

## STIMULATING RUINS – CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS' RESPONSES TO DECAY

CONTEMPORARY RUINS / RUINEN DER GEGENWART  
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Romantic views of gradually dilapidated classical temples, sorrowful visions of sudden destructions caused by earthquakes and tsunamis, critically melancholic renderings of the scenery with fragmented architecture of run-down malls and unused factories, terrifying depictions of war wreckage partially covering distorted human bodies... Ruins follow us – they regularly appear on our news screens, making it impossible to escape facing the fact of continuous destruction happening today all around the globe. At the same time, though, the ruin-interest or “ruinlust” is very high nowadays. Besides the intensive media coverage, many books as well as thematic issues of journals and magazines aim to analyse various aspects of decay. Special art projects, photo series and thematic exhibitions – including the one of which accompanying book is reviewed here – display artistic responses to the convoluted set of questions connected to ruination. Numerous visitors queue up not only to enjoy the ancient archaeological sites, but also to discover relatively recent, few decades old, constructions that start to fall into decay, in order to observe their initial decay, before they are either torn down or saved through restoration or finance-oriented and gentrified modernisation.

It is fashionable to explain this fashion, and to justify the current interest in ruins and decay with the insecurity in the world today. Social and political tensions, especially their tragic result and aftermath, can easily be symbolised by ruins – hence the increased interest in derelict edifices may also indicate the general and high state of worry in many of us. In the Preface – written by Monika Schnetkamp and Andreas Fiedler – of the present volume we can even read: “It is said that in times of change, artists tend to turn their attention to the motif of the ruin. It therefore comes as no surprise that the ruin fantasies of European artists have

quite often been inspired by political incidents.” (p. 6), after which the authors draw a parallel between the French Revolution and Hubert Robert’s paintings, as well as the political turmoil of the globalised present, and the massive load of various ruins and their renderings. Fortunately, however, neither Schnetkamp and Fiedler, nor the other authors in the book, simplify the issue to this singular aspect. They are aware of the temporality as well as the temporally changing reasons of the ruin-interest. Exactly because the ruin as object, phenomenon, and symbol is so complex, every period found aspects and ways of reading it that made decaying constructions both intellectually and aesthetically fascinating. As known, already in Antiquity, ruins served as poignant reminders of the fading of even the best men’s achievements. During the Renaissance’s rediscovery of ancient cultures, ruins often became open-air source books for research and better understanding of antique architectural and aesthetic principles. In the 18th century, the purpose of ruins in landscape gardens – both original and artificial or fake ones – was to provide a picturesque background element in the scenery, but from their auxiliary role they soon turned to be protagonists in Romanticism: The often dramatic depictions of crumbling constructions did not only serve the increasing sense of belonging and of national identity, but also provided striking visual materials for aesthetic and critical reflections on the transiency of life. After this, perhaps not surprisingly, in the future-obsessed Modernism, the investigation and incorporation of ruins sometimes played an important role in architectural discourse and practice, while obviously in Postmodernism, they continued to radiate their symbolic and aesthetic energy with full capacity.

The bilingual volume in question – titled *Contemporary Ruins / Ruinen der Gegenwart* – was published on the occasion of a double exhibition bearing the same title, on view throughout summer and winter of 2017-2018 in KAI10 Arthena Foundation in Düsseldorf and KINDL Zentrum für zeitgenössische Kunst in Berlin. The selection focused on the productions of ten artists: Dorothee Albrecht, Morehshin Allahyari, Francis Alÿs, Katya Gardea Browne, Clemens Botho Goldbach, Arata Isozaki, Gordon Matta-Clark, Ryuji Miyamoto, Marike Schuurman, and Manit Sriwanichpoom, hence creators from the last half century, though a dominant part of the artworks comes from the recent years. Among the pieces we can find a wide array of approaches that efficiently prove that, in the contemporary art production, ruins can be interpreted just as broadly as throughout their entire reception history so far.

The selection of works inspired by ruination and decay thus includes pieces that depart from “classical ruins”, in the double sense, i.e. they show the well-known classical Graeco-Roman and Middle Eastern sites, and classical also because their ruination is caused by the “classical” reason of the simple passing of a large amount of time that provides the time-frame for natural elements to slowly erode the edifice. Apart from this natural ruination, however, other artists in the exhibitions were focusing on edifices of cities suddenly ruined by either Nature – through earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes etc. – or by human aggression, including war bombings, terror attacks, or intentional violent eradication of material forms of cultural history. Another group of works critically analysed the ruins of unfinished buildings: those constructions that stand as reversed monuments, as dilapidated warning signs of the investment boom, and that, at the arrival of the financial crisis, were thus left abandoned.

A further crucial and currently extremely relevant question that is analysed both in the introductory essays and throughout some of the works is related to the relationship of the ruin and the human body. As Julia Höner writes: “Bodies and ruins belong together. Not only is the body like «a ruin in progress» – being pre-programmed for decomposition – but both the body and the ruin are also comparable when one applies concepts from architecture and psychology.” (p. 23). This again proves that the contemporary ruin-interest is not “simply” aesthetically and (art) historically driven but connects us to questions of our own existence and prospects, on a personal as well as collective level.

Therefore, given the many different approaches to decay, at the end this volume is not (only) a catalogue documenting and highlighting the works exhibited on the previous shows, but more than that: a summary of the current issues of ruination and intentional ruining, of deleting and disappearing. Those interested in any of these phenomena and their appearance in contemporary art can read the book as a concise survey. After the two introductory essays (“*Contemporary Ruins*” by Ludwig Seyfarth and the aforementioned “*Bodies in Ruin*” by Julia Höner) ten mini-essays follow, written by different authors, analysing the art pieces of the exhibitors, and often contextualising them in the larger oeuvre of the artist. This naturally results in dissimilar types of texts, some focusing more on a unique group of works, while others trying to provide the reader with an overall understanding of the artists’ approaches, methods, and ideas. And, just like throughout the whole book, sometimes even on the singular

artist's level, the polyvalent questions and perspectives of ruination can be synthesised. For example, in Thomas Burlon's essay on Arata Isozaki, the examination of the Japanese architect's work includes references ranging from Albert Speer's theory on the "Ruinenwert" (Ruin value) to Robert Smithson's concept of the "Ruins in Reverse". Besides the references mentioned in Burlon's text, another automatically comes to one's mind. Given the nature of Isozaki's pieces, i.e. rendering his own design plans for the Tsukuba Centre in the form of ruins, one can easily think of Hubert Robert's well-known Louvre series too, that are also mentioned in other essays in the book. This is just one example of how the wide-spanning survey of the classical viewpoints, modern topics, and contemporary approaches are inspiringly interwoven – just like in the case of the actual ruins themselves, where, as it often happens, the multiple temporal layers embedded in the history of the (former) building glue the crumbling, although still aesthetically valuable, construction together.

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