

Carousel Slide Swing

Kamila Szejnoch

The project Carousel Slide Swing aims to pursue a dialog with the space and history of Warsaw. This is a dialog with memorials that served as communist propaganda, such as the commemoration of the Polish-Soviet brotherhood in arms and the liberation of Warsaw in 1945. Although such memorials have been consigned to the historical scrapheap we can still meet them in the streets and parks. If the time of tearing down monuments is over, maybe we should change our approach to those that remain.

The project not only allowed me focus on the space of my home city (Warsaw) but also to live the history anew. To suggest a change in the function of the monuments is an attempt to build a bridge between the present and the past, to add a contemporary layer distinct from their original style and function. The 'dead' approached more actively becomes more vivid and palpable - encouraging people to consider what a particular memorial actually refers to and what kind of history it conceals.

The history is not unambiguous. For example the idea of Swing is based on a contrast between the monumental bronze Berling Army Soldier and a tiny individual swung by a big hand of history. For me, it is a communist propaganda monument from a former era, but at the same time I understand that from the Berling Army soldier's point of view it is how much history can differ from the perspectives of individual and collective memory. My aim is to make this complexity and ambiguity more conspicuous, to show the relation between an individual versus the historical machine.

Warsaw 1939 - 1945



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On August 23, 1939 the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, the so-called Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, was signed in Moscow. The heart of of foreign affairs of both powers, Joachim Ribbentrop and Viaceslav Molotov (on behalf of Hitler and Stalin) made the partition of Central and Eastern Europe. By this protocol, the two contracting parties envisaged a joint attack on Poland and the Baltic States, and the division of their territory between them. Stalin was no less responsible for the outbreak of war than Hitler. ¹



*Hitler - The scum of the earth, I believe?
Stalin - The bloody assassin of the workers, I presume?*

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When the Nazis attacked Poland on September 1, 1939, the Soviets stood by and watched. On September 17, the Soviets rolled into eastern Poland, and German forces on the Western front, desperately trying to delay the capture of Warsaw in the hope that France and Britain would stand by their agreements and start military activity against Nazi Germany.²

To prevent possible resistance in the eastern territories great numbers of the civil population were deported to Siberia. The Soviet secret police systematically entered each Polish town and village and arrested anyone they thought would object to the new system. This included valuable members of society such as mayors, lawyers, policemen, bankers, priests and doctors, etc. Those arrested were either killed or more frequently exiled to Siberia.

"The Soviet crimes of this vintage are symbolized by the fearful name of Katyn (...). Katyn Forest in Byelorussia marks the site of a mass execution of Polish officers, reservists, and other military personnel, who had disappeared from Soviet captivity in the spring of 1940 (...). They were almost all educated professional men – doctors, civil servants, teachers – and each one had his hands tied behind his back, and a bullet in the base of his skull."³

"(...) It could be argued that at this stage the Soviet terror in many ways exceeded that of the Nazis. The Stalinist regime had a head start on the Nazis in the techniques and logistics of terror (...). At Auschwitz or Treblinka, the Soviets could accommodate a few million Polish and West Ukrainian additions to the population of their 'Gulag archipelago' with relative ease. Although they preferred to condemn their victims to a long slow death from cold and starvation, in contrast to the Nazi methods of summary murder (...). Of the estimated two million Polish civilians deported to Arctic Russia, Siberia, and Kazakhstan in the terrible railway convoys of 1939-40, at least one half were dead within a year of their arrest."⁴

The situation unexpectedly changed when Germany, on June 22 1941, invaded the Soviet Union: The Ribbentrop-Molotov pact was supposed to last for ten years but it lasted for less than two. Stalin was forced to cooperate with the Polish government exiled in London and agreed to evacuate Polish soldiers from the Soviet Union. In a tragic exodus only approximately 115,000 men, women, and children made it out of the Soviet Union.⁵ Under the leadership of General Wladyslaw Anders, in March 1942, after endless obstructions by the Soviet authorities, they crossed into British-controlled Persia. They traversed from Uzbekistan through Iran, Iraq, Palestine and as The II Polish Corps joined the British Army in North Africa.⁶ "In the next three years, the Second Corps covered itself with glory – at Tobruk (1943), at Monte Cassino (1944), and at Bologna (1945)."⁷

However, when the Anders Army was formed, in 1942, not all Poles managed to join and leave the Soviet Union. Then, in 1943 the remaining deportees had a chance to come back home by joining another army (so-called Berling's Army), but this time formed under the supervision of the Red Army. It marched on from Lenino through Warsaw to Berlin alongside its Soviet comrades.



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On the 1st of August 1944 the Warsaw Uprising broke out in the Nazi occupied city. It lasted for two months. The insurgents – some 150,000 armed men of the underground Home Army – expected help from the advancing military front, however, on Stalin's order, the Red Army, together with the Polish division, stood waiting on the eastern bank of the Vistula River until 17th January 1945, watching the Germans suppress the uprising. "A quarter of a million civilians died, from shelling, from dive-bombing, or from wholesale massacres. (...) Hitler ordered that Warsaw be "razed without trace." It was the end of the old order in Poland. After that, the Home Army was broken, and no one was left to challenge the communists effectively. The Nazis had done the Soviets' work for them."⁸





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The new communist government in Warsaw exposed Polish-Soviet friendship. On the ruins of the city new monuments appeared, commemorating Soviet heroes and Polish-Soviet brotherhood in arms. The time of terror had come.

(... put on trial as 'bandits', 'smugglers', or 'Fascist collaborators'. Returning Polish soldiers and airmen, who fought for the Allied cause at Monte Cassino or in the Battle of Britain, at Arnhem and Falaise, were arrested as 'imperialist agents'. (...) Poles who had fought for the Allied cause in the rank of the Soviet front, were welcomed home as heroes. Those who had died in the West (...) could not be honoured even in their death. Gravestones, obituaries, and memorial notices making any reference to the Polish Government, the Home Army, or to foreign service were simply removed by agents of the state police. (...) Historical monuments were raised exclusively to the 'victims of Nazi aggression'. Every Polish town had its War Memorial to the heroes of the Soviet Army of 1944-5: none to its own sons who died in the service of their country in 1939."¹¹

Counter-monument



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In 1986 the artists Jochen and Esther Gerz designed the Monument against Fascism, War and Violence – And For Peace and Human Rights. It was unveiled in a commercial centre of Hamburg. This twelve-meter high, one-meter square, pillar made of hollow aluminium, plated with a thin layer of soft lead, had a temporary inscription:

“We invite the citizens of Hamburg and visitors to the town, to add their names here to ours. In doing so, we commit ourselves to remain vigilant. As more and more names cover this 12-meter tall lead column, it will gradually be lowered into the ground. One day, it will have disappeared completely and the site of the Hamburg monument against fascism will be empty. In the end, it is only we ourselves who can rise up against injustice.”¹²

They called it a counter-monument. The more actively and the faster the visitors covered the monument with their names, the sooner it disappeared.¹³ To the artists’ minds, the didactic logic of monuments and their rigidity recalled too closely traits they associated with fascism itself. Their monument against fascism, therefore, intended to contradict a monument itself. It was against the traditionally didactic function of monuments, against their tendency to displace the past in peoples’ memory, and against the art that too often reduces viewers to passive spectators.¹⁴

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 throw it back at the town's feet."¹⁵



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 Yctucy."3; :70



In its conceptual self-destruction, the counter-monument also refers to the
 contingency of all meaning and memory – especially that embodied in a form
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 dote to the illusion that the permanence of stone somehow guarantees the per-
 manence of a memorial idea attached to it. By negating its form, however, the
 counter-monument does not negate memory. It negates only this illusion.¹⁶



Og o qtkcn"vq"Dtqvjgtjqff"kp"Ct ou."Yctucy."3; 670



(... carried over into a new time suddenly appears archaic, strange, or irrelevant altogether. For in its linear progression, time drags old meaning into new contexts, estranging a monument's memory from both past and present, holding past truths up to ridicule in present moments. Time mocks the rigidity of monuments, the presumptuous claim that in its materiality, a monument can be regarded as eternally true, ... 17

The Gerzes' counter-monument is already a very classical example of examples of contemporary public pieces that present different approaches, but still being written down into a general phenomenon of the counter-monument. One thing we can be sure all of them have in common – critical content¹⁸ and political engagement.¹⁹



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Besides, we can argue for instance, that the concepts of the monument and counter-monument are not so much in binary opposition. We can say, "they are rather 'contained' within each other, (...) a monument almost equals a counter-monument, as if they were mirror images, (...) they are engaged in an 'illicit' relationship. The counter-monument's validity lies not simply in its status as a new category, but also in the way it is 'exploiting' the monument. Besides, (...) another theoretical question arises from the concept of the counter-monument, namely that a monument's meaning is not necessarily related to its form, but can be assigned, (...) by 'us'. Politically speaking, this implies that the meaning of the (counter) monument can be manipulated."²⁰

One thing is beyond discussion – after the counter-monument, the dead. By resisting its own reason for being, the counter-monument paradoxically refreshes the idea of the monument itself.²¹

Monument in inverted commas

The 'dead' memorials in Warsaw should either disappear or be refreshed.

The monument is the sign of tragic and grim historical reality, but at the same time people who pass by treat them as any other piece of street furniture. Thus, if they exist and will stay there for good, as a permanent element of our streets, maybe we should change our attitude to them. If the time of tearing down monuments is over, maybe we should just 'disarm' them. Maybe they should be left as a quotation from history, as an oddity, an exhibit from a museum of communism?

A quotation in public space requires visible quotation marks that separate the monument from the urban context.

Every monument consists of a sculpture and its architectural surrounding. The surrounding is not meant only as a background, but as its integral part. In practice, no sculpture is able to its assumed tear out of context, we do not need to interfere with the structure of the monument itself, it would be enough to skillfully play with its surrounding space. By changing its arrangement in an unconventional way we can add to a monument a frame that will contrast with the original monument's style and function. This visual quotation mark can be

[K. S.]

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Dematerialization of a Monument

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In a culture that has developed virtual forms of existence and communication, physicality and duration have changed their meaning and are › | ¥ª £ · - ±¡ · ° ¥ªª | Ÿ · šª Ÿ · ® | Ÿ · Ôª | Ÿ · š · ° œ° | £ª®¥¡ · · §®«· ¸ · «· œ · ° ±®š · · ¥Ÿª a- tity is being unconsciously and inconspicuously transformed, often because of shifting aesthetic categories and historical perspectives. In the contemporary multi-layered reality, objects and forms that organize social and cultural life continually fall out of circulation, become outdated, destroyed, consigned to the historical scrapheap, or isolated. They are familiar and at the same time strange, stable, boring, abstracted from the reality – attaining the status of a souvenir, or an orientation point on the transforming map of the city. The status of some objects is protected if they are encompassed within a taboo area, where they function as depositaries of recognized values, a sense of harm or a feeling of guilt. The status of some other objects remains suspended. Among them are the memorials whose meaning and function has become fuzzy and whose form has lost its aesthetic value.

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Kamila Szejnoch proposes a view of monuments in Warsaw which makes the city an archive of the past. The artist drags them into the context of contemporary culture, adapts them for recreational reasons: a ‘swing’ on the Berling’s Army Monument, a ‘slide’ on the Monument to the Red Army or a ‘carousel’ on the Brotherhood in Arms Monument. Still objects come to life, acquiring new functions, are accessible

for a while, losing their pathos. Kamila Szejnoch refers to the idea of the counter-monument, which is based on a gradual disappearance. The artist catalyzes processes of settling the area of the memorial by the surrounding reality. The vivid, pulsating tissue of a transforming city swallows the memorials, this becomes a sort of acquiring, scaring old wounds and traumas. This kind of transformation provokes presence of time, changing the most solid monuments into historical dust. Swings, carousels, slides are like a moss growing on stone walls – they cover the past, but let new life appear. They become a sign of a cultural vitality that replaces the culture of heroism and tragedy.

[A. Z.]

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