

Pirkko Siitari

Adrift at sea

- *Observations on 'Drifting' by Hanne Nielsen and Birgit Johnsen*

Combining documentary and fiction, *Drifting* is a work about otherness, borders and the indifference that permeates society today. An exile in distress is a 'problem' that must be fixed – and here empathy has no place. The video installation is based on a true story: In 2006 a Norwegian tanker rescued a man who was drifting on a raft in the middle of the sea. The video describes how the authorities tried in vain to establish the man's identity and nationality and how he ended up in this life-threatening predicament. Who was he? Was he cast adrift from a ship? Who were the perpetrators of this crime?

Drifting is a mosaic-like, multi-channel installation that subtly tells its story from shifting perspectives, including that of the captain of the rescue vessel, a sailor, the police and immigration officials. Each interviewee presents a different take on reality: There is no univocal truth or common interpretation – each speaker tells the story as they see it from their particular perspective, through the filter of their professional role. Mounted on the walls around the installation are collages of news headlines paired with a letter written by the victim.

Applying a practice that is becoming increasingly popular in contemporary art, the artists adopt a documentary approach. The work is not strictly a documentary, however, nor is it a direct window to the world; rather it uses a documentary methodology to deconstruct and comment on our immediate reality. The artists employ strategies such as interviewing people involved in the incident and quoting media headlines. The work thus uses artistic devices to make a general statement about social reality through the lens of a particular event.

The main protagonist – the abandoned man adrift on the raft – turns out to be a paperless stowaway who has been cast off a ship. He refuses to reveal much about himself; many things, including his name and identity, remain a mystery. One interviewee explains that transporting a paperless stowaway inevitably leads to problems for ship crews, who avoid it at all costs, even by criminal means, as in this case. The ship and the perpetrators were never found. All clues had been carefully covered up – even the serial numbers on the drums under the raft had been removed.

The victim's voice is heard in a letter recounting a tale of extreme human distress. The man describes how he had been cast off the ship and forced aboard a makeshift raft built by the crew. He was then set adrift at sea for days on end. Amazed that he was never detected by coastal radar towers, he recounts that many ships sailed past him without bothering to stop. The letter tells us nothing about the man's identity or former life, but it tells a compelling tale of despair, suffering, survival and gratitude towards his rescuers.

The man was in poor condition by the time he was rescued – indeed it was a miracle he ever survived on the precarious raft. The incident received extensive coverage from mainstream media including CNN and the BBC news. The captain appearing in the video recalls how the first media helicopters and planes appeared in the sky within only half an hour of the authorities being notified. By the time the ship arrived in Sweden, it was greeted by a throng of Swedish and international reporters. The media followed the case with keen interest while the authorities investigated the victim's identity and searched for the culprits. The installation comments on the media's coverage of the tragic events with a series of collages comprised of sensational headlines.

Drifting forms a multi-voiced narrative. The viewer pieces together fragments to form an overall picture of what happened, but many questions still remain unanswered, as no doubt was the artists' intention – indeed it correlates with the way the events unfolded. What, ultimately, can we ever really know for certain? How is information conveyed to us?

Whom can we believe? The authorities? The media? The victim? And, most saliently, how could this happen? Why would anyone choose to cast a paperless stowaway adrift at sea – how could this ever be a preferable option to taking him ashore?

The installation raises questions about morality, violence and the right to one's privacy. According to the interviewees, it is quite common for ships to abandon paperless stowaways at sea. The victim further states that many ships passed him without stopping. The media serves up its own sensationalized version of events, while the victim in turn wants to protect his privacy: He is willing to describe the crime, but not to reveal his identity, which becomes the subject of much speculation. The search for the culprits meanwhile leads nowhere.

Drifting is about otherness, about an exile living outside society and beyond generally accepted rules and norms. The rescued man refuses to reveal his name, nationality or origins – the very things that define our identity in contemporary society. Why did the man conceal these facts? What made him abandon everything and become a vagrant? The installation offers clues to help us construct our own version of what happened.

It is impossible to view *Drifting* without linking it to the current refugee crisis and the rising tide of racism that is sweeping Europe. The work is a stark reminder of the innumerable refugees who cross the seas in rickety boats that are barely seaworthy. Some survive; too many do not. We find ourselves associating the fate of the paperless stowaway with current events: the crimes of human traffickers and the bureaucrats who probe the identities and origins of an ever-growing influx of refugees.

Despite its happy ending (the man is rescued) the work is neither uplifting nor cathartic (the criminals are never caught). The reaction it evokes is rather one of bewilderment and incredulity: Is this really the world we live in?

Drifting is a thought-provoking commentary on violence, closed borders and the cool indifference of contemporary society. Rather than eliciting a cathartic response, it achieves something even more important: Its affective content awakens our ability to feel empathy.