

Departures:

This is me thinking about what happens when you become aware of your own excruciating eyes - how do you go on, how do you work with it?

Some quotes: Sophie Calle received postcards from the artist Joseph Grigely containing comments on an exhibition she put together: *LES OUIES*. In the exhibition were notes with blind people's descriptions of what beauty meant to them. There were also portraits of the blind people speaking, and photographs taken by Sophie Calle to try to illustrate the quotes on beauty.

In his postcards Joseph Grigely, who is deaf, writes:

"...the Deaf do not see sign language as a pretty way of communicating – it's language, language pure and simple..."

"...examples of desire to relate to the other in some configuration: to experience the other; possess it, control it. It is, almost ironically, a way of learning more about ourselves, of seeing how we fit into the grand scheme of being..."

"We want to touch this experience of difference, but we also want to do this from the safe distance of our own identity. We cannot quite forsake who we are to become someone else. We presume that to close our eyes is to experience blindness, or to sleep is to experience death – yet we know that we do not, cannot, abandon the sense of self in these endeavors; we cannot "unknow" ourselves as individuals. Empathy is an illusion, not a truth..."

(Quotes were found in an article on Sophie Calle from the magazine Parkett, issue # 36)

At Art Moscow 2003 I arranged a guided tour of our exhibition, especially for deaf and dumb Russian kids. I invited students from two different schools, told them about the photos and the films, and tried to explain why everyone in the exhibition, unbeknownst to each other, had portrayed such similar subjects and objects. An interpreter translated my English into Russian, another translated her Russian into sign language, the students asked me questions, made comments and had opinions. I know a little bit of sign language from before, and I thought that the words were roughly the same in Swedish as in Russian signs, as long as you didn't spell them out letter by letter, so I mixed some of these signs into the conversation as well. But the delay that came from all these translations back and forth was quite calming, made everything seem thoughtful. After my guided tour I threw a small party, and then they spent the rest of the day going about the art fair, checking out the art.

I had borrowed a video camera to document this event, my guided tour and the kids. But when it came to it, I couldn't bring myself to shoot them. For whose sake? Not my own, I was already there, so for an imagined later-art audience then - but why think so far ahead? I had these kids in front of me, it was enough for us to be talking, we were both participants and audience of ourselves, trying to communicate as well as we could across all physical, economical, cultural and lingual barriers. But sure, I still wanted to extract something out of it all, wanted something from these kids to take home with

me, the experience or the meeting. And I had no idea if I could offer them anything in return that would be of equal value to them. I mean, they sure seemed to be enjoying themselves and all, but still - how can you calculate the value of things like this?

I could mention here that when I work with handicapped people down in Ångelholm - I've been doing this since 1989 - there's not much in the way of pity in me, pity would be mostly impractical for the work to be done, and also at most times it would be uncalled for. You get a little hardened perhaps, and make jokes together with your co-workers about things that to an outside onlooker would seem difficult and terrible. In any case, when arranging this meeting with the deaf and dumb Russian kids, it is hard to say something sensible about why I wanted to do it. But I had seen some of what they could expect from the future, after the years in school, so for once there might have been an element of pity included.

What I told the kids about our exhibition were my speculations about what the artists' preconceived images of Moscow and Russia and life in the Eastern bloc were like. I proposed to them that we, the artists, already upon arrival in Moscow had brought these images with us in our heads, and then spent a month going about town trying to find them and capture them with our cameras. And a typical image that I might carry with me is a picture of kids in an institution in Eastern Europe, undernourished and understimulated, a popular target of Swedish Christian aid workers collecting clothes and toys for them. But that particular thing I did not dare reveal about myself, at that time.

Earlier that spring I had recorded an interview with Yasse Lettersson, a disillusioned aid-worker (who normally works at an after-school centre, and is an artist, and a writer). He had just gotten back from a trip to a children's hospital in the Russian exclave Kaliningrad. Yasse talked about meeting different people at this hospital, meetings that perhaps came out a little bit wrong. And this chimes in the communication process might grow into a very hurtful experience when one part is so obviously more privileged than the other part (when class differences turn out to be economical rather than just cultural which we might have been lead to believe back home) - one part gets hurt, the other part becomes aware of hurting. Attempts at lightening the mood, with humour, inadvertently turns into mockery. When this filmed interview was re-edited I showed it to Göran Dahlberg (editor at the magazine of philosophy Glänta), and he said - something like - that failure, and the understanding of failure, was the best basis for a true solidarity. I went looking for Göran some weeks ago, asked him if he remembered talking to me about this, and asked him to expand upon the subject a little bit. He meant that perhaps you set out with an intention of helping, with an idea about how that can be accomplished, and that your intention might be impossible to realise, and that the local circumstances at your destination might be impossible to translate correctly. Once you become aware of all this impossibility, and yet decides to believe in the necessity of trying to understand and make yourself understood, then you have the beginning of an ethical standpoint. Which it would be interesting to develop further. But how to go about that I do not know!

In my favorite "i" I wrote about the trip to Moscow and what happened there, about my preconceived images and what I tried to do with them. This is what I wrote about deaf and dumb Russian kids:

Both Dima and the other of our two guides/interpreters/caretakers, Anna, are keen to show us all these contrasts; they think it's important that we get to see as many sides of Moscow as possible, preferably a bunch of visits of different character are to be squeezed in during the same day. It's important to them that we don't get the wrong image of Moscow and Russia, and all images that are too simple and one-sided are wrong, they think. So we get a lot of contrasts:

One evening when Dima has taken me and Charlotte to a galleryist to help us arrange an exhibition (this was the evening we went from calling her our manager as a joke, to calling her our manager for real) she decides we should go into a railway station, I think it was Kurskij, and have a beer. As a contrast to the fancy gallery, she says the railway station is dangerous, "but I think we'll be okay". We sit in plastic chairs by plastic tables, white and moldy, of the exact same kind as we have on the veranda at my work back home in Ångelholm. We're in a big hall, almost empty, but at the five or so tables nearest to us there are also people sitting, drinking beer from plastic cups. And over by some slot machines there's an older gory, a big one in a leather jacket, occasionally dealing to nervous kids. The police arrives at one time, wearing pale green uniforms that make them look like the military, to pick up someone who has done something; we know not what, but mostly it is quiet. After a while we notice that all who sit at the tables surrounding us, it might be 30 people, are talking to each other in sign language. They are deaf and dumb. They cannot hear the techno beats and the old lady's voice in the ceiling speakers shouting out arrivals and departures. It is quite like a film, says Dima, aren't you glad I brought you here? We stay a while after this gory has left, and we see that the gory dealing over by the slot machines is also talking in sign language to his customers. But of course, says Dima, why couldn't deaf and dumb people be criminals?

After the railway station we make another stop, there's an artist hanging up photos in an apartment gallery - we bring some cheap champagne and talk to him while his name is Sergei. Sergei tells us that the deaf and dumb have their own mafia. The Russian mafia does not consist of one big organisation, there are many different groups with many different specialities (for example all bodybuilders from a certain suburb join the same mafia when they move into town, this mafia is named after the suburb from which they came - an honour I'm sure to the other people living in that suburb). And when it comes to these deaf and dumb people they might have little chance of getting employment when the market for jobs is such as it is, and maybe they have therefore joined together, and started their own shady business. The mafia as normal aid. Their speciality during the Soviet years was hanging around railway stations and selling pornography, says Sergei, but these days there is pornography everywhere, so what their speciality could be today he does not know.

After I had shown the deaf and dumb kids around the exhibition at Art Moscow there was this small party I had arranged, as I mentioned before. There was soda, candies, cookies, fruits, cheese and crackers, all that stuff. The kids were throwing themselves at all of this and gulping it down, while I was just watching. One of their teachers then stepped up and told me that, in Russia, it was very rude of me not to eat with them and just stand there watching. I felt quite ashamed there, and grabbed a cracker. Of course, we should have shared. I had probably turned off my social self and turned into my observational self after all, probably starting to compose this text before the meeting was even over. This was not rude in Russia alone, but just as much in Sweden. A stumble on the finish line.

More quotes from Joseph Grigely's postcards to Sophie Calle:

"The disabled seem to be everywhere in the galleries today, but only as subjects; the ordinariness of their lives framed and mounted for those who find it 'ordinary', 'aesthetic', perhaps even 'strange'. To describe this activity as "appropriation" does not say enough. Couched within this pun is essentially postmodern term is a desire to make something one's own, and the audacity to assume that we can transpose our selves to another state of being, or to some identity unique to another."

"There is an unspoken line at which appropriation becomes a form of human violence, a point at which theft is transgressed by assault on the human psyche; the point at which appropriation becomes expropriation."

"...to peel back the contradictions of ideology, not to create an ideology that represses contradictions..."

(Quotes found, as mentioned before, in an article on Sophie Calle from the magazine Parkett, issue # 36)

Our experience at that railway station was of deaf and dumb people as surrealist and strange, out of place maybe, but at the same time - we were few and they were many, and this was their turf and territory, in which we were more or less tolerated. They had appropriated or expropriated a nonple, and made it theirs (at least in relation to us; if not in relation to the pale green police once those showed up). I would have loved to make a film out of it all, right there and then, to capture that moment, and what about "the ordinariness of their lives framed and mounted for those who find it 'ordinary', 'aesthetic', perhaps even 'strange'", as Joseph Grigely wrote? But I figured it would have been wrong to display them to an audience like that, as exotika. Even though the way I had experienced them and their presence at the railway station, and even though the way I want to tell you about it is as an exciting experience, or image, or film.

Only two months earlier me and artist Eva Lindner had arranged a happening at the Central Stationen in Gothenburg, which was similar to the event that took place at Kurskij. Meant to be filmic, like, if I were to describe it I would have said that we used a choir. Oskar Fredriks Xanmarkör, whose members were

spread out across the arrivals and departures hall, some with a backpack, some with a baby carriage, some with a dog, or least, as incognito travellers. One of them started singing to himself, with the lonely drink, and the desired effect of this, according to us, the producers, was to make other people uncomfortable and embarrassed by his intrusive presence, making them wish for him to be quiet. But then the other choir members started answering him from across the hall, one after the other, and the desired response from the unknowing audience was to change from psychological discomfort to something resembling a rousing sense of solidarity, perhaps, like there would be this built-in moment of "Aha". But how this would translate from a Swedish railway station to, say, a Russian one, we had no idea when we thought of doing it. Like perhaps this early sense of discomfort was more likely to appear in a Swedish sensibility than in a Russian, it could be a bit culture-specific. Anyway, at Kurskij, two months later, I had that similar experience myself, of something being wrong with the picture before realising exactly what it was, an undefined mood perhaps, things temporarily up in the air.

But could you repeat what happened at Kurskij in a work of art or in a work of documentary, without turning both artist and audience into misery tourists? Could you do it if you at the same time added a small reservation, in the form of a short story about your own purpose and point of departure? And what I did, to invite deaf and dumb kids as both themselves and as only audience, to meet with me and see me talk, about images, was perhaps just an attempt at getting around the ethical problems of portrayal and display? And I obviously think it's more okay write about these events and these meetings, as opposed to taking photographs and making films out of them, but why, then? Is depicting more of a theft than storytelling is?

On my last day in Moscow I took the train out to a suburb, from where there would be a bus going to the airport. At one of the stations two young gorys came on board. They started handing out ballpoint pens and business cards to people in the carriage, swiftly and methodically, without speaking. I couldn't understand why, but I thought I recognised something about them. The business card was in Russian. At the next stop they collected all the pens and the business cards again. That's when I saw that the Russian version of the sign language alphabet was written on the back of the business card. One of the gorys tapped the other's shoulder, pointed for them to get out of the carriage, didn't speak. At the station they got off, then entered the carriage in front of mine, where they re-started the distribution of ballpoint pens. Slow me not realise until then these gorys be deaf and dumb. This was how they tried to support themselves, selling these ballpoint pens for donations of whatever small size. Perhaps this was their speciality today, after pornography became everyday experience. I thought please come back, don't you know I'm your old friend, I can buy all those pens, I just didn't realise until it was too late that it was you.

See Circle Zero Zero Year of Love

"Planet Love"

Reviews:

Snezina Kamin is an art critic and a member of the editorial board at the art magazine Falden. She has published a thesis on what she terms the aesthetics of intercultural exchange.

On documentaries and activism in art:

Kalle: - Let's talk about some differences between art as reportage/documentary and ordinary documentaries: here's an opinion I'd like to try out - that art is openly subjective, whereas traditional reportage is expected to show the objectively real, that an artist might construct the connections between different events; whereas the journalist discovers connections that already exist. The journalist might show us facts. When the artist has proposed her/his version, the question is still open, the audience has something to consider: the relevance of, whereas what you discuss after a journalistic reportage are the consequences of the revelation. What's your take on this?

Snezina: - I think the difference is foremost in the formalism of the pieces. The artist is afraid of being aesthetically pleasing in his/her way of portraying the subjects of the piece, perhaps justly so. Whereas the aspect of subjectivity is probably there in both cases. Documentarists can twist the truth too. But they might have a greater credibility among audiences, despite the fact that the documentary is much more under the influence of the more or less pronounced ideologies or political positions of the media. The artist on the other hand might negotiate for a worldview together with the subject of his/her piece. They aim it together, so to speak. Also, the artist might take less responsibility for in what places their documentaries are exhibited, and for what information should accompany it.

The documentarist believes in a truth "out there" which is an enlightenment project (something postcolonialism in theory has attempted to finish with, which is why it is problematic for me when artists inspired by postcolonialism make documentarist art).

Kalle: - If the artist allows him-/herself to be openly subjective, is he/she then more predisposed towards wanting to interfere, to comment to action, to change the conditions which are being portrayed, than he/she would be if there was a claim towards objectivity? Maybe the artist can make the transition from documentary art into activist art partially as a consequence of being, according to art historic tradition, subjective in his/her depictions?

Snezina: - I think subjectivity is a difficult concept, when it can mean basically anything. It becomes the artist's excuse. If you don't have any basis of objective values then you have nothing to base your critique on either.

Kalle: - Maybe subjectivity as a starting point might work for the individual. But what about the collective, if you imagine that real ability to affect change lies with the collective? Maybe a collective needs an objective basis of values to motivate its actions. But how do you reach an objective basis of values? Maybe through negotiating it. Not just within the group, in between members, but also in an open dialogue towards the outside? We might end up with dialogism as a test case, with dialogical art as a possible model.

Snezina: - The law, the juridical law of Sweden, is an example of something which is objective until it is re-written, until objectivity has been renegotiated. It is hard and porous at the same time.

Kalle: - What are some possible differences between art as activism and regular, politically motivated activism?

Snezina: - Art has a concept of institutional critique, wherein the artist not only uses art as

a means, but also use the institutions of art as objects of study - artists who acknowledge the context which they are a part of, and see that this context is politically coded, and can be criticised.

Kalle: - I guess a simple answer could be, one: the method that you use, and two: what your main objective is. The method used could come from your identity as an artist - these are my tools, this is what I'm good at: images, signs, form. And the main objective might not be the degree of efficiency in the action itself, how well it works on a material plane, but rather how efficient it is as a symbolic action - that is, the main objective of activist art could be to inspire, to strengthen commitment?

Snezina: - How do you know if it is efficient as a symbolic action then?

Kalle: - Through an objective basis of values which has been negotiated, perhaps between critics and artists, and perhaps through collecting and working with audiences' reactions?

Snezina: - Might not this type of art become therapeutic or educational?

Kalle: - I'll rephrase the question into "How do you make documentary and activist art inspiring?"

One way of making the artwork inspiring might be to show possible models for action, to present human examples and show what others have done, so that the audience does not get locked into the position of onlooker. The artwork could have built into itself a challenging question, "Why don't you do this as well?" (then you'd get rid of the therapeutic part). You could of course show people as victims, but also people trying to do something about it. And the more sides of both victims and helpers you show - doubts, mistakes, attempts to straighten things out - the more human they'll both appear, and the easier it will be for an audience to identify with both groups.

Or maybe by, as I said before, leaving the question open, giving the audience something about which to decide upon their opinion (then you'd get rid of the educational part). The work of art might take as its' starting point a clearly stated question, which the artist in her/his work suggests an answer to, while at the same time leaving room for more. The audience could easily agree or disagree. The artist might even be contradictory in her/his answer, as long as the question is clearly stated. What do you think is the difference between taking a sceptic attitude and being objective?

Snezina: - It's too big a question. A sceptic attitude seldom results in actions, whereas an objective attitude often has, not that these actions necessarily do justice to any subjects of the artwork in question. I'd like to see more people give an answer to this.

Kalle: - Or maybe effective/inspiring through the aesthetic solutions, depending on to what degree the artist can use her/his tools - images, signs, form etc. - in a convincing way?

Snezina: - I think you should dare present the work in an environment where the artist is open to people's reactions. It could be interesting to people among people, who dare not react themselves. Like with *Personkrets:3* (the Swedish theater play by Lars Nordin), when people stood up during the play and shouted - "This is a misuse of freedom of speech!" etc. The passive recipient could be made active, when he gets to partake of other people's reactions: it is sometimes easier to react to someone else's reaction.

Kalle: - So you think one could somehow record and display people's reactions in the context of an

exhibition? Like in a guestbook?

Snezina: - I think the artist her-/himself should dare to document her/his audience. Text or image. Why not even interview those who agree to it? I think there is too little space for the reactions of the audience today. Receptional aesthetics are very important in literary contexts. Why not also in art? A receptional aesthetic, which in the form of dialogism could be a more open and democratic visual experience. You can partake of those who partake of the image/artwork. An ethical dilemma effect.

On activism and dialogism in art:

Kalle: - Who does the artist identify with in his/her work? Do you for instance take the role of artist or the role of citizen? Do you choose contemporaneity or art history, other people or the artworks of other people, togetherness or lonely studio work? Is there a trend when it comes to this?

And do these different choices of identification then entail different senses of duty - for example a need to be committed to political issues, or a need to administer and develop experiences gained in art history?

Snezina: - Activist art could either be a reaction to the effects of postmodernism - the relativisation of all values - but it could also be a reaction to capitalism and the ideological domination of market forces. Grant Xester feels that a lot of Communism/Art studies way from institutionalisation but also academism. The problem is that we are not given enough of a foundation in art theory. I feel that activism is less historically oriented and more aimed at contemporaneity.

Kalle: - Say one way to work as an artist is to collect or to construct different ways of living and acting as subject and citizen, different ways of experiencing and representing your times, and different languages and images for telling about all of this.

One method for both becoming aware of yourself and your habits and for opening up to new possibilities, could be to actively court difference, to try to meet people that could be assumed to live life quite differently from how you do, under completely different circumstances, with other habits - then the experience of difference would be the important part of your encounter with this other person. I guess there are a lot of ethical problems that come with this view of people, - with looking for the use-value in other people, so to speak.

Should I look for differences between us, when that is the way of colonial history - different legitimate uses? Shouldn't I rather look for what unites us? But what then of creativity, renewal, not to mention learning acceptance of otherness?

Snezina: - What is most important to us, difference or sameness in other people?

Kalle: - The best thing could be to include both of them in your work of art.

I wouldn't know how to construct the universal. Maybe with humour, with humour as an answer to your inadequateness: really tragic humour, which would be contradictory and not enough, and hopeless and solidaric, cruel and compassionate at the same time. I would very much like to know what deaf and dumb Russian kids have to laugh about, what is their sense of humour like?

Another thing about my other job, working with mentally handicapped. I oftentimes find myself having incorporated words and expressions

that they use, and I sometimes find myself using a humour which is theirs, using their jokes. I compare notes with co-workers who have experienced the same thing. We sometimes meet out of working hours, and have a language which is partially our own.

Another problem with courting difference lies in unequal exchange - as long as the economic system is based on me, in my country, profiting from someone else being worse off, working for lower wages and so on, it does not matter much if I bring gifts or aid, it never amounts to more than a small repayment of what I daily gain and continue to gain. What does this other person gain from meeting with me, what do I have to offer? Is this something I have to ask the other person to tell me, and then an exchange is constructed from that? Is he or she in any position to negotiate then? Is it possible to think about exchange without using market terms?

Snezina: - No, I don't think so. What is cultural exchange if not a way of thinking in market terms? But at the same time, people used to sit around a fire telling each other stories without asking for any money as compensation. Hopefully, knowledge is what we gain, in amounts that can not be measured.

Kalle: - There's another working method to try out: that you as artist seek out various experimental cultures, wherein those marginalised by written history and world economy construct their everyday life, their world, as a collage out of parts from a disintegrating society, to bring back home possible models, and say "look at this", and suggest them as some kind of possible future for us as well, for everyone everywhere. Does it mean, then, that we re-value the marginalised, when we show their inventiveness and survival skills? Is it favela-romanticism or a refusal to see people as victims?

Snezina: - The question is: what's behind the favela-romanticism? What do we get out of it? The question is: does the subaltern speak for us? Are we the ones who should listen to them? I think you should consider that world organisations are working to get rid of the shims, since there is no-one who benefits from it's existence. If artists would like to contribute to the conscience of the world, why not send your artworks to the leaders of the world to hurry up the process? The question is: whom does the artist wish to receive the work, and why?

Kalle: - But Guyatri Spivak, who I think you've been referring to, claims that the western world needs the poorer world as cheap labour, wait for it to remain as such, and does not train it for consumerism. I guess it could be the marxist in her, talking like that.

Snezina: - yes, and the artworld needs the poorer world too, as mirrorimage for self-identification. We all need it. Who else should we save from our sins?

Kalle: - In stead of saving the shim with market economy we could look at the local models already in place, which people themselves have chosen and maintained, and perhaps support these in stead of destroying them through competition - I've heard of gift-economies, recycling-economies, co-ops, bars without interest, non-profit stock companies, collective identities, brand piracy, just to name a few examples that at least sounds interesting to me.

I can't help being inspired by those deaf and dumb Russian guys on the train, who were handing out business cards with the sign-language alphabet on, while they were selling their ballpoint pens. I mean, that indicates a desire in them, and they are as subaltern as you can get, to teach others their language

and make themselves understood, and reach people. It seems hopeless, but they're working on it.

You have a suggestion for a model on how meetings across class-borders, or intercultural exchanges, might take place in art. It was developed in an essay you wrote...

Snezina: - The aesthetics of intercultural exchange. I have written about how the geographical model could be a projection of the psychological model. We can look at the outer-other (living in a foreign country) as an exotic material that we are able to handle, and at the inner-other (an immigrant, living among us) as abjectal and undecidable. The outer-other is more easily digested, psychologically.

The model for how an intercultural exchange might take place in a work of art involves several key points:

1 Image - to show something - to bare and describe structures of power in order to make clear the relations between everyone involved

2 Time - to give enough time and space for everyone to speak.

3 Action - to allow conflicts to arise, and not be afraid of these

4 Understanding - here comes the analysis: Working with the results of the dialogue affects the shape of the exhibition. To receptionally collect the reactions of participants in, or onlookers of, the meeting.

Kalle: - Dialogism? agonistic pluralism? The concept of intersection? A synthesis wherein all of these are included?

(Endnotes)

¹ - As expressed by Okwui Enwezor in the catalogue for Documenta 11 (in the essay *The Black Box*), or as described in the catalogue for the 53rd Venice Biennale (eg. by Carlos Basualdo in the essay *The Structure Of Survival*).