

# ...ce phénomène photographique, la vie

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More than thirty years ago, I had the opportunity to attend a retrospective of films directed by Marguerite Duras. I must admit that those films, which I watched with amazement and admiration at the time, were among those few moments that decisively influenced my future research work. So many questions arose from her transgressive cinematic discourse. I came to comprehend the problem of lacking a language and, consequently, the impossibility of utterance, as pointed out in numerous feminist theoretical elaborations, and it was through Duras' unique procedure of dissociating the cinematic image from the actors' voices and the film music. Many years later, I came across her statement concerning the necessity of utilizing voice-over. In her 1979 conversation with Jean-Luc Godard, which revolved around his need for images and her need for the text, for the written, as she called it, Marguerite Duras said: "On the screen, I need both things, neither of which gets in the way of what I would call 'the amplitude of speech.' In general, I find that almost all images get in the way of the text. They prevent the text from being heard. And what I want is something that lets the text come through. That is why I made *India Song* in voice-over."<sup>1</sup>

Six years after *India Song*, in 1981, Duras made another film, titled *L'homme atlantique*, also in voice-over. Moreover, in this film, what sounds from the voice-over is her own voice giving instructions to the actor on how to stand, where to move, and what to look at in front of the camera. Her voice directs him on what and how he should see, thus equating his gaze with that of the camera, behind which she remains invisible while narrating. Among the spoken scenes that the actor was supposed to see was one specified as "this bird beneath the Atlantic wind." In *L'homme atlantique*, Duras radically applied a distinct element of her cinematic syntax—her emblematic black frame, a total eclipse of the image in which "the amplitudes of words" versify the letter in which "a lover's discourse" resounds with a death drive. It is in one of these black frames, which lasts for fourteen minutes, that the off-screen voice declares: "Ne cherchez pas à comprendre ce phénomène photographique, la vie"—"Don't try to understand this photographic phenomenon, life."

1 *Cinema Hardly Exists: Duras and Godard in Conversation.*

This imperative pronounced by Marguerite Duras resurfaced in my memory while reading the diary of painter Katarina Ivanišin Kardum, published in her artist's book *De materia avium*<sup>2</sup> from 2017, whose purple canvas cover was hand-bleached by herself. The diary is related to her series of charcoal drawings and watercolours depicting dioramas with taxidermy birds from the collection of the Natural History Museum in Dubrovnik, where the artist worked as a museum educator from 2011 to 2014. The series is titled *Still Landscapes*. This title, which hybridizes two standard art genres with their historical specifications, was not chosen by chance: still life and landscape both appeared as independent genres at the dawn of the baroque period. While reading the diary, I learned that while studying the history of the museum, founded in 1872, she discovered “her hero” Baldo Kosić, a professor of drawing and calligraphy, naturalist, curator, and taxidermist who managed the museum from 1882 until his death in 1918. He left behind valuable natural history collections, objects he had personally collected, and numerous scientific works.

The first part of the book *De materia avium* is structured so that the left-hand pages contain the diary text, while the right-hand ones feature one or two photographs each, reproduced in the following order: a photographic portrait of Baldo Kosić; a photographic portrait of Katarina Ivanišin Kardum,<sup>3</sup> disguised as Baldo Kosić and standing in front of his framed photographic portrait in an identical pose; a photograph of the natural history collection from the Dubrovnik museum taken in 1950; two photographs of the same collection from 1956; two photographs of dioramas with birds, taken around 1960 by Andrija Lesinger. The last three pages of the diary are accompanied by photographs taken by the artist herself in 2011, in the storage of the Natural History Museum. In Katarina Ivanišin Kardum's photographs, taxidermy birds can be discerned through transparent nylon foil. The physical interaction with these musealized objects—stuffed birds presented so as to look alive, with an industrially produced, synthetic cover intended to protect them from dust—creates a three-dimensional, model-like configuration: a stylized depiction of an indefinite mountain range with its peaks, ridges, plateaus, gorges, and passes.

I have learned from the diary that the Natural History Museum, which Katarina Ivanišin Kardum remembers from her childhood, was initially situated in the former Benedictine monastery on the island of Lokrum, but was later relocated several times, “losing some of the flair of a small yet refined world museum.” In search of that spirit, she writes, she came across old museum documentation: photographs of numerous dioramas, only a few of which are on display in the museum today: “The remaining dioramas from the photographs I soon discovered in the museum's store-

2 Ivanišin Kardum, *De materia avium*.

3 The photographic portrait was made by artist Ivana Dražić Selmani during the Night of Museums 2011.

room. They were in a melancholic state, covered with nylon foil to protect them from dust and slow down the natural decomposition process. When I first entered those rooms, the atmosphere tightened my chest: it was damp and emitted a peculiar odour. There they lay abandoned, frozen in time, undead, as if they were still breathing, these captive birds. Everything was quiet, yet disturbing, as if something was about to happen at any moment. Every thought of them in that place evoked the same sensations. [...] One windy day, I opened a window with its shutters and blinds, and for a brief moment, I let the light fall on those dead landscapes. I took a quick photo—documenting that they were momentarily alive, that they breathed in light, if only for a short while. It all felt like a single prolonged breath: long, yet never deep enough.”<sup>4</sup>

In the second and third parts of her book, Katarina Ivanišin Kardum reveals the background of her “re-enactment” of the photographic images of dioramas from the Natural History Museum in drawings and watercolours: “By translating the objective, old black-and-white photographs of dioramas into charcoal drawings, I explore the unnatural nature of landscape. Neither dioramas nor diorama photographs are simple copies of the situations. Thus, charcoal drawing is just another generation of seemingly natural motifs.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, “I continued to explore the unnatural nature of landscape by translating my own photographs of dioramas kept in the storage into watercolours of proportions that are rather unusual in this technique. It seemed to me that the watercolour's inability to conceal changes and errors best suited the character of the unique moment I had captured with my camera.”<sup>6</sup>

Katarina Ivanišin Kardum's depiction of the moment when she opened the museum storeroom's window shutters to let “undead” stuffed birds breathe in light brings to my mind the enigmatic imperative formulated by Marguerite Duras: “Don't try to understand this photographic phenomenon, life.” Can this sentence be interpreted as Duras defining life as a photographic phenomenon? And do I have the right to take her sentence out of its original context in order to relate it to Katarina Ivanišin Kardum's translation of old black and white photographs into charcoal drawings and her own photographs into watercolours, as part of her exploration of the unnatural nature of landscape? Marguerite Duras also engages in translation; and she has adapted her own novel into a film with the same title—*L'homme atlantique*. She needs both text and image, an eclipsed image manifesting itself as a black frame, a dense darkness of long duration perceivable on the screen.

For a photograph to come into existence, it literally must breathe in light. A camera shutter must briefly open to allow light to pass through, much

4 Ivanišin, *De materia avium*, 16-20.

5 Ibid., 24.

6 Ibid., 38.

like the window shutters of the Natural History Museum needed to be opened while Katarina Ivanišin Kardum was taking a photograph to record that the stuffed birds within a dead landscape were alive. In the case of Marguerite Duras, I am inclined to identify that breathing in light in the amplitudes of words uttered by her voice. I am also convinced that Katarina Ivanišin Kardum needed to give voice to her *Still Landscapes*, which are re-enactments of old black and white photographs of dioramas representing the very idea of a landscape, that is, a living nature, by exhibiting dead bodies of birds as if they were still alive. What preceded such lovely staging? Who had captured the birds and put them to death? And why? And for what purpose—scientific research or spectacle? Could all these questions be encapsulated in the sentence “Don’t try to understand this photographic phenomenon, life”?

In his essay *The Four Boundaries of Seeing*, dedicated to the blind photographer Evgen Bavčar, Dietmar Kamper argued that, “it is impossible to identify objects visually without bringing them to a standstill” and concluded that “the acquisition of the world in the searching grid of visual perception means mortification. Images are the corpses of things.”<sup>7</sup>

These corpses are not apparent in the English term used to signify this specific genre—*still life*—but its French equivalent, *nature morte*, reveals them. This linguistic, which I perceive as analogous to the gap between different visual media—photography and drawing, or painting—brings me back to the issue of translation, specifically the resemantization that takes place during translation.

A century ago, Walter Benjamin wrote an essay titled *The Translator’s Task*, which was published as an introduction to his own translation of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens*. Considering that the word *tableau* also stands for a painted image, I would say that Baudelaire painted Paris with his “amplitudes of words,” much like Marguerite Duras, many years later, made cinematic images pulsate with her voice pronouncing elliptic sentences. Benjamin argues that translation is a mode, and points out that “certain relational concepts gain their proper, indeed their best sense when they are not from the outset connected exclusively with human beings. Thus we could still speak of an unforgettable life or moment, even if all human beings have forgotten it. If an essence of such lives or moments required that they not be forgotten, this predicate would not be false, it would merely be a demand to which human beings fail to respond, and at the same time, no doubt, a reference to a place where this demand would find a response, that is a reference to a thought in the mind of God.”<sup>8</sup> When Benjamin asserts that translation is properly essential to certain works, he makes it clear that it doesn’t mean that their translation is essential for the

7 Kamper, “The Four Boundaries of Seeing”, 56.

8 Rendall, “The Translator’s Task, Walter Benjamin (Translation)”.

works themselves. Instead, it suggests that, “a specific significance inherent in the original texts expresses itself in their translatability”. For him, “translation stands in the closest connection with the original by virtue of the latter’s translatability. Indeed, this connection is all the more intimate because it no longer has any significance for the original itself. It can be called a natural connection, and more precisely, a vital connection. Just as expressions of life are connected in the most intimate manner with a living being without having any significance for the latter, a translation proceeds from the original. Not indeed so much from its life as from its “afterlife” or “survival” [*Überleben*].”<sup>9</sup>

Katarina Ivanišin Kardum’s exploration of the unnatural nature of landscape, articulated through her translation of photographs into charcoal drawings and watercolours, stems from such a natural or vital connection, as Benjamin terms it. And when she speaks of undead birds whom she allowed to breathe in light, she precisely highlights the significance that arises from the afterlife of these once-living beings that have become musealized objects.

The fact that the artist has found content that calls for translation within the Natural History Museum holds significant meaning. Natural History was one of the recurring themes in Benjamin’s thought. Erich Santner has argued that Benjamin’s use of the term *Naturgeschichte* refers not to the fact that nature also has a history, but rather that artefacts of human history tend to acquire a quality of mute, natural being at the point when they begin to lose their place in a viable form of life. For Benjamin, natural history ultimately names the ceaseless repetition of such cycles of emergence and decay of human orders of meaning, cycles that are, for him, always connected to violence.<sup>10</sup>

In a 1985 documentary film titled *Marguerite Duras: Worn Out with Desire to Write*, Duras mentioned that all her writings originated from photographs taken during her childhood and adolescence, when she lived with her widowed mother and brothers in the French colony of Indochina. Among other things, she alluded to the injustice done to her mother. In doing so, she indirectly pointed to the muteness of trauma that requires various modes of translation. That raises a question: Is it possible to translate violence? Is it possible to understand this photographic phenomenon, life?

The charcoal drawings and watercolours from the *Still Landscapes* series are not Katarina Ivanišin Kardum’s first translations of photographs. At the very beginning of the catalogue for her solo exhibition held in 2014 at the Museum of Modern Art in Dubrovnik, she reproduced a series of drawings in pencil and latex on paper made during 1999 and 2000, titled

9 Ibid.

10 Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*, 16-17.

the *Atomic Bomb Series*. In this series, conceived as a frieze of six drawings of equal size, she sequentially decomposed the media image of a hydrogen bomb explosion. The sequence of images suggests that the process of drawing mimics a process of photographic blow-up in which the primary object of representation becomes unrecognizable. Instead of the atomic mushroom recognizable in the initial pictorial fields, the final images are saturated with floating spots that appear beneath the membrane separating the viewer's gaze from the observed scene. Are these spots signifiers of microscopic living organisms, or particles of lethal contamination by which humankind marks its presence in nature? In the exhibition catalogue, the reproduction of the *Atomic Bomb* series is accompanied by a citation of an excerpt from a report on bomb testing in the Pacific, published in 1962 in a magazine with a telling name—*Life*. It reads as follows: “[...] The blue-black tropical night suddenly became like a lime fruit, bright green. It was brighter than noon. Green was replaced by the colour of pink lemonade, and finally turned into an uncanny blood-red. It was as if someone had thrown a bucket of blood at the sky [...]”

Wanting to compare the “translation” with the “original”, I turned to Google and stumbled upon a photograph of an explosion featured on the cover page of *Life* magazine dated July 20, 1962. That cover page is an oxymoronic semantic assembly where, next to the well-known logo of one of the world's most influential magazines, named LIFE, there is a text that reads: “Space bomb in color; Eerie spectacle in Pacific sky.” I also found two earlier cover pages of *Life* magazine, both featuring photographs of thermonuclear bomb explosions. One was from February 27, 1950, and the other from April 19, 1954. When I consider together the printed name *Life* and the images that span its cover pages, I discover another possible interpretation of Marguerite Duras's enigmatic sentence—*Don't try to understand this photographic phenomenon, life*.

In 1958, Marguerite Duras completed the screenplay for Alain Resnais's film *Hiroshima mon amour*, which was released the following year. The film commences with the sentence: “You have seen nothing in Hiroshima, nothing.”

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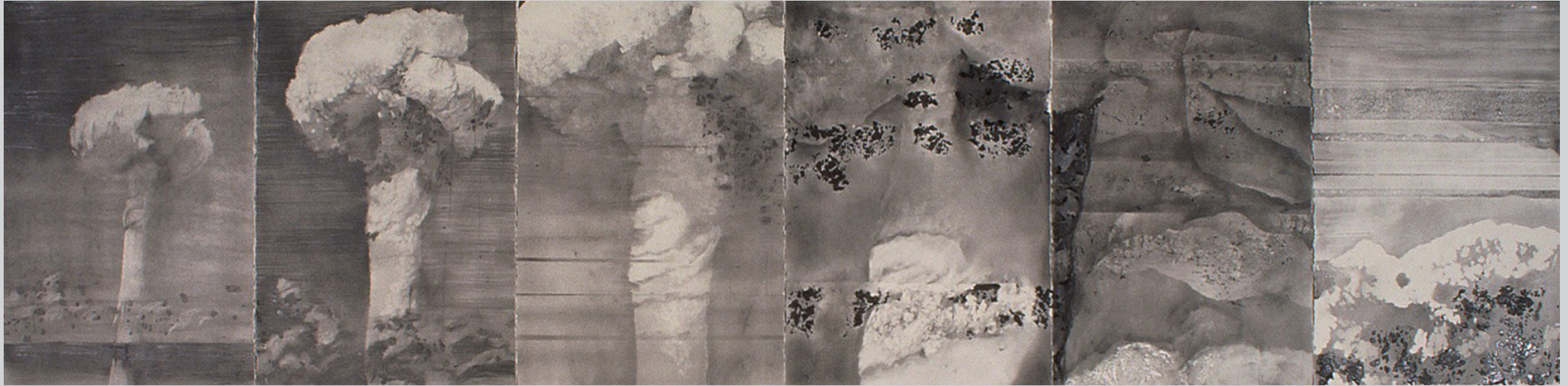
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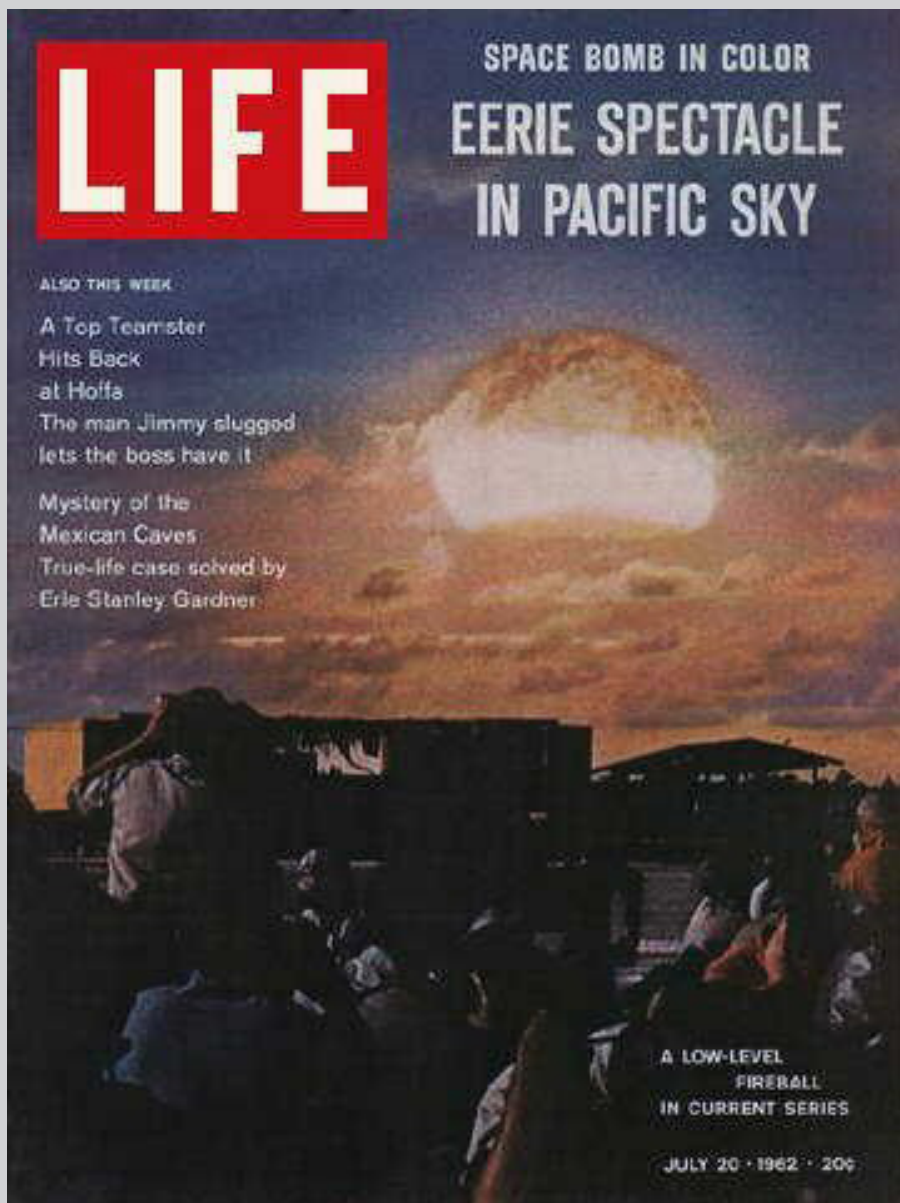
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1. Marguerite Duras  
*L'homme atlantique*, 1981, film still
2. Marguerite Duras  
*L'homme atlantique*, 1981, film still
3. Katarina Ivanišin Kardum  
*De Materia Avium*, 2017  
Photograph from the storeroom, 2011
4. Katarina Ivanišin Kardum  
*Atomic Bomb Series*, 1999 – 2000  
*Little Boy*, 1999
5. *Life*, July 20, 1962, cover