

Photomonth Krakow: Alias

By Laura McLean-Ferris

‘Could it think, the heart would stop beating.’ Fernando Pessoa’s words are used, rather curiously, as an epigraph to the publication *Alias*, a set of texts that provided the backbone for a recent project of the same name, curated by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin for Krakow Photomonth. Pessoa’s words were, in fact, published under the name Bernardo Soares, one of the poet’s many heteronyms (these are rather more than pseudonyms, being developed characters). Soares’s character is that of a melancholic, thoughtful accountant, who (in Pessoa’s fabricated story) he often saw hunched over, dining in the same unremarkable restaurant: ‘In his pale, uninteresting face there was a look of suffering that didn’t add any interest’. It’s a set of heteronyms, in fact, who created artworks for *Alias*. Broomberg and Chanarin commissioned 23 writers to anonymously create texts which described invented personas that were then assigned to 23 artists, so that they might inhabit the roles and make work, anonymously, on the heteronym's behalf. Artists and writers included in the project included Johan Grimont, Brian Dillon, Roe Ethridge, Jennifer Higgie, Rut Bles Luxemburg and Alex Soth. As a viewing experience, particularly solo in the pretty town of Krakow, I found this a singular and absorbing way to look at art. In between following the Photomonth map around the city and discovering the venues (a mix of galleries and found spaces, each very well marked with the project’s distinctive posters, a monochrome face partially obscured by a red circle), I read the writer’s stories in cafés and restaurants, absorbing narrative and character as one might research an artist’s previous work before visiting an exhibition.

After reading a psychological profile of Gerald D’Amato, a retired New York electrician who has become convinced (following the death of his wife) that the Brooklyn Bridge is energised and can electrocute people, I looked at D’Amato’s (assumed) photography with what seemed to me an unusual way of viewing. Images of joggers on the beach and black teenagers in baseball hats and leather jackets sit alongside those of electrical elements and cabling around the New York city. Did these images display a vestige of vocational interest following a long career? Or signs of the character’s growing paranoia? Why the joggers? Why the cool kids? Rather

than the affront that one often feels when confronted with an actor playing a character that you have constructed in your head, the act of getting behind the eyes of the persona in question and looking at what 'he' has seen and chosen to capture allows some further imaginative character building on the part of the viewer. And in fact it's often in the gaps between the texts and the images that this imaginative construction occurs.

James Wyatt, *The end of another legendary party in Kabul*, 2009 Another character: a young man named James Wyatt, who is pursuing a PhD in Sanskrit studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Studying apart from his lover, who works in Kabul, Wyatt becomes obsessed with images of his girlfriend's male friends as they appear on Facebook: 'I follow the most charismatic competitors (funny how easy it is to spot that in photos), down random visual paths; there's a bearded French filmmaker, an equine Australian diplomat, a preppy Californian journalist.' And so, for the *Alias* exhibition 'Wyatt' has presented images (stolen from Facebook?) of these Kabul friends passed out drunk on the floor wearing what appear to be a range of coloured silk suits (*The End of Another Legendary Party in Kabul*, 2009), as well as another set of pictures of young faces mugging for the camera in the kind of snapshots ubiquitous on online social networks (Look at us! We're having such a good night out!).

Historical precedence for this imaginative structure was provided by an excellent and thorough museum exhibition at the Bunkier Sztuki Contemporary Art Gallery, covering the artistic alias in history. Among those included here are Marcel Duchamp as Rrose Sélavy, Christian Jankowski's *My Life As a Dove* (1996), Sophie Calle's creation of the artwork described by Paul Auster's artist character Maria Turner (herself modelled on Calle) in his 1992 novel *Leviathan*, and the work of fictional artist and gallerist Reena Spaulings (in fact a rather fluid collection of New Yorkers, including John Kelsey and Emily Sundblad).

Where borrowing the work was not possible, as in the case of Blinky Palermo, installation shots of the artists' work were treated as photographs, pasted straight onto the museum's walls. An image of a Palermo screenprint is overhung with a small black-and-white image of boxing manager and mafioso Frank 'Blinky' Palermo, who became the artist's namesake after (so the story goes) Joseph Beuys suggested the

resemblance between the two to the young artist. What in fact may have been a set of decisions based on budget and borrowing constraints is transformed into a consideration of the way installation shots function as images and the way that inaccessible artworks themselves might attract narratives, falsehoods and imaginative props.

There are far more sombre notes struck by some of the other contributions. Dora Fobert's fictional tale is narrated in writing by researcher Laura Lejsu, who describes being given a box of photographs by a woman who was a teenager in the Warsaw ghettos in the early 1940s after lecturing at a conference on women in the ghettos. She describes her shock on discovering that the photographs are all of young naked women – Dora's family ran Warsaw's leading photography studio, and as the city began to pulse with violence and fear, the schoolgirl invited her friends over for photoshoots. The situation in the city worsened, and soon the girls were posing naked. Presented with the negatives, Lejsu wonders how the girls could 'look so calm and sensible when they knew that any time a shoe of an SS officer could pry the door of the studio?' What we are shown in the *Alias* show is a series of unfixed negatives that can only be displayed under red glass. The fragility of the images, the sense that they are a fleeting moment held under dark glass, and the ghostly qualities of the negatives compounds the fragility of youthful characters who, in the narrative, were soon to be extinguished: only one of the photographed teens survives. The unstable qualities of imagery were also explored in the story of Marine Lazarre, a filmmaker and diplomat's wife who filmed crowds of people at times of upheaval (the Cuban missile crisis, the assassination of JFK, May 1968), which gave her a seemingly uncanny ability to call the way popular opinion would turn. She never processed any of her films, however: the mechanical document of history has run blank. Though I missed the screening of the 'blank' film in Krakow, I was choked by the character's upset upon realising that 'her cinematic time machine has proved far less reliable than her own memory'. One of the contributors made a film that seemed to conjure a sense of emotional instability itself, by stringing together quotes from Bernardo Soares, Pessoa's downcast, anxious heteronym. In a collaged film of quotes and scattered footage (a deer bolting, ice breaking), and in the slippages between Pessoa's/Soares's words and the artist's imagery on the screen, it's possible to glimpse something like the flash of a strange, hybrid soul - created by various writers, artists, readers and viewers – seen like a deer glimpsed through the trees. In this exchange of thoughts, characters and ideas, the heart, unthinking, is occasionally allowed to do its thing. *Alias was curated by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin for **Krakow Photomonth***