

### **THREE MONTHS' WORK**

This was going to be my farewell to art.

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It started with Israel's attack on the Gaza Strip at Christmas in 2008. Only the very cold-hearted could remain unmoved by the images of the dead among the rubble of what had been homes, schools and shops. It became impossible to read the papers. Every day they showed how civilians' basic rights were mercilessly trampled on. It was shockingly ugly. A terrible sense of powerlessness crept in along with the awareness that I had no right to feel this pain, which strictly speaking was not mine. The pictures from the Gaza Strip had no concrete consequences for my life. It would be inappropriate to make this problem my own, yet, at the same, it was impossible to ignore the images. The only right thing to do was to act.

I received a number of requests from committed colleagues who called for a cultural boycott of Israel. We discussed it for some time. Our conversations repeatedly circled around without finding a way out. Our compassion and solidarity meant nothing. Our toolbox contained no useful devices for this situation.

Events on the Gaza Strip made clear my limitations as an artist. In principle, there was nothing wrong with making art based on the feeling I shared with so many others that Christmas. Nevertheless, in relation to how the term ART can be understood and dealt with there are insurmountable ethical problems with works of art that are based on such issues. Regardless of how good the intentions are and how real the commitment of the artist is, it becomes impossible, for example, not to aestheticize the pain of others. Works of art seem forever removed from the reality they spring from and cannot generate a reciprocal dialogue with the world outside.

My works have always been attempts to create windows onto a different, albeit as real, a world to create a sense of alternative possibilities. There is nothing wrong in doing this through pictures, but if one senses that the work of art is contained by the surface of the image, it remains "just" a picture. It does not operate in the world of the viewer and has no impact. In the intersection between the art institution, the press, the market and the public domain it is often in this way art is understood and mediated. The works of art are no longer windows onto a potential reality, but a fantasy world one does not need to take seriously. It is as if they have been subdued.

It felt utterly meaningless to hold onto the importance of artistic production in light of what else happened in the world that Christmas. I thought this was definitively the end. I was done, I needed to abandon art and enter the real world.

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For some people do act. And what they do does not mean anything more than just that, it does not refer to anything else. They are in direct contact with reality. Their actions lead to real, concrete changes. This was exactly what I missed as an artist.

The Red Cross upholds the Geneva Conventions, which all nations have signed up to. The Conventions state that there are rules even in war and that civilians have inalienable rights. The attack on the Gaza Strip was a blatant breach of the Conventions. What Israel did that Christmas WAS wrong, and could not be excused or interpreted in any other way. Regardless of historical precedents and other factors: this was in principle WRONG. The Geneva Conventions were a stable, guiding light against a murky backdrop.

So I offered the Red Cross the time I would otherwise have spent on filling this exhibition space. This autumn – for three months – I have been a full-time volunteer at the Oslo Red Cross.

The activities of the Red Cross are based on seven guiding principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality. The organisation maintains rigorous self-control to ensure that it does not lose sight of these principles. As the working days passed by, I became increasingly overwhelmed by the power inherent in this approach. These principles place the Red Cross outside other mechanism that regulate society, which can seem to reign supreme. One cannot control the Red Cross from outside, it will not allow itself to become instrumentalised. In many ways it represents what I mean by this “other world”, showing not only that it is possible, but also that it really EXISTS. It is the same world that we inhabit, just seen from a slightly different angle.

The people who work for the Red Cross persistently strive for a clear ideal. They repeatedly express it, and place it in reality as a concrete fact for all to see.

Our systems ARE NOT reality, they are merely instruments for understanding and inhabiting reality. The Red Cross is an example of how there are traces of radically different models of understanding within our system. They can be found where our system fails, in the gaps between the different concepts we operate with. The activities of the Red Cross are as real

as the attacks on the Gaza Strip. They express real aspects of humankind, and give these aspects concrete, living form in the world.

So I continued to use the time I would otherwise have spent on art production on the same thing: on the possibility of creating a slightly different world. In this case, my work was set in a worldwide system, and it was, of course, not about my free, individual expression. However, after a while it seemed less important to maintain the boundary between my artistic practice and what I was now doing. In reality, they felt the same. And if what I did for the Red Cross was part of my artistic practice, one could say, given that my colleagues had exactly the same tasks and carried them out in exactly the same way, that their endeavours could also be seen as an aesthetic gesture. Was there any real difference between my work and theirs?

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It is easy to assume that the systems, categories and concepts we are surrounded by are naturally given or absolute; that we have to accept them and adapt to the boundaries between one concept and another, one category and another. But if we rest our gaze on a face, for example, it is as if the contours gradually disintegrate. The face is still there, but more as a concentration of presence rather than something that is distinct from everything else. In the same way, I feel that, if we look closely at this room, the walls that set it apart from the outside world may lose their significance.