

The Principle of the Missing Piece

By Andrea Domesle

Our Lady's Forever is Anna Konik's latest video work. Compared with her previous videos, there is one major difference: the characters are played by amateur actors, a young woman, a young man, a little girl and a little boy. In the past, Anna Konik's film works featured real people in their everyday settings. The film narrative was based on interviews, conversations and staged group scenes. This method is derived from reportage, and videos that use it are often placed within this genre. But the method has been appropriated by young artists, in particular those whose interest focuses on content, clear statements and specific socio-political messages. The last two points are not of primary importance in Anna Konik's works, which have a poetic quality that is especially prominent in *Our Lady's Forever*. In addition, while Anna Konik takes those she interviews seriously as individuals, she also generalises their fates and what they say. This sets her firmly apart from her older Polish colleague Artur Zmijewski, who uses a brutal, merciless interview technique that pushes interviewees to commit dubious acts they would not otherwise consider. With her highly sensitive handling of her subjects, Anna Konik has introduced a very different tone into Polish video art that might be described as feminine, but more importantly as humane. For her reserve also sets her apart from the current *grande dame* of Polish video art Katarzyna Kozyra, whose approach is voyeuristic and, more recently, lavish.

The fact that Anna Konik's video work has its place within the realm of art becomes clear by the way it is presented in the exhibition space. The positioning of the individual videos establishes links between them and determines the way viewers stand, thus influencing their interpretations – a method developed in particular by Bruce Nauman. Furthermore, the installation-based approach turns the presentation into a three-dimensional volume that can be walked around but also entered. This sculptural approach to video was developed by Bill Viola, whose sense of time Anna Konik also appreciates.

Links exist at various levels between *Our Lady's Forever* and Anna Konik's older video works. Some of these are discussed below in order to give an outline of developments within her oeuvre and an impression of the distinctive quality of her artistic use of video.

Thematic links:

The theme of isolation and solitude touched on in *Our Lady's Forever* is a leitmotif in Anna Konik's oeuvre, featuring in all of her past videos. In *Toys* (2000) it is linked to the situation of the ill people featured in the film: the artist has them play with latex body parts, creating interaction between individuals that overcomes their usual isolation. In *Przezroczyłość (Transparency)* (2004), Anna Konik visited old men and women living alone, whose statements highlight their detachment from social ties. Her series entitled *In The Middle Of The Way* (since 2001), focuses on the theme of homelessness, but coupled with the idea of people being on the move all the time in a more general sense: here, everyone is alone on their way through life.

In *Our Lady's Forever*, the man and the woman represent different persons, different points of view, and thus also different attitudes and feelings. They always appear on screen separately, they never meet. The theme of illness is also hinted at: here, as in *Toys*, the illness in question is schizophrenia. In the two previous works, *Przezroczyłość (Transparency)* and *In The Middle Of The Way*, this multiplicity of perspectives is embodied by a succession of main characters, each of whom is the subject of one part of a multipart video series, and thus spread over the various parts.

Aesthetic links:

The movements and gestures of the actors in *Our Lady's Forever* determine the rhythm and framing of the video: the camera feels its way, finger-like, over walls and objects in close-up, as if in search of traces and signs. Or it follows the woman as she wanders around or the man as he searches the empty hospital rooms: sometimes pausing to almost become a still, sometimes quickening the pace through narrow corridors. This aesthetic of actors determining rhythm and framing is especially pronounced in *In The Middle Of The Way* by the contrast between the individual parts, each devoted to a single homeless person. The shaping elements here are the individual characters, the shared walks through the cities, and the relationship with the artist.

Methodological links:

Although Anna Konik's film narratives have a fixed length, they are without any real beginning or end. At the Zacheta Gallery, *Our Lady's Forever* is shown on seven screens, with the piece's total length of 10:14

minutes spread across them: the film narrative is split up, only perceivable as a whole by walking through the space and seeing the parts one after the other. Two of these projections differ from the others in particular: the first screen on the left, showing various sea scenes, the only outdoor footage; and the screen positioned at the far end of the room as a kind of “head.” The latter shows a fan whose constant turning and blowing is briefly interrupted by a sequence with a water basin. The other five screens show similar images, repeating individual gestures or motifs at staggered intervals. One is tempted to match them up like the face-down images in the game of Memory/Concentration. If one watches for long enough, however, it becomes clear that they are not the same images, but variants of gestures and perspectives. If one then tries to mentally link up the individual parts, the story goes round in circles. The motif of the jigsaw puzzle that appears in the video, and which is on show as a real object at the entrance to the video space at Zacheta Gallery, can be seen to stand for Anna Konik’s artistic method: it is impossible to assemble an intact “picture” of *Our Lady’s Forever*, the film will not yield one specific interpretation. The puzzle is missing a piece, so to speak. It is that crucial piece that usually gives video narratives the necessary openness – even if the film is about the lives of specific individuals, they are embedded in some more general framework.

The method of creating a story that goes round in circles was highlighted in *Przezroczystość (Transparency)* by the use of double filming, turning those interviewed at home into prisoners of their own circular thoughts. In the multipart video series *In The Middle Of The Way*, the individual parts – like *Our Lady’s Forever* – begin with no particular emphasis and end in similarly casual fashion. In the exhibition, a further aspect is added: by spreading the different parts of the series around the space, the story’s transcendence of specific time or place is highlighted. Screened simultaneously, the separate videos cause different times and places to flow into each other: the past and present of the narrative, the present of what is seen during the screening, and the past of imagined images, inside and outside – physical and mental. In *Our Lady’s Forever*, this phenomenon is to be read primarily in psychological terms.

Personal link:

The artist has a personal involvement in all of her works. Besides an interest in the subject matter, her ideas are prompted by personal encounters with individuals and issues. In her previous video works, Anna Konik tracked people down in their everyday surroundings. In *Toys* she created a framework for their actions. In *Przezroczystość (Transparency)*, she is the unseen interviewer who remains off screen, in the background. In *In The Middle Of The Way*, she speaks to and accompanies the homeless people and is visible in the film. *Our Lady’s Forever* is quite different in this respect: in 2000, the artist happened to meet a young man suffering from schizophrenia who showed her his love drama “Doves”, on which her video is based. In the empty hospital in Cork, Ireland, where Anna Konik chose to shoot the film, she found the jigsaw puzzle featured in the video. These found elements are poetic in themselves, surreally metaphysical like the script, possessing their own distinctive qualities. This, as well as the use of actors, makes *Our Lady’s Forever* Anna Konik’s most poetic work to date. The sensitive treatment of human individuals that characterized her previous videos is heightened here into an aesthetic sensitivity, underlined by a soundtrack that reproduces the sounds of the wind and the sea. It is as if the film images touch our skin like the wind and quietly get inside us like sound.