

## **Subterranean Story**

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*Archaeology of a City* is Orit Siman-Tov's title for the series of urban photographs she took in Berlin during the year 2000, patterned after "Symphony of a City". She is right. The symphonious quality of Berlin – a truly diversified and heterogeneous human-architectural metropolitan tapestry, which in the past decade has undergone a process of dynamic, spectacular, turbulent and disconcerting urban transformation – cannot be understood separately from its archaeology. This assertion indeed applies to any modern metropolis, in fact to anyplace anywhere. One cannot fathom the crystallizing, the originating and evolving, the ever-changing, without understanding the foundations of its being. And since any origination necessarily eradicates the existent and established in order to spawn the "new", historical "debris" gradually piles up, for which Walter Benjamin time and again demands remembrance – namely, deciphering the surface in the sense of exposing that which is embedded within and buried underneath; in short – unearthing the archaeological strata of the visible. This general assertion is doubly reinforced in Berlin. Even if you are not in the habit of ringing the loud cathedral-of-the-past bells whenever "Germany" is discussed or recalled in passing; even if you believe that a fair bit of what happened in Germany in recent decades, socially, politically, economically and culturally, ought to be judged on its own merits, namely – that it can demand to be considered in light of its structural logic, rather than based on a psycho-ideological reference to it as an idiosyncratic projection surface – even if all this

is true, one cannot dismiss Berlin's specific history, and hence its archaeology, as far as the material evidence of that past is concerned.

The reasoning behind this is twofold. First of all, by virtue of its decades-long division, Berlin – perhaps more than any other city in Europe – embodied the essence of the “Cold War” between the Eastern and Western blocs, and thus, the essential consequence of the National Socialist German past. Not only were totally different political, social and cultural entities created in the two parts of the city; not only did the rate of urban development in these two parts differ considerably throughout the years; but the city itself was a distinct meeting place of disastrous hostility between the two blocs, to the point that it became one of the sites perpetually shrouded by the threat of an imminent outbreak of a third world war and a sheer embodiment of that threat. Indeed, when the Communist regime in East Germany fell, when the Wall came down and the two Germanys re-united, it was only natural that Berlin would once again assume its position as the capital of the “new” country, united Germany. However, this move – symbolically manifested by Reichstag (a building which in itself symbolizes part of Germany's disastrous history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) once again becoming the home of the German Parliament – carries, as aforesaid, a heavy historical baggage which cannot be disencumbered when observing Berlin's overwhelming process of transformation.

Secondly, Berlin's re-unification and its reinstatement as Germany's old-new capital have set in motion a dynamics, enormous in scope and size, of the city's re-modeling, which ubiquitously manifests itself in the unprecedented wave of construction that has transformed Berlin – so it often seems – into a vast field of

bustling building sites, a terrain profuse with excavations and strewn with cranes. And in the midst of all this (alongside a profound awe for the new architectural landscape, the sprawling transportation networks and the exciting cultural centers that gradually emerge in different parts of the city), a disconcerting thought lately crops up, that perhaps this construction spree, the act of covering increasing expanses of the German metropolis with concrete, serves something other than the objective need for urban reorganization: burying the past under a modern-postmodern cloak of effusive architectural magnificence. Neither a provocative thought, nor a matter of giving credit where credit is due, it is rather a reflection essentially pertaining to the discourse about “drawing a line under Germany’s past” carried out in the country ever more forcefully since the re-unification, and to the possibility that changing the capital’s appearance conceals a certain material dimension of this discourse.

These aspects of Berlin’s breathtaking transformation revalidate its “archaeology”. And just as there is a point in contemplating the vacant lot on which the Holocaust memorial is to be erected in central Berlin, before it is all covered, sooner or later, with great masses of concrete, so there is also good reason to linger on the intermediate state of the dug-up city, before its lower strata disappear beneath the cloak of the “new” city. This, among others, seems to be the motivation underlying Orit Siman-Tov’s series of photographs: *Archaeology of a City* is aimed at the concrete excavations of building sites, but at the same time alludes to that which was unveiled in these excavations and will soon be covered up, and equally so – to the concealment aesthetics of these revealed, revealing sites.

Each of the photographs in the present exhibition may be deemed paradigmatic in this respect. It would suffice, however, to elaborate on but one as an example. The upper section of the photograph presents an inkling of Berlin's visible life: buildings in prevalent modern architectural style, some of which have been refurbished in recent years, and given post-modern "updating" in terms of design. The ground floor of the building seen on the right-hand-side of the photograph, with semi-functional, semi-decorative columns in its facade, is ornamented with a line of logos and trademarks of companies and commercial chains: department stores, supermarkets, etc. The lower boundary of this upper "sphere" is formed (according to the photographic perspective offered here) by a fence, which determines the limits of nearing the building site, but at the same time functions as a compository dividing line between the upper and lower sections of the photograph. In the lower section a gigantic trench is gaped open before the viewer's eyes, whose sides turn out to be the ground floor of an old building, which in the meantime has been destroyed, and whose sooty, decayed residues have remained as a silent subterranean testimony to the site of past existence. The architectural domination of this subterranean world is marked in the right and left edges of the photograph by means of construction materials, iron grills and the foundation columns of the new building about to be erected on site. A rash cultural-artistic "intervention" in its gloomy being may be detected in the graffiti inscriptions smeared on the walls of the old building; when these are ruined and buried underneath the new edifice, the popular art work will disappear with them.

The photograph encapsulates the essence of Berlin's transformation. The remainders of the old building with the prevailing air of desolation and neglect,

attest that this is a building site located in the eastern part of the city, which was at the time under the Communist regime. And just as the life-worlds unique to that society disintegrated after the re-unification and ceased to exist, so its material embodiments in general, and the architectural manifestations in particular – were doomed: The penetration of the free capitalist market into the East German world – an issue symbolically articulated in the photograph through the tokens of the sphere of commerce on the building facade on the right – coincides with the visual improvement of the chain of buildings in the background and the adjustment of their external design to the standards of “Western” taste. What is left of that gradually diminishing world flickers for the last time in the gloomy light of the subterranean vestiges before it is permanently removed, and a new (probably fancy) building is erected thereabove. This does not concern the private realm alone: depicted in the upper section of one the photographs is the “Palace of the Republic,” one of the quintessential spectacular buildings of the East German Communist regime, and in the lower section – the ruins of old 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings (judging by the construction materials and the design still discernible in the residues). In this photograph too, a wooden fence separates the top and bottom sections of the work. On the fence one can identify a strip of posters and underneath them – a sign reading: “The history of the *Schlossplatz* from 1443 until the present – 68 panels”. Not only will the subterranean remainders of the anonymous buildings vanish in the foreseeable future, but so will the “Palace of the Republic”. The Berlin authorities plan to demolish the “Communist” structure and re-erect the “Castle”, a glorious palace from the monarchic past of Prussian Germany, which was badly damaged during World War II and subsequently destroyed by the East German regime in order to make room for the “Palace of the Republic”.

History's re-shaping is thus articulated in this photograph on two levels: below the surface, the architectural residues of the 19<sup>th</sup> century burst forth, before they are covered up by the super-modern structures of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, whereas above the surface the residues of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the century that gave rise to the Nazi regime in Germany, and as its conclusive consequence, following the defeat, brought about the East German Communist state – are being obliterated, through an ostensibly cultural-historical, but equally so ideological, linkage to previous centuries, monarchic in terms of their regime, and pre-modern in terms of their social orientation.

The construction commotion is omnipresent, and there is nothing like the photograph of a crane-ridden vista in *Pariser Platz* to lend it monumental expression. However, it seems that those who inspire the radical changes in the city's appearance and expanses are also somewhat "ashamed" of their destructive-constructive acts, or at least ashamed of exposing the ugliness involved in this great act of transformation: From a distance, this photograph depicting the crane forest in *Pariser Platz* may still seem like an artistic performance tinged with futurism; a photograph of the same site from a different perspective, however, lays it bare in all its ugly dis-grace. The city's administrators and the construction companies have found a solution for this general predicament: the fences and mighty panels they installed around the building sites concurrently function as surfaces for commercial advertising. An abundance of images, graphic designs and inscriptions decorates these fixtures aimed at masking the sites of functional transpiration as a mundane aesthetic of concealing the real. A degree of irony – unintentional, of course – may be found in the giant advertisements displayed on entire walls protruding behind and

towering above the building sites: at least in one case, the huge female figures seem to be watching the viewer, insinuating that the visible is but *trompe l'oeil*, and in any event – it is not the whole story – there is also a subterranean story here that is begging to be deciphered.

Orit Siman-Tov's series of photographs indeed perform an act of "archaeology". The historically-triumphant united Germany, that strives to remove the traces of the Communist regime and its manifestations, is also the Germany that buries, there and then, its Nazi past. In one instance this is expressed by the destruction of the old and construction of the new; in another – by erecting a monumental memorial for the atrocities on an "empty" plot. In both cases, it involves a simultaneous covering up and unearthing of that which is below the surface. In both cases, this takes place within the context of teeming capitalistic urban diversity, "aesthetic" in terms of its random appearance. In both cases, there is something ephemeral, which will cease to exist and eventually will be buried under layers of concrete, iron and glass. This is the nature of the necessary detachment from historical events which become "history": it generates "a pile of debris [that] grows skyward". The gaze of the angel of history wishes to remember each and every detail buried in it. The camera's eye documents the moment in which the "archaeological" wreckage emerges, the temporal appearance of the hidden strata in the inevitable process of transformation. This, too, is an act of remembrance.