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Enduring Peripheries

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Anna Yeroshenko

Enduring Peripheries

Thesis statement

In the 80s when Russian state-sanctioned architectural production consisted of standardized buildings that deplored any unnecessary ornament or decoration, an architect functioned only as an interpreter of numerous limiting factors. As an act of protest against the stagnation in architecture, a group of young architects began to create projects that existed only on paper. For them ‘Paper Architecture’ became a way of bypassing restrictions and dissenting, a way to critique the dehumanizing nature of the architectural style that prevailed at that time. Spatial compositions, which were hard to comprehend visually, elements of inverse perspective, and impractical, idealistic environments depicted a mental picture produced by the artists' imagination. There one could feel cramped or spacious, cozy or desolate. The irony of life can be seen in these projects as well as in their titles: “Island of Stability”, “Villa Claustrophobia”, “Ruins of Paradise”. For those architects it was an act of personal liberation, where paper appeared as a kind of revelation, a means to overcome feelings of unfitness and disappointment. Thus paper preserved from disappearing the ideas that failed to be realized in construction, and sustained them in the form of artworks.

Just as Paper Architects created their utopian projects, that were never meant to be built, I build an imagined reality with an intention to bring back to the viewer the joy of looking at the things we are surrounded by and take for granted, things that are the stage sets of our lives. Architecture is first created on paper, to be then embodied into solid material. By photographing the vernacular landscape of Boston’s periphery, I bring its mundane architecture back to paper. My photographs can prolong its life, or they can give it a new life. By making new structures out of my photographs I, perhaps, fulfill what I gave up doing as an architect.

Walls of residential and public buildings, backyards, fences, and signs are the subjects of my

photographs. I intentionally find places, that are difficult to locate, or identify as belonging to a particular region, country, or city. They are not specific to any style or territory. If desired these featureless, neglected places can be found everywhere, otherwise they may be widely ignored. There is a sense of impermanence and malfunction: family houses that in fact are just temporary havens for strangers; warehouses in which nothing is stored; and fences, that do not protect from anything or anyone. Designed for particular utilitarian functions, many of these structures have lost their original function and are no longer what they seem. For me, they are the symbols of our time, our modern nomadic way of life where one travels from place to place, and possesses nothing permanent, tangible, certain. These structures convey a sense of displacement, temporality, and wandering. They occupy space and their presence reminds us that there is nothing more permanent than the temporary.

As urban dwellers we live in a maze of walls, a complicated network of streets and passages in which it may be difficult to find one's way. By building walls, we not only impose limits on space, but we limit our thoughts, and constrain our sense of self. In our routine we stop paying attention, unless a crack in the wall or a breach in the fence remind us of their monotonous regularity. Perhaps, that is why I like to photograph at night. Dusk alters the contours. It frees up space for imagination. Walls are no longer barriers, darkness dissolves them. In this regard my constructed photographs are just one step further in an attempt to break the walls which we come up against and to push the limits of perception.

While paper architects sought to demonstrate the adverse effect of rationalist architecture on a person, western American 'New Topographics' photographers like Robert Adams and Lewis Baltz, among others, were concerned with the destructive impact of urban development on the natural environment. Photographing the 'man-altered' land, they criticized the pervasive transformation of the Western landscape. Their reticent and straightforward pictures were too real to look at truthfully. Rows of standardized tract houses, blank walls of office buildings and

warehouses, suburban sprawl in all its regulated uniformity create a sense of displacement, rendering the landscape cluttered, unbalanced, constrained. There is something apocalyptically frightening, yet attractive in these desolate and faceless areas. Newly built, but already abandoned, uninhabited, they look like ruins.

Joseph Brodsky said in one of his poems that 'architecture is the mother of ruins'.¹ Like Roland Barthes assumption that every photograph of a person contains the implication of death² resonates with many of those who think about photography, architecture often conjures up thoughts of ruins. Ruins are the evidence of decay, yet they also reveal what remains. They give us a chance to encounter the past. Being factually present, showing us parts, that we can comprehend, ruins make us think about what is lost. They indicate the parts, that we will never be able to reconstruct. That is why they are so alluring. While architectural constructions define limits, ruins suggest what is possible, balancing the edge of what has been and what could have been. A ruin 'beckons itself as a raw matter to be transformed under the gaze of the explorer's watchful eye',³ akin to the idea that photography only shows us fragments of a subjective reality, and always suggests that something is there but can not be seen.

"They'll tear down your building in twenty-five years. All that will remain are its ideas," said Louis Sullivan, alluding to the transience and impermanence of the modern world, where everything becomes obsolete too quickly. It is easier and more expedient to build a new building rather than to retain an existing one. In this way the idea of a building is indeed more important and durable than its embodiment. I think the ruins of modernity will be not the masterpieces of

1 Joseph Brodsky, *Architecture*, 1993

2 "by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive, because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality an absolute superior, somehow eternal value; but by shifting this reality to the past ('this-has-been'), the photograph suggests that it is already dead."
Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.79

3 Dylan Trigg, *The psychoanalysis of ruins*, p.7

architecture, but the utilitarian structures on the outskirts of cities, unsought and left there to the mercy of time.

I like roaming places like these. They make me think about what is permanent and what is temporary, what will remain and what will be lost; about the visibility of things and their true destiny; external constraints and intrinsic freedom. Imagination is what give us this freedom. It is the most powerful thing that we as human beings have, and it is the main instrument of our perception of the world. A picture of the world is different for everyone. It is always distorted by one's personal way of thinking and understanding.

Distortions or deformations have been an integral part, or even the basic concept, of many movements in the visual arts throughout history. Artists deliberately distorted forms, proportions and perspective in order to create a symbolic space in the visible scene.

Medieval painters used the method of Reverse perspective in order to show the viewer unseen spaces behind the horizon line, imagined landscapes of the mind. Such an approach allowed them not only to embody what they really saw, but what they felt, knew or imagined about the represented reality. Cubists also believed that artist's experiences, memories and feelings can be represented by depicting familiar objects from unexpected points of view. Assuming that the perception of reality is multilayered in its imagery as well as in an artist's logical knowledge of it, they decomposed objects into many angles in an effort to convey to the audience the most complete information about it. Surrealists, in contrast, sought to resolve the contradiction between dream and reality and create a kind of absolute reality, a superreality. For them art was perceived as a main instrument of liberation.

"Visible things can be invisible. If somebody rides a horse through a wood, at first one sees them, and then not, yet one knows that they are there. In Carte Blanche, the rider is hiding the trees, and the trees are hiding her. However, our powers of thought grasp both the visible and the

invisible - and I make use of painting to render thoughts visible."⁴ This is Rene Magritte commenting on his painting *Carte Blanche*, in which all three elements, the horse, the rider and the trees, situated at different depths in three-dimensional space are overlapping, being simultaneously in front of and behind the adjoining fragments. Rene Magritte is perhaps one of those artists that had the greatest influence on me with his ability to create paradoxes out of ordinary objects, combining the incongruous in nature, but quite natural forms and objects. Last year I was lucky to see Rene Magritte's exhibition in The Art Institute of Chicago.

Josef Koudelka's panoramic landscapes from his recent project "Wall" that capture the barrier separating Israel and Palestine were shown in the museum at the same time. The long line of the photographs looked like a dashed line, where the wall was sometimes interrupted by the interval between two pictures and sometimes within the image itself. The photographs were intentionally straightforward, but the installation created almost an optical illusion, where the wall seemed endless and its beginning and end were unclear. Up until recently I did not think about the effect the viewing of these two shows simultaneously made on me. Now looking at my photographs I see reflection of both in my own work: the tricky method of the painter and the minimalistic and direct, but nonetheless mysterious, aesthetics of the photographer.

Photographers have never had as much freedom of creative expression as painters have. Despite the obvious fact that any projection of three dimensional space and objects onto two dimensional plane is notional, the medium of photography has always confronted the stereotype, that an image from a camera is a carrier of some kind of truth about the object or place it depicted. Many photographers have challenged this idea. Some of Walker Evans' photographs, specifically those, that represent other images like signs, billboards, and posters, address issues of our reading of a photograph as an image which is diverged from reality, but at the same time presents us with a

record of it. Kenneth Josephson, layering pictures within pictures, uses the photograph itself to comment on photographic truth and illusion, and to question the veracity of the medium.

In today's world photographers have an almost unlimited number of options to alter images digitally, and many artists have embraced this opportunity, however there are still a lot of those, who continue to investigate the possibilities and expand the scope of a photograph as a material object, and think how this materiality can contribute to our understanding of the picture. Letha Wilson mixes the physical presence of an artwork with an image. She often uses interior features of the exhibition space as part of her work. Instead of being hung on the walls her photographs cut into them, or they are pierced by columns, tubes and other external objects. Sculpturally manipulating her landscape photographs she is investigating how a photograph can convey a place and time in the moment of looking at the work, which is different from that represented on the image. Sara VanDerBeek is also interested in how photography affects the reading of scale, time, and place. But unlike Letha Wilson she never exhibits her works as installations. She creates the installations out of her earlier photographs in order to photograph them. In her photographs, sculptures generate images and images generate sculptures.

“Just as Barthes argues that the image and the referent are laminated together, two leaves that can’t be separated [...], photographs have inextricably linked meanings as images and meanings as objects; an indissoluble, yet ambiguous, melding of image and form, both of which are direct products of intention”⁵ In the recent past the only way for a photograph to appear was to be printed onto a material such as paper, glass, or metal. A photograph was an object and its material qualities played an important role in the way the image was perceived. What used to be an integral part of a photograph is now optional and therefore must be conceptualized. The printing process, the choice of paper, and the size of a photograph become critical for many photographers today.

The paper substrate is still vital in my experience with photography and I use the paper as a conceptual element as well as material. The nature of seeing and perception, the relationship between object, space and camera have always been the central issues in my work and in this project, paper takes the role of the mediator among those three components. I fold and manipulate a paper photograph to create dimensionality and to give the image new depth. Then I re-photograph the folded structures, leading to a new perception of the subject. Even though I control the vantage point, the negative space around the objects and the back sides that cannot be seen, my concerns are still sculptural.

Paper has been the main carrier of information for more than 2,000 years and today we are witnessing how it loses its position in favor of new electronic devices. Along with these changes our habits, traditions, and way of life are changing. Digitalization has touched nearly all areas of our contemporary life and the sphere of art and photography in particular. Architects visualize projects with photographic accuracy, painters reference photographs and sculptors use photography to be able to show their sculptures to the wider audience. Eventually we receive these different kinds of works as images online. What can we lose in this process of transition from paper to digital and what new possibilities can we gain? While contemporary society is enjoying the convenience of emails, business and banking online, and digitizing old archives, artists today are concerned with different forms of these changes. Some artists investigate how these changes affect the culture, and others are striving to hold on to the passing 'paper epoch' and the emotions, sensations and uses that are associated with this material. In her project *Mailer* Moyra Davey, for instance, plays with the almost forgotten ritual of sending telegrams and writing letters on paper. She prints her photographs on durable paper, folds them and mails them to family and friends. She then exhibit the photo-letters marked with tape, postage stamps and the traces of transit. Darren Harvey-Regan is interested in producing an interplay between the image and the world. In his work *The Halt* an axe

cuts into a photograph of the same axe. In another work, *Relation*, he partially slices a photograph of a saw, and the cut belongs equally to the photographic paper object and to the peeling blade of its contained image. Within his work he aims to create a sense of tactility where imagery becomes an object and asserts a presence.

Affirming concerns about the decline of paper, Vint Cerf, Google's vice-president, recently published an article warning that our generation is at risk of becoming forgotten. "Ancient civilizations suffered no such problems, because histories written in cuneiform on baked clay tablets, or rolled papyrus scrolls, needed only eyes to read them. To study today's culture, future scholars would be faced with PDFs, Word documents, and hundreds of other file types that can only be interpreted with dedicated software and sometimes hardware too, - he says, - we are nonchalantly throwing all of our data into what could become an information black hole without realizing it".⁶ For many artists paper becomes not only a reliable carrier of ideas, but also a source of inspiration. Paper will inevitably be more rare in our everyday experience, and as a result it will become increasingly more precious and important as a material for art.

Today, when more and more visual and written information has moved from the physical world into the virtual, this is nowhere more evident than in the medium of photography. The medium itself has changed, but also the way we experience the subject of the photograph. In my thesis I am expressing my thoughts about those changes. I use the language of architecture, which is intimate to me, and whose terms and symbols are universally understood. Using paper I create architectural constructions that can not exist in the real world, however, being physically present they prove that all we imagine can be seen and tactile. And this for me is the phenomenon of photography, it strengths make the invisible visible, the unspeakable or unnoticeable palpable, and sometimes the opposite: to make the solid fragile, the obvious mysterious and the universal

6 www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/feb/13google-boss-warns-forgotten-century-email-photos-vint-cerf

personal. In another sense, photography allows us to scratch beneath the surface, to look beyond what is seen. Through the subject of simple everyday objects photography speaks about the metaphysics of things, showing us not only how they look, but what they might connote, at least for the person who photographed them.

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