

How to Touch on Understanding Without Touching

On the Work of Inga Fonar Cocos

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Understanding means getting to the bottom of things.
But what do you do, if the bottom of things is at the top?
Then understanding means climbing the steps of things
through seven heavens and beyond them.
And there is the thing. Waiting in a shining envelope, untouched.
What do you do with this untouched thing?
How to touch on understanding without touching?

For more than 15 years, Inga Fonar Cocos has been developing her own complex language, and using elements at the intersection of nature, technology, science and art. Like David Avidan's poem "Going Up, Going Down,"¹ Fonar Cocos raises questions about perception and cognition, and about the sphere of meaning and of personal and collective responsibility they point to.

By simultaneously addressing different systems in interdisciplinary contexts, Fonar Cocos examines questions concerning the compatibility between natural systems, information systems and realms of thought. She wonders what may serve as a basis for "understanding" in a world populated by terms such as "anomy" (a state of incompatibility between social norms of behavior) or "entropy" (a measure of disorder in a complex physical system) – terms that have served as titles for her exhibitions during the years 1996–2000. In Fonar Cocos' exhibitions, the gallery space is transformed into an investigative site that combines the world of sensory experience with the worlds of science and technology and of religious and philosophical knowledge. Fonar Cocos' works recontextualize classical questions such as the degree to which meaning may be derived from sensory input, or the relevancy of

¹ David Avidan, *Avidanium 20*, Jerusalem: Keter, 1987 [Hebrew].

basing meaning on a conceptual system, in a manner highly relevant to the present. Her art examines various possibilities for coming to terms with the perception of reality; her point of departure is not transcendental, but rather stems from an understanding of subjective existence as an inextricable part of this reality.

Fonar Cocos' environments include natural elements such as honeycombs; conventional manmade products that make use of nature, such as beehives or rubber cables; objects that represent the world of technology, such as batteries; or contemporary electronic components and scientific methods such as technological mapping. Her work also includes a representational-conceptual dimension, which is evident, for instance, in drawings concerned with illustrating states of observation. These drawings cause the viewer to relate to the work from a different point of departure – through processes of marking and perceiving, rather than through the final product. In other instances, this dimension is given expression through various kinds of texts – ranging from words deconstructed into their individual components to philosophical excerpts concerned with perception, such as a quote from the work of Merleau-Ponty. In these exhibition environments, the viewer's senses are activated by means of sound, flickering lights and the sensual, tactile quality of materials such as cast wax.

The simultaneous positioning of materials from the natural world alongside manmade artifacts, technology and science was a central means of investigation in the first Cabinets of Wonder. Created more than 400 years ago, these exhibition spaces were the predecessors of the modern museum. The collapse of systems of knowledge based on ancient Greek philosophy and science; the rise of astronomy and physics; changing belief systems and religious attitudes; and the undermining of a holistic conception of the universe – all of these led to the need to internalize a new understanding of the relations between man and world. The Cabinets of Wonder that first appeared in Europe towards the end of the 16th century reflected an attempt to come to terms with the representation of a new world image by means of a detailed and complex display of various kinds of objects. The contents of such displays were meant to underscore the reciprocal relations between "natural" and "artificial" elements; they formed part of a revision of existing knowledge, and a reevaluation of familiar systems of perception and cognition.

These Cabinets of Wonder did not serve as sites of passive and exclusive display, but rather as the active research laboratories of scientific experts in botany, medicine

and philosophy. Systems combining large-scale collections and workshops were founded by the rulers of that period. They typically included, one alongside the other, crude natural materials; animal and vegetal specimens; manmade arts and crafts; items representing the art of using nature; art assisted by nature; art that perfects nature; scientific and mechanical artifacts, maps and models. The taxonomic arrangement and display of these objects allowed for their simultaneous observation; it reflected a vital need to reexamine the dynamic relations within both the macrocosm and the microcosm – the universe and the world of man.

Yet the dynamic potential of these exhibition spaces was abandoned in the museums founded over the following centuries, as separate institutions and departments were created for various kinds of collections. The canonical form of order that shaped these museums was two-dimensional, systematic and rational; it no longer enabled the examination of what is concealed from the eye, of the invisible, of affinities or of metaphorical resemblances between objects. From this point onward, connections between various artifacts were based on identical morphological elements. With the establishment of distinct systems of knowledge and specialization, museums did away with the elements of transformation and change that were an inextricable part of the conception of reciprocal relations between things.

Inga Fonar Cocos conceives of artmaking as a realm of endless investigation, which refuses to be circumscribed within the confines of distinct disciplines. She comes to terms, in her own way, with the apparent partitions between nature and technology, science and art. Unlike other conceptual artists, who engage with interdisciplinary scientific or anthropological contexts, Fonar Cocos does not adopt a dichotomous approach that privileges the cerebral over the sensual, or typology and taxonomy over the process of working with matter. Her work endows both dimensions, the cerebral and the sensual, with equal status as significant perceptual positions. Each one of these dimensions exists in its own sphere throughout the various stages of the work process: the initial stage at which the idea is formed, the stage of complex processing, the stage of editing the material and the finished exhibition. This point of departure means that Fonar Cocos does not endow technology or science with the status of an objective truth, even when her work includes a stage of intensive research in a given scientific field (for instance, the six-month-long study of defects in the field of vision, which she conducted with a doctor at the Assaf Harofe Medical Center). The encounter with contemporary science and the acknowledgement of

instrumental, scientific and technological progress is not aimed, in her work, at bolstering the modernist faith in the myth of progress.

Inga Fonar Cocos conceives of artmaking as a realm of endless investigation concerned with consciousness itself – an investigation that cannot be exhausted or contained within the confines of this or that discipline. The process of artistic investigation is a journey with no final or definite destination; rather, it is repeatedly motivated by the power of a subjective dimension. The sensory experience and private and collective unconscious that motivate this process inevitably infuse it with a hidden, enigmatic dimension. This approach has been at the basis of Inga Fonar Cocos' work ever since the early 1990s.

The essence of her artmaking reflects a continuous process, which has resulted in a variegated series of works and several exhibitions titled "Entropy" (1996–2003). Within this framework she was concerned, for instance, with a form of blindness caused by a flood of light, and known as "white hole." In the work *Punctum Caecum* (2002), Fonar Cocos focused on the retinal aperture, which is devoid of receptors, and made direct and metaphorical use of various technological tools and their products: a monitor, image registration and linear scanning, vision tests and computerized vision maps.

In the course of working on one of these exhibitions, "Entropy 3, Disrupted Vision," (1999), Fonar Cocos began an evolving collaboration with German artist Klaus Illi. According to Illi, his work dialogues with the "German obsession with cleanliness," with the manner in which society and culture "clean up" any disturbing or foreign elements, and the manner in which the normative transposes "otherness" to the category of "unseemly things."² Klaus Illi's work attempts to come to terms with the hidden historical, religious and ideological mechanism that blinds the eye and prevents it from seeing whatever challenges the existing order and threatens to disrupt it. The dialogue between these two artists has focused on mental blindness, on the blindness of those defined as having normative vision. They have each examined those aspects of their own lives relevant to the subject, and have imbued their works with elements of their worlds, while examining the specific blind spots characteristic of the environments in which they live.

² Lili Abudi, "Eyes Wide Shut," *Zomet Hasharon*, December 27, 2002.

In the course of the prolonged work process on this exhibition series, the subjective dimension of Fonar Cocos' work was enhanced, and the concern with vision disruptions was internalized and directed towards bodily, sensual and biographical strata. The corporal dimension was present, for instance, in the mural *in invalid* (2003), which was concerned, among other things, with the fragile boundaries of what is considered normative. The splitting of the word invalid raised questions concerning the validity of normative social limits; it did so by alluding to a physical and mental destruction that is simultaneously experienced in the work as an act of delimitation, penetration and injury, as a physical or mental disability. This work was composed of two horizontally hung dark wax tablets of unusual dimensions (6 X17X105 cm.). Metal pins were inserted into the vulnerable, exposed and fragile wax surface, injuring it and mapping onto it a horizontal representation of the land of Israel; a map as a recumbent body.

In the work *Do-Do-Mo* (2004), Fonar Cocos delves deeper into an emotional and conceptual investigation of a disrupted capacity for self-orientation. More than anything, the title of this work – which means "homewards" in Polish – is perhaps aimed at the basic, existential experience of domestication, at the dialectic of foreignness and belonging anchored in a vague, fluid childhood memory that cannot be decisively reconstructed. In this work, which was also exhibited in Weissbaden, Germany (2006), is concerned with an active process of mapping/searching that is enacted upon a rounded sphere, along endlessly rotating railways/roads composed of light cables and matches.

Fonar Cocos has recently completed a video work composed of still photographs, and titled *Between Homelands*; it features a panoramic Polish landscape seen from a moving train, as well as documentary elements. The moving train and changing landscapes parallel the movement between the realms of reality and memory, flashes of remembrance and moments of reflection. This video work is based on a postcard collection from the 1940s and 1950s, which Fonar Cocos' parents kept in a hefty album; it also features black-and-white photographs that were taken after their return to Warsaw in the aftermath of the Second World War, and photographs that the artist herself took during a 2007 sojourn in Poland. This film successfully translates Fonar Cocos' three-dimensional language into a flow of moving images that motivate changing rhythms of consciousness, while also harboring a continuum of absence – a dark screen devoid of images.

It seems that the owl filmed in this video work appears in homage to artist Chris Marker, who studied the cultural memory of the 20th century in various mediums – photography, cinema, writing, video art and installation art.³ Marker frequently included images of owls in works such as the film *Description of a Struggle (The Third Side of the Coin)*, which was filmed in Israel in the early 1960s and included simultaneous images culled from natural and artificial worlds. The film juxtaposed an electronic device photographed at the Weizmann Institute (an oscilloscope, which registers fluctuations in an electric current) and owls at the Biblical Zoo in Jerusalem. According to Fonar Cocos herself, she was influenced by Marker's iconic film *The Pier* (1962), which brings together images of the future, present and past. This influence is given significant expression in her film and in the affinities it reveals between remembering, trauma, selfhood and death.

As she examines the fluid boundaries of the term "home," Fonar Cocos touches upon this "untouched thing" (in the words of David Avidan). In this sense, her work also reveals an affinity with the work of Avidan, whose poem appears as a preface to this essay – an interdisciplinary artist who developed his own unique language. Like Avidan's poem, Inga Fonar Cocos' journey does not circumvent sites of blindness and disruption; it traverses biographical regions and represents worlds both near and far, groping for the place where one may touch on understanding without touching.

³ Catherine Lupton, *Chris Marker: Memories from the Future*. London: Reaktion Books, 2004.