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Blindness – Inga Fonar Cocos' Ophthalmological Diagnosis

In the installation *Dodomu*, a leather-like ball is suspended in space like a globe in the universe. Nevertheless, it is not alone: this globe or sphere, an image of mankind's home in the cosmos, has a viewing device trained on it. Moreover, it is surrounded – or perhaps constricted – by materials that conjure up captivity, war and torture; they allude to "camps," and hence also to "borders" – to barbed wire and to railroad tracks. Although artist Inga Fonar Cocos may not realize this herself, installations are part of a tradition which cannot but be described as Jewish. Although this may initially seem far from obvious: they are a twentieth-century manifestation of an externally imposed prohibition on graven images.

“Thou shalt not make unto thee,” the Torah says, “any graven image.” In the Torah, this prohibition on graven images did not only apply to portrayals of divinity, nor was it directed only against idols of all kinds: for a time at least, it was understood in absolute terms. Although God in the Torah behaves like a human being who acts and suffers, he does not look like a human being, and cannot be seen in any shape or form: “Thou canst not see My face,” the God of the Bible informs Moses on Mount Sinai, “for man shall not see Me and live.” God does promise some comfort: “While My glory passeth by [...] I will cover thee with My hand until I have passed by. And I will take away My hand, and thou shalt see My back” (Exodus 33: 20-23). Nevertheless, the biblical prohibition is not as clear cut as it may seem, for the book of Genesis clearly states that God created man “in his image” (Genesis 1:27). In the original Hebrew, the word for "image" is *tselem* – a word whose meaning approximates that of the English "shadow." Only in the second century BCE did the Greek translation of the Bible, the Septuagint, refer to an *eikôn* of God – a word that literally means "image." The Ten Commandments, meanwhile, are categorical in terms of codifying the prohibition on making images: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing ...” The two terms for "image" used in the original Hebrew, which respectively mean "statue" and "picture," thus completely lost any connection with the "shadow" from the account of the Creation. With the advent of Christianity, pictures finally receive serious recognition: for if it pleased God Himself to make Himself in Christ knowable to the senses as a man, according to

the argument advanced in the eighth century by the renowned theologian and Christian Arab John of Damascus, then who are men to deny themselves pictures?

Jewish thought, however, continues to be critical of visual images. As the German-Jewish philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno argue in their *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, published in 1947, what is vital is "... the prohibition on invoking falsity as God, the finite as the infinite, the lie as truth. The pledge of salvation lies in the rejection of any faith which claims to depict it, knowledge in the denunciation of illusion. Negation, however, is not abstract. The right of the image is rescued in the faithful observance of its prohibition." Like an old picture which has repeatedly been painted over, Horkheimer and Adorno's paradoxical formulation contains – in a greatly compressed form – motifs and problems that had already shaped the religion of the Israelites, and which continued to reemerge with the evolution of Judaism and of early Christianity; they subsequently reappeared in medieval Christianity, and – ultimately – in Protestantism. Although Horkheimer and Adorno do refer to discussions of God, they themselves speak of "salvation," "faith," "knowledge," and of the "prohibition of the image." Horkheimer and Adorno's theological language is consistent: without making reference to the biblical religions and to the controversies between Judaism and Christianity, indeed *within* Christianity, what is supposedly an aesthetic discourse on the "prohibition of the image" remains ungrounded. Nor do Horkheimer and Adorno shy away, as ponderously as only theologians can, from speaking of the "pledge of salvation." This pledge, they assert, is to be found in the prohibition of the image. Yet the image has its own rights – rights which can only be protected through its prohibition. What, then, are the rights of that which is protected through its prohibition? The prohibition of the image refers to a particular kind of image, which Horkheimer and Adorno call "that which saves" (*das Rettende*). Whether or not it is called "God," it can only maintain its power if people forbid themselves to come into supposedly direct, sensory contact with it. Today, the doctrine concerning the inaccessibility of the formless is considered to be equally illuminating. Nevertheless, it is no longer a question of showing or concealing "that which saves"; post-Auschwitz, it is a question concerning the very possibility of representation in the wake of destruction.

This is not to say that Inga Fonar Cocos's art should be understood as theological, or as partaking of theology's demise. Rather, it is a form of artmaking that editorializes the problem of the image and of representation in a radical manner –

radical in the sense of "from the very root." In the wake of the disasters of the twentieth century, "editorializing" means investigating the question of how it is at all possible to become aware of images, to see them, to ask questions about looking and overlooking, about those who have eyes and yet do not see. To see! No image is possible without sight, no image is possible without eyes. Eyes, however, are the living organs of living people, and hence extremely vulnerable. On the one hand, physiological optics has proven that it is only due to the eye's specific incapacity – its blind spot – that it is actually possible to see. At the same time – and here Cocos' art addresses the history of Europe, and in particular German and Jewish history – people can also prevent themselves from seeing horrors, and are subsequently tempted to feel pity by deliberately choosing blindness.

Inga Fonar Cocos addresses the problem of images and of their prohibition – of seeing and of not wanting to see – by using a form of artistic ophthalmology that makes visible the distorted process of seeing. Yet by showing the injured organs of vision, this strategy itself amounts to complying with the prohibition on seeing. In this way, then, Fonar Cocos proves the impossibility of her own work. Judaism's collective memory, however, contains a corresponding incapacity; it is unable to behold what has been suffered, to fix in an image that which exceeds our ability to see. *Dodomu*, the installation that simultaneously evokes memories of the globe as a "camp" and identifies the camp as a "globe," is not only connected with barbed wire. The wire also connects numerous points on this inhospitable sphere with one another, thus creating the impression of a network of rails.

Inga Fonar Cocos' installations and images address the gray areas of the twentieth century: the gray areas on the borders of statehood, as well as the blind spots in the eyes of the beholder. By revealing the difficulties involved in seeing, and hence making blindness visible, this artist exposes the twentieth century's blinders and blindness – and the ways in which they continue to cloud our vision in the present.

What kind of people, or individuals, are so utterly convinced of their incapacity to recognize what is made manifest before them, and yet remain in thrall to a perceptual taboo? In the installation *Blind Man*, the eponymous blind man is in fact a woman rendered unidentifiable by a black blindfold; she cannot be recognized, nor is she able to see. Assembled in perspective in a black and yellow box (what did this color combination once stand for?), black threads run through both the viewer's field of vision and the blindfolded woman's possible field of vision. Black threads in front

of – no, *in* – the field of vision are identified by ophthalmology as early signs of a cataract. Known as "rhagades," these fine linear scars are very difficult to cure; one can only live with them if one resolves to simply forget them.

The representation of modern man in art evolved in relation to the emergence of one-point perspective, which portrays the world from the point of view of an individual observer. *Blind Man* appears superficially to have maintained this perspective, while simultaneously making visible its distorted nature; the black and yellow colors of the threads that indicate a distortion of vision also allude to the persecution of the Jews in the twentieth century – and hence to a world characterized by rails and barbed wire.

As Horkheimer and Adorno wrote in 1947, “the right of the image is protected by strictly observing its prohibition.” Inga Fonar Cocos demonstrates that in the aftermath of the twentieth century, the prohibition on the image can no longer be used as a means to preserve the truth; it can only serve to point to the difficulties of seeing the truth. To put it another way, she is concerned with the right to see in an age of blindness – or rather with the difficulties, or downright impossibility, of perceiving and remembering both historical and contemporary truths. On the threshold of the twenty-first century, blindness has become the *condition humaine*. This mental state, moreover, is not accompanied by even the slightest hope of a cure...