

el my delicate bones in
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t me. I realized that you
'll go. Come,.... it's not
ause. Just listen, don't
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you this gift because of
but it's true,..... you
.... give me Your hand!
and the galactic touch
your hand between my
me and from behind.
ely where I am swollen
of my neck to the rosy
. Come inside..... stay
ds what beauty really
fail to convey what we
. But this very place is

Recent Works

JAN VALENTIN SÆTHER

Documentation · Art after the age of documentation · Self surveillance · Map making in *terra incognita* · Arranged fragments of context · The polyphonic variability of lumps of context · The subjective un-ground of the document · Documentation as the sublimation of the artwork, achieved by glossing over the missing context by composition · Self surveillance as doctoring of the image in the mirror · The debt of forms of documentation to Goebbels is like the debt of cosmologies to Einstein · Art after the age of documentation ·

Jan Valentin Sæther



Detail of: *Exile: Jan Valentin Sæther. (Humunculus in jar). 2003.*
Oil on canvas.

PARADOX, PARABLE AND POETIC REFLECTION IN JAN VALENTIN SÆTHER'S RECENT WORK

by Einar Petterson, Professor of Art History, University of Oslo

Jan Valentin Sæther is an accomplished draughtsman and figurative painter in an age which no longer values these qualities. Had Sæther's figurative talent been employed in an earlier artistic period more sympathetic to artistic craftsmanship, he would have been highly acclaimed for his drawing and painting abilities alone. Today such figurative talent is often considered to be anachronistic, in conflict with or out of touch with the spirit of our time. Figurative painters of talent are therefore viewed with suspicion. Some art critics seem to feel compelled to criticize talented figurative painters as superficial virtuosos, reactionary spirits out of touch with the mainsprings of contemporary life, unable to express truths relevant to our age.

Sæther is also a highly talented and poetic author who often and in a strikingly different and original fashion employs texts in his art. Conceptual artists use texts to reflect upon the nature of language and signs as purveyors of ideas. Sæther's texts sometimes function in such a way, but more often strive to illuminate or elucidate spiritual insights about our human condition. Occasionally ("The Viloshin letters", and "Descent into rust. A future monochrome") his texts take the form of narratives, even of conventional fiction. However, to understand Sæther's use of texts in an exclusively conceptual or more traditional narrative framework would be a reductive simplification. His texts can better be understood as paradoxical parables, inspired prophecies in need of interpretation and demanding of reflection, the open ended products of divine or at least supra-mundane inspiration.

A thorough understanding of Sæther's art would demand a study of Gnosticism which is so important to him. His art does not illustrate or interpret religious texts or preach or propagate dogma as do medieval art works. He does not seek to convert his viewers, nor

are Sæther's works artistic sermons. Nonetheless, his art inevitably reflects and sometimes expresses his spiritual or religious insights. Fortunately, Sæther's art can also be understood and appreciated – albeit perhaps not fully – by those viewers without any knowledge of one of its main creative or spiritual sources. If Gnosticism has anything to offer non-believers, it is because it expresses basic truths or insights which are independent of specific Gnostic beliefs and convictions.

RECENT WORKS · 2000–2003

During the last four years, Jan Valentin Sæther has undergone a radical artistic development motivated by a desire to express ideas and insights which cannot be effectively formulated by figuration alone.

The roots of this artistic development lie in his growing interest in the theme of exile existence, and were first expressed in his project "An Artist in Exile: The Viloshin Letters" which was exhibited in the Phoenix Art Gallery, Los Angeles in 1992. Janosh Viloshin is an artist in exile in Russia who writes coded letters to his friends which are illustrated with photocopied and manipulated drawings. The juxtaposition of coded letters and manipulated illustrative drawings which relate in a cryptic manner the story of the artist Viloshin's exile existence initiate Sæther's artistic examination of the relationship between text and figuration, word-signs and image-signs and the deeper roots of human alienation in the semiotic structure of all human expression and experience. In the last few letters written by Viloshin to his friends, Sæther introduces the theme of God's communication with Man as a particularly significant and complex semiotic problem. How can God communicate His

Divine Knowledge to Man whose understanding is so limited by his imperfect perceptual and cognitive abilities? How can a divine message be coded, transmitted and received by such a limited intelligence? Viloshin's attempts to communicate his experiences to friends who cannot possibly understand what he has suffered in an encoded form which his captors cannot understand, and the readers' attempts to decipher and interpret these messages illustrate general problems of communication which are also relevant to the artist Sæther's attempts to communicate with his audience.

During the last few years, Sæther has repeatedly treated the exile theme in art works in different media.

The "Exile" project is Sæther's most traditional treatment of the theme. Large portraits depict people suffering from some sort of exile in the masterly figurative style which characterized Sæther's earlier work from the 70s and 80s. The eerie contrast between highly illusionistic or naturalistic portraits and an abstract, two-dimensional and non-contextual background expresses the alienation of these exiled characters (among others Bakhtin, Buñuel and the artist Jan Valentin Sæther himself). The obvious alienation of such naturalistically depicted individual portraits from any context which could afford them some form of spacial or contextual integration is slightly reduced by the fact that these persons stare directly at the viewer, thereby including him in their otherwise isolated existence. The viewer is thereby encouraged to reflect upon the nature of the depicted subject's alienation and lack of contextually integrated identities by enriching the descriptive portraits with his own knowledge of the depicted person's experiences of alienation and exile.

The theme of alienation, conflicting identities or exile-existence and its ultimate consequences (persecution, suffering, death) are also expressed in two works which employ artistic techniques relatively new to Sæther: fragmentation and the use of envelopes treated with wax to create a semi-transparent "filter" between the manipulated media-images and the viewer.

In "This is my Body" one wall was covered with enlarged newspaper photos of fragments of the mutilated bodies of Palestinian teenagers. On another wall, similar semi-transparent envelopes concealed/revealed different artist's manifestoes from the 20th c. An unfolded yardstick, a waxed in money bag, tape and the repeated sound of a falling coin completed the installation as it was first shown in the Galleri Sub Comandante in Oslo in 2002.

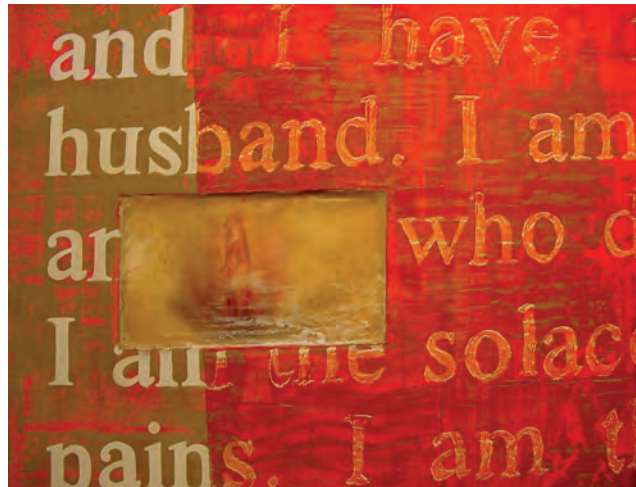
The use of waxed, semi-transparent envelopes of a standard size is a visually interesting and provocative commentary on the nature of communication viewed from the theoretical perspective of semiotics. All communication can be reduced to a sender, who transmits or sends a message by means of a medium or media to a receiver who then decodes the message in order to generate meaning. An envelope is a very low tech means of transmitting a message. Usually, an envelope is opaque such that only the intended receiver who opens the envelope and removes the message is able to interpret the intended meaning of the sender. The treatment of envelopes with wax seals the envelope, gluing the content to the medium of its transmission and making it impossible to open the envelope and separate the message from the medium. In addition, and paradoxically, the treatment of the envelopes with wax simultaneously makes the envelopes semi-transparent, and thereby makes the message partially visible and partially hidden both from the intended receiver and more chance observers of the transmitted message. The semi-transparency forces the viewer to scrutinize the partially hidden and revealed contents of the envelope thereby making explicit the inevitably filtered nature of all communication. The fact that all the envelopes are of a standard size forces a standardized fragmentation of the depiction of the mutilated Palestinian victims. Such fragmentation of the message functions according to the well-known rhetorical device synecdoche by which a part can represent a whole. The content of the transmitted message thus transcends the unique individuals who are depicted, and the fragments thereby represent more than just individual Palestinian victims/martyrs. The fact that Sæther duplicates several of

the fragmented images and places them in an incomplete Cartesian grid like configuration reinforces the synecdochal rhetoric of the installation, and leads the viewer to view the individual victims as representative of all Palestinian victims. The striking similarity of the pose of the victims to depictions of Christ on the cross or Christ deposed from the cross can lead the viewer cogniscent of Sæther's religious perspective to reflect on the parallels between the martyrdom and suffering of Christ on the cross with all martyrs or victims of human injustice. The waxed moneybag, the recurrent sound of a coin falling and the unfolded yardstick awaken possible hypotheses as to the immediate causes of man's brutal treatment of man – a dehumanized society dominated by technocratic calculations and the evaluations of economic gain. The artistic manifestoes remind us that all art also encodes its meanings in ways specific to the stylistic and expressive concerns, techniques and materials of the art work used to communicate with the viewer.

"Uganda. Ars Memoria" employs similar techniques of waxed semi-transparent envelopes of a standardized size containing a blown-up image of a newspaper image of refused children. The subtitle "Ars Memoria" and the fact that the composite image creates a large rectangle (2 x 3.55 m) instead of an incompletely filled out grid leads the viewer to reflect on memory's role in the semiotic structure of communication. Man's lack of perfect memory leads to the distortion of reality in memory which tends to erase or blur insignificant details in the interest of creating logically or emotionally consistent wholistic but distorted representations of perceived reality. The alignment of identical waxed envelopes creates a pattern of vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines which overlay the blown-up, indistinct and slightly unclear image – reminding the viewer that not only perception, the decoding of messages but also our imperfect memory contributes to the imperfect transmission of meaning.

"Hermeneutic Box" develops the theme of semiotic-determinant disjunctive communication even further and introduces again the theme of God's relationship to Man (as first seen in "The Viloshin

Letters" from 1992). A Bible without its cover is sealed with wax and bound tightly with packing strips. The semi-transparency created by the waxed "envelope" allows only a glimpse at the title of the book which contains the prophets' and evangelists' depiction of God's relationship to Man, from the creation to the last judgment. The semi-transparent sealing, binding and framing reminds the viewer of the semiotic conditioned limitations of all communication, and specifically of the communication between God and Man. Any student of the Bible is aware of the long and complicated tradition of biblical exegesis. Even for those with access to the Word, with knowledge of the languages (Hebrew and Greek) of the original text, and with the benefit of generations of biblical scholarly interpretations, the message contained in the Bible is filtered by dogma, translation, interpretation and for believers by divine grace. Only those chosen by God can hope to decode the holy scripture



Fragments of Magdalen (detail). 2001. Panel, oil, wax, fragments of paintings.

as God's Word, and even those cannot hope ever to understand the mysteries contained therein. God is ultimately unknowable to Man. Man's knowledge of God is hermeneutic. Man must strive to know God by knowing himself and can never fully transcend the hermeneutic limitations imposed on him by the poverty of his own senses, intellect and spirit. The hermeneutic box is a framed and hermetically closed container whose contents must necessarily remain a mystery. Somewhat akin to the viewer's incapacity to fully understand the (divinely) inspired artist or creator. The fact that the Bible is also stained with blood refers perhaps to Christ's sacrifice, to Christianity's bloody history of conflict, but also to Man's attempt to overcome the limitations of the communication with God by the participation in the sacrament of the Holy Communion where one symbolically drinks Christ's blood.

"Fragments of Magdalen", 2003, is a large oil painting with a Gnostic textual fragment from the Nag Hammadi Library – a compilation, translation and commentary of the Gnostic scriptures. The text in question is a revelation discourse by a female figure who is not specifically identified with the title "Thunder: Perfect Mind (vi, 2)". The cited text reads as follows:

*"For I am the first and the last,
I am the honored one and the scorned one.
I am the whore and the holy one.
I am the wife and the virgin.
I am (the mother) and the daughter.
I am the members of my mother.
I am the barren one
and many are her sons.
I am she whose wedding is great
and I have not taken a husband.
I am the midwife and she who does not bear.
I am the solace of my labor pains.
I am the bride and the bridegroom"*¹

Jan Valentin Sæther has painted the text with yellowish serif letters on a red and brown painterly background in such a way that the letters appear sometimes to be painted on red, sometimes on brown with a strong red pigment overlaid. The letters and words appear therefore to be bathed or enveloped in the powerfully and bloodlike red. Placed asymmetrically on the panel are rectangular or trapezoidal areas with naturalistic fragments of a woman; the upper part of her face with eyes and nose; her ear, her lips, her right hand and her vagina.

The juxtaposition of text and body fragments surrounded by passionately red pigments invite the viewer to interpret the text and the figurative fragments in light of each other. The isolation of the organs of sense perception (eyes, nose, ear, mouth, the hand of touch) leads the viewer to reflect upon human perception through the senses. The depiction of a woman's vagina in this context is slightly disturbing and forces the viewer to suspend his reading of the text which is obscured by impasto and stained red pigments and partially missing in the areas with the naturalistically depicted body parts. A typical male viewer's first interpretative intuition might be to view the vagina as icon of woman's passion. Throughout much of premodern European intellectual history, woman's sexuality is viewed, like the human senses, as a source of deception. Man's understanding and intellect are deceived by imperfect senses and perverted and attacked by their passions. However, sensual or moral overtones frustrates this initial interpretation, and forces the viewer to painstakingly decipher and then interpret the partially obscured text.

The text is a formulation of paradoxes and contradictions expressed by an unidentifiable woman who is first and last, honoured and scorned, a whore and a holy one, a wife and a virgin, a mother and daughter, barren and with many sons, a midwife and one who does not bear, a bride and bridegroom. Jan Valentin Sæther has apparently seen Mary Magdalen mirrored in this text, prostitute and holy woman, as his title and his use of luscious red pigments

imply. Or to be more precise, Sæther has wished to move the reader to initially interpret his painting as “fragments of Magdalen”. A closer reading of the text from which Sæther cites only a few lines gives the curious viewer other interpretative possibilities of which I will only sketch one.

Seen in the context of his other recent works, which often and in varied ways comment on the inherent difficulties of communication – between message sender and receiver; between artist and viewer, between God and Man – one can view this art work as an artistic interpretation of God’s creation of and communication with Woman. Men and women share the same sense-perceptual instruments – the five senses. The presence of a vagina and the repeated references to marriage, childbearing, motherhood, midwifery etc. concretizes the painting’s interpretative framework. In the Bible, God’s major sign of blessing or grace to women is their fertility. Mary, the mother of Christ, was especially blessed by being chosen to bear God’s only son. Woman’s punishment for the Fall from Grace was to bear children in pain. The solace of this pain is perhaps the grace of being able to imitate God in the creation of new life. The 4th c. text cited by Sæther is formulated with paradox and contradiction in a manner which is common in textual attempts to express the unknowable and mysterious nature of God and His works. Sæther’s painting expresses, reflects upon, comments on and interprets in a poetic visual/textural assemblage the paradoxical, oxymoronic rhetoric which is required to express the inexpressable. That Sæther has chosen a Gnostic text instead of a biblical one that concerns God’s incomprehensible relation to Woman could perhaps indicate an even more narrowly defined interpretative framework. Regardless, “Fragments of Magdalen” remains as mysterious and non-discursive as a divine sign or revelation.

“Descent into rust. A future monochrome”, 2001 (1.5 x 2.4 m), text on rusting steel, exhibits a basic similarity with “Fragments of Magdalen”, in that the work consists of a text – this time written by Sæther himself – sand-blased and painted slightly obscurely in

shades of white, gray and blue against the background of an unevenly rusted steel plate. The title implies that the text with time will eventually be absorbed by the rust of the decomposing steel plate becoming a monochrome in rust-brown. The solidity, strength, weight and durability of steel is contrasted with the ephemeral text which reads as follows:

“Come now, feel my hand, how small it is inside yours. No, .. no, .. both hands... and don’t be a soldier now, don’t be shy,..... come closer.feel my delicate bones to your strong. ...palms. Be still,look at me.....look, see.... notice the rapid pulse in my temple. Yet...as you come to see.... I’m very calm, and as calm as me will you become.... I saw you ... you didn’t notice that you gazed at me. I realized that you were a gentle man. Come, ... I will give you a gift and then I’ll go. Come,....it’s not dangerous to me. Sit here. Loosen this knot and pause. Just listen, don’t say anything.....just tell them afterwards what really happened. Please,....the other open it! Then pause again. Yes, I give you this gift because of your . You men are all.....you know, embarrassed, but it’s true.....you see, all love faces the spirit of God. Here, ... breathe now... give me Your hand. The third knot will release me, profoundly...by your touch, and the galactic touch by touch relation of living materiality...confounded by your hand between my thighs. Sink and fly....as always, by my side....above and from behind. Mmm. Pause, often on my generous lips..... Touch me freely where I am swollen with our coming release from shame. Kiss me from the nape of my neck to the rosy shape where silky moistures whispers to you, yes, yes and yes. Come inside....stay forever, also when I’m gone.. . but tell them afterwards what beauty really happened on this Afghan carpet by your bed..... I can only fail to convey what we all know is there, but I promised I’d try to put it out here. But this very place is every place and in every one the same... And yet, in public... we hide it all in vain.”

Again Sæther forces us to concentrate on deciphering and interpreting

his text. He forces us to look closely and to attempt to fill in the missing words and phrases so that we in fact can read what is written. After having identified the words, we are left with an open-ended description which demands and simultaneously resists interpretation. The letters, the words, the phrases and the implied narrative and its implications are semi-transparent, like the images and icons sealed in wax envelopes. The text conjures up an obvious love scene described from the perspective of a woman who seduces a man on an Afghan carpet by his bed. Shame in sexual intercourse – except at the instant of mutual satisfaction – is insinuated and directly asserted. The woman requests that the man remain after she is gone and that he relate the beauty of what happened. The act of love is explicitly framed in the context of the spirit of God. Perhaps the ephemerality of the instant of procreation is expressed formally by the text itself, which will disappear, like rust, while the steel plate of humankind will assert itself in perpetuation of mankind, created in love which always reflects the spirit of God. Or perhaps the juxtaposition of ephemeral text on a slowly decomposing steel medium indicates that human procreative love, somewhat embarrassing, shameful and very transient, will be reabsorbed and disappear into the oneness of God's nature at the end of time.

The "Oikos" series consists of fifteen photographs of the reflections in turned-off television sets. The format of the photographs and their frames reproduce in approximately life size the television sets which are depicted. The height 55 cm of all pictures is determined by the format of the color plotter used to print the photos. The photographed reflections of the empty domestic interiors reflected in the TV-screens are distorted by the curvature of the TV-screens. Some reflections are less precise and detailed than others, due to the reflective characteristics of the glass screens. Sæther has placed the screens facing the windows of the apartments in order to ensure recognizable interiors and a minimum of the furniture and decorations of the living room. The resulting images are hauntingly empty and devoid of life – somewhat like de Chirico's metaphysical

landscapes or Hopper's cityscapes. The title "oikos" is the Greek word for house, home or home life. Our word "economy" stems from Greek words for home ("oikos") and rules or laws ("nomos"). The Greek title "oikos" awakes associations to an integrated life in the domestic sphere which has disappeared in our modern times, and which has disintegrated because of the increasing power of the television media to alienate us from the rich domestic life of the past.

Seen in the context of Sæther's interest in the semiotics of imaging and the exile experience which always involves contrasting or contradicting identities, these haunting images imply that modern man sees himself or interprets himself in the reflection of the dominant TV medium through which the generation of meaning and creation of identities is created. Paradoxically, modern man's domestic environment and most intimate or personal context appears only when the dominant television media through which he receives most of his "knowledge" about the world and himself, is turned off. In Sæther's "Oikos" pictures, the center of Man's social sphere is only seen reflected in the preexisting format of the TV-screen, distorted and made unclear according to the reflective properties of the individual reflective "envelopes" which carry the optical message.

During the last four years, Jan Valentin Sæther has demonstrated a remarkable capacity for artistic development. In his installations, assemblages, series of paintings and photographs, he has managed to transcend and supplant his masterly figurative technique with more "contemporary" artistic techniques in order to express artistic, intellectual, emotional and religious truths which could not have been expressed so poetically in his earlier figurative style.

Superficial viewers may find Sæther's recent works less accessible than his earlier figurative paintings. Art which comments on its own inherent communicative limitations does not reveal itself at first glance. But those viewers who resist the temptations of intellectual and aesthetic lethargy will be rewarded with the type of deep insights and aesthetic pleasures which are nourished by paradox, parable and poetic reflection.

NOTES:

¹ James M. Robinson: The Nag Hammadi Library, revised edition. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 1990, p. 297.

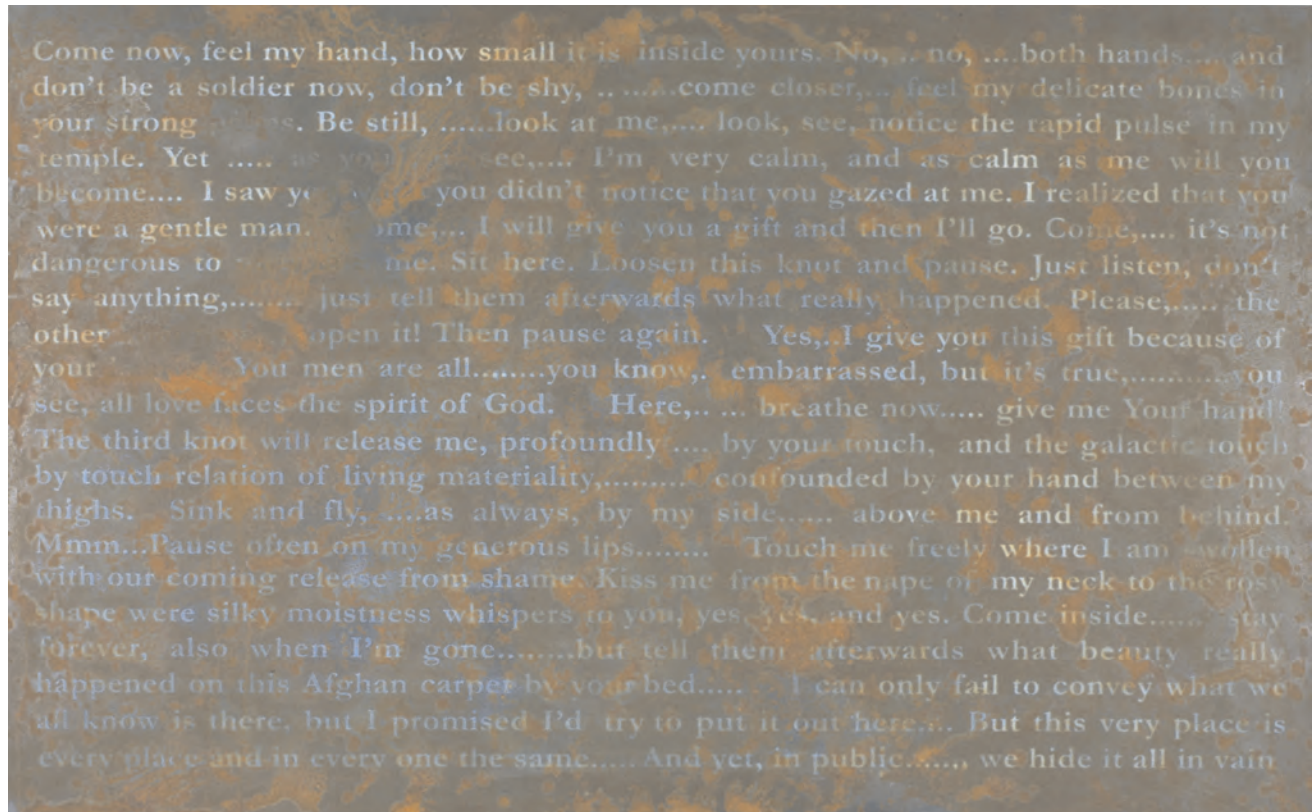
HERMENEUTIC BOX

2003. Bible dipped in blood, wrapped in ribbons, boiled in wax. Wood box. 34 x 30 cm.



DESCENT INTO RUST. A FUTURE MONOCHROME

2001. Text, rusting steel. 150 x 240 cm. Text by artist.



UGANDA. ARS MEMORIA

2003. Press photo enlarged, cut in 80 pieces, laid in envelopes and boiled in wax. 200 x 355 cm.



THE "EXILE" PROJECT

2003–. Ongoing production. Portraits of exiled individuals, cataloguing the phenomenon. Oil on canvas. All paintings: 130 x 105 cm.



Exile: Ali Djabbari. 2003



Exile: Mikhail M. Bakhtin. 2003

SUGGESTIONS FROM THE VIEWERS AT THE EXHIBITION "KONTRASTER. IDENTITETER" AT KUNSTVERKET GALLERI, OSLO OCTOBER 2003:

Pablo Neruda, Knut Jarle Arntzen, Superman, Wilhelm Reich, Pat, Nestor, Jødene (the Jews), Henrik Ibsen, Neil Armstrong, Emma Goldman, Pushwagner, Yasser Arafat, Jose Martí, Christopher Isherwood, Picasso, van Gogh, Jimmy Hoffa, Albert Einstein, Charlie Chaplin, Adam + Eve, Hugo Chavez, Salman Rushdie, Oedipus, Kurt Schwitters, Kjartan Slettemark, Fritz Thaulow, Per Eispjeld, Joey Ramone, Pjotr Kropotkin, Bela Bartók, Me+ Eva, Rolf Nesch, Lindberg (seal inspector), King Constantine of Greece, Karel Hlavatý, Marlene Dietrich, Mikis Theodorakis, Vladimir Iljitch Lenin (Ulyanov), Filip B (searching for his home country), Julia Kristeva, Berthold Brecht, Thomas Mann, Hélène Cixous, Patti Smith, Ernst Jünger, Dalai Lama, Johan Mühleg, Napoleon Bonaparte, Noah, Ghadaffi, Oscar Wilde, Andrej Sakharov, Elvis Presley, Muniam Alfaker, Joseph Smith jr., Fidel Castro, Jesus Christ, The Pianist, Rachael Anne, Frida Kahlo, Arnold Schönberg, Mulla Krekar, Martin Luther King, Osama Bin Laden, Georg Johannessen, King Haakon, Said Dibadj, Odd Nerdrum, Sigmund Freud, Samrand Yeydi, Marilyn Monroe, Einar Pettersen, Mogale Mokyoatsane, Bartkata Mokyoatsane, Iggy Pop, John Carew, Siamak Heraapour (?), Fernando Pessoa, Vegard Ulvang, Kjartan Fløgstad, Johan Galtung, John Dee, Arnold Schwarzenegger (The Governor of California), Bruce Lee, Noam Chomsky, Virginia Woolf, Leo Trotsky, Carl Ivar Hagen, Master Eckhart, refugees, Chechnyan refugees in Georgia, Mani, the 14-year old wanted by the department of family affairs, Joachim Nielsen, Greta Garbo, Henrik Ibsen, Rachmaninov, Moses, Dos-toevsky, Nelson Mandela, Oscar Niemeyer, Alastair Crowley, Daniel Proust, Dante, Solzhenitsyn, Pasternak, P. Ovidius Naso, Anne Frank, The Human Being, James Baldwin, Sonja Henie, Spøkelseskladden, Arne Fjortoft, Willy Brandt (Egon Dorn), Christopher Marlow, Sakajawe, Ronald Biggs, Anders Wilhelmsen, Winston Churchill, Khalid Salim, Rados Dédic, Nazim Hikmet

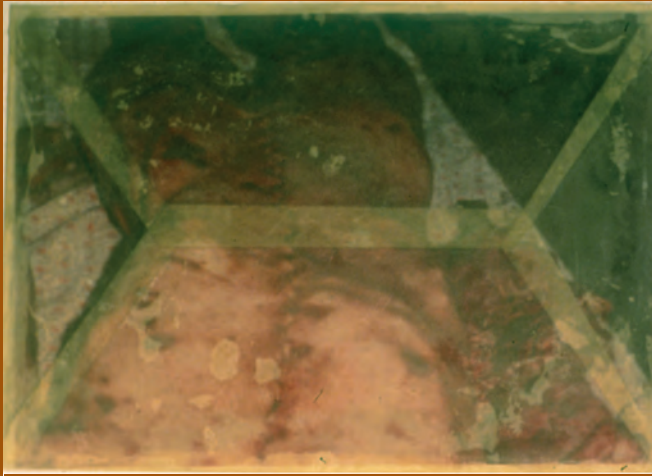


Exile: Jan Valentin Sæther. 2003

THIS IS MY BODY

2002. Installation shown at Galleri Sub Comandante, Oslo (2002) and Galleri 21, Malmö (2004). Materials: press photos, envelopes, manifestoes, beeswax, cartoons, sound, unfolded yardstick, tape peelings and moneybag. Detail photographs.





THE "OIKOS" SERIES

Digitally manipulated photographs. Height (all photos): 55 cm.



Oikos 01. 2003



Oikos 08. 2003



Oikos 11. 2003



Oikos 10. 2003

JAN VALENTIN SÆTHER · A SHORT ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

by Hanne Storm Ofteland, Art Historian, Oslo

2000–03

2004 *Arrival by Withdrawal*. Galleri 21, Malmö

2003 *Kontraster. Identiteter*. KunstVerket Galleri, Oslo

2002 *Envelope*. Galleri Sub Comandante, Oslo

2001 *Inpermanence*. Galleri Asur, Oslo

During the first years of the 21th c. Jan Valentin Sæther completely reorientates his style. From a strict formal American-style figuration, Sæther now embraces the more clearly conceptual and abstract. Fusing the textual with the pictorial he explores the possibilities of expressing ideas about collective memory and the act of forgetting. In the age of information, what remains in our memory? Thousands of images, texts and sounds invade our brains every day – how do we digest and store them? Sæther now starts working with photography, video, sound, media images and materials such as blood, steel, texts, wax, and colored ribbons. E.g. the work *Ecumene* (2001) employs these new materials and ideas. Here holy texts from different religions are wrapped in small parcels with gold and silk ribbons and soaked in wax. The viewer can see that there are texts inside the little packages, but she cannot access them.

1990–99

1997 *Objekter*. Galleri Asur, Oslo

1993 *Drawings*. Bruchion Gallery, Los Angeles

1992 *An Artist in Exile: The Viloshin Letters*. Phoenix Art Gallery, Los Angeles

1990 *Paintings, Sculpture, Drawings*. Andrea Ross Gallery, Santa Monica

In 1995 Sæther moved back to his native city, Oslo, after more than twenty years in Los Angeles. He soon got a position as assistant professor of painting at the National Academy of Fine Art in Oslo, and in 1996 he was appointed professor of figurative painting the same place after the media duel of the decade, as he and painter Odd Nerdrum had both applied for the same position. Artistically the period was one of struggle and of re-thinking his position. In the early '90s Sæther felt he had reached the end of his classical figurative project after a series of large canvases with mysterious themes in the 1980s. However, he felt compelled to complete the work already in progress, and these paintings were exhibited in Oslo in December 1997. The Norwegian audience had not seen his work since the 1970s, and the response to the exhibition was mixed. Sæther himself was eager to move on to the next phase in his development, as the *Exile* exhibition in Phoenix Art Gallery in 1992 was the first indication of.





1980–89

1986 *Paintings, Sculpture*. Dassin Gallery, Los Angeles

1985 *Paintings, Sculpture, Drawings*. Spring Street Design Center Gallery, Los Angeles

1984 *Paintings*. Gallery One, Beverly Hills

1980 *Paintings, Sculpture, Drawings*. X-Art Gallery, Santa Monica



The 1980s represented a fertile period in Sæthers painting. By now he had developed an iconography of his own, exploring Christian, mythological and mystical themes in a context with cardboard boxes, concrete surroundings, empty eerie rooms, and the human body (often expressed through serious, awe-inspiring naked women looking the beholder straight in the eye – a modern version of Sophia?). Among his masterpieces from this period can be mentioned *Epiphany* (1987) – reproduced to the left on this page – or the highly original *Anathema* (1979–82) where a rose, a fish cut in two, and John the Baptist's cut-off head are displayed inside three cardboard boxes laying on top of a kitchen bench with their flaps open so as to produce three uneven crosses.

1970–79

1976 *Paintings*. Seventh Street Gallery, Los Angeles

1972 *Paintings*. Kunstnerforbundet, Oslo



In 1972 Jan Isak Sæther as he called himself then, held his debut exhibition in Kunstnerforbundet in Oslo. At the time he was one of the leaders of the rebellious neo-figurative movement in Norway, insisting on learning the secrets of the old masters. In 1974, while visiting the family of his first wife in Los Angeles, fate intervened in a dramatic way: His wife fell seriously ill and could only be treated in L.A. The promising young Norwegian artist had to start all over again in a new home country without a penny in his pocket, with a wife sick with cancer, two small children and no knowledge of the Californian art scene. After a couple of tough years he managed to establish his first art school in Venice.

EDUCATION

1965–68 + 1968–71: The National Academy of Fine Art, Oslo

1963–64 + 1965: The National College of Applied Arts, Oslo

REPRESENTED IN THE FOLLOWING COLLECTIONS

Norway: The National Museum of Contemporary Art; The Norwegian Cultural Council; The Science Academy; The University of Oslo; The Ski Museum; Oslo Concert Hall; Merkantilbygg AS; Drammens Faste Galleri; Østfold County Hospital; The Elvegården Collections; The Oslo Free Masonry Lodge

The U.S.: Palm Springs Desert Museum, CA; Federal Courthouse, Los Angeles; Federal Courthouse, Portland, OR; The Albert Hofmann Foundation, Los Angeles; Chicago Hilton Hotel, IL

In addition represented in several private collections in Norway, the U.S., Canada, and France.



Images (from the top): *Viloslin Letters, image # 07* (1992), *Epiphany* (1987), *Diptych* (1986), *Limbo* (1980), *Oracle* (1979), *Self-Portrait* (1964)



A SELECTION OF GROUP SHOWS

- 2003 *Class of 2003*. With Galleri subcomandante at Vestfossen Kunstlaboratorium
- 2001 *Stikkord: Figurativ*. Bærum Kunstforening, Sandvika
- 1999 *Mu: Elleve elever av Olav Mosebekk*. Tegnerforbundet, Oslo
- 1996 *LA Figures: A Survey of Figurative Painting in Los Angeles*. Lizardi/Harp Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1996 *Figurasjoner u*. The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Oslo
- 1994 *Burning Lights*. Laband Art Gallery, Los Angeles, et al.
- 1993 *Five Scandinavian Painters*. University of Oregon, Portland
- 1991 *The Big Picture*. Riverside Museum, CA
- 1984 *The Olympic Arts Festival*. Spring Street Design Center Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1983 *Pulsart International Exhibition*. Luther Burbanks Center for the Arts, Santa Rosa
- 1983 *Scandinavia Today: Scandinavians in Los Angeles*. Bridge Street Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1980 *Ancient and Contemporary Sculpture and Portraiture*. J. Paul Getty Museum in Cooperation with Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles

COLOPHON

Jan Valentin Sæther. Recent Works

Editor: Hanne Storm Ofteland

ISBN 82-92313-05-2

Hand to Mouth Publishing, Oslo 2004

www.handtomouth.net

info@handtomouth.net

All artworks: Jan Valentin Sæther / BONO © 2004

Essay: Einar Petterson © 2004

Biography: Hanne Storm Ofteland © 2004

Photographic credits:

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Thanks to the Office for Contemporary Art Norway for the financial support granted on the occasion of my exhibition "Arrival by Withdrawal" in Galleri 21, Malmö 2004.

