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Master of Contemporary Art

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[in between] returning the gaze

Master's Thesis

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12 May 2021

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The thesis complies with the Master's thesis requirements

Mark Dunhill & Kristaps Ancāns

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RESÜMEE

– Häälte polüfoonia –
manada [vahele] ruum,
äratada vaataja silmad
vaiksed pilkude [vahel],
vastuseks kostuv
– hää! –.

Pilgule vastamise [vahel] püüab häälte polüfoonia kaudu piiritleda teoreetilist raamistikku, mõtteid ja afektiivset dünaamikat, mis on kujundanud minu kunstiloomingut õpingute vältel Eesti Kunstiakadeemia kaasaegse kunsti magistriõppekaval 2018. aasta sügisest 2021. aasta kevadeni.

Magistritöö lähtepunktiks on kõnekäänd 'Ilu on vaataja silmades' –konstateering, et isiklik esteetiline kogemus on seotud 'tajutava jaotamisega' Jacques Rancière'i mõistes. Roland Barthes'i 'punctumi' mõistest ja Jane Benneti 'elava materiaalsuse' käsitlest tõukuvalt püüan seetõttu avada Materia võimet 'punkteerida' meie tajutava jaotuskorda, kutsudes seejuures esile erinevaid efekte ja afekte, millest üks võib olla vaadatava vastupilk.

Pilgule vastates heliseva vaikuse kuulatamine lubab teadvustada iha suguluse ja läheduse järele [vahel]; ajendades otsima vastuseid küsimusele: miks vastata pilgule?

ABSTRACT

–A polyphony of voices–
to summon [in between] a space,
to invoke the eye of the beholder
silent [in between] a gaze,
returning
– A voice –

[in between] returning the gaze seeks to circumscribe through a polyphony of voices the theoretical framework, thoughts and affective dynamics underlying the development of my art practice while belonging to the Master in Contemporary Art Programme, from Autumn 2018 to Spring 2021, at the Estonian Academy of Arts in Tallinn, Estonia.

Central to this thesis lies the idiom ‘Beauty is in the eye of the beholder’, an acknowledgment of personal aesthetic experience as bound to the ‘partition of the sensible’, a concept conceived by Jacques Rancière. In resonance with Roland Barthes’ idea of ‘punctum’ and Jane Bennet’s notion of ‘vibrant materiality’, I advocate towards the capacity of Matter to ‘puncture’ our partition of the sensible, causing effects and affects, one of which may be to return our gaze when beholden.

Listening to the silence that prevails during the return of the gaze gives rise to the recognition of a longing for attunement and intimacy *[in between]*, an incentive to investigate the question: Why return the gaze?

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[PROLOGUE]

–Spring 2020, Querétaro-Helsinki. As the virtual room fills up with people, I sit alone in my house. “I” is one more among those names popping in the darkness, sometimes appearing in the shape of a face looking steadily ahead, not to another, but to the whole. Framed by the range of amplitude allowed by our built-in webcam, one may say we have come to inhabit the screens we usually stare at, and by doing so our projection, as encapsulated in the event of the virtual, has come to be a ‘some-thing’ to be seen.

A MEET-THING

Behind a screen
there can be no fear of the other,
without the need
there can be no facing each other.

Centaurus with a chair for body,
choose a head
[in between] a floating face
or this pair of ears
hanging onto a black case.

Can we puncture the screen with our active gaze? To seek intimate closeness in this unfocused general stare, one may choose a preferred content as we have become accustomed to do in our phones. Pin an unaware person’s face video within the zoom chat and embody the voyeur, a spectator in our shared spectacle! While intently staring from your side of the screen, seek for the return of a gaze, but beware, ‘cause the screen, (darned black mirror!), may be the one to gaze back at you.–

– POLYPHONY OF VOICES –

ON THE NEED OF A POEM

What is indeed the need of a poem?
Commanding the language erects itself
to verse on what resists to be summoned.

Behold the presence of a word
immediate response to a world,
itself an ungraspable circumstance
that deems it necessary.

–Speak– it says.
Speak of the uncanny shadows
that creep towards feeling
to place themselves under our bodies.

–Speak!– it demands.
Since it is by speaking
that we shall together erect
our Babel tower of meanings.

What if words refuse
to determine themselves?
If I call them one by one
and they do come, undoubtedly,
but with the lightness of
snowflakes on a winter morning?

Fleeting, they stop at my gaze.
Decidedly, they sweep by
towards the end of the street,
lightheartedly changing course
to chirp among the branches
of the dormant chestnut.

And yet, and yet...
I can see the bulk of civilization
disappearing under their persistent weight.
Here lies the need of a poem.

A ‘Polyphony of Voices’ *On the Need of a Poem* acts like an overture. The lines introduce both the writing logic that is to be found running throughout this thesis and the main substance of which this text is made: words (thus signs). Because a sign signifies and ‘the elemental unit of language –the sentence– is a mandate’¹, this text is meant to recognize the uncomfortable implications of identifying one’s own art practice as about ‘something’, as in ‘signaling towards oneself’, especially if ‘one’ (understood as a particular written voice) does all the ‘talking’.

Therefore, I turn to the possibility of presenting this text as a multiplicity of voices, each with an independent ‘melody’. Here a polyphony of academic writing, quotes, narratives, footnotes and poems is a means to provoke multiple signifying functions for ‘all verbal activities... are susceptible to changing signs and transforming into poe[try]: from the interjection to the logical discourse.’²

[in between] the space generated by this polyphonic text, I gesture towards the presence of a silent voice, that which I behold as capable of ‘returning the gaze’: Matter. Through an epilogue in the format of a pictorial composition of gazes upon my artwork images and a deliberate omission of explanatory texts on them, I hope to create space to allow ‘matter a say’.

Countering ‘the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought... [I] cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism’³, so it follows that when the whole ‘Polyphony of Voices’ expresses sounds and silences together (some of them in *Eesti keel*), it shares the agency over this thesis text and over the artworks that accompany it.

¹ Transl. from – G. Deleuze & F. Guattari, 20 Noviembre 1923 Postulados de la Lingüística [20 November 1923 Postulates of Linguistics 1988]. – Mil Mesetas: Capitalismo y esquizofrenia. Transl. J. Vázquez Pérez & U. Larraceleta, Valencia: Pre-Textos, 2004, p. 81.

² Transl. from – O. Paz, Poesía y Poema [Poetry and Poem] – El Arco y la Lira [The bow and the Lyre], Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005, p. 3.

³ J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. London: Duke University Press, 2010, p. xvi.

01

TO SUMMON

–Spring 2018, Querétaro, Mexico. As the semidesert sun fills the second floor apartment, I gather on my dinner table a hammer, scissors, an industrial stapler, a rusty saw, a small but fierce staple remover and a 20x20 centimeter canvas of the classical female nude torso I painted back in 2010. All is set. These are my tools for Ritual to Summon Art. I proceed as ‘We’ (the material and myself) blend together into a state of transformation by means of our encounter.–

Ritual To Summon Art 2010-2018 sought to bring art practice back into my present experience through the deconstruction of –myself and– an oil canvas I painted in 2010. The canvas and its subsequent transformations from object into mass, from painting into sculpture and from poetic performance into video and photography, allowed me to symbolically gather my tools towards conjuring my admission into the Master in Contemporary Art at the Estonian Academy of Arts.

Through performing it, I reaffirmed and even exposed an underlying belief in the possibility of complicity with material or Matter, ergo with the ‘physical substance that everything in the world is made of’⁴, a complicity that seems to encompass a trust in Matter’s capacity for bearing and even materializing a ‘yearning desire’⁵. Growing up in Mexico, daughter of a Mexican father and a Canadian mother, both self-proclaimed Animists, it is no wonder I have practiced thinking so: each November, by undergoing the ritualistic preparations for the Day of the Dead

⁴Oxford University Press, Oxford Learner’s Dictionary – Matter.

https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/matter_1?q=matter (accessed 19 April 2021).

⁵ S. Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993, p. ix.

traditional celebration, we aim to experience the transcendence of death, - a sweet and sour longing- into a gathering event with our departed.

The ritual for remembrance requires of the living the construction of a seven-level altar, lovingly embellished by a collection of personal belongings embedded with memory –the ‘souvenirs’⁶ of the loved ones–, a selection of their preferred dishes, cempasuchil flowers and specific objects that will help the deceased on their journey back home for the event of the celebration. Candles to light the way, cut paper to summon the wind and keep them on the move, earth to connect with the terrestrial realm, water to refresh, salt to purify and among others, a mirror and a photograph so that they may reconstitute themselves not as ‘what is no longer, but only and for certain [as] what has been.’⁷

Both the traditional Mexican Altar and *Ritual to Summon Art 2010-2018* relate to Matter through the assemblage of significant actions and the narratives that accompany them. To summon ‘It’ means to acknowledge its dichotomy as an object-thing: an ‘object’ that receives the action of our personal attachment and a ‘thing’ which exerts itself upon us.

Symbolically enabling the event of a journey from the known into the unknown, these types of encounters with Matter operate the way souvenirs do, by seeking ‘distance (the exotic in time and space)... in order to transform and collapse distance into proximity to, or approximation with, the self’⁸: an intimacy that I sought to find at the core of developing my art practice while ‘venturing’ into Estonia.

⁶ P. Ricoeur, P. Blamey, K., & Pellauer, D. (2010). *Memory, history, forgetting*. Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press.

⁷ R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Transl. R. Howard – London: Vintage, 2000, p. 85.

⁸ S. Stewart, *On Longing...*, p. xii.

02

[IN BETWEEN] A SPACE

Mon pays ce n'est pas un pays, c'est l'hiver.⁹

GUILLES VIGNEAULT,

Lyrics from the song *Mon Pays*, 1964.

–Winter 2021, Telliskivi, Estonia. –How do you come to like winter here?– asks my Italian taxi driver as we cross the city. –I know!– I propose enthusiastically. –Walk around allowing a thing to come to you (out of nature works best), be it a tree, a leaf, a patch of soil or even snow. Then, follow it throughout the seasons; throughout its multiple appearances, spend time with it, learn its rhythms, hold it in your hands, intimate...–

The *Huichol*, an indigenous people from Mexico known for their ritualistic use of *hikuri* or *peyote* (a psychoactive cactus), believe that these plants are teachers. If in need of a lesson, 'They' will find 'You' while wandering in the desert, and not the other way around. This slight turn of narrative, for it can be read as such, transforms the experience of consumption into communion, a communion beyond the distinction among human and non-human, for it symbolizes a communion with the land itself.

In the same way that the dessert-goers realize that before attaining the sought experience, they must first encounter *peyote*, it can be said that the desire to be conversant with 'another' place begins by recognizing oneself as an 'other', who yearns for something to be added: 'and-other'.

⁹ [My country is not a country, its winter]

A wanderer in Estonia, I can pinpoint my first experience of ‘practicing art’ to the moment when, while walking down a street, I bent down and picked up a feather. Singled out from the streetscape, the newly found became my ‘and-other’, a souvenir gesturing towards my ‘longing for its place of origin’¹⁰.

Gradually, I accumulated souvenirs into collections of forgotten, lost or disposable objects: gloves, lint, pieces of fallen murals, plastic waste, peeled wall paint. Detached from their source, as I was myself from home, these objects connected to my personal narrative in ways that I had not yet foreseen. Their unclaimed nature allowed me through ‘appropriation’ and practice, the opportunity of transforming ‘space into property’¹¹, creating a method for navigating an unknown landscape and rooting-in:

The immigrant, the exile, the tourist, and the urban wanderer... resemble those plants that do not depend on a single root for their growth but advance in all directions on whatever surfaces present themselves by attaching multiple hooks to them, as ivy does. Ivy belongs to the botanical family of the *radicants*, which develop their roots as they advance ... in accord with its host soil. [---] It translates itself into the terms of the space in which it moves.¹²

A ‘radicant’ in Tallinn, spreading alternative roots, I soon found out that my *modus operandus* of ‘appropriation’ of the environment worked both ways. How was I to possess that which had already taken hold of my own body through varying seasons of light and temperature? To root, I needed to dig deep down and cling there, where I couldn't see or know, where I could communicate through practice with that which

¹⁰ S. Stewart, *On Longing...*, p. xii.

¹¹ S. Stewart, *On Longing...*, p. xii.

¹² N. Bourriaud, *The Radicant*. Transl. J. Cussen & L. Porter – New York: Lukas & Stenberg, 2009, p. 51.

resisted 'gathering': the gradual changes of light coming each day through a window, the capricious appearances of snow and ice, the paced awakening of trees and their dramatic shred into sleep, the freshness of air lingering inside the throat...

IN THE ESTONIAN LAND

One comes across
mighty iceberg travelers
wise grandmothers
that call you to climb
upon their lap.

vanaema kivi

Patient keepers
of a subtle rhythm
dignified grandfathers
full of elbows
shoulders and knees.

vanaisa puu

Among such noble presences
with a wild flower at hand,
the traveler invokes
the name of thine land
long left behind.

vana maa

Translating [in between] what is experienced and what can or has already been 'signified' about it, 'the one who seeks to appropriate such temporally layered objects with critical intent... must be prepared to relinquish the claim to full possession, loosen the grip on the object and call it forth, invoke it rather than seize it.'¹³

¹³ J. Verwoert, Living with Ghosts: From Appropriation to Invocation. – Art and Research [on-line], vol. 1, no. 2, 2007, pp. 1-7. <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/verwoert.html> (accessed January 17, 2021), p.3.

03

TO INVOKE

'Poetry does not belong to those who write it, it belongs to those who need it.'

MARIO RUOPPOLO

Quoted in the movie 'Il Postino' [The mailman], 1994.

-Summer 2020. Kalamaja, Estonia. I had a need for a poem, but I did not know until I heard it. It came across seas, riding a playwright's voice, from a beloved book picked up at random for me. I needed a poem, and he gave me Efraín Bartolomé's Invocación [Invocation]. As he read, the words I heard anchored within me with the same desperation with which our hands seek to hold onto anything when on the verge of falling. I needed a poem, so I took to the daily ritual of memorizing each sound of it.

Invocation took place in the bathroom in front of a mirror. For the ritual, I was to wear a mask. My face covered with the foam of charcoal soap and the poem sliding on my tongue, I sought to find the truth of each word in the reflection of my own gaze. Mask over face, face over mirror, mirror of a poem, a splash of water and the invocation, an earnest desire, was voiced.-

* * * *

-Autumn 2020. Järvakandi, Estonia. The precisely defined curve of the forest road has swallowed the last glimpse of the green van. It will be dropping my companion a kilometer ahead, in the middle of 'nowhere', just as it has done with myself. Nowhere, nevertheless, clears into a path into the forest. I have fantasized before about walking bravely into the unknown. Equipped with a stick and a camera hanging from my neck, I advance a first step into the dark landscape.

'Walk straight ahead, make noise, do not cross the road.' 'Walk straight ahead, make noise, do not cross the road.' Thoughts of bears and other dangerous creatures cross my mind. I hold tighter to my wooden stick

and press ahead. Will I stumble into a bog? Will I be consumed by it, only to be found petrified a hundred years from now, holding onto all my fears in a fetal position? Second step, third and then it came as a natural impulse: The poem. Since noise didn't come naturally, I whispered the first verse: –'Land of my grandfathers.'– I can feel a light breeze caressing my face. –'Land of my grandfathers!' –I scream and the trees around shiver with joy. –'Land of my grandfathers! Speak for me!'– I continue shouting with the deep voice that poetry brings into one's soul, braver now to head deep inside.

Verse after verse, my voice parts the herbs, the fallen logs, the scary shadows. I shout the poem and the Estonian Maa answers back. I am exactly where I am meant to be: lost, but with a purpose. 'Walk straight ahead...' a flow of colour palettes swishes by my face. 'Walk straight ahead...' my eyes move fearlessly, taking in beauty, expanding in secure, gradual motions. I am with the trees, I am with the stones, I am with this earth.

Then came the shots. At least five of them. The urge of a barking dog. The forest maze cleared ahead to reveal fluorescent vests and the road I wasn't meant to cross. –'Ah! Here you are! You didn't get lost! We cannot find your partner; it seems he turned in a circle back to the road where we started. We have made two kills today. Do you want to go and check them?'– The joy of the communion I felt with the forest and the conquest of my fears now dissolving in the face of a bitter realization: I have killed with a poem.

It is a cold sunny day. I stop in awe to admire the shimmering beauty of a red leaf covered with frost. Around me, grass towers evenly except for a spot near ahead where two wide hooves protrude into the sky. A stream of blood slides gently into drops under a massive humped beast. Steam. Elu life evaporates from its body. Is it safe to touch it? Why do I feel so compelled to do so? Warmth. An open eye. One that seems only able to stare into the realm of absence. Overcome by an urge to accompany it, I behold the void of that look, eyes wide open. It appears to look back at me. The bark and the moose, the womb and the moon, the gaze of a being that recognizes its tomb. And a single thought occupies my mind: –Honour it–.

INVOCATION

A poem by Efraín Bartolomé¹⁴ (Ocosingo, 1950).
Translated by and for Angela Ramírez Fellowes (Querétaro, 1985).

Tongue of my grandparents, speak for me
Do not let me lie
Do not allow me ever to offer a cat for a hare
concerning the movements of my blood
concerning the variations of my heart

In you I trust
In your wisdom polished by time
Like gold in a pebble under the patient water of the clear river
Allow me to doubt in order to believe
Allow me to light up words to walk at night

Do not let me talk about what I have not seen
About what I haven't touched with the eyes of the soul
what I have not lived what I have not palpated what I have not bitten

Do not allow fake music to come from my mouth or my fingers,
a music that has not arrived through the air to touch my ear,
a music that has not twanged before
the blind harp of my heart

Do not let me buzz in the void, as bumblebees against the nocturnal glass
Do not let me remain silent, when feeling danger or when finding gold.

Never a verse, let me insist,
that has not shuck before
the dark clam of my heart

Speak for me, tongue of my grandparents
Mother and woman
Do not let me shortfall you
Do not let me lie
Do not let me fall
Do not leave me
Not.

¹⁴ E. Bartolomé, *El Ser Que Somos* [The Being We Are]. Barcelona: Ed. Renacimiento, 2006, pp. 25-26

04

THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

‘What senses do we lack that we cannot see and cannot hear another world all around us?’

Extract from the ORANGE CATHOLIC BIBLE

As quoted by Frank Herbert in *Dune*, 1965.

–Summer 2020. Kalamaja, Estonia. I was craving honey. To have my mouth invaded by its silky sweetness, yet I could not taste it. –This honey has gone stale!– I told myself disappointedly. Then I realized it was I who had lost the sense of taste and smell! Awakening all my senses, I gathered them around the missing flavour: texture, appearance, temperature, would all with their presence highlight the now inaccessible sensorial experience. It felt as if I were staring blankly at a key which I had forgotten how to use. Nevertheless, through the perception of the scent of absence, I was capable of “seeing” the emerging silhouette of a keyhole on a door.–

Growing up I was taught that ‘Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.’¹⁵ For me this implied first that beauty exists. Second, that ‘brought by the judgement of the eye,’¹⁶ it is circumscribed by our capacity to sense. And finally, that limited as we are, beauty exists boundlessly, beyond our perception.

The idiom ‘Beauty is in the eye of the beholder’ therefore comprises an acknowledgment of personal aesthetic experience as related to the ‘partition of the sensible’ as Jacques Rancière would put it. It refers to the ‘dividing-up of the world (*de monde*) and of people (*du monde*). This partition should be understood in the double

¹⁵ The earliest citation is credited to Margaret Wolfe Hungerford (née Hamilton) as found in her 1878 novel *Molly Bawn*. In memory of my grandmother, J. S. ‘Ishka’ Hamilton, I now recognize this idiom as clan inheritance.

¹⁶ Martin. G, The phrase finder – Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder. Expressed by Shakespeare in *Love's Labours Lost*, 1588. <https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/beauty-is-in-the-eye-of-the-beholder.html> (accessed 10 May 2021).

sense of the word: on the one hand, as that which separates and excludes; on the other, as that which allows participation'¹⁷, a 'desire for self-completion through another'¹⁸.

I HAVE DISCOVERED A CONCRETE BLOCK

Or, has it discovered me?
The instant of realization
transformed into the event
of our encounter.

Next to each other in parallel ease
we exist in the same manner
that big rocks do,
lying around Tallinn.

Alas! A concrete block.
Coarse between two dormant trees
at the edge of a parking lot.

Leftover of an already forgotten day
disjointed and ambiguous
it cannot but dully display
having belonged elsewhere.

A pile of snow thrown on the side,
a bag of leaves with a suggestive dent,
a slip protruding from a nearby roof,
are all, along with it, poetic.

But it is this concrete block
what has touched me
rising from the scene
so that poetic and human
may meet in between
[a poem].

¹⁷ J. Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. Transl. S. Corcoran. London: Continuum, 2010, p. 36.

¹⁸ M. Olin, *Gaze*, quoting Jacques Lacan – R.S. Nelson & R. Shiff, *Critical Terms for Art History*, pp. 208–219. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003, p. 215.

It could be said that one does not write poetry, but writes about the way in which the poetic is experienced. In the same line, ‘participating’ with ‘an-other’ can be understood through the experience of desire, engagement, empathy and completion. In the same way, ‘separating’ calls upon rejection, avoidance, apathy, and loss.

In my experience, loss, the absence of something with which we ‘participated’, may increase our awareness of the existence of a ‘partition’ as something we place between ourselves and the world, and something placed by the world (*de monde*) itself. This realization makes us ‘attuned’, sensitive to someone’s else’s agency.

It is in a state of deep loss that Roland Barthes writes *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Faced with the ‘yearning desire’ to learn what Photography was ‘in itself’, he recognizes that when ‘looking’ (at a photograph) there is ‘a field’ placed in between us and what we perceive; a natural consequence of our knowledge and culture. This characteristic of ‘beholding’ he calls ‘studium’¹⁹ as derived from ‘study’.

Emotionally invested, Barthes attunes to a second way of ‘beholding’, one that will unexpectedly puncture the field of the ‘studium’. Unexpectedly, what he names the ‘punctum’²⁰ ‘rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces’.

Touché! We are touched by the real.

Touché! We are touched through an encounter.

The encounter with the ‘punctum’ as a ‘wound’ that pierces our ‘partition’ or ‘field’ of the sensible ‘highlight[s] what is typically cast in the shadow: the material agency or affectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things.’²¹ In other words, it allows us to explore our capacity to sense the effects and agency of Matter.

¹⁹ R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida...*, p. 26.

²⁰ R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida...*, p. 27.

²¹ J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter...*, p. ix.

05

SILENT

‘All these objects ... how can I explain? They inconvenienced me; I would have liked them to exist less strongly, more dryly, in a more abstract way, with more reserve. The chestnut tree pressed itself against my eyes...black and swollen.’

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE,
Diary entry, Wednesday 6:00pm, *Nausea*, 1949.

–Winter 2021. Tondi, Estonia. I had a visceral need to lie down on a pile of leaves, and I did. What I did not know was how pressing it would become to me to be able to stand up again. Somehow I felt that through recognition, I was prone to experience substitution. Aspiring to stand up in the shape of a dignified leaf column, I collapsed once again. Yet within the gentle rhythms of things being, beyond the urges of my human will, Matter, in the shape of a small stem of life, sprouted from within that leaf body, standing up for itself in silence.–

Faced with the undeniable fact that Matter manifests ‘traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience,’²² I clung to Jane Bennet’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. To be able to recognize ‘dull’ Matter as ‘vibrant’, the meaning of ‘effect’ had to participate in regarding ‘it’ as a source of action: An ‘actant’ from which something arises as testimony of its efficacy, be it through its effects on other bodies or through its being active in persevering in its own being.²³ ‘An actant is a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which [...] “modifies another entity in a trial,” something whose “competence is deduced from [its] performance” rather than posited in advance.’²⁴

²² J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter...*, p. xvi.

²³ Baruch Spinoza’s concept of *Conatus*: an ‘active impulsion’ or trending tendency to persist.

²⁴ J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter...*, quoting Bruno Latour’s *Politics of Nature*, p. viii.

So what if we were to take silences as proof of that which ‘addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available’²⁵? Venturing into listening, accompany me into considering an alternative reading for the romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*; quoted by Sigmund Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to illustrate the perpetual recurrence (or voicing) of a ‘wound’:

The most moving poetic picture of a fate such as this is given by Tasso in ... *Gerusalemme Liberata*. Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders’ army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again.²⁶

Silenced, the tree that Tasso summons through words has been stripped from its possibility of effects. When receiving Tancred’s blow, it is not it, but Clorinda, who is ‘wounded’. Strange and magic, it is banned to the world of the ‘unknown’ where it can no longer sustain its existence as a mere tree. Used as a vessel, the tree becomes a mirror for the human wound. It is the reenactment of the cry, its form of reflecting. And it is our reflection that makes it still and silent.

Tancred listens to the tree’s ‘cry’. Not knowing or not wanting to know, he perceives it as Clorinda’s. As he is wounded, he can now relate to the effects that a blow of his sword has on that which seems ‘inanimate’. In the act of perceiving, he has opened to ‘the very possibility and surprise of listening to an[-]other’s wound’²⁷.

²⁵ C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 4.

²⁶ S. Freud & J. Strachey, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). London: Hogarth Press, 1964, p. 24.

²⁷ C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience...*, p. 8.

DEEP SYMPATHY FOR THE MIRROR

For by facing it bluntly,
it has given my body
a human head
engulfed by its enchanting gift.

For whenever the hospitable surface
seeks to return my gaze,
it must abide vain appropriation.

For with the gentleness of undisturbed waters,
it subtly reflects on the self,
as echoed
on every inversion of others.

The ‘habit of parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)’ is [---] ‘a partition between what is visible and what is not,... what can be heard from the inaudible’²⁸, a screen. We define our forms of engaging with the world, by ‘defining the modes of perception in which they are inscribed’²⁹. By increasing our awareness of levels of effectivity, we can amplify our sense of agency beyond ourselves, so that in spite of our banishment, there is ‘some-thing’ to be found within the scope of our perception where we have come to regard existences as absences, and where knowingly or unknowingly, we can choose to attune to silence:

Since a thing cannot be known directly or totally, one can only attune to it, with greater or lesser degrees of intimacy. Nor is this attunement a “merely” aesthetic approach to a basically blank extensional substance. Since appearance can’t be peeled decisively from the reality of a thing, attunement is a living, dynamic relation with another being—it doesn’t stop.³⁰

²⁸ J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter...*, p. vii, p. 123.

²⁹ J. Rancière, *Dissensus...*, p. 36.

³⁰ T. Morton, *Being Ecological*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018, p.139

06

[IN BETWEEN] A GAZE

‘Dogen-zenji said, “Even though it is midnight, dawn is here; even though dawn comes, it is nighttime”... Nighttime and daytime are not different. The same thing is sometimes called nighttime, sometimes called daytime. They are one thing.’

SHUNRYU SUZUKI

Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind, 1970.

–Autumn 2020. Käsnu, Estonia. Had I awakened the ghosts on the other side of the mirror? I could hear their voices repeating over and over the same evocation: ‘every absence reveals a presence, every presence reveals an absence’. As in an echo, I could sense the gap in between ‘one’ and the ‘other’, everywhere. It was there in between a tree and its expelled bark, in between a stone and the persistent caress of the water, in between a plastic bag and its live contents. There it was in between remembering and forgetting, in between subject and object, in between feeling alienated and being with the world, but I unhesitantly chose being.–

‘Soon after we see, we are aware that we can also be seen. The eye of the other combines with our own eye to make it fully credible that we are part of the visible world.’³¹ The ‘one’ and the ‘other’ already embeds through language the existence of an [in between], yet the challenge ‘to induce in human bodies an aesthetic-affective openness to vital materiality’³² is a yearning for a gaze between equals, interchangeably ‘one and another’ and not ‘the one and the other’. The [in between] then, from this perspective, is considered the place for the event of an ‘encounter’, where agency and affects are negotiated.

³¹ J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1977, p.9.

³² J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter...*, p. x.

That which ‘punctures’ our [in between] is an ‘encountered sign’. Gilles Deleuze in *Proust and Signs* describes this sign as something ‘that is felt, rather than recognized or perceived by cognition. Deleuze’s argument is not simply, however, that sensation is an end in itself, but that feeling is a catalyst for critical inquiry or deep thought’³³. But what about the experience of encountering ‘us’?

We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body,... to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, ... to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with [it] in composing a more powerful body.³⁴

It follows that even when we are able to understand how ‘others’ may enhance or threaten our human capacities, their power is perceived as impersonal, ‘an affect intrinsic to forms that cannot be imagined (even ideally) as persons’³⁵, therefore the propension with which their agency is made invisible from the perspective of our anthropocentric viewpoint.

In the context of my art practice, if I attempt to pinpoint the moment in which I first consciously recognized Matter as something capable of causing effects, I would have to admit that although there was a ‘punctum’, I was not immediately aware of the affects it caused beyond my feeling to have ‘encountered’ some-thing.

Settled within me, to the point where I felt it threatened ‘[my] identity from within as well as from without, through the processes of metamorphosis’³⁶, I was faced

³³ J. Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005, p.7.

³⁴ J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter...*, quoting Deleuze and Guatary, pp. xii–xiii.

³⁵ J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter...*, p. xii.

³⁶ B. Creed & J. Hoorn, *Animals, Art, Abjection*. – R. Arya, N. Chare, *Object Visions : Powers of Horror in Art and Visual Culture*, pp. 90–104. Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2017, p. 91.

with the effects of an 'abject': 'The corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled. The border has become an object. How can I be without border?'³⁷

ÉCRAN

It is through a screen
that I never saw
-will never see-
that I am to be pierced
by the pang I affiliate with.

Negotiating the affects [in between] an 'other' that had 'settled in place and stead of what will be 'me','³⁸ I turned to the possibility of developing empathy instead of aversion and therefore the possibility of recognition: 'an uncanny feeling of being in the presence of an aspect of oneself that is located in the body of another, or an acknowledgement of a kinship between bodies conventionally said to be unrelated'³⁹.

To speak about a return of the gaze implies a two directional relationship. 'There must be someone to gaze and there may be someone to gaze back.'⁴⁰ Before becoming spectators 'held before an appearance in a state of ignorance... about the reality it conceals [we must---] learn from as opposed to being seduced by images;... become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs'⁴¹. Walk fearlessly [in between] the shadows of the unknown where there is some-thing waiting to be seen.

³⁷ J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Transl. L.S. Roudiez - New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, p. 4.

³⁸ J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror...*, p. 10.

³⁹ J. Bennet, *Encounters with an Art-Thing*.- mycourses.aalto.fi, pp. 1-18.

https://mycourses.aalto.fi/pluginfile.php/527945/mod_resource/content/1/Bennet%20-%20Encounters%20with%20the%20Art-Thing.pdf (accessed 30 March 2021), p. 16.

⁴⁰ M. Olin, *Gaze...*, p. 209.

⁴¹ J. Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*. Transl. G. Elliott. London: Verso, 2009, p.2, 4.

07

RETURNING

IT IS NO LONGER I

It is no longer I
who recognizes current time
as a wound:
a presence that can be felt over the body,
seen,
even touched and carved upon,
and therefore
thought about.

'It' hurts, 'I' observe.

It is opposition
that which makes us
infinitely homologous,
yet one could argue
that such an encounter
could never be reciprocal.

Can 'it' feel us?
And even if it does,
is it condemned to be
unfelt, unnoticed,
the absent?

What pierced me?
I am so numb,
I cannot begin to recall
what was just asked.

Pure affect, no effect.

To feel affect.
The challenge of our frenetic times,
suddenly disrupted by silence.

May You Live In Interesting Times, the title for the 58th International Art Exhibition, *La Biennale di Venezia 2019*, proposed that art has the potentiality of creating mechanisms and generating information through which scenarios for understanding our times can evolve. The title also reminds of *Create Dangerously*, a speech by Nobel Prize-winning philosopher Albert Camus, which begins with the next quote:

‘An Oriental wise man always used to ask the divinity in his prayers to be so kind as to spare him from living in an interesting era. As we are not wise, the divinity has not spared us and we are living in an interesting era. In any case, our era forces us to take an interest in it’⁴².

Is there ‘wisdom’ in dismissing the ‘interesting’ in our times, be it through an ignorant glance or through a non-impressed awareness? Or because we are not ‘wise’, our era has forced us to take an ‘interest’ on it? ‘I now understand that ‘there exists another punctum ... which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time’⁴³.

Three years ago I ventured to Estonia with the purpose of incorporating art practice into my everyday life. Needless to say, I had trust in Matter’s capacity for bearing and even materializing such a desire. I now see this was the longing of ‘a human head engulfed by its enchanting gift’. Pursuing doing ‘art about life’ and approaching it as a wound that I needed to heal, I began by relating to Matter in the same way that Roland Barthes did with photography: as something ‘I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think.’⁴⁴ It is in such a spirit that this thesis and the artworks that accompany it became a way of reflecting on what I have identified as the first moment of art practice: that of an encounter –the sensing of ‘an other’–.

⁴² A. Camus, *Create Dangerously*. London: Penguin Random House UK, 2018, p.1.

⁴³ R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida...*, p. 96.

⁴⁴ R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida...*, p. 21.

If 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder', sensing –may be understood–, means recognizing that 'some-thing' has become visible 'participating' with us as an aesthetic experience. Looking at ourselves seeing, it may also become evident that some things manage to escape 'participation'. 'The subject turned-object sees itself as the other sees it: it internalizes the gaze.'⁴⁵ Determined by the context or by ourselves as 'non-worthy of visibility' or escaping visibility through defying meaning and therefore representation (as it is the case of the absent and the abject), these things may manage in spite of their banishment to 'touch us'.

Faced with the undeniable fact that there is nothing separating 'us' from Matter if we recognize it as capable of causing effects and affects, I found myself advocating for Jane Bennet's 'vibrant materiality'. Unavoidably, the necessity of intimacy with Matter led me to the concept of 'attunement', the building up of a relationship that cannot be momentary, but constructed throughout time. It is through attunement, one might venture, that we might get closer to accessing the one reality that escapes us: that of Matter experiencing us, as in returning our gaze.

Through art practice, I seek to go beyond utilitarian purposes and to return the gaze by practicing art as a poem, one to encourage understanding and attuned encounters. I see poetry as a way of being able to access the knowledge of that which we cannot know, a way of challenging the mandate of language and reconciling the rational with the emotional, the universal with the personal. Because my time in this land has been essential to such an understanding, I symbolically attach myself to Estonia through the action of presenting a translation of *On the Need of a Poem. Luuletuse Vajalikkusest* helps root me deep down where I cannot know, cannot fully understand, but nevertheless, where I hope to communicate.

⁴⁵ M. Olin, Gaze... p. 215.

– A VOICE –

LUULETUSE VAJALIKKUSEST

Translated by Mihkel Kaevats (Tallinn, 1983).

Miks on päriselt luuletust vaja?
Keele juhtimine püstitab end värsiks
püüdes seda, mis ei anna end kätte.

Jälgi sõna, tema kohalolu,
tema vahetut vastust maailmale,
mis ise on haaramatu asjaolu,
mis sõna peab vajalikuks.

"Räägi", ütleb ta.
Räägi neist jubedaist varjudest,
mis roomavad tunde poole,
et libistada end me kehade alla.

"Räägi," see nõuab.
Sest just rääkides
me koos püsitame
tähenduste Paabeli torni.

Ent mis siis, kui sõnad keelduvad
ent määratlemast?
Kui ma kutsun neid ühekaupa
ja nad tulevadki, kahtlemata,
ent kas lumehelbete kergusega
talvehommikul?

Haihtuvad, nad peatuvad mu pilgu ees.
Nad otsustavalt libisevad mööda
tänavaga lõpu poole,
kergemeelselt suunda muutes,
säutsudes uinunud kastani
okste vahel.

Ja siiski, ja siiski...
Ma näen tsivilisatsiooni põhiosa
kadumas nende järjekindla raskuse all.
Sellest tuleneb luuletuse vajalikkus.

[EPILOGUE]



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(2)



(3)



(4)



(5)



(6)



(7)



(8)



(9)



(10)



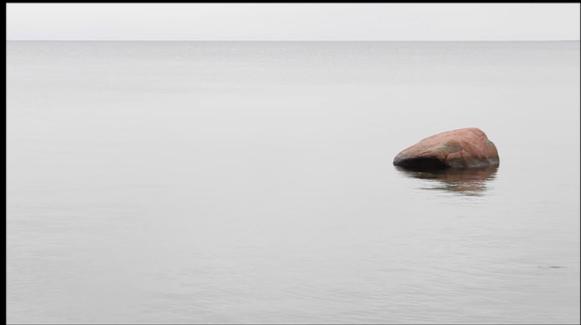
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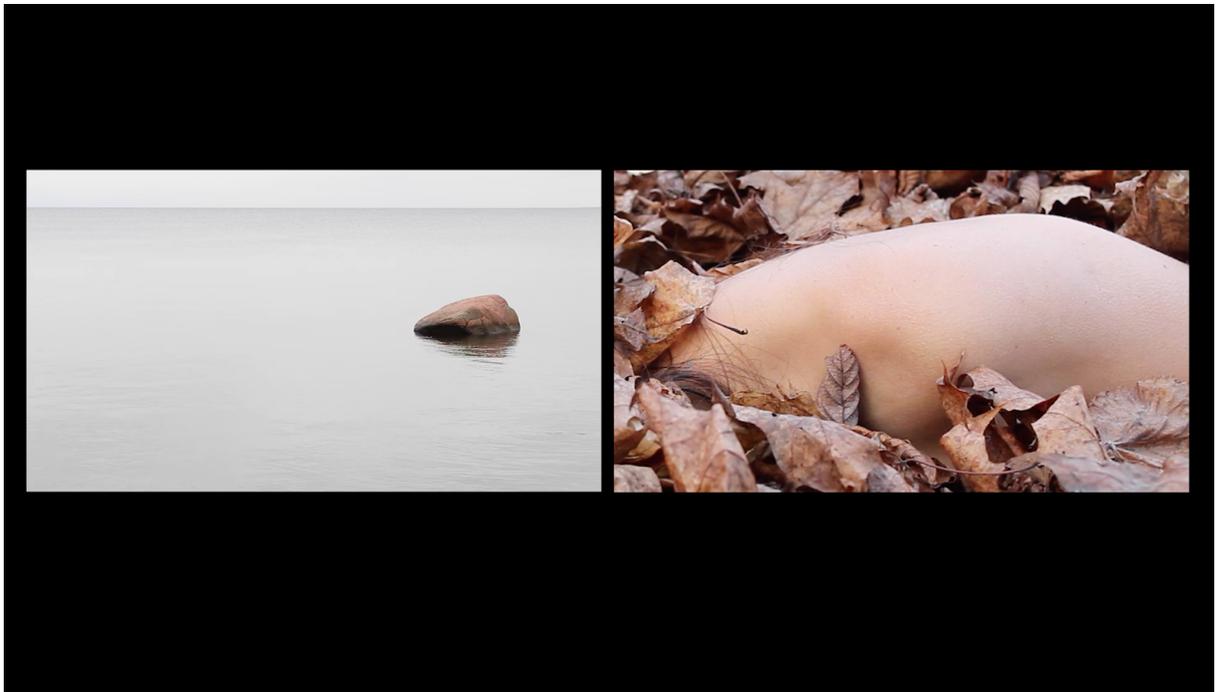
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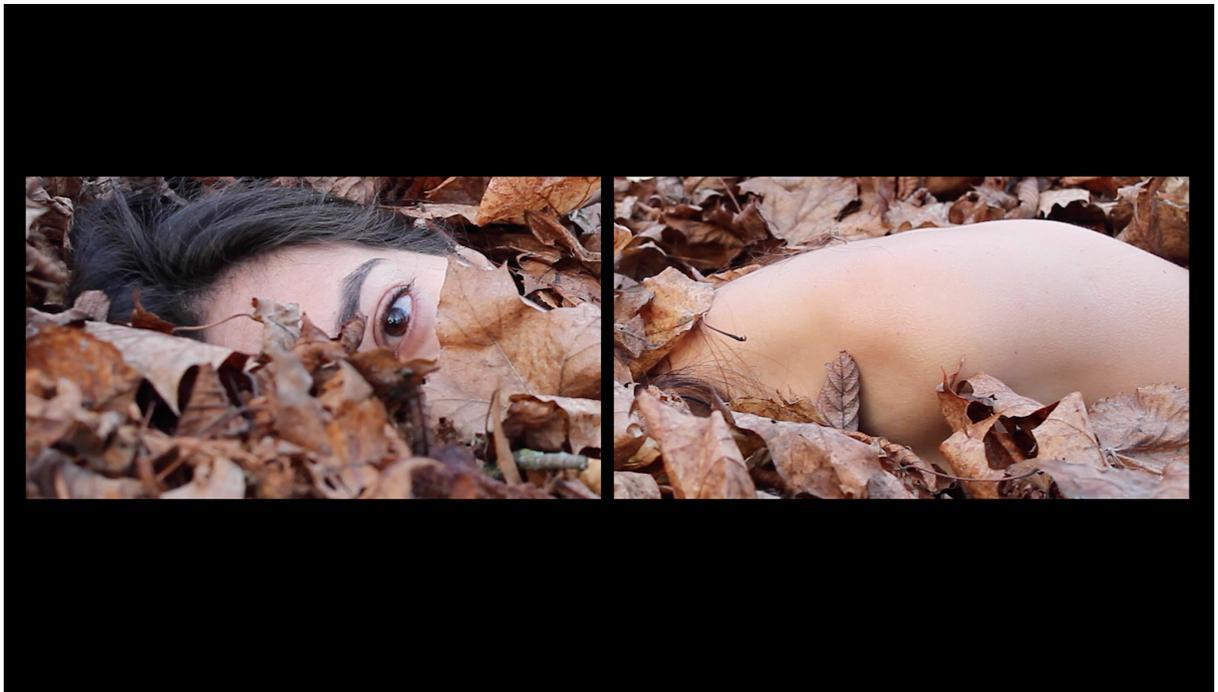
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NOTES FROM THE EDITOR

Random, unedited thoughts for you

Is the gaze a leap of faith?

Could it be that you are proposing a system in which no concrete proof is required to determine a concrete block's capacity for communication beyond our need and desire to transcend our aloneness and feed our appetite for company with the apples of our eyes? When sheer belief is sufficient to sustain a system, we can suspect the existence of a religion.

This new animism, with its tender faith in the poetic capacity of any and all non-human entities to be agents with autonomy and feelings, does express an urgency for man to respectfully interrelate with his complete environment. (*the connection that you expressed to me between the environment and your thesis*)

In this inclusive new world, empathy and affinity constantly give rise to meaningful associations of one's own choice. The world is no longer a lonely place; in fact, in direct relation to the increment in our sensibility, new forms of overpopulation and overstimulation will become dangers that our agile minds will, once again, have to learn to ignore.

"Il faut cultiver notre jardin " Voltaire...from Candide ((missing accents)

You are a crusader for a new world order!

And this is what I read to you the other day:

Dearest Daughter,

You could have chosen a "noble" material such as marble or bronze for your sculpture, but no, it was an ignominious bunch of frozen leaves that took your fancy. Had life taught you, somehow, that we mortals have a lifespan closer to that of a leaf than to that of a chunk of metal? And what did your leaves proceed to do? Why, *naturally*, they acted true to themselves by steadfastly trodding a downward path towards a ritual annual suicide, notwithstanding any of your frenetic efforts to emulate the elegance of a classical column or resurrect their contrived stature or just simply stop the spread of their ungainly mess.

Your affinity with a fragile, finite natural substance did not produce a preconceived form, but it did lead to the acquisition of greater knowledge and respect on your part. And, as for the leaves... well, who knows what they learned!

Love from your Mummsy

CHEAP BUT GOOD ADVICE TO ATTUNE

CHEAP BUT GOOD ADVICE FOR PLAYING MUSIC IN A GROUP

Chick Corea

1. Play only what you hear.
2. If you don't hear anything, don't play anything.
3. Don't let your fingers and limbs just wander--place them intentionally.
4. Don't improvise on endlessly--play something with intention, develop it or not, but then end off, take a break.
5. Leave space--create space--intentionally create places where you don't play.
6. Make your sound blend. Listen to your sound and adjust it to the rest of the band and the room.
7. If you play more than one instrument at a time--like a drum kit or multiple keyboards--make sure that they are balanced with one another.
8. Don't make any of your music mechanically or just through patterns of habit. Create each sound, phrase, and piece with choice--deliberately.
9. Guide your choice of what to play by what you ~~like~~ not by what someone else will think.
10. Use contrast and balance the elements: high/low, fast/slow, loud/soft, tense/relaxed, dense/sparse.
11. Play to make the other musicians sound good. Play things that will make the overall music sound good.
12. Play with a relaxed body. Always release whatever tension you create.
13. Create space--begin, develop, and end phrases with intention.
14. Never beat or pound your instrument--play it easily and gracefully.
15. Create space-- then place something in it.
16. Use mimicry sparsely--mostly create phrases that contrast with and develop the phrases of the other players.

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