

UNFLUID WERE THE WAVES

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8. JANUAR – 31. JANUAR 2010

TRØNDELAG SENTER FOR SAMTIDSKUNST

The hand-written letter seems now to be an archaic form of communication. It is time-consuming and impractical, its mark making slow and awkward. Yet as words start to flow and the pen accelerates into wavy loops and rhythmic punctuation, this experience can become sensual, perhaps even novel, a kind of fluid telescoping to another time and place. Maja Nilsen's exhibition *Unfluid were the waves* at the Trøndelag Senter for Samtidskunst, offers a similar experience. It is comprised of a series of twelve black and white digital collages and a sculpture. This work seems to be from another time, from a distant, monochrome reality, the reality of the collage, the reality of contradictions. In *collage 1* a woman, who appears to be stranded on a deserted island, sits atop of a beached whale, eating a banana. Her head tilts contemplatively towards the surrounding ocean, but her face, though fringed with curls of hair, is absent, invisible. In the background, warships cut through the turbulent waves, appearing to be on a collision course with the island, as a tripod and camera stand to the side capturing the whole event. The different elements of the image seem precisely cut out and pasted on; like an obsessive film director, the artist carefully choreographs the image. Even the lighting seems to be well considered, as the foreground is sharp, full of contrast and depth, while the ocean is faded, pixelated and gray. The image is vaguely reminiscent of an early Hollywood production, as though shot on a studio set with a projected backdrop, and featuring a familiar subject-matter: the conflict between the untamed beast, the savage island and the manmade naval marvels, where a faceless token woman is placed in their midst, torn, timid, perhaps even exploited. Yet in following such a possible narrative, the image begins to unravel, revealing its own inner logic, its own convincing reality.

Originally this body of work was conceived as a film - an art form measured in time, with a beginning and an end. Together these individual pieces are like film stills, without a concrete sequence, or actual continuity, but with common imagery and shared stylistic incongruities that allude to an overarching narrative. Each work is a cluster of activity, set in a detailed, fantastical setting, designed to entice the viewer's eye into the scattered action, to move across its plane. In *collage 2* a man with his back to the viewer is pasted into the foreground of a forest landscape. In the distance, a white dove struggles with a cloth that partially obscures the face of a woman lying on a black casket. In the back of the image, camouflaged by branches, another face peers in. It is also part of the spectacle, but as a foreign eye, or perhaps the eye of the forest. Each of these entities faces another, each one of their gazes creating openings or paths to the next. The gaze, like a thread in a piece of cloth, ties these entities together into an unstable whole. This whole is composed of objects and figures, which in themselves carry strong symbolic significance (i.e. black casket, white dove, forest), alluding to many possible interpretations and readings. As each one demands attention, other content is inevitably overshadowed, creating competing points of focus and thus syncopation and discontinuity.

The issues of continuity and discontinuity that are fundamental to collage are also fundamental to Nilsen's practice. When working in different places and communities, she often incorporates elements of these environments, such as existing epistemologies, local histories, tradition or myth into her practice. It may be that an artist is only capable of offering a translation, an interpretation of what already exists, that an artist always finds oneself amidst a pre-given context. In Nilsen's case this is a conscientious choice, it serves a strategic purpose, it allows her to analyze and question the formation of the relationship between the artist and the context in which they situate their work.

The reference point of this exhibition is *Zoo, or Letters Not About Love* (1923), a book written in Berlin by the exiled Russian writer and formalist Viktor Shklovsky. The book is in the form of a letter correspondence between two ex-lovers: Shklovsky and Elsa Triolet (another Russian writer, referred to as Alya in the book). On

the surface it may appear that Nilsen's work stages some excerpts from the book, acting as its secondary support. Though her work often involves an illustrative style and occasional direct references to passages from the text, these works are not simply visual elucidation to the book. Rather they explore some of its predicates, attempting to continue what has been left open. But how can one provide a continuation to something that is already completed? Shklovsky's book in fact, also explores this topic of continuation, of reaching out. The correspondence with his ex-lover is only upheld on the condition that he will not write to her about love. But Shklovsky wants only to profess his love for Alya, and as the letters discuss a variety of different topics they all invariably end up being metaphors for his unrequited love. Sometimes one can sense disillusionment, powerlessness, even desperation in Shklovsky's language as he breaks the agreed upon arrangement, as he overwhelms his letters with obvious allusions to love. It seems as though in his vulnerable state he can only express himself plainly and directly. Nilsen shares this tendency to attempt a direct approach to the other's heart. In *collage 3* several baboons unsuccessfully attempt to climb scaffolding built out of fallen, discarded trees, in order to reach an opaque window mounted on a woman's torso in the place of her heart. It seems that it takes extraordinary effort and skill, but also a higher form of thinking to reach the other's heart, something beyond one's intrinsic abilities.

Almost every image in this exhibition contains a vast space, an open terrain, the indefinable outside. Sometimes this vast space simply creates a sense of place as the forest does in *collage 2*, in other work it is interrupted by windows, or surrounded by a dam of organs, seemingly caging in its expansive realm. Consequently, these spaces often appear as cultivated enclosures. But they are never fully constrained, refusing to be tamed, they spill over the edges, span until the horizon, perhaps representing the irreducible other. Sometimes the other is like a desert, harsh, turned away, its terrain unmanageable, inhospitable. One can only witness its permanence, and try to maintain a set distance in relation to it. In *collage 4* such a desert has the lover naked, turned away on a recliner, as flower pots stand behind her and seem to float on the sand, their roots incapable of penetrating the uninhabitable ground. Shklovsky, unable to persuade or coerce his ex-lover into returning his love, is left to a kind of prolongation of the inevitable rejection, where the maintenance of the present situation is sustained because it allows for a postponement of the final closure. In one of his letters he exclaims that he wants to "write literarily," yet more than anything, his letters evoke the inexhaustible vastness of language, of its endless nuances and terminology, of its avoidance of closure. Their correspondence sways back and forth like gentle waves, like a soft dance; it is a kind of stationary movement. In *collage 5* a small lake in the mountains is converted into a ballroom where couples dance, making their way across its surface, from one shore to the other. The shoreline, that pulsating border, once water, once sand is an entry, or a disembarkment, a moment of change. But how easily the shore dissipates into a horizon, into the impenetrable itself.

Ultimately, what seems to be at issue in this work is how to bring the horizon to the shore, how to make the closure into an opening. In *collage 6*, water bursts from windows in an apartment block, flooding a street in Berlin. Strangely, the gushing water hangs suspended, stretching but not quite reaching the ground. Shklovsky writes: "The water is rising. It has flooded all Berlin; in the tunnel, a subway train has surfaced belly up, like a dead eel. It has washed all the fish and crocodiles out of the aquarium. The crocodiles float without awakening, though they whimper because of the cold, but the water keeps mounting the steps. Eleven feet. It's in your room, Alya." Water, the substance that overflows, that floods, that enters every crevice, cleaning out, taking away, but also leaving a sediment where it passes. In one smooth motion, in one simple gesture it causes an exchange, in this moment with its force it brings together the most unlike elements, it establishes a continuity, where there was distance. From the left bottom corner of the image a hand reaches out, as if about to touch the water, bringing a sense of optimism in the reconciliation with the other, with Alya. Water is a substance, which symbolizes purification and renewal. When it springs out, when it rains down it causes radical change, it becomes an otherworldly force, the substance of myths.

A myth involves the many and so it takes the form of a story, it is a form of communication. Myths are a mediation that can communicate that which was incommunicable otherwise. They rely on rituals, on chants, on sacred clothing and masks. Perhaps this is why in all of Nilsen's work the face is always covered, turned away, cut off,

tucked away into the pillow of a recliner. The face must disappear; it is too immediate, too familiar, too complete. One can only gain access to the other through a mediatory person or object, an amulet, or something with symbolic value, special significance or powers. Perhaps in the exhibition this object is *kingdomphylumclassorderfamilygenusspecies*, a sculpture composed of long, rib-shaped plaster tubes hanging in the middle of the space, surrounded by the other images in the exhibition. As if in an archeological museum these tubes hang like the remaining bones of an unrecognizable ancient animal. Bone reconstructions, computer generated models may help in visualizing what such an animal might have looked like, but none of these methods can completely recapture an animal's appearance or behaviour. Like the vast spaces in some of the images in the exhibition this skeleton represents the irrecoverable other, that knowledge which is in some way inaccessible to us. Simultaneously, this rib cage of bone-like beams also appears to be in the shape of a boat, an object that has a strong cultural history, being an integral part of human activity, whether for functional, recreational or economic purposes. In its double articulation this skeleton-boat structure functions like the mediation between culture and nature, but also between the measurable and the immeasurable. This is also how Nilsen treats Shklovsky's book. For although it is an already completed book, by creating a mythology around it - which always presents the world in a state of becoming, at a moment of formation - the text itself becomes an open passage, an unfinished sentence.