

A GUIDEBOOK TO LIFE ELSEWHERE



ERRA

ON

NIMALS

ATASTROPHIC

C.A.T. CONTENT

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HOLDING ONTO

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Johanna Folkmann



Entering the landing zone first time after our scouting mission, I was standing on what had become of one of the small sheds somehow in the time span of around two months.

There I stood in its ruins, looking on shattered parts and materials.

Before I had not even dared to enter, no lock I dared to open, no bottle I dared to take out of the inclining wooden shelf, no flowers I dared to step on to access the inside.

Instead, I peeped inside, watched the spiderwebs moved by the wind, the walls and their colours partly coming off in little pieces but still sufficiently stuck on to give a clear picture of what had once been.

Once. When did the wooden stakes of the outer door catch fire? When did one part of the big window break? And when the next?

Admiring the shed in all its beauty and accidental, worn-out integrity, I stood there and tried to fix it onto/into photographs. But photographs are two-dimensional and have their limitations, which can be opened up or widened by combining them with other means. These can be examples of mate-

rials, thoughts connected to them, drawings, measurements.

Approaching a landscape out in a formerly inhabited and farmed area, abandoned for some time, carrying multiple signs of its former use and things left behind, meant entering a rich scenery. 'Stop. Wait.' I asked the others to leave everything in its place while being at the landing zone the first day. Thirteen people on their way, invading, passing and finding things they were open to and looking for, things that speak of old and new, even when they find their new positions.

It can be read as despotic instructions from someone bound to the past in a nostalgic way. Or be read as our thoughts, raised in the group so many times before, to find ways of staying without damaging and leaving as little impact on nature as possible after our departure. The fear of changing without fixing the found state implies a certain disability to act, a standstill. Being slowed down also means to acknowledge the actual state and reflect on found traces but is also about making new ones. How to approach without destroying? How to create artworks that speak of

and show respect and awareness of a scene? What is something's natural/cultural habitat anyway? Is it the bag lying out in the open, having been populated by moss and small insects? Is it the wooden stake, once a hut, lying now on the ground, rotting? What are one's artworks, one's constructions consisting of? What materials to use?

With these questions in mind I approached the landing zone. They speak of different roles, shifting between the role of an archaeologist, scientist and artist and the practices connected to them like preservation, documentation/mapping and creation.

STORIES TOLD BY THINGS LEFT BEHIND

On the landing zone I started working with the hut's ruins, first going for pieces of colour formerly used for paintings and patterns on the walls. I concentrated on bricks and the fragments of colours on them due to some of my previous artworks in which I utilised a technique for detaching wall paintings. In conservation of an artwork this technique is applied when the only alternative would be its loss and the impossibility of the piece staying in situ.

Driven by my interest to explore the different colours and layers of paint and thus reconstructing a little part of the building's history, the fragments of colours were giving me an understanding and functioning somehow like annual rings of a tree. I started to mark them with warning tape, turning the whole into a sort of crime scene. I mapped their appearance on a plan, photographed them and partly collected some as samples.

"The distinction between "accumulation of rubbish" and "valuable cultural-historical antiques" is often determined only by the factor of time [...]."¹

To me these fragments seemed to be endangered because it was easy for them to fall off the bricks' surface. Moreover, within the landing situation, bricks were needed for setting up some things anew, such as a big fireplace.

The act of collecting can be viewed as an act of art itself: chosen objects of desire assembled in a gathering for purposes regarded as special.

Can 'worthless' objects be changed into something valuable by establishing an order? What are one's objects of desire and what is then the individual history behind each collection?



The division of different materials at the ruin – the removal of the bricks and the division of wood and other usable materials – led to the uncovering of different fabrics. On most of them floral motifs could be found.

Plants have been used as signs for Ukrainian spiritual strength and people's love for their country. The reproduction of nature on fabrics shows a magical and symbolic connection with the world of nature and the importance of it for the people.

* * *

On our first visit to Nyzhnje Selyshe I originally started from the idea of working with edible flowers and plants in Ukraine, wanting to use them for food or learn about their medicinal potential, bringing botanical books along with me to compare and itemise. Soon I realised that my plan was not appropriate for our intensive programme and the hospitable way of offering food and dining as a warm sign of welcome wherever we travelled and stayed. Instead I began to collect flowers, grass and leaves along our way, putting them into a book and drying them. Here the act of collecting was driven by the wish to conserve, to give maximum attention by singling a specimen out and being able to show its beauty to others.

Different from a photograph of a flower I could have taken in the same situation, a picked and later pressed flower is turned into a material object connected to memory and showing me the magic of objects. As beings of bonds, humans tend to build up and hold onto things due to sentimental feelings for the object of interests; the perceived value is also changed by the collected gathering of chosen objects for purposes regarded as special. On the other hand it also means to have a responsibility for the things accumulated, due to the act of taking them out of the found scene.

Thomas Junker sees collecting and hoarding as a basic human characteristic but also as a basic phenomenon of life per se, used to save experiences in the form of material objects, as long-lasting, precise and flexible storages of (cultural) knowledge. As Junker might say, collecting can be seen as part of the cultural universe, leading to substance and durability.²

Collecting can also be read as a way of appropriation of the concrete environment, constructing an intelligible worldview: 'Objects are our other selves; the better we understand them, the closer we come to self-knowledge.'³ Thus a contribution to the creation of identity,





as part of the extended self. They establish relationships between the individual, her/his present and the past.

* * *

As I collected fabrics on the site of the landing and used them in rearrangements, I researched flowers and their meaning in Ukrainian embroidery since this art has existed since prehistoric times. Coded patterns have served as charms, to protect from trouble, give luck and prosperity or change one's fate, relieve distress and anxiety. Cloth embroidery was used with faith in the power of protective symbols and aesthetic motifs.

Embroiderers did not copy other people's patterns but instead designed their own as a form of writing about one's life and future.

* * *









One other piece of material that I found on the landing zone could later be identified as a 'rushnyk'. This is the name of an embroidered or woven folk towel, 20–50 cm wide and 1–4 m long, which has been used for decorative and ceremonial purposes.

In our exhibition at 'The Essence 18' (an annual presentation from the University of Applied Arts Vienna) the fabric was installed in a very prominent place, hanging from the ceiling, overlooking the table which served us to celebrate the Ukrainian hospitable way of offering drinks to welcome our guests. There it was fully shown, not partly wrapped or folded like rushnyks can often be found decorating important pictures in private houses.

At 'The Essence 18' it was shown with all its beauty, its colours, its crochet, its stains and holes.



Rushnyk by folk artist Natalia Ponomarenko.⁴ Photo courtesy of Natalie Kononenko, professor of Ukrainian Ethnography, University of Alberta.

A rushnyk is made of an un-seamed length of whole white cloth, which represents the pathway of life's journey. The ends are hemmed, knotted, or finished with some type of fringe or lacework. Thus, they are 'sealed', with a beginning and an end.⁵

In Ukraine it usually accompanies a person throughout his/her life and is used in ceremonies, representing for instance a person's wealth and talent, often decorating the house. People's belief in the protective strength and sacred natures of these textiles is very ancient.



Natalia Ponomarenko and her grandson.
Photo courtesy of Natalie Kononenko.



RIPKA (THE GIANT TURNIP) — A FOLKTALE

Found hanging in one of the sheds was a fabric with a completely unknown scene to me.

A group of people and some animals are pictured building a line to pull out something. Without asking Tania to tell me about the story behind it, I couldn't have made sense of it.

Once, not too long ago, an old man planted a turnip.

He spoke to the turnip: 'My dear turnip, please grow. Grow strong and sweet!'

The turnip grew, and grew, and grew until it was enormous.

Happy, the old man started to pull the turnip out of the ground.

He pulled and pulled, but it was just too big for one man alone.

So he called his wife to help.

The old woman came over and took hold of the old man,

the old man took hold of the turnip.

They pulled and pulled, but could not pull it out.

The turnip was just too big.

So the old woman called her granddaughter to help.

The granddaughter came over and took hold of the old woman,

the old woman took hold of the old man, the old man took hold of the turnip and they pulled and pulled.

But the turnip was just too big and they could not pull it out.

So the granddaughter called the dog over to help.

The dog came over and took hold of the granddaughter,

the granddaughter took hold of the old woman,

the old woman took hold of the old man,

the old man took hold of the turnip and they all pulled and pulled.

But still they could not pull the turnip out.

So the dog called the cat over to help.

The cat came over and took hold of the dog,

the dog took hold of the granddaughter,

the granddaughter took hold of the old woman,

the old woman took hold of the old man,

the old man took hold of the turnip and they pulled and pulled.

It seemed impossible, but still they could not pull it out.

So the cat called the mouse over to help.

The mouse came over and took hold of the cat,

the cat took hold of the dog,

the dog took hold of the granddaughter,

the granddaughter took hold of the old woman,

the old woman took hold of the old man,

the old man took hold of the turnip.

They all pulled and pulled together, and pulled some more –

and finally out came the turnip.⁶

The moral of this story is one of collaboration: it took the help of the tiny mouse to finally put together all the strength and pull out the turnip. It shows that there is value in even the smallest and by working together and uniting all strengths anything can be achieved.

My impulse was to take the fabric with the tale of the turnip with me, but beginning to extract the first nails it felt wrong. Instead I decided to leave it in its place, for the next visitors to enjoy. I drove in new nails and installed a piece of moss which fitted into one big rip on the right side as a small intervention.

NOTES

1. Translation to English by the author: 'Die Unterscheidung in „Anhäufung von Müll“ und „kulturhistorisch wertvolle Antiquitäten“ wird oftmals nur durch den Faktor Zeit bestimmt [...]'. Martin Lödl, 'Sammeln – ein kulturelles Phänomen', in *Austria-Forum*, <https://austria-forum.org/af/Wissenssammlungen/Essays/Geschichte/Das_Ph%C3%A4nomen_Sammeln> [accessed 5 April 2019]; see Tony Curtis, *A Fortune in your Attic* (Glenmayne: Lyle, 1993).
2. See Thomas Junker, 'Grundphänomen des Lebens: Sammeln und Horten – eine menschliche Eigenart?', in *Glanzlichter der Wissenschaft: ein Almanach*, ed. by Deutscher Hochschulverband (Stuttgart: Lucius & Lucius, 2012), pp. 41–43.
3. Susan M. Pearce, *On Collecting. An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. VII.
4. Natalie Kononenko, 'Some Examples', in *Folklore Ukraine*, <http://www.artsrn.ualberta.ca/folkloreukraine/?page_id=225> [accessed 5 April 2019].
5. Ellen Katz, 'Rushnyky – Stitched Talismans from Ukraine – Part 1', in *File under Fiber: Textile Adventures*, blog post, 30 May 2018, <<https://fileunderfiber.blogspot.com/2018/05/rushnyky-stitched-talismans-from.html>> [accessed 5 April 2019]; text from exhibition *Rushnyky: Sacred Ukrainian textiles*, 15 February to 3 June 2018, Museum of Russian Icons, Clinton, MA.
6. Transcription of the story told by Tania Bielousova.

FURTHER READING:

Peter M. McIsaac, *Museums of the Mind: German Modernity and the Dynamics of Collecting* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).

<<https://www.storiestogrowby.org/story/the-giant-turnip-folktale/>>

<<http://proudukraine.com/floral-symbols-of-ukraine-flowers-and-trees/>>



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