



Anna Konik: Far away, so near...

Void, Derry

Joanne Laws

Far away, so near... was a solo exhibition by Polish artist Anna Konik, featuring two video works which had never previously been shown together. Sensitively curated by Suzanne Stitch across Void's subterranean spaces, the dual video installations proved technically and aesthetically engaging, while the content was harrowing in its portrayal of society's marginalised and voiceless people, which constitutes a recurrent theme in Konik's work.

Within a lavender-walled space *In the same city, under the same sky* (2012 onwards) was televised across a multitude of screens, relaying the experiences of female immigrants displaced to foreign lands. An eclectic assortment of modern and old-fashioned domestic seating in the space comfortably

accommodated the audience, while bric-a-brac furniture and table-tops supporting monitors configured segregated 'viewing areas' vaguely reminiscent of corporate 'pods'. This seemingly welcoming veneer was, however, at odds with the unfolding encounter, which was unsettling and fraught with numerous barriers to the viewing experience, eroding any possibility of connecting with the women portrayed in the films. With no headphones provided, the noise level in the space was overwhelmingly, as chattering voices in unfamiliar languages overlapped and competed with one another. In the act of zoning in on individual films, further distractions were presented by their visual form. Each woman's monologue was translated using scrolling subtitles, which sped horizontally across the bottom of screens in a 'breaking-news' fashion, making it difficult to engage with the text while simultaneously trying to gauge the speakers' emotions.

Accounts of women from Chechnya, Afghanistan, Iraq and other places outlined the reasons they had left their native countries and the inadequacies of their current lives. Increasingly, it became difficult to reconcile the women's spoken words with their affluent home settings, which featured in the films almost as stage-sets, cluttered with soft furnishings, teacups and other domestic 'props'. As one woman appeared to read from an autocue, questions arose regarding the authenticity of these accounts. It transpired that the women depicted on screen were enacting monologues of female immigrants who currently inhabit the same city, providing dislocated and second-hand accounts of trauma that seemed to resist an immediate or transparent reading. In preserving the anonymity of these immigrant women, who are never directly seen or heard in the films, Konik further highlights their political precarity and unrecognised status, presenting them as a voiceless and superfluous 'other'. Transmitting their stories through western women in indigenous languages allowed their different lives to momentarily collide, warranting some reflection on how immigrant stories are reported and consumed through the global news media. In leaving their war-

torn homelands, these women now battle depression, poverty and the constant threat of deportation, while trying to create better lives for their children, with one stating 'women suffer the most'.

While *In the same city, under the same sky* tackles the inherent complexities of representation regarding the immigrant experience – characterised by displacement, alienation and a general fear about the future – *Transparency* (2004) is an encounter with the loneliness of old age, featuring four elderly Germans as they confront their lives and impending death. Four video projections were arranged across three walls of a darkened room. The space benefitted from the provision of headphones for three of the works, although the repetitive wailing of an elderly woman in the fourth film proved harrowing in contrast to the others, who vied silently for my attention above their subtitles. Filmed within the domestic interiors of their own homes, some post-production editing conjured the effect of each person appearing alongside mirror images of themselves. Such 'intellectual montage' devices draw on a canon of film theory, encompassing Soviet Montage and wider Avant-garde film practices from the 1920s onwards. As a counter to straightforward narrative production, montage offers a dialectic space which juxtaposes conflicting realities, thus implicating the viewer in unsettling scenarios.



Anna Konik: *Transparency* (2004). 4 channel video installation / colour / sound. Video still from 'Mija' (8.15 minutes). Image courtesy of the artist.

My attention turned to 'Doris' (b. 1911), who occupied the compact frame with her chimerical twin. Engaged unnervingly in a dual dialogue, the two differently- dressed 'sisters', overlapped, interrupted and mimicked each other's speech patterns as lifelong companions might do. Following some life reflections, Doris concedes bleakly that she is 'much too old to still be happy to be alive'. Upon the revelation that 'now I sit and wait for the departure', we acknowledge that she is completely alone. Elsewhere, 'Mr Brozy' (b. 1915), who is wheelchair bound and in need of full time care in a nursing home, states wearily that 'God wants it that way...but the time has been so long'.

While being momentarily touched by these people's lives, the viewer feels compelled to assess their own role, whether as detached observer, victim or co-conspirator in such palpable human suffering. Ultimately, guilt gives way to the conclusion that compassion, although necessary, is completely exhausting. Difficult and draining on so many levels, this exhibition did provide some rewards, found in unexpected places. 'Tadeusz' appears in his apartment on a mound of hoarded junk. His reflected self is juxtaposed upside-down below, rummaging, searching and sorting through the detritus, but not making any headway. Following the death of his mother 37 years ago, Tadeusz suffered with depression and other disorders, and began to collect things. 'Collecting things is very popular all over the world' he explained, seeming conscious of the difference between the orderly, systematic collecting of funds and libraries, and his own neurotic hoarding. His compulsion extends to books and other 'bibliophilic things', with a quest for knowledge encompassing philosophy, psychology and the arts. As the apartment 'kept filling up', most of his belongings and furniture were rendered inaccessible. 'I had reached a point of alienation, as the Materialists call it' he concedes. Such a philosophical reference – suitably denoting a reality defined in terms of physical matter – attests to the fact that Tadeusz is smart, articulate and has clarity about his chaotic situation, yet seems powerless to change it.

Far from uplifting, *Far away, so near...* offered a challenging set of propositions for a persistent viewer. Konik's alienation of the audience through technical and conceptual mechanisms serves to robustly underscore the inherent complexities of her human subjects and our relationship to them. The viewer's ongoing negotiation of these barriers (noise, unfamiliar languages, text and intense 'human interest' stories) becomes symptomatic of our daily tendency to 'block things out', ignoring the weary and 'unwanted' people in society, and the prospect that one day we might become one of them. Such ongoing denial clearly produces a far-reaching lack of compassion, diminishing our capacity to address whether a place of collective solace can ever be found, liberated from human neuroses.

Joanne Laws is an arts writer based in Leitrim. She has previously written for Art Monthly, Art Papers, Cabinet and Variant. Far away, so near... was on view 28 January – 7 March 2014.