

In the Waiting Room to Heimatland

Inhabiting

“Always when I come back here faster beats my heart, when I see towers and familiar houses already from afar; and when I’m far away again, far away from here, a longing grows in me to see our home so dear (...)”

“Ja, die Heimat, sie ist schön. Die Zukunft liegt in unserer Hand.
Gott, begrüß mein Heimatland. Ich lebe gern im diesen Land...”

(fragment of a song sung in Guttentag)

Works by Anna Konik are usually precisely situated: what I mean is that the artist uses a liquid and obscure — albeit surgically precise — image to fill specific spaces, which adopt the role of one of the protagonists. In *Our Lady’s Forever* (2007), an abandoned half-phantasmagorical hospital building in Cork was saturated with moving film shots, which seized the subsequent rooms, thus preparing the setting for the activities of figures lost in the maze of a house lit with cool seaside light. In *The Villa of the Entranced* (2009–2011), the camera equally carefully explored the nooks and crannies of a home belonging to *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin*. The walls of Villa Linde seemed to absorb and exhale time, conversations and memories. In the work *In the Same City, Under the Same Sky* (2011–2015), recently shown in Warsaw, the artist arranged thirty five meetings with women in their apartments in order to listen to reconstructions of refugee stories. Those stories had been previously collected in thirty five rooms in which the individuals fleeing war found refuge. The publication *A Grain of Sand in the Pupil of the Eye. Video works 2000–2015* (2016),^a which presents projects created by Konik to date, includes other subtly distributed tropes that confirm the extraordinary importance of places: two photographs of rooms, provokingly different but at the same time strikingly similar, inaugurate and culminate the volume, thus establishing a spatial frame, attesting a special key to read the artist’s creative practice.

- a Cf. A. Konik, *A Grain of Sand in the Pupil of an Eye. Video works 2000–2015* (Warsaw: Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, 2016); A. Konik, *In the Same City, under the Same Sky... (35 Stories)* (Warsaw: Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, 2016). The book was published on the occasion of the exhibition: Anna Konik, *A Grain of Sand in the Pupil of an Eye. Video works 2000–2015*, Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw 4 December 2015 — 14 February 2016, curator: E. Gorzałdek.

Anna Konik does not enter a space with the intention of embracing it with a subordinating and commanding gaze. Her camera does not aim to conquer the world, but rather engages in the work of reconnaissance. The filmed places may be safe and encompassing (as it is in the work *In the Same City...*), while to a certain degree they resemble a stage (it might be an afterimage of the experience of collaboration with the Academia Theatre and the Opera Buffa Theatre) for a ciphered performance of identity (as it is in *My Own Room*). I believe they can also be understood as territories of conducting research: a kind of observatories. What matters is the exposition properties of space. It is the backdrop and at the same time a co-participant of the act in which an experience reveals itself: told, embodied, reconstructed.

In the work created during her artistic residency at POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Anna Konik performs a move that leads her from interiors out of doors: it is no longer rooms, home interiors, but the space of a town that becomes the area of (expanded) observation. Entering outdoor space with the camera is a logical and necessary step in verifying the potential of the technique of analysis developed thus far. It has already been tested in the cycle of ten films about homeless persons (*In the Middle of the Way* — 2001–2015). In the latest work, **(b)** the artist films Dobrodzień — her hometown in Upper Silesia, which was inhabited by Germans, Poles and a small Jewish community prior to World War II, whereas now it is still Polish-German, but no longer Jewish. The territory depicted in the work is therefore larger, more heterogeneous: the camera will need to cope with an extra-human perspective as well as architecture, sounds and objects: a larger space will usher in more light, more stories, more times. A completely new actor — nature — will emerge.

Remembering

“Mum, mum — *yes* — look at me. — *yup* — Mum — *yes* — Look at me. — *twenty and here is fifty and she kiei kiej* what is it and this this is *ca one ka* — Mum, look at me. — *what* — What’s your name? — *no* — What’s your name? — *I don’t know* [...] — Do you know when you were born? — *no* — 6 March — *mmm* — 1938 — *yes* — in Nyzhnia Bika”.

Dobrodzień, or Guttentag, is a place on which a knot of memory has tightened, one of the knots so often described nowadays by the researchers of

- b** The work on Dobrodzień is to adopt the form of a film. Footage from thirty shooting days, film chronicles and found documentaries is under development; Konik’s characteristic precise process of analysis will culminate with an installation in the future. I am referring here to the *work in progress* footage.

memory. (c) After the Great War (in which the town lost 167 inhabitants), the town decided in plebiscites to join Germany (despite an almost equal proportion of Polish and German speakers). Tranquillity was disturbed only by the events of the Third Silesian Uprising and the Night of the Broken Glass. Even during World War II, the town did not witness bloody encounters: the post-war remnants are a tomb at the cemetery and a solitary grave of a German soldier killed by Russians, which is situated on the premises of the former Jewish estate belonging to Salo Hepner, murdered in Theresienstadt. After Guttentag was incorporated into post-war Poland, repatriates from the East began to arrive: the artist's family originates from the vicinity of Lviv. Personal stories, whose setting (but not stage) the town becomes, are present somewhere between the buildings of Dobrodzień, although they simultaneously seem impossible to reclaim. The footage gathered in the course of the new work includes records of conversations with the artist's ill mother: no story wants to emerge from amongst glossolalia, looped bits of sentences and distorted words. This experience of the unreachable past and loss of identity, dramatic and personal, should probably be recognised as the intimate kernel of the project. Conversations with the mother transform into a dialogue with another interlocutor — Anna Konik ventures into the town in an attempt to force it to reveal its past, and what follows is identification. The artist extracts stories from places into which the past has blended: the central role is played by Hepner's estate (the carcass of a barn pierced by stalwart willow trees becomes a symbol of memory of that past: material remnants of human activity are devoured by biological processes). The camera records, it listens to the cicatrised, obliterated and coalesced tissue for narratives hidden therein — very peculiar, deformed by the passage of time, seized by emotions and illusive memory. Guttentag seems — as the artist's intention can be read — to have a problem with bonding its stories — the trajectory of the movement of memories, their inheriting, their records — is not continuous. In the same way as the memory in the artist's family is marked with void — it no longer reaches so easily to Lviv. In the same way as the memory of other inhabitants is riddled by illness and old age. Movement, strolling, going into the town — the acts of care, soothing anxiety in contact with specific people provide the artist with an opportunity to shape a diagnosis: looking out for symptoms of the past, building knowledge about the current state. The memory of the ill physical body and the social body: of the family, of the community begins to fulfil itself in a sequence of meetings, long conversations, observations.

- c M. Rothberg, "Introduction: Between Memory and Memory: From *Lieux de mémoire* to *Noeuds de mémoire*," *Yale French Studies*. *Noeuds de mémoire: Multidirectional Memory in Postwar French and Francophone Culture* 2010, no. 118/119. Also cf. M. Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

In the work, the camera acquires the properties of a highly sensitive microphone, which is able to record the inner speech of the town and its dwellers. This act of listening to what can only be mentioned in passing or whispered, what is unvoiced, and what happens during traditional interviews, almost classically formatted as video-testimonies, familiar from the oral history practice. The patient and long company kept with the process of restoring memory takes place owing to the unique capability of close and very respectful contact with the interlocutor. Konik is able to wait for an intimate story to unfold. Investigations into memory preoccupied the artist in several of her previous projects: in *Play Back (of Irène)* (2007–2011), the female protagonist of the video returned to the moment of an accident in the mountains within a broken story that was undergoing reconstruction, arduously assembled of the tatters of memory. Konik takes particular interest in memory at critical moments: when it is stored in places that are a difficult, inaccessible archive of fragments. She is preoccupied with memory that is old and tired — as is the case of the project *Transparency/Przezroczyść* (2004), in which four protagonists are caught in a loop of talking about themselves, in a web of constant repetitions and reflections in the past.

Division, waiting

A small one-storey house, neglected, an old building, perhaps from before the war. No more than two cramped chambers can fit inside. But, still, there is a wire fence adjoining the facade at a right angle that divides the yard into two symmetrical halves. The house is also divided. On one side, underneath the window, an old man is sitting on a bench.
(film still)

The railway station building in Pawonków, not far from Dobrodzień. Germans departed from here after the war. It was here that repatriates from the East got off their trains. An inscription hanging on the facade above the entrance next to the town name reads: “The Waiting Room.” Two elderly men are sitting on the bench.
(film still)

The Dobrodzień project gauges gaps: slips of memory, its escapes into amnesia and senility. The question of Jewish absence becomes a diagnostic topic: it causes bursts of the smooth surface of thoughts, it reveals hidden voids. The lack of memory about the community from before the Night of the Broken Glass, the lack of traces left by the owners of the restaurant, pharmacy, by Edyta Stein’s aunts, who ran a guest house here, resonates with the desolate memorial site of other Jews — those whose departure was seen in small towns near Lviv: Borshchovychi, Nyzhnia Bilka, from where Konik’s family hails. At the same time, the bits of that past resonate with the

memory of acts of violence experienced somewhere else: under the occupation near Lviv, during the liquidation of the ghetto in Yarychiv, during the pacification of Polish villages in Ukraine. A traumatic memory, the person whom it concerns, the person who experiences it, the place with which it is connected — all that is uncoordinated: the killed are somewhere else; the remembering were displaced; the places belong to a different country. That incongruence generates a state of ontological under-determination. The figures are as if not entirely real, as if they were not able to settle down in their here and now, always leaning towards a different time and place. This applies in the same way to the absent Jews, to the displaced Germans (and those who stayed), and to the Poles who were brought here. When Ann Michel, a Jewish woman who came from the United States to search for traces of her great-great-grandfather, talks about the memory of her family, filmed in the interiors of ruined buildings of Bzionków, she joins the circle of *dislocated* and *unsettled*. In *Dobrodzień*, everyone is *elsewhere*.

The state of division of memory and experience, which is symbolically captured in the film take of *house no. 5* (so small, but so ruthlessly divided) and of the *waiting room in Pawonków* (which focalises the state of suspension of the filmed world), is the cognition that turns Konik's work into a story about something more than a local intimate family problem with memory and identity. The footage from *Dobrodzień* concerns the experience of this part of Central Europe in which, as Ryszard Nycz (d) recently wrote, (almost) nobody is (with) themselves at home. Exiles and relocations of the population (people leaving Guttentag and those coming to *Dobrodzień*) yank at the memory and turn it into a *memory in motion*. Yet, such memory is not kindred with what is described today by researchers of transnational memory, who move along the lines of migrations. (e) That old memory after (post-)war relocations reveals what happens with the memorial sphere when the past is deprived of its referent, when the traumas born therein have nowhere to root, settle; therefore, detached from their original topography, they hover akin to floating signifiers above the remembering — in mid-air, without assignment, omnipresent. The only stable element proves to be nature: a tree in Hepner's estate, filmed in cyclical shots of the four seasons by the camera that revolves around its own axis, becomes a mute guardian of the process: demanding, non-judgemental, included, and yet indifferent.

Konik's work becomes a photosensitive film on which these phantoms are developed: in a subtle yet inquisitive way the artist deconstructs the violence that resonates here, although it is silenced — the violence whose memories were brought here by new residents and taken away by their predecessors. Thus, the *Dobrodzień* work transforms into a psychoanalytical activity, in

- d R. Nycz, "Sondowanie pamięci (5): być (z) sobą nie u siebie" in *Migracyjna pamięć, wspólnota, tożsamość*, eds. R. Sendyka, T. Sapota, R. Nycz, from the series *Nowa Humanistyka* (Warsaw: IBL 2016).
- e A. Erll, "Travelling memory," *Parallax* Vol. 17, No. 4 (2011).

a therapy through conversation: despite the fact that the fragmented memory of Konik's interlocutors often proves to be ruined, inaccessible or sealed off. The film/installation in progress about Dobrodzień can be therefore considered — from the broadest perspective — as a unique project of diagnosing the memory of regions stricken with painful history akin to the history experienced by this part of Europe, where people — places — of the past cannot be correlated, matched and connected. The memory that could allow them to take root in a place where the residents live transforms into a tightened knot which somehow keeps that entire complex of incommensurate fates and emotions in balance, yet it does not allow the past to be soothed. Konik's film, which deals with this knot in a very subtle way, shows how fragile that state is, even if cemented by a mixture composed of amnesia, uncertainty and pain.

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