

Laura Grisi, Germaine Kruij “The Mirrored” at The Approach, London

16.03.2023

READING TIME 10'

SHARE



Laura Grisi, Germaine Kruij “The Mirrored” at The Approach, London, 2023. Photo: Michael Przewinski

THE SOMATIC CONCEPTUALISM OF LAURA GRISI AND GERMAINE KRUIJ

This piece is not *about* the exhibition “The Mirrored” of Laura Grisi and Germaine Kruij’s work. I write to the exhibition, to this encounter between the work of two artists. At the time of writing, there are detailed plans and digital models of the show; but its experience, its textures, will only emerge in situ. I write from images and from memory: from a beautifully illustrated catalogue of Grisi’s from the 1990s, and from fond memories of working with Kruij on exhibitions at The Approach and going to see her theatre of light and shadow *A Possibility of an Abstraction* in Brussels in 2016. Encounter, time, experience, texture, emergence, image, memory, theatre, light, shadow: these are materials that Grisi and Kruij share.

Kruip (born 1970) and Grisi (born 1938) never met; the younger artist only encountered Grisi's work after she had passed away in 2017. And while this missed opportunity is tragic, the remnants of a life's work—photographic diaries, sculptures and paintings, catalogues, and several interviews—allow Kruip to engage with Grisi nonetheless. The two artists, both deeply interested in optical effects, sensory perception, and how art might engage the concept of time, will “meet” in the same space for the first time in “The Mirrored.” Kruip's *Kannadi* series of small hexagonal mirrors made from hand-polished metal alloy might act as a metaphor for this encounter. Mirrors trigger introspection: thinking about the self in relation to the world around us. Yet, installed above eye level in this exhibition, these specific mirrors, commissioned from a family of artisans in Kerala, India, are not made for reflecting the self-image, but to propel consciousness into other space-times. They are mysterious windows.

When the Italian art historian and critic Germano Celant interviewed Grisi in 1989, he repeatedly offered his analyses and interpretations of her work according to philosophical concepts, psychoanalysis, contemporary artistic movements. . . ¹ Each time, her replies diplomatically avoid engaging with these readings of the work. Instead, she brings their conversation back to the *stuff* of the work: the materials she used, the experiences she had created for her audiences. These include a gallery in which it rained gently from the ceiling into a basin lowered into the ground (*Rain Room*, 1968) and an exhibition in which hidden fans created wind speeds of 40 knots (*Wind Room*, 1968). She had methodically studied the effect of this force on different landscapes using 16mm film during her travels, resulting in *Wind Speed 40 Knots* completed in the same year. Grisi's responses make it very clear that her climatic installations are not symbolic of something else, they are not metaphors; nor did she want “earth, air, or water to become objects.” ² She insisted that her atmospheric works are about the phenomenological experience itself. They might also have had something to do with the collective mood of the time. In the same interview, she refers to the chaos of the student movement of 1968 in relation to *Un'area di nebbia* (1969), a gallery filled with artificial fog, in which her neon and plexiglass columns lit up like otherworldly beacons. Politics, after all, can also be felt “in the air.”

In “The Mirrored,” Kruip presents her own meditation on the wind, an installation which translates the wind speeds on an uninhabited Japanese island to the gallery wall in real time. The wavering intensity of a white spotlight indicates the strength of the faraway gusts, like a film without image (*The Illuminated Wind, Udone-shima, 2023*). This new work recalls *A Possibility of an Abstraction* (performed in 2016 in Brussels and in Rotterdam the following year), a whole theatre performance in which the only two actors are light and shadow, made uncannily physical on the stage. The manipulation of vision is an ongoing concern for Kruip, which she explored in early site-specific installations by fitting rotating blinds on windows and skylights, bringing the outside inside the museum, and highlighting how light informs our experience of space. In *Daytime*, the black and mirrored sides of blinds alternatively block, admit, and then intensify the incoming daylight in the room (2004-2010). Translucent blinds in orange and blue revolve in skylights to alternatively bathe the empty gallery in tones of sunset and dusk. When the two overlap for a second, all colour is lost to *A Shimmering of Grey*, which gives the work its title (2007-2009).

But why try to imitate the textures of natural light, a pursuit that had already preoccupied the Impressionists? Why remake shadows or weather conditions inside a gallery when we can experience them in the landscape? Grisi wanted her audiences “to hear once again the sound of the rain, [. . .] or to feel the wind, or to see that the air is a presence, that there are stars and rainbows as well as the noise of the city and the lights of advertising.” She wanted to “let the spectator participate in the physical quality of the element itself, which was made provocative by its reproduction in a context as different from the space of nature as the space of a gallery.”³

Kruip not only confronts the gallery visitor with their own sensations in “The Mirrored,” but invites them to actively participate in the sensing through three playable brass beams that are suspended from the ceiling (*360 Polyphony, Brass, 2023*). These sculpture-instruments are a continuation of her collaboration with Thein, a renowned German instrument maker, which had already led to the invention of new percussion instruments in the form of a rhombus (*Rhombus, 2017*) and circle (*Circle, 2018*). The verticality of the narrow beams mirrors Grisi’s monolithic *Spiral Light* neon sculpture (1968).

This exhibition, I expect, will makes visitors aware of their bodies navigating the space, absorbing light and

sound, creating shadows and reflections, making the sculptures ring. The gallery and the theatre are spaces of artifice that sharpen the senses to stimuli; they are specifically designed to heighten experience. It is no surprise that both Grisi and Kruij had formative experiences in scenography: Grisi worked in a studio making props and costumes when she was 18, and Kruij began her artistic career as a scenographer. Celant described Grisi's work as "expeditions into the artificial, into fiction."⁴ The movement from scientific exploration to spectacle in this phrase encompasses the contradictions that hold together so coherently in both artists' work: natural and artificial, scientific and theatrical, analytical and transcendental.

Whilst Kruij might have been buoyed by the knowledge of Grisi's practice at the beginning of her visual arts career in the early 2000s (when the two could have conversed directly, visited each other's studios!), she forged her practice without the knowledge of her counterpart from an earlier generation. In a research proposal for this exhibition, Kruij writes that "a late discovery of role models is actually how many women artists encounter their histories. This project is an opportunity to lay a ground for outlining my own oeuvre, but more importantly, to recognise myself within a long lineage of artists."⁵

The feminist art historian Helen Molesworth points out that young male artists are "quickly legitimised into comfortably entrenched art historical narratives, given fathers by their critics" according to "Oedipally inflected narratives of influence" between "fathers"⁶ and "sons." Until quite recently, art history has been preoccupied with the creation of genealogies of masculine genius. Art historians often struggled to identify precedents for women-identifying artists, in part because the available artistic "mothers" had never made it into the canon in the first place, and many were simply forgotten.

Grisi exhibited frequently and internationally, participating in the Quadriennale in her hometown of Rome in the 1960s, '70s and '80s, and had solo shows with the legendary New York gallerist Leo Castelli throughout the 1970s and early '80s. But as she grew older, things grew quieter; the practice had not quite attained the self-perpetuating level of critical and market attention that results in museum retrospectives around the world. This level of attention is reserved for a few dozen artists, who are mostly male, white, and from Europe or the USA.

Renewed curatorial interest in recent years resulted in posthumous retrospectives in Switzerland and Italy, as well as in the presentation of Grisi's neon sculptures in "The Milk of Dreams," the 2022 edition of the Biennale di Venezia.

Thinking about attachment and the queer model of the elected family, Molesworth points out how "women artists have often forged connections over disjointed periods of space and time."⁷ "The Mirrored" is more than just the presentation of two artists' work: it is the scene in which Grisi gains a supporter and posthumous friend in Kruip, and in which Kruip adopts Grisi as her artistic godmother.

Both artists' work invites, or perhaps even requires, a type of carefully attuned perception that leads to a different experience of time than that which we are accustomed to. For 20th and 21st century people who are used to thinking of time as something to be "spent" like money (the two have, in so many ways, been made equivalent), this exhibition presents a challenge. The experiences that both Kruip and Grisi create—through the manipulation of daylight or artificial light, the creation of shadows or colour spectrums, the sensations of wind or rain, the ring of a sculpture turned into a body of sound—propose experiencing the world through the senses. And I don't mean the type of spectacular sensory overconsumption that is designed to satisfy everything all at once. I mean experiences that are much more subtly choreographed, using only one of the described atmospheric devices at a time. The use of technology is pragmatic, never gimmicky. The experiences have been distilled by the artists to the very essence of the thing (the shadow, the drop of water) using the only the most restrained and precise aesthetic means.

Their respective practices demonstrate that Grisi and Kruip recognise that perception does not end with vision (the sense which has been elevated to dominate all others since the Enlightenment, coming to signify truth itself), but involves the whole somatic apparatus of the body. Such a phenomenological mode is in fact key to aesthetic experiences, not just in art, but in daily life, in experiencing the landscape, the city, the changing seasons. It is about attentiveness. Some would call it mindfulness, a term that has become synonymous with remedying this society's current turn to hyper-productivity and burnout. Perhaps we must retrain in something fundamental known to every other animal on this planet: being through perceiving.

At the same time, both artists' practices are deeply conceptual, rigorous to the point of being forensic in their working methods. But theirs is a conceptualism that does not buy into the separation of mind and body, one of the greatest errors of (masculine) Western philosophy. Instead, Grisi's and Kruip's practices propose what I will call a *somatic conceptualism* that becomes apparent through the very comparison of their oeuvres in this exhibition. Their emphasis on embodied, sensory experiences of time and space is by no means innocent or escapist; it is very much about living in this world with all its challenges and contradictions. To experience the world in this way, at the invitation of the artists, creates a pause in the usual rhythm of the day. Or perhaps it reveals a mysterious window that beckons us towards a different movement of time. I recommend that you accept this invitation.

— *Nora Heidorn*

at The Approach, London
until April 6, 2023