

OVERGADEN.

Yvette Brackman
AGIT FLIGHT
15.11 2014 – 11.01 2015



Yvette Brackman, *AGIT FLIGHT*, 2014. Installation view. Photo: Anders Sune Berg

Agitprop, Agit Flight, Agit Mem

By Maria Finn

When entering Yvette Brackman's exhibition at Overgaden the presence of textiles is striking. Transparent or shining, they unfold themselves in the space modest and insistent at the same time. As material they represent a flexible possibility by the fact that they can fill out the space, but also potentially be folded together. This gesture returns in several of Brackman's works that are rooted in her family background and deal with the experience of exile, immigration and displacement, all something that points towards the nomadic and elusive. In this exhibition the artist positions herself as the primary narrator combining her own experiences with accounts from previous generations. By stepping out of the position of the listener Brackman adds new layers to the story that unfolds itself as a kaleidoscopic narrative in which several perspectives on the

same experience are woven together, creating a new version of the family story. This new version reveals aspects of how loss and trauma, inflicted by dramatic historical circumstances, is handed over from one generation to the next.

As a starting point for the exhibition, Brackman uses the notion 'agitprop', short for the Russian agitatsiya propaganda, which was introduced after the Russian Revolution in 1917 to propagate the Soviet political cause through a wide range of media such as posters, films, theatre plays, etc. In her title the artist has exchanged the word 'prop' with 'flight', referring to how her Jewish parents managed to escape the anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, by immigrating to the United States. Agitprop has thus become Brackman's

AGIT FLIGHT, as well as *AGIT MEM*, a theatre play about remembrance, in which several voices from the past are united to recount, in fragments, the family's narrative.

To frame Brackman's memory work it is relevant to mention Jean-Luc Godard's film *In Praise of Love* (2001) that deals with time and memory, both literally as well stylistically, by reflecting on how we depict and represent these concepts. The structure of the film is built up around a man trying to create a "project" about love, and how this is experienced when we are young, adult, and old. As in most of Godard's films we are not presented with a traditional plot but rather a sophisticated and challenging montage of points of views as well as references to film, literature and the director's previous films. The film investigates time and reverses our expectations of how it traditionally is depicted, for instance by letting black-and-white footage represent the present in the first part, while in the following past events are shot in colour. In the beginning of the film we follow the conversation between an art dealer and his colleague. They talk about events that took place during the war and the art dealer utters: "Memory is a complex thing." Because when things have passed there is still memory, and the colleague continues: "Yes, the obligations of memory." To this the art dealer answers: "No, the right. Memory has no obligations. Read Bergson." Memory as an obligation is also the focus of Marianne Hirsch's essay "The Generation of Postmemory" in which she writes about the second generation in families that have been affected by traumatizing historical events. Through oral recollections within the family these experiences are passed on to the next generation on which they have such a strong impact that these memories almost feel like their own. Hirsch further reflects on how the increasing accounts of these experiences have resulted in both cultural artifacts as well as academic studies which seem to reveal an urge to share as well as contextualise what has happened: "The growth of memory culture may indeed be a symptom of a need for inclusion in a collective membrane forged by a shared inheritance of multiple traumatic histories and the individual and social responsibility we feel towards a persistent and trau-

matic past – what the French have referred to as 'le devoir de memoire'."¹ Here Hirsch mentions the same notion that appears in Godard's film, 'le devoir de memoire', and the obligation of memory.

Godard and Hirsch's emphasis on the right to one's own memories is pertinent in this context since Brackman in the play *AGIT MEM* precisely is not only sharing the experiences of previous generations but, as mentioned, also adds her own. The obligation to pass on what has happened has also become a story of the effects these experiences have had in their aftermath. The 'agitation' from agitprop, combined with 'memory' becomes the 'memory that agitates', and thus an enlightening act. The duty of memory becomes a right to use them to reveal what has been overseen in the shadows of previous events as Hirsch writes: "Second-generation fiction, art, memoir, and testimony are shaped by the attempt to represent the long-term effects of living in close proximity to the pain, depression, and dissociation of persons who have witnessed and survived massive historical trauma. They are shaped by the child's confusion and responsibility, by the desire to repair, and by the consciousness that her own existence may well be a form of compensation for unspeakable loss."² Brackman describes this herself in an interview in the book on her work from 2012, *Systems and Scenarios*: "There is no doubt that the story of my family's struggle in Soviet Russia plays an important role in my work. Soviet Russia where my parents, who are both Jewish, grew up were very anti-Semitic. Stories that I have heard as a child are like fairytales of survival but where also fraught with anger, shame, and even violence."³ Thus the obligation to listen to and to take part in these experiences also affects your own needs and even in a sense overshadows them but because Brackman in *AGIT MEM* addresses this issue the play becomes more than an account and instead turns into a multi-faceted narrative reaching into the future.

The play is loosely based on Aleksei Kruchenykh's Futurist opera *Victory Over the Sun* from 1913 that playfully sketches up a scenario in which the sun – the symbol of the past – is locked away in a cement box as an

image of the battle between the old and the new. Kazimir Malevich designed the set and the costumes for the opera and also made his first Black Square (that was later to revolutionise painting) as a backdrop for the play. In the exhibition, Brackman uses Malevich as a recurrent reference: in the costumes for the play, but also in textile collages, and a tent which the visitor can slip into. In these works the black square appears in chiffon, creating a transparency to this loaded reference which can be seen as a formal representation of the memory work.

By adding these layers of cultural and historical references to personal experiences Brackman turns her obligation of memory into a right, a right to create a new narrative. Hirsch sums up the experience of the second generation like this: "These events happened in the past but their effects continue into the present. This is, I believe, the experience of post memory and the process of its generation."⁴ The works in the exhibition appear with integrity, and just as the textiles, that many of them are made of they both reveal and hide something and awaken our curiosity to what can be found behind them. Brackman's exhibition outlines, with the help of materials, voices, and layers of experience woven together, an image of how memory constantly is proc-

essed, and thus also renegotiated, by being retold. One statement contradicts another and by including the discrepancies, a new translucency is created, through which we momentarily discern a new unity. Thus the works in the exhibition not only present another version of previous accounts, but simultaneously point towards a new position, a place that can contain both previous experiences and new acknowledgements.

Maria Finn is an artist and has a PhD in Visual Art from the University of Copenhagen and the Royal Academy of Fine Art.

1. Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory", in *On Writing with Photography*, ed. Karen Beckman and Liliane Weissberg, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2013, p. 211.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 211-212.
3. Yvette Brackman, *Systems and Scenarios*, ed. Helene Lundbye Petersen and Heike Munder, JRP Ringier, Zürich, 2012, p. 164.
4. Hirsch, *op.cit.*, p. 206.



Yvette Brackman, *AGIT FLIGHT*, 2014. Installation view. Photo: Anders Sune Berg

CV

Yvette Brackman was born in New York in 1967 and is a graduate of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Illinois, Chicago. She was a professor at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts from 2000 to 2007, and is a member of the Academy Council as well as the artists' association Den Frie. In 2012 the monograph *Systems and Scenarios* was published by JRP Ringier. In recent years she has exhibited at the Moscow Biennale, Russia (2013); Liverpool Biennale, England (2012); Freies Museum, Berlin (2012); LAXART, Los Angeles (2011), and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Roskilde, Denmark (2010).

EVENTS

Monday 17 November, 24 November, 1 December, 8 December, 5 January 3-6pm

Therapy // *Family Constellations*

In connection with Yvette Brackman's exhibition Overgaden offers the opportunity to get acquainted with the method 'family constellations'. Family constellations is acclaimed worldwide as a fast way of uncovering and highlighting challenges in families and other relations – challenges that it otherwise may take months and years to realise. The family constellations are conducted by psychotherapist Kristina van Kampen. Participation is free but registration is required: ls@overgaden.org.

Thursday 27 November 7pm

Debate // *Re-staging the Past*

This evening Overgaden invites you to a panel discussion on aesthetic strategies for memory processing. In the company of Jacob Lund from Aarhus University, Morten Thing from Roskilde University Library, among others, it will be discussed how we, as individuals as well as societies, can make use of the arts to gain an understanding of and release from the past.

Thursday 4 December, 8 January 6pm

Performance // *AGIT MEM*

As a basis for her show, Yvette Brackman has written a play in collaboration with the

authors Gitte Broeng and Suzi Tucker. The text is a rewriting of the artist's family history and is loosely based on the Futuristic opera *Victory over the Sun* (1913). During the exhibition period, the play will be performed twice, and on this occasion several of the exhibited works will be brought to life as props in the performance.

THANK YOU

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UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

Friday 23 January 2015 Overgaden presents the solo exhibitions *Between the Past and the Coming* by Ruth Campau and *A Staggering Territory* by Asbjørn Skou. The exhibitions run through 15 March 2015.

This exhibition folder can be downloaded from: www.overgaden.org

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Institute of Contemporary Art
Overgaden neden Vandet 17
DK-1414 Copenhagen K

www.overgaden.org
+45 32 57 72 73