

Utvalgte tekster

Stamping Time: Parallel Histories and the Material of Absence

After reflections by Sohrab Mahdavi on Jinoos Taghizadeh's Letters I Never Wrote

What does it mean to commemorate something that never entered history?

Jinoos Taghizadeh's *Letters I Never Wrote* operates in a space where history loosens its grip on certainty. The work gestures toward a parallel register of reality—one composed not of what has been officially recorded, but of what has been omitted, displaced, or never allowed to appear. It is a project of possible histories. The logic of the work recalls the many-worlds interpretation in quantum mechanics, where each event contains multiple potential outcomes, each unfolding in its own branch of reality. In a similar way, Taghizadeh's stamps suggest that history, too, could have taken different paths. What we recognize as "the past" is only one version among many—stabilized, selected, and repeated.

Commemorative stamps traditionally function as instruments of memory. They condense events, figures, and narratives into small, symbolic surfaces, fixing them within a shared cultural imagination. Like banknotes, they circulate as markers of value—offering a sense of continuity, coherence, and legitimacy. Yet this apparent solidity is constructed. What they present is not history itself, but a curated version of it. In the context of Iran, this process becomes particularly visible. The Revolution of 1979 disrupted existing frameworks of meaning with immense force, unsettling what had previously seemed stable and unified. For a brief moment, multiple realities coexisted—competing visions of the future, each attempting to define its own symbolic order. This condition of plurality was both generative and destabilizing. Without fixed reference points, reality itself appeared open, contingent.

Such openness, however, is difficult to sustain. The subsequent consolidation of power—intensified by the Iran–Iraq War—produced a renewed urgency to stabilize meaning. New symbols, new narratives, new figures were installed to anchor a reconfigured historical arc. The nation became a surface onto which this reordering was inscribed—a palimpsest where previous layers were overwritten, yet never fully erased. It is within this context that *Letters I Never Wrote* unfolds its quiet subversion. Rather than reproducing official narratives, Taghizadeh works with their inverse. The stamps she produces do not commemorate what has been recognized, but what has been excluded. They catalogue events, actors, cultural moments, ecological losses, and political absences that have not entered the symbolic order.

The gesture is deceptively simple. By reimagining the stamp—a medium associated with authority and permanence—the artist redirects its function. What emerges is not a counter-history in the traditional sense, but a parallel one: a constellation of absences that nonetheless exert influence on the present. A striking aspect of the work lies in its material logic. If the front of a stamp establishes an image, a reference, a claim to meaning, then its underside—blank, adhesive, hidden—becomes a space of potential. Mahdavi describes this as a kind of "white hole": an inversion of the black hole, from which something might emerge, but into which nothing can enter. It is a metaphor for absence that is not empty, but generative.

This raises a broader question: where does memory reside?

If memory were solely located within the individual brain, the idea of collective memory would be difficult to sustain. Yet collective memory clearly exists—it shapes identities, narratives, and shared realities. Some speculative theories propose that memory operates beyond the individual, distributed across fields or environments that can be accessed and activated. Whether taken literally or metaphorically, such ideas resonate with Taghizadeh’s practice. Her work can be understood as accessing a dispersed field of memory—one that exists outside official archives. Through the stamps, she retrieves fragments that have been suppressed, ignored, or rendered invisible. These are not simply forgotten histories; they are absences that continue to structure the present.

This concern with absence is not new in Taghizadeh’s work. In earlier projects such as *Rock, Paper, Scissors* (2009), she manipulated historical images through lenticular techniques, allowing different realities to appear depending on the viewer’s position. In another gesture, she inserted her own childhood portrait into a newspaper format reserved for missing persons, suggesting that something of the self had been lost in the revolutionary moment. In *Letters I Never Wrote*, absence becomes more diffuse, yet also more insistent. It is no longer tied to a singular image or event, but accumulates across a series. The work does not necessarily aim to equate absence with presence, nor to resolve their tension. Rather, it marks absence as something that exists—something that has weight, consequence, and form.

Philosophically, this touches on an enduring question: is nothingness simply a lack, or does it have its own mode of being? While some traditions treat absence as a negation, others suggest that it operates as an active condition—structuring what can appear, what can be known, and what can be remembered. The existence of *Letters I Never Wrote* seems to affirm the latter. The stamps do not fill a void; they articulate it. They give contour to what has not been granted recognition, allowing absence to register as part of reality rather than its outside.

In this sense, the work does not oppose official history directly. Instead, it expands the field in which history can be thought. Each stamp becomes a small but persistent opening—an invitation to consider that what we take as fixed is, in fact, contingent.

To stamp something is to declare it as real, as worthy of circulation, as part of a shared narrative. Taghizadeh appropriates this gesture, not to reinforce a singular history, but to multiply it. What emerges is not a corrected version of the past, but a layered one—where presence and absence coexist, and where reality itself remains open to revision.

A Murmur of Forms

After reflections by Sofie Marhaug on Eve Ariza's Murmuri

Across continents and centuries, the ceramic bowl appears again and again. It emerges from the ground in archaeological sites in China, Greece, Crete, and Mesopotamia, and from the histories of Indigenous cultures across the Americas. This recurring form speaks to something fundamental: a shared human impulse to shape the world through touch, to enter into a material dialogue with the earth.

Ceramics, in this sense, is not merely a medium. It is a trace of labor—of hands meeting matter, of time sedimented into form. For the young Karl Marx, labor is precisely this: the process through which humans engage with and transform the natural world. It is not only what we do, but what constitutes us as human. As Marx writes, humanity lives from nature, in continuous exchange with it. Nature is not external, but constitutive—a body we are part of and cannot be separated from.

Yet this relationship has become increasingly strained. Under capitalism, labor is often detached from its origins and from its meaning. What we produce appears as something independent of us, obscuring the processes and relations that brought it into being. Marx names this condition “commodity fetishism,” asking, in one of his most evocative gestures, what a table would say if it could speak. The answer, of course, is that it cannot. But if it could, it would reveal its origins in human labor—stripped of mystification, returned to its making.

Standing before Eve Ariza's *Murmuri*, this question quietly returns, but in another register. What would these ceramic vessels say, if they had voices? What would the wall they form express, if it could speak? And perhaps more curiously: would we recognize what we heard?

Each bowl is singular. Slight variations in shape, glaze, and texture mark the presence of the hand. At their base, an opening—a hollow—suggests a mouth. Individually, they seem poised to speak. Yet it is in their accumulation that something else emerges. Installed across the walls in rhythmic sequences, they form a continuous surface, a kind of cartography of clay. Repetition does not erase difference; it amplifies it, allowing variation to unfold within a shared structure.

The title *Murmuri* offers a key. A murmur is not a singular voice, but a field of sound—diffuse, collective, difficult to locate. It does not demand attention; it invites listening. In Norwegian and French, the word echoes *mur*, meaning wall, derived from the Latin *mūrus*: to fortify, to enclose. The work thus hovers between two conditions. It is both a wall and a voice. A structure that contains, and a resonance that disperses.

This duality extends into the space itself. The ceramic surfaces do not only occupy the walls; they subtly alter the acoustics of the room. Sound behaves differently here. Voices soften, disperse, return. The audience becomes part of the work's sonic field, entangled in a shared act of listening. The installation does not speak in a declarative sense. It modulates the conditions under which speech and attention take place.

In a contemporary context marked by contradictions, this becomes particularly charged. Capitalist production tends toward standardization, enforcing sameness through the logics of efficiency and profit. At the same time, political discourse often mobilizes difference in exclusionary ways—constructing rigid identities that must be protected, sometimes literally, by walls.

Murmuri gestures toward another possibility. Here, unity does not require uniformity. Difference is not something to be eliminated or defended against, but something to be held in relation. The work suggests a form of collectivity that is neither homogenizing nor divisive, but attentive—a gathering of distinct voices that do not collapse into one yet resonate together.

To listen to a murmur is to relinquish the expectation of clarity. It requires patience, proximity, and a willingness to remain with what is not immediately legible. In this sense, *Murmuri* proposes not only an aesthetic experience, but an ethical orientation. It asks: what if we understood collectivity not as a chorus in unison, but as a field of differences, held together through attention?

Perhaps, then, the bowls do speak—but not individually, and not in words. They speak as a surface of relations, as a quiet insistence on the value of both multiplicity and connection. Not a single voice, but many—held together in a continuous, shifting murmur.

The text performed by geologist Bjarte Hannisdal

Think for a moment... think for a moment, and consider that in just a handful of soil, there are more living organisms than there are stars in our galaxy.

And deep down in the crust of the Earth there are ancient organisms, tiny cells, buried alive, just sitting there waiting - some of them almost as old as the dinosaurs but still alive - and still waiting, quietly.

Consider that trapped inside our own bodies are remnants of the entire history of the Earth. The red color of our blood is a reminder of an ancient time, when life truly transformed the young Earth and caused its surface to rust.

Bjarte Hannisdal, researcher at the Centre for Geobiology, Department of Earth Science, presented this original text in a performative reading that framed the colourful and dreamlike universe of Valeria Montti Colque. In the performance *Cloudforest*, Montti Colque herself appeared as the Dark Wild Cloud, while the Night was embodied by singer Silje Mørch and the Owl by violinist Diltumar Ehet (both from the Grieg Academy). Two mountains were performed by dancer David Alræk and art student Matias Grøttum. The Flower was embodied by dancer Yohei Hamada and performed by artist Tanya Varbanova. In 2024, Valeria Montti Colque became the first Chilean artist in exile to represent Chile at the Venice Biennale.

Poem by the artist Valeria Montti Colqu

Cloud Forest

The little dreamer comes walking

He is handsome

A well-dressed man

Sits down and fish

One night without stars in loneliness

He fishes dreams

High in the sky

A large white cloud of birds

Every human being is a universe

His body is his planet

He sees the other planets but they don't see him

Just a black dark wild cloud they see

The mountain stands motionless

The dreamer walks around on his planet

Around and around

How should they ever see him

The planet is hard as stone

A black dark cloud embraces him

As if a monster is carrying him

Or is it his shadow

Or A mother who rocks her child

The only one who sees him is the night

The night is singing for him

Her voice caresses him tenderly

He falls in love with the night

There is a dream!

Lays down at the foot of the mountain

On his bed of suitcases

Feeling the drops of rain in the face

Ready to travel

Over mountains

Desert

Forests

Crossing galaxies and the universe

Ready to dream

The mountain is watering him

One day he will be a beautiful flower

Falls asleep

The mountain is pushing him in his journey

The sun wakes up

The mountain is playing with the sun in the sky

It smells good

In the horizon cloud branches

Suddenly there, the dream sparkles

Rays shine from a cloud

Seeds grow from darkness

The most beautiful rose

Dikt skrevet av Anne Hellen Guddal til billedkunstner Kwestan Jamals sine arbeider

*Er det himmelen eller havet
som reiser seg og trenger gjennom alt
alle grenser*

*Er det en verden som skapes
eller går under
i virvler og sug*

*Er det en verden som begynner
der flukten slutter
eller er det drømmene som filtrer seg inn i hverandre*

*Er det ingen tomrom i naturen
bare pulserende farger
eller er sammenhengene uoverskuelige*

*Er det kroppen som åpner seg
foldet ut som en blomst
eller er det sjelen som endelig våkner*

*Er det et overskudd som ødsles
og krefter som slippes løs
eller er det noe som likevel holder tilbake*

hånden som holder penselen husker alt

(Anne Hellen Guddal is a research fellow in comparative literature at the University in Bergen)

The Difficult Work of Forgiveness by Elisabeth Schanche

How does reconciliation become possible after injustice has taken place?

This question sits at the heart of *Living / Forgiving / Remembering*, an exhibition that gathers artistic responses to histories marked by violence, rupture, and survival. The works draw on contexts such as Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, Vietnam, Chile, South Africa, and Israel–Palestine—yet their resonance exceeds any singular geography. They ask whether forgiveness is imaginable, not only in the aftermath of extreme conflict, but within the smaller, quieter fractures that shape everyday life.

Art offers a particular threshold for approaching such questions. It allows us to remain present with experiences that might otherwise overwhelm us. Through form, distance, and transformation, what is unbearable can become perceptible. In this space, empathy is not instructed but emerges—sometimes slowly, sometimes with force. Art does not resolve pain, but it renders it shareable.

Encountering the exhibition also raises a fundamental tension: who has the right to speak about forgiveness? Positioned within relative safety, without direct experience of war or large-scale violence, one is confronted with both humility and hesitation. And yet, the emotional structures at stake—injury, anger, withdrawal, the impulse toward revenge—are not foreign. They belong to a shared human repertoire. There is no clear division between “us” and “them.” The same capacities that enable harm also contain the potential for repair.

Forgiveness, however, is often misunderstood. It is not a moral command or a decision that can be made on demand. Rather, it can be understood as an internal, voluntary process through which one gradually releases the grip of resentment, hatred, and the desire for retaliation. This process does not erase what has happened. It does not justify wrongdoing. Instead, it concerns a reorientation of one’s own emotional life. Crucially, forgiveness cannot begin in conditions of ongoing threat. Before anything else, there must be safety. When faced with harm, the human nervous system responds with intelligence: we defend, withdraw, or shut down. These responses are not failures but necessary forms of protection. Only once danger has passed can another kind of work begin.

That work often starts with turning toward one’s own wounds. To acknowledge pain without denial or suppression—to stay with anger, grief, fear, or shame without being consumed by them—requires considerable courage. It is a slow process, sometimes supported by others, sometimes requiring therapeutic or communal frameworks. Over time, the sharpness of the wound may soften into something else: not disappearance, but transformation. The metaphor often used is that of the scar—evidence of injury, but also of healing.

Within the exhibition, a photographic series from Rwanda by artist Lana Mesic offers a striking articulation of this process. Survivors and perpetrators are depicted together, more than two decades after the genocide, each image reflecting a different stage of forgiveness—or its absence. Some figures reach toward each other; others maintain distance. Bodies speak where words fall short. What becomes evident is that forgiveness cannot be staged according to expectation. It must unfold at the pace and on the terms of those who carry the experience. This insistence on individual timing also reveals a risk: the pressure to forgive too soon. Cultural, religious, or social ideals often position forgiveness as a moral endpoint—something to be achieved. Yet when forgiveness is performed prematurely, it can bypass necessary emotional processes, leaving wounds unacknowledged and unintegrated.

This tension is echoed in Saad Qureshi's *Gates of Paradise*, where ornamental structures—drawing on symbols from multiple religious traditions—can be opened or closed. The work suggests both the promise and the ambivalence of forgiveness as an ideal. It can offer access to something expansive, but it can also become a mechanism of closure—imposing resolution where there is none. Forgiveness, in this sense, is not inherently liberating; it depends on how and when it is approached. An important distinction emerges here: forgiveness does not require reconciliation. One may forgive and still choose not to restore a relationship. What is relinquished is not the recognition of injustice, but the internal fixation on revenge. Boundaries remain not only intact but essential.

At the same time, it may be necessary to consider what could be called “non-forgiveness” as a legitimate position. In situations where harm is neither acknowledged nor repaired, individuals may find ways to live without forgiving, while also not being consumed by hatred. It is possible to carry anger without letting it define one's entire orientation toward the world. There is, perhaps, a form of integrity in this stance.

Ultimately, forgiveness is less an endpoint than a movement—a gradual shift in one's relationship to memory, to emotion, and to others. It requires time and often unfolds unevenly. What the works in *Living / Forgiving / Remembering* reveal is not a single path, but a spectrum of human responses to injury and loss. What remains, across these differences, is a sense of the human capacity to endure. To witness individuals who have lived through extreme violence and yet continue to engage with life—sometimes even with openness toward others—is to encounter a form of resilience that resists easy explanation. It is here that art does something essential: it does not prescribe forgiveness, but it allows us to imagine the conditions under which it might become possible.

Falling Apart Together by Johnny Herbert

There is something strange about contemporary global capitalism. It appears to be undermining the very conditions that allow it to continue. What emerges is not simply crisis, but a more diffuse atmosphere: a growing sense of deflation, of exhaustion, of something like inagency.

This is not the same as passivity. Passivity suggests a withdrawal from action. Inagency, by contrast, names a condition in which action persists, yet fails to produce meaningful effect. One continues to act, but without traction. Within this landscape, cultural production can be understood differently. Rather than imagining art as resistance or critique in any straightforward sense, it may be more useful to think of it as a practice of sufficing. A way of making do. A way of staying afloat.

In this sense, a cultural object might function as a kind of flotation device. Or a safety net. Or perhaps a form of counter-acoustics: something that dampens the noise of the world just enough to make it bearable. This perspective offers a way into a notoriously difficult question within art: abstraction.

Abstraction often produces unease. It is frequently associated with distance, generalization, or a withdrawal from the concrete world into something detached, even transcendent. Yet, as Peter Osborne reminds us, abstraction is not an invention of modern art alone. Already in the early nineteenth century, G. W. F. Hegel described modernity itself as a “culture of abstraction”: a world of abstract individuals, abstract rights, and abstract values circulating through monetary exchange.

Today, this condition has intensified. We inhabit systems that operate at levels increasingly removed from lived experience: high-frequency financial trading, algorithmic decision-making, machine learning processes that exceed human comprehension. The world is not only abstract—it is actively self-abstracting. In such a context, abstraction in art may no longer signal escape. It may instead offer a way of coping with the saturation of abstraction in everyday life.

Marianne Morild’s exhibition *Septentrionalis* can be approached through this lens. Here, abstraction does not operate as extraction—a pulling away from the world—but as separation. What we encounter are fragments: landscapes, objects, residues that appear detached from any stable ground.

The earth itself seems to have been edited out.

Forms appear as if cut loose, displaced, or digitally lifted from their original contexts. They hover, or rest uneasily, as if awaiting reassembly elsewhere. This introduces a shift in how abstraction functions. Rather than dissolving into generality, it becomes discrete—an arrangement of separated elements. As Gilles Deleuze suggests, the more precise opposite of the “concrete” is not the abstract, but the discrete: that which is divided, segmented, held apart.

From here, it is possible to push the idea further.

Separation begins to slide toward dissolution. Objects lose their coherence. What remains are traces: fragments of matter, residues of use, remnants of exchange. These are no longer commodities in any stable sense, but something like ex-commodities—things that have fallen out

of circulation, yet continue to persist. Some objects resist this process. They retain a stubborn sense of identity, as if still searching for an owner within the debris of landfills. Impulse purchases sit alongside necessary objects; the logic of consumption lingers even in decay. Around them, a muted field of greys and browns forms a kind of background atmosphere—a ground for these strange survivals.

Entropy is at work here. But entropy is not simply destruction. It is also a reorganization—a slow rearranging of matter as it moves toward indistinction. Things fall apart, but not in isolation. They fall apart together. In *Septentrionalis*, this sense of decomposition resonates with the history of still life painting. Yet the relationship is not one of continuity, but of inversion.

Seventeenth century still life—by artists such as Simone del Tintore, Balthasar van der Ast, or Jacobus Biltius—presented objects with extraordinary care and precision. These works often emerged within contexts of wealth, colonial expansion, and global trade. Exotic goods, transported across vast distances, were arranged in carefully composed scenes that suggested both abundance and control. As John Berger observes, the drama of the still life lies in proximity: in how objects are brought together, how they coexist within a protected space. Still lifes are, in this sense, images of residence—of things that, despite their fragility, appear to belong together.

Yet this apparent stability carries another history. As Norman Bryson notes, many of the objects depicted in Dutch still-life painting were not locally sourced but imported, cultivated, or extracted through complex global networks. The space of the still life, contained and intimate, is underwritten by vast distances and systems of exchange.

The genre thus emerges alongside early forms of transnational capitalism. The same structures that enabled the circulation of goods also reduced human beings to objects within systems of exploitation. There is an unsettling reversal at play: as people are objectified within economic systems, objects in painting are rendered with an almost human attention. The very term “still life” carries this tension. In French and Italian—*nature morte*, *natura morta*—it translates as “dead nature.” The genre hovers between animation and lifelessness, presence and absence.

Perhaps, then, still life is not only a celebration of material culture, but also a quiet memorial. A record of extraction, displacement, and the uneven distribution of life and value.

Morild’s work enters this history obliquely. The objects we encounter are not trophies of abundance, but remnants. They do not affirm possession; they resist it. Rather than stabilising a world, they point to its fragmentation. In this way, *Septentrionalis* reopens the question of still life as a site of social tension. What does it mean to gather objects today? What kinds of relations do they carry? And what forms of life—or afterlife—do they suggest?

If earlier still life asked how things come together, Morild’s work asks how they come apart—and what forms of collectivity might persist within that disintegration.

A quiet, uneasy collectivity.

Not held together by order or ownership, but by proximity, by residue, by shared entropy.

Falling apart, together.

Trauma and Position by Johnny Herbert

In approaching the works of Marcelo Brodsky and Joy, presented here at Kunsthall 3,14, I would like to offer a set of reflections on trauma—its impersonal intimacy, its conceptual slipperiness—and to place these alongside Walter Benjamin’s call to consider the “position” of the cultural producer within the conditions of production.

To begin, I turn to a personal image.

Some years ago, I encountered a photograph of my grandmother. Her head was shaved. The image was taken during her internment in one of Stalin’s gulags during the Second World War. While she was alive, it was almost impossible to get her to speak about that time. The camps, known for their brutality, remained largely unspoken—sealed off, as if language itself could not withstand them. It is strange to hold this knowledge: that my small Polish grandmother endured years of forced labour in the north of the Soviet Union. Now, having become a parent myself, and through stories my mother has shared, this knowledge has begun to shift. It no longer sits as distant history. It reverberates.

I have come to sense that the trauma of those years does not belong solely to the past. It moves, obliquely, through generations. It shapes relations, gestures, silences. My grandmother, my mother, and I have each, in different ways, navigated its aftereffects—caring for it, avoiding it, circling around it. A significant amount of energy has been spent minding these experiences, in the double sense of attending to them and steering clear of them.

There are many such stories. Some are known; others remain hidden. Yet trauma, in this sense, is not only an event. It is also a condition—a diffuse, often ungraspable presence that exceeds documentation. What we call “the record,” including documentation, is always partial. Trauma resists full inscription. It flickers at the edges of what can be said.

It may be more useful, then, to think of trauma not only in terms of events that occurred, or narratives that recount them, but as something like an impersonal rhythm. A force that moves through individuals without belonging entirely to any one of them. A rhythm that must be traced again and again—what psychoanalysis terms “working-through.”

This rhythm is experienced in contradictory ways. It can feel distant, almost abstract. Yet it is also deeply intimate, registering in gestures, in hesitations, in the clearing of a throat, in a silence that lingers too long. Language is only one of its carriers. In this light, the works of Brodsky and Joy speak not only of specific historical traumas, but of a shared condition: a contemporary atmosphere of mutual, often indirect traumatising. Here, experience is not something one possesses. It is something that possesses us.

We are overtaken by it.

This challenges the notion of testimony as a straightforward transmission of “what happened.” As Lauren Berlant suggests in her essay *Trauma and Ineloquence*, the testimonial form does not

simply communicate experience—it also produces effects. It condenses history into symptoms, into forms that require activation by those who encounter them. To engage with trauma, then, is not only to listen, but to risk being affected. It requires a willingness to hold open a space for return—for repetition, for instability, for the shifting nature of what is being addressed.

Trauma operates at multiple levels. It is both specific—tied to events—and diffuse, shaping the broader conditions in which we live. It is possible, therefore, to think of trauma not only as something that marks individuals or groups, but as a structural condition of the present. This is not to flatten differences or deny the uneven distribution of suffering. Rather, it is to insist that even positions of relative privilege are not outside trauma but are themselves implicated in its structures. Another word for this terrain might be class.

At this point, Benjamin's notion of "position" becomes crucial.

In his essay *The Author as Producer*, Benjamin argues that the political significance of a work lies not in its declared intentions but in its position within the relations of production. This involves examining not only what a work says, but how it is made—its techniques, its material conditions, and its relation to broader systems of labour and power. Marx distinguishes between the "relations of production" and the "forces of production": the former concerning labour processes and exploitation, the latter machinery and productivity. Benjamin's intervention is to insist that cultural production must be understood within this dynamic—its techniques inseparable from the structures that enable and constrain them.

This may appear as a modest, even technical proposition. Yet it carries a deeper implication. Cultural works do not simply represent the world; they participate in it. They trace connections between past and present, often unintentionally, carrying forward unresolved tensions and traumas.

As Susan Buck-Morss notes, Benjamin understood the relationship between material reality and aesthetic expression as one of mutual demystification. Material history is needed to interpret artworks, preventing them from becoming mere ideological ornaments. At the same time, art offers a critical language through which history itself can be deciphered—its elements reconfigured in relation to the present. In this sense, every work carries a kind of critical iconography. A way of seeing that is shaped not only by imagination, but by technique, by history, and by the reverberations of trauma.

The works presented at Kunsthall 3,14 operate within this field. They do not simply narrate trauma, nor do they resolve it. Instead, they suspend it—holding it in a state of tension. What emerges is not clarity, but a space in which the viewer is asked to encounter something that resists full articulation.

A space shaped as much by what cannot be said as by what is shown.

Paranoia's Afterlives by Johnny Herbert

What is the afterlife of paranoia?

More specifically, what remains—psychologically, materially—after the paranoid structures of a regime have receded? What lingers in the wake of the architecture of suspicion that shaped Lithuania, and to which Indrė Šerpytytė's work returns? And how might one approach such remnants without reproducing the very logic of paranoia itself?

One point of departure is to recognise that paranoia is not contained. It spreads. It is, in a sense, contagious. Sigmund Freud's reading of the judge Daniel Paul Schreber—perhaps the most famous case of paranoia in psychoanalytic literature—reveals this dynamic. Freud, while attempting to analyze Schreber's elaborate delusional system, finds himself partially drawn into it. His own scientific distance begins to blur with the internal coherence of Schreber's reasoning.

As theorist Cyndy Hendershot notes, paranoia often seduces through its promise of total explanation. It mirrors a model of knowledge shaped by earlier scientific paradigms—particularly those influenced by Newtonian physics—where the world appears as a closed, knowable system governed by universal laws. Within such frameworks, everything can, in principle, be accounted for. Yet contemporary scientific thought has shifted. As Isabelle Stengers and Ilya Prigogine have argued, modern science increasingly acknowledges randomness, complexity, and irreversibility as fundamental conditions rather than anomalies. These ideas have not fully permeated common understanding, and in this gap, new forms of speculative reasoning emerge—new fantasies, new systems of explanation.

Paranoia, in this sense, evolves.

If earlier forms were sustained by grand, totalizing narratives, we might now be dealing with something closer to a postmodern paranoia—less anchored in a singular system, more diffuse, more fragmented, yet no less compelling. A paranoia without a center, but still structured by suspicion. At the same time, it would be too simple to dismiss paranoia as merely pathological. Certain strands of psychoanalytic thought suggest that paranoia exists on a spectrum with rationality. The construction of elaborate explanatory systems—however persecutory—can offer coherence, a sense of order, a way of making meaning in an otherwise unstable world.

From this perspective, the boundary between paranoia and critique becomes less clear.

Philosophy, criticism, even the interpretation of artworks, operate through the production of frameworks that organise and stabilise meaning. The difference lies less in the structure of thought than in its social validation. As Sianne Ngai observes, what is considered legitimate knowledge and what is dismissed as paranoia often depends on who is speaking. Paranoia, when articulated by marginalised subjects, is frequently disqualified as irrational; when articulated by dominant voices, it may be recognised as theory.

This raises a difficult question: to what extent does critical thought itself rely on forms of abstraction and speculation that resemble paranoid reasoning? Perhaps abstraction is not the opposite of paranoia, but one of its conditions. A space where imagination and system-building intersect. A space in which gaps, contradictions, and traumas are smoothed over in order to sustain a coherent sense of reality—whether in political systems, belief structures, or intellectual frameworks.

Paranoia, then, is not external to knowledge. It is entangled with it. Paranoid systems often take monumental form. They are built—materialised—in architecture, institutions, infrastructures designed to regulate behaviour, secure control, and ward off uncertainty.

In Lithuania, buildings once served precisely this function. They were instruments of ideological power, shaping perception and enforcing order. Today, the architecture of control has shifted. As Shoshana Zuboff has argued, contemporary forms of power operate increasingly through what she terms “surveillance capitalism”: systems that anticipate, monitor, and influence behaviour through data extraction. These systems are less visible, more diffuse, yet no less pervasive.

But, as Rob Lucas points out, such systems rely on representation. Data is never neutral; it is always formatted, translated, rendered into structures that can be processed and circulated. Representation becomes a site of power.

It is here that Šerpytytė’s work becomes particularly resonant.

Her practice involves repeated acts of mediation: archival photographs, annotated notebooks, wooden models, photographs of models. Each stage introduces a shift, a translation, a re-framing. The buildings are not presented directly, but passed through layers of representation, as if each iteration might reveal something that remains otherwise inaccessible. Something unsaid.

This process can be understood as a form of attentive reconstruction. Not an attempt to restore a lost totality, but to engage with what persists in fragments. The work does not claim to resolve the past. Instead, it lingers with it, circling around its residues. In this sense, mediation itself becomes a method—a way of approaching the afterlife of paranoia without collapsing into it.

At the same time, this layered approach evokes another logic: that of surveillance. The careful cataloguing, the accumulation of representations, the attempt to assemble a comprehensive view—all suggest a desire to observe, to contain, to make legible.

Kunsthall 3,14’s ongoing engagement with themes of surveillance resonates here. Transposed into the present, Šerpytytė’s work can be seen as reflecting not only on historical regimes of control, but on contemporary modes of watching and being watched.

What happens when the archive becomes a form of vigilance?

Recent debates within critical theory have begun to question the dominance of suspicion as a mode of analysis. Paranoia, in this context, is seen as a habitual stance—one that seeks to expose, to demystify, to reveal hidden structures of power. While this approach has been politically vital, it also risks reducing its objects to symptoms, fixing them within predetermined frameworks.

The object becomes known in advance. Its complexity flattened.

In response, alternative modes of engagement have been proposed. Drawing on psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, one might think in terms of an anti-paranoid approach—one that does not seek to master or resolve, but to remain with ambiguity, with ambivalence, with the difficulty of not knowing.

Applied to Šerpytytė's work, this suggests a different kind of encounter. Rather than interpreting the buildings as symbols to be decoded, or as evidence within a broader theoretical system, we might approach them as sites of tension—holding together multiple temporalities, multiple affects, multiple unresolved histories. Not as answers, but as questions that persist.

What remains, then, is not the paranoia of the past as such, but its afterlife: a set of conditions, sensitivities, and forms of attention that continue to shape how we see, how we know, and how we relate to what has been.

Paranoia does not simply end.

It changes form.

It lingers—in structures, in images, in methods of looking.

And perhaps also, quietly, in us.

Quarries of Wandering Form

Judy Price / Quarries of Wandering Form

April 2017

Interview by Christiane Monarchi

Judy Price is a lens-based artist whose exhibition at London's Mosaic Rooms presents a complex body of work focused on Palestine. Two multi-screen installations and a photographic work reflect, in different ways, on Palestine's colonial past and the current lived experience of occupation. The exhibition's subject is especially timely. In 2017, one hundred years had passed since the Balfour Declaration and the beginning of British colonial policy in Palestine, a period that culminated in the mass displacement of the Palestinian people.

Price's exhibition includes the multi-screen audio-visual installation *Within This Narrow Strip of Land*, drawing on archival films from London's Imperial War Museum documenting the British Mandate period in Palestine (1917–1948), and *Quarries of Wandering Form*, which explores the stone quarrying industry in the occupied West Bank. Composed of film and photographic work, *White Oil* was installed as a double-screen work for the first time. Made over a period of three years, the film offers a subtle examination of the occupation and its workings, in which much of the quarried material is expropriated by Israeli authorities, used to build settlements, and exported as Israeli stone.

Below, Christiane Monarchi speaks with Judy Price about *White Oil*, which was shown at Mosaic Rooms for the duration of the exhibition. The work was also presented in Bergen, Norway, at Kunsthall 3,14 until 2 June 2017.

CM:

I confess that, as the daughter of a geologist, I look at the quarries in *White Oil* with awe, almost as if looking at a cross-section of geological time in abstract striations laid bare. In your compelling film, the viewer is taken gently through layers of understanding of these particular quarries, where economic and social relationships enmesh the local residents who depend on the continual harvesting of rock. My first question is: what led you to these quarries as a point of departure for your research and enquiry?

JP:

There were a number of things that led to this research. I had previously made another body of work, *Within This Narrow Strip of Land* (2008), which used archival footage from the British Mandate in Palestine alongside footage shot on the ground in both Israel and Palestine, so I had already spent some time in the region.

Then, in 2009, I set out in search of some photographs that Franz Kafka had either taken or commissioned as evidence of the conditions in quarries in former Czechoslovakia in 1911. As part of his work for an insurance company, investigating accidents in these quarries, Kafka later wrote about the images as landscapes of ruin and devastation. The photographs were rumoured to be in private collections in Jerusalem, and I was initially interested in how such images might be read within the context of Israel and Palestine through their displacement.

Although I never found the photographs, what I did discover, while teaching at the International Academy of Art in Palestine and walking through the craggy hills of the West Bank with the Palestinian walking group Sha-shat, was that limestone quarrying is a major industry there. My focus shifted from Kafka's photographs to the present-day quarries in Palestine.

With over 350 quarries in the West Bank, it became absolutely necessary that these vast and multiple spaces of absence take centre stage, as they epitomised so many aspects of a geography and geology of disaster resulting from ethnocide, colonialism, and globalisation.

CM:

I've been interested in how you got to know the people in your work, since the gentle unfolding of narrative from their histories adds both veracity and poetry to the imagery. You mention "intersubjective relations" as an important part of your practice. Could you say a little more about that?

JP:

In the first two years, my time was spent predominantly meeting people from different social groups and organisations in Palestine who were connected to, or invested in, the quarries, with filming only beginning two years later. In that sense, my research drew on local and consensual knowledge, engaging with the particularities of both the quarries and the West Bank, while situating the work within collective interaction.

Encounters in the landscape, listening, and attending to workers' daily lives without imposing an already formed creative vision were the ways I began to understand the complexities of the quarries and the larger narratives of colonialism, land expropriation, and mobility. There had been very little textual or visual work done specifically on the quarries, so this was really the only way I could generate knowledge about the subject.

The quarries are situated around Hebron in the south of the West Bank, Nablus and Jam'een in the north, and around Ramallah and the periphery of Jerusalem. They form one of the main industries in the region. It is important to note that many of the quarries are in what is known as Area C. The West Bank is divided into Areas A, B, and C, each controlled in different ways by Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Area C is under Israeli security and administrative control and makes up around 70 percent of the West Bank, deeply affecting the extent to which Palestinians are able to use space. The quarries are poorly regulated and often located very close to residential areas, where a high concentration of dust and particles can be found. In recent years, asthma rates have risen in mining environments, particularly among children.

Ramzi Safid, one of the main narrators of the film, was someone I first met when I visited him at the quarry in Rafat, near Ramallah, in 2009. A close friend of mine, the Palestinian filmmaker and cinematographer Issa Freij, took me there. It was a Friday afternoon, and Ramzi invited us for coffee in the portacabin where he stayed while working night shifts as a security guard. His day job was as a plumber for the municipality.

Ramzi is an articulate, intelligent man and a brilliant storyteller with deep knowledge of the quarrying industry. He began telling us about the quarries, and it was moving and upsetting, since neither Issa nor I, at that point, knew the extent of the industry's impact on the region, or what I

came to understand as one of the invisible sides of the occupation. I then began visiting Ramzi regularly, often on my own, since his English is very good. At first, we simply talked, and I recorded our conversations. We spent time together and shared life stories. His family comes from a small village where Ben Gurion Airport now stands.

Arrangements to meet were usually open. Ramzi would tell me which evenings he was working, and I would visit after filming elsewhere or after teaching. It's interesting to think about Ramzi's openness to me as a woman in relation to the history of the Palestinian liberation movements, in which he was involved during the 1980s and 1990s, and to the role of Palestinian women within those movements. I like to think that his openness may partly have had to do with that historical background.

Ramzi showed me new maps, both literally and metaphorically, in relation to the political, historical, and economic implications of the quarries. What mattered was that I first listened and learned about life under occupation and life in the quarries. In many ways, listening created for him a needed space in which to speak and vent frustration, anger, disappointment, and anguish. It also required a degree of intersubjective vulnerability.

Sometimes he took a pedagogical stance in our conversations, fully aware that he was educating me about the violence of the occupation in everyday Palestinian life. This changed as he got to know me and realised that we shared similar political leanings, not only regarding the occupation, but also regarding the wider world and the capitalist global economy.

Where we differed was in how we grappled with the geopolitical and historical narratives imposed on the Israel/Palestine conflict, and in our analyses of Jewish-Israeli identities. Our dialogue became a matter of collaboratively generated insights, revealing the multiple perspectives and power relations that permeate life under occupation.[1]

In the film, his stories reflect on changing human values and on how communities have been divided as a result of the occupation.

I met the Alshalaldaha brothers and their associates at a neighbouring quarry near Birzeit, owned by a wealthy Palestinian entrepreneur with many quarries and a stone-cutting factory, who willingly sells to Israel. His business is vast, and his treatment of employees is very poor, both in terms of wages and conditions. Sadly, neoliberalism leaves nowhere untouched, and in Palestine its effects, coupled with occupation, make life in the West Bank extremely difficult for most people.

There is a union attempting to bring in regulations for wages and working conditions, but so far it has not been successful, for reasons too extensive to expand on here.

At the time of filming, the brothers rented land in order to excavate stone. They came from a small village near Hebron and spent five nights a week sleeping in a metal shipping container in the quarry, because the journey home from Birzeit to Hebron, through Jerusalem, could take more than three hours due to checkpoints and the Separation Wall.

Unlike Ramzi, who belongs to an older generation, the Alshalaldaha brothers and their associates do not speak English, so one of my students at the time, the artist and filmmaker Khaled Jarrar, accompanied me as translator and mediator. In the film, I am never directly addressed by the brothers, only referred to, which relates to the issue of language and to the fact that my time with them was mediated.

We spent five nights with them over a period of four weeks, bringing meat for the *zarb*, a traditional meal cooked in a stone-and-mud oven, and spending five or six hours at a time together. It was a wonderful experience, full of laughter and warmth. Khaled and the brothers knew what my concerns and interests were regarding the quarries and life under occupation, so many of our conversations centred on those themes, though they often moved elsewhere, which was equally important.

When I returned to London, I spent more than a year translating the recordings with a Palestinian friend, Alaa Owaineh, and it was through this process that I scripted the film. There were so many insights and references that I could never have anticipated, and that would never have surfaced in a straightforward interview setting. So, this lengthy way of working was vital.

There is also a great deal of performing for the camera by the brothers, because from the outset they knew the film would be shown in a Western context. One of my favourite scenes is when they play with the politics of representation and one brother is framed to represent one or another of Palestine's divided political and religious factions, Fatah versus Hamas, as a way of provoking Western representations of Palestine. It is done in a playful way, ending with a nod to the "Guevara bunch".

As you can tell, intersubjective relationships are central to my practice. The work develops through embodied and situated listening and exchange. Dialogical aesthetics, a term Grant Kester borrows from Mikhail Bakhtin and Paulo Freire, helps articulate what is at stake here. Central to such work is a focus on the particularities of a specific place or social group, rather than on uncovering a universal experience. It is a provisionally binding practice, generated by local consensual knowledge and situated within collective interaction.

Another important aspect is that relationships between artists and participants are extended over time, allowing for what Kester calls "a decentering, a movement outside self through dialogue". In that sense, it is the artist's commitment to dialogue, no matter how self-reflexive, that creates shared systems of meaning in which participants speak, listen, and respond. Discourse becomes dialogical rather than fixed or hierarchical.

This also touches on questions of identity formation. Identity is shaped through encounters with the world and with others. In dialogical aesthetics, the making of art is defined by openness, listening, and a willingness to accept dependence and intersubjective vulnerability in relation to the viewer or collaborator.

We also need to be aware of the extent to which those with more or less cultural capital are able to speak and be heard, and of the different cultural and social frameworks from which different voices speak, if we hope to open up real exchange through listening. Easier said than done, of course, but I think this is often the challenge for artists whose practice involves field research.

This kind of work requires negotiating the space and lives of others, and therefore recognising and appreciating the generosity of participants who grant access to their intimate and personal worlds. That was certainly the case in making *White Oil*, though it was very different from my earlier work in Palestine, the nine-screen installation *Within This Narrow Strip of Land*, which was also included in the exhibition *Still*.

For artists working in contested environments like me, it is not about legitimising art by co-opting the social sphere, but about becoming actively engaged with issues and thinking through what art can bring to collective struggles. In the case of *White Oil*, that meant that an experimental,

embodied practice was essential in encountering the landscape of the West Bank and its quarries, where openness to contingency and chance formed one of the work's main methodologies.

To refer to Hal Foster's writing on the ethnographic turn, the political site of transformation is not posited elsewhere, in the repressed other, the Palestinian quarry worker, but in my embodied experience as filmmaker, articulated through the film itself and through a practice that I hope produces a sense of veracity rather than adhering to conventional documentary or realist models of representation. Or, to use Patty Lather's words, it is a place "where we do what we can while leaving a place for what we cannot envision to emerge".[2]

CM:

Turning to the visual language of your film, I'm struck by the many explorations of duration, of slow time, and of repetitive tasks in the lives of the quarry and its workers. Could you say a bit about those choices in your filmmaking process and aesthetics?

JP:

The static frame, the highly composed images, and their duration are partly a legacy of my background in photography. Each image is a tableau that can be read not only within the timeline of the film, but as an image in itself, in which different dynamics and forces are brought to bear on the landscape I am working with.

In many ways, the film is like a sequence of moving photographs. This relationship between stillness and movement has always been central to my practice. I use the precision of photography together with a pensive slowness in order to reduce the subjectivity of the image, creating a kind of distanciation that allows critical reflection.

Framing in this way distils the different relations within the landscape, drawing out time rather than movement. Very little happens in terms of action, but the observation of detail and of relations within the image is extremely important.

The film theorist André Bazin writes about how this kind of filming opens up time for thought and affect in the viewer, requiring a more active mental engagement in making meaning. In that sense, the images in *White Oil* are not strictly ethnographic, but mobilise a different visual language, one that can also be considered in relation to photography and what the anthropologist Christopher Pinney calls its "transcriptional excess" and "incapacity to fix any image".

The durational moving image intensifies this. Its time-image allows a shadow, the flutter of a plastic bag, or a sound to mark contingency within the frame. In the opening sequence of *White Oil*, for example, a single shot lasts four minutes and shows a piece of stone being compressed, cracking, and bursting. I filmed this in a laboratory, and the shot acts as a metaphor, or perhaps a condensation, of the entire film.

It also stands apart from the rest of the film, functioning as a prologue. It is followed by the digital sound of the *azan*, the Muslim call to prayer, which animates the title *WHITE OIL* as a kind of performative text. Then comes another long, wide-angle shot of a quarry in the early morning, showing a desolate landscape with houses and industrial buildings in half-light. A discarded piece

of paper falls like a feather from the edge of the quarry into the cavernous space and out of frame, animating the scene.

Ramzi's voice then fills the image, his vocal cords thickened and dried out by dust and chain smoking:

This is not a garden but it's calm. We are not living in the lights, we are in the darkness, always. We got used to this life... the first two days were very difficult... and then one gets used to it. It's exactly how when you enter a cell for the first time... It's like having a seizure, but then you adapt. That's the beauty of the human mind... things that were unimaginable you bear, you adapt.

Framing also abstracts and enlarges by lifting something out of the background so that we can look more closely. It distills and connects things that might otherwise be overlooked. In *White Oil*, abstraction delineates scale, borders, and boundaries, revealing the precariousness of the landscape and imbuing the image with politics.

This happens in the way people are framed in relation to the landscape, helping register the scale of the quarries, their borders, their transitions, and their proximity to residential areas. The framing is often very tight, with the landscape leaking in and out of the shot, as a way of describing a peripheral landscape: the grass, flowers, and olive trees that are about to be consumed by the insatiable appetite of quarrying machines.

What remains outside the frame is as important as what is visible. It suggests greater depth, more complex narratives, other tragedies, a larger environmental disaster, and a deeper humanity that cannot be fully represented. It points to the limits of both film and photography.

The visual ethnographer Anna Grimshaw speaks about the partiality of vision: what we see is inseparable from how we see. Our viewpoint is shaped by who we are, by the social and cultural landscapes that formed us, and by the systems that inform our gaze, systems from which we are never entirely separable.

One example in *White Oil* is the long, durational image of a makeshift stone-cutting factory perched on a hill overlooking the West Bank, followed by an image of a settlement. In my PhD thesis, I write about this image as being both actual and virtual: it evokes a landscape being gradually dismantled, a premonition of what lies ahead as well as a record of what is already happening.

Perhaps because of my own Jewish background, the constructivist lines in the image recall Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin. His architecture has come to represent both the physical and psychological architecture of Jewish history, housing memory and trauma. But here, in the context of Palestine, the architecture of those histories imposes itself violently on the landscape of the West Bank, cutting through another people's history and making it legible only through Zionist ideology.

The following image of a settlement, with its uniform houses and red-tiled roofs, is meant to set Jewish settlements in the territories apart from Palestinian houses by literally seizing locality. As Eyal Weizman has written in *Hollow Land*, during the 1980s the Israeli military recommended red-tiled roofs as part of settlement planning so that Jewish houses could be distinguished in the landscape from Palestinian houses, for "security reasons" and to help settlers orient themselves.

Coming back to the quarries, the stone of the West Bank is also tied to the history and visual language of occupation through bylaws. In 1918, during the British Mandate, a law was introduced requiring buildings in Jerusalem to be made of local limestone. This regulation was later extended by Israel in 1967, and the stone was used to convey emotional messages around the sacred city and the idea of homeland. The bylaw also helped secure the visual unification of Jerusalem through military outposts in the West Bank, which later became the settlements we see today.

As for the repetitive tasks in the quarries and the lives of workers, time is again crucial. It intensifies the workers' predicament. Palestinians are not permitted by Israel to use explosives in quarrying, so it takes much longer to extract stone and earn a living than it does elsewhere, where explosives are standard practice.

Time in the image also alludes to the waiting and stasis that shape Palestinian life, and to the sense that nothing changes. This is important in relation to the strata of stone we see in the quarries, which recall deep geological time. What does this human obsession with place and time mean, in the midst of a far larger environmental catastrophe that we all face? And what does it mean that borders, ownership, and the nation-state continue to be so obsessively defended?

In Israel and Palestine, the battle is literally over time, with the conviction that returning after two thousand years gives one people the right to displace another. Jewish archaeologists and architects have sought Jewish history above and below ground in order to symbolise presence in the landscape and define Israeliness as a native local culture, casting Palestinians as latecomers.

When I visited and lived in Israel in the 1980s and 1990s, I was struck by how consistently one's attention was directed toward the Old Testament and ancient Jewish history, in the landscape and in almost every visual or textual document, with very little or no mention of Palestinian history. In many ways this is perhaps not surprising, given the volatile foundations of the state.

However, most Jews in Israel at that time came from the diaspora and were either Ashkenazi Jews, from Northern Europe, which is my own family background, or Sephardic Jews, from Spain and the Middle East. Their histories were embedded in European, Spanish, or Middle Eastern cultures. In Israel, the complexity of these identities was repressed in the early period in order to unify all Jews under a Hebraic identity and install a strong national consciousness rooted in biblical history.

Under Israeli sovereignty, the lack of respect for other histories and cultures is tragic, especially in light of Jewish history itself and the systematic erasure of Jewish life and culture through pogroms and the Holocaust.

Returning to *White Oil*, another crucial concern was how the viewer is drawn into the film and becomes a referent within it. I did not want to make a film in which the spectator remained merely passive.

This is especially evident in the beginning of the single-screen film featuring the Alshalaldaha brothers, when we hear, but do not see, the brothers muttering and calling out into the velvety blue abyss of the scene, before soldiers are revealed in the following image. Built through a single durational landscape shot at sunset, with a settlement in the distance and a valley below, the surveying of this space establishes several dynamics.

The viewer is effectively asked: who watches the watchers? This produces what Elizabeth Cowie describes as the uncanniness of looking back. The spectator becomes the referent and is made uneasy by the ambiguity of the gaze: who is being searched for, by whom, and from where?

Foucault writes of surveillance not as a specific look at a specific time by a visible gaze or camera, but as a generalisable condition: one could be watched at any time, in any place, from any direction. This can become internalised, so that one becomes one's own surveyor.

That scene in *White Oil* establishes precisely such a sense of permanent surveillance, as if danger might exist behind any rock. The time of the shot is not specific, but the context created by the preceding sequences, and unfolded through the dialogue and images that follow, redistributes the image into other circuits of meaning, exposing the military and controlling architecture of that space.

As we try to orient ourselves in the darkened landscape by listening for sounds that belong to it, the silence itself becomes a disturbance, a sign of trouble.

Because the script is fragmentary, alluding to but only partially naming the experience of occupation and the conditions of the quarries, the viewer is left with many questions. What I hope is that *White Oil* is resonant enough to arouse an embodied emotional response through image and sound, while also operating intellectually, so that viewers become more engaged and begin asking more of what they see and hear.

CM:

Thank you for your time, Judy, and for sharing these insights into your work.

Notes

[1] Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, p. 95.

[2] Patty Lather, "Against Empathy, Voice and Authenticity", p. 21.

Det finnes ingen genetisk determinisme

Den biografiske bakgrunnen bidrar til en eksistensiell nerve i Heather Dewey-Hagborg og Chelsea E. Mannings undersøkelse av bioteknologiens muligheter og begrensninger.

Av Kristoffer Jul-Larsen

21.08.18

Kunst Kritikk

Men då sa Jonatan att det fanns saker som man måste göra, även om det var farligt.

«Varför då», undrade jag.

«Annars är man ingen människa utan bara en liten lort», sa Jonatan.

– Astrid Lindgren, *Bröderna Lejonhjärta*, 1973

30 livaktige, men uvirkelige ansikter uten kropp, en bukett av kjønn og etnisiteter, svever foran oss i øyehøyde i gallerirommets ellers tomme sal. Den skarpe, hakkete kanten rundt hvert ansikt gjør at de ligner et besynderlig Photoshop-prosjekt i full størrelse og tre dimensjoner.

Ved nærmere ettersyn ser en at ansiktene virkelig er digitale. De bærer dataspillfigurens flate fylde: tredimensjonale til et punkt, flate der teknologien ikke strekker til, for eksempel i gjengivelsen av øyets krumning og lys. Går en nært, kan en gjenkjenne 3D-modellens kartlignende kotesystem, som brukes for å skape de menneskelige konturene.

Nettopp teknologiens og vitenskapens nødvendige forenklinger og antakelser er et hovedpoeng her.

De 3D-printede ansiktene er alle forskjellige, vitenskapelig sett mulige tolkninger av aktivisten og varsleren Chelsea E. Mannings DNA, skapt av den amerikanske kunstneren Heather Dewey-Hagborg. Hun har de siste 17 årene jobbet i grenselandet mellom kunst, teknologi og naturvitenskap, særlig med spørsmål knyttet til IT og genetikk, og har brukt den samme teknologien tidligere i et prosjekt hvor hun samlet inn ukjente menneskers DNA fra tyggisklyser og lignende, og skapte 3D-printede portretter av opphavspersonene ved hjelp av teknologi som blant andre amerikansk politi benytter for å lage tegninger av mistenkte.

Hun fikk enorm respons, og verket ble sågar stilt ut under elitekonferansen World Economic Forum.

Så da det amerikanske fengselsvesenet nedla fotoforbud for Manning, som satt fengslet fra 2010 til 2017 for å ha lekket nesten 750 000 hemmeligstemplede militære dokumenter, fikk en redaktør i *Paper Magazine* en lys idé og satte Dewey-Hagborg på saken.

Der Dewey-Hagborg i tyggis-prosjektet ville sette søkelys på hvor mye informasjon vi etterlater oss uten å være klar over eller kunne hindre det, og hvor sårbare vi er overfor såkalt genetisk overvåking, så går hun og Manning her i motsatt retning.

Det umiddelbare resultatet av portrettjobben var en todelt avbildning: én der algoritmen leste DNA-sekvensen uten å legge vekt på kjønn i det hele tatt, og en versjon der DNA-et ble lest som om det kom fra en kvinne. Slik understreket kunstneren sin solidaritet med Mannings valg om å undergå en kjønnskifteoperasjon i fengsel.

Denne presentasjonen på Kunsthall 3.14 i Bergen, med hele 30 forskjellige lesninger av DNA-sekvensen, slår poenget fast med store bokstaver: Det finnes ingen genetisk determinisme. Gjennom DNA-analyse kan man si en hel masse om et menneskes egenskaper, dets slektskap og så videre, men alltid innenfor et sannsynlighetsspekter, ikke med full sikkerhet.

Er *Probably Chelsea, A Becoming Resemblance* i første rekke et ideologisk og didaktisk identitetspolitisk utspill, som vanlig ment for å utvide spillerommet for mennesker som ikke faller innenfor normen? Det er i alle fall delvis det.

Men Chelsea Mannings unike biografi gjør henne til en fantastisk modell. Hennes modige beslutning om å avsløre alle de overgrepene hun hadde kjennskap til i den amerikanske hæren, og viljen til å realisere idéen hun hadde om seg selv som kvinne, skaper en eksistensiell nerve i et prosjekt som handler om mulige versjoner av oss selv.

Selv om de 30 ansiktene er nokså uttrykksløse, er det tydelig at hver av dem rommer svært ulike fortellinger. Det er opp til oss selv å bestemme om vi er løvehjarter eller lorter. Det visste Astrid Lindgren, og det vet Chelsea Manning.