

Rift – Space – House – Home: A Foray through Several Videos by Miriam Bajtala

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Humans in close-up, their bodies entangled, leaning against one another, several bodies piled up in one massive body. They are dressed in similar colors. The sun shines on their faces, a soft wind plays with their hair, their eyes are closed. Some look exhausted, a few seem to be sleeping, while others apparently enjoy the sun's warmth. They are all interconnected, not least by the continuity of the camera's movement and the music that begins to play, initially subdued, then more and more forceful and propulsive. It is the conciliatory closing sequence of *Becoming Outline* [WVZ 127 / 2024], Miriam Bajtala's most recent video to date and her first long work in the medium.

It is her "opus magnum" in more than one regard. Not only did the artist change her approach, adopting practices from major filming operations – writing a script, submitting applications for funding support, working with a large team –; it also throws themes into sharp relief that her earlier videos often only hinted at: a larger narrative of social dislocation, trauma, the experience of space, body memory, and auto-fictionalization. The hybridization of the woman artist's biography with Miriam Bajtala's own life. This may be a conservative reading, one that assumes that an artist's output evolves in linear fashion. In retrospect, however, *Becoming outline* reframes the interpretation of other videos, like a user's manual released long after the object. Picking up this clue requires me to take several steps back ...

¹ Translated by Gerrit Jackson.

Rift

am absent present

am image in head

if wanting to be image

having to be absent

either guest in guesthouse

or guest in headhouse

(...)

Elfriede Gerstl, alle tage gedichte, 1999²

A barren desert landscape, a woman appears and runs away, her movements are decelerated. Before "leaving" the frame, she disappears, and now it is the camera that sets itself in motion. It pursues this woman in fast motion, an action accompanied by odd toddling noises. The figure, wearing a summer dress and sunhat, keeps appearing and disappearing at different locations in a ghost town in the American Death Valley. Time and again, the strangely toddling camera entity follows her, until both reach the ruin of a house, though even there the pursuer cannot catch up with its prey. In the end, the latter leaps from the window (and out of the picture). After this escape, the entire pursuit starts from the beginning, as though in a videogame. In *Paranoia (Death Valley)* [WVZ 30 / 2005], Miriam Bajtala works with the disintegration of narrative closure and the opening toward a potentially infinite continuum,³ complicating the stable positions of camera, protagonist, spectator, and space. Space, here, is engendered by a continually moving camera that "gazes," that is on the lookout for "its" object. And that is where the punchline of the whole thing begins to come into view – and Miriam Bajtala's work is full of this sort of humor – for this relationship between the camera-subject and the object, the artist herself, is so distorted as to be laughable. As though the artist were signaling to us as the spectators that the regime of the gaze and the order imposed on it by feminist film theory are just not to be taken too seriously. Because subject-object relations are not so simple, because both these relations and the artist persona area always already multiple/many. The building's blind windows become the place where the protagonist can disappear by means of an "artifice."⁴ They serve her as portals that allow her to pass

² Repr. in Elfriede Gerstl, *Werke, vol. 3: Haus und Haut*, ed. Christa Gürtler and Martin Wedl (Graz and Vienna: Droschl, 2014), 148.

³ Miriam Bajtala shot *Paranoia (Death Valley)* while working on a Schindler Fellowship from the Museum of Applied Arts (MAK), Vienna, in 2004. It was not the first video by her that I saw, but it has exerted a lasting fascination over me. Back then I noted looped and repetitive structures, loose ends and fragmented narratives, which drew inspiration not only from the tradition of experimental film, but also from videogames and TV series. Contemporary spectators, needless to say, would need to add YouTube and the moving imagery produced for the various social media platforms to these references.

⁴ Bajtala herself describing this technique: "Each cut in the video marks a change in time and is visible only because

from the picture's "interior" to its "exterior," to another place, and later also to resurface in the picture. The place as passage marks the boundary between an inside and an outside – for the time being, between a presence and an absence in the media image. In the following videos, this aspect will also be transferred to the narrative dimension.

On the surface, the attempt to upset the media framework conditioning the image (likeness), especially one that reads as female, is a concern in many of Bajtala's early works. In *Im Leo* [WVZ 20 / 2003], she stands outside a white room and uses a mirror to capture the light and redirect it into the camera's lens, blinding the spectators and the camera. The initial result is a partial eclipse; then the camera zooms into the picture, which is flooded with white by the reflected light. This disintegration of the object rendered in the image occurs only for brief moments and is tied to a recurring acoustic signal. Here, too, a peculiarly disconcerting interrelation links camera position, spectator, and protagonist. Is the artist trying to erase the image, blind the spectators, or send a message? It is Bajtala herself who is "in the Leo" or "safe," guarded against attempts to take hold of her person as subject or object or to assign her to an unequivocally determinable position. Also noteworthy is the white room, in which one window and one balcony door are wide open: another liminal place whose openings suggest a connection between interior and exterior that only the artist can activate, by means of a disruption of the image she evokes. In *Grießbrei* [WVZ 2 / 1998], the mouth is open, waiting to be fed the titular semolina porridge. The work, which the artist herself has catalogued as her first video, opens with a harmless nursery rhyme.⁵ A shimmering bluish video image coalesces into the contours of the face of a woman who is being fed. A soft electronic drone sets in, and we see the woman's head amid an interior, her image recorded off a television screen. She wipes tears from her eyes. Then the procedure starts over. The movements grow increasingly rapid, the sound more penetrating, until the image liquefies into the blue streaks from which it had emerged. Finally, a voice repeats the chanted rhyme. The gesture typically associated with loving care work reveals its brutal side in the staccato-like repetition. As a reenactment of what may have been a childhood experience, it only the more clearly points at something other than a sense of safety and comfort.

Instruction No. 3 [WVZ 11 / 2001] again opens up the image: the artist claims space, takes up a self-determined position, which however proves unstable. One is tempted to spot a satirical pastiche of VALIE EXPORT's video *Raumsehen und Raumhören* (1973-1974)⁶ when Bajtala walks into the frame and stands on a black X drawn on the white ground. As a crackling and whistling noise is heard, she starts spinning, gradually moving away from this marked center of the picture, drifting outside the frame, then back in. Suddenly, an offscreen voice addresses the spectators: "Imagine there is a center";

⁽⁴⁾ of the performer. I'm behind the camera, but I also – in the next segment – run away from the camera until I leave the field of view again."

⁵ "Drei Tage Regen, drei Tage Schnee, drei Tage Sonnenschein, morgen wird alles besser sein." ("Three days of rain, three days of snow, three days of sunshine, everything will be better tomorrow.")

⁶ In that video, EXPORT uses closed-circuit camera movements and acoustic signals to probe the split between the performer, her media image, and the genesis of space. In contrast with EXPORT's media-analytical angle, Bajtala's work takes a much more anarchic approach.

feet "hang" into the picture from above and seem to flutter. The camera position changes again, and now the woman appears in a low-angle shot. She adjusts the camera, walks away, returns, and raises her foot as though intent on an aggressive act, on covering or even smashing the camera. "Fix your gaze on this center on the floor," we hear, and later: "Now switch to play!" Then everything repeats in fast motion, accelerates, the sound's volume rises, until all ends in a black screen. This work of grappling with a media (or already post-media) condition continues in *Without Shadow: Trigger and Satellite me* [WVZ 67 A+B / 2009], which feature a female protagonist sitting at the center of a factory hall and operating a lighter. The space between the camera's position and the woman is paced out fifty times; in linear fashion in *Trigger*, whereas *Satellite me* is based on an algorithm that montages the individual frames of the circular segments to simulate a spiraling movement around the object that is the woman. The camera or the subject behind the camera⁷ means to approach this woman and record her in the entirety of her being. Yet countervailing forces are at work that fragment the picture. The lighter marks the starting and end points of a possible narrative, almost like a stale joke after these ecstatic tracking shots.

Home

(...)

how (come) I am where
where am I
when I am (some)where
am I in this dumb body
or more out there
and who please
will put me back together

Elfriede Gerstl, ort-klauberei (geseires beim aufwachen)⁸

Three voices [WVZ 86 / 2011] heralds a shift.⁹ From now on, it is no longer the question of the subject and the media realities conditioning it that is central, but the more basic concern of who this subject actually is. Who is this woman who sometimes lifts off and whose feet flutter into the picture, who kicks the camera, runs from a toddling pursuer, floats, bounds, crawls through the picture? Who is this artistic subject named Miriam Bajtala? Who is she when she appears in the frame and performs? Who speaks through

⁷ Oddly, even Bajtala's structurally organized videos never make me think of a pure camera apparatus or a mechanical eye. I always sense a vestigial biomorphic entity, be it the toddling something in *Paranoia (Death Valley)*, be it the presence of an individual who has chosen the field of view and is involved in telling the story.

⁸ Gerstl, *Haus und Haut*, 197.

⁹ The questions of representation and the authorial subject will continue to preoccupy Bajtala. In the exhibition *in meinem Namen (in my name)* she develops for and realizes at the Association of Visual Artists Secession, Vienna, in 2013, she will also wrestle with these concerns.

her, with her, and, finally, within her?

In *Three voices*, Bajtala has two actors read a text, in German and English, about her experience of escaping from what was then Czechoslovakia, about being a foreigner in her new "homeland." The third voice, heard offscreen, is the artist's own, who narrates the events in her first language, Slovak. In the beginning of the video, the voices exist outside the bodies, they first need to find their places, then they overlap. The close interweaving of narrative I and the real person Miriam Bajtala effected by the presence and use of her own voice is a strategy the artist resorts to in numerous works. In *Three voices*, she talks for the first time about her personal biographical experience. Key phrases are spoken that make conflicts she has long internalized tangible, put them out there, and subsequently attach them to objects and verify them in reenactments. "I often didn't understand and repeated. Many emotions slipped into the body," or: "This foreign place has become a sort of home." The old language is struggling to keep up, and the dominance of the "new" language elicits shame. In *Three voices*, too, a rift or cut, though not visible at first glance, runs through the picture. That a man and a woman respond to each other in it is a deceptive appearance: in the final analysis, they are communicating with a blank, are alienated from one another. That is as sad as it is symptomatic.

In *critical spaces need affection* [WVZ 96 / 2014], Bajtala returns to the picture, performing in the historically fraught building complex at Prora, a beach resort in Rügen on the German Baltic Sea coast that was planned yet never completed by the Nazis. By 2014, it is a landmarked ruin of imposing dimensions that is about to be adapted by real estate developers. Time and history have left their marks on the hallways, the bedrooms and bathrooms; meanwhile, the here and now makes itself felt as well: windows are open, as are closet doors, noise filters in from outside, the wind ruffles peeling wallpapers. The artist plods, stomps, jumps, and jitters through the rooms, the latter an artifact produced by time-lapse animation that makes her appear ghostly, remote-controlled, and very droll, too. The performance turns the space itself into a protagonist, one whose own agency is primarily heard. Never before was what was happening offscreen as crucial as it is in this work. The presence of the filmmaker and the cinematographer who pace out the rooms and make noises increasingly corresponds to the film's "operating noise," to the stoppage, repetition, and acceleration of the time lapse. Bajtala again and again sets about flying through the "spaces," then she walks out of the frame with a casually spoken "there." Done.

"Topoanalysis, then, would be the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives. In the theater of the past that is constituted by memory, the stage setting maintains the characters in their dominant rôles," Gaston Bachelard writes in *The Poetics*

of Space.¹⁰ At this point in the evolution of her creative practice, if not before, Bajtala manifestly pursues just such a "topoanalysis." She looks for outward counterparts – images, scenes, words – to match possible loci of inward life, a quest that takes her to ruins, deserted places, bourgeois apartments, sanatoria, factories. These sites are invariably both sheltered and uncanny, and the artist translates them into visual spaces that suggest a permeability between interior and exterior.¹¹ It is a strategy that always allows her to elude the influence of these spaces and the memories stored up in them. The incongruence between inward experience and an outer shell that functions – or, then again, does not function – in accordance with societal norms is first touched on in *Three voices*; in *So Far Real* [WVZ 98 / 2015], it becomes the object of an exploration of actors' tactics and gestures serving to appropriate the inner life by way of its outward expression. It is initially unclear who is being spoken of. A woman is seated before a white backdrop – a classic documentary interview setting – and describes another woman, whose role she will later play. We gradually come to understand that the interviewees are actors who, as it were, "interpret" the inner states and behaviors of people suffering from mental illnesses for medical students. The descriptions are intercut with images of empty rooms whose function likewise remains unclear. Some look like an upper-class apartment or a hotel room, others like a former doctor's office or treatment room. One performer traverses these spaces, walks up and down stairs, launches into commonplace gestures only to seem irritated, confused, abstracted at the next moment. For brief instants, the actors' descriptions match the states acted out by this performer. Such coincidence is especially marked in sensory experiences that trigger pathological mental states, like noises drowning out all other sounds, powerful smells, material surfaces that suddenly feel differently: in the dimension of film, these same experiences can be vividly conveyed by a sound design reflecting the qualities of a space, camera zooms, or rapid pans. The composition of the images and the camera's perspective add to our sense of dislocation. Architectural openings, a theme hinted at in earlier videos by Bajtala, now dominate the picture. Reflections, details of flights of stairs, corners of rooms, nested nooks and crannies make for what feel like labyrinthine spaces. "The body's sensations are often blurred. She has a hard time differentiating between herself and other objects", we hear at one point. And it is Bajtala herself who begins this sentence, which is then completed by one of the actors. As in *Three voices* the voices overlap, but this time the split into the subjects who speak is even more pronounced, generating another confusion: Who speaks for whom? The actors for an outside world? Bajtala for an inner world that finds its counterpart in the woman performing the spaces and objects? In one incredible scene, the performer, prone on the floor, crawls across

¹⁰ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon, 1994), 8.

¹¹ How does Bachelard put it so finely and aptly? "In any case, inside and outside, as experienced by the imagination, can no longer be taken in their simple reciprocity." *Ibid.*, 216.

the whole room, past the doorway. What we witness, that is to say, is a translation – psychoanalysts would speak of transference – of mental states into language and their retranslation into the performative and visual register. At one point, this situation of transfer from patient to actor is described as "functional" when "no playacting is involved." What does that imply in turn for the artist's role?

The performative gestures pointing to pathologies that manifest themselves in the body have become productive forces in *Work by the Piece* [WVZ 104 / 2019], a fragmentary portrait of Bajtala's mother: its subject is the labor she performed in an eyeglasses factory for fifteen years. On the screen, the repetitive actions of the hands and feet are shown as "dry runs." The body remembers, the movements fit. In gazing on this performance, the video not only brings into focus a form of discipline subject to the laws of economics, it indirectly also reflects a daughter's perspective on her mother, whose occupation only now garners her respect and strikes her as worthy of representation. It is an occupation that she perhaps also connects to the discipline to which she was subjected as a teenager, when she was a competitive artistic gymnast. We have heard about assembly-line workers who keep going through their motions when they sleep, who keep working in their dreams. In that sense, what is happening here is an exorcism. Film as a recording medium endows the mother's occupational biography with a history. The body, at long last, is allowed to forget and relax.

Memory and narrative are also central concerns in *First Scenery #Mirka* [WVZ 114 / 2020]: an offscreen narrator's voice – it is the artist's – is heard as Bajtala presents images of southern landscapes. A deserted basketball court, sheep, the tinkling of bells, dogs barking. The voice speaks of fresh starts, movement, situatedness, it encircles the question of the self and where it actually is at a given moment. Childhood memories rise to the surface – "memories age in the camera" – accompanied by reflections on placelessness and the desire for a place where one belongs. The text's third-person protagonist is, as so often, the artist herself and a narratorial self at once. Any biographical congruence will have to remain speculative. The "head is full," after all, and "she will start the next scenery (landscape)."

That "next scenery (landscape)" – Bachelard's "site of the intimate life" – comes into full view in Miriam Bajtala's most recent work, *Becoming Outline* [WVZ 127 / 2024]. With reference to her artist's book *densestory in 18 rooms* [WVZ 120 / 2020], Bajtala stages the eighteen layouts of the apartments in which she has lived to date. She literally stakes off the field of her topological analysis in a meadow, demarcating and connecting the ground plans with streamers. The reenactment as a therapeutic as well as artistic strategy serves a range of functions. It can help a patient work through the memory of a

traumatic situation and ideally dispel it. Meanwhile, it can effect a dislocation in the underlying event's role as an anchor of meaning and so shift significations and open up new avenues for action.¹² The first half of *Becoming Outline* is accordingly defined by the linearity of the biographical narrative. In the ground plans and, in some instances, in concrete settings, the performers – most of them artist friends and other longtime associates of Bajtala's, a "chosen" family – reenact scenes from the artist's life. A migrant biography unfurls, one that is hardly unusual: the parents take menial jobs to stay afloat; frustration and grief fuel violence on the part of the father; the child is caught in the middle, falls silent, finds recognition as a gymnast, as an old video from 1982 attests. Miriam wants – needs – to enact her own way.

"The space unfolds whenever it is possible, or folds up when it becomes necessary", the speaker in the video says. The topology of the eighteen living and memory spaces is governed by this principle. The Bachelardian "theater of the past" is put onstage, produced, acted out in its entire abundance and spread out before the spectators: the internalization of a trauma, of despair, of shame instilled by the felt classism – "How should I accomplish what others have known from an early age?" – and the simultaneous insight (gained in art class in school) that one can immerse oneself in, and take possession of, universes of images. It becomes clear that the splitting of the subject and the overcoming of the dichotomy between inside and outside have always been tied to the artist's person and the abovementioned question of who "she" actually is. In *Becoming Outline*, in any case, Bajtala is quite explicitly the director and the offscreen voice. She has "delegated" the performance to eighteen performers of herself, seventeen of them women, who all play her at various stages in her life. These selves often appear together, supporting each other in the reenactment of the autobiographical scenes.¹³ As in several earlier videos, Bajtala speaks with and through them. The second half of *Becoming Outline*, finally, enacts the order of dreams, and the artist pulls out all the stops of her medium to lend the scenes a powerful aura of the surreal: at one point, the image is upside down; people walk backwards; smoke rises from a stone quarry. The narrative ends in 2001 with the last apartment. The "old" Miriams lie scattered across the ground plans in the meadow. Each has the place to which she belongs. A final dreamlike sequence in a studio follows in which a photograph of the image with which *Becoming outline* concludes hangs on the wall. It is a house built of humans, one in which the different Miriams have their places, in which they can find support while also being part of it. "Sometimes the house of the future is better built, lighter and larger than all the houses of the past."¹⁴ In this spirit, I am curious to see what will come after *Becoming Outline*. I cannot say; Miriam will know.

¹² The result might be described, with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as a "coherent deformation of the (experienced) world" or, with Jacques Rancière, as a "redistribution of the sensible," allowing for the potential reconfiguration of a future.

¹³ Some of these performers get more screentime, others less. For dramaturgical reasons, some vanish in the film's narrative. Six of them have lines and for this and other reasons, theirs is the strongest presence in the film.

¹⁴ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 61.