



Ewa Klekot

**“A broken continuity
of memory and
objects”**



Residence No. 2

ELIANE ESTHER BOTS

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POLIN
MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY
OF POLISH JEWS



There are no ideas but in things.

— William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*

The premise of Eliane Esther Bots’ art project at the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw was to focus on objects that were somehow entangled in the Jewish past. Through the Museum’s website the artist asked the audience to bring her such objects and tell her the stories behind them. Her earlier experiences of relations connecting the fates of people and things, shown in the film *Conversations* (2014), are a study of memory and passing as seen through the prism of the bonds between people and objects, a visual exploration of spatial and temporal dimension of these bonds and of elements of biographical narration. The camera itself is for Eliane Bots one of such things: the artist uses it not only to show the bonds that are the subject of the film, but also to create them, deepen them, to change their nature.

That way of work was adopted by the artist to her Warsaw project as well — making of the film was a way to examine the reality, but also to create relations whose presence in the film is as important as relationships between people and objects, about which the artist outright asks her interlocutors. The work of Eliane Bots has a character of a documentary. However, in its essence it is more lyrical than epical. Not only because it is narrated in first person but foremost because of the chosen convention of report on reality depicted in the film. The artist does not create a narrator external to the representation, and the camera lens is not an eye of an external observer — on the contrary, it’s a sensitive participant of the events: it withdraws when a situation becomes uncomfortable for the protagonist.

In such moments Eliane Bots records only sound, so the story continues in voice-over, or recounts the conversation herself.

- In Warsaw one of the participants brought an object that according to her could be a key to a family secret — a mystery still unresolved. Her imagination suggests a few explanations, some of which are not a reason to be proud of the ancestors that left her the object. The artist decided to keep the object in a closed box at all times while filming because — as she said — “the protagonist is not yet ready to show it.” That is, she is not yet ready to face all the possible versions of the past of which the object could potentially be a part. Her narration of family heritage — a past that is significant in light of what is and what might be — is still fragile and uncertain.
- In most cases, calling things brought to Eliane Bots by the participants a heritage doesn’t seem to be a misuse, if we assume that heritage is not a collection of objects — like a collection of antiques or exhibits — but an approach to the past. Interlocutors who decided to take part in the project were supposed to bring objects related to the Jewish past — instead, they brought things that allowed them to tell stories about themselves, who they are here and now. “Heritage is primarily *not* about the *past*, but instead about our relationship with the *present* and the *future*. — writes Rodney Harrison, a British specialist in heritage studies — Heritage is not a passive process of simply preserving things from the past that remain, but an active process of assembling a series of objects, places and practices that we choose to hold up as a mirror to the present, associated with a particular set of values that we wish to take with us into the future.” **(a)** Therefore, from the perspective of anthropology the heritage can be understood as the separate from

(a) R. Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (London, New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 4. Emphases as in original.

history, but also inherent to the modernity, attitude toward the past. The one that brings back the sense of continuity between the past and the present, and allows to settle the modern identity in what once was. According to Eliane Bots, all objects brought to her by the Warsaw participants of the project were “pre-texts for stories” — they enabled narratives of the past for the storytellers to define themselves in the present.

- › The identity potential of heritage comes from the characteristic for modernity way of constructing the antiquity and the past as valuable. The modernity discovers the value of the past because modern consciousness is linked to the feeling of loss. Philosophers who interpreted the modern attitude toward the past were pointing out the role of scientific history in that process. The feeling of loss is a result of the historicization of reality, “the emergence of history as both knowledge and the mode of being of empiricity.” **(b)** Historicity as a way of existence implies fortuity and finiteness of a human being “deprived of history” understood as the past — the only thing left is the history as a science, history of historians, in which “the past is a foreign country.” Modern man becomes dispossessed of the world and of the past because in terms of science they became an abstraction, distant from the human experience and often even contradictory to it. Modern historical consciousness, which appeared along with romanticism, is based on the acknowledgement of the past as a “foreign country” from which man was banished by modernity.
- › A museum is an institution set in that very construction of the past; an institution whose role in creating the identity is obvious, and much has been written about it. Things end up in the museum because contemporary people consider them as important elements of the past. Eliane Bots’ project took place

(b) M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 239.

in the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Why an object ends up in the museum, and how it signifies therein, ensues from the identity narration of those who have authority over the museum. Modern attitude toward the past has created a specific category of objects that are “naturally” musealised thanks to the value associated to them, namely the monuments. The value of monuments depends on their material connection to the past. Just as most of the categories crucial for the modern West, during its colonial and cultural expansion, the monument has become considered to be a universal concept as well, and the belief in the common value of the monuments went together with the practices — professionalized at the end of the nineteenth century — aimed at their preservation and protection. The social significance of practices related to monuments at the beginning of the twentieth century is clearly indicated by the fact that Alois Riegl, an Austrian art historian, called them in 1903 the cult of the monuments, **(c)** and his younger colleague Max Dvořák, conservator general of the Royal and Imperial Central Commission for the Research and Preservation of Artistic and Historical Monuments, in 1916 published a book titled *Katechismus der Denkmalpflege* (*Conservation Catechism*). **(d)** In both cases the use of religious terms was of course deliberate and reflected unusual importance associated by the West with the monuments as the universally valuable testimonies of the past. That is to say, as another way that allows to restore the continuity between the past and the present — thanks to the material substance of an object recognized as a monument.

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- (c)** A. Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin,” *Oppositions*, vol. 25 (1982), pp. 20–51.
- (d)** M. Dvořák, “Katechizm opieki nad zabytkami,” translated by R. Kasperowicz, in P. Kosiewski, J. Krawczyk (eds.), *Zabytek i historia* (Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza “Mówią Wieki,” 2002), pp. 225–231.

- › Similarly to the great modern identity narratives (national, class, ethnic) created on a foundation of heritage and monuments, which anchor the community in the past in order to legitimise it here and now, small individual narratives based on family heirlooms legitimise here and now a particular human. And even though individual narratives may challenge the collective narratives and question the relation between individual and collective identities, the principle is similar and narrativization, as Hayden White — an outstanding theoretician of historiography — wrote, is a method of giving a meaning to the past, which always “serves the purpose of moralizing judgements.” **(e)** The point is that the very selection of the elements of narrative and the narrativizing way of their arrangement conveys a moral judgement.
- › The work of Eliane Esther Bots at the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews turned out to be — according to the artist herself — less about objects and more about stories. Identity stories. Though in the *Conversations* appear memories of the Second World War and the Shoah, which personally affected the protagonist of the film and her family, the Jewish identity has not been problematised in it, neither were the national or class identities.

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In the protagonist’s memory and it the objects that surround her the continuity between the past and the present exists: laboriously created by her when she meticulously attaches detailed labels to every object. Presumably, in the film that will be an outcome of the artist’s Warsaw project it will be different: things that are a pretext for identity stories are witnesses of the break

(e) H. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 24.

in continuity — the material continuity and the continuity of memory — and the narrators on the one hand try to restore the continuity, and on the other make a moral judgement of the break because otherwise it will be impossible to tell about it. The latter is much more difficult — not only for the Eliane Esther Bots' interviewees.

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Translation: Paweł Falkowski

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