

Caterina Albano

The Murmur of Walls

When I was asked to write about Sława Harasymowicz's *dismal sheet of dust* (2019) – a work based on the artist's visit to her childhood home in Kraków – I was reminded of Jenny Erpenbeck's novel, *Visitation* (2010). The original German title, *Heimsuchung*, alludes to both haunting and longing, and refers to the protagonist of the novel itself, a lakeside house in the Brandenburg region, not far from Berlin. In the novel, fragments of the lives of the three generations of its owners intersect the unfolding of the first five decades of the twentieth century. History is so to speak told through the murmurs of walls. For each chapter Erpenbeck uses a different form and style (from *Märchen* to Modernist experimentation) as if each epoch had its own voice and mode of telling. The mythical figure of a gardener – who silently attends the garden following the regular cadence of the seasons – marks the passing time and joints the shattered events of a century.

That buildings can be witness to history is not only a narrative device but, as the investigations of the interdisciplinary collective Forensic Architecture demonstrates, an important source of information, as they act as sensors that bear traces of changes in the surrounding environment, such as pollution and telluric movements, or of damaging impacts such as explosions as well as encapsulating structural alterations and renovations. Such evidential traces concur to the reconstructions of events and conditions, adding to the historical significance of buildings and their intersecting political, social, and cultural narratives. Beyond the potential for forensic and historical reconstructions, however, edifices also



disclose another kind of trace that, as in Eperbeck's novel, is akin to the murmur of the past, to faded signs of inhabitation, to untold stories of lives lived.

Harasymowicz enters this figurative space where history and memory overlap when she walks into the imposing and now dilapidated 19th century tenement block that was also her childhood home at Łobzowska 12. Her is also a visitation (*Heimsuchung*) – both a search imbued with longing of her lost home and a haunting encounter with the past that the tenement embodies. She pieces together archival information about this building, pointing to its diverse groups of occupants and the histories of emigration and displacement, occupation and appropriation of which it has been a silent participant from the early 1900 to the present. However, she is also a ghostly presence who furtively makes her way through the building's imposing front door into the courtyard and the once familiar staircase, eagerly looking for the flimsy signs of her own memories on the worn steps and grim walls, finally breaking into what used to be her family's flat. This "breaking in", urged by the desire of mapping the current places with the rooms of her own memory, well epitomizes the overlaying of time and space that the tenements at Łobzowska 12 stands for – at an individual level, for the artist herself, but also culturally, as a place that throughout its history has hosted people who were displaced in Kraków either because they were regarded as social outsiders, invaders or migrants. Estrangement thus pervades the dusty corridors Harasymowicz walks through and otherness looms behind the close doors she tries to unbolt.

Her visitation is, in other words, a work of memory, and can be assimilated to processes of remembering themselves; when unsolicited, often silenced or supposedly forgotten, memories interact with conscious remembering. Neuro-psychologists refers to such process as *chaining* and *spreading*, reminding us that once a memory has been encoded in processual remembering it is available for recollection. Selectivity in memory however consolidates the traces of certain memories when one recalls an event or experience by drawing on them, while weak-

ening or silencing others that could otherwise inhibit the ways in which what is remembered is reconfigured in the present. Such supposedly forgotten or silenced memories can nevertheless reemerge unsolicited by way of unconscious associations, either reaching consciousness as new memories or remaining beyond the threshold of conscious awareness influencing and interacting, or even interfering, with remembering itself.

At Łobzowska 12 the sedimented traces of the past – whereas material or intangible – mostly belong to what is latent to remembering. The songbook written by many hands that Harasymowicz finds in the courtyard alludes to the post-war period when the building was used for the relocation of Poles from Ukraine and to their uneasy, often ambivalent, re-assimilation that, as the pages of this songbook testify to, was disguised under nationalist pretense. The now sealed well in the courtyard also seems to suggest the blocking of past stories to resurface and their potential association with those of the migrants that now occupy the tenement. These overt signs intersect more subtle ones that Harasymowicz captures with her camera as she peeps through the thresholds of empty rooms. The resulting images, enlarged sequentially, disclose shadowy openings and sunlit glares. They evoke the associative unfolding of remembering, the diffusion, rupture and swelling of those memories that have been neglected, obliterated, or discarded. Not unlike the gardener in Erpenbeck's novel, Harasymowicz attends to this layering of time on the architecture of Łobzowska 12 as she weaves the history of the building with the loose traces of memories that linger among its walls as eerie presences and faint murmurs. In the process, on a *dismal sheet of dust*, she uncovers unexpected and perhaps even unwanted resonances to her own and other stories.

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