

The Ghosts of Trans-Europa: Loss and the Soul

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Over the map of Europe the child is schooled, directed towards costumed national types, while all the time retaining its inner archives of family and fantasy. Placing the photographs selected for this exhibition in relation to each other seems to disclose another – equally diverse – map; one of memories, where griefs, scars, dimmed faces and recovered bodies contend together in a series of subjective spaces. Several directions are apparent here: first the tracing of family identity in Ania Bien; then the mapping of the land, disruptively and meditatively with Ron O'Donnell and John Stathatos; this is followed by the dismantling of figures of male authority in the pictures of Leonel Moura and Matthias Wähler. Allied to this is a fourth strand in the exhibition's narrative, the examination of the deathliness of all organic existence – human and animal – in Per Bak Jensen and Michel Medinger. The environmental frames of power are critiqued by Victor Sloan and Astrid Klein through monuments specific to their own national sites; finally, the sufferings and resurrections of toil and piety are represented by Andre Jasinski and Cristina Garcia Rodero. All of these strategies trade in memories, and the transmission of memory is insisted upon in the collection of evidences in Ania Bien's *Hotel Polen* suite of photographs. The act of reconstituting childhood family memory, which Bien does, remembers in turn the dispersed and the dead, and allows children and elders to reappear. The installations of Christian Boltanski have, for two decades, organised childhood memory into one of the most forceful forms in contemporary European art, plotting photo-portraits into social groupings and admitting a terrible pathos. Bien occupies this line of country: she takes the possibilities of the unsettled family photograph – (unsettled partly on account of the hideous displacements of those Polish Jews portrayed, their reappearance in concentration camp inmates' uniforms, deported, consigned to night and fog) and combines it with familiar fragments of lettered proper names and handwritten traces. Bien re-writes the map of Europe in terms of the family's drastic de-territorialisation, a dislocation of the frontiers of identity, which throws to the winds and that bleak pictured horizon, the seemingly assured unit of the family.

Strategies for mourning these losses of family, nation, land and home recur in this exhibition. Ron O'Donnell stops at a traumatic moment in Scots' history. The Highland clearances figure on the left of his diptych as an intrusive overlay of flags and colours of national and supra-national identity around – and comically in – the bodies of grazing sheep. But the right hand of the diptych mutilates O'Donnell's native geographic body: the manic map, bodying forth as the land, has been lynched.

As in *Bien*, a mortal breakage, a tear in the sense of the experience of place, nation and identity has happened. Nothing so phantasmatic occurs in John Stathatos' rendering of the long continuities of the landscape on the Greek island of Kythera. Not obviously, at least, but Stathatos invokes hallucinatory epochs of millennia – the geological time spans of the cretaceous; sublime and beyond man, except for his boundary-making, stone gathering for walls into stray sinewy traces. This is a micro-Europe of frontiers, a political map of locality, divided and sub-divided by family and clans but transient in relation to massive geological fact. Disorientation, confiscation and the obdurate primacy of place and places characterise *Bien*, O'Donnell and Stathatos, as it does Sloan and Klein, too.

The disabused re-positioning of human monuments – the dislocation of the tradition of the culturally venerated and reputable – pre-occupies Leonel Moura and Matthias Wähler. The latter takes a grand panoramic sweep of the incarnations of 'kalokagathia' (nobility) from the countries of the EC and discovers that these elevated personages – Spinoza, Shakespeare, Apollo – are also the samples of greatness imaged on banknotes circulating within the borders of these personified countries: the money economy bears the pantheon. Wähler then carries through another demolition of Western sacralised structures by gathering these worthies together at a parody of the Last Supper. Here the pious sacrifice of the original narrative is ironised by the replacement of the Last Supper's table by a wooden palette used to frame and support commercial goods being moved to market across the new Europe. The free market flows, it is implied, obliterate any authenticity of generic 'genius' – which has anyway already been recruited to the 'economic club'. This satiric and cynical motif of cancellation is at work, too, in Moura's similar parade of agents of 'greatness' – Hegel, Kafka, founders of the modern European mind – who have been 'blacked out' across their eyes, as if criminal suspects, by a linguistic sign of the immaculate geo-political phantom, 'EUROPA': a kind of psychotic portent sent back from the end of the twentieth century, to be superimposed upon the era of enlightenment and modernity, like *The Terminator* or a T-shirt design. Here the territory on the conceptual map is that of 'entzauberung', the progressive de-sacralisation of the high and reserved cultures of (European) authority, – thus by Moura's tactics Philosophy and Literature are blinded or blindfolded by an overlay of techno-chill from electronically-generated graphics.

If Moura and Wähler put figures of European mastery 'under deletion', there is a countervailing

drive within the exhibition to try to retrieve – no matter however battered and mutilated – the lost, obliterated figure. In contrast to the suave negative economies of Moura and Wähler, nostalgia and romantic interiority are activated in the photographs of Jensen, Medinger and Jasinski which deal with memory and loss in an affective mode. John Bowlby wrote of a definite phase in mourning consisting of yearning and searching for the lost loved one.¹ In terms of twentieth century visual culture it may be that de Chirico's paintings of statuary and mannequins mark the first instances of this in the cultural frame of post-Nietzschean, post-human thought. Jensen's photographs insert themselves into this range of feeling and are set in depopulated urban parkland spaces. As de Chirico read Schopenhauer, it was the latter's mention of a memoryless man finding his everyday surroundings incomprehensible that stayed in his mind. It is the rhetoric of disconnection and amnesia: just as O'Donnell's amputated Scotland is torn from the body of England into a feeling-less oblivion, Jensen kidnaps a statue of the Danish seventeenth century astronomer Ole Romer and dumps it in wintry undergrowth. Moses hears the sound of the blaspheming Israelites on top of a disused Copenhagen air raid bunker of 1939 vintage; a certain Judaeo-Christian nobility is marooned, caught up in a cycle of trans-europ displacements, (in this case one with a long lineage of the melancholy of Southern classicism under Northern skies). Amnesia leads to mutism – while Victor Sloan and Astrid Klein overwhelm with a torrent of noisy memories, by contrast Michel Medinger's boxed-in, claustal, photographs have the silence of the tomb. Mourning here takes on the aspect of muted longing as the 'memento mori' iconography of dried and dying nature accrues a stiffening skin of the body in 'rigor mortis'. Medinger has trampled up the flight of birds and stifled them behind the wallpaper.

In the figuring of a certain European loss this deathliness connected to stranded objects is overtaken by rage and the presentation of savage spectacles. The recent re-casting of Benetton's global advertising registered a shift from a happy consciousness of universal kinship and a unified body whose substance was visual – (*The United Colors of Benetton*), to scenes of violent pathos, grievous crimes, moments-of-death and moments of birth, whose textures were abject. The spectator's scopophilic drives were knowingly engaged by these rents and holes in the everyday. When Victor Sloan scratches at the surface of his photographs he also rips the boundaries of the urban 'skin' of Londonderry, a skin made up of monumental gateways, themselves blockages and openings punctuating the urban body. Sloan tears

at the photograph's originating body skin, the negative itself, to trace his 'ressentiment' of the traces found there of the incarnate fabric of the Protestant Ascendancy, the Londonderry Walls. Where Moura cancelled the reified greatness signified by the flat personifications of European philosophers, Sloan similarly bars the triumphalist way through these gateways with scribbled makeshift roadblocks that rage against the traditional, power sanctioned markers of territory and sectarian identity. The sheer excess of gesture in his reiterated cross-hatched barriers and turbulent atmospherics, stand in a kind of rustic contrast to the machine blankness of Moura's obliterations.

Another monumental, triumphal place is represented and similarly overthrown in Astrid Klein's **Untitled (Quadriga)** – the Brandenburger Tor, the once and future cynosure of German nationalism, but also barrier marker, with Check Point Charlie, of the division of the Cold War world, that fatal but reassuring barred doublet, now, since 1989, dissolved. The tenacious memories of World War II worry at the edges of our own contemporary iconographies, as they do here in this exhibition – Jensen's Moses enthroned on top of a bunker; the aura of clandestine combat in Andre Jasinski's underground vistas; the topographies of deportation in Bien; or equally the abject remains of Nazi victims which buttress up the high power of the Brandenburg Gate's Victory statuary. Klein's mountain of skulls which reach up to the Tor are the paradoxical 'downside', the obverse of power; as Klein presents them on her gigantic paper pictures, the skulls phosphoresce, they possess a ghostly glowing light. But when both Klein and Sloan cut into the urban decor to draw the blood that would appease the ghosts of the past, sacrifices on paper that would prevent 'the doleful return of the dead',² they must fail.

So ghosts haunt the scenes of this exhibition just as they, in the form of intrusive, persistent memories, haunt the multifold consciousnesses of contemporary Europe. (We could say that the paintings of Ron Kitaj, over the period of the last fifteen years have continually addressed these ghosts of Europe and the primary trauma of the Holocaust). Some of these spooks are localist, like these in the photographs of Andre Jasinski; but these undead Poles, relegated to labouring in Belgian coal mines, crossed the internal national frontiers of Europe and were displaced from the geographic specificities of home. They live on, posthumously, as kinds of vagrant spooks, as unnoticed by God in their fall as the dead sparrows in Medinger's cabinets, but they also live on as bodies reanimated and recovered through memory, by stories told to Jasinski about the mines by his grandfather. All of his shadow-land figures

labour under dolourous burdens or are disabled by the weights of history telling on them even in the act of re-telling the past: one of them toils again in this afterlife of mining like Atlas shouldering the world. In the re-telling of their stories comes enchantment, shown by a flickering golden light in the underworld (a very different re-collection of the world of family and place that arises from Bien's ricorso incantation over remnants). If Jasinski re-animates these underground sprites, the earth, the clay and the coal play with the substance of their bodies in another re-awakening of the memories of the First World War: those of trench existence and the dissolution of bodies into landscape: the scenario of Wilfred Owen's **Strange Meeting** of warring soldiers of different nations meeting as living dead underground; or the pan-European hope found in Pabst's film **Kameradschaft**, set in a coal mine on the Franco-German border, where visceral enemies are reconciled.

Beside the rationalised and sanitised strategies of a politically satiric deconstruction, Europe is also narrated in these photographs through its inescapable Judaeo-Christian heritage of signs; Jasinski's resurrected miners rise like Lucifer with a smouldering ashy light running over them; Klein's **Untitled (Quadriga)** is literally Golgotha, the place of the skull; Sloan overthrows the Temple – if there is a universalism present here it might, subversively, be found in the claims of the universal Catholic Church, its figures and teachings, perhaps an unacknowledged cultural fear in our largely Protestant minds?

In contrast to the rage of Sloan and Klein with their assault on the fabric of worldly power, Cristina Garcia Rodero informs her documents of Spanish catholicism with an affirmative carnivalesque that is not far distant from Bunuel, illuminating and full of strange epiphanies. She has tracked the pilgrimages of penitents across Spain and has, like Jasinski, focused upon the mourning for the lost yet risen body (of Christ). Hers are regular public occasions where the phantasmatic has established itself – the processional statue of the Virgin swathed in a Pac-a-Mac raincoat, for instance. One of her most compelling photographs returns us to the figure of the child, for whom the passage to adulthood must be felt as its own peculiar loss, when seen in the light of later, adult memory. In Rodero's **The Sleeping Soul** a girl stands or hovers at the entrance to a graveyard in a nimbus of light. She stands at the gate to the mansions of the dead, unlikely kin to the undeleted portion of Psyche in Moura's **Eros and Psyche**, personification of the travels and travails of the soul, as it shuttles – by metempsychosis – across human frontiers and bodies. Jensen's winged angel, commemorating Danish sailors lost

in World War I also stands over the Kingdom of Sleep along with Medinger's Owl, an attribute of Hypnos, brother to Thanatos, Death. These last are fundamentally disconsolate and desolate in their elegaic register; Roderó's **Sleeping Soul** escapes these bonds to magic transports.

Notes

1. J. Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, 1981, pp.86.
2. J. Derrida, 'Onto-Theology of National Humanism', *Oxford Literary Review*, Vol. 14, No. 1-2, pp.15.

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