

The Gravity of the Situation

By Anders Eiebakke

MARIANNE HEIER: JAMAIS – TOUJOURS

ANDREA LANGE: RITURNELLA

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*'For the hearts of these people are hardened,
and their ears cannot hear,
and they have closed their eyes
so their eyes cannot see,
and their ears cannot hear,
and their hearts cannot understand,
and they cannot turn to me
and let me heal them.'*

Acts of the Apostles 28:27

People in the West have never enjoyed greater formal protection and individual freedom. Nevertheless, increasing segments of the population have no rights. They live in hiding, on the run from the authorities. "Illegal immigrants" are the outlaws of our time.

At the same time, descendants of the Norwegian working classes enjoy prosperity. "We" have never had it so good. However, we may quickly become worse off if we do not address the current situation.

Political art practices often affirm their own moral scruples, and audiences seldom refute good intentions. In these exhibitions, however, we are confronted by uncomfortable truths that we cannot ignore without becoming complicit in the injustices at hand. We are confronted by the social reality of our welfare society, which is difficult to fully comprehend for radical, thinking people born and bred in Norway. We are all, that is everyone who belongs to the accepted majority, privileged and well fed, for now. Political initiative is required, but not for viewing our own happiness reflected in the misery of others. It is time to decide what sort of society we want to live in, because society as we know is rapidly changing.

Marianne Heier and Andrea Lange are committed artists who use abstract, aesthetic experiences to deal with questions that concern us all. They show how important rights are about to be eroded under the strain of global capitalism and that Europe's political traditions are on opposite sides in a battle where the outcome is, as yet, unknown. In their respective parallel exhibitions, they also show how artists, through their individual practices, can transcend political debates and create new, social understandings. Not least, they challenge our image of ourselves.

These two artists do not merely invoke important political questions, but also treat their art practices with great seriousness. For them, the meaning of art is inextricably linked to its epistemological depth, rather than to its social position. At the same time, they assume a critical stance, as making political art is problematic if the artist has an actual political goal. Both artists have reacted to what they see as the unacceptable conditions of global capitalism. They have spent a lot of time and energy on gaining insight into the actual state of affairs, and have studied, in particular, the conditions associated with Norwegian and broader, European policies.

We can, therefore, trace fundamental similarities in both exhibitions, not least in the artists' ability to see right through the transparent official rhetoric of European states, which is still imbued with nationalistic pathos. They also observe increasing racism and how it gradually becomes part of government policies.

Dehumanization

We ought to recognize the cynicism that lurks behind our young, presumptuous liberal and egalitarian nationalism: we are no better than anyone else. When some of our forefathers got the chance, they seized it and deported Jewish people. We are on the precipice of a similar political development where “undesirables” become dehumanized and stigmatized. The nationalistic demand for “integration” will soon be *passé* as fewer Norwegians want to have “the integrated” as their neighbours. It is hard to imagine that the increasing demands of integration will lead to anything other than a breakdown of European civilization. We stand before a new political reality.

Whereas liberals are still discussing “integration” as if the racists would want to intermix, the artists in these exhibitions go straight to the core of the political situation. Nevertheless, when we seek to immerse ourselves in their works of art, we can discern different artistic approaches to a political situation, which is both alarming and full of promise.

Travillons Toujours

Marianne Heier has opted to use her irritation over everyday experiences to create works of art that blur the distinction between “work” and “life”, “art” and “employment”.

The subtle, formal results of this process are morally challenging and thought-provoking. In the capacity of employee at various institutions, Heier has worked alongside others. She has taken the working conditions that she and other employees have seen as negative as a point of departure, and has financed architectural and interior design alterations to improve the workplace. These initiatives become institutionally critical works of art that have been described as “Trojan horses” as the finished works are donated to the institution, which can be problematic for its leaders to accept. This approach came about as the result of the fact that Heier needed to supplement her income as an artist, before it gradually developed into an artistic strategy of its own. Today, Heier, like many Norwegian artists, enjoys the public support structures that came about as part of the development of the Norwegian welfare state, where artists also fought to gain certain rights. That is why Heier can enter into a normal working situation with artistic motives to create a work of art based her own experiences of particular situations. These situations are, nevertheless, important because they concern everyday challenges that rarely capture the interest of the media, and that risk being seen as prosaic through the lens of our cultural reflexivity. In the triviality of the everyday, these

interventions can be as banal as changing the light setting with an awareness of how electric light affects people's images of themselves. Architectural and interior design details are similarly imbued with meaning. When Heier, for example, chooses to highlight authoritarian aesthetic details in the existing architecture, while creating a pleasurable working environment, she is underlining, not just the importance of history for our own time, but the mechanisms of subjection that currently exist.

The ambivalence of Heier's projects is uncomfortable. This sense is underlined when she ties the Norwegian economic boom to her own life. The first definitive, exploitable oil discoveries on the Norwegian continental shelf were made in 1968, the year she was conceived. The work *Saga Night* was installed at Maihaugen Museum, a museum that charts Norwegian housing from the 1700s until today, and thus functions as a mythological, symbol of Norwegian nation-building. Heier covered part of the museum walkways in asphalt, the parts that designated buildings from 1968 until the present day. The work was funded by Heier selling shares in oil companies that she had previously bought with money from her artist's grant. This gesture was ironic, but also consistent: Heier is part of a generation of Norwegians who, from nothing, were granted a standard of living greater than anyone could have imagined.

Heier's interest in how lives – and more importantly work – in Western societies have changed since the rebuilding after the Second World War is expressed in the seemingly naïve work *Jamais – Toujours (Never – Always)*. This work is based on the famous Situationist piece of graffiti *Ne Travaillez Jamais (Never Work)* on Rue de Seine in Paris from 1952. When Heier and Marco Vaglieri “restaged” the historical graffiti in its old location in 2009, the aim was to express the original idea behind the piece. However, over two generations have passed since the text was first written and the relationship between labour and capital has changed dramatically in our part of the world. Respect for the working process has been eroded in the West, concomitantly with increasing prosperity and the outsourcing of industry. Heier and Vaglieri's updated slogan, therefore, became *Travaillons Toujours*, which directly translates as “let us always work”. This slogan could be seen as a motto for the strike-breakers a few years ago. Today, the leading trend is for teenagers to go back-packing. They are not only alienated from the origin of goods, but from the working process itself.

Riturnella

Andrea Lange's strategy is to treat geo-political questions in a form that dwells on the extreme contradictions of our time. Her exhibition is entitled *Riturnella*, which is an equivocal term drawn from a traditional Southern Italian song. Its beautiful lyrics invoke emigration and dreams of a better life. The song belongs to a time that seems remote from our own, but social relations in Southern Italy remain complicated. This is also the region of the country where most of the refugees from Africa arrive by boat. The military effort to combat the “illegals” is carried out alongside mafia activities in the region. Neither “illegal” immigration nor the mafia would have come about in a just society with basic rights for all. Lange's exhibition title does not simply address migration, but also the return of authoritarian and racist ideologies, and the struggle against these ideologies.

Lange is conscious of the fact that she is politically confrontational in her work, and feels that there is an important potential in the exchange between the aesthetic experiences of the art world and political mobilisation outside its traditional spaces. Lange puts herself in an artistic dilemma: her practice transcends the boundaries between art and politics, and tries to generate

consequences that are beyond her control. She makes direct references to renowned American artist Bruce Nauman, without her multi-coded work requiring art historical references to be understood. Lange employs a beguiling approach where she draws on artistic experiences from Western Conceptual Art to political activism. At the same time, she asserts the freedom to bring street activism into the museum space where it can generate new meanings. She captures an important issue in the work *Pay Attention Motherfuckers*, which is a title appropriated from Nauman's famous text-based work from 1973. This multifaceted work takes the form of a silkscreen print within the Stenersen Museum, which will be freely distributed to visitors; a public poster project in advertising cases around Oslo; and an animated text on the screens of the arrivals and departures hall at Oslo Airport, Gardermoen. You do not have to know that the text on the screen – *No One Is Illegal* – is a well-used slogan for the militant, anti-fascist movement to understand its significance as you arrive in Norway on the outer borders of the Schengen Agreement remit. The question is what YOU think of the statement.

Lange refers to the “illegal immigrants” whose fate seems to touch many people to greater or lesser extent. It seems that empathy and solidarity decreases proportionately with every new, racist law. Nevertheless, there is also a great deal of commitment to their cause in large parts of the population. There have repeatedly been loud protests against the deportation of “illegal immigrants” in several European countries over the last few years. The activists behind these protests, as well as the broader, more popular campaigns on climate change and against war have often united in a generalised movement that sees these issues as interconnected. Both Heier and Lange reflect this development, succinctly formulated in Lange's photograph based on a snapshot from Paris. The photograph is taken inside a metro carriage and shows a window with a sticker that says: “Lutter plus pour gagner plus” (“Fight harder to make more”) and “Le Medef est un fléau social” (“Le Medef is a social scourge”). Through the window, on the platform in the background of the picture, we can make out a group of beaten down, homeless people. These fierce radical slogans – Le Medef is a conservative trade union led by President Sarkozy's brother – are required in a society where collaboration across the classes has created a permanent state of social stagnation. In this standstill, various workers' rights such as pension arrangements have been undermined, while the majority seemingly live happy, petit bourgeois lives. Even workers voted for Sarkozy and do not seem to care about the people who have slipped out of the employment market, ethnic minorities or their own, objective interests as workers. The old leftist parties with their well-salaried career politicians, who most of all fear “wild” political protests they cannot control, are being challenged by new, border-transcending political movements.

Actionism

This development of alternative action has been noticeable since the large-scale protests to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) meeting in Seattle in 1999. It has also had an impact on artists. The anti-capitalist movement has had such an effect on art practices that it has become evident internationally that younger, Western artists choose to embrace political activism and break with what they perceive as the shortcomings of the socially marginal art circuit. Over the last decade, many artists have articulated disillusionment in the name of art because they see their own participation in the elitist art world as meaningless in a decade that has been characterised by wars and aggressive neo-liberalism. Marianne Heier also found herself at a crossroads where she seriously considered giving up her art practice. She chose to work full-time for the Red Cross without any ambition of it leading to a work of art. The work included

collaboration with the Church City Mission's medical centre for "illegal" asylum seekers without papers and consequently with no other access to health care. "Illegal immigrants" in Norway today have no rights to life-saving medical treatment and are turned away from emergency wards, despite the fact that the duty to help in these cases is codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Heier's volunteer work led to an artistic recognition that there was no opposition between social work and her artistic practice.

Artistic value

Heier and Lange are optimistic about the role of art. Both start from a belief in the social potential of their artistic experiences. These experiences represent linguistic values and viewpoints that can be mediated within, as well as beyond, the bourgeois gallery space. They have chosen to work in a pragmatic, but artistically committed process where the aim is to enter into a dialogue with a larger audience consisting of you and me. We share the same reality. We can also take part in the artistic experiences if we choose to get involved.

When we view Andrea Lange's drawn out and uncomfortable video work *Fallujah Meditations*, we are caught off guard by the hell that Western leaders subject people to; not just the "innocent", but also those who resist. The grotesque incident in Lange's video where an injured resistance fighter, who is unable to defend himself, is coldly executed is, of course, not an isolated example of a particularly evil American soldier, but a result of the logic of war. After Norway stepped up its participation in the war in Afghanistan, the Norwegian military tried to incorporate artists in their propaganda effort. Some artists have chosen to make works that are fully or partly funded by military powers. These artworks fit perfectly into the military strategy of creating a humane impression of the war effort, while preparing public opinion for the fact that it is increasingly the case that Norwegian soldiers will kill and be killed. Lange's video, on the other hand, generates disgust because it shows the true character of the war as imperial occupation, mutilation and murder. The soundtrack is an example of our individualistic culture's flight from reality as a voice encourages us to delve deeper into our own consciousness. The soundtrack is taken from a self-help CD on meditation and tries to teach us how to create a new internal visualization of reality. Through Lange's editing, the voice in turn relates to the victim, the killer and us, the viewer.

A premonition of barbarism

Italy's extreme right wing government passed the so-called "Security Decree" in Parliament last summer. The new law (*legge* N. 733-B) is seen by many Italians as a return to the race laws of the late 1930s. One of the consequences of the law is that the children of "illegal immigrants" can be taken away from their parents. There is also a prohibition of marriage between Italians and "illegal immigrants", and social workers and teachers, among others, may face long jail sentences if they do not report "illegal immigrants". Under the banner of "Against the Reintroduction of Race Laws in Europe" central Italian cultural workers such as Dario Fo and Andrea Camilleri take a stand against this development in their country. Andrea Lange supports their stand and is distributing and commenting on their declaration as part of her exhibition. This declaration notably underlines the historical ability of Italian society to influence the rest of Europe. This is not merely about an historical footnote relating to Silvio Berlusconi and his thrown-together coalitions of opportunists, separatists, fascists and neo-liberalists. This is a battle for our civilisation, particularly in Italy with its apparent and deep political divisions.

Both Heier and Lange have links with Italy through childhood (Lange), studies (both) and marriage (Heier). The political conflicts between the descendants of the fascist regime and the 1970s working class activists seemed to favour the left for a long time with its legitimate basis for mobilisation among workers and other subjugated peoples against chauvinism and capitalism. Today, Italy's public life is permeated by Berlusconi's media emporium, which several critics say corrupts the minds of many Italians.

Andrea Lange's presentation of this declaration against the racist policies of the Berlusconi government expresses the other side of Italian political life, the left who are still a powerful force – even if the Berlusconi-owned media tries to cement the impression of its demise and the triumph of a nationalistic compromise across the classes.

Solidarity

Heier and Lange situate themselves at the centre of these issues through their exhibitions. One question that arises when we view Lange's brutal depiction of the boat people's fate in the Mediterranean is whether the battles against racism and fascism in the last century have already been forgotten. Her description of the drownings should be utterly unbearable – yet we know that this is exactly the fate that awaits the people who are chased away from the beaches of our continent.

It may seem as if Western rulers have not understood that the Bible quotation: "For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him" (Matthew 25:29) was not meant as a rule to be followed, but as a warning against what would happen if people did not act justly. While the capitalists of this world may invest as they wish, unhindered by national boundaries, the victims of this globalized economy cannot flee its economic consequences.

Heier and Lange both show the necessity of art and people's inherent capacity for solidarity in two exhibitions that capture the gravity of the situation.

Translated from Norwegian by Natalie O'Donnell