

The indistinct whisper of books in the library

To dream, one should not close their eyes but read: the true image is knowledge. The imaginary is not made against reality to deny or replace it; it extends between the characters, from book to book, in the cranny between comments. It is a library phenomenon.

*Michel Foucault*¹

The idea of the library as not only a universal archive, where the texts of all times and disciplines interpenetrate, but primarily as – which the author of the essay *Library and Madness* quoted above turned our attention to – the space of the infinite, imaginary book collection is the subject of reflection by Mikołaj Groszpiere, an artist known so far mostly thanks to his documentary photographic series. Shifting the focus of his attention from the reality surrounding him to the spectral library, he undertakes an attempt to sum up all the activity he has so far conducted in the field of contemporary art. If we look closer at Groszpiere's photographic series, we can clearly see that he has always been inspired by the potential of imagination, and at times of insanity: from obsessive typologies of bus stops via total portraits of communities (from hippies to inmates) and alarmingly empty hotel interiors to the photographs of communist architecture representing a dead ideology. Distributed in time, the project of documenting the changing world is far from the sublime heroism and requires all the greater attention from critics and historians alike. The common denominator that links the installation, based on the photographs from Warsaw's National Library, to previous works is this very imagination, which becomes the leading theme in the latest project. Though a paradox it is, for Groszpiere the most inspiring context today is not as it might seem the gallery or the museum but the library or – to make a reference to the famous essay by Rosalind Krauss – the discursive space, within which technical images operate. It is only in the library, in the book that – influenced by the text – the images come to life and enliven the imagination. The same images of reality generated systematically in recent years by the camera at the artist's service are given conceptual framework: Groszpiere's art becomes an archive. And, as Foucault was right to note, commenting upon the works of Manet and Flaubert, this is not only about the snivelling over the Alexandrian quality of our culture (the lost youth, the lack of freshness, and the fall of invention) but about the disclosure of a fundamental fact: every image comes into the great, partitioned space of painting, every literary work joins the infinite whisper of writing, and each photograph is an element of the inexhaustible reservoir of technical reproductions of images of the real.³

¹ M. Foucault, *Biblioteka i wyobraźnia*, [w:] *Powiedziane, napisane. Szaleństwo i literatura*, Warsaw 1999, p. 101, transl. by M.P. Markowski.

² See: R. Krauss, *Photography's Discursive Spaces*, [w:] *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Boston 1986.

³ Op. cit., s. 102.

Groszpie's library enters the succession of book collections conceptualised recently in the field of contemporary art. To become convinced about the potential that the subject carries, it is worth quoting Martha Rosler's travelling library, which in turn makes reference to the entropic modernism-focused book collection of Robert Smithson, commented upon by Alexander Alberro, and the imposing library of Donald Judd situated in Marfa in the USA. A separate subject is the simulated library of Robert Kuśmirowski, working on successive scenes of his *The Ornaments of Anatomy* and Maurycy Gomulicki's rainbow library project currently in preparation. The artists tackling the subject of the library remind neither Romantics whose existence is defined by what they read nor, all the more, the librarians: lay cabalists convinced that the world is a book that can be read. The interest in the library and all forms of archives may be associated with an analytical impulse, which leads artists to reflect over the ways of creating knowledge, and gathering and ordering information.

Moving from point to point along the circle imagined by the artist, we discover "the infinity and periodicity" of Borges's *The Library of Babel*, we are led to the temptation of books – enchanted with the possibility of possessing the one containing all the others: the One Book – the "impossible volume", to quote Foucault. And indeed, finding the concretisations of sublime ideals, we lose the sense of our wandering and become lost in the labyrinth of bookshelves and never-ending rows of grey books, in this way nearly perceiving bodily the distance that spans the worlds of imagination and reality. (It is in this grey zone that Groszpie generally resides, building his madness-inspired archives of images of reality). What in this context seems especially useful to describe Groszpie's library is the notion of entropy frequently quoted by critics dealing with Smithson's art. The lack of power over the accessible knowledge and, which is worse, the awareness of the progressing process of losing information to chaos could lead to melancholic stupor. This is, however, not the case.

"In the *Library of Babel*", Foucault says in his essay *Language without End*, "everything that can be said has been said: you can find in it all languages, possible and impossible alike; everything has been said – even things that do not make sense, and this is why the finding of even the feeblest formal cohesion becomes highly improbable, which is attested by the vain efforts of many a daredevil. Yet over all these words, there looms large the precise and commanding language that speaks about them and which, to tell the truth, lets them be: language leaning against death. Suspended in the abyss of the Hexagon, the most enlightened (and in consequence, the last) of librarians discovers that even the infinity of language multiplies infinitely, repeating with no end in the dimidiate figures of The Same."

At the same time, placing the recipient in the position of "the most enlightened of the librarians", Groszpie, as it seems, cannot stand the gravity of the moment. The moment when the book turns out to be a dummy, and the wall of the library a flat photograph/mirror is in fact a hardly sublime experience of the illusive quality of knowledge, lameness of the language, two-dimensionality of photography, weakness of art, and inability to recognise. It is possible, however, that irony – this inseparable companion of Borges's readings – creeping stealthily into the project, turns out to be the salutary vaccine against melancholy that otherwise would quickly take over the space of the library. Hence also the choice of the "Palace of Ancient Books", which – rather than with the positivist mission of spreading knowledge throughout the nation, which public libraries are usually associated with in Poland – is associated with chance, with the anarchic desire and ownership of books, so characteristic for the place that is an institutional hybrid: a second-hand bookshop, a reading room, a gallery, a cabinet of curiosities, and a non-public library for the chosen.

An important aspect of Groszpie's project is passing step by step from the level of the library perceived as the "infinite and periodical" book collection to the level of an individual book. Should we assume, following frequently quoted Foucault, that libraries are an enchanted land, which mathematicians as well as tyrants stand up against, it is so due to the dilemma that becomes the idea of the book: "either all books are already contained in the Word, and for that reason should be burnt, or they oppose it, for which reason the more should they be burnt..." In this context, it is worth perceiving Groszpie's activity as an attempt to solve the paradox that has harassed the most enlightened, and hence the keenest librarians: "If we create a book that speaks about all other books, is it a book itself or not? Could it speak of all books being one of them? And if it does not speak of itself, what could it be if it wants to be a book, and why should it not speak of itself if it wants to speak of all the books?" The artist's answer seems at the same time intriguing and simple. And though it would be hard to deny it a particular elegance, the final decision whether we sincerely accept it or reject it as too trivial, rests with us, the readers (and not librarians!) who, affected by the syndrome of bibliophilia, discover our own answer to the question posed above during the long hours spent reading in the silence of the library broken with indistinct whispers. René Char phrased it in a more poetic way "Pathetic companions who hardly whisper, roam with the lamp shut and return the jewels! A new mystery is singing in your bones. Develop your legitimate uniqueness."¹⁰

4 Martha Rosler's library in her home at 53 Ludlow Street, New York was open for the public from 15th November 2005 to 15th April 2006.

5 See: A. Alberro, *The Catalogue of Robert Smithson's Library*, [in:] *Robert Smithson* (exhibition catalogue), The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Sept-Nov 2004, pp. 245-248.

6 See: *Język bez końca*, op. cit., p. 79, transl. by M.P. Markowski.

7 Op. cit., s. 78.

8 Op. cit., s. 79.

9 Op. cit., s. 79.

10 René Char, *Suzerain*, in *Poèmes et prose*, p. 87