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Warsaw – Moscow. Monuments of Transition

> What has rendered constructivism impossible in the Western tradition? Tradition which, on the other hand, has constructed and deconstructed so much, but without being able to confess how it managed to do it. If westerners had really believed they had to choose between construction and reality (if they had been consistently modern), they would never have had religion, art, science, and politics. Mediations are necessary everywhere. If you forbid them, you may become mad, fanatic, but there is no way to obey the command and choose between the two-polar opposites: either it is made or it is real.
>
> Bruno Latour, *What is Iconoclash?*[1]

What is "Transition"?

Christian Jankowski, *Heavy Weight History (Ludwik Waryński)*, B/w photograph on baryt paper, 140 x 186,8 cm, 2013 (Photo: Szymon Rogiński). Courtesy of the artist

A group of strong men, their faces full of tension and muscles bulging, are lifting a monumental bust in bronze from the ground. Weightlifters, maybe, clad in the outfit of the Polish national team. What they are struggling with is the weight of history, it seems, as the bust belongs to Ludwik Waryński, a 19th-Century socialist activist and ideologue, the founder, in 1882, of Proletariat, the first worker's party on Polish soil. His monument was dismantled in 2006 because of the redevelopment, as residential area, of the factory grounds it was erected on. From then on until 2013, when it was put back into the urban space, a battle raged in the city council as to whether one should have a Socialist in the public space of the new, „post-transition" state that has renounced its pre-1989 history. In the project *Heavy Weight History* from 2013 the artist Christian Jankowski managed to picture in a playful manner most, if not all, questions that interested us while working on *Warsaw / Moscow: Alterations in*

Progress. The Vicissitudes of Monuments in the Post-socialist Public Sphere, a transdisciplinary research project realised in 2013-2014 in Warsaw and Moscow;[2] questions such as: What is it that gives shape to the public space in contemporary, post-socialist Poland and Russia? Can this space tell us something about the post-socialist condition as such?

The end of the Cold War was famously hailed by Francis Fukuyama as the "end of history", understood as the "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution," marking the disappearance of any viable alternative to Western liberal democracy and thus voiding, at least in theory, any possibility of ideological struggle.[3] As a founding gesture – and seemingly illustrating the above point – in post-socialist countries the key monuments to the old heroes were toppled to make way for a new, supposedly open, public space in which a new revolution could take place. In Jürgen Habermas's words, a revolution of making up for the "lost time" in relationship to the Western democracies.[4] The transition from socialism was thus immediately defined in terms of a teleology of the transition towards liberal democracy, but above all towards capitalism. While the metaphorical public space was shifting to join the global market, the actual cityscape was being cleaned of the symbolic remnants of the recent past. At the same time, as can be clearly seen with the benefit of hindsight, this transition was from the beginning riddled with a constant return to of history. We set out to ask what these returns actually mean – returns understood both in terms of being haunted by the past and in the sense of searching for sources, but also in the meaning of working through phantasmatic projections. These returns resulted in tensions and conflicts, not only about our understanding of the past, but also about our plans for the future. We wanted to see how the dialectics of past and present, of memory and actuality, play themselves out in the visual field, in the contemporary public space of both capital cities – Warsaw and Moscow.

Needless to say, this project is not something new or previously unheard of. There have already been several attempts at addressing analogous questions, most notably: the monumental "Former West," a long-term project that aimed to reflect upon "the changes introduced to the world (and thus to the so-called West) by the political, cultural, artistic, and economic events of 1989" (2008–2016);[5] and "Monument to Transformation 1989 – 2009", initiated Zbyněk Baladrán, Vít Havránek,[6] and that resulted in the immense *Atlas of Transformation*, published in

2009.[7] While asking similar questions, this project is nowhere near the scope or scale of the aforementioned initiatives, neither does it try to draw more general conclusions related to questions of globalization and the new system of relations established after 1989. Instead we were interested in focusing on very particular cases, to study them with the tools we had at our disposal, to see whether we would be able to make them speak about the wider context they were embedded in.

"Inscribing" a Monument

We started by asking ourselves whether there was a way to approach these issues of transition, conflict and public space in a manner that would not be centred on discourse. Furthermore, we wanted to know whether – looking closely at the urban spaces of our capitals – we could find sites that would in some way represent the said tensions and conflicts, thus rendering them visible, be they monuments, buildings or symbolic spaces of all kinds. A "symptomatic reading of the landscape, the cityscape of both capitals," so to say.

Ludwik Waryński returned to Wola district. Google Street View. Photo: Krzysztof Pijarski

Out of this questioning arose the idea of focussing not on the vicissitudes of the monuments of the old order (as originally planned), but on "discovering" or "inscribing monuments", that is to say, monuments *of* the transition that we could use as devices to address the central questions that interested us - the character of the transition or transformation. Given that it is not a process one could call finished (in fact it is essentially interminable[8]), the idea of a monument as dedicated to something that is already of the past but should yet remain present seemed all the more appealing. What we needed were mediations, devices that could work like a looking glass allowing us to focus on the key aspects of the contemporary state of Polish and Russian post-socialist reality.

Hence the idea of the "monument." The scare quotes around the word do not denote our inability to tell what a monument is, but rather the tentative or performative nature of our monuments: they were not designed and built as such, but were discovered and then inscribed as monuments of the transition. This act of inscription has very much to do with artistic practice, with the tradition or paradigm

of the readymade. In his *Green Box* of 1934, Marcel Duchamp included the following "specifications for 'Readymades':"

> by planning for a moment to come (on such a day, such a date such a minute), "*to inscribe a readymade*," –The readymade can *later be looked for*.–(with all kinds of delays). The important thing then is just this matter of timing, this *snapshot effect*, like a speech delivered on no matter what occasion but at such and such an hour. It is a kind of *rendezvous*.– Naturally inscribe that date, hour, minute, on the readymade as information. Also the aspect of the readymade as *exemplary instance*.[9]

We used this artistic idea as methodology for our research and proceeded by inscribing our (readymade) monuments, that is by providing detailed specifications: what wanted to analyse and interpret *as* monument of transition were objects and sites in public space – and the gestures performed around them – that:

1. have the capacity to allegorize social and political conflict, to condense and accelerate or even trigger important and often untold anxieties, divisions, exclusions, but also superstitions and prejudices.

2. have the quality of condensed time, so that in their current form present and past appear superimposed

3. mediate the above two in figurative, visual and spatial form - the images they generate and the (public) space they produce was one of our main objects of research.

Having formulated our specifications or criteria, we started *looking for* the thus inscribed monuments in the public space of our two capital cities. Our aim was to put together a constellation of *exemplary* instances of monuments of this kind, ones that could be read in terms of a *snapshot* of contemporary conflicts permeating Polish and Russian contemporary societies. This concentration on contested histories and projects seemed important as a means of counteracting the teleological view of the transition - as a movement from point A (the East, rendered obsolete) to point B (the West, epitomizing modernization). The roots of this new focus is the understanding of democracy as a space of conflict, defined by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in terms of radical democracy[10]. According to this understanding democracy is empty at its core, it has no essence. It is not founded

on consensus but rather on the constant mediation of opposing political and social projects and postulates.

The aim of our research was to find and name the fault lines of these conflicts and present them in visual form, since our critical tools – as visual culture scholars, historians and theorists of art and photography, anthropologists and finally artists – are above all visual. What we were interested in is what form these conflicts take in public space and how they are expressed in gestures of both construction and destruction, in terms of both strategy and tactics in public space, to use Michel de Certeau's distinction.[11]

"Monuments" of Transition

The starting point was an analogy: the toppling of the monuments to Felix Dzerzhinsky, a Polish nobleman turned communist and the founder of the Cheka. The toppling of the Dzerzhinsky monuments became an iconic image of the changes taking place in both countries. (The monument in Warsaw was taken down on November 16, 1989; the one in Moscow was removed in the wake of the so-called "August Coup," on August 23, 1991.) This analogy was both the point of contact and the point of departure because, as became clear in the course of discussions within the research group, the public space of these two countries is structured very differently. Whereas in Warsaw we were able to identify constructed structures as monuments of the transition, Moscow did not seem to offer this kind of vertical marker - a tangible point of reference.

As Nina Sosna, who headed the Moscow research, pointed out: to speak of monumentality in Moscow simply in positive terms would be to repress the basic recognition that the public space of the Russian capital is the effect of a policy of "destroying to the ground," something she compared to the logic of the "zachistka" - a systematic erasure of all traces of the unwanted past, a removal of layers, of complexity. This is why her contribution concentrates on ephemerality as the ruling principle of a critical reflection on monumentality in post-socialist Moscow. Her claim is that while monuments are traditionally associated with memory – a project of collective memory and identity firmly rooted in the past – in the case of Moscow monuments become unmoored and ungrounded. The only direction they are able to point to is forward, whatever this means. The other participants also chose spaces that somehow evade monumentality. Evgenia Abramova chose a site

whose structure is horizontal, the Bolotnaya Square, as her object of research and as an allegory of the condition of dissent in the Russian capital. For it is mostly near monuments or squares that contemporary activist movements meet, a tactic that is countered by the government by erasing all traces of their presence, and, with the use of various methods, by rendering these places inaccessible and thus forcing people to assemble somewhere else. (I was told this had been the case with Triumphalny Square). This way Moscow becomes something of a chessboard on which various moves and countermoves take place but which fail to inscribe themselves - again an example of ephemerality. Finally, Alexander Makhov decided to look at Lubyanka Square or more precisely – to deconstruct Lubyanka Square as an iconic image, trying to ask what the yellow façade that came to represent the Russian state secret police signifies and, more importantly, what it hides from view.

In Warsaw we chose three structures as objects of study: one temporary and rather modest but flamboyant in the effects it produced, the other two monumental by any standards - to the extent of dominating the cityscape. First the National Stadium in Warsaw: in its original incarnation the *10th-Anniversary Stadium* which had been constructed as monument to the then new, socialist state and which became the location of the most important sporting events and mass festivities. Later it would become the site of the self-immolation of Ryszard Siwiec who died in protest at the intervention of the Polish Army in Czechoslovakia in 1968. Subsequently, after 1989, the stadium became a living monument to the "baggage trade" economy of the Eastern Bloc countries. Currently in its latest guise as the post-Euro "National" stadium it projects the self-image of a modernized, 'nearly-western' country that has gone through a global economic crisis seemingly unscathed. It was Helena Patzer, together with Magdalena Góralska and Małgorzata Winkowska, who approached the stadium in an attempt to reflect on the history of transition as one of the adoption of a market economy and the subsequent process of social (re)stratification. Secondly, Julita Wójcik's *Rainbow* on the Square of the Saviour (Plac Zbawiciela) as a site of the Polish contemporary Culture Wars, to which Weronika Plińska dedicated six months of field work, maps the "monument" as point of intersection of several conflicting ideas about the shape and structure of the community in post-socialist Poland. Plińska views the *Rainbow* as a powerful device: a Gellian "trap", or in other words "a 'gift' that interpellates emergent political subjects who respond to it as receivers." As such, the *Rainbow*

has been able to produce social visibility. The third object of study is one we were unfortunately unable to address due to limited resources: the *Temple of Divine Providence* - the most deeply rooted an symbolic monument being constructed in Poland today. The temple was initially planned as a votive offering honouring the Constitution of May 3, 1791 -the second modern constitution to be passed, and then at the centre of debates in the interwar period (planned to commemorate independence regained). The temple can be seen as a monument to the role the Catholic Church played in political transformation, but also to the political power it has acquired since 1989. It would have been most suggestive to have considered it together with the Cathedral of Christ The Saviour in Moscow, constructed between 1839 to 1883 as a votive temple in the wake of the faltering of Napoleon's invasion of Russia and then destroyed in 1931 by Stalin to make way for the planned Palace of Councils but instead becoming the site of Moscow's largest outdoor swimming pool until the 1990s. The Cathedral was rebuilt and inaugurated in its latest incarnation in 2000. (Nina Sosna briefly addresses the temple as monument in her contribution.) Both structures bear witness to the new bond between church and state that emerged after 1989, and would make perfect occassions for a reflection upon the role of religion in the process of political transformation - both as a guarantor of security and as a reactionary force. Alas, this strand of research will have to remain unrealized for now.

The central part of this edition is accompanied by several presentations of artistic and documentary projects that either comment on the structures we inscribed as 'monuments', or establish relationships between them. And so Filip Skrońc's *1/280th* shows the last remnants of the bazaar that once occupied the whole of the 10th-Anniversary Stadium and was a defiant oasis of the former hustle and bustle in this now cleansed and tightly controlled 'national' environment, while Jakub Rubaj's series of photographs documents the dismantlement of the stadium's former incarnation. Ekaterina Lazareva's *Just Say No* addresses, by way of the figure of the rainbow, questions of the discrimination of LGBT persons in reaction to the passing of a law prohibiting the "propaganda of non-standard sexual orientation" among youth in Russia, thereby establishing an analogy, by way of the rainbow, between our two countries. There are also visual interventions by Russian artists in Nina Sosna's and in Evgenia Abramova's contributions, by Lena Koptyaeva and Roman Minaev respectively.

This is the moment where I would like to thank all the participants of this project, especially Łukasz Zaremba, who was the co-author of the original research proposal; most of the central issues emerged in our discussions while preparing the proposal and later working on the project. Also heartfelt thanks to Nina Sosna, who looked after the Moscow part of our joint endeavour, and to all the contributors to this issue for their work and commitment. Finally, everyone who participated in the field work should be remembered: Emilia Piechowska and Katarzyna Zarzycka.

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Although this issue of "View" serves to publish the outcome of one specific research project, it does not restrict itself exclusively to that project. In point of fact, there is much to be had from its other half: in the "Panorama" section of issue 9 we propose the translation of one chapter of Michael Rothberg's important *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*,[12] as well a chapter of Klaus Theweleit's tremendously influential *Männerphantasien*.[13] In this section we also present a reflection on weak images as images of the weak by visual sociologist Marek Krajewski, as well as philosopher Michał Pospiszyl's paper on Walter Benjamin's critique of violence.

Furthermore, in this issue's "Perspectives," you will find two most engaging interviews: in the first, Katarzyna Bojarska talks to Annett Busch and Anselm Franke about their exhibition "After Year Zero" in terms of a critique of the western historical imagination, and in the second Adam Lipszyc and Paweł Mościcki engage Siegrid Weigel - one of the most prominent scholars in the humanities in contemporary Germany- in a conversation about her academic career, institutional engagements and research achievements.

We close this issue with six 'snapshots' of critical writing, taking into view important current exhibitions and publications. One of these pieces - written by Iwona Kurz in response to the recent surge in interest in the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw – may easily be read as another inscription of a monument of transition.

Footnotes

1 Bruno Latour, "What is Iconoclash? Or, is there a World Beyond the Image

Wars?", introduction to Latour et al., eds., *Iconoclash* (Karlsruhe and Cambridge, Mass.: ZKM, Centre for Art and Media; MIT Press, 2002), 25.

2 The project, realised within the framework of the Participatory Action Research initiative – itself part of Academia in Public Discourse: Expanding the Breathing Space – of the Artes Liberales Department, University of Warsaw, resulted in a conference that put together all projects realised within the PAR framework; all in all there were four. (See the conference program: http://www.ial.org.pl/msh/pliki/program_academia_en 07_12.pdf, accessed November 11, 2015). Furthermore, the project's aim was to put scholars from Poland and Russia into dialogue, a gesture that should be understood as acknowledging the mutual lack of systematic scholarly exchange between the countries of the former 'Eastern Block' after the fall of the iron curtain, in favour of relations with the countries of Western Europe and the US. The PAR framework, also encouraging collaboration between young and more experienced scholars, can be seen as trying to (re)establish lateral relationships, and this goal might be as important as the overall scholarly effect of the research we undertook together.

3 See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Reissue edition (New York: Free Press, 2006).

4 Jurgen Habermas, *Die Nachholende Revolution* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1990).

5 http://www.formerwest.org/About, accessed November 11, 2015.

6 http://monumenttotransformation.org/en#more, accessed November 11, 2015.

7 http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/index.html, accessed November 11, 2015.

8 See Buden Boris, *Strefa przejscia* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2012), or German edition: Boris Buden, *Zone des Übergangs Vom Ende des Postkommunismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2009).

9 Marcel Duchamp, *The Green Box*, 1934 (my emphasis, KP), after: Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1996), 393.

10 See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy:*

Towards a Radical Democratic Politics, second edition (London and New York: Verso, 2001).

11 See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, third edition (Berkerley: University of California Press, 2011).

12 Forthcoming in Polish by the publishing house of the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

13 Forthcoming in Polish by the PWN Press.