

HELEN CAMMOCK IN CONVERSATION WITH BINA VON STAUFFENBERG

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Bina Von Stauffenberg: Your work comprises film, photography, printmaking, prose, poetry and song. As well as your own writing, you often draw on texts by writers who inspire you, such as James Baldwin, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou or Walter Benjamin. Could you talk about the power of words, the power of your own voice and how these are central to your work?

Helen Cammock: I have probably always been fixated on words. I love speaking and I love language. But I am also really aware of how powerful language is – its ability to control, to manipulate, to investigate, to exclude, to include and collude with. Words are used politically and socially in many different ways. Through the meanings they convey, they define the way we see ourselves and the ways in which communities and nations develop. And while language is used as a tool to control, it can also be a means to explore. I use a combination of poetry, prose, philosophical and historical texts in my work because I think the way that words and language are used in these forms is very different – they do and say different things, and the intent is often different in them. I am interested in the way that this can be subverted or unpicked by bringing certain forms of writing or language into conversation. The idea of authorship is also interesting to me. When we say something, we own it through our own voice. For example, I can take Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech and speak it in my voice (as I did in *The Singing Will Never Be Done*, 2011), and my speaking of those words does something very different to Enoch Powell speaking the same words in 1968 – the meaning is changed. This shifting of meaning can traverse geographies and histories, exposing frictions across race, gender and class, making something itchy happen. It's a kind of conversation that is happening between us simply because of who we are when we utter the words that we utter. I think of my relationship to authorship as my 'audible fingerprint'. It is about my voice – who I am when I speak, and how I do it – interwoven with where and from whom the words originally come. I explore this idea not only in my performances, but also across my film, photography, print and written work.

BVS: All of your projects involve extensive research, through which you aim to unearth unheard, forgotten or repressed voices. Recent subjects have included the slave trade, migration, racism, inequality, moments of political struggle and injustice. Where is your starting point for each project, and what motivates you to bring these stories to light?

HC: While the starting point is different for each project, I always know that I want to change something. Often it's about wanting to open up the histories we encounter, because I have never subscribed to the idea of a single 'history'. For me, the very word is a misnomer – there can only ever be multiplicitous collections of histories, which are subject to manipulation, bias, omissions, truth and storytelling in varying measures depending on who's doing the telling and to whom. I want to insert new histories into dominant historical frameworks – that's about change for me. And in order for change to occur we often need to go back, to understand what came before so we can understand where we are now and where we need to make changes for the future. I recently made a film in Derry, *The Long Note* (2018), in which I interviewed former politician Bernadette Devlin McAliskey about the role of women in

the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland in the 1960s and 1970s. She talks very eloquently about the need to go back for these women – that it is both our right and our role to do this. I suppose in all my work I am interested in going back, and I'm going back for a reason: I want people to understand the world that we live in differently. It is about change, acknowledgement and growth. I cannot do that without researching – it is inevitable.

BVS: There is a line in your work, *Moveable Bridge* (2017): 'Windows are clear if you clean them.' Do you think the visibility that your work gives to overlooked people and their stories has the potential to change mainstream historical narratives?

HC: It's about revealing. I was doing some writing the other day and was thinking about unheard voices. But of course, as soon as you utter something, you hear it for yourself. So, there is no such thing as an unheard voice, really; it's just about who hears it. And that is the thing that I am interested in – more people hearing voices that otherwise wouldn't be heard. This is partly a request and partly a provocation on my part: I am asking you to look at this, or be touched by this, or just to look at something in a way that it is not generally represented. I suppose what is meant by 'windows are clear if you clean them' is that we can choose to see if we erase the dirt that is obscuring our vision, but that there is effort or labour involved in getting the clear view.

BVS: Performance has become integral to your work. What does it mean for you to bring your physical body into your practice?

HC: There is something energising about it, but it is also political. When somebody is standing in a room, or taking space with a gesture or a sound, or an action, or something that they are reading to you, speaking to you, singing to you, you are being asked to pay attention in a very direct way – you have to take notice. It is quite a powerful act to take space in this way, and it is a political decision to say 'look at me' when I'm saying these things, 'hear me when my voice opens'. I also think that something profound can happen when a performance is live and bodies are together, sharing the same physical space. There is an interaction and a connection between people, and if I am interested in language and words, communication and articulation, and whose voice says what and to whom, then this is absolutely something that I am interested in instigating.

BVS: Prints have also increasingly become a part of your practice. How did you come to printmaking?

HC: Initially I studied photography, but by the second year of my course I had started to incorporate text alongside image, and by my third year I was working exclusively with video. I went on to do an MA, again working only with video. I describe this as my move to working with the 'energised frame'. Later, I started to think deeply about the different registers of the voice. If intersectionality and relational histories and experience were becoming increasingly important to what I was making work about, it made sense that what I wanted to say was defined by how I said it. This is where print came in. I began experimenting with screen-printing as a way of re-incorporating photography into my work. More recently, working with lino printing and etching has been a particular challenge. These techniques incorporate my drawing and writing, so the prints

carry the mark of my own hand. It is not something that I was used to doing or thought I could do, but now it feels right. So print has become utterly integral to my work, and with it the idea of something being replicable but taking a new form, the idea of working in series, with fractured and linear narratives. I'm interested in the idea of building bodies of work made up of intersecting conversations and it seems obvious to me that this could mean working in different mediums to enable these conversations to have different sound, tone and nuance.

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BVS: For this latest project, you set out on your residency in Italy to explore the notion of lament through the examination of individual and collective female voices. How would you define lament and what draws you to it?

HC: Lament is a space that every culture has – some less openly than others, but it is pretty universal. There is not one form that lament takes, but I see it everywhere. It has been here since the beginning of time and it will never go away – it is part of the human condition. It has to do with the expression of loss and longing, but I am also interested in the strength of it, the idea of it being a demonstration of resilience and, in some situations, an act of resistance. For me, lament has this core of strength; to acknowledge loss opens up the possibility for action or for growth. In Bologna, I met a 92-year-old woman who, as a sixteen-year-old, had been part of the Resistance at the close of the Second World War. She had experienced great loss because of the war but had managed, even at a young age, to channel that loss into resistant and courageous acts. Other women I met during the residency talked about the strength they had to find in situations where they needed to fight for themselves and others.

BVS: Do you think lament is seen predominantly as a female trait?

HC: It is probably fair to say that lament is often seen as weakness and, in many cultures, it is much more acceptable for women to express their emotions and perceived weakness publicly, in ways that men are not. For men, it has often been easier to express anger, which is no less of an expression of sadness or lament, but the form is read differently. Ultimately, they are both about pain. If you look at the blues, for example, there are as many men expressing lament as women. There are many communities where it is something that men express; there are cultures around the world that talk about sadness and loss in poetry and song, and where men are dominant in the articulation of it.

BVS: Your initial research centred on two Italian female Baroque composers, Barbara Strozzi and Francesca Caccini. Could you say more about how the project developed, and some of the people and places you visited during your residency?

HC: Bologna was the beginning, the introduction. It is known as the 'Red City', not only because of the colours of the buildings and the famous Portico di San Luca, but also because of its political positioning. This is where I wanted to look at women's resistance, partisan fighters and their experience. I also took classical singing lessons – the first singing lessons I've ever had – and got familiar with Barbara Strozzi. She never left me throughout the residency. She was the beginning of my journey and she endures throughout. I am going to perform a piece composed by Strozzi at Whitechapel Gallery and Collezione Maramotti. She also features in the film and appears on the frieze – a long, architectural print work that brings together many of the conversations, ideas and landscapes from across the project. She moves around the project in various ways, and a few other women who I researched will do the same. Florence was another place to research Strozzi, as well as Francesca Caccini and other artists. I had access to books and books and books from the Berenson Library at Villa I Tatti and just tried to read as much as I could. I also met Federica Parretti there, a dancer who features in the film and is choreographing the two performances in the UK and Italy. When I first met her she had not danced for twenty-five years.

In Rome, I had a ten-day residency at the Istituto Centrale per la Grafica, where I worked with an amazing printer to begin a small artist's book for the show in Italy. I stayed at the American Academy, which had a real vibrancy that I had not expected. I felt part of a community there.

Venice was sublime. I stayed at Fondazione Cini and met many interesting artists in the city. I had a really productive time and felt very active and engaged with people there. Filming in the lagoon, I became much more aware of the negative impact that cruise ship culture is having on the economy and ecology of Venice.

Palermo – I loved Palermo. I could live in Palermo. One of the really significant meetings I had there was with a Carmelite Sister who runs projects to support women who are new to Palermo, most of them refugees and asylum seekers. In one, women are given a space to sew tote bags and talk. The idea is that they can also articulate their stories through the bags that they make and decorate. I have written about them and they are going to be part of the film, while the bags themselves will be shown at Whitechapel Gallery and in the research space at Collezione Maramotti.

Reggio Emilia was the one place where I thought, 'What will I do here?' A small and quiet city on the face of it, I soon discovered that it was brimming with culture and activism. In 1977, Reggio was the first city in the world to sign a pact of solidarity with the African National Congress (ANC) in a commitment to end apartheid. I met a woman, Bruna Soncini, who had worked closely with Oliver Tambo, president of the ANC, and had met Nelson Mandela. There were also inspiring inter-cultural projects like Mondinsieme, which works with a range of local communities. I ran some workshops on lament with women from Ukraine, Bosnia, Sierra Leone – from all over the world – who had been in Italy either for years or for a very short time. They made photographs and wrote texts about their own sense of lament, which are also included in this book.

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(excerpt from "Che si può fare" [What Can Be Done], Helen Cammock in conversation with Bina Von Staffenberg, exhibition catalogue)