

ON BASTARDS & ORPHANS, part II

*To derive objects from their royal silence,
one needs either trickery or crime.
Zbigniew Herbert , To bring objects out*

Agnieszka Kurgan: You are already at the end of your operations, so we can try to force you to sum up... Książ had a sentimental dimension for you; it was a return to the first factory where you worked after graduation. Royal Boch, Spode, Giesche were all "virgin" to you in a way. Where the operations therefore different, maybe easier?

Monika Patuszyńska: All the operations were very similar, it was a matter of roaming around bankrupt, closed factories with a camera, casting from plaster moulds abandoned and slowly decaying, talking to people; looking for a key that would allow me to put the emotions and experiences gained in the various factories together.

The Książ operation was indeed the most difficult of all, not because of my previous relationship with the factory, but because of what I witnessed when I went there for the last time and when the factory was being razed to the ground in front of my eyes. "On the horizon flashes and the clack of iron can be heard. There will never be a summer like this again", the end of idyll and carefree. If it wasn't for this experience, the whole project would probably not happen. Never before have I experienced such inevitability and irreversibility of what is passing before my eyes.

The experience of losing the old world- it's so twentieth-century isn't it? The entire twentieth century consisted of this losing. The romantic notion that ruins will survive us, and that if something was before us, it will also be after us, i.e. the constancy and immutability of the world around us, no longer holds true. Ruins and their remnants disappear before we manage to return to the same place after winter, the world has accelerated, and the economic crisis - instead of slowing it down - accelerates this process even more.

I'm no longer putting anything off until next spring....

After operations in five factories, do you notice any changes in yourself? I mean more of a substantive and artistic approach than an emotional metamorphosis.

My whole creative path so far has been inextricably linked to the factories and has been about defining myself in relation to them, their heritage and their history. Someone once called me the 'antithesis of a factory worker ', I am used to thinking of myself that way but it is hard to be the antithesis of something that doesn't exist. It's like being a coin with only one side - an impossible figure, isn't it? To be a reverse without an obverse? Tails without heads?

Since I graduated from college factories have been going bankrupt and were closing but never as definitively and irrevocably as now. Then they would usually get back in business - with a new owner, debt free, with a new name or management company. The CEOs, the capital or the form of ownership would change but the factories themselves still continued.

The world that surrounds me is changing before my eyes, and it is difficult for me not to change myself being a part of it. Values are changing, customs and rituals are changing, the way we look at objects and the way we collect and celebrate memories are changing.

We are returning to a culture of wandering, we move for work, for love, for dreams. It's good then to have empty hands and not too heavy bag. Objects are inexorably losing their sentimental value, they have become easily replaceable, and almost everything can be bought back at the next stop, as long as it is really needed. I myself feel more of a nomad than a settler, I have a few places that I consider my homes and still other nomadic camps set up temporarily along the way - for a week, for a month or two.

Auction houses report that old porcelain is no longer in demand, only single pieces are sold; the time for desiring entire services is over. Buying porcelain no longer buys the dream of a better life... I don't know if this is a temporary trend, but even if it passes - most of the factories will be gone by then.

Is there anything that has surprised you?

The scale of denial.

I was surprised to discover that there seemed to be a new feature, a new thread in the history of industry that was shame that had replaced pride. The pride has always been inseparable feature of the factories: the pride of their founders, of the owners who endowed them with their names, the pride of the families that created the powers, the pride of the societies, the pride of the workers.

Finding the abandoned factories was a way of uncovering the shameful, silently ignored truth and bringing it to light; in virtual reality which is slowly becoming a new reality and in which factories have been replaced by labels, seemingly nothing has changed: factories continue to produce, their products are successful, the network of dealers is expanding and marketing campaigns are flourishing.

That is a reality that became more real than the truth but it is still ashamed of itself. And this shame enforces invisibility: invisible work, an invisible factory, an invisible crew. It was created for our well-being by the new owners of the old labels. Only one European producer that I know of does not hide the relocation of production to Asia. So maybe it is as some sociologists claim, we are moving work to the edge of civilisation and making it invisible, because both, work and manufacturing have become shameful?

What do the forms themselves look like (I don't mean plaster moulds of course but the casts)? Are you able to find any patterns, narratives in them?

It was very important to me to find the individual voice of each of the abandoned factories I visited. Anything could turn out to be a clue around which the story was then built: a chance word or phrase uttered during a conversation, a detail in one of the photographs viewed for the hundredth time or a frame of film shot that gave direction to the next action and defined the entire operation. There are threads that run through the visits to every factory I have been to: a series about nature that takes

over abandoned halls; a series about idols from the afterlife fading on posters in cloakrooms and modelling rooms; a series of 'letters in a bottle' left by laid-off workers; a series of plants dried in pots; a series about the colourful butterflies' wings, which, once the factory colours has faded, together with the abandoned Christmas baubles, are the only colourful elements in the factory halls.

Some of the factories had their own caretakers, others were simply left with their doors wide open; they differed in their history, heritage, state of preservation: in some, nature slowly forced its way inside through holes in the hall roofs; in others the city crept in through window holes bringing its wind, its urban dust and noise, some were flooded by water after the spring melt. In one, I showed up too late and everything I was looking for had already been tidied up by a professional cleaning company.

In Operation Książ and Operation Royal Boch, the role of the main narrator telling the tale of oblivion was taken by water leaking from the factories' ceilings and then gouging corridors in the plaster moulds slowly disintegrating them. In Spode, the layers of dust and dirt deposited over the years inside unused plaster moulds penetrated into the cast and vitrified during firing, combining many years of dust into a single layer of glaze.

The cast objects from each location are somehow similar; they are casts of absence and emptiness, which are the same in all factories. Although each of the operations is a separate story, each tells the same tale, about the splendour that preceded exclusion.

You have already shown the effects of your Operations at several exhibitions in completely different configurations and contexts: from official institutions focusing on both form and narrative (SiC Wrocław, ID Kielce), through a commercial gallery (Jeroen Bechtold Gallery), to international events focusing on ceramics – (British Ceramics Biennial) or design (Łódź Design Festival). What were the differences in these exhibitions and the reception of the works?

This project was developed in stages, each of which was summed up in an exhibition.

Apparently, the experience of mourning is about recognising the loss, coming to terms with it and finally integrating oneself anew without the lost part that has gone. My integration proceeded in stages determined by the rhythm of the exhibitions. It was a very personal project and it always remained so despite being presented in public.

Through the exhibitions, when confronted with the public, it uncovered additional layers which I was not always aware of. The cast objects placed in the context and structure of the different exhibition spaces, each time took on a slightly new face and played a slightly different role, both for me and for the public.

At the Glass and Ceramics Gallery in Wrocław, the city that is home to the only Faculty of Ceramics in Poland and believes it knows everything about ceramics, they were perceived first and foremost as a show of technical skill; in a commercial gallery, they became objects of desire; at a design festival, a commentary on transformations in the post-industrial landscape; and in the gallery space of the Kielce Design Institute, symbols that speak of the human condition. Despite my fascination with all the other layers of interpretation, these last two are probably the closest to how I see it.

Do you think the differences in the reception of these exhibitions result more from the context of a particular place, or do your operations give the viewer a huge spectrum of interpretations, or maybe you, as the artist, are able to 'manipulate' the viewer?

I think the very story I have to tell is strong enough and doesn't need to be dramatized further. Anyway, the psychology of crowds is completely mystery to me. As you know yourself- I am not a favourite of the masses (laughs).

It started as a kind of personal game of negative/positive, is/isn't. As the project matured in this game of negative and positive spaces, presence and absence, existence and non-existence, permanence and passing, the objects gradually receded into the background, because it turned out that absence can be more significant than presence, and an empty space weighs more than a filled one.

The exhibitions were part of the creation process. Certainly, the space where an exhibition is shown determines the type and level of sophistication of the audience and determines the expectations, thus the reception. Objects, especially such as degenerate versions of well-known tableware, can be vessels for conveying various messages and the way such a message is read depends to a large extent on the frequency which the viewer is tuned to.

It's time to ask "what's next"? Factories have been visited, operations finished, exhibition tour done, do you have a new idea?

This project, although seems to be finished, still has not sounded to the end completely. It's like finishing reading a book or watching a movie: until it settles properly inside, it would be a pity to start the next one straight away. Maybe something important, an important thought, won't be able to come then...

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