

Ginnungagap ("seeming emptiness"), in the cosmology of Norse mythology, is the primordial void separating Niflheim and Muspell, the land of eternal ice and snow and the land of eternal heat and flame.

In the beginning, before the world of men and gods existed, the spring Hvergelmir, deep in the frozen wastes of Niflheim, gave rise to eleven rivers known as the Elivagar. Over a long period of time, water of the Elivagar ran across Niflheim and poured into the northern part of Ginnungagap. The water froze, forming vast sheets of ice in the void. Hot air from Muspell melted some of the ice, creating a zone of meltwater amid the ice and snow. Here life began

"at the beginning of time, when nothing was; sand was not, nor sea, nor cool waves. Earth did not exist, nor heaven on high. The mighty gap was, but no growth." Volupsa, The Elder Edda

Ginnungagap

There are no precipices on which to take in a global view in Sandström's paintings; instead we wander in the mythic land of Ginnungagap. Its endlessness, like the loops of Sandström's films and the serial nature of her paintings, at first seems to represent a sort of futility of action and aspiration of ever getting beyond a place and the inability to escape the melancholic emotions it induces. But in that in-between place of ice and snow, emptiness gives way to vastness, allowing a restless nomadism to take hold.

Even in the smallest of her paintings, we are lost in monumental scale and in the instability of space. Though each painting evokes a sense of quietude in its minimal monochromatic facture, it is the very reduction and playfulness of planes in each canvas that force the viewer to keep searching for a place to rest among its peaks and valleys. Imagining ourselves, as we take in these paintings, walking through the snow, one foot in front of the other, slowing making our way to a place that looks just like the one we left behind, we lose ourselves in the rhythm of our movement and start to pay attention to the way our thoughts meander through the crevices of our own brains, processing and responding to the accumulation of perceptual information. So that even if the place looks the same, time has passed, and we have come to a new plane of understanding. "This long and boring walk through the shadow of land and memory," (as August Strindberg, a 19th century writer and fellow Swede, once began) actually allows us time to pay attention to our own longing for stability, stillness, and tranquility within Sandström's paintings. And eventually within the pulsing of time, we might abandon those utopian ideals for the excitement of simply experiencing the force of the "directionality of our longing," (as Sandström put it).

While the paintings strategically keep us from claiming a space within the landscape, the films challenge the purpose of such an activity. In different

temporal rhythms, and with different effects, Sandström's explorer/ wander attempts to stake out a site for herself in the Nordic landscapes with perpetual anticipation of accomplishment, but also futility. Once staked, marked with a black flag, why does the land need to be claimed again and again? This is the question that the looped structure of these films opens up for contemplation. While one of the loops makes this activity a monomaniacal task in the way it quickly recycles the image, the other presents the same activity with a slowness that empties it of its grandiose human gesture. The black flags within these films represent a constant flow of meaning, becoming empty signifiers onto which we can pin our own understandings and desires. Used by Nordic explorers to indicate everything from food stashes to treacherous passages and referencing anarchism (the politics of anti-politics), their undifferentiated black surfaces become symbols of anti-symbolism. In their proliferation of connotations, they end up achieving a mobility of meaning that frees them from any one reading or from being seen from any one perspective. In Sandström's arctic landscapes, they carry both the positive potential and the unremitting nature of our own mental meanderings.

By thwarting easy paths into each of the paintings and establishing a freedom of meaning within the rhythm of repetition, Sandström asks us to question the very notion of "belonging" in such a landscape, much less surveying it as if we could tame it and make a home within it. Our endless perambulation within them allows for an intimacy within the infinity of Ginnungagap's void, opening up to the possibility of experiencing the minutia of time and catalyzing an understand our own constantly shifting positions in the world.

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This essay was written to accompany the exhibition **Sigrid Sandström: Ginnungagap**, on view from September 10 – October 9, 2004, Inman Gallery Houston, Texas.