



NARRATIVES UNFOLDING

NATIONAL ART HISTORIES IN AN UNFINISHED WORLD

Edited by **MARTHA LANGFORD**

“artist as witness.”

Personal and Public Histories and the Place for Technology

Another artist to bring into the visual language of the Highlands a whole new range of signifiers is Daniel Reeves. Reeves arrived into the Outer Hebrides from the United States in 1985, via occupations and periods of living in the Philippines, Vietnam, Guatemala, India, Wales, Northern Spain, and the North of France.⁴⁹ He remained in the Highlands until the year 2000. During this period he produced a body of profoundly original works: digital paintings, video films, and multi-media installations. He articulated precisely the conditions in the Highland thoughtscape which allowed him to discover “multiplicities” within: “Essentially in my life during those years there was a calmness, quietude and deliberate attention to kestrels, peat bogs, marine life, tide pools, constantly shifting skies and wind patterns, voles, and stones so old and weathered; all set down in patterns beyond the edge of remembered time, full of mystery and resisting any simple explanation.”⁵⁰ Reeves’s sense of constant movement and patterns waiting to be read is remarkably reminiscent of the writing of English novelist and poet John Berger (1926–2017) in his description of the Scottish Isle of Gigha:

The crofters’ cottages crouch like animals sheltering on the ground for the night. Everything moves on, the larches, the bracken, the caledonian pines, the heather, the juniper bushes, the scrap grass. And then moving



8.6 Daniel Reeves, *I Have This One Afternoon*, 1999. Digital painting, Lambda print bonded to glass, 115 × 293 cm. Daniel Reeves, private collection.

into the land, water: the rivers running to the sea, the sea with its tides filling lochs. And across both land and water the wind. And, above all, the northwest wind. The honking of the wild geese in the sky is like a fleeting measure, a counting in another algebra, of all this movement.⁵¹

What is especially pertinent to my argument here is the emphasis on movement and the response of the senses. In their responses to place, Berger and Reeves do not analyze or interpret, they describe; they do not feel a sense of self or identification. They describe the relationship between landscape and things as Reeves muses, “resisting any simple explanation.”⁵²

Reeves’s film *Obsessive Becoming* (1990–95), resolved during the period he lived in the Outer Hebrides, is a dense rhetorical and visual stream-narrative lasting fifty-four minutes, which forms a completely new structure, or public space, for an exploration of both self and politics. *Obsessive Becoming* begins with the camera closing in and interrogating his own family on the subject of abuse and violence with its roots in “secrets and lies.” The film tape widens into a montage of the horrors of twentieth-century warfare – the one begets the other – “the secrets in this family were immense, the secrets in this world are immense.”⁵³ Reeves’s strategy to reject the divide between the private and public is visualized with a poetic virtuosity as he weaves and layers images of his childhood self with iconography from the Warsaw Ghetto, Vietnam, Hiroshima, and the Gulf War. The unrelenting profusion of violent images presents us with a kind of phantasmagoria of the real (Fig. 8.6).

Reeves's receptivity to innovations in video technology and his mastery of technical processes gave him the language through which he could uncover his own past and connect this to a collective consciousness. He appropriated the very latest technologies to arrange and compose his archival probing as he unfixed the apparently stable and static images from the past. His visual poems/documentaries/installations are like religious meditations: circular, revolving around a point whose location is limitless, circles of ever-expanding and contracting attention. It was as though he found in the Highland communities and landscapes the sense of so many other selves within. His works have redefined our sense of what experimental video can bring to the politicized autobiography – relations are multiple, not linear, the self morphs and evolves, familiar faces from our histories dissolve and reappear, and the whole stream is accompanied by incantations and echoes amid the omnipresent metaphorical motifs of stone and water. We might reflect here on Ascherson's description of the "concentric circles pecked into the rock around a central cup" which were cut between 5,500 and 4,500 years ago.⁵⁴ Argyll is particularly rich in these markings: in Kilmartin Glen, for example, there are about a dozen known markings in a family of designs. The synergy between Reeves's thinking within the Highland landscape and these traces of the "rock art" from Neolithic times unexpectedly reinforces Ascherson's contention that the most powerful revelation is the one where the mental boundary between life and non-life is transcended.

To further illustrate the synergy between Ascherson's thinking and Reeves's work created when living in the Highlands, we have *Eingang* (1990–98), a three-channel video installation and sculpture composed of sections of Douglas Fir, beach cobbles, glass bowls, volcanic rock, rice, and saffron – Reeves's ingenious materialization of the Zen principles of the interconnectedness of all things.⁵⁵ And we see, most tellingly, in the poetic short film *Sombra a Sombra* (1988), a meditation on the architecture of an abandoned village as evoked in the poetry of Cesar Vallejo.⁵⁶ Reeves here employs the dissolve and the isolated disappearing object as a technique, almost a metaphor, for his conceptual approach – there is no simple linear life to death progression within his vision but rather all is cyclical, part of a pattern of ever-changing forms. The death masks of the poet John Keats, composer Felix Mendelssohn, naturalist John James Audubon, and physicist Isaac Newton are subtly merged with the faces of young Scottish soldiers in Korea to produce a haunting confluence in Reeves's digital painting *Keats in Korea* (1990). This is a more literal example of Reeves's engagement with cyclical time – "that all moments exist in not only the present moment but in all other moments past and still to come."⁵⁷ In Ascherson's text the historian's musings on the biographies of the stones suggest that the ancient people are still there, present and incised into their rock art.

Art history

Somewhere between global and local, the nation still lingers as a concept. National art histories continue to be written – some for the first time – while innovative methods and practices redraw the boundaries of these imagined communities. *Narratives Unfolding* considers the mobility of ideas, transnationalism, and entangled histories in essays that define new ways to see national art in ever-changing nations.

Examining works that were designed to reclaim or rethink issues of territory and dispossession, home and exile, contributors to this volume demonstrate that the writing of national art histories is a vital project for intergenerational exchange of knowledge and its visual formations. Essays showcase revealing moments of modern and contemporary art history in Canada, Egypt, Iceland, India, Ireland, Israel/Palestine, Romania, Scotland, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, paying particular attention to the agency of institutions such as archives, art galleries, milestone exhibitions, and artist retreats. Old and emergent art cities, including Cairo, Dubai, New York, and Vancouver, are also examined in light of avant-gardism, cosmopolitanism, and migration.

Narratives Unfolding is both a survey of current art historical approaches and their connection to the source: art-making and art experience happening somewhere.

MARTHA LANGFORD is research chair and director of the Gail and Stephen A. Jarislowsky Institute for Studies in Canadian Art at Concordia University.

McGill-Queen's/Beaverbrook Canadian Foundation Studies in Art History
McGill-Queen's University Press
www.mqup.ca

Cover image: Hale Tenger, *Being a Turk (Between 26° West–45° East Meridians and 36° South–42° North Parallels)*, 2002.
Fabric dolls, audio by Serdar Ateşer, Museum voor Moderne Kunst Arnhem collection.
Courtesy of Galeri Nev Istanbul and the artist.

"*Narratives Unfolding* tackles a central project in the discipline of art history, one which has important implications for all humanistic enquiry: how to understand the persistent human need to project social imaginaries in the face of the displacements, the dislocations, and the demands for similarity that have accompanied globalization. Martha Langford offers a brilliant summary of the most influential thinking on these questions as they apply to contemporary art and to the challenges of thinking about it historically."

TERRY SMITH,
University of Pittsburgh

978-0-7735-4979-1



9 780773 549791