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Witches and Demolition Art in Helsinki

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In the shade of birch trees, the five-story building displays a joyous set of rainbow colours. Forty minutes from Kerava train station, north of Helsinki, the artists of *Purkutaide* (“demolition art”) have taken over the thirty flats of an apartment block programmed for demolition, now rechristened *Taiteen Kotitalo* (“House of Art”). Their art mainly takes the form of colourful graffiti: beautiful faces as large as the wall, dreamy landscapes in pastel tones, urban or psychedelic colour explosions. The graffiti offer an immersive experience, spread from floor to ceiling and spill out on the balconies. Some of the rooms surround you in a deafening manner, such as Sheikki’s “High On Life,” a white-washed living-room where the words “High on life” are scribbled in different black fonts on white-painted sofa, armchair, curtains, table and laptop.

This painted building draws inspiration from earlier demolition art in France (Dédale, Vannes, 2018) and Germany (The Haus, Berlin Art Bang, Berlin, 2017)¹ and other examples can be found in Singapore (The Mill, WeJungle, 2015; Eminent Plaza, 2014).² In a hypermnestic digital era,

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¹ Forsman, Elias, “Grå betong förvandlades till färggrann konst i Kervo,” *Hufvudstadsbladet*, n° 198 (25 July 2020): 22-23.

² Leong, May and Mimi Kirk, “Trend: Singapore’s ‘Demolition Art’,” *Art Radar*, 31 July 2015, retrieved 28 August 2020, www.artradarjournal.com/2015/07/31/singapores-demolition-art/

concerned with the deliberate preservation of history, art, and personal files, and with the unconscious preservation of our footsteps in the web, such projects interrogate the nature of destruction.

When art colonises condemned buildings like a parasitical plant, their programmed destruction turns into fertile ground. I started to wonder where our obsession with the preservation of art and of societal practices came from, and what new forms could spring from destroying what had so far been preserved. I wondered what conditions were necessary for destruction to harbor new life. Destruction can easily be perceived as something nebulously threatening, as when collapsology ponders the idea that our present civilisation may fall. Yet even this field of research does not point to an integral apocalypse, but rather, to the end of the world *as we know it*, with the implication that a creative rebirth will follow the collapse.

Demolition Art

Typically, art is carefully preserved in museums and its destruction is perceived as a barbarous act. Yet new works will spring up and talented young artists demand space, which might be gained by doing away with the old. Is the canonisation and preservation of art a ritual madness? In the face of the visitors' plea to keep *Taiteen Kotitalo* up,³ one might wonder: what makes it acceptable and even desirable to tear down *Taiteen Kotitalo* but not a Vermeer?

One of my colleagues, a doctor in Aesthetics and author of hundreds of art columns in the most eminent newspaper of Finland, asked his students to reflect on the following question: "Imagine you are at the museum, and fire starts spreading, destroying the art. Someone lies unconscious next to you, and you can either save the Rembrandt on the wall or that person, what would you do?" All answered that they would save the visitor, but what was interesting, he said, was that we perceived this as a valid question. We feel a moral duty to preserve art, which he suggested comes from a more general desire to *preserve* that may be ingrained in Western thinking. As a counterpoint, in Japan there exists a tradition which consists in tearing down

³ Nyman, Jael, "Jono vain kasvaa: 94 taiteilijan käsittelemä purkukuntoinen talo aiheutti yleisöryntäyksen ja kiitosten tulvan Keravalla," *Helsingin Sanomat* (7 July 2020), retrieved 28 August 2020, www.hs.fi/kaupunki/kerava/art-2000006564462.html

(and rebuilding) the most sacred shrines every twenty years.⁴ In this case, planned destruction avoids destruction by decay and allows for traditional building techniques to be kept alive.

Taiteen Kotitalo is not simply going to end like a transitory phenomenon, but it will be actively bulldozed. Yet, in some ways, its destruction is creative. Some forms of destruction are more forgivable, acceptable, or desirable than others. Athens' Parthenon, slowly destroyed by time, was rebuilt using the process of anastylosis, which pieces together fragments with as little new material as possible.⁵ But Afghanistan's giant Bamiyan Buddhas, dynamited by the Taliban in 2001, are in such a state that their reconstruction has been ruled out by UNESCO.⁶ Through this destructive act, the Taliban wished the destruction of a civilisation. They waged war against what they saw as "idolatry" and what we regard as aesthetic expression and freedom of belief. This destruction is perceived as barbarous partly because of its symbolic power. Unlike the destruction of the Buddhas, the tearing down of *Taiteen Kotitalo* raises no moral issue. What is planned is the physical destruction of an apartment block, not the symbolic destruction of Art. The artists consented to it from the start and it conditioned their art.

Is *Taiteen Kotitalo* really going to be destroyed anyway? Just as the Bamiyan Buddhas continue to live a ghostly existence online, the graffiti will continue to exist as simulacra, as *images* of graffiti, after the building is destroyed. Visitors have taken hundreds of pictures of the house and one can almost visit it virtually by browsing through them online. Jouni Väänänen, the director of the project, said in an interview that there were plans to turn the exhibition into a virtual one.⁷ Why then, lament the destruction? And why even go to Kerava to see the original graffiti, when they exist online? What is it exactly that will be destroyed in the destruction of the apartment block? My colleague, art critic and doctor in Aesthetics, surprised me when he said that despite its notoriety, he had not been to *Taiteen Kotitalo*, nor did he intend to go. One of his acquaintances had been there and taken many

⁴ Adams, Cassandra, "Japan's Ise Shrine and Its Thirteen-Hundred-Year-Old Reconstruction Tradition," *Journal of Architectural Education*, vol. 52, n° 1 (1998): 1.

⁵ Hegarty, Stephanie, "Bamiyan Buddhas: Should they be rebuilt?," *BBC World Service* (13 August 2012), retrieved 28 August 2020, www.bbc.com/news/magazine-18991066

⁶ Hegarty, "Bamiyan Buddhas: Should they be rebuilt?"

⁷ Nyman, "Jono vain kasvaa: 94 taiteilijan käsittelmä purkukuntoinen talo aiheutti yleisöryntäyksen ja kiitosten tulvan Keravalla"

pictures, so he felt no need to go. What makes it acceptable for graffiti to be physically destroyed and exist only in digital form, as simulacra, as opposed to a Vermeer or a Rembrandt?

Witches

The House of Art was the first of two artistic events occurring in Helsinki in the summer 2020 that spurred me to think about the creativity that springs from destruction. The second was a series of three short films by French film-maker Camille Ducellier. Screenings of Ducellier's films are rare and seldom commented upon, and this summer, *Sorcières mes soeurs* (2010), *Sorcière Queer* (2016) and *Starhawk* (2017) were shown at Kino Regina, an art cinema inside of the main public library of Helsinki. All three films pointed to the space that the destruction of gender norms would free up. The first film showed a woman's face up close in flickering light. She looked straight at the camera, while the voice-over read a letter in which she explained that she was a prostitute and asked the bishop to excommunicate her. In the second film, two transgender people, who formed a couple, were filmed as they discussed the way they were perceived by the world. The camera followed them as they camped in the woods in a community that practiced nudity, flower baths, and put glitter and costumes on at night, and the sequencing suggested that they practiced some form of ritual that, to me, resembled artistic expression. One participant could be seen wearing a bull head and I could not help but think of Dionysus' bacchantes. The third film focused on Starhawk, an American figure of feminist activism, as she talked about power and community.

The end of the second film shone new light on the concept of destruction. "We bring the destruction of *your* world," said a voice-over superposed on a slow and calm close-up shot of the couple. They were filmed lightly touching each other, or almost touching, in a warm intimate light. "Our existence portends the end of the world as you know it. We bring the destruction of man and woman, the destruction of the heterosexual family," continued the voice, which proceeded to explain that they did not believe in the destruction of *the* world but worked towards the destruction of *our* world—"your world," the voice said (author's translation).⁸ The collapse that they wished for was concomitant with the creative shaping of another

⁸ "Notre existence annonce la fin du monde tel que vous le connaissez. Nous portons avec nous la destruction de l'homme et de la femme, la destruction de la famille hétérosexuelle [...] Nous ne croyons pas à la fin du monde, nous œuvrons à la fin de votre monde" (11'). Ducellier, Camille, *Sorcière Queer*, 2016.

world. It was by no means a violent collapse, but, rather, because of its softness, it echoed the words of Starhawk, interviewed in the last film. The American activist insisted on the etymology of “power,” linking it to the French *pouvoir*, from Latin *potere*, that is, the ability to produce things, to make them happen. Opposing the dominant discourse, which associates “power” with “conquest,” Starhawk pointed out that it was possible to see power in the ability to take care of others and to show benevolence, cooperation and generosity.

Witches and Demolition Art in Helsinki

Neither Kerava’s house nor Ducellier’s film exalt destruction or romanticize ruins. Rather, they focus on the promise of a renewal and show creative practices that are concomitant with soft forms of destruction. Ducellier’s films support the argument that freedom and creativity may spring from the dismantling of current gender norms. *Taiteen Kotitalo*’s purpose is mainly aesthetic, suggesting that abandoned buildings can become spaces for artistic expression. However, the second life of the building puts at a strange distance a setting very familiar to us: the apartment with its kitchen, curtains, furniture, etc. Visitors may start to look upon their own houses differently and begin to view destruction as something that affords new possibilities. The collapse of previously held ideas and of familiar structures does not have to occur violently with a crash, a bang, or a nuclear explosion. It can occur softly, and simply be ingrained in the pictorial dots of graffiti.

The question that remains is how much destructive power artistic and societal projects can have when they occur in isolation. Interestingly, *Taiteen Kotitalo* is located on the outskirts of the capital city. This summer, while that peripheral building was being turned into art, a major building was being destroyed in Porthaninkatu, in the very central neighbourhood of Kallio. While Kerava’s apartment block stayed empty for three years before being turned into art, in the centre, time does not stand still, and passers-by cannot contemplate slow destruction: space is expensive, and empty buildings are immediately destroyed and rebuilt.

The main setting of Ducellier’s film *Sorcière queer* is also geographically marginal. The couple she follows reinvents love in a community that meets outside of the city, in a forest. The first shot of the film shows them packing, which suggests that they need to exclude themselves from society to be free. This move to the outskirts echoes the content of *Sorcières, mes soeurs*, where a woman asks to be

excommunicated, that is, to be taken out of the structure of the Catholic community. One may thus wonder, can destruction and creativity emerge elsewhere than in the margins?

The films and the House of Art are connected through their locale, Helsinki, a city unfazed by the Covid crisis. With its large airy streets, virtually free of traffic, and its smooth pastel facades, renovated even before they start showing traces of wear, Helsinki is an Apollonian city. It is my belief that this makes it the ideal site for experimentations in art; no matter how much Dionysian chaos develops, with feminist queer films and half-destroyed buildings, it is unlikely ever to disrupt the uniform surface of the city.

For the modernist poets, there were two types of catastrophe: the eternal recurrence of the Same, and the sudden end of this recurrence. One catastrophe turns you into stone, the other one brings new life, which explains Baudelaire's wish: "Avalanche, will you take me in your fall?"⁹ (author's translation). A century and a half later, two thousand kilometres from Paris, one can glimpse the desire of artists to take a much more active part in forms of (artistic) collapse. In July, the singer and graphic artist Draama-Helmi was sitting in a small gallery, next to a very delicately crafted and half-burnt paper model of her childhood house. She had intentionally destroyed part of it before exhibiting it to the public. I suggested to her that she could let the visitors destroy her art next time, so she would not have to do it herself, especially after taking such pains to assemble it, to which she responded: "But I *want* to be this destructive force!"

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⁹ "Avalanche, veux-tu m'emporter dans ta chute?" (v. 15). Baudelaire, Charles, "Le Goût du néant," *Les Fleurs du mal* (Paris : Gallimard, 1996), 108.

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