

Hans Carlsson: "26 minutes from the horizon – Transcendental knowledge in Magnhild Øen Nordahl's art"

This text is written especially for Magnhild Øen Nordahl's exhibition "Standard Primitives", on display 10th of June - 14th of August 2016.

I often get the feeling that I do not understand how the logic of the art space can include so much. Where, except in this historically conditioned room, can a mixture of associative chains of thoughts; a reliance on abstraction's ability to communicate meaning; explicitly political material; cultural genealogies; references to visual culture in general; references to art history in particular; ambitions to create desire, curiosity and joy; etc., exist side by side?

Representatives from the academic world could certainly argue that the interdisciplinary mess described above actually is, and have been for a long time, present within the university walls. But the art space is different from the academic world, not least because of its affective dimensions – which attracts our gaze, and which also makes the gaze draw attention to itself. Because, since the university's logic stems from a desire to create new knowledge, the art space's standards and codes is in large part established because of a desire to make the spectator see the framework that knowledge uses to sustain itself.

The art space, one can say, creates its own episteme (its own knowledge regime), an episteme which through Magnhild Øen Nordahl's practice is actively confronted with other methods of acquisition of knowledge. The piece Standard Primitives and Extended Primitives consists of a series of sculptures in various sizes and materials, reminiscent of standard objects from a 3D-modeling program. The virtual world, where the origins of the digital objects are to be found (a world where no materiality, but only a form exists), has been replaced with a context in which the objects' material properties play a crucial role in how they are perceived. It also turns out, something that the sculptures in their revelation as art works only gives us a sense of, that it requires a lot of skills and access to various technical means to make the virtual physical. Nordahl received help from, among others, the potter Anne-Lise Karlsen, in this process. Karlsen helped to produce a Utah Teapot – a standardized teapot – and also other more abstract forms in clay.

In one of Nordahl's previous works (which is not in the exhibition), Anne-Lise Karlsen is filmed when she is in the process of making a Utah Teapot. For those who see this movie, How to Make a Utah Teapot, without prior knowledge about the film, it is easy to believe that the experienced potter has done countless similar teapots, but this is not the case. That which is visible to the viewer is instead a compelling practical knowledge, a knowledge of the material and a knowledge of how it should be managed to produce a specific form.

The overall experience of Standard Primitives and Extended Primitives however, is different from How to Make a Utah Teapot. Despite the materialization of something immaterial the series of sculptures paradoxically privileges vision, surface and final result, and not explicitly tactile experiences or the visualization of a fabrication process. The sculptures are, after all, when completed, items intended to be looked at. In this process of sublimation the labour leading up to a desired result play a secondary role.

A number of artists, theorists and designers have – like Nordahl – taken the dichotomy, between the visible and the material, which is inherent in the concept of art, as a starting point for an artistic practice. In this context, a designer like William Morris by the end of the 1800s, and the 60s and 70s conceptually oriented artistic practices (such as Yvonne Rainer's choreography and dance), might be noted. And also in Nordahl's practice bodily knowledge accessed through the making of things makes itself apparent, however in a more or less explicit way.

Part of the exhibition at Hordaland Kunstsenter is the work *Avstanden til horisonten* (The Distance to the Horizon). In the film a camera, attached to a boat, moves toward the horizon. The film is 26 minutes long, as long as it takes for the boat to get to the horizon. If *Standard Primitives* and *Extended Primitives* partly can be said to conceal a manufacturing process, *Avstanden til horisonten* can be described as a visualization of a totally unproductive act. One can ask why anyone would want to spend time traveling toward a horizon, that will just disappear the closer you get? Is it because you want your body to understand the Earth's circular shape? Or is it an empirical attempt to actually question this fact? But although the process (creation strategy) is the focus of the piece, it also contains a certain ambiguity: the journey towards the horizon is after all executed because of the production of a work of art: that is, part of a visualization of something that should resemble a knowledge gathering process.

With the sociologist Richard Sennett in mind, it is possible to assert that the division between vision and tactility, between aesthetic idealization and materiality (as outlined above based on Nordahl's practice), is a very conflicted division. It can be described as a kind of trauma that is represented not only in art's internal logic, but also in the communities constructed in Europe since antiquity. In the book *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* from 1994 Sennett draws up some of political, social and architectural genealogies of the distinction made up between the gaze (and the notion of the visible) and the body's reality (the material, with everything that belongs to it, such as disease, aging and death).

In *Flesh and Stone* Sennett reflects upon, among other things, ancient Athens' various myths and political systems. He argues that Athens' urban planning during the 4th century BC established a tension between the sphere of the spoken word: the official, visible and the representative (attributes associated with masculinity), and on the other hand the body's reality: the private, hidden and mystical (presumably female characteristics). Athens squares, Agoras, for example, was framed by long houses which were called Stoa. The Stoa consisted partly of rows of pillars, and included rooms of more enclosed character as well as more open spaces. In the closed rooms (the feminine side) meetings of a more informal nature could be held as for example dining meetings, while the open spaces (the male side) was intended to official statements and public meetings. The ancient police was a place where the body's relation to reality could be negotiated and renegotiated, and where the visible and invisible – even though these attributes were given different statuses – allowed a place in the cityscape.

Sennett, however, also writes about Renaissance urban development, including the first ghetto for Jews in Venice. The Jews' presence was associated with plague and death, and during an economic downturn in the early 1500s when immigration of Jews to the town was great (partly because they were expelled from Spain in 1492) a ghetto was created in order to separate the Jews from the rest of the society. Now there was no longer a renegotiation of the relationship between materiality and ideals, body and ideology. Renaissance Venice is an example of how people, in the name of civilization, have been trying to shut out bodily decay and replace it with notions of order, structure and planned community.

Sennett began work on his book on the Western dichotomy between body-materiality and visibility-idealization, together with his colleague, the philosopher Michel Foucault. This happened just before Foucault died in 1984. A death that took place in the middle of his efforts to complete the book series *The History of Sexuality*, which to a greater extent than in the past works by Foucault would come to announce man's excesses and subjective irrationality as important for historical processes. Sennett writes, interestingly enough, that this shift in Foucault's thinking also was personal: "A certain paranoia about control which had marked much of his life left him as he began to die".

And so it may well be. Sennett is not alone in pointing out this affective turn in Foucault's production. But already in early works, such as *The Order of Things*, from 1966, it is possible to grasp a certain fascination about a kind of thinking, imagining the world as interconnected by, you might say, affective relationships. In this case, however, affections between people, things and environment. This holistic world is understood as a tangible entity rather than a world that is divided into separate spheres (like the empirical world of science as it starts to appear in the "Classical Age" – beginning of 17th to the end of the 18th century – where the observable qualities of plants, beings and process in nature was making it possible to distinguish things from each other, which provided the framework for knowledge at this time). Foucault describes the pre-modern science (in the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance) approach to knowledge with the words:

In the vast syntax of the world, the different beings adjust themselves to one another; the plant communicates with the animal, the earth with the sea, man with everything around him. Resemblance imposes adjacencies that in their turn guarantee further resemblances.

In the animation *In World View* Nordahl has animated the production of some of the sculptures part of *Standard Primitives and Extended Primitives*. The spinning object has been made with a 3D-modeling program. In addition to the fact that the viewer here is brought back to the realm of the digital work, the work's title indicates that it in an associative way can be said to link to the boat trip undertaken in *Avstanden til horisonten*. Perhaps can the spinning object be compared to the spinning of Earth in space? Of course, an equally spontaneous, as in a scientific sense, unnecessary observation. One observation that is similar to the pre-modern transcendentally as with Foucault's words allowed comparisons between micro- and macrocosm in a pre modern European society.

The understanding of the world requires frames of knowledge. The art space is one of the sites where things can be given a meaning, the Athenian polis was another and a 3D modelling program represents yet another epistemic basis on which the world can be shaped and given an order. In Nordahl's practice several barriers of knowledge is being re-established, exceeded and addressed, in an art context as well as elsewhere. This highlights the limits of what is knowable and for whom, limits institutionally and technologically defined. But might it be that Nordahl's work is not only making it clear to us how we depend on conditioned frameworks as we build our beliefs about the world around us? Does *Standard Primitives and Extended Primitives*, *Avstanden til horisonten* and *World View*, do something more? Can Nordahl's art and artistic method be of any importance to science itself, or be seen as part of a discussion in the theory of science, on how desirable results are achieved?

Scientific practice is today carried out within the framework of a method based on a critical questioning of achieved results. Karl Popper is a philosopher who had had enormous significance for the theory of science through his theories on the importance of hypothetical deduction for the emergence of modern science. Hypothetical deduction is, with a very deficient summary, based on the idea that known results are constantly tested against results that could disprove these facts. Popper's idea of falsification has been criticized by, among others, the philosopher of science Thomas S. Kuhn for not taking into account that some issues can not possibly be raised, and to some criticism of gained results can never be formulated, within an established discourse in a scientific framework. The reason for this, according to Kuhn, is that science is controlled by so-called knowledge paradigms from which all the questions, and answers, possible are then constructed.

Popper's and Kuhn's scientific methods of analysis are very different; they also result in diametrically opposed views of what man is capable of and how rational humans are when thinking and acting. Nevertheless, they address the issue of access to true knowledge in science through

well articulated and clearly defined methods for a better judgment to be met. Such claims can advantageously be criticized using theories from the *Enfant Terrible* of philosophy of science, Paul Feyerabend.

When professor at Berkeley, Feyerabend developed a theory of science as most successful when it was not supported by a rigid method. In the controversial book *Against Method*, 1975, Feyerabend argued that neither deduction nor social constructivist analysis of science gives, or has given, better and more true scientific results. He argued instead that a kind of non-methodology, the so-called "counterinduction", was what had led to the great scientific discoveries. Counterinduction is based on an ability to create context by reckless comparisons, and through an affirmative approach to knowledge. It's about starting research from the point of departure of spontaneous reactions to the world order, but also to break the understanding of these reactions by impulses from unexpected sources:

The first step in our criticism of customary concepts and customary reactions is to step outside the circle and either to invent a new conceptual system, for example a new theory, that clashes with the most carefully established observational results and confounds the most plausible theoretical principles, or to import such a system from outside science, from religion, from mythology, from the ideas of incompetents, or the ramblings of madmen.

This non-method was effective for Nicolaus Copernicus, and later Galileo, when they questioned the geocentric worldview. Through a maze of non-logical arguments, rhetorical and associative thinking, they managed to convince the science that the world order was quite different from the geocentric: the cosmos was based on completely different principles than those previously known: the planets revolved around the sun and not the earth. This step is, again, counterinductive.

The irony of the counterinductive method is that it questions the rationality and the non-rationality at the same time. This because it highlights what we today call logical and rational truths are actually the results of irrational scientific processes. One approach that maybe should be borne in mind by those who visit Nordahl's exhibition: since perhaps its associative appearance, and its ability to incorporate interdisciplinary fields, are not properties that are exclusive to the fine arts. The pieces within *Standard Primitives* might instead be regarded as reminders of that a non-rational transcendence between disciplines and methods of knowledge acquisition actually takes place, and have been taking place, all the time, even in science. A transcendence that for various reasons is denied retrospectively – as would what we see and know forever be separated from what we feel and believe.

Notes:

Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method*, 3rd edition, New York and London 1993 (1975), quote from page 52f

Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, e-book, New York and London 2005 (1966), quote from page 20

Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*, New York and London 1994, quote from page 26