

Rendering visible the immaterial, materializing the invisible.

Noemi Smolik

Just seeing is not enough.

Ceal Floyer

*It's not true, yes, it's true,
it's true and it's not true,
there is silence and there is not silence,
there is no one and there is someone,
nothing prevents anything.*

Samuel Beckett

In this article, I will focus on the question of perception, differentiating between the visible within the invisible, and the invisible within the visible. What is it that becomes discernible, and when? Under what circumstances? How does the visible relate to the invisible? How do I render the invisible perceptible? What is the invisible, after all? A kind of nothingness? To initiate such an inquiry using the language of art is by no means an easy endeavor. The practice of German-Danish artist Tine Bay Lührssen is concerned nevertheless with delving into the invisible within the visible, into the question of nothingness. Her installations, in particular her most recent work *Retention*, represent a way of approaching the field of the visible within the invisible by employing contemporary art media, evoking nothingness in spite of its very elusiveness.

What does *Retention* consist of? The ground of the ample exhibition space features dark square stone tiles. The layout of the tiles in a grid, together with their variegated marble-like patterns, provides a strong visual element – expansive, abstract, geometric – that could stand on its own as a work of Minimalism a Minimalist work. They are reminiscent of Carl Andre's Minimalist seminal floor tile arrangements in the second half of the twentieth century. In this sense, Lührssen handles the grouted tiles as an already complete

visual component. How? She places additional, single masonite tiles on the ground; their surface drawings executed with pencil. These drawings echo the structures of the stone tiles lying under the hard board plates, including the actual tile joints.

The hard board drawings are carefully distributed on the ground, so that even the drawings depicting tile joints correspond with those of the actual stone tiles beneath. Some hard board tiles are leaned against the wall, while others are arranged on a pushcart, as if ready to be distributed across the installation. It seems as though the process of laying out the tiles were suspended, so there is an all-encompassing fleetingness and 'in-progress' feel about the space. This sense of the ephemeral is emphasized by the invisible though discernible air current that an additional element of the installation, an electric fan, generates. That the fan alters the imperceptible presence of the space is not without art historical antecedents. Previously American artist Robert Barry attempted to forego circumvent the expected visibility of art. In 1969, as part of his *Inert Gas Series*, Barry released cylinders of helium and other gases in the Mojave Desert. And not long before him, American conceptual artist Michael Asher had opened his studio window to allow for an air draft, as a gesture in accord with his *Air Works* series. Thus, air flow as the materialization of the invisible can be seen as emerging from a Conceptualist tradition.

In addition to the placement of tiles with surface drawings on the ground, attracting attention to its grid structure, and the introduction of air movement as an installation element that questions the visibility of an art work, a further component of the work is light, which is projected on one of the walls as black and white video sequences. One of the sequences depicts three tiles hanging adjacently, spinning on their axes at irregular intervals. In another sequence, the tiles initially appear vertically arranged, then fall down at irregular intervals. Although these projected video sequences are clearly visible, they remain immaterial, thus adding a further dimension to the question of perception posed at the beginning of this article: can the visual become immaterial or how to render the immaterial visible?

The question of the visibility of the immaterial extends from a further tradition. Since the late sixties, myriads of artists have strived to shift the production of visible objects towards immaterial ideas. Art historian Hans Belting describes this attempt to dematerialize the art work in the practice of conceptual art: "New, therefore, was not the blurring of art as an idea, and art as work, but the new decision to break that conjunction and to detach the idea from the work, as had been the privilege of art theory."¹ Tine Bay Lührssen directs our attention to objects and processes that appear invisible at first sight. Thus she sharpens the

¹ Hans Belting, *The invisible masterpiece*. Helen Atkins (transl.), University of Chicago Press, 2001, p.371

gaze and the other senses towards the ephemeral, the fleeting, or immaterial. While ideas, experiences, and processes become art, experiencing time and space are crucial to their understanding. American art historian Lucy Lippard summarizes these tendencies, so pervasive in the art of the seventies, under the phenomenon of the “dematerialization of art”.²

Lührssen’s approach to visibility and invisibility delve further into these concerns. Indeed, even as she sets out to sharpen sensory perception, it is also important to consider the element of illusion in her installations. In this case, she does not conform to the Conceptualist act of presenting an idea, a procedure or experience that then stands on its own. As she reproduces the surface structure of the ground tiles on the hard board squares, she creates an illusion that compels us to take a new view of the original tiles. In this sense, the video projections are purely illusionary. As archives of the visualization process of the tiles (both as stone tiles and drawings), the projections operate within the realm of the fictional. Indeed, Lührssen’s installation title, *Retention*, connotes the act of remembering.

Illusion, and this is what differentiates Lührssen’s work from earlier conceptual strategies, is always central to her body of work. *Carpet* (2005) features the austere drawing of a horizontal, black line stretched across the middle of a bare white wall upon which rests a black crow. The bird and the horizon drawing, akin to a power line in the landscape, guide our view to the mirage of a space beyond, filled with the projection of a woman who unrolls a carpet towards the horizon’s vanishing point. Thus the space unfolds into an imaginary depth that becomes perceptible.

Lührssen’s works and installations are quiet, sober instances with a deliberately succinct employment of imagery, and thus stand in stark contrast to today’s world, brimming with images of the spectacle. Art critic Thierry de Duve has pointed out that the spectacle’s “blinding, dazzling excess of visibility [...] is there to conceal that there are things that remain invisible and that between the visible and the invisible there is no mediation.”³ Not if, as in Lührssen’s installations, illusion steps in precisely to mediate.

² Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, London 1973

³ Thierry de Duve, “Come on Humans, One More Effort if You Want to Be Post-Christians!” S. Pleasance and F. Woods (transl.) in *Political theologies: public religions in a post-secular world*. Eds. Hent de Vries and Lawrence A. Sullivan, 2006 Fordham University Press, p.670