Remembering in Order to Forget

Our life over the past two or three decades has been inundated with information and with means of obtaining every type of information for any form of use with a keystroke. It seems that the human obsession with accumulation of any type of data, its storage, and its replacement with new information, symbolizes an attempt to embrace the entire sphere of existence, to evaluate reality and overcome it. Data that will never be used piles up, if only to gain momentary importance and be immediately neglected and forgotten. The duty of remembrance is consistently exchanged for a frenzy of consumption and digestion only for the benefit of the next new thing, while every scrap of the past is recorded and then thrown into the trashcan of history.

While obsessive documentation and its storage have been dramatically ratcheted up, every person has become an independent database, but is not actually in complete control of the ways in which others are liable to use it. Easy exploitation of the disseminated and available information for purposes of detection and surveillance has become easy and accessible. Details of no interest that in the past were pushed into a dark corner, may now emerge as revealing and of real validity. But this unending, insatiable informational regurgitation blurs the lines separating the wheat from the chaff, and the shelf life of a life detail expires as soon as it is recorded.

Secularization of the bastions of intelligence – universities, municipal archives, museal databases, etc. – and conversion of their content to functional and neutral has taken from them not only the distinction between important and unimportant, between central and marginal, but also the experience of smelling the unmoving air in the aisles separating the shelves, of touching the binding of a book and leafing through it, or consulting the dying generation of professionals, the gatekeepers of the abandoned encyclopedic "temples".

Miri Mor, who embarked on a career as a photographer in 2008 after moving to Bucharest with her family, can be associated with an unofficial group of photographic artists that includes Candida Hőfer, Massimo Listri, Russell Watkins, and Tali Amitai-Tabib, who in their photographic work over the past two decades have addressed the changing status of what Mor terms "monuments of remembrance".

Whereas the above mentioned photographers observe the magnificent architectural mantle of these vast institutions of knowledge with an admiring and romantic eye, and longingly dwell on church-like, broad, and symmetrical architectural compositions, Mor exposes the less ceremonial and more urgent facets of parallel, yet more hidden worlds.

Mor's series of photographs "Monuments of Remembrance" and "Cellars of the Soul" (2011-2012) are based on her desire to capture the nature of a disappearing world, in this case of archives in one of Romania's national institutions. This country has undergone far-reaching changes since the fall of the communist Iron Curtain following the execution of President Nicolae Ceausescu in late December 1989, and up to its present position as a democratic state and member of the European Union. But Romania's liberation and the opening of its geographical frontiers for the benefit of joining the global world serve only as a background for Mor's work. She is more interested in the places preserved as ascetic hegemonies of knowledge into which ordinary people were denied entry, and which in many respects preserve a zeitgeist whose impressions are seemingly vanishing. Her photographs impart a sense of obstruction, suffocation, and putrefaction that raises questions on their role as symbols of time and place, but also on their implicit covert strategies. What is the importance of the knowledge that over the years has piled up in these places? What is the relevance of its present use? And is the manifestation created by any entity holding coded material cloaked in confidentiality and secrecy more important than the material itself?

This historical institution, together with other information banks, remains detached from the outside world, and Mor has succeeded in penetrating it, documenting the core of the cellars of remembrance imprisoned there, a moment before the arrival of the real estate development bulldozers. But Mor has rescued not only the photographed impressions of the various rooms, storage cupboards, and the site's overall aesthetics, but she actually took with her hundreds of catalogue index cards, which from minor useful objects became a remnant of history saved from destruction.

At the same time the artist qualifies conversion of the remnants into sacred relics, and does not cling to the blindness of a nostalgic gaze, which is usually added to photographs documenting something that existed and has disappeared, but she formulates a position

that raises essential questions on the benefits of accumulating and preserving mountains of information. Are obsessive past and present documentation and according retrospective value to every written scrap of paper indeed necessary, or are they a tool for rewriting and distorting history? Are the various archives intended for the storage of information and making it available to society in general, or for burying and concealing it while creating a hierarchy of authorized accessibility to it, as opposed to those excluded from it? Does stuffing the past into orderly drawers not abet its exclusion from the contemporary narrative being formulated? The viewers of Mor's photographs seemingly stand before a monumental tightlipped sphinx. All the locked drawers, the bound file folders, the accumulated data and the mountains of information are austere and undecipherable.

More than they expose themselves to the observer they place question marks before him, and wonderment regarding the symbolism of their present role as a historical strongbox, an echo of different times when the hidden was greater than the revealed.

It is interesting to consider Mor's project together with such artistic precedents as Micha Ullman's "Library" memorial on Berlin's Bebelplatz (1995), and the exhibit of the National Library Archives by artists Joshua Neustein and Uri Tzaig, with author David Grossman, curated by Gideon Ofrat, shown in the Israeli pavilion at the 1995 Venice Biennale.

The void of extirpation in Ullman's white and seemingly abandoned "Library" that stands in silent testimony to the burning of books by the Nazis on the same site in 1933, beside the full to overflowing halls in Venice, which place a show of strength of Jewish intellectual and historical power on European soil, symbolize two poles of the ways of presenting the monumentality of enterprises for accumulating human knowledge. In contrast, Mor draws out the fleeting, detached, unspectacular aspect, the one that trembles in the face of the events of history, the one forgotten and left behind.

The "Nature Morte" series of photographs (2010-2011) forestalls her ambivalent interest in the ways of shaping remembrance and turning it into sweet nostalgia. Mor places old kitchen tables covered with oilcloth on which are arranged pots, plates, and jars that centralize a composition at the heart of which is a pig's severed head, a slaughtered

chicken, and various body parts peeping out before they are cooked. There is a degree of irony in these photographs that combines colorful, familial ornamentation with the direct fleshliness of carcasses to be devoured, when the dim memory of the aromas of grandma's cooking is contrasted with the forgetting of how it was done.

In the context of Miri Mor's work, accumulation of memories in photograph albums and locked drawers resembles archeological strata steeped in history and charged with the past. They embody fossilized remains of human existence that have been pushed downward in the information hierarchy and assimilated into the existing texture. Extraction of these fossils can reveal forgotten worlds, and this harsh penetration can lead to a breach of the existing order and upset the balance of the house of cards.

Sagi Refael, Curator