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Extended Identity and the Specters of (Post)communism: Artistic Interventions in the Relics of Communism in Central and Eastern European Cities

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There is a sort of temporary lack of distinction between what is beginning and what is coming to the end.

Alain Badiou

Despite being an undisputedly joyful event, the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe was a traumatic experience in the strictest

sense. Although longed for and anticipated for many decades, the collapse violated the conceptual system in which and in relation to which human subjectivity in the region was constituted. Thus, people were forced to reevaluate the system, which had been based, after all, on a Cold War structure of binary terms. This process, inherently intense and violent, was accompanied by another gradual and almost imperceptible one: the progressive decline of the region's intellectual culture, which drew upon and continued to expound a simplified version of a now-rejected Marxism, including its underlying structural dialectic. At the same time, this dialectic potentially offered a perfect set of critical tools for responding to the crisis resulting from the antithetical conceptual framework, in relation to which the subject was now left helpless, with no dialectal principles to fall back on.

One of the most striking philosophical reactions to this changed world was Jacques Derrida's book *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International* (1993). Although Derrida does not mention the concept of post-communism even once in the book, the specters described by him constitute precisely this "post-communist condition" of the world. Indeed, I would call these specters the re-materialization of that which had dematerialized after the fall of the Berlin Wall, that which plagues market-based liberal democracy. The

best definition for these beings is provided by Derrida himself: they are born as a result of “killing the dead”.¹

The conceptual framework of democracy automatically appropriated, or rather adopted, all the troublesome notions that had previously constituted the totalitarian regime. This resulted, however, in certain structural shifts and redefinitions, which found their visual counterpart in social space.

Post-communist countries faced the problem of how to construct their democratic present and negotiate with the communist past which haunted it. Few, however, engaged in the kind of public debate that could have enabled society to carry out a conceptual and intellectual transformation, which occurred only in selected areas, leaving other spheres helpless against a “haunting” historical identity. Desperate efforts to eliminate relics of communism followed. In cities such as Druskininkai and Budapest, parks filled with communist monuments were built. Those monuments and statues which remained in their original locations provoked numerous artistic interventions that reflected a semantic penetration of public space.

These semantic relics of communism are one of the major factors determining the identity of post-communist Europe as it is. Post-communist identity defined in these terms is constituted in opposition to what is post-political. In fact, it informs the “return of the political” pos-

1 J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International*, New York 2006, p. 109.

tulated by Chantal Mouffe.² For more than two decades, post-communism has run a parallel course to the processes of democratization; the latter, however, have been more dynamic. Post-communism, on the other hand, has developed slowly and deliberately, fated to the psychoanalytical mechanism of repetition. Post-communist identity is based on its physical and temporal non-presence (as Derrida defines spectrality),³ which has given rise to numerous artistic interventions related to this issue.

The two-year period between the fall of communism in Central Europe and the break up of the Soviet Union was marked by an intervention which later was regarded as the beginning of Moscow *street actionism*. A group of artists with the telling name Expropriation of the Territory of Art (E.T.I.), founded by Anatoly Osmolovsky, organized a performance entitled *Cock*. Members of the group and casual (punk) passers-by lay down on Red Square to form the Russian word *xyй* (cock). Although this action was originally meant to comment on the ban on using swear words in public, the re-introduction of such a taboo word into public space was read as a political provocation (because of the proximity of Lenin's Mausoleum and because of the date of the performance, just before the anniversary of Lenin's birth). The group was sued, but the evidence presented was insufficient to support a guilty verdict. Indeed, the intervention was met with symptomatic social response: many intellectuals supported the group, and the well-known poet Andrei Voznesensky offered it line

² See C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, London, New York 2005.

³ J. Derrida, op. cit., p. XVIII.

of defense he had concocted himself: “testify that if you had intended to offend Lenin you would have preceded the word “cock” with a dash.”⁴

The intervention was carried out in both a space and conceptual system that defined the status of the social sphere. Even the choice of the word itself was significant. It exposed the fact that Lenin’s name functioned as Lacan’s “name of the father”: a linguistic representation of the symbolic phallic order.⁵ Lenin acquires here the status of his own name, his symbolic function, and on this basis appropriates social space. Instead of recognizing Lenin as a symbolic father, whose attributes are the phallus and power, E.T.I. used the phallus – in an obscene, vulgar and forbidden form – against the communist government. This gesture assumed the status of an expropriation of both social space and the power relations inscribed within it. In this way, the artists from E.T.I. revealed the mechanism that governs social discourse: the official nature of the power of the ruling elite and the unofficial, obscene, and forbidden nature of the power of society, which had undergone a fundamental transformation. The group thus used the left-wing tradition of the deed against the power which interpreted it and misconstrued in a totalitarian manner. The form of the work can be described, as Derrida puts it, as a conspiracy with the ghost who in Shakespeare’s play utters the words “I am thy father’s spirit.” This conspiracy ultimately results in what Badiou,

4 Э.Т.И. – ТЕКСТ (в народе – „ХУЙ”), http://osmopolis.ru/eti_text_hui (accessed: 10.04.2013).

5 J. Lacan, *Ecrits*, New York 2006, p. 230–231.

Deleuze, and Derrida call the “event.”⁶ The event, in turn, disregarding differences in interpretation, is invariably a Marxist deed.

The group tried to semantically recover public property (power, language, public space) through a close, almost erotic, relationship with public space: by penetrating it with their bodies and the language they created. Interestingly, E.T.I. has reached a similar intimacy with passers-by. The group read curses off their lips and formed the swearwords with their bodies. The artists also repeated and interpreted the authorities’ gesture: both E.T.I. and the authorities proved to be factors which encouraged the public to swear. The authorities, however, bar the public from discovering this mechanism. E.T.I.’s performance represented a kind of a turning point between communism and post-communism. It preceded the actual socio-political changes. Russia declared sovereignty just two months later, and the August Coup in Moscow put an end to the ruling communist party’s dreams of one-party rule. The Expropriation of the Territory of Art’s action *Cock* translated a serious economic crisis in the former Soviet Union into a semantic crisis.

The tenth anniversary of the fall of communism in Central Europe was commemorated in Russia by an action that also took place in Red Square. The action was prepared by artists grouped around Anatoly Osmolovsky and a magazine he founded entitled *Radek*. In October 1999,

6 J. Derrida, op. cit., p. 50.

before the Russian parliamentary elections in December, the Radek group organized a performance on the steps of Lenin's Mausoleum. The action *Против Всех* (Against everyone) was designed to encourage potential voters to vote not for but against all political parties. In it, this message was written on a banner – hung on the upper part of the mausoleum – in a manner that provocatively resembled Lenin's engraved name on the porphyrean wall of the sarcophagus. Moreover, the message on the banner seemed as if it were a quote from Lenin. The Radek group legitimized its actions by referring to the figure of Karol Radek, an activist of the Communist International, and thus tried to maintain the revolutionary leftist discourse that opposed any form of political Establishment. The political scene at that time had been discredited by suspicions about its dependency on an aggressive form of capitalism. Osmolowski, who in 1998 initiated the creation of a "Barricade" in Moscow as a tribute to the May 1968 Revolt, was a devoted reader of post-Marxist philosophy. As Alain Badiou points out: "[t]hat failure of the [communist – M.R.] Idea leaves us with no choice, given the complex of the capitalist organization of production and the state parliamentary system. Like it or not, we have to consent to it for lack of choice."⁷ Thus, although the action carried out by Radek emphasized the postulated lack of choice, it also made a "Marxist" deed possible. When the group approached the Mausoleum, it redefined the close relationship between their bodies and the relics of communism as one that was insufficiently close. This very intimate rela-

7 A. Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, London, New York 2010, p. 5.

tionship between the public body and its visible and invisible communist past was visualized when the bodies touched the stone. The action interfered with the “arrow of time,” allowing the Lenin’s name to appear under the group’s banner. Such a version of history possesses the structure of the Marxist dialectic and illustrates the relevance of the revolution. This is how the dialectical lack of distinction in Derrida’s notion of “specters” between those who are already dead and those who are not yet born⁸ should be understood. They are dialectical figures of the “specters of communism” and the revolution.

In 2009, twenty years after the fall of communism, the Romanian artist Daniel Knorr planned a performance entitled *Awake-Asleep* for the Warsaw Turn Off the System Festival. The event lasted for twenty days (from May to June 2009). Its meaning was ostensibly clear. Each day symbolized one year after the collapse of the communist system and symbolically represented the individual winning back the communist regime from the system that had enslaved him/her. The Warsaw Palace of Culture and Science was usurped by the artist to be used as his bedside lamp. Knorr would switch off the electricity in the building before going to bed and switch it on back again after waking up. There was more to the project, however, than meets the eye. The objectification of the Palace of Culture and Science had only been a matter of appearances. Moreover, one usually does not turn the bedside lamp on during the day. In fact, the true result of Knorr’s

⁸ J. Derrida, op. cit., p. XVIII.

performance was not the objectification, but the subjectification of the Palace of Culture and Science.

In 1932, Jacques Lacan described and analyzed an attempted murder, which made the headlines of French newspapers in 1931. The case, known today as the Case of Aimée, involved an anonymous woman who tried to stab a well-known actress of the Comédie-Française, Huguette Duflos, with a knife. The woman did not have any personal squabbles with the actress and had never even met Duflos, which surprised the public. Lacan's diagnosis was also surprising. The philosopher claimed that human identity goes beyond the biological limits of the body and can, in part or in whole, be incorporated into an object or another person.⁹ According to Lacan, what was defined as an attempted murder was in fact a suicide attempt: an attempt to get rid of a part of a displaced and unaccepted identity, such as sexual liberation and an affluent lifestyle, which the well-known actress embodied.¹⁰ The same concept, which can be defined as "extended identity," appeared in Knorr's *Awake-Asleep*. The physical coupling between the artist and the Palace of Culture and Science can be interpreted thus: the relics of communism function as an "extended identity" of society. That is why society's attempts to get rid of them (including the debate on whether the Palace of Culture and Science should be torn down) can be analyzed as suicide attempts by a democratic society haunted by the ghosts of its own (although) totalitarian past.

9 J. Lacan, op. cit, p. 138–139.

10 Ibidem.

Knorr's action can be read as a partial reclaiming of, not an external ideology that was previously linked to power, but an internalized ideology. Thus, the ghosts of the communist past are located not only in the context of public space, but also in society's identity. As such, they are the object of all operations carried out upon this identity.

These suicidal tendencies were not shared by the Romanian artist Anca Benera. In her 2010 action, the artist acted as a guide for tourists, showing them squares throughout Bucharest that were left empty after communist monuments were torn down; in spite of this, the squares continue to function as landmarks – physical ghosts suffering from phantom pains.

In 2007, an artistic action in Warsaw offered a comprehensive analysis of post-communist suicidal tendencies in society. The Israeli artist Yael Bartana created a video work entitled *Nightmares*. The video was shot at the Tenth Anniversary Stadium in Warsaw, which at the time was being torn down to make room for a new stadium for UEFA Euro 2012. Bartana asked a leftist activist and founder of the *Krytyka Polityczna* (Political Critique) magazine, Sławomir Sierakowski, to deliver the last speech at the stadium, which served as a tribune for speeches delivered by communist leaders. The moving speech, written by Sierakowski and Kinga Dunin, evoked memories of speeches delivered at the stadium in a specific style characteristic of Polish communist authorities. Sierakowski asked the Jews who had left Poland for forgiveness and urged them to

return. Bartana's action also comprehensively addressed the act of destroying the stadium. The top deck of the Stadium was built in 1955 from ruins left after the suppression of the Warsaw Uprising. This act of resistance against the German occupation, which took place just a year after the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto, was used by the communist regime, which built the stadium atop the ruins and with the ruins left after the German invasion. The new regime was built using the material remnants of its predecessor. Thus, an act of resistance was interpreted as an act of building the future. Moreover, Bartana's work exposes a shameful feature shared by both regimes which contributed to the lack of cultural and ethnic diversification in Warsaw: the exile and emigration of people of Jewish origin. Sierakowski's text called for diversity. It referred to the destruction of the stadium brought about by an international sports event. As a result, thousands of immigrants were deprived of a primary source of income. *Nightmares* thus allow one to re-evaluate the concepts of the nation, political transformation, identity, and diversity anew. The work exploits various components of co-existence: the interwar Poland, international communism, multiculturalism, democratic society, a future built upon the past.

A field of negotiation between a communist and democratic society was established in the Palace of the Romanian Parliament (original name: The People's House) built for Nicolae Ceausescu in Bucharest. Since 1997, the building has housed the Chamber of Deputies and since 2005, the

Senate. In 2004, the palace acquired the status of a metanarrative when the National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC) opened in the west wing. During the inaugural exhibition, entitled *Romanian artists (and not only) love Ceausescu's Palace*, curated by Ruxandra Balci, the palace underwent various artistic interventions. In 2005, the Spanish artist Santiago Sierra presented in the Museum the second part of his project entitled *Under Construction 2: Casa Poporului*. Sierra hired nearly four hundred women to beg for money in the hallway of MNAC. The artistic event lasted two hours (from midnight until 2 a.m.), forcing visitors to adopt the uncomfortable position of a privileged minority. Such a position, although desirable in the context of the social structure, was extremely uncomfortable in the symbolic order. As Mihnea Mircan observes: "the performance that was enacted in the corridor produced the extreme actualization of a stereotype about Romania, a fragment of the rudimentary sociology that divides the world between advanced nations and nations smothered in their mediocre destiny, between winners and losers in the game of history."¹¹ Sierra, however, in his performance was negotiating between "winners" and "losers," adjusting the paradigm. His critique of capitalist valuation evoked an egalitarian discourse, according to which inequality affects both the undervalued and the privileged. Although MNAC's space, the very space which previously housed the Ceaușescus, was open to the public, the social hierarchy of a new, though still totalitarian, capitalist system was still present there. The Romanian

¹¹ M. Mircan, *The Corridor in the House of the People – Santiago Sierra*, <http://www.museumofconflict.eu/singletext.php?id=18> (accessed: 09.04.2013).

economic crisis, resulting from foreign debt, was resolved in the 1980s, but it was followed by a wave of aggressive capitalism, which had a decisive influence on Romanian society. Just two months before Sierra's performance, Romania forgave USD 2 billion of Iraqi debt, making it the first country outside the Paris Club to do so, and thereby trying to repay its "debts" as a formerly indebted country. Thus, the words "Give me money," repeated by the beggars in Romanian and English, can be read as an allusion to Romania's dual status on the political scene.

According to Derrida's diagnosis, foreign debt is the result of what Marx called overproduction,¹² a function of the design and inequalities of capitalism, which excludes that which constitutes it.¹³ However, as the philosopher observes, the concept of debt can also be defined on another level. This would then be a debt that the "New International," a responsible and active entity, has to pay off to Marx and Marxism.¹⁴ Sierra's work can thus be read as a paying off artistic debt to the author of *Capital*, who was not repaid, or improperly repaid, by the creators of the totalitarian regime.

The very structure of Ceausescu's Palace is psychoanalytic in nature. The symmetrical structure of the building, whose height corresponds to the depth of the basement, has always housed both social awareness and social ignorance. While the building was designed to legitimize

12 J. Derrida, op. cit., p. 79.

13 Ibidem, p. 102.

14 Ibidem, p. 114–115.

an ideology of power, its basement became the object of speculation and myths. The public assumed that the building housed underground bunkers, safety rooms, and escape routes linking the palace with the airport. Therefore, fear of the regime falling was the equivalent of the official propaganda. And the capitalist economy of Western countries served as the unconscious of Romanian's propaganda, socialist prosperity and poverty.

In 1992, the Hungarian artist Tamás Szentjóby problematized the issue of the relics of communism in post-communist urban space by directly addressing the concept of the specter. He covered the Budapest Freedom Monument with a canvas bag. The monument was erected in 1947 to commemorate the liberation by the Soviet Army of Hungary from not only the German, but also the Hungarian Nazis, led by Ferenc Szálasi, the leader of the fascist Arrow Cross Party. Even back then the monument, designed by Zsigmond Kisfaludi Strobl, had a special status. It was one of very few monuments originally associated with the communist regime which was not removed and taken to the Statue Park designed by Ákos Eleőd in 1993 to commemorate the second anniversary of the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary. Almost all other monuments and statutes were now there: on the outskirts of the city, in a place lacking any historical context. The Freedom Monument was said to transmit a universal message, which was actually questioned by Szentjóby, who dematerialized the statue and gave it the form of a ghost. Szentjóby cut holes in the canvas bag, which gave the dematerialized creature

two “eyes.” Dematerialization paradoxically contributed to the monument’s inclusion in public debate, together with its history and the historically variable definitions of freedom associated with the monument’s materiality. The artist points to the fact that the conceptual synchrony of the city, based on a coherent democratic identity, is illusory. Indeed, Szentjóby defines this identity as post-communist and full of contradictions. Social space, in his view, is diachronic and haunted by its history and the historicity of its meanings.

A number of similar artistic interventions in the conceptual space of a city-relic, a ghost town, were carried out by another Hungarian artist, Tamás Kaszás. Hailing from Dunaujvaros, a town founded from scratch in 1951 as Sz-tálinváros (“Stalin City” in Hungarian) in an agrarian area, Kaszás not only acts as a guide to the city, which is a true masterpiece of socialist realism, but also makes reference to the city as an artist. Two key projects, which were based on a reversal of Szentjóby’s concept, and attempted to restore the materiality of what was now phantom-like, were not carried out because the artist was not granted the necessary permits.

The first project was a plan to restore a five-pointed star that once adorned a water tower. The artist tried to give it a contemporary form, that of a capitalist logo, producing a whole range of designs, including one based on the Heineken logo. This project could not be carried out because Hungarian law prohibits the display of totalitarian

symbols in public. In the second project, Kaszás wanted to sow grain in front of a monument depicting peasants in a field (a work by Jozsef Somogyi). Kaszás goal was to restore a realistic register to the symbolic: thanks to the grain, field tools would become real tools in the hands of workers and not merely their symbolic representations. Moreover, the unmowed grain would evoke the possibility and need for Marxist action. The grain would call for a revolution.

Through their interventions in post-communist cities, artists tried to soothe their phantom pains. These phantom pains seem to function in a wider context: as phantom pains of democracy, deprived of the possibility of acting on behalf of society simply because they had been amputated from their conceptual area and stigmatized as totalitarian relics of the communist regime. The concept of communism, unified by its awareness of its place in the social structure, endowed with revolutionary potential and the ability to act, an alternative to the concept of the nation, whose relation with history is based on a completely different set of symbolic and mythical references,¹⁵ has been stripped of materiality and haunts us like a specter within the frameworks of accepted and recognized conceptual structures. Derrida replaces it with the term “the New International” – a revolution without a party, but still endowed with responsibility.¹⁶ Indeed, Derrida defines capitalist cities as phantom cities.¹⁷ It is at the

15 R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, New York 1991, p. 131–155.

16 J. Derrida, *op. cit.*

17 *Ibidem*, p. 103–105.

meeting point of similarities and differences, between the new and the old totalitarian system (capitalism and communism), and at the meeting point of the new and the old egalitarian system (democracy and communism), that the most symptomatic artistic realizations are produced. The motivation for these works is the materialization of spectres that haunt these new cities, cities which legitimize their existence with an artificial conceptual synchrony.

While Derrida states explicitly that Marx's spectres are the same spectres that haunted him,¹⁸ he considers this spectrality to be the driving force of communism. "Capitalist societies," Derrida writes, "can always heave a sigh of relief and say to themselves: communism is finished since the collapse of the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century and not only is it finished, but it did not take place, it was only a ghost. They do no more than disavow the undeniable itself: a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back."¹⁹

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

18 Ibidem, p. 122.

19 Ibidem, p. 123.