



Sabine Kuehnle

THE VOYAGE OUT

The Voyage Out - A Journey Into The Unknown

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For you – against you
Throw all the stones behind you
And let the walls loose

The opening lines of the poem *For you – against you* by Meret Oppenheim¹ are steeped in creativity and destruction alike: Despite the obvious appeal for a heady departure, for a liberating act of abandonment, there is a manifest awareness of the struggle with hidden opposition. Sabine Kuehnle's installation *The Voyage Out* is characterized by a similar ambivalence of power. The combination of multiple discrepant parts conveys a sense of strong restlessness that is barely restrained by the black and yellow barrier tape.

“Under the glassy, cool, translucent wave”²

Resplendent in the international warning colors black and yellow, the barrier tape instantly catches the eye of the beholder. In an uneasy up-and-down it embraces a white timber scaffold with transparent “walls” made of glass and plastic film. Crinkled and torn, the film webs have been unevenly and generously draped around the horizontally and vertically braced timber beams. Three branches adorned with gleaming mirror fragments protrude from the scaffold, while a black-and-white photo spool unreels beyond the marked outline of the installation. Rock crystals and magazine clippings of single woman's eyes have been applied especially to adorn the interfaces where the different elements meet. Strategically placed neon tubes dazzle the spectator. Apple cores, trampled on tinfoil, torn and crushed drawings, and branches covered in black snake leather appear to have been accidentally scattered across the floor within the fenced-off area. On closer observation, the four clay-encased stands and a head that has been draped with printed paper and propped onto the supports make for striking elements. (*cf. fig. p. 14, 15*).

Linked by complex connections, the multifaceted components of the installation *The Voyage Out* interact in controversial debate. The various bright, shiny, transparent and fragile materials, such as the thin white timber beams, the transparent film and the broken shine of the mirror, give the installation a delicate and tender appearance. This is offset by the use of dark elements to produce a stabilizing effect: black and white paper – draped, crumpled, arranged as a spooled photo series – and clay. The imbalanced shape of the

scaffold and the way in which, crinkled and torn, the film has been tensioned to obscure the view serve to spawn a feeling of great restlessness. Even though the barrier tape with its slanted stripes holds all those fleeting materials together, it introduces an additional element of movement into the work by guiding and confounding the beholder's gaze. In search of a place where our eyes can alight, we inevitably find our attention riveted by the neon tubes. Most of the small objects – the tinfoil, the apples and the eyes – appear to have been randomly and accidentally scattered, however, their positioning has actually been carefully and deliberately thought through. The installation gives the overall impression of being both intricate and compact, both intuitive and open, both deliberate and closed. Enticing you to come closer, but not to enter, thus forcing you to move around the object.

Where is the beginning and where is the end? In terms of formal composition, the work evolves from the branch set with mirror fragments that, propped on a sheet of glass, hovers one meter above the ground (*cf. fig. p. 12, 13*). The installation has been composed with no particular viewing sequence in mind so that its fragments and components will randomly and successively reveal themselves. Making direct or indirect reference to literary works or traditional art historical contexts, the elements frequently transpose the atmospheric connotations conveyed and inherent therein. Without the rigidity of a fixed viewing pattern and through the associative mood a space opens up where own thoughts and perceptions can freely develop.

This freedom of observation characterizes the way in which Sabine Kuehnle generally approaches her work. With an open mind, she gathers impressions, thoughts and items, contemplates moods and perceptions. Often, what is casually picked up is what remains and later gets associated with other fragments and translated into sculpture. It is a long and non-controllable process. By and large, the essence of Kuehnle's work is human identity: how it is formed, structured and perceived, referencing the individual and society alike. In addition to literature and art, Kuehnle relies on the font of everyday life to draw inspiration for her artistic discourse. She is especially fascinated by the literary works of Early Romanticism, with their depiction of individual and most intense experiences within a highly symbolic environment. However, she is also keenly aware of the symbolic power of everyday things

and situations, which has each of her artworks steeped in allegory. The relationships between all components used in her 2008-9 installation begin with the title *The Voyage Out*.

“What happens is, as usual, that I'm going to write about the soul, & life breaks in.”³

Sabine Kuehnle has been studying the oeuvre of Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) for a very long time and with great intensity since 2008. The innovative narrative structure and psychological portraits the English writer paints have gained her a place among the most distinguished representatives of world literature. Her central themes revolve around the search for identity and the achievement of harmony between mental states. As early as her debut as a writer, with *The Voyage Out* published in 1915, Woolf explored her protagonist's journey of self-discovery, which indeed looks promising at first: From a well-to-do family, Rachel Vinrace has a very protected but uneventful childhood until she leaves her safe haven by embarking on a sea voyage and dares to restructure her life. However, Rachel's audacious journey eventually results in a fatal illness. Even though the novel allows for a variety of different interpretations, her unfortunate fate leaves the reader disheartened in the end. All that remains is:

“During this time his sense of dismay and catastrophe were almost physically painful; all round him he seemed to hear the shiver of broken glass which, as it fell to earth, left him sitting in the open air.”⁴

Over and above the real-life journey on the sea, the title of the novel *The Voyage Out* also evokes connotations of Rachel's journey towards her own identity. In a figurative sense, the title adopted by Sabine Kuehnle can also be seen as sparking the idea for her installation, namely as an act of turning away from the familiar cocoon and embracing an uncertain future. That Rachel's attempt at reshaping her identity is ultimately condemned to failure lends ominous connotations to the layers of meaning in Kuehnle's work of art.

“Nobody will give you freedom, you have to take it.”⁵

The broken sheen of the mirroring pieces is at the outset of our own journey around the installation *The Voyage Out* (*cf. fig.*

p. 12, 13). The work's starting point immediately lays bare the fundamental theme of the work, which is only revealed by the novel's title if we are more familiar with it, namely reflection. In classical iconography the mirror symbolizes deep contemplation and self-awareness, amongst other things. But the splinters hamper self-reflection: The visual experience is shattered into broken fragments, deprives the beholder of experiencing himself holistically and thus permanently, and finally abandons him feeling void of relationships and in self-doubt.⁶ The crushed tinfoil scattered about the floor resumes the theme of the broken sheen and acts as a subtle but persistent reminder (*cf. fig. p. 36*).

The mirror shards are seamlessly arranged on a tree branch positioned on a raised sheet of glass. Within the culture of the Christian West, the branch partially assumes the tree's symbolism. An abbreviated embodiment of the Tree of Knowledge, such as seen in Albrecht Dürer's painting *Adam (Adam und Eva, 1507, Museo del Prado, Madrid)*, it also makes reference to the Garden of Eden: Paradise, the primary habitat of mankind – a place of bliss, purity and peace. However, in the combination of branch and mirroring splinters, the negative connotations of the tree – in other words, the Fall of Man – are also brought to the fore: “But from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.”⁷ In the artwork, the forbidden fruit has therefore been placed at close range. Gazing through the glass, the crumpled tinfoil and a circular array of apple cores (*cf. fig. p. 22, 23*) will be encountered. Disaster has already happened – the fruit has been eaten, the cognitive process sparked and expulsion from Paradise has taken place. The artist's associative approach is somewhat removed from the fixed interpretations of conventional iconography nonetheless. Instead, objects are personally conceived, creating new and subjective contexts of meaning. Contrary to its conventional symbolism, the apple in *The Voyage Out* has positive connotations. While staying in a paradise of a garden at Monk's House (Virginia Woolf's country house in Sussex) Sabine Kuehnle ate several apples. This joyful pleasure is embodied by the apple cores – “expulsion” and “knowledge” thus indeed become desirable notions. In reference to the novel's title *The Voyage Out*, Rachel's contemplations cited below are testimony to the feelings of claustrophobia and oppression she experiences in her protected

space: “By this new light she saw her life for the first time a creeping hedged-in thing, driven cautiously between high walls, here turned aside, there plunged in darkness, made dull and crippled for ever – her life that was the only chance she had – a thousand words and actions became plain to her.”⁸

In spite of this new perspective, the beholder is not able to liberate himself fully from the conventional context of meaning. The clear ambivalence thus derived reveals that the journey towards self-awareness is anything but a smooth ride: In a metaphorical sense, it must hence be preceded by being expelled from the Garden of Eden.

Numerous other elements displayed in the installation reference the Garden of Eden which, in relation to the other components, serve to intensify our impression of an emotional world steeped in conflict. The house-like structure of the scaffold initially evokes feelings of being safe and secure in a protected paradise; the landscape images depicted on the photo skein as well as the use of natural materials such as clay and wood do the same. Like the branch, the latter shares in the symbolism of the tree, thereby emphasizing the original holistic state of the world. The clay connects the timber beams to the ground which, symbolizing Mother Earth, firmly locate the artwork within the material world and lend it stability – in a visual and a metaphorical sense (*cf. fig. p. 26, 27*), while the photo web, suspended vertically from the timber scaffold and unreeled across the floor (*cf. fig. p. 8*), adds an element of movement to the installation. The shots taken from inside a car contemplate the idyllic atmosphere surrounding Virginia Woolf’s country house in Sussex. In search of a point of fixation amidst these restless and partially blurred images, the gaze of the beholder is subconsciously drawn towards the captured atmosphere. As regards spatial composition, it represents the most accessible and yet the most inapproachable point in the entire work. Even though interested spectators are indeed able to approach the work closely, in doing so, they are faced with the installation’s highest “wall”: a forceful warning composed of barrier tape, which appears to have been most densely arranged in this very position, as well as transparent, crinkled film. Every element that dares to break free from the composition’s tightly defined outline appears to be guiding us ahead and steering us away at the same time. From different angles two branches set with shimmering mirror pieces

thus draw our attention to the striking finish of a vertical bracing (*cf. fig. p. 28 and p. 39*).

“Paradise is a park, where only brutes, not men, can remain.”⁹

Draped with printed paper, the upper end of the one-meter high, vertical structure is an eye-catcher indeed. The sheet of paper depicts a black and white image whose meaning only becomes apparent at second glance: What emerges is the torso of a naked, long-haired woman holding up her left arm. Positioned between her face and the crook of her arm, another person’s foot comes into view (*cf. fig. p. 16*). The image is identified as a section from a reproduction print by Moses Haughton (1772/74–1884), which is based on a painting by Henry Fuseli (1741–1825): *The Dream of Eve*.¹⁰ The image shows Eve reclined on a hillside. Abducted by Satan in her sleep, she accompanied God’s adversary – who has just left her – on a dreamlike journey in anticipation of the fall of man (*cf. fig. p. 7*). Painted by Fuseli in the period 1796–9, the oil painting formed part of a spectacular artistic project – the Milton Gallery.

Henry Fuseli created his “Milton Gallery” in the years from 1790 to 1800. Comprising 47 paintings, it depicts themes mainly from the Baroque epic poem *Paradise Lost* by English poet John Milton (1608–1674).¹¹ The 12 books of the poem written in blank verse and published in 1667 give a dramatic and detailed account of Genesis from the fall of Satan to Adam’s and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Major significance is attributed to the seduction of the first human couple. However, many details in Milton’s epic work deviate from official theology: Satan is given the lead role and it is him – not Adam – who gets to play the central part at Eve’s side prior to her seduction. In his paintings, Fuseli follows Milton’s example. In fact, in creating his cycle, the artist deviates even further from the traditional theme by softening the Christian depiction of the Eve’s character as a weak-willed and easily seduced creature, amongst other things.¹²

Fuseli’s attitude towards the figure of Eve is shaped by the period of Enlightenment and marks the beginning of an alternative concept to the highly influential myth that has prevailed until the present day: Hand in hand with the rise of female emancipation, Eve’s behavior begins to be interpreted in a different light. Female artists of the 20th and 21st century, amongst them Meret

Oppenheim and Kiki Smith, no longer regard the consumption of the forbidden fruit as calamity and sin. Instead, it marks the “beginning of consciousness”,¹³ the first step towards self-determination that enabled man to overcome the constraints and rules of life in paradise. Liberated from the negative perception in Christian ideology, Eve now appears to be driven by her thirst for knowledge – a woman who has achieved self-awareness by seizing the opportunities that life has given her.

The character of Eve as part of the *The Voyage Out* must also be interpreted in this context: From this new point of view – personified by the artwork’s title and the apple cores – the Fall of Man along with expulsion and knowledge is shifted into the realm of the positive. Exploiting the same ambivalence, however, the work’s negative connotations serve to place the quest for self-awareness on a more profound and complex level.

This double ambiguity is enhanced by yet another symbolic element in the installation – the black snake leather (*cf. fig. p. 17 and p. 18, 19*). The symbolism of the serpent is both complex and contradictory. Within Christian iconography, the serpent is perceived to be “the sliest of all animals” – a metaphor for Satan, a symbol for vices and sin, and a seducer: “You shall not die. [...] When you eat of it your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be like God, knowing Good and Evil.”¹⁴ While merely acknowledged in the Christian world, the serpent was in fact worshipped for its sagacity in many ancient religions, serving as a symbol denoting Mother Earth as well as several other goddesses. Liberated from its negative connotations in Christianity, the serpent emblemizes wisdom and – in a wider sense – femininity. As regards the work *The Voyage Out* it intensifies the positive connotations evoked by Eve and the knowledge insinuated to us. However, calamitous undertones still linger on: Drawing from its destructive meaning within color symbolism, the blackness of the snake leather is associated with doubt and melancholy.

Hence, the elements referencing Paradise fall into two categories: While wood, clay and idyllic landscape images are associated with a sense of security and a familiar existence within a protected room, the apple cores, the work’s title, the snake leather and the figure of Eve all indicate – in their very ambiguity – that meaningful self-reflection must necessarily coincide with

conflict-laden and unforeseeable sentiments. Thus there are two strong forces competing with one another within the installation. What is it that drives man to pursue this painful quest for knowledge in the first place?

“In a kind of waking dream”¹⁵

The image of *The Dream of Eve*, with its powerful and pioneering message, depicts a central moment in the installation. Adorned with mirror fragments, the branch serves as the formal starting point, while the painting denotes its spiritual counterpart. The only indicator to identify a fundamental aspect of the work, it enhances the interpretative power of the work’s core components.

Against the backdrop of biblical Paradise, the journey to self-awareness begins with the act of eating the forbidden fruit. However, the motif used by Sabine Kuehnlé, namely Fuseli’s *The Dream of Eve*, depicts not the incident at the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, but a non-biblical and rather unknown scene: Eve, while sleeping, dreams she accompanies Satan to the Tree of Knowledge where she is tempted to taste the forbidden fruit. Crucially, in the installation *The Voyage Out* the ultimate fall of man is intellectually anticipated through the staging of a dreamlike experience. The choice of motif from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* reveals that the work is not exclusively focused on the path to self-awareness, but that it embraces also the second before it – the moment of its origin. The work *The Dream of Eve* heralds that the act of dreaming will be at the heart of the self-awareness process.

The dream as a central topic not only features in Henry Fuseli’s Milton Gallery, but represents a recurring theme throughout his entire oeuvre that serves both as a leitmotif and a subject of theoretical debate: The artist identifies the complex associations of the dream world that have been triggered by internal and external stimuli with the “driving force behind every creative fantasy”.¹⁶ That dream experiences and the subconscious provide enormous potential to the artistic process has been uncontested ever since the Surrealist era at the beginning of the 20th century, if not before. However, dreams and fantasy worlds are not only reflected in art, they can also become part of mundane, ordinary life. Meret Oppenheim, for example, who has kept records of her dreams since she was 14 years old, not only uses surreal

images as inspiration for her art but, amongst other things, as an indicator of her various behavioral patterns so as to better engage with her own person.¹⁷

“That the dream should concern itself with efforts to perform the tasks with which our psychic life is confronted is no more remarkable than that our conscious waking life should so concern itself.”¹⁸

The creative energy inherent in every human being can therefore be used to evoke self-reflection, both on an individual and on a subjective level.

In the installation *The Voyage Out*, fantasy in the guise of a dream is materialized as a spiritual impetus and an immaterial process – through the snakes leather epitomizing the subconscious, the clippings of women’s eyes, the rock crystals, the white color of the scaffold and the light exuded from the neon tubes. In traditional iconography, light and the „non-color“ white signify spirituality, enlightenment and divinity. Due to their cool, artificial and dazzling effects provided within the artwork, the two elements serve to convey the notions of intellectuality, clarity and the illumination revealing a condition (cf. fig. p. 22, 23). In a conventional sense, the eyes furthermore symbolize, amongst other things, enlightenment but also omniscience, intuition and watchfulness. Sabine Kuehnle regards the eyes, which introduce a playful element of proximity and distance to the installation, in close relation to the rock crystals and frequently combines them (cf. fig. p. 2). A variety of crystalline quartz, rock crystal is composed of homogeneous molecules that have assembled to form a stable, regular lattice. It denotes an internal order in which each crystal is given its own unique design nonetheless. Translated into the installation *The Voyage Out*, the qualities of crystal convey the notions of identity and individuality: a character who is aware of being a self-contained entity and who has set himself apart from others. The completed journey to self-awareness – emblemized by the rock crystals – appears to be both guarded and watched by the women’s eyes. Also the beholder feels as if he is being watched – yet compelled and attracted at the same time.

Transparent and inclined towards the immaterial world, the all-encompassing film personifies the circular thoughts going

around in one’s mind during self-reflection, the internal torment that is expressed in extreme furrowing and tensing of the face (cf. fig. p. 20, 21).

**“And since time is a measure of motion,
it will also be a measure of rest”¹⁹**

The installation is firmly anchored in the present due to its contemporary form vocabulary and highly topical theme in the age of individuality. However, highly charged traditional subjects have also found their way into the design: Paradise, Eve and the Tree of Knowledge. Primarily through these objects referencing the first significant and basic conflict of humankind the notions of fundamentality and consistency inherent in human self-awareness get addressed.

“The tectonic layers of our lives rest so tightly one on top of the other that we always come up against earlier events in later ones, not as matter that has been fully formed and pushed aside, but absolutely present and alive.”²⁰

Thinking in limited time frames – past, present, future – hardly matters here. What matters is time as a meditative and continuous factor within the process of growth and becoming. This opens up a way of interpreting the crumpled, yet interrelating drawings scattered across the ground: Every single sheet – its black lines lovingly drawn by hand – took six hours to complete (cf. fig. p. 11).

The core theme of *The Voyage Out* is the search for identity and awareness – an illumination of triggering causes and associated mental states. Sabine Kuehnle creatively transposes these tortured emotional worlds into art the moment they arise. The method of establishing correlations within the installation in reciprocal leaps and bounds is reminiscent of Virginia Woolf’s narrative structure: Particularly in her later works she frequently toyed with fragmentary thoughts and tense multi-layered sentences, thereby unfurling a complex psychological panorama. The process of self-reflection thus remains caught in the perpetual struggle between creation and destruction: *For you – against you*. Ultimately, it signifies a leap into the unknown. To take this leap will always be a challenge.

References

- ¹ Meret Oppenheim (1913–1985), Swiss artist and poet, 1st verse of her poem *Für dich – wider dich (For you – against you)*, 1933, cited in *Meret Oppenheim. Husch, busch, der schönste Vokal entleert sich. Gedichte, Zeichnungen*, edit. by Christiane Meyer-Thoss, Frankfurt 1984, p. 112.
- ² John Milton, *Comus*, Line 861, cited in Virginia Woolf, *Die Fahrt hinaus (The Voyage Out)*, Frankfurt 2008⁵, p. 444.
- ³ Virginia Woolf, diary entry from 2/19/1923, cited in *Virginia Woolf. Leben und Schreiben. Tagebücher 1915–1930 (Virginia Woolf. A Writer’s Diary)*, Frankfurt 2003, p. 30.
- ⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Die Fahrt hinaus (The Voyage Out)*, Frankfurt 2008⁵, p. 385.
- ⁵ Meret Oppenheim, excerpt from her acceptance speech on the occasion of being awarded the Art Prize from the city of Basle in 1975.
- ⁶ Cf. Marc Augé, *Orte und Nicht-Orte. Vorüberlegungen zu einer Ethnologie der Einsamkeit*, Frankfurt 1992, pp. 100/101.
- ⁷ The Bible, Genesis 2.17.
- ⁸ See Note 4, p. 92.
- ⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), cited in Ernst Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, Frankfurt 1968, p. 116.
- ¹⁰ The art print is described by the following caption, an abbreviated quote from John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (lines 86–91): “Forthwith up to the clouds / With him I flew, and underneath beheld / The earth outstretched immense, a prospect wide / And various: wondering at my flight and change / To this high exaltation / My guide was gone, and I, methought, sunk down, / And fell asleep; but O how glad I waked / To find this but a dream!” Cited in John Milton, *Paradise Lost*.
- ¹¹ The Milton Gallery was a commercial enterprise modeled on the so-called Shakespeare Gallery, which exhibited a comprehensive series of themed images that were sold twice: firstly as a master copy for the engraver of the reproduction graphics, and secondly by selling the work itself. Overall, the Milton Gallery was not a financial success, even though it enhanced Fuseli’s reputation as an artist. Cf. Note 12.
- ¹² Cf. Claudia Hattendorff, *Die Milton-Galerie*, in: *Johann Heinrich Füssli. Das verlorene Paradies*, Christoph Becker and Claudia Hattendorff (eds.), 1997/98 Exhibition Catalogue of the Stuttgart State Gallery, Ostfildern-Ruit 1997, pp. 10–81, p. 45.
- ¹³ Kiki Smith (*1954), Carmela Thiele interviewing the artist on 4/9/2001, cited on the homepage of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Cf. also Meret Oppenheim, see Note 5: “We must remind ourselves that it was Eve who first ate of the apple from the Tree of Knowledge, in other words, who encountered conscious thinking.”
- ¹⁴ The Bible, Genesis 3.1 and 3.4–5.
- ¹⁵ Henry Fuseli, from his third lecture on the topic of “Invention” for the Royal Academy, cited in Claudia Hattendorff, *Traum und Schrecken*: see Note 5. 12, pp. 122–137, p. 127.
- ¹⁶ Cf. Claudia Hattendorff, see Note 12, p. 127.
- ¹⁷ Cf. Christiane Meyer-Thoss, *Meret Oppenheim. Aufzeichnungen 1928–1985. Träume*, Bern 1991.
- ¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Die Traumdeutung (The Interpretation of Dreams)*, Frankfurt 2009, p. 499.
- ¹⁹ Aristotele, *Physik (Physics)*, Book IV, Chapter 12, Leipzig 1829, p. 113.
- ²⁰ Bernhard Schlink, *Der Vorleser (The Reader)*, Zürich 1997, p. 206.