melding of ourselves with our devices, or at least the maximization of the fit, has been forecast as an implicit aim of technological evolution all along. To go beyond the uneasy relationship that Sigmund Freud describes in *Civilization and Its Discontents*: 'Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times.'

What struck me first in my encounter with Oen Nordahl's rowing boat was how unwieldy the oars were, how little these clunky, heavy, wooden instruments, which constantly jumped out of their forks on the boat's gunwales, felt anything like extensions of my arms. Ergonomically speaking my body and the boat were a less than perfect match. The system is modelled on a human physiology, obviously, but customization was clearly operating at a different level of precision back when the basic model for the rowing boat was arrived at. The one furnished in Oen Nordahl's performance piece wasn't a particularly slick or modern version either – an old, simple classic, replete with abrasive oar-handles. (Out of some ascetic impulse I still waived the gloves the artist offered me.)

Body and technology are increasingly intertwined – not so much in terms of the invasive and ergonomically enhanced nature of specific devices (we have yet to see species-wide implementation of cognitive nanotechnology outside the purview of science fiction, for example) as in terms of the modifications to the vocabulary we use to describe the two phenomena. The dichotomy becomes moot once a mechanical understanding of our own functioning has rendered us essentially one with technology. Construing the human subject in mechanical or materialist terms is no longer a crime perpetrated only by over-eager positivists, but an intellectual trend that spans the entire spectrum of allegiances. The conceptual foundations that guaranteed a decisive divide between man and his surroundings, whether natural or technological, have crumbled. Although our behaviour might still intimate otherwise, from the point of view of science we are becoming increasingly transparent to ourselves – and predictably harder and harder to pin down.

Such a reconsideration of the human, coupled with the pace of current technological development, makes visions of a posthuman future where dysfunctional meat is exchanged for (or at least supplemented with) invincible machinery seem increasingly plausible. Yet for now, the new devices that are added to our technological habitat are mostly geared towards enhancing our interaction with digital, networked media and the second skins that inhabit it. (Our actual bodies, waning in front of the screen, remain a far cry from the post- or superhuman.) These endlessly mutable profiles and images are essentially cyborgian, however; they transcend the restrictions imposed on our situated physical bodies in obvious ways while, importantly, remaining extensions of them. We take on the reach and plasticity of pure information.

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Getting lost in unbounded speculation here seems unavoidable; *Vika Sjóvar* is transparent almost to a fault – a quality that curbs any attempt to analyse it as an art work. Simply offering a trip in a rowing boat in an art context is elusive to the point of self-erasure.



The work teeters on the edge of visibility, both literally and figuratively. The Facebook invite I received spoke to me like any other ad hoc tourism venture offering unconventional ways of exploring a city. Minus the brief and didactic discourse on the history of measurement that served as a press release, what was being offered was access to a means of transportation slightly out of the ordinary, and with it a shift in perspective – nothing more. How the experience would play out was largely left to factors beyond Øen Nordahl's control: the relationship you formed with your rowing partner, weather conditions, ambition, stamina, familiarity with rowing and so on.

Audience participation is not anathema to contemporary art, of course, but Øen Nordahl's earlier work evinces no particular interest in what the art critic Claire Bishop has termed "participation art":² In appearance her often-sculptural installations even tend towards abstract formalism. At first glance her metal structures inhabit the exhibition space with the same heavy and autonomous air that a piece by Alexander Mikhailovich Rodchenko or Anthony Caro would. But they are of another kind than they admit at first; their ambition is to bring into view – make tangible – the models that we use to grasp our world but that elude perceptual access. Seemingly less transparent than *Vika Sjóvar*, her exhibition practice still aspires to connect our bodies to something from which they are essentially removed. In a video interview done in conjunction with the Astrup Fearnley museum's recent survey of what they – somewhat misguidedly in my opinion – christened *New Norwegian Abstraction*, Øen Nordahl performs this sensualization of information when with a simple hand gesture, in an attempt to explain the idea of her installation (*Sexagesimal*, 2015), she gives a quick demonstration of the bodily origins of the sexagesimal numeral system.³

Øen Nordahl's work seeks legitimation, not through the heroic sculptural gesture of taking up space in the name of artistic autonomy, but with the modest ambition of mediating between our bodies and the systems that surround and determine them, yet are not present to our senses. Using the art exhibition to establish this intimate type of understanding is of course made difficult by the abstraction processes that art itself is subject to at every turn. Perhaps as a response to this condition, in *Vika Sjóvar* Øen Nordahl seems to have emphasized pedagogical concerns over formal ones. As I have already noted, art's usual gamut of obfuscating techniques was notably absent here. The piece was set up as a rabbit hole that you climbed through and came out at the other end already immersed in an activity that required your full attention – seemingly out of reach of instrumental agendas. Directions were few and self-evident. I felt a far cry from the nervous, symbolically charged interactivity that participation art often resolves into. Participation here meant taking over and being let loose. It also meant being exposed. Not to the panoptic eye of media technology embodied in art's perpetual self-documentation process; exposed to its opposite, the open and unguarded sea, where the constrictive and enabling forces of media technology are notably absent.

The nature of the experience itself deserves a more exhaustive account: The first half hour aboard the boat I spent restlessly shifting my weight around, trying to optimize my position: finding out where to put my feet and how to angle them, deciding the best distance between my hands to avoid the handle of one oar scoring the flesh on the opposite hand, while, crucially, keeping them close enough together to ensure maximum efficiency in the strokes. My partner soon raised a bloodied hand for me to inspect in a call for sympathy. The constant craning of the neck that was required to make sure that our boat was aimed in the right direction, not at the hull of some expensive cabin cruiser, of which there were plenty anchored to piers jutting out into the canal, added to the awkwardness. It felt like driving in permanent reverse. Another issue was timing the strokes to avoid punching my partner in the

back. Once a rhythm had been established, adhering to it and keeping our oars from smashing into each other was the only order of the day.

After only a few minutes a desperate boredom took hold – the kind you feel when you've committed to a task that is too unfamiliar and you realize that you have hours ahead of you before you will begin to experience anything resembling real proficiency at it. Hours you in fact don't plan to spend, thus circumscribing your endeavour with failure from the outset. The learning curve, however, was steeper than expected. Our speed soon picked up. And with it an uncalled-for sense of invincibility (at least on my part). I became bent on pushing it up.

On our way back, after my partner had wisely broached the suggestion that we should call it a day when heavy rain set in, we passed a medium-sized tanker going in the opposite direction. The ship was close enough for us to see the two men who stood looking down on us through the floor-to-ceiling windows of the cabin. I half expected them to wave, which they didn't. It struck me as odd and a little impudent at first that they would just stand there and gloat, considering our predicament. Some gesture of sympathy or at least merriment seemed in place. But then I realized that they were busy filming us with their phones.

1. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), 39.

2. Claire Bishop introduces "participation art" as a catchall for art practices "in which people constitute the central artistic medium and material, in the manner of theatre and performance". Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, 2012, p. 2.

3. Sexagesimal (base 60) is a numeral system with sixty as its base. It originated with the ancient Sumerians in the 3rd millennium BC. It was passed down to the ancient Babylonians, and it is still used in a modified form for measuring time, angles, and geographic coordinates. (wikipedia.org)

