

# GENERALLY I AM MADE WITH THE INTENSION

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## OF STIMULATING THOUGHTS AND EMOTIONS

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Listaháskóli Íslands

Myndlistardeild

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## **Introduction**

There are a lot of questions out there and by asking the right ones you can get much rewarded. When working with art you spend more time looking for the questions rather than the answers, because there are no right answers. The pursuit of the questions is one of the objectives behind this paper, but to realize and understand my own way of thinking is what I'd like to be able to conclude.

In the first chapter I open with going over my thoughts on what it means to be an artist. The term "artist" is so extended today that some don't even want to be categorized as one. What seems to be tougher to pinpoint is the quality of the artistic object so in the second chapter I will debate the reformed opinion of aesthetics that developed with newer genres such as minimalism and concept art, grounding myself with the romantic philosophies of Kandinsky. I continue to my personal favorite art form: media art (video to be specific) which I have been working and experimenting with lately, and will analyze this medium from a socialistic perspective rather than artistic or aesthetic, because it is, contrary to the traditional art forms, a public medium. I will then carry on and reflect upon my work and personal development throughout my studies at the Iceland Academy of Fine Arts.

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## The Artist

In my application to this university I explained in my personal statement how I, as a random wandering individual, wanted to find myself and had chosen the path of art to do so. Today I believe that I create in order to find a sense of peace. The artistic object, you can reflect upon, because you have fixed your ephemeral thoughts into it allows you to further develop your mind and perception. It's like a little piece of the jigsaw that forms your personality. We are only capable of understanding what we can see and measure and by creating you are able to interpret all these jigsaw pieces that float around in your formless mind and you hope that one day you might be able to sense the bigger picture.

I am the product or process of deliberately arranging symbolic elements in a way that influences and affects the senses, emotions, and/or intellect. I encompass a diverse range of human activities, creations, and modes of expressions, including music, literature, film, photography, sculpture, and painting. The meaning of me is explored in a branch of philosophy known as aesthetics and even disciplines such as history and psychoanalysis analyzes my relationship with humans and generations. Generally I am made with the intention of stimulating thoughts and emotions.<sup>1</sup>

Fifty years ago the definition of the artist changed. They were no longer classified as painters or sculptors, but only as artists. The artistic area has never been expanded as much as these past years and artists are asking themselves if there is anything left to do. I have also been asking myself these questions and I have come to realize that as an artist or a human being, I am only a medium, a body, a brain and a shell - reflecting its reality and experiences of life, and the role of the artist is something that enters and fills me, only to leave it again when the process is complete. In the meantime I am an observer, a student, just another individual in society which I like to look upon as a playground.

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<sup>1</sup> "Art" described on wikipedia, I changed the paragraph into first person and I find that it establishes a more personal relationship with art.

## Is it an Everyday Object or a Spiritual Entity?

In each manifestation is the seed of a striving towards the abstract, the non-material. Consciously or unconsciously they are obeying Socrates' command – Know thyself. Consciously or unconsciously artists are studying and proving their material, setting in the balance of the spiritual value of those elements, with which it is their several privilege to work. – Wassily Kandinsky <sup>2</sup>

Lately I have been concerned about establishing a subjective relationship with art. To me, art has been a subject of higher understanding, mentality and spirituality. It's Art with capital A, and Art has been something I could turn to when caught up in the endless speculations about life. So naturally I was attracted to the writings and art of Kandinsky and Munch. I was preoccupied with expressing the true essence of me, so to say.

And with the obsession of examining the "Abstract Self" I developed an interest for social behavior and norms after questioning how much of "me" was actually genuine. This forced me to turn my attention outwards and completely inverse my approach to Art.

Allan Kaprow said in the early 1960's that "the young artists of today need no longer have to classify themselves as a painter, poet or dancer. They are simply artists and they will discover the meaning of ordinariness and out of nothing they will devise the extraordinary and maybe nothingness as well." <sup>3</sup> This statement opened up my mind but at the same time it put me in a dilemma where I felt as if I had to swallow the world in one piece, because in this statement lies the foundation of today's art philosophy, but it is also contradicting my former and rather romantic perception of Art as a spiritual entity similar to the descriptions of Kandinsky who also said that: "On the average man only the impressions caused by very familiar objects, will be purely superficial. A first encounter with any new phenomenon exercises immediately an impression on the soul. This is the experience of the child discovering the world, to whom every object is new." <sup>4</sup> It is interesting here that he basically talks about the same philosophy as the conceptual artists who would present ready-made/everyday objects in a new context. Instead of creating a new object they create a new experience with this known object in a completely new situation; a classic example would be Duchamp's "Fountain" from 1917. So the abstract and the non-material that Kandinsky spoke of, no longer lies within the painting, but in the atmosphere or space surrounding the artistic

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<sup>2</sup> *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. p. 19

<sup>3</sup> *Art Since 1900* - p. 450-452

<sup>4</sup> *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. p. 23

object and the viewer gets his experience from observing the “object in space”. Kandinsky also implies this when he says: “Shapeless emotions such as fear, joy, grief, etc., which belonged to this time of effort, will no longer greatly attract the artist. He will endeavor to awake subtler emotions, as yet unnamed. Living himself a complicated and comparatively subtle life, his work will give to those observers capable of feeling them lofty emotions beyond the reach of words.”<sup>5</sup>

But what we are really talking about here is the Aesthetics in art that since the last century has been redefined so many times, and still is. The Expressionism around 1900 was one of the first genres to really break the academic rules of painting, as Edvard Munch’s caricaturist way of painting, according to the philosophies of Rosenkranz<sup>6</sup>, is the “Absolute Beauty’s” contradiction. Ernst Gombrich explains that what made people angry about the expressionistic art was perhaps not the fact that reality was re-shaped but more that the result was directed away from beauty. Munch was not aiming to please people; instead his pieces move people and tell them about the gruesome terms of reality that might not be liked.<sup>7</sup> The aesthetics in the piece have abstracted away from the beauty and found some deeper roots.

You could say that the spirit of art has been released from its frame and is now floating through the space and all the objects in it. Nowadays a lot of artists choose to move the focus away from the object and into the space, there’s hardly an interview where an artist does not state how important the space is. The meaning of space in my opinion is the atmosphere surrounding the object, the energy, or spirit if you will and whatever space you choose for your art, it flows through the artwork and becomes a part of it, and vice versa. The space is an inevitable factor of your piece, whether you like it or not. The space can be restricting, giving or opening and working with the space has become a very important element for any artist. Video artist Pipilotti Rist talks about the space:

It helps to open up your principal space: your mind and body. You may wish to imagine as many ‚real’ spaces as you can, but you can also open up your own primary space and expand it, so that you no longer return to a closed personal space. This is the main reason why I’m interested in these spaces within the spaces.... The moving picture itself is always a room within another room. When you project an image, the wall dissolves and the image becomes the architecture.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. p. 2

<sup>6</sup> Rosenkranz, J. K. F., (April 23, 1805 - July 14, 1879) was a German philosopher

<sup>7</sup> *Det Hæsliges Filosofi* p. 67-68

<sup>8</sup> *Pipilotti Rist* p. 26

When TV appeared in history and the video recorder became available to the people, artists started experimenting with this medium as well and the question about “space” was explored in more different ways; television artist Nam June Paik being an excellent example of how experimenting with large TV installations creates a completely new sense of depth in the artwork (See image ref #08). I am very interested in this medium, not only for the opportunities it gives you to work with space, be it real or virtual, but also for its symbolic meaning in today’s society. However I must admit that I just recently discovered these possibilities and have only just begun experimenting with space combined with video in my latest installation called “Peeling”. But before I talk about that, I’d like to go over a few things concerning the television medium.

## **The Medium of the Masses**

I’ve been working with video art the past years and am fascinated about how extensive this medium is. The contents and themes of a video can define themselves, but I also feel like involving the social significance of the medium.

Big words such as “Modern Media Technology”, “Culture Industry” and “Capitalism” are associated with the television today and make it a very curious and even scary medium to work with. Its function as a mass medium makes it a good tool to explore social norms, as we also make them up from what we see on TV. In 20th century philosophy we read a lot about the individual in society and what impact society has on our lives; for example, Freud wrote in 1930 “Civilization and its Discontents” regarding the relationship between the individual human psyche and the cultural progress. We still question the impact of society as it keeps growing and spawning new issues and subcultures, the biggest of them all being “Pop culture” brought to us by the new media.

Theodor W. Adorno was a founder of the Frankfurt School of social theory and criticized the ideology of the modern bourgeois society. The group claimed that as members of the “information society” we are all trapped in conventional thinking which forces us to forget that there are other ways of looking at things, and therefore it is self-reinforcing. This command-ideology was first turned towards nature and thus established the industrial revolution and the technological breakthrough. Now it is turning towards culture and the result is a culture-industry where even art is considered merchandise.<sup>9</sup> But that is not necessarily a bad thing, even though it brought down the avant-garde, the industry brought art

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<sup>9</sup> *Det hæsleges filosofi* p. 69

to the public and spread its colors throughout society. However we start to see that art can be used seductively and even be abused by the media and commercial businesses.

Ragnar Braastad Myklebust<sup>10</sup> writes in the book *An Eye for Time* that it is the tasks of television to not only build a “collective past” of subjectivity (the subjectivity must be primarily understood as “the ability to control the relation between perception and memory on a social level”) but also to control the present and actuality by filming and duplicating it in images. Television is a form of recollecting the present and establishing the relation between the actual and the virtual, and it is here video technology allows the possibility of creative intervention.<sup>11</sup> So, by working with video and photography or images duplicated from real life, you create relational art, and by experimenting with the boundaries of fiction and reality you can really raise some interesting questions.

I should mention that by television art I do not mean video art. A video piece is often understood as experimentation with the recorder or the subject being recorded and is generally shown in an art gallery or experimental film festival. Video artist Nam June Paik is often also referred to as a Television artist, as he uses and manipulates the TV itself and has created various TV installations.<sup>12</sup> But the television Myklebust talks about, is the public TV, the TV-station or the channel and I think that this is could be an even more interesting medium to work with.

Maria Lind (b. 1966), a Swedish curator and writer who talks about the development of video art towards a documentary-like style, says in an interview: “The development within this field is very exciting, and it is not so strange that we see a lot of documentaries these days, if we think of video as a kind of sketch board. There is documentary in TV-format, surveillance aesthetics and home video inspired works. Contemporary video obviously relates to the TV-medium, to news and the reality genre.”<sup>13</sup>

So my question here is: what would happen to a video piece that belongs in a gallery if it was to be exposed on public television? A common debate in the art-world is how we bring art to the public and we’ve seen video pieces exposed to the public on electronic billboards, Pipilotti Rist being one who exhibited on Times Square in 2000 with her piece

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<sup>10</sup> Contemporary Norwegian philosopher and author,  
<http://www.hf.uio.no/ifikk/personer/vit/ragnarm/index.html>

<sup>11</sup> *An Eye for Time* p. 55-56

<sup>12</sup> See image ref #09 for example.

<sup>13</sup> *An Eye for Time* p. 103

*Open my Glade*<sup>14</sup> for example, and on screens in shop windows, but what makes the art different if it was to be labeled by a TV-channel and showed on their network? Would it then become a part of our collective past? Would it become “actual” if presented after the local news? And what makes it less actual when not broadcasted?

I am going to leave this chapter with these open questions and go back to the video art that I have been experimenting with.

## Personal studies

### The Peeling

Uncomfortable. Stressed. In a tight spot. Get rid of the old. Show the real you. Layers. Vanity. Cosmetics. Obsession. Take off your skin. Loosen up. Crawl out. Renew. A game. An OCD. A ritual. A tan. A sunburn. A chemical burn. A chemical peel. Madness.

*The Peeling* was a pair of videos projected onto a wall and should be viewed in a social context. The first video is showing a woman's face and the second a pair of hands peeling a mandarin. The woman's skin seems uncomfortably tight and eventually it starts to loosen from her face. She then starts to peel it off.<sup>15</sup>

The video is projected onto a plastered "blob" that is sticking out from the wall, like a nasty tumor growing on the surface. The sound of the hands peeling the mandarin is loud and disturbing and makes you look at the mandarin as a juicy fruit but with the image of the face next to it, the loud sound of the peeling gives you more goose bumps with every skin-patch peeled off. The video is a continuation of the former piece *Spitting Girl*<sup>16</sup> where I wanted to play with the transgression of comfort and social norms. Peeling is a piece on how society can result in a sort of madness or obsession in individuals, especially women with a tendency to focus so hard to meet the requirements of normality that they develop a deranged perception of it, leading to compulsive thinking and actions. The video is also connotative in the symbolic sense of a growing snake changing its hide and as the mandarin hints, the peeling to get to the inner goods. But I mentioned before that this was my first experience with space and video together: the plastered tumor that sticks out of the wall makes the face come more to life. Instead of being fixed on a two dimensional area the face expands with the

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<sup>14</sup>A press release about this piece can be read here :  
[http://www.publicartfund.org/pafweb/projects/00/rist\\_p\\_s00\\_release.html](http://www.publicartfund.org/pafweb/projects/00/rist_p_s00_release.html)

<sup>15</sup> See image ref #01

<sup>16</sup> See image ref #03 and subchapter Spitting Girl

tumor into physical space which makes you relate to the object in a different and perhaps closer manner. When watching a projection or TV we do see the visual space within the medium but the screen itself functions like a window and detaches us from the actual content. By experimenting with space and video you break that barrier between the viewer and the piece, something that contemporary American artist Tony Oursler is very known for doing, his perhaps most famous pieces are his talking dummies with faces projected onto them.<sup>17</sup> Oursler is known as the artist who freed the video from its screen and the exhibition *Number 7, Plus or Minus 2* in Beijing last year showed selected video works by him from the early 90's up until now.<sup>18</sup> *The Peeling* is definitely a reference to his work, and to Rist's philosophies on space, and we share an interest of the human psyche in relation to society: "Tony Oursler's video installations are influenced by exactly this: his interest in our information and media society and its effect on mankind."<sup>19</sup>

### **Flying to Vegas**

Another experiment of mine, commenting on the information society, is an experimental video called *Flying to Vegas*<sup>20</sup>. This video is partly real footage and partly animated. The footage is from a trip I took last summer to the U.S. Here driving from Los Angeles, California to Las Vegas, Nevada. It is footage from the highway traffic we drove in and me being from northern Scandinavia have never seen nor experienced anything like this before. It was an overwhelming experience and I was fascinated by the speed and volume of not only the traffic but also society on this area of the planet that seemed like a parallel universe. The video and sound has been sped up to correctly project my memory of this experience. The sound you hear are voices of people in the car and the song on the radio – sped up about 800% they sound like birds singing in a loud chaotic noise and at the same time you experience a romantic mood because of the repeated melody the noise creates when looped. This mood led to the animation of two half abstract bird-like figures appearing playfully, almost like bats, in front of the car window and then disappearing again, as a symbol of the free human spirit. I consider this an introvert piece, as it spawned from my personal experience and perception of a situation I was in. In the next section I will talk about how I came to define my works as introverted and extroverted pieces.

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<sup>17</sup> See image ref #07

<sup>18</sup> Can be viewed on [www.tonyoursler.com](http://www.tonyoursler.com)

<sup>19</sup> A text about Oursler's exhibition: *Number 7, Plus or Minus 2*. See reference no. 12 for link on the internet

<sup>20</sup> See image ref #02

## Earlier Pieces

This concept of human and spiritual freedom is something that I have used continuously throughout the last couple of years. One of my earliest pieces from 2008 was small a silk screen print titled *Freedom*<sup>21</sup> and depicts a silhouette of an individual leaning on a fence on a mountain side with a blue communist sun in the background. A copper-plate print of mine, also from 2008, called *Mother Nature*<sup>22</sup> depicts the outlines of a female figure combined with organic veins and leaves. Both of these prints depict female individuals resting in their body when in touch with nature, independent of their culture. I should mention that my intentions at the time were not feministic, but being a woman it came natural to depict other women. These women are an illustration of my understanding of the idealism today and the illusion of freedom. They are both strong women and free of worries, although they don't know it they are still attached to their roots and culture, one to society (with the communist sun) and the other to nature itself. I continued with my thoughts on man in nature and in 2009 I tried combining technology with nature: with my giant flute<sup>23</sup>. The giant flute probably sounds like a vast phallus now but a little sexuality merely makes things more attractive. *The Flute* was an iron sculpture meant to convert the windy nature into an interpretable sound to the human ear. It was planted into the dirt and in order to tie its function to nature, the sound chamber was made of toilet paper, so the flute needed water or rain in order to function; otherwise the wall of the sound chamber would dry out and leak air. *The Flute* was not aesthetically pleasing in any visual manner; it was built from a rusty water pipe, and its beauty came purely from the sound it generated. This was my first experiment moving away from those classical visual aesthetics that you may find in the two former pieces I mentioned, *Freedom* with its sublimity and *Mother Nature* focusing more on the gesture of the drawing.

With *The Flute* I discovered what Kandinsky really meant when he said that shapeless emotions such as fear, joy, grief, etc., will no longer attract the artist.<sup>24</sup> It was my first object that did not relate directly to my emotions or perception and it felt different. It was built for another purpose. At first I thought it was the music and lack of visual aesthetics that made it unlike the rest, but it was also the first extroverted artwork that was intentionally directed at something else than myself, and I reached a new maturity in relation to my role as an

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<sup>21</sup> See image ref #04

<sup>22</sup> See image ref #05

<sup>23</sup> See image ref #06

<sup>24</sup> See page 3, lines 14-15.

artist. I started questioning the “abstract self” which I had depicted so many times before and compared it to relational art, objective art, extroverted art, and from that I developed my interest for social behavior and norms instead. This forced me to turn my attention outwards and inverse my former introverted approach to Art. I wanted to research identity and look at these individuals in society without involving my personal emotions and without creating just for my own sake. I needed an agenda.

### **Spitting Girl**

I mentioned earlier that I look upon every artifact as a jigsaw piece of what makes your personality. So, why is there an image of a girl spitting on a window inside my head? I’m not sure. Does that girl reflect me? Does that girl represent what it is to be a woman? Or does she simply reflect the child that she is and what we once were?<sup>25</sup>

But the unruly act of spitting on somebody’s window is something that most of us can relate to; that feeling of bitter satisfaction when you have successfully imposed yourself upon somebody else or their property. The girl finds it hilarious to be allowed to spit on the window but only because she knows that what she is doing is forbidden. To allow her to do this, kind of makes it a privilege. There is a satisfaction in doing what you normally are not allowed to do, and what would happen if you’d do such a thing with no privilege? People would point fingers at you, yell at you and even punish you. Because when breaking a norm, what you are actually doing, is intruding somebody else’s emotional space.

And then there is the window; the glass that separates the outside from the inside, the girl from us, the cold from the heat. It protects us. It stops the girl from spitting on us. It defines the borders between the hazardous environment on the outside and the safe environment on the inside. The saliva is shot onto the window and every drop disgusts you more. It troubles you. But this beautiful little innocent girl with her golden hair and smooth skin and big eyes, her moment of amusement, all of a sudden this action isn’t as repulsing anymore. The little drops of spit flying out of her little mouth with little lips on her little head, it’s like the saliva on the window becomes as pure as the child. Until; the video is reversed and she is sucking the saliva back into herself. The pureness she spit out has been contaminated, contaminated by the dirty glass, the dirty environment, the dirty world. And she is sucking it all back in; still laughing; still enjoying it; she doesn’t know. Remember when you were a kid and used to eat chewing gum of the street?

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<sup>25</sup> See image ref # 03

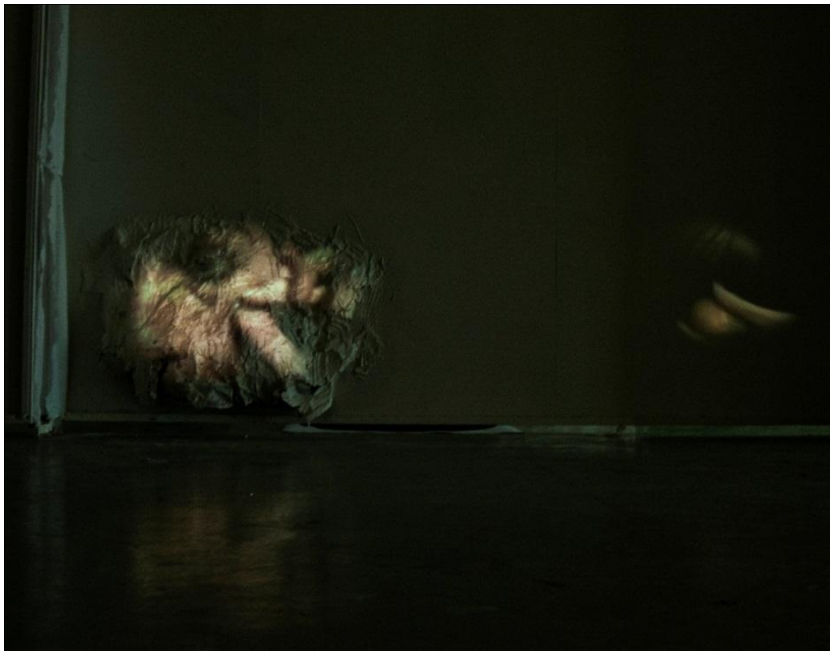
## Conclusion

Like Adorno, I believe that we are trapped in conventional thinking and I believe that the cure is Art with capital A. Art is a cornerstone in our development as human beings; artists are dreamers, observers and doers, and aim to develop themselves not only as artists but as beings. Opposing to technology, art is not restricted and long before technology reaches its point the artists have already dreamt it. Just look at the works of Leonardo Da Vinci or look at the history of science fiction movies where artists dared to imagine about traveling to outer space, robots, holograms and flying vehicles. These have all been invented now.

I believe that art today is more alive than it ever has been, people have awoken and started to question things, and it's developing in all directions simultaneously, the new media is only one of them, and the traditional art forms have not been forgotten either, and shouldn't be - as they too are part of the foundation of our understanding of physical and abstract life, which so greatly attracts the artists. Art is still an integrated part of society and the Avant-Garde still exists in my opinion, and they will produce tomorrow's artwork that will be incorporated into society in the form of fashion design, music, movies etc. *The Peeling* and *Spitting Girl*; for example, are just one of my ways to analyze the individual's relationships to the pyramid society and they help me understand and develop completer thoughts on what it means to be human.

## Image References

### Image ref #01



*The Peeling* 2010, video installation

**Image ref #02**

*Flying to Vegas* 2010, video 1 min.

This video can be viewed on the internet at [www.helenahara.webs.com](http://www.helenahara.webs.com)

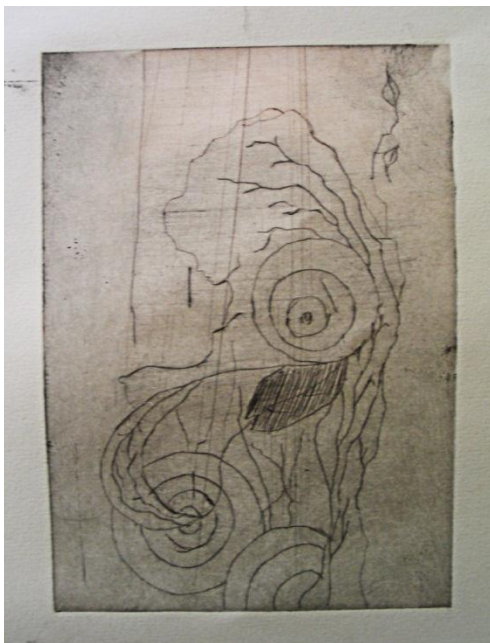
**Image ref #03**

*Spitting Girl* 2010, video 10 min.

This video can be viewed on the internet at [www.helenahara.webs.com](http://www.helenahara.webs.com)

**Image ref #04**

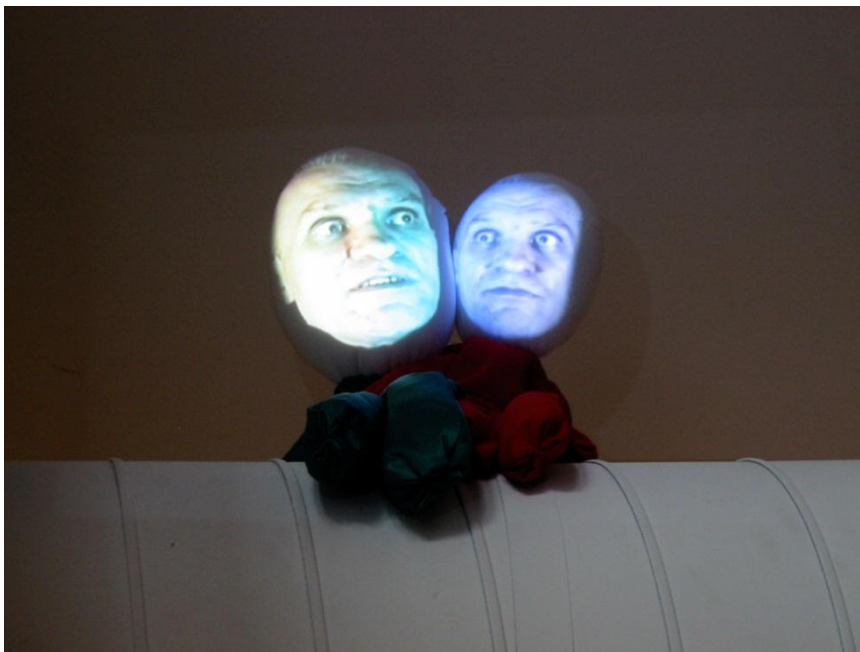
*Freedom* 2008, Silk Screen print

**Image ref #05**

*Mother nature* 2008, Copper plate print

**Image ref #06**

*The Flute* 2009, Iron sculpture

**Image ref #07**

Two of Tony Oursler's dummies, picture from

[http://artav.co.uk/?page\\_id=6](http://artav.co.uk/?page_id=6)

**Image ref #08**

Nam June Paik, image from <http://namjunepaik.wordpress.com/>

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8. *Open my Glade* press release by Public Art Fond, New York:  
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9. Image ref #08 [http://artav.co.uk/?page\\_id=6](http://artav.co.uk/?page_id=6)
10. Image ref #09 <http://namjunepaik.wordpress.com>
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12. Tony Ourslers exhibition *Number 7, Plus or Minus 2* can be found here:  
[http://tonyoursler.com/individual\\_work\\_slideshow.php?navItem=work&workId=8&startDateStr=Feb.%206,%202010&subSection=Installations&allTextFlg=true&title=Number%207,%20Plus%20or%20Minus%20](http://tonyoursler.com/individual_work_slideshow.php?navItem=work&workId=8&startDateStr=Feb.%206,%202010&subSection=Installations&allTextFlg=true&title=Number%207,%20Plus%20or%20Minus%20)
13. Ragnar Braastad Myklebust: Contemporary Norwegian philosopher and author,  
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