Teaching a Stone to Talk

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art

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Spring, 2016
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Abstract

Like my visual work, this text is based on both fact and fiction. Throughout my thesis I speak about my preference of resorting to fiction instead of describing my work in a couple of definitive words. The title derives from the book *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*¹ by Annie Dillard. Here, Dillard explores the world of natural facts and human encounters with them. The word “exploring” often functions as a metaphor for the artistic process. During my own artistic process I like to see myself as a character from one of Dillard’s books: roaming the unknown while recording or observing the environment. My work often starts out like this, it derives from certain objects, landscapes or situations that I observe in reality and that trigger my imagination. It originates from a desire to document things that are difficult to define or visualize. Along the way, I replace this documentary impulse with a poetic perspective; I am interested in what might have happened, or what could still happen, it becomes a speculative way of dealing with reality. The narratives that accompany my work arise intuitively; I trace the storyline of my subjects while describing my own experiences of them with equal importance. This MA thesis is a supplement to these semi-factual narratives. As I was writing it, I wondered what would have happened had I worked solely with text in my practice; had I produced a novel instead of a video, would I present this thesis then as a written supplement to the novel? I pondered on the absurdity of different kinds of writing accompanying (visual) art. This text is an attempt to teach myself to talk about certain aspects of my work that arise intuitively and are therefore difficult to articulate or define. The two essayistic videos in the MA exhibition *Sounds of the Sea, Crickets and Translucent Yellow* and *Yellowhammer Infrasound* are stories about the desire to explore and based on different experiences of sound.

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On board such a ship, everyone begins putting together a brief autobiography, as though he might otherwise forget who he is.

On board such a ship, everyone begins to lie.2

When I was about eight years old I would tell my Dutch classmates that I was born in France; I made up colourful stories of my first years there and I created a whole new identity for myself. In reality I am born in Rotterdam, a city in the Netherlands. I spent the first years of my life on a riverboat cruising the waterways of Europe. By the time I was twelve I started wondering if I was maybe suffering from a compulsive lying disorder. Today I think that it was just more convenient to come up with a story than to explain the actual facts. In conversations with friends and strangers I try to stick to the ‘truth’ these days. I am however still fascinated by the ways in which we create stories, by the friction between lived experience and narration and by the conjunction of literature and visual art.

In this research I will focus on duplicity in identity and place and consequently, the gaps that occur between these different realities and the categories that we place ourselves in. I will mention the ways in which narration and a subtle form of role-playing appear in three of my recent works, which were triggered during three different journeys. In 2015 I undertook two trips to Japan; one in spring and one in autumn, and one imaginary trip to Jan Mayen, an island in the Arctic Ocean.

This text, like my visual work, is deliberately constructed as some sort of collage, weaving selected references from literature, cinema and visual art together with my own work and thoughts. I feel related to a mode of thinking as coined by the artist/writer Magnus Bärtås: ‘The artist/collector is striving to create his/her own order and take a part of reality aside in order to organize it.’3 Before I started to write, I taped a sentence by the literary critic James Wood to the wall above my desk, it says:

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3 Magnus Bärtås, You Told Me: video essays and work stories (Gothenburg: Art Monitor, 2010), 35.
No single story can ever explain itself: this enigma at the heart of story is itself a story.¹

Next to it, there is a quote by the Swedish playwright Lars Norén:

I am extremely sound-sensitive. Too sensitive! I can hear.. I think – a lot that is never said.²

These two quotes are prominent in the creation of my work. In my opinion the audience shouldn’t know whether a visual artwork or a piece of literature is based on fact or fiction. The most important aspect of creating fiction might be the ability to listen to other people and to observe different situations, this might be more important than having a lively imagination. My narratives can be personal or informed by others, they are however always arranged and directed by me. This is one of the reasons why I would like to answer all questions concerning the fictional aspects of my work with another story. The danger in this is that in the end I would be entangled inside a web of stories, not sure which story was told to whom, thus, I would be accused of lying and I would, once again, question my ability to tell the truth.

My research focuses on the way in which the artist functions as an interpreter/storyteller while travelling elsewhere (physically, but also, and maybe most of all, in the imagination). How do we reorganize certain references, impressions and objects to create our own reality? And, since this is a subjective act: how much of one’s own biography/history will be visible in the work? Why do I often feel the urge to take on different roles while I am creating a work? And how much of the explanations surrounding our own work is based on fiction?

There are many forms of narration in artistic practice. In order to find out which forms and methods would suit my work best, it often helps to take, as a point of departure, a work or book that upsets me. I want to start by addressing a book on narration in visual art, which I found lacking in imagination. The publication in question is Artist Novels by David Maroto and Joanna Zielińska, it focuses on the phenomenon of the visual artist writing a novel, and whether novels could be considered to be a medium in their own right within the visual arts. David Maroto states that narrative fiction could be a valid manner to convey the complex

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content surrounding a visual work into an accessible form. ‘Instead of delegating the production of a text that bridges the gap between the audience and an artwork, which often brings obscurity to that artwork through highly specialised critical jargon, some artists have decided to take the responsibility to write a text that mediates between artwork and audience in an accessible format, like the novel.’

If the novel would be written for the purpose of mediating between an artwork and an audience, possibly even as a way to explain visual works, then the novel would be constrained by a framework (that of the visual work). To me, this seems a rigid and didactic way to approach literature, as if the novel or fiction would function as some kind of manual. Maroto calls the novel ‘an accessible format.’ I personally do not see how some of the more complex works from the history of literature are more accessible than the key works from the history of visual art. I also wonder if the term “artist novels” as opposed to “writer novels” isn’t a form of tautology. I have always considered the writer an artist in his or her own right. Maroto continues by asking why artists are appropriating ‘an obsolete genre [the novel], and if so, why now?’ By saying that the novel, thus a big part of literature, is no longer in use, it seems that Maroto is placing visual art on a pedestal.

I don’t think that novels should serve as a way to “bridge a gap,” I think it is in fact important that novels do not try to serve anything or anyone, in the same way as I think that visual art should stay away from this. I also dislike Maroto’s clear distinction between visual artists and writers. Throughout the history of cultural production, there have been many people whose work overlapped between these fields, whose Wikipedia describes them as both visual artists, writers and/or film- theatre makers. By reading Artist Novels I found out that making such a clear distinction between these categories doesn’t seem necessary to me in this case. Although I would like the idea – instead of organising the books on my shelf by colour, size, or in alphabetical order – of categorising my books by the profession of the author. I would of course have a section for “plain writers”, but I would also create sections for “veterinarian/writers”, “meteorologist/writers”, “butcher/writers” and “musician/writers”. In this way, I would view my collection of books as something positive that came out of the categories we like to create. When I introduce myself as a visual artist to a stranger, I hear a giggling voice in my head saying: ‘you, an artist?’ As if it were just a role I am playing. And, if this is “just a role”, I might at times take on a different role as well: the role of a sound

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6 David Maroto and Joanna Zielinska, ed. Artist Novels (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 11.
technician, a golfer or a filmmaker for example. I will begin the next chapter by mentioning a couple of artists and writers who also liked to play with the idea of a double identity.
Dear Double,

In *Negotiating with the dead: a writer on writing*, Margaret Atwood describes a process of duplicity in writing which I find interesting in relation to the creation of another identity. She describes a sort of double identity; the person who exists when no writing is going on, the one who does the groceries and picks the children up from school; and then there is the other one, the one that shares the same body but takes over when the writing takes place.

You might say I was fated to be a writer, either that, or a con-artist or a spy or some kind of criminal, because I was endowed at birth with a double identity. Due to the romanticism of my father, I was named after my mother, but then there were two of us, so I had to be called something else. Thus I grew up with a nickname, which had no legal validity, while my real name— if it can be called that— sat on my birth certificate, unknown to me, ticking away like a time-bomb. What a revelation it was to discover that I was not who I was?

Fernando Pessoa took the idea of a double identity of a writer a step further: he often employed heteronyms. Heteronyms differ from pseudonyms in that the characters have their own biography, which enables the author to write in different styles: the fictitious poet and ship engineer Álvaro de Campos being one of them. Álvaro de Campos sailed to the East and described his experiences in his poem *Opiarium*. He was a decadent dandy and heavy drinker; it could be that in him, Pessoa infused all the emotion and a way of living he never allowed himself. Cy Twombly might have felt related to the idea of a double identity of an artist when he made a small monument out of plaster; on one side of which he wrote in pencil: “In Memory of Álvaro de Campos.” [Fig. 1]

The film *La Double Vie de Véronique* is based entirely on the idea of duplicity. The main score in Krzysztof Kieślowski’s film is composed by the fictitious 18th century Dutch composer Van de Budenmayer, a pseudonym invented by Kieślowski and the composer

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7 Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the dead: a writer on writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 35.

Zbigniew Preisner. When the protagonist Veronique hears the music, she catches glimpses of her Polish double Weronika. It isn’t always clear when the music is in her ears, when it’s in her mind, or when it’s only present to the viewer. For the last year or so, I have become more aware of the role of ambient sounds connected to certain places in my videos (I will discuss this further in chapter IV).

It was never my intention to come up with an alter ego in my own work. In a way, it happened while I was working on one of my fictional characters. The first person, or the “I” in the voice-over of my videos, is often associated with the voice of the author/artist. The audience came to think of my fictional creations as different versions of myself: during an exhibition in Norway in which I showed my video The Inhabitants – where the “I” is a sound-sensitive writer who writes a play about the island of Jan Mayen, – I was approached by several people who asked me if the ambient sounds in the exhibition weren’t too much for my sensitive ears.

At first I was surprised and found it somewhat entertaining. Later, on the plane back to Reykjavik, it also scared me. I never presented the video as an autobiography. In the process of making it, I was in fact considering an actor to play the role of Alfons - the character in The Inhabitants who is sensitive to sound. [Fig. 2] From this experience I started to question the use of the first person (which I will discuss further in chapter III) and the possibility of using fiction as a way to explain the things (objects, situations and stories) that I am drawn to. One could of course state that by placing oneself in a certain situation, the artist, while being in the role of an artist, might turn any task into an artwork. Am I a different person when I travel somewhere in the role of an artist? Why do I feel an urge to observe/record a situation in the role of someone else, a sound-technician for example – like I did in zesentwintig gaten (26 holes)? Does it give me a feeling of freedom?

To explore the possibilities of a fictitious author/artist, I re-watched Sans Soleil, a documentary/ travel story by Chris Marker, for which he invented the cinematographer Sandor Krasna and his brother, the musician Michel Krasna, to accompany him through various countries during the shooting of his film (in reality, the music and cinematography were done by Chris Marker himself). Throughout the film a narrator reads letters sent to her by the cameraman Sandor Krasna, weaving together footage from Japan, Africa, Iceland, France and San Francisco. To me, it seems that the creation of a fictitious cinematographer and musician while travelling somewhere, gives a filmmaker who works in an essayistic
way an enormous sense of freedom. Every character has their own made-up set of rules and characteristics – a bit like Pessoa’s heteronyms. The different roles can be explored and a specific situation can be approached from many different angles.

Marker is known to have fictionalised his own biography as well: his real name was Christian-François Bouche-Villeneuve. Presumably born on the 29th of July (the same day on which he died), in either Paris, or Ulan Bator. According to him, in the human imagination, ‘it is after all perfectly possible to be born in two places at once.’9 When travelling elsewhere, the reading of a work however still depends heavily on the biography and the place of birth of the maker. Much has been written about the roles attributed to gender and nationality, it would be too big of a topic to cover in this essay. I will therefore speak of small personal experiences. But who is the “I” that I refer to? What happens when we turn her into the third person? Is she a European female in her twenties who attended art school and who grew up on a boat? She might be someone who, when she was young, would become quite enraged when she would read a book or watch a documentary depicting children who grew up on a boat; as if they were some kind of anomaly – although she had never heard of the word ‘anomaly,’ back then. When she enrolled in art school and started to make her own work, she became aware of the difficulties when depicting a situation or place different than the situation or place that one is accustomed to. At the same time, she can imagine that she would never address certain topics – like growing up on a boat, or the sea – simply because they would feel too close to her.

The sea and personal journeys are recurring themes in Tacita Dean’s work. She seems to have a personal approach when it comes to the use of the first person in moving image, according to her, ‘filmmaking is deeply connected to a personal vision, a certain way of perceiving the world around us.’10 She stretches this notion onto the viewer as well: ‘The work can only ever exist in the subjective experience and biography of the perceiver.’11 I feel related to this way of thinking; it would dismantle the notion of the narrator’s voice as the voice of the author in disguise. It would therefore allow more freedom while experiencing the work.


11 Ibid., 44.
There is no commentary in most of Dean’s films, instead, her visual work is accompanied by ‘asides’; separate pieces of writing. She said that ‘the narrative thus functions as a supplement in relation to the film, but on occasions the film is also a supplement to the narrative.’\textsuperscript{12} The film could probably function without the supplement as well. During an exhibition in Reykjavík I showed my video \textit{The Inhabitants} with a supplement in the form of a text. During an exhibition a couple of months later, I nonetheless decided that I wanted to show the same video without the additional printed text, the video however still has a voice-over. A voice-over might be more authoritative than texts which resemble Dean’s asides. I became aware of the different forms of text that appear in my videos alongside the images:

- No text, the images and ambient sounds speak for themselves.
- The text in the form of a voice-over.
- The text is presented as a supplement to the video, in an additional printed piece of writing.
- The text is spoken out loud by characters/actors.

So far, I have only experimented once with the voice of actors in my videos. During the making of the video \textit{Yellowhammer Infrasound} I tried the voice of two male actors, in the end I however decided to only use subtitles. Right now I feel drawn to the essayistic qualities of the voice-over and the speculative qualities of the written word.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 86.
II  Being in different places at the same time

In an interview about the film Island, set on the Swedish island of Gotland, Fiona Tan describes a feeling of being there – on the island – and yet of being somewhere else. She experiences this feeling as an image of memory, a sort of double projection, where two places at a certain moment can exist simultaneously in our mind.\(^\text{13}\)

The narrator in the film speaks about sleeping naked under a mosquito net. When we think of the climate in Sweden this appears somewhat unlikely, as if there exists some sort of gap in time or place.

I often question my need for different places, or my desire to be in different places at the same time. Why don’t I stay in Iceland for an uninterrupted period? Why do I often have a tendency to ponder over the past or the future rather than staying in the present?

Miwon Kwon discusses locational identity in her book One Place after Another. She describes the current interest in site-oriented practices that mobilise the artist to create works in different parts of the world. ‘Thus, if the artist is successful, he or she travels constantly as a freelancer, often working on more than one site-specific project at a time, globetrotting as a guest, tourist, adventurer, temporary-in-house-critic, or pseudo-ethnographer.’\(^\text{14}\) Kwon refers to Renée Green's World Tour, a reinstallation of four site-specific projects produced in different parts of the world, incorporating the tension around the mobilisation of the artist and the feeling of authenticity attributed to a site:

‘By bringing several distinct projects together, World Tour sought to reflect on the problematic conditions of present-day site specificity, such as the ethnographic predicament of artist who are frequently imported by foreign institutions and cities as expert/exotic visitors … Just as shifts in the structural organization of cultural production alter the form of the art commodity (as service) and the authority of the artist (as primary narrator and protagonist), values like


\(^{14}\) Miwon Kwon, One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 46.
originality, authenticity, and singularity are also reworked in site-oriented art – evacuated form the art work and attributed to the site – reinforcing a general cultural valorization of places as the locus of authentic experience and coherent sense of historical and personal identity.¹⁵

I wonder if I am suffering from this state of the artist described by Miwon Kwon. My fictional journey to Jan Mayen in The Inhabitants was never meant to take place in reality. Instead, I wanted to focus on the translation between my written text and the visual imagery. Simultaneously, I wanted to incorporate some of the aspects given to me by the actual journey that a polar archaeologist that I interviewed and who travelled to Jan Mayen undertook. In a way I mimicked a working method as employed by writers who decided to stay at home. In his essay Writing the Sea, Michel de Certeau describes the process in which Jules Verne often worked while writing his novels. According to a contract that Verne established with his French publisher in 1877, a geographer in service of the National Library, Gabriel Marcel, was responsible for assembling the data necessary for the construction of Verne's fictional landscapes. Although Verne never traveled to some of the places depicted in his novels, he familiarized himself with these places by examining the information provided by Marcel.¹⁶

In my current project, I however take the opposite approach as in The Inhabitants. I don’t only imagine travelling somewhere; in the autumn of 2015 I did physically travel to Nagoya to look for a statue of the hydraulic engineer Johannis de Rijke, who created several flood control and water management projects in Japan. The focus of my project (which I will discuss in further detail in chapter VI) lies on two identical statues of him; one situated in a park close to Nagoya and the other one next to the sea in a small town in the Netherlands. Unlike The Inhabitants, where I appear in the video in person, the narrator in this video will only be 'visible' through camera movement, hands and a voice, to create more speculation around the image of the author/artist. And to get back to Tacita Dean who mentioned the subjective experience and biography of the perceiver, when the narrator is not depicted, some things in the video might give the audience a feeling of recognition. It would therefore allow more freedom while experiencing the work. And whereas I did in fact travel to

¹⁵ Ibid., 52.

Colijnsplaats and Nagoya, the structure of the video – the statues are only shown through reproductions or close-ups – gives the impression of a fictional statue, or a fictional journey. The journey might as well not have taken place.
III Gaps: different realities and the voice that says “I”

Through the creation of narratives I try to achieve a form of estrangement and self-reflection. Narration can be seen as a way to put things together, to include and exclude. I often question the voice of the narrator and the use of the first person singular in my videos and in the way in which I speak/write about my work. To me it seems that ‘including and excluding’ could function as very convenient tools when guiding the audience in their thoughts about a work.

The literary critic/writer Jacq Vogelaar stated that a diary is the most artificial form of writing there is, exactly because it resembles a natural form of writing (a direct depiction: not yet edited or rewritten). He extends this to the autobiography, another form of writing which claims to be authentic. I want to extend this to the texts that we create around our artworks: our statements, our dissertations, the way in which we speak about our work during studio visits. I think that they similarly often claim to be authentic. Magnus Bärtås’ speaks of the “work story”: ‘a work story is a written or oral narrative about the forming of materials, immaterial units, situations, relations, and social practices that constitutes, or leads to, an artwork.’ According to Bärtås, ‘the work story can scatter meaning rather than capturing it. This is the essayistic work story that permits a writer/artist to wander off and touch upon a subject as if in passing.’ It is this ‘touching upon subjects as if in passing’ which appeals to me. The act of storytelling – storytelling in general, not just the work story – gives the artist a sense of freedom. It enables the artist to experiment with different roles and methodologies, to establish connections between things that weren’t there before. These connections free images and words from their original meaning, in the gaps in between something else might appear; just like in film or video where we can experience something unknown in the junctures between the images. In this way, the first person singular can create an alternate reality.

17 Magnus Bärtås, You Told Me, 7.
18 Jacq Vogelaar, Terugschrijven (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1987), 304.
19 Magnus Bärtås, You Told Me, 7.
In *A Reader on Reading*, Alberto Manguel describes himself as an eight-year-old reading a story in the first person singular. At the age of eight, to say “I” and tell a story, meant for him a promise of truth. He continues by saying that ‘On that terrible afternoon, reading became, not a voyage of exploration guided by a trusted author, but a game in which the author only played the part of the author and the reader the part of the reader.’

When I started to wonder who the “I” is that I present in my video’s, a whole set of accompanying questions started to appear. Does the audience, like the eight-year-old Manguel, think that it is a version of myself? Who is the “I” travelling to Japan for example? In what role am I documenting the statue and recording the sounds of the river? How much subjectivity should I deliberately show in my final outcome? Why do I notice certain books more than others when I visit places that are new to me? [Fig. 3a-b] I would probably notice different books would I visit the same place in a year’s time. I make connections between the thoughts/projects that occupy me at a certain moment in time and the things that I ‘randomly’ stumble upon. Is it horribly egocentric when I experience some kind of pleasure when I read that Chris Marker was born on the 29th of July: the same day on which I was born? Is it horribly egocentric that I refer to myself all the time? Am I changing into one of my own fictional creations, am I more sensitive to sound than I was a year ago? And most of all, am I still lying: are the stories that I like to surround my work with more legitimate when I use the first person singular? Even if I try to be as honest as possible, I am still shaping my experiences and references into a certain form.

In an article with the title *On using “I” and first-person narration* containing an interview with Moyra Davey, Iman Issa mentions her occasional discomfort with this “personal voice”: ‘I felt uncomfortable with the enormous leeway an artist can have when using such a voice. As if it gave one license to draw connections between different elements and narratives with no justification beyond the incontestable claim of subjective inclinations. At that same time, I was convinced that certain elements and topics could only be accessed with it.’

It seems that Issa mainly refers to the use of an “I” in audio-visual work. I personally think that this ‘problem’ with the first person singular doesn’t just occur in videos, it equally appears in the way artist talk and write about their work, in their “work-stories”.

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20 Alberto Manguel, *A Reader on Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 128.

Chris Marker said that: ‘contrary to what people say, using the first person in films tends to be a sign of humility: “All I have to offer is myself.”’

He did however often use pseudonyms and different roles. The appropriation of different roles can be seen here as a methodology to explore different perspectives. ‘A diverse methodology means to try and experiment with different roles, and by extension the interrogation of the functions of different roles.’ This might explain my own desire to create different roles while I am working: the voice-over adds elements of self-reflection. At the same time I like to think that all of history, and consequently, all visual art, starts from the individual.

In the essayistic video Les Goddesses, Moyra Davey combines the biography of the 18th century writer/philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft with her own thoughts on the human urge to tell stories. While walking around her house and speaking into a microphone, Davey calls herself a flâneuse who never leaves her apartment.

She searches for different connections between Mary Wollstonecraft’s daughters and her own life: overlapping names, the reoccurrence of specific dates. The content of the video is based on a person that did in fact exist. But what would have happened had the video been based entirely on fiction? I often feel as if my own visual work needs aspects from reality, as if it would otherwise not have the right to exist. At the same time, I feel that these aspects from reality can constrain my work; they limit my imagination from flowing freely. Then again, how legitimate are “aspects from reality” to begin with? If Davey had depicted Mary Wollstonecraft as someone who was always accompanied by a chubby cat, there probably would be few people who would object that in fact, Mary Wollstonecraft hated cats.

In the interview with Iman Issa about the use of “I”, Moyra David said that: ‘Borges points out that people “long for confessions”, and viewers have told me the same, that they prefer the grittier, autobiographical material in my narratives.’

This is one of the reasons why it seems tempting to create a fictional (auto)biographical story around my visual work, to legitimise my decisions. Or, in order to experiment with different roles and working methods: to make up a character or a heteronym that deals with the making of my work. At the same time, the use of the first person singular in writing and

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22 Catherine Lupton, Chris Marker: Memories of the Future, 12.
23 Magnus Bärtås, You Told Me, 43.
25 Iman Issa, “On using “I” and first-person narration, interview with Moyra Davey”.

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moving image can be frightening, because it is where you are most exposed. I have to think here of Maggie Nelson’s *The Red Parts*, in which she looks back on the trial of the murderer of her aunt. I can imagine that, would I ever write a text or create a work based on similar experiences in my life, I would be happy to switch to “she” instead of “I”. Some things can simply seem too close in the first person, they can make the author re-live things from the past that are better kept at distance; “she” might be able to create this necessary distance. In the next chapter I will discuss how some of the things discussed in this chapter may or may not come together in my work based on two recent trips to Japan.

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Spring
While I specifically purchased a ticket to Japan to look for a statue in the autumn of 2015, the project zesentwintig gaten (26 holes), which I made a couple of months before, started to take shape while I was already there. While walking along a river in the outskirts of a former fishing village, I encountered a situation that I found interesting to work with; along the riverside, a solitary woman was playing a game of golf. She had built her own course. Plastic bottles filled with water served as a substitute for traditional holes.

My work often derives from certain objects or situations that I observe in reality and trigger my imagination. Along the river I took photographs of the landscape and the objects that I encountered. Although the objects were quite commonplace – water bottles and plastic buckets – they also appeared strangely unfamiliar because of the way in which they were placed. I think it partly had to do with the fact that I was in Japan, a country which is in many ways unfamiliar to me. I can however also imagine that this situation would have triggered my imagination had I met this golfer while walking along a river in Iceland or the Netherlands. I basically don’t know anything about golf, that doesn’t change depending on the country I’m in at each moment. As a follow-up on this encounter in rural Japan, I started to write a short internal monologue from the perspective of the golfer and a sound technician, using the photographs to supplement the text. Next to Hanna (the golfer) and the sound technician, I was interested in natural phenomena as characters. I was particularly interested in weather forecasts at the time. I started to think of a sound forecast as a supplement to the weather forecast. Instead of listening to the sounds that I had collected along the river, I translated them into words. Because I didn’t understand the spoken words around me, I was more aware of the ambient sound. I came to think of this sound forecast as a way to comment on the scene, similar to the function of the chorus in Greek theatre. The text eventually resulted in a printed poster. [Excerpts from the text, where the sound/weather forecast functions as the chorus and a description of the characters, can be found in the visual appendix. Fig. 4a-b-c-d]
Back in Reykjavík I read Empire of Signs by Roland Barthes and Talisman by Yoko Tawada. Barthes’s aim for his projects was to understand ‘his’ Japan. He acknowledged to have approached the country as a “fictive nation”, not as an ultimate cultural reality. Similar to the way in which I created a fictive version of golf. It was Barthes’s goal to achieve alienation, to undo his own reality, although there was still the risk of exoticising the foreign. Yoko Tawada – writing in both German and Japanese; often from the perspective of a first person, female, Japanese narrator; resembling herself – wrote Talisman in a mock ethnographic tone. The book consists of 16 short stories that document travels to Europe and Asia. Several of the stories are set in Germany and consider common objects and practices of everyday German life. She describes language, the body, social codes, customs, food and packaging. In Tawada’s Erzähler ohne Seelen the narrator offers an approach similar to Barthes’:

We learn a lot more, when we try to describe a fictitious society. How should their lives look like? How does their language function? … It would be equally interesting to play an observer who comes from an imagined culture. How would he describe ‘our’ world? 

This text can be seen as a parody of the traditional travelogue, where the author already anticipates what they will find, before the actual departure. In the essay Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Tawada considers how in contemporary travel, photography is used to come to terms with an unfamiliar environment. Susan Sontag remarked that photography allows people to ‘take possession of space in which they are insecure … The very activity of taking pictures is soothing, and assuages general feelings of disorientation.’ It made me think of my own experiences as a young, female and European artist travelling to Kaizu, a small town near Nagoya in Japan, and Colijnsplaat, a coastal town in the Netherland, to look for


28 Yoko Tawada, Talisman (Stuttgart: Konkursbuch 1996), 24. This is a loose translation in English from the original in German: “Man erfährt viel mehr, wenn man versucht, ein ausgedachtes Volk zu beschreiben. Wie soll ihr Leben aussehen? Wie funktioniert ihre Sprache? … Genauso interessant ist es, einen Betrachter zu spielen, der aus einer fiktiven Kultur kommt. Wie würde er ‘unsere’ Welt beschreiben?”

the identical statues of the Dutch hydraulic engineer Johannis de Rijke, and my attempts to record the sounds and document the bronze/stone of the statues with my camera.

Autumn
I had come to know about this engineer during my trip to Japan in spring, through one of the waterworks he had built, in the village where I was staying. At the time it didn’t particularly interest me. It was only later, at the end of the summer, while I was looking through the pictures I wanted to include in the poster belonging to *zesentwintig gaten (26 holes)*, that I googled his name and found out about the two identical statues; one in Japan and one in the Netherlands. I became fascinated with these two statues because they gave me a feeling of being able to be in different places at the same time. The choice of these statues in particular was a coincidence. I personally do not connect them too much to the personal life of Johannis de Rijke. In fact, I like to think that they could have been of anyone. It is however important that they are placed in surroundings where the sounds are distinctly different from one another. I started to wonder if the two statues know of each other and can somehow communicate, despite the distance. In my mind the two statues started to blend into one.

Right after I had booked a ticket to Nagoya to search for the statue, I doubted if it made a difference whether I would actually leave my apartment in order to make a video work around these statues. Although I had only seen them through pixelated pictures on the internet, I already had a clear image of them in my head. I thought of Yoko Tawada who referred to the author/artist who already anticipates what they will find, before the actual departure. Because it was important for me not to visit Jan Mayen when I made *The Inhabitants*, I decided that I would have to take the opposite approach this time; I had to take the plane and look for the actual statue in Japan. I still had a few weeks left before my departure, so there was plenty of time to consider different ways to film/document the statue. I taped the following note to my wall:

A mixture of a theatre play and a nature documentary.

To me, the nature documentary is the ultimate way to travel someplace while staying at home. Some documentaries have a soothing atmosphere to them, people can watch nature documentaries in order to forget about their daily worries and instead focus on an idealised version of a rainforest, similar to the idea of those infamous cd’s with nature sounds that
people listen to while they try to fall asleep, or similar to a weather forecast, which I like to see as a way to create order out of chaos.

The footage I eventually shot and the sounds I recorded in Kaizu and Colijnsplaat are more focused on my direct experience of the statues. The images in the video *Sounds of the Sea, Crickets and Translucent Yellow* refer to the artwork while it is being made [Fig. 5], they consequently also refer to the work story and the role of the artist. In order to experiment with different roles and working methods I like the idea of making up a character or a heteronym that deals with the making of my work, or to see myself as a subtle version of a character while I am creating the work.

To create the possibility of an imagined statue, the two statues are only shown from up close or as replicas, the statues are never shown in their entirety. The close-ups in the collage are all taken from the same spot in a deliberately clumsy manner while I was standing on top of the huge marble plinth on which the statue was placed. In this way, the lens of the camera was incredibly close to the legs of the statue, while the head was still high up in the air. It was my intention to approach the statue in Colijnsplaat from a similar angle, this however proved to be quite difficult, since the plinth here was not a rectangular piece of marble, which was ideal for climbing upon, but a big slippery stone. [Fig. 6a-b-c]

**World-making and fictitious souvenirs**

One of the props in my video around the two statues is a small statue made of wax. [Fig. 7] This small version of the statue doesn’t have feet, which can refer to the missing plinths. Here, the piece of wax functions as a relic or a souvenir, which links the two statues with each other. Susan Stewart examined the souvenir in her book *On Longing*. She wrote that ‘the souvenir moves history into private time’.30 Because of its miniaturisation the souvenir turns a public symbol into a private possession. The souvenir functions in two ways; they can either be representations and purchasable in large quantities, or they are souvenirs of individual experiences, which are not available as consumer goods. The individual souvenir is closely linked to the autobiography: scrapbooks, memory quilts and photo albums all serve as examples. In travelogues or memories of undertaken journeys, both of these

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versions appear. Susan Stewart concludes her chapter on the souvenir by stating that ‘the souvenir [just like the statue] is destined to be forgotten; its tragedy lies in the death of memory, the tragedy of all autobiography.’ The fictitious souvenir in my video brings me to the creation of fictional worlds in art. My work always begins with finding a subject of interest and then exploring where that interest leads. The objects and situations that I am drawn to often catch me by surprise. In a couple of seconds something can fascinate me for no particular reason. I then try to establish a certain sense of estrangement, to create a speculative reality. I think we all collect certain books, references and images to support our own reality. According to Mieke Bal, ‘this is an essential human feature, that originates in the need to tell stories.’

Amelia Barikin wrote about the link between the ‘world-making’ in science fiction writing and the use of world-making in contemporary art. Why do some artists make worlds while others make works? She cites Nelson Goodman who in Ways of Worldmaking writes that ‘worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking.’ In this way, we could construct several, contradictory worlds. This seems related to the montage of film and video. The many thoughts, images, sounds and impressions that I gathered while in the process of creating a work, eventually all come together in a narrative. My work traces the storyline of my subjects, but I often find my own experiences while dealing with them equally important. This narrative could again be linked to Magnus Bärtås’ work story. When I woke up one morning there was an extra note attached to my wall, it said:

All in all, for a work that wants to be 'a mixture between a theatre play and a nature documentary', this video shows fairly little theatrical elements or reflections on nature. Seems like your work is what happened while you were busy making other plans.

No idea who put that there.

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31 Ibid., 151.

32 As cited in Magnus Bärtås’ You Told Me, 34.

Is some of the fiction written by artists as described by David Maroto in *Artist Novels*, which I mentioned in the introduction, a result of the theoretical texts artists are often asked to write about their own work these days? Is it an attempt to create a fictional work story? A method I might have employed in chapter IV *Two times Japan*? To come up with a story, seems to me a better solution than to capture my work in a couple of alluring words. I could say that my work is about the absurdity of the human condition. The problem with that is that the giggling voice I heard in my head when I introduced myself as an artist, is now taking on an intensified version; it is laughing so hard that it gives me a headache. Because I think that humour, poetry, absurdity and the fantastical – the things that I find important – are easily destroyed by explanation, and often also if they are simply addressed by the author/artist, I might feel more comfortable saying that my work is not about anything.

“My work is not about anything.” Saying this to myself doesn’t feel completely right either. Recently I read in a newspaper an article about ‘theme-tyranny’ in film and literature. According to the article, a book or film doesn’t have any value in itself any longer; out of economical reasons the publishers would overwhelm books with attributed themes. A result of this is that criticism in the press often tends to discuss these themes, rather than the actual book or film in question. The work is reduced to an anecdote and the creator is consequently hailed or attacked as if everything in the book or film would be their personal opinion. The article continues by mentioning the general enthusiasm for works “based on a true story” and the paradoxes this brings along, since fact and fiction almost always collide. I would like to draw a parallel with visual art here. This article describes a feeling I have grown accustomed to since I started to apply for funding and/or residencies. We are often asked to fit into a certain theme or to complete an application form in which we have to fill in the checkboxes of the themes that interests us. I, for one, would feel terribly relieved if I were to simply come up with a major theme to research through my work, and stick with that theme for the rest of my life. It would undoubtedly save me from a lot of sleepless nights. I can imagine it would make me feel legitimate, as if my work would serve some kind of

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higher purpose. It makes me wonder if I would, in order to receive funding, completely alter the initial story and/or themes around my work, to tell some convenient lies along the way. But I also wonder if we aren’t all doing this to a certain extent? In chapter IV I mentioned Mieke Bal, who said that it is an essential human feature to collect references and images that support our own reality, that this originates in our need to tell stories. I think it is an essential human feature to tell ourselves all kinds of stories about our own being in order to live peacefully. The themes we attribute to our work could function here as anchor points in the stories about ourselves and our work.

The American poet and novelist Jesse Ball teaches a course on lying in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago’s MFA in Writing program. He also wrote a novel in which the narrator is similarly called “Jesse Ball”. He describes his course on lying as ‘it’s just a reappraisal of the general moral position that it’s wrong to lie and it’s right to tell the truth. That’s reductive and silly, since everyone lies all the time.’³⁵ Likewise, Magnus Bärtås states that the work story and the life story share propagandistic and idealizing features.³⁶ This made me decide that, in order to serve my daily happiness, I would very much like to come up with some themes, a convenient work story and a clear conclusion about my recent work. I am just not sure if it would serve my work and my imagination.

**When even the weather doesn’t matter**

I continued to talk to myself through the notes on my wall. This time it said:

> Whatever you wrote in your thesis today, write it in reverse tomorrow.

To me, a conclusion always seems to work in reverse. I don’t mean the actual words or letters, but the events described: When I was about eight years old I would tell my Dutch classmates that I spent the first years of my life on a riverboat cruising the waterways of Europe. I made up colourful stories of my first years there and I created a whole new identity for myself. But this isn’t entirely true; in reality I am born in France. That is how easy it is. In the meantime, I feel quite all right just sitting inside, watering the plants, pondering what might have happened in Japan, and to what extent the events described in


³⁶ Magnus Bärtås, *You Told Me*, 52.
chapter IV fit my own reality. Would they fit the reality of others as well? During this week, which I spent on my own in an apartment in Amsterdam, I printed out a second version of the quote by James Wood:

No single story can ever explain itself: this enigma at the heart of story is itself a story.

And glued it above my sister’s desk, because this apartment in Amsterdam is actually hers. One could say that the two of us are double as well; strangers tend to think that we are twins. She accompanied me on both trips to Japan, so she would be the only person who could vouch for me actually having been there both times.

When I was looking for an infrasound array in two forests in Iceland for *Yellowhammer Infrasound* I was also accompanied by another person. The text in this video describes two people searching for the array, and although this did in fact happen – we did look for the array in two different forests and I did contact a sound engineer – the text is also partly fictional. I think that in order to deal with fact, it is often best to resort to fiction. A fact is that I tend to create alternate realities out of the things that I encounter, and also that I like to question the voice of the artist. In literature this has been a common practice since the publication of Roland Barthes’ *The Death of the Author* in which he argues that a text and the biography or intentions of its author are often unrelated.37 I think that they can be related, but I also think that this ‘truth’ aspect is very flexible. I also think that written or spoken words surrounding visual art, just like for example autobiography, to a certain extent still claims to be authentic. At the same time, and I am sure many others do, I feel some reluctance when I have to answer the question “what is your work about?” While I am working, I find it crucial to have an intuitive and emotional response to the things that I find on the way. My need to create stories can at times feel like a constraint, in the same way as the definitive words do. A press release connected to the exhibition *What is lost is at the beginning* by the artist Angelika Markul stated that:

> Exploring means plunging into uncertainty, but at the same time, immersion into that which is unrecognizable or oblivious to us. The answer to the emerging uncertainty usually arises in the form of a phantasm or myth. Instead of hasty attempts to fill or compensate for the loss, the artist suggests exactly the opposite. She proposes to stop on the threshold, to immerse oneself in the

uncertainty and to commence a certain game … Angelika Markul focuses on places or situations in which what might be called “liminal phenomena” manifest.\textsuperscript{38}

This take on the word “exploring” seems relevant to me in relation to my recent work. For \textit{Yellowhammer Infrasound} I deliberately visited a place of which I knew there was a sound lower than I would be able to perceive. [Fig. 8] While I was there I couldn’t hear or see the infrasound or the array, but I still knew it was there and I wanted to frame it somehow. To me, this kind of uncertainty is connected to a sensuous experience of a certain place. The musician an author David Toop wrote in \textit{Sinister Resonance} that ‘sound is a haunting, a ghost, a presence whose location in space is ambiguous and whose existence in time is transitory.’\textsuperscript{39}

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\textsuperscript{39} David Toop, “The Mediumship of Listening: Notes on Sound in the Silent Arts,” 1.
One can look at seeing, but one can’t hear hearing.\textsuperscript{40}

In the MA Exhibition I showed two videos:

- \textit{Sounds of the Sea, Crickets and Translucent Yellow} combines two identical statues with each other: one of them is situated in a park close to Nagoya, the other one next to the sea in a small town in the Netherlands. The work focuses not on the historical associations that statues often entail, but rather on the way the statues function as representatives of the environment they are placed in. With \textit{Sounds of the Sea, Crickets and Translucent Yellow} I wanted to experience whether I could combine the sounds of two different places with one another, in a similar way as how I combined the statues visually.

- In the video \textit{Yellowhammer Infrasound} a narrator is searching for an infrasound array that is placed in a small forest in Iceland. The array is placed there in order to measure the trembling of the earth and to calculate volcanic activity. Infrasound is lower than the human hearing can perceive; when the two characters reach the forest where the infrasound array should be placed, all they hear is bird sounds. The sound of the yellowhammer draws their attention away from the infrasound.

In the text of \textit{zesentwintig gaten (26 holes)} the written description of sounds function as a storyteller. In order to make the sounds into a storyteller in \textit{Yellowhammer Infrasound}, there is no voice-over in the video, only subtitles.

Both of my videos departed from the idea that the senses can be a way to be at two places at once. I like to see these two videos as stories about the artistic process and the desire to explore. The word “exploring” often functions as a metaphor for the artistic process, it can be connected to Magnus Bärtås’ work story: ‘a written or oral narrative about the forming of

materials, immaterial units, situations, relations, and social practices that constitutes, or leads to, an artwork.  

What particularly fascinated me about infrasound while I was working on *Yellowhammer Infrasound* is that it can be linked to ghost sightings; people experience something: a sound lower than the human ear can hear, but they are not sure what it is. To me, the artistic process works in a similar way: I feel attracted to something but I often find it difficult to define what it exactly is, or I find it difficult to explain why I feel attracted to particular things. During the MA defence Didier Semin asked me if I had ever heard of Duchamp’s “infrathin”, a notion said by Duchamp to be undefinable – although the art historian Hector Obalk attempted to define it as ‘a distance or a difference you cannot perceive, but you can only imagine.’

This description seems fitting to both of my videos, the two forests in which I was looking for the infrasound array, and the difference between the two individual statues.

The text in *Yellowhammer Infrasound* caused me some trouble, I tried different kinds of voice-overs: two male voices in English with a strong Icelandic accent; two female voices in native English and finally, one female voice in Dutch. None of these voice-overs worked for me in the end. In order to fully focus on the ambient sound in the video, I realised that the voices would be too much of a distraction. The character of the speakers – their gender, nationality and age – became too important. Instead, I wanted the ambient sound by itself to function as a way of storytelling; instead of a voice-over I only used subtitles. [Fig. 9] It made me think of my reference to Tacita Dean in Chapter I, about certain things that can dismantle the notion of the narrator’s voice as the voice of the author in disguise: ‘The work can only ever exist in the subjective experience and biography of the perceiver.’

By only using subtitles in *Yellowhammer Infrasound*, the “missing” voice-over starts to act as a voice inside the head of viewer.

In the MA exhibition I showed these two videos on one monitor [Fig. 10] because the videos are connected to each other and are the result of a similar working process: I was searching for particular things – the infrasound array and the statues – and I needed to travel to

41 Magnus Bärtås, *You Told Me*, 7.

42 Hector Obalk, lecture on readymades, given at the College Art Association, Boston, Massachusetts, February 1996.

43 Jean-Christophe Royoux, Marina Warner and Germaine Greer, *Tacita Dean*, 44.
particular places in order to find these things. Both of the works are nevertheless fictional accounts of these travels. In *Sounds of the Sea, Crickets and Translucent Yellow* I deliberately didn’t show an image of the statues in their entirety in order to create the illusion of a fictional statue and a fictional journey. Although both of the videos contain fragments of things that I did experience during my journeys, I like to think of them as fictional essayistic videos in which I intuitively rework the information that I gather during my research process into a narrative.

This thesis started out from the idea that I enjoy working with text in my visual work but that I find it difficult to talk or write about the intuitive and fictional aspects of my practice. Writing offers a way to present all the information that I discovered during my research process to an audience, but as I was working on my two recent videos I realised that I can also easily drown in all this information and all these stories. In the future I might find a way to present information without always feeling the need to use written or spoken words. I however also realised that I greatly enjoy this process in which I gather information about certain things, where one piece of information will lead me to the next piece and so on, and that I will probably always have shifting feelings towards the mixture of text and visual art and a tendency to go around in circles and still being covered in uncertainty in the end.

2. Still from the video *The Inhabitants*, 2015.
3a. Stills from Sounds of the Sea, Crickets and Translucent Yellow, 2016.

3b. Sounds of the Sea, Crickets and Translucent Yellow, photograph, mouldy book with text in English, Icelandic and Dutch, 2016.
4a. Poster belonging to zesentwintig gaten (26 holes), 2015

Personages | Characters:

Een vrouw die haar eigen golfbaan bouwt en daarbij gebruik maakt van plastic waterflessen om de traditionele gaten in de grond te vervangen. (Het merendeel van de waterflessen is gevuld met regenwater, een aantal met kraanwater.)

A woman who is building her own golf course, using plastic bottles to replace the traditional holes in the ground. (The majority of the bottles are filled with rainwater, the rest with tap water.)

Een geluidstechnicus die geluiden verspreidt volgens de voorspelling van het weerbericht, als een pianist die de stomme film in het filmtheater van geluideffecten voorzag.

A sound technician who is broadcasting sounds mimicking the forecast of the weather report, resembling a pianist who provided sound in the movie theatre during the silent era.

De gebeurtenissen vinden plaats op een stuk braakliggend land, net buiten de stad, naast een kanaal of een kleine rivier, in de buurt van een oude fabriek omgeven door bomen die niet kunnen besluiten of ze na de randen vormen van een uitgebreid bos of deel uitmaken van het braakliggend land. In het gras staat een groot bord waarop de geluidsg- en weersvoorspellingen staan afgebeeld.

The events take place on a plot of wasteland, just outside the city, next to a canal or a small river, close to an old factory surrounded by trees that cannot decide whether they are the outskirts of an extensive forest or simply the fringe of a brownfield. A big sign depicting the sound- and weather forecasts is hanging on a pole in the grass.

4b. An excerpt from the text zesentwintig gaten (26 holes), 2015.
Weather forecast until midnight:
Increasing southwesterly winds, light drizzle and dropping temperatures.
Strongest winds expected in the coastal region.
Dry in the afternoon. Light drizzle in the evening.
Decreasing wind in the evening and night.
Probability of precipitation (40%).
River calm and faint, scarcely audible.

GELUIDSTECHNICUS | SOUND TECHNICIAN:
(GELUIDEN VAN EEN KALME RIVIER.)
(SOUNDS OF A CALM RIVER.)

4c. An excerpt from the text zesentwintig gaten (26 holes), 2015.

4d. A photograph of the golfer that triggered the narrative and the publication, 2015.
5. Melting the wax in order to create another replica of the statue, 2015.
6a. Collage made from close-ups of the two statues, 2016.
6b. Collage showing folds from previously being folded into the form of a boat, 2016.

6c. Close-up of the folds in the collage, 2016.

9. In order to turn the ambient sound into a storyteller, the video has subtitles but no voice-over. Still from Yellowhammer Infrasound, 2016.
10. The two videos shown together on one monitor in Kópavogur Art Museum Gerdarsafn, 2016.
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