

Art | Basel

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Abigail Reynolds
Rokeby (Discoveries)

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"In Abigail Reynolds' collages images seem to recognize each other. Different times and geographies collapse into one. Her formally driven, almost literary works on paper transform into sculptural assemblage. Rokeby's presentation was a big exhibition in a small space."

Lost Libraries of the Silk Road

Abigail Reynolds, the third recipient of the BMW Art Journey, talks to András Szántó about her journey to document lost libraries, interweaving religious and secular narratives of Europe and Asia. Equipped with a 16mm camera and travel memoirs by Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta, her project is a physical experience through landscape as she visits 16 cities along the Silk Road.

Interview held in August 2016, updated in December 2016.

Based in Cornwall, United Kingdom, Abigail Reynolds studied English Literature at Oxford University before pursuing Fine Art at Goldsmiths University. Her interest in books and libraries prompts her collages and sculptures that are often composed of found photographs spliced to create fresh narratives. She has exhibited at art institutions and galleries in London, Vienna, Los Angeles, Seattle, Berlin, and Eindhoven. She is represented by Rokeby, London.

ANDRÁS SZÁNTÓ Books figure prominently in your work. How so exactly?

ABIGAIL REYNOLDS I often work with books that have some sort of objective view—a guide to England, an overview of a time period. Such books channel a sort of wider sense that is held by a community that the writer belongs to, rather than a very individualized reaction or research. I am also interested in structures. I often work with images of architecture. The architectures I am drawn to are colleges, motorways, theaters, and libraries rather than private houses. In such buildings, society takes form.

I see books as individual voices in the manner of a choir: you are not so aware of the specific quality of the voice of the individual singer, but you are aware of the harmony of voices. That is how I approach the books I am drawn to in my work. With such books, I can allow myself a personal voice, because I am not overriding the voice of another individual too strongly. Authorship is quite weak or wide in these books. It is pretty much the same with my subjects: I am often working with images showing groups of people who are gathered together in a landscape to protest or celebrate something—the shape of a group identity.

AS When you conceived of your journey, you decided to research “lost libraries.” What appeal do these abandoned sites hold for you?

AR A library is a compendium of knowledge. It is a meaningful collection. But I go to places where all that



Abigail Reynolds in her studio, Cornwall, United Kingdom, 2016

meaning has been voided. I am visiting 16 sites of libraries lost to political conflicts, natural catastrophes, and war. Their tragedies date from as recently as 2011 all the way back to 291 BC. The journey takes me along the trajectory of the ancient Silk Road in China, Uzbekistan, Turkey, Iran, Italy, and Egypt, which I am approaching in two stages, starting from the Eastern and the Western end points, then traveling inward as far as today's conflict zones allow. So far, I have been to ancient libraries in Yinchuan and Xi'An, to the famous Library Caves in Dunhuang (all in China), and to Tashkent and Kokand in Uzbekistan on a first trip.

Libraries point to our ambition to encompass all knowledge. Of course, that is an illusion, because we cannot know everything. Perhaps, our desire is revealed more completely by journeying to places that only retain a shadow of our human thirst for knowledge. We have, as

civilizations, built libraries for centuries and through all these attempts we have been groping to find meaning. Different civilizations have searched for meaning and categorized learning in different ways. So, in one sense, the order libraries have imposed on the world is a symbol of our desire to master chaos. It is about our aspiration to slow time. And also to commune with the dead—after all, writers' books survive past their lifetimes. Now, if the library is symbolic of these desires, then a lost library is even more symbolic of those impossibilities.

AS That tells us why you find libraries compelling. But why lost libraries?

AR I feel intuitively that even an empty site retains a residue of its former life.

I am not overly concerned if I find nothing obvious at these sites. There will be something about the library that it is still there. It may be just the shapes left in the ground. In some cases, books may still be there, but they may be, as at the Villa of the Papyri, in Herculaneum, carbonized, no longer legible, but for the painstaking efforts of science.

For all these reasons, this is a journey into darkness or void. The center of the Silk Road is closed to me because of current conflict. I can't do anything to change that. The conflicts that have destroyed many libraries over time still continue today, and this just happens to be smack in the middle of my journey. There will be a beginning and an end, but no middle. Libraries are being destroyed right now. The line of the Silk Road is broken, but then the whole of my journey is about things that are broken.

AS Why focus your research about libraries specifically along the Silk Road?

AR In my work, I am always looking for lines, formal lines. The Silk Road is among the most ancient of lines we have. It is an invisible line across the landscape. I knew that ancient library sites would be dotted along it because books have always been a precious commodity. Therefore, they would be traded and they would travel up and down the most important trade routes. The Silk Road is the most ancient and celebrated route.

I was aware that paper and books originate in China and came to Europe via the Middle East. So any thought about the materiality of books would

draw me toward China. I also knew that the most famous lost library, at least for the European reader, is in Alexandria, Egypt, and that this was destroyed by Julius Caesar, when it was taken by the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire traded with the other extremely wealthy empire of the Chinese dynasties. Each lost library is part of a longer narrative of Empire, structures of power. Recently, China has been talking about reopening the Silk Road as a gesture to its past as an empire that was open to trade.

There is also a reciprocity between the symbolism of the idea of lost libraries and the symbolism of the Silk Road. The Silk Road is a concept. It exists in the imagination today as an exotic image, not as a material fact. It's dematerialized and exists culturally as an idea. I am making a journey along a path that exists as an idea to libraries that now exist as ideas.

I do not want to embark on a history lesson, but on a philosophical journey. It will bring me to question what we understand as knowledge.
—Abigail Reynolds

AS What is the artistic process you envisage that will transform these vivid experiences into artworks?

AR I don't generally make my own images. I work with existing images. Partly because I am parsimonious—the world is stuffed with images already. Why make new images when someone has already made them? However, this time I am journeying to these blanks where there may be no preexisting images to use. So I need to somehow record this. And I want to align the sites. They will be connected by my physical presence, and I will gather together the traces of my journey at the end of the whole process in the book—another one—we will make together. It will be extremely enjoyable to me in this book to interrogate the conventions of travel memoirs and how to document what has been lost and what I have actually been able to discover.

The BMW Art Journey is a global art initiative by BMW and Art Basel offering artists an opportunity to undertake a journey of creative discovery. It is the latest in a broad range of cultural projects initiated by BMW over the last 40 years. Like a mobile studio, the BMW Art Journey can take an artist almost anywhere in the world to undertake research, envision, and create new work. Artists that are showing in Art Basel's sectors for emerging artists in Miami Beach (Positions) and Hong Kong (Discoveries) are eligible for the BMW Art Journey. Since 2015, it is awarded twice a year to one artist in each location. Two international expert panels, one for Hong Kong and one for Miami Beach, select a shortlist of three artists per sector and invite them to submit proposals for a journey. One artist from each shortlist has the chance to undertake the BMW Art Journey. The 2015 selected artists were Samson Young and the duo Henning Fehr & Philipp Rühr. The 2016 selected artist from the Discoveries sector of Art Basel in Hong Kong is Abigail Reynolds. The nominated artists from the 2016 Positions sector of Art Basel in Miami Beach are Max Hooper Schneider, Maggie Lee, and Beto Shwafaty; the selected artist will be announced in Spring 2017. More information about the initiative and previous and current projects by Samson Young and Henning Fehr & Philipp Rühr can be found at www.bmw-art-journey.com.

J Abigail Reynolds
Lost Libraries, 2016
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