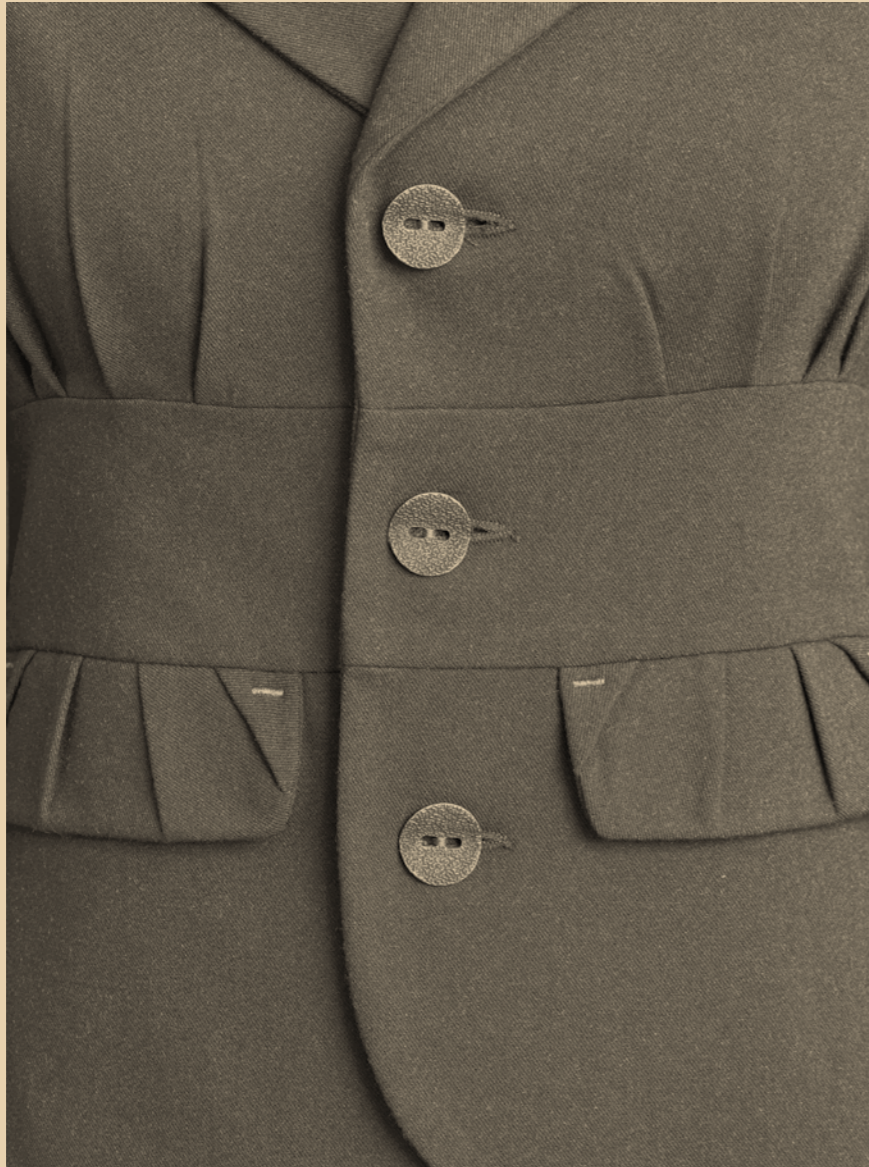


BOWNIK

UNDERCOAT

*Front (two-piece suit, the Januś company of Tarnów, 1990s),
2016, 160 x 119 cm*



BOWNIK

ŁÓDŹ, 2022

UNDERCOAT



I used a large-format Toyo 810M II camera with 8 x 10-inch negatives. This meant going back to the oldest photography technique, with roots in the nineteenth century. We might recall old photographs and the first silent films showing scenes from the *atelier*, when the camera with its bellows was propped on a tripod, and the photographer had to be cloaked with a black hood to see what was on the focusing screen. Models posed motionless for hours to get a sharp picture. With this technique, the photographer was cut off from their illuminated surroundings and could see only what they were photographing, which they could frame and focus. This technique requires remarkable precision, both in terms of framing the shot (a camera on a tripod weighs over ten kilograms and is unwieldy to move) and mastery of the craft. The analogue nature of this technique is not only in the size of the camera itself, but also in the fact that every step along the way to the final print is done manually. The picture's focus is set with a hand-held magnifying glass, all the distance measurements are made by the photographer, the cartridge with light-sensitive film, containing only two shots, is also loaded manually. The post-production of the developed negative (color, black-and-white, or slide)—its cleaning or tinting—involves no use of digital technology. It is only printing the photograph on archival paper (most often) measuring 180 x 150 cm that is carried out on high-quality ink printers in a professional photo lab.

MAGDALENA ZIÓŁKOWSKA UNDERCOATS, LININGS, AND POLAROIDS

The Polish word for “undercoat” is *podszerek*. It’s a word that annoys and tickles the ear when you say it out loud; its scant vowels seem wedged between the consonants, and the tongue has to perform some serious acrobats for the sound to ring true. Apart from the compact dentally resonant “d,” there is the fricative postalveolar unarticulated “sz” that produces the rustling sound. In music theory, sounds where the tip of the tongue comes near the palette and air is expelled by the tongue are called sibilant. These are generally avoided in musical compositions. Furthermore, *podszerek* is a tongue-twister, a good word for pronunciation training. In this single word something rustles, hisses, and hums, in both its sounds and meaning. Undercoat, lining, drawer, wardrobe... Deep breath in, out, in once more, and start all over. Undercoat, lining, drawer, wardrobe...

The Polish *podszerek* less reminds us of clothing than of the thick, short, soft layer of fur on animals, just beneath the main coat, important for thermal isolation. Undercoat, lining, bristle, hair... The English “underfur,” and certainly “undercoat,” has a different range of associations, more closely related to the world of fashion and clothes. It is literally what is concealed underneath the outer layer, filling the gap between the skin and the fabric, while remaining unseen from the outside. A good craftsman is said to know his trade “inside-out,” but not because what is inside distinguishes the work of a tailor from the mass production of the global South. He need not even look there to detect a masterful style, the faultless seams between fabrics, the unerring cut of cloth or stitch of the buttons. The eye of the connoisseur will know if the lining is satin, muslin, or modal from the style of the coat. You know the cut from the lining, one might say, and a solid cotton lining serves a range of functions. Undercoat, lining, drawer, wardrobe...

Szopenfeldziarz, *szoper*, *szmates*, *szarywary*—the prewar underworld slang rustled marvelously. In the language of ne’er-do-wells, a person who swiped things while pretending to shop for clothes was a *szopenfeldziarz*, a “clothesman.” A *szoper* stole goods from a wagon. In Łódź, you could find a *szpringowiec*, a shoplifter. *Szmates* meant clothing or a dress, *szarywary* was a peasant’s pocket.* These pockets were filled with all sorts of goods to sell on the street and booming *geszeft*; literally anything

• Taken from: *Żargon mowy przestępców. Błatna muzyka. Ogólny zbiór słów gwary łódzkiej*, eds. Wiktor Ludwikowski, Henryk Walczak (Warsaw: Mazowiecka Biblioteka Cyfrowa: 1922), pp. 69, 68, 67.



could be bought from a guy in an overcoat. A shady character would approach you and open up his coat, which would be hung with all kinds of small things. There were watches, jewelry, tobacco, fake IDs, and in Warsaw's Kercelak district, even revolvers. Street smugglers stitched meat hooks inside their coats, their linings were fixed with special bags. Clothing served as a means of transport and short-term storage of goods in quasi-legal circumstances. Rustling and murmuring... Monogrammed initials, scraps of information, and confessions from loved ones were stitched in linings and inside pockets. Information and data was smuggled this way; untouched for years, it overslept its moment, never reaching its addressee.

When I think about my grandparents who raised me in Łódź, I see individual frames that assemble into sequences, like one-of-a-kind Polaroids, records of a moment. There are no faces, gestures, no relationships, household spaces or landscapes from strolls. There are no scenes of family life. On the other hand, there are fabrics and outfits, textures of cloth, insides of wardrobes, the loose-fitting drawers of a shelf, the memory of their touch and smell. Paweł Bownik has been making these kinds of Polaroids for several years in photo sessions for the *Reverse [Rewers]* series. He sees them as exploring production materials—they have close-ups of clothing details, fabric seams, accentuated trims, and running stitches. Looking at the various outfits that Bownik pulled from museum storehouses, the ceremonial dresses, liturgical robes, examples of skilled tailoring, but also the everyday outfits, once belonging to famous people and nameless figures from history, I am struck by a parallel family story. These close-ups on tiny touches start me reminiscing about my own family, which may have had no famous names, but in which, as in almost every such unit, there was more than one story swept under the carpet.

We know nothing at all about the owner of a gray wool fur-lined coat, stitched by Łódź tailor Mieczysław Grzelczyk in the 1950s. In 2014, it was donated to the museum collections of the Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź. To whom could it have belonged? Was it made to order? Was the fabric specially chosen for the otter-fur collar and polecat/ferret lining? Or was this choice more dictated by practical concerns of the decades following World War Two? There is no trace of this piece, cataloged as

CMW 21515/O/3509, having been worn—no unraveling threads, worn sleeves, stains, or holes. The owner's smell has been smothered by cleaning and conservation agents, meaning we know still less about those whom this coat served.

My grandfather was a driver at the Textilimpex United Foreign Trade Enterprise in Łódź, and, when it was transformed into a new company, the Textilimpex-Tricot Foreign Trade Bureau. This was one of the first companies to be known Poland-wide and one of few that, in socialist Poland, had financial turnover in an exchangeable currency. This explained his foreign business trips with trade representatives (mainly eastward). Grandpa had a similar fur-lined coat. It came out of his wardrobe for special occasions: trips to the cemetery, visits to Great-grandma's house, and Sunday afternoon strolls when it was sunny, yet still frosty. When one of these times arose, the coat was slipped out of its cotton sleeve and its smell spread throughout the foyer. I cannot say if it came from the fur lining—in childhood I thought it peculiar that one might line a coat with decorative fur—or from the thick, grayish-light-green outer material. The coat was heavy and bulky. It would not have worked for the fashion shows my cousin and I orchestrated for name days and other family get-togethers. Unlike my aunt's furs, grandpa's coat had an air of seriousness. Unlike the furs made of Chinese dog or white fox, which always trailed across the floor when we walked through the foyer in our high heels. A sharp left turn at the end of the catwalk and the fur swept the floor clean. Grandpa's fur had an unusual majesty, but it was in Auntie's fur my sister and I found a warm, soft undercoat that made us want to put it on and touch it.

The next Polaroid. Object number two—an evening gown, museum inventory number CMW 14628/O/1866. Synthetic silk, wrinkle-proof, waterproof, no need to iron. Technology made to measure for the times. To compensate for the lack of lining, cotton sweat-pads were sewn in to serve as thermoregulators. An in-between layer, as if modeled on an underfur. A fancy floral-patterned vermilion and burnt-sienna dress for a night on the town. Would my grandmother have liked it, is this what her dreams were made of? Would this three-shift spooler at the Szymon Harnam Cotton Industry Plant have wanted it among her modest outfits? My grandma's

wardrobe (my grandparents each had their own) was packed with cotton house dresses and aprons, indispensable for bustling around and doing the household chores. I only recall one dress. It was made of grayish-brown loose-hanging cloth, flared a bit at the bottom, with a white lace collar attached for special occasions, to which grandma pinned a brooch. That was an outfit for going out on name-days or other celebrations. There weren't many of them, there were few opportunities over the years spent hunched over machines, in the noise, dust, and grime.

When our loved ones pass away we are left with their clothing, memorabilia, books. We sometimes find an object that stokes our memory and evokes their smell, touch, sound, or image. Sometimes we are lucky enough to have some of these things crammed into the bottom of our wardrobes, in the nooks of our house, in the basement. Lying there with their stories.

*Reverse (evening dress, 1959/60),
Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź, 2021,
182 x 140 cm*



The only piece of clothing photographed for the *Reverse* series that was not turned inside-out was the Siberian shaman's garb from the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In a sense, these clothes were always turned inside-out, because what we see represents "the other side" of the world, and the shaman, as such, is a bridge to that other reality.



ANDREW BERARDINI TAXIDERMISTRY

[...]

Though we lost much of our plant magic, it's no surprise that a monk (a distant descendant of our spiritual forebears), sometime in the nineteenth century, discovered through agriculture and science one of the great secrets of life, dubbed by subsequent scientists genetics. Not even brainy Darwin could nail discontinuous inheritance (he tried out pangenesis, but that song didn't sing). The gardening Augustinian monk, Gregor Mendel, in coupling the abbey's peas realized he could breed for traits, with some dominant and others recessive. It took a few years after his death for his work to be rediscovered and hurrahed in 1900, and another century for the heirs of Watson and Crick to unweave the rainbow of the human genome. Even then scientists (still clerics in all but name most of the time), putter and experiment, discover and rediscover some of the long-held secrets of life. We splice and bend these genes with great regularity and yet unknown dangers.

Though we slash and chop the recipe, the breaking and unbreaking of plants can have some more mechanical play.

Cracking a plant isn't always just cracking its genes. To dismantle the architecture is to discover its contours. The slit stem reveals the flowing veins, the broken leaf bleeds sap, the fleshy body holds some secrets. Life is not a toaster to take apart and put back together again, its pulse too fragile for rough handlings, but to disassemble and reassemble is to discover the subtlety of form, the strange and fractal beauty of plants, and to build from its parts a whole.

The accoutrements of re-enlivening the dead give us splashes of color, both natural and manmade (though the distinction is flexible at best). Translucent tape attempts to unbreak the neck of that flower, the web of strings hold together the carefully numbered parts of the undismantled flower, orange plastic and checkered binders make for rudimentary cyborgs. Can we bring back the dead to life? Can we animate them with art?

The numbers and tape and string and glues, all the simple products that put the plants back together after their surgical separation, they don't restore the spark of life.

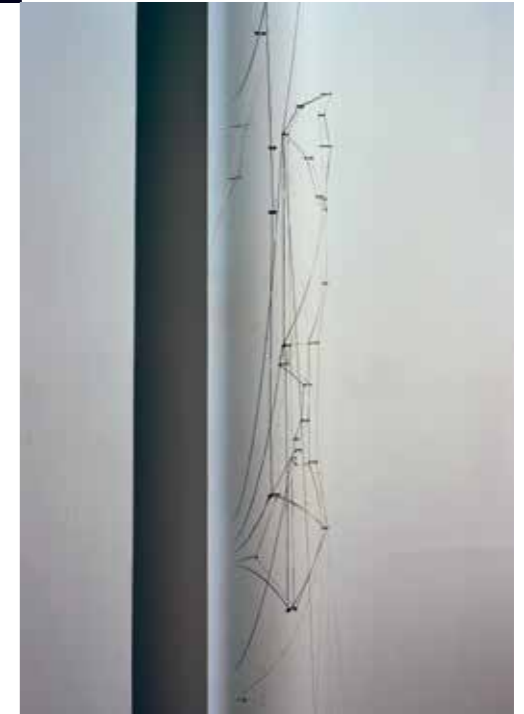
To observe is to change the thing you're observing, live vivisection reveals its own sinister knowledge, once known, impossible to unknow.



This is merely a record of what happened from a misunderstanding of curiosity and progress. Scissors, a scalpel, desk glue, tacks, tape, wire, a paper clip, an eraser, a pen, plastiline. Two flash bulbs and a camera. The lens had to be very low, beneath the table I was photographing on. That made the flowers look more natural.



The post joins two surfaces. I focused on tiny adjustments between the top and the bottom. I don't know why myself, but I often think of doing something in this spot.





I have always worked with amateurs. They are crucial to achieving the right sense of imitation. I look for masks for the figures which, despite their artificiality, can swiftly be forgotten. I construct photographs so that what is past can pass for contemporary, the imaginary becomes real, and a mistake is sometimes the only solution. Visual clichés are convenient and inspiring. You can use them to make whatever picture you like, which also draws from a collective memory; on the other hand, any presentation of content can disrupt our sense of stability. This was how *Girls and Boys I Know* came about—as a compilation of what we know and what does not fit.

SOREN GAUGER NEARLY TWINS

[...]

ALMOST IDENTICAL

Swedish filmmaker Roy Andersson sometimes takes a decade to make a film. This is because he builds each of his sets from scratch in his studio and then destroys it to start building the next one. This can only be a megalomaniac urge to control every detail, to make this reality on film the closest possible reflection of what he sees in his head. But also—if the reflection is doomed to be imperfect, then he is going to decide exactly *where* all the imperfections will be.

Bownik is eager to point out where the differences lie. Look carefully at their shoes, he says of *Grid* [*Krata*]. And in *Passageway* [*Przejście*], you'll notice the door is slightly narrower than it should be. The man's shirt, for no apparent reason, is transparent with sweat.

Actually, if you look long enough at Bownik's photographs, everything starts seeming a touch awry, just slightly suspicious. Do shadows actually behave that way (*Passageway*)? Is that a wall anyone would actually construct (*Doe* [*Łania*])? Do human nails ever really grow so strangely *Earthworm* [*Rosówka*]?

Rather than call attention to themselves, in the extravagant manner of Dali's flaming giraffes, these adjustments to reality work like the floor of the *Garden of Exile* in Berlin's Jewish Museum—they keep you just the slightest bit off-balance, without always allowing you to say exactly what is causing you a sense of discomfort.

To offer a remote analogy—Russian Symbolist poet and novelist Andrei Bely was in the habit of quoting his authors from memory. For this he was mocked by several critics, but in fact I wish it was more common practice. Books take on lives of their own in people's heads, especially years later. They become altered and warped, and after all, who wouldn't want to know how Woolf remembered Dostoevsky, how Proust mangled Montaigne (one could imagine a whole alternate history of literature composed of authors misremembering other authors). The appeal in this

kind of creative misquoting is getting to see the world (literature is also part of the world) through another person's eyes.

By the same token, these "mistakes" in Bownik are like creative misquotes of reality which, rather than breaking the illusion of the piece, tend to immerse us deeper within it, paradoxically giving us a sense that every detail is being minutely controlled.



MICHAŁ KSIĄŻEK AFTERIMAGES OF THE PAST / SPECTROGRAMS OF LOSS / INSTEAD

[...]

Paweł Bownik spent many years collecting engravings and depictions of birds that had gone extinct. He got them from used book stores, European museum archives, and Internet resources. He put his finds on whirling discs and photographed them with a long exposure time (and a large-format analogue camera). The result was colorful (closed) cycloids, or orbs, in fact, rainbow-colored multiplications, occasionally geological whirlpools, galactic tunnels, causing the head to spin. Bownik's works resemble mandalas that make us yearn for a cathartic cleansing, the void, or even evoke nausea (*Circle 3 [Koto 3]*). Others could serve as symbols for a new religion or faith community (*Circle 11 [Koto 11]*, *Circle 12 [Koto 12]*). Still others could be crystallographic patterns for the creation of non-existent minerals. Meanwhile, they are all remains of creatures we now term "bygone." Lost.

Still, the artist calls them documents and furnishes them with carefully-plotted shadows. These colorful rota-specters, themselves echoes of extinct species, cast shadows. A shadow is proof of existence; for a moment we can fool ourselves into thinking they're still here, that not all has been lost.

No one apart from the artist knows what species of birds they are. We do not know if they are birds of the forest or the swamp. Or perhaps the desert, the steppe, or the shoreline? We have only colors, their kaleidoscopic cycles. Well, and shadows. Those of them that are colorful, and so were visible from afar, are probably species that took shelter high in the treetops. The gray ones could have lived lower, in the bushes, perhaps even on the ground. The cryptically colored and dark rota-whirls could be from nocturnal birds. Binary thinking, which I cannot quite leave behind, makes me separate them into warm and cold.

They are colorful, yet somehow vague and dark. The more colorful they are, the darker they get. This makes me all the more curious, and makes me know all the less. I don't know what once lived. What sang, what laid eggs, what multiplied. Itself. What loved, was afraid, fled. What rejoiced. We know that now it's gone. This double ignorance is

Photo shoot for the series *Colors of Lost Time*,
artist's studio, Warsaw, October 2021

a reflection on the nature of awakening. Far away from us, hard to say where precisely, something important is happening, we know nothing about it. It escapes our attention. It is a mystery to us. A dark process that perhaps concerns us as well. As imperceptible as evolution or the law of supply and demand. People look this way too, during their lives, their mating rituals, or various other moments of their peculiar biology. They look like species who killed.





Bownik working on *Chamber*, artist's studio, Warsaw, October 2021

The whole space is wallpapered in wafers depicting motifs from the Bible. There are nearly four hundred of them, warped from the damp air in my studio. I feel as though the eye not only registers, but also experiences the deformations. The imperfection in the *Chamber* photograph is the fold, but not only in the wall of wafers with biblical motifs. The focus in the whole picture has also been distorted, it is erratic, illogical, non-physical. It often appears and vanishes where it shouldn't. This results from tilting the front and back surface of the picture in a large-format camera. The deformity caused by this procedure takes away its technical function, while making the mock-up of the titular chamber seem more real.



Ceiling, 2020–21, 200 x 120 cm



Photo shoot for *Remnants*, Central Museum of Textiles, Łódź, December 2021

The ceiling measured 400 x 400 cm. Altogether, I used fourteen incandescent light sources, which are warmer than natural light and create a white temperature. I built special handles and mini-tripods—they came in handy, as there were plenty of non-standard settings for the light falling on the mock-up. I drew shapes on the surface of the ceiling with an LED light, tungsten, and a screwdriver. Sometimes I used a file bit. All these moves were intuitive. I didn't have to understand, it was important just to feel something. There was no plan or sketch, just a process. Adding and subtracting, layering and removing. The mock-up of the ceiling was created from materials that were lying around my studio. It measured four by four meters. I built it upside-down. Naturally, many elements I introduced to this space function in reverse. Working on the ceiling on the floor I sometimes felt like I was in a RTS (=Real-Time Strategy) game.

The stray bits of fabric say nothing for themselves. They measure only a few centimeters. Without scientific study, no one will ever learn a thing about them. And perhaps even this study is not enough to tell us their history. First I photographed them, then enlarged them to reveal what the eye alone could not see. There was more than just textures and scraps. The black parts also composed themselves into visual associations, like traces of things we once knew.

I couldn't tell you. Not because I was unable to, or because I'm ashamed, we just haven't got the time. We have no time for speaking. Never mind talking, I just mean basic speaking. Someone speaks, the other listens.

I wouldn't be able to tell you this, and you wouldn't be able to listen. I have to write it down. I'm writing on ordinary printing paper, no lines, the words come out crooked, the letters slant downward of their own accord, I've lost the habit of writing. It makes no difference, you won't read this anyway. I bet you wouldn't even let me write it, but I can write it, because you won't read it. That must be why you write at all, because there's always someone who won't read it. And you've got to do something with all the things that can't be said.

I'm trying to understand. I can't understand. I even bought a book on how to understand, I read it cover-to-cover and I still don't understand. I mean, I understood what the book said, but I still don't understand what I should do. The book said not to try to force yourself to understand and not to blame yourself for not understanding because in puberty there is such a surge of hormones that a person is out of control. Not even the person who's in puberty is in control, to say nothing of the people around him. Those hormones surge so strong that they take over everything, willpower, emotions, common sense, he slams the door without thinking he might break the glass, returns late at night without thinking someone's laying awake worrying, he says why should his mom care without thinking about the fact that she cares. Hormones switch off thinking. Delete key. They switch it off without saving it on the hard drive or in the cloud, there's no going back to it.

That's why you shouldn't worry or blame yourself when you're standing behind the door that was just thoughtlessly slammed or when you hear "what do you care," because a person in puberty with surging hormones has no idea what he is saying or doing, and all because of those hormones, he can't be held responsible. Anyway why should someone be responsible for what they say or write, since there's always someone who doesn't listen or read. [...]

I repeat myself sometimes to hear anything at all, because I barely hear anything over the course of the day. A shuffling through the wall, a tapping, sometimes the slide of a chair, just like I was raising a little animal. What difference does it make if I've said something already or not, you're wearing headphones, to make out the footsteps, passwords, shots, which repeat themselves all day long, all the time.

I thought those headphones were so you wouldn't hear me, my nagging, moaning, complaining. That the headphones were a weapon against me. But then you told me that the headphones are in fact not really against me, they're for me, you have to put them on so that the sounds don't bother me. What sounds, I asked. Footsteps. Otherwise the footsteps would bother you. And I have to hear the footsteps to know where they're coming from. Where who's coming from?



All that doesn't exist. The world where you spend your time doesn't exist. If the day comes when I believe that world exists, I'll go mad. It just doesn't exist. Oh, I know what exists. The broken dishwasher exists, it's the afternoon there's a pile of things to iron, there's half a loaf of bread. That exists. There are no footsteps, no one's coming, no one is shooting anyone and no one dies. Not that many times.

BOWNIK. UNDERCOAT

21 APRIL — 24 JULY 2022

EXHIBITION

Curator:
MAGDALENA ZIÓLKOWSKA

Coordinator:
PRZEMYSŁAW PURTAK

Display:
BOWNIK
MAGDALENA ZIÓLKOWSKA

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FOLDER

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Back (two-piece suit, the Januś company of Tarnów, 1990s),
2016, 160 x 119 cm



Reverse (shaman's attire, Siberia, Yenisey Province, 19th/20th c.), Russian Museum of Ethnography in St. Petersburg, 2017, 173 x 130 cm

