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MALGORZATA MARKIEWICZ, "A MAP," 2013. COURTESY OF: THE MOCAK COLLECTION, R. SO-SIN.

Motherland in Art

Museum of Contemporary Art in Krakow, 2018

REVIEWED BY ANNA VICTORIA BREIDENBACH

“Motherland was a fortress where all spoke the same language, worshipped the local god and cherished tradition... Today, the entire world is our motherland. The motherland ‘of old’ will of course continue to be cherished, providing an expanded sense of self and inner identification [...]” The description of the temporary exhibition of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOC AK) in Krakow between April and September 2018 seems to answer one of the questions that exist regarding global history writing—to what extent is the individual connected to a certain region or a nation? To what extent is he or she, a global subject?

The exhibition “Motherland in Art,” housed in one of Krakow’s most renowned museums since its opening in 2010, displayed the works of 60 artists of various nationalities and origins, all depicting their feeling of a Motherland. The exhibition was part of the cultural program connected to the celebration of the 100th anniversary of Poland’s independence in 2018. The wide variety of perceptions of Motherland put together under one sole exhibition necessitates a comparison, especially for those engaged in questions pertaining to global history.

Works of art are interesting sources for historical research. Differing from written sources which can be elaborate and vague, the artists have to simplify their message down to one point, as they have to give it a very concrete shape. On one hand, this concreteness makes the feeling of the Motherland exhibition quite easy to grasp; on the other hand, it presents a variety of individual views on Motherland. Given that a collection of individual perceptions always has to be the base of research for historians, comparing individual perceptions of Motherland could be a fruitful perspective of research. Which symbols are mainly used and referred to when expressing the feeling of Motherland in different contexts?

One of the exhibitions’ main themes were flags. The majority of the artists used his or her nation’s flag to deliver a message, such as Szabina Ösz-Varga from Hungary exhibiting photos of herself with the Hungarian flag wrapped around her naked body. Often the flag was used as the background of the work of the various artists. Flags obviously play an important part in the perception of one’s Motherland. This opens up the question of a global cultural history of flags. One could study the history of each nation’s adoption of a flag; or one could ask how the close association of a nation to its flag came to be. Through these questions, we could understand the global networks promoting and eventually resulting in the requirement of a flag as the most important national symbol.

The permanence of the motif of the flag also raises historical questions regarding the educational system. At which point in history were children taught to link

a nation to a flag? Education is fundamental to the perception of Motherland and an educational system can be historically assessed as a source for the phenomenon of ‘othering.’

In contrast to this ‘look from above’ that repeated throughout the exhibition, streets and paths were also considered important. Deimantas Narkevicius from Lithuania displayed a video installation which documented his journey through the center of the country, simply filming the streets passing by. This sense of movement strongly opposes the otherwise often static views on the map in other works of art.

The ‘mental mapping’ that was felt through the whole exhibition drew attention to the connection between geography and history. It appeared as if being connected to a place resulted in an eagerness to learn about its history. Does all history need to be associated to a defined space? Being connected to a history, as being connected to a space, seems to be an important global human feature.

The second major theme of the exhibition was the association of Motherland with the use of stereotypes, recognizable artifacts, and famous characters. The exhibition displayed the interconnectedness of a group of people through a network of common symbols. The Motherland in this case means a passive connection to a history passed from generations in a specific cultural space. Klaus Staeck from Germany used posters on which he collects such symbols, giving them a slogan and therefore a new meaning. He used garden gnomes and paintings from Caspar David Friedrich as symbols of a common German culture.

This reference to a nation’s stereotypes can hardly be regarded as a foundation for global history writing. More interesting for the transnational approach is how this focus on nations is being counterbalanced. Tim Parchikov from Moscow for example displayed in his work his city district, showing the beauty of a place in photographs that would not be seen as such by usual aesthetic standards. The localism that was strongly felt in several artistic works in contrast to nationalism is striking. Motherland can be the simple depiction of a house as a small unit of living. It can also be the communist architecture still surviving from the time of the Soviet Union.

Global networks were problematized in numerous examples throughout the exhibition. One example is Communism, as it affected the daily life for people throughout Eastern and Central Europe, extending beyond national boundaries. The exhibition in the MOCAK emphasized once more that the history of the Soviet Union is a global history.

Interconnectedness between nations—be it negative or positive—was an important theme of the exhibition. The perception of the countries associated with the Arab Spring as being interconnected with each other was displayed through two very vivid examples. In a work by Mounir Fatmi of Morocco, countries are represented as supersized Mikado-sticks, stacking up to form a huge game of Mi-

kado. Another installation by the same artist shows the same group of countries represented through flags hung on the wall next to each other. Those who got rid of their dictators are put on broomsticks, making them able not to hang, but to lean on the wall.

The continent of Europe as a Motherland was depicted by Malgorzata Markiewicz from Poland, displayed as the back-side of a carpet, with innumerable threads, making national distinction impossible. Another example in which the artists assess the tension between nations and supranational connections within Europe was the depiction of it as a matrix. Represented through the shape of their borders, countries appear barely connected, as they are set up in separate spaces and seem like loose puzzle pieces.

The exhibition shows that being a global subject means being rooted somewhere. When trying to depict their rootedness, artists often portray it with similar symbols like flags and border shapes. Nevertheless, the nation they belong to is not always considered their "Motherland." Its existence is not denied, but a feeling of regional belonging persists. Global historical phenomena, which affect the individual until today like Communism, the European Union, and the history of the Arab spring, were felt throughout the exhibition.

When walking through the exhibition, certain repetitive structures regarding the meaning of the Motherland to individuals were striking. The similarities between individual perceptions living in a globalized society are a product of the contemporary age. Still, the historical connections that heavily influence the present cannot be disregarded. It has to be emphasized that the exhibition displayed, above all, a global interconnectedness between people. And it encouraged the historian to look for the roots, the reasons and therefore the history of this interconnectedness.