

Structure From Rhythm

Kiyoshi Yamamoto spoke with Johnny Herbert about poetry and refuge in relation to his work showing at Kunsthall 3,14.

J.H.: Thinking of poetry as a kind of refuge—a notion meaningful for many people—what led you to think of the inverse: a place of refuge as a kind of poetry/poetics?

K.Y.: Poetry has two aspects: the writer and the receiver of the poetry. But to whom do we write poetry? Writers who want to escape from something and find themselves with some autonomy, a free place; or receivers (readers or listeners) that have to struggle to get into this open place but sometimes find themselves in a trap, feeling like they are misunderstanding or outside of what they are encountering. I want to see poetry from all angles and sides. I found out that some Bedouin communities, like those in Palestine, make short poems that become songs after a number of repetitions. This reminds me of Sámi *joik*. I wonder if my textile work can also be poetry?

J.H.: Your last thought reminds me of something I read about the quilters of Gee's Bend in Alabama in which singing and quilting began share terms; the two were inseparable not only in terms of activity but also conceptually—quilted songs, sung quilts. However, aside from farming and childrearing, as I understand it, the women quilters of Gee's Bend often considered their primary activity to be music, quilting being a kind of para-praxis (albeit a practice born of necessity).

K.Y.: Very interesting that you relate my project to the Alabama quilters. It is inspiring work. I'm also reminded of the Brazilian "clothes-washer singer", a recent Brazilian folk music started by a group of women workers who wash clothes for a living in a river in Minas Gerais in central Brazil. The songs portray the washerwomen's daily life—their work, struggles, and activity that come from the relation between Indian, black, and Portuguese people during colonial times. Those songs achieved international fame, but the real context has been overlooked and is still forgotten.

J.H.: Are you thinking of poetry here as a globally coherent form—e.g. a specific kind of relation to language—or are you most interested in Bedouin socio-political and cultural contexts?

K.Y.: I'm using the Bedouin idea of poetry as a base for this project, but intend to think of poetry globally; poetry connects many different cultural backgrounds. As an example of a poet I find engaging: after visiting Palestine, I became very interested in Arabic literature which led to me discovering Mahmoud Darwish's *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?* a book that has perhaps become one of my favourites in recent years. I was captivated by the style of his poetry, the paradox of something both illustrative and abstract or allusive. The work of Darwish takes us to another place. This place is a

homeland, a lover, or just a matter of feeling pain. Darwish's family had to exile from the Nakba [the expulsion and fleeing of approx. 700,000 Palestinian Arabs from their homes] in 1948. This traumatic childhood experience makes a mark in his life and is an ever-present theme in his work.

J.H.: I'll definitely have a read of that! Returning to the idea of refuge or fugitivity: I think this kind of 'positive escapism', or shaping of an ecstatic meeting place—the homeland, lover, or feeling of pain—is a prevalent, but also, to invoke Fred Moten, a “terribly beautiful” way people cope with varying intense traumas that reverberate through them, sometimes engendering a ceaseless flight. When contemplating ideas for the exhibition, you stated another aspect of how you understand poetry to operate, writing: "poetry is also used as a way to disseminate information or as a negative form of social control." Can you unpack this a little more?

K.Y.: Poetry, music, and art are forms of social control. I believe that when we internalize norms and values in a society, we create social control. Poetry was so crucial for the Bedouin community in Asia that not knowing what poetry was excluded people from socialization ...and so begins the ideas of hierarchy and status. This is the basis of social control.

J.H.: It's obviously a big subject, but a phrase like 'social control' can often invoke a thought of top-down, state government indoctrination...etc., but it seems to me like you're talking about a kind of normalisation that is less to do with a sense of having something imposed and more like a type of self-production and mode of relation (as in Michel Foucault's later work). It seems to me that control/normalization occurs in situations of different state powers—different strengths of institutions, different modes of governance...etc. For example, whilst of course dissimilar, how do you consider experiences of refuge—and poetry/literature as refuge—to correspond or diverge in Norway and with the Bedouin practices you have researched? If this is too broad, I would also make sure we remember that you initially wrote that poetry can *also* be used as a "way to disseminate information", so how do you think of practices that counter or escape such normalising environments and how do you consider your own practice in light of this?

K.Y.: When it comes to poetry and art, I often draw from the Swedish artist Leif Holmstrand. I am fascinated by his approach to life and materials. His poetic work is very materialistic and his textile work is exceptionally poetic. My idea for Kunsthall 3,14 was to create a large textile tent that could cover the entire gallery room. Unfortunately, I could not do this as I have to consider certain safety aspects. I was looking into the paradox of having a tent inside a place that usually creates new spaces (an exhibition space). I am trying to place and construct the work similarly to how I write poetry: I maintain a rhythm and try to make short sentences, then putting everything together, creating a new structure.