Katharina Reich
O on O

Opening: June 1, 2024 • • • 5-9pm
Juni 1 - 29, 2024

It is May 25, 2024. I am sitting with Katharina not far from zqm, in front of a small café, drinking cappuccino in the sun. We had been in the project room shortly before, looking at her new installation „O on O“ together and having an intense discussion about our ideas and feelings regarding it. Now, Katharina is telling me about her childhood, her parents of German-Russian descent who (re)migrated to Germany with her in the 1990s. We delve further back in time, talking about the history of German-Russian settlements, how Catherine the Great offered land to Germans in Russia in the 18th century, promising them economic advantages and benefits. Many answered the call and settled successfully in regions like the Volga and later in southern Russia (today Ukraine), Kazakhstan, and Siberia. They largely preserved their culture, language, and religion, staying among themselves. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, this, along with their existing privileges, led to initial tensions. When the Bolsheviks, under Lenin‘s leadership, came to power through the Russian Revolution, many German colonies suffered from looting and violence. An anti-German sentiment developed, reaching a peak during World War II. German-Russians were generally considered „enemies of the people.“ In the 1930s, Stalin‘s government ordered the deportation of the entire Volga German population to Siberia and Central Asia. Hundreds of thousands suffered under the catastrophic conditions during the deportation and forced labor. German-Russians were dispossessed, arrested, or shot. During the Nazi era, many were forcibly relocated to German territory, only to be interned as „Displaced Persons“[1] in labor camps after the German defeat and eventually handed over to the Soviet military authorities and deported back to the Soviet Union. In the decades following World War II, German-Russians remained under strict surveillance and were not allowed to return to their original settlements. Only from 1955 were they free to choose their place of residence again. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to a massive wave of emigration to Germany in the 1990s.[2]

Among them were Katharina and her parents – and my own father with his family. Upon arriving in Germany, a sense of security initially prevailed, according to the accounts of my own German-Russian family. Finally „home,“ finally „homeland“? Previously defamed as the „Germans“ in Russia, they were now derogatorily referred to as the „Russians“ in Germany and discriminated against. Concealing their roots was the consequence, an identity crisis that had solidified over the past two centuries and continues to this day. Both Katharina and I experienced that the traumata of the past – the repetitive moment of migration, the demand and expectation of cultural adaptation, the double alienation, and the aftermath of the ever-present will to survive in the face of adversity and persecution – were not addressed.

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1 »Behandelt wie ein drittklassiges Pack«, Der Spiegel. 32/1983: https://www.spiegel.de/politik/behandelt-wie-ein-drittklassiges-pack-a-8e243274-0002-0001-0000-000014019660?context=issue

2 Dalos, György: Geschichte der RUSSLANDDEUTSCHEN. Von Katharina der Großen bis zur Gegenwart, Verlag C.H. Beck, München

These burdens and themes are something Katharina processes privately in her diaries but also expresses publicly in her art, ranging from playful to hyper-aesthetic. Her visual language is so universal that viewers are triggered by their own cultural memory [3], socialization, and personal experiences.

Katharina often constructs geometrically seeming shapes from generally known objects, leading to expansive, sculptural installations. These open up new interpretive pathways in their result, usually completely detached from their original function. The objects come from her collection archive, amassed over years. In the exhibition „O on O“ at zqm – which received a gray, warehouse-like floor painting for this exhibition – she shows a constellation of grave vases, floral foam, and brightly orange-lit plastic boxes. The latter are arranged by the artist into a rectangular, almost human-high tower positioned tightly at the entrance to the exhibition space. On top, she placed dark gray floral foam squares, each with a green grave vase inserted. Each of these had another grave vase mounted mirror-like. The used vases come from cemeteries the artist visited over the years. She replaced the vases on-site with new ones and took the sometimes heavily used ones with her. In „O on O,“ although some vases are recognizable as memory carriers through loving inscriptions from the deceased‘s relatives, they lose their function entirely due to their arrangement. They jut out in their inverted doubling like bombs or little soldiers, statically supporting each other only through their tight arrangement, above the visitors‘ heads. The confinement upon entering the room dissolves after a few meters, and the overall picture of the installation becomes perceptible. It stands like a monument in the room, appearing preserved for eternity in the windowless zqm, leaving an ambivalent feeling. It oscillates between extreme attraction due to the created aesthetic situation, which seems to arise mainly from the contrast of color and form composition, and an intrinsic repulsion that is hard to grasp. It coagulates into a feeling of alienation.

After a brief silence, Katharina looks at me and says, „I like it when works raise questions, that one also – sooner or later – gets an answer.“

Miriam Jesske

3 Jan Assmann: Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. In: Derselbe: Thomas Mann und Ägypten. Mythos und Monotheismus in den Josephsromanen. Beck, München 2006, S. 67–75, here S. 70