



SMOKING SYNDROME
ANDA ROTTENBERG

Exhibition curator, art historian, art critic, and writer, graduated from the University of Warsaw. Employed in the Polish Academy of Sciences 1973–1986. Founder of the EGIT Art Foundation, 1986; Warsaw Soros Center of Contemporary Art, 1992; Institute of Art Promotion Foundation, 1997. Director of the “Zachęta” National Art Gallery in Warsaw 1993–2001; Visiting Consultant in the Museum of Modern Art, New York 2001–2002; President of the Program Advisory Board and Program Director of the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art 2005–2007. Board member of: *Manifesta 1* Foundation; Sztuki Museum, Łódź; Museum of Modern Art and National Museum and Chopin Museum in Warsaw; State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau; MOCAK Museum Kraków. Recent publications: *Przeciąg: teksty o sztuce polskiej lat 80* [Draft – texts on Polish art of the 80s] (2009); biographical book *Proszę bardzo* [Here you are] (2009); *Let it be. Talks with Anda Rottenberg* by Dorota Jarecka (2014). As of 1980, active as a curator of art exhibitions worldwide. Curator (1993–1995) and commissioner of the Polish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 1993–2001 and the São Paulo Biennale 1997–2007. – Address: Biala 3 m. 28, 00-895 Warsaw, Poland. E-mail: arottenberg@msn.com.

Yes, my plans were different. I thought I would spend all the time sitting quietly in my studio, writing my book. And eventually learn German. I even started. But you know, I am a smoker. Each time the sentence didn't go smoothly, I jumped up from my desk and ran to the balcony for a cigarette. Knowing my habits, my daughter-in-law gave me a very thick and warm dressing gown so that I wouldn't suffer the cold while smoking outside. She made something very personal out of it: on a light grey surface of this elegant

piece of cloth she attached the bright orange “AR” right in the middle of the back. I felt I was marked with it the same way the Jews were “stamped” with the yellow Star of David several decades ago. Maybe I exaggerated. That means I might have had an obsession about the subject. Now I see it more clearly. I realize that most of my recent studies and texts have had something in common with war trauma. Or at least with war memory. Like the texts for books of photos by two different authors, one the Polish-Israeli-American Loli Kantor, whom I presented at Wiko in October ’15, and the other, the Polish senior photographer Tadeusz Rolke. Both printed just before I came to Wiko. Or the album of drawings made by the Hungarian painter Laszlo Feher, published in 2016. The memory of WWII was a subject of my lecture in the Berlin Deutsches Historisches Museum (February 2016); its consequences became the point of departure for my text “Negotiating Freedom. Polish Art 1944–1970”, published in the catalogue to accompany the international exhibition *Art in Europe 1945–1968. Facing the Future*, which opened on June 23rd in the Bozar, Brussels. And it was hidden between the lines of my essay for the book on the almost-abstract paintings of Stanisław Fijałkowski, which came out in Berlin at the end of April 2016. It is also visible in my recent essay on the sculpture installations and monuments by the Israeli artist Dani Karavan, written for the catalogue of his new exhibition in Katowice, Poland that I am currently curating.

Yes, it might have been an obsession. Only now, thinking of this, I realize that many of my previous exhibitions were also tinged with the same subject. I started in 1995 with the “Where is Abel, thy Brother?” show (Warsaw). This biblical question that is always asked too late, after Abel is already gone, was repeated there by many great artists from the whole world. In 2000, I conceived “Amnesia – Die Gegenwart des Vergessens” (Bremen), referring to the ability to forget that lets us, the human species, repeat the same mistakes over and over. In 2004, I curated the Art Salon “Continental Breakfast” (Belgrade), in which I raised the subject of long and short collective memories that still serve as a trigger for acts of revenge based on the classic, tribal reflex that repetitively powers social and political aggression. In the same year, I happened to realize “Warsaw–Moscow/Moscow–Warsaw”, originally meant to illustrate the common Polish-Russian achievements in art and culture in the course of the last hundred years. In its Warsaw venue, I did my best to display all possible fields of conflicts caused by history and politics; my Russian partners didn’t follow me when arranging the Moscow venue of the same show. Their version was about beauty. In my exhibition “Tür an Tür. Polen–Deutschland. 1000 Jahre Kunst und Geschichte” (Berlin 2011) covering a thousand years

of our neighborhood, the 20th-century problems occupied half of the whole exhibition space; the four biggest rooms focused only on WWII and its consequences up to the year 1989.

It seems that I have not been able to get rid out of this traumatic historical experience. Not mine, as personally I have never witnessed any war, but ours, as the “family of man”, so to speak. I have been turning it over and over in my mind and each time discovering new aspects. Like the postwar changes in the population structure in most Polish cities and towns from multinational, multicultural, and multi-religious into homogeneous, hence xenophobic. I conceived and displayed two different exhibitions that approached this specific aspect: in Nowy Sącz (“Void”, 2012) and Lublin (“Uni-Ja/Uni-On”, 2013). The latter also touched upon the everlasting question of “better” and “worse” citizen of the given states or political structures, like the EU, in reference to the well-known concept of “Europe of two speeds”. Finally, looking at the rising waves of nationalism and religious fundamentalism clearly visible all around Euro-Atlantic and Middle Eastern territories, I decided to recollect the brief history of racism, starting with the “modern” idea of hygiene and eugenics and moving to the current situation of immigrants and passing by the quickly forgotten notions of racial hygiene, social Darwinism, the practice of forced sterilizations, “euthanasia”, and the “final solution” that accompanied the “race-improving” programs of the “Lebensborn” centers.

The exhibition “Progress and Hygiene” opened in November 2014. I felt I contributed to the process of preventing people from repeating this kind of history. At least in Poland. In May 2015, Polish society elected the new president of the republic, who started by breaking the existing constitution; instead, he promised to keep the state free of strangers. The same promise paved the way for the power of the newly elected government (October 2016). I was already based in Wiko, but I went to Warsaw to vote against this program. It didn’t help, of course.

I know that all these exhibitions and articles also don’t help. Nobody listens to artists and intellectuals when it comes to social or political mass movements, as we could witness watching the process of Brexit. But what has been done in the field of art and writings stays longer than some regimes. “Manuscripts don’t burn,” wrote Mikhail Bulgakov in his novel *The Master and Margarita*. I decided to come back to the subject of WWII one more time and write a book about artists’ attitudes toward it. While doing this, I was taking my cigarette breaks every now and then. Leaning out from my balcony, I inevitably turned my attention to all those busy birds picking invisible insects, seeds, and red fruits of the

yew tree growing right at my fingertips. Or squirrels jumping from one branch to another for their secret purposes. Listening to the regular drumbeat of acorns falling from the huge oak tree on the flat roof of my next-door neighbor's house, I guessed at the age of this tree. And many others. Were they planted before or after *that* time? And who planted them? The yew tree grows very slowly, I thought; if it's so tall, it could have been planted by the Brauns, whose "Stolpersteine" pave the way to the Villa Jaffé and whose history my neighbor Daniel Cefai traced. I tried to compare the height of this yew tree with the one that grows in front of my flat in Warsaw. That apartment building was erected some three years ago to replace the older one, built in the early 1950s on the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto. This means my Warsaw yew tree, which is shorter than my Berlin one, is something like 65 years of age. The same as many other trees growing in the backyard of the house and partly blocking the view from my Warsaw balcony to the side wall of the only still existing pre-war tenement building in the neighborhood. That house, called "Under the clock", was inhabited by the head of the Warsaw Ghetto Judenrat, Adam Czerniaków, for a short period before his suicide on July 23, 1942. No "Stolpersteine" in front.

Being frank, I should confess that the question of the age of trees used to come to my mind also when I smoked my cigarettes just outside the back door of our main Wiko building. I mean the door that leads to the restaurant. But gradually, week after week, my attention shifted from their age to their beauty. Especially the magnificent shapes and colors of the red beech trees, growing in different gardens in Grunewald. I wouldn't dare to say that my thoughts about our Fellows underwent a very similar process: from evaluating their age (and enquiring whether I am still the oldest) to recognizing their charm. You know how it is when all of a sudden you are surrounded by dozens of unknown people. The proper recognition of who is who takes some time. Especially in my case, since I didn't belong to any group, neither to the "Pain", nor to the "Coloration" one; "Recht im Kontext" was not my specialty and I got a bit lost in Middle or Far Eastern art. Not to even mention economics.

During all the Wiko seminars, each on a different subject, I dug through the archeological layers of my memory trying to reach the proper strata in which I could possibly find some forgotten knowledge. For example, I was searching for the Latin *Divide et impera* but instead I came across mysterious *horda dorsalis* from the time of my biology school lessons; listening to a talk about Einstein in Prague, I was torn apart between $e=mc^2$ and two spectacular Prague defenestrations. By the way, the same references, but in the opposite order, came to my mind also a bit later, during the Jonathan Sheehan talk. Despite

this sort of intellectual deficiency, I could eagerly agree that color serves as a factor in sexual attraction in many species, but could not believe they have any understanding of formal aesthetics. On the other hand, I was amazed to learn how intelligent the colonies of one-cell protozoans are and felt a deep compassion for suffering fish and other animals. I followed the secret codes of mammals' communication (especially dogs) discussed by Dorit Bar-On and learned the notion of the Rumanian word *dreptate* and the reasons why some Muslims converted to Catholicism in 17th-century Jerusalem. Luca Giuliani confirmed my conviction that everyone sees what he already knows, especially on ancient Greek vases. Telling her story about Ingeborg Bachmann, Ina Hartwig helped me to understand the real meaning of Paul Celan's "Mohn und Gedächtnis"; Hassan Jabareen convinced me that justice really exists, even if it concerns Palestinians in the state of Israel; Jane Burbank and Tatiana Borisova proved that we are able to understand the clauses of Russian law, while Maria Shklyaruk let me believe that she would improve the Russian trial procedures. I hope they will become as transparent as the building of the German Constitutional Tribunal as shown by Gertrude Lübke-Wolff. Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger showed me a new face of Maria Theresia; Ralph Ubl revealed to me the secret life of gloves, especially the left one. And Daniel Jütte pointed out an uncountable number of windows glittering on the distant horizon of art sciences. I learned a lot. I even tried to understand the paradox of liberation in purely philosophical terms. However, I still don't know what zebras did to have such attractive stripes.

Thus, from one seminar to the other, I have gradually become acquainted with our Fellows, the fields they work in, and the way they think, although their private features such as their temperaments, senses of humor, and taste in wine and cheese were easier to learn during common lunches and dinners. Especially dinners. Long and unforgettable. And during some side parties, organized on many occasions here and there. But still, I have spent a lot of time all alone. Days became shorter and shorter. Passing every day by the illuminated window of Michael Jarrell's studio in Villa Jaffé and seeing him working, I thought about my low productivity, my politically incorrect obsessions, and, finally, my slightly suspicious position in this campus. Neither an artist nor a serious writer, not even a real scholar, I have been trying to develop a concept that I would not be able to defend or prove scientifically, as most of my conclusions are based rather on the intuitive interpretations of art. On top of all this, I have not been able to cut off my mind from the political and social changes in my country. One dark autumn afternoon, smoking a cigarette on the balcony of my luxury studio and feeling torn apart between Polish affairs and

orderly Wiko habits, I decided to start a sort of Berlin diary. Not instead of my book, but as a side activity.

My main task has resulted in two chapters, so far. I diminished my speed when I realized that I would probably not have a chance to publish this book in my country, as each publisher would need to get the additional public funds in this purpose. But the diary grew to some two hundred pages. Curious about what I had been writing during all those months, I tried to read it yesterday, but found it very boring. All about the same: Berlin-Warsaw, Germany-Poland. And myself torn apart between these two.

It always ends up differently than previously planned. Not in general, but in my case. At least I made friends with many bright people and hope to keep in touch with them in the future, whatever it brings to each of us and to this world.