

AGNIESZKA POLSKA

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Remembering the past is a central theme in the videos of the young Polish artist Agnieszka Polska (*1985). We see here, for example, how she reconstructs the performance of a Polish artist from the 1960s in the form of a re-enactment, describes the plundering of abandoned houses in Poland during the 1940s through fantastical animated images, and reconstructs masterpieces of 20th-century art history by reproducing them as miniatures. In the course of her œuvre, she delves repeatedly into the treasure chest of modern (art) history and makes use of the historical material she discovers to produce new works of her own. In this aesthetic, a key role is played by her very personal formal idiom, animation combined with photographs she has found and video films that resemble documentaries. As cameras track through reconstructed studio sets, they meet with animations in slow motion, clearly distinguished in turn from her videos shot in documentary style. In the animations, therefore, she frequently plays with sound. Hence the narrator's voice in "How the work is done" gives way to an acoustic backdrop of clinking glass or the rhythmical beats of a triangle. This enables Polska to build fully on the power of the animated or constructed images and to highlight the contemplative level in her films.

The artist maintains an overarching interest in the archive as well as in the testimonies of art history and the preservation of artefacts. Here she is particularly concerned by questions such as: Why does the documentation of an art work often seem more interesting than the art object itself? How are attitudes to an artistic work influenced by the way it is archived? And what is the relationship between our yearning to reconstruct the past and the mechanisms of archiving?

How the Work is Done (2011)

In this work, not quite a documentary, Agnieszka Polska explores the strike in 1956 by students in the Pottery and Sculpture Workshop at the Academy of Arts in Krakow. The students protested against political conditions in the country by refusing to work and occupying college premises for many weeks. The artist brings the situation back to life, along with its links to this specific place. She not only describes for viewers the everyday work routines carried out in the atelier, but reconstructs

the student protestors in the form of sculptures made from pieces of clothing. The dreams of the sleeping students, weakened by their meagre strike rations, play a vital role. This is where the piece switches from documentation to animation, and it is this dream sequence that illustrates the actual work of making art, i.e. the day-to-day artistic processes in which the students engage. The switch marks both a shift from an everyday world to a dream world, but also the moment when the film begins to address its fundamental theme: how the work (art) is done. Is the creative act embedded in the moment when the work takes shape, or is it the process of reflection that enables the idea, and the true work, to break forth?

Plunderer's Dream (2011)

The piece entitled "Plunderer's Dream" emerged from the memories and stories of Polska's Polish grandfather. Driven by the desperate poverty of the post-war years, he combed abandoned houses in the surrounding area in a hunt for food and valuables. In dream-like animated sequences, the artist draws on these personal recollections to play, on the one hand, with stereotyped images of the master thief and, on the other, with images of concealment and disclosure, appropriation and re-designation. Plundering serves her as a metaphor in presenting both her family history and the core of her artistic methods.

Polska's own approach to archive materials and to the marginal notes of art history pursues, after all, a similar strategy to her grandfather's. Just as he, in his dream, creates a new ensemble from the objects he has cobbled together, she reworks the documentary material, rearranging and processing as she goes. Just as the act of plundering is ambivalent, because it saves lives and yet commits robbery, Polska's art swings between fresh interpretation and (hence) creative destruction. However, she makes no secret of how valuable and important the past is to her. Underlying her iconoclasm is a tremendous love of detail and history – comparable to the tender care with which the plunderer appropriates his treasure in her film.

Three Films with Narrator (2009/2010)

This trio of videos consists of the films "The Forgetting of Proper Names" (2009), "Sensitization

to Colour" (2009) and "My Favourite Things" (2010). The binding features of these three works are the narrator's voice off and the close references in the plot to Polish and Western post-modernist art. The miniatures which Polska recreates in "My Favourite Things", and the meticulously researched performance by Włodzimierz Borowski which takes the form of a re-enactment in "Sensitization to Colour", indicate that this trio constitutes an attempt by the artist to define her own position. Her respect and veneration for the generation of artists working in the 1950s and 1960s play just as important a part in this as her awareness that, as Walter Benjamin declared, reconstruction deprives the original of its aura. Polska demonstrates impressively, nonetheless, that this process can also be cathartic. Believing that "misunderstandings, misinterpretations (...) are the factors which push culture forward, creating new qualities and posing new questions", she makes it possible to access modern art in ways that are completely unconventional and, with that, refreshing.