

**HORRID LANGUAGE**

***MEIRA***

***AHMÉMULIĆ***

***CURATED BY PATRIK HAGGREN & DANIEL TERRES***

MEIRA AHMEMULIĆ



The Cursed Landscape (still image), 2024

## ABOUT THE WORKS IN HORRID LANGUAGE

### PATRIK HAGGREN & DANIEL TERRES

Meira Ahmemulić's *Hemskspråket* (*The Horrid Language*) is an exhibition about the ravages of language in our lives. In new and older works, the artist exposes the duplicitousness of words and exploits their potential for dissonance — using noise, dissidence and humor. The works, consisting of text, film, sculpture and sound, move between different narratives, landscapes and forms of attention to political and aesthetic boundaries. With a language characterized by extraordinary literalness and symbolic ambiguities, Ahmemulić here continues her long-standing work of pinpointing contradictions in language, memory, class and identity in Sweden today.

Ahmemulić weaves together installations, films, objects, and sculptures with text-based works *Sidenfigrar* (*Silk Fingers*), *Mattan* (*The Carpet*), and *Hemskspråket* (*Horrid Language*), which are included in this brochure.

#### Room 3B

For this exhibition at Havremagasinet, Meira Ahmemulić has expanded on earlier works and combined them with new ones, with themes, materials, and narratives recurring throughout. The relief *Hemskspråket / Horrid Language* (2024) — in Swedish, a pun on native and horrid language — gives the exhibition its title. It consists of a blue-and-yellow tongue pinned down with rusty nails. Beneath the tongue is a halo made of travel icons bought in Belgrade, whose images have been erased. The work unmistakably sets a tone of anger and retribution: “Swedish is a chronic disease that leads to premature and painful death for immigrants,” reads Ahmemulić’s accompanying literary work. Both the erased icons and the irreverent treatment of the national language are iconoclastic. Like Vladimir Tatlin’s counter-reliefs in the 1910s, Ahmemulić’s work shifts focus from transcendence to the material conditions of perception and thought. Her exhibition is shaped by this redirected look at the order of things. As a voodoo doll, the tongue in flag colors subverts the supposedly natural order of the Swedish language, turning it from a dominant subject into an object of curse, diagnosis, and satire. Within the political frame-

work of *Tidö* (the agreement underpinning Sweden’s current far right nationalist government coalition), which demands that immigrants assimilate, Ahmemulić’s text describes the Swedish language as mutilating and scarring the body. However, the shifts in perception and the sickness described in her text—along with the literal chewing and metabolization of language—also signify a refusal to accept the rules of the game. As Felicia Mulinari points out in an essay on Ahmemulić’s work, this refusal is intertwined with her surrealism, seen as the only rational response to the present, a response full of anger as well as hope.

The floating work *Sidenfigrar / Silk Fingers* (2024) in the same room consists of a golden bedspread that Ahmemulić’s mother sewed from silk bought in their homeland of Montenegro. The silk that was also used to make curtains and dresses seemed to magically transform the family’s apartment in Gårdsten in Göteborg during the artist’s childhood. At the same time, for Ahmemulić, the precious material covering the bed, in all its luxury, is a memory of impossible rest from migrant labor in Sweden’s welfare state. The knotted and scarred fingers reaching into the air above the bed were painstakingly hand-sewn by the artist. The fingers’ imperfections, caused by the difficult labor—her mother used a sewing machine—reiterate not only dreams of beauty but also the toil of work, placing the two in relation to each other. At the same time, these fingers are acts of cursing, referencing the curses in the sound piece *När moster gav SKF fingret / When Aunt Gave SKF Factory the Finger* (2022), which tells the story of her aunt losing a finger by industrial work. Curses from the homeland are uttered in Göteborg’s million-program housing projects built 1965-1975: “May you lose your fingers in a workplace accident, may your social benefit destroy you.” It is a surreal tale of everyday wordplay, inescapable fate, and prophecies of change.

#### Room 3A

The first thing that greets the visitor in Room 3A is *Three Generations* (2022), three lamb tongues cast in concrete, representing human tongues. This gesture manifests a refus-

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al to speak, but the three tongues also symbolize language as continually changing over generations (the three tongues of Ahmemulić, her mother, and son). The sculptures are accompanied by *Modern / The Mother* (2018), icons adorned with portraits of Ahmemulić's mother at significant moments in her life in former Yugoslavia and Sweden, as a young woman, a parent, and on. In the nearby video piece *Modersmålmord / Mother Tongue Murder* (2022), Ahmemulić prepares lamb tongue in her mother's traditional way, serving it to her son just as she once was. In a nearly ritualistic act, the lamb tongue is prepared—stretched, skinned, boiled, and sliced—a brutal and careful imagery of loss and tradition in exile.

At the far end of the room, the film *Det förbannade landskapet / The Cursed Landscape* (2024) is projected, showing drawn-out sequences of the so-called “cursed mountains” in Montenegro and the interior of a mosque. These scenes contrast with idyllic myths of the Swedish nation and stories of concrete architecture and urban periphery. The question, “Are you aiming at the buildings... Are you cursed?” — another pun on the Swedish disambiguation between being accursed and being pissed off — is directed at the viewer, pointing to conflicting loyalties to the nation and the suburbs.

Next to the film stands *The Carpet* (2024), which the artist has borrowed from a friend from former Yugoslavia living in Göteborg. It replaces Ahmemulić's own lost Granaš carpet, a gift from her parents. Granaš carpets were woven by Muslim women in her mother's home villages of Plav and Gusinje, beneath the the so called Accursed Mountains. On a trip there, Ahmemulić discovered that the craft had been lost to industrialization, tourism, and emigration. In an accompanying text, Ahmemulić writes about how every home and mosque in the area used to own a Granaš. The carpet on display, which substitutes for the lost heritage, is instead a ćilim from Gotovuša. Ahmemulić has placed the silk fingers that she has sewn from from her mother's fabrics. In the work *Sidenfingrar*, the fingers are a haunting monument to the sacrifices of migrant workers in Swedish industry; on

the carpet, they rest.

In another new film for Havremagasinet, *Jag tömmer mig på svenska / I Rid Myself of Swedish* (2024) refers back to the sculpture *Hemskspråket* (2024) and its ambiguous notion of language as submission and surrealist possibility. Over images depicting an environment that can be interpreted in several ways — as a school cafeteria or perhaps as a dining room in a refugee camp — the voice-over speaks of the right to refuse a language that prevents you from dreaming. And dreaming is not a luxury but a necessity. While the native language is perceived as threatening, we are told, Swedish is a spirit that takes possession of the body. Yet in turn, Swedish risks being swallowed, literally, and translated word by word beyond recognition. The work transforms this threat of linguistic degradation and alteration into a practice that displaces familiar notions of what is noise and what is speech, truth and madness, in ways that complicate the objectification of the immigrant as well as well as the idea of the subject as immaterial and untouched by society's conflicts. In this work, as in several of the works in the exhibition, stories of mutilation also signal the montage or weaving of different images, places and languages whose cracks and demarcations present an attack on essentialist divisions of culture and hierarchies of power.

### Floor 2

Montage as a method is perhaps most central to the virtual reality film *De höga husens rundgång / The Roundabout of the High Rises* (2022) on the second floor. Starting from a magic formula for becoming invisible, the viewer then undergoes a series of hallucinatory movements through a segregated city. The film's narrative takes place between biblical passages and suburban concrete houses in the architectural center of Swedish modernity. A concrete building, a theater stage, a square in Göteborg's million programme, under a pulpit of the Bethlehem Church are the scene for various revelations in a drama in which the viewers seeming passiveness is shaken.



Horrid Language, 2024

## ART WORKS

**Floor 3A** *I Rid Myself of Swedish* (2024)  
Video, 7:14 min

*Three Generations* (2022)  
Concrete, iron

*The Mother* (2018)  
5 icons (10,5 x 14 cm), pictures from  
private archive

*Mother Tounge Murder* (2022)  
Video, 7.45 min.

*The Carpet* (2024)  
187 x 304 cm, wool

**Floor 3B** *The Cursed Landscape* (2024)  
Video, 5:33 min

*Horrid Language* (2024)  
Wool, iron nail, wood, icons

*Silk Fingers* (2024)  
Silk, wool, cotton, piano wire

*When Aunt Gave SKF Factory the Finger* (2023)  
Sound, 25 min

**Floor 2** *The Roundabout of the High Rises* (2022)  
**(entrence floor)** VR-film, 15 min



## ACCOMPANYING TEXTS

### MEIRA AHMEMULIĆ

#### Hemskspråket / Horrid Language (2024)

Wool, iron nail, wood, icons

Adapting to the rhythms and sounds of Swedish seems easy at first. Even if the organs and limbs are out of sync, they quickly learn which Swedish words, phrases and melodies require warning – when feet should run or kick, hearts slow down or beat harder.

But immigrants who give Swedish precedence and let it displace the home language suffer stomach problems. The digestive system has the hardest time adjusting to a language that wounds and mutilates. 30 feet of intestines must be synchronized to absorb nutrients and expel waste from the body. The stomach struggles against Swedish and does everything it can to make the body get rid of the hostile language.

The eyes, too, sting and burn from Swedish, blurring vision and causing headaches.

Awareness of the harms of Swedish often comes too late, resulting in abdominal pain, depression and anxiety, but also more serious illnesses. The longer the language remains in the body, the more it wreaks havoc.

Swedish is a chronic disease that leads to a premature and painful death for immigrants.

#### Mattan / The Carpet (2024)

187 x 304 cm, wool

In the summer of 2024, I went to Plav and Gusinje, two villages up in the Cursed Mountains of Montenegro where my family comes from, to find out more about my textile heritage. On the very first day, I learned that the carpet I am interested in, which is unique to the region, is extinct. No one has woven a Granaš, as the rug is called, for almost 30 years. In the past, there was a *Granaš* in every home and in every mosque. The pattern was crafted, and woven, by Muslim girls and women in the villages for centuries.

My mother received a Granaš as a dowry. My aunts wove the rug because my grandmother was too ill to weave it

herself.

My mother took the rug to Andersberg in Halmstad, and later to Biskopsgården, Bergsjön and Gårdsten in Göteborg. Her sister took a similar rug to Hammarkullen and also wove her own Granaš rugs until a workplace accident at Sweden's ball bearing factory in Gamlestan cost her an index finger. My relatives in Sweden, Germany and America had similar rugs in their homes. With the help of the carpet, they could create a home far away in a foreign country.

I learned to walk, and celebrated my birthdays until I left home, on the Granaš rug. When I got married, my mother gave it to me and my son took his first steps on it.

My relatives who came to Sweden brought with them craft traditions that they practiced as best they could alongside heavy work in Swedish industry or as cleaners in Swedish factories, offices and homes. But they rarely managed to pass on their skills to their children.

I have counted on those who still live in Plav and Gusinje to maintain their, my, cultural heritage, to protect it and keep the old knowledge alive. But most of the population has left the villages to work in the West, where their traditions have not been valued and their knowledge has rarely been utilized. In Sweden, the way people from the Balkans decorate their homes and their craftsmanship has often been looked down upon – ostentatious in vulgar colors and cheap materials that signal low status and lack of education and taste. An aesthetic that cuts against the minimalist, cold, Scandinavian ideal.

The decimated population that has remained in the villages has struggled to maintain their traditional crafts. Weaving a Granaš requires many people and a lot of time. At least two years, from wool shearing, wool roping and dyeing to thread spinning, warping and weaving. There are too few people left in Plav and Gusinje.

## ACCOMPANYING TEXTS

Today, most Granaš rugs are found in the West. The villagers of Plav and Gusinje have replaced them with bright, synthetic carpets made in China. The last carpets woven in the villages were bought by Americans.

Back in Sweden, I couldn't find the Granaš rug we put away one autumn when we grew tired of it. Not only has the craft died out, but the object of the older generation's efforts is also lost.

Artist Mileta Mijatovic received a *ćilim* when he got married, which he brought with him to Kortedala in Göteborg. It was woven in the area around the village of Gotovuša in Montenegro in the 1960s before he was born. His grandmother put the rug away because it was too precious to use. Eventually, Mileta's father, the youngest of ten siblings, inherited it, but he, too, found it too fine to tread upon. The rug in this exhibition belongs in Kortedala, where Mileta's two children learned to walk on it. I've borrowed Mileta's rug for the exhibition at Havremagasinet because I can't find my own.

On the rug, I have placed fingers sewn from silk, representing the lost fingers of migrant workers in Swedish industry—so that they may finally rest.

### **Sidenfingrar / Silk Fingers (2024)**

Silk, wool, cotton, piano wire

"Imagine the bliss of sleeping in," says my mother as she explains how the night has been. Sleeping in is a luxury she has dreamt of since coming to Sweden.

My mother's fingers are curved from heavy work. She often hurts so much that she struggles to hold a pen. It pains her that the hands, which have shown care and love for as long as I can remember, no longer obey her.

Aching joints and muscles prevent her, and my relatives in the first generation—migrant workers—from resting, even though it has been decades since they worked.

In the anthology *Open Arms*, Daniel Rahaut and Lovisa Broström write that employment rates between 1945–1970 were higher among migrant workers than native-born Swedes, but also: "Immigrants and natives worked in different sectors of the Swedish economy; immigrants took the dangerous, dirty, and low-paid jobs that the natives didn't want. That immigrants faced more health risks and accidents at their workplaces is therefore not surprising."

I see my mother's hands before me as I go through dresses, jackets, pants, robes, pajamas, toiletry bags, and curtains she has sewn over the years. A brown imitation leather suitcase, which she used to pack gifts for relatives in Montenegro, is stuffed with fabric scraps. Among them are pieces from a dark blue summer dress in thin jersey with silver threads and delicate straps that she made for me the summer before the outbreak of the war—when my sister and I took the bus to Yugoslavia for the last time—purple chiffon from a bohemian dress we co-designed for my first graduation from Angered High School, with a bodice made from a patterned scarf she bought at the Indiska department store, cherry-colored raw silk from the dress I wore when I graduated two years later. At the bottom of the suitcase are pieces of golden and light pink silk with embroidered flowers, textiles that framed my upbringing until I moved out.

On one of the last days of our vacation in the early 1980s in Gusinje in the Prokletije mountains, where my mother was born, we shopped for the trip home. The store was small, but the selection of fabrics was large. We chose the finest. My mother took out the measuring tape, calculated how much silk we would need, and how much it would cost. The expensive silk seemed magical when she described how it would transform our home—and us.

Back in Sweden, she spent many evenings at the sewing machine. When she finished, she dressed my and my sister's room with light pink curtains, bedspreads, cushions, and canopy beds embroidered with flowers and ruffles. Entering our room at Kanelgatan 6 in Gårdsten was to be



embraced by a magnificent, glittering fairy tale world draped in pink.

My parents' bedroom was decorated in golden silk, the same precious fabric used for folk costumes and traditional clothing: *dimije* or *salvare*, traditional trousers originally worn in the Ottoman Empire, along with gold-embroidered vests and sheer white blouses. In one of the few photos of my mother before she moved to Sweden, she poses arm in arm with her friend. Both are wearing gold *dimije* and matching vests with gold brocade, looking serious and giggly at the same time.

"The best thing about a wound is that it's open," writes Lia Garcia. But the best thing about a wound is that it gives the pain legitimacy. Without a wound, the pain floats around the body like a restless spirit. "I think one should carry their wounds," says a friend somewhat solemnly, as if there's something noble in it.

On pieces of that slippery, shiny silk, I draw fingers that belong to those whose bodies, abilities, labor, and dreams were appropriated by Swedish industry and the Swedish welfare state as soon as they set foot in Sweden. The fabric is slick and elusive; I have to pin it down carefully to keep it in place. With a needle and thread from my mother's sewing kit, I sew a monument of fingers in shimmering golden silk. The fabric is as shiny and seductive as the day we bought it.

I go to the doctor. I think that, like my mother, I have rheumatism in my fingers.

"Why don't you use a thimble?" my mom asks. She looks at my red fingertips, the blisters on my right thumb and middle finger. I stuff the silk fingers with wool until they cannot be bent. With cotton thread, I join the slippery fabric with tight stitches, pack the wool fibers as tightly as possible, stretch the silk to the breaking point. Sometimes it cracks and the black wool peeks out. I sew the tears together, small fine stitches next to and on top of each other.

My fingertips press the needle through the dense wool. Often it stops and I have to pull the needle out with my teeth. Last, I sew wrinkles, cracks, knots, scars and calluses, striving towards the smooth, resilient silk fabric. The fingers are strong and unbending. Every time my mother visits, she carefully examines one finger at a time and tells me how much better they would be if I used the sewing machine instead of sewing them by hand.

As soon as I pause the work, my fingertips heal and the pain goes away after a couple of days.

MEIRA AHMEMULIĆ



I Rid Myself of Swedish (still image), 2024

**About the Artist** Meira Ahmemulić (b. 1974 in Halmstad, Sweden) is an artist and writer whose work relentlessly explores the complex intersections of language, identity and environment. Educated at Valand University of the Arts in Gothenburg and the Academy of Fine Arts in Colombo, Sri Lanka, Ahmemulić has established herself as a multifaceted artist with works that touch on issues of exile, memory, identity, national subject and language's inherent contradiction of enablement and subjugation. Her art has been exhibited at several important art institutions in Sweden such as Blå Stället in Angered, GIBCA (Gothenburg International Biennial of Contemporary Art), Göteborgs Konstmuseum and Moderna Museet. As a writer, she has been published in prominent cultural magazines such as Ord&Bild, Glänta, OEI and Paletten.

**About the Curators** Daniel Ricardo Terrés and John Patrik Haggren organized program series, exhibitions and artistic interventions in public spaces under the project Urban Konst at Göteborgs Konsthall 2017-2023. They were guest editors of the journal Ord&Bild, no 3-4: 2021 with an issue on urban and aesthetic categorizations. *Hemskpråket* is their second exhibition at Havremagasinet Länskonsthall Boden and is part of their ongoing investigation of art's reproduction of urban contradictions.

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