

# *Xenos* – An art-project through the perspective of cinematography\*

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## Abstract

This paper is written as a personal reflection on the process of working with *Xenos*, a multichannel installation artwork. *Xenos* opened in Europe in May 2014 as a part of an art exhibition at the Museum Bärengasse in Zurich, Switzerland, and was directed by Jyoti Mistry, a South African scholar, artist and filmmaker. The paper discusses the process of working with the installation with the assumption that all art processes constitute an embodied knowing of art (Johnson, Mark 2010). As such, this paper draws on the descriptions and discussions of Hatfield (2006) and Oosterhout et al (2012), which function as inspirations to this research. The paper describes the personal process of the cinematographer from conception to the final work of art. The text is anchored in personal notes and a concept paper shared between the cinematographer and the director (artist).

**Keywords:** cinematography, art, perspective, expression

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The South African artist, William Kentridge, proclaims in his performance piece *Anything is possible* (2010): “I’m only an artist. My job is to make drawings, not to make sense”. From the viewpoint of an individual artist, Kentridge is right. Treating the question of responsibility of interpretation in this way presents the artist with freedom of expression. But what if the work requires, or the artist chooses, collaboration with other artists or craftsmen? Which foundations are used to develop the process and how are these different bodies of knowledge and forms of expression amalgamated? Surely at some point in this shared representation, the individual artist must make sense to the other or others involved in the artwork.

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This is my focus of interest in this paper. What is the narration of an art process in collaboration? How do people working with audiovisual art (video- and media art or experimental film) understand the purpose, and how do we translate our intentions and aims into practice and experience, when defined rules and language of filmmaking and storytelling seem inadequate?

In discussions on audiovisual art, there is often a division between technology and content (cf. Meigh-Andrews 2006). However the Finnish-born artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila comments in an article (BOMB Magazine 2012) on the relationship between objectives and the use of technology in her piece *Horizontal*:

What we see and hear in an exhibition space is a huge tree moving in a heavy wind. But if we take a closer look, we'll see that it's not (only) a portrait of a tree but an image of the technical apparatus constructed as an extension of the human eye and perception.

Ahtila (2012) continues to comment on the process:

It soon became obvious that the more we tried to reproduce in the portrait of what we saw standing next to the tree and combine that with our ideas about the portrait of the tree, the more the final work would be about the devices and technology of cinematography and about us humans as observers. Again, the spruce returned us to Uexküll's ideas about the coexistence of separate spatial and temporal worlds of different living beings and to the idea of existence next to and with something else.

In my opinion, this quote reflects the main development in audiovisual work of art today: the relationship between the idea, and presentation of audiovisual art, is in increasingly complicated ways blended in the process and execution of making art (in contrast to the thought that the medium would mainly function as a mechanism of presentation). Therefore in my mind, the separation between technology and content is outdated, faulty and inaccurate. In other words, to use a phrase from more traditional creative processes, it does matter how you hold the brush while making the stroke. It is equally important and inseparable for the existence of the piece to consider how it is done and why it is done.

## **2 XENOS – YIELD TO INSPIRATION**

In 2007, I was working with Mistry on an experimental film project *Le Boeuf Sur Le Toit* (2006-2010), when I had an accident injuring my knee. The damage was so serious that at one stage there was a real threat that I would lose my leg. It was a short time later, during the lengthy healing process that Mistry and I met for a session of working with *Le Boeuf Sur Le Toit*. It was then that she first expressed an idea of making a film about my knee. The idea was not much more than the sentence itself. She did not in the beginning convey any other information and her idea was not put in any perspective whatsoever, maybe intentionally to allow me space for consideration and contemplation.

Much later, in the beginning of 2011, when I had repeatedly avoided the idea and so, perhaps unintentionally provoked Mistry to develop her own thoughts on the matter, she presented a framework that was much more than a mere proposal. Mistry expressed her fascination with my stories of my healing process, and the surgical images and X-rays I had shown her. She said she was fascinated by the 'foreign' that made it possible for us humans to survive – 'foreign' referring to objects that are used to support broken bones in our bodies, hands that intervene and touch normally hidden living tissue, reconnecting pieces, metal as the dead matter that connects with living tissue and heals us.

We continued to discuss the idea from this angle, until, at some stage I found myself discussing this notion of 'foreignness' as a concept. In May 2011, she presented a concept paper called Foreignness - a multichannel installation for four screens:

Immigrant, foreigner, alien, exotic, non-indigenous, are only a few terms used to suggest a binary about what is not "natural" to and environment and what is "natural" (...) This binary presupposes that "the foreign" is unable to co-exist, adapt or be incorporated into an environment. It affirms the prejudices that the foreign is inherently "bad" and what is native, indigenous and national is good. The objective of this work in its entirety is to present in a non-politicized way the significance of celebrating foreignness as a space of four synergies and simpatico. To offer a way to consider "plurality" or hetroglossia (as described by Bakhtin) as a vehicle for addressing how new meanings and experiences can only be made through the intersections of differences and, to further challenge the notions that any forms of provenance at a time when mass global cultural flows (as described by Appadurai) can be concerned with ideas of "the origin" or that the categories of "indigenous or foreign" might even be relevant (...)

The decision to engage in the experiment of using a multiscreen presentation, and in this way primarily aim for an installation meant for a gallery space, was her own. Multiscreen installation is in no regard a new form of audiovisual art, on the contrary. First video installations exhibited in the seventies, and as Margaret Morse writes in her book *Video Installation Art: The Body, the Image and the Space-in-Between* in 1990: "it is undoubtedly the most complex art form in contemporary culture".

From my perspective and limited experience in this presentation style, the idea of working with storytelling in this new, (and for me) untested way became an inspiration. However, during production, it did add complications to our discussions. At all times we had to remind ourselves: it is at the same time linear and nonlinear.

The screens in the multichannel installation were divided, and the idea and discussion for each one was presented in the 2011 concept paper. The descriptions follow below:

- Screen 1: Jacaranda Trees were introduced into South Africa in 1880. Originally from the subtropical regions of South America (Brazil and Argentina), these ornamental trees have since thrived in the Pretoria and Johannesburg areas, and in many respects their presence conceals the "natural" environment (...) There has been an increasing move in South Africa to return to an indigenous flora. The undertone of this rationale assumes that an "origin" after more than 150 years can be determined and that the systemic eradication of the Jacaranda trees is both desirable and possible.

- Screen 2: X-rays as a metaphor promises to reveal what cannot be seen with the naked eye. They suggest the idea of what lies beneath; it creates the impression of revealing a vulnerability and “nakedness” that would otherwise not be visible (...) X-rays that show bones that have been held together by surgical steel pins. They reveal how foreign objects, which are often imagined to be damaging to the body enable the body and are integrated into the body’s system.
- Screen 3: Cradle of Humankind is viewed as the seat/site of human origin. While this claim is highly criticized and controversial, this location offers incredible and invaluable opportunities to examine the idea of what constitutes foreignness...
- Screen 4: 8mm film in the digital realm offers a tactile experience of what is “natural” to one moment in film history and what is now the “natural” normative mode of representing images. The last aspect of this installation emerges from the development and processes that unfold from the first three contexts.

The production of the art installation started once a schedule was set with the first shooting days in the latter half of September 2011. At this stage, I found myself thinking: “I never actively decided to participate”. Why I did, remains unclear to me. I only remember a strong feeling that our thoughts and intentions had to continue, and they had to evolve and materialize.

### **3 XENOS – FORCE THE UNKNOWN**

From my perspective as the cinematographer, the discussions of what would be shot and how, based on the words in the concept paper written by Mistry (the director), often seemed overwhelming. There was very little information given as a lead for discussions in normal cinematic terms – no defined script, with only vague characters in the form of trees and X-rays. How do you, for instance, represent X-rays? Where are they and how do they appear? We knew we wanted to show the Jacaranda tree in a South African landscape, and we knew one location for our shoot was the caves at Cradle of Humankind. Other than that there were no given locations. For me, the intentions expressed by the director were in stark contrast to the practicalities involved for making the shots.

When planning the visual style and look of the material, it was apparent early on that there needed to be an abstract, almost surrealistic, feel. In trying to alter and conceal reality, I hoped to give the viewer a possibility to surrender to the subtext and symbolism. To achieve this, I wanted to create “non-space” and remodel the conception of time. I strived to collapse the third dimension by seeking strong two-dimensional composition (earth, tree, sky) or by using third dimension depth to create an optical illusion in the two dimensions of the screen. This became a “rule for the camera”.

It was only then that we translated our images to words so we could discuss the installation. We decided to try out some practical ideas in a studio for a couple of days. We worked with the separate themes of the installation during different shooting blocks and concentrated on investigating them separately. We set out to combine different elements (human bodies, X-rays, backgrounds, symbols) with various projections, working with them using different camera techniques (for instance different paced time-lapses etc.).

Those test shoots in the darkness of the studio turned out to be successful, except for our plans on how to present the X-rays. Mistry wanted them to turn around in a “projector machine” – described as an “*archaic projection mechanism to create a loop of images*” in the concept document. Unfortunately, we did not manage to work with the machine that was built, and the shots looked nothing like we had set out to create. The reason was partly economical – we just did not have the funds to design a proper frame. We had to come up with something else.

We faced another challenge. The Jacaranda tree had to be set in an “*arid terrain and climate of the South African Highveld*”. I also wanted the images to express a timeless space between earth and sky, roots driving into earth seeking nourishment and branches reaching up for sun only altered by the rhythm of day and night. I believed my ideas around the two-dimensional feel to the shots would be useful in creating the representation of the mechanism of survival – simple and harsh. Also following the theme of remodelling, time was a key element and used to give footage an unreal dreamlike look.

We had identified a primary area to work out of in the Cradle of Humankind area, northwest of Johannesburg in South Africa, and we walked the arid terrain and found a couple of trees mirroring our goals. Through the filming process, we discovered that we needed more than these two embodied representatives for the Jacaranda to be able to work with the notion of time in the way we imagined. For this reason in the final installation our main character, the Jacaranda tree, is ‘played’ by four different trees in different locations of which two stood model for more than 50-days and nights of ticking time-laps.

Some visuals we tested in the studio were directly for the purpose of the ideas we had imagined for the shots in the caves at the Cradle of Humankind. These turned out to be crucial for this part of the installation. Mistry had written in her concept description for this part of the installation:

The relationship between man and nature provides the context to explore the delimitations of foreignness. In this section, languages in its multiple forms and also mathematical configurations are used to explore what we deem as “natural” or innate in humans.

In a way, the working process in the caves was probably the most recognizable from my cinematographic point of view – the location together with the chosen elements and some “rules for the camera” inspired the shots. It is a common technique when working with more conventional storytelling. But again, bringing down projector, lighting and camera equipment into the caves tens of meters under the South African soil was not accompanied by clear intentions, but imagination and ideas of ways to experiment for the overall purpose of the work.

We shot 8mm film in connection with the three other parts of the installation but in the end, this element as a fourth channel was dropped. I do not recall what might have been the reason(s) for this decision. Maybe, in hindsight and in all simplicity, the fourth part as described in the concept treatment is the ‘famous darling’<sup>ii</sup>?

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<sup>ii</sup> With reference to: “In writing you must kill all your darlings” - William Faulkner

## 4 *XENOS* – SURRENDER OWNERSHIP

Using the word “ownership” here might be misleading – this is not a discussion about rights nor property, that is a different matter and discussion. This is a discussion about process. After working together with Mistry on the previous film *Le Boeuf Sur Le Toit*, I had left the director with the footage saying it was hers to work with as she found best useful – I would not present any suggestions, requests or opinions about the final edit unless asked. Instead I expected the director to use her own artist licence to give new input and perspective in postproduction. Later, I discovered it was much harder than I expected to let go of the material and not express any opinions of my own.

To me the experience of the finalized installation artwork *Xenos* is still a discovery despite the fact I worked with the installation myself. The multichannel artwork is enhanced by the work of my fellow collaborators in postproduction and in the composition of music for the installation.

I held the brush for a moment, and then surrendered my material gathered through cinematography to someone else. Ultimately, I believed that my responsibility was to trust my collaborator, and my tenet that the artist herself holds the ultimate responsibility for the final piece. I also believe the strokes gathered in cinematography never would have been how they are now, had I not shared in the discussions and execution constituting the process of making this work of art. It is indefinable and inseparable as the technology used.

## 5 EPILOGUE

In the beginning of this paper, I set out to describe the process of working with the installation piece *Xenos* as embodied knowledge of art. Describing the process of making art I find as hard as the process itself. Many reasons for decision-making during the process are prosaic and banal from the perspective of the intentions of the art piece itself. Somewhere in my description, I hope to have succeeded in describing the cinematographic processes that I, together with the director, used for this work of art and I hope it gives a suggestion on the new creative experiences I discovered while working with the installation piece.

While listening to a seminar given by Mistry at the opening of *Xenos* at the Museum Bären-gasse on Vimeo in Zurich (2014), I rediscovered that the complexity of discussion I had been a part of was eminent. At times, I think Kentridge is right also in a broader sense – an artist does not necessarily need to make sense, not to his or her audience, and not even to their collaborators. That might be an essential part of the mechanism of working with art.

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