

OVERGADEN.

Kirsten Justesen
Ice Script – Meltingtime #17
16.11 – 25.12 2013



Kirsten Justesen, working on ice pedestal, 2000. Photo: Jo Selsing

Ice Script – Meltingtime #17

By Cecilie Høgsbro Østergaard

REVISIT is the title of a new exhibition format at Overgaden. The REVISIT series 'celebrates the artistic long haul' by re-curating art projects the institution considers to have been significant in creating the history and identity of Overgaden. The first in this series is Kirsten Justesen's *Smeltetid #5* ('Meltingtime #5'). The project was exhibited at Overgaden in 1993, long before Overgaden was an official art institution with a professional director and curated exhibition programme. Exhibiting artists were allocated a space, then did just about everything else themselves. They created a temporary institution around their own projects, be they sales exhibitions or freely flowing experiments. Whereas Kirsten Justesen's first *Meltingtime* project at Overgaden had the artist as its sole author, today it is the institution that acts as curator. As a result, the most recent edition of *Meltingtime* – the 17th in the se-

ries – represents an art historical and institutional summary and selection from an artistic project that has been on-going for 35 years. This is an elegant fit with the fact that *Ice Script – Meltingtime #17* is also a conclusion: according to Justesen it will be her last *Meltingtime* exhibition.

Kirsten Justesen has apparently never given any definitions of *Meltingtime* as a project. Overgaden describes it as research. It probably is, if we accept that the project, like any other artistic investigation, has no defined hypothesis, explicit method, cannot be reduced to a research result, and makes no stringent distinctions between primary and applied research. But it is an investigation, and at the very least *Meltingtime* can be seen as a collection of kinds. It is not a collection with any set scientific criteria, but a more wide-ranging association on ice as a phen-

omenon. None of the *Meltingtime* exhibitions have had any boundaries for the forms in which ice can appear. The goal is not to distinguish between essential and inessential ice. It is the totality – the sheer volume – that matters. On the flyleaf of the large catalogue published in 2003 for the exhibition *Meltingtime #11*, there is a list of hundreds of examples of ice in words: ice that describe physical phenomenon, like ‘glacial ice’ and ‘permafrost’; ice as a metaphor, as in ‘breaking the ice’ and ‘heart of ice’; ice in compound words like ‘ice pick’ and ‘ice rink’; ice as a phonetic sound, as in ‘isolation’ or ‘isosceles’. Long lists, where range and association play a greater role than taxonomy. The lists form, in an interesting way, Kirsten Justesen’s rhetorical answer to an old linguistic myth: that inhabitants of the Arctic have hundreds more words for ice and snow than people from more temperate regions of the globe. This is a myth Justesen has drawn on repeatedly, both directly and indirectly, and which has apparently inspired her to collect every imaginable kind of ice – not only the ‘noble’ forms to be found in nature. Linguistic, technological, industrial and edible ice are equally valuable. From isocyanate, isolation and ice lollies, to cyrotherapy and household freezers.

The project has no defined environmental or anthropological agenda. The idea for *Meltingtime* was sparked during the artist’s time in Greenland, and the deep fascination of icebergs and the Arctic landscape she experienced there, but like a linguist her collection of endless forms of ice is an entirely formal exploration, neither value-laden nor idealised. There is no hierarchy in the artist’s formal investigation: no ice form is more rarefied or authentic than another. This punctures the old, romantic myths of nature versus civilisation which survive in our contemporary political agendas.

In addition to ice as a natural, linguistic, technological and industrial phenomenon, comes ice as an artistic material. Given the turn to craftsmanship, consciousness of form, and desire for materiality in contemporary art today, it is tempting to describe *Meltingtime* as an investigation of *materiality*. The physical properties of ice are naturally at

the very core of the project, but Justesen’s open-minded, complex and exploratory way of working has always made it possible to interpret her work to fit shifting artistic agendas, from the radically political to the stringently formal. But the question that remains is whether ice is primarily a material in and of itself for Justesen. After all, ice could be seen to represent the point zero of materials, as being devoid of artistic qualities. Ice has no colour, the extent to which it is influenced by its surroundings is extreme, and it can – with or without human intervention – revert from an imposed form to pure formlessness. Ice is simultaneously a non-material and the ultimate material: a matter that pervades or influences all other matter and organisms, at least in its liquid form. Ice is perhaps better understood as a basis for extensive explorations of form than as an actual material.

In this way ice can be seen as a symbol of Justesen’s art. In other words, Justesen has – excuse the metaphor – always demonstrated a unique ability to flow with the times. She has managed to avoid being frozen in any one artistic gesture, without abandoning the essential, sculptural core of her work. Her absorption by the relationship between the figure and the plinth remain central and immutable. Be it the naked figure on the plinth of a block of ice, the white plinth in the hand of a black, male ‘odalisque’, the body as a plinth for a melting figure, or an ice cube in a bag.

Justesen has not restricted herself to collecting every imaginable ice phenomenon as well as manifold form experiments, but has also used ice in an art historical perspective to enact an extensive catalogue of her own and others’ artistic ideas. She has used ice in sound works, conceptual art, performance, sculpture, photography, mail art and action art. Ice also appears as handicrafts and jewellery, as well as in set design, a field Justesen has worked with professionally for many years, yet which is often overlooked in the art world. Justesen has, for example, used ice aesthetically and in set designs that have a visual affinity with those of the avant-garde theatre company Hotel Proforma and the 1970s Billedstofteateret (‘Theatre of Images’), in her birthday

performance on December 24th 1993 at Overgaden, as well as in the *Meltingtime* exhibition at Magnusborg in Finland in 1992. Ice is equally integral to the conceptual and formal considerations of container, area and form (à la Piero Manzoni's *Linee* from 1959) in the work *Mould for Ice Stick* (1991), which also included a Fluxus inspired score for an act. Justesen has often invited fellow artists, scientists and others to translate their ideas into a *Meltingtime* work. *Meltingtime* thus becomes a kind of social plastic, in which everyone contributes to a vast artistic circuit, which is both historical and social.

As accumulation, as enactment, as reorganisation, and as reinvention of fact, form and matter, *Meltingtime* functions as research. For Justesen, it is ultimately not about method and full demonstrability, but about what – on the basis of an inner core of facts – we need to know and what we need to exchange with each other. This coincides with the mythological, scientific truth about the hundreds of Arctic words for ice and snow. Everyone knows this story, but few of us know how we know it. In fact it originated with the American linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf. In 1940, a year before he died, he published a famous article in the journal *Technological Review* with the title 'Science and Linguistics'. Here he gave a small handful of examples of different words for ice and snow. Falling snow, for example, is called *qanik*, and snow lying on the ground is called *aput*. The article has been reprinted, quoted, referenced and misunderstood repeatedly: the fact is there are not that many more words for ice and snow in Greenlandic than in Danish. According to the Danish linguist Ole Stig Andersen, during the repeated retelling of Whorf's example, his original "three Inuit words for snow have become 'several hundred'". Andersen was writing in the mid 1990s, when the myth had been revived by Peter Høeg's novel *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*, the period when Justesen was working most intensively with the *Meltingtime* project. "It has become a myth that spread from the academic fringe to ordinary people. The myth is retold and the number is reinvented, not because it is a fact [...], but because we need the myth. That is the reason why desperate, moralising



Kirsten Justesen: *Smeltetid #5*, 1993. Installation view
Photo: Martin Sne

and grumpy revelations of 'The Big Fraud about Inuit Vocabulary' like those of Geoffrey Pullum og Laura Martin, have had little real effect – on the contrary. People continue to believe that the Greenlandic language has as many words for snow as there are snowflakes".

It is, in other words, the extent and range of the idea that makes us cling to this poetic, even artistic truth as truth, and it is maybe here that any artistic research results are to be found.

Cecilie Høgsbro Østergaard is manager at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and additionally works as writer, curator and art critic at kunstkritikk.no

Translation: Jane Rowley

CV

Kirsten Justesen (b. 1943) is educated at the Jutland Art Academy. She is a pivotal figure in Danish art history, and in recent years her works have been central to key exhibitions like *WACK – Art and the Feminist Revolution* at MoMA, New York; *Human*, Musee d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain, Nice, and *Whatever Happend to Sex in Scandinavia?*, OCA, Oslo.

EVENTS

Thursday 21 November 1-4.30pm
Performance // Jens Haaning: *Untitled*

Wednesday 27 November 6-7.30pm
Lecture // Henrik Højmark Thomsen: *Ice as Phenomenon*

Thursday 5 December 6pm
Performance // Henrik Plenge Jakobsen:
Lord of the Sky

Thursday 12 December 6pm
Performance // Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmus-
sen: *ICE SCRIPT*

Thursday 19 December 6-7.30pm
Ice concert // Københavns Laptop-Orkester

Wednesday 25 December 3-5pm
Finissage

THANK YOU

Kirsten Justesen would like to thank Marie Hallandvik Hortemo, Peter J. Lassen / Montana, Roskilde Festivalen, Kristoffer Ørum, Jacob Stangerup and Boje Hauch.

This exhibition folder can be downloaded from: www.overgaden.org

UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

Friday 17 January 2014 Overgaden presents two new solo exhibitions by Troels Sandegård and Naja Maria Lundstrøm. The last day of the exhibitions is 16 March 2014.

The exhibition is supported by:



KUNSTRÅDET
Danish Arts Council



KØBENHAVNS KOMMUNE
Kultur- og Fritidsforvaltningen



Grosserer L. F. Foghts Fond
Kvindernes Bygningsfond

Overgaden is supported by the Danish Arts Council's Committee for Visual Arts and the Obel Family Foundation.

Overgaden.

Institute of Contemporary Art
Overgaden neden Vandet 17
DK-1414 Copenhagen K

www.overgaden.org
+45 32 57 72 73