



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

# **WHEREVER THE END TAKES ME**

**the palindromic journey of existence**

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## SUMMARY

This work is an attempt to acknowledge the common ground that lies between the artist, the object of inquiry presented and the viewer. The object of inquiry being the woman as the Other. The gaze as the crucial element that informs our sense of belonging and alienation and consequently our position in the world. The geographical, social, economical and psychological displacement and their implications in the formation of a woman's identity shaped by personal history.

The roles of language, uniting or dividing, as means to communicate as well as oppress, and the logos of objects conscious and subconscious as represented in the artwork and as met in world around us. The presence of objects, their relation to their visual representation and the viewer. The role of memory in the functions of the body and the mind, and the use of memory as a possible tool to instill empathy.

The opportunities provided by the means – written and spoken word, photography, installation art, objects, found and offered and the implications of technology – as well as their limitations. Strategies chosen in the creation and exhibition of the artwork, contemplation on the process and the outcome. Glimpses on the respond of the viewers. The 'here' and the 'now', as the space and time that surrounds us and how we relate to them, to ourselves and to the others.

**KEYWORDS:** existence, identity, women, alienation, belonging, memory, gaze, visual arts, photography, installation art, language, migration, society, technology

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“Man is but a network of relationships,  
and these alone matter to him.”

*Antoine de Saint Exupéry, Flight to Arras (1942)*

I WOULD LIKE TO EXPRESS MY GRATITUDE TO

*my teachers*

Arne Kjell Vikhagen

Marika Orenius

Richard Viderberg

David Crawford

*the ladies who participated in the project*

Feker, Diana, Katja, Ulla, Alexandra,

Isabel, Katerina and Anna Lena

'bob' Kulturförening, Tidsnaetverket and Svenska Kyrkan i Bergsjön  
for their help and hospitality

my family and friends, my 'safety net'

my beloved Spyro, who stands by me

*thank you*

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## INTRODUCTION

– Θα ανοίξω την αυλόπορτα και θα φύγω!

– Που θα πας γιαγιά;

– Όπου με βγάλει η άκρη...<sup>1</sup>

*a dialog between my grandmother Katina Gounari and me as a child*

1 “I will open the yard door and I will leave!”

“Where will you go grandma?”

“Wherever the end takes me...”

The above dialogue is a word by word translation of our grandmother’s warning, everytime we, as kids, became to loud or disobedient for her to handle.

2 The Other meaning a person other than oneself. The Other singled out as different in the Hegelian notion. Also additional layers are taken into account as applied by: a) Simone De Beauvoir in her description of male-dominated culture, where Woman is being treated as the Other in relation to man, and b) Edward Said on the feminist notion of the Other to colonized peoples. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Other>).

3 In Heidegger’s use, beings are Dasein even when they are ontologically wrapped up in a tradition which obscures the authentic choice to live within and transmit this tradition. In this case Dasein still authentically chooses the tradition when it is confronted by a paradox within the tradition and must choose to dismiss the tradition or dismiss the experience of being confronted with choice. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dasein>).

In the project this text discusses, I wished to explore the issues of the ‘I’ and the ‘Other’<sup>2</sup> as our inescapable relation to ourselves and to others. The past and the future – our inescapable relation to where we come from, but not necessarily where we are headed. The ‘here’ and the ‘now’ as the space and time that surrounds us, but also the ‘Dasein’,<sup>3</sup> our being engaged in the world. The known and the unknown and how we deal with them.

I decided that the content of the project should be the presentation of women with various ‘percentages’ of belonging, to the place they live. The women would be asked to present objects that belong to them and represent for them the idea of ‘home’ and the stories related to the objects, which would explain why they represent ‘home’. Eight adult women of various ages – who live today in Gothenburg, Sweden, participated in the project. Feker a refugee, Diana and Ulla – migrants, Isabel – daughter of native mother and migrant father, Katja – daughter of native father and migrant mother, Alexandra – daughter of second generation migrant mother and native father, Katerina – daughter of migrant parents, Anna Lena, an Asian lady who as a baby was adopted by native Swedes.

The project was presented in the form of analog, photographic images, scanned and digitised, which were projected as a slide-show, by light. The images were accompanied by sound, recorded narration – digitised. Texts related to the images shown, were hand-written in a notebook which was exhibited as part of the installation. Also, found lace and pieces of furniture were used. The whole was orchestrated as a two-part installation in a gallery space.

The background of this project is directly related to my mother's family who became refugees and settled in Greece during the 'Asia Minor Catastrophe',<sup>4</sup> as the Greeks call it. My mother's mother was a role model for me, although nobody special. Simply somebody that given the 'wrong' circumstances, still managed to lead a life with dignity and grace. War happened to her, and her life changed. She left her home never to return and so she made a new home. She and her family salvaged objects and stories from the past, to build their future. However, although she spoke the same language, the fact that she came from elsewhere always made a difference to her new surroundings. My grandmother along with all the refugees who came from the same place during the same era, were usually perceived in continental Greece as intruders, never mind the fact that their arrival triggered social and economical changes which aimed to better the conditions for the lower classes of Greek society. I loved my grandmother, I loved her cooking, and the stories she was telling us, and all the lace she knitted day after day after day – an exercise in patience. She took care of us and she did it with a quiet pride. It was the same quiet pride she lived her life with, taking in whatever this life threw at her, standing up and continuing to walk after falling.

4 Refugee displacement and population movements which occurred following the Balkan Wars, World War I, and the Greco-Turkish war (1919-1922). These included exchanges and expulsion of about 500,000 Turks from Greece and about 1,500,000 Greeks from Asia Minor, Anatolia and Eastern Thrace to Greece. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asia\\_Minor\\_Catastrophe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asia_Minor_Catastrophe)).

5 A security blanket is any familiar object whose presence provides comfort or security to its owner, such as the literal blankets often favoured by small children. The term security blanket was popularized in the Peanuts comic strip created by Charles M. Schulz, who gave such a blanket to his character Linus van Pelt, but the terms comfort object and security object are also used by professionals and academics. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Security\\_blanket](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Security_blanket)).

My grandmother's story and her presence, the things she salvaged, and which existed around us in our home, made me sensitive to observations about what other people care about, what they hold precious. The things we hold on to, projecting on to them and investing them with properties, qualities, powers even, they do not really possess, except for the memories they might embody. But also the things we have forgotten, tucked neatly in the back of our heads, the ones we suddenly come across and which strike us like a lightning and wrap us like a long lost security blanket<sup>5</sup>, at the same time. The little china cups and the crystal glasses spoke of an attempt to regain the lost status. The silk sheets and the streams of lace were used as proof of qualities, talents, a stature and a dignity that was never lost. The rose garden my grandmother was forced to abandon, the one she said, she turned around to look at one last time before leaving, is the forever-lost garden of Eden, and the sweet she used to make from rose petals were the only – imaginary – glimpses that we would catch of it. The signifier-objects, images, fragrances and flavors of the signified -hopes, -dreams, -memories.

No matter whether the objects were ‘dressed’ in, or ‘inhabited’ by stories, what happened was that little fragments of personal history were passed on to us, the next generation, in the anecdotal form of intimate narration. The history of the ‘little people’ passed on by word of mouth and by the shape of common objects that surround us in our environment. However, these common objects were ‘crowned’ with a mystical aura. An aura that connected their presence in the ‘now’ with an existence stretched as far as the ‘then’ of a place unknown, painted by memory on the lips of my grandmother and perceived as a mythical image by the eyes of our imagination.

The aim of this project was to acknowledge the common ground that lies between the artist, the object of inquiry presented and the viewer. In photographing these women, did I capture the fleeting aura of their existence? While faced with them, will the viewer close their eyes and recall someone dear to them?<sup>6</sup> The memories, dreams, hopes, are they projected upon the home-embodying objects of these women, for us to see? Through them will we recall our own significant objects, the memories, the dreams, the hopes that shape us?<sup>7</sup> Will we grasp their idea about what the world is – or should be – shaped like, by visiting these women’s thoughts as they are expressed, carefully written in the mother tongue, then translated by memory – because this is how word-of-mouth functions? The stories are reshaped time and again by those who transmit them, in what they hold important, some details lost in the process, others enhanced and gaining importance according to the knowledge, judgement, background, education of the occasional storyteller.

Can we bring to the surface our own thoughts, hopes, dreams, memories, faced with those images? Will we lose ourselves in day-dreams facing them? What would happen if we were to be immersed in such a day-dream? If we were presented with objects that are inhabited by someone else’s dreams, hopes, memories, would that create an empathy that could bring us closer to the Other? Are we to recognise a *punctum*<sup>8</sup> that will make perfect sense as to why, someone would keep a pair of old training shoes for more than twenty years, or evening gowns they will never wear, or a framed print of a painting – made banal by numerous reproductions – which is valued by its owner as the equivalent of *Mona Lisa*? Are we to remember, faced with the exhibition of the actual notebook, the diaries

6 Reference to French semiologist’s Roland Barthes suggestion that “in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes.” Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Vintage Classics, London 1983, p. 53

7 ‘Remembering *is* an ethical act, has an ethical value in and of itself’, Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Farrer, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2003, p. 115.

8 reference to the element of chance that we come across in some detail in a photograph that holds our attention and gives to an image a private meaning according to its viewer. “[...] A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Vintage Classics, London 1983, p. 27.

9 reference to the poem  
'He Wishes For The Cloths  
Of Heaven'  
Had I the heavens' embroidered  
cloths,/ /  
Enwrought with golden and  
silver light,/ /  
The blue and the dim and the  
dark cloths/ /  
Of night and light and the half  
light,/ /  
I would spread the cloths under  
your feet:/ /  
But I, being poor, have only my  
dreams;/ /  
I have spread my dreams under  
your feet;/ /  
Tread softly because you tread  
on my dreams./ /  
by William Butler Yeats  
([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/  
Aedh\\_wishes\\_for\\_the\\_Cloths\\_of\\_Heaven](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aedh_wishes_for_the_Cloths_of_Heaven)).

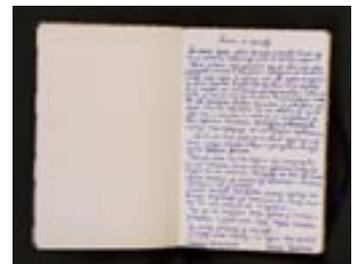
exchanged between sisters, cousins and girlfriends, filled with stories and passages taken from novels and poems, neatly hand-written with caution and care, but still carrying the occasional mistake or smudge that retained the assurance of a human presence in the trace? Does the recreation of a home-environment with the setting of furniture, where the viewer must walk through in order to enter the dark room with the projected images and the narration, prepare the viewer to *tread softly*?<sup>9</sup> We may not own the same 'valuable' possessions, but by making associations and drawing parallels to our own histories, diving into our own personal mythologies, I believe we can view and see and interpret the work, as we interpret life around us.

The project was set to spread in two connected areas. The first part worked as an entrance hall, surrounded by works of lace set on the floor in such a way as to enclose the space and create a boundary that the viewer would have to consciously cross, in order to visit the space and be included in it. There, in a setting which would remind the viewer of a living-room corner, stood an armchair, its back covered with a piece of lace next to



a coffee-table, again decorated with lace, on which rested the notebook with the stories of the objects hand-written in the native languages of their authors, its pages open for the visitor to leaf through.

Next to that setting, an open door covered with black tulle, which cut an amount of light, still allowing the viewer to peek through it, led to the darkroom where the photographs – portraits, objects and the pages of the notebook – were presented as light projections, on a screen. The projections were complemented by a narration in English of the stories translated by memory, and little bits and pieces of information about the women presented in the portraits, by the artist. The two loudspeakers, on the floor were covered with a set of identical lace works. On the floor, under the screen and surrounding it, more pieces of lace were spread, in a variety of sizes, patterns, and shades of the white used in their creation.



\* in my case, to be an art student,  
which of course I did mention to them,  
but without putting emphasis on that fact,  
because I could imagine their gaze sizing  
me as somebody so detached from life's  
urgent-survival issues, that has the luxury  
of dealing with art.

## A GATHERING OF 'OTHERS'

The project started in Bergsjön, a part of the city of Gothenburg, which is inhabited by migrants and refugees in an equal percentage to Native Swedes. The local Church offers lunch and coffee every Monday to the women of the community, giving them the opportunity to meet, get to know each other and form social relations and a tighter-knit community structure. By visiting and sharing lunch with them, I got to know some of the women and managed to create a bond with a few of them. Although the church makes no distinctions between the various dogmas of Christian faith, the women seem to gather around their own, with only few exceptions, who generally choose to mingle, by sitting in different tables and in different company every week. That is understandable to some degree, since the refugees and migrants taking the opportunity to meet, are also given the chance to speak their own language and talk about issues and topics common to them.

Early on, I came to the realization that it would not be so easy to penetrate this community, although a woman myself, not so much because of my different background, but more because of my social status. To be a student\* is a chosen role, to be a refugee certainly is a different matter altogether, and even in the case of migrants – where one is entitled to say that since they choose to leave their country, they too choose a role, the role is very different, and in most occasions this choice to leave one's homeland is forced by oppression, poverty or both. The sociologist Nikos Papastergiadis, in his book *The turbulence of migration* draws parallels to revolution, which promises alternatives to a miserable present, and migration, which promises the possibility of “rebirth and salvation” elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> The realization of such a promise is postponed for the future, in what seems to spring straight from the Christian tradition – in that case the paradise to be gained being the hope that the migrants' children will someday be included and accepted as equals in the hosting community. The *buy now-pay later* highly promoted policy of consumerism, totally reversed as *pay, in the form of work for us now – buy, our acceptance that you are a human being, later*. To become a migrant then, is a choice somewhat forced in many occasions. Again in the words of Papastergiadis: “movement occurs because there was either a force ‘pushing’ or ‘pulling’ the subject, or

10 Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalisation, Deterritorialization and Hybridity*, Oxford: Polity Press, 2000, p. 29.

because of the collapse of traditional structures.”<sup>11</sup>

My background certainly made matters easier – our common presence in an alien environment, bringing us closer together – and the fact that my country of origin has a coastline on the Mediterranean Sea, same as the countries of origin of most of the women I met, further simplified things. They could easily recognise me as a daughter or a niece, someone they could identify with, someone they were willing to socialize with, happy to be acknowledged as interesting for who they are in whole. I tried to open channels of communication that would allow me to be accepted as someone they could trust, pointing out my family’s background as refugees, exchanging information about habits and traditions that would prove to be common on many occasions.

Food, as always, worked as the glue that connects people and brings them closer together. As a response to me being included as a member at their Monday lunch meetings, at one occasion, I brought an offering, a home-baked traditional sweet, the recipe of which is shared – in variations – among the eastern mediterranean countries and the middle east. A sweet that I knew they would recognise, and which always brings my grandmother in my mind, because it is the same one she often baked after the arrival of unexpected but beloved visitors. As I hoped it did work as a means to engage them in conversation about recipes as well as other cultural information exchanges.

What soon became apparent was that their ability to help me communicate in a language that is foreign to us both, would be a great source of satisfaction to them. In this gathering of Others they simply loved to be given the opportunity to be the ones to help and teach me new words, and were patient with me every time I was endlessly looking for the proper word to use. Their understanding of the Swedish language much better than mine, my command of the English language more than sufficient, but theirs barely existent. One comforting factor was the will to understand, the will to communicate. Grammar and syntax rules, correct pronunciation were often barely existent, still we managed to understand each other, because we wanted to and because we were prepared to ‘receive’ a meaning in the other’s ‘transmission’, disregarding

<sup>11</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalisation, Deterritorialization and Hybridity*, Oxford: Polity Press, 2000, p. 73.

the ‘noise’ of formal mistakes. By bending the formal rules of language we were recovering its essence. But in the end, the lack of common knowledge of a language in spite of all the good intentions still posed obstacles between us.

Another issue that did not go unnoticed was the fact that the life inside the borders of a specific neighbourhood, which has become familiar and works as protective ground – a shelter from the unknown, seemed to prevent the inhabitants of Bergsjön from daring to come out of it, in order to mingle and meet other people. Their shelter doubles as a self-imposed prison in that sense, one they feel to be in control of. In choosing what we know, we feel we are in control. Our control might simply extend to the fact that we know what we are dealing with, even simply the knowledge that we will lose, but at least it will be in a familiar way, as opposed to an unknown situation we would face, should we choose the ambivalence of the unknown.

And so they withdraw, fearing the possibility of failure in an upcoming attempt to be accepted for who they are, settling “[...] they do not speak, they have no need to speak; they represent themselves to themselves, and that’s enough.”<sup>12</sup>

## THE OBJECTIFICATION OF STRANGERS

It is understandable to feel the need to protect oneself from the gaze of others, if we feel that gaze is turning us into objects. That is the case when we come across the gaze of a stranger.

“In fact the other’s gaze transforms me into an object, and mine him, only if both of us withdraw into the core of our thinking nature, if we both make ourselves into an inhuman gaze, if each of us feels his actions not to be taken up and understood, but observed as if they were an insect’s. This is what happens for instance when I fall into the gaze of a stranger.”<sup>13</sup>

The observation of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>14</sup> that our gaze has equal power to objectify as the other’s is not enough to work as a shield that would protect the bearer of ‘otherness’ in a strange land. A refreshing approach to the dominating gaze on the Other was Laurie Anderson’s work ‘The Ugly One With The Jewels’<sup>15</sup> in which she tells

12 Jacques Ranciere, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, University of Minnesota, 1994, p. 45.

13 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, 2007, p 420.

14 Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908 – 1961), French philosopher, strongly influenced by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, also closely associated with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. At the core of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is a sustained argument for the foundational role that perception plays in understanding the world as well as engaging with the world. His writings have become influential with the recent project of naturalizing phenomenology in which phenomenologists utilize the results of psychology and cognitive science. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merleau-Ponty>).

15 Laurie Anderson, *The Ugly One with the Jewels and Other Stories: A Reading from Stories From the Nerve Bible*, Warner Bros., 1995.

a story about herself, visiting her anthropologist brother somewhere in the Amazon, where he is researching the life, habits and traditions of the local tribes. During her stay she is participating in the everyday chores along with the women of the tribe, who unsuccessfully attempt to teach her how to make bread. They end up wondering in discussions among themselves how this pale, awkwardly tall – ugly – woman who lacks any dexterity in performing simple everyday women’s tasks will find a husband, to fulfill her purpose in society. At least she has those jewels –her contact lenses – which she wears in her eyes during the day and which she takes out for safe-keeping in a little box under her pillow every night. Thus the observer becomes the object of observation. Truth be told, although the native inhabitant can also be gazed by the stranger as an object, nevertheless he has the major advantage of being on his turf.

Already before the 5th century BC, Ancient Greeks created the word ‘Barbarian’ to distinguish themselves as being a cultural unity in the face of others: their expression was «πας μη Ἑλληγ βάρβαρος», which translates to *whoever is not Greek, is a Barbarian*. The word ‘barbarian’ itself explained etymologically refers to those whose speaking tongue is incomprehensible, sounding like “bar-bar”, an incomprehensible *blab-blab* in English. What started as a way of distinguishing and naming the Other, as someone coming from another community, bearer of another culture, language, set of beliefs, sadly, transformed gradually into a distinction and name-tag of the uncivilized, the brute, the one with less mental abilities, all the afore-mentioned qualities still referring to and pointing towards the Other.

If, as the Greek-French philosopher, economist and psychoanalyst Cornelius Castoriadis<sup>16</sup> pointed out about the formation of a society “[...] the first institution is the fact that society itself *creates itself* as society and creates itself each time by giving itself institutions animated by social imaginary significations specific to that society.”<sup>17</sup> is true, then in order for the psyche to become part of a society it needs to belong. It needs to invest in what society has to offer, find a potential meaning.

“Territories and so on acquire their importance only because of specific meanings attributed to them. [...] a *stranger* is a stranger because the significations of which he is the bearer are *strange*,

16 Cornelius Castoriadis (Greek: Κορνήλιος Καστοριάδης) (1922 -1997), Greek-French philosopher, economist and psychoanalyst. Author of the *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, co-founder of the Socialisme ou Barbarie group and ‘philosopher of autonomy’. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornelius\\_Castoriadis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornelius_Castoriadis)).

17 Cornelius Castoriadis, *First Institution of Society and Second-Order Institutions*, 1986, in *Figures of the Thinkable, including Passion and Knowledge*, p. 166 (pdf p. 232).

foreign. Now a signification can be non-strange only if it is positively cathected. It suffices to replace the term *non-strange* in the previous sentence with the term *familiar* to see that this is in fact a tautology.”<sup>18</sup>

Castoriadis goes on to identify two expressions of hate, hate of the other and self-hate, which both stem from our refusal to accept what is alien to us in ourselves and in others.<sup>19</sup> The expression of this hate is tamed during our socialisation process and diverted towards various forms of inter-individual competition – athletic, economic, political etc.<sup>20</sup> The surplus of hate is further channeled into “formalized, institutionalized destructive activities—that is, into war.”<sup>21</sup> Castoriadis concludes that the resources of hate “manifest themselves rampantly under the guise of contempt, xenophobia, and racism.”<sup>22</sup> It is hard to argue that from this point of view, strangers are considered to embody a convenient scape-goat for any society that plays the role of being their host, should the occasion for such a need rise.

Starting with the industrialization of the first world, a need for urbanized labour occurred. Peasants moved in the cities, to offer cheap, manual labour. In this alien environment, they would work with the dream of returning to their homes. In various occasions they would move seasonally, back and forth. Perhaps this is how the model of ‘visiting workforce’ was created to begin with. As the need for industrial workforce grew bigger, labour was invited from other countries to complement national workforce. Depending on each country’s policies, the new workers could be accepted as citizens or would remain in the status of ‘Gastarbeiter’, and expected to move out as soon as the need for their labour would cease to exist. Extra labour needs were covered by citizens from the first world’s colonies and other poor regions of the world – not necessarily poor in resources though, who were considered second-class at best, their inferiority *proven* by the fact that they had been conquered in the past. In that sense, “migrants were seen as the ‘reserve army of labour’ that could be strategically manoeuvred to fill the ‘dirty’ gaps and fortify the ‘dangerous’ positions that indigenous workers had refused to hold.”<sup>23</sup> That would serve two purposes at the same time, and it still does: firstly the gain of cheap labour without the burden of social cost, while secondly, at the same

18 Cornelius Castoriadis, *The psychical and social Roots of Hate, 1996, in Figures of the Thinkable, including Passion and Knowledge, p. 284-285 (pdf p. 350-351).*

19 Ibid. p. 288 (pdf p. 354).

20 Ibid. p. 289 (pdf p. 355).

21 Ibid. p. 289 (pdf p. 355).

22 Ibid. p. 290 (pdf p. 356).

23 Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalisation, Deterritorialization and Hybridity*, Oxford: Polity Press, 2000, p. 32

time using migrant workers as a lever to suppress the general labour cost, thus achieving a status of more *flexible* working conditions. But in having the migrant workers pose as a cheaper substitute for the native workforce conditions for hostility between the two are being spawned, in the old ‘divide and conquer’ strategy tradition, while the capacity of labour in general, to endure insecurity is further stretched.

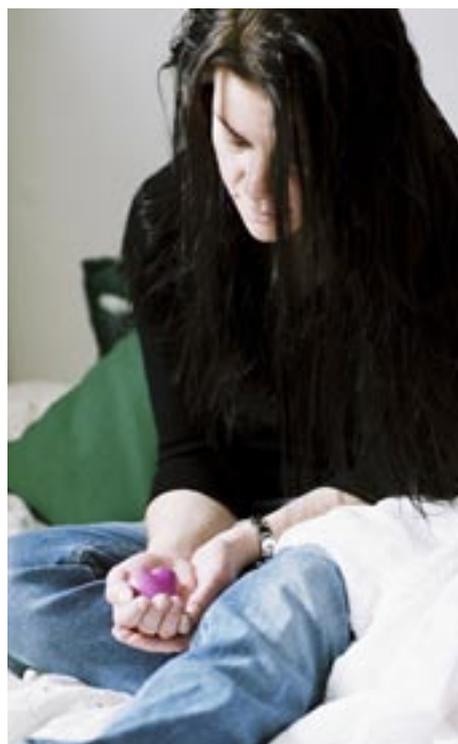
Because of their traditional role in society, women and their position within the immigration patterns and history has been generally overlooked. Until recently, they were either left behind or taken along as part of a family.<sup>24</sup> Such was the case of Alexandra’s grandmother. Sometime in the decade of 1960, she was to follow her husband who decided that he would provide a better living for himself and his wife if he immigrated from his native Italy to Sweden. The couple’s origin is a small village on the mountains of central Italy. The wife, Alexandra’s grandmother, was given two choices, either to follow her husband to Sweden or to be given a divorce and stay behind. She chose to follow him, since a divorce would be dishonoring both to herself, but probably, also to her family. Moreover, had she decided to stay behind and face such consequences, additionally she would have to face a life of poverty and loneliness. Who would marry a woman who chose to defy her husband’s decision and dishonor her family, and how would she make a living in a place that didn’t provide enough jobs for the male population, in the first place? Today still, she lives in Sweden, with her husband, who is proud to ‘have become a Swede’, to be able to talk and live like a proper Swede, although, in Alexandra’s view, his pronunciation is full of mistakes and he, naturally, still is much more an Italian than a Swede. His wife, keeping her Italian identity intact, dreams of one day returning to her homeland.

Perhaps, it is difficult in today’s standards to grasp the complexity of their situation. The man seems to have made the right decision in order to provide for his family. Moreover we cannot presume that it was an easy decision for him to make, either. He too, left his homeland, his family and friends to go to an unknown country. He too had to learn a new language with which to communicate and certainly he too faced all the relative difficulties of not speaking properly

24 Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalisation, Deterritorialization and Hybridity*, Oxford: Polity Press, 2000, p. 52.

and not being accepted in the host society, from the beginning. The difference is that Alexandra's grandfather was responsible for the decision to move and was not 'dragged' along. He 'invested' in this change that would make his family's life better – and it did, while his wife who would live a relatively isolated life in her homeland as a housewife, although she has enjoyed the better quality of life in Sweden, had to endure a total isolation in her everyday environment, lacking all the psychological support that her traditional family environment would have provided along with the sense of community.

It came as no surprise that Alexandra chose an object which absolutely lacked a history, so she could instill it with the one quality she chose it should have. She showed me a decorative object, that can be found in stores today, a purple heart, that she decided it would represent the universal idea of home, to her. Everywhere and nowhere specific. Perhaps she thought she would betray either of her grandparents, both the Italian ones as well as the Swedes on her father's side, if she chose sides. Or, knowing that none of her two homelands is perfect – and this could never be the case – Alexandra made up her mind to consciously doubt and question and then choose the best from each country and from the rest of the world, in whatever the world has to offer.



*left: Alexandra in her living room  
holding the purple heart*

*above: the purple heart (detail)*



above: spread from Duane Michals book *The house I once called home*. (source: <http://www.neo-bookshop.co.uk/catalog/house-once-called-home-p-141.html>)

I cannot speak about the form, but regarding the content – the personal that can possibly be understood as universal – and how I wish it is presented, there maybe a relation to be detected to American photographer Duane Michals' approach. The images can seem incomplete without a text that would explain them.<sup>25</sup> The narration partially addressing, perhaps solving this issue of incompleteness, although I feel it is questionable, whether answers are given if we do not look for them between the words.

Nowadays the pattern for women migrants is shifting. They move to other lands to work themselves. Or maybe their traditional role is needed in western societies where women having been liberated and equalized, do not take up on doing what is seen as inferior chores anymore. As much as we loathe Others, or maybe because of it, we find ways to make use of them. The world is not defined by black and white, limitless shades of gray fill the in-between space. We rationalise, we calculate, we balance, we compromise, we make allies and enemies along the way and we constantly redefine our limitations, our borders and our means. In the end “[...] all human activities and all their effects come to be considered more or less as economic activities and products, or, at the very least as characterized and valued essentially through their economic dimension”<sup>26</sup>, in the words of Castoriadis. We can easily substitute ‘economy’ for ‘power’, whoever controls the economy, has the power, whoever holds the power, rules. Have we compromised in allowing women equality? If yes at what cost, and what is there to be gained? Are our women, a lesser evil, allies in the face of the common enemy who is the Other, the one that comes from other lands? And what about women who come from other lands, what is their level of otherness?

25 Duane Michals, *The House I Once Called Home*, Enitharmon Editions, 2003.

26 Cornelius Castoriadis, *The “Rationality” of Capitalism, 1996-1997*, in *Figures of the Thinkable, including Passion and Knowledge*, p. 87 (pdf p. 153).

## WOMEN, OURS AND THE OTHERS

Migrants are more and more likely to be women who leave their homes to work abroad temporarily, in manufacturing and service sectors, notes Papastergiadis and quotes American sociologist Saskia Sassen's observation that their employment is generally short-termed and it is characterized by the deindustrialization and the decentralization of the west, their jobs are mostly low wage. After they are laid off they rarely have

the opportunity to find another employer, and having been westernized, they are left with very few options.<sup>27</sup> What is more as Mary Kavar, a Senior specialist on gender and employment at the International Labour Organization, indicates in her paper ‘Women and Migration: Why are Women more Vulnerable?’, even in the event of dealing with women that have a higher education and specific professional skills:

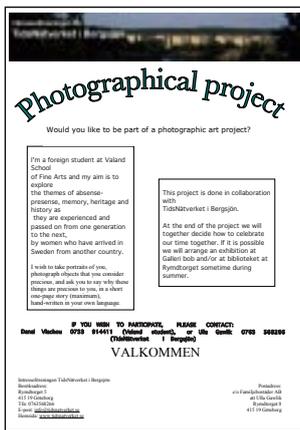
“The migration of women is mostly unrelated to career advancement and skill acquisition. There is enough evidence to suggest that a significant number of migrant women possess skills and qualifications often not recognized or unneeded in the types of work that they perform. In fact, many studies indicate that migration involves deskilling for some groups of women. For example many Filipino women with college degrees work in domestic service or the entertainment industry.”<sup>28</sup>

So then, women who come from elsewhere, to whom western society’s issues on equality rights do not seem to be of the uttermost importance – perhaps because of ignorance for their existence, or simply because a petty life with little respect offered to them, is still better than the one they leave behind – are substituting for those who have achieved a status of equality. Again it seems, as was the case in ancient Athens, for democracy to exist, there have to be slaves that do the petty chores in the background.

It becomes clear that in providing equality to our own, without having created the supplementary social and psychological conditions with which to support this ‘liberation’ from all those little everyday chores, that were considered to be female tasks and therefore rejected as inferior, we end up in need of finding servants to fulfill those needs, instead of raising these tasks to their rightful place in terms of their importance in our everyday lives. There is an issue to be addressed about a society that dismisses chores as inferior, instead of embracing them as minor tasks which are necessary to ensure our personal hygiene, or the order of our living space. Such tasks should reflect our dignity in the first and foremost sense, as human beings who live in a society based on self-respect, respect of the other, respect towards the space we communally occupy, a society which is supposed to be progressed and has reached high living conditions and education standards.

27 Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalisation, Deterritorialization and Hybridity*, Oxford: Polity Press, 2000, p. 61.

28 Mary Kavar, *Gender and Migration: Why are Women more Vulnerable*, p.74 ([http://www.antigone.gr/listpage/selected\\_publications/international/070603.pdf](http://www.antigone.gr/listpage/selected_publications/international/070603.pdf)).



above: Tidsnaetverket's flyer

The progress that has raised our standards of living does not necessarily ensure that it has raised our awareness in issues that are relevant to the gap created in the home after the liberated woman of the western society has walked out of it. This gap is being filled by the less fortunate, *less equal* women of more traditional, conservative origins, who nevertheless are being pushed by poverty and limited viable employment opportunities to pursue a life away from their home, away from their traditional shelter. Do we remain conveniently passive, faced with issues addressing gender based discrimination as well as discrimination based on race and ethnicity?

I was lucky to come across Ulla, during one of my Monday lunch breaks in Bergsjön. Ulla was born in Germany sometime in the 1960's. She is working for Tidsnaetverket i Bergsjön,<sup>29</sup> an organization whose purpose is to bring people closer and help build a tighter community, through the exchange of free time among people. At first Ulla suggested we make a flyer in order to invite women to participate in my project via the organization, which would count for the women as time spent for Tidsnaetverket, thus giving them the opportunity to buy time-points. Unfortunately, no one responded, probably dismissing the flyer as impersonal or simply because within the realm of everyday life we tend to let the less important things – to our current issues – escape our memory. There was only a girl from Afghanistan who expressed her interest in participating, but there was no way for us to communicate. She spoke no English and I speak very poor Swedish. I was given a phone-number of a social-worker who I was told would help translate, but after calling her and leaving messages to her a couple of times, I gave up. However, still willing to help, Ulla personally introduced me to Isabel, a lady whose mother is Swedish and father was a migrant from Ghana. Also, Ulla told me of something that she kept over the years, and in the end became herself one of the people who participated in the project.

Ulla's object was a pair of training shoes that she as a teenager bought with savings from her pocket-money, because her parents refused to buy them for her, dismissing them as too expensive. Her unconscious embodiment of a declaration of independence even led to an offer for

29 In English 'Timenetwork'



*right and below: Ulla's shoes*



an apprentice's position in Bayer Leverkusen Chemicals, because her act of independence was appreciated by a by-stander, as well as the joy it brought to her. Ulla was brought up at a time and in an environment that supported and promoted her independence. She was brought up to stand up for herself and to both demand and work for the things she is entitled to have. What is more, she grew up at a time and in a place where the ability to choose and acquire consumer goods is not viewed as a luxury but as a right. Her act of independence was an exercise, perhaps a lesson that her parents aimed to teach her, rather than a struggle to gain, or to hold on to her dignity. In Ulla I recognized myself. I too remember saving and counting my own pocket-money to buy a vinyl record, or a book, or a T-shirt, or a pair of jeans by a brand that was considered to be fashionable. In fact, it is possible that my sister had a pair of shoes just like Ulla's and that she also bought them with her pocket-money. Ulla's ways compliment her features and allow her to mingle unnoticed, and be accepted as one of 'us'. On the other hand, the lady Ulla introduced me to, Isabel, with her dark skin and African features, stands out.

right: Ulla

far right: Isabel



Isabel was born in Sweden by a Swedish mother and Ghanaian father. She was very interested to participate to this project, but sounded reluctant as to whether she fit the profile, since, as she observed, she is not a migrant herself. It felt like Isabel is used to be in this position where she is not exactly included but at the same time not exactly excluded. She seemed prepared to be excluded and was more than happy to realize that this would not be the case. Having lived all her life in Sweden and knowing her father's country only via vacation trips that she has taken there to meet his side of the family, Isabel is considered by her African relatives a European, and every time she has expressed an interest in her father's culture, she has met her relatives disbelief and disappointment in that she ruins her European image, they so appreciate. In their eyes, they have an 'insider', the 'European connection'; Isabel represents the fulfillment of the dream to be accepted by the *First World*, to be part of it. As a result she does not seem to belong, neither here, nor there, at least not in the eyes of others.

Much like Alexandra's grandfather, Isabel's father considers himself to have adopted the European ways to the extend that he believes he is a European, and much like Alexandra, Isabel pointed out in our conversations how non-European her father is, still clinging to his native customs and ideas even if they appear to be slightly diluted by north-western European custom additions. The peoples' need to be accepted and belong goes to the extend of, them being prepared to lose

their identity for it, becoming convinced that they have to lose it. Because their 'I' has come to be considered even to themselves as being the 'Other' who needs to be reformed in order to become part of our society and to belong. Their 'I' has been humbled to the inferior 'Other'.

Duane Michals photograph *Black is Ugly* accompanied by its explanatory text, in which part of it reads: "It seemed to him to be the natural order of things (although he could not guess why he should be punished)."<sup>30</sup> speaks about this condition, of having adopted the 'Other' identity as being inferior. The same condition is depicted in the images by Australian photographer Tracey Moffatt, from the series *Scarred for Life*, and specifically the one called *Useless* which is paired with the text: "her father's nickname for her was 'useless'."<sup>31</sup> In Michals case the information lies in the caption as opposed to Moffatt's image in which the disappointed face of the girl who is depicted washing a car, gives us a hint, the text serves to clarify.

While *our* women, liberated, thrive in professional lives that allow them to become consumers with significant spending power in their own right, a power that provides them with the luxury of applying for divorces and allowing them the possibility of living on their own, we still get to keep the traditional submissive forms of relationships with the Other, in marriages of convenience at the better end of this equation and trafficking at the worst end. Passive, willing, well-mannered, young women are to be found in many places in the world, ready to exchange their hopelessness and poverty for a life in the blessed west. They consider a life as someone's wife, a wife of a husband with a steady income, a father-figure – often more than a couple of decades older than themselves, to be a blessing compared to miserable living conditions. They will happily play the role of nurse and cleaning-woman along with the traditional wife role, and will forever be in debt. At the same time, men will spend less than the cost of a nurse's, or cleaning-woman's salary and enjoy the benefits of a relationship, probably without a variety of compromises expected to be made within a relationship. Certainly a good bargain, compared to the ever-growing trafficking business in which people are traded as cheap merchandise, in a world where a human is bought "cheaper than a kalashnikov or a kilo of heroin and

30 The Essential Duane Michals, Marco Livingstone, Thames and Hudson, 1997, p.170-171.

31 Tracey Moffatt / Kunsthalle Wien, Cantz, 1998, p. 80.

the merchandise, aside from being safer, is also moving by itself, you kick them and they walk” –the words of a ‘merchant’ when asked why he does not trade guns or drugs but chooses to trade human beings, as they were presented in a report issued by International Organization for Migration (IOM).<sup>32</sup>

It is easy to measure people and consider them to be of lesser importance when one is in a position of power. Moreover, in the margins of human societies our beastly instincts still lurk. Having the luck to have been born on European soil, having the luck to be citizens of countries that are E.U. members, we enjoy the freedoms and values of a democratic society, that allows us to consider women equal to men, – and that is debatable as the uses of language can prove in a following related chapter. However, still, in contrast to men, even these women do not enjoy the same equality in other parts of the world. Their equality status is at best fenced within the western world. But even here, a woman would possibly not enjoy the same right to be considered equal, if she for some reason happened to be alone in a park, at night, facing somebody who will see her as prey. And it is for the same reason why those less fortunate than us, who were not being born within those *First World* borders, do not enjoy even within the western world the same rights in equality like we do: our name, our color, our race and our gender still matters, and that exactly proves women’s potential relapse in inequality status, if certain occasions arise, that could dictate such a ‘need’. Women’s status of equality is one dictated by politics and possibly guided by the current laws of economy, still not one deriving from their human condition.

## **WOMEN AS THE ‘MUTED GROUP’**

Although over time conditions have changed and a woman’s position in the western world seems to be equal to man’s, it is not so far back that women were led out of their homes to support the production of industry as a fully capable workforce, only to be herded back into their homes when men returned from WWII. In a research by Betty Friedan that was published as a book to become a best seller in the USA in 1963, the relevant psychological issues raised, regarding this fact, were only partially explored from the viewpoint of the ‘significant’ part of the female population; those who were educated in colleges and

<sup>32</sup> [http://news.kathimerini.gr/4Dcgi/4Dcgi/\\_w\\_articles\\_civ\\_12\\_10/04/2009\\_310649](http://news.kathimerini.gr/4Dcgi/4Dcgi/_w_articles_civ_12_10/04/2009_310649). (a greek article on human trafficking with parts from IOM reports that unfortunately I couldn’t locate in english.)

had earned university degrees, those belonging to the middle class of society.<sup>33</sup> This part of the female population could speak up and possibly stood a better chance at being heard. Having been taught the formal rules, the ‘correct’ use of language, they expressed concerns about their condition – to be confined in their homes, back in their traditional role of the housewife, not be able to participate in society in a productive way, not be able to seek jobs fitting their education – only to be ‘fenced in’ by polite flattery through the columns of women magazines of the era, in ways such as the following by Dorothy Thompson in *Lad Ladies Home Journal* in March 1949: “a world full of feminine genius, but poor in children, would come rapidly to an end... Great men have great mothers.” as quoted by Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*.<sup>34</sup> Cut down to size by a Procrustean<sup>35</sup> bed that got conveniently readjusted at the will of those in control, these women were pointed towards their accepted position in society.

33 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 1963.

31 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 1963. (<http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~hst203/documents/friedan2.html>)

35 Procrustes (Προκρούστης) or “the one who hammers out”, also known as Damastes (Δαμαστής) “subduer”, a figure from Greek mythology. Son of Poseidon and a bandit from Attica, with a stronghold in the hills outside Eleusis. There, he had an iron bed into which he invited every passerby to lie down. If the guest proved too tall, he would amputate the excess length; victims who were too short were stretched on the rack until they were long enough. Nobody ever fit the bed exactly because it was secretly adjustable: Procrustes would stretch or shrink it upon sizing his victims from afar. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Procrustes>)

36 Jacques Ranciere, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, University of Minnesota, 1994, p. 18.

37 Jennifer Coates, *Women, Men and Language, a Sociolinguistic account of Gender Differences in Language*, Longman, 1999, p. 35-36.

We can only imagine that all the others, less educated, those of the lower classes, could be handled easier still. Their opinions could be easily dismissed, simply for their improper usage of language. The content of their speech dismissed due to improper use of form.

“The poor are those who speak blindly, on the level of the event, because the very fact of speaking is an event for them. [...] Eagerness is the common failing of those who do what they have no place to do. The poor speak falsely because they have no place to speak.”<sup>36</sup>

If they attempt to speak at all.

A ‘Muted group’, a theoretical term proposed by anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardener, refers to the difficulty of those belonging to a non dominant group within a society, to make themselves and their opinions, or even needs, heard. The Ardeners’ argument is, that in a society there are dominant modes of expression, set by and belonging to the dominant groups. In order for all others to express themselves and be heard, they are required to follow those rules.<sup>37</sup> For instance, as sociolinguist Jennifer Coates notes, “the androcentric (male-as-norm) attitudes so conspicuous in early pronouncements on language were actually used as the basis for some prescriptive rules of grammar.” and she continues

“it is naive to assume that codification was carried out in a disinterested fashion: those who laid down the rules inevitably defined as ‘correct’ that usage which they preferred, for whatever reason.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, even today in our western progressed society that promotes equality, we commonly use a form of expression, which is exclusive to one half of the population of the world, still considering it to be the norm. As much as it can be viewed as an attempt to mend, or rather to point out this injustice, the fact that certain authors, for example Lev Manovich and Cornelius Castoriadis, chose consciously in their texts the use of ‘she’ instead of ‘he’ for all unspecific third person usage, this choice simply turns the injustice around, and shows that we still have not come up with a solution to such political issues raised by the structure of language.

It seems that on many occasions a woman is still perceived as the Other, thus being included in the ‘muted groups’; considered still to be less intelligent, less capable, less important, in many parts of the world, if not inferior, at least, to put it politely, not unfit but too delicate, in the end *less equal*. Strategic tagging works to address the differences of the Other in a way as to put the Other in an inferior position. Even in the parts of the world than we consider to be developed, there is still a need for less inequality. The terms are more subtle, but the issues are still visible. Women may be allowed to speak, but their talk can still be disregarded as ‘woman talk’ – usually meaning less important. Political correctness although aiming to obstruct the usage of expressions that discriminate, often ends up putting obstacles in the way of addressing issues, and at the same time it is politely ‘dressing them up’ by the use of new beautifying names. There is an oxymoron, for instance, in demanding ‘more equality’. One would expect that once equality has been achieved, an equilibrium has been reached. But in truth we are forever to struggle with words as we forever “struggle under the sheets.”<sup>39</sup>

More opportunities were lost during the process of this project, aside from the unfortunate outcome of the case of the Afghan girl. In Bergsjön, I was given the chance to meet a lovely Syrian lady, Asiza, probably well in her seventies, who was actively involved in the Monday lunch meetings. This refugee from Syria seemed to be interested in me, welcoming me with open arms to hug me at my arrivals. She was keeping

38 Jennifer Coates, *Women, Men and Language, a Sociolinguistic account of Gender Differences in Language*, Longman, 1999, p. 24-25.

39 Reference to Greek author’s Marios Chakkas quote ‘there is no such thing as class struggle, there is only struggle under the sheets’, *Heroes Shrine for sale, the elegant toilet*, Kedros, 1997.



above: *Asiza*

contact and chatting with me as much as she could, in spite of our difficulties in communication. Although Asiza seemed willing to participate in the project, in the end she always ‘slipped’ quietly away, postponing the part where she would be obliged to write a story. I never asked, partly because it would be impolite, even insulting, and partly because in my reality it would sound absurd to not know how to write. But on second thought, perhaps she was never taught. After all before the twentieth century literacy among women was not common. Perhaps in her reality, when Asiza was growing up, still it was not common. Censorship applied once but effective for a lifetime.

Almost all of the women who did participate in the project were introduced to me by each other. After participating themselves they thought of others who would possibly care to be included and they told me about them and told them about the project. One of the participants, Diana, offered to introduce me to a Berber lady from Morocco, called Nadja, who happens to be the wife of one of Diana’s colleagues. Diana called her at a time that she knew Nadja’s husband would be absent. Diana informed me that Nadja was interested, but was also hesitating, not wanting me to take her portrait, because that would constitute a sin according to her religious beliefs. To her worry, I replied that, having thought of such possible obstacles, I could instead photograph her hands. Still, she was reluctant, and in the end she declined. In Diana’s words, although Nadja considers herself ‘modern’, and studies at the University to improve her education, possibly to get a job in an attempt to become self-sufficient, still she feels restrained by her husband’s gaze over her shoulder, even in his absence. A Mabel Longhetti<sup>40</sup> of different origin and for different reasons, still forced to only make “normal conversation”<sup>41</sup> in order to meet her husband’s demands, or in that case no conversation at all. A self-inflicted censorship, that has become a conditioned reflex after years of being trained to be kept silent or judged about what is proper to say and what is not, according to a higher power.

In many cases there is no reason to even question the quality of life women enjoy. The examples of Asiza and Nadja do not prove a life in poverty. Their male guardians and protectors – be it fathers, husbands or sons – are not necessarily to be viewed as oppressors, who

40 Mabel Longhetti is the main character in John Cassavetes film ‘A woman under the influence’, 1974.

41 Nick Longhetti’s (Mabel Longhetti’s husband) line in a dialog taken from John Cassavetes film ‘A woman under the influence’, 1974, when his wife starts talking ‘crazy’. Tom Charity, John Cassavetes, Lifeworks, Omnibus Press, 2001, p. 125.

do not provide for them, or who prevent these women from living good lives, within their given roles. Women and their opinions may well be respected within their field of given occupational choices, their roles celebrated. However in the event of absence of an appointed protector their lives can be dramatically changed, in the same way the life of a child changes if it happens to become an orphan. I still remember my mother saying that her mother – my grandmother could have become a wonderful teacher. But in her time women only got the basic education, which was a custom to be terminated around their twelfth year of age. My great-grandfather was often teased by his friends, for having five daughters, he had to find husbands for. But he always said that he did not worry, certain that he could provide more than enough for all of them. Alas, after their displacement, during the Asia Minor Catastrophe, all his daughters were forced to work as seamstresses and factory workers. The family's wealth and properties were all left behind, while knowledge provided by a higher education, would have travelled lightly along with them, and it would have shielded them from poverty, possibly would have ensured them a better life.

Chilean Mayra Buvinic, social psychologist, who works for the World Bank as an expert on gender and social development, in her article titled 'Women in Poverty: A New Global Underclass',<sup>42</sup> written in 1997, pointed out the feminization of poverty as a new global trend.<sup>43</sup> In her article, Buvinic wrote of the inequalities in literacy, proven by statistics researches from 1990, where for every 100 literate men there were only 74 literate women.<sup>44</sup> A rising percentage of households headed by women, which is a case that becomes more and more common in countries of the developing world, combined with the fact that women receive lower earnings, often accepting low-wage work and no benefits as a norm, the reasons for the feminization of poverty seem obvious. Two pieces of information stand out in this article. One is that women in poor households work more hours than men, and the poorer the household, the longer women work.<sup>45</sup> "As research has shown, increased family burdens such as declining income or additional children, tend to change women's and children's – but not men's – allocation of time between work and leisure."<sup>46</sup> The second is the observation that although female-headed households lack resources as opposed to their male-

42 Mayra Buvinic, *Women in Poverty: A New Global Underclass*. (<http://www.online-womeninpolitics.org/beijing12/womeninpoverty.pdf>)

43 *Ibid.* pdf p.3.

44 *Ibid.* pdf p.4.

45 *Ibid.* pdf p.5.

46 *Ibid.* pdf p.8.

\* *The choice of the greek word 'logos' serves as to point out the dual meaning it offers, both 'speech' and 'reason'.*

headed counterparts, still they prove to be more resourceful in positively affecting the well-being of the families by yielding higher health and social benefits.<sup>47</sup> Thus supporting what World Bank's vice president Mieko Nishimizu once stated: "If you educate a boy you educate a human being. If you educate a girl, you educate generations."<sup>48</sup>

## THE LOGOS\* OF OBJECTS

During an art course last summer, I was given the opportunity along with all the other participants, to visit a migrant couple's home, in Bergsjön. The reason for the visit were the miniature Mosques and Churches Mr. Mujcinovic is creating after originals seen on photographs and videos. His work is really masterful and he talked about in as much detail as his skills in the swedish language allowed him to. He also talked about the couple's previous life in Bosnia and the changes the destructive war brought to the family's life. All that time, his wife was standing silently nearby, after having served us coffee, tea, home baked sweets and cake. In their apartment the walls around the living room were covered with framed photographs of ancestors and members of the family, now scattered all-over the world. The cupboards and shelves for the china and glasses were decorated with carefully knitted stitch work and lace. Where the man, being deprived of his previous possibility of professional occupation, kept his mind and hands busy, creating the miniature buildings, the wife simply continued doing her chores inside a new house, furnishing the void by re-creating their previous home environment, marking her territory with the use of lace, remaking a home. Although the fatherland<sup>49</sup> is lost, the mother language<sup>50</sup> is kept alive. In this case the mother-language is not even a spoken one, it is more likely a type of language, if we are to consider true the observation German-Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin did, at the beginning of his essay *On Language as such and On the Language of Man*, where he wrote: "Every expression of human mental life can be understood as a kind of language [...]."<sup>51</sup> It is interesting that Benjamin also noted that, no matter the degree of consciousness involved in such communication, a total absence of language is unimaginable.<sup>52</sup>

I believe my observation about the Bosnian couple's home is relevant to what French philosopher Gaston Bachelard wrote in his

47 Mayra Buvinic, Women in Poverty: A New Global Underclass, pdf p.9. (<http://www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org/beijing12/womeninpoverty.pdf>)

48 Ibid. pdf p.10.

49 Fatherland as the nation of one's "fathers", "forefathers" or "patriarchs" (without the negative connotations). (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fatherland>)

50 Of the various definitions on what we call a mother language, the language a human being learns from birth, or a person's first language as a basis for socio-linguistic identity etc. The definition chosen here the one based on origin: the language(s) one learned first (the language(s) in which one has established the first long-lasting verbal contacts). ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother\\_language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother_language))

51 Walter Benjamin, Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings, On language As Such And On The Language Of Man, Schocken Books, 1989, p. 314.

52 Ibid. p. 314-315.

book *Poetics of Space* where he supported the idea that: “In the intimate harmony of walls and furniture, it may be said that we become conscious of a house that is built by women, since men only know how to build a house from the outside, and they know little or nothing of the “wax” civilization.”<sup>53</sup> Bachelard dealt mainly with spaces, the house, rooms, that we have lived in; he briefly mentioned objects as well, as the sources of our day-dreaming and the bearers of memories and along with them imagination. “Not only our memories, but the things we have forgotten are “housed”. Our soul is an abode. And by remembering “houses” and “rooms,” we learn to “abide” within ourselves.”<sup>54</sup> He went on to add how, by presumably studying something – an object if I may take a guess – we might as well be standing on the threshold of a daydream.<sup>55</sup> Another observation, supports the same idea about how objects inhabit us as soon as they are inhabited by our stories and memories. American author and magazine editor Akiko Busch, in her book *The Uncommon Life of Common Objects* writes about “the emotional content”<sup>56</sup> of objects buildings and places, and how “sometimes objects tell stories, more eloquently than people”<sup>57</sup> in a brief passage where she mentions the art of American painter John Singer Sargent – who if fact was famous for his portrait painting – in relation to how in his portrait paintings often “the action resides almost completely in the objects.”<sup>58</sup> As long as we are paying attention to the silent details, of course. “The gaze gets more or less from things according to the way in which it questions them, ranges over or dwells on them.”<sup>59</sup>

53 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics Of Space*, 1994 Beacon Press, p. 68.

54 Ibid. p. xxxvii intro.

55 Ibid. p. xxxviii intro.

56 Akiko Busch, *The Uncommon Life Of Common Objects: Essays on Design and the Everyday*, Metropolis Books, 2005, p. 17.

57 Ibid. p. 15.

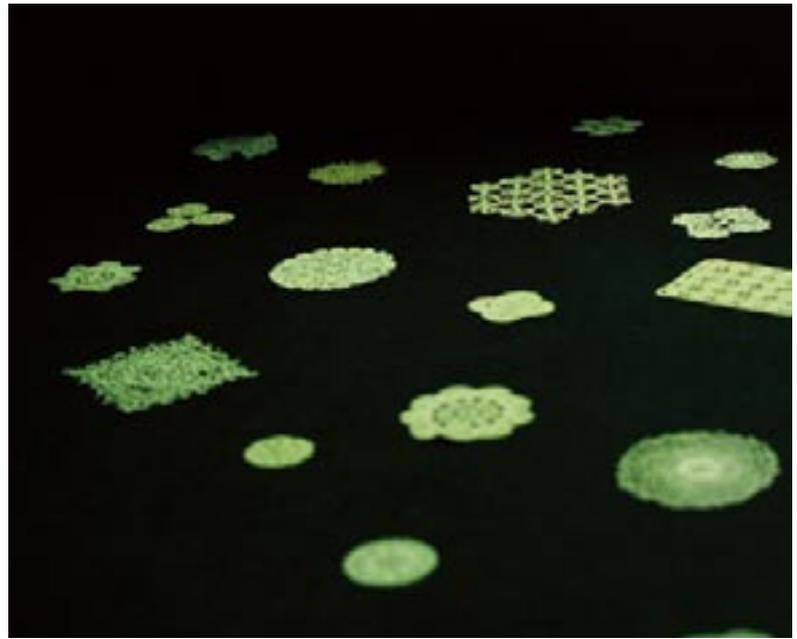
58 Ibid. p. 15.

59 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology Of Perception*, Routledge, 1996, p. 177.

The creation of endless pieces of lace, pattern after pattern – a lot of them complicated and demanding their creator’s full attention – such as my grandmother could knit for hours, proved patience and determination, as well as a care for detail and a gift for creativity. She would exchange ideas and patterns with friends, or simply decipher them by observing the finished ones. There was both a rivalry and a solidarity, to be seen in those works, as it was to be found in those women. They would sit in small groups, sipping their afternoon coffee, making small-chat in very low voices and knit, and every now and then they would be consumed by silence. Our house and all the homes I knew, were covered with those little pieces of lace that seemed to multiply magically. The lace, covering every possible surface would spread from tables to shelves,



*above: lace set as boundary surrounding the artwork*



*above right: lace spread on the floor of the dark room.*

to the backs of couches and armchairs, in a variety of sizes that would fit every purpose. Of course there was a legitimate purpose to the existence of all that lace. It would protect furniture from scratches and upholstery from dirt. The lace would be replaced regularly, washed and ironed with caution and care. But in the caution it took for it to be created I now recognize a greater need for keeping the mind occupied, busy, a creative self-inflicted work-therapy.

Perhaps it was a way for the silent women to distract their minds from issues that could not be addressed, issues that they were not allowed to discuss. Where silence is considered to be as good as gold, or rather the equivalent of obedience, expression may take silent forms such as in the case of creating lace works. They may speak with their beauty, their complicated patterns, their inventive knit work. But they also speak with their mass, slowly spreading and taking over the interior of a house. Setting rules and boundaries as to what is off limits, where we are allowed to put our cup, or our feet, keeping us on our toes. It can talk about existence and resistance in silence and, at the same time, set limitations and mark territories of influence within the confines of a home. A delicate disobedience silently spreading and taking over.

Humans have the ability to adapt and to be resourceful, even if on a subconscious level, however the mass of lace spreading, could be seen as an act relative to what American painter Georgia O' Keeffe

60 Women Artists in the 20th and 21st Century, Uta Grosenick, Taschen, 2001, p.398.

61 Reference to Porphyry: The Nymph's Cave §27, Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics Of Space, 1994 Beacon Press, p. 223

62 Mandala ("essence" + "having" or "containing", also translates as "circle-circumference" or "completion", both derived from the Tibetan term *dkyil khor*) a concentric diagram having spiritual and ritual significance in both Buddhism and Hinduism. [...] In various spiritual traditions, mandalas may be employed for focusing attention of aspirants and adepts; as a spiritual teaching tool; for establishing a sacred space; and as an aid to meditation and trance induction. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandala>)

consciously did with the size of her flower paintings. In her own words: "Most people in the city rush around so, they have no time to look at a flower. I want them to see it whether they want to or not."<sup>60</sup>

Lace in this project became my symbol of choice that served two purposes at the same time. The lace set as boundary, that people visiting the exhibition should consciously leap over in order to enter and view the installation. It was a fence between the 'I' and the 'Other' that we were called to cross. It marked the territory of an artwork that spoke about Others, but it did so in a way that I hope, people would recognize as familiar, perhaps thinking 'oh no, that lace again...?', which would make them conscious of entering someone else's space, and would keep them on their toes, presented with rules set by others, because "A threshold is a sacred thing."<sup>61</sup> At the same time, the lace-works spread on the floor of the dark room, symbolized all the silent women of the past and the present, those who could not, or who dared not speak, but whose silent works speak for them, beyond bitterness, anger or desperation, transcended into something positive, useful, and beautiful; not unlike mandalas,<sup>62</sup> the similarity of which I could not help but notice in what my grandmother and many other older women did, with their free time, keeping busy, keeping focused.

"We have to turn to things when we find it impossible, for one



*right: Isabel's 'family' in her livingroom*

reason or another, to turn to people.”<sup>63</sup> We hold on to things, we cherish them and in return they ‘protect’ us, they serve as shields that we put between us and the world that surrounds us. This is exactly the reason why we even use them as weapons, taking as much as possible away from people we once loved, thus stripping them of their ‘armor’, when we fight over things, which are not really so important. But at the same time, because we have decided that they should be important, we extract power from them, at times they keep us going, or at least we hope they will. There is a scene in American film director David Lynch’s movie *Wild At Heart*, that I always found striking, an incident that has no relation to the main plot. The two main characters of the story, on their way to escape, somewhere on the American highway, come across a traffic accident. They stop to help, finding only one survivor, a young woman, barely able to walk, her head bleeding. She is in a state of shock and clearly dying, but in spite of that, or exactly because of it, absolutely detached from what is happening to her, she is looking for her purse, so that she can put some lipstick on, as if that would fix things and reality would turn normal again. For some reason, this little ‘intermission’ from the main plot made nothing less than perfect sense.

If we can imagine incidents from our past, people and places that are out of reach, as the phantom limbs<sup>64</sup> of our existence, then objects seem to substitute for our losses, silent, inanimate, feasible.

“This paradox is that of all being in the world: when I move towards a world I bury my perceptual and practical intentions in objects which ultimately appear prior to and external to those intentions, and which nevertheless exist for me only in so far as they arouse in me thoughts or volitions. In the case under consideration, the ambiguity of knowledge amounts to this: our body comprises as it were two distinct layers, that of the habit-body and that of the body at its moments. In the first appear manipulatory movements which have disappeared from the second, and the problem how I can have the sensation of still possessing a limb which I no longer have amounts to finding out how the habitual body can act as guarantee for the body at this moment.”<sup>65</sup>

Although Merleau-Ponty is referring to loss of body parts and the

63 Akiko Busch, *The Uncommon Life Of Common Objects: Essays on Design and the Everyday*, Metropolis Books, 2005, p. 155.

64 “[...] if in the case of a man who has lost a leg, a stimulus is applied, instead of to the leg, to the path from the stump to the brain, the subject will feel a phantom leg, because the soul is immediately linked to the brain and to it alone.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology Of Perception*, Routledge, 1996, p. 87-88.

65 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology Of Perception*, Routledge, 1996, p. 95.

66 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics Of Space*, 1994 Beacon Press, p. xxii intro.

67 Akiko Busch, *The Uncommon Life Of Common Objects: Essays on Design and the Everyday*, Metropolis Books, 2005, p. 155.

lingering ‘memory’ of the body functions, his observation fits also for the mechanisms the soul chooses to use in order to come to terms with its losses and its being in the world. And so we invent the importance of objects as the perfect prosthetics. “Even if the “form” was already well-known, previously discovered, carved from “commonplaces”, before the interior poetic light was turned upon it, it was a mere object for the mind. But the soul comes and inaugurates the form, dwells in it, takes pleasure in it.”<sup>66</sup> Perhaps this is why “we so often draw from frivolous accessories when we confront our fiercest battles.”<sup>67</sup>

Feker from Ethiopia and Diana from Serbia, both choose to show me luxurious garments as their objects representing home. The dresses that Feker showed me, being silk evening gowns of the highest quality, made to last a lifetime, bought by her during a trip to her country of origin, have been worn only a few times. Feker was reluctant to wear one for me to photograph, preferring to let them hang or lie on a piece of furniture. I had a hard time convincing her to put one on, which she finally did and posed with both shyness and pride, seemingly not being used to be the center of such attention and at the same time enjoying it. I loved the fact that the silk evening gowns she chose to show me embodied a sense of luxury and even female vanity in a way that it speaks about her wish of being given the opportunity to celebrate the frivolities, beyond the necessities of the bare essentials of everyday life. At the same time, though, I felt there is a gap, quite familiar to me, in

*right: Feker in her evening gown*

*far right: Diana wearing her her fur over her shoulders*



fact, between the lives we live and the lives we wish to live, the objects we choose to project those hopes and dreams on, and therefore cherish, but at the same time rarely dare to use in fear of damaging or even destroying them, and along with them our hopes and dreams and wishes. I could not help but wonder whether, along with fine clothes preserved in our closets, saved for the special days, we also lock our lives, behind the closet doors? For what is the point of accumulating possessions if we do not even get to celebrate by using them? What are the special occasions if not the ones we make for ourselves at each and every given opportunity?

Diana called the fur she showed me a dilemma. She had no part in the decision to make the fur, and yet she accepted it as a gift. It was purchased by her mother in the 1970's. A family heritage, something that has an objective value, and at the same time something that Diana would never have wished for herself. An act that she would never have imposed on another creature for the sake of frivolities. To kill an animal in order to look good wearing its fur on her shoulders for a night at the opera? And yet, she said, it is done and there is no way back. She kept the fur. To give it away, or to throw it away, would not bring the animal back. The fur is hanging in her closet, never to be worn, a luxurious memento in human cruelty. In making a conscious, ethical decision to preserve the memory of things we would wish to forget, about ourselves as well as about others, especially those things we wish had never happened, Diana acknowledged the fact of the loss of innocence, and she refused to simply look the other way, she incorporated it in her existence, and in her choice to show this fur to me, to us, she made a decision to preserve and share this knowledge. "The side of truth is where the spoken words are no longer written on paper or on the wind, but engraved in the texture of things."<sup>68</sup>

Polish-born Ania Bien is an artist who let objects speak in her work *Hotel Polen* from 1986. The artwork is constituted by replicas of menu stands from Hotel Polen, which was in Amsterdam and burned to the ground in 1977. On the replica stands arranged in a closed circle, she placed enlarged images, of winter landscapes, death camp I.D. photographs, a map of central Poland. She portrayed, the loss, without depicting the horror of the

68 Jacques Ranciere, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, University of Minnesota, 1994, p. 57.

Holocaust. She chose to use objects that had no relation to the history she dealt with, but to which she gave an allegorical meaning, making use of the accidental relation she recognized in them.<sup>69</sup>

We certainly like to ‘read’ history on the surface of things. Our desire for it creates an aura that surrounds them. Busch quotes Chilean poet Pablo Neruda’s *Ode to Things*<sup>70</sup> and while I recognize the importance of things in our lives, my mind cannot help but ‘fly’ to the shrines we create in dead poets’, authors’, and other significant peoples’ houses. The exhibition of objects, from the tiny common ones on desks, to whole spaces, becomes a ‘must’ for us to witness. We become pilgrims that seek to get as close to their aura as possible. It is the aura of the people as well as of the objects that surrounded them. I wonder if that can apply also to the common people, so that this pilgrimage can come full circle. It certainly does so for the things owned by people we are familiar with. Can it happen for those who are the Others?

69 David Levi Strauss, *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics*, Chapter: A Second Gaze, Aperture, 2005, p.115-122.

70 Pablo Neruda, *Ode to Things*, Bulfinch, 1994

“many things conspired/  
to tell me the whole story./  
Not only did they touch me,/ or my hand touched them:/  
they were/  
so close/  
that they were a part/  
of my being,/  
they were so alive with me/  
that they lived half my life/  
and will die half my death.”/

71 John Berger, *About Looking*, Vintage International, 1991, p. 51.

72 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, *The Work of Art in The Age Of Mechanical Reproduction*, Schocken Books, 1988, p. 225.

73 Marshall McLuhan, *The New Media Reader*, *The Medium Is The Message*, MIT Press, 2003, p. 203.

## **THE THREE GRACES OF PHOTOGRAPHY: PRESENCE, DISTANCE, AURA**

Photography documents what is there, what exists as a three-dimensional shape, living or still. It manifests presence. In doing so it creates an aura around the subject which it depicts. The action of pointing the camera and taking a picture is the equivalent of pointing a finger to show whom or what we noticed. We ‘capture’ our visual note and save it to share with others what is to become a two-dimensional visual slice of frozen time. Simply because someone pointed a camera towards someone or something, this someone or something becomes significant; in the words of English author and art critic John Berger: “Photography, because it preserves the appearance of an event or a person, has always been closely associated with the idea of the historical.”<sup>71</sup> Benjamin wrote that: ‘In photography, exhibition value begins to displace cult value all along the line.’<sup>72</sup> Perhaps exhibition value has become cult value. As Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan explained “This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology.”<sup>73</sup>

Of course photography can hardly be called new technology nowadays, however, over the years of its existence, our perception of what it represents has changed and yet remains the same. What a photograph shows is ‘significant’, because the photographer made a choice to point a camera towards it, and it is ‘real’ because we do not point towards nothingness, we point towards an existence, a presence of some sort. In that sense, the act of photographing is ‘arresting’ a certain presence that is considered to be significant, and informing about this existence and its significance by representing it in a two-dimensional visual form. The arrival of digital technology has brought along with it a seed of doubt, in relation to the truth of a photograph; however this question about photography’s truthfulness, whether it represents reality or not, was existent already a long time ago. The fact that from ever harder to detect any sort of editing, nowadays it can become impossible, is merely a symptom. “The most modern thing about digital photography is that it reflects our knowledge about human memory.”<sup>74</sup> If we go back to McLuhan’s observation, it becomes clear how by taking photographs we not only reflect our knowledge about memory, we can also deliberately use them as a tool to shape memory, opinion, view.

When I first spoke with Diana she mentioned that her moving to Sweden was not related to the war, which burst out in Yugoslavia and ended up with the formation of seven new States – Kosovo’s status still in dispute. Right from the start, she made it clear that she was not a refugee. Why was it so important for her to let me know that she was not a refugee? So that my gaze would not be one of pity? We can form general opinions about what refugees are, we have seen them in old black and white photos and documentaries, carrying their tiny bundles they have salvaged in their backs, slowly walking in endless rows, puppet-like, worn-out, dirty, often resigned. Their faces are not recognizable, they come from the past, or they come from faraway places. We look at their images to see what a refugee looks like, not to recognize a face. We are protected by the distance created by the exemplary use of their images. Our information is completed by statistics. Numbers, percentages, figures that translate to amounts of units displaced. Even if our gaze is arrested by a face – the

74 Akiko Busch, *The Uncommon Life Of Common Objects: Essays on Design and the Everyday*, Metropolis Books, 2005, p. 129.

photographer having decided that it is beautiful or simply interesting – usually this happens in a way that it still promotes a ‘one-dimensional’, quality being of interest, that of the refugee. No wonder that one does not wish to be seen as being or having been in that position. The technology of today could be used to add interactive features, info-bubbles that pop-up with the roll of a mouse over the faces, giving us details about family members, studies, jobs they occupied, music instruments they may play, personal data. Would that make a distant viewer value refugees again as complete human beings? Would their aura be regained?

Chilean photographer Alfredo Jaar decided not to show the images he collected in Rwanda, instead he entombed 550 of them in an equal amount of black linen boxes, which bore silk-screened descriptions of what the images depicted, in his work *Real Pictures* from 1995.<sup>75</sup> Jaar’s choice is discussed in the chapter named *A Sea of Grief is not a Proscenium*, by David Levi Strauss in his book *Between the Eyes*.<sup>76</sup> His was a different approach to that of Sebastiao Salgado, who photographed the Ethiopian famine of 1984 as if depicting a biblical disaster in the narrative we are familiar with through the cinematographic Studios of Hollywood and Cinecitta. “The dual powers of photography—to generate documents and to create works of visual art—have produced some remarkable exaggerations about what photographers ought or ought not to do.”<sup>77</sup>

It is very hard to meet another person face-to-face and stay on a projected surface, without moving inwards, towards their unique personal richness. People, although multifaceted, their qualities may escape the first encounter, however a fleeting manifestation of their existence is always present. In meeting with these ladies, I got to know them even if only a little. We spent a little time drinking coffee and talking about this and that, on most occasions. In most cases I was lucky enough to be invited to their homes. It gave me the opportunity to see them move about their private space and it made them feel comfortable – their turf, their rules, them being in control. The portraits of Diana, Ulla, Alexandra, Isabel and Katerina have a snapshot quality that I admire. It is the type of quality one comes across while leafing through family photo albums. The subject at ease, facing a

75 [www.alfredojaar.net](http://www.alfredojaar.net)

76 David Levi Strauss, *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics*, Aperture, 2005, p.79-104.

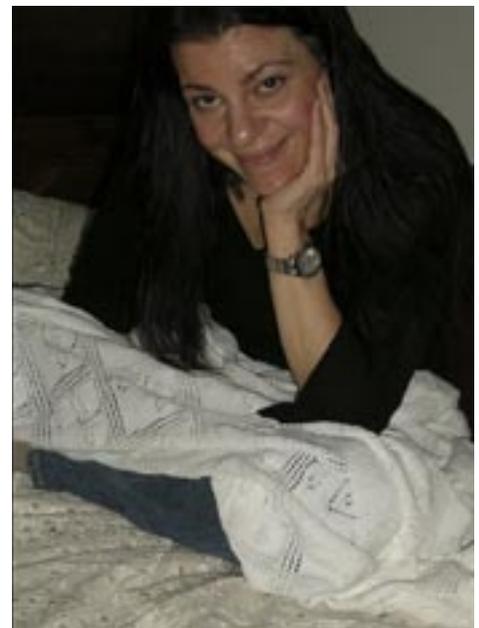
77 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Farrer, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2003, p. 76.

*top right Diana*

*top far right: Katerina*

*below right: Ulla*

*below far right: Alexandra*



friendly person, even if the camera stands in between. We do not face the Other in those images, or we come to the realization that the Other is not so different, not so distant. By pointing my camera towards them, I declared their existence as significant.

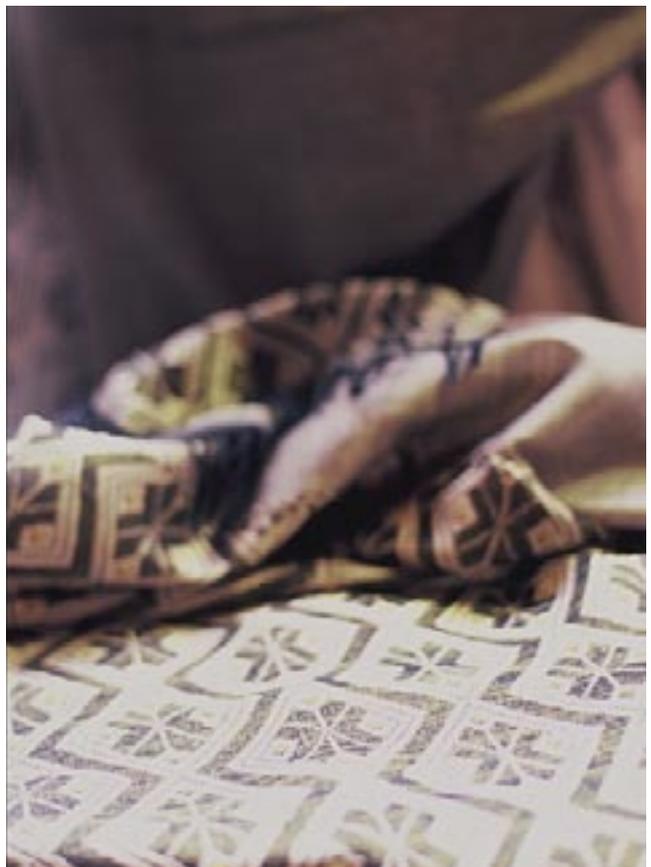
There was no photographic style to be followed, no formal setting of any sort, no technical guidelines even. I used whatever I was given. Natural or artificial light were captured according to the amount of light the day and hour provided me with, the colors of the images were affected accordingly. This was adopted as a conscious decision, after all I do not believe that the truth of an image is to be found in the exact reproduction of the colors of the object photographed. In the reality

of present time the human eye adapts to the given light and deals with it as 'normal', and afterwards memory either 'swims' in a sea of moving images, therefore fleeting, or 'bows' to the 'truth' of the fixed image which is provided by the photograph. The camera was set depending on where the subject to be photographed would normally sit. More or less, the same applied for the photographs of the objects. If they were positioned in a specific place in the house, there they were photographed; such was the case for Isabel's family of dolls. Alexandra held the little heart in her hands. Ulla's shoes were laid casually on the floor.

In the case of Diana and Feker, where their objects were garments, I asked the ladies to wear them – so that the clothes would fulfill their purpose – which is how they were photographed. Feker, not having much free time – being a single mother, agreed to allow me to photograph her at work, during a break. She works at the church's second hand store in Bergsjön, so we picked a curtain that was for sale, which would complement the color of her dress and used it as a divider and a mask of the clutter around. In the photographs of the rest of her dresses as objects, I consciously decided to let slices of the surrounding space slip into the frames of the pictures, to have an effect that would be

*below: one of Feker's dresses*

*below right: detail of Feker's dress*



*top left: Anna Lena*

*top right: Katja*

*below left: Anna Lena's  
kitchen towel*

*below right: Katja's painting  
reproduction*



less formal than a museum-documentation.

Katja and Anna Lena, chose to meet me in my studio. The setting in these two cases was as neutral as the space used. I photographed them both sitting on an armchair, attempting to keep as much of it out of the picture. The same applied for their objects, a reproduction of a painting and a kitchen towel, which were layed on neutral surfaces. Since the surroundings were not related to the 'story' the face or object 'told', I tried to keep it as 'silent' as possible. Both ladies look a little uncomfortable, which is usually the case when photographed like that; the awkwardness of the situation is manifested in their faces. Given the conditions I did not really have the opportunity to photograph many variations for their portraits. However, I believe this is part of the 'photographic game'. On rare occasions we feel that the photographer did us justice, often we are not satisfied with how we look on pictures,



*top, and top right: Katerina's photographs*

*right: Katerina leafing through her albums*

*far right: The only photographs Katerina's parents possess, depicting their youth*

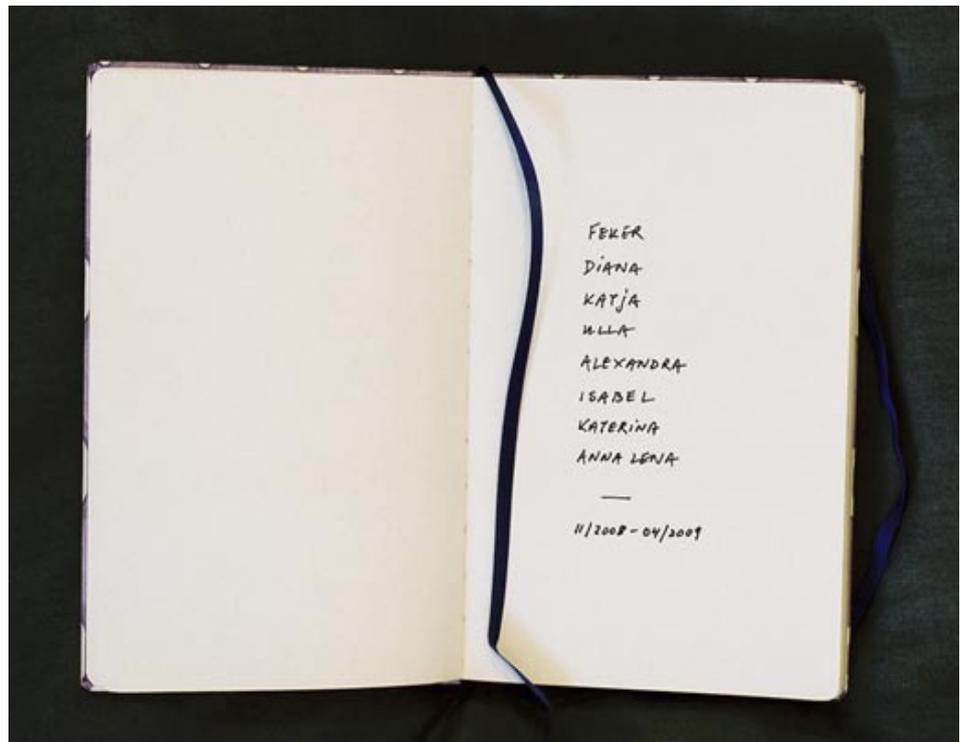


not recognizing ourselves, the way we wish we would look.

Katerina's case was interesting in that she chose to show me photographs as the object representing home to her. She showed me albums and boxes full of them, depicting her life, her friends, the places she has been to. Home are her memories – already at the age of twenty-something, that was a weird realization for me, but perhaps it is related to the exposure to the medium of photography she has had, as opposed to older people. Katerina noticed that in comparison to her parents collection of photographs, which are just three, she probably has too many, a plethora that does not necessarily 'walk hand in hand' with value. A quantity of moments saved, but not necessarily one that depicts quality of life. In this plethora of images she already recognizes that we now pose, smile and live for the camera, which once was used to depict us during the course of our lives. Our concern being about saving

*right: index page of  
the notebook photographed,  
and projected as part  
of the slide show*

*below: the notebook exhibited  
on the coffee-table, next to the  
entrance of the dark room*



memories more than living in the moments that these memories are spawned. We are corrupted by the power of camera to record and document all our otherwise fleeting flaws. The gaze of the Other falls upon us even in our absence. By this knowledge, are we doomed to act, mask and pretend? As Benjamin wrote: “The film has enriched our field of perception with methods which can be illustrated by those of Freudian theory. Fifty years ago, a slip of the tongue passed more or less unnoticed.”<sup>78</sup>

Along with the portraits and the objects, I felt it was important for the notebook containing the handwritten stories to be photographed and projected, aside from the actual notebook, which was presented as part of the artwork, on the table, in the gallery space before entering the dark room. I toyed with the idea of the notebook pages being blown up, out of proportion, projected on the screen inside the darkroom, their importance magnified, for the viewers to notice and be able to read, in this relation that photography can create, where we can go as close to the image as possible and inspect every detail, but still not be able to touch the actual object that is depicted. A ‘here and now’ that is inescapably ‘somewhere else and sometime ago’, an appearance that speaks of absence and distance. The actual notebook was also there proving the existence, of what was projected inside the dark room – not

<sup>78</sup> Walter Benjamin,  
Illuminations: Essays and  
Reflections, The Work of Art  
in The Age Of Mechanical  
Reproduction, Schocken Books,  
1988, p. 235.

<sup>79</sup> reference to French painter  
Rene Magritte’s work ‘La  
trahison des images’, which  
while depicting a pipe is  
accompanied by a text  
underneath that reads ‘Ceci n’est  
pas une pipe’ (this is not a pipe).

the notebook but the pictures of the notebook.<sup>79</sup> However, I feel the impact of the projected images of the notebook pages was far greater than the object itself, to the eyes of the viewer – at least in my presence during the exhibition of the artwork, I do not remember anybody, checking the object and leafing through the pages. We are satisfied to observe from the safe distance that photography provides us with, but do we approach, do we come closer? “Has the meaning erased the sign, or has the sign abolished the meaning?”<sup>80</sup>

## **PATHS OF LANGUAGE**

What is language? A system of thoughts, ideas formed into words, formed into sentences, but also a system of aural and of visual signs. A means of communication, formed through the ages. A manifestation of culture. Different languages expressing different cultures and origins, all optimal in their diverse means, but at the same time, not so diverse in their structure. Along with them are transcribed in each of us the ways and habits of our individual origin. Language is homeland, our identity formed from the everyday communication to the complicated thought, within us wherever we may go. The way we use language speaks about who we are, but also about who we wish to be. But language has set rules and it obeys them, rules that speak about its culture’s structure, if we care to listen.

Coates observes that since language is important in the socialization process and children are socialized into culturally approved gender roles, they also learn to use gender-appropriate language.<sup>81</sup> She identifies differences in the use of language as described by researchers in their studies on the forms of conversation a) between male groups as “gladiatorial, a contest in language with a familiar topic the arena,”<sup>82</sup> which she identifies as a style of interaction based on power.<sup>83</sup> as opposed to b) female groups who adopt a cooperative rather than competitive approach, “with a willingness to accept confusion and speculation as an end rather than rely on a dogma of formulae”<sup>84</sup>, which she identifies as a style based on support and solidarity.<sup>85</sup> This latter type of conversational approach has generally been labeled as ‘Woman Language’ and later identified as ‘Powerless Language’,<sup>86</sup> given women’s relative lack of power in societies, which is used as an explanation for

80 Giorgio Agamben, *The man without content*, Stanford University Press, 1999, p.10.

81 Jennifer Coates, *Women, Men and Language*, a Sociolinguistic account of Gender Differences in Language, Longman, 1999, p. 166.

82 Ibid. p. 136.

83 Ibid. p. 136.

84 Ibid. p. 137.

85 Ibid. p. 136.

86 Ibid. p. 134.



*right: the notebook as it was photographed in order to be presented as part of the slide show*

their linguistic behavior seen as a positively chosen strategy aiming at the protection of face for a relatively powerless speaker, while not attacking their addressee.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, Coates mentions women's sensitivity to linguistic norms, which she attributes to their insecure social position.<sup>88</sup> This issue she supports with the example of Lower Middle Class women's speech often being mistakenly identified as Upper Middle Class, whereas men's speech from the same class is mistakenly identified as Upper Working Class.<sup>89</sup> In short, women chose their words carefully.

The written language being more formal than the spoken one, being at once expression and document, demands caution even more so. We prepare for this type of expression, we formulate strategies. We used to write cautiously, in content as well as in form, even our hand-writing manifested our care, our letters were as well-proportioned as they could be, no mistakes and no smudges. We used to choose fine paper to write on. Nowadays, the content and form choices remain, and as a substitute to a cautious calligraphic hand-writing we choose the layout of our text-editing tool, the type, style and size of fonts and so on and so forth. In doing so, it is important to be noted that, we give up our personal mark in the action of writing. The one that others used to recognize as our own, a unique one for each person.

87 Jennifer Coates, *Women, Men and Language, a Sociolinguistic account of Gender Differences in Language*, Longman, 1999, p. 134.

88 *Ibid.* p. 78.

89 *Ibid.* p. 71.

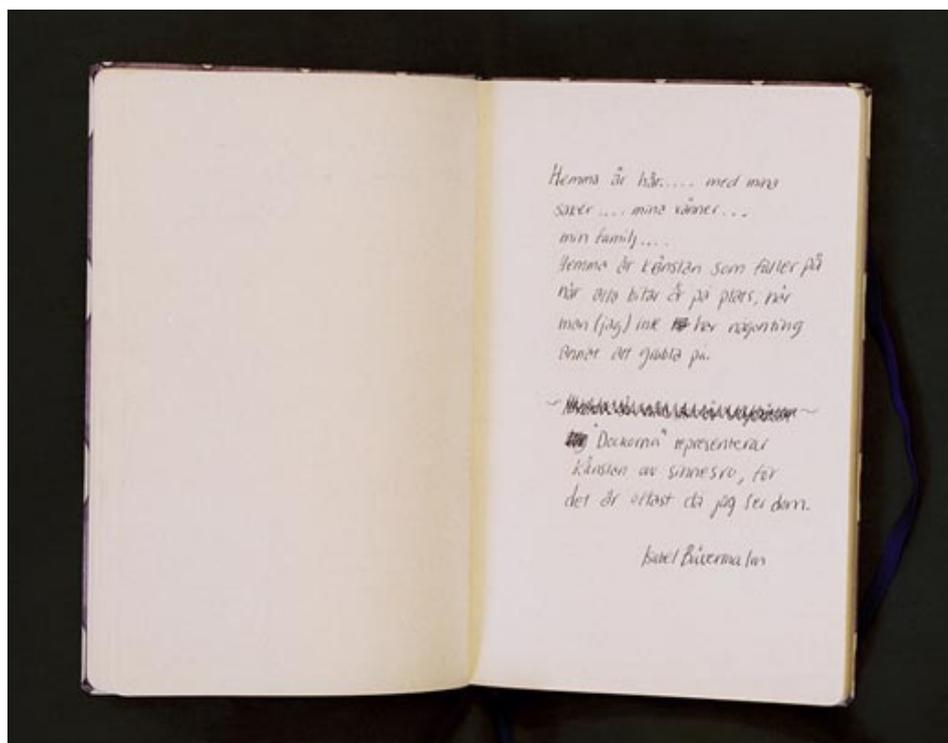
The texts hand-written on paper in the notebook, symbolise in my point of view, the intellectual trace one leaves as a manifestation of existence, in the most simple way. A way that was common until recently, but slowly seems to fade in favour of the computer-typed text and even the mobile-phone messaging, as opposed to the old-fashioned memo on a piece of paper. Our hand-writing used to symbolise our uniqueness, a trace that our friends and family instantly recognized. As time goes by, we reduce the times we write as well as the amount of text we write by hand. I wished to point out this manifestation of identity informed through our own bodies but also through ‘mother-language’. I believe it was one more way of coming closer to those ladies, the handwriting text becoming a personal contact.

I chose the notebook as an object one had to be involved with in order to see, an object that reveals itself page by page, if the viewer-reader wishes for it to be revealed, but not otherwise. After the end of the project and even after the end of the exhibition I came to recognise this notebook as a tribute to the diaries, which teenage girls used to have and used to exchange between them, where they wrote and copied poems and paragraphs of texts they had read and liked, notes and little mementoes of friendship and recognition to each other. The moment of realization came to me, when I ‘saw’ the little heart Alexandra drew on

*right: Alexandra's text  
hand-written in the notebook*



right: Isabel's text  
hand-written in the notebook,  
the only one with smudges.



the left side of her name, in the page she wrote. The diary was the sort of object that was treated with great care and was filled with variations of hand-writing, but in the end it did not escape the various mistakes and smudges, as it is inevitable for people, being the imperfect creatures we are, not to make mistakes here and there.

Nevertheless, when dealing with an object like this, a diary that is shared among friends, mistakes are not met with a judgemental gaze. They even become endearing expressions of individuality we tend to recognise in our friends, the repetition of a misspelling, or an expression used incorrectly over and over again, in the end becomes a trademark, for the people we accept and love. Being educated in a German school, and being surrounded by classmates whose parents were half-German and half-Greek, I recall smiling at mistakes my friends did; incorrect intonations of specific words, or the translation of expressions directly from one language to the other, which ended up, not making any sense to an outsider, were crystal-clear to us. I am certain that to a scientist concerned with the preservation of language, we must have been a nightmare, but if the basic function of language is communication, then we managed to communicate very well. There is a fine passage in American mathematician Norbert Wiener's<sup>90</sup> work 'The human use of human beings. Cybernetics and Society' about the transmission of

90 Norbert Wiener (1894– 1964), American theoretical and applied mathematician. A pioneer in the study of stochastic and noise processes, contributing work relevant to electronic engineering, electronic communication, and control systems. Wiener also founded cybernetics, a field that formalizes the notion of feedback and has implications for engineering, systems control, computer science, biology, philosophy, and the organization of society.

information and the disregarding of ‘noise’, where he makes a point about the human ability to block out irrelevant information, and makes a distinction between the ‘phonetic’ aspect of language which would represent its form and the ‘semantic’ aspect which refers to language’s content.

“[...] while the English of an intelligent foreigner whose pronunciation is marked by the country of his birth, or who speaks literary English, will be semantically good and phonetically bad. On the other hand, the average synthetic after-dinner speech is phonetically good and semantically bad.”<sup>91</sup>

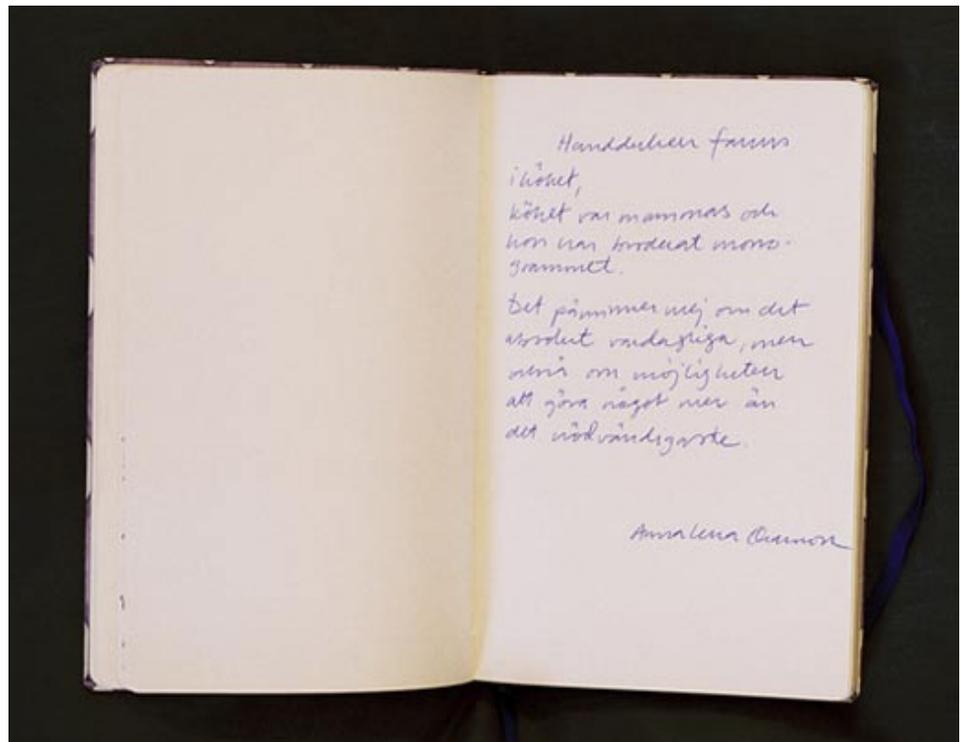
It may depend on the good will and the ‘flexibility’ of the listener to some extent, whether the message will be understood or not.

I asked the ladies to write the stories of their objects – the explanations of why these objects ‘meant’ home to them in their mother language. This gesture would reposition the boundaries as to who is inside and who is outside. I have to admit, I was also hoping that some visitor would recognise their language and would be able to read, happy to be included. For the rest of us, not being able to understand what the text meant, a narration in English would have to suffice. I have to admit, that the choice for the use of the English language is a trap we easily fall in, it being perceived as a lingua franca of today, us believing the convention that everybody speaks English, something that is not true, of course, and thus making it inevitably a choice that excludes many people. Certainly, had I sufficient knowledge of the Swedish language, it would probably be my choice, since the artwork was created and presented in Sweden. Anyhow, to move back from the form to the content, this narration was the outcome of what I held in my memory, from the stories the authors told me. During the process I did not make any notes, relying on the hope that I would retain the important parts of the stories. Of course, it is needless to say that these parts would be those that I considered to be important, in my judgement, enlightened by my knowledge, informed by the education I happened to receive over the years, in the part of the world where I come from. Perhaps the viewers held in their memory some piece of information from the narration and now that information travels towards destinations unknown to me and unknown to its author, transformed by the knowledge, the memory and the imagination of those viewers. Stories

91 Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings, Cybernetics and Society*, 1954, p. 79.

*right: Anna Lena's text  
hand-written in the notebook*

*below: the calligraphic 'K' stitched  
on Anna Lena's Kitchen towel.*

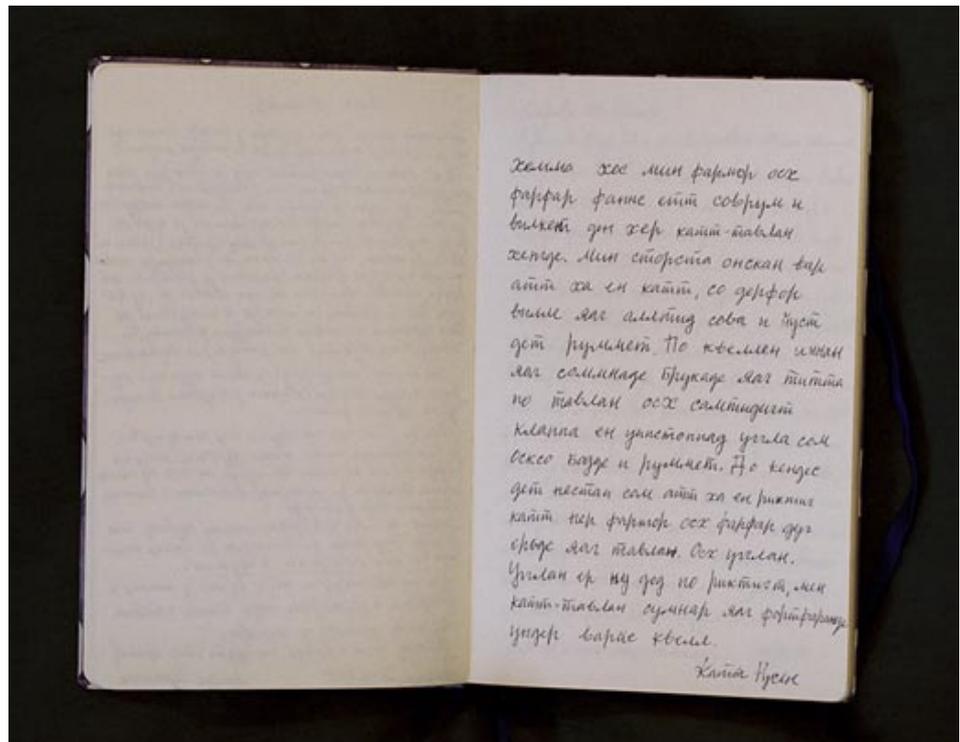


travelling by word of mouth.

With the notebook I was aiming to picture the variations of alphabets, scripts and languages, all valuable and valid. However, as is often the case, our prior theoretically well laid plans change according to what we come across. Three of the eight ladies said that they considered their mother language to be the Swedish language, dismissing my dreams for variety. Isabel always communicated with her father in English, him coming from a British colony that had the English language established as the official language of the State. Anna Lena having been adopted as a baby, by her Swedish parents, has never spoken a word in Korean. Perhaps the only relation to the writing of the culture she originates from is to be seen in the object of her choice, a kitchen towel that has a calligraphic 'K' stitched on one side, if it can be said that Calligraphy could be the distant connecting link, but that again is just me guessing. Perhaps, there lies the surprise, in that we expect Others to be different and they are not.

In Katja's case my surprise was even more refreshing, and yet, what happened was not new to me, I come across it often, I myself do it, but I had never thought about it in that frame of mind. Katja, whose mother came from Russia and whose father is a Swede, said to me that she does not really know how to write in Russian, but it did seem

right: Katja's text  
hand-written in Swedish, but with  
the use of Cyrillic alphabet.



important to her to signify this part of her heritage, possibly feeling that to disregard it as part of herself would be like presenting less than the whole picture. She came up with the idea to write in Swedish by using the Cyrillic alphabet. Katja went on to explain to me that this was the code she and her father used very often in notes they exchanged. As she had told me during our meetings, her mother faced troubles in her attempts to communicate in Swedish, because the structure of her mother language, being different than that of the Swedish one, made her use expressions that in Swedish sounded impolite. As a result Katja's mother withdrew, and felt unwelcome in her husband's homeland. Perhaps, then it was her husband's way of showing her recognition and appreciation in the way he invented this Cyrillic-written Swedish code for in-family written communication. An attempt to take a step towards her direction, since she had left her homeland to follow him. Katja's 'code' would only be deciphered by those who speak Swedish and at the same time are familiar with the Cyrillic alphabet. In my mind I pictured those possible visitors at the exhibition smiling, while becoming participants in a harmless conspiracy.

My familiarity with this creative approach in writing has a totally different starting point, one which is simply the short comings of contemporary digital technologies, or the disregarding of the variety of

languages used to communicate via the internet, which often leads me to write in the Greek language making use of the Latin alphabet, when I exchange e-mails with friends. In doing so, I realized that I have to reinvent orthography, which is something that also those who respond to my e-mails do; their adaptation-interpretation of spelling varying from mine, which is something that makes the whole thing even more interesting. Again, I am sure this must be a nightmare to those who aim to preserve language and save it from the hybris of such simplifications, but to me it proves our human tendency to adapt, and find ways to solve problems, when they rise in front of us as walls to keep us apart. Of course as everything else in life, these solutions come at a price.

### **THE PILES AND VILES OF TECHNOLOGY**

When I first started writing on a computer, I came to the sad realization that I had to become conscious about the orthography again. While searching for the position of a key on the keyboard, I lost the long time ago gained ability – and therefore forgotten – of automatically writing without thinking about the spelling of words. I felt deeply humiliated, because I always considered myself good in spelling, and suddenly, it seemed my ability was lost in remediation. In the same way, I hold a mobile phone and suddenly I feel puzzled about which button to press, although I was born into a society where telephones existed in most households I knew, and in which television provided us with examples of a future life, where people would be able to communicate with each other by talking to devices which would look like futuristic watches, tied around their wrists. This time, more or less, has arrived and mobile phones include clocks, calculators, GPS devices, games, radios, cameras, mp3 players etc. I stopped considering funny the actions of people who seem to be talking to themselves, intensely facing their palm, while pacing aimlessly up and down, only to realize that in fact they are not talking to an imaginary little friend, but that they are simply talking on the phone. In short like every one around me, I got used to the existence of the mobile phones; the mobile phones, which have become much more than a necessity that solves the problems of communication while being on the move or in the event of an emergency. The solution was promoted as fashion. Extra features were added and the mobile phones became a fashionable, disposable

necessity to all, following the path which, if I am not mistaken, was pioneered in 1983, by Swiss watch brand Swatch.

“For Baudrillard tools and machines in contemporary consumer culture lose their instrumental functions, their practical uses, their use value. They instead operate as signs, fashion, toys or games” observes Lister.<sup>92</sup> Mobile phones from the beginning of their existence were seen as an accessory to be renewed, if not with the seasons, certainly every year. I am not in a position to say whether mobile phones and other devices could last longer, given the possible limitations in the technology provided during their invention, but I have certainly noticed how they gradually become useless once their guarantee time has expired. Adding features to such devices is a quest to be followed, adding longevity is not. There are devices that are designed to last significantly longer and those devices include exquisite and exclusive useful and even more advanced and amusing special features. I am almost certain that those devices are beyond the financial capacities of many people, or, depending on the level of necessity we elevate them to signify to us, we might consider the cost to be logical. However most people are condemned – and at the same time happy – to buy ever so often, cheap devices that function for a short time-span and are to be replaced once they start failing. “More and more we must accept a standardized, inoffensive and insignificant product which, like the white bread of the bakeries, is made rather for its keeping and selling properties than for its food value.”<sup>93</sup> And yet what to me, being safely rooted in a progressed society, feels on many occasions like a frivolous luxury we indulge ourselves in, simply because we can afford to, I cannot help but accept how important and valuable a mobile phone is to those who are away from their families and away from their homelands. An approachable technology that, compared to older standards, at a very low price brings one, in an instant, close to loved ones. No wonder that mobile phones are the technological product which thrives in the developing countries markets, as opposed to the computer which is a much more common tool to ‘surf the net’ and exchange information, in the West. Nevertheless, the West is also divided in those who are fortunate and the Others.

“Whites are more likely to have access to the internet from home than Blacks or Hispanics have from any location. Black and

92 Martin Lister, *New Media: A Critical Introduction*, 2003, p. 232.

93 Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings, Cybernetics and Society*, 1954, p. 132.

Hispanic households are approximately one-third as likely to have home Internet access as households of Asian/Pacific Islander descent, and roughly two-fifths as likely as White households.”<sup>94</sup> Hungarian-born British art historian Arnold Hauser in his *Social History of Art* saw the new art of Cinematography as a possible tool for the masses to emancipate and express themselves, because it was democratic and popular, due to its mechanic origin that allowed cheap reproducibility.<sup>95</sup> Nowadays, the same is said about the new media technologies, however, it is clear that those in power do not easily give away their established positions or share them. For example: “Women have to add computers as a new way of receiving threats.”<sup>96</sup> Perhaps we could speak about a remediation of inequality practices?

In 1997 the Hamburger Kunsthalle – Galerie der Gegenwart announced that it would be “the first museum” in the world to host an international Net art competition. The project was named *Extension*. Out of the total 280 entries, 200 artworks were created by German artist Cornelia Sollfrank with the use of one piece of software, which scanned the Web for existing HTML material and remixed the data. She fabricated names of faux female Net artists, of various nationalities and registered them, so the majority of contestants ended up being female, nevertheless all three prize winners were male. After the winners were made public Sollfrank exposed her action and attributed the result to the widespread sexism which biases artist selections for exhibitions. Her work named *Female Extension* aimed to criticize the dominance of men in the online world and the technology industries. Later Sollfrank developed the software she used in the creation of the submissions and named it *Net Art Generator*.<sup>97</sup> This example goes to show how our perception of what is worthy of paying attention too and acknowledge as important can subconsciously be biased by the androcentric attitude of society at large. One thing we will never know is whether Sollfrank would stand a chance to win a prize had she registered as herself to exhibit this work in its whole, as it was revealed after the end of the competition.

“Media not only influence the way in which we see and experience our world but are products of the world in which we live.”<sup>98</sup>

94 Martin Lister, *New Media: A Critical Introduction*, 2003, p. 199.

95 Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art v. 4*, 1951, Rutledge 1999, p. 244.

96 Martin Lister, *New Media: A Critical Introduction*, 2003, p. 181.

97 Mark Tribe - Reena Jana, *New Media Art*, Taschen, Köln, 2006, p. 88.

98 Martin Lister, *New Media: A Critical Introduction*, 2003, p. 190.

The obvious waste of natural resources and the amount of useless junk piling in ever growing heights, is something that already in the 1950's, Wiener saw as the equivalent of Alice's Mad Tea Party, where, at the exhaustion of tea and cakes at one seat, Mad Hatter and the March Hare moved and occupied the next.<sup>99</sup> Meanwhile, we are comforted by "the idea that we will all, globally or even just in terms of the rich countries of the world, at some point be equally technologically able to 'catch up'."<sup>100</sup> I probably should have started by stating my personal dysfunctional relation to technology, but it seems I am not alone. To paraphrase illustrator's Charles M. Schulz's Peanuts character Peppermint Patty, I believe "Technology is the awful feeling that you know less today than you did yesterday."<sup>101</sup> I get this feeling quite often and I find it pretty annoying. I believe technology to be useful and fun, I enjoy using it, but I hate spending my time learning how. It is supposed to serve me. Why is it then that in order to be able to use it, I have to 'waste' time adjusting, reprogramming myself, my way of thinking and working to its ways of functioning?

"[...] to be alive is to participate in a continuous stream of influences from the outer world and acts on the outer world, in which we are merely the transitional stage. In the figurative sense, to be alive to what is happening in the world, means to participate in a continual development of knowledge and its unhampered exchange."<sup>102</sup>

The problem is raised at the crest where the memory and the quest for new information meet. "[...] the ambiguity of knowledge amounts to this: our body comprises as it were two distinct layers, that of the habit-body and that of the body at its moments."<sup>103</sup> observed Merleau-Ponty. "[...] living beings showed (a) a spontaneous tendency to develop in many directions, and (b) a tendency to follow the pattern of their ancestors."<sup>104</sup> observed Wiener. Both, each emerging from a different scientific starting point, and even addressing different issues, came to the same conclusion about how humans act and develop, how the human mind functions. This conclusion is the existence of patterns formed by the experienced knowledge turned into memory, which is expressed as a conservative restrained approach, in the emergence of new data, and at the same time the curiosity that pushes us forward when faced with the new data, the 'spontaneous tendency to develop'. The fear of the unknown and at the same time the need to find out what lies ahead.

99 Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings, Cybernetics and Society*, 1954, p. 46.

100 Martin Lister, *New Media: A Critical Introduction*, 2003, p. 180.

101 In fact Peppermint Patty says "Subtraction is the awful feeling that you know less today than you did yesterday". Peppermint Patty's little Book of Blunters, by Charles M. Schultz, Ravette Publishing 2001. p. 28.

102 Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings, Cybernetics and Society*, 1954, p. 122.

103 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, 2007, p 95.

104 Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings, Cybernetics and Society*, 1954, p. 37.

The fast pace in the advances of technological innovation concerning digital technologies in photography, combined with the high cost a relatively good digital camera has and the very short amount of time it takes for new improved camera models to appear in the market and soon transform the previous ones into obsolete relics, in a weird race where the one that comes last is the winner, were the reasons for which I still do not own a digital camera. Moreover, my analog equipment is far from inadequate and relatively new. I am not to imply that I would not wish to own a digital camera but until now my financial priorities were different. However, during the course of my art project, I came very often to dream of having a digital camera. At the beginning of the progress I wanted to create an old fashioned analog slide-show, with the use of a slide projector. But the process of meeting and photographing the ladies was slow and unregulated; added to that, there were technical issues raised, which in the end made the choice seem unfortunate. Already I had started to photograph, having loaded my camera with positive film, and my camera ended up being 'held hostage' by this, because I could not use it for anything else. On top of this, the images were 'trapped' inside the camera, latent, in undeveloped form, making it impossible to even know what I had done so far. In the end, having decided to project the work as a slide-show of digital images, I had to develop and then scan the analog images, in order to acquire the images the way I needed them to be in the final form.

With the use of a digital camera, the whole process would have been much more simple, less time consuming, not to mention cheaper – provided the cost of purchase for a digital camera would not be included of course – and last but not least so much less stressful. Truth be told, I was offered a digital camera to use, for which I am grateful and which I held on to, more as a last resource solution than anything else. I ended up not using it. Although I studied its manual and toyed around with it, I did not feel that I managed in a short time to familiarize myself with it. I feel confident in using my analog camera and its variety of equipment. My hands 'know' where the various buttons are, they 'speak' its language fluently. With a new unknown piece of equipment I would have to 'stumble at every step', spend time to search and face the increased possibility of mistakes, that I would not be able to

foresee, and what is more, I would have to do so, while being exposed in the eyes of others, possibly seeming unqualified to people who do not know me and who offered to collaborate with me and would be exposed themselves in my pictures. My body of habit had its way.

During the installation of the exhibition there were more troubles to be faced. As I know from my previous professional engagement as a graphic designer, various applications demand various types of file encoding. Where the stress factor in analog photography would have decreased to the level of extinction – the slides developed, put in their little plastic frames, set in their tray and ready for projection, the file containing the digital still images was encoded over and over again in order for a satisfying projection to be reached; the encoding procedure demanding its time, only to be producing unsatisfactory results numerous times. In the end a satisfactory solution was produced and my remarks about the impossibility of finding out all the little tricky secrets about the function of a vast variety of equipment, were faced with the response that we find the equipment that suits us and we ‘stick with it.’ The body of habit winning the argument yet again. The other choice we are given is to do what Greek-American film director John Cassavetes called his directorial debut, “a blind man’s improvisation which depended on chance accidents”<sup>105</sup> and hope in all honesty for the best.

## **AN INSTALLATION OF CONCLUSIONS:**

### **WHERE THE END TOOK ME**

“Entrapped in being, we shall always have to come out of it. And when we are hardly outside of being, we always have to go back into it. Thus, in being, everything is circuitous, roundabout, recurrent, so much talk; a chaplet of sojournings, a refrain with endless verses.”<sup>106</sup>

Old habits feel like the extensions of ourselves – we don’t need to think before acting – our bodies know, they know how to overcome, or by-pass known obstacles; that is comforting. New ways require that we adjust, that our bodies reprogram their movements. New ways require that we stay alert, we can not rely on any sort of auto-pilot, because there is no program written for it yet. We need to figure it out, starting from scratch; that is unsettling. We gradually turn our new moves into new

<sup>105</sup> John Cassavetes, *Lifeworks*, Omnibus Press, 2001, p. 32.

<sup>106</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics Of Space*, 1994 Beacon Press, p. 213-214.

habits in order to cope. The process is often inconvenient and the progress takes time, and what is more it does not appear in a linear form. In any case “linear reading deprives us of countless daydreams”<sup>107</sup> Bachelard would add. “The simple faith in progress is not a conviction belonging to strength, but one belonging to acquiescence and hence to weakness.”<sup>108</sup> We end up in crossroads and we may choose right or wrong, randomly, by chance or intuition. Paths are taken only to be abandoned when we realize that they lead us nowhere, or that they lead us away from our goal. Sometimes we follow the new paths and invent new goals. We argue, we disagree, we moan, we readjust, we adapt. The same rules apply in technology, art, life, probably this is the ‘mechanics’ of our existence. As Anderson wrote:

“You’re walking. And you don’t always realize it,  
but you’re always falling.  
With each step you fall forward slightly.  
And then catch yourself from falling.  
Over and over, you’re falling.  
And then catching yourself from falling.  
And this is how you can be walking and falling  
at the same time.”<sup>109</sup>

If we consider the ‘strange’ to be something which bears new information, whereas the ‘familiar’ has given us all the information it could, and carries nothing new in it – which is exactly the quality that makes it familiar – then the ‘familiar’ has, in a sense, become useless to us. It has served its cause and is now as good as being empty of content. We have burned its fuel and it cannot take us further. In Wiener’s words “the more probable the message, the less information it gives”.<sup>110</sup> That would not give us much hope for evolution, though. In order for something to evolve, a change has to appear in the given data, that is the factor which can potentially alter the outcome of any process. We hold on to the familiar as to a beacon which serves to orient us, while we move ahead to meet the unknown.

“Everything about a creature that comes out of a shell is dialectical. And since it does not come out entirely, the part that comes out contradicts the part that remains inside. The creature’s rear parts remain imprisoned in the solid geometrical forms.”<sup>111</sup>

107 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics Of Space*, 1994 Beacon Press, p. 162.

108 Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings, Cybernetics and Society*, 1954, p. 47.

109 Laurie Anderson, *Walking and Falling*, United States Live, 1984, Warner Bros. (5LP set)

110 Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings, Cybernetics and Society*, 1954, p. 21.

111 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics Of Space*, 1994 Beacon Press, p. 108.

Perhaps that is the reason why, “Like a virus, a photograph turned out to be an incredibly resilient representational code”<sup>112</sup> as Manovich observes. We hold on to Photography’s reality factor in the hope that the ground will remain stable under our feet, while, again as Manovich points out in discussing the consequences of software compatibility, the 20th century concepts still in use as descriptions in different cultural fields such as graphic design, cinema, animation and others no longer describe the reality in an adequate way.<sup>113</sup>

Another issue Manovich notes, is that the creation of software used in media production usually does not aim towards a revolution. It aims to fit already existing production procedures, job roles, and familiar tasks.”<sup>114</sup> It is useful to remember, the form of a medium is dictated by what is technically possible, but that happens in relation to the limitations posed by other factors such as material and economic circumstances, which maybe commercial, intellectual or a combination, nevertheless leaving the medium marked with a social form we cannot ignore.<sup>115</sup> The choices made in the paths taken by those who decide the aesthetics of software are interesting, to say the least. Whereas animation emerging from the field of fiction aims to accomplish an environment that wishes to imitate reality, software applications such as the Google maps, which serve purposes related to real life and our everyday, adopt the aesthetics that were created as a visual language for the entertainment industry in its digital manifestations of computer games, imposing these interface aesthetics of a game in our real-life, as if in an attempt to establish them as a universal language. Such a language that we are accustomed to read as one that moves between the polarities of winning and losing, the resulting options games offer us – as opposed to living, one could wonder, would it end up obscuring the irreversibility factor that life possesses as opposed to a game?

112 Manovich, Lev, *Software Takes Command*, Softbook, Version 11/20/2008, p. 167.

113 *ibid.* p. 163-164.

114 *ibid.* p. p. 160.

115 Martin Lister, *New Media: A Critical Introduction*, 2003, p. 191.

116 Giorgio Agamben, *The man without content*, Stanford University Press, 1999, p.37.

“Everything that the spectator can still find in the work of art is, now, mediated by aesthetic representation, which is itself, independently of any content, the supreme value and the most intimate truth that unfolds its power in the artwork itself and starting from the artwork itself.”<sup>116</sup>

While, attempting *my* “blind man’s improvisation” and depending “on

chance accidents”<sup>117</sup>, I had to rely on my instincts as to what would feel right and how the installation would be perceived by viewers, since my knowledge in the field of installation art is very limited. In the gallery space, in a corner before the entrance to the dark room where the images – the core of the artwork – were projected, I set pieces of furniture that I considered neutral, a common coffee-table and an armchair one would come across in any home, in the hope that they would look familiar without drawing attention to their aesthetics. I then proceeded to set lace-works on top of the table and on the back of the armchair, in the same way it is usually done in a home. I aimed at recreating a common home environment, one which people could relate to, possibly not pay much attention to, and one they would feel familiar with. I surrounded that setting with pieces of lace that I laid on the floor, so as to create a boundary, a visual fence. The reason was to mark the area of the artwork as someone’s territory. I thought of spreading many pieces of lace around on the floor, in what could look as if they would take over, but did not do it, because such exaggeration, although it would make the act of marking more obvious, it could also end up looking like an intention to ridicule, which certainly was not my aim. I believe it served the work best, such means of expression to be used with restraint. On the table I set the notebook open, and I occasionally did flip the pages, so that all would at some point be viewed. Of course, it was up to the viewers’ choice to flip through, if they so wished, but to my knowledge very few did, preferring to observe it from a distance. It seems, we indulge our curiosity by peeking at a spectacle – in this case the projections, but few dare to come closer and establish a real connection.

Where in the first, outer part I adopted a setting that would introduce a sense of ‘reality’ in the scene, the purpose of the dark room and the presentation of the images as slide projections, as opposed of them being presented in the form of printed photographs, was to disconnect the viewers from their reality. There is something haunting in the absence of physicality on a projected image which, once the light gets turned off it ceases to exist. Humans are used in moving in lit spaces, however lit spaces allow our gaze to stray towards any detail presented, thus distracting us. Moreover, the dark space complimented the images by pointing the focus of attention towards them and at the same

117 John Cassavetes, *Lifeworks*, Omnibus Press, 2001, p. 32.

time ‘masked’ all the irrelevant visual information any space possesses. The lace-works spread on the floor played a different role this time; emerging from the dark background the carpet provided, they made their silent presence very obvious. In the corners, left and right of the door inside the dark room, the loudspeakers were set, not clearly visible, because it would not serve any purpose. They were just technical equipment needed for the artwork that the viewer would pass by them while entering the room. However, because they were in danger of being stepped on or knocked over in the darkness I covered them with identical pieces of lace, which also served as a reminder of the well-known persistence of some of our loved ones to cover everything in sight with lace.

The images depicted the women that chose to come forward and share with me – and consequently with the viewers – a part of who they are, a glimpse of what they have to offer as human beings. People are both private and fragile. And it seems that “Nobody has the time to be vulnerable to each other. So, we just go on. I mean, right away our armour comes out like a shield and goes around us, and we become like mechanical men.”<sup>118</sup> as Cassavetes observed. The fact of these ladies being completely or partially and in various levels *from elsewhere* served to make more clear the fact that we are unlike everybody else, if we aim at pointing the differences, or, if it is similarities we aim to point out, that

*right: Six of the ladies were present at the opening of the exhibition, top row from left to right, Ulla, Anna Lena, Katja and Isabel. Below left Diana and the artist.*



\* *The artist's parents were of Thai origin, he was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina and has lived in Thailand and Ethiopia. He lives in the USA and in Argentina. Where does he belong? Does it matter?*

we are very much alike. Both conclusions can be perceived as truthful.

I did not wish to make any anthropological or ethnological research of any sort. I approached these ladies as I approach any other person in my everyday life. It was about people meeting, not cultures meeting. Could my approach strategy be related to the relational aesthetics – the term French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud used to describe works such as the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija\* who cooked for the visitors in the events he created<sup>119</sup> or Cuban Felix Gonzalez-Torres with his candy landscape which gradually disappeared over the course of the exhibition<sup>120</sup> – in that I brought offerings whenever I was going to meet people for my project?

“What used to present itself to aesthetic judgment as absolute otherness has now become something familiar and natural, while natural beauty, which was, for our judgment, a familiar reality, has become something radically alien: art has become nature, and nature, art.”<sup>121</sup>

Has human interaction become an otherness that in order to re-acquaint ourselves with we need to appropriate and point to as creative means?

Back to the ladies, I don't believe they are either better or worse than other people. The *in limbo* position society often puts them in, possibly allows them to view more clearly past and beyond the convictions closed circuit societies stand on, if there are any such societies left. While we live with the hope that ‘things will get better’, we tend to view this hope as an axiom, judging by the things the extend of our knowledge covers, therefore we become devastated when reality proves this axiom to be nothing more than wishful thinking. In the mean time we may be missing the chance to appreciate whatever we are being offered.

“Where is the main stress, for instance, in *being there*: on *being*, or on *there*? In *there*—which it would be better to call *here*—shall I first look for my being? Or am I going to find in my being, above all, certainty of my fixation in a *there*?”<sup>122</sup>

The same questions can be posed on societies, which invest in themselves for happiness, success, salvation. Like the units that form them, in the end they are in need of a gaze on which to measure up against. As

119 Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled (Still) and Untitled (tomorrow is another day)*, Claire Bishop, *Installation Art A Critical History*, Routledge, New York, 2005, p.116-119.

120 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Placebo - Landscape - for Roni)*, Claire Bishop, *Installation Art A Critical History*, Routledge, New York, 2005, p.113-115.

121 Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without content*, Stanford University Press, 1999, p.51.

122 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics Of Space*, 1994 Beacon Press, p. 213.

123 <http://www.cavafy.com/poems/content.asp?id=119&cat=1>

124 George Prochnic, *The Porcupine Illusion*, Cabinet, issue 26, 2007, p. 23-24.

Greek poet Constantine Cavafy observed in the last verse of his poem *Waiting for the Barbarians*:

“And now, what’s going to happen to us without barbarians?  
They were, those people, a kind of solution.”<sup>123</sup>

It seems we still have not reached the ideal, tolerable distance – or closeness. A condition for which German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote in his *Parerga und Paralipomena* the parable about the porcupines in cold weather, who come together to profit from each other’s warmth, but feeling one another’s quills they distance themselves again, “only to be driven endlessly back and forth from one trouble to another.”<sup>124</sup> Most of the time we do not even realize what it is.



The palindromic journey of existence.

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