

FRAGMENTS OF MATTER JEANNETTE CHRISTENSEN

BY **MIEKE BAL**

PREFACE

This book is part of a series of publications funded by Bergen National Academy of the Arts (KHiB), which has as its stated goal to focus on artistic research and to contribute to current theoretical discourses on contemporary visual art and design. As Adjunct Professor at Bergen National Academy of the Arts from 2000 through 2007 I am grateful for the support that made this publication possible. Thanks to Dean Paula Crabtree and Artistic research and development Coordinator Lin-Christin Berentzen and to Adjunct Professor (KHiB) Anke Bangma and Professor (UiB) Siri Meyer for their comments.

The aim of the book is to present my artistic work together with an essay by Mieke Bal, with whom I have had a continuous dialogue ever since I got interested in her writing and she in my art. We met in New York in the fall of 1994, when I had the opportunity to attend her lectures at Columbia University. Besides being a well-known writer and cultural critic Mieke also has a link to Bergen as an honorary doctor of the University of Bergen. Mieke's lectures on the rereading of older masterpieces and her fascinating book *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*, along with more recent publications, has been a continuous source for exchange. When I met Mieke I had recently done a series of polaroids titled *The Passing of Time* (1994). They were based on the appropriation and remediation of some of Vermeer's paintings. Fascinated by Vermeer's realistic descriptions of women carrying out everyday actions, I took polaroids of women carrying out the same actions as the women from the 16th century. I removed all the allegorical representations from his paintings and with the aid of photography I sought to activate a kind of snapshot quality that is present in his paintings.

I wanted to make my own interpretation outside a historical context. This set off a dialogue between us. Mieke has written several times on my work, especially in the essay *Jeannette Christensen's Time* published in 1997 and in her *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* from 1999. Now, ten years later I feel privileged to still conduct that dialogue and happy to present a new text on my work that brings other aspects into play. Mieke's caring and careful descriptions of individual art works, moving back and forth and allowing them to challenge each other, show the yield of such recurrent dialogues. It is invaluable for an artist to have one's work read and re-read, through different theoretical concepts.

In a later series I exchanged Vermeer's women with men; men writing love letters, reading letters, pouring milk or drinking from a glass. These polaroids were juxtaposed with jell-o monochromes representing more than the substance, but also transience and change. Quoting, appropriating and combining aspects of art history with the contemporary has been a recurring interest, as well as investigating the meaning of a historical image viewed through a reworked contemporary version. My choice of polaroids for this reenactment questioned traditional distinctions between high and low culture. More importantly, what spoke to me was the specific

quality of polaroid photography as a medium that changes over time and where the image itself may fade and even disappear, as in the *The Passing of Time (Woman asleep at the table)*, 1995-2008. Looking back at this early work, I see now that it contains many of the returning issues I have continued to investigate.

The above also applies to a recent work, a dialogue with the Norwegian sculptor Gustav Vigeland (1869-1943), titled *Dead man talking* and shown at the Vigeland Museum in 2006. I made a photographic remediation of one of his bas-reliefs for the large fountain in the Vigeland Park in Oslo. It shows five children gathering bones and clutching skulls. What caught my eye were the actions the children are carrying out, taken out of the wider context of his series of reliefs. I gave each of the small children a space of their own in separate photographs. Titles taken from Francisco Goya's *Los desastres de la guerra (Disasters of War)* put them into a different perspective from the one Vigeland envisioned, also bringing them closer to images that confront us daily in the media. This site-specific work was thus a kind of processing of Vigeland's art, tracing new possible ways of seeing it. On another level, in the exhibition at the Vigeland Museum as in my work in general, there is a discussion specifically concerning sculpture and materiality along with distinctions between high and low culture.

In the installation *Den ene banner og den andre ber (One is Cursing and the other Begging, 2003)* a white marble speech bubble is opposed to a speech bubble in black granite. The transient sign for speech that we know from comics is arrested in a material used in antique, classical sculpture, connoting eternal art. In *Philosopher's Stone* (2004) the granite is made to resemble a piece of plasticine, which again refers to *Exercises I* (2002), a series of photographs of a child's hands modeling plasticine. The installation *Tiden lager alle sår* (1996) consisted of seven benches covered with a thick layer of red gelatin. In time the jelly was taken over by mould and destruction and started to drip onto the floor, spills suggestive of body fluids. In *The Birth of Liquid Anxieties* (2001) horizontal, black diabase sculptures are "spilled" on the floor, in marked contrast to the verticality of Vigeland's enormous fountain sculpture in the adjoining room, consisting of giants holding a huge vessel meant to be filled with streaming water. Liquid forms suggestive of fluidity, instability and change, but ending up as frozen moments - like photographs.

A Lover's Discourse: Fragments by Roland Barthes was an eye opener for me, which indicated a fruitful way of working. His book is a kind of literary sampler, where quotations, references and Barthes' own reflections can be read side by side. The conceptions one has about one's own role as an artist, how

one expresses oneself, how the work of art creates meaning, are conditioned by how you understand subjectivity. The nuanced way in which Barthes relates to himself through his author-persona, is for me a convincing example of how one can have a personal and original voice without leaning on traditional notions of the self-made heroic artist. He opens up a dialogue-based understanding of how we establish ourselves as individuals or subjects. We recognize ourselves and our passions through an already existing language conveyed by culture, through the voices of others. One exists perpetually in a dialogue that transcends past and present and as an artist and a teacher I am interested in that dialogue.

JEANNETTE CHRISTENSEN, OSLO, JANUARY 2009

FRAGMENTS OF MATTER

Matter and materiality matter. Concrete noun, abstraction, and verb are related for a reason. The importance of matter lies in its inherent connection with reality; it offers us reassurance of the real existence of the world. Matter matters because it helps and forces us to deal with the world on its own terms. No philosophy that severs soul from body, no hope of an afterlife can get around that simple fact: matter is here, now, and hence, it always comes first. It is also vulnerable; matter is in our care as much as it is caring for us by providing food, shelter, and a visible world.

Fragments are pieces, broken off from a whole, and continuing their existence alone. They always carry the idea of the whole with them, even if that whole is no longer around; even if we can no longer say what the whole was. In this, the fragment is different from the detail. When the whole is available, details of it help us understand it in all its complexity. That is why details are such favorites of critics. Fragments, in contrast, are the melancholy bearers of irretrievable loss, of irreparable destruction; of time's relentlessly stormy passage.

Matter is also at the heart of our bodies. We are matter. We are bodies that need care and that give care, helping themselves and those of others to endure. Bodies are matter that exists in time and will fade away on its wings. The realization that matter is not durable inspires ideas of something else that lasts longer and is temporarily housed in the body. But mortality is evidence of our materiality, not of its opposite.

And during its lifetime, the body is an ongoing exercise in specification. Each one is different, particular, and singular. Yet, like molecules, bodies form groups, according to the dividing lines of the day: gender, color, age, ability, economics, and all combinations of these, make one body belong with others – or not. A world in which care is the inevitable condition of survival constantly reconfigures these groups, thus maintaining the porosity of its boundaries. Matter, thus, moves beyond its own definitional specificity. So as to shed its status as fragment and memorial of loss and move towards the status of detail, a unit of matter – alive or lifeless – prefers to belong to others.

For, in such a world, each body struggles to remain a detail of the social fabric that sustains it, fighting off the threat of becoming a lone fragment. In order to accomplish this, it needs to acknowledge that matter matters not only because it alone can answer the ontological questions of the child: what are we, what is? And that question of time: where do we come from, and where do we go? With the title “fragments of matter” Jeannette Christensen, the artist working with matter, inscribes modesty and time into her work. The title foregrounds the awareness that we are irremediably subject to loss and offers the hope that this awareness is of help instead of hindrance.

In *Creative Evolution*, a book devoted to the enigma of life, French philosopher Henri Bergson wrote something to this effect in the chapter “The Endurance of Life”. In his life-long effort to theorize life, time, and the world in terms of a continuum, he wrote

about the difference of what he calls the “real whole”:

The systems we cut out within it [the real whole] would properly speaking, not then be parts at all; they would be partial views of the whole.²

As is well known, Bergson revolutionized the current conceptions of time. He replaced measurable, dividable time with continuous duration. The tension between fragment and detail bears a resemblance to the tension between part and partiality in Bergson's passage. Apply this tension to time, as Bergson is wont to do, and the key to Christensen's work emerges. For, it is this tension that underlies Jeannette Christensen's art of matter, which is also an art of time.

The bond between matter and time is a logical consequence of the ongoing effort to become (social) “details” rather than remaining “fragments”. Comfort in the face of fragmentation is only possible when it is anchored in facing time, rather than running away from it. Comfort becomes possible when fragmentary existence is the starting point, not a gruesome truth to be repressed. For, matter also matters because it is never only itself. We invent other things for which matter can be a home: forms, sense experiences, souls, minds, sociality, life.

Matter is always matter-plus. Thus, fragments of matter are also, always, capable of acts we tend to reserve for humans: yearning for what is lost, hope for what is possible. They perform such acts

by means of the porosity of their limits, their openness to contact, extension, and mutuality. Jeannette Christensen explores the miraculous capabilities of matter, not to overcome but to keep the status, dimensions, and states of its fragments mobile, uncertain, open to change. Thus, the boundaries and surfaces of each object Christensen makes are soft, transitory, and materially multiple.

Christensen's work consistently pursues the possibilities and conditions of art's social agency on the terms of this conception of matter, the body, the social world, and their fragmentation. Whether addressing issues of age and generation, of gender, of the transitoriness of life, of temporality both as relentless passage and as obstinate duration, she walks the fine line between representation and action. She does not depict, unless it is a depiction of action. She does not represent, unless it is a representation of other acts of sociability. And while her work must be qualified as “abstract” in ways I will later indicate, it is never abstract in any of the common meanings of the term: it is emphatically not the opposite of figuration, of concrete, of material. Rather, matter is what concerns her most. As do connections – which make each work a fragment in pursuit of becoming a detail. Hence the title of this book.

1 Henri Bergson 1991 [1896] *Matter and Memory*. Translated by N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer. New York: Zone Books, 223

2 Henri Bergson 1983 [1907] *Creative Evolution*. Translated by A. Mitchell. Landham MD: University Press of America, 31



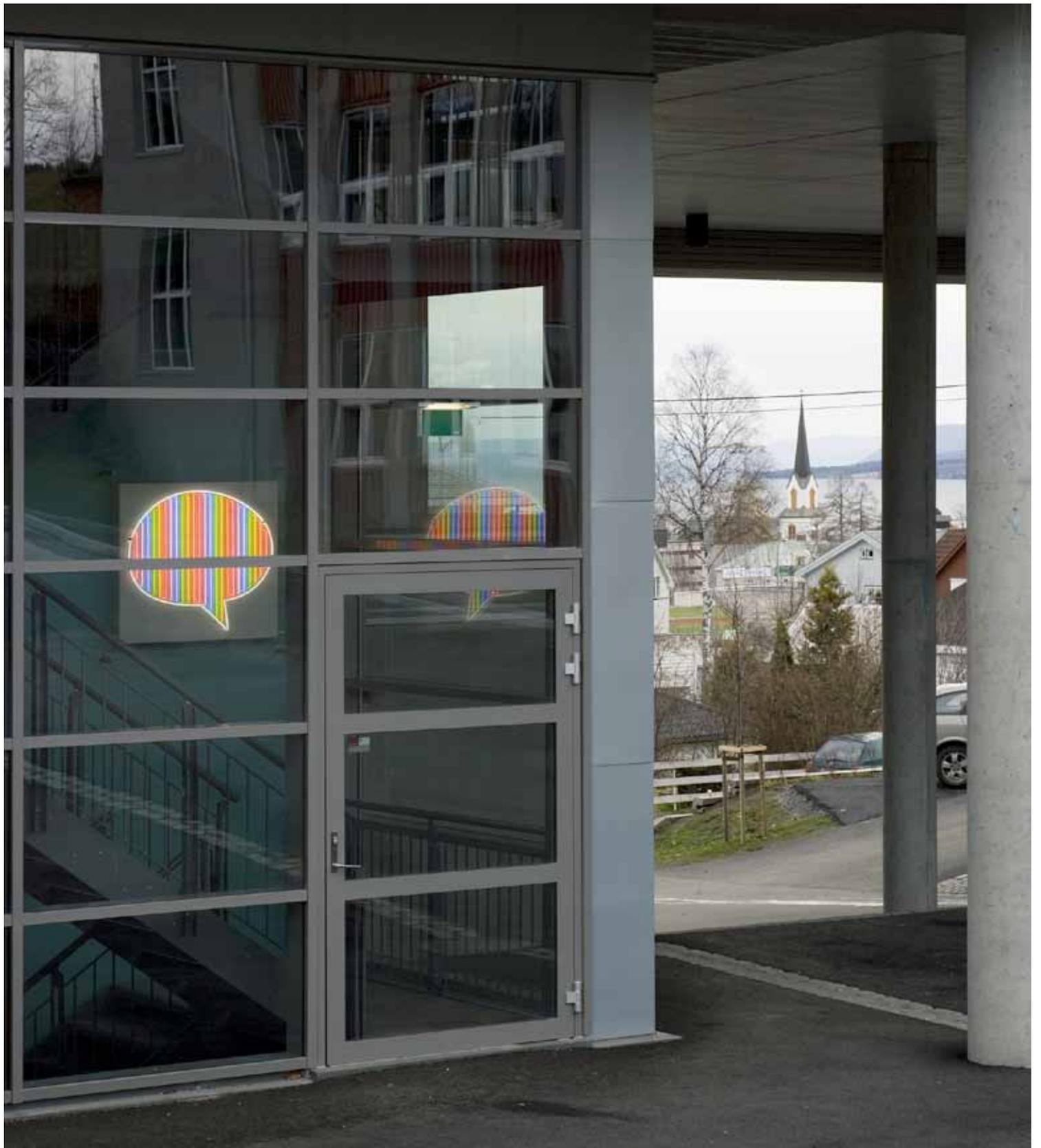
GJØVIK VIDEREGÅENDE SKOLE, 2007. VIEW FROM SCHOOLYARD THROUGH GLASS FACADE. PHOTO: JIRI HAVRAN

... forms applicable to things cannot be entirely our own work ...
if we give much to matter we probably receive something from it.

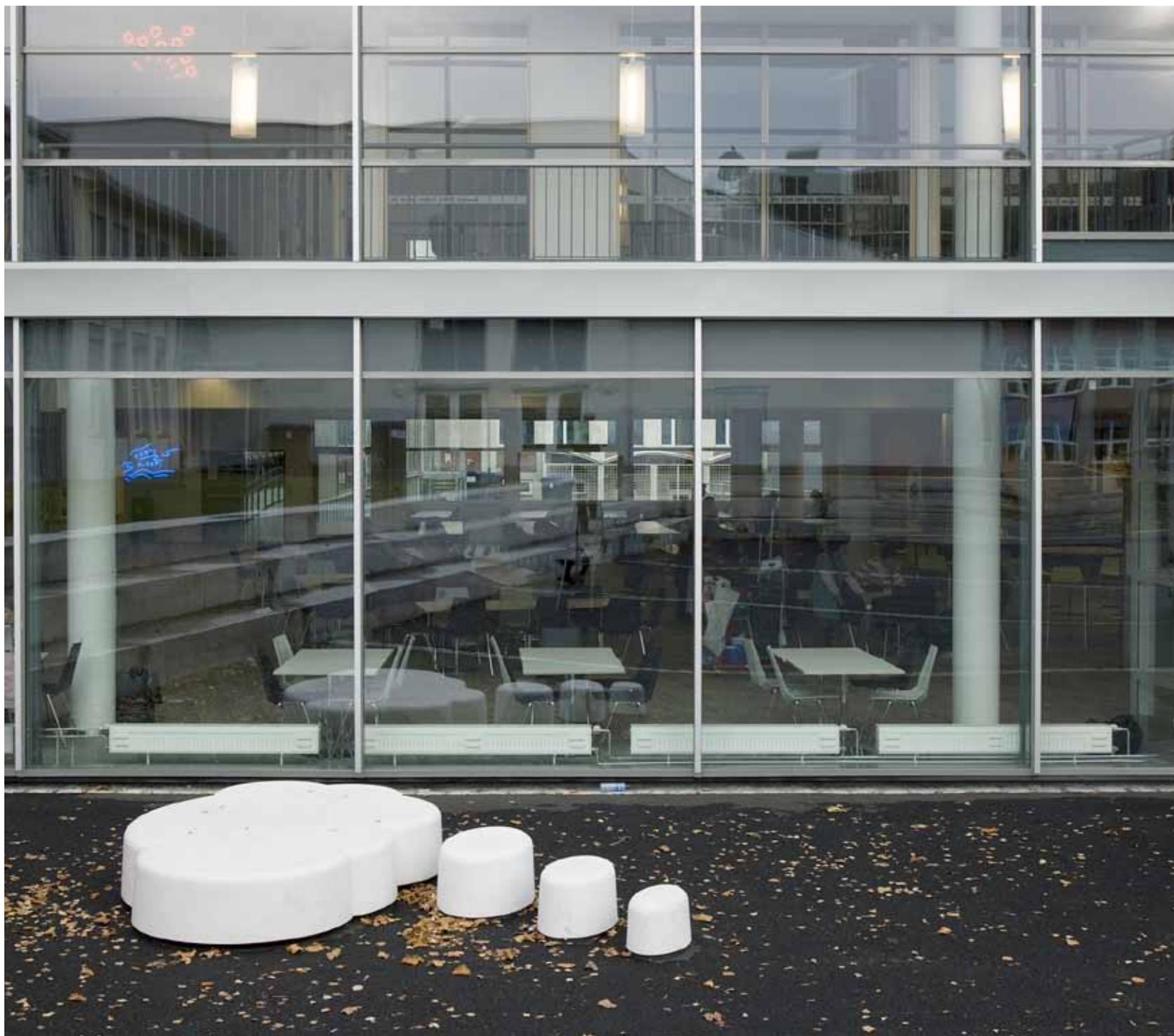
Henri Bergson¹



COMMUNICATION OBJECT (?!?!?) 2007. NEON TUBING MOUNTED ON ALUMINUM FRAME 196 X 172 X 15 CM AND GLASS. PHOTO: JIRI HAVRAN



COMMUNICATION OBJECT (RAINBOW), 2007. NEON TUBING MOUNTED ON ALUMINUM FRAME 117 X 124 X 15 CM AND GLASS. PHOTO: JIRI HAVRAN



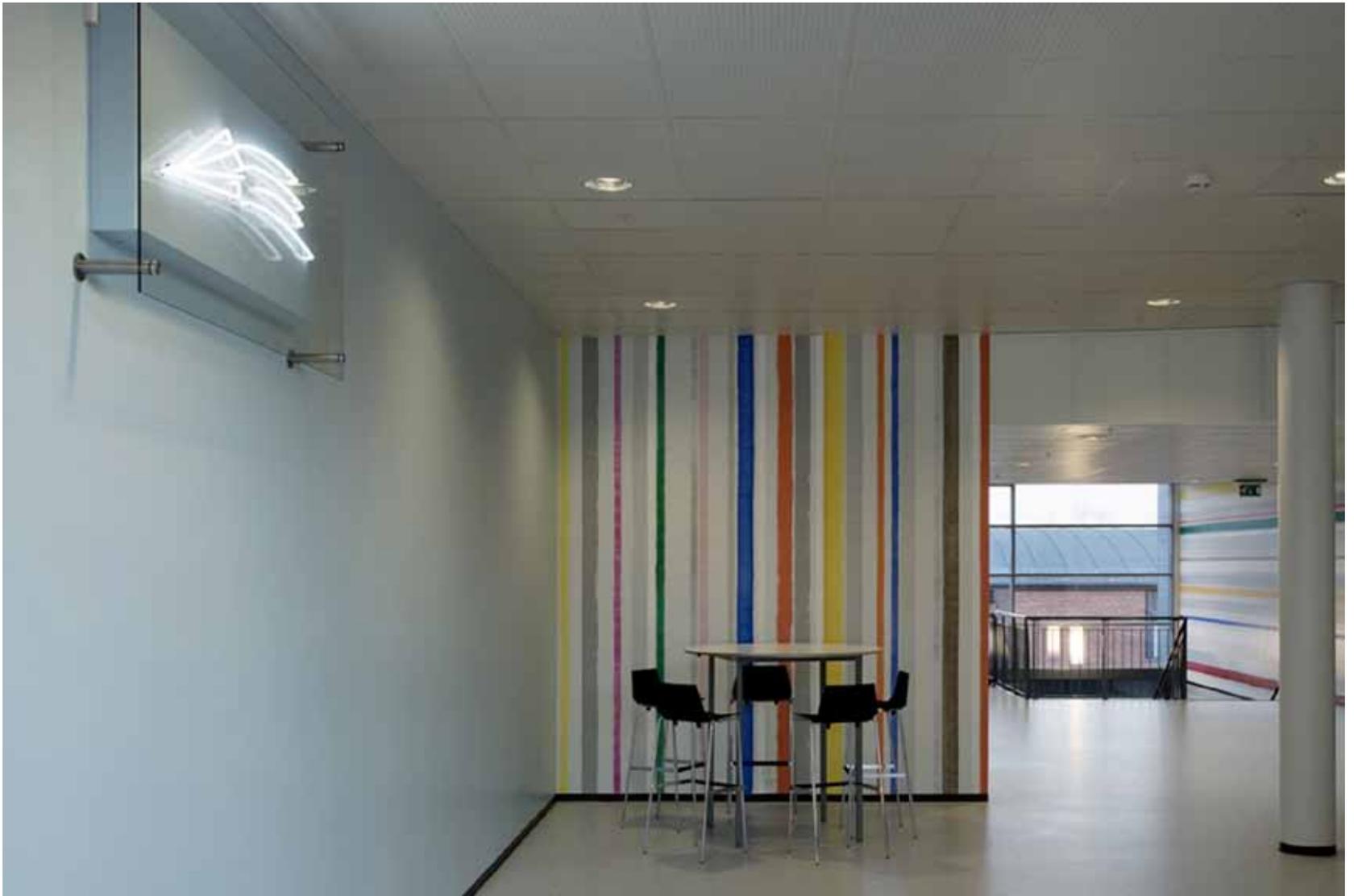
COMMUNICATION OBJECT (THINKING), 2007. CONCRETE WITH INTERIOR HEATING, 36 X 268,5 X 182 CM, 36 X 80 X 59 CM, 31 X 64 X 42 CM, 26 X 50 X 33 CM. PHOTO: JIRI HAVRAN



COMMUNICATION OBJECT (TALKING) 2007. CONCRETE WITH INTERIOR HEATING, 36 X 275 X 183 CM. PHOTO: JIRI HAVRAN



COMMUNICATION OBJECT (LIGHTBULB) 2007. NEON TUBING MOUNTED ON ALUMINUM FRAME 120 X 109 X 15 CM AND GLASS. PHOTO: JIRI HAVRAN



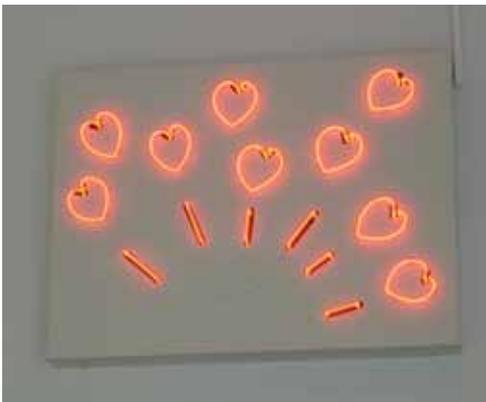
COMMUNICATION OBJECT (AIRPLANE) 2007, NEON TUBING MOUNTED ON ALUMINUM FRAME 77 X 108 X 15 CM AND CM AND GLASS. PHOTO: JIRI HAVRAN
(WALLPAINTING: JON ARNE MOGSTAD)





COMMUNICATION OBJECT (HEARTS) 2007. NEON TUBING MOUNTED ON ALUMINUM FRAME 103 X 126 X 15 CM AND GLASS. PHOTO: JIRI HAVRAN

COMMUNICATION OBJECT (PSST!) 2007. NEON TUBING MOUNTED ON ALUMINUM FRAME 108 X 160 X 15 CM AND GLASS. PHOTO: JIRI HAVRAN





THE SUN (SOLEN) 2008. NEON TUBING. DIAMETER 225 CM.
SENTRUM VIDEREGÅENDE SKOLE, KONGSVINGER.





THINKING AND TALKING, 2006. DIABAS AND CARRARA-MARBLE
120 X 110 X 8 CM OG 83 X 150 X 8 CM. PHOTO: ØYSTEIN THORVALDSEN





DEN ENE BANNER OG DEN ANDRE BER / ONE IS CURSING, THE OTHER BEGGING, 2003, BLACK GRANITE (DIABAS) AND CARRARA-MARBLE, 140 X 80 X 8 CM AND 120 X 80 X 8 CM HEGE NYBORG, HEARING VOICES I, CHALK ON WALL, O.P.L. 110 X 180 CM & 110 X 110 CM INSTALLATION VIEW SØRLANDETS KUNSTMUSEUM. PHOTO: WERNER ZELLIEN

CHAPTER 1

WEIGHT: THE MATERIALITY OF COMMUNICATION

When a sculpture weights 20 tons, we know that its materiality matters. In the summer of 2007, several workers using a big truck and heavy lifting equipment delivered five concrete sculptures to Gjøvik videregående, an upper-level highschool in Gjøvik, two hours north of Oslo. The sculptures were installed near the main entrance of the new building with its glass façade. This glass wall faces the schoolyard, connecting the inside and the outside. The heavyweight sculptures form a counterpoint to six works made of neon light that cheer up different walls with merry colors and messages, at the other side of the glass.

Bright, snow-white objects with smooth surfaces and edges made of the sturdiest of materials, concrete, mixed with a white stone. The sheer whiteness marks the sculptures pristine state that will be altered when they are handed over to the adolescent students who might sit on them, eat from them, and perhaps even write on their surfaces. They are 37cm thick, and, lying on a 5 cm thick, slightly smaller base, they seem, in all their heaviness, to hover above the ground. Large white surfaces offered up to a multitude of young adults are not likely to remain pristine. Foreseeing that particular work of time, the artist has prepared the sculptures' surfaces for cleaning with warm water. The comfort of the students is cared for in yet another way. An interior heating element will make the sculptures stand out in the Norwegian snow, and offer outdoor shelter from the severe winter weather. These sculptures are prepared to have a life of their own in communication with their users. They are made to exist in time. They are meant to be used, addressed, and loved. They are elements in a physical, material dialogue.

This is no coincidence; it is the definition of this art. The ensemble of which these sculptures are elements is titled *Communication Objects*. Each one of the eleven elements has a main title, *Communication Object*, and a subtitle in bracket that specifies it. The large series of works made and named for this particular school also contains six neon objects mounted inside the school's public spaces; transitory space where the rooms open up to the building as a whole. From the outside sculptures, placed in the area that is most trafficked by all users of the school,

you can see all of the neon objects through the glass covering two floors, with the canteen, service desk on the ground floor, and the library on the second. The sculptures outside have the forms of speech and thought bubbles, empty of content, blanks waiting to be filled. The fluorescent neon works inside consist of the content, or interior, of the speech bubbles and thought clouds in comic strips that the sculptures (re-)present.

Offering up the contents of speech and thought bubbles, the neon works do not contain words. A fan of red-orange hearts, evoking affection or being in love, with underneath them fanning-out lines that recall the material frame of fans while signifying exclamation marks, that most used of graphic marks in comics. The hearts are casually drawn, not perfectly symmetrical. High up, out of reach, the warm fuzziness of hearts as the popular shorthand for affection is a bit distanced in the literal, spatial sense. Thus, this work, *Communication Object (Hearts)*, questions as much as it proposes the positive outcome of communication.

This double-sidedness is even more pronounced in a neon work hung low, close to the entrance *Communication Object (?!?)*. Three candy-colored question marks with one exclamation mark recall comic book curses, most notoriously Tintin's drunken seaman friend Captain Haddock. But as we know, that character of curses is nevertheless friendly. The *?!?* signs also form a dialogue within a single speech box. Imagine a youngster assaulted by questions from three different others; or a series of questions coming from one interlocutor. "Of course," says the exclamation mark. Do you love me? Do you love *me* more? Or: do you also loath that slob whom we don't want to hang out with? Of course not! Gossip about teachers, the management, or fellow-students. The creation or destruction of community, always precarious.

The sweet candy colors suggest the utopian potential of the conversation; the cheap quality of such colors is invoked and dismissed by the precious presentation behind glass. Precious, preserving, but also violent, with the thick bolts fixating the signs to the wall, out of reach. And then we notice that the most distinctly colored sign, the exclamation mark, is also the highest. This, then, is also an image of the classroom where the students are constantly on the side of ignorance, asking the questions, while the teacher towering above them offers knowledge with a hint of impatience as suggested by the exclamation mark.

If we put these two kinds of dialogue together, the power inequality inherent in schools becomes also more prominent in the popularity contests among the young students. Conversely, the classroom situation can benefit from the image of the schoolyard where talk occurs among peers. The dialogue of this light work is there everyday; students and teachers can engage in an ongoing reflection on what dialogue is, what it means to converse, and what kind of relationships result.

High on a blue wall, a blue-white neon sign offers the shape of an airplane folded from paper. The plane flies, hence the height; it is silvery, hence its color; and it looks small due to its distance in the sky, hence its relatively small size. In everyday life, the paper airplane, that most transitory object of youngsters revolting against boredom, is put to many different uses. It represents the attempt, mostly failed, to make things fly. It is sent to others to make contact. It stands for freedom, the desire to move, and the lust to disturb the droning rhythm of classes; to show the teacher who is boss. And it recycles the paper of exercises. The cool color brings in the other side of the utopian quality of the figure. Blue, the color of the sky, is also cold. In twenty-first century the figure of the airplane can no longer be seen as signifying freedom but rather danger in the form of accidents or war.

Communication Object (PSST!) intimates secrets and whispering conversations, braving the forbidden talk during class. It is a strategy to initiate contact in a situation where it is not allowed, yet impossible to avoid. *Communication Object (Rainbow)* consists of a range of vertical lines in different colors. This symbolism is a culturally widespread iconography. We know it from the utopian symbolism of racial (South-Africa) or sexual (European gay culture) social reconciliation; of the happy side of multiplicity and diversity. Whether or not one makes that association, the mood is cheerful, happy, and diversity-oriented. It also invokes the rainbow's most subtle and light materiality, a combination of humidity, air, and light. A yellow *Communication Object (Light Bulb)*, finally, recalls the comic's symbol for brilliant ideas. Putting these six works together, then, a narrative of hope and a bright fu-

ture emerges, without erasing the risks of adolescence and the dangers of stereotypes – all comic strip issues, all elements of the quivering live culture of youth.¹

Neon light is traditionally associated with commercialization, urban space, and visual loudness, with New York's Time Square as a notorious example. Through its common use in outside spaces and its relatively low cost (and low consumption of electricity), neon also has connotations of democratic distribution of the images it produces. Moreover, it figures in the constant negotiations between “high art” and “popular culture” – two unequal composite terms that question each other as well as the opposition between cultural domains they imply. The material has been definitively connected with high art and museum spaces by the work of American artist Dan Flavin (1933-1996) in the second half of the twentieth century. In the context of Christensen's work, light takes on more specific meanings to which I will return.²

Christensen's turn to neon as a material gives new meaning to the concepts included in the title to this chapter. Both weight and materiality are challenged when neon, the gas-based light, is the material support of the work – is, in fact, the work. The very tension between material and work is suspended. Emphasizing this weightlessness of matter in works devoted to communication and materially displayed in contexts such as schools, is an act of creative dissolution that fits the way children and young adults “leak” out of the discursive regimes that try to discipline them. This is also the case for Christensen's 2008 work *Sun*, a huge neon work for the Sentrum videregående skole of 2.20 m in diameter. This work, consisting of circles and lines, a center for the sun of circles rippling out, overlaid with rays pointing outwards, in sunny orange, red and yellow, gives this light materiality to the energy of youth – with the two meanings of light taken literally.

In connection with the group of three speech bubbles and the two think bubbles or thought clouds at Gjøvik, together called “Thinking & Talking”, light as the material of sculpture is primarily striking as precisely that – as matter. Its lightness contrasts with the heavy concrete of the outside sculptures. What connects the inside and the outside elements is more than the content-form relationship, with the neon works providing the speech for which the concrete provides the bubbles. It is also the parallel and contrasting

deployment of materiality itself. Like other artists from the past century, such as the American Light Art Movement, and of today, among whom Olafur Eliasson is doubtlessly among the most spectacular, Belgian artist Ann Veronica Janssens goes furthest in her search for, specifically, the *materiality* of light. It is her work, in my view, that provides a backdrop for Christensen's play with light as light and light as color as two aspects of light as matter. More than other aspects of the visible world, light is fleeting, transient, ever-changing. The relatively stable light of neon is always at risk of breaking down in flickering and trembling. At the very least, it needs to be switched on and fed.³ [Ills. 1.1, 1.2]

The light works have color and the concrete sculptures are white. White as the classical marble of ancient Greek and Roman sculpture as we now see it. White as the snow that will surround the bubbles during almost half the year and with which this heated white competes. White as the clouds in the sky. White as no color and all colors, ready to absorb the colors of the neon works, and of the people using the sculptures. White as that (non-) color for which Eskimos, they say, have eight different words because they live its nuances. White as the sheet of paper, dauntingly awaiting the aspiring writer. White, finally, as the symbol of innocence and openness, the as-yet unwritten history to come.

White, or rather, an off-white that adds to the effects just mentioned a coziness and intimacy, an equally pristine but smooth, sensual effect, is also the color of Christensen's 2008 installation *Jeg- er en variable størrelse* (I-is a figure of variable scale). Here, the walls of the first room in Trafo Gallery are painted in that smooth cream color that makes you want to caress or even lick the surface. But it is the seven benches made of concrete mixed with lycitt that are so smooth they invite a sense-based response. This is made even more inviting through the example of three sets of buttocks imprinted on them, hollowing out the neat surface with a trace of human presence. On the walls, two mirrors of a perfect circle of a diameter of 80 cm face white neon handwriting. The word *jeg* on one side, its mirror image on the other, propose layers of thought for the installation's title: “I”, that first-person singular of either individualism or a socially-based subjectivity, of either an autistic or a communicative version of the Cartesian definition of humanity. To this variability we can now add the subtlety of the color scheme: white against off-white; as well as of reading: straight or mirrored.



ILL.1.1 ANN VERONICA JANSSENS, BLUETTE, 2006. EXHIBITION VIEW, “AVRIL”, 2006, AIR DE PARIS, PARIS. COURTESY AIR DE PARIS, PARIS



ILL.1.2 ANN VERONICA JANSSENS, BLUE, RED & YELLOW, 2001 EXHIBITION VIEW. COURTESY AIR DE PARIS, PARIS AND GALERIE MICHELINE SZWAJCKER, ANTWERPEN

1 An inspiring study of the comic as cultural artifact was published by M. Thomas Inge 1990 *Comics as Culture*. Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi.

2 For an efficient overview of light art, see Annelie Lütgens 2005 “Twentieth-Century Light and Space Art.” In Olafur Eliasson, *Your Light-house: Works with Light 1991-2004*. Wolfsburg: Art Museum and Hatje Cantz Publications, 32-40

3 Janssens, Ann Veronica 1999 *Ann Veronica Janssens: Une image différente dans chaque oeil/A Different Image in Each Eye*. Ed. Laurent Jacob. Liège: Espace 251 Nord

In Gjøvik, the largest of the think bubbles, 275 cm x 183 cm, is accompanied by three dots, with diameters of 80, 60 and 40 cm, standing for infinite possibility. The clouds in the sky opposite the horizontally laid-out sculptures, with their transient travel and dissolution participate in the dialogue that begins inside, with the ??? and *PSST!* works, expanding it towards a future beyond our sight.

The speech bubbles and thought clouds are empty, ready to be filled, open for the input of the people who are invited to be less the sculptures' viewers than their users, their temporary, cultural owners. I imagine the schoolyard filled with the voices, the shouting, and the manifold sounds of the students who populate it. They arrive and depart in the yard; they spend their breaks there, hanging out, shaking off the boredom, and steeling themselves for homework. They sit down to talk with a friend, thus unwittingly filling the bubble with who they are. Or they sit down alone, doing their bit of thinking that fills the thought clouds, perhaps digesting what they have just learned in their course on media. In the school day, the yard and this furniture that turns it into an almost fairy-like environment, is not only a transit space but also a transit time.

With *Communication Objects*, Christensen speaks to a whole array of contemporary art that is both "abstract" and anchored in the culture of the comic. Speech bubbles have been deployed as a figure of the openness of the sign designed in popular cultural expression. The exhibition *Comic Abstraction: Image-Breaking, Image Making*, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Spring 2007, for example, showed many different versions of the bubble. There, Paris-based, Algerian-born artist Philippe Parreno's 1997 painting *Speech Bubbles* emphasized the flatness of the comic characters by cutting their bodies off half way, but then gave the bubbles an artificial line-drawn volume in the iconography of balloons, in reference to Warhol's 1966 installation *Silver Clouds at the Factory* [Ill. 1.3]. Warhol's installation is even more emphatically evoked – but its aesthetic dismissed – in Parreno's luscious speech bubble balloons in the installation *Speech Bubbles*, 1997 [Ill. 1.4]. And in some installations of her series derived from the Disney character Zé Carioca, Brazilian artist Rivane Neuenschwander [Ill. 1.5] opens the speech bubbles up for the writings of the viewers (2004).⁴

Other artists in that exhibition eliminate the speech bubble altogether, but bring their abstract version of the comic – its emptiness – to bear on

a variety of political issues. Their works become implicit speech bubbles. Julie Mehretu (Addis Abeba/ New York) fills her canvasses to the hilt with busy figurations that import the visual loudness of neon in public spaces. She fills the bubble that the canvas becomes with so much graffiti talk that it becomes unreadable – much as could happen when the students take their felt pens to Christensen's sculptures. Her large canvas *Looking Back to a Bright New Future* [Ill. 1.6] over-paints with busy colors reminiscent of old globes, an ink drawing of the Tower of Babel (2003; 241,3 x 302,3 cm). This work of time and space extension, different as it is in look, is as keenly implicating past and future, myth and social binding, as the marble-invoking empty concrete sculptures in the schoolyard. Gary Simmons, finally, addresses the school as institution with his backboard drawings – in turn invoking Cy Twombly's blackboard paintings. Simmons half-erases the drawings, after turning the Disney characters into stereotypes of black people. Thus, like Christensen, against the setting of the school he creates things with porous boundaries, in their way to negotiate time between loss (erasure) and hope (participating in something larger than their own materiality). [Ill. 1.7]

These artists share a political deployment of abstraction by means of a tradition from popular culture. This is also characteristic of the light work of Janssens, mentioned earlier. One example may clarify the depth of the political engagement in the lightest of modes – literally. In *Ciel Artspace*, Janssens put the sky outside inside, on the wall or floor, turned 90 degrees so that clouds that are normally floating by horizontally, are turned vertical. In its initial version, at the company Belgacom in Brussels, 2003, the camera was installed on top of the building, accessible only for the higher-placed staff. The camera captures the outside sky day and night, and transmits the images instantly. Thus Janssens' projection gave them the access that was denied by the social-economic hierarchy in at least one, light respect. This transmission happens in real time, so that the image we get to see remains unpredictable, impossible to master, either by the artist or by the viewer. Something of this unmasterability, I imagine, will be the effect of the nuances of the brightness and shade the Norwegian clouds will have on the think clouds in the Gjøvik schoolyard.

Like these artists of bubbles and clouds, Christensen uses emptiness to open possibilities. Thus she foregrounds the importance, the seriousness, and even the heavy, life-saving quality of speech – including babbling, teasing, shouting, chatting, and

whispering, all forms of communication as indispensable as teaching, providing knowledge, or asking and answering questions. This makes abstraction, and specifically, the abstract use of the speech bubble, political; this makes *PSST!* the most important (pre)speech act; the one through which fragments reach out to become detail.

But in Christensen's aptly titled *Communication Objects*, this political quality is foregrounded and embedded in an aesthetic of matter. The works have gorgeous shapes and colors, surfaces and reflections, and edges that have been polished to be soft to the touch. All these formal characteristics solicit an engagement that goes beyond the interpretive, intellectual response I may appear to have given so far. The lightness of the neon works and the heaviness of the white sculptures go hand in hand with the sweet, edible candy colors of the former and the smooth soft white surfaces and edges of the latter. Thus, in complementary manners, the two groups of works insist on their materiality and its sensuous appeal as much as on, or rather, together with, their abstraction.

But that materiality is not isolated; it flaunts its incompleteness – its fragmentary nature. For, the matter they consist of is designed to extend, to entice use, from reflection to shouting, from sitting to writing, from warming your butt to teasing your teacher. The works are not objects that just sit there, ones you can look at or overlook. As the title intimates, they are objects for communication. They begin to break out of the isolation of the fragment to extend their material existence into the future. In this sense, they are no less durable, no less empty – of color, of meaning – and no less fragmentary than the pieces of marble we consider the beginning of sculpture. [Ill. 1.8]

In Summer 2006 I traveled to Oslo. The reason was that Jeannette Christensen exhibited work in three locations at the same time, which seemed a unique opportunity to see many of her works materially, so to speak. One was the exhibition of *The Birth of Liquid Desire* [p. 21] from 1997 in the National Museum, the work with which I ended an earlier text on this artist's work. This work made of glass, among the hardest of materials, questions our preconceptions regarding matter and its relationship to time in every way. Glass is fragile, and once broken into fragments, it cannot be repaired. The sharp edges hurt. Durable and fragile, smooth or painful to the touch – this combination puts a particular spin on the artist's politics of matter.⁵

4 Roxana Marcoci, *Comic Abstraction: Image-Breaking, Image-Making*, New York: Museum of Modern Art 2007.

5 My earlier text 1998 *Jeannette Christensen's Time*, Bergen: Centre for the Study of European Civilization, focused on the issue of temporality. In



ILL.1.3 ANDY WARHOL'S SILVER CLOUDS (1966) INSTALLATION AT THE ANDY WARHOL MUSEUM FOUNDING COLLECTION, THE ANDY WARHOL MUSEUM, PITTSBURGH. © ANDY WARHOL / BONO 2009



ILL.1.4 PHILIPPE PARRENO SPEECH BUBBLES, 1997, INSTALLATION VIEW AT THE MUSÉE D'ART MODERNE DE LA VILLE DE PARIS, 2002 COLL. FRAC NORD-PAS-DE-CALAIS. COURTESY AIR DE PARIS, PARIS



ILL.1.5 RIVANE NEUENSCHWANDER. ZÉ CARIOCA AND FRIENDS NO. 2, A VOLTA DOS TRÉS CAVALEIROS (THE RETURN OF THE THREE HORSEMEN) (1944). EDICAO HISTORICA, ED. ABRIL, 2005. INSTALLATION VIEW AT 2005 BIENNALE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN DE LYON. PRIVATE COLLECTION.



ILL.1.7 GARY SIMMONS; GREEN CHALKBOARD (THE KING), 1993 CHALK & FIXATIVE ON SLATE-PAINTED FIREBOARD WITH OAK FRAME, 48 X 60 INCHES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND METRO PICTURES



ILL.1.6 JULIE MEHRETU. LOOKING BACK TO A BRIGHT NEW FUTURE. 2003. INK AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS. 95 X 119 INCHES. 241.3 X 302.3 CM. COLLECTION OF DEBRA AND DENNIS SCHOLL, MIAMI BEACH, FLORIDA



ILL.1.8 VENUS DE MILO, C.130-120 BC. PARIS, LOUVRE. © 2004. PHOTO ANN RONAN/HIP/SCALA, FLORENCE



ILL.1.9 DALÍ, SALVADOR (1904-1989): THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY (PERSISTENCE DE LA MEMOIRE), 1931. NEW YORK, MUSEUM OF MODERN ART (MOMA). OIL ON CANVAS. (24,1 X 33 CM). GIVEN ANONYMOUSLY. 162.1934. © 2008. DIGITAL IMAGE, THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK/SCALA, FLORENCE © SAVADOR DALÍ / GALA-SALVADOR DALÍ FOUNDATION / BONO 2009



ILL.1.10 INKA ESSENHIGH, FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH/FLORIDA STATE SEAL.1999. OIL ON CANVAS, 6' 2" X 6' 8" (188 X 203,2 CM). COLLECTION OF STEPHANIE AND MARK J. LERNER. COURTESY 303 GALLERY, NEW YORK.

Visually inspired by Dalí's paintings of melting solid things of which this work's homonym is an example [Ill. 1.9], it is also aligned with another comic-abstractionist, American Inka Essenhigh who sets off liquid forms in an impossible flat aesthetic [Ill. 1.10]. With Dalí hovering in the background, *The Birth of Liquid Desire* seemed in its right place in the solemn space of the National Museum, occupied in majority by artists who are men. *Birth's* perverse combination of durability and fragility is deployed to render a form that is itself impossibly contradictory. The look of jelly, of spilled liquids, of puddles, waste, and loss, is primarily determined by the passing of time. Such forms cannot hold; they appear and disappear, the liquid dripping on the floor, the puddle on the floor extending as the mass on the table diminishes. The moment of destruction when the person spills the liquid is also the breathtaking moment in which these stunning forms get a chance to be, if only for a fleeting moment.⁶

Such visual moments occur due to the materiality of the liquid. Yet, they raise the question of their own being: are they things, or events? They cannot be reduced to either. In this hovering, they are like fire, the famous example in John Austin's theory of speech acts that changed the philosophy of language. Christensen's concern with communication expressed in such paradoxical tensions between matter and the look of the thing-event must be aligned with that philosophy. Austin inaugurated a long discussion – primarily concerned with categories of speech acts versus aspects of each speech act. From philosophy, this discussion traveled to literature and cultural studies, and back to philosophy. In its wake, many artists appear to be inspired by its implications. The most important one of these is that the essence of language lies in its production of subjectivity by means of "deixis"⁷

Eternalized in glass, the dripping liquid may seem protected from time, but the fragility of glass does not guarantee that protection. Symmetrically, the simple wooden furniture with its straightforward, elementary design supports the pieces; yet, less durable than glass it is itself subject to decay. Moreover, it is just as spatially contradictory, standing there, casually, in what should be a kitchen or living room but is a prestigious art museum where one is not to touch objects due to the risk of scratching the table top, or break the glass.

Hence, both space and time are caught in contradiction. And so is form. The square, sharp-edged furniture contrasts almost violently with the smooth, soft-looking, sensuous forms of the glass; the rough surfaces of

wood offer support to the smooth surfaces of the glass. But it is the glass that is hard, the wood softer. This tension, a true surface tension, determines the visual effect. One wants, one needs to stroke the surfaces, to assess the relationship between look and touch, in other words, the deception of the senses. And while the liquid is forever dripping from the table, the puddle on the floor forms shapes that resemble those of speech bubbles and thought clouds.

And then, in another venue, I had my first encounter with Christensen's speech and thought bubbles. *Talking*, consisting of two juxtaposed and nested but separate speech bubbles, and *Thinking &*, one large thought bubble with three dots in increasing distance from the large piece, both from 2006, are obviously connected to *Communication Objects*. *Talking* is white, made of Carara marble, *Thinking &* is black, cut from diabase, black granite. As always in this artist's work, matter matters. And it matters primarily in and through time. The white work shows the veins that tell of marble's geological formation, hence, its extremely long-term temporality. The variations that occur in the extremely short-term temporality of atmospheric variations of light in the Speech Bubbles in the schoolyard are here spatially distributed but otherwise fixated.

The cheerful white with its variations is not quite identical in the two parts of the work; each speaker has her or his own color. The points that direct the

it I also established relationships with old master painting (Rembrandt, Caravaggio) that I will not reiterate here.

⁶ Waste, or detritus, is the subject of an interesting special issue of the *Journal of Visual Culture* 6 (2): August 2007.

⁷ J.L. Austin 1975 [1962] *How to Do Things With Words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. A lucid presentation of this discussion is provided by Jonathan Culler's article 2000 "Philosophy and Literature: The Fortunes of the Performative." *Poetics Today* 21 (3): 48-67, reprinted in his 2007 *The Literary in Theory*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. The idea that deixis is the essence of language because it produces subjectivity was put forward by Emile Benveniste 1971 [1966] *Problems in General Linguistics*. Translated by Mary Elizabeth Meek. Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press



THE BIRTH OF LIQUID DESIRE, 1997, PLYWOOD AND GLASS. PHOTO: MORTEN THORKILDSEN, THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ART, ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN, OSLO.

talking are bent inwards, suggesting intimacy and dialogue. The two speakers are engaged with each other; their speeches touch. Logically, the thought is on its own; one mind – one thought. But it has those extending dots that make it infinite, an open-ended process. The thought, also, lacks the variation of the veins in the marble. As if the even black is there to remind us that thought is invisible, as long as it is not put into words.

Exhibited in one gallery, at the Henie Onstad Art Centre, these two sculptures do not oppose speaking and thinking. They complement each other, engaging in a dialogue between them. The thought participates; speech presupposes thought. But what of the thought ends up in speech is as unpredictable as what of speech gets heard, understood by the interlocutor eager to listen selectively, so as to make the other's speech suit one's own thought. *Thinking & Talking* are joined together.

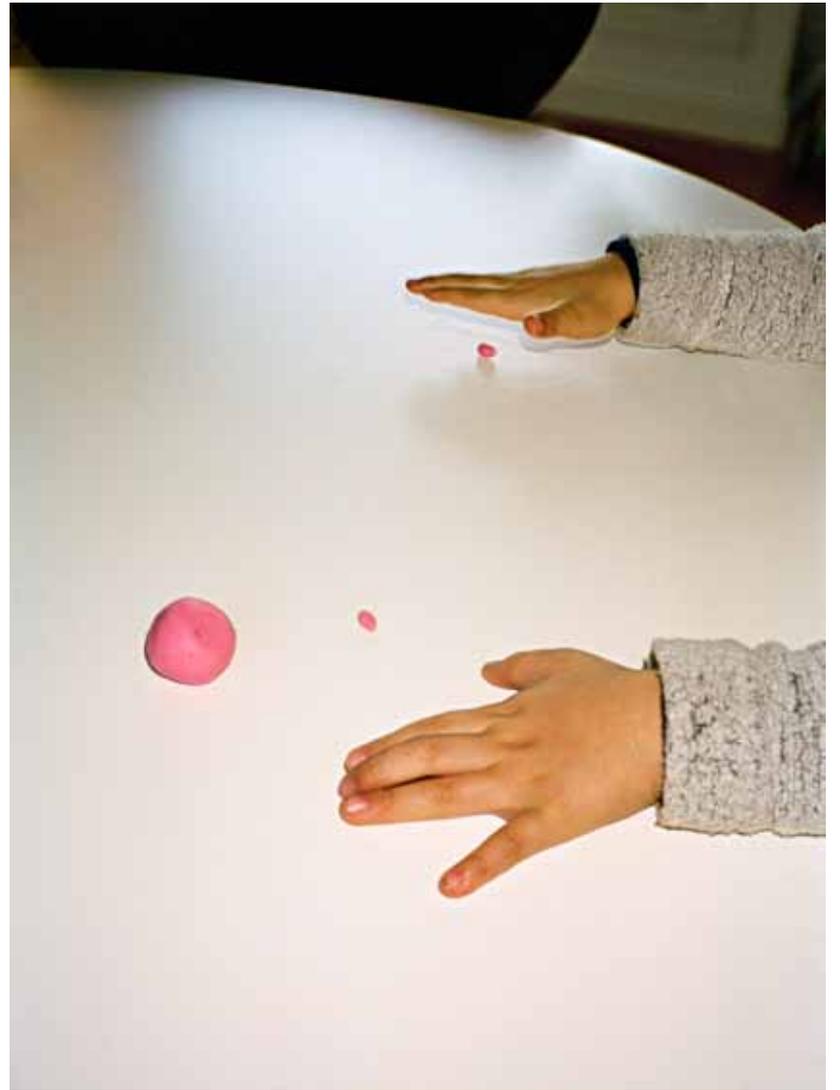
And so are two other pieces in the same exhibition. Two other speech bubbles, one white carrara, one black diabase, face each other with their points indicating that two characters are involved in dialogue, although not on the basis of intimate proximity as in *Talking*. Together, these are titled *One is Cursing, the Other Begging*. Beyond the comic allusion to Captain Haddock's constant cursing that we saw in *Communication Object (?!??)*, these verbs point to speech acts of inequality. In arguments or fights, the interlocutors are hardly ever equal.

The one is angry, the other sad; one only gives vent to his or her own emotions, the other appeals to those of the other. And if the interlocutors lack the social skills or political push to resolve their inequality, these speech acts can go on forever.

Between *Birth of Liquid Desire* and *Communication Objects*, ten years have passed. During that decade, the artist has pursued an oeuvre that, already before 1997, was consistent as much as it was diverse. From work to work, the politics of time is given all the material, linguistic, communicative, and aesthetic weight it deserves.



ØVELSER (I) / EXERCISES (I), 2002, 4 C-PRINTS MOUNTED ON ALUMINUM, 120 X 90 CM





ØVELSER (II) / EXERCISES (II), 2004. C-PRINTS MOUNTED ON ALUMINUM. 65,5 X 95 CM





ØVELSER (III) / EXERCISES (III), 2006. 15 EPSON INK-JET PRINTS. 40 X 40 CM, WITH PASSEPARTOUT 70X 67 CM.
PHOTO: WERNER ZELLIEN

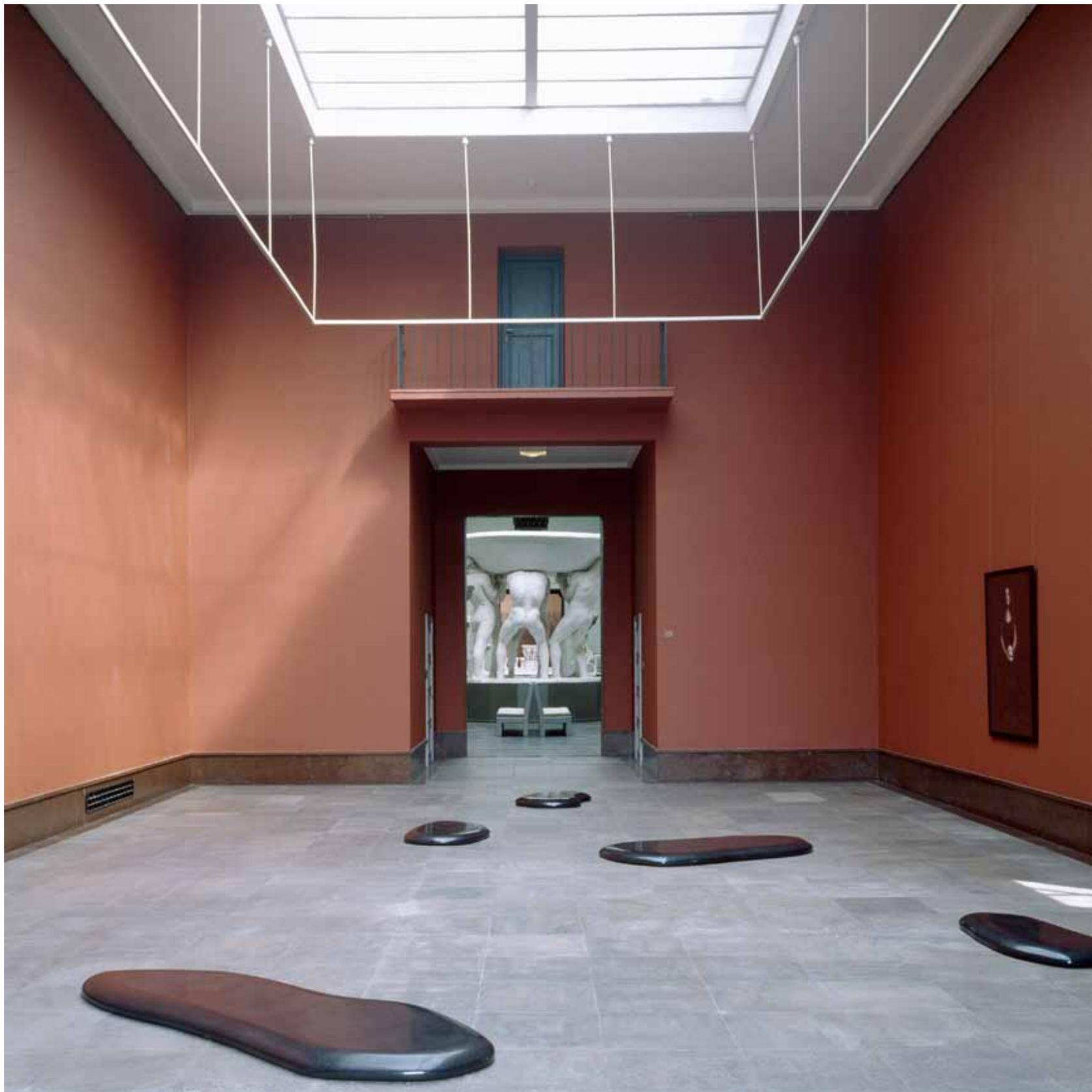




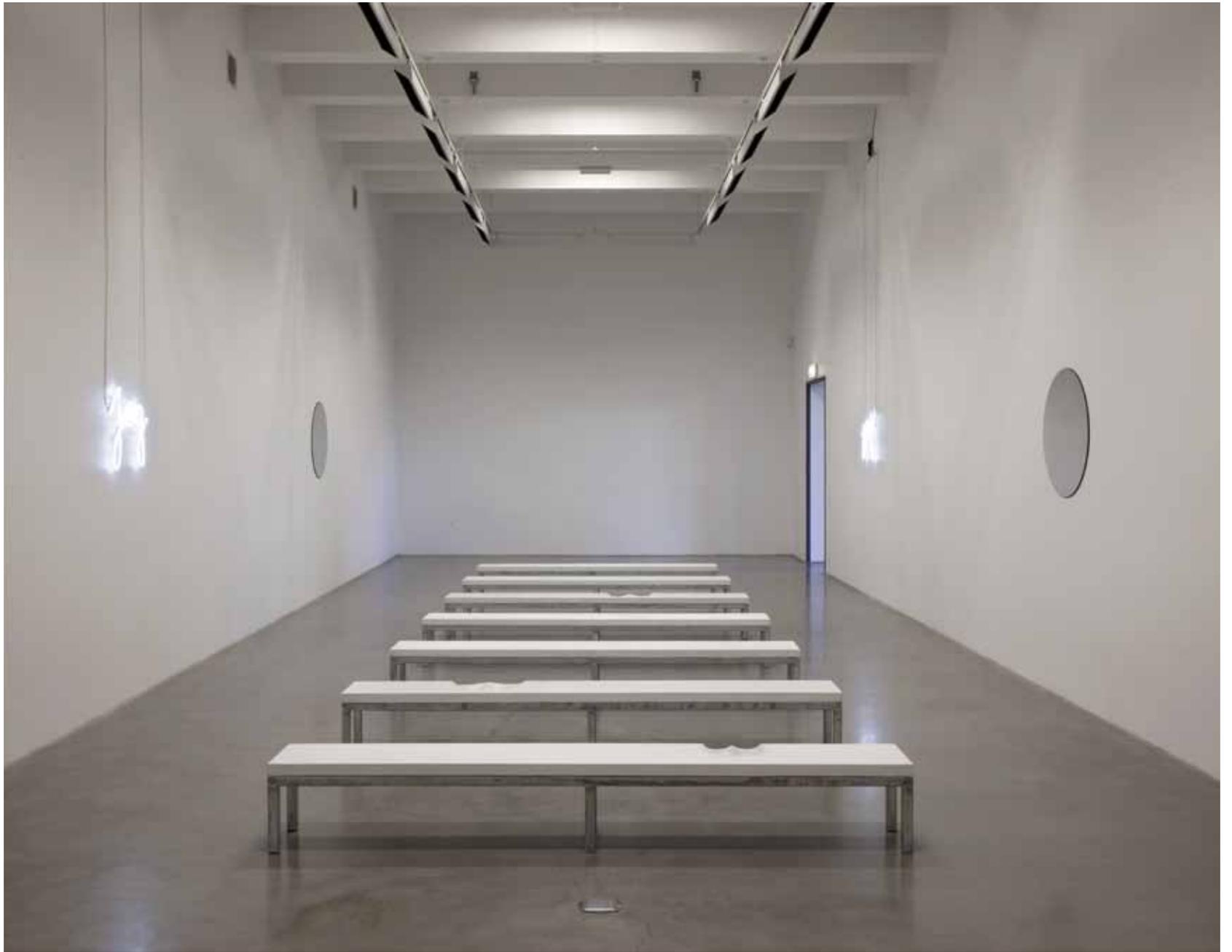








INSTALLATION VIEW, VIGELAND MUSEUM, 2006. PHOTO: JIRI HAVRAN



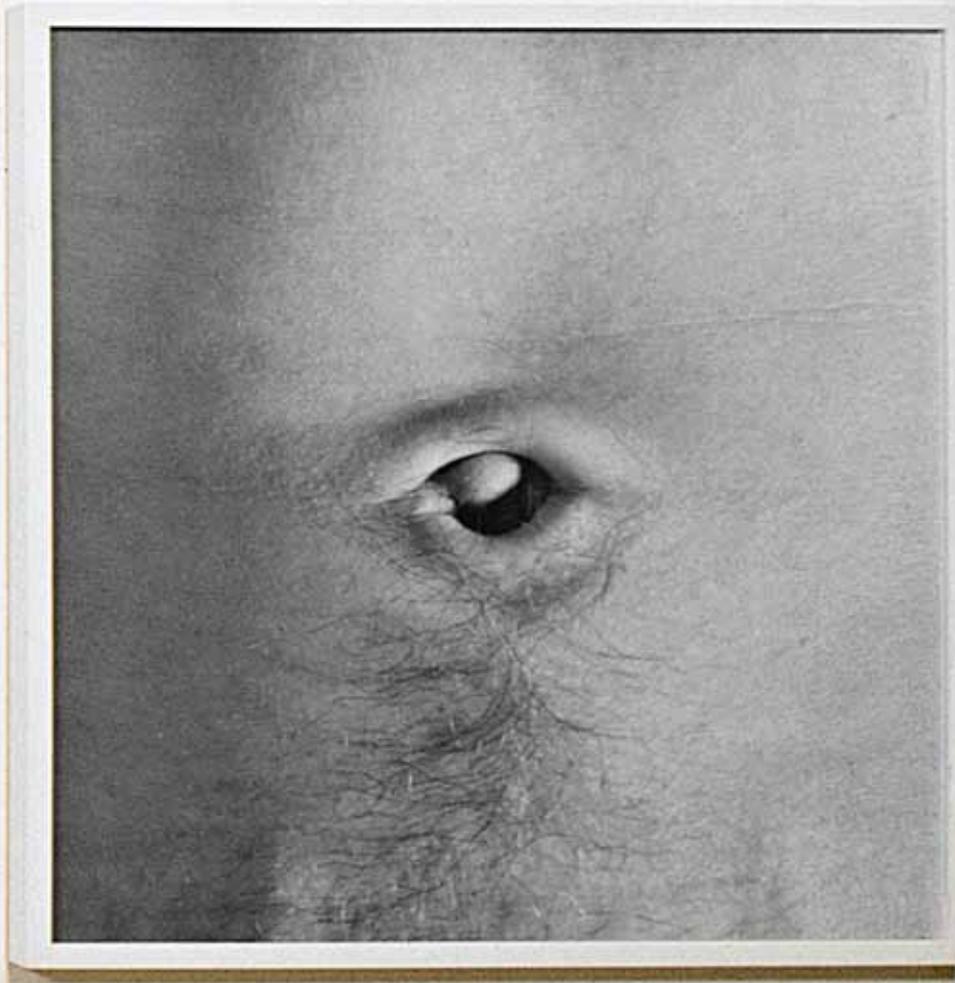


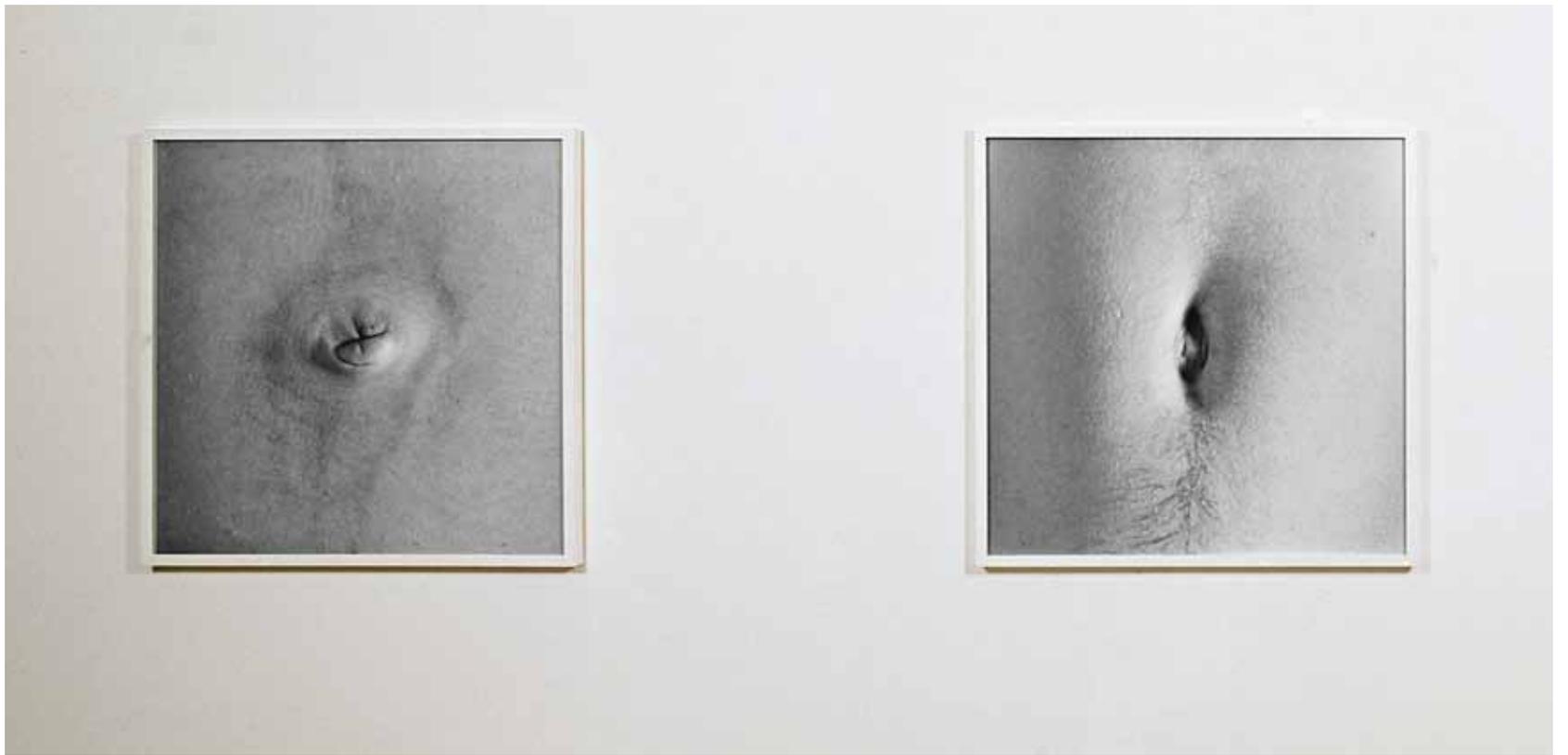
JEG - ER EN VARIABEL STØRRELSE / "I" - IS A FIGURE OF VARIABLE SCALE, 2008. INSTALLATION OF SEVEN BENCHES COVERED WITH CONCRETE, MIRRORS AND NEON TUBING. GALLERI TRAFQ, ASKER. PHOTO: JIRI HAVRAN



JEG - ER EN VARIABEL STØRRELSE / "I" - IS A FIGURE OF VARIABLE SCALE, 2008. INSTALLATION OF SEVEN BENCHES COVERED WITH CONCRETE, MIRRORS AND NEON TUBING. GALLERI TRAFQ, ASKER. PHOTO: JIRI HAVRAN







POINT OF DEPARTURE, 1999. BL/W PHOTOGRAPHY, 86 X 86 CM



CHAPTER 2

THE BODY AND THE POLITICS OF TIME

The politics of time cannot be thought outside of the body. The life cycle of humans is an element in such a politics. From childhood to old age, from birth to death, or from conception to decay are three distinct ways of looking at that cycle, and each, as well as other possible ones, implicates a politics of time. One can think of life in terms of giving life and taking life; of health and illness; of dependence and autonomy; of sufficiently and insufficiently sustained life. One can also think of life in terms of gender. No wonder, then, that some have considered time itself a gendered category, even if the major philosophers of time have not.¹

In a famous and important article dating from 1979 and often reprinted in English as “Women’s Time,” Julia Kristeva distinguished three “kinds” of time, three relationships to, or politics of time, and genders them. In addition and in contrast to the linear temporality of becoming or of history (the teleological time traditionally occupied by men), she poses the temporalities of repetition and permanence. She associates both of these with motherhood, which she, in turn, calls “the labyrinth of an experience that, without the child, she [the mother] would only rarely encounter: love for another” (206). Repetition is the second temporality. The third temporality Kristeva mentions, concerning permanence, is monumental time. This time of eternity is bound both to the perpetuation of the species, hence to maternity, and to the “time of another history,” to the sedimentation of historical time.²

These three categories of temporality are easily but not necessarily essentialized. I take them here as provisional tools to come to grips with Christensen’s work with the materiality of the body and its images, especially in photography; they are useful in considering Christensen’s work as fragments of matter and

its temporal counterpart, fragments of duration. These works function in the public domain at a time when viewing is often a practice of subjecting, colonizing, and possessing, while it is also frequently superficial, fleeting, and unreflective. Christensen’s photographs undertake a critical engagement with such habits of viewing.

In her recent work there are photographs of children and of skulls, of children playing with skulls, and of an adult woman holding one; earlier, she made photographs of parts of belly flesh with navels, and of people posing according to classical paintings. For example, the series *Point of Departure* from 1999 consists of large black-and-white pictures of navels and the area around them. The title as well as their exclusive focus on the body suggests I begin this reflection with these works. They also exemplify Kristeva’s first kind of time, that of becoming, or of history. The works separate this Kristevan time into two temporalities.

The navel has a strong symbolic function. It stands for beginnings (of life) and for deep connections to meanings. It is also the most democratic of body parts; everyone has a navel, and no distinctions are based on it. This indistinct quality is signified in the photographs by the way the images are cropped. It is not possible to distinguish, for example, between well-nourished or lean bodies. While the navel is fundamentally ungendered, it remains on the body as a visible trace of life’s dependency on the mother. Hence, the navel stands for the limits to human autonomy – for everyone. And this limitation does have a gendered “origin” or “point of Departure”.

In general, other distinctions are more readily visible. All skins in the series appear to belong to white people. But is this so because they are all white, or because, in the contrastive surface of black-and-white photography, skin color is not really visible if no other indications of racial belonging are present in the image? Then, the cropping shows pubic hair in some pictures. Hence, we are tempted to presume

that gender is visible, but is this so? The bits of body hair we see can be a sign of masculinity, but need not be so. As with skin color, these signs are tentative and tempting, daring us to jump to conclusions. But ultimately they are undecidable because isolated from other possible signs. And then, the photographs all appear to be of adults. Neither children nor old people are included, as far as the equal quality of skins can tell. What is really distinct, instead, is the shape of the navels themselves.

This is a distinction that is neither here nor there. The photographs substitute a meaningless distinction for all those that society has given meaning. No one has ever proposed, in the folly of declaring irrelevant properties to be used for the administration of human differentiation – age, race, gender – to base distinctions on the shape of navels. Hence, this juxtaposition of three markedly different navels, for example, seems to propose reflection on formal distinction in itself, as well as its relationship to human life. This reflection leads to the insight that such distinctions are arbitrary. This does not mean that arbitrariness makes them less powerful, it qualifies the “point of departure” of that power. It challenges, that is, the self-evident relevance of the temporality of evolution, progress, or sequentiality. This challenge occurs with the help of the category of age.

The equality of age groups indicates that this group is, so to speak, the standard, the neutral, the invisible, unmarked group. That, the series suggests, is where the power behind the power rests; the power of the unmarked. In this respect, *Point of Departure* joins the reflections, emerging around the same time in academic writings, about the semiotic mechanisms that produce power for the unmarked. As we speak of “artists” and “woman artists,” people and people of colour, we also speak of people and children, or people and the elderly. Film scholar Richard Dyer has made a brilliant case for such an analysis in a book called, in utter simplicity, *White*.³

1 In the background of this chapter are Henri Bergson 1960 [1889] *Time and Free Will*. Translated by F.L. Pogson. New York: Harper & Row, and Martin Heidegger 1962 *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row. A thorough study of the politics of time as a philosophical issue is Peter Osborne’s 1995 *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*. London: Verso.

2 Julia Kristeva 1986 “Women’s Time.” Translated by Alice Jardine and Harry Blake. In *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi. New York: Columbia University Press, 188–213

3 Richard Dyer 1997 *White*. London and New York: Routledge

But if the unmarked is where power is generated and inequality fabricated, then the unmarked age of the bodies whose fragments are photographed is not innocent in terms of temporality either. The point of departure the navel signifies has been marked on the body a little after birth; it is the primal birthmark; the visible remainder of a moment in time always already past. The importance of the mark is foregrounded in one of the photographs, where a spot called “birth mark” in English and “mother stain” in Dutch reminds of the mother’s mark. But with gender and race indeterminate and age so homogeneous, the mother mark that is the focus of this series is simultaneously deployed and dismissed. It is foregrounded for the insight that gender is arbitrary as a category that anchors power, since all human life has its point of departure in the mother. Yet, once that arbitrariness is established, its importance is undermined because the adults in the pictures, unmarked age-wise, still hold their power – equally arbitrarily.

The age of these body fragments is arbitrarily positioned in relation to the time of becoming. Historical time, as Kristeva called it, is the time of such arbitrary moments framed as necessarily powerful. It is the time of evolution, of progress, of the idea of advancement and development. It is the time, that is, that declares the current state of the unmarkedly powerful (nations, cultures, groups) the outcome and ideal, and all other temporalities as “behind” or “immature”. This historical time, Christensen’s series intimates, must be distinguished from the other sequential temporality, the time of becoming. Where historical time is invested in power, becoming is the time of a future-oriented openness. The former is a fragment parading for wholeness; the latter is a detail of a wholeness that we must endorse, lest we remain fragments. This reflection on the uniqueness and banality of the navel and its relationship to human time is also forcefully proposed in *Jeg*, mentioned in the previous chapter. The imprints of buttocks can be seen as another kind

of navel, even less marked because invisible. The way these hollow sculptures interrupt the smoothness of the benches is both inviting, calling out “join us!” and off-putting – someone has been here, the benches are not pristine after all. There is always a prior point of departure.

Like the navels, these imprints raise the question of individuality. What is the point of distinction if its standard is totally banal, and the result invisible? As so often, Christensen reflects tongue-in-cheek on the individuality of the subject, in *Jeg* more than ever. The word *Jeg* inscribed on the walls turns the firm basis of subjectivity into thin air – or thin light, light-weight light-matter, and thus contrasts with the hollow sculptures, produced by weight, after all. The weight of the body was here, but left. Through the mirror that mirrors the word *Jeg* the ancient myth of Narcissus is invoked, then qualified. As opposed to the deadly self-love, the relationship between mirroring surface and the ego glimpsed in it is vertical here, not horizontal as in the version from antiquity. This brings the installation in touch with the communication bubbles in *Cjøvik*. In a utopian vision foregrounded by the pristine (off-)white space, the artist proposes that the ego of narcissistic investment in the self can be turned around to become a communicative posture. Horizontality signifies sustaining equality, rather than deadly isolation. Presenting one neon *Jeg* in normal script, one in mirror scripts, the installation breaks up the vicious circle of the mirror. Similarly, navels are not, in *Points of Departure*, the object of a deadly navel-staring exercise but, on the contrary, true departures to go out into a world where mirroring is only one angle, interrupted by the reversal of symmetrical relationship.

This reflection of points of departure – note that the artist does not call them points of origin! – puts a gloss on the presence of children in Christensen’s recent photographic work. Three series of photographs show a child. Always alone. In historical time, children are among the powerless. In the time of

becoming, they are the most powerful, for they own the future. The photo series featuring a child make this very clear.

Called *Exercises*, they figure a child quietly but intensely occupied in some activity. In the first series, from 2002, the child is rolling balls of pink and white plasticine, a kind of play-clay on a white table. As in *Point of Departure*, the body is fragmented. Only the child’s hands are visible. With delicate fingers, in one picture the child seems to be counting the balls, or stringing them together. In another, she is rolling some clay, giving it form, her fingers turned upwards. In a third, she seems to be measuring the piece of clay needed for the next ball. On the table, we notice that some of the balls are miniscule, as if measuring was indeed part of what she is doing. In the fourth, she might be measuring not the balls but the distance between them.

In all these pictures, the child’s hands are engaged in “exercises” that adults do, too. She is playing and practicing, having a good time and learning. The sequence does not stipulate a particular order in the activities. We see fragments – of matter, of the body, and of time. If this child were caught in the web of adult measurements of historical temporality, she would be at the beginning – at a point of departure for her long learning process. As a fragment of the time of becoming, in contrast, she is just there, in the present. The ludic element of her activity requires a sense of a thick present; a time to be enjoyed. The fragment of her becoming that is made visible in these pictures implicates time as future-oriented, in every stage: each ball taken from the bulk of the unshaped matter with which she plays the game of creation, is a beginning of a future. Not coincidentally, the delicacy of the child’s gestures suggests a great mastery of adult skills.⁴

The modesty of the game, the exercise, as well as

⁴ I refer to this child as a girl, not for theoretical reasons but because she is the artist’s daughter Tara Lu Christensen Steihaug. Playing with clay implies an obvious reference to the creation of man according to the Hebrew Bible.

its product, the balls, joins the fragmented, cropped image of the child's body. Both these elements point to a critique of appropriating modes of viewing. While the photographs are lusciously made, beautifully printed in a large format, and hence, are clearly artworks, they do not offer the illusion of the possibility to appropriate what is represented in them. While the chubby hands are telling of the child's tender age, we have no way of assessing her physical beauty or attraction. The critique of evolutionist, historical time, thus, goes hand in hand with that of a mode of looking that so frequently accompanies such temporality.

In *Exercises (II)* (2004) there is no evolutionist order either. Again we do not get to see the individual features of the child. This time she is not cropped but staged in spatial indifference to the viewer. One picture shows the child from a short distance, but obliquely from the back. She is intensely involved in making signs in the sand of a beach. Astonishingly, given how small she appears to be, some of the signs look like letters of the Latin alphabet. The other pictures show her drawing lines, curved in two, straight in one. Each picture makes her features invisible, her individuality more difficult to grasp, her body more distant. In the fourth, a yellow plastic bucket with a green handle stands near the place where two lines almost cross. The little girl is far, on the upper right of the picture.

These photographs are as delicate and limited in colour as the first series. There, the hands of the child are the only touch of beige skin colour in an otherwise entirely white environment, with white and pink balls on the white table. Only the dark upper edge of the picture breaks with the bright colour scheme. In the second series, where the girl wears a white and pink dress, and the entire field is beige, the shadows she casts bring in such contrast. Shadows, the companions of light, foreshadow. They orient us to the future. They also mark the time of day, thus importing, in the narrative temporality of becoming signified by the exercises, the time of day that will repeat itself tomorrow.

This is Kristeva's second temporality, of repetition and thus of permanence. For Kristeva, it is the time of motherhood. Here, it is the time of the everyday, of the repetition with difference. Only because of the difference inevitably involved in repetition can this time bind itself to the time of becoming. The child is not shown in its dependency of the mother whose love and care sustains its life. For Kristeva, this temporality is gendered (female). Christensen qualifies this gendering. She does that in this series by means of another kind of bond – that with the viewer.

This bond is established in an extremely subtle manner, again passing through the critique of traditional modes of looking. In each of these photographs, not the child's body but the marks in the sand are cropped. In the first, the mark that is largest and least easily readable as a letter runs off the image towards the viewer. In the second, the curved line and the other marks in the sand do the same. In the other two images, the lines are cropped at the left-hand side. Instead, it is the child who is turned in our direction, seen from the back in the one where she is closest to us, and when, in the last one, she is seen from the front, perhaps even running in our direction, she is so distant that we can barely make out her body movement.

But I must immediately qualify this reading. For, the lines run over into the viewer's space only if the image is seen horizontally, laid out on a table, in a photo album, for example, not hung on a museum wall. For the reader of this book they do; for the visitor in the gallery they do not, strictly speaking. Yet, I contend, we do read the images as if they were horizontally displayed. In the first one, the large scale of the markings brings about this effect. In the others, it is a slight shade of darker sand colour at the far edge, or top. That, as well as the receding scale of the child's body, turns the exercise, for the viewer, into an exercise in reading and critical reflection of perspective.⁵

Over the distinction between the image on the wall and the image on a table, in a book, hovers that between image and word. In the titles lies the small indication that this distinction as well as its questioning matter for the artist. These are never indifferent or simply referential. Writing is a primary skill valued in evolutionist, historical temporality. This child is engaged in a game of writing, not one that qualifies as, nor confines her to adult "maturity". In the visual, pictorial equivalent, this alleged maturity takes the form of linear perspective.⁶

These beach images lack the classical indications of perspective, such as the lines of tiles, for example. They do contain two hints of perspective, subtle but clear enough to forbid indifference to it. These hints are shaped in colour and scale. What our constant

5 For the consequences of the distinction between wall and table as support for the image, see Begüm Özden Firat's forthcoming book.

6 Of the many publications that critically engage perspective I mention only Hubert Damisch's groundbreaking 1994 [1987] *The Origin of Perspective*. Translated by John Goodman. Cambridge: MIT Press, and Hanneke Grootenboer's 2006 *The Rhetoric of Perspective: Realism and Illusionism in Dutch Seventeenth-Century Still Life and Trompe l'Oeil Painting*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. Damisch's book starts with urban perspective. Grootenboer with the creaturely, materially dense images of set tables. Together, these studies offer a wealth of ideas relevant for Christensen's work.

practicing of perspective almost made us forget is that these are two alternative technologies of perspective that help just as adequately our efforts to visually understand space. Colour perspective is a favorite of Caravaggio, for example – a predecessor hinted at by the pronounced shadow as well. [ill.2.1] Scale perspective is known from those cultures (ancient Egypt) or moments (the Middle Ages) we see as "points of departure" from which the glorious present evolved. [ill.2.2]

Thus, while *Exercises (I)* qualified historical time by distinguishing it from the time of becoming, *Exercises (II)* qualifies these two temporalities further. It does so in two ways. First, it demonstrates how the time of repetition is always enmeshed with difference, and therefore embraces the time of becoming. What *Exercises (I)* distinguished now approximates the temporality from which Kristeva separated it. Thus, the series, especially when considered in conjunction with the previous one and with *Point of Departure*, further intervenes in the gendered politics of time Kristeva inaugurated.

Second, at the same time, *Exercises (II)* again implicates habits of viewing in this qualification. This helps us realize that modes of seeing, even seeing such beautiful images, are always more than pleasurable encounters with art. Far from spoiling art for us because it becomes enmeshed with politics, this insight is what makes a meaningful encounter with art possible. Lines in sand have a long tradition of temporal reflection. They also resonate with the biblical image of Jesus writing in sand to demonstrate the fugitive temporality of our judgments. Always about to be overtaken and erased by the incoming tide, the exercises become enigmatic in their brevity, urging us to do their bidding, and think. Boldly, by means of the cropped lines in the sand, this series draws us in, even by means of a strictly erroneous look – taking for horizontal what is hung vertically, hence, confusing private looking with the hitherto invisible impact of the institution of the museum. Once drawn in, we are led to see not one but three forms the representation of space, or perspective can take.

Exercises (III) dates from 2006. The child is older, the hands less chubby. And she is no longer alone. Or is she? The first photograph is of a skull. Bleached to near-white, against an even white background, the long shadow coming down from it looks like a garment, as if the skull was dressed up so that the person of which it is a bodily and temporal fragment has become whole again. The skull faces us exactly frontally, and, disposed in the vertical middle of the

image, is placed horizontally on the higher part of the surface, with light shining from the top, or behind it. Both in its frontal address and due to the long shadow, this first image appears to be a direct address to the viewer.

In this series, light and shadow play a major part. The next photograph has the skull turned sideways. There is an opening between the jaw and the back of the head, which causes the shadow to be opened as well. In fact, the shadow appears to be two separate bodies. In a subtle game of narrative, it now seems to address someone to its right. The teeth grin cheerfully, perhaps wickedly. After an encounter with the viewer, the skull now greets its companion, supposedly the child about to play with it. In the next image we see the hands of the child. Young still, but quite skilled, with elegant long fingers. They take in the skull, turning it face up, as if gauging or judging it. In the following images, she quietly and patiently takes the skull apart. No violence is visible, except perhaps when she pries the mouth open, an act that appears to require some force. Clearly, this exercise of learning human biology is again just a game.

The pictures drawn by the white, illuminated parts, the shadows, and the hands become sometimes almost abstract. Together, they refer to past pictorial traditions in their display of a future-oriented anatomical lesson. They combine two traditions around death in Western art. The anatomical lesson, were learned men perform exercises on the corpse of a recent dead, which they take apart. [ill.2.3] And the vanitas still life, devoted to the awareness of the passing of time, the idleness of earthly things, and the inevitable wreckage that awaits all of us. Both are future-oriented: the anatomical lesson serves learning, which in turn serves the postponement of death, and vanitas is meant to detach our desires from life. Hence these two genres both concern death, but also time.⁷ [ill.2.4]

In the last image, the skull is alone again; the child has gone on to other activities. The skull, far from the illusory wholeness extended by the shadow in the first image, is now entirely broken into pieces. But this fragmentation does not entail a simple scattering. Instead of the skull's own way of holding itself together, it is now the image that performs this. Within the frame its parts are stacked, and the way the photograph shows the stack makes us even more uncertain of perspective than *Exercises (II)* did. The lighting makes the fragment on the top of the stack appear to hover in the air. What, for a while, seemed to become a narrative, ends in a still life in which the traditional image's fragment of the skull is the only remaining part.

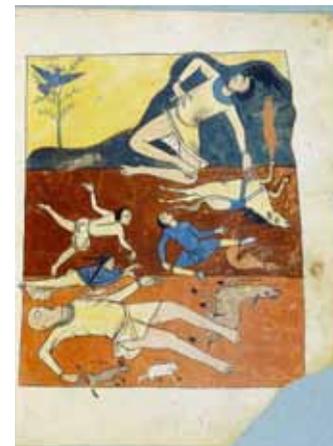
The serial quality of this work is more pronounced than in the other two, if only due to the larger number of images. In the second series, I suggested to see an attempted restoration of a fragmented temporality of becoming through enmeshing it with the time of repetition. Although this combination is most surely still at work in the third series, it is no longer dependent on that second temporality. The beginning and the end of the series, where the live child is absent and the dead skull the only remainder, suggest a different temporality.

Kristeva mentioned as a third temporality, monumental time. Here, this is the time after life has ceased. In Kristeva's conception, this is the time of eternity. *Exercises (III)* suggests otherwise. For Kristeva, like repetitive time, this time, too, was bound to the perpetuation of the species, hence implicitly to maternity, or rather, rivaling with it. For she also connected it with the "time of another history," the sedimentation of historical time. Both interpretations place this temporality in stagnation – and maternity with it. I consider *Exercises (III)* as a work that offers an alternative interpretation of monumental time. The motive of the skull and its connection to death foregrounds the mortality that the monument attempts to obscure. But rather than simply deploying that time, this work engages with it.

⁷ On the tradition of the anatomical lesson, see the final chapter of my 1991 *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*. New York: Cambridge University Press (reprint Amsterdam University Press 2006). That the tradition is very much alive is clear from Maaike Bleeker's forthcoming *The Anatomical Theatre Revisited*. On the vanitas tradition, Norman Bryson 1989 *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still-Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press and Grootenboer 2006 *The Rhetoric of Perspective: Realism and Illusionism in Dutch Seventeenth-Century Still Life and Trompe l'Oeil Painting*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press



ILL. 2.1 CARAVAGGIO, MICHELANGELO MERISI DA (1573-1610): THE BAPTIST. ROME, GALLERIA BORGHESI. © 2005. PHOTO SCALA, FLORENCE- COURTESY OF THE MINISTERO BENI E ATT. CULTURALI



ILL. 2.2 BEATUS OF LIEBANA, COMMENTARIES ON THE APOCALYPSE: THE FLOOD, SAINT-SEVER, GASCONY, MID-11TH CENTURY, FOLIO 85, MS LAT.8878, BIBLIOTHEQUE NATIONALE, PARIS.



ILL. 2.3 REMBRANDT VAN RIJN, THE ANATOMY LESSON OF DR NICOLAAS TULP 1632, OIL ON CANVAS, 216,5 X 169,5 CM. ROYAL PICTURE GALLERY MAURITSHUIS, THE HAGUE



ILL. 2.4 CORNELIUS GIJSBRECHTS, TROMPE L'OEIL WITH STUDIO WALL AND VANITAS STILL LIFE, (1668), STATENS MUSEUM FOR KUNST, COPENHAGEN

The way this visual discussion is conducted is as subtle as it is forceful. Although the skull stands for death and permanence, it is here first anthropomorphized, hence, brought back to a semblance of life; and then decomposed, hence, killed a second time. The fact that the first and the last images of the series show the skull alone refers to an enduring materiality, an extension of time if not a permanence. For, the radical difference between the wholeness of the first and the fragmentation of the last image qualifies this idea of permanence as an illusion.⁸

One of the tools that help undermine the illusion of monumental permanence is narrativity. This is why it matters that the child is not only the agent of decomposition but also of the agent of the story told. Thanks to her acts, the differentiation from image to image is neither simply repetitive nor fragmenting, but leading to some kind of end, or conclusion. That conclusion is more than simply the fragmentation of the skull. It is also the fragmentation of everything that turns visual representation into a readable image. This is the function of the perspectival oddity that makes the upper fragment look on the move.

Monumental time, this work suggests along with other works (on which more below) is an attempt to deny death, while at the same time being a symptom of “maternity envy”. What’s on a man’s mind? The shadow below the stack of fragments could be of a large adult head, of which we see the eye lashes on the right. On top of that shadow-head the fragments are stacked, but the upper one is ready to take off in flight, escaping the attempt to hold on. The alleged monumentality is now a precarious balancing act; the eternity, a fleeting moment. The eerie distribution of white light moves the image out of the realm of the solid. [ill. 2.5]⁹

If this series engages monumental time, it is to question, not to reconfirm the eternity of the monument. This is not to suggest that the work opposes monumentality; it just qualifies its temporality. And this qualification harks back to the other temporalities, questioning their distinct identities, including, perhaps its gendered rigidity. In none of these three series is the ever-present child a newly born; nor is her mother ever present in the fiction. This is not the child of an evolution to adulthood. She practices for adulthood but also plays with its demands, establishing her own

duration in the present. Nor is there a figure of old age to complement the child in any of the pictures. From conception to decay and beyond: the skull has not reached the end of the body’s decomposition after death. At the hands of the child seemingly readying herself for adulthood, the dead is further decomposed. And, given the stark light and the precarious balance it creates, one may wonder what the politics of monumental time can do to counter this refusal of a static endpoint. [ill. 2.6]

Christensen does not really reject the gendering of temporality in these series. But she does not allow us to rest easily with the certainty of such gendering; she relentlessly critiques any potential essentializing that might result from it. Nor does she allow us to consider these in separation from what we are doing when we see these images. From the *Point of Departure* series to *Exercises (III)* the works implicate the viewer, the history of visual culture, and the acts of viewing encouraged and discouraged in their philosophical musings on temporality and its politics. The fragments of bodies and the fragments of time they stage are constantly making us aware of the porosity of the categories and distinctions, while also playing on them. Thought and play: as the playing child demonstrates, these two activities are to be bound together if we are to loosen the rigidities of gender categories as well as the others that reduce human existence to binary oppositions. And with that loosening up, the categories of the politics of time are no longer safe.

The photograph of a woman in *Dead Man Talking* (after Vigeland), also from 2006, quietly encompasses all these issues. The adult woman sits in a relaxed pose, looking straight at the viewer, in a near-monochrome composition of dark brown and flesh tones only interrupted by the skull she holds. The skull is turned obliquely to the side, as if speaking to someone in the room. The woman with her long hair looks gendered feminine enough. Or does she? Perspective, that nasty player, makes her legs appear over-sized, and the men’s shoes confirm that this figure might just as well be an androgynous composite. Does gender matter? At the locus of sexual difference, instead of either the proud penis or woman’s emptiness of traditional manhood, the skull of the Memento Mori keeps talking. And one look at the gallery where this image hung in the Vigeland museum suggests what the issues are. Can monumental time survive gender? [Birth of *Liquid Anxiety* and the six giants holding the fountain with *Dead Man Talking* on page 31]

WHAT'S ON A MAN'S MIND



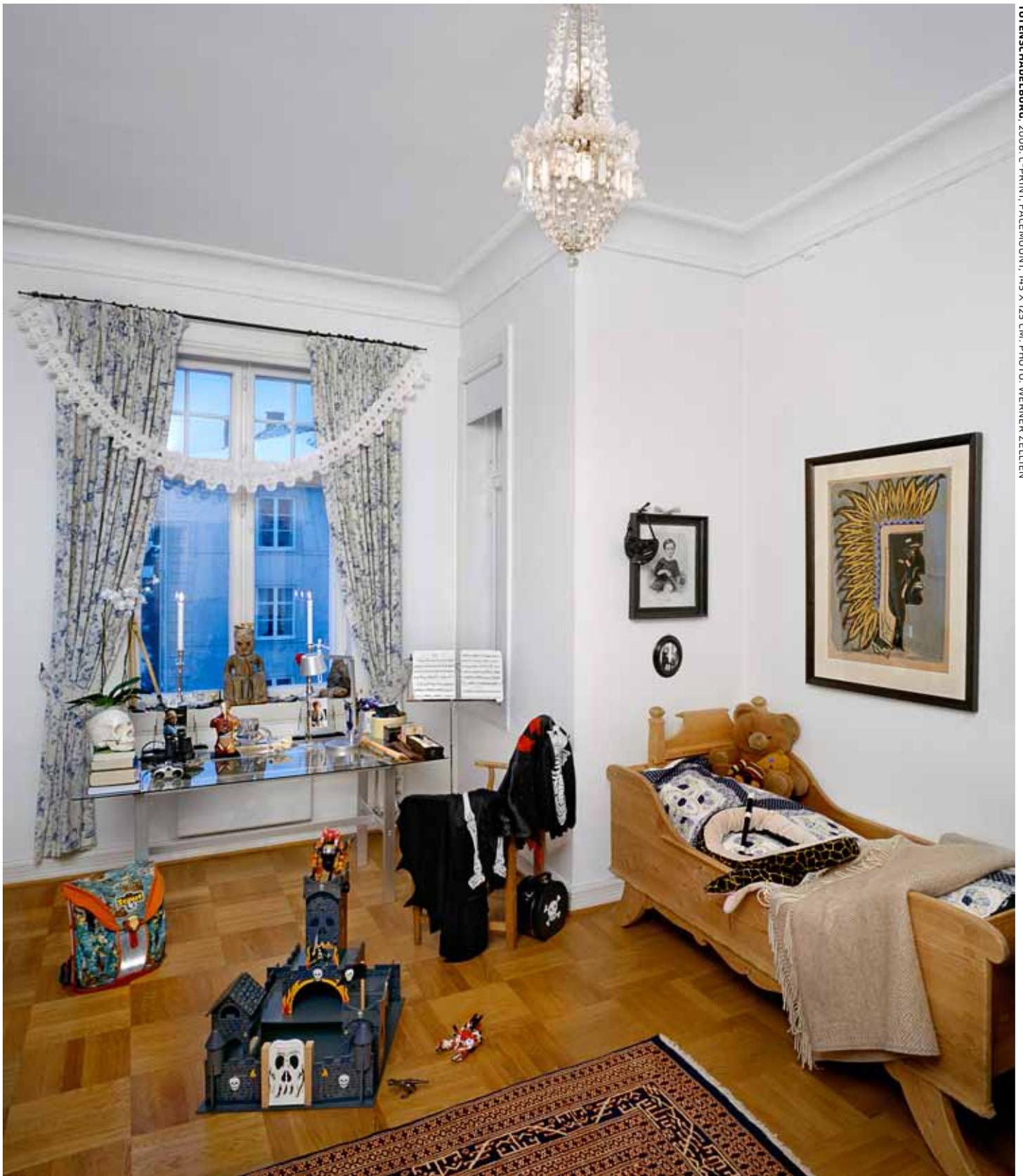
ILL. 2.5

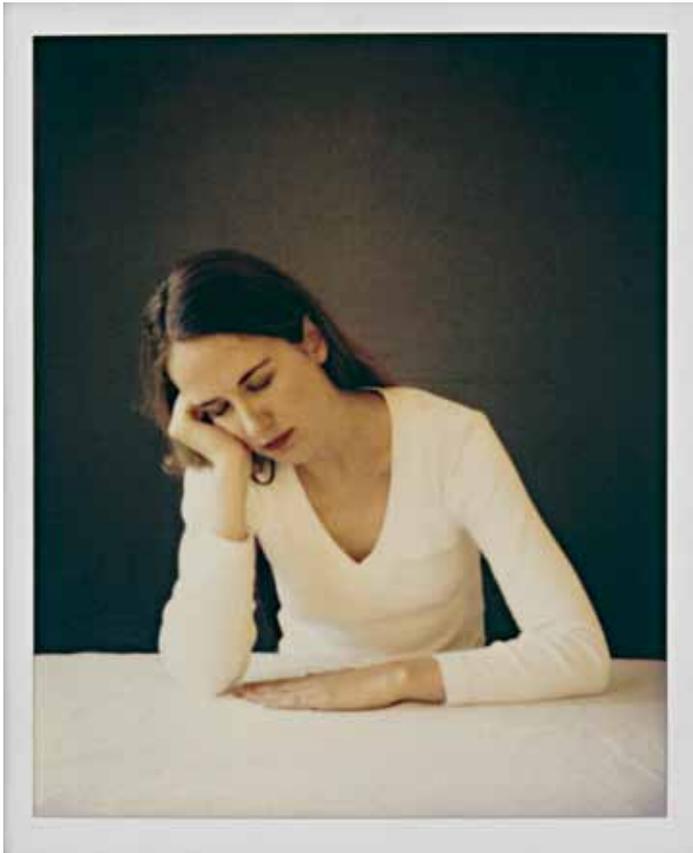


ILL. 2.6 GUSTAV VIGELAND, VIEW OF THE MONOLITH, THE VIGELAND PARK, OSLO, © VIGELAND MUSEUM/BONO 2009

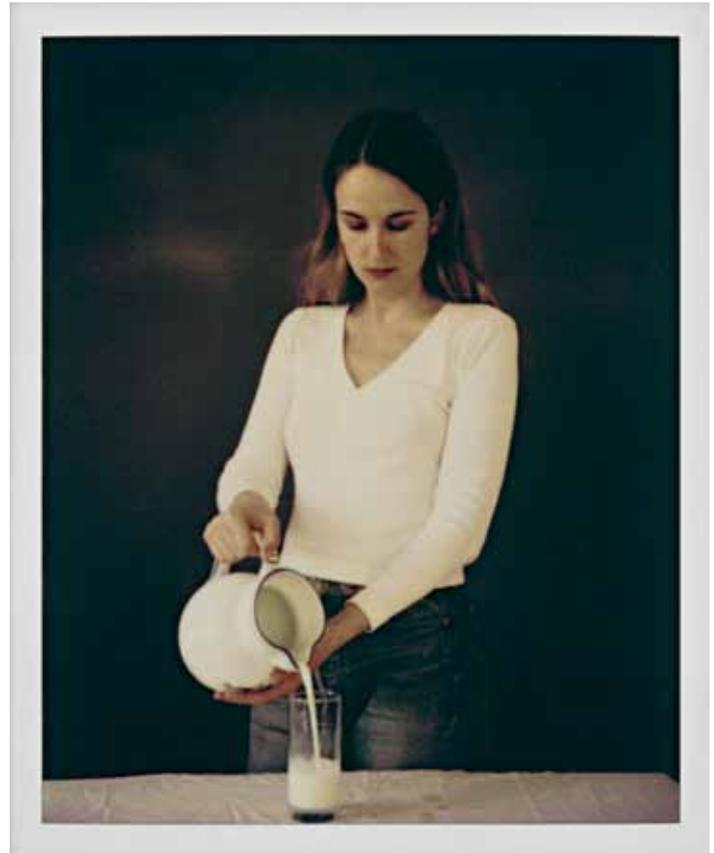
⁸ The fact that the skull is a plastic toolkit designed for precisely such exercises of taking it apart with putting it back together again, makes the somewhat pompous allusion to monumental time ironic.

⁹ What’s on a man’s mind? This phrase has become a famous joke about Freud and the idea he is accused of propagating that men are sex-obsessed. The phrase “maternity envy” alludes, of course, to Freud’s (in)famous notion of “penis envy.”





THE PASSING OF TIME (WOMAN ASLEEP AT THE TABLE), 1994, POLAROIDS



THE PASSING OF TIME (WOMAN POURING MILK)



THE PASSING OF TIME (WOMAN READING A LETTER)



THE PASSING OF TIME (WOMAN WRITING A LETTER)



THE PASSING OF TIME (WOMAN DRINKING)



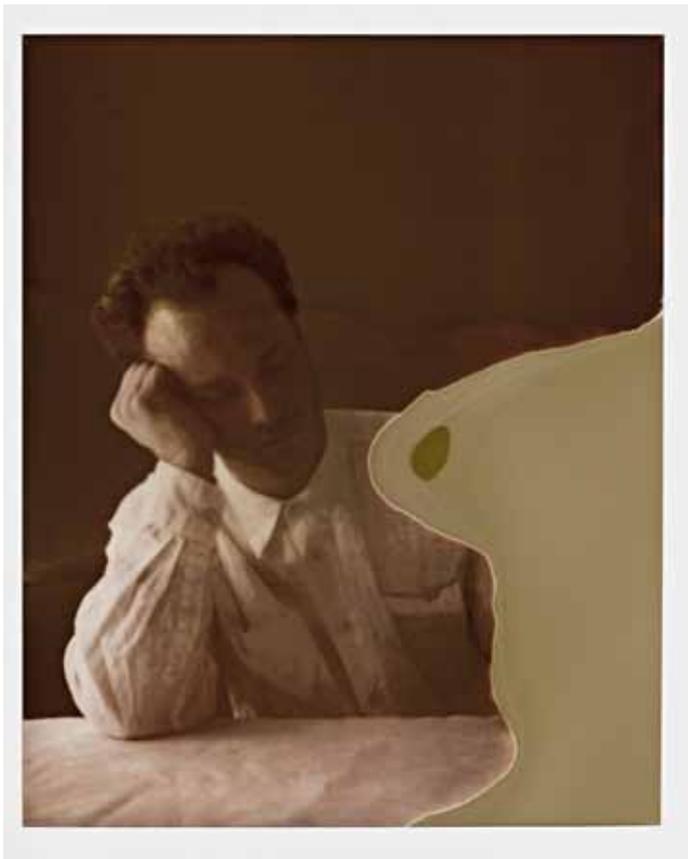
THE PASSING OF TIME (WOMAN HOLDING A BALANCE)



THE PASSING OF TIME (WOMAN INTERRUPTED)



THE PASSING OF TIME (WOMAN AT THE VIRGINALS)



THE PASSING OF TIME (WOMAN ASLEEP AT THE TABLE), 1995/2008, POLAROID

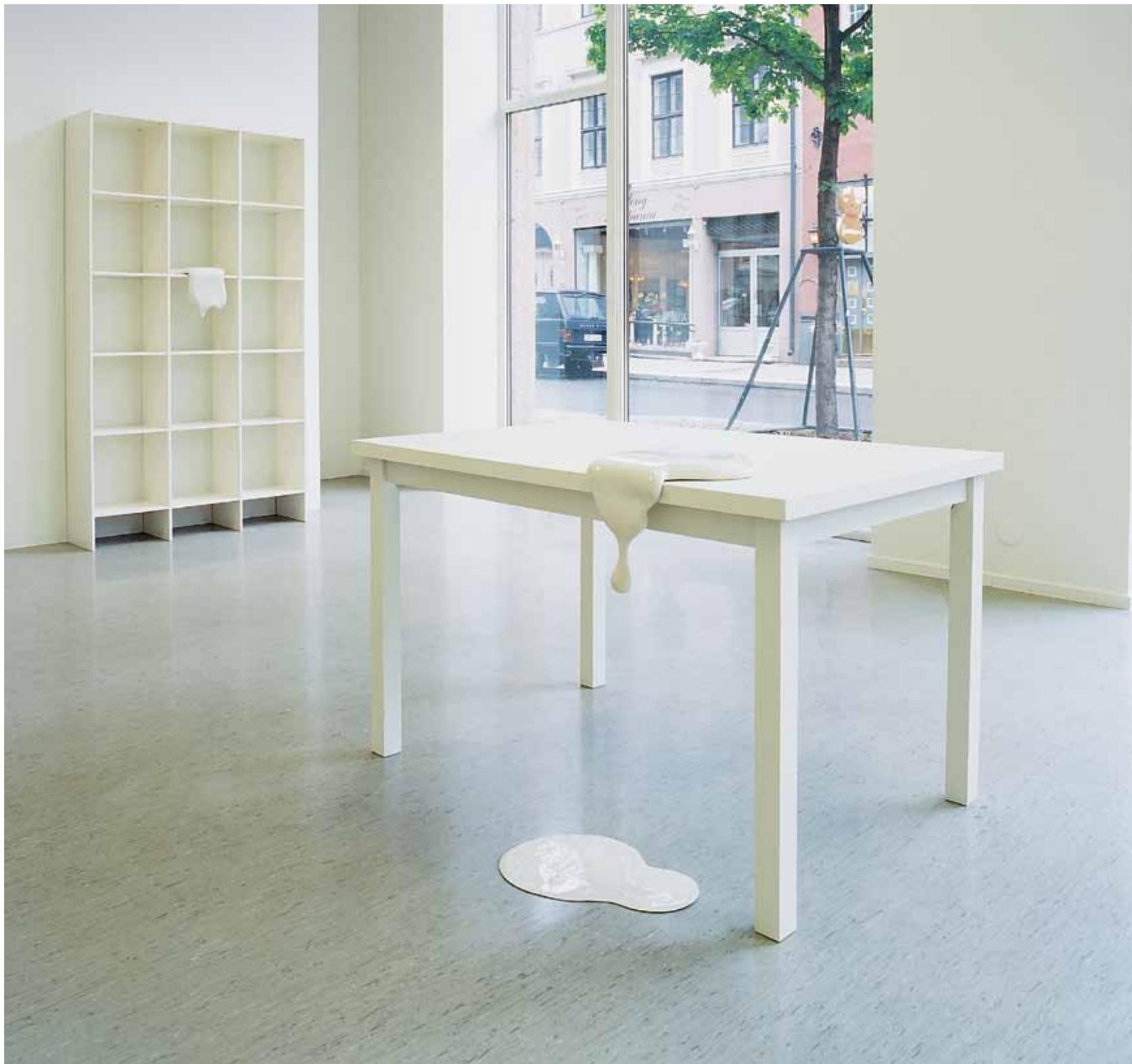


THE PASSING OF TIME (WOMAN READING A LETTER), 1995



WAITING FOR COLUMBUS. ROOM, NEW YORK 1995. FRAMED POLAROID. BENCH, GOLDEN GELATINE, 160 X 50 X 40 CM. FRAME WITH BLUEBERRY JELLO, 305 X 30 X 2 CM. PHOTO: DAG ALVENS





WHITE LIES. 1998. PORCELAIN. TABLE AND SHELVES. GALLERY C/O ATLE GERHARDSEN. 1998. OSLO. PHOTO: STEIN JØRGENSEN

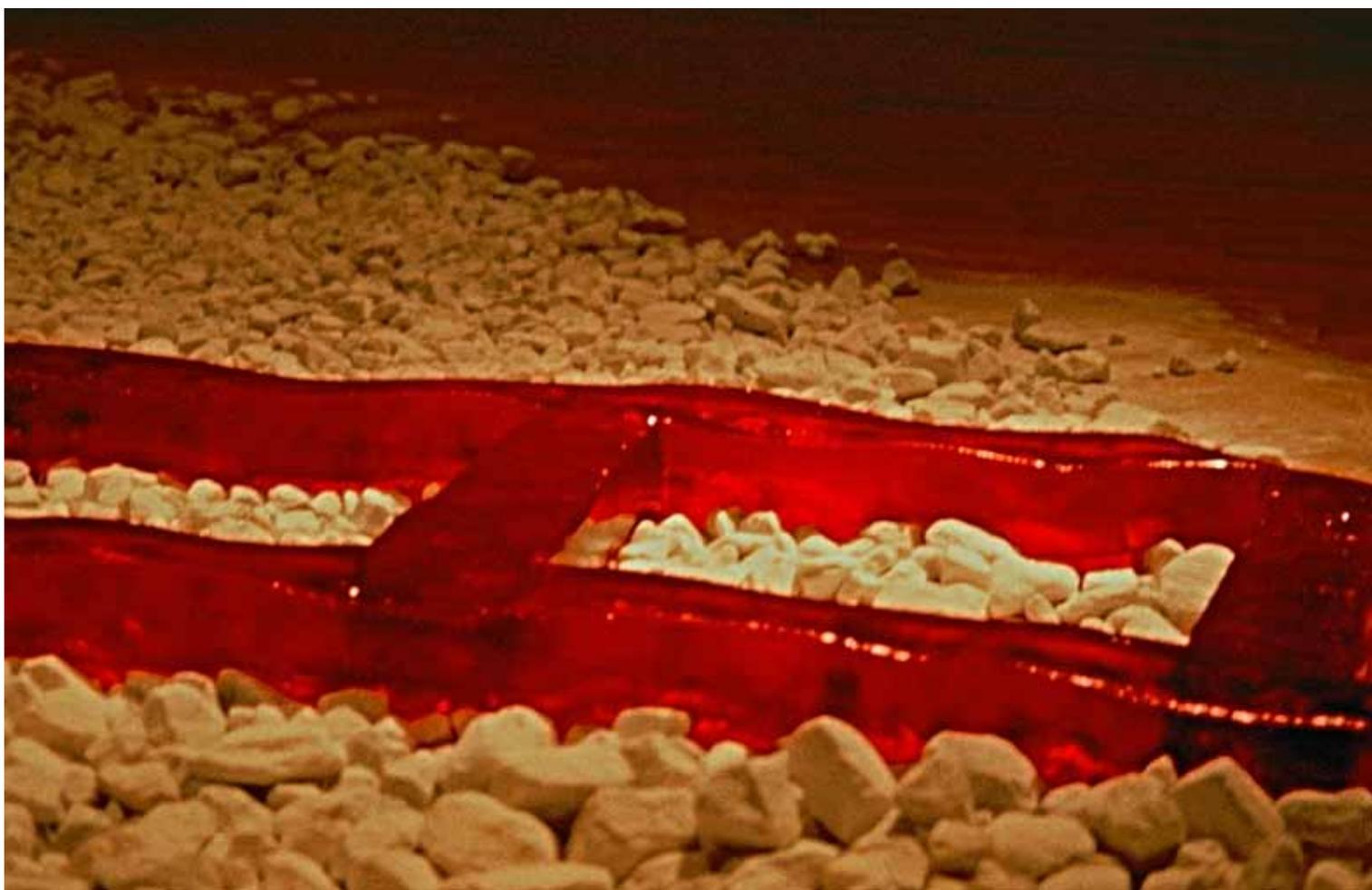


MELLOM ROMMENE, 1990. A LADDER, MINING HELMETS AND A STACK OF DYNAMITE ALL MOULDED IN RED JELLY RESTING ON WHITE POWDER. **BOMBSHELTER**, BERGEN & **DIE AUGEN ESSEN MIT**, 1994, STEPS IN GOLDEN GELATINE, SCHLOSS NEUHAUSEN, GERMANY.





HORIZONTAL VERTICAL, 1993, P.S.1 MUSEUM, NEW YORK, JELL-O AND MARBLE CHIPS, AND DETAIL OF THE SAME BELOW.





TIDEN LAGER ALLE SÅR, 1996. INSTALLATION OF SEVEN BENCHES COVERED WITH RED GELATINE. DETAIL: MOLD AND COLORS SEPARATING (AFTER TWO WEEKS)

CHAPTER 3

WHY MATTER MATTERS, AND HOW

We are not yet finished with death and its troubled relationship to monumental time. The photograph of the woman in *Dead Man Talking* (after VlGeland) in its stark composition, dark colors, and monochrome distribution of tints contrasts systematically with another photograph of the same year 2006, *Totenschädelburg*. Titled after the game slightly to the left of the middle foreground, this photograph has nevertheless a thematic connection with the former. It is bright, crowded, and colorful, but has no human figure in it. *Totenschädelburg* is as oblique in its represented space as *Dead Man Talking* is frontal. And whereas the latter's figure holding the skull is an adult woman, the absence of a human figure in the former nevertheless clearly indicates a child, probably a boy, as the occupant of the room and owner of the toys.¹

This single photograph, monumental in size, of a casual, slightly disorderly child's room is at second look a museum of items of *Memento Mori*. From the stylized skulls in the bit of rug visible in the foreground to the two funerary candles at the window sill, the room is entirely devoted to death symbols, so consistently so that one assumes the score on the music stand to be a lament – something of the order of *Stabat Mater Dolorosa*, adapted for children. And while the school bag on the floor on the left suggests that the occupant/owner is very much alive, and the blue outside suggests it is bedtime, the toy snake on the bed where the boy should be sleeping is rather ominous. The cheerful, entirely normal colors of a child's room full of toys can also turn the image into the picture of a shop in Mexico at the Day of the Dead. Not all cultures repress mortality.

Two features make this photograph central to Christensen's work with time. The first is time as generator of narrative. Seeing all these emblems of death takes time, the time of the present in its tendency to orientate itself to the future by means of the narrative it produces on the spot. This turns the viewer into a narrator of sorts. The image also suggests a futural narrativity, partaking of two temporal orders. The child evoked intimates the future, the narrative of a life, while his absence points to his imminent return. The latter short-term expectation clashes with the time-consuming activity of spelling out all the symbols of death, discovering them as they are hard to see, be they close by but stylized (in the rug) and far away even if explicit (on the glass table).

The second element central to this photograph ever-present in the artist's work is allegory. Harking back to her two series of Polaroid photographs after Vermeer, in which she redeployed Vermeer's allegories hidden in realistic depiction, this is an image of allegorical meaning but pushed to excess. This excess of allegory signifies the extension of fragments mentioned earlier. That extension here becomes contamination. The allegory of death – *vanitas* – overtakes all elements of the image. The picture of an Indian on the wall, for example, comes to refer to the extermination of native peoples and cultures all over the world. The old photograph can only be of a woman long dead. The mask on the corner of the photo frame looks to the costume of a skeleton thrown on the chair. The toy cowboy thrown off its horse next to the skull castle must have died in the accident.

The viewer is implicated in this excess. This is the function of the oblique take of the image. The rug of which we only see a corner extends in the viewing space welcoming the viewer. Standing there, inside the fiction, he or she is enticed to gather, to collect the emblems of death, taking the time of the narrative to be built, and participate in the allegorization of objects of everyday life.

In the process of doing these two things – of following the picture's directions concerning the two different temporalities in tension with each other, the viewer is inevitably touched by matter. Standing

on a woolen carpet, held at bay by the cool blue color of the outside, confronted with toys that ask to be touched, the viewer is involved in the play with texture that the totally sharp photograph also plays. The snake is of cotton, like the curtains and the backpack, and has a very different feel from both the shiny parquet floor and the glass tabletop, on the one hand, and the comforting blanket and the fuzzy bear on the other. Indeed, the only reassuring element is the cuddly teddy bear. Yet, it, too partakes of the allegory-mania.

Teddy bears, as a brilliant installation by Canadian artist (and curator and collector) Ydessa Hendeles has demonstrated by means of its own excess, are both reassuring and unsettling toys. The bears they refer to are extremely dangerous animals. The toys made after these wild beasts are held, cuddled, schlepped along everywhere, and used for identity building. The dangerous referent and the anxiety it might raise are held in check by the fuzzy texture of its imitated fur. This fur is crucial for the toy's attraction. It is a case if ever there was one of how matter matters.² [ill. 3.1]

The ambivalence of the teddy bear, bringing together danger and (false) reassurance, as well as the adult world of commerce, hunting, and war, with that of the child's play, is its allegorical significance. Christensen has not put the toy bear in that corner of the child's bed to reassure us, in front of all those spooky symbols of death. Instead, shrewdly exploiting the allegorical contamination of the composition, she makes the bear central to the ambivalence inherent in allegory itself. The materiality of its plush texture extends, along with the other textures in the represented room, the space to include a viewer engaged beyond visually alone to include the tactile as the sense of materiality. And this, in turn, evokes the issue of materiality in its relation to

¹ In fact, when looking at the full size photograph it is possible to see the reflection of the artist in the window. Spooky, like a ghost hovering over the work, this reflection offers a comment on the inclusion of the artist in the artwork as many artists of the classical genre did.

² See the extensive catalogue of Hendeles' exhibition in the Haus der Kunst in Munich, 2002 *Partners* (Köln: Buchhandlung Walther König). Hendeles gives her own commentary on the teddy bear (210-212) and Ernst van Alphen analyzes the exhibition as narrative in terms relevant for our discussion here (166-185).

allegory, the mode of abstract, eternal, monumental time, to bring its Memento Mori back to the tempi of the everyday.

This is how the teddy bear brings its fur to bear on the material quality of the Vermeer allegories à la Christensen. The simple but crucial fact that these works from 1994 were made in Polaroid determines their relationship to *Totenschädelburg*. In the latter work, texture is the index of matter. In the former it is the fugitive nature of the technology that fulfills that semiotic function. Over time, constantly cuddled toy bears wear out; Polaroids fade away. Their colors go, and they end up as monochromes, their sharpness looking like soft focus. [Polaroid; The Passing of Time (Woman asleep at the Table) 1995-2008 page 48]

This modest, humble temporality of imperfect technology and human usage binds duration to repetition, and puts the middle-term duration between monumental long-term and cyclical short-term of the rhythm of day and night. Take another look at the picture at the end of the previous chapter. On the right of the wall of the gallery we see *Dead Man Talking*. On the floor, black, liquid-looking puddles connect the photograph as well as the viewer standing at the front of the gallery to the monumental white, plaster casts of male nudes seen from the back in the next gallery. We are in the Vigeland museum in Oslo, hosting an exhibition by Christensen in which she engages a discussion with the prestigious predecessor, one of Norway's primary modern sculptors. Of his works, the huge sculpture we glimpse here is among the most monumental. It is titled *Six Giants Holding a Vessel of Water or Carrying the Burdens of Life*. [ill. 3.2] The sculptor has recycled visual and mythical motives from classical antiquity, doubtlessly with the ambition of emulating classical sculpture, to make a fountain. No water is visible. Or is it?

Humbly distributed on the floor are the shiny, black diabase granite puddles that look like water. Reflecting the gray tiles of stone on the floor, these sculptures are both counterpoint and partner to Vigeland's giants. The fact that the figure in the photograph on the wall is a woman looking boldly into the camera makes all the sense in the world. This, then, is a visual dialogue between the dead man talking to the live woman, in other words, Vigeland to Christensen. Who, as it happens, talks back. Politely, through the modesty of the horizontal mode of display, yet also boldly, through the allusion to minimalist sculpture and its prestige. Modestly, also, through the shapes of ephemeral water; but

then again, boldly because the material is just as durable as Vigeland's. Modestly, because the shapes are so casual, and abstract; boldly, though, because their gorgeous forms emulate the curves of the giants' buttocks.

This ensemble of five puddles is titled *The Birth of Liquid Anxieties*. The allusion to the earlier *The Birth of Liquid Desire* invites reflection on that work, also made in conversation with a prestigious male predecessor, Dalí. There, I mentioned the double tension, between liquid ephemerality and durable glass, and between glass' durability and its fragility. There, Dalí's presence is invoked by the title and the shape of liquid substance. Here, the interlocutor is present in real space, in the adjacent gallery; materially. The connection, through the title, with the earlier work and its interlocutor demonstrates a consistent preoccupation. This preoccupation concerns the relation to past art, its materiality of monumental time, and, if the installation in the Vigeland museum is any indication, of gender.

This brings the Vermeer Polaroids back into this grouping. Old Master painting – a tradition most certainly on Dalí's ironic mind – uses materials that endure, even if not eternally and not without regular interventions of restorers. In the two Vermeer series, small scale and ephemeral colors gloss the ambition of the old masters whose works are staged and updated in the photographs. In *The Birth of Liquid Desire* the relation to old masters is indirect, passing through Dalí, but also boldly asserted through the materiality of glass and wood. The narrativity of the work is future-oriented, merging the extremely short-term time of the instant of imminence with the uncertain long-term of the protection afforded by the art museum. In *The Birth of Liquid Anxieties* these dialogic relations are made more complex in at least two distinct ways.

The first, brought in by way of the title, is the triangle – old masters, Dalí the modern master, and the anxiety that, according to one theory, is the socio-psychic structure of art. Harold Bloom's famous proposition holds that all artistic accomplishments are the result of an "anxiety of influence" that produces a tension between emulation and differentiation. The artist must be influenced in order to earn the acknowledgement that makes him – surely a him – belong to the club of great Artists. But at the same time he must be original to stand out and be remarkable. The result, instead of a highly original creation, will always be a productive, creative misreading. Bloom's corpus of study

was poetry, but the thesis has equal status for the history of art. Norman Bryson has deployed it there, remarking critically on its stark oedipalism.³

The second complication is the material one. As I mentioned above, the look of ephemeral puddles and the enduring material of granite state both the modesty and the boldness of the relationship. Anxiety is also future-oriented, albeit less cheerfully so than desire. But with those over-burdened white giants in the background, anxiety is only to be expected. Yet, subtly, a paradox is involved here. The white of the giants is plaster, a material of copies, not original. This material attracts dust, is not smooth and shiny, and hence, captures the light much less effectively than Christensen's granite, black as it may be.

Christensen's view of the relationship between artists and their predecessors can be considered with another related work in mind, *White Lies* (1998). This entirely white work, consisting again of glossy liquids spilling from a white table and an otherwise empty white book case, with a puddle on the floor, is made of porcelain. Durable but not quite as much as marble; white like marble but more fluid, porcelain brings with it its history as liquid clay. Surely, to choose porcelain over marble for a work of this nature is an ironic comment on the ambition of the great masters. But it is a gentle one, without major stakes. The tension between the liquid look and the durable material is a white lie only; an insignificant one that is in every participant's best interest.

This work, in turn, reflects back on another one that Christensen made two years before, *Tiden Lager Alle Sår* (1996) as the last in a series of works, begun in 1990, primarily defined by their ephemeral material. That series consisted of the sculptures made of jell-o for which she first became famous. In a gigantic ladder of jell-o laid on marble chips in 1993 (*Horizontal Vertical*) the stark contrast between the preferred material of ambitious sculptures and the gorgeous, translucent red of the jell-o made the assertion that the Vigeland Museum gallery elaborates in so much detail and complexity. In both 1993 and 2006 the relationship is critically engaged, yet not dismissed nor overruled by strident irony. And in both cases, matter – signified and deployed, beautiful and deceptive – is the language used to

3 Bloom, Harold 1973 *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press; Norman Bryson 1984 *Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Bloom's ideas have been taken up and criticized from a feminist perspective by Catherine Lord 1999 *The Intimacy of Influence: Narrative and Theoretical Fictions in the Works of George Eliot, Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson*. Amsterdam: ASCA Press.



ILL. 3.1 YDESSA HENDELES, PARTNERS (THE TEDDY BEAR PROJECT), 2001. INSTALLATION AT THE HAUS DER KUNST, MUNICH, 2003. COURTESY OF THE YDESSA HENDELES ART FOUNDATION. PHOTO: ROBERT KEZIERE.

present those thoughts. Specifically, the temporality of matter is at stake.⁴

It is that temporality that makes the issue, or the discussion, both gendered and gentle, multi-sensorial and temporal. *Steps in Golden Gelatin* (1994), made and exhibited in the context of an exhibition titled *Die Augen Essen Mit* put the multi-sensorial aesthetic of these works on the table. In addition to touch, solicited by the luscious shiny surfaces, taste was invited to participate. Taste, with its pun on aesthetic taste. And, of course, these were smelly works. Of the jell-o works, I wish to point out an “accident” happening to *Tiden Lager Alle Sår* that led, I speculate, to the fictitiously liquid works in porcelain, glass, and granite. In 1996, the artist installed seven benches of bright red jell-o in gallery c/o Atle Gerhardsen in Oslo. This installation was breathtakingly beautiful when the benches, with daylight shining through them, first appeared.

Like all the jell-o works, time is of the essence; after a few days, the interventions of the viewers, time, and matter changed the work. The viewers could not resist touching them, perhaps even briefly sitting on them, and picking from them. This temporality is retrospectively glossed in the later re-use of the same benches for *Jeg- er en variabel størrelse (“I is a figure of variable scale)*. As if holding their breath

of time, the benches are hardened there, but the trace of visitors’ bodies remain, now as if graven in stone. Unlike with Old Master paintings, this physical contact was allowed. But then the benches started to grow old, to dry, to harden in some places and liquefy in others, and people stopped picking and touching; instead, they felt disgust. This transformation of the appeal to the senses was primarily the work of the material itself that began to rot, dry, and stink, thus turning it into a nightmare of messy molding matter that assaulted the senses. But barely had this process begun or beauty reasserted itself. Now, the stains developed their own attraction, with green dots of mold appearing on the surface, producing an abstract surface not unlike a Jackson Pollock painting. But, due to the construction on metal frames that left space between these benches and the floor, they started to drip.

Whereas the entire process of decay was a matter of merging and blurring boundaries, unexpectedly to the artist the colors, all on their own, moved in the opposite direction. They split into red and yellow. A golden yellow over-layered and embraced the red, creating appealing shapes that became strong metaphors for erotic desire as imagined inside the body. Red and yellow playing together, blood and urine, voluptuous golden desire. No wonder, then, that soon after the artist made *The Birth of Liquid Desire*.

If history is defined by its attention to change over time, then this work (of) *Tiden* is “about” history. The question this “work”, or occurrence – this hovering between thing and event – raises and addresses to the great predecessors and the historians of art who study their legacy, is simple: who did this? The puddles, with their shapes and colour schemes, just happened. The artist did not know they were going to happen. Of course she expected some form of decay, and abandoning her beautiful, sharply cut, translucent forms to that decay was her act, its unmasterable effect, her “point”. An act of relinquishing; a negative act of non-intervention that left matter to its own devices. But she was still flabbergasted by these puddles, and happy as well, because they were beautiful.

And more importantly, I speculate, they made her happy because they gave her new ideas for further work. Yet, their aesthetically pleasing appearance was neither a consequence of her will, nor an expression of her subjectivity, a reflection of her authorial intention. Did she make the puddles? Yes and no, and this non-answer revises the meaning of the verb “making”. She caused them to happen, but she did not shape their shapes in the way she shaped the sharply cut benches. The contrast between the sharp cutting of mastery and the appealing, pleasing result of the shapes produced by abandon is structural, not arbitrary. This contrast is what structures change across time. But again, who did this – who is the “master”?

If this event had happened four hundred years ago, there would have been no photographs to document

⁴ For extensive commentary on the jell-o works, see my earlier text on the artist 1998 *Jeannette Christensen’s Time*. Bergen: Centre for the Study of European Civilization



INSTALLATION VIEW, VIGELAND MUSEUM, 2006. PHOTO: JIRI HAVRAN

what happened to it once it was abandoned to time. Today, we have at least that: slides, transparencies, and photographs. No documentation of the design, just a few reviews, a catalogue essay – all interpretations. The photographs show that what happened is a change, a transformation of form and colour, not a loss of form, not formlessness. The sharply delineated form of the classically perfect benches became a different, baroque form based on colour and colour distinction. In its haste, time, the short duration of the material, skipped from one stable of old masters – classic – to the other – baroque – in a direction opposite to that of historical time.

This is why and how matter matters. And this is where, with the help of matter's temporality, modesty meets boldness. The artist opposes to the ambition of the masters fraught with anxiety of influence a disenchanted but happily endorsed knowledge about ignorance; a knowledge that glosses the idea, so dear to artists and the institutions that promote them, of artistic intention. She did not know that these puddles were to happen, but she did know she would not be able to know. She willfully endorsed the conception of learning that American literary scholar Shoshana Felman derives from psychoanalytic theory – as knowing that you do not know – and puts it in opposition to knowledge that becomes corrupted into “opinion, prejudice, presumption”.⁵

With this insight comes also the realization that there is no need for anxiety. In line with the work of British literary and film scholar Catherine Lord, she proposes an alternative, an intimacy of influence. Intimacy is a connection to predecessors that can be the object of desire, liquid or not. It allows for emulation, in the gentler form of affiliation, as

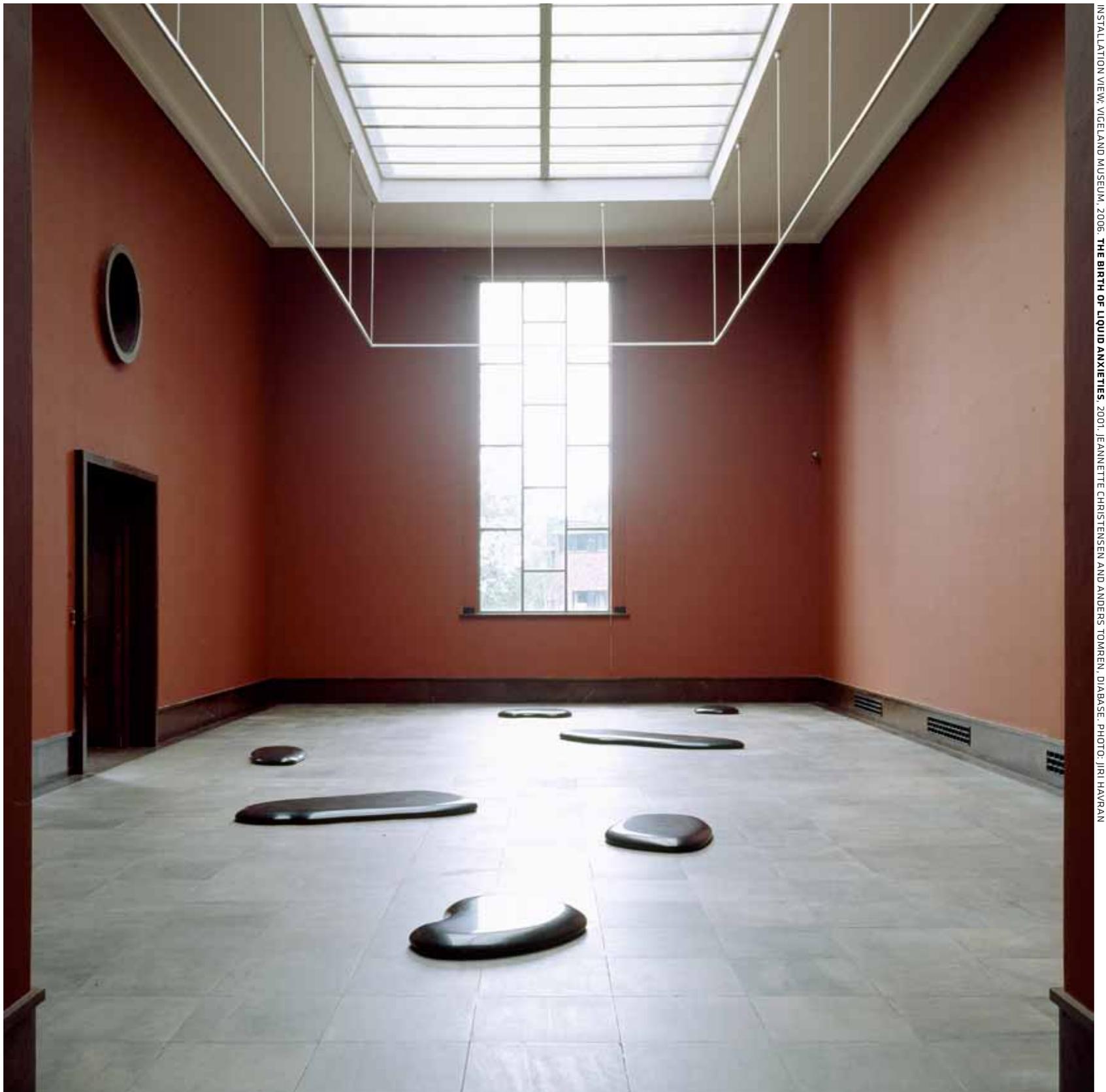
⁵ Felman discusses learning, and teaching, in the context of Freud's discovery of the value of knowing the limits of knowledge, or of not knowing. Shoshana Felman 1982 “Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and Interminable.” *Yale French Studies* 63: 21-44 (quote from 32 n15).



ILL. 3.2 GUSTAV VIGELAND, SIX GIANTS HOLDING A VESSEL OF WATER OR CARRYING THE BURDENS OF LIFE. ©VIGELAND MUSEUM/BONO 2009

well as difference, not as a desperate originality. Instead, a kind of friendship becomes possible, indeed, desirable. In the company of masters, this intimacy must be critical. But as Gayatri Spivak has argued, critical intimacy is the only attitude that can lead to something like innovation: here, new art, that emerges in friendship but without blindness. Needless to say, this difference between the anxiety of influence and the critical intimacy of influence is gendered. But so was, to begin with, the idea of anxiety.⁶

⁶ Catherine Lord 1999 *The Intimacy of Influence: Narrative and Theoretical Fictions in the Works of George Eliot, Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson*. Amsterdam: ASCA Press. On the concept of critical intimacy, see chapter 8 of my 2002 *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto: the University of Toronto Press. That chapter offers a discussion of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 1999 *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, where the author proposes this concept in the context of a postcolonial discussion with European philosophy.



INSTALLATION VIEW, VIGELAND MUSEUM, 2006. **THE BIRTH OF LIQUID ANXIETIES**, 2001. JEANNETTE CHRISTENSEN AND ANDERS TOMREN. DIAGASE. PHOTO: JIRI HAVRAN





INSTALLATION VIEW: VIGELAND MUSEUM 2006, PHILOSOPHER'S STONE, 2004, DESK AND GRANITE STONE BY JEANNETTE CHRISTENSEN, COURTESY OF SØRLANDETS KUNSTMUSEUM; FOETUS, BRONZE SCULPTURE BY GUSTAV VIGELAND © VIGELAND MUSEUM/BONO 2009. PHOTO: JIRI HAVRAN



SCULPTURE. STEEN & STRØM STOREFRONT WINDOW
EXHIBITION, OSLO, 1995. WHITE SILK SLIP, FAN AND TIMER.





CHAPTER 4

FRAGMENTS OF SKIN AND STONE, OR ON CONTINUITY

In the installation in the Vigeland museum the matter of stone is further developed in two other works. One is a simple stone, the other a series of photographs. The first is a sculptural work of utter hardness, located near the four photographs of *Exercises (I)*. This *Philosopher's Stone* is formally and thematically related to the photographs showing the small child's hands delicately work the white and pink, soft material of plasticine. It is a sculpture whose title refers to wisdom and Chinese Scholars' rocks, stones for contemplation on a desk. It is also related to Harry Potter, hence, to "truth" and fiction, high thought and popular literature; to weight and lightness; and to immutability. Its placement in the gallery's center on a school desk related it visibly to a sculpture of a fetus by Vigeland. The fetus is standing on its head, as fetuses do, and rests on a tall pedestal that gives it an upward thrust, ironically reversing the small scale of the pre-baby in the adult world of sculpture. The other work, called *Dead Man Talking*, hangs in an adjacent gallery.

In *Foetus*, the modern master, predecessor and unwitting host Gustav Vigeland literally turns the human being upside down and thus, in the ironic reversal, reconfirms the "normal" chronology of life. He gave the sculpture the size of an adult human, with the fetus in the place of the head. Doubtlessly unaware of the possible interpretation that being adult means producing a brainchild, he suggests that human procreation is the climax of life's evolution. The body carrying the fetus is nowhere in sight; the tall pedestal, instead, give that body an erect, abstract form. Christensen's *Stone* acknowledges Vigeland's reflection on the temporality of human life expressed in *Foetus*. At the same time, the artist positions her work in oblique dialogue with it.

The stone has a recognizable square form that echoes Vigeland's pedestal. But the planes are polished slightly unevenly, and the corners are rounded, invoking the round forms of the upside-down fetus. The result is a remarkable undecidability between cube and globe. This ambiguity not only binds the activity of making balls of the child in *Exercises (I)* to that of the adult sculptor. It also merges the two forms that are distinct within the latter's work. The square form of the pedestal and the round form of the fetus join in the single stone of wisdom that joins the two basic forms in a single one where they can no longer be told apart. And it offers the heavy stone to the viewer with the striking tactility of surface, proposing a haptic look that Christensen's work so frequently succeeds in soliciting. Suddenly, the material, hard to the actual touch becomes soft to the eye. This effect is not unlike the effect of fluidity of the liquid sculptures, although the means are very different: form here, surface there.

The second part of the sculpture is its pedestal, or the lack of it. It sits, over-heavy, on a school desk that brings in the child and her learning. The desk looks as if it can barely sustain the weight; the stone is really too big to be placed there. The discrepancy is very meaningful, almost ominous. On the one hand it announces the wisdom to come. But it leaves no room for the child doing the learning. The stone literally fills the desk's surface. On the other hand, then, it asks if the knowledge that schools impose on their young charges is not too heavy, indeed, top heavy. And top heavy is, precisely, the formal result of Vigeland's balancing fetus. Both sculptures are of a head – but a very different one. Christensen's head is hyperbolic; with a hint of the hydrocephalic. [page 61, 64 and 67]

Vigeland's *Foetus* is allegorical, a token standing in for a type of class of similar fetuses. Its meaning, life's evolution, is complex and ambiguous, and exceeds the individuality of the fetus. Christensen's desk has a different relationship to the anonymity of generalization. It is a worn one, bearing the traces of generations of children. We do not know who those children are, but we know that they have passed time sitting at this desk, scribbling on it, perhaps with the point of their tongue between their teeth in the effort to do the exercises. We can see them sitting there. Instead of the generalization of allegory, Christensen

proposes the duration of a thickened temporality drawn by the crisscrossing traces.¹

And duration, here, is produced in surfaces and their tactility. Duration is a key concept for this artist's work with fragments of matter always trying to become details. I have already pointed out the materiality of time in the jell-o works, the Polaroids, and the positioning of the viewer in need of duration to see the child's room, in *Totenschädelburg*. In all these cases, an important aspect of that materiality of time is the impossibility to pinpoint exactly at which moment a change occurred; yet change never ceases. Change itself is in duration. This involves perception as well as the material object; indeed, it is a demonstration of perception's own materiality. Since the title of this sculptor invokes philosophy, a short detour to philosophy seems in order. I return to Bergson, the major philosopher of duration.

In the chapter "The Idea of Duration" in *Time and the Free Will*, the French philosopher explains the importance of a conception of duration based on continuity. The key to understanding this is Bergson's concept of multiplicity. Partly in discussion with his British colleague and friend Bertrand Russell, who maintained the possibility to break up duration in discrete instants, Bergson distinguished two ways of considering multiplicity or two kinds of multiplicity to argue for the continuity of duration:

...that of material objects, in which the conception of number is immediately applicable; and the multiplicity of states of consciousness, which cannot be regarded as numerical without the help

1 On the concept of allegory, see the classical book by Angus Fletcher 1964 *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. More complex, and indeed, positive views of allegory have been published in the wake of the rediscovery of Walter Benjamin's 1977 [1928] *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne. London: New Left Books, such as Paul de Man 1979 *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press. On the distinction between type and token, Umberto Eco 1978 *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, remains the clearest.

of some symbolical representation, in which a necessary element is *space*.²

Instead of a numerical conception of duration as a succession of instants, he proposes the idea that living in duration is a form of *gathering*: each moment is accompanied by the memory of the preceding ones. As we will see, gathering is a major issue in Christensen's work with Vigeland.

The formulation of the distinction in this passage between countable objects (in space) and states of consciousness might wrongly suggest a phenomenological, subjectivist account. Instead, the two forms of multiplicity can be said to merge in the occurrence of perception that involves both the materiality of objects and that of the human body. This is not a mentalist, subjectivist or phenomenological conception to the extent that Bergson considers the body as material, and perception, likewise, as a material practice. As a result, Bergson's struggle to eliminate space from the theory of time, useful as it is to realize the gathering aspect of duration, ultimately leads to a renewed sense not of time alone but of spacetime in which duration is the over-arching dimension, or as Bergson would have it, medium.³

I find the conception of time and space as mediums helpful to consider Christensen's work with timespace. Imagine an exhibition space – real and fictitious at the same time – in which these images and its viewers are brought together. No longer a neutral background, the space is a section of the world in which fiction and reality cannot be distinguished. In this sense, every exhibition is a piece of installation art. The proximity of *Philosophers Stone*, *Exercises (I)* and *Foetus* is a case in point. Beyond the individual art works installed in it, the space itself has something to say. Bergson calls space, like time, a medium, and this seems a helpful intervention.

If the exhibition room is a space, a section or spatial fragment of the world, then the things in the room are companions of the people walking in that space; their bodies are on a par with the viewers' bodies. They share the fantasy space within which the viewer temporarily lives together with the art objects. This is, say, the Harry Potter connotation of the *Philosopher's Stone*. Moreover, Western art has selected the human body as its all-time favorite subject matter. As a result, the human body has become the measure of all things, the standard by which we gauge proportions. Hence, every work of art is – or can be measured by the standards of – a representation of the human body. We can handle what is proportionately smaller: smaller size confirms the superiority or, at least, the normalcy of the human body. What is proportionately larger threatens this self-evident status: unable to normalize such extravagant shapes, we easily consider such representations grotesque. The stone on the desk foregrounds the discrepancy of size that threatens the delicate balance of scale.

This holds for the space itself as well. Too small, it makes us feel confined and see the objects in it as not quite up to the task of speaking to us. Too large, the space can easily make us feel disoriented, as if the task of harmonizing objects and space is too heavy. But once the viewer gives herself over to the fictionality that reigns in an exhibition space, world and body become potentially congruent. The oversized pedestal of *Foetus* is now acceptable, as is the desk-stone discrepancy.

To understand how this would make a difference for Christensen's work, let us consider the photographs of navels in *Point of Departure* once more, now in a specific exhibition space where, in 1999, they were combined with an extraordinary early work, *Sculpture* (1995). This work, first made for a window in the department store Steen & Strøm in Oslo consists of white silk slips, a delicate woman's garment with a soft shiny surface. A fan connected with a timer fills the slips with air. The air brings them to life: they stand up, quivering, waking from a sleep that lasted a hundred years; they stretch out; then falter, bend over and collapse. They exist – tenuously – in time. Imagine this work and the short-term duration of its "life" as a body. These rhythmically moving sculptures, after coming to life and to the erect pose of adults, bend down as if in a position of begging – begging like the one speech bubble of the pair *One is Cursing, The Other Begging*. In an installation in the Kunsthalle Feldbach, Steierische Herbst, Austria in 1999, the navel photos surround the *Sculptures*.

Cut outs from the human body, hung on the wall, these images demonstrate the spacetime Bergson's philosophy intimates. If the room is a medium with a life – say, a body – things change, and we can no longer

consider ourselves the measure of all things. Within a fictional body, the objects are elements, cells or molecules in a gigantic womb. Christensen had enlisted this suspension of proportion and scale, and the ontological uncertainty it entails, to create a show in which body and space question one another in duration. Endless space and a sense of confinement coexist, when on the large walls, here and there, photographs of navels, surrounded by arbitrarily cut-out fragments of belly, punctuate the emptiness, while throughout the space figures stand up, bend over and collapse. Space is turned inside out, and duration is made tangible in the short-term rhythm of the *Sculptures'* movements.⁴

I consider this exhibition a perfect example of Bergsonian spacetime, where the inextricably bond between space and time does not contaminate time with spatiality. The photographs are blown up in size, hence, spatially; the slips are blown up in volume, also spatially. Both blow-ups change the object of representation. They serve no illusionary purpose but induce the desire to see depiction where none emerges, confronting us with the enigmas of representation. These navels, barely recognizable due to their size, exist in space. Or so it seems at first sight. But something precludes a hasty viewing. That is the explicit temporality of the slips.

Still as they are, stuck to the wall and fixed in their images, the navels carry their own temporality. They exist as scars, rewinding the history of the body back to the separation from the maternal body; to that moment eliminated by Vigeland's sculpture of a fetus without womb. The navel is permanent in the duration of a life, but also historical in its status of trace. Flaunting the transgression of the boundary between private and public, it tells stories of labour, birth, cutting off, bloody becoming. Vigeland's fetus exists in the repression of that history.

And yet, the glossy photographs also confront the viewer with reflection. The temporality of relative permanence of the photographs contrasting with the quicker – though in its own way, slow – rhythm of the slips yields to the flickering of light caused by the visitor's movement as it is reflected in the glossy surface of the photographs. The slips – distributed through the three-dimensional space, behaving like

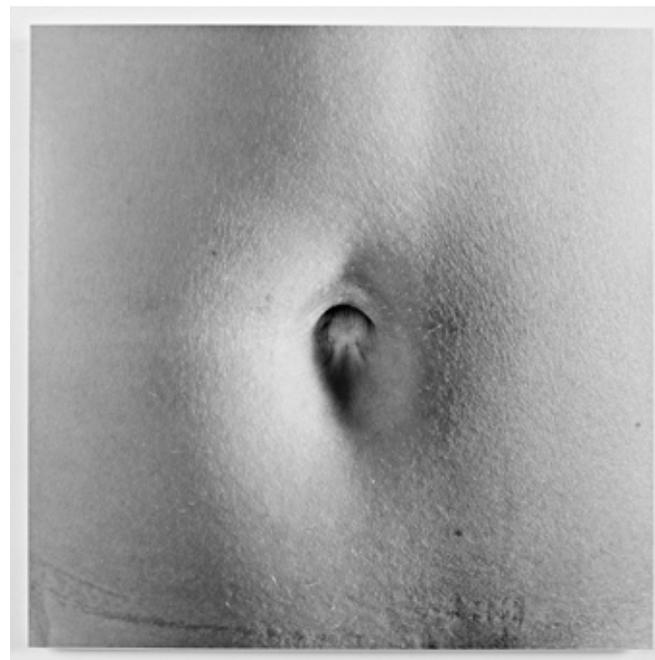
² See Henri Bergson 1960 [1889] *Time and Free Will*. Translated by F.L. Pogson. New York: Harper & Row. This text is more readily available in 2002 *Henri Bergson: Key writings*. Edited by Keith Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey. New York: Continuum. This volume contains a good selection from Bergson's writings and an excellent introduction. The quoted passage is on page 54 of this volume.

³ Spacetime or timespace is my term for the unity of time and space that Mikhail Bakhtin has theorized as chronotope in 1996 "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel." In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 84-258, esp. 84. On the relevance of this concept for contemporary (popular) culture, see Esther Peeren 2007 *Identities and Intersubjectivities in Popular Culture: Bakhtin and Beyond*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press

⁴ The uncertainty of scale that can turn a room into a body and outside into inside, is a feature of what I have analyzed elsewhere as a specifically baroque aesthetic and philosophy in a book that also discusses Christensen's jell-o works. Mieke Bal 1999 *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (on Christensen, 166-207). This study was based on Deleuze's study of Leibniz in his 1993 *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Translated and foreword by Tom Conley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. I return to the baroque aesthetic in the next chapter.



FOETUS, BRONZE SCULPTURE BY GUSTAV VIGELAND, ©VIGELAND MUSEUM/BONO 2009



POINT OF DEPARTURE, 1999. BL/W PHOTOGRAPHY, 86 X 86 CM

live matter, keeping you enthralled through their relentless attempts to stand, their merciless failure to stay – change the space within which they enact their temporality. This is why they embody space-time. Their attempts to stand appear like a second birth, a coming-into-being as a full-fledged, grown creature.

But after blissful sleep, they wake up to the need to bend down. Their joyful pride is broken, submission their reality. With the child who, in the three *Exercises* series, refuses to separate play from learning so that she stays out of reach for standard chronology, these empty skins are busy negotiating the stages of life. The rhythmic temporality of this work contests the succession of historical time. Between repetition and succession, the bodies of *Sculpture* merge the time of maternity not only with the time of becoming but also of decline. They can do this thanks to the medium of space.

The two series in the exhibition, *Sculpture* and *Point of Departure*, thus appear in symmetrical contrast to one another, creating a temporality out of the show itself. First they seem to be each other's counterpart, and then they meet halfway. The two series have something more fundamental in common, which gives this rigorously dual installation its spacetime unity. Both the slips and the navels question the skin as the boundary of the human be-

ing, through a probing of representation. On a level where thought, discourse and image meet, they offer two sides of a number of tensions, collaborating to question our most commonly held beliefs.

They represent the human body by way of its largest and most visible organ, the skin. But what vision of the skin can this be? Not the usual kind, in which the skin is seen as boundary, as envelope or as the body's touchable surface, the site of desire and the surroundings of the orifices that open up the body. No part of the skin is more dubious, ambiguous, confusing, than the navel. The body's orifices and extremities are easier to understand than this pointless point, which is both surface and depth, or neither. The navel is not penetrable, nor can it penetrate. Yet it gives relief to a smooth surface, interrupting it, poking a hole in it. The navel tells about prior depth, about existence in the uterus and the fantasies of safety and bliss, confinement and anxiety, we retrospectively project onto it. It tells about the mother, the primal female body that produced ours. About everything that Vigeland has eliminated. The slips, in contrast, for all their vulnerability and aliveness, are not part of the body, but the primal layer of its cover-up. They are so thin, like a skin peeling off; the slips are a cultural skin.

But which skin – the natural or the cultural one – is more "real"? Which representation more

reliable? Here lies yet another enigma this installation proposes. "Real" bodies are fragmented, aggrandized, and flattened on the wall; and thin body-covers get all the volume. The question of ontology is articulated through gender, and gender, in turn, through time. Both the slips and the navels are delicately and uncertainly gendered. The slips are pieces of fine female clothing – intimate underwear that one does not show in public – but their form, once standing up, is decidedly phallic. In the course of their short life cycle, they change from feminine to masculine, from submission, or prayer, when they are collapsed, to proud and mighty, imaginary images of erections at the end; perhaps to "cursing and begging". These figures are female, yet they draw male form. Thus they question the reality of that dichotomy. The navels, on the other hand, are more real than anything else in the body, it would seem; they are part of us, we cannot shed them. But, in their present size, this colorless representation in this public room, how real can they be? The sheer size of everything – the navels, the naked skin, and the space surrounding them in the gallery – makes them grotesque. Like those anthropomorphic, dream-inducing, moving slips.

This installation thus examines the intricacies of representation and gender as the testing ground of ontological truth. In the exhibition space, we can



walk on the ground of that uncertain truth without being sucked into its quicksand. The slips can brush against our skin whenever we come too close. The navels can seduce us with their representational allure. But doubt is always built in. The slips, delicate like feathers, allowing or suggesting a soft, subtle caress, don't feel as smooth and ethereal as they look; don't feel like the soft skin they evoke. And their deceptive aliveness brings the phallic form that changes the fantasy of skin each of us may bring to them. The navels offer representations different from those we have learned to expect.

It is here that the over-quoted and frequently abused distinction from Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* between studium and punctum becomes relevant. The search for meaning as a studious activity gratefully accommodates timeless, eternal allegory. But allegory can only appear timeless when all circumstantial evidence of the different, enmeshed temporalities of matter is eliminated. And according to Christensen's work, one element, or fragment of this thick timespace, is the viewer and his materiality. Barthes' punctum is the umbilical cord between the object and the viewer; the connection without which materiality cannot reach out and is condemned to remain fragment. Punctum is the place and moment where that connection occurs.⁵

That word, fragment, is key to another text by Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*. Infelicitously, in the English edition the key word "fragment" is relegated to the subtitle. Fragment is a key term not only because Barthes' text is organized in fragments similar to the lemmas in a dictionary. More importantly, the fragmentary status of the bits of discourse in which "love" circulates foregrounds the historical and public nature of all discourse; its *bricolage* aspect. This involves time once again. Only when seen as recycling of earlier bits of discourse – hence, as fragments – can the discourse of love ever reach its provisional destination.

Only then, that is, can the utterances in which the discourse manifests itself become a detail of the connection we call "love".⁶

The immutable, stone works of sculpture to which Christensen addresses her many complicating questions embody the elimination of all contingency. Their durability is only one aspect of that elimination or, in a certain sense to which I will return, abstraction. Vigeland's *Foetus* is a case in point. Even though the upside-down baby body refers to time, the sculpture remains invulnerable to time. In the other work offering reflections on stone, *Dead Man Talking*, Christensen expands her experiments with temporality to include, more boldly than ever, the tensions between time and space discussed so far. In the next chapter, this work will help me to consider the many different aspects of Christensen's visual philosophy of duration as continuity; the idea that living in duration is a form of gathering.

5 Roland Barthes 1981 [1980] *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang. On navels in art and theory, see Elisabeth Bronfen 1998 *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and Its Discontents*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

6 Roland Barthes 1977 *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*. Paris: Editions du Seuil; 1978 *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang.



DEAD MAN TALKING 1-5 (NADA, ELLO DIRÁ, NOTHING, THIS ONE WILL TELL), 2006.
DETAIL FROM RELIEF BY GUSTAV VIGELAND © VIGELAND MUSEUM/BONO 2009. PHOTO: WERNER ZELLIEN





DEAD MAN TALKING 1-6 (NO SE PUEDE SABER POR QUÉ; ONE CAN NOT KNOW WHY), 2006.
DETAIL FROM RELIEF BY GUSTAV VIGELAND © VIGELAND MUSEUM/BONO 2009. PHOTO: WERNER ZELLIEN



DEAD MAN TALKING 1-6 (TANTO Y MÁS; ALL THIS AND MORE), 2006.
DETAIL FROM RELIEF BY GUSTAV VIGELAND © VIGELAND MUSEUM/BONO 2009. PHOTO: WERNER ZELLIEN





GUSTAV VIGELAND, RELIEF FOR THE BASE OF THE LARGE FOUNTAIN.
© VIGELAND MUSEUM/BONO 2009, PHOTO: WERNER ZELLIEN

CHAPTER 5

LIGHT AS REMEDIATION, OR THE GATHERING OF STORIES

The skin of photography, accompanied and glossed by the thin fabric of *Sculpture*, brings us back to materiality. Sculpture and stone, as we have seen, stand for long-term, allegorical art; art that lasts and outlives its artist; art that inserts itself in a history of ambition where art accompanied a history of conquest and glory. That Vigeland inserted an unborn baby into that prestigious and long lineage demonstrates a concern that clearly speaks to Christensen, who is an artist involved with the temporal as well as the spatial fragmentation and aliveness of matter, a woman, and also a mother. In the same exhibition where the photograph *Dead Man Talking* (after Vigeland) showed a young woman in men's shoes holding a skull in front of her crotch, other serial work engaged with materiality, time, and the fragment's attempt to become detail that makes matter alive. The title of the ensemble resonates with Jeff Wall's light box photograph *Dead Troops Talk* from 1992, another critique of the culture of war in which we live. [ill. 5.1]

Six large black-and-white photographs hung on a Pompeian red wall. The photographs are of the plaster cast model from a clay form. This plaster cast was later cast in bronze. Hence, the photographs are twice removed from the "real" Vigeland. They represent the small children and the skull represented in relief on the base of Vigeland's *Fountain*, shaped like a basin held by the six giants. What we see in the museum where the

photographs speak to the relief, however, is a plaster preparatory cast; the bronze fountain is in the nearby park, Frognerparken in Oslo. [ill. 5.2] Moreover, the relief on the fountain's base is one image, while the photographs fragment that image into its six constituent parts. These come together again against the background of a color, Pompeian red, which, like the form of relief itself, refers to antiquity, the cradle of sculpture. [page 64]

The photographs constitute a double remediation of Vigeland's masterpiece, itself a forecast of fragile plaster to become durable bronze. This plaster cast has been both photographed and fragmented. In the predecessor's relief, the five children are harmoni-



ILL. 5.1 JEFF WALL; DEAD TROOPS TALK (A VISION AFTER AN AMBUSH OF A RED ARMY PATROL, NEAR MOQOR, AFGANISTAN, WINTER 1986) 1992. TRANSPARENCY IN LIGHTBOX 229 X 417 CM. MR. DAVID PINCUS CINAMATOGRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPH. © THE ARTIST

ously disposed, one in each of the four corners and one in the center. Their bodies are those of babies, but their activities imply a more advanced age; as with the photographs of Christensen's girl on the beach in *Exercises (II)*, who seemed to be writing before knowing how to write, there is a discrepancy of age. These baby children each carry out an intensely pursued activity; they neither look at one another, nor at the viewer. Although they do not look at the skull lying, half-buried and perspectively flattened, on the far lower-left edge, all but the central baby are turned in the direction of the skull. The central one turns its back to us. They are, as Michael Fried would have it, fully absorbed in their activities.¹ [ill. 5.3 Of an absorption painting]

Recalling, but as a symmetrical counterpart, the issue of horizontal versus vertical display evoked earlier a propos of *Exercises (II)*, these creatures stuck onto a vertical wall barely emerge from that material. If this were a horizontal display, in a book, they would look like babies lying in their crib, unable yet to stand up. Here, though, one doesn't overly wonder how these creatures with the limbs of babies can do what they do. The activity in question is gathering. They gather up the bones of the presumed skeleton to which the skull must have belonged. Gathering – the activity has come up before. Gathering was Bergson's explanation of a concept of duration based on the multiplicity that cannot be discrete.

Christensen challenges this gathering. She photographed each child separately, giving each its own space. But this is not an opposition to either the philosopher or the old modern master. It is also a gloss on the latter's work in the name of the former's. For, this spacing out of the single image into five further fragments the relief. She thus draws attention to the narrative fragmentation already striking in Vigeland's relief, where the children do not interact nor bring the results of their activities together. As a scene, this is not a clear case of absorption either. Or rather, it is not a scene at all. The skeleton remains broken up, and evokes the state of the skull at the end of the *Exercises (III)* series. Gathering is a two-sided activity, of bringing together and scattering at the same time.

In addition to being one of humanity's earliest means of survival, gathering is also a highly cultural activity. The babies gathering bones so as to make the dispersed skeleton whole again – and each bone not a fragment but a detail – are also like curators



ILL. 5.2 GUSTAV VIGELAND, VIEW OF LARGE FOUNTAIN WITH BASE, THE VIGELAND PARK. © VIGELAND MUSEUM/BONO 2009



ILL. 5.3 CHARDIN, JEAN BAPTISTE SIMEON (1699-1779): BOY PLAYING CARDS. FLORENCE, GALLERIA DEGLI UFFIZI. OIL ON CANVAS, 82 X 66 CM. ©1990. PHOTO SCALA, FLORENCE- COURTESY OF THE MINISTERO BENI E ATT. CULTURALI

¹ Michael Fried 1980 *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. Berkeley: University of California Press

collecting objects to shape the image of a culture in a museum. This, too, is an ambivalent intervention in the relentlessness of historical time. Collecting has several dimensions; each has a positive function and also a negative consequence.

Acts of acquiring artifacts build up a significant collection that has its own value for the public and for scholarship; similarly, the bones collected together remedy the dispersion that deprived the bones from their meaning. But acquiring as acquisition is a form of greed, of building up possession, of withholding from the free circulation of objects and thus hampering the “social life of things”. The children in this work each gather, but do not bring their loot together.

The gathered items are subsequently valued as preserved, saved from perdition. Preserving is a primary goal of collecting: to preserve objects for the future, protect them from the wear and tear of ordinary use and from oblivion in private attics or basements, from staying buried beneath the surface. But preserving also means encasing, treating like caged animals, taking out of context, and hence, culturally and socially “killing” the object. The story can never be made whole again as it was; only new stories can be gathered.

Collecting is also a way of delimiting, and this is readable in Christensen’s act of isolating each child in its own frame. This means erecting boundaries around an object. In its collecting practices, the museum thus specifies the artifact’s meaning, protecting it from the vagueness of ordinary (non) interpretation. But delimiting also means that precisely the constant transformations of meaning due to historical and lived time can no longer reach the object; it thus becomes semantically sterile. The children cannot come together to fashion a whole skeleton out of the bones they each collect.

Finally, collecting serves the purpose of showing, of making visible. Showing objects in museums puts them at the visual disposal of visitors who can decide themselves whether to consider them aesthetically, historically, for their use value, or nostalgically. But showing is also boasting, staking a claim of authenticity, of meaningfulness, of beauty, and thus imposing inevitable value. Christensen probes these ambivalent implications of gathering, first of all by recasting the cast relief into another medium. Hers is an act of remediation.

Christensen’s remediation, as her own act, is also a form of gathering and scattering at the same time.

Remediation, according to its theorists Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, answers to a paradoxical logic. New media borrow their rights to citizenship in the media landscape by means of reference to, and improving upon, predecessors. Thus, photography is a “better” – more precise, more realistic – form of painting and drawing. Internet is a more effective newspaper. Film is photography in movement. On the one hand, this emulation of older media sustains the novelty of the new. On the other, it gives it the prestige of the predecessor that the new medium would still have to conquer. Both valuations proceed by means of a logic that is equally paradoxical. The quality of the new medium is anchored in its hyper-visible status as medium. On the other, it obeys a standard of transparency. Photography is “better” than painting because it is transparent; it cannot lie. Or so the cultural commonplace goes.²

Vigeland’s work with putti, both in the form of relief and the material of durable stone or bronze

2 Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin 1999 *Remediation: Understanding New Media* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. As Nanna Verhoeff wrote: “Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin’s vision of remediation is that media tend to put forward a paradoxical logic of transparent immediacy (the medium is invisible) and hypermediacy, ‘a style of visual representation whose goal is to remind the viewer of the medium.’” 2006 *The West in Early Cinema: After the Beginning*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 272.



ILL. 5.4 LEWIS HINE: TENEMENT WORKERS MAKING ORNAMENTS, CA.1910. SILVER PRINT, PHO 1986-85.HINE LEWIS WICKES (1874-1940) (C) WICKES HINE LEWIS. LOCALISATION: PARIS, MUSÉE D'ORSAY © RMN (MUSÉE D'ORSAY, PARIS) / © JEAN-GILLES BERIZZI

inserts itself in a long line of sculpture that, more than the traditions of other media, returns continuously to classical antiquity. Remediated into plaster bronze but “pre-meditated” in the exhibition of the plaster cast, the essential feature of durability of marble is taken out of the work – as is its presumed primary originality. Using black-and-white photography, the medium that itself has an ambivalent status between old and new, Christensen acknowledges the old medium in the new-old one. The photographs are still images of still children; and yet, they are busy gathering. And color-wise, the images are strikingly consistent. They are neither black nor white, but gray. The incredibly precise nuances of that color of mediation between white and black take the white out of the plaster. And the only areas in the images where black occurs are places where the relief causes shadows. Those shadows show the reality, the materiality of the plaster relief in the flat, even images. They are also the places where the remediation shows its hypermedial hand.

Literally, photography is the medium of writing with light. Here, the medium signs off its status as medium in darkness. Clearly, the artist is deploying light and shadow to make points that have

theoretical import. She does this consistently in her work. And always the light is where we don't expect it. The puddles of black granite in *The Birth of Liquid Anxieties*, for example, derive their light from the shiny surface that reflects the light of their environment, emulating the light of the white plaster that is rather dull.

This in turn influences our interaction with materiality. The matter of these puddles in spite of their liquid appearance is the most durable of stone, with an extremely long history of geological formation prior to ending up on the gallery floor. But the light they reflect makes them change constantly, with the flickering of sunrays and the movement of clouds outside the windows. Differently but with a similar result, the light in *The Birth of Liquid Desire* is captured, collected like butterflies or bones, inside the bubbles of air within the glass. In the evenly lit somewhat gray gallery, the glass liquid sparkles, its light changing with the passing by of the visitor.

The three *Exercises* series all do things with light, in addition to the light work of photography itself. The first series casts the actions of the child on the plasticine against a backdrop of such pristine white that the nuances of flesh tones appear with glorious

precision. The small band of darker space at the top of the photographs, where we see perhaps the backs of chairs and a bit of wall in what now seems an extremely oblique perspective, work according to the tradition of color perspective. The shadows give relief to the white table, making its upper edge gain softness and volume. In the second series, the shadows participate in the drawing. The child draws lines and these acquire depth. In the image where the girl is nearest to the picture plane, her shadow is ominously large, the letters deeply graven and the even plane of sand beyond them, visible grain by grain. Light and shadow – the two elements of the (black-and-white) photograph – are foregrounded as both hypermedial and transparent. To rephrase this, we could say that Christensen values light, as well as its absence in shadow, as neither medium nor transparent, but instead, as *creative*.

In *Exercises (III)* there is an even clearer sense that light, the pen of the light-writing that photography is, creates what did not exist prior to its work. The shadow, here, is itself bright, and is the only background. The hands with their beautiful long fingers, further sculpted by the light that edges them, manipulate the pieces of the skull but also seem



ILL. 5.5 FRANCISCO GOYA, LOS DESASTRES DE LA GUERRA (THE DISASTERS OF WAR), 1810, PUBLISHED IN 1863 80 AQUATINT PRINTS. NADA. ELLO DIRÁ. WE SHALL SEE. TANTO Y MÁS. ALL THIS AND MORE. BIBLIOTECA NACIONAL DE ESPAÑA

to hover over them. There is no transparency at all. Light is the medium, and there is nothing outside it. But light is not simply the medium that creates the two-dimensional image. It is also the sculpture of the illusion of three-dimensional materiality. This is why, in the last photograph of the series, the pieces seem to float in air. Matter does not have solidity. Held together by the light, it does not need solidity either.³

Hands are the crucial tool of the artist, the instrument of human contact, the locus of the touch. They are also the most individualizing element of the body, second only to the face. As I am writing this essay, a small exhibition in the photography department of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris makes this very clear. Simply titled *La Main*, the exhibition shows old photographic portraits. And suddenly, all those hands leap forwards. What to do with one's hands when posing? According to codes of expression, the

hand is capable to conveying emotions. It is an index of activity, of play, and of body language. And during the long posing sessions for early still photography, the hand cannot do anything, and becomes itself still, stultified, embarrassing and useless – a self-reflection on the stillness of the medium.⁴ [ill. 5.4]

Making still photographs of active hands taking apart the bones that form the skull, then, is another kind of remediation. The hands in *Exercices (III)* do not create something; they unmake; they do not gather but disperse. Yet, the light that accompanies these hands holds the elements precariously together. Thus, the light is the agent of gathering. This is another instance of Christensen's dialogue with old masters. She boldly addresses the masterpieces, but will always put a gloss on them that states the need of a necessary modesty. Not the hands but the

light; not the artist but time; not the whole but the fragment; that is where the act of creation begins.

In *Dead Man Talking*, another act of remediation intervenes in the use of language. Titles are an integral part of the works in Christensen's oeuvre. Here, each image from the series has a title of its own, borrowed from Goya's famous and devastatingly actual series of etchings, *Los Desastres de la Guerra* (the Disasters of War), from the second decade of the nineteenth century. Although Goya was one of several artists to respond to the gruesome Napoleonic wars, his etchings focus on the horrors of war in general. They are not a nationalistic protest but a humane one. As the last of the old masters as well as the first modern artist in Western Europe, he helps the contemporary artist position herself more specifically in relation to the sculptor of modernist classicism, on the one hand, and her own time, on the other.⁵ [Ills. 5.5 and ill. 5.6 From Goya's series]

The titles are singularly telling. In Goya's series,

3 Light is deployed as creating form and even matter in the work of such divergent artists as Olafur Eliasson, Ann Veronica Janssens, and David Reed, to name only a few whose work I have studied in conjunction with Christensen's in my 1999 *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

4 Joëlle Bolloch 2007 *La main*. Paris: Musée d'Orsay / les 5 continents. This exhibition takes up a famous text by art historian Henri Focillon 1981 [1943] *La vie des formes, suivi de "Eloge de la main."* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France. Another exhibition on this topic was held in 2004 at the Guggenheim museum in New York and Bilbao. 2004 *Speaking with Hands: Photographs from the Buhl Collection*. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Publications.

5 Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes 1746-1828. The 80 aquatint prints were made between 1810 and 1820 and published only in 1863, 35 years after Goya's death.



ILL. 5.6 FRANCISCO GOYA, LOS DESASTRES DE LA GUERRA (THE DISASTERS OF WAR), 1810, PUBLISHED IN 1863 80 AQUATINT PRINTS. NADA. ELLO DIRÁ. WE SHALL SEE. TANTO Y MÁS. ALL THIS AND MORE. BIBLIOTECA NACIONAL DE ESPAÑA

they all put a heavily ironic spin on the images of horror performed by people on people – no matter who attacks, destroys, or eats whom. In Christensen, where they accompany innocent putti, in her selection they become more abstract. *This is the true one*, for example, or *Nada. Ello dirá* (*Nothing. This one will tell*). *Yo lo vi* (*I saw it*), positions the gathering child as witness, and the disenchanting, cynical *Para eso habeis nacido* (*for this you were born*) shrinks human life to pointlessness. The relationship of tension between the titles that indict war and the innocent babies trying to make the dead man whole again is obvious. The tension between general and specific is less clear-cut. The children each received their own space, which must be seen as individualizing them. But this spacing-out makes it clearer than in Vigeland's relief that they are not specific at all either in plaster or on paper. In all of the images, the round, chubby body holds either a bunch of bones or a single piece of (hip-?)bone (*No se puede saber por qué*), or the entire skull (*Para eso habeis nacido*). The small, half-buried skull at the bottom left is unburied,

made central and visible, in the image titled *Eso es lo verdadero*. Translated as either “This is the true one” or “This is the true stuff”, this title probes the relationship between individual life and anonymous matter.⁶

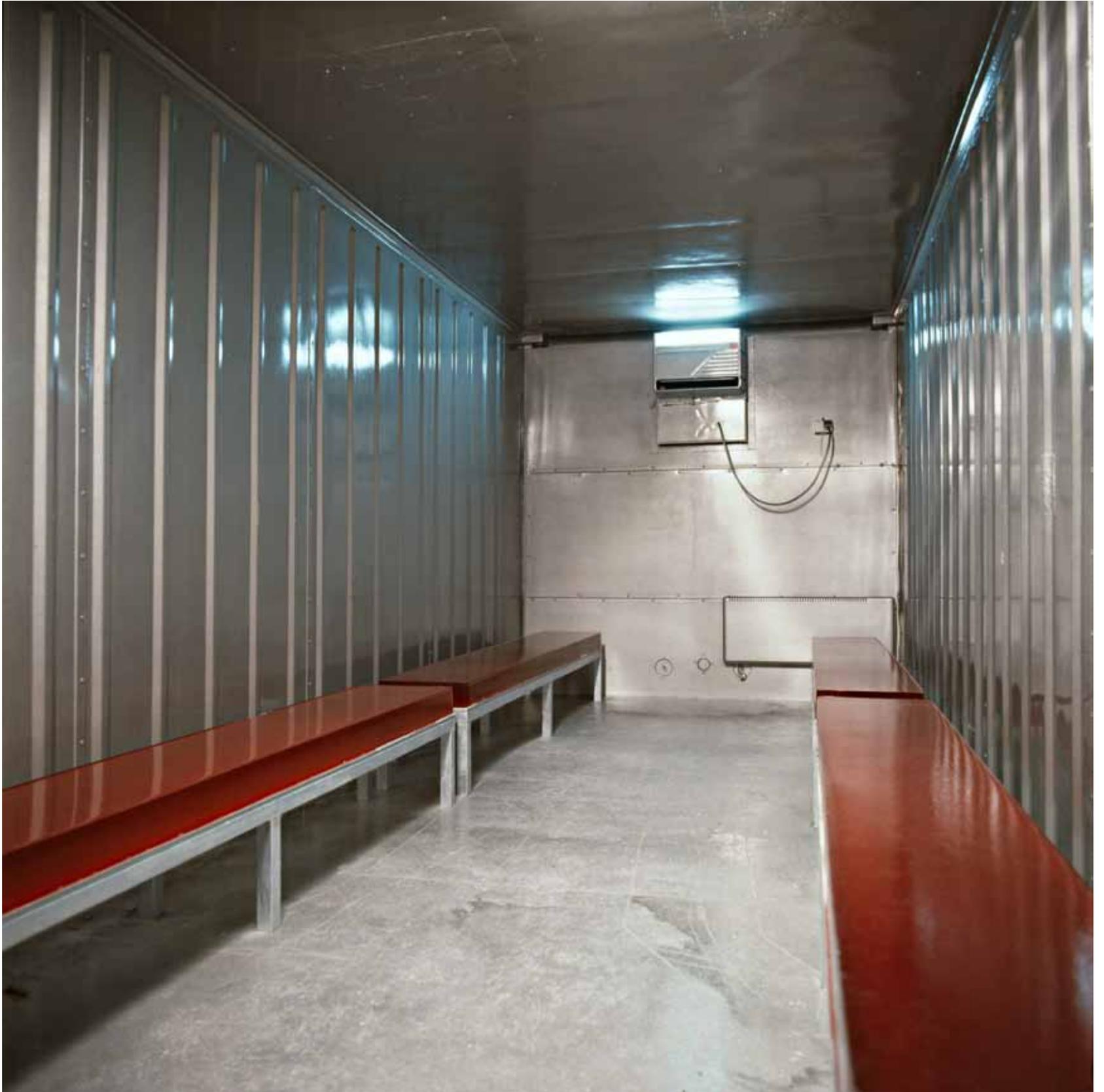
There is a determination to create an ambiguity that is politically relevant here, and that pertains to the twice-removed remediation. In order to articulate the political thrust of the work we must first consider the spatialization. These are separate images of very similar figures with different titles of similar meaning. They relentlessly separate what was once together. And as it happens the activities represented are precisely situated in that tension. The children in the Vigeland gather what time had separated. And their collecting separates them from the unifying relief. When foregrounded by the seriality of the photographs this action becomes specific.

It makes a statement about the fragments of matter and – or as – fragments of time that organize

⁶ Strictly speaking, the second translation is the more precise one, but both are possible, and the ambiguity is certainly intended, either by Goya or Christensen or both – another ambiguity.

our world where violence occurs now here, then there, then and now, as if these acts of violence were unrelated. Countering this fragmentation, Vigeland/Christensen's baby children collect fragments. The bones and skulls of the dead, this work intimates, can be gathered, collected, so that they can tell their stories. In Christensen's interpretation of the relief, the children gather stories. But they do not really do this with their hands. There are no hands visible; their chubby arms look like stumps (*para eso habeis nacido*), are buried in the sand (*nada, ello dirá; nothing, that he will say*), or turned away from the viewer (*tanto y más; so much and more*). Instead of hands – the tool of the proud, individual artist – light, the light of that light-writing that is photography, makes art possible. The relinquishing of mastery, so characteristic of all of Christensen's work, becomes the paradoxical tool of her political agency.

WAITING FOR COLUMBUS (II), CONTAINER 96, ART ACROSS OCEANS, COPENHAGEN CULTURAL CAPITAL 1996.
FRIDGE CONTAINER, 4 STEEL BENCHES EACH 250 X 35 X 37, GELATINE. PHOTO: ROBERTO FORTUNA









CHAPTER 6

ABSTRACTION TOWARD POLITICS

How can we situate Christensen as a political artist, then? The gathering babies are just figures, quite traditional ones. There is no enigma about the representational quality of Vigeland's relief nor of Goya's etchings or Christensen's remediation of both. And yet, as I have suggested, the tension between general and singular, between allegorical and historically specific, implies a determination to create ambiguity on many levels at once. That sustained ambiguity raises the question of figuration in its relationship with abstraction on the one hand, and with the political on the other. To put the issue in the simplest way: when they seem figurative, Christensen's works deceive; they perform their white lies about the status and function of the works as art. There is always a second look that tells us something different from the first-sight interpretation where a rose is a rose, into the more complex realm proposed by Gertrude Stein, where a rose is a rose is a rose.¹

Consider *Burning Down the House*, a site-specific painting, or installation, from 1999 at Kunstneres Hus in Oslo. The painted flames were depicted mechanically after the design used by the fast-food chain Burger King on their paper bags. Extended horizontally along the plinth of the room they appeared like a patterned ribbon. Both the pattern, from that other instance of popular culture, the fast-food chain, and the title, from the well-known tune by the pop group Talking Heads from the nineteen-eighties, refer to popular culture. In this sense the work accords well with the speech bubbles from the comics and the jell-o sculptures made from junk food.

Invariably, Christensen broaches cultural issues of political importance. She does so in gestures that address artistic concerns through popular culture and entertainment. In this way she avoids isolating art from the world or, conversely, she refrains from using art for political propaganda. Merging the three realms is the surest way to assert the complicity of art in politics, as well as to claim political agency for

art, by means of the bond that connects each to popular culture, in turn standing for, simply, social, collective life. *Burning Down the House* is a good example. This work was made at a specific historical moment when fire was on the news on an everyday basis as it is during my writing of this essay because the Peloponnesus is ablaze. When she was installing *Burning Down the House*, many were concerned and scared, as she was, by the conflict in Kosovo, where thousands of people experienced how their houses and villages were burnt down and the world they knew was literally on fire.

Christensen was not alone in addressing this disaster in her art. Many art works referred to Kosovo directly. Perhaps the most successful way of implicating all levels of politics was Mary Kelly's *Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi* from 2001. Like Christensen, Kelly uses worthless, inconspicuous material. In *Ballad* she uses the lint or dust from laundry dryers, on which to imprint (literally) her anguished narrative of a lost and found child. Kelly recounts a narrative about the way war invaded the private lives of people up to the happy ending where the child inserts itself, upon being found, into the patriarchy that caused the war in the first place. This story, based on a true anecdote from the Kosovo horrors published in the *Los Angeles Times* on 31 July 1999, is stamped onto worthless matter, the leftover of the inconspicuous housework performed routinely by women.² [ill. 6.1]

Both Kelly and Christensen make their highly political work outside of the divides of art history. Both artists are hard to pin down in any current, other than noticing that their work is conceptual, while, other than classical conceptualism, that conceptual nature is strongly invested in materiality. Along with this life-shattering, indeed world-threatening event of war, the gesture of making art itself is put up for scrutiny. For, surrounding an otherwise empty exhibition space with flames, even those from the grills of Burger King as used for advertising the fast food, also raises questions of institutional power. Fire – hovering between thing and event – is a powerful symbol as well as real danger and tool. Fire emanates associations of destruction and purification, transformation and energy. A symbol of catastrophe, it is also a symbol of power. And what it burns down, here, is the site of private lives – the house.

Considered in relation to the divide between abstraction and figuration, I submit that Christensen's work must be seen first of all as abstract, albeit if not in opposition to figuration, if it is to accede to its power as political art. But this statement, paradoxical to say the least in view of, especially, her photographic works, can only hold if we reconsider abstraction itself. For, as much as Christensen's photographs are figurative, abstraction is reputed to be a-political. That makes for two paradoxes.

According to common conceptions of abstraction that gained currency in the beginning of the twentieth century, an abstract work has no figuration, no representational meaning, and therefore, no recognizable referent. The logic is negative: a work is abstract when it lacks recognizable form. But this negativity is literally abstracting, purifying the object from its form, as if to punish it for its polluting commerce with the outside. This logic purifies art of its ties to the world. The result may be a flight into transcendence, even religious experience, or it may also end up in riveting fascination with an exalted purity. According to such a conception of abstraction, abstract art is also, inevitably, the opposite of political art.³

With her investment in matter, time, and fragmentation; with her passionate commitment to the everyday, the media, and world, Christensen is most certainly not an abstract artist in this sense. Far from being pure, her works can be quite messy. Her most abstract works are doubtlessly the jell-o sculptures. And these are also the most ostentatiously material ones. The golden steps from *Die Augen Essen Mit* (1994) end up decaying into

2 On this brilliant work, see Miguel Ángel Hernández Navarro 2007 "Resistencias a la imagen: Mary Kelly y la balada de la antivisualidad." *Estudios Visuales* 4: 71-98

3 For this and some of the next few paragraphs I have drawn on my earlier 2007 "Inside the Polis/Im Innern der Polis." In *Ann Veronica Janssens, An der Frühling*. German text translated by Martina Fuchs. Köln: DuMont Literatur und Kunst Verlag, 165-201(german 43-81).

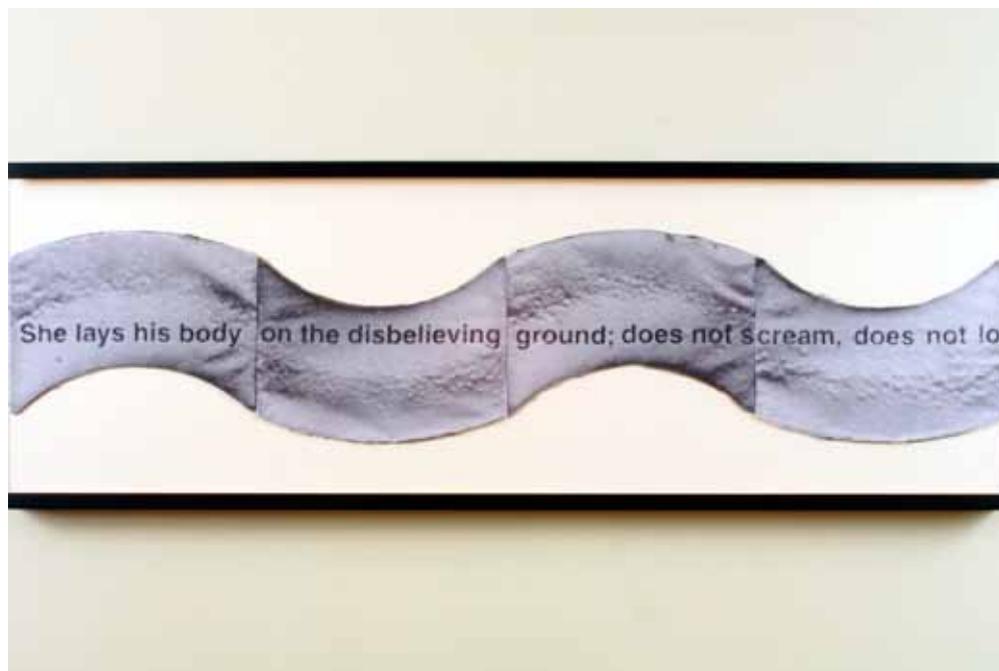
1 The famous, polyvalent line appears to confirm the no-nonsense realism that the third repetition undermines.

stinking masses and puddles. The four red benches of *Waiting for Columbus II* (1996) do not represent benches; they *are* benches, but then, simulacra, copies without originals; useless and unstable. Her installation *Everything Moves in Circles* (1996), in an exhibition commemorating Linnaeus, also worked with replication without representation. For this she replicated two showcases of the kind used in old natural history museums. One was filled with red jell-o, the other with yellow, and in spite of the merciless uniformity of the material they responded differently to time. The red one molded and rotted, the yellow one dried up. These works are abstract, yet invested in materiality and time, historical specificity and process.

This affiliation-in-difference is consistent with Christensen's connection to her predecessors – from Vermeer to Vigeland – because it marks a mode of social existence that is very important to her work. The same holds for its relationship to other forms of abstraction than this founding one. As Ernst van Alphen has recently reminded us, there are other conceptions of abstraction that are not to be conflated, and with each one, Christensen's work establishes a connection-in-difference. One is the expressionist one, mainly put forward in post-war American art, and advocated by Clement Greenberg and later Michael Fried, critics who took, and were given the position of masters of taste – the last connoisseurs. Here, purity is also a primary focus, but it is less purity *from* figuration as it is the purity *of* the medium. The work of painting is emphatically flat, no depth, only surface must be made to work. Sculpture has its own obsessions in this respect; abstract sculpture must at all cost be pure of narrative, hence, allegedly, of time.⁴

To this form of abstraction, Christensen addresses the ironic play with taste – now as a sense, not a

4 Ernst van Alphen 2004 "Opgenomen in abstractie." In Marian Breedveld, *Windstil*. Staphorst: Hein Eiferink, 5-25. Fried's (in)famous article 1967 "Art and Objecthood." *Artforum* V (10, Summer): 12-23 has set the tone. Rosalind E. Krauss' critique of Greenberg and Fried is worth reading; see 1993 *The Optical Unconscious*. Cambridge: MIT Press



ILL. 6.1 MARY KELLY, THE BALLAD OF KASTRIOT REXHEPI, 2001 COMPRESSED LINT, 49 PANELS-OVERALL DIMENSION 16 INCHES X 206 FEET. IMAGE COURTESY POSTMASTERS GALLERY, NEW YORK

cultural authority. Her jell-o sculptures are pristine, visually pure, when first made. And the clear-cut (literally!) shapes of the jell-o benches obey the anti-narrative rule. But then comes time, Christensen's major player, and ruins it all. Sweet taste turns sour or bitter, shapes collapse, and time tells a story after all: of decay and transfiguration. The split colors of the 1996 *Tiden* mentioned earlier do more than state the non-mastery of the artist; the fact that time takes the work, so to speak, out of her hands. It also betrays the deceptive nature of the former purity. Bright red, it turns out, is just a mix of colors, and square forms cannot hold and become fledgling round forms. Matter itself has lied.

Christensen's work is not expressionist either; on the contrary. The dots of mold invoke Jackson Pollock, one of the masters of abstract expressionism. But Christensen did not even make the dots; she only let

them emerge, without her hand touching them. While a passionate commitment is clearly visible in the pursuit of formal perfection and intense thematic engagement, nowhere is the artist herself at stake. Not that she remains aloof of her responsibility. Instead, she fulfills that responsibility in her engagement with the world, going out towards it instead of putting herself in the mix. There is a generosity in, for example, *Thinking & Talking*, and *Communication Objects*, where all the gestures the artist has made – the heating element, the easy-to-clean surfaces, and the fun association with comics – speak to the user, offering the work to them, instead of expressing herself.

The British art historian Briony Fer has described a third conception of abstraction. This conception, primarily revealed in critical essays by Georges Bataille on artists such as Miró and Picasso, focuses on the unconscious. Here, traumatism, loss, and castration

generate a refusal of or even an incapability to make clear form. Forms are not absent but assaulted. Again, the abstraction is primarily characterized by negativity, this time psychic and historical rather than metaphysical. And far from pure, as in the medium-oriented abstraction, it is here impure, confused, and superimposed on experiences that are themselves negative.

This abstraction is closer to Christensen's process works that are subject to short-term temporality. Not only the jell-o works but also the figurative Vermeer Polaroids stage the loss of color and sharpness of line. These works possess forms, but not forms that can be defined in an absolute sense; nor are they stable. *Tiden's* pristine shapes, horizontal as they are, "are" (simulacra of) benches, but as soon as we give them figurative meaning they become bodies of fallen soldiers. But these works do not have the traumatic, dark mood of the surrealist abstract works Fer discusses in her book. Instead, they merge serious awareness of horror with a life-enhancing sense of humor. Incidentally, this surrealist abstraction is very much male-oriented, even if not exclusively so.⁵

Christensen's form of abstraction is closer to a fourth view of abstraction, the Deleuzian view, as the philosopher elaborated it in writings with Félix Guattari. Revolting against the negativity of standard notions of abstraction, they refuse – as they do so frequently – the negative logic as well as the binary opposition this entails. Abstraction, for them, is not the opposite of figuration but, imagined along the axis of a temporal logic, precedes it. Christensen's abstraction has similarities with this view, but offers her own version of it. For example, she reverses the temporal logic of representation. While Deleuze and Guattari's abstract artists mainly postpone representation, Christensen absorbs its possibility but subjects it to time's caprices. Abstraction for the philosophers is the exploration of an unknown world of possible forms, not yet invented, while modernist artists labor to make those possibilities available. For Christensen, as for light-artist Janssens with whose work I see affiliations in this respect as well, these possibilities

would not be realized in subsequent forms that would, in turn, stabilize them, but in the way viewers temporarily and fleetingly "experience" forms that by all accounts do not exist "out there." In Janssens's work, this fugitivity is due to the delicate materiality of her primary material, which is light. Christensen's quivering, thin fabric in *Sculpture* offers this sense of possibility. Differently but along the same lines, she makes the representations precede the abstraction instead of emerging from it; then they fade away (the Vermeer Polaroids) or hover about the work as a possibility, and in *Exercises (III)*.⁶

A second important feature of this view seems also eminently fitting to characterize both Christensen's and Janssens' work. Instead of expression, abstraction conveys intensity, according to the philosophers. "Intense" means that the work is bristling with unknown and unseen possibilities and powers. The puddles with split colors of *Tiden* are the prime example of this. And so are, in a very different because literal way, the empty speech bubbles in *Communication Objects*. These possibilities emanate from the work to the viewer; they are by definition relational. They also need time to unfold. And in order to be able to see them, one must be blind to the habitual. In the final image of *Exercises (III)* the routine look of perspective must be shed if one is to see this image at all. And the reward for this shedding is the marvel of seeing shapes that, far from representing anything, appear to be just fragments of light and shade. Fragments hovering, in search of the lost whole.

Divesting perceptual routine is also a political act of opening up the world. Only then can one suspend already-known forms. This is the paradoxical aspect of abstraction. As Hernandez Navarro pointed out in connection with Mary Kelly's *Ballad*, it indicates the limits of the visual. In this precise sense, Janssens conceives of her works with mist as abstract, even if forms of the architecture, the environment, and the people engaging with it, are present. Christensen, in a similar vein, opens her works with jell-o and with Polaroid up to such an abstraction. But compared to

Deleuze and Guattari's view, the focus of intensity is displaced from what the works emanate to the viewer's experience. This is the logical consequence from the fact that there hardly are objects. No hard objects, at any rate, except for that hydrocephalic stone of wisdom on that precarious child's desk; or the stone speech bubbles, whose emptiness invites.

How, then, is abstraction the royal road to political art? This is where Christensen's moving back and forth between the specific and the general, her suspension of that very opposition, in *Dead Man Talking* achieves its full power. I recall Adorno's caution against particularity: "not [...] to search for the particular interest groups [...], as to decipher the general social tendencies that are expressed in these phenomena and through which the most powerful interests realize themselves".⁷ To address this problem involves accepting the severe critique couched in negative dialectic, yet refusing the paralysis that may result from a permanent inhabitation of negativity. This is why Christensen wavered between the particularity of Goya's etchings/titles interaction and Vigeland's generalization. To achieve this without losing the intensity that is capable to produce affect, she intensifies affect in matter and by means of time. She does so by slowing down duration. The resulting dilution welcomes the body's intense experience. As a consequence, narrow and oblivious individual existence can open itself up to transform its own, limited particularity into a porous subjectivity able to become permeable by the singularity of others. This is the political version of the search of matter's fragments' to become detail; details of a world that restores it to wholeness.

5 Briony Fer 1997 "Poussière/Peinture: Bataille on Painting." In Fer, *On Abstract Art*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 77-92. The gendered nature of castration is both over-determined and dubious, as clearly explained by Kaja Silverman in her masterful book 1996 *The Threshold of the Visible World*. New York: Routledge. Fer's study is indebted to Krauss and Bois' exhibition in the Centre Pompidou in Paris. See Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss 1997 *Formless: A User's Guide*. New York: Zone Books

6 This is a very simplified account of their view. They also consider Beckett and Kafka abstract authors. But I limit myself here to the consequences of their view for visual art. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari 1987 *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated and foreword by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. The philosophers' view, here rendered in conjunction with Van Alphen (see above), has been effectively summed up in an article by John Rajchman 1995 "Another View of Abstraction." *Journal of Philosophy and the Visual Arts* 5: 16-24

7 Many of Adorno's writings relevant to art in relation to social trauma have been collected in 2003 *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 158; emphasis added

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