



## COMPLICATE THE STORY

By Elisabeth Millqvist

**In *Not A Single Story II* at Wanås, the story, the artists, and the place comes together. The artworks depicts landscapes, narrates with crushed glass, and gives form to fantastical beings, void and shadow plays between the trees. New questions arise, one of them is posed by the author Taiye Selasi, who asks where you are a local instead of where you are from. What is your answer?**

### The Political, Poetic, and Metaphorical

Curator Sarit Shapira entitled an exhibition at Magasin III in Stockholm in 2007 *Fleeing away from what bothers you most*. The artists in that exhibition were working in the Middle East; for them, having an interest in the political situation and confronting the conflict between Israel and Palestine was inevitable. At the same time, Sarit Shapira met artists who were occupied with completely different questions, who were tired of the expectations of what their art should deal with, who wanted to create space for delving deeper. Artists dedicated themselves to both parts or, as she saw it, to three parts: *The point of departure of these works is actually split into three. On the one hand the actual immediate political-contextual reality, and on the other hand the imaginary poetic-allusive and metaphoric sphere of a utopian art-work. And between these two worlds there is a gap, an unbridgeable fissure... The persistent existence of this gap stress out the absurdity of any try to soar from the ground of the political and actual field. Yet it is.. right into this gap the artists could flee, away from their bothering (political) context, then returning back to it, and so on and so forth, in an endless circular move.*

The political situation is interwoven, Shapira meant, with poetic and emotional states in the stories they bring up. The writing of history in South Africa, as in Israel, is fringed with conflict and trauma. When the artists from different parts of the world undertook the exhibition *Not A Single Story* in South Africa in 2018, they used a variety of different entry points. Meanwhile, there was no doubt that the mundane, filled with political stories, became a part of their artistic expression and content like an inescapable presence. Poet Wisława Szymborska has claimed that time is political:

*Whatever you say reverberates,  
whatever you don't say speaks for itself.  
So either way you're talking politics.  
Even when you take to the woods,  
you're taking political steps*



## Not A Single Story II

Where, then, have the artists stepped when working with these exhibitions? Nirox lies in the province of Gauteng in an area grandly named the “Cradle of Humankind,” a UNESCO World Heritage Site estimated to contain 40 percent of the fossils of the ancestors of humans that have been discovered thus far. The site is influential when artists create new artworks outdoors; these milieux are the opposite of neutral rooms, regardless of whether it is a Swedish beech forest or an area that combines neatly-trimmed lawn with kilometer-long paths in caves of dolomite. At Nirox, several artists returned to the ground, to the question of who once lived on that site, to our ancestors—a heritage that imbues the surroundings with meaning. One of the oldest finds in the area is the remains of an *Australopithecus africanus*, dated 2.3 million years old. These fascinating archeological finds turn our focus backwards in time and give us a shared history. When researchers today use DNA technology to tell about who we are, how we have migrated, and in part how we looked, it is a history that often astonishes us, that we didn’t know, but its traces exist in our very bodies.

The second part of the *Not A Single Story* exhibition is occurring at Wanås, a place associated with the medieval Danish defense fortress, built during the wars between Denmark and Sweden. Old unpaved paths bordering avenues emphasize the structure’s central placement, marking direction, while stone walls show boundaries, and the surrounding buildings have grown up around it. The fortress’ history, which from a Swedish perspective is old, is so much younger compared to the site of the exhibition’s first part; it is so young that the line of ownership is documented—the list of names goes back to 1480. The place connected to the building relates to work, cultivating the soil, to heritage and roots, but we live in a time of migrations.

## Santiago Mostyn

A filmed caravan of people comprises one part of Santiago Mostyn’s video, which he created to Erik Lundin’s rap song *Suedi*, Arabic for Swedish. Artist Lundin raps the story of his childhood in “Västerort”, i.e. the suburbs west of Stockholm, about how he lives and resides in Sweden, breathes in the air but is seen as an immigrant, second generation; he is happiest there but eventually leaves Sweden for good in order to feel at home. But then comes the twist in the text:

*Suddenly, something terrible happens  
I’m introduced to my cuz’s buddies as Swedish,  
I was a Suedi, I woke up and was a Suedi.*

Lundin’s rapped story, his struggle with himself, existence, and how others see him is combined with in Santiago Mostyn’s images in the video work *SUEDI*. Two men try



wrestling holds, broad backs and thick necks, wrist on hand, hand on neck; they follow a silent agreement about how the practice will go, their pale bodies in the bright room stand steady and they repeat movements they know well. Shoulder, backs, muscles—when the camera zooms in, the bodies are like a billowing landscape and it is precisely a landscape we see in the video’s second part, set to the same lyrics. We leave the training facility and see winding lines of people, moving like a biblical exodus along a train track and along fields in a broad agricultural landscape. Filmed from the air, the surroundings looks like a green and brown quilt. It could be around the corner in Skåne, but these are Associated Press images from 2016 when the war in Syria in particular forced large numbers of people to flee, and gradually the number itself—a stream, a train, a mass—became significant instead of the fleeing people behind the numbers. Mostyn has previously fixed his gaze on movement in the video *Delay*, where he ventures out into the Stockholm night at Stureplan and fumbling, dancing, stumbling, he goes around among those who typically spend time at nightlife hangout places. He stands near and sometimes touches the people he has approached, dark hand against white skin; he is next to them, but not one of them. The experience, the belonging, the alienation is embodied and emphasized by his movements. In *SUEDI*, Mostyn juxtaposes confident bodies, two individuals, against a mass that doesn’t know who they will wake up as tomorrow, what language they will hear and try to learn. Lundin’s story has another background, but one day he became someone different from who he thought he was—identity is not static.

### The Danger With a Single Story

“Where are you from?” is one of the first phrases the student of a new language learns, along with “My name is...”. Author Taiye Selasi thought that every time she was introduced during a book tour, it felt wrong: she was introduced in different ways, and this produced very different expectations. Thinking of herself as “multinational,” like some companies, didn’t feel any more accurate. She had been born in, studied in, and was resident of different countries, and her parents were from countries that were even different from these—but the introduction was reduced to *a single story*, Selasi claimed. She referred to author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who introduced her well-known TED Talk with the words: I’m a storyteller. And I would like to tell you a few personal stories about what I like to call “*the danger of the single story*.” Adichie argues: *Stories matter, continuing: How they are told, who tells them, when they’re told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power.*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s story is the starting point for the exhibition and the inspiration for the exhibition’s title, *Not A Single Story*. The participating artists, their current questions and practices, along with the site and story as a concept form the central elements of the exhibition. The word story can and has been used in exhibition titles with endless interpretive



possibilities, but the artworks in Wanås Konst's exhibition are not necessarily narrative; they have a wider and more transformable frame of reference.

## **Marcia Kure**

Transformation is a recurring theme for Marcia Kure. She has worked with a series of collages with the title *Dressed up Series*, 2011, which she sees as a self-portrait without pictures of herself. The collage technique links things together; she dresses up, down, and out the character she puts together. One of these self-portraits of Kure may comprise a wood duck's head, a male rapper, a 19th-century Victorian dress, a sneaker, and a dog. She says that it feels like there are pieces of her everywhere.

At Nirox, Kure worked with the Bird of Paradise (*Strelitzia regina*), which comes from South Africa. The name emphasizes the plant's resemblance to a bird, but the plant also has a hidden connection to animals because it contains the substance bilirubin, which in humans comes from the breakdown of red blood cells and is filtered out by the liver. Researchers have previously only known that the substance is found in animals, and the discovery underlines the difficulty in all methods of categorizations. In Kure's case, the plant's English name became the title of a group of soft, textile sculptures and the inspiration for their color palette. The choice of material is a continuation of other work she has done with cloth and fur, combined in compound forms that move beyond conventions of clothing and fashion. At Wanås, her soft sculptures have grown and reached up into the trees; they rest safely on the branches and their colors, inspired by the moss in the beech forest, camouflage them among the green leaves of the trees.

Kure samples expressions in her sculptures and makes them difficult to define. There are connections to Natural Synthesis, a theory of cultural mixing advanced by Art Society, an artist group formed by students from the university in Zaria in northern Nigeria in the late 1950s. They wanted to forge a postcolonial aesthetic by mixing Western modernist sensibilities and local, traditional art forms and themes. Uche Okeke became a leading member of the Art Society and, eventually, head of the art department at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka that Kure would later attend. He is known for drawings of figures made with whirling lines that combined botanical, human and animalistic forms. After Nigeria became independent in the 1960's, the Art Society worked for a new national cultural identity by weaving together Igbo, Yoruba and Urhobo art forms, folktales and contemporary Nigerian subject matter. While Kure maintains the working method, she also uses material from research, Disney, and hair extensions; there is a closeness to the everyday and popular culture.



## Lungiswa Gqunta

The things that are closest to us—objects in the home—form a starting point for Lungiswa Gqunta’s art, and the home is both safety and a place for danger in the everyday. She wants us to feel it, we shouldn’t be able to defend ourselves from her works. It’s not enough that we see several thousand cast-off, lined-up glass bottles, glittering pale green in the work *Lawn I*. Through the smell of gasoline that dominates the exhibition space, she wants us to have a physical reminder of the components of the weapon everyone can make: the Molotov cocktail.

Gqunta was born in 1990. Four years later, the Apartheid regime was abolished and Nelson Mandela was elected president, and the man whom Reagan and Thatcher called a terrorist became a symbol of peace. In 2018, his more controversial wife, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, passed away. While Mandela was imprisoned, Madikizela-Mandela managed to keep going, and her choice was not a strategy of nonviolence; in interviews, she expressed sorrow and frustration, and she encouraged active resistance: *“There is nothing the government has not done to me. There isn’t any pain I haven’t known. [...] We have no guns—we have only stones, boxes of matches and petrol”*. This quote is one of her most famous statements. Gqunta uses it in the title of an artwork with the print of matchsticks on paper, painted by and saturated with gasoline: *Together, hand in hand, with our matches and our necklaces, we shall liberate this country*. In her last interview, just a few weeks before she passed away, Madikizela-Mandela said: *“would be extremely naive if I suggested to you that South Africa today is what we dreamt of when we gave up our lives”*.

It is the segregated South Africa, weighed down by poverty and structural injustice and the fight for the black population that are central to Gqunta’s art. When the bottle is the material for constructing a petrol bomb it stands for violence, but it is connected to several types of violence. Beer bottles hang from twisted ropes in the work *Divider*, which comprises a drape and screens off a path in the forest, making it necessary for the observer to find another way to get through. Gqunta grew up in a shebeen-household, an unlicensed bar for blacks. During Apartheid, there were several laws and restrictions connected to alcohol, traditional liquor production was forbidden, replaced by the trade of mass-produced alcoholic drinks and alcohol was used as a way of conforming, oppressing, and rewarding. We don’t need to go far back in time to find the same tradition, if in a different context, in Sweden. Several estates had breweries, and alcohol was both a reward and a means of enduring. Alcohol goes hand in hand with dependence, and through the silent stories of the empty bottles, the artwork spans the political and the private.



## Lubaina Himid

The points of contact between story and history are many, and in Sweden, the words can have the same meaning, in contrast to the English distinction between them. By using the term “sculpture park” and primarily working outside, references to a tradition arise—art history—concerning sculpture in general and land art in particular, with earth, stones, and sand as materials and motifs. It is a male tradition. As an answer to a onesided art history, the exhibition at Nirox in South Africa was dominated by women, but also by artist duos—in contrast to a single originator—as well as people who don’t identify with any sex. Artist Lubaina Himid rails against history through her art; she lets us enter it and rewrite it. In *Vernet’s Studio*, she fills a room with women from art history. The portrayal is based on the individuals’ own artworks, which she painted on plywood and gave the forms of silhouettes that personify them. While we can probably identify Frida Kahlo (1907–1954) and Georgia O’Keeffe (1887–1986), Himid makes us wonder which ones we don’t know the names of and why, and she has added oeuvres she believes should be included in art history, among them Claudette Johnson, who—like Himid—was a part of the BLK Art Group, which was founded in 1979 in Wolverhampton, England. The group was an association of young artists who challenged the prevailing canon and asked questions about what black art was and could be. Several of those active in the group later formed part of the radical British Black Arts Movement, which was established in 1982 with a focus on anti-racist discourse and feminist critique.

The artwork at Wanås, *Vernet’s Studio* from 1994, refers to an actual painting: *The Artist’s Studio* from 1820 by Horace Vernet (1789–1863). At that time, the studio was an important motif, and in the original painting, the artist works in a lively atmosphere surrounded by men doing everything from fencing to debating. An approximate contemporary of Horace Vernet was Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun (1755–1842), who is the oldest represented artist in Himid’s “studio.” She was active in a time of few female artists, and those who were active have been erased from history, necessitating their re-discovery in an ongoing process. Himid returns to this anonymity in several works with human silhouettes, among them *Naming the Money*, which consists of 100 figures. They depict people who have been enslaved and given fictional but possible fates and are presented with name and occupation alongside a new assigned identity in their existence as slaves. Himid has described her art: *“I need to do it because there are stories that have to be told. There are stories that aren’t told. There are gaps in history that aren’t being filled [...] and I can only paint. So instead of being a politician or a historian, this is what I do”*.

In *Feast Wagon*, 2015—a collaboration with Susan Walsh—Himid leaves these characters and lets old hand made carts and wheelbarrows, become the foundation for paintings of items that refer to trade and migration. With the tradition-laden medium of painting as a tool, Himid highlights an invisible history; she transforms the space, but also underlines that the observer adds content and other layers of experience.



## **Anike Joyce Sadiq**

With Anike Joyce Sadiq, too, the observer becomes a significant part of the artwork, and absence plays a leading role. If we sit on the solitary chair in her *You Never Look At Me From The Place From Which I See You*, we see our own shadow on the wall, but also someone else's; the shadows glide together and apart when the unfamiliar shadow moves. For the next person who comes into the room, the back of the seated person becomes a projection surface for a text. Sadiq quotes and reformulates Jacques Lacan and Frantz Fanon. Similar to the meeting of the shadows, she interweaves the French philosophers and compiles their statements and questions into a text about the observer and the observed. According to Lacan, the individual has an ambivalent relationship to herself, the self is not unifying, identification with the reflection is never wholly accurate, and we have to revise our conceptions all the time, which impacts our concept of reality. Fanon analyzes how colonialism has quelled and created a negative black self-image, a stereotype, and how black people as well as white are limited by their blackness as well as whiteness.

In her working process, Sadiq begins with the written word, and she often integrates text in the installations. Words appear on placards, written with a looping cord, or on the artwork's sign, but the artwork is also an experience beyond the text, and there is no guarantee that the letters are even noticed by the person in the chair. If we do manage to read, it is probably only fragments, such as *The only form of recognition is mutual*. In Sadiq's mother tongue of German, as in Swedish, "recognition" means both seeing something familiar and admitting a truth. Sometimes, the meanings are not unambiguous; the words get tangled up in each other and language becomes yet another layer of our understanding.

## **Peter Geschwind & Gunilla Klingberg**

The history of moving images is in focus in Peter Geschwind's art, using a grandiose idea of going back in time to early moving pictures, depicting moving compositions and examining where we would have ended up if the innovators had gone in another direction, which stories we could have imagined. Like Sadiq, he has often used shadows, and in the exhibition in which Geschwind and Gunilla Klingberg collaborate, shadows appear again. The duo's gigantic inflatable sculpture, spreading architectonically in the forest and filling the empty space between the trees, also becomes a two-dimensional projection screen through which to see nature. Shadows from trees and leaves become patterns on the sculpture's tarpaulin walls, and the image of what we are completely surrounded by in the park makes us notice nature again. Klingberg has worked extensively with patterns in her art, but those she has created herself. She has combined repeated words into hypnotic mandorlas whose elements we, upon closer examination, recognize as well-known discount chains' logotypes.



Geschwind and Klingberg work both separately and together. One of their most well-known collaborations was in the exhibition *ReShape* in Venice 2003, where they took plastic bags from grocery stores and interlinked them, then connecting them to a fan, filling them with air and creating a moving sculpture. The bags—a mundane material, taken from their surroundings—is a characteristic choice for them, like sounds from their apartment mixed into a soundtrack or a sculpture made of rice paper lampshades. At Nirox, they used tarpaulins and a material used in extreme situations, a thin plastic that functions as a warming blanket for people in distress. Recognizing the material is important for them—we know how tarpaulins feel, how they sound, but Geschwind and Klingberg use familiar elements to fulfill new functions.

There is a famous photograph of the Earth taken from space, the blue-flecked sphere with the continents in silhouette, more or less green, against a black background: *The Blue Marble* shows the Earth as only astronauts have seen it with their own eyes. It interests the artists that there are only a few such photos that have been able to give knowledge about another perspective. It is to this exact purpose they continually return: from which position we see, the relationship to space and time, change that hones our perceptive ability and reveals new possibilities, and maybe even transforms our worldview. The possibility they examine is nothing less, but at the same time they choose to work in a tradition where their monumental sculptures disappear if we pull the plug. Like artist pair Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who wrapped buildings and declared that every surface belongs to somebody, they borrow sites for a brief time through their artworks.

## **Latifa Echakhch**

Latifa Echakhch also sets great importance on the material; it is a starting point, but in her investigations, she would rather break down than build up. She has broken narrow tea glasses with gold ornamentation and strewn the shards along the exhibition walls (Erratum, 2009). In *Crowd Fade*, 2017, she created a mural depicting blue skies on two parallel masonry walls and then scraped it away and displayed what remained. She has taken blue carbon paper and covered the walls with it in *For Each Stencil a Revolution* (2007).

At Nirox, and now at Wanås, she has created *Blush*—a circle of bricks on the ground, 6 meters in diameter. The work's outermost bricks are whole, but as the bricks are laid closer to the middle, they are broken into increasingly small pieces, until finally in the middle, they are completely pulverized. In the work *Tkaf*, 2011 and 2012, she worked with the same material and threw bricks at the gallery floor, then letting visitors walk on them in order to further grind them to pieces. The bricks became a pigment, which then found its way up onto the white exhibition walls as red handprints. *Tkaf* is, in the North African dialect of Darija, a curse spoken from someone close to you. Echakhch refers to ancient traditions and handprints in red clay she has seen in Morocco in a place where witchcraft is still practiced. The is





repetitively minimalist, but the scale is large and the content charged. In *Blush*, she brings make-up to mind, but also blood; the crushed brick shifts from being a potential building material to coloring the ground red. Echakhch has commented on destruction in her works as opportunity: build up, rub out, begin again, leave and forget, leave and lift up, re-do, do better—reflect. Like the other artists in *Not A Single Story*, Echakhch complicates stories—they add, take away, present choices before us.

For Taiye Selasi, the standard question of where she comes from was just as difficult to answer as when none of the choices on the questionnaire are quite right. She suggests a three-step model. Countries come into being, are transformed, and disappear, but in contrast, Selasi says, experience is real and culture is experience. She challenges us to swap out the question and replace it with: Where are you a local? She asks us to name where we have our relationships, our rituals and restrictions, and from these criteria, we have our answer. We have used her framing when we've introduced the artists this year; her reformulation sets other limitations, it is still difficult to answer, can seem wrongly stated; we haven't changed the question for practical reasons, but to gain a different answer, a different story.

In memory of Sarit Shapira, 1957 – 2018