

A Journey, the Pain of Others, and Historical Experience: Susan Silas

Roma Sendyka

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Abstract

The author interprets Susan Silas' *Helmbrechts walk* (1998-2003), a unique series of forty-five photographs and supplementing visual and textual materials collected during the walk along the route of two hundred and twenty-five miles. The walk repeats the route which in 1945 had to undertake women prisoners from the concentration camp in Helmbrechts near Flossenbürg in their death march to Prachatice in Czech Republic. The pictures Silas takes, the people she meets, and finally the trees, the very materiality of the road become the factors of creating her own, individual memory of the event from the past. Silas selects an object from "the margins of the Holocaust" – a forgotten event that she re-presents by reacting to contemporary objects placed along the route of the event. Silas' work offers an opportunity to critically review the concept of memory landscapes (where is memory located in a landscape?) and the phenomenon of dark tourism (is following in the footsteps of the prisoners a kind of pilgrimage, tourism, or therapy?). Silas problematises the question of memory, as well as examines different kinds of non-memory. Her camera is directed at locations that can be termed "the non-sites of memory."

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There is nothing here to see

- [1] In *Everything is Illuminated*, a novel by Jonathan Safran Foer, the protagonists find a witness who can finally direct them to a Jewish town they had been searching for. The aged Augustine first refuses to help them, which the narrator notes in peculiar English he uses: "There is nothing to see. It is only a field. I could exhibit you any field and it would be the same as exhibiting you Trachimbrod."¹ In the place from which first life was drained and then memory, all is left is an empty field, indistinguishable from others. "We have come to see Trachimbrod – Grandfather said – and you will take us to Trachimbrod"² – the protagonists insist. When finally they reach the place that had seemed to avoid them like a living creature (that was impossible to locate on any map, and when they approached it, it immediately moved somewhere else, like a mysterious centre of a

¹ Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*, London 2002, 155.

² Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*, 155.

labyrinth), it turns out that what they see is "nothing." "When I utter 'nothing' I do not mean there was nothing, – the narrator of Foer's novel says – what I intend is that there was not any of these things, or any other things."³ The black abyss devouring all colours, where "there is nothing to see." "Tell him it is because it is so dark,' Grandfather said to me, 'and that we could see more if it was not dark'. 'It is so dark', I told him. 'No', she said, 'this is all that you could see. It is always like this, always dark.'"⁴

[2] In *Everything is Illuminated* Foer constructed the plot around the search for the place that exemplifies an object on which I would like to put special emphasis in this text.⁵ Across the landscape of East-Central Europe, referred to recently as "bloodlands,"⁶ there are scattered very numerous places of potential memorialisation: places which have witnessed an important event of mass violence. Despite this fact these locations are now devoid of any memorial objects or are marked "insufficiently" (in a flawed or mistaken manner). They are sites of various acts of genocide that took place in the previous century (the time scope is set by both the twentieth century origin of the term "genocide", as well as by the scope of "living memory" of present witnesses). They are sites where Jews and Roma-Sinti were murdered, and where people died in ethnic cleansing (Bosnia, Volhynia) or other similar deportations (e.g. the Sudeten Germans). Nowadays, these places – sometimes vast, yet usually smaller and more like points on the map – are covered with natural regrowth of nature, sometimes with neglected ruins, sometimes with a newly constructed parking lot: they are rifts, omissions in the texture of the landscape. They are surrounded with a negative, performatively expressed memory: they are sites "where one doesn't go," about which one should "better not to talk," "places that haunt." The act of making these sites objects of taboo stems most certainly from their origin being linked with a sudden, unavenged, unaccounted death (and from the presence of badly- or non-buried corpses).⁷ I consider these sites symptomatic for the territory of our region and perhaps crucial for the understanding of the local forms of memory and alternative (for example to the ones that are well researched, positive, and describable with Pierre Nora's theory⁸) relations of place and

³ Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*, 187.

⁴ Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*, 184.

⁵ Cf. Roma Sendyka, "Pryzma. Zrozumieć nie-miejsce pamięci", in: *Teksty Drugie* 1-2 (2013); "Robinson w nie-miejscach pamięci", in: *Konteksty* 2 (2013); "Co widać z góry. Inne miasto i jego trudne dziedzictwo", in: *Widok* 4 (2014).

⁶ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, New York 2010.

⁷ Cf. Roma Sendyka, *Miejsca, które straszą (afekty i nie-miejsca pamięci)*, *Teksty Drugie* 1-2 (2014).

⁸ I wrote critically on Nora's theory in "Miejsca pamięci – lektury krytyczne", in: Teresa Szostek, Roma Sendyka and Ryszard Nycz, eds., *Od pamięci biodziedzicznej do postpamięci*, Warszawa 2013, 206-222. In the same volume, Maria Kobielska summarised the main points of the project of *lieux de memoire* (Maria Kobielska, *Czytanie Nory. Appendix*). The French theorist's proposition may be accused of e.g. nostalgic approach, excessive politicism, nation-centrism (sites of memory serve the nation rather than, for example, immigrants), singularity of perspective (critical views on the history of France do not include "sites of memory"), and lack of neutrality (the point is to

memory. The research on their characteristics, and the search for examples of such objects, come together with a new, increasingly stronger trend in the studies on the Holocaust: namely, after many years of the focus on the figure of the "camp," working in the broader field as a concept that organises a complex set of discursive and non-discursive elements emerging around the issue of the twentieth-century genocide, there has developed an interest in the Holocaust as a "decentralised set of events" (I mean here the research of Christopher Browning on Skarżysko-Kamienna,⁹ Omer Bartov's on Buczacz,¹⁰ Yehuda Bauer's on Nowogródek¹¹ and, of course, Jan Tomasz Gross's on Jedwabne).¹² When the "other Holocaust" is discussed, or the "Holocaust by bullets,"¹³ researchers become interested in places previously omitted¹⁴ – for they were too small or too indeterminate to compete with "the camp" or "the ghetto." The project of Susan Silas – an American artist of Hungarian background, is an example of a similar shift of attention, this time in the field of visual arts.¹⁵

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Darkness, the everyday

This is all that you could see. It is always like this, always dark.

Jonathan Safran Foer

[3] The moment of the encounter with the site of the past suffering, an entrance into its area, is constructed in Foer's novel around the metaphor of *nothingness*. *There is nothing to see*, the protagonists face an impenetrable density, an all-devouring black abyss of

provide a ground for "Frenchness"). Nora's theory can be seen as an unfalsified primary notion (altery, myth), which leaves no space for discussion.

⁹ Christopher R. Browning, Jürgen Matthäus, *The Origin of the Final Solution, The Evolution of the Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939 – March 1942*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 2007.

¹⁰ *The Voice of Your Brother's Blood: Testimonies of Coexistence and Genocide from Buczacz, Galicia* (announced by Yale University Press); see also Omer Bartov, *Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine*, Princeton University Press, 2007.

¹¹ Yehuda Bauer, "Nowogródek – historia sztetla", in: *Zagłada Żydów 3* (2007); originally published as "Nowogródek – the Story of a Shtetl", in: *Yad Vashem Studies* (2001).

¹² Jan Tomasz Gross, *Sąsiedzi: historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka*, Sejny 2000.

¹³ Cf. Patrick Desbois, *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews*, New York 2009. Published in France as *Shoah par balles*, Paris 2007.

¹⁴ Cf. report of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance "Killing Sites" from the plenary conference in London (May 2014), <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/focus/killing-sites> (accessed 20 June 2014).

¹⁵ Similar actions are more and more common. Artistic projects focusing on the discovery of a traumatic object under the semblance of the ordinary and the everyday have become a distinct trend in Polish art. Cf. Łukasz Baksik, *Macewy codziennego użytku*, 2010; Elżbieta Janicka and Wojciech Wilczyk, *Inne miasto*, 2013; Andrzej Kramarz, *Kawałek ziemi*, 2009; Anka Sasnal and Wilhelm Sasnal, *Z daleka widok jest piękny*, 2011; especially: Wojciech Wilczyk, *Niewinne oko nie istnieje*, 2009. Similar in nature is a more extended project on the area of Otwock developed since 2011 by Mirosław Bałka. Relevant here is also a group of works that focus on the discussion of the abandoned places that I am interested in – cf. Jason Francisco, *Alive and Destroyed*, project started in 2011; the already mentioned Andrzej Kramarz, *Kawałek Ziemi*, 2008-2009; Roz Mortimer, *Reduced to Silence*, project started in 2012; Sandra Vitaljić, *Nieplodne tla / Infertile grounds*, 2009.

darkness. The strategy of the description of the small towns they pass by makes the reader get used to the poetics of humorous realism, yet the centre of the novel hides a trap: imagination collapses in the face of the undeserved and unmourned death. *There is nothing to see, only darkness*. The makers of the film adaptation¹⁶ of *Everything is Illuminated* did not decide to take this radical step: the emptiness of the area left of Trachimbrod must have seemed unbearable and un-film-like – what the viewer sees in its stead is a scene composed around a green, neatly kept clearing, where someone put a small memorial plate. Foer's aggressive image, a reproach present in his novel (how could this place be so abandoned and so completely forgotten?) was effectively deprived of its expressive power.

- [4] Susan Silas' project is a kind of journey, similarly relentless and marked by an equally traumatic event of the war as the act of murder (one of actions of Einsatzgruppe C) of the inhabitants of a small Ukrainian shtetl in Sofiówka, represented in Foer's novel by a phantom of Trachimbrod. Silas' project involved her walking over two hundred and twenty-five miles exactly along the route of the death march of female camp prisoners rushed in 1945 from the concentration camp in Helmbrechts (Germany) to Volary/ Prachatice (at present in Czech Republic). Walking along the road of over three hundred and sixty kilometres, Silas was looking for traces of the past: traces that could remind of past experience. Discovering, just like Foer's protagonists, only fields, roads, and towns, where chapels and roadside memorials said nothing about the suffering of five hundred and eighty Jewish prisoners, Silas confronted the same vast space of forgetting an event too insignificant, too similar to others to attract attention and become an object around which the identity of local communities is being constructed. Whereas Foer's gesture: radical, yet also very much like the repressed "turning a blind eye," was a clear act of emotional reaction to the lack of life and the memory of life at the site of the past crime, Silas takes a more critical stance on the road from Helmbrechts. She takes a close, cold and analytic look, recognising the banality and indifference of the surrounding landscape, searching for the reasons of this situation, and actively transforming it with her body moving along the route.

- [5] *Helmbrechts walk* is a performance set in a particular location and time: the artist started her journey on April 13 1998, on the fifty-third anniversary of the march from 1945. For twenty-two days she walked along the route planned in reference to available maps and documents, keeping the pace and the stops made by the prisoners. At the same time, her work is a complex set of multimedia objects exhibited in galleries since 1999 (seven times until 2014¹⁷). The work available now on-line – in its third version – consists of a series of fortyfive photographs accompanied by personal notes from the travel journal. It

¹⁶ Directed by Liev Schreiber, USA, 2005.

¹⁷ E.g. in New York, Toronto and Vienna; Nicholas Mirzoeff, nowadays a renowned theoretician of visual studies, was a curator of one of the first exhibitions.

comes with notes from the current press, excerpts of documents, maps, an interview with one of the survivors of the march, documentation of preparatory studies, photographs of the cemetery where the victims of the march were buried, images from the museum erected to their memory in Prachatice, written meditations, and a series of twenty two two-channel video works illustrating each day of the journey. This entire set of objects creates a branching, spatial network of mutual links, hence the Internet is the perfect exhibition space for it.¹⁸

[6] The march from Helmbrechts is one of the many death marches from the first half of 1945. It is being recalled when an example of *senseless bestiality* of the Nazis is being addressed. Silas read about it in the famous work by Daniel Goldhagen (*Hitler's Willing Executioners*¹⁹), and this is where she found a map with the route of the march. She could have also learnt about the event in a different way – at the permanent exhibition at Yad Vashem the march of Helmbrechts is recalled as a paradigmatic example of death marches marking the side roads of Central Europe by the end of the war. According to the present knowledge, on April 13, 1945 a thousand and a hundred and seventy female prisoners were forced to leave the camp near Flossenbürg. The column moved towards Dachau, yet due to the changing lines of the front it was ultimately moved south, towards Czechoslovakia. In Zwodau five hundred and ninety non-Jews were selected, and five hundred eighty Jewish prisoners were forced to move on. The estimated amount of the deceased during the march is thirty per cent (supposedly, around two hundred seventy five women died).²⁰ When the column was liberated, the local authorities forced the German community to bury the victims under the supervision of the military – the bodies were collected from the final sixty miles of the route; a small military cemetery in Volary memorises the deceased.

[7] Departing on a journey in the footsteps of the prisoners from Helmbrechts, Silas poses a similar question as the one posed by Frank Ankersmit, who in his 2005 book *Sublime Historical Experience*²¹ considered how the experience of the past can become the subject of research of a historian who attempts to represent the past (to tell a story) by means of a text. Silas' mediation concerns an identically formulated problem, with an artist as its subject: how to tell about the past experience – today? How authentic suffering of particular people from the past can be represented many years later by means available to visual arts? Why to make attempt at reclaiming the experience of the past – which is irreclaimable since its vast part concerned living presence and was impossible to express in words. How does the artist express this part of it that was impossible to tell by means

¹⁸ <http://www.helmbrechtswalk.com> (accessed 10 June 2014).

¹⁹ Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, New York 1997.

²⁰ Dora Apel, *Memory Effects. The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing*, New Brunswick 2002, 141.

²¹ Frank R. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, Stanford 2005.

of linguistic codes? How does the artist produce a second-degree, personal "memorial equivalent" of a historical event in a place that is devoid of anchoring elements or elements that evoke memory? Silas' response is complex and made up of many elements, and without any conclusions available at hand – to construct them out of the conversations with her work, one needs to take a closer look at *Helmbrechts walk*.

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Elegy of Helmbrechts

- [8] One of the first features of Silas' work discerned by the viewer is certainly the recurring gesture of duplication. Photographs taken on a given day always come in pairs. A picture placed on the right hand side is usually visually connected (e.g. the photographs from the day four) with the one on the left: we know that we are at a particular place, that both shots were taken nearby, perhaps from the same point in space and time (it is suggested by the same type of the scattered light and usually similar weather of a not very clear day of early spring). At times the images do not provide different views: on the eleventh day both of them show only the image of rail tracks, and on the first and fifth – a thick forest. At times the takes provide contrasting images – a view of a forest and shrubs and empty field next to them (day three). The visual field is usually filled with nature (forest, fields, shrubs), and rarely with the product of man (road-side structures, village houses). Photographs never show people, animals or passing cars. The rule for the choice of framing could be reconstructed as follows: we see what the walking artist sees, and the camera seems to register the natural act of looking at the road surroundings: it shows not more and no less, as if it was impossible to manipulate the length of the focus in the camera. Two shots placed next to each other – which is reminiscent of the poetics of stereoscopic images – suggest documenting the road while looking straight and to the side: the traveller is looking around. Hence, it is not so much about the goal, about the horizon where the road ends and where there is something behind it. The roadside is as important. The artist looks for something there.
- [9] For what? – this needs to be figured out. Some of the pictures' recurring details might work as a hint here. On the second and fourteenth day the artist photographed hunting blinds, on the tenth and eighteenth – waste; on the eighth, thirteenth, twentieth and twenty-second – the side road graves, crosses, and chapels. The disquiet that fills the shots is very poignant: the viewer realises following the photographer's sight that we walk *alone*, that nobody is walking next to us, with only thick forest by our side. The shapes of hunting blinds [fig. 1] make us feel uncanny, too visible, too exposed and observed. The traces of those who were here before us are not pleasant: it is waste and scraps. The chapels and the crosses invest the route with a dolorous atmosphere. Despite nature and the green plants typical for early spring, the pictures produce an emotional aura that underlines the main topic – suffering.



1 Susan Silas, *Helmbrechts walk*, 1998-2003, Day 2, Tuesday April 14, 1998, Schwarzenbach Saale to Neuhausen

[10] After placing the cursor over the image, we can access the text, or rather two texts that cover the shots. Up to that moment the artist had only proposed brief notes under pictures, identifying the day and the main points of a given stage of the journey. The upper part of the added note is an excerpt from the artist's personal remarks. It includes visual references (for example to Resnais's film on Marienbad she is passing, or to an exhibition by Josef Beuys), references to literature (Primo Levi's memories from Auschwitz), her own biography (the story of her stepfather, a refugee from Hungary after 1956), and culture (oaks as a symbol of Nazism). These essayistic fragments sometimes turn into journal entries, noting usually the state of threat – Silas describes the passing cars, solicitations, intimidations, sexual propositions, prohibitions (of entering or photographing), drunken carousals in hotels, heads of hunted animals in a guest house. Only once she describes a "positive" encounter – with the last Jew living in Knysperk, Karl Schubosky. He was mentioned by Klaus Rauh from Helmbrecht who gave her a map with the marked points where the prisoners died during the march.

[11] Below, yet still in the area distinguished from the white background by a doubled picture, Silas presents headlines copied from the "New York Times" issues parallel to the days of her journey. They are dominated with events connoting violence or death (the public execution of Rwandan genocide perpetrators, the death of Pol Pot, the news of the number of executions in Iraq, the exhibition of the Shroud of Turin, the death of Octavio Paz, the funeral of a black girl shot in South Africa, the trial in the case of murder of a new-born in Delaware, the illness of Václav Havel, the death of the murderer of Martin Luther King, or the protests of students in Indonesia). Supplementing the cycle with a text seems to realise the strategy predicted by Walter Benjamin ("Won't inscription become the most important part of the photograph?")²² and Susan Sontag (photographs "are not much help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand")²³, who stated that photographs, especially those that are supposed to inform us about suffering, require the support of narrative, a support of the text to speak for the victim's

²² Walter Benjamin, *Little History of Photography*, in: Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume 2 (1927-1934), ed. Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1999, 527.

²³ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York, 2003, 89.

case. Silas shares this conviction and supplements the series of pictures with numerous documents, yet texts that she puts directly on the pictures do not have an explanatory nature. They are like echograms, like records of what had happened, of what reached the walking artist from the world – and in their fragmentary, selective and presentist nature they do not explain the past – we still do not know what the artist tries to find when she looks around. Yet, what is definitely clear is the broader ground: of war, the genocide, violence, threat, and suffering.

- [12] One might say that the *memorial testament*, as the artist referred to her work,²⁴ has a distinct elegiac tone.²⁵ I suggest that this association is justified more than just on the basis on the particular atmosphere of the photograph constructed through the choice of objects, lights, and the length of exposure. The entire work is also elegiac in nature due to its structure, the recurring gestures of doubling of text and text, text and image, image and image²⁶ are reminiscent of the elegiac distich: the incessant linking of the similarly sounding, long, epic phrases – hexameter and dactylic pentameter. This structural foundation, nowadays rather unreadable, remains nevertheless easily discernible as an echo of once popular tradition: felt when we are touched by the seriousness, sublimity, sadness, and melancholy of given work.²⁷

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Walk from Helmbrechts

- [13] The additional materials from archive research, photographs, maps, and documents (like the transcript of testimonies given by Alois Dörr, who was responsible for the march from Helmbrechts), the author's introduction placed in the first plate before the viewer enters the virtual gallery reveal the most general reason behind the artist's journey. We know that we are supposed to refer what we see in the pictures to the event from almost seventy years before. The artist states openly that she "set out to retrace the path of these women."²⁸

²⁴ <http://www.helmbrechtswalk.com/project.html> (accessed 20 June 2014).

²⁵ Cf. the statement of Jean Bloch Rosensaft, the director of HUC-JIR museum, quoted at the artist's website: <http://www.helmbrechtswalk.com/project.html> (accessed 20 June 2014).

²⁶ The material accompanying the series of photographs contains also a less exhibited series of video works, equally "doubled." On the left hand side, the frame is filled with mastershot – so stable and immobile it looks like a photograph. On the right hand side we can see the blurred image from the camera put outside of a fast driving car. They are juxtaposed documents of the same fragments of the route: the immobile shots were recorded during the journey to Prachatice; the blurred ones – on the way back, <http://www.helmbrechtswalk.com/video.html> (accessed 20 June 2014).

²⁷ Elegiac tone is usually associated with sadness, yet – it needs to be added – in the tradition of the genre, "tristia" were just one of the three main lines of development – next to "amores" and "heroides" – that addressed love). Cf. Grażyna Urban-Godziek, *Elegia renesansowa. Przemiany gatunku w Polsce i w Europie*, Kraków 2005.

²⁸ <http://www.helmbrechtswalk.com/project.html> (accessed 20 June 2014).



2 Susan Silas, *Helmbrechts walk*, 1998-2003, Day 16, Tuesday April 28, 1998, Deplowice to Jeseni

- [14] One cannot, however, see this intention as equal to the gesture of re-enactment. The title of the work differentiates these experiences – the past one and the one from the late 1990s. The "march" is transformed into a "walk", or rather – walking. Yet, it is more of a pilgrimage than a trip: the journey takes place along a marked route, it is important to go through it in stages, the destination is reached at the cemetery in Volary, and during the journey there is no search for beautiful views or pleasant experiences. Moreover, the work is supplemented with undated "Meditations." The sublime act of walking would be conformed with the reference to Werner Herzog, who emphasised the "sacramental aspect of walking."²⁹ However, Silas does not allow for an excessive development of this association even though it is, of course, important for her: "he and I share the belief that walking is not simply therapeutic for oneself but is a poetic activity that can cure the world of its ills."³⁰ After this statement the artist significantly makes an ironic comment about Albert Speer, who walked all around the globe while being imprisoned in Spandau.³¹ Pictures from day sixteen [fig. 2] of her journey comment on the undertaken action. The photograph on the left presents signs of tourist routes: the route of the march from Helmbrechts crosses or overlaps with the routes of those who walk here for pleasure. Her "Meditations" contain yet another quote from Herzog: "walking is virtue, tourism deadly sin."³² Clearly, Silas would not like to be called a tourist – she defends against this association both in visual as well as textual layers of the project. She does not photograph views or objects that respond to aesthetic needs or the desire to look for curiosities. Her pictures capture the ordinary, the unattractive, or even – the repulsive. Neither do her texts report on what is worth seeing, but rather develop her reflections and painful encounters. Silas does not provide the length of her routes and rarely hints

²⁹ <http://www.helmbrechtswalk.com/meditation.html> (accessed 20 June 2014). Herzog is quoted after Bruce Chatwin's book (*What Am I Doing Here*, London, 2001). Essay "Meditations" published in: *cultureID* May 21 (2010).

³⁰ <http://www.helmbrechtswalk.com/project.html> (accessed 20 June 2014).

³¹ <http://www.helmbrechtswalk.com/meditation.html> (accessed 20 June 2014).

³² <http://www.helmbrechtswalk.com/project.html> (accessed 20 June 2014).

on the weather; the difficulties of the repeated journey (physical effort, the rain, the long walks, or the aching feet) are not addressed apart from the very beginning of the story.

- [15] Nevertheless, numerous elements of *Helmbrechts walk* gravitate towards tourist practices: the included maps, the reconstructed route, the descriptions of nights at hotels where she stopped, memories of dinners in restaurants, her admitted act of collecting souvenirs (Silas picks up a stone every day). Thus her practices can be seen as reminiscent of the phenomenon of "dark tourism."³³ The term defines the "practice of travelling to a place which entirely or partly is justified by a need for an actual or symbolic encounter with death, especially – though not exclusively – sudden death."³⁴ In other words, her journey is a sign of the tendency of late modernity to fulfil the need for a thanatopic encounter with death – yet, in a homeopathic amount, in a controlled and safe manner. Nevertheless, Silas' project successfully opposes also this kind of ordering. It is actually an interesting example of an artistic endeavour that discredits and criticises these practices. Her opposition against being drawn into the orbit of dark tourism consists in her turning away from what is modern: in her understanding of walking as pilgrimage, in the emphasis on the physicality, stubbornness, and discomfort of the undertaken task (Silas never sits in the car with which her assistant follows her at some distance³⁵); in her emphasis on the deep experience of the past (meditations), in her stress on the necessity to put some work, effort, to learn something about the past: this is not about pleasure. Her performance comes within the framework of the work of a researcher studying documents, searching for data in archives and libraries. This practice is not entertainment, but forensics: the one who takes to the road looks for justice, for making the crime public. Yet, wherein lies the blame? The murder of the prisoners is deeply sealed in the past, the criminals had been judged. What, then, is not all right? Who is being accused?

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Heidi's landscapes

- [16] An important structural element in the visual and textual plan of the project is the recurring meditations on the forest, landscape, and trees (Silas refers, for example, to the cultural meaning of the forest, from Tacitus's *Germania* through the Nazi myth of *Blut und Boden* to the "blooming landscapes" in Helmut Kohl's speeches). Many pictures suggest that *the walker* is surrounded with the forest [fig. 3], fields, and the regenerating nature. This recurring reference to the landscape can be read very literally. The artist is looking for traces of the past murder. Yet, there are no scars left of it, no signs – perhaps

³³ Cf. Sławoj Tanaś, *Tanatourystyka. Od przestrzeni śmierci do przestrzeni turystycznej*, Łódź 2013. See also Roma Sendyka, "Macie – napatrzcie się! Mroczna turystyka i nowoczesność", in: *Didaskalia* 4 (2014), 62-71.

³⁴ Cf. A.V. Seaton, "Guided by the Dark: from Thanatopsis to Thanatourism", in: *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 4 (1996), vol. 2, here 240.

³⁵ The video material made in the car would be recorded on the way back.

apart from the trees, perhaps *the scenery* has not changed. This possibility, however, is hinted at in the text placed next to the final photograph. Silas quotes the survivor of the march, Halina Kleiner,³⁶ and her amazement when she was asked about the details of the route the prisoners were forced to take. "You mean the scenery?" – Kleiner responds. And she admits that "she didn't have a visual memory of the landscape or her immediate surroundings."³⁷



3 Susan Silas, *Helmbrechts walk*, 1998-2003, Day 17, Wednesday April 29, 1998, Jeseni to Zhuri

- [17] This lack of visual memory could have been surprising for Silas (an example of an expected perception of the passing landscape would be the final scenes of *Smoke over Birkenau* by Seweryna Szmaglewska. The view of the mountains was *longed for*, while "the dark blue colossus covered with the woods" brings "in the sound of the spruce the word *freedom*." The ground "beats with the hearts of brothers who died in combat," while the liberated prisoner "goes to plant trees in place of the burn forests"³⁸). Silas' act of turning her camera towards the roadsides of the route from Helmbrechts can suggest that her work is of complementary nature – it is a supplement to the experience of the women blinded by pain. Yet, this gesture is deconstructed by Bret Ashley Kaplan, who finds in archives a recorded testimony of Kleiner (from July 23, 1987), where the survivor recalls the march with a surprising comparison: "the countryside was like a story of Heidi."³⁹
- [18] In Silas' diagnosis the forest is not bucolic (although such an association is often the first dominating impression when one is confronted with the site of the Holocaust – as was demonstrated by Claude Lanzmann in *Shoah* and by Simon Schama in *Landscape and*

³⁶ The artist interviewed the survivor: "I interviewed Halina Kleiner and spent the day at her home in New Jersey", <http://www.helmbrechtswalk.com/the-women.html> (accessed 20 June 2014).

³⁷ "I interviewed Halina Kleiner...", <http://www.helmbrechtswalk.com/portfolio/e/helmbrechts23.html> (accessed 20 June 2014).

³⁸ Seweryna Szmaglewska, *Dymy nad Birkenau*, Warszawa 1972, 317; *Smoke over Birkenau*, transl. from the Pol. by Jadwiga Rynas, Oświęcim, The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Muzeum, Warsaw 2008.

³⁹ *Helmbrechts walk*, slide 23, <http://www.helmbrechtswalk.com/portfolio/e/helmbrechts23.html> (accessed 20 June 2014).

*Memory*⁴⁰). The trees do not provide an Arcadian peace. The dark wall around the road [fig. 3] evokes the atmosphere of hunting: the associations of the artist involve the stories of Göring visiting the Białowieża Forest⁴¹. The twice-repeated images of hunting blinds, immediately suggesting the association with the camp, introduce together with the accompanying texts the topic of hunting. Silas recreates in this work a kind of uncertainty that the behaviourist Konrad Lorenz described (in *Morals and Weapons* from 1935⁴²) as a primeval fear sensed by humans in open space, a fear we share with animals. This kind of emotion comes from the deepest, primitive instincts of the hunter who prefers to be hidden than expose himself to sight (and to the danger of becoming a victim), appreciating the advantage of seeing without being seen. Recent publications, such as *Manhunts*⁴³ by Grégoire Chamayou or *Judenjagd*⁴⁴ by Jan Grabowski, make this kind of sensation of violence – in this case of past violence – more specific. Therefore, Silas not so much reflects on the role of trees as witnesses (compassionate – as in Szmaglewska's text, or indifferent – as in the work of Dutch poet and painter Armando⁴⁵), but accuses the material surroundings that witnesses the suffering of women forced to the death march of favouring the executioners. The forest provided no shelter, and today it offers no account of the past events. It just stands there – menacing, hostile, being there only for itself, as in Wilhelm Sasnal's painting inspired with Lanzmann's film (*Forest*, 2002). The forest is here identified as the in-law of the war.

[19] Apart from compromising the scenery as a witness – what is the result of this *walking*? The hint is provided with a picture of prisoners taken during the march in 1945, found in a small museum that commemorates the event. Silas, although she had just walked along the entire route, cannot locate the point where the photograph was taken. The forest today does not help to identify the setting of cruelty. It is not a witness, and it is impossible to draw any story from it, any report. The trees, the forest, the background left of the historic event, do not let one approach the experience locked in the past. The woods are no longer a witness as a *by-stander*. The forest does not stand here "next to someone," it exists only for itself – separate, unfavourable to the walker, and the discovered picture becomes just a paradoxical "documentary lie."

⁴⁰ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, New York 1996, 26.

⁴¹ See also the first chapter in Schama's book: "The Realm of Lithuanian Bison", the sub-chapter "Mortality, Immortality", 67-69.

⁴² Article published as a chapter in: Konrad Lorenz, *King Solomon's Ring*, transl. Marjorie Kerr Wilson, New York, 2003, 170-188, originally in German in: *Er redete mit dem Vieh, den Vögeln und den Fischen*, 1949.

⁴³ Grégoire Chamayou, *Manhunts: A Philosophical History*, trans. Steven Rendall, Princeton 2012, cf. chapter eleven: Hunting Jews.

⁴⁴ Jan Grabowski, *Judenjagd. Polowanie na Żydów 1942-1945*, Warszawa 2011; *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland*, 2013.

⁴⁵ Armando accused: "The edge of the forest, for example the trees towards the front, must have seen a thing or two", in: Ernst van Alphen, *Armando: Shaping Memory*, Rotterdam 2000, 10-11.

- [20] "Then, on the wall, there is a large blown up reproduction of a photograph taken surreptitiously by an unknown photographer. It is a grainy, black and white image of these women huddled together, trudging down the road. None of the women who survived the march have been able to identify where or when it was taken. I had just walked that 225 miles from Helmbrechts and I could not identify its location either. It is as though the photograph had not been taken in real space and time. The perfect documentary lie."⁴⁶
- [21] Significantly, Silas does not show any picture of the victims, even though she mentions the existence of such visual documents. *Helmbrechts walk* avoids showing faces from the past, and the section of *The Women* from her website includes "portraits" only in as much as it shows the pictures of individual graves. Photographs of the survivors, the ones treated in Prachatice – are removed from our visual field, although Silas provides a very rich visual and documentary material for analysis. Hence, the distance of the viewer from the faces of the prisoners is important, as is the use of colour.⁴⁷ Evidently, the artist meant to oppose the dominating methods of turning the attention of contemporaries towards the past – focused on monochrome esthetics and exposing faces of victims – used too often to be effective anymore.

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Self-portrait in a convex mirror and the failure of imagination

- [22] The final plate of the central sequence of pictures from *Helmbrechts walk* project is different from the preceding pairs. The lonely picture [fig. 4], not covered by the text, presents the only human figure captured by the camera. The figure is small, deformed, and doubly mediated by the camera lens and the street mirror, detached by means of the lens of the camera and the surface of yet another optical object. The yellow cloak distinguishes the figure from the background. The cloak is certainly of symbolic colour, evoking the iconic symbols of the Holocaust and its system of colour-coding people. "The mirrored, distorted self-representation not only reflects the performance of walk, but reproduces the conceptual nature of the project, that is, the relationship between the secondary witness and the site of memory at a remove" – wrote Dora Apel.⁴⁸ This distorted image of Silas is a kind of admittance to the failure of realising her plan of reactivating historical experience; to the insufficiency of sight that was supposed to

⁴⁶ Susan Silas, *Meditations*, <http://www.helmbrechtswalk.com/meditation.html> (accessed 20 June 2014).

⁴⁷ Silas explains this in the following way: "Most of the documentation of the Second World War comes to us in images shot in black & white. The newsreels shown in movie theaters were all shot in black & white. In fact, I would argue that our entire visual knowledge of that period plays in our heads in black & white." As a result, the use of monochrome aesthetics produces an unnecessary "chasm that removes these images from us in time in a way that distorts their distance and creates a kind of complacency built on a foundation of forgetting" – cf. Susan Silas, "Volary", in: <http://www.helmbrechtswalk.com/volary.html> (accessed 20 June 2014).

⁴⁸ Apel, *Memory Effects*, 143.

provide what the prisoners' eyes had not seen. Repetition, compulsive repetition, the one reminiscent of the work of trauma, defined by Dominick LaCapra as *acting-out* ("making through acting"), transforms itself in the course of her walk from Helmbrechts to Prachatice into *working through*,⁴⁹ into an acceptance that the temporal distance from the traumatic event produces an ultimately impassable emotional, physical, and critical distance. However, what is most puzzling in Silas' project is the fact that the desired direction of the work with trauma (from repetition to working (walking?) through) seems to have been reversed. The witness of the second degree, who comes *later*, comes here *too late*. With her gesture of *repetition* that is supposed to bring her closer to the victims, she falls inevitably into critical detachment, captured in the series of reflections and mediations, rejected to a critical distance: the event is no longer accessible, it has already been worked-on; worked-through by the natural, un-compassionate by-standers that filled "the setting."



Halina Kleiner walked from Helmbrechts to just short of Prachatice in the spring of 1945. I met her in 1998. She was seventy but didn't look it. I asked her if she remembered what it looked like there - in what was then the Sudetenland; that swath of the Czech Republic that bounced back and forth between Germany and Czechoslovakia so many times. She remembers a great deal about her experiences. She remembers the biting cold. She remembers the harshness of the guards. She remembers her friends. To my questions about what things looked like - "you mean the scenery," she asked - she didn't have a visual memory of the landscape or her immediate surroundings. Perhaps under such conditions it is not possible to look too far - to either side or ahead. She did recollect being marched by houses that were lit inside and wondering what the people in those warm houses were thinking about and doing at that moment.

Helmbrechts Walk, 1998-2003

(to access text, please place cursor on image)

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4 Susan Silas, *Helmbrechts walk*, 1998-2003 (the final piece of the cycle)

[23] Despite the impossibility of recreation, the project is not a failure. It is obvious that the experience of the prisoners cannot be compared to any contemporary experience in the scale of pain and danger. The difference in the physical experience makes *Helmbrechts walk* a kind of homeopathic approximation to the traumatic past: an approximation – yet nothing more. Ultimately, the project is closed within a personal plan. The lonely figure at the end of the cycle seems to declare: this project is turned towards identity, it is an act of creating my own memory of the *walk*, an act of *meditation*, a form of self-creation, *autopoiesis*. It could be made in an archive – yet then it would be a passive act. Taking action, *walking*, makes it a *formative act* – an act of taking the past inside oneself in the form of the memory of being *exposed* to it.

[24] Nevertheless, in his *Landscapes of Holocaust Postmemory* Kaplan describes Silas' project as a "monumental failure of imagination,"⁵⁰ quoting actually the artist's own diagnosis. Imagining the nature of that pain is impossible; what is possible is to perform a kind of

⁴⁹ See: "Dominick LaCapra, Conclusion: Acting Out and Working Through", in: *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*, Ithaca 1994.

⁵⁰ Brett Ashley Kaplan, *Landscapes of Holocaust Postmemory*, New York 2010, 111.

identification by means of the movement of the body in space, leading to an emphasis that between the experience and interpretation there is an unbreachable difference. By *being on the move* Silas managed to stand on the side of experience. *Mimetic approximation*⁵¹ – is how Apel defined this act in *Memory Effects*.

I think of the actual artwork as my physical presence in the landscape that the women from Helmbrechts were forced to march through. And it is perhaps in this way, by the act of choosing to stand where they stood, and memorialize them with my physical being, that I see myself as a Jew. How I came to the decision to actually walk this 225-mile route is hard to remember.⁵²

[25] – wrote the artist, putting accents and direction points inside her project.

[26] Therefore, in Silas' project the conventions of realism, landscape, portrait, document, travel journal, and elegy that construct a sophisticated conceptual project, are set to motion in such a way as to discredit interpretation in favour of experience. History – the one drawn from documents – becomes transformed through the medium of the body into personal memory. What is more, it is not about memory, the artist seems to declare, but about creating memory, about the ontological act, about personal poiesis. It is an example of constructing relations with the traumatic past for the second degree witnesses, for post-generations, a means to formulate individual memory in a situation when more and more often there is no one (the deceased witnesses) and nothing (the incompleteness and insufficiency of archival sources) to provide it. In the face of the ubiquitous forgetting our own body becomes our own source of memory. And, just as in terms of realism a self-portrait in a convex mirror is anything but close to perfection, equally impossible is a "mimetic" memory of the past; in this situation, all that is left is consent to transformations and deformations. Those are not signs of failure. Thanks to them, as John Ashbery noted in his *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*: The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts.⁵³ The point was to reveal what was effectively hidden under the veil of the past.

Translated by Karolina Kolenda

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⁵¹ Apel, *Memory Effects*, 143.

⁵² <http://helmbrechtswalk.com/maps.html> (accessed 20 June 2014).

⁵³ John Ashbery, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror: Poems*, London 2009, 68.