

“Inhabiting the space between origin and destiny”

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The Futureless Memory exhibition at Kunsthaus Hamburg (19 September - 22 November 2020 - extended until 10 January 2021) comes at a time when many people in the world are perplexed about their future. The current pandemic accompanied by a series of other crises —economic, political, ecological—harshly separates us from a past in which we still could dream about our “own” futures. Now we find ourselves in the waiting room of history, anxiously waiting in this uncertain time zone we call the present. “In the risk society, the past loses the power to determine the present.”¹ We are exiled from the past, but the past never passes, and continues to haunt us. The future, on the other hand, orchestrated by warmongers, corporations, derivative markets, the real estate appraisers, media empires, power-loving charlatans, the security forces...invades the present. In other words, many of us are exposed to a future —promising nothing more than waste and death.

The exhibition comes at a time when all of this happens more loudly. But rather than assuring us about a bright future that awaits us somewhere, over there, the exhibition suggests a novel and intriguing attitude towards temporality and historical experience. The concept of the exhibition, the *Futureless Memory*, stands out as a timely intervention challenging not only the politics of art but also living in this world.

The contemporary artworks as well as the historical documents in the exhibition refer to a wide array of images, words, and objects reflecting on exile —associated with thematic fragments such as migration, borders, destruction, utopia, remembering, mourning, and regeneration. Weaving these fragments into a sad and beautiful ensemble, the concept of *Futureless Memory* invites us to a double reflection: remembering and mourning a past that could not have a future, but also creatively working on the potential of dislocated memories without being forced to anchor them in the designated future.

¹ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (Sage, 1992), p. 34.

Edward Said writes in his reflections on exile that, “exiles, émigrés, refugees, and expatriates uprooted from their lands must make do in new surroundings, and the creativity as well as the sadness that can be seen in what they do is one of the experiences that has still to find its chroniclers.”²

Francis Alÿs stands out in the exhibition as such a chronicler with his artwork *1943* (2017):

I think about Morandi painting on top of a hill surrounded by fascism,
 I think about Marinetti returning sick from the Russian Front,
 I think about Duchamp playing chess in his New York apartment,

Alÿs’ artwork resonates with Said in pointing to the unregistered memory and potential of exile that does not call for a homogenized aesthetic and/or theoretical depiction of exile as such. Instead Said discusses how one should attend to the multifarious experiences of uprooted-ness and dislocation for *including* and *remembering*, “rather than for merely giving focus to or encoding crucial historical experiences.”³

The voicing of these experiences “necessarily bears a unique freight of anxiety, elaborateness, perhaps even overstatement—exactly those things that a comfortably settled tradition of modern (and now postmodern) reading and criticism has either scanted or avoided.”⁴ In Said’s discussion “exile” corresponds to an experience that cannot take for granted “the luxury of long residence, habitual environment, and native idiom.”⁵ Said calls for criticizing the terms of Eurocentric conceptions of normalcy, of “consensus and centrality” enforced upon its others as future under conditions of systematic assault and exclusion.

² Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile: and Other Cultural and Literary Essays* (Granta, 2012) p.15.

³ Ibid. p.30

⁴ Ibid. p.17

⁵ Ibid.

This future cannot be sustained for many affected by war and aggressive attacks such as genocide, racism, enforced migration, and xenophobia. Under assault one has to give way to past attachments in order to awaken to a new understanding. “Much is forgotten, until the moment when the house of the self is under sustained assault. When this occurs, our very foundations are rattled. [Walter] Benjamin suggests that once this assault has occurred, we are cut adrift from our past and become fully transformed.”⁶ We are no longer the same person. “We are also who we are not.”⁷

Kurt Schwitters, an avant-garde artist, was exiled from his home city Hannover, Germany in 1937. He spent the last seven years of his life in British exile. The displayed documents in the exhibition draw attention to the time he spent in the internment camp on the Isle of Man in 1940/41 with many fellow artists, poets, and intellectuals who had fled Nazi Germany. Dilek Winchester’s artwork *Sticks, Stones and Bones* (2020) that alludes to Kurt Schwitters’ exilic experience in the exhibition creatively revisits the materials and the scenes of his art built by scraps. Winchester celebrates as well as releases the regenerative energy of Schwitters that transforms life through art or vice-versa.

Reactivating the past energies for a critique of the present is not an easy move, however. There is an entanglement of life and destruction, of what is homely and unhomely, of the deep time of nature and the rapidly accumulating surface waste as in Samara Sallam’s video work *Four and a half hours* (2015) in the exhibition. Traveling through time connects and disconnects spaces at the same time. Time/space is violently fragmented but also violently forged as continuity. The echo of an old woman’s question “Where is my home?” fades away in one of those moments. One has to patiently find a way through the labyrinths of time/space in order to mobilize things and gestures full of life but perhaps considered of no use in the present.

⁶ Esther Leslie, “Homes for Ghosts: Walter Benjamin and Kurt Schwitters in the Cities,” *Societies* (no.3, 2013) p.416.

⁷ Ibid.

The potential of “exile” then is related to temporal overlays that retrieve past modalities of critique in a contrapuntal manner⁸ in order to open up not only the past but also possible futures. It is not an exit from but a new entry into the time of now.

Yet the dislocated fragments of the past can be very heavy. Ergin Çavuşoğlu’s video work *Liminal Crossing* (2009) presents how one is physically and psychically strained in leaving the past behind. The concept of Futureless Memory acquires yet another meaning in this context. How can one bring the mourning process to an end?

In his work on migration and refugees Vamik Volkan employs the term “futureless memory” that has inspired Dilek Winchester’s concept for the exhibition. In his psychoanalytical reflections on working with refugees Volkan has recognized their particular difficulties of mourning the past. The refugees cannot leave their sense of helplessness and humiliation that the forced migration introduced. They cannot alter their attachment to the painful loss in the past; they are in “perennial mourning”. Volkan points to an important dilemma: “the mourner is torn between a strong yearning for the restored presence of the lost person (or thing) and an equal wish that the lost item become futureless.”⁹ The ambivalence is internalized as part of self-representation, and the perennial mourners feel that they are “doomed” to suffer. But when these feelings are worked through, when “the object representation of the lost item has no future, the mourning process comes to a practical end.”¹⁰ When these mental images or memories become unbound they can go forward in time as futureless memory. They nourish the re-libidinalization in the present.

⁸ Edward Said used the musical term “contrapuntal” for an analysis that takes into account the intertwined histories and perspectives within the narratives of power and critique. See Derek Hook, *A Critical Psychology of the Postcolonial: The Mind of Apartheid* (Routledge, 2012) for the potential of temporal overlays and the retrieval of past modalities of critique in a contrapuntal manner.

⁹ Vamik Volkan, *Immigrants and Refugees: Trauma, Perennial Mourning, Prejudice, and Border Psychology* (Karnac, 2017) p. 18.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.17.

Similarly, but in different terms, Richard Sennett has written about the paradox of exile: “frozen in their mourning of a past and the melancholy of longing for a vanished home, the migrant...must leave this seductive attachment to memory in order to *become*, to take memory into new forms of inhabitation.”¹¹

The exhibition makes us think that we need to remember the lost dreams in the past, and *at the same time*, move the potentials of memory into new forms of inhabitation. Perhaps we need an aesthetic time-lapse for this. How else shall we remember the broken dreams of Ivi Stangali¹² who was forced to leave her future in her hometown Istanbul due to violent policies of displacement in Turkey. Or the dreams of Courbet, the Communist who had to flee Paris? Courbet and his comrades had an unforgettable dream in their Artist Manifesto during the Paris Commune of 1871 before being killed or exiled: “We will work cooperatively toward our regeneration, the birth of communal luxury, future splendors and the Universal Republic.”¹³

The Futureless Memory is a way of “inhabiting the space between origin and destiny.”¹⁴ The exhibition gives a temporary time and space for this.

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¹¹ Cited in Gillian Swanson, “Memory, Subjectivity and Intimacy: the Historical Formation of the Modern Self and the Writing of the Female Autobiography” in *Memory and Methodology*, ed. Susannah Radstone (Berg, 2000) p. 126, emphasis mine.

¹² See the artwork of Hera Büyüktaşçıyan and Dilek Winchester on Ivi Stangali: *You have got a letter from Ivi Stangali* (2015).

¹³ Cited in Balca Ergener’s artist talk (September 21, 2020) on her artworks for *An (art) historical research on Gustave Courbet* (2020).

¹⁴ Swanson, p.129.