

Anne Katrine Senstad, *Radical Light*

Kai Art Centre, Tallinn, January 2020

I have broken the blue boundary of color limits, come out into the white; beside me, comrade-pilots, swim in this infinity, I have established the semaphores of Suprematism.

I have beaten the lining of the colored sky, torn it away and in the sack that formed itself, I have put color and knotted it. Swim! The free white sea, infinity, lies before you.

Kazimir Malevich, 1919

Anne Katrine Senstad's "Radical Light" creates an immersive environment encompassing all senses, where abstract light sculptures, the surrounding sound and the space filled with white light all play an equal role. With an aim to show light in a pure form, the author composes with different hues of white, paying attention to nuances and soft transitions in light flooding out from the glass tubes. The slender tubes filled with neon and argon, illuminate the space at colour temperatures between 3500 to 8300 Kelvin, ranging from warmer satin and egg-shell whites to colder green and icy blue hues barely visible to the eye, indicating simultaneously the physical character of the colour white as well as its culturally acquired connotations. The shape and position of the light sculptures – vertical columns divided in the center, and the cornice of light forming a horizon – produce a spatial structure that gives an orientation for moving in and perceiving the space. In this framework, in addition to the pre-defined form, the contingency of the viewing situation becomes important, turning the neutral visitor into an active participant. In dialogue with the light sculpture installation, experimental composer JG Thirlwell has created a sound piece specifically for "Radical Light", enveloping the viewer in an abstract aural experience.

The large hall of the Kai Art Center that has been divided into two matrices of light columns is augmented by an intimate video installation, where a sequence of chromatic projections provides space for contemplating on the experience of the large work. If the main hall

allows to perceive structures juxtaposed to the viewer's body and are in dialogue with them, the "antechamber" represents the internal particle world experienced within the body.

The video work has been projected onto a bed of white powder salt, reflecting and reinforcing projected light; referencing salt as an important bodily component as well as a beloved material in land art and post-minimal art.

In composing a sensory environment, Senstad is primarily examining the emotional and semiotic meanings produced by white colour: bright white light as eternity, purity, perfection, a symbol of death and rebirth; or naturally clean white as something that departs from the reality and approaches the surreal: the white tiger, the albino moose, the great white whale. On the other hand, Senstad's installation makes a separation between the light source as an information channel and its cultural meanings, demonstrating how various shades of white are nothing more than sensations of electromagnetic wavelengths that can be altered by changing the ratio of noble gases harnessed within the glass tubes. The physical properties of neon and argon facilitate the transportation of electricity that produce luminal spectrums with a discrete durational hum. Light is physically present in space, like surrounding objects or enclosing walls. The use of light as material, its scale and the purity of the white hues, refer to a radicalization of space and colour, striving towards their zero-degree, that would allow to pose questions on the character of the artwork and challenge its place within a gallery.

The idea of a white colour on a white background that enthralled avant-garde artists (e.g. Malevich, Rauschenberg or Cage) signified for them an endpoint of certain artistic developments and a transgression beyond the canonic rules of the artworld (and the society). The pure white denoted contemplation and a possibility to arrive at a new reality, "to swim in infinity". But a white canvas was simultaneously a mirror and a blank slate, receiving signals from its environs and registering its temporary interventions. From here, there was only one step towards art that undid the separation between the artwork and its surrounding space. Senstad's work is situated in a tradition of installation art, where the surrounding environment and the viewer in it become part of the work itself. By moving between the light columns, in different speeds, on different days or time, observing the

change of light and shadows, the gallery space acquires an equal role with the installation elements and sounds. The scale of the space, its proportion, temperature or the amount of visitors in it at a particular moment (running children, art lovers on a guided tour) merge with the installation and alter its connotations over time.

In addition to sensorial effects, or a relationship to the geographic location of the Kai Art Center – by the northern sea of cold white hues –, “Radical Light” produces connections to the history of the former industrial space. The Noblessner submarine factory, built in the beginning of the 20th Century, was a milestone in the oil-based economic modernisation process, where the rational use of space and time was in many ways made possible by electric light. A hundred years later, it is the continuously glowing artificial light that has become one of the pillars of the globalised world order, where cyclical separation between night and day as well as a clear division between work and leisure has disappeared (the latter, in many ways, with the help of increasingly brighter “personal” devices). Or even more importantly, where electricity-dependent advertising screens occupy exceedingly larger surfaces, demanding constant attention of the users and making commodified displays an unavoidable part of the public space. “Radical Light” is in this context a critical project, that points to the instrumentalization of light in the service of a continuous cycle of production and consumption, and stands against a unified perceptual experience in the public space. By detaching light from a command to consume, the installation becomes a counter-environment that transforms the visitors’ perception of space and provides possibilities for a different kind of cultural experience.

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Andres Kurg is a professor of architectural history and visual culture at the Institute of Art History, Estonian Academy of Arts in Tallinn and Senior Research Fellow at the Faculty of History at Vilnius University. His academic work specializes on the Baltic countries and Russia during the Soviet era, with a special focus on the influence of technological transformations and changes in everyday life to the built environment from the 1960s to the 1980s. He has curated exhibitions on Soviet architecture and design, including *Environment, Projects, Concepts: Architects of the Tallinn School 1972-1985* at the Estonian Museum of Architecture (2008); *Our Metamorphic Futures. Design, Technical Aesthetics and Experimental Architecture in the Soviet Union 1960–1980* in Vilnius National Gallery of Art and Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design (2011–12); and *Centrifugal Tendencies: Tallinn, Moscow, Novosibirsk* at the Museum of Architecture Drawing in Berlin (2017). His recent publications include: *Werewolves on Cattle Street: Estonian Collective Farms and Postmodern Architecture* and *Three Takes on the Environment*. He has held several international fellowships, including at the Getty Research Institute in L.A. and Yale University, and received funding for his work from the Graham Foundation, EU Culture program and Estonian Cultural Endowment.