

Artist in focus: Annik Leroy

“I’ve sometimes been asked why I don’t have any thoughts or visions of a utopian country, a utopian world where everything will be good and we’ll all be good. I’d say that when you’re constantly confronted with the abomination of daily life, a paradox arises, since what we really have is nothing.

I do believe in something, and I call it ‘a day shall come’, and one day it will come. Well, probably it won’t come, because it has been ruined for us, for thousands of years it has always been destroyed. It won’t come, and I believe in it anyway. Because if I can’t believe in it anymore I can’t go on writing.”

— Ingeborg Bachmann

Es ist immer Krieg: haunting words borrowed from poet and writer Ingeborg Bachmann provide the subtitle for Annik Leroy’s newest film, *TREMOR* (2017). But the sentence also brings to bear a sentiment that runs through all of the work of this Brussels-based photographer and filmmaker: a sense of non-reconciliation, of refusing to resign oneself to the violences that permeate our daily lives. Leroy’s films remind us how histories of oppression and injustice keep on haunting the present, how their presence can not only be perceived in the scars ingrained in the physical landscapes that traverse contemporary Europe, but also reverberates in innumerable instances of violence and destruction that slip by with impunity. It’s those barely perceptible, brooding tremors that continually penetrate our everyday lives and interpersonal relationships, which can be felt throughout the films, videos and installations that Leroy has made since 1980; a variety of works that each in their own singular way encapsulate the words of Bachmann: “Here, in this society, there is always war, there’s no war and peace, there is only war.”

The dark passages of European history are always throbbing in Leroy’s work, starting with her first feature-length film, *In der Dämmerstunde Berlin de l’aube à la nuit* (1980), in which a solitary wandering through the old neighborhoods of the city of Berlin evokes a past of destruction and loss. Faceless ruins and deserted streets are the silent witnesses of a tragedy that has left a deep woundedness, one that finds resonance in fragments borrowed from the work of writers such as Gottfried Benn, Else Lasker-Schüler, Witold Gombrowicz and Peter Handke. Another journey filled with traces of the past, linking exterior to interior geographies, big to small histories, is recounted in *Vers la mer* (1999), this time following the Danube river from its source in Germany to its outlet into the Black Sea, connecting the soft landscapes of

the Hungarian *puszta* to the borders with Vojvodina and Serbia, where turmoil and hatred raged along its shores. Over the course of many encounters, however, the river does not only reveal itself as a passive witness of an always present past, but also as an active force that, in its perpetual movement, comes to symbolise the organisation of a possible common space that defies boundaries and borders.

Leroy's investigation into violence and oppression as structural moments of both the public and the private spheres is at its most radical in the short videowork *Cellule 719* (2006). Taking as point of departure an letter written by Rote Armee Fraktion member Ulrike Meinhof when she was incarcerated in solitary confinement, the video probes the inner world of a woman who, in total isolation, is at the mercy of her most private self. The physical and psychic experience of violence and oppression is also what resonates in the voices that populate *TREMOR* – the voices of poets and madmen, of a mother or a child. Guided by the words and articulations of Pier Paolo Pasolini, Fernando Nannetti, Sigmund Freud, Barbara Suckfüll and others, the film takes us from Stromboli to Rome, from Vienna to Vestmannaeyjar, tracing a sensory journey through desolate and devastated wastelands that bring to mind the last images of Pasolini's *Teorema*, in which we see a naked man howling across volcanic slopes: images of madness and anguish, but also of possible redemption. Not coincidentally, it is the vision of Pasolini that is brought to bear on *TREMOR*'s ending, evoking the prophetic dream of a life reborn beyond reason. An ending that epitomizes an essential undertaking in Annik Leroy's poetics: to counter the continuing history of war and violence with an utopia that Ingeborg Bachmann has proclaimed as "a day will come".