

BLACK HOUSE. NOTES ON ARCHITECTURE

Press release from a group exhibition curated by Anders Härm

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artists: Jasmina Cibic, Dénes Kalev Farkas, Eve Kiiler, Karl Holmqvist, Paul Kuimet, Neeme Külm, Arne Maasik, Jüri Okas, Anri Sala, Mario Garcia Torres

Architecture is for me the exemplary case of how ideology is at work precisely where you don't think you will find it.

Slavoj Žižek *On Architecture and Aesthetics*

In his book *Looking Awry* Slavoj Žižek hints that a house, or architecture in a broader sense, can serve as a kind of a screen for the projection of desires. He uses the example of Patricia Highsmith's short story "Black House", which takes place in a small American town, where the locus – an abandoned house – functions as an empty surface onto which the local men can project their nostalgic desires, their distorted memories of their first sexual encounters, etc. Entering it supposedly involves mortal danger and is thus forbidden. Several myths surround the building. The house is haunted, it is inhabited by a lunatic who kills intruders, etc. A newcomer to the city, a young engineer, decides to enter the house, finds nothing there, and victoriously returns to tell the residents. By publically announcing there's nothing there, that the house which was elevated to the status of the Thing is actually empty, the young intruder reduces their fantasy space into everyday, common reality. As Žižek puts it, "He annulled the difference between reality and the fantasy space, depriving the men of the place where they were able to articulate their desires."¹

In 1995, the then young photographer Arne Maasik photographed North Tallinn, a working-class district comprised of wooden housing from the late 19th and early 20th century. (It's the same area where EKKM is located). Maasik depicts a district that is romantically in ruins, with the houses partly burned and empty. In a way, the whole district functions as a "black house", as a perfect screen. However Maasik distorts

¹ Žižek, Slavoj *Looking Awry. An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts. London, England, 1991, pp 8-9, 136

this image by making the materiality of the photos visible. We see that he has photographed over the edges of the film, and the technical data and holes are also a part of the images. There is a kind of correlation or balance between the fantasmatic images and their visible edges, their limits, which might also be interpreted as articulations of the difference between fantasy and reality.

The current exhibition is not an architectural exhibition; it's an exhibition about architecture. For example, we are not interested in architects and their architectural achievements although some very explicit buildings appear in many of the works exhibited here (like Villa Bled designed by Vinko Glanz for Josip Broz Tito in Jasmina Cibic's video *Framing the Space* [2012] or the famous fascist building *Plazzo della Civita Italiana* as a 1:36 model in Karl Holmqvist's piece *Untitled [Memorial]*, 2011). We are not interested in architecture as an art form, but rather as a social and political tool. According to Žižek, the paradox of architecture lies in the fact that "it's not only that the fantasy, which is embodied in the mute language of buildings, can articulate the utopia of justice, freedom and equality betrayed, denied by actual social relations; it can also articulate the fantasy of inequality for clear hierarchical distinctions." Žižek speaks in this context about Stalinist architecture, in which Stalinism on a rhetorical level spoke of equality, but on an architectural level expressed nothing but the necessity of hierarchies. But this kind of hidden architectural agenda (for example, private spaces like shopping centres that mimic the public sphere, while many former public areas like the space between apartment buildings, or even some entire areas of the city, that are now sealed and fenced off) is even more complex in our late capitalist society. Dénes Farkas uses spatial structures modelled of paper and turned into photographs to demonstrate the repressions of neo-liberalist ideology, thus, literally, revealing the architecture of current capitalist society and hinting at Etienne Balibar's concept of "capitalism as a structural violence". Or perhaps we can even speak of architectural violence? In Eve Kiiler's photos we can clearly see the power relations, and power in relation to the architectural space. She has photographed the demolition of the Trade Union Building built in 2003 during the Soviet era and the construction of the City Plaza business centre on the same spot.

Anri Salas's extremely touching video *Dammi i colori* follows a painter-turned- mayor of a relatively small and extremely poor Albanian city. Since the mayor totally lacks

the means to run the city, he turns towards the means he knows best— namely paint and colours – in order to revitalize a city consisting mainly of ugly Communist-period buildings. He uses the city as his canvas and produces very beautiful colour combinations, while also being fully aware of the fact that he is merely dealing with camouflage. However, there isn't much more he can do to improve the life of his city's residents. So he continues to paint obsessively in order to escape the depression he is suffering, and which is quite evident in Salas's film.

We encounter another kind of obsession in Mario Garcia Torres's piece called *Have You Ever Seen the Snow?* Namely, the artist's tremendous attempt to establish a connection with the artist Alighiero Boetti (1940-1994) and find the location of his famous One Hotel in Kabul, a place where he lived and worked between 1971 and 1977. Through this attempt Torres also reveals the destiny of an artist, the history of the city and evokes the Afghanistan that predated the civil war and the Soviet invasion. Jasmina Cibic uses Villa Bled to reveal the historical contradictions and current social situation by carrying out a thorough and complex case study in which the different layers are interwoven in a very interesting way. Paul Kuimet works within the realm of a fellow artist depicting a work by sculptor Edgar Viies called *Spatial Image I* from 1968 that functions as a Mobius leaf. Viies's modernist sculptures from the 60s, many of which were large public works, are charged with a true belief in progress and technology, while Kuimet's film represents one of them as haunting, inhumane and mechanical.

From 1974 to 1986, as well as in 1995 and 2009, the architect and the artist Jüri Okas systematically photographed what we could call architectural "weirdness". The slide series called *Little Dictionary of Modern Architecture* consists of 319 images. He was not searching for the architectural merits but quite the opposite. The series is a collection of imperfections, failures, mistakes, architectural naivetés, coincidences, self-made practical spatial compositions and architecture, etc.; all of which seem to constitute the modernist in "everyman" for him. The series is accompanied by a series of texts called *Remarks I: Architecture* (2013), which consist of his personal notes on architecture over four decades.

The current exhibition is about architecture as an effect, as a trigger that sets desire in motion, becomes an obsession, makes artists dig deep into history or the ideology of a house, or to capture every strange imbalance, mistake or fault in architecture. In

a way, all the participating artists have this somewhat fantasmatic relationship with architecture although it surfaces in very different ways. Architecture, the image of a house or some kind of spatial structure, is here used as a surface or a lens – as a Black House – in order to reflect the political, historical, mnemonic, ideological, personal and even romantic aspects of the built-up environment and thus the society.

Anders Härm