

Zijn naam was Austerlitz/Austerlitz was his name

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A collaboration between A Tale of A Tub and Tlön Projects

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Guest curator: Sam Steverlynck

“Every great writer creates a new genre,” is a famous quote by philosopher and critical theorist Walter Benjamin. This not only applied to Benjamin, but also to the German author W.G. Sebald (1944 - 2001). Alongside a few collections of essays and poetry, Sebald wrote four novels in a decade before dying prematurely in a car accident, shortly after the publication of his masterpiece *Austerlitz*. Despite the brevity of his writing life, his unique style made him one of his generation’s most influential writers. Sebald’s books are literary collages; perfectly woven mosaics of facts, fiction and quotes. Incidentally, Sebald detested the word ‘novel’. After all, his stories could not be reduced to a plot. When his British publisher had to categorise his books as a genre, he did so in three: fiction, travel books and history – to his great frustration he was not permitted to add a fourth. Other attempts to classify Sebald’s work as ‘auto-fiction’, ‘documentary fiction’ or ‘essay-like semi-fiction’ are inadequate. After all, Sebald succeeded like no other in mixing (cultural) historical facts, autobiographical elements and fiction together into a single, inextricable knot. Moreover, he interlarded his writings with (family)portraits, his own photography, found pictures and other documents. This enabled him to make his stories feel real, thereby exacerbating the tension between fact and fiction.

Sebald grew up in post-war Germany, where the latent wounds and shame of World War II were left undiscussed. During his childhood he paged through a family album and – to his great dismay – saw his father in a Nazi uniform. When he confronted the latter, his father answered: “I can’t remember that.” The experience left a lasting impression. This not only explains his life-long obsession with the German taboo concerning the Second World War and Jewry, but also the use of photography for eliciting memories. Or, in his case, to conjure up new stories surrounding them.

Sebald escaped the claustrophobic atmosphere of post-war Germany by studying literature in the United Kingdom, later lecturing at university there. He swapped his academic style of writing for more associative connections between a huge diversity of sources. For his stories, the self-exiled author often based himself on childhood memories which he managed – like no other – to reforge into fiction by retaining some elements, morphing or exaggerating others. Sometimes, he would even surreptitiously incorporate whole sentences from Stendhal or Kafka, whom he admired beyond measure. The touching portrait of his Jewish primary school teacher who committed suicide as the result of an unprocessed family trauma, was modelled on his own memories and partly on Wittgenstein’s experiences as a teacher at an Austrian village school for the short story *Paul Bereyter* in *The Emigrants*.

Stylistically, Sebald is notable for his long, meandering associative sentences, soaked in melancholy. He primarily does so in his third ‘novel’ *The Rings of Saturn*, which adopts the narrative structure of a travelogue based on a number of walks through the English countryside. It is a mix of autobiography, history writing and cultural-philosophical essays in which he manages to weld together historic facts, encyclopaedic trivia and anecdotes, once again marbled with his own black & white photographs, reproductions or pedagogical illustrations.

His final book, the widely praised masterpiece *Austerlitz*, is marginally more akin to a ‘classic novel’. It can even be viewed as the culmination and synthesis of his writing. The book further details the repressed trauma of the characters in *The Emigrants* with countless asides and associations like in *The Rings of Saturn* though now more for the benefit of the plot. At Antwerp Central Station, the nameless narrator meets one Jacques Austerlitz, a somewhat closed man who expounds at length on cultural history and architecture. Both men keep meeting each other in various cities over the years. Initially, Austerlitz never discusses his feelings. Until, suddenly,



repressed memories of youth arise of how he was put on a so-called *Kindertransport* from Czechoslovakia to the United Kingdom as a child in 1939 to escape the concentration camps. In his adoptive country, he not only had to take a new name, but also suppress his mother tongue and past. It is a heart-rending portrait of an eloquent man who cannot express his emotions. The story rises above the issues surrounding the Holocaust – which is not really dealt with that extensively in the book – thanks to the description of the repercussions of this trauma in the present.

Zijn naam was Austerlitz/Austerlitz was his name refuses to literally illustrate the book. The exhibition is more about attempting to elicit *Austerlitz*'s atmosphere and paying homage to Sebald's unique combination of text and images. Sebald is one of the few authors whose name – like Kafka or Borges – has become an adjective. *Sebaldian* refers to a melancholic atmosphere, old railway stations, dusty natural history museums, 19th-century spas, yellowing archived documents in display cases and fading albums of black & white class photos and family portraits. The artists selected for this exhibit tackle themes evoked by *Austerlitz* as well as in Sebald's other books as the author left us a conspicuously coherent oeuvre. The exhibition therefore also deals with subjects such as the impossibility of communication, memory's unreliability, history's latent life in the present, the use of found photographs to evoke or create memories and the unique combination of historic facts, autobiography and fiction. All fascinating themes the author has managed to meld together in his inimitable style that continues to inspire 20 years after his premature death.

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The exhibition *Zijn naam was Austerlitz/Austerlitz was his name* marks the second edition of an annual collaboration between A Tale of A Tub and Tlön Projects and presents a variety of artworks selected from the *imaginary collection* of Tlön Projects. This imaginary collection is formed by the convergence of selected artworks from various international private art collections, whereby Tlön Projects aims to make artworks – that would otherwise have been largely shielded from the public – accessible.

The works comprising *Zijn naam was Austerlitz/Austerlitz was his name* originate from the following collections: Laurent Fiévet (France), Edgard F. Grima (France), G + W (The Netherlands), Joseph Kouli (France), Reyn van der Lugt (The Netherlands), plancius art collection (The Netherlands), Alexander Ramselaar (The Netherlands), Family Servais (Belgium), Veys-Verhaevert (Belgium) along with other collections that wish to remain anonymous.

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