

ELISABET NORSENG

A STRUCTURE ON TIME, SPACE AND THE SUBLIME

By Michael Casey

*The aspirations of those who n art from the social world are analogues to those of Kant's dove which dreamed of how much freer its flight could be if only it were released from the resistance of the air. If we are to learn any lesson from the history of the past fifty years of art, it is surely that an art unattached to the social world is free to go anywhere but that it has no where to go.*

Victor Burgin, "Commentary Part 11, " Work and Commentary.

**Few** contemporary artists seem content with the term "Post Modernism." For one thing, it would appear that there is little agreement – unity, understanding, accord – about what exactly the phrase means. <sup>1</sup> There is some question, for example, about whether the Post-Modern is a reaction against earlier tendencies or merely an elaborate extension of them. As the name implies, it acknowledges a depth to modernism but transcends this movement by synthesizing it with other concerns. While many art historians, critics and semioticians maintain that Post-Modernism represents a distinct way of confronting experience, few imply that it constitutes a movement, that is an intelligible body of work based on recognised or acknowledged precepts. In its current usage in the visual arts, the "post" is as bedevilled by ambiguity and imprecision as are most of the shorthand historical terms used to describe visual or artistic discourse. Such a reading of the "post" underlies, for instance, Charles Newman's sardonic characterisation of Post- Modernism "as a brand of vainglorious contemporary artistic following the circus elephants of Modernism with snow shovels. <sup>2</sup> Other evocations of the Post-Modern emphasise this sense of decline. Irving Howe has reviewed Post-Modernism development as lacking in commitment, dedication and intelligence, while Arnold Toynbee, in what is acknowledged to be the first use of the epithet, "Post-Modern," uses it to characterize the demise of Western Civilisation from the turn-of-the-century.<sup>3</sup>

**More** recently the contentions of Post-Modernism have progressed to a much more affirmative level. In the work of Fredric Jameson, John T. Paoletti, Phillip Stevick, Jean Baudrillard and Charles Jencks, etc. Post-Modernism is reviewed as a positive and probing enquiry into our current disposition. In the work of these writers and essayists, the "post" of Post-Modernism signifies not the fatigue of the late-corner, but the freedom of self-assertion of those who have awoken from the past. Moreover, what is especially striking about the function of the "post"– prefix is not so much the difference between the two kinds of connotation, the one submissive the other dismissive, the other iconoclastic and promotional, as the way in which both connotative fields tend to intersect (the essence of time and space). One is tempted to say that the characteristic of Post-Modernism is this peculiarly complex relationship which it has to the modernism which in its very name is at once invoked, admired, accepted and rejected. <sup>4</sup> This relationship is overlaid with further complexities in the varying disciplinary discourses of Post- Modernism (e.g., architecture, photography, painting, drawing, sculpture, etc.), in which the struggle with modernism often represents an internal struggle with the history (and institutions) of that discipline – as, for example, in art and literature.

**One** of the most striking preoccupations of modernist and Post-Modernist aesthetics in art and literature is the question of time and space. Clearly, the obsession with time in all its manifestations is to be seen throughout modernism – from, for example, the massive imaginative archaeology of time to be found in Marcel Proust's "A la recherche du temps perdu" to the fragmentation of the clock-time into mythic time in T.S. Elliot's "The Waste

Land,” the melding of contemporary time and the times of history in James Joyce’s “Ulysses” and Ezra Pound’s “Cantos,” and the visions of cyclical or universal time in William B. Yeats’s “A Vision.” Although things are as complex and various here as anywhere else in literary modernism, contemporary accounts have tended to assume that the modernist challenge to bourgeois clocktime can be reduced to a single principle – the flattening of time into space. To run together the time of epic with contemporary, or to view history and human life as an endless series of cycles, is to attempt to defeat transience, by blending it into a pattern. Even those writers (and there are many) who followed Henri Bergson’s counsel – that time should be rendered as a pure and fluid process rather than a artificially frozen instant – found themselves condemned to spatialise or suspend time in attempting to be true to it. Virginia Woolf’s “moments of vision” and James Joyce’s “epiphanies” are such a vision of spatialised time works easily alongside the modernist requirement of aesthetic autonomy; for, if the pasdenial of time is what might seem to guarantee the unyielding, unchanging permanence of the work of art.

**When** Elisabet Norseng mimics high modernism ( as defined in the teachings and writings of Sir Ernst H. Gombrich), she does so through the abstracting processes of Minimalism. Rather than interpreting the history of 50’s abstraction in terms of minimal reduction, a peeling away, a paring down to essentials – in essence, to idealisation, Norseng makes “abstraction” a process of addition, construction, of incremental embellishment, of layering and fragmentation. The artist argues that in the works of many contemporary European and American artists – Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Joseph Beuys, Antoni Tapes, among them – the process of reading (and composition) is highlighted against the still contemplation of meaning. Norseng’s critique of the metaphysical basis of modernist aesthetics derives, in part, from the work of Donald Judd, which is distinctively devoted to understanding questions of “singularity” and “actuality” not as essential and unhistorical principles, but as grounded in the particularity of historical circumstances – “being in the world” rather than abstract being. This Juddian perspective promotes dynamic movement over the static presence of pure ideas or pure being, and similarity denies the possibility of any disinterested or objective act of interpretation, insisting that all such acts must be from a particular perspective and therefore interested, or involved in its material. Judd’s aim, which Norseng shares, is a “destruction” of traditional forms of frozen hermeneutic disinterest, and the opening of content to the play of options and partialities through time and space. For Norseng, this is the purpose of formal self-reflexivity in Post-Modern art – not, as in modernism, to promote and assert the integrity of the artistic medium, closing it off against time, but to dislodge the viewer his or her position of spatialising outside time. This concept (Post-Modern) emphasises the contingent flow of temporality at the expense of the atemporal stasis of metaphysics.

**In** Norseng’s work, the visible leads to an awareness of something that would be lost if it were ever clearly shown. Meaning is generated, not by adding to the visible, but by subtracting it. Something remains behind, which we experience as an absence conveyed by seeing, a sensory quality. Our knowledge and memory do not step in to fill the void left by this experience of the unseeable; on the contrary, our inner images serve only to reinforce the awareness of the absence. When we examine her approach, we can, of course, persist in taking an interest in the depiction of the minimal, or the minimally surreal; but it is characteristic of Norseng’s that it thwarts us of any such interest, that is, in the traditional sense. This sense of withdrawal nullifies any effort on our part to look into the image and distinguish its forms. Norseng’s concern is to respond to the appearance of what she calls

“the celestial condition of time and space – the apocalyptic inheritance of Nietzsche and more obviously from Kant, which suggest that the only form of value is to be found in the embrace of minimal or theoretical extremity. For Norseng, the “collapse of narrative” leaves only one option for Post-Modern culture, to reactivate an art of interval or duration, which testifies to the impossibility or importance of art, or representation in general, when faced with certain kinds of extremity or vagueness, in nature or beyond it. This kind of art goes beyond the limited ambitions of the real. In common with the art of the avant-garde, Post-Modernist are gestures to those things which lie beyond the scope of representation. But where modernist art still allows pleasure in the capture of the sublime (reductive) in artistic form, Post-Modern art, says Norseng, goes further in addressing the fundamentals issues surrounding time, space and movement, etc. <sup>6</sup>

**In** the artist’s drawings; all sized 2,50 x 2m – for example, “Two Dots” (1993), “Two Shades” (1993), “Two Lines and One Dot” (1993), “Three Shades and Two Dots” (1993), etc. – the notion of time and space are normally given visual form by the depiction of a “field” – domain, range, realm – where surface suggests completeness and contour infinity. The sensory experience of a uniform surface, in Norseng’s work, reduces all our mental baggage of cultural clichés, all our craving for projections, explorations and distinctions, to the opaque materiality of the visible. <sup>7</sup> In her paper works, what is there to be looked at does not seem to bring its source with it. <sup>8</sup> The motifs (shades, lines, dots, etc.) evolve through a process of minimal production. The practice of pictorial illusionism has its own theory. Consequently, Norseng’s does not show systems, but rather systems being generated. <sup>9</sup> Moreover, these “schemes” suggest timelessness, totality, completeness, resolution and fear, the still point at the centre of a “chaotic vortex.” The following passage – taken from Burt Norton – serves to highlight some of the above variables in her art:

*At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards; at the point. There the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered Neither movement from nor towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point.  
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.  
I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where.  
And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.  
The inner freedom from the practical desire,  
The release from action and suffering, release from the inner  
And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded  
By grace of sense, a white light still and moving,  
Erhebung without motion, concentration  
Without elimination, both a new world  
And the old made explicit, understood  
In the completion of its partial ecstasy.  
The resolution of its partial horror. <sup>10</sup>*

**According** to Norseng, there is always a palpably derivative aspect to her work – a characteristic that is shared by her mentors, Richard Long, Enzo Cucchi, Mario Merz, Anish Kapoor, Matti Kujasalo, etc. The artist’s position has never been one to deny authorship and originality, but rather to expose ambiguity. Jolting the stereotype of the artist whose creativity rests in his/her own individuality, Norseng makes manifest the entire matrix of art production.

For her, questioning originality is a conceit by which to unearth the role that originality plays today, at the close of a series of modernisms in which it has featured prominently.

**In** her art, the possibility of, and the conditions for making art are brought to bear through spatial isolation and interval. There are no self-sufficient and obstructive fragments here, no divisions which cannot be linked to the viewer into a kind of narrative. And the narratives that the work invokes internally, as it were, readily moves out of the work itself into a consideration of other, “larger” narratives. This is not the internalised narrative of someone’s imaginary but a narrative of connection and effect in the world. In other words, the work goes beyond the fragments, as Agnes Martin puts it, and replaces a lost linearity, a lost narrativisation. Time, space, and the sublime are all caught up in a relay that becomes an expanse for meditation, with the smaller elements acting as a kind of memory to or for the large abstraction. There is, too, a reinvestment in the minimal approach to subject-matter. It is arguable that since the advent of Minimalism the task of the spectator in front of any work of art has been to consider not so much the image itself, but the process of its construction.

**In** front of such works the spectator has been asked primarily to consider the nature of a work’s intervention into ongoing conversations about the supposed crisis in literal representation. Alternatively, with other kinds of Post-Modern work, the spectator is subjected to a whole variety of discourses and codes whose aim is to recontextualise and refunction the artefacts and commodities of our consumer culture and which ask to be considered as critiques of the time and place in which we live. Whatever else one might want to say about these two pre-eminent kinds of contemporary art practice, it is largely the case that they have tried to eradicate the power of reference and affect – of expressivity even – from the art work. For Norseng, art’s points of reference are still the self-reflexive languages and forms of art itself and/or the depredations of the increasing complex culture of Post-Modernism. In this context, to begin talking about effect, reference or expressivity – rather than about self-referentiality or disembodied cultural signs – is not exactly fashionable right now.

**Yet**, finally, all these superficial similarities are exceeded in Norseng’s visual production. Since the early 1990’s she has been conducting a kind of battle with Neo-Expressionism and has begun a thorough traversal and critique of the modes of Post-Modernist art. That is, her position in relation to much other contemporary work is perhaps best described as a need (and desire) to turn the spectator’s attention away from where it is usually left- with the art work’s process – and instead to draw it towards the actual image, its content and its historical ground in whatever context, code, or language. For her there is no question of simply moving materials around in various combinations or modes in the kind of formal dance with which spectators are currently so familiar. Rather, her position - aesthetically and conceptually – is guided towards ideas which are actually attached to images and objects: it is an art of the signifier rather than the signified. In this context, words like time, space, and the sublime may seem retrogressive, but they act as important signifiers for the spectators to consider. As already suggested, Norseng’s enquiry or research has rejected the notion of fetishism: fixation, obsession, passion. The artist and critic, Victor Burgin has suggested that to move against fetishism in the visual arts is to move “beyond its fragments”, beyond its divisions”<sup>11</sup>. Such a move can, of course, appear retrogressive. The reconsideration of the look, the taming of attention that anti-fetishism requires might be said to belong more properly to the modes of a traditional or modernist art – something like Cy Twombly’s perhaps where, in Anselm Kiefer’s term, the spectator’s contemplation and

meditation are rewarded by the experience of rarity.

So Norseng's "strategy" is in some sense "about" bringing back the possibility of reverie and meditation to the spectator's experience of the art work. As in the literary works of, for example, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, William B. Yeats and Virginia Woolf, the artist's approach – metaphysically, metaphorically and ideologically – emphasises the irreversibility of time and space. All the temporal sequences are tied to "disintegrating" structures that preclude any reversion to status quo.<sup>12</sup> In addition, this conception of time and space recalls the idea of Roman Opalka, who speaks, in connection with his "Details" of a constant process of change, in which – as in life itself – mistake can never be erased without leaving behind a trace bears witness to error and generates an image that is not perfect but is authentic.<sup>13</sup> Our clocks and calendars, being based on reversible schemas, utterly erase the past in all its forms; by contrast, Norseng's principle of irreversibility preserves intact the uniqueness of every event. In her actions, Norseng structures time and space by making it fan out into different modes of experience and thus divides it into segments that the senses can perceive. All of the artist's actions are based on a desire to reverse conceptual pairs such as "light/heavy" or "crystalline/fluid". The polarity of these apparently irreconcilable pairings is resolved by looking within each pole to find the other – hence the subliminal element. In her actions, the artist, herself acts as a prime mover and catalyst; but once the initial fuse is lit, she reduces her personal involvement to a minimum and allows the formal process to take its own course.

One of the major efforts of the artist's work, then, is to encourage the spectator to re-evaluate the power of the static image (the product of time and space), its ability to make reference to our histories and its power to reinvoke our thought and our perception through minimal acts of attention and antifetishism. It can thus be argued that Norseng's work is an expression of that quest which T.S. Eliot found so frustrating:

*And so each venture  
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate  
With shabby equipment always deteriorating  
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling.  
Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what there is to conquer  
By strength and submission, has already been discovered  
Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope  
To emulate – but there is no competition –  
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost  
And found and lost again and again; and now, under conditions  
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss  
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business. 14*

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oct. 1993 helsinki  
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**NOTES:**

1. Douglas Davis gives a good summary of recent discussions of Post- Modernism and indicates the amorphous concepts that the term is used to describe when he states that it “is thriving in the soft linguistic underbelly of the visual arts...” (Post everything,” *Art in America*, 68 (February 1980): 11, 13-14). Peter Schjeldahl has referred to “that rhetorical chameleon “postmodernism”... (“Falling in Step”, *Vanity Fair* 46 (march 1983): 116.
2. I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1924
3. See Terry Eagleton, “The End of English”, *Textual Practice*, 1:1 (1987), pp.1-9.
4. A recent rather polemical definition for post-modernism has been given by an artist/critic:”...post-modern, meaning simply the activity of artists searching the ruins of a discredited ideology for a renewed sense of purpose and authority. This search has typically taken the form of an investigation of text and context, of the impure situation in which art finds itself, and of the means it uses to represent itself.” (Thomas Lawson, “The Dark Side of the Bright Light,” *Artforum* 21 (November 1982) 66. Lawson posits this definition in direct response to the critical attention given to recent expressionist painting in America.
5. See Joseph Franck, “Spatial Form in Modern Literature”, in the *Widening Gyre* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1963), pp. 3-62.
6. Interview with Elisabet Norseng, Helsinki, January 21, 1993.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. T.S. Elliot, “Burt Northon”, 11, VV. 62-78, *Four Quartets*
11. Victor Burgin, “The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity” (*Atlantic Highlands*, NJ, 1986), p.108.
12. Cecilie Ore, Elisabet Norseng: “Temporal Relations”, *Exhibition Catalogue*, Oslo 1988, unpaginated.
13. Roman Opalka, in *Recontre par la separation (Encounter Through Separation)*, Galerie Walter Storms, <exhibition Catalogue, Munich, 1990.
14. T.S. Eliot, “East Cooker”, 111, V. 121, *Four Quartets*.

