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JUSTYNA BALISZ-SCHMELZ,
PRZESZŁOŚĆ NIEPOKONANA.
SZTUKA NIEMIECKA PO 1945 ROKU
JAKO PRZESTRZEŃ I MEDIUM
PAMIĘCI [THE UNSURMOUNTABLE
PAST: THE GERMAN POST-1945 ART
AS THE SPACE AND MEDIUM
OF MEMORY]

Kraków, Universitas, 2018, 363 pp.

The monograph is the first analysis of the German postwar art in the light of its relation to the category of memory. The title, which uses the term “spaces of memory” (*Erinnerungsräume*), coined by Aleida Assmann, points to the scholarly tradition towards which Justyna Balisz-Schmelz feels the greatest intellectual affinity in her work. However, the author does not slavishly follow the work of Aleida and Jan Assmann. She employs Assmann’s theoretical framework to analyze specific works created by the celebrated postwar artists, such as Gerhard Richter or Anselm Kiefer. Her analyzes are informed by a range of primary sources, as well as by the Polish (Katarzyna Bojarska, Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska), German (Astrid Erll, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Lisa Saltzman), and French (Pierre Nora) secondary literature. Balisz-Schmelz traces through a series of well-chosen artworks the elusive, yet clearly discernible sensation, of “being touched, as if from the outside” (Gumbrecht). According to the author, this factor conditions “the entire postwar landscape and the human existence” (p. 19).

Balisz-Schmelz defines with great clarity the specificity of the post-1945 German art in terms of geography and time. In her analysis she disassociates herself from the term “the artist as a historian” (Mark Godfrey), and underlines that in general the interpretation of artworks reveals not the history, but the memory defined as “presencing the past” (p. 47).

The author states that the Anglo-Saxon literature on the subject has been previously explored by the Polish scholars and highlights that particularly in the United States the memory studies are greatly influenced by the minority discourses and the context of the Holocaust, on which she did not want to focus in her monograph. However, she should perhaps have given specific references to the Anglo-Saxon authors, whom she deemed representative of that school of thought. She does cite in a footnote a book by Joan Gibbons in relation to the memory perspective that illuminates studies on contemporary art, but it seems rather insufficient for the purpose of defining the entire field.

Chapter 1 provides a very thorough and useful account of the memory studies, as a problematic category, which encompasses research conducted on the memory across humanities and social studies. As the author points out, the autonomy of these studies impeded the development of the common vocabulary, much needed to facilitate a discourse between scholars of different disciplines.

Chapter 2 considers the ways in which fascism influenced German postwar art, understood *en masse*, through the discussion of parallels with contemporary literature, exhibitions, and artistic critique. Balisz-Schmelz provides the general overview of the historic events to outline the context for artworks selected for a more in-depth investigation in the subsequent chapters.

Chapters 3–6 constitute the main body of the book and discuss works by Joseph Beuys, Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, Beate Passow, Andreas von Weizsäcker, Jochen Gerz, Hanne Darboven, Sigrid Sigurdsson, and Gerhard Richter. Each chapter focuses on a different theme: the embodied memory and the body in postwar art (chapter 3), the spatial memory (chapter 4), the writing impulse (chapter 5), and the need to produce archives (chapter 6). This thematic structure results in some artists' oeuvre being split between two chapters (notably Beuys and Kiefer), and others missing from the discussion (lack of references to Kiefer's work in the chapter 5 seems rather arbitrary).

The author diligently applies the selected methodology to her interpretation of artworks. However, at times the reader would benefit from contextualizing the artistic practice within the specific oeuvre. The author is clearly well-equipped to place the particular visual investigation in the context of the artists' careers – her discussion of Beuys's and Sigurdsson's work is exemplary in that respect. In other instances, Balisz-Schmelz “drops” certain works and “floods” them in socio-historical context, thus disregarding their place in the specific artistic practice (reference on p. 304 to Richter's addition to the *Atlas* in the late 1990s is particularly frustrating example of this approach). Problematic is also Balisz-Schmelz's interpretation of Richter's *Atlas* as a simple attempt at systematizing the past. The artist's own writings, Benjamin Buchloh's emphasis on its reading in terms of denial (which the author dismisses as theoretical on p. 302), and, most importantly, the visual evidence, all position *Atlas* as a way of commenting on the elusive nature of memory. The project highlights the difficulty with the richness of the material that obscures rather than clarifies the past in the present. Balisz-Schmelz's interpretation is ever

more surprising since the author rightly discusses the interpretative openness of Sigurdsson's archives (pp. 281–282).

The author should have addressed the scholarship on the importance of the family in shaping the historic events and memory. Perhaps family could have been a separate medium and space of memory? The author makes scattered and very brief references to the role of family in the postwar German art (p. 162), and to the way photographs from family albums are presented in order to disrupt the identities of those portrayed (p. 304). The absence of the defined category of the familial versus private clearly limits the interpretation of many works discussed in the monograph, surely those of Baselitz and Richter, but also the installations by Sigurdsson such as *Hitler was my Father* (p. 284). This omission is notable and perhaps the weakest aspect of the monograph.

Balisz-Schmelz offers many valuable insights and her study fulfills a very useful and ambitious objective of interpreting the works of postwar German artists through the category of memory. Acute awareness of the materiality of selected works (clear, for instance, in the analysis of works by Hanne Darboven, p. 256), and the sound methodological perspective ensure long readability of the monograph.