

**else**where



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M A R T A C O L P A N I

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Elsewhere

This book could not have been produced without the kind advice and cooperation of many friends who shared their stories, their thoughts and their skills with me, my teachers from Gerrit Rietveld Academy and the artists who participated with their comments. A special thanks to:

Robert Adolfsson and Q.S. Serafijn, thesis mentors

Gianmaria Colpani, Olivier Oosterbaan and Zsolt Mesterhazy, editors

Dan Higgins and Helene Sommer, artists

Sarah Natsumi Moore and Denise Pires, interviews

Ivo van der Bent, photographer

Paolo Pedretti, graphic designer



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# a place to speak from

A PERCEPTIVE AND AFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ENVIRONMENT, THAT INCLUDES REACTIONS OF PROTEST OR REFUSAL OF THE ENVIRONMENT ITSELF.

To dwell means to live in or at a specific place. It describes a presence and activity that are strictly related to the place where they occur. The activity of dwelling becomes more aware and intentional for those who are displaced, have moved to a different city or a different country or were made into foreigners in the very country they were born in. I have gotten a sense of this situation on a day-to-day basis since I moved from Italy to the Netherlands in 2006, and I have been asking myself what this experience means to me personally, to me as an artist and to my surroundings. In other words, I have been wondering how the place where I live and its culture can benefit from my **dwelling** and I have been looking for a place in it, as a place to speak from.

Although displacement is often idealized as an experience of enrichment and opening, it also brings with it deep social and personal conflicts that too often remain insufficiently expressed and lead to forms of cultural fundamentalism and xenophobia (Morley 2000, 6). On the other hand this displacement generates loss for the ones who are “foreign”, a personal loss that becomes a social loss when real reciprocal integration fails (Scheffer 2007, 17).

In addition to the personal experience of displacement and loss, also places (neighborhoods, cities, regions, etc.) change in their **landscape**. In this respect, the phenomenon of displacement on a larger scale has been studied in community studies and cultural

geography. Philosopher Hakim Bey criticizes modern society as “an epoch where speed and ‘commodity fetishism’ have created a tyrannical false unity which tends to blur all cultural diversity and individuality, so that ‘one place is as good as another.’” About what he calls *psychic nomadism* he says:

THIS PARADOX CREATES “GYPSIES,” PSYCHIC TRAVELERS DRIVEN BY DESIRE OR CURIOSITY, WANDERERS WITH SHALLOW LOYALTIES [...] NOT TIED DOWN TO ANY PARTICULAR TIME AND PLACE, IN SEARCH OF DIVERSITY AND ADVENTURE... THIS DESCRIPTION COVERS NOT ONLY THE X-CLASS ARTISTS AND INTELLECTUALS BUT ALSO MIGRANT LABORERS, REFUGEES, THE ‘HOMELESS,’ TOURISTS, THE RV AND MOBILE-HOME CULTURE - ALSO PEOPLE WHO “TRAVEL” VIA THE NET, BUT MAY NEVER LEAVE THEIR OWN ROOMS (OR THOSE LIKE THOREAU WHO “HAVE TRAVELLED MUCH - IN CONCORD”); AND FINALLY IT INCLUDES “EVERYBODY,” ALL OF US, LIVING THROUGH OUR AUTOMOBILES, OUR VACATIONS, OUR TVS, BOOKS, MOVIES, TELEPHONES, CHANGING JOBS, CHANGING “LIFESTYLES,” RELIGIONS, DIETS, ETC., ETC. (BEY 1985-1991)

In Bey’s view, *dwelling* or living out our engagement with the environment becomes a strongly individualized activity, no longer rooted into a culture or community but rather picking from different cultures, disconnected from

local reality and lacking commitment. On the other hand, the *existential homeless*’ dwelling as a self-conscious process of integration contradicts the situation as it is described by Bey. Displaced individuals learn the history of the place they find themselves in, try to understand and create a context in which they can act in order to become a member of a local community. Eventually they transform the place itself through their engagement. This course also includes taking responsibility for what is part of the surroundings, and finding a standing for yourself within a place and (one of) its communities.

When we speak of place, it is inevitable to refer to a “specific past and tradition that are linked to common values, ideal, customs, and location” (Morley 2000, 33). This idea of a cultural common ground that is deeply rooted in the history of a place, a country, tends to exclude relatively new comers or dwellers who can be ethnically distinguished from the majority. But is it possible to think of other unifying principles that make a community as such?

The new-comer (the traveler), like the ethnologist, the anthropologist and the archeologist, feels an intensified need to “read” a place and its culture in the traces that its inhabitants leave behind.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold compares the work of the archeologist to the experience of the inhabitant of a landscape, since “they are engaged in projects of fundamentally the same kind.”

FOR BOTH THE ARCHAEOLOGIST AND THE NATIVE DWELLER, THE LANDSCAPE TELLS – OR RATHER IS – A STORY. IT ENFOLDS THE LIVES AND TIMES OF PREDECESSORS WHO, OVER THE GENERATIONS, HAVE MOVED AROUND IN IT AND PLAYED THEIR PART IN ITS FORMATION. TO PERCEIVE THE LANDSCAPE IS THEREFORE TO CARRY OUT AN ACT OF REMEMBRANCE, AND REMEMBERING IS NOT SO MUCH A MATTER OF CALLING UP AN INTERNAL IMAGE, STORED IN THE MIND, AS OF ENGAGING PERCEPTUALLY WITH AN ENVIRONMENT THAT IS ITSELF PREGNANT WITH THE PAST. (INGOLD 1993, 152)

The different chapters in this booklet will present a study of some strategies set in place by artists, writers and other *dwellers* in order to become part of a place or find out what their place is. Generally this process of *settlement* and discovery comes about at the place where we live and sometimes also the place where we have been growing up. To explore different styles and practices that relate to these mechanisms, I have engaged in conversations with friends who are confronted with foreignness in their personal life, and with art-

ists who deal with it more or less explicitly in their practice.

The strategies employed to reach different stages of participation in the surroundings can be very diverse and quite personal and they reflect ways of *being somewhere*. As Ingold suggests, the process is in its essence comparable to the work of the archeologist. It is a perceptive and affective engagement with the environment, that includes reactions of protest against, or refusal of the environment itself. You can call it *home*.

The question to be asked when looking at experiences of “foreignness” felt from the inside, is how this specific experience of *dwelling* results in cultural growth. Perhaps even more importantly, I propose to investigate in what ways, new or resumed, a solid local community can be (re)built and what is the role of the artist and the “foreigner” within this reconstructive process.

## Local art

Among the friends and acquaintances that I interviewed during my research, the writers and artists that I have come across and whose stories are told in this book, artists and their practice in particular are given more space in my study. What does it mean for artists to go through the process of becoming a member of a group or an active participant in a culture that is more



STILL FROM *ALICE IN DEN STÄDTEN* (1974), WIM WENDERS

or less circumscribed to a specific place? How do artists reflect on their own culture and environment and how do they address a local public with their art? Do they produce art that is in the first place “local”, even when it reaches a larger public?

While, as Lucy Lippard notes, the term **local art** (or **regional art**) unfairly seems to refer to traditional forms of amateurship (Lippard 1997, 36), it is a pity that another meaning of this appellation is given less consideration. In fact, what makes art “local” is not its poor quality of execution or a lack in depth and meaning. On the contrary, their subject matter, content, audience and consequently a specific attitude mark certain artists and works of art as “local” among others. I want to quote Lucy Lippard, who writes:

IF ART IS DEFINED AS ‘UNIVERSAL’, AND FORM IS ROUTINELY FAVORED OVER CONTENT, THEN ARTISTS ARE ENCOURAGED TO TRANSCEND THEIR IMMEDIATE LOCALES. BUT IF CONTENT IS CONSIDERED THE PRIME COMPONENT OF ART, AND LIVED EXPERIENCE IS SEEN AS A PRIME MATERIAL, THEN REGIONALISM IS NOT A LIMITATION BUT AN ADVANTAGE, A WELCOME BASE THAT NEED NOT EXCLUDE OUTSIDE INFLUENCES BUT SIFTS THEM THROUGH A LOCAL FILTER. GOOD REGIONAL ART HAS BOTH ROOTS AND REACH. (LIPPARD 1997, 36)

Subsequently Lucy Lippard tries to identify what makes **local art** attractive, especially to those who look a lot at art in different places. She reckons it is a “certain foreignness (a variation on the Exotic Other) that, on further scrutiny, may really be an unexpected familiarity, emerging from half-forgotten sources in our own local popular cultures.” So, what does local art do to the local and international audience, what does it communicate? And is its form tied to a local audience or can it also be received by “foreigners”?

I will try to answer these questions by looking at **local art** as a means for consciously **being somewhere** and actively becoming part of a local context, but also as an attempt to change culture in different ways. When I refer to **local art** (or local artists), I refer to works of art that are characterized by content that reflects on a locally circumscribed culture, history, place or community and to artists that aim at speaking to a local audience before aspiring for international notice. I will argue that Lorna Simpson, Wim Wenders, Helene Sommer and Rebecca Belmore, among many others, produce in fact art that we can call “local.”

The chapters of this book describe each a different human and artistic strategy for becoming part of a place and of a com-

munity, whose borders very often correspond with those of a country (or alternatively a region or a state, like in the case of the United States). These strategies are often related to language, taste, popular culture, habits and beliefs of a group of neighboring people and ways of looking for inclusion by individuals who see themselves as *foreign*. The different angles that I found, are clustered in four themes: “To tell”, “To see”, “To

collect” and “To change”. Each one of these themes describes a different approach to the same process. In addition to personal accounts by different individuals, interviews and analysis of contemporary literature heroes, works of art that I interpret and experience as “local” and their makers are also discussed in relation to the specific content and to their value for the local identity of a place and its inhabitants.







{ SARAH NATSUMI MOORE }



MARTA COLPANI, SARAH IN HER HOUSEBOAT (2012)

I interviewed Sarah in the spring of 2012, when she was living in a houseboat in the East of Amsterdam. The end of her stay in the Netherlands was imminent and she was mentally preparing to move back to Austin, Texas, where she had been living before coming to Amsterdam in 2009. Sarah is half Japanese, half American and she grew up travelling to a different country about every two or three years. She moved very often with her father, who worked in the military. In this respect, Sarah is the ideal prototype of the generation of “wanderers with shallow loyalties” that Hakim Bey describes. Uncommitted to and unrooted in any particular place or culture, “always looking for adventures”.

Although Sarah is not directly tied to a specific place or country, not even in her thoughts, and she doesn’t come from a specific place, she feels part of a “group”. A more imagined group, defined by attitude to life and somehow also by the shared lot of being “country-less”. When Sarah was little, she experienced Japanese and American school as evenly alienating. In both settings, she was immediately identified as the “strange kid”, or the “foreigner”. On the other hand she felt at ease in military school: everyone was more or less in the same situation, moving very often, being a foreigner was not an

exceptional circumstance, it was the norm.

**MARTA:** YOU DON’T WANT TO ANSWER THE QUESTION, WHERE ARE YOU FROM?

**SARAH:** HERE I JUST SAY I’M FROM TEXAS, BECAUSE IT’S WHERE I’VE BEEN LIVING A LOT THESE YEARS. IT’S EASY FOR ME TO SAY THAT, SO I JUST LEAVE IT AT THAT. BUT THAT’S NOT REALLY WHERE I’M FROM.

I WAS PART OF A MILITARY COMMUNITY, SO IF YOU MOVE, YOU GO TO SCHOOL WITH OTHER KIDS THAT ARE IN THE SAME SITUATION. YOU GROW UP THINKING THAT IT’S NORMAL. YOU KNOW IT’S NOT NORMAL BUT THEN YOUR FRIENDS ARE ALL DOING THE SAME THING. NEW PEOPLE ARE COMING ALL THE TIME SO IT’S A SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT THAT’S VERY DIVERSE. AND EVERYONE IS DOING THIS TOGETHER SO YOU DON’T THINK IT’S STRANGE.

I THINK IT WAS EASIER FOR ME TO BE IN A MILITARY SCHOOL BECAUSE YOU DON’T HAVE TO EXPLAIN ANYTHING. IN A MILITARY SCHOOL EVERYONE IS A MIX, SO YOU SEE PEOPLE THAT LOOK LIKE ME. ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS WHEN YOU MEET SOMEONE IS NOT “WHERE ARE YOU FROM?” BUT “WHERE DID YOU MOVE FROM?” AND “WHAT ARE YOU?”, LIKE HALF WHITE HALF KOREAN? ARE YOU PILIPINO MEXICAN? BECAUSE EVERYONE IS SO MIXED-LOOKING, THAT PEOPLE START GUESSING ALREADY. EVERYONE IS

THE SAME. AND BEING A NEW KID IS NOT A BIG DEAL BECAUSE THERE IS ALWAYS A NEW KID. THERE'S PEOPLE LEAVING ALL THE TIME SO YOU SWITCH OUT FRIENDS AND YOU FALL INTO GROUPS FASTER, IT IS NOT THE "SCARY SURVIVAL".

JAPANESE CULTURE IS VERY HOMOGENEOUS, SO YOU ARE JAPANESE OR YOU ARE NOT. AND IF YOU'RE NOT JAPANESE IT'S SO OBVIOUS. IN AMERICA I LOOK JAPANESE, TO A JAPANESE PERSON I LOOK AMERICAN. OBVIOUSLY I'M ASIAN BUT THEY KNOW I AM NOT FULL JAPANESE. BEING A FOREIGNER AND GOING TO JAPANESE SCHOOL, I WAS ALWAYS DIFFERENT. THEY WANT YOU TO CONFORM. THEY WANT EVERYONE TO BE THE SAME. AND I GOT TEASED ALL THE TIME.

BUT THEN WHEN I WOULD MOVE TO AMERICA AND GO TO ONE OF THOSE PUBLIC SCHOOLS, EVERYONE HAD BEEN THERE SINCE THEY WERE BORN. THEY WOULD FEEL REALLY SORRY FOR ME. THEY REALLY THOUGHT I WAS SAD BECAUSE THEY GREW UP THEIR WHOLE LIFE THERE, THEIR GRANDPA LIVES IN THE SAME TOWN, THEY HAVE THE WHOLE SYSTEM OF GOING TO THE SAME KINDERGARTEN, JOINING FOOTBALL TOGETHER AND THEY MARRIED THEIR HIGH SCHOOL SWEETHEART AND WHATEVER SO WHEN THEY SAW ME THEY THOUGHT IT WAS REALLY SAD THAT I WAS TORN APART FROM THESE FRIENDSHIPS. AND THAT PART IS SAD. I NEVER THOUGHT THAT THEY WERE SAD BUT I SAW IT AS A DIFFERENT LIFESTYLE. I THOUGHT THAT I GOT TO SEE

THE WORLD AND I WAS LUCKY BUT THEY SAW IT AS UNFORTUNATE.

WHEN YOU GO TO A SCHOOL IN A SMALL TOWN IN NEW MEXICO, YOU HAVE TO USE YOUR SOCIAL SKILLS TO FIGURE OUT WHERE YOU WANT TO BE PLACED AND YOU HAVE TO TRY HARDER TO MAKE FRIENDS. PEOPLE HAVE BEEN FRIENDS WITH EACH OTHER THEIR WHOLE LIFE AND YOU HAVE TO BE ABOVE THAT AND SEE EVERYTHING AND FIGURE OUT WHERE TO GO. AND WHEN YOU MOVE A LOT YOU GET GOOD AT THAT, YOU KNOW HOW TO MANIPULATE THE SITUATION.

I became curious about what Sarah meant when she said that she learned to “manipulate” the situation. She spoke of a special kind of “social skills” that she developed over time in order to adapt to the new context and fit into the new setting as fast as possible.

**SARAH:** WHEN I FIRST MOVED TO NEW MEXICO I WAS REALLY CONFUSED. IT IS SO STEREOTYPICAL THAT IT IS HARD TO FIGURE OUT WHERE YOUR PLACE IS GOING TO BE AND HOW YOU ARE GOING TO MAKE FRIENDS. IN MILITARY SCHOOL THERE'S ALL THESE THINGS TOO, BUT IT'S CHANGING ALL THE TIME. IT IS A LOT EASIER TO JUST GO TO SCHOOL. IN NEW MEXICO YOU HAVE TO MAKE A CHOICE FOR YOURSELF AND YOU HAVE TO TRY. YOU CAN END UP LIKE A LONER OR MANIPULATE YOURSELF AND HANG OUT

WITH COOL KIDS. YOU HAVE TO DEFINE YOUR PLACE.

IF YOU MOVE AROUND EVERY TWO YEARS, YOU KNOW EVERYTHING, YOU JUST SEE IT ON THE SURFACE. I JUST FELT SO DETACHED FROM THE SITUATION AND I WOULD SEE IT AND I DIDN'T CARE AND I WAS LIKE "I AM GOING TO PUT MYSELF IN THIS PLACE SO THAT I CAN DO WHAT-EVER I WANT", AND THEN I'D GO WITH HAPPY, PRETTY MUCH. IN HIGH SCHOOL I JUST MADE IT SO I WOULD BE IN A HAPPY SITUATION ALL THE TIME. SOMETIMES I WISH THAT PEOPLE WHO NEVER LEFT THE TOWN THAT THEY'VE LIVED IN COULD HAVE THAT EXPERIENCE, SO THAT THEY COULD FEEL A DIFFERENT PART OF THEMSELVES.

We elaborated a while on the idea of "making a new identity for yourself" when moving to a new place. We agreed on the fact that this doesn't mean you are becoming another person or pretending you are someone else. It has more to do with the chance to discover – or *feel* – different parts of yourself. This is much easier when you arrive in a new place, where you do not have a defined role yet and people have no clear expectations from you. By staying for a longer time in the same place we tend to involuntarily generate patterns that are hard to break, in others but also in yourself. These patterns are not completely personal, they might be

triggered by the place itself and by the people we meet.

Finding a place within a context might be oversimplified more easily when we speak in retrospect about our teen years, like Sarah did during our interviews. But it becomes more complex as we get older and we expand our identity into far larger domains. An increasingly scattered combination of work environment, old and new friends, neighbors, hobbies, ambitions, partners, lifestyle preferences, language, beliefs and political choices among other things, define who we are in our social context. Inevitably, this "image" also outlines who we can become.

**SARAH:** I DISCOVERED AMERICA PROBABLY THE MOST WHEN I MOVED [BACK]. I KNEW ABOUT IT, OBVIOUSLY. I HAVE BEEN MOVING BACK AND FORTH AND I'VE LIVED IN AMERICA OFF AND ON. I GOT A SENSE OF IT, SOMETIMES. BUT THEN I'D HAVE THIS HALF OF ME THAT WAS IN ASIA, AND THAT WAS JUST AS BIG TO MY LIFE.

GOING TO UNIVERSITY WAS WHAT REALLY DEFINED MY PERSONALITY, WHAT MADE ME FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE WITH BEING IN AMERICA. I MADE A LOT OF FRIENDS FROM A LOT OF DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS, WHO WERE MAYBE ALSO FROM TEXAS BUT THEIR PARENTS WERE KOREAN. OR THEY WERE FROM CHICAGO BUT THEIR PARENTS IMMIGRATED FROM

INDIA. OR REGULAR AMERICAN FRIENDS TOO, WHO STILL HAD THE SAME IDEALS OR THE SAME OUTLOOK ON LIFE AS ME. AND THAT'S WHEN FOR THE FIRST TIME I REALLY FELT COMFORTABLE IN TEXAS. OR IN AMERICA. OR ANYWHERE, I GUESS.

THE FIRST TIME I CAME TO AMSTERDAM I FELT LIKE "THIS IS WHAT I AM, TEXAS IS SO BACKWARD. I AM NOT AMERICAN, I AM EUROPEAN." BUT THEN LIVING HERE FOR ALMOST THREE YEARS NOW, I REALIZED THAT I REALLY AM AMERICAN. BECAUSE IN AMERICA I'VE ALWAYS BEEN THE FOREIGNER, BUT LIVING IN AMSTERDAM HAS MADE ME START TO DEFINE MY IDENTITY A LITTLE MORE BY COMPARING IT TO OTHER PEOPLE. I AM NOT AMERICAN LIKE ALLYSON IS AMERICAN, BUT I AM HELL OF A LOT MORE AMERICAN

THAN ALL THESE DUTCH PEOPLE, OR YOU. I REALIZED: THESE PEOPLE ARE REALLY DUTCH, THEY HAVE THEIR IDENTITY AND I AM NOT LIKE THEM. THAT'S WHEN I STARTED TO REALIZE THAT THERE IS THIS PART OF ME THAT IS VERY AMERICAN AND THAT I DIDN'T SEE IT BEFORE.

I DON'T UNDERSTAND DUTCH PEOPLE AT ALL. I DO, AND THEN I DON'T. EVEN IF WE WERE SPEAKING FLUENTLY TO EACH OTHER, I FEEL WE ARE SEPARATE. AND WHEN I'M IN TEXAS, I CAN JUST BE IN AN ELEVATOR OF SOME BUILDING AND SOME CHUBBY WOMAN FROM THE SUBURBS WOULD WALK IN AND SHE'D BE LIKE "HI, HOW DO YOU DO?" AND I FEEL LIKE I'D KNOW IMMEDIATELY EVERYTHING THAT IS GOING ON IN HER BRAIN, EVEN IF I KNOW WE ARE DIFFERENT.







# to tell

"FINDING A FITTING PLACE FOR ONESELF IN THE WORLD IS FINDING A PLACE FOR ONESELF IN A STORY." (JO CARSON, QUOTED IN LIPPARD 1997, 33)

Everything is a story and it can be told. So is a nation, so are its inhabitants, so is its particularity as a specific form of collective identity. The question I ask myself is what is the story that is to be told? And who is telling it to whom? Even when I think of my own story, I am not sure whether I am an Italian immigrant in the Netherlands, or rather a Dutch woman with Italian origins. Who are my *others* and who are my neighbors, and to what extent are my neighbors part of my personal narratives of foreignness, in both my countries? In other words, what stories do *I* want to tell about my culture, once I have found out what culture that is, and to whom do I want to tell those stories?

Benedict Anderson defines national identity as an imagined

community because "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1991, 15). According to Michael Harbsmeier (quoted in Löfgren 1991, 105), the existence of this image of self as a community and its value can only be confirmed by contrast with other groups' identities. Thus in the case of a national identity, the identity becomes such when it projects a "national otherness". The imagined community identifies as a unity, a single voice.

The Swedish ethnologist Orvar Löfgren ascertains that "in spite of expanding literature [on national identity] we still live with

TO TELL



MARTA COLPANI, DUTCH NATURAL PARK VELUWE (2013)

an underdeveloped and ambiguous analytical framework; concepts like national identity, culture, mentality or heritage are still vaguely defined” (Löfgren 1991, 101). One of the reasons for this is the nature of **national identity** itself being often perceived as timeless, although it is completely dependent on a context and time in history.

For instance Swedishness, like any other nationality, has a different meaning in different times in history and so it refers to different qualities over time. In his attempt to reveal the mechanisms involved in the formation of a national identity, Löfgren criticizes normative definitions, or even descriptive ones that seem to create an unambiguous and unifying image of a nation’s idealized members:

THE EXPERIENCE AND STRATEGIES OF CREATING NATIONAL LANGUAGES, HERITAGES AND SYMBOLIC ESTATES, ETC. ARE CIRCULATED AMONG INTELLECTUAL ACTIVISTS IN DIFFERENT CORNERS OF THE WORLD AND THE EVENTUAL RESULT IS A KIND OF CHECK-LIST: EVERY NATION SHOULD HAVE NOT ONLY A COMMON LANGUAGE, A COMMON PAST AND DESTINY, BUT ALSO A NATIONAL FOLK CULTURE, A NATIONAL CHARACTER OR MENTALITY, NATIONAL VALUES, PERHAPS EVEN SOME NATIONAL TASTES AND A NATIONAL LANDSCAPE (OFTEN ENSHRINED IN THE FORM OF NATIONAL PARKS), A GALLERY OF NATIONAL MYTHS

AND HEROES (AND VILLAINS), A SET OF SYMBOLS, INCLUDING FLAG AND ANTHEM, SACRED TEXTS AND IMAGES, ETC. (LÖFGREN 1991, 104)

Dutch publicist Paul Scheffer wrote in 2000 that “a lazy multiculturalism establishes because we don’t sufficiently articulate what it is that keeps our society together.” The way I see it, Scheffer’s “lazy multiculturalism” and Bey’s “tyrannical false unity” are strictly connected, and both remind me of the phenomenon criticized by Löfgren in the abstract above. An idealized, peaceful and comfortable story of a place or community (such as the nation), where all conflicts are shrouded, is the result of a weak attempt to describe what keeps a community together. In such a context, individual stories of any kind do not get a voice.

This has been happening also in the Netherlands: what can be shared more easily (or can easily be perceived as “foreign”) are visible national traits, small trivial elements as symbolic representations of central ideas (Löfgren 1991, 109), which manifest themselves in what Morley calls “regressive forms of cultural fundamentalism, xenophobia and nostalgia” (Morley 2000, 6). These elements tend to create an idealized image of a single national identity that is by definition obsolete. If we look

at the Dutch example, these trivial elements place emphasis on a certain imagined “Dutch singularity”, in contrast with other national, cultural and even religious identities that are themselves as much idealized and anachronistic.

Unfortunately, Scheffer’s edge is solely practical and more concerned with the socio-economical consequences of migration than with the personal experiences of otherness or *foreignness* experienced by many individuals in their own environment. I like to freely interpret his statement as a plea for telling the stories that coexist in the Netherlands, among its inhabitants, because otherwise the characters and tellers of these stories don’t get **a place to speak from** within this “false unity”.

Scheffer was probably wrong and somewhat superficial in his socio-political conclusions, but at some point he spoke the truth: “we don’t sufficiently articulate what it is that keeps our society together” (Scheffer 2000), hence we tend to universalize. We should take a step back in this social, cultural and political dispute, stop keeping ourselves busy with the “nation”, the “migrants” and its unavoidable

generalizations, and start telling the single stories that make us who we are (Ramadan & Scheffer 2010).

In the Netherlands, like everywhere else, the static identity that is communicated and cultivated in the public sphere mismatches the experience of the *dwellers* on so many levels that our true stories threaten to get lost, we almost forget them. It requires a certain discipline to keep telling these stories with honesty and to share them with others. After all, the stories that we tell to each other shape our identity, in the first place as individuals and eventually as a group. What I would want to encourage is to stop thinking in terms of national identity with all the imagery that comes with it, and to start giving shape to our particular stories. We live here, we  *dwell*, we create the landscape and care for it, we use the surroundings and shape it at the same time. This is something that we’ve already been doing, more or less consciously. We should become more aware of the stories that we tell to each other, in that they establish who we are, they settle who becomes the foreigner and who does not. And how.







{ PAUL SMAÏL }

To find a place for himself in the world and in a story is what Paul literally does in his second book, “Casa, la casa”. He is placeless and writes a story for himself in order to fit in it. The story of his attempt to feel part of the place where he lives, and to abandon the idealized **home far away**, Morocco: the home from his parents’ memories, where he was virtually brought up. Paul and his friends, born in France from first generation migrants, see themselves as outsiders, foreigners even. In the story told by Paul, this becomes a choice. They choose to take a distance, to adopt the attitude of the external observer.

When Paul goes back to Casablanca for the first time in his life, hoping to finally find his real **home**, he realizes that in Casablanca his story doesn’t exist, and so that **he** doesn’t exist. He becomes what others make out of his appearance or associate with France, and feels completely cut out of reality.

“AND I? DO I LOOK ARAB?”

“AT FIRST GLANCE I’D RATHER SAY YOU ARE A BERBER, FROM YOUR OUTLOOK. BUT THAT’S NOT THE POINT. I AM NOT SURE IF...”

“I DON’T UNDERSTAND IT AT ALL. WHAT DOES AND DOESN’T HE SEE...?”

“NOTHING. THERE IS ALSO NOTHING TO

UNDERSTAND. IT IS WHAT IT IS. MAYBE IN FRANCE YOU ARE AN ARAB, BUT HERE “

“AM I A BERBER?”

“NO! ALSO NOT. NOT A REAL ARABIAN EN ALSO NOT A REAL BERBER. I DON’T KNOW. IF I SEE YOU “

SHE CAN’T FIND THE RIGHT WORDS AND PUTS ON A SMILE. HOW CAN YOU DEFINE THE INDEFINABLE? BY THE WAY, THE SUBJECT BORES HER.

“LET’S TALK ABOUT PARIS!”

BUT HER PARIS IS NOT MY PARIS. (SMAÏL 1991, 101)

Through the loss of identity that Paul experiences in Casablanca, you could say the loss of his story and of his voice, Paul understands that his home is not in Morocco, also not in France and not even in Paris, but in Barbès, the Parisian district where he grew up and where he still lives, where he shares meaningful experiences with his friends and family and where he learned to look at others and at the surroundings with a particular gaze that could possibly be identified with Frenchness, or even with **Paris-ness**.

It was a scandal in France when it became clear, in 2000, that Paul Smâil himself was fictional, one of Jack-Alan Lèger’s many pseudonyms.





PHOTOGRAPH OF BÂRBES, PARIS (BY CHRISTOPHE DUCAMP)



PHOTOGRAPH OF BÂRBES, PARIS (FROM YANIDEL'S BLOG, 1-10-2008)



{ ANIL RAMDAS }



IVO VAN DER BENT, ANIL RAMDAS (2011)



It seems impossible to talk about Anil Ramdas without identifying him almost completely with Harry Badal, the central character of his last book, *Badal* (Ramdas, 2010). The entire book is written from Harry's perspective and repeatedly refers to actual facts and existing places from Anil Ramdas' life. During interviews, the writer confirmed that the book was semi-autobiographic and essayistic, that some traits of his own personality were used to serve the fiction, some were made up, and more in general that Harry's character was exaggerated for the sake of a narrative, which served to develop some ideas that would be far too complex for an essay or a pamphlet (Ramdas 2012).

Ramdas' voice is extremely present in the book. Not only his opinion about actual political facts is recognizable; the human condition of the main character also reminds me of Ramdas'. A human condition which enlarges Ramdas' political and philosophical positions on a meta-level: an intellectual migrant, failing in his personal life as much as in his public career, trying to be assimilated by the "white Dutch elite" and at the same time constantly avoiding inclusion, preserving a sharp and conscious *foreignness*.

Harry Badal, Anil Ramdas in disguise, shortly but repeatedly

formulates this thought in the book, referring to the "position of the migrant" as a possibly privileged state, because it allows one to see things more clearly, from a distance. In the story, this distance seems to be Harry's survival technique and at the same time the source of his fears and insecurities.

I almost forgot that I was reading fiction when, at some point in the story, fictional Harry Badal meets Paul Scheffer personally. Harry becomes curious about his work only to be disappointed when he reads his column "The multicultural drama", published in Dutch Newspaper NRC in 2000.

HE FILLED HIS EMPTY MUG, TOOK A COUPLE OF GENEROUS SIPS AND KEPT READING WHAT ALL THE DRAMA WAS ABOUT. NOT ABOUT IDENTITY STRUGGLES, NOT THE HEAVY BURDENS OF HOMESICKNESS, CONFLICTING FIDELITIES, CULTURAL AMBIVALENCES, HOMELESSNESS, INSECURITY IN A NEW ENVIRONMENT, THE LONGING FOR A GRIP, FOR CONTINUITY, FOR AN UNINTERRUPTED LIFE STORY; IT WAS ABOUT THE STATE OF "ALLOCHTHON" PEOPLE ON THE JOB MARKET AND IN EDUCATION.

WAS THAT 'HIS TERRITORY', AS THE AUTHOR HIMSELF TOLD HIM? HAD HE EVER BEEN DEALING WITH UNEMPLOYMENT AND SCHOOL DROPOUT?

THE ESSAY STARTED WITH A SENTENCE BADAL HIMSELF COULD HAVE WRITTEN:

"SOMETIMES CULTURAL CONFUSION TAKES A COMICAL TURN." BUT WHILE BADAL WOULD HAVE BEEN WRITING ABOUT THE CONFUSION AMONG IMMIGRANTS, THE AUTHOR WAS CONCERNED WITH THE CONFUSION AMONG THE WHITES.

BADAL THOUGHT HE COULD QUIETLY PUT DOWN THE NEWSPAPER AND GO ON WITH THE DAY. THE NEW SOCIAL ISSUE WAS NOT HIS ISSUE. IT WAS NOT ROMANTIC ENOUGH. IT WAS NOT AN INTERESTING LITERARY FACT. THERE WAS NO POETRY IN IT. OFFICERS AND ADMINISTRATORS SHOULD DEAL WITH IT.

BUT BADAL HADN'T COUNTED ON SUCH REACTIONS TO THE ARTICLE, WITH ITS SENSATIONAL TITLE. THE NETHERLANDS WERE RELIEVED, BECAUSE THE MULTICULTI CRAP COULD FINALLY BE DEALT WITH. THE ARTICLE WORKED LIKE A POOP BAG. DOOM WAS NOT CAUSED BY DISPLACEMENT, NOSTALGIA AND CULTURAL AMBIVALENCE, BUT BY LANGUAGE

DEFICIT, LACK OF EDUCATION AND PUBLIC ORDER ISSUES. (RAMDAS 2010, 286)

Harry wanted to stay out of the political discussions about inclusion and exclusion, being foreign, integration and national identity, which he found uninteresting and somewhat banal. He was concerned with telling marginal but very specific stories, which fascinated and interested him. Anil Ramdas himself explains his choice to write his first work of fiction, *Badal*, as a choice for a form where one doesn't need to take a stand, where personal conditions of the characters can be discussed while also philosophical and political arguments can be made through the characters' voices and stories. A form where one can "constantly switch from the largest to the smallest, and find a balance between the two." (Ramdas 2012)





{ REBECCA BELMORE }



REBECCA BELMORE, AYUNEE-AAWACH OOMAMA-MOWAN: SPEAKING TO  
THEIR MOTHER (2008)

Rebecca Belmore comes from an experience of “foreignness” in her own land as native Indian in Canada, she was brought up by a mother who remained deeply faithful to her own original language and at the same time forced Rebecca to speak only English. Rebecca Belmore explains that her experiences of displacement and cultural loss are at the source of her art works, which she defines as “objects and acts of separation and protest.”

Belmore’s work doesn’t only speak of a state of displacement: the leading tone of voice in her art is that of domination, submission and power. In her work, the elements of violation and enforcement come back, often symbolically but also with more layers of complexity, as a very direct action on the environment or on objects. These elements are returned to the public in the form of a victim’s reaction, or as a protest, like the artist says. In her work ***Ayunee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to their Mother, (1991 - 1996)*** as I interpret it, the emphasis is on attachment to the land and on the force of this relationship between land and inhabitants, that transcends ownership and agrarian exploitation. The land gives a voice to native communities, their stories and their voices are understood and become powerful when they address the land.

The installation consists of a wooden megaphone, through which aboriginal communities in Canada and the United States were invited to speak to their landscape. Rebecca Belmore says:

THIS ARTWORK WAS MY RESPONSE TO WHAT IS NOW REFERRED TO IN CANADIAN HISTORY AS THE “OKA CRISIS.” DURING THE SUMMER OF 1990, MANY PROTESTS WERE MOUNTED IN SUPPORT OF THE MOHAWK NATION OF KANESATAKE IN THEIR STRUGGLE TO MAINTAIN THEIR TERRITORY. THIS OBJECT WAS TAKEN INTO MANY FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES - RESERVATION, RURAL, AND URBAN. I WAS PARTICULARLY INTERESTED IN LOCATING THE ABORIGINAL VOICE ON THE LAND. ASKING PEOPLE TO ADDRESS THE LAND DIRECTLY WAS AN ATTEMPT TO HEAR POLITICAL PROTEST AS POETIC ACTION. (REBECCA BELMORE, ARTIST’S WEBSITE)

Outsiderness in this work is not quite subtle but remains double: the artist acts as a counterforce against a very clear social and political entity. Nevertheless, her role is undefined in terms of inclusion and loyalty. Her work is not against the Canadians or Canada. On the contrary, her work comes from a deep attachment and love for the land where she belongs. This feeling of belonging is just the backbone of the work, together with the desire to speak out the natives’ stories. Those narratives

were oppressed as before during the Oka conflict, and the Canadian government didn't respond to them adequately.

In Belmore's work, the land, the **landscape** in the more complex meaning of the word (**taskscape**, in Ingold's terms) is rendered as an active participant in the dispute between the communities that are sharing and claiming the same space. In a historical conflict, marked by oppression and vio-

lence, the land is the greatest witness, and the First Nations communities' custodian and authority. In this respect, the poetic image of the megaphone and the intimate action of speaking out become political and subversive. The artist participates in Canadian culture and takes a stand in local conflicts by literally creating **a place to speak from**, as an insider who has been made into a foreigner by her own country's policies.







{ DAN HIGGINS }



DAN HIGGINS, FROM ONION PORTRAITS (1970-1980)



DAN HIGGINS, FROM *ONION PORTRAITS* (1993)

MOST OF MY PROJECTS OVER THE YEARS HAVE RISEN FROM A DESIRE TO LEARN ABOUT A PLACE AND TO USE PHOTOGRAPHY OR VIDEO TO ALLOW SOMETHING OF THE CHARACTER OF THE PLACE TO REVEAL ITSELF THROUGH COLLABORATION WITH PEOPLE THERE. (HIGGINS 2013)

Dan Higgins' work "The incredible onion portraits" was triggered when he experienced what you could call a "loss of placeness" in the local community of Winooski (Vermont), where he had been living for about 7 years. This process of loss was triggered by an urban renewal program, which included the tearing down of many city blocks, enforced closure of local businesses and relocation of the inhabitants. Higgins experienced the change as a violent assault on the lively local neighborhoods and their rituals, and decided to react on this process through documenting the locals and create a symbol to express their identity as a group.

The visual and material result of this work is a series of photographs that document the inhabitants of Winooski. The actual project was in fact much more lively: Higgins started photographing the members of a community that seemed to be going to disappear, or at least change radically, and he displayed the photographs in the area that was going to be dismantled. He describes his work

as a "documentation as much as a celebration" of the local community. I also think that his work was a way to affirm the presence of a group of people whose importance and sense of belonging were going to be disregarded. This was not only done by taking the symbolic "onion photographs" but also by placing the photographs in the changing space, while the subjects photographed were being forced to leave. By doing so, he made the whole community part of this celebrative project. A kind of a funeral for a small group and their rituals that were going to disappear.

I CHOSE THE ONION AS PROP, APPROPRIATE NOT ONLY BECAUSE THE TOWN'S NAME, WINOOSKI, IS THE ABENAKI WORD FOR WILD ONIONS GROWING ALONG ITS RIVER, BUT BECAUSE THE ONION IS STRONG AND REEKS OF A FLAVOR UNSETTLING TO A GENTRIFIED SENSIBILITY. I SAW IT AS AN UNPRETENTIOUS WAY OF RESIDENTS AFFIRMING THEIR PRESENCE IN THE COMMUNITY. EACH DAY DURING OCTOBER 1976 I EXHIBITED A NEW *ONION PORTRAIT* IN THE WINDOW OF AN UNOCCUPIED STOREFRONT STILL REMAINING ON THE WEST SIDE OF MAIN STREET. AS THE PHOTOS ACCUMULATED THEY SPILLED INTO THE WINDOWS OF OTHER ESTABLISHMENTS ON MAIN STREET AND THE EXHIBITION BECAME A KIND OF LOCAL THEATER. BY THE END OF THE MONTH MANY PEOPLE WERE ASKING ME TO COME INTO THEIR HOMES AND PHO-

TOGRAPH THEM FOR THE PROJECT. (DAN HIGGINS, ARTIST'S WEBSITE)

Higgins' work might seem nostalgic, but I think it is not the case. Higgins took notice of a vital center of interactions and relationships between the people in a town that was relatively new and foreign to him, and he made this common feeling more tangible through his work. When I contacted him and asked him to talk more about his work, he wrote to me that he has an "interest in using art as a way of connecting with (and celebrating) the social dynamic that underlies communities, especially marginalized communities whose identities are often known only through representations of outsiders." (Higgins 2013)

Higgins took up the project again in 1993 when, through a Federal Resettlement Program, immigrants were repopulating Winooski. He made a new series of portraits, where the members of the new community also posed with the symbolic onion, surrounded by objects and the home environment that referred to the place where they originally came from.

"***The Onion Portraits*** continues to speak of specificity. To pose with the onion is to participate in local lore; its embrace is an affirmation of locality." (Higgins 2013) While

the onion is merely a symbol, one of those who could be easily used to create that "false unity" that I referred to in the beginning of this chapter, Higgins' photographs have the opposite objective because they want to document the single individuals who are part of the community and also bring them together to share their own specific cultures.

His work is strongly grounded in his anthropological interest and he feels that although he is engaged with both art and anthropological studies, the umbrella of art has allowed him greater flexibility to engage in the kind of representational work that he does. About his work as an artist, which clearly stands close to anthropology and to the typical formal presentation of documentation, Higgins says:

JOHN BERGER MAKES A DISTINCTION I FIND ESSENTIAL BETWEEN WHAT HE CALLS "RECORDING", WHERE IMAGES REMAIN IN THE CONTEXT OF WHERE THEY ARE MADE, AND "REPORTING", WHERE IMAGES ARE REMOVED FROM THAT CONTEXT AND PLACED IN A NEW ONE. I LIKE MY WORK TO FUNCTION AS "RECORDING", AND IT IS IMPORTANT THAT I EXHIBIT WORK AS I MAKE IT, IN THE COMMUNITY, IN A PUBLIC SPACE, WHERE PEOPLE CAN GET AN IDEA OF WHAT I AM UP TO, AND WITH THE WORK ENTERING THE COMMUNITY DIALOGUE. (HIGGINS 2013)





## to see

SPACE IS THE SURFACE WHERE A CULTURE, AN ERA, AN INDIVIDUAL PROJECT THEIR CONDUCT, THEIR PAST AND THEIR DESIRES. (LEMAIRE 2007, 18)

I remember how I wanted to learn the logic behind any insignificant habit, rule, taste or word that I noticed when I first moved to the Netherlands. Sometimes I would pick up ways and manners that I hadn't seen before or I didn't understand and I would exercise them as a daily routine, to internalize, master them and make them into my own features. To become "owned" myself by the culture. For example, I remember buying a backpack to replace my big purse, and getting a bicycle with coaster breaks. Or learning to drink butter-milk and to bake apple pie, to not dry my hair after a shower.

You could say that this process is double-sided: like an archeologist, I observe and try to interpret, to understand. As *foreigner* in a new place and as member of a group,

I mimic actions, play with them, until I am able to elucidate my feelings and thoughts about these practices. By being in the space and exercising these activities, I believe I also produce culture and affect the environment.

This process of seeing with the particularly sharpened gaze of the foreigner, who wants to find a stand and agency for himself in a new environment, becomes a language on its own.

SIGHT IS A FACULTY; SEEING, AN ART. THE EYE IS A PHYSICAL, BUT NOT A SELF-ACTING APPARATUS, AND IN GENERAL IT SEES ONLY WHAT IT SEEKS. LIKE A MIRROR, IT REFLECTS OBJECTS PRESENTED TO IT; BUT IT MAY BE AS INSENSIBLE AS A MIRROR, AND IT DOES NOT NECESSARILY PERCEIVE WHAT IT REFLECTS. (MARSH 1965, 15)

Observing the landscape is yet another way of reading and interpreting the story and identity of a certain place. Like Ingold says, in this respect the archeologist and the inhabitant of a landscape “are engaged in projects of fundamentally the same kind.” (Ingold 1993, 153)

When I speak about landscape, I don’t refer to a natural scenery – as the aesthetical approach to landscape might suggest, neither does “landscape” stand for rural as opposed to modernity or urbanization. I rather appropriate Marsh’s and Sauer’s cultural geographical tradition and think of landscape as “a substantive landscape in which issues of environment, economics, law and culture are all important. It is also a symbolic medium to be perceived, read, and interpreted on the ground, in written text, and through artistic images.” (Olwig 1996, 645)

## Landscape is community and culture

According to geographer Kenneth Olwig, the first step in order to approach the more substantive essence of landscape is to understand the origin of the word “landscape” and its meaning, which constantly changes through different historical times and carries particular connotations depending on its geographical and political context. So,

what does the word “landscape” mean today?

To answer this question, Olwig’s analysis dates back to the 17th century, when the Germanic word **Landschaft**, predecessor of the contemporary word “landscape,” referred to the independent geographical areas that persisted in Germany as alternatives to a feudal system (typically Italian) or a centralized absolutist state (like in France). The word **Landschaft** is etymologically related to **Gemeinschaft** (community) and contains the word **schaft** (shape or create). **Landschaft** indicated the geographical organization of those independent territories, but also their social and political structures.

The term referred, among other things, to self-governance of a community within its geographical area. It described a territorial entity and at the same time the presence of citizens who were socially and politically engaged in their territory and exerted a certain agency. In short, the word **Landschaft** seems to have had far richer meanings than what is commonly understood today. It reflected a whole set of ideas regarding personal, political, and place-related identity that dominated in Northern Europe until the 17th century, where independence and freedom played a great role.

Olwig continues by writing about how, in the beginning of

TO SEE



A VIEW OF CHATSWORTH HOUSE, LANDSCAPE BY LANCELOT CAPABILITY  
BROWN (BY PAUL COLLINS, 2008)

ELSEWHERE

the 17th century, the court of King James I of Britain started importing the esthetics of the Italian Palladian landscape from Venice to Britain first, and how this will consequently affect the Northern European concept of **landscape**. At first, the Palladian type of landscape was used in British theater sceneries. Idealized, geometrical landscapes inspired by the Venetians of that time were inserted in British theater plays with a central-point perspective.

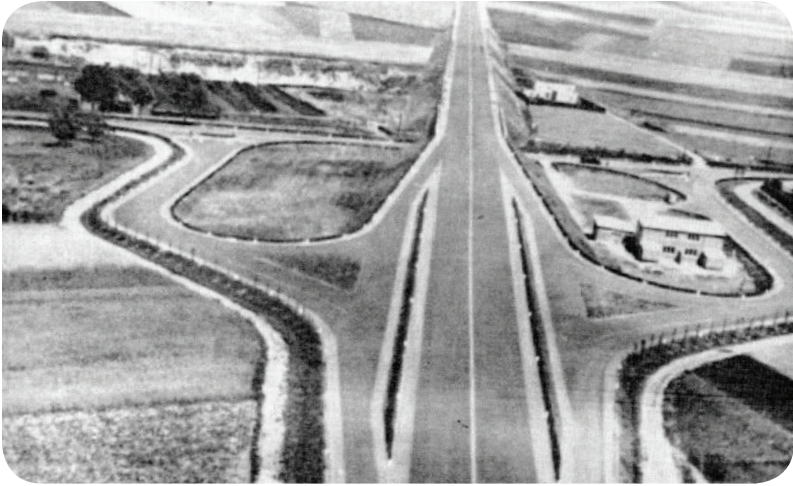
This new classical view of landscape from Southern Europe slowly found its way to English urban planning and gardening. It has been argued that the court was trying to promote her own concept of law and nature, by visually introducing idealized landscapes that referred to the classical times and by unifying those images with the more general British concept of nature. Shortly after, the same architectural principles would be employed in “real” urban planning and gardening, and these traces are still visible in the modern “English garden”. One of the main proponents of this new “philosophy of nature” was astronomer and geometrician Christopher Wren. He applied the main principles of Renaissance architecture to London urban space, with his substantial contribution to the reconstruction of London after the Great Fire of 1666.

THERE ARE TWO CAUSES OF BEAUTY - NATURAL AND CUSTOMARY. NATURAL IS FROM GEOMETRY, CONSISTING IN UNIFORMITY (THAT IS EQUALITY) AND PROPORTION. GEOMETRICAL FIGURES ARE NATURALLY MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN ANY OTHER IRREGULAR; IN THIS ALL CONSENT, AS TO A LAW OF NATURE. (WREN, QUOTED IN BENNET 1982, 118)

The traditional Northern European landscape was as much idealized as the Palladian one, and at first sight the two don't look very different from one other. However, the Palladian landscape was inspired by the “image” of classical imperial Rome, idealized timeless geometrical laws in space, and referred to a view on **land** that was radically different from the one prevailing in Northern Europe, from both a political and a social perspective. Think for instance of the classical concept of possession in relation to the Roman grid, or to the Northern European rural tradition of customary law.

Olgiv argues that the import of the imagery and esthetics of the Italian Renaissance into the English urban and rural landscape was not limited to fashion in architecture. Since landscape and culture are deeply connected, this change in style produced the adoption of a whole set of ideas and beliefs about nature that would change English culture and society.

TO SEE



THE "FIRST" EUROPEAN AUTOBAHN EXIT ON THE COLOGNE-BONN ROAD  
NEAR WESSELING (1932)

ELSEWHERE

THE RATIONAL GEOMETRIC SPACE THAT UNDERLAY THE CONCEPTION OF THE WORLD AS SCENERY EXPRESSED, THEREFORE, A REVIVAL NOT ONLY OF PLATONIC IDEAS OF NATURE BUT ALSO OF THE ROMAN GRID AND THE ROMAN LEGAL IDEA OF POSSESSION. THESE IDEAS, WHICH WERE FOREIGN TO NORTHERN EUROPE, LENT LEGITIMACY TO THE IDEOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION OF LAND INTO PRIVATE PROPERTY. (OLWIG 1996, 638)

According to Olwig's analysis in the 19th century, landscape had lost its original socio-political connotations and the meaning of the word "Landschaft" was reduced to "scenery". Nevertheless its traditional symbolism still lived in Northern Europe's popular culture, and Germany began to struggle with the popular concept of *Landschaft* – the "idealized freedom-loving character of people from physically difficult peripheral environments" (Olwig 1996, 641) – , because of her desire to progress and centralize. The conflict between the popular sense of independence and a new desire for centralization was resolved ideologically in "the idea of landscape as the creation of layered stages of development" (Olwig 1996, 641). Freedom and independence were disassociated from their original context of local self-governance, and were progressively attributed

to the general laws of "nature" and attached to the scenic landscapes in popular culture.

The National Socialists carried on the concept of landscape that had evolved in the 19th century. That of a styled image of universal and "natural" freedom and independence, where progress becomes visible through the addition and juxtaposition of layers in scenery. Germans kept shaping their imagined national identity through landscape.

A very tangible example of the liveliness of these ideals and how they have been used as a political instrument, was the construction of the Autobahn: the high-speed connections between German cities were used as a propagandistic message of the "*Reich* as a consolidated geographical entity" that would "put an end to the last remnants of particularistic thinking" (Leupold 2000).

The Autobahn did not only function as a mean of fast transportation, but aimed to create the perception of centralized "germanity". This was achieved by celebrating and making visible a particular aestheticized vision of the German landscape to the drivers, through their windscreen. A vision that, as we saw in this chapter by following Olwig's analysis, evolved over time and still carries its original connotations in popular imagina-

tion. Technological progress was so literally used to reach a desired German ideal of unified natural freedom, by using the internalized aesthetics of landscape as the matter to shape socio-political perception.

THE AUTOBAHN BECAME MEDIUM AND MESSAGE IN ONE, A MEANS TO CONQUER SPATIAL DISTANCE THAT ALSO TRANSFORMED THE MEANING OF THE TERRITORY THAT IT TRAVERSED. (DIMENDBERG 1998, 62)

One might argue that something similar happened with the construction of the TGV in France: while French urban centers are highly connected, the disconnected regional territories in between tend to disappear from the traveler's consciousness. A similar process also took place in the Netherlands with the creation of the Randstad.

### The Netherlands: constantly (re)building landscape

In 1874 Edmondo de Amicis traveled to the Netherlands as correspondent for the Italian newspaper *La Nazione*. He wrote down his observations in a travel journal, more from the point of view of the foreign visitor than that of a newcomer, lacking any desire for inclusion. In his observations De Amicis

often draws strong parallels between geography and cultural and social aspects, sometimes with explicit comparison and other times through more subtle allusions. This approach is by no means scientific and might have something to do with his personal background in pedagogy. Nevertheless, his poetic parallels between Dutch landscape and Dutch "soul" sound very familiar to me.

One of the most peculiar elements that constantly got his attention, is the artificiality of both Dutch gardens and parks, which he found awkward and exaggerated. He also describes how Dutch settlements were typically shaped through the struggle to create more habitable ground and protect the dry land from the waters. He was surprised by how Dutch people organized in groups of neighbors, in order to collectively fund and manage the necessary improvements and maintenance of dams and other water-related infrastructures. This self-organized dynamics somehow made landscape a tangibly collective construct. Another geographical and architectural characteristic that he describes is the changeableness of the environment. The landscape was unstable because of what he saw as extreme geographical conditions but also as a consequence of Dutch industriousness.

Hundred and fifty years later, these two elements of Dutch landscapes still strike me as an Italian migrant in the Netherlands: artificiality and changeableness. The extent of control that seems to be desired and applied in architecture, the desire to tame and shape the environment, makes space look artificially clean. Public buildings but also houses, gardens, whole residential neighborhoods and natural parks are extremely functional. Predictability of how the construction will change over time seems to have a great influence on the choices in design. As a result, the Dutch boast of extremely polished and “cultured” surroundings, where the presence of people and time paradoxically becomes almost invisible and yet absolutely regnant.

A feeling that the landscape is constantly changing and rarely holds traces or elements from the past makes me feel disaffection and unsettlement. I cannot grasp the environment, because everything seems just too new and refined to tell me about the passing of time and culture. Not enough layers have accumulated upon each other in order to interact and produce meaning, or even just to reflect the temporality of things. Here I can hardly feel that I can become part of something that is alive.

Ugliness, rejection and mortality are erased from the landscape, or their occurrence is prevented as much as possible, by constantly updating and cleaning the landscape from undesired and obsolete presences. “Our cities sadly display never ending bungling in public space. We never give the impression that we are finished”, wrote historian Sander van Walsum recently in the Dutch newspaper *Telegraaf*, and also “buildings, the principal landmarks of public space, are too often demolished because they are no longer functional or because the successors’ volatile taste stands against them.” (Van Walsum 2013)

In relationship to the perception of time through architecture, philosopher Alain de Botton writes about Japanese architecture that “there seemed a deliberate joy to be had here in watching nature attack the works of man. The architects of the old tea houses had for much the same reason left their wood unvarnished, treasuring the ensuing patina and marks of age, which they saw as a wise symbol of the passing of all things. The rusted and stained walls of the weekend house made us for a most artful receptacle in which to entertain thoughts of decline and mortality.” De Botton also mentions that “[...] Buddhist



writings associated an intolerance for the imperfections of wood and stone with the failure to accept the inherently frustrating nature of existence” (De Botton 2006, 235). This seems to me an almost opposite attitude towards decay, compared to the Dutch.

If landscape becomes the medium, the carrier and the “listener” of our self-image, our feelings and our morality towards the human condition, how could we

look at Dutch landscapes in order to understand the local cultures that develop in different areas of the country, at different times? And how do these cultures relate to each other? Recurrent elements in distinct Dutch landscapes, or at least an understanding of these changeable and artificial landscapes coexisting, might offer a valuable foundation for a possible answer to the question about what keeps our society together.

## TO SEE



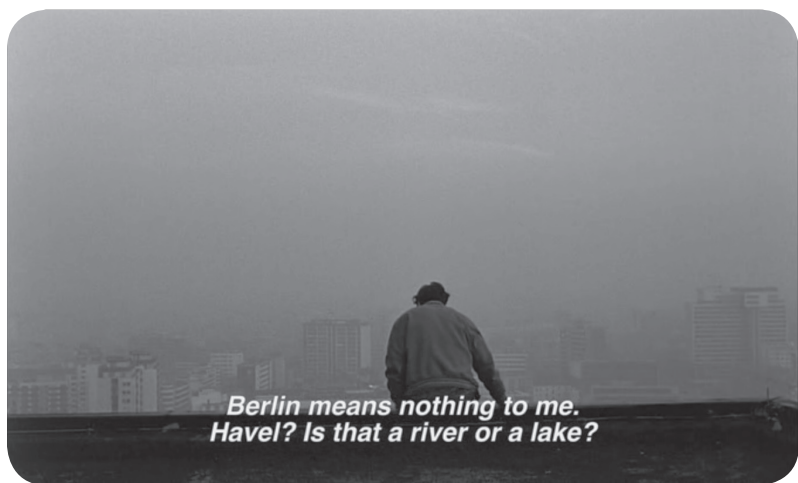
MARTA COLPANI, *NEDERLANDSCHE BANK* (2013)

THE VOLKSVLIJT PALACE WAS DESTROYED IN A FIRE IN THE NIGHT BETWEEN THE 18TH AND 19TH OF APRIL 1929. IN 1960 THE NEDERLANDSCHE BANK WAS BUILT IN ITS PLACE. BECAUSE THE INSTITUTION LOST A GREAT DEAL OF HER FUNCTION SINCE THE INTRODUCTION OF THE EURO CURRENCY, WIM T. SCHIPPERS AND OTHERS PROPOSE TO REBUILD THE ORIGINAL VOLKSVLIJT PALACE. THEREFORE THE "ASSOCIATION FOR REBUILDING AND EXPLOITING THE VOLKSVLIJT PALACE" WAS CREATED ON THE 17TH OF JUNE 2002. IN THE NEW AREA OF SCHIPHOL AIRPORT, A SMALL PORTION OF THE PALACE HAS BEEN REPRODUCED AS A RESTAURANT. (FROM DUTCH WIKIPEDIA, VISITED ON 13-1-2014: [HTTP://NL.WIKIPEDIA.ORG/WIKI/PALEIS\\_VOOR\\_VOLKSVLIJT](http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paleis_voor_Volksvlijt))





{ WIM WENDERS }



STILL FROM DER HIMMEL ÜBER BERLIN (1987), WIM WENDERS

Artists speak about a culture and shape that culture with their practice at the same time. For artists, the challenge to find a place in a culture becomes more significant and less passive. It becomes essential to the content of their work and to the choice for an audience. As an artist, I ask myself the questions: where do I want to stand in this culture? And how do I go about it?

Wim Wenders is for me a local artist who was able to participate in German, European and American culture, by adding to them from a personal perspective of *foreignness*. His movies are almost literally a search for a place to stand in the world as a German, looking away from, then again looking back to his own culture. This is especially the case in his less wordy, more “observing” movies that unfold between America and Germany in the ’70 and ’80, like *Alice in den Städten* (1974) or *Falsche Bewegung* (1975). Wim Wenders uses film to explore his own life-choices and subject matters that sourced out of his own experience.

I UNDERSTOOD THAT IF FILMMAKING WAS WORTH ANYTHING, IT HAD TO BE ABOUT MY OWN EXPERIENCE. IT HAD TO BE ABOUT SOMETHING I KNEW. IT HAD TO BE ABOUT WHAT REALLY COUNTED FOR ME. (WENDERS & HOPPER 2003)

## The meaning of places in Wenders’ work

Places, or *tasksapes* as Tim Ingold (1993) would call them, are essential to Wim Wenders’ movies.

*Der Himmel Über Berlin* is one of the clearest examples. With this movie, Wim Wenders seems to have found a clear place for himself in the schizophrenic culture of the ‘80, waggling between the United States and his fatherland, Germany. He didn’t only make a movie about Berlin, he made a movie about *being* in Berlin. The movie didn’t just show the city of Berlin as it was, it showed an affectionate interest in the city and a strong willingness to discover it, give it credit for what she was and for what she had been before, to acknowledge her history.

The movie seems to finally reveal, almost descriptively, what Wenders was frenetically looking for in his previous movies. In those movies the main characters were always lost either in American or German landscape, searching for an image from the past (which, for instance, materializes in the narrative as a photograph, like Alice’s grandma’s front door photograph that she carries with her). *Der Himmel Über Berlin* is, by contrast, a proud and loving fairy tale of Berlin, despite the constant sense of despair that populates the whole movie.

The inhabitants play an important role; they compose the city through all their stories, mostly tragic ones, and at the same time they are protected and *carried* by the city, by her angels. The apparent loneliness of the characters, wandering, reflecting and worrying, rarely speaking to each other, is filled with the hope and affection of the angels who stand at their side, listening to the characters' discouraged feelings and sometimes interfering with their darkest plans. And in any case, there is no *elsewhere*. No place to leave or to find outside Berlin.

Wim Wenders approaches Berlin by telling her micro-history: personal facts of the people living there, funny or strange encounters, the inhabitants' peculiarities one could observe every day just by looking around. But he also tells about the inhabitants' relationship to the city, through their own thoughts. The "soul" of Berlin is omnipresent in the characters' lives, although they are not aware of it. This presence is personified in the angels, who are constantly close by, observing Berlin's inhabitants, looking after them, experiencing earthly life through their lives. This way, the invisible "hand" of the city becomes visible in the movie, giving to the place the importance of a main character. You might say that Wenders'

movie does the same for culture as Ingold's article does for archeology: they both put landscape back in the picture as a living, evolving, active social entity.

Besides using the technique of micro-history telling, Wenders creates a changeful portrait of Berlin by filming it as it was at the time when he made the movie and by simultaneously describing the same landscapes as they were in the past, through the different characters' voices. For instance, an elderly man is no longer able to find Potsdamerplatz because he doesn't recognize the place as he remembers it from before the war. While an angel (together with the viewer) listens to his thoughts, he silently walks around the desolated area nearby the Wall, recalling his favorite cigar shop and the coffee shop where he used to hang out.

In another part of the movie, the two main angel-characters recall Napoleon's arrival in Berlin in the 19th century, and go on about how that area of the city had been changing since then. Thus Wenders also uses the immortality of the angels to enable this story telling across times in history. He explores the history of the city and feeds that history back into the culture of the place. He creates parallels between often devastated, neglected and hostile-looking areas of Berlin and their history, which was





STILL FROM DER HIMMEL ÜBER BERLIN (1987), WIM WENDERS

just as tragic to deal with and often remained unspoken.

The beautiful and lonely circus trapezist who will eventually make one of the two angels want to become human, at some point thinks: “I have a story, and I will always do”. Somehow this statement seems to summarize Berlin’s voice as Wenders transposed it in ***Der Himmel Über Berlin***.

In a 2002 lecture called ***In defense of places*** (Wenders 2002), Wenders describes the process of making a movie starting with a specific location, instead of a script or a character, through examples from his career, including the failures. In the fragment below, he tells about ***Der Himmel Über Berlin*** and how the movie came to exist in his mind and then on film:

I LIVED FOR 8 YEARS IN AMERICA, FROM THE LATE SEVENTIES TO THE MID-EIGHTIES,  
IN SAN FRANCISCO, LOS ANGELES AND NEW YORK.  
THEN I MOVED BACK TO GERMANY  
AND SETTLED FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THE CITY OF BERLIN.  
I WALKED AROUND FOR WEEKS, FOR MONTHS,  
STARING AT BUILDINGS AND PLACES,  
LISTENING TO MY MOTHER TONGUE, GERMAN,  
AS IF I NEVER REALLY HEARD IT BEFORE.  
I REDISCOVERED MY OWN COUNTRY.  
I WANTED TO KNOW ALL ABOUT THESE PEOPLE,  
THEIR PAST, THEIR HISTORY AND THEIR SECRET THOUGHTS..  
IT WAS THE CITY THAT INDUCED THIS DESIRE.  
I WANTED TO TELL THIS CITY’S STORY.  
IT WAS A DIVIDED CITY STILL.  
2 DIFFERENT PEOPLE LIVED HERE,  
ALTHOUGH THEY SPOKE THE SAME LANGUAGE.  
IT WAS A CITY WITH A DIVIDED SKY, SO TO SPEAK.  
I CALLED MY PROJECT THE SKY ABOVE BERLIN,  
OR THE HEAVENS ABOVE BERLIN,  
BUT I HAD NO STORY FOR IT WHATSOEVER.  
NOT A CLUE.  
I DIDN’T EVEN HAVE CHARACTERS.  
I HAD NOTHING BUT THE DESIRE TO DIG DEEP INTO THIS PLACE. [...]  
[...] BUT NONE OF MY POSSIBLE LEADING CHARACTERS  
ONLY REMOTELY FULFILLED MY DESIRE TO DIS-COVER,  
TO UN-COVER THIS CITY.  
I WAS REALLY OBSESSED WITH THIS PLACE.

I FELT VERY CLEARLY THAT THE CITY WANTED TO BE TURNED INTO A MOVIE,  
AND WANTED TO USE ME AS ITS INSTRUMENT.  
AND, HEY, I WAS WILLING.

WALKING AROUND AND STARING AT HOUSES  
I SAW A HUGE AMOUNT OF DECORATION, PILLARS, ARCHES,  
AND STUFF I HAD NOT NOTICED BEFORE.  
A LOT OF THEM WERE INCORPORATING ANGEL FIGURES, TO MY AMAZEMENT.  
EVERY SECOND STATUE, AND THERE WERE LOTS OF THEM,  
DEPICTED ANGELS.  
A LOT OF NAMES EVOKED THEM.  
CEMETERIES, FINALLY, WERE CROWDED WITH THEM.  
SO THE CITY SLOWLY IMPOSED THESE FIGURES ON ME: ANGELS. [...]  
[...] ANYWAY: THAT OBSCURE, SCRIBBLED LINE FROM MY NOTEBOOK  
"TELL THE CITY THROUGH THE POINT OF VIEW OF GUARDIAN ANGELS"...  
SEEMED TO WANT TO BE THERE FOR GOOD.  
OTHER NOTES GOT ERASED.  
THIS ONE STUCK,  
UNTIL I FINALLY ACCEPTED MY FATE.  
THE CITY HAD IMPOSED THE LEADING CHARACTERS,  
I WAS SURE THE CITY WAS ALSO GOING TO TAKE CARE OF THEIR STORY. [...]

[...] PLACES IN AMERICAN MOVIES ARE MOSTLY EXCHANGEABLE.  
THERE IS VERY LITTLE LOCAL COLOR IN THEM, SO TO SPEAK.  
MOST STORIES COULD TAKE PLACE SOMEWHERE ELSE JUST AS WELL.  
CITIES AND LANDSCAPES ARE "BACKGROUND",  
"LOCATIONS", THAT ARE FOUND BY THE "LOCATION MANAGER".  
THEY ARE NO LONGER HEROES,  
LIKE MONUMENT VALLEY WAS IN JOHN FORD'S WESTERNS.  
OF COURSE, THERE ARE A FEW GLORIOUS EXAMPLES THAT PROVE THE OPPOSITE,  
BUT THERE ARE NO RULES WITHOUT THEIR EXCEPTIONS. [...]  
[...] IN MY BOOK, THE LOSS OF PLACE IS A LOST QUALITY IN MOVIES.  
IT COMES WITH A LOSS OF REALITY,  
A LOSS OF IDENTITY.



{ HELENE SOMMER }



HELENE SOMMER, OASIS (2005), INSTALLATION ROGALAND KUNSTSENTER

For me, Helene Sommer's works are the stories that places would tell if they could use words and video images. The artist seems to be concerned with ecological issues, as well as documentation and storytelling. However, it is especially striking how her works are always tied to a specific context and seem to originate from an intensified experience of the environment.

In her work *Great piece of turf* Sommer uses the form of the documentary to tell the story of a piece of urban land by a former freight switching facility and the Los Angeles River. She guides the public through an informed study of the uncultivated plants that populate this piece of land. By speculating about these plants' origins with a number of experts during a very factual analysis of the area, she indirectly tells a story about American culture in modern history and she unveils how landscape is constantly "produced" by our hopes, ambitions, fears and failures.

The combination of almost compulsive information retrieval, facts from history about the landscape's elements, together with the personal storytelling that emerges from her video-editing style, like her peculiar use of different qualities of video material, make her works speak about identity and culture.

I SOMEHOW FIND IT FUNNY YOUR FIRST SENTENCE ABOUT MY WORKS BEING "THE STORIES THAT PLACES WOULD TELL IF THEY COULD USE WORDS AND VIDEO IMAGES." THERE ARE TWO SIDES TO THIS. ONE IS AN OLD CHILDHOOD FANTASY OF MINE ABOUT A PLACE/LANDSCAPE/ OBJECT REALLY BEING ABLE TO SPEAK, IMAGINE WHAT SOME PLACES HAVE SEEN AND WHAT THEY WOULD SAY! YOU CAN LOOK AT A TREE THAT IS HUNDREDS OF YEARS OLD AND ONLY IMAGINE WHAT IT HAS WITNESSED. THE OTHER SIDE TO IT IS THAT THE STORIES IN MY WORK ARE DEFINITELY NOT THE STORIES THE LANDSCAPES WOULD TELL THEMSELVES AS THE STORIES HAVE BEEN TRACED, FILTERED AND ARTICULATED BY A CERTAIN PERSON OF A CERTAIN NATIONALITY OF A CERTAIN AGE, ME! THIS IS KIND OF OBVIOUS OF COURSE, BUT I BOTH LIKE THE IDEA AND THINK IT IS UNAVOIDABLE THAT THERE ARE TRACES OF ME IN THE STORIES I CHOOSE TO TELL.

ON A GENERAL BASIS I DEFINITELY HAVE AN INTEREST IN ECOLOGICAL ISSUES. I THINK IT IS INTERESTING THAT THE ETYMOLOGICAL MEANING OF ECOLOGY STEMS FROM OIKOS, WHICH MEANS HOUSE AND IS ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORGANISMS AND THEIR ENVIRONMENT. I LIKE TO THINK OF IT IN THIS WAY RATHER THAN LIMIT MYSELF TO BIOLOGY. IN THIS WAY HISTORY (AND STORYTELLING) BECOMES A NATURAL PART OF IT, AND HISTORY CAN IN SOME WAY BE SEEN AS AN ORGANISM. I ALSO SEE ECOLOGY AS A CONTINUATION OF THE

UNDERSTANDING OF LANDSCAPE AND "NATURE" - THE SO-CALLED DICHOTOMY TO CULTURE, AND HOW WE PERCEIVE AND WHAT CONSTITUTES THE IMAGE OF THESE CONCEPTS. (SOMMER 2013)

The same undertone is present in *A landscape with no horizon* (2004), where the factual telling of the production trajectory of an artificial living plant, destined to be installed as interior decoration in commercial settings, is used as a vehicle to speak about how we appropriate and manipulate the environment and how we (re)construct nature in order to satisfy our desires or fill our voids. In a way, it unveils the spaces that we actually have to deal with in a day to day context. The commercial and social spaces that are shown in the video, where the plants will be installed in the end, become exposed for the viewer in their artificiality and ambition. And with them all the spaces that we, as inhabitants of any city, recognize as recreational or working spaces.

The owner of Biotech proudly tells how the company is able to fulfill even the wildest architectural dream, by preserving organic material and recreating accurately lifelike or imagined immortal plants, that can be installed anywhere. The artist turns his words into a comment on the phenomenon: she combines them with the

images of how a preserved plant is created, transported and installed. All the functional spaces that are part of this production process suddenly become part of the mall, restaurant, office where the plants will be installed. These spaces of production also become irremediably associated with our experience of familiar environments.

IN A LANDSCAPE WITH NO HORIZON I WAS AMONG OTHER THINGS INTERESTED IN GARDEN HISTORY. THESE EARLY MEDIEVAL GARDENS THAT WERE BUILT WITH HIGH WALLS SO YOU COULDN'T SEE THE OUTSIDE (NOR THE HORIZON) AND WHICH WERE SUPPOSED TO CONTAIN A REPRESENTATION OF PARADISE OR AN OASIS. THE GARDEN IS AS MUCH OPEN AS CLOSED, INSIDE AS OUTSIDE. THESE IDEAS AND IMAGES STILL FOLLOW US TODAY AND IS WHY PLACES LIKE SHOPPING MALLS USE PLANTS VERY INTENTIONALLY TO ATTRACT US. THE FACT THAT OUR IDENTITY IS CLOSELY CONNECTED TO OUR UNDERSTANDING OF LANDSCAPE AND NATURE IS SOMETHING COMMERCIAL ENTERPRISES KNOW HOW TO EXPLOIT. (SOMMER 2013)

In her work *The Settler (Nybyggeren)*, Sommer again exposes the history of the natural landscape of Osloomarka, the vast forestland surrounding the city of Oslo. She is guided through the forest by former inhabitants of the area, who remember its recent history.





STILL FROM A LANDSCAPE WITH NO HORIZON (2004), HELENE SOMMER

The guides, the *dwellers*, point at specific places that seem to be completely arbitrary as an external viewer, but hold great meaning for them or remind them of very precise and vivid events. As the stories are told, a completely different space unfolds for the camera. What seems a peaceful, idyllic landscape becomes a place of fear, bitterness, conflict and survival. What seems general and silent becomes distinct, rich and eventful.

In Sommer's work, I experience a critical attitude through the conceptions about space and how space is given shape in reality but also in our minds. More or less directly, with her work she questions the gap between our beliefs about the landscape that we inhabit and its factuality (its history, its constitutive elements).

I AM INTERESTED IN THE POSSIBILITIES OF READING A LANDSCAPE AND WHAT KIND OF POTENTIAL AND ALTERNATIVE UNDERSTANDING RESTS IN THESE READINGS.

HOW THE DEPOSITS AND SEDIMENTS OF HISTORY LEAVE TRACES - BOTH VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE. I FIND THE COEXISTENCE/ PARALLEL HABITATION OF HISTORIES INTERESTING, BOTH HOW THEY MAY EXIST TIME-WISE BUT ALSO HOW THEY CAN MANIFEST THEMSELVES PHYSICALLY IN LANDSCAPE. (SOMMER 2013)

She seems to look for evidence in the space itself in order to uncover "the truth". What happens to our dreams, to our hopes and our desires? Sommer does not necessarily want to suppress any fantastic feeling about the environment if it is not grounded in real documented facts. Instead, her works just broaden our perception of the landscape. Sommer restores stories that are forgotten and almost invisible and she trains us to sharpen our senses, to see and read the stories held by the places where we act and to acknowledge their "real" presence, their significance on our perception of what there is. By doing so, you might say that Sommer empowers the landscape.



Here he has struggled and worked hard to create a small home,

STILL FROM NYBYGGEREN/THE SETTLER (2013), HELENE SOMMER



# to collect

THE MATERIALITY THAT WE THINK MIGHT MAKE US UNAUTHENTIC  
IS IN FACT PART OF WHO WE ARE.

ACTUALLY, AS IBSEN'S PEER GYNT OBSERVED, WE ARE ALL ONIONS. IF YOU KEEP PEELING OFF YOUR LAYERS YOU FIND - ABSOLUTELY NOTHING LEFT. THERE IS NO TRUE INNER SELF. WE ARE NOT EMPERORS REPRESENTED BY CLOTHES, BECAUSE IF WE REMOVE THE CLOTHES THERE ISN'T AN INNER CORE. THE CLOTHES WERE NOT SUPERFICIAL, THEY ACTUALLY WERE WHAT MADE US WHAT WE THINK WE ARE. (MILLER 2010, 13)

We constantly surround ourselves with objects: we collect things, we preserve them, we get rid of things that we no longer feel attached to. The “ecosystem” of things, which contains us and define us at the same time, must be kept in balance. It reflects our *self* to the environment and simultaneously directs the environment toward ourselves.

In Western anthropological and psychological analysis, involvement with non-human agencies “continues to be apprehended within the terms of the orthodox dualism of subject and objects, persons and things”(Ingold 2000, 47). This (mis)interpretation of our relationship with things is limited and doesn't acknowledge our whole experience with objects and its cultural and psychological implications. In every day life we do not act as separate minds or bodies toward things. Instead, our daily activities allow us to become familiar with objects and places “in just the same way as one becomes familiar with people, by spending time with them, investing in one's relations with them the same quality of care, feeling and attention” (Ingold 2000, 47).

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Because of this traditional dualism between inside and outside and between people and inanimate things, material culture is often seen as superficial, since we assume that materiality pollutes our true and natural inner self. Instead of embracing this somewhat superficial dualism, we might consider stuff as part of who we are and explore our relationship to it.

A relatively new stream in anthropology that might be adopted for an alternative study of material culture speaks about animate and inanimate things as “agents”. The idea behind this model is that the relations between people and other animate or inanimate entities cannot be reduced to strictly functional activities or to unidirectional subject-objects relations. Objects are also seen as “agents”, which are entities with the ability to act independently within diverse systems.

Starting from this model of structure and agency, I want to reflect on mainly two ways in which objects exert their agency on our personal identity: they allow us to test our *self* in the outside world and, prior to this, they constitute the environment in which we learn to *act* from the very beginning.

## Objects that are part of our body

The presence of some objects in our

day-to-day existence is so taken for granted that they almost seem to become parts of the body itself. At the same time these objects force our continuous engagement and exert constant pressure to respond to changes in the surroundings and in our social environment. One obvious example is that of glasses: especially when one grows up wearing them, they become part of our body. Not only because we cannot see properly without them, also we end up barely recognizing our own facial expression if we are not wearing them.

More objects that we use in common daily life become extensions of our body by commodity: if we have a car we become accustomed to its speed and we assume a certain fastness of movement that comes with it. We also take all its sensorial effects for granted: its warmth, its noises, the hardness or softness of its seat while we are driving. Our body gets used to the arrangements it has to make in order to fit in the car and drive it.

When we suddenly don't have a car, we will miss everything related to the experience of driving in it. Also, then we will be forced to rethink our social interactions and to reorganize our time: are we going to be able to attend all our meetings? Can we get to that place in time? What time do we need to wake up in the morning? Can we

bring this or that heavy bag with us? If we go by bus or by taxi, will we be able to review a document, read a book, answer emails or sleep while we are sitting in the vehicle?

Other objects become a part of who we are, not as much by providing comfort, as by defining how we look at ourselves and at others. For example, our clothes (but also our cars!) become a uniform by which we manipulate other people's expectations and we test our personality, more or less consciously.

In the past, clothes were more a prescript for a certain social class or even for a particular profession, so "getting dressed" was much less a matter of personal preferences than a dutiful ritual. Today, expectations related to fashion are much more fluid and understated. In a comparative study of style choices in London (and among other cities), Daniel Miller found that fashion in London is in the first place about anxiety, caused by an overwhelming pressure to express individuality and at the same time a lack of clear response to personal style choices. In this logic, Londoners are confused because they are expected to "invent" themselves through style choices but no one responds clearly to the way they look. You could say that no one is telling them *who they are*.

COMMENTS [ABOUT CLOTHING] IN LONDON ARE RARELY DIRECT; THEY ARE MORE OFTEN BASED ON BANTER, OR IRONY OR SAID TO A THIRD PERSON, RATHER THAN DIRECTLY TO THE INDIVIDUAL IN QUESTION. AS A RESULT, INDIVIDUALS IN LONDON FIND IT MUCH MORE DIFFICULT TO GAIN A PURCHASE ON THIS EXTERNAL PRESENTATION OF THEMSELVES. THEY SIMPLY FEEL UNSURE ABOUT WHAT OTHER PEOPLE THINK ABOUT THEM, AND THEN IN TURN THEY BECOME INCREASINGLY INSECURE THAT THEY EVEN KNOW WHAT THEY THINK ABOUT THEMSELVES. (MILLER 2010, 37)

It is clear to me that London is not alone in this crisis of self-representation. And the personal confusion that Miller describes through his analysis of clothing might also, at some point, become cultural confusion. The lack of ability to identify with a larger group, without overlooking what really makes us a group. That is one of the reasons why it is problematic to discard material culture as a valid part of who we are.

In the illusion that we are free to act out our imagined inner self, we might overlook that there is no inner self to express. The materiality that we think might make us unauthentic is in fact part of who we are. By getting rid of it we are neglecting our *self*. In the mean time, we might discard all our precious layers of being just



to discover that in the end there is nothing left.

In his book “Home possessions” (2001), Daniel Miller approaches this problematic from a slightly different perspective, that of the objects in our homes (including the house itself as object) and their temporality, which could be one of the motivations for us to develop concepts of the inner self being opposed to materiality. We might tend to discard material culture as superficial because of our desire to transcend temporality with our soul. Miller also speaks again about that process of coming to terms with things as constituent of ourselves:

IN COMING TO TERMS WITH THE AGENCY EXPRESSED IN THE TEMPORALITY OF THE HOME AND THE TEMPORALITY OF ITS ASSOCIATED MATERIAL CULTURE, ONE IS ALSO DEVELOPING A LARGER COSMOLOGY OF AUTHENTICITY, TRUTH, NEGOTIATION AND IDENTITY THAT IN MANY CASES MAY HAVE CONSEQUENCES FOR ONE’S VIEW OF THE WORLD IN A MUCH WIDER POLITICAL AND MORAL SPHERE. COLLECTING AND MATCHING CAN BECOME QUITE OBSESSIVE SUCH THAT ONCE AGAIN INDIVIDUALS ARE NOT SO MUCH CHOOSING, BUT BECOMING INCREASINGLY POSSESSED BY WHAT THEY SEE AS THE FUNDAMENTAL MORALITY INVOLVED IN ESTABLISHING THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THE HISTORY OF MATERIAL CULTURE. (MILLER 2001, 112)

## Objects that make us who we are

Objects seamlessly *frame* our culture and our behavior. Of course these “frames” remain invisible most of the time: since they match and confirm our expectations of what is appropriate, we don’t notice them. In the first place we come to a world that is already filled with objects, things that come down to us with their internal order, direct our actions and our thoughts and constitute the cultural environment in which we grow up, not only with our mind but also with our body and, eventually, with our imagination. As Alain de Botton writes with regard to architectural objects, “we are, for better or for worse, different people in different places – and [...] it is architecture’s task to render vivid to us who we might ideally be.” (de Botton 2006, 13)

The systems of objects that we grow accustomed to – what you could call *material landscapes*, silently convey to us the conditions to encounter, create or even imagine new spaces, social situations and other people or other things. While singular objects, like a car or a shirt, can be identified more clearly as significant to a person, a body or a culture, it is the whole system of things that makes us who we are, while this system itself often remains unnoticed.

A PARTICULAR SOCIETY ELABORATES ITS CULTURAL PRACTICES THROUGH AN UNDERLYING PATTERN WHICH IS MANIFESTED IN A MULTITUDE OF DIVERSE FORMS. BY LEARNING TO INTERACT WITH A WHOLE SLEW OF DIFFERENT MATERIAL CULTURES, AN INDIVIDUAL GROWS UP ASSUMING THE NORMS THAT WE CALL CULTURE. THE CHILD DOESN'T LEARN THESE THINGS AS A PASSIVE SET OF CATEGORIES, BUT THROUGH EVERYDAY ROUTINES THAT LEAD TO CONSISTENT INTERACTION WITH THINGS. (MILLER 2010, 53)

Material objects altogether form the setting of what is appropriate and inappropriate, and in most cases that implicit knowledge goes unquestioned, we accept it without examination. You could say that things powerfully direct us precisely because we don't *see* them. The less we are aware of them, the more effectively they can induce our expectations, "by setting the scene and ensuring appropriate behavior, without being open to challenge." (Miller 2010, 50).

With this in mind, we could return to the example of Japanese architecture mentioned in the previous chapter. The very materiality of things and their changes over time, as they were designed by the maker of the objects, become part of our conceptions about time, history, nature, and materiality itself by working not as much on our intellect, as on our body.

We might also mention a few more examples in the domain of the home: what does a higher or lower eating table demand from its owners? How do smaller or bigger windows direct us towards a different behavior or even a different ideal? What does it mean to my body or to my feelings that a door opens to the outside, instead of to the inside of a room? Of course I don't have the answers to these questions, although to me searching for them would be enough of a lifetime purpose, as inhabitant of the social space and as an artist.

## The power of art as stuff

Anthropologists study how things and people interact within diverse systems, with which logics, and what kinds of agencies each individual exerts within these systems. In the previous paragraph it has become clear that objects too relate to us actively and affect our behavior and our beliefs. Art objects are also part of the material landscapes – the systems of things with which we interact, and therefore they can be studied from an anthropological perspective.

Nevertheless art objects are mostly framed as such and can become somewhat removed from the realm of things that is the field studied by anthropologists. For example, if I see a fork in an art museum, I will automatically interpret

that fork as an artifact, abstracted from its original context and depleted of its original function, that of being used to bring food to my mouth. I will assume that the object is intended as the carrier of a more abstract meaning (what does a fork stand for? Hunger?) or as a trigger for an aesthetic experience (does this fork look particularly threatening? Or luxurious? Or sad?).

While I am looking at the fork, I am also much more aware that objects, just by being displayed as art, can address my own implicit assumptions about what they are or represent, be it cultural, moral or aesthetic ones. These dynamics make our relation to art objects radically different from our approach to objects of daily use. The art object becomes much more evident in its abstract qualities, somehow it gets more attention as “thing” and it becomes charged with all kinds of moral and aesthetic expectations.

Alfred Gell writes about the “anthropology of art”, a term that he explains as being “the social relations in the vicinity of objects mediating social agency” (Gell 1998, 7). For Gell, art doesn’t strictly refer to the art context, it rather reaches to the familiar material realm of “daily life stuff”, and the way objects of art work on our perception should not be “discredited” from our day to day

relations to objects in general. Art becomes extremely powerful just because it is connected to every other object and every other person that we might encounter:

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY OF ART CANNOT AFFORD TO HAVE AS ITS PRIMARY THEORETICAL TERM A CATEGORY OF OBJECTS WHICH ARE ‘EXCLUSIVELY’ ART OBJECTS BECAUSE THE WHOLE TENDENCY OF THIS THEORY, AS I HAVE BEEN SUGGESTING, IS TO EXPLORE A DOMAIN IN WHICH ‘OBJECTS’ MERGE WITH ‘PEOPLE’ BY VIRTUE OF THE EXISTENCE OF SOCIAL RELATIONS BETWEEN PERSONS AND THINGS, AND PERSONS AND PERSONS VIA THINGS. (GELL 1998, 12)

When interpreted this way, art objects might even challenge these systems of social relations and, in the best case scenario, art might push us towards inventing new dynamics, or play with the old ones freely enough to escape or manipulate their structure.

Of course I don’t want to visit an art museum and look at a fork that stands for hunger. Neither do I want to see a particularly luxurious fork, just because it looks beautiful. Instead, I believe that art objects have the aptitude to participate in a different – way as social agents – in the material landscapes: objects of art can potentially reveal to us the very ubiquity of the systems of things that structure our behavior.

ior and beliefs. So art can make us more self-conscious and can, eventually, free us by making us reflect on how we are, most of the time, taking for granted the way we think and behave.

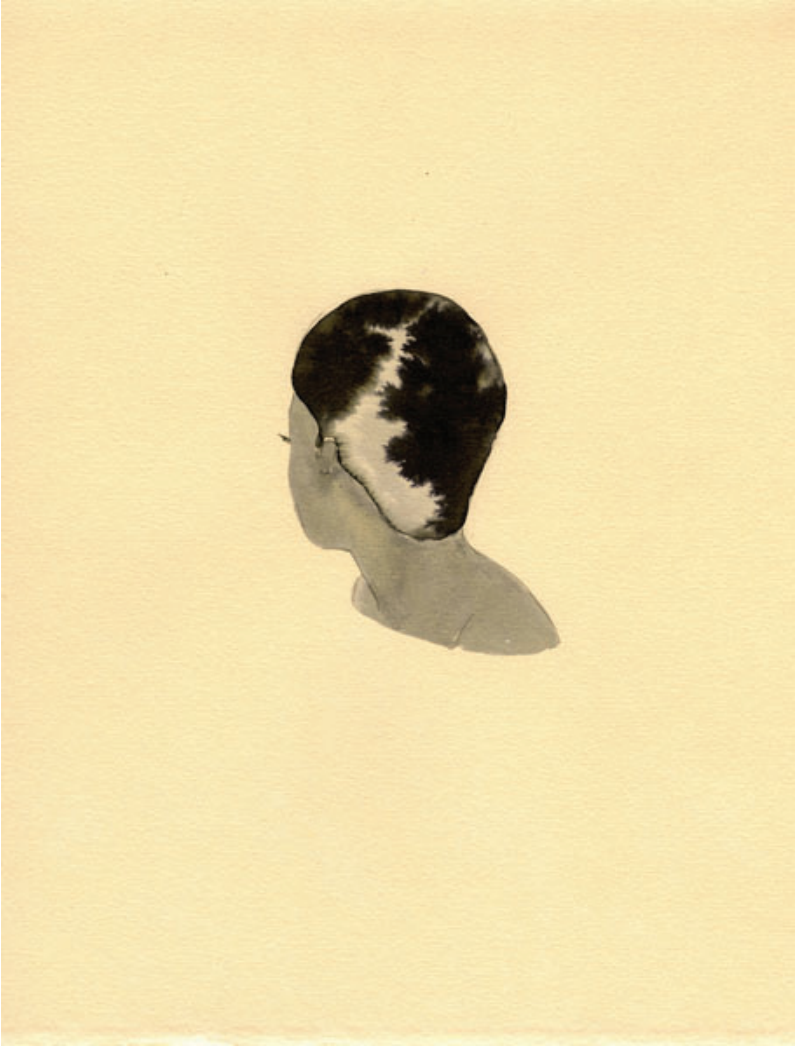
To summarize, I agree with Gell's arguments that our response to artworks cannot be reduced to aesthetic feelings and cannot be separated from the social implications that come with

whatever reaction the artwork triggers. I also agree with Gell's view that works of art should not be interpreted as symbols, carriers of meaning that can be extrapolated, similarly to words in the system of language. Instead, art objects should be understood as actions, with all their social and material qualities. More specifically, as actions that trigger some kind of change.





{ LORNA SIMPSON }



LORNA SIMPSON, *HEAD Q* (2008)



Through her different works, which are often associated with the social and political themes of racial and gender-related discrimination, Lorna Simpson clearly addresses a larger and more penetrating subject: how objects, including images and words, direct our thoughts and our imagination towards assumptions. In other words, how our means of interpreting things are constantly upheld by the material landscape that we are immersed in. Lorna Simpson challenges these assumptions by creating more and less recognizable combinations with these objects and by constructing narratives that make us more aware of our interpretative process.

A reoccurring element in her works is the portraiture of subjects through objects and textual fragments that are presented together with one or more images. She often uses images, both drawings and photographs, where the subject looks away. In most of her works depicting persons, the viewer only sees the back of a head, like in **Stereo Styles** (1988) or of the whole body, like in **You're Fine** (1988). According to the artist, this choice means for her a "refusal to giving the viewer a complete view of the subject and try to supplant that with other information". She experiments "other ways of looking at portraiture and photography. It

is about dismantling all these different aspects of photography that you assume should operate in one particular way, about not taking these aspects for granted" (Simpson 2009).

## Image and words as stuff

What strikes me in Lorna Simpson's work in relation to the usage of materiality and objects is her desire to bring to light the material quality of an image. This act challenges my interpretation of images, because I am forced to see them also as objects that have been manufactured for a specific reason. Also with her drawings she pushes me as a viewer to ask myself what is being depicted in the image, what is the drawing showing to me. Simpson obtains this effect by drawing realistic situations very factually, where each and every object has clearly a logical function but at the same time this function remains unfamiliar to me as a viewer.

When Lorna Simpson works with found footage, she not only extrapolates the content of these images. She rather brings to light (and brings to life) their materiality as artifacts. In **Photobooth** (2008), each found photograph that she collected is carefully and beautifully framed in a heavy frame. This form of presentation transforms

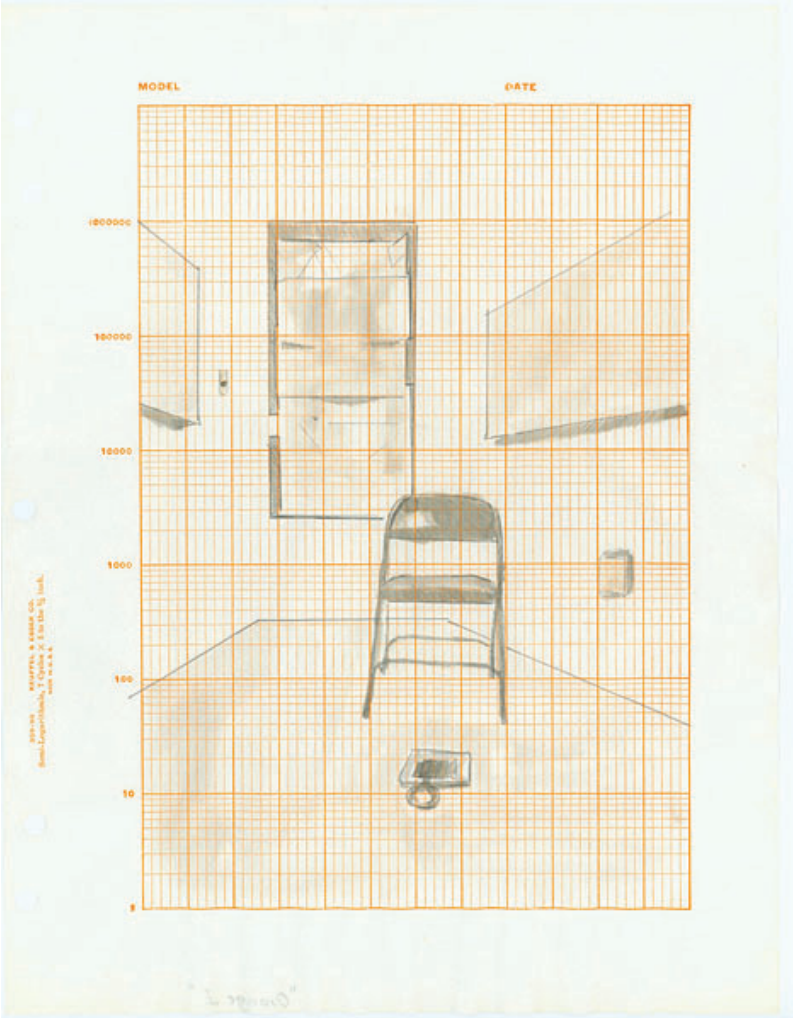
the photographs into objects again, so that I don't look at the collection as I would look at an archive, but I look at every single image as an object that once belonged to someone else. In the work there are also a few drawings, framed exactly in the same way, but it is not clear what the drawings represent.

In her own words, "the drawings are to me like the back of a photograph, if you rip it out of an album it has part of the black paper that is either left, or the way photographs deteriorate in terms of chemicals. So it [the drawing] is a surrogate of images that aren't there or to think of them just in terms of quality or of the way that photographic images deteriorate." Seeing these photos as objects rather than as the mere carriers of their visual content, makes me more aware of their original context and of their makers' intentions. The self-portraits in **Photobooth** are not only portraits of happy, well-dressed men of color but become the photographs that have been taken by them at a specific time, preserved as a memory, sent to a family member or a lover, then lost or thrown away in the trash, to be finally collected by a stranger and sold on flea markets as "photographs of men".

I'VE ALWAYS HAD AN INTEREST IN  
DESIRE FOR PHOTOGRAPHY, NOT ONLY

IN WHAT THE PHOTOGRAPHS DECLARE  
AND HOW WE MIGHT READ THEM BUT  
ALSO A VIEWER'S DESIRE-RELATIONSHIP  
TO THOSE IMAGES. THE PHOTOBOOT IT  
IS A VERY DIRECT CASE BUT IT IS ALSO  
ONE THAT IS INTENTIONAL, TO CREATE A  
PARTICULAR KIND OF POSITION OR FACIAL  
EXPRESSION, TO EVOKE SOMETHING AS  
OPPOSED TO JUST HAVING YOUR PHOTO-  
GRAPH TAKEN BY A PHOTOGRAPHER. SO  
ALL THE PORTRAITS ARE QUITE INTENSE  
IN TERMS OF THEIR GAZE BACK TO THE  
VIEWER. A LOT OF IMAGES COME DURING  
THE TIME OF JIM CROW'S LAWS, SO IT'S  
ALSO PORTRAITURE DURING A PARTICULAR  
TIME IN AMERICAN HISTORY BUT ALSO  
OF INDIVIDUALS LEAVING THE SOUTH,  
GOING TO THE NORTH, AND THERE WAS  
THIS NECESSITY TO SHOW THAT YOU ARE  
SAFE OR THAT YOU ARE DOING WELL,  
HAVING LEFT WHAT WAS HOME. [WHEN  
YOU COLLECT THEM,] YOU ALSO EXPERI-  
ENCE THE WAY PEOPLE CATEGORIZE  
AND INTERPRET THESE PHOTOGRAPHS  
THEMSELVES. (SIMPSON 2009)

Lorna Simpson's works expose culture's invisible means of power and its culture's temporality, as well. Decay of the objects in her artworks reveals decay of their intended function and of the original desires attached to the objects. To this extent, she makes clear to me as a viewer that the context of the object becomes decisive to its meaning. While context is taken for granted most of the time during our daily activities, Simpson wants



LORNA SIMPSON, ORANGE 1 (2008)

me to pay particular attention to it, at least as much as to the object itself.

In her drawings of interrogation rooms (*Selected drawings*, 2008), the same effect has been achieved by drawing images from current newspapers. The images portray interrogation and torture rooms, occasionally with a person in them. According to Lorna Simpson, “it creates a kind of apathy of taking in all that information [when we read the newspapers]. It does come unquestioned – at a certain point, after a barrage, what you are actually looking at. And what you assume to be appropriate or inappropriate, because it becomes so part of one’s daily existence.” By drawing these spaces by hand instead, everything in the image seems to get more gravitas.

IT IS REALLY HARD TO MAKE OUT WHAT THEY ARE, IN THE DRAWINGS. YOU HAVE TO LOOK AND KNOW WHAT THOSE THINGS ARE IN THE PHOTOGRAPHS. THEY DO PLAY ON THE ORDINARINESS OF HOW THOSE IMAGES BECOME VERY FAMILIAR BUT AT THE SAME TIME THEY BECOME VERY FOREIGN VERY QUICKLY. IT PLAYS WITHOUT ANY EXPLANATION, I THINK THOSE DETAILS START TO STAND OUT MORE AS A SIGN OF HOW UNUSUAL THEY ARE. THERE ARE JUST LITTLE DETAILS IN EACH IMAGE THAT SUGGEST PHYSICAL DETAINMENT OR TORTURE. (SIMPSON 2009)

## Objects that make us who we are

*Wigs* (1996–2006), a collection of African wigs and of text fragments lithographed on felt, seems to play with the idea of portrayal through material things and with our social or moral interpretation of daily objects. Some texts have the qualities of excerpts from personal stories, others sound more like statements or observations from an outsider. For example, “The wig produced the desired effect”, or “She dressed them as twins/ sometimes female/ sometimes male”, or “Strong desire to blur”.

When I saw the work for the first time, I thought of how we can adopt a different personality through objects. Of course the things that we choose to wear or to carry with us accentuate or hide some aspects of ourselves, but they also trigger different expectations towards the environment and towards the people we will encounter. When we are forced to carry or wear certain objects that we didn’t choose, we are somehow depleted of our control, of our will to “be” in the space or in a social situation. In this way, we are depleted of a certain power.

THE PIECE HAS TO DO WITH HOW PEOPLE CHOOSE TO LIVE THEIR LIVES IN TERMS OF THEIR APPEARANCE AND THEIR GENDER IN DIFFERENT MOMENTS



LORNA SIMPSON, *WIGS II* (1996-2006), INSTALLATION MUSEUM OF  
CONTEMPORARY ART LOS ANGELES.

IN HISTORY, AND IN TIME ON A DAY TO DAY LEVEL. ONE TEXT IS ABOUT A MAN, HIS WIFE WAS A SLAVE THAT WENT TO ESCAPE SLAVERY BY LEAVING THE SOUTH AND GOING TO THE NORTH, AND COMING TO NEW YORK. SHE WAS VERY LIGHT SKINNED SO SHE PRETENDED TO BE AN ELDERLY WHITE MAN AND HER HUSBAND, WHO WAS A SLAVE AND DARK SKINNED, PRETENDED TO BE HER SLAVE. SO IT IS KIND OF MIMICKING THE SOCIAL

STRUCTURE THAT THEY WERE TRYING TO ESCAPE. THAT THEY EMBODIED IN ORDER TO ALLOW THEM TO ESCAPE. THE SOCIAL OBSESSION OF TRYING TO LIMIT AND CONTROL OR TO SEEK OUT SPECIFIC TRUTHS AROUND SOMEONE'S GENDER IDENTITY. THEY [THE WIGS] ALL HAVE A HIGHLY STYLIZED QUALITY AND THEY ARE ALL COMPLETELY DIFFERENT FROM ONE ANOTHER, WHICH I FOUND FASCINATING. (SIMPSON 2009).







{ DENISE PIRES }



STILL FROM VIDEO-INTERVIEW WITH DENISE PIRES (2012), MARTA COLPANI

## Denise tells about her house

I lived behind the corner, and my primary school was also here close by. I saw this house being built, from groundbreaking on. My mother picked me up after school and we came here every day, to see how the house was being built. We had to walk over wooden planks, we had to be careful where we walked. I thought it was great to see that. It took almost a year, we saw the house growing. I knew which room would be mine, and we would have a garden. I had never had a garden before.

For the first time I was completely conscious that we were moving to a new house. I thought “I will move there”. I still find it beautiful that I can remember so vividly the day we moved. From the classroom I could see the truck riding on the street, and I knew that at the end of the day I would come home here, and I would sleep here for the first time. In a new bedroom. That was very exciting.

My memories in the previous house are much less. I was also younger than when we lived here. I have lived here 4, 4 and a half year with my parents, I moved out when I was 18 or 19. It is true that I have lived here much shorter than in the previous house, but the memories from this place are my dearest. Because I was older, I

was starting to make up my mind about certain things. That didn't always work out between me and my parents. That's how I remember it. And in this house I've had the best talks with my father. At the kitchen table, about essential things, about life.

When you are younger, you are just a child and your father is your father, and you listen to him. Other than that you just do your thing. But that was the time that we started to talk about the important things in life. At the kitchen table you talk about your ambitions: he told me about his life, how he met my mother and everything he did before then. Things like that kitchen table are for me... I mean, it is a horrible table but it becomes beautiful to me because there I shared things with my parents that no one will ever take away from me. And every time, when I sit at that table I think that that could be the same table where I will be with my own children. So it becomes very meaningful to me.

Nostalgia. But also these talks with my parents made me who I am today. I hope to pass that to my children one day. We also had some hard talks, not only nice ones. And that all has made me. Sometimes, when I sit at the table, some situations come back to my memory and I am like “Oh, yeah, dad said that, back then. The reason that I am

here today has to do with what dad mentioned that time.”

He always taught me to have ambitions and work to fulfill them. And he told me about his own life. He was planning to retire within ten years, it was my parents’ dream back then. That has been a very important lesson to me: have a goal and work towards that goal. Be focused. Ten years later, my father retired at 55. Now he lives with my mother in Cape Verde and together they have a brilliant life. He got what he wanted. These are the things that I remember. These are the lessons that I’d want to pass through to my children. That all this has happened at the same kitchen table is quite precious to me.

The table works as a memory and a symbol. The kitchen is a very important place in a house: the place where you eat and where you create a deeper relationship with people. I like to invite people to have lunch or dinner at my house, especially dear friends. And then to sit at the kitchen table, instead of here [in the living room]. The kitchen is closer to my heart, and is warmer. I cook there, I can talk with my friends, I do stuff. The living room is more formal, less homey. Here you serve dinner when your in-laws come to visit. Or I eat here on the couch when I am on my own, while I watch

television. When I am alone it [the living room] is nicer because then my cats can come close, lie on the couch with me.

The floor is theirs. I just renovated it and painted it. I found it very important, the house must become my own but some elements have to stay, to remind me of them. What I do need though, is to put my energy into this house. Otherwise I’ll keep missing them and it will never feel like this is my place here. I’ve been very busy with it: for example they used the different rooms of the house differently, the walls had a different color, too. I feel like I have to feed the house with my own energy and with my identity.

I don’t think I could ever sell this house. I might move out, but I couldn’t sell it. My parents have been the first owners and my father found it very hard to sell it, too. Back then, he first tried to sell it to friends. Then he asked me if I would want to buy it. It wasn’t an easy decision to make: buy your parents’ house. Wouldn’t that be weird? How could I be really at ease in it? How could I make my own house of it? When I looked at the house, my parents’ things, I found it too strange. Also, I was thinking of moving to Amsterdam. I already knew this house, so I was afraid that I would have been done with it very soon. Actually, I was

looking for an old house, which would have made it more exciting. With a lot of strange places to discover, in every hallway. It is nice to get to know a house. And I would have missed that with this one, because I have already lived here. But the house also offered a lot to me, and it had become a kind of a family thing. So after a week-end of hard thinking I thought: I am just going to do this.

The sale of the house meant a ticket to Cape Verde for my parents. And for me a new start in Rotterdam, on my own. They were just waiting for the sale before emigrating, which made the sale even more loaded emotionally. When we were signing the paper I was thinking: "Ok, now my parents are leaving for real."

That was very emotional. And it still is. On the other hand, it is also beautiful. This is the utmost that they could have done. They did not let their possessions and their family and friends hold them back. They just left. That shows a strong will.

They think it's fantastic that I bought the house and that I am making it my own. They like to hear that I am changing things, improving the house. That I am making the house more beautiful, and that I have the means to do that, on my own. That means a lot for them.

The house will become more mine over time. I bought it almost one year ago and I have been feeling it is my home since about six months. I believe that houses are still filled by the energies of their previous owners. Just by being around, by changing things, you let go of the past and you put yourself into the house itself. I am almost done with the decoration. The house is almost finished. I am just searching for the perfect mirror. And a treasure chest. And then, if you ask me, it will be finished.

## **Denise tells about things**

My mother was 21 and my father was 24 when they moved to the Netherlands. I haven't gotten much of Cape Verde growing up. My parents did it on purpose, they wanted me to be in a white school, they did not want to hold me back. I became quite Dutch, I started to speak differently and dress up differently, too. My friends went to a black school, they had friends who listened to R&B and I must say that it made a difference. I hung out with the snob kids. I was contaminated.

My best friend went to a mixed school. She became a real R&B girl. Braid hair, her sideburns stuck to her face, like Antillean kids. She removed her hair and she was occupied with boys. I went to school with hockey girls, snobs

and arty-farty families. I started to play tennis, suddenly I liked that. I started to listen to rock music, Jimmy Hendrix, and then soul and jazz. We didn't hang out on the street. After school we went to play football or tennis, or something like that. I didn't care about boys so much. I even started speaking "ABN" [standard Dutch], I became interested in things like art. My friend didn't get in touch with these things. And I don't mean it in a belittling kind of way, but that was because her friends came from a lower social class. My new friends' parents had great jobs, big houses and expensive cars, and more time for things like art and tennis. And that is contaminating. I was hanging out with people from a higher social class, or whatever you want to call it.

I still hang out with all different kinds of people. I have something of both "worlds." I have more **urban** friends, from the street. But I can also feel at ease with my preppy friends. I am a bit of both. When I am with street people, I adapt my language to theirs, mostly unconsciously, as a reflex. But sometimes I do it on purpose, when I try to connect with someone. It feels unnatural,

because I am just a bit different, but then again, also not really different. They notice that, but they don't mind. They accept that.

I don't like to label people. You shouldn't compartmentalize. Each one of us is unique. So why would you divide people in "types"? Preppy or street kid, we are all beautiful and that is what counts. I have friends who make a lot of money very easily, and who can get whatever they want. But I have other friends who are more down-to-earth, who have to be more parsimonious. And that keeps me grounded. Having different kinds of friends make me see things more realistically. That is what I have learned.

I think that my parents are proud of me because I am quite successful at work. And because I was able to buy this house, on my own. They would want me to be married and have children, that would make everything complete for them. As a person, they probably see how strong-minded I am. Sometimes a bit too strong, a bit too sharp. I should be more calm, accept things the way they come to me. Learn to swallow the bitter pill. I think they're right, but all this makes me who I am, too.







# to change

ART MAKES US CHOOSE TO BECOME FOREIGN TO THINGS ALL  
OVER AGAIN.

IN PLACE OF SYMBOLIC COMMUNICATION, I PLACE ALL THE EMPHASIS ON AGENCY, INTENTION, CAUSATION, RESULT, AND TRANSFORMATION. I VIEW ART AS A SYSTEM OF ACTION, INTENDED TO CHANGE THE WORLD RATHER THAN ENCODE SYMBOLIC PROPOSITIONS ABOUT IT. (GELL 1998, 6)

I experience art of any kind as an action carried out upon the environment and on everything in it, including all the things and people that **make** this environment. Throwing a new artifact into the system of all things is, in my view, meant to trigger some kind of change, by virtue of the agency carried by this artifact and of the artist's intentions through the object(s) that he or she created.

To some extent, the distinction between local art and art at large

becomes irrelevant. Art directed towards a public that is in turn able to perceive it as familiar yet unsettling to the expected is, I think, local. As Lucy Lippard writes:

"IF CONTENT IS CONSIDERED THE PRIME COMPONENT OF ART, AND LIVED EXPERIENCE IS SEEN AS A PRIME MATERIAL, THEN REGIONALISM IS NOT A LIMITATION BUT AN ADVANTAGE" (LIPPARD 1997, 36).

Factual locality of a work of art is an advantage, not a prerequisite. Still you could say that each artist discussed in this essay is local in the sense that he or she produces culture through his or her own "local filter". For instance, Lorna Simpson mainly addresses Americans and her art clearly refers to the perception of Americans, their daily objects, their visual con-

sumption. Nevertheless, her work is meaningful to an international audience. Simpson trains me to see how expectation and interpretation about images and things are created and how they affect me. She restores the materiality of images and things, and by doing so she reveals the mechanisms by which these things were created, their original intent.

Neglecting the materiality of our surroundings means neglecting our identity, existence, and this seems to become clear throughout Simpson's work: objects, images and words in Simpson's work often depict people whose additional personal traits are practically erased. So I, as a viewer, make use of these objects, images and words to create something else that is not there. In this sense the material context is not a complement to her work, it is the work. By making me aware of the power of those images and objects she gives me, as a viewer, more control not only of myself, but especially of my knowledge of the world. The artist encourages me to decide what story *I* want to be told.

In a similar way, Helene Sommer is extremely aware of her "contextuality", so to speak. The accounts of the environment that she creates with her works are extremely personal in their narratives. Also in her case, the context

comes back as content of the work, as **subject matter**. As the artist herself says about her work:

THE STORIES IN MY WORK ARE DEFINITELY NOT THE STORIES THE LANDSCAPES WOULD TELL THEMSELVES AS THE STORIES HAVE BEEN TRACED, FILTERED AND ARTICULATED BY A CERTAIN PERSON OF A CERTAIN NATIONALITY OF A CERTAIN AGE, ME! THIS IS KIND OF OBVIOUS OF COURSE, BUT I BOTH LIKE THE IDEA AND THINK IT IS UNAVOIDABLE THAT THERE ARE TRACES OF ME IN THE STORIES I CHOOSE TO TELL. (SOMMER 2013)

Along with the frames of thought and of action that are created by the things in our environment, I became fascinated by certain cultural beliefs that originally derive from the qualities of the environment itself, became in many cases detached from their original context and were turned into traditions. We now expect them to persist on their own accord. An example of this is the ideal of freedom and independence that is still being associated with natural landscapes in Northern Europe. But how do we nurture these ideals in reality? And how do these ideals manifest themselves today in our environment and through our behavior?

Sommer wrote to me that "history leaves traces – both visible and invisible." Wim Wenders uses

film to draw attention to just what Helene Sommer calls the “parallel habitation of histories”, and to their manifestation in the environment. Wenders also explores, along with the environment itself, the attitude of *being* in it in the present. I believe that both artists, among others, contribute to an honest, straight-forward formation of our personal and collective identities by, in simple words, introducing the context itself as a powerful subject.

## To become foreign

Another distinction that lied at the foundation of this book is the one between artists that are insiders and other artists who are foreign to their environment. Also this distinction has to be refuted, at least in its literal interpretation. In fact, the conditions that led the artist to the creation of the work of art do not matter. What does matter is the state of mind that the work of art can produce in me as a viewer.

Lippard argues that local art is interesting because of “a certain foreignness that, on further scrutiny, may really be an unexpected familiarity, emerging from half-forgotten sources in our own local popular cultures.” (Lippard 1997, 36). In relation to foreignness and familiarity, I argue that the combination of both feelings does not need to be triggered by

works of art through reference to a popular culture, be it local or exotic. This happens rather more subtly, through the adoption of a language, a system of logics that is recognizable for the viewer as his or her own. That ordinary element in the work becomes “unexpected familiarity” when the art work subverts some of it (what Lippard calls “a certain foreignness”).

In a cultural climate of confusion about personal, national, religious identities, I think that art that works this way, that reaches the public through what you could call a meta-regionalism, is in essence political. It resists universality and it points to the particular, by making us aware of how we choose, interpret, embrace and embody objects, images, words and, more at large, the environment. Thus the artists mentioned here, among many others, are not so much telling an alternative story, rather they are encouraging us to make up our own stories out of what the material landscapes contain and of what they offer to us.

In his essayistic fiction, Anil Ramdas refers to the “position of the migrant” as a possibly privileged state, because it allows one to see things more clearly, *from a distance*. Ramdas makes this point repeatedly through explicit statements, but also through the narrative itself. And in the end the same

distance that is seen as a privilege also causes the death of the main character in Ramdas' story. Ramdas and Jack-Alan Lèger (author of *Casa, la casa*) both tell us, with their stories and with their acts in real life, that the invisible frame of things direct our perception of the environment, and that being aware of these frames both emancipates us and puts us in danger. But how is it an advantage to **look in** from the outside, from a distance?

The individual who enters an environment as a foreigner inevitably directs his or her attention more consciously towards these **invisible frames of things** that are, indeed, invisible and go unquestioned for the ones who are instead accustomed to them. The landscape, the objects, the stories that are told are constantly compared by the foreigner with what there is **elsewhere**. The environment might be experienced by him or her as estranging, unsettling, and it might lead to misinterpretation. Thus what do the objects tell to the foreigner? What is, for him or her, appropriate or inappropriate? Somehow, he or she will have to choose to be educated by things all over again.

I asked myself the question how do artists reflect on their own culture and environment and how do they address a local public with their art. My answer to this question right now lies in the acknowledgment of a great kinship between art in itself and **foreignness** as a state of mind. Looking back to the artists discussed in this book, I can relate this idea of **foreignness** to how Dan Higgins **sees** and celebrates a strong, ritualized network of relations between people as an element of the changing landscape. And to Rebecca Belmore in that she inserts her audience in a conversation with the landscape itself. Sommer, Simpson and Wenders also direct our attention to the environment, each in his or her own way, as I argued earlier.

What makes me appreciate their works as artists is that they make me a foreigner to things, all over again. They force me to make a choice whether I want to be educated by things, all over again. They make me take that distance that is necessary in order to be freed, as far as possible, from the invisible dictatorship of the systems of relations in which I am contained.





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