

Sint-Lievens-Esse,
Monday, 21 March 2016

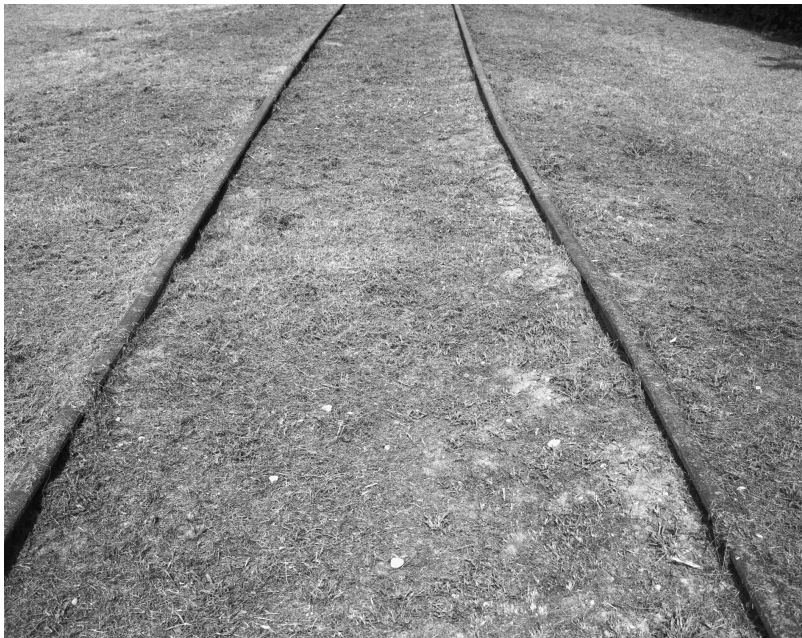
Dear Jelena,

I hope you are fine. I know you are preparing things to travel from Ghent to Serbia. This letter might reach you somewhere in between, lingering between past and future images of a foreign homeland.

Some images have the power to stick in the brain.

They haunt our memory, flickering in a fluid of emotions. *Mira, Study for a Portrait* (2010 - 2014) will haunt my mind forever. And that's a good thing. There is this powerful image of a railway, covered with moss and greenery. Like many other photographic images in *Mira*, it flirts with the 'intractable reality' of the past. Of course, this image resonates with the sad history of the deportation of the Jews to the death camps by railway transports, under strict supervision of the German Nazis and their allies. The *Judenrampe* leading towards the entrance gate of Auschwitz-Birkenau is iconic in this matter. The image functions as an "emphatic marker" in our collective memory (Liss 7). Even more so, it has become representative of a whole historical event.

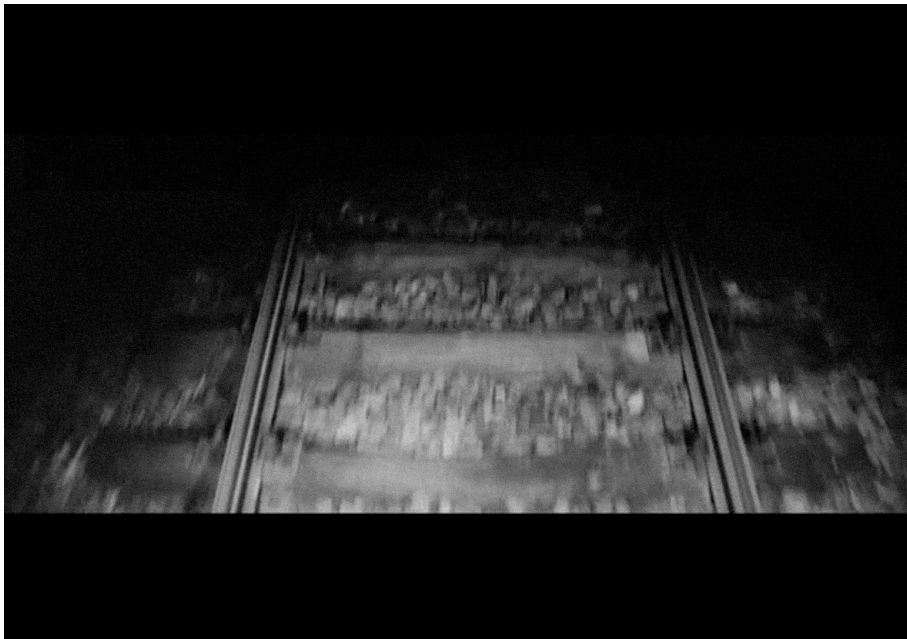




A photograph taken in Jasenovac (Croatia), former concentration camp, in July 2012 (*MIRA, Study for a Portrait*, 2010 – 2014)



Claude Lanzman, *Shoah*, 1985, video still



Lars Von Trier, *Europa*, 1991, video still

I catch myself in the act of writing ‘of course’ a couple of sentences ago. Thinking over the self-evidence of this association, I realize that, being circulated over and over again, an image runs the risk of inciting short circuit thinking; an analogous sign calls –pars pro toto – for cognitive recognition of a complete event. It becomes an “iconic cliché” (Vos 176).

Is it possible that iconic clichés prevent us from thinking through the complexity of a cultural trauma? According to philosopher Slavoj Žižek, the overwhelming horror of violent images in the media and their univocal call for sympathy for the victims prevent us from thinking about the deeper mechanisms of violence. I tend to believe him.

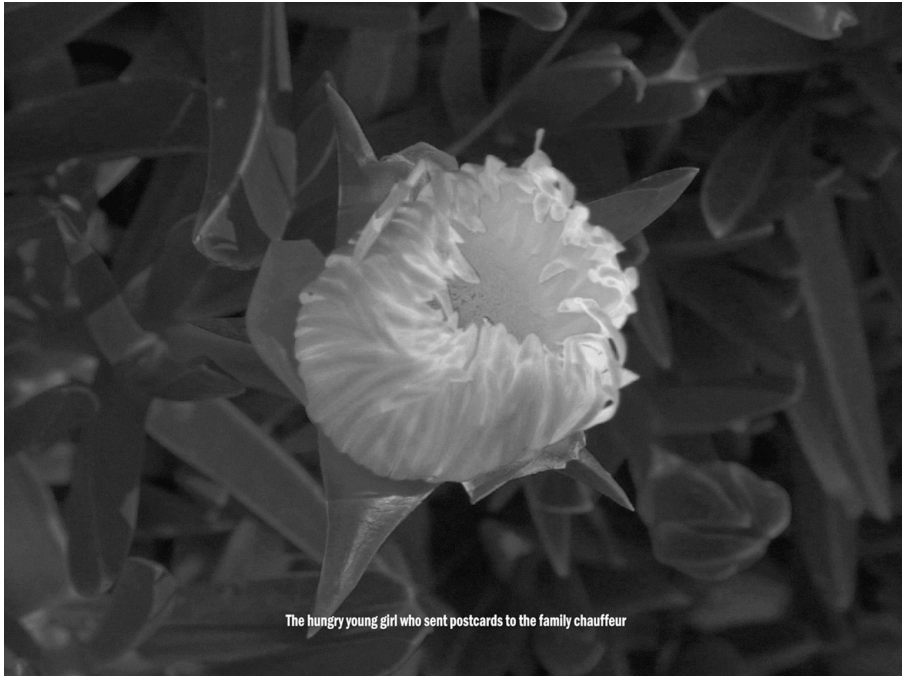
It takes some time before I realize that such death rails also exist in Belgium. Research teaches me that the Kazern Dossin in Malines was a transit camp for Jews and Gypsies (*SS Samellager Mecheln*) where 25,259 people were deported to Auschwitz. It was called the antechamber of death. Only 1,123 survived the death camp. For more than fifty years, its railway was also covered in greenery, oblivious of the deportation activities that took place there. After the liberation, the building resumed its pre-war military function, as if nothing had happened. It was only in 1996 that the Kazern Dossin was turned into a museum, acknowledging its deportation activities (Steinberg, Adriaens and Schram).

Memory scholar Douwe Draaisma is right: forgetting is one of memory’s crucial capacities. It serves as a kind of protective shield in coping with traumatic events. It allows traumatized people to move on with their lives. In fact, Draaisma calls the art of forgetting essential for preserving valuable relationships and encouraging personal contentment. But what if this ‘art’ of forgetting turns into a politics of oblivion?

I think the revelatory function of art is not to be underestimated here.



Mira, Study for a Portrait, 2010-2014, video stills



The hungry young girl who sent postcards to the family chauffeur



from the concentration camp.

On Narrative Recall

Some words have the power to stick in the brain.

Some words have the power to heal.

Narrative recall is considered an important tool in “working through” cultural traumas. To narrate enables a community “to make meaning out of a chaotic world and the incomprehensible events taking place in it” (Bal 2002, 10). As James Thompson observed, “constructing a narrative from the pain of the past allows it to be contained or healed” (2009, 45). Novelist Aleskandar Hemon also exclaimed that in order to understand our histories, we have to narrate our catastrophes. As such, *Mira, Study for a Portrait* unfolds how the shared Ladino language of the displaced Sephardic Jews “comforted them like an embrace”.

But what kind of narrative is at work when “working through” cultural traumas? Is it possible that some master narratives prevent us from thinking about the deeper mechanisms of violence? News items love to present facts and figures in reporting ‘objectively’ about catastrophic events. A trauma is hence rendered intelligible, pegged to a data set or to solid statistics. As if the mathematical precision of death rates would make the trauma more easily digestible.

“In four years of war in Yugoslavia, over a million soldiers and civilians of every nationality, belief and political standing were killed.”

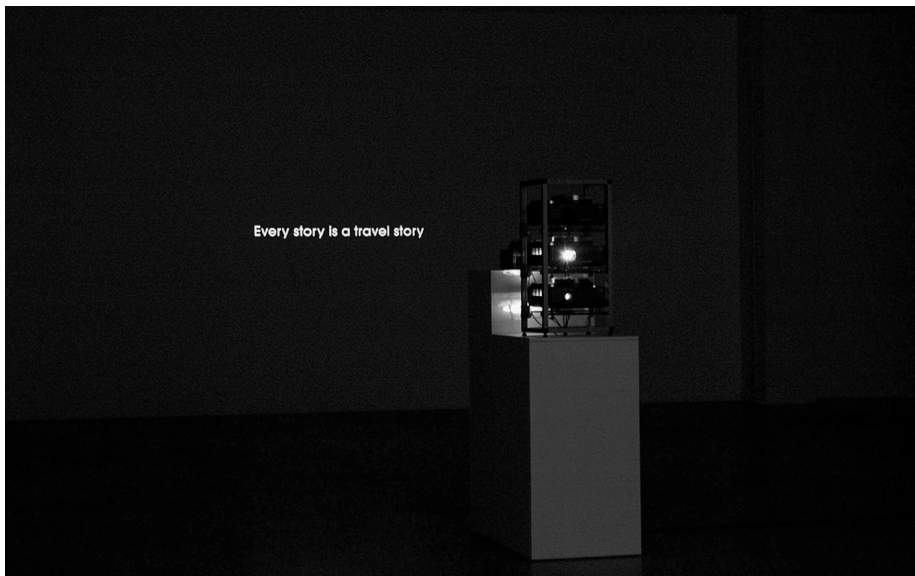
In *Mira, Study for a Portrait*, these exact figures and explanatory notes are rare. More abundant are the poetic phrases, accompanied by images of a natural any-space-whatever, or by sparkling moments of silence.

“Over seven thousand streaming corpses around the mountain range, masses of wounded swimming between them.”

Every story is a travel story - a spatial practice (Michel de Certeau).
Crime - Migration - Displacement - Genocide - 1492 - Journey



Mira, Study for a Portrait, 2010-2014, photograph



Ana Torfs, *Displacement*, installation view, WIELS, Brussels, 2014
(c) photo Ana Torfs

I do not get a complete picture of Mira, not even a portrait. I have to engage with a *study* for a portrait. The video is developed from (archival) research, but the documents used are not strategically *mise-en-chaine* in order to convince the spectator of a truth behind a historical event, of a truth that needs to be recovered from the folds of history. This video does not report. It does not present facts. It does not draw solid connections and does not attempt to convince the audience of an objective representation of a *katastrofa*. It does not claim to reveal the Truth, it is more interested in truth functions than the Truth itself; it is mostly investigating “the condition of its creation”. That is why I am denied a clear and sharp image of Mira, Jozef or Rifka. I do get to see an over-exposed photo or a photo with too much backlight, offering me an image of a bride whose face is covered with shade. Or I get to see shoes, shoelaces, dirt and mud on shoes. I get to see a kaleidoscope of sideways glances into the life of Mira, and of the *katastrofas* that befell her family, as the “*katastrofa* is everywhere, its particles always shimmering like shrapnel on a sunny day” (Hemon).

It is also a poetic conception of space that I have to deal with. With Mira, I move through an intensive space, lacking spatial orientation. Rather than providing spatial coordinates, the images of nature offer an ungrounded space. In Deleuze and Guattari’s words, “It is a space of affects, more than one of properties. It is *haptic* rather than optical perception. (...) It is an intensive rather than extensive space, one of distances, not of measures and properties. Intense *Spatium* instead of *Extensio*.” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 528). The scene reminds us of – nothing. It breathes the emptiness of a Deleuzian *espace quelconque* or any-space-whatever.

These sideways glances on violence and trauma do not offer me a unilateral or straightforward perspective along which I can identify with the characters and through which I can experience *catharsis*. On the contrary, the sideways glances inaugurate what Deleuze would call a shock to thought; I am not merely affectively overwhelmed, my affects connect with a *Denkbild* or *image pensante*: “l’image devient pensée, capable de saisir des

Places and layers. Places of memory. Pierre Nora.



Mira, Study for a Portrait, 2010-2014, photograph



Alain Resnais, *Night and Fog*, 1955, video still

mécanismes de pensée“ (Deleuze 1990: 75). The startling effect or ‘shock’ invites me to a new mode of thinking; that is to move beyond the mathematical, easily digestible format of facts and figures. Following Žižek, genuine thinking comes to an end when we too easily look away from the overwhelming horror of violent images in the media, when we look away from the horror we recognize in the violence that is represented. Creative thinking, however, emerges when the cognitive gaze stutters and stumbles, when there is no longer any univocal recognition. When we are offered no catharsis or easily digestible facts and figures.

“Herds driven down to the river”

“Rolled in thick blankets”

But, it is mostly in the silence that follows, that my thoughts are woven.

On Sticky Silence

Some sounds have the power to stick in the brain.

Think of the frustration a stubborn earworm can cause. There is something imperative in the functioning of these earworms. That’s why neurologist Oliver Sacks refers to them as fixations in the brain (44). The ‘catchy’ or ‘sticky’ music “hooks the listener” (42) and leaves ample space for creative imagination.

The auditory space in *Mira, Study for a Portrait* overwhelmed me in a different way. Because of the sustained silence, I felt unhooked from any kind of ‘easy’ listening and comforting tunes. And strangely enough, this being unhooked felt terrifying and liberating at the same time. The silence withdrew more emotions and meanings from me than catchy tunes ever allowed me to imagine, moving my musical imagination beyond sentimental and nostalgic tunes. These extremely varied unconscious associations were manifold, sometimes absurd, sometimes explicit, most of the time tangible like billowing smoke.



Mira, Study for a Portrait, 2010-2014, photograph



*Ophelia, Painting by Sir John Everett Millais, Bt (1851-1852)
© Tate (2016) , CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0 (Unported)*

Some moments of silence inaugurate paucity in my thoughts. It allows me to stutter in my interpretation. Silence is then not the negation of language, nor a posture of negativity. It is the creative urge to express oneself despite the short-circuiting effect of rigid language systems and clear images; it is the pronouncement of the unspeakable not despite, but thanks to the blank spaces of silence. Silence or ‘not-telling’ is from this perspective not “a dangerous retreat, a failure or the site of continued harm” (Thompson 2009: 45), nor a “tailing off into silence” (Summerfield 98), but a confident embrace of articulatory potentiality.

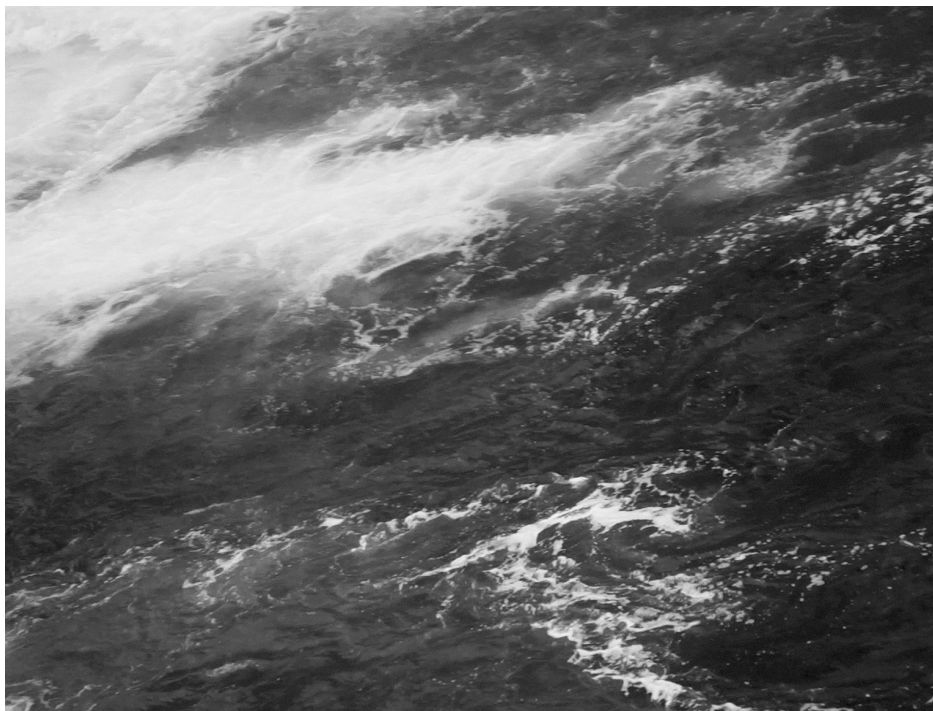
In *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, the poet John Keats evokes why he prefers that “unravish’d bride of quietness”, that “foster-child of Silence and slow Time” above heard melodies.

Thou, silent form! Dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,
‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.’

(...)



Andrei Tarkovsky, *Solaris*, 1972, film still



Mira, Study for a Portrait, 2010-2014, video still

On Palpable Absence

“First memory. Chin resting on the back of the chair”

Images of empty seats, some of them with blankets hanging over the backrest, cling to my brain. They are bound up with a high level of familiarity and, at the same time, with an acute sense of inaccessibility. Its atmosphere is dense with palpable absence. The elliptical quality of the images lies in their ambivalent interplay between presence and absence. On the one hand, these images breathe loneliness and isolation. Death might be present in the absence of a living body. The Christmas tree and some party garlands seem out of place in this setting. The blankets function like the chalk drawings used by the police to mark the position of an absent corpse.

On the other hand, the blanket on the seat also reminds me of a body that used to be comforted with its warmth. Someone put a blanket on a seat. At least someone took into consideration this need to be comforted. Someone cared for a person who needed help.

“Old people deserve attention. (...) You have dinner with them, entertain them, help to take their minds off of their absent children. You ask yourself whether someone will take care of you in your older days.”

Some day in the future, I will recall these words.



Mira, Study for a Portrait, 2010-2014, photograph

Mira, Study for a Portrait (2010 - 2014) will haunt my mind forever. And that's a good thing. It demands to move hesitantly along sideways glances. It demands to move away from the one-sided perspective on violence exercised by one individual or a clearly identifiable group. Only after a while, with the trained eye of a sideways glance, can I start seeing the contours of the background that generates eruptions of violence.

A big hug,
and stay safe,

Christel



Mira, Study for a Portrait, 2010-2014, video stills

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