

Brussels, May 15, 2009

Dear Els, Dear Dirk,

Thank you very much for your invitation. The request to make a printed contribution in relation to "the beginning, reference frame, circumstances, sources of inspiration etc..." of my work was not easy though. I don't adopt a fixed working method and my spheres of interest are not fixed either (one gradually changes when one grows older). The (often) long period of time between the crystallization of the concept for my projects and the finalization of it also makes continuous transformation possible. Sometimes, I make changes until shortly before the planned presentation of a new work. But chance and coincidence play a very big role too. My new installation *Displacement* (2009) for example, was created on the occasion of a production-in-residence in Gotland, a Swedish island in the Baltic Sea. Though I had already received the invitation from Baltic Art Center (Visby) in November 2006, I didn't want to leave straightaway. I thought it was important to take into account that I would go to Sweden – I had never visited a Scandinavian country before – but I was also convinced that I should make a project that could not be realized in Belgium.

The first tracks I followed were the letters – love letters – of Mary Wollstonecraft¹, who made a journey by boat to the Scandinavian countries in the summer of 1795. *A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* was the title of the resulting publication (1796). For a few weeks I also searched for information about the "last days" of René Descartes. In early September 1649 he went to Sweden, where he was invited by Queen Christina to teach her philosophy. During the cold and dark Northern winter Descartes caught pneumonia and he died on the 11th of February 1650, only a few months after his arrival in Stockholm. Somehow I did not feel satisfied about these starting points, however and I decided to concentrate on Gotland instead.

My trip to this impressive island in the summer of 2007 convinced me of the possibility of a remake of Roberto Rossellini's *Journey to Italy* (1954) – one of my favorite films,

and also a key landmark in the development of modern cinema. *Journey to Italy* was filmed less than a decade after the end of the Second World War, which had clearly left traces in Italy. It's not only a modern road movie, an exploration of Napoli with several tourist guides and the story of the disintegration of a marriage, but it's also one of the first films proposing an "essay": the images are linked together by abstract logic of thought rather than by conventions of classical narrative storytelling.

I gradually detected manifold correspondences between the historical Napoli featured in *Journey to Italy*, and Gotland. It's interesting to note in this context that Rossellini had not written a script for *Journey to Italy* – he only provided a list of tourist destinations in and around Napoli to his producers. When I arrived in Gotland, I immediately told my Swedish hosts that I considered a remake of *Journey to Italy*, and I showed them a list of tourist's destinations that I wanted to visit. I didn't know then at all exactly how I imagined this remake, though I knew Rossellini's film almost by heart then.

While exploring this desolate island by car (Gotland has only 57.000 inhabitants in a total area of 3140 km²) the new work started taking form in steps. I tried to recollect all the scenes in *Journey to Italy* and imagine which locations in Gotland would fit certain ones. Though I carried my camera only as a means to prospect the island's visual possibilities, I knew almost immediately that the pictures I was taking would form the basis of *Displacement*. After a few days I started photographing as if the images would reflect the point of view of "a man" and "a woman" observing the different spaces or landscapes from different angles.

One of the first things that struck me while I was driving around, were the overall traces of military presence: bunkers, barbed wire, radars, watchtowers, etc. Though I vaguely knew that Gotland had been a military defense zone during the Cold War, I had no idea that the omnipresent military equipment had been dismantled only very recently. During my

three-week long journey I photographed diverse locations such as an airport, a boat terminal, limestone quarries, pine woods, coast lines, an Italian villa, golf course, a Swiss-style summer house, several bronze age grave yards, a military defense museum – forming a collection of images that hovered between artificial (man-made) and natural landscapes or locations – always taking into account the shifting point of views of the two archetypical protagonists.

Back home I developed a system to catalogue the approximately 5000 photographs I had taken and I tried to construct a "travelogue," strictly following the structure of *Journey to Italy*, of which I bought the rights to use the dialogues: the point of departure for the audio narration of *Displacement*. But it was clear that I couldn't keep those fragments that were pointing to the very specific history of Napoli.

The new dialogues I needed were based on "found footage," with text clipped from tourist's guides, newspapers, and travel magazines (like the fact that Ingmar Bergman landed on Gotland in 1960, on location hunting for his film *Through a Glass Darkly*). I continued to alter the script, which would serve as the basis for the sound recording of five voices made at the end of August 2008, until the last moment. Thus I could include some very recent news items such as the strife between Russia and Georgia which escalated during the same month of August – a conflict which could have consequences in relation to Swedish defense politics (Gotland being geographically situated only at very short distance from the borders of several post-Soviet states.)

It's very important to add however, that I didn't want to create a realistic or documentary image of Gotland: I wanted to achieve something on a more abstract level. Every travel sequence in *Displacement* is completely fictional and composed of images taken in different parts of Gotland – I don't even mention the name Gotland once in the whole audio narration. I describe the destination (in the words of an anonymous narrator's voice) as "an island in the far north of Europe." The words spoken by the same voice (an adaptation of a quote by Michel de Certeau²) give an indication of *Displacement's* conceptual framework: **Every story is a travel story. In standard Modern Greek the word 'metaphor' means transport. It denotes the act of moving people or goods from one place to another. Stories can also be considered as metaphors. Every day stories traverse and organize places, they select and link them together, they make sentences and itineraries out of them.** It's not a coincidence either that *Displacement* takes place in seven days – as in Rossellini's film, but both works also share thematic and structural similarities with Dante's *Divina Commedia*.

In my contribution for TIMEBOOK I made a small, but relevant selection of the images that became part of *Displacement*. I hope it in some way provides an answer to your questions.

With warm regards,

Ana

¹ Mary Wollstonecraft's life and work have attracted me since many years, not only because she's the mother of a famous daughter with the same name (author of "The Modern Prometheus," generally known as Frankenstein) but especially as she's one of the most fascinating figures of early romanticism and the author of a major feminist work "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" (1792)

² The Practice of Everyday Life, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984, p. 115.