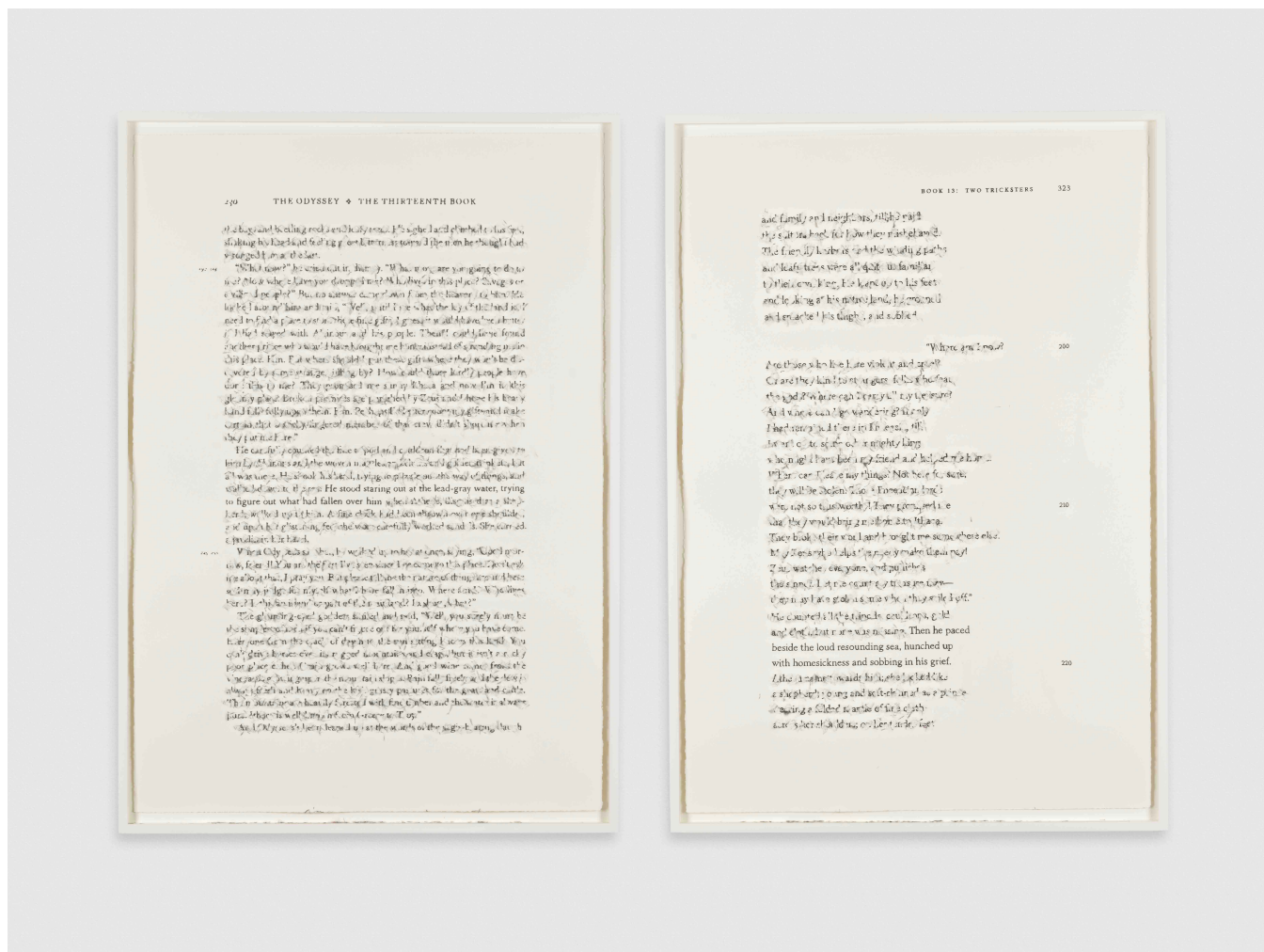


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***Nine Lives*: artist reflections**

While organizing *Nine Lives*, a set of open-ended questions emerged, circling around considerations like storytelling, translation, rewriting history, and the personal, social, and political dimensions of narrative in our lives. A number of the artists—or their collaborators—have chosen one or two of these questions that call out to them. Responding in their own ways, they have recorded brief audio clips, which also offer additional insights about their works.

This document contains transcriptions of the audio responses currently available on the Renaissance Society website. It will be updated as additional replies from the artists are posted throughout the duration of the exhibition.



Bethany Collins, *The Odyssey: 2001 / 2017, 2020*. Courtesy of the artist and PATRON, Chicago.

Bethany Collins on reshaping a story...

I came to *The Odyssey* specifically for Book Thirteen, where after ten years at war, and ten years weeping on every wrong shoreline he lands upon, Odysseus finally reaches his homeland. He stands on the shoreline of his own country and does not recognize the place. Which felt like an apt description of that post 2016 election moment for me, when a place, particularly your own homeland, can feel simultaneously familiar and estranging.

What's also interesting about this ancient text of exile, and homecoming, and strangeness among intimates is that there is no

agreement even among this ancient text. In fact, the first line of *The Odyssey* has been translated at least thirty-six distinct ways. And this is the line where we find out who is this man? Before we follow you on this epic journey home, who is Odysseus? Translations have run the gamut from positive to negative. He is crafty, or cunning, mischievous, adventurous, tossed to and fro by fate; or he's a hero. Emily Wilson, the first woman to translate *The Odyssey* into English, in 2017, writes or translates, no, "he was a complicated man."

Translations are a myriad of choices by, if not subjective, then flawed hands. They will never be the original. And so it matters who translates our stories, because they craft the world. It matters so much that in 1852, a translator of *The Odyssey* translates Odysseus first questions to Athena upon arriving to his own homeland to be: "What men are born here?" But in 1980, another translator writes: "Who are the people who dwell in it?" They are not the same question, but they come from the same origin text.



Hương Ngô, *It was her handwriting that ultimately gave her away* (detail), 2020. Photo: Useful Art Services.

Hương Ngô on translation...

My name is Hương Ngô, and my installation is entitled *It was her handwriting that ultimately gave her away*. Translation is an embodying and a re-performing of the original writer. For me, it's often as much a technical act as it is an exercise in empathy. So when I'm translating documents like the ones in the vitrine [in *Nine Lives*], many of which are coming from the colonial civil police (or the Sûreté), and those letters that they intercepted, I'm embodying their voices, their motivations and their perspectives.

In the translation of the intersectional Marxist historical analysis of women's struggles in Vietnam, *Vấn-đề phụ-nữ*, which is the document that's relief printed and framed, I'm negotiating the same ideologies and theories that are affecting the original author. In those

surrounding letters, the ones that have been written in invisible ink and loosely pinned to the walls, the text of which you can hardly see, I'm tracing the handwriting—the movement, performance, and mark-making of the original writer. So each time I trace the same word or letter, I become more and more familiar with the writer's handwriting, as you become familiar with a word in another language.

Though the meaning is invisible in those letters, they carry for me the most urgency. In this case, those letters were handwritten by the anticolonial revolutionary Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai, to and from fellow women in the resistance. They were speaking to each other of their lived realities of sex, pregnancy, and generally of being a woman within a male dominated revolution, within a larger patriarchy. And it's her handwriting which eventually incriminated Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai. So to embody that handwriting, it's to be so intimately connected with her, our protagonist, as well as to those colonial authorities who eventually executed her.



Aliza Nisenbaum, *Kayhan Reading the New York Times (Resistance Begins at Home)*, 2017. Courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York.

Aliza Nisenbaum on the ties between public and private experience...

In 2015, I was part of a fellowship for immigrant women leaders sponsored by the New York City Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs. Kayhan Irani, depicted in my painting in the Renaissance Society's exhibition *Nine Lives*, was the group organizer for that fellowship. After that residency, I decided to paint the fifteen women who participated in that group as a way of reflecting on how each of them goes out into social life with the various NGOs and grassroots organizations they worked in. Subsequently, Kayhan and I stayed in touch and became friends.

I was curious about the relationship between the activist work each of the women do, and to think about that in relation to their private sphere as well. So I reached out and painted many of them in their homes. I've painted Kayhan three times now. Once as part of this larger group. Then, I went to her home and painted her reading, surrounded by the art found in her home. Kayhan is a writer and a Theatre of the Oppressed trainer. She has a book out that is very relevant to this exhibition: it's titled *Telling Stories to Change the World: Global Voices on the Power of Narrative to Build Community and Make Social Justice Claims*. In this book, storytelling is used as a strategy for speaking out for justice.

The third time I painted Kayhan is the portrait in this exhibition, which is titled *Resistance Begins at Home*. I took the title from a New York Times article about community activism that begins with traditions found in the home. The private sphere can be thought of as a place of absolute freedom, but it is also linked in many ways to notions of autonomy, activity that is separate from the state—that is, family or friends, or even work that revolves around individuals and not institutions—though the state may try to intrude into them as well. I wonder how the private can at times mimic larger power structures, or alternatively, be the seed for our feelings of empowerment and agency, particularly as women, where decisions made in private are oftentimes politicized.

Kayhan Irani on the center and margins of narratives...

The question is: what happens when we are marginalized? From our own story and our own lives. The work that I'm exploring right now seeks to understand how those traumas that we endure, how those hurtful experiences that we endure, cause small breaks in our understanding of where we belong, who we belong to, or even our sense of belonging in the world.

Every human being is at the center of their own narrative. And it's not a selfish thing. It's actually an experiential and bodily thing. The tingle, the aches, the sweats, and the breath that I experience color and shape the way I see my day. The point of systematic racism or systematic oppression is to convince us that who we are, all our potential, all the possibility that we have tied up in ourselves, the experience that we've lived, and the things that we've seen, are not valid, or are ranked in terms of validity according to our skin color, our gender expression, our class background. And so the work that I'm exploring right now asks us to use storytelling as a way to uncover those memories of hurt, uncover those memories of when we were cast out of our own lives, when we were cast out of the universe that we thought we belonged to. And made a decision then to stay outside of that universe, we made the decision to limit our power, to obscure it or bury it in some way.

In uncovering and unveiling what has been obscured, we can actually reclaim and connect to who we truly are, our soul's purpose, but also all the potential that the future holds for us. We don't have to live according to those past decisions, we don't have to live according to the ways in which we might have previously shaped our narrative. There's a line in the piece that says: "Every retelling gives me new vision. Each memory is a chance to start again." And so what might that mean, if we started again from our memories?

Kayhan Irani is an award-winning writer, performer, and leader of theater workshops.



Alison O'Daniel, video still from *The Tuba Thieves*, 2013-ongoing. Courtesy of the artist.

Alison O'Daniel on rewriting history...

When I try to locate history, I find myself in a pretty skeptical place. There have been so many examples over the last few years coming to light—and for much longer than that—that history has really been told in very particular ways by very particular people. And I'm pretty actively involved in rewriting certain histories. So in my film *The Tuba Thieves*, I became really interested in the act of writing a film, and the authorship of writing a film, and how complicated that is. So when I started the project, I decided that I wanted to work like a composer, and kind of switch roles and have composers in some ways be the director. So I ask some composers to respond to different prompts, and then I listen to their scores and really let those scores direct me. And while I was doing that, I started to learn about all of these really specific anecdotal histories. One story I learned about was the Deaf Club in San Francisco, which was a deaf social club that became well-known in the punk scene because it opened its doors for about

nine months to West Coast punk music and all of these shows were programmed there.

When I was researching the story, I was struck by the fact that the stories were really only told by hearing punks, and that there were no historical deaf anecdotes about this place. And the stories were charming, but they also had a lot of stereotypes and misperceptions and common misunderstandings about the deaf experience. One example was these stories about deaf people putting their hands on the speakers. And most deaf people know that this isn't really something that deaf people do, because deaf people are really sensitive to vibrations coming up through the floor, or in their chairs, or you know, just in the space. And so that seems like a romanticization told from a hearing perspective. I decided that I wanted to recreate the very last night that the Deaf Club hosted a punk show in 1979. And I was really eager to tell that story from a perspective that I had not found in any sort of literature or anecdotes or anything online, which was the perspective of being hard of hearing, which I am, and through a research process that really prioritized a lot of deaf people. We crafted this reimagining, basically, of that night.

In some ways, it's this interesting revisionist history that I've been undergoing in telling the story of multiple concerts, and then much more intimately, really designing how a deaf woman who is a drummer would approach playing her drums in a small space privately on her own. I filmed a bunch of scenes with Nyke Prince, who is a performer based in Los Angeles who has a relationship to drumming. And we focused much more on her organizing the space and really making it a safe space for her to start to approach these drums. I was really aware in telling the story that a very typical kind of hearing approach to this would be an "overcoming disability" story, like an obsession with a deaf drummer being just excellent at drums. And I was really not at all interested in that story.