

Considered from a broader art historical point of view, conceptual art in Finland has a unique and at times decidedly strange nature, since as a way of understanding and making art, it arrived relatively late compared with a number of other countries. Any survey of the significant names in conceptual art in the Finnish context would surely include such artists as Lauri Anttila, Jan-Olof Mallander, and Jyrki Siukonen, yet an intriguing question presents itself with quiet insistence: who may have prepared the ground for Finland's acknowledged greats of conceptual art – and even anticipated their impressive insights? Today we can reasonably assert that their direct and vital precursor may be located in the art, ideas, and life of Stella Laura Andersson.

This exhibition's primary objective is to re-introduce the work of Stella Laura Andersson (1924 – ?), a prominent Swedish-speaking artist. Andersson's oeuvre remains relevant today on many levels, and thus needs to be recognized and looked at anew. Her body of work does much more than showcase an important strain of post-WWI landscape painting. It also exemplifies how this modality of inter-war European visual art collided fruitfully with major emerging currents of Conceptual art in ways which – as many art historians are only now beginning to see – have been a vital factor in the development of proto-conceptual and conceptual art in the West in general.

Through relationships with artists whose names continue to occupy the headlines of major essays, auction catalogues, and historical news articles internationally – for example, Robert Rauschenberg and Ad Reinhardt, both of whom she met while visiting the first Documenta exhibition in Kassel in 1955 – Andersson developed a completely original artistic practice which has earned its place in history not only because of its remarkable originality, but because her work and thinking radically influenced the aforementioned artists, as well as the younger generation conceptualists such as, for example, Luis Camnitzer and Ilya Kabakov. In fact, Andersson's oeuvre served as an intellectual *primus motor* for development of the early Conceptual art in the West.

The genuine uniqueness of both her artistic profile and the story of her personal life is a duality – one which was complexly shaped by historical circumstances. While Andersson was an intuitive, natural-born philosophical conjurer and a tireless lover of paradox, she began her artistic life in a cultural environment in which art was primarily conceived of as painting. So she indeed became a painter – in fact so skillful that even capable to create a number of spiritual sophisticated 'behind-The-Mona-Lisa'-style landscapes. However, her life-long predilection for questioning the canons and challenging 'common sense' ideas was already 'bubbling to the surface', even in her earlier, most

traditionally made works. Through extensive, open-minded journeys to hot-spots of contemporary European culture, and especially through her meeting with major American artists of the 1950s, Andersson rigorously began to rethink her own work; questions such how one could re-contextualize the painted landscape as purely an object, or work with art history as a linguistic material, became of profound interest for her, since this opened new critical dimensions to her painterly practice, which, she now felt, had arrived at a state of crisis. This, in fact, is how her remarkable 'assisted landscapes' were born, including 'Spinscape', 'Stormface', 'View of Rome with Inclined Horizon', and 'Landscape with Thermometer'.

These two scarcely compatible artistic 'personalities' – a sophisticated aestheticist painter, and a Dada-like humorous and philosophical 'anti-artist' – had previously coexisted harmoniously, together gradually crystalizing probably the most significant of Andersson's core insights: that the 'art proper' is art that cannot be exhausted by only its visual, perceptual aspect. Or, as she memorialized it in her notebook, "art, first of all, is idea, and only secondarily, the visual appreciation of it". This gradual but fundamental turn was apparent in her later works such as 'Item Under Restoration', and 'Please Do Not Cross'. These works signal her move from a self-ridiculing 'Sunday painter wanna-be Dadaist', to a kind of proto-conceptual

art, and finally to what Peter Osborne has called ‘strong conceptualism’.

Andersson’s contribution to the area of conceptual art in the West is major; one could actually quite reasonably, as some art theoreticians have now claimed, say that her influence on the main figures in conceptualism in post-war Europe is extraordinarily important. In ways similar to how the Swedish painter Hilma af Klint pioneered abstract art notably before Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, Andersson’s impact both as an artist and as a thinker of conceptualism is something that demands – and is now finally getting – proper recognition.

The last day Andersson was seen was January 12, 1983. Around the beginning of the 1980s, Anderson was becoming increasingly reclusive. After an extended period of silence during January, 1983, her few close friends alerted the police, who, upon breaking into her studio flat, found it tidy, with no signs of any accident or misfortune. However, the home appeared to be “closed”, as when one plans to go on a long trip – the refrigerator emptied and electrical appliances unplugged, and, as it was later learned, her mail forwarded to a general delivery post box. A sketch, drawn in Andersson’s hand and depicting a map of some unidentified archipelago, was discovered on the kitchen table. Whether this was an oversight on the artist’s part, or an

intentional “I will be okay” message to her friends, continues to be pondered.

Given the fact that Andersson’s body of work has had a critical impact in the forming of many conceptual art practices, two important questions remain. First, did she disappear on purpose, and if so, why? Secondly, why has her work been omitted from Western art historical writing? This is something that has inspired increased debate in academia and the larger art world in recent years, especially as new written documentation – for example Robert Rauschenberg’s notebooks, in which Andersson’s name is mentioned on many occasions – have come to light.

But to look at these questions, one is inclined to first acknowledge that there is seldom just one reason for such matters. Not surprisingly, the opinions of experts are significantly divided. Some emphasize the gender inequality in the society of that period, which simply did not allow many talented female artists to become recognized. In the case of Andersson, the issue of being part of a national minority should also not be overlooked. These suggest an appropriate emphasis on both feminist and cultural perspectives in Andersson Studies going forward. However, other researchers are inclined to see the reason for Anderson’s long ‘invisibility’ in the art world rather in the specificity of her personality: the rarity for an artist to hold any

career ambitions and a strong allergy toward the art world's never-ending 'vanity fair'. This latter quality – in clear sympathetic vibration with Duchamp's total indifference to fame and superficial recognition – also reveals a striking kinship between the philosophical nature of Anderson's artistic strategy with that of the inventor of readymades: that 'art proper' cannot be thought of in the banal managerial terms of success and failure. In fact, a definitional requirement for the future recognition of artworks which are ahead of their time is their being a failure in the eye of contemporaries.

Stella Laura Anderson: The Missing Matriarch of Finnish Dada aims to bring Andersson's pioneering contributions to their appropriate position in the artworld by showcasing a selection of her most iconic works and shining a light on a forgotten artist whose innovative approach to conceptual art continues to inspire and challenge audiences today. This exhibition, thus, works not only as means of reintroducing Stella Laura Andersson to a wider audience, but also as a platform to highlight the enduring relevance of Andersson's ideas and practices in the history of conceptual art and, in the end, the contemporary art world.

Life of Stella Laura Andersson

1924

Stella Laura Andersson is born in Jyväskylä to a Finnish-Swedish family. Her father, Thomas Andersson, works as a philosophy lecturer at the University of Jyväskylä, her mother Hilma Nietos manages the library in the same university.

1930

Starts elementary school.

1941

Is accepted to the Finnish Art Academy Ateneum in Helsinki and begins her studies with artists such as Unto Koistinen and Helge Dahlman. Especially the landscape paintings of the latter influence Andersson significantly.

1949

Drops out of studies at the Academy for unknown reasons, and never graduates. Studies 16th century renaissance paintings in depth for the next years as an autodidact.

1955

Travels extensively in Europe. Visits the first Documenta exhibition in Kassel, meets artists Robert Rauschenberg and Ad Reinhardt.

1956

Produces 'Stormface' and 'Spinscape', the first of her 'assisted landscapes'.

1960

Continues working with the 'assistedes'. Produces 'View of Rome with Inclined Horizon'.

1962

Travels to Venice for the 31st Biennale d'Arte. Notes in a letter to her father that the landscape paintings of Erich Heckel in the German pavilion are "views without soul, rich colors without ardor". Produces 'Landscape with Thermometer'.

1964

Moves back to Jyväskylä, also known as the Athens of Finland. Continues to keep in touch with the art scene in Helsinki.

Mid-1960s – 1970s

Work develops towards conceptualism. Produces 'Item Under Restoration' in 1971.

1980s

Begins to distance herself from the art scene. Retains a small circle of close friends but becomes increasingly reclusive. Produces 'Please Do Not Cross' in 1981.

1983

Andersson is last seen in mid-January. Alerted by her concerned friends some weeks later, police breaking into her studio flat find it empty. Andersson's later whereabouts are never discovered, and her fate remains unknown to this day.

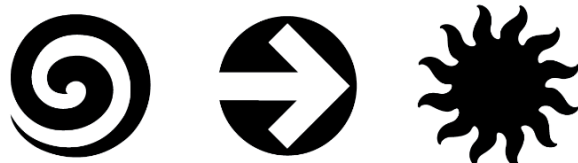
2003

Robert Rauschenberg's notebooks detailing his discussions with Andersson are discovered, leading to debates within art history that are still ongoing.

2023

Exhibition *Stella Laura Anderson: The Missing Matriarch of Finnish Dada* in Forum Box in Helsinki showcases the artist's most important works from the 1950s through to the 1980s.

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