

## SIRI HERMANSEN

**Offering a context for her work *Dreaming in the Stone-bed Valley* showing at Stiftelsen 3,14, Siri Hermansen talks with Johnny Herbert about the development of her working methods and how, through notions of exhausted geographies and being guided, she approaches a thinking of place.**

**JH:** Your work seems to gravitate around partially or completely evacuated territories. Yet, the binding elements of these evacuations or expulsions have very different sets of interlocking narratives: they have become nodes, or in some cases receptacles, in which previous and current power operations can be traced. Can you talk more about how you select the sites for your work?

**SH:** I grew up during the 1970s and '80s in a very politically engaged family. During this period the world was polarized and divided due to the cold war. At a certain point I discovered that I have been revisiting remains of sites and situations that are in various guises linked to these childhood memories of the cold war. As a child, the threat of nuclear war was real in a polarized world in which it was West vs East, communism vs capitalism, and nuclear war vs peace. My family household was under surveillance for years; as a sensitive person, all this must have made a huge impression on me, leaving unresolved feelings. Within this global and personal anxiety, as a child and teenager I developed a deep curiosity about what life behind the "iron curtain" might be like. So, yes, I think the histories of the places with which I choose to work are on many levels closely linked to larger political, economic, and cultural shifts in the world. This is likely why I became so interested in engaging artistically with such places in the first place. For me, going in person to these politically significant places has been a way to engage with society and participate in the world. On a personal, artistic level, I have tried to develop a space for practicing political art that is not directly moralising or finger pointing but a space where different realities – even paradoxical realities – can exist.

**JH:** ...and that this engagement is enacted through your experience of these places, rather than only coming by way of a media outlet, say.

**SH:** Yes. The motivation for a new project is a strong, urgent impulse to go to a place – to see for myself, to learn from the place itself, to gain a personal experience of it – an experience that is subsequently transformed into an artwork. The desire to experience these places for myself is related to the notion of respect, a term that derives from the Latin *respectare*, meaning 'to look again.' I have been working in this way for some time and have been invited to live for varying durations in places such as Jerusalem/Bethlehem – from where my project showing at Stiftelsen 3,14 emerges – and in Germany – where my next project centring around the physical and mental remains of WWII is focussed.

**JH:** Has there ever been an occasion where this 'transformation to artwork' you describe doesn't happen?

**SH:** No, my instincts are strong and therefore a powerful driving force in the creative process. Up until now I have always followed up on these instincts and art projects have always subsequently emerged. But of course this is also an intellectual choice, a choice to trust my sensitivity and instinct as a tool, but also to take myself, and my practice, seriously. All this being said, when processing material, I spend a long time thinking before deciding in which direction I want to focus the projects and how to express my site-specific experiences.

**JH:** To what extent are specificities of what you'll work on in these places planned beforehand? For example, do narratives and/or materials mostly emerge before or during your trips, or, do you compose more in post-production? Your process has perhaps changed through the years?

**SH:** By travelling alone into what one might call "unsafe zones", working with guides for fairly short, intense periods, I developed an artistic method that resembles shared anthropology<sup>1</sup> to obtain new information from places that have a great deal of media coverage. Continually documenting what I experience with a video camera, I repeatedly expose myself to risks or make myself vulnerable to unfamiliar environments, environments otherwise closed off from society. The feeling of the recorded materials depends on the interpersonal relationships that occurred at the site between my guide and I; micro-perspectives – subjective and intimate conversations – form the basis of my work.

Entering unfamiliar landscapes and situations as a stranger, there are two different methods one can use to learn from new perspectives on places we all have knowledge of through the media: One method is about not knowing what I am looking for in a place but finding knowledge from the place itself – this is by far my favourite way of working and accounts for all my projects except the projects concerning the neo-colonisation of Sapmi. The second method is to look for issues you already know exist, having a predetermined agenda for a project. With the Sami-projects *Terra Nullius* and *Sorry*, I wanted to show aspects of our society that I think are not discussed and taken up in the media and by society at large.

**JH:** Reading 'The Economy of Survival', your final thesis from the time you recently spent as Research Fellow at the Oslo National Academy for the Arts, you take up the notion of "exhausted geographies" initially developed by Irit Rogoff. Could you expand on how this idea has been important for you?

**SH:** My strong desire to work outside my own cultural sphere brought intellectual and ethical challenges that I had to overcome. In the beginning of my research fellowship, important questions kept coming up in various academic and artistic situations – questions like: "How can I – a white, privileged woman from oil-rich Norway – travel to places in deep distress, making artwork of them without trespassing ethical barriers? Was it at all possible to work this way as an artist?" I kept asking myself such questions as I knew I had to resolve them both intellectually and physically in order to work within the territories I longed to be in. In this period of deep thinking and discussion with colleagues and supervisors, I heard a recording of Irit Rogoff's lecture "Exhausted Geography". Her essay with the same title became an important starting point on my way to developing my new artistic method which related to being guided as a tool to learn from a site itself.

Rogoff used the term 'exhausted geographies' to think about the territorial claims of the highly mediated conflict between Israel and Palestine. She speaks of a "territory" being claimed, and argues that people in these places do not necessarily regard themselves in terms of a "culture or identity" where "this is not that, that is not this". What she proposes is that we view "geography" not as a physical place, but as a way to point to the different ways a place is defined in narratives. Unexhausted geographies support the prevailing views about a site of conflict as conveyed by the mass media. Rogoff sees a possibility to 'exhaust geographies' when the prevailing ways of understanding and defining places do not correlate with the more complex realities of that place. In this way, the prevailing understanding of the place can implode.

The first time I visited Chernobyl, as I was staying the night, I had a secret dinner with my guide, Dennis, and our driver. Breaking the rules by eating together in Chernobyl, we created a semi-professional, semi-personal sphere – a mental space for dialogue between strangers who share histories, dreams, and memories. Cultural and linguistic barriers did not seem important. Our unlikely meeting within the special conditions of the zone became a catalyst for our dialogue. That evening, Dennis told me that Chernobyl was his paradise. My project shifted from wanting to document the ruins of the lost society to understanding survival and adaptation within the uncertain zone. To use Irit Rogoff's terms: Dennis's narrations of his geography exhausted the Chernobyl geography because it imploded the idea of Chernobyl as only a place of a human-shaped hell. His subjective view of the zone opened up a new possibility to understand the forbidden zone from within and in this way gain new information from it.

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<sup>1</sup> Coined by Jean Rouch, "Shared Anthropology" is the practice of cultivating methods that are mutually developed by the previously separated "object of study" and the "studying subject" (an approach to filmmaking, in Rouch's case) – J.H

**JH:** So, again, the sense of countering the mass media seems important; focusing on stories told within specific sites rather than taking a general, generic – and violent – politico-historical canonisation which will help us understand the “real story”. It’s in this respect, then, that the guides or people living in the places you visit are really highly significant figures in your work...

**SH:** Yes. As an example, an earlier work, *Chernobyl Mon Amour*, became a starting point for discovering how I could develop a method of being guided by an insider: I chose to make the guides and their everyday life and activities the main focus of my research; I defined myself as “the guided”.

The guide can be viewed as an ancient, mythical figure: a storyteller and a carrier of wisdom and truth for society. The guide possesses insights and an authority that are unknown to the outsider trespassing on new land or foreign territory. With the help of the guide, the guided is navigated through a physical or mental landscape, overcoming boundaries and thereby gaining access to an otherwise unknowable territory that the guided “sees” and experiences for the first time. The value of entering the site alone from the position of “not knowing” and “being guided” as a method for gaining knowledge about the site I did not know permitted me to really look for the less obvious in the situations into which I was being invited. The subjective perspectives of the guides became a method for learning from the place itself. I never questioned the guides’ thoughts, criticized them, or made any judgment within our conversation; in postproduction, their reality is treated as fact. I sensed that my role as an artist was not to verify and find proofs for what they talked about, like a scientist or a journalist would do – I wanted the focus to stay on the guides’ subjective realities.

This idea can be generalized, and for me the guides’ subjective perspectives were productive as ways of opening myself up to Chernobyl (and later Detroit, Lapland, and Jerusalem). The guides offered ways to view the forbidden zone from other perspectives, demonstrating how life can be lived within a highly mediated and dangerous place. This means that the dominant geographies of “Chernobyl”, “Detroit”...etc., become exhausted when we imagine something beyond the endlessly rehearsed views in the media. This way of thinking has become a method that, to me, opens up a possibility for really listening to what “my guides” say in the places I visit as an outsider and to really look at what they show me. I never question their life choices or experiences but take what they say as the truth.

**JH:** In destabilising the usual fixed referent of a place’s name as being a specific mapped territory, how do you think of place now?

**SH:** Although the places or situations that I feel attracted to and enter into are very much defined by a place’s own destiny, as I mentioned before I want to enter a place without preconceived ideas of what to experience. Trinh T. Minh-ha’s notion of “not to speak about/just speak nearby” a site has been a very valuable approach for me both in terms of how I think of and approach a place. “Speaking nearby” a situation allows artists to adopt a position that avoids moral judgment and the pitfalls of post-colonialism whilst still being significant. There is also room for paradoxes and the poetic in this “nearby” place.

“Speaking nearby” allows me to search without an agenda of obtaining knowledge from people who are living in the uncertain zones that run parallel to a so-called “normal society”. The “nearby” aspect was a consequence of the method of being guided by people, staying close to them, participating for a short period of time in their lives with as few

boundaries as possible between them and myself, viewing places through their eyes and imaginations. It would not have been possible for me to be “nearby” them without their being able to be “nearby” me, therefore my way of interacting to create this intimacy required that I share my own dreams for the future, my own worries and fears.

Toni Morrison invites us to think that all places inhabit their own internal story that remains hidden if you don’t look for it and that such stories can be discovered through the meeting of a place and a person who is sensitive to look for it through their own “emotional memory”, itself revealed in the meeting between two places:

*“You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and liveable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. ‘Floods’ is the word they use,*

*but in fact (the river) is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get to where it used to be. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory – what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our ‘flooding’.” (Toni Morrison, ‘The Site of Memory’, *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*, 77)*

This inspired me to use my emotional memory as a tool to look into the unknown yet over-exposed landscape and situation of Chernobyl, Detroit, and, later, Jerusalem/Palestine. In the beginning, when I developed this working method, I was very uncertain in the process, but with several projects I have developed a strong emotional trust towards my own my sensitivity and emotional memories. Together with my intellect, they have led me to find and connect to on-site signs and symbols during the field works, offering me a deeper understanding of a place.

**JH:** You mentioned that forthcoming work is revolving around the memories and remains of WWII. As a final question, can you say more about this?

**SH:** The working title is *Islands of Memories* and I will again work with intimate conversations and micro-perspective to look at physical and mental traces and signs of memories of the traumas of WWII, with an emphasis on my own generation. The project is the result of a one-year residency I was awarded by Internationales Künstlerhaus Villa Concordia, Bamberg, in 2015. Situated nearby Nürnberg, this area being deemed by Hitler to be the “most German” in Germany. Hitler’s main architect, Albert Speer, designed and built the Nazi Party rally grounds as well as some of his most monumental architectural works there. By complete coincidence, I met and became friends with the grandson of one of the most high-ranking SS officers in Norway. This friend’s grandfather led the invasion of Narvik and later acted as Harbour Chief there (it is important to remember that after Oslo, Narvik was the next most important place to conquer because it had iron mines and was also the harbour where the Kiruna Iron mines shipped from). Narvik was vital for the Nazi’s plans of building a third Reich because the iron was necessary for weapons and ammunition. My friend nevertheless states that, despite his high-ranking position, his grandfather was not a Nazi. I have also done in-depth interviews with a psychiatric nurse who talks of the demented passions of those who only remember glimpses from their childhood in which Nazi culture was prevalent.