A JOURNEY TO THE END

On Nina Staehli's study of greed

«The text is smarter than its author.»
Heiner Mueller

The theatre of a small town is staging the premiere of Ferenc Molnár's play Liliom. According to the play's program, Liliom is someone incapable of saying he loves – though he can throw a mean punch. He makes his living as a carousel barker at a fair, but loses his job right when he finds out his girlfriend is pregnant. He then turns down an offer to work as a caretaker, botches a robbery, commits suicide, and appears at the gates of heaven, where god holds him accountable: "What good have you done on Earth?" The play is staged just like the plot: straight as a line. The fairground setting of the play could have been an excuse for kitschy, nostalgic costumes and bright, colorful lights, but this production resists any such temptation – perhaps the director thought it might have been too entertaining. The fate of the proletarian characters unfolds in brittle encounters throughout the play. The review of the performance will say: "What remains incomprehensible is how [the production] – in its clear-cut, composed style – does not stop the actors from speaking in such a forced, affected way. Stooges […] are not interesting characters because they speak loudly."[1] The audience musters up a subdued applause. The play – and the entire evening – appear to have gotten stuck in the year 1909.

The text is not smarter than the author. The author of the play was very capable: he created a snapshot of a certain time, connected social issues and milieus. However, a century later, the material does not have much left to offer us. Whereas the eloquence of Brecht or psychological complexity of Döblin still arouse our interest and compassion for the life of a Johanna or a Marie, the only thing Liliom leaves us with is the question as to why this story, wavering somewhere between fairy tale and social drama, is still being performed today.

If a text is, indeed, smarter than its author – as Heiner Müller claimed and probably hoped both as a reader and a writer – then the text is a better storyteller than the author intended. Such a text creates something that has meaning beyond the time in which it was made. It presents recurring themes of humankind, such as power, love, death, purpose, etc., in a generally understandable way that does not necessitate any specific context to be accessible. What's more, in such a text, the psychological conflicts of the characters are relatable over time; the plot has something universal. And, even if the substance is tied to an individual event, a text that is smarter than its author takes the reader on a journey far beyond that specific event. Naturally, these criteria apply to other modes of expression aside from the textual form.

Whoever goes atraveling…

After she was awarded a travel grant from the Canton of Zug, Nina Staehli went on a trip to the United States in 2014. For two months, she traveled through eight states while doing research on the Trail of Tears.

Before her journey, Staehli was only vaguely familiar with the concept of the Trail of Tears[2], which is, to this day, a very important part of the identity of Native American cultures (in contrast to white American culture, which still prefers to identify itself with stories of conquering the Wild West). She researches, reads, and conducts interviews with descendants of the various Indian tribes. But Staehli does not go about this process with the sober interest of an academic. No. She is angry, distressed, aggressive and full of guilt. She feels ashamed of being a paleface. While traveling, she makes countless drawings on paper bags – the ideal medium for someone on the move, as they are sturdy, cheap, and available everywhere. Her subjects include animals, perpetrators and victims, and are drawn in the typical Staehli palette of red, white and black, where red always stands for blood and violence; black and white for death and mourning. Staehli is also making a direct reference to the region known as the Black Belt or the Bible Belt, a wide swath of land once full of enormous cotton plantations which were only profitable thanks to slave labor and for which, due to their growing need for land, the indigenous peoples were driven out. In her images, Staehli paints the white Cherokee rose, the state flower of Georgia, black. Legend has it that a white rose grew for every tear shed by

the Cherokees during their expulsion. But in Staehli's version, it is no longer this specific white rose. In her work, the symbolism of Europe and the different Americas develops into its own figurative language that does not allude to the specific situation but to something universal. The figures in her images are not clear-cut; they remain ambivalent, oscillating between vulnerable and threatening, which creates a general atmosphere of violence and destruction. The artist stitches her drawings with a red thread – as though this embroidered scar could reconcile, if not heal, the violent expulsion of the indigenous people.

In a way, this comprehensive multimedia series, entitled Glory Land, is a reckoning for the artist. She works through the subject matter in order to give her rage space. And, also, perhaps, to stand up to the historical injustice that has continued to repeat itself over and over in different ways since the dawn of humanity. Of course Staehli is aware that, as a white European woman, her preoccupation with the history of indigenous peoples is yet another appropriation and thus problematic in itself. When we talked, the artist said she felt freer to explore the destruction of the indigenous cultures of America than she would have in the case of a European conflict. As a white person, she bears historical guilt, but, at the same time, as a European, she has a certain distance from the violent events involving the Native Americans – which makes it easier for her to see the universal in the specific.

Enough is never enough

Since her trip to the United States, the artist – who works in large-scale cycles, staying with a topic for several years, using different media and letting one work develop organically into the next – has been exploring the subject of greed. Because even after the whites drove the Native American tribes out of the southeastern regions and into present-day Oklahoma, their greed was still not satisfied. When around 100,000 Native Americans from the southeast were forcibly relocated to the territory of the Plains Indians, it put immense pressure on the latter in their ancestral land. The more white America populated the western territories, the more indigenous people were displaced.

It is the idea of this incredible greed – one that claims everything for itself, that appropriates whatever comes across its path – as a basic part of the human constitution that preoccupies Staehli. As the daughter of a man whose nickname was "The Tree King," Staehli had always felt it was only natural to respect other life forms and cast a critical eye on capitalism and environmental abuses. But now she feels that people are stuffing themselves until they explode, literally and figuratively, because they are so filled with greed. Staehli tells her stories as a sort of puppeteer who does not bring her characters to life tethered to strings but with oversized head sculptures – the "Big Heads" – carried on someone's shoulders.

Her figures have pleasant names like Ruby Dean, Gloria, Melvin, Sparrow, James and Moshi… The artist creates the figure of Tear Head, who stands for the displacement of the indigenous peoples and their culture, for the Glory Land video. The viewer hears the heavy breathing of someone running, yet the figures hardly move at all. The size and weight of the heads make for slow, careful, swaying movements that are echoed by static camera shots. Tear Head, with its tremendous mop of hair, is standing there, forlorn, lost in thought, absent to the world. It seems like the city architecture and enclosed spaces make him melancholic. Tear Head's counterpart, Sparrow – recognizably sparrow-like thanks to its pointy beak of a mouth – walks around with its white flag, somehow every bit as forlorn and apathetic as Tear Head, whether outside in nature or in building ruins. The two do not follow a narrative. As in all of her video performances, Staehli works here without text, without verbal language. But she still manages to create a depressing mood with Tear Head and Sparrow, acoustically emphasized by the rattling of a train, the snatches of a melody, and the buzzing of insects in the summer heat. Does this video suggest that "Glory Land" should be here somewhere between a train station, a cemetery, a memorial, a forest, and a casino?

Staehli makes her figures with their characteristically childish faces just as thoughtfully as she does laboriously. The way of interpreting them remains ambiguous: Are they characters the artist uses to make her videos? Are the Big Heads merely props or, on the contrary, sculptures in their own right? In any case, they are not simply alter egos of the artist. It is more helpful to think of them as a growing family whose members correspond to primitive psychological traits. Created for one context, they appear again elsewhere later. Tear Head is linked to Staehli's latest video "Battlefields of Cupiditas," in which this sad, naïve figure encounters in "Cupiditas" the personification of greed. Ever since Staehli traveled along the Trail of Tears, her thematic focus has been more strongly towards greed, which, she posits, is a human organ that has to date been largely unexplored. She asked the people in her immediate environment about the color, shape and appearance of greed. For Staehli, greed is clearly an organ, which she reproduces as small sculptural objects. In the "Battlefields of Cupiditas" video, Tear Head and Cupiditas are constantly rearranging these objects on a playing table. The reckless displacement and expulsion of people and species continue. Cupiditas wants it that way – until the end. As Chief John Hollow Horn of the Oglala Lakota tribe once said: "the earth shall weep."[3]

Fanni Fetzer

[1] Tobias Gerosa, NZZ, 14th Jan 2018

[2] This term is from an 1831 article published in the Arkansas Gazette on the displacement of the Indian population from the fertile woodlands of the southeastern United States into the barren territory of present-day Oklahoma. One of the tribal chiefs of the Choctaw, probably Thomas Harkins oder Nitikechi, described the violent forced relocation as a "(…) trail of death and tears." This phrase has since become widespread as "Trail of Tears."

[3] This phrase, coined by John Hollow Horn in 1932, was later used as the title of James Wilson's 1999 book on the history of the Native American populations of North America.