

# PYL (Theresa Schrezenmeir, Maria Komarova): **Re/un/doing the Ruin**

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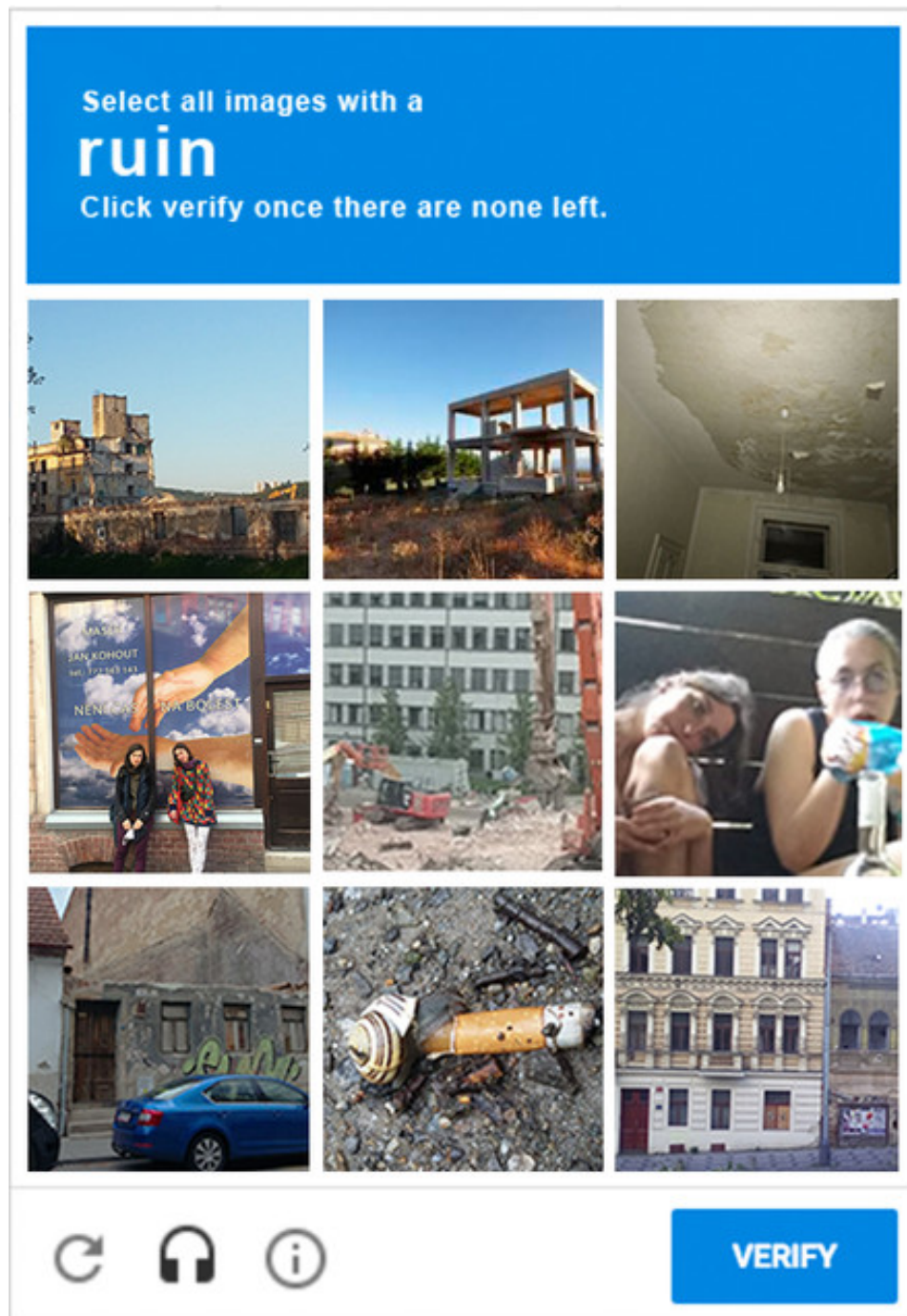
What do you call a ruin? It may be a structure that has lost its original purpose. It may be an empty shell.

Why do we find beauty in them? Because they are shaped by greater incidents than human planning; a ruin is a combination of results of human impact and processes outside human control. Unpredictable forces involved when thinking of ruins include weather, changes induced by chemical reactions on a material layer or by activities of other living entities (e. g. animals and plants). As human impact we can consider a planned and executed construction, ordering things in space and time, as well as the mere fact of thinking of something as a ruin – the framing.

Let's say ruins are places where we admit to relinquishing control. For this reason someone might also find these places terrifying rather than beautiful. And let's say ruins are temporary states in time. We suppose that sooner or later, everything will reach a moment of transition to a state without purpose, surrender to entropy, until grass grows over it and something new happens.

The decision to define the borders of such a state is unilateral in nature. It is probably made by someone who sees an advantage in giving meanings to things and considers them in terms of usefulness. But something that seems ruined to one person might serve someone else (human or another species): remains of organic waste could enrich the soil for new sprouts to grow, the collapse of a house foundation could create a new place for teenagers to hang out or for a tree to grow.

Our angle of viewing is very small and very wide at the same time—we can narrow and expand the borders of the frame. Like when we expand and contract our lungs, we would like to hear the frame of ruins breathe. And we might come to the point where everything (or nothing) could be a ruin.



In the following, we will start with *regular* ruins, which are for us more or less abandoned buildings. We will introduce you to a few of those that we have experienced:

Once, in Greece, we found an abandoned villa near the seaside. We were camping on the island for one week; that is how, after several days, we began to rate many of the places that we came across in terms of potential lodgings. The

villa looked very luxurious and attractive for our needs. We waited until sunset, so we wouldn't disturb the neighbors with our impudent presence and slipped into the house. The beautiful appearance of the building was contrasted by its internal devastation: the walls were gone as well as most of the traces of human inhabitants. Instead, on the marble floor, there were long columns of ants creating new infrastructures around the remains of a bonfire. A lonely tire solemnly lay on what might once have been called a terrace, as a manifested symbol of desolation, overlooking the seaside.

Having a smooth floor and a roof was more than enough for us that day. After a week of sleeping on the beaches and in the bushes, such conditions seemed unusually comfortable. Looking back, compared to other places where we slept, this villa deserves four stars. Someone else's garden would get three, unfinished buildings and kaki trees near highways hardly deserve two.<sup>1</sup>

When we returned to Prague after several days of exhausting travel, our flat in an old house in Krymska Street seemed like a real kingdom—a bathtub with hot water, a bed, a kitchen with a fridge and other commodities, which we hadn't had a chance to enjoy for a while. But from another point of view: most of our guests kept pointing out that this flat was more of a ruin than anything else. It had a hole in the entrance door, no proper heating system and sometimes the ceiling leaked. One day we woke up and discovered a huge water stain on the ceiling. Its outlines looked like lace ornaments and were so beautiful that all artworks in this room (which was mainly used as an atelier) suddenly seemed unimportant compared to this dripping accident. The air in the room was moist and pieces of the plaster were falling down. We visited the room from time to time, like a museum, checking for newly emerged art works.

This house in Prague had a twin, they were two buildings that belonged together.<sup>2</sup> The one on the right could have been called a real ruin, the left one was our home. Passersby often thought that the left house was empty as well (a ruin?). In both houses, hierarchies were slightly different from other houses in the neighborhood. In them, different things were finding their own ways—rainwater not only flowed through the gutters, as someone had planned, but could leak through broken windows, drench the walls or slowly soften the structure. In both houses, plants were growing through cracks, like green explosives lacking an assassin who put them there. Both houses contained rats, and letter boxes that were out of service. Still, in the left house ('ours'), there was a landlord, who was receiving money from a few not entirely official tenants. In the right house, there were people staying without paying any

money, without telling anyone, without electricity or running water. The right house was a place where a lonely tire and an infrastructure built by ants could fit in.

*Maybe we could say that places where a tire could lay around for more than three weeks without being cleaned away could be called a ruin.*

Some ruins don't belong to anyone and have enough freedom to become what they are; some do, but suffer (or benefit) from a lack of care from the side of the owner. This allows them to be emancipated from what we have called human planning.

The objects collected by Plyushkin—the richest landlord from Gogol's 'Dead Souls'—are an example of property lacking attention. Plyushkin was so stingy, that instead of taking care of what he had, he tried to acquire more and more things, randomly cluttering his formerly magnificent possessions with everything he found: '...a stack of papers written all over in a small hand, covered by a marble paperweight, gone green, with a little egg on top of it, [...] a completely dried-up lemon no bigger than a hazelnut, the broken-off arm of an armchair, a glass with some sort of liquid and three flies in it, covered by a letter, a little piece of sealing wax, a little piece of rag picked up somewhere, two ink-stained pens, [...].'<sup>3</sup> 'While the bread and the wool rotted in the barns, insatiable Plyushkin looked every day for more objects on the streets of his village—[...] under the little bridges and stiles, and whatever he came across—an old shoe sole, a woman's rag, an iron nail, a potsherd—he carried off and added to the pile [...] in the corner of the room.'<sup>4</sup> Once picked up, the item was sooner or later forgotten and left to the fate of decay.

Plyushkin's example illustrates that the lack of care can give birth to ruin and disorder. But at the same time, in a ruin, weather or processes on a material level seem to be more in control than a landlord. Like this, we can observe different hierarchies, alternating between cultivated planning, economical goals and profit. If we speak of ruins as structures that have lost their earlier purpose, in the case of houses, the purpose of being a home to someone might seem to be lost.

But ruins can still be homes. If it's a building, people who are not tenants might consider it as a shelter and spend time there. If we speak of things, which might lie around in such 'empty' buildings—a green glass bottle, a plastic chair with moss on it, remains of jeans in which mold is growing—we can say that they have lost their owner. We would like to call them micro-ruins. And we

can observe that they are turning into homes as well: for ants or birds building their nest, for instance. Apart from their use as housing, these things might be 'recovered' and returned to the cycle of usage and 'usefulness' by a stranger, who might visit the building, pick up the bottle and exchange it for money.

There are other micro ruins that we encounter at every step, like cigarette butts on the ground. Someone might try to light them again and get another breath flavoured with sun dried tobacco from places far away. Someone else might be angry about them and see them as trash. The transition of small objects into the state of a (micro) ruin is often faster than the transition of bigger ones. Imagine a box of cigarettes. If they belong to someone who plans to smoke them, you can consider them micro-ruins in progress. They will burn down.

Fire and ruins are a field on their own. Fire produces ruins, but it also releases them from being in this state, when it burns them down completely. We often burn objects we do not want to see: e.g. things we define as trash or leftovers of building structures (as long as this is not too strongly forbidden).

If you like, we can also think about our planet as a macro-ruin, carrying our houses, our castles, our ruins, ourselves, including those who have viruses in their bodies or those who were dead and buried hundreds of years ago. You can try to imagine earth and then compare it with the perfect green and blue ball we are often shown in schools, with its flat and smooth surface and clearly calculated landscape capacities. Like columns of ants building infrastructures around a lonely tire, we are building our infrastructure based on these capacities—we are layering highways under oceans and inhabiting square meters high above sea level. Of course, we all admit that the ball we inhabit is not perfect, or maybe we see that we currently have troubles understanding its balance and wonder if we are guilty.

It could be that inhabitants of another planet will not even consider visiting ours because of the pollution, our constructions and increasingly emerging holes in the atmosphere and the surface. But the opposite could be possible as well; all the changes that can be experienced within a lifetime or even within a moment here could be the reason for their visit. The borders between experiencing devastation and something new are thin and mean something to us. We can observe our attraction to places that were strongly interrupted in their previous state when we think of all the people who are visiting Chernobyl or the ones who take photos of villages destroyed by hurricanes, of a red river,

its bloody color caused by a malfunctioning factory<sup>5</sup>, of white sand on the beach littered with bright pink Vanish bottles.<sup>6</sup>

Why are people interested in such places? As we have mentioned above, some appearances are both terrifying and beautiful. There, you feel the change ‘right in front of your face’, the transition state is strong enough to mirror the existential questions that we carry inside us.

And what about us? We were speaking about different kinds of ruins, stretching them to the size of our planet—but the space inside us also seems quite vast. If you are getting lost in it (sooner than losing the planet) everything can feel like a *universal* ruin...

Let’s add a person to what we already have: a person, walking on planet earth (ruin), through the empty building (ruin), turning an old plastic bottle without a label (ruin), sitting down on the old tire and staring at ants. Let’s say the person is old. A 86 year-old woman says: ‘I’m a leftover. And everything around me is breaking. The shower, the car, the radio, the fridge... Also me.’ Can people be ruins? The test: could an old tire with ants lie inside you without being cleaned away? In a lifetime, you can encounter states in which felt or thought concepts you built for yourself stop to work and are in transition. And you can see the old ones, still pre-shaped thoughts in your brain, and you see seeds of new ones cracking through. Back to the scenario: if you are sitting there on the old tire, hypnotized by ants, maybe you are in a transition state, too. Between work and sleep, between a relationship and a trip, having memories and thinking of the future. Maybe your thoughts are disturbed every other second, as if it would rain in your brain, or because some ideas feel like burning everything else that is down there? Maybe you have old memories, lying at the bottom of your stomach like shipwrecks. The world inside you can fall apart as easily as the outer world. We can become ruins.

When I asked my mother about ruins, she only said:

*‘Sometimes we stabilize them, to see that they are there.’*

So she was pointing to the energy that is invested in keeping some existing bonds. To stabilize the structure in its current state in the case of ruins often means: nailing up the doors and windows, in order to protect the building from intruders who might change it faster than weather and rotting; putting a sign in front of the building to remind of its former identity (if it was a castle, a residency, a shop)<sup>7</sup>. Stabilization can mean adding a wooden beam

somewhere to the side of the building to prevent a wall from falling. It can mean trying to be more conscious in terms of relating to the planetary-ruin. Could it also be an action like collecting empty shells on the seaside and putting them on your shelf? An important point to us is the difference between stabilizing a ruin as an act of care, feeding it into something important, and the pathological act of exhibiting, such as putting a fence around something and framing it to death.

In terms of a person as a ruin, stabilization can look like the following: people re-visiting their concepts of beliefs or structures of thoughts and consuming the media that fits in perfectly without any friction, in order to stay in a bubble of cohesive concepts. But it can also mean feeling someone's (or your own) foundations, supporting those who are really carrying, revisiting some inner ruins and seeing how it feels to spend time there.

If you care about a ruin, it means that you look at it differently. You might see the ants and like them or appreciate the strength of plants cracking the concrete. It can also mean, you'll repair the holes of the building and save it from more water damage to the foundations. It means that you see yourself in a relation with it and start to spend time there. Rain might not be the only thing coming down from the sky, you might bring your human thoughts from the air to the old stones lying there on the ground and share them with another human. You might feel at home, sitting on the tire while having a good talk or just because you found a shelter.

So, what to do after all this?

*Choose a ruin you care about. Relate. Stabilize things that speak to you. Return to it. Bring someone or something else. Be aware—it might eventually stop being a ruin.*<sup>8</sup>

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1. We don't mention junkyards and a cemetery where we nearly put a tent, because it was dark and we did not know the origins of these places. ↩
  2. The two houses belong together, because they are on one building plot. If someone wants to buy one of them, he automatically would need to get the other one as well. They can't be separated, but are in different conditions (which is probably why no one wants to have both). ↩
  3. Gogol, Nikolai, *Dead Souls*, translated by Soviet Academy of Sciences, volumes 6 and 7 (Leningrad, 1951), p. 65-66 ↩
  4. *ibid*, p. 66 ↩
  5. In Siberia, a 'Blood River' in a Dead Zone Twice the Size of Rhode Island—The New York Times (nytimes.com) ↩
  6. Thousands of pink bottles wash up on Cornwall's beaches—BBC News ↩

7. In different languages there are different words for different types of ruins, for example in Czech, apart from general ruins ('ruiny'), someone explained to us that there exists a word for ruins of a castle ('zřícenina'). It makes us feel that people think that some ruins are more precious than others. ↩
8. Unfortunately there is no encyclopedia yet and no recipe for how to behave in a way such that the following instruction will not be an act of colonization but rather an act of living. We guess it's up to you. ↩

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PYL is an international collective of artists who collaborate in the field of postdramatic theatre, visual arts, sound and intermedia. Their practice explores the borders of anthropocentric perception in a dialog with objects and ironic attempts to grasp nonhuman agency. Through application of DIY methods, recycling and compilation principles, the group develops its own visual language, which extends the meanings of scenography far beyond the theatre stage. Their works shift cultural codes, contexts and origins of common things, while transforming objects to beings and beings to objects. Sensitivity towards the dailiness of life, sharing moments and personal experiences in non-linear and playful ways transmit on the group's associative approach on coworking process. PYL was established in Prague in 2018 and has presented productions including ČBRŠK (2018), Dead End (2019), and Reality Surfing (2021). The group's current members are Maria Komarova, Světlana Silič, Anna Romanova, and Theresa Schrezenmeir.

Maria Komarova is a theatre maker, scenographer, sound artist and curator originally from Belarus. She often works with the principle of rethinking primary functions of things and misuse of technologies in order to change the visual/auditory perspective on everyday life. Maria is one of the founders of the art group PYL, the festival of performative arts in Minsk Performensk and the music band kaine anung. She is currently based in Prague.  
<https://mariakomarova.wordpress.com/>

Theresa Schrezenmeir works with sound and movement. As a director and composer, she explores how shared situations create their own specific meanings, ways of navigation and communication. She is active in Germany and the Czech Republic. Theresa currently cooks for people and is part of the collective PYL and the band kaine anung.

