

A letter to Henrietta

Dorota Lukianska

Dorota Lukianska is an artist based in Göteborg and Berlin, whose work explores our societies' mythologies through images, language, and objects often appropriated and rearranged in alternate and fictional compositions. She started her maritime journey in 1986, when, at the age of 11, she began to travel back and forth between her original home, Poland, and her future home, Sweden. The boat trips were frequent: at Easter, Christmas, the Summer holidays, weddings, and funerals. These travels were always made by boat and involved eating, playing, and sleeping routines in the cabin overnight. Years later, she started to work on the psychological and physiological transformations that occurred between these two homes, reflecting on the acts of bidding farewell and greeting, of discovering and forgetting, on home as a place of belonging and renewal. Her interest in maritime imaginaries, both literally and metaphorically, took her to the Algarve in search of Portugal's navigation past. In the following text, she reflects on the letters she wrote to Henry the Navigator Prince of Portugal (1394-1460), known for his patronage of long-distance maritime journeys. In Lukianska's letter, Henry is not the man he used to be. Rather, she points to some newly discovered qualities the former Portuguese ruler's lingering presence reveals to the interrogations of our twenty-first century.

It was 2015 and I was writing from Porto, Portugal, explaining to Henry how he had caught my interest. I told him that I had started to have dreams about him, about his presence, while I was in Portugal. I told him that I was not convinced of the facts written about him in the history books, about the truthfulness of his depiction in portrait paintings. I felt that there was more to tell and to discover.

I started to collect oral histories, as well as myths and legends about Henry. When myths get repeated over and over, they eventually become accepted truths. I started to shape an installation exploring Henry's mythical life with

objects I found, and items that I collected and created. I soon discovered that this well-known representation of him – a man with a rounded hat – to be found on all paintings, was, apparently, not him at all. If he was not the man wearing that hat, then who was he? In another myth he was a she and maybe her name was Henrietta and she also wanted to discover the world. If she were a woman, how would she explore the world, and what would she find? In yet another story, he felt he had to leave Porto and abandon all his plans of starting a family to become Grand Master of the military order of Christ – surrounded by scientists and navigators – as a cover for his homosexuality. I hope that he followed his heart in the end.

I was trying to talk to Henry's ghost when I was in Raposeira, the place where he stayed in the Southern Algarve. He remained resolutely silent. Instead, his shadow pursued me in the streets while I was following his foot-steps. In his house I found signs that I think he wanted me to see, such as disappearing images of the sea that made me think of the current troubles with our environment: disappearing ocean life, a sea fighting to breathe due to oil 'bubbles'. And the broken sail above his bed? A souvenir of discoveries and colonization? Maybe he saw the poet Nayyirah Waheed trying to cross the ocean to come to Europe, only to realize that no one wanted her there? Did he collect an army of angry shells? The army is growing and the sea refuses to feed us; there are rumours that say it is only for now but what if it becomes permanent? Why was the chinaware in the kitchen unpainted? And what about the story of the last cork tree in Portugal? Did he see it coming? We could barely save it. We also realized that the fire came from inside the tree itself. It was a forest fire brought on by nature. In a second letter in 2017, I wrote about our deep concerns. I told him that we are all burning up and dying slowly inside. And I told him of how paralysed we feel, desperately wondering how to go on. How can things ever change? We don't have kings anymore, for whom the only way to be remembered was to wage a war. But, to be sure, we have greedy and incompetent politicians and dictators.

I told him about us, people who spend holidays on his old territory. I asked him if he remembers the first time he was there. This place is now crowded with tourists, people who have taken time off work and are still so very busy. I asked him whether we are better people now than we used to be, or whether we are just bystanders.

I told him that our world today is run by powers no longer visible to us, and that we have been kept away from the truths and distracted with small-

scale topics, while powerful nations negotiate our fate; that we still have wars, poverty and systems of enslavement. Is a long-lasting state of peace impossible, because we cannot come to terms with the true meaning of it? The boundary of the no man's land is gone. There are limits now more than ever. Every city, street and home has its border. Where does my land start? And what is the story of that land? I am writing a third letter to him, and I am convinced that Henry is actually Henrietta. I am telling her about oil drilling in the Algarve, about 'cleaners', who determine the course of people's lives, and about facts; about the sun that doesn't take a break, about democracy and diplomacy, about society and citizens in the present fairytale of the emperor's new clothes. I still have so many questions to ask her. In December, when I return to Raposeira, I will try to call her again.

I went to Raposeira, but I could no longer feel any connection to her. It made me sad, but I realized that it was time for me to move on. As she wanted to back then; as she wants me to today. My mind is in the North, in the Far North. On the land where the fire and lava eat all that lives. The fires from the inside really exist. My mind is there. My body will soon join. And there the story will continue.

Fig. 1: Dorota Lukianska, The nature was helping me. Cork sculptures, various sizes, 2017



Fig. 2: Dorota Lukianska, What if you were a woman? Photo, 40x35 cm, 2016



Fig. 3: Dorota Lukianska, *How is the sea doing?* Photo, 85x130, 2016



Fig. 4: Dorota Lukianska, *Your home in Raposeira*. Photo, 65x40 cm, 2016



Fig. 5: Dorota Lukianska, You were not present then. Photo, 35x60 cm, 2016

