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Life Is Elsewhere - Social and Visual in the Art of Katerina Šedá

Index

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Katerina Šedá's artworks are usually interpreted as social interventions in the rural atmosphere of one of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. However, when Katerina Šedá synchronised the activities of just about all of the three hundred inhabitants of the small southern Moravian community of Ponetovice for one day, she was not trying to get them to reflect on themselves or change their behaviour, but rather to showcase 'nothing'. Perhaps this is best expressed in the title the artist chose for the project *There's Nothing There* (2003), a phrase used by the people who live in the environs of Ponetovice to describe ordinary life there. Katerina Šedá got her inspiration to present that 'nothing' through reproduction from a visual experience she had had: the panorama of Ponetovice was absolutely identical to that which came into sight as she approached the next village over one day by mistake. The success of the whole event was based on her consistent respect for the village's everyday life, which she researched by sending out questionnaires. Then, when for the duration of one day all the village's inhabitants did to what the usually did—with the sole difference that they did it together, the everyday was transformed, paradoxically, into a festivity.

From this perspective, Katerina Šedá's most complex project to date is doubtless *Raising Children* (2004). The trigger for this project was, in her own words, the experience of entering a chess tournament without any knowledge of the game. She was intrigued by a tacit phenomenon underlying the game of chess, namely the invisible grid—neither white nor black itself—which simultaneously divides and connects the black and white field of the chessboard. The grid can be understood as a condition for the possibility of differentiation. She started working with this theme in a series of graphs in which she gradually came up against issues relating to parent-child relationships. From a spatial standpoint, the child is a sort of central link or neutral point. From a temporal standpoint, the child is an as yet undifferentiated potential which gradually takes form by differentiating itself in its relationships with its mother and father. Šedá investigated these relationships in 24 hour-long actions during which she imitated the behaviour of her mother and father and then they imitated hers. At the same time, however, she drew attention to the entirely formal problem of differentiating the visual field. She experimented with both a horizontally divided visual field of the child, whose perspective is situated at the level of the tabletop, as well as a vertical field by recording her straightforward movements using a helmet to which she affixed two cameras, one pointed right, the other left. The resulting video documents the *I* as a boundary which itself establishes the possibility of spatial differentiation. The artist's *I* is present through the double projection in its differentiation with respect to the surroundings in the recording. Its inhumanity is clearly evident in the experience of watching the documentation, which is presented in the form of a double video projection, for our gaze wanders naturally from one projection to the other, attending either to what's on her left or on her right. We balk, however, when we try to adjust our attention by focusing on both projections at once—we are immediately overtaken by a feeling of vertigo or queasiness.

Katerina Šedá developed her particular relationship to the regime of visibility in her projects titled *It Doesn't Matter* (2005) and *What Is It For?* (2006) which she worked

on together with her grandmother, Jana Šedá. The aim of the first was to eradicate the phrase 'It Doesn't Matter' with which her grandmother reacted to all efforts on the part of the family to awaken her from her lethargy. Her interest was peaked only by remembrances of when she was in charge of stocks at a large department store which carried a wide variety of goods from 1950–1983. Whereas she answered questions regarding her present life as a pensioner with resignation, when talking about her former workplace she could recall several hundred types of hardware items, including their dimensions and prices. Thus Katerina Šedá tried to induce her grandmother to reconstruct the world of her active life by drawing the goods she would order for her stock room. The resulting series of drawings by Jana Šedá are thus a singular archive of intimate memories which nonetheless take on the stark form of an inventory catalogue. The principle of reproduction dominates not only the collection as a whole, but each individual drawing as well, providing a complete registry of every item that had been in stock long before, including variations and sizes. The matter-of-fact style of the drawings, which favour a schematic depiction of each item's function over a realistic representation of its shape, makes an indirect reference to the main role of each item as a means by which humans make the world around them their own. Thus the anthropomorphic form of most of the tools drawn by Jana Šedá is nothing but a logical consequence of understanding them as extensions of the human body. The effort to attain the most complete enumeration possible thus contrasts sharply with the fragmentary quality of the items, which are, unlike the tools, mere spare parts, lacking independent functionality. Each object before us appears quite mechanical, with no context whatsoever, as when we recall memories out of chronological order from absolutely different periods of our life.

Just as mechanical are Jana Šedá's answers to the questionnaires prepared for her by her granddaughter in which she was supposed to react spontaneously to what different things were good for. Listed in alphabetical order are the names of (mostly common) things and activities to which Jana Šedá was then to associate a corresponding function. This seemingly impersonal logic is interspersed with the proper names of some of the people who were close to Katerina Šedá's grandmother which Jana reacts to as a rule with a personal reminiscence, though some of them, whom she was apparently unable to recall, elicit no reaction. Considering her advancing illness, it must be noted that a significance-laden and frequent reaction regarding the functions of things or activities was 'for living'. Jana Šedá not only responded that way to temporal and vital concepts like 'day', 'existence', 'energy' or 'love', but also to place names such as 'Brazil', 'Europe', 'Ethiopia', 'India', 'Israel' and 'Ireland'. Paradoxically, places which were geographically or politically closest to Jana Šedá do not fit the pattern. Although she lived her entire life in the environs of Brno, she did not refer to that city as 'for living', but 'for making tractors'; similarly, 'Russia' was 'for everything'. On the other hand, 'grandmother' was 'for nothing'. For Jana Šedá and for us as well, life was elsewhere.

Translated from the Czech by Ivan Gutiérrez.

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