

Hanna Putz's waiting room

“...the waiter’s body finds itself not in the center but merely *among* objects.”(Harold Schweitzer, *On Waiting*)

In one of Hanna Putz's photographs a young woman in a blood red dress leans against a blind, white wall, arms crossed, bag thrown on the ground by her feet, her gaze – pointing out of the frame. Another woman, further away from the camera, is passing by, caught in movement. They are both in the same frame, but do not engage with each other. One is in the centre of the image, another one seems almost an accident. Grey asphalt and bits of grass springing up from its cracks take up the foreground. Soviet building blocks lurk in the background behind the trees.

The red dress draws the beholder's eye like a magnet at first. However, the more I look at the image, the more it seems to develop into a sum of visible objects, all carrying equal importance, balancing within the careful composition: the women, the bag, the asphalt, the trees, the buildings, the ladder, the pipes, a few cars, the red dress, the hands crossed, the fence, the blind wall. There is no indication that the woman's body position, which demonstrates boredom, might change in the near future, that she might turn her passiveness into action. She is on pause. She is waiting.

In his book *On Waiting* Harold Schweitzer scrutinizes an episode from Henry James’s *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) in which Kate Crow, one of the main characters, is waiting for her father, pacing in and out of the waiting room. “[C]hanging her place, moving from the shabby sofa to the armchair upholstered in a glazed cloth that gave at once – she had tried it – the sense of the slippery and of the sticky...” she tastes “the faint, flat emanation of things.” Pacing onto the balcony “to feel the street,” turning back in “to feel the room,” stepping towards the table “to feel the tablecloth and . . .” leaning closer, “the centrepiece and the lamp””. (Schweitzer, 2008: 38) Bored, with no plan to act, waiting for time to pass, she dwells too long on the objects around her, and precisely because of that, Schweitzer argues, the surrounding world becomes fragmented, each object obtains a distinctive form. Even more - Kate herself becomes one of the pieces. “Each object is dragged out of its invisibility to have its particularity exposed to the vexed gaze of the waiter who finds in the accidental phenomenology of things only a mirror image of her own accidental presence among them.” (Schweitzer, 2008: 39) The room under the waiter's gaze turns into a sum of objects, which have lost their previous usefulness - the same as in the photograph described above. Furthermore, Schweitzer suggests that the text itself is structured “by the gaze of the waiter” inspecting the objects one by one. (Schweitzer, 2008: 40) Lists pull words apart, forcing the reader to pause and wait, making him to read for a longer period of time than one needs to. I would argue that Putz's images pull their objects apart and force the viewer to observe the photograph longer in a similar way that lists do.

Putz took these photographs during a month long residency in Moscow, Russia. She would get up in the morning to meet her assistant and translator at a tube station and drive to the last stop of the line, get out and then walk until the sun was gone. And then drive back. One line every day. Geographic places might bear little importance to Putz’s work, however, some cities diminish a person more than others. On the subway in Moscow it can take up to one and a half hour to get from one end of the line to another. The grey concrete, evident in every image, sucks in Putz's protagonists despite their standout features - be it a red dress, a deep blue bathing suit, a tiny bikini or a horse in a parking lot. Portraiture's noble mission, encouraged since the birth of photography, to expose the subject's character, to unfold his soul, is thus abandoned. Bodies have become anonymous figures

against an urban background, turning away, looking out of the frame at something that is invisible to the viewer. It is as if they were expecting something to happen, while the viewer's eye wanders through the image, examining details, jumping from one object to another, looking for clues. We, as observers, are disturbed by the lack of action. Waiting is an activity to be avoided in the rapidly changing world.

Because of the absence of events, these images show neither a distinct past, nor provoke a definite future. However, time, located somewhere in between the two, endures. By forcing the viewer to look longer, Putz overcomes the immediacy of photography, the fleeting moment, which has been considered to be the medium's main quality for decades. Her photographs become an experience of time by imposing the same sensation as waiting does. As Schweitzer puts it, "waiting is not a passage of time ... but a condition of our being. In waiting, time enters our bodies; we are the time that passes." (Schweitzer, 2008: 128) The urban architecture has become Putz's waiting room.

by Evita Goze

References:

Harold Schweitzer, *On Waiting*, Routledge, 2008