

EN Stéphanie Saadé
The Leaf Once Pilgrim

curated by Chiara Ianeselli

25 November, 2016—21 January, 2017

“In entomological literature, which soon began to fill the house on the island, he quotes a Finnish scholar, Olavi Sotavalta, whose only interest was to calculate the frequency of the wing beats of insects. In particular, he studied midges, a kind of stinging gnats that, as it turned out, reach the astounding rate of 1046 beats per second.”

Fredrik Sjöberg, *L'arte di collezionare mosche*,
 Milano, Ierpborea, 2015, pp. 18-19
 translated by Chiara Ianeselli



The Sky is a Village, 2016, printed photographs left outside,
 115 x 78 cm and 115 x 95 cm (detail)

How many times do you blink in a year's time?

Welcome to *The Leaf Once Pilgrim*, Stéphanie Saadé's first solo show in the Netherlands. What we experience in the gallery is the artist's path of pilgrimage through growth; accompanied, from time to time, by a leaf: the years at school, her travel diaries, a map still being drawn, skies not yet fully explored, departure and arrival schedules on uncommon transportation systems... Though very personal, the exhibition includes and absorbs the spectator, whatever provenance and millennium he/she is from.

The frequencies Saadé transmits are definitely uncommon and they can be heard if only we walk on the same traces left by the ballerina that was the first visitor of the show, and is, after that, always on her toes.

Wall Piece sets a shift in perception, indicating what happened when the ballerina came: a wall moved to the floor, from vertical to horizontal, willing to support her delicacy and kindness, maladjusted to just be watching, standing. It could not prevent itself from making that extreme gesture. A wall that might remain untouched for the time *The Leaf Once Pilgrim* is given: only the ballet slippers can float on its side, never actually touching it. The smooth surface allows a subtle investigation to take place in the gallery entrance: why isn't the wall reported missing? Two works nearby remain suspiciously silent, mirroring each other in a guilty way. *Golden Memories*, a photograph from the artist's childhood covered with gold leaf, addresses *Identity in Change*, a recent passport photograph of the artist covered with silver leaf, and vice versa. They stare at each other, while time continues to interrogate them about what they have circumspectly witnessed, oxidising the surface of one of the two, to better read the hidden expression underneath.

Perhaps a clue for this mystery, of the provenance of *Wall Piece*, can be found in *N-S-E-O*, clearly indicating where everything once originated. It shows four cardinal points in four chained, linked pearls, that leave no space for doubt. Another trace of where *Wall Piece* might come from is tangible in *The Four Corners of the World*. Wooden beams coming from four locations in the world enclose a map, visible to some, invisible to most, clearly reporting the pilgrimage of the artworks, how they were carried on the Amsterdam water canals and then finally hidden in AKINCI. The four different forests definitely have met once in the past, while playing cards, but with leaves.

Some more circumstantial evidence regarding a possible location from where *Wall Piece* came from can be found in Saadé's *The Sky is a Village* and *Portrait of a River*: works that directly address our perception of natural phenomena; shifts, moves, twists, somersaults, and pirouettes.

In *The Sky is a Village*, tiny pieces of sky taken from childhood photographs are scanned and enlarged to the size of the artist's studio's windows. The marks left by the rain, wind, and air reactivate them today. In *Portrait of a River*, a map of a part of Lebanon is rendered waterproof, except for the river showing on it. The work is hanging from the gallery's ceiling. Water is poured on the top of the map and drips through the Lebanese river onto the floor. These works relate to each other not only in the weight given to their materiality, but also for their particularly tactile dimension. Indeed, they all have been through a process of transubstantiation, the change of one substance into another: fragments of the sky become the sky itself, while a blue line on a map becomes a flooding river.

Similar conditions occur in *Portrait of a River*, when evaporation of the water on the gallery floor feeds the humidity of the air. Again, another shift in perception takes place at the moment in which the map, which represents the ground, is above us, upside down, and the river, upside down, starts to rain.

Another question arises: how can the sky be captured or depicted? Saadé, regarding to that, notes:

The sky is, in general, a very abstract, hard to grasp, to define and to delimit, notion or construction, and here it has been untouched, unaffected by the political events happening underneath it at the same time. As in *Golden Memories* and *Identity in Change*, the actual image disappears. In *Golden Memories*, the image becomes a background, the one of icons, an abstract surface, on which new images start to appear, while in *The Sky is a Village*, the background also comes forward to become the subject itself: an abstract background which is a village, a village to be inhabited.

These maps bring the spectator to the most encrypted work of the exhibition: *Travel Diaries*. This series of works presents travel related documents printed and used by the artist to leave and return home where gold leaf has been applied on the plights formed with time. This technique allows unexpected codes to emerge. Paper transforms into a landscape where Saadé deeply studies the topographic relief of yet unnamed mountains. Deleuze suggests that "a 'cryptographer' is needed, someone who can at once account for nature and decipher the soul, who can peer into the crannies of the matter and read into the folds of the soul." (Deleuze, *The Fold. Leibniz and the Baroque*, The University of Warwick Library, 1995, p. 3.)

Later, he specifies that he considers cryptography an art for inventing the key to an enveloped thing; exactly what we witness in *Travel Diaries*. The key is metal as in the case of *Home Key* – the key of the home of the artist in Beirut, plated with gold.

The occurrence of leaving and returning home are registered in the material of the key as the gold slowly wears off. A similar condition of ephemerality becomes more tangible in *The Shape of Dis-*

tance: do all materials grow? How can a pupil chair and table cope with the growth of the child? How do they relate to the natural, perhaps, magical phenomenon of a child's expanding antennas? How is growth measured?

Saadé responds to these questions by clearly sharing with us two little lines, corresponding to the size of the artist, and her size when she is standing on the tip of her toes, presented side by side in a frame. The title? *Double Altitude*.

As we can see in *The Leaf Once Pilgrim*, a new language is set; made by signs, a ballerina's toes, hidden, unnamed mountains, giants drops forming rivers, and subtle particles of sky. There is no space for sophistication, rather a full immersion in nature and its fortunate codes.

Saadé shares an anecdote that introduces an essential work in the show; *The Rose is Without Why*: "Biology class back at school... The topic was cockroaches. A question was asked, whether we were to measure them with their antennas or without? The teacher answered with another question: do you measure yourself with arms up?"

The idea of being composed by different entities, shapes, elements, becomes indeed tangible in *The Rose is Without Why*: a rose is dismantled into its main parts to understand the logic and the musical chords it was composed on. What is released in the dissection of the rose? Where does its exploration begin and end? How can roots be equally celebrated? This region of investigation is also at the centre of the performative work *Sub Rosa* by Estelle Delesalle.

The search for the essence can be visible in the piece *Oud*: the string of an Oud is smeared with Oud oil. Perhaps we can still listen to the musical chord, while we accidentally step on *Thin Ice*: a diamond that has been hidden for millions of years, while we were looking at the sky, which, by the way, is a village.

Chiara Ianeselli, 2016

Stéphanie Saadé graduated in Fine Arts from the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris. She attended a post-graduate program at the China Academy of Arts, Hangzhou, was an artist in residence at the Jan van Eyck Academy, Maastricht, and the Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris. Her work has been exhibited across the world, including MuHKA, Antwerp (BE); Marres, Maastricht (NL); Mosaic Rooms, London (UK); La Conserva, Centro de Arte Contemporáneo, Murcia (ES); Beirut Art Center (LB); Grey Noise, Dubai (UAE); and recently in Castle Oud-Rekem (NL). Stéphanie Saadé lives and works in Beirut and Paris.

Chiara Ianeselli is an independent curator based in Italy. Graduated in Cultural Heritage at the University of Trento, she has been involved in the organization and coordination of exhibitions and events in various galleries, institutions, associations and platforms, working within various disciplines. She was an assistant in the curatorial department of dOCUMENTA (13) and the 2012 edition of Artissima in Turin (IT). For both the 55th Venice Biennale and the 14th Istanbul Biennial she worked as a production assistant. Chiara Ianeselli recently concluded De Appel Curatorial Programme, Amsterdam (NL).

Estelle Delesalle lives and works in Paris and Avignon. She studied History of Art and Fine Arts at the Université de Nantes and the École Supérieure d'Art d'Avignon (FR), and was an artist in residence at the Cité des Arts in Paris. Her most recent project, DE AMORE-1 La fabrique des cœurs brisés and DE AMORE-2 L'Hermitage des Consolations, in collaboration with Jean-Marc Ferrari, was performed at Nuit Blanche 2016, Paris. Other projects and collaborations include La danse perdue at Palais de Tokyo, Paris (FR); L'heure Bleue, an early-morning cyclic exhibition in the garden of Cité des Arts, Paris (FR); Labyrinth*en-Valise at Centre Pompidou Metz (FR); H at École des Beaux-Arts, Nantes (FR); and De L'Ombre des Idées in the Bibliothèque Universitaire, Avignon (FR).