

Łukasz Gorczyca: Who is Afraid of Ruins?

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I'm travelling to Ostrava to talk about ruins. I'm travelling from Warsaw, where ruins are not a metaphor, but an image permanently etched in memory. They are a figure of history, but also a state of ceaseless negotiation with the surrounding matter. We understand the notion of ruins first and foremost literally, as structures sinking into the soil, deprived of even the romantic staffage of wild vegetation. But today we will discuss rhetorical figures. From the window of the train our Central European landscape looks at first like a ruin—seen already in so many ways that it gives the impression of being thoroughly exhausted, woven from visual clichés, swept by the winds of history and art, like a vacant building missing all its glazing. Worn out by all of the perspectives of 20th-century photographers and artists contemporary to ourselves documenting the barrenness of “the land, this land”—as the pope from Poland put it.

The atmosphere of exhaustion spreads like fog, but it does not disperse. As I write these words, the state of pandemic suspension continues. Museums, galleries, theatres, cinemas, restaurants and bars remain closed. They pursue only a more or less secret inner life, revealed in the form of takeout orders and less and less enthusiastic online exhibitions, shows and projects. Travel is discouraged, even leaving your own home. But I find an eatery that is not only open, but is operating entirely legally. The waiter nods invitingly. It is the dining car on the international train between Warsaw and Vienna, which I am taking to the meeting in Ostrava. Here I am the only guest. There is the waiter, the cook, and from time to time the conductors and the cleaner look in. The atmosphere unequivocally evokes Josef Dabernig's unforgettable film *Wars* (2001). It could have been shot on this very same Central European route. Unrepeatable and inimitable combinations of apathy and boredom, waiting,

and languid attempts to chase away thoughts about the barrenness of this route. This life's journey. From nowhere to nowhere.

This day carries an added charge of nostalgia. Yesterday the death of Papcio Chmiel (Henryk Jerzy Chmielewski) was announced. He had shaped the linguistic imagination and sarcastic sense of humour of two generations of Polish youth growing up during the era of late socialism. His cult work is a series of comics about Tytus, a chimp who was born from a splotch of ink spilled by the draughtsman and taken into the care of a pair of boy scouts. Their shared adventures are a daring blend of the political correctness of that time with a sense of humour that deconstructed the system. In the 11th volume of these adventures, the boys come to the rescue of landmarks. They seek a historic structure they can restore and adapt to serve as the headquarters of their own scout troop. Under the realities of our transformation, when art could officially provide a release for its emancipatory and causative force, it revealed a similar scout-like enthusiasm. Starting from the 1980s, artists took over desolate ruins or unfinished development projects, transforming them into more or less professional art spaces, art fortresses, and several similar artistic institutions. In Warsaw, the Centre for Contemporary Art took up residence in the historic (but rebuilt from the foundations) Ujazdowski Castle. A number of other institutions began in a similar fashion—by wresting half-ruined structures from local government authorities. Only art (and maybe scouts?) has the strength and enthusiasm to successfully operate in ruins and restore them to life. This approach is global in nature. The model was set by the operation of New York's Institute for Art and Urban Resources Inc., founded in 1971 by Alanna Heiss, later known as the P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center and since 2000 as MoMA PS1. This ultimately gave rise to a kind of unwritten social consensus: if art cannot be conceived in any other way, let it serve as a midwife for processes of revitalization and gentrification.

A similar story is playing out now in Ostrava, only softened by the characteristic Central European sense of humour. This is PLATO, a nomadic public art institution which moves from one temporary home to another. According to the plan, in 2022 it should settle for good. But here we are faced with the captivating figure of a double oxymoron. The institution's current home is the vast pavilion of a former construction market from the 1990s, now slated for demolition. The intended permanent home is a former slaughterhouse, a stylish ruin from the late 19th century which, after reconstruction, will maintain its historical shape but will be filled with a new “vegetarian” content, flatly contrary to the original. Where the devil fears to

tread, send art. The history of modernity is familiar with various types of ruins, both symbolic, in philosophical debate, and physically tangible. We recognize the tragic nature of wartime ruins, but also their expiational, cleansing power. Post-war ruins meant a farewell to the old order, a reincarnation, a transubstantiation and herald of the new order: they created a contrast for new construction and the new political system. In the urban plan, ruins were deemed a necessary sacrifice for the recovery of spatial policy and rebuilding urban organisms—as in the rebuilt Warsaw. No one then could have anticipated how quickly the icons of the new, modernist architecture would themselves become living ruins. At the start of the 21st century, images of that architecture ploughed through the mass imagination of art. This didn't necessarily have to do with the ruined structures themselves, but rather with the promise encoded in their rigorous, modernist forms of a better future, a promise that burned out before it was fulfilled. Thus these were images from a recent but nonetheless politically and socially remote past. Deactivated structures like the Palast der Republik in Berlin, a phenomenon portrayed by Tacita Dean in her film *Palast* (2004). The collapse of the Soviet bloc, visualized in the form of the ruins of the Berlin Wall, was the key inspiration here: it marked a historic change of epochs, played out before our very eyes.

The main problem with these artistic visions, or rather afterimages, was their omnipresent nostalgia. As the curators of Documenta 12 queried, “Is modernity our antiquity?” From this perspective, images of modernism have undergone romanticization, much as ancient ruins did during the Enlightenment. At the same time they have become another stage of a universalist narrative. This time, as a post-transformation Central European society, we seek our own ruins. Modernity, inflected through all declensions and photographed from all sides in the mannerism of “post-Soviet porn,” is no longer our antiquity. Now the history of the post-communist transformation is becoming our antiquity.

A ruin is a building bereft of people. A material structure created by the hands of man but then vacated by him. It is a picture of wasted effort, a signal that our interests and emotions have moved on, somewhere else. But the order of this concept can be reversed. If a process is carried out in discursive or virtual space, then a material confirmation of the process is particularly needed, some trace, some ruin as an image of the change in hierarchy. Something, some concept, action, or accumulated energy, supersedes the existing configuration. A ruin may thus serve as something anticipated, as the hope accompanying an approaching change.

In this endless need for ruins, the quest for a new founding myth, a new past, is also inscribed the ideological context of rewriting history and the political danger of populism. An ambition of 20th-century totalitarianisms was to build cities whose ruins could rival the ancient ones. In this perspective the ruins of our transformation seem pretty unspectacular. Why is PLATO calling on us today to discuss ruins? Is it a sense of the importance of the approaching change, a return to our familiar rituals? The ruin as a state of passage from one order to another, or rather the art institution as a metaphor for a ruin—a body in transformation, in a process of ceaseless change, uprooting, fulfilled unfulfillment? The train stops in Ostrava. The station is nearly empty, like the square in front of it. It is a Saturday afternoon, the city is holding its breath, and even if it's just a coincidence of the pandemic, it is happening at the best possible moment. Our world is frozen in anticipation.

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