

Mikhail Ryklin
The Collapse of the Statues
or What Can & What Cannot Be Buried?

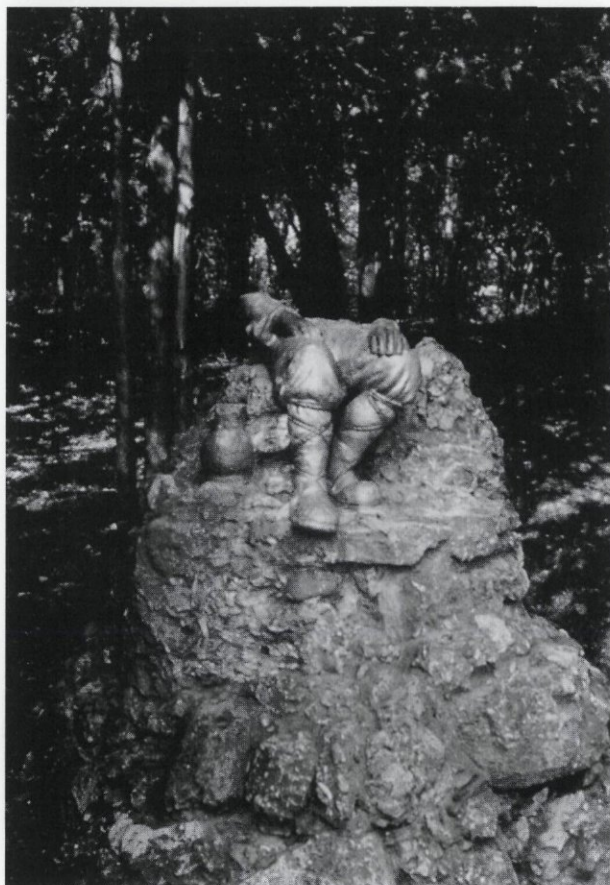
The Soviet Union provides an example of a state that, for more than seventy years, carried out a distinct policy of representation, i.e. it controlled and decorated public spaces according to a plan. Initially, Lenin signed the decree »On the Monuments of the Republic« on April 12, 1918. It is not accidental that the founder of the first socialist state valued monumental propaganda so much – more than 80% of the population was at the time illiterate, so that, along with cinema, monuments seemed crucial for the reeducation of the masses in a new socialist spirit.

In the thirties, under Stalin, monumental propaganda acquired a more illusionary dimension, especially with the Palace of the Soviets, which was supposed to have been built near the Kremlin and to surpass it in its size and decor. It was so huge that the architects failed to build it. Instead, seven skyscrapers were erected in Moscow after the war which still dominate the city and remind us of the unfulfilled dream of communism.



Throughout Soviet rule, there existed a list of leaders whose images were first to be immortalized by well-known sculptors and then copied and dispersed (in *replicas*) all over the country. Lenin invariably remained at the top of the list. Stalin also remained number one for about thirty years followed by Sverdlov, Dzerzhinsky, Kalinin, Voroshilov, Frunze and other other, less distinguished personalities. Each new reign, up to Gorbachev's, was, as a rule, accompanied by the destruction of monuments honouring the immediate predecessor as well as the whole visual and literary archive, including books, albums, etc. It happened to Stalin and his condemned comrades under Khrushchev. At the beginning of the Brezhnev era Khrushchev shared the same fate.

It seems that Soviet society aspired more to oblivion than to memory, scrapping most of its monuments instead of storing them, like many other societies do. I vividly remember how, in the early sixties, in the Crimea, I



witnessed as a child the »execution« of a Stalin statue: a bulldozer pulled up and instantly it dragged the former god away, a hoop over its neck.

So, there was a kind of continuity in what took place in Moscow in August 1991, after the *coup d'état* had failed, that is in the demolition of the statues which were toppled from their pedestals. The difference, however, should not be underestimated because this time it was the crowd that resorted to the acts of violence against the monuments without any instructions from above.

I cannot resist the temptation to quote a passage from an essay of mine written the next day after the *coup*:

A secure old age was certainly not to be the destiny of many Stalin-era statues. Those who were in downtown Moscow on August 22, 1991, could witness agitated iconoclasts chipping pieces off the pedestals of the overthrown monuments to Dzerzhinsky and Sverdlov, throngs of people posing at the feet of former citadels.

Those were the days of the downfall of statues. The goal of the crowd that attacked the statue was clear; to allow the totalitarian spaces of Moscow to acquire a new aesthetic status, to become, irreversibly, spaces of exposition. Unsuccessful »rainmakers« during a drought, these idols were humiliated, knocked down and secretly dumped up in the backyard of some garage. Destruction, as we know, is the highest form of worship; it is not just an expression of moral illiteracy but of an unresolved feeling of guilt spilling out and clamoring for immediate victims.

On Dzerzhinsky Square without Dzerzhinsky and on Sverdlov Square without Sverdlov, I physically sensed that now, from this moment on, every one of us had become an agent of terror. The internalisation of guilt was complete; that is why the crowd itself assumed repressive functions. On the empty pedestals reigned the final, non-anthropomorphic referent of Terror, the people itself.

The Sverdlov monument was the hang-out for the the mute. In total silence, the mutes had climbed onto the pillar and chipped off chunks of stone. The crowbars sent sparks flying.

The exultation was chilling. (Ryklin 1992:49)

After the events of August 1991 an international team of artists inspired by the New-York-based founders of Sots-art Komar & Melamid, came up with the idea of temporarily transforming Moscow, or at least a section of it, into a »garden of totalitarian sculpture«. It would have given the artists the possibility of turning the sculptures into a kind of history lesson, performing on them, for instance, turning them upside down, painting on their surface, enacting their destruction and so on. In fact, artists were urged to »behave like angels« without being such. The question that naturally arises is as fol-

lows: are we sufficiently removed from the age of Terror to play innocently with its referents? Is it not an obvious narcissistic attitude that holds the artists within the confines of the imaginary?

These doubts are justified and shared by many art historians. Let me make reference to one of them, F.S. Licht:

On the face of it, the idea is admirable. It neutralizes the monuments potentially damaging propaganda while salvaging the monuments' themselves, conferring on them an archival status. It also produces a spate of new works. And yet there remains a nagging doubt: is emasculation by aestheticisation as defensible as it seems to be?... Can we justify our right to deal with the monuments of a past epoch in such a high-handed manner? Are we sufficiently free of fanaticisms, of the hypocrisies and manipulatory strategies that lie behind the monuments to point an accusing finger?... Monuments have behind them impulses of generosity that cannot be utterly discounted... (Licht 1995:55)

There is another problem that remains unresolved, thus making any possible »garden of totalitarian sculpture« desperately incomplete. I have in mind the fact that at the very top of the Soviet hierarchy of stone, bronze and marble monuments, indeed crowning them, there is a mummy, the »undead« body of Lenin, and this »monument of monuments«, providing for them their very possibility, still lies in the Mausoleum in the Red Square. It is there despite the fact that since 1991 the Damocles' sword of destruction has been hanging over it (or, if one prefers, he) too.

Komar and Melamid themselves do not even doubt the key importance of the mummy; in their letter to the President of Russia they playfully propose to incorporate it in their project:

For us, the most important monument is Lenin's mausoleum. We propose adding a mere three letters - 'ISM' - to the leader's name. So doing, we would save this 20-century masterpiece and transform it into a symbolic grave of Leninist theory and practice. Perhaps pink flamingos could be allowed to wander about the tribunal from which the leaders greeted people on the state holidays. (Komar & Melamid 1995:5)

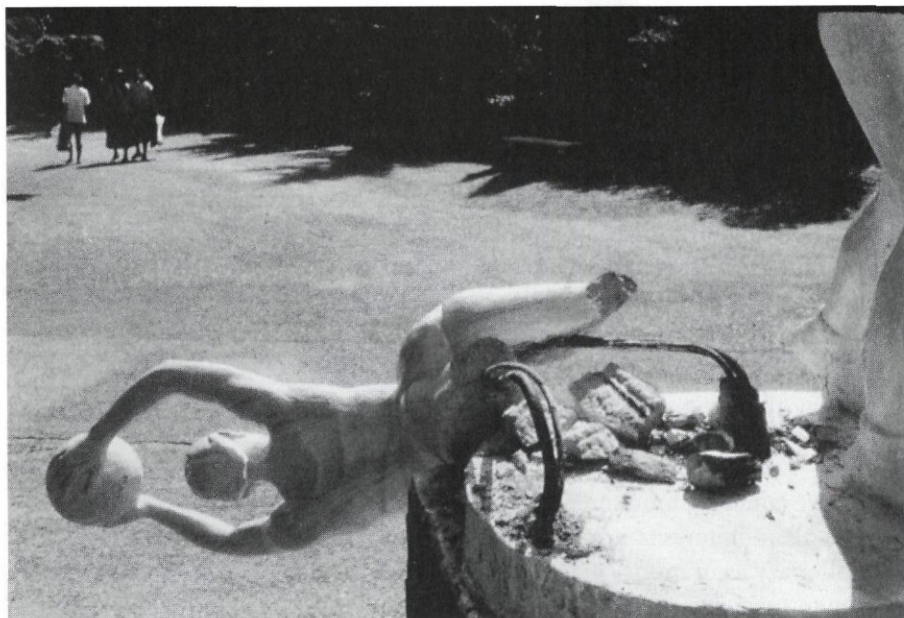
They are not the only ones who believe in the crucial role of Lenin's body for the whole mythology of communism. Some emphasize it even more strongly. V. Todorov, for example, writes:

Although justified by science, pre-planned and pre-rationalized, communism had to be authorized by allegorical images, visions, ceremonies, monuments. In its center was laid the mummy of the leader...The mummy is the

materialized spectre of communism which advertises its imaginary space; it is its real political body. If the teaching of the leader is the rational motive of communism then his corpse is its irrational one. Thus communism transformed both the rational and the irrational into a political mode of life, where both coincide. (Todorov 1993:252-253)

If we earnestly accept these statements, they will force us to recognize that while Lenin's dead body remains where it was, communism is still in its place, even though less essential communist *insignia* had undergone destruction. It means that we are not allowed to »behave like angels« in relation to the material remnants of the past. Trying to »behave like angels«, engaging ourselves in a playful demolition of the left-overs of the previous period of history, we do nothing else but reproduce the vicious circle of violence inherited from it.

In other words, the time is not yet ripe for »the garden of totalitarian sculpture« to be created in Moscow. Although rumors constantly circulate in the Russian press about the necessity of burying Lenin like a Christian and the leader himself is quoted as having said that he would like to be buried near his mother's tomb, the mummy is still in its shrine and one cannot say whether communism, like Kafka's hunter Grachus, is alive or dead. At least its definitive, its final burial is constantly adjourned until a later time which fails to come.



I do not share the view of those who believe that, once Lenin's mummified corpse finds its last abode, everything else will automatically change, and the transition will be seen as completed. Moreover, nothing will change before we change ourselves enough to let »the dead bury their dead« without disturbing our lives to the present extent.

In his book on Marx Jacques Derrida uses the word »*hantologie*« to define *la science des revenants*, the science of phantoms, ghosts, shadows and other ephemeral phenomena whose main property is to haunt, returning from beyond the grave. »Good« ghosts may at any moment become »bad« ones, as has recently happened to Lenin.

But statues are not ghosts, they are neither good nor bad, instead, if we do not imbue them with our own pathos, they are neutral. The capacity to become excited by them belongs to us and not to them. Once we recognize them as *neutral* witnesses and learn to bear their glance, they will become completely harmless, devoid of either »impulses of generosity« or »natural depravity«. What has brought them to life is one thing, whereas statues are quite another. They have nothing to do with the bitter fact that somebody's past has not yet turned into »past perfect«, *un fait accompli*. A witty person once remarked that theft is the best compliment one can pay to a thing: in much the same way demolition is the best declaration of love, dependence and guilt in relation to things demolished. This urge is rooted in us, it is not theirs, and the only cure is simply to become aware of the logic of the situation.

In the final account, monuments belong to an immense family of neutral mnemonic traces and in that capacity they can be arbitrarily ascribed the qualities of being either revolutionary or reactionary (depending on who judges). But glorified or debased, in due time they start to resemble each other. Some believe that democracy is in principle incompatible with monumental commemorations but that does not prevent democracies from erecting monuments. If we single out monuments separating them – as self-contained entities – from other traces, we shall be at a loss thinking of how to get rid of them:

...we cannot but deplore the monumental mode. Yet much as we hate, fear or mock monuments, it seems we cannot do without them...we inadvertently erect monuments of our own. (Licht 1995:57)

If we conceive monuments as unavoidable traces, it will make little sense to say »all monuments are reactionary« or »by definition they are against revolutionary aspirations« or, on the contrary, »they contribute to the progress of humanity«.



Traces are by nature different from the manner in which they may be defined, they repeat themselves before any definition whatsoever and are still interchangeable within it.

However, *revenons à nos moutons*. Russian politicians do not pay much attention to the monuments of the Soviet epoch. Some of them remain where they were, others have either ceased to exist or are kept in storage spaces. Any comparison with *nazi* symbols does not hold true, for communism suffered no military defeat with its habitual consequence – a formal prohibition on the part of the winners on the display of the symbols of the conquered enemy. In our case the Russian people has to cope all by itself with its positive and negative memories, its reactions ranging from adoration to destruction, from »joyful irresponsibility« to evident figures of guilt. It happens some-



times that statues are involved in this process as hostages, witnesses or in some other similar capacity.

The situation is much like the one from a story told by Walter Benjamin in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. What I have in mind is the opening story about an automaton that never lost a single game of chess. But the real player was hidden behind »a system of mirrors« and »guided the puppet's hand by means of strings« (Benjamin 1969:253). It was »a little hunchback (Zwerg)« who responded to each of his opponent's moves with a countermove. Benjamin continues:

One can imagine a philosophical counterpart of this device. The puppet called 'historical materialism' is to win all the time.
(Benjamin 1969:253)

From his Moscow trip in 1926-1927 Benjamin knew what kind of game was played behind the screen under the name of historical materialism and whose personal interest was a factor in transforming privileged »little hunchbacks« into a neutral »system of mirrors« posing as automatic historical necessity. From 1991 on, since the time the *USSR enacted its own disappearance*, it has become clear that it was not a materialist automaton constantly winning, but that dwarfs or hunchbacks guided its lucky hand. Having destroyed the »system of mirrors creating the illusion that the table was transparent from all sides« (Benjamin 1969:253) they emerged – well, not as former hunchbacks, but as ... experts in a new game of capitalism. They are the first to hate the dirty tricks that permitted old hunchbacks to win; they are leading others to a new, no less radiant future, the outlines of which are already discernible behind a new system of mirrors that is claimed to ensure true transparency, this time without deceiving anyone. And it is hard to prove that these characters are the same »little hunchbacks« from Benjamin's tale, for nobody saw them emerging from behind »a puppet in Turkish attire« as clandestine chess players. As for the former *system of mirrors*, they tell everyone that it became quite rotten naturally through expecting one good kick to collapse. They themselves, of course, were the those who gave the first kick.

These are just well-known *ruses* on the part of those who want to cross out their past. What is really important is the fact that the little old hunchback did not lose a single game of chess to the other, more expert player. He lost at best to historical necessity, the nature of which remains to be defined.

The idea of »a garden of totalitarian sculpture« (considered by both the Moscow authorities and international artists in 1992-1993) has yet another drawback: it encompasses a small group of *elite* Moscow monuments, a kind

of statuesque *nomenklatura*; made of bronze and marble they were meant to last for centuries. But during more than seventy years of its existence monumental propaganda has produced millions of such statues, busts, mosaics and *bas-reliefs*. In most cases their destruction is not ideologically motivated and results from bad climatic conditions, spontaneous acts of barbarism on the part of the local populace (made mostly of clay and plaster, they are easily destroyed) and a whole range of other unpredictable circumstances including natural decay. They seal the fate of the socialist visual archive in a way that no articulated position or deliberately chosen attitude does.

There are artists who try to document the process of decay at the grass-roots level travelling all over the country. A vivid example of a modest and yet essential effort of the kind is provided by the Moscow photographer Igor Mukhin whose extensive project known as »*Empty spaces*« carried out persistently for several years (since the late eighties) aims at preserving the remaining traces of what used to be one of the biggest plastic archives on Earth. He collected a considerable body of evidence testifying to the actual state of the archive and dismissed a largely shared illusion that what really matters is nothing but Lenin's mummy and a number of related monuments.

Another of Mukhin's discoveries is the mainly apolitical nature of decay, as distinguished from deliberate destruction or decreed demolition. Millions of gypsum young pioneers with drums or trumpets and girls with oars simply decompose in parks, squares and elsewhere because of the lack of public interest, poor maintenance etc. It does not matter in whose honour they were erected; Pushkin, the eternal favorite of the Russian public, equally praised by Dostoevsky and by Zhdanov, is sharing now the fate of numerous Gorkys, Unknown Soldiers and Motherland images of. Hardships currently suffered by the people make them indifferent to the remnants of the past; as for the State, it is notorious for its lack of resources and inability to cover even the basic needs.

Most of my compatriots possess a superficial impression of living in such a hurry that they simply have no time for the rites of mourning. Perhaps, however, they live like that precisely because of a constant mourning, so deep and suppressed in them that they simply cannot allow themselves to notice it? They suffer badly from »*the present moment*« perceived and described by most of them as something unheard – of and unique.

But they are mistaken. Benjamin once remarked that the lower classes permanently live in a state of emergency which is the only *etat de la nature* known to them. In this respect Russian history is hopelessly repetitious.

In his *Russian Journal* John Steinbeck recalls a game that was popular among the American journalists in Moscow in the late forties: somebody

read out a text declaring, for instance, that Russians were afraid to meet foreigners because they were constantly watched after by the police, that they »refused to answer any questions on their life« and so on. But how, exclaimed a correspondent, evidently a new-comer, are you hoping to get it through the censorship, you will simply not be allowed! A burst of general laughter followed, for the text in question happened to be written in the 17-th century by, say, a Dutch merchant or an Italian ambassador.

The vicious circle of the same, of what is supposed to be the same seems to give memory no chance, it erases, deletes everything as always-already having taken place. The inscription automatically becomes a palimpsest and is doomed to fall victim to the next inscription and so on. Or, to put it differently, too much of a presence creates a gap, an enormous absence under the dictatorship of »present moment«.

Can one be a historian of the potential? The answer to this question is crucial for everyone who studies the archives of the Revolution or of other no less violent events. For it may happen that archives contain more blanks than information, and who can guarantee that what one takes for information has not been many times sifted, rarefied, if not indeed annulled? The notion of a zero archive does not at all seem too extravagant with respect to such events. The question then would be: how does one deal with proteic beings who regularly suppress their past?

By being a witnesses to an absence, to the loss of memory (mostly an ontological loss that does not involve oblivion or forgetfulness, but is, perhaps, the only form of survival for catastrophic events). By memorizing the immemorial, by reading texts that were written in order not to leave traces, being such traces themselves. By reading them, so to say, against the grain, *à rebours*. Then we shall probably see how the revolutionary *arches* transform themselves into traces, strange ones, no doubt, but still traces, belonging to a whole family.

Gathering traces is not the same thing as taking a stance or systematically explaining something. Benjamin's »Moscow Diary« is itself the best example of how to assemble traces without providing their systematic explanation or, in other words, a theory. From the very beginning of his stay in Moscow, then the epicenter of the Great Revolution, he keeps repeating that »the present moment« here is so charged with unpredictable possibilities that an outsider must refrain from judging. Several times he calls Moscow »an impregnable fortress« and, unable to pass a verdict, confines himself to the closest possible observation. Here is a quotation from his letter to his friend, sculptress Julia Radt, sent to her from Moscow:

I cannot assess all of this; basically, the situation here enables and requires one to take on a position within it ... from an outside, all you can do is observe it. It is totally impossible to predict what's going to come of all this in Russia. Perhaps a truly socialist community, perhaps something entirely different. The battle that is going to decide this is still in progress. (Benjamin 1985:127)

This passage draws a distinction between collecting traces (Benjamin himself was a collector, and the list of things he bought in Moscow, mostly hand-made objects, is truly impressive), observing things from the outside and taking a position or theorizing the situation that he deems fundamentally uncertain both from within and from without. As Derrida remarks in his text *Back from Moscow, in the USSR* written in 1990 after his first voyage to Moscow, the »phenomenological motive« in the »Moscow Diary« is inseparable from the fact that here, in this particular place, i.e. in postrevolutionary Moscow, each fact is always-already a theory (Derrida 1995:74-75). A hermeneutics, as it is practiced elsewhere, is always blocked here by the privilege of »the present moment«, unique to the degree of becoming totally unclear and thus undecipherable. Phenomena brought into being by the Revolution are too extreme to be seized by normal means.

Despite such facts as Benjamin's unfortunate love, his unborn child and the unfulfilled revolutionary promise, Derrida insists on the irreducible na-



ture of his *Diary* as a collection of traces in its own right. This text along with other texts is the only remnant and survivor of his stay at the epicentre of the World Revolution (Derrida 1995:74-94).

I took this example in order to show that the uniqueness of »the present moment« is a recurrent theme in Russian history, so that we should not entertain any illusions concerning the epistemological privilege of *our own* present moment and the status of some »unheard-of« that we arbitrarily ascribe to it. By doing so we simply rationalize our traumas.

For this is the main reason why, not without some hesitation, Derrida finally refused to equate *perestroyka* (which almost literally means »deconstruction«) with deconstruction proper: *perestroyka* is a promise postponed until some more or less remote and hazy »after«, it is imbued with potentiality, it points to still another kind of radiant future, whereas deconstruction deals with traces of something that has already happened, that has definitely taken place. The combination »presence-absence«, with inevitable reversibility it entails, cannot directly be applied to traces that are irreversibly there. Nothing is more human than our desire to go beyond traces, nothing is less possible than that.

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All photos are from Igor Mukhin's project »Empty Spaces«.