

AMELA FRANKL ::: THE FACE

"But that face facing me, in its expression — in its mortality — summons me, demands me, requires me: as if the invisible death faced by the face of the other [...] were 'my business'. As if, unknown by the other whom already, in the nakedness of his face, it concerns, it 'regarded me' before its confrontation with me, before being the death that stares me, myself, in the face. The death of the other man puts me on the spot, calls me into question, as if I, by my possible indifference, became the accomplice of that death, invisible to the other who is exposed to it; and as if, even before being condemned to it myself, I had to answer for that death of the other, and not leave the other alone to his deathly solitude".

Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence* (1995).

Uncertain of the consequences of these words, nevertheless I resort to them. They help me to start talking, to be able to go on. After them I might perhaps without condemning my own facility or imprudence in what I say, to be less weighed down by the look of the other. And shame.

And so then I start up the story of the three stories of Amela Frankl. They are linked indirectly to the trauma of the Holocaust, revolve around the issue of the connection, in the words of Giorgio Agamben, of bare life and sovereign power. The artist explains that 'she neither calls out nor calls for responsibility'. And I believe her. Not because I blindly accept her claim but because I am convinced by the way in which she has told her stories. Now when they are in front of us, it is somehow clear that there must have been, before their performance — and it cannot have been for any other reason than the trouble of overcoming the condemnations of the individual, society and their politics and the possible entanglement in new accusations — a time of suspicions and contractions of thoughts, a process that required touching the stitches of the wounds, the endless opening and chasing of folds of identity, all the way to the calming of passions, to restfulness. I would almost call them commemorative.

The performances of Amela Frankl draw on the personal, while making it clear that the collective and the personal partake of the same circulation, that they are interwoven and mutually determining. And when I say 'personal', I am thinking not only of the family history as told in the *Ballad of Two Grave Blocks* (2015) but of something – it seems to me that all three works endeavour to convey – that rests on the responsibility to

confront one's own with the face of the other, of those that are no more and us that are, the community. Keeping then to first person speech, the artist in a sense spares the other. At the same time, precisely in this way it leaves us to determine our own stance, to occupy a position. And it will be formed by the encounter with works that say it is essential to speak of wounds and traumas that cannot be healed by silence, negation, refusal to accept the truth, which can be measured by nothing but bare facts. And it is on them that Amela Frankl, after all, insists, pulls them into the web of the works, offers them as pre-text and sub-text of the performances.

We link facts with something that is patent, undoubted. Here it is about the transposition of facts contained in things, in materiality that is only apparently neutral and detached from the subject and the fate of the subject. In one case, this is an organ, in another a grave headstone, then a ring. These are pieces of history, dislocated, deposited, archived. Jacques Derrida, however, in *Archive Fever* (1995) writes: 'There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory'. Politics wants well ordered archives, ordered remembrance and memory, law and order. But does not this mean a kind of manipulation and interpretation carried out by those in power? How much is a document stored in the archives really true? Precisely this question elicits the 'fever in the archive', the resistance to power that regulates it according to its own rules and requirements. This is the reason why the artist/art enters into the archive and subverts it. Seeks there alternative stories, picks over memory, the revoked, the forbidden, forgotten and suppressed memories. It/he/she casts light on them, offering truth the ability to be mirrored in small events and things that touch on the individual, the family, community, through fabrics without which there can be no big narratives.

Amela Frankl explores the available documentary records, consults historians, draws on living and written testimonies to compress all the knowledge and involve it into her own texts that regularly follow performative or video productions. Thus the performance *For a Beginning* (2013) was produced as a video but there is also a poster on which we read, in the words of the artist herself, about the meaning and the inspiration of the performance, which is almost a kind of manifesto of coexistence. It was put on in a former synagogue in Koprivnica, which was destroyed in World War II and turned into a prison, while the Jewish community met its fate in the concentration camps. It is focused on the synagogue organ, which since then has been placed in the Franciscan church in Koprivnica. The performance posited two locations, with the

central event in the synagogue, in which the artist squeezed the juice of a thousand oranges and shared it with the audience to the sounds of the organ music of Franjo Lučić, Brahms, César Franck, Louis-Claude Daquin..., which was electronically conveyed (across the square, the forum) from the Church of St Anthony of Padua, where it was being played by Pavao Mašić.

For a Beginning is a provocative work. Not just for the sake of provoking; Amela Frankl never agitates, rather, calmly, without a loudhailer, bridging cultural, religious and political spaces with music, emboldens and reconciles. With such a proclamation of facts contained in the real and metaphorical meaning and role of the organ, there is a suggestive production of encounter and of dialogue in the local community, persuading one that it is possible to cross glances with often insuperable obstacles when it is a question of the interpretation of historical truths and the taking of sides (which, it seems, cannot provide any advance). This needs working on. The artist's body in the effort of performing the squeezing of oranges in a sense is a simulation of this work, for it is a 'labouring body' that urges activity. But it does not do this insistently, which is clearly manifested in the conception of the performance: the physical effort necessary to be able in the space of one hour manually to squeeze a huge amount of oranges and offer the juice of refreshment to the audiences, is above all a message of empathy. Not just of understanding but of acceptance of human diversity.

A Ballad of Two Grave Blocks (2015) too is a project about empathy. It is, anyway, how it is defined by the artist herself. Put on in the Zagreb park of Zrinjevac, where for a week Amela Frankl dug in the grave headstones of her great-grandmother and great-grandfather. In choosing the title of her work, the artist, it seems, deliberately uses the term 'blocks', instead of a usual term 'headstones', thus giving a full measure to a massive weight of the family legacy in them contained. For seven decades, these memorial stones, after the Ustasha regime had at the beginning of World War II devastated the Jewish part of the cemetery in Krapina, had been kept by relatives in Zagorje. In the video, along with the audio monologue of the artist, her trip with associates to Zagorje is recorded, the cleaning of the headstones of earth and their return to Zagreb, to Zrinjevac. The work raises the question of how, after the death of her father, she was to cope with the difficult family heritage, how she was to process everything he had told her, how to go on and fulfil the wish of her father that a solution be found for the grave headstones. We will not fail to say that

actually we do not know whether her father had ever expressed such a wish. In fact, it need not ever have been uttered. It is here, it is present. But it is shielded behind – shame.

Only because I feel that this is permitted by the uncompromising sincerity of these works of the artist do I dare to speak of shame, for it is ultimately ours too. I shall borrow the Agamben text from *Shame or On the Subject (Remnants of Auschwitz, 1998)*: 'Shame is not a feeling of guilt or shame for having survived another but, rather, has a different, deeper and darker cause [...] To be ashamed means to be consigned to something that cannot be assumed. But what cannot be assumed is not something external. Rather, it originates in our own intimacy; it is what is most intimate in us [...] Here the *I* is thus overcome by its own passivity, its ownmost sensibility. Shame is nothing less than *being the subject*'. If we return to *A Ballad of Two Grave Blocks*, then at issue here, I shall repeat, is the shame that has to be in each one of us. However much statutory justice seeks to persuade us of individual responsibility, I have never been able to resist the feeling that not a single individual is able ultimately to defend himself or herself against the shame of the other, of his or her community.

The performance *This Too Shall Pass* (2017), done on the eve of an exhibition in the Zagreb Institute for Contemporary Art, confirms this to us in every way. Kafka wants, says Agamben, to teach people to use the only good that is left to them – not to shake off shame, but to set it free: it seemed to Joseph K. that at the moment of his death his own shame would survive him! The stimulus for the performance *This Too Shall Pass*, says Amela Frankl, stemmed from a story told her by an acquaintance of the fate of a ring today kept in the Memorial Museum of the Jasenovac Memorial Site. The ring, engraved 'This too shall pass', was given by an inmate to another, Gabrijel Jug, and after his death was given by his wife to the Jasenovac Museum.

May I be permitted to draw attention to the order in which the performances of Amela Frankl were created? Naturally, her talk with her father, and hence the knowledge and sudden awareness that her father's, or family's, burden, had suddenly become the artist's own responsibility – in the sense of resolving or at least psychologically processing such a huge news, such a 'novelty' in the family inheritance – comes much before she decided through her artistic work to resolve the onerous story, fate, the burden..., to face up to the family and so her own history.

And this courageous act of facing-up-to, the attempt to transform it into artistic expression, opens up some of the most difficult questions. How to penetrate the very heart of darkness, why and how to depict what can be found there, what is so terribly disturbing: how, and if it is at all possible, to imagine the unimaginable, to understand the unintelligible, to express the unutterable. What kind of answers and messages to take back, are we ready to hear them, individually and collectively? What are we allowed to depict? And again, since this heart of darkness is constantly opened up in the life of man, hovering above it alternatively as an unuttered presentiment and a merciless reality, that cannot be evaded in general, it cannot be evaded also by artistic contemplation and reflection. *This Too Shall Pass* of Amela Frankl thus confronts this through a ring from the hand of one human soul, through its gleam in the densest darkness, the Holocaust. A ring from the hand of a human soul telling of the whole of the human condition.

The words 'This too shall pass' engraved on the ring are an ancient endeavour to summarise the wisdom of the secret of the life of man, to whom are given deep awareness of the self and the highest ability to think, but is also at the same time brutally limited by the temporariness and ephemerality, the fragility of his corporeal being, his transience and exposure to the unknown and the random, to capricious fate, the inexorable will of god, to pure fortuity. And here the question of all questions arises: how is one to bear misfortune, how can it be avoided or overcome, how can it be explained, with what strength it can be accepted, why evil exists; how though to enjoy happiness, how to create and maintain it, with what strength to accept that it is not eternal, why good does not prevail constantly.

The story of the ring with the engraved 'This too shall pass', one that will, with all the heaviness of the fate of he who wore it and then vanished in the darkness of the Holocaust, be illuminated through the art of Amela Frankl, transmits the lore of the ancient Hebrews, and it is also ascribed to the Persian poet Attar of Nishapur of the 12th to 13th century, a theoretician of Sufi, mystic Islam. The story tells of a powerful ruler – King Solomon in the Hebrew tradition – who fruitlessly sought for a ring that would make him happy when unhappy, unhappy when happy. His subjects after long search brought him the wished-for ring, which bore the engraved pithy thought of the wise man 'This too shall pass'. The king, and all of us with him, thus gained the longed-for announcement of

happiness after unhappiness – and the curse of reminding us of the transience of happiness.

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