

The Danish artist Maj Hasager has over the past two years been working on the project *Decembers* in collaboration with Laznia – Center for Contemporary Art in Gdansk, Poland. The project is being shown for the first time in Denmark at GREEN IS GOLD, entitled *Decembers revisited: Re-narrating a past*.

The project *Decembers* takes its point of departure in recent Polish history focussing on the two December strikes in 1970 and 1981. These seminal events, which the title refers to, mobilized a large part of the population in solidarity against sudden and extreme price hikes on food, low wages and the totalitarian communist government.

The December strikes were two violent events that left deep marks in the Polish population and the collective memory. The exhibition at GREEN IS GOLD is based on the memory and recollection of a group of women, from which Hasager's work departs. Through video, photography and installation she provides glimpses of a forgotten past, and with gestures such as subjective writing of history and reinterpretation of archival material she focuses on an otherwise overlooked perspective, which is that of the women.

By Dea Antonsen

You have a research-based approach to the writing of history, but how do you come across the peripheral narratives – in this case the Polish women's stories?

In 2011, I was commissioned to make a new work, which had identity in Gdansk as its point of departure. The commissioner was Agnieszka Kulasinska from Laznia – Centre for Contemporary Art in Gdansk. I was interested in investigating recent Polish history, and to focus on the female perspective which seems absent in the discourse around the Solidarity movement and in general.

During a research stay in Gdansk, I was introduced to a group of women writing their subjective history, affiliated with the University of the Third Age in Gdansk. The women, aged 55-80, meet every Monday and I was interested in working with an already established group created around the narration of alternative stories from the periphery of official writing of history. A collaboration arose after a longer presentation of my praxis and method, and eight of the twelve women decided to participate in the project which would involve a staging of their narratives centred around the December strikes of 1970 and 1981. The women chose which perspectives to present and through dialogue with them I chose to situate them around a scaled down version of the round table where Lech Walesa negotiated with the communist rule in 1989, to have free trade unions re-established. Placing the women around the table also references the history of the marginalised, feminist history and political negotiation.

For me, the women's stories are important to bring forward as examples of historical events witnessed from the periphery. Previously they existed solely in the oral tradition, through this project they are now re-contextualised and enhanced.

It is striking that you are working with clearly manifested aesthetics and staging in the presentation both of the historical material, in particular the

archive, and when portraying the personal narratives. How does this relate to your way of exploring and your method in writing history?

I usually work in the intersection between documentary and art, where the subjective narrative becomes a reflection of, or counter-narrative to, the so-called official construction of history. Aestheticizing and staging the historical material is essential to my praxis, and serves as an investigation of different perspectives on the writing of history, and what we traditionally have been told are the important and iconic moments - simply put. I'm concerned with the stories that are slightly displaced from these moments - material which the archives are often full of, which the photographer in the frozen instant thought important to document, but which later becomes a form of surplus in the historical mass.

Through aesthetic processing I can steer the project in certain directions and step away from the documentary "trap" that often exists when working with archival material. It also enables a playful investigation of authenticity, where the aestheticizing contributes to new displacements of the subjective material, but also to a reinterpretation of a part of a certain time, filtered through the eyes of an artist. By placing the archive in the exhibition space as an installation I'm investigating the relation between the contemporary and the museum.

Several of these shifts and investigations are active in *Decembers - performing a past*, which again makes it clear that you are playing with staging and performativity in relation to the writing of history. The eight women are placed in a situation mimicking that of political negotiation, but speak all at once, while one after the other comes into focus. Besides, their stories are unintelligible to non-Polish speaking viewers, since the film has no subtitles. Here, there's a clear displacement between language and text, when the viewer can only read the women's stories. You repeatedly insist on the deconstruction of the linear one-to-one narration, why is that?

In relation to the film the women perform their stories simultaneously - without subtitles - and the film plays a major part in relation to the destabilisation of the strict archival style, leaving it pending between different interpretations and positions and remaining open to the viewer. By leaving out subtitles, the film might at first seem to exclude non-Polish speakers, but the possibility exists to immerse in the individual stories which are presented as texts in the exhibition. If the viewer can overcome the wish for translation in relation to the film, one can simply let oneself follow the flow of the chorus-like soundtrack, which makes the exhibition space vibrate rhythmically, without it necessarily being alienating.

The deconstruction of the linear story stresses how historical periods consist of a sort of layering of several pasts as opposed to one linear narrative, which traditional writing of history is based upon. This relates to how Michel Foucault describes the writing of history as being closer to archaeology in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, where the approach to the historic material is more of a mapping of discourses, which are often non-continuous, and not about looking to reveal the truth of single events - briefly stated. It's certainly a gesture I put to use in my explorations, with the intention of shifting the interpretation of the archive and the documentary as being a witness of truth - despite the heavy processing of the material.

You mention playing with authenticity. Your artistic direction and processing of the historical re-narration, which takes place is very prominent. How did you relate to this, throughout the project?

I have a method of working, beginning with several stays during a research process which can last for years before I start to limit the scope, which means that incredible amounts of material, narratives and research are processed before the staging takes place. This process can be likened to that of making a film in the more traditional sense. I often work with larger film productions and film crews which requires precision in the staging of the material. In this case in collaboration with a group of women who weren't actors and hadn't been in front of a camera before which opens gaps, through which new aspects can appear through improvisation or accidents, all contributing to the work. You could say my job as an artist is to orchestrate a process based on historic material or subjective perspectives. This can be seen through the staging of the subjective narratives in the two film projects *Decembers - a round table conversation* and *performing a past*, where the aesthetics of staging serves to challenge documentarism and the aesthetic gestures become a supporting framework for the women's personal stories, in which they can improvise.

In the case of the documentary images which make up part of the archive and the montage film narrating history shown in the exhibition, the artistic processing plays an important part, where the non-linear is cherished and fragmented in ways that are far from the role of the historian. A concrete example could be the images of Lech Walesa's wife hanging laundry out to dry on the balcony, shortly before he gives his iconic speech - both images can be found in the processed archive in the exhibition without any hierarchy.

Through the use of film language, references to political theatre and exhibition design, the stories can unfold while the forgotten and peripheral history is revealed. Then the archive is not just an archive, and a new piece is added to history, which is far from spectacular.

The women's written accounts in *Decembers - a round table conversation* are very different. Some are very much to the point in describing repression and interrogation from the militia and missing family members, others revolve around the fear of not being able to feed the children or give them presents for Christmas. What was your impression of what it meant to the women, to have their individual memories voiced?

The wide range of their individual accounts is one of the strong points of the project and it's essential that all perspectives are presented equally so that nothing seems more or less important - they all contribute to the writing of history with their subjective descriptions and angles. I let the women decide which narratives were important to bring forward, and only gave a few guidelines in relation to the length and speed of their performances after the first rehearsals. The women have clearly expressed how important it was for them to be heard, and that especially the filming of *Decembers – a round table conversation* and *Decembers – performing a past* played a major part in this due to the high levels of production, which made them feel that they were being taken seriously. In a sense, they are also written into a new narrative, where their voice has great influence on the view of two highly debated events in Polish history, but the greatest thing probably is that the films become monuments of their individual stories.

Where do you see these stories go on after this exhibition?

The project has definitely taken a turn, where the women for the first time feel seen and heard in a larger context, which has given them a sense of autonomy over their own personal stories. The mutual/joint ownership has always been important to me in

terms of developing the project, since I am making use of their personal narratives. One of the aspects which became the point of departure in the project is what the Polish writer Zbigniew Herbert names “the substance” in his poem Substancja, referring to the people supporting the transformation in the periphery of a revolution or of a movement. I have experienced similar aspects of peripheral positioning as having great relevance in many other contexts, ranging from feminist movements, international theoreticians who work with post trauma, and Palestinians who can relate and have mentioned the relevance of the project’s reliance on counter-narratives and alternative historical perspectives. In a Danish context, I hope the project can shed light on a historical period which has also had great significance for Denmark, considering Cold War rhetoric and alienation in the form of the East/West (un)balance which remains to this day, where migrant workers with an Eastern European origin still are faced with the same alienation despite the fact that they are EU-citizens. The women’s narratives live on and so far the project has been shown in Poland, Italy, Sweden, UK, Scotland and Norway, and each exhibition and screening adds something new to the project.

Thank you

Maj Hasager is a Danish artist based in Copenhagen, Denmark. She studied photography and fine art in Denmark, Sweden and the UK, earning an MFA from Malmö Art Academy, Sweden. Her work deals with power structures, identity, memory, the construction of history and architecture, looking at how these interlinked phenomena are interpreted and represented culturally and spatially. Her artistic approach is research-based and interdisciplinary, and she works predominantly with text, sound, video and photography.

She has exhibited her work internationally in events and institutions such as: Past Upon Past, Red Barn Photo Gallery, Belfast, Ireland (2013), Kino der Kunst Film Festival, Munich (2013), Decembers, LAZNIA Centre for Contemporary Art, Gdańsk, Poland (2012), Liverpool Biennial, UK (2010), Between Here and Somewhere Else, al-Hoash, al-Kahf gallery and Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center, Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Ramallah, Palestine (2010), Overgaden Institute of Contemporary Art, Copenhagen (2010), Guangzhou Triennial, China (2008) and KargART festival in Istanbul, Turkey (2007).

She has been awarded grants in support of her work from the Danish Arts Council, The Danish Arts Foundation, Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (Beirut, Lebanon), ArtSchool Palestine, Danish Centre for Culture and Development and the Danish Arts Agency. She is the programme director of Critical and Pedagogical studies at Malmö Art Academy, and is a guest lecturer at the International Academy of Art – Palestine, Dar al-Kalima College, Bethlehem Oslo Art Academy and University of Ulster, Belfast.

As a part of the exhibition the 65 min film Decembers – a round table conversation will be screened at Husets Biograf, Rådhusstræde 13, 1466 Copenhagen K on 9th of October at 19.00. There will be a short introduction to the film and after the screening a Q & A session with the director.