Every new telling of a story perfects its narrative but also rearranges, edits and moves it further from its original, authentic plot. What do we remember? How do we remember and retell stories of the past? How do we project them into the future?

In his book of essays, Idea of Prose, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben defines the concept of the “immemorable” as that which “skips from memory to memory without itself ever coming to mind [and which] is, properly speaking, the unforgettable.” This immemorable, or unforgettable, is an unconscious element that infiltrates the conscious memory and creates an involuntary memory. As Agamben further explains, “The memory that brings back to us the thing forgotten is itself forgetful of it, and this forgetfulness is its light. It is, however, from this that its burden of longing comes: an elegiac note vibrates so endurably in the depths of every human memory that, at the limit, a memory that recalls nothing is the strongest memory.” Located in the space between remembrance and forgetfulness, the conscious and unconscious, the immemorable brings to mind another concept, that of modernist nostalgia—a future-oriented longing for something that never existed.

The Russian writer and theorist Svetlana Boym defines a type of nostalgia that is restorative, that tries to reconstruct the lost root that nobody remembers. Reflexive nostalgia, on the other hand, does not try to reconstruct a space, but rather reflects its strength, power and time and can thus be not only retrospective but also prospective, directed towards the future. It is a thought of the past as a potential; i.e., it is about “watching dreams” through which we can think about the future. This triangle between Forgotten - Reconstructed - Projected forms a field on which the works in this exhibition inscribe their narratives, (un)intentionally taking up the roles of nostalgia triggers, causing perhaps brief and fragmented awakenings. These works point to the social impact of the invisible boundaries delineated by past and future expectations, drawing attention to the intersections of the psychological, social and physical spaces and memories that have been constructed in order to formulate cohesions between individual and collective histories.

The artist Artur Zmijewski met a German girl, Lisa, in Israel and made her the protagonist of his video of the same name. Inspired by a divine revelation, Lisa moves from Germany to Israel to start her new life there, claiming she is a reincarnation of a Jewish boy murdered at the age of 12 by the Nazis. Despite the fact that her living conditions in Israel are far from ideal and that most of the people there find her story absurd and appalling, she is persistent in not giving up on her beliefs. In Lisa’s case, the collective feeling of guilt for the past deeds of Nazi Germany is a starting point for her nostalgia for the future that directs her radical decision.

The story actually has the structure of a medieval quest: The hero, or in this case heroine, embarks on a journey, begun in the context of an unfair and cruel social order. The quest ends in the establishment of a new, more just society. With its medieval literary form, the contemporary story appears romanticized and fanciful, leading to associations with heroism, belief, dream, change, revolution, and personal sacrifices. In the observer, these associations produce either contempt for the heroine’s naiveté or nostalgia for the imagined time and belief that seems to have been there since long in the past, but is now irrevocably lost.

Zbyněk Baladrán, in KOLDOM, is inspired by the idea of an ideal apartment drawn by the Czech modernist architect Karel Honzik, which today is just a forgotten utopia. In KOLDOM, a simple pen drawing that the artist creates from memory becomes the archetypal transcript of the modernist idea. The accompanying work, Glossary, takes the form

Zbyněk Baladrán, KOLDOM, 2006, Video, 4 min.
Ahmet Ogut, Devrim (Revolution), 2005, Wall drawing, variable dimensions

Ahmet Ogut, Devrim (Revolution), 2005,

Wall drawing, variable dimensions

In Footnote # 5, by Alejandro Cesarco, a barely noticeable asterisk takes center stage in the form of Letraset on the wall. The title of the work straightforwardly suggests its function, while the sentence at the bottom is given to describe the empty, referenced place: “To me, this has always been the heart of the mystery, the heart of the human kind, the way people talk about losing things, which things and why.” Just as the asterisk sign denoting a footnote seems to be fixed to an anonymous space, so the pronom “this” in the footnote stands for an anonymous signifier and the even more anonymous signified. The mystery here is the mystery of language and love — the mystery of an unlimited number of word combinations that somehow never seem to reach the invisible target. As if knowing numerous ways to get there, but unaware of where the target is, the words locate the “this” on the empty page for which the asterisk is searching. The work is an expression of a nostalgic insight into the inadequacy of language or, more precisely, the impossibility of reaching a satisfying connection between things, between people and things, and that which is signified as love. The footnote in the show refers to an indefinite terminable place filled with potential for resurrecting a slower time of love and contemplation.

References: