

TELL IT
LIKE IT IS
Contemporary
Photography
and the Lure
of the Real



For Yuri and Aila



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25 Facts of Life, part 39, 15, 19, 7, 6, 4, 12, 2, 66,
etc. scattered around, you know, like wild rabbits

Preface

This book is a product of its environment. It was made with and for students in contemporary practice and discourses of photography – not understood as a strictly controlled medium, but as a content driven activity with a clear sense of its past connected to the variations of its present articulations. It is deliberately written from a certain point of view, which is Nordic, both personally and professionally. But it certainly seeks to be and become a self-critical and open-ended position that cherishes confrontations and questionings. This effort is acutely aware of the honest dilemma, of the complex balancing act of simultaneously being locally specific and internationally comprehensible, if not legible.

The arguments here were rehearsed in lectures and discussions with the MA students of HFF, the photography department at the faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts, University of Gothenburg. The arguments have also been exercised and debated on various occasions with the doctoral students in photography and fine art in the same university. Special thanks for comments go to Lars Wallsten and Niclas Östlind. The first trial of the argument present at the end of Chapter 4 was published as “Oh Happy Day – What Makes Research Count as Research” in *ArtMonitor, A Journal on Artistic Research*, n. 8, 2010.

My appreciation and thanks go to all of the participants during the journey of this book. Obviously enough, a big hand goes to the engaged participation of all the four artists involved: Mads Gamdrup, Annika von Hausswolff, Esko Männikkö and Vibeke Tandberg, who all possess a long-term position and back catalogue of works and visions into these matters that matter.

Another big hand goes for all the colleagues and friends who have joined in the arguments along the way: Branislav Dimitrijevic, Minna L. Henriksson, Mary Jane Jacob, Staffan Schmidt, Tere Vadén and Paola Yacoub.

As with the spoken-word version of the argument, I need to exercise a certain rather long litany of what this present argument is not addressing. This negative framing is certainly not all, nor enough, but hopefully it is sufficient enough to at least limit the number of unnecessary confusions. Because, well..., because, searching desperately for the right words, articulating the relationship between reality and images is a crowded event. I am not alone. This is a typically heterogeneous field that has gained more and more attention through the last two decades of mostly overlapping and criss-crossing discourses. The participants come with signs around their necks that say anything from visual communication, visual theory, visual culture, to narrative theory, photojournalism, photo theory, semiotics, or dedicated followers of Walter Benjamin (whatever he wrote or whoever he was as a person). You name it, they are all there, and here.

In this book, the specific focus is framed with both the students and the professionals taking part in the discourses of contemporary photography and art. I am not into an academic game of counterfactuals. The exercise here is performed with the aim and attitude of talking with, and speaking from, not analysing something that is of or about. My argument is not directly part of any of the above-mentioned, well established discourses. No doubt about it, I am part of the networks, part of the productive games, which may use all the means and mediums at hand, applying a sort of practical multi-tasking of making

connections and shaping connotations. But there is a central difference in strategy and attitude at stake here. All these grand discourses share a common paradox. They want to approach the issues with a 360-degree view and vision, while they are only willing to stay in their very segmented positions that allow not much more than a 3-degree view and vision.

Not that my present set of arguments is able to achieve much more of a broader view. But the saving grace of this not-360-degree attempt is that the emerging argument is not about any and every potential aspect of the relationship between reality and image. This book does only this: it brings together a number of discourses of the changing same, through the specificities of contemporary philosophical argument (common sense vs. deniers of the worth of the concept of truth) and argument in contemporary photography and art (inherent truth claim vs. cultural contextualization of an image). It does this not only by flying high on the effects of abstract theory, but by seeking dialogue with the practice. This aim and an enterprise is itself already broad and difficult enough. Thus, try to bear with me, and welcome, welcome to the journey. Be patient, please, and trust that notion that is way too underrated: curiosity. But no, do not bother to look for the mental seat belts. There are none.

Introduction

How could there be a more boring, jaded and faded activity than trying to grasp what reality is? Especially when searching for the connections and constitutions between an image of it and the truth claim of that image which always both describes and defines what it depicts; how can we be more out-dated, waiting to be pushed into the cul-de-sac of long forgotten shadows of intellectual and emotional parking lots? Or, to turn this around, how is it that we could find pleasure in, and the commitment for staying with this honest dilemma of what is reality and how it is made, shaped and maintained with images?

Not that it makes much of a wave within the big ocean of claims, but let us be frank, and let us get it straight: this is a book that deals with reality, as the plurality of experiences and confrontations that are not neat, not tidy, but which are always in a mess. This dealing with reality is not about the capital R, one-and-only Real; it is not about relay or delay of it, or even return to it, but it is about that thing called daily life that we are all in, a part of, next to, beside and bubbling under and flying over. It is something we try to make sense of and deal with, until we do get stuck with the inherently confusing and conflicting claims and demands of the task. And no, it is not any and every reality, but a very particular type. It is an argument that articulates the

ways we construct a narrative version of a reality – both how it is actualized and imagined.

It is a story told with words and images; a story that is about words and images, which ceaselessly affect one another. It is a story of what, how, where, when, why, why not, what time is love, and certainly how soon is now. It is a story that is never captured in a solid unity. It is not one but plural. It is a telling of a story approached with a critical take, first on the discourses on truth and, directly following, on the politics of representation in photography. It is a process of a story that is brought together with the aid and guidance of four comprehensive discussions done with photographers with up to or over two decades of experiences in the field, respectively. Thus, it is an intertwined mix of critical reflection and arguments within the theoretical discourses, combined with four interrelated articulations in and through a photographer's practice in the field of contemporary art.

But let us focus on the main presupposition of plurality. This lack of oneness is characteristic of both of the main discourses – constructed together here in a set of intended clashes and collisions. It is a strategy that relies on the inter-connectedness of our being-in-the-world. It is an idea of how things effect one another and how they re-shape each other. It is a view based on both/and understanding, not a dualistic either/or model of how we are, who we are, what we try to become in those particular time and context bound sites and situations where we are.

When following this presupposition, and taking it seriously, we face stories of a reality that is not united but fragmented and segmented. We can no longer hunt down the ultimate concept of truth, or of photography. In one important sense, nothing we talk about, deal with or face ever is, but always becomes – something that is a made and shaped some place, in a situated and committed version of a reality. It is an act, that is to say, an actualization, an interpretation, a participation, and an acknowledgement. It is a plurality – that is to say, a mess – that is definitely not out to provide an answer, or salvation, or even a safe haven for peace and quiet for our unbalanced mental imaginative mine fields. It is a mess that

requires confrontation, dealing with, and not ducking away from the issues at hand. It is the idea of a pleasure principle: to allow, to trust and to cherish a situated view of multi-axial politics of positionality. It is a game of power relations and positions – who gets their say, what and where and who not only has a voice, but who gets listened to. It is a dilemma where we face the burden of listening and the danger of the death, not of the author, but of the reader, the listener.

Luckily, we have lost our innocence and our ability to hold on to the illusion that we could get an all-encompassing concept and definition of whatever. But we must keep in mind that this was not the case not so long ago – not in the activities of what is called the search for the concept of truth, and not in the field of photography. Whereas Susan Sontag – to highlight one of the most credible and critical articulations from the latter discourse – in her modern classic collection of essays from the year 1977, could still talk about photography in common overall terms, this is no longer sensible. That self-assured and convinced overview of it all is gone – vanished. Our sense of social imaginary does not allow it. Instead of an assumption of 360 degrees, we are shattered into barely connected fragments and segments of less than 4-degree, site specific views and visions.

Obviously enough, the weight, volume and speed of photographs presented, distributed and available has increased dramatically since the late '70s. More than perhaps ever before pictures – i.e., photographs – are worthwhile, as means and ends; for example, as investments and as tools to comprehend who and where we are. Interestingly enough, this claim is made by people coming from varied backgrounds, ranging from the canonical critic Michael Fried (2008), to any public representative of a large-scale company which, with the logic of the spectacle, pays more attention to what their products look like than to what they actually are or do. It is not the economy, stupid, it is the image of and with it.

We are – whether we admit or acknowledge it or not – surrounded, flooded and suffocated by images and photographs of realities. But the point is this: what connects all these hundreds and hundreds of

different ways of using and applying photography is not that much. To be precise: it is not enough. What is the content of sameness for, let's say, a photograph in a newspaper's news pages, in its advertisement section, and a photo of that newspaper's front page? All of them are framed and contextualized by the same item – a newspaper – but already here we have three different uses and histories of function and ideology of a photographic image. As with any common talk about photography, the general and generic frame can very well be the same, but it does not tell us anything unexpected. We must get into particularities – the internal logic of each case, of how credibility is claimed, and how photographs are used.

Or to give an example with two different takes on a reality – lived and experienced next to me and with a distance. Both are examples of photography that claims to prove something to be exactly this, not something else. What separates the photo of my daughter in her first ever passport and the photo-finish of the 100 meter men's final in the European championship in Barcelona in the summer of 2010 is much more than pulls them together. The photo of my daughter was taken when she was five months old, and appears in a passport that she now proudly carries to the airline counter when she is four years old. It is the missing connection between what was then and what is now that is illustrative and informative. As a tiny baby, the photo was taken so that her head was laid on a table, looking lost in an uncomfortable forced position, as on a plate – whereas now she smiles eyes wide, at the airport desk, with a face that no longer is round and hairless. In her face, as a site, something generic has turned into a specific character.

As a contrast, what about the ultimate precision of that photo finish of a 100 meters sprint where – for the first time in the history of the games – the time of 10.18 was shared by the runners finishing as second, third, fourth and fifth? The only way to have a proper required placement for a person for the silver and the bronze medals was decided by this incredibly exact and detailed photograph, with the numbers for respective positions of 10.172, 10.173, 10.178 and also, the for fifth runner, the same 10.178 seconds.

But perhaps that is enough about the plurality of the field and the need for detailed distinctions of use and context. As a book, this is not only about a critical yet constructive reading and participation in two discourses that are combined, compared and sewn together. This argument tries to achieve more, much more – and this 'more' is how these very specific discourses desperately need to be brought back to our daily experiences, back to the gravity of particular practices, back to the aggravations and annoyances of what, where, how, when and why.

This is the part where we confront the wish (and the title of this book) to tell it like it is – asking ourselves, and anyone involved in the same or similar games of production of knowledge, to tell us a story, tell us a version of reality: a version that connects the dots and enjoys the connotations that start evolving and running about; a version that makes the past visible but is not captive to it. It is a task that is truly embedded with the inherent impossibility of telling and covering it all, because that 'all' – our lived and experienced reality – is shifting and evolving, not staying in one place and format.

Tell it like it is. It is a slogan that carries with it a lot of weight, a lot of history, and a lot of promises. 'Tell it like it is' is a wish to get to the point; 'tell it like it is' is a political act of demanding the truth be heard and made visible – and 'tell it like it is' is an encouragement to articulate just exactly how things are and happened.

The phrase is a wish and an aim that links us simultaneously to the recent history of emancipation and empowerment of what then were called Black Americans (later to be swapped with the term African-Americans) in the late 1960s, a hint of a specific time and location that does not stay static. It has had enormous importance in many varied and mixed discourses since the initial events. It has become a symbol, part of the *Zeitgeist* of that period, part of its parlance, part of its reconstruction of rites, and part of the daily fibre of the symbolic and linguistic wallpaper that we project on those times. (For an example, a paraphrasing use of it in literature, see Ellroy 2009) There is a song with that title, made famous by many groups

and singers such as Aaron Neville and the group aptly named S.O.U.L.^(Maycock 2000) It is a claim that is accompanied with a serious load of presuppositions, a claim for the possibility of and our ability to tell, to explain and to describe how things are, not just some part of it, but all of it. Truly and duly, you know, honestly.

At the same time, the slogan Tell It Like It Is has a contemporary connotation. It serves here as a link between two different discourses that share the same focus on a phenomenon, but which seldom have any exchange or interaction with one another. The phenomenon is that very thing we are asked to define, and describe how it really is. We are talking about reality – and consequently, we are addressing the roots and routes of how we discuss what is reality, truth and our relationship to it.

The two discourses that are brought to the core here are, on one side, the philosophical question of what is a truth claim, and whether such a claim has any relevance in today's life-worlds that have learned about the co-existence of plural realities the hard way. From the other side, it is the discussion of the content and form of the photographic image, and its claim to truth and connection to reality.

On the face of it, both discourses (philosophy and photography) share the same starting point, a point of departure that is not necessarily so uncommon to many approaches that try to figure out their relations to that thing called reality. There is no neutral or natural position. Truth and claims for truth are contextual, situated and conflictual. We have moved from an illusion of the solid 'one' towards the mess of a uncontrollable 'many'. And sure enough, we are still struggling with both the implications and the consequences of this change of paradigm.

What this means for both discourses that while the participants have learned to question and to critique claims of truth, there is still a nagging feeling which remains. We are stuck, stuck in the groove of not being able to say what it (truth) is, but simultaneously not wanting to let go of it. In philosophy, this is the honest dilemma that is labelled as the argument

between those on the side of Common Sense, and those who are the Deniers of the relevance of a concept of Truth.^(Williams 2002, 5) This is the dilemma we will fully focus on in Chapter 2.

In discussions ongoing within the characteristically heterogeneous area of photography and within the even wider issue of the politics of representation, this honest dilemma is fought out between the truth value and the face value of an image. Here, the setup is found in the discourses on photography and its identity. It is a face-off between those who want to see photography have a specific and unique identity of its own and those who see photography as having no particular identity, but always being fully dependent on its context. It is a locked up – and unfortunately dispiriting – constellation between photography as having an inherent nature of its own and it being entirely a cultural phenomena, between hoped for eternal criteria and values and complete mutability and contingency. It is a manipulative confrontation between, on one side, the Formalists, and on the opposite side, the Contextualists, that is not very helpful when openly wondering and asking how truth and photography are in each case constructed and actualized.^(See Batchen 1999, 20)

Because, well..., because, we can pose all we want, fake a nonchalant attitude, or refuse to pay attention, but these issues always rebound. They return with fierce poignancy and with amazing accuracy. Both are honest dilemmas that are constantly parked at the heart of the issue. This begs, and demands that we ask: how can we articulate and address the world in here and out there, if and when we know that anything we do is always doing two things? We are in the process of describing and defining, observing but also affecting. It is a duality, a double injunction of being part of the mess, of being part of the problem, and having absolutely no excuses left but to be forced into facing and dealing with it.

Therefore, the central claim of this book: to return to and to confront practices that are never seen as ready and fixed, but as situated and committed, open-ended processes begging for critical interventions and constructive discussions. This is nothing else left but to

ask: what do we do when we do what we do? Not alone, but in a give-and-take continuity of collective conversation. For this to make sense at all, we have to distance ourselves from the still-powerful narratives of modernism, especially the ideal of a one size and one concept that fits it all. In one sense, whereas modernism was about creating and keeping boundaries, the idea connected to facing and dealing with plural realities is to make and maintain meaningful connections. Instead of distance, it is about relationships and how things are generated, to be and to react together. On another note, this means that we set aside the claims for purity and instead start to focus on how things really hang together, not as a harmony, but as a productive give-and-take of situated and embedded, committed confrontations.

Consequently, we would no longer hunt for a definition that is based on counterfactuals. We would allow ourselves to slip out of the dangerous demand and aim of being able to address a coherent whole of anything, whether it is philosophy, photography or the wonderful world of table tennis. There is no whole, but an amazing number of co-existing versions and interpretations that form ever-changing networks. We must get into the nuances, into the details and into the shadows of our doubts.

This is to say that we need not to worry about the task of discovering what belongs to this or that medium and to no other. We should be able to focus on the content and the context within which that work of art, or an act of doing things with words, is taking place. Following Jonathan Crary (1990) in regard to the theme of what do we see when we see something, it is not so much about the biological or psychological truth, but about the degree to which, and in what ways that vision is situated in its actual historical site, and how it is embedded into the nets of its historical processes.

While contextualizing the issue, philosophers and photographers are not the only ones bothered and occupied by this honest dilemma of how to confront reality. It is not an over-statement to say that it is significantly enough part of our current senses and sensibilities. It is in the air, and it is perhaps in the water that we drink. We are living in times that can

be described as a sensation of loss: a loss of clarity, loss of security, loss of continuity – say it out loud, yes, tell it like it is, and you immediately find dozens of connotations to our everyday issues and struggles. What used to be seen and comprehended as material and as located in a fixed manner, has become increasingly immaterial and floating. Some call it the passion for the real (Alan Badiou), some are amazed at the horrors of reality TV (anyone ready to admit watching it?), and yet others are confessing to their hunger for reality (David Shields).

But what is that reality that we are so preoccupied with? Why does it matter how we define it? Or: is this not just another example of a vain activity that would hugely benefit from a real dose of reality that bites – like working the long, late evening shifts for a monster of a month non-stop at your nearest discount supermarket?

We should not deny it, or try to fight against it. We need the real, even if it constantly escapes us. We are stuck with it, stuck with the way the gravity pulls. There is a lure of the real. It is a both/and site and situation that rocks and sweeps us away. It fascinates us, it pulls us towards it, and it has the emergency button that certainly makes us stop. It kind of cheats us, but well, we like it, and we want more. We have landed; our attention has managed to be located. There is a spell, even perhaps a hint of a seduction.

It is lure, as in a proposition, to follow the British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, for whom a proposition is a tale – a tale told about particular actualities, a tale that with its focus on the ever-burning necessity to be actualized is here linked together with the British pioneer of documentary practice, John Grierson, and his highly original interpretation of the idea and aim of documentary practice. The time line is also tempting. While Grierson is archived with his view of documentary as a “creative treatment of actuality” in the year 1926, the date set for Whitehead is 1929. Both are about not only actualizations of reality, but also about the existence of not yet actualized potentialities – things about to become. (See Shaviro, 2010, 8)

Because, well..., because this is what it is about: becoming a place. An actualization of a content of a concept, image, sign, or an act that gains a temporal singularity – and one that is not yet activated into the past, present and future chances and challenges before this singularity acknowledges and cherishes its connections and loving conflicts with other evolving and emerging temporal singularities.

And yes, for that, we do need a positioned, self-critical, open-end and argued-for version of a reality. The inherent scepticism concerning the discourse on reality is definitely required, but only helpful up to a certain crucial point. Sooner rather than later, we must try to make sense of where we are and how we are. For that, for holding on to even the slightest hope and chance of being able to have something to say about it and attaching some relevance to it, we need tools to be able to discuss it. Interestingly enough, while discussing the current challenges of political activism, the recently-deceased British born historian of ideas, Tony Judt, claims that our problem is a discursive one. Or to be precise, Judt is referring to our discursive disability. “To convince *others* that something is right or wrong we need a language of ends, not means. We don’t have to believe that our objectives are poised to succeed. But we do need to be able to believe in them.”^(2010, 180)

We must be able to discuss with differentiation, and to comprehend the necessity for slowness while trying to do so. Quoting the philosopher – another British citizen – Bernard Williams, “no abstract or analytical point exists out of all connection with historical, personal thought: that every thought belongs, not just somewhere, but to someone and it is at home in a context of other thoughts, a context which is not purely formally prescribed.”^(1978, xii) Stated from the internal logic of how we view ourselves and our relationships, we are embedded, because “things we perceive make sense only when perceived from a certain point of view.”^(Merleau-Ponty 2002, 499) It has to be one position after another, inter-twined and interactive, but not at the same time. This ‘certain point of view’ is constantly made and shaped, but not only that: it needs to be constructed with never-ceasing attention and felt-for responsibility for the act of speaking from and speaking with.

We not only have to learn again how to talk differently, and to let ourselves and others take the time to do so, we also need to learn how to focus in a different way. If and when we leave the garrisons of oneness, and move towards the mess of plural co-existing realities, we have to get rid of a lot of luggage that keeps standing in our way and keeps on dragging us down.

From the side of philosophy, we should take productive leave from the topics of authenticity, origins and purity. We do not want to box in or cut down the dilemmas. To follow Foucault, we must not claim to possess scientific (or any other kind of) truth, because it is rather distracting in facing how things are done, why and how. “What types of knowledge do you want to disqualify in the very instant of your demand: Is it a science? Which speaking, discoursing objects – which subjects of experience and knowledge – do you then want to ‘diminish’ when you say: ‘I who conduct this discourse am conducting a scientific discourse, and I am a scientist?’ Which theoretical-political avant-garde do you want to enthrone in order to isolate it from all the discontinuous forms of a knowledge that circulate about it?”^(1980, 84)

From the side of politics of representation, we must not get stuck on the 19th century version of realism, or its current heir of new realism, which both are very busy at making something as an expression to appear as real. We need to cherish and to follow the principles of 6 C’s. It is a world that is made and shaped in accordance of being constructed, contextual, conflictual, contested, confused and finally, not to forget, hopefully compassionate.^(See Hannula 2009, 46)

One particular way (fully dealt with in Chapter 3) is to get into the inter-connections of the genealogy of the concept and practice of documentarism. In a broader view, and also in terms of the time line, there is a view of a three part process of 1) a detached documentary with a self-image of being neutral and objective and therefore most truthful, that then moves into accepting the active and biased role of the one doing the documenting, conceptually moving into 2) documentarism, which is defined in strong opposition of the former version, emphasizing subjective views, cultural contexts and identity politics,

and then third, the openly ideologically-laden concept of 3) documentality, which argues for a return to power struggles and questions of hegemonies.

It is a three-step model that too often is reduced to the obvious differences and discrepancies between each position, but which is a historical continuum. As a contested continuity, there is truly a great need here to articulate how each of the positions are interdependent and over-lap one another. Because, well..., because, articulating it with the help of the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, “For what constitutes a tradition is a conflict of interpretations of that tradition, a conflict which itself has a history susceptible of rival interpretations. If I am a Jew, I have to recognize that the tradition of Judaism is partly constituted by a continuous argument over what it means to be a Jew. Suppose I am an American: the tradition is one partly constituted by continuous argument over what it means to be American and partly by continuous argument over what it means to have rejected tradition.” (2006, 11)

It is a lively and agile discussion that gives us the opportunity also to go back to beginnings that are almost a century old – and reconnect those openings with contemporary interpretations. The suggestion here is to re-claim and re-connect that opening made by one of the pioneers in the field of documentary films, (John Grierson: creative treatment of actuality) with the philosophical statement that is in accordance with the idea of seeing power and power relationships as being productive. (Foucault 1984, 92-96)

Walking, talking, feeling for and being with Grierson and Foucault is an act of social imagination, of combining two ways of productive openings, two ways of shaking the bag and paying attention what and how something comes out with it – not of it.

It is a carousel of productive acts stating things about reality that can take many forms of documenting and reaction, mixing fiction with facts, tales with scales, but as an act that is not in itself good or bad, meaningful or sad. It is just potentially productive. It is only possible to deal with all the rest when, with dedication and stubbornness, you go into the specifics and the particularities of what, when, how, why and why not.

And this, yes, this is the task of this book. In short: practice based and content driven differentiation.

It is an argument presented in four essays that is challenged and shaped by four discussions running criss-cross but also parallel. It is an act of making sense when it makes sense not to make sense, and when it is necessary to stop and articulate, argue for, and stand for a situated and committed view of a reality – presented and pushed for as anything ranging from a word, or an image or an act, all of which share the same wish and the same need: to do something, to make some waves so that what is now static and stale starts to move and turns into non-calculable and uncontrollable processes of becoming something else.

TELL IT
LIKE IT IS
Mika Hannula

On truth, Experience and Representing Reality

“Without desire, women bored me beyond all expectation, and obviously I bored them too. No more gambling and no more theatre – I was probably in the realm of truth. But truth, cher ami, is a colossal bore.”

Albert Camus, 1957, 75

Three concepts, and three takes on how to make sense of who we are, where we are, how we are, and with whom we are what we are and try to become. Three concepts as potential accidents waiting to happen – causing conflicts of interpretation and confusion about what, how, where and when, especially if and when the aim here is to spin these three variations of relating to our being-in-the-world so that they clash and collide. It is an exercise, which actively looks at both the genealogy of the individual concepts and their hopefully fruitful, intertwined interactions. It is hardly news to state that these three concepts of truth, experience and representing reality are tightly connected to each other. The point is not what is, is not, could, would, should, or ought to become, but instead, the aim is to pay attention to, and to slow down the process of acknowledging the versions of how they affect one another. It is a complex act of bridging the gap and bringing these concepts close, closer and closest, so that what comes out of it is not a dance in perfect unison but something else – something far away from predetermined formalism of emotions and motions, and much more on the level of unfolding and emerging events.

However, what is, if not new, at least is not yet taken seriously enough, is how the discourses on these three

large and difficult topics too often have very little to do with their neighbours. On its own, each discourse grants the inherent embeddedness of truth, experience and representing knowledge, but it is mainly due to habits of the heart that each discourse chooses to follow the logic of a tunnel vision. Consequently, the necessary productive clashes and collisions that might occur here do not happen. The connections are not necessarily denied; they are simply not on the agenda, and they are not given the weight of the requisite attention.

But bringing them together must not imply the act of sliding them into some kind of a unity. Instead, the task here is to articulate each in terms of the discourse of their distinguished past, that always colours and affects their present and future versions. This, in itself, serves to paint a picture of a conceptual mess where plurality is the rule, not an exception. To state this in other terms, we are looking at concepts, which, by their very nature, are on the move and always per se controversial. What's more, these are concepts that have a wide variety of actualizations. And yes, often enough, these versions are incommensurable. Based on each version's background – that is, the roots and the routes they have chosen to take – they might be sailing along with each other, but their grounded presuppositions assure that they are not so easily or meaningfully comparable with each other.

Thus, we have the concepts of truth, experience and representing reality. Where they all meet, shake hands and possibly trade punches is how we deal with the idea of an image. This is, then, an image as a carrier of content – the made and shaped content of a given act that is accomplished in an image. It is an image that no longer is seen or believed to be innocent. It is an idea of an image that is part of our daily lives, an image that is not a frozen property of objectified knowledge production, nor is it glorified into some entity of a cosmic mystery. In short, it is an image as a version of a reality. It is not the reality itself. An image is constantly more, and less. It is not one-to-one with what it deals with. It never breaks even, but always comes over as too short or too overdetermined. It is an understanding of an

image that cannot be contained, but it certainly can be confronted – with full force, and pleasure: always with pleasure.

It is an image – any image: let’s say a commercial, a photograph placed behind the protective plastic pocket in the family shower curtain, or from an evidentiary appendix of a court case – that is by its nature productive, not protective or prohibiting, but really making something happen. This is what Foucault^(1984, 92-96) meant by power. He puts his finger where it comes from, in the quote: “The omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.” ^(Ibid. 93)

As yes, in these ways of being in shifting and emerging relationships, like anything that we try to deal with, images are not exactly this or that; they are made, shaped and maintained. We are in the middle of productive interaction, reactions and houses in motion, emotions that cannot be predetermined or controlled, but that produce effects and, even more so, a wide variety of after-effects.

It is a chain reaction that is never determined, but is always sent off in a direction. It is an image that teases and terrifies all three concepts, of truth, experience and representing reality. It is a triangular drama that is here on the stage in three parts, and a drama where the main plot is to seek ways to articulate these issues, with the aim of providing versions of what we are for, and is no longer just satisfied with adding up another list against this or that. It is the task of articulating versions of truth, experience and image that we want to stand for – arguing with, talking with, and keeping the process up and ongoing.

Truth

Truth, if it is anything, is a peculiar concept. Everyone has or wants to have something to say about it, but the moment we do, we are so schooled into questioning what we had just claimed to have said that this moment of doubt takes us over a mental bump on the road, causing a mental hiccup. Truth is contested. But at the same time, it is so effortlessly used and abused in our daily lives that we cannot deny its importance or existence.

It is not so surprising, then, that the very professionals who are thought to be interested in the wellbeing of the concept – that is, of course, philosophers – have one thing in common: they love (and consequently hate) to disagree on the content of the concept of truth. Even if they can form certain groups or groupings, which then tend to vote for, let’s say, a coherence version or a correspondence version of truth, what exactly those might mean is always very controversial. To quote a modern classic, Donald Davidson, on this topic: “We cannot hope to underpin the concept of truth with something more transparent or easier to grasp. Truth is, as G.E. Moore, Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege maintained, and Alfred Tarski proved, an indefinable concept. This does not mean we can say nothing revealing about it: we can, by relating it to other concepts like belief, desire, cause and action. Nor does the indefinability of truth imply that the concept is mysterious, ambiguous, or untrustworthy.” ^(1996, 265)

The most important thing to notice in this quotation is the characteristic loop that it produces. It is a quote, a set of smart, so smart words by a modern magnificent authority who has a mind that cuts diamonds like we mortals cut cheese. It is a quote based on referring to previous authorities, previous generations and previous players in the game. It is the actuality of a continuity that Davidson spells. He does not spill anything. He keeps on keeping on: the productive process of self-doubt and sincere belief, that possessive idea of a truth is not about truth but about something completely else. Spell: power over, not even power to something.

The name of the game is so open-ended it is beneficial to have some tools for thinking about this issue. Such a tool is provided by Bernard Williams, who faces the dilemma of the concept of truth: we know it exists but we have grown used to being wary of it. Williams conceptualizes the rival parties in the overall discussion with a practical double tag. He terms the participants the side of common sense, on the one hand, and the deniers, on the other.

But what exactly does the side of common sense believe? And what do the others deny, and why?

The background of the dilemma touches the realization and the awakening to the act that truth, as already underlined often enough, is not a neutral or natural entity. It is biased, based on openly stated or hidden ideologies, or it can be horribly self-serving and closed. It is the shift from believing that truth exists as one, into the paradigm of plural versions of many truths competing with and against one another. Whatever is claimed to be the (or a) truth, depends on who says it, when and where and for what purposes, and in what connection (i.e., the frame of the utterance). We must be wide awake to how all narratives are historical, how they are socially represented, and how our self-understanding colours them, and finally to how there are endless variations of psychological and political (not to say economic) interpretations of it. This is to say, in fact, two things: to be aware of a) what a word means, and at the same time how the surrounding world within which this utterance is made is arranged, and b) the difference between what an utterance and a message conveys and what it might mean in given circumstances. (Davidson 1990, 122)

This said, we can easily grasp the construction of a face-off between the common sense party and their opponents, the deniers. Funnily enough, both sides are commensurable in the very sense that they do enjoy fighting over the issue of what is at stake. For the common sense side, there is hardly any drama on the face of it. Truth is a concept that we need and that we use. In the words of J. L. Austin, truth is one of the “medium sized dry goods” that we can hardly do without. We have learned – and often

also learned to accept – that no world as itself exists, but nevertheless these realities (as in: the world) do have certain properties. And yes, the common sense party claims that it is definitely worth our while to spend time dealing with these properties, getting closer to them, and continuing to re-define them and situating them in a locality (Williams 2002, 9).

But let’s detour with a side step – with the concept of ‘medium sized dry goods’. Because, well..., because this is an intriguing opening, this medium-sized thing that is meant to be kept in a dry place, out of the sun, and out of humidity, salvaging it for a remarkably long shelf life. Ironic or not, it is such dry goods that provide a middle ground – something to return to, without closing either side off. These ‘goods’, shop talk for chairs and shirts and washing powder and other such fairly uninspiring, boring but important materials, are what truth might indeed be closest to: something we need, and even need to take – more than less – for granted in order to function. We need such materials to wash our shirts and keep daily life running and functioning. We need them, and because we are so very accustomed to them, we miss them only when they are gone – run out, or lost. Sounds kind of relieving – or? Does it really – what?

But for many participants from the side of common sense, there is more to the idea of being true to the concept of truth. Williams points out the basic necessary virtues of a functioning and dependable concept of truth. He calls them accuracy and sincerity. The former is there to take care of the needed seriousness of being precise and staying with the issue, while the role of the latter is to convince us – all of us taking part in these discourses – not to lie. (Ibid. 11) In short, there is, says Williams, a great deal of value in truthfulness and the concept of truth.

From the side of the deniers, there is no need to deny the fact that we do need this type of a general concept. The sad, embarrassing fact, they claim with a terrible predatory smile, is that a concept of truth is basically very uninteresting. It does not help us to be more precise or to go further with our arguments. This is to say that what we need to do is to focus on the burning and healing issues that are related to the concept of truth, but are

The 12 most dangerous words in English language: I am from the government and I am here to help you.

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not that itself. We enter the world of situated and embedded use of language – and participation in language games that can be traced all the way back to Nietzsche and his angry rants. It is an aim that underlines contextualization and the use of words. To quote that man who knew the art of provoking perhaps too well, “Alles aber ist geworden; es giebt keine ewigen Thatsachen: sowie es keine absoluten Wahrheiten giebt. Demnach ist das historischen Philosophiren von jetzt ab nöthig und mit ihm die Tugend der Bescheidung.”^(1999, 25)

Even the more extreme deniers do respect our need to recognize facts, but they insist on the dispensability and elusiveness of them. In the power games of interpretation, the concept of truth is a means to make these things not usable, but bearable. Thus there is a kind of joviality to be found within this type of an almost vicious circularity – as in the act of genuine doubt that does not let loose. On the more moderate front, we have a wide variety of participants who ask us to focus our limited attention on the issues of agonistic pluralism,^(Mouffe 2000) or who insist that we should talk about the civic virtue of how to treat each other in a democratic society,^(Rorty 1991) to name just a two of the alternatives. But the point of the deniers is: since we cannot achieve the aim of an over-all applicable and

convincing concept of a truth, let us turn from this task to something more beneficial and worthwhile.

But is that it? Is that all there is to it?

For Bernard Williams there is much more at stake than simply competing and colliding interpretations. There is, for him and many others, something intrinsically valuable in a concept of truth, despite all its potential short-comings and weakness. For Williams the civic virtues are also structural, even on a level of a self-understanding of a society and its civilization. In his words, taken as a challenge to argue against the more radical deniers of the concept of truth, we “need to take seriously the idea that to the extent that we lose a sense of the value of truth, we shall certainly lose something and may well lose everything.”^(2002, 7)

Is Williams overreacting? Even getting uncomfortably hysterical? Or are we missing something in our ironic permissiveness and joy in the play of the productive competition of pluralistic versions of truths?

But do we recognize what we are losing? Is this the ethical variant of a global warming? Like, you know, you are kind of aware it, reading or hearing about it, and you can't really avoid not knowing about it, but until it hits you home on a personal and experience-based level, well, why bother? But if we are losing something, what is it? And where did it go? What did we lose?

Can anybody answer that, please?

Experience

Without doubt, many of the aspects vividly present when dealing with the concept of truth are also activated when addressing the content of an experience. Whereas with the concept of truth the change of paradigm was between the ideal of a single unity of a solid gold truth and the paths that took distance from this, with experience the dilemma is between an ideal of an experience as something authentic and pure, that is then contradicted by the practices of how these experiences are constructed and very much so

conditioned. It is a comparison that again shows the inter-connectedness of both the concepts of truth, and experience.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the same model of common sense and deniers can be found within this discourse. This time, the deniers not only question the role and importance of an experience, but they go so far as to claim that in our modern lives of full-blown consumerism an experience is out of the question – impossible. We will return to this shortly. But before we do, let's take a step aside and go a bit back to one of the main milestones of conceptualization of an experience. Mind the gap, since experience as such is part of the self-reflection on our past in its plurality. The question is what kind of qualities are attached to it? The frame of mind is there, sure; we all have experiences, but well, how can we translate them to others, and how can we, if not measure them, then compare them?

With the concept of experience, there is simply no way out of the historical significance, this make-it-or-break-it point where a German philosopher named Wilhelm Dilthey (1833 – 1911) distinguishes, in German, between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*.^(see Dilthey 1985) It is Dilthey whom we credit for this lifting up of a difference that certainly makes a difference. And well, now that we've gotten rolling, let's state his other achievements. He did – he really did – come up with the notion of the hermeneutical circle, a concept that later was taken somewhere else by, well, quite a lot of other writers. But Dilthey did not only spin around on a carousel. He was the one who made the ever-important distinction between the internal logic and the inherent relevance of natural sciences and human sciences, employing and developing criteria that are valid and meaningful for each, not for both. For Dilthey and so many who followed, the difference was based on the former applying and aiming for, in German, *Erklären* (to explain), and the latter, the human and social sciences, focusing and aiming at (again in German) *Verstehen* (to understand).

But let us get back to the concept of experience. When talking about the distinction between *Erlebnis*

and *Erfahrung*, it is a difference that gains weight by how each of them are defined, and how that is done in connection to the other. The classical notion is to see *Erlebnis* as a lived experience, with a connotation of an individual perspective and take on things, while *Erfahrung* has more of a collective character. The implication is that while *Erlebnis* is then more about the intensities of the every-day, *Erfahrung* is about the normalization and objectification process of the sense of experience.^(for an overview of the background discussions, see Jay 2005, 11-12)

Keeping this game of distinctions in mind (and the evident inter-dependence that can't be cemented into an either/or scheme, and which still causes an enjoyable controversy between almost anyone using this pair of concepts), the common sense part of experience also goes a long ways at fetching back the importance of this private and personal sphere. Some types of hermeneutics try to achieve an objectified level of this as a sum of experiences, but the more interesting challenge is to have both sides of the dilemma constantly on the move. In other words, it is about enjoying the uncertainty of the experience and how it cannot be guarded, guaranteed or granted. It boils over, and it does so with style. For this, it is adequate to turn to John Dewey, who came up with the following definition of the act of having an experience. It is an act that does not stop or get arrested, but carries an element of ongoing process in it – a process that is not about closure, but about openness. It is a process that is never just intentional. It is both passive and active.

“For ‘taking in’ in any vital experience is something more than placing something on the top of consciousness over what was previously known. It involves reconstruction, which may be painful. Whether the necessary undergoing phase is by itself pleasurable or painful is a matter of particular conditions.”^(Dewey 1934, 42) Dewey emphasizes how an experience is created and recreated in interaction with the world. There is the act of editing in and editing out of what is seen as meaningful and what is not. “In every integral experience there is form because there is dynamic organization. I call the organization dynamic because it takes time to complete it, because it is a growth. There is inception, development, and fulfillment.”^(Ibid. 56-57)

The lived and uncontrollable experience is an engaged one. It is far from neutral, natural or objective. It is an understanding of our being-in-the-world where we are never completely out of it, but always part of the mess, part of the inherent dilemmas connected to its emerging and existing interpretations and actualities. What's more, we can easily accept the common sense line that says, yes, sure, experiences are what we have, and the content of them is not direct, but is shaped and made with the use of language and our ability to work in and through a chosen language game. In the discourse of truth, the same part of common sense agrees that whatever the meaning of an act or image is, it must be traced back to the experience of it. (Davidson 1990, 126)

The problem with experience is a very typical one. It is the difference between seeing the content of a concept as a full scale answer, or, in contrast, as a situated version of a dilemma where everything begins and where everything returns, but as an act, where something has left its mark and its trace. In the jargon of philosophy, we call this a condition. When trying to understand what, how and where, it is necessary to take into account the complexity of having an experience, but no, that in itself is not enough. It is a necessary, but not a sufficient ingredient. And it is not innocent.

But well, what do the deniers then have against this? Just about everything, because for the deniers, the process of an experience is not what it promises. It is not an open but a closed endeavour; it is not an experimental process but a determined dead end. But before dealing with the chosen protagonists of the part of deniers of experience – that is, Benjamin, Derrida and Agamben – let us take another detour. And surprisingly enough, it is a detour into an anecdote. It is an anecdote that can stand for any number of small news items in any of our newspapers, on any randomly chosen day or year. This particular piece was in a German newspaper, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, on 18 March, 2010. It consists of a single column of 20 lines. It is the type of mundane and condensed news that is short and laconic, but very dramatic – and without doubt, somehow connected to the idea of having an experience (as in *Erlebnis* or *Erfahrung*).

The news item is about a man who was killed while jogging. He was jogging on a beach in South Carolina, in the USA. The man had headphones on, and no, he did not die due to a heart attack, or because of a drive-by shooting, or by colliding viciously with a killer whale on the shore. He died because he was hit by an airplane trying to make an emergency landing. The four-seater plane had to land because it kept losing oil, and had already lost one of its engines. The motors were no longer running, and the man with the headphones was listening to music when he was struck by the plane. The newspaper informs us that the man was the father of two children. He was from Atlanta and was in South Carolina on a business trip. None of the other people on the beach or in the plane were injured.

But this man, this man running along a presumably unfamiliar ground on that beach? Was he having an experience – while jogging for his life without being aware of it? Was it *Erlebnis* or *Erfahrung* – and did anyone have a chance to ask him, or any one else who would and could care? What kind of music did he listen to? How loud was the music? Did the choice of music affect his ability to experience the soundscape outside of his head and the music system?

Question after question, generating just more and more questions that must, that need to... stop. Now.

A blur of conflicting images, that stops for a moment when connected with another memory. We recall Alfred Hitchcock's 1959 movie *North by Northwest*, with Gary Grant lost in the plot, running around somewhere out in the vast corn fields of Americana landscapes, being attacked by a small enemy plane. A vision of Grant barely escaping the attack by plunging to the ground, getting up and having no place to hide, running scared, away from the returning plane and its dive that tries to kill.

Are we having an experience while watching the movie? What about when we remember the movie, gluing bits and pieces of it together in our imagination, sometimes confusing parts from other movies, and moving images that have re-enacted the 'original' film? What are we then experiencing?

According to Walter Benjamin, nothing much. At least, nothing as of yet, because for Benjamin, despite all his negative views on the chances for experience, there is hope. There is hope of reclaiming that version of an experience, which is not dominated by the logic of modernity. It is logic, says Benjamin, which denies the chance for an integrated experience. It is altered in various kinds of false consciousness and manipulation. In one word, the experience turns into a commodity. Or for an even more dramatic turn, Benjamin saw the demise of a pure experience as the decline of a culture into barbarism. It was the totality of the politics and the exhaustion of a culture that had direct consequences on his life. (We will return to Benjamin and the dilemma of experience with another take and details in the Chapter 5). As is well-known, Benjamin committed suicide while fleeing occupied France in 1940. Before escaping, he did articulate a sort of a hope: he believed in the Messianic times that would return, and through which we could re-discover the real pure experience.^(see Löwe 2005, 4)

In the genealogy of the negative experience, and mourning after alienated and lost experience, but always embedded with a hint of a something that can be rescued, Theodor Adorno developed the notion that began with Benjamin. It was grounded in shared experiences, in fact, experiences of World War II, and for Adorno, the consequences of the Holocaust that inform the content of their analysis. For Adorno, especially in his thesis in a book accurately titled *Negative Dialectics* (2005), there is no other way to regain the lost experience but by diametrically opposing the current false one. The main chance lies in the emptiness, the lack of a subject who is – paraphrasing that modern classic novel about a man without qualities – a man who could be anyone and anywhere, without history, without identity. It is only through the consequent logic of negative takes and turns that a chance for an experience is constructed. Perhaps it goes without saying, this is a circularity that permits little room for ways to break that spell. What is most disturbing is that this version of an experience comes very close to being without an historical dimension.

Interestingly enough, Adorno traces the decay of real experience back into the modern metaphysics that by

its dichotomy leaves no room for the true interaction between, let's say, subject and object, or emotional and rational levels of attention and strategies. It is a story of a damaged life with no unity. Here, Adorno rehearses a point that was already made by Benjamin. "The identity of experience in the form of a life that is articulated and possesses internal continuity – and that life was the only thing that made the narrator's stance possible – has disintegrated. One need only note how impossible it would be for someone who participated in the war to tell stories about it the way people used to tell stories about their adventures."^(Adorno 1992, 31) It is a view and a darker-than-dark vision that is shaped by and with the experiences of the Second World War; an experience that through its unprecedented annihilation and destruction generated a sense of time that was before and after it.

To add to the soup of deniers of experience, to the loose bunch of writers among the deniers, Jacques Derrida follows this train of thought and claims that there is no experience left. Experience is monumental, it is confirmed, it is static. It has the metaphysical presence that is the presence of one, not many. It is a presence of stop, no go. For Derrida, there is no interaction, no dialogue within the experience. It has reduced the other and the difference already outside of itself^(see Derrida 1989, 53) Therefore, the differences that are necessary to be acknowledged are not found within the concept of experience, be it *Erlebnis* or *Erfahrung*. Both are interlocked in the game of metaphysics, but they are located within the acts of shaping relationships, the acts of reading and re-reading, between an experience and a text of and with it. Thus, at this stage it is no longer what something called experience might be, but how it is opened up, re-thought and re-made – but not through the front door, not through the centre, but in and through the margins.^(Derrida 1987, 139)

The next in this line of deniers, a grouping made with a fair dose of randomness and highly level of heterogeneity, strongly suggesting the re-enactment of the quote by Groucho Marx that noted wryly that he would never belong to a club that would allow him to be a member, is Giorgio Agamben, for whom experience is gone. It is no longer possible. Certainly, within the mass-produced entertainment

of, for example, the shopping and cultural industries, there is definitely no lack of the animated shout and the spectacular scream. But these vast collections of ooh's and aah's are not experiences. They are reflections and incorporations of affects. They might be hysterical, overwhelming and solidly boring, but they are one-dimensional and seldom anything but empty. While following Benjamin, Agamben concludes that excited recollections and ecstatic emotions do not collide or come closer with experience. The former remains in the closed area of consumer goods, while the latter, as in a classical understanding of an experience, still carries with itself the promise of empowerment and change. These emotions, claims Agamben, are second hand; they are bought and sold without any hindrances; they are just surrogate sad shadows of what they could have been.^(Agamben 1993, 18)

But what exactly is then denied – denied at massive volume and with high energy fields by all the names mentioned, and more? Along the whole logic of the denial, albeit in various versions, there is always a trace of that experience which is actually – somewhere, somehow, some way – taking place, but it has lost its importance and chance in the current conditions of our conditions. Thus, it is not experience that is at stake, but the reality that frames and sustains it. It is exactly what it smells like and what it really promises. It is a modern problem of the most peculiar kind: it is about how and why modernity and modernization is understood, with what values, needs, interests and fears it is defined.

This is a realization that allows us yet another way of linking the discourse of truth and experience together. Now: a reminder of the analysis by Davidson,^(1990, 122) who underlined that any quality of an utterance is based on its balance and embeddedness in the acts of a) what that given word might mean, and b) how the background world within which the word is used and activated is arranged. It is a crucial point that brings us back to the presuppositions of the conditions of our conditions - not only how they are defined, but what type of a character they are provided with – the scales of their elusiveness, flexibility or determination. It is a point that begs us to go further and to

ask: how are these realities then represented? And the even more cruel follow up: how do the representations affect our comprehension of that given reality?

Representing Reality

Hito Steyerl, the German video artist writing of her works and the theories that inform her work, brilliantly puts her finger on the sore spot. She asks the real hard question, a question that takes us to the core of the issue at hand. For Steyerl, the dilemma is between seeing the image, as a representation of reality, as a means to a potentiality of a real political experience, or its opposite, where, due to its commodity character and its endless flow, an image actually makes all chances of an experience completely redundant.^(2008, 57)

But hold on – please, please not so fast. What kind of an image and representation of reality are we talking about? As with any concept – the same applies to truth and experience – what is said about a concept strongly depends on from what position and with what values the utterance is made (how we comprehend reality and how we also imagine it). What's more, this same notion ought to be expected as a standard strategy with the concept of image.

Therefore, what is that image? For Steyerl, it opens up a similar dilemma. An image can again be seen as in the middle of the whole delicate struggle for content and substance. Is an image a source and means for emancipation, or is it reduced to distributing lies, oppression and persecution? Or does an image provide us with the way to productively create and generate our view of reality, and consequently also affect that reality, or is it the other way around? Are images just products of the current power structures and their hegemonic alliances?^(ibid. 122)

Is it really here we might recognize, find and cherish, and take with us that chance of a middle ground – something that might pull together rather than break apart? Are there any medium-sized goods that might help? Some effective mental washing powder, which would allow us to do something instead of yet again criticizing anything and everything until nothing moves any more, or leaves a shadow?

On this carousel, in the hearts and minds of this honest dilemma, I certainly claim so: the most productive way is to see the relationship and the conditions as both/and. What if the issue is to leave the field of generalizations and remain in the domain of local, particular and situated dilemmas? Or what if the challenge is to ask not *what* is produced – but *how* an image is produced? What if we stop longing for some nostalgic time before the consumer society convinced us to become our own worst enemies by reducing us to simple consumers rather than being beautifully empowered multi-dimensional citizens?

This would then be a view of the reality that we are situated in and embedded in as partners in crime. It is a realization that can be articulated as the litany of the six C's: a world that is constructed, conflictual, contested, contextual, confused and hopefully passionately compassionate. (see Hannula 2009, 46)

This is where social imagination needs to be activated. The lights go up, and no, there is no scene, there is the act of connecting the dots. Again and again: making visible and generating an actualization of an event between past, present and future. When dealing with the combination of how the world is and how it is at the same time imagined, we have a very interesting source that already, a long time ago, gave us the hint about how not to get stuck in the dead-end between facts and fictions.

We can return to one of the pioneers of documentary cinema. It was in 1926 that the British film maker and producer John Grierson articulated a brilliant take on the character of a documentary. For Grierson, it was about creative treatment of actuality. (see Grierson 1971, for interpretative reflections, for example, Rehberg 2005, and Bill Nichols 1991)

It is a statement that we still ought to hold on to – and make the best use of it. It is a statement that is begging to be connected with the idea of how knowledge and the versions of truth and experience never, ever just *are*, but how they are always made and shaped in any and all given circumstances. According to Foucault, none of these (whether truth, experience, science or whatever) are this or that, they are always produced. It is a process that is productive, and its particular content cannot ever be made

sense of without the tacky and demanding local site and situation. (see, for example Foucault 1984, and 1987)

The other way of rephrasing what Grierson already has said, is to make us aware of how, in anything we do, we are constantly engaging in a double act: we describe and we define the reality that we are a part of, or at least try to be part of. (This is something we will return to with care in Chapter 3). We effect while we are being affected. No matter what the strategy of the person doing the act of representing reality, whether the tag on one's lapel says realist or a constructivist, formalist or contextualist, there is no escape from the this brutal double injunction. It is a bind that grinds. This, however, does not diminish the gravity and the relevance of the variations of the same. We are not

Once upon a time, a tall thin man from a tiny island won it all.
In the 1976 Olympics, in Montreal, Alberto Juantorena got gold medals in both the 400 and 800 meter races.

His performance was elegant and sovereign.
I witnessed him in action in 1988, in Prague, doing a make-shift product presentation for his line of sports shoes in a not so well-polished department store.

He did not look so elegant and sovereign any more.

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innocent, and we are part of the mess of the game of representations. We face the wall, and we face decisions – decisions and acts that can take us between the axes of affirmation or critique, or between hope and despair.

What the productive status and character of any representation, any narrative, any take on reality forces us to relate to, is how we use images. As with the double injunction, it is impossible to deny that an image has a connection to what it depicts. This is not to say it is one to one, or that this connection is even meaningful. That is only possible to state in a specific case, within a particular structure and its competing histories. An image is always both/and. It has a referent and it is made – it is partly also about simulation – making of the world while acting in it and imagining it. An image always has that double role: it has a use value and it has an exchange value. The use value depends on the rules and habits of the game where that image is taking place. And just as surely, the exchange value can vary from a clear price tag on its cost to its symbolic value, that is never only about numbers any more, but about something else.

The idea and reality of a double injunction is nevertheless often enough either forgotten, or just simply ignored. The trouble with the realization of our embeddedness in the dilemma of a double injunction is that it leaves us no emergency door. We are stuck. We are stuck with our laziness, stupidity, hopelessness and vanity – well, you know, just to hint at some of the acute options. And when we awake, we feel even worse. We feel the pull of responsibility, pulling our head heavy down down down. We know the limits of our interpretation and imagination. But these limits are the source of the energy to take part in the production of the content of concepts. This limitation is perhaps the very one and only saving grace we can ever reach toward – and gain.

But at the same time, we are aware of the high number of versions of representing reality and the conscious act of doing it that do not wish to stay with the dilemma. In colourful varieties of camouflage, we have the participants in words and moving images who claim to have access to truth, or claim to offer

ways to escape our being stuck. It is a field that is discussed through and through, but to which it is still worth paying attention, a field that is being shaped, is becoming, right here, and now.

We can take, for example, the idea of a neutral observer. This, in the jargon of the documentary line of representing reality, is described with the metaphorical wish to be like a fly on the wall. Leaving the actuality of a creature called a fly aside, what this image strives towards is that unattached position of a viewer to whom nobody pays any mind. It is a viewer who can see and document the reality without participating in it, and without the protagonist being aware of the act of documenting which, as a site and a situation, as we know, affects how we are, both in front of and behind a camera.

Against this dream or illusion, there is the opposite view, promoted, for example, by the grand auteur of a filmmaker Werner Herzog. Instead of the wish to be like a fly on the wall, what Herzog advocates is the aim of an ecstatic truth.^(Häntzschel 2010) Here there is no search for neutrality and detachment. In its place, we find the intensified and underscored drama of the events so familiar to us from his own productions. It is an ecstasy that does not dwell on some mystic waters, but which is certainly happy to be playing the role of the devil's advocate, and the cruel manipulator of the schemes and scenes. An example – and a proof – is so vividly present in the film *My Best Fiend*, which Herzog made of the relationship between himself and the actor Klaus Kinski. It is an ecstasy of the impossible rudeness and egomania they both shared. It is a product of cultural industries, that is equally informative of the wish for ecstatic expression, and the ultimate failure of the act of desperately keeping looking for it.

Another established way to fix the dilemma of representing reality is to refer to the use of power in and through images. Here, the artist Hito Steyerl, mentioned above, has been one of the main protagonists in advocating the shift from the illusion of the innocence and immediacy of documentary towards both the conscious use of documentary means, and especially how these means are churned within power structures, into what is labelled as documentality.

Here the shift is indeed made from one extreme to another. With documentality, Steyerl creates a concept that she copies (or would it be properly called appropriates?) from another discourse and another dilemma. In fact, Steyerl's documentality, as she openly advises us, is a sort of an re-enactment of Foucault's concept of governmentality.

This direct adaptation causes, however, major problems (on which we will focus fully in the next chapter). Whereas for Foucault (1991, 95), in his very late writings, governmentality provided a point of opening into the productivity of truths, for Steyerl (2003) it is a fixed entity, an entity where documentary stands for truth that is not only manipulated but completely made by the interests of the government. But this setup is based on a strong contradiction. Because, well..., because for Foucault, governmentality is about the conduct of conduct. It is about the processes of governing, not about value judgements.

It is an acute point of controversy, which highlights the necessity for avoiding all-encompassing formulas – even if they do bring the solace of an overarching answerability. However, since words are not only objects but also always deeds, we are doing things with words, like providing content for concepts. It is a realization that especially in a combination of three complex concepts ought to assure us that what really matters is not what they are or mean but how they are used. (see Skinner 2002, 103)

It is a realization that might be possible to grasp with yet another anecdote found in the daily newspaper. This anecdote and exemplificatory piece of a tiny news item takes us to the heart of the issue of representing reality. It is a story that made the international waves of information flow, the story of how that symbol of evil, that sign above a concentration camp saying "Arbeit macht frei" was stolen. This article is dated 19 March, 2010, again found in the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. It tells us that three Polish men have been sentenced for the crime. They got between 18 months and 2 ½ years of prison. The accused admitted to stealing that sign, which was five meters long and which weighs over 30 kilograms. It was stolen in the night of 18 December, 2009.

The same news item, of one column and 19 lines, adds that this crime was done to order. The impetus for it came from a man with a known connection to the neo-Nazi milieu. This main man behind the scenes, who initiated it and paid for it, is sitting in prison in Stockholm, says the news.

Here is a case that is as bizarre as it is scary. We are not talking about only images. We are talking about historical facts and objects that both exist and represent history. But what is the truth and experiential quality of that object of five meters and over 30 kilograms? Was it the very original sign? What is the content of origin here? The idea of it? The original steel sign? Was the original made by the prisoners, the military guards or by Polish metal workers? Who got paid, and how much? Why would someone living in Sweden want to pay for it, and go to such lengths to get that sign? Why not make a copy of it? Whose property is that object of a sign? Does it belong to the memory of humankind? And if yes, what would that mean?

It is a case that is not a straight-forward issue of the polemics of the truth of the events. This is not a revisionist reading that would try to convince us that the volume and depth of the atrocities has been falsified and exaggerated. This is an act, a crime, which for some reason tries to steal perhaps the best-known symbol for the Holocaust. But does the stealing of that steel sign take away the memories and their content? How could that be possible?

Moving away from the rather endlessly surfacing list of questions that we could ask that man sitting there with his thoughts in the jail in Stockholm (but not necessarily getting that many intelligent answers!), let us return to the conceptual game of what happens when we put truth, experience and representing reality next to each other. Let us get radical. Let's leave, as fearless and faithful parents would do, the scene, let them sort it out amongst themselves. Let the fight begin. And let the fight not be fair.

Because the processes of giving or trying to give content to concepts is definitely never fair. It is not controllable. It is not civilized. The Habermasian ideal of absolutely free and un-coerced circumstances is,

unfortunately or not, far away from our daily realities and experiences in and through it. Words are deeds, and deeds are only comprehensible in connection to their background and the version of reality that they support – and also neglect. Words are biased, and they are corrupted. But does that make them less worth while? It makes their use just a bit more complicated, always allowing and insisting they be particular and contextual, not general, in use and, sure, abuse.

But where and how do we then discuss the content of the concepts? If the idea of a consensus-driven ideal speech situation is not credible, what then? Let us take two examples of a way to tackle the issue. The first one takes us back to the end of the '60s. This was originally given as a radio speech by Adorno, and dramatically entitled "Education after Auschwitz" (1985). After a very adequate analysis of the conditions that made the Holocaust possible, he proposes an idea. As a means to fight against instrumentalization of the value of a human and of humanity, Adorno obviously enough turns to education and its qualities. For these educational aims and purposes, Adorno speculates about the chance of using television as the medium for transmitting the new knowledge and enlightened views of the world.

We all are aware how silly that idea sounds today. Today, we confront a completely saturated television network that produces an incredible amount of material, but where the source of knowledge and chance to change something is out for lunch – permanently. But it is not Adorno who is to be laughed at here. At the time he wrote, there was still a potential to imagine this. In the late '60s, in most of the countries where we live, there were no more than a couple of choices of what to watch. There was no private TV, no private radio, no internet. There was a potentiality of a concentration of a medium, a common mass concentration of an audience.

I think this is a point we can, in fact, agree upon. This collective consciousness of the mass volume of attention, and the shared publicness of it is gone. We face a fragmented spectre of information flow that, with the contemporary means of technology,

splits the common sense of an audience into more and more disintegrated segments. What is left of the common without doubt follows the inverse logic that Adorno believed in. Instead of education and the aim of taking things higher, the current common sphere functions on the basis of the lowest common denominator.

The second example for schematizing that tricky and slippery ground that we miss and need, but which escapes us, is a more recent one. This time, the argument for paying attention to the ways in which we debate and discuss the use of words, the where, when and how they are applied and performed, is put forward by Tony Judt^(2010, 171). According to Judt, we have lost our ability to talk differently, by slowly but surely having surrendered ourselves to the one-sided language of economic arguments. Judt demands a return to the ways of talking about the ends of our actions, not only about means to achieve them. "Our disability is discursive: we simply do not know how to talk about these things any more. For the last thirty years, when asking ourselves whether we support a policy, a proposal or an initiative, we have restricted ourselves to issues of profit and loss – economic questions in the narrowest sense. But this is not an instinctive human condition: it is an acquired taste."^(Ibid. 34)

But, while so very accurately being able to define the loss and the lack, in his writing Judt says very little about where, how and when we ought to discuss these matters, and where it is that we ought to return to – since, as we have said, that common ground of a comprehensively accessible and available public space and sphere is no longer there. There is no comprehensive medium that would reach us all. There is no platform that would coherently and consistently collect even most of the people who would be participants in the game of giving content to concepts – not to mention getting people with opposing world views to actually not only talk but to listen to each other.

What do we do when what we do no longer has a common ground? What is to be done when we have allowed ourselves to not be enjoying the liberating effects of the death of the author, but have reduced ourselves – helplessly sliding on the road, from being

a citizen to an act we act as consumers – to facing the fact that it is about the death of the listeners and witnesses that we must worry?

What do we do when we – not anyone else, but we – ourselves, you and me – no longer know how to listen?

The strangest swimming pool I have ever been to was in Yerevan, Armenia.

This was in the early years of the new millennium. The pool was on the top of an old clothing factory turned into a post-soviet style department store.

It had a magnificent glass roof that could be opened both from the sides and above.

The pool was not innocent. It belonged to a brothel.

The first time I went there, when I bought my ticket they asked me if I wanted female company.

When I said no, they were perplexed.

I said I only came for a swim.

There was nobody in the pool, just me, but along the side, some big fat guys came to cool off from the sauna.

The next day, when buying the ticket, they asked me if I was interested in male company.

Denying this also, I added that I just wanted to swim.

The third day they did not ask anything.

They paid no attention to me at all.

Facts of Life – PART 56

Introducing the discussions

These four discussions were all done following the same method, the same internal logic of how to conduct and organize a discussion. Each discussion took place in one session. They took place during the fall of 2010. I used the technique I always use. It is an old c-cassette. The technique may seem ancient, but it works, for me. One of the participants was amazed that you can use both sides of a cassette. But, well, trust me, you can.

The time line of the conversation is practically and conceptually limited to a maximum of 90 minutes – two sides of the cassette. There is a bit of a talk before and after, but the whole encounter takes no longer than two hours. The method is grounded on a clearly framed focus and a pre-existing joint background. The whole discussion took place on that one occasion, but it was not the first time I had met the individual. Some of the participants (Gamdrup) I have worked together with on exhibitions, some (Männikkö and Tandberg) I have written with and on, and with Hausswolff, I have had the pleasure of seeing her works and admiring them from a distance for a long period of time.

These meetings were discussions, conversations shaped and informed by mutual curiosities. There was basically only one question: what do you do when you

do what you do? Since facing this directly is impossible, all discussions use productive detours. I intentionally call these meeting discussions, not interviews. They are based on the willingness to participate, from both sides, and to go into an open-ended give and take process. We also needed a focus, to avoid talking in general terms. This was found in the act of focusing with each person on one single work – that in itself always was connected to other works and themes we then followed up with.

I have transcribed all the texts, which then went back and forth between us for comments and clarifications. There were no major new questions staged afterwards. Language was corrected, and the text edited. All the discussions, except that with Männikkö, were in English. With Männikkö, we spoke Finnish. And yes, I almost forgot, if there is a soundtrack to go with these discussions, and with this method, it is this. Obviously, it is just one song, called “This Must Be the Place” (Naïve Melody), by Talking Heads, released on their album *Speaking in Tongues*, 1985.



Annika von Hausswolff

The Legacy of Beige, 2002,

silicone mounted on plexi,

128 x 100 cm

Born 1967 in Gothenburg, Sweden

Lives and works in Gothenburg, Sweden

1995-96 Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts

1991-94 University College of Arts, Craft & Design,
Stockholm

1987-89 Sven Winquist's School of Photography,
Gothenburg

www.andrehn-schipjenko.com

Mika Hannula

Our discussion will focus on and revolve around one main question: what do you do when you do what you do? It is a question, which implies a deliberate double injunction. As a challenge, it is one that is important to face and confront, but it is impossible to answer in a straightforward manner. Therefore, let us start somewhere else, and approach it in a roundabout way. Let us start with a text you published on the Berlin North exhibition catalogue at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin in 2004. It is a text without a title, and consists of 11 parts, 11 short but intensive takes on your practice. How did this text come about, and is writing something you do a lot?

Annika von Hausswolff

I wrote it in Berlin, for the show where I exhibited. Writing is not so unusual for me, and lately I have done more of it. For example, I am part of a web project^{(see www.tsnok.se)} – it's two philosophers (Lars-Erik Hjertström-Lappalainen and Jonatan Habib Engqvist) and I am writing about art and things that matter, and also inviting other people to participate. I have always been very fond of writing, and I am pretty good at it. I just need a reason, I don't write out of the blue. →

MH

How active is the blog and the web page?

AvH

It is up and running. I have two texts there now. It is interesting for me, I was asked to participate, and since the art scene here in Gothenburg is not too lively, it is important to make something happen and create a platform for exchanges and discussions. In my practice I have been mostly alone – not lonely, but what I mean is that my practice has been very traditional, it's me, the artist, doing the works, having solo exhibitions and so on, so it's nice to reach out and do something else.

MH

But when you take a look at this text from 2004, how do you see it now?

AvH

I am surprised, because I had forgotten about it. I am pleased, because I remember I had a lot of fun writing it. I do think it is a good text. And it is very much me.

MH

In what ways is it you?

AvH

It is very much me in the sense that I wanted to give a picture of the reasons behind the works – the reasons that are both very general and very personal.

MH

For me, that “you” in it is recognizable in the condensed and tight expression, this intensity that is something I really appreciate in your works, and something I also see in your writings. But what's that “you” for you then, personally?

AvH

Well, I have no experience in writing differently. I have not studied it, nor have I written an essay for any studies or so. I just jump on it and that's that. But yes, my works are very condensed. But I have been moving a bit away from that now. Earlier, it was so important for me to narrow everything down, to reduce it to one single image that would tell it all. But now I have been doing series (for example, a series of work shown at Casey Caplan gallery, New York, 2008, called “I Am the Runway of Your Thoughts”) of the same motif, changing the light and the angle, in order to be able to stress that you can't say it all in one image. Nothing is as focused in reality.

MH

O.K., let us concentrate on this one work, from the year 2002, included in the catalogue and exhibition I just asked about. It is titled “The Legacy of Beige”.

AvH

I am very fond of titles; perhaps that's where I have been practising writing with my work. That title is very strange.

MH

Where does it come from?

AvH

The colour beige has been a central starting point in many of my works. The colour comes from my mother's underwear. I have another work, titled “The Memory of My Mother's Underwear Transformed Into a Flameproof Drape”, 2003, and that colour and texture is this childhood thing. You know, you go through your mother's dresser drawer and pick up a bra, or a stocking. It is a very tactile and curious situation, a situation where you want to know something, something about your mother, and you can't really ask or confront her, because it is not really about her. Maybe it is a transitional object.

MH

Transitional to what?

AvH

I don't know whether it is *to* her or *from* her. It is perhaps from a symbiosis to the real world – or back. Maybe it is a longing to belong to her again. I don't know. But what I do know is that I have been very preoccupied with this, and I used the colour beige for years in my works without really realizing what it was about.

MH

About condensation and concentration in your works. I am assuming that there are many takes that lead to the final version of, for example, this work. Can you describe the process behind this work?

AvH

At the same time I did this image, I made a series of these shirts [an untitled series of photographs of shirts tied up with knots] as little objects that I photographed – objects almost like skinned chickens. It was a very fruitful time. I had the laspis studio in Stockholm for six months. I had given birth to my son, and he was also six months old then. And after having the first child, I had so much energy for a while, because you realize that you no

longer have all that time you used to have. It started out with the shirts and then this image. I was looking for the shirts in second hand stores, and I saw these trousers, and then I saw a body with them. But why it ended up like that, and why in the corner? Well, in the first shot she was standing up. But that did not look good. Then I sat her down, it looked better, and now she was in a corner, almost like when they used to put children there to shame them, facing the corner in the old days – nothing that I have experienced, but it is a strong image. So, there is a kind of shame involved, in a way it is very unrealistic because, well, you do not normally sit like that, and you do not have clothes on your back and you definitely do not hold onto them to like that.

But then again, in another way it is a very realistic photograph. The notion of realism has always been there in my works. That's where I started, with a vision of documentary photograph.

MH

We will return a bit later to the question of documentary, but let's stay a while with this particular photo. How many shots did you take?

AvH

It was three. Not more, because if you go beyond three takes you need to realize that the idea is probably not good.

MH

Is that a clear criteria or a rule for you?

AvH

No, it is just a feeling that I have, knowing within the process when not to make it. Usually it is three takes. Shoot, go back, shoot, go back and then shoot it again.

MH

The size is 128 x 100 cm. Was this already decided before shooting?

AvH

No, the size almost always comes from some secondary reason, like this was meant to be a series and they need to work together, some being small, some bigger. I have not been interested in the size. Only in the beginning, when I made these big, huge pictures.

MH

But let me insist. What is going on here, for you?

AvH

For me, she is not really important in the image. She is just a vehicle for the clothes. But there is something about the clothes representing another person

in the image. There are two persons, at least. Instead facing that other person, she tries to hide it – this 'it' being a person, but not a clear one, it's an inarticulate one. But it is a stupid way to do it, because she is not really hiding it, it is facing us, so instead she is actually on display. But, of course, that it, that possibility of a person, it is hidden from herself, but for us it is really visible. The other one, this person is not really in charge, because that 'it' is really lifeless. It is like a ghost almost. But she holds on to it as if it was very important to her. So it is, for me, about wanting to let go of someone or something that is still clinging to you because of some reason that remains unclear.

MH

You have this concept that you use, suspended time. What do you mean by it?

Monopoly, the board game, was patented in 1935. The inventor was the then unemployed engineer Charles Darrow, from Germantown, Pennsylvania, USA. Today, it is played in 111 countries, and in 43 languages. The game made him a millionaire. It is only prohibited in North Korea and Cuba. In 1974, Ralph Anspach, a professor of economics in San Francisco, introduced a new version of the game: Anti-Monopoly. Its intention was to educate people about the dangers of monopolies. It did not become a great success.

Facts of Life – PART 2

AvH

I think it was a reaction. At one point many people referred to my works as images where something had already happened and we came too late to react to the actual thing. I was not so comfortable with that because I do not want to see – well, of course, there is a narrative in the images, you can't get a way from it when you are realistic, but at the same time, I did not want there be a clear before and after. I wanted to be hanging in the air, hanging in time.

MH

Does suspension mean anticipation for you – as in expectancy?

AvH

No, well, could be. Everyone is always expecting something. Even when you look at art, you expect something, you expect to 'get it'.

MH

Is it an accident waiting to happen?

AvH

No. Either she could sit there forever, or she could walk out.

MH

Yes, it is very inviting to read in different scenarios and versions. One thing that does not wait, does not lurk around but comes to the core immediately when looking at your works, is sexuality.

AvH

Yes, sure, always. Almost, at least.

MH

But it is a very difficult theme, a theme that so easily, as we constantly see around us, is turned into a cliché or into a one-dimensional object. What fascinates me in your works is how this topic is dealt with. Besides its condensation, there is a suspension of sexuality – something that is absolutely certainly there, but something that is not possible to pin down or to explain – something that does not stop or satisfy our curiosity.

AvH

My images should not satisfy anyone. But you know, all these things that we are talking about, these are not that premeditated. I just kind of do them, trying to answer my sub-conscious or something – and the answers are the images. But I can't be too nosy about my own sub-conscious, because then it kind of slips away. I really try not to analyse what I am doing beforehand.

Years after I am very pleased to do it, because then the image is out there and has left me.

MH

I think this is central, central to anything we try to do and articulate, because all these big issues, all these matters that we care for and about, it is very difficult to address them directly, we need to find detours and back doors and different angles to confront them – otherwise it becomes too flat and obvious. But is it difficult for you not to think too much beforehand?

AvH

No, because when working I am so preoccupied with all the technical details and demands, not that much about the subject matter. It also comes from the years of working, you kind of know how to realize an idea. I know that when a specific idea comes up, when it surfaces on many occasions, then that tells me that I have to do it. When an idea just floats away, well, then it was just nothing. These ideas or thoughts can hang around in my head for years and years. I can often trace the images back to my notebooks.

MH

For the sake of comparison, let us focus on another work, again something that deals with your mother, at least by the title of it, but has a very different spatial content and also materiality. It is the work, already mentioned by you, titled "The Memory of My Mother's Underwear Transformed Into a Flameproof Drape", from 2003. It is an installation in space, described technically as "textile, made of flame proof fabric, 570 x 1000 cm".

AvH

The background is again very everyday. I was invited to a show at the Statens Museum of Kunst in Copenhagen, Denmark. I went to see the space and there was this pretty ugly emergency exit in the middle of it. So I thought I need to cover this up, thinking that a drape would be good. We went to the Danish Opera workshop because they have the knowledge and background for materials of that sort, and the technician said that a drape in a public institution has to be made of flameproof materials. And it was precisely then when I became aware, fully aware, of the textile and the colours that I had been fascinated with for years – which had to do with my mother's underwear. I made a drape and built in the title as it was; it is actually very documentary in style. It is about my mother's under-

wear, and it is transformed into a flameproof drape. The violence in this act is kind of obvious.

MH

What do you mean?

AvH

Well, to actually say out loud that it is flame proof. First of all, it is funny, to be so deadpan, because, well, it is flame proof, but then again when putting emphasis on the material being flame proof, it indicates that you would actually like to set this drape on fire. This memory is not soothing, it is very painful. In retrospect, I see that act I was performing as a child as a sad one. I wanted to get close to my mother but in real life I could not. This is not even important, but my mother was very cold, not affectionate, she was not a hugging mother. So, in order to get close, I had to go through her drawers and touch whatever she had had on her body.

MH

Do you remember those situations? I suppose we do not have that many clear memories of early childhood – or...?

AvH

Sure, I do remember them very well, but also yes, we don't have many vivid memories. But I have some key memories, and this is one of them. I do not think it is uncommon for a girl to take out her mother's bra and test it. It is kind of an initiation process of growing up, changing into the clothes of an adult. On one hand, it is very childish and banal, but at the same time it is very dramatic.

MH

Is your mother still alive?

AvH

Yes, but she is not interested in art, she does not know about this piece.

MH

What would she say?

AvH

She would not get it.

MH

Why are you so sure?

AvH

[Laughs] I am not sure. But no, it is not important.

MH

But this title, it makes me wonder...

AvH

I know, sometimes they are a bit too catchy. Some-

times I think I should work for an advertising agency as a copywriter, sometimes I am just too smart.

MH

Yes, titles are one thing, but I was after another concept that you use, this time "lost authenticity." What do you mean by that? How do you connect that to this particular photo?

AvH

Did I say that? Oh dear. I should keep quiet.

MH

Sure, it all comes back to you. Here is the full quote, it's number 10 in your list in that text I started with: "To sum up a decade, I guess my work could be described as a movement that has its point of departure in a consciously political art, which has then shifted toward a search for 'lost authenticity' before ending up with a rather pragmatic interest about whether a work of art functions or not."

AvH

I was referring, obviously, to photography and the development of my practice and the ways my interests have moved on. As we know, in a broader context, photography has gone through many changes. What I always made use of in my work is this notion of photography being a little bit closer to reality than other techniques. In a way, it is, of course, a lie, because my works are very conceptual, but in another way what you see in my photographs is also what we call reality. I never do digital manipulations, I do not change things, it is documentary in that sense. I was referring to that connection; a connection to reality that digital technology has now battered. We can no longer believe in anything. I don't know if we could even before, but at least it is now even more difficult. But then again, fake is not in itself bad. I fake all my art works. There is a longing for something to be true, I think. But we have to face the fact that it is a dream. Then again, it is true, because this is what I wanted to say. It is unreal but also realistic. And that's why for me photography is so perfect. It has that build-in realism, but still we can stage and lie as much as we want to. In the end, there will always be an element of reality in a photograph, you can't whisk it away.

MH

Going back to this drape installation, do you do a lot of installations?

It was a message, no doubt about that. A thing written on a wall. A graffiti tag, so to speak.

It read: Kliff Barnes 55.

That's what it said. But what did it mean?

Facts of Life – PART 18

AvH

Well, in fact, this was my first non-photographic work. It looks a lot like a photograph that I made couple of years before, "Now you see it, now you don't", 1999, so it's almost like I have paraphrased myself. After this I did the objects, the boxes, also other works with drapes. It is still flat, like images, very composed. I get very nervous when I have to deal with space, so I really do not want to condense media.

MH

What do you mean?

AvH

For a long time I claimed that I could not believe, for example, in sculpture, I needed to represent reality in order to believe in it. It was fun to do the drapes because now I could believe in them, even if it is not photography. But I am only going so far as drapes and Venetian blinds, very flat three-dimensional works.

MH

What was the motivation for this move?

AvH

I think it comes for a certain degree of boredom with photography, that it was always so fucking flat. I wanted to break out of it, and I gradually grew fond of the exhibition spaces, and I wanted to activate the space more. This is also the reason why I have not been working much with frames. Most of the works are without

frames, so that they would float into the actual wall they are in. I was happy with the drapes because it activates the space where it is at.

But this was also some time ago, and in between there have been both framed works and other installations. Right now, however, I am going back to very small size black and white photographs, maybe because I am afraid that this technique will disappear from the market. I want to do it before it goes away. The demand for analogue technique is not so great, because most professional photographers use digital cameras, for a wide variety of reasons. You see one lab after another to close down, but perhaps it will grow into a specific, exclusive thing, or it will vanish.

MH

You do not shoot with a digital camera?

AvH

No, not at all. Although recently I started to work with digital camera, but it's a completely different project, nothing to do with my art. I am doing a book together with an economic historian, Jan Jörnmark, a lecturer here in Gothenburg at Chalmers Technical University. It is on globalization, and together with Jan I am photographing abandoned places, factories and schools, etc. We were in Detroit and Cleveland, for example, during the whole process, we will go to many places, to Dubai, Croatia, to China, and so on. It is about trying to understand what is happening, because the world is changing very rapidly. We will also go to abandoned places in Sweden.

The initial question is: what implications does globalization have for us? Through these places we go to, we analyse the impact and processes of post-industrialization, and the effects of digital information for economy. It is not just about images that are effected through digitalization, because money does not exist any more. Jan writes, and we both take photographs^(see <http://globaliseringen.info/>). But we do discuss things, and I question him – and then we argue.

MH

About what?

AvH

His approach is very descriptive, I am much more for taking a stand and criticizing. I am not used to just looking and reporting. But Jan clearly has a point when he claims that trying to understand what has happened, trying to explain the circumstances around

economic currents, is crucial to people. Everyone has the right to know the cause of phenomena that effect their lives so deeply.

We are just at the beginning of the project. I have not been interested in economics before, but I soon realized that there is not such a huge gap between psychology and economics. The picture is bigger – and I have read now Marx for the first time. He was a genius, he saw it all coming. *The Communist Manifesto* is a great description of the state of the world today.

MH

How did this project start?

AvH

All this came about by sheer chance. We met because we have our children in the same kindergarten. He saw my images and invited me to participate. I was really happy to, because I was longing for this kind of work again, because my starting point was in documentary photography.

For this project, a digital camera is perfect. You have to work fast and you need to see what you have, because it is going into a book. I would never use digital for an artwork, because it is not good enough.

Why? Well, I have build my world of images on the notion that you have a black space inside the camera, and you have a black space in the darkroom, and then you have light reflecting on the film, and it is some kind of alchemical process that I really need.

MH

Do you print the works yourself?

AvH

I do not, unfortunately, do the prints myself, but I stand there, next to the printer. It is sad I don't have time to be in the darkroom enough. There is something in film, being better and more sensitive. There is some magic involved that I like.

MH

Let's get back to the quote, and the part where you talk about "consciously political art". What do you mean by this?

AvH

There has always been that side. I was never just an aesthete. I have always had concerns, mostly about gender issues, but also psychoanalytic issues in my works. It is no longer as clear as it was in the beginning, but I think there is still a kind of criticism involved in almost everything I do.

MH

Back to the particular photo. What would be political here?

AvH

I think it is about excluded anger. About being trapped in a very defined situation, being victimized by the past. It is on both levels, but activated more on the personal than on the structural side. The latter part would be, well, you see... the funny thing is that the person we see on the behind of the woman, we are not sure if it is a man or a woman. Or are you?

MH

No, and sure, that is a central part of its inherent gravity, this ambiguity that is hanging there, heavily present but unresolved.

AvH

Yes, and again, it is both its power, but also its downside. I hate being too obvious. Partly people appreciate my work because it is so ambiguous. The question is: how ambiguous can you be before you lose focus? It is a balancing act.

MH

Talking about the structural level, there was something that caught my eye this morning, walking the streets of Gothenburg, recognizing the numerous posters from the election campaigns (parliamentary elections were held in Sweden 19.9.2010). What threw me off balance was a sentence in the poster by the Green party, and their using the word heteronormativity (*heteronorm* in their parlance), demanding a new Sweden without, for example, heteronormativity. Is this concept close to you?

AvH

It is a word I would never use. But it is very interesting. I am more occupied with that subject in my private life than in my work. There has always been some kind of research of gender and of pre-fixed postures of identity.

MH

If not that concept, what then?

AvH

The only theory that I have been interested in, and that I have read a lot about is psychoanalysis. It both explains things and turns them around. It is very subversive. Sometimes it has a tendency to lock things up, but then again, at other times it is very liberating for our thoughts.

MH

What type of psychoanalysis are you interested in?

AvH

The classics, Freud, that's the basis, but after that Winnicot, I have read a lot of child psychology, also Melanie Klein. My favourite contemporary one is the French analyst Didier Anzieu. He was analysed by Lacan, and he developed a theory called 'skin-ego', which has been a very inspiring idea for me, the notion that our skin is both a container and also an interface, a screen. It is about the mental connections with the skin, connecting the body and the mind. His thesis is that mental processes are rebuilt from bodily functions in conjunction with the environment.

MH

Do you go a psychoanalyst?

AvH

No, I have been to therapy, but I would never ever lay down on a couch.

MH

Why?

AvH

[Laughs] I'm so afraid of losing control. I do not think that an analysis would ruin my artistic processes, but it is a very scary situation.

MH

That is a very honest and direct answer, and something I can easily agree with. I might be a mess, but it is my mess ...

AvH

Exactly, I at least know my mess. I am familiar with it.

MH

But skin and all its connotations is of course very interesting, with the connection to photography and surface.

AvH

This is something I wanted to go deeper with, with a hypothesis of analysing the shift from analogue to digital with the concept of the skin-ego. There are so many connections around this that are worthwhile. I am not at all sure if the basic idea is valid, and if it can go the necessary distance, but I think it is definitely worth looking into.

MH

O.K., let's turn to something slightly lighter. *Ich bin die ecke aller räume* was the title for your 2008 retrospective exhibition, with a comprehensive catalogue, produced and shown first by Magasin 3, in Stockholm, and which then travelled, for example, to the Turku Art Museum where I saw it. Where does the title come from?

AvH

Oh, that is from a song by Rammstein, called "Mann Gegen Mann". You know, listening to Rammstein was the best introduction to the German language.

MH

But isn't it a bit politically incorrect to admit to listening to Rammstein?

AvH

[Laughs] Well, I love ice hockey as well. But only on TV. I might start to go to the games because I need a hobby. But in fact, I just wrote about ice hockey on the tsnok blog, it was also about Formula One. It was about the two idols that I had as a child, the goalie Pelle Lindberg and the race driver Ronnie Petterson.

MH

Didn't they both die in car accidents?

AvH

Exactly, and they were both the idols of my age. I was in love with them both. But they died, yes. Lindberg was playing for the Philadelphia Flyers, and was killed in a drunken car accident in 1985. Ronnie Petterson died in a competition in Monza, Italy, in 1978.

MH

But the title?

AvH

Yes, I love some texts of Rammstein, and this is a line that continues *Ich bin die schatten alle Bäume*.

MH

[Laughs] It sounds so much better when you take the latter part away ...

AvH

Yes, the title was perfect for me, because, for one thing, the *Ecke*, the corner in every exhibition space, is so important. You have to relate to it. I also felt that I had put some of my people in the photos into the corner. And being the corner of every room is a fantastic task.

MH

Let's go on to the self-portraits that you have made. While looking at the retrospective catalogue, it was a surprise to me to realize how many of those you had done through the years.

AvH

I keep doing them, yes. For one thing, it is a very distinct genre in photography, surely in painting too, but then the other part is the practical one: what you have when there is nothing else, is you and yourself. I guess I am not that interesting in portraying me,

but of course that is a part of it, but it is more about the issue of self-reflecting that interests me. In each of these I wanted the shutter to be visible in the image; that it is me, who presses the button there. It is visible, almost like an unbroken chain, the image and myself and the gaze, and like an umbilical cord, this shutter and its wire.

MH

It is a very impressive and heavy type of work, including the titles, just referring to this one, talking about infidelity and decay?

AvH

It is about my mother again. She practised both infidelity and decay.

MH

And I assume you haven't shown these works to your mother either?

AvH

No, no.

MH

Now we can finally go back to where it all began, and to the documentary issues.

AvH

Well, the very beginning, the fascination with photography began with my parents' bookshelves. They are not intellectual persons, they are working class. No cultural interest whatsoever. In the bookshelves there were no books, only an atlas, the *Bästa*, *Reader's Digest*, but there was also a series of books called the *Nordiskt Kriminalkrönikan*, something like the Nordic Crime Annual, a yearly book that the police in Nordic countries publish. They say they publish it to generate money for their sport activities. The book collects the main crimes, the highlights in all Nordic countries in that year. There are longer essays written by lawyers and policemen, very detailed and very graphic images. They also had a historical section.

But these were in the bookshelves. I have no idea why, because my parents are not interested in law or in crime. My theory is that someone was selling this series from door to door, and that my parents were too embarrassed to say no to it. The books came every year, and they formed a big collection. I was a very curious child, always looking for information, things to read and look at. I used to sit there and look at this stuff, and this was in the '70s, when pretty heavy photo material was published.

This was my first encounter with photography.

You know, portraits of both victims and perpetrators, chopped off arms and so on, stuff that you could no longer publish. But also images that were complete unromantic, just a big empty field, a very bad photograph, and often they had these added elements, an arrow pointing at something. All this really got me going, it really got me started with my imagination. There was no clear story yet, but a great deal of room for thinking the story out.

So that's where it really started. Later, as a teenager I got involved with organizations like Folkets Bio, then working with the record label Radium, here in Gothenburg, looking at strong black and white photographs, Chister Strömholm and the like. This interest made me steal a camera, because I was really poor as a teenager. Then I started to take pictures. But soon enough I realized I was not a good documentary photographer, it made me uncomfortable. I felt uneasy approaching people with a camera, as if I was about to steal something from them. I could not get close, and if you can not get close to people, you better turn to objects.

Then I started studying in Konstfack, University of Arts and Design in Stockholm, meeting one of the teachers, Hans Hedberg, who completely turned my head around by introducing post-modern theories and philosophy and feminism. It was a two-year course where much of the focus was put on theory, which was new to me at the time. It was like a different world opening up, and it gave me the tools to work within the context of art. The program was very ambitious, and the students as well; it created a great environment to work in. In spite of the dreadful technical conditions, I should add. We did not even have our own desks at school, a fact that really toughened us up!

MH

Is there still some kind of a longing in you for the documentary and the truth in a photograph?

AvH

I kind of left that behind, but it is a great joy to take part in this book project that is so much about the act of looking for good pictures in these places. I am not looking for truth any more, I am looking for things and images to work, to be effective, to shine!

MH

Let us focus a bit more on the context. We did talk about Rammstein, but since you have clearly stated

how “många av mina bilder bygger på andra bilder”
(My pictures are built upon other pictures),^(Caidahl 1999, 66)
how do you contextualize your works?

AvH

Most of the artists I enjoy do not do works that are close to mine. I don't think these people would actually like my art. I am referring to the conceptual artists, especially the notion of letting your eye rest on the surface, but at the same time realizing that there is a spin, there is something behind the curtain. There is room for speculation.

I am talking about artists like John Baldessari, Dan Graham, but then again I love Francis Bacon. Of course Cindy Sherman was inevitable, extreme important for a large number of female artists, but I have not seen anything from her after the Hollywood women series. I still like Jeff Wall. Louise Bourgeois is great, she is sometimes very messy, but her passion and creativity is very inspiring.

But if I would pick an artists I would really like to be, that would be Bruce Nauman. He seems to have so much fun at working. I never have fun working.

MH

No? Are you sure?

AvH

Yes, it is just a big hassle. The only time when it is really fun is when the idea pops up. You have a few seconds or perhaps a minute of this feeling of yes yes yes. After that it's mostly just boring, trying realize it, having to deal with exhibition situations etc.

MH

O.K., now comes a big question, and a difficult one, but if you look back, are there any clear big issues or crises in your practice?

AvH

Oh yes, it's a constant crisis. I have never felt comfortable or secure with my work. But the biggest crisis was when I started to get attention. It made me self-aware and it became almost suffocating. This was in mid '90s, I had so much self-critique going on. I honestly thought that people who talked about my photos in an admiring way did not understand anything at all.

MH

What the about retrospective exhibition?

AvH

That was fun, that was truly fun [laughs]. But that was an extremely luxurious situation. Magazine 3 had

collected my works for ten years, they had almost everything that I had done. So when David Neuman, director of the Magasin 3, and the curator of the exhibition, called and said I have an idea to do a retrospective, first I told him it was a stupid idea, that it was not right time, such a bad idea, but he convinced me and then we started to work on it. It was so much fun. I made a new piece, that blue wall, and that was also great, constructing it with an architect. Some other people were also involved. What we did was to go to the storage room, carry out pieces of art, put them on the floor, and kept looking at them, asking, O.K., where should we start, and where should we put it, you know, improvising the whole set up, spending three months building it. I had never seen my pictures in that wide a scope and all in the same place. It was really important to discover that there is a consistency in them. I never felt I had continuity before, but now I saw it. I guess you are always your own blind spot.

But it was great, breaking old series, placing them with new ones and so on. It was a creative and fun process.

MH

Any post-retrospective blues?

AvH

No, the one thing is, not perhaps a crisis, but an issue is working here at university, and at the HFF, the School of Photography at the University of Gothenburg, now for three years. It surely has not done good to my own work. I don't have the energy and time. I do enjoy the contact and working with the students, but the rest is problematic. I do not enjoy the bureaucracy and the strange hierarchies you have in a university. I thought I came to a place that would be more open-minded and flexible. But the students are great.

MH

One more big question – narrativity. Has there been a change in your perspective to it through the years?

AvH

Yes, I think I was more into it before than now. It is all about telling and not telling at the same time. It is all about wanting to say something and rejecting the desire to say something. For me, this type of really convincing narrative takes place in the works of David Lynch, whom I really admire. His take on things is admirable, talking about the last film, *Inland Empire*, which is a masterpiece. It is three-hour-long story, very strange, illogical and nonlinear.

What interests me especially is the breaking up of logic, in linearity and also in reason, in how the characters behave, but how it still makes sense as a whole. Film is probably the most ultimate form of art. You have the narrative, the visuals, the sound and a perfect space to mediate the movie: a screen, speakers, and comfortable chairs. You have the focus and the darkness surrounding the spectators. It is perfect.

MH

Have you ever thought about making films?

AvH

No, no. Why? I can't hold all the strings together then. I am very narrow-minded when I work. Making a movie would require making so many choices that I would go bonkers. I don't even want to imagine how many compromises one has to make and how many negotiations to go through when making movies. That is definitely not for me.

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Three Steps to Heaven (and Back Again)

– Documentary, Documentarism and Documentality

“Although, therefore, any feature of any tradition, any theory, any practice, any belief can always under certain conditions be put into question, the practice of putting in question, whether within a tradition or between traditions, itself always requires the context of a tradition.”

(Alasdair MacIntyre 2006, 12)

There is this saying, this set of distinguished words that pops into my mind. They come and they go, but they return with an increasing frequency and ferocity. It is a sentence that I most likely have read somewhere, but can't recall where or when. I doubt it is from a pop song; it's a bit too sophisticated for that. It is a sentence that serves as a traffic light. Admittedly, I am not that sure whether this sentence functions as a green, yellow or red light – or if the lights are out and gone, dysfunctional. But I do know that it has a meaning, and that it carries with it the gravity of importance.

The sentence goes like this: Anything new is based on something old.

Is this a conservative statement? Is it *brutto tutto* reactionary, looking into the past and staying there? Does it imply that everything is and remains the same old same old, and nothing changes?

Let us repeat the seven words: Anything new is based on something old. Instead of conserving or naturalizing a situation, it claims attention for the forever recurring give and take among all three time spheres, past, present and future. It does not state that everything comes from the old, or that everything labelled

as new is in fact just something old. This sentence claims that we indeed must pay attention to how things are built upon and what they are based on. It is the embeddedness, the situatedness of our being-in-the-world that is in question. And that creation and construction of 'how things hang together' is here both addressed and articulated, not as an answer, but as a beginning.

It is a sentence that I can't shake off when thinking about the discourses on the quality and content of documentary. It is a discussion with multiple voices that is not a monolithic enterprise. It is a discussion with a distinguished past, present and future. It is a presence, a theme that is gaining weight and importance in various fields of contemporary art. It is a theme that combines and connects some major exhibitions, such as documenta 11, 2002, and the 6th Berlin biennial from the year 2010, both of which we will return to later on, in great detail. Not so surprisingly, it is a theme that is also constantly faced in the wide fields of photography and photography discourses, which by itself gives legitimacy for the whole enterprise. Whether we admit it or not, the question and content of what is a document and its relationship to reality is an open issue, an open wound, to put some colour in it, but also a dilemma that does not disappear. It is here to stay, not to fade away, and no amount of talk about the death of it or how very yesterday it is will make it disappear.

What is common to all of the discussions dealing with the main question of the role and content of documentary, is the relationship that we have with the world out there, and the world inside each of us. In short, it is about how, why, when, where and with what means we deal with reality. It is a constellation that is as evident as it is vague. Reality, sure, but what kind of a reality are we talking about? We will return later on to the shift from addressing reality as a fixed entity, and instead seeing the world as not so controllable sets of plural realities that nevertheless are always embedded.

But for now, let us stay with the beginning. At the beginning, there was a word, and not that much later, an image. A picture. A picture that had a tendency to claim that it served as a proof of how the world

is and is made. It is a picture (think: a photograph) that claims to be objective, truthful and neutral. Increasingly, the favoured metaphors for this picture were a mirror, and also a window. Later, the objective character of a photograph was criticized and disqualified thousands of times, but the inherent myth lived on. If there is nothing else left to say, the propaganda for the pro-photography mindset as being in itself a realist medium claims that even if not all photos are carriers of true messages, a photograph has nevertheless more confidence in truth claims than handmade images. ^(Walden 2010, 104)

This is a belief, a conviction held firmly by Scott Walden. Without a shadow of a doubt, Scott Walden is a serious man. He is trained in philosophy, works as a professor in that field, and he also practices photography at a highly competitive level. With the experience and background of his twin practices, he goes on to state the following: “Perceptual beliefs formed via photographs, as a species of perceptual beliefs in general, thus likewise never deserve unreserved confidence. But we are nonetheless better off – perhaps in terms of truth and frequently in terms of confidence – learning about the world via photographs than we are learning about the world via subjectively formed images.” ^(Ibid. 110)

To highlight the time frame, in the histories of about 150 years of photography, Walden’s view is located at our end of the spectrum. Photography presents reality, and while actually almost everyone admits that, well, it’s not exactly only doing that, it is nonetheless the spot where it lands, and lands hard. It no longer moves. It is time to go home, stay home and take some more pictures. True pictures.

But Walden, well, he is not alone. Not at least in the search for an independent solid gold identity for photography. As Geoffrey Batchen ^(1999, 8, 12) has argued, the group that still keeps looking for that one true identity is spearheaded by influential characters and players like John Szarkowski and André Bazin. This is the view that photography has its own essence. Against this, within the same frame of a large discussion, we can produce, for example, John Tagg claiming that photography has no identity, or Victor Burgin arguing

that photography is all about how it is connected to the general sphere of cultural production, or how for Allan Sekula photography is grounded in its contingency. For Batchen, the difference is sited in the move from seeing photography as a form and a style to focusing on its function and use. Thus, it is a contest between seeing something having its own nature, versus seeing it being solely a cultural phenomenal – a collision between a formalist and a contextual reading. ^(Ibid. 20)

At the same time, it is anything but difficult to list those agents who have credibly and clearly articulated a profound criticism of the belief that photography has a capacity to offer a direct insight into the real of the real, a real that for those who do make it is exactly that: it is made and shaped. It is a site and situation that the philosopher of history Hayden White has described like this: “All discourse constitutes the objects which it pretends only to describe realistically and to analyse objectively.” ^(1978, 3)

This is to say that we are never absolute insiders or outsiders. We are caught in-between – the acts and their connectedness to where they come from, where they are acted upon and where will they be performed next time. We are part of the mess, part of the problem, and anything we do is a combination of reflecting and affecting the way we are and the way we perceive who we are and where we are. In connection to taking photographs and the photographer’s role, Judith Butler has well underlined this contextual conditioning that is never-ending. “The photos depict or represent a scene, the visual image preserved within the photographic frame. But the frame also belongs to a camera that is situated spatially in the field of vision, thus not shown within the image, thought still functioning as the technological precondition of an image, and indicated indirectly by the camera. Although the camera is outside the frame, it is clearly ‘in’ the scene as its constitutive outside.” ^(2009, 80)

Unfortunately or not, this realization in itself does not let us off the hook. The burden of contextualization, the necessity for context-based interpretation that is always value-laden and never neutral, is acutely present and demanding. This construction and comprehension of how-we-see-depends-on-where-we-see-

it-from is not a simple exercise of dedicated analysis. It is the mess we are in, and often enough worried about. We are conditioned in our ways of seeing, perceiving and feeling for, and not paying attention to. This is to say: we are constantly conditioned but not completely determined. Following Butler, it is crucial to remember: “to learn to see the frame that blinds us to what we see is no easy matter”.^(Ibid. 100)

When paying attention to the ways artists articulate this productive tension, the act of constituting the discourse, we can recall Martha Rosler, for example, who has a long practice to lean on, and who can articulate a critical practice-based position: “A defining element of a documentary image is its particularity, that it represents a specific spatio-temporal ‘what-is’.”^(2000, 15). What this then implies is that for Rosler what is at stake is in every case and site the history of the photograph, its practice, and its context. “There is no use in trying to pin down photographic, or cultural, meaning outside a context of reception.”^(Ibid.)

As for the quest for the real and the truth embodied in it, the documentarist’s liberal conscience and sensibility for visual imaginary is undressed and brought into devastating clarity by Rosler’s angry but still very credible set of words: “Documentary is a little like horror movies, putting a face on fear and transforming threat into fantasy, into imaginary.”^(1989, 306)

What this implies is not that all documentary images lie or veil, but that their inherent character is that they are made. Therefore they are constantly searching for a balance, without a locked-up frame. They dangle between hurting and helping, paying attention and dismissing, returning and leaving.

Or to add more fuel to the fire, I refer to another name worth taking into the discussions, the artist and writer Trinh T. Minh-ha, who emphasizes that a documentary cannot ever be neutral. It always does what it is supposed to do: it points out and highlights a version of what is seen and viewed as important. Reality, in its arrangements and re-arrangements, can be heightened or impoverished, but it is never objective. And yes, even if documentary practice has many ways and tricks to ‘forget’ where it comes from and how it comes about, its aesthetics and politics cannot be separated.^(1990, 89)

However, following the light that is definitely not green, as in go-go-go, we recall the assertion how everything new is based on something old. It is an act of recollection from a past that does not get repeated, but rather brings something back to the fore, back to the centre of the issue and the struggle of argument at hand.

Looking at the calendar of last century, we go back to the year 1926. We go back to the words written by the pioneering filmmaker and producer of documentarists named John Grierson^(see Hardy 1966). Now what is it that is so wonderfully interesting in what Grierson was already saying way back then, when we did not even have the Polaroid picture? You know, the picture that we were asked to shake-shake-shake?

Here it comes, but it does not go – away. It stays, and it remains. In light. It stings in its accuracy and its openness. It is one of the most beautiful utterances dealing with how we face and respond with the world. Are you ready?

The creative treatment of actuality. Let us spell it like it is desired and destined to be laid out and displayed:

Creative Treatment of Actuality

This is how Grierson defined documentary film and photography. It is a creative act, it treats the world in constructing a version of reality, and it does it right here in connection and conflict with what it sees and what it wants to see.^(For an interesting discussion of the inherent contradictions of Grierson's motivations in combining an aim of civic rationale with the prospect of accessing a mass audience, see Rosen 1993) For Grierson, the task of documentary was in its focus and character *social*, not art in itself. The aim was to affect public opinion, to educate people. He writes: “The documentary idea demands no more than that the affairs

of our time shall be bought to the screen in a fashion which strikes the imagination and makes observation a little richer than it was."^(1971, 22) This act was the act of creative treatment of actuality. Not the new thing, not the new truth, but a potentiality of an opening. Not a wound, but a site where something might emerge – becoming a place.

And this is where we should have stopped, and thought. Already then, and especially now. Not for a minute, but for a long time, engaged in the task of thinking through, and staying with and constantly returning to, asking what is going on and why. Because, well..., because if we had had the courage to accept the process character of reality and our narrated versions off and with it, we could have – collectively speaking

Calling for compliments.
Is that a naturally given trait or an
intentionally cultivated habit of the heart?

Facts of Life – PART 25

as parts and participants of the mess, parts of the problem – we could have saved a lot of unnecessary confusion and trouble.

Because, well..., because, Grierson was not alone. Not having the time or means to delve deeper into the other challenging paths, it is enough here to mention two opportunities. On the discourse level, we can choose the road leading to Dziga Vertov (a name he chose to use, but a man born with the name David Abelevich Kaufman), the Russian pioneer of moving images and writing with them. Vertov, best known perhaps for his experimental work *Man with a Movie Camera*, dating from 1929, and his aim of working with a camera showing 'life as it is', was a source of inspiration for the later development of cinema vérité.^(For Vertov's writings, see 1995) Or we can stop and think with the following description, that no lesser figure in history of photography than Walker Evans used to speak about his practice. For Evans, what he did when he did what he did, was photographing in "documentary style". It is an opening for a practice that keeps both sides close on purpose, having them re-enact one another, the more objective approach that it is not possible to separate from emotional and aesthetic interests and ideas.^(For a discussion on Evans, see Schuman, 2004.)

But let us stick around, and hold on to Grierson's slogan, those three magic words that beg to continuously participate in the situated and committed definition of how they are used, articulated, accelerated or stopped in every site of an image. The question is: is it really that interesting a claim? Brian Winston has used a lot of energy in deflating our expectations and hopes regarding this slogan. For Winston⁽²⁰⁰⁸⁾, Grierson failed then, and he fails now. Grierson does not live up the huge expectations for documentary. But with this critical cry, Winston is both on the spot, and amazingly out of it.

Certainly, there is no doubt that the high ambitions of Grierson's project have not been fulfilled. Grierson – and he definitely was not the only one – had great hopes for the educational and civilizing role of documentary cinema. Those hopes did not live long – or well. Grierson's vision failed, but so did a lot of other things attached to the idea of a civil society.

Three steps
to Heaven
(and back again)

In short, the world we live in changed from the idea of a whole united public space into thousands of fragmented parts of it. But this change and the flaws do not detract in any way from the potential of the original opening of a definition. What we need to do is to get back to it – not in time, but to re-activate it here, and now. For that, Winston puts his finger in the right place, demanding we answer all of it, point by point. What is creative, what is treatment, and what is actuality? But unlike Winston, we should stay clear of the all-encompassing answers and aims. We need to get into the specifics, into the particularities. In a pleasantly well-articulated text that pulls things together that have drifted apart, Vivian Rehberg⁽²⁰⁰⁵⁾ draws our attention to this sentence. She describes it as famous and paradoxical. Besides being famous (it has truly gained a life of its own, especially since Grierson himself does not really provide a more detailed analysis of the slogan), it has also been oddly neglected in terms of its embedded potentialities. But paradoxical?

Here we go to the heart of the issue. We go to the archives of both film and photography. We go to the facts of works of art and life. We look at them, and we nod. Sure, and certainly. Regardless of their origin, whether these photographs come from the south or the north, the east or the west, they all do (or at least claim to do and try to do) the same thing. It is not a trick of the light. It is the core of the activity: it is a creative treatment of actuality.

Let us do this act of visualization again:

*Creative
Treatment
of
Actuality*

It is a trick that has perhaps a perplexing treat. This trick cannot be solved. It can only be activated, done here and now. It is never possible to repeat it the

same way, even if the trick itself must be constantly repeated while the changing same alters. Never that much different, but always enough. Because, well..., because, if I now would give fixed content to these lovely three words, I would spoil it. I would kill it. I would destroy it. These words must remain as challenges – something confronted in and through practices, not abstractly and absent-mindedly.

But hold on. Why has that been so vehemently, and still so successfully denied? Why do so many of those discourses of documentary and documentation pretend that they are not taking part in the creative treatment of actuality?

Why has the theoretical discourse not enjoyed that deliberately open and emerging call for participation? Why has, instead, so many an enthusiast searched for an over-all categorization? We can easily take the case of Michael Renov^(1993, 21) as an example of the act of pinning down, who conceptualizes the content of the active making of photographs, the voice of a documentary, into the four categories worth repeating here:

1. to record, reveal, or preserve
2. to persuade or promote
3. to analyse or interrogate
4. to express

Or to pick up another point of reference, even more of a modern classic, let us recall the extremely influential list in which John Szarkowski⁽¹⁹⁶⁶⁾ defined what makes photography so very unique. Szarkowski's list articulated a series of propositions 1) The Thing Itself, 2) The Detail, 3) The Frame, 4) Time, and 5) Vantage Point.

Not wanting to go deeper into the details of each of these two lists, or how credible their claims as definitions are, and ultimately, how the time frame has affected them, the main question here goes back to the task of forming such exclusive lists. Why do we need lists like this?

These lists – we might even be able to agree on this – never cover the terrain fully, and while pointing out

a direction, they are always contested. It is a setup which always walks that thin line, where even if they claim not to be all-encompassing and normative, but merely a tool to aid thinking, they tend to become what they deny being. Why these normative, exclusive lists, which only shut things down, when we already have a definition that opens things up and is available for productive use?

Is the slogan given us by Grierson seen here as a probable definition, as a proper tool to do something with, as a stepping stone, a trampoline that gives us what we need to move from guarding and controlling, into the processes of how and why and when? Why not enjoy the responsibility of producing contextual definitions, instead of illusions of conceptual safety nets? And yes, why not the pleasure principle rather than the sense of security provided by frozen categories? Before going into this complexity of honest dilemmas, let us enjoy one more brief moment with Grierson, another anecdote, another frame of mind that gives hope. "A mirror held up to nature is not so important in a dynamic and fast changing society as the hammer which shapes it – it is as a hammer, not a mirror, that I have sought to use the medium that came to my somewhat restive hand."^(1971, 29)

Against the act of openly and actively trying to make and shape our views of the world, we have the claim that nothing much comes in between a photograph and reality. It is a claim that its supporters hold onto with such blind conviction that to call them fundamentalists is a rather mild statement. A photograph shows us reality, and this is so whether it was retouched, cropped, made by combining negatives, or whatever tricks of the trade made the picture in analogue times, or with all the changes and challenges learned by two generations of Photoshop users in the digital age. A photograph is authentic even if it is, by its character, a construction of its presence. And even if (as Susan Sontag noted so gracefully) the experience and the realization that a photograph can add and diminish, in short, that it can manipulate what and how we see, is basically as old as the medium in itself. Sontag reminds us of how the technique of retouching the negative was already introduced at the World's Fair of 1855 in Paris. The morality is lost, but should be gained

back and relocated within our games of desire and desirability. "The news that the camera could lie made getting photographed much more popular."^(2008, 86)

But well, with or without an educated guess, now we see it, and now we don't. And now we wonder whether what the photo in its presumably mechanical setup represents is actually connected to its source or its function. Or is it witnessing something that it is taking part in, or whether it is truly out of the sequence of events?

The problem crashes down on the issue of authenticity. Consequently, we are not only begged but forced to ask the follow up questions: Whose authentic and which authenticity?

Somebody, somewhere, some time ago sang about synchronicity. Or was it about the seventh wave, the longest wave? The love we lost and the security that we gained when turning the corner and hiding behind the wishing well of a solid unchanging reality. It is a story of a searched for, aimed at and desired oneness. One truth, one rationality, one world. One, one, one. Not two, not three. No two ways about it. Just one. Perhaps one that, from time to time, is replaced by another one, but never placed next to others. There is always only one king of the hill. No more, never, but due to the cruel denial of alternatives and plurality, it is much, much less.

It is a oneness that we might be able to believe as a story. But as a description of reality it is kind of sad. It is naive, and it is simply not convincing. We read, we see, we hear and we feel. We do all these things that make us confront and deal with the world as a plural number of realities, that is not to be boxed into one without enormous structural and practical violence.

The problem is not only the ideality of an authentic one in the ways of realizing ourselves in the world. The problem projects itself onto the discussion on the identity of the medium of a photograph. Here, the illusion of authenticity gains another form and format. Here, the issue is about the model of an 'either/or' construction of an identity of what photography is, does and should do.

As with authenticity, this belief in the exclusive identity of a photograph is based on the claim that identity is a construction of the idea where the winner takes all. It is a construction where it comes down to the important selection of the always limited number of 'either/or's'. To put it simply, if a characteristic of T (this time, a photograph, but this time, also any kind of photo) is to be part of the identity politics of a photograph, then it cannot be a significant part of any other medium. It is unique, and unique universally, across all its uses, and only for a photograph. It is to be solely either this, or that; in other words, distinguished, specific, unique and characteristic. Never both, and never with any meaningful shades of grey.

The claim that the act of taking a photograph is mechanical is used by many sides of the debate. It is used by Scruton (1983), for example, to argue that a photograph cannot be art because it does not actively shape and represent the world. It just operates on the mechanical level. The very same argument is used for concluding that due to its mechanic mode, photography is neutral, objective and trustworthy.

But well, like, what is the credibility, what is the actuality of all these propositions? When and where are they made? Surprisingly or not, some were uttered very recently, some not so many years ago. All of the claims mentioned and hinted at above are still hard currency in the arguments, while we confront a reality that has completely exploded in their faces. It is very hard to believe, but well, what can you do, life is cruel: it is the fact. The discussion is often enough successfully framed by the totalizing entity of what is or what is not a photograph. And this in a time of the conditions of our conditions, when the segmentation of what a photograph is, what a photograph does, and what do we do with the item called photograph is not possible to sustain in an all-encompassing way. The thing itself, the ways photos are made and used and abused, slips away. It leaves the hall, and it certainly leaves multiple traces – be they economic, historical, psychological or whatever.

These traces, luckily, bring us back to the heart of the issue. What is it that makes documentary actually, and in fact, a proper version of documentary?

What is the line, or gap or hidden agenda between a realist take and a constructivist version? What happens when we focus on the split between the use value (means) and the exchange value (commodity) of an image? It is a realization that ought to give us the capacity to comprehend that we cannot disentangle the inherent cross-reference and inter-dependence of how we constantly do the double thing: we describe and we define. There is no either/or, but a both/and relationship between a) the world as it appears, and b) the way the world really is.

Before going into the particularities of the discussion of a) (how the world appears) versus and in interaction with b) (how it is) in the context of contemporary art, let us refresh the plot with one particularly anchored view on the role of documentation. "The process of documentation is not an external record of artistic decisions, it is intrinsic to the decision-making process itself: no decision without documentation."^(Groys, 2004, 5) Thus, a document is an inherent part of anything we do when we transform one experience into another one, when we communicate and when we distribute and archive. A document leaves a trace, and it is a central part of the act of both how to do things with words, and what it is that you do when you do what you do.

Here, a proposition, a mild one. What if we could agree on these starting points (the plurality of the uses of photography and the central role of documentation in a creative treatment of actuality), and to get off the passive strife and get on with it? Get on without the hysterical need to pin down the act of knowledge production, and instead go on to the honest dilemmas of what is in an image and how do we deal with images as controversial and never as something that is one, but rather as something in the making, something that is both/and? In a complex and shifting situation with regard to both content and technology, the aim of trying to answer in a wholesale manner what is and what is not a documentary is not helpful. On the contrary, it is misleading and harmful. Instead, what might be productive is to ask how it is done, and also why and for whom, not in every site and situation, but every time and in each specific case.

This is an idea that finds solace in the philosophy of situatedness and contextualization of our life-world. But it is an idea that also has a friend in practice. It is an idea of slowing down, that is articulated by a Finnish photographer with a more than three decades of work in photography. When asked if documentary has a role in the 21st century, with the vast information highways and insatiable media networks competing with it, Jorma Puranen stressed the need for new strategies for both doing and presenting photography. “If we still think we have something to say, we have to slow down, to contextualize and frame the image properly in a way that it becomes understandable and receivable.” (Raatikainen 2000, 30)

But what about this how? How do we do it when we do it? This is to ask: how do we position ourselves with regard to the context of our actions? The implication is that we must become as aware as possible of the evident presuppositions that we carry with us to every and any site and situation. To say this in other words: please pay attention to the inherent logic of each act – its past, present and future articulations and attachments. It is a logic that is to be described thus: what we find depends on what we are looking for.

Therefore, it should be possible to admit that what we find is rather significantly different if we position ourselves in the context as a participating observant and not as a parachutist (for example, a photojournalist) who drops in and comes out with a product that is fast and furious. We should also be able to admit that the task is not to add a prohibiting normative tag to either of these strategies. They are in themselves productive strategies that have no inherent connection to their internal qualities of being good, bad, truthful or sad. But the catch is that we cannot choose them both at the same time.

What we can't avoid is the choosing. We can choose to be a fly on the wall – another well rehearsed and used metaphor for a one certain type of positioning of the *how* of documentary practice. A fly on the wall that sees but is not seen. Or a fly on the wall that sticks to the wallpaper once it has been well and truly squashed. This is the strategy we have learned to know in moving images as cinema vérité.

But is it possible just to watch and not be part of what we watch? Philosophically it has been argued here that this idea of a fly on the wall is an impossibility. We are never outsiders, but always situated inside, in the messy activity that we try to observe and then figure out what is happening. We do the double thing: we define and describe, we watch and our watching has an effect on the events.

Another connected and relevant thing is to ask: should we even want to be like a fly on the wall? To confound the dedicated followers of the cinema vérité genre, the German filmmaker Werner Herzog cuts a great figure. Given his work, in a recent interview, Herzog states rather predictably that he does not want to be a fly. He wants to be a hornet, the one who never lets go and always returns to pester and to sting, the one who sets the “hordes of cows in panic”. It is the strategy Herzog both believes in and practices, and what he has labelled as ecstatic truth^(Häntzschel 2010). Now, well..., now, is that it? Is the choice between a presumably neutral (friendly or fiendly) observer or ecstatic participation? And well, how does this all manifest itself in documentary driven practices in the contemporary art?

Let us now focus on two seminal exhibitions – both curated with the preconceived intention of facing and dealing with the world out there. And yes, both presented and promoted with the embedded claim that these shows would deal with the raw and real reality out there – the reality that bites and is per se problematic. The difference between the two is not just their timing or their scale, as documenta 11 is obviously the event of the early decade of the new millennium, and the Berlin biennial can be seen as a direct continuation, not as a consequence, of the other exhibition.

However, what both share and promote – sometimes openly, and often enough semi-unconsciously – is the aim of showing how reality is as it is. It is a strategy that seeks to remain in anonymity and without a clear voice, that Boris Groys has defined in the motto “so ist es einfach” – translated as “that’s how it just is”. For Groys, this leads to the following observation: “Today, up to 90% percent of

the advanced type of video art is more or less based on the idea of just disposing and showing people from different levels of society and different positions... These works are grounded on the presupposition that the Other is in itself always worth while to be presented and that it (the otherness) will show its face in one or another way – ways that do not happen in life.” (2007, 26)

The curator of the documenta 11, Okwui Enwezor, articulated a mega-exhibition with the aim of rethinking the avant-garde of today, especially from a post-colonial perspective. It locates itself within a conceptual label of sheer extraterritoriality. It claims to avoid normalization and uniformization, but rather stresses the continuity and circularity of the nodes of discursivity and debate, cultural situations, locations and translations. It is a position that deals with the world of proximities. “It is a world of nearness, not an elsewhere.” (2002, 44) Through its post-colonial positioning, it tried “to sublimate and replace all grand narratives through new ethical demands on modes of historical interpretation.” (Ibid. 45)

The exhibition project as a whole, with its structure of four consequent conferences called platforms leading to the main event, challenged the previously known habit of documentary claiming to be self-reflective and critical of the ways it is done. It distanced itself from the previous paradigm, here called documentary, with its characteristics of purity and neutrality, and its dichotomized black-and-white version of the world. Instead, documenta 11 stood for plural versions of reality.

The curator of the 6th Berlin biennial, Kathrin Rhomberg, already announced its focus in the title of the exhibition: “What is waiting out there”. “The common denominator of the artistic approaches presented in this exhibition is their perspective on reality. It is a perspective that can be analytical, speculative, or associative, but never relinquishes its focus on the life realities we are familiar with.” (2010, 12) For Rhomberg, it is not about a retrospective view, but it is a view placed and committed fully on the present, something she calls “our own present”. (Ibid. 12)

In Swedish buses, they ask you to use a seat belt.
They announce this first in Swedish, then in English.
They are very nice and polite about it.
The seat belts look fresh and new.
But I have never seen anyone using them.
Is it a linguistic problem?
A case of conceptual inaccuracy at work?

FACTS OF LIFE – PART 41

The 6th Berlin biennial responded to a long list of open-ended questions about how art can deal with the ambivalence we have towards reality, and especially how it can negotiate a critical and alternative view amidst the abundance of images that we are confronted with. Rhomberg goes on to say how “the works on view at the Berlin biennale give artistry only as much space as necessary to make reality visible.” (Ibid. 12)

It is a sentence that says a bit more than it was expected to say. It is a sentence that becomes the face of the whole enterprise, effectively underlining the presuppositions of the version of the game being played. The focus is here on the words “only as much space as necessary to make the reality visible”, which consequently leads to limited ways of expression and reaction. For Rhomberg, what counts are works that do not transform or translate, but reproduce the reality. Not exactly as it is, perhaps, but with as little intervention and space in-between as possible.

As an exhibition, the Berlin biennial was without any doubt well articulated. It knew what it wanted to say and how to claim the positions for it. It openly acknowledged that these works represent reality, but they also produce it; but at the same time, as an exhibition activity, it was conscious of not mixing

A Short Guide to the Genealogy of Three Concepts of Documentary

Documentary

1968–1970s

students protest,
oil crisis

end of golden years

photography not
yet an established
art practice;
photojournalism,
objective, neutral
alternative reportages

politicalization, black
and white, juxtaposition,
emerging critique
of realism

showing the other side
of society, giving a face
to the otherness,
authenticity, every-
day life, work, living
environment

Documentarism

post-1989

fall of the Berlin wall

collapse of Soviet Union

photography a central
part of contemporary art,
identity politics,
and politics of
representation

hype and hope
of pluralism

the other now has a voice
and visibility – feminism,
post-colonialism, post-
modernism

Documentality

post-2000

anti-globalization
demonstrations

naive use of
of mediums;
lack of historical
knowledge

hang-over,
anger is energy

post-Marxism,
critique of hegemonies

Three steps
to Heaven
(and back again)

the exhibition space with the real world. Whereas documenta 11 was arguing with and against the inherent truth claims of the documentary status quo, the Berlin biennial took part in the discourse from the position of what has been labelled by its main protagonist Hito Steyerl as documentality. Steyerl did not present her works in the show, but took part in a discussion in the exhibition catalogue. In their discussion, reproduced as a text, the concept of realism was actively attacked, while Steyerl came up with the following comment: “I don’t know about realism, but documentary is all about failing.”^(2010, 114)

But let us backtrack a bit. The title of this chapter announces that its core will be the three concepts of documentary, documentarism and documentality. The time line here is worth underlining. With documentary, the reference is mainly to the end of the period from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, a time when documentary photography still could maintain its illusion of purity and neutral objectivity, of showing how the world really is. Or at least some (the most politicized ones, with a tendency for flag-waving) did, while some other photographers had already moved on to a completely other place. Since the late ‘60s, and in increasing concentration and volume, since the ‘70s, there were a number of counter-movements within photography and cinema that began their internal fragmentation. No need for any excessive name dropping here, but for a playful take, and a hint for memory lane, Godard’s films are clearly an effective case in point.

To quote one source, a photographer, Stephen Shore, reflecting back on the times: “In the early ‘70s, the term ‘fictive’ was often used in conversations amongst photographers. And despite all the post-modern writers who would come soon after, this was no news for photographers.”^(Blank 2007, 106) It is a quote that points directly to the early, existing diversity and incompatibility of various photographic practices and various sites of its practice. However, one must be aware that what was news to Shore was not necessarily the same item or agenda to people working, for example, in Finland or in Sweden, where there already was a difference in the Nordic content of practices. It is an example of cultures so close but yet so different, underlining the phenomena called plural modernities

and the emergence of local particularities^(see Taylor 2004, 195) through which we become aware of the ways how the same concept is actualized in such various ways and rhythms.^(For the particular Swedish perspective, see for example Östlind 2009, and for the Finnish perspective, see Järvinen et al. 2000)

The next step was the critical take, spearheaded by both post-colonial and feminist re-readings of the histories and current events, closely related to the documentary acts of how reality is represented and why. It was an act of finding the deeply missed balance of variations of the changing same, and an act of finding the balance that – as expected – went actively across the board. Needless to say, this lead often enough to various kinds of over-simplifications. With the concept and practice of documentary, it was a face-off, and with a deliberately short circuited and negative definition of neutrality and objectivity of photographic practices of the ‘70s that was made mainly by those who attacked these artists and practices.

However, regardless of its instrumental nature, the point of the acclaimed change of paradigm is that documentarism claimed to push forward a reflective and critical version of the documentary practice. This is then localized in the rupture, experienced since the fall of the Berlin Wall, when it was no longer possible to support the view of the world as one. It had become a plurality of voices and means of expression. Instead of oneness, there was a cacophony of voices, some of them old, some of them new. The difference is that they were co-existing with their claims for visibility and for their assurance in the strength of their own voices. In short, documentarism is characterized by the following changes and elements: agency, subjectivity, the central role of women artists, post-colonial issues – and photography becoming an established form of art and its discourses.

In the large-scale and unfortunately very general time line, documentality, as argued for most strongly by Steyerl, but which has been appropriated by a large numbers of followers, drew the circle back together. Documentality brought the discussion back to the structures of power. It was not enough any more to focus on questioning identity and cultural histories,

In Belgrade, there are two riverboats
next to each other.
They are both restaurants.
The one is called Dilemma,
and the other Argument.
Definition of quality of life:
to move from one to the other and back
again without recognizing the difference.

Facts of Life – PART 16

as the generation of the early '90s had done. With a new-won interest in articulation of the workings of hegemony, the agenda was filled with a number of similar questions, like the highly politicized discussions of the '70s, but with a new time and a very different frame of mind, and the consequent visions of alternatives, or their absence. Documentality forced the issues back to the realm of who owns the structures of distribution, who controls the mechanism of representation, and who blocks the unpleasant voices out of the mainstream media. Interestingly enough, this return to politicized themes, and the act of forcing things to be seen as a political, created an echo that immediately connects it to a great number of issues debated in the mid-'70s, especially the problematic role of the monopoly of a mainstream media.

But let us now set aside the first two concepts, documentary and documentarism, which have both been argued for and against in numerous efforts.^(see, for example, the discussions on documentary in Roberts 1998, Elkins 2007 and Tagg 2009, and for documentarism, see, for example, Enwezor 2008 and Nash 2007) Let us focus on the latest of the concepts. What does documentality refer to? Interestingly enough, Steyerl coins the term with the help of the concept of governmentality, which we encountered in the late writings of Michel Foucault. Foucault was not able to develop the idea

further, due to his untimely death. But in his sketches on the theme, he followed the logic of power as a productive force. It is a force that in itself does not provide us with the ability to claim it to be positive or negative, worthwhile or destructive. Power is all around us, and it is productive. The question of how it is so, must always be faced on each given site and situation that is embedded in its structures, but not determined by it. With governmentality, Foucault wanted to address the issue of how to govern – and stressing that in his analyses, it is to be done without any prior value judgement. He was asking: what are the conditions of our conditions of government?^(1991, 95, 102)

What Steyerl does is to link together governmentality and documentary's claim to truth. They become one in documentality. For her, documentality is a location, a locality, as in an image, where government and truth production come together and converge. She refers to documentary forms that have that dual aim: "to create at once mature and immature subjects, they are supposed to educate them as critical citizens but also to adapt them to the norm, to emancipate them but also to surveil them."^(2006, 3) For Steyerl, the notion of enlightenment and education lurks behind the presuppositions of a document converging with established power to become an act of documentality. "These concepts are not neutral, they do not represent an objective picture of reality out there. But they influence their public and try to control and transform it."^(ibid.)

The problem with Steyerl's unifying of governmentality and documentary is that it flattens the edges of Foucault's argument. In fact, Steyerl's interpretation turns out to be diametrically opposed to what her source actually was striving towards. Foucault clearly did everything to avoid falling into the predestined categories of the wrongs and rights of the world. This was the so-called Marxist or post-Marxist positioning he was arguing against, and from whose attacks he spent quite a lot of time disentangling himself. The irony of the time-line is that whereas at the end of the 1960s Foucault distanced himself with notable frequency from deterministic versions of Marxist ideologies^(see, for example, Eribon 1993, 259), with Steyerl's act the setup is turned upside down. Now Foucault is made to serve a position that he actively opposed.

Re-enactment,
Repetition,
Remembering

This point cannot be overstressed. For Foucault, governmentality was part of the processes of the production of truth. These are processes where power is always present, but not as ready-made models of political structure, government, dominant class, or master and slave. For Foucault, it is about the relations of power. What is needed, said Foucault, is to break free of the simplification that power relations are bad in themselves.^(1989, 441, 446)

However, for Steyerl (2003) this same production of truth is strongly emphasized, with her value judgement linking that production of truth to the ways governments – especially the one run by the G.W. Bush, Jr. – aggressively manipulated and falsified their descriptions of reality. Her example is undeniable, and it is undeniably important in its unmasking of the manipulative practices and lies of the US government.

The reference is the lie that the then Secretary of State Colin Powell made in his presentation in 2003 to the UN Security Council – using faked and manipulated material to argue the case for the existence of weapons of mass destruction, and therefore justifying the aim of invading Iraq. “Every indexical sign reference, which is traditionally regarded as a characteristic of documentary authenticity, was quite paltry in the pictures and charts and was mainly supported by ‘secret’ sources. Nevertheless, this politics of truth prevailed over that of the weapons inspectors, who had developed considerably more complex and codified procedures for determining truth – such as comparing hypotheses prepared from photo material and witness accounts with measurements and information attained on site.”^(ibid.)

With her well-argued case, Steyerl joins the ranks of many others who later exposed the lie. But there is a substantial difference between one example of wrong-doing ‘caught with its pants down’, and a generalization made through this particular case. And here, here is where Steyerl gets confused. It is a classical mistake. She is making a political value judgement based on one case, that then serves as the proof for linking governmentality with documentary, as in documentality. It is a unification of two concepts

that not only goes against the core of Foucault’s argument, but is also an example of over-simplified reduction of the complexity of the argument. As ever, the emotionally driven moralistic claim to have it right does not mean that one gets it right.

And now, back to our two exhibitions. What both major exhibitions actualize is the impossibility of keeping separate these three phases and forms of dealing with reality. They are not the same, but they are definitely inter-connected. Their inter-connectedness is based on the unavoidable fact: how they define themselves is strongly informed and influenced by how they define their chosen enemies in the crime of passion, of who has the power to use and define what is done under the label of documentary. Documentary, documentarism and documentality as practices and as phenomena co-exist and co-effect each other. They need each other.

However, the awareness of the closeness of the various strategies of dealing with the real is unfortunately not yet enough. The dilemma is located in the shift from what (is talked about) to how (it is done and executed) – and then highlighted in the topic of how reality is dealt with in each particular and specific, context and time bound case. This is to say: what are the means and ways by which it is expressed and communicated?

When focusing on the ways images are made and remade, the inter-connectedness of all forms of dealing with reality gains another meaning. It is a cruel one, that stresses the lack of critical ability to comprehend, and questions how the means (a still camera, or film in moving images) function and how the images are interpreted. In an era of an extended wish to be political and theoretically grounded, there is a growing lack of understanding of the basic features of how things are done and made, and with what – both in the sense of the history of a given medium, and also in terms of its inherent logic, what it implies and allows and disagrees with.

This is a claim that can be confronted in both the exhibitions. Granted, with such numbers – over 100 artists in documenta11 and over 40 in the 6th Berlin bienal – it would be ridiculous to claim that the whole

exhibition suffered from the naivety of dealing with the means and the structures within which it is embedded. This said, both exhibitions provide an alarming amount of food for thought about the lack of critical realism when claiming to be interested in reality.

In the worst cases, what we see is yet another version of the innocent camera, that again and again reveals and visualizes the problems of a given location. This locality could be, for example, the side of a Moscow highway, and the problem the migrant workers waiting there for work. The reality is there in front of us, in black and white (purposely not in high-end, quality reproduced large photographs), set in a long line by Olga Chernysheva. It is one-to-one, and nothing happens in between.

But what do we get? As a result of these photos, how much more do we know or realize about what might be going on in the suburbs of Moscow? These are photos that claim to depict reality. The difference between before and after, the supposed distance between what is and what is made of it and with the photo, is that act of levelling. The photo is deliberately taken from below, showing the men waiting there above, on a small hill. And well, this lowering of the camera, and the lifting up of the position of the object, leads to a claim that this would elevate these people into some previously unknown position. It is a positioning that is done twice, for the second time by installing the photograph at the very top of the wall, so that it touches the ceiling. It forces us, it really does, to lift our chin and gaze upwards. As a courtesy from the curator, a quote from the exhibition catalogue: "By photographing them from the foot of an embankment, Chernysheva reverses their usual position in the hierarchy of the gaze and elevates them to icons in a pictorial composition reminiscent of Constructivist propaganda posters."^(2010, 34)

Sometimes we might wish that this was all that was needed for us to be more aware, for example, of the situations and problems of migrant workers in Moscow... but well, perhaps not. On the contrary, one feels that it verges on being cynical and naive to believe that by us gazing at them from a slightly lower position, we would also respect and realize their new

position in connection with the daily reality that the artist claims to be dealing with. Is this really enough to state that her photographs stress how "society is also the distribution of attention"?^(ibid.) What we see is not what we get. We do not get any closer. The distance remains, precisely because the artist claims to bridge the gap between two realities by very simply picturing the reality. Chernysheva states that, "I want to analyze the normal",^(2010, 34) but she fails. Not that terribly, but very symptomatically. Instead of being able to deconstruct the processes of normalization and hyper-normality and its embedded rationality, she joins the hordes of reproductions of images of the other that do not analyse, but just repeat the flat image that does not pierce through anything. It remains alien, outside – and for us, safe, not demanding.

Another example within Berlin biennial is the work by the Israeli artist Avi Mograbi, who, in the video work "Details 2 & 3", is there at the site of the open wound of the Israeli military checkpoints. What we see are close-ups of the soldiers patrolling the scene, getting agitated by the presence of the camera and the provocation it causes. The image struggles, and it stumbles, supposedly creating an effect of real action. Real or not, what is transmitted in the video adds nothing to the pre-existing expectations of the setup. Mograbi witnesses the angry reactions by the Israeli soldiers, and the artist enjoys the effects.

But effects of what, and for what? Nothing is made stronger, or more visible through these numerous incidents at the checkpoints. We do not get closer to structures that are behind these, granted, very problematic situations, and we get nowhere near the personal dilemmas from either side of the fence. What we get is a self-congratulatory dose of so-called reality that is just another lame duck. It does not move. Unfortunately, the text in the catalogue makes it even worse, not far from parody, with this sound bite from the not so terribly deep conversation.

"Who are you?" the soldiers ask.
 "Who are you?" The artist calls back, showcasing relations in a democratic system:
 "You work for me! You're a soldier in my army!"^(2010, 130)

Sadly or not, no amount of !!! marks in a text can redeem the insensitivity here. Granted, Mograbi is not the only artist enjoying the action of visiting and witnessing the hot spots of the world with a camera; at least he stops with a conflict that he is part of and familiar with. But the tendency of the touristic gaze of slumming is the same: the childish enjoyment of mixing and mingling with dark and dangerous forces, holding up a camera as a symbol of resistance and a totem for the rationale foe ones not so innocent but generally very harmless actions. Here, the work of art remains a tourist, a somewhat neat gimmick that gives a hint of the troubled reality out there. But it is a hint that does not fulfil any of its promises. It remains ridiculously ineffective, failing to even recognize how the claim of a democratic system in a shouting match is not necessarily that credible.

Funnily enough, with its aim of dealing with a world out there that is waiting, the Berlin biennial made an interesting strategic move by including an artist who dated back to the latter part of the 19th century in its contemporary showcase. It was intended as a juxtaposition, this exhibition of drawings by the German realist Adolph Menzel, curated by Michael Fried, and indeed, it did the trick. However, I doubt the trick it did was what I suspect the curator (Rhombert) wanted it to do: the comparison between the realistic drawings of the 1870s and the very contemporary video footage that is so proud of not using any cinematic skills, editing tools or narrative insights, was a very cruel one.

We can perhaps admire the touch of the hand in Menzel's drawing, or we can brush him aside because he is just an historical figure, but what we can't deny is that Menzel knew what he was doing, and he did have a solid knowledge of the means of expression he used. And this, this is not a conservative argument. It is a practical argument that simply locates one of the main problems caused by the fascination of the real encountering the increasing availability of the technical devices to reproduce it.

But reproduction is not what Menzel did: he did an interpretation of what he viewed as interesting and worth while, whereas with the hordes of artists in Berlin biennial, they were unabashed about the

importance of their message, but very limited in their ability to deal with the demands of the medium they used. We did not see versions of video-making that dealt with its past, and we did not see works that questioned the medium they used. What we got was either a deliberate dismissal of the importance of the way it was filmed, or not even that. But well, what we did not get was what we would have required and needed: visual material that is able to achieve more than just copying what it believes to be meaningful – with the failure to comprehend that anything we try to communicate is a combination of how it is done and what is done to try to deal with it.

In documenta 11, the contrast between what the exhibition claimed it was going to do and how the works were displayed could not have been more emphatic than in the case of the Igloolik Isuma production. There was a distance between the exhibition practice and the wishing well that it evoked. As a case in point, it was a nasty and unfortunate comparison, due to the unlucky fact of it having Allan Sekula's *Fish Story* on the wall behind one of its monitors. Whereas Sekula confronted the huge issue of the economics of today's shipping industry by not just claiming to reproduce and repeat it, but truly narrating an edited story with it, the Canadian collective documenting the lives of the indigenous people in the north of the north did not intend to distance themselves from the wish to show how these people actually live.

The problem with the Igloolik installation was two-fold. We were watching a series of documentations that were exactly that: well done, slow moving images of the daily practices of these people, how they fish and how they take care of their children. Nothing wrong with that at all, except it was presented by the exhibition organizers in the frame of a critique of this form of solid, old style documentary.

On top of that, the content of the material in the videos was brutally contradicted in the way they were shown in the installation. It was an installation of seven monitors next to one another, with a couple of meters between them, placed in a rather narrow but long corridor. The monitors were were installed relatively high on the wall, leaving the viewer to stand in

front of them, watching about half an hour of footage that was characteristically made to function better in a cinematic frontal fashion. And this, well, multiply this by seven, and what do we get: images that fly past, and recollections that fade away or never take root at all. In short, it was a failed opportunity to connect us with the interpretation of the views and values of that fisherman out there – the one who was permanently and unchangingly left out there, while you were forced to hurry to the next and yet another monitor.

The work by the South-African Kendell Geers was another case in point. Here, the medium was straightforward photography, and the content was the current state of affairs in his home country. What Geers addressed is the well-known story: the rise of violence and the resulting increase in home surveillance equipment. We have photos of the gates, the doors and the walls and the fences that keep some in while keeping the unwanted out. We read the signs that give warnings, the names of companies that provide the security, or the demands that animals are kept outside and the gate is closed. But why is it that Geers's photos are so harmless and uninteresting? It is not due to the chosen subject, nor is it due to the chosen composition of the medium size photos (30,5 x 40,5 or vice versa), which at least do not try to bludgeon you through their size. The problem is that they do nothing: they just show what is there, and that's that. It is documentary in its purest form, but with a message about the dangers of these gated communities – even if its own understanding of what it is doing claims to be critical and political. But it is a mixed message that is lost and not so easily found, because why should we keep looking, why should we want to return to these photos that say nothing and do nothing?

Regarding documenta 11, it is one thing to criticize how well or poorly a body of work by an artist or artist's collective functions in the main conceptual frame of a huge exhibition, but it is even more problematic when we address the construction of the main catalogue of the exhibition. The strategy of the catalogue, with its body of essays, runs aground in the very first pages at its beginning. There we first flip through 32 pages of colour reproductions of photographs, showing us the state of the affairs in

the world. We can read at the bottom where these all come from. The very first one claims to show how, anno 2000, in Rio Janeiro, "profiting from renovations, Valeria sells her house in the Favela Vigário Geral to escape the continuing violence", while the next page shows an image of Iranian students protesting against curbs on the press, and then we move on a couple of pages later to Tokyo, where an electronics store assistant watches footage of the terrorist attacks on 9/11/2001, and on the next page we land on the Kosovo-Macedonian border.

It is a well-chosen selection of journalistic photos from all over the world, one by one highlighting a problem in reality somewhere out there. What these photos deal with are the issues we recognize, but the reoccurring question is how they use that reality. Why is it that the documenta 11 curators decided to stress the prelude for their catalogue with a 32 page cavalcade of the wrongs of the world, doing this in a manner that asks us not to stop but to speed up – so that we get to the texts that follow? And, well, as a strategy for criticizing the constant flow of images in the media, this is a very awkward, not to say counter-intuitive one.

The question is: what do we see in these images? How can an image be expected to go anywhere but the shallowest of skin deep, when it is displayed and represented as it is in the catalogue? It is a catastrophe of using images in the name of the "good" that ends up in tears, flattening reality into a never-ending number of surfaces that turn the passion and the problems and the fragility and the fear – into a commodity.

With their choice of public face for the whole project, the 6th Berlin biennial did not fare any better. There was the timing of the show, happening exactly 20 years after the fall of the Wall in Berlin, and the curatorial dedication to over-stress the laconic understatement of the chosen works of art, that claimed to be dealing with reality. As the public poster "symbol" of the exhibition, the choice for the two series of photographs by Michael Schmidt is comprehensible. However, the gap between what it claimed to do and how it was then done is here about as deep and wide as it can get.

The two series of Schmidt's photos date from the end of the Cold War, the one depicting the grey-on-grey daily life of West Berlin just before the changes, and the other a series of 81 photos of women, strangely composed as mid-torsos, pictured either from the front, or mainly taken from the back. It is a series of photos that do not intend to visualize anything but the details of things we commonly do not pay attention to. Neither of these series of photographs were in the exhibition itself, but they were used as the coherent set of images for the public face of the event, taking place especially on the billboards and posters around the city.

Schmidt's Berlin series actually collaborated very well with the ongoing and increasing sensibility for nostalgia in the city. There is a longing for the old days – longing for the safety and security of the divided city. And for this longing, nothing could be better than a vast series of the nothingness of the public spaces of West Berlin. However, the clash is there, precisely there in the reading of the content and intent of boredom and stillness: what the photograph's connotation might have been when taken, and how they are now used in the present context. Whereas there might be an illusion of what the world was then, how they are now contextualized is not neutral or objective. They are instrumentalized into underlining the solitude of a time where nothing ever happens. And yes, is this how it was, and well, is this how it ought to be? Or?

With the series of women, the content of the photos is aggressively the lack of visual candy. But it is a strategy that soon backfires. The quality of the photos again deliberately stays the same. But what more do we get after the 11th or the 22nd one? Why 81? Where is the saturation point in an inherent logic that rests on the quality of there being nothing interesting in the photos at all. It starts as a visual provocation through negation, but does not go anywhere. It goes deeper into its negation, ending up negating its own meaningfulness as a way of dealing with reality. It becomes what it tries to deal with: nothing much at all. The main difference being not of quality, but about quantity.

The emotional minefield of dealing with reality is productively inviting to a wide variety of misunderstandings or moralistic revelations. In the case of the 6th Berlin biennial, the illusion of managing to avoid the struggle with the issue of *how* by depicting only the boring details of seemingly nothing is one way. But it is not – contrary what it claims or believes – an innocent strategy of a by-stander. It is a part of the game, the politics of representation, and even willingly so. Because of the white lie, however, because of the self-deception at stake, it does the opposite of what it seeks to achieve. It does not touch what might be a version of reality in a set of conflicting and confusing details of a site and a situation with a past, present and a future all intertwined. Instead, through glorification of the scheme from which it begins, it falls into

The Finnish writer and artist Henrik Tikkanen, now deceased, once told a story of how he, when starting up as a young talent, managed to convince his bosses in the newspaper to let him work on aphorisms with images that he drew.

His strategy was bold. He signed all the short aphorisms that he had written himself with randomly picked, well-know names of philosophers and writers.

Nobody noticed, nobody complained. This is what we call production of knowledge.

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the age-old and well-known trap when claiming to show how the real, you know, really is as it is.

This is what Roland Barthes^(2007, 19) kept arguing about, already at the end of '60s. He called our attention to the problem of how the real becomes the flattened effect of a signifier. Rather than dealing with the mess of reality, the real(ity) effect turns things into a one-size-fits-all model. It is a manufactured feel for a real that is shaped into a naturalized form. It is a road from internal complexity into a flattening of nuances that become a one-dimensional product. Instead of a confrontation with whatever is or can be called nature (or real), we get a naturalized and objectified version of it that makes and fits the norm at the same time.

It is a model that is regressive and safe and also sound for serving the expectations of an answer. This is to put the finger on the sore spot where it should stay and keep on hurting us: the difference between reality and fiction is that the latter has to make sense, while the former is not to be boxed in or cut down in its complexities. Fiction is contained, no matter how non-linear its way of telling the story may be. But well, reality does escape us. It does not break even, but is constantly shifting, going under or boiling over. It has a set of relationships and communications in and through it that are not to be fully grasped, but rather seriously respected in their inherent level of a combination, some parts of which can be shared, but where something always remains untranslatable.

Yet another example of this cruel confusion of the transformation and translation of reality into a work of art is provided by our familiar friend from the beginning of this chapter. And as all good things come to a circular end of a sort, let us finish with Scott Walden.

In the end of his introduction to the book he edited and wrote for, Walden takes up the issue of respect of the individual whose picture is taken. Walden writes: "Is an individual's desired appearance always to be respected, or would such a demand lead only to portraits that appeal to the vanity of their subjects? Street photography as practiced by Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, and Garry Winogrand, or candid portraiture of friends

and lovers as practiced by Nan Goldin, often depict their subjects in unflattering ways. Is such work – which includes many the finest photographs of the previous century – to be condemned on ethical grounds?"^(2010, 13)

This is what Walden asks, and he lets the question hang and dangle up in the air. He does not return to it in his own texts included in the book. But why does he end his introduction with such a eventualization of the ethical grounds of taking photographs?

Let me follow the argument here with taking the lead with Nan Goldin and the claim that the subjects in her photos are possibly depicted in unflattering ways. This is a very interesting and nakedly telling statement by Walden. It is also a statement that demands precision: unflattering for whom, and based on what values and judgements?

Walden does not cite a single work by Goldin. Thus we have to deal with the whole body of her work, which is obviously very frustrating. It is a choice that makes me wonder, because, well..., it is hardly that Goldin's photos are not widely circulated, and not that it is impossible to find a focus of a thematic frame that the artist herself has articulated.

Because, well..., because there is evidence in a form of a retrospective of Nan Goldin's works, displayed at Berlin's Museum of Modern Art, Photography and Architecture, opened in November of 2010. In this particular show there are up to 70 portraits of people set in the Berlin scene of the '80s and early '90s, with some works dated later. What is striking in all individual shots is the awareness of how the presence, the intertwined connection, is shaped between who is in the photograph and how it is taken. It is a nearness of a kind that presupposes a strong link, an intensive sensitivity that spells acute understanding of both a person's vulnerability and hedonistic pose. In one word: intimacy. This is a claim backed up by the recollections of the persons in the photographs, re-enacted on the occasion of the exhibition in the city magazine *Tip*. Following up six photographs, people (for example, the artists Piotr Nathan and Käthe Kruse) in these photographs recall the scenes and the times, and no, they do not feel humiliated or wrongly represented. They might

be nostalgic and melancholic, perhaps unavoidably so, but well, that is something different. ^(Dörre 2010)

But even without the help of then actuality of an exhibition or the selection of works, we can make the distinction between the people in the photos and the people looking at them. We also know from the literature dealing with Goldin that there is an element of at least sufficient mutual respect at stake. It is not an issue of whether Goldin lived like these subjects in the photos, or if that was her “culture” or conviction or whatever. What we can read from the photos is that, minimally speaking, she was not a total outsider. She was not a tourist with a one-dimensional gaze.

The intellectually entertaining aspect of the issue comes down to this: whether these photos are unflattering or not, has to do with time. At the time they are taken, we can rather well trust that the subjects were in the game by their own choice. They were most likely often enough even pleased to be photographed in the context provided by Goldin. At the time the photographs were taken there was hardly any fame to be gained, but sure enough plenty of room for hedonistic pose and brilliant exposures of a joyful kind of self-esteem.

Another completely different issue is what these people might think of their lifestyles 15 years later – or 35 years, to drive the point home. This time, next time or out of time, with the issue of something being unflattering or not, we know that an ethical condemnation turns into a totalitarian activity every time it seeks to prove a judgement that is not contextual, time and space based. It might even strive for positive effects, but amazingly enough is only able to produce the prefabricated boxes into which everything must be fitted.

There is a case of “reality strikes back” in point that I still carry with me, that I was confronted with while working in the city’s southern cemetery as a assistant gardener in Stockholm in 1989. Every now and then while using the metro, I had no choice but to stare at the actively present, well meaning photo advertisement campaign against the use of drugs. Moving up or down the steep stairs, I saw three variations of the same idea. This was a campaign against drugs

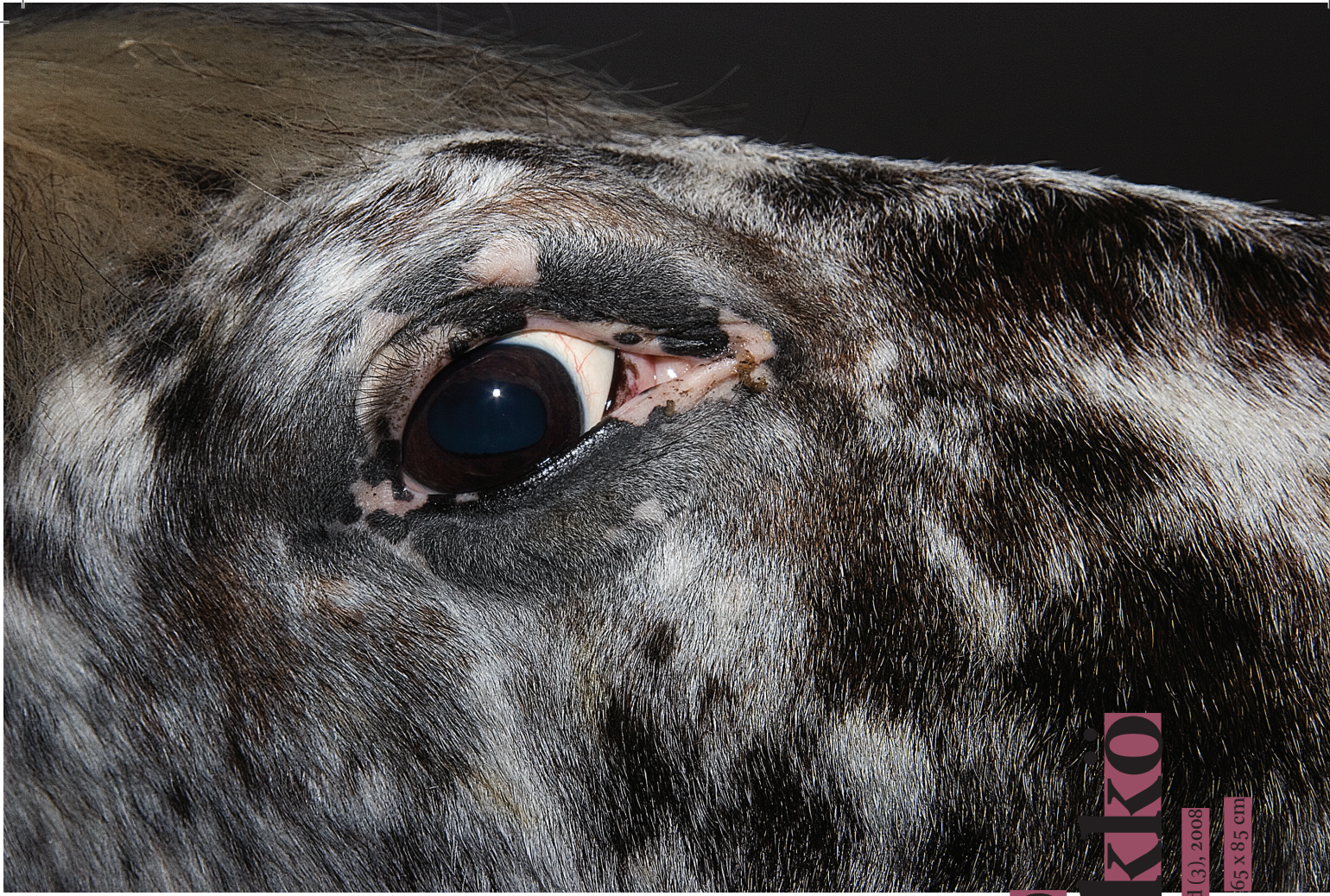
that had a scheme of before, during and after in each poster, trying to make the viewer aware of the ultimate dangers of starting to use even the milder drugs. In the first photo you had the person still as he/she was, not in touch with herbs or chemicals. Then the second was a photo of the same person when they had just started with the habit. And consequently, the third photo, placed lowest in the vertical line, was a photo of the person as a junkie.

I am convinced that it was not my bad gaze, my one and only perverse eye – the evil eye that made the unintended connection. The photos were convincing, but not with regard to the case they were arguing. The first photo showed a square person, too normal to be true, while the second one had at least some quality of energy in it, and well, the third one actually showed an individual – not perhaps in the best of moods, but nevertheless an individual with an attitude. The result: the photograph that was supposed to put us off from experimenting with drugs in fact looked the coolest and most flattering.

As an example of recollection, this, however, tells much less than it embodies. It is a case in retroactive memory that underlines the brutal distance and difference between what is said and how it is done. Or: what we see or want to see is not necessarily what that very thing we focus on is, or even better, can become and turn into. The litany of what, where, how, when and why not is not determined, but set into potential motion. It is the very honest dilemma that we constantly need to confront and face, not to duck away from.

It is, yes, it is the act of giving content to the concepts, signs, images, acts and symbols that we are part of and that we participate in and with. It is, sure it is, the act of facing the productive and honest dilemma of

*Creative
Treatment
of
Actuality*



Esko. Männikko

Untitled (3), 2008

65 x 85 cm



Born in Pudasjärvi, northern Finland in 1959

Lives and works near Oulu, Finland

In 1995 he was named Finnish Young Artist
of the Year and in 2008 he was awarded the

Deutsche Börse Photography Prize

www.nordenhake.com

Mika Hannula

What was the last photograph you took?

Esko Männikkö

I take a lot that never go anywhere. But this new exhibition (September 2010, Galerie Nordenhake, Berlin) includes statues that I shot in a graveyard in Milan in the autumn of 2009. →

MH

What was the initial motivation for this project (the *Blues Brothers* series)?

EM

I don't know. They are a bit similar to the animal photos, close-ups. Originally the idea was to photograph statues in Cologne Cathedral, but I didn't have the right equipment with me at the time. In Milan I did, so the idea was simply to take close-ups of old statues.

MH

Why Milan?

EM

No particular reason. I was visiting Milan. I had an exhibition there and when I was there, I asked whether they had the kinds of statues I was looking for in the local graveyards. The idea was to take more of these pictures, for example, in Berlin, but it's actually quite irrelevant where the statues are geographically – it's what they look like that matters.

MH

When did this animal project (the *Harmony Sisters* series) start?

EM

The first photos I showed were made in 2004. That is an old idea too, I simply didn't get them done before. It goes back to the time in the mid-'90s when I spent an extended period in Texas. That was a bit of an equipment problem, too, I didn't have the gear to produce good close-ups. The cows there were a bit more timid, they were like reindeer in Finland, half-wild beasts in a large enclosure.

MH

Equipment?

EM

In these close-ups the whole digital thing is a good thing, since I had to take masses of pictures to get what I wanted. It would be difficult with a still-film camera, frankly impossible. With digital you see the results straight away, and because you use all sorts of lights in the shooting situation, whether it works or not depends on the minutest detail.

MH

When did you switch to digital?

EM

I haven't gone over completely yet. I might still use a still-film camera, but I began using a digital camera sometime around 2004.

MH

Where did this zooming in on details and the change in physical distance come from – if we compare the pictures of people, which show them in full, with these very precisely cropped close-ups of various animals? I don't mean the presence conveyed by the picture, but rather where did the desire come from to get so close, right up to the skin?

EM

It's a visual thing, you get good pictures that way. When you think, for example, of the animal pictures, of how many pictures have been taken of horses, there is a great danger of making meaningless ornaments – and my photos may well be meaningless, too. It is also a challenge, I am an old nature photographer and am also interested in animals. I have tried to take pictures that look good.

MH

An old nature photographer?

EM

I began my photographic career as a nature photographer – landscapes and wild birds – around the end of the '70s. This animal series was a bit like a return to my roots. Although it's a bit easier to photograph an elephant in a cage than a wild animal. It's down to the smallest detail whether anything comes of them or not. I have a lot of pictures that I think are so clichéd that I haven't shown them yet.

MH

So, this series contains pictures other than the ones that get right up to the skin?

EM

Not very many – but what does the distance signify?

MH

I mean, quite simply, will we still be seeing an Esko Männikkö photograph of a whole horse, or still only a focussed part of it?

EM

Well, I won't be showing an entire horse any time soon. But yes, actually the most important thing about them is only what they look like.

MH

What size are the prints in this series, without the frames?

EM

The biggest are in the 65 x 85 range, and then there are the smaller ones that are 30 x 40.

MH

Let's concentrate on this photograph of the horse, called *Untitled (3)*, from 2005. We see the horse's face, and above all the horse's eye, the black pupil. In what situation was this specific picture taken?

EM

I got interested in them when my daughters started going riding. While I was waiting for them, it occurred to me to take some photos at the same time. In the end, things reversed so that, at the start, the girls would stay behind stroking the horses, and I used to hurry them up, saying let's go home, then, later on, I'd be the one asking them, saying: Just one more picture, just one more picture. Just let me take one more picture. This is very typical of someone lazy like me, it starts, as it were, from some substitute activity. The statue photos started off that way, too.

MH

But let's clarify this specific situation a bit further. So, you are at a riding stables somewhere around Oulu?

EM

Yes, the horse is in a stall there. There's nothing more to it than that. You go there and take a picture, you don't need to prepare at all. Of course, I asked the stable owner if I could take pictures.

MH

But, nevertheless, you said that in that situation you have to take several pictures before you succeed. How much do you modify the situation?

EM

In fact, it works both ways, sometimes you try to arrange the situation, sometimes you just take pictures. But in these pictures all the details are incredibly important, i.e. the position of the head, the way the eye is, open or closed, and the less you try to boss the creature around, the better the result. You try to be like a fish in water, being too systematic and issuing commands doesn't work.

MH

How long can you be in that sort of situation before the animal gets annoyed?

EM

Eight months, after that, you have to go for coffee. I am, in fact, terribly patient in the shooting situation. In fact, you can go without eating for a few days if you know you might get a good picture. I photographed that same horse lots of times, but I'd bet that that picture, the best picture, is from the first time.

MH

Let's talk about differences and similarities, i.e. starting by comparing the photographs of people from the start of the '90s and the pictures you are taking now, 20 years later. What has happened in between?

EM

For one thing, I'm lazier than before. I don't know whether I am also a little bit of a hermit. You don't have to socialize so much with animals as you do with people. I don't know, it was something dictated a bit by chance. If you actually started digging about, then perhaps you'd find some logic to this job, but personally I don't even necessarily want to know so precisely. Most of the themes have, in fact, already been incubating in my mind for an extended period, I just haven't had time to do them.

Excessive amounts of money do not always make us happy.

For proof, try this.

In 2003, the US band OutKast outsold everyone.

The result: too much money and too much free time.

As a direct consequence, half of the entity, called Big Boi, was ready to fulfill his childhood dream.

He started a farm, a huge place, raising animals of all kinds.

The curiosity of the farm was an enormous fish tank he had constructed in the barn.

It had one single species in it.

It was a shark.

The name of the beast was Billy Ocean.

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MH

But you have still taken pictures of people in the 2000s?

EM

Quite few. I don't know, it somehow feels like that's already been done. And if you think about the present day, and all this reality-TV stuff, which I have actually never seen, because we don't have a television at home, but I've read about them in the papers. That's the most ridiculous thing of all, since you don't even have to watch, as they tell you all about them in the papers afterwards.

It seems I no longer feel like barging into people's homes to take photographs. There's already too much of that, this shitty sensational celebrity, I feel like I'd be part of it. I don't know whether that's the main reason, but at least I've thought about it and started to be wary of it. Of course, I don't totally rule it out.

MH

But that is a different matter, is there some issue that feels like it has already been fully dealt with and, on the other hand, the way the media productize and dumb-down people into a specific mould, something that is not true of your pictures, at least?

EM

That's true, but, in fact, I do think about whether I myself am guilty of voyeurism, of putting people on display. Everyone goes on about Männikkö approaching people with so much respect. I don't know, I've begun to doubt whether that is the case. When you go to take a picture, you are, in fact, always guilty of some degree of pornography.

MH

Well, twenty years ago, Helsinki's main media came up with the idea of accusing you of peeping into the lives of the backroom boys in your own backyard?

EM

They do, of course, come up with stuff, now and then, you have to come up with a contrary opinion.

MH

One major qualitative, content-led difference lies in how raw and grainy the photographing of reality can be left to be, and how polished and neat the packaging is.

EH

I do, in fact, wonder, every day, about today's world, and about whether this actually exists, the stuff in these TV programmes. To some extent, as the situation

has arisen, I have followed some police series, too, in which some celebrity or other is taken in a police car to arrest criminals. Or these silicon programmes, they all seem totally incomprehensible.

MH

If we think about your career, i.e. well over twenty years of professional picture taking, are there any clear phases, or points when your way of working has changed?

EM

Not really. The subject matter varies, but whether it is a change, of some sort, yes, but how profound a change is it, when I switch from people to animals. I'm not sure. That is hard for me to analyse. But, for example, when I published this book, *Naarashauki* (The Female Pike, 2000), at that time, I knew that this type of photographing of people has reached the end of its road.

Then, it felt like it was all wrapped up. Since then, it doesn't work, no matter how much I try.

There were no major problems with it. I had pretty much done what occurred to me, without thinking overmuch about what to do next. I don't care about trends, and never have.

MH

And the first animal photos were shown in Berlin in 2006. When was the more extensive exhibition at Millesgården in Stockholm?

EM

That was in 2007, a sort of retrospective, everything totally mixed up.

MH

What does it feel like – to be so young and already retro?

EM

[Laughs] It was an amazingly good opportunity and a splendid exhibition. I could see for myself, too, everything that I've done. I was very pleased.

The hanging was crap, the works put side by side, crammed together, on all the walls of the exhibition space. When the same hanging was in New York, a *NY Times* critic speculated about whether this was a new trend in showing photographs.

I did that hanging just like a country boy, without asking anyone. I'll just put them like this, they look good, and if they aren't O.K., then they aren't. It's good when you are a total outsider on the art scene, you can do whatever you feel like. It's enough for it to look good to me.

It is very rare that nobody else is allowed to interfere

with the hanging. If my way isn't good enough, then I go home.

In Stockholm I told the people in charge pretty much what I wanted to do and they said, do that then. In the end, I left some of the works out, since not everything suited the space, for example, the panoramas inside the hanging wooden contraptions.

The space itself didn't play any particular role, either, I had already decided how I wanted it in advance, with all the photos side by side and all the series totally jumbled together. I had tried this out on a few previous occasions.

MH

How many pictures were there in the exhibition?

EM

That was one problem. I was going to send 250, and they said 150 would do, but, in the end, about 120 fitted in. There they were all along the walls, with the frames touching each other, it made no sense.

MH

But to go back to 2006, and to the first animal series in a solo exhibition. Was the series already complete before the exhibition?

EM

You take enough pictures to make sure it will work. I won't agree to be in any exhibition before the series is already completed. I don't go along with saying that, in three years' time, there will be a big exhibition, and in the meantime, I will try to think what I will do. The photos have to be ready before I promise to do an exhibition. I haven't accepted absolutely everything that has been suggested.

MH

Let's focus for a moment on frames.

EM

In these new series they are no longer made by me, you can't really find those old frames any more. The new ones are made out of board, with a carpenter, and painted to look a little older, they might, for example, be stained black. I can't really imagine them without frames.

MH

Why do the animal pictures and the statues have frames?

EM

They look better. And it pisses me off that, nowadays, everyone makes diasecs, that, too, has been done as

far as it can go, and theorized. Everyone who has studied anywhere does what they have been told.

MH

You still make the prints yourself?

EM

Yes, they're done at home. Still. I don't know whether I will carry on making them, it is getting so difficult. You can't seem to get the papers or the chemicals, they are used so little nowadays. Then, there is using the machine, it's had the liquid solutions inside it for six months now, and washing it is a dreadful job. I may well buy one of those printers.

MH

So that's the frames and the prints. But this being an outsider. How can an artist who has been given so many prizes, and who has shown in all manner of biennials, still be an outsider on the art scene?

EM

Right, I don't know, but quite another issue occurred to me. When the animal photos were shown in New York, in Yancey Richardson's photography gallery, a black man came up to me to praise them and, during the conversation, it somehow came out that the photos are not of wild animals. He was totally horrified, it looked pretty much like he was simply going to shoot me. He was really disappointed when it emerged that they were, in fact, taken in a zoo.

MH

Bloody imposter. So where were the elephants and other animals photographed then?

EM

Around zoos. Mainly in Europe – in Berlin, Antwerp, Amsterdam...

MH

But why did this person assume the picture showed authentic wildlife?

EM

People still view photographs as though they were somehow "absolutely true" – fortunately. This is a question of attitude. If we think, say, of newspaper pictures, everyone thinks they are totally authentic, that they have not been altered in any way, regardless of the fact that, nowadays, they can be manipulated however you like. Newspapers have totally impossible criteria, about whether you can change them or not – and if yes, then how. Then, when some poor wretch sees a picture of a wild animal, they imagine that someone on

I don't know what it meant but this is what they said, this is, honestly, what they said on the radio the other day: You don't get better if you swim in butter.

Facts of Life – PART 10

the savannah in Africa has succeeded so splendidly in taking a close-up of an elephant. And regardless of the fact that it was on display in an art gallery. They relate to them as though to newspaper pictures, where the captions, at the latest, tell us if the animal is not wild. But my photos are authentic, too, no matter how much they have been taken in a zoo. Why should I tell people in the exhibition leaflet: Don't imagine that these are wild animals. What responsibility do I have to do that? The photos are solely and quite simply visual entities, in them I am not trying to prove I'm some sort of mad photographic hero. It isn't a sporting achievement.

MH

Why did you use the word "fortunately"?

EM

With a photograph you can lie as much as you want. People believe, and in fact I too believe, that newspaper pictures are pretty much true. But in art it doesn't matter. That horse could originally be bright red, and it has simply been made black, it has nothing to do with reality. It makes no difference, you can manipulate a horse to look like an elephant or a dungfly, nobody can condemn you for that.

MH

But in this case it wasn't a pink horse or a dungfly?

EM

No, no, no. That is of no interest to me. It's too hard

a job, I'm too lazy. If I want a picture that looks like a horse, I take a picture of a horse. The main thing is that it looks good, the picture.

MH

What makes this specific picture a good one?

EM

There are no other criteria, it looks good, it pleases the eye. I can't define it using art terminology. I took umpteen pictures of that horse, with the head in different positions, and it didn't look good, since it wasn't directly side on, etc. The little details make the picture, everything affects the composition, the way the mane hangs down, the direction in which the pupil is staring, how the black-and-white surface is aligned, and so on and so on. This is clearly the best shot.

MH

How many pictures from the entire animal series have you shown?

EM

How many of them are there, about 50. That's quite a lot for such a lazy person. Then, there are dreadfully many of those close-call pictures. The idea is to publish some of them in a book sometime, when I get round to it, the only criterion being that the photos are of animals. I might even mix straight documentary shots with the art pictures.

When you've used a ridiculous amount of energy on something, you want something to come out of it, so that it is not a waste of time and trouble. We'll see. The kind of book that analyses a bit, and shows the backgrounds, just like those trailers and commentary tracks in DVD films, which show the working methods, the outtakes.

MH

Close calls. How many of them are there, then?

EM

Hundreds, hundreds.

MH

What sorts of series do you make?

EM

Before, I did 20-photo series, the statue photos are still series of five. I can't manage to crank out any more.

MH

But let's go back to being an outsider? How much do you keep up with contemporary photography?

EM

What is a lot and what is a little, I don't know. I don't

actively keep up with it at all, and that is not something I'm proud of, but I'm just not interested. I'm interested in hunting and fishing. You absorb too many influences if you know what other people are doing. Yet, on the other hand, that's not at all bad thing. There is so much of everything in the contemporary world, there is, as it were, a bit too much of everything.

MH

Are you in the habit of swapping photographs with other artists?

EM

I don't remember have swapped one even once.

MH

Who would you like to swap with?

EM

I don't know. I have bought one work in my whole life, a photograph by Jorma Puranen, from the series in which Jorma photographs old paintings in the Sinebrychoff Museum in Helsinki, and there are these powerful reflections in the photograph. Puranen hasn't made any works that I haven't liked, and, of course, he's done lots of different ones. And it struck me, when I saw Puranen's pictures for the first time, that this was the end of my career as a nature photographer. It was there, at the Lammi Biological Station, when, in '78 or '79, he showed those Sámi pictures. It was then that I decided I was going to be a proper photographer. They were incredibly touching pictures. When some Koltta man plays a mouth-organ on a bus, it looked a lot better than anything else that I had come across before.

MH

Let's go back to this picture you took of the horse's head. What is it about it that touches you?

EM

I don't know whether anything in it touches me. Nothing so terribly much, I guess. I'll say the same thing again: it looks good. When you are a picture maker, you try to make pictures that are as good as possible.

MH

I won't push the point about you giving an answer about the content of the pictures, but still, everything we do is linked with the way we are in the world, how we are in everyday life. And in that situation, for example, what and how something touches us is one motive for doing something in one way and not another.

EM

If we look at that picture of the horse, then at least for

me, when I look carefully, I think about how present it is. Even though it's in profile, it looks you straight in the eye. It is incredibly powerfully present. If you look at the position of the eye, the way it stares – that is probably what affects me most. It is a real person, that animal.

MH

We've come back to distance – to both its physical and mental dimensions. The presence of the content of the picture has, in this case, been achieved via a still considerable distance; i.e. the way the feeling is conveyed, even though we are looking right here at a small, low-quality image output from the Internet. If, for instance, we remember the actual work on the gallery wall, then just a paper print is enough in this case.

From there we come to the, perhaps not at all surprising, idea that what I see in all of these different series is the same thing on this level of presence and being in the world. Not exactly the same thing, but rather they convey the same basic attitude and feeling. They are credible, they are more than just surface.

And now we are faced with that cruel situation in which we all find ourselves. Because there is so much surface-level attention, and we come across it in such large numbers of distributed images, how can we stop, collect our thoughts, and be present?

EM

That's how it is. In fact, I always try to get under the surface. With both people and animals, when you are together and mess about there, then in fact you want more there than just the surface. I.e. to really make contact with them – even though, in the end, the camera is always there in between. It may be that this contact is my own illusion.

But then – of course, it is a real contact. I have dozens of pictures of that same horse, but that is the only one with which I am satisfied. It is, by the way, a horse called Peppi, one of those black-and-white dappled ones, one of those that looks like Little Man (from the Pippi Longstocking stories).

MH

Do you read much?

EM

Now and then, the last time must have been Riikka Ala-Harja's *Kanaria* (Canaries), or was it Elina Hirvonen's book about Africa, *Kauimpana kuolemasta* (Furthest from death).

MH

And music, have you downloaded much recently?

EM

I have never downloaded anything in my life, but I have bought music, the last time being when we were on holiday in Cape Verde, great music, that young woman Mayra Andrade, not just Cesaria Evora, who is also absolutely brilliant. Then I bought my wife a Meta4 album, chamber music.

MH

But if not talk about art, then what are you interested in?

EM

Hunting and fishing, getting firewood to heat the house takes two months a year. Just last week, we were in the Käsivarsi Wilderness Area fishing, and after the exhibition we are again going to the forest with the dog. Mostly I go alone, sometimes pals come along on fishing trips. I enjoy being there on my own.

MH

Pictures of people – your project at the Liverpool Biennial (2004), where you photographed old people in their homes. How did that start?

EM

It's true, I took pictures of people there. It started with them taking me to this place, a building where old people live, and asking me: Will you take photos here? And I said: Why not? I drank whisky with 70-80-year-old grannies. That is probably the last time I photographed people. I have, in fact, found these commissioned works to be quite problematic. I haven't taken on too many of them. Whenever someone is telling me what to do, it bothers me, even if the boundaries are quite vague. And it wasn't a matter of time, there was quite enough time in Liverpool, too. On the other hand, it also bothers me if there are no boundaries at all, then it can easily get left undone. There would be book projects, but not right now. The idea is, alongside the animal-pictures book, to make one of these derelict buildings, a kind of farewell to the Finnish countryside. These are those vacant houses and backyards, and those houses and doors have been exhibited, too. There are already over 150 of the door pictures, and I can't really seem to stop that, either. There's even a title already for that: *Organized Freedom*. But I don't know whether that title will stay in force, it may only be a first impression.

MH

So, we come to the end of the '90s, and to the *Organizing Freedom* exhibition curated by David Elliot at Stockholm's Moderna Museet...

EM

That's where it came from, and that's where I got it from, it suits very well. Although I've modified it a bit.

MH

You have been taking these vacant house pictures for well over 20 years now. What has happened in the meantime?

EM

In the meantime, what has happened is that many of those vacant houses have been ruined and repaired [laughs]. Whereas, ten years earlier, I'd photographed some dreadful shack, now it has been renovated to be a summer cottage. I've seen that happen in lots of cases.

MH

But isn't this then not a goodbye, but a return?

EM

I don't know, it's not at all fully thought through yet, this is just one idea. But a change, I don't know. I've always been an old romantic, who feels that everything was better before. But that, too, is more closely linked with the destruction of nature. It feels like nature can no longer go back to being better. Take, for instance, brown-trout streams in Northern Finland, they will never go back to being like they were, no matter how much people try to save them. If we look at the salmon question, people have been harping on about it for decades, and nothing has changed. It's this so very incomprehensible indifference that people have. It wouldn't take many years of behaving in a civilized way, and nature, too, would be quite different.

MH

The salmon question?

EM

Yes, the way that Torniojoki River salmon are treated, they are caught at sea, ripped out there already, and even sold as mink feed, since there is sometimes so much. And then millions of them are restocked by the State, when that, too, could be left to work quite naturally. You'd get better fish, and cheaper, but this silliness is actually party politics, for the sake of a few Baltic Sea fishermen's pillage fishing. It's hard to watch what is happening, although as you

get older, you try to find the positive sides, too. When I was young, it was hellishly hard, when I think of the hunting grounds there in my home village in Utajärvi, there are no forests there now. Hunting with a Spitz is no longer possible. People nowadays don't understand the level of destruction, because for them, a stand of saplings and any old thicket is already a forest. When I remember what the forests were like, it's an absolute, total catastrophe. The forests have gone, they have been turned into shit-paper and pulp. I don't know what the alternative is, but a stand of saplings is not a forest. Just imagine, one current Government minister thinks peat is a renewable natural resource. It does renew, in about one or two thousand years, if we can really wait that long.

MH

We are nearly finished now. What do you do when you do what you do?

EM

I don't know, as long as I can arrange things so the time passes enjoyably. On the other hand, it's a complete mystery. But I am a photographer, an artist.

MH

Are the photos good?

EM

They are good, yes. It's been a long, long time since I had any doubts about that.

MH

Let's turn for a moment to documentary photography. Do you see yourself ever going back to it?

EM

I don't even know what documentary photography means, so why couldn't my photos be documentary, too. I don't know whether such a thing exists or ever has. Is it even possible to define it? At least, for me, these definitions are quite alien.

One starting point is that the picture has been taken, there is a certain time and place. I don't know. But this picture of the horse isn't a document. Hell, no, this is very difficult.

MH

Historically we get a somewhat too-easy target, with 1970s objective photographers of what was supposed to be reality, and then via the post-modern we get to open-ended making and reworking of pictures. But the boundaries have always been quite fluctuating – by the '70s, it was clear that pictures are made to be a certain

way, there was no copied reality in them, rather they were consciously made and produced. And in the same way, nowadays, the picture is always somewhere and taken somehow of something, and the physical space or trace, the force of gravity, don't vanish anywhere, even if the picture can subsequently be manipulated to be anything.

I am reminded of Jorma Puranen's (2000) response to what documentary photography could be, i.e. even what it is supposed to be. When he was asked the same question, Puranen wasn't able to define what it is either, but, in any case, he wanted to emphasize what it should be. For Puranen, it was a question of the potential of the photograph. For him, it derives from the slowness, from the way that making a picture and the rhythm of the taking is slowed down, it's taken, for instance, by trying to create a production process that takes place outside of the commodified image creation. The task is to remove it from the hopelessly fast torrent of image circulation, and to put more time into the taking and thinking about pictures, to seek to be present with the pictures, outside of time. For Puranen, the meaning of the photograph derives from its slowness, from staying with the subject.

EM

There is a major change here, in the way that photographers can work. It is an enormous change when photographers are able to work as artists. If we look at exhibitions of the '60s and '70s, then they specifically showed the work of press photographers, but they still had to work to a minute-by-minute timetable. Nowadays, when photographers work as artists, they can work on a picture for years. These days, it is rare for anyone to do press pictures as a steady job, they might teach or do one-off gigs, but they concentrate on making their own art.

MH

Slowness, what does it mean to you?

EM

In fact, it is the Alpha and Omega of it all. I am by nature one of those ditherers, who wants to do everything to perfection. When I go to a place, then I want to be there right to the end. I remember when I was young, when we went to dances, my mates were already leaving and I still hadn't got round to asking even one girl to dance. Dances ended at one, and I wanted to be there until dead on one, while the lads would have left a bit earlier. If I had left at a quarter to, it would have been

like leaving in the middle. Everything has to be seen through to the end. I have to be quite sure that I have seen the thing from beginning to end. For instance, if I have taken a thousand pictures, I nevertheless somehow sense that this can still be made even better, so yes, I still take those extra shots. Perhaps I have a bit of the perfectionist's failing, that if I know that something can be improved, then I can't leave it alone. It is, in fact, a terrible nuisance, when you can't get things finished – especially when you yourself make the timetables.

MH

How do you know that that's enough now, i.e. in the case of this specific picture of a horse?

EM

It can happen that, even though this one, too, has been in four or five exhibitions, then nevertheless I still go to the horse and still take a few pictures, it's this kind of incredible fiddling. That's not at all impossible. Not so that I'll use them, but I have to be sure. The job is finished, when I have taken a hell of a good picture.

MH

Have you been to see Peppi again?

EM

Well, this picture is in fact finished, I haven't met Peppi for a few years now. But, just last summer, when I was driving past my neighbour's farm, and I saw the cows that I have been photographing for years, from all angles, it occurred to me: Should I stop and go and take a few more pictures. Because you often find at least something new there.

In his latest album, *I Am New Here*, 2010, in a song called “Where did the night go?”, Gil Scott-Heron asks the very same burning question again and again.

He knows the answer perfectly well through his own experience, but nevertheless repeats the same question:

where did the night go? Why?
Gil knew that the night did not go anywhere.

It just kept on going on and on, on and on.

Facts of Life – PART 8

Truth Value vs. Face Value

*“All art is propaganda but not all
propaganda is art.”*

George Orwell, 2009

*“It’s quite clear – it’s got to look demo-
cratic, but we must have everything in
control.”*

*Walter Ulbricht, leader of East German Communist
party in 1945 (quoted in Judt 2005, 131)*

We know it, and we know it well, very well. We know that images are enigmatic. They create problems. They generate difficulties. Images are both pleasurable and painful. They do the tango: they define and they describe. They lure us and they laugh – with us and at us. They deny and they lie and they tell it like it is. Yes, they do.

But hold on. Saying what images are is already a claim that deserves to be called ‘a brilliant mistake’. Images never are. They are made, constantly re-made, activated, delayed, relayed, reconstructed and destroyed. Images are processes of stop and go, circular movements of anchorage and free floating. Images are not comprehensible without their inter-woven texture of past, present and the future. Images are performative. It is a performative act within, not outside of, but both outside and inside a through and through mediated world. It is a world where we live to love and live to hate, that exists in the very centre of the conjunction between images made of and with reality and reality itself making that particular image.

But how does an image become and keep on turning into a temporal actualization? The starting point is a site – and an acknowledgement of it – that must be constructed with care and with passionate slowness.

Because, well..., because when two sides clash, we must fight against the DNA-driven DIN-reaction to flatten things out and make some soothing, static sense out of it. Instead of cemented categorizations and processes of normalization, we must go into the details. With an image, for example, this means that we recognize how it is constantly doing at least two things with the same actualization of an articulation. It deals with reality but it also shapes it, constructing it while describing it. Or, to put another spell of polarization on it, it is the combination, not the distance, between how an image can simultaneously be fed with the strategies of moral instrumentalization (it functions for legitimizing or condemning X, Y or Z) and a full blown cynical carelessness (it means less than nothing, but is widely available as a means of abuse).

For this not taking things for granted, and in order not to be captivated by the reassuring clarity and stability of an either/or model, we need assistance. For this, here is a sentence from Bill Nichols that ought to be useful: “separation between an image and what it refers to continues to be a difference that makes a difference.”^(1991, 7).

This sentence is not as simple as it might seem. It states, certainly, that there is a distance between what an utterance – any utterance, image, concept or act – conveys and carries, and what it means. We know also that there is a distinction required between what an utterance – let’s stay with an image – is meant to mean by the sender, and what it comes to mean in the interaction with the one taking the utterance of an image under his/her consideration.

But let us focus on Nichols’s description of the conditions of our conditions. There are two parts, two instances, let’s say two participants that are in the same, well, game. There is an image, and that image pictures, it portraits, it witnesses, it shows something that we can accept as a part of a reality. We have an image and we have a version of reality. According to Nichols, what happens between A and B is the “the difference that makes a difference”.

Sounds good, right? Right?

It is not A, and it is not B. It is what's taking place in between A and B, in between a version of reality and a version of an image, not of, but made and shaped with it.

Let us take another sentence, another helping hand, and another lifesaver in the high and stormy seas of conceptual sharks. This is about the content of concepts, about those incredibly dangerous sharks that eat the concepts that shape and make our memories of how, where, why and why not – reminding us of the genealogies of any utterance, its shifting connections to the detail and content of the intertwined time spheres of past, present and future.^{(For an accurate}

conception and development of these scary monsters, see Steven Hall, *The Raw Shark*

Texts, 2007) This is now about how things emerge when they merge and get mixed. Or: what happens when they are, deliberately or unconsciously, forgotten and forged.

This second helping hand is the idea that images are both visual and conceptual, and that they also produce situated concepts at the same time. "Images have a unique ability to disregard differences and join together to form a trustworthy third."^(Schmidt 2010, 67) This becoming a place is possible if and when the images are embedded into a situated practice that sees the knowledge produced as social and material – speaking from a place and to space within its spatial challenges and limitations. It does not follow the formal logic of counterfactuals, but makes us aware of what happens in-between, in the relationships of the process. "This would mean that a place/context is produced simultaneously in two directions of time. Through the reference to a place/context, its own prerequisite is produced, which in turn the given meaning of the place/context can be derived."^(Ibid.)

Here, we are still in the middle of it. And we are at it, with it, next to it, behind it, or out of it with a vengeance. A sweet and sour vengeance. We stay with it. Truly and duly. But now, now we have another participant, another ingredient, another element – next to the difference from a difference. This is the element that Staffan Schmidt, through working in an artistic research practice of not having a hierarchy between images and words, called the third. The middle of it that is not in the middle – it is something more than

in between. But that third is not something that belongs to or that can be reduced to either A (image) or B (words). It is temporal, it is fragile and it is where the action is at. It is the activate space where interpretation and reality meet, shake hands and start struggling with themselves and each other. It is that space where image and words go for a long long walk and well, they come back from the woods but not looking or feeling the same. They have become something else.

And as expected, besides the two conceptual tools we have acquired, we need more confidence. We need more tools for thinking. Thus, let us here throw in yet another sentence. This is from the French historian of images, Georges Didi-Huberman, and it is from a very unique book – a book to which we will turn our full attention later on – in which he confronts the four photographs from Auschwitz, the only ones that have been found to exist of the actual killing fields.

"The image is neither *nothing*, nor all, nor is it *one* – it is not even *two*. It is deployed according to the minimum complexity supposed by *two points of view that confront each other under the gaze of a third*."^(2008, 151)

Here, with Didi-Huberman, the reference to a third party and participant does not have the same content as in the previous reference. But neither is it something entirely different. The third that is talked about here is approached from a different position and it has distinct qualities, but it is sufficiently about the same sort of proposition. It is about the character, the internal and inherent logic of images, that is not about either/or constructions, but about this setup of both/and that always leads to another place, which is called the third.

But what is that third space? The third has no normative assumption, other than that it is not where it comes from, but what is made with it in a confrontation between A and B, that is, between one and one, that accumulates in a funky fashion. It never adds up to two, but goes up and down in a constant balance of an unbalance between a bit less or a bit more than that neat number 2.

And the space? It is the space of this confrontation that is both imaginary and physical. It leaves a trace. It is the ethical space where nothing is resolved, but where we must remain. And it is this remaining in a light that casts that shadow – both of a doubt and a hope. We must stay – with the problems and anxieties and the difficulties. It is a staying with that recognizes both sides of the dilemma, not as the same, but as participants in their own right. It is a setup where understanding the other is not what the interaction and potential meeting can be based on, since that presupposes too much credit and weight on either side of the non-existing balance between A and B. Instead of an a priori aim of a result of common consensual understanding, the ethical third space is a place that turns this ideal of a settled agreement upside down. Instead of getting it, we allow ourselves to admit that we can't ever bridge the gap between A and B – and we should not even want to. But we might be able to generate that necessary criss-cross activity between A and B.

It is an activity grounded on recognizing that we do not understand, we misunderstand. This misunderstanding is the saving grace that gives us the possibility of moving away from predetermined views and opinions and challenges, not what A says to B, but exactly what and how is A saying when he/she is saying while doing that performative act with words. What's more, this is simultaneously about how B manages to relate to how A is performing, while not even wanting to force A to fit into B's pre-existing expectations and visions, but rather allowing A to articulate his/her version in and through his/her views, dialects and distinctions.

This is the location, the temporal collision course of the ethics of misunderstanding. This is the space where that third place is developed, questioned and further activated. This is where A does not demand B be what A wants himself/herself to be – or other way around. This is where – after a long process of slowly touching various positions and views that no longer just divide but might even be sharable – there grows an acceptance of a difference between the backgrounds and the present actualized views of both A and B, and how that difference is the third place that becomes what has been missing. It is that bind, it is

that link between A and B. It is not a common ground, it is not a set of principles. It is the very humble and very volatile achievement of the interaction between A and B. It is an achievement that might take years to build, but which can be destroyed in seconds. And that's, well, that's precisely why this is what it is: this is the ethics of misunderstanding.^(see Hannula 2007)

But why this need for three different versions of the “changing same”? Why do we need a reassurance that the image is not one, that it is a process, and that it is always in great need of situated and committed interpretation?

We land – with our feet running wild – now in the heart of the issue. This is called the discourse of whether an image has a resemblance or reference to something that is called reality, not the Real, but reality as the site where we breathe in and out. A reality that is not fixed, nor is it a remedy for a fantasy. Because, well..., because believe it or not, there are many people out there who claim that, well, that there is no connection between that thing called an image and that description of something, in a version of a reality.

This is where the claim for the truth value of an image meets the other partner, called the face value of an image. This is the place where we see remainders of something that we thought and were told was long gone. This is where we have the *Ahnung* of an echo – something that was there, is now gone, but is about to return – or not. This is where we recall the debates on and over the original and its possible copy, the debate between the real and the fake, and this is where we reel and roll towards the paradigmatic change, the implications of which are yet everything but clear between an analogue world and a digital world of images.

This is the junction, very much recognizable also in the similar setup in the discourses of truth, where the one side, even if questioned and critiqued, claims to have a connection to something that is labelled as truth, while the other side denies this connection and claims that all there is to be accomplished is a wide variety of shades of lies and fakes.

When in doubt, trust capitalism.
 My favourite of a new career in the
 service-driven post-industrial society:
 wardrobe consultant.
 The catch: Try finding that in
 your local yellow pages.

Facts of Life – PART 12

But why can't we, not have both, but deal with them both? Is it really that impossible to accept (and even cherish) that images do reflect and they do produce, and that images are both informative and affective? The point should not be this or that or what, but in every case and every image, how and why. Because, well..., because, we do have, and we do need them both. We need to have a concept of truth (in order to know the difference between agreement and disagreement), and we need to have a reference of an image to a version of reality, while we use a great of energy in questioning and doubting not what that is, but how it is achieved and performed. We need these things, right. Right?

Or do we?

Fredric Jameson, the American veteran on the cause of the troubled sense of reality we have, would perhaps not deny that there is a reality, but he would clearly be against the idea of us having even the slightest chance of connecting images with a true version of reality. This is not because Jameson is not interested in this connection. According to Jameson, the connection is distorted. So much so that it is no longer possible. Setting aside the questions of whether it ever was possible to have an undistorted connection or not, and what that, in fact, would imply, and how it would manifest itself, let us now stay with Jameson's (see, for example, in 1991) often rehearsed point – a point that is this: schizophrenic signifiers.

What causes this, says Jameson – and he has said this consequently and coherently since at least early 1980s – is the capitalist system of late-modernity, something that for him is called post-modernity. It is a system that owns its identity and its success to the compulsive investment and idealization of the image, that must be instant and overwhelming. Post-modernity as a system of late capitalism is characterized by two intertwined notions, the fragmentation of time and the processes by which reality is flattened into images. This causes the disappearance of a sense of history. Instead of producing change, or even something new, post-modern culture is repetitive – and it is a type of repetition that is just a surface, failing to have any vitality. For Jameson, this means that the modus is altered from an individual's position towards the rule by the institutions. "It is the institutions which are now speaking through us in the form of a pastiche, and rehearsing the dead letter of older thoughts in a simulation of reaction."^(1998, 99)

But if Jameson sounds like a hard-core case of painting with pessimism, Jean Baudrillard tops the stakes again with greater sense of drama and rhetoric. Baudrillard's critique took flight already at the end of the '60s, and the strategy he chose did not falter. For Baudrillard, the question of an image is no longer in between, on the scales of its referential and simulacra status. Baudrillard saw nothing but a simulation. Images are commodity signs – and that's that.

And then that's really that, the game is over, and with it, a point well-rehearsed by Hal Foster^(1996, 128), it is also over and done for with the long-lived hope for the subversive force of disruptive representation. Indeed, it is the end of subversion, with the total integration of an image into a political economy of the commodity sign.

But what is Baudrillard after, with the term commodity sign? What does it mean, what does it convey? The background is the break up of the relationship of the image with its use value. It becomes a combination of a use value and a sign value. In the language of Baudrillard, this is to say that "it is because *the logic of the commodity and of political economy is at the heart of the sign*, in the abstract equation of signifier and signified, in the differential combinatory of signs, that signs can function as exchange value (the discourse of communication) and as use value (rational decoding and distinctive social use)."^(1981, 146)

For Baudrillard, the ideology of capitalism that turns everything into commodities captures and captivates all areas of society: it ranges from production, whether it is material or symbolic, to abstraction, reduction, turning everything into the same, and then exploitation of this unity. This is to say that there is no more excess, no more connotation, the commodity sign as a form "establishes it as a total medium, as a system of communication administering all social exchange."^(ibid. 146)

Jean Baudrillard has spent a fantastically great amount of time in denying the wish to have any meaningful connection between reality and an image. In his vision, the former differences between true and false, and the real and the imaginary fail to make any sense whatsoever. What he says is possible to conceive in one single concept: simulacra. Or to use a longer version of the same formula, in simulation we live and inhabit "the desert of the real itself"^(1994, 2). Simulacra, for Baudrillard, are the negation of the value of a sign. There is no referential relationship, but we do have images, the whole bulimia of them, but they are simulated ones. It is the full integration of an image into the political economy of a sign that is nothing but a commodity.^(ibid. 6)

This is the total liquidation of all points of reference. It is not about former aching dilemmas of imitation, or copying by duplication or even about parody. We have left that domain, and entered yet another paradigmatic change. "It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes."^(ibid. 2)

However, for Baudrillard, the images that we see, that we use, and that certainly make a use of us, are not detached but inherently built into the everyday structure of our lives. They are us, and in us. We can't escape them. We are made to feel, and we have learned to feel, that we can't live and survive without them. This is what he labels as conspicuous consumption, which by its sensibility is brutal, it is vicarious. It is vicarious because it both constructs and preserves a hierarchical order of values. "It is a restrictive *social institution* that determines behaviour before even being considered in the consciousness of the social actors."^(1981, 31)

Later on, through the years living life in the desert of the real, Baudrillard made a habit of producing statements as provocative slogans. This strategy was actualized in pronouncing titles as 'Watergate is not a scandal' and 'The Gulf War did not happen'. Increasingly, Baudrillard lost contact with the use value of a sign that turned into a totality of a simulation. Everything and anything was total – total loss, total nothing, total total. And with this sliding into a weird combi-coupe type of cul-de-sac of formalism and predestination, his argumentation became so slippery it was hard to distinguish a distance between self-hatred and vicious cynicism. The consequence is that when anything and everything is simultaneously true and not, especially lived experience is nothing more than a fundamental banality. The lights are out, and they do really stay out. It is dark, and it is cold, so very cold. The only thing left to ask and to wonder is: what becomes of the broken hearted?

But where do we go from here? Home? But when everything is useless and anything is nothing, when all are the same and when all differences have

collapsed, where is home – or even the directions towards something like that, which is not the same as longing for the nostalgia of a safe haven?

Reading and re-reading both Jameson and Baudrillard, and while focusing on the interpretation of the images by Andy Warhol, with the guidance of Lacan Hal Foster returns to a position that puts a shade and a significance against the increasingly deterministic and even totalitarian claims of commodity fetish critique. The real that both Jameson and Baudrillard see as a distortion via the complete takeover of consumption, is perhaps something that was not there in the very beginning. Perhaps the real did not get (the horror! the horror!) this terrible simulated treatment. Perhaps it was always missing. Because, claims Foster with a reading of Lacan, the real “always remains, behind and beyond us, to lure us”^(1996, 141).

The real (as in: reality) does not stand still. It slips away, and it does not break even or confine itself to a static object. Therefore, the real in its plurality cannot be represented one-to-one. What can be represented is parts of it, some lost traces or objects of desire, but not the whole. It is a missed encounter, but being a continuation of misses and semi-hits does not make it irrelevant. On the contrary, the acknowledgement of its inherent failure is what saves the dignity and the credibility of the process. We ought not even to try to capture it, or to catapult us with it to the heaven or hell of our individual preferences. Instead, the real that escapes, the real that lures us and cheats us, is what we must stay with.

To point to the point where we stop – to go: the extra value is in what keeps missing and escaping. It is a process to move with and towards, but a process in which we never reach a conclusion and catharsis.

And for that open-ended, self-critical and self-doubtful process, following Foucault, what we have and what we face is the productive heart, the productive mode and the productive energy of the acts of confronting the processes of giving content to signs, symbols, images and concepts. It is the act of social imagination^(see Hannula 2009). It is an act that loses it all if it fails to accept how things hang together and are

not to be artificially separated into prepaid boxes of either/or answers. This is to say that an image is never this or that, it is both/and. It holds both the promise of a critical yet constructive experience, but also the suffocation of that potential experience into a endless sequences of commodified signs.

This is not to say that we can get rid of the opposites. When, for example, Hito Steyerl, our well-remembered acquaintance from Chapter 3, paints the picture between the two opposites of the strategies, the act of painting itself is not the problem; the problem is in the consequences it has. The picture she paints has the alternatives of a) *potestas* and b) *potentia*. The former holds the hand of the hierarchical and authoritative power of representation, while the latter stands next to the creative force of power.

^(2008, 126) Now, if the choice would be between these, there would be no choice at all. Using the coloured description of Steyerl, it would be between the forces of lies and the forces of emancipation – and well, with the wishing well that we stare at, nobody wants to be one with the ones against empowerment and perhaps even revolution. Because the promise is out there and the stakes are high.

We are, we are, oh most certainly we are – the world. Or are we?

But hold on, please. Hold on. Because, well..., because that construction is in itself a commodified sign. It is the world of the t-shirt peddlers. It is the sign of Che, it is the slogan of “make love not war” and it is the way-too-cozy and comfortable act of loving your good old enemy. But the enemy is not even a projection. It is a static object that is relentlessly made and re-made into exactly that: a perfect sitting duck. Nothing more, and actually much much less.

Because, well..., because if we allow ourselves to leave the drama divas and catastrophe prone divans, we are stuck with the honest dilemma. We can't get the real, because it slips away. It is a nauseous plurality of a mess, but we can't let go of the ways to articulate a temporary version with it. This is then the spot where we no longer ask *what* but *how* is it in each site and situation made – the connection between an image

and a version of a reality. This is where we leave aside the hope for a disruptive avant-garde, but take the comprehensive route (not forgetting its roots) via Barthes, that the nature we represent is not nature in itself but a nature that is made to look and present nature. It is a naturalized form. And well, like it or not, we are not going to get closer, better or more effective than that.

This is the notion that makes us wide-awake to the practices of how representations are constructed. Here, we get nostalgic and remember, we recall an experience nothing less miraculous than Casablanca. Not the city, but the imitation of the real as true blue product: the film. We have the two stars that shine like they should. We got Humphrey and we got Ingrid. In so-called real life, their physical taxonomy was quite problematic, which did not stand in the way of them getting it right for the celluloid.

The female in this physical relationship was way too tall for the male partner. They were not an immediate authentic match that fitted the desired norm of social imagination. Here, the male was short but still managed to represent the cool charisma of a hard-boiled man with a hungry heart. But well, for the movie production, that of course was not a problem because this story was not about something real. It was a story. And for the story, the makers of the film solved a rather simple pragmatic issue. They had a shoemaker build special shoes. In the reality of making the film, in the parts when it's required, Bogart walks on these special made-for-the-occasion shoes, now even looking down on Bergman a little. But in the film, we see and recognize only that part that is really important – for the story. We get them face to face, kiss on kissed lips – in a perfect match with the required melancholy and merry heroism. On film, they matched perfectly. Did you hear me, perfectly.

This elegant construction of naturalness is not, let me repeat, is not medium specific. In photography, we have the practices of learning how to take photos naturally. This again does not mean, or does not want to be mixed with the idea of taking natural photos or, heaven forbid, photos of so-called natural life. This is the learned and practised act of taking photos

that look like they were taken without effort, without predetermined planning and without a clear aim. This is the act of, not the so-called invisible hand, but the invisible eye. One of the main artists in the new documentary genre, the new colour photography, coming from USA, Stephen Shore (2010), later recalled how he worked very hard conceptually and practically to gain that naturalness in the photos. This was a series called “American Surfaces” that he finished in 1973. Quoting Shore: “It required a lot of effort to achieve a result that looked so effortless.”

It is not the ready-made coolness that we see, but the worked-through constellation of how to make photos that carry with them the constructed elegance of a lightness of being – and not being. It is, according to Shore, comparable to an actor who has to learn how to walk consciously in order to learn how to walk naturally on camera. In a photos series called “Uncommon Places”, 1975, there is a breaking up of a clear and poignant motive and focusing on places and events that in themselves were everything but interesting. They were non-places, non-sites that were made important through the act of photographing them there and then. It is the real that is realized, it is made and shaped into an event of an actualization. Shore states: “Some photographers go out and want to make beautiful photographs. I think that puts the cart before the horse. Good photographs are the by-product of some other exploration, or some other intention.”^(Blank 2007)

But, well, not wanting to spoil the excitement, well, here comes the catch, here comes the buzzer sounding for the danger zone. It is a difference that should make a difference but well, not so very surprisingly, it is a difference that too often is actively hidden and not acknowledged. This is the act of making sense of a distance between what is experienced and the act of actualization of it in a sign, or a word or whatsoever. Because, well..., because this act of making a transformation is never neutral, never innocent and never impartial. It is the act of taking part in the problem – an active part. In this act, the way we can make sense of the bulimia of images, or the tsunamis of information, is never one to one, never direct and never flat out straightforward.

For examples of strategies for survival, we can look to and admire not only photographers such as Shore, but novelists such as Don DeLillo (1985) and David Foster Wallace (2004). Both are writers who transform and transmit to us stories about characters who try desperately to fight a battle they do realize they are losing. These are tales – anywhere from short stories to huge bricks of books – that articulate the common desire to maintain some sort of dignity and sovereignty over our inner lives, against the onslaught of high technology and its overwhelming speed and volume. With DeLillo, the characters are biting in hard, they are coping, trying to make a difference, while with Foster Wallace they turn the impossibility of the task into a conceptual carnival where everything that is up is already long way down.

Another way to address the honest dilemma of how to deal with reality while both describing and defining it is to make the distinction so often used in studies of narrative. Here, the setup is between what's called a mimetic and a diegetic take on reality. Mimetic is what it promises; it is about imitating the world perfectly, not perhaps as the result, but at least as the aim of the act of how to construct the relationship between reality and its articulation as an image. Unlike the mimetic, the diegetic understanding of this relationship aims not at copying, but at telling this relationship as a story in a particular way. How diegetic is to be used and understood, is a hotly debated issue, ^(see, for example, the opposing views of the definition and content of diegetic, Genette 1988, and Bal 1997) but the fact that concept is very deeply contested does not diminish its productive potentiality.

As a concept that certainly points towards something, diegetic is about a specific angle, not the idea of telling it all or covering it all. It is opposed to showing and enacting. Diegetic also starts from the position that reality in itself is impossible to contain. Instead, we can achieve particular and partial stories of time- and space-bound sites and situations. These are then stories that are biased and constructed – leaving aside the dream of naturalness and immediate as something authentic and real.

A diegetic relationship with reality implies a participatory attitude. We are part of the game, part of the mess.

We are after something, and what that something is depends on what our values, wants, wishes and fears are. As the song says: be careful what you wish for.

But sometimes (read: almost always) we do not need to go fishing for the real. It is already there. You know, like here. And it is a version of a reality that does not caress. It hurts, and it does not leave us with a sense of solution and in a state of harmony. It remains, and it gets stuck. This is the version of reality that Didi-Huberman relates to in his remarkable analysis of the four photographs from Auschwitz. Here, we are facing a specific fact that is important to underline. So far, we have millions of photographs of the camps after the prisoners had been freed, but there exist only four (4!) photos of the actual Nazi killing machine that managed to industrially annihilate over 6 million people during less than four years from the summer of 1941 to May 1945.

With this theme, Didi-Huberman touches upon the dilemma of how to deal with atrocities that are so enormous, so impossible to comprehend and to imagine. So, so, so, so – anything and everything. This is the ongoing discussing that the survivors of the camps started, but which took a long while before it got going and before it got recognized. As we know from the better quality of history books dealing with this period and issue, in Germany the first important processes against the Nazi criminals after the war took place in the early and mid-1960s. We also know, for example, from the writings of Primo Levi, how difficult it was to confront the memories and how long it took to get the theme to be recognized. For years, all the way from the 1960s, Levi met no interest and was only able to get published in the 1980's, first in Italy, then later on in translations that followed. It is also from these survivors that we learn the incredible cruelty of the crimes. They were so disgusting and so terrible it was really difficult to believe them. What's more, as Levi writes ^(1989, 31), there was the precisely planned and implemented action by the Nazis to destroy not only the human beings but also their memories. To destroy it all. Did you hear me – all.

With economic style and great precision Didi-Huberman articulates the story and aims behind

this war against memory, the destruction of the tools and structures of the most massive obliteration that was ever aimed at or that ever existed. This was a war, which the Nazis were almost fully successful in winning, by managing to destroy almost all direct evidences such as photographs of the killing camps. Didi-Huberman looks carefully at these four not so clear photos. He walks us through it, telling us the archaeology of these photos that were taken by the Sonderkommando people; that is, Jewish prisoners working at the ovens for killing their fellow prisoners. They were a specific type of prisoner who, with their most horrible service, gained between three and six months of desperate extra time, but who were also annihilated after they were of no use any more.

These are photos that depict the unimaginable. And they are made in circumstances that are too horrible to think about. History tells us how only very few of these Sonderkommandos lived to tell us about their activities. But Didi-Huberman^(2008, 25) does not accept that these photographs are unimaginable, unarticulable, unsayable and unthinkable. That is for him way too easy and way too lazy, as an attitude, as a relationship in being-in-the-world. He refers to Hannah Arendt's principle that instead of ducking the issues, we must think and articulate that which is so difficult to confront, to think and to talk about. Instead of turning away, we must face these dilemmas, these horrible acts and events.

Didi-Huberman uses the phrase that helps and hurts for the title of his book: in spite of all. Because these four remaining photos are images – in spite of all. Therefore, “we must say that Auschwitz is *only imaginable*”.^(ibid., 45) We must look at these pictures, but not to either get caught by them and believe they present some absolute truth, or to dismiss them as ‘just images’. They are both/and – something we must deal with in order to make these images be present and open up for today.

With this notion, Didi-Huberman underlines a very significant matter that has implications and weight for basically any case that deals with the connection of reality and images. It is the point of an argument that claims a general view, but only when it is

anchored into a particular case and its embedded reading with. Whatever images we have of anything called X, Y or Z, they do not represent or give the whole truth, but always instances of it (here again, he is linking the argument strongly to Arendt's writings, especially her report on the Auschwitz trials, 1964). But that does not diminish the weight of those particular instances. Again, as we have argued above, the whole picture of a reality is in itself pure illusion, and a dangerous one.

The logic of how the winner takes all, the logic of a world according to an endless set of either/or's is something that constantly asks much too much and way too little of the images that we have confronting the versions of realities. As Didi-Huberman so convincingly argues with this most dramatic case,

Some places have oddly fitting names.
One of the most poignant ones is this location
in the north of the north of Finland.
It is called Kusipää – literally: Piss Head.
It is truly out in the woods, the out back of beyond.
Barely a spot on the map.
The only reason it is known is that for some weird reason,
that small hill is one of the best places in the whole huge
reservoir region to receive gsm signals.
Thus, it attracts large numbers of recreational fishermen
and hunters on holiday from the south of the south.

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images are per se inadequate and inexact. The other side of the same failure is to ask too little of the images. “By immediately relegating them to the sphere of the simulacrum – admittedly something difficult in the present case – we exclude them from the historical field as such.”^(Ibid. 33) The danger is in asking an image to give us everything, and then again, nothing. It is the excess between hypertrophy and the full reduction of the image to plain neutral document. It (an image) is not honest or fake; it is torn. It is in between. It is a position that requires from us a situated and committed take on it – not avoidance of it.

For Didi-Huberman^(Ibid. 162) imagination is a political faculty. We must get closer, in spite of all – we must persist in approaching, for example, these images. We must question how images are used, but at the same time, we must resist the failure of not seeing how the use value of an image is not the same as its truth value.^(Ibid. 75) As the consciousness of the image is not this or that, but is the in-between, the stuckness of being torn, an image does not only hide or distort. It is what Didi-Huberman calls a tear-image that consists of its dialectical plasticity. Because the image is that both/and procedural entity. It is a dual system. It consists of both resemblance and difference, form and formlessness, comeliness and cruelty. It is immediate and obscure.^(Ibid. 79)

This duality does not let us off the hook. On the contrary, it demands more, much more of us – seeing, and thinking of and with what we see when we see that what we think we are seeing. This is the moment Didi-Huberman describes as following: “between a *certain* knowledge of what is represented and an *uncertain* recognition of what is seen; between the uncertainty of having seen and the certainty of having *experienced*.”^(Ibid. 86) This is what can be defined as the ethical moment of the gaze. It is the striking awareness of being part of the process, part of the productive force of how, why and when images are made and used, seen and not seen.

What’s more, the ethical point of both departure and constant returning is how this gaze, how this thinking with an image does not provide any solutions. There is no magic hand, no respite. It is what

Didi-Huberman labels as “knowing without end”.^(Ibid. 84) There is no conclusion, no closing up. We confront a version of a reality while shaping and making a version of it: not the same but the changing same. The version we articulate, the version we try to transmit and communicate is never all of it, neither is it none of it, nor is it one thing. It is a part of multiple chances and challenges – a part that exists as itself, in relation to other parts, but a part that exists by itself – for that time and being. It is always one next to another, never many at the same time.

And this is, this is something that is not about speed, volume, and getting everything and everywhere now and forever. This is slowness, and this is the pleasure principle. This is the politics of small gestures.^(see Hannula 2006)

But to go back to the very beginning, back to the sites and situations where it perhaps does not always hurt, but definitely annoys us the most – with the act of slowing down. Thus, let us do the dirty thing and let us now focus on slow, not on instant pleasures. Is it slow as in a slow song? Or as in a slow food? Or as in a slow speed of travelling down the road on foot, stopping at every sight worth our while, and then some?

Yes and no. Indeed, if there ever is a concept that is in great need of being clarified, that is the concept of slow. Because it would be wonderfully simple if it was only about lessening the speed with which we do whatever we do. You know, do it slower, take your time, don’t hurry and remember to take enough breaks in between. Look right, then left, and right again before eating your muesli.

But the slowness as a quality that we are after – again in whatever we do – is not a prepaid description. The slowness of a practice is only meaningful when it is defined and recognized as a need from within the activity itself. It is a version of slowness that stresses the necessity of allowing time for anything worthwhile to sink in. Consequently, it is slowness as the realization of holding back, dancing unaccustomed sidesteps and enjoying boxing with the shadows. As its counterpart, it is about not producing just for the sake of producing. Instead of cutting corners and charging around at full steam, it is about looking for

and then also taking those detours – luring oneself to gain distance in order to get another new look into the intimacy of a practice. Instead of a one-size-fits-all solution, it is about finding the concentration on the internal – always evolving and emerging – logic of a practice.

This is then slowness that is not the same as the motto of less is more. It is not slowness as a quantity or the lack of it. As said, it is the quality of doing something that requires slowness, a certain attitude of caring and learning how to let things evolve – instead of forcing them into previously recognized and expected forms and formations.

For an example, and an example articulated by an artist, let us take a look at how Gil Scott-Heron, the pioneer of spoken word and politically inspired music, articulates this important and inherent quality of going slow and taking time when meeting someone new, someone perhaps like a work of art you want to be with, seriously. This is a text that accompanies the latest album he has released. After years of absence from the scene, and after suffering various cases of addictions, he bounced back in the year of 2010 with the aptly titled work “I’m New Here”. On the sleeve of the record, Scott-Heron writes:

“There is a proper procedure for taking advantage of any investment.

Music, for example. Buying a CD is an investment. To get the maximum you must

LISTEN TO IT FOR THE FIRST TIME UNDER OPTIMUM CONDITIONS

Not in your car or on a portable player through a headset.

Take it home.

Get rid of all distractions, (even him or her).

Turn off your cell phone.

Turn off everything that rings or beeps or rattles or whistles.

Make yourself comfortable.

Play your CD.

LISTEN all the way through.

Think about what you got.

Think about who would appreciate this investment. Decide if there is someone to share this with.

Turn it on again.

Enjoy yourself.”

This is slowness as a quality, not of, but with life. It is not ecstatic or glorified life, but everyday life. Life lived daily while being stuck and not running away, but making the best moves to come to terms with it. It is slowness as the ability to appreciate how things come about and emerge. It is, to be sure, an instance, but it requires something else. It needs more, it needs a perspective and trajectory.

What we face is slowness in the required task of repetition and, in clear terms, the acts of practising anything we do (ranging from playing a violin to walking in a park, and rebounding back with the act of placing words after words in a specific order). It is the necessity of a repetitive act that has been comprehensively studied. The numbers might alter from one field to the next, and while everything is in the end based on individual cases, the estimate of what it takes for us to master any complex skill, and for that skill to become ingrained into our practice, is the golden rule of ten thousand hours. Hidden in that number is a sign of what it means to become an expert – translated into doing what you do when you do it, for three hours a day for ten years. (Sennett 2008, 172)

This is slowness, as in the strategy of building space for the chance of surprises – surprises within your ongoing, deeply embedded acts and activities. Especially when addressing the means and ways of production of culture, practising such slowness is to avoid the straightforward logic of yet another new product with a shiny price tag that does exactly this and that. It is a small gesture that breaks loose the spell of speed, a gesture that turns the handle and opens the door so that in comes something that has all of a sudden become possible. There are no illusions here of a great leap forward, just an endless series of try-outs at moving sideways. Not linearly, but in circles over circles over circles. Like that water dripping in a bathtub, that very simple drop that is followed by, well, another drop, making those circles appear and that, well, disappear, so they can come back again.

Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind
is a movie.
Everybody loves the sunshine
is a song.
Both are great, just great products
of culture.
They have absolutely nothing to do
with one another.

Facts of Life – PART 79

It is a motion of emotions happening today, not tomorrow, since time does not wait, it will only accelerate.

It is slowness, as in the ability to let the nuances of our acts gain confidence to be affected. It is to be ready and open for impulses and interventions. Instead of trying to cover and get it all, slow is to focus and to gain integrity and situatedness, both with the material and the context. To borrow from another set of terms, the type of a slow act we are after can be highlighted with the differentiation between volume and intensity.^(Barenboim 2009, 105) The wished for effect and result is not to be gained through the simple increase of volume and power. If anything, it (quality) is approachable in and through the inherent logic of the practice that produces the integrated knowledge and its integrity and intensity.

Slow is the act of not just talking and talking, but in very concrete terms, slowing down and listening. Listening, not to what you think is being said, but more vigorously listening to what is said in the terms and means performed by the other, not by you. Here we already have a notion that is not a self-fulfilling prophesy, but a practice that generates its own slowness. Since the act of listening, and the intention to listen to the other's voice and his/her ways of describing the same and similar reality, requires

that you change perspectives and let go of your own semi-fixed, always biased positions, this alteration and shift of balance takes time. There are no fast-forward solution, just the reality of moving away from something that you are familiar with, towards the third space of something that is about to happen and to become. It is a slowness without which a meeting between A and B is not meaningful and possible. It is a meeting that never is, but always might potentially happen, if and when both sides allow themselves to take the risks and move towards shaping together that yet unknown third space that is created there and then during the give and take, push and pull conversations and negotiations.^(see Hannula 2009, Chapter 3)

Now, at the end of a chapter, a re-check of our check list. We are back, back at that space where a place is in the making. That place is situated site of a third place. It is a place for which we keep searching, reaching. Can you feel it? Can you feel it missing, too?

There is a wish. It is a wishful kind of a wish. But it is a painful one, too. It is a wish that goes against the sense of time, sense of light and sense of gravity that pulls tighter and more aggressively than we even might notice. A wish for something that perhaps never was there, but which clearly is further away from us now than before. It is a wish for common ground, a wish for a civic collective public that shares enough of the basic elements in order to be able to talk and walk, argue and agree upon things that matter. We are getting closer to a site and situation that Karl Jaspers (1970) called the loving conflict. It is an idea of a never-ending search for what we will not achieve – the balance between caring for a sense of togetherness and caring for it enough to be able to disagree in a fruitful and constructive way, without forcing oneself into a false consensus.

It is a site that two scholars of photojournalism, Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, want to reactivate and win back with this well articulated candy store, sky-high type of wishing well: "It might be that in an increasingly liberalized society, any form of collective compassion is better than none. The task is not to mute disaster coverage or discredit the iconic image but rather to find ways to keep citizens orientated toward helping one another."^(2007, 281)

This is a text written from America of the 21st century, and it is written for America of this not yet so old century. It is a wish that is out there, far away from so-called daily politics, a wish that has so much soap in it that it is no longer just in and around our eyes. It fills our ears and settles our fears. A wish that any collective is better than none, and that images can function as a means so that people would help one another.

But where is the common ground? It is placed and based in a hole so deep it is difficult to find courage to stare into it. Not only in the so-called new world of America, not only in so-called Old Europe. That hole is everywhere. It is made, remade and further deepened daily by the dedicated followers of principles of speed, volume and price. And then if you add vanity to the bag, you got it all – almost. It is the result of the rules and regulations of a game that denies quality, content and concentration. To play by its rules and regulations is fatal. But not to play at all is just as fatal.

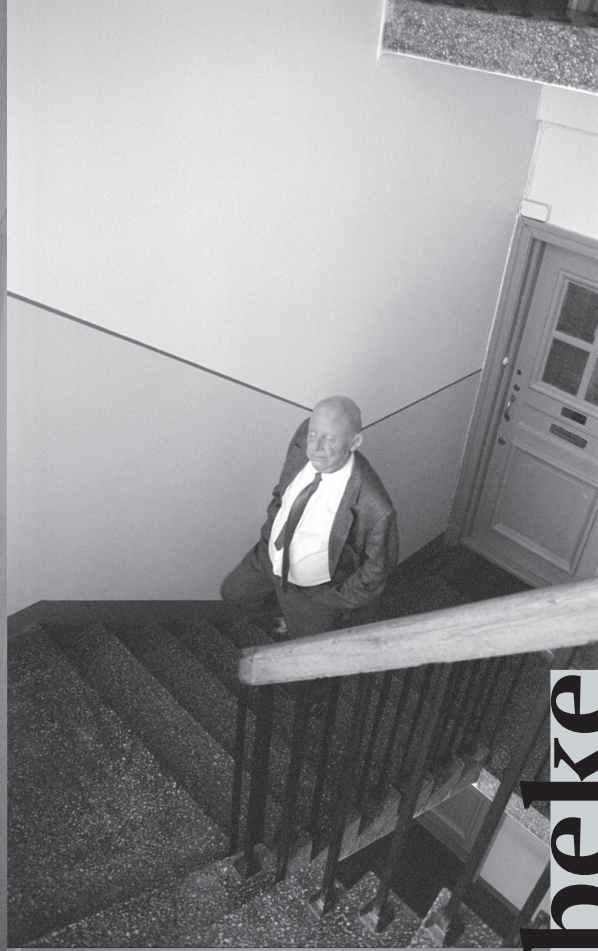
We need, we *do* need – something. Something of a loose common ground that as a platform generates an intersection between both physical and discursive sites where we can argue and participate. This is what we must have. Right? Right?

Is there, is there anyone out there?

Where do we go from here, and from where? How do we keep on keeping on? How can we manage to follow Hannah Arendt's maxim of the *vita activa* and take it with us – take it somewhere? How, and where in this modern act of multi-tasking are these open challenges located? But in this game of why oh why's, happily this particular why is something we know. Why, because that's the chance that we have. Nothing more, nothing less. A something that is closer to a rupture than a common ground. It is temporary, and constantly on the verge of vanishing, but it is there, tentative and attainable. It is based on the recognition that no matter how much that common chance of reasonable disagreement and loving conflict escapes us, and how hard it is every time to achieve for even the shortest periods, it does not become less but more of an aim.

This is what Didi-Huberman^(2008, 81) called, instead of a consensual experience, the experience that tears, altering the parameters and expectations, and also limits and limitations. An act of tearing is not seriously confronted if it is glorified. It is an act that demands its counterpart – for the balance, for the balance that does not end in harmony but an ongoing sidesteps and stumbling around. A tearing that needs the part of pulling together. Back and forth, back and forth and so it goes – and continues again. Hopefully.

Can you hear it? Can you feel it, too?



Vibeke Tandberg

(Photoserie)

Old Man Going Up and Down a Staircase, 2004

each photo 105 x 70 cm

Born 1967 in Oslo

Lives and works in Oslo

1995/1997 Department of Film and Photography,

MFA, Film och Fotohögskolan, Gothenburg

1991/1994 Department of Photography,

Kunsthøgskolen, Bergen, BFA

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Mika Hannula

What are you doing right now?

Vibeke Tandberg

I am writing. I am writing three different things. One is a novel. Then I am writing texts for a film. It is not a script for a film, but a text as a film, a film showing my hand writing a text. The hand is writing and editing the text as the text progresses, so it changes all the time. It is a very plastic way of writing. Then I am writing these short texts, consisting of two or three words, for paintings and collage works. These short texts can come out as "And my heart, and my heart" or "My face", and that's that. Very short ones, referring to a subject reflecting and looking at oneself. →

MH
Isn't that a lot of writing for a photographer?

VT
I know [laughs].

MH
But for some years now you have done quite a lot of work, which is not easily described as photography. How and when did that start?

VT
The change?

MH
Yes.

VT
It started when I had my children. It was, really, the very minute they were out that my focus shifted. I did not realize it clearly at that moment, but about a year later I understood that everything had changed – things around me got a different meaning. It was impossible to go on thinking about making art the way that I had done before for so many years.

MH
Why?

VT
Well, because my practice until then had been so much about turning the camera towards myself. My main issue in the world was no longer myself, my appearance in the world and my connections to it. The focus had shifted to my children, which by itself made it impossible to force the focus back on me. It was undoable. It was also impossible to use the children as a source in themselves, they were too close. That's how I ended up, not rethinking my working process, but just reaching for what was closest and most natural to analyse around me.

VT
It started with newspapers, because that's what was closest to me when the kids were really young. They were my connection to the outside world. I started digging into newspapers, very concretely with scissors, making huge collage works of newspapers. This was very conceptual work. I had not done anything like that before. It was a way of dealing with the world. It came about in a natural way, but looking at it from the outside, it looked like a huge change. No one understood this change, and I think my gallerists were really frustrated.

MH
Yes?

VT
Sure. But for me it was, and felt, natural. There was no direct visual link between my older works and these new ones, but the background setup was the same. All my other stuff had also come very much from the things that were closest to me.

MH
This change, was it confusing to you?

VT
Not at all. Like with other stuff I had done, it was something I wanted to see. When I started working with newspapers – so far I have done two huge ones – I did it because I wanted to see them totally disconnected from their original purpose and form, to be cut up and made into huge collages.

VT
Each newspaper was categorized. All the words were cut out. They were placed into different categories like "Animals", "Words starting with the letter P", or "Words with five letters", etc. The categories come from a wish to find simple labels for complicated matters, political stuff, material addressed in the daily news. It is an almost childlike way of dividing things and making the world comprehensible.

MH
This exhibition was at gallery Klosterfelde, Berlin at 2005?

VT
Yes, by then, the kids were three years old, and we had just moved to Berlin for a while. I had done shows after the kids were born, but this was the first new work that I had made and shown. They are all the same size, each category done in 70 x 100. The first newspaper was itself a big show, 200-300 square meters of a space, and it was packed. So one single tiny newspaper was spread out, enlarged and very decorative and beautiful.

MH
Which newspaper was it?

VT
The *International Herald Tribune*.

MH
What date?

VT
[Laughs] I remember that, it was 24.9.2004, and the show opened exactly one year after that. These details were really important for me, especially when I was doing the project. I got so into this one particular newspaper. It was like one whole year of working. At one point,

I knew exactly how many words were in this one paper. I knew the relationship of how many times the word and was used in comparison to the use of the word *the*. These two words occurred the most times.

MH

After newspapers, what was the next most natural thing to proceed with?

VT

In work or in life?

MH

In work.

VT

That was literature. Right after the newspaper, I did Albert Camus' *L'étranger*. It was for the Sao Paolo biennial in 2007. I had a very conceptual frame on a very existential subject. I wanted the look of the work to be in total opposition to the content of the novel. I just cut out all the words – there were about 32,000 – and I alphabetized the words very strictly. The work in itself looks very dry, it is only columns of alphabetized tiny words. It is done in French, the original language of the novel. I do not understand French, so for me the words were like objects without meaning, like tiny signs or images.

MH

How many such literary projects have you done?

VT

I have done only two: the Camus and T.S. Elliot's *The Waste Land*, the poem. That is much shorter, about 3000 words. This was shown also in 2007. T.S. Elliot is the most beautiful of the text works. The poem is from 1922, and is said to sort of highlight the literary shift to modernism. It has a collage-like structure, it is totally fascinating. It tries to grasp the decline of the western civilization after World War I. The poem is chaotic, like a labyrinth. What I did to it was to make it very structured, like with Camus. But with Elliot, I did not alphabetize, I just categorized all the words into collages based on the criteria of how many times they appeared in the poem. The word *the* got its own collage, it occurred so many times, exactly 206 times. I have all the details you need, yes yes yes. Then I wrote a number to each word, noting where exactly it occurred in the poem.

MH

But no more books after *L'étranger*, and no more in planning?

Education, you might want to ask,
what is it good for?
After some doubts and hesitations,
now I know, I think.
It is to learn how to turn –
not away – but towards.

Facts of Life – PART 17

VT

In planning, maybe. I have again become curious about doing it. I am not too keen on working that conceptually, as I did with the text works. I find the working process is really boring. It is fun to think about it, but the doing is so boring. After Camus, I could not face another process like that.

MH

It sounds very interesting coming from you, stating that you do not like working conceptually, whereas everything that you do has a strong conceptual element in it.

VT

Yes, sure, but there are differences. Like when I used to act in front of the camera, that in itself could be very funny. But the best thing with those projects was sitting in front of the computer and re-making the pictures. Performing them was not always that interesting. The text works had very little in the process at all which I found interesting to do.

MH

Why Camus, and why that particular book?

VT

Because I read it when I was a teenager, like 16-17 years old, and then it really had a big impact on me. This teenager's attitude, feeling lonely, thinking that no one understands me, dressed in black ...

MH

Which one was better, the book or the song based on the book...

VT

[Laughs] The book, as the lyrics include "Killing an Arab" and *The Cure* later changed it several times so as not to provoke any unwanted reactions. Camus would never have done that. But I think the impact it had on me came back when I was around 40. It was like a natural loop for me, like a mid-life re-thinking of everything. I know that Camus rejected the label existentialism, but it is an existential work in the sense that it does reflect on human existence. And as a teenager living in Oslo, those thoughts were in harmony with my own thoughts and spirit.

So when I took it up again, it was to re-actualize the content it perhaps had for myself. The novel is about how to exist in the world – not that the main person directly articulates this, but it is about these complex questions: who are we, where and how are we?

The thing is that the person in the novel is estranged to the society. Not because of his choice, but just because of how he is. He does not see or understand why he should feel and show grief when his mother dies, because he does not feel anything of that.

And he does not feel the need to follow these social patterns of normal behaviour, something that in the end society condemns him for, and that costs him his life. And as a teenager, it feels natural to identify with this, you know, rebelling attitude, and so forth.

But when I got over 40, I was again fascinated by the kind of social detachment that Mersault in the novel represents. It represents a certain freedom that I remember from my teens, and not only freedom, but also the courage to live it out, or perhaps more like a need to live it out, to show the world who you are in all your actions and everything you do all the time.

Later in life, like now, I realize I have made a lot of compromises in life, to this way of living, in order to make things more comfortable for myself.

That's why I wanted to look upon it again through the novel. I had like 20 years of more experiences behind me, years where I had adjusted more to society. So, revisiting my thoughts when I was young was also a process of re-thinking and re-living the choices I had made in the last years.

MH

And?

VT

It is not a very therapeutic work initially, but it sort of gave me a chance to look at existential questions closer, look at the details of what the novel brings up, asking myself: what does it mean to me now? Because there is, of course, a huge difference between then and now.

I also made a huge wallpaper connected to this work, titled "Aujourd'hui Maman est morte" (Today my mother died), which is the opening line of Camus' novel. The wallpaper shows a picture of my mother, dressed in a swimsuit from the '60s. It is a really sexy and beautiful photo. It is made into a star-shaped pattern. It was mounted on huge museum walls in two different shows.

MH

And your mother, what did she say?

VT

She was a bit embarrassed, I think, but not against it, then I would of course not have done it. And she had no reason to be embarrassed, she looks totally fantastic in it.

MH

Have you taken photographs after your kids were born?

VT

Yes, some, but in a different way than before. Now, it is no more big bodies of work like before, when it could be hundreds of photos in one series. Now it is more single works or very small series. I no longer have the urge to do the big series. Also, the new photos do not involve acting in the same way as before. I am not looking at my own expressions and gestures any more, but use myself more like a doll.

MH

And you have been showing them, right?

VT

Sure, during 2008, until recently in 2010, I did shows in Oslo, Berlin and in Kyoto, which were all based on found material from paparazzi photographs of Amy Winehouse and Britney Spears, mixed with self portraits done in this doll-like way. The Berlin show was titled after a song by Britney Spears, called "A Piece of Me", and for the base photographs for this show I had a blond wig on to resemble her, and then I treated these photographs very physically, drawing on them, cutting into them, turning

them into collages. It was a very physical work. These photographs became a new approach for me to deal with imagery again, away from the textual conceptual works, but still not returning to the Photoshop perfectionist type of collage. I worked very roughly, making the works more physical than before.

MH

Why?

VT

I think it comes from the fact that I had been working so many years with the Photoshop technique, the smoothness of it, the seamlessness of it in the collages.

I wanted to do the opposite. I often use this strategy. I think in oppositions. The rough collage functions in opposition to the perfectionist style that I was totally hung up with in the Photoshop work.

I still use Photoshop, but only to re-touch photos, not re-making them completely.

MH

What is so interesting in Amy Winehouse?

VT

I don't know what is so interesting in Winehouse herself. It is the phenomena of celebrities and the images made and distributed of them that interests me.

For example, in the case of Britney Spears, it was because of her problematic situation that I got hooked.

She was in court, fighting over the custody of her children. She had exposed herself in a very vulnerable way, the paparazzi photographs were amazing. I love them. She was totally exposed and completely incapable of defending herself. So when I finished with Britney, I just stumbled over Amy, who was by then equally exposed, equally dramatized.

MH

Let's stay a while with Britney. What exactly is interesting in this for you? Why spend so much time and energy on her?

VT

It just feeds the most unpleasant curiosity I have. Looking at the pictures, I get information that I do not even want to admit to myself that I am interested in. I love this stuff. It is so contradictory. The paparazzi are after exposing this other side of the stars, to show how they are incapable of taking care of children, or whatever bad thing, but what happens is that this has a flip side. As we identify not only with the perfection of these idols, but also with their collapses,

with their down-sides, they become ever bigger after the scandals, because they become real people and not perfected idols.

MH

Do you feel for sorry for Britney?

VT

Well, sure, she is obviously so dumb. But when I use her as a picture, it is because the material itself is so fascinating. I don't like Britney's music at all, and her image and whole life do not seem to me desirable, I am simply not a fan. But the whole picture industry that expose these individuals is amazing, because it evokes in me this enormous desire for the information it provides.

MH

But you do not use a copy of an image of Britney, you do a photo of yourself that is connected and comes from the downloaded one, but that itself becomes something very different. So, what is going on in this transformation for you?

VT

With Britney, it was clear. The reason it all triggered something and made me focus on it was that her situation was comparable with mine. She was vulnerable in a moment when she had lost custody of her children, and it was really easy for me to relate to that as I have children and could easily put myself in her place. That was a moment of clear identification. It was a re-acting her position.

MH

There seems to be something else going on with the distance you take, some desires clashing and colliding loudly. I recognize some traces of type of a visual cannibalism – or...?

VT

Well, I think the paparazzi industry brings these people very very close, it makes the distance between me and the celebrity so small. Of course, they are out there, rich and famous, but they are available, I can download them and use them. These images become a part of me and my life, which happens in a private and personal way. When working on both of them, Amy and Britney, so intensively, what happened was that in the end, very strangely, I felt like these images were mine. When I saw Amy in the papers, I would get this brief sense of familiarity, as if I was looking at an image of myself, a sort of total and blind identification. That was a very funny feeling. Especially with Amy. I would really see her as me when

seeing her in newspapers. It took me couple of seconds to realize the fact that it was not me there in the paper, but a global superstar.

MH

Let's take it slowly. Perhaps it is a good idea to pause here with the word funny. Define 'funny' in this context of everything that is at stake with doppelgängers and twins...

VT

A good question; that is a word I use all the time. Funny, it means everything from having a good time to being something I reflect upon. Having a good time, you know, like eating a good meal, talking to someone, that can be funny, does not have to be a big thing. But funny on the other end of the scale would be when something is interesting to think more about.

The first cyclist ever caught for doping during the Tour de France competition was the British athlete Tom Simpson. In 1967, while climbing the 1912-meter-high Mont Ventoux, he died. Traces of amphetamine were recovered from his shirt pocket. The doctors declared the cause of death was a mix of alcohol and chemical cleaning substances.

Facts of Life – PART 19

MH
But isn't this confusion, however brief, is that not a weird sensation?

VT

It is funny! [Laughs]

MH

I got that, but...

VT

Sure, it's weird, but it comes from being totally concentrated on one thing. You are so absorbed in this world that you lose track and perspective. That is a working process I really like being in. With the Winehouse material, it was funny and a good time, it was so much going back and forth, dealing with the material.

MH

Let us return to the beginning, where we started. A novel?

VT

Yes, I am writing a novel. It describes a period of time that is not that long, it could be an hour or two hours. When put down as words, thoughts being thought, it will take perhaps six hours to read. That means that I can use and expand on this urge, this liking I have of being totally absorbed in a working process, in a moment or in just one picture, or any material detail. I can be totally absorbed in this one moment, and then just stretch it out and stretch it out. That is the basis of it. The working title is *Duck Extract*. It will be in Norwegian, and published, well, at the earliest in a year.

MH

Let us now focus on that moment of change, and the time just before it. There is the work "Old Man Going Up and Down a Staircase", from 2004, and it's a series of black and white photographs, and it's also a super 8 film. This is something you did just before giving birth...

VT

Yes, it was like four weeks before. I realized it was the last time I was able to do it. The belly was at its best [laughs]. The idea is older one. I wanted to dress up as an old man, with an old man's mask, and just do something. But when I got pregnant I thought the idea would get some extra nuance and substance that would fit into the whole thing I was after. My body was behaving in a completely new way that was strange to me. The feeling I had when I was pregnant is exactly,

or at least very close to the sensation of being old. It is the same way of walking. I remember that from my grandparents, they walked the same way. The stairway in the series, it is the same that my grandparents used. It is in the house they used to live in, and where we moved afterwards. I go up and down these stairs daily.

MH

How many photos are in the series?

VT

It is together 114 photos. It is all the photos that came out well, everything is included. I did not want to edit it in any way. It was a performance, recorded by camera and film. Editing did not seem like a good idea; that would have been like doing pictures. But that's was not what it was: I was walking up and down and trying to get the feel for that. My motivation with the photos was more about documentation.

The photos and the film were made by my boyfriend, the father of our children, Runar Hodne (he works as a stage director). He has a way of working with me that I can just say, "I will now go up and down the stairs, and I can do it only for like 20 minutes, just take photos of me," and that is all that is needed.

MH

All 114 photos came out of this 20 minutes?

VT

Exactly, and after that, I had to lie down for the rest of the day.

MH

Just one take?

VT

Yes, no breaks, one shoot. It was just only the two of us working on this, no lights, no make-up help, nothing. Natural light and the stairs. I just told Runar to take all photos vertically, and I went up and down and asked him to describe my movement with the camera.

I don't remember how many rolls he did, but I took everything that was usable. When I went to through them, it was so funny, because I did not think that it was not me who had taken them. He photographs the way I think. That is a super match.

Everything has to do with the staircase, it's from the year 1924. It is so beautiful, the light is so wonderful in it. We did it during the daytime, it was then in early April. It is a Hitchcock kind of a scene, you know, *Vertigo*, the cylinder stairs and the light.

There is a funny story to these stairs. Later on, like four

years later, I came home once and saw this TV commercial company shooting a film in the same stairway. They told me that they had seen my work, and they thought this stairway was too good to be true. So they shot this commercial in the stairs.

MH

Commercial for what?

VT

It was for meatballs! [Laughs] Someone dropping a box of meatballs down so they have to get down to get them, using exactly the same shot I had.

Then another bizarre anecdote to this series happened when I showed it the first time in Paris. At the opening, this old man, the man in the photos, with the same mask but different clothes, walks in. It was an art student who had seen the work, and then went on to buy the mask and imitate the man in the photos. It is a generic old man's latex mask, and obviously it seems that it can be bought in many places. The face of it is very kind. I got it in a mask shop, Halloween outfit kind of place in Oslo. It was the only one that was not so overdone, no huge ugly noses with warts, making fun of the old face, which of course was not what I was after. I wanted the generic old man's look.

But the clothes were from my father. Just recently, I was cleaning up my studio, and I found this bag, found these same clothes I had used, and well, I threw them away. But I kept the mask.

The size of them is fixed, it's 70 x 100. But I show them in different sets and positions. I prefer to show them in a cartoon strip, or in this block setting. But it is flexible. The largest number I have shown in a series is 15. They are not all even printed – yet.

MH

Have you done performative acts like this afterwards?

VT

No, and the reasons are, on top of what we already talked about, it feels more remote to have a focus on my body, but also the act of doing it was never the fun part. Realizing them was not the thing. Nowadays I like sitting still more, that is: studio work.

MH

Have you done performances for an audience?

VT

No, they all have been done for a camera, with the idea of producing photographs or film out of it. There might have been audiences at the site, like with

the *P11* series, where I was the handball referee. There were a lot of the parents of the kids watching us.

MH

If we can now go back to the older series, like *P11*, the *Bride* piece, and the *Living Together* one. How do you see them now?

VT

There was a period when I was really bored talking about them, no motivation to encounter them again. But well, now, well, *Living Together* was made 15 years ago, and that is long enough, now I can enjoy talking about them. But in many ways I do feel very disconnected from them. That was another time, another way of thinking. I can relate to them in a much more analytic way than before. Now they are distant. By then, everything I was doing was very connected to my life situations, where I was living, my immediate surroundings. They are documenting my life at that time.

MH

What is your relationship to documentary photography?

VT

That is how I started. I did documentary photography, yes. But well [laughs], now that I think about it, something pops up in my mind. There was this photo I did, I was like 16 or 17 years old, and I was on holiday in London. I took a photo with my new camera of a man living in the streets, with all these bags with him, like an alcoholic in a park. I took the picture and sat down and talked to him because I thought that is what I have to do if I do documentary photography. But he was totally incomprehensible, I gave him a cigarette and went away. But when I was back in Oslo, I developed the photos and thought it was a fantastic picture. Then I wrote this totally fictive story about it, it was a conversation with someone having no home and being an alcoholic. I sent it to a small local newspaper and they printed it out as a real documentary. That's when I thought, hmmm, interesting: there are some endless possibilities here. If this is how it can be done, well ...

MH

But where or when did the motivation to do photography come from?

VT

I am not quite sure. But yes, now I got it, now I remember. It was already at our house. My mother had the equipment to make photos in home, and I used the bathroom to develop photographs. So it all goes back to my mother.

Then I went to a photojournalism school in Oslo, it was one year technical education and I was very occupied with documentary photography. I was into the Magnum tradition, you know, Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander and the rest. It meant to take photographs from the real world, to say something essential about the big issues, to bring it all up to another level.

I was really into that for a long time. I also worked as an assistant for an art photographer, Dag Alveng, who was working in this MoMa tradition. This was before I studied fine art photography, but that's how I got into the art track. Then I moved slowly into a more subjective style. I really thought I would start doing documentary photography, not wanting to become an artist.

But well, then I went to the photo school in Bergen, this was 1992, I got a grant for it, I was also accepted at Gothenburg, but went to Bergen due to the grant. For the second time, then I did go to study at the HFF, the Photography department at Gothenburg. But that was later in 1995 to 1997.

In my first studies, the difference was that Bergen was an art school, while Gothenburg was pure documentary and no art profile at all. And when at Bergen, it was like after just two months that I realized, wow, if making art means that I can do whatever I want, then yes, then that's what I want to do. That's when I realized very quickly I could do anything. I did not have to photograph the world outside, I could be inside my head.

But this was happening parallel with the self-portraits that I had been doing for some years. But I never saw that as a way of making a living. Of course I was aware of these other artists at the time. Cindy Sherman was there, and then this other photographer, Francesca Woodman, a woman doing black and white works, who committed suicide. I think she was very formative for a lot of young female photographers. They are very passionate and beautiful self-portraits.

MH

So that was the context and the references when you started?

VT

Yes, and they legitimized what I was trying to do. When starting art school, it was not only that these other artists legitimized what I was after, but I also became aware of that there were all these other people doing similar stuff and being interested in the same questions. I emerged totally into this field. It was a

perfect place and time for me to be in. At that time there was a great deal of talk about identity, it was a hot thematic. It was a rewarding spot to be at.

MH

Influences?

VT

For me, Cindy Sherman was always too impersonal. I really liked the untitled series, but then I develop off from that track. I always needed to be more personal. I was not interested in commenting on the representation issues, of femininity in art history or in popular culture. I was more interested in looking at myself as a human being, being in this society today with my background, things like that.

MH

If not art history, what discourse then?

VT

Many of the early works are embedded into the feminist discourse. But the motivation was always very personal. And this is something I could not say then, but now I can talk about it. These works were totally therapeutic. When I was little, only three months, I was adopted.

I was always looking at myself from a distance. My parents always looked at me like, what is going to become of this creature that we have in our hands.

The mirror stage – you know, the writings of Lacan and that part of post-Freudian psychoanalysis – for me that was very important for understanding what was going on. The thing is that you develop a certain way of looking at yourself, that you get from your parents. You mirror your closest surroundings, of the way they look at you. And we do this without really having a choice. So I grew up looking at myself as a big big wonder, a mystery, like my parents did.

MH

When did you know that you were adopted?

VT

Since always.

MH

Do you have contact with your biological parents?

VT

No, I've never have done that.

MH

Never felt the urge to know?

VT

Sometimes, yes, but not enough. It would be possible to find out, and not even complicated, but it has never

been a strong enough urge – yet. But I have never talked about this in the Norwegian press or so. I did not want to be tracked down.

But it is not a secret either. It is interesting to see for myself how the works have developed through a very personal perspective – and all of it makes a lot of sense as a continuum.

MH

What exactly do you mean with therapeutic here?

VT

The beginning of each work would start with thinking what would I look like if I did this or that. So, every work is like an answer to a question – like the *Bride* series, also *Living Together*, or *Aftermath* was very much like that, thinking how I would look like in a death announcement.

MH

But I wonder what happens in the next level? At first glance, it is about what you would look like, but the moment you open up that door, the moment you start to think who you are and where you are, it is no longer only funny. It also hurts. What about this side?

VT

Yes, this is the part that is more unconscious. It is definitely there. It is in the process of why I was making it. I have often heard that my works have a humorous side, but the thing is that I never saw it myself. I can see it better now that it can be interpreted as funny, but for me that dark side was always there much more strongly. This is especially when I dress up as my father. It has that bizarre part, putting on my father's clothes myself. It is an act, sure, but it is at the same time so natural. I always grab onto the closest things. Of course, the old man is my father, it is the only old man I know.

But I never find funny art funny. I have never laughed at funny art in museums.

For me, it was never about being funny, even if I know many find my work humorous. I have always done things in a way so that I can expose things I had wanted to see. There is that longing for making something that will enlighten me, that I can learn from the work even if I am myself the creator of it. I make work I want to see for myself.

MH

But was there any change in the way of working with these performative works?

VT

Sure, because even if I was working from a very personal perspective and departure, it was focused on questions of identity and feminism. But I got soon tired of it. When something can define me or my work, I need to change. That is also very typical of me, I think, restless and resistant to be categorized. It makes me claustrophobic. So, when I was labelled as feminist photographer, I immediately changed to something else.

MH

Feminism. What did it mean to you then?

VT

Then, back in the nineties, I think it was a very propagandistic and square tight-ass political view when paired with artistic practice. My first feminist project, the *Bride* series, depicts a woman who is in charge, not as a victim of a patriarchal system. It was a woman who was in control, and I also wanted to do it to criticize mainstream feminism in art.

MH

What does it mean to you now?

VT

Wow, well, I am supposedly living in one of the most equal countries in the world. But Jesus Christ, huh huh, all the people you see cleaning the offices are either women or foreigners. How equal are we, indeed? It is bullshit. I am a feminist, absolutely.

MH

What kind?

VT

I would not go to demonstrations. I live together with a feminist, I could never be together with him otherwise. And this means simply that you regard both sexes as equal, to view men and women as two sides of the same thing, human beings. Totally equal in a humane sense of the word. It is not that women should be construction workers or such, it is a mental and cultural thing, it is about values. But unfortunately, we are still at the stone age.

Here's the thing. Just recently, I was on a plane, seated next to two Norwegian men both working in real estate. I did not know them but I was listening to what they were talking about. These were modern Norwegian men, liberal people, one close to 60, the other one in his early 40s. And then they said this thing about their female employees or associates that really blew my mind. They said it is so great to work with women because

they have this kind of a kindergarten view of all things, meaning that you can keep an eye on a lot of different things at the same time. You can keep track of your own kids amongst whatever 16 other kids. And this is apparently a good thing when it comes to real estate, because it comes down to finding the right people for the right houses. So, it's great to work with women, they said.

MH

Did you interfere?

VT

No no, they kept talking, I listened. Then they talked about their children, they both had small ones. The older one was on the second round, he had older kids, and the new one with his current wife, the new kid being six years old. And he said this, and it's so typical: With my first children I was never home. Now I have learned, and I am more focused on the second round. Only a man could say that.

MH

What else did you hear?

VT

Oh, a lot of things. A lot of real estate issues. Then the older guy told how he has been teaching his kid how to hunt, I think it was moose hunting.

MH

What are you reading right now?

VT

Beckett, Beckett, Beckett. Currently, I am at the *Unnamable*, finishing the trilogy that starts with *Molloy*.

MH

Why Beckett?

VT

Because it is brilliant regarding representing a subject, which is what most of my work has been about. With Beckett: A subject that is constantly creating itself. I think Beckett is the only thing that I have read where I feel that the content is being created while I am reading it, as if it has not been pre-thought by anyone. I love it. It is very relevant for me now. Beckett is creating a subject that is diminishing, it is vanishing as I read it. It is a collapse of a subject, and the same time the creation of it. It is a reading process that is completely present.

MH

We are almost at the end. What do you do when you do what you do?

VT

Have a good time. [Laughs] That is so superficial, I can't say that. But well, I do want have good time when I do what I do. My ideal of spending time is to be totally absorbed in what I do. And that means thinking very clear thoughts, very clear thoughts.

MH

Give us an example of a very clear thought.

VT

That I can't answer just like that. But let's take an example from somewhere else, let's go to literature again, to *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust, the classic, it was a total revelation. But [laughs], I can't say that either, it sounds too pompous. But well, a very clear thought for me is when I have the same revelation that Marcel in the novel has, when he has these epiphanies. When your own thoughts carry you off to somewhere totally unexpected, and revealing in some way or another. That is a clear thought. I gives me a total high.

MH

Total high. When was the last time you had a total high?

VT

That was during the writing process of this novel I am working on. It can last almost a whole day until I finally read what I have done. Then I am back down. [Laughs]

MH

Well, we do know that we have to get down to get up.

VT

Yes, but I am like a goldfish. I never remember the downs. I never remember the previous ups either, only the current up that I am in.

MH

On a scale of 1 to 10, how obsessive are you?

VT

Ten, definitely. Before having kids, it went over ten, I was exceeding my physical possibilities. It was more than 13, but now it is better. I realized that I needed to sleep.

MH

That high, can you get that high by trying to get that high?

VT

It comes in and through hard work. It is not like that I am a victim of an inspirational moment, even if it can come up very unexpectedly. But it is always through the process of working, always. And for me, it is more the high of the conceptual part, not the actually doing of the thing, but the thinking and re-thinking of it.

Many people wonder why the movie *Gandhi* became such a huge hit. It is simple. It was about a man who was both thin and tan – giving us all we wanted, fulfilling our deepest needs, wishes and commitments.

Facts of Life – PART 3

Re-enactment, Repetition, Remembering

“Photographic history, it seems, always carries within itself the process of its own erasure. A singular point of origin, a definitive meaning, and a linear narrative: all of these traditional historical props are henceforth displaced from photography’s provenance. In their place we have discovered something far more provocative – a way of rethinking photography that persuasively accords with the medium’s undeniable conceptual, political, and historical complexity.”

(Geoffrey Batchen, 1999, 202)

Three concepts, three interlocked but not locked-up ways of dealing with the past – the past as a discursive construction of the present. It is a process of confronting a past. It is a story to be told, re-told and re-written. It never sits still, but is constantly made and remade. The past is not the distant country, not even the distant cousin. It is part of us, and we are part of its complex web of nodes and notions that don't only save the day or share some joy and happiness. The past also weights and pulls us to the ground, heavily.

Re-enactment, repetition and remembering. These concepts bring together most of the central issues that have been circulating and addressed within contemporary art and photography during at least the last two decades. These three concepts address the process of how the past is constructed. It is a process that realizes its embedded nature, realizes where it comes from. It is a process, not progress, which does not get stuck in a past, but each concept in its own way seeks to find alternatives for comprehending and viewing the challenge of the past in a critical yet constructive manner.

These three concepts are all anchored in the ways we experience the intersections between past, present and future. Did I say experience? Sure. But what if

there is no experience? Or what if there might be experience, but it is so thoroughly commodified that it kills all chances and challenges for risk-taking experiments, for nuances of feeling for, and details of becoming enchanted?

What? No experience? How come? Or to be precise: what is that supposed to mean?

No experience. No, no, no. And that is not a fairy tale. It is certainly a tale, but far from children's fables. This is social science, this is cultural criticism, and this is Marxist materialism in practice. This is Walter Benjamin.

No experience. Because Walter says... Because Benjamin claims... Because Walter Benjamin writes... He says he says he says that there is no experience possible in modernity. Benjamin writes, and in the 1930's he writes with an increasing sense of fear and disillusion. But also with an increased will to fight – to fight for...

Walter Benjamin states. Walter Benjamin accuses. He says that the new technology of photography and the ever-present logic of commodity causes the inevitable decline of aura. When a commodity is no longer a usable functional object but a fetish object, we lose touch. We lose control. Aura, once there, is now gone. And without aura, we have lost. Not that loving feeling, but a sense and sensibility for the origin. When a commodity is no longer dependent on its use value, it will lead towards an epoch of no historical traces, and no experience. It is the era of the death of experience.

(For the complexity of the background and variety of routes it takes, see, for example, Benjamin 1965, 1998, and 2009)

But Benjamin writes in German. Contextualized, he writes in a 1920s and '30s, highly educated idiom that emphasizes belonging to a certain class. And he wrote so much in such sad futile conditions that a great portion of his writings were only properly published long after his untimely death. (For the genealogy of publishing of his texts, see Unseld 1972)

Benjamin came from a bourgeois background, with a Jewish religious lineage, and with a strong wish to take part in the political developments of Marxism. He wanted to belong, he wanted to be

part – of so many conflicting sources and settings. The sentences above were there to say just that one thing: Benjamin said, Walter wrote and Walter Benjamin claimed what he did in a very specific time and place – in their plurality. To read him and to respect him is to remember the times and the deeds that took place around there, and then.

Because, well..., because what Walter, what Benjamin, and what Walter Benjamin (or whoever) wrote and meant, and how he is interpreted and received was never the same when it was done at the time of its utterance and publication, and when it is read and consumed later. So simple, so wonderfully simple it is.

Because, well..., because now, looking and reading afterwards, we know. Differently. We know much more, we know too much to lament Walter, to flatten Benjamin, to instrumentalize Walter Benjamin into a one-size-fits-all model. Now we have the documents, they are available. We have the numerous reconstructions of what, how and when and why not. We know that since the very beginning – after his death – there was not one but at least three versions of Walter Benjamin that were in circulation, at first, during the early 1940s, and even during the war, very slowly and in small circles, then later after his collected essays were first published in mid-50s in German for a slightly larger audience. But the point is this: since the very beginning, there was a struggle for who owned and who gained access to Walter, to Benjamin – finally, to Walter Benjamin. The potential, promised pearls dived for and found by Benjamin, the *Perlentaucher* as he was dubbed by Hannah Arendt, were not distributed or shared nicely or with solidarity. They were fought over, and about. Furiously.

From the first steps of his post-life, there was a struggle between Adorno, as the guardian agent of Benjamin's *Nachlass*, so obviously enough reading his old friend's texts through his own lenses, and another friend, Gershom Scholem, reading the material so that it fit better into a religiously aware version of mystical Judaism. Then, again, there was another friend, also a well documented one: Bertolt Brecht, who wanted to adjust his old friend to his needs, visions and fears. Alongside these three competing

and disagreeing men, there was a fourth player in the a game of interpretation: Hannah Arendt, who openly challenged the way Adorno was editing the texts. All in all, it was a mess. But it certainly was a productive mess. And that mess was not invented. It went straight back to the source. Walter was, and so was Benjamin, and when put together, Walter Benjamin was a complex and contradictory person and personality. He struggled and worked through simultaneous and complementary senses of belonging that took him to and back from German romanticism, Jewish messianism and Marxism strongly influenced by Lukacs.^(see, for example, Unseld 1972, and Löwy 2005)

And if we care to, and if we accept respecting the timeline of the complexity of the personal and historical events, we can paint a picture. Not one picture, but many. We have the comparison between the time of the writings (1920-1930's), the first wave of closer scrutiny and serious, welcoming celebratory readings in late 1960s and '70s, added to the difference of how he is perceived in the new millennium. It is a point of comparison that begs another set of variables: the language. There is a question of which language, and who does the translation. And ultimately, as the German philosopher Peter Bürger (2010) has recently articulated, the ways and reasons why Benjamin was read at the height of the 1968 student tumults (of which Bürger was himself part) were anything but objective and neutral. Benjamin served then, as he serves now, as a point of departure, but also serves a purpose.

In his writings on experience, Benjamin followed the common track that dates back to Wilhelm Dilthey – although the chain of events is obviously always older, all the way back to how Goethe read and interpreted Rousseau.^(see Jay 2005, 223) Benjamin re-enacted what was there already at hand. Writing in German, he made a big point of the difference between experience as *Erlebnis* and experience as *Erfahrung* (stressed above in Chapter 2). Whether this distinction is so clear cut and so overwhelmingly important as has been claimed is a central issue in the practices of lost-in-translation, ever since Dilthey's main writings in the early 20th century, underlining how Benjamin's interpretation is not unique, but is yet another participation in a long chain of inter-linked versions.

Not so surprisingly, during these past generations, these passionate years of talking not to each other but past one another, one commentator's emphasis is happily not shared by the next version. When accumulated and brought together, these are multiple versions, which, in the end, are barely comprehensible to one another. (see, for example, Eagleton 1981, 35, and Jay 2005, 334)

What Benjamin, in his forties during the thirties, makes out of this chance to make a difference is this. He chooses one alternative while condemning the other. He condemns experience-as-*Erlebnis*, also known as direct experience. This is because Walter connects this experience with yet another sign of those times; that is, *Bildung*, a very typical German notion of the highly educated class and the formalistic canon of what one was expected to know and to learn. This is the experience materialized in the entertaining epic novel that Benjamin so despised. It is an experience that is shallow and rude, direct but useless.

In experience-as-*Erfahrung*, Benjamin (see especially Benjamin 1999) finds what he keeps missing, and what he wants to hold on to. This is the experience that carries an aura with it. It is the inward, intellectual experience, internal and insightful. It reflects and rejoins, it thinks through and it emerges. It becomes a place, so to speak. And yes, this experience is only possible as recollection – as an act of memory. As an act of joining past, present and future.

But Walter says. And Benjamin claims. And Walter Benjamin preaches. Experience is gone. Modernity took it away. We have no history, no chances for memory. We lost our connection to and being in touch with the origin of ourselves. For Benjamin, this origin is not Marxist. It is Messianic. He certainly sees and believes he finds a destructive character within the aura, within the experience-as-*Erfahrung*, that makes revolutionary violence potential and possible.

Walter says. Benjamin states. And Walter Benjamin writes. No experience. No history. And the hordes of late or not so late commentators shout Hurrah! Hurrah! (For behavioural evidence, see, for example, Jameson 2009 and Steyerl 2008) This is exactly where Agamben (1993) starts off.

First page, first paragraph, where without any shadow of doubt he writes how our incapacity to have and communicate experiences is likely to be one of the few certainties we have. It is a claim he builds upon Benjamin, especially Benjamin's text called "The Storyteller", dating to 1933 and dealing with the diagnosis of our poverty of experience. Agamben writes – and he writes this in the year of 1978 – in the original Italian version: "For modern man's average day contains virtually nothing that can still be translated into experience." (Ibid., 15)

What Agamben offers here as a food for thought and as the weight for an argument is the above-mentioned text by Benjamin. What Agamben is practising is the use of a text to gain authority and credibility for one's own views. Nothing special, nothing extraordinary there. Except the way he joins the dots and makes the links. Because, well..., because if we want to, we can make an issue of Agamben's act. There is something going on in this act of setting Benjamin's comment and his own interpretation next to each other.

If we want to, we can return to the source. In his typical way Benjamin tries to achieve many parallel things in this short text. But what he mainly focuses on is a close reading of the works of the Russian novelist Nikolai Leskov. With Leskov's help and guidance, Benjamin claims that "the art of storytelling is coming to an end". (1999b, 83) What's more, Benjamin claims that our ability to exchange and compare experiences with one another has been taken from us. For him, the consequence is that "experience has fallen in value". (Ibid.) The point that Benjamin makes is the shift from telling oral stories, shared with and from a one-to-one perspective, face-to-face setup, to the – for him a suspicious act – distribution of stories via printed material, in novels. The novel is to blame for the decline of the storyteller – even if the storyteller is the person, personality and the amazing force Benjamin finds, precisely in the printed material by Leskov.

And then, then from this anything but unproblematic set of highly speculative claims in his source, Agamben moves from the reading of a text and the problems of the novel and its bourgeois background into something completely different. It is a move,

which is, of course, possible and even potential, but what strikes one as odd is that Agamben does not make this shift transparent. He does not even acknowledge it. It is not important to him that where the claim comes from is, in fact, not directly comprehensible and compatible with the use he makes of it. There is a bridge, and Agamben makes it, but it does not follow the lines of the source, but distracts us from them. Certainly, with the new direction we might come down somewhere great and magnificent, but what happens if that new distorted direction is authorized with an old source that would have actually pointed somewhere else?

But who cares. For crying out loud, who cares? Therefore, let's forget the academic confusions and

It is a significant fact not to be overlooked.
Personal revenge is the perfect motivation
for a work in a public space.

Facts of Life – PART 5

rules of fair reading. Let us focus on the hard part, let's focus on the motivation. Why that celebration? Why that devoted acceptance of what Walter says? Is it because of what Benjamin states, or is it because what Walter Benjamin conveys with his words? Or is it because it is that solid block of the ultra-acceptable personality cult of a figure called Walter Benjamin that the claims are glued onto? And how is it possible to speak of the same 'modern' over the years of anchoring it to experience, in and through the daily tumults of 1933, 1978, and, well, 2010?

One more time – for the long and lonely road. Walter says and Benjamin claims – and it's all wonderfully packaged into the brand label of WB. No experience, because modern life makes it impossible with its over-determining commodity fetish. An experience is only conceivable if, and only if, we have a connection to the original Messianic state. It is a state of origin that Walter achingly searched for, but as a state of origin, he was seriously confused about how to find it, and even define it.

Do the dedicated followers of Benjamin articulate that precise point of origin for us? Do we get a road-map, some mental coordinates of where and how? Hardly. They pass by, and they do not wave. They are in a hurry. They have so many important things to do, so many marvellous things to say. They are too impatient to stop.

But if we stop, the whole constellation stops. And the walls, the walls of that addictive construction of no experience tumble down. What Walter says, what Benjamin states and what Walter Benjamin writes is only meaningful if we accept that there is that original position that we have lost. It is an original position that is absolutely original in its inner confusions and contradictions. The position was fuelled by that wishing well of keeping three incompatible *Weltanschauungen* constantly up in the air – that mix of German romanticism, combined with Jewish messianism, while adding in a version of Marxism. It is the return to an origin that he saw as the promise of a primitive society, a primitive communism, that is the most remarkable beauty of it all: a classless society. (see Benjamin 2006, 405) It is an origin that is imaginative and

Re-enactment,
Repetition,
Remembering

based on imagination. It is an origin that never was. Let me repeat that: It never was.

What we have is an origin that is no origin. It is a dream of a real that is not a part of reality, of events and actions. What do we do? Where do we go from here? If that constellation is no longer credible, nothing remains the same. If we distance ourselves from the new paradise that he (WB) sometimes promised, sometimes dreamed of, then he is gone, dropped out, faded away. Especially when focusing on the variety of discourses on the role and content of experience, it is just dead weight. Not even dead on arrival, because the belief on an original state does not arrive. It simply never left the scene of the accident.

But isn't this a terrible, cold-hearted thing to say about our dear Walter? Why this brutal attack on poor Benjamin? Why this lack of sensitivity? Why this avalanche of political incorrectness? Or to put the erratic move on the groove: Why insist on asking the undesirable and unaccepted questions? Why, oh why? Why, indeed, to throw ourselves off our self-satisfied balance and to change the track and neglect the well-meaning mental speed limits: why insist on listening to Bruce Springsteen's acoustic *Nebraska* album at a techno party, a self-proclaimed progressive and radical deep house event?

Because, well..., because the target of the argument here is the manufactured iconic figure of a WB, not what Walter Benjamin said and wrote in his particular time and contexts. And when we manage to pay attention to the productive clashes of what, when and how, and to respect the context of his writings, all of a sudden we find that the argument presented here is something that the man himself, in the '20s and early '30s, would have most likely been encouraged by and excited about taking part in.

But what about re-enactment, repetition and remembering? Well, they are not necessarily saved, since they are active in and through us anyway. But we have a moment, a moment to focus with them. A moment, which we win when we recognize the trap of the original position that is static, stale and gone. Out of reach, out of touch, but oh so intriguing,

because Walter says, Benjamin states and Walter Benjamin the wholesale figure writes.

But we do not need Walter, nor Benjamin. We must get rid of iconographic, all-encompassing solutions. We must be able to laugh at, and laugh loudly at constructions of WB that use and claim that Benjamin's comprehension of history "uses nostalgia for the past as a revolutionary method for the critique of the present".^(Löwy 2005, 2) Why is it that we should carelessly just pass by and accept examples like the above-cited ceremony for using and abusing WB as a wishing well for anything, everything and all times – as long as it is not situated and committed to a given problem and location?

Why, crying out loud, why? Is there, is there really nobody out there? Anybody out there that cares?

Because, well..., because wishing wells and instrumentalized feel-goodism are not enough. We need contemporary articulations of connecting the dots between past, present and a future. We need to return to the open-ended, challenging version of an experience. Not as an answer, but as the beginning of a beginning. We need to take seriously the emerging event of having an experience. We need to, we need to, we need to feel for and feel with. It is an experience, as something that does not break even. It is not controllable. Even if it might frequently be packaged into a welcoming commodity, it is never possessed or accessed fully by its owner. It slips and it slides, it collides and it churns out productive effects that are not possible to return to its previous positions. It is a give and take site and situation, that boils over, or falls under. It is both passive and active, a proposition as a starting point to which we return to in order to keep the process going, and maintains its openness and internal traffic of conflicts and incoherencies.

What follows, is a three-part argument on the act of how experience is productively present, and a three-way articulation of how it makes sense to deal with it. It is an argument that starts with a take on the idea of re-enactment, continues with repetition and finishes off with remembering. It is an argumentative strategy that sets its hopes on articulating the potential and

possible content embedded within each of these concepts. It is not about an abstract notion, nor is it about specific connections and readings of works of art and cultural products as ways of illustrating how it is to be done. Instead of a cavalcade of briefly introduced examples, the aim in each three cases is to push forward the content, the heart, even the substance that can be applied to any case and site. In one sense, it is about attitudes – that then do anything in their power not to become predetermined forms.

Re-enactment

As a concept, re-enactment has the taste of something complex. It is doing many things at the same time. There is that evident connection to a time and place that is gone but is now returned to and activated again. And there is that part of acting, of doing something, making something happen. It is, so to speak, something more, something different than just doing something again. Re-enactment anticipates, it promises and sometimes it even delivers more than just a re-make.

Re-enactment: a concept that surfaced back in the discussions during the last decade, a concept that certainly has its own distinct past – and present. In the discourse within contemporary art, and what it refers to, it has some very close friends. What is in contemporary parlance referred to as re-enactment, some 30 years earlier was called appropriation.^(see, for example, writings by the artist Richard Prince, 1981, and the Hal Foster readings of artists such as Sherri Levine and Cindy Sherman, 1996) Still again, other concepts such as simulation or even mimicry are lurking and haunting not so far away. Or we can recall the concept that the experimental filmmaker Chris Marker developed for his unique practice of doing video essays by following the literal and physical footsteps of movies previously made. This was a process Marker called pilgrimage.^(For a discussion on Marker, see Bártás 2010, 17)

But it is a concept that does not stem from the worlds of contemporary art where it certainly is nowadays in active use. It is used in articles and exhibitions: for example, two recent group shows and publications named in the frame of the main concept: “History Will Repeat Itself” (2007), and “Life, Once

More – Forms of Re-enactment in Contemporary Art” (2005). Interestingly enough, while these and other activities dealing with re-enactment see themselves as critical enterprises with an active task of revisiting what has been said and done before, the background of the concept of re-enactment is not acknowledged. Certainly, the past of the acts of re-acting historical events is well documented and analysed, but the conceptual background is missing.

This seems to be an interesting absence, because where it comes from is where the discussions have been heaviest throughout the many years. Not so very surprisingly, the concept of re-enactment has its home base, not perhaps its origin, in discourses on how to interpret and how to write history. Certainly, on a banal level, it is about the popular pastimes of performing lost and/or won battles from the history pages. But it does, it surely does also have a more challenging side. This productive conceptual part is located in the writings of the British historian of philosophy R. G. Collingwood, who had a presence in the discourse in the ‘30s, but who also played a significant role later when his lectures on the theme of history were posthumously published in the ‘50s.^(see Jay 2005, 234)

Collingwood joined in a long discussion, dating at least back to Dilthey in modern times, dealing with the hardcore question: what can we know of history? (Although it was Aristotle who had already wondered how much pre-knowledge we need to have in order to comprehend at all what we ought to know about any subject). Collingwood’s answer is telling. There is knowledge “of that which can be re-enacted in the historian’s mind. In the first place, this must be experience. Of that which is not experience, but the mere object of experience, there can be no history.”^(1956, 302)

Collingwood’s contribution was this: he wanted to see this act as a re-enactment, instead of as re-experiencing, as it was seen before. The difference for Collingwood was that history was acted. He made the distinction between historical events, which inquiries such as geology would focus on, and historical acts, which are the task of critical histories and thinking about these histories. With re-enactment, Collingwood believed he had found a working

balance, a certain creative tension between subjective and objective takes on both historical facts and our contemporary reading of them.

When connecting memory to interpretation, Collingwood remarked: “Memory as such is only the present thought of past experience as such, be that experience what it may; historical knowledge is that special case of memory where the object of present thought is past thought, the gap between present and past being bridged not only by the power of present thought to think of the past, but also by the power of past thought to reawaken itself in the present.”^{(Ibid. 294;}

see also Jay’s remarkable contextualization of Collingwood and the genealogy of the concept of experience, 2005.)

But that was the past, as in past tense. What about how the past is present? All retro now – or? Any room for something that does not become a pay, play, throw away product? What if there is a chance for re-enactment as an attitude, regardless of the medium it is used in and with?

Then, well, if so, then so goes the argument, re-enactment in its most direct and also immediate way can nevertheless be found somewhere else. It is not be found – no matter how carefully they are conducted – in period costume dramas, or in re-makes of almost forgotten ‘60s feminist performances by contemporary artists – acts that truly make the connection with the past and the present but rarely manage make something else happen in between then and now. Within contemporary art, re-enactment suffers from its force-fed nature, and from its archival and academic actualizations that look too much to what was and too little to what is perhaps becoming. It is the legacy of archives and research that lacks the desire for constantly reoccurring actualizations – acts of doing something with the materials instead of just hanging them out.

For the sources of careless whispers, and happily controversial free-spirited re-enactment, its power and productivity as an act filled with surprises lies in a place that is not hidden or secret. It is placed in a field of production of culture where absorbing and altering what has been done before and turning it into

a slightly modified but still recognizable version has been the name of the game since the very beginning. We are talking about pop music, all the lightness and anchored light-heartedness and silliness of it. We are talking about connecting one-to-one while the outcome is not a sum of its parts but either much more or a whole lot less.

In the wide and cacophonous fields of popular music, it is possible to beautifully and effectively address the productive act of doing something new by re-enactment with a focus on two classical songs. These are “I Will Survive”, and “Everybody Loves the Sunshine”. They are songs that are no more and no less than part of our daily wallpaper of sound. Both are songs that carry motions and emotions through the layers of years and layered years, and both are songs that are re-done so that something is changing while a lot of it stays the same. These examples serve the argument that re-enactment in itself is nothing special and nothing peculiar. It is not about what is done, but about how it is done – and what kind of changes of meaning can be articulated with the remake. In one word, and in a word that is certainly conscious of its naivety: it is all about *spirit*.

The benefit of this type of pop pop pop music is that it is by definition air (and perhaps a cavalcade of big hair), consumable in mass volume and distributed easily, especially in contemporary times of internet accessibility. It is re-enactment that is not so much worried about the consequences or implications, but is focused on doing something the same differently, altering the point of view, changing the perspective and making a new version that both stays true to the previous one but also does something with it. It is a game of connecting the dots and not sitting tight and hard on the consequences, but really appreciating and enjoying their whirling and winding around and around. Borrowing from the above-mentioned catalogue^(see Arns 2007, 43) on contemporary artistic strategies of re-enactment, these pop songs and their interconnectedness does the dual act: they erase and they create distance. But unlike so much of re-enactment within contemporary art, these songs are not just derivatives. They land at somewhere – somewhere else. Starting with the song “I Will Survive”, it brings us

back to a time that has later on been repeated and glorified ad nauseum. It is a song that premièred in 1978, sung by Gloria Gaynor. It was the very hey-day of what was labelled as disco music. The song was performed by Gloria Gaynor, but written by Freddie Perren and Dino Fekaris, becoming a Billboard number one single and selling millions of copies. It is also very heavily re-interpreted song, and has gained many connotations throughout the years, ranging from personal empowerment to a pro-gay rights anthem. (For these and all the rest of the wonderfully tacky trivia, Wikipedia, I do thank you!)

In the 1978 version, a black woman is singing about the break-up of a relationship, telling us that no matter what, she will survive. It is surely about emancipation, something that is in the air she breathes, a new found confidence. She will survive no matter how hard and difficult it was to get over the relationship gone wrong. For now, the last thing she wants is to have that same person back. There is no room for a rebound, so to speak.

Then there is another version. This dates to the year of 1996. It was performed by a group called Cake, who play music that is labelled as rock, perhaps alternative rock, perhaps with an ironic touch, and at least as college rock, but rock nevertheless. In this version, the lyrics stay the same, almost. The tone of the music is clearly different. Instead of the hedonistic beat of NY disco, the Cake version is deliberately slowed down. Something active and upbeat is transformed into the gravity of a passive beat. The main immediate trick is that the voice is now a male one. It is a white male, not so much singing but telling in laconic verses how things are and how they have developed. Whereas the Gloria Gaynor version has the power to push borders and make a convincing claim for empowerment, the Cake version has an anything but upbeat tempo and attitude attached to it.

This melancholic meanness is stressed in the accompanied video. In this piece, we follow the lead singer as he is working in the city of San Francisco as a parking ticket officer. He drives a petty vehicle and he whines and makes faces at people passing by. And he is telling us that he will survive. As a man, as a person

who is not extremely happy in his current job. But he will survive because he sings the opening lines “As long as I know how to love I know I’ll be alive”

But what is it that changes when the same lyrics are sung by a white male? What is different is the context – the context that the Cake version is able to articulate and accelerate fascinatingly well for a rock group. It is the difference between 1978 and 1996 that this re-enactment of a pop song makes both visible and meaningful. It is a re-enactment that has plenty of stories following it. As we can read on Wikipedia, the Cake version is the least favourite of Gloria Gaynor, the singer who says she is a devoted Christian. The reason why Gaynor so dislikes the man who sings not of his empowerment but of his being the heedless loser that he self-evidently is, is not the social and political implications. The reason is found in another site of the connotation game. The Cake singer did alter the lyrics a bit. Instead of the original line, “I should have changed that stupid lock”, with an unmistakably bitter voice he sings “I should have changed my fucking lock.”

It is a comment that again tears the two versions apart. Not the songs in themselves, but who made them, when they were made and what possibilities can be read into them and made with them. In this comparison, they both win, because they both possess a quality that does not diminish. They are unique sounds of a period of time. Their content is tightly inter-woven with the time of day when they were made – and re-made. The slogan of “I Will Survive” has no universal content; it gains substance by being performed in a very particular and very time- and context-bound way, and, well, then passed on and on.

With the second example, we also start in the mid-70s, again proving the inexhaustible resources of that strange period in music. This time, the starting point is a song written and performed by the vibraphone player Ron Ayers. It is a song and an album with the same title: “Everybody Loves the Sunshine”. The song became a huge hit for the all-around musician with jazz roots but with a funky touch. In the 1976 version, the singing is placed somewhat behind the music. The singing is shared by Ayers himself and a group

of female backup singers. The sensibility is light, and well, sunny. The air is filled with positive feelings, a laid-back atmosphere and a convinced attitude that this day will be a great day.

“Everybody Loves the Sunshine” has gained a large following, translating this status into many new versions of the song. But the version that really manages to re-enact the power of Ayers’s own version, but then again do something more and different with it, is done by the Brazilian singer and actor Seu Jorge. Jorge is perhaps most known for his performance in the 2002 movie *City of Gods*. But most likely, this is going to change after the new version of sun and shine gets better known. Because, well..., because the man has a voice that does not move mountains but makes us aware of what he is up to. It is not about the degrees of temperature in the sun or in the shadows, but it is about sunshine. Not the eternal belief in or dream of it, but that momentous, even monumental joy of being able to be there, and then: sunshine as an imagined state that carries you along – along as you go go.

This version was released in the summer of 2010, performed by Jorge and the band Almaz. It is a part of a whole album where Jorge and the band do their own versions of songs, from close and far away, that have influenced them through the years. It is a version, which can be characterized as edgier, steamier, in short, sexier than the Ayers version. But there is more to it. This more is how Jorge has decided to re-do both the music and the singing. The new construction plays down the typical vibraphone sounds used by Ayers, because it hardly makes sense to compete with the original one.

This time, there is a guitar, short and furious, a less than ten seconds interval that makes the breaks within the structure. And then there is Jorge’s voice, and his way of underlining the words that he is singing. The voice is deep, it is slow and it is convincing. It sings how everybody loves the sunshine, and with a repeat, makes the significant distance between sun and shine. In this version, people love both sunshine and how the sun shines. The playing conducts the content. Jorge and Almaz take it slow, and they let the song breathe. They let it evolve and

Trauma of context, I believe, is
a necessary but not yet sufficient
reason for what?

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linger. They let it tarry in and around, distancing and coming forth, escaping and returning.

And he sings the lines that are worth repeating and re-enacting anywhere and everywhere. A set of words as simple as sunshine, but as difficult to catch, with its power and glory: “Feel what I feel, what I feel, what I feel what I’m feelin’ In the sunshine Feel what I feel, what I feel, what I feel, what I’m feelin’ In the sunshine Do what I do what I do what I do what I’m doing In the sunshine Do what I do what I do what I do what I’m doing In the sunshine Everybody loves the sunshine Sunshine...”

It is a line that screams and begs for being re-connected, that line of “feel what I feel what I feel what I’m feeling”: a line that comes close and keeps its vital distance from another line that did not appear in music, but no matter, it has a great sense of rhythm. That’s a line from John Dewey, asking that we – for our own pleasure and necessity, regardless where and in what practice – focus on facing the never-ending process of “what you do when you do what you do”.

As with Ayers, who is not giving us a weather report but stating the desired frame of mind, starting the song with the line “My life, my life... in the sunshine”,

Dewey is not selling us a formula for successful living. What both Ayers and Dewey, and sure, Jorge, do in their very specific and detailed ways, is to force the concentration away from where it is already directed towards something that might be in a state of not emergency, but of becoming. This is the act of imagination, the act of social imagination where that ideal of sunshine is what begs and beckons us to move on, and go further, and to make something happen.

Repetition

With the second strategy of an R in a row, we remain with Dewey, and we ask a question, not so innocently, no. What is the road from Dewey's mantra asking us to stay with the fundamental question of what it is that we do when we do what we do, to conscious acts of relentless repetition? How can we recognize the potential difference in experiences that seemingly repeat themselves in the same way, but then again add something every time, however minuscule the thing is that is added to the experience? Is there more to repetition than reproduction of reproduction as imitation of life?

The take on the concept of repetition follows the same logic as the previous part. The idea is to return, to return back to the time when this concept was used, not for the first time, but used in a very influential and ground-breaking way. This is in the writings of Sigmund Freud, in a short but important text from the year 1914, and by that leaping act, taking us back to the early days of the reflective modern thing, as above in connection to Collingwood, archived for the year 1936, and in Chapter 3 before that, with John Grierson, in the year 1926. All in all, the aim is to imagine the connections and re-act upon them, making them alive and present. Because, well..., because if we care to see, hear and feel, the heavy dents in the idea that the past has no importance for how we comprehend the present and how we shape the future have been around since the early days of modern developments.

The backdrop of the concept of repetition is directly linked with the solid understanding of high modernity. This is modernity that has only one direction: it is more, it is up, and it is the future. It does not

repeat, it invents. This idea denying the relevance of the past – any past – is one of the central features of modernity as an entity. It is a cornerstone that places a strong belief in the continuing progress and development of human kind. Progress with the motto that the only way is up requires the tactic of not acknowledging the past. In this blind prospect of a future of irresistible progress, the events of the past are something that need to be either brushed aside, or if that is not possible, then dealt with effectively so that they can be set aside and one does not have to be bothered with them again. It is a vulgar vision, that nevertheless in its caricatural mode has possessed a great deal of confidence and credibility.

When changing tack, where we land is the writings of Sigmund Freud (1956-1939), and more precisely, at an extremely influential essay whose title already says more than expected: *Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten* (in translation, Remembering, Repeating and Working Through), which appeared in English for the first time in 1924.

It is hardly surprising that Freud would be the one to make us aware of the role of the past. (Another seminal essay that is helpful here as a background is *Trauer und Melancholie* from the year 1917, translated as Mourning and Melancholy; see Freud 1946b) As is well known, his whole oeuvre of psychoanalysis is based on the presupposition that regardless of what we might want to believe, we as humans are not the sole masters of our own house. There is – to follow the available arsenal of metaphors within the clashes of modernity – a ghost in the machine that coughs up stuff that is not pleasant to see. This comparison to a haunted house suggests that what goes on in our heads is not fully controllable, and has side effects, which after Freud were understood as the workings of the subconscious. It is a part of our psyche that is directly connected to and involved with the ways that we are linked to our past – both individually and collectively, and deliberately or without our will.

Without dwelling too deeply on the contents of Freud's version of psychoanalysis, we can take a great deal from this essay. What we have is the recognition of a significance of a past that never is, but is always constructed. What kind of role it plays is then of

course a different question. But here it is enough to emphasize the change in the understanding of the constant necessity of dealing with the past – no matter whether the past is or is not filled with dramatic events and occasions. It implies a move from denying the actuality of a past to the task of coming to terms with the past. Instead of solving it, we must face it – and continuously try to deal with it. Significantly too, this is a theme that is closely linked to the discourses of recalling the Holocaust, as addressed in Chapter 4.

In Freud's version, unless we are able to confront the past, it will reoccur with force, and without our ability to steer it. This confrontation involves a process of trying to overcome our resistance to recall, to remember and to act out the past. The process begins in recalling the past, moves toward the task of going through the events, repeating them in our mind and articulating them, and then, after that, slowly working through their content and their meaning for us, then and especially now. It is a process of here and there that is bound for a rebound, and has to be exercised again and again. And for sure, this is a process that is not harmless or easy, but characterized by inner and external conflicts and collisions. There is no, and there should be no manufactured, clear-cut linearity from one stage to the next. It involves a circularity of movement that tries to keep on moving – and facing the unpleasant demands and challenges it shakes up.

It is this idea of the necessity of repetition that wants to and must leave a trace. It moves in two directions, while changing directions; it goes deeper, while it also changes its spots and sites horizontally. It is a movement into, and aside, not skating on the surface, but an act of widening horizons while looking for ways for digging deeper – not by force but by movement, small steps and gestures. This repetition is time consuming and irritatingly slow. It does not break, but mends, in and through the continuous act of being done again and again – in a slightly different ways each time.

The act of repetition is a process that is time and place bound, because Freud's advice and conceptual tools do not bring about a solution. They are and remain only ways to deal with the constant need to face the

past, a past that means and implies different things depending when it is dealt with, because wanted or not, we are always partly what we inherit. But it is a past that does not provide legitimation for this or that act or non-act. If we take the process character of our self-understanding seriously, we must take care not to become captives to the past. That is a danger that lurks there so effectively because the past has a capacity that the other time frames do not allow: since it is already gone, it is available, sitting there to be carved into and narrated as forms that follow our current desires, and not necessarily the factual events and their inner logic.

There is a difference between confronting memory as a task of coming to terms with the past, or as an all-consuming willingness to be a spectator to rituals that solve the past, a difference between a critical and a repetitive memory that is highlighted not only in the ways we recall and face the versions of the past, but in how we constantly need to move on and not get stuck on the frozen horizon of a given past. As a strategy it either falls into a passive amnesia or adopts an active version of amnesty, an act of amnesty that stands for forgiving but not for forgetting^(see Ricoeur 1999, 11) – something like the act of letting go in order to be able to move on, that we will shortly return to.

But for now, what about a repetition that is not caring and caressing? What about the vicious circle of repetition in obsessive acts? What about the inherent melancholy of an act that is repeated and stays the same, not gaining anything by each turn, but diminishing slowly but surely – like air slyly escaping from an inflatable chair. And this time, this time that chair has a tiny hole in it, that the eye can't see. You hear it, that slight hiss of air escaping. You hear it, but you use all your powers of concentration to not pay attention to it. It is followed by a sinking feeling. A repetition is not serious and not challenging enough unless it is constantly in danger of falling into that world of a hiss and a hiccup. It is repetition as a trial and try-out for a series of almos, not quites and never enoughts. It is a muddled and murky collection of acts that keep on becoming something slightly different, not in or by themselves, but in and through the experiences that are situated in the structures, guided and guarded by them.

Beware: objects acting on us.

Facts of Life – PART 21

It is like practising. Or not even like. It *is* practising. You know, doing it again, and again. And doing it again because one thing leads to another and that again gives us motivation to stay with the act of trying to make it better. Not three times, not 33 times, not even triple the same number. We do it year in, year out. We do it over a thousand times, and more, more more.

But when is that more just a repetition of a bore?
When is it no longer letting something happen, but instead falling down and stopping – for perhaps nothing?

Here, we confront the act of repetition as the reverse of the act of editing. It is a point to ask: a) who is talking, and b) who is controlling this decision?

Just recently, those who follow discourses in contemporary literature were in for a surprise. We were told that the collection of stories by Raymond Carver (1938 – 1988), first published in 1981 and called *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, was not what the book was meant to be called – or to be. The evidence for this claim was published 28 years later. The evidence was the manuscript that Carver sent to an editor at the publisher Alfred A. Knopf, a man named Gordon Lish. Now, how many of us who have heard and read Carver

– and seen adaptations of his stories into motion pictures – have met with this other name before?

Not many, and even fewer of us could have imagined what took place between the newly published first version called *Beginners* (2009) and the now classic collection of short stories. The difference between the material before and after the editing was significant, to say the least. In terms of length, Lish thinned down the prose a great deal. He changed the title of the book, and took the new name from one of the short stories included. It was Lish that made an event out of the phrase that has become the trade mark for Carver: what we talk about when we talk about love. Lish did not invent it; it was a sentence ‘sleeping’ inside the text. He lifted it up, editing it into the cover line.

Reading the version that I have carried with me for years, always carefully placing it on the top of each pile when moving houses and countries, the one from the year 1981, in a parallel two-step take with the new old one that I bought after many moments of hesitation, is not what one can call a pleasure. It was an instant struggle of mixed feelings and mixed focus. The struggle was not just about the questions of what was there before, and how it is now changed. The struggle went deeper – into the content, into the processes of how content is shaped when it is confronted by a reader, by a listener. Because, well..., because, as a reader, you are not innocent either. You have a past. You are tainted, biased, and easily put off.

With these two books, we have two versions that are almost the same. The edited version is – without doubt – tighter and faster. It is dry and laconic. It is what we have learned to relate to as this writer called Carver. The new old version is slightly more hesitant in its voice. It moves to another terrain, in parts coming closer to a prose recognized from novels, not short stories. Without doubt, the new old style is, after you let it grow on you and manage to accept the change, a worthwhile experience. Again, a very distinguished voice is heard, albeit a different one.

But where is Carver? One book, two takes, and how many authors? Where was Carver when Lish rolled

up his sleeves and got into the job? Why was Lish not mentioned in the discourses during the '80s? And yes, why actually is it now, after so many years, that this all is made public? Questions and complications accumulate, but well, does it matter? Can't we enjoy the plurality of the changing same – reminding us of that anecdote from the end of the Cold War, with the then president of France, François Mitterrand, commenting on the emergence of a united Germany, how he and the rest of the French loved Germany so much it was great to have two of them. But well, love is not easy, never. For the the reading, and re-reading, it was a case of a repetition that only made sense when you chose which part of the open-ended sequences to start with – and then follow all the roots and routes that make you move, and move along – not generally, but while feeling for, and feeling with the texts, not at the same time, but always next to each other.

Remembering

There is a convincing reason why so many philosophers addressing the way we construct our memories are doing this with the help of a narrative understanding of ourselves. (see, for example, Ricoeur 1992 and MacIntyre 1985) With the notion of narrative, the act of remembering gains two important aspects. We recognize how memories are not solid and stable, but are constantly made and re-made. What's more, the concept of a narrative understanding of who we are, where we are, how we are and with whom we are, both allows and requires our participation in the acts of narrating versions of reality. We tell stories, and stories are told of us – stories in which we are never the only ones participating, but well, participate we do. These stories change and take different shapes. They get loaded and they get warmed up. The embedded and characteristic value is that all stories can be told in another way, manner, colour and sense of clarity. The aim is not to get it all, to cover it all, or to discover the ultimate truth but, to create a continuity of telling stories that make sense. This means: enough to hold together, enough to maintain the momentum to move on and on within a structure that loves to alter its functions – just so slightly, just so slightly. It is a continuity that

connects the dots between our interpretation and positioning to the past, present and the future.

The act of remembering is precisely that: it is to do something, instead of something else. It is a precise choice, not abstract dwelling. As an act, it is a productive one. In itself, it is neither positive or harmful. It is both/and, ranging from categories of being anguished to humiliated to tainted, unheroic and then to celebration and joy. Both the above-mentioned philosophers stress the act of remembering as something that has to be about listening. This is listening to oneself-as-the-other, and this is listening to and giving chances to alternative versions and variations. If anything, memory and remembering is the act where the hermeneutics of suspicion are extremely important to have at hand, and at use.

Thus, in our created context of the discourse on photography and contemporary art, the widely accepted and amazingly uncontested idea, promoted through the years by, for example, Susan Sontag,^(2003, 83) that photographs have the remarkable and unique character of haunting us, that they do not let us off the hook, must be critically confronted, not denied. This speculative claim that photographs remain with us and they haunt us is a proposition, not a metaphysical truth. Certainly, some photographs can stay with us, and they can carry with them the traces of loss and death, but the point is not if they possibly can achieve this, but how and in what conditions of conditions this is made to be seen so. Because if and when any photograph does indeed haunt us, it is always partly because we want it to haunt us.

The act of remembering is always partial. In fact, the moment it tries to catch it all, it no longer is an act of telling stories. On the contrary, the aim of remembering it all is the act of denying the contextual and time-based character of our stories. It is a denial of the impossibility of freezing our views and emotions. In short, it is the domain of control and power – power to limit and to manipulate.

Remembering is not meaningful or possible without its counterpart that is not its opposite but a necessary component. There is no remembering without letting

go and forgetting. The memory that claims to contain it all has the effect of dangerous paralysis. Instead, the act of remembering opens up and demands participation, rather than an acceptance of a deterministic view. Without forgetting, the past is stuck and cemented.

But what kind of a forgetting and forgiving are we talking about? The Irish philosopher Richard Kearney^(1999, 27) has offered two sets of pairs of conceptual tools to make the distinctions within the ethics of remembering. Kearney proposes the pair of amnesty and amnesia, and critical memory contra repetitive memory. The difference between these is important, but just as important is to note that there is always that shade of grey in between the variations. The point is that forgetting is also an active act. It is not passive forgetfulness, as in amnesia. We forget in order to move on, and to remember. With critical memory, we face the embedded prejudices that we all carry with us, and we do not allow memory to be compartmentalized and commodified into neat products and packages.

But forgetting is not enough. What is missing is an act that demands a great deal of self-esteem and recognition. This is the act of forgiving. Again, this is a dual, directed act of forgiving others, and forgiving oneself. All this serves the purpose of not getting stuck, but instead breaking a negative circle. Ricoeur^(1995, 12-16) proposes a triple model in the acts of understanding, respect and reconciliation. With these, in order of appearance, Ricoeur is after a) the ethics of linguistic hospitality, b) the exchange of memories, and c) forgiveness aiming at shattering the debt.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt adds yet another crucial ingredient to the act of remembering and the act of forgiving. Whereas Ricoeur follows up the task of reconciliation with others, for Arendt (2002) the focus also needs to be on coming to terms with one's own tasks and dilemmas. This is then the act of forgetting and forgiving that one does for oneself. You do this in order to shatter the irreversibility of the past traces, and you do this in order to be able to take distance and to tell, to remember the contemporary story with the past in a way that does not just repeat it but recollects it, and indeed, re-enacts it.

For this, Arendt uses the term *vita activa*.^(ibid. 15) It is a term that foresees the necessity of acting, and participating in the narratives of past, present and the future. For Arendt, the emphasis is on the act, because it is a beginning. There is an initiative taken, something is set in motion. Something is moving. This act, this participation is something we owe to ourselves. We must move on, and we must keep on keeping on. It is the act of remembering, not to be captive to the sweet and sour delights of fixed memories. At the same time, Arendt sees another dimension in our capacity to start off, and to continue. This is then nothing less than the ideal of freedom.

Arendt sees a strong link between an act and being free. This is the source for things that generate views and visions and, well, acts that are not predetermined, expected and anticipated. To be sure, Arendt acknowledges the difficulty of any such act, because it goes against the habits of security and certainty set into any structures we live in and through. We are already within these structures. Nevertheless, to act is to question these – and to continue questioning them, and through these consequent acts, also altering them. This act is by its character a collective enterprise – a collective that is not given but constantly shaped and made. This action is where, according to Arendt, we can expect the unexpected, the difference that makes a difference^(ibid. 178-180).

For this act to be meaningful and possible to hold on to and to evolve with, we need to avoid the illusion of controlling the past, and well, the present too. We are part of a complex web of actions and interventions. In the words of Judith Butler, “The social conditions of my existence are never fully willed by me, and there is no agency apart from such conditions and their unwilled effects. Necessary and interdependent relations to those I never chose, and even to those I never knew, form the condition of whatever agency might be mine.”^(2009, 171)

Remembering while remembering that when we remember, we are not trying to get it right, make it right or feel good with it, we remember when we keep opening and closing, and opening again, keeping things in motion – how what went on before has

an effect on what might be happening now and in the next page.

At the end of this chapter, with these three versions of three concepts bursting in and out of our heads, it is time to pay another visit to the very personified person we started with. What is it with Walter, oh dear Walter? How does this all connect to Benjamin? Can we argue with the roots and routes of the three concepts of re-enactment, repetition and remembering as productive acts that a certain Walter Benjamin got it wrong?

No, even if he certainly left enough material behind him to be thrown to the lions of contemporary critical re-reading. If anything, this following quote is a sound-bite that suggests perhaps there is more than just the numbers that have changed in how we perceive the world with and via images from the 1930s to the present day. Writing in the year of 1931, Walter Benjamin finds the proper target. It is the target of the cartoons of Mickey Mouse, produced then by Walt Disney but not yet marketed and distributed without mercy through all possible consumer goods and amusement parks. He writes ^(1999, 545): "These films disavow experience more radically than ever before. In such a world, it is not worthwhile to have experiences."

And yes, Walter did it, while Benjamin followed. They said: no experience. They found the perfect enemy in early Disney-produced cartoons, which for the contemporary viewer look both magnificently well done and also fabulously anarchistic in their content. Because, well..., because not only are the very early Disney cartoons, in today's eyes, worth preserving and paying attention to, but these products do remain what they never denied or tried to camouflage. They are cartoons, dear Walter. Read them, watch them, disagree with them but no, do not get stuck on them.

But no, this is not hate mail. We are not harassing Walter, or deflating Benjamin or proving that Walter Benjamin is out of date. It is not only that we don't perhaps manage to do it, but more important, that is not what is sensible to strive towards. We should

not lose any energy in trying to have it right against Walter, or Benjamin, or even Walter Benjamin. What we must do is to push forward versions, interpretations and participatory acts that confront, for example, the claim that in modern times, experience is an impossibility. This is, and should be, a human condition to respect, and for our emergence as human beings.

In this argument, who is wrong and who is right is the aim of the hysterical traffic controllers. Obviously, the fact that the red, yellow and green light system at your neighbourhood's busy intersections is working, and its signals are respected and acted upon, is a daily achievement worth celebrating. But this celebration of functionality must not turn into a glorification of it. It is not about winning,

The story goes like this:
the one and only time the two
giants of European philosophy,
Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel
Levinas, met, that encounter was brief.
The only thing the latter was able to ask
of the former was this:
How is it possible that your *Dasein*
never feels hungry?

Facts of Life - PART 6

or losing, but about keeping the process open and evolving – not moving through the revolving doors, but figuring out what kind of doors, and where and how they are placed, and also manufactured.

The only way we can respect what Walter says, and what Benjamin claims and what even Walter Benjamin writes is that we challenge it, we rattle the cage where it is now lamented and protected. We run straight to the wall, straight to the wall – and we enjoy it. And through these continuities of experiences, we can focus on how experiences are possible or impossible in late modern, fully commodified societies. Never because Walter, or Benjamin, or Walter Benjamin happened to say so, but despite and next to him. Or to borrow from Didi-Huberman, with WB, there is a chance, in spite of all. This is embedded into these texts, these fragments, these things that are not one but very many and shifting complexities to read and quarrel with – not to glorify and commemorate, not to get fixed on and about.

Because, well..., because the wind blows and it blows hard, but what happens if you try to picture it – or even describe it? Where did that sensuality of a breeze vanish? When picturing it, it escapes you. As with experiences, the wind is there – to be felt directly but only to be communicated via a transformation, via its effects. We are, and please excuse my language, always pissing against the wind, albeit the degrees of humidity and humiliation might vary. We see and then also feel the wind taking the curtains for a brief dance, we recognize the wind closing the door that we wanted to walk through, and we, well, we are in the middle of it, not inside or outside but both/and. We make it, but it simultaneously makes us. To borrow from Roland Barthes, this is to remain seated with a firm conviction of enjoying the honest dilemma: “*Who speaks* (in the narrative) is not *who writes* (in real life) and *who writes* is not *who is*.”^(1977, 111-112)

It is a position of pluralistic realities, of difference getting next to another type of difference that bumps off yet another difference that disallows the type of simplicities provoked by Walter and his dedicated followers. We are constantly shredded to pieces, challenged and massaged through language and through our experience – all which shape and

make, constitute us as we shape and make them. We are in a mess, and it is our mess – to experience and to participate. In the words of Michel Foucault: “Man is an animal of experience, he is involved ad infinitum within a process that, by defining a field of objects, at the same time changes him, deforms him, transforms him and transfigures him as a subject.”^(1991, 124)

We could continue. No problem. I can walk them out all here, one by one. Quotes on quotes on quotes build upon attraction and authority – bought, borrowed, broken, or boxed in. Because Michael believed, Foucault felt, while Roland feared and Barthes collapsed. Or how Ricoeur shouted how he has read much more important books than any of us, or that Hannah feared so much less than the most of us in her place would have. But no, let us not go there, not now. Because, well..., because it is not about getting it all, or having it right, and it is not about dear Walter, dear Michael and/or whoever. We are, we are, we are not the world, but we are each other.

And then we hear a bang, a big one. We are not dead. We are alive. And please please please: do not let anyone tell you otherwise.

TELL IT
LIKE IT IS
Mika Hannula



Mads Gamdrup

Pink: Monochrome Colour Noise, 2009

Framed inkjetprint mounted on aluminium

50 x 60 cm, framed 74 x 84 cm

Yellow: Monochrome Colour Noise, 2009

Framed inkjetprint mounted on aluminium

50 x 60 cm, framed 74 x 84 cm

Born 1967, Copenhagen, Denmark

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Mika Hannula

You have been working on this series called *Monochrome Colour Noise* for some time now. When did you start with it?

Mads Gamdrup

The whole ongoing series began when I started to scan my old analogue photographs into digital format. This was around 2004. While doing this, I found that there was a lot of stuff that kind of surfaced, sort of left-overs, stuff that was unusable in itself. It was out of focus, or it was messy. It was something I right then decided to call 'noise'.

I began to collect it, to pull all this noise together. I found it very interesting. The noise was full of extra information, but I did not understand what that information was about. When I did the scanning and the collecting, I didn't know what I should do with this material. I began to experiment with it, like separating the colour parts out of the rest of the noise. In this material, you have a lot of colours, and that's where the name comes, *Monochrome Colour Noise*. The thing is, the colour found there is extremely rich, in all it contains up to 5000 different colour variations. →

MH

The left-overs? What do you mean? Let's say, you take an analogue photograph of yours, a photo of a desert. What happens then?

MG

When I was scanning the photos from the desert, for example, and I looked at this material, it was the blurriness, or the colour that was not precisely defined, that caught my interest. What I did was look at the colours, separating them, looking at the scales of the colours. This information is not in the margins of the photo, it's inside the photograph, but now it has become digital information. There is no negative any more. Now it's only digital, and as material and as information, it is finer and it has much more room for variations. What you see in the digital image is not what you see in the analogue.

The other important thing was that while I was scanning, I was thinking a lot about what I was actually doing as an artist. I was really preoccupied with the idea that the ways we talk about photography are so focused on the motif in the picture. I started to feel and think that there is so much more in a photograph than just a motif. We talk so much about what the photograph is about, or what is the image, but that is too limited. We talk about only 5 percent of what it is or can be.

Thus, in this process, I got to thinking about what was, in fact, my motivation for working with photography, and working with art. And that was, of course, a much more bigger question. [laughs] But what I can say, what I remember is that, when I had these colour elements in hand, I began to feel something inside myself, to sense a new openness, something that I had not felt in a long time. What was also interesting for me was that this process was open-ended over such a long time. I did not have to decide and determine the photograph at the beginning – it remained in process. A lot of things both could and did happen. But for this, I needed a frame, a system to work with.

That's why I use both the Goethe's and Newton's colour theories in this series. They serve as a starting point, and a means of framing the process. There are some elements that are present when we talk about colour in almost any kind of photography. Both of these classics talk about this basic thing, how colour behaves. They explain how too much light takes the colour away, and how too much darkness takes it away, too. You can see that also in my work in the desert.

Often I had been out there, and I was actually more or less colour blind because the light there is so strong. This is also apparent in the evenings, you know: the trees are no longer green, but dark. The colour around us changes. The colour in cities is different from in the countryside. Every time period lives, and adapts to a different light.

Therefore, in this process, I started rather simply to work with the colour as 100% light, down to 100% colour, and stopped the process just before black started to get into it. I do it in both versions, in a lab with daylight and with artificial light.

MH

So, when doing this, you are no longer working with the computer?

MG

Well, I can still work with it in the computer, or I can print it out and use it as a negative, or well, it is then actually a positive. Then I get started again – having gone full circle.

But when I start with the 100% light, then it is so bright you can't see anything at all. So, at first I expose the whitest, the purest I can get, and then move up from it.

MH

How?

MG

There are different ways. In the beginning, I did it with my body, pressing and lifting the paper in light. Later on, I've done it with bubbles. I use some liquid – it can be water, for example – and then I project light onto the bubbles that are in the water. I need some organic material for this process. Now I use bubbles to find the form of the colour.

MH

Bubbles? What kind?

MG

It can be different types of gas. I can use also magnetism to generate the effect I am after. The type of gas I use depends on the speed of light I want in the bubbles. It also depends what kind of water I use, how much salt is in it. But I never have full control of the process. The way I found out about bubbles was that I talked to people who actually study them. I met these folks in Trondheim, where I have been teaching for the last six years. They use them in the oil industry, they use them in fishing. I just use them as a form to create light; for them their bubbles have a specific function.

MH

Hold on. What exactly do you do? Where do you put those bubbles and how?

MG

I work in a kind of aquarium, a see-through box. When I started, I worked with the box that the scientists used, then I built one for myself. Some of the boxes are the size of a small table, some of them are bigger. Then I take the camera, and I make a photo of the process – of the light hitting the bubbles. Then I print that photo. It is just like a normal studio, but this time without objects or people. Now it's in water, and I can see the bubbles and the way they reflect light.

I need an organic form for the light. But bubbles are great because their form is close to the sun. They have a roundness that I like.

MH

All right, just to get it straight: at one moment of the process, what you do is that you take a photograph of bubbles in water?

MG

Yes.

MH

So you are a photographer of bubbles.

MG

Yes. [laughs]

MH

And you are feeling O.K.? Taking your medicines?

MG

[laughs again] What I do is when I have those bubbles in water, I start projecting light onto them. Then I take pictures, and that's that. [laughs]

MH

When was the first time you showed this series?

MG

It was at Nils Staerk's place in Copenhagen, the gallery I work with, in 2008, using both Goethe and Newton for framing the context, using lights and also bubbles. In that exhibition, I showed three works in colour that are about how the colour is almost going away – like, at the time when it comes to the paper it is already going away. It is like you breathe onto the surface of a glass, it stays for a short while and then it disappears. So the result is a photo that has a really strong colour in the middle and it is very bright at the edges.

I have shown different versions of the series, always different works, many times, so far about ten times.

MH

Let us focus on this recent show, in the fall of 2010, the special work you did for the Willumsens Museum, near Copenhagen, where you were invited to work with the old masters collection and have produced new pieces in the *Monochrome Colour Noise* series.

MG

Yes, here, I did eight versions that are close to the ones from 2008. Out of these, three are done with bubbles, and the others are done with a technique, that the result looks as if someone had breathed onto them. Like the Pink one here, a lot of the exposure is out of the paper, this is only a bit of what's going on.

MH

Wait a second. You said it again. Breathing?

The Kronos Quartet, the US based chamber orchestra, are famous for their amazing individual skills and unbelievable collective ability to play most difficult music in such fantastic unison. An urban myth tells us that this four member orchestra has grown to enjoy and respect each other's company so much that when they travel, each of them stays in a different hotel. They also refuse to fly in the same plane.

Facts of Life – PART 4

MG

Yes. Of course, it is not the actual act of breathing, but I use the metaphor of breathing as a way of talking about these works, and about the method I am using here. It is about a movement, and creating that up and down movement in the photograph. It is generated by the ways I use the lighting when I expose it. It is very much about randomness, a kind of accidental thing, how it comes about. So, the process, instead of painting the colour, is how you can light it.

For me, well, it is about how we breathe, and that is why this element is so important for me with the colour. We as human beings change a lot, depending on who we are together with. But colours have the same quality. They change a lot depending what are they next to. You go to Greece, and see this typical blue and green thing, and take it or buy it and bring it with you, then it looks completely different. It is a touristic example, but the point is that the feel and the material of colour always changes due to its context.

MH

Do the works in this series have numbers?

MG

Sure, but those are not important. They run up to 30 or something, I don't remember. [laughs again] But they are always new. And here there are eight pieces, but it can be also seen as one work. But the number of elements you can have in a photo is amazing, this one has over 9000 parts in it. So, it is kind of like those classical Roy Lichtenstein paintings where he reproduces the spots, the raster, of the photo in a newspaper. But again, it's not with paint, but done with colour.

MH

Let's get specific. When we look at this Pink photo of yours, what's happening here?

MG

We talk about how important context is, especially how it does not exist on its own, but how you create it. For me, this is about how we are as human beings in a social situation, but also about how you use the knowledge and sensitivity of what you've got with you already. It can be a memory, or things you have learned the hard way. This colour work is very much about the ways in which we create our contexts. It is about changes, and about relationships. It is about how altering just a little part of the context has a big effect on the whole.

MH

What's the size here?

MG

The colour is 50 x 60, and the frame around it 20 cm more. This is the smallest size.

MH

Is the size important?

MG

Not for the idea of the colour, but it is important for the art piece, how it is shown and where. I normally do not use frames, but mount the photo into Plexiglas. It becomes a work that goes into the spatial elements of architecture.

MH

Is the space where you show important, then?

MG

Yes, because when I know I will make an exhibition, then I actually start from the specific space. It is somehow site specific, working in that particular room – and that is why the size changes. But I also find the size important because it is connected to your own body – it has that physical element, that meeting point there. So that you can really feel it.

Because, well, these are very different depending on where you look at them from. From a distance, they look extremely sharp, and just colour, but when you get real close to them, all of a sudden nothing is sharp, everything is just a mess.

MH

Then what is that about?

MG

Yes. [laughs very loudly] Well, it is about colour, honey.

MH

No doubt about it.

MG

Yes, well, it is also very much about what noise is. If we go to the details, we soon realize that as a mass every noise has so many different aspects and details. Some of them take our concentration away, but some of them have opposite effect. Noise can open up our mind to what is happening around us. With photography, I think, you work a lot with the frame, what is inside and what is outside. Normally, what is noise could be from outside, but well, in my particular case, the point is that all the noise comes from the inside. So, when you are close to them, the blurred element, the element of mess, is something you react

to physically. It is not pleasant to be so near to bright colours like this and their wild distortions.

MH

Let's go back to Goethe and Newton. They are here as a helping hand, a set of rules for the game, or...?

MG

Yes, otherwise it could be infinite. There has to be a frame that keeps things together. Here, in this photo, the Pink one, only 20 % of what's on the paper is the format of the colour. As mentioned above, this is the detail, it moves from 100 % light to 100% colour, it's the movement. And here, it's both of them that are talking about the same thing.

But we can also go back to the Danish astronomer, Ole Romer, who was the first to measure the speed of light, back in 1676. This changed how everybody, and that still includes all of us today, think about colour. He realized that light is not a mass, but something else. He found out that when you look at universe, you can see back in time. If you look at light, you can see the beginning of where we are at now. Really amazing stuff. But it is too big an idea for the practice where I am right now – but he, for example, helps me to clarify what I am after and what can be done.

The funny thing is that he also found out how to measure how cold things are, but well, it was a German guy who got the credit for it and made all the money.

MH

This idea or concept of noise, where did it come from? Any connection to the book by Don DeLillo called *White Noise*? The book came out in 1985, and has been really influential in so-called post-modern literature.

MG

No, that's something I have to check.

MH

All right, that's interesting, because here is a book, a fiction that is extremely articulate about our complex relationship with new technology, and how often enough that technology kind of takes us over, and we have difficulties in dealing with it. For him, that white noise is the endless flow of information that we struggle with. There's also an intriguing anecdote about the background of the book. The story is that DeLillo wanted to call the book 'Panasonic', but had to change it because the company with the same name was strongly against it and prohibited him from using it.

MG

For me, this concept did not come from any reading. It was a process that came from another process – the process of scanning from analogue to digital. And this is interesting – what we do or do not find as worthwhile and worth our attention – what we focus on and what we see as irrelevant. For example, the way we isolate ourselves as individuals, as a family and so on, the way we act in these frames, is extremely interesting. For me, it is the distance between X and another point, and not how they are, but how they are created.

MH

This process started in 2004, but I assume you are not scanning any more?

MG

No, no scanning any more, and almost no photos either. [laughs] Of course I do photos, but well, the background of this new series is that I used to travel a lot. It took a long time and a lot of energy to find a new place where something could happen. It was my looking at a reality that we could all say that, O.K., it is out there. But here, in the new series, I deal with a reality that we have to admit we don't at first see, but well, it is in there anyhow. It is no longer out, but in. And this is something that I think is really fascinating. Something that is truly part of our lives, but not yet visible. At the fantastic locations of deserts or seashores, there it is kind of obvious.

MH

Yes, I have no difficulty in seeing the connection and the strong continuity between the older photo works of empty places far away and the results from within: the details, all the variations of the new process. It is not the same, but the way you deal with reality, and this intertwined connectedness is definitely present and activated: how everything hangs together, this relationship and construction of what's in and what's out, how do we define them and why, and finally, how the content comes from the interaction with the viewer. All of this is very clear and also very powerful – both as a metaphor but also as a visual physicality of an image. It is about relationships, and well, you always need two for that damn tango – even if you dance backwards, or sideways.

MG

Exactly.

MH

What was the reason you started this whole process of scanning and getting away from the deserts?

MG

As I said, I got interested in seeing the photo as something more than just a motif. And of course that led me to thinking about my motivation – what is behind all this activity, why do I do it? I remember looking quite a lot at the paintings by Mark Rothko at this time. It was interesting to see where he came from in quite traditional painting, and where he then ended up. I was looking at his colours, and how they act and react.

MH

So it was not just a question of technique or a change of technique? Was there some kind of crisis that led you to change the way you worked?

MG

Yes, I can really say it was a sort of crisis. I had lost something, but at first, I could not recognize what it was that I had lost. I had lost something in the process of making art, and afterwards I realized it was happiness. I lost the capacity to enjoy what I was doing. The last series with deserts was called *Renunciations*. It ended in 2002; it was in Egypt where the last photo was made. I am not thinking of going back, but sometimes I do feel that I really miss the desert, this thing of being out there.

I talked about this a lot with my wife.

MH

You often travelled with your wife?

MG

For this series, yes. It was not a collaboration, but she is the closest one for me, with whom I talk about my work. I am not so open in the way I work, and it can be a bit difficult, but with her I discuss things a lot.

MH

What was the problem with the far away and dusty deserts?

MG

Well, there were so many practical problems to deal with, it was really difficult to travel to and in the deserts with a large format camera. But the real problem was this: I kept thinking only about what is in the image – and then as a reaction I turned the other way and started thinking what's behind it. Not only as principle, but more as a feeling.

I also thought that the way I had presented the *Renunciations* series was not good enough. I was in fantastic exhibition places, in Malmö and in Houston, but it was not enough for all that this work had inside it.

MH

What do you mean?

MG

I had stopped my process too early. I stopped too early in thinking about what's inside, in the process. I should have continued much further, about how I translated and transformed the ideas I had. I do like the photos still, but there is just so much more in them that I was not able to bring out in the shows.

MH

I see and feel the connections between now and before. But you haven't been back since. So it is a radical change – thinking of the differences of the physical side of the work and the rest?

MG

Sure, it is a radical change. I knew I could not go back any more. But funnily enough, right now I am still working with the landscape. I just finished a big series of work on landscape. It was a part of a large project where the government had invited more than 20 photographers to work with the social and environmental change in Denmark. It was a two year project. I opened the show, also in the fall of 2010, with a piece with 20 black and white, and 20 colour photographs,

rather classical photography where I played with the central perspective, concentrating on what happens when we look at things that are in and out of focus. It is very different from my current work. It was a commissioned work.

But it was great to work with the latest landscape project. The whole thing is called *Denmark in Change*, and my work has the same title. It is a strange thing. I have never really worked that much in Denmark, and it has been a while that I worked with landscape.

MH

Do you have background in documentary photography?

MG

No, not at all. My background is in the Fine Art Academy, first actually starting with sculptures and then moving on to use a camera.

MH

O.K., but let me insist again. The change: I assume it must have been both an enjoyable thing, but also a burden – or...?

MG

Sure, but I would still say that this is an open process, it develops from one day to another. It is not something where I sit down now and decide on a strategy of how to go on and how to work. This change was something that was completely necessary for me, and for me it started by looking at my material. Now, I am just getting into it more and more. In the beginning, it was not yet about images, but about the process itself.

The Sun Storm series from 2004 is a very good example of the process, in between the deserts and the current works. Here, I took a photo of the storms on the sun and separated magenta and yellow, the colours we need to make the photos. Then I made one image with one colour, but it was always the same sun, of course. Here, there is still a motif, there is the sun that title gives away, but here the sun as a motif is just a small part, but there is a lot of white around it.

MH

Yes, and if memory serves me correctly – perhaps I am wrong – this piece was in the exhibition, *Situated Self – Confused, Compassionate and Conflictual* that I curated with Branko Dimitrijevic, shown then in 2005 in both in Belgrade and in Helsinki, and I think I recall that when I wanted to invite you for it – this would have been in the fall of 2004 – you said that you would be happy to be in the show, but that I ought to check your

new series on the internet, because they were totally different from the previous ones. My reaction was to ask you to describe the new series, since I did not want to get it via the net but from you – and the way you described was enough for me. Do you remember this?

MG

That's true, that's how it went.

MH

But even if the connections between before and now are evident for me, as someone who has followed your work so long, I can imagine that there must also have been other type of reactions?

MG

Sure, I remember a little story. I had a few months in Paris, this was in 2002, and my idea was not to do anything, just to be there, talk to people and to look at art. I was almost finished with the Renunciation series. Then I got interested in this market that was only on Sundays, and it was only for birds. It was magnificent. So I went there often, but even if I was not working, I knew that rather soon I would have a gallery show at Elba Benítez Galería in Madrid. The gallery owner expected me to come with big American landscapes or deserts.

But I actually ended up with really big formats of these birds from the bird market, but not the full birds but only parts of them. When I looked at the market, all those birds there in a tight space, there was so much central perspective in it, so I took out every colour except the yellow. So the yellow colour was the only thing on the very white paper. It looks very abstract, and almost like a silk screen. The gallery owner was really shocked. Later she enjoyed them, but at first it was certainly a shock.

That was a great experience for me, the experience that as an artist, you must not close yourself off. You have to be open. All the way, keep it open, it is always your work, and an exhibition by you. You have to work in your own freedom.

MH

Was this transition period difficult for you?

MG

No, on the contrary. It was full of happiness. I really enjoyed what I did and what I looked at. But there was a lot of quietness during that period in me.

MH

No anxieties? Hesitation with the content?

MG

No, but sure, from the point of a gallery owner, I knew this move was a radical one, but I never really thought so much of the sales, not having that many of them anyway. [laughs]

With the content side, I was at a point where I wanted to change a great deal about how I worked, and how I also saw myself as a person – real fundamental things. I was at a point where I did not want to go on as I had before. For example, I had realized that there was a gap between how I saw myself and how I actually reacted to situations. The difference got to be too much. At that time, I had been away from Academy for like five years, and I could no longer go on with the ideal of what it could be. I had to face how things really are. I do not mean this negatively, but I could not use other people's experiences, I needed to look at myself.

I knew I had to take my time. I talked a lot with people, especially with my wife, about other ways of seeing and being. It was a good time, it was necessary, and things did change.

And sometimes change is really a good thing.

MH

Let's get back to specifics. This Pink photo, from the idea to the finish, how long does it take?

MG

It can take days, or months. It can be the first take or the last. It all depends. When I work, I try not to have a pre-fixed idea, but try to be open – as I said before. I try not to create a picture of an idea, but to have the process to take me and to follow it.

MH

O.K., but here's another question. For someone who has always been so preoccupied with and interested in how we relate to others and how we treat others, why is it that you have never taken pictures of people?

MG

[laughs] I love to be together with people, I love to look at people, but when related to my work, I think the story I see in the people is too small. I think the time I have with the relationship in the work is too little, I can't approach and get close to people in that time. I can't create a space big enough in my pictures for the people I would want to have in them. Do you understand what I mean?

MH

Errr, perhaps, but does it imply that you try to load too

much into a single picture?

MG

No, the way I work in the *Monochrome* series, every picture is on its own, but it is also together in a big ongoing series. So it grows up together. I think I don't see people as pictures, I see their relationships with one another as pictures.

MH

There is this great old anecdote of Giacometti and his sculptures, the long thin human-like figures. When he was asked why he distorted and brutalized the human figure, he did not understand the question. He just replied that he did not distort anything, this is how he saw human beings.

MG

[laughs loudly] That is a beautiful quote. I think that the greatest quality of art is that it is a social space where you have to deal with the fact, not the idea, but with the fact of how you react and how things are in the social space. Not what's bad, what's good, but the reasons what, how and where you are out there.

MH

You mentioned that you talk a lot with your wife.

MG

Yes, I really do. She has that background in social sciences, but also because she has a fantastically open mind for so many things.

MH

What do you talk about then?

MG

It could be about ideas that I have, or what I see when I look at stuff, that's really important, or it can be something that's inside me. We also talk about hope, and we talk about things like that, things that are a little bit out of the main frame. And that's also her input, not the word hope, but our discussions.

MH

Hope? Why is that outside the frame?

MG

No, what I mean is that it is a part of the whole, it is somewhere there in middle of it, linking things. It is also around me, it is my central motivation why I do art.

MH

What's hope for you?

MG

Hope is a mix of fantasy and reality. I hope that the distance between them could be used more creatively,

the distance between words, between colours, between you and me, well, the distance between anything.

MH

There is a certain kind of a harmony in your pictures, and that's also what you are partly after, right?

MG

Sure, here, I work with an idea of harmony and aesthetics because I start from noise, and then I transform that into something else. I need to have cleanness around it, so that the noise gets out of it, and also so that you can have a chance to look at it.

Some people think that these are too beautiful, but well, this is loud and annoying noise, it's heavy stuff when you get next to it.

MH

There is this ethical side here, and a situation.

I'm thinking about these shades of grey in each relationship which are – as we know brutally well enough through our own experiences – often not that pleasant and comfortable. How do you deal with that side of things?

MG

It is not something I work with directly, but it is very much part of my observations – how things change with a small alteration in an element in the whole. It is of course part of my personality, as it is part of anyone. These clashes and collisions are there.

MH

Let's return to one of the bubble pictures, the Yellow one. What are the rules here?

MG

This is about movement, and how things change when they come closer to you, observing the yellow colour on the bubble and how it moves. Here, the centre is very tight in comparison to what's around it. It moves from the centre and into the centre. A movement from 100 % yellow, to and back from 100% of white.

MH

So, this is a clear classical strategy of the changing same. And you have been doing this since 2004. A tricky question: how far you are with it? Getting bored already or just getting started?

MG

Right now, there is yet another big change in the process. I now want to focus more on the details, get more into the nuances of this movement. The photo can be about the same colour, but it gets into the tones around it,

showing how compact the colour is and how it reacts to the movement of light. The series continues and I use the same material. With this, I am just at the beginning, it's full of potential. But I can see that staying with one colour might be too narrow. I could go on with it forever, but I do see all the other variations and I will go into them.

MH

So, you are not ready for the desert yet?

MG

No, but I could take a little trip, for sure. [laughs]

MH

Context, as in influences?

MG

As I said, Mark Rothko was special and important in this new process. Also David Hockney's way of using different perspectives was influential, but also how Richard Prince works and how he changes his photos. It is not something I use directly. More directly the connotations are with the artists working with light, like James Durrell. Or like Olafur Eliasson, and then comparing how these two work with light. They both are a lot about this same thing: how we perceive colour and how it changes from where and how we see it. What's important for me in both of their works is how they deal with colour and light without sentimentality. Not dealing directly with feelings, they have cleaned it up, creating another dimension to it – and experiencing it. These two are close, not that they have worked together, but it gives me material to work on my own things.

MH

Rothko. What was interesting in him?

MG

He made a clear statement of not using the feeling with colour but working with facts of colour, and how to create a space with colour. Now, we see his works more sentimentally and as more sentimental, but then it was something else. He was talking about colour in three dimensions, and about value, not good and bad, but about balance. In some of the latest works by Rothko you can see a statement of a space and another dimension of experiencing the space.

MH

There is something very important in this notion of avoiding straight-forward sentimentality when dealing with light and colour. I've started to think, and I am actually convinced, that no matter what it is, when we deal with these

big issues, love, hate, relationships, how we are together, we can't deal with them directly. It becomes very banal. We must always invent detours, ways to get round the first moment, the first contact and connection.

MG

Yes, exactly. Everything is in movement, and in a process of change. What I find interesting is how we might be able to make more use of these connections – and let each other's to affect one another.

MH

You work alone?

MG

Yes, well, I have someone who helps with the computer, and then there is of course the gallery, which is really important.

MH

Are you religious?

MG

No, I don't believe in any one god. I have problem with how institutions like that work.

MH

Experiences. Let's get back to them. This Pink work. Why would it be important to see it and feel it live?

MG

[laughs] Right, now, we talk about the idea of the work, but that is only the beginning. We cannot go into the work if we do not see it. When we see it, we can go into it, and get into the meanings that are embedded in it. When we talk about noise it is something different than when we actually look, not at it, but with it.

MH

Yes, sometimes I feel that it would be a good idea if we could only talk and write about works that we have actually seen, and seen in an exhibition, in a space and time where they are meant to be seen – not just in magazines and in hearsay. But yes, let's get to the final part. What do you do when you do what you do?

MG

[laughs loudly] It is a way of living, this way of working with my art. It is part of everything. There is some kind of balance of no balance in my work, because it is pretty much the same thing that I do in my daily life, or when I am in my studio or when we meet, like here. What I do is that I search, I look for something. Not only observing, but participating, it is kind of research. It is an activity grounded in curiosity.

There was a site, a peculiar site. It had a name: Deepwater Horizon.

It was a drilling platform in Gulf of Mexico. The date is infamous.

On April 20, 2010, this platform exploded, killing 11 workers.

The explosion caused an unprecedented catastrophe – for the environment.

Before the so-called “leak” was fixed, more than 780 million litres of oil got into the sea.

Now think about it.

Not only the amount of water bottles you would need to fill to get up all the oil, but what about placing them on top of one another.

How long of a line would that make?

Would it reach to the moon?

But think of that hole, that opening on the bottom of the sea that had that thing called a leak.

What is the size and shape of that crack when all those millions of litres of that black magic keep pouring out of it?

Just think about it, would you, please, think about it.

Conclusion (Begin the Begin)

“Numquam se plus agere quam nihil cum ageret, numquam minus solum esse quam cum solus esset.” (Never is man more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself.)

*Cato, ascribed in Cicero, in De Republica 1,17
(Quoted at the very, very end of The Human Condition, Hannah Arendt, 1958, 345)*

Not so long ago, I went to see an exhibition by the Atlas Group. It is a long-term artist project that comes from Lebanon, and focuses on the consequences of the Lebanese civil war, its histories and atrocities, and how the stories are told and re-told.

In this particular case, walking along the long corridors at the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum, Berlin, looking at the images, photos, videos and installations that filled them, I was caught unaware. I was wondering what was I looking at, and what was I actually seeing in this show from the year 2006, bringing together a version of the activities of the project from 1989 through 2004.

I had not read a specific catalogue for the show before entering the spaces, nor had I turned to the information material, most likely readily available if I had chosen to do so. But I did not want to. I was too preoccupied with something I had heard discussed, something that I could not let go of, but kept carrying with me.

I kept facing those numerous photographs and collages that depicted violence, its traces and sources: exploded car bombs, maimed and injured people, broken down and blown up buildings. What I recalled was how the Atlas Group, as a strategy for dealing

with the reality they communicate with, defined their works, these installations, as fiction. Obviously enough, in their art, they made use of the vast press material and other information related to the events, the years of troubles in Lebanon, especially in Beirut (1975-1990).

But why call a work of art like this fiction (even if the group itself is a fictive construction)? Why do that even if a work of this sort is evidently a way of reconstructing history as a self-conscious fiction, something that is grounded on the idea of how, in the words of Walid Raad, so called founding member of the group and the artist behind the whole idea and all the projects, “facts have to be treated as processes”? (Quoted in Lambert-Beatty 2009, 84).

‘Why not?’ is an effective counter-question, but it does not let us off the hook. The works of Atlas Group have literally thousands of elements in the constantly evolving whole that come from a source (photo journalism) that relies on its credibility of *not* being fiction. The openly stated aim of the Atlas Group has been “to research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon”, and to do this especially in the format of a living archive available on the net, setting off and letting loose acts of performing memory. (See www.theatlasgroup.org)

So, once again, as I kept walking, watching and wondering, I asked: when does the same photo change from being a description of an event as a fact, to become a part of the act of telling of a story of the events, that is then fiction? What is the difference, and what is the same? And yes, what is going on in between them?

It is very easy to speculate about the reasons and motivations of the artist. On the one hand, the idea of using the means of fiction is something we all use – and need. We need it to get away, and to gain distance in order to return and to see more clearly. It transforms, and it translates. It is a strategy that opens up, let us begin, not stop, at first. But where does it lead? Or, indeed, does it have to lead us somewhere?

Second, it is as easy to speculate that by labelling some horrible material as fiction, it is not only perhaps more productive to deal with it, but also to have access to it,

and to transform the sensations and sensibilities, the feelings of fear, longing and hurt, just as examples, into something else. There is a sense of freedom with the notion of fiction. And a third, again a relatively easily graspable intention: using the shield of fiction functions as a protection. With fiction, one cannot be co-opted or attacked with the criteria of truth – whoever it is that uses them or claims to own them.

But I did wonder, and I still do, actively. I wonder how would I feel if I had some direct, not authentic, but some one-to-one connection to the events in Lebanon (which I do not have). How would I feel if the terror that I, or people who I knew or was familiar with, had gone through was now labelled as fiction, instead of something that factually happened? What would I feel and think, how would I relate to these events presented as fiction, especially when acknowledging how in reality, these politically motivated killings and enforced disappearances have not been prosecuted, but instead, due to amnesty laws passed by successive governments, there reigns a virtual total impunity?

The example of the Atlas Group led me, via numerous sidesteps and mental hiccups of losing and gaining connections, to the idea of re-activating a sentence that was not forgotten but set aside. I wanted to use this sentence as a tool, not in the process of solving anything, or finding answers, but because I needed a tool to make sense of the process of what happens when facts and fictions collide, and what happens when I look at reality that is not one but many?

The tool I have been using through the process of this book is the one established by John Grierson. The tool, word for word, is this: Creative Treatment of Actuality. One of the fascinating features of this tool is that Grierson himself uses it very strangely, that is to say, sparsely. He rarely refers to it, mentioning it offhand. It is as if for Grierson the sentence functions as a given presupposition that is there, having an effect on everything he does and writes.

My claim is that with this sentence we have a great deal of potentiality to focus on, to get into the activities of shaping and making of a context, a site and situation that is particular, not general. It is an act

during which we must give a version of how we use and understand what is creative, what is treatment, and what is actuality – especially how they bounce off and on each other.

The process of confronting any ways of dealing with reality, is a process of taking part in the acts of giving content to concepts. These are concepts such as signs, images, symbols, words, acts etc. In each case, it is not about *what* we do, but *how* we do it. In this process, the tool that I re-activate from Grierson is used to avoid falling into the assumed security and clarity of constructing what we see, feel and hear as a set of either/or's. Instead, Grierson gives us a chance to comprehend how things hang together, how they are generated in connection to one another – in short, how things are always both/and. And sure, needless to say, this both/and is always more difficult and time-consuming than boxing things in through the categories of either/or.

In the endless give-and-take interactions of both/and we face, for example, the discussions of whether a concept of truth has an ultimate value or no intrinsic value, whether photography has an inherent value or has only contextually-formed content, or whether, as in the case of the work of the Atlas Group, dealing with reality is based on facts or made up as fiction.

In each and every one of these processes, all of which never take place neatly and in a clear order of appearances but always on top of and in the middle of everything, we need to move slowly. We do need to move, but very carefully. It is slowness that allows us to stay away from the illusion of creating yet another vocabulary that would give us the direct contact with what is happening right now, with all its delirious vast changes and chances. But because everything new comes from something old, we do not necessarily need new vocabularies. What we definitely need in each case, in each site, is contextual and situated uses of the content of a concept. It is the act of generating an actualization of the past, present and future of how a concept is defined, used and maintained.

With this book I have brought together a variety of discourses. These discourses – philosophy and

photography, theoretical practice and artistic practice – are placed next to one another, but they are not meant to become one. Therefore, this conclusion has no concluding findings of what the results of this process actually are, of the factual outcomes of bringing two sides together and making each side aware, at least a bit more than before, of both where they themselves come from and how they are connected to other versions of the changing same. These discussions sail, float and sink within the covers here; they relocate themselves alongside the essays, and next to the other versions. They are on the move – all of these parts of the whole, I hope. But they are not lonely, and they are not standing on nothing. It is an argument for, not against.

Through the years of thinking with the tool provided by Grierson, I have learned to trust two sets of complimentary tools. For the first, I find David Couzens Hoy^(2004, 232) supplies the balancing advice that is required if our view of and participation in our being-in-the-world is to be that of a strategy for a both/and act. This is an act during which we must allow openness for the process to keep on going on. This means we must at all costs avoid the polarized oppositions of the attitude that anything goes and the attitude that nothing matters. It is neither anarchy nor nihilism that we face, but a both/and mess. In this act of facing reality, that reality must be allowed to continue emerging and evolving. It is about participating to the production of versions of a reality, which by their character are embedded. The possibilities to see and sense, and perhaps to make a difference, are always limited, and they are always situated. But they are there – somewhere. Because, well..., because, “even if the social is infinitely complex, complete scepticism about our social knowledge does not follow.”^(ibid. 233)

The other complimentary helping hand, the other extra tool for anchoring and attaching these processes so that they can indeed keep on emerging, taking risks, experimenting and failing productively, is the word performativity. It is the only word I would add to the words described by Grierson, right there in the very beginning. Because, following Judith Butler,^(2009, 168-169) with performativity we can see and feel how the structures within which we exist, the language that

we use and that uses us, the norms that guide us and control us, all are iterable. They are not deterministic. For Butler, this means that we lean on, and lean strongly on, the notion and the hope of affirming the continuation of life, “a preoccupation with notions such as *living on, carrying on, carrying over, continuing*, that form the temporal tasks of the body.”^(ibid. 169)

Yes, this then is not where it all ends, but where it all begins. We need to tell it like it is – in its plurality, and always with a joy acknowledging the internal conflicts and collisions that we inhabit and argue with and for. We need to participate in all these processes, actively facing all the pleasures and pains of re-reading, re-seeing and re-thinking. These are open-ended, emerging processes of how to do things with words, signs, symbols, images and acts. Again and again. And that’s, well, that’s it, basically. There is nothing more to it but to go do it.

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