

Łukasz Gorczyca: On The Immortality of Art Institutions

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Images of museums in ruins are among the catchiest tropes of modern and postmodern culture. At PLATO Ostrava, such images are evoked by Lukáš Jasanský and Martin Polák, but they ascribe to them active rather than symbolic power. Their photographs occur on the thin boundary between archiving and staging, and restore to art the role of a medium—an intermediary between the real and the potential.

One of many possible beginnings of this history was in Wilno (present-day Vilnius). In 1944 the Red Army entered the city, for the second time in one war, and ultimately assumed control. The leading local photographer, Jan Bułhak, a pioneer of Belarusian, Lithuanian and Polish artistic photography, was commissioned to document the wartime destruction. With his son he took over 300 photographs. One of the ruined structures was a residential building at ul. Orzeszkowej 3 (on what is now Vinco Kudirkos aikštė), burned out on 10 July 1944 in a bomb explosion. It housed Bułhak's own apartment and studio. All of its contents, along with the library and the archive of negatives and photographs, went up in flames. A month later, on 8 August, the photographer's wife died. Thus the documentation he made of the ruined Wilno can be treated as distinct type of report: an official record of losses, but at the same time an emotional farewell to his life up to that time, his place of work and art, and the city and landscape that had served as the artist's principal inspiration.

After completing that commission, Bułhak and his son travelled to Warsaw, and again—this time by way of welcome—they photographed ruins. One of the buildings surviving in good condition was the monumental edifice of the

National Museum, erected in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In 1946, Bułhak was the first photographer in the history of the institution to present an individual exhibition there: *Warsaw 1945 in Photographic Pictures* by Jan Bułhak. In an archival photo, the artist posed in an overcoat with a fur collar and a camera around his neck in front of displays of his prints. The white of the freshly painted walls contrasted with the “photographic pictures” captured by Bułhak of ruins and heaps of rubble, and above all with the apocalyptic landscape of the devastated city spreading out beyond the walls of the museum.

The case of Bułhak, one of the region’s first conscious creators of landscape photography, illustrates the key tensions accompanying this artistic genre. Firstly the political context of documentary photography, but also the institutional hunger for images needed to build the institution’s own history and identity. The photographer not only records the existing state of affairs, but also through his pictures constructs and confirms a hierarchy of values. Among the numerous photographic testaments to the demolished Warsaw, it is hardest to find images of districts that avoided wartime destruction. Bułhak’s photographs thus are among those most suggestively creating a vision of historic catastrophe, shocking in their images patterned on paintings of ancient, picturesque ruins. Bułhak understood his role as a kind of artistic servant in the face of a catastrophe of historic proportions—and the needs of national propaganda.

The figure of the demolished city is one of the foundations of European visual culture. It has been, and continues to be, exploited in various ways, and many times over—from Pompeii to Warsaw and Dresden, Beirut and Aleppo. It is tempting to ponder a specific, typological subgroup of images of ruins, namely the ruins of art institutions. Has such a collection already arisen somewhere? A museum of demolished, torched and plundered museums and art centres? Such a photographic collection, a kind of “institution porn,” would offer undoubted rhetorical potential. But it is not just wars or earthquakes that kill off museum institutions. Who could have foreseen that the biggest existential crisis to face art institutions in decades would be caused by a flu-like epidemic?

The official announcement of this year’s edition of the Steirischer Herbst festival in Graz begins: “Today’s art institutions are often stuck in a mode of imaginary participation, while real audiences might give these institutions a wide berth. Such self-isolation represents a huge blind spot of contemporary art, especially when it consists of social, activist, engaged, and participatory practices. Why don’t we as curators try to escape our comfort zones and safe

spaces, refuse to be among our own all the time—whoever this ‘our own’ might be—and give others the right to an aesthetic ‘otherness,’ to fiction, theatricality, and perhaps naïveté? Why don’t we tell more nuanced stories, whose moral is not so evident? Why don’t we stop knowing for sure what is good and what is bad?”

It should be admitted that the vision of an empty art gallery is not a particularly exotic image. It was all too familiar to us in pre-Covid times. The question of the audience may now be taking on a new urgency, but in essence it is an age-old dilemma of artists, of new art and the institutions promoting it. But at the same time, it is hard to believe in the death of these institutions. Particularly considering that, as the current crisis shows, it is hard to imagine more self-absorbed, self-reflective entities operating in the field of culture, built on an avant-garde ethos of questioning the received order and its own limitations. Art institutions display the greatest vigour precisely at their birth and their death. Surely no one can convey this paradox as aptly as the photographic duo of Lukáš Jasanský and Martin Polák. Their fascinating oeuvre, comprising dozens of shorter and longer photographic series, is largely devoted to various aspects of the institutionalization of art.

PLATO, an institution in a transitional phase, between one of a series of deaths and an approaching rebirth, turned to these artists with a request at once intimate and public. Intimate, because it involved a photographic portrait of an institution in a state of undress, in its own prenatal phase. Public, because the wish was to immediately share these images with its current and future audience.

The photographers donned the coveralls of the foremen of art, and with their large-format camera entered the construction site and ruins of the former slaughterhouse. There they created their own “to-the-camera” exhibition. On the bare brick walls hung unexposed sheets of photographic paper, but also individual still lifes from the series *Colour Photography* (2010), composed suggestively with piles of bricks, mounds of rubble, and abstract constructions of discarded equipment and building materials. Audiences at PLATO, like participants in a pandemic videoconference, could view refined, black-and-white contact prints narrating an arranged situation. At first it’s hard to decide what to focus on: the photographs themselves, what they present, or the absurdity of the spatiotemporal displacements. The action documented in the photographs occurred just a stone’s throw away, on the other side of the street. Are we watching scenes from the future, a live report, or views of a presumed future? The disruptions of time and distance are more and more troubling.

Where is farther, and where is nearer? What happened first, and what later? In life, in art, in history?

Playing on the image of the institution and the form of the exhibition was the subject of earlier series by these photographers.

Photo Exhibitions (1998) is a collection of black-and-white views of various photography exhibitions. The apparently neutral, archival shots essentially explore the dark power of contemporary (but time-worn) exhibition conventions. In the daring series Director and Founder (2011), the artists accompany with their camera Antoni Malczak, director of the Sokół Małopolska Culture Centre in Nowy Sącz, whose day seems to be filled with ceremonial routines: suit and tie, a cup of coffee in the office, a walk in the park, dinner with a glass of wine, a speech at a folk culture festival, a ride in his official car, a visit to a rehearsal for a piano recital. Nothing happens, but at the same time, form is maintained. The photographs from the series Churches, Churches (2012) fit in a non-obvious way into this sequence, depicting how fanciful contemporary architecture can be an instrument for identification (or alienation) of a social institution, in this case the Catholic Church.

Jasanský and Polák cast doubt on the possibility of the death of an institution. In their works they reveal its capacity for rebirth, showing this using the example of art and photography, which mutually hibernate and undergo reincarnation. But at the same time they convey an intriguing observation, a surprising diagnosis of the vitality of the institution. The quality decisive for its life is not ideas, and not even—God forbid—artists, but everything we are inclined to regard as the deadweight of any institution: its material tissue, bureaucratic habits, routine forms of operating, and their constant repetitions. Without all this the institution cannot exist, and this also accounts for its exceptional status. Here it is not motion but steadiness, not excess but postures and conventions, that are the medium of its existence. The structure of the institution forms the art within it, not the other way around. Archivists thus take precedence over artists.

As with Buřhak, photography and its apparatus—a lens in an old wooden box affixed to a tripod—is here both a witness and the final oracle.

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