



The Hidden Code of Reality

The Art of Vigilance in the Works of Anna Jermolaewa

by Aleida Assmann

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The artist Anna Jermolaewa fled Leningrad in May 1989. If she had waited a few more months, she could have left her home together with many other refugees after the collapse of state socialism. Thousands came to Europe, Israel, and other Western countries in the early 1990s. Anna Jermolaewa went her own way. She had to leave her country as a political refugee because she was one of the original members of a newly founded democratic party and had come under the scrutiny of the state apparatus. So, she was a bit early; her biography didn't evolve in lockstep with the events of history. She also found it impossible to return to Leningrad, as the city had changed its name to Saint Petersburg. The world Anna Jermolaewa left no longer exists. Russia has long entered the post-Soviet era. But even in today's Russia, there's no room for this bleeding-heart democrat. In exchange, the artist has created a space in her art for the world she was forced to leave behind overnight.

Flight, Travel, and Quotidian Life

Expelled from her home, Jermolaewa went through many stages of flight: political prosecution, escape, dependence on friends in the transit country of Poland, denial of asylum, a homeless week at a train station in Vienna, arrest at the Salzburg border, a stint in a refugee camp. These dramatic biographical experiences, however, which she shares with so many people around the world, are not the core subject of her art. She has long found her footing in Austria, where she studied art history and art. In the process, she has come to translate her political commitment into an artistic way of life.

Part of this process has been transposing her traumatic experience of flight into its civil, constructive form of travel. The artist, who was initially denied asylum, has discovered her love for hotel rooms. She enjoys the brief escapes from everyday life, loosening the ties to the stasis of her safe and sound existence. Traveling allows her to have a different experience of time—one that is fleeting, preliminary, and always limited in its compartmentalized state.

The counterpole to traveling and hotel rooms, for Jermolaewa, is the bed. “A long time ago, I made a habit of working from home because I raised my daughter as a single parent for the most part. Disappearing into the studio, therefore, was unthinkable.”¹ The bed is her incubator for the written word and thought—the horizontal, immobile position par excellence lets her mind wander as freely as possible. Her laptop doesn’t rest on her lap, but on top of her belly as she lies on her back—the locus of creative pregnancy.

Especially, single mothers must learn to work any- and everywhere. Some artists create their own worlds and have the privilege to move in the expanded realm of their studio like a king in his kingdom. It is hard to imagine such an original genius with a cat on his lap. Others must subject themselves to a rigorous time regimen and are forced to build their work into their daily life.

Deautomatization and the Lacunae of Memory

Traveling and free movement in space changes one’s perspective, leading to an expansion of one’s view through unexpected discoveries and surprises.

“The most beautiful thing of all, for me, is to stroll around a place where I’ve never been before, not knowing what’s behind the next corner. I’ve thus come to a sharper awareness for discovery in such moments. You are awake! You see things that you would otherwise walk past. After three days in the same place, this awareness dulls again.”²

These are the words the artist uses to describe a concept that ranks among the crown jewels of Russian art theory. More specifically, they refer to Viktor Šklovskij’s notion of “deautomatization” (also known as “defamiliarization”). A formalist and Saint Petersburg compatriot, Viktor Šklovskij is regarded as one of the most intelligent, well-educated people of the 20th century. In 1916, he defined the concept as follows: “The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself[.]”³ Art is based on defamiliarization, which, in turn, is based on the freedom of being allowed to see things differently than they present themselves in the busy daily life regulated by routine. This is the formalist basis on which Jermolaewa has developed her

political art, which consists in raising awareness of the thoughtlessness in political system changes and the gaps in historical memory.

How does one advance in a post-Soviet world? That is the question Jermolaewa explores in her video work from 2015 about the toppling of Lenin statues in Ukraine. In this example, the artist illustrates what it means when political symbols are merely switched and one doesn't take the time to come to terms with the past. Political iconoclasm is not education. Her own *Monument to a Destroyed Monument* (2016), erected in front of the Department of History at the University of Graz, shows a pedestal with empty, worn-out boots. As a post-heroic, ironic, quotidian gesture, it thwarts the nationalist symbolism of pride, honor, and grandeur. When historical phases are not deliberately brought to a conclusion and completion, nothing new can follow. With a lack of communication about the collective self-image, society lacks orientation for a common future.

Time and again, the works of the artist point out lacunae. Gorbachev went down in history with his concepts of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, but the repressive Soviet state apparatus could not handle the disruptive changes in the political system. So, it resorted to its most time-honored means of censorship—noninformation, glossy facades, and numbness. The signs of change had to be made invisible at the time. Through a lack of social discourse, the shift from the Soviet to the post-Soviet era has itself become a lacuna in society. Jermolaewa addresses this notion in another work in the pavilion, employing the popular ballet *Swan Lake*, scored by Pyotr Tchaikovsky. This ballet was broadcast on Soviet television, to cover up unexpected fissures and ruptures caused by unintended political change when the control of political leadership over current events grew shaky.

Dramatic change in politics was greeted with aesthetic anesthesia—which is to say, yet another televised presentation of *Swan Lake*. Here one may draw an interesting parallel to Erdoğan's behavior in Turkey in 2013, when the Gezi Park protests snowballed. At the time, news updates about the uprising were banned from television; instead, viewers could enjoy a documentary about penguins. The activists of the movement, however, knew how to handle the situation and recoded it for their own benefit. The penguin became a figurehead of satirical symbolism, with which the blunt brutality of censorship was undermined.

The Penultimate (2017) can also be considered in this context of "art against censorship." In this case, it is silent art employing reduction and metaphor—deliberately staying silent about what is being discussed. What at first looks like a trifling array of bouquets in a flower shop, on closer inspection turns out to be a collection of "colors of the revolution."

The work addresses the tyrant's fear of flowers by conjuring a series of mostly nonviolent color revolutions. Taken together, the flowers and

their colors make up a tableau of civil-society revolutions of recent decades. What was quashed with brutal force, and may have been unsuccessful in the long run, in this collective picture presents itself as a continued fight for human rights. By honoring each event individually and summarizing the scattered uprisings in their totality, the work inscribes these partly ephemeral revolutions that, though ultimately failed, were nonetheless not futile, into our collective memory.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, an Austrian from the same generation as Sklovskij, left us a sentence that fits the sentiment of Jermolaewa's works: "Where others pass by, I stop." ⁴ Jermolaewa's art is, in the vein of Wittgenstein, a manual for awareness and sharpening of the senses. For one of her works, the artist had to travel from Vienna to Acapulco. It was there that she encountered a picture that unveiled a reality hidden on her own doorstep. Entitled *Hendl Triptychon* (Chicken Triptych, 1998), the work shows that pulling back the curtains of habit, which reveals the triviality of everyday life, can be a sublime moment in and of itself. In her alienated perspective, she presents the grilled chicken, so revered in the city of Vienna, as a sacred, sacrificial animal on the altar that secular society built in its honor.

"I don't look for exotic things—on the contrary," the artist comments on her work, "*Hendl Triptychon* came about at the very beginning of my career and is very special to me. For it, I filmed three ways to grill chicken in Acapulco. Harald Szeemann saw the work, and that was how I came to be presented at the Venice Biennale in my sophomore year at university. And the basis for it was the vigilance that lets me see things on my travels that are not really tied to any particular place—things that are omnipresent." ⁵

Retrospect and Recourse

The little prefix "re-" really packs a wallop. It comes from Latin and plays a major role in many words that have to do with memory, repetition, and retrieval. Think of the terms "remember," "remind," "recollect," or the "return of the repressed." Consider historical periods like the Renaissance or the Reformation. There's always something to retrieve, to get back, that isn't necessarily the same as the initial situation. Or something comes back on its own, as a complete surprise. The "re-" is basically the "reference" to a prior event or input and a revisit thereof in "retrospect." This form of creativity is an ally of memory, but it is in no way purely "reproductive."

It creates new things, though not on a tabula rasa as a genuine creation out of thin air but in reference to something that has been there before and that is reactivated and reinvigorated with this reference. The act of "recycling" comes into play here. Not the straight shot of an arrow or the line is the protagonist here, but the loop. One must go backward to get

ahead. Or, as Ilse Aichinger put it: “It’s difficult to believe that one must move the bases back in order to advance. Take a run-up. Anyone who starts at the front doesn’t leap far.”⁶

The syllable “re-” also plays a central role in the works of Anna Jermolaewa. She speaks of “recourse” whenever she emphasizes the significance of her earlier experiences for her works. In an interview, she described the ambiguous temporal relationships in which they are created: “Yet everything is still quite new—or rather, has been here before but is newly rediscovered. That’s why I want to take my time with it and get some clarity about a few things.”⁷ Much like the theoretician Sklovskij, who wanted to expand and prolong perception, Jermolaewa wants to deepen reflection by making old things visible and alive in the new.

As a conceptual artist, Jermolaewa doesn’t work with any single idea for which she then seeks the appropriate materials. Rather, she deliberately reverts to earlier experiences and phases of her work. This is frequently about coming to terms with something in the past—something that is identified as a shift from the present perspective and can often only be grasped and processed retroactively.

There are also acts of taking back and leaving behind, for instance when the artist takes the canvases of her old paintings and cuts them up, thereby signifying detachment from a previous phase of her artistic practice. Working in photography and film at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna allowed her to delve into a new medium, a new language and expressive force. Or consider the nude sketches of her teenage years, which she retrieved for herself and revisited from a different perspective by changing positions and making herself the nude model.

Impulses of recourse, but also of “recycling” and “remaking,” run like a thread through Jermolaewa’s works. Her perception habitually gets caught on something or other. Whenever she comes back to something, it presents itself in a different light. Much as in the work of the grandmaster of involuntary memory, Marcel Proust, art allows one to get back, or to catch up on, things that haven’t yet been thoroughly experienced, seen, or felt. This game of retrieval is often played in metaphor or recoding, as we see in *The Penultimate*. What on the surface looks like the window of a flower shop turns out to be a political memory image.

The Latin prefix “re-” stands for culture’s veto against the flow of time and the fury of disappearance. Art can keep, retain, and honor what went missing or got lost in the torrents of time. There is no way back in time, in life, in history, but art can make some leaps. Everything can become a trigger when we talk about receiving an impulse or re-perceiving, reinterpreting, or retrieving. How this works and what it means is shown by the oeuvre of Anna Jermolaewa, an artist whose life was put on hold by flight, who was robbed of her environment, and whose prior existence was

destroyed. Through art, she is able to get in touch with her self again by revisiting old episodes and establishing occult connections with the past that were once removed and lost.

All this has nothing to do with nostalgia but a lot with reflection, attentiveness, vigilant perception, and the ability to reinterpret. Everything can get new meaning: the ballet that is used for censorship, the X-ray film that is recycled as a sound-storage medium, the color of a flower that stands for a political revolution, the train station bench that served as a preliminary reception center, and the six telephone booths at the Traiskirchen refugee camp that maintained a precious connection to an abandoned homeland.

Jermolaewa calls herself a realist. But you cannot have a thing without its connotations. Her art is on a quest for hidden codes and mysterious meanings that must be decrypted. Associations are instruments of discovery, and discovery takes time. Lived time. The time may come to decipher a message—or it won't.

¹ Anna Jermolaewa, "I Am a Realist, No Matter in Which Medium," interview by Gabriel Roland, *In the Studio*, Collectors Agenda, November 2017, <https://www.collectorsagenda.com/en/in-the-studio/anna-jermolaewa>.

² Jermolaewa, interview.

³ Viktor Sklovskij, "Art as Technique," trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longmans, 1988), pp. 16–30, p. 20.

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Vermischte Bemerkungen," *Über Gewißheit*, Werkausgabe Bd. 8 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), 543.

⁵ Jermolaewa, Interview.

⁶ Ilse Aichinger, *Kleist, Moss, Pheasants*, trans. Geoff Wilkes (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2020), 38.

⁷ Jermolaewa, interview.