

Not Our Country

Emotikon, a joint project by Robert Rumas and Piotr Wyrzykowski, is the outcome of a journey around the Black Sea, which the artists embarked upon in 2011, visiting Turkey, Georgia, Ukraine, and Romania. As they said *emotikon*, for them, comes close to *fotoplastykon*, i.e. a stereoscopic theatre, with “a minimum of words and a maximum of images”. *Emotikon*, therefore, is a device that accumulates experienced emotions. But, should the visual archive developed within the project in fact, be treated only as a collection of emotionally-imbued representations from a particular region of the world? The project was conceived for the Muzeum Sztuki Łódź—a museum being a site of knowledge production. Speaking of their antecedents, the artists point to the travelling anthropologists, who employed the stereoscopic theatre and the visual material they collected to create knowledge about the visited countries and their inhabitants. Rumas and Wyrzykowski, however, tap into this heritage in a highly subversive way—referring to emotions as the “touchstone” of the events encountered along their journey . . .

It is no accident that, among the protagonists of their project, we find Elvis Rromano—a singer performing Elvis Presley’s songs in the Roma language. Elvis Rromano is the stage name of Tudor Lakatos, a school teacher in the town of Somcuta Mare in Romania, visited by Rumas and Wyrzykowski in April 2011. Interviewed by the artists, he emphasizes the independent nature of the Roma people, the fact that they are at home practically wherever they choose to settle. As Elvis Rromano observes, they are known by different names in different places, but they don’t seem to care. “It’s not our country” says the Roma singer speaking about the situation of his people. The Roma are wanderers — and the fact that they were forced to accept a settled way of life in many countries often led to a degradation of their culture. In a culture “purged” of nomadism, they are a contemporary example of natural nomads, “roaming” the borderlands of the settled world, unable to fully accept it. Where, in fact, are we while accompanying Elvis Rromano? In Romania? Or perhaps in Poland? The location seems irrelevant. The car radio plays a song by the “real” Elvis, in English—the language in which Rumas and Wyrzykowski communicate with Elvis Rromano.

“I’m unique, I sing in Gypsy,” explains Elvis Rromano. An exceptional context, worth noting here, is a work by Joanna Malinowska, a New York-based artist born in Gdynia. Set deep in the Canadian interior, her video *Umanaqtuaq* (2006) is an account of a meeting with Jimmy Ekho, known as the Arctic Elvis. Ekho, who died in 2008, was also inspired by the American singer, and performed his songs in the Inuktitut language. A single character, quoted by people in radically different cultural contexts, testifies to both an overwhelming globalisation of

culture, as well as a paradoxically deep need for expressing one's individuality and attesting to the unique character of one's existence. Both Jimmy Ekho and Elvis Rromano seem to hold an exceptional position in their communities.

Another location visited by Rumas and Wyrzykowski was a former Soviet atomic submarine base in Balaklava, Crimea. In April 2011 the artists interviewed Ivan Orishchenko, a retired Russian Navy Major. The video titled *Объект №825 ГТС* is actually a monologue of Orishchenko sharing his memories—a journey in time with a man whose own fate was entwined with the history of a no longer existing state. Can the fate of a single man stand for the history of a region, state, or a whole generation? Ukraine is also the backdrop of another interview: a conversation with a Muslim imam Sabri Suleymanov shot in Bakhchysarai. Suleymanov introduces the community of Crimean Tatars from the perspective of Islam—a religion practiced by the majority which, as he claims, has a global character. But do we learn anything exceptional about this community? Or, to reverse the question, do we gain an insight into the global world of Islam followers, as well as the religion itself, by learning about this exceptional community? Or could it be that such generalized knowledge is not essential, and the greatest value lies in the meetings with specific individuals, their stories, their views—like the conversation with the Imam, whose peaceful and enlightened remarks almost convinced the artists to convert to Islam.

Robert Rumas and Piotr Wyrzykowski came across people busy with everyday routines who allowed the two men “armed” with a camcorder and photographic cameras to intrude into their worlds for a brief moment. In the documentary accounts one sees how their distrust mixes with the will to open up and share their history. The material also mirrors the artists' own experience coupled with a highly ironic approach to the history and the realities of the place where they come from. Both artists are connected with Gdańsk, a port city known as the Polish “window onto the world.” However, they chose to leave it behind and, throughout recent years, have been living their lives as nomads, marked by places where they happened to work. Thus, the new people they constantly come across on the trek become part of their world for a time. The experience of this journey is what they bring to the project.

The meetings that make up *Emotikon* seem (like in real life), as much accidental as symbolic. As far as moving from one place to another appears to be the characteristic feature of travelling, what we are dealing with here is a journey between narratives, from meeting to meeting. One has the impression that it is the people, along with their stories, who define the visited places—not the other way round. Yet this impression is perhaps misleading as it stems from the accumulation of emotions that accompany each meeting. These emotions, condensed in the *Emotikon* project, testify to the fact that the artists succeeded in

creating (even if only for a brief moment) something which is unfamiliar to tourists traversing the spaces that yield to their presence—a bond with people met on the way.

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