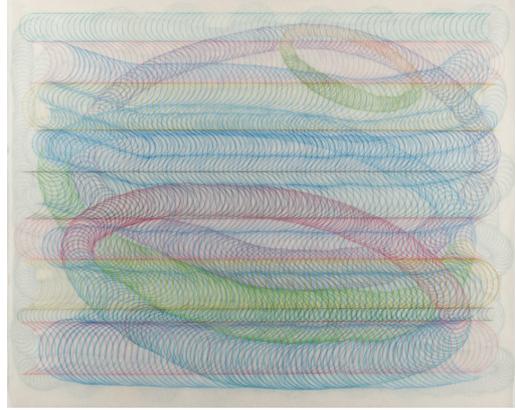


Annu Vertanen



Annu Vertanen was born in 1960 in Imatra, Finland. She studied art in Kankaanpää Art School, Lahti Art School and University of Art and Design in Helsinki. Her work was first exhibited in 1989 in Gallery Kluuvi in Helsinki, Finland.

Annu Vertanen originally studied painting, but graphic art increasingly began to interest her after graduation. She found the means by which it was possible to place a painter's personality into a woodcut so perfectly that brushes and canvases could be abandoned completely. An artist's background was certainly also of assistance in the woodcut renewal phase in the eighties, because Vertanen could embark without preconceived attitudes on an experimentation of how a painter finds her creative identity in wood engraving, which is both respected and yet held to be so very archaic.

From the very beginning Vertanen treated the woodcut technique in an unorthodox way. Gradually she came to deal with the concept of printmaking. The process of printing, mirroring and the conventions of showing prints became a significant part of the contents of her work.

Vertanen's work combines figuration and abstraction; expanding the tradition of abstract minimalism, she draws her influences from artists such as Agnes Martin and Yayoi Kusama. Her later works are more purely abstract. She has absorbed the acute attention to the traditional methodology and form of the print media subsequently refining her own visual and conceptual vocabulary that emerged through her focus on the points of intersection between two dimensional print and spatial analysis.

Vertanen's work can be found in myriad of public and private art collections both in Finland and abroad, and has been seen in numerous exhibitions worldwide. She has granted several awards in Finland and abroad.

The pleasure of meaning and the enjoyment of events – the two arts of Annu Vertanen

We do not easily quit the world that meanings have created for us at some indeterminable time in the future, even though it will happen one day. Roland Barthes distinguishes between the pleasure derived from the 'normal' use of a text and the different, hidden kind of enjoyment of a text created by the possibility of destroying the order of language. The language of the culture of pleasure is not used as parts, but as a whole, together with its contexts and even by stretching the safety nets of metalanguages. For their part, poetic language and modern art move towards a kind of destruction, consciously testing their limits. Barthes sharply distinguishes between pleasure and enjoyment despite the fact that one contains the other, as Erkki Vainikkala writes in his epilogue to the Finnish translation of Barthes's *Pleasure of the Text*. My title compares Barthes's differentiation to another writer's distinction, to Ricoeur's dialectical pair of concepts, meaning and events, which describe language as a system – the production of meanings as the icons of theory – and as an event, i.e., language as a rhetoric that is always seeking its limits in order to acquire new 'incomprehensible' meanings.

In terms of the above distinctions, I try to visualise Annu Vertanen's art as a metaphor of pleasure, tradition, and enjoyment, transgression. Between them the artist accepts the challenge to combine different impulses into the same performance. The pictures and performances, meanings and events, are the paradoxes of a way of thinking. In place of the passage of time, Vertanen has decided to use submerged and diffused paints, azur, as a sensation that tunes the winds, creates light and awakens memories. Even though ultimately this is not enough, she is in harmony with herself and prepared to present one without the other, as the other is always present as a memory, a complementary thought.

Vertanen's works are often very large, some even dominate the whole exhibition space with their multiple, repetitive graphic surfaces. She calls her method 'wallpapering'. It tells ironically about her relationship to handicraft: "There's not much difference between graphic art and printing wallpaper". Over the years Vertanen has accepted her role as a graphic artist and decided to do herself what she could have had done by others. A graphic artist is a craftsman. But who decides how a work is defined? A graphic work is by nature flat, paper, a large but limited print or reproduction, plus the original composition. Vertanen still works with coloured plates on rollers, sampler's records, as a work is only finished when performed at the concert. She discovered her graphic expression from the principle of paintings, which she wished to transfer to her prints. The fact that colours could be printed one on top of the other, not beside one another, has been taken from the world of painting. Green and red on top of each other, aluminium, pressing metals, 'blood'. Different shades of aniline and red run parallel in huge prints on metal surfaces.

I discover Vertanen's European and American soul mates in the recent history of non-figurative painting. I can see Vertanen in the works of Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell, Susan Rothenberg, Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke; the same sensitivity, perception – and straightforwardness. I don't mean the whole careers of the artists or even the themes of their most important paintings and works. I mean the first impression that satiates the visual power with the possibilities of the materials: oil paints and their register, readymade, metal, the absorbability of unprimed canvas; everything that decides the treatment of the motif and also the motif itself. How a colour becomes another, keeps its shape, adheres to a new surface, separates, spreads, runs. Only by hesitating, slowing down, delaying, can Vertanen's works be

fully appreciated. Non-figurative forms are only now acquiring meanings with the interpretations of seeing. Delay means freedom. Thus giving symbolic meanings is uppermost in modernism, irrespective of the fact that even it is linked to remembering by the delayed search for contact with our experience, about our bodies, our environment, our other world. Exaggeratedly, the parts of the world are thrown inside us. There is nothing 'inside' that has not been thrown in. In this respect, Vertanen's abstractions are anthropomorphic, and I do not believe that the importance of the non-figurative aspects of a work of art can be expressed without anthropomorphic icons. It was just these icons of representativeness that modernism passionately wished to eliminate in its struggle for the unobtainable and the unseeable: principles, universal principles, also from the hereafter. Without noticing that the hereafter suffers, actually consists of the existing world. This characterisation of mine is supported by those artists Vertanen feels close to: Eva Hesse, Judy Pfaff, Agnes Martin, Terry Winters and Yayoi Kusama. Common to all their works is a renunciation of the geometrical form language of modernism and a tendency towards a biomorphic (and anthropomorphic) form.

There is a clear difference between the works of Vertanen and similar artists and early abstract expressionism. When observed, the view mainly focuses on the physical or biological world. The expressive innovations of painting in the 1950s gave way in the following decade to new materials, a kind of illumination of the everyday and an ornamental organism. Often almost presupposing a natural history type register: I'm thinking here of Mark Boyle's output since the 1960s. The bodily experience or experience of body proliferates. We're all part of the same thin layer on the surface of the planet: eye, skin, touch, the living world. Vertanen's name is repeated as the colour of blood, microscopic images of the body, bundles of nerves, veins and signal tracks invade the series of prints alongside and beyond the mythical and monumental expression.

Another area in Vertanen's work is represented by a misty but distant rhythm of repetitive 'concretism': stripes like the rumble of lived life, particles dancing on a drumhead. Maintaining a hypnotic line-drumming like Agnes Martin's works, background music produced in a colour cosmos of pastel tones. The iconography of Vertanen's 'wallpapers' fills the whole field of vision, turning and signifying it as a performance space. This is not a question of naming something but of signifying the difference. Attention is transferred from the object, picture and space to the viewer. It is a question of how I see, not what I see. Vertanen's surfaces do not answer question or even invite questions. The printed surfaces expect the viewer to pose the question on the basis of what he or she sees. Non-figurative opticity, the great theme of post-picturesque abstraction has been removed. The sequela remains as a stimulus of the relation of the optical visual space and the concrete space to creation. Vertanen's whole output is characterised by what the Swedish art theoretician Sven-Olof Wallenstein calls the main interest elements of the "extended field of painting": the virtual, two- and three-dimensional subjective experience which separate from the technique, medium, of painting and in this case also graphic expression.

Vertanen has spent months in India, the United States and Japan. These influences have been strained into one through the expressions offered by different art forms and methods. An ever more important reflection of the process of observation has emerged in the background of non-figurative expression, the cognition of seeing and the genesis of remembering. The works in the space perform various tests, as in a laboratory, but perhaps it is not so necessary for the occasional exhibition visitor to know this. The artist may well have a number of different

agendas in the background of her works. The motives, which are not precisely told, may well all be equally as significant.

The dual expression of Annu Vertanen's art presupposes the acceptance of aesthetic experience, but there is a condition for this. The pleasure of text is ambivalent: the possibility via germination to present another and at the same time oneself. Looking as a physical stimulus becomes a possible, original and absolute condition without language: through life. In their entirety, the possible conditions for life's pictorial and spatial themes move in parallel in Annu Vertanen's works. The artist's works mean the space we are examining. With her clear starting point and borderline fusing contact with the world, the enjoyment of events can begin.

Jan Kenneth Weckman

Sources:

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