CHAPTER 9

Touching the Unknown: On Marte Johnslien's Ceramic Presences

Martine Hoff Jensen
Master of Art History and Visual Studies, University of Oslo

Abstract: Touching is never a unidirectional event; what you touch will always touch you back. 'How can the way we relate to the world around us take shape as sculpture?' Norwegian artist Marte Johnslien asks. In the 2018 exhibition *A Square on a Sphere* at Lillehammer Kunstmuseum (Art Museum), Johnslien showed, amongst other works, a sculpture consisting of ceramic shapes stacked on top of each other with glass plates between. In this work, Johnslien explored a new technique of reinforcing ceramics in which she put steel mesh underneath the clay. By strengthening the thin ceramic shapes with iron, Johnslien changed the material and thus changed the texture. This chapter elaborates on how artistic presence can provide a way to access the glitch between the visible and the invisible, by exploring the ceramic works by Johnslien in light of Barad's essay on touching, esotericist Pyotr Demianovich Ouspensky's view on the fourth dimension, Eastern philosophy, and relativity theory.

Keywords: ceramics, esotericism, touch, the fourth dimension, artistic presence, eastern philosophy

Introduction

Upon approach, the sculpture looks fragile. Like it might fall apart. The surface of the ceramic looks crackled, divided into many shedding pieces, reminiscent of sunburnt skin or a dried-out plateau. The palette, consisting of different nuances of white, rust and dark grey, adds to the feeling of something dried out, burnt, about to fall apart. Within, the shapes are strengthened by grid steel mesh sheets, but from the outside the sheet

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Figure 1. Marte Johnslien (2018). *A Square on a Sphere* [A series of sculptures in steel-reinforced ceramics on platforms of wood and glass]. Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of Galleri Riis.

is hidden. A glass plate separates the forms; three shapes underneath, two on top [figure 1]. The largest ceramic shape stretches upwards, like a spire on a cathedral, its colour a mix of browns, orange, and white patterned like tie-die. Its body forms two round, rippling shapes. The second ceramic shape curves like a white sheet of paper, lying sideways on the glass. The three shapes underneath the glass are in dirty white, rust and dark grey. Their forms vary, from round to square. The three ceramic pieces stand on a glass plate; they exist between glass plates. With their bodies, they carry the weight of the two others, but they do not touch.

In artist Marte Johnslien's (b. 1977) ceramic sculptures, we can explore the space between objects and dimensions, our connection to our surroundings and the history of matter, in order to acquire a different view of the world in which we exist. Many of the works in Johnslien's *oeuvre* investigate topics

Figure 2. Marte Johnslien (2018). *A Square on a Sphere*. Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of Galleri Riis.

connected to scientific fields such as physics or chemistry, spirituality and philosophy, and material properties. In the exhibition *A Square on a Sphere* at Lillehammer Kunstmuseum in 2018, in which the described sculpture installation was on display, Johnslien investigated modern physics, Eastern philosophy, and Einstein's theories of the fourth dimension, in order to explore the unknown beyond our limits of perception [figure 2].

In this chapter, Johnslien's artwork is analysed by activating the term 'glitch,' which can be described as a mode of non-performance, malfunction, or a 'bug in the system.' The etymology of the word 'glitch' is deeply rooted in the Yiddisch 'gletshn' (to slide, glide, slip). As such, glitch is an active word that implies movement and change. In recent developments of cyberfeminism (Russell, 2020), the glitch is suggested as an opportunity to embrace what is not perfectly ordered.

Deep Dimensions

In 1905, Albert Einstein presented his theory on special relativity, proving that time and space are linked, thus radically challenging the established scientific worldview. He also elaborated on 'the fourth dimension,' a theory that had circulated since the late 1800s. The idea of something existing outside of our physical reach has inspired many to search for this other,

dark and unknown dimension ever since. According to art historian Linda Dalrymple Henderson, the fourth dimension 'possessed mysterious qualities that could not be completely understood, even by scientists themselves' (Henderson, 1983, p. xix). Henderson shows how many artists, writers, and musicians tried to express higher spatial dimensions in their work. A few even believed that the fourth dimension could answer the mysteries of the world. Amongst them was the Russian esotericist Pyotr Demianovich Ouspensky (1878–1949), who wanted to find evidence from natural science for a spiritual-mystical worldview and tried to create methods for developing the potential in human consciousness. Ouspensky's belief was that he 'had found an explanation for the "enigmas of the world,"' and with this knowledge he 'offer[ed] mankind a new truth that […] transform[ed] human existence' (Henderson, 1983, p. 246). Many of these beliefs came to an end when Einstein later redefined the fourth dimension as time instead of space.

In an interview with *Kunstkritikk* in 2014, Johnslien said that art experiences have always appealed to her *spirituality*, meaning that they enhance her affiliation to the world around her. 'Eventually I discovered that this experience is reminiscent of Buddhist thought and forms of meditation that exercise the ability to understand the situation of others' (Liven, 2014). Finding inspiration in the teachings of Tibetan Buddhist meditation master Chögyam Trungpa, she experienced some of his writings of what she defines as 'artistic presence' as fundamental. In her exhibition *A Square on a Sphere*, Johnslien explored how our understanding of reality can translate to spatial structures (Lillehammer Kunstmuseum, 2019). As the name of the exhibition indicates, Johnslien explored the impossible notion of drawing a geometrically correct square on a circular sphere. It is just not possible for the angles of the square to meet up, and this produces a *glitch*, or in other words a mistake or a bug in the system. The image of the square on the sphere can be used to illustrate the problems that occur when you try to translate something from a two-dimensional space to a three-dimensional space. Moreover, the glitch can hint at the possibility of yet another dimension. It represents something unknown: that which human beings cannot really grasp within the physical limits of our perception of the world.

Mystical Physics

The gaps that Johnslien explored in the work are relatable to the mystic cult of the fourth dimension, Einstein's relativity theory, and contemporary physics, as these fields try to address what is not possible for us to grasp. For the sculpture series, Johnslien drew inspiration from physicist Fritjof Capra's 1975 book *The Tao of Physics*. In this book, Capra explores the parallels between modern physics and Eastern spirituality, giving particular attention to the relationship between quantum mechanics and Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. Capra claims that the common link between Eastern philosophy and modern physics is a desire to find truth and reality.

In the chapter 'The new physics,' Capra explains Einstein's relativity theory in relation to gravity, using the square on a curved sphere as an example. Capra writes that '[t]he force of gravity […] has the effect of "curving" space and time,' saying that three dimensional space is curved, 'and that the curvature is caused by the gravitational field of massive bodies' (Capra, 1985, p. 59). In the chapter 'Space-time,' the readers are introduced to the fourth dimension. Einstein's equations can be applied to determine the curvature of stars and planets, and the structure of the universe. Cosmology studies the correspondence between different answers to the equations and the actual structure of our universe. Capra explains: 'Since space can never be separated from time in relativity theory, the curvature caused by gravity cannot be limited to three-dimensional space, but must extend to four-dimensional space-time and this is, indeed, what the general theory of relativity predicts' (Capra, 1985, pp. 156–157). To explain it simply: when driving a car very fast, vision lags and it feels as if one is experiencing time. Just as, for example, when an object is about to hit you, you feel as if it is happening in slow motion. Such lags, delays, and blurs—in other words, glitches—are the gravitation of time.

Glitches are also fundamental in contemporary physics. In philosopher and physicist Karen Barad's essay 'On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I Am,' she explores the act of touching as it takes place in physical matter. When hands touch, the flesh is sensually graced, it is warmed, lightly pressured, and it senses the presence of otherness. 'So much happens in a touch,' Barad writes, 'an infinity of others—other beings, other spaces, other times—are aroused' (Barad, 2012, p. 206).

What happens when objects touch? Or, as in Johnslien's sculpture, only appear to touch? The touch can, as Barad writes, take you away to 'other spaces, other times,' perhaps even to other dimensions.

In an important sense, in a breathtakingly intimate sense, touching, sensing, is what matter does, or rather, what matter is: matter is condensations of response-ability. Touching is a matter of response. Each of 'us' is constituted in response-ability. Each of 'us' is constituted as responsible for the other, as the other, Barad writes (Barad, 2012, p. 215).

However, touching is not always what we think it is. In physics, touch is an electromagnetic interaction. The glass plate that separates, or is perhaps caught between, Johnslien's ceramic sculptures [see figure 1], might seem to touch the forms of burnt clay. But in reality, as Barad explains, 'there is no actual contact involved' (Barad, 2012, p. 209). What is actually happening, 'is the electromagnetic repulsion between the electrons of the atoms that make up' the ceramic shapes and those that make up the glass plate (Barad, 2012, p. 209). Like two magnets, it is impossible to get electrons to touch, as the electrons are 'negatively charged particles that surround the nuclei of atoms and having the same charges they repel one another' (Barad, 2012, p. 209). When we feel someone touching us, it is the electromagnetic force that we sense (Barad, 2012, p. 209). The ceramics and the glass are indeed separate from one another. But even though in physics nothing ever really touches, it is not what we experience. Barad writes that 'touch moves and affects what it effects' (Barad, 2012, p. 208). How we approach our surroundings reflects on us. In other words, although contemporary physics has established that even our touch is located outside the physical limits of our perception of the world, touching still moves us.

Poetising Glitches

'How can our world view be translated into something physical,' Marte Johnslien asked in a talk in 2018. She continued, 'How can it be translated into something sculptural, spatial? How can the way we relate to the world around us take shape as sculpture?' In her work, Johnslien searches for other perspectives to understand ourselves, objects and materials. Or,

in Ouspensky's words, she seeks a 'broadening of our conception of the world' (Ouspensky, 1997, p. 72). 'All that I am discovering is so wonderful and so miraculous that I become more and more enraptured, and am grabbed by a certain presentiment of further revelations awaiting me. It is as though I already feel the *unity of all* and am overcome with awe at the sensation' (Ouspensky, 1997, p. 2).

In the sculpture series *A Square on a Sphere*, Johnslien explored a new technique of reinforcing ceramics: by wrapping clay around steel mesh sheets in order to embrace the steel. In return, the steel gives the ceramic forms a new inner stability. Moreover, Johnslien explored the way a two-dimensional diagonal can be transformed to a three-dimensional object by cutting the diagonal in two and *curving* the two new pieces to become one. Stacked on top of each other, with glass plates placed between them, the two-dimensional diagonal curved into a new form and a new space.

The glitches that Johnslien explored in the work are relatable to the studies of both Capra and Ouspensky. In the essays collected in the book *A New Model of the Universe*, Ouspensky asks questions about the various ways humans have tried to find the fourth dimension and whether or not it is possible. He writes that the idea '… must have arisen in close connection with mathematics, or, to put it better, in close connection with the idea of measuring the world,' and that '… besides the three known dimensions of space—length, breadth, height—there might also exist a fourth dimension, inaccessible to our perception' (Ouspensky, 1997, p. 73). What exists in the glitches are perhaps inaccessible to our perception as well. Continuing, Ouspensky writes that '… people have always divided the world into the *visible* and the *invisible*' (Ouspensky, 1997, pp. 67–68). Traces of this can be seen even in ancient cave paintings. This division of the world is the foundation of our world view (Ouspensky, 1997, p. 68). The invisible has long been connected to the *mythical* realm. Capra links mathematics and physics to the mystical philosophies of the East. According to Ouspensky, 'the fourth dimension [generally] is used as the synonym of the mysterious, miraculous, "supernatural", incomprehensible and incognisable, as a kind of general definition of the phenomena of the "super-physical" world' (Ouspensky, 1997, p. 72).

In Eastern philosophies, physical laws, matter, time or space *glitches* seem to play a pivotal role. Something may exist in the glitches of the world that humans cannot grasp. As part of her ceramic work, Johnslien collects a wide range of references, reads scientific theories, researches new techniques and understands material processes so that the artwork itself becomes 'the reaction to the research process' (Johnslien, 2018). In her own words, Johnslien's working method 'activates the use of both the intellectual and the intuitive, hence operating between the "knowing" and the "non-knowing"' (Johnslien, 2018). In the space between these two, art emerges. Not as something visual but as something sensed, as something that touches us. Between the felt touch, that we perhaps only imagine, and the impossible touch, that is due to the laws of physics, there might be a gap, a secret space we do not have physical access to. Yet *artistic presences* might bring us closer to the unknown.

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