Maddie Leach: The Grief Prophesy

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The gothic old water tower is almost monumental, overlooking well-kept Keiller's park from a ledge on the southern hillside of Ramberget. Standing on that ledge, you can see the cityscape of central Gothenburg stretch out before you on the far side of the river separating the island Hisingen from the rest of the town. It is a beautiful site and particularly so on the crisp but sunny Saturday in November when I approach it from the far side of Ramberget. This is a popular area for public recreation, especially on a day like this. It all seems rather peaceful, but signs put up by the municipality indicate regular disturbances of that peace, warning as they do that the park may be closed off at nights if the situation does not improve. And if it were not for a rather disturbing episode in the history of Gothenburg, that took place in this particular park, I would not be visiting here today.

I am approaching the site in question as part of an on-site artist talk during the Gothenburg International Biennale for Contemporary Art (GIBCA) 2017. The artist in question is Maddie Leach, and she's leading us to the scene of a crime. Summer marked the 20-year anniversary of the murder of Josef ben Meddour, a gay Algerian man, who was found shot dead here on 27 July 1997. Meddour's murder was regarded as a homophobic hate crime by the court, and as such it certainly provides material suitable for a reflection on the institutions of public memory and

how a city retells its history to itself. But there is something more to this particular crime.

Meddour's murderers were no 'typical gay-bashers'. Rather, they were radical Satanists, leading members of an organization that called itself the "Misanthropic Luciferian Order" (MLO), and the police seriously pursued this as a possible motive in their line of inquiry. Was the murder intended as a human sacrifice to Satan? We will probably never know for sure, and even though the case was solved, the perpetrators tried and convicted, an aura of mystery still surrounds the case. As if this was not enough, one of the perpetrators was Jon Nödtveidt, a prominent musician in one of Sweden's most renowned up and coming metal bands of the time, Dissection.



Water tower, Keillers Park, Ramberget, Gothenburg. Image: Maddie Leach.



Water tower, Keillers Park, Ramberget, Gothenburg. Image: Maddie Leach.



Water tower, Keillers Park, Ramberget, Gothenburg. Image: Maddie Leach.

For someone who, like me, spent their teen years in circles fascinated with extreme metal, Meddour's case remains legendary. Dissection produced two albums in the 1990s, *The Somberlain* in 1993 and *Storm of the Light's Bane* in 1997. The group reformed with a new lineup under Nödtveidt's leadership after his release from prison in 2004 and proceeded to record one more album, *Reinkaos* in 2006. The group disbanded after Nödtveidt's suicide under what appears to have been ritualistic forms the same year.[01] All in all, the case and the history surrounding it may seem like something out of a Nordic Noir novel, and it is perhaps no surprise that it has taken on a mythical air.

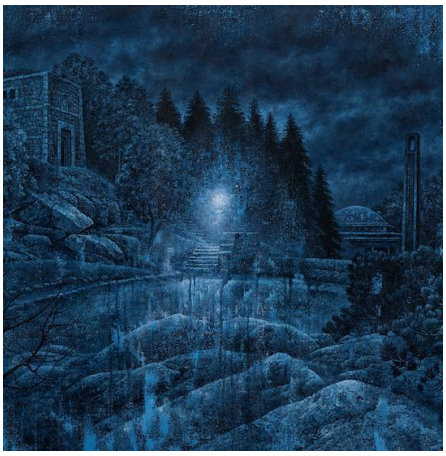
This is the reason that I have come to hear Leach present her project at the actual site of the murder, a ground zero for a version

of the Dissection myth if you want. The project is especially connected to this spot for obvious reasons, but besides the intended installation on the site, the other main elements of the work are not bound by similar spatial and temporal restrictions. Our coming together here constitutes a sort of temporary coherence between material and ideal aspects of the work, in a sort of performance, but the other elements will inevitably have an afterlife that extends the work's meaning in new contexts, which in turn will reshape their implications.

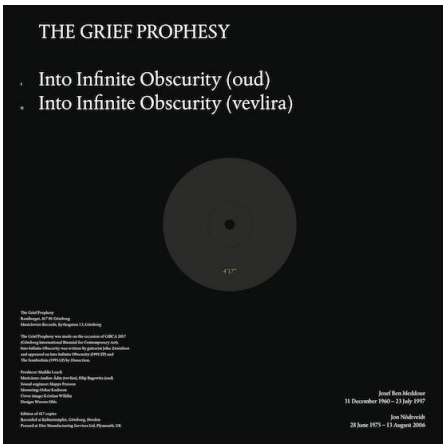
The work contains and connects several elements. There is of course the site itself and the water tower, on which Leach intended to engrave an inscription of a protective pentagram, an installation that the municipality prohibited. Then there is a recording of one of Dissection's songs, "Into Infinite Obscurity", in two versions, slowed down and performed on oud and hurdy-gurdy. These recordings are featured on a 12" LP pressed for the project in a limited edition of 416 copies, an object that should perhaps be mentioned as a specific part, given the fact that the recording is now available digitally online through Bandcamp as well. On site, we had the privilege of listening to the recordings in our earphones, together in a sort of thoughtful, mournful silence. The atmosphere that this produced (a distinct sense of grief and sorrow, for myself at least) is mirrored in the cover of the record. The image shows a rendition of the site of the murder, complete with the water tower as a central focus. It was commissioned by Leach from the artist Kristian Wåhlin, known as "Necrolord" in the world of extreme metal. Under this name, he has illustrated many album covers, including those of Dissection during the 1990s.

One could also mention the title of the work as in itself constituting an important element, a sort of appropriation of something out of the Dissection mythos, as *The Grief Prophecy* was the title of their first demo. Claiming it for a ceremonial remembrance of Josef ben Meddour and a critical reflection on what has become part of the foundational myth for Nordic black metal constitutes a sort of attempt at *détournement* of Dissection's story. This, to me at least, is the basic gist of the project itself. It is particularly revealed by the fact that in Wåhlin's painting, the water tower is flanked by the Gothenburg mosque, built at the foot of Ramberget a few hundred meters from the site in 2010-2011. The

meeting between oud and hurdy-gurdy in the recording and between the water tower and the mosque in the image is another expression of the subtle confrontation with established myth intended here.



Maddie Leach, *The Grief Prophesy* (2017). 12" album cover. Commissioned image by Kristian Wåhlin.



Maddie Leach, *The Grief Prophesy* (2017). 12" album cover. Design by Warren Olds.



Public event, listening to *The Grief Prophesy*. October 28 2017. Image: Kjell Caminha.



Musiclovers Records, Göteborg, September 26 - November 19 2017. Image: Hendrik Zeitler.



Live performance by Anders Ådin & Filip Bagewitz on 26 September 2017, at Höga Nord Records, Göteborg, where the album was also available to listen to during GIBCA. Image: Hendrik Zeitler.

Leach often works this way, with themes of history and memory related to site and space, and the work she is presenting today is no exception. Originally from New Zealand, Leach took on the position as senior lecturer and head of the fine arts unit at the Valand Academy, University of Gothenburg, in 2016. Before that, she has held numerous residencies at art institutions around the world. Her art is research intensive and features a variety of materials. This leads to the necessity of working with varying techniques and in a range of media. She has used text, print media, video, performative actions and so on to produce a series of work

with a structure similar to *The Grief Prophesy*. Through the processes that the works initiate, local histories unfold and new, sometimes idiosyncratic narratives become visible.[02]

To me, what is most striking in Leach's practice is her eye for the universally interesting in the seemingly peculiar particularities of local history. A recurring reflection on her art is the emergence of new possibilities within the narratives she approaches and opens up. Risk and chance seem vital to her process. In fact, it may be its central technique. Thus, a delicate necessity of possibility is written into her aesthetic itself. Leach's contribution to GIBCA 2017 was no exception in this regard. Concerned that the symbol might be read the wrong way and incite further violence or damage to the water tower, the municipality declined her request to inscribe the protective pentagram on the water tower's entrance. A performative event intended to take place in the nearby town of Strömstad, where Dissection originally formed, was cancelled by the local cultural programme organisers for unstated reasons. Leach has also had trouble obtaining the rights to the music in the recording. Still, the sensitivity to the material quality of the particular history out of which she weaves her project's narrative clearly requires this flexibility and responsiveness.

The theme of GIBCA 2017 was secularity, a difficult topic with many implications for the field of contemporary art.[03] What *The Grief Prophesy* does, and to my mind better than most other works presented at the biennale, is to confront the limits between art and religion, between artwork and magic, through its investigation of the media that makes up the fundamentals of the myth surrounding the murder of Meddour. The project becomes a meditation on contemporary art as a particular form of secularity and the closeness to myth and belief that it still requires. While most works featured on the biennale amounted to observing and representing religious aspects of life and society, *The Grief Prophesy* did not simply apply a distant, reflective perspective on a radical religious ideology. Rather, the work attempts to rearrange some of its elements in a new constellation, from which its mythology might appear in a different light. In short, it puts in motion rather than registering affects inherent to the mythology it allows us to encounter.

The Grief Prophesy actualizes a series of themes proclaimed as central to questions regarding secularity according to the biennale's program—minority rights, intolerance, fanatical faith, and religious motives. Through Leach's careful examination of elements central to the subculture of black metal, the work also uses their expressive power to examine the boundaries of art and aesthetics. Modern art has always struggled with the world's disenchantment. On the one hand, it presents an alternative to the loss of myth and organic faith. On the other, it helps dethrone all the gods of tradition, including its own authority. When confronted with the threat or promise of the world's re-enchantment, art simultaneously confronts the limits of its own secularity.

In the exploration of black metal's gothic aesthetics of horror, *The Grief Prophesy* finds echoes of romanticism and its promises of new gods and a new mythology. But in black metal, this sort of confrontation with and questioning of secular ideologies takes on a distinctly Dionysian form. It is simultaneously outrageous (visually, stylistically, ethically) and deadly serious. *The Grief Prophesy* mirrors this peculiar duality through the reproduction of not only the visual aesthetics of the metal genre, but also in the materiality of the 12" record, an essential triumph for any struggling band with serious intentions in the 1990s. Yet, the work does not play with any of these motifs. It takes the elements of the challenging narrative as seriously as it takes its consequences. Ultimately, Leach's project intends to undo a mythology sealed by violence and blood, turning hatred into grief, perhaps melancholic rage into an attempt at effective mourning. It may seem strange that a 20-year-old murder case would need this kind of attention, but Leach's research indicates continued relevance beyond a welcome confrontation with sanitized versions of official city history.

Meddour's murder became part of the mythology surrounding Nordic extreme metal and its nihilistic creed. The Norwegian part of the scene had made a name for itself through acts of suicide, violence, and church burnings during the early 1990s. Since this was before the internet made everything readily available and transparent, news of this mostly reached my small hometown through word of mouth, and in the form of scandalizing headlines. This, of course, just made the allure stronger, the myth more

powerful. I was 19 and moved out of my parents' house in the autumn of 1997. Black metal had by then lost some of its appeal for me, but the music of Dissection was part of the soundtrack to my teen years. Their sound was part of the ambience in which we hung out. Friends of mine had adopted their own watered-down versions of Satanist ideologies, but left them behind before entering their 20s. Still, the aesthetics of the scene made a lasting impression on us, and we were not alone. The mythic appeal of the music's brutality, the gothic imagery, the uncompromising attitude, was undeniable—as was the sexism, the racism, the homophobia, the proto-fascism that came with the territory. Nevertheless, Dissection had quite a large following and the band had made essential contributions to both the sound and aesthetics of extreme metal. The band was inescapable for anyone who followed the scene and helped define the Gothenburg soundscape as well.



Dissection. Research Image. Credited to Mikael "Willy" Wilhelmsson & STRÖMSTAD METAL-SCENE (past & present).



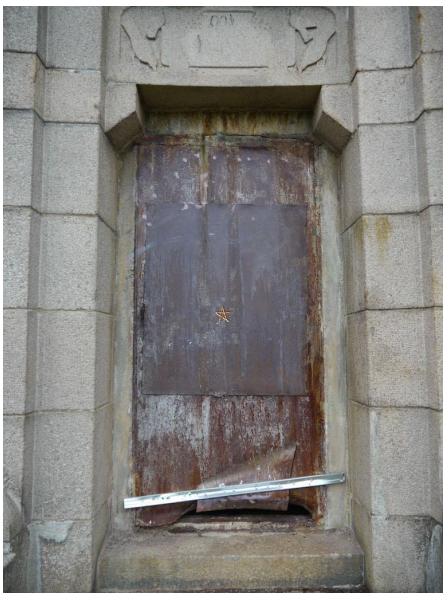
Grafitti (unknown author). Vattentorn / water tower, Keillers Park, Ramberget, Gothenburg. Image: Maddie Leach.



Grafitti (unknown author). Vattentorn / water tower, Keillers Park, Ramberget, Gothenburg. Image: Maddie Leach.



Found detail. Public signage, Keillers Park, Ramberget, Gothenburg. Image: Maddie Leach.



Maddie Leach, Proposal for Keillers Park vattentorn (unrealised).

Seeing Leach's work and hearing her describe the project brings parts of this back for me, but the whole thing appears beyond memory and nostalgia. I suddenly see the extent to which Meddour's death has become part of the aura surrounding Nordic metal in its wildest years during the 1990s. The police investigation could not determine whether the killing of Meddour was a realization of earlier ideas about murdering a human being as a sacrifice to Satan. Whether this was the greater motive, hidden behind confessed homophobia during the trial, is the subject of much speculation. In either case, it is striking to what extent the murder has actually been turned into a sacrifice of human life for the building of a mythical image of the band and an uncompromising satanic organization. During her talk, Leach retells the story of how, on one of her expeditions to the site, she

discovered sprayed graffiti on the water tower a few days after the 20-year anniversary of the murder, graffiti celebrating the killers and insulting their victim. On a nearby public information sign displaying a map of the park, Leach noted someone had drawn the distinctive 'Satanic' inverted pentagram next to the ‘vattentorn’ site of the murder. The site clearly holds significant symbolic power to this day, a testament to the enduring mythic energy that the murder produced.

Thus, Leach’s work presents a welcome counter-narrative to the violent celebration of force that still claims the murder site. The proposed engraving of a protective pentagram would have meant recognition of the need for an exorcism of the site and a confrontation with myth and the ongoing worship of naked force, dominance, and violence. But the project works to this end even without it. In her talk, Leach mentioned thoughts of expanding the project by following up the Algerian connection, where Meddour’s body is buried. What would the recording of “Into Infinite Obscurity” mean in an Algerian metal setting, for instance? After the talk on that crisp November day, a friend and I sat down in a restaurant and discussed our impressions. Writing this essay, I think about that conversation and how we came to agree that the piece should be considered finished and closed. The elements, the image, the recordings, the proposed but never installed pentagram symbol, and so on—all were in place for the narrative to close off in a certain way. What, we reasoned, could possibly be added by further explorations of the Algerian connection?

However, rethinking this conclusion now, I believe there is something about Leach’s careful treatment of the elements in her work’s commentary on the case that undoes its closure and opens the narrative for ongoing questioning. Whether continued endeavors would be successful or even interesting in themselves is secondary to what the questioning itself does to the coherent and dominating narrative of established myths. Through its meditation on the objects and the place, *The Grief Prophesy* conjures forth the realization that the myth the work taps into builds on two formative absences: the lives of Josef ben Meddour and Jon Nödtveidt, here present only through the mythology that ultimately meant the death of both. Thus, *The Prophesy* makes a space for grief.

Footnotes

01. For a thorough and well-researched discussion of the history of the Swedish metal scene and Dissection's part in it, see Ika Johannesson and Jon Jefferson Klingberg, *Blood, Fire, Death: The Swedish Metal Story*, scheduled for release in English translation by Feral House late autumn 2018.

02. Leach's homepage features her work in an informative way: www.maddieleach.net/

03. The program outline relating to the biennale's theme can be found at www.gibca.se/index.php/en/2017/thematic

Biographies



Maddie Leach was born in Auckland, New Zealand and is currently Senior Lecturer in Fine Arts at Valand Academy, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. From 2001-2016 she was Senior Lecturer in Fine Arts at Massey University Wellington. She has an MFA in Sculpture from the University of Canterbury, Christchurch and has recently started a PhD by Publication at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. Recent presentations of her work include: *The Grief Prophesy* (2017) Gothenburg International Biennial for Contemporary Art; *The Blue Spring / Mata Air Murni* (2015) Jakarta Biennale, Indonesia; 28th October 2834 (2015) *Spaced: Future Recall* at Western Australian Museum, Perth. Her project *If you find the good oil let us know* (2012-2014) was nominated for the Walters Prize 2014 at Auckland Art Gallery, New Zealand. Leach is currently developing a new public project in the city of New Westminster, British Columbia with the support of Creative New Zealand and CAG (Contemporary Art Gallery) in Vancouver.



Hjalmar Falk is a Swedish academic and critic with a Ph.D. in the History of Ideas, currently employed as a researcher at the University of Gothenburg. He is also a member of the editorial committee of the periodical *Ord&Bild*. His research and writing mainly concern modern political thought, German and Nordic intellectual history, and historical conceptions of the secular.

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