

Look up, look down, look away – on searching in light and darkness

- *Master, is it true you can see in the dark?*
- *Certainly!*
- *But why then do you carry that lamp?*
- *To prevent others from bumping into me.*

The apprentice to the old Buddhist monk was surely expecting a more profound answer. About night and day, light and dark, and the diffuse states in between. Twilight, shadows, and anything that obscures forms and blurs things as they really are. True nature. Instead he received a purely pragmatic response, devoid of symbolism. The road to knowledge begins on the surface.

What if we approach Randi Strand's *Forestilling* (Conception) in a similar manner? Since she is an artist, we expect her pictures to tell us something about life as such. About reality, illusion and linguistic constructions. Blindness and insight. Think again. What do we really know about what we see?

While working on this text, I happened to catch some fragments of a radio programme with the Danish philosopher Arno Victor Nielsen. He described the Christmas message as a confrontation between two types of science. The Greek concept of the cosmos that was inscribed in the stars, and the Jewish idea of creation contained in the tales of the prophets. The wise men from the Orient saw a manifestation of the sacred, but didn't fully understand what they were looking at. The chief priests and those learned in the scriptures, who sat hunched over their books and scrolls, understood it, but did not see it. Since then a science has evolved here in the West that knows a lot, yet lacks deeper vision. Genuine insight often occurs in the grey zone.

When, in the 1820s, the German physician and amateur astronomer Wilhelm Olbers was struck by an eye disease that left him almost blind, he began to ponder what he had seen through his telescope over the years. The firmament existed, but had he ever really seen it? According to Newton's physical theories that describe the nature of the universe, the brilliant points of light that make up the endless sea of stars ought to be evenly and homogeneously distributed in space. Olbers compared the phenomenon with that of looking up into a tree,

where the myriad leaves are optimally distributed so that none throws its shadows on another. If the leaves were stars, the sky would be bathed in light. But what about all that darkness? Where did that come from?

The expert astronomer and learned Olbers formulated a paradox: the stars exist and we can see them, yet the laws of physics preclude such a sight. According to rational explanation, the night sky ought to be as bright as the sun. There is only one way to escape “Olbers’ paradox”. We have to abandon the idea that space is stable. The universe simply cannot be even in its consistency. It began with a Big Bang, since when it has been expanding steadily. The darkness between the stars offers us a glimpse of the universe’s birth.

Art tackles the irrational in other ways. In Randi Strand’s *Forestilling*, snow is the great maestro of light. Snowflakes distribute themselves on photographic paper just like the leaves in Olbers’ tree canopy. They are arrested in flight, permanently captured as particles of time and light. Where do they get their light? Immediately we sense a dialectical interaction between the tapestry of stars and the carpet of snow. In snow, the sky literally lands on earth. Without a shadow and glistening white, like the world on the first day.

Ironically, it was Olbers’ chronically failing vision that enabled him to glimpse the dark. It was as if he wanted revenge on the trustworthiness of sight as such. A similar conflict is laden with meaning in *Forestilling*. In general, one can say that the use of Braille in art poses the riddle of sight anew. For those who can see, it is hard to formulate a credible impression of how these raised points can have such evocative qualities. Yet I sense that there must be something there, something visual, in the substrate beneath the tactile reliefs, as both potential and kinetic energy – just as there is in the gaze. For neither is the sense of sight ever static. A fixed gaze is at best a lame metaphor. The physiology of the gaze depends on movements of the eye, at first incessant and unconscious (the instinctive glance), but later sustained and conscious – once the gaze has chosen its object.

Braille is a vision machine, an “aesthetic technology” that helps to determine the expressive quality of a work. The same can be said about oil paint, photographic equipment, and digital tools. One does not create with ideas, but with pigments, chemicals, pixels, and letters. In the 1870s, Friedrich Nietzsche decided to buy one of the very first typewriters, the “Hansen Writing Ball”. This prompted him to comment on the nature of media in a way that put him ahead of his time: “Our writing tools are also at work in our thoughts.”

Written in Braille in the picture *Forestilling 7* are the words: “*We never know self-realization. We are two abysses – a well staring at the sky.*” The aphorism is taken from *The Book of Disquiet* by the Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa. According to the publisher’s foreword, this work, which wasn’t published until the 1980s, almost fifty years after the author’s death, is an “unruly collection of notebook entries and symbolist word imagery”. It is a book in flux. And the same can be said of Randi Strand’s exhibition. All is in motion, like an intuitive interplay between the aesthetic material, the artist herself, and us as viewers. A quest for fruitful aesthetic circumstances. A game played with mentally stimulating images, without clear rules, without a key, and without a tried-and-tested approach that might guarantee results. A form of expression that not only demands a response, but also invites the viewer to participate. Look up, look down, look away. Are you looking for art? It is there, and you can see it, but only in the darkness between snowflakes and stars.

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