

THE ARMENIAN PROJECT BY UNNI GJERTSEN AND LIV STRAND

Հայաստան նախագիծը



ABOUT THE PUBLICATION	5
IMAGES FROM ARMENIA	7
DIALOGUE BETWEEN UNNI GJERTSEN AND LIV STRAND ABOUT THE JOURNEY TO ARMENIA	19
INTRODUCTION TO THE ARTWORKS FROM THE ARMENIAN PROJECT	29
LITERATURE	36
IMAGE INDEX AND TRAVEL ROUTE	37



ABOUT THE PUBLICATION

This publication is the collaborative part of the artistic project, born out of a research journey to Armenia in June 2009. A limited first edition is printed in connection with Eternal Tour 2010 in Jerusalem.

UNNI GJERTSEN is a visual artist working with subjects relating to history and memory. Her body of work include projects focusing on historiography and most recently travel related works dealing with geography and the perception of places

Ունի Ջերտսենը մի արվեստագետ է, որ աշխատում է պատմությանը և հիշողությանը վերաբերող-աղերսվող առարկաների հետ: Նրա աշխատանքները ներառում են պատմագրության վրա կենտրոնացող նախագծեր և վերջին շրջանի ճանապարհորդության հետ կապված գործեր, որոնք աղերսվում են աշխարհագրությանը և տեղանքների ընկալման:

LIV STRAND is a visual artist working with re-shaping as strategy. Re-shaping as means to reflect definition. Re-shaping used in a broad sense from mechanical installations — a tactile space-body-meeting — to emphasizing gaps and cracks between disciplines as a performative space.

Արվեստագետ Լիվ Ստրանդը աշխատում է վերաձևավորումը որպես ռազմավարություն համատեքստում: Վերաձևավորումը որպես որոշակիությունը արտացոլող միջոց: Վերաձևավորում լայն իմաստով, օգտագործելով մեխանիկական սարքավորումներ - շոշափելի տարածք-մարմին-հանդիպումը, ընդգծելով բնագավառների (դիսցիպլինների) միջև հատումները և ճեղքերը որպես ներկայացուցչական (պերֆորմատիվ) տարածք:

IMAGES FROM ARMENIA

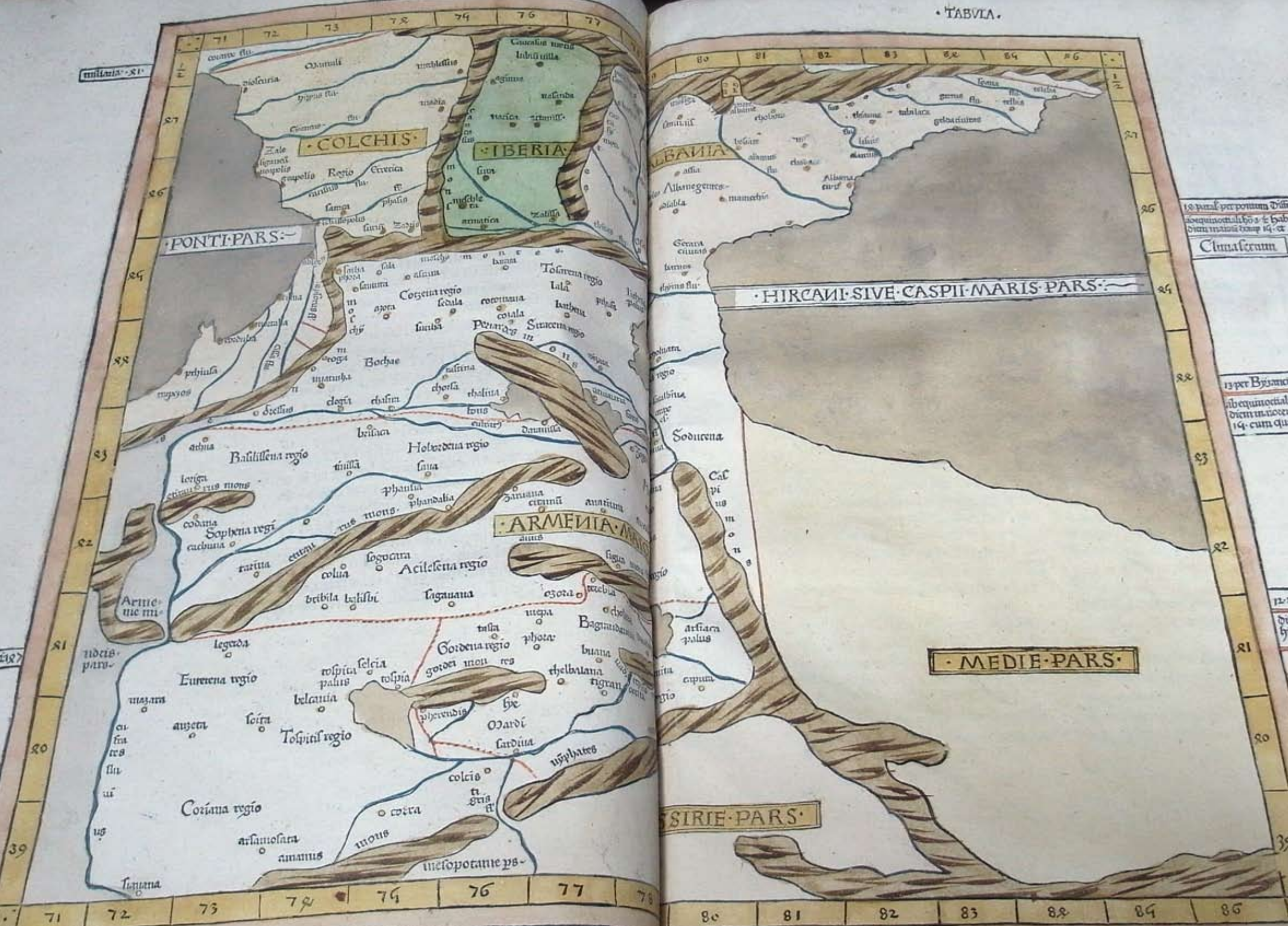




Treaty, 1920, including the first republic)







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DIALOGUE BETWEEN UNNI GJERTSEN AND LIV STRAND

03.06.10 15:08

Liv: State your personal origin, what is this about? These stories take on certain forms. Our journey was a socio-cultural visit, as well as a visit along tourist routes. The journey enhanced our sensitivity to stories shared with us. A sensitivity concerning the form of narration itself and the reasoning behind each story — the way in which a person presents him/herself in how the story is performed and delivered. What is the source and what protocol does it follow. How does one overcome stereotypical stories? Can the most obvious story also be the most central one? Like a blind spot that actually helps focus? Meeting intellectuals and characters along the way, the journey we created formed a network.

Listening to the generously shared stories put my own stories about Sweden in perspective. I perceive this difference partly as a cultural one — a difference regarding the willingness and the need to distinguish and define one's origin. How prepared am I to define myself as part of my nation of birth: Sweden (placing myself in the center?). One distinct question that I received encouraged me to explain why there is so little corruption as regards state administration in the Nordic states. A question that perhaps mirrors a Swedish symbol that brands and export the ideal of a good and equal (welfare) state. A question that set the exchange of prejudices in action.

The concept of nationalism came in focus, nationalism as an -ism. Even more so after returning home. The framework of nationalism as the one drawn by Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.

03.06.10 15:49

Unni: What is it to speak about your own background and origin? That certainly is a question! Does Benedict Anderson touch upon it?

03.06.10 16:03

Liv: Yes, but he views nationalism from above and in general terms as a perspective of zoning. Benedict Anderson describes differences and affinities between the German, French, English and American application of nationalism, in the procedure and in how they relate to what is a “natural” division of nations. He mentions how the different states apply their notions of nationalism in their use of colonial power.

Stories told by a single person, appearing to be nearly private, link to the state builders' aspiration. These became articulated in the second half of the nineteenth century, and enjoyed establishing “natural” connections within a population and between a population and the territory where these live. In a shared language, in a shared origin based on a long history and even kinship in appearance. These mechanisms are still active and is achieved via constructed and written history, by establishing academies and structuring collections in museums. To put it incisively, one may say it is about “personal stories” designed and mastered by those in power. It is about creating unity and belonging, a base for democracy and about uniting a population without open violence and force as a means of consolidating superiority.

When ideas began to be expressed through nationalism obvious problems arose, as in the case when different segments of society did not share the same language. The German ruling class did not even speak German, but Latin and French. Some territories were inhabited by an almost homogenous population, as was our cold, sparsely populated Northern part of Europe — even if intellectuals were brought in from abroad, from south. And it was towards the southern parts and neighbouring countries that Sweden and Scandinavia defined itself and drew up borders, and fought over them. Towards the north the nations blurred into the areas where the Sami population live; they were just included by force (negotiations still goes on

concerning their rights). More central areas in Europe have “always” been inhabited by a larger variety of ethnic groups co-existing in self-enrichment or in conflict over thousands of years, as in the case of Armenia.

Census, map, museum is the title of a wonderful chapter in Benedict Anderson’s book where he connects the drawing of maps to the evolvement of science and aspired accuracy. The drawing of maps was performed by the military, often carried out practically, through hostility or in war, to pin down borders distinctively, once and for all — until next aggression, though war intended to move borders is almost out of fashion nowadays. Further back in history, land areas were controlled by central powers, areas as vast as the control was able to reach, linked to the next central power by a fuzzy transition.

03.06.10 17:08

Unni: Accuracy or exactness. I will take this on. Exactness is often separating one thing from another, promoting clean categories. What I have in mind right now are academic disciplines and disciplines within the arts on one hand and the term multiculturalism on the other. I have experienced that thinking in interdisciplinary terms is not always as welcome as one might think. The claim for accuracy is often misused to prevent scrutiny from external “amateurs” in disciplines where specialists have been free to narrow down the curriculum to fit their specific qualifications.

I think it is interesting whenever one takes something, say for example a term used in one type of discourse, out of one context and see how it works in a different setting. Experimenting along horizontal axes as in the case of trying to act across disciplines, with the risk of a failure in communication, confusion and crisis, yet hopefully also some gained experience.

The term multiculturalism is challenging somehow. You mentioned that Scandinavia has been a homogenous society. Since this is about to change Norway appointed 2008 as The Year of Multiculturalism. (Sweden has carried out a similar project.) An interesting critique of the strategy has been that celebrating cultural differences encourages the construction of differences. For example by following the temptation to compare the historical epochs during which differences were most obvious. If you ask for difference, difference is what you get, while studying similarities might have produced a result that was just as useful. Anyway multiculturalism has a sound to it that gives me the impression it does not mean mixing, changing or challenging, but rather preserving and keeping a distance. I might prefer the implications of the prefix inter- (–national, –disciplinary, –cultural) to multi–.

Another aspect of storytelling has to do with personal identification and the risk that identifying with a group may become a destructive stigma. Say I become obsessed with the miseries of women in history and this becomes the only narrative I care to look for. The repeating of stories may turn into a handicap reproducing the regrettable. In psychotherapy talking is the cure, but trauma should be retold a very limited number of times to avoid re-traumatisation.

What are histories good for? Can over-focusing on history become an obstacle? Who needs their story the most? What does the new look like? Is it more or less homogenous?

04.06.10 10:10

Liv: Isn’t every human being attracted to hearing one’s history — to become visible? A story told by him/herself or by others.

At the same time I begin thinking of the ambiguous question of what a story of oneself can be. Doesn’t it rely on the repetition of material gathered by others? Repetition and the repeated material structured as new orders to convey the message aimed for (as a story about oneself). Material collected from common stories and things read or overheard, filter out of the omnipresent (popular) culture. What is shared experience and how does it differ from exclusive experience the one being first-time experience — departing out of an action not yet carried out by many, still original? What is the instinct at work in narrating and performing “oneself”?

Is it to mediate a true and sincere presentation of oneself or rather to propose a concentration of personal characteristics to be tested out and adopted. Reused or rejected. Being one as becoming one among others, oscillating between that state and one that is separated from others, showing oneself by way of difference. Manifesting one’s difference in performance.

What is there but seemingly personal stories, apart from rationality?

04.06.10 10:23

Unni: There is always *the present* — the body and the senses. We rely on experience of course — or else what we see with our eyes would be totally abstract. If there is nothing to compare with. The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan writes in *Space and Place: the perspective of experience* about experience in terms of “having gained from what one has gone through”.

I have been occupied with the subject of history for a long time but mostly out of a curiosity to find out how it affects the experience of the present.

I note that the more time I spend with histories, the more they attract me. I think I can say that it applies to any history I choose to give my attention to. Consequently, there must be a lot of power inherent in the decision to select a specific subject. It must also be of great importance what time dimension to choose to pay attention to: certain periods in the past, the present or the future?

04.06.10 11:11

Liv: It is interesting that you are getting to how something can become utterly abstract. Baumgarten writes in the eighteenth century about sensual experiences — of poetry, in my interpretation as something beyond what is intellectual and abstract. I like the way he groups the intellectual and the abstract as something in a representation that is rational and exposed as a systematic reflection... (of mediated knowledge, as for instance mathematics). My feeling is that the grouping of the intellectual and the abstract often (sadly) splits into unlinked directions where the understanding of the intellectual tends to move towards academia with tight drawn genres and the abstract merely projects at senses condensed as forms that only in general terms point to what specific it derive from. My art work *Quicksand frontier understanding* is an abstraction of the condensed knowledge of readings and our conversations formed into a kinetic sculptural landscape. Re-shaping forms as a way of reflecting definition. Re-thinking as an action. It is an urge to test if something can be understood as form — through bodily perception, as an analogy to text-based knowledge. I am interested in how to update a topic or a situation by making an artwork to take it up for reconsideration.

One concept in the universe of art is re-enactment — delivering an event again is to reconsider it. Re-scripting (it literally means “written back”) is to write anew, *a transcription* that interests me more as a form of “re-writing”. To write the same by tracing the first text, all being the same but at the same time different.

This was how I felt in Armenia, as one of all, generally the same but still different. The tension between what one can and what one cannot share, can you comment on that?

04.06.10 11:43

Unni: What one can and cannot share. Huh. We share space. (Not the history. Now. And we are always *now*.) That is why I am concerned with geography and positions. The driving force is that what is different, the impossibility of experiencing things from the position of someone else’s body, knowing what the other body remembers, what it sees — history from a different perspective. I try to open myself to other histories via geographies. I study landscape as an extension of the body in the understanding “a position that it is possible to share.”

I am working on a composition of words for the floor in my installation using the World Atlas as my dictionary. I look for different kinds of rhymes when combining names of places. The names have associative qualities insofar as the audience knows something about the place, and even if they don’t, the words resonate different characteristic ways of spelling, reminiscent of the language they originate from. One rule I have is to break with spatial and

cultural categories. The places I combine are neither situated close on the map in reality, nor deliberately put together (or “selected”) according to any criteria other than shape and sound. There is an abstract dimension in the familiarity between sounds, endings and letter rhymes, and finally the visual shapes of the letters. In the installation you move between these ‘islands’ of letters.

In science theory the word horizon is sometimes used as a metaphor for the limits of understanding. The horizon is what you can see from the present position. It is inherent in the definition of understanding as being conditional. I was always interested in the aspect of philosophy of science having to do with questioning the limits of understanding and how to capture new ways of thinking about something. Changing the landscape or changing the perception of landscape by linguistic efforts are ways to go about this.

Maybe it is all about a kind of capacity for the future after all. *Wanting* to want the new, new form — and strategic amnesia. Encircling what is to be forgotten.

04.06.10 12:15

Liv: *An Armenian must be surrounded by mountains* said our artist colleague Mkrtych Tonoyan about the Armenians. The beautiful resemblance between the hood of the priest and the shape of mount Ararat, that rises over the capital Yerevan, yet still in a different country, in Turkey. A chain of associations about shape and the shape of narration comes to mind. A thing resembles another thing, but also senses have similes and referents. Aggression and rage have mutual aspects, love and care, neighbouring one another in positive or competitive pro-forma... Osip Mandelstam exclaims in an optimistic moment in his book *Journey to Armenia*:

An inexhaustible operatic repertoire gurgled in his throat. His open-air-concert, mineral-water heartiness never left him. A sluggard with a mandolin in his soul, he lived on the string of a song, and his heart sang under the needle of a phonograph.

In Yerevan, at the grocery store in the block where we were staying, choosing food mixtures beyond shared language together with the staff, a woman came up and invited us over for dinner — just like that (what is the name of our friend?). She was working in the same area, we popped up in her neighbourhood and right there she created a now.

04.06.10 12:41

Unni: I think her name is Susana. We were going out to buy breakfast on our first morning in Yerevan. I remember some small, sweet, pickled tomatoes with cheese filling. In our local supermarket they were playing the Norwegian tune from the Eurovision Song Contest non-stop.

Your Osip Mandelstam quote reminds me of Robert Byron’s travelogue *The Road to Oxiana* (that I have borrowed as a title for my series of travel-related works.) By exposing his personality openly in the writing of juicy factual fiction, Byron succeeds in communicating a reality that more factual reporting genres fall short of.

At the Persian block-house in no-mans-land we found an officer who had only been two days in command there and was already depressed beyond speech by the companionship of few troopers, a savage dog, and a yardful of scraggy mares with their new born foals. Not a tree nor a stream or any hint of garden warded off the sodden yellow cow-parsleys in the desert.

Literary quality. Is that ultimately about addressing forms and associations that emerge from the experience of being a body in space? A body that owns sight and smell, and kinetics.

04.06.10 14:43

Liv: Aback to me captures the tension between what one can and cannot share. The quote by Robert Byron speaks about place, a very particular place where sensations are being brought forward –on display. To experience a place might be to tell a story about it. And trying to imagine and understand the first hand experience shared. I think a lot of the position of the listener, the one trying to understand. The place in the quote is indeed a position, but my mind

is rather tracing positions assumed by human beings — interacting human beings presenting something specific, possibly looking for understanding. These positions are always systemized subconsciously in hierarchies.

Hierarchies are investigated thoroughly by Jaques Rancière, in the sense of positions, based on prejudices and often taken up by or given to individuals nearly automatically. He speaks of the transmission of knowledge and the supposed ignoramus, of breaking down the superiority of the one who is in the possession of knowledge and of the subsidiary receiver (spectator). A way around these nearly automated hierarchies is to endow everyone with intelligence, in the sense of an ability to collaborate with anyone in a collateral process of exchange of information and in doing so build knowledge (acquired by everyone as their own). This might seem obvious to most people I know, but the rupture is always nearer than what I choose to recognize. In everyday traffic for instance, where everyone in fact behaves in accordance with the law, even a minimal disruption may cause people to lean out from their cars and hurl the most appalling insults. Clearly over the top.

Exchange in the form of communication is widely negotiable and a lot can be agreed upon using nothing more than physical gestures and insinuating glances. I enjoy encounters beyond language cause then it is like you initiate a play as kids do: as long as the participants pitch in what goes on continues. Armenia is one of the best locations I have visited for this kind of encounters. Many of the people we met most willingly offered an attentive delicacy in their seeing, hearing and interpreting of us and our attempted messages in a very refined way. Accrediting the one you meet an equal intelligence despite the shortage of a decent vocabulary (to make yourself understood by) — I consider this advanced knowledge. Acquired perhaps only through practice?

The thing is to recognize what is seen. In *The Emancipated Spectator* Rancière writes about the knowledge of the spectator as the knowledge of recognizing what one does not know, comparing that with what is already known and through this analysis incorporate the hitherto unknown into one’s own knowledge. He directs us via symbols, the way in which symbols are perceived... well, this you already know. Rancière claims that the one without (prior) knowledge (the spectator) can be just as actively involved as the one who already possesses knowledge in performing the predetermined spectacle.

The difficulty of remembering that someone’s stutter or hesitation while speaking a new language is not an effect of blurred thoughts, but of the form, in which the thought (the new language) is presented, being incomplete, as in not fluent. “The immigrant thing” — it is what I call the situation for people settling in a new country — pointing toward a shift in how one are being treated, in which one find oneself being ranked in a new and unfamiliar way, as a result of a scanty vocabulary.

05.06.10 10:15

Unni: But I have experienced breakdowns of my good intentions in my teaching practice when I have tried to encourage students to explore with me. Sometimes it works, but sometimes I end up blaming them silently for being uncreative and unable to think for themselves.

I am challenged by these failures in communication. It often has to do with me taking things for granted that are not. Being unable to see my behaviour as determined by my cultural self — in the understanding of habits, tradition, that which I do not question. I use the art practice to confront myself with the *self-evident*.

05.06.10 10:51

Liv: What I call “the immigrant thing” is a precarious situation where a shift of location affects how one’s intellect is (or is not) included and received. It is a serious thing. Affecting one on a far deeper level than a journey or a visit to a foreign place can ever do. Moving your home, the centre of one’s life, is at the same time a change of one’s point of view — where to view from. It is a change in what to look at.

I am making a link to topography — the study of surface shape. I imagine the landscape as

a sculpture shaped by erosion and earthquakes. Changing the place from within, form below: the landscape as an ongoing material flow.

The second link is that a private change as the one described above is radical in a different way than an overthrow of power or the introduction of a new faith that affects a population as part of a landscape (and of a culture). In Armenia, Christianity was imposed as a state religion in 400 A.D., causing thousands of Greek temples to be demolished and replaced by Christian churches. In today's Armenia only one Greek temple, in Garni, remains in good condition — it overcame its destiny by becoming the king's summer resort and a Christian church was built at a distance of five meters. The cult location remained the same, yet was given a new explanation and a new faith.

"... the exorbitant, ponderous (...) grating jerk of the rudder". *The struggle to recapture reality from ideology and the falsification of history*. A quote by Birgitta Trotzig in the preface of the Swedish edition of *Journey to Armenia* by Osip Mandelstam where she places his use of language at the same time in poetry and as an activating action taking a pronounced position within the Soviet post revolution society.

05.06.10 11:34

Unni: It is interesting how certain orientation seems to have remained the same when temples were replaced with churches. But this was a long time ago. In Turkey the destruction of the remains of Armenian culture within Turkish borders still continues and the Armenian Genocide in 1915 is still denied. Physical change, mental change, diverse positions and mobility. At breakfast you asked me to elaborate on something I said about the *idiot*. I think it is linked to positions.

The original meaning of the word idiot is a *local person* — someone who is limited to one place (Vilém Flusser discusses this, but I am no longer sure how far he goes and where my associations take over). Reflecting along these lines, an idiot must be someone who does not see herself from outside. Nevertheless a person is often perceived as an idiot when she enters a *new* culture. If I have a strong sense of unity with the place where I live, if I do not see myself from outside or reflect upon my habits and values, I may view a *newcomer* as an idiot when she does not know how to operate a bottle-collecting apparatus in the supermarket. In this case I am the idiot — the local. The idiot, one may think, is the always-local — the one who is at home. Safe. With no need to ask questions or learn new things.

I guess it is possible to bring *your own idiot* when you move to a new place. A person who is rooted in her origins to the extent that she cannot function or interact in relation to a new place remains an idiot. But new physical structures make it hard not to gain new insights as a foreigner. The potential for learning is precariously present. The foreigner has a privileged position when it comes to the potential for new insight. Reflections on the *idiot* could also be adapted to interdisciplinary or interdiscursive challenges (questions about multiculturalism if we think about discourses as cultures.) If I, as an artist, take up an interest in philosophy and decide to bring experiences from my field to the table in a philosophical debate, I could easily appear to be an idiot.

In this situation, is it not the philosopher who occupies the role of the idiot — as the one being at home, safe? She may of course also be willing to embrace the challenge of thinking from a different position. In that case she is not an idiot. Ideally one would always be aware of one's inherent idiot, and have the possibility of being with people who are aware of theirs.

05.06.10 14:19

Liv: Transformation as re-shape, re-shaping as my first vision that lead me to discover that it was Armenia we were going to visit. In the beginning my inspiration was triggered by Ryszard Kapuscinski's writings in *Imperium* where he is travelling across the Soviet Union, in the last months of its existence. Among other places, he visits Nagorno-Karabach just as the war had started. Along came a shortage in my knowledge of what the map of the region of Armenia looked like. Nagorno-Karabach being the latest change on the map of Armenia

through the siege of that area, which belongs to Azerbaijan — a change that has not been recognized internationally. People of different ethnic groups were supposed to move "home" to where they belonged. During the Soviet Union era, East of Lake Sevan, there was no clear division between which Soviet republic an Armenian or an Azeri settled in. Some organized exchanging of homes between countries as a result of the war, others still lived in refugee camps in Azerbaijan. Today, 97% of the Armenian population is Armenian. As an analogy to the marches that the Armenian population was exposed to when Turkey was created... Tell me more about the books and the thoughts that our journey started from.

05.06.10 14:39

Unni: You sent me excerpts of Kapuscinski's text and suggested a travel to Armenia. The text arrived in the mailbox, stamped. That was the departure in spring of 2008. At the time I was working on a film about the perception of places (Istanbul at the time). We were already on the same track since I was trying to get an impression of Turkish history by reading a novel that you had recommended, *Birds Without Wings* by Louis de Bernières, the story set during the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the emerging of the Turkish State.

The novel touch upon Atatürk's growing up in Macedonia. In fact we spoke a lot about the Balkans when we were in Armenia, comparing the engagement that people have in history there with the engagement that we encountered in Armenia, both regions digesting their communist heritage while dreaming away about ancient times. Anyway, I think the associations started with coffee. In Armenia coffee is prepared in a small, narrow kettle with one handle — the same I got it in Slovenia under the name Turkish coffee.

05.06.10 15:21

Liv: In the flat that we rented in Yerevan you were reading aloud on the sofa from a book of testimonies from the massive relocations of Armenians during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Was it the testimony of one or several voices? What was the title of the book? The book is in Oslo in your part of our collective project library accompanying this project.

05.06.10 15:59

Unni: *Marsovan 1915: The Diaries of Bertha Morley*. She was an American missionary and music teacher. In her diary she describes the intensification from day to day of persecution of Armenians in Marsovan in 1915. Another book we purchased in Artbridge, the bookstore café in Abovyan Street in Yerevan, was a biography written by Mary Terzian *The Immigrants' Daughter*. Her family emigrated to Egypt during the exodus in the early 1900s and Cairo is one of the major Armenian Diasporas.

From where does one picture a place? Terzian describes a visit to Aleppo, another important Diaspora, travelling there from Cairo as a child together with her family. William Dalrymple's arrived in Aleppo from Turkey following the traces of Christian heritage in the region. As I imagine an arrival in Aleppo from Egypt and another from Turkey the place becomes increasingly real. The geographer Doreen Massey writes in her essay *A global Sense of Space* *It is a sense of place, an understanding of "its character", which can only be constructed by linking that place to places beyond.*

Our approach is that of a traveller, a researcher, a detective perhaps, or a tourist. Anyway, there is something about treating a specific place that is not *mine* as a centre, a position from which to study something, and doing so with an artistic means that feels meaningful.

A more urgent perspective from the Armenian point of view is featured in Stefan Kristensen's text on Atom Egoyan's film *Ararat*. Here it is a question of revisiting and place as the scene of crime. He treats different ways of processing memories of the genocide, comparing destructive denial to creative reformulation. The traumas are individual and/or collective even inherited. In Armenia we were received with gratitude as people (more than one) who took interest and cared to know. This attitude towards us may be explained by the unrecognized history of crimes in Armenia.

06.06.10 10:55

Liv: I held a short six-minute lecture on the journey to Armenia, as part of an event at Fylkingen in Stockholm (a venue for improvised (and electronic) music and staged experimental events, founded in 1933). *Eight Short Ones* had the format of six-minute sections — lectures that were to be as experimental as the invited persons dared to deliver them. My reading contained a series of associations: facts on Armenia, my impressions and stories gathered from our visit. Accompanying the text I showed a large number of maps of the region. Found on Internet. The maps show the area in different epochs. They verify the shifted location of the “Armenia” I had imagined and are fascinating in the exactness by which they draw the line of truth of every time. They were arranged in a chronological stream of stills, including maps photographed in the Matenadaran — a museum of handwritings and scripts in Yerevan.

The cultural exchange of scripts, thoughts and knowledge were part of the agency of the church. The large monasteries were universities. Significant Apostolic Orthodox Armenian Church centres were spread out in the region: in Jerusalem, in Venice and so on. This was the age preceding the defined -ism of nationalism, when an ethnic group did not necessarily need to have a “natural” connection to a location that were coherently overlapped with a nation, a state. And sometimes ethnic groups neighbouring did not have to be separated in aggression. This can be the exact same case nowadays but the mechanisms of division and definition is stronger in action. Culture among intellectuals was activated by exchange. Knowledge was like software these days — an exchangeable currency, and the Armenians considered themselves to be educated people.

06.06.10 13:23

Unni: I am interested in mind-maps and the possibility to organize places and events by the experience of near or far, experience that are individual, as well as collective. The experience may be connected with history but inhabit associations that are obscure. The old maps we saw in the Matenadaran were made before they had instruments to measure distances accurately. They reflect the experience of space belonging to the person who constructed the map and his contemporaries. The Mediterranean Sea must have been drawn on the basis of travels made by the designer or on stories told to him. Colors and recognizable figures illustrate experience. These drawings are somewhere in-between maps and mind-maps.

06.06.10 14:06

Liv: Now, did we arrive at abstraction? I think of how you chose to define “abstraction” on our walk today, in comparing the sunlight reflected in all lakes between Oslo and Stockholm flying over them on your way here and the reflection of the sun in the weather vanes by the chimneys of a block of flats. What is it to speak of one thing by comparing it to another? Replacing one thing with another in the practice of using language. Personal interpretations and preferences are inevitably involved. Playing and creating language, in which sayings are referents within a language...

In my installation, a kinetic sculptural landscape abstracts different parts of my Armenian perception. It brings up the -ism of nationalism in general, with its potential to transform and its degree of uncertainty being a construction as well as mathematical accuracy, as in the case of census. One part is retelling the quote: “The tall steppe grasses on the lee hump of the island of Sevan were so strong, juicy, and self-confident that one felt like coiffing them with an iron comb.” by Osip Mandelstam.

My piece is wide open for each visitor to interpret as whatever they like, possibly something quite remote from my own intentions and associations. I enjoy making the installation a communication tool, it performs a spatial ongoing version of my thinking. How can abstract knowledge reach the receiving person, how does content reach the receiver? Can a sentiment be shared?

06.06.10 14:39

Unni: Add time and repetition and almost anything can communicate, that's what I think. As precisely as it is possible to communicate, which is not very precise, I imagine. But there has to be a *will* to understand, change, communicate, to be among forms in language and take part in creating meaning. Association is creative observation. Somebody discovers that something resembles something else. (Abstraction).

I feel like mentioning two scholars — Rosie Braidotti and Wendy Brown— who we read and discussed during this period. Although they are not related to the subject of Armenia, their thoughts have become part of our platform. They both suggest each in their own way, a new strategy for thinking ahead. Braidotti is scrutinizing our obsession with history by way of a critique of modern melancholy, and insisting on the wound as a healing force. Brown is pointing towards problems inherent in identity politics. Choosing to build an identity by identifying with a discriminated group may in the long run have self-fulfilling consequences. They both suggest more affirmative strategies and ways out of locked polarized positions.

It is about premises for change or *re-shaping* to use your word. If I should draw lines to my own work it is about the relationship between space, perception of space and imagination. Imagination is mobile, space is not. Imagination comes before change — with the exception of earthquakes.

06.06.10 16:12

Liv: I remember the family in Goris running a restaurant on the pavement by their home. We got there after showing our adorable taxi driver that we wanted something to put in our mouths. He jumped out of the car and asked a man on the street who gave him directions. We got to visit the kitchen to point out the meat that we wanted — all other parts of the meal came preset.

07.06.10 15:12

Unni: What I recall most vividly from the visit in Goris is a scene on the roof. We were shown around the house by the woman in the household while the man prepared our barbeque. I showed her the map and gesticulated to her to express something about her relation to the neighbouring countries. She pointed towards South: “Iran: thumbs up, good!” Then towards North: “Georgia: good!” Then to Azerbaijan: “Thumbs down.” And finally towards East: “Turkey, dark face.” Her description really situated the veranda politically and geographically.

07.06.10 17:45

Liv: There is a connection to abstraction within this meeting, in that we received the same information from this family as from the intellectuals and the news sites that we visited to get an idea of the current political position, and the exchanges between Armenia and its neighbouring countries in June 2009.

I recall the last day of our journey, it was as if the attention had shifted from a close-up view to something different. We were going back home and that brought a refreshing distance to the present location. You were in a bad mood and after a while we discovered the reason was that we had been affected by, and drawn into, the framework offered women to act within. This role was much more narrow than what we are experiencing in our daily lives back home. I think the bad mood came from the proximity of relief.

INTRODUCTION TO THE ARTWORKS

UNNI GJERTSEN

The Road to Oxiana, Station III: Armenia
3 channel video projection and floor text

this page: videostill

next page: illustration for floor

The Road to Oxiana, Station III: Armenia is the third in a series of four travel related works. Borrowing their title from Robert Byron's famous travelogue they explore how conceptions of places are brought about and become fixed collective bodies. The working method is partly deconstruction, reflection and composition of new juxtapositions.

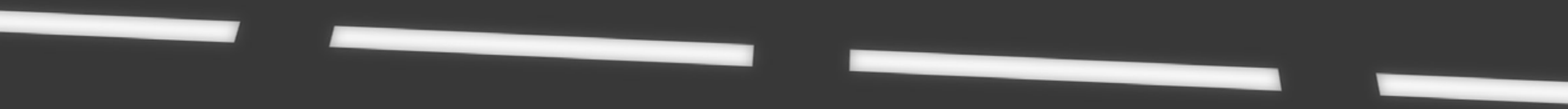
The Road to Oxiana, Station III: Armenia is concerned with geography and positions. In science theory the horizon is used as a metaphor for the limits of understanding –referring to a position that must be transgressed to be able to capture new ways of thinking about something. The three video projections in the installation dwell on the horizon of three mountainous views, facing respectively towards The Black Sea, The Caspian Sea and the Mediterranean Sea that were once incorporated in the Armenian cultural sphere.

The World Atlas is used as “dictionary” for the composition of words for the floor that plays with reorganisation of space by linguistic efforts. Different kinds of rhymes have been favoured often with humorous result. The names have associative qualities insofar as the audience knows something about the place, and even if they don't, the words resonate different characteristic ways of spelling, reminiscent of the language they originate from.

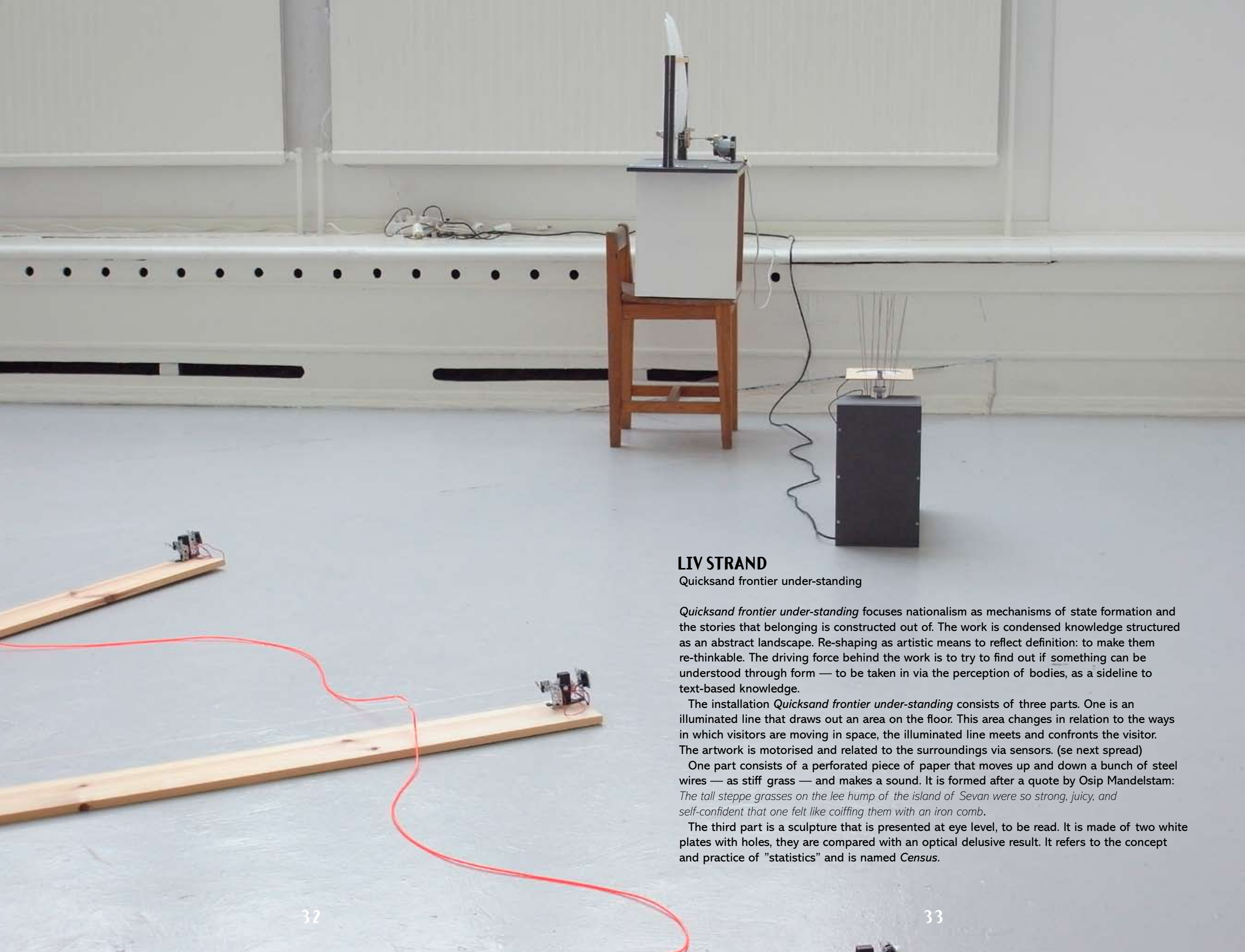
Breaking with spatial and cultural categories, the place names grouped together are neither situated close on the map in reality, nor deliberately combined according to any criteria other than shape and sound. In the installation the audience move between these ‘islands’ of letters.

Chennai

**Karabakh
Battambang
Chu Chiang**



where near – in line



LIV STRAND

Quicksand frontier under-standing

Quicksand frontier under-standing focuses nationalism as mechanisms of state formation and the stories that belonging is constructed out of. The work is condensed knowledge structured as an abstract landscape. Re-shaping as artistic means to reflect definition: to make them re-thinkable. The driving force behind the work is to try to find out if something can be understood through form — to be taken in via the perception of bodies, as a sideline to text-based knowledge.

The installation *Quicksand frontier under-standing* consists of three parts. One is an illuminated line that draws out an area on the floor. This area changes in relation to the ways in which visitors are moving in space, the illuminated line meets and confronts the visitor. The artwork is motorised and related to the surroundings via sensors. (see next spread)

One part consists of a perforated piece of paper that moves up and down a bunch of steel wires — as stiff grass — and makes a sound. It is formed after a quote by Osip Mandelstam: *The tall steppe grasses on the lee hump of the island of Sevan were so strong, juicy, and self-confident that one felt like coiffing them with an iron comb.*

The third part is a sculpture that is presented at eye level, to be read. It is made of two white plates with holes, they are compared with an optical delusive result. It refers to the concept and practice of "statistics" and is named *Census*.

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IMAGE INDEX

- p. 1 On the road to Sisian and to Dilijan
- p. 4 Heading for Tatev Monastery
- p. 6-7 Heading for Tatev Monastery, close to the caves at "Devil's Bridge"
- p. 8 Shinuhayr on the road from Sisian to Tatev (a), Yerevan (b)
- p. 9 On the road (a), Map of Armenian borders spanning 70 B.C. to 1920 (a), Hovhannavank Monastery (b)
- p. 10-11 Sevan Lake from Sevan Peninsula
- p. 12-13 Map from Matenadaran Library in Yerevan
- p. 14 Ararat the driver makes café (Dilijantrip)
- p. 15 A little museum at Goshavank Monastery (Dilijan trip) (a), Yerevan (b)
- p. 16 On the road towards Mount Agravakar (a), interior of Hovhannavank, Monastery (b)
- p. 17 Inside Tatev Monastery
- p. 18 Mother Armenia monument in Yerevan
- p. 28-29 Still from video installation (Unni Gjertsen)
- p. 30-31 Illustration of text for floor installation (Unni Gjertsen)
- p. 32-33 Installation (Liv Strand)
- p. 34-35 Installation (Liv Strand)
- Back cover From trip to Sisian (a), a café in Sisian (b), a map from Matenadaran Library in Yerevan (c)

TRAVEL ROUTE

— coming and going from Yerevan

Daytrip to Fortres Amber (50 km North of Yerevan) stopping at Oshakan where Mesrop Mashot is buried, Mughni Monastery, Saghmosavank and Hovhannavank Monastery.

Two day trip to Sisian in South East Armenia including excursion to Tatev Monastery and Goris.

Two day trip to Dilijan in North Armenia via Lake Sevan.

One day trip to Geghard Monastery (40 km east of Yerevan) stopping at the Garni Temple.

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