

Zinovy Zinik  
**Old Wreck**

Artists and property developers are unacknowledged accomplices in the conspiracy of rising property prices in the neglected parts of London. Initially, artists move into such areas because renting is cheap there. Their presence creates a bohemian local ambiance, which attracts a richer type of resident, followed by property developers who turn ruins into luxury apartments and then by estate agents who transform the area into a booming property market. Soon, artists can no longer afford the local rent and have to move on somewhere else in the permanent search for a new rundown neighbourhood. Property developers watch their next move closely.

Stephen Morris could never persuade the general public of the greatness of his pearl-gray industrial landscapes depicting urban decay. Eventually, having got fed up with the misery of being an artist he decided to change the urban landscape itself by becoming a property developer. He recently acquired a semi-derelict building in West Hampstead which he planned to demolish and build a luxury apartments block instead. Before the demolition took place, he had decided to merge the two aspects of his personality – artistic and that of property developer – and organise<sup>1</sup> in this space a kind of “demolition show” in which friends as well as professional artists (Ruth MacLennan and Margarita Gluzberg, Anthony-Noel Kelly and Arnis Balcus, Yelena Popova and Liza Dimbleby, Mark Stuart-Smith and Vivian Chan) were invited to exhibit works associated with the theme of ruins. Each of them came up with quite intriguing imagery – from ravishing Kazakh falconers, ready to tear you apart, to old chairs painted as human bodies; but it was an incidental video of a former artist who long ago became an art dealer, Matthew Bown, that entranced some members of the audience. The video was a hip-hop montage of a pillow fight between boys mixed with the footage of the recent Beirut bombing. A Philippine girl, who came as part of the entourage of the rock band that performed during the “demolition show”, saw the video and went totally berserk. Her verbal abuse was aimed at Zionist aggression and Capitalist conspiracy but the bottle of wine in her hand was hurled in the direction of a wall photograph depicting a naked torso of the confusing gender. The damage to this piece of art was considerable. I would doubt very much that the girl was guided in her actions by Gustav Metzger, who used acid to simultaneously create and destroy “auto-destructive” works, or by Bakunin’s maxim that “the urge to destroy is also a creative urge”.

I am not implying that the recent Beirut bombing was conducted in collusion with property developers but, clearly, the scenes of destruction have no doubt a more powerful effect on the audience than any, however daring, form of the well-balanced artistic endeavour. Amongst the exhibits of this show there was a snapshot from the 1990s of the Twin Towers, still intact, seen romantically from the industrial Jersey City shore<sup>2</sup>. The Towers are beautifully lit up on the other side of the Hudson River by the rays of the setting sun but our eyes hardly notice them, being distracted by the heaps of rubbish, civilisation’s junk in the foreground.

What is it that makes the crowd of spectators in Manhattan spend hours standing before the quarry on the site of the absent towers? What, really, are they staring at? What are they expecting to see there? In Rome, the city of ruins, the thought occurred to me that these spectators are motivated by the same feelings as tourists, viewing, say, fragments of an ancient tablet inscribed with the name of a Roman senator, or the stump of a column, overgrown with wild grapes. This is hardly a desire to connect with the beauties of the ancient world. It is a display, rather, of sadomasochistic sentiments. We are drawn to these ruins by our immense attraction to chaos, the abyss on the edge of pillage and destruction. The concept that Rome is Manhattan two thousand years ago is extremely appealing. Our contemporary, facing the site of ancient ruins inwardly gasps: just imagine, what a palace this was, and what a piazza before the palace, and what a wall surrounding the piazza, what power was in the possession of man, and what now, what do we have instead? - a pile of rocks, stumps of columns, and a collapsed arcade. All gone now. And what then is the point of trying? Ruins sedate the people's mind: they level all ambition and talent. On the other hand, ruins add depth and unity to our ephemeral present: if there are ruins then there was also a great past. Ruins like any common tragedy of the past, unite us.

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<sup>1</sup> In collaboration with 1441 Club and The Safety Pin Society of Great Britain

<sup>2</sup> [photo by Zinovy Zinik: with Alexander Melamid - his back to the viewer]

In our era of live reporting we are overwhelmed with images of wreck and disaster. But even in the most pitiable quarters of the third world, where dwellings are a pile of old boards, corrugated metal, and beer-crates, we see the attempt of man to construct his life, with a roof over his head for himself and his family. In the paintings of German romantics ruins are the wreckage of castles, palaces, antiquities. This is an allegory of the transience of earthly existence, human civilization. In the paintings of Russian predecessors to socialist realism, however, we see a different state of affairs: ruins as a result of total neglect and lack of repairs. Ruins are a reflection of national consciousness, of course. Each nationality deserves their own ruins.

The ruins of Ancient Rome are like a fragmented consciousness of our civilization. My father had lost his leg on the frontline during the Second World War. It was replaced with a prosthetic one. In my childhood, during a visit to the Moscow Museum of Fine Arts with my father, I once encountered a statue of the Aphrodite whose lower part of her left leg was missing, replaced with a metallic rod, like my father's prosthesis. My father in my eyes became a statue of a Greek hero with a limb missing.

A disabled person at certain moments resembles in his helplessness an infant. Furthermore, a fetus with undeveloped limbs looks like a decrepit old man with amputated body parts. This transitory state of in-between-ness can be translated into buildings also: is this the ruin of a king's palace or the incomplete building of the party headquarters? Precisely in this state of transformation, migration from one world to another, we are engrossed by the ruins of the past.

The gaps in the ruined walls of our lives are filled in with memories, myths and legends of our past friendships. My current visit to the eternal city of Rome brought back the memory of my Roman walks with the mentor of my Moscow youth, the writer and mail-artist Alexander Asarkan. A voluntary exile from Moscow, he arrived in his beloved Rome (he spoke Italian fluently) a quarter a century ago. It was there that we had met after many years of separation. Since then, Rome has considerably changed, but its monuments remain the same. Here, in the Pantheon, Asarkan recounted to me his letters to the Soviet authorities begging them for an exit visa, in which he tried to convince the officials of his utter uselessness to the Soviet motherland. It won't make any difference, he said in his letters, where he would end his days: grinding down the old sofa in his communal flat in Moscow, or somewhere in Rome: it's just that the old wreck is attracted to ruins. They let him go. He died recently.

As we stood beneath the dome of the Pantheon, the light beat down upon us. A huge hole was gaping in the roof, like in a gigantic human skull. That was the original architect's design - not the lack of repairs. The sun shone through the spherical gap in the dome - the sole source of light in this building. It was this beam of light that reminded me of my mentor who is now in the land of shadows. As if light is capable of penetrating only through the fissures in our fossilized memory.