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MATERIAL PERFOR- MATIVITY IN CONTEMPO- RARY ART

Polish-based female artists and scientists

THE REBIRTH OF THE MATTER STORY: ANKA LEŚNIAK

Katarína Balúnová

In her work, Anka Leśniak (1978) deals with the themes of gender, body, ethnic identity, history, language, and memory. She is particularly interested in the history of women, which she considers to be under-represented in official history. In 2016, she successfully completed her doctoral studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdansk, where she currently works as an assistant professor. In 2011 she was awarded with a Scholarship of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage of Poland. In 2016 she was selected for the residency at KulturKontakt in Vienna and in 2019 she was awarded the OeAD Scholarship for her project A Reconstruction and Recontextualisation of Cultural Discourse By Means of Transmedia Art. The Witch by Teresa Feodorowna Ries – A Case Study.

For Anka Leśniak, art is a way of reviving and transforming social memory in connection with the memory of a place: the genius loci. Memory is shaped by a sequence of events, a cultural-social, political, and religious situation, with certain narrative structures being favoured over others. History was written by men and reflects their view of the world. Women are pushed to the periphery of interest and their stories are repressed, especially those that do not correspond to the role which they are expected to play in society. As Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) revealed in her writings, women were defined in relation to men who themselves determined the structure of society and its rules. While men were the subject, actively involved in the events of the day, women were expected to be passive, controllable both physically and through their reproductive role.¹

The artist focuses on the stories of marginalized female characters who often controversially deviated from the usual norms. It highlights the freedom of their thinking, the courage to take their lives into their own hands. She rediscovers and revitalizes historical events in order to present them to the audience and to develop a dialogue not only with the past, but also with the present and thus with the future. The current political situation in Poland (and elsewhere) actively suppresses women's rights, deprives women of the opportunity to make full decisions about their own bodies and lives. Anka Leśniak not only works in the field of visual arts by creating installations, performances, site-specific and video art, but also co-organizes "Seminarium Feministyczne" feminist panel discussions and as a member of the Frakcja Group of women artists, she works to shape the public opinion through social media and other means. She approaches art as a way of communication, a special language that can break down barriers.

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, New York Vintage 2012.

Her works *The Dance of a Stork* (2014), *Momento Fruimur* (2015) and *Sculpture Rituals* (2020) are an intersection between the seen and the unseen, the solid and the ephemeral, in which apparent opposites are another form of the same. The selected material reflects both the physical location of events and the meaning level of the narrative. In works like *Lilith's House* (2011), *I Only Wanted to Fly* (2012), *Fifi zastrow. Acta est Fabula* (2015) and *I Reserve Complete Possession of my Life* (2016), the artist uses abandoned buildings, especially their facades, which become 'objects trouvés' for site-specific interventions. Static architecture is a witness of the flow of time, a public monument standing along the street, a mildewed past and the lives of people who, although they have lost their physical bodies, remain energetically present. The installations reveal the biographies of individual women or ethnic groups through typefaces and other materials or objects.

Despite their slogan – like titles, the texts are full of meaning; they are concentrated forms of their narratives story and become their manifestation. The composition, font, scale and methods of implementation on the facades are crucial. Sometimes the artist uses a stencil, sometimes handwritten characters, or smears the letters into the dirty plaster to reveal the hidden layers of the building.

The work of art opens a discourse not only with the represented story, but also with the building itself. As the artist says:

"Paradoxically, abandoned buildings become invisible in a sense. By ceasing to fulfil their former function, people lost their emotional connection with them. Such a building is increasingly neglected, devastated, and people look away from it. The artistic intervention, when passers-by see that something has changed, restores the building's visibility. Sometimes it triggers a debate as to why the building is in that state and which of the economic and political mechanisms caused it... So, my work with architecture is also a symbolic revitalization. I am working with the building in a transitional state when it has lost its former function and it is not known whether it will be renovated or demolished."²

The artist sees working in the public space as vital; in contrast to the exclusivity of the exhibition in the gallery, art in the public environment is an intervention in a specific reality which can directly affect its inhabitants through the transformation of the aesthetic qualities of the location. The work of art thus acquires several meanings: it is not only a reminder of past stories, but it also becomes an active factor in the transformation of the memory and the social and urban structure of the city.

² Anka Leśniak. Personal interview. January 15, 2022.

Anka Leśniak, *The Dance of a Stark*, 2014



Anka Leśniak, *Momento Fruimur*, 2015



Anka Leśniak, *Fifi zastrow. Acta est Fabula*, 2015



Anka Leśniak, *Sculpture Rituals*, 2020



Anka Leśniak, *I Reserve Complete Possession of my Life*, 2016

