

Responsibility for the Story

by Katarzyna Bojarska

In the video *Fresh Cherries* (2010), produced in the frame of the project Falstad Kunst in Norway, **Anna Baumgart** tackles some pivotal questions related to dealing with traumatic past and pursues a critical reflection of the contemporary “division of sensuality”, both in the field of art and science. The artist lays bare the fact that being a woman at war is nothing neutral, and the memory of it – a game with a lot at stake. The video *Fresh Cherries* focuses on the problem of forced prostitution in Nazi concentration camps and sexual abuse of women at war. It is not a reconstruction, nor a re-enactment, although Baumgart plays (sneaky) with the canon in a very clever way. It is not a documentary, nor TV theatre, though the work derives some of its components from both of these genres. It is multilayered story of several female (and male) characters, which interlaces various threads from the past and the present. Being a bit perverse, one might regard this video as a continuation of the artist’s projects from the 1990s, such as *A Small Collection of Makeshift Epitaphs*, *Who Speaks?*, *When She Kissed a Frog*, *Mothers* or *Condom, Money, Lady – No Problem* – as a perverse “film about love” made by a “well trained girl”.

It must be stressed that the video *Fresh Cherries* does not concern the past as much as it tackles the question: why today (still, or actually only today) do we have to deal with the past – as women, researchers, artists? One of the immediate answers that Baumgart’s work elicits pertains to the fact that this duty, even though unwanted, is related above all to the responsibility for the future – the future when history will be taught with no need for omissions to keep spirits high and the collective awareness intact.

A major part of the film consists in the fragments of a record of Hellinger’s Constellations practiced by young actress Klara. We see her as she enters the roles of (it’s difficult to say incarnates) a Polish woman raped by Soviet soldiers and a German woman forced to prostitution in Auschwitz, and as she leaves these roles. The field of transfer of figures and stories, times and places is where the vast critical potential of the work is situated. We meet Joanna, a young scholar, with a PhD in the making at the Institute of Jewish Studies of the Jagiellonian University, and struggling with a project groundbreaking for our historical knowledge – or rather ignorance – dealing with prostitution in concentration camps. And finally, there is the artist herself (visible-invisible), who not only lays bare the intricate relations of shame and guilt, but also poses the question about the possibility of identification on different levels of artistic and historical record. There is also a man, Marcin Koszałka, camera operator, director and screenwriter – renowned as the author of controversial films *Such Beautiful Son I Delivered* and *The Existence*, among others, here as the director of a film about Auschwitz. And also, present despite his absence, Lars von Trier, especially as the author of *Dogville*.

The fact that war, and even the Shoah, bear a “perverse” relation with eroticism has long been part of common knowledge. Let’s just mention *The House of Dolls* by Ka-Tzetnik (1955), prose devoted to prostitution in concentration camps; the “Stalag” fiction, popular in Israel in the 1960s during Eichmann’s trial – pornographic books depicting the prisoners of concentration camps in usually sadomasochistic relations with their female tormenters; the film *The Night Porter* by Liliana Cavani or *Salo* by Pier Paolo Pasolini; attempts made by the artists in the 1960s at “montaging” photographs from camps with pornographic images

(for example the panels 16-23 of Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*); and more recently the outstanding works of the Israeli artist Roe Rosen; novels *Kalooki Nights* by Howard Jacobson, or Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*. We should definitely ask about that what hides behind this disturbing combination. Is that not some irksome truth about the relation between the executioner and the victim, violence and survival, life, death and desire? And finally, what role can history, art or literature play in discovering this truth.

Baumgart's work is critical and feminist, indeed. Not because the film mainly depicts women, nor since it tells their stories, but because the artist demonstrates nearly surgical precision, avoiding the didactic overload, at deconstructing the existing frames of knowledge/power, which not only organise our awareness of the past, identify the acceptable traumas and victims, but above all usher in hierarchisation, indicating the centre that merits attention and the "less significant" fringes. It is a matter of certain valid consensus that when we think of war, we don't usually associate it with women or sexual violence (even though it is recognised as a war crime by the Geneva Conventions), we don't regard prostitution in concentration camps as a form of forced labour, and in the context of sexual violence, we are often inclined to lay the burden of shame and guilt on the victims. Currently, the mutual links and relations between these two concepts fuel the liveliest debates in the humanities.

In her book *From Guilt to Shame*, American historian Ruth Leys remarks that the recent years have seen the Western world repress the concept of guilt in favour of the concept of shame (she attacks the so-called theorists of shame, such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick or Giorgio Agamben), which leads to the basic shift from agency (what one does) to identity (whom one is). When we address someone, we don't evaluate her or his intentions and acts any longer – as Leys writes – but that whom they are, her or his emotions and experiences. Leys regards it as part of the "emotional turn" in cultural studies, which draws from the belief that the system of emotions and passions is essentially independent from intentions and events, since it is the material system of the body.

Yet, in *Fresh Cherries* Baumgart highlights the fact that passions, like meanings or values, are formed in the frame of the very same system of knowledge/power. Shame ("an uncomfortable feeling of guilt or being ashamed because of improper behaviour, words, etc., usually related to the fear of damage to the reputation", as the dictionary has it) is after all primarily related to the concepts of "decorum" and "form". The artist proves shameless as she renounces the belief that to evoke this shame means to harm the already abused victims even more. We are bound by a proper form of "avoiding painful matters", which obscures the fact that it also stigmatises the bodily and the sexual, preserves the martyrologic myths of male heroes, and finally provides for repression, which cements the existing order of things. I would argue that Baumgart's gesture is paradoxical in nature: it lays bare "our" cultural structure of shame (how it is constructed, reconstructed and represented), but also tackles shame related to the awareness of such "order of things", in other words – the price that the community has to pay to feel better.

Undoubtedly, as Baumgart (and her heroines) claim, the price is high; too high to pay for constantly multiplied melodramatic narratives of impossible love at "the time of plague", therefore the artist plays (sneaky) with the melodramatic canon and confronts it with the female historian's work. The gesture evokes similar attempts at forging an alliance between art and science. For that matter, I would primarily point out *Pole in the Closet* – collaborative work of anthropologist Prof Joanna Tokarska-Bakir and artist Artur Żmijewski. Such formula seems to be particularly fruitful. The author of *Fresh Cherries* weaves her elaborate motion picture story revolving around the fact that there is no actual or unmediated access to repressed and traumatic stories, that they have been repressed for a reason and that transparency is always an illusion,

with the role of the artist (and the scientist) being to question it on an ongoing basis.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE WORK:

2011 LOOP Barcelona

EMAF Osnabrück

Videonale 13, Kunstmuseum Bonn

2010 Falstad Art Project, Falstad Center, Norway

DKF Muranów, screening and debate, Muranów Cinema, Warsaw

Films Not Only About Love, screening and debate, CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw

Watch Docs, screening and debate, Kino Lab, CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw

Fresh Cherries – Around The Video Oeuvre Of Anna Baumgart, Galeria Arsenał, Poznań