

Strophe, A Turning

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This piece was conceived as a two-screen video work, where the viewer watches one screen and then turns around to watch the other. *Strophe*, the Greek word for ‘a turning’, is the organizing principle for how the video is physically installed and experienced in the space. But ‘the turning’ is also implicit in how the narrative is structured; it invokes the turn of events as well as the turns of action and interpretations within those events.

The video is shown on a loop, but the starting point of the work is a biographical sketch of the Russian poet, Osip Mandelstam, who compared writing poems to launching messages in bottles into the sea. Somewhere, someone will find the poem and read it. In Mandelstam’s essay, “The Interlocutor”, he stresses that the poet must write to an unknown person, to an unknown addressee, that there must be some

kind of distance to overcome by the act of writing a poem.

Mandelstam writes: 'The letter sealed in the bottle is addressed

to whoever finds it, being the finder I am thereby the

mysterious addressee'.^[1] In the video, while I speak this text

in a voice-over, the viewer sees a hand searching through an

archival box of letters, pulling them up one by one

for the camera, messages found in bottles on the beach.

In 2014, I received a fellowship from the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet) in order to create a body of work about the history of 'messages in bottles' and how they have been used in literature, popular culture and ocean science.

I mean this in a metaphorical sense – I wanted to look at how accidental drift leads to new discoveries, how people interpret what they find on the beach, and what they do with it. Two of the sites that I planned to visit during my fellowship were in Greece in the Aegean Sea. One was the island of Symi, home of the patron saint of messages in bottles; the other was the island of Lesbos, which, legend has it, is the source of the first message in a bottle.

There is a beachcomber on Lesbos named Eric Kempson who earns his living by making crafts from the driftwood that he finds on the beaches. While walking on the beach one spring morning in 2015, he found a doll next to a

*child-size life vest on the beach. Eric posted his first video blog
that day as a plea for help. Soon afterwards, his family's
house was converted into a supply depot, a rescue base,
and a beacon for volunteers. You can say that the doll
on the beach Eric found that day was a message,
which he interpreted as a call to act.*

Soon after I received this fellowship I, like many others,
became increasingly distressed about the dangerous sea
crossings people had to make in order claim asylum in
Europe, including toward the islands that I had planned to
work with. I had to ask myself whether I could continue
working on this project about messages on beaches, and
the metaphor of drift, while also ignoring the brutal reality
unfolding on the shores of the Aegean. My relation to the
proposal had changed, but I wasn't sure how to act.

*In one scene I find myself in the message in a bottle museum
on the island of Symi, located in the southern Aegean Sea.
There is a long tradition throughout the Aegean of launching
prayers in bottles to communicate with the patron saint of
the island. Some of these bottles are on display in the island's
monastery. Many of the bottles are launched by people
who are sick (asking for help from the saint) and when I
interview the museum keeper, he opens one of the bottles that*

washed ashore and, reads the message folded up inside.

Then he looks at me and says:

What I'm trying to tell you is that for someone to reach the point of making this desperate and irrational act of launching a message in a bottle to communicate with the Archangel Michael, proves that at the end of the day, that person has tested all the boundaries of human nature. One has found a dead end. Totally. We might not understand this because we are healthy, up until now at least. When a doctor tells you that you are very sick, everything around you falls apart. This is when people start looking to the horizon and then raise their gaze towards the sky. And this is really when the unimaginable occurs.

It felt crucial to still go to the Aegean, but it also felt important to decide on a role, a plan of action ahead of time. Was I going to these proposed places as an observer? A documentarian? Or as a volunteer? The often ambiguous term 'artistic researcher' didn't seem to cut it in this situation.

Soon after this quote, the audience turns to a series of interviews with female asylum seekers at the port in Lesbos. These interviews were recorded as audio, after I obtained the asylum seekers' consent, but only for the purpose of transcription. So the viewer reads the women's words on a screen but does not hear their physical voices.

On the one hand, this might seem like an act of exclusion at least in relation to the other people who feature in the video, whose faces and voices are usually shown. But at the same time, there are also situations when a researcher, artist, writer, must refuse to include.

I would end up volunteering on the beaches in Lesvos off and on during 2015 and 2016. The moment that I arrived, my worries dissolved, or rather, they were postponed. The amount of help needed was urgent.

Footnotes

1. Osip Mandelstam, "On The Interlocutor," trans. Philip Nikolayev, *Battersea Review*, <http://thebatterseareview.com/component/content/article/85-back-issue-content/154-on-the-interlocutor> (accessed May 1, 2017).