

# ANN VERONICA JANSSENS

## visual frontier

Ann Veronica Janssens is best known for her mist installations which create a sensory deprivation-like experience due to the reduction in one's field of vision to a hand's length. Mieke Bal gives the following evocative report of her experience of a Janssens installation: 'No, space is the wrong word, too worldly. The world was on the other side of the door. Where was I? In a strong sense, nowhere. I saw nothing, with my eyes wide open.' {Bal, 1999}. The effect is not only immersive but is a species of blindness, an absence of the image and in this sense the very opposite of the iconography that has driven the history of western art for centuries.

The art historical context for Janssens' work begins, in modernism at least, with Malevich's *Black Square* which was a metaphorical doorway into the mystery of nature that science was opening up at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One remembers the poetic responses to the invention of X-Rays and motion photography evident in the Futurist Manifestoes. And Italian Futurism was especially influential on early Russian abstraction such as Malevich's Suprematism. The sequel to this particular thread in the history of modernism was the monochrome in particular Yves



Klein's blue monochromes which like Ad Reinhard's black monochromes stemmed from an involvement in Zen Buddhism. Echoes of the meditative value of the monochrome are evident in Janssens' work most particularly in her use of chromatic environments. Colour field painters such as Barnett Newman in the 1950s wanted to immerse the viewer in massive fields of colour but the field painters deployment of colour surfaces is nowhere near as effective as the deep immersive effect one experiences in Janssens' mist installations.

One has to look further back into the very beginnings of the history of art to find comparable immersive methodology. In 1994 the Chavet Cave art was discovered by three pot-holers. The spelunkers found deep chambers filled with paintings, engravings and drawings created some 35,000 years ago. What is remarkable about these particular works is the fact that they are buried so deeply in the ground. They are extremely difficult to reach even today, and the mind boggles at the thought of delving so deep into the earth without modern equipment and light sources. Why did these prehistoric artists hide their work so far away from the light of day?

One *modern* answer would be that the ancient artists wanted to give the work a powerful psychological impact capable of matching the deep, libidinal energies that motivate us from a place beyond common sense space and time. Dream is the most commonplace site of contact with this *other* within. And there is most definitely a dream-like, other-worldly quality to Janssens' immersive installations.

Switching from a psychoanalytic to a philosophical point of view one can add that Janssens' immersive installations appear to be designed to focus viewers' attention on the process



Coloured Fog Project. On the grounds surrounding the classical psychiatric institution, De Geestgronden (in Bennebroek), a cloud of fog occasionally appears, making its way across the property. 'Ann Veronica Janssens imagined a work of art in the form of a cloud that would interact with the two ponds on the property. Reminiscent of the 'works of fog' that she previously made in enclosed and often museological spaces, it is now in Bennebroek's park that, a few times a day, an actual cloud is seen to appear. It is a low-hanging cloud made of concentrated fog which is usually white and sometimes pink. The cloud appears unannounced, then blows away and disappears, only to reappear later.' (sklor.nl 2005) Photo: Joke Stote.

of perception in itself, rather than on a specific object. And in this sense she follows in a venerable modern tradition that begins with the eighteenth century philosopher Immanuel Kant's observations on the 'Transcendental Aesthetic', 'the science of all the principles of sensibility *a priori*' (where *a priori* means wired into the brain). Kant pointed to the possibility of sense without sensation which is substantiated by imagination, dream and hallucination. Kant's transcendental aesthetic sensibility is isolated from understanding, thereby foregrounding its innate or intuitive nature.

When all that belongs to sensory experience is stripped away we are left with the basic structure of the mind that is wired in from birth. For Kant this fundamental structure was composed of the two most immaterial features of perception: space (in itself without objects) and time (in itself without actions). Without these fundamental immaterial coordinates the mind would not be able to perform the miraculous re-presentation of the 'buzzing confusion' (William James) of sense data it receives into the coherent simulcarum we blithely accept as objects in the world outside our head. Founders of modern philosophy (and psychology) such as Locke, Hume, Berkeley and Kant laid the basis for the realization that the distinction between objects in the world (including our body) and events in our mind (including our self) is actually a subtle species of mental trickery. One can note that Buddhism is also based on a deep awareness of the most fundamental mental matrix (the nothingness from which everything arises) via meditation. It is to Janssens' credit that her immersive installations come closer than most to recreating a meditative-like experience.