

**Roni Horn**  
Not this nor that

VOORLINDEN









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# Introduction

## Not this nor that

The secret of art's existence always extends further than mere comprehension of its meaning. Writing about the work of artist Roni Horn (1955) is like trying to hold water in the palm of your hand: the moment you think it's in your grasp, it slips the words' constraint and flows away from you. It is no coincidence that precisely that image springs to mind. Water—changeable and perpetually in motion—is an all-important aspect in Horn's oeuvre. That oeuvre can be seen as a river: a stream of interconnected works, in which the individual parts reflect, absorb



and change one another, ferrying their counterparts along, and in which a few recurring themes can be observed to trickle from the stream's meandering bed.

Identity and—more precisely—the elusive changeability of identity are at the heart of each of Horn's pieces. Her androgyny is a major force driving her life and artistic career: *"It started with my name which is not male or female. It seems to me, retrospectively, that my entire identity formed around this, around not being this or that: a man or a woman. I don't fit in with these kinds of singular identities."* [1] Just as she herself experienced at a young age what it was not to conform to a single identity, in the same way, her artworks resist being categorised under a single movement or heading. Through this fluid identity, she directs our gaze to the transformations that can occur: a thing can be *this* and simultaneously something else as well; it can be *here* and also *there*; it can exist both in the here-and-now and at another moment in time.

**“A good work of  
art has at least  
ten different  
meanings.”**

Walter De Maria





CHAPTER 1.

# Untitled

The piece in the collection of Museum Voorlinden consists of five large, squat cylindrical forms cast from glass, which are approximately 138 cm in height and 128 cm in diameter. [p. 6-7] Each element weighs an incredible 4,500 kilos. Despite this immense weight the objects breathe a certain lightness. The sculptures are spaced throughout a room which offers an unobstructed view of the landscape surrounding the museum and allows the changing conditions of natural light to enter the space as well. The arrangement of the five cylinders conjures associations with random patterns of nature such as raindrops hitting a puddle or cows standing in a pasture.

A frosted matte skin seems to cover the sides of the objects, in which seams and irregularities in the surface appear to be frozen. This is the imprint of the texture of the ceramic moulds in which the glass is cast, visible on the exterior of the cylinders. To free the sculptures from their forms, the artist had to break the moulds. So each piece shows its own unique pattern on its raw shaft. The upper surface, by contrast, is completely transparent and smooth – as reflective as an undisturbed pool of water.

The main component of glass is silica sand. Blended with sodium carbonate and calcium oxide it is heated to very high temperatures. Horn uses very fine type of sand from the north of Norway. This sand is so pure and clean that the glass can almost equal the transparency of water. To make this piece, the viscous mass of molten glass is poured slowly into moulds over a period of twenty-four hours, after which they must be allowed to cool for several

hydrogen 1 <b>H</b> 1.0079																	helium 2 <b>He</b> 4.0026				
lithium 3 <b>Li</b> 6.941	beryllium 4 <b>Be</b> 9.0122															boron 5 <b>B</b> 10.811	carbon 6 <b>C</b> 12.011	nitrogen 7 <b>N</b> 14.007	oxygen 8 <b>O</b> 15.999	fluorine 9 <b>F</b> 18.998	neon 10 <b>Ne</b> 20.180
sodium 11 <b>Na</b> 22.990	magnesium 12 <b>Mg</b> 24.305															aluminium 13 <b>Al</b> 26.982	silicon 14 <b>Si</b> 28.086	phosphorus 15 <b>P</b> 30.974	sulfur 16 <b>S</b> 32.065	chlorine 17 <b>Cl</b> 35.453	argon 18 <b>Ar</b> 39.948
potassium 19 <b>K</b> 39.098	calcium 20 <b>Ca</b> 40.078	scandium 21 <b>Sc</b> 44.956	titanium 22 <b>Ti</b> 47.867	vanadium 23 <b>V</b> 50.942	chromium 24 <b>Cr</b> 51.996	manganese 25 <b>Mn</b> 54.938	iron 26 <b>Fe</b> 55.845	cobalt 27 <b>Co</b> 58.933	nickel 28 <b>Ni</b> 58.693	copper 29 <b>Cu</b> 63.546	zinc 30 <b>Zn</b> 65.38	gallium 31 <b>Ga</b> 69.723	germanium 32 <b>Ge</b> 72.64	arsenic 33 <b>As</b> 74.922	selenium 34 <b>Se</b> 78.96	bromine 35 <b>Br</b> 79.904	krypton 36 <b>Kr</b> 83.798				
rubidium 37 <b>Rb</b> 85.468	strontium 38 <b>Sr</b> 87.62	yttrium 39 <b>Y</b> 88.906	zirconium 40 <b>Zr</b> 91.224	niobium 41 <b>Nb</b> 92.906	niobium 42 <b>Mo</b> 95.96	technetium 43 <b>Tc</b> [98]	ruthenium 44 <b>Ru</b> 101.07	rhodium 45 <b>Rh</b> 102.91	palladium 46 <b>Pd</b> 106.42	silver 47 <b>Ag</b> 107.87	cadmium 48 <b>Cd</b> 112.41	indium 49 <b>In</b> 114.82	tin 50 <b>Sn</b> 118.71	antimony 51 <b>Sb</b> 121.76	tellurium 52 <b>Te</b> 127.60	iodine 53 <b>I</b> 126.90	xenon 54 <b>Xe</b> 131.29				
caesium 55 <b>Cs</b> 132.91	barium 56 <b>Ba</b> 137.33	hafnium 72 <b>Hf</b> 178.49	tantalum 73 <b>Ta</b> 180.95	tungsten 74 <b>W</b> 183.84	rhenium 75 <b>Re</b> 186.21	osmium 76 <b>Os</b> 190.23	iridium 77 <b>Ir</b> 192.22	platinum 78 <b>Pt</b> 195.08	gold 79 <b>Au</b> 196.97	mercury 80 <b>Hg</b> 200.59	thallium 81 <b>Tl</b> 204.38	lead 82 <b>Pb</b> 207.2	bismuth 83 <b>Bi</b> 208.98	polonium 84 <b>Po</b> [209]	astatine 85 <b>At</b> [210]	radon 86 <b>Rn</b> [222]					
francium 87 <b>Fr</b> [223]	radium 88 <b>Ra</b> [226]	rutherfordium 104 <b>Rf</b> [261]	dubnium 105 <b>Db</b> [262]	seaborgium 106 <b>Sg</b> [266]	bohrium 107 <b>Bh</b> [264]	hassium 108 <b>Hs</b> [277]	meitnerium 109 <b>Mt</b> [268]	darmstadtium 110 <b>Ds</b> [271]	roentgenium 111 <b>Rg</b> [272]												
		lanthanum 57 <b>La</b> 138.91	cerium 58 <b>Ce</b> 140.12	praseodymium 59 <b>Pr</b> 140.91	neodymium 60 <b>Nd</b> 144.24	promethium 61 <b>Pm</b> [145]	samarium 62 <b>Sm</b> 150.36	europium 63 <b>Eu</b> 151.96	gadolinium 64 <b>Gd</b> 157.25	terbium 65 <b>Tb</b> 158.93	dysprosium 66 <b>Dy</b> 162.50	holmium 67 <b>Ho</b> 164.93	erbium 68 <b>Er</b> 167.26	thulium 69 <b>Tm</b> 168.93	ytterbium 70 <b>Yb</b> 173.05	lutetium 71 <b>Lu</b> 174.97					
		actinium 89 <b>Ac</b> [227]	thorium 90 <b>Th</b> 232.04	protactinium 91 <b>Pa</b> 231.04	uranium 92 <b>U</b> 238.03	neptunium 93 <b>Np</b> [237]	plutonium 94 <b>Pu</b> [244]	americium 95 <b>Am</b> [243]	curium 96 <b>Cm</b> [247]	berkelium 97 <b>Bk</b> [247]	californium 98 <b>Cf</b> [251]	einsteinium 99 <b>Es</b> [252]	fermium 100 <b>Fm</b> [257]	mendelevium 101 <b>Md</b> [258]	nobelium 102 <b>No</b> [259]	lawrencium 103 <b>Lr</b> [262]					

*Periodic system of elements*

months, depending on the used pigments. The ethereal pastel colours (referred to by the artist as green, purple, straw, peach and colourless) are stirred into the molten glass. The pigments occur as elements in the periodic system of Dmitri Mendeleev (1834–1907), a tabular arrangement of the chemical elements, ordered by their atomic numbers. Green was made with the element praseodymium (Pr). Purple is a blend of cobalt (Co) and erbium (Er). Straw is coloured by samarium (Sm). Peach is a combination of samarium and erbium (Sm + Er) and the colourless sculpture doesn't contain any elements.

Because the objects stand approximately chest-high, one must approach them in order to see one's reflection appear on the surface. Then, entranced like some modern-day Narcissus, one moves even closer in order to peer into the seemingly bottomless depths of the piece.

The reflective surface invites an endless ritual of looking and moving. Viewers slow their steps and direct their gaze towards the artworks again and again, as if they are seeing something strange and unexpected. What marvellous secret is being revealed here? In his novella 'Transparent Things' (1972), Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) gives us just a glimpse of the possibilities. He describes that which is hidden behind the thin veneer of man-made or natural objects as follows: *"Man-made objects, or natural ones, inert in themselves but much used by careless life (you are thinking, and quite rightly so, of a hillside stone over which a multitude of small animals have scurried in the course of incalculable seasons) are particularly difficult to keep in surface focus: novices fall through the surface, humming happily to themselves, and are soon reveling with childish abandon in the story of this stone, of that heath. I shall explain. A thin veneer of immediate reality is spread over natural and artificial matter, and whoever wishes to remain in the now, with the now, on the now, should please not break its tension film. Otherwise the inexperienced miracle-worker will find himself no longer walking on water but descending upright among staring fish."*

[2] This delicate glossy layer, already cracking in some places, allows us to escape from the here-and-now. We are here and we are elsewhere. We stare at the miracle that lies beyond the 'now', as we fall through it, desperately clinging to the edge, falling further and further... *humming happily...*

Language is essential to Horn's work. She uses language not only as a visual element; she speaks and writes about her work and themes copiously, using words in a forceful and succinct manner that has obviously been influenced by literature. This is what makes describing Horn's work feel like an act of hubris for the mere observer. It can really only be captured using her own words, or those of literary giants. This becomes apparent when reading the title of this piece.

*Untitled*, the first part of the title, describes the as-yet undiscovered country that these five mesmerising objects bring towards you. Following this neutral beginning, the title introduces an evocative 'second act'; like the engine of

a parked car suddenly growling to life, contained within parentheses: (*"The immense accretion of flesh which had descended on her in the middle of life like a flood of lava on a doomed city had changed her from a plump active little woman... into something as vast and august as a natural phenomenon. She had accepted this submergence as philosophically as all her other trials, and now, in extreme old age, was rewarded by presenting to her mirror an almost unwrinkled expanse of firm pink and white flesh, in the center of which the traces of a small face survived as if awaiting excavation."*)<sup>[3]</sup>

The subtitle clings to the artwork like patches of dissolving mist. Like a series of cinematic stills, we see the life cycle of this woman unfold before us as if caught in amber. The squat proportions of the five objects call to mind an image of a woman with a short and sturdy build (I am reminded of Oskar Matzerath's grandmother in Günter Grass' (1927-2015) novel 'The Tin Drum' (1979), sitting as if rooted in the midst of the vast stony fields, stirring in her pots and pans. There is so much space under her wide pleated skirts that three-year-old Oskar is able to crouch beneath them, completely hidden from sight). A woman whose flesh has become fused with the volcanic stone surrounding her, who can reflect back to her stone counterpart the firm, pink-and-white flesh, nearly free of wrinkles that extends from her on all sides. But she does not see this lovely young flesh *in* her reflection when she looks in the mirror – rather, she presents it *to* her reflection. The reflection diffuses outward to become an individual separate from herself.

The text of the title of Horn's work comes from Edith Wharton's (1862-1937) 1920 novel 'The Age of Innocence', which in turn refers to the 1788 painting of the same title by Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792). Wharton describes the torn feelings and indecisiveness of her protagonist, Newland Archer, a lawyer moving in the upper class circles of New York. Innocence and real love, embodied by the character of Ellen, undermine his marriage of stature. With the aforementioned description of Ellen's obese grandmother, Wharton exposes the successive layers of conformation to society's standards. All these built-up layers serve to hide the innocence *in the features of a small face*.



*Roni Horn, aka [detail: image of Roni Horn in Iceland (1975)] (2008-2009)*



The final sentence of the title is reminiscent of a photograph taken of Horn during one of her first visits to Iceland. [p. 17] From the time she was nineteen, Horn has visited that country repeatedly; it occupies a special place in relation to her art. In the photograph, we see only the artist's shoulders and head, with a wild mane of curls fanning out around her face. The rest of her body appears to be submerged in the landscape. In the catalogue 'Roni Horn aka Roni Horn' (2009), she has the following to say about it: *"Recently I found a picture that was taken during my first trip to Iceland (1975). I am posed in a thick, moss-covered lava field. But looking at it now, more than thirty years later, I am fascinated by how powerful, even then, the resemblance between me and Iceland was."* [4] If we consider the second part of the title and Horn's age of 57 at the time of making these five objects, this photo from the past seems almost a premonition. It makes the artwork a portrait—even a kind of self-portrait—as well: a self-portrait of the changeable identity, dissolving into the surrounding landscape, which exists both within Horn and in ourselves as viewers.



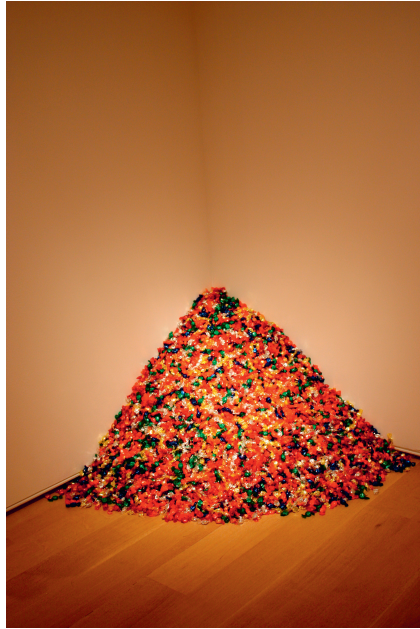
*Hveravellir hot springs in Iceland*





*Northern lights (Aurora Borealis) in Iceland*

The title provides a clue to the meaning of the artwork. Or better said, to its lack of meaning. The work is untitled but at the same time it bears a discription of several extensive phrases. It is not titled nor untitled, it is not this nor that, and so it is everything at the same time, which creates a space in which the work's pure being can emerge. Horn: *"I'm not interested in answers per se. The answers create closure. I don't think that there are answers anyway, they are always provisional. I think that's part of it."* [5] Her work cannot be interpreted in unambiguous terms; it rejects all attempts to 'solve' it. When one encounters a stranger, one doesn't urgently ask them, *"Yes, but what is the meaning behind you?"* In the same way, one cannot affix a single interpretation or significance to her artworks. Through repeated encounters, one can establish a relationship with her work, just as a friendship is renewed and altered each time friends meet.



*Félix González-Torres, untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) (1991)*

In addition to the massive glass, the long title and the squat cylindrical forms is also remarkable for its soft, nearly luminescent colours. The tints emanate through the gossamer outer surface, so that the pieces seem as if they are drawing soft breaths. They are reminiscent of the bright pastel colours of sweets, an association that makes sense in light of Horn's friendship with artist Félix González-Torres (1957-1996) and his partner Ross Laycock (1959-1991). González-Torres' work 'untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)' (1991) consists of the ideal weight of the artist's partner Ross, represented in a pile of sweets, the pieces of which visitors are allowed to take with them. [p. 20] The work is quite tragic when one considers how Ross continued to lose weight until his death as a result of AIDS. Yet, at the same time, the installation invites association with Jesus' comforting words about everlasting life, spoken at the Last Supper, and re-enacted in Christian tradition through the sacrament of communion.

The colours found in Horn work also invite associations with the natural hot springs of Iceland. Iceland is an island formed when molten magma cooled into rock. The enchanting hues of this igneous rock shimmer throughout the landscape with its many hot springs; these springs boast the jade, purple and peach tones of semi-precious stones, quartz and other minerals. Together with the fairytale tints splashed across the sky by the Northern lights during the winter months, the hot springs supplied the colour palette for this piece. [p. 18, 19]

Submerging oneself, literally becoming part of the landscape, occupies an important place in Icelandic culture. All over the country, in both the summer and winter months, one can bathe in the open air. With the work in Museum Voorlinden we can also feel a force of attraction, pulling us towards the massive glass objects and inviting us to submerge ourselves in them. One's head and shoulders would then just barely emerge from the top of the piece - just like those of the young artist barely emerge from the landscape in the photograph taken in the Iceland. We would ourselves be the landscape.

CHAPTER 2.

# No man's land

Horn was born in New York City in 1955, but moved to a typical 1950s suburb—indistinguishable from so many others in the US— at a young age. *“The suburb was a totally alienating experience, giving me the sense I was nowhere. Nowhere because nature was all too controlled and the distances between things left me feeling isolated and disconnected”*, Horn explains about this period in her life. [6]

It was not a place where one could easily develop an identity in relation to one’s surroundings. Left or right, everywhere one looks, one saw the same things: a lawn, a neighbour mowing the grass on Saturday morning, or the paper boy flinging a newspaper onto the driveway of each house. A no man’s land, and the place where literature became the first anchoring point the teenager found to shape her life around. As an adolescent, she studied the novels of all the great writers, including Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) and Clarice Lispector (1920-1977), who would later have various important roles to play in Horn’s own work. Horn developed a strong personal connection to these writers. For her, their books were more than introductions: they



*Roni Horn, aka [detail] (2008-2009)*

were islands of recognition, personal encounters she could use to fuel the development of her own identity within her colourless suburban existence. To the young Horn, reading was as important as drawing breath.

Horn finished high school at the age of only sixteen. She trained as a sculptor at Rhode Island School of Design, followed by Yale University School of Art. Here, too, literature played a greater role in shaping her as an artist than her education ever did: *"I moved from one author to another through footnotes or references in the books—that's how I got my education in literature because I never studied it formally. I didn't want to study things that I had an instinctive connection to, and that's why I never studied art either. I went to art schools, but I never studied any of it. I did my best to avoid classes at both Yale and Rhode Island School of Design."* [7] She found her true education in life itself, especially in her travels, which would determine the direction of the rest of her oeuvre. A true child

of her era, she first connected with the movements that dominated the New York art scene at that time.

Precocious as Horn was, she gravitated more towards the elder generation than to her peers and classmates. The New York art world of the 1960s and 70s was strongly influenced by the minimalist art of Donald Judd (1928–1994), Carl Andre (1935) and others. Modular, geometric forms—frequently executed in glossy, high-end materials—dominated the field. The somewhat-younger artist Mel Bochner (1940) aptly expressed the massive influence this movement exerted on his own generation: *“For my generation, Judd posed the same problem as Picasso did for the Abstract Expressionists; you either had to go over, under, around, or through him.”* [8] This is the same artistic climate Horn encountered as a student in the 1970s. She later became personally acquainted with Judd. In 1988, he included her work in a show and purchased the piece for permanent display at his Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas.

It is quite tempting to view minimalism as a major influence on Horn’s work. In the monumental forms and repetition, one can indeed recognise similarities between the two; kinship is evidenced by the technically-refined use of materials as well. The art of the minimalists, however, is not intended to reflect reality and real life; each work refers exclusively to itself. And although Horn sometimes adopts the same guise, the content of her work is in fact very different in nature: *“[...] in many ways, my work is a criticism of minimalism. Using geometry isn’t enough to place it in the context of minimalism. The attitude towards making objects as separate from human experience is not one I can participate in.”* [9]

The piece Judd bought is ‘Pair Object VII’ from the series ‘Things That Happen Again: For a Here and a There’ (1986–1991). [p. 27] This piece, too, shows how Horn’s work diverges from pure minimalism. ‘Pair Object VII’ consists of two identical, tapered objects made of solid copper, laying on the ground in two separate spaces. Although the objects were machine-produced to be precise duplicates, they appear as if hand-turned on a lathe. When viewing

these identical forms, one experiences the remarkable sensation of *déjà vu*. The image is the same yet diverges in a dizzying splitting of its identity, a feat that makes one think: *"I have been here before; things seem the same but, at the same time, are so different that it feels like I must be two separate people."* The concept of a mutable identity, one that can divide itself into parts and break free of time's constraint, is already present in this early work.

The human experience is by nature ever-changing from one moment to the next. It was precisely this aspect that so fascinated other artists in the 1960s as well. The male-dominated world of minimalist art was suddenly rendered speechless by the soft voice of Eva Hesse (1936–1970), who also used a number of principles from abstract, minimalist art, but did so by adding a sensitive, sensual eroticism to its content. In 1966, her work was presented by Lucy Lippard (1937) in the exhibition 'Eccentric Abstraction', together with the work of other artists including Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010) and Bruce Nauman (1941). Lipton had the following to say about this exhibition, which became legendary in the art world, in 2008: *"It, too, was an attempt to blur boundaries – in this case between minimalism and something more sensuous and sensual [...]"* [10] More than the technological, rational side of minimalism, we find in Horn's work its sensual and sensory aspects.

### **THE ARTISTIC CLIMATE IN EUROPE IN THE 1960S**

Other major movements from the late 1960s onward—the formative years of Horn's youth—were unfolding in Europe. The 'poor man's materials' found in nature and seized upon by arte povera artists such as Mario Merz (1925–2003), Luciano Fabro (1936–2007), Jannis Kounellis (1936) and Michelangelo Pistoletto (1933) were not used to create a representation of nature but to reflect natural processes instead. Agility, change and transformation were central aspects of this art. Above all, arte povera was a statement made at a time when the emphasis was increasingly shifting onto the individual.

The stage itself was changing radically as well. In the groundbreaking exhibitions 'Op Losse Schroeven' in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and 'When Attitude Becomes Form' in the Kunsthalle Bern (both in 1969),





*Roni Horn, Pair Object VII. Things That Happen Again: For a Here and a There (1986-1991)*



*Roni Horn, Ant Farm (1974-1975)*

minimalists, conceptualists, anti-formalists, performance artists and arte povera adherents from both Europe and America were exhibited side by side in an eclectic mix.

These exhibitions broke with the existing convention of exhibiting like styles and movements (or ‘...isms’) together. The shows immediately resounded across the international art world: the time was ripe for art—whose development paralleled that of society at large—to no longer merely accept authoritarian convention, but to take it as the basis for individual stylistic departures instead.

This was the context in which Horn produced her first artworks and exhibited the piece ‘Ant Farm’ (1974–1975) as her graduation project at RISD. [p. 28] She erected a wooden frame in her studio, into which she set two large sheets

of glass, holding soil and an active ant colony sandwiched between them. The artist herself sat on one side of the installation, studying the movements of the ants intently. Visitors could see this performance—the artist observing the colony of ants—for themselves. Experiencing a piece through the eyes of the viewer remains an important aspect in all later work as well. *“Eyewitness is usually associated with a criminal act. But what you’re really talking about is people owning up to their experience... I have this ambition to make the meaning of a work people’s experience of it. Every eyewitness is an authority.”* [1] It is fitting that this piece was reconstructed during the major retrospective of Horn’s work at the Tate Modern in London in 2009. The natural materials, together with the attention paid to processes and transformations, connect this piece not only with the artistic era in which Horn was raised, but are also a sign of things to come in her later works.



*Roni Horn, THAT XV (1994)*



## **PATTERNS AND SHIFTS**

That 'Ant Farm' reappears in the drawings primarily created by Horn from 1984 onward as well. These pieces are deeply significant to the artist and extremely labour-intensive to make. When in her New York studio, she works on them practically every day.

Using pigment on paper, she draws shapes and patterns which she then cuts up and rearranges. Some of these drawings seem inspired by the observation of ants' nests, in terms of material and form. In a drawing from 1994 we can see two barely-touching circles trembling in the water. [p. 29] They resemble concentric infinity symbols created by the entrances to underground ant colonies on the earth's surface, now severed and recombined into a single pattern. The process used here by Horn would become increasingly complex in her later drawings.

The works are also reminiscent of a poem by conceptualist Lawrence Weiner (1942), which speaks to his keen insight into natural processes: [12]

*WORN DOWN ENOUGH BY EROSION  
TO ALLOW THE FLOW OF ALL  
BUT  
THAT WHICH THROUGH DAMMING IS CLOSED OFF*

The shifting lines of Horn's drawings are like the dams to which Weiner refers, in that they interrupt a flow in similar fashion. Rather than a single explanation or sole meaning behind the works, it is this kind of association with reality and life itself that is set in motion by Horn's art.



CHAPTER 3.

**Iceland:  
an “encyclopaedia  
of identity”**

When one thinks of Horn, one thinks of Iceland. She has visited the country many times, using it almost as a kind of outdoor studio. The island lies along the fault line between two continental plates and as a result is constantly in motion. This movement is visible in the earth's crust throughout the young landscape. The shifting plates allow the magma underneath them to force its way out, seeping into and filling the cracks it forms in the process. Hot springs and icy pools, waterfalls, geysers and rock formations characterise the rugged landscape of Iceland.

The artist, who embraced her own androgynous nature from an early age, became fascinated by the ever-changing, shifting topography. For Horn, androgyny is about lacking a permanent form or fixed identity. *"Androgyny is the possibility of a thing containing multiple identities... Integrating difference is the basis of identity, not the exclusion of it. You are this and that"*, she says as much herself. [13]

Just as literature offered the school-aged Horn her first holdfast for developing an individual identity, so were the trips she took to Iceland (starting at the beginning of her time at university) formative for her specific artistic approach to the theme of changing identity. What had previously been a matter of *not being this nor that*, as she later summarised the sensation that dominated her youth, became in Iceland *you are this and that*.

The degree to which something or someone can be both one thing and another is also illustrated in the exhibition catalogue from the show 'Roni Horn aka Roni Horn.' A.K.A. is the abbreviation for *also known as*, and in this catalogue the artist provides an index of the many subjects by which she is fascinated. Under the heading *Mother*, she refers to *Dust* and under the *Dust* entry, she refers in turn to *Down*. There we find the following description of a room diffused with the soft light of areas near the Arctic circle, with a table in the middle of the room, upon which several downy feathers are arranged: "*In its almost weightless state these feathers tremble perpetually. [...] It is a movement that cannot be seen among things too light to be still.*" [14] In this way Horn connects the mother figure, source of life and identity, with dust which is irrevocably linked with death in our minds and with a barely perceptible, weightless state of being.

This index is like a decoder ring for Horn's oeuvre: it unlocks the mutual connections between her works and shows how they flow together like a rushing river, mingling into one another and changing in the process. Under 'A', we find: *androgyny, see Water*. Water—omnipresent in Iceland—is the alpha and omega with regard to visualising this quality of changeability. The fluidity, the current, the water: as far as the concept of identity goes, it is the common denominator present in all her works made from the first visits to Iceland and onward through all the decades since.

The greatest and most direct influence exerted by Iceland can be found in the ongoing series of artist's books she published starting in 1990, under the title 'To Place', also in the collection of Museum Voorlinden. This series





*Caspar David Friedrich, Frau vor der untergehenden Sonne (c. 1818)*

features images of landscapes, hot springs, rocks, people and animals. 'Book V' of the series is entitled 'Verne's Journey' and refers to the writer Jules Verne (1828-1905). While the main character, Professor Otto Lidenbrock, is searching for the centre of the Earth, he discovers a hole in the ground amidst the volcanic landscape of Iceland, where the Earth's crust is at its thinnest. He descends into the hole and begins his journey to the centre of the Earth. In 'To Place V', we find photographs of the place where this voyage began, the crater known as Snæfellsjökull.

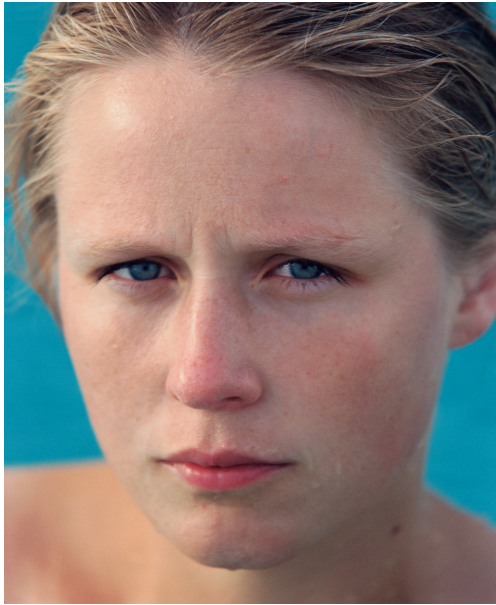
The books occupy an important position in Horn's body of work. They act as treasure chambers for the rest of her pieces, repositories for her precious concepts. The artist uses the verb 'to place' to signify an active ongoing process. The cohesion between identity and place is the key to her oeuvre, in which she delves into the myriad forms taken by identity, time and time again. *"The entrance to all my work is the idea of an encyclopedia of identity."* [15]

## THE FACE AS LANDSCAPE

The concept of the landscape as a locus of identity was explored for the first time in the Romantic period. In Caspar David Friedrich's (1774-1840) 'Frau vor der untergehenden Sonne' (c. 1818) —the female counterpart of his iconic painting 'Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer', which he most likely painted in the same year—we see the back of a standing woman. [p. 35] Our gaze moves over her body to the landscape that holds her attention. Following a long pictorial tradition of human figures in a landscape, something remarkable now occurs as a result of the figure's position in this particular painting: our perceptions merge with those of the woman, which in turn become one with the landscape into which she gazes. In its day, the painting introduced an entirely new way of looking at a landscape.

In the piece 'You Are the Weather' (1994-1995), we can see the head of a young woman, the Icelandic artist Margrét Haraldsdóttir Blöndal (1970), photographed one hundred times in different natural pools formed in the landscape by hot springs. [p. 37] The pose remains unchanged: the face is visible, while the rest of the body is submerged in the water of the spring. As a result of the images' similarity, one begins to notice the subtle shifts in details between the individual photos, such as the skin tone being a bit paler or rosier, pearls of moisture beading on her head and her hair which is drier or wetter. It is these slight differences that reflect the varying weather conditions; the mist, rain, sunshine or clouds glide over her face as if over a landscape. "*I was curious to see if I could elicit a place from her face, almost like a landscape. Not in the literal sense, but how close those identities were*", Horn says about these artworks. [16]

In Horn's photographic portraits, the woman Friedrich depicts from the back finally turns around. The viewer is staring right into Margrét's eyes, into the eyes of the other people or animals captured by the artist, or into the eyes of the artist herself (if one recalls that early photograph taken in Iceland). [p. 17] In these eyes, one can now see the echo of a landscape in which it is possible to dissolve; the ghostly image hangs like a veil obscuring a face.



*Roni Horn, You Are the Weather (1994-1995)*

The image of this bathing woman, her body submerged in the warm water of the spring with only her head and shoulders emerging from the surface, once again summons associations with the glass works in Museum Voorlinden. This is especially true of the part of the title referring to those underlying layers of identity that are continually glimpsed through the surface in brief flashes. It refers to the innocence that remains unaltered in the face of accrued trials: an innocence that can be disinterred if we so desire. Margrét's gaze is both penetrating and direct. Her eyes follows us throughout the entire space. It is not we who are looking at this woman: she is looking at us. We are stalked by the gaze of our own innocence, buried under just as many layers as that of Ellen's grandmother in Wharton's novel. The hundred portraits of Margrét, each of which follows the viewer from a different angle, emanate a sensual, erotic tension. *"You walk in and you're surrounded by up to a hundred images, which are one portrait of a person, who is a multitude. So, it comes in and goes back out. The viewer's relationship to the portrait is very erotic because there is eye contact and ambiguity. And in my mind, the ambiguity is very much about the viewer—about what the viewer wants from the subject."* [17]

Other pieces of Horn's art are frequently sensual and erotic as well. In the series 'Becoming a Landscape' (1999–2001), we see photos of hot springs and caves, each of which is shaped like an anus or vulva. [p. 39] The landscape becomes a seething mass that the viewer can penetrate in different locations. Once the viewer is aware of how the artist's works are interconnected, a spring-fed pool or a hole in the ground calls to mind many things at once: the piercing gaze of the portraits' subjects, the eyes of an eagle, the cylindrical hollows or a roiling in the water's depths, revealing the mystery below the surface. This idea of merging into nature is a major theme in Horn's oeuvre. The union of various life forces plays an prominent role in Freudian ideology as well. Here, identity is given form in the act of penetrating to ever more deeply hidden layers, as if sinking into the realm of the subconscious.

Verne took a fictitious journey to the centre of the Earth, Nabokov fractured a thin veneer: Horn brings these depths to the surface and places them in the here-and-now.



*Roni Horn, Becoming a Landscape [detail] (1999-2001)*

Horn's pieces display the world in a pure state of being rather than illustrating a world that depicts a place or thing: *"Presence occurs when a thing is what it appears to be. They are not images. So I have a certain way of working that is concerned – not with the invisible, but with the nonvisible; meaning it's there and you can sense it. The nonvisible is confluent with the visible, it's the bigger part of the sensible."* [18]

As the daughter of a pawnbroker, Horn was familiar with material objects that had been divested of their meaning. A gold ring, a piece of jewellery, a watch: all with precious memories and images attached to them by the owner, and all stripped of meaning and reduced to their basic material. For Horn, this basic material is not the destination but rather a point of departure. Because of her particular sensitivity to the pure matter, she manages to create a glimpse into that which we cannot see but only perceive instead. *"I harbour the deepest of convictions that the infiniteness of matter is not merely a dream."* [19]

Her experiences in Iceland offered Horn an opportunity to discover the many potential facets of water and to then include them in her art. This fascination with water can also be observed in the piece 'Still Water (The River Thames For Example)' (1999). [p. 42-43] In a series of fifteen photographic lithoprints,

we see a record of the river that flows through the heart of London. The photos show only the water's surface, so that—just as with Margrét's head in 'You Are The Weather'—the varying weather conditions are reflected and made visible. One moment black and ominous, foaming with whitecaps, then beige or dark green the next, calm and eternal with tiny furrows or the smooth surface of a pool. Numbers have been superimposed on the water, referring to footnotes under the photographs. The notes contain quotes from books and movies, song lyrics, excerpts from reports on suicides in the Thames or musings about water, all flowing together in the river's current. Footnote 15 reads: *"In the River Thames, in an arctic iceberg, in my drinking glass, in that drop of rain, on that frosty pane, in my eyes, and in every other microscopic part of me (and you) all waters converge."* [20]

In a forty-minute monologue, delivered on the banks of the Thames at sunset, Horn reads her notes for the piece aloud as an independent text. She intones a succession of physiological, geographic, philosophical and erotic observations: *"Thinking about water, is thinking about the future. And importantly, water is sexy. Because it is powerful, vulnerable, energetic, fragile, she says: Near it. Immersed in it. Deeper into it. Washing all over me."* [21] This mantra-like recitation of thoughts illustrates the major, overarching and connecting role that water plays in her work: it is the great fluid medium in which people and things sometimes collide and cluster, only to dissolve their bonds and flow onward. It is a medium in which a deeper metaphysical meaning is hidden: *"When you look at water, you see what you think is your reflection. But it is not yours. You are a reflection of water."* [22]











CHAPTER 4.

# Afterimage

*Being this and that*, in the form of the artist's personal narrative, is transformed by Horn into a powerful and focused artistic body of work. Hers is an oeuvre that makes use of eclectic media—drawings, sculptures, photos, image and text—but always keeps sight of this central theme. This is often illustrated by paradoxes in the works themselves: they are hard and sensual, liquid and congealed, concrete and metaphysical, plump and graceful, fluent and stammering, obstinate and seductive, all at once.

Stylistically, her pieces do not fit neatly into any single category; her work is an amalgamation of minimalism, conceptual art, arte povera and performance art. A similar amalgamation of styles can be observed in recent decades in the work of many artists, not only in Europe but in other parts of the world as well. Artists from Horn's generation (or near enough) such as Ann Veronica Janssens (1956), Félix González-Torres, Pierre Huyghe (1962), Liam Gillick (1964) and Tacita Dean (1965); as well as younger artists like Jeppe Hein (1974), Alicja Kwade (1979), Chaim van Luit (1985) and many others may mix styles in a comparable fashion, yet



*Alicja Kwade, Stellar Day (2015)*



in doing so, each develops a distinct body of work all their own. It is the kind of visual language that Horn developed early on – one that has been used by successive generations in turn, and one that will likely continue to be used in the future.

Similarly, the themes Horn addresses—the changeability of identity and the fluid transformation of matter—are today more relevant than ever. Kwade placed a large boulder directly on the floor. [p. 46] Only after careful observation of the piece does one note that the stone is turning, ever so slowly. In 23 hours, 56 minutes and 4,099 seconds (the exact equivalent of a day measured in astrological time – one stellar day) the stone completes a single turn in the direction opposite the Earth’s rotation. This means that ‘Stellar Day’ (2015), is an attempt of the artist to create the only object on Earth which is standing still. It seems for a moment as if an image of the viewer detaches from the true self and remains motionless, watching as his or her duplicate continues along on the journey around the Earth’s axis. As if one peers into Horn’s pool of water and realises that what one sees is not one’s own reflection, but the reflection of the water. It’s like looking into a reflection on the cylinder’s glass surface and seeing not one’s own reflection, but rather *being* the reflection of the glass.

Like Horn’s work, Kwade’s art displays a great interest in and sensitivity to the world hidden beyond the visible one. In her installation ‘Die Gesamtheit aller Orte’ (2012), objects including a bicycle, a door, a concrete paving stone and a copper rod curve around in diminishing concentric circles that surround a one-euro coin in the middle. The objects appear as if some centripetal force is pulling them into a central cavity. It’s the hole in the earth where one might find Kwade, Horn, Nabokov or Verne.

Here and now... There and elsewhere...

**“When you look  
you see what  
your reflection  
yours. You are  
watching**

**ook at water,  
it you think is  
n. But it is not  
a reflection of  
ter.”**

# Biography

Roni Horn was born in New York in 1955. She grew up in one of the suburbs and moved into the city at the age of fifteen. She attended the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence (RI) from 1972 to 1975 and then continued her studies at Yale University in New Haven (CT) earning her MFA from that institution. Today she divides her time between New York (NY) and Reykjavik, Iceland, living and working in both.

One of the first exhibitions of Horn's work took place in Europe, at the Kunstraum München in 1978. A few important recent solo exhibitions (from among her impressive list of shows) took place in the Whitney Museum, New York, (2009), Tate Modern, London (2009), Kunsthau Bregenz (2010) and Centre Pompidou in Paris.

In the Netherlands, her artworks have been displayed in the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag (1985) and Museum De Pont, Tilburg (1994, 1998 and 2016). Horn has pieces among the permanent collections of Museum De Pont, H+F Collectie, the Kröller-Müller Museum and Museum Voorlinden.







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Along with countless international exhibitions, many catalogues have been published which include interesting contributions from art historians, critics, artists, novelists and Horn herself. The latter is remarkable for both the style of Horn's writing and the images contained in the catalogue, as well as its design. The heart and soul of these personal publications is the ongoing series of artist's books entitled 'To Place'. Ten of these visually appealing volumes have been released to date.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS OF IMAGE SOURCES

Cover, p. 2–3, 6–7, 8, 11:

Roni Horn, untitled (“The immense accretion of flesh which had descended on her in the middle of life like a flood of lava on a doomed city had changed her from a plump active little woman... into something as vast and august as a natural phenomenon. She had accepted this submergence as philosophically as all her other trials, and now, in extreme old age, was rewarded by presenting to her mirror an almost unwrinkled expanse of firm pink and white flesh, in the center of which the traces of a small face survived as if awaiting excavation.”) (2012–2013)

5 glass objects

c. 138.0 x 128.0 x 128.0 cm each

Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar

© Roni Horn

photography: Antoine van Kaam

p. 14:

Roni Horn, aka [detail: image of Roni Horn in Iceland (1975)] (2008–2009)

ink jet prints on rag paper, 30 paired photographs

38.1 x 33.0 cm each

© Roni Horn

courtesy the artist and Hauser &

Wirth

p. 17:

Periodic table of elements

p. 18:

Hveravellir hot springs in Iceland  
photographer unknown

p. 19:

The Northern Lights (Aurora  
Borealis) in Iceland  
photography: Moyan Brenn

p. 20:

Felix González-Torres, untitled  
(Portrait of Ross in L.A.) (1991)  
candies individually wrapped in  
multicolor cellophane, endless  
supply  
dimensions vary with installation;  
ideal weight 175 lbs.

Art Institute of Chicago

[promised gift of Donna and  
Howard Stone, 1999]

© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres  
Foundation

p. 24:

Roni Horn, aka [detail] (2008 –  
2009)

ink jet prints on rag paper, 30 paired

photographs

38.1 x 33.0 cm each

© Roni Horn

courtesy the artist and Hauser &  
Wirth

p. 26–27:

Roni Horn, Things That Happen  
Again (1986)

Two solid copper forms

diameter 29.2 x 43.2 cm each, length  
88.9 cm each

installation view Judd Foundation,  
Marfa (TX)

© Roni Horn

courtesy the artist and Hauser &  
Wirth

p.28:

Roni Horn, Ant Farm (1974–75)

[silent performance in Horns studio,  
Providence (RI)]

oak, glass, earth, ants

119.4 x 177.8 x 10.2 cm

© Roni Horn

courtesy the artist and Hauser &  
Wirth

photography: Morgan Rockhill

p. 29:

Roni Horn, THAT XV (1994)

pigment and varnish on paper

94.0 x 98.4 cm

© Roni Horn

courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

p. 35:

Caspar David Friedrich, Frau vor

der untergehenden Sonne (c. 1818)

oil on canvas

22.0 x 30.5 cm

© Museum Folkwang, Essen

p. 37:

Roni Horn, *You are the Weather*  
[detail] (1994–95)  
64 C-prints and 36 gelatin-silver  
prints  
26.5 x 21.4 cm each, 100 units  
© Roni Horn  
courtesy the artist and Hauser &  
Wirth

p. 39:

Roni Horn, *Becoming a Landscape*  
(detail) (1999 – 2001)  
20 chromogenic prints  
6 prints 52.1 x 52.1 cm each, 14 prints  
77.5 x 58.4 cm each  
© Roni Horn  
courtesy the artist and Hauser &  
Wirth

p. 42-43:

Roni Horn, *Still Water (The River  
Thames, for Example)* [detail] (1999)  
15 offset lithographs on uncoated  
paper  
76.8 x 105.4 cm each  
© Roni Horn  
courtesy the artist and Hauser &  
Wirth

p. 46:

Alicja Kwade, *Stellar Day (23  
Stunden, 56 Minuten, 4,099  
Sekunden)* (2015)  
stone and engine  
c. 50.0 x 100.0 x 120.0 cm

Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar  
© Alicja Kwade  
photography: Cassander Eeffinck  
Schattenkerk

p. 51

Roni Horn No. 3, New York, 2011  
courtesy the artist and Hauser &  
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photography: Juergen Teller

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