



REVIEW - 21 APR 2018

# Sofia Hultén's Antidote to Our Anxious Longing For Certainty

The artist's show at Museum Tinguely, Basel, Switzerland shows her central concern is contingency

BY JÖRG SCHELLER

Sofia Hultén's solo show, 'Here's the Answer, What's the Question?', at Museum Tinguely in Basel, is a clever demonstration of the ways in which art, often more so than philosophy or science, can mediate between abstract reasoning and aesthetic experience. Despite recurrent references to quantum physics in the texts accompanying Hultén's 12 installation and video works, no such theoretical expertise is necessary to appreciate them.





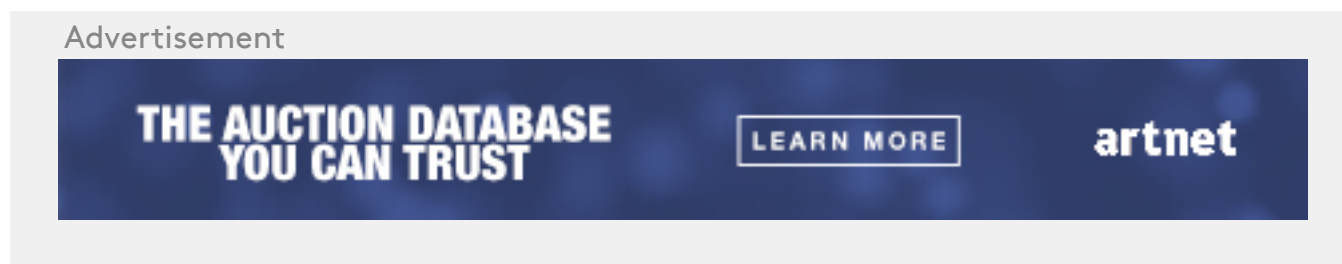
Sofia Hultén, *Mutual Annihilation*, 2008, four-channel video, chest of drawers, 95 x 73 x 50. Courtesy: Daniel Marzona, Berlin and Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm

We usually enter Plato's Cave through philosophical texts. Yet, in *Nu Cave* (2011), Hultén re-interprets the allegory by means of tools and gadgets from a car workshop. On one side of a freestanding wall is a shelf displaying dusty lamps, paint tins, a record player and other items. On the other side, small screens show the objects in use, illustrating functions that, at times, seem absurd. Separating material originals from their representations, this subtle, humorous inversion of Plato's idealism sees the shadows, rather than the physical objects, put to use. A different type of inversion appears in the video *Nonsequences IV* (2013–14), in which Hultén puts a fast-food tray on her laptop and begins to eat from it, and then pours food onto the laptop. In *Nonsequences I* (2013–14), we see the artist shuffle the linear order of another everyday act: she polishes an apple, eats it and throws the remainder into the bin. Then, she polishes a half-eaten apple, eats a dirty apple from the bin and another apple from a bin bag. She does all this systematically and devoid of emotion, as if it were a mundane factory job.

Hultén's central concern is contingency: the way we do things could just as easily be different; everything depends on other things that could be different, too. Take the shabby, old chest of drawers in *Mutual Annihilation* (2008). It is as it is: in the here and now. But it became what it is through a curious process: Hultén restored the piece of furniture to make it look new and then un-restored it to its shabby state.



Everything has to change so that everything can stay the same.



<https://www.artnet.com/price-database/>



Sofia Hultén, *Nonsequences IV*, 2013–14, single-channel video. Courtesy: the artist and Museum Tinguely, Basel

Humans have long sought certainty. Centuries after René Descartes, the speculative realism movement once again seeks absolute truth. Simultaneously, a rhetoric rooted in unambiguity and identity has spread in global politics. This is what makes Hultén's work so topical and implicitly political: it is an antidote to our anxious longing for certainty, clarity and security. Her methods resonate with the postmodern ethic of openness and possibility, and its suspicion of grand narratives. The installation *History in Imaginary Time* (2012), for instance, consists of five sections of chain-link fencing, framed in metal. Each fence displays a different arrangement of the same elements: a tennis ball, pieces of cardboard, a sweater and green spray paint. Each represents a possible underlying story that viewers are invited to imagine.

Hultén's interventions could be viewed as non-committal, nondescript, indifferent or too playful. But I see her work as a non-deterministic, real-world exemplification of what the writer Robert Musil, in his *The Man*

*Without Qualities* (1943), termed a 'sense of possibility'. This sense of the possible is the reality of our existence. With her brain-teasing, enjoyably philosophical show, Hultén communicates this to both layperson and expert.

Main image: Sofia Hultén, *Immovable Object/Unstoppable Force (Skips)*, 2012, film still. Courtesy: Daniel Marzona, Berlin and Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm

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OPINION

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