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W(H)ETTING THE WORD:
RONI HORN NOTES THE VIEW
IN STILL WATER (THE RIVER
THAMES, FOR EXAMPLE)

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1. Most Heraclitus scholars agree on the following translation: "On those who enter the same rivers, ever different waters flow." Daniel W. Graham, "Heraclitus," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed April 08, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus/>.

The dangerous, unpredictable, and varying conditions of a river require one to rest alert. Like the sharpening of a knife against a whetstone, looking at river water sharpens one's attention to the view. Critical information rests in minute details. How tight is the earth packed along the bank's edge? What is the distance between rocky points puncturing the surface? How wet is the stone? Is it a stick or a snake? How fast is the current? Where is the bottom? From a young age I learned a set of rules particular to rivers that protected me from their wildness: no touching; supervision required; no standing near the water's edge. Predictably, the rules of engagement amplified the allure, arousing desire for touch, for entrance, and for intimacy.

The erratic behavior of river water stimulates desire. Rivers are dangerous. Rivers are opaque. Rivers are deceptive. Their reflections mask rocks, snakes, fish, bodies and trash; you never know what you're looking at or into when you look at river water. Rivers are playful. What they reveal or obstruct is hypnotic; participating in the river's game of hide-and-seek demands your full attention. The rivers I've encountered, despite how much they vary, have two main things in common. They are never the same. They always confound expectation.

Regardless of where I am, when I stand in front of a river, two questions surface. What is in the water, and where does it come from? When you consider these two variables, you must consider multitudes—content(s), source(s). Every conclusion one could make about a river begins another. Therefore, thinking about any water inside of a river produces new thoughts and, as a result, new knowledge.

The way rivers act on the mind has a history of producing metaphor. For example, Heraclitus of Ephesus (fl. ca. 500 BCE) used the metaphor of river water's variability to define flux as a law of the universe. From a single volume of Heraclitus's translated fragments arose the well-used saying, "You can't step into the same river twice."¹ Another example can be found in the work of contemporary American artist Roni Horn (b. New York, 1955).

Throughout a career of over three decades, Horn has investigated the confluence of geology, identity, and place through the subject matter of water, focusing significantly on London's major urban river, the Thames. In this work, Horn images the

Sightlines 2017

raging surface of the Thames tideway, which produces the most movement and variation in the water's appearance, from an aerial perspective.² Horn paradoxically captures the moving water as a motionless surface.

Horn likens water to a "master verb: an act of perpetual relation."³ In this article, I consider how Horn reconstructs the landscape view as a dynamic, active subject rather than as a passive object, through her verbing of the River Thames. By irregularly deploying the exacting systems of photography, language, and perspective, I argue that Horn has converted these tools of reason (*logos*) to river logic. As a result, landscape does not become a symbolic form; it remains a stage where projection yields to the indeterminacy of an unquantifiable subject.

Horn was commissioned by Minetta Brook in New York and the Public Art Development Trust (PADT) in London to complete a project on the Thames between 1998 and 2000. During this period of production, Horn created three bodies of work. In this article, I focus on *Still Water (The River Thames, for Example)* (1999), which consists of a suite of fifteen footnoted, offset photolithographs (fig. 1). The paratextual footnote system in *Still Water* rests in the photolithograph's bottom white margins. The footnotes were written and compiled by Horn. Each photolithograph measures 30½ by 41½ inches. The superscript numbers appended to the notations at the foot of the plate are matched to digits that are placed intermittently on the paper's surface over the river. (fig. 2)

Still Water is the only iteration of Horn's work on the Thames produced for a museum exhibition. (fig. 3)

Uniquely featured in *Still Water* are the rogue superscript digits overlaying the surface of the Thames. These aquatic numbers offer a redress to the historical construction of linear perspective in the "landscape" genre of Western art, which imaged nature as a stage for political and religious narratives. Canonical works like Alexandre Cabanel's *Birth of Venus* (1863) depict landscape as an unyielding backdrop to the ideology expressed by the figures in the foreground (fig. 4). *Still Water* omits a horizon line, and there is no vanishing point. Instead, the foreground has enfolded the background.

Horn's removal of recessed space formally deconstructs distance. This strategic maneuver challenges one of the most powerful inferences of perspective in the history of Western art:

² "Tideway," Wikipedia, accessed January 22, 2017, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tideway>.

³ Jan Avgikos, Kathleen Merrill Campagnolo, and Roni Horn, *Still Water* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: SITE Santa Fe, 2000), plate 8, footnote 27.

⁴ Roni Horn, *Another Water (The River Thames, for Example)* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2011), footnote 104.

Angela Berry

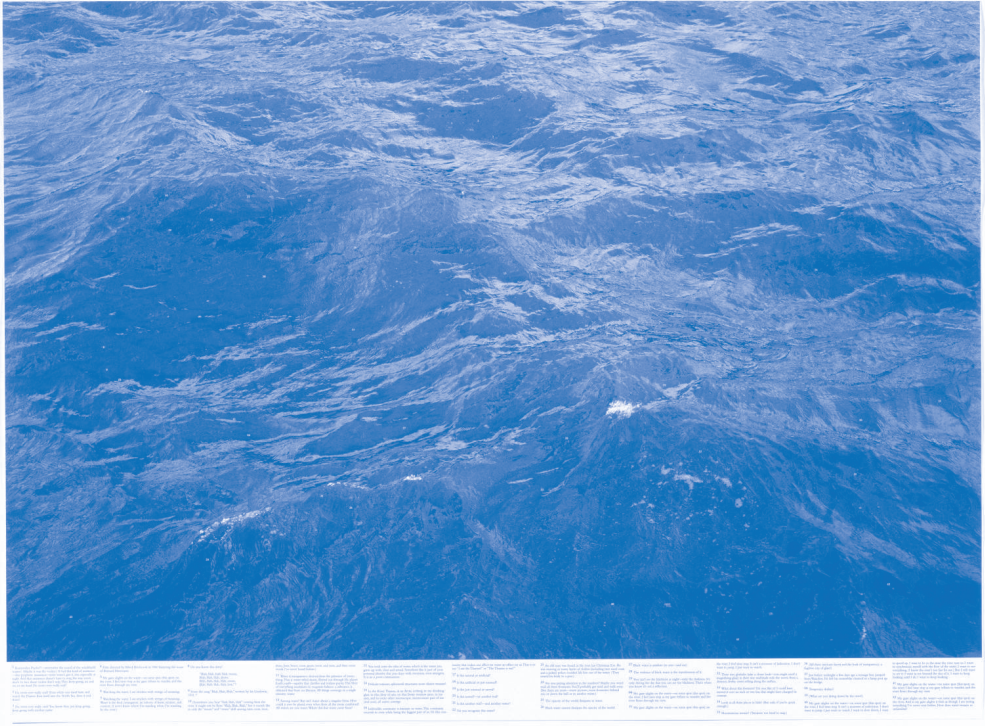


Figure 1: Roni Horn, *Still Water (The River Thames, For Example)* (Plate 9), 1999 (TATE Modern, American Fund for the Tate Gallery), accessed January 11, 2017. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/horn-no-title-p13071>.

Sightlines 2017



Figure 2: Roni Horn, *Still Water (The River Thames, for Example)* (Plate Detail), 1999, in Jan Avgikos, Kathleen Merrill Campagnolo, and Roni Horn, *Still Water* (Santa Fe, NM: SITE Santa Fe, 2000), Plate 15.

Figure 3: Roni Horn, *Still Water (The River Thames, for Example)*, installation view, in Lynne Cooke, Thierry de Dave, Roni Horn, and Louise Neft, *Roni Horn* (London: Phaidon Press, 2001).



the God’s-eye view. Without linear perspective, the viewer cannot master the view. Instead, in *Still Water*, Horn has created a reciprocal coordinate system, empowering every point with contradictory content. Unable to express ideals, they elevate difference. *Still Water* offers a “DIY” map, permitting the viewer to create value and meaning through the associative logic of still (or dry) water.

The adjective “wet” describes something covered by water or saturated with liquid. In this definition, when something becomes wet, it shows a character of yielding. Yielding could be interpreted to mean a lack of forcefulness, submissiveness, or even weakness. In this interpretation, to become fluid is the dilution of strength. Horn states that, “‘Wet’ always seemed to be one of the more appropriate words to apply to water. But when I look at water ‘wet’ is rarely the adjective that comes to mind.”⁴ I apply the adjective of whetting to *Still Water* as a metaphor for Horn’s verbing of landscape. To whet is to sharpen, an act of stimulation that heightens awareness. I propose that Horn’s yielding is a strategic strengthening—a whetting. As you read Horn’s view, the water cites Horn and you. In return, the viewer’s sight is sharpened, whetted against an alternative regime of visual, linguistic, and spatial perspective. Water is indifferent to monolithic projections of power. As Horn says, “Water brings the distance near.”⁵ Horn’s erudition of image, language, and perspective inverts the ratio, equalizing the scale of image to the scope of the text. Most significantly, Horn’s survey inverts the top-down hierarchy of knowledge production, which is typically wielded by experts and bestowed upon the layman. Further, in Horn’s mutated aberration of surveying, the human perspective is merely a footnote. Horn sights water; water cites Horn. Horn cites viewer; viewer sights Horn and water. Although, as Horn points out, “The Thames is us!”⁶

Horn’s work arrives through fugitive structures contained by the material conditions of unbridled, yet tempered, forms. By operationalizing motifs of redundancy and accumulation, her work resists monolithic projections of vision. This aesthetic strategy prioritizes the viewer’s affective perceptual experience over “idealistically detached” and autonomous observations.⁷ Thus, her art demands corporeal presence and is often site-specific. Horn states that her works, “necessarily exist *a priori* ... these objects exist in very literal relationship to human presence, not without

5. Jan Avgikos, Kathleen Merrill Campagnolo, and Roni Horn, *Still Water* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: SITE Santa Fe, 2000), plate 4, footnote 8.

6. Jan Avgikos, Kathleen Merrill Campagnolo, and Roni Horn, *Still Water* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: SITE Santa Fe, 2000), plate no. 2, footnote 31.

7. *Ibid.*

9. Jan Avgikos, Kathleen Merrill Campagnolo, and Roni Horn, *Still Water* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: SITE Santa Fe, 2000), plate 12, footnote 6.

Sightlines 2017

human presence; not in the making and not in the viewing.”⁸ Paradoxically, her work relies on the limitations of autocratic systems, such as footnotes, language, geometry, meteorology, and perspective, to achieve the desired effect of affective presence. For example, in *Still Water*, the footnotes are so minute they are initially difficult to recognize; intimacy is integral for the work’s legibility (fig. 5). Paradoxically, intimacy with the work creates disorientation; viewers become performers in an uncertain visual field. Herein lies the strategy through which Horn creates a “vertigo of meaning.”⁹ The closer one is to the work, the further one is from organizing the triangulation of visual systems. As Horn implies through her invocation of vertigo, being off-center inside the Western codes of aesthetics and writing creates distortion.

Horn’s footnotes, like the weather and water, structurally interrupt the main body on the page.¹⁰ The notations reference a body of water rather than a body of text. Therefore, they do not support arguments (or *logos*) born out of sentences. This paratextual system follows the nonlinear *logos* of the river and surfaces the mysterious and material conditions of its content(s) and origin(s); its *muthos*.¹¹ The superscript does not proceed numerically throughout the suite of fifteen plates. Each photolithograph begins again at one (fig. 11). These aquatic digits punctuate the image randomly, and the footnotes are arranged in columns and appear fragmented. The columnar notations are atomic in scale. The minute size of the font creates illegibility. Each footnote amplifies water’s relational properties and references aspects of the river’s physical, cultural, literary, psychological, and geographical history.

Horn’s footnotes include quotations that summon cultural references to water, in general, and the River Thames, in particular, from a large expanse of literary references. For example, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), William Faulkner’s *The Wild Palms [If I Forget Thee Jerusalem]* (1939), Flannery O’Connor’s short story “The River” (1955), and Charles Dickens’ *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–1865). Recurrent eyewitness and secondhand accounts of lives lost on the river are interspersed throughout the notations. Reports of murder, suicide, and accidental drowning are contextualized alongside the graphic appearance of water. Apparently, the Thames served as a burial site for bodies dismembered by the London parliament. Countless references are made about the river’s

¹⁰ In academic writing, footnotes acknowledge which ideas or quotations used by the author are derived from sources and discourses beyond the text. Footnotes are paired with a superscript number. The superscript number is inserted at the end of a sentence where an author has cited outside references.

These numerical digits match a superscript number that is inserted at the beginning of the footnote in the paper’s bottom margins. According to the Chicago Manual of Style, which has been the definitive writing guide for American English since 1906, writers should begin the superscript at 1 and proceed numerically. The

rules of American English clearly state, “Do not start the order over on each page.” Predictably, for the whet mind, the rules of engagement amplify the allure of discord and invite dissent. (EasyBib, accessed April 16, 2017, <http://www.easybib.com/guides/citation-guides/chicago-turabian/footnotes/>.)

Angela Berry



Figure 4: Alexandre Cabanel, *Birth of Venus*, 1875. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed March 1, 2017. <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/435831>.



Figure 5: *Visitors to The Museum of Modern Art view Still Water by Romi Horn*. Image credit: Frances Roberts / Albany Stock Photo. License details: Thursday, April 06, 2017. Expiry: date Wednesday, April 06, 2022.

11. *Muthos* is what the ancient Greeks called a myth or story that truthfully attempted to describe metaphysical beginnings of the world and of people. Notably, unlike its contemporary framing as fiction, *muthos* could not be debunked, because it was not a “false fact.” (Catalin Parrenie, “Plato’s Myths,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed April 16, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-myths/>).

Sightlines 2017

contamination. Horn points to reflections on the water's surface and asks, "Moonlight or Mercury?"¹²

Footnotes choreograph the reader's departure and return from the main body of text. As a result, footnotes are often seen as extramural. The fact that they inhabit the same page as their referent makes them easier to access, as opposed to an endnote. However, their recursion raises resistance, intolerance, and even rejection by readers who want to stay to the point. What is the significance of forcing the action of reading upon viewers in a work of art? One thing that reading a visual work does is force an onlooker to sustain the view. Looking at, reading, and recognizing letter characters demands time. The marginal details of Horn's text recall those hidden beneath the water's surface. Stick or snake? Moonlight or mercury? Time creates experience. The requirement to read a view interrupts the act of looking at the picture, signaling a departure and a return.

In academic scholarship, footnotes provide a discursive space of meaning in the margins, situating the hermeneutics of the text inside of a broader lineage of thought. The history of the footnote is the topic of Anthony Grafton's book *The Footnote*: A Curious History* (1997). Grafton offers many examples of how footnotes are used in scholarship. His working list of uses includes claiming authority, invoking muses, legitimacy, entertainment (also referred to as scholarly assassination), omission (as political statement), accessibility, and authenticity.¹³ Grafton states, "To the inexpert, footnotes look like deep root systems, solid and fixed; to the connoisseur, however, they reveal themselves as anthills, swarming with constructive and combative activity."¹⁴ Grafton identifies the footnote system as a dynamic and unstable culture. Coincidentally, ants were the topic of one of Horn's earliest works.

Horn completed *Ant Farm* (1974–75) at RISD in 1975 (fig. 6). Originally presented in her studio as a silent performance, the piece consists of Horn observing an ant farm housed between two sheets of glass inside a minimalist wooden frame. The materials Horn lists in the work include oak, glass, earth, and ants. In an entry for *Ant Farm* in Horn's *Subject Index* (2009), she states, "Eyewitness is usually associated with a criminal act. But what you're really talking about is people owning up to their experience... I have this ambition to make the meaning of a work people's experience of it.

¹² Jan Avgikos, Kathleen Merrill Campaigno, and Roni Horn, *Still Worker* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: SITE Santa Fe, 2000), plate 3, footnote 28.

¹³ Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Roni Horn, *Roni Horn Aka Roni Horn: Subject Index* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), 135.

Every eyewitness is an authority.”¹⁵ (fig. 6)

Linda Norden, author of the entry for *Ant Farm* in *Subject Index*, recalls Horn describing this work as a “culture.” Horn defines “culture” as “any work that brings things together and makes me aware of something I wasn’t aware of before. The performance wasn’t me looking at the piece; it was me opening up a space in which my looking at this culture was being viewed by others as a culture...together.” In figure 6, we see Horn looking at, through, and with. Her revolving gaze parallels the gaze of the contorted viewers observing *Still Water* in figure 5.¹⁶ Nearly twenty-five years later, Horn adds water and whets the word, citing hundreds of eyewitness accounts of the river and inviting those of us outside of the frame to witness the culture of the river together.

To understand how Horn has effectively sharpened the view through a textual, rather than optical system, we must first understand the regime of vision Horn’s work refutes—linear perspective. Looking at *Ant Farm* recalls Albrecht Dürer’s *Artist Drawing a Nude with Perspective Device*, published in *The Painter’s Manual* in 1525 (fig. 7). This canonical work illustrates the regime of perspectival construction that Horn’s work is refuting. In figure 18, we see the illustration of a perspective machine being used in an attempt to organize a view of the female nude. The male painter signifies the advancement of culture, order, and geometry. The female nude stands for nature, disorder, and asymmetry. Here, woman is both matter and material, a symbolic form. The conversion of matter and material into form is celebrated as a triumph in this image. Culture has conquered nature. Holding Dürer’s perspective device in mind, let’s reconsider Horn’s constructed landscape. Formally, distance has been obliterated, and there is no hierarchy of organizing principles. In *Still Water* the viewer is contorted and the River Thames absorbs our projections. This structural arrangement challenges one of the most powerful inferences of perspective in the history of Western art—the God’s-eye view.

In *Still Water*, Horn has created a reciprocal coordinate system, giving every point unique content. Her points do not express “ideals,” they elevate points of difference; they encourage and celebrate alternative perspectives. Rather than direct the view through an equilateral recession toward the distance, they offer a DIY aesthetic, allowing the viewer to create free associations in

Sightlines 2017

Figure 6: Roni Horn, *Art Form*, 1974 – 75, oak, glass, earth, and ants. Image Courtesy the Artist and Hauser & Wirth Zurich London. Take online: <http://www.late.org.uk/whats-on/latemodern/exhibition/roni-horn-aka-roni-horn/roni-horn-aka-roni-horn-explore-exhibition-2>, accessed March 1, 2017.



Figure 7: Albrecht Dürer, *Artist Drawing a Nude with Perspective Device*, 1538. Found in the Collection of The University of Exhingen. Getty Images: <http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/artistdrawing-a-nude-with-perspective-device-1538-found-in-news-photo/45443243#artist-drawing-a-nudewith-perspective-device-1538-found-in-the-of-picture-id49443243>, accessed March 1, 2017.



perspectival space. When viewed in comparison with the scientific, rational construction of space, Horn's points do create offset linear perspective, but only because they refuse visual mastery and autonomy. The paradox of Horn's distortion of the habitual view through autocratic systems recalls Andy Warhol's *Do It Yourself* series (1962–1963). Composed of five large Prestype works on canvas, *Do It Yourself* appears before the viewer as half-Warhol, half-template. The unpainted areas of canvas are outlined and contain subscript digits that correspond to an absent color palate. The unpainted areas of canvas are outlined and contain digits that correspond to an inaccessible palate, referencing the paint-by-numbers arts kits (figs. 8–9).¹⁷

In *Do It Yourself (Sailboats)* (1962), we see a deep blue background with pink clouds. The foreground is largely incomplete (fig. 9). The incomplete nature of the instructions makes this work a collaborative effort; the viewer and Warhol work together. Like Warhol's *Do It Yourself* series, the completion of *Still Water's* system of triangulation, which references the Thames points-blank, is contingent upon participation. Horn's work demands intimacy. The annihilation of distance in her landscape views creates geographic imaginaries between the artist, the viewer, and the view. It is not possible to be separated from Horn's moving subject. In Horn's own words, "Water brings the distance near."¹⁸

When a photograph is oriented horizontally in the genre of landscape, typically the composition leads the eye to a point in the distance (or "Godward"). When text is read from left to right in the Western tradition of linguistics, the reader goes from point A to point B, or from capital to period. The intent of these knowledge systems is to derive reason from meaning. Instead, Horn reroutes our attention to unconsolidated fragments, narrative contradictions, and an imaginative geography that unquantifies the landscape view.

For Horn, nature is neither an amenable muse nor a noun and modifying adjective. Therefore, nature cannot be a nurturing mother, a pristine woman, or a positive teacher. In *Still Water*, landscape neither stages nor services the ideological authority of the foreground. Horn is refusing these normalizing, phantasmagorical associations. *Still Water's* aerial perspective of the undulating surface of the Thames recalls a human perspective, rather than

17. Warhol's *Do It Yourself* references the painting-by-numbers art kits, which were originally created by Max S. Klein, engineer and owner of the Detroit-based business Palmer Paint Company and Dan Robbins, a commercial artist, in the 1950s. ("Paint by Number," Wikipedia, accessed April 16, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paint_by_number).

18. Jan Avgikos, Kathleen Merrill Campagnolo, and Roni Horn, *Still Water* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: SITE Santa Fe, 2000), footnote 10, plate 4.

Sightlines 2017



Figure 8: *Palmer-Pann Craft Master New Artist Series 10 Series 12 and Series 18, page 1.* Palmer-Pann Corporation: Toledo, OH, May 19, 2013. Paint by Number Museum: <https://www.paintbynumbermuseum.com/catalog-page/4571>. (Accessed March 1, 2017).



Figure 9: Andy Warhol, *Do It Yourself (Sailboats)*, 1962. The Andy Warhol Museum, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. The New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/13/arts/design/warhol-museum-is-adding-long-sought-do-it-yourself-sailboats.html> (Accessed March 1, 2017).

Angela Berry

the view afforded to God, a bird, or a drone. As a result, this work offers Horn's audience a communion with the view presupposed by the entirety of human experience—the whole of it, its corruption, mythology, literature, history, geography, psychology, politics, and suicide. Horn calls this experience of water a type of "*a priori* communion." Origins are contested in Horn's mythology. Man never fell from grace; instead he seeps up through the disgusting drain of filth of an urban river and watches his reflection float downstream.

In *Still Water*, we are given an aerial perspective looking down at the river. When we look down at the river, we miss our reflection, but make amends with the echo of Horn's language. Her use of redundancy overwrites endings and affirms origin(s); we conclude only to begin again. We are given columnar cradles of rhetorical interruption. We are descending, rather than transcending, Earth's kingdom. The kingdom is here. There is no stage affixing our projections. The field of view is that afforded to a pigeon, a horse, or a fish. The heaven Horn's work gives us is a falling away from reason, a falling into place, and the ability to see the freedom beneath our feet.