

**TOM PAZDERKA** is currently an Artist in Residence at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His MFA thesis, 'Psychoanalysis of the Cabin', was a partly autobiographical critique of Western culture, escape, seclusion and self-exclusion. The thesis weaves together history, biography, critical theory, and the topics of nostalgia, exile, and conspiracy theory. As well as being an Artist in Residence at UCSB, Tom has exhibited at the AD&A Museum, Santa Barbara, Parasol Projects, New York City, MeetFactory and Trafo Gallery in the Czech Republic, and the Asheville Art Museum, Asheville, North Carolina.

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## Interview

# Ideology of the Cabin

Tom Pazderka



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Q. Could you briefly say something about your biography, where you studied and how those institutions have affected your art practice and how you approach art? Who or what movements or styles have influenced your work?

I received my BFA from Western Carolina University and my MFA from University of California Santa Barbara. I am a product of public education and even though I don't like saying the word proud—as in that I am proud to be a product of public education—I feel very satisfied with my education and have an affinity for it. Public education informs my practice by staying close to the source, by not cutting myself off from society, and because for various reasons I was usually the odd or the strange kid in class.

But I also like obscurity. There is a paradox here that tells me that, on the one hand, I do not like to hang around people too much and many times I feel I need to cut myself off from everyone; but, on the other, I also cannot live without people. I do not have too many friends, but I have a small group of very good friends. I am not sure if it is because of public education, but this personal experience of it led me to finding out as much about obscure knowledge and people as I could find. I like strange musical genres from dark ambient and black metal to minimalist jazz; I research occult knowledge like western alchemy and magic; and I am very interested in continental philosophy, psychology, and history.

I search out things that to me feel authentic, and maybe right now making work about cabins and Ted Kaczynski, or Heidegger who wrote about authenticity, and listening to recordings of Jim Cirt, a guy with an

accordion singing drinking songs in Czech pubs, seems authentic. I approach art as something that is deeply personal and borne out of experience. If I wanted to emulate anybody it would be Joseph Beuys. He made work in which everything had a meaning, including the materials—many of which had double or hidden meanings. There was an air of authenticity and obscurity in his work that is tantalising.



Figure 1. *Lost on the Search for Identity (Channeled)*, 2015, recycled pallets, 64" x 96" x 5".

Q. You have written about the differences between studying and working in America and having grown up in a satellite state of the former Soviet Union. Could you say anything more about this 'disjunctural' identity?

The identity I feel is one of indeterminism. I was born in the former Czechoslovakia, today Czech Republic, but emigrated to the US when I was 12 and now I am 34. I am neither an American nor a Czech, or maybe I am both an American and a Czech. Let me explain what this means. To an American, born and raised in the US, I could never be a true American: I could never be the president—I could not even vote until 2005; I am 'only' a naturalised citizen. I did not share in the culture as I was growing up, for example, I do not know any of the nursery rhymes that all American children learn. The way I socialised was different from American children. And then, on the other hand, to a Czech I could never be a true Czech because I have been away too long, over two decades and counting. My teenage years were spent in American schools, my higher education is American, I learned American social mores as an adult, and I mostly speak English because all of my friends speak it. I rarely run into a Czech person in the States.

So I've been questioning my national belonging for quite some time, and I like to think that I am actually neither, rather than both. It is an interesting place to be. When I say growing up in the former Soviet Union this is also important because those were my earliest formative years. Czechoslovakia was not a part of the USSR but it was in its sphere of influence, and the 1980s, when I was growing up, were a strange time, when 'normalisation' was at its height. I do not remember much of it, but I cannot shake the feeling that this experience was all the deeper because it exists in my unconscious, so I return to it over

and over again to try and mine the information so that I may continue to understand my present condition. I have to credit my parents and grandparents; they were the ones that had to live in that bizarre climate.

**Q. Nostalgia is an important theme in your work. Why is that?**

I long for things: for my past, for the places I have been, for the person I once was. I am fascinated by this, and when I think about this longing, I try to understand why I long in the first place. I began to read about nostalgia because I wanted to understand it. I am attracted to art that is nostalgic and melancholic, like Caspar David Friedrich paintings, Kabakov's installations, or Tarkovsky's films. I also wanted to find out why, if communism in Eastern Europe was so devastating, do people there feel nostalgic for the communist past?

Nostalgia, because it was originally treated as a disease, still has negative connotations. It is a dirty word because it is usually used to cut something down as not being rooted in reality, a person or an artwork for example. To say that one is nostalgic is to dismiss that emotion on the grounds that should one investigate the emotion itself one would necessarily find it to be unfounded in anything rational or concrete. So the question for me is why then does the emotion recur and what is its purpose? I work with nostalgia because it has this power to overwhelm and because it is so difficult to rationalise and understand. It seems that the more one investigates it, the more it recedes from view. Nostalgia is really a return home, so perhaps the conversation begins there. What is home? But nostalgia also posits that a return home is impossible because once we leave home, it changes.

So, perhaps that nostalgia for communism in Europe has something to do with the changing aspect of home, and even though many people never left the country, their sense of home changed while they were in it. I suppose a lot has been written on the subject of nostalgia, but only now are there serious inquiries into the phenomenon of nostalgia for communism. When I read Svetlana Boym's book *The Future of Nostalgia* it was like a light turned on somewhere. It was as if in this book she identified many aspects of my experience.

**Q. Turning to your pieces *Lost on the Search for Identity (Channeled)* and *Somewhere Nowhere*, could you say a little about their production, why those materials were chosen, why those forms seemed appropriate for a mediation of nostalgia?**

'Lost' is about the way I felt, and to some degree, still feel about my national identity as I described it in the earlier question. *Lost on the Search for Identity* is a title I gave to a smaller series of works I developed to deal with the question of identity and this piece subtitled *Channeled* is part of that series. 'Lost' is about symbols and being and the way those symbols represent being. Like I said, being Czech but living in the US for two thirds of my life, makes me neither Czech nor American. I also spent a great deal of time living in the Southeast of the US, amounting to something like 18 years. It was only when I left for California in 2014 that I realized how deeply I was affected by the South, its people and its problematic history. It is easy to dismiss the South as backward and racist; but I found the people there generally good natured, reasonable and honest. Once I went west, a certain nostalgia for the South overtook me.

'Lost' was also made at a particular time when I felt very disconnected

from my practice as an artist. I felt literally lost in my work because I didn't know what to make and whatever I made, I thought was either not good enough or just plain nonsense. So when I made 'Lost', it felt like the one thing at the time that made sense. It's a cross between the South and the West, the past and the present, the South with its heavy burden of history and the nostalgic rusticity of the West mixed together. The channels remind me of the troughs used for panning gold, a very western theme. Pallets are a very humble material. They are made with the specific purpose of only holding up other things and I felt that to be an appropriate material for this piece given its symbolism. Also, the pallets themselves were made in the Czech Republic.

*Somewhere Nowhere* compounds the subject of confusion that I sometimes call the 'fog'. The pallet is the pedestal for the piece which is an old broom holding up a drawing of a mountain. I like the pallet because it is an ordinary object made from everyday materials. I used the broom a few times in the past to signify a presence, of someone, a human, but also a symbol for the act of sweeping something away. In the old twentieth century socialist posters, for example, the broom takes on a presence of its own, sweeping away the capitalist 'trash'. In the occult the broom is also a powerful tool because it cleans and cleanses space. The popular image of the witch is one flying on a broomstick. I use the broom as a melancholy presence of the inability to keep spaces clean. It is holding up a drawing of a mountain because that is a pure space that requires no cleaning but one that is also deeply melancholic. In short, the broom could be a representation of a nostalgic holding up an image of the object of desire and longing, knowing full well that it is only an image and that should their hold on the image shift the whole piece would collapse.

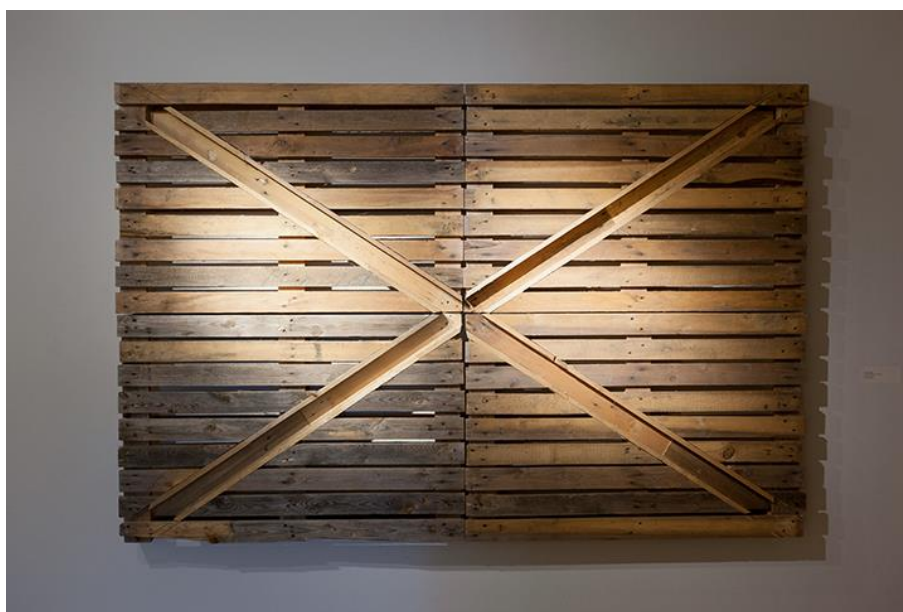


Figure 2. *Lost on the Search on the Search for Identity (Channeled)*, 2015, recycled pallets, 64" x 96" x 5", photograph courtesy of Troy Small.

Q. The titles suggest to a disorientation and inability to adequately locate one's subjective experience within the world-system. Is there a type of mapping at stake here, a 'cartographic nostalgia'?

Yes, I believe this is true. I moved a lot in the past, and it seems that I will continue to move in the near future. While, on the one hand, this allows me to have new experiences, of place and cultures for example,

which on the whole is a good thing; on the other, moving from place to place—especially over long distances—uproots me, and this leads to disorientation within this, as you say, subjective experience. I feel that mobility on the whole is responsible for cultural inability to locate itself within this world-system as you put it. Maybe this is because we have not adequately described what it means to be a mobile culture in the first place. We have described the pros and cons of a mobility culture, but not necessarily what it is and how it functions. So, we tend to locate ourselves in an existing paradigm that tends toward an old world idea of place: it starts with the family, moves to the tribe, and finally into the nation-state. We have not yet been able to identify and describe global culture.



Figure 4. *Somewhere Nowhere*, 2015, pallet, broom, charcoal and beach coal on tar paper, 36" x 24" x 48", photograph courtesy of Tony Mastres.

People tried in the past and it seems to have ended badly. The Futurists tried to describe and accelerate modernity and ended up in Fascism; and the global free market turned out to be another method of economic exploitation. In the conspiracy theory subculture, globalism is synonymous with the NWO (New World Order) and therefore totalitarianism. I tend to think of mobility and globalisation as mostly positive. In the 1980s and 1990s the anarchists were pushing for the walls and borders to come down so that people could for the first time live together as one. Just because many borders are now gone, does not mean we are living in peace, at least not yet. New economic walls have been erected and the anarchist dream is just that, a dream.

**Q. The installations themselves come across as recently abandoned objects, apparently emptied of human presence. How do you see the view inhabiting this space?**

In the work, I feel that human presence is always implied by its absence. It seems to me that there are very few places on Earth that humans have not been, and this makes it seem that even in those empty places, that human presence exists, in the imagination or otherwise. I like to work with built spaces, those that imply human interaction from the beginning. A cabin has to be built by someone. And I like to find out how certain people live and inhabit a space. How do they fill their homes, what are the daily rituals and where do they take place? When these places are abandoned the remainder of the occupant's existence is frozen in time. When we bought our house nine years ago, it had been abandoned for four years. The food was still in the cabinets, there were beds and some furniture, a carpet. The original owner lived in this house for many decades and then one day she decided to pack up, sell her stuff and leave. Her presence was felt in that house for a long time before we were able to replace it with ours, with our habits and daily rituals, and our belongings. The installations are like a talisman, or an echo of the personalities that I am interested in and that I place there along with my own. I inhabit these spaces and fill them with these 'others' that I could not do in my actual home.

**Q. Is there a connection between these installation pieces and your thinking on the function of the cabin in the American imaginary?**

Absolutely. I fill my work with various cabin dwellers, and the installations are just as much about them as they are about me. I look at the cabin as a historical object that had a specific function. The cabin was the primary home of the frontier people. It was the simplest dwelling that could be built from local material and spread throughout Europe and into America. As the frontier kept expanding, the cabin came with it. When the frontier effectively disappeared the cabin underwent a transition from primary residence to a place of retreat, a second home. In the American imaginary the cabin is synonymous with simple living, an ideal past, and with myth like Daniel Boone. Homesteading was how America moved westward. Americana is part rusticity and part gothic, think of Grant Wood's painting *American Gothic*. It is the gothic part that interests me most. There is a dark aspect to the cabin; during his brief flirtation with Nazism, Heidegger hosted his students at his hut as they rolled burning hay bales down the hill in celebration. Ted Kaczynski's cabin was used as evidence of his insanity by the FBI during his trial. During the period of slavery in the US, slaves were housed in rows of tiny cabins, one of the most famous ones being Mulberry Row owned by Thomas Jefferson.



Figure 3. *Somewhere Nowhere*, 2015, pallet, broom, charcoal and beach coal on tar paper, 36" x 24" x 48".

Q. In your writing you draw extensively on philosophy, film, and literature. What sort of relation does this have with your art?

I am not that interested in popular culture, and I am hardly interested in politics because politics today is an extension of pop culture, so I cannot and do not base my work on that. Philosophy, film, and literature are a lot like art, and it could be argued that they are art in their own right. So, when I see or read something, even though it exists in this or that way, as a book or a film, there is always room for interpretation of that subject as art. But it is not as simple as reinterpreting what someone else already said or did. Philosophy draws me because it attempts to make sense of the human condition; film and literature attempt to put the human condition in concrete form. Bad film and bad literature does this, which is why I like to watch bad films as well. But philosophy, literature, and for the most part film, still try to put their subjects into words, spoken by characters or written by their authors. Art takes similar ideas and condenses them into objects that

might take up many written pages. Take Slavoj Žižek for example. I like Žižek because he is a Slav from a Slavic country, Slovenia, and I identify with a lot of what he has to say about ideology, maybe because I am also a Slav from a Slavic country, Czech Republic. It takes someone like him, from that particular place, to tell the West what it is like to live in ideology, especially when one does not know or recognise that ideology is everywhere. The insidious nature of ideology is that, even when we believe we do not live in ideology or that we have somehow moved beyond it, we are in fact even deeper within it. But if you read Žižek, it is hundreds if not thousands of pages of written text that you have to get through to get to the core. I can take what Žižek writes and turn it into an artwork, a symbol, and all it is, is a simple object. But there is so much philosophy and literature, and they keep constantly changing and I feel like I need to be in conversation with that change.

**Q. What direction do you see your work going in the future?**

This is a hard question. I want to make large and immersive installations in the vein of Ed Kienholz or Mike Nelson. I also want to make smaller, more digestible work. I started a series of portrait drawings of some of the cabin dwellers I mentioned earlier. It starts with a completely burned panel onto which I draw with a graphite pencil and these have been very satisfying to make. They come out looking a bit like black mirrors with faces peering out from the darkness. I certainly feel like the subject of cabins will remain because it is such a fertile ground for imagination and I like to keep digging in American and European history.

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