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TERESA FEODOROWNA RIES AND *THE WITCH*

Despite the fact that she was Jewish and a woman, Teresa Feodorowna Ries (1866-1956) gained the position of a prominent artist at the time of Austro-Hungarian Empire and the First Austrian Republic. In 1938 her studio was 'Aryanised' and she had to flee to Switzerland.¹ Vienna quickly forgot about her, but traces of her activity can still be found in the city's public space. She was one of the first women sculptors in the Austro-Hungarian Empire to receive a state commission, for the figure of Saint Barbara for the Church of Our Lady of the Sea (Madonna del Mare) in Pula - a city today situated in Croatia. The sculpture can still be seen on the upper part of the church's facade. It is situated in the middle of a group of five saints and is the only female saint adorning the facade. It is also the only sculpture there that is made by a woman.² Teresa Ries also made a bust of Mark Twain and a statue of Count Johann Wilczek, an art patron and an explorer who supported polar expeditions. Wilczek derived from Polish noble family. His daughter Elisabeth von Kinsky was a model for the *Saint Barbara* in Pula.³ The statue of Wilczek installed at the Wiener Rettung building still exists in the public space in Vienna. In the Kongress Park, we can see her sculpture group entitled *Invincibles*,

which was removed during the dictatorship of Dollfuss and reinstalled after the Second World War.⁴ Some of her works are stored in the Wien Museum and exhibited from time to time.

Teresa Ries's name was recalled in 1994 in the book *Künstlerinnen in Österreich 1897 - 1938. Malerei. Plastik. Architektur* by Sabine Plakolm-Forsthuber. Almost two decades later, by means of the book *The Memory Factory: The Forgotten Women Artists of Vienna 1900* by Julie Johnson, the story of Teresa Ries gained more international recognition. Although her works have appeared in important exhibitions such as *The Better Half: Jewish Women Artists Before 1938* in the Jewish Museum in Vienna, and *City of Women (Stadt der Frauen)* in the Lower Belvedere in Vienna, many details regarding her life still remain unknown or uncertain.

I am writing this article from the perspective of an artist who has been also educated as an art historian. The case of Teresa Ries, and especially her sculpture entitled *The Witch*, are the subject of my research-based art project entitled *Lost Element*, on which I began to work during the KulturKontakt artist-in-residence programme in Vienna in 2016. A second opportunity to go back to Vienna and

continue my artistic investigation appeared in 2019, thanks to an OeAD scholarship. During this period I had a chance to discuss my project with prof. Marina Grzinic, who runs the Studio of Postconceptual Art Practices at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. At that time I also met the artists Valerie Habsburg, who was also working on the subject of Teresa Ries, and Simone Bader, a professor at the Academy interested in the biographies of women artists. Just a few weeks before our meeting Valerie Habsburg managed to purchase Teresa Ries's private archive, which may shed a new light on the life and art of this artist. A person who also contributed much to clarify some questions about the details of Teresa Ries's life during my stay in Vienna was Anita Stelzl-Gallian, of the Commission for Provenance Research/ the Archive of the Austrian Federal Monuments Authority

There are three intertwining threads in my article. The first one refers to some facts from Ries's life, that seem to be significant for my research. The second concerns the fate of her sculptures during and after the Second World War, with a particular focus on *The Witch* (Die Hexe), which, according to the surviving documents and the opinions of art restorers, has been damaged on more than one occasion, and under varying circumstances. I also consider possible causes of this damage, which in my opinion is related to the rebellious meaning of this sculpture, both in its title and in its form of artistic expression. The last thread is an explanation of my own interest as a contemporary Polish woman artist in Teresa Ries and her *Witch*.

According to the documents preserved in the Archives of the City of Vienna, Teresa Feodorowna Ries was born on 30 January 1866 in Budapest, into a Jewish family, as a daughter of Bertha (*née* Stern) and Gutmann Ries.⁵ She herself declared that she was Russian, although the registration document gives her place of origin as Prague-Bohemian. Although many discrepancies concerning the place and date of her birth have appeared in different sources, according to her autobiography she spent her youth in Moscow where, as she claimed, she attended the 'Moscow Academy'. We may assume

that she was a student of the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, which was a branch of the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg. We can deduce from her book that she was a formally-registered student, which would not have been possible in other centres of artistic life in Europe in that time, where women were completely barred from studying at the most prestigious art academies and could not matriculate in the normal manner. But in Russia, due to the reforms introduced by Tsar Alexander II, including access to higher education for women, this was possible. It is also worth mentioning that the first women art students came from Jewish families.⁶ However, Teresa Ries did not enjoy her status long. After a promising beginning as one of the most gifted and valued students, she was expelled from the Academy because she had challenged the authority of a professor in front of the other students.⁷

She therefore decided to search for better opportunities for her artistic career in Vienna. The young artist, dreaming of being a sculptor, was impressed by the quality of artworks produced in the Viennese Academy of Fine Arts. But its door was closed to her because she was a woman, and in the field of sculpture women were even less welcome than in other art disciplines. Only when she showed a photograph of her sculpture entitled *The Sleepwalker* (Die Somnambule) to a professor of the Academy, Edmund Hellmer, was she able to convince him to take her on as a private student. Hellmer promoted her in Viennese artistic society, but he also used her talent to his own advantage. She secretly took some of his commissions, which he later exhibited under his own name, including *The Lamp Carrier* (Die Lampenträgerin). Hellmer received the Grand Gold Medal (Grande Médaille d'Or) for this sculpture at the Paris World Exhibition in 1900.⁸

The Sleepwalker, although providing evidence of technical skill and an extraordinary feeling for sculpture on the part of the young artist, follows the aesthetical cliché of the representation of a woman as an object created to please a male viewer. *The Sleepwalker* depicts a young woman, still a girl, who, is trying to walk

with her eyes closed against a wall. The wind blowing against her face is stirring her long curly hair and revealing the shapes of her adolescent body, hidden under her nightdress sculpted in the manner of wet drapery covering naked female bodies in ancient Greek statues. These patriarchal clichés, and an artistic education based on the study of copies of antique statues, were unconsciously revealed in this debut artwork by Ries. However, this sculpture depicting a young woman walking with her eyes closed and with her hands slightly, as if shyly outstretched in front of her and exploring the world with the sense of touch instead of sight, could be interpreted as a representation of the artist herself. She feels her vocation for art and follows it, but is still uncertain which way to choose in order to achieve her goal.

The real debut of Ries in Vienna was at an exhibition in the Künstlerhaus, where she showed her sculpture entitled *The Witch* (1895). This sculpture depicts a vigorous sorceress preparing herself for a Witches' Sabbath. The naked female figure with dishevelled hair cuts her toenails with large scissors, while looking at the viewer defiantly and biting her lips in a smile both a malicious and lascivious. The initial opinions of fellow-artists and critics proclaimed the work a disaster. The sculpture was considered to be scandalous and disgusting. The art critic Emmerich Ranzoni greeted the artist the day before the opening in the Künstlerhaus with the words "Is that Ries? How can she support making such a horrific grimace out of noble marble? One should deny her entry!". However things took a different course when the Emperor visited the exhibition and saw the sculpture. As Ries recalled, he engaged her in conversation for over half an hour, and the next day the newspapers discussed *The Witch* at length.⁹

The circumstances in which the artist decided to create the figure of the witch are also worth considering. Bored with sculpting nothing but busts, which was a part of the standard training for sculpture students she felt a need to find her own subject in art. This story is connected with the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, where Ries studied privately with Professor Edmund Hellmer, and used his atelier as a place in which

to work. In her book she recalls how she came up with the idea of the *Witch*. One day after leaving the academy she stumbled upon an old broom in a dark stairway leading to the basement. She had been contemplating plaster models of antique statuary in the Academy's auditorium, and wondered why the hands and feet of the statues were so beautiful. She concluded that they expressed the sublime mood of the artist.

Beautiful hands and feet, toilette, broom, witches' Sabbath, a witch who so enchanted and enchants, who has power over humans, power, power – my fantasy took flight, and my thoughts had taken form. I created the witch after an academy model named Anna Faust ... Faust – witch – witches Sabbath!¹⁰

Although, as Per Faxneld notes, witches were not a rare inspiration for artists at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Ries's sculpture was an extraordinary example of an artwork challenging the old patriarchal order. He agrees with Ulrike Stelzl, who concludes that the witch was a symbol of feminine power for Ries.¹¹ At this point, we should juxtapose *The Sleepwalker* with *The Witch*, as two sculptures created one shortly after the other, both realistic and influenced by the Secessionist style, both depicting a young woman, but completely different in their expression. The image of a soulful but also fragile and defenceless *Sleepwalker* with her eyes closed contrasts with the glance both piercing and witty of *The Witch*, looking straight into the viewer's eyes. Ries's *Witch* seems to reflect in a broken mirror the patriarchal imagination of female beauty, which was expressed in a peaceful face and graceful poses and gestures. The confused feelings that *The Witch* may evoke in a viewer today must have been even more striking in the case of Ries's contemporaries. First of all, Ries's *Witch* does not follow the simple pattern of an old and ugly crone, which appears in the artworks of her male colleagues. Her body is young and attractive, but her grimace and her pose are rebarbative. The witch as depicted is seated with her legs slightly spread apart, and





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1 Teresa Feodorowna Ries, *Saint Barbara*, c.a. 1903, The Church of our Lady of the Sea in Pula, Croatia, photo: Anka Leśniak.

2 The facade of the Church of our Lady of the Sea in Pula with the figure of Saint Barbara in the central part, Croatia, photo: Anka Leśniak.

3 The facade of The Church of our Lady of the Sea in Pula, Croatia, photo: Anka Leśniak.

4 Teresa Feodorowna Ries, *The Witch*, 1895, photography from the the autobiography of the artist *Die Sprache des Steines*, 1928.

5 Teresa Feodorowna Ries, *The Witch*, the exhibition *The Better Half: Jewish Women Artists Before 1938*, Jewish Museum in Vienna 2016, photo: Anka Leśniak. Courtesy the Wien Museum.

6 Anka Leśniak, *The restoration of the Witch. Part I. An interview with Marija Milchin*, video-work, 2019.

7 Anka Leśniak, *The Witch in Red*, video-work, 2016.



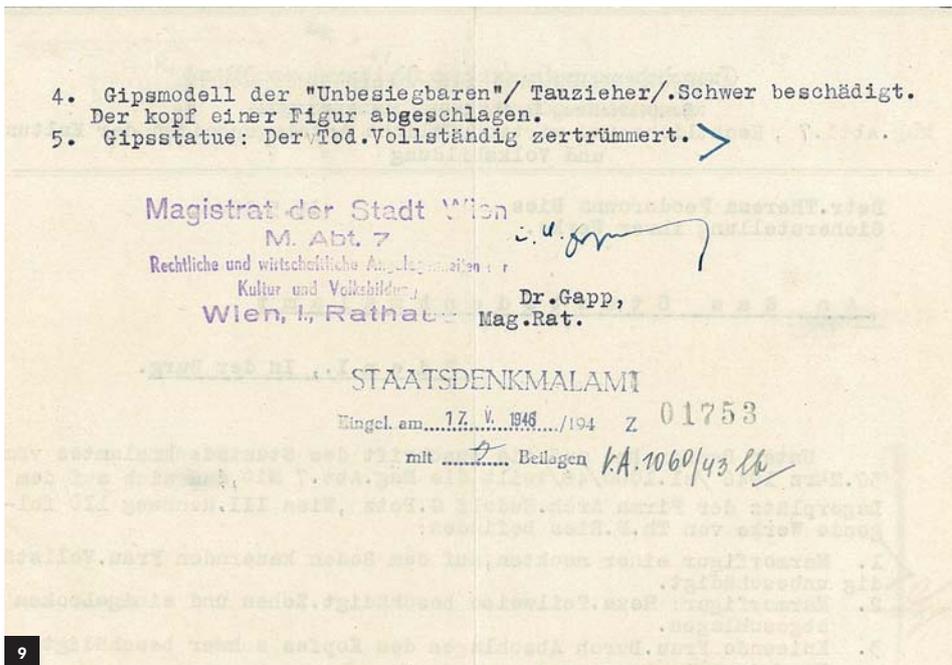
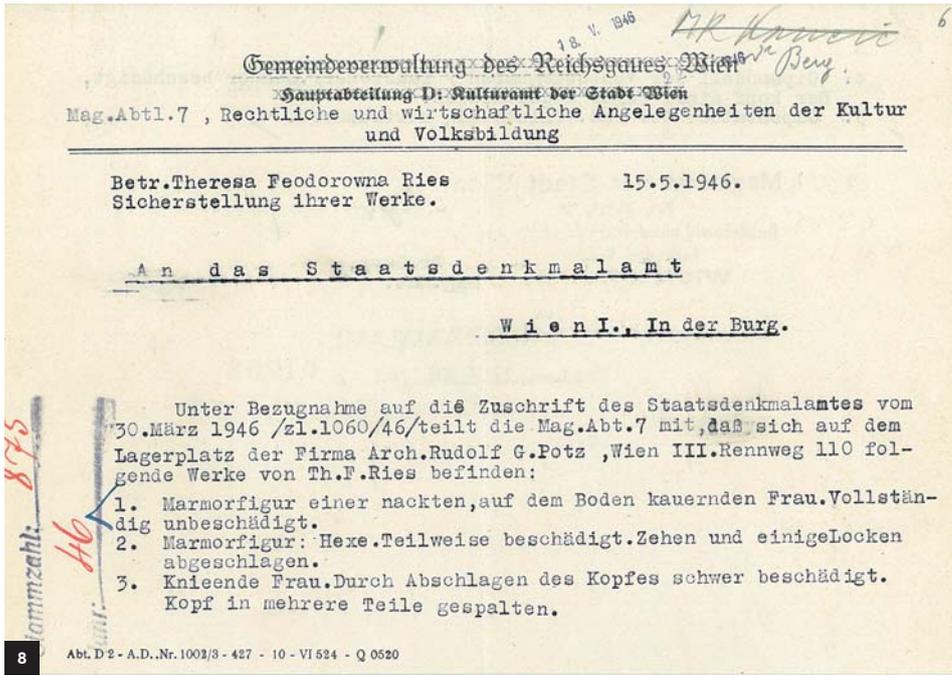
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8 BDA-Archiv, Restitutionsmaterialien, K44-2, PM Ries-Feodorowna S.6V. Courtesy thw Commission for Provenance Research in Vienna.

9 BDA-Archiv, Restitutionsmaterialien, K44-2, PM Ries-Feodorowna S.6V. Courtesy the Commission for Provenance Research in Vienna.

is cutting her toenails with large shears. We are unable to see her genitals only because a strand of her hair 'accidentally' covers her lap. The 'toilette of The Witch' is a reversal, a sort of profanation of the 'toilette of Venus' – a classical subject, frequently appearing in artworks throughout the centuries. Ries's *Witch* is conscious of her sexual attractiveness just as Venuses in the artworks of the Old Masters are, but she is not waiting passively and half-asleep for an (art) lover/voyeur who is going to (symbolically) consume her body. The Witch symbolises an active sexual power, and is ready to 'devour' the viewer. With shears or scissors as her attribute, she evokes associations with the Three Fates, one of whom cuts the thread of human life at the appropriate time. In an internet encyclopedia on Russian Art and Architecture, *The Witch* is given the title *The Kiev Witch*.¹² Could *The Witch* be the result of inspiration deriving from Russian and German folklore? Could we see in Ries's *Witch* traces of the iconography of Lilith, the beautiful female demon, a temptress from Jewish tradition? Although Ries declared that she was Russian, in fact she was a cosmopolitan with multiethnic roots, which must have influenced her art.

When I began to be interested in *The Witch*, it was really striking and surprising for me that an artist only 22 years old had created such a powerful artwork. I even included this information in my video-work entitled *The Witch* from 2016.¹³ The information that Ries was born in 1874 has been repeated in many sources. Based on this knowledge, I interpreted *The Witch* as evidence of the extraordinary intuition that leads promising young artists, rather than as the result of a conscious decision by an already experienced artist and woman. But the fact that Ries was born probably a few years earlier than 1874 sheds a new light on *The Witch*. In these circumstances the figure, full of vigour and eroticism, and at the same time a rebel who challenges the divine and patriarchal order, who sows mayhem and goes beyond stereotypes, could be understood as the manifesto of a still young, but already mature artist.¹⁴

Over the next few years, comment on Teresa Ries appeared frequently in Viennese newspapers. She also received many private

commissions, evidence for which is provided by the photographs of her sculptures included in her autobiography *The Language of Stone* (Die Sprache des Steines), published in 1928. She not only exhibited in Vienna, but was also invited to participate in international exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale or the Paris World Exhibition.

Even during her lifetime the sculptures of Teresa Ries were compared to those of August Rodin's. However, the similarities between Rodin's and Ries's sculptures still need more and deeper research, and the assumption that she was his follower appears too simplistic. Here it is worth drawing attention to her figure of *Lucifer*, unfortunately destroyed during the Second World War, which evokes associations with Rodin's *Thinker*. Both sculptures were created at the same time, and Ries's sculpture was presented to the public earlier than Rodin's.¹⁵ Two other outstanding sculptures created by her under the influence of the Secessionist style are *The Soul Returning to God*, at the Central Cemetery in Vienna, and *Eva*, a recumbent female figure with soft, rounded forms, which today belongs to the collection of the Wien Museum. Ries was not only a successful artist, but she also attracted people's interest on account of a lifestyle challenging the morality of bourgeois society. "There's too much Feodorowna Ries", Karl Kraus complained of the press interest in the artist when she opened her atelier at the Palais Liechtenstein in Vienna.¹⁶ Her eccentric personality was caricatured in the play *Der Feldherrnhügel* by Roda Roda.¹⁷

Art historians working on the subject of Ries ask the question, how did it happen that an artist hailed 'a genius' by her contemporaries, among them Stefan Zweig, disappeared completely into oblivion?¹⁸ Sabine Plakolm-Forsthuber, while working on her book on Austrian women artists of the turn of 19th and 20th centuries, found a few sculptures by Ries in the open space in Oberlaa, on the outskirts of Vienna. These sculptures had been vandalised, some parts were missing and others were covered in red paint. Among them were *Eva* and *The Witch*. This last was found with the face painted red, and the hand with its scissors missing... To reconstruct what happened, we have

to look into the archives of the Wien Museum and the Archive of the Federal Monuments Authority Austria (Archiv des Bundesdenkmalamtes). The sculptures were probably transported to Oberlaa on the occasion of the World Garden Exhibition WIG 74.¹⁹ They were found there about 20 years later. They were already a part of the collection of the Wien Museum at that time, but most likely not considered particularly important. After the incident had been reported, the sculptures were taken to the museum's depot and restored. During the last few decades they have been exhibited with increasing frequency, especially *The Sleepwalker*, *Eva* and *The Witch*.

The debate regarding *The Witch* reaches a different level after seeing contemporary photographs of the sculpture, which show the hand with scissors missing. Through an unexplained loss of this important element, the artwork has changed both its expression and its meaning. With the use of new media art, I am trying to 'reconstruct' the lost element. My research-based art project also poses the question, how it is possible to get at the 'truth' of the lost element, to describe it and 're-create' it through contemporary cultural discourses and interpretations. As part of my research, which I also call an artistic investigation, I interviewed art historians, curators, art restorers and contemporary artists from Vienna.

The first question that fired my imagination was, in what circumstances had *The Witch's* hand disappeared? Was it vandalised by the Nazis, for ideological reasons before or during the war? Or was it perhaps hit by shrapnel from an explosive weapon? The damage could also have happened during transportation of the sculpture, because of carelessness on the part of the people responsible for it. And the last supposition is that the hand was stolen, either as a kind of sexual fetish, or as an 'amputation' by a mad person motivated by a fear of castration. Thus the aim of my artistic investigation is rather to show what this missing element signifies, how its loss is meaningful, and how we can reconstruct it by means of contemporary art in contemporary contexts, than to find the missing hand or to reconstruct it in a physical way. However, the circumstances

in which the hand disappeared seem to be important, because they somehow reveal the changing attitude of Austrian policy towards the history of the country and the legacy of women artists as a part of it.

The Witch was among the sculptures that Ries had to leave in her atelier in the Lichtenstein Palace when the Nazis occupied the country.²⁰ In 1941, when she was already in her mid-seventies, Ries had to flee from Vienna in order to save her life. During her exile in Switzerland she used the surname Loewitowa, after her ex-husband. After she had left, her atelier was taken over by Gustinus Ambrosi, who collaborated with Hitler's architect Albert Speer. The museum dedicated to Ambrosi was established in 1977, and remained open to the public until 2017(!).²¹ In 1948, there was discussion of the idea of dedicating a room at the Wien Museum to Ries, but the idea was never implemented.²²

Ries managed to avoid death in a concentration camp, but her exile in Switzerland was a death for her as an artist. She still probably made some pictures and sketches in the Casa of Santa Brigitta, which was her first shelter, and then in the retirement home in Villa Emilia.²³ After she left Vienna and found shelter in Switzerland, she desperately tried to find out about the fate of her sculptures. She never returned to Vienna, but she corresponded incessantly with the Viennese and Austrian authorities, and with Fritz Hunziker, who was the Austrian consul in Bern in that time. In her stirring letter to the ex-Chancellor of Austria, dating from 1946, she asks for state protection for her artworks, to rescue them from destruction and vandalism.²⁴ In the same year, the sculptures were found in the yard of the architect Rudolf Potz, who had probably got acquired them from SS officers. The sculptures were taken to the City Art Collections, the continuation successor of which today is the Wien Museum. *The Witch* was among Ries's few surviving artworks.

As Rudolf Potz testified, he was ordered by the Nazis authorities to clean out the atelier after the sculptor Ries, where he found a lot of plaster models alongside marble sculptures. Some of the sculptures, among them *The Witch* and *The*

Sleepwalker, were taken to his company's yard, where they were damaged during bombing in 1944. *The Sleepwalker* suffered the most, and probably at this time the sculpture lost its hands. Potz added that *The Witch* and *The Kneeling Woman* were also damaged during the Russian invasion.²⁵ A document from 15 May 1946 drawn up by an official from the City Hall of Vienna states that five sculptures by Ries were found in Potz's yard: the marble figures of a recumbent naked woman, probably *Eve* (the only one not damaged), *The Witch* (partially damaged), *The Kneeling Woman* (without the head, which had been broken into several pieces), the plaster model of *Invincibles* (badly damaged), and *Death* (completely destroyed). According to this document the figure of the witch "lacks some toes and curls of hair."²⁶ The fact that the official sent to Potz's yard noticed such tiny losses and did not mention a missing hand, allows us to presume that *The Witch* still had the hand with scissors at this time. However, there is no mention in this document of *The Sleepwalker*, which according to Potz was also in his company's yard. Why did the official not mention it? Should we rely on his testimony?

While collecting materials for the series of artworks inspired by the Ries's case, I interviewed two art restorers who specialised in stone restoration: Marija Milchin, from the University of Applied Art in Vienna, and Johann Nimmircher, from the Department of Conservation and Restoration of the Federal Monuments Authority in Austria. I was curious as to their opinion of whether the hand of *The Witch* should be reconstructed or not. I also asked them if they could identify the cause of the damage to the sculpture. According to their statements, the sculpture could have been damaged on more than one occasion. Milchin noticed characteristic hollows in the surface of the face of *The Witch*, which may have been made by shrapnel.²⁷ Nimmrichter considered that it is very unlikely that *The Witch* was intentionally damaged by the Nazis, on account of the subject of the sculpture or the Jewish origin of its author. Both the theme of the witch, frequently appearing in German folklore, and the realistic aesthetics of

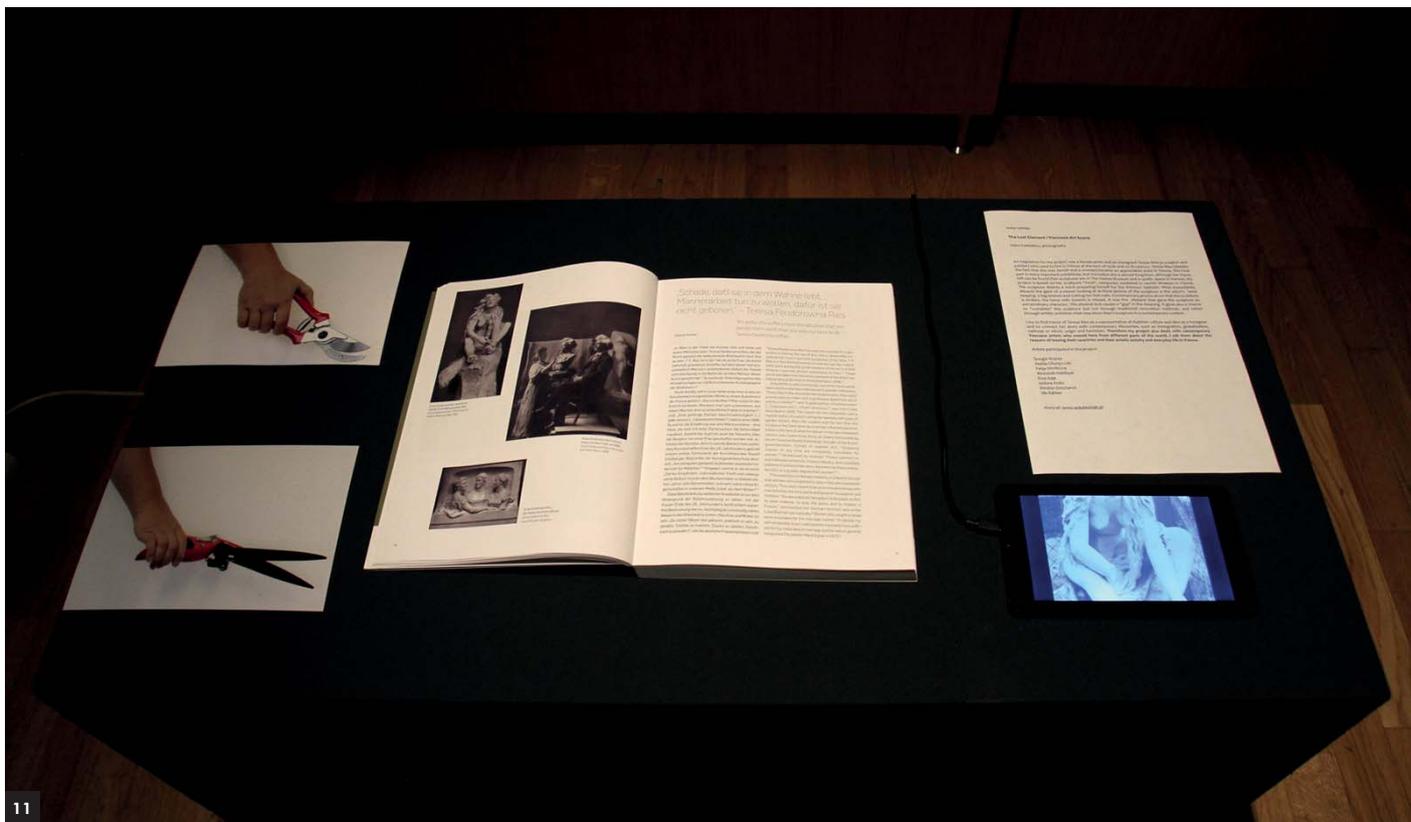
the sculpture itself did not run counter to Nazi ideas about art.²⁸ And Austrian Nazis, unlike their German allies, were generally reluctant to destroy artworks.

We can also notice round holes in the place of the toenails, and in the missing parts of *The Witch*'s hair. These holes are the traces of the conjunction of two pieces of marble connected by means of metal rods. However, the sculpture is rather monolithic, consisting of a single piece of marble. The holes may thus be either the traces of an early restoration of the sculpture, or could have been made by the artist herself if, while working on the sculpture, she encountered a brittle part of the marble.²⁹ In this case, she had to connect the pieces of marble, and these parts of the sculpture became more fragile and consequently more susceptible to damage.

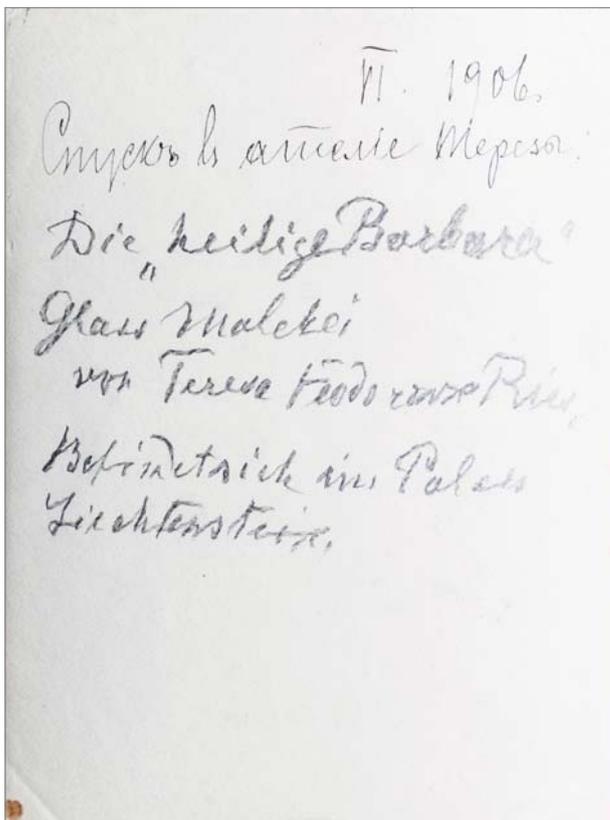
The other damage, such as the red paint or spray on the face of *The Witch*, is much later and is probably the result of an act of vandalism committed between the 1970s and the 1990s, when Ries's sculptures were left exposed in an exterior setting. Even if we assume that there was nothing other than an aggressive stupidity behind the attack on her sculptures, we can see a kind of deliberate logic in the manner of their devastation. The lap of *The Kneeling Woman*, the buttocks and thighs of *Eve* and finally the 'provocative' face of *The Witch* were all painted in red. All these parts are associated with female sexuality. Thus the question arises, to what extent did the subject of the sculptures – female nudes – trigger the aggression against them? It is also worth noticing, as Johann Nimmrichter indicates, that some of the damage to the face of *The Witch*, such as an irregular hollow in the left eye and a missing part of the nose, could have been made intentionally by a sharp instrument. Looking at the photographs of *The Witch* made immediately after the sculpture was found in Oberlaa, we can see that this damage was made after the face of the sculpture had been covered in red paint.³⁰ Thus we do not know how many times the sculpture was vandalised while it had been left in an exterior setting. In the photographs referred to above we can also see that one foot of *The Witch* is lying next to the sculpture. This part



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10 Anka Leśniak, *The Witch*, video-work, 2016

11 Anka Leśniak, Re-construction of the Witch, the exhibition of KulturKontakt Artists-in-residence, Vienna, 2016.

12 Teresa Feodorowna Ries, *Saint Barbara*, a stained glass window. An archival photography with the inscription on the back. The Private Archive of Teresa Feodorowna Ries. Photo: Courtesy Valerie Habsburg.

was subsequently reattached to the sculpture, but the hand is still missing.

To conclude the issue of the damage to the sculpture, we still do not know under which circumstances the hand disappeared. It is rather unlikely that the Nazis damaged it. It is more probable that the damage happened during the bombing of Vienna, when the sculpture suffered from shrapnel. But when we realise the meaning of a female hand holding scissors, which can be interpreted as a castration tool, it seems to be more likely that the hand was either stolen, as a sort of fetish, for example, or was intentionally smashed. At this point we can conclude that the damage to *The Witch* was 'accidental' rather than ideological. However, if we remind ourselves that it was Nazi politics that resulted in subsequent damage to Ries's artistic heritage and the oblivion of her achievements, none of this damage can in fact be regarded as simply accidental. But Nazi politics always has its roots in patriarchal societies, based on the persecution of so-called 'feminine values', minorities and otherness.

Teresa Ries died on 16 July 1956 in Lugano and was buried in the Jewish Cemetery there.³¹ Until this year, when the certificate of her death was discovered and the date of her death was confirmed, the year had only been presumed on the basis of the date of her last letter to Fritz Hunziker, 4 February 1956, written with a shaking hand.³²

The exile of Teresa Ries was not limited only to the period of her life that she spent in Switzerland. It should also not be interpreted as simply the fate of an individual. The fate of Teresa Ries is a representative case of the exclusion of minorities from the dominant narrative. As Whitney Chadwick proves in her book *Women, Art and Society*, outstanding and famous women artists existed in every epoch. Only the forgetting of them is very modern. Ries was a woman and a Jew. Because of the second of these reasons, she was intentionally erased from the Viennese art scene by the Nazis. After the war, paradoxically, her story belonged to the uncomfortable history of an Austria which the citizens of a new, post-war state would rather wish to forget.

Teresa Ries on the one hand represents the problem of a woman artist who was conscious

of her artistic potential, and who, despite the limitations imposed on her gender in that epoch, fulfilled her artistic aims. On the other hand, her life recalls the motif of a newcomer from a remote place, who searches for opportunities to fulfil her professional aims, but cannot be completely assimilated, particularly because she is an alien. She can be defined by the category of the 'other'.

Teresa Ries managed to succeed as an artist in the Austro-Hungarian Empire even though she was a woman, a migrant, a Jew and, at least for some part of her life in Vienna, not even a citizen of any country. The document dating from 1936 records that she was a stateless person.³³ There were obviously some protests from the members of the Künstlerhaus against the fact that she – the foreigner, not an Austrian – had received the commission for the figure of Saint Barbara in Pula.³⁴ But these protests were neither caused nor supported by the authorities of the state. Although we cannot glorify any country with imperial ambitions in history, the case of Teresa Ries shows the difference between the Austro-Hungarian Empire, consisting of many nations and accepting this fact, and Hitler's 'empire' based on nationalism and the division and persecution of people according to their ethnic origin. The latter has its roots in the nationalistic politics of the Prussian and Russian Empires of the 18th and 19th centuries, based on the denationalisation of people from conquered lands.

At this point I would like to refer to my own roots and to the history of Poland, which for over 120 years was divided between the Prussian, Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires. In two first of these the Poles were persecuted because their nationality, and use of the Polish language was forbidden. In the third of these empires the Poles had a relative autonomy, which also resulted in cultural contacts, such as the participation of Polish artists from Kraków in exhibitions in Vienna. I was born and grew up in the southern part of Poland, which had been a part of Austrian-Hungarian Empire until 1918, and traces of infrastructure of that time, such as railway stations, old fortifications and military barracks, are still a part of the landscape. There is also another more significant place,

which was built in 1916 as a transit-camp for immigrants from lands controlled by Prussia or Russia and searching for employment in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This was the camp in Oświęcim, today internationally recognised as Auschwitz. When Poland gained its independence in 1918, the barracks of the camp were used by the Polish Army, and then were abandoned. This complex drew an attention of a German officer during the Second World War, when Poland was under German occupation. It was transformed into Auschwitz Concentration Camp.³⁵ Would Ries have ended her life there, if she had not managed to escape to Lugano?

My interest in the case of Teresa Ries is a consequence of my earlier artworks inspired by the biographies of women, whom I call 'women disconnected from history'. These are women from the past who gained a certain position in public sphere, but today they have receded into oblivion, because of a 'blemish' on their biographies. There were the cases of Michalina Tatarkówna-Majkowska, a Polish Communist, the leader of the Communist Party in Łódź; Fifi Zastrow, an actress of Jewish origin who played the leading roles in the Nazi Propaganda Theatre of the Third Reich in the Theater zu Litzmannstadt in Łódź; or Hanna Reitsch, a German test-pilot, born in Hirschberg, today Jelenia Góra, who worked for the Third Reich during the Second World War. All these women managed to make a professional career in a public life that was largely dominated by men, and all of them lived during periods of totalitarian regimes, which influenced their choices. The dominant political Polish narrative of the German occupation of Poland during the War and Soviet control over the country after the War unequivocally condemns these periods and the people somehow involved in the structures of these totalitarian regimes. However, the biographies of these women are not as obvious and clear as the simplified narrative invented for current political propaganda. When we look more carefully into their biographies, it is not so obvious whether they were more persecutors or victims of the regimes in question. That was a reason why I decided to make a series of site-

specific artworks on the facades on abandoned houses. My interventions become another layer of change and yet, at the same time, form a part of the existing palimpsest. Superimposed on existing structures, they show the relationship between the status of abandoned houses and a biography that we may not wish to remember.³⁶

What Teresa Ries has in common with the women listed above is her ambition to make a career as an artist in the field of sculpture, a field that was almost entirely reserved for men at this time. She was a defiant woman, challenging the patriarchal and bourgeois expectations directed at women. What distinguishes her from them is the fact that she was definitely a victim of a totalitarian regime, but was nevertheless treated as its unwanted part, as an uncomfortable flashback of Austrian history that did not want to be remembered. "Austria – the first victim of Nazism" – announced the board installed in the Auschwitz Concentration Camp, that was subsequently dismantled and today is exhibited in rearranged pieces in the House of Austrian History in Vienna. When Austria entered the European Union it had to prove its status as a victim of the Second World War. In consequence, this fact caused a gradual increase in interest in such artists as Teresa Ries. In the case of Poland it was more obvious that the German invasion was completely unwelcome. Poland was definitely a victim of the Second World War and felt the consequences of the political division of Europe for the next four decades and more. However, this 'consistent' narrative of Poland as an everlasting enemy of Nazism, and of Poles who invariably rescued Jews, that was taught in Polish schools, turned out to be not so clear-cut. Alongside people of heroic attitude who risked their lives in order to save Jews, there were many who collaborated with the German occupant and persecuted people of Jewish origin, motivated by antisemitism or/and financial gain. Antisemitism and xenophobia did not appear in Poland only with the German invasion, and did not end with it. After the collapse of Communism these questions were raised, but the current politics of the government tries to suppress these voices again.

I work as an artist with the biography of Teresa Ries, not because it is important for the past, but because it is meaningful for the present and the future. Because of different crises, the established order of political forces seems to be shaky, and, in the face of uncertainty, people turn toward populists, who provide them with simplistic explanations for their fears and troubles, and offer the easiest and most final solutions to them... And this consistent image of the world, where there is no place for any doubts, disputes or inconsistencies, destroyed the life of Teresa Ries and many others, and seems to appear attractive once again.

The Witch by Teresa Ries is the contradiction of a consistent image through and through. Firstly, because although we see the influence of different artistic styles in the form of this sculpture and the traces of diverse cultural traditions in its allegorical layer. Secondly, because the sculpture today is damaged and some of its parts are missing. Thus *The Witch*, a witness of history, of political and social changes, is an accusation against the HIStory, institutions, politics towards women (artists), and antisemitism, that support patriarchal order. However, *The Witch* as a representation of the character of the witch in culture has an inspiring potential for political and social changes and the emancipation of minorities.

To recall stories such as that of Teresa Ries I use the language of art, which, through many levels of meanings, influences the emotions and the imagination of the viewer, while avoiding an excessively persuasive and didactic tone or unambiguous message. The project on Teresa Ries, which is currently in progress, will result in a series of artworks based on her life and artistic heritage, as well as in a book and an artistic film documenting her story.

Notes

- ¹ Sabine Fellner, "»It's a pity she suffers from the delusion that she can do men's work that she was not born to do« – Teresa Feodorowna Ries," *The Better Half – Jewish Women Artists before 1938*, ed. Andrea Winklbauer and Sabine Fellner (Vienna: Jewish Museum Vienna, 2016), 40.
- ² Teresa Feodorowna Ries, *Die Sprache de Steines* (Vienna: Krystal Verlag, 1928), 30. The note in a Pula's newspaper confirms this fact, although the name of the artist has been written incorrectly. In the newspaper there is mentioned a woman sculptor "Tries," who made a figure of Saint Barbara. This mistake was also repeated in other publications concerned with this church. "Le statue alla Madonna del Mare," *Il Giornaleto di Pola*, 17.10.1903.
- ³ Teresa Feodorowna Ries, *Die Sprache de Steines*, 30-31.
- ⁴ Sabine Plakolm-Forsthuber, *Künstlerinnen in Österreich 1897 - 1938. Malerei. Plastik. Architektur* (Vienna: Picus, 1994), 211.
- ⁵ The confirmation of Teresa Ries's registration in Vienna (Meldzettel), Akt 2.5.1.4.K11.Ries Theresia.30.1.1866, Wiener Stadt- und Landesarchiv, <http://www.wien.gv.at>.
- ⁶ Hillel (Grigorij) Kazovsky, "Artists: Russia and the Soviet Union," Jewish Women's Archive. <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/artists-russia-and-soviet-union>.
- ⁷ Julie M. Johnson, *The Memory Factory: The Forgotten Women Artist in Vienna 1900* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2012), 205.
- ⁸ Ibidem.
- ⁹ Ibidem, 209-211.
- ¹⁰ Teresa Feodorowna Ries, *Die Sprache des Steines* (Vienna: Krystal -Verlag, 1928), 13-14. Translation based on: Julie M. Johnson, *The Memory Factory*., 209.
- ¹¹ Per Faxneld. *Satanic Feminism. Lucifer as a Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 239.
- ¹² "РИС Тереза Федоровна" (Ries Teresa Feodorowna), *Искусство и Архитектура Русского Зарубежья* (Russian Art and Architecture Abroad). <https://artz.ru/menu/1804660060/1804786114.html>.
- ¹³ Anka Leśniak, *The Witch*, video-work, 2016, from the series *Lost Element*.
- ¹⁴ Per Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism. Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press.), 240. See also: Anka Leśniak, "Exception? Unbelievable that a woman made this!," *Spezialschule*, ed. Simone Bader, Katharina Hölzl, Jakob Krameritsch et. al. (Vienna: Schlebrügge.Editor, 2019), 125.
- ¹⁵ Julie M. Johnson, *The Memory Factory*, 235. After Teresa Feodorowna Ries, 78-79.
- ¹⁶ Ibidem, 203.
- ¹⁷ Sabine Fellner, "It's a pity," 39.
- ¹⁸ Stefan Zweig, *Das Geheimnis des künstlerischen Schaffens* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), 81.
- ¹⁹ Object data sheet of the sculptures by Teresa Feodorowna Ries, Wien Museum.
- ²⁰ Letter from Teresa Feodorowna Ries to the Federal Ministry of Education in Austria (Bundesministerium für Unterricht), including the list of her works left in her atelier at the Lichtenstein Palais, 28.02.1946, BDA-Archiv, Restitutionsmaterialien, K.44-2, PM Ries Theresa, fol. 18
- ²¹ Julie M. Johnson, *The Memory Factory*, 203.
- ²² Sabine Fellner, "It's a pity," 40.
- ²³ Postcard sent by Teresa Ries Loewitowa to Fritz Hunziker, depicting the retirement house where the artist spent last years of her life. 04.02.1955, Lugano, Correspondence with Fritz Hunziker, Austrian National Library, Vienna. Ries, Teresa Fjodorowna. 1874-1956 [VerfasserIn]; Hunziker, Fritz [AdressatIn], Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Sammlung von Handschriften und alten Drucken (HAN), 1121/24-1.
- ²⁴ Teresa Ries's letter to the Ex-Chancellor of Austria, BDA-Archiv, Restitutionsmaterialien, K.44-2, PM Ries Theresa, fol. 13.
- ²⁵ Rudolf Potz's letter to the State Monuments Authority, informing about the sculptures by Teresa Feodorowna Ries, 14.03.1946. BDA-Archiv, Restitutionsmaterialien, K.44-2, PM Ries Theresa, fol. 9.
- ²⁶ The list of Teresa Feodorowna Ries's works found at Rudolf Potz's company yard, made by Dr. Gapp, Mag. Abt. 7, 15.05.1946.
- ²⁷ Anka Leśniak, *The Restoration of the Witch*, Part I, An interview with Marija Milchin, video-work, 2019, from the series *Lost Element*.
- ²⁸ Anka Leśniak, *The Restoration of the Witch*, Part II, An interview with Johann Nimmrichter, video-work, 2019, from the series *Lost Element*.
- ²⁹ Anka Leśniak, *The Restoration of the Witch*, Part I and Part II, from the series *Lost Element*.

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ The Death Certificate of Teresa Ries: No 167, Loevitowa Teresia, Registro delle Morti, Circondario dello Stato Civile do Lugano, 17.07.1956.

³² Teresa Ries Loevitowa's correspondence to Fritz Hunziker, Lugano, 04.02.1956, Austrian National Library in Vienna. Ries, Teresa Fjodorowna. 1874-1956 [VerfasserIn]; Hunziker, Fritz [AdressatIn], Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Sammlung von Handschriften und alten Drucken (HAN), 1121/24-6.

³³ The register of population in Vienna, Magistrat der Stadt Wien, Magistratsabteilung 35, Einwohnerkartei Nr. 00323426, 14.3.1936.

³⁴ Julie M. Johnson, *The Memory Factory*, 213.

³⁵ Sybille Steinbacher, *Auschwitz: Geschichte und Nachgeschichte* (München: Verlag C.H.Beck, 2004), 13-20.

³⁶ Anka Leśniak, *Invisible inVisible. Women Disconnected from History. Site-specific Artworks on Abandoned Buildings* (Łódź: Art & Documentation Association), 2017, 11.

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