

TRAVELOGUES

Ines Schaber in conversation with Eleni Kamma

Ines: Eleni, you have been working on a series called *Travelogues* for the last three years. Each piece that is part of the series consists of a video and a booklet. At first sight, one could think that the booklet simply holds a translation of the “video-text,” but I would say that the two formats operate quite differently from one another. The video could be seen as a final piece: it is edited, it has a length, and it is ready to be shown. The booklet on the other hand is like a script: it transmits the idea of becoming something else. A script could be a text for a performance for example, which people would read in a square. Were these important aspects for you in making the booklets?

Eleni: Yes. I find it very interesting that scripts might potentially transform and develop different lives. The strength of each medium might at the same time be its limit: moving images absorb the viewer and the surrounding environment disappears. To take the booklet and have the script with you and to engage with it is a totally different experience. Perhaps it is this shifting between a passive and an active participation of the viewer that I am looking for.

I: What role did languages play in the *Travelogues*?

E: In all the works, the question of translation is very important, because it drastically affects the content. Speech might vary from being intelligible to being imperceptible. In *Georgofili* the script takes more the form of a collage or an assemblage of different moments in time, whereas in *P like Politics...* the script is made in one go. The setting of *The Tuner's Monologue* is conceived as a circular narrative structure with many potential beginnings and endings. The script in the booklet of the work follows a much more linear format in comparison to the video. The booklet was conceived and designed to be read in one go, whereas in the video the narrator makes pauses. So in a way, the script in the booklet is an interpretation of the script in the video and vice-versa.

I: Can you describe the creative processes behind your three *Travelogues* pieces... from arriving with your suitcase at a residency, not knowing the place, often not knowing the language, and maybe not even having an idea of what to do there...?

E: All of the *Travelogues* are the result of long processes. In *Georgofili*, I was initially very interested in the question of landscape and agriculture, and I was searching for historical dialogues that related to this question. I had worked with the dialogue format before. In my first dialogue-related work, I was interested in the alternation between a dialogue as a theatrical event and the spontaneous comments of the performers related to the dialogue that followed each rehearsal. In Florence, I wanted to dig deeper into the format.

I: Did you use the historical dialogues as research material or as dialogues themselves?

E: The latter. I think there is a lot of interesting existing material around. It is enough for me to edit and recontextualize it. Together with Angelika Stepken, the director of the Villa Romana, I visited the Gabinetto Vieusseux, an old, literary Florentine Gabinetto. We spoke with Maurizio Bossi there and I told him what I was looking for. He explained me how the Tuscan landscape was inextricably linked to aesthetic as well as social and political questions, and he came up with some dialogues. They were compiled in the Tuscan Agrarian Journal dialogues, written by members of the Academia of Georgofili and published by the Gabinetto Vieusseux. The Academia of Georgofili was founded in Florence in 1757 in order to promote the use of science in agriculture. The three dialogues Maurizio Bossi offered were published in 1827 and 1835. It was the period of enlightened despotism. The owner of the land felt that he had the responsibility to educate the peasants. Thus the dialogues are stories with a moral conclusion. The peasant women were taught not to go into debt, and the peasants to economize time. The texts also introduce the function of a bank and the virtue of saving one's money.

I: Do you know how the dialogues were used?

E: No, I do not. Maybe they were a script for a play, performed from one village to another, or maybe the landlord read them to the peasants. Today, formats of vocal social organization where many people participate are not very popular in Florence. But the old genre of the *contrasto*, a “conflicting coexistence” of two performers, is still popular. Tuscan *contrastos* take the form of a verbal duel between two poets. I wanted to work in a way that would be looking from a distance at Florence's spectacular past. In my study of the city, I became interested in a type of theatrical performance or spectacle, with music and often dance, which was performed between the acts of a play to celebrate special occasions in Italian courts. The *intermedio*—*intermezzo* in the Italian Renaissance—was one of the important predecessors to the opera, and I could detect remnants of the *intermezzo*'s extravagant structure in contemporary Florence: its pluralism and complexity, and its transition from life into art. The *intermezzo* has been a very influential and inspiring guide in my attempts to join different elements as the *contrasto* and the educational dialogues. I wanted to use them for a new work on contemporary Florence without limiting them to their historical purposes. I thought about actors rehearsing them, and discussing contemporary Italy between the rehearsals. I was also hoping that the “poets of the street” Emilio Meliano and Realdo Tonti would like to join the conversation and to compose a new text regarding their own perspective.

I: How did they do?

E: They wanted to do it as a professional performance, which means I had to hire them. We did the recording in a farm in Tuscany with a small audience. I introduced the topic, and explained what I was interested in and they decided how they would work: they took opposing positions. One defended the past and the other the present. I didn't know what the outcome would be. It was totally up to them. It was a complicated and difficult process. They improvise. They have to respond to each

other in rhyme: the eighth verse of the first poet has to rhyme with the first verse of the second poet. It's an oral tradition.

I: So you didn't give them any material?

E: I gave them my area of interest and the historical dialogues. I was interested in contemporary Tuscany, the landscape, how it had changed, what was there before and what is there now. I was also interested in the economy of the place and the acoustics of the space.

I: What is your role in this whole process as an "outsider"? Do you start a discussion that brings things to the surface? I feel it is quite courageous to go to Florence and start a discussion on landscape.

E: Why do you think so?

I: Because it is such a cliché.

E: I really like working with clichés. The cliché presents a possibility for understanding what people are sharing. One can start from there.

I: Could you talk about the working process behind *P like Politics*, *P like Parrots—the Braeke choir in action*?

E: Braeke is a small village, five hours from Stockholm. Before arriving in Sweden, I knew that I wanted to work with notation there. I was interested in the relation between music, architecture, and the discussion of common places. Different than in Florence, I wrote the score—a text assemblage—myself. It became a purely textual score for a choir to read. I invited the choir of Braeke to join in the reading game experiment and they accepted my invitation. I do not think a discussion of the common should be created by one person.

I: Do you mean the commons or the common?

E: I mean the discussion of what could be a common place. From my point of view there are many threads between the "commons" and "a common place." If I try to define the one or the other, something escapes. I am more interested in how these two terms interact; what they suggest, and where they meet each other.

I: You mean you are interested in how a political concept can be translated into everyday life and vice versa?

E: Exactly. What unites people in the choir is that they physically meet, and share an activity. I wrote the score using words from a speech by George W. Bush. I picked the P-words and used them in the Paper Rock Scissors game. Through bringing it to the choir and having it read by them, things unfold. I brought the script, gave them primary instructions. They rehearsed, and at first tried to follow the score, but then

they got hold of it and it became their own game. At this point in the work, I am no longer important. What they developed was their own way of working with the text. They decided to read it all together from the beginning to the end. There was no individual voice.

I: Was this your original plan when you came to Sweden?

E: The original idea became more and more enriched over time. Parallel activities unfolded. I also recorded a dialogue between two architects, which became another film. The two videos complement each other. In one, language is used in a more rational way, through a discussion; in the other, language is performed in a space between words and music.

I: Could you talk about the working process behind *The Tuner's Monologue*?

E: The working process with *The Tuner's Monologue* was a bit different. When I arrived in Rotterdam, I did not think about producing a monologue; I wanted to work with the philharmonic orchestra, but it was impossible to bring people together. Later I met an interesting person, a tuner, and interviewed him. I transcribed the conversation, and somebody else performed it. I wanted to rework the interview in a way so that the tuner's life and his work experience would become relevant to a larger group of people. I thus replaced specific words with more general ones: piano with instrument, pianist with player or professional, etc.

I: For me, there is a huge discrepancy between the tuner's text and the architecture presented through the images in the video. The way the tuner speaks about the work and the instruments is physical and tactile, whereas the images of the city show distant contemporary glass facades. One never sees the ground. There is no common space whatsoever represented in them. Did you mean to comment on the tuner's text?

E: Yes, somehow. But I am also trying to say that there is an urge to rethink this space. Lately, I have been reading *Économique* by Xenophon. What often appears there as a topic is the question of the knowledge of use, as a criterion of economy. I think I am hinting at the discrepancies between the facades and their possible use.

I: It seems that what unites all your *Travelogues* is the search for what can be common or what is common, which might be a reason why architects and the city as a theme are so relevant to your work. Do you think of the "commons" in relation to space and architecture, or are you searching for another form of communality within or beyond architectural spaces?

E: I think the latter. Perhaps the practices I am looking for do not necessarily need to have a dominant material presence. Perhaps they do not have to create a built space. Perhaps the answer cannot be found in architecture.

I: The choir offers a temporary space; it proposes something that has to be performed. It is present in a moment in time and then it disappears, dissolves.

E: It is really inspiring to hear what people have to propose and what they think. Perhaps it is about embracing this kind of fragility in time and space. But I want to read something to you. It's also from Xenophon's *Économique*. He writes: "Not having what one needs at one's disposal is certainly a sign of poverty, but it is a less painful privation to look for an object without being able to find it than not looking for it at all because one knows one cannot possess it".¹

I: Is this a general plan for the *Travelogues*?

E: I think it is a general plan of how I work: bringing together the disappointment of realized objects or spaces with the exercise of an obligation not to stop searching for potentially better ones, ones that will not be disappointing. In a way, what I am really searching for is the "common(s)."

I: ...to leave it open as to whether the commons produce a common, or the common produces a commons?

E: Exactly.

I: Are the *Travelogues* a finished project?

E: No, it is continuing, hopefully forever. I love travelling and I like to be confronted with different situations. Whether you can really become engaged in a place, start interacting with the inhabitants, and eventually become a vehicle for local voices, or whether you can hold up a mirror in an interesting way—all this is something to be discovered there, on the spot. There are no safety rules and no guarantees.

I: I think that one basic obstacle one encounters when working in different places is language. Language is a basic form of interaction, especially if you work with the dialogue format. Do you feel that it is an advantage not to speak the language of a place?

E: When I started doing these residencies, I had to find a new format, and new working methods that would respect but also challenge my new living conditions. The loss of the ability to understand things, and not being able to fully grasp a situation, makes one feel partially lost and disoriented, but one also has to use antennae to understand things differently.

I: So you trigger something you are interested in, in "non-language", and translate it back into language?

E: Exactly.

¹ Translated from French to English by Emiliano Battista.

I: This is interesting, and it is not necessarily obvious that you would come back to language.

E: A couple of years ago, I felt that I could not communicate my work the way I wanted unless I started to introduce language.

I: I think that this question of language also appears in your work with video and subtitles. The subtitles pose an important question in relation to our perception of images and sounds, narratives, language, and places. With subtitles the oral quality of sound and language can be hindered or even destroyed. One constantly follows them; one cannot help but read them, in whatever language they are in, even if you don't speak that language...

E: It is a difficult question, also on a practical level. Take *Georgofili*, for example. I initially created it in Italy, and had worked out the best possible solutions for the work to be exhibited there. For me, the specific conditions made total sense. The work was shown in its natural context. The majority of the viewers were Italians, and the ones who did not speak Italian could access the work through the script. I am currently showing the same work at the Neue Aachener Kunstverein in Germany. Laying the printed script next to a 30-minute video in Italian would be too demanding for the majority of viewers. Thus we added English subtitles. It is a compromise, but it also makes the work more inviting to a local audience. Every time the work is presented in a new context, a new balance has to be found.

I: I think it is difficult to find a perfect solution where the words are not superimposed on the images. In your work though, the complication lies for me not only in the subtitles being superimposed on the images, but really on top of the voices. One would be and is always hindered by subtitles when listening to voices. I think the question of language is extremely relevant to your work, particularly since you are on a commission to produce a travelogue. You are "on duty" for those questions. Which brings me to the question of life and work as part of the *Travelogues*. You travel. You go and live in all those places, and then you develop a narrative.

E: I enjoy this way of working. It is beautiful to open up situations, and to invite people to come in and create a temporary space together, a space between different practitioners. It is a temporary structure that sometimes leads to an interesting result.

I: Do you prefer temporary structures?

E: I haven't found a format yet that could work in a permanent situation. Somehow it is difficult to keep the concentration going over a long period of time. There is a specific type of shared tension within any specific situation that is destined to last only for a short period of time.

I: What are you doing when you do not have a residency?

E: I have only been doing this for three years. It is an experiment. Normally, when I have a residency, I collect material and meet people. Then, I work on the material back in my studio. I try to get locals to answer questions rather than try to do it myself. But there is one work that I would like to realize in Greece, in the place I

come from. My affinity to this place makes it almost impossible to speed up the process. Perhaps it will take me years to finish it because everything is linked to something else and I understand things too well. In a way, limited knowledge helps me to edit information, probably also because I am more emotionally detached.

I: You mentioned you would rather speak broken English than perfect Greek. Why is that so?

E: By speaking in other languages, I can invent myself anew. I can get rid of the heavy heritage of what is expected from me as a Greek within Greece. We do not act so much in this rational western European way, and somehow this blocks me. It is too heavy. But it is very difficult to fight your own language; you cannot so easily decide to speak it differently, because you grew up with it since day one of your life.

I: What do you mean by speaking differently; different in tone, or different in content?

E: I think both. You are trained through your native language and it becomes part of your identity. You cannot easily change it. With a new language, you have the liberty of adopting it and being more precise about how you want to speak. Whereas we both for example communicate in a language that is not native to each of us. We make an effort to meet half way. Some people never decide to make this effort and this is a different position.

I: I can totally understand that it is liberating not to know about certain codes and rituals of a society that places you in a specific position. But sometimes it can also be very limiting not to be able to speak a language properly.

E: Perhaps I need to be in different position to continue thinking; I have to be in the position of the outsider and the insider. It is about the possibility of changing places in order to think. Changing sides basically.

I: The terms “speculare”, “speculation”, and “spectacle” come up in your work time and again. Tor Lindstrand, one of the architects in *Malin and Tor: Two Architects In Conversation*, suggests that the root of the word specular also means to project and imagine something. He links imagination with speculation; with something that is not yet true, or realized. He states, as far as I remember, that what is lacking in our contemporary work is a speculation about the future; something that tries to produce a space, a sphere, or concepts that we do not know of yet; something like “unknown knowledge.” Do you also believe that we have to speculate more in our work—in the sense that we have to learn, re-learn, and re-imagine spaces we would like to create and have ourselves?

E: I think so. In the discussion between the two architects, Tor’s point is interesting, but I also remember Malin Zimm’s remarks very clearly. She said that we momentarily only reproduce structures, and that we have lost the general enquiry behind things. She states that we cannot change the cassette in the player. We would

have to play it until it breaks. So probably my question is whether a moment will come soon when things break and if that will happen violently—or if change could happen by re-examining tools and thinking differently about their uses.

I: In your work, you examine or probe tools: commonly shared things, activities or structures—such as the choir; activities in which we share time and space for a moment; dialogues that are created and can grow for a couple of weeks or months. On the other hand, your work often highlights architectural and societal failures. This is present in the images in *The Tuner's Monologue*; and in the architects' dialogue, in which they talk about the limits of their profession. My understanding of your work is not that it tries to break things, but to plant seeds in places; it is about how dialogues could be started and tools re-learned. So even though you might believe in a kind of violent break, your work seems to suggest that tools need to be developed or re-learned.

E: Actually I do. I feel that we are in a period of waiting, a period of preparation for bigger changes to come. The discussion keeps coming back to questions of education and the knowledge of use, of learning and re-learning things, and possible future ways through which we may transmit knowledge. I think speculating is about aiming at something, having a target. But what is the target at the moment? Where are we aiming for? I'm perhaps unsure whether artists and other practitioners are aiming for the same thing right now.

I: How to speculate on some more common questions...