

## **Drifting. Hanne Nielsen & Birgit Johnsen. By Frank Falch Sørlandets Kunstmuseum**

### Drifting

A close-up image of the ocean is projected onto three juxtaposed canvases. On one of these, the picture of waves is replaced by one of a ship's deck. Shortly thereafter we see the ocean again, but also glimpse something off in the distance. Is it a raft, we wonder? On the screen to our left, pictures from a ship's bridge fade in, and a voice says: «I remember we had just eaten breakfast....».

Thus begins Hanne Nielsen & Birgit Johnsen's monumental video installation *Drifting* (2014), which is based on a true story. On 21 April 2006, a man was found drifting on a raft about 30 nautical miles south of Kristiansand, in the international waters of the Skagerak strait. His flimsy craft consisted only of a pallet fastened to four oil drums. The thinly-clad man, after several days at sea, was clearly suffering from hypothermia when he was picked up by the Norwegian gas tanker *Berge Odin*. The ship brought him to Sweden's west coast. There he was handed over to immigration authorities who began trying to establish his identity. But he didn't want to talk or cooperate. The situation generated international attention, and the press began speculation over his many possible nationalities. One theory was that he had been a stowaway on a ship, and when discovered, had been put on the raft and left to his destiny.

This true story is the starting point for a work of art that raises several important questions. On an immediate level, the question is how to relate to someone whose nationality cannot be established and who refuses to cooperate in any way whatsoever. On a more general level, there are questions about the relation between the individual and society. A key aspect here is how identity today is closely tied to nationality and to being classified according to social systems. A case such as the raft-man challenges our social structure, where we experience ourselves as having found a natural place in society.

Does this mean the raft-man has less value as a person, thus also less entitlement to protection as an individual? On an existential level, the work deals with the theme of lacking a sense of belonging, something some of us take for granted in our well-adapted and integrated lives. The man on the raft is adrift, with no goal or direction, quite literally, but also in a metaphorical sense. The video installation can therefore be read as picturing an existential situation where a person lacks anchorage and security.

The narrative structure is an important aspect of *Drifting*. Hanne Nielsen and Birgit Johnsen have chosen a form that emphasises the main theme. They tell the story in a fragmented way, with no traditional chronology propelling it from beginning to end as in a typical Hollywood film. It presents the story of the raft-man on three canvases that hang displaced and at some distance from each other. A fourth projection shows fragments from e-mail correspondence and so forth relating to the man. As viewers, it is impossible to comprehend all the projections simultaneously – our gaze wanders back and forth between the pictures. The pictures also fade in and out of each other and alternate between close-ups of the man on the raft, the raft on the ocean, pictures from the ship and images recorded by the Swedish police who tried to establish the man's identity.

Another breach in logical narrative structure is the combination of fiction and facts. This is underscored through the use of authentic pictorial material, interviews with involved persons and film clips of a more poetic character. Here we find documentary elements, such as interviews with the ship captain and representatives

from the Swedish authorities, in combination with staged depictions of the man on the raft and beautiful ocean sequences. The man is seen up-close and at a distance, as a lonely, abandoned figure on the small raft, drifting on an infinite ocean. But he is also represented by an actor, since part of the film appears as a reenactment, a fiction or re-telling of his experiences. In some parts of the installation, the man is shown in the company of the Swedish police, but without actually being present. These pictures clearly violate realistic narrative conventions.

Since he takes no part in the proceedings, he appears as a silent witness to his own story. These sequences show him as lacking a voice of his own, unable to influence decisions. He is passively present, no more than an object. *Drifting* is a hybrid narrative with different voices and perspectives. It combines actual events with fictive and poetic elements. It is both beautiful and crassly realistic. Viewers shift attention from one narrative component to another and must themselves establish an understanding of what has happened. The sense of confusion redoubles through the constantly changing pictures projected onto the screens. They fade in and out, alternate between close-ups of the man's face, the infinite ocean and factual film clips of real events.

The artists see the phenomenon of the raft-man as picturing the relation between the individual and the wider community. They use the story as a catalyst for asking important questions about the way we organise society and the position we as individuals have in it.

The starting point for the story is the destiny of a single person, but the questions that are just as relevant on a general level. They can be seen in light of the stream of refugees and migrants the world has witnessed in recent years. Also today, people are forced to relinquish a fixed anchor point in life, and to drift towards the unknown.

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