

*TAKING FLIGHT: Birds & Bicycles Berlin – Symposium  
At Zionskirche, Berlin on 9 November 2021*

REFLECTIONS ON PARADOXES OF FREEDOM

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Thinking about the paradoxes of freedom that are evident in the works shown in *Taking Flight: Birds & Bicycles. Berlin*, on show in MOMENTUM in the Kunstquartier Bethanien (4 September - 14 November 2021), and also about those recently evinced in the exhibition *Points of Resistance* in Berlin's Zionskirche (4-26 April 2021), I cast my mind back to 1999, a decade after Germany's reunification, when I opened, first in Stockholm then in Berlin and Budapest, the mega-exhibition *After the Wall. Art and Culture in post-Communist Europe* (curated by David Elliott, Bojana Pejić, and Iris Müller-Westermann). It was a time then still full of hope, and the aim of the show was to capture the energy and diversity of the new European culture that had emerged in the decade since the fall of the Berlin Wall (9 November 1989); hopefully, we wanted it to reveal a brave, newly "free", largely "unknown", world.

As usual, the clarity of the artists' vision hit this nail on the head: the managements may have changed, but the essentials of life had remained the same. In a veiled critique of the continuing conservatism of the art market, *In Old Legends Newly Tested* (1995), Lithuanian artist Audrius Novicka's "constructivist" sculpture, pithily reflected on the continuing ubiquity and inequity of poverty by presenting, like outstretched arms, an array of authentic, and empty, beggar's caps at the end of each of its struts.

Ukrainian artist, Arsen Savadov set his sights on the continuing class-war, sex-and-death vulgarity of new oligarchic regimes by staging a series of fashion shoots in which skimpily-clad young models posed in cemeteries where, to the consternation of mourners, burial services were still taking place. This was the harsh *verité* of a new order in which entrepreneurs appeared to have replaced apparatchiks.

Interior borders of prejudice, racism and *lèse majesté* were on the menu for Armenian artist Azat Sargsyan's performance *Welcome to the Wall* (1999) in which, clad in black with the word

“WELCOME” emblazoned down his body, he insisted that each visitor to the exhibition would have to step over his prone body to enter. The discomfort and unwillingness of many to do this were the point of the work.

The religious conflict of jihad, long experienced by the Soviet Union in its occupation of Afghanistan, was sardonically, and in our present context prophetically, universalised by the Russian collective AES[+F]’s *Islamic Project: Witnesses of the Future* (1996) in which large poster-sized, coloured photomontages imagined a reversal of history – a decaying modern world, peppered with mosques, camels and nomadic Taliban - in which the Reichstag’s-Norman-Foster-Dome had been converted into a mosque circled by minarets, and even the Statue of Liberty herself had covered her face with a niqab.

My reflections about these works today have been prompted by paradoxes – and hiatuses - of freedom that are now even more keenly, and wearily, expressed in art as the energetic ideals of that new age have floundered in a slough of “normality”. In a former ward of the old Bethanien hospital, where winged angels crown the capitals of its cast iron columns, *TAKING FLIGHT: Birds & Bicycles Berlin* is shown. Here, Russian artist Vadim Zhakharov’s first work, *An Exchange of Information with the Sun* (1978), exudes a spirit of tentative optimism. But today the future looks dark; in a found image overlaid with text, one of a series of recent works on the subject, a kitsch chubby baby gurgles under the assertion *I am Ready to be a Dictator!* (2021)

This idea is extended in Kirghiz artist Shaarbek Amankul’s short video *Lenin Stands – Lenin Fell Down* (2003) that captures the unconscious absurdities of the ideological “cleansing” that took place in many of the independent former Soviet Socialist Republics. Frozen floating mid-air at half-mast, the vast bronze sculpture of the father of Soviet Communism may seem to be on his way out, but he could just as easily rise again as the goosestepping guard of honour beneath him still continues to carry out their drill.

Exquisitely, the fragility of eggshells contrasts with the brutality of other materials in Russian artist, Alexei Kostroma’s paintings. Based on formal and numerical codes, these invoke new experiences, orders and progressions that suggest genetic advance as well as the negative possibilities of mutation. A similar impression emanates from Polish artist Dominik Lejman’s ceiling projection *60 Sec. Cathedral* (2011), recreating the geometry of the Norman architecture of the vaulted ceiling of Durham Cathedral in the UK. In this abstract distillation of a skydiving experience, free-falling figures coalesce, intertwine, dissolve, and then reform into intricate, organic spirals and loops. It is a celebration of both Christian architecture and its values, as well as of the molecular chromosomal structures that themselves form the origins of life.

In her staged operatic video performance *Loser [version 1]* (2012), Hungarian artist Hajnal Németh reiterates ridiculous statements taken from the confessional monologues of failed former political and business leaders in a form of musical recitative. In their naïve belief in power and ideology,

these characters may seem amusing, even pathetic, but their sense of entitlement cannot be discounted. Politicians and bankers similarly justify their actions and their lack of empathy and self-pity are almost the same. Looking back, it seems as if she hopes to cast a spell against such malevolence, but this paradoxically raises the possibility of its return.

*Allegoria Sacra* (2011-13), the third part of AES+F's *Liminal Space Trilogy* that, after "Heaven" and "Hell", addresses the subject of "Purgatory," features an airport waiting room as its central motif. Everyone there is in transit without destination; time stands still, a diversity of ethnicities and species abounds, yet everything is smothered by overwhelming sensations of exhaustion and lassitude. Not even the wonder of difference or diversity offers solace.

These, with other works in the exhibition, reinforce the realisation that it is not art or "things" that must change, but systems, mindsets, habits, senses of entitlement - in brief: the institutionalised conservatism of humanity, as well as its vision of itself.

Throughout its history, the Zionskirche has been a centre of resistance, and solace, to many opposing regimes. At a time when the pandemic temporarily suspended normality, the references of the works in *Points of Resistance* freely ranged from the specific to the global through different times and places. What brought them together was their sense of moral imperative, combined with a political and social need to preserve and promote difference as a fountainhead of creativity. *Birds & Bicycles*, however, adopts a metaphorical approach by examining ideas of freedom that focus on borders - mental and actual, physical and figurative – suggested in the earth-bound technology of the bicycle and the poetic symbol of birds in flight. In various ways these works reflect on the analogy of flight in different paradoxes of rooted mobility.

A number of the artists, such as AES+F, Zuzanna Janin, Via Lewandowski, Dominik Lejman and Milovan Marković, who appeared in *After the Wall*, were also shown in one of these two exhibitions, but no conscious link has been made between the three exhibitions. Twenty years on, these artists' positions may have changed but their sensibility remains largely the same. The modernist idea of progress, challenged by a few in the 1970s, '80s and '90s, is now widely recognised as an authoritarian extension of the Eurocentric Enlightenment that erodes narratives that are not its own. Colonialism too is now regarded as not only a historical phenomenon, but also as a continuing mindset that still moulds culture, society and even globalisation itself. But in spite of the evidence, many people, and places (China and Russia for example) are still in denial of this and regard such observations as both empty and futile.

Most striking, though, is the increasingly visible paradox that runs throughout all three exhibitions: that any idea of universal freedom is automatically impeded by the proliferation of individually conflicting freedoms. Total freedom, of course, is an impossible ideal; to have any meaning at all, it has to be relative. Yet, too often, fanned by Culture Wars and Identity Politics, neo-liberal ideas of freedom have implicitly depended on the subjugation of the freedom of others whether through

political, economic, or extra-legal channels. Racism, engendered by nationalism, or colonialism, are established world-wide models for this behaviour but, on a smaller scale, anti-vaxxers or anti-gun control activists who try to assert their “freedoms” to the detriment of others may be found almost everywhere.

The tide of neo-liberal globalisation that followed the Cold War evoked a crisis within democracies (old and new) occasioned by fear of an overbearing state on one hand, and of wide governmental responsibilities on the other. In the USA and the UK, at least, the triumphalism of western democracy at this time unleashed an orgy of capitalist libertarianism in which the global benefits of “victory” remained illusory because they were not democratically shared. In such a world, the past replicates the present in order to intuit the future, and change is largely cosmetic: the result has been a fragmented social mess which, increasingly since the 2008 world financial crisis, has polarised politics, retrenched economics, and widely despoiled the environment. All this has been underwritten by widespread poverty, particularly in the global South.

For many, uniformity is the handmaiden of “normality,” but for others it is a nightmare. Whether in politics, culture, or economics, it results from mass thinking, mass production, and mass manipulation, increasingly via social media. In politics, so-called free, democratic parties crave the uniform desires of increasingly overwhelming majorities to keep themselves in power. They differ from one-party state dictatorships, that use government as a means of control, by fetishizing individual liberties to the detriment of any idea of a forward-looking, responsible government which may be held accountable for its actions. Instead, bolstered by the commercial dogma of privatisation, they default to the presumed, often corrupt, efficiency of the “free” market while saving on the costs of reactive, effective infrastructure.

In such an uneven world, opportunities abound. While history may be written to confirm that human nature conspires either to corrupt or destroy, the opposite is also proven by our undeniable, supreme creativity. As a result, within many democracies, a barely taxed, super-wealthy minority has flourished, untrammelled, often assisted, by “fake news” to protect, in the name of “freedom”, that which is in fact its complete opposite. In post-communist autocracies oligarchic entrepreneurs were also welcomed but “taxed” and their companies enlisted by the authorities for their “freedom” to exist. Without political options, the public survives as best it can in another zone, acknowledging that all news is, to some extent, fake. But both systems acknowledge the same basic truths: the political, social, cultural, and environmental costs of their “freedoms” will be widely spread, while any income accruing from them will remain firmly concentrated.

Berlin, an international Colossus straddling the geo-historical-political fault line between East and West, with an airport legendary for its disfunctionality, is a capital city of many different aspects. It too is redolent with paradox: palaces for both Emperors and the People have been erected here – and destroyed – even to be rebuilt – in a constant recalibration of memory and time. A centre of government, philosophy, culture, and learning, it has also engendered some of humanity’s darkest



acts but now honestly acknowledges their gravity and horror in its museums, monuments, plaques, and pavements. But the ghosts must remain.

Looking forward, it seems as if Berlin could be an object lesson in “freedom” because it harbours the worst and the best of all possible worlds. But will this alone be good enough to change anything? Should we not try to achieve instead an inevitably imperfect but “good enough” freedom *for all*? In an imperfect world, is the very idea of working towards such an ideal both futile and bound to be thwarted?

Whatever the outcome, as reflectors, vectors, dynamos or sumps, the arts will play an important part; but although they may well accuse, enlighten, amuse, delight - or perhaps even enrage – it is the people, not the arts, that will hold us to account.