

Experiencing Semantics with Roni Horn



Fig.1 Roni Horn

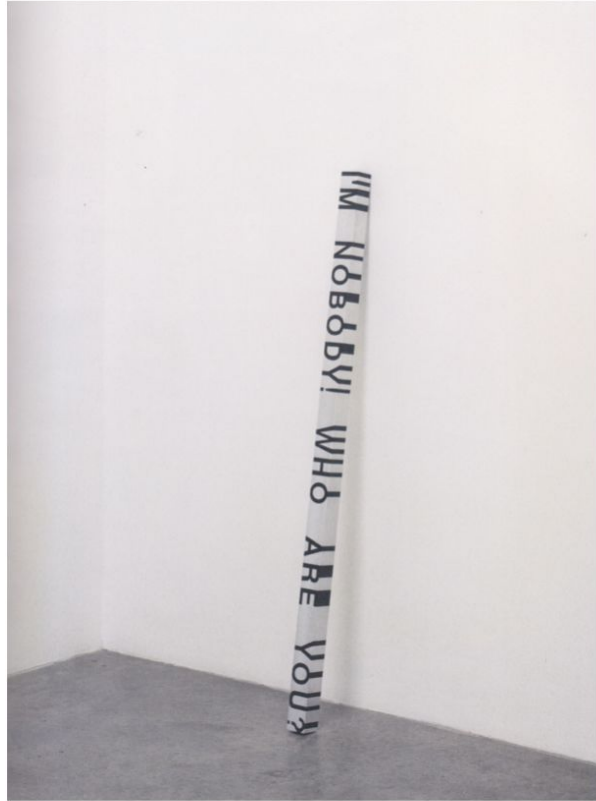


Fig.2 Horn, R.,(1994/2003). *Key and Clue, No 288*.
129.5 x 5.1x5.1 cm aluminium and solid cast plastic

This essay is a very personal account of how the writer has experienced Roni Horn's approach to art and to identity through the lens of semantics. Its declared subjectivity makes it open to debate, and it shuns away from the pretentiousness of revealing an encompassing truth about her artistic endeavour, let alone about the human being behind it. It is simply yet another perspective on this beguiling artist.

Horn is an American artist of world renown. Throughout her lasting career she has been experimenting with a variety of materials including glass, metals, plastic and rubber (Fig.2-5). Her practice encompasses, amongst other media, drawing (Fig.18), both sculpture and photographic installations (Fig. 2-6) and art performance (Fig.8). Over the years she has developed a close intimacy with Iceland, a second home and a powerful source of inspiration. Identity is one of the themes that prevails in her artistic discourse.

The present analysis concentrates only on sculptures and photographic installations with reference to identity. Horn's work will b



Fig.3 Horn, R., (2006-07). *Opposite of White, v. 1 (Large)* . Height 50.8 cm, diameter 142.2 cm. Solid cast glass.



Fig.4 Horn, R., (1994-1995). *Pair Gold Mats, for Ross and Felix*. Two pure gold mats 0.002 x 152.4 x 124.5 cm each.



Fig.5 Horn, R., (2004). *Rings of L especta r (Agua Viva)*. Twenty-five rubber tiles inlaid with rubber text, height 3cm e a c h , approximately 139.3 square m



e discovered as much as possible through her own words. Her ideas about art were clear from the beginning, and she managed to remain consistently loyal through time to her initial ambition:

“Eyewitness...is people owning up to their experience...I have this ambition to make the meaning of a work people’s experience of it. Every eyewitness is an authority” (Horn, 2009b, p12).



Fig.6 Horn, R., (2003-04).
Doubt by Water. Thirty double-sided pigment prints in plastic sleeves on aluminium stanchions. Photographs 41.4 x55.9 each, stanchion 179.1 each.

The centrality of 'meaning' imperatively points to semantics.

Human languages are an ideal ground for anyone interested in meaning because they provide the most complex source of significations. Both linguistic signs and languages as a whole are ontologically arbitrary (Chandler, 1983). As Ferdinand de Saussure pointed out "if words had the job of representing concepts fixed in advance, one would be able to find exact equivalents for them as between one language and another. But this is not the case" (Chandler, 1983). Languages divide reality into arbitrary categories, hence they act as mediators of individuals' signification of reality. Furthermore, from an individual's perspective, the language one is born into is a given; its arbitrariness leads to the acceptance of its implicit semantic schemes as a 'natural'. Paraphrasing, the authority of the eyewitness is obfuscated by the elusive meaning-harnessing embedded in languages.

Horn seems to be acutely aware of this imposition, especially with regards to identity. She likes to think of herself as an escapist artist, and shuns being trapped in definitions such as painter, sculptor or photographer (Tate, 2009 & Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2013). Her need to break free has been there since her childhood when she wanted to run away from the suburb in which she grew up; a place where "the only presence was absence...I knew I wanted to run out of there at a very early age" (Tate, 2009a). Furthermore, in a nation where until 1973 homosexuality was officially considered a sexual disorder, wasn't the concept of identity she was being educated into another burdensome absent presence?

'The androgyny of my name had a deep influence on me. I understood from when I was young that my gender was nobody's business.' (Horn,2009b, p11)

'Androgyny is the possibility of a thing containing multiple identities... Integrating difference is the basis of identity, not the exclusion of it. You are this and this and that....' (Horn, 2009b, p11)

"The mutable version of identity is not an aberration...the fixed version is the aberration" (Horn 2009b, p79).

Through her words, identity, a symbolic sign, almost feels like a suffocating iron maiden, and the urge to get rid of it erupts. In Horn's works the writer perceives a deliberate intent to undermine the conventional signification of identity in order to appropriate her own meaning. Her art pieces elicit the audience to do the same by trusting their own eyewitness.

Horn's rebellion seems profoundly entangled with language: she rebels to it by using its logics, and language is her elective artistic choice:

"My relationship to my work is extremely verbal, extremely language-based. I am probably more language-based than I am visual, and I move through language to arrive at the visual" (Art21, 2011).

Horn refers to drawing, sculpture and photography as idioms and she uses them as such. Artists often tend to develop a passion for the formal properties of the medium they use: they identify and engage with their elective medium. To Horn media are literally instrumental to the handling of meaning. She considers drawing as "not material specific" (Tate, 2009a). Horn compares sculpture to Chinese take away food (Tate, 2009a) because she does not create it in her studio, she simply hires and carefully instructs crafted artisans. Finally she does not consider herself a photographer; she feels more like a director of photographers (Tate, 2009a).

If visual media are idioms, then their basic units and their logics are to be found in the semantic field. The overall impression is that the artist leverages on the more intuitive, as opposed to conventional, nature of icons and indexes to concoct a mix capable of unmasking and questioning the arbitrariness of a specific symbol: identity.

The set up for her challenge is the installation, the elective locus of the conceptual artist, the space constructed with the viewer in mind. Art spaces are very connotative of what they contain. They could be thought of as indexical signs because they point artworks at the visitors. An abandoned air balloon in a public space would probably go un-noticed by most



Fig.7 Manzoni, P., (1960). *Artist's Breath Fiato d'Artista*. Balloon, rope, lead seals and bronze plaque on wooden base.

passersby. Yet, when a red balloon appeared within an art space, on a wooden plinth, and with a tag bearing *Artist's Breath*, visitors stopped and stared to understand what Piero Manzoni was trying to express. Since the very beginning of her practice Horn has been intimately aware of the psychological impact that museums and galleries produce on the viewer; it is one of the pillars in the construction of the experience of meaning.



Fig.8 Horn, R., (1974-75). *Ant-Farm*. Silent performance at studio, Providence, Rhode Island. Oak, glass, earth, and ants 119.4 x 177.8 x 10.2 cm

“Every artist who does the work that is meant to be looked at...[is] setting the viewer in a certain relation to the view...I think that the sculptures and the photographic installations are very performative on the part of the viewer. If you come through the show unless you are not active in there, there is nothing in there.” (Tate, 2009).

Horn activates her audience by thwarting its expectations through both visual and textual tools: she thrives on paradoxes. She also orchestrates the observer’s journey through an intricate web of interactions between the elements of the installations, i.e. usually title, sculpture or photographs, and viewer. Finally, it is mostly through doubles and repetitions that she both points to identity and instills doubt about its conventional interpretation.

Visually, she approaches the viewer with signs that, per se, are rather unequivocally iconic. Her sculptures are usually monochromatic solids easily assimilated to standard geometrical forms (Fig. 9, 14, 16). Horn’s images are not crowded with details; the eye easily rests on one focal point: a face, a water surface (Fig. 10), a stuffed animal (Fig. 11). No sculpture nor image could be mistaken for an example of aesthetic or technical prowess. The gaze can only interpret them literally, for what they stand for. Her images are solidly anchored in their bare iconicity. A sculpture or a single image is voided of meaning because, within the art space,

one expects to see more than an ordinary self-referential icon. Paradoxically, seen outside a museum, without any expectations hanging over them they could regain their semantic valence. The viewer is pushed to search beyond the obvious; the experience has been triggered.



Fig.9 Horn, R., (2008). *Pink Tons*. Solid cast glass 48x48x48 cm



Fig.10 Horn, R., (2008). *Becoming a Landscape*.
Chromogenic print 58.4 x 77.5 cm 41.4 x 55.9 Part of the of the installation of twenty chromogenic prints. Six prints 52,1 x 52.1 cm fourteen prints 58.4 x 77.5 cm 41.4 x 55.9



Fig.11 Horn, R., (1998). *Dead Owl*. Iris print 73.7 x 73.7 cm

Verbally, Horn 'manipulates' titles. Titles are usually informative of the artwork; they guide the viewer in the interpretation of it. They are indexes that point to the meaning of the representation or at least this is what the viewer expects. She systematically chooses nouns that have multiple meanings and innuendos, e.g. *Bird*, or that are enigmatic with reference to the work, e.g. *Pi*, *Asphere*, or she opts for shifters, e.g. *This is you*, *This is me*. Shifters are a specific subset of indexes that per se are void of any meaning; they need a referent to pick up one. For example in *You are the Weather*, 'you' could stand for the sitter, the photographer or the viewer. Her titles are ambiguous. If the visual icons seem void of significance, the indexes point simultaneously in multiple directions. Horn's work could be entered from anywhere for there is no front door.

Doubles and repetitions play a fundamental role. The concept of identity ontologically revolves around the double, because the self needs the opposition to the other in order to establish itself as identical to itself. At the same time, the co-presence of the self and of the other opens a dialectical space between the two, which leads to the process of identification. Identification is the continuous morphing of the self through successive contaminations with the other. This leads to an accumulation of different fragments within the self; it turns the compactness of the self into a cohabitation of multiples. Through doubles and repetitions Horn evokes the mutable and multiple nature of identity.

The artist creates visual doubles by paring images which are often very similar (Fig. 12), when not identical. She confronts a viewer that is looking for an interpretation: an observer.

Each ostensibly meaningless icon is an index that points to comparison: the search for differences and similarities is triggered. The viewer often lands on a fictitious double because either the two images are identical or their differences are semantically irrelevant. The bereaved viewer is suspended in the non resolved tension between the pushing apart of the double (if there are two images then they are not the same) and the pulling together of the similarly/identically perceived. If the comparing is short-circuited then the identifying is disintegrated.

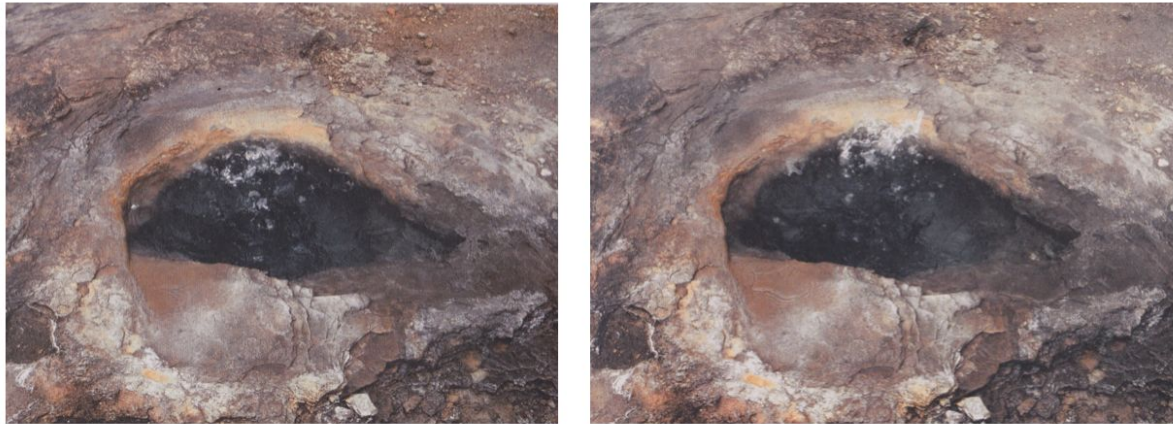


Fig.12 Horn, R., (2008). *Becoming a Landscape*. Two Chromogenic print 58.4 x 77.5 cm. Part of the of the installation of twenty chromogenic prints. Six prints 52,1 x 52.1 cm fourteen prints 58.4 x 77.5 cm 41.4 x55.9



Fig.13 Horn, R., (1998). *Dead Owl*. Iris print 73.7 x 73.7 cm

Horn's visual repetitions revolve around the dis-continuous continuity of an indexical self that keeps on casting a different representation of the same physical persona. Viewers self represent themselves as a multitude by staring at their blurred and ever-changing reflections on the surfaces of the sculpture (Fig.14-16). Reflection is all there is to see because it isn't the sculpture's physicality that carries the unique artist's imprinting. An elusive self emerges as a series of fragments, as a coalescence of multitudes, or as both.

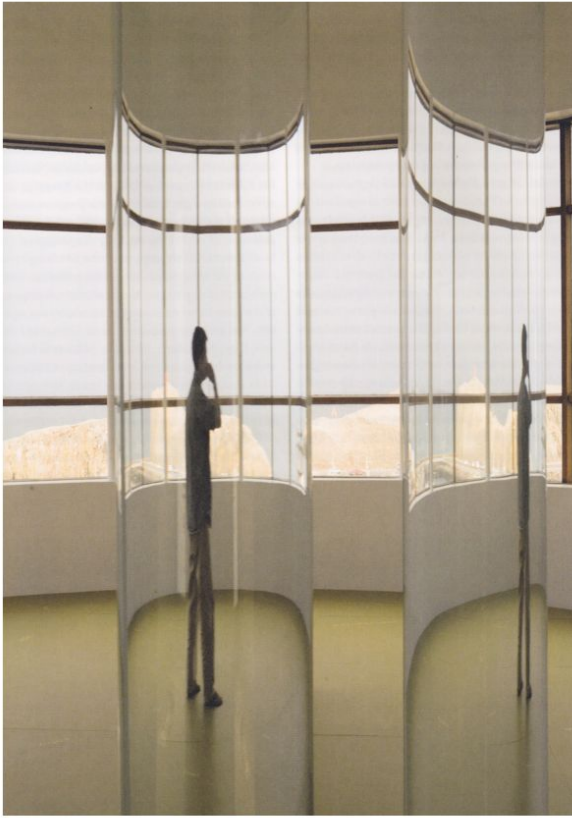


Fig.14 Horn, R., (2007). VATNASAFN/
LIBRARY OF WATER



Fig.15 Horn, R., (2007). *Blue by Blue.* (detail)
Solid cast glass blocks, 22.9 x 101.6 x 152.4
cm each



Fig.16 Horn, R.,
(2007). *Blue by Blue.*
Solid cast glass
blocks, 22.9 x 101.6 x
152.4 cm each

Horn's works are a beguiling labyrinth for the mind; perhaps the only way to stay loyal to their spirit is to narrate a viewer's experience. The writer has not been exposed in person to her installations, what follows is an imaginary encounter with *Asphere*.

A solid steel sphere sits on the floor surrounded by empty space. Its opaque surface is exposed to contingency. The absence of the pedestal and its anonymous look eclipse the search for the artist's unique imprint. A first circumnavigation seems to reveal a slightly off-form, but perhaps this is simply an optical illusion. The enigma deepens, and moving through space won't solve it. An insolent smudge keeps distracting the gaze; it morphs on the sphere and won't go away: if I could only get rid of my body... The scrupulous search stalls on



Fig.17 Horn, R., (1988-2001). *Asphere*. Solid forged stainless steel, Diameter 30.5-32.5 cm

the movable spot, the only tangible truth. Someone arrives; multiple spots now flirt on the sphere, they mix like balloons in the air, each one securely tied to a different wrist. Somebody utters "one, no one, and one hundred thousand". It is definitely time to resort to the title. *Asphere*: What a paradoxical connection! Not about scope: the lens that corrects the visual aberration with the opaque and distorting 'mirror'. Neither about form: the quasi-spherical quasi-cylindrical glass with the metallic solid that-is-not-about-the-form. It mustn't be that... I know. It's the privative 'a' to suggest it's not a sphere. But, no: that thing is definitely one! A misspelling is ruled out. I am about to give up, when a lightning melts down, from the sphere's top curving down to the floor, like a cascade of light. It was my gaze... I can finally see what my eyes already knew. It was always about the smudge; it was never about a-sphere, that's what was

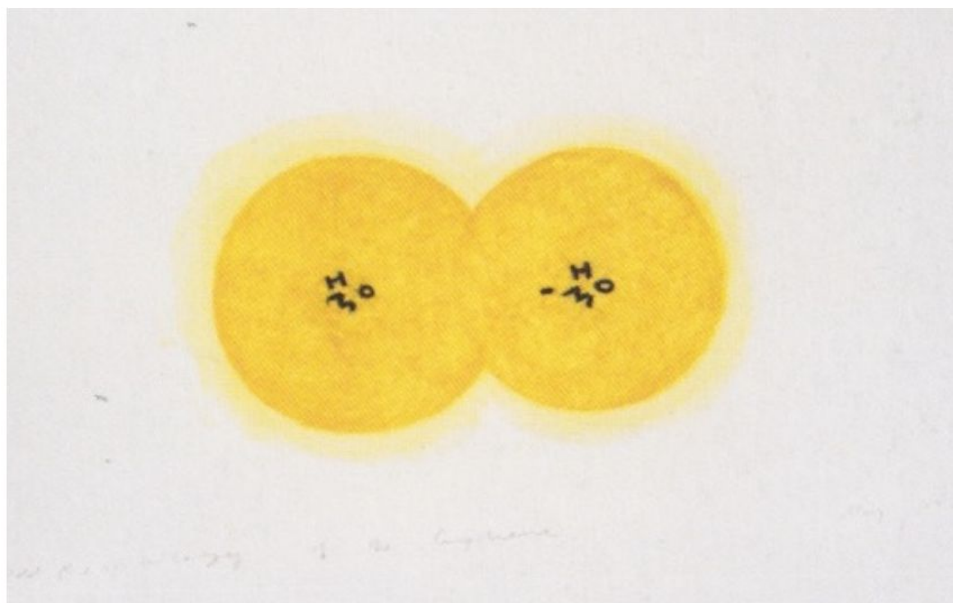


Fig.18 Horn, R., (1988). *The Odd Morphology of the Asphere*. Watercolour and graphite on paper, 50.2 x 43.2 cm

there to see.

And this is how Horn has experienced her own sculpture: 'asphere...is the object of a corrected spelling: a-sphere. The proximity of these opposite meanings point to its inclusive nature....' " [It] is an homage to androgyny. It gives the experience of something initially familiar , but the more time spent with it, the less familiar it becomes. I think of it as a self-portrait." (Horn, 2009, p17).

There are indeed many ways into Horn's world, and the linguistic one seems to be just one of the many. Rosalind Krauss (1985) suggested that the artistic pluralism of the 70s could be seen as a synchronic march of individuals marked by the index. If that is held true, Horn is at one with her time.

Word count 2281

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Images

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