

Line Ulekleiv

## POROUS MATERIAL, ACTIVE ACTIONS

Line Ulekleiv is an art historian educated at the University of Oslo and a writer, critic and editor. In her essay for osloBIENNALEN she writes about Marianne Heier's performance *And Their Spirits Live On* at the former Museum of Contemporary Art.

I

For Marianne Heier, art is something we have within us, like a backbone. It represents an inherent possibility of change, action and awareness. Art has a continuous potential and an unconsummated becoming. In Heier's practice, historic art is seen with a new, activating gaze, forced out of rigid abstraction and stylistic regimes. With poetry and energy, the gaze can be liberated from fixed habits and thus discover neglected linkages.

The idea is Heier's principal form, played out in performances, objects and films. Nevertheless the material is never 'immaterial' in her work – on the contrary it forms a crystalline core. She has among other things immured a genuine diamond in the facade wall of Bergen Kunsthall, as an image of the relentlessly hard resistance of art to the market (*Diamond*, 2012), and exhibited a meteorite from space, acquired on eBay (*The Guest*, 2015). The silent material was presented here as a guest in time and space, diverted from its cosmic path. The often-concentrated mythical materials to which Heier turns her attention are in effect equally porous, in Walter Benjamin's sense<sup>1</sup>. The material bears within it conceptual hollows and openings, labyrinthine passages not refilled with absolute meanings. The porous as principle sustains a theatre of unpredictable constellations and an openness to new interpretations.

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin described Naples as a "porous city", in as much as it could absorb heterogeneity. For Benjamin the porous stone that forms Naples was also an image of the city's social and public life, including a rich underlying network which, through dynamic improvisation and fluid boundaries between inside and outside, old and new, counteracts absolute walls and fixed solidity.

*And Their Spirits Live On* is a guided, performative tour presented for the first time in Milan, then in Oslo during the opening week of Oslobiennalen First Edition. In the work, the idea of sculpture as reproduction is associated with the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera in Milan, where Heier was an art student in the 90s. Heier's point of departure is a series of colossal plaster sculptures placed in the corridors of the Accademia building. The performance in Oslo, which takes place in the abandoned premises of the Museum of Contemporary Art on Bankplassen, is an echo of the performance in Milan and shows images of these sculptures projected in various parts of the main hall.

They are all casts of famous sculptures, ranging from Greek sculptures of the 450s BC to the Michelangelo works of the Italian Renaissance. Many of these casts, in museum quality, were given as gifts by Napoleon, and have long been in use as a standard repertoire in classic academy teaching. At the time they were models – and that was that. They have remained standing there, simply too big to be moved into storage. In the corridors, paradoxically, the monumental sculptures can be overlooked – the everyday exhibition space makes them seem everyday and invisible. Since the 1700s students have toddled unruffled past Athene and Hercules with the greatest matter-of-factness.

The sculptures at the Accademia come from a mythology whose meaning has faded. But Graeco-Roman mythology is still a collective body of material of which we all to some extent share cultural ownership. It continues to metamorphose in all its grand-scale extravagance. For over two thousand years, the view of antiquity has been about reconstruction, an unceasing montage of fragments and bits and pieces. Metamorphosis is the very soul of antiquity, as in the Roman poet Ovid's mythological poem *Metamorphoses*. The myths are about transformations involving gods and heroes – but Ovid also transformed the content of the myths, and the legacy of among others Homer. The epic material has no constancy, and the Graeco-Roman gods are an unruly, stubborn lot. They are initiators of plots and injustices, ruled by lust, revenge and madness – beyond any morality. Figures and ghosts from the past stand ready to breathe life into new situations, concealed behind historical masks.<sup>2</sup>

Reproductions in plaster of Greek and Roman sculptures were an obligatory part of the drawing lessons at the historical art academies. Admiration of antiquity was for a long time absolute, and Greek art was the Holy Grail. Politically, its cultivation reached an imperialistic high point at the beginning of the 1800s when Lord Elgin moved sculptures from the Athenian Acropolis to England, where they ended up at the British Museum, washed shining white. The so-called *Elgin Marbles* brought with them an endless succession of plaster copies, annexed fragments in new ideological and cultural frameworks of meaning.

<sup>2</sup> Heier has used antiquity as a source and metaphorical resonance for the contemporary before, not least in the exhibition *Orpheus* at Kunstnernes Hus in 2013, when the background was the financial crisis in Europe. This was concretized not least in a 2,400-year-old Greek coin, a video titled *Orpheus*, which showed the staging and performance of an extract from Monteverdi's opera in front of the Oslo Stock Exchange, and a spiral staircase that the public could ascend (*Eurydice*).



Marianne Heier, *And Their Spirits Live On*, performance at the former Museum of Contemporary Art, Oslo, May - June 2019

The plaster sculptures express a pedagogical principle where clarity of form and idea trumps materiality. Precision is made possible without the weight and tactility inherent in marble or bronze. The collection of such casts could be made close to complete, something that is an impossibility with the originals<sup>3</sup>. For example, the National Museum owns 800 of these casts, including *Day* and *Night* by Michelangelo, which are also in the Brera monumental collection, and consequently in Heier's performance (*Night*).

The museum-oriented way of thinking subjects art to a constructed order with a linear logic that stabilizes and harmonizes. By definition the plaster copy lacks authenticity and genuineness, qualities we automatically expect from art. It is necessarily secondary, empty, an anachronistic form in which one can truly sense the "distaste for plaster."<sup>4</sup> But, as set up here in the marginal zone of the academy, can it tell us something today? Can this gallery of roles, with its long-overlooked bodies and unheard voices, be aroused from torpor and set in motion?

### III

In the Milanese corridors, Heier uses the sculptures that more or less arbitrarily stand there, boldly and without beating about the bush, borrowing quotations and postures from a conglomerate of scattered sources. These are brought together into a hybrid composition, which tumultuously and emotionally steps into the closed-off chambers of the past. A dislocating cavalcade of motions arises, with touches of the pop concert and experimental theatre. Moments are frozen and electrical, and the sculptures are transformed into narrating and symbolic actors, lose themselves in their own symbolic lustre, struggle and die. Like the plaster casts, this is a composite manifestation with no core, and follows no art-historical chronology.

The goddesses make their entry: Flora and Athene with Medusa's head hanging around her neck, with snakes as hair and a gaze that petrifies everyone who looks at her. Heier herself becomes Medusa, and the viewer looks danger in the eye. The mythical women become a reflection of power and powerlessness, extraterrestrial explosive force and imposed limitations.

Bodily strength works together with excess – mimed by Heier's physique – male for the occasion – with a stylized and padded chest. A massive, muscular Hercules leans against his club. A faun sleeps off a Dionysian intoxication, with legs akimbo. Of all the sculptures at Brera this is the most vandalized, covered with inscriptions. Many of the figures frequent a transitional zone between categories and genders; dichotomies lose their sharp contours. Heier's progress cultivates the wanton comedy of the masque. But through repetitions and exorcisms, an existential abyss is also suggested. The copy and the original meet in the phantasm, and create an intricate interplay between different levels of fiction.

<sup>3</sup> See Mari Lending, «Spøkelsesmuseer – Arkitektonisk gipsskulptur», *Agora* no. 3, 2010, pp. 36-55.

<sup>4</sup> Lending, p. 41.

## IV

When the performance is executed in the now abandoned premises of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Oslo, Heier appears together with Marie Askeland Gundersen. The building is no longer in use as the nation's institutionally most ponderous exhibition space for contemporary art, and marks a vacuum pending the coming of the new National Museum. Now the building's interior is a ruin, with demolished walls, with no other content than its own temporal features and traces of bygone operations. Have all those years of art left an imprint on the building, a kind of image memorial? Images of the sculptures in Italy are projected on the wall – reproductions that can be said to function as the casts of our own time, spectral and disembodied. They are here as visual ideas, but are physically and materially absent. The emptiness in the hollow plaster bodies finds a parallel in the ephemeral image that is projected for the occasion, activated in clear contrast to the performance's emphasis on theatrical bodies full of willpower, set in motion.

Heier performs in both places with a chorus of students, from Brera and the Project School in Oslo respectively, equipped with upper bodies in plastic, bulging like tourist gladiators. Through these walks with the public, Heier effects a distortion of the academic tradition that lies behind the sculptures in Milan, which thus become utility sculptures elevated exponentially. They become copies of copies of copies. The projected images at the same time become history represented, as enduring as light and shade. Gods, heroes and masterworks from the history of art thus become the starting point for a further profanation, staged and shaken up. In Heier's hands the plaster sculptures are props, vitalized by dramatization and interpretation – they can inflame and inspire.

The chorus can be compared to partisan singing, as a continuation of ancient Greek theatre. For Heier, the voice becomes a metaphor for civil courage and collective alliances. Daring to use one's voice means everything. A roman lion in relief symbolizes courage and strength. Heier's narrative collage borrows its title from the resistance movement *Die Weiße Rose*, a non-violent group of students in Munich during World War II who wrote and distributed pamphlets against Hitler and the Nazi regime. They knew they would not survive, but lived according to Goethe's motto: "Be yourself, despite all resistance!"<sup>5</sup> Some must sacrifice themselves, stand fearless and erect.

There is great flexibility in Heier's open, playful form, in which she rummages supply around. The associative guided tour becomes in itself a sculptural form, a mobile social sculpture which reflects transformation as motif, and long expanses of time from the contemporary to antiquity. It insists on taking back what is demonstrably ours: the thought behind the material, the impulse behind the form and the courage behind the action.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.aktive-fredsreiser.no/biblioteket/biografier/sophie\\_hans\\_scholl.htm](http://www.aktive-fredsreiser.no/biblioteket/biografier/sophie_hans_scholl.htm)