

Showing private rituals

Czech-UK artist Tereza Stehlikova works as the head of the visual arts department at Vysoká škola kreativní komunikace – VŠKK – in Prague. She lived for 30 years in the UK and has a PhD from the Royal College of Art. Here she talks to Alex Mayhew-Smith about her artwork. One of her ongoing projects, entitled *Four Generations of Women*, examines the relationships and connections in her family through ritualised performance, which is later filmed.

Below: Still from Tereza Stehlikova's *Four Generations of Women*.
Right: Still from *Performing Daughters*.



I imagine the *Four Generations* work you have done involving your own family (daughters, mother and grandmother) must be excruciatingly personal at times. How do you live the emotions that this must involve and yet maintain the distance to form an artistic creation out of the experience?

THIS IS VERY true indeed. When I began working on the project, it was almost like a confrontation – I felt I needed to do it, in order to face ‘something’ important, but it felt intensely uncomfortable and challenging. I deliberately made myself extend the shots for as long as I could bear. Behind the camera I was in control, I had an authority which made me feel quite uncomfortable.

The camera enabled me to peer deeper, to see every small twitch in the face, every discomfort which I also experienced in myself. But I tried pushing through this resistance, to learn to hold the gaze, to not flinch. My family were incredibly open to being exposed this way. As the project went on, we all grew more comfortable, it became a habit and felt less intimidating.

The other difficulty is almost the opposite of the above, because normally a domestic family setting is one of habitual ease and comfort, a certain kind of inertia can set in. And it becomes very hard to get oneself into the right and alert kind of mind frame, to keep focused as well as distanced enough. Being usually both the subject of the film as well as the cinematographer, there are inevitably various conflicting forces which too are rather challenging to manage.

So to answer the question – to keep the right balance is hard and not always successful. What helps me is the editing process, which introduces this sense of distance, of being an observer. It separates me from the moment by time and it also enables me to perceive myself as one of the subjects.

Additionally, given that this project is very much about time, family memory, as well as the extension of one’s sense of self beyond the personal, I believe that the right kind of perspective will only come to me in the

future, when I plan to re-edit some of the work, based on new insights and emotions.

There are some ritual elements to your work and unlike the work of Tereza Busková it is not a public ritual but a private one, filmed. Is the ritual created for the artwork or is it something you might do anyway? Most ritual in my experience is male-led or officiated, is there an aspect of claiming those moments back from that ownership?

YES, RITUAL is definitely an important part of this project. And as you say, here the ritual is private. These are rituals that I deliberately create for the films, so they are artificial in a sense. But their effect becomes real, it enables us to share and mark moments in time, not only through the video footage, but also in our own memory. They even appear to have a kind of magic function at times, a sort of working through of unspoken issues.

Hence the film rituals have become an important part of our being together, especially in the summer house in South Bohemia. The filming itself has become a ritual of framing shared moments in time. And as you say, in our western culture many rituals are male-led and are to do with some sort of hierarchy and authority. In my work the female element is key, to the point that I do not like to even include my father or partner, although occasionally they have helped with camera or other practical issues. But it is the female energy that informs my project and in fact the female energy and family dynamic that has led me to start this project in the first place.

You write about the power of these rituals. Does it always feel safe to explore that and how do the rest of your family see those moments? Are they as committed as you to that experience or are they indulging you? Would you even know? Do your family contribute at all to the setting, actions or clothing in the rituals; is it created collectively or is the vision yours alone?

IN THE PAST, at the start of this project 11 years ago, the questions of repressed emotions and unspoken thoughts were obvious. My

grandmother was in mourning, having lost her husband and there were various family tensions tangible in the air. But with time many of these have been worked through, they decreased, having been replaced by an acceptance and a new kind of serenity.

My family have always been incredibly open, patient and generous in indulging me. The hardest work is my youngest daughter who can get very impatient and bored by the filming process. But overall, my family are very committed.

My grandmother is a total natural and she has always been a great storyteller, she is in her own element when being filmed, very unselfconscious. My mother is very helpful whenever I ask her. She has been helping me practically and creatively all along. She was with me and my then baby daughter in Hawick, Scottish Borders, when I was putting on my *4 Generations of Women* exhibition there, for the Alchemy film and arts programme in 2019¹. And she has been involved in the most recent manifestation of the project, for my upcoming exhibition in Vienna².

This exhibition also includes the use of frottage: taking rubbings of various textures along the streets of Prague, as well as the walls and floors of the apartment which I grew up in. The idea behind this is a kind of visualisation of the tactile dimension of a familiar place. It also forces one to come into close contact with these places and spaces, to kneel down and spend time in a kind of tactile dialogue with them.

This work is set in a very rural experience. Could you create a meaningful ritual in the city?

TO EXPAND A little more on this latest frottage project and to put it into a wider context: I am very interested in the surrealist notion of mental morphology. It puts forward an idea that the external topography of a place shapes our psyche as profoundly as human relationships do. I grew up right in the centre of Prague, hence my psychology has been shaped by its

winding streets, the cobblestones, Petřín hill, the spiral staircase of my childhood apartment.

To retrace some of these landmarks with the use of frottage technique certainly has an element of a ritual, or even a kind of private pilgrimage and reconnecting directly with the materiality of these places. So absolutely, a city can be as good a setting for a ritual as rural areas. It just feels a bit more fixed in its meaning, at least for me personally. It is full of memory layers, heavy with personal histories. The countryside is more open, it doesn't have the same weight. I feel like I can be more inventive there.

As an artist and educator will you always go where the job is? I understand that after 30 years of living in London you are back working in Prague. Does it matter where you are when you create? Is there any difference in your thoughts or the themes of your thoughts if you are in the UK or in Czechia?

A VERY, VERY interesting question. I have not returned to Prague because of a job. There were other forces that led to this decision. The job appeared, auspiciously, without looking for it. For me the key is to find a place which enables me to be as free as I can, in an artistic sense. London has been that place for these 30 years. It has given me the freedom to find myself, to get to know myself, to meet a number of wonderful people, to gain insights, to feel enriched. But I have also become used to a routine, comfortable in what I knew, perhaps a little stuck.

For an artist it is important to remain alert, to have one's comforts but also new challenges, to keep attention sharp. Moving to Prague has brought these interesting new challenges. It made me realise that there are still many things to discover about myself. It also made me realise that to a great extent I am a foreigner in my own country. My identity is mixed and there is no possibility of a

"return".

I have also been intrigued to find out what will happen when I reconnect with my childhood self, which, in some way, I left behind here in 1991. I have often had a feeling that gaining freedom in London was at the expense of something else – a sense of rootedness, a kind of grounding. What happens when I reconnect with this place or person? I must admit I am still in the process of discovering this.

So absolutely, any place has a profound effect on how one thinks and creates. What is exciting is to be open to this effect and to try and work with it as much as possible. This is something that I do through my own artistic practice but I also explore through my dialogue with other artists, scientists and scholars in my *Tangible Territory* journal, which I founded and now edit.³

Sensory experience is a strong interest in your work and I wonder how that can be conveyed through the essential limitations that film offers. Or is it exactly there where your art can be found; in that effort to convey touch in ways that aren't touch?

FROM THE VERY beginning of my pursuit, when starting my PhD in 2008, I enjoyed the apparent contradiction of trying to communicate touch through an audio-visual medium. Somewhere in this contradiction lay an interesting conundrum and a poetic challenge. It was only through the process of my PhD research and also the subsequent post-doc research, that I realised that the idea is far less paradoxical than it appeared at first.

There are a number of film theories which explore questions of haptic visuality, a visuality which is close to our tactile sense. In my projects I also became involved with experimental psychologists and philosophers of the senses, who explore the interconnection between our different senses. This phe-

nomenon is called crossmodal interactions and it basically shows us that our senses work collaboratively, they inform each other constantly, they can enhance or counteract each other, even trick one another. After all, our senses are just different input channels which help us construct a unified sense of the world around us.

The shape of a plate will affect our sense of taste. An altered pitch will affect our experience of texture. These effects run in all directions. Even our sense of body ownership can be fooled easily, through the rubber hand illusion. So rather than being frustrating, I find this sensory interchange exciting, poetic even. This is what F T Marinetti already told us 100 years back, in his *Futurist Cookbook*. There is poetry in how our senses can be exchanged for one another.

You have a group exhibition in the UK coming up, can you give us any detail about that yet? Yes indeed. The exhibition is curated by artist and curator Philip Gatenby and will explore people, places and lived memory in a number of political and social contexts, one of these being Czechoslovakia. More information will be available soon, but the exhibition titles, venues and dates have been confirmed and are: *Indelicate, Ungenteel, Vulgar & Outrageous*, Durham University, Josephine Butler College, June 2023; and *Pease, Butler & Spence – the art of transgression*, Crown Street Gallery, Darlington Civic Library, November 2023

Your project *Disappearing Wormwood* appears to unite Prague and Willesden Junction in London. Is this just a concept at the moment or has the idea progressed? What is the possible result of this work... a film or an exhibition perhaps? *DISAPPEARING WORMWOOD* is an ongoing project about NW10, an industrial part of north





Left: Tereza Stehlikova in London, and below from her joint work with artist SJ Fowler on their *Disappearing Wormwood* project.

west London, where the HS2 runs through and which is part of a major redevelopment or regeneration project. It is an area where I lived for some years and which I grew to love, despite the industrial ugliness of it. There was a beauty in the disorder, a poetry in its liminal qualities.

The project also has an added value of recording an area that is soon to be transformed beyond recognition. It's a project about a deeply subjective and personal experiencing and knowing of a place. This is a collaborative project. I connected with another artist, S J Fowler, who became both a good friend and a collaborator.

Together we have been exploring the area, regularly, by walking, while talking, and recording all on video, in photographs and in text. The result is now a feature length film, which was premiered at the Whitechapel Gallery in 2020, as well as a series of small publications and two gallery exhibitions. Just like the *4 Generations of Women* project, this is a project about the effects of time and it is an ongoing one.

Steve and I will be meeting again this sum-

mer to continue recording the transformations and will be making further short films and publications. The most immediate plan is to organise a public screening of the work, ideally right on location in Willesden Junction.

This project has no direct link to Prague. But, this method of getting to know a place, which I developed through my working with Steve, as well as by myself, is something I am using here in Prague, currently for developing a performance for the Prague Quadrennial this June, in Holesovicka Trznice. See: <https://pq.cz/>

I read that Brexit played some part in your move back to Czechia. How did you feel when it became a reality? Did it become harder for you to work in the UK as a result?
 BREXIT DID PLAY a part in my leaving the UK. It was not the main cause of it but it certainly contributed to it. It was not that I felt unwelcome... I haven't had that feeling for many years in the UK and I do have a British citizenship. So I have not really been effected in any direct way. But it was more of an emotional and symbolic effect.

What I loved about London has always been its openness to the world, the cosmopolitan nature of it. And this feeling has shifted. I didn't like the idea of moving away from Europe and its values. When I woke up that morning, with the results of the referendum clear, I was distraught, like most people around me. I had a feeling that something was irretrievably gone.

Having been on the other side of this equation when the Czech Republic joined the EU, I could not understand how a country could voluntarily choose to make its life more closed off, more complicated. But of course this is in fact a much more complex question/issue. Anyway, being back in the Czech Republic, I love feeling part of Europe again and really treasure its benefits, such as travelling to Vienna without a passport.

¹<https://alchemyfilmandarts.org.uk/four-generations-of-women-tereza-stehlikova/>

²<https://cinestheticfeasts.com/2022/12/05/familial-traces>

³<https://tangibleterritory.art>

