

Will You Ever Go Back?

Joanna Zylińska

Joanna Zylińska has been living in the UK for nearly fifteen years. Dwelling on the question she regularly gets asked, by Brits and Poles alike, 'Will you ever go back?', for the project presented here she revisits her Polish home town in search of the ghosts of the past. This memory trip leads to some further questions: What does it mean to want to return home? Or not to want to, for that matter? What do we take with us when we leave? What do we leave behind? Most importantly, is there much point in talking about returning if we have not yet established whether 'leaving home' is ever even an option? It is the uncertainty of the response to these questions that the series presented here attempts to capture.

British theorist of Caribbean origin Stuart Hall reflects on this vexed experience of leaving home in the following terms: 'The classic questions which every migrant faces are twofold: "Why are you here?" and "When are you going back home?" No migrant ever knows the answer to the second question until asked. Only then does she or he know that really, in the deep sense, she/he's never going back. Migration is a one-way trip. There is no "home" to go back to. There never was'. Zylińska's exhibition is an attempt to stage this impossibility of capturing something that perhaps never was, at least not in any substantial and fixed way.

In the blurriness and reflections of the interior shots, the viewer can also perhaps see the projection of their own memories and fantasies of what is often referred to, however inaccurately, as 'communist Poland'. Some may notice the ugliness of the concrete block architecture, joyless repression, martial law and economic crisis, while others may be able to detect outdoor play, shared Christmas meals, traces of sunny holidays in Bulgaria and Cuban peaches.

But the project also goes against photography's representational, indexical and eidetic ambitions. As we know both from theorists of the image such as André Bazin and Roland Barthes, and from our own experiences of living with snapshots, albums and digicams, photography is typically associated with memory: it is seen as an attempt to capture and preserve memories, to reconstitute them and to both mourn their loss and celebrate their at least partial recuperation. Yet the question that underpins the 'Will You Ever Go Back?' project is how one can actually *photograph a memory* or even a *fantasy* of a place. What does such a meta-photographic attempt 'at one remove', as it were, deliver, and what does it withdraw from us?

Joanna Zylińska is a writer, lecturer and photographic artist. She is a Reader in New Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London. Zylińska is the author and editor of five books on culture, ethics, politics and art - most recently, *Bioethics in the Age of New Media* (MIT Press, 2009) and *Imaginary Neighbors: Mediating Polish-Jewish Relations after the Holocaust* (University of Nebraska Press, 2007, edited with Dorota Glowacka). Her exhibition, 'Solid States/Liquid Objects', was held at the Shifted Gallery in Melbourne in August - September 2009.

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