

**Points, particles and paradox.
Elisabet Norseng's
synecdochic universe**



The reader of this essay may have already noticed the two small dots placed under the title of this essay. Readers cognizant of Elisabet Norseng's art during the past 15 years will already have noticed a similarity between these periods or black points and her art works which often consist of small drawn points, dots or particles on white paper. Connoisseurs of Norseng's drawings who have reflected upon the aesthetic qualities of her art will have already drawn the conclusion that the two dots above this paragraph have only a very superficial similarity to her works. No reader of this essay will presumably have noticed that the two dots printed on this page are the same size as, and positioned at approximately the same distance from each other as the drawing "Two Dots" 1993 which hangs on my own living room wall.

I have chosen to begin this essay with such an inadequate and quite misleading "reproduction" or "re-representation" of "Two Dots" from 1993 in order to emphasize both the conceptual nature of her work, while at the same time emphasizing the fundamental difference between original Norseng drawings and reproductions.

U n r e p r o d u c a b i l i t y

In his famous essay “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit” from 1936, Walter Benjamin reflects on the impossibility of capturing the essence of an original artwork in printed reproductions. Benjamin’s reflections are uniquely relevant for the work of Norseng. It is impossible to reproduce Elisabet’s art - a fact that is essential for an understanding of its aesthetic qualities. Let us dwell for an instant on this sometimes quite annoying fact - in an effort to isolate the qualities of her works that make them impossible to reproduce in illustrations.

Size; scale; paper and ink color, type and quality; texture, composition, form, calligraphic quality and framing of the work are some of the qualities which have to be reproduced correctly in any illustration of an art work. Some art works on paper can be reproduced more successfully than Norseng’s drawings. If one chooses the same type, color and texture of the paper; if the photograph and photographic reproduction of the original is done carefully with inks similar in color and quality to those used by draftsman, only a highly skilled conservator with a microscope can distinguish the reproduction from the original. A printed reproduction of some art works can be made in such a way as to have the same size, composition, printed indentation, paper, watermark, texture and calligraphic quality as the original.

Elisabet Norseng’s art works on paper are drawn, not printed. This fact alone makes it extremely difficult to reproduce her works in a printed medium such as this essay. However, the specific qualities of Norseng’s art works make them even less reproducible than most other drawings. Firstly, her “dots” or “marks”

are often very small and always highly complex. If viewed up close, or through a magnifying glass, they seem to have been drawn with very small brushes and pens. The ink used can be more or less diluted, leading to varying degrees of absorption and capillary effects - depending on the quality of the paper. The original in my possession which is symbolically reproduced on the first page of this essay exhibits for example a highly unique "aura" which is made up by the ink being absorbed by the fibers of the paper upon which Norseng's pen or brush rested for a certain time. The color, transparency and tone of the resulting circle of absorption depend on many factors, which could never be reproduced. Indeed, many of the qualities of her drawings are probably created by chance in such a way that Elisabet herself could never be able to reproduce her own works even if she so desired.

This last argument - that the artist herself could never successfully reproduce her own works no matter how hard she tried - is interesting and significant. An artwork, which cannot be reproduced by the artist herself, must for example be viewed as possessing a high degree of uniqueness, or "aura" if one chooses to employ this problematical Benjamin concept. The implication is also of course that no photographic reproduction can do justice to Norseng's individual art works.

One can only experience Norseng's art by close observation of the original drawings. All photographic reproductions of her work are inadequate. These two facts alone make Norseng's drawings highly exclusive, inaccessible and difficult to appreciate, yet thought provoking, challenging and immensely rewarding if we choose to invest the necessary time and energy to reflect and dwell upon them.

The semiotics of "Less is More"

Mies van der Rohe's often cited credo "less is more" is a useful starting point for an investigation of the peculiar aesthetics of Norseng's drawings. The limitation of the artist's visible or perceptible marks or signs to a few small dots on white paper transfers the act of creating meaning (semiosis) from the artist to the observer.

It would of course be possible to decipher and analyze Elisabet's artistic language and explain how her drawings can be related to other artists and artistic languages. One could write an essay on her minimalism. One could relate her sensitive and minute drawing techniques to other accomplished draftsmen. One could view her art as almost conceptual art. One could comment on her drawings in the context of the larger artistic movements like abstraction, dada, action painting, and abstract expressionism. But such categorizations or classifications of her artistic vocabulary and syntax would not lead to a satisfying interpretation of her work - at least not for this observer. Elisabet Norseng rarely mentions or comments on her work in the context of other artistic movements and their formal qualities. Her artistic language and utterances seem to be of a more private, personal nature - not products of theoretical study or immersion in the artistic languages of other artists and movements.

In this essay, I will therefore relate one, limited and very personal interpretation of what I view to be most important and fascinating about Norseng's cryptic and complex calligraphy. I leave it to others to decide whether my utterances have any interpretative significance or meaning for them.

Metaphysical reflections on the dot

One of man's most impressive achievements was the postulation that the cosmos in all of its complexity consisted of one type of substance - the atom. This breathtaking abstraction is usually attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher, Democritus in the 5th c. before Christ. The reduction of every substance in the entire manifold universe to one indivisible particle is the greatest conceptual art work ever created. Its reductionism and high degree of abstraction has inspired philosophers, natural scientists and artists ever since. Elisabet Norseng's drawn dots on white paper relate in many and varied ways to this great body of subsequent elaboration of Democritus' divinely inspired vision.

The point relates to visual perception and artistic form, as the atom relates to matter. Lines consist of points. Shapes and volumes are constructed by lines. Volumes, textures and figures are perceived because of the varying tonal qualities of the perceptible dots on the surface of objects. Our eyes perceive visual phenomena due to the millions rods and cones on our retina which translate visually perceivable phenomena into millions of electrochemical impulses which our brain synthesizes into larger forms. Dots or points are the irreducible building blocks of artistic images and also the basis of visual perception itself.

It is therefore completely understandable that art theorists from Leonardo da Vinci to Kandinsky have reflected upon and written about points and dots, as metaphysicians have speculated about the non-reducible substance of the universe; as physicists have reflected and investigated the atom, and later subatomic particles; as chemists have investigated molecules and their

strange interactions with each other.

One could write many volumes of text of definitions and interpretations of Norseng's dots, which related to the rich tradition of metaphysical speculation and scientific investigation of points and particles and their relationship to perception, matter and the universe.

Neither the reader nor the author of this work has the patience to do this huge topic justice. I therefore choose to point out what I personally view as the potentially most relevant analogies between her dots and reflection on points and particles.

A point or atom in Democritus' sense of the word is completely conceptual in nature. The definition of both includes the necessary precondition that both point and atom are irreducible phenomena. An irreducible point could never be drawn or perceived. The 2000-year long search for a physical atom in the Democritean sense of being the irreducible building block of matter and the universe presumably always will prove impossible. Niels Bohr's atomic model consisted of other smaller particles: neutrons, protons and electrons. In the 20th c., one discovered that even these particles consisted of even smaller particles. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle taught us that the very attempt to measure or perceive such small particles altered them and changed their characteristics. His arguments have perhaps taught us that our desire for knowledge about the universe and its building blocks will itself ensure that we never will be able to satisfy our curiosity, simply because our investigations themselves change the perceivable nature of the universe. One could therefore conclude the following: Points, like atoms or even subatomic particles, can not be perceived, represented, measured nor fully understood.

Nonetheless man paradoxically must employ them in order to understand the universe and his place in it.

Norseng's dots appear to be points when one views them from a distance. This is due to our inherent need to abstract complex visual phenomena into easily understandable concepts. If one views her dots up close or with a magnifying glass, one sees that they are complex and textured. Whether or not the artist has created these dots with the help of optical enhancing devices - as did artists in previous generations who painted with brushes consisting of one boar-hair and large magnifying glasses; whether or not the artist wishes or intended the viewer to observe them through a magnifying glass is uncertain. If, however, one does so, one is amazed at how very subtle these dots appear. Seen through a microscope, they transform themselves from the "points" seen from a distance to galaxies of points and tones. And this is no coincidence, nor is it surprising to those with only a superficial knowledge of the history of science and thought. The most persistent model of the atom with electrons rotating around a nucleus very much resembles the most persistent suncentered model of the universe - with planets rotating around a central star or sun. Microcosmic and macrocosmic models have always been intimately related, and perhaps always must be. For both entail extreme abstractions created by the same human intellect. Scientific breakthroughs in the study of the macrocosm are quickly appropriated by research into the nature of the microcosm.

Aesthetically, one can therefore view Norseng's dots as abstractions, conceptions and representations of both the subatomic world and the entire universe. Paradoxically, the smaller her dots become, the more effectively they represent the entire universe. This is due to the conceptual power of such funda-

R e l a t i o n s h i p s

So far, I have only commented on the basic component of Norseng's art - the dot or point. Norseng's drawings, however, always consist of at least two and often several dots. The juxtaposition of two dots on a white piece of paper compromises and reduces the drawings' abstract conceptual quality, and introduces another aspect - the aspect of relationships.

The viewer of her drawings are therefore forced to ask themselves: why two, three or more dots. How does the artist decide where to place them on the white, unmarked paper? What is the relationship between the marks to each other, and to the size, shape and texture of the medium upon which they are drawn? Two dots always imply a line. More than two dots can imply either several lines, or bodies floating or moving somewhere in an illusionary space. How should we read or explain the configuration of the dots? Do they exist on the same geometric plane of the surface of the paper? Does the whiteness around them imply a spatial universe in which they float or reside? Should we view them as signs, marks or representations? Does the artist prefer one possible interpretation or perception to others?

The questions about relationships between the marks, signs or dots in her drawings are much more insistent and persistent than any single possible explanation. Renewed study of the concrete drawing and reflection about its possible meanings only leads to increasing uncertainty about their "correct" interpretation. The viewer who dwells upon and contemplates the relationships implied or created in Norseng's drawings gradually becomes aware of an increasing number of possible interpretative strategies, and perhaps abandons the desire to ever attaining certainty about a or the meaning(s) of the drawings.

The tension created in the viewer between the wish to decipher and the impossibility of deciphering the dots and their relationship to each other and the blank, white minimally contextual paper remains one of the most enduring aesthetic qualities of Norseng's drawings.

A b s t r a c t i n d i v i d u a l i z a t i o n a n d e x p r e s s i o n

Having relinquished the hope of being able to establish any single definitive meaning of the manifold relationships created by Norseng's dots, one sometimes chooses to study their individual qualities. And there is a great variety to be found in Norseng's dots or "marks". Some are larger than others. They are drawn in different ways, with varying amounts of inner detail. Sometimes the pen is full of ink and allowed to rest on the surface so that the paper fibers absorb the ink creating an aura of tone around the dark center. Sometimes charcoal is deposited unevenly, partly smudged and partly densely covering the delicate fibrous paper surface. Each dot is different and intentionally unique - a fact which gives them a lifelike quality, even a personality. Groups of dots or marks can therefore be perceived analogously to populations or groups of individuals. And the observer can be led to attribute human qualities to dot or mark configurations or compositions.

The observer's attempt to find any a priori or simplistic explanation for the variations in the size, form, detail and configuration of the dots is frustrated - forcing the viewer again and again to rely on his and her own subjective interpretative strategies. The observer's experience of Norseng's drawings can therefore be compared to the viewer of Rorschach-ink-blot whose non-representational, yet figurative-like qualities similarly force the viewer to

construct highly personal, subjective interpretations which reveal more about the observer's inner soul than about the drawings themselves.

Despite or perhaps because of the individual, complex yet abstract qualities of Norseng's dot drawings they often appear to express very human qualities - at least to this observer. The tendency of human beings to interpret the world in light of their own emotional qualities and characteristics is very strong. Some compositions seem comical. Others appear to be tragic, pathetic, angry, involved, intelligent, conventional or insane. Any viewer who allows himself to dwell upon and contemplate her drawings for a while will begin to experience how powerfully expressive her minimalist compositions become.

T h e e m p t y s h e e t

There is no doubt that the white paper sheet upon which Norseng makes her marks is highly important in the aesthetic experience of her works. The whiteness and emptiness of the sheet is intimately and indissoluble related to the placement and characteristics of the drawn marks. The perception of marks and medium cannot be experienced or understood in isolation from each another. The size, shape, texture and framing of the white sheet determine and are determined by the marks that are made upon them. One can therefore not alter the framing of a Norseng drawing without destroying the original work.

One could construct a Greenberg-like critical tradition around Norseng's drawings, analogous to the art critical discussions of the 1960s and 1970s relating to the empty canvas, monochrome paintings and minimal art. One could argue that Norseng's drawings challenge our very conceptions of what a draw-

ing or print should or can be. One could postulate that Norseng systematically reduces the calligraphic marks necessary for constituting a drawing or print; that she insists upon the aesthetic primacy of the flat white sheet; and that her artistic development steadily moves closer to the emptying of the sheet and the end of drawing. Posed perilously close to the annihilation of the aesthetic category which infuses her marked sheets with aesthetic significance and the status of art; she plays a very dangerous game. How will this flirt with artistic suicide, or genocide if it means the end of drawing as an art form, end? One could surmise that the last work could be a large white sheet with a barely visible signature entitled "The end of drawing". It might perhaps be appropriate that last mark made by a draftsman artist would be the signature or sign referring to the author-destroyer of the drawing as an art form. However one could also argue that even a blank sheet with no mark would be - like an empty canvas - a semiotic sign of a non-existent drawing. Could one then expect a proliferation of empty sheets, each contributing a renewed interpretative context to "drawing without marks", and offering us a new starting point for the re-emergence of the mark, dot or point in three-dimensions?

Norseng herself would never accept such a Greenberg-like analysis of the emptying of the white sheet because she herself perceives both her marks and the sheet as equally important aesthetic components of her art. Nonetheless the potential for this alternative reading exists and thereby enriches her art's expressive quality.

L e s s a n d m o r e

The most important feature of Norseng's drawings is their capacity to stimulate reflection and contemplation about fundamental questions, which have no ultimate answers. More than other artists, who freely reduce their repertoire of aesthetic tools to a minimum, Norseng's dots continually frustrate and refuse adequate explanation. Color field painters like Barnett Newman have for example reduced their means of expression to color, sometimes to a single huge fields of color offer occasional compensation. Donald Judd's minimalist aluminum boxes exhibit mathematical and proportional relationships which can easily be observed and sometimes superficially or non-cognitively appreciated. The high quality of his craftsmanship can also be enjoyed and admired in a simple, non-intellectually demanding way. Franz Kline's monumental calligraphic paintings evoke emotional responses, intimations of a larger and perhaps heroic world outside our own which can produce emotional pleasure. Norseng's drawings initially offer less tangible, sensual or aesthetic enjoyment and demand more involvement from the viewer. The more the viewer invests in their contemplation, the greater becomes his aesthetic, cognitive and emotional reward. And this is perhaps their most important and enduring quality.

By Einar Petterson