



**AN ENCOUNTER
LIKE A FLASH,
FROM NOW
TO THE END OF
CONSCIOUSNESS**

Munan Øvrelid

22 October til 14 November
Tirsdag til Søndag 12–17

Unge Kunstneres Samfund
Lakkegata 55D

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Munan Øvrelid’s exhibition *An encounter like a flash, from now to the end of consciousness* at the Unge Kunstneres Samfund dwells in almost complete silence.

Like a cat around the hot milk
The one exception, which greets the viewer in the corridor to the exhibition, is the video, *Like a cat around the hot milk* (2010). Here, an animated, anthropomorphized cat delivers a speech calling for revolutionary action

in which he recites Franz Kafka’s short story *The Silence of the Sirens*. In this story Ulysses sails through the seas, anticipating a confrontation with the sirens, whose singing have led many to their demise. In order to protect himself against the deadly sound, he chains himself to the mast and puts wax in his ears, though such measures are widely known to be insufficient. Amazingly, he survives. Kafka proposes that either the sirens believed that their silence

was a sufficient weapon, or that, transfixed by his distant gaze, they forget to sing. But the sirens’ silence much like the silence in this exhibition can be heard because one listens, expecting sound, a voice, a resounding voice to sail through the space. Silence here, is not the absence of sound, but a hollow resonance which requires an especially sensitive ear, where one must not forget to listen, where one must listen as one must speak.



1. Like a cat around the hot milk (2010)
2. An encounter like a flash, from now to the end of consciousness (2010)
3. To Lost Footholds (2010)

1.



2.

An encounter like a flash, from now to the end of consciousness
In the main space of the gallery one is confronted with the installation *An encounter like a flash, from now to the end of consciousness* (2010), which is composed of a video projection, a sculpture and two concrete slabs. Like a monument each monolithic slab stands vertically, in a frontal position. Bold, expressive lines reminiscent of early modernist abstract painting grace their façades; the marking is deep and forceful, as though chiseled out by hand or delivered by a violent blow. In the nearby video, what looks like a courtyard of a parliamentary building in the midst of an upheaval is set ablaze. Cameras flash and figures lurking behind the windows discard unidentifiable objects, which fall mercilessly and crash to the ground; the scene fades to black. The subsequent scenes follow a similar structure in different settings, as other objects such as computer monitors, papers and furniture topple down from windows. The footage is hand-held, choppy, pixilated, taken from the Internet. The sources are anonymous, the culprits behind these acts are unknown, even the falling objects are hardly distinguishable. In short, these clips have a bareness about them. One cannot attribute any content or motivation to them, they simply happen, and

here they happen in super slow-motion. This spontaneous act is made to linger, it has duration, sometimes the objects seem weightless, still, unresponsive. Eventually however, they all respond to gravity, and as they fall, the wind and other countering forces cause them to spin, float, accelerate downwards. The installation also includes a more tangible version of this spectacle, as a chair and computer lie crushed under an office cabinet. These objects look damaged, battered, smeared by a crusty beige substance; they have also crashed down, the imprints of their unique shapes preserved on the faces of the concrete slabs. It now becomes evident that these marks were not the result of fine craftsmanship, but the result of chance, rendered not by hand, but by an authorless object. In this installation one feels a kind of inevitability of the fall, of the overpowering force of gravity, which leads to the encounter with the impassable, unconquerable ground, what Georges Bataille called “base matter,” a substance always external and foreign to “human aspirations”, irreducible to “the great ontological machines.”¹

One may suggest that monuments in themselves are also a kind of moldable stuff that mark out history, geography, and also the geography of history. However,

every monument is also a summarization. Through its imagery, or through a few concise words on an accompanying plaque it establishes a simple, digestible, durable truth. Yet, a monument is not only a snapshot of a complex of events, a monument also re-maps history, restages it, allows a story to be told, provides a language from which to embark on to the truth. For to convey what really happened is not a simple matter, one may need to adopt unorthodox measures, start from incoherent narratives. As Jacques Rancière writes, one may need to look at “different types of traces (interviews, significant faces, archival documents, extracts from documentary and fictional films, etc) in order to suggest possibilities for thinking [a] story or history. The real must be fictionalized in order to be thought.”² Perhaps in Øvrelid’s work these monolithic structures are not meant to open up histories, or unearth important truths, for their history is blatantly obvious, it has not blossomed yet, has not become a truth. They are the transparent real that must be fictionalized. They are themselves a kind of a raw canvas, but unlike the non-representational gestures of high modernism, the marks on their surface are purely representational, completely staged, staging the act of violence, seemingly acts of desperation.

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3.

To Lost Footholds
The video *To Lost Footholds* (2010) also investigates the commemoration and representation of violent acts, but also of important historical events of violence. In the video a slowly rotating sculptural reproduction of the universally recognizable “raising the flag on Iwo Jima” emerges out of the darkness. The light flickers feebly, illuminating occasional details, and as the flag pole comes into a fuller view, sparks flare up, revealing the flag pole to be a sparkler, and the sculpture to be a miniature. This realization drastically changes the interpretation of the miniature, its presupposed symbolic authority diminishes as it no longer symbolizes American perseverance and pride. It is now just a figurine, an object. Gradually, close-ups of other sculptures are introduced, each more abstract, more colourful than the last. As the concrete materiality and the epic imagery of war is replaced by a light, majestic bouquet of tissue paper and broken pieces of clear plastic one’s attention may also shift away from the political content of this video. By the end the picture is out of focus, the imagery is soft and vivid, just an array of formless colours and abstract shapes. The move towards abstractness drowns out the symbolic imagery of the video as it destabilizes and depoliticizes the content of the work.

However, this very process is countered with a more subtle process of politicization, which relies less on unambiguous political symbolism and relies more on recognizable cues, on a formal language, on various filmic techniques. Such a process allows the viewer to navigate through the video in accordance to one’s own political perspective. This does not mean however, that these cues and techniques are incoherent or completely arbitrary. An example is the obvious reference to the formal language of war documentary films, which is evident in the grainy, scratched, mostly monochromatic character of the footage. This is also apparent in the film’s structure, the use of long and contemplative shots, the many close-ups of neglected nooks, littered with debris, the lighting methods which etch out architectural spaces and human forms from the darkness; all these techniques create a visual language that is typically used for showing the horrors of war or the tensions of political struggle. Halfway through the film a red fabric interrupts the grayness of

an architectural assemblage reminiscent of a bombed out wreckage, it appears like a handkerchief, a poppy, perhaps even a banner, a call for change, a call to action. However, even as the process of politicization occurs, it does not in any way prevent the process of depoliticization to continue, the red fabric can still be interpreted as just a red fabric.

The work is simply in an intimate proximity to these two simultaneous movements -not that this entails a dual nature- but that it lingers on the periphery between the two, cascading into reversals and inverses of conflicts, of sound and silence, of ascension and declension. One can always choose to ascend or descend. After all, the heavy concrete of the monuments points to material action, to a falling, to a grounding, whereas the abstract ideals, the elevated thoughts of transcendence point into the distance. Sometimes, the artist himself seems to be locked in a process of deliberation, where the camera circumnavigates the sculptures as if to re-examine them, looking for a new perspective, for a new way to approach the content. Like a fluttering flag the content of the work is constantly reformulated, rethought. A flag is like a pigment, which absorbs the surrounding space, it jerks and pulls, like a liquid suddenly spilling over large crevices, abruptly filling the empty canvas. At other times, the movement is calm, regulatory, almost predictable. The video *To Lost Footholds* (2010) often flickers with a steady pulse, falling into darkness, into the internal consciousness only to sharply re-emerge again. It is like a forgotten photograph, or an idea on the edge of one’s consciousness, being clear and distinct in one moment only to fade and momentarily disappear in the next.

No situation is completely clear and distinct, no action is truly singular, each is entangled in its context. But to act in a revolutionary manner demands a singularity, a bareness of one’s context, of one’s personal agenda. In a sense, for this act to be achieved the impossible must become possible. This may be the result of a moment of extreme aggression or desperation, as for instance when throwing one’s possessions out the window. Such acts erupt in moments of urgency, when one is vulnerable, as the ill-prepared Ulysses, after he chained himself to the mast. Revolutionary action often starts from a vulnerable position, from a position of resistance, with very basic equipment,

a bottle, a chair, or some wax and a chain. Such items are accessible, domestic, and can be utilized in a direct, straightforward way. In other words, one must think with what’s at hand, one must think with the act, rather than rely on an ideology, as Louis Althusser wrote, the intellectual “must revolutionize his thought.”³ But as one revolutionizes one’s thought does this not lead to a fictionalization of the real? Does the real not become sacrificed in a sense, become the impossible? Ulysses felt this at the moment when he became convinced that the sirens were singing when in actuality they were silent. With the wax in his ears, with his eyes gazing into the distance, in perhaps the defining moment of his life, when one should proceed with caution, when one becomes acutely aware of their surroundings, Ulysses became a chimera, absent to the moment, as if the real didn’t exist, or as if he didn’t exist. But everything about this exhibition indicates the importance of an active consciousness, of continuing to re-approach the present moment, of always clinging on to the presence of the moment in all its rich content. And so this exhibition may not be so much a call to revolutionary action, but to a political disposition, to the internalization of this disposition. Perhaps such an internalization stirs something deep in one’s psyche, allowing for an opening of the political within the framework of the private. Perhaps a more abstract disposition, one that is more sensitive to the politically untainted situations, leads one to recognize more easily the slipperiness and subtleties of the political. At this point one may realize that the silence of the apolitical can actually be heard as the quiet resonance of the political.

Wojciech Olejnik

I. Georges Bataille, trans. Allan Stoekl, *Visions of Excess*. University of Minnesota Press: (Minneapolis, 1985), p. 52.

II. Jacques Rancière, trans. Ben Brewster, *Lenin and the Politics of Aesthetics*, Continuum: (New York, 2004), p. 38.

III. Louis Althusser, trans. Ben Brewster, *Lenin and the Philosophy and Other Essays*, Monthly Review Press: (New York, 1971), p. 13.