



Adresse Fossveien 24  
0551 Oslo  
Norge

Telefon (+47) 22 99 55 00

Post Postboks 6853  
St. Olavs plass  
N-0130

Faktura Postboks 386  
Alnabru  
0614 Oslo

Org.no. 977027233  
Giro 8276 0100265

**Asmaa Barakat**  
On the Inconspicuousness

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Kunsthøgskolen i Oslo,  
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[khioda@khio.no](mailto:khioda@khio.no)

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**Asmaa Barakat**  
**On the Inconspicuousness**  
**MA Essay**  
**Oslo National Academy of the Arts**

## Abstract

This essay is an attempt to introduce a situation I have been through, a visit to Rome particularly the Colosseum, the scene was very striking to my eyes, I didn't play the role of a tourist but I was more surprised as observer, I observed the scene in a form of three layers, the Colosseum great monument (first layer in the background as history), mass of tourists standing in front of the huge monument, waiting to get in, posing and taking picture (second layer, present) and the third layer was the Vendors/ immigrants (selling water, mobile sticks and wooden sculpture from Africa, ...etc.)

I was surprised for many reasons, the huge amount of tourists, the contradiction between tourists and immigrants (both are in the same place but for different reasons, the first group is welcomed and the latter is not) and the huge monument standing in the background as a witness and the change of its function that shifted according to the time it belongs to it. It was such chaos.

*“Space is the dimension of things being existing at the same time, it is the dimension of multiplicity, space present us with the question of the social, and presents us with the most fundamental of political question which is, how we are going to live together... ”<sup>1</sup>*

Doreen Massey

Through this essay, I am trying to unfold the observation above by using the Colosseum as a case. It is divided into 2 parts. A description of the history, a transcription of a tour guide of the colosseum from inside, with the comments explaining the three layers. What do we see? Explain our observation and how far we can penetrate the normal.

The second parts consist of 2 projects. Project no.1 (work in progress) installation of the obelisk 2, 5 to 3m.) a description of the process, the inspiration, the material and the elements used. Project no.2 is a series of zinc plates and prints using etching and aquatint technique (work in progress) and explanation of the artwork and the historical elements (The book the description of Egypt) and (The She-Wolf myth) used in this artwork.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Quj4tjbTPxw&t=911s> Doreen Massey on Space\_Social Science Bites

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## A description of the history:

Guide video of a historical site 8'6'' color 2010 founded video.

*We are running between 2 different tiers, the second level on top of this lovely walls behind you that will again a staircase go into the second level it's going nowhere today... so, the whole part of the building is missing on that side. Look at the opposite side can see the first slope, that a walkway people are and a second slope and those are the first two tiers we're looking at the skeleton of the building, the bricks are original for the most part but you know as you come earlier here in the ancient times you will just found in a white marble seats all around you.<sup>2</sup>*



This is a transcription from an online video for a guided tour in 2010 of the Colosseum founded on YouTube. The tour guide and the tourists were standing inside the Colosseum, he was pointing and describing, and they were listening and recording. He is pointing to parts that are vanished, reconstructed or partly exists.

*The first seats are a VIP of ancient romans, senators, foreign ambassadors, high priests and similar. On the second level, the knights, wealthy, yeah, it's not a novel let's say the middle class using a modern expression. On a third level above the square windows the average people the working class. And on the northern wing section the top level, see the last railing, the lowest and the lowest in Roman society people like slaves, peasants, and women that kind of people...*

*Some ten years ago a portion of the fall arena was reconstructed on this side, you know... to show the people what the arena was like. Well, an identical timber floor to be*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kyw3QTSpbjc>, Roman Colosseum Tour Part 1

*stretching across it are over. The whole ever down below was covered by a big wooden floor sprinkled with sands the purpose of the sand was to absorb the blood show in August literary literature on busy days. The word sand in Latin is arena, that's why we call this kind of buildings arena, from this blood absorbing sand.*



Fig.2

*There were two more levels under the floor arena, it does call colosseum backstage, underground over the building. Now, that's where they kept the wild animals... Yeah the little armory was there at the morgue and if you look at the center of the arena should be able to see the row of square chambers running parallel to the long axis... Well, what also was under the floor of the arena was at the machinery a system of cranes and a counterweight that the comb of trees, rocks, sands it seems that the whole new stage set up could be emerging or any area underground within minutes and a part of the floor arena could even flip over. Questions anybody before moving on?*

Nowadays, the tourists are surrounding the Colosseum, standing in queues to get in, and taking pictures in front of it, or of it and inside. They are documenting their journey and the building always appears in the background. A new relationship has emerged between the building and the tourists; they are there for the memory, witnessing and documenting. A selected knowledge of the history that had been told to them by the tour guides representing the identity of this place, in return the tourists select only what they want to document of such a site or about the other.

The vendors also roaming around the Amphitheatre, but for different reasons, they are not there to document a trip or to know the history of the place, it is a new territory for them a *shelter*. They hold water bottles, selfie sticks, wooden toys and souvenirs, waiting for the

tourists to buy it. They took the site as a new territory to survive, the site again changes at this moment. Most of the vendors are immigrants and refugees, they arrived with procedures different than the tourists followed.

**A question: what do we see?**



2018, Rome Italy

*The banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary. The background noise, the habitual?...how are we to speak of these common things, how to track them down, how to flush them out, wrest them from the dross in which they are mired, how to give them meaning, a tongue, to let them, finally, speak of what it is, who we are.<sup>3</sup>*

- Georges Perec, species of spaces, 1974

This is an image of a touristic sight in Rome, in the foreground a woman is holding her son's hand, the vendor is standing with selfie sticks, another vendor is talking next to him trying to sell something to the man with the black glasses, the woman in the white trouser is also walking next to them, another lady and a man are walking heading somewhere, and the image show half of the man in the jeans short. In the middle there is a garden, two women are posing to take a selfie, the man on the black shirt is standing looking around, group of tourists is taking pictures and a long queue of tourists standing to enter the building. The Colosseum, trees, street lamps and buildings appear in the background.

To decipher the image in another way, it can be in the form of layers, almost like archeology, the ruin of the colosseum is standing in the background as the layer of the history, the second layer is the tourists and the last one is the vendors.

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<sup>3</sup> Species of Spaces and other Pieces, Georges Perec, 1974

The three steps archeologist follow on archaeological field investigations is Step1: Identification – where they identify the site and gather information about the history of the area, step2: Evaluation – define the historical and cultural significance of archeological materials, step3: Data recovery –excavation and analyzing of the culture material found in the site. <sup>4</sup> If we can apply the three steps into this image as a way of perception to penetrate what we see, to observe the hidden and to *document the ordinary to make the unnoticeable remarkable*. <sup>5</sup> To rediscover the place that we are living in, how we are living together, how must we look to see.....*to make it remarkable but what if we get used see things, the value of observation-the fact that looking is not self-evident. We look but we don't see, so how must we look in order to see.*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.jobmonkey.com/archaeology/phases/>

<sup>5</sup> The everyday, Paul Virilio, on Georges Perec 2011, p. 109-111

<sup>6</sup> The everyday, Paul Virilio, on Georges Perec 2011, p. 109-111



## Project no. 1



This installation is made from Glass, mirror, metal. The height is approximately 2,5 to 3 meters. One side is open to give the viewer the chance to get in where a sound piece is installed. The sound piece gives the obelisk a voice in which it speaks with the I and directing to directing to the

It is inspired by the Obelisk in front of the pantheon in Rome. Macuteo Obelisk originally moved from Egypt through the Mediterranean during the Roman Empire. A bronze cross is placed on the apex and the obelisk was erected on a beautiful fountain, sculptures were added later to it. Originally, the obelisks were carved from one stone pointing to the sky to Ra the god, put in two pairs in the entrance of the temple and engraved with inscriptions.



The intent of using this object is to interpret the aspect of the displacement (immigrants), history and identity (the shifting of the function of a monument or historical building). The glass is to represent the transparency of the history and how far we can observe what is left, the mirror and reflection is used to reflect different perspectives or reading of such a scene, and the metal side was originally inspired by the printing plates of the book the description of Egypt as an attempt to document a place and its identity.

The obelisk will be exhibit outside kunstnerneshus in front of the entrance.

The initial idea was to create the obelisk from four materials, ceramics, mirror, glass and metal, with engraving on the metal side, but because of the different visual language of the materials minimal, a decision has been made to replace the drawing with immaterial medium which is the sound piece and replace the ceramics side with access inside the obelisk.

### **Audio Text:**

*I Would like to end up putting a forward notion that have developed. a concept, that everyone has the right.*

*Yes, I am an obelisk, but a different obelisk, I am not carved from one stone like the ones before. I would like to tell my dream.*

*Everything is touched by political backlash.*

*I have been made from metal, glass and mirror and I am surrounding you. I have been made specifically for this place. You can't see through the metal side, but you can see yourself in the mirrors and the metal in your background, as well. You can see through the glass side, but you can't get outside from it. It is transparent as if it is not there, maybe you thought about that on your way to it.*

*Can't you see?*

*See all things whatsoever they flourish, return to the root from which they grew, this return to the root is called Quietness<sup>7</sup>*

*Here we live.*

*We are running between 2 different tires, the second level on top of this lovely walls behind you that will again a staircase go into the second level it's going nowhere today.*

*Someone told me that most of the obelisks that had been carved before in Egypt, transported to another place, and most of them are now erected in Rome. In the past to move an obelisk, they used obelisk ships. During the Roman Empire they did the same, through the Nile to the Mediterranean then to its new location.*

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<sup>7</sup> Lao Tzu, Tao-te-ching, 16 (tr. A. Waley)

*I want to have a voice to speak about everything, to speak about the world, justice, dreams, people without voice, I want the world to be better place, I want everyone to live in peace. No matter where or how? I want to give a voice for everything.*

*Do you know what is the truth, where does it come from? It might come from you and everyone.*

*Originally, we were made in pairs with carved inscription on the four sides, standing in the entrance of the temple, pointing to the sky. Now, we are erected separately in new places. Nowadays, after so many decades we changed, most of us got new pedestal.*

*We came from a far place crossed the land over there, can't you see? I see and I know how far it is.*

*How many worlds do we live in, how many truths? So many but we must find it.*

*If you and I believe in myth, we would rather create a new one. A new one to become true, myth of our dreams. The very concept of utopia, refers to that which has no borders, beginning with the imagination itself. The power of utopianism lies in its ability to instantiate the tension between borderlessness, movement and place, a tension....<sup>8</sup>*

*I have the words, I have the right, I want freedom. You have the choice.*

*You can't gather the whole stories, but you have to know what is happening? We don't have to blame ourselves, count the words, stay blind. Who is controlling the world? Where is the world? The stories about everything, and everyone. Why don't we all live in peace?*

*You can make the unnoticeable remarkable, it's your choice, your perception, no one is going to blame you. I can see you where you are, and you can do. Yes, I am an obelisk, but a different obelisk, I am not carved from one stone like the ones before. I would like to tell my dream. The world is a foreign land and the word can make a difference, it is a voice we can use it.*

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<sup>8</sup> <https://chimurengachronic.co.za/the-idea-of-a-borderless-world/>

## Project no.2



Zinc plate no.1- 50x70 - 2018



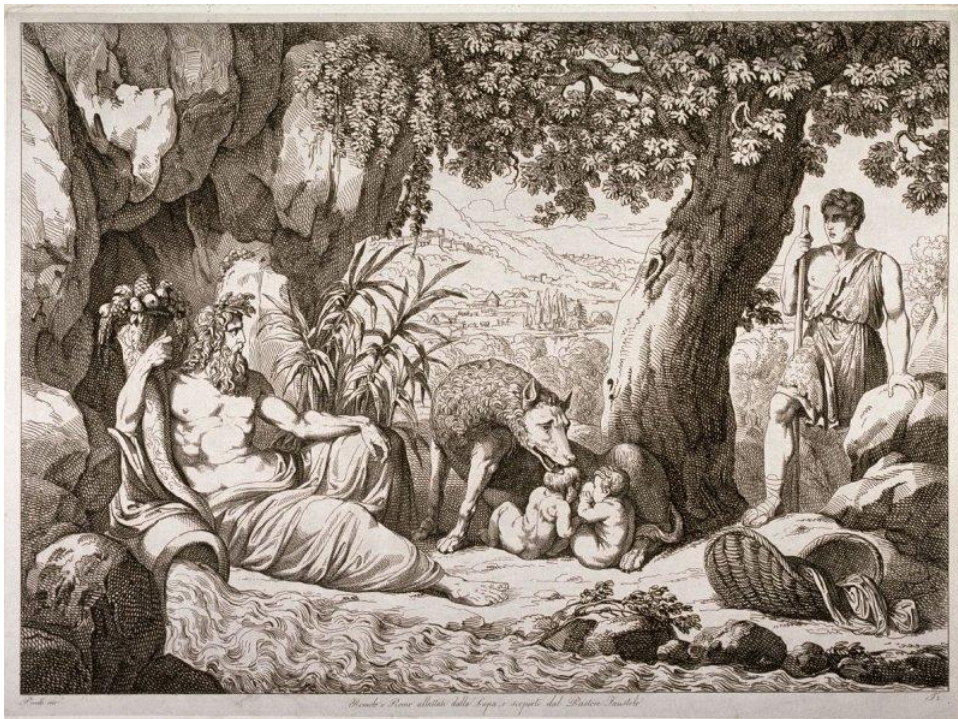
Print no.1 50x70- 2018/2019

This artwork is a series of prints on cotton paper and engraved zinc plates 50x70 cm, using the technique of etching and aquatint. A book will be created from the prints and the zinc plates will be displayed next to it.

It is inspired by the book the description of Egypt by Napoleon Bonaparte, which is a documentation of old and modern Egypt:

*The Description de L’Egypte is arguably the largest single effort ever undertaken by one culture to study another. It was the fruit of the labors of 167 scientists brought by Napoleon Bonaparte to Egypt in 1798, who after a stay of three years, went back France and worked diligently with some 2000 draftsmen and engravers for 20 years to produce a monumental work of almost 1000 plates and some 7500 pages of text. The magnificent large format editions are works of art of unprecedented accuracy and beauty. The plates are grouped in 11 volumes of 56cm x 75 cm each, under the headings of Antiquities (5 volumes), Natural History, covering Egypt’s flora and fauna in three volumes, and the Modern State (as it existed in 1798-1800) in two volumes, and a Geographic Atlas volume. The nine volumes of text also covered Antiquities (4 volumes) the Modern State (3 volumes), Natural History (2 volumes), and an Index volume.<sup>9</sup>*

This project is influenced by the idea of what do we see using the book The Description of Egypt and the myth of the she-wolf as a tool, in which the main idea of the original book is to document the other limited to what observed. The artifacts, streets, tools, architectures, maps,...etc are documented drew an identity from one perspective. The book is an observation of the normal and the obvious, but not what is concealed by what is visible.



Artist: Bartolomeo Pinelli -1817 <sup>10</sup>

The myth is illustrating the foundation of the city of Rome, it started in a little town outside Rome in Alba Longa, the mother was Rhea Silvia and her dad was the King Numiter who was displaced by his brother the king Amulius. King Amulius thought that the twin was a threat for his kingdom so he ordered that the twins should be killed. The two brothers

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.wdl.org/en/curator-video/2/>,

<sup>10</sup> <https://art.famsf.org/bartolomeo-pinelli/romulus-and-remus-nursed-she-wolf-and-discovered-shepherd-faustolo-19633037297>

Romulus and Remus were abandoned were found by a Lupa who suckled them and later found by a shepherd. When they grow up, they manage to get unit with the grandfather Numiter. They decided to establish the city of Rome, but they disagreed, and Romulus killed Remus. Romulus wanted to gather people for the new city, so he created an asylum and after the city was created, he organized a festival and ask the neighbors in the city around to come with young women, but a war raised against Rome by the neighbors communities, and the women intervened to ask to stop fighting to come to some agreements and the result was that Remulus rolled with joint king .<sup>11</sup>

The she-wolf myth is used in the artwork for its case, the myth was created in a way to fit a contemporary political circumstance, and resonate with the society that was expanded, for example the story of the asylum , which shows that Rome was a community open for everyone, Roman through history is community open to outsider, the city was open for everyone, and everyone was accepted. In the artwork the symbol of the she-wolf is used but without the twin and the colosseum appeared on her back.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b01q02t7> Romulus and Remus, BBC Radio 4, Ancient Rome