

Pictures from History's Other Side
by Trmasan Bruialesi

«History happens in front of our eyes, every moment, every hour.»
Ryszard Kapuściński, Imperium

There are shows that you leave feeling a few grams lighter. Even if I don't belong to that particular species of human being that seeks relief from earthly burdens in works of art, I can't help but admit that I recently left a show in a Geneva off-space – the name of which I can never remember – with just that feeling. It was a thematic group show on questions of public housing, architecture and urban future planning. Alongside the usual video research and standard photos of dreary stairwells, there were the remnants of self-help projects for female residents of the neighborhood with migrant backgrounds, etc. Then, however, I came upon a video that I could not tear myself away from. It must have been realized with considerable effort. The cinematography, editing and sound were brilliant and all in the service of the content: the camera travels slowly over the reflecting glass facade of an urban office building, higher and higher, until it pauses on the face of an older man who is looking out through the window at the city. Cut. We are looking over the shoulder of the man toward the outside. The city has no name and no recognizable landmarks, I guess that it is a medium-sized city in central Germany with a pedestrian zone, city hall, urban park, bicycle paths, parking garages and shopping centers, with a mansion district in the south and apartment blocks further outside. Perhaps a palace or a castle and a river, and definitely access to the expressway. In other words, the usual. Though this is something that is more felt than seen from here above, where our man lets his gaze wander over the horizon. Cut. The man turns around and looks into the camera. He is wearing a suit and tie, a city employee type, a higher official, perhaps even the mayor, but he is in fact ultimately revealed to be the head city architect. The camera follows him as he goes to his desk and carefully packs papers into folders and folders into available cardboard boxes. Someone is bringing something to a close here, but what? Satisfied, he rolls up the big blueprints. «So, we won't be needing these any more», he says half to himself and half to the camera, «because everything, everything is now renovated and completed. Brought to a conclusion. The city is – thanks to communal effort and thoughtful planning – finally finished. And we should be pleased with the result.» «Beginning today» says the city architect, «there will not be one single construction site left, no place where pavement will be torn up, there will be no pipes laid and no cables run, no sidewalks replaced and no more foundations poured, and as of today no more scaffolding will be set up and no more trucks will mix concrete and no more excavators will dig pits, because we've reached the point where we can say: It is good.» He says this and, with a last look through the window, leaves his office for good. One hears the key in the lock, then only silence. The camera slowly climbs higher and higher and the city that is now finished sinks beneath our eyes in a haze.

With this image before my eyes, I left the show. On the other side of the street, workers in orange garb were tearing up the pavement. In that other utopian city, they would have been unemployed, useless. If it were the end of construction activity – this radical rejection of progress – wouldn't that, at the same time, mean the end of this city? Or at least the end of its history? The city fathers had lain down hammers and chisels because all urban planning sins had been literally leveled, all social tensions balanced, all contradictions removed, to express it loosely, in the spirit of Hegel: In this city, dialectics came to an end; this city had become pure synthesis «per definitionem». I quote from memory: «The dialectical method is about renouncing definitions because definitions are always a final and thus, absolute *history free* statement on that which must be determined, and dialectics describes precisely that which is not fixed and given once and for all in concepts and those subjects denoted by them.»¹

¹ Lenk, 1969

Of course, one might argue that Mother Nature would ruin the city architect's plan (or the definition) sooner rather than later. Ice and frost would tear up the streets, rust would eat through the sewer pipes. Hail, wind and water would wear away facades and roofs. Gravity alone would continue to write the history of the city. There is nothing to object about these material arguments of reason, except for the fact that these are false criteria. With regard to the discussion of the idea of the city architect, resp., the idea formulated by the artist in this video, such arguments are misguided. They should be applied to scientific, economic, social, etc. matters. But this of course involves an image (in the form of a video) for which the same artistic criteria should hold as – let's say – oil paintings by the artist XY, the difference being that it, the video, inexorably references that reality in which we move. While I pondered this, I found myself in front of the shop window of an antiquarian bookstore. On display were film history books flanked by old film posters, including one with the title «Une petite ville sans histoire.» The film, based on the play «Our Town» by Thornton Wilder, was made in 1940 by Sam Wood. With my interest piqued through the coincidence with the video that I had just seen, I entered the antiquarian bookstore and approached the elderly gentleman who stood behind the counter. I had up until now, I said, never noticed the concept *history free* in any of the standard translations of the title of «Our Town», and wondered whether he could explain to me what the reason might be. Unfortunately, answered the elderly gentleman in fluent French infused with a Slavic accent, he could not help me. French, he continued apologetically, was not his mother tongue, and although he had already spent over half of his life in Geneva, this language was still full of riddles. Yet the question was very well justified. Also in his mother tongue, Lithuanian, the play is translated verbatim as «Our Town», and in German, his father's tongue, he continued in perfect German, the translation is «Our Little Town», which in view of the simplicity of the small town described, is quite valid. The film, by the way, was not very good, he added dryly, in complete contrast to the play, «which at first glance appears to be a kind of milieu study about a village in New Hampshire, » said the elderly man. «Examined more closely, however, it is a meditation on the difficulty of understanding life while one is living it.»²

By the way, Wilder is said to have sketched out the third act in just one day in Zurich in September 1937, after a stubborn writer's block. It was following a long evening walk through the rain with the writer Samuel M. Steward, with whom Wilder – as one assumes – had an affair. But he didn't want to take up my time with these old stories. «Could he roll up the film poster? » the older man politely asked. Becoming curious, I took my time paying and picked up the thread again: what city in Lithuania was he from, I wasn't in a hurry, and besides, I was travelling to a symposium on the Curonian Spit – Nida, to be exact – to reflect on new forms of artistic activity and its transmission together with other artists and curators. The old book seller laughed. From his desk drawer, he dug out a pile of old maps. «Here is where I was born», he ran a finger over the paper, from the strait at Memel over the lagoon along the narrow line of the peninsula, «here in Schwarzort (Black Shore), on the Lithuanian Juodkrante. My father was a teacher and came from Königsberg, my mother came from Vilnius. We spoke German at home and Lithuanian in church. You know, until shortly before the end of the war, it was relatively quiet on the Spit. That's something one easily forgets because the war didn't savage us until its horrible end. The Germans were forced to evacuate back to a land that was foreign to us, the rest of the populace was expelled and fled. Whoever stayed was killed or kidnapped. I'll spare you the details.» said the elderly man and continued: «My mother brought my three siblings and me to Leipzig to relatives on my father's side; my father wanted to join us later but he did not survive the flight. We never learned whether he was hung by the Germans as a deserter or shot by the Russians as a German. You know, information flowed sparsely from that area, at the end of the war it dried up completely. Up until Stalin's death, the Nehrung was virtually inaccessible to civilians, a white spot on the map of Europe, a *history free* space. Hardly the same kind of *history free*

² quoted after Thornton Wilder

that the French translator of *Our Town* could have meant.» He ventured that, for the French, a city in which no battle had been fought and no king crowned would automatically be *history free*.

He stayed in Leipzig, incidentally, only a short time. He had the luck of coming to Switzerland with a Red Cross transport. The rest is – as one is wont to say – history. «Apropos», he turned around and pulled a thin notebook from underneath a pile of books, «this might interest you. My brother sent it to me from Leipzig, a few years ago now.»

In the train to Berlin, I took the notebook into my hands. *LIFETIME EUROPE, a history free space (clean room in accordance with EN ISO 14644 contamination control standards)* was the title. An artist couple from Switzerland created the space inside a garden shed in 2005. The garden shed is located in one of the countless small garden colonies in Leipzig, specifically in Allotment Garden 266 of the Allotment Garden Association Anger-Crottendorf. The centerfold in the middle of the notebook showed a photograph of the garden shed surrounded by luscious green, the window dipped in a mysterious blue. Since I wasn't in a hurry, I decided to get off the train in Leipzig and visit the aforesaid garden.

From the main train station, it doesn't take more than a quarter of an hour for the bus to arrive at the stop described in the notebook, though the telephone number that was also listed remained mute. So I tried my luck at the bar of the Anger-Crottendorf gardens, ordered a beer, asked the owner about the *history free space* and received only a shake of the head in response. I should ask Hannes, the one over there, yes that's him, the one with the Bundesliga jersey. He knows everybody, he knows everything, he lives in the colony the whole year round, even though it's of course prohibited, the owner says, meaningfully, but that's the way it is with Hartz 4. Hannes, a man in his mid-50s with somewhat watery eyes, takes me to Plot 266, but before he shows me the *history free space*, we drink a beer in his garden shed. He's the next door neighbor of the artist pair and knows the story from the very beginning. Not that he had ever cared about art, that doesn't interest him at all. When the Swiss couple turned up here, he noticed immediately that they were up to something other than planting carrots. He brokered the deal for them to get the garden from his neighbor who he couldn't stand anyway. Not for the last 30 years, and after the fall of the wall, it got only worse, a real turncoat, playing Sunday radio sermons at deafening volume, and then scrounging cigarettes and beer on the side. The Swiss couple came just at the right time, very nice the two of them, even if they're there too infrequently to look after their garden; every now and then he mows the lawn, pulls some weeds, whatever his garden friends haven't managed. Hannes drinks up and unlocks Garden Plot 266, then he leaves me there alone. He has other things to do and he can close it up later too, since there's nothing to steal from a *history free space*.

I enter the garden shed and don't know at first whether I should be disappointed, or if I should have imagined something different for a *history free space*: In the middle of the shed is an unplastered cube put together with raw two-by-fours and plaster fiberboards with a door and small windows on all four sides. Inside is the structure, divided into a lock where two red whole-body overalls hang on a coat rack, and the actual clean room that is completely white and empty. The door is locked, the windows likewise. On the backside, two large air pipes bring filtered air from an air conditioner into the inside and create a slight positive pressure which prevents particles from infiltrating. The space between the cube and the outer wall is narrow, a grown person can just barely squeeze through. In the back, there is a bunk bed and a dark wall closet, both leftovers from the previous tenant family. Hanging on the walls are bric-a-brac and other souvenirs, newspaper articles and an old calendar from DDR times, garden tools lie around, a couple of empty beer bottles, boots, an electric lawn mower and garden chairs. I step out of the shed into the sun, the garden is steaming. Paradise is described as a garden. Is eternity, perhaps, *history free*? Nietzsche writes in *The Gay Science*: «The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!» Somewhat hesitantly, I make my way from the garden colony

back into the city. The *history free space* in the form of a dust-free space in a garden shed in Leipzig is, first and foremost, the bold assertion of an idea that materializes in an (intentionally?) imperfect way in that garden shed. People like Hannes, who clear the weeds, pick the apples and cut the grass of Garden 266, do so in the service of this idea. But for how long? The idea of a *history free space* – like that of the *finished* city of the video described at the beginning – is doomed to failure in the material world. In the spiritual world, to which I count art, the idea, in contrast, becomes absolute freedom in the Hegelian sense: «In order for the whole to become complete, the eternal, *absolute spirit* creates its realm in finiteness, where the barriers of the limited are overcome: *art* expresses the truth of the idea for sensory perception.»³ And since we can recognize the truth of this *history free space*, we must assume that the idea must have germinated in all of us once before. Basta. That's heavy German idealism, which is not only concerned with life or death – but more than that. I can't keep pace with that on my way to the main train station in Leipzig. The Lithuanian bookseller in Geneva probably encapsulated it better: «The willing suspension of disbelief is the true and only secret of all art», he said to me in farewell. I had read about that in connection with the theory of *breaking down the fourth wall* in Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town*, but that was also a long time ago. The theory holds that people who consume a work of art are, to a certain degree, ready to let themselves in for an illusion in order to be entertained. In so doing, they - the consumers - accept cheap props and big holes in the narrative logic. Which could also be the case here too, while reading this text. In the best case.

Trmasan Bruialesi

**1956 in Tbilissi, Georgia. Slavic Studies with focus on the ancient Slavonic texts of early Christianity. Since 1989 active in Berlin as translator, author and musician.*

³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, from Wikipedia