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## *A Library of Incommensurables*

A disembodied voice carries over an open square, singing in a high-pitched voice. Some of it you can make out: "...words floating in the wind, not knowing where to fall..." A woman walking her pug stops, looks up, trying to figure out where the voice is coming from. The singing continues, multiplying in number and tone, as a group having a salsa lesson in one corner of the plaza move in their own separate rhythm, and a man in a crumpled suit wearing headphones gleefully belts out a line of a show tune, knowingly competing with the growing dusk chorus.

Elsewhere, a pale blue butterfly, its wings tinged black, lands on a pair of empty trainers sitting amongst leaves on the ground. The laces and tongue of the shoes are bolts of neon green, the rest of it a bluish grey: the butterfly seems to belong here, blending in as if it were drawn to the colour coordination.

A stray curl of dust rests on a sheet of grey glass, overseen by a semi-transparent conch. The grey glass is frosted, absorbing and neutralising the colours around it, a template for the muted contours of those who pass by. The conch, open on one side, is luminous glass that swallows the remainder of the light, its shadow somehow also shining bright.

These are just brief moments, taken in time from across the spectrum of works that make up *A I S T I T / coming to our senses*. *A I S T I T* features artworks across a range of media, such as these instances from Kalle Nio and Hans Rosenström's outdoor sound installation *Weaving, Yearning* (2021), Laure Prouvost's skipping video *Swallow* (2013), and the sculpture *Lambi* (2019) by

Kapwani Kiwanga. A I S T I T — the word for “senses” in Finnish — already suggests the approach taken, a “coming to” the senses. Though as in these stolen moments, it also works *through* sense to arrive somewhere else, somewhere unexpected. Collected within the project’s five chapters and over twenty artists are a series of artworks that act as frameworks — frameworks to attract or hold a certain kind of accident, frameworks that might ask us to pay a certain kind of attention and encourage a certain kind of investment. Just as Christine Sun Kim’s sound work *4x4* (2015) is inaudible, its frequencies made apparent only in a slight sense of unease and maybe the occasional shudder and throb of the panes of glass in the windows near the speakers, it is as much about what happens within and around a work as it is about what is explicitly perceptible. These are frameworks that do not respond to our senses so much as activate, open, and demand we accept, for a fleeting moment, a full immersion in our senses.

What you are holding in your hands is a spectral library of sorts. It is an attempt to document and share the series of events and exhibitions that have happened over the past few months, and that will continue into the coming few, in different sorts of spaces throughout a number of cities. Taking “sense” itself as a theme for an exhibition is already a quixotic affair, an effort that can only ever be partial, incomplete. The nature of A I S T I T, dispersed over space and time, acknowledges this disjuncture in its own way: while all the artworks are gathered for a time in Helsinki, its iterations and rearrangements across the continent seem to emphasise that the project that can never be experienced in its entirety. And yet here in this book is an attempt to summarise, to share in some way, snatches of the events, and glimpses of the relics of those efforts through the mediums of word and image.

Photography itself is one of the newer experiential prosthetics that humanity has contrived to share experiences; language being one of the older and more established. In my work as an art critic, the leap of describing art on the page never gets less weird, less of a chasm. British writer Stuart Morgan’s essay on the impossibility of writing about art and the folly of being an art critic, ‘Homage to the Half-Truth’ (1991), provides a passage I have long taken inspiration from:

That criticism refers to another art does not prevent its existing in an artform in its own right. (We don’t despise ballet because it needs music.) Its nearest neighbour may be translation — the act of shifting an experience from one language to another — since finally, perhaps, the experience of perceiving art can never be explained, but only evoked or paralleled.<sup>1</sup>

This might hold true for any writing that attempts to touch on feelings and senses: it is a ferrying back and forth, somehow attempting to be neither and both, and so becoming something else. Which is to say, what we are talking about here must, by its very nature, be elided and mostly absent.

Earlier in 2021, when galleries and museums began to reopen, there was a day when I ventured out and saw a few exhibitions. After months of video meetings, emails and predictable television shows, punctuated only by walks

in the nearby park, it was a peculiar kind of explosion. There were feasts of varied textures and colours, in all kinds of unnatural arrangements; all manner of surfaces in unexpected directions, external thoughts and intimate encounters that weren’t entirely pre-planned or set with a certain theme in mind. It felt like a massage for my eyeballs (to use a tactile metaphor) and awoke a certain part of my brain that I hadn’t used in a long time. The multifaceted workings of the A I S T I T exhibition series come at a point where, perhaps more than at any other time in recent history, there is a broader awareness of what we need in order to find some kind of balance — what kind of stimulation or surprise is required, whether mental, or creative, or simply to find a sense of well-being. It is in this moment, now, that we might be more aware of and might more deeply appreciate the affective movements of art, as something that works on and with the many parts of us, multi-sensory and para-sensory. While language can convey its own proxies of experience, the shifting, morphing mass of art is of a more complex depth, more appropriate for communicating the tangled contradictions of the sensory realm. Art has long been understood as a communicant of the non-verbal — primarily, as is pointed out elsewhere in this book, of the visual, and the visual representation of the tactile (look — but don’t touch!). But what A I S T I T helps clarify is that artworks are contradictory containers for sense — they don’t necessarily hold a sense or speak directly about it, but make the issues around sense shareable and transportable. They become a locus around which to gather for an instant, and then disappear. While here in this book we have some means of documentation and evocation of these absent senses in writing and imagery, I would propose the dispersed artworks themselves as their own paradoxical library. Accumulatively, hovering somewhere just beyond this book, they form an itinerant, non-linear, temporarily gathered library of the senses.

The gallery is quiet, hushed like a library, apart from the shuffle of feet and the occasional snuffle. But the images on the walls are bursting, swollen with lumpen browns and irritated reds, outlined with halos of bile. In between each of these images are pale crusted squares like enlarged segments of irritated skin, as if the building itself has erupted with eczema. The installation of Dafna Maimon’s drawings and sculptural excerpts has a visceral slipperiness, a mashed up fantasy of teeth and intestines, though these visions are an inward journey — or, rather, their source are apparently from within our bodies, but the direction of this movement is for us to determine. The accompanying film *Leaky Teeth* (2021) gives us a logical enough proposition: that each of us hold within us a vast store of innate sensory knowledge, accumulated over millennia of evolution. Its absurdist humour presents this idea through a tribe of primitive cave people who inhabit our teeth, the yellowed bits of caked material that dot the walls next to the drawings being parts of their dental cave. Between the film’s awkward expectancy and the swirling vortices of the drawings is a sense of decay and collapse, that we are witnessing a moment of breakdown, as a transitional moment where other forces might seep through. Within each of us is a portal to unspeakable knowledge, and as Maimon asks: what happens if we let it out?

The walls are moving. They bristle with lush greens, hatched with trees and dense foliage in a slow panning camera shot that makes its way around the room with the slow draw of a hospital curtain. Eyes follow the flow of images

<sup>1</sup> Stuart Morgan, ‘Homage to the Half-Truth,’ lecture given at the ‘Writing About Art’ Symposium, Van Abbemuseum, 1991, reprinted in *What the Butler Saw* (ed. Ian Hunt, Durian Publications, 1996), p. 233.

from one corner to the next, accompanied by a lamenting soundtrack. The appearance of the outdoors that encircles us, though, seems to demand stillness, fixing us in place. The portal of the screen is expanded in Terike Haapoja's *On Belonging* (2021), as a three-sided video that slides over the walls around us. Here, there is no crossing the threshold, as we pan across a set of zoo enclosures and terrariums. Most seem empty or abandoned, but for the shadows that linger on the glass that separates us from those segmented, artificial environments, all we can see of the visitors trying to catch a glimpse of a monkey or a fish. It is a slow march, a eulogy for trapped beings, where we are the ones who have created these barriers, and hemmed ourselves in. At one point, a dad cradling his toddler waves to an unimpressed, unresponsive gorilla. The child's reflection bounces off the glass to appear as an apparition inhabiting the primate, one held inside the other, a shared fate. Among the shifting imagery, the gallery becomes its own enclosure, and we the specimens as we mill about in a place for observing human behaviour. Most zoos are founded with the presence of preservation, of survival; you might step out of Haapoja's cage, but the question of what escape or survival might mean persists.

In 1977, a posthumous exhibition of the work of Marcel Duchamp was held at the newly opened Centre Pompidou in Paris. A catalogue accompanied what was the artist's first retrospective in his country of birth; in the book, postmodern theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard contributed a patchy and largely note-form essay, looking primarily at Duchamp's sculpture *The Large Glass* (1915-23). Lyotard was drawn to the avowedly "anti-retinal" aspects of Duchamp's work, how his readymades, installations, portable works and even paintings asked those experiencing the work to seek other ways to understand the world that didn't prioritise sight. Such work created, according to Lyotard, a "dissolution of visual ensembles [...] which plunges the self-sufficiency of the eye into disarray."<sup>2</sup> The focus of Lyotard's essay is on "hinges": literally, as the meeting points of different materials; in narrative terms, as turning points in the abstract plot depicted in the *Large Glass*, but also metaphorically and as fourth-dimensional hinges, turning points of our own understandings through time.

It is not so much the view of a late 20th century postmodern thinker on an early 20th century proto-conceptual artist's museum-bound work, though, that feels relevant here. What Duchamp was proposing and Lyotard articulating was an initial shift in countering the dominance of sight. The work of A I S T I T follows on from this in proposing a further shift, one that isn't a move against the visual so much as an integration of the visual, bringing sight on a par with the other senses. A moment in the world is never just one seen, but holistically experienced, and gathered here are ways of making and experiencing art that reflect, demand, and expand on this. What feels resonant in Lyotard's writing is the phrases used and images conjured, in approaching ways of conceiving and describing artworks as nexi of sense: Duchamp's work is termed a "dispective machine," the thinker coining a new word to attempt to describe the artist's disassembling or discarding of any fixed perspective. Lyotard goes on to set out what he calls the "paradoxical hinges" that run throughout Duchamp's work, a set of external and internal junctures and negotiations that create "a politics of incommensurables."<sup>3</sup> Such notions of unsettled, paradoxical hinges seem useful to help try to describe A I S T I T's meeting points of different planes

of existence, points that are also ones of movement and articulation, that can move and drive toward multiple directions.

A falsetto voice echoes over an enclosure, a short phrase is released, bouncing off the surrounding buildings and then gone. People sat outside a bar just down the way look up from their table, wondering if a busker has started playing, then look away again. The voice calls out once more, more heads turn. A similar voice begins further away, drawing us hesitantly towards it. A staged escape or excursion is put to us by Nio and Rosenström's *Weaving, Yearning*, as an attempt to guide us through a section of the city through song. Some people might be waiting for it, knowing what to follow as each singing voice leads us astray; others might overhear, or stop simply to see what other people are doing. As sunset sets in and the air thickens, the swells of the choir pull us forward and do more than fill the air with soundwaves; it animates the architecture, gives a sense of orchestration to the incidental, and weights the moment with a cinematic pull. The voices drift in the wind, through the traffic and passing chatter, and the sounds lost and unintelligible feel just as important as those heard, as only fragments of the lyrics become comprehensible: "...under a changing sky they follow the ripples of sound..." Bystanders accumulate while the urban shuffle continues, and all of it becomes part of the work. These are uncertain containers, holders for the absences and accidents that might allow us to get a sense, however awry and elliptical, of our own understandings of sense.

A cough sounds out in the theatre, somehow dampened and amplified by the formalised silence of the place. A sound hums hesitantly on the edge of audibility, while a vague light begins to show, a diffuse white that by the time you feel you've seen it, it has become more of a blue, then a blue tinged with fuchsia. Another cough, that seems to herald the onset of the humming intensifying, signalling the start of something. There is a threshold in some performative works where it might seem nothing is happening; or the not knowing when something is happening, or if it is part of the work; and that question itself then becomes an activation of sorts, an embrace, of all, and of nothing. This is, in a way, the language of senses: a negotiation of cumulative almos. *Disappearing — a passion* (2021), a performance by Tari Doris, Meri Ekola and Kid Kokko, is an apposite attempt to hold these contradictions, where spoken words, the sounds made by wind passing through organ pipes, and shifting tones of atmospheric lighting can work towards such an ephemeral and encompassing embrace. The piece enacts a question, of how we access a feeling, a sense of liberation or belonging, that might always be there but is not always felt; and whether the experience of the work itself might become a portal towards such a space. Leaving the performance theatre, all that remains is a memory of an improvised moment, a vapour remnant of a feeling made in some way transportable.

As A I S T I T implicitly suggests, art is the best means we have to communicate sense through time; to share and expand on its invisible traces. These are gathering points and impossible placeholders, hinges for moving from one way of sensing to another. Each artwork forms part of an unwritten library of senses, a library that can't always be accessed but is somehow always there, accumulated over a lifetime of accidents and evaporated incidents. And we are each a further paradoxical but necessary hinge in this system: these works are the library, and you are both the librarian and the language in which they are written.

2 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Duchamp's TRANS/formers* (Originally published 1977, trans. Ian McLeod, Lapis Press, 1990), p76.

3 Ibid., pp. 103, 153, 26