

THE MEANING OF HANDS

“Artists are people who are making a physical manifestation of their sense of possibility.”
(Kiki Smith)

On a cold December morning in 2005, I am at the studio of Liv Zachrisson and Martine Linge. I am to contribute, with my hands, to their collaborative project “hvit lyd” (white sound), that will be shown at Vigeland Museum in the spring of 2006. They have already explained the casting process to me, that I will be covered in plaster from my fingers up a ways to my elbows, and that the whole thing will take approximately one hour. They have also determined what position I will be in. My hands will be formed like a bowl, as if I’m going to drink from them, or as I am holding my hands around something protectively. One week later, I happen to be looking at some old black and white family photographs, and discover one that was taken of me as a child. I am sitting on a chair smiling, and am reaching out my hands towards the photographer. I am holding them in precisely the same position as those that are immortalized in plaster many years later.

That gesture represents something of what I immediately experienced upon first gaining insight into this project. The way I experienced being packed in plaster, while also being an integrated part of the casting process’s own movements, was also how I experienced the works of Liv Zachrisson and Martine Linge – as visible and invisible movements in time. And some of these movements can take us further in to something forgotten, or something uncomfortably close. On the one hand, gestures made with the body can seem instantly recognizable, and on the other hand, decoding them can be complicated. Because I saw the photograph of myself, and simultaneously thought of my own hands in plaster, I was suddenly not entirely sure what my hands actually were saying.

The Process and That Which is White

Zachrisson’s and Linge’s project consists of several distinct material elements – video, white tablecloths, tables, and plaster casts. Each of these functions as a visual extension of the others, and creates a wealth of possibilities as well – and not merely by dint of the differences in form, structure, category, and properties. The project also makes possible a poetically rich space where a series of suggestive clues in the form of thoughts, actions, and dialogues are subtly woven together. In this way, these four elements become the basis for many different experiences of the room in which they function. The elements constitute a structure, an architecture in the architecture: tables above tables or alone, tablecloths piled together or spread out over tables, the light of the projector falling upon the wall in a loop, and all the hands in plaster, grouped and arranged, like the scene of some event or act, where the event is still underway – yet also completed and finite.

In this artificially illuminated room, white is central. The use of colors is often culturally determined, and the same color can mean different things in different places and during different time periods. In our part of the world, white is generally connected with purity, innocence, and peace. In China, on the other hand, white symbolizes above all sorrow. Aside from the symbolism of color, we can also think of white as a component of daylight: that white is white because it reflects all visible light. But because this project does not exist in daylight, and is only accessible to the eye via demarcated light sources,

many contrasts of white are encountered here. Zachrisson's and Linge's work creates, in other words, not simply recognizable harmonies; it also violates generally accepted meanings, even if, here, we aren't dealing with large dramas. It in this state of calm, of balance, melancholy and thoughtfulness also exist, and the formal aspects of the exhibition, create the possibility of something that doesn't entirely permit formulation in a precisely conveyed verbal language. An unease one hadn't exactly expected develops. In the absence of light, blackness and darkness also arise – on many levels. It sets upon all structures, softens them, hides them and makes all inaccessible hollows and cavities behind the textiles and under the tables even darker.

Points of Rotation

That the hands are a place where language is made visible is something we know from the reality of the deaf. For those who aren't deaf, as well, the hands are always part of the doing or saying of something, but this we tend not to think much about, perhaps not until we see what the hands of others are doing. Who hasn't followed with fascination how the body is involved in a conversation, when meaning arises in the way that the hands move?

The plaster casts of hands show that many people have been involved. Woman, men, young, old – there is a chorus of quiet voices, hands captured in a moment, frozen in plaster. But even if we aren't able to learn more about them, they are nonetheless individual, each with its anatomical peculiarities. We identify with the turning of a wrist, with the placement of two fingers in relation to each other, or with the bend in the palm of a hand. Even though the artists have selected several determinate positions of the hands, a much larger register of various signs opens up: hesitant, questioning, closed, confirming, waiting, eager, resting, outstretched, protective, and so on. They are hands that do not have anything firm to hold on to, no familiar objects to grab hold of, nothing that yields concrete answers – only gestures. They are both present and absent. They move towards each other and they are cut off from each other.

The hands become a visual pivot point, and through them a framework for comprehending the project becomes manifest. They contribute to the process of defining the space, and they open the space up for us, with respect to both structure and content. The space unfolds in parallel layers of time, in the short moments and in the long stretches of time, in the concrete and physical, and in the mental and abstract, in video and in plaster. One simple hand gesture can contain an entire body of knowledge, and thus contains both the past and the present.

The Museum Connection

No one who exhibits at Vigeland Museum can claim to be entirely liberated from the weighty historical context of the museum. This applies to Zachrisson and Linge as well. Whether they like it or not, their plaster elements enter into a relation with models and plaster casts already there. The question is what the effect is when this project enters. What happens at the point where the project and the history meet, and how do we perceive it? Even though the artists have chosen a cast technique, continuing a tradition, the sculptural proximity to the museum is experienced as neither disturbing nor problematic. In this way, Vigeland is both taken along and banished. By using concurrent

elements, Zachrisson and Linge manage to establish a distinction. In this encounter, their own work becomes both strong and vulnerable at the same time. We compare and expose twice, but the layers nonetheless don't line up with one another.

Textile Events

Two people hold a large white tablecloth. Neither of them needs to say anything. The hands have done this before. The body knows how it should move for the tablecloth to be unfolded, lifted, stroked, and finally folded together. We perhaps did something similar a long, long time ago, but nonetheless, it has not been forgotten. The body has taken care of and stored that knowledge. We immediately recall the characteristic feeling of seeing the fabric lifted up high in the air between our hands. We know what it feels like when the waves of air propagate along the entire tablecloth and over to the person standing on the other side – almost like a mirror. At a certain point, the fingers grasp onto the cloth firmly, and, together in a coordinated motion, the tablecloth is tightened up from each side while the two move closer to each other. And when all motion is completed, when both people stand face to face with the tablecloth between them, then the cloth has become a folded together zero-point. Sooner or later, the cloth will once again be unfolded, shaken open, and laid over a table.

That little performative act is actually nothing other than a practical task of a quotidian routine, a concrete way to organize and maintain order in the everyday textiles of the house. But in Zachrisson's and Linge's abstract video loop, it is the folding of a tablecloth separated from the surroundings of the everyday – and has become a simple, but poetically laden choreography. A necessary action appears as a beautiful and intensely visual image. Textiles are touched, they are taken in via the perspective of the fingertips. Textiles are experienced via bodily contact, via heaviness and lightness. That which is entirely concrete has acquired something open, timeless, and abstract about it. In such an aesthetic experience, the space of meaning is expanded.

Dialogues

The table and the tablecloth represent a symbolic starting point for a potential dialogue. People sit at a table, a tablecloth is placed on the table, and hands begin to stroke and feel the textile while the conversation flows and carries itself in the air between those who sit opposite one another. The words billow, expand, fold together, and unfold themselves again, not unlike the ritual that the tablecloth has gone through. The table has become an anchor, a place where conversations can be created.

In this situation, there is nonetheless a physical distance between people. The white tablecloth signifies precisely that intervening space. And under the tablecloth, secret things can take place that never reach the light of day, things that remain as dark insinuations. The cloth covers over, but it also draws attention to that which doesn't get exposed.

In the span between light and dark, between soft and hard forms, in a subtle interplay with the surroundings, and via tradition and the present, "hvit lyd" (white sound), comes into being. And together with the many objects of the installation, in the span between order and chaos, the dialogue between the artists also transpires all the way into the museum. For Zachrisson and Linge, this joint project is formed by a processual and searching train of thought. The preparations have taken place on many levels, from concrete testing and determinations, to detailed discussions on themes, ideas and aesthetic choices. In parallel with this, displacements in ways of seeing and thinking have arisen – that which can arise when two people meet in a common physical and mental

space, when dialogue is about sharing and exchanging experiences. The traces of that process are intrinsic to the elements we encounter in the exhibition room. In this way, Liv Zachrisson and Martine Linge demonstrate that the dialogic never can be taken for granted. It always will demand the effort of everyone involved.

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