

Nikolay Flotskiy

# "Immigration to Nowhere"

Master's thesis in Fine Art

Supervisor: Nabil Ahmed

Co-supervisor: Alexandra Murray-Leslie

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Norwegian University of Science and Technology  
Faculty of Architecture and Design  
Trondheim Academy of Fine Art



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«But as an adult can I find the childish courage to get lost? Getting lost means finding things without any idea of what to do with what you are finding»<sup>1</sup>,  
— Clarice Lispector.

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<sup>1</sup> Lispector, C. (2012) The passion according to G.H. New Directions.

## ABSTRACT

From the earliest and lowest stages of the human development, art had not an aesthetic, but a religious significance. By endowing objects of artistic value with a special metaphysical meaning, a man of that era hoped to use them to ensure his luck in future hunting. It aimed to provide the existence of the tribe.

A centuries-old period of time has changed a person, but one of the main goals of art has remained the same. G. Hegel designates it as a «sensual representation of the Absolute»<sup>2</sup>. In his epoch «Absolute» was mostly associated with a divine manifestation, which was considered to be outside of the visible reality.

I suggest that the concept of a divine «Absolute» is gone today. A gap between technological progress and human development is becoming more obvious, thus generating uncertainty of the future and changing the aims of art. For me this gap infuses emptiness in our everyday life, causing traumatic world transformation. But what is emptiness? Does the actual meaning of it coincide with its common understanding, mostly as the state of containing nothing? And what is «everyday»? Is it only just a repetitive reality that persons can observe in front of them?

Notions of «emptiness» and «everyday» are foundational for my work, as through relation between them I determine the status of today's world. By usage of cinematic techniques along with fine art methods I am exploring the mentioned concepts, aiming not only to rethink them but also to set a new path in shaping art goals in the XXI century.

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<sup>2</sup> Bryant, WM. M. (2021) Hegel on Romantic art. The journal of Speculative Philosophy.

## 1. CURRENT WORLD SITUATION: EMPTINESS

In what proportion does art relate to life? This question filled my mind, while I was editing a documentary film «Aether» ([click to watch](#); password: aether2023) within the 1st year of study at KiT. The title lifted up naturally as film uncovers the lives which were lived in Panov Arkhangelsk Regional Youth Theatre and opens the history of this unique place. The notion of «Aether» refers to the upper atmosphere, a material element of the cosmos and stands for the theatre founders as a desire to rise above the material world and to build a space where everything is art and life is a miracle. Aristotle, who was Plato's student, considered aether to be the fifth element after earth, water, air and fire. For me art is bigger than life in a way that it absorbs and converts life in objects or «art actions». So I used small quantity of archive footages in film to show from what substance theatre was created. The screen ratio is 2:1 and it is the answer for the question posed.



However current social situation demonstrates that life isn't a miracle. On the one side, our world faces a technological progress, but on the other it confronts a number of widespread problems and dilemmas, such as wars and revolutions, hunger, climate change, poverty, child abuse, gender discrimination and the outcomes of a not-ending Covid-19 disease. The degree of uncertainty in all spheres of life has increased, as a right to physical and mental health as a fundamental human right has come under threat.

A desire to live peacefully and without a fear of survival pushes millions of people to immigrate. Some flee their homelands because of violence or political issues, pursuing security conditions. Better socioeconomic opportunities and living standards are the reasons for others.

Education, welfare and healthcare, religious concerns, family reunion, career enhancement may be also considered as immigration causes.

A person leaving his/her country arrives «empty-handed» to a new country of residence and has to start from the very beginning: learn the language, understand culture and traditions, build up social networks, get the education, get employed to be economically independent, find housing to feel safe and secure, get integrated into the society. I assume that immigration process is one of the solid factors that transforms a persons identity greatly. And the problem of identity is one of the most complex and multifaceted in modern science. Awareness of people experiencing changes of identity in the result of immigration contributes to a deeper understanding of human development in social and cultural contexts.

Reflecting about the personality of a person, its nature and features, scientists and artists have always been occupied by thoughts about the category of identity. The connection of this category with the individual's awareness of the continuity of his own personality was emphasized by philosophers as early as the 16th-17th centuries. In the 19th century, W. James interpreted identity as «one of the personal foundations that ensure the integrity of the «I», understanding one's boundaries and place in the world»<sup>3</sup>. In the 60-70-ies of the 20th century in philosophy and psychology, the theoretical and empirical development of the problem of identity became more active. The common terms «self-consciousness», «I-concept» began to be gradually replaced by the term «identity».

The formation of identity is directly related to the fact that the subject begins to realize the time of his existence. The ability to build perspectives of one's life, to perceive the boundaries of time, to understand historical time, social time is an extremely important component of a person's psychological health. In the process of becoming a personality, an individual must acquire the ability not only to be aware of time, but also to regulate it. It is not enough to perceive social norms for existence in the world, it is important to perceive the standards of the time. However, what are these time standards today? Where are we all going? What are the social fundamentals and moral landmarks? Trying to answer these questions myself, I feel that the world in 2022-2023 shows us that it needs to be renewed urgently. For me time is diffused today, as people all across the world face unresolved problems of the past, thus stopping the future to come.

This process is quite special nowadays, as the time appears to be in a different form. It seems like we look into the past, like the *Angelus Novus*, painted by Paul Klee. Great number of socio-economic and world moral problems unsolved in history arises today, thus blocking the future to come. The progressive development of technologies with a combination of constant advertising of «perfectness» or «immortality» by social media create a huge gap between harsh reality in which we actually live in and a fictional virtual life. I suppose this gap generates a feeling of emptiness, leading to depressions and psychophysical disorders. But what actually emptiness is?

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<sup>3</sup> James, W. (1991) The principles of psychology

It is a question that has been always boiling inside of me since I remember myself. More or less conscious attempt to analyze the topic of emptiness was made through writing about transcendental style within cinema in my graduation paper from Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (VGIK). From that time I understood emptiness as something that exists behind the reality. If we imagine that the material world around us is only a visible part of a hidden whole, then according to Paul Schrader the purpose of a transcendental film is to reveal this whole. Paul Schrader designates the reality hidden behind the visible as an unattainable divine Absolute that cannot be expressed through words and images. However, by analyzing films by Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson and Carl Dreyer, he says that «there is a cinematic strategy consisting of three successive stages «the everyday», «disparity», «stasis» that could make the audience feel the transcendent element»<sup>4</sup>.

Transcendental style, described by Paul Schrader became the ground for me as a director to create my first short narrative films during 2018 - 2020: «TEOREMA» ([click to watch](#)) and «VOW» ([click to watch](#)). Main characters in these films are put into collision with their inner void and by solving the issue open a new path for themselves. Thus I wanted viewers to experience at least a tiny shift in their souls. After some years I felt necessity to rethink this cinematic method by starting new art practices. I entered Fine Art Academy in Trondheim and moved to Norway. Relocation to a new country makes me experience being in liminal space, as a connection with my usual life is partly broken and I have to look in front where nothing is clear. Identity is definitely changing as I have to adapt to a new space and find my place here. This feeling affects me significantly even after almost two years and gives a fresh breath in developing the theme of emptiness.

## **2. PROCESS: FROM SCREEN PRINTING THROUGH WATER COLORS TO PHOTOGRAPHY AND BACK TO FILM**

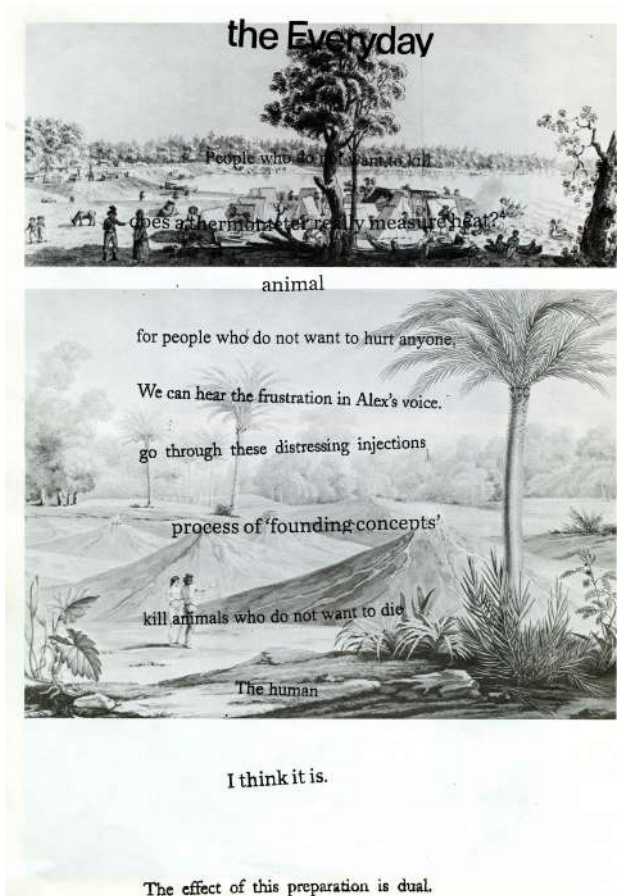
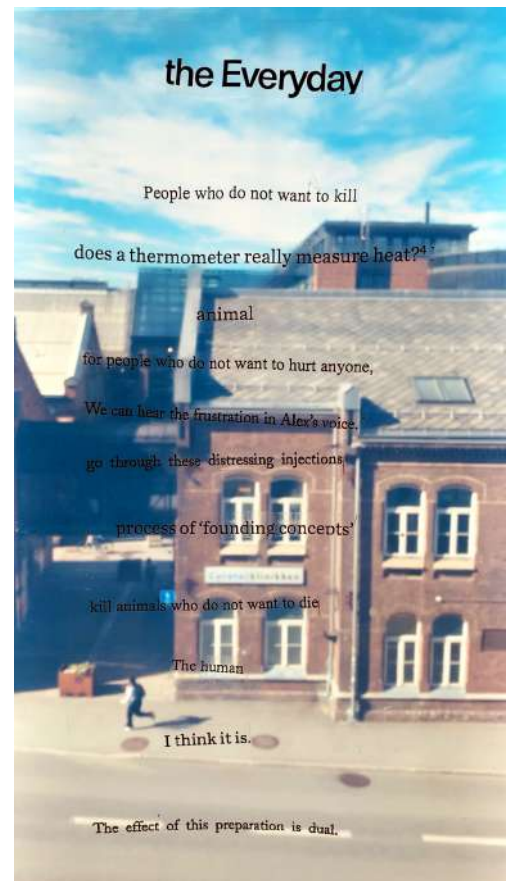
Keeping in mind my previous experience and the topic that interests me I have decided to look at it from the other side not only in a theoretical way but also practical. Thus having a theory of transcendental cinema technique as a ground I've moved opposite way towards a concept of everyday being. The first new practice that I've discovered at KiT is a cut up method of writing. I haven't tried such writing before and got extremely interested by it. Reading about the method I discovered such artist as Brion Gysin, whom I haven't known before. Being inspired by his works, I created a poem:

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<sup>4</sup> Schrader P. (1972) *Transcendental Style In Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. A da capo paperback. University of California Press.

## «The Everyday»

People who do not want to kill  
Does a thermometer really measure heat?  
Animal  
For people who do not want to hurt anyone  
We can hear the frustration in Alex's voice  
Go through these distressing injections  
Process of 'founding concepts'  
Kill animals who do not want to die  
The human  
I think it is  
The effect of this preparation is dual.



Next step with the poem was done during the screen printing workshop. While I was making a stencil for the print, I decided to attach a transparent with the poem on a window and shoot a short video. By doing this intuitive action I came up for the better appliance of the poem. I realized how much the meaning of words could be changed depending on the background. An unknown man which is running along the street becomes a character who captures in himself the exact moment of time. What if change the background?, - that was the 1st question which appeared in my head. Trying to analyze what kind of picture can it be I decided to make it opposite the video, which was shooted in present time - September 2022. I've found an illustration with an ancient scenery and printed the poem on top of it. The meaning of the picture and the poem are changing and they bring together a different message.



During the course «Key Concepts of Art Theory» we read different outstanding and overwhelming texts by such authors as Walter Benjamin and Antonio Negri. Especially I was impressed by the text «To be in a time of War»<sup>5</sup>, written by Lebanese-American poet and artist Etel Adnan. While reading the first time, the text seems to be simple, but if you dive into it, you see that there is no bottom in it, as each sentence includes so much life in it. I was thinking about the text for a long stretch of time in a way how it is possible to convert into a picture. Eventually I came up with the idea, that collage method will be the most appropriate for this text.



The white pieces are like icebergs, which wake you up from the «viridian dream». I printed and glued (in the right corner) two phrases from the Etel's text: «To say nothing», «To wake up» and the whole piece is about getting rid of the everyday routine, which feels like a continuous dream sometimes.

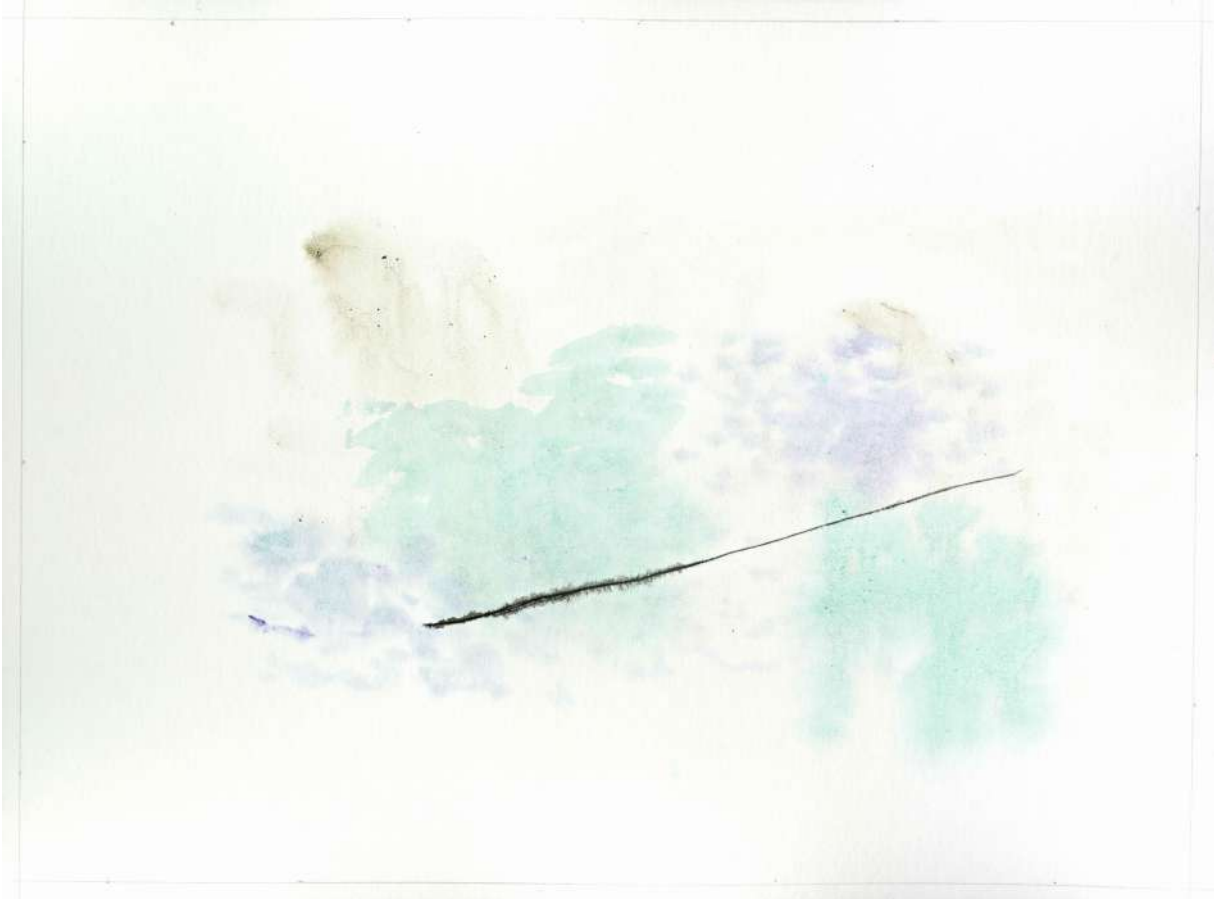
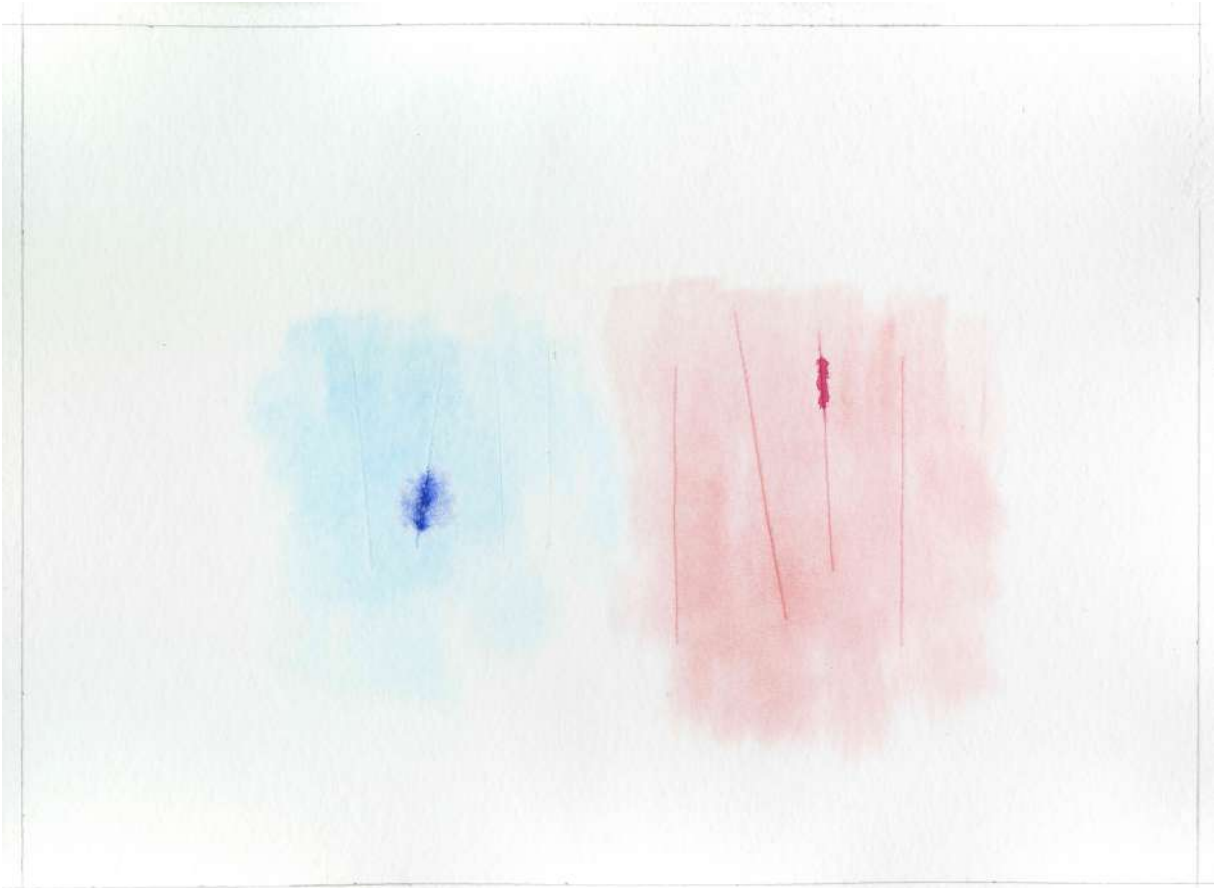
Discussions about various approaches of understanding what is time, duration and continuity pushed me to start experiments with watercolors. Time can be considered also as a part of everyday life and definitely water too, as a lot of our trivial actions are connected with water. In that point I feel that it is also a path for me in my research of «beyond». I've chosen watercolors as technique as water gives me a sense of uncontrollability. Being film director you are supposed to be well organized and structured. In this particular case ambiguity becomes a state which you wish to be in for the purpose of saving yourself. Working with water calms me down and brings fresh ideas.

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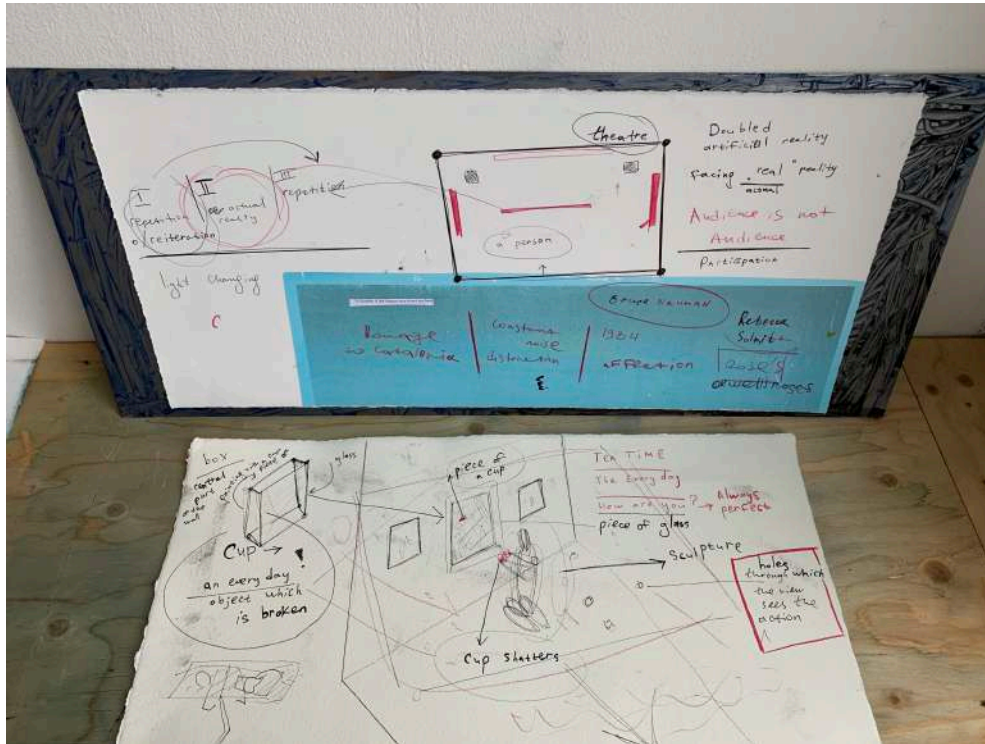
<sup>5</sup> Adnan, E. (2019) Time. Translated by Riggs S. Nightboat Books.



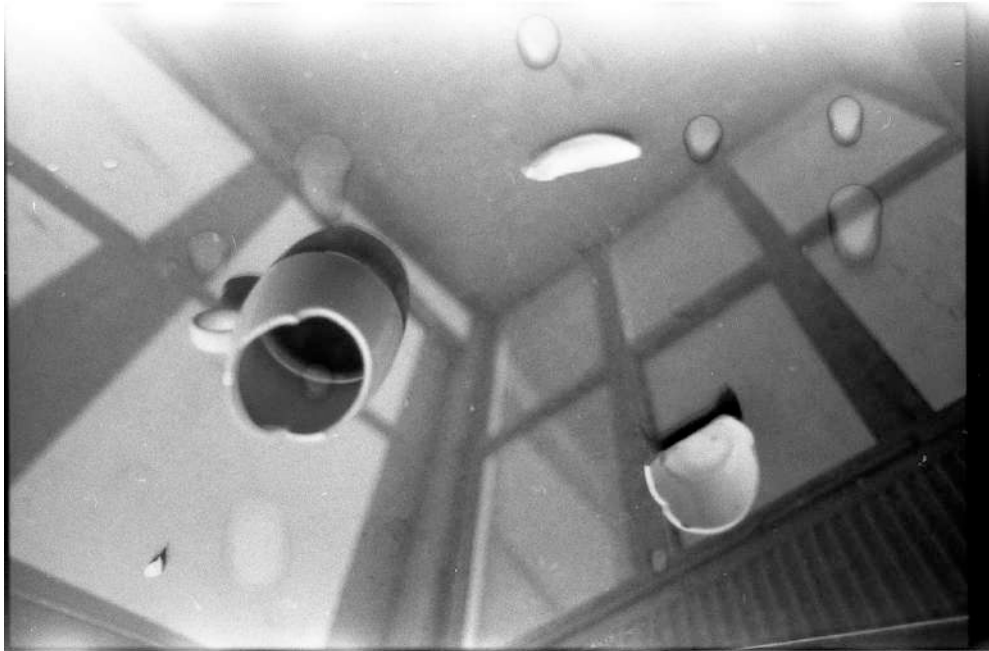
Furthermore, I believe water to be a conductor to another dimension. If you think in a such way you can feel irreality in your every day, as water always goes along with our routine actions.



I have been thinking about the concept of «everyday» through a sculpting practice too. I planned to make a figure, sitting in front of the painting and holding shatters of a cup. An ordinary cup is a daily object, and being broken means that everyday reality is broken too. At painting you can also see a piece of cup. The painting and figure connected to each other in that way. These two objects I would love to combine with a performer, suggesting tea to viewers.



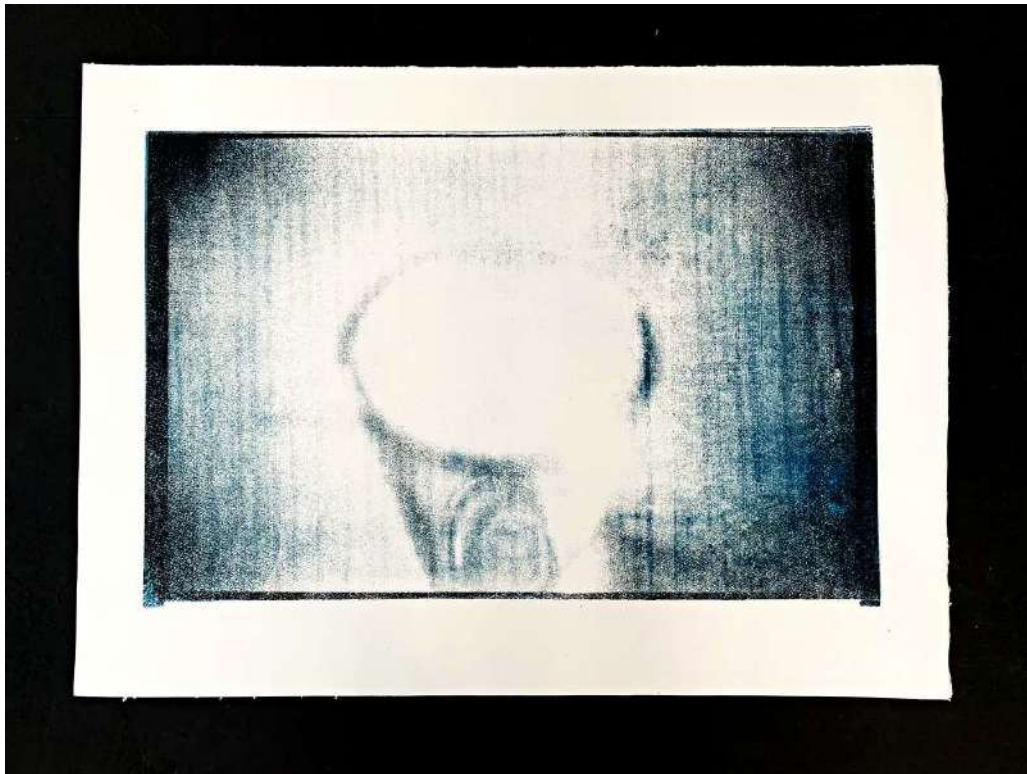
Idea is still in progress. However it gave me an impulse to bring it into another medium. I've started doing analog black and white photography. I came into doing it very intuitively. The first reason was to capture the broken cup in the studio, while I was in fresh thoughts of creating a sculpture. Then I started to explore the whole process of creation: from choosing camera lenses and types of films to developing and analog printing.



Being in the process of photographing everyday objects, nature, people, light reflections, liminal spaces and at the same time continuing with watercolors I decided to combine both artistic methods in screen printing. This art technique includes many steps: creating a transparent, preparing a screen, exposing and washing off the emulsion, pressing the ink through the screen. Between these steps you have to wait. The photo that was chosen for being transferred into a screen print depicted an empty glass and it returned me back into thinking what emptiness is.







The turning point in the ancient understanding of emptiness was the formulation of an atomistic philosophical position (its founder was Leucippus, and its most important follower was Democritus), where emptiness is considered and comprehended in the same way as atoms – as an equivalent fundamental principle. Emptiness is the key to the necessary movement of atoms. Emptiness and atoms are two important parts of a tandem, like zero and one. Atomists have formed the ground for further understanding of space, however, emphasising the separation value and allowing for the possibility of interpreting «emptiness» as another ingredient in a mixture with atoms, rather than a container for placing them.

Later Lucretius proposed an idea of clinamen, which explains the origin of the universe. Atoms have weight, which provoke their motion. Thus, taking into account main properties of atoms, their movement can only be parallel. However, in this case, nothing will ever arise and nature could never have generated anything. Lucretius assumed that there must be a deviation during the movement, causing subsequent meetings and collisions of atoms, leading to the emergence of new life forms.

Within the framework of my project the theory of clinamen correlates to an idea of immigration, as it can be interpreted as a deviation from a persons individual life path. And through this deviation an identity changes too, thus making a person finding oneself in a new place with a new «I».

## IMMIGRATION TO NOWHERE

My exploration of new art methods and techniques is going along with acquainted film practice. Every time I am working with film I feel it to be completely different from still images as the final product shows changes in time. Rudolf Arnheim said: «The motion picture in itself is an event, it looks different every moment, whereas there is no such temporal progress in painting or sculpture»<sup>6</sup>. By practicing drawing or printing for more than one year I affirmed myself consciously that essence of Arnheim's statement is the main reason why I prefer working with cinema. That is why I decided to continue with this media for my final project. Through rethinking it by means of photography I explore the topics of «emptiness» and «everyday».

In the process of analog printing from negatives, it is essential to keep the finished photos in water for a certain period to cleanse them from residual chemicals. It was during this process that I noticed that still pictures seemed to be in motion due to the running water. This observation sparked an idea, which is elaborated: to create a film using still photographs, replacing each other, driven by the force of flowing water, thereby constructing a narrative. A sink with flowing water represents a concept of «emptiness» in which our collective memories (photos = atoms) are mixed with individual ones. And cinema as the medium which can be described as «sculpting in time»<sup>7</sup>, as Andrey Tarkovsky said, seems to be the best tool for expressing it. For me the movement of photos in water opens a new reality behind events captured in pictures. Reality loses its fixedness and becomes fluid. You literally see pictures from different perspective and it opens new paths for interpretation. This process reminds me of immigration, when a person's settled life becomes to transform.



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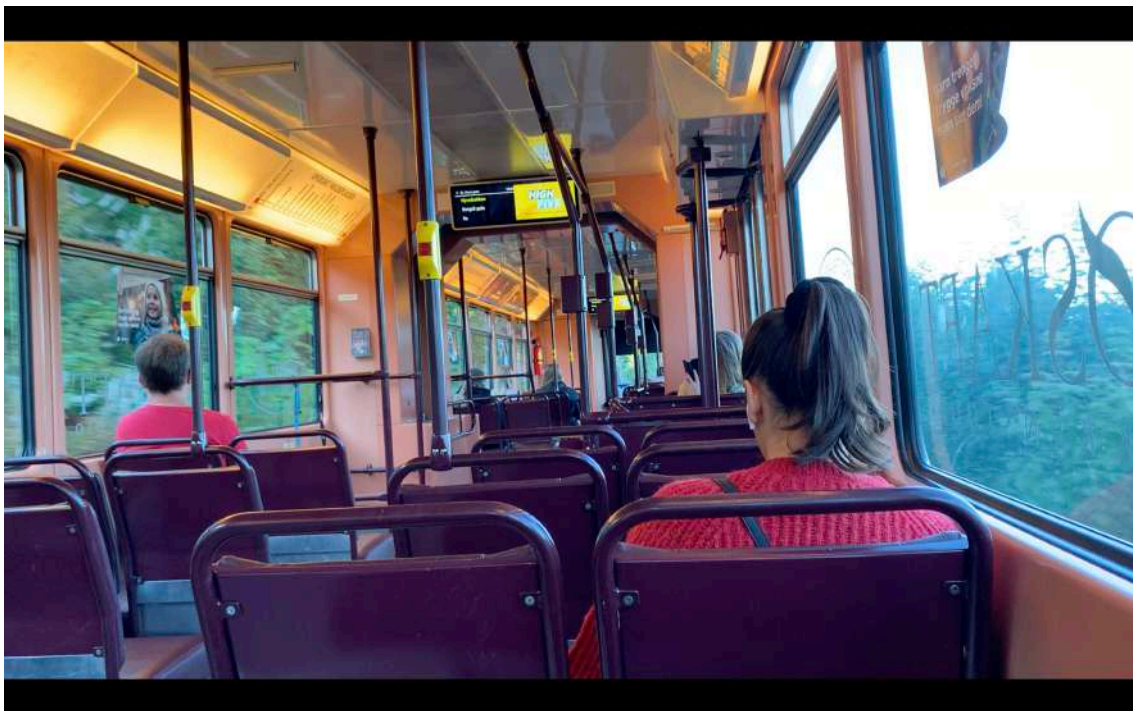
<sup>6</sup> Arnheim, R. (1957). *Film as art*. University of California press.

<sup>7</sup> Tarkovsky, A. (1989) *Sculpting in time*. University of Texas Press

Ariella Azoulay says that «One needs to stop looking at the photograph and instead start watching it»<sup>8</sup>. The verb «to watch» she interprets regarding moving images and suggests to use it for photographic ones. Thus, by putting the taken photos in the media of film I don't only change the way of showing them, but also the way of perception. I let viewers to be tete-a-tete with images, however helping not to be lost in thoughts, by replacing photos within the film time.

The film's title is: «Immigration to nowhere». It is a narrative film, uncovering a story of an immigrant who is reconstructing his persona in a new country. I am using as a tool not only cinema language, but also photographic one to experiment on collision of chosen techniques in one work. John Berger said «Photographs are retrospective and are received as such: films are anticipatory. Before a photograph you search for what was there. In a cinema you wait for what is to come next»<sup>9</sup>. For me bringing both medias together echos the collision of «emptiness» and «everyday» in a way that they could substitute each other. Purpose of this engagement is to look at «everyday» through «emptiness» or vice versa.

Photos which are presented in the film are taken in Norway and Russia, which is the motherland of the hero. However, the video track is accompanied by a Norwegian voice over, thus binding the happening to a particular territory. The text which is pronounced by a non native speaker opens a story of a person facing the feeling of emptiness, while going through immigration adaptation. It is inspired by such novels as «The malady of death» (Marguerite Duras) and «The passion according to G.H.» (Clarice Lispector). Apart from photos the film consists of video recordings, made in several places of Trondheim: a tram, the main square, a hero's house and a photo laboratory.



<sup>8</sup> Azoulay, A. (2008) The civil contract of photography. Zone books, New York.

<sup>9</sup> Berger, J. (2013) Understanding a Photograph. Edited and introduced by Geoff Dyer.

The second part of the project is the film which mostly deals with «everyday». It is called «Archimedes» ([click to watch](#); password: cart\_ball). XXI century. A 64-year-old Alexey Novikov, creates trick mirrors while living in a modest workshop, behind which a view of the endless Russian field opens up.



The owner of an astonishing life filled with ups and downs, a pioneer and artist by nature, Alexey Novikov makes trick mirrors very rarely. It's not as popular now as it used to be in the 90s. Building and repairing stoves is a solution for Alexey to keep body and soul together. Despite the living conditions, Alexey is filled with bright endless light and care. Concerned about what is happening around and wishing to contribute to the future, Alexey came up with a game - «Kartball». It is a sports discipline that blurs the boundaries between athletics and par-athletics. Wanting to prevent the growing number of disabled people around the world and to improve the situation of this population group, Alexey Novikov has invented a wheelchair that allows not only people with disabilities to move around the city environment safely, but also to play football. Like a samurai, he lives his life steadily, looking proudly in the face of all adversities. Thus the character of Alexey determined the Japanese motive of the musical accompaniment of the film.

However, it seems that Alexey will never manage to implement his invention in life, because of many socioeconomic factors. But the crucial reason is miscommunication between him and society, especially with those persons who are in power. His idea finally becomes a tool for him to deal with a feeling of emptiness through everyday life. And this is the cause for me to create the film. It is worth mentioning Sartre's approach to emptiness, as for Sartre it «doesn't follow after being, as it does for Hegel, nor is it beyond the world, as it is for Heidegger»<sup>10</sup>. Sartre puts

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<sup>10</sup> Kovacs, A. B. (2006) Sartre, the philosophy of nothingness and the modern melodrama. The journal of Aesthetics and art criticism.



emptiness right into the world, «into the heart of being»<sup>11</sup>. Emptiness or nothingness, as he calls it, exists within being, together with it and at the same time. Many examples of contemporary cinema prove the interrelation between foregoing concepts. For example «Perfect Days» (2023) by Wim Wenders or «Poor Things» (2023) by Yorgos Lanthimos.

## CONCLUSION

Being in photography process for a while I discovered the main reason which forces me to continue: it helps to overcome the feeling of death - the main feeling that is cultivated by news today. And while overcoming this personal experience, I assume photography to be the most appropriate method of expression today as it deals with a concept of death through its nature. According to Susan Sontag all photographs are memento mori. «To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt»<sup>12</sup>. Desire to stop moments of life emanates from my will to stop the chaos, going on in the world. While creating films before starting photography practice I experienced that the flow of images replacing each other 24 times per second gave the audience energy to merge with real world tighter. Through watching a film piece a person is immersed into a fictional world no matter if it is a feature or documentary and thus gaining a deeper understanding of reality around. However due to the social processes occurring today, I assume that viewers need a distance from daily events to have the capacity to analyse and accept them without hurting. And photography gives this distance. It doesn't push you to be in a flow of artificial emotions and allows you to step back, providing with more intimate and gentle connection with reality.

«But as an adult can I find the childish courage to get lost?»<sup>13</sup> - the epigraph from which the thesis starts. For me, being in art means having courage to get lost. The same as being an immigrant. As one doesn't know the final destination and constantly should be adapted to changes. Relation of «emptiness» and «everyday», through which an artist, an immigrant and every human goes through, shapes such fundamental goal of art as revealing what is behind the visible reality. And I believe that there is something.

«Archimedes» and «Immigration to nowhere» will be screened in gallery KiT and at Trondheim Cinemateket within the graduation exhibition. For gallery KiT both films will be shown with the usage of projectors. Photos used in «Immigration to nowhere» might also be presented as a side work, but the decision to show them or not will be made later, as it is dependent on shared exhibition space.

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<sup>11</sup> Sartre, J.-P. (1957) *L'être et le néant*. Gallimard.

<sup>12</sup> Sontag, S. (2001) *On Photography*. Picador.

<sup>13</sup> Lispector, C. (2012) *The passion according to G.H.* New Directions.



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