



INSTYTUT
KULTURY
POLSKIEJ



View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture.

title:

Between Nostalgia and (Political) Solidarity. Some Notes on the Shipyard Ruins

author:

Ewa Majewska

source:

View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture 4 (2013)

URL:

<http://widok.ibl.waw.pl/index.php/one/article/view/108/235/>

publisher:

Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences
Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw

Ewa Majewska

Between Nostalgia and (Political) Solidarity. Some Notes on the Shipyard Ruins

But not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons – the modern working class – the proletarians.

Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*

The procedures for linking heterogeneous elements that ensured dialectical conflict now produce the exact opposite: the homogeneous great layer of mystery, where all of yesterday's conflicts become expressions of intense co-presence.

Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*

Situating the ruins

In his text for the catalogue of the dOCUMENTA 13 exhibition in 2012, Franco Berardi (Bifo) suggested that “the collapse and the rebirth of the European project may be seen as the beginning of a new process of autonomy based on frugality rather than accumulation, on friendship rather than rivalry.”¹ Bifo proposed that the current catastrophe not only of the idea, but above all of the practice, of the European Union could be seen as “the condition for the imagination of a new Europe – based on social solidarity and no longer on competition.”² Reconstructing the criticism of a debt-based mentality and emphasizing the irony and distance necessary for any form of *ligne de fuite*, Bifo renounces the easy “there is no alternative” thinking formulated by Margaret Thatcher, which became the hegemonic capitalist commandment after the erasure of state communism in 1989. As I will try to show, a confrontation with ruins and nostalgia might be a necessary step in the process of moving the petrified imagination, in proposing new contexts for the recent past and new perspectives for the close future.

In this article, the search for ruins becomes an opportunity to reflect on the concept

of political solidarity with some reference to the massive political movement of "Solidarność" that developed an alternative to the bourgeois public in the Poland of the 1980s – a working class, organized, hybrid and (dramatically) temporary "autonomous zone" or "heterotopy" of a multitude organized for change.³ The Shipyard of Gdańsk, where most of the events that I refer to took place, is now being cleaned up after some years of an ongoing, slow process of ruination. I believe that this context is an important one to begin with, above all as an element in the process of healing, of reparation after a neoliberal transformation, which a large part of the Polish population experienced as a harmful, disintegrating process of re-establishing strict class distinctions and reshaping the clash between tenured workers and the "army of the unemployed," as Marx used to call them. This process of healing and reparation is currently undermined by a predominantly nostalgic contemplation of the Shipyard ruins by many politicians, local artists and activists, and the irresponsible politics of the president of Gdańsk, who recently decided to bring back the words "dedicated to Lenin" on the gate of the Gdańsk Shipyard. By making the gate look exactly as it did in 1980, he appropriated the historical gate to his own vision of historical memory without ever consulting the local inhabitants. This local disagreement can also be seen as exemplary of a major trend of appropriation of the worker's mobilization by political elites in semi-peripheral countries.

In contemporary Polish debates, nostalgia usually implies a sentimental longing for state communism, sometimes also a longing for the idealized inter-war period of the "2nd Republic." In this article, I will try to use it in a different way – as a word for the sentimentalizations and affective petrification of the activities of the "Solidarność" Independent Workers' Unions from 1980–1981.



Izabela Kowalczyk, *The Gate of the Lenin Shipyard, Gdańsk 2012*

As I try to argue here, instead of a nostalgia for the supposedly lost social mobilization of 1980 "Solidarność," a look at the now-disappearing Gdańsk Shipyard might open new ways for action, lines of flight, as Deleuze might want us to put it, a deterritorializing impulse for a nomadic collectivity to come. Instead of aestheticizing the picture of the rapidly disappearing Gdańsk Shipyard, we might want to move towards the future, learning from the past, without becoming hypnotized by it.

In the ruins of the Gdańsk Shipyard we might not only find an unprecedented social

mobilization, but also a search for freedom which has been appropriated by neoliberal economic doctrine and reduced solely to an aspect of a fight for capitalism. One important aspect of my effort to revisit these ruins is to undermine the reduction of "Solidarność" Independent Workers' Unions to an element of the building of neoliberalism. This also seems to be the aim of David Ost's analysis of the remnants of the "Solidarność" movement⁴. David Harvey, one of the most important contemporary theorists critiquing neoliberalism, depicts the movement as a "utopia" – an effort to realize a theoretical concept in a real economy, or a "political endeavor," as it attempted to rebuild the conditions which allowed for an accumulation of capital and a restoration of the political power of the economic elites.⁵ My main argument is that the ruins of the Gdańsk Shipyard still harbor a potential for political agency, for building a commons, which the nostalgic focus on ruins and ruination obscures. The aestheticization of the Shipyard ruins might actually be seen as an effort to distance oneself from a possible identification with those who "inhabit" these ruins – the workers, the proletariat, the elderly, unemployed, and rejected. As a strategy of masquerade, this might cover up some subversive potential, but it might also result in a peaceful acceptance, not just of the erasure of a once important industrial space in Gdańsk, but – more importantly – of the relinquishing of the demands for a just, egalitarian and democratic society formulated by those who are now rendered invisible, partly by the neoliberal logic of profit and productivity and partly by the overly aestheticized shipyard ruins⁶. Prevailing postmodern theories do not make research on modernity or writing on ruins particularly easy. The "cultural ideology of late capitalism," as Frederic Jameson used to call it, made the idea of the instability, ambiguity and difficulty of justified political agency the crucial point of any reflection, resulting in paradoxical formulations of the impossibility of collective action, exemplified by Richard Rorty's individualist vision of solidarity.⁷ "All that is solid melts into air," the phrase from Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, developed by Marshall Berman into a nostalgic recapitulation of modernity, became a symbol of instability and a postmodern vision of transformation as – eventually – a form of disappearance hidden in every effort of "overcoming" its contradictions. In line with the postmodern dismantlement of any stable signifiers, the notion of "perestrojka" – the Russian word for transformation applied specifically to the reforms proposed in the late USSR by Mikchail Gorbachev – was also translated as "deconstruction," as Jacques Derrida claims in his *Spectres of Marx*.⁸ In all these instances, we clearly witness the development of a sense of acceptance of the process of ruination, destruction and dismantlement, unseen in the progressive theories of the 19th and early 20th century, where progress seemed near at hand. After years of skepticism, however,

a new hope in criticality has appeared, as seen in the works of Jameson, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak or Jacques Rancière, who clearly point to the necessity of analyzing contradictions without reducing them to all-too-often praised "ambiguities."⁹

One can observe a certain mistrust of both ruins and nostalgia in recent theoretical works by authors such as Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Rancière, Sara Ahmed and Svetlana Boym.¹⁰ The above mentioned critical approaches constitute a symptom of the overcoming of postmodern and deconstructive acceptance for the passing of time, and a search for ways out of the mistrust of modernity and the Enlightenment. If applied to the ruins of the Gdańsk Shipyard and to the concept and practice of political solidarity, this methodological criticism might, I think, bring interesting results.

Nostalgia. Regarding the Ruins of Others¹¹

Svetlana Boym, who discovered the petrifying effects of nostalgia on political mobilization, emphasizes its peculiar dialectics, which consists in a necessity to act and an inability to obey this need¹². Boym writes about the "double exposure" as a cinematic form of nostalgia. She connects the sentiment of nostalgia with home ("nostos – return home and *algia* – longing"),¹³ one which either no longer exists or has never existed, being just a phantasmagoria. As she explains, "Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy."¹⁴ In this, nostalgia clearly is a form of "phantasmagoric attachment" similar to Walter Benjamin's description of the substance of the life of the *flâneur*. Let us not forget though, that for Benjamin the *flâneur* was the avant-garde of bourgeois consumption, as is the contemporary nostalgic spectator. What is more, Benjamin's narrative was one of historical materialism – one where the dialectical play of contradictory images was not supposed to petrify, but rather to transform the viewer.

The melancholic contemplation of ruins can sometimes be opposed to their all too easy rejection, intertwined with a rage toward insufficiently reflexive acts, as happened with Jean Baudrillard in his (in)famous response to Susan Sontag's project of staging Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in besieged Sarajevo in 1993. Somewhat inspired by Jacques Rancière, Slavoj Žižek summarized the contemporary situation of the political as "postmodernist postpolitics."¹⁵ In my opinion, this postmodernist rejection of politics can be found in both Sontag's efforts to show solidarity with the Bosniaks and Baudrillard's immediate rejection of

her project, resulting in the rejection of any form of agency from the West. The Sontag/Baudrillard debate constitutes a vital example of what can and what cannot be done with ruins, particularly when it is "others" who try to work with them.¹⁶

Baudrillard's answer to Sontag is important here, not only as an example of politics overwhelmed by its own sense of impotence, and as an expression of harsh misogyny, but also as an expression of the impossibility of solidarity. Let me quote a passage from his article in *Liberation*:

Yet, to do something for the sole reason that one cannot do nothing never has been a valid principle for action, nor for liberty. At the most it is an excuse for one's own powerlessness and a token of self-pity. The people of Sarajevo are not bothered by such questions. Being where they are, they are in the absolute need to do what they do, to do the right thing. They harbor no illusion about the outcome and do not indulge in self-pity. This is what it means to be really existing, to exist within reality.¹⁷

I think that this kind of description of the situation of Sarajevo's inhabitants is above all a convenient way of doing away with the political agency of the critical theorist, who – sitting comfortably in his apartment in Paris indulges himself with accusations of another "stupid American woman," as we can read between the lines of his astonishing text. This position allows him to situate all the political agency there, where it is not "ours," on the side of the suffering people it is supposed to support. In Baudrillard's text, they are not only perceived as those who have a "real life," unlike anyone in the West, clearly deprived of this luxury. It is, I think, a quite repugnant way of renouncing one's own responsibility, a melancholic position of resignation which finds its legitimization in the pain of others. On the other side of the conflict, we find Sontag and her incredible belief that normality can be something she can bring to besieged Sarajevo. Her effort of investing herself in the pain of others is yet another way of becoming apolitical where politics would truly be necessary. As she wrote just after finishing her work in Sarajevo:

I had spent two weeks there in April, and had come to care intensely about the battered city and what it stands for; some of its citizens had become friends. But I couldn't again be just a witness: that is, meet and visit, tremble with fear, feel brave, feel depressed, have heartbreaking conversations, grow ever more indignant, lose weight. If I went back, it would be to pitch in and do something.¹⁸

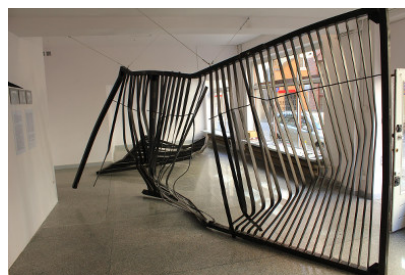
This sentimental passage opens up ways of thinking about a naiveté of any *passage à l'acte*, the naiveté of someone willing to do things. However, it can also be an occasion to rethink the words of Hannah Arendt, Judith Butler and so many others, demanding a necessary reflexive moment in any form of political action, a moment freed of necessity and devoted to making a choice. After reading the opening pages of Sontag's text one might feel just as disgusted as Baudrillard, for the effort to help herself clearly dominates over the sense of empathy for others. It is her who needs sleep, who needs not to worry and who needs to work with her needs.

Comparing these two leading theorists of what became the postmodernist canon, we might be shocked by the over-invested subjectivity, by the (Western) ego that abounds and swallows all otherness. In the end it is nostalgia that is at work in the efforts of both Baudrillard and Sontag, as the former tries to leave the people who live the true life in peace, and the latter tries to bring them some normality. This nostalgia clearly leads them to focus on their own pain, but not on the pain of others.

Memory work of the ruins

Interestingly, the experience of ruins or – as in the case discussed above – of the ruined lives of others – can work as either of the two basic forms of aesthetic experience distinguished by Kant: as beauty immediately looking for engagement – as in the case of Sontag confronting the inhabitants of Sarajevo; or as the sublime, which could put our own life in danger, or at least grant us such an impression – as in case of Baudrillard watching Sarajevo *via* the experience of Sontag. The aestheticization of ruins and indulgence of a preoccupation with their beauty can be seen as an important element of a cultural politics of resignation, and a denial of their belonging to or being connected with the working class.¹⁹

It can also become a way of healing wounds after traumatic events, as in Dorota Nieznalska's work "Re-Construction of violence," in which she reenacts the destruction of the historical gate number 2 of the Gdańsk Shipyard, damaged by tanks during the military pacification of the workers' protest against the installation of martial law on December 16th, 1981. In Nieznalska's work, the focus on the gate



Dorota Nieznalska, *Re-construction from 16.12.1981*, Gdańska Galeria Miejska, Gdańsk 2011 (Reconstruction of the historic Gate no 2 of the Gdańsk Shipyard from December 16th, 1981, after it had been rammed by a T-55 tank; scale 1:1, based on archival photographs, material from the Institute of National Remembrance and witness accounts.) From the collection of the European Solidarity Center, courtesy of the artist.

allows for a confrontation with the history of violence directed at the workers by the state apparatus, mediated by a large piece of metal. The lived experiences of the workers, their pain, suffering, and possibly also acts of resistance, are therefore possibly less perceptible than the material effects of violence and a depersonalized damage. In a society in which destruction caused by the economic transition and neoliberal politics are still described as being “the human costs” or “social costs”, the strategy chosen by Nieznalska, the strategy of condensation, estrangement and abstraction, resulting in the erasure of the human from the sculpture, of focusing on a damaged gate, might at first bring associations with an effort to do away with empathy for workers. Yet on the other hand, the gate brutally damaged by the military tanks in December 1981 looks fragile and as if it was itself in pain, therefore providing a visual metonymy for the pains suffered by individuals at the Gdańsk Shipyard and elsewhere in Poland during the Martial Law.

We might consider Nieznalska's choice of artistic strategy as “purely aesthetic,” but I would like to suggest considering thinking about the Shipyard and the ways of staging its history as a field of memory work, in which everything is present everything except the workers. This is, I believe, quite similar to what Jacques Rancière has suggested happens with the proletariat in Marx's work. It tends to disappear in works of art, and also in social and political projects, that have anything to do with the shipyard.²⁰ Neither the Museum of “Solidarność,” the European Centre of Solidarity, nor the Wyspa Institute of Art (located on the premises of the Shipyard) nor the new district that will be built for future inhabitants consider the Shipyard workers to be users of that space, or even clients.

Interestingly, this preoccupation with violence seems to run in Nieznalska's family; her father witnessed the army's attack on the Shipyard in 1981, and the artist used his photographs to construct her story. Moreover, she herself was the victim of the longest criminal court case against an artist that ever took place in Poland (from 2002 until 2010), which she eventually won.²¹

Nieznalska's recent work clearly deals with other forms of violence: she started a cooperation with an antifascist NGO (“Never Again”) and every year produces a symbolic sculpture – unreadable books containing archives of racist, sexist and homophobic violence, always using black pages. However, these are works that do not touch upon the class origins of these forms of violence – the attack on the workers caused by the state's elites and attacks on immigrants, lesbians or



The Gate of the Gdańsk Shipyard, December 16th, 1981. Photo: Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance, cat. no GD 0361/5

transsexual persons by members of contemporary racist/homophobic groups clearly could clearly be analyzed through the category of class. Due to the detachment from class issues, or even perhaps a certain shamefulness associated with class, Nieznalska's work can easily become another element of the class separation between those who empathize and show some capacity for culturally transforming empathy into artistic expression and those who only present rage and resentment, and whose artistic production is either absent or very poor.²² It is important to remember that in the summer of 1980 the Shipyard of Gdańsk was a space where these distinctions were overcome in the process of creating the "Solidarność" Workers' Unions. For at least one and a half years, they were absent or latent. I think it would be very interesting to attempt and reconstruct this. I would thus like to move towards the Gdańsk Shipyard – first to its history, then to its ruins.

"Solidarność" and Solidarity

The Shipyard of Gdańsk is the place where, for approximately one and a half years, the so-called "carnival of solidarity" took place. The strikes, which started on the August 14th 1980 in the Shipyard and simultaneously in the textile industry in Łódź and factories in Lublin, began a wave of other strikes in Gdańsk and other cities, which eventually led to the creation of the first independent workers' unions in the state-communist block. The 21 demands of the striking workers were negotiated consensually and an agreement was made that no one would stop the strike until all of them were accepted. The government initially wanted to cut Gdańsk off from other cities but in order to stop the strike and meet at least some of the demands was ultimately forced on August 31st 1980 to sign the 21 postulates, which now are known as the "August Agreements" or the "Gdańsk Agreements". Until the introduction of Martial law on December 13th 1981, life in Poland seemed like a carnival, in which 10 million people registered for and joined the "Solidarność" union by the spring of 1981. The history of "Solidarność" has been recapitulated in detail so many times and by so many authors that I do not think it is necessary to repeat their work. I also think that it is time to propose some interpretations of these events, and to discuss them rather than reconstruct them, as these events are, as Claus Offe rightly puts it, "undertheorized."²³

In her article written for the twentieth anniversary of "Solidarność", Elżbieta Matynia suggested the events of 1980 are a lost treasure requiring a new approach.²⁴ She claims that "Solidarność" should be seen as a transformation of the public sphere rather than just a social movement, as it has been by most theorists including Alain Touraine, Jadwiga Staniszkis and numerous other

sociologists.²⁵ In her essay, Matynia refers to Jürgen Habermas' work on the bourgeois public sphere and claims that "Solidarność" opened a public debate, that it was itself a possibility for bringing privatized political discussions to the public again.

As much as I agree with Matynia's suggestion concerning the necessity of using the concept of "public" in order to understand the phenomenon of "Solidarność," I would not be so certain as to whether Habermas's concept of the public sphere is the most effective way to analyze this specific structural transformation of the public. I would rather suggest that the notion of "subaltern counterpublics" proposed by Nancy Fraser in her polemic with Habermas might be more accurate, as it encompasses an important element of "Solidarność;" namely the presence of the excluded (workers, women, members of opposition) in the debate.²⁶ In her essays dedicated to the issue, Fraser suggests that the members of "subordinated social groups – women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians – have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics."²⁷ Further in the article Fraser writes that the US-American feminist movement is the best example of what she depicts as the "subaltern counterpublics," as it became a massive zone of redefining the identities and needs of masses of excluded women, but later also other groups, such as sexual and ethnic minorities, migrants etc.

Interestingly, at a certain point "Solidarność" became a form of a hegemonic "public sphere," because during the August Agreements in 1980, and for 1,5 years afterwards, it participated in the shaping of the legal, economic and political decisions at a level never achieved by American feminists, who always were, and still are, a minority in their country. "Solidarność" became a majority, and a specific weakness of the concept proposed by Fraser is clear here: how do we theorize about a minority group that becomes hegemonic, at least for a period of time? Can it still be called a "subaltern counterpublic" or should be understood differently? The notion proposed by Fraser, interesting as it is, does not allow us to speak about a transformation of the public, which becomes hegemonic: the idea of a marginal, "subaltern counterpublics" doesn't seem ample enough to discuss a political mobilization of some 10 million people.



Ewa Majewska, *A worker of the Shipyard of Gdańsk I and II, Gdańsk, 2004*



Ewa Majewska, *A worker of the Shipyard of Gdańsk I and II, Gdańsk, 2004*

The notion of a “proletarian public sphere” proposed by Alexander Kluge does not suffice either, although it might be closer to the Polish events than any other concept of the public, partly because in proletarian public “no concrete interest remains excluded or unresolved.”²⁸ I think that the concept of a “post-bourgeois public” could be more pertinent in the case of “Solidarność,” because this particular social movement clearly overcame the existing public, being not a mere alternative to it, but rather a synthesis of the proletarian publics, intelligentsia circles, workers’ unionism and some underground or activist practices. In this sense, it quickly replaced the corrupted public of the capitalist state in a way calling to mind Hegelian “sublation” rather than becoming a constant alternative to some bourgeois public, something not really extant in communist Poland.

As I try to argue elsewhere, a concept of “semi-peripheral public” could also be applied to the situation in Poland, both historical and contemporary, because we need to face the specific role that bourgeois cultural practices played in the last century, with the bourgeoisie not always (and often not) constituting the hegemonic class. We also need to face the constant efforts to “catch up with the West,” expressed in the 1990s and the analysis of the semi-periphery offered by Immanuel Wallerstein in *European Universalism*, where he clearly mentions the existence of semi-peripheral states such as these, who are always lured by the opportunity of becoming a part of the center and who also are always the closest resource available for the center.²⁹ I believe that Poland, but also the Republic of South Africa, are good examples of semi-periphery, and their efforts at building the institutions of the public sphere clearly reflect this in-betweenness³⁰. As much as it is necessary to embrace the history of proletarian publics and contemporary proletarian practices, we should also see how they shaped the public in general and not just the situation of the workers. As Hegel suggested and Marx proved, the bourgeoisie and proletariat are intertwined, not just on the level of their historical fate, but also on the level of them both creating their own “cultural capital” and “habitus,” to use Pierre Bourdieu's terms. My disagreement with Kluge lies precisely in my belief that it is necessary to look at a public together with its margins and exclusions rather than on the separated territories of the proletarian and the bourgeois. An example of such a joint analysis can be seen in Jacques Rancière's *The Nights of Labor* and *The Philosopher and his Poor*, where he recapitulates the cultural work of working class struggle, which later become the *mesentente*, constituting the excluded of politics.³¹

Medusa's Gaze at the Ruins of the Gdańsk Shipyard

Michał Szlaga is a photographer based in Gdańsk. He recently published a large collection of photographs of the Gdańsk Shipyard. He also has a blog with many of the Shipyard photographs and short comments.³² From his blog and book one can clearly deduce a nostalgic perspective towards the shipyard; the author declaring his attachment to the ruins of the disappearing industrial space, to its machines and cranes, to the garden-like collection of plants, and to the people and history of the place. However, if Szlaga's involvement in the documentation of the vanishing Gdańsk shipyard started as a form of nostalgic observation, then it quickly became an engaged and critical observation of the ruins as an element of a wider landscape – the politics of the city of Gdańsk and its social history. Szlaga clearly moved from documentation to activism, supplying an important voice concerning memory work and production in Gdańsk, the strategies of reconstruction and modernization, and the public debate on ruins and how they should be organized. Albeit at times sentimental, Szlaga's project cannot be reduced to mere documentation – he clearly takes a stand for the workers, activists and history. Drawing on the famous urban manifesto of Henri Lefebvre, *The Right to the City*, we can say that the city is not a collection of detached objects, buildings, plans, plants and humans; it should rather be perceived as an organism.³³ The capacity of rising back from ruins, as Marshall Berman suggested, requires a confrontation with pain, loss and damage, yet it has to proceed toward transformation: [k]nowledge is power; understanding pain can help us work our way toward a stronger civic identity. If New Yorkers can come to feel how much we all have lost, it can help us work together fast before we lose it all. We need first to mourn, then to reform: to go through our grief together, and then to move beyond the work of mourning, to create a framework that can bring our city's future development under its citizens' control. Then we will be able to let go of our pain, and to build over the ruins a city we can share.³⁴



Michał Szlaga, *Stocznia* (still from video), *Shipyard of Gdańsk*, 2010, courtesy of the artist

A similar pronouncement should be made about Gdańsk some day, and the pictures of Michał Szlaga constitute an important step in this direction, together with the work of Iwona Zajęc on the wall of the Gdańsk Shipyard. and Dorota Nieznalska's *Re-Construction of Violence*.

There is, however, one aspect of the work of Michał Szlaga that I find problematic – precisely the dominance of the nostalgic over the critical. Instead of making his

photographs a tool for further critical intervention, it seems that the author cannot decide whether to engage or not. This choice has been tackled by many artists at least since Walter Benjamin's writing on artistic production, and if we look at the work of Joseph Beuys, Martha Rosler, and many others, we will see how engaged observation can become. With Michał Szlaga's work, it is clear that his intentions are political and that his loyalties lie with the Shipyard and its past, however it would be difficult to say what this past actually means for him and what it is supposed to mean for his viewers. I would suggest that we encounter here a fear prevalent in Polish art, where saying that a particular capitalist is unethical is acceptable, but making a broader statement concerning the sometimes mortifying tendencies of *capitalism in general* is seen as too strong. In the case of the Shipyard a choice has to be made whether to contemplate or to criticize, and – as Szlaga's wonderful photographs allow us to see – it is not an easy choice. It was the hard work, courage and persistence of the striking workers of the Gdańsk Shipyard that made their workplace so rich in historical value and meaning, and yet it was the workers whose presence in that place was systematically erased by those in power. *The Shipyard* by Michał Szlaga depicts this presence of the social actors, but an unfortunate interpretation could easily concentrate on the alienated beauty of the ruined buildings, which would probably be in opposition to the artist's intent.

In the photographs of Michał Szlaga, we witness the dismantlement of an entire industrial zone of production. The massive shipyard cranes collapse, huge production rooms fall apart and the people, if they happen to be there, seem terrified by this quickly approaching end of a space they have known forever – the Gdańsk Shipyard functioned for 150 years. The resignation and disappointment on the faces of the people of the Shipyard – its workers, the political activists of the

"Solidarność" Independent Workers' Unions, local inhabitants – can be explained with more reasons than just the rapid destruction of their buildings. It also stems from disappointment and lost hopes. The experience of "Solidarność" in 1980 was a huge promise, both to the workers and to the rest of the Polish population. A promise of a democratic, equal society, released from dependence on the USSR; an egalitarian society respecting all citizens, regardless of their class position; a society, where women would actually have a voice.³⁵ The destruction of the Gdańsk Shipyard can be therefore seen as a material representation of the destruction of this political hope. The shipyard's cranes, documented by Szlaga,



From the series *Paskudne Pocztówki* (*Dreadful Postcards*), Shipyard of Gdańsk, 2007, courtesy of the artist

were for years associated with the summer of 1980. They were a confirmation of a past mobilization that – although it was massive and genuine – did not last until our own time; on the contrary, it was neglected and contradicted by the harsh neoliberal line of Polish politics after 1989. The Shipyard stood in Gdańsk as a ruin of political hope, and its destruction can in fact be seen as a disillusioning transformation of the city space. This perspective would, however, neglect the 30 000 workers who lost their jobs in the past 20 years, and the possibly risky strategy of dismantling all ship industry at a time when it still was profitable.

One particularly powerful photograph in the *Shipyard* series opens up a way to rethink the heritage of the Gdańsk Shipyard. The monumental Anna Walentynowicz, a strike leader in 1980, the woman whose dismissal triggered the strikes on August 14th 1980, already a very old woman, stands in a ruined shipyard building, looking sad and tired. The photograph allows us to see the elderly female worker in her disappointment, stripped of social security, work, and respect, rejected as “useless” in a neoliberal economy governed by notions of productivity and effect. It is a testimony to all those whom Leszek Balcerowicz, the author of the neoliberal “shock therapy” introduced in Poland after 1989, and other politicians of the transition called “useless” and inscribed in the “human costs of transformation.”³⁶ It also contradicts the logic of success, still fueling neoliberal thinking of short-term productivity and the end of history, because there are still witnesses, photographers among them, who do care for what was once an important site of social struggle.

In Szlaga’s other photographs, we mainly witness the dismantlement of buildings and the fall of the shipyard cranes; the slow transformation of a monumental industrial site into a ruin and then, the process of cleaning up its debris. Therewith the work of ruination is concluded by making way for a highway, a series of business oriented skyscrapers, and houses that the 99% will never be able to afford. Szlaga’s photographs thus portray the process of building capitalism: their strength lies partly in the clear attachment of the artist to the space and its workers, and the seductive beauty of such a monumental and history-laden space growing old and useless, and ultimately being dismantled. In this fascination we can find respect, but also a tendency to contemplate rather than to criticize or oppose. These



Michał Szlaga, *Anna Walentynowicz, Shipyard of Gdańsk, 2004*, courtesy of the artist

photographs provoke, but they do not take a stand; they witness, but pretend not to be involved; document, but refrain from resisting. They follow the path of traditional documentary; yet, we might want to rethink the position of the documentarian in many different ways since Brecht, Benjamin, Rosler and so many others.³⁷

Michał Szłaga's book is involved in nostalgia. It is perhaps the best recent example of how sentimental spectatorship has to be overcome in order to avoid turning into passive observers. As I tried to show in the brief reference to Sontag and Baudrillard, individualized compassion can not transform into action; it is a self-devouring mechanism. A set of photographs so carefully collecting every detail of the collapsing cranes, of the dismantled buildings and explosions leading to the dismantlement of this industrial site, clearly suggests



From the series *Paskudne Pocztyówki* (*Dreadful Postcards*), Shipyard of Gdańsk, 2007, courtesy of the artist

much more than simply a seduction leading to contemplative observation deprived of any transformative acts. This petrification in front of the Shipyard ruins is a beautiful tribute to the past of the Gdańsk Shipyard, but it will not have any political effect unless its author reformulates his artistic strategy, and instead of aesthetizing the demolition, will think about more collective strategies. "I really have to leave those ruins alone" – declares Szłaga – "and start working with the people."³⁸ Indeed, this would be an important step on the way to overcoming the nostalgia and reaching for a new solidarity to come.

In his extraordinary essay concerning the image in ruins, Eduardo Cadava suggested that an image of ruins always evokes the death, or at least the impossibility, of the image understood as a form of representation. His point is one of great beauty, partly because the author does not essentialize ruins as a reappearance of an (always already naturalized) "nature." On the contrary – both ruins and image remain elements of representation, not mere "life", which situates them on the side of culture and epistemology rather, than ontology.³⁹

I believe this kind of approach should also be part of Michał Szłaga's future projects – instead of indulging himself and us in the nostalgic contemplations of the Shipyard of Gdańsk, he, and we, could rethink the contradictory paths of representation, political agency and gentrification. This would make the disappearing Shipyard meaningful again, and instead of a petrification, could create some renegotiation of the strictly profit-oriented politics hiding behind the current dismantling of the Shipyard buildings.

Rebuilding the ruined libraries

In my opinion we need to look at ruins and theories of ruination with a critical distance and historical conscience. Otherwise metaphysics will become the new version of the social sciences, and it need not be this way, even if we speak about "Solidarność," which of course was informed at least partly by Catholic theories, dogmas and practices.

In his essay, Cadava discusses a photograph which probably impresses most academics – the ruined Holland Library in London after the German bombings in 1940. I think there are several libraries that have been symbolically "bombed" due to the processes instigated in the now ruined Gdańsk Shipyard and continued in the form of the neoliberal transformation in Poland after 1989. The tacit consent of not reading Marx, of not allowing any thinking in Polish academia other than the neoliberal and conservative variety, has now reached its peak with the disproportionately high funding for theological research, attacks on gender and queer studies and various exclusions of Marxist thought in Poland in the recent years. Contrary to this, a critical reinterpretation of the ruins of the Gdańsk Shipyard could serve as a reminder of a pluralism and social change that proceeds without exclusion.

Footnotes

- 1 Bifo – Franco Berardi, "Transverse," in: *The Book of Books 1 100 Notes-100 Thoughts* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012), 611.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Elżbieta Matynia, "The Lost Treasure of Solidarity," *Social Research* 68, no. 4 (2001): 917-936. See also Edward Wnuk-Lipinski, *Values and Radical Social Change* (Warszawa: ISP PAN, 1998); Sergiusz Kowalski, *Krytyka solidarnościowego rozumu* (Warszawa: PEN, 1990).
- 4 David Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity: Anger and Politics in Post-Communist Europe*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).
- 5 See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005). For theoretical approaches to neoliberalism, see also Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization. The Human consequences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). In Poland neoliberalism has mainly been analyzed by its critics, see

Ewa Majewska, Jan Sowa, eds., *Zniewolony umysł 2. Neoliberalizm i jego krytycy* (Kraków: Korporacja ha! Art, 2007); Martin Kaltwasser, Ewa Majewska, Kuba Szreder, *Futuryzm miast przemysłowych* (Kraków: Korporacja ha! Art, 2007).

6 For a detailed analysis of "mimicry" – a colonial version of masquerade, see Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28, Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis (Spring, 1984): 125-133.

7 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

8 See Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).

9 See Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image* (New York and London: Verso, 2007): 43.

10 See Slavoj Žižek, "Melancholy and the Act," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (2000): 657-681; Sara Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004); Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and his Poor*, trans. John Drury, Corinne Oster, and Andrew Parker (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) and Svetlana Boym, "Ruinophilia: Appreciation of Ruins," in: *Atlas of Transformation*, ed. Zbyněk Baladrán and Vít Havránek (tranzit.org, 2011), accessed November 10, 2013, <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/r/ruinophilia/ruinophilia-appreciation-of-ruins-svetlana-boym.html>.

11 Reference to the title of Susan Sontag's book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003).

12 See Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 For the notion of postpolitics in Žižek, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999).

16 See Jean Baudrillard, *No Reprieve For Sarajevo*, transl. Patrice Riemens, <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jean-baudrillard/articles/no-reprieve-for-sarajevo>, accessed October 1, 2013. Originally published in *Liberation*, January 8, 1994. Susan Sontag, "Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo," *Performing Arts Journal* 16, no. 2 (May, 1994): 87-106.

17 Baudrillard, *Ibid.*

18 Susan Sontag, *op. cit.*

19 The issue of giving up trying to reconnect to the working class was interestingly analyzed in Jakub Majmurek's text, "Czy potomek chłopów może patrzeć na Wilanów i powiedzieć 'to moje'?", *Dziennik Opinii*, accessed October 1, 2013, <http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/artykuly/opinie/20130525/potomek-chlopow-panszczyznianych-patrzy-na-wilanow>.

20 See Rancière, *op.cit.*

21 The case of Nieznalska stands for the most famous Polish case of censorship, her work *Passion* was accused of hurting religious feelings. After a lengthy trial she was declared innocent on 4th June 2009, on the 10th anniversary of the first free elections in Poland. I discuss her case at length elsewhere, see http://groups.chass.utoronto.ca/complitstudents/transverse/transverse/current_issue_files/CensoredBodies,CensoredSelves.pdf

22 An interesting analysis of the effects of the differences in the adolescence of working class and higher classes was presented in Alexander Kluge's and Oskar Negt's analysis of the proletarian public, which I discuss later. They claim that since the working class youth enters the labor market immediately after school, it is a shocking conversion and an upbringing, which does not allow for the development of the capacity for "reflection, criticism, communication or expression," whereas the higher classes – having at their disposal some 10 more years of education – can learn these skills, constitutive for democratic living – during a time nowadays often labeled as "unproductive." See Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, "Selections from Public Opinion and Practical Knowledge: Toward and Organizational Analysis of Proletariat and Middle Class Public," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 24-32.

23 See Claus Offe, "Capitalism by Democratic Design?" In: *Social Research* 71/3/2004, p. 501-528. Of course, there are many historical accounts of "Solidarność", but what we still miss is its theorization. For the historical accounts, see for example: Timothy Garton Ash, *The Polish Revolution. Solidarity 1980-1982* (London: John Cape, 1983); Jadwiga Staniszkis, *Poland's self-limiting Revolution* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), and the works of David Ost, Grażyna Pomian, Jerzy Holzer, Alain Touraine and Ireneusz Krzemiński, just to name some of them. Interestingly, in Steinar Stjerno's *Solidarity in Europe. The History of an Idea* (Published in 2008!) there is no mention of either the Polish early 20th

century theorists of solidarity, such as Edward Abramowski, nor of the "Solidarność" movement. The book should therefore be titled "Solidarity in Western Europe," in my humble opinion. Two efforts of theorizing "Solidarność" that I find genuinely important yet never sufficiently developed, are those proposed by Elżbieta Matynia, where she applies the concept of public sphere by Jurgen Habermas to "Solidarność" (Matynia, "The Lost Treasure of Solidarity"), and a book by Sławomir Magala, published too early, and finished only later as: Sławomir Magala, *Walka klas w bezklasowej Polsce* (Gdańsk: Europejskie Centrum Solidarności, 2012). This point would require a longer discussion, I would just like to mention that the practice of theorization becomes at times a practice of resistance to subjugation. This happened within American feminism during the 1980s, when feminists of color realized that their role was to provide examples of daily life (and not the analysis), and within postcolonial studies, where people such as Gayatri Spivak rightly addressed the privilege of Western feminists in global discussions on the issue of "women"; see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

24 Matynia, op.cit.

25 See Alain Touraine, *Solidarność. Analiza ruchu społecznego 1980-81*, trans. Andrzej Krasieński (Gdańsk: Europejskie Centrum Solidarności, 2010).

26 See Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, No. 25/26 (1990).

27 Ibid., 67.

28 See Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, op.cit.

29 Immanuel Wallerstein, *European Universalism. The Rhetoric of Power* (New York: The New Press, 2006).

30 I am currently working on a chapter that compares these two countries and their institutions.

31 See Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Dury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); *The Philosopher and his Poor*, trans. John Dury et. al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); *La mésentente : politique et philosophie* (Paris : Galilée, 1995).

32 See Michał Szlaga's blog, accessed December 2, 2013,

<http://szlaga.blogspot.co.at/>, and Michał Szlaga, *Stocznia: Szlaga* (Gdańsk: Fundacja Karrenwall, 2013).

33 See Henri Lefèbvre, "The Right to the City," in *Writings on Cities*, ed. and trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Cambridge, Mass, USA : Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

34 Marshall Berman, "Ruins and Reforms," *Dissent* (Fall 1987): 428.

35 I do not quite agree with some feminist voices concerning "Solidarność," particularly with those expressed by Shanna Penn and Ewa Kondratowicz around 2000. I think that early "Solidarność" was actually the first public platform where women not only participated massively, but also played crucial roles. It had never happened before in communist institutions, where women typically had a sort of decorative function. In the "first Solidarność" there were women leaders, women experts and women activists publicly known by name by the whole country. It was later dismantled by the anti-women turn in "Solidarność" around 1990, but until then it was actually a space for women to enter politics. See Shana Penn, *Solidarity's Secret: The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), Ewa Kondratowicz, *Szminka na sztandarze - kobiety "Solidarności" 1980-1989. Rozmowy* (Warszawa: "Sic!", 2001).

36 See Tadeusz Kowalik, "Blaski i cienie polskiej transformacji," in: *Futuryzm miast przemysłowych, op.cit.*

37 See Martha Rosler, "The Artistic Mode of Revolution: From Gentrification to Occupation," *e-flux journal* 33 (2012), accessed December 2, 2013, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-artistic-mode-of-revolution-from-gentrification-to-occupation/>. Iza Kowalczyk appreciates Szlaga's project as an example of memory work, see Iza Kowalczyk, *Michał Szlaga o wymazywaniu historii Stoczni Gdańskiej*, accessed October 1, 2013, <http://strasznasztuka.blox.pl/2013/02/Michal-Szlaga-o-wymazywaniu-historii-Stoczni.html>.

38 "Michał Szlaga: Stocznia to najbardziej barbarzyńska rewitalizacja w Europie," interview by Jarosław Zalesiński, *Dziennik Bałtycki*, September 25 2013, accessed December 1, 2013, <http://www.dziennikbaltycki.pl/artukul/1000605,michal-szlaga-stocznia-to-najbardziej-barbarzynska-rewitalizacja-w-europie,id,t.html?cookie=1>.

39 Eduardo Cadava, "'Lapsus Imaginis': The Image in Ruins," *October* 96 (Spring, 2001): 35-60. Polish translation of the text published in this issue of Widok. See: <http://widok.ibl.waw.pl/index.php/one/article/view/141/203/>.