

Davka: Jewish Artists in Germany – Tanya Ury

They are living amongst us - to a greater extent unnoticed by the Jewish public, in as far as they are defined by an official, Jewish, cultural and reporting press: Jewish artists, who have put up their tents in Germany to creatively generate a dialogue between art and life-stories and to work against cultural ossification. For, as a result of the omnipresent politically correct word rituals and mock battles carried out specifically by Jewish representatives and their helpers, a constructive debate on Jews and society, Jewish artists and politics, is in effect prevented. By placing Jewish and Israel-related themes in dialogue with political questioning, Tanya Ury demonstrates that a different approach is possible. The artist, who was born 1951 in London, who amongst other things, is a relation of Lesser Ury, moved to Cologne in 1993, a place where several of her ancestors had been active. She has enriched the cultural life of the Rhine capital. In 1998, after the death of her mother Sylvia, née Unger, she decided, what's more, to leave the family estate of several generations, to the Cologne City Archives. Whether giving and taking are here to be perceived in any kind of decent ratio is doubtful, for the Cathedral City and its representatives have proved to be miserable administrators as far as the Ury and other Jewish families are concerned, who with absolute faith left their estates to the City of Cologne: it is a bitter irony that this inheritance, including documents belonging to her grandfather have, through the loss of the Historical City Archives, gone missing - Alfred H. Unger had been actively involved in the "German Pen in Exile" together with Thomas Mann. The damaging after-effects were, not only massive mistakes made during the underground train construction but also, above all, an indifference demonstrated by the Cologne cliques' sedated City managers. With the burial of Jewish estates, Nazi obliteration manoeuvres seem to have been carried out; Tanya Ury recognises in this the persistent and continual invisible making of a Jewish presence, of the Jewish body. In her projects she reflects upon the disappearance of this Jewish presence and the resistance to the memory of the victims, with irony and a consistency that in every way gets under the spectator's skin:

In "Kölnisch Wasser" (Eau de Cologne) 1993, in which she remembers her murdered family, she gets a "4711" number tattoo.

Aspects in the coming together of Palestinians and Israelis are the subject matter of "Promised Land". "Right of Return" 2005, takes on the right of return debate surrounding hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, driven out in the 1948 and 1967 Israeli-Arab wars, who wish to return to their former homeland. In "Beelzebularin" (2005) she is disguised as Bezalel (meaning in the shadow of God) ben Uri, the biblical artist and fellow traveller of Moses. In "Calving Trouble" she demonstrates the contradictory behaviour of Moses, the bearer of the Tablets of the Law, when he sanctioned the colonisation of the foreign "promised Land".

In the exhibition organised by the Berlin artists' group "Meshulash" she turns up naked in a German Air Force leather coat. The involvement of fashion in politics is something that she points to in her project "Who's Boss" (2002-), in that she exposes the Swabian fashion designer Boss, whose company founder Hugo Boss produced SS, SA (Storm Trooper) and Hitler Youth uniforms – she confronts them with a "Hair Shirt" made with her own hair that brings to mind the concentration camp hair mountains and the fact that in 1946, Hugo Boss did not comply with the Allied Forces requirement to compensate his former forced labour employees with a symbolical payment – a minimal amount was first paid (by the Hugo Boss AG) into the Forced Labour fund in the year 2000. Ury takes these facts and a Hugo Boss advertising campaign as motivation for a video-performance, in which she sews the letters "Boss" into the palm of her hand.

With her double portraits in dialogue form, Ury takes on the furtive and glossed over casting out of Jewish artists and scientists, within historical positioning; in 2003 with “lesser is me more or less” and “or else” (2007), and in a double portrait with Albert Einstein (“doo bee doo”), that references the monopolization of Albert Einstein within the Bertelsmann Group promoted advertising campaign “Du bist Deutschland” (You are Germany). “Now they’re advertising German patriotism in my name. (...) but back then I had to flee the country, for my life.” In “Sibling Rivalry” (2008) she presents her brother’s children, Elà and Leylà Ury, whose mother is a Muslim - one wears a Kefiyah, the other a Star of David. The rich diversity of her themes, her courage and humour is convincing. In her text “Self-portrait of a Self-hating Jew” (2009), that Tanya Ury reads in combination with her performance “Touch me Not”, she explains what Jewish culture is: making taboo zones and censures visible; she wishes to do justice to a cultural heritage and a family that produced many painters and writers. Tanya Ury’s path has by no means been straightforward – the tracks were absolutely bourgeois until she found the courage, with (literally) body and soul, to live the life of an artist. And, in that unlike many of her colleagues, she has never sold any of her works, as she often reminds, she hints at the status of contemporary art: it should be capable of establishing a majority interest, not be political, or politically correct and should suit customer interest. But more than ever today art does not measure itself by its saleability, its spectator or readership figures. And thus one is reminded of the once unappreciated, or now well-known (dead) artists. Or, as Karl Valentin put it: “Art comes from being ‘able’ and not from ‘wanting’ to” otherwise one would have to call it “wart”. It is also a particularly appropriate comment on the works of Jewish artists. Only those who avoid taboo zones, whose current work is easily digested, will surely find a majority interest; this is a position that Tanya Ury in the future will probably also not be prepared to take on board.

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