



# BEHIND THE HIGH GRASS

SOFT TURNS (SARAH JANE GORLITZ AND WOJCIECH OLEJNIK)

Essay by Weston Teruya

## STORYTELLING IN THE GAPS

Behind the High Grass first grew from the gaps left by a book's missing text. In 2009, Soft Turns—the collaborative duo of artists Sarah Jane Gorlitz and Wojciech Olejnik—first picked up what appeared to be an historic travelogue for sale at a flea market in Berlin. They rediscovered it in their trove of files a year later, only to find that the narrative had been torn from the secondhand book. Only disjointed pages of photographs and an occasional caption remained. The leftover images appeared to document two European men as they traversed South America in the 1950s. Faced with the undefined spaces between those photos, Soft Turns began imagining their own interpretative links to connect the snapshots.

In photographs, the two men seemed to be travelers in the long colonialist tradition of rugged adventure and documentation of the exotic. Gorlitz and Olejnik eventually discovered that these European authors were Miroslav Zikmund and Jíří Hanzelka, two Czech engineers whose dream of traveling the world earned them sponsorship by a Czech car manufacturer after World War II. They documented their journeys in photo

graphs, recordings, films, and texts that were subsequently published and turned into radio plays for countrymen still left behind the Iron Curtain. Their work provided access for a curious audience without the means to travel across the globe themselves. However, after government crackdowns in the late 1960s, Zikmund and Hanzelka were restricted in their travel and their publications were not made available again until 1990s.

Over the course of their investigation and building of the lost narrative, Soft Turns embarked on their own travels, trekking to the hometown of Zikmund and Hanzelka and visiting a small museum dedicated to the two figures. Drawing from the tale of the two Czech explorers and Gorlitz and Olejnik's personal experiences and research, Behind the High Grass is a hybrid installation, born from the collapse of the paired narratives into one archive.

A series of rotating triangular shelves forming the backbone of the installation reference the unusual museum cases in Zikmund and Hanzelka's hometown of Zlin. However, instead of packing the shelves with the obscure ephemera of the



Czech duo's journey, Soft Turns opts for a stripped-down display, emphasizing the shelves themselves. By doing so, they apply their own selective editing of the conjoined narrative and underscore the storytelling and display apparatus, inviting the viewer to step into the role of new investigator. Behind the High Grass creates its own fragmentary narrative to be built and unraveled by the audience.

Alongside the series of curiously shaped display cases, two looped video clips serve as the foundation of Soft Turns's mysterious archive. One screen frames what appears to be a simple sepia-toned photograph of a handsome, sharp-featured European man situated amongst tall reeds, motioning upward. He is caught mid-gesture, his long sleeves carefully rolled back to his elbows as he holds something high above his head. A barely perceptible halo separates his outline from his outdoor surroundings. This thin delineation becomes more apparent over time, as he and his surroundings subtly shift in and out of focus, as if an untrained camera operator were continuously racking back and forth, attempting to capture the brief moment of clear focus for both the man and his surroundings before losing it again.

Soft Turns selected the photograph from the travelogue to utilize in their subdued video *Solitary Man with Nature*. The piece serves as an instructional moment within the installation as a whole, hinting at the careful pace needed to unravel the details woven into Soft Turns's work. What at first appears to be a still image begins to offer up its own curious movement. As the man and his surroundings alternately slip into and out of focus, never aligning long enough to provide full clarity, Gorlitz and Olejnik present a metaphor for their own (and the viewers') attempts to complete the story.

In the second video, *Behind the High Grass*, the rich wood slats of an endless series of train boxcars stream by. Every few seconds, the scene shifts to the interior of the train, where the passing landscape creates shifting patterns of light on the floor. At first the clip appears to simply reference the classic film setting of the moving train; but as suggested by the understated videography of *Solitary Man*

with *Nature*, the details of the video reward a patient eye. With each pass of the looping video, new layers become apparent. In the interior view, the shadowy silhouettes resolve into the silhouettes of trees. In the exterior view, hints of open sky and outstretched trees rhythmically flash through the gaps between the blurred cars. The cut edges of those trees eventually become noticeable, along with a slight stutter in movement, hinting at the stop-motion animated origins of the video.

Soft Turns constructs each frame of the videos through staged photographs to build the animation. Each image in the series is viewable only for a fraction of a second before being replaced by the next. Gorlitz and Olejnik build intensive apparatuses and sets, many of them populated by images taken from Zikmund and Hanzelka's book, all in the attempt to construct a seemingly seamless animation. As with many of the pieces in their installation, the subdued surfaces can only obliquely hint at the time and work behind them.

As artists used to dealing with stop-motion animation, Soft Turns came to look at the broken travelogue in a similarly stutter-step fashion. They understood that books in themselves can be viewed as fragmentary collections of pages, each leaf displaying its own discrete set of information. With a turn of the page, readers discover something new, unfurling an additional piece that requires a reassessment of the text to that point. Instead underscoring the typical conception of a book as a whole and resolved unit, their investigation into what they came to know as Zikmund and Hanzelka's travelogue challenged them with this deconstructed framework. Without the guiding hand of the textual narrative, each image and page became its own encounter—a layer that reached back to shift and reinterpret the prior photographs. Even though Gorlitz and Olejnik eventually discovered the origins of the publication and have slowly pieced together the biographies of the two Czech explorers, new morsels of information merely serve to tweak the artists' overarching narrative construction. The fragments of *Behind the High Grass* grant information in barely perceptible bits

that accumulate and reveal themselves over time. As a whole, the installation appears to be easily consumed in a quick scan of its spare gestures. However, Soft Turns's deliberate minimalism compels viewers to sit with the work, to begin the process of building their own narratives between the installation's subtle moments.

*Soft Turns bio*

*Currently based in Toronto, Canada and Malmö, Sweden, the artists Sarah Jane Gorlitz and Wojciech Olejnik have been collaborating on video installation and stop-motion animation since 2006. With simple means their work considers the relationship between the real and the imagined, the intimate and the unfamiliar. Currently their work may also be seen at kunstraum t27, Berlin, and at Centre Clark, Montreal, and has been presented at numerous international venues, including as part of the 17th International Contemporary Art Festival SESC\_Videobrasil in Sao Paulo, and at YYZ in Toronto.*

*Weston Teruya was born and raised in Honolulu, Hawai'i. He joined Southern Exposure's Curatorial Committee in 2009. He has exhibited artwork at Patricia Sweetow Gallery and Intersection for the Arts in San Francisco, the de Saissett Museum in Santa Clara and the di Rosa Preserve in Sonoma. In 2011, he will be exhibiting at Pro Arts in Oakland, the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco and the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center. Weston has had residencies at the Montalvo Arts Center and Oliver Ranch Studio Artist Residency and was a recipient of a 2009 Artadia grant. He received an MFA in Painting and Drawing and MA in Visual & Critical Studies from California College of the Arts.*