



Still from *Dorota* 2006 video transferred to DVD (color, sound); 15 minutes

SUBTLE SHIFTS: ARTUR ŻMIJEWSKI

Born in Poland, 1966. Lives and works in Warsaw.

Since the mid-1990s, Artur Żmijewski has been creating anxious, strange, and beautiful films and videos with an intensely emotional impact. Most of his projects examine spiritual and physical aspects of human psychology. The stories Żmijewski tells map the mentality of his main characters in such a way that we are compelled to accept their autonomy and renegotiate our own thinking in response. He has stated that his ultimate goal is to subtly shift our thoughts so that we might reconsider how we treat people who are marginalized by society, lonely, or disenfranchised, and that the central question driving his work is, "Will the viewer dismiss what he sees and retain his own view, or will he allow

the work to violate him and introduce into his brain a revelation?"¹

One way in which the artist reveals certain ingrained ideas and prejudices to his viewers is through revisiting historical traumas. He has explored the therapeutic potential of invoking past injuries in his films *Game of Tag* (1999), in which Polish men and women play tag naked in a concentration-camp gas chamber, and *Repetition* (2005), a study of the psychological conditions of authoritarianism in a re-creation of the Stanford Prison Experiment originally conducted by American psychologist Philip Zimbardo in 1971.² Both films reawaken the psychic wreckage of World War II, as does *Pilgrimage* (2003), a documentation of a Polish Catholic group's visit to Israel that uncovers the group's anti-

Semitism, and *Our Songbook* (2003), in which elderly Israelites who had spent their childhood in Poland before the war were asked to sing any Polish songs they could remember. By taking on the subject of the Holocaust, Żmijewski turns a collective memory into a game that diffuses the present traumatic effects of historical prejudices.

Danuta, *Dorota*, and *Halina* (2006) are three roughly fifteen-minute-long videos. Each shows us a day in the life of the Polish working-class woman after whom the piece is titled. The project began with a newspaper advertisement posted by the artist seeking employed persons who would agree to be filmed for an entire day. He interviewed and selected a laundress, a factory worker, and a supermarket cashier, and then followed each with a camera for a full twenty-



Still from *Halina* 2006 video transferred to DVD (color, sound); 15:32 minutes

four hours. The footage was edited to reveal the strict structure of the women's lives: riding the bus to work, repeating their habitual job routines, preparing meals for their family, and taking care of their homes. Although the day's events are out of sequence, the slow pacing and minimal dialogue convey a feeling of lonely monotony.

The narratives of these women suggest another reconsideration of the historical record—this time of Poland's more recent Communist past. The worker was a galvanizing figure in Polish history. From the Polish United Workers' Party's control in the Communist era to its end in the early 1980s brought about by the Solidarity trade union led by Lech Wałęsa,³ the worker has been the source of modern social reforms and power in Poland. For Żmijewski, to

invoke this figure is therefore to reawaken both the optimism and distress of the Communist era. However, the artist shifts our understanding of the standard proletariat hero. By approaching the figure from the perspective of individual women, he repositions the worker on the margins of power. Thereby, he juxtaposes old icons with new and ultimately unchanged routines of labor, even amid the economic ideals of the European Union, which Poland joined in 2004.

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1. Artur Żmijewski, "A Favorite Theory of Art," master's thesis for Warsaw University, in *If It Happened Only Once It's As If It Never Happened*, trans. Marzena Guzowska, exh. cat. (Warsaw: Zachęta National

Gallery of Art for the Polish Pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale), 158.

2. For the experiment conducted at Stanford University, Zimbardo re-created the physical trappings and psychological aura of a prison. He randomly assigned half of his student volunteers the role of prisoner and the other half that of guard. He used these findings to conclude that physical abuse is part of the psychological condition of authority in such an environment. However, Żmijewski's film contradicts Zimbardo's conclusion: in the artist's film, one of the "prisoners" manages to manipulate a "guard" into calling off the experiment. Zimbardo eventually had to halt the simulation because of the violence that ensued between the two groups.

3. Recipient of a 1983 Nobel Peace Prize, Wałęsa served as president of the Republic of Poland from 1990 to 1995.