

Does Anyone Remember Unni Gjertsen?

By Lisa Torell

The Mai Zetterling Project
Beyond Oxiana
Diary – Five Days in Jerusalem

Large white rolls of film hung across the hall in a brilliant arrangement, the audience was forced to confront projected film and printed messages, such as: *Mai Zetterling's political influence is gigantic; Many streets and public places are named after Mai Zetterling; The Mai Zetterling Award is the most prestigious film award in Sweden; Sweden's most celebrated film director is called Mai Zetterling.* The design was concrete and freed up space and movement, the hanging and installation conceptual.

Do you remember Unni Gjertsen's exhibition of *The Mai Zetterling Project* at Konsthall C in Stockholm six years ago, the one that Niklas Östholm curated? No, you don't, because you weren't there. Very few people attended and saw the complete piece. Institution, exhibitor or exhibit had yet to be endowed with the value or status it ought to in order to warrant a larger audience or greater publicity.

2005 was a regular year, which began on a Saturday according to the Gregorian calendar.¹ The Swedish government had pronounced it the Year of Design and the FI (Feminist Initiative) had begun to gather momentum, a law change resulted in the debate about file sharing flaring up in earnest, and YouTube had just been launched. Viktor Jusjtjenko came in to office as president of the Ukraine. Islamic suicide bombers attacked the London Underground, Hurricane Katrina caused untold damage as it swept across Alabama, Florida, Louisiana and Mississippi, and Angela Merkel became Germany's first female chancellor.

When the exhibition opened, Unni Gjertsen was just limbering up at the starting blocks of her international career, but nobody knew this at the time. With hindsight, it is easy to put two and two together, but institutions, just like artists, need anchorage. Either the institution is anchored through a well-anchored artist (or vice versa), or artists become anchored through well-anchored institutions. The combination of neither marked a huge public and professional risk taking, although not experimentally.

Konsthall C, which had been open for approximately one year, was, and still is, a work of art initiated by the Swedish artist Per Hasselberg in collaboration with the local council of Hökarängen, just outside Stockholm. It was, and still is, located in a former communal laundry from the 1940s, designed by the modernist visionary and architect David Helldèn, who also designed Sergel's Square. Since its inception, Konsthall C has functioned as an exhibition space, a place for experimentation and discussion for a number of artists and curators, local as well as international. At present, Kim Einarsson curates and leads the programme.

Recognition transforms institutions and people. Soon, you, I and everyone else will insist that we were there at the beginning, that we actually saw *The Mai Zetterling Project*, that we took part in the work, the exhibitions and the discussions. Because there were discussions, discussions about communication, formulation, and visualisation—talks about tendencies in art and politics. And, sure, the exhibition was well attended; some of us were indeed there. But the existence of supposed deeds and support are so much easier to claim in the past tense than in the present. The denial is as emotive in the present as painfully absent critically and historically. Funnily enough, with hindsight, even this contributes to the question that Unni Gjertsen sought to shine light upon with her exhibition.

Mai Zetterling was born in 1925 and died in 1994.¹ She was a Swedish actress, scriptwriter and one of very few women film directors at the time. She featured in Ingmar Bergman's *Hets* (1944), Peter Sellers' *Only Two Can Play* (1962), collaborated with the author Sara Lidman and directed films such as *Älskande par* (Loving Couples), *Nattlek* (Night Games), *Amorosa* and the feminist film *Flickorna* (The Girls). In spite of her success, she struggled to gain support and to raise funds for new projects in Sweden; her work was often met with negative critique or stony silence. Simone de Beauvoir was of a

different opinion concerning *Flickorna*: “Ironic and comic, this film moves us by the beauty of its landscapes, its poetry and above all its subtle tenderness.”

Ingmar Bergman, Simone de Beauvoir, Mai Zetterling and Unni Gjertsen—a string of great names. No, I had no idea who Mai Zetterling was before this exhibition opened, but my curiosity was awakened, how could I not be intrigued? Who was she? Great names woven together: Unni Gjertsen, Mai Zetterling, Ingmar Bergman and Simone de Beauvoir.

Repetition, affirmative strategies and acknowledgements make a red thread that runs through Unni Gjertsen’s work.

Konsthall C, like many other places for art in Sweden and abroad, is housed in an industrial setting, which clearly bears the marks of its history and original function. The entrance splits laundry and exhibition space, the floor is tiled. Drains and stands for several washing machines remain. In spite of exposed piping, New York-feel and ceiling height, the traces of *whom completed which work* remains a loaded question, palpably present and the space is interesting but tricky and regarded as a bit of a problem. Unni Gjertsen works site specifically, which means that she considers the space she’s in when she works, prepares and installs—the place itself contributes to how the project will develop in one direction or another. The room is the space, as is time, and Hökarängen, Stockholm and Sweden also play their part. You can read a lot between the lines – equality, women. As a Swede, my thoughts turn immediately to *Folkhemmet*, a concept central to the development of The Swedish Model, Swedish society and the history of social democracy.

Democracy, women’s liberation and class struggle, words that move and tell stories, stand so obviously together, side by side. Text, Unni Gjertsen works with text, persuasive rhetoric. Now is not then. Words are memories— words become memories.

The exhibition contained stories, knowledge, history, cultural capital and memories, but the lack of references was acutely felt, where were they? I could see and feel them in their absence, but did I dare speak of them? Usually, exhibitions, press releases and catalogue essays are bursting with them. The names, our common frames of reference that demonstrate what we have read, that we can think, that declare our mutual understanding and enable us to safely agree that this is a corker of an exhibition! These signals, this validity and seal of approval—shallowly manifested through a footnote or a quote—were absent.

It takes courage to stand alone.

I was born in 1972.

Unni Gjertsen was born in 1966, which was also a regular year that began on a Saturday, according to the Gregorian calendar.¹ In Sweden, the coil becomes an approved method of contraception and Göran Palm creates a stir when he publishes his book *En orättvis betraktelse* in which he asserts that industrialised nations profit from the developing world. The president of France, Charles de Gaulle, pulls out of NATO and the president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, is deposed. The Cultural Revolution begins in China and all Western influence is condemned. 3,000 people are displaced after an earthquake in Turkey and France detonates an atomic bomb at Mururoa Atoll. Bechuanaland and Basutoland are declared independent states with the names Botswana and Lesotho, China detonates its third atomic bomb and the world’s only female cosmonaut, Valentina Teresjkova, visits Sweden.

What makes one thing lead to something else? She jumps from *The Mai Zetterling Project* to *Beyond Oxiana* and *China*, or at least I do. It becomes too diffused; I need to find my way back, to find a way of comprehending, contextualising. I begin with 1966 and 1972. I compare her to me, years with time, link China to one fuzzy memory after another, politics and inconsequential images, rhymes which pop into my head and give form and colour. Yes, it was a long time ago now, and I was very little; *Mummy Chinese, Daddy Japanese, Poor little Baby*. It seems silly, but there is something here, in me, which is stirred, something meaningful, which she touches upon. It’s not only in this, but it is a point of contact that surfaces in many of her works.

It is this direct or indirect influence, the creation of one identity or multiple, how it grows and the way she allows it to grow, how she binds together and reconnects, this which is now with that which was

then. Information of a social or even familial character is interwoven and equated to that of general context or current affairs.

ZHUANG HUI
b.1963
SMELL OF SOUP

From the stone workshop
To the metal workshop

From the room for casting copper
To the room for gluing wood

Lunch at his house
Mushrooms and seaweeds
Enriched with greens
From the kitchen garden

More running between the floors
Emptying of drawers
And picking down from shelves

Keepsakes and remnants
Objects with tired Mao red color
Paintings he made as a boy
Light green landscape in the Jilin province
North East China houses made of grass and mud
Frogs to catch
Wild grass to pick in the spring
And snow boards of wood

His days in the Red Guard
He does not speak

*Until 1980 personal experiences did not exist
Propaganda from loudspeakers morning till night
Printed inside the drinking cups*

Beyond Oxiana is the title of both the exhibition and the work and it is the last of four instances of an ongoing project about travel, history and identity. While *Beyond Oxiana* was produced in China and has been exhibited at 1 Shanthi Road in Bangalore, India, the previous three are based on travels in Egypt, Armenia and Turkey. If I compare it with *The Mai Zetterling Project*, this production is bare. The installation consists exclusively of text.

It looks good, grey upon white, from floor to ceiling, stylish, literary and professional.

She is a so-called text-based artist, a category as telling as it is abstract. Place-based, poetry or prose—the definition—does it really matter? It is art, and the story is once again at the centre, as is the communication, the sharing, the message construction and the people.

Every text begins with a name and a year of birth. Seven texts are displayed, one for each contributor, where the repetition of names and years of birth create a rhythm and a familiar time and space that I need in order to stay reading. One disturbing yet meaningful angle, is a kind of disconnect, a gap, which reappears both between first and third person, as well as in layout, space and architecture. The exhibition features Bao Pao (b.1940), Zhuang Hui (b.1963), Chen Shaoxiong (b.1962), Xiao Ke (b.1979), Jin Lianying (b.1955), Sui Jian Guo (b.1956), and Mu Chen (b. 1970). They all come from completely different parts of China. Unni Gjertsen interviewed them when she was an artist in residence in Beijing in 2009. The birth dates tell me something, the names hardly anything. I'm sure

there must be conventions for gender, others for naming, but here I'm not even sure who is male and who is female, or which names are common or unusual. I wish I knew the Chinese language or at least that I had been there. My entry points are meagre, but the language is English and the questions which were asked probably contributed just as much to their history as to my own, that of Europe or the world. The topic for discussion was World War Two, the Cultural Revolution and the student uprising. Memories that I remember, even though they were never mine.

Even as I write this, I find I get stuck on Beijing, Peking, Beijing, Peking. Words are memories or become memories, history. Nobody says Peking anymore, no one of my age; perhaps my grandma would, but definitely not my mum. Beijing is what it's called, although it took a while for me to understand that they are one and the same. In spite of this, Beijing will always reflect something rather different than Peking. The same can be said for Tiananmen Square or as it is known in Sweden "Himmelska fridens torg". The Swedish name will always feel bigger, and resonate deeply for me.

It's in this gap that the meeting takes place. The texts are so encompassing that my thoughts are accepted. But the voice is hers as are the words; it is personal, narrative and documentary, fiction and fact. The sentences say one thing, my thoughts something else. I fill in and top up. In 2009, twenty years to the day after the student revolts in Tiananmen Square, the Chinese government closed down several Internet channels, Twitter and You Tube amongst others. Unni Gjertsen does the opposite; she acknowledges the audience and the potential interpretations and versions that arise, creates her own stories, which in turn multiply depending upon those who have already seen or are currently looking. Words are important, they speak.

Whoever has the power over communication, who interprets and speaks of what, how and why, does not cease to be interesting. Rather, communication becomes even more of a burning issue than ever and is closely monitored. The importance of the Internet is obvious; Wikileaks, Wikipedia and Google are hugely influential, as are other similar media channels. As both voice and technology have become public property, the form of what, how and why has become what differentiates the private from the professional or the public. Perhaps this is why it has become more urgent than ever to regulate, oversee, categorise and censor the very mode of communication—that which now dictates the what, the how and the why. Content is judged differently depending on the speaking subject's self-interest, what is in it for them, and their commercial or ideological purpose. Perhaps it is the complexity and the sheer volume of communication platforms that has contributed to this skewed thinking, that is, that it ought to be straightforward to discriminate and tell one (truth) from the other. As if the pedagogy ought to be simple and the art pedagogical. Funny art suddenly needs to look funny, academic art, academic and brash, important needs to look important, everyone needs to be able to understand, to "get it", to tell black from white, now, here, at once. *A* precedes *B* which precedes *C*, the reading is structured logically and illustratively, no *g h l x 2*—shock, surprise or similar confusion would ensue. The shape of the content has become the content or, rather, what has happened is that the content now has a *fixed* form. Suddenly *the truth* has one face and *lies* another.

All of this takes place in 2011, a year that will potentially become a critical point for many countries, politically and in the collective imagination. It begins, like so many others, on a Saturday, according to the Gregorian calendar.⁴ The UN proclaims it the International Year of Forests and the International Year of Chemistry. Estonia adopts the euro. In Brazil, Dilma Rouseff succeeds Lula da Silva as president. A landslide kills 800 people in Brazil and the president of Tunisia flees the country following violent protests. Hosni Mubarak, the president of Egypt since 1981, resigns after violent demonstrations are directed at him and his regime. Violent protests are also sweeping Libya and the price of crude oil rises by 20 per cent, petrol prices in Sweden hit a record 14.28 kronor per litre. A magnitude 9 earthquake hits the east coast of Japan followed by a huge tsunami. The UN introduces a no-fly zone over Libya in order to protect civilians. In Sweden, Håkan Juholt is elected party leader of the Social Democrats, replacing Mona Sahlin. In May, Great Britain is expected to undertake a referendum on electoral reform and in July Southern Sudan is expected to become a sovereign state. On September 11 a large memorial ceremony is planned in New York to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre.

It is at this time that Unni Gjertsen begins her new piece of work *Diary – Five Days in Jerusalem*.

It is a work that will be published in the magazine you are now reading. The work builds on a journey earlier this year, this time taken together with artist Liv Strand. The magazine is the site and the piece

now consists only of text. It is more naked than previous pieces, something that, I suspect, will have no repercussions for the shape or execution of her future works.

Unni Gjertsen's pieces are neither logical nor pedagogical. It is in this light that I consider her a professional, in as much as the professional place and context are contributing factors, but that she does not play it safe. Today there appears a principle, even within art, that people prefer to be correct rather than consciously wrong. Correct is, after all, correct, and wrong is wrong—regardless of whether what is at stake is being wrong, people would rather be in the wrong correctly as opposed to in the wrong wrongly. Making visible all but the most simplistic view points to courage and above all respect for me, as audience member and observer. When the artist chooses another route other than the most obvious, interactivity arises, it gets me thinking, I take a position—aha, this feels different, not quite the usual.

Jerusalem. It makes me think of Palestine instantly, Hebron, the West Bank, Gaza and Israel. It is inflamed, almost too inflamed. It seems to be so sensitive that not even the media channels, which ought to be writing about it, do. Not now at least, when it is happening in the present. It is as if it is at its most sensitive in the present, and so people hang back from taking a position, until someone else has, someone who makes it legitimate to be of one opinion or another. In this way, one could argue that the world develops on fear. The fear of being perceived to be of the wrong opinion influences our behaviour and our way of expressing ourselves, of taking a position for or against, of speaking.

It is hard to work with the incomplete, even I am affected. She is not finished with the text, I receive it piecemeal, every other day another fragment. I am aware of my own critique; this is a sensitive subject and I would like to know more, to have the whole text. I don't want to contribute my own reflections on Palestine before I have seen hers. The material that would be my defence is not yet complete, the piece that would shield my thoughts from themselves is not there.

Sensitive, infected or difficult, she succeeds even now to be confrontational. It is subtle, but she does it. It is so obvious that at first I do not even think about it. *Diary – Five Days in Jerusalem*. The concept and the form enable possible mistakes and errors. It is written in the first person, perhaps the only form in which the subject is seen as neutral and the object as other. The world changes and values shift, and thus her direct experiences are re-evaluated, made equal to a greater political convention. It is her voice we partake in, her experiences, who can take that away from her? All we can do is to participate in the meeting (the material is Jerusalem) in which we silently and automatically add, delete, remember, take in, formulate and reformulate.

I have no idea what is about to happen, either with Unni Gjertsen or with the world. But one thing is certain: more of us ought to have the courage to dare to work in the present, with the small and the great.

1, 2, 3, 4.) Swedish Wikipedia <http://wikipedia.se> v.14 2011

4 Footnotes (4 references)

- 1. [^](http://wikipedia.se) Swedish Wikipedia <http://wikipedia.se> v.14 2011
- 2. [^](http://wikipedia.se) Swedish Wikipedia <http://wikipedia.se> v.14 2011
- 3. [^](http://wikipedia.se) Swedish Wikipedia <http://wikipedia.se> v.14 2011
- 4. [^](http://wikipedia.se) Swedish Wikipedia <http://wikipedia.se> v.14 2011

- See more at: http://aprior.org/article-detail/does_anyone_remember_unni_gjertsen#sthash.EWLH4dWD.dpuf