

(No Man is an Island)

On the video installation *Drifting* by Hanne Nielsen and Birgit Johnsen.

Water as far as the eye can see. A figure is silhouetted on the horizon. It is a man on a raft. The picture then changes and the only thing to be seen is the sea. On all three screens. The situation changes once more: a visit to the Swedish police. Many different scenarios are edited together; they weave in and out of each other, seemingly achronological, in an installation-like capturing of the viewer in a story without a beginning. And without an end.

The story of an unidentifiable man on a raft, who, in 2006, was picked up by a Norwegian tanker in the Skagerrak strait, went around the world. The media mused and many news stories were spun concerning the event. The fact that the man would not reveal where he came from, and contributed to the speculation himself with many fantastic accounts, did not lessen the media attention. However, more interesting than the actual narrative and the man's personal story are the more general implications – especially now where the newsworthiness has long since expired. And it is precisely this aspect that is addressed in the video installation *Drifting* by Hanne Nielsen and Birgit Johnsen.

The story of the man on the raft raises questions of existential character: questions of identity and affinity, of nationality, and of what it means to take flight. At the same time, the story has socio-political implications and is remarkably relevant in an age where migration is part of the global reality. In an interview in connection with the exhibition in Fotografisk Center, the two artists have stated: "Our focus to a great extent has been the vacuum one is in when faced with the authorities and the press defining questions of identity from a condition of belonging. Because when does anyone have a condition of belonging (...) It is an identity vacuum, which can be unfolded to be not only concerned with the man on the raft but more generally on how we as a society tackle a situation such as this."¹

¹ Louise Steiwer: "Hanne Nielsen og Birgit Johnsen om "Drifting"" (interview), www.kopenhagen.dk, May 2014. ("Hanne Nielsen and Birgit Johnsen on "Drifting"").

Drifting can be seen as a re-enactment of the event, in that Nielsen and Johnsen have placed an actor on a raft in the sea and allowed him to incarnate the actual man. Fiction and fact are blended in the video work when shots of the man on the raft in the sea are cross-cut with shots of the Norwegian captain who picked him up, and the Swedish authorities who subsequently handled his case. The actor is mutely present in many of the shots and in this way becomes a post-realistic witness to his own story.

By combining documental elements – for instance, the interviews with the Norwegian captain, the Swedish police officer and the immigration authorities – with staged shots of the man on the raft, and more poetic depictions of the sea, *Drifting* itself eludes categorisation, instead becoming a hybrid form which draws meaning from various genres such as documentary, experimental film and feature film. In this way the work's field is widened, and its context of significance is extended from a characteristic fine art framework to also contain documentary film as a context for its reading – even though the authenticity, which is traditionally seen as the hallmark of the documentary genre, is challenged drastically in *Drifting*.

Drifting simultaneously awakens suggestions of classic works of literature and art history: Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* narrative from 1719 and Théodore Géricault's well-known painting from 1818–19, *Le Radeau de La Méduse (The Raft of the Medusa)*, together with the more contemporary feature film *Titanic* from 1997. *The Raft of the Medusa* is an especially obvious comparison, because Géricault's painting is also a contemporary historical depiction. The painting depicts an actual event, namely the wreck of the French frigate *Médusa* off the West African coast in 1816. As there was not enough space for everyone in the rescue boats, large groups of those shipwrecked were placed on a wooden raft and towed along. In the meantime, the rescue boats were quickly cut adrift, as the raft was sinking the boats. And when the shipwrecked survivors were finally rescued by another ship after 13 days, only 15 of the 133 were still alive (and five of those died immediately after). The shipwreck, and in particular the captain's handling of the situation, became a huge media scandal in France. The misconduct has since been depicted by many different artists. Géricault's painting especially stands out as a landmark in art history, maybe because the work, despite its treatment of a specific event, also touches on common themes such as existence, togetherness, survival and hope – in the same way that *Drifting* also does. An essential difference between the two

works, though, is that the man in Hanne Nielsen and Birgit Johnsen's wooden raft is alone in the world, while the survivors from La Médusa are many. However, it makes sense to point out a parallel between the two works, not least because *Drifting* – even in an indirect way – also touches on a current and controversial socio-political subject, namely the stream of displaced persons heading towards Europe.

The man's story and its political implications, however, is not the only thing of interest to Hanne Nielsen and Birgit Johnsen. In general they are "interested in a dialogue based on which expectations one has towards the media and to the way in which one tells a story"². For them it is also just as much about investigating how one can tell a story without an unambiguous narrative structure. As the work is spread spatially on several screens, common narrative structure, which one recognises from feature films, for example, or novels, is nullified. Instead we are met with a polyphonic narrative, where several different voices – the Swedish police, the Norwegian captain and the raft man himself – are given equal narrative positions and, in a dialogical way, let their perspectives on the story enter into the collective narrative. This dialogical narrative form is emphasised by the work taking its starting point in an actual story and attaching fictive and poetic elements, as well as creating a narrative which does not unfold chronologically. In this way the two artists lay down some traces in the narrative, but the viewer must find the way him- or herself.

Movement is a central element in the work: movement between the various layers of meaning and genres in the video, movement in time, but also the actual movement in the work, in the movement of the sea, in the edits between the various scenes, and in the sound, which exchanges between the roar of the sea and the personal accounts – everything is in flow. Continuously. To use a term from the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, *Drifting* could be described as movement-image, in that movement is the constituent principle for the video.

Hanne Nielsen and Birgit Johnsen's joint practice stretches over 20 years. In a number of earlier works they have also utilised video installation across several screens, and works that balance between fiction and documentary. In connection with the exhibition *Drifting* they

² Louise Steiwer: "Hanne Nielsen og Birgit Johnsen om "Drifting"" (interview), www.kopenhagen.dk, May 2014. ("Hanne Nielsen and Birgit Johnsen on "Drifting"").

state, "The relationship between documentary and fiction is something we have worked with in many of our works, because we feel that, amongst other reasons, the video medium always relates to some classic genres".³

And if one views *Drifting* in relation to their practice up till now, the meta layer, the exploration of the cinematographic and the documental stands out even clearer. One example, *Replay* from 2004, contains the juxtaposition of a documentary scene and the reproduction of the same scenarios played out by the same actors, questioning authenticity and, at the same time, clarifying precisely the relationship between the fictive and the factual. In *Replay*, which consists of five split-screen videos, the volunteers involved allow themselves to be surveilled and consent to actors reproducing their lives.

In *Territoriale udsagn (Territorial Statements)* from 2002 one is met with several different versions of the same story. But here it is the main character herself who reproduces the story. Six different women were asked to tell of an episode from their lives. The same episode is retold four times in total with several days' space between them. As a viewer one can observe that the stories change, even though the narrator is the same. Incidents from real life are also dealt with here – events that are, if not fictionalised then de-authenticated, in that the expectation of an objective, unequivocal truth is disarmed when the narratives are not identical.

Where both *Replay* and *Territoriale udsagn* are concerned with everyday stories, *Drifting* deals with a particular story, a media event. This introduces an extra layer to the video, as the viewer's own recollection of the event is activated, and thus one is involved on another level in the narrative.

The only one who is not given a voice is the raft man himself. He sits like a silent witness to his own story, and only speaks in the fourth video projection, where all the fantastic stories he fabricated about himself and his origin are unfolded as text. Who he actually is and how the story ends are of no interest to Hanne Nielsen and Birgit Johnsen in *Drifting*. They are preoccupied with the raft man as a symbol of the conditions of civilisation and of the story's

³ Louise Steiwer: "Hanne Nielsen og Birgit Johnsen om "Drifting"" (interview), www.kopenhagen.dk, May 2014. ("Hanne Nielsen and Birgit Johnsen on "Drifting"").

existential, social and political aspects. And one is, therefore, left with a deliberately open ending.