

Esther
Shalev-Gerz

White Out –
Between
Telling and
Listening

5.3.2024 –
4.8.2024

Exhibition
Leaflet

MUSÉE CANTONAL
DES BEAUX-ARTS
LUSARNE
Espace Focus

Making use of a broad range of media that includes installation, photography, interventions in public space, and video, Esther Shalev-Gerz (born 1948 in Vilnius, lives and works in Paris) has been developing a body of work for over thirty years around questions relating to the construction of memory, be it personal or collective. Her reading of history is firmly anchored in the present of her protagonists. Most of her works have been created in dialogue with other people, whether the inhabitants of a specific place, or witnesses of a particular event. The past then is always read through the present of those who remember or work with its relics. The people she speaks with are most often filmed in a static shot, answering questions and telling stories, suspended in the instant that comes before speech, or in that moment of listening, to the words of others or their own that have been 'othered', too, through the distance imposed by the process of film and filming. All of Shalev-Gerz's output can be likened then to work on the question of the portrait. Through various narratives, in the interval between listening and speaking, and thanks to the particular elements of her installations, Shalev-Gerz creates new spaces in order to take on questions of memories, remembering, bearing witness, and our relationship with history.

Acquired by MCBA for its collection following the 2012 retrospective devoted to Esther Shalev-Gerz, *White Out – Between Telling and Listening* is a work the artist created at the invitation of Stockholm's Historiska Museet. Learning that in Sami, the language spoken by the Sami people, the word 'war' does not exist, and that Sweden has not been at war for some 200 years, Shalev-Gerz began researching in the archives of the two cultures to explore the existence of a possible link between these two facts and, more broadly, to question what separate cultural heritages, languages, peoples, and landscapes may have in common.

The video installation features two static shots of Åsa Simma, a woman of Sami origin living in Stockholm. The two shots are projected on facing screens, one filmed in the capital and the other in Karesuando in Sweden's far north, the landscape where Simma and her fellow Sami originate from. In the former, Åsa Simma reacts to various quotations

that touch on subjects like nature, war, the connections between genders, and the condition of women and children in Swedish and Sami cultures. In the latter, she listens to her own words. The contrast between the two selves is striking – on the one screen, the animated city dweller her hands and arms expressive in their movements as she tells her own story; on the other, the calm reserved face of a woman listening and specifically listening to herself speaking. The piece divides the ego between the subject of the speech act and the subject taking in speech. The ‘in-between state’ that is implied in the title is the space that is continuously crossed from one to the other of two contemporary identities, a permanent oscillation from one outside position to the other.

On the walls are works with the quotations that served as the basis for the discussion between the artist and Åsa Simma; these come from a range of Sami and Swedish sources, including historical records, travel literature, and magazines. Also shown are photographs in which we can make out large storage shelves filled with objects. They are holding in fact some of the 22 million objects making up the vast collection of Stockholm’s Historiska Museet, tokens of the country’s official history, from which Sami culture is largely excluded.

As the artist explains, “My investigation terrain is the construction of memory. My aim is to challenge and disturb normalized expectations of memoirs, and of historiography, by disrupting the various forms of official histories, including anthropology, ethnology and museology. My work makes use of existing historical representations, such as documentary texts and images, which aid memory. But I intentionally present such materials from disparate times and locations as these things can exist synchronically, across time, and ahistorically, outside of time – as in a hypersystem, with interchangeable links, always in the present, even though history seems absent in the present.”

Publication:

Nicole Schweizer (ed.), *Esther Shalev-Gerz. Entre l'écoute et la parole / Between Telling and Listening*, with texts by Nora M. Alter, Georges Didi-Huberman, James E. Young and Annika Wik, Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne / JRP Éditions, Geneva, 2012, 163 p., 228 ill. (FR/EN)

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Events:

Guided tours for the Ami·s du MCBA (in French)

Thursday 21 March at 6pm

Tuesday 26 March at 12:30pm

With Nicole Schweizer, Curator of contemporary art and Exhibition Curator

Guided tours (in French)

Thursday 25 April at 12:30pm

With Nicole Schweizer

Thursday 30 May at 6:30pm

With Eleonora Del Duca, Assistant Curator

Reservations required for all events:

→ mcba.ch/agenda

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