

Where Are The Invisible Trains Headed?

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**The little girl I was –
I knew her, naturally.
I have a few photos
from her brief life.**

Wisława Szymborska, "Laughter" ¹

**Wax
to seal the unwritten
that guessed
your name,
that enciphers
your name.
Swimming light, will you
Come now?**

Paul Celan, "With Letter and Clock"²

A large ball hangs in mid-air, obstructing the viewer's upward-looking gaze. It is sewn out of black rubber that is neither new nor uniform, and which forms an imperfect globe. Miniature train tracks are affixed to the surface, or envelope, of this diminutive world: matches laid down at carefully determined intervals are pasted onto thin, transparent plastic tubes, which extend vertically over parallel pairs of light ropes. Lights flicker on and off; the rails branch out in different directions, sometimes intersecting again along the way; some of them continue around the ball – it seems possible to follow them – but where to? Where are these invisible trains headed?

A preliminary answer may be found in the Polish title of the work, "DO-DO-MU," which may be translated into English as "homewards." Nevertheless, the question itself exceeds the meaning of this specific word. Beyond the invisible movement of the trains, which continues in other works (see the green landscapes in the series "Night Vision Photographs," 2006), this question addresses the very nature of the arena in which Fonar Cocos operates: where are Inga Fonar Cocos' invisible trains headed? Or, more generally speaking,

what invisible motion – what motion of the invisible – takes place in Fonar Cocos' works? And what does the word "homewards" mean in this context?

The invisible constitutes a central theme in Fonar Cocos' work. Her interest in the relations between vision and blindness is explicitly expressed in the names of her recent exhibitions: "Punctum Caecum" (2002), "Blindreflex" (2003) and "Blindsehen" (2006), as well as in the titles of works such as *Vision Gestalt*, *Night Vision* and *Seeing Is Believing*. Surprisingly, however, the encounter with the works themselves does not immediately reveal – and perhaps even conceals – the essence of Fonar Cocos' concern with the visible and the invisible. Moreover, at first glance it remains unclear how these works express a concern with the dimension of visibility. How do they come to terms with the question of visibility, with the ability to see or with states of blindness? What dimension or dimensions of the visual do they attempt to touch upon? How do they wish to operate in relation to these dimensions? In what way, for instance, are Fonar Cocos' wax plates – and the fragmented quotes etched into them with a metal pin – related to this problematic of seeing and blindness? Can the fragmented quote, which was taken – with slight changes – from the last notes written by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, serve as a point of departure?

In the last years of his life, Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) was concerned with an aspect of the visible which he termed "the invisible." This term evolved, for Merleau-Ponty, out of the understanding that what is visible to the eye and what is hidden from it – and, by analogy, vision and blindness – are not, as we habitually think, a set of contrasting terms. According to Merleau-Ponty, the visual field – the realm of the visible – is not a realm of positive facts. The visual is not simply there in front of us. What we see is never merely what we

see; in other words, the structure of the visual is not frontal. The act of seeing, therefore, cannot be reduced to the framing of visual contents. Vision is not an action that entraps an object or visual information, and one may even argue that vision is not an action at all. Yet if vision is not a kind of action, how does it connect us to the world? Vision is first of all a form of our human existence, of our being in the world, among people, among things, always already within circles of meaning; nevertheless, we are never in a context in which meaning is given over to us, is in our possession. The visibility of the world is not just another fact in our world, but is an integral part of the complex structure through which we inhabit the world. Being in the world means experiencing the intersection between vision and visibility, and being part of the visual sphere – whose characteristics are intimately related to who we are (our identity, body and sexuality; on a personal, social, political, cultural and historical level). Such a sphere is neither geometric nor homogeneous. This is a sphere that possesses real depth and an irregular morphology; it has shifting horizons, layers, centers of gravity, unexpected crevices, twists and turns, and myriad folds that do not exist a priori, but are rather revealed within the particular contexts of our lives. In this sense, the presence of the visual is always suffused with a dimension of absence. That is, its very essence as a realm in which things are made manifest simultaneously defines the visual field as a realm of concealment. Surprisingly, the visual and exposed also conceals. Yet what is at stake here is not the covering up of something that can, in principal, be made visible to the eye. What is hidden within the realm of the visible is a different kind of fact: the existence of what cannot be revealed. As such, the invisible is not what is outside of, or beyond, the realm of the visible; it is not the non-visual, but rather what belongs to the fundamental structure, to the pulsating heart of the visible. This, as Merleau-Ponty calls it, is "the invisible of the visible" – or, from another perspective, "the blindness of the perceiving consciousness"; it is "the point of blindness" –

punctum caecum – which characterizes not only the physiological structure of the eye, but above all the essential structure of the encounter between the human subject and the visuality of the world. Merlau-Ponty describes it in the following manner:

"What it [consciousness] does not see it does not see for reasons of principle, it is because it is consciousness that it does not see. What it does not see is what in it prepares the vision of the rest... What it does not see is what makes it see, is its tie to Being, is its corporeity, are the existentials by which the world becomes visible, is the flesh wherein the *object* is born."³

According to Merlau-Ponty, in order for the visual to appear to the observer as meaningful, it must be anchored in a more primal connection – a physical support that connects between consciousness and the world. Such a connection is at the basis of our ability to register what we see and imbue it with meaning; it precedes the division between subject and object, and the representation of the object by the observer. This initial connection or ancient intersection – "the tie to Being," "the corporeity of consciousness" – are a precondition that enables consciousness to frame the visual; yet precisely since it constitutes a precondition, this intersection cannot appear as part of the framework of the visual. The ability to see grows out of a nucleus of blindness. What makes vision possible cannot open onto the gaze. It is no longer a visual object, yet its non-visibility is mysteriously present within the visible. How so? Merlau-Ponty identified and began analyzing some of the ways in which the invisible exists within the visible. At the same time, it was clear to him that a conceptual or theoretical study was not sufficient to truly understand the life of the invisible. It is at this point, he believed, that the philosopher and the artist embark on a

shared journey. Is Fonar Cocos concerned with a shared journey of this kind? As I noted above, her wax tablet bears a quote from Merlau-Ponty that is concerned with the invisible. Yet whether or not this quote amounts to an explicit dialogue, Fonar Cocos' artistic strategy certainly seems focused upon those irregular traces that the invisible leaves within the visible. Fonar Cocos' work scrapes away at the surface of the perfect, completed image in order to reveal the conditions of its creation. Her focus is not the "frontal" visual tapestry that meets the eye, but rather that blind movement that makes itself present through this tapestry's constant unraveling. Fonar Cocos searches for ways to trace that which underlies the structure of the visual, while never appearing in the field of the visual as a distinct object of our vision. The movement with which Fonar Cocos is concerned is not a movement towards the visual liberation of the image or the object, but rather an opposite movement – one that ties the object back to the past out of which it emerges. Such a movement opens up the object onto its non-optical past, revealing the history of its crystallization as a visual object and making present what Merlau-Ponty terms "the flesh wherein the *object* is born."

Fonar Cocos approaches the object in a way that does not enable it – nor us, the viewers – to forget what we must seemingly forget in order to capture the gaze. She presents us with objects whose exterior has come unraveled, whose mechanisms of self-presentation are suspended – so that the question of the object's meaning is no longer subordinate to what the eye can grasp. The eye of the rational viewer facing Fonar Cocos' work may indeed identify the characteristics and qualities of an object; yet this optical framework is not sufficient for seeing the work itself, which operates on a different register of the visual field. Something else peers out from among the wax plates. But what exactly? Or, returning to the initial question, what invisible movement takes place in Fonar Cocos' works? Would it be correct to approach it in the same way as Rosalind Krauss, for instant, reads Eva Hesse's works? That is, as

an expression of the alternative tradition within modernist art that refuses to concern itself with satisfying the eye, and which embodies what Krauss understands to be "the optical unconscious"?⁴ In Fonar Cocos' works there is indeed a refutation of the scheme offered by the structure of the optical. At the same time, however, the non-optical that preoccupies Fonar Cocos is not a conceptual or dialectic structure. While Krauss examines "the optical unconscious" by means of the Lacanian formulation of the "real," which is always fundamentally located outside of our system of meaning, Fonar Cocos is concerned, rather, with the concrete ways in which the non-optical teams within what manifests itself to the eye. More specifically, I believe it is possible to point to a number of axes of non-visibility operating in Fonar Cocos' work. These axes exist in a dynamic relationship to one another – a relationship that is based on parallels, analogies, contingencies, intersections and tension-building contrasts. What are these axes? Three types of non-visibility are revealed, in my opinion, as central: *materiality*, *memory* and *pain*.

How may we understand the relations between these three dimensions? To begin with, what is the relation between materiality and memory? The word "memory" has two meanings in this context. On the one hand, we speak of memory in the sense of a specific event, such as a certain childhood memory or image from the past; at the same time, we speak of it as the realm out of which specific memories arise. The realm of memory is thus not identical to the appearance of a given image; it is, rather, a precondition – the underlying framework or ground for what may present itself. Memory in this sense encompasses the entire range between what is concealed and what is revealed, a range that is no less fundamental to the materiality of matter. More precisely, this archaic connection between the visible and the non-visible is a primary characteristic of matter, and is related to memory by way of analogy: hence the expression "the matter of memory." To put it

differently, memory – like matter – contains within itself the possibility of distinct forms. Yet precisely for this reason, matter and memory themselves do not appear as objects. They do not give themselves over to the perceiving eye; rather, they are present at the core of the field of vision as an impenetrable realm, which lacks transparency and reflection. This is the non-illuminated dimension of what is revealed to the eye. It is both unlit and oblivious to light; it is a dimension that is unwilling to accept the laws of light (optics); nor is it willing to accept the play of light as the name of the game of visual appearances. The light is swallowed by Fonar Cocos' tablets of black wax – tablets that the eye may interminably linger upon without succeeding to contain them and to make them its own. As far back as antiquity, the image of a wax tablet has been associated with the "inner surface" of the soul; with the receptiveness of human consciousness; with its affective dimensions; and with memory. Yet wax is not only an image, but also a direct embodiment of the relationship between materiality and memory. Due to its unique material qualities, wax served as a writing tablet, as a support for etching and stamping – as a tool of memory. Memory is thus analogously compared to a soft writing tablet, upon which images, events and the past itself are imprinted and etched. Yet not everything is inscribed upon the tablet of memory. Just as light is absorbed in the black tablets, so memory swallows up those impressions whose presence it cannot cope with, those impressions that the psyche is unwilling or unable to represent. In this sense, the tablet of memory is selective. It never shows everything, and must not express anything that will mar or crack its surface; it must conceal that dimension of depth that cannot be ignored, yet which cannot be compressed into the framework of the visible – the *depth of pain*. Inga Fonar Cocos does not enable this depth to disappear, but rather examines the ways in which it is present within the visual order. She sticks metal pins into the tablets, repeatedly pricking the wax surface. This is a serial act, out of which letters are born and writing appears. This act of

pricking and boring holes – the controlled and microscopic damaging of the wax – enables the tablets to speak, to carry meaning, to become part of the realm of the optical and of the symbolic. At the same time, it is worth noting that the focus of Fonar Cocos' artistic action is not the reconstruction of the past, nor the attempt to endow specific memories with meaning. From her point of view, despite the strong presence of the dimension of memory in the present, the past has truly passed. It is present only as that which is absent. It partakes of the present as a founding, shaping, injurious, painful and irresolvable presence, yet it cannot be revoked. In his book *W or the Memory of Childhood*, Georges Perec examines the tension between what was really there – what he experienced as a child during the war when he bid his mother a final farewell – and between the impossibility of ever reconstructing, understanding, or giving appropriate expression to the past. As Perec writes:

I don't know where the break is in the threads that tie me to my childhood. Like everyone else, or almost everyone, I had a father and a mother, a potty, a cot, a rattle, and, later on, a bicycle which apparently I never mounted without screaming with terror at the mere thought that someone might try to raise or even remove the two small side-wheels which kept me stable. Like everyone else, I have forgotten everything about the earliest years of my existence.

My childhood belongs to those things which I know I don't know much about. It is behind me; yet it is the ground on which I grew, and it once belonged to me, however obstinately I assert that it no longer does. For years I tried to sidetrack or to cover up these obvious facts, and I wrapped myself in the harmless status of the orphan, the un-parented, the Nobody's boy. However, childhood is neither longing nor terror, neither a paradise lost nor the Golden Fleece, but maybe it is a horizon, a point of departure, a set of co-ordinates from which the axes of my life may draw their meaning. Even if I have the help only of yellowing snapshots, a handful of eyewitness accounts and a few paltry documents to prop up my implausible memories, I have no alternative but to conjure up what for too many years I called the irrevocable: the things that were, the things that stopped, the things that were closed

off – things that surely were and today are no longer, but things that also were so that I may still be.⁵

W or the Memory of Childhood amounts to a search for a perspective that may incorporate childhood's horizons of meaning –its foundational presence – into adult life. This quest is based on the understanding that a direct, coherent gaze at what has already been locked away is no longer possible. Fonar Cocos shares this understanding. Yet, like Perec, she does not view it as an indisputable fact, but rather a ground for action. Fonar Cocos does not attempt to express the inexpressible, nor does she make do with a general understanding of what cannot be made visible. Rather, she is concerned with the area between these two poles: she opens up and exposes lanes that enable some form of movement, flow or passage between the pain that structures of the invisible depths of memory and what is made visible to the eye – the object, the word, meaning.

¹ Wislawa Szymborska, *Poems New and Collected*. Translated by Stanislaw Branczak and Clare Cavanagh (Harcourt Brace, 1998), p.73.

² Paul Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan*. Translated by Michael Hamburger (Persea Books, 1995), p. 109.

³ Maurice Merlau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Northwestern University Press, 1968) p. 248.

⁴ Rosalind Kraus, *The Optical Unconscious* (MIT Press, 1994)

⁵ Georges Perec, *W or the Memory of Childhood*, Translated by David Bellos (Boston D.R.Godine, 1988) p. 12