

Three instances of 'What if?': Space, Audience and Memory

Home, belonging and memory have been central themes in my artistic practice. I will show how I respond to the theme of migration and what forms it takes. I will talk about young prospect migrants from India and Pakistan portrayed in "No place Like America". I will show how Yorkshire based refugees in "Reporting to the Landscape" only had sheep and hills listening to their stories. And I will introduce the HOME project, in which we experience memories that are lost or don't match up. What the works suggest is, that we can inhabit the stories presented. The installations offer firsthand experiences, the stories told could become our stories.



Let me tell you the story of these portraits. They are my brother, my sister, and me. They were painted in the Netherlands, where I grew up. I was born in Bavaria, in Munich. But, my family had migrated to the north of the Netherlands when I was 3 years old. The painter, Hildgund von Debschitz, stayed with us for a month to paint our portraits. And what is interesting about them is that they were quite accurate predictions of the future.

For my brother she chose a very abstract and graphic background and, as you can see, he is holding the model not ready to build, but rather like a scholar,

contemplating the object. It seemed Hildgund's predicted my brother would become a mathematician. Today he is a professor of mathematics in Amsterdam. My sister, Hildgund placed with her feet square on the ground, holding her first patient. She became a doctor.

My portrait is not so straightforward. I don't know why, but in my case Hildgund did not chose the object or background by herself. She asked me: "What would you like to hold and what background shall I paint?" Well, I loved cats and we could not have cats, so I was going to hold a cat. As for the background it was quite clear to me I wanted to have the alps, as I felt this strong longing for them. I thought they represented the landscape where I belonged.

12 years later I moved to Munich to start my education as apprentice mechanic at BMW. But during the first half year I was consumed with home sickness. Here I was in my mountains and all I desired was flat countryside and wind gushing in my face. You see, in Bavaria they don't know real wind. What about Hildgund's prediction?

Her portrait prediction turned out true after all. Because, she let me participate in creating my portrait, and portrait making is what I do as an artist. More relevant to this story, the landscape I chose represented a longing for 'home'. I don't long for 'home' anymore, the disappointment with 'my

mountains' did away with homesickness once and for all. Nevertheless, home, belonging, and memory have continuously been themes in my artistic practice.

But how do I do this? How do I respond to the theme of migration? What form does that take?

And why - what conclusions can we draw from the research I do?

Curator Charles Esche introduced the idea of art as 'modest proposal' which is "essentially speculative in that we imagine things other than they are now yet those speculative gestures are intensely concrete and actual. They avoid the clearly fantastical [no Utopias] as well as the hermetic purity of private symbolism [no artist's genius probing the self] in order to deal with really existing conditions and what might be necessary to change them."¹ Meaning, art is a tool to rethink our current conditions. And artists ask: "what if...?"

I am a 'media-artist'. Often my material is video projection. And in the following I like to share 3 works. One deals with place and space, one is about the audience or listener, and the last work looks at memory.

Esche (2005)

Desire for space

What if there is "No Place like America"?

This work starts with a story by the author Peter Bichsel. "I heard this story from a man who tells stories." He writes, "I've told him several times that I don't believe his story. "You lie," I said, "you deceive, you fantasise, you cheat.""

The story is about Colombin, a young boy at the court of the Spanish king, who discovered America. Truth is he was hiding in the forest for several months and when he returned to the king he declared he had discovered a country. For his entire life, Colombin was never sure whether the people who supposedly go to America also hide in the forest and make up stories, or that America actually exists.

For the project I spoke to young men from Bombay and Lahore, who were unskilled, underemployed and desperate to migrate to America. The men described their ideas of a life in America. As a listener I felt the frustration of the men. It becomes clear that their current society offers them very little.

The installation is made up of projections onto consumer-goods packaging, waste of our global economy, and is structured in such a way that we, as viewers, have to squeeze past the cardboard boxes to be able to see. We end up in the middle of fragmented

projections and fractured screens. The installation shows a layering of real and dreamed-up rooms. There are the private places of the men. The spaces they imagine and the room we are in that functions as screen.

As an Artist I am taking experiences from strangers composing ephemeral works of art which may just exist as stories. The projections are persuasive not because they are materially 'real', rather because they make visible what we could imagine as real. They show the need to understand and aim at recognition of migration as normal.

Desire for an audience

What if we were "Reporting to the Landscape"?

"Reporting to the Landscape" was an intervention in public space. Several sound-tags were attached to the sculpture group "Family of Man" (1970) which is displayed on the hills of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in the UK. The sculptures are by Barbara Hepworth. Hepworth's installation is a nod to a photo exhibition by the same title. Edward Steichen created the display for MoMA in New York in 1955, after which the exhibition traveled widely (mainly through Europe). Both works, the exhibition of Steichen and the sculptures by Hepworth, are, we can say, a universalist survey of humanity.

The sound-tags I attached to "Family of Man" played interviews of refugees from Africa and the Middle East. These new residents of Yorkshire described the landscapes of their homeland and their newfound relationship with Yorkshire. The sound intervention invites us to rethink how we look at these sculptures representing a universal humanity.

Desire for a Memory

What if we (re)claim "HOME" through drawing?

For many years I have studied memories of homes and homelands. The central question I was interested in was how to deal with memories that have lost material evidence. Initially, I went about it more or less like a documentary film maker: I would ask questions, and I would film headshots. Until one day I tipped the camera while filming ... It was too hard to look at the face of an old woman while she told the story of fleeing her home, imprisonment and witnessing a woman in despair and starvation eat her own baby. When I changed the camera angle suddenly her hands were speaking.

I continued filming hands instead of faces and ended up with over 100 hours of footage of hands drawing out memories. In the HOME project drawing is used as a method to intensify the conversations and activate a remembering process. Doodles of landscapes, floor-plans, village maps, appear as a person is remembering. While drawing, people reason with

themselves, they ask what happened, and draw out an answer in a chaotic and messy way.

If the goal of drawing was to recreate their homes, it was doomed to fail from the outset, because the passing of time and recollection through photographs and stories has blurred earlier memories. However, the images were secondary to the gestures. Jacques Derrida describes the draughtsman as blind - he is searching and groping, and perhaps never reaches his goal. What we look at when seeing a drawing is an evidence of these gestures.² You could say the act of remembering is 'fossilised in the drawing.

For instance 2 sisters remembering the family house in Haifa. Vera Tamari and Tania Nasir started a stamp size drawing of their family house and kept redrawing floor plans and details. Later Vera wrote in an e-mail that the afternoon we spent drawing and filming was very emotional (both she and her sister cried). Drawing became both a trigger and evidence of memory. Vera and Tania reclaimed their memory by this process.

In the installation, as an artwork, the memories become tangible on the 3 dimensional screens, even if this is just for a short moment.

Summing up makes for a depressing picture. The young men of "No place Like America" remain prisoners of their place - and are part of the waste of

² Derrida 1993

global capitalism. Only sheep and hills listen to the stories of the Yorkshire based refugees in "Reporting to the Landscape". And the conclusion we can take from "HOME" is that memories are lost and don't match reality.

But if art is a modest proposal, as Charles Esche has it, the picture is not so bleak. Because what the work proposes is that we can inhabit the stories presented. What if we enter into the space out of waste boxes. What if we press our ear close to the "family of man". What if we place our arms onto the arms of Vera and Tania, or Gulzar, or Sami. So, what if we take the position of the narrators and don't think of migrants as other, but think of her as self. Because our involvements in artworks are first hand impressions, therefore the stories we encounter could become lived experiences and we might remember and retell these stories as our own.

Sophie Ernst, 2025