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iconographies of xenofobia

● Struck by a meteorite, the pope took a tumble. He survived and was ready to lead his flock onwards, holding his cross firmly and sporting a still spotless fetish-cassock. This installation by Maurizio Cattelan was shown in post-protestant Basle and London's *Apocalypse* - to only mild excitement. But exhibited in the pope's native Poland, it sparked controversy and rekindled anti-Semitism.

A man ran through the rooms of Poland's National Gallery, Zacheta. He reached the statue of the pope and removed the meteorite. A rush of footsteps, shouting - wardens struggled to stop him, but were flashed immunity papers: the man was member of the Polish Parliament.

"It was heavy," said M.P.Tomczak, "the meteorite was not made of styro as I'd expected." In his young days Tomczak painted May Day parades. Today he is a catholic and a right-wing activist. Next to the statue, Tomczak left a letter where he berated the Gallery's director, Anda Rottenberg, calling her a "civil servant of Jewish origin." Why is Ms. Rottenberg not realizing her ideas in Israel, for the money of Israeli taxpayers? he asked. A hallucinatory phrase followed: "in the National Museum of Israel she could show a figure of a recumbent Great Rabbi crushed under the foot of Stalin or of Yasser Arafat or by the dome of the temple of Muhammad."

The Gallery is haunted. In 1922 the first President of independent Poland was assassinated on the main staircase of the Zacheta. A "Jewish president" elected by "non-Polish votes" who would bring not only "dishonor", but also "bad luck to Poland" - these punch-lines triggered "national anger." During an exhibition opening a frustrated painter-nationalist shot the President. Now Tomczak's anti-Semitic letter is a reminder of dark history; it conjures up the ghosts of 1968 when Jewish intellectuals were expelled from Poland at the instigation of the chauvinist faction of the Communist Party.

Cattelan's installation of the pope figured both in London's *Apocalypse* and then at the Zacheta Gallery's 100 jubilee show, curated by Harald Szeemann. Avant-garde artists had been prohibited from showing in the Zacheta before and after the Second World War. It was Anda Rottenberg who reinvented the Gallery. Nationalists love to hate Ms. Rottenberg. Her offence? Inviting the world's best artists and curators, open-

ing Poland to the latest trends in visual culture, putting Warsaw on the cultural map of Europe. In a macho Poland, Rottenberg broke new ground by choosing shows of two women artists for the Polish Pavilion in the Venice Biennale: Zofia Kulik and Katarzyna Kozyra. She was also responsible for an exhibition on xenophobia which featured Kiefer, Wodiczko, Finlay and Abakanowicz: *Where is Abel thy brother?*

The controversy over Cattelan's pope is part of Poland's culture wars. Catholicism is deprived of its mystique and coupled with chauvinism against any attempts to open up to diversity. The anti-Semitic letter was interpreted by a nationalist daily *Zycie* as counter-productive, another part of anti-Polish conspiracy - to empower Ms. Rottenberg. Hate of the other with predictable rhetoric and violent acting-out? In a TV show, Witold Tomczak called Ms. Rottenberg a "foreigner", a "stranger." His letter with hallucinations reviled the stranger as abject.

East Europeans produce, nay, we produce iconographies of abject. My fellow East European, Julia Kristeva, maps out abject. Neither subject, nor object - abject. It evokes disgust and desire. What is in-between. Without divides, without separations, without mercy.

We not only witness, but also participate in an explosion of xenophobic representations - full of abject - in Eastern Europe today. Anti-Semitism, prejudiced assumptions about sex and class... Iconographies of abject are produced to represent the supposed stranger: Jews, Roma, women, the unemployed and homeless. A violent search for enemies within, conspiracy theories, and degradation of the marginal. Some artists and activists attempt to counter xenophobia - and I will write about it. There is an urgent need to found an ethics of openness and hospitality - "at a time when nations and continents tend to withdraw into themselves, a responsibility remains to adopt the cosmopolitan dream of the ancient Stoics: in the megapolis of today, we are the inheritors of all traditions" (Julia Kristeva).

"The horror! The horror!" of our time and space. We change into beasts. Totalitarianisms. Shoah. Genocides. Humans disappear. Beasts remain. We tear to pieces, rape, lie in wait, kill. Our hate of the strangers, our abjection is a tribal call. But it enters polite society: it is not only the

youths with shaved heads who are the haters. Jews, women, homeless are regarded as offals in Polish culture. They produce phobias, nausea, attraction tinged with repulsion: sickening, beastly, hypersexual, rotten them. Polish culture gives them a dirty look.

The subaltern is represented in Katarzyna Kozyra's work, *Krzysztof Czerwinski*, a portrait of a beaten homeless man. His body in livid bruises is depicted against the background of Poland's national flag. A typical comment: "Looking at this photograph the average Pole has the same feeling he would have if a pigeon fouled his coat."

Twelve years into the transition, Eastern Europe undergoes an economic and ideological crisis. Unemployment, poverty, homelessness is mounting. The fragile and very limited democracy wants to pass for macho. It is categorically straight, and in general, hostile to minorities. The Holocaust and Communism put an end to multiculturalism, and after 1989 the "resurrected" states invest in their mythic identity and monolithic "national spirit." The Baltics, when independent, desired to build states of one and only nation which resulted in Russians being stripped of citizenship in Estonia. A number of post-Communist countries are filled with hatred towards their Roma population. The young republics are far from welcoming strangers - they fear their purity may be soiled by an inclusion of others and excel in entrenching themselves against foreign infections. Poland adopted very restrictive immigration laws.

East Europeans cultivate closed imagined communities. A violent overprotection of the invented blood and soil belonging was ironically commented on by a Polish artist, Andrzej Dłuzniewski, when he installed a fence around a little piece of soil in no way different from the land around it.

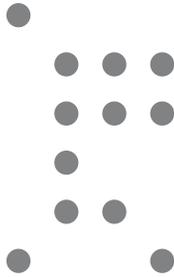
According to Julia Kristeva, in Eastern Europe people turned into wolves. The specters of the Gothic that she articulated in her novel *The Old Man and the Wolves* are haunting Poland and Lithuania. Whereas Bulgaria did not carry out deportations of the Jews (see Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fragility of Goodness*), more and more episodes are being revealed of Poles' and Lithuanians' contribution to the Holocaust. In spite of public apologies, the two peoples are not ready and willing to mourn the Jews; witness the case of Jedwabne where

the president of Poland acknowledged the participation of Poles in the pogrom, but the society denied any guilt. The past and present guilts of anti-Semitism are repressed in Poland and Lithuania alike. East Europeans are "ill with their own innocence."

In Eastern Europe the work of mourning has not been completed. Transgenerational hauntings continue. The debates over past guilts are heated and violent. Lithuania and Poland belong in "the haunted land" (Tina Rosenberg). In the heart of the baroque Old Town of Vilnius we happened on a concrete Soviet-style building, the Center for Contemporary Art. It was freezing inside: wardens donned fur-coats and stamped their feet. Ill-lit halls did not promise much. But sepia-toned photos loomed out of the dark: gothic, gallows humor, uncanniness. The cruelty of the unconscious and of history. The artists responsible for the works and for dimming lights, Stanikas, conjure up the ghosts of Lithuanian and Soviet past and of the difficult transition. They unearthed traumas: xenophobic and Soviet past, violence, mafia, difficulties in joining the European Union. All distanced with sophisticated wooden frames. Ghost townscapes of Stalinism, nudes of teenagers, a giant picture postcard 'Vilnius, Soviet Union' presents a woman lying in state surrounded by artificial flowers, not unlike the lavish funerals of Soviet leaders, a shot of Lenin's statue with an eerie aura.

The Stanikas's is abject art, but it digs deeper into the unconscious and history than American abject art. The dark and dank images are shadows of Shoah. Vilnius or rather Vilna, as Jews call it, formed a world Center of Yiddish culture, *Yerushalayim de-Lita* (the 'Jerusalem of Lithuania'). "[I]n our modern rational society, at the high stage of our civilization" Vilna was murdered; in the words of Hannah Arendt, it became a city of apartheid. In the Holocaust 100 000 Jews perished in Vilna and its vicinity. The catastrophic suffering here equaled persecution and slaughter and resistance. Vilna fighters.

Derridean *Mal d'Archive* is at the heart of the evil, disease, fever of the twentieth century depicted by the Stanikas. Griselda Pollock's warning: "the archive of photographs that appear to be the historical record, the fascist shape of memory. These house the unmourned losses of the Jewish



people and those exterminated in the camps for their sexuality, ethnicity or politics. It is often felt that the mere reproduction of the images of those on their way to the death chambers or starved to death, or executed and buried in mass graves revisits a second death, a second Orphic look that kills again. Faced with the horror, the people in these images too easily become abject." How to represent the Holocaust? Is the art of the Stanikas one of the ways?

Hanna Krall recounts the stories of two women: Rywka Urman and Krystyna Krahelska. The death of the latter is part of national hagiography: there is an aura around it. Krahelska was a member of the Home Army and author of anti-Nazi songs. Krall writes: Krystyna "has helped a wounded partisan, and is running in the sun. She is running among sunflowers, but she is so tall she cannot hide, even when she bends, and the bullet hits her in the back. She is lying on her back, still among the sunflowers, still looking into the sun. And brightness is when you die so beautifully and brightly" (translated by Jaroslaw Anders). Rywka Urman came from the decaying Krochmalna Street. "Rywka was standing in the yard, her hair disheveled, her eyes mad, with the body of Berek Urman, her son, lying in front of her. Berek had died the previous day, but we shall put some dots here, because we are trying to tell what the hungry Rywka was trying to do with the body of her son" The crystal, Apollonian, decorous death of Krystyna and the supposed abjection of Rywka.

The representation of abject is not a narrative - according to Julia Kristeva - but a vision: it is not an *aletheia*, but an apocalypse. In my view, abjection in Eastern Europe founded an iconography - from the hallucinations of the average Pole to his M.P. to the delirium of predictable sex and violence in the critical art of the Lithuanians, the Stanikas. You are abject in Eastern Europe if you are, but you do not belong. If you dare to be and dare to undo your belongings. The diagnosis of Marcel Proust at the time of the Dreyfus Affair is topical here: "to be or not to be one of them...the question is not as for Hamlet, to be or not to be, but to belong or not to belong." It is repeated by Hannah Arendt in her *Anti-Semitism* and by Julia Kristeva.

But there is another way of representing the archives of evil: Polish-Czech-Jewish-Parisian artist, Alina Szapocznikow.

The artist, survivor of ghettos and camps, sculpted the archives of her identities: her body-soul as monument to survival. In her own titles: *Fetish*, *Herbarium*, *Biological Sculptures*. Let us try to read her work: Lip by lip. Rubble by rubble. Tumor by tumor. I break and make: my archives. In my archives my mother and I in the ghetto, Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Theresienstadt. Lip over lip. Rubble over rubble. Tumor over tumor. My wax herbarium: I piece myself together. Strangers, undesirables, offals: archives of them, of myself? My beauty... I break and make sense and the senses. My archives. Lip without lip. Rubble without rubble. Tumor without tumor. I break and make sense and the senses. Lip by lip. Rubble by rubble. Tumor by tumor.

Because the evidence of anti-Semitism and Shoah has been concealed in Eastern Europe, it is important to highlight it in the archives. As feminism "makes trouble in the archives," so critical research and art subverts archives in Poland. Poland's leading feminist, Maria Janion, reveals Eastern Europe's skeleton in the cupboard: abjection in not-belonging and anti-Semitism. Recently she unearthed a lampoon by an Enlightenment writer and political activist, Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz. His dystopia set in the year 3333 presents Poland turned into a wretched condition by Jews. Warsaw, changed into Moszkopolis where "[e]verywhere swarms of filthy Jews moon about." An abject-ridden cityscape: the staircase of the Court is filled with garbage and dirt, restaurants serve sordid dishes, the National Jewish Theater is repulsive. Maria Janion, the scholar who analyzed and warned against this text, found herself the target of vitriolic attacks against her work of the archives of anti-Semitic abjection in Poland.

Maria Janion does not hide abjection in anti-Semitism. Likewise, the cultural initiatives of artists-educators admit the guilts and, moreover, endeavor to envisage a future of memory and toleration. A space which counters xenophobia is the Grodzka Gate Center - NN Theater Company, a self-government institution of culture housed in Lublin's Old Town. The seat of the Center is a fourteenth-century Grodzka (City) Gate which formerly served as passage between the Gentile and the Jewish quarter of the city. In its activity, the Center draws on the historic and symbolic significance of the

Gate as link between nations, religions, traditions.

The Grodzka Gate Center collects the oral history of the inhabitants of the Jewish quarter of Lublin, survivors of the Holocaust. A number of students of Lublin's Curie University are involved in the project. The younger generation is also engaged as staff and volunteers of the Center in coordinating exhibitions about the history of multicultural Lublin which foreground oral history, and use a variety of techniques and media (three thousand photographs of the Lublin before 1939 were amassed, oral history was presented both at the Center's exhibitions and broadcast by the Polish Radio). At the moment, a maquette of the Old Town, in particular of its Jewish part, is under construction in the Center.

Lublin's Gate prepares scholarly conferences designed for wider public. One of the conferences dealt with - and this is the Center's mission - *Memory. Place. Presence*, and hosted Zygmunt Bauman; the thinker returned to the country which exiled him and his family in 1968. The Gate teaches seminars for students of Curie-Sklodowska University who are invited to explore the history and the present of selected houses in the Old Town of Lublin with the aim of researching the urban landscape and municipal social policy. Data collected at the institutions of the city's local government is interpreted. At the same time, Lublin's cultural changes are examined, including the tragic end to its multiethnicity, and a need for remembering the former diversity is emphasized. A research project has been completed by now: it is concerned with the past of the house at 24, Grodzka Street. A group of students analyzed the documentation of the house (data from 1576 on). When the Nazis turned Lublin's Old Town into a ghetto, fifty-four Jews were placed in this house. The students interviewed the present inhabitants of the house who are unemployment- and poverty-stricken; social workers who help in the house were also interviewed. The study conducted by the students will be used in exhibitions and research about the urban history.

In the Gate of Lublin an ethics of hospitality is unfolding with the younger generation's hands-on experience. In a similar vein, the Pogranicze Foundation, Borderland of Arts, Cultures, Nations was set up on the north-eastern confines of this

country where Poles, Jews, Lithuanians, Belorussians, Roma, Tartars, Armenians co-existed. The Pogranicze (Borderland) Foundation rebuilt the White Synagogue and Yeshiva of Sejny in the vicinity of the Lithuanian border. Pogranicze's roots lie in the theater company with which the founder member, Krzysztof Czyzewski used to work in troupes with their pedigree in the theater-maker and anthropologist, Jerzy Grotowski. Czyzewski admitted having discovered that Poland was "not Catholic and Polish only" thanks to his work in anthropology-inspired theater. The Borderland Foundation's emphasis is on educational programs. The functioning of the Sejny venue encompasses the following issues: "Meeting the Other" and "Classes of Cultural Heritage" (seminars and field trips destined for high-school pupils); "European Borderland School" (training for leaders and managers of cultural organizations); "Open Regions of East-Central Europe" and "Borderland Publishing House" (research and publishing on such melting pots of the region as Bukovina, Transylvania, Spisz). *Krasnogruda* is a magazine run by the Pogranicze Foundation which deploys the results of their intellectual and artistic research; an issue of the magazine was published in English and included work by authors from Ljubljana, Sarajevo, Skopje, Sofia, Vilnius, Warsaw, Zagreb.

Hope against iconographies of abject lies in such initiatives as Lublin's Gate and Sejny's Borderlands, but also in the critical art of the Stanikas. Theirs is an ethics which goes against xenophobia - that of cosmopolitanism - without hiding the violence of the unconscious and history. Artists-activists warn about the totalitarian temptation which lies in wait in the human being. Jan Tomasz Gross's book *Neighbors* about the pogrom in Jedwabne was published by the Borderlands Foundation. Apart from a potential for dialogue and hospitality towards other there is evil that inhabits us.

How to find in us a love for the strangers? If we do not, we loose our humanity, hate and kill the strangers - again and more vilely. I choose, after Julia Kristeva, the idea of strangeness in ourselves: we are all strangers. And this is a remedy for xenophobia. The critical work of a Polish-American artist, Krzysztof Wodiczko, is revealing here: he projected the image of a swastika on South Africa



House in London, constructed a vehicle for the homeless in the United States and, last but not least, sculpted a staff *The Alien's Spokesman* by which a stranger, homeless or immigrant can communicate on the streets with passers by; Wodiczko's art may be regarded as part of transnational civil society. The pressing need of our age is to found a public sphere which would cherish subjectivity, where plural experiences of cultures would correspond to diverse inner lives. Being as opposed to belonging. How to care for strangeness? One's own and others'?

This is my reading, hidden in a series of East European narratives: in the beginning was xenophobia. Philoxenia is a work of culture.

Eastern Europe today is hostage to hate and abjection and exclusion; we witness, nay, we participate in a ghostly return of anti-Semitism.. At stake is one's disgust, abomination and violence against the not-belonging, against oneself. This is captured by Elaine Feinstein:

ANNUS MIRABILIS 1989

Ten years ago, beneath the Hotel Astoria, we watched a dissident cabaret in Budapest, where they showed Einstein as a Jewish tailor. All the women on stage were elegantly dressed. Their silken garments were cleverly slit to expose illicit glimpses of delicate thighs and breast. Einstein was covered with chalk, in ill-fitting clothes; he was taking measurements, trying to please the rest. At the climax of the play, to applause and laughter they raked him with strobe lights and the noise of guns. I was chilled by the audience euphoria. Of course, I don't have a word of Hungarian, and afterwards there were embarrassed explanations, which left out tailoring and obsequious gestures. Their indignation was all about nuclear science, while I pondered at the resilience of an old monster. ●

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