

SLIPPING AWAY

If we consider mankind as a whole and substitute it for the single human individual, we discover that it too has developed delusions which are inaccessible to logical criticism and which contradict reality. If, in spite of this, they are able to exert an extraordinary power over men, investigation leads to the same explanation as in case of a single individual. They owe their power to the element of historical truth which they have brought up from the repression of the forgotten and primeval past.

Sigmund Freud, *Constructions in Analysis*

*And you may find yourself living in a shotgun shack
And you may find yourself in another part of the world
And you may find yourself behind the wheel of a large automobile
And you may find yourself in a beautiful house, with a beautiful wife
And you may ask yourself, well, how did I get here?*

Talking Heads, *Once in a Lifetime*

THE PRESENT EXHIBITION BY SEBASTIEN BERTHIER AND SHIRIN SABAHİ INVITES US TO PONDER FOR A MOMENT THE GIVENS AND THE preconditions of our place. And you may ask yourself, well, how did I get here? This exhibition answers this, not so much by giving an end-of-the-story answer to the question – but rather by delivering a somewhat ambiguous, open-ended-story. By directing our attention to the constructed and perhaps unconscious prerequisites of our place, Berthier and Sabahi lets us rethink these conditions anew. Taking the cue from Freud, we might set up a dual perspective of both the individual and a more general account of the nation or mankind. As this text will argue further down, the place of man as intersected between the individual and the more general perspective of cultures, is the traditional scope of the ethnographer. For this exhibition, the artists generate a perspective close to early ethnography, a perspective of displacement and rearrangement.

The displayed works elaborate questions of belonging and expectations. Installed with fluorescent light, an over-sized counter records the statistical average of people migrating from Sweden today. The number starts with zero at the initial point of the exhibition and then increases with one person every 13-minutes and 26th second. It shows the unexpected underside to the contemporary political and news agenda: today's focus being set on migration to Sweden – not the decrease of Swedes.

Historically, this inversion of the ideological programme is true though. Two other works in the exhibition set their conceptual framework around the past conditions of population decrease in Sweden. In the later half of the nineteenth century, the country was part of a general, European exodus towards the States. Swedish authorities tried to minimize this emigration by producing propaganda campaigns against it. Berthier and Sabahi reuses two posters dating back to 1869 depicting two versions of the life in America for a fictive Swedish emigrant, Per Svensson. One of the posters shows the imagined paradise of the Swede in America before actually arriving in the States. The second, more conspicuous image shows the actual, harsh life of the settler – famine and attacking Indians.

Being used to commercial propaganda language, the mind of today instantly recognises the contradiction of reality and phantasm, not in between these two presented images, but on the level of image production itself. Both images show phantasmagorical images of an imagined culture. The insertion of these illustrations into the present exhibition context

reveals their double mirroring effect: What we immediately see is received as false, i.e. the images as depictions of the life in the new world. Our reception of the propaganda maker's plan also fails its operative task – the task of the official agency to invert our call for something better. We do not land at just grasping the operation. Only on a second reflective plane do we find ourselves: as seeing the vision of the propaganda-makers seeing us.

The second work dealing with the historical time of emigration traces its effects on a bodily micro-level. We encounter a photographic reproduction of the *Diphyllobothrium latum*, a parasite tapeworm known for its habit of reproducing itself raw in fish meat and using the human intestines as host environment for its habitat. It causes an infection in the human body that goes under the name of “the Scandinavian Housewife's Disease”. The reason for this naming is because the tapeworm was known to infect fish-eating Scandinavian immigrants in late 19th century America. The image of the parasite thus tells the story of a stranger within the stranger of the new country.

Returning to Freud's thoughts on the common traits of the collective and the individual's inaccessible delusions, we could say that the exhibition proposes a similar perspective. Our place within the confines of the nation is there, yet slightly disintegrating. Similarly, our place as singular subjects is likewise just as porous: unstable towards conditions both within and outside ourselves. And you may ask yourself, well, how did we get here? To give an answer to this question one could cast a glance at earlier ideas from political theory of how the nation as one singular body is joined together. Both in Thomas Hobbes and in Vladimir Lenin the idea of the collective acting as one supra individual is paramount. Whereas the Hobbesian and Leninist head of state is more or less clear cut in the singular will of either the sovereign or the communist party – the same could not be said of the modern mind. With psychoanalysis we got a mind going in several directions at once and talking with many disparate voices at the same time. The introductory quote by Freud is thus interesting as it joins a contemporary and coherent image of the modern man as decentred with the older well-known motif from political theory: the multitude of citizens joined together as one individual.

Contemporary medicine also underscores this image of man as a split structure. Today, the human body's constituent parts – the human cells – are believed to be outnumbered ten-to-one by bacterial cells dwelling in or on the very same human body. Thereby questioning the very nature of the human being as a singular uniform organism. The image of the tapeworm thus bears witness to an early realization of this lack of unity in us. This is also evident in the adjacent image chosen by the artists of the exhibition: an image of the unborn human embryo. Perhaps no other bodily process is so equivocal as birth and reproduction. Juxtaposed with the tapeworm parasite, the embryo here signals both the unknown and the extension of the self.

The exhibition directs us towards the uncertain nature of the givens and preconditions of our place, the instability of our concepts. Instead of a general model of things we get something, which is not quite there, indeed something, which is constantly slipping away. This is done by a slight change of focus: from immigration to emigration, from reality to ideological image, from familiar to unfamiliar. Strategies like these were likewise some of the most significant traits of the first generation of ethnographers appearing in between the two world wars in France. Not surprisingly, these early ethnographers were also influenced by psychoanalysis. Developing their practice in close collaboration with the Surrealists, they used transcultural perspectives to readjust the importance of nationality. As the Surrealists used photographic collage to break down the human body, so did the ethnographers rearrange the constituents of human culture by constant shifts in classificatory strategies and points of authority. The present exhibition by Sebastien Berthier and Shirin Sabahi shows an affinity with this early ethnography in its ambition to rethink our commonplaces and givens anew.

Emil Nilsson

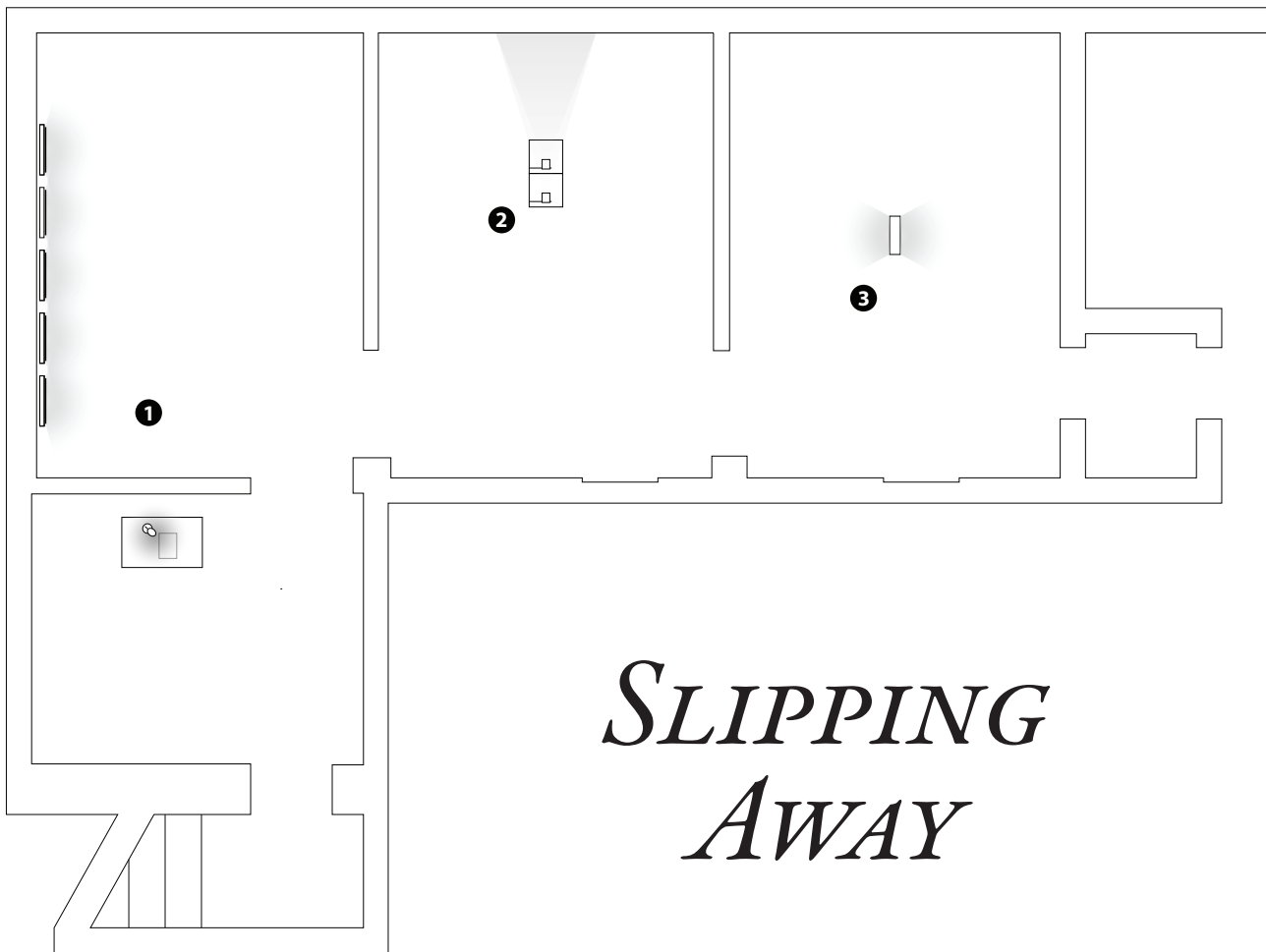
Literature :

James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 23, No.4, Oct., 1981.

Alex Coles (Editor), *Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000.

Franco Rella, *The Myth of the Other* (1978), Washington: Maitsonneuve Press, 1993.

Natalie de Souza, “Ingestion / The Beast Within: The tale of the tapeworm”, *Cabinet Magazine*, Issue 34, Summer 2009.



❶ *Counter*

2010, Installation with 35 fluorescent lights, five-digit counter based on the emigration from Sweden in 2009 estimated by Statistiska CentralByrån (Statistics Sweden), Programmed by: Michael Möller, 140 x 360 cm.

* The installation will count one digit every 13 minutes and 26 seconds and in the 29 days of installation at Etikett Malmö will count up to 3118. At the next exhibition the counting will start again from the last shown figure. After counting 39242 emigrants in a one year period the counter will cease to count.

❷ *Projections*

2010, Overhead projection installation with two black and white transparent A4 prints depicting illustrations published in the Swedish periodical *Läsning för folket* (Reading for The People) in 1869, dimensions variable.

❸ *Scandinavian Housewife's Disease*

2010, Double-sided light box, color picture depicting a human embryo on day 24 by Lennart Nilsson and a *Diphyllobothrium broad tapeworm* by an anonymous scientific research, 47 x 47 cm.