

RONI HORN with Jarrett Earnest

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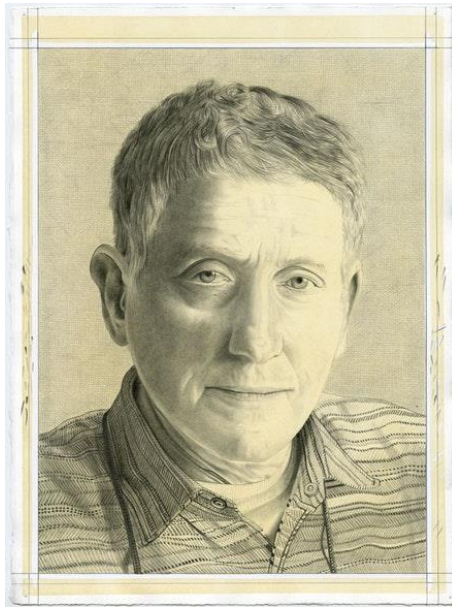
Since entering the art world in the early 1980s Roni Horn has produced an ever expanding cosmos of objects, images, and text that are as paradoxically coherent as they are multifaceted. Her exhibition *Everything was sleeping as if the universe was a mistake*, currently at Hauser & Wirth (November 11, 2013 – January 11, 2014) contains two sculpture installations—each made of 10 cast-glass forms. One gallery is all shades of violet while the other is a spectrum of pale green. Horn met with Jarrett Earnest in her Chelsea studio to discuss aspects of transparency, metaphor, and being an artist in the world.

Jarrett Earnest (Rail): If a sculpture is transparent, how does that affect the way people contemplate its interior?

Roni Horn: I was talking with a friend who is a really brilliant artist and he asked, “what is inside the glass?” I didn’t know how to receive that question because it has so many ways in. It speaks about this idea of transparency in its ultimate form—that it becomes in a way invisible. Transparency has this beautiful kind of paradox to it: these objects are massive in tonnage and fragile—they have very odd qualities in one package that I think people sense. My friend’s question points to the opacity of extreme transparency. The object has a kind of presence that takes it away from simple visual or common sense understanding.

Rail: When you encounter something with a lot of mass it’s usually opaque. So when something has a continuity between its inside and outside and is very dense and also transparent, that presents a novel relationship to it as an object.

Horn: I’ve always thought that glass is an extremely peculiar material, even in its most ubiquitous forms, like window glass. I’ve been awed by it partly because its ubiquitous quality is based in its transparency and so-called solidity. Of course its solidity is a masquerade—it isn’t a solid—which I think is also what attracted me to glass as a material. Glass is still a liquid, technically it’s a super-cooled liquid. There is a kind of opacity from that, no matter how transparent the material.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Rail: Because of the pristine upper surface on those cast-forms at Hauser & Wirth, they seem to be filled with liquid.

Horn: And they are. When I developed those forms, the biggest issue was to find a technique where the glass is still just doing what it does when you take the mold away. I'm not going in and changing the look of it. What is on that top surface is what glass does: if you touch it you find that the forms are very curved—by two inches or more. The thing with glass is that it tends to be close to water until the temperature drops below a certain point, and then it mimics a solid.

Rail: I like that the tops are referred to as "oculus" because they do look like the Pantheon.

Horn: That is the reference, yes. When I first saw the object I understood it was an oculus but I don't think I realized that when I first drew it out. One of the things about the forms with the oculus is that they are the first glass forms I've made that actually have an interior. I see those forms as objects with a window into themselves. The sculptures in the other room have an interior space but there isn't an interior in the same way.

Rail: A lot of 20th-century art was trying to reject "metaphor," and there are times your work does that, and other instances that are drenched with metaphor.

Horn: I think early on I thought you could make something that was so full of itself that it wouldn't really bare out metaphor—"that is that." I think the issue of metaphor is the issue of how we experience something and whether we experience it through things we know or through the possibility of discovery, which would be outside of metaphor. I don't know whether my work succeeds one way or another but I am aware that when I experience something that functions on another level of awareness usually metaphor is not present—it's not in the room. It might come later.

Rail: Dore Ashton said about Pop art in the very early 1960s that "metaphor is as natural to the imagination as saliva is to the tongue." I think metaphor is something applied by the receiver; the person eating the thing is the one who supplies it and uses it to digest the material. Then, to a certain extent there, is no escaping it.

Horn: I've found that when I reached for metaphor too quickly it was because I was more familiar with what was going on. I'm not so sure that it is absolutely the human condition to go for metaphor.

Rail: I'm interested in how often you reference film stars in your writing, as images and descriptions.

Horn: I think of Marilyn Monroe. She taught me about “image”—in the literal sense of peeling a banana, you could peel the “Marilyn” off and you’d have the “Norma Jeane.” That was my way into making *Gold Field* (1980–82) which was my trying to peel off all the images from gold so that you just had the core material. With gold you have all of this mythology and iconography but when you take that stuff away you just have this material—which looks like all that mythology too—but it is a substance with specific qualities. Suddenly gold isn’t about metaphor—it’s not about being the sun—it’s just there. The splendor is all there. Hollywood is so reductive because the kind of images it makes are very exclusive and idealized. In the case of gold and Marilyn Monroe it was a natural pairing for me—the psychology of it—of the relationship between image and matter. Later on when I came back to gold through Felix Gonzalez-Torres and his boyfriend Ross they inspired me to do the work *Paired Gold Mats*, for Ross and Felix (1994). It had a completely different content, which is where all the metaphor comes from—intimacy—which you didn’t get with a single mat. With that I came to realize how I was trying to evade metaphor when I was younger. Like you say, it’s not an easy thing to do, but I would fantasize about things that bore no metaphor. Now that makes me a bona fide pervert.

Rail: *Subject Index* is a kind of self-portrait, a glossary of your writing as the catalogue for your retrospective in 2009. The entry on “me” describes your sexual awakening remembering/misremembering Monica Vitti as/or Doris Day on television.



Water, Selected, 2007. 24 Glass columns filled with water from unique glacial sources. Each column: 12 ~ diameter × 110 ~. Permanent Installation at Vatnasafn/ Library of Water, Stykkisholmur, Iceland. Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography, Zurich.

Horn: I wrote this observation about the “me” as a kind of scribble. I think about people’s ways of being in the world as a labyrinth, which usually has a way in and a way out. But a lot of things that make up the labyrinth don’t lead in or out, they are just scribbles you can follow around—and that is your life: you don’t arrive anywhere. With Monica Vitti I remember being so deeply attracted to her as a sexual presence at a young age—I learned a lot watching *L’Avventura* (1960). I was very young and I saw it on television, which I almost can’t believe was possible—that it was on television—but it was. I’m always so skeptical of my memories.

Rail: Well the idea of confusing Monica Vitti with Doris Day is crazy: they couldn’t be more opposite.

Horn: Doris Day fascinated me too because I couldn’t figure out why she was appealing—that is an idea of sexuality I don’t have the imagination for. But Monica Vitti I didn’t need to talk about—that is how I know it had to be Monica Vitti on television, or else I invented the whole thing.

Rail: When you wrote to Isabelle Huppert about doing *Portrait of an Image* (2005) you described her as “anti-iconic, the opposite of Marilyn.” Just so I’m clear: you were asking her to impersonate herself performing characters she played in films. How did that work?

Horn: Something about the absurdity of impersonating yourself, which I think is actually real because the self is not a singular thing—it never is. I was taught that you are one thing and it's all laid out with certain options in each direction. It didn't work out that way for me. So the idea that you could impersonate yourself isn't an absurdity, but a real active way of being present in the world. When I talked with Isabelle Huppert about doing this, it was complicated. I'm not a director and she is used to being directed. She asked: "What do you want me to do? What will this look like? Where are we going?" I wasn't able to answer that in a satisfactory way for her, and I could sense that. She wanted to be "put in her place." I said, "Well, I don't know what it looks like, but I will when we get there," which is a way of saying that anything is possible. That may have come off as me not knowing what I want, but there is a way of knowing what you want that stops your work from developing as you go. Photographing her was very difficult. I was also working with H  l  ne Cixous on another project in Paris so I talked with her about it. H  l  ne just said, "Oh, it's sexual. She wants to be dominated," which didn't immediately occur to me, but I think there is some truth to it—there is a profoundly sexual component to directing which is a form of domination. Anyway, Isabelle didn't want to be told what to perform so we put all the names of the characters in a hat and she would pull one out each session to perform that day. One of my favorite roles she impersonated was Beatrice from *La Dentelli  re* (1977). It was just me, two cameras, a photo assistant, and Isabelle. It was like watching Dr. Jekyll turn into Mr. Hyde without going off-screen for the conversion—watching her go from Isabelle to Emma in *Madame Bovary*. The camera was not good enough to get the nuances I saw in that process, so on one level I was very frustrated. But it was an extraordinary experience.

Rail: Did you see that partially as the limitation of a still image as opposed to film?

Horn: No, I think a film would have been too descriptive, which is not the direction I wanted to go in. It was a little bit about getting the right picture, but it was always going to be in the context of other pictures. So it's halfway between a still image and a moving image—I think a lot of my work is somewhere between those two.

Rail: I think a lot about the strategies of the anti-iconic—something hard to represent, that resists representation. A lot of your work aims to be specific while opposing the iconic.

Horn: My interest in working with Isabelle Huppert came from watching her films for years and from her accumulating sensibility—who she is, the kind of risks she’s taken. There is a sense of transparency. For me, Marilyn Monroe is very opaque. The anti-icon is starting from zero each time and Huppert’s acting really does feel that way. There is a peculiarity and a psychological complexity to each of her roles that an iconic actress like Marilyn does not have, perhaps because of the language Marilyn’s body sparks, which is aggressively sexual in a heterosexual context, or that she wasn’t allowed any options. In the end, you can watch all of Marilyn’s films and just watch her being the same in all of them. With Huppert, in each new role she adds to the complexity of the whole.

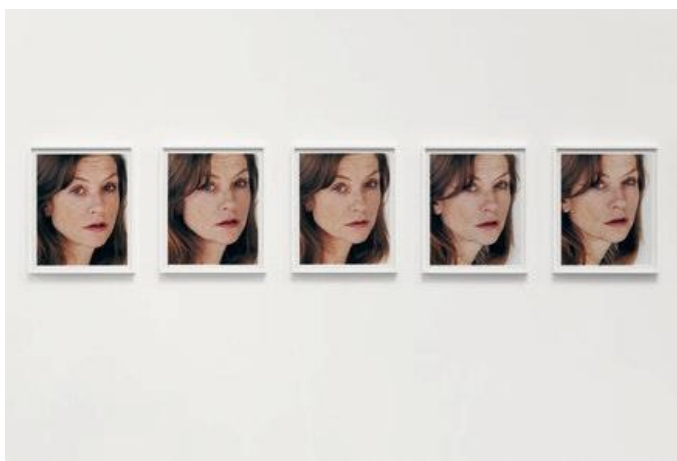
Rail: The way that you position identical objects simultaneously in different spaces makes me wonder if you feel there is a spatial muscle memory that carries perceptions of the sculpture, becoming complicated with each new encounter.

Horn: With the piece *Things That Happen Again: For Two Rooms* (1986) I learned a lot—it had a big influence on me, which I know sounds crazy. The original form of that work came from me sitting at a picnic table in Long Island reading a book that was improperly bound so that it repeated a signature. It was fiction, and as I was reading it and it was suddenly the same story again. It was fascinating to have that kind of slippage in time where things are happening again in exactly the same way, but of course it is not the same. From that came *Things That Happen Again: For Two Rooms*.

Rail: I am wondering about the experience of the thing and how memory works physically or spatially, not in an intellectual sense.

Horn: I think there is a physical and intuitive memory—the sense of seeing something or experiencing a relationship that strikes close to something you’ve seen or experienced before. It’s complicated because you’re aware that it is similar, but that it is also completely different—a different time and place. In that juxtaposition there you are—you, individually, are. I love that you can be a part of my work, that you are there in effect performing the work. The sculptures and the photo installations are, at their inception, very much thinking of the experiential aspects, which always include a viewer because there is no experience without a present consciousness. For years I never showed my drawings and I think it was because I didn’t need an audience to evolve or engage them—I needed the drawings only for myself. But when it comes to the photo installations, or books, or sculpture, there was no way to understand what I was doing unless it was put out in the world so that people unknown to me could engage with it.

Rail: Gaston Bachelard wrote a book on water images called *Water and Dreams*. In it he talks about water aggregating all “synthesizing” metaphors. When I was reading *Subject Index* I really felt like all of these texts and images were suspended in this aqueous solution of Roni Horn. It is a brilliant book and I’m curious about what you had in mind as you developed it.



“Portrait of an Image (with Isabelle Huppert)” (detail), 2005. One hundred c-prints. 121/2×15 ~ each.

Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Gallery.

Horn: I came up with this idea that started with *Roni Horn aka Roni Horn*. It was an edited collection of images of myself throughout my life. Those became the end papers of what I thought was going to be a group show of myself. That was the starting point for *Subject Index*. It involved bringing into close quarters all these different idioms and angles of my work without being descriptive. I'm not a big fan of art historical writing in general—I don't engage it. What I do enjoy reading are interviews with artists and primary sources, artists' writings for instance. The *Subject Index* was my way of keeping the art historical aspect to a minimum, even though I had a lot of pressure from the museums to have that kind of analytical text. So, *Subject Index* evolved until it became an artist's book, with a separate catalogue, to give the museums what they wanted. It became a two-volume work that went together. I started by going into all of my writing and pulling little bits and pieces and parts of interviews. Then it started to get more complicated because I couldn't not include certain quotations. And there are memories I know are influential to me though they don't necessarily have manifestations as art, and I'm not interested that they do. So *Subject Index* became a place where I could include all of those active sources for me. I think my book *Another Water* (2000) was a kind of predecessor, although different because in it I was footnoting a visual. I've always loved footnotes because you could be reading about the Second World War and all of a sudden there is Schnitzler in the footnote and suddenly you are in a totally different state of mind—that is a metaphor for how one moves through life! So the footnote is a beautiful form and I was excited to use that in an essential way in the book, though I admit to the absurdity of footnoting an image. From a distance you get the image but when you move in on it, and have a forensic relationship with it, you get the footnotes.

Rail: There is no straight way through it, which I really like. I think it's fun.

Horn: It is very playful. There is no conclusion to that work: it just stays open like with *Subject Index*—I think of it as a very playful thing. Now I feel I could do another volume with all the things I missed and all that has come since.

Rail: People rarely comment on the fun parts of your work.

Horn: I've noticed that too. I've seen that people think I don't have a sense of humor, and I think that's funny. What can I say? I grew up in a typical secular Jewish household where humor is absolutely the most important thing in keeping people connected. I feel there is a lot of humor in my work and a lot of absurdity, like the *Library of Water* (2007). It's ridiculous but I was aware when I was doing it, too, that there was an element of necessity to it beyond me. What is scary now is that a number of those glaciers have disappeared in the six years since that work has been finished.

Rail: In works like *To Place*, the encyclopedia-like work of Iceland, or the *Library of Water*, those are forms that are about ways of knowing, and of transmitting knowledge between people through time. They fill these didactic forms with different concerns. What other ways of knowing does art offer?

Horn: They are subjective. An encyclopedia is ostensibly an objective container of knowledge. It's interesting how our concept of that has been so profoundly subverted by the Internet and levels of access that put the lie to that particular form. I think my use of these things is tongue-in-cheek. I used "encyclopedia" to talk about *To Place* (began 1990, on-going) which is a work specifically about "me and Iceland"—an essentially closed system. Once I stop looking, it stops. Once I stop engaging, it stops. So in some ways it's the opposite of an encyclopedia even as it is an expansive collection of knowledge. *Subject Index* was just a beginning. The thing I really want to develop here is the cross-referencing. I love going lateral, and that really started to develop as the book started to grow.

Rail: In the erotic boundaries become unclear. That is a physical metaphor for other engagements with intimacy. Are there formal decisions that can embody the intimate or erotic?

Horn: The erotic for me is never an idea. It is always an experience and in the experiential realm. It's fluid, agreeable and disagreeable.

Rail: It's about presence?

Horn: Yes, it's never conceptual. These sculptures are extremely sensual and I think part of the sensuality of them is that you don't know where the boundaries quite are. It is a little bit of the nature of how I am using the glass. Kids always want to lick them which I think is an appropriate response.

Rail: The impulse to want to lick is a very under-appreciated quality.

Horn: Right! What's wrong with licking? I know that when I did the *Library of Water* children had the most playful relationship to those columns of water because they distorted their faces. I would come in and there would be all of these lick marks at a certain height throughout the library.

Rail: Thinking of your pieces *Gold Field* and *Paired Gold Mats*, and the intervening Felix Gonzalez-Torres piece *Untitled (Placebo-Landscape-for Roni)* (1993), do you feel that, even if just for a historical moment, queerness as a sensibility can be related to specific formal aspects of a work of art?

Horn: I don't know if there was a historical moment *per se*, but I always thought about *For Two Rooms* in that context—not specifically queer, but that as a possibility. Coming from where I did, there is no question that that context was there. It was the early '80s. I think the AIDS crisis opened up people's willingness to engage sexuality publicly and it became more accessible, no longer something unspeakable. I remember the difference between what I was thinking and what people were seeing in that work and all the early *Pair Objects*. I don't know whether I would have done those *Pair Objects* if I were a straight girl.



"Untitled (A dream dreamt in a dreaming world is not really a dream....but a dream not dreamt is)," 2013. Solid cast glass with as cast surfaces. 10 parts, heights range from 19 - 19,5 inches, diameter 34 - 36 inches (tapered top to bottom). Exhibition view at Hauser & Wirth, New York. Photo: Genevieve Hanson. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Gallery.

Rail: Is that because of the doubling?

Horn: The doubling and the increased similarity. It's hard to really know, but it's not something I was conceptualizing; it was just something I was aware of. I don't think of my work as queer art—I never had a strong context in the gay world. Up to a certain point in time I think people didn't have a clue what I was. It was 50/50 if people would think I was a man or a woman, and people didn't associate that with homosexuality. I'm not hiding anything; I would say I've lived my life in a mild state of drag but that's about it. I don't identify strongly with either gender so it was never important for me to announce myself one way or the other.

Rail: So much of your work is very personally grounded. How do you think of the relationship between the personal life of the artist as being relevant to discussions of their work? What is the best way to talk about that?

Horn: It's a really tough thing. Look at Gore Vidal with these recent news articles on whether or not he was a pederast. I think he probably was, but why do we have to discuss this now? You can see that the guy was not on the straight and narrow. I think people will go wherever they want, so what difference does it make for me to say how people should look at me? I'm just one voice, even though it's my life.

Rail: Are there instances in which you like someone's art in spite of thinking they are a horrible person?

Horn: Yes. In art I have to suspend moral judgment—all of those point-of-view issues take me away from being there. If an artist or the experience they have put out in the world interests me, but I know personally they are a complete asshole, or historically they are a raving anti-Semite, I don't want that to take me away from the work if I am interested in it. Even if you could arrive at anti-Semitism through the work, I want the possibility of the experience. But then I think about all of the secret assholes—I think there are a lot of them. The obvious ones are those that rubbed their culture the wrong way, like Pound, but there are plenty of them that didn't manage to do that but that are just as virulent.

Rail: When did you start writing?

Horn: I write when I am in extreme emotional discomfort. For a long time I couldn't write unless I happened into that space, which I wouldn't voluntarily go into—it was too painful. *Another Water* came out that way. I was like, "This is brilliant, who knew that breaking up with someone that I was madly in love with would result in this—I can't get enough of it." I do write a bit now but I'm not finding it as easy to access.

Rail: How did you know that you were an artist?

Horn: No idea. Mostly I guess I never really felt I was an artist; it was almost like a dare. To me an artist is more nature—talk about a conceit! You never really know the answer: "Am I capable of that type of achievement?" I never really called that one but I went down the road.

Rail: Can you tell me about a moment when you felt certain that you are an artist, or that you had some sense of confidence about what you were doing?

Horn: I'm not sure that I do, but when I was doing the *Library of Water* I had to interact with the community because it's a community center. It's public art but it wasn't financed publicly. I found myself at a town hall meeting trying to articulate what we were going to do there and I said, "You don't have to think about this as art. It's a community center with a couple of sculpture installations and you can think about them however you want." I'm inclined to go down that road. It doesn't bother me if it's not thought of as art. The more I'm in the space of art the less interested I am in the social construction around it—although I've never been terribly interested in it. It's becoming even more extreme, my wanting to withdraw from that identity.

Rail: Do you think that is just your personal development or that the art world is changing?

Horn: It's hard to really know. My feeling is, I do what I have to do. I'm not sure to what extent the art context has ever been a particularly rewarding one for me and that is why I tend to isolate myself from it. I would not say I am engaged actively—though the work is out there.

Rail: What context interests you the most?

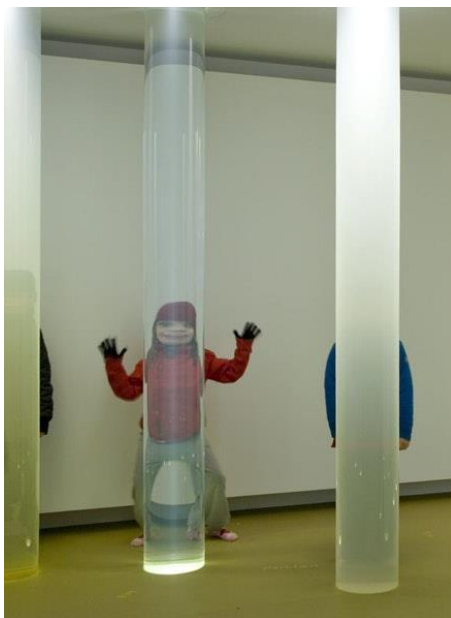
Horn: Something like the *Library of Water*. That was a rewarding experience for me. It's interesting because although I've always looked to museums in a very positive way, I find myself doing that less and less. It's not by choice, but I think I'm finding that the experiences that I'm having there are not particularly interesting to me, or at least not as interesting as they were. There are brilliant artists today just like there were brilliant artists yesterday—I don't think that is the issue, but the context that exists now is not one I'm drawn to. So the question is: how do you get to the work without having to go through the swamp?

Rail: It seems that with *Library of Water* not only were you not dealing with art people, but you were totally in control of the context.

Horn: That's true. Obviously I like being in control. Less compromise. I'm alienated by the extreme level of commodification now. That is nothing new. But, when I started out, things had a broader appeal. There was an element of education in galleries, it would just be about the experience—I'm thinking of a Fred Sandback I saw, or the *Earth Room*. Yes, those are rarified situations connected with a fairly enlightened organization that was economically driven, but very different than the typical business model. Now you have artists with 100,000-square-foot spaces producing thousands of things a year. Some artists can get away with that because there is an extraordinary degree of invention and intelligence at work, but those talents are very rare. Now the fact is money really is the sole driving force behind a large portion of artists today. Just because someone pays 10 million dollars for something doesn't give it value in an artistic sense. The making of the master artist is very much the function of an economy that demands a very high level of financial value whether or not the work is masterful. They find these people, and they are all male, and they anoint them—I've seen this process throughout my life and it's become jaw-droppingly absurd.

Rail: Well of course Hauser & Wirth is one of those galleries that is criticized for being so large that most artists who try to fill it end up really damaging their work, as Jerry Saltz wrote about the previous show there.

Horn: Not every artist needs that much space; I certainly don't for all the shows I do, but sometimes I do. I don't believe bigger is better—that is a problematic thing to get sucked into. I've always worked with dealers that are very respectful and have nothing to say to me in that regard, or would not dare. I don't expand my production for an audience, it's very limited: it is what it is.



Water, Selected, 2007. 24 glass columns filled with water from unique glacial sources. Each column: 12" diameter × 110". Permanent Installation at Vatnasafn/ Library of Water, Stykkisholmur, Iceland.
Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth Gallery.

Rail: Has it been useful to you to be perceived as fierce so you don't get that kind of pressure from the art world?

Horn: The fierce thing is probably protection. Compensation against general nonsense, hypocrisy, and injustice.

Rail: Because you are so articulate and such an interesting writer, I feel you have taken a strong hand in directing how people talk about your work. What are the prevalent misunderstandings people have about what you do?

Horn: First let me say about being articulate: it is a curse and I feel it that way, especially now.

Rail: Why is that?

Horn: Because my intention was never to direct what people would say. The fact that people took the position of following rather than questioning or engaging is very frustrating for me. So I wish I had learned to keep my mouth shut a long time ago. On the other hand I enjoy talking, I enjoy language, and that is who I am. To get to the other part of your question—the misunderstandings—most of it comes from the historical segment with its line of questioning: “Are you a Minimalist? Are you a post-Minimalist?” One of the reasons I find art historical writing very problematic is that it is often descriptive, and, reductive and is about understanding in a technical sense, and there is just so much in art that is in that less-knowable realm. People want to pick at the unknown like it’s a sore that won’t heal. I see that in the way people try to grasp my work and I’d rather not, because it always results in a very simplistic understanding.

Rail: As I read everything about you—all the interviews, reviews, statements—I noticed that everyone is coming at this from the same direction, and it’s the one that you charted. I wanted to have a game with myself to see if we can have a conversation where we didn’t talk about weather, or, androgyny, or Iceland, or water.

Horn: You are making a good point, which is that I do talk about these things but I don’t insist that other people do. I agree that there is a great deal of homogeneity in these writings, but I’m not sure that is my problem. If people are going to engage the work—great. What I have to say is irrelevant to a great extent. You have the experience, then you know as much as I do about it. One thing about the pieces up now is that you don’t need to *know* anything.