C-print

A Paralysis of One's Inner Sense of Direction

A great shared interest in literature and interdisciplinary knowledge exchanges, joins Kristina Bength, Malin Pettersson Öberg and Hiroko Tsuchimoto together in *A Paralysis of One's Inner Sense of Direction* that bears an echo of realities of the past pandemic, while bringing forth the satirical and existential work of the seminal Japanese author Kōbō Abe as a pillar of the exhibition.

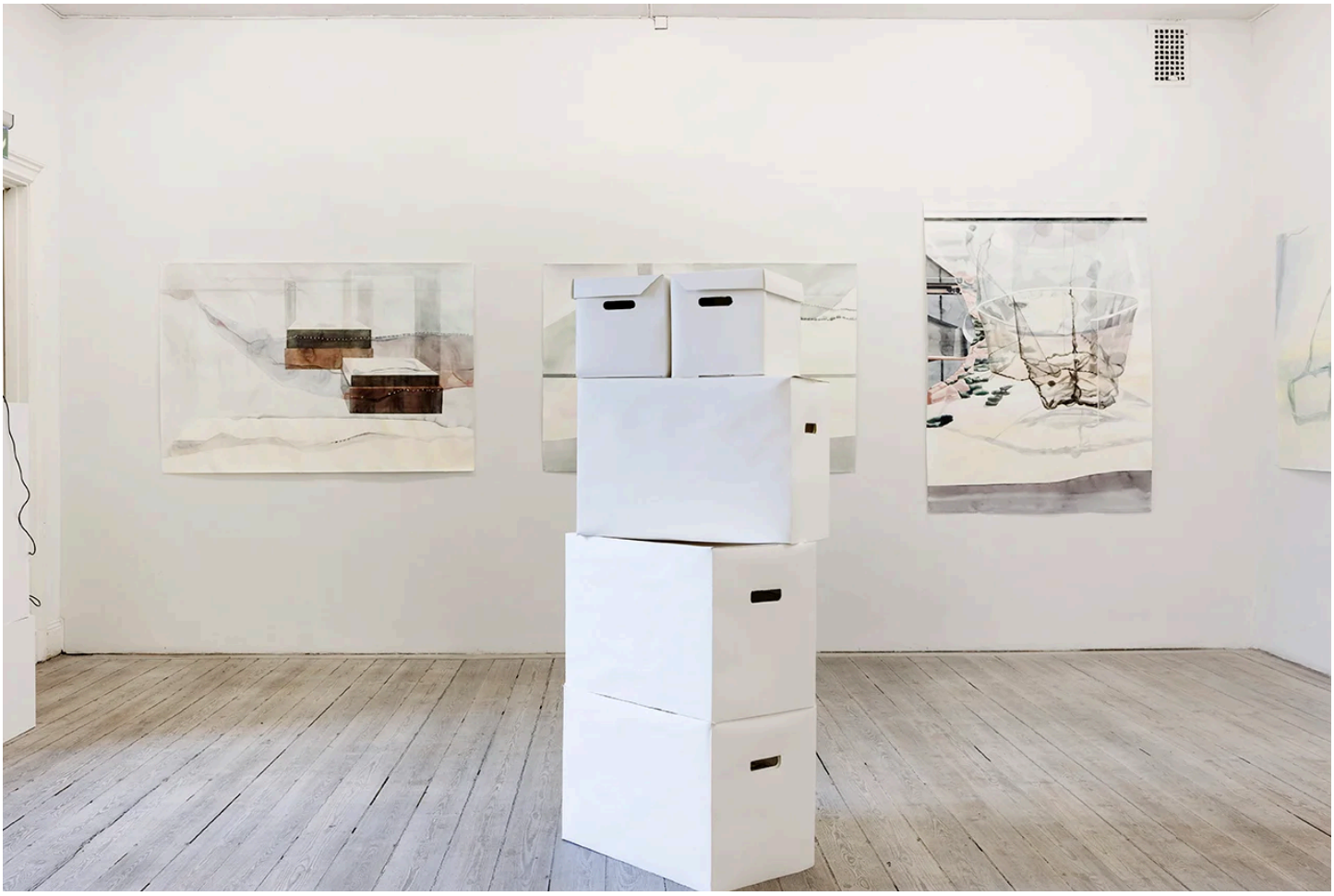


Installation view, Malin Pettersson Öberg, *A Paralysis of One's Inner Sense of Direction*, Övre Galleriet, SKF/Konstnärshuset, Stockholm, Photo: Giulia Cairone

C-P: An early seed for this exhibition were ponderings during the pandemic. Can we take it back to how the exhibition connects back to various realities we were living through then? It's interesting; there was a moment at the height of the pandemic when I might have expected an upsurge of exhibitions and projects informing the pandemic to see the daylight, but it never reached the magnitude I anticipated.

K.B: Firstly, thank you Ashik for hosting a talk in the exhibition on April 20 and for your reflections. The seed for this exhibition was already planted in 2020 when I was looking for an author who explores peepholes. I found, among other things, *The Box Man* by Kōbō Abe, which is about a photographer who puts a cardboard box over his head and starts looking at the world through the cardboard's "observation window". Abe compares a photographer to a "window viewer" who drills holes anywhere. Living a life inside a cardboard box is "far from an end, but rather an entry into another world" Abe writes, likening this other world to a blind alley. To be a box man is to see but not be seen.

When I read *The Box Man*, I felt that the alienation portrayed by Abe was like the isolation of the pandemic but also the filter bubbles of our time. As if we all have a cardboard box over our heads, but instead of looking out through the handle of a cardboard box, we look down into our mobile phones and it is the algorithms that limit our perspectives. I started painting watercolor paintings on aquarelle paper that I folded into boxes so they could only be seen through the handles of the box. Since I felt that there is much more to work with in Abe's writing than my artistic practice is capable of, I asked if Malin Pettersson Öberg would like to do an exhibition with me based on Abe's works. Malin started reading Kōbō Abe and suggested Hiroko Tsuchimoto, whose research-based performances have dealt with issues such as exclusion. In this way, the three of us started working on a joint exhibition.



Installation view, Krisitna Bength, *A Paralysis of One's Inner Sense of Direction,* Övre Galleriet, SKF/Konstnärshuset, Stockholm, 2024. Photo: Giulia Cairone

M.P.Ö: Kristina's question to collaborate was both timely and untimely for me. In retrospect, I appreciate her introduction to a fascinating author – Kōbō Abe and his world of thought – and I am proud of what we have managed to create together. But for me, the pandemic, and especially the year 2021, was a dark period. My sense of isolation, alienation and helplessness was profound when both my partner and I were affected by the virus, followed by post-covid, while we had two babies to take care of. It was an unpleasant experience where I could not recognize myself. My focus in this work – presented as a series of paintings placed on wood together with a film – therefore slightly shifted from Abe's theme of alienation to an excavation of the pandemic itself. What have we actually been through? How has society changed, and how can we use our experiences to better navigate the future?

These questions I began to explore in depth in early 2022. I read most of what I could find about the pandemic and how previous pandemics have affected society. But unfortunately I don't have any good answers. My view of the societal change brought on by

the pandemic is quite negative. However, I feel a responsibility not to give in to hopelessness: as Rebecca Solnit so nicely puts it in *Hope in the Dark* (2004) and *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (2005), there is always a value in the unexpected and unforeseen. Chance is not always unwelcome in our lives, not least in artistic processes, and we may have to learn to embrace a certain lack of control.

As I felt a bit stuck during the pandemic – like the main character of Abe's novel *The Woman in the Dunes* who repeatedly tries to get out of a sand pit – it took us some time to complete this collaboration. Hiroko Tsuchimoto is an artist I have had the pleasure of working with on several occasions, not least in Japan in 2012. Given the exhibition's starting point in Abe's writing, and Hiroko's interest in issues of cultural and national identity, belonging, interpersonal relationships and cultural "translations", I thought she would fit like a glove in this collaboration.



Hiroko Tsuchimoto performing *The difference between plants and animals is not qualitative, but only quantitative* in the exhibition *A paralysis of one's inner sense of direction runs through on April 20.* Photo: Giulia Cairone

H.T: When Malin suggested me being involved in this project, I was reading a Ph.D dissertation by John Pit, *Becoming Botanical: Entanglements of Plant Life and Human Subjectivity in Modern Japan,* which addresses how Japanese writers and filmmakers reconfigure human subjectivity in their works inspired by and associated with vegetal life in the context of coping with historical crises. One of the works the author highlighted in the thesis was *Dendorocacalia* by Kōbō Abe. It was during the pandemic that I changed my routine from traveling abroad to walking in my neighborhood and my attention from humans to a more-than-human world.

I was walking to "Japanska dammen" in Bergianska trädgården every day, then became interested in the role and history of botanical gardens. Reading historical archives and interviews with scientists and gardeners made me reimagine the arrival of the European botanists in Japan during the Edo period and how it impacted Japanese modernization, imperialism, and eventually

post-war development. Abe is a prominent author who critically examined the history of colonial violence associated with natural science collections and the construct of subjectivity as manifested through the influence of Western ideology. *Dendorocacalia* also invites readers to imagine beyond-human consciousness and physical/mental transformation away from the status quo. Abe's work has been an interesting mediator in developing my research as I could associate my practice with his work which applies uncanny imagination and irrational juxtapositions to sense non-human realities and unfolds the impact of historical events that caused separations and classifications.

C-P: *Dendorocacalia* and *The Box man* evidently rest as pillars in the exhibition and I was not well-informed of Kōbō Abe's satirical literary work before. Rather, your exhibition is introducing him to me. Artistic making is almost always inspired by other art, but that relation is not always transparent. In this case you elevate Abe to a very prominent figure in the exhibition and thoroughly exhibit his presence. What are some of the considerations to run by as you reference and bring a seminal figure like Abe to light through your work?

K.B: I am happy if you and other visitors to the exhibition become interested in reading Kōbō Abe. For my own part, I have used quotes from *The Box Man* as titles for the paintings, as a way of creating an associative space, which hopefully can provoke new thoughts and unexpected connections in the viewer, as his language has done for me. I guess I see it as a processing similar to that of a book circle. I have used the method of working with other artists on a literary text for a long time now. Cecilia Darle and I used Marguerite Duras's *The Lover* in 2014, and George Perec's *Species of Spaces* in 2016, when we curated exhibitions together, and Maria Nordin and I used *De två saliga* by Ulla Isaksson when we painted watercolor paintings together and kept a journal of the process in 2014. Using the work of a Nobel Prize tipped author as Abe may seem pretentious, but if there is one place where I think one can allow oneself to be ambitious, it is in art.



Malin Pettersson Öberg and Hiroko Tsuchimoto in conversation with Ashik Zaman on April 2020. Photo: Leyung Wang.

M.P.Ö: I agree with Kristina. I am not sure if visitors perceive it as pretentious, though. I believe that the questions we raise in this exhibition – about the pandemic, a sense of isolation and lack of both control and belonging – are engaging to many. If they find their way to the gallery, they will see how we activate Abe's authorship in relation to a contemporary visual art's context. To connect with Kristina, I have been working in between text and image, narrative formats and site-specific installations, for quite some time. In 2009, I used letters between Selma Lagerlöf and her partner Sophie Elkan in a textile installation, and in a film made the following year I worked with a Swedish guidebook on Paris from 1953. I like to explore hierarchies and challenge what is considered high or low.

Lately, I have mainly been writing scripts for video essays, where a large number of sources and ideas are woven in a new narrative. In the video essay I show here, *Unexpected and Unforeseen* (2024), Abe is but one of several sources. His thoughts on isolation are brought in relation with theories of unexpected events, crises and lack of control, formulated by writers such as Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2007), Rebecca Solnit (2005) and Buddhist teachings and thought.As for Abe's role in the exhibition, I think we have a responsibility to introduce him to a wider audience, which has also been our ambition. We have been in contact with writers, publishers and universities, even members of the Swedish Academy, but it has been tricky to find someone willing to analyse Abe's work. Hiroko, you also mentioned how Abe is a difficult author to read and translate, even in Japan.

C-P: What are some of the common denominators that align the three of you together on a more general note?

K.B: That all three of us work with methods that are able to make use of a literary text like Abe's so that our respective readings of it emerge through the works, i.e. what allows the works to share an exhibition and its concept.

M.P.Ö: Our interest in literature and interdisciplinary knowledge exchanges, but also a curiosity and willingness to reflect on what is happening in the world around us.

C-P: What can be said about the process of making and curating this exhibition? How symbiotic was the actual making of it?

M.P.Ö: I think it has been surprisingly easy-going and friction free. Plus, very rewarding. Perhaps that is the outcome of (three) long art practises? An ability to collaborate and think of "the bigger picture" and not just of your own presentation. I think the spatial experience of the exhibition is quite visual and tactile – no overload of information, to think with Claire Bishop, and neither is it a regular painting exhibition. The pieces are thoughtfully and unconventionally installed, in terms of their high or low placing, material choices and the interplay of light and darkness.



Kristina Bength in conversation with Ashik Zaman on April 2020. Photo: Leyung Wang.

C-P: I'm curious about your thoughts of the balance between literal and figurative representation of ideas; about a spectrum between very literal and very abstract.

KB: I guess I need to tell you a bit more about Abe to answer that, and how it is that my paintings are models of fishing nets, constructed spatialities under water. Fishing nets are completely flat on land; only when they enter the water do they unfold as a kind of architecture. Just like cardboard boxes, which can be both two-dimensional and three-dimensional. After all, a fishing net is ultimately a trap. Quotes like "Soon the feeling of the free lightness of matter begins to diminish bit by bit. Something is wrapped around your body in layer after layer as if you were forced into a fish-shaped trap" and "I suppose a fish could very well drown in the air by falling in the opposite direction, upwards towards the sky" inspired the motifs.

The watercolor's formation in floating pools of water also struck me as corresponding to the water migrating between translucent fishing nets. The yellow-green color of the paintings, which comes from the underwater environment of the photographs, also relates to the line from which our exhibition title is taken: "*A paralysis of one's inner sense of direction* is something a cardboard man constantly complains about. At such times the earth's axis swings, and one suffers from severe nausea, reminiscent of seasickness."
In short, it's about losing your footing, being trapped in a state of being.

H.T: Since Abe's text is quite surrealistic and allegorical, I could imagine the story too visually, which ironically made me resist the use of symbolic motives in my drawings. Therefore, I chose rather to seek to expand my consciousness to the nonhuman

world through the process of drawing, meditating on rootedness to the surroundings and slow temporality. I can also refer here to *How Forest Think* by Eduardo Kohn which describes that the symbolic reference is something unique to humans.



Installation view, *A Paralysis of One's Inner Sense of Direction*, Övre Galleriet, SKF/Konstnärshuset, Stockholm, 2024. Photo: Giulia Cairone

C-P: Malin, your film *Unexpected and Unforeseen* that you mentioned, departs from the notion of the potentiality in the unexpected and unpredicted. What are come "conclusions" you arrive at in your mind?

M.P.Ö: It is so recent that I can barely reply, but as I mentioned earlier, this work served as a sort of "treatment" of what I had been going through during the pandemic, which was initially a very negative experience. Some sort of trauma that needed a resolution. In the film I say: "I kept dreaming about the years before the pandemic, as some sort of lost paradise where we could travel to places and exchange with people in ways that now seem far-fetched, dreamlike, Utopian". I wanted to go back to that time. That is why all the clips in the film, and the photos used as blueprints for the paintings, were taken during those years *prior:* to allow myself to linger on a past, previous life. Eventually, however – and this is what I had hoped for – while researching the pandemic in 2022, my negative feeling started to shift to a more hopeful attitude. I got interested in the ideas of hope and potential, in chance and the unexpected, in human lack of control, that can be found in certain branches of Buddhism, in the Japanese art form *Ukiyo-e*, and in contemporary writings by for example Rebecca Solnit.

I am not sure I have a conclusion. Just that we should sometimes welcome chance and the lack of control – we do not always know what is best for us. The pandemic was by large a negative experience and it brought many negative effects on society, but perhaps some good things will come out of it? Perhaps we can be less naïve and more prepared to tackle the future.



Hiroko Tsuchimoto performing *The difference between plants and animals is not qualitative, but only quantitative* in the exhibition *A paralysis of one's inner sense of direction runs through on April 20.* Photo: Giulia Cairone

C-P: Hiroko, you recently presented a literary performance in the exhibition which circles around Abe's *Dendorocacalia*. What can you tell about it?

H.T: I somehow wanted to deliver the text of *Dendorocacalia* not only as introducing the story but also sharing the process of "translation" of the text as a "*metamorphosis*", becoming a stranger to myself. The method of performance helps to untangle the web of texts I collected and read for my research (such as texts by Emanuele Coccia, Kinji Imanishi, and Kliment Timiryazev), and to present them playfully. I hoped the performance added another layer of understanding to my drawings and video work and expanded our conversations around the subject and Abe's text. The medium of performance allows the artwork to keep changing and to remain alive, even after exporting or framing. I like the openness and fragility that I cannot control by myself.

I appreciate other artists who also employ this kind of potential in performances seriously, creating time and space to share and participate, in unexpected encounters, not as a trend or entertainment to attract visitors to art exhibitions.

C-P: Lastly, what's next for your collaboration?

M.P.Ö: We do not have a precise plan but we might try to show this exhibition in Japan. I was recently in contact with a friend there, who absolutely wanted us to come and show it! But he is not in charge of an art institution, so we might have to apply for funding and a host institution first. Speculations aside, I am sure that we will collaborate again, in various constellations (as we have done before).

I want to take this opportunity to thank Kristina and Hiroko for a wonderful collaboration, and also direct a big thank you to Ashik Zaman, and Ninna Cavallin and Arne Widman at SKF/Konstnärshuset.

A paralysis of one's inner sense of direction runs through by Kristina Bength, Malin Pettersson Öberg and Hiroko Tsuchimoto runs through May 4 at SKF/Konstnärshuset