Modernity retired — science as image

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I will start from some doctrinarian claims followed by an outline of my ongoing artistic research project Modernity Retired, after which I will return to some more doctrinarian claims.

The anthropologist Mary Douglas states in her *How Institutions Think* (1986) that for any discourse to take place the participants must first agree on some basic categories. She writes: "Nothing else than institutions can define sameness. Similarity is an institution". She makes the claim that what institutions do is to assign similarities between themselves and what they define as 'nature'. Institutions ground their identities, and the reason for their existence, by referring to 'nature' (in that the formal structure of the institution corresponds to structures in non-human realms). That is; institutional decisions on artistic research and art texts must agree with the nature of art, and the natural identity of the artist.

Knowledge is compartmentalised. I'm sure there must be a good reason for this. If we are to tell a story, to write a text and to form an artistic research narrative, it is impossible to know everything that is of importance, we need to leave that to experts. Right? Therefore it is much better, not to mention safer, to stay within the conventional borders set by institutions. Institutions will guide the individual through the many higglers, hagglers and hucksters of alternative stories. Safe on the inside, the individual can rely on institutions to draw the line and monitor the movements along its borders, to ensure that art stays inside the area of control, and that everything else stays everywhere else.

Modernity Retired (MR) is an artistic research project, and an International network, based in Sweden. MR interviews elderly persons in five countries and asks them about their ideas of modernity from when they were young, and uses images of the 'future in retrospect' as its common reference. The MR research group: a historian, a historian of ideas, a state scientist, a philosopher and an artistic researcher, make use of a variety of research perspectives, and explores transdisciplinary possibilities. Labeling disciplines and demarcating borders is less important than the collective ability to grapple with modernity as a problem, as a research question, simultaneously defining modernity and its contextualization.

At this moment the interviewees are (or were) active as artists, architects and city planners in five countries: Israel (a modern settler project with a specific relation to tradition and rights); Sweden (representing a broad and socially responsible modernity); Turkey (tensions between the modern Kemalist state, and Islam as an alternative vision for the society); GDR/Germany (Bauhaus 90-years, and the occurrence of two states both

with claims to modernity); USA/Chicago (a socially radical European modernity reshaped by a pragmatic and capitalist context). Given resources, the number of countries may be expanded by introducing countries on the southern and eastern shores of the Baltic Sea. Five interviews will be conducted in each country, on two separate occasions.

The differences between countries and contexts will not be discussed as implementations or different examples of a single modernity, but from the perspective of situated modernities. This will affect the presentational form, the visual appearance of the interviews, and how the research texts and their narrative structures are produced.

Once highly antagonistic and divided against itself, the Bauhaus is already becoming antiquated, celebrating its ninetieth birthday this year. What was modernity all about? Through the interviews, MR intends to describe, discuss and interpret their views of a modern future in retrospect. If modernity, today, is clouded by disappointment, what did it mean to them? MR's reflection on modernity follows the experienced micro-narratives of the interviewees.

From a personal point of view, my interest in modernity begins with the stories that my grandmother told me as a child about her early days, such as when her parents lined up the seven sisters and let the youngest sister be the first in the family to turn on the electric light. Or when the whole city was emptied because an aeroplane landed on a nearby field. On another note I felt that the critique of modernity and modern society in the late 1970s, that focused on the coerciveness of the unitary modern narrative, needed to be rethought. In particular because the negative effects of its assailants' political agenda has become obvious: emptying out of the commons, and the individual reduced to rational choice.

Another reason for my interest in modernity is my fascination with architecture as an art form that constructs space. Architecture and city planning answers to the ambitions of the dominant interests in society, enabling or suppressing social behavior. It produces concepts of time, moods and it helps to identify memories over very long time cycles. It is continuously interpreted and reshaped in a complex and heterogenic mental map. But in the end, it was all produced and instituted by human action; ideas and built environment equally.

The research question "What was modernity?" is in successive steps developed and made more precise by resulting questions, and through an interpretation of modernity as failures, successes and hopes.

The research group consists of Prof. Mika Hannula, State Scientist, School of Photography, university of Gothenburg takes interest in the articulation of the contemporary modern, through a discussion on the limits of the socially imaginary; Charlotte Tornbjer, Historian, Lund university , focus on the everyday and the working life and men's and woman's differing narratives and experience of modernity; Klas Grinell, Historian of ideas, the Museum of World Culture, will study how tradition is in conflict with mo-

dernity in particular over the idea of the free individual; Fredrika Spindler, Philosopher, Södertörn university, will be looking at thinking as an a-temporal interjection and modernity as inserted between experience and expectations.

MR principally understands the concept of modernity as "multiple modernities" (Göle 2000; Wagner 1993; 1999; 2001; 2008), and as "socially imaginary images" (Taylor 2004; 2007). MR is apprehensive about the tension between liberalisation and disciplining in the interviews (Wagner 1993) and the difference between liberal capitalism and state oriented and state organized modernization (Wood 1999). MR pays attention to the difference between the space of experience and hopes for future (Koselleck 1985), and it appreciates modernity as a "constant creation of otherness" (Luhmann 1998), as a crisis for memory and a lacking coherence between time and subjectivity (Terdiman 1993), as the 'destabilising' of artistic, architectonical and geographical borders (the artwork, the common space, the nation) as well as the "disruption of discursive traditions (the unity of the book, the universality of reason)" (McQuire 1998). MR also takes interest in the metaphysics of development that appears as the spitting image of a colonial power to deny the validity of traditions, demanding a revolutionary transformation: the existing everyday must perish before anything new can be created (Fabian 1983; Mignolo 1999; Venn 2000). One approach to the relation in-between the concept of modernity and actual realizations of modernity, for instance the relation between the modern state and cosmopolitanism, would be involving the latter concept in the second round of interviews, and looking at them through the perspective of their respective justification (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006).

MR acts as a frame from within which researchers can move outside the institutionalised borders of their own disciplines, since the project in the words of Gianni Vattimo represents artistic research as "weak thinking" (Vattimo 1984), without a disciplining object or tradition. Images are visual and conceptual, they are situated concepts and they create contexts where new concepts can appear.

The project is divided into three phases –

Phase One: the research group will, after a first round of interviews is completed, receive unedited transcriptions. The material will be approached from particular research perspectives, aiming to encircle, focus and look out for themes and images as they present themselves. The group will discuss their particular interests and what remains in-between the perspectives. The material will be edited according to its artistic potential. A first round of presentations will be prepared.

Phase Two: The material is then approached collectively. The interviews are discussed and worked on by the group. The participants read, comment and add to the first round of individual reflections, in the light of particular passages in the interviews they refer to. The interviews are edited according to themes answering to the reflections. A second and final round of interview questions are drafted. Throughout this phase, questions are

related to method addressed: what kind of knowledge is generated by the interviews? In what ways do different approaches to the material produce different texts? How does the situated visual material affect the reflection? The results from phase two will be presented in the form of a minor conference.

Phase Three: the focus of the concluding phase is on presentation. It is vital to make the layers of reflection available, ideally through an open source digital document that can provide written as well as visual material. A visual presentation of the material, edited according to the collective reflection, is made public and a conference is arranged to present Modernity Retired by the group and the network participants. The conference material is to be published in an anthology, and on a website, together with excess material from the research process.

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To talk about my view on the artistic research text, I need to repeat my doctrinaire claim: Images are both visual and conceptual; they are, but also produce situated concepts.

Artistic research is practice based. I start from, and I am oriented towards, images as situated concepts. Which to this research project, means, besides documenting the interviews, examining concepts, sites and places pointed to by the interviewees. Artistic research approaches images as simultaneously visual and conceptual, because images simultaneously reflect and produce situated concepts and contexts in which new concepts may appear (Bode and Schmidt 2008). Situated concepts are formed by a particular practice, a predictable context and an interpretative culture (Brown and Collins 1989; Barsalou 2002; Yeh and Barsalou 2006). To work by way of a situated practice means that knowledge is seen as social and material, and that its underpinning is spatial (Lavé and Wenger 1991; Lefebvre 1991; Vygotskij 1999). Images have a unique ability to disregard differences and join together to form a trustworthy third. Artistic images are inseparable from other research practices that through description seek to "change the world": to narrate modernity differently is to reshape reality.

That images are both visual and conceptual could also be understood by the way Aristotle conceives of topoi. In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle mentions that 'material' topoi (places) do not establish their meaning by keeping to formal logic, but through a relation between the meaning of the topoi and its content. This would mean that a place/context is produced simultaneously in two directions of time. Through the reference to a place/context, its own prerequisite is produced, which in turn the given meaning of the place/context can be derived.

Loosely speaking, it is expected of an artist, as a part of an artists expected identity, to side with the image in discussions on the art text. Artistic writing is, to my understanding, typecasted to be the institutionally motivated intermediary between two well regulated

and supervised fields of knowledge production. Is it not better to state that artistic research challenges any abstract, superior, or primordial perspective that decides between image and concept, and image and text? That the distinction collapses if images are accepted as situated concepts? Is the call for more research on artistic research the emergence of a new institution, or a retreat to a traditional mapping of art versus art history?

The film and photo material that MR collects, by itself and together with the transcribed interviews, act as situated images. The touch of modern ethos, identified through aesthetic attitude and objects in a particular interview setting (always the choice of the interviewee), and the way an interviewee is dressed, and his or her body language, as well as the mobility, half-figure, close-up and angle of the handheld and the fixed cameras that the setting permits, ends up inseparable from and intertwined with the discursive content.

Images resist being emptied out by texts. They teach humility. The interview appears similar to an archaeological site, it is an actuality, lost in traces of traces from which an emotional connection develops, that appear as orientation, as a compass. In the interview so much is taken for granted, obscurity and myth slips through the flow of the conversation, giving rise to a heightened awareness of limitless complexities, beyond the reach of my capability.

It became obvious from working with the PhD that the immanent knowledge of the situated image reached beyond what was individually possible to thematise, but not beyond what had become necessary to communicate – and change. Conceptions of modern historical time, for instance, calls to be examined from perspectives and textual approaches that stays with the interviewees, and cannot add up to a single storyline. As the image catatonically displays the radical connectedness to the interview situation, I felt that the interpretative text needed to be broadened by introducing fields of knowledge outside what is deemed artistic. But coming from an image-oriented context, I am still aware of the importance disjunctive relation image/text have to the project.

The interviews are the core material to the research, but as the interviewees constantly refer to memorable situations and buildings, the transcriptions and the comments on the transcriptions are lured into a maze of references. A defining border between science and image becomes blurred: Raymond Williams once showed how the two concepts were separated by the scientific revolution. The interviewees do not care to cordon off historical data from their personal engagement, to separate cool statements of facts from social imaginary. The images of the past, in the present, are in fact producing the situated concepts by which they make sense. This is also the effect of the situated image; it produces its own narrative references while it produces the hitherto unseen.

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