

Amela Frankl's project *Black Glass on the Way* begins by following the road on the west coast of Africa, in Mauritania, between the desolate port of Tanit and the main national road that connects the two largest Mauritanian cities, Nouakchott and Nouadhibou. ...and if now, for a moment I were to shut my eyes, I might feel the desert warmth and the fresh sea from the Atalantic. What a feeling?!, writes the artist in the text that accompanies the photo of the said location, exhibited in 2019 in the French Pavilion in Zagreb, introducing us to the dialogue in a very personal, sensory and tactile manner, while observing the photo we see an asphalted road partially covered with sand blown by the wind disappearing towards horizon, and whose edge and route we discern under the sand only thanks to a series of street lamps, in the desert. It is August 2019 and this is where the story of Amela Frankl and her temporary life in Africa begins, which will make Mauritania become one of "our" points in contemporary art in Croatia, and which will teach us what we didn't know before, give us new views and themes for dialogues that we did not have before. Croatian contemporary artistic production is rarely oriented towards international, particularly extra-regional and extra-European themes. Little connects today's Croatia and Africa, only some faded memories of the Non-Aligned Movement, of the generation that still remembers it. Amela Frankl's works are often said to be based on her own life. And so it is, but isn't that the case with most artists? So what creates that emphasized personal experience that stands out so often and for a reason? As a series of exhibitions that grow not only from the *Black Glass on the Way* project will show, it is learning. In this case, it is learning about the other, which teaches us also about ourselves, provided that we want to learn, of course. Another element that gives the impression is talking about topics that are not, conditionally speaking, standard in our cultural landscape. Thematically, the works refer to a wide spectrum of local African specificities, from economic, cultural, ecological, or traditional to completely personal observations and experiences. The mentioned topics are not programmatically separated, but are intertwined through the artist's perspective and the prism of emancipation, decolonization or exploitation. However, although the entire project is developed around Mauritania, the artist actually offers the viewer herself, her feelings and experiences, comments, remarks or criticism, various facets of her self-portrait that she brings to us through text, moving and still images and sound. Today, four years after the initial impulse to close the eyes and surrender to the feeling, the project has been rounded into a multi-component whole that, in terms of media and genre, includes texts, photographs, posters, diary entries, documentary and staged photographic and video recordings, performances for the camera and spatial installations. Several components of this exhibition were already exhibited individually, and now for the first time we see all the segments of the project combined. It must be surprising when in a new environment, no matter how secure you are in it, you face the fact that the knowledge and skills you possess, the habits and the way of life you practice, daily or professionally, mean almost nothing there, that they are only the foundation which maybe, and just maybe, enable you to start from somewhere in attempts to understand a new and different environment. Such an experience creates a kind of cultural stress, and requires cognitive adaptation. Perhaps we will see the first step in understanding our new situation in 2021, when the work *Diary from the Edge of the Desert* (2019-21) was created, i.e. publicly exhibited for the first time in the Zagreb Museum of Arts and Crafts, during the pandemic and post-earthquake period, when the audience welcomed the exhibition in a state of cultural stress. *Diary from the Edge of the Desert* is a group of 150 photographic notes on which Frankl intervenes with handwritten notes about travels from Zagreb through France, which is also her home, to Mauritania. This corpus of handwritten and photographic records, which is exhibited without linear logic, without narrative sequence or chronological order, indicates to the viewer an emotional experience of the mixing of

cultures, history and customs, and the artist's willingness to decompose her acquired knowledge and open herself up to the foreign and the new. Approaching the Diary in Amela Frankl's work actually opens up a new beginning, new themes, new methods of her artistic approach, and in this foreboding of the new, new questions arise. Amela Frankl takes us to locations that, by coincidence, she visits in her own life and that are not only out of sight, but also out of reach for most of us. In its deliberate disorganization, *Diary from the Edge of the Desert* does not offer the viewers the narrative they might expect, but rather a plot. It offers fragments of thoughts and feelings, fragments of thinking and segments of associations to selected points in social relations that we think we recognize. In addition, elements can be seen in this work that will later form the links of all elements and the atmosphere of the entire project. The text becomes an increasingly powerful component of the work, the stays in Africa never mean leaving Zagreb or France, moreover, every trip connects them more and more, and the somewhat surprising revealing of thoughts and associations, and the apparent ease of communication actually draw us deeper and deeper into the artist's personal experiences, her self-perception and self-presentation. In a series of works that we could see later in the same year in the Varaždin city museum at the exhibition *PK 22*, we realize that we ourselves are sinking into that area where our previous knowledge is not of much use for understanding the situations that Frankl offers us and that we have to start learning how we could follow the development of the project. The apparently coded title *PK 22* actually means Point kilometerique, kilometer point or kilometer post as the term is used in our country, indicating a location 22 kilometers from the capital of Mauritania, Nouakchotte. This mark from not only the French building tradition was also used in the colonies, and the system of such signaling has been maintained until today. The mark of primarily rail transport is also used in road transport. The video work *PK 22* is a footage of several male characters that we can make out in the distance. The scene is visually very gentle, the image is not sharp and vibrates, it was shot from a long distance, with maximum zoom. The men are on the sand under a hot blue sky, leaning on a horizontally tensioned rope they slowly pull – we understand, with great difficulty – on the beach – a heavy fishing net from the sea. The 5-minute loop video gives the impression of a slow and somewhat futile, Sisyphean effort which, in gentle natural tones, resembles dance choreography, and the artist notes that it associates her with the performances of the famous Belgian dance group *Rosas*. With its ambient repetitiveness, the sound enhances the atmosphere of the video, which is built by the beauty of the image and movement. As in the previous two works, the visual part of the work is accompanied by text. Frankl also uses the text in some of her earlier works, but in this series of works the text takes on an increasingly extensive and significant role. From the accompanying text we also get instructions for understanding what we have seen:

*I come upon a scene.*

*Twelve young men on the shore.*

*They don't feel the needling of the glass-sharp grains on their skin. With no words or shouted instructions, they know what they have to do. Twelve to a net, that's the rule.*

*Awaiting them hard by, there is just a small and rusty truck. With ice and wages.*

*For a clean job.*

Acknowledging the almost slavish working, economic and social situation that this visual beauty hides, in the middle of nowhere, although at a distance of only 22 kilometers from the center of the capital, these people work and live in conditions whose difficulty we first think is unknown and distant. To us, the generation that grew up in one of the leading countries of the Non-Aligned Movement, many associations come to mind. The political history of the process of colonization and decolonization, independence and emancipation of African countries is only a framework for recognizing the details, the fragments from which Amela Frankl builds her new project. Croatia, which is now only an observer member of the Non-Aligned Movement, I learn while thinking about the exhibition, has something in common with Mauritania that we are not even aware of. Perhaps the artist's quick sensitization to the inhuman working conditions that she records as a foreigner in Mauritania intuitively stems exactly from the common point. She is in Mauritania for completely private reasons, but as an insider with more information than would be expected from the average visitor, let alone a tourist. She is familiar with the socio-political situation there, in her new project she brings her impressions of the reality there through her own observations and artistic articulation. While in 2013\*, Mauritania was the first, Croatia was the 61st country in the world with the share of people living in modern slavery. At that time, the Walk Free Foundation, which monitors and measures modern slavery, estimated that 16,000 modern slaves live in Croatia. In the 2018 report\*\*, Mauritania dropped to 6th and Croatia rose to 54th, with an estimated 25,000 of Croatia's then official population of 4,236,000 living in modern slavery. Globally, the main product on which the largest number of modern slaves work is precisely fish, and the industry is fishing. Unsuspectingly, Amela Frankl, 22 kilometers from the center of Nouakchott, on the edge of the desert, touched on the issue of modern life in Croatia. The desert may be closer to us than we think. In her new works, the artist takes a personal approach – she learns about the other, and takes us into that learning with her in order to understand and know ourselves a little better, just as she does. Speaking about how she approaches work, she once wrote that her work speaks *About the consequences left by historical and social events, about the individual and the community, about the unspoken facts, about the inherited family burden that commits, about transmission. The topics are old, sensitive, often unarticulated, suppressed. I approach them personally: Without calling names and calling anyone to their responsibility, without offering any solutions. I provide no conclusion.*\*\*\* No, the artist is not the one who should come to a conclusion. The conclusion is the consensus of the audience, the community, the public, society and the state, but it starts with the individual. With learning. Three new video works, *Stone in the Eye*, *Rust on Words* and *Last Motif but One*, which are now being displayed for the first time, were shot in the desert, in a similar setting and costume, always the same, in which the artist appears, covered in a fur coat, in the wind whose sound follows the picture, barefoot and half-naked under a fur coat, providing viewers with a truly tactile feeling, but not only that. In *Stone in the Eye*, she is deconstructing a stone mound she finds in the desert for about twenty minutes in front of the camera. With this deconstruction, she not only neutralizes it, but erases its trace. Mounds are well known to us too, stone Croatia is full of them. Here, and it is no different there, stone mounds can be tombstones, which does not necessarily mean tombs, or they can be the remains of fortifications, prehistoric ritual spaces, boundary markers or mounds created by clearing stone fields. Deconstructing any of these possibilities is an encroachment on space, but when you deconstruct something that is close and familiar to you, it is a dialogue with yourself, with existence and survival, especially when there, none of your skills and knowledge mean anything anymore. We especially see this in the video *Rust on Words*. The artist is sitting in the desert and is obviously speaking, but the words are covered by the sound of the wind. We would not know what it

was about if the introductory text in the video did not introduce us to the fact that it is a comment on the monument to the victims of the Holocaust and the Ustasha regime at the Central Station in Zagreb. Here we connect with an earlier series of works by Amela Frankl, which also dealt with issues of the Holocaust and the Ustasha regime through several iterations. Here too, experiences, social and family traumas, like the rest of her knowledge, are inapplicable in Mauritania, a country where slavery was abolished in 1981, making Mauritania the last country in the world to adopt a law prohibiting slavery. But slavery was criminalized by the criminal law that punishes slave owners or slave dealers, introduced under pressure from the international community only in 2007. This leads us to another short video work titled *Last Motif but One*, in which, again on the road, the artist covers the tracks of car wheels with a shovel, of course in the desert where the wind covers everything with sand anyway. In all three videos, she deals with the absurdity of her knowledge, traditions and traces of history. Or maybe by accepting that what we know is not everything, that there is more, and that we should make an effort to integrate it into our new, so far non-existent self. The series of 32 posters *A Stone on a Branch* (2022/2023) was presented at the Josip Račić gallery in Zagreb. The black-and-white posters depict the artist who is moving and gesticulating while facing the audience. The photographs are actually video stills that were extracted from the video. At the bottom of each there is a horizontally placed text. The texts are partially written in metric and rhyme, and they bring us experiences and anecdotes of life in Mauritania, and of the critical relationship with Zagreb. Unlike the sequentially scattered photos with hand written notes in *Diary from the Edge of the Desert*, even though these photos do not have a linear development, they still bring collected thoughts, experiences, feelings, and even conclusions or decisions. With her texts, Frankl addresses everyone, but in fact she conducts a dialogue with the curator of the exhibition. The texts are witty, cynical, instructive, entertaining, critical and very different, and are written colloquially, conversationally and personally. I have to leave the analysis of their literary components to competent colleagues for literature, and I'm sure they would enjoy it. That series of 32 events actually tells us everything that I tried to mention in this text in order to make the total body of works from this series more accessible to the viewer who encounters them for the first time, but in her texts Amela Frankl naturally does this directly and originally. From the texts we can learn that her stay in Africa benefits her, that the change in the cultural environment removes part of the burden from which she creates her works, that she can free herself and change, but also that this migration is temporary, she lets us know that she is rooted in her original domicile. She implies her feelings about it and how she sees her social environment. No matter how informal and anecdotal they seem at first glance, the texts thematically touch on the position of women, the position and exploitation of Mauritania, the perception of one's own cultural environment and artistic practice. *A Stone on a branch* is a challenge to herself, and to some degree in spite of her environment. As she herself concludes – I'm telling you this before my descent, it is all about me, not about African continent. And that is why from the beginning I insist on learning through this exhibition, because learning brings new questions and changes. The video and the series of photographs from the performance for camera, as well as all the performances in this series, were made exclusively for the camera. *Hadidja and Harmatan*, produced in 2023, after her final return and presented at the Žitnjak Ateliers in Zagreb, speak, in the context of talking about oneself, about another view of herself from a female point of view. Hadidja is a real person, a woman from the banks of the Senegal River who is engaged in the production of widely known African fabrics and their patterns. Harmatan is a desert wind. On the banks of the Sava in Zagreb, Frankl re-creates and simulates the struggle with the wind wrapped in or in an attempt, perhaps futile and perhaps unsuccessful, to wrap herself in fabric, which she

clearly enjoys..... *and if now, for a moment I were to shut my eyes, I might feel the desert warmth and the fresh sea from the Atalantic. What a feeling?!* And the last work, the way out of this project, was presented in the LexArt Gallery in Zagreb, and it takes us back to the road, to the street, to the asphalt, to the small granules of bitumen paper reminding us of warm sand under the feet of fishermen. *Something Like a Blackout*, (2023) is a wall-mounted, two-dimensional installation made on waterproofing, bitumen tape, tar paper, on which the text is handwritten with graphite. This installation is the final part of this multi-component project *Black Glass on the Way*. Each segment of the project so far has prompted the viewer to quickly google all the content that he does not recognize at first, and that is almost all the content on display. *Something Like a Blackout* is actually the concluding act of the artist's African saga, its exit. The use of bitumen tape is related to the association of roads through the desert, goudrons, the word used in Mauritania for asphalted roads, which apparently comes from the French language, but which in fact has an Arabic origin, is derived from the words قَطْنَار, qaṭrān, tar, asphalt, bitumen. Asphalted roads through the desert sand and its sometimes stormy movement, disappear and reappear, as the wind blows and deposits or removes sand from them. On the black bitumen tape, the texts written with graphite are barely visible, but they are easily recognized by the first letters <https://>. These are URL addresses that direct us to specific content, but since the work is entirely analogue, we cannot just click on the title to access that content, so it remains a mystery. And it's actually a whole bunch of video materials that represent Mauritania's neuralgic points. The installation is equipped with a text that takes the viewer out of the desert storm and returns to the black glass, the European tars that, as the accompanying text says, *persistently and continuously bring something and take something away*. And so the artist provides us with instructions, material for studying, for further learning, so that we might question ourselves and change as she herself did in her Africa.

\*<https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/sokantni-podaci-otkrivaju-u-hrvatskoj-zivi-petnaest-tisuca-robova-900571>

\*\*[https://downloads.globalslaveryindex.org/ephemeral/GSI-2018\\_FNL\\_190828\\_CO\\_DIGITAL\\_P-1636134603.pdf](https://downloads.globalslaveryindex.org/ephemeral/GSI-2018_FNL_190828_CO_DIGITAL_P-1636134603.pdf)

\*\*\*Amela Frankl, *This Too Shall Pass*, Institute for Contemporary Art, 2018.