



Un-, 2018. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view, MFA exhibition, KHM1 Gallery, Malmö, 2018. Rasmus Ramö Streith



The Undead, 2018. VHS film 4:3, 19:00 min, loop. Installation view, MFA exhibition, KHM1 Gallery, Malmö, 2018. Rasmus Ramö Streith



Untitled, 2018. VHS film 4:3, 05:50 min, loop. Installation view, MFA exhibition, KHM1 Gallery, Malmö, 2018. Rasmus Ramö Streith



Un-, 2018. White bed sheets, white thread, iron, foam rubber, 89 x 200 x 9 cm. Installation view, MFA exhibition, KHM1 Gallery, Malmö, 2018. Rasmus Ramö Streith

Un-

“If you walk along the main street on an August afternoon there is nothing whatsoever to do. The largest building, in the very center of the town, is boarded up completely and leans so far to the right that it seems bound to collapse at any minute. The house is very old. There is about it a curious, cracked look that is very puzzling until you suddenly realize that at one time, and long ago, the right side of the front porch had been painted, and part of the wall—but the painting was left unfinished and one portion of the house is darker and dingier than the other. The building looks completely deserted. Nevertheless, on the second floor there is one window which is not boarded; sometimes in the late afternoon when the heat is at its worst a hand will slowly open the shutter and a face will look down on the town. It is a face like the terrible dim faces known in dreams.”

—Carson McCullers¹

(1823) Somewhere on the outskirts of Madrid

You wake up every morning just as the light hits the wall above the bed. Another night of poor sleep. Breakfast is simple and doesn't take long to prepare; in fact, today, you'll settle for just a cup of coffee. Time is essential. Time is everything. The world outside has changed. You've seen enough of it. The skin of your fingers has grown rougher as the years have gone by, and a little numb at the tips. And yet you find your fingers to be the most beautiful feature of your body. They are attached to a steady hand, still steady. They have served you well, as have your eyes. Thank goodness, this might turn out to be a good day. It's barely begun. You look out the window, and further into the distance. The neighbour's house is still there. Today, you're going to finish the last painting. Months have passed, and nobody has been allowed to see it yet. Nobody has come to visit. On the way upstairs, you lose your footing, and the coffee cup falls from your hands. You follow it with your gaze, turning slowly to follow its fall. It all happens without a single sound: the china shatters all over the floor, getting mixed up with the black coffee. Seconds, maybe minutes, pass. The light above the bed is shining on the pillow now, and you try to remember what it used to sound like when things broke.

Arrival

I'm going to try to explain how I ended up here. I came here to write this paper. I came here through a landscape from another time. Along the way, I met people who spoke a foreign language.

I had just gotten off the bus by a hostel close to the motorway we'd just been driving on. From there, however, I had to continue on foot. The young man at the reception seemed indifferent about my visit. The heat was glistening on his face, and the fan on the small bookshelf behind him didn't seem to be making any difference. Before I fell asleep that night in that sparsely furnished room, my eyes came to rest on a framed picture. An etching had been hung on the far wall of the room. A man leaning against a desk. Judging by his clothes, it likely was a late eighteenth-century scene. Has he fallen asleep while writing? Bats and other nocturnal creatures appear from the dark background. They might want to do him harm. Is that why he's concealing his face, to fend them off? Or are they monsters, haunting his dreams? A feline predator is lying next to the chair the man is sitting in, waiting.² There is something written on the desk in the picture:

“El sueño de la razón produce monstruos.”³

Before I left the hostel the next morning, I showed the receptionist a map. It was an elderly woman working at the desk this time. After a short while, she realised which direction I was headed in, and shook her head. She gave me the same response as all the others I'd asked: “No, sorry, it's no use. Turn back! Go home! There's nothing there.”

For a long time, I thought I was lost, gone. This place really doesn't exist. I cursed myself in my solitude while I dragged my finger along a line that

was drawn on the map. Earth can't be this dead. There's nothing here but sand mixed with rocks. Time was going to waste. But just as I was about to give up, there it was, right in front of me. The windows looked like a pair of recently awakened eyes that had just caught sight of me.

1.

I must have made my way inside through the back entrance. A small hall, shrouded in darkness, greeted me. The walls are made of white plastered stone. There is an oil lamp on the floor, next to the entrance. I light it, and it chases the shadows away wherever my footsteps take it. The old wooden floor is creaking. The hall leads to an open door. I end up in a corridor that soon turns to the right. I look down at my shoes, which are white from the dust outside. The air in here has been still for a long time, and I suddenly become aware of my own breathing. After several footsteps, the footsteps continue, and I begin to suspect that I'm going around in circles. I look back to where I came from. The light of the lamp only reaches a few metres, and after that, there's just dense shadow. Soon, I reach a wall. Somebody has made a painting on the bare surface. It depicts a mountain, obscuring the sun, and at its foot, a tree that almost disappears into the dark colours of the mountain. The landscape takes up almost all the space of the picture. The composition is odd. Eventually, the eye lands on the four faces that protrude from the corner in the lower right. They look like passers-by—or have they ended up here by mistake? Do they live somewhere near the mountain? Are they farmers, or travellers? One of them looks happy, another looks sad, and you can barely see the last one's head; all you can make out is a hat and part of the forehead.⁴

*

When me and my siblings, were young, we would sometimes gather to draw little comics on paper or plastic bags. Later, we would tape them to the radiators in our rooms. The ceiling light would be turned off, and we would sit down on the floor. One of us lit a torch and illuminated a single frame at a time. Whoever was holding the torch would make up a scary story for each picture, and the rest of us listened as the darkness closed in around us.

It's a picture. It can be so clear, but it doesn't mean anything. Not right now.

The flying house began its existence as a small drawing, just a few centimetres in width and height. A few simple lines on a small slip of paper, which had been on its way to the bin on many occasions. I ended up framing it, along with another pencil drawing. It depicted a potted plant, and I had made it during a stay in a house I once visited, and ended up spending a whole summer in. I had a vague notion that I would

draw all the plants in that house. Mostly as a way to get started with my drawing again. The house and the plants were connected. They told a story together. Everything tells stories, especially the objects and personal belongings that we keep inside our homes. The flying house is set to make a return in a film project I am developing and working on as I write this.

A scene from *The Wizard of Oz*, from 1939. Just a short way into the story, the protagonist, Dorothy, desperately runs back after attempting to run away from home. Full of regret, she returns to an empty house and an abandoned farm. She doesn't know that her family has gone down into the shelter, to seek protection from the coming tornado, which will carry the house off with it. Dorothy is still inside, and she can see out through a window. It's spinning round and round. A model of the house, suspended from the ceiling by a string, was used to film this scene. Once the storm dies down, and the house has returned to the ground, Dorothy walks out the front door. However, she is no longer on the farm, or even in this world.

I want the house to fly just like Dorothy's house. Against the black backdrop, it exists as a weightless object, a state of mind. Once the house was there, as an image, it could be further developed. It has an inside too. What's it like in there? It's an artificial world. It's a film, it's a world inside the TV. Each scene is its own space, colour, and theme. Like a tableau, like a painting. Everything is at a distance, somehow. The people exist inside, like a doll's house. Boxlike environments. Doors to pass through. Sometimes they can't move, or they get stuck in a loop. Characters are dissolved. This is the first time I've worked with amateur actors. But in this film, the actors don't act; they don't speak. Once they are in motion, it all seems repetitive and dull. I begin to see how the actors and the objects are trading places. The film is constructed, in this case in a set. The actors are acting as extras, like placed props. And the sound, which isolates the image, but also tells the story of what's going on outside the image. The moving images take you to one space, the written words to another, and the sound to the next. The challenge is to keep them from cancelling each other out.

How is the film shown, and where? Thinking of the film as a "material" that can be shaped and considered from 360 degrees. A similar process takes place during the shoot. As we've been working on this film, the composition, the placing of the actors, and the appearance of the sets have been important. There is this sculptural element to filmmaking.

I write scripts for most of my projects, even the ones that aren't videos or films. This text does more than just explain to me what is going to happen or be made clear. The act of writing carries me forward. Writing to become somebody else is a method often used for developing characters. In the film, there is a narrator who has neither a face nor a body as of yet. Perhaps the voice will never be granted a physical body and will remain solely textual.

I was high above the ground, and I could see everywhere. I thought what I saw up ahead over the horizon was the moon. My feet and legs like untied ropes, blowing in the wind. Something was holding onto me. I looked up and saw the enormous, oval body of an animal, covered in fur, and a head with two pointed ears. I've never seen ears that big before. A leathery, flapping wing extends out on each side. I wasn't afraid, and the creature's claws didn't harm me.

-Pause-

The landscape beneath me was littered with holes, holes everywhere. No trees, no houses, no roads, and no people. Just row upon row of holes.

-Pause-

We were slowly losing altitude. The closer we came to the ground, the better I could see that each hole had a small, familiar object placed inside it. Bicycle, tire, gravestone, rubbish bin, plastic mug, door, plate, bottle, knife, dress, computer, book, ladder, key ...

-Pause-

We landed in one of the holes; it was empty. The creature very carefully set me down. Now, it was able to fold its wings away. Then, it stood there, like a dark pillar. It was hard to make out, apart from the bulbous eyes, which looked like a pair of black glass spheres. They were impossible to look into. I thought that it was speaking to me, but then, suddenly, there was nothing where it had been only a moment ago.

-Pause-

I couldn't move my foot. I was stuck. I looked down, and the legs that were no longer my own had ceased to be human. They had turned into wood, finely carved and lacquered, like the leg of a chair or dining table.

—Excerpt from an untitled manuscript

*

The corridor continues to the left. I leave the wall with the painting behind. But after just a few steps, I'm greeted by a new painting on the wall. Its style is reminiscent of the one I was just looking at. Three women dressed in dark clothes, standing in a semi-circle. The bodies' outlines are difficult to make out against the near-black background. But their faces are clearly visible—not their eyes, but their grins! They are talking, or laughing. The woman at the far right has rough facial features, a toothless smile, and much of her face is veiled in shadow.⁵

Once again, I continue moving along the gradually narrowing corridor. Eventually, I have to twist my body to get any further. Taking one step at a time, sideways, I see a door up ahead. There is a large area above the door, which is occupied by another

painting. I raise my arm that is holding the lamp, to get a better look at it. When the beam of light reaches all the way up, I suddenly shrink back. Something resembling a human being is standing in the dark, again, almost pitch-black, landscape. This creature is staring straight into the air. Its naked, slim arms end in a pair of hands that are clutching a human being. Or rather, what's left of a human being. The rest is in the creature's jaws.⁶ After a few quick steps, I make it through the door, and the painting is behind me. It brought back a memory. During my last year of secondary school, I had an art teacher who encouraged me to pursue my interest in drawing. It was the last week of school, just before the term ended. She handed me an envelope with my name on it and told me I was going to like it. When I got home, I pulled the contents out and found that it was a book. I quickly leafed through it and realised it was about old paintings. Boring, I thought to myself, and sighed. But I kept the book, and have returned to it many times since then. Especially to its more macabre and grotesque parts, the black.

Once I'm out the other side, I advance through a new hallway. But then a strange sensation comes over me. The corridor seems identical to the one I had started out in earlier. I hurry through, shuffling along. This can't be right! Am I back where I started? Everything is identical, except for one detail: the painting on the wall over the door is gone. As are the other paintings I passed by. This can't be the same corridor. I shake my head and decide to go through the door one more time. However, this time, I do so with a certain degree of trepidation.

*

"Time is compressed or stopped inside the movie house. ... to spend time in a movie house is to make a 'hole' in one's life."

—Robert Smithson⁷

The first time I visited a cinema was relatively late in my life. To me, film was something you experienced at home, on your couch in front of the TV, by inserting a video cassette into the player and pressing play. We had VHS movies lined up on our bookshelf. Off we'd go to the rental shop, where we would choose two films: one for grown-ups (a drama, thriller, or action movie) and one for kids (a cartoon). I watched them over and over again. One day, a VHS tape on the table caught my attention. First, I saw the cover. I knew this was something forbidden, something scary. This film ended up meaning a great deal to me, but not because it had any deeper meaning. However, it was completely different from anything I'd ever seen before, far removed from costly Hollywood productions. This was a film that somebody had made all by himself, with nothing but the help of his closest friends. An intergalactic fast food chain has landed on Earth. Its representatives disguise themselves as



Un-, 2018. Cardboard, wax, jeans, shirt, silicon, sneaker, dimensions variable. Installation view, MFA exhibition, KHM1 Gallery, Malmö, 2018. Rasmus Ramö Streith

Un-, 2018. cabinet filled with things, 50 x 53 x 195 cm. Installation view, MFA exhibition, KHM1 Gallery, Malmö, 2018. Rasmus Ramö Streith

humans and settle in a small village somewhere in New Zealand. They are here for human meat, which they intend to use in hamburgers. Fortunately, their plan is foiled by a heroic group of humans. However, one of the aliens manages to escape in his spacecraft. His craft is also camouflaged to blend in on Earth; it's disguised as an ordinary wooden house.⁸

In the 1980s, the VHS format changed the way people watched films. The VHS camera wasn't the first video camera, but it was the first one intended for the family market. It was a camera you could use on your holiday and in your everyday life at home. Today, I found a couple of films that my grandfather shot on midsummer's eve in 1992. The colours bleed into each other, and part of the picture is distorted when I play the tape back. I decide that my project with the flying house is to be shot entirely on a VHS

camera. I'm thinking of the movie *Blair Witch Project* (1999), in which three American film students head out into the woods to make a documentary about a local legend, a ghost story. The students go missing under mysterious circumstances, and the only trace of them that can be found is the videocassette they left behind in their video camera. Rumours said that *Blair Witch Project* was real: it was a true story, and the tape was genuine. I'm also thinking about *Videodrome* (1983), by Canadian director David Cronenberg. A secret TV channel induces a trance in its viewers that causes reality and nightmares to blend. The TV set itself comes to life, and the VHS cassette turns into flesh and blood, so that it can be inserted into people rather than into the player.

Whenever something scary happened in a film, one of the grown-ups would ask me to cover my



Un-, 2018. Wood, styrofoam, foam rubber, iron, plaster, concrete, dimensions variable. Installation view, MFA exhibition, KHM1 Gallery, Malmö, 2018. Rasmus Ramö Streith

eyes. It's not real, it's just a film. But if it's not real, then what is it? Corn syrup, foam latex, silicon, and prosthetics. Trick photography and costuming.

In the early twentieth century, interest in the inner world of mankind grew. Modern society and technology were on the rise. Science was working harder than ever to help us understand the unknown. The medium of film was still very young, and it was thought to be a key way of portraying the subconscious and dreams of human beings. Germany after World War I: a nation in ruins. Art and film mirrored people's lives and concerns. When there was still no room for dialogue, before sound film took over, the nonrealistic sets with weird angles, deep shadows, and the makeup all helped to communicate the characters' inner thoughts. A way of further blurring the line between dream and reality. German expressionism

took its inspiration from painting and theatre. Films about external threats invading and disturbing the status quo. This disturbance can take a variety of forms, the most tangible of which is a monster. It's easier to address uncomfortable topics when they've been dressed up as or converted into fictions. Horror, just like humour, is a way of laying bare our fears, or talking about the things we mustn't or daren't speak of. However, monsters are rarely frightening unless they draw their power from something familiar, that we have either intentionally or unintentionally forgotten. The discomfort intensifies if, instead of being external, it comes from something in the immediate vicinity, from the most mundane of things.⁹

I want to try different ways of making film. In many cases, what attracts me has to do with the actual craft. I like to look at the things that

go on behind the camera. How was the film made, how was it written, how has it been portrayed, and which materials have been used? My first films were animations made with a technique called stop-motion. To a great extent, it mirrors the way an ordinary feature film is shot. Everything happens in front of the camera with actors (puppets), a set, and lighting. It's a lot like a real movie studio, only everything is made to a smaller scale. It's film as miniature. We create these environments in the studio and they don't look like anything comprehensible, but once they are seen through the camera lens and the various layers are combined, something completely different is produced.

The film is shown on a lit screen or projected onto a screen—it's flat, but it also depicts a space, a space beyond space. The film is viewed from a distance, but it still feels real, close, and alive. Today, we use smartphones, computers, and VR goggles. The body has stayed in one place while the mind, the experience, has wandered into another world. The experience of space has become more and more disembodied. We no longer experience space; rather, we experience depictions of space.

2.

A large group of people has gathered. They are sitting on the ground, close to each other, in a semicircle. Several of their faces disappear or distort and are blended into abstract shapes. Some of them have grotesque features. Wrapped up in layers of clothing and different fabrics. Somebody whispers into somebody else's ear. Another warms his hands. They're old, and they're young. At the far left, what looks like a child is sitting on a chair, playing an accordion. They have gathered here to listen and enjoy the music. A silhouette in the foreground—it looks like a man at first, but it turns out to be a goat. Two long horns, wearing a cape. Or is it a mask? Is there a person behind its muzzle, behind those horns?¹⁰

The painting is wide and occupies a large part of one of the long walls of what looks to be the dining room. There's an old oak table in the centre of the room. A pair of plates has been left out, still covered with dust. I imagine myself sitting down at the table to eat a meal with that painting behind me. Suddenly, the oil lamp I'm holding in my hand goes out, and the room turns pitch black. In the lower part of the room, I glimpse a narrow crack of dim light, which is seeping into the room I'm standing in. I move towards the light, but I can't see where to set my foot down for my next step. A chair gets knocked over, and the noise is made unusually loud by the quiet of the dark room. I stop for a moment, waiting for a reaction. When I get closer, I can see that it's a doorway. On the other side, I am greeted by an odd sight: a bright room, with white and grey colours. But the walls seem to be dissolving somehow, while also being rebuilt and reshaped. An unceasing motion. I move between the walls, through what seems more like a tunnel. When

I bring my eyes closer, I can make out handprints on the moving shapes.

On the other side of the tunnel, the white light fades into red. Hundreds of photographs hang from strings attached to the ceiling, at eye level. It still reeks of development fluid, and you can almost make out a kitchen under all the various objects that have been jumbled around and piled up. It takes some time for the eyes to adjust to the red light. The photographs mostly depict corridors and different rooms full of various things. More corridors and doors. Several of the rooms seems to have different-coloured walls. Purple, red, green, or blue.

*

"If we characterise the logic of installation art as, simply, the construction of fabrication of space ..."

—Helen Hughes¹¹

"Gilman's room was of good size but queerly irregular shape; the north wall slanting perceptibly inward from the outer to the inner end, while the low ceiling slanted gently downward in the same direction. ...

"... As time wore along, his absorption in the irregular wall and ceiling of his room increased; for he began to read into the odd angles a mathematical significance which seemed to offer vague clues regarding their purpose. Old Keziah, he reflected, might have had excellent reasons for living in a room with peculiar angles; for was it not through certain angles that she claimed to have gone outside the boundaries of the world of space we know?"

—H.P. Lovecraft¹²

If the sets in the expressionist films of the 1920s were a way of portraying the inner thoughts of the characters, and to dissolve the boundaries between the realms of dream and reality, then Kurt Schwitters's project *Merzbau* was a way of embodying space and one's surroundings. In Hanover, around 1923, Schwitters was back in his childhood home at Waldhausenstrasse 5 after suffering a series of setbacks. There, *Merzbau* grew into being, from one room to the next. If World War II hadn't interrupted the work, it would probably have grown into even more. Schwitters collected things and piled them up. These piles gradually turned into something else. Nobody knew about them at first, secretly constructed from wood, plaster, and pulp as they were. Found objects from the street, and private objects that were encapsulated inside, became parts of the walls of the flat, and determined the geometric shapes of their protrusions. It took a while before even Schwitters himself began to think of it as art. Eventually, friends and acquaintances were invited to experience and interact with the strange passage-ways. A room that is also a sculpture? Before anybody had ever used the term "installation," Schwitters explained it as follows: "not only a room construction, but also a sculpture in space, which one can enter,

in which one can go for a walk. ... I am building a composition without boundaries, and each individual part is at the same time a frame for the neighboring parts; everything is reciprocal.”¹³ *Merzbau*, then, was a chamber you could walk through, stay in, and notice the different colours of various sections of the spaces. Mirrors on the walls and small sculptures in various spots. “Grottoes” full of personal objects, including the death mask of Schwitters’s firstborn son, who died just one week old. Architecture as self-portrait, but just as much a portrait of the surroundings and the city. A time capsule. Collective stories and personal ones, constantly undergoing transformation. While this “nest” was growing, the unrest in the streets intensified.

*“Schwitters’s Merzbau may be the first example of a ‘gallery’ as a chamber of transformation, from which the world can be colonized by the converted eye.”*¹⁴

In her book *Installation Art* (2005), Claire Bishop writes about the “dream scene.” She bases this discussion on *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which was written in 1900 by Sigmund Freud. In it, Freud defines the nature of dreams in psychoanalytical terms, and explains how they are to be interpreted. According to him, dreams have three main properties: 1. They are essentially made up of images, although they can also include sound fragments; 2. They have a composite structure, and can only be interpreted when they are divided and solved, like picture puzzles. Most of all, Freud claims that dreams aren’t supposed to be decoded; they are supposed to be analysed by means of free association; 3. Each element of a dream can be replaced with an associated word or sound.¹⁵

A total installation can be compared to the dream scene. By bringing objects, sounds, texts, and images into the gallery, or constructing architectural scenes for the visitor to pass through and experience, information comes at us from all directions, and activates several of our senses at once. The visitor doesn’t identify with some character in a depicted scene; instead, they end up taking the role of protagonist. Through the act of interpreting the work, you become a part of it. Atmosphere is very important for installations of this kind. The gallery transforms, and the visitor is transported elsewhere.

*

“I’m looking to make installations that allow the viewer to walk in and occupy an idea, rather than have the idea imposed on you.”

—Mike Nelson¹⁶

The Coral Reef was installed for the first time by artist Mike Nelson and a small team of assistants at Matt’s Gallery in London, during the last three months of 1999. It was a large installation, consisting of fifteen rooms with attached corridors. When it’s installed

in a gallery, the entrance and exit of the installation become part of the building. There’s simply no way of seeing the size of the installation from the outside. Floors, walls, doors, ceilings—they’re all constructed! None of the gallery space as such remains visible to the eye. The first room the visitor enters looks like a waiting room. This leads to a rundown taxi office, with a calendar on the wall from a Muslim association in Nigeria. After this, the visitor can roam at will through a network of dimly lit, dusty corridors leading to other rooms. Several of the rooms have vaguely defined themes. There is a CCTV monitoring room, a mechanic’s garage, a room full of drug paraphernalia, a wood-panelled lobby decorated with American kitsch. Other spaces contain various objects: advertisements for a religious group, Soviet and Western propaganda, a toy gun, a clown mask, and an empty sleeping bag. One room is full of motorcycle gear, another is full of computers. All the different objects were found and chosen by the artist. The last room of the installation is a replica of the waiting room that appears at the beginning. This is intentional, and done to confuse the visitor, to get them to lose their orientation, feel trapped, and experience repetition. In the artist’s own words, it’s getting “lost in the lost world of lost people.” This sense of confusion that the visitor experiences in this network of rooms is, according to Nelson, among other things an analogy of various systems of faith that provide the illusion of freedom while actually keeping you trapped.¹⁷

The rooms look recently used and lived in, but there are no other people here apart from the other visitors. Individuals or fictional characters have lived in and used the spaces, and then disappeared.

Like the places depicted in William Burroughs’s novel *Naked Lunch* (1959), Nelson’s rooms and corridors can be regarded as “interzones,” or dreamlike spaces that exist between other places. This is reflected by the ambivalence that emerges in these rooms, their lack of a clear purpose, or the illogical transitions between them.¹⁸ Doors and corridors seem to perform another role in *The Coral Reef*: they act like gaps, transitions, or edits in a film. They give rise to a montage of sorts. But also to a circular motion, which supports the fragmented narrative, and opens the installation up rather than closing it.

*“The main motor of the total installation, what it lives by—is the cranking up of the wheel of associations, cultural everyday analogies, personal memories.”*¹⁹

Ilya Kabakov installed his work *Ten Characters* in 1988. It consists of ten rooms. Each room portrays a character. The rooms have names like *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*, *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, *The Untalented Artist*, *The Garbage Man*, and so on. It’s a socio-political work on lost communities, capitalism, and communism. Kabakov was born in Russia in 1933 and worked there as an artist until the 1980s. After that,

he moved to the United States. Much of the inspiration for his works comes from his own experiences and memories. He constructs spaces filled with objects, much like Nelson. Both of them create environments and fictional characters. However, they are also very different. Kabakov often includes text in his works, which gives them a more clear reading, in a way. He also compares his own work to theatre—a stage play directed by the artist, in which all the objects in the room have their own dramatic plot functions. Nelson's work gives rise to further ambiguities, and is perhaps even closer to the dream scene than Kabakov's.

Similar to Nelson's fictional biker gang, the Amnesiacs, Mai-Thu Perret has created a fictional feminist collective that refers to itself as the Crystal Frontier. They live in the desert of New Mexico and are led by their founder, Beatrice Mandell, who is also fictional. Perret has a great interest in utopias and alternate faiths. Her installations usually consist of objects and different materials related to crafts. Perret's fictional characters write diary entries, sew clothes, make ceramic sculptures, and author letters and manifestos. They also sometimes make films. Instead of creating an entirely new environment for you to enter, here Perret presents a kind of fragmented archive. The characters are sometimes included in her installation as dolls or dummies, usually faceless ones.²⁰

3.

If this were a body, I would be balancing on one of the ribs right now.

I take a few steps inside, to get a better view of the ceiling. It must be more than fifteen metres high. I glimpse a pair of rough roof beams made of dark, old wood. I'm standing in the waiting room. It could be a door to the outside that I'm seeing, all the way over there on the other side. The door is sealed from the inside and has several boards of wood nailed to it. To protect myself from whatever is out there, or to protect the outside from whatever is here, on the inside.

I turn my attention to yet another painting. Whoever painted these might have lived in this house at some time or other. Maybe they spent a lot of time in this exact spot. Painted them right onto the wall, as though to attach them to something, give them a body, or have them keep something away, like a magic spell. I begin to think about the way the paintings have been placed in the house. The artist is telling a story. Who are these characters, and what are these places? Observations, nightmares. Just like the one I viewed earlier in the dining room. The same elongated landscape format. But this painting is darker, if that's possible, and much larger. A brown, desolate landscape; the horizon almost black. The sky looks to be the same colour. On the ground, thousands of people in a line, snaking their way down between the hills. A pilgrimage—or maybe they're running from something? Faces and bodies are close together;

in some places, the colours blend together, and the brushstrokes transform the people into a cohesive dark mass. The closest ones, in the foreground, look like they're screaming. One part madness, one part despair.²¹

*

“Let me explain: In order truly to see a thing, one must first understand it. An armchair implies the human body, its joints and members; scissors, the act of cutting. What can be told from a lamp, or an automobile? The savage cannot really perceive the missionary's Bible; the passenger does not see the same ship's rigging as the crew. If we truly saw the universe, perhaps we would understand it.”

—Jorge Luis Borges²²

For me in my own work, it's all about creating an image, an idea for you to experience and to formulate your own conception of and rules for. I don't dictate the viewer's movements, but I do plant hints and clues. In various materials and mediums. They are usually linked by an invisible thread of some sort.

Drawing x 3, wooden frames (42.5 x 60.5 cm)

1. Untitled. There was a drawing on this paper once. Spiral notebooks are filled with notes. The paper is lined. Its edges are broken. Perhaps the artist found the right sheet. Was there something written or drawn on it that should no longer be there? Something that's been erased? It's a note that has been forgotten in somebody's clothes for a long time. Not even the person who once put the note there can remember what was on it. It's a forgery of time, an attempt to attach a history or fiction.

2. Untitled. This is the second page of a spread from the same spiral notebook. There is a drawing here that hasn't been erased. An oval shape (which reminds me of an eye) in the centre of the paper, filled in in pencil.

3. *Sunrise*. The title of this drawing is taken from the German silent film of the same name from 1927 (directed by F. W. Murnau). One of the first-ever films to use synchronised music and sound effects. It is about a man who gets an opportunity to leave an impoverished life in the countryside for a wealthier life in the big city. However, he has to do an evil deed in exchange for this. The film has a particular, dreamy look, which matches the way the story is told. *Sunrise* was one of the last silent movies ever made. The drawing depicts the closing scene of the film, in which the sun rises over the village where the man lives. It's a little narrower than a regular sheet of A4, and thinner, too. The drawing is a negative, making the rising sun black. In the middle of the paper, a dark stain gives rise to a hole.



Un-, 2018. Cardboard, packaging tape, dimensions variable. Installation view, MFA exhibition, KHM1 Gallery, Malmö, 2018. Rasmus Ramö Streith

Sculpture: *Glove on Arm.* Wax, cotton, thread

A glove with letters embroidered on the palm and fingers. Based on William Terry's touch alphabet, invented in 1917. A glove that allows the outside world to communicate with a deaf and blind person, and vice versa. A person who lives in absolute darkness and silence. "I found myself a dozen years ago in the valley of two-fold solitude," explained Helen Keller, who became one of the first to use the glove in the late nineteenth century.²³ The glove is worn by a prosthetic arm. A casting of my own arm. It is a broken chain of communication.

Sculpture: Two casts of wooden boards, snapped at the middle. Bronze, aluminium, plywood

The crunching noise of the arm breaking when the board snaps. They are standing on top of boxes, which raise the sculptures over the ground. To produce movement and amplify the sound that can only be heard when you're looking at the board.

4.

I've arrived at a dead end. There's no way to progress from here. I am standing at the deepest point of a corridor that ends abruptly. The stone of the wall has been replaced by wallpaper. I suspect that the wallpaper was patterned once, long ago, and perhaps even had a colour. What have I missed? A door somewhere. But then, my gaze gets stuck to one of the corners. A line from the floor, about two metres up, to the ceiling, then it turns 90 degrees, continues on for a bit, and then on down to the floor again. It creates a rectangular section, wallpapered over to hide it from sight. There's no door handle, so I try putting my weight against it, and it makes a noise and opens slowly ...

For a while—I can't tell how long—everything is completely black. I can't see my hand in front of me. I also can't tell if I'm moving down, sideways, or up. It's as though I am in a state of nothingness, utterly weightless. But then, I see two dots of

light, next to each other, in the distance. I try to steer my steps towards them, and the dots come closer. Soon I can see that they are actually two holes that are letting light in from the other side. The holes are in a door, but it doesn't look like the door belongs to this house. It's wide, sturdy, and old. It reminds me of the door to a dungeon where something is kept locked up. The holes are almost at eye level, but a little too low, so I have to bend down to look through them. On the other side, I see a pair of eyes staring back at me. My body reacts before I have time to think, and I withdraw with a jolt. But I'm slowly drawn back, and the eyes are still there. There's nothing threatening about them; they rather look insecure and uncertain. They never look away. I close my eyes, wait, and then reopen them. They're still there. Wink, and a wink back.

*

"Page 45/(top left) screw/Head fixed in place/(top right) upper shell/lower shell./The head is attached to the body with this screw/point on the body into which the corner of the lower shell of the head is slipped/Head fixed in place/(bottom) hair attached with the clothespin."

—Marcel Duchamp²⁴

There are certain artists who I can never quite seem to figure out; they leave something behind that draws me back to them. And I return, over and over. Sometimes only to certain pieces, sometimes to whole periods, sometimes to specific methods.

"Marcel Duchamp" is more than a name; it is a symbol, a milestone in the timeline. It took me some time to approach him. I haven't fully committed yet, but I'm getting there.

"*Étant donnés*" means in English: *Given*: 1. *The Waterfall*, 2. *The Illuminating Gas* (1946–66). There are many different theories, and an equal number of answers. Was that the idea all along? To leave a question mark, or riddle, behind? Duchamp himself was a seeker, and he worked on one main issue for most of his artistic career.

"What art is in reality is this missing link, not the links which exist. It's not what you see that is art, art is the gap."²⁵

Around 1946: The artist has explained to the outside world that he won't be producing any more art. Instead, the artist plays chess, writes some articles, reads, and appears on TV shows. Twenty years go by, and nobody knows that in secret, behind a closed, hidden door in the artist's studio, passionate work has been underway all along. In the end, the piece is shown, along with the artist's request that it not be presented to the public until after his death. Today, *Étant donnés* (*Given*) is permanently installed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. There, at the far end of one of the

galleries. The visitor is confronted by the massive wooden door, and two holes you can peek through. But the holes aren't immediately apparent; the visitor has to find them themselves. There's only room for one person at a time at the door, to look through the holes with slightly bent posture. In the foreground, there is a brick wall, with an oval hole in the middle where the bricks have fallen or been knocked out. On the other side, a naked woman's body is lying among the branches and fallen leaves.

We can only see part of her body: the thighs and torso, and the left arm holding a gaslight. We see some hair, but no face. In the background, a waterfall glistens under a blue sky. What you're looking at is a diorama. A picture that is also a frozen theatre stage. The visitor feels uncomfortable, maybe even a little ashamed. If certain parts of the body have been left out of the field of vision, others are granted more focus. The eyes wander back and forth between her exposed sex, the gaslight, and the waterfall. The visitor straightens up, blinks, and lets their eyes adjust. Back in the gallery in the museum. Another visitor is in line, waiting for their turn. Soon, the peepholes will be free.

Duchamp made installations before this. Back in 1938, with a group of surrealists, he installed *1,200 Coal Sacks*. The exhibition or installation consisted of sacks hanging down from the ceiling. There were paintings hanging on the walls and leaves on the floor. Along with this, sounds were played in the rooms. To see the paintings on the walls, you needed to carry a torch. *Given* is something else. It is an image that has to be activated through the act of looking through the holes. An illusion that is dispelled as soon as you take a step back from the door. The dream scene described earlier is about dissolving the ego. The visitor takes on the role of protagonist, becoming a part of the installation. Duchamp's point seems to be the opposite: the peephole shuts the viewer out, screens the picture off. What do we get when we look, or rather, what don't we get? What is on the other side reminds you that you're standing there looking, and that others can look at you. We receive something inexplicable, and dark. A dream image, but approached from the other direction. Behind the scenes we can tell that it's an optical illusion produced using various materials, handmade parts, chosen angles, and directed light. The museum visitors never see this side of it. In the restored and published manual for *Given*, you get to see Duchamp's own photographs and handwritten instructions explaining how to attach the various components and in which order. You might expect this to shatter the illusion, but it actually strengthens it.

*

The darkness has lifted now, and I can see further. In the centre of the room is a pillar. It is bright yellow all over. What looks like one object at first is actually

several. The pillar is made of identical small Madonna figurines, all yellow. The Virgin Mary's hands are clasped. They look like they were made in a factory, and they are lined up in a circle. Then, another row on top of the first, and another on top of that one. The pillar extends up towards the ceiling.²⁶ I move around it, and when I've made it almost all the way, my foot brushes against something on the ground that gives off a metallic noise. It turns out to be an angular handle that's attached to a hatch. Without any serious exertion, I manage to lift it open. A primitive, worn stone staircase descends into the abyss. The space down there has mortared stone walls and earthen floors. The air is damp and cold. Tree roots hang down from the ceiling. I hear the noise of running water. There is something on the ground up ahead. It turns out to be jutting out from the wall. A leg, cut just above the halfway point of the thigh. It's dressed in smart suit trousers, beige socks, and dark brown shoes. The trousers have been pulled back a little, and a patch of hairy skin is revealed above the sock.²⁷

*

“(Un)heimlich is the antonym of heimlich only in the letters first sense, not in its second.”
—Sigmund Freud²⁸

Robert Gober has described his sculptures and installations as dioramas about ordinary, contemporary human beings that live in the Western world. They eat, sleep, love, and die. They exist in the present, but they also come from somewhere completely different. They look like something from another time, perhaps the artist's own childhood. A North American suburb in the 1950s. Gober began work on a series of sculptures based on a home and what was in it, the things that people used every day. Sinks, beds, armchairs, doors, chairs, and wallpaper. Later, he would build full-scale installations in which several of the sculptures and motifs reappeared. They often include a sensitive, dreamy background narrative, which is divided into fragments and symbols. The word “trauma” is often used in relation to Gober and his works. His themes revolve around the body, gender, and religion. An underlying violence that exists in the home, but also in society at large. Never visible, always restrained, and always kept silent. Nothing is what it seems. Some of his sculptures could be mistaken for readymades, but they are all made by hand, from scratch. The materials confuse, transform, and recode otherwise familiar objects. Everything has a dual meaning. Similar to the worlds Grober creates, nightmares and dreams can be described as distortions of reality.

Katharina Fritsch's sculptures also create a bridge of this kind. She is very particular about referring to them as “pictures.” Pictures that you can walk around. In a solo exhibition at the Matthew Marks Gallery in New York in 2008, she installed several sculptures in different rooms. A giant with a club, an

all-black Madonna figure, a black snake, a skeleton dressed as a doctor, a pair of skeleton's feet. They are realistically sculpted and usually cast from plastic. Each sculpture was positioned in front of an image. The images came from postcards and photographs that she had collected during her childhood. Enlarged, and then printed in black and white or given a single monochrome hue. Blue, red, yellow, or green. The format of the images reminds me of old films and old special effects, which were used back when almost all films were shot in big studios. Rear projections were used to transport the actors and the set to another location. Something similar happened to Fritsch's sculptures in the gallery. Her world originates in the fairy tales we all know. She's interested in mass production and stereotypes. Fritsch's sculptures lack texture and usually are only one colour. They look like they fell from the sky, like they came from nowhere.²⁹

5.

I wake up in a bed. I stand up and walk over to a window that's letting light in on my left. I can't see outside, because the window is covered in dust. But I see enough. I'm on the top floor of the house. The room isn't very large, and besides the bed, there is also a wardrobe and a door. On a chair next to the bed is an old TV. I walk over to the chair and turn the TV on. After a while, the image fades into view. We're moving forward, leaving the darkness behind in the tunnel. A railway, supported by beams, following the slope of the mountain. There are more mountains up ahead. It's an old black-and-white film. There's no sound, and the film keeps skipping. The train disappears into a new tunnel. There is a cut, and then the sequence starts over again. I stop, to take another look. It's the same the next time: a cut, and then it starts over. I leave the train to continue on through its loop and walk out of the room.³⁰

A rattling noise, and then I have just enough time to see another door close in front of me. I walk over to it and open it, but there's nobody there—just a staircase. A bluish light falls onto the steps from above. I reach the top floor of the house. It's big and spacious for an attic. There are boxes and things that have been left behind lined up along the walls. In the centre, a man's suit hovers in mid-air. I know every part of it, every last stitch. I assembled it and created it.

*

“In normal contexts, the room, the simplest form of shelter, expresses the most benign potential of human life. It is, on the one hand, an enlargement of the body: it keeps warm and safe the individual it houses in the same way the body encloses and protects the individual within; like the body its walls put boundaries around the self preventing undifferentiated contact with the world, yet in its windows and doors, crude versions of the senses, it enables the self to move out into the



Un-, 2018. Plaster, nail, 42 x 1,5 x 9 cm, and 38 x 1,5 x 9,8 cm. Rasmus Ramö Streithz

world and allows that world to enter. But while the room is a magnification of the body, it is simultaneously a miniaturization of the world, of civilization.” —Elaine Scarry³¹

I was tired of film. I wanted to make something involving space, something that would interact with the visitor on a more physical level. I had been to experience an exhibition by Mika Rottenberg at Magasin 3 in Stockholm, in 2013.³² It was an important visit. The sets from Rottenberg’s films were reconstructed in the hall, dividing the gallery into several spaces, each usually centred on a particular film. Characters and environments changed, but they all belonged in the same world. The films’ contents were made stronger by their inclusion in the installation, which resembled a peculiar machine. The visitor ended up on a conveyor belt, transported through an endless production of “things.”

I wanted to work in a new material, one that I didn’t have the same experience using and control of, so that I wouldn’t know how to begin. The idea of sewing a suit was the trigger for the whole project. Sewing a suit for a character who doesn’t exist, who is invisible. I soon realised that the craft would be an issue all of its own. The challenge of making something by hand, fumbling with the fabric and thread, became an aspect of the character that had begun to appear. I had no idea how I was going to present the suit when it was finished. At first, I intended to use it in a film. But I never made the film. Instead, I got an

idea for a scene after I began writing a manuscript, which took the form of a logbook. Finally, the suit was installed in a large room. Using thin lines and a dress form that I installed in the suit, I created the illusion that it was hovering in mid-air. More lighting was added, as well as some found objects, which I placed along the edges of the room.

The light goes out, and the suit disappears into the attic space, which is now dark. The door closes. My steps are heavy on the way down. I catch sight of one of the house’s paintings, one that I must have missed on the way up. A solitary dog’s head protrudes from what looks like a sand dune. The dog is completely alone. It’s looking up at something. What might be the sky occupies the greater portion of the painting.³³ I continue to make my way down the stairs.

*

There is no real beginning, for anything. And that means there can’t be a real end, either. A new thought begins where the last one left off. Like an artistic process. An excavation that begins by digging through the upper layers. The earth is more than dirt; it’s also moss, leaves, and dead animals, all mixed up with worms. Or, like the rings inside tree trunks. Dad showed them to us once during one of many excursions to the woods. He pointed at them with his finger. “Look, that is time, lots of time.” Suddenly the trees seemed more alive to me.

- 1 Carson McCullers, *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* (Stockholm: Raben & Sjögren, 1965), 9–10.
- 2 Francisco De Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, from the *Los Caprichos* series of 1799.
- 3 “The sleep of reason produces monsters.”
- 4 Francisco De Goya, *Heads in Passage*, 1819–1823,
- 5 Francisco De Goya, *Women Laughing*, 1819–1823
- 6 Francisco De Goya, *Saturn Devouring His Son*, 1819–1823
- 7 Robert Smithson, “Entropy and the New Monuments,” *Artforum*, June 1966, https://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/entropy_and.htm.
- 8 *Bad Taste*, feature film, directed by Peter Jackson (New Zealand: WingNut Films, New Zealand Film Commission, 1987).
- 9 Matt Levin, “A Ribbon of Dreams: Dreams and Cinema,” *Crosscuts*, August 3, 2012, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/dreams-cinema-history-matt-levine>.
- 10 Francisco De Goya, *Witches’ Sabbath*, 1819–1823
- 11 Helen Hughes, “An Editorial Approach: Mike Nelson’s Corridors and *The Deliverance* and *The Patience*,” *emaj*, no. 6 (2011–12), <https://emajartjournal.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/hughes-an-editorial-approach2.pdf>.
- 12 H. P. Lovecraft, *The Dreams in the Witch House and Other Weird Stories*, ed. S. T. Joshi (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 302.
- 13 Kurt Schwitters, quoted in Melanie Eckner, *Kurt Schwitters* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 73.
- 14 Brian O’ Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica, CA: Iapis, 1986), 45.
- 15 Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), 16.
- 16 Mike Nelson, quoted in Roger Atwood, “Britain’s Curator of Garbage,” *Art News*, referenced on June 1, 2011, <http://www.artnews.com/2011/06/01/britains-curator-of-garbage/>.
- 17 Mike Nelson, quoted in Seán O Sullivan, “Review—Mike Nelson: The Coral Reef, Tate Britain, London,” *Paper Visual Art*, November 30, 2010, <http://papervisualart.com/2010/11/30/mike-nelson-the-coral-reef-tate-britain-london/>.
- 18 Mike Nelson, in conversation with Clarrie Wallis, *Tate Etc.*, Summer 2011, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/mike-nelson-conversation>.
- 19 Ilya Kabakov, quoted in Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), 16.
- 20 Julien Fronsacq, “Medium-Message,” in “Mai-Thu Perret,” *Parkett*, no. 84 (2009), https://www.parkettart.com/downloadable/download/sample/sample_id/32, 118.
- 21 Francisco De Goya, *A Pilgrimage to San Isidro*, 1819–1923
- 22 Jorge Luis Borges, “There Are More Things,” in *Collected Ficciones of Jorge Luis Borges*, ed. Allen Lane (London: Penguin, 1999), 441.
- 23 Mary T. Clark and Harold T. Clark, *The William Terry Touch Alphabet*, 1917, 8. Available online at <https://archive.org/details/cu31924030299600>.
- 24 Marcel Duchamp, *Manual of Instructions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009),.
- 25 Marcel Duchamp, quoted in Dalia Judowitz, *Unpacking Duchamp: Art in Transit* (London, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 135.
- 26 Katharina Fritsch, *Rack of Madonnas*, 1987–89
- 27 Robert Gober, *Untitled Leg*, 1989–90
- 28 Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 132.
- 29 Jessica Morgan, “From Out There to Down Here,” in “Katharina Fritsch,” *Parkett*, no. 87 (2010), http://www.parkettart.com/downloadable/download/sample/sample_id/10.
- 30 Stan Douglas, *Overture*, 1986, 16 mm film, black-and-white, sound, 7:00 loop.
- 31 Elaine Scarry, quoted in Karen Marta and Dave Hickey, *In the Dancehall of the Dead* (New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 1993), 34.
- 32 The exhibition was called *Sneeze to Squeeze*.
- 33 Francisco De Goya, *The Dog*, 1819–1823

Further references

- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. New York, Penguin Classics, 2014.
- Cuadecuc, vampir*. Feature Film. Directed by Pere Portabella. Spain: Films 59, Pere Portabella, 1971.
- The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Feature Film. Directed by Werner Krauss. Germany: Decla-Bioscop AG, 1920.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Open Work*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Goya, Francisco. *The Disparates, or, The Proverbios*. New York: Dover, 1969.
- . *The Disasters of War*. New York: Dover, 1967.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*. Edited by David Galloway. New York: Penguin Classics, 2003.
- Roelstraete, Dieter. “The Sacrificial Lamb. Dieter Roelstraete Ponders the Work of Jos De Gruyter & Harald Thys.” Flanders Arts Institute Visual Arts, December 24, 2009. <http://bamart.be/en/pages/detail/4238>.
- Seigel, Jerold. *The Private World of Marcel Duchamp: Desire, Liberation, and the Self in Modern Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Vidler, Anthony. *Uncanny Architecture*. London: MIT Press, 1994.
- Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew, and Carl H. Sederholm, eds. *The Age of Lovecraft*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016.