

THINGS

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Before tackling essential issues, I would like to honestly confess that, besides being a freelance critic, I also run a gallery at the Tartu Art House and was thus directly involved in the birth of the idea of this particular work, as well as in the technical side of the installation.

The six-part work *Things* by Jevgeni Zolotko,¹ one of the brightest of the younger Estonian sculptors, was displayed in the attic of the Tartu Art House for six months, 19 March–6 October 2012. The idea was born after the Art House suggested to Zolotko that he work with the attic. The proposal was based on the playful but sincere realisation that the attic room, covered with an even layer of grey dust, resembled the monochrome abandoned environment of Zolotko's installations. It would have been appropriate to put a sign up on the door saying *Zolotko's Office*, and the work would have been completed. Zolotko, of course, did not agree to this kind of banal dubious deal, but the idea of undertaking the attic had been set, and a year later the first part of *Things* was opened.

The following is not an art-critical commentary on the work, but rather something like a reportage-description. The reason for choosing this genre is, first of all, Zolotko's

sharp reactions to the vocabulary of prestige language often used while talking about his work. According to the artist, this is not an installation, the work does not examine anything (least of all the room), despite the temptation, drawing parallels with archaeology is the wrong interpretation, and the moral enlightenment that struck the current writer at the opening of the fifth part, *Ecce homo*, that the essence of the whole series was humanism, turned out to be a misunderstanding. However, although the artist's world-view is directly religious, *Things* does not constitute religious art in its classic sense (iconography can be disregarded – the dove is not the holy spirit). Instead, it is a reflection of Zolotko's own picture of the world.

Thus, although the above can be classified as opinions influenced by the close cooperation between the artist and the critic, it still seems more sensible to tackle *Things* by describing the work in a way that is as faithful to the author as possible, which then provides the necessary layer before any critical analysis. Zolotko's view of the world, modern in form but occasionally rather archaic in content, is undoubtedly a unique combination in the Estonian art scene.

Chapter I. *Speech*

Naming is one of the most archetypal images in the myths of creation. Thus Zolotko's work in the attic also begins with naming things. The thoroughly prosaic attic as it is realised as an artistic space by the artist who names the things he has found there. The loudspeakers issue a list of things in a monotonous booming voice ... The list is long enough to symbolically cover the whole reality, at the same time adding a fascinating layer when at the end of reading the list the voice becomes tired and coarse.

Chapter II. *The Loss*

Directly after the world was created, we were deprived of it. This is the central intrigue of the work: man's relations with things. An attic is a strange zone where things have not been thrown away, but equally they do not quite exist, so we can call it a junk room of memory.

The artist has removed all the things from the attic and filled it with books made of pulped paper known from his earlier works. The essential element of the chapter is a video where a young man sitting at the attic window reads extracts from the *Book of Moses* about

the genealogy of the human race since Adam (1Ms5). According to Zolotko, this is one of the most peculiar parts of the Bible, because it is practically impossible today to understand the meaning of the family tree leading back to the first human being. This is a text that associates with the beginning of everything, but it has become an incomprehensible, illegible muddle.

The things in the attic form a layer of memory, and if we remove this layer there will be a gap, although the consequences remain unclear for the time being.

Chapter III. *Things*

The title chapter *Things* is visually perhaps one of the most impressive. A sieve has sifted out smaller items from the debris on the attic floor, and these are placed for our viewing on two graduated altars. These things cannot be named and thus constitute the beyond of the attic.

The images of the Last Judgement Day in the form of the altars and the sieve are, according to the author, intentional but not completely meaningful. Sieving things is indeed a reference to the beyond, although at

Jevgeni Zolotko. *Things*. Attic of the Tartu Art House, 2012



the same time it is a purely practical or ethical question: on what basis should the displayed things be separated from the debris?

Chapter IV. *Dove*

Chapter IV starts the conditional solution of the raised intrigue. The previous chapter contains a reference to archaeology and an attempt to make the unnamed meaningful, whereas now the reconstruction attempts are properly finished. A room with walls painted white displays found objects. The central object is the Dove, the only living being, who is shown in many forms: a photograph of the found skeleton, the skeleton itself, its 3D reconstruction, and a dove in a sculptural form.

Chapter V. *Ecce Homo*

The static *Ecce Homo* is both a semantic pause and the solution to the intrigue posed in Chapter II. In the second part, a large-format projection depicts the young man reading the incomprehensible genealogy, bringing back his father from the country of the dead. Man is defined by remembering his roots. It is no coincidence that the title indicates man in the singular, but the photograph shows father and son; a human being is a human being only in relation to others.

The key text of the chapter is an excerpt from Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls* about the layers of things in the Pljuškin manor house, which even too figuratively describes the nor-

mal situation in the attic. At the same time, it presents a moral evaluation: the way we relate to things reflects back in our human relationships.

Chapter VI

Every single thing, to the last detail, has been put back in place. The sound track is Helena Tulve's *Stella matutina*, where the lyrics are the *Litany of Loreto*, dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

Chapter VI does not have a title, but brings us from the relationships between human beings and things to eternity. Zolotko does not agree with the opposition between the spiritual and the material world. The Virgin Mary was the purest part of the material world through whom God became material and, against the backdrop of the litany dedicated to her, the attic is still the same as it was: nothing has changed. Man's moral obligation is to cleanse the material world. Nothing is disgusting, and everything is equally harmonious. This brings us to the work's epigraph: "Love all the creation of God, both the whole and each single grain of sand. Love every little leaf, every ray of God's sun. Love animals, love plants, love every single thing. If you love every single thing, you will also understand God's secret in things" Dostojevski's *The Brothers Karamazov* (from the conversation with the old wise man Zosima).

1 Zolotko has been awarded the Köler Prize (2011), issued by the Museum of Contemporary Art of Estonia, and in 2012 he received the Anton Starkopf award from the town of Tartu, the only award in Estonia for sculptors.

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