

POINT 33 - ether

A discussion in 2000, with Kicki Sjogren for her doctoral dissertation, "The interaction between word and image", Art History Department of the University of Lund, Sweden)

KS. Have You made several versions of "Point 33 - ether"? In the background material that I got from Östasiatiska museet in Stockholm, I read something about "point 33 - helix"! Could You tell me more about this?

VN. There is only one version of "point 33 - ether" but, I have done a series of works titled "point 33 - ____". The first works (made in 1999) are a set of drawings of which two - titled "point 33 - feet" and "point 33 - meeting point" were part of a project called 'the world is taken to a point' initiated by an artist from Berlin. Next, I constructed "point 33 - helix" - a sculptural backpack for a body-based nomadic gallery called Scapular Gallery Nomad, performed by an artist from The Philippines.

KS. The title "Point 33 - ether". I read in the catalogue Text/Subtext that "33" relates to a compass that points inwards, but in what meaning do You employ the word "ether"? Does it relate to "ether" as in the sky/heaven, or to the anesthesia? Or both?!

VN. Studying a compass, it points in 32 directions surrounding us. Directions that most of us look in to seek whatever we are looking for in life. I came up with 'point 33' as directing inwards - to the point within us. "Ether" relates more to the idea of air or sky. When I re-visited my family home, the feeling I got was that the 'emptiness' of the space seemed to be filled with a special kind of airiness.

In some parts, the image in the video seemingly dissolves and vanishes into air - a bit like smoke. Also the net tent is quite ethereal and airy. I also employ it in a sense, to talk about our lived experiences which might not be visible as such to others but are very much within us and eventually go towards creating a kind of an aura or air around us. The 'anesthesia' connotation, as I thought at the time of coming up with this title, was quite ironical as the process of creating this piece worked in a way like an anesthetic for my turbulent emotions of that time - somewhat lightened my mind.

The structure and the elements of the piece :

KS. A. I could with my own words describe "Point 33" as consisting of two simple beds with cushions, and one of the beds is arranged outside and the other in the tent. I find this fascinating, because the work presents several possible viewing points for the spectator. I understand this arrangement as an invitation from You to the spectator to lie down and take part of the work. (?) Of course it should also be possible to stand anywhere in the room and view the installation from that point, or walk around in the projected textual landscape?

VN. Yes, I intended to create many points of views and also, for people to interact with the work by resting/sitting inside or outside. I was told that in Stockholm people coming to the exhibition were very hesitant to enter my work - Probably because people are conditioned from childhood by being told "do not touch the art works"! When the work was first installed in Singapore there were upto 4 people sitting inside the net, also many walked around touching the surface or smelling it even. This interaction was great - more than I had expected.

KS. B. What are Your thoughts or intention behind the doubling of the beds, is it some sort of inside/outside-theme?!

VN. The beds (if they were placed correctly when you visited the space) are placed to exactly mirror each other so that if you are sitting inside you might get an illusion of seeing a reflection of yourself in the same position outside. And, vice versa - blurring of geography. Yes, it is to talk about the dialectic arising from the inside/outside spaces - being outside and looking in or inside looking out.

KS. C. The form of the triangular cushions - is that an ordinary form of cushions in south-east Asia or is it a design of Your own

VN. They are traditional Thai cushions which are used to lean against on the floor or on a bed. They can be made bigger or smaller and with or without a mattress. I use the ones without a mattress and include the turquoise fabric (which is the pre-dominant colour in the video) as a mat instead.

The video - the sequence of writing and the notion of palimpsest :

KS. A. How is the video edited - is it a linear or cyclic "narration"? Is it a loop, so that the same events of writing and washing is repeated?

VN. It's both. The footage is approximately 13 minutes long which is then played in reverse. So, the marks appear and disappear. It is cyclical so there's no beginning or end as such - specially as the 26 min. footage is then looped on a two hour video tape.

KS. B. I noticed that the spectator is not possible to see any actual human hand writing, only the traces made of the writing procedure. Why have you chosen to exclude the moving hand? Is it for practical reasons or for other aesthetic concerns?

VN. The text is about re-visiting a space one has known intimately but in which there is no longer a physical presence of the people who were once living in a particular place. But "a presence" is almost tangible in the air of the place, which has built up over a period of time. It's like this - the traces or imprints remain well after we are gone, like a palimpsest of marks - our smells, sounds, emotions, conversations etc. fill the air. I knowingly excluded the portrayal of a hand writing text.

KS. C. Is the framed little paper with written text, a postcard (?), that You could see on the wall over the second bed, identical with the that piece of the paper that You have used for washing and writing in the video?

VN. Yes, it is a postcard and the same is on the wall on which I wrote and washed and filmed the video. I wanted to turn this 4 x 6 inch 2-dimensional space (of the card) into a multi-layered space and then, fill a whole room with the same via a projection and, create even more layers and planes by projecting on, in and through the net structure.

KS. D. I noticed that beside the text there is also some geometrical signs and dots that occurs in the video? I wonder if these elements maybe could be read as some sort of map? (I think that's it the theme of orientation and (dis)location that made me think about a map!)

VN. I love maps and include them in my works from time to time. Here, the signs are an architectural plan - one kind of map. In the Hindi (Indian) language we can use the same word 'naksha' for map, pattern, structure, chart, sketch, plan.

Reading :

KS. A. The process of reading the text You have written is complicated because the text constantly changes or is washed away. The verbal or literary interpretation is obscured. But I don't find this feature disturbing but rather intriguing! Is it latin letters, and english words, or have You used other languages as well?

VN. It is English written in Latin alphabet but deliberately loses literary interpretation, yes, some words can be read, and the once legible text goes back to simply being marks. So it could appear as anything - marks or scribbles or, people start to think : is it Hindi, Pali, Arabic, cuneiform??

KS. B. But I'm still a bit curious about what You're actually writing ? could You please tell, if it's not a secret?! I tried to read, but I only could spell out some separate words, like "solitude"?

VN. To explain a bit about the text: when I re-visited my childhood home after the death of my grandmother (an uncle inherited it) I was not prepared for what followed in terms of my own reaction. The place had been renovated and locked up and for the first time ever, I had to get permission and keys to go in. It struck me how throughout my 'nomadic' existence, this place, in my subconscious, had provided a grounding, always been there for me - "open" to me and now it was not. Added to this, there were many physical dislocations in the renovated house - such as misplacement of furniture, old cupboards pulled out and left in the rooms, doors or windows blocked to re-define spaces etc. Walking through the "empty" rooms, I was struck by the light coming in from the windows.

This pouring light and reflections, to me, were the only constant reminders of how the place had once 'felt'. I had a camera and took slides and for a long time after could not look at the images. The same day of the visit I wrote a long text. This included family related events and stories, what special foods were made on occasions, lists of things stored in the kitchen storeroom and my grandmother's cupboard etc., recording what I remembered and how I felt, I suppose, this was the only way to deal with my emotions. Here is a brief excerpt:

"..... an island of intimacy a pool of light a shut window a solitary piece of furniture a view of rooftops a storeroom a cupboard though now empty still contains layers of smells of things stored locating ones inner space in relation to the outer space becoming the store of essences that re-locates over and over again images of spaces known intimately witness to births deaths quarrels happy moments sad moments sexual awakenings aromatic pickling meeting parting places where life took shape over collective chatter of sorting grain and pounding spices once filled now abandoned even by the sparrows that built nests in its protective corners when boundaries shift and geographies blur the light pools constant witnesses in solitude to the passing of time lights and shadows stored of the place once called home left behind"

KS. C. I find this notion of the palimpsest (and the process of composing layers) very interesting. Do You have some special source of inspiration for this feature, like the writings of Roland Barthes or Gerard Genette or any maybe other artist?

VN. I've always liked the look and physical feel of impressions that are left on the following page when one writes with a strong hand in a notebook (a bit like Braille). And then when you write over this impression, it forms yet another 'pattern' on the same and next pages, where the knowledge and feeling of what you have started writing always remains - with subtlety. The scientist Archimedes' theories, obviously written in a time when paper was scarce and therefore valuable, are beautiful palimpsests - I have an old frail newspaper cutting of such documents.

Writing/filming/projecting - horisontal/vertical - material/immaterial :

KS. When Your writing on a piece of paper or in a book, You work so to say in a horisontal mode. But in process of filming and projecting the field of orientation shifts from horisontal to vertical, and this movement is also paralalled by some process of dematerialization, from writing on a material support, like paper, to just colored light in the projection of the video. The graphic materiality (the writing on a support) becomes light! Can You follow my line of thought?

I'm also thinking about something that Rosalind Krauss has written in her book Optical Unconscious in the chapter "six" when she discusses

Jackson Pollock's and Jasper Johns's work in relation to writing: "Writing, which differentiates itself from the pictorial images by orienting itself to the horizontal surface of the table rather than the vertical field of vision, should by all logic, go very far in defeating the 'image'."

"That it does not was a longstanding paradox of surrealist theory and something quickly observed by Pollock." "For as soon as writing is 'framed' it becomes an image: either 'writing' turned into a decorative picture of itself, as in Breton's presentations of schizophrenic productions, or a projective matrix within which to see images, as Polonius saw the camel in the clouds or Leonardo the figures in the fire."

VN. I've been reading Krauss's essay titled 'Horizontality' in her book - Formless. To add to what you mention,

.. from horizontal to vertical and then video, also playing with the scale, a process of de-materialization takes place. Thus words on a small piece of hand-made paper distort and become giant marks when projected and, the texture of the same paper becomes even more pronounced in the projection - like some kind of a landscape with craters when seen on this large scale.

When you talk of the graphic materiality (of the writing) turning to coloured light of video. I had just acquired a camera prior to making this work and atleast in this part of the world it's regarded as going 'high-tech'. I found it humorous and exciting to use the video process to record another process - that of 'hand writing' and making a drawing. So, a video about writing/drawing if you like which eventually, when installed in a certain way, goes through a process - that of a 'break-down' of the written words.

Also what you mention makes me now think of seeing old texts from the bible written in elaborate gold lettering called "illuminations" - connecting writing to light..

The tent - intentions and possible interpretations :

KS. I imagined the tent as a place of dreaming and resting, and maybe as a metaphor for a secured sleeping-place or childhood home? Or could You say that it is a manifestation of an internal room of memories that take concrete realisation? And that You could look at Your memories from outside, and then to into the tent and "be" inside. Or is it a temporary place for rest for the contemporary nomad in the globalized world? What was Your thoughts during the course of work?

VN. It's all that you mention above. When I conceived of the work, I wanted to make it so that it could travel in a small box and when installed, could fill a space. Very much in keeping with the way traditional nomads live - a 'home' is set up quickly wherever one chooses to rest for a night or longer. Also, the exhibition Text & Subtext is a travelling one and in my mind the work becomes "nomadic" by itself - it moves from site to site and provides a temporary space where people can rest, dream, etc. Certainly the connection with childhood and sleeping under a net is quite strong. The experience for me was/is of being in a space that is at once safe/secure and also intimidating. The play of shadows on the net at night can be scary, especially to a child, if say one suddenly wakes up in the middle of the night - yes, waking up from a dream and feeling that you were still in the dream.