

A letter from Ory Dessau to Zlatko Kopljär on the occasion of the work “K19”

Artist Zlatko Kopljär was invited to present his vertical-rectangular brick structures in the circular space of The Barrel Gallery in Zagreb. The structures are made with a particular kind of bricks, manufactured during World War Two in Jasenovac camp, outside Zagreb, by prisoners. After the war the people from the surrounding villages were taking those bricks and used them as building blocks for their houses. Eventually, Kopljär decided to keep the space of the gallery empty and constructed the structures, brick by brick, in front of the building, around the fountain. The following text is written in the form of a personal letter, which I delivered to Kopljär on the evening of the opening.

Dear Zlatko, I decided to write you this personal letter because I cannot simply inhabit a critical external stance in relation to your work. When it comes to **K19**, being a Jewish Israeli, third generation of survivors, makes it impossible for me to judge and interpret it from the outside. My thoughts are moving around and go back and forth to many different directions, when associated with your **K19**, which I find ethical as much as conceptual, a personal gesture as much as a theoretical gesture. One of the directions my thoughts go through includes a story I want to share with you on architect Louis Kahn and his 1968 revolutionary proposal for the restoration of the ruined **Hurva Synagogue** in the Jewish quarter of old Jerusalem, a proposal that was never put into effect, that remained a pure concept. **The Hurva Synagogue** was founded in the early 18th century by followers of Judah he-Hasid and was destroyed by Muslims a few years later in 1721. The plot lay in ruins for over 140 years and became known as the Ruin, or **Hurva** in Hebrew. In 1864, the Perushim, a local Jewish sect, rebuilt the synagogue, and although officially named the **Beit Yaakov Synagogue**, it retained its name as the **Hurva**, the ruin. It became Jerusalem's main Ashkenazi synagogue, until it was deliberately destroyed by the Arab Legion after the withdrawal of the Israeli forces during the 1948 Arab–Israeli War.

After Israel captured East Jerusalem from Jordan in 1967, a number of plans were submitted to the Municipality of Jerusalem for the design of a new building for the synagogue. One of the rejected submissions was delivered by Louis Kahn, the Estonia born Jewish American Architect, known for a specific kind of monumental buildings. Kahn's proposal was rejected by Teddy Kolek, the famous mayor of Jerusalem, because it did not fit the heroic narrative the Jewish Israeli authorities wanted to tell. Kahn's vision for the restoration relied on leaving the synagogue's ruins exposed, untouched, and erecting a building that would not hide them, that would leave them as they were. Inspired by archaeological sites of broken Roman temples, Kahn wanted to preserve the ruins rather than put on a bogus ideological spectacle of restoration. He wanted to avoid the appropriation of the ruins as an irremovable truth. He wanted to emphasize an historical destruction and decay that could not be expropriated, and to form, or maybe more accurately to deform an unresolved image of fragmented past, devoid of any illusion of overcoming. In the case of **K19**, I believe that you, Zlatko, share some similarities with the historical approach underlying Kahn's unrealized sketch. Your act does not presume a tranquil peaceful present from which one can experience the past as something that really truly passed but rather as that which insistently continues to appear in the fabric of daily life in order to remind the dark process that shaped it historically. You avoid the aestheticization of this past, or its archiving. You do not integrate it into an indoctrinated idealizing symbolic order. You act as someone who is haunted, obsessed, possessed. This act is not just analytic or one-dimensionally political.

I find the repetitive aspect of these brick structures very strong and drastic. The inhabitants from the villages surrounding the camp of Jasenovac were recycling the bricks this death place was producing during World War Two and after it was liberated, used them for their houses. In this context your repetitiveness should be related to. You recycle the recycled, you repeat the repetition. You redo what was already done in order to undo it. There is no transformation or elevation in your outcome, you do not change the logic of these things, you join it in order to open and articulate it as something which cannot be assimilated into moral ways of life.

Repetition, we all know, is one of the characteristics of trauma. One cannot encounter a traumatic event, but can only repeat it belatedly, after it happened. These structures are repetitive arrangements that repeat the repetition of the people that recycled them when the camp was liberated. They are constructed methodologically yet they are traumatic, haunted by unregulated irresistible memories. I like the idea that every formal structural aspect of this installation addresses its exaggerated complement or inversion. The brick structures can be thought of in relation to Robert Morris' definition of Minimalist, non anthropomorphic, non pictorial elementary formed sculpture, where each of the sculpture's fragments brings as a gestalt, its experience as a whole, as totality, but in **K19** this totality is not an abstract cognition, as it is connected to an ungraspable historical totality of evil. On the one hand the brick structures are all about factuality of actual here and now, and at the same time they are all about commemoration. They are based on structurality as they point on absolute destruction one cannot simply overcome. We see their solidity while facing the frictions it holds.

Zlatko, I thank you for the discourse you generate and cherish the opportunity to confront it on a close view.

Yours,

Ory Dessau