

CURATING THE VOID OF COLLAPSED MACHINERY

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In the Gallery an officer's garmenture is crowned with a feathered mask. Portraits of colonial masters and laboring slaves hang alongside images of machines that grind and extract. A stack of mattresses recalls aspects of Kafka's thematic oeuvre. The collection of artifacts displayed in the room suggests a memorial to an historic trial or perhaps the staging of a theatrical scene where some grand injustice is about to unfold. A rope awaits the fettering of limbs. Witnesses to the torture event look on from within their frames. Paradoxically, the more evidence I strive to examine, the further removed I am from reaching a singular view of the exhibit. A ladder rests against a wall inviting the always possible escape, which is rarely ever taken.

Walter Benjamin referred to Kafka's work as "an ellipse with foci that are far apart."¹ The writing is replete with fissures, wounds and ruptures which illuminate variations of the separation motif: the arbitrary nature of the law, alienation from authority, the culture of exile. In *The Penal Colony* takes this theme of dislocation to an obscene climax when the machine of the story disintegrates. As the animated gears scatter a kind of double wound erupts, repre-

sented by the fatal blow to the officer's skull but also the space vacated by the machine's departure. One imagines what the villagers might do with this site, if anything? What mnemonic potential is contained within the machine's absence? Memory, it would seem, may give way to superstition as we acknowledge the explorer's silence as he reads the inscription on the Commandant's gravestone. "Have faith and wait!"—a prophecy the villagers find ridiculous.²

Weeks after seeing *The Insurance Man: Kafka in the Penal Colony* I travelled to Berlin. Ruins, excavations, monuments and memorials mark the landscape at every turn. Berlin is a living archive, a national gallery of failed totalitarian dreams. The Berlin Wall was the progeny of Kafka's machine, a mad instrument of judgment and condemnation. The Wall, in fact, was a kind of vertical Bed with layers of apparatus to thwart escape: an inner Wall, barbed wire, electric fences, a dog corridor, control towers, alarms, anti-tank obstacles, a fakir bed (essentially an area embedded with raised spikes), and finally the outer Wall that marked the boundary between East and West Berlin. The effect of the Wall was to create a form of self-colonization—to preserve the paranoid fantasy of the ideal state.

The Wall produced its own expressions of the animalized human. By scurrying, climbing, ramming, burrowing or taking flight, many managed to flee successfully and yet hundreds were wounded and killed as they sought a way out of the state apparatus. Sections of the Wall and the gears that constituted the death corridor sprung off during the years after reunification. Pieces of the Wall were dispersed across oceanic divides while other sections have been aestheticized as *objets d'art*. Like the Machine in the story, the collapse of the Wall has created a negative space with a multitude of readings; it is a scar, an emancipatory event, a place of remembering, longing, forgetting. As with the empty lot in *The Penal*

1 Walter Benjamin, "Some Reflections on Kafka," in *Illuminations- Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 141

2 Franz Kafka, "In the Penal Colony," in *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p.167

Colony, the question of reclamation arises—giving rise to the problem of what to do—what is the zoning potential of space named the “death strip”? How do planners curate the void of collapsed machinery?

In places the Wall is maintained as a memorial, elsewhere it is a trace distinguished as a line of masonry in the pavement. Along certain sections, the banks of the Spree River and facades of other buildings absorb the Wall seamlessly. With disbelief I came across evidence of a different kind of rezoning of the Wall-machine void. In Prenzlauer Berg a showroom for a housing development had been constructed within the Wall corridor, metres from an apartment building where in 1961 residents flung themselves out of third-story windows to reach West Berlin on the street below. The developer’s slogan on the hoarding read, “Your New Home, WITHOUT COMPROMISES!” Further along the Wall in the Kreuzberg district the Fellini Residences were being sold under a similar premise, “You do not have to die to arrive in paradise. You have it right on your doorstep.” The Wall has become the final frontier of post-colonial Berlin.

Kafka insisted on exploring those dissonant pauses that linger in human relations, urban spaces and the rule of the law—in order to make such voids visible. In turn, the Installation extends the memory of the machine as it responds to its absence. As with the Condemned man of the story, who remains condemned after his temporary reprieve, the Wall in Berlin remains embedded in the psychic-self of the city. The city is condemned to continuously re-invent itself and re-build its empty spaces and historic wounds. And yet it would appear that with reunification, in true Kafka style, many Berliners have been left behind to suffer the same fate as displaced and confused villagers elsewhere. Viewing the Wall as an extended metaphor of the story it is evident that speculative forces have been re-colonizing the city and the effect is dizzying.

Interviewed twenty years after the collapse of the Wall a former border guard reflects on his memory of the collapse of the Wall:

*“I wouldn’t wish that on anyone. I more or less fell into a deep depression. I didn’t want to go home. I stayed in the barracks. Everyone else had left. I stayed until the end. I didn’t do anything, just stayed in bed [...] I drank beer and stared at the sky.”*³

3 CBC, “Berlin, 20 Years After”, November 6th, 2009