

## Climatic Accounts

By: Tine Semb

Constructions that look like easels are placed within different landscapes. But in place of a canvas they hold a narrow basin of liquid and a sheet of paper. Like a director, Høyer sets up pigment and water and when she leaves the scene the work begins to unfold by itself.

For almost a decade Gunnhilde Høyer's work has revolved around studies of various forms of printing. With remarkable persistence and seemingly inexhaustible zeal she has studied what an imprint can be, how it can be preserved and understood. And the real core of the project, or hotbed if you will, seems to be Høyer's wanting to know what an imprint can tell us about the "sender" <sup>1</sup> – its referent, or source of being – rather than what the original itself does. Just like an X-ray image, an imprint is revealed from torn paper, showing all details and gestures in black on white. Or how ink, absorbed into a rug and then taken through the graphic press, will draw the tactility of the textile.

In the project *Environmental Residue*, Høyer has given further complexity to the works: time-consuming, controlled experiments in which climatic factors such as temperature, wind and sun intensity comprise the result. Specially-constructed basins or chambers containing water, pigment, and a sheet immersed into each are placed in an outdoor space, protected only by a little roof. In direct dialogue with the weather the water gradually evaporates over months until it is dry. Left on the sheet are traces of pigment and slag – an imprint of the weather at a certain place at a certain time. The image that remains is then marked with the time and place for the survey.

Høyer's work in facilitating site-specific "portraits" of the climatic conditions can undoubtedly be seen as an extension of her specialising in printing and as part of a larger, ongoing project. The pictures that remain after these evaporations are monochrome and in transparent colours. It is not completely sure what we see. They are abstract, but definitely cast a hint of the landscape with their patterns of horizontal stripes, thereby drawing the representation closer to the tradition of landscape painting. But unlike landscape painting, these pictures are devoid of the artist's control of the motive. It is only set up to allow nature's own processes to have full rein. As Høyer says "[...] the watercolours visualise the weather that was there at exactly that place during the time the painting was created. Hence they are like classical field pictures of landscape. The documenting of the place-specific weather conditions and/or environment at each place was previously an important part of the function of landscape painting, before photography took over with its "objective" representation. These pictures (*Environmental Residue*) in many ways share the objectivity of photography because they document the relationship to the landscape in a direct way, without the intervention of the artist's subjective experience. One can imagine that in this way my role as a visual artist is to facilitate how the climatic conditions in a landscape can portray themselves." <sup>2</sup>

In addition to the basins or chambers in the *Environmental Residue* series, in 2014 Høyer started a related work, *Show Residue*. In this case the constructions were placed not outdoors, but in gallery and exhibition spaces. It is no longer sunlight and air circulation that are the main influences on these works, but also the heat given off by

visitors which determines the final result: if many people are in the room and close to the work, there is more evaporation. In this way we can perhaps see that the work is partly documenting its own success with its audience, as well as saying something about an "artificial" climate. The first work in the series was in the Autumn Exhibition (Høstutstillingen) at Kunstneres Hus in Oslo in September and October 2014.

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Høyer's working method is highly conceptual: it is not tied to a specific place and can be transferred anywhere. The images produced are indeed unique. They are climatic accounts, which by their nature have been created through a direct proximity and connection to their surroundings. One could call such a relation *indexical* **3** and Høyer has long been interested in how this area of semiotics is based on just such a "close relation" and coherence to its referent rather than what we might call a "fluid" sign, without a physical or logical relation to its origin. The way in which the pictures come to be, means that every day in the basin can be traced through the ornate renderings that come about due to evaporation. The pictures are physical documents of all the climatic factors that took place during the process of their creation, but they are perhaps primarily symptomatic expressions that convey information about a cyclical "disposition". **4** To illustrate a dogmatic distinction: Høyer's process has parallels not just to the observer role of the photographer but also has much more in common with the unbiased methodology of science than with the artist's traditional subjective interpretation. **5**

On the other hand, Høyer's role in this project is both active and passive: she is helping to create images by placing the easels and facilitating a process – and in the second part, to allow nature to do its part. This creates an interesting balance between the artist/subject (Høyer), the technique and methodology (chambers, facilitation) and how the "work" (the imprint) will turn out. It is neither the artist nor nature that exclusively "makes" the pictures, but a cooperation between the two. In this area we can draw another parallel, namely through the artist renouncing control. This is a well-known element in Dadaism and the spirit of Fluxus, where the genesis of a work is based on a random principle, beyond the intention and hand of the artist. **6** It is more about method than form, but in a similar way unintended factors have been involved in the creation of Høyer's pictures. In some cases the evaporation process was interrupted by just such unexpected events or interventions. Early on in the project, a snail colony moved in to one of the water chambers, interrupting the climatic imprint with their tracks. Another issue was rust, which occurred when iron oxide in some of the pigments reacted with the water. The fix in both cases was to send a weak electrical current into the water. By first minimising the influence of disturbing elements, the movements, temperature differences and other climatic changes could be reproduced as precisely as possible. A similar method to that deployed by Høyer in *Environmental Residue* can be traced in her ongoing work *Tracing Sea*, where pigment is used to render wave undulations. But instead of using easels, Høyer goes out to the sea and places large casks on the water, each with a sheet of paper and liquid watercolour. This project is not about evaporations or temperature variations, it is about different processes in a particular environment: the sea and its currents and ripples, along with the wind's strength, set their own marks on the paper.

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A latent question was asked at the beginning of this piece: can an imprint in some

cases convey information about its "sender" which would not otherwise have been open to us? Høyer's watercolours are pictorial documents of movement and temperature, but without an author. In the project *Tracing Sea* it's more about sea and ocean with a kind of "Turnerish" weather-beaten sense, only without a determined effort at representation and mimetic similarity according to the eye's view. It is in that case here – in a non-representational landscape – that Høyer's pictures can be placed, as they in no way reflect the artist's sensibilities but are pure objective recordings. In this way she unites the normative characteristics of an imprint with a descriptive intention, as it is she who is orchestrating the whole.

### *Tine Semb*

1

The word "sender" indicates a subject, but in this context it is the sense of an object that is not itself an actor or action, but acts as an elementary part of a story-line.

2

From Høyer's own artist talk 24.07.2014, Kolbjørnsvik, Norway.

3

The term has been widely used in semiotics (sign learning; the meaning of images, word/language objects, defined by social/cultural affiliation), primarily in the model of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), which was based on a tripartite way of regarding signs. These are, in summary: icon (based on similarity), index (real relationship/physical connection to its referent) and symbol (based on agreement, with an obvious or logical connection to what it stands for).

4

Can one then claim that Høyer's "observations" are designed in a way that could be said to be akin to nomothetic science ("the laws of nature"; science based on defined rules on how processes occur in nature, for example chemistry), where the microscope is set against the general, the consequential and the universal?

5

A classification where science and objectivity – "that which is" – acts as a counterpart to what is interpreted, we see already for example with Plato, and this relationship differs remarkably from a concept of a flatter structure, as in Aristotle among others. More recently the philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) argued for art and research to be seen as equals, where science does not have a monopoly on what can be regarded as truth, but that "the truth" can be achieved through a variety of ways, including aesthetics. It is important to note that this dichotomy is just outlined here to show two other separate practices (science and art), and in no way confirms a hegemonic relation where science is in a special position.

6

So-called "chance operations" and recipe-based works (such as instructions for use) are considered as a poetic instrument where the work becomes more or less arbitrarily designed and is then not driven by the artist/subject, capitalist forces or other intentions. These methods have been used in text-, sound- and visual art, especially in

Dadaism (ca. 1915–22) and later in Fluxus. (The latter is also referred to as non-Dadaism and was at its height around 1962–78. As Fluxus was seen more as an artistic practice than an "-ism", it has never really come to an end).

7

A reference to the turbulent seascapes of the well-known impressionistic painter J.M.W. Turner, ca. 1775–1851.

8

The concept of mimesis means "imitation" and comes from Greek philosophy, namely Plato.

9

Normative (imitation) indicates that something is shown as it is, while the descriptive addresses how something is perceived, partly due to different usage, function and sensory perception.

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