

Interview – Quarries

Interview with Ellie Ga

After *Gyres* in 2020, you come back to FID with another film based on the same method: the screen as a light table, your hands organizing the circulation of images and your voice conducting the movement of thought. What was the origin, the starting point of *Quarries*?

There are multiple starting points for *Quarries*, several of which predate *Gyres*. I've been carrying around the eoliths material the longest—eight years. The eoliths were discovered in France and England in the late 19th century and believed to be the oldest stone tools. In England, a grocery shop owner set out to find them and he was encouraged by the scientific luminaries of the time. Most of the major European and US museums collected these stones. Today, we know they are just a bunch of rocks—their significance created entirely through human desire. The rocks lost their status as artifacts but were transformed into “*culturefacts*” in that although they gave us no insight into prehistoric humans, they give us insight into the 19th century mind.

What drew your attention to the *calçada* pavements on Lisbon's sidewalks? What did you see and find in this technique and tradition, which made you put and use it as the core of this film? Why do you prefer *calçadas* to statues?

I am fascinated by the human desire to project onto a stone's surface. Around the same time, I started digging through boxes of eoliths in the Maidstone Museum in Kent, the actual earliest stone tools called *Lomekwi 3* were discovered in Kenya's Turkana Basin. In *Quarries*, we encounter replicas of these tools. To modify a stone in order to create a tool requires a degree of mental projection that I began to link with other spaces and histories I was engaged with: namely the drawings made on small stones in the Cold War-era concentration camps on islands in the Aegean Sea—the most infamous of which was Makronissos. The small stones that ended up in museums and archives could have been shards from the stones prisoners were forced to dig up to build replicas of Greek antiquity on the island.

In *Quarries*, this history is encountered twice: first via a neuroscience lab in New York and later on via the work of the artist Vaso Katraki. A visit to Katraki's museum is placed within a story about the personalized marks of the *calçateiros* embedded in the pavements of Lisbon. When I was living in Lisbon in 2019, I read about the early history of *calçada* and forced labor. With my mental rucksack filled with the above ideas, I began documenting the work of one of the Lisbon's last *calçateiros* Jorge Duarte, shortly before his death.

I was slightly embarrassed to tell Lisboners about my fascination with *calçada*. All tourists fall in love with it, they say. However, I see the *calçada* as the lay person's philosopher's stone: if one looks down at the pavement long enough, one can trace multiple narratives leading to forced labor, colonization, knowledge on the verge of obsolescence and the ability of the human hand.

Towards the end of *Quarries*, we encounter a surreptitious mark left by Jorge on Avenida da Liberdade. I was

moved by this humble gesture: this desire to be acknowledged for one's work— despite knowing these marks will be walked over and remain mostly anonymous. However, the desire to leave a mark in stone is also a gesture of hubris and propaganda, as evidenced in monuments such as *padrão dos descobrimentos*, and in the replicas of antiquity that once stood on Makronissos.

Is *calçada* the core of *Quarries*? I resist saying *Quarries* has a core. But certainly *Quarries* is constructed with a *calçada* pavement in mind—multiple stories radiating outwards, with no starting or ending point.

From the oceanic currents in *Gyres* to the relation between hands and stones in *Quarries*, it is a radical change in scope, scale, materiality, which seems to have deeply informed the tone, materiality, feeling of the film itself – although the method and form seem to be unchanged. Is it something you were aware during the process? Can you develop on this matter?

I think of *Quarries* as a series of parenthetical statements. There is no through line, no story in *Quarries* that the parenthesis gather around. Rather, the film's structure is a series of parenthesis gathering around stories that can't really be told: how my brother ended up where he is; the photographer who won't tell her story (the viewer never learns why the book was a (still) painful chapter in her life); the sliver of insight into prehistoric ancestors and the mark of a pre-human hand); nor do we know neither the names nor the stories of the people used for forced labor to pave the streets.

In *Quarries*, there's a tug of war between flux and stasis--both in the story and the visual form. The most obvious example is the description of my brother's hands passing from stasis to flux over the course of the film. Visually the play between flux and stasis can be seen in the accumulation of images on the screen forming a petrified layer, which is swiped away revealing a "real time" flowing video underneath.

The movement of the film retraces that of your thought through a proliferating network of motifs and subject matters. Can you describe your researching method? How do you proceed with the gathering and selection of these motifs?

I'd like to augment the term "method", with words like "circumstance" and "mantra".

I think of method, at least in how I would like to talk about method in relation to my work, as a series of circumstances that one finds oneself in, or that one creates, or that one has no control over but nevertheless one must work with or work despite of. Circumscribed by circumstances (which shift over time), one finds one's mantras—one's working refrains— like the character Ida in Gertrude Stein's novella: despite the changing circumstances in Ida's life, she returns to the refrain, "I am I because my little dog knows me". Another mantra which has followed me over the course of making both *Quarries* and *Gyres*: David Antin's talk poems, particularly *The Noise of Time*, wherein he lands on narrative as the representation of "the conformation of somebody who wants something with the threat and or promise of a transformation that he or she struggles to bring about or prevent or both."

Can you talk about the editing of the film, i.e. the building of the narrative? Does it follow the same movement as that of the researching process? How faithful is the filmic movement of thought to that of the research?

Quarries was written through sifting through conversations and written correspondences. In addition to written literary sources, there's also hearsay (someone telling me something that was told to them). These various ways of sharing knowledge and information is then written as a text to be spoken out loud, but not in a flowing style of everyday speech. It's a chiseled writing style, staccato at times, with pauses in the unusual locations. All of which was a deliberate process of chipping away at the sentences, which is then mosaicked together.

How do conceptions of linear progress petrify certain values in history-telling, scientific enquiries, evolutionary theories—even in our assessment of our relationships to others? In *Quarries*, knowledge is forgotten and

rediscovered—or on the verge of disappearance. We are presented with the frightening implications of progress-driven time: the fly treading a ball in a neuroscience lab; the prison camps designed to eradicate communism; the use-value of agile human hands. Yet the cracks of resistance to this progression are abundant.

Beside *calçada* pavement, the person of your brother, his accident and his subsequent handicap make the other center of the narration, to which it regularly comes back. The film draws its movement between these two poles, one being very intimate and painful, the other presenting the more impersonal tone of scientific research. Still your voice never loses its detached, decidedly cold and “stony” tone. How did you work on these connections and weaving of the personal and the impersonal?

In this resistance to a main story that all parentheses gather around, there is a leveling of both voice and image. The even tone of my voice is deliberate. I want to create an even surface, a democratic plateau where no one story is privileged over another in the telling. Similar to my spoken voice and the use of diverse information sources, images are treated equally. An oversized photo book is folded into an iPhone presentation, a banal pastel image of fake flowers on a window sill is repeated until it gains a pathos beyond its generic quality. The scientific research presented in *Quarries* is a result of conversations with a range of interlocutors, (sometimes through happenstance, sometimes planned) wherein obsessions overlap, knowledge is exchanged and friendships are often formed. The research process that resulted in *Quarries* was undertaken with the intention of becoming a slightly more attuned listener and question-asker. In this sense, research is rarely impersonal.

Interview by Cyril Neyrat