

Line S. Hvoslef (b. 1965) – Landscape

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Translated by Arlyne Moi

Give me a place to stand on, and I shall move the earth.

– Archimedes

When walking from Nøstet to the cultural centre USF Verftet in Bergen, there is a building by the water's edge that is flanked by enormous antennas turned towards outer space. The saucer-like structures appear strikingly foreign and almost exotic in the urban environment. For a few seconds it seems like you are moving inside a sci-fi landscape where the very sounds of the place have a unique and remarkable resonance, as if you can sense something without being able to base the sensation on anything tangible. But the experience is short lived, and you soon fall back in place in a safe and familiar world.

'Something foreign in what is well-known' also characterises several of Line S. Hvoslef's works. Combinations of recognisable objects, strange organisms and dissolved landscapes are visible in her paintings in recent years, one example being *Lydlandskap IV (Sound Landscape IV, 2019)*. At first glance this appears to show a rather steep mountainside. It is classically composed in three layers, with a foreground, a main focus and a background, and with gradation from dark to light colours. But there ends the similarity to traditional landscape paintings, for they almost always allow us to feel that we can 'enter into' the landscape. In *Lydlandskap IV*, our gaze into the painting is blocked by formations and drawn structures placed right in the front, and these seem both recognisable and strangely foreign. We sense a certain logic in the lines that encompass what we at first perceive as clouds in a sky, but which now look more like punctured air balloons calmly drifting by. Other formations appear as dissembling ships from another world, both merging with and floating out from the

mountain in the background. This reinforces the work's planar effect. A spinning top hovers in the foreground and is in perfect harmony with the rest of the landscape. This is a surreal landscape, and it appears to us as both strange and disconcerting. Structures and patterns erode into the landscape in the background, gradually dissolving it and undermining the notion of a place as something constant.

The scenographic quality

Hvoslef held her first solo exhibition in 1994 in the art society Bergens Kunstforening, two years after completing her studies at the art academy Vestlandets Kunstakademi in Bergen. In the exhibition she presented several paintings entitled *Scene (Stage)*. These works show something resembling theatre stages flanked by heavy columns or curtains. Each stage is occupied by formations that alternate between being stage scenery for possible actions performed on site, and as mere patterns lying on the pictorial surface. The alternation between formation and pattern can bring to mind Matisse's paintings of room interiors, one example being *Harmony in Red* (1908), in which a tablecloth pattern in the foreground floats to the background to become part of the wallpaper. This infiltration of foreground and background creates a flat and complicated pictorial room dominated by decorative patterns. The alternation between pictorial room and plane in Hvoslef's *Scene* series is perhaps a bit more subtle than in Matisse's interior paintings, but there is still a comparable sensibility between the formed elements and those that are more dissolved. In *Scene (Stage, 2005)*, the columns to the right and left of the stage have been re-shaped into tool-like objects; they are still room-creating pictorial elements, just as columns have been in the past, but they also point forward to a type of thing-aesthetic, which eventually becomes increasingly obvious in her artistic practice. Even the patterns in the stage motif have changed: what used to seem like something mythological now looks more like a technical drawing or the contours of machine parts.

A series of paintings called *Fartøy (Vessel)* can exemplify what I would call the start of a thing-aesthetic in Hvoslef's practice. In these works, which alternate between abstracted and apparently non-referential subject matter, there is a repeating form that could be understood as either a spaceship or a container floating in an undefinable space. The form is more or less defined as an object in the various works, but it appears most clearly in *Fartøy I (Vessel I,*

2003). In this work, two objects float in a pictorial space, the one as a shadow in the background of the form in the foreground, which appears distinctly separate from everything behind it. We perceive both objects as technological metal constructions, as part of something that might possibly exist in the real world. Knut Ove Arntzen, a professor of theatre studies, sees the *Fartøy* series as 'travelogues' in which the different objects appear as ritual, mythical objects that 'unite space and time in a kind of time-travel for the mind and the laws of nature'.¹ The *Fartøy* series can thus be seen as embedded in a modern mythology about things as representatives for something other than purely functional objects.

Video and sound installation

Ever since Line S. Hvoslef attended the art school Strykejernet in Oslo (1984–85), painting has been her preferred medium. It is usually in relation to painting that she explores other visual media. Her artistic research does not follow a strict method, in the sense that she does not delve into a specific and limited research question and pursue it in a methodical way. Instead, she bases the research on the question of how it is possible to manage or engage with painting within its framing conditions. Perhaps her large installation *Lydlandskap* (*Sound Landscape*, 2014)² is the best example of this. For this work she created a combination of paintings and assemblages by placing several small analogue sound sources in the paintings. The small mechanisms stand out from the pictorial planes but nevertheless merge fully into the imagery in the background due to elegantly drawn lines that follow the mechanisms' contours, thus firmly establishing their belonging in the paintings. Sound mechanisms can also be the starting point for further drawing in a painting. Hvoslef's interest in scenography also comes to the fore in this large work, but in a different way than in her earlier *Scene* series, in which the stages themselves are static. *Lydlandskap* encourages the viewer to participate in the work by following an almost choreographed line of sound sources that creates a specific course of action in the experience of the work. More specifically, the viewer can break this course by following other directions that result in new sound pictures. The installation thus takes on a performative character, since the viewer 'activates' and partly determines the work.

The performative picture

This is not the first time performativity becomes part of Hvoslef's experimentation in art. She has done several collaborative projects with the composer Jostein Stalheim, who is today also a certified sound painter. In 2008 Stalheim and Hvoslef worked together on *Movimenti*, a project culminating in a presentation at Galleri s.e. Here Hvoslef presented a video she had made using analogue techniques and a light box (which she herself made) for linocuts printed on calque paper. These were set in a rotating motion with neon lights and a motor, then filmed close-up by Hvoslef. The video was projected on a wall in the gallery, accompanied by Stalheim's partly improvised composition. A small group of singers participated with their voices and improvised movements in the room. The following year she and Stalheim worked together on the project *Dreamscape* (2009), as a continuation of their collaboration on sound and 'moveable' pictures.³ Hvoslef used the same technique as in *Movimenti*, but also included transparencies of her own paintings in the video.

Perhaps it was her encounter and eventual collaboration with the composer Mansoor Hosseini in Paris in 1995 that can be seen as the springboard for the later performative projects with Stalheim. In Paris, Hvoslef projected photos of her paintings on a wall, accompanied by Hosseini's music. The two have continued collaborating: their most recent project is *Wings and Chains* (2017), which involved a video projection and a performance by a chamber orchestra and a dancer from Komische Oper Berlin.

Hvoslef grew up in a family in which music and visual art were part of everyday life. So it is perhaps only to be expected that these art forms come together in her artistic practice. In the video *Toccata Lucente* (2019), she uses her father's composition *Duo for akkordeon*,⁴ performed by Jostein Stalheim and Kai Hansen, in which Hvoslef's lines enter into dialogue with the music. The rhythm in the music is emphasised by a corresponding movement in the lines – from point to line to complete drawings – which appear as luminous outlines in a black and empty room. The contrast between, on one hand, a gliding and distant atmosphere, and on the other, a more close-at-hand and hectic mood in the music, corresponds with near and distant glimpses of lines and hints of places. The work stands as a coherent whole due to the dialectic between the contrasting media: the line becomes an audible material, and the audible

material becomes a visual track of light. The video was made through analogue means, with Hvoslef using the same technique as for *Movimenti*. A sensibility for rhythm and tonal clusters, which Line and her father Ketil Hvoslef share, sheds light on this side of Hvoslef's art and enable us to sense that music, particularly that of her father, can be a source of inspiration.

A continuity and development of the technique and aesthetics used in *Lydveggen (The Sound Wall, 2014)* can be found in Hvoslef's corridor decoration for Voss's secondary school – yet another 'sound wall'. This work, called *Alle fugler (All the Birds, 2016)*, includes mountings of analogue loudspeakers, electronics and led lighting, but there are also holes in the wall through which one can see miniature landscapes. If a spinning top is set in motion, the sound of birdsong streams from a small loudspeaker, but it is hushed in order to adapt to the work's context. Hvoslef has produced several works of public art, which are commissioned projects she finds both interesting and challenging in many ways. First and foremost, they involve aspects that are not part of her usual artistic practice. She must make sketches, so in this respect she diverges from the intuitive approach she ordinarily takes when creating new works. She must relate to a given room's architecture and paint directly on the wall. This is physically strenuous. Painting on walls also adds something new to the pictorial subjects, says Hvoslef. The landscapes become more expansive. It is as if the frame around a place is pushed outward and allows greater insight into something previously hidden.

Processes

Hvoslef often paints in large format, which requires her quite literally to 'position' herself differently in relation to the media with which she works. The canvas is rolled out on the floor, just as was Jackson Pollock's practice back in his time, throwing and dripping paint on the canvas while he moved around it, shocking the whole art world by letting randomness steer the visual subject. Random aspects are also starting points for Hvoslef. She begins a new painting by working with water-based paint, applying it in thin layers, eventually seeing something in the picture that she wants to develop further. It can be an exciting form or a landscape that gradually reveals its existence. She does not concern herself with 'the painterly brushstroke' clearly evidenced in thick layers on canvas, but instead thins, rubs and brushes

out the paint to achieve a smooth surface character. Nevertheless, she lets the first traces of her work with the canvas remain visible underneath new thin layers of paint, and thereafter starts working in a more concentrated way with the subject. The painting process appears as a movement from something intuitive to something constructed and formed, and the process in itself is seen as important. To leave traces of the initial part of the work on the canvas is significant for Hvoslef. It tells something about the time that has passed and visualises a thought about the past in the present – that the one leads towards the other.

The colour palette in Hvoslef's landscapes is unique, beautiful and unerring. There is nothing hesitant about the way she combines colour tones that do not accord with our understanding of the real world; they still appear exceptionally well-tuned, harmonious and convincing, as if the world really could have looked that way.

Her further work with paintings involves drawing with ink and/or printing with linoleum, the latter being a technique she has only begun working seriously with in recent years. Certain starting points from older linocuts are still in use, but they are cut into smaller pieces, such that only one form remains in a template. Linoleum templates can be used innumerable times, and the repetition of such motifs characterises many of her works: the same form is repeated over time, but appears in different landscapes.

Drawing with ink

Hvoslef extended her studies at Vestlandets Kunstakademy for a fifth year in order to specialise in printing methods. This was when she became interested in linoleum printing and a visual expression with a stronger relation to drawing. In 2011 she began experimenting with ink, in connection with a project at the art-and-culture centre USF Verftet in Bergen where she drew with ink directly on a wall. Today, both drawing and linoleum printing are incorporated into her pictures, resulting in works that find a balance between painting and drawing.

Acrylic ink sets certain limitations on drawing as far as colour is concerned; one must work quite deliberately with the ink, since what is drawn becomes permanent and cannot be

'erased'. In Hvoslef's art, lines therefore function as more than drawn forms, for they also tell about time, process and creation. In certain works, she has tried to cover the drawing with paint, but it is still possible to see ghostlike hints of something from an earlier stage.

In her motifs, lines also allude to something precise and manmade – it is with the ink that intricate patterns and machine-like objects are established. In several cases it is as if the drawing takes control of the painting, as if the rationality of the line dominates the more primitive landscape painted in the background. In *Lydlandskap VII (Sound Landscape VII, 2019)*, the landscape in the background is controlled by the ink's almost intrusive character. Mechanical things and mushroom-like antennas annex the place, and even the horizon is broken down and fragmented by lines. A strange machine-like form, centrally placed, functions as a gathering point for the lines, and we can imagine this form steering further events in the picture. It can be read as a form of social criticism, for technological and manmade things have created distance to nature – created an alienation from 'the natural'. But it can also appear as an acknowledgment of the existence of things in the world.

Surreal landscapes

Futurism as an artistic direction celebrated technology as the symbol of progress and modernity. Its practitioners expressed their enthusiasm for technology through designs for trains, cars and other objects that could move at high speed. There are also the more sci-fi-looking works of Giacomo Balla, in which abstract or non-figurative forms are inspired by force-fields. The Dada artists, perhaps especially Francis Picabia, were also fascinated by technology, but more on account of the form of objects than what they represented. This fascination was passed on to André Breton and the Surrealists, who, in their enthusiasm for objects, ended up changing for all time the way we look at the placement of objects in the world.

Surrealism paved the way for strange and illogical combinations of forms in visual art. Landscape depictions changed character: from being somewhat accurate renderings of reality, to become realistically made dreamscapes. Through a peculiar logic, a world emerged in which objects encountered each other and linked up without necessarily having any kinship or

logical connection. An object's form was seen as interesting, not its function or contextual belonging in the world. Salvador Dalí is perhaps the Surrealist who pushed his art farthest by treating the human body as an object in its own right, or, more accurately, by treating the body as one thing among all the other things in the world. In this way, he was perhaps a harbinger of the later object-oriented ontology, in which the existence of things in the world is often treated in the same way as human existence. The political theorist Jane Bennett, in her treatise on 'vibrant matter', acknowledges non-human forces or energies inherent in diverse things and materials that influence and instigate events and change in the world. Not everything springs from human beings, and the things we see as 'dead' have their life, their energy, their 'thing power' : '[...] the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle'.⁵ Bennett's theory facilitates a new way of seeing the connections between nature and culture. It may be possible to read Hvoslef's aesthetics in relation to a comparable ethical perspective.

But technologically-related structures are not the only things to see in Hvoslef's paintings, for her visual vocabulary also includes biomorphic structures and organic forms that spread across relatively large fields of colour. *Multitude* (2009) presents us with a complicated and apparently biological system in which a network of microorganisms forms a pattern that covers the entire pictorial surface and extends beyond the frame. It is like getting a glimpse inside a tiny part of something far larger, where we can sense an interaction between parts in a unified whole that has not been presented to us. Later works also show similar microorganisms that form plausible systems, examples being *Havlandskap* (*Ocean Landscape*, 2016) and *Lydlandskap* (*Sound Landscape*, 2018). Yet these do not offer the same sort of close-up image that we see in *Multitude*, where the arrangement of forms is marked by being more organic and less rigid than in the later works. In the later works, an order is instantiated by the lines, which seem far tauter and closer together, perhaps especially in *Havlandskap*. An elaborately drawn background with innumerable repeated lines in delicate patterns indicates an interest in repetition, slowness and the process of creation itself. Plant-like oval organisms in the foreground soften the drawn background simultaneously as they infiltrate the background and make dark holes in the linear system. The black ink used in the picture moves across a background of light green, blue and ochre, with glimpses of red here

and there. The picture has a certain affinity with the earlier Pop Art, but the typical raster dots in Pop are replaced here with repetitive lines.

Sublime and dystopian experiences

An interest in microscopic phenomena within something larger, also to glimpse something large and elongated, can be seen in the more recent landscapes, almost all of which concentrate on an excerpt from a place. They deal with something tentatively positioned in relation to something else so small that it is about to vanish. The feeling of looking into something infinite and elongated can set the tone for Hvoslef's dreaming landscapes. This is the same kind of feeling experienced when hiking on the Hardanger Plateau. The silence can be overwhelming, as if the landscape itself is holding its breath. This kind of silence is almost possible to hear. There is, as Mai Lahn-Johannessen points out, a unique silence in Hvoslef's landscape paintings: 'A large, encapsulated, almost physically present silence. Not merely as it can appear in the world of dreams or in the depth of the sea, but also as it must be experienced in the outermost space.'⁶ In saying this, Lahn-Johannessen refers to the metaphysically charged artistic direction known as Colour Field Painting. The concept of the sublime came to be linked to Colour Field painting, perhaps especially to works by Barnett Newman, who wanted to establish a foundation for sublime experience in the painting itself. 'The sublime' refers to an experience of something boundless, overwhelming, difficult to grasp or understand, and which, according to Newman, can be triggered by 'formlessness'. There is a boundlessness and silence in Hvoslef's landscapes that enable a similar experience.

It can also be interesting to situate her paintings in relation to the concept of dystopia. A dystopian society or place is not beautiful or well-balanced, as Hvoslef's works certainly are. Quite the contrary: the term is used to describe the worst possible scenario, a terrifying image of what the future may hold. Nevertheless, there is something uncanny in her paintings of people-empty landscapes marked by technology and schematic models, for they cause the landscapes to seem to be dissolving or undergoing constant change. Take for example *Triptykon (Triptych, 2018)*, which shows a landscape that is almost solely atmospheric, as if all fixed elements have completely dissolved. This large three-part work has a reddish central

field that separates the more uniformly blue side panels, thus sabotaging the impression of continuous formations in the work. Smaller globe shapes float in the blue fields, while something like a spinning top floats in the red field and becomes one of several repeating motifs in Hvoslef's visual vocabulary. Lines link the three parts together through an architectonic or mechanical form that embraces them all and holds the work together. There is a fascinating compromise between drawing and painting in this work, which neutralises and balances the work's three parts and renders them as one unified whole. But the landscape lacks the firm Archimedean place on which to stand – a place for viewing the rest of the world. And that is an outrageous thought in its own right; to be in a world without a core, without stability, without a place to lay the compass that can lead us on the right course.

According to the author Rebecca Solnit, it is the daring to get lost in a landscape that enables a person to become independent, find a direction, and manage to get away from the force of habit. In the book *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, she argues against a society in which '[...] many people never disband their armies, never go beyond what they know. Advertising, alarmist news, technology, incessant busyness, and the design of public and private space conspire to make it so'.⁷ She quotes Thoreau as evidence for the value of getting lost: 'Not until we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are in the infinite extent of our relations.'⁸

¹ Knut Ove Arntzen, *Rituelle, mytiske objekter – Line Hvoslef i det fysiske kaos* [Ritual, Mythic Objects: Line Hvoslef in the Physical Chaos] (2005), 3–4.

² See Trond Lossius, *Lydlandskap – en visuell lydinstallasjon av Line Hvoslef* [Sound Landscape: A Visual Sound Installation by Line Hvoslef] for a more in-depth reading of the work.

³ Hvoslef and Stalheim were commissioned by (the former) Hordaland County to create an opening presentation for the conference *Den europeiske landskapskonvensjonen og kommunene* [The European Landscape Convention and the Municipalities], at Grieghallen, Bergen, November 2009.

⁴ Ketil Hvoslef, *Duo for akkordeon* [Duo for Accordion], 1979.

⁵ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 8.

⁶ Mai Lahn-Johannessen, Essay for Line S. Hvoslef, in connection with an exhibition at Galleri Gann (Sandnes, 2006).

⁷ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (New York: Penguin, 2006), ch. 1.

⁸ Ibid.