

ON BASTARDS & ORPHANS, part I

Agnieszka Kurgan: You spend a lot of time working in the porcelain factories. Where did the idea of exploring ruins of long closed factories come from?

Monika Patuszyńska: There is a passage in the "Hopscotch" by Julio Cortázar when the main character "convinced that memory keeps everything, not just the Albertines and the great journals of the heart and kidneys" is trying to reconstruct in his mind, step by step, the number and the arrangement of ink pens in his pencil case of years ago.

For me it started with the game that I played with my memory in the abandoned Porcelain Factory "Książ"; with the attempts to retrace, step-by-step, the topography of the place where I had worked for a month 10 years earlier. Most of the references that I could rely on: kilns, machinery, casting tables and dividing walls were gone by then.

Only later it revealed the unavoidability of dropping out of the role of the observer and engaging in the processes taking place in order to add another end to the story.

At the exhibition "Bastards & Orphans" you show the works cast from the found moulds that has been "eroded by time". Do you visit the factories just to find the interesting moulds or do the actual visits play an important part in the project?

The essence of the project is casting directly on the closed factories' sites from the moulds that I find there; a gesture that reinstates the original function they lost, thereby losing their *raison d'être* and turning into nothing more but halls waiting for demolition. It is a kind of "closing the corpse's eyes" rite for me, a completion of a rite of passage.

The objects themselves are not the main focus of the project. They are used as a medium that carries a record of the entire history of the factory in all its stages. I'm trying to preserve different elements found on the sites, but I would never restrict it to the simple act of taking the plaster moulds away.

In a sense, casting in the closed and non- functioning factories is my personal rite of reconciliation, my ritual farewell.

You are an artist, a designer, a ceramicist. What do you feel while exploring the ruins of the factory that used to produce ceramic objects, that used to be teeming with life?

For some time after closing, before they are demolished and disappear completely- the factories doze in some strange state of suspension, in an odd *between*.

They are softening. They are fading. They are becoming monochromatic.

At first the *between* seemed unbearable to me. No hustle and bustle. No heat. No rhythm of pumps. No colours that I was so accustomed to. Divorced from time. I came up with casting not to feel an

intruder any more, but to pay my way into being there, to become a part of it and to tame the new situation.

Some spectators might find the title of the exhibition "Bastards & Orphans" controversial. Can you explain it and its origins?

Both Bastards and Orphans come from broken, crippled plaster moulds collected both in operating and abandoned ceramic factories. They are descendants of discarded and forgotten styles, mismatched ventures, stale ideas and failed projects - those that went out of fashion, did not have a sufficiently wide appeal or simply ran out of luck.

Bastards are made of borrowed details and processed traditional designs. These are hybrids, cross-breeds of unwanted or outdated styles and forms, kinds of mongrel produced from fragments of found plaster moulds which have been modified and joined to form completely new species.

Orphans are foundlings. The moulds they come from were abandoned in the empty halls of closed factories decaying slowly along with the buildings declining into ruin.

After a factory is closed a new life starts for the kilns, machinery and equipment. They do not carry any specific, characteristic features of a closed enterprise so they can be used everywhere. Plaster moulds on the other hand lose their reason for existence: they are not suitable for recycling, they cannot be burned down to give warmth or play any other role. They are a physical medium of the intellectual achievements of the factory. As such- they usually pass away along with the factory, hanging on for a while as an embarrassing reminder of better times...

Following it further, do you have any feelings for your objects after you bring them back to life?

I always feel somehow guilty towards objects that nobody uses.

My studio has recently become a kind of shelter for stray and disabled plaster moulds. Of course there is a feeling that all these moulds don't have anybody but me, but, both in real life and in work, I try to avoid megalomania so let this thread stop here. (laughs)

The works that you show at the exhibition are very aesthetic. I expected more "factory filth", ugliness and mutants. Are you also surprised by the final result of the casting?

That story is composed from very different, alternating stages, both aesthetic and filthy. Focusing on only one of them does not allow access to the others because no single one defines the whole history. The ugly duckling grows up to be a swan, crudely scratched coin turns out to be the Zahir, skunk's musk is used in perfumes, in the ugly mollusc you can find a pearl, in the pile of rotting seaweed, an amber with a preserved fly and under the municipal car park in Leicester, the tomb of Richard III.

Some years ago in Paris I saw the remains of a nineteenth-century *cabinet de curiosité*: lungs of the smoker, hermaphrodite's genitals, two-headed calves in jars, a head of an Eskimo modelled in wax, a photo of a Lion-man; a catalogue of distortions and oddities; all that does not fit into the standard, which escapes the norm and exists somewhere on the border of perception. The specimens were pleasant. They were aesthetic, not repulsive; fascinating, not off-putting. Their abnormality, their particularity and freakiness was attractive, as tempting as a key hole, as seducing as a crack in the tissue of the world that lets you peek behind the scenes of reality, behind the stage set of what is standard.

Perhaps the casts are just another step in the story. Maybe they are not its end. I do not know if they are simply adding another stage set or if they are uncovering the existing one. I am glad to be able to show them because, thanks to their distinction and uniqueness, they are giving new meaning to the abandoned factories, just as a pearl changes the way of seeing a mollusc and the sore heel of Mr Cogito, the way of seeing the pebble in his sock. *

How does your project differ from the recycling trends present in the world of ceramic design, e.g.; processing the porcelain scrap found in factories?

I am interested in the very process of working with the tissue of an abandoned factory: in the order of corridors hollowed by time, in the structure of decay, in attempting to record it; in the discovery that a negative and a positive of dripping water are exactly the same. The casts are actually the by-product of the project. A photographer would use a camera, a mathematician, numbers; I am used to expressing myself with "negative spaces", with casts from the modified moulds. It is natural for me to look for "negatives" to cast.

The moulds are used in exactly the same purpose as they have been used before. I do not offer them immortality; do not even prolong their lives. I only give them the attention that they were deprived of.

The project, which began in the porcelain factory Książ is spreading to other factories and countries. What are your future plans?

In a way, I feel like a hostage of the project, a tool in its hands. It grows and evolves in ways that even surprise me. Initially, it was supposed to be just a one-day action of casting from the plaster moulds hollowed by water in the abandoned factory "Książ". It resulted in a film, a set of photographs and the series of porcelain casts.

There is no Porcelain Factory "Książ" anymore. It started disappearing a few weeks after my casting. Suddenly and surprisingly. The halls that I have been casting in no longer exist. They have been demolished and cut up for scrap.

I found myself in the middle of a wave that is sweeping across the world in recent years. Old factories all over the world stand empty, awaiting the bulldozers. The "Operation Książ" soon will be joined by

other projects across Europe: Operation "Wałbrzych" in Wałbrzych, Operation "Giesche" in Katowice, Operation "Royal Boch" in Belgium and Operation "Spode" in Stoke-on-Trent, Great Britain.

Adding further chapters will take me a whole year.

April 2013

* Z. Herbert, Mr Cogito [Pan Cogito], Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993 (first published Warszawa 1974)