

Curatorial Text: Laughter and Forgetting

Curator: Olga Stefan

Opening: September 8, 7:30 p.m.

Exhibition duration: September 8 – November 13

Artists: Esther Shalev-Gerz, Dor Guez, Clemens Von Wedemeyer, Agnieszka Polska, Sarah Sweeney, Nedko Solakov, Himali Singh Soin, Sophie Calle, Kateřina Šedá, Hito Steyerl, Dorothy Iannone, Dread Scott, Adam Vačkář, Dan Acostioaei

Exhibition architect: Lukáš Machalický

Laughter and Forgetting is a group show that explores the malleability of memory, pain of laughter, the interrelationship between public and private life, and the deception of human relationships, taking its start from Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* written in 1978 and published while in exile in Paris. The participating artists address the themes of laughter, forgetting, love, litost (the untranslatable Czech word that refers to a special type of regret), angels (symbols of totalitarianism) and the border that develop in Kundera's text musically through repetition, and are presented in the exhibition through expanded video and photography projects that reflect these media's relationship to the construction and alteration of history, elicitation of affective responses, or the actual documentation of past experience.

The architecture of the MeetFactory was especially conceived to guide us organically in and out of the rooms where the works are arranged in loosely thematic groupings, establishing additional meanings through their proximity to each other as we glide through the porous space delineators that rather than divide, remind us of both the limits and possibilities that borders pose.

As is the condition of categories in our contemporary society, so in the exhibition the lines separating artists' works based on these specific themes are blurred, a more metaphorical way for borders to be crossed and resistance to the totalitarian imposition of a singular meaning to be expressed. Therefore, despite the works primarily falling into one of six themes mentioned above, these themes also overlap and melt into each other.

In the first room, Nedko Solakov, Dor Guez and Esther Shalev-Gerz tackle history and time, sometimes through personal narratives. In *Replacement*, Solakov deals with the political system change in Bulgaria. A video that recalls the history of the mausoleum of the country's first communist leader, which was built in six days, the time it took for his body to be transported back to Sofia from Moscow where he had died, it also questions the merits of the new political model. In 1999 the democratic government destroyed the building attempting to eliminate that part of the country's history. While moving the camera in one shot around the empty space, Solakov superimposes historic black and white photos of the area to show the contrast, and maybe the lack of an ideological replacement.

Nedko Solakov's *Nostalgia* deals with personal memory as he compares his younger skinny self, appearing in a photo on his daughter's shelf, to his current self, one who is older, more corpulent, and who has experienced the collapse of communist ideology and the settling in of capitalism from which he, as an artist, has benefited. If sometimes "a type of forgetting motivated by repression" as Freud said, leads us to nostalgia even for hard times, then it is mostly due to the realization of the passage of time and the longing for our lost youth.

Also through personal narrative, Dor Guez reveals a little known chapter of Israel's colonialist past – that of its repressive relationship to the Christian Palestinian minority, a minority within a minority, whose fate is almost entirely absent from any official historical accounts. In *40 Days*, Guez documents his Palestinian grandfather recounting some of the

events of 1948, when in Israel's war with the surrounding Arab countries that attacked it after the UN Separation proposal, the IDF occupied the city of Lod which would have been in Palestine, and expelled its Arab population, allowing only very few to remain, and those that did had to leave their homes for other places of residence. The city was then taken over by Jewish refugees, themselves expelled from Arab countries, pointing to the cycle of violence, displacement, and ever-changing borders.

In Inseparable Angels: An Imaginary House for Walter Benjamin, Esther Shalev-Gerz documents a taxi trip from Weimar to the Buchenwald concentration camp. The two are only 10km apart but the journey is not only geographic – it is also a spiritual one from the center of Germany's enlightenment (the home of Goethe and Schiller) to the depths of its moral depravity. This extreme moral shift through time is represented by Paul Klee's *Angel of History (Angel Novus)*, a print that Walter Benjamin kept with him as he wandered Europe in search for a home in the wake of the Nazi's ascension to power in his country of origin. The video's flow, like memory itself, is staggered, and interrupted by a voice that reads texts from Benjamin, Kafka and others, which appear as photographs alongside the video.

From this room we can slip through the borders into the space on the left or continue straight. The large room to the left features works that use the image to refer to historical and personal forgetting, while those in the room straight ahead refer to forgetting in art. In *Lovely Andrea*, Hito Steyerl searches for an episode in her past, when she was a bondage performer during university in Japan. In this video, she is on a quest to find a picture of that moment and questions arise – did the event actually take place? Is the photo that she ultimately finds really of her? And as bondage is the act of giving pleasure through submission, then who ultimately has power, the one that is intentionally surrendering control or the one that is permitted (for money, love, or pleasure) to take it? "Some people have to be tied up to be free".

Dread Scott's archive of 100 images from various communist revolutions in *Let 100 Flowers Blossom/ Let 100 Schools of Thought Contend*, are placed together with vases of fresh flowers, thus creating a memorial, like a grave, to those moments that with time might ultimately be erased from the annals of history, and turning the exhibition manager who must replenish the flowers into a witness.

Digital forgetting is illustrated in Sarah Sweeney's *The Forgetting Machine*, an app that erases the image with each new refresh. Like our memories themselves, the image on the app deteriorates and alters with each new repetition, rather than reinforce the original. Our understanding of our past, too, is malleable and changes as our relationship with it alters based on our time perspective and life experiences.

In the space with works by Dorothy Iannone, Adam Vackar and Agnieszka Polska, the latter also takes up forgetting in her animated video, *The Forgetting of Proper Names*, titled after Freud's essay which is read as a voice-over in the background. As Freud analyses our propensity of forgetting names and substituting them for others, Polska's images of famous artworks are recontextualized and manipulated so that we no longer really remember the author, thus creating an altered version of events.

Personal narrative, as is present in many of the other works in the show, is a technique for confronting historical forgetting, and Adam Vackar's installation features an archive of objects belonging to his grandparents from both sides, including one grandfather's musical compositions found on ebay, letters, photographs, etc. Through these objects we learn of the turbulent micro-histories of war-torn Europe. Here Adam becomes curator of his grandparents' lives and their migrations over shifting borders.

Through humor, as is another facet of forgetting, we are able to deal with trauma, but this time by distancing ourselves and allowing the painful events to exist beyond us, as if they

happened to someone else. Humor is also a political weapon – it shatters the carefully constructed image of the powerful and reveals a hidden truth. Hito Steyerl, Dorothy Iannone, and Nedko Solakov all address history and memory with humor. Steyerl's *November* tells the story of Andrea Wolf, the artist's childhood friend, who became a revolutionary PKK fighter and was killed by Turkish forces in Kurdistan. Her image became a symbol for the revolutionary left the world over, and a poster of her as a martyr was even seen in a cinema in Japan while Hito Steyerl was filming *Lovely Andrea*, her alias during her bondage days. Through footage from a film that the two friends made together as teenagers juxtaposed with footage from the period after Andrea's death when her image became instrumentalized by both the PKK and the Turkish/German governments, *November* tells how an image (both the physical photo and the constructed identity of a person) can be manipulated and given symbolic meaning at the service of opposing interests.

With unrestrained irony, in *The Story of Bern*, an artist book of text and drawings, Iannone recounts an episode where an important exhibition at Kunsthalle Bern, at the time managed by the legendary Harald Szeemann, was shut down by the police due to accusations of pornography in her work. However the story reveals much more about sexism and power relations, solidarity and the lack thereof, as well as conflicting personal interests in the art world, subjects that most would prefer to leave undisturbed, thus continuing the politics of forgetting in art and life.

The border, both physical and metaphorical, is the subject, and also the title in Russian, of Clemens Von Wedemeyer's *Otjesd*. The mass migration from Russia to Germany in the early 1990s and the often unclear distinction between fiction and reality are part of von Wedemeyer's exploration of lines that are crossed, a topic of renewed urgency today and that is also the subtext of the work of the majority of the other artists, as is the struggle for power and control.

Historical forgetting is once again explored through personal narrative, this time by Dan Acostioaei originating from Iasi, a city whose population before the war was 50 % Jewish, deals with the image of Jews in contemporary Romania, when the discourse is heavily framed by Legionar-sympathizers, antisemitism, or extreme ignorance.

Sophie Calle's *Exquisite Pain*, Himali Singh Soin's *Follies*, and Katerina Seda's *Normal Life* all deal with love and forgetting, which are often associated with regret and humiliation (lítost). *Exquisite Pain* is an artist book that tells the story of the break-up of Calle's amorous relationship in India, where the two lovers were to meet. He never showed up and didn't have the courage to explain why. Calle's anguish from this loss of love and great betrayal are expressed in two parts of the book: the first takes place before the break-up while the second is after. On each page of this second part, Calle shows the photograph of her hotel room where she realized that that love was an illusion, and juxtaposes it with the text descriptions made by friends and colleagues of their most painful life experiences. The repetition of the photograph along with that of the stories of others' misfortunes becomes a healing mechanism for Calle and she is thus able to move on. Himali Singh Soin's *Follies*, named after architectural elements popular in the 18th century that serve no function but are purely ornamental, are a series of twenty love letters, addressed to follies found in the twenty arrondissements of Paris and translated by Google into French, left for passersby to find on the street and in public spaces. In this exhibition the project takes on additional significance in the context of Kundera's novel that opens with the story Love Letters. How does one translate one's feelings into words? Isn't there always something lost when emotions are articulated? But love is a risk, an adventure, an unplanned encounter, as Alain Badiou tells us, and yet with time it also can pass, leaving behind only words as its traces.

Normal Life is an autobiographical book and series of drawings made by Katerina Seda's grandmother for Katerina's baby, Julie. It tells of the war, life under communism, and her

preference for communism to the current capitalist reality. Katerina saw her grandmother only once per year, on Christmas, and the regret she feels about this lack of contact led her to ask her grandmother to engage in this project, a sort of love letter to little Julie who can never know the past except through her great-grandmother's subjective narrative.

Moving freely through the spaces of the show and experiencing the works both individually and in relation to each other, we grasp the full range of elements that make up the human condition while many of the mechanisms we use to construct our reality are revealed. Most artists in the show look inside to their personal biographies to question these truths and subvert official narratives, while also approaching other topics of existential import. Some treat the themes of love and laughter as instruments of resistance in the face of oppression (*"Love is a constant interrogation."*), while others tie them to the act of forgetting: with time, memories even of those we once most loved begin to fade, and laughter helps trauma wane – it is both a weapon and a medicine. *"...in this ecstatic laughter he loses all memory, all desire, cries out to the immediate present of the world, and needs no other knowledge."*

Political and historic forgetting are confronted by revealing or articulating past episodes inconvenient to our present national or personal image. One type of image is challenged by another, more physical one.

The struggle for power that fuels most human action plays out in the interpersonal, as well as on a political and global level. It is the thread that connects the exhibition together. We see it manifested in amorous relationships when we try to avenge our humiliation (*"...When the illusion of absolute identity vanishes, love becomes a permanent source of the great torment we call litost."*), or in totalitarian regimes that also use humiliation as a means of control, along with historic forgetting, and the prohibition of free thought. But it also exists in our refusal to conform or to accept given truths, thus reclaiming power from Power – it is present in our "NO".

In the exhibition that follows, we try to reveal how *"the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting"*.

(quotes from Milan Kundera's book)

This show was adapted especially for the MeetFactory from a version that appeared during Bucharest Art Week, October 2015.

Open daily 1 – 8 pm and according to the evening program. Voluntary admission fee.

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