

Still Waiting

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The amphitheater itself is a haunting sight: thousands of vandalized seats gaze at an empty, rotting stage, a 20th-century Colosseum. As a ruin the amphitheater is a moving sight, perhaps even more striking than Billy Rose's original Aquacade. (1)

From opening day the people turned their Fair into something particularly special and vital to them: a setting for a series of important personal photographic souvenirs. No one can estimate the number of pictures ... that amateur photographers created out of their Fair. (2)

How to respect a ruin, with its peculiar temporality of disappearance and persistence, memory and forgetting? Ruins ... fall apart, as Achebe said of things. They are things only insofar as they are crumbling, disintegrating, falling to pieces and to pieces of pieces. And the disintegration affects the thing itself, renders it no longer a thing and strictly incapable of responding to the question of what it is. What is ruined here is the possibility of an answer to the question "what is?" We should never say "a ruin," but only ruins, in the plural, ever more plural.

Ruins, perhaps, have no present -- only an uncertain past and a possible future. They risk slipping beyond recognition.

Yet there they are. Ruins happen, and they don't just happen. They go to pieces in the intricate politics of neglect, amnesia, migration or expulsion, violence, revolution or reaction or attempted annihilation. Memory enforces its exclusions and what's left out disappears. Sometimes altogether, without a trace: things and people and ideas just vanish, period, irrecoverably and absolutely. Even the sign of their loss is lost, as if they had never happened. And when the obliteration takes some time, as it always does, we are given ruins. Left behind or shattered, they seem then to escape the networks of signification, of exchange and performance, which we sometimes think -- in shock or appreciation -- constitute our lives. In the barren lifelessness of our departed intention, it seems, the ruins emerge, and go on without us. This is, they say, just what a carcass is: the material remnant once its animating soul, the life of our ideas, our uses and meanings, has fled.

There is perhaps a lingering prejudice here: the unstated privilege of all that we call human, as if without us there would be no life, as if without our attention things simply expire. Ruins challenge this scheme and ask us, on the contrary, to suspend the easy distinction between body and soul, material and ideal. They live after life, without it. Ruins go on, beyond our life and theirs, remaining. They remain, perhaps quite simply -- without the heroism of resistance, the bravery of the trace that holds onto its past, the reassuring tenacity of a link to what cannot be forgotten.

And of course, ruins do have their uses. People (and others) live in and off them, admire and revile them, deface and preserve them, shell them and shore them up -- no matter what their 'original' identity, use, or meaning. Ruins, like anything that might mean anything, can always be put in new contexts, reinvested and reinscribed -- the ruin "can always be detached from the chain in which it is inserted or given without causing it to lose all possibility of functioning, ... [and] one can perhaps come to recognize other possibilities in it by inscribing it or grafting it onto other chains." Indeed, as Derrida has argued, the mark that communicates has the structural properties, precisely, of a ruin -- "the nonpresent remainder of a differential mark cut off from its putative production or origin." (3)

Dennis Adams regularly names this paradox, in one form or another, "ambivalence" -- not as an excuse for the difficulty of getting at the 'political position' so often demanded of his complex work, but as an effort to approach the very condition of the political: groundlessness, instability, ruin.

There are those monuments, buildings, or public places that live beyond the symbolic frames that inform their meaning. At that fragile moment, before they are razed or captured by the heritage industry, they share the ambivalence of the transplanted. (4)

Sometimes that moment lasts a long time, and its fragility provides the possibility for interventions that do

not seek to annihilate or to rescue but rather to provoke, or perhaps to bear witness: "my work ... stopframes the dissipation of meaning that permeates our culture, but nothing is recovered" (5). Nothing is to be saved or rescued or reconstructed, he repeats again and again, all the while insisting that the recycling and simulation technologies of everyday media life ("our culture") do not simply use things up. "History, as it is being distributed through the conventional channels of exchange, suffers the same fate as any information. It is not privileged. But this does not explain the complex layers of our collective memory. The ruins of history are too pervasive -- fragments waiting for reinvestment" (6).

These ruins are images, gone to pieces and cut together, repeated, flattened, put into motion. Fragments still waiting ...

Even if they happen instantly -- in the click of the shutter or the explosion of an artillery shell -- there are no ruins without waiting. Ruins wait, in pieces, without affect or pathos, without even waiting "for" anything in particular. The expected bus, the translation or transplant, the drift or the graft can always fail to arrive. Ruins have no intended destination, suspended as they are between contexts or actions, between the corrosion of significations and the imminence of annihilation or preservation. But the waiting makes a time or a frame of its own -- there is no freedom from context, just as there is no absolute anchorage -- which speaks to us of something more general, a certain "vacillation of identity" which renders everything fragile, fragmented, and hence interesting again. Without this structural ambivalence, this wavering or fragility, there would be no possibility of investment, reinvestment, or of any future. And of necessity there is "no 'last word,'" because the waiting marks us indelibly. (7)

Waiting has always meant vigilance, the careful attention of the watcher, the responsible scrutiny of the gaze ... with all the predictable existentialist pathos it can often induce. Ruins seem to call forth an obligation, a duty to remember, to protect and preserve what remains so that it does not cease to appear -- guard the remains, ward off oblivion, recall our heritage and save it for our future, that there may be a future. But ruins wait differently -- neither object nor subject, neither inert nor active, they disrupt the security of a responsibility assumed. Without moving, ruins haunt, exposed to all that consciousness, vision, cognition, intention, and experience tend to put out of reach. "A toppled statue is freed from its vigilance -- it can begin to dream," says Adams. (8)

Ruins that dream wait in a state of distraction, headed elsewhere -- falling apart, they do not coincide with themselves, open from 'within' to the possibility of alterity. This freedom is the banal, flat, everyday wasting away of ruins, the signature of their blank "distress." (9) They do not remind us of our past or protect us from repeating it, but they simply testify to what has occurred. Their testimony finds no privileged reader or listener; it is offered to a public so radically undetermined that even the name 'public' might seem excessively optimistic. This open suspension, this uncertain address, suggests that perhaps, where ruins are involved, we must risk doing without the comforts of the clues found in the rubble, without the self-satisfaction of the commitment never to forget and its implied guarantees for the future. Promising always to remember, we turn away, secure in the self-knowledge of our good conscience and inoculated from engagement by the very certainty of our commitment.

Out of the ruins no lesson emerges, no knowledge held intact in order to ground our actions for the future. Only the haunting, waiting, dreaming ... the open ambivalence of something -- fragments -- that remains to be seen, to be read, to drift. Such reading, which is to say what becomes of these ruins, is necessarily a public matter: not only because these ruins are images and exposed to view, but because ruins imply alterity in all its indetermination. This is not the Enlightenment public rightly criticized as "a great fiction, that imaginary zone of free access" nor simply some "mask for the manipulation of private interests," but precisely "a collision of diverse languages" that ruins the self-identity of privacy even as it demolishes the fiction of the meta-language of reason. (10) Thanks to this collision, this insistent heterogeneity -- which is to say, because there are ruins -- we are troubled with politics and the possibility of intervention, but without guarantees.

NOTES

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1. Christopher Gray, "At Old Aquacade, Things Aren't Going Swimmingly," The New York Times, 28 May

1995, sect. 9, p.5

2. Warren I. Susman, "The People's Fair," in Helen A. Harrison, cur., *Dawn of a New Day: The New York World's Fair, 1939/40*, New York: The Queens Museum and New York University Press, 1980, p.22.
3. Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, in *Limited Inc*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988, pp.9-10.
4. Anna Novakov, "Temporary Connections: A Conversation with Dennis Adams," *Public Art Review*, Spring/Summer 1994, p.19.
5. Eleanor Heartney, "Studio: Dennis Adams," *ARTnews*, October 1986, p.72.
6. Daniela Goldmann, "Kontradiktionen der Kunst: Daniela Goldmann im Gespräch mit Dennis Adams," *Noema*, October/November 1991, p.61 (English original supplied by artist).
7. Dennis Adams, "Transit Authorities," *Stroll*, Spring-Summer 1985, p.3.
8. Bartomeu Marí, "An interview with Dennis Adams," *Saint-Denis: Memento Mori*, Paris: Direction régionale des affaires culturelles d'Ile-de-France, 1994.
9. "How to set up a time frame for distress?," asks Adams in "Masquerade and Ambivalence," *Place-Position-Presentation-Public*, Maastricht/De Balie: Jan van Eyke Academie, 1992, p.126.
10. Eleanor Heartney and Dennis Adams, "Public Discourse, Private Interests, and the Public Street," *Art Papers*, March-April 1992, p.15; "Studio: Dennis Adams," p.72.