

Gestures, cleaning, political ecology and the commons

Susanne M Winterling

Short excerpt on the occasion of a seminar on art and activism Feb 26th 2016 to accompany the exhibition "[Deception in High Places: Woman Cleaning Weapon Industry](#)" by Gitte Sætre at Oslo Kunstforening. Copyright: Susanne M Winterling

Opting for a poetical rather than a power oriented practice Susanne M Winterling is looking at the ecology of the work in the exhibition and the necessity to question "who sings the nation state" in a tiny heresy as well as a grand gesture.

Thanks so much for inviting me. It has been a pleasure and a reward to work with TrAP. We collaborated a while ago during the exhibition of works by Apichatpong Weerasethakul. These collaborations across institutions and nations in pursuit of culture as a critical and productive tool are proving that solidarity in the arts, despite tough times of rising barbarism, totalitarian nationalism, racism and systemic violence, are very important. You have to choose your allies.

In the following I will make some notes inspired by the current exhibition because I think the artwork is symptomatic of our contemporary condition. It is a primary material for artists to work with paradoxes and schizophrenic aspects of the society and politics in specific contexts. A crude example and a known phenomenon is the weapon industry. We are making money from the refugee situation by first causing them to leave their home places and then we capitalise on their future as labour force. Who is this "we"? But what is still to be investigated are the strings and relations of how this works, - in crude words, the coming barbarism and new slavery and colonialism have consequences for us all.

As an artist myself I would like not to interpret but rather to make some remarks and notes, aspects that are embedded in my own practice, especially concerning the non-existing border of culture and nature, - and the blurred line between the private and the public. In this specific case this is demonstrated by an emotional and irrational answer, for example the very physical act of peeing and the possibly countering and equally private act of domestic cleaning. There is even a surreal ironic aspect, in the act of using a flag too small, "the disrespected unusual" use of a national symbol. However, the flag and the nation is a huge topic that I will not go into here.

Instead I want to draw some lines to what Isabelle Stengers calls "the art of paying attention". Artists and poets focus on the daily life, the art of living in the focus, which means taking care of our commons and common ground (soil, air, water, as the ecology). Gestures are more than language, the law (on which the nation and the nation state is based) is not equal to power, and the state does not define metaphysics. Artistic means can be non-representational. They have and claim a different power that is neither down to bits and codes nor to the representation mode in a 1 to 1 kind, instead they rely on common features of our bodies, interspecies communication and an immersion with elements: the art of living.

It's good again to look at Gayatri Spivak and Judith Butler's essay "Who sings the nation state" claiming the state and the nation of first to be two different concepts (for

internal structure and especially considering the context of statelessness). First we might have to ask what kind of state we are in. *"If the state binds in the name of the nation, conjuring a certain version of the nation forcibly, if not powerfully, then it also unbinds, releases, expels, banishes. If it does the latter, it is not always through emancipatory means, i.e. through "letting go" or "setting free"; it expels precisely through an exercise of power that depends upon barriers and prisons and, so, in the mode of a certain containment. We are not outside of politics when we are dispossessed in such ways. And even though one necessarily arrives somewhere (we can see that we are already in a dystopic kind of travel narrative), that is not another nation-state, another mode of belonging; it might be Guantanamo, where there is no state (though delegated state power controls and terrorizes the territory where its inhabitants live), or it might be Gaza, aptly described as "an open-air prison. This is "bare life": a life steeped in power".*

Gitte Sætre is not singing but sweeping the dirt of the abuse of the power of the nation-state to speak provocatively: Maybe through conversation we can pay the attention that freedom consists in the exercise of freedom; *"it is something undertaken by a plurality and, hence, a concerted exercise, an exercise in concert. There is no „natural“ state of freedom nor a natural state to which those deprived of freedom can allegedly return. Nature has nothing to do with a certain political mechanism of deprivation that works first through categorizing those who may or may not exercise freedom. Power does not deprive or strip freedom from the person"*

Can life ever be considered "bare" ? and what could this be - an animal state with eating pissing and crawling? Life has already entered into the political field in ways that are clearly irreversible. The questions of when and where life begins and ends, the means and legitimate uses of reproductive technology, the quarrels over whether life should be conceived as cell or tissue, all these are clearly questions of life and questions of power - extensions of bio power in ways that suggest that no simple exclusionary logic can be set up between life and politics. Life and its matters of gender, manual labour as well as affective emotional labour, and reproduction can not be excluded from the field of the political but we need to see the complete destitution of the human (as such) connected to it. This is a notion of destitution that is without recourse to any rights at the level of Nature, thus bringing us to politics of life and the web of life.

I would even say that it is a state of the social that takes form in discourse and other modes of articulation, including song, the video, and a poetry slam - and cleaning is needed all the time, as Spivak says: *"In such a world, global feminism might seek to reinvent the state as an abstract structure with a persistent effort to keep it clean of nationalisms and fascisms"*. The art of paying attention is a kind of critical regionalism and the awareness of the power of capital as the market is never going to throw up demands for clean drinking water for example. Other kinds of institutions have to take up these behests and be concerned about the commons - the world suffers too much from the binary opposition between philosophy and the practical, nature culture or body and mind, there is no pre-political. We are connected in ecology.

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 JUDITH BUTLER AND GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK
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