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“WE WERE IN THE AIR”

Cultural in-between spaces in the video installation “Angles of Incidence”

We didn't know where we are going and when we are going. We could be there a hundred years or one month. We didn't know. We were in the air.

This is how a young Afghan man describes his feelings of uncertainty while he was living temporarily in Cuba. He was still a teenager when he and his family fled from Afghanistan to Iran. From Iran they then went to Cuba with the help of a human smuggler, and the family lived there for many years before the UNHCR granted them a refugee status in Finland, where they have now lived for two years.

A complete uncertainty about life and the future is often at the core of stories told by refugees. Their whole life seems to be on hold – in a psychological and physical standstill. The video installation *Angles of Incidence* (Minna Rainio and Mark Roberts, 2006)¹ deals with the experiences of refugees living in Rovaniemi, northern Finland. The installation consists of three synchronised video projections which depict spaces encountered during different stages of the asylum seeking process: interview rooms

1. *Angles of Incidence* premiered in the Finnish Photography Triennial “Talvimaa” in Salo Art Museum, 2006. Since then it has been shown in Rovaniemi Art Museum, in Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen; Kiel Stadtgalerie in Germany, and Franklin Art Works, Minneapolis, USA.

in border control offices and police stations, reception centres where the refugees might live many years while waiting for their permits, and the Finnish Immigration Service offices where decisions concerning the residence permits of refugees are made. Each of these spaces is part of the complicated process that asylum seekers must go through when they arrive in Finland and want to be legally accepted into Finnish society. In the video installation, the images from these spaces are juxtaposed with audio interviews with refugees in which they describe how they had to leave their homes and families, travel around the world, and wait in uncertainty. They also talk about how it felt when eventually arriving in Finland. These lived experiences create a stark contrast with the empty administrative spaces depicted in the imagery (Rainio & Roberts 2006, 70).

The stories the refugees relate in the interviews are touching and powerful in many ways. The fact that most of them have unimaginable experiences of war, loss, uncertainty and fear, but yet also talk about hope and belief in a better future is very poignant. The first story encountered is of a young woman from Afghanistan who escaped with her mother and siblings to a refugee camp in Iran. From the camp they moved to Tehran and lived there for years as illegal refugees without any official papers. Now in Finland, this woman speaks fluent Finnish and English and hopes to study in a Finnish university. Another story is that of young Somali man who experienced indescribable hardship as a child, and was brought to Finland by a smuggler. He doesn't have any family here or elsewhere. When he arrived in Finland the smuggler simply left him on the street, saying there was nothing more he could do to help, and directed him towards the police station. At the time of the interview, the Somali man had been in Finland for two years. During that time he had been moved between reception centres in Helsinki, Kajaani, Vaasa and Rovaniemi. After two years he was still waiting for a decision to be made about his residence permit, and lived in complete uncertainty about his future.

In many ways these refugees exist on the thresholds of different realities: physically they pass through and live in transitional spaces; psychologically

they exist between several cultures, identities and languages. Their memories might be (dis)located in places out of sync with the collective memories or official history of any given mainstream culture. These memories can often also be visceral and non-linguistic. For example, the only thing that the Afghan woman remembered of the day they fled Kabul was that it was very hot, and they had nothing to drink. When they arrived in Finland it was during the summer and therefore light at night; her mother was wondering if everyone was dead because there were no people anywhere. The weather – be it snow, or light nights – and affective conditions such as feelings of bodily strangeness were repeated in the memories of the arrival of the refugees (see also Huttunen 2002, 60, 82).

How, then, can video art and experimental film describe such visceral memories and the transitions from one time, place and space to another? How can art communicate these often non-linguistic experiences that are not easily transmitted through research and language alone? Laura U. Marks has analysed how intercultural experimental films might deal with topics such as displacement, migration and diaspora. According to Marks, film can influence senses and emotions because it is not primarily linguistic, and does not follow the same principles as written research. Film can, in itself, take the form of a sophisticated argument that subtly and fully conveys people's experiences in and of the world. It can offer the viewer an experience that is simultaneously intellectual, emotional and affective (Marks 2000, xiv – xvi; see also Sobchack 2004).

Marks points out that the distribution channels of intercultural experimental films differ from the places where mainstream films are typically shown. *Angles of Incidence*, as well as our other video installation works, could be said to be located somewhere in the space between documentary, video art, and experimental film. However, in recent years the boundaries between these art forms have become increasingly blurred: video art is no longer only shown in museums or galleries, but also at festivals, cinemas and on television. Conversely, short films and documentaries are frequently shown in art exhibitions, in addition to cinemas, festivals and television. Many film- and documentary-makers create video art versions of their

works to be shown in galleries and museums, and many works by video artists are technically high-quality films, professionally produced, scripted, directed. For example traditional documentary makers and directors such as Chris Marker and Jean-Luc Godard have recently shown their video art in museums and galleries. Other examples of artists negotiating the boundaries of film and video art are Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Matthew Barney, and Chantal Akerman, to name but a few. In addition to distribution channels, the formal definitions of the works have also become increasingly incorporated and blurred.

Film in-between cultures

The intercultural films that Laura U. Marks discusses are typically made by people with an immigrant background living in Western countries, often as cultural minorities.² The common characteristic among these films is their experimentalism, meaning that they in some way break the conventions and rules of traditional film narrative. The films also deal with immigration and people's diasporic experiences in their subject matter. The starting point of these films is often found in the silences and erasures committed in the writing of official histories, and they aim to highlight the forgotten and often ignored personal and collective memories of minority cultures living in the West. These memories are not only visual or linguistic, but often also multisensory experiences; memories buried in the body, in, for example, touch, scent or taste (Marks 2000, 2, 6-7).

Marks defines interculturality in these films as a context that can not be tied to just one culture. It refers to the bilateral movement between different cultures, and takes into consideration the possibility for change

2. While *Angles of Incidence* and our other artworks were made by Finnish and English artists, I don't consider them as intercultural through the artwork's authorship. Rather, I see Marks's arguments as relevant to our works in that the installations deal with globalisation, borders and immigration through the lived experiences of people who have transitioned from one country, place or identity into another, and live on the thresholds of different cultures. I therefore define our works as intercultural through their topics.

(Huddart 2007, 67-68; Brah 2007, 85). Interculturality can also depict the interaction between two minority cultures, and therefore the relationship is not always only taking place between the majority and minority cultures (Marks 2000, 6-7). The concept of interculturality does not assume that cultures are separate entities with clearly defined boundaries, but takes into consideration that they are always already ambiguous and hybrid. No culture is ever “pure” (Huddart 2007, 67) or isolated from outside influences (Said 2007).

Our starting point in making *Angels of Incidence* was our critical attitude towards Finnish immigration policy, and public discourse surrounding immigration issues. One of the reasons a decision was taken to deal with this topic was probably also influenced by the fact that I have lived in England, and that my husband Mark Roberts, who I collaborated with, is British. When we moved to Finland we began to see Finnish immigration politics and the quietly accepted racist attitudes of the nation especially clearly. With our artwork we wanted to make visible some of the experiences of refugees in Finland, and point out that these people are living amongst us, that they are part of Finnish society, and that their memories and experiences now form part of Finland’s collective past and histories. It is paramount to also remember that Finnish culture is heterogenic, shaped by processes of globalisation, colonialism and post-colonialism, and influenced by various cultures (Lehtonen and Löytty 2007, 110,116; see also Leitzinger 2008).

In Any Spaces Whatever

The narratives in *Angels of Incidence* move back and forth in time and space: the refugees’ memories of their homelands and their journeys are juxtaposed with the sterile and mundane spaces they and others pass through when entering Finland. These are spaces of power, in-between spaces, and spaces of waiting; they are interviewed in the rooms of the border control stations and police stations; they live in the reception centres, walking through the corridors, waiting in uncertainty to face

a decision made behind the closed doors of the Finnish Immigration Service about their future.

In one scene, the Afghan woman relates how her father disappeared in Kabul, and recollects her traumatic escape from Afghanistan. As she tells this story, the images show the empty rooms in the police station in Rovaniemi where refugees are photographed, measured and have their fingerprints taken. Later, the Somali man expresses his wish that Finland would give him a new life, a new beginning, while his words are juxtaposed with images of the exterior of the Finnish Immigration Service offices – the impenetrable walls beyond which decisions about the man's future and the direction of his life are very slowly being made. The refugees interviewed did not necessarily pass through the exact spaces filmed. Instead, the spaces seen in the installation become symbolic and abstract cultural in-between spaces through which the refugees' experiences are reflected.

Following Laura U. Marks and Gilles Deleuze, these spaces could be called *any-spaces-whatever*. Marks writes that these are "[--] not only the disjunctive spaces of postmodernism, but also the disruptive spaces of postcolonialism, where non-Western cultures erupt into Western metropolises, and repressed cultural memories return to destabilize national histories" (Marks 2000, 27). *Any-spaces-whatever* is an apt description of the real, lived circumstances around migration and diaspora, especially in Europe and North-America.

The visuality of *Angles of Incidence* is uneventful and unembellished. Nothing really happens in the images; the shots are long, static images of empty rooms. The installation is instead defined by silence, slowness and absence. Marks has written that many intercultural films share a certain kind of suspicion and hesitation towards representations and easy narratives. This might partially be rooted in the historical and complicated relationship of photography and film to power, anthropological classification and colonialist practices. On the other hand, this suspicion towards the representational power reflects awareness of the limits of images and narratives. Images are not neutral reflections of the world, but always

representations from a certain point of view. Seeing, then, is always partial, because it is located and embodied in a particular viewer. It is tied to a certain situation and is always changing. Nothing is ever seen in its entirety, but only from the angles that interest the viewer (Marks 2000, 41).

Silent and uneventful images do not offer the viewer easy explanations. Instead, they are reminders of the inevitable gaps, silences and amnesia that form part of history and the relationship between majority and minority cultures. The viewer fills in the space between the image and language by drawing on their own experiences and memories. This holistic affective experience has the potential to stay with the spectator for a long time. Marks describes this process as participatory spectatorship, which might also have political potential – and perhaps that is where the power of art lies. (Marks 2000, 48; see also von Bonsdorff 2005, 32, 34–35).

Between Image and Sound

If we want to understand an event, we must not show it. (Marks 2000, 29)

The relationship between image and sound in *Angles of Incidence* is not straightforward. The image and the narrative do not correlate. The image does not tell the whole story, nor does the sound and the narrative in isolation from the imagery. Each is dependent on the other, and at the same time they both reveal the limits of the other (Marks 2000, 30).

As the refugees interviewed for *Angles of Incidence* are not shown and the audience hears only their voice, the viewer is not offered an opportunity to categorise or define these people according to their appearance. In other words, the installation discourages the practice of ethnic othering. That makes it more difficult for the viewer to categorise people into “us” and “them”, as the unseen narrator could be any of “us”? Iris Ruoho has pointed out that “[–] the central categories of difference and classification are sexuality, gender and race – they privilege others and differentiate other bodies. The obsession to measure and classify people according to exterior, especially visual observations, is also directly aimed towards

the category of nationality." (Ruoho 2006, 39). However, the invisibility of the refugees in *Angles of Incidence* could also be interpreted as referring to their invisibility in the Finnish society (Uimonen 2006, C2). The spaces that refugees encounter and the places they live are invisible to most Finnish people, who never have to pass through the interview rooms of border crossing stations. Nor are their fingerprints taken in police stations, and they never see the rooms and corridors of reception centres where refugees might spend years of their lives.

Our video installations combine elements from the traditions of documentary film and video art. We have interviewed refugees and use the edited versions of original audio interviews in the installation. However, documentary films are traditionally expected to show the physical presence of the human face and body in their imagery; the visual appearance of central characters is rarely left to the viewers' imagination.³ It is often assumed that images of "talking heads" add to the truth value of the film. According to Bill Nichols, films that don't show their central characters leave an empty space at the core. This space "[--] becomes filled by those who speak about that absence; it is their perceptions and values, their attitudes and assumptions which become the subject of our scrutiny" (Nichols 1991, 292).

Even though many experimental and intercultural films use documentary methods in their narratives, they also frequently question the traditions of documentary.⁴ The topics of these films may somehow escape visual representation: their visuality is often uneventful, silent and

3. An illuminating example of this is when we applied for funding for one of our earlier video installations "Borderlands", which, similarly, did not show the interviewees, but used only their audio interviews. The documentary funders did not accept our artistic choice, emphasising the point that the audience must see the people to be able to form a connection with them. However, the project was funded by media art foundations.

4. Of course, the genre of documentary film is so broad and heterogeneous that it is not possible to talk about "one tradition" in documentary film, but many. Many documentary makers are very aware of the blurred line between fact and fiction, and use methods of fiction film in their documentaries (see Helke 2006).

ambiguous. What takes place is not necessarily shown, and sometimes the viewer only hears a voice or sounds without any image at all. Marks writes that “[t]he moments of thinness, suspension, and waiting in these films are not encounters with a dreadful void but with a full and fertile emptiness.” (Marks 2000, 29). On this threshold between sound and image, a new understanding may open up, as the viewer has to listen and look for the gaps, and seek what is not shown by interpreting the absences (Marks 2000, 30-31).

Each audio interview in *Angles of Incidence* has been edited with a slightly different emphasis: the Afghan woman speaks about leaving her home country; the Afghan man recollects the journey and waiting; the Somali man talks about arriving in Finland, his life there, and his uncertainty and hopes for the future. The images of the empty spaces do not illustrate these stories, nor do the extracts from the interviews aim to create a coherent narrative. The stories that the refugees tell are fragmentary and inconclusive. These personal recollections are juxtaposed with the administrative spaces in which the Finnish state enacts its immigration policies, simultaneously creating its official history. This contradiction between image and sound emphasises how different histories can be articulated in the same geographical and psychological space (Brah 2007, 73).

The themes and content of *Angles of Incidence* are reflected in the way we use the installation space. The projection walls are placed so that the viewer has to move through the installation space and “travel” with the refugees from one stage of the journey to the next. The work attempts to force the viewer to stop, look and listen by making the spectator *enter* the installation space, instead of just walking by and glancing at the video. With the spatial arrangement we want to challenge the spectator to have an affective encounter with the people in the work and to take an ethical position. The viewer becomes part of the physical space of the installation in the same way that she or he is part of the same society where these people live. The aim of the work is to create a spatial, physical and visceral experience in which sound plays a central part.

Settling in/between cultures

I say that I am an Afghan, but that my home is Finland. I was born in Afghanistan, but my home is Finland. I feel that Finland is my best second home country. That's how I feel.

It is difficult to say where I am from. I say that I am originally from Afghanistan, but I am from two or three cultures. I was born in Afghanistan, but I also have the culture of Cuba. And now I live in Finland. It is difficult to say – normally I say that I'm from Afghanistan, but sometimes that I'm from Cuba. It's difficult to say.

The refugees interviewed for *Angles of Incidence* found it hard to answer the question "where are you from?". They did not feel that they were from any one place and, at the same time, they did not seem long to be back in one particular place. Their cultural and national identity is not tied to one country, but to two or even three. However, these multiple locations of home did not necessarily mean rootlessness (Brah 2007, 88) as some of them already felt firmly rooted in Finland, or were imagining and hoping for a future for themselves in Finland.

Avtar Brah has written about the multiple locations of home in the contemporary globalised world. Brah's concept of diasporic spaces takes into consideration the concept of *homing* – the desire to feel at home in the context of migration. The experience of diaspora is not always attached to a desire to return, even though diasporic journeys mean settling down and making roots somewhere (Brah 2007, 74). Although the experience of exile always encompasses traumatic separations, it also includes the possibility of new beginnings and the potential for hope (Brah 2007, 85). Diasporic spaces, however, are not inhabited only by those who have left, but also by those who are at home – typically the native people of the country (Brah 2007, 74, 99; Marks 2000, 123). When refugees arrive in a new country they are influenced by the new place, its way of life, and its rituals. But at the same time their new homeland will be impacted by

their lives, histories and experiences (Rainio & Roberts 2006). The people migrating from one country to another not only bring a part of their own culture and background to the new place, but they also make the familiar in the new country seem strange, revealing the cultural hybridity that already exists there (Marks 2000, 124).

Diasporic spaces could be described as transnational spaces; the emotional and familial ties of refugees exist across traditional national borders. In this case borders not only represent borders between nation states, but all those psychological and cultural boundaries and border crossings that are negotiated in everyday life (Hirsiäho et al 2005, 12-13; Huttunen 2004, 138). It is exactly these boundaries and in-between spaces that become the locations where new cultural forms are created. Homi Bhabha uses the concept of liminality to describe these boundaries. Liminality dismantles the idea of solid cultures that interact with each other, and emphasises that culture is often located precisely in between these cultural processes. For Bhabha, the location of culture “means [--] temporality and spatiality: liminal is often found in certain postcolonial social spaces, but the existence of liminality is also a sign that the creation of new identities is an on-going process – that they are open and becoming.” (Huddart 2007, 68 see also Marks 2000, 24).

At the intersection of images and words, thoughts and emotions

The video installation *Angles of Incidence* crosses various thresholds through its themes and medium: it deals with people’s transitions from one country to another in the globalised world and their settling in new places. As an artistic work the installation is located somewhere between documentary, photography, experimental film and video art.

Art exists in the tension between observing and understanding, an in combining intellectual and emotional experience (Sakari 2000, 9). According to Marks, “[--] intercultural cinema works at the edge of an unthought, slowly building a language with which to think it. What can already be thought and said threatens to stifle the potential emerging new thoughts. The already sayable against which intercultural cinema struggles is not only official history but often also identity politics, with their

tendency toward categorization.” (Marks 2000, 29). Intercultural films can bring up new cultural and personal memories as alternatives to the numbing silences and erasures of officially written history.

Perhaps intercultural art – and in some ways our video installations – could create spaces where “personal and collective memories collide, get reorganised and reformed” (Brah 2007, 85). Spaces that would remind the viewers that cultures and nation states are, and have always been, connected, diverse, changing, and historical phenomena. The installation space of *Angles of Incidence* could be imagined as one kind of liminal diasporic space where viewers, at the intersection of images, sounds and words, not only encounter refugees and their stories, but at the same time encounter something in themselves.

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