

THE RAVEN: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANNE KATRINE SENSTAD

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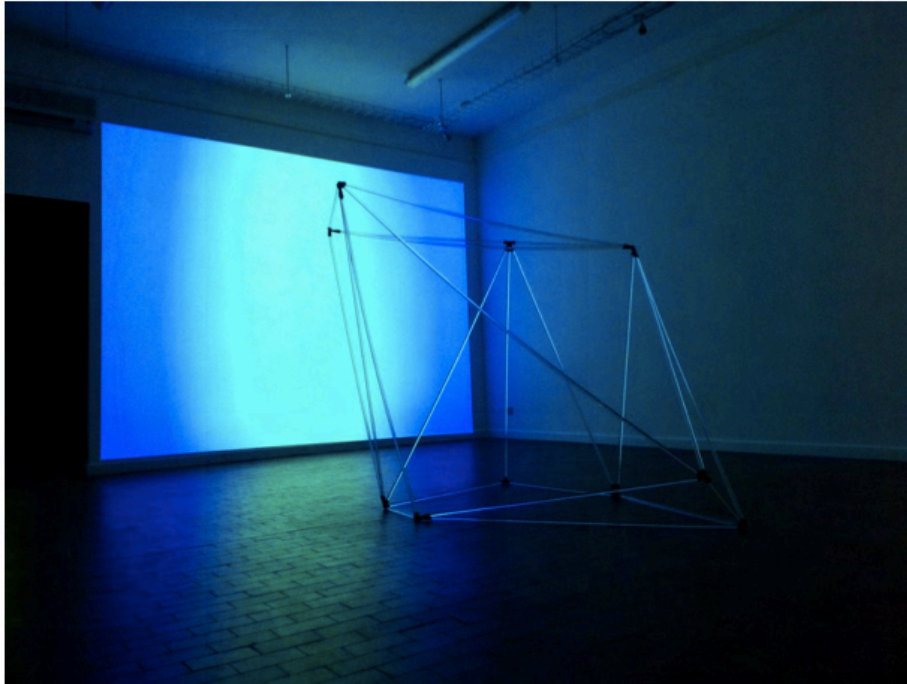


Anne Katrine Senstad, "Projections of the Surreal", 2012, Site-specific video projection , installation at The Surreal Gardens in Xilitla, Mexico.
Image courtesy of the artist, 2014

ANNE KATRINE SENSTAD: Coffee and correspondence. Organizational and practical work, the creative process happens nocturnally for me.

SW: What have you been listening to this past week?

AKS: I'm listening intensely to **C.C.Hennix**, an electronic sound pioneer, it's drone merged with eastern influences. I've started a collaboration with her which I'm deeply excited about, so I'm living with and absorbing the sound and expression in her performance. In using her sound for my video and installation work, I listen to it repeatedly while editing. She is currently still a collaborator of Henry Flynt and in the past with other drone-electronic sound people like Lamonte Young and Tony Conrad. I'm also listening to Popul Vuh's album Aguirre, the soundtrack for Werner Herzog's film Aguirre, Wrath of God w Klaus Kinski. They were A 70's trippy German early electronic avant-garde band who made the soundtracks for most of Hertzog's 70's films. Soundtracks like this tend to be more experiential narrative and almost visual. Synaesthetic.



Anne Katrine Senstad, Universals, Video projected, Colour Synesthesia, Silent version. 60 min DVD. Image courtesy of the artist, 2014. Installation view from Metamorphosis of the Virtual, Officina della Zattere, as part of The Venice Biennale, 2013

SW: What are you reading or have recently read?

AKS: I am currently reading Octavio Paz's *Conjunctions and Disjunctions*, which is in essence about the relationship of body and non-body in the history of civilization, the varying degrees of the corporeal and the spiritual. One could say an account and survey on the history of knowledge, eroticism, art, cultures, history of man, religion, that talks about where they all conjure – or not. He interweaves all these elements in a lyrical, yet intellectual/knowledgeable pen and mind. He goes into territories such as erotology in various religions, comparing with man's relationship to the body in art, literature and politics, bringing that into current history, quite complex and interesting. I am also reading Rimbaud's early poems, which are a delight and romantic escape into the subconscious free stream of thought, very creative and full of wonder, yet slightly melancholic. Reading Rimbaud is like having a conversation with a character from *Alice in Wonderland*. The poems were written as a child/teenager which is quite incredible, some of the poems have the voice and indication of experiences of someone older. It's part of my investigation into the surreal. Rimbaud is seen as an early influence on the development of the surrealist basic ideas of the free expression from the subconscious. Some of the lines are out of this world, like, "Our desires are deprived of cunning music", or "They have saints, veils, weavings of harmony and chromatic legends in the sunset". It goes on. It sort of tickles one's brain.

SW: When did you begin to make art?

AS: It has been a process and narrative development with no specific beginning. I was always very creative and made art in various forms all through life. I started working with photography when I was given a 35 mm Nikon camera around 16-17 and I started training my eye and printing black and white in the darkroom all night. I didn't think of it as art though, I was a "photographer" at first, photography wasn't really considered art at the time.

SW: Who were a few very strong individuals or specific influences (people, places, experiences or things) that may have served as thresholds or break through moments in the evolution of your practice?

AS: I never had a mentor or major "guide, it was always an internal process, life itself, nature and experiences that have served as the main evolutionary drive and influences. The inspiration of light and technical knowledge that strongly affected my vision and creative expression in an almost physical repetitive way, was working as a cinema projectionist in Oslo while studying social sciences and politics at college 2-3 years prior to moving to New York in 1990. I had to take the projectionist license which was a 6-month aspirant course while working with an old school projectionist as my teacher, sort of like in the film *Cinema Paradiso*. This entailed having to learn all the technical aspects of light bulbs used for projectors, about xenon gas, light and color temperatures, technicalities of film and optical sound, optics and lenses, various projector makes and engines, technical history of film, how sound behaves in spaces, surround sound and so on. The very action of projecting itself, working with the intense light streams from the projector and running the machinery, has clearly created a foundation for my visual language.

I do feel deeply inspired by certain artists who came into my orbit along the way though, I absorb and draw information to use for my work from what I find to be good art. Early on when I was influenced by Dan Flavin and James Turrell, it was pretty instinctual, I learned about their work simultaneously as I was actually using light tubes, or office lights as I prefer to call them, and various color filters to create spaces I then photographed and for my early video pieces.

I was also inspired by the land and light of the American West which I responded to in a pure sense. By not being familiar with the history of land art gave me freedom in that my development was tempered through purity of absorption and the experiential and not through that it's cool to dig Robert Smithson. I developed my own interpretational language, in responding to the landscape of American west and profundity nature itself. The development of my installation and site specific work in New Orleans and the Louisiana country side working with Sugarcane farmer Ronnie Waguespack on the agricultural land art piece The Sugarcane Labyrinth was a very fundamental time of creative freedom and exploration. It was in a way a self-imposed program in land specificity, time conditioned, social, environmentally and politically concerned work that I merged with my developed aesthetics concerning light, color and sound in installation and video art.

My solo show at Bjorn Ressel gallery in NY was an important exhibition that established my photographic works on light and color. I feel that was a strong moment in my development where I got to really show what my work was about in an established gallery setting and to the public. The gallery's identity was focused on minimalism and modernism and showed work by artists such as Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, Robert Rauschenberg and so on. I showed a series of large color panels, which would later lead me to the public Art commission I made in Ohio in 2009-11 with the architecture firm Snøhetta. The public art commission represents another major breakthrough moment. In those two years I learned to work with engineers, architects, construction employees and unions, and bureaucracy. The art commission consists of 39 large panels that were installed in the lobby of The Wolfe Center for the Arts, a performing art center at Bowling Green State University, and funded by the Ohio State Percent for Art Program. The 39 panels, literally weighing 1 ton in total, were produced in New York, shipped on an 18 wheeler trailer up to Ohio, and installed, under my supervision by a construction team I hired, so there were a lot of hard-core logistics I was solely responsible for.



Anne Katrine Senstad, Public Art Commission, ETERNAL, 2011. Photographic C Prints, Plexiglas, Aluminum brackets. The Wolfe Center for the Arts, BGSU, OH. Image courtesy of the artist, 2014

SW: Could you talk a bit about the role that healing/catharsis/shamanism might play in your thoughts/working process (if any) as you make decisions on materials, transformation and symbolism?

AS: Catharsis exists for me as focused calmness and response – a creative process while responding to space, site, content and allowing the inner to express and create in a very primitive and voiceless manner, almost removing the ego/self and allowing a channel of thoughts, ideas, visions, expression, performative action and creation to emerge. In a controlled way, in the moment of creation there is the synergy of complete focus, a transcendental and subconscious open space. It manifests as a calm, precise delivery. In working on conscious ideas and research, one builds up layers of information that are then transformed and digested through the intellect and creative levels, and merged with one's own psyche, in the subconscious and dream state – this emerges as concrete, focused practice. It's like when you know a handicraft, you don't have to think to make the object, your hands have a familiarity and a compulsion. There is a drive and deep need behind the production.

I have looked into various philosophies, religions, cultures, mysticism and ritual symbolism with great interest in both an anthropological sense and as inspiration that connects with processing ideas, the emotive and the abstract. I think ritualistic and shamanistic practice is a fundamental part of human consciousness and activity, even though it's not practiced classically in the contemporary branded city life. But human behavior does display a need for the ritualistic and fetishistic. People collect and have fetishistic relationships with objects, places, people, behavior, desires, there's often an order and system to things or how we do things that have intent. In my work I have some ritualistic expression, or repetitive patterns, I usually create series and not singular pieces, there's a narrative and relationship between artworks that belong in a series, or bodies of work that can be seen in relation to one another. The use of light and color is a recurring subject/object, that is used as the main protagonist, it becomes iconic. To express though art is in itself a form of shamanism, that one reaches in and walks the bridge of creativity between platforms that could be interpreted as inspiration, the invisible world, or anything else one could call it. The Norwegian painter Edvard Munch would listen to the radio tuned in between two radio stations, I see this image as the space artist work in. Shamanism is perhaps more an act of clearing, healing, performing, sorting out, than just opening the door, it is active. It is actively changing energy fields. Culturally I find shamanism/mysticism/indigenous belief systems very interesting as well as the theatrical aspect, there is a fearlessness of death, as you have in Mexican culture; life and death are two sides of the same coin, there is no separation. You find this in the old Nordic Viking culture, sagas and mythology as well. We also have an old belief system that entails the power and symbolism of nature as a whole, and especially in mountains, brooks, rivers and forests. In bridging the worlds of the seen and the unseen, you can say that art has a similar function. The language and function of art is to express what is inexpressible, it is in that sense transcendental. Why is some art so legendary, immortal, beyond time and space. It lives in that shared realm of consciousness and the exquisite that taps into the immortal, the eternal.

In working with social-political commentary and land art I think the role that art has is to bring awareness to a wider audience. The subject is given importance/attention, which again activates it. When working on the Sugarcane Labyrinth with Sugarcane farmer Ronnie Waguespack in Louisiana, I experienced that giving importance to agriculture and the social-economic conditions of small non-multi national corporation industrialized farming, gave not only information about their existence to a wider audience and city folk, but the local community and farmer Ronnie Waguespack himself felt a sense of importance in sharing their lives and work.

SW: Can you expand on your choice of labyrinth as a metaphor in your [sugarcane labyrinth](#) piece? can you tell a bit about the process of taking on such a large project and its process?

AS: The idea of the labyrinth developed from working in Shanghai for the installation "White Lights, Neon Words" at Zeng Moma in 2008. I felt compelled to do a human labyrinth – which didn't work out due to the restrictions for art in the public realm in China, however the Labyrinth concept was transferred to my work in New Orleans with KK Projects, and we decided to make a Labyrinth as an agricultural land art piece for the art part of Voodoo fest, and to plant cane locally as part of the restorative program for post Katrina neighborhoods that were hit socially and economically hardest like the lower 9th ward. Due to local politics and practicalities this did not work, so I started investigating Sugarcane farms in the countryside and learning everything I could about Sugarcane and farming it. I got together with Sugarcane farmer Ronnie Waguespack who felt that advocating Sugarcane as a bio fuel as opposed to the US governmental promoted corn industry, would be beneficial. Corn is now also the main sugar provider in the US rather than the healthier sugarcane sugar and molasses and bio fuel production is sadly in decline in the US with the expansion of Fracking and new oil drilling methods such as shale oil production. As did French-Brazilian agricultural economist Alex Vialou, who joined the project and became my right hand pilot on this project. I also had immense help from friends in New Orleans and Houma. Local help and support are needless to say a large part of succeeding in a project of this scale. The unique part of this project is that it is about agriculture as a culture and political statement merged with an artists aesthetic vision. Resulting from this I made an 11.22 minute video piece on the building process and experience of the Labyrinth with music by [JG Thirlwell](#) which was screened at the Canadian Museum of Nature, and will be part of my show in New Orleans this fall as a satellite installation for Prospect 3, the New Orleans biennial. Curator Pamela Bishop and I wanted to recreate the labyrinth experience with sugarcane and projections of the video piece. So the labyrinth and sugarcane is returning to its birthplace, and through that we're interweaving time and experience.

Regarding the idea/symbolism of the Labyrinth, the human mind exists as a labyrinth, as seen in literature, meditations, emotions and ideas. There are endless notions of the Labyrinth. Historically and mythologically, King Solomon claimed to have invented the labyrinth, but as we know through Greek Mythology it was Daedalus who invented it to hold the Minotaur, half man half bull. There are several versions of what Ariadne's thread represents, one lesser known one is where Ariadne's red thread and the labyrinth symbolizes the womb and the minotaur is then the fetus, in other versions young innocent boys are captured inside the labyrinth to be sacrificed. The Labyrinth also represents death in the end, what one cannot escape. In Christianity you have the labyrinth representing the path to god and salvation, in Cathedrals there's usually a circular labyrinth to walk while praying. The meditative process of walking it would bring the monks closer to god. But the Labyrinth exists in basically all cultures and religions you can think of. Later one has labyrinths and mazes in gardens in England and France for seduction, as activity, entertainment and games. This perhaps reflects the age of reasoning and moving away from the soul and closer to the flesh. The Labyrinth becomes a symbol of seduction.

In modern literature it can be seen especially in Jorge Luis Borges authorship, he refers to the labyrinth as the structure of the universe as a theme through much of his writing. The universe and man's existence is created as a labyrinth with multiple simultaneous realities and paths. I also have an affinity for gardens, they have to be manicured and organized. This comes from growing up in Singapore living next to the Botanical Garden and spending time in Singapore's many elaborately manicured and ornamented Chinese gardens.



Anne Katrine Senstad, *The Sugarcane Labyrinth*, 2009-10 aerial view, a 1.5 acre agricultural land art piece in Theriot, Louisiana. Image courtesy of the artist, 2014.

SW: Are any of your pieces self portraits?

AS: All work is a self-portrait in a sense, on some abstract level. Or aspects of a part of oneself, even with work that's social political, because those are subjects we are concerned with as artists and human beings.

SW: What is one current project you are working on?

AS: I am working on quite a few projects now for shows through 2015. Most of them are large site specific and spatially oriented pieces. One large piece I am very excited about is the work I'm developing for the inaugural Bruges Triennial in Belgium that opens in May 2015. The installation will be word based and dealing with capitalism. Another exciting piece for me is the installation I am developing for ISEA Dubai 2014, opening in October. Here I'm collaborating with electronic sound and drone composer C.C.Hennix. The piece is based on traditions of the Bedouin and will consist of an electronic Bedouin tent with light and sound installation.

SW: Your work often involves many materials and you work with many others as you direct projects. So, do you spend a lot of time in the studio alone or need a lot of think space alone time? What is your balance of the need to retreat into a reclusive state to continually reconnect with your individual voice and then also be out in the world working with others, exhibiting, lecturing etc.?

AS: I really enjoy exhibiting, I find great pleasure in it and sharing my work with the world. I see that part of my practice as my external self. But in the creative process I can't have people around, I need to work in solitude and have space to think. However I do enjoy brainstorming or discussing with other artists, writers, architects, filmmakers and academic people. In production of the art work itself, I enjoy working with manufacturers, they usually have a lot of technical information and experience that opens up to new possibilities of what I can do with materials and how to produce work. I usually edit the video pieces myself, but have worked with editor Manuel Sander on 4 video pieces, and his vision and editing capabilities are a good input to what one can do, so there is a communal factor there that I think is quite fun and healthy to share and explore. With composers and musicians I feel that there is a shared platform where we inspire each other. I often have a lot of sound ideas myself, and do a lot of research on sound to use for my pieces that I share with the composer. I have worked with musician and composer JG Thirwell on a number of projection installation pieces and video's, and I think that the dynamism in that working relationship is very creative, professional and with ease. I think it's important to let the composer do their thing as well, so to not micromanage or be controlling. I think it's important to respect other people's creativity and level of experience, as long as you explain what you're doing and what your vision with the project is. With a known composer, it's not like you're working with an assistant you have to guide so there's mutual respect for the other persons history and capabilities. It should all come together as a stronger piece, where the composer is also proud of what they have created and feel they stand for it. With Thirwell, he's included pieces he composed for me on his CD's, so we're all benefiting from the creative efforts and merging of ideas.

SW: What kind of bird are you?

AS: I'm a hybrid; part colibri, condor, owl and a flamingo. Defiantly not a woodpecker, turkey or a parrot.



Anne Katrine Senstad, *Convergence of Light*, 2013, projection installation at Cathedral Shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Dallas Aurora, Dallas, Texas. Image courtesy of the artist, 2014