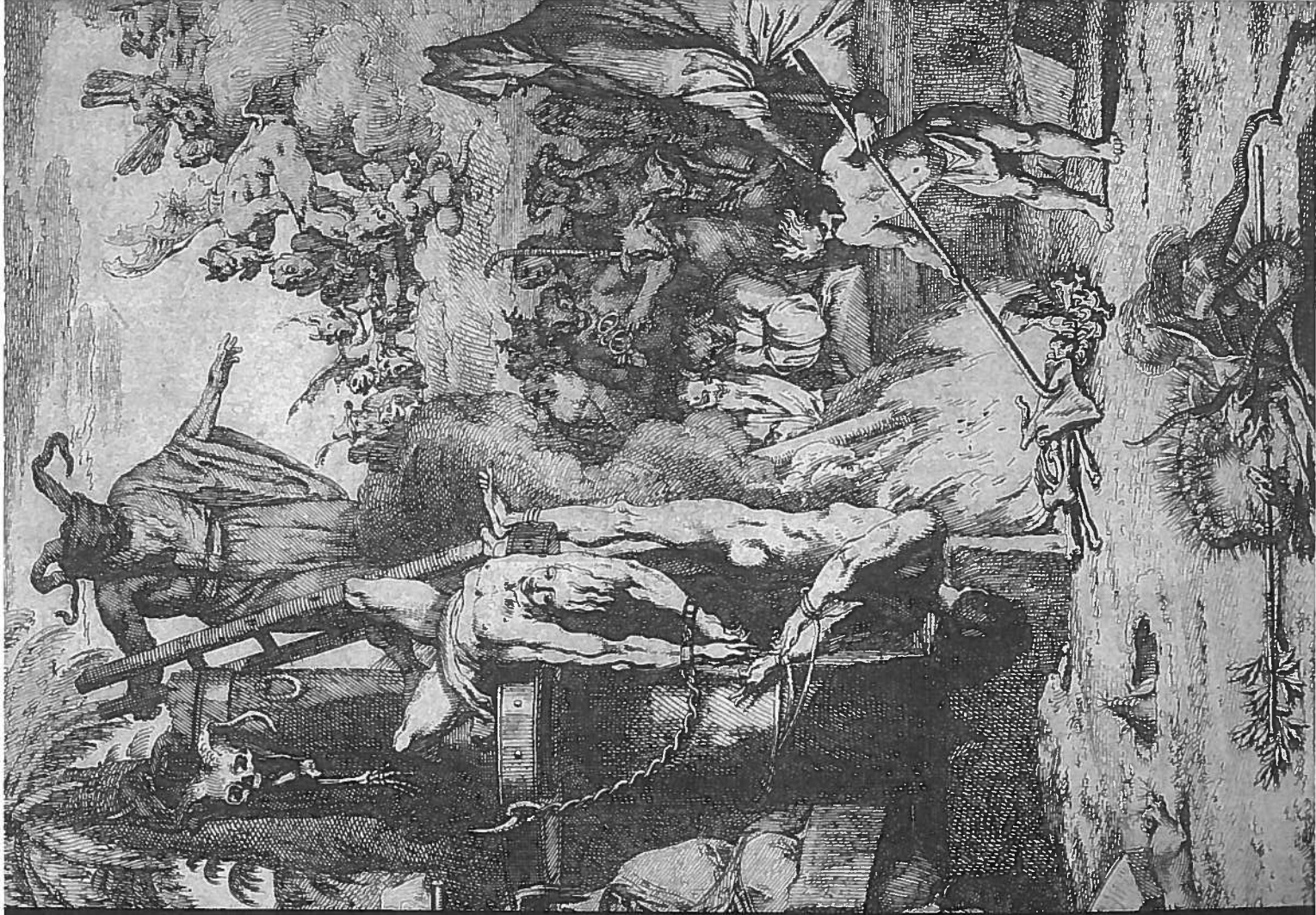




# Witch Hunt *Heksejagt*



A Reader on the Nordic Witchcraft Trials  
En publikation om de nordiske hekseprocesser

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ENIGMAS OF  
THE HORIZON:  
Youmna Chlala,  
Liv Helene  
Willumsen and  
Alison Karasyk  
in Conversation

The following conversation took place on 13 August, 2020 between historian Dr. Liv Helene Willumsen, artist Youmna Chlala, and curator Alison Karasyk. Moving between Willumsen's work on the Steilneset Memorial to the Victims of the Finnmark Witchcraft Trials and Chlala's deep engagement with questions of memory and futurity in her practice, their dialogue with Karasyk interweaves topics ranging from witchcraft trial confessions to the materiality of the weather.

Alison Karasyk: Thank you both so much for participating in this conversation and for being vital resources for my thinking throughout this project. Could you both start by giving us an introduction to your work and interests?

Liv Helene Willumsen: For me, as a scholar, my interest in the witchcraft trials and the related archival documents began with my participation in the international women's movement of the 1970s and 1980s. When I started to read these historical documents relating to the witches of northern Norway, I was gripped, particularly by the confessions. This was the starting point of a process that has lasted for forty years now. I still reread the same documents and have the same feeling. They remain powerful, exciting, and interesting. They still keep a kind of enigma. You can never say that you've gotten to the bottom of them, particularly the confessions of the accused, because they can always generate new views, new images, and new methods of interpretation. Every time you read the sources, you see and understand and feel something else. This is the reason behind my interest in the seventeenth-century Finnmark witchcraft trial court records. Lifting forth women, lifting forth voices from the documents and the discourse in the courtroom: this approach is combined with a deep interest in language and the extent to which language can still tell us something, after 400 years. Since my journey with witchcraft trials started, language has presented an unsettling number of parallels between the seventeenth century and the mechanisms of the world we live in. This is why this work is important; to bring forth the material not only for historians, but also because it can tell us something about what is happening to people today.

Youmna Chlala: When you talk about looking at the documents over and over again, and feeling like they're never static or static – I think that's how we experience memory. No one thinks of having the same memory over and over again as something frozen in time. We understand how it has temporal movement. And so my practice recently has been around one particular project, *The Museum of Future Memories*, which is about how we use memory and speculation, and how to reinsert the body into these processes. At a certain point, the language of speculation became analysis related to finance projection and it was removed from the body, from our bodies. If a museum is an ever-evolving space, not a static or enclosed space but a space that contains, this allows us to hold ideas or gestures and it becomes a place we know how to access.

The idea started from a project I did a few years ago in Fornebu, Norway, a site that used to host the country's main airport, right outside of Oslo. The airport was transformed into a luxury apartment and work area. When I walked through it, my biggest surprise was how it felt more like an architect's rendering of a space than an actual space. There were barely any people. It was functioning and doing exactly what it was supposed to, but something was missing.

All of that made me think about how we understand futurity. I've always done work around movement and immigration and migration as things that are speculative. You have to believe in the future if you are going to move somewhere. Even if you move by force, you have to believe that there's something else. I was also thinking about location – Fornebu is by the sea – so I moved towards the idea of the horizon. All of my projects are now about this question: What happens when we can no longer tell the difference between sea and sky, when the horizon line disappears? The horizon is the point we look for in order to make sense of where we are. My work has become about what happens when we lose our horizon line.

LHW: Yes, and the question of the horizon is deeply related to the witchcraft trials. The horizon is the point where this enigma is hidden. There is something hidden, something secret, something we want to reach, and at the same time it is

not possible to reach it. I think this longing for the answer or the line between sky and sea is central for me as well. There is something in these documents that we want to find out, and as we read them again and again, we still think there is something left that we need to know.

When we think about the Steilneset Memorial, the body is also extremely important. The way we receive Steilneset is not through the brain – it is something that hits us in the stomach, in the breast, and in the heart. It is not just transmitted through an intellectual operation; it happens much quicker. It happens when you move from the entryway to the inner room, but also as you move from an environment that is safe and regulated into this long corridor. After your first few steps, you are hit by something else. I'm interested in this *something else*, what that means. When you enter this building, something happens – not because you are thinking, but because of a change at that moment of passage. I'm interested in understanding how this memorial with its three components of art, architecture, and history can create such a physical and emotional change.

**AK:** How did you participate in the formation of the memorial? How was your contribution informed by architecture and artwork?

**LHW:** My contribution was the historical material. In the Memorial Hall, there is one text for each of the ninety-one persons who lost their lives in the witchcraft trials. The texts are condensed, yet they are taken from the original court records and still bear the meaning: the names, identities, and confessions of these individuals. The architect Peter Zumthor was particular about every detail that should and should not be in this long room, a 135-metre corridor. The symbolic elements are spare. There are ninety-one windows and small lights, and through the windows you see the sky and the water. You can also see the ground through the floorboards, so these basic elements of nature find their way in. When visitors contact me after seeing the memorial, they all use the same word. They say that they have been *touched*. In Norwegian, *berørt* implies something very specific, along the lines of being taken by the arm, and feeling the hand that

grabs you. So in the aesthetic experience of memorials or art or architecture or exhibitions, what can create such a feeling of being touched? It has to do with simplicity and rawness, with the effects that you use, but most importantly when it comes to Steilneset, you have these three components of art, architecture, and history intersecting. They preserve a core. The texts, even if they are shortened, are formed so that each person is individualized. The core meaning of the original court records has been preserved. This is what language can do. And then you have what architecture can do and art can do, and the meeting point between these three elements. It's difficult to express in words.

**AK:** Absolutely. These three elements interact so naturally with one another, through both the memorial's position within the landscape, at the edge of the ocean shore, and through its materiality. There's a distinct integration of the Finnmark environment: the wind that's mentioned throughout the confessions and felt through Zumthor's design, and the sense of vulnerability and fear inscribed in the court records that is captured within the circle of mirrors and burning chair in Louise Bourgeois's sculptural cell. For me, there is something about this interrelation that creates a feeling, being touched by a combination of sensations that reorient us and move through the body upon entering that space.

**LHW:** Zumthor has said that when you are walking through the corridor of Memorial Hall, between the planks, there are small openings, and in the summertime, as the grass grows, it can come up and should not be cut. The grass should grow. He intended for natural changes to occur between the seasons. This means that there is no fixed division between inner and outer space when experiencing Steilneset. Nature, what is outside, and even the glimpses of the sea and ground and sky, are part of what you are meant to experience inside. What is outside is coming in.

**AK:** There's a kind of echo within the context of your work Youmna, evoking memory and a sense of intimacy through the elemental, the time of day, the quality of light. Remember how we even tried to convince the staff at the

Hessel Museum to remove a pane of window glass so that the wind could quite literally come in and become part of your installation? Your attention to these temporal and climatological details, and your subtle insistence on isolating and even empowering them, is a remarkable through line of your work.

YC: It's impossible to imagine architecture outside of the place it exists. I'm interested in the perspective you were describing through the experience of being within the memorial. It's about how a body moves through space and about the time it takes to move between Point A and Point B. It's about how your body feels when you enter it and how your body feels when you leave. And all of those aspects are just as real as the scale of an object. The way we hold objects and the ways we engage with them in our everyday life is similar to how we engage with space. I'm really interested in how we return to thinking about the elements or the elemental as something that has the power.

If things are always changing and everything is in flux, and we believe in shape shifting then we don't have the comfort of meaning. We look for space and form to give us meaning. If we see a cube or a square, a sphere or a circle, we're comforted by the meaning those forms provide. But if that square or circle then shapeshifts into a different type of object because of how it's handled or seen or installed, because of time, how it rusts, falls apart or melts, then we're no longer comforted by its form. I'm interested in making objects that allow us to reconsider our own position and relationships. What does it mean to allow harsh light into a gallery where the light is usually controlled? What does it mean to get very close or intimate with an object? Would that also mean that we then have to be very close and intimate with each other? And what does that proximity do?

LHW: These questions are interesting to consider in relation to Steilneset, in this barren landscape in the north with its intense darkness in winter. For this memorial, the intention for me was to show something about a historical event that happened 400 years ago and to lift forth the individuals who were victims of this event. But when you

talk about outer and inner influence, I would say that when you go through this corridor and there is a storm, as there is often in the far north, you see all of these panels with texts related to each person moving with the wind. The outer forces, the weather, informs your reading of these objects and texts. Walking through both the Memorial Hall and the glass pavilion with the Louise Bourgeois, you get the feeling that the memorial is not a static place, it is moving alongside time and the seasons. The everlasting sun in summer and the total darkness in winter. These elements that come in, strong wind and smooth light, reduce the inner and outer division.

This meeting point between the sky and the sea, this shifting enigma that we are continuously looking for, can help us express our aim. My work with the Steilneset Memorial has to do with the persecuted, the people who lost their voices. My work is about giving them their voices back. I want to give them a kind of dignity that they never experienced in their lives.

AK: I'll never forget when I was visiting Tromsø, you expressed the importance of my visiting the archive to view the court protocols, the over 400-year-old records that systematized this gendered and indigenous persecution. You emphasized that I must hold this material in my own two hands, that nothing would bring me closer to understanding this history to be not some distant myth, but a series of violent events that happened to real people. To bear witness to the objects that made the hunts part of the Danish-Norwegian legal system. As you impressed upon me, we're not just talking about witchcraft as ritual, we're talking about witchcraft trials. You encouraged me to think critically about the hunt and legal proceedings as a form of systemic violence.

LHW: When you visit The Regional State Archives of Tromsø and see the protocols and the texts written by a scribe 400 years ago, you can still see where he pressed the pen harder into the paper because of the amount of ink. This sensation, this tactile feeling of the paper under your fingers and the condition of the ink gives you the closest meeting with the event itself. We can never get closer to the trial than

sitting in a reading room in the archives with the protocols in front of us. It is my desire to get very close to the happening, to individualize the victims. They were not ninety-one people burned in Finnmark. They were ninety-one individuals with names, with a life, with everyday troubles and joys. I've given them all a name, which is at the top of the text in the memorial. When you give them a name, you also give them back some semblance of individuality. And with the confessions, some personality. In my view, my work with the language of these documents is about bringing forth women and men from the pages of these protocols into a new environment, where they can be shown a respect that they were not shown while they were living.

In every one of these texts, there is a voice, the language that they dared to use in the courtroom to tell a story. This is what all people living in oral societies can do. They may never be able to read a page in a book, but they can tell a story. A story can be a masterpiece. And this is what was so impressive in my meeting with these documents. The confessions are formed as stories with images, with poetic language, with narratives, monologues and dialogues, and the swift expression of a plot. You can hear their personalities and a glimpse of their reality, their understanding of the world, their way of expressing fear but also expressing what they knew.

These confessions are so rich in detail. They are golden treasures in terms of historical documents. We do not hear victims who are subdued: we hear poetry, hope, stunning images painted in words. We hear resistance. So this has been my work and my struggle over these forty years, to try to show that through the help of diligent scribes, we can learn about how people lived, what they thought, what they experienced, how they saw each other, and how they also viewed the powerful men that interrogated them. Even if there were strong power structures in the courtrooms, I think these confessions contain such richness that it overrules the dynamic between the judiciary and the accused.

AK: In many of our discussions, Youmna, we've talked about the confessions and the power of language as a tool for observation and a mechanism for spreading fear. People used language to instrumentalize alienation, to observe and

accuse each other, and to claim their own moral high ground. However, as you mention, Liv Helene, language also served as a tool for the accused. Youmna's commission for *Witch Hunt* takes its title from one of the confessions, *She Holds the Wind in a Bag that Is Her Power* (2020). She actually quoted you in her proposal: Liv Helene explains that '[these] stories were an act of dignity and creativity'.

Youmna, these narratives have been a cornerstone for your work relating to the histories of the Nordic witch hunts as you've engaged with confessions relating to shape shifting, the power of household objects, and making contact with the weather as a form of witchcraft. What initially interested you in these texts?

YC: As Liv Helene said, there's just so much power in language and the language that we use in different contexts. They were telling stories as a form of resistance to the moment they found themselves in. It gave them a kind of liberation from the language being used against them. They could transpose their own narrative, way of living, and things that were important to them. Among those things was each other. I am very interested in the collective, in how one implicates their friend, cousin, sister by simply knowing them, which is how control happens. Control happens in clusters and groups. But these are intimate groups, so it is your neighbour who you shared butter with, or your friend who also lost her husband at sea. And these associations were a way that the language of the court system could make everyday life – intimacy, connection, and relationships – into something divisive or too powerful and threatening, against order. Whereas we know that those associations are what life is actually made of. I am interested in these everyday things: the teacup, what kind of fish they ate, where they held the butter, and what kind of birds swarmed and scared away the fish. Depending on the location, the weather and climate were such an important part in the circumstances of the accusations because the changes that were happening were beyond control and imagination. The accused, through details and inventiveness in their own storytelling reinscribed the narrative.

**LHW:** Yes, in Finnmark for instance there is one incident where women are accused of chasing the fish away from the shore. There is a woman who sits in the centre who remains in her own clothes, in laces, a cap, and an elegant blouse. And then the other women have shape-shifted into different types of seabirds who use seaweed to chase the fish away from the shore. That is an example of the kind of knowledge written into the records, the names of seabirds are woven within the elaborate images described. In Denmark you have trials where a woman is casting a spell or a curse on another person and the next day a tragedy happens and then either death or sickness on humans or animals. This is a kind of malevolent witchcraft or maleficium. In Finnmark, we have the belief that the devil is in the picture and because a person gives herself or himself to the devil, they get a particular power to expel or to create something evil. And when they give the names of neighbours or people they know, it is closely related to witches' gatherings, where they worshipped the devil who sat in the middle.

These two elements, the gatherings and the devil's pact, are very important for Finnmark. During related confessions, there's always the question of who else was there. They most often choose names of those they know from the village. I think that is an important difference between the witchcraft trials in Denmark and Finnmark. Finnmark is very much connected to books of demonology circulating throughout Europe at the time. And it cannot be overstated that the women accused of witchcraft in Finnmark were tortured. They are telling stories and when the interrogator wants more information and the names of accomplices, they are tortured until they tell more. This is a point where the judiciary can violently wield their power towards the accused. In Finnmark the ideas are closely connected to what is happening in Germany, Scotland, and the Netherlands, to European persecution and demonological notions, while in Denmark and also in Finland, it was more connected to maleficium or throwing spells or casting an evil word on a person.

**AK:** Something that really stands out here is the power of the collective. The fact that women who were thought to gather posed a threat to these patriarchal societies, in terms

of both local governments and the church. These women forming communities outside of their homes, outside of their marriages, gathering together on a hill or by the ocean, enacting rituals, exchanging information and ideas, forming their own networks were thus deviating or posing a challenge to the norm.

Lately I've been thinking a lot about the relationship between collectivity and commemoration. Instead of an obelisk, a phallic structure asserting a linear historical narrative in the middle of a city square, certain memorials, monuments and artworks have the potential to do something quite different, instead insisting on a kind of collective reckoning that causes us to explore our own positions.

In thinking about the conversations in the United States at this time, about the need to tear down confederate monuments, I'm interested in how those structures affect and orient the communities that live around them, and what our interactions with these objects and spaces tell us about the present. When I spoke to Louise Bourgeois's studio manager, Jerry Gorovoy, he shared that the artist's interest in working on the Steilneset Memorial began when she read a selection of the court records. Having left France with her husband, who was Jewish, right before Nazi occupation, she was deeply concerned and affected by the reality of events of social persecution repeating themselves. Memorials, artwork, and exhibitions may be able to make these histories accessible in a collective, and embodied way.

**LHW:** There's a great difference between a sculpture of a man on a horse who has been victorious in war versus a piece of artwork made to commemorate the witchcraft trials. The parallel mechanisms that we can see, in the seventeenth century and in our own century, are a reminder that we need to lift these painful histories into our consciousness and memory, as a warning that it should not happen again, but also as a reminder that it easily can. Here is where the future comes in. 🖐️