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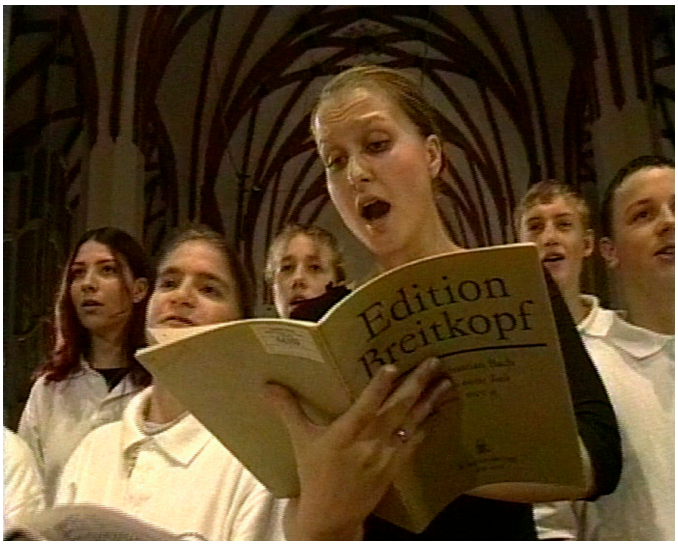
Gallery TPW gallerytpw.ca

The Rubbish Heap of History

by Daniel Baird

In the opening sequence of Polish artist Artur Zmijewski's *Singing Lesson 2*, we see a teenage girl playing the piano, fingers pounding the keys with a blunt aggression. It is only when she begins to sing, her voice garbled, flat, abrasive, and strange, that we realize that she is deaf, that she cannot hear the tortured sounds issuing from her eager mouth, that unlike most of us her sense of self is not rooted in her tone of voice. Then the video cuts to what looks like a lunchtime scene from a school for the deaf, the lively banter and laughter displaying an alien quality, all squeaks and moans and guttural barks, punctuated by flashes of rapid signing. *Singing Lesson 2* unfolds as a series of rehearsals in which the elegant conductor of a baroque ensemble in Leipzig, Germany, attempts to teach a group of deaf kids to sing, to give musical form to their otherwise unruly voices, to turn them into a choir rather than a wild cacophony of noises, and it culminates in the performance of a Bach cantata, accompanied by a small chamber orchestra and a professional singer, high in the beautiful wooden choir loft of a Renaissance church. The result has an idiosyncratic sublimity. The choir's murmurings and occasional animal roars, always threatening to devolve into chaos, bring to Bach's abstract rigour, and the church's immaculate symmetry, a painful, striving, and very physical humanity.

The power of Artur Zmijewski's videos rests in the way they stage half-repressed inner conflicts, dissonances of the self at the unstable intersection of private identity and national history. In his finest work, history is at once intimate and inexorable, and it draws to the surface invisible wounds, strange, unexpected stigmata, in the voices and bodies and souls of the people who participate, whether they be old women in Tel Aviv or deaf teens. Zmijewski's videos not only confront the audience with these wounds, these conflicts that seem to admit of no closure, but also render viewers strangely complicit, as though their very presence exacerbates the enduring pain. Like the earlier *Singing Lesson* — in which Jan Maklakiewicz's soaring, romantic "Polish Mass," composed in 1944, the year of the Warsaw Uprising and one of the bleakest in Polish history, is sung by a deaf choir in a Protestant church in Warsaw — the woozy noise of the singers in *Singing Lesson 2* sets in motion metaphors that are deep and ambivalent: of the struggle with inward deafness and giving form to one's voice, of the rift between our porous selves and our high and sometimes inhuman ideals of beauty. And while *Singing Lesson* alludes to a history of Protestant, German-speaking Poles that was



Artur Zmijewski, video still from *Singing Lesson 2*, 2003

effectively destroyed by the mass deportations at the end of World War II, *Singing Lesson 2* feels haunted by the combination of purity and brutality that is German history. "[E]ither the world is dumb/or I am deaf," the great Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert writes, "but perhaps/we are both/doomed to our afflictions." The upshot of Zmijewski's work may be that we are doomed to our afflictions.

If the two *Singing Lesson* videos resonate with Poland and Germany's dark mutual history, then the videos Zmijewski has devoted to Poland's Jews and the Holocaust address that history in a more direct and declarative way. For *Our Songbook*, he asked elderly Polish Jews in a nursing home in Tel Aviv to recall Polish songs from their childhoods. The bodies and voices in *Our Songbook* have the wispy frailty of people at the far end of their lives, and their memories, likely not accessed for seventy years, are uncertain and fragmentary. "God who for many centuries surrounded Poland with power and fame," a man intones. "Third of May, third of May, blissful paradise for Poles," a woman chirps; and, a little later, a failing, bedridden woman murmurs, "There was another song, but I can only remember the melody," and begins humming. These are nationalist songs, strange when issued from the mouths of Jews driven from Poland by anti-Semitism and the Nazis, and one can hear the fissures of an unresolved identity in their brittle, slightly lost voices. This is also the source of the discomfort and even embarrassment one feels while watching *Our Songbook*. Most of us are reassured by the idea that there are sharp boundaries between Poles and Jews, that their histories don't intermingle in ways that are difficult to unravel, that the ethics of history and identity are clean. Zmijewski doesn't allow us to rely on those clarities, doesn't, in fact, permit the past to remain the past, or leave us to tolerate some easy and final healing. Perhaps we've been in denial that part of the tragedy of the destruction of Polish Jewry is that Polish Jews were also Poles; that the Holocaust was also a part of a larger Polish tragedy; that the *our* in *Our Songbook* includes Jews, Protestants, and Catholics; and that, finally, the sinuous complexities of identity are knotted into impure histories that are less a matter of choice than of fate.

In a way, *Lisa* pursues themes similar to those in *Our Songbook*, but from a provocatively different point of view. It is a portrait of a troubled German woman in her mid-thirties who moved to Jerusalem as a result of her intense, and quite literal, identification with Jews and Israel. "I remember they showed us *Night and Fog*," she says, referring to the important 1955 documentary on the concentration camps by Alain Resnais. "It was a deep moment. This was my first connection to Israel and the Holocaust." As Lisa tells her story under the ruthless, tracking gaze of Zmijewski's camera, images of an ironically idyllic, sunlit West Jerusalem drifting by, we learn that she had become increasingly alienated from her native Germany, that she felt no connection to the people or life there, and that eventually she had a dream that illuminated her predicament: in a previous life, she was a child who went to her death at Auschwitz. She is a morally ambiguous figure—having, after all, moved to a country whose history is partially defined by the reality of the Holocaust—and it would be easy to dismiss her as delusional, insulting, and pathetic,

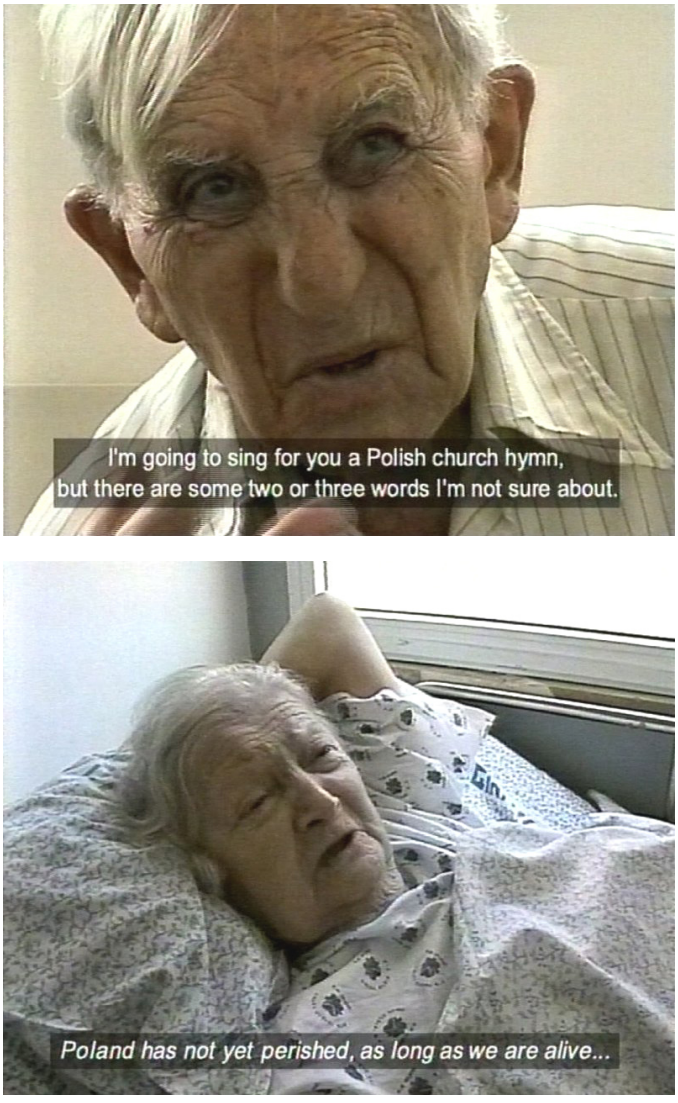
Artur Zmijewski, video still from *Singing Lesson 2*, 2003

Artur Zmijewski, video still from *Lisa*, 2003

fleeing a sense of historical guilt which she lacks the intelligence, imagination, and courage to face; but in the end, she is far more poignant than that. Earnest and resigned, Lisa is adrift in a fantasy disconnected from everything around her, a lost soul groping for an intelligible narrative, a victim of a history that, in its aftermath — rubble cleared and cities rebuilt, victims and perpetrators dead or dying — only seems to produce more victims. If *Our Songbook* suggests that the claims of history and identity are outside the boundaries of the will, *Lisa* illustrates that identity, porous though it may be, cannot be grounded in fantasy and dream. Yet the question *Lisa* insists upon is the extent to which any vision of our own identity and history, of the ways in which we provide ourselves with meaningful narratives, is inevitably afflicted by forms of fantasy we would otherwise regard as ethically troubled: who and what we are seems to demand an often feverish warping of the truth.

The history Artur Zmijewski probes in his videos is not, of course, objective history, history from a remote, omniscient point of view, but rather the history of the present, history as it fulminates up into the unbalanced bodies of the living, full of wounds and erasures and delusions and contest. Shot in a reserved, classical style, Zmijewski's art is largely performative: he orchestrates situations that are morally ambiguous (both for the participants and the viewers), provides them with a grammar, and allows them to unfold without determining their meanings in advance. But he is hardly neutral. While he often does not appear in his videos, his manipulating presence is always palpable, pushing the situation into a space of discomfort and ethical indeterminacy, subtly implicating the viewer, as though he or she were actually there. The results are exemplary re-enactments of the paradoxes of the present, and even his most aggressive and painful works have an aura of beauty, humour, and compassion. Yet summoning these dark, historical dynamics back into the present carries with it the risk of simply replicating them, and there are pieces in which Zmijewski crosses the line. In *80064*, for instance, a dapper ninety-two-year-old Auschwitz survivor sits in a tattoo parlour, wryly recounting how he had a friend stencil his identification number before it was scored into his arm. He is there to have the number freshly re-tattooed, and when he begins to balk, memories of that original trauma rushing to the surface of his spry, trembling body, Zmijewski pushes and pushes with a kind of tragic relentlessness. We watch, appalled, sickened, and complicit, yet also illuminated: Zmijewski presents us with wounds and suffering that we lack a ready-made language to address, transporting them out of the past and into a terrible, fleshly immanence. His art takes place in a zone of ethical indeterminacy that includes the viewer, but he also grasps that in our ethically crude culture, where we expect sharp answers to every question, that is the only place where ethical discourse can begin.

Created for the 2007 Documenta, *Them* is Zmijewski's most elaborate engagement with the divisions that resurfaced in the new, democratic, capitalist Poland after it emerged from the isolation of fifty years of Soviet occupation and communist rule. Setting *Them* in a fluorescent-lit industrial space in Warsaw, Zmijewski brought together various social groups in Poland — older, devout Catholic women, members



Artur Zmijewski, video stills from *Our Songbook*, 2003

Artur Zmijewski, video still from *80064*, 2004

Artur Zmijewski, video still from *80064*, 2004

of the conservative and religious Polish Youth League, young socialists, gays and lesbians—and, providing them with gallons of paint and rolls of paper, assigned them the task of creating an emblem, a kind of coat of arms, for Poland. After each group fashioned an image reflecting their vision of Poland, any other individual or group could revise it, paint over it, even cut it out altogether, and those who created it could then restore it as they pleased, the cycle repeating itself indefinitely.

Them is structured around four "meetings," and in the opening scenes the groups are brainstorming and making their emblems with evident delight. The pious women paint a church with a tall cross in the red and white of the Polish flag; the earnest, clean-cut youth league kids produce an old-fashioned heraldic sword; others write *Poland* in Hebrew; still others simply write *Freedom* in big, sloppy letters. They even have their emblems silkscreened onto T-shirts, as though they are part of a design competition for brand Poland. But the real dynamic of *Them*, and the one that gives it its divisive title, does not begin until the editorial phase. A young woman paints a goofy rainbow above the youth league's coat of arms, commenting, "It's a symbol of homosexuality"; another spray-paints *Poland* in Polish above the Hebrew lettering, asserting the primacy of the Polish language; the church and cross are slathered over with white paint. Once these revisions and erasures get going, they swiftly spiral, and an atmosphere of uneasy and increasingly raw aggression settles over the video. Like Zmijewski's 2005 contribution to the Venice Biennale, *Repetition*, in which he recreated the 1971 Stanford University prison experiment studying the psychology of relations between guards and prisoners, *Them* displays the disturbing ease with which ordinary people with alternative visions of nation, religion, and life resort to a kind of destructive, symbolic violence, even when there is nothing immediately at stake.

The final segments of *Them* are a study in escalating division, the refusal to collaborate or compromise, the refusal to acknowledge the complexity of desires and values, the refusal to listen. The sword gets cut out because it is "a symbol of totalitarianism"; the sword gets taped back in, along with the words *Symbol of a great Poland, for Poland shall be great against all adversity*; the sword gets cut out again, ripped up, and thrown into a circle drawn on the floor with the title "The Rubbish Heap of History." The paintings in *Them* are curiously beautiful, a combination of the Vienna Actionists and Julian Schnabel, and by the end

Artur Zmijewski, video still from *Them*, 2007

they are destroyed in spasms of frustration and anger. *Against Nazism*, someone scrawls over a cross; *Great Catholic Poland!* another writes. And after the shredded remnants of emblems are hurled out the window into an alley, a woman streaks an already muddy image with oil and torches it, the flames quickly swarming over everything. "Should we put it out?" someone asks. "No, let it burn."

The last moments of *Them* have a desultory, melancholy quality, the aftermath of strife, violence, and failure that allude back to the ruins of World War II but in this case are more pathetic than tragic: a sterile, smoke-filled space strewn with ash and burned paper. Whereas *Our Songbook* points to the scarcely acknowledged nuances of history and identity, *Them* seems governed by confusion. The words and symbols painted onto the scrolls of paper, then vandalized, then repainted, then destroyed—*Freedom, Honour, Great Catholic Poland*—appear hollow, a nostalgia for a dialectic of history no one quite understands anymore. In the end, everyone flees the smoking rubbish heap of history, running down the stairs and out into the open, undefined fluidity of their lives. "Therefore we must/ arm in arm," Zbigniew Herbert writes, "go blindly on/ toward new horizons/toward contracted throats/from which rises/an unintelligible gurgle." Zmijewski's work never offers catharsis, indeed almost always lights and then fans the fires of anxiety and ambivalence, but

Artur Zmijewski, video still from *Them*, 2007

Them seems to leave us with an exhausted sense of hope, a bewildering and even frightening question mark. Perhaps our tormented cleaving to the nightmare of history is itself an illusion. Perhaps we're not doomed to our afflictions after all. Perhaps all we can ever do is go on blindly, armed with grade school art supplies and unintelligible cries.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Artur Zmijewski was born in 1966 and resides in Warsaw. His videos and photography have been extensively exhibited and critically reviewed. He represented Poland in the 2005 Venice Biennale and in 2007 was included in Documenta 12. Zmijewski is also on the editorial team of *Krytyka Polityczna* (*Political Critique*), a forum for left-wing political and cultural discourse in Poland: www.krytykapolityczna.pl. He is represented by Galerie Peter Kilchmann in Zurich.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Born in Los Angeles, **Daniel Baird** lived and worked in New York from 1989, where he was a founder of *The Brooklyn Rail*. Since moving to Toronto in 2000, he has written on the arts for numerous Canadian publications, including *Canadian Art* and *Border Crossings*. He is currently the arts and literature editor at *The Walrus*, for which he is a regular contributor on such diverse topics as contemporary art and history, political theory, and religion.

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