

# Anna Jermolaewa. Good Times, Bad Times

28 February–10 May 2015

opening: 27 February

curator: Christiane Erharter

collaboration on the part of Zachęta: Magdalena Komornicka

*Good Times, Bad Times* is the title of the first solo exhibition of the Austrian-Russian artist Anna Jermolaewa in Poland. It is borrowed from a series of unpretentious photographs from 2007 that capture an urban everyday life situation: on a grey facade pigeons use the arrows of a wall clock to sit on. Through the serial arrangement of the photographs, it turns out that a quarter to three is a better time for them to rest there than five minutes to five. The title at the same time refers to the German soap opera *Gute Zeiten, schlechte Zeiten* that has been broadcast from Monday to Friday in the early evening programme on the private TV channel RTL since 1992.

The exhibition features artworks that were created over the last fifteen years and brings into focus new and very personal productions by the artist, such as *Shopping with Family* [2013]. Besides projects about the current oppositional movement in Russia (e.g. *Methods of Social Resistance on Russian Examples*, 2012), political works that deal with her personal history are also shown. The video film *Aleksandra Wysokinska/20 Jahre danach* [2009] about the Polish woman who helped the artist's escape is a touching portrait that will be presented for the first time in Poland. In May 1989, Anna Jermolaewa was forced to leave the USSR for political reasons — she was co-founder of the first oppositional party, the Democratic Union, and co-publisher of their party newspaper. This is how Jermolaewa and her former partner ended up in Poland, where in Cracow they got to know a woman who not only organised and financed their escape, but even accompanied them personally and supported them to seek political asylum in Austria. Out of deep gratitude, the artist twenty years later started to look for this woman of whom she knew only little — her name, her approximate age and that she used to work in an architecture office.

It is with the ups and downs of life, its setbacks and small successes, that the video installation *Shopping with Family* [2013] also deals. As a preparation for cancer treatment, the artist accompanied by her family is buying a wig. Jermolaewa changes her appearance while trying on all kind of wigs and receives feedback from her family. The slapstick mode of this gender performance lets us forget its tragic component — the artist's sickness. The setting reminds of a changing room in which a star gets ready for the stage. The actual star of this video is a very skilled and talented sales woman. In a very professional and empathetic manner, she presents a variety of wigs in different styles — short and long hair, lighter and darker shades — and convinces Jermolaewa to buy the right one.

The multi-media installation *Methods of Social Resistance on Russian Examples* [2012] shows the impressive plurality of creative methods of resistance that are used against the Russian authorities. On a table, Jermolaewa reconstructs at eye-level a demonstration of toys that in reality took place in the Siberian town Barnaul in winter 2012. Thereby, the organisers of this unapproved demonstration subverted a demonstration and assembly ban in a playful and humorous manner. In a video, members of the opposition from Moscow and St. Petersburg talk about their methods of social and political resistance and their experiences with the fight against the political establishment in Russia.

With the installation *Untitled [Gulag]* [2012], the artist takes us on a journey to the past. We follow her into the middle of nowhere researching her family history, as some of its members were dispossessed and deported to the camp region of Perm. In the course of the engagement with this still unfinished and dark chapter of the Soviet Union, it becomes obvious that political imprisonment as an instrument of intimidation and suppression does not belong to the past, but is still present in contemporary Russia. Maria Alyokhina, a political activist of the punk band Pussy Riot, served her sentence in this region until she was set free in December 2013 in the course of an amnesty prior to the Olympic Games in Sochi. 'The Gulag is a timeless concept', says Jermolaewa.

In some of the artworks that were created over the last twenty years, animals play a crucial role, as in *Hermitage Cats* [2013] which has cats as protagonists. In a 1745 verdict, Russia's Tsarina Elisabeth ordered an abundance of cats from Kazan to protect the State Hermitage. After more than 250 years, the Hermitage in St. Petersburg still employs an army of cats who live there as service workers. Jermolaewa does not just credit their status as workers, but even dedicates to them a roll of honour [Daská Pachóta]. This was once a common socialist practice, namely to publicly showcase on billboards placed in front of factories the 'heroes of production', as role models and incentives for their colleagues.

Very often, banal and trivial scenes that Jermolaewa observes in her own life and the everyday become the point of departure for her projects, as in *Step Aside* [2008] and *Trying to Survive* [2000]. 'These scenes serve as metaphors for social and political processes', the artist puts it.

Jermolaewa also presents three new works that were created for the exhibition at Zachęta. Once again, there is a feature on animals as workers: in this case, the role of goats when it comes to the production of argan oil in Morocco. Remaining two works deal with the conformity experiments developed by Solomon Eliot Asch, an American Gestalt psychologist, and the Soviet psychologist Valeria Mukhina, who analyses the impact of suggestion on human choices.

**Anna Jermolaewa**, born in 1970 in St. Petersburg, has been living and working in Vienna since 1989. She is considered one of Austria's most outstanding contemporary artists. Her work focuses on the human existence — its basic conditions and requirements.

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