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Édition électronique

URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/conflits/1865>

DOI : 10.4000/conflits.1865

ISSN : 1777-5345

Éditeur :

CECLS - Centre d'études sur les conflits - Liberté et sécurité, L'Harmattan

Référence électronique

Antonia GARCIA CASTRO et Miriam Perier, « “Art has the power of its undefinability”. An interview with Banu Cennetoglu », *Cultures & Conflits* [En ligne], Inédits de Regards sur l'entre deux, mis en ligne le 10 janvier 2006, consulté le 27 août 2022. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/conflits/1865> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/conflits.1865>

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"Art has the power of its undefinability". An interview with Banu Cennetoglu

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- 1 This new feature of "Looking-in-between" focuses on two works by the artist Banu Cennetoglu, respectively called "False Witness" and "The List".
- 2 The starting point of the first work is the visit to an asylum seekers registration center, Ter Apel (The Netherlands). The second presents a list of 6,336 refugees who died within the European borders since 1993, a list which the artist intends to disseminate in the city of Amsterdam. Art work ? Plan ? What can be said of the creation process when the artist's eye focuses on the most crude reality ? We have been particularly interested in this artist's visual approach and in the originality not only of her look at but also and above all of her attitude dedicated to the mediation and the possibility of a dialogue between the artist and the public. In this respect, "questions" seems to be the keyword. A questioning motivating the artist, her will to do and the way she does it. A questioning that is intended to be submitted to the observer when confronted to an artwork. The link between the words "art" and "politics" for Banu Cennetoglu – if it exists – is given by the relation to uncertainty, not considered as a problem but as a tool, or even a force for the artist concerned by the reality.
- 3 The visual dimension of Banu Cennetoglu's works – as the artist indicated us during the interview – being essential, we invite the reader to visit her personal website (<http://www.banucennetoglu.com>)¹.
About "False Witness"
- 4 Banu CENNETOGLU (B.C.) : False Witness started to take shape in my mind after I saw the "Asylum Seeker Registration Center" (prior to the attribution of the status of refugee) in Ter Apel, Holland.
- 5 The process involving the asylum seeker once he or she is inside is parallel to the architectural structure of the building.

- 6 The asylum seekers have a 48 hours examination procedure (16 hours during three days) during which they are not allowed to leave the building. This center has a linear organizational structure, and the building in which this center resides, was built using the same linear logic. Its interior and exterior architectural design illustrates a very particular state of mind.
- 7 The asylum seeker have to follow a path "in accordance" or parallel to the structure of the building. Here are some examples. When they enter, the asylum seekers need to go through a blue door as the color blue symbolizes the "cold and the East". If they are authorized to stay in Holland during a specific period in order to obtain the status, they leave the center using the orange colored side and go to a camp where they will be accommodated in caravans (this could previously last six years ; it is currently on average six months long, during which a decision must be taken). The rooms where the interviews take place are also divided in colors. The person conducting the interview sits in the white ("neutral") part, while the asylum seeker sits in the colored part (the color is deemed to symbolize the luggage, the passing).
- 8 It is important to note that these explanations regarding the colors' "symbols" were given to me by the center's public relations manager.
- 9 "False Witness" however is not a survey of this registration center.
While the documentation of the "Registration Center" is used as a main source, the book borrows images from other stories.
- 10 In this perspective, I wished to find a way to combine the center's documentation to other images, the whole being ment to become something else. A kind of third situation. Aiming to form sentences by using photographic means, it opens its subject to discussion, and instead of shouting "This shouldn't have happened" tries to reach the invisible through the visible. The sole written text in this book has a quality similar to the structure that those photographs following it create among themselves. It is an edited and revised version of the corpus-based data for the word "measure". A corpus can be thought of as a collection of texts gathered according to particular principles for some particular purpose. This corpus gave me some fragments of the sentences containing the word "measure" and I used them as my source. I edited and completed these fragments, and now I expect them to behave as a whole. The text and photographs have a parallel but independent structure. It seemed important to me to keep the whole as such and that is what is exposed.
- 11 C&C : Does the book have other distribution media than the exhibition? Can it be diffused outside the exhibition? Would you like this?
- 12 B. C. : Yes it does. When I conceived *False Witness* as book, I wanted to explore if a book could work as an exhibition, a project space on its own. This is also the reason why when I show it I want to keep the content of the book together and not expose the photographs separately from the book. Outside the exhibitions it is getting diffused *via* bookstores.
- 13 C&C : According to what you said on the architectural specificities and dispositions/ arrangements of the Ter Apel centre: can we say that there is a kind of parallel between the exhibition visit and the asylum demand or registration procedure taking place in Ter Apel centre?
- 14 B.C. : No, not directly. But there are conceptual and formal reasons to build a corridor as the spatial translation of the book.

- 15 Three consecutive corridors create a 12m x 90 cm constructed space and the entire book is printed in three stripes respectively to each corridor.
- 16 Due to the narrowness of the moving area, the viewer is not allowed to scan images in one gaze. By entering in the space one enters "physically" in the book and has to traverse the whole space in order to finish it.
- 17 C&C : Have you had any contact with asylum seekers during the preparation of False Witness (book and exhibition)?
- 18 B.C. : No I did not have any contact with asylum seekers during this project. That was my decision. I wanted to work especially on the space as an illustration of this very 'peculiar' state of mind. And from my ethical point of view I did not find it proper to work with asylum seekers whose states are delicate, extreme and in need of immediate interventions when I am not able to bring any concrete solution to their situations. Considering that False Witness is not a survey or reportage about the Centre I did not feel it right to invite them directly to be part of the project.
- 19 As a matter of fact, during my project Ter Apel was a Registration Centre for Asylum Seekers. It has since June 2004 become a deportation centre for some of 26,000 "failed" Asylum Seekers whom the Netherlands wanted to deport between 2004 and 2007.
- 20 The government decided in February 2004 to go ahead with the deportation within the next three years of Asylum Seekers who arrived in the country before April 2001.
- 21 C&C : Have you taken (or did you want to take) pictures at Ter Apel centre? What are the other images or pictures used in your work? Where do they come from? (what sources?)
- 22 B.C. : Yes, I did. When I sent my proposal to the Centre to get permission for the visit I told them it was for "research" purposes. One of the main reasons for my interest in Ter Apel is because the process involving the asylum seeker is parallel to the architectural structure of the building. In my proposal I promised not to disturb any asylum seeker by photographing them. So I only photographed the building and architectural structures. Later in the book I used these photographs to form the main story line.
- 23 I call it the main story line since there are other photographs from other stories. I collected these other images from all over the world during several years. They belong to different stories in very different geographies: from governmental kindergartens in Batumi, to social housings in Quito, as well as surroundings of Chamarande in France. They have their own story but within this given context I wanted them to interact with my main story line and to create other possibilities. The selection and ordering within these photographs do not have a random approach. Actually it is the opposite: despite the fact that they belong to different locations and situations I had a hidden mission for their ensemble and I was quite manipulative of their possible interaction. The book is not illustrating one subject but using a particular documented fact as a source while the associations within the images become crucial and full of potential.
- 24 It is a discussion more than a statement.
- 25 C&C : Regarding the corpus base data and the word "measure": Why did you explore the notion of measure? Explain ?
- 26 B.C. : In my work I'm very busy with the notion of distance, especially in the way we perceive and deal with the information. I think once we perceive the information,

depending on its "weight" we create a mental space that will generate a possible way to deal with it.

- 27 I have chosen the word "Measure" because of the rich, variant and critical association possibilities that it might offer.

378858 mr badman uses false weights and *measures* cheats his debtors through a bogus bankruptcy.

110487 all have to show goodwill and find appropriate emerg-ency *measures*

331431 in the United States, color like weights and *measures*

have been standardized by the national bureau.

037783 I different...I suppose I was never contented with half *measures* I am sorry your life is so burdensome.

- 28 This is the only project in which I literally talk about the word "measure".

- 29 As you may know a corpus is a collection of texts gathered according to particular principles for some particular purposes.

- 30 By interfering with these purposefully collected fragments I was interested in their possible behaviour as a whole. The text has a similar structure to the photographs that they create among themselves but at the same time due to its formal characteristics it could act as a pseudo index for the following part.

- 31 The numbers at the beginning of each sentence indicate the source information where this fragment has been taken.

"The List"

- 32 B.C. : Recently in my research I have been examining the concept of the Mobius Strip, and coming across its use as a major metaphor; particularly in the writings of Didier Bigo and Hito Steyerl this interlocked form becomes the key figure illustrating complex issues which pertain to the indefinable Europe, which is an issue that concerns not only the citizens of Europe (new and old), but our entire global community.

- 33 What this deals with is the concern of an "outside" and "inside", which inherently has to do with issues of security, angst and ignorance. With Europe's steadily expanding borders and the continuous mobilization of its economy and citizens this is a very relevant and dire matter, however, it is no longer possible to maintain a closed format when seeking solutions to these topics; in this, information is vital. We are in a moment where the European borders are in a process of redefinition and where the external of today is the internal of tomorrow.

- 34 The List is a document, which lists the names of 6,336 (known) refugee names, who died within the borders of Europe. The document also contains the country of origin, the cause of death and the source of this very information. The first part of the project includes a public diffusion of the list displayed as posters in 110 Mupis (cultural city information units) throughout the city of Amsterdam. They will be on display for one week. Besides the structured display there will also be a wild diffusion all over the city via the pasting of printed Lists.

- 35 The second part of the project includes a documentation centre. SKOR, a non-profit artist initiative has a small building located on the sidewalk in a busy neighbourhood in the city. This place will contain documents, books, printed materials and videos dealing with this subject. We are aiming to collaborate with a local newspaper for possible distribution of the List during the same week of Mupis' display.

- 36 The third part of the project is screenings, discussions and presentations.

- 37 I believe in the extreme necessity of its diffusion and the effect of its confrontation.
- 38 By placing it within a cultural/commercial structure inside the urban space the assurance of it confronting audience heightened; if the audience has missed in the morning, they should have to come across the List on the way home.
- 39 I do not regard The List as my artwork nor as a political act. I do believe that through the undefined boundaries of art as well as the exploitation of my position as an artist it is possible to make visible the concerns that are inherent to The List's content, as well as test the boundaries of public information. Art is not CNN; through a medium it can offer or impose unexpected information at an unexpected moment, which is exactly its power.
- 40 Presently the frontiers between socially engaged art and its autonomous counterpart are under discussion, as well as the boundaries between outside and inside, due to having reached the limits of our political imagination. I am highly aware of the fragility of this material as well as of the chronicle indifference of the society in which I wish to make it visible.
- 41 C&C : How did you come to contact the University of Amsterdam? How did they welcome your work? Have you met any difficulties?
- 42 B.C. : Via my project partner Huib H. van der Werf who was a former student at the University of Amsterdam. They were interested in collaborating and we did not have any difficulties on this part.
- 43 C&C : *The project includes a dialogue (a conference) with artists and academicians: how did you choose the participants? How did they (the artists and the academicians?) welcome the idea of a conference?*
- 44 B.C. : Besides the existence of the List, a book from Carlo Ginzburg "Wooden Eyes and 9 Perspectives on Distances" is a major trigger for this project. Based on this book, I wanted to ask if "what is out of sight is out of mind" or if "what is in sight necessarily what is in mind"?
- 45 Then I read the article by Didier Bigo about security systems and became very interested with his ideas about the uncertainty as a possibility and the metaphor of the Mobius strip. I have been thinking and reading about the power of the potentiality for a long time. From Aristo to Agamben it is a continuous discussion. But it is very important to see it from the point of view of a professor of International Relations who can trust the uncertainty while dealing with new systems of security within Europe.
- 46 I find this very inspiring and influential.
- 47 In March 2004 I was part of the 3rd Berlin Biennale and met the work of Hito Steyerl, a writer and filmmaker who also uses the Mobius Strip as a metaphor for the new structure of Europe. Next was Zelimir Zilnik's wonderful film: "Kennedy goes home". A very intense and smart film with an extreme subject matter.
- 48 Zilnik is the greatest example of asking questions with films.
- 49 One of our guests is Ad Van Denderen. For thirteen years Van Denderen travelled and documented along what later came to be called the Schengen borders. I am very much interested in his direct approach and how this direct information can lead or may lead to a direct action? I was careful to find people from different disciplines with a genuine engagement to the subject and within 2 years they all came together.
- 50 At the end I approached eight people and they were all very interested.

- 51 As you know, due to financial problems we had to postpone the project from September 2005 to September 2006. But we won't give up!
- Art and politics : making the most of uncertainty
- 52 C&C : What does your artistic work consist of? How could you present us your everyday work? What are its pillars? Are there recurrences?
- 53 B.C. : It first may be better to give short information about my background: After studying Psychology four years in Istanbul (where I am from) I moved to Paris and studied photography in Speos. After finishing my studies I moved to New York City. In New York while I was working as a professional photographer I was developing my personal projects and at the same time all these questions about the photography and information, especially about the production and distribution of information. Eventually questions did increase in quantity and quality and I decided to quit the professional part and to focus as much as I can to my personal work. It is precisely during this period that I got a scholarship offer for two years at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam.
- 54 The scholarship was for a post-graduate research program on contemporary art. That's where I started to conceive False Witness and progressively the List.
- 55 I work mostly with photography: I am interested in photographing spaces whose identities are transitory and unstable. Through this process, I aim to question the potential of these spaces/places and the power of their uncertain conditions.
- 56 As you may guess from these phrases I don't walk around with my camera all the time. I work very often in my studio giving long periods for researching. Since my projects involve distances and respectively travelling, I don't produce lots of work in short periods. I rather work during a long time on a project and concentrate on different layers. Layers mean all the different parts that come together to make one piece.
- 57 They can have different thicknesses and weights, that mean different levels of intensity and importance. Layers are important because it indicates the depth of a work and even you don't see each of them explicitly, that fact that they have been considered will affect the perception and reading of the final work.
- 58 As Einstein says 'there is no space without a field'.
- 59 How do I approach a space and its history, and later the photograph and its original context? Once an image is presented, it offers multiple possibilities of interpretations.
- 60 I start from the land and, through photographing it, construct its story. I use land to mean an area, a field. I guess land can be translated as "terrain" in French. The field or *that* particular land that I am talking about is located within *that* country, thus layers of information start to come together depending on the economical, social, political state of *that* country. So I am interesting in looking at this land, as it was isolated, also within the larger context it is located.
- 61 I find that, paradoxically, once the evidence has been recorded, I search for ways to hide it. I question what to offer. I interfere with myself through the collection of this information.
- 62 After that stage the presentation process starts where the space to show and the audience become an essential part of the work. I'm interested in the performative aspect of the photographs where the audience might confront the content of the work *via* its formal aspects. I don't have a very direct attitude, I am interested in raising

questions and open discussions via my work rather than screaming the problem. I'm highly aware of the disadvantages of this approach, especially when you want to get a quick and strong response from the public.

63 But I believe the one that comes quick disappear even quicker.

64 C&C : Similarly, *False Witness* and *The List* are linked to very actual themes which can be considered and declined in various angles whether you are a Human Rights' NGO member, a journalist, a social science specialist (sociologist, political science specialist), a law specialist, a politician, etc. Have these themes mobilised you as an "artist", a "citizen", both? Neither? In other words, has your own work frontiers? If so, what are they? Or otherwise, what kind of frontiers do you not admit? To say it in other words, you say, in relation to the *List*, that it is neither an artistic work nor a political act? What is it? Could you specify and develop this dichotomy (art work and political act) and your own position on this subject?

65 B.C. My work is based on questions, and thus research is an internal part of the work. Literature has a major influence on it as well.

66 For example Giorgio's Agamben's '*La Communauté qui vient*' is a book which I have been mesmerized and in fight with for several years. I have been struggling between his radical almost fantastic ideas, and inoperativeness of these very ideas about the power of "the potential" vis a vis immigrant communities. When I was working on *False Witness* '*La Communauté qui vient*' had a major influence.

67 I believe art has the power of its undefinability.

68 Like the Mobius strip, uncertainty can be exploited; art can go beyond its own limits. Lately I hear many discussions and questions about the "mission" of art: Should art have a mission? Are you an artist or an anthropologist?

69 I don't find these discussions productive. Art is a powerful tool, and can be used in different ways. With Didier Bigo's words *The fact of not knowing on which face of the strip one is located is not a danger but rather an opportunity*.

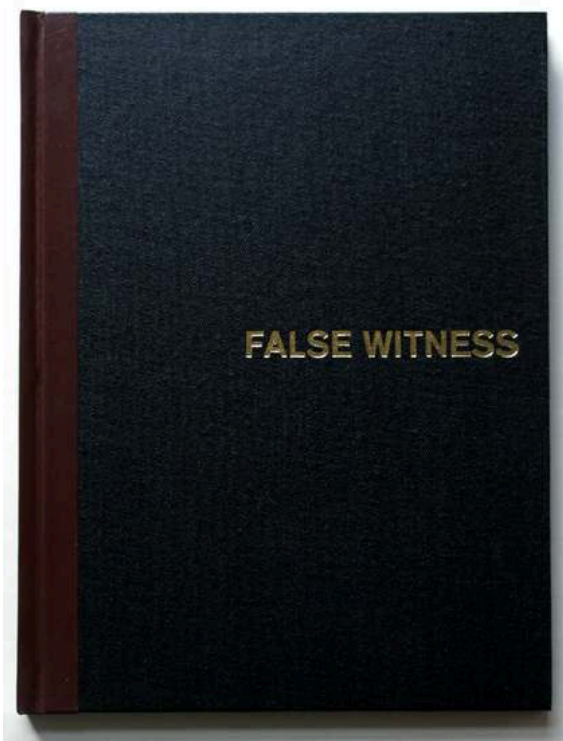
70 In relation to the *List*, I don't classify it as artwork neither political act because it is about its diffusion and being able to raise questions. I am a mediator not a creator in this project. I like to use the system that I function in, to diffuse this information because I believe its urgent necessity. I don't call it a political act because I use an indirect way for communicate. I have the risk to be unseen and unheard. *List* could be an example for what Agamben calls "Means Without Ends"

71 This in the context of cinema which Agamben claims

"has its centre in the gesture and not in the image and thus it belongs essentially to the realm of ethics and politics and not simply to that of aesthetics (...) What characterises gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported. The gesture in other words, opens the sphere of ethos as the more proper sphere of that which is human. But in what way is an action endured and supported? (...) In what way does a simple act become an event? (...) In the distinction between production and action ; if producing is a means in view of an end and praxis is an end without means, the gesture then breaks with the false alternative between ends and means that paralyzes morality and presents instead means that, as such, evade the orbit of mediality without becoming, for this reason, ends".

72 C&C : What is the lifetime for your works? How do you deal with ephemera?

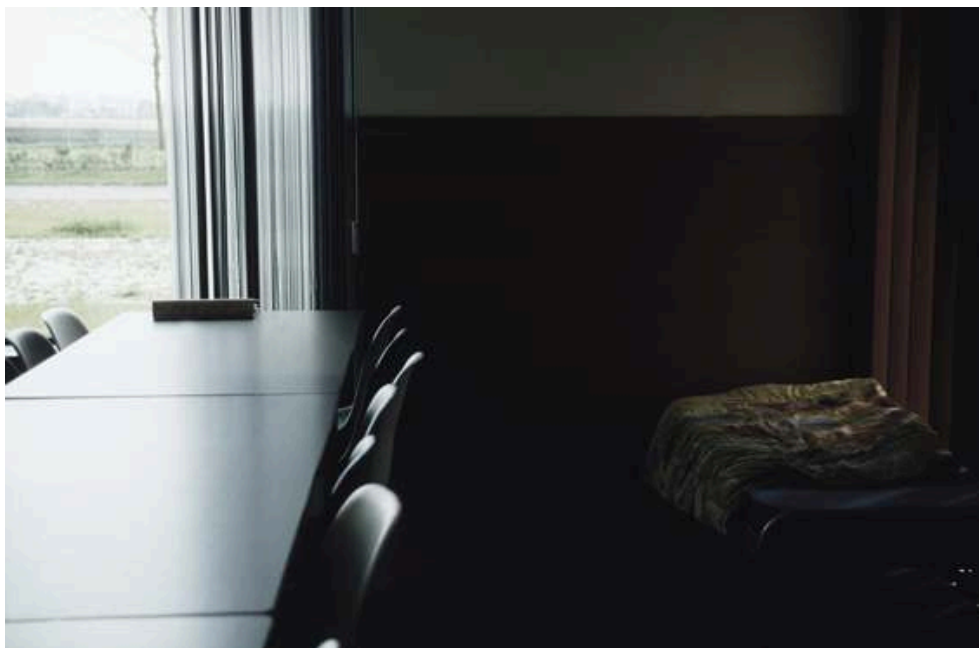
- 73 B.C. : My works have two lifetimes. One is when I am conceiving the work and producing, the other is when the work is finished and people start to be interested in it. And there is a serious time difference between them. For example, I finished a project about Former Yugoslavia in 2002, I finished it in March 2004 and exhibited it in May 2004 for the first time. After the first exhibition, nothing followed until September 2005, then I did show the same work within the last four months four times. It's an odd situation, people need confirmation or reference before they want to invite the work for exhibitions. Once it starts, it can continue fast and intensely. If I say no to shows, the work won't have the means to circulate. But if I go from one show to the other, I won't have any time and energy to make new work. But I think after some time it is important to say no and concentrate on new projects and let the old and tired ones sleep for a while.
- 74 C&C : *In your work and in the presentation of your work it appears that the visual aspect dominates the written (even if the two are used): can one say that there is a primacy of the visual in your work? If so, why? Or, what does the visual aspect enable?*
- 75 This question is particularly interesting for us regarding two considerations you had while presenting the project: 1. The possibility that invisibility rises from visibility. 2. The will to diffuse, to link, communicate something, and what (false witness has more than one story to tell). Then, the necessity to introduce a dialogue. Can you tell us more?
- 76 B.C. : Yes there is definitely a primacy of the visual in my work. First of all I am a visual artist so I believe and want the photographs to generate a possibility for associations and discussions.
- 77 When I say invisibility can rise from visibility I refer to the unpredictable space where the work can take the audience with the existing material.
- 78 Photography has a conflictual nature, while it depicts what is there, it cannot change the situation where the photograph is taken. That's why I am very interested in how to build a narration which can go beyond an illustration or education.
- 79 I believe that's the only way to have a dialogue instead of a monologue.
- 80 In general when people look at the False Witness they are immediately uninterested and leave the book or they stay and the dialogue starts.
- 81 C&C : What is indifference? For us, sociologist, it is the impossible interlocutor-speaker and at the same time, a strong motor for action: many political experiences, and particularly specific political innovative experiences find their primary motivation in the necessity to stop this indifference. How does "indifference" intervene in your work?
- 82 B.C. : Indifference is normal and a very effective self-defence mechanism. The collective indifference is dangerous. Especially in the world we live in, many people can only cope with it by being indifferent.
- 83 I'm highly aware of it but I don't act upon it. The only way to change is to ignore it. I don't think we can stop it but we don't have to stop either. We have to continue although it doesn't seem like making a difference, but am sure it does, sooner or later.
- 84 Did you see the movie "TAKE" from Naomi Klein and Avi Lewis? A documentary about how the workers in Argentina took over their factory after the big economic collapse in 2001. A wonderful example of how to make a difference!



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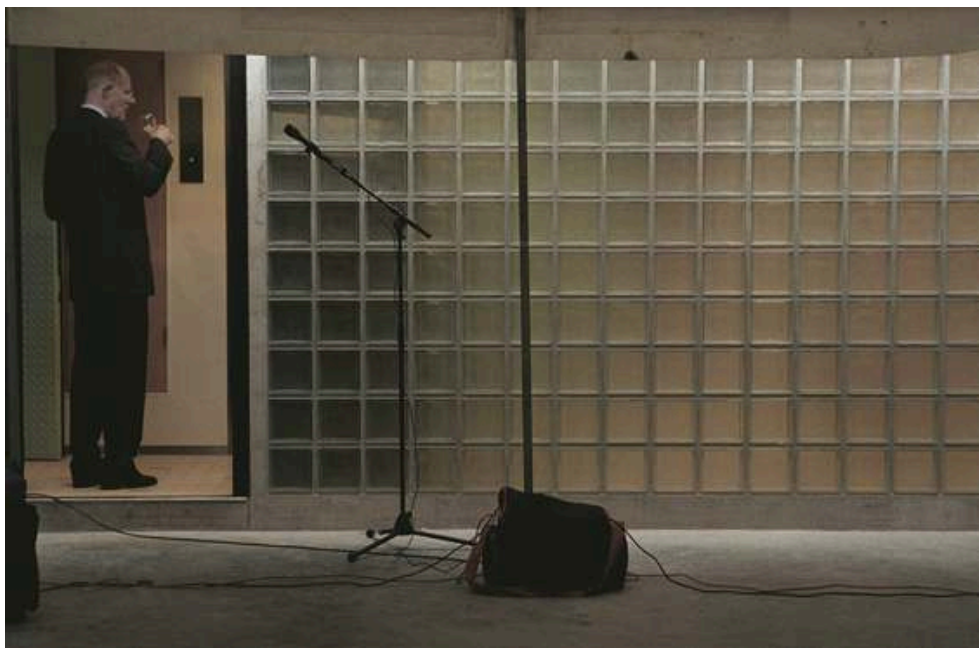
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90 extracts from the book "False Witness"

NOTES

1.. This paper uses the information available on the website as well as a direct dialogue with the artist during the months of August and September 2005. An interview has also been done at a distance in October 2005.

INDEX

Keywords : asylum, refuges, art, symbol, visual

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