

The Impossible War Memorial:

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a cadaver
considered
a murder?

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Text piece written for the project *Memorial to Irak War* organized by the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London. 23 May - 27 June 2007.

A good question with which to begin a reflection on the project for a «Memorial to the Iraq War» would be this: why did the Hungarian refugee decide to destroy the original model of Reg Butler's winning entry to the 1953 competition? The small text accompanying the current project remains very obscure about the incident; the story is told in passing, and it seems that it is only there as a footnote for the important issue, which is the destruction of the original model and the non-realisation of the final monument. Furthermore, and judging from the short description of Butler's work («... three women overshadowed by an abstract scaffold»), it doesn't seem to be offensive to sensibilities to the extent that someone should decide to destroy it. And even though the symbolism of the three women remains obscure (who are they and what do they represent?), the scaffold supports an interesting double reading: it is used both to construct (buildings) and to execute (people), it is both an abstract geometrical construction and a representation of an actual object, etc. And we can safely assume that Butler was conscious of these oppositions when he presented the model for his sculpture. Why, then, would a Hungarian refugee in London take the decision to destroy a work of art —a piece to which he should be theoretically sympathetic, given that it addresses the commemoration of «people who had been imprisoned or lost their lives in the cause of freedom»—? One could posit, of course, the possibility that the Hungarian refugee only

wanted to draw attention to himself, or to a cause, and in order to do so he committed a spectacular act—which could have been anything really—in order to get himself in the news. If this was true, then the destruction of the winning model was only coincidental, and it had nothing to do with the work of art itself. But then again, of all the possible spectacular acts that the Hungarian refugee could have chosen from, why did he choose to destroy a work of art? And why this one in particular? Was he just passing by, saw the work, inquired what it was, took offence and decided to attack it? Or was the act premeditated, which means that he had some information about the ICA competition, about its conditions and the debate that it might have stirred, about the winning work and probably a bit about the artist who produced it? The first hypothesis presupposes that the destroyed model was exhibited in an absolutely public space (one of London's many squares perhaps), so that anyone might have access to it (and consequently destroy it, like the Hungarian refugee did); the information is lacking here, but this seems like an absurd assumption: why would the ICA exhibit the winning model outside of its premises? And in any case, the person who we are dealing with would not be a mere uninformed refugee; we could assume that he has some knowledge of the English language, and some ideas about art's role or how it should or should not look like to take offence from a mere sculpture. These last arguments seem to reinforce the second hypothesis rather than the first one: the act was premeditated, and was carried on by a Hungarian refugee who must have been quite informed about art in general and about this competition in particular. What remains a mystery, though, are the reasons behind the act of destruction, and the reasons why the monument was never realized—after all, the artist could have easily provided another model, and the work could have been easily realised, regardless of the spectacular act of destruction—.

In order to continue my investigation, it is imperative that I make a detour; too many facts are missing and all I can provide are speculations and hypothesis. And most of all, how would an investigation about an act which happened in the 1950s be pertinent to producing a memorial to the Iraq war in 2007?

In fact, all I can do, all that is available to me, is to play the role of the detective from inside my study. I have absolutely no knowledge about what's going on in Iraq, and my position in an Arab country quite close to Iraq (geographically and culturally) does not give me any special insight on the Iraqi war; as for the reports that I see on the news, they tend to obscure knowledge instead of providing it by focusing only on the spectacular. In fact, the only way for a person to make sense of all these television image-based reports is to actually turn away from them, to watch them with eyes wide shut. The images on which these reports are based come from another space and another time; they come from the space and time of the catastrophe. The catastrophe in Iraq is not the actual destruction itself, or the countless dismembered bodies; these are only the sole possible manifestations of the catastrophic on TV screens. The catastrophic could be anywhere really, and I'm sure that we've all had the experience of catastrophic space and time sometime in our lives. In the lives of the Iraqi people, one of the most salient manifestations of the catastrophic became visible right before the start of the actual war and the beginning of the body count. It was in the choice that the Iraqis were given by History, a choice that was none: either they accept to remain a unified nation, slowly sliding outside the course of history, a hypothetical nation held together by a tyrant actually feeding off the blood of the people he is ruling, or they accept a foreign occupation that was the only possible way out of the previous situation, they align themselves with the course of history by obeying to the imperatives of the *Zeitgeist*, thus suddenly becoming a post-modern nation torn apart by murderous identity politics. This non-choice is yet another example of history's cruelty, and one of the firmest indications that the Iraqis are now living in the space and time of the catastrophe, subject to the eternal return of the Old (History's cruelty: slavery, wars of ancient tribes, the deliberate extinction of life, etc.) disguised as New. *Qoheleth*, the son of David, knew that a long time ago; he also knew that catastrophic time can never be linear, it can never be a rational consequential progression from one historical event to the other (*Qoheleth or The Ecclesiast*, 1: 1-11). Linear time is that of the Victors, while the Defeated, the ones who were defeated by History, live in allegorical times, which is the time of the catastrophe.

A memorial is, by definition, an object which serves to remind people of certain events. The function of a memorial is to create a continuity in the fabric of time, and it does so, ironically, by creating a spatial rupture, a rip in the urban fabric. Memorials preserve time and retain it, so that the present generation is constantly reminded of the accomplishments of past generations, and secure in the knowledge that future generations as well will be able to experience this continuity of time and connectivity of events. Memorials are the most vivid articulation of the language of the Victors, a precise language where everything means exactly what it should mean, leaving no space for metaphors or allegories. Memorials, and war memorials in particular, simply cannot exist in catastrophic space and time, where language is undone, where meaning is always besides itself and where signifiers are always illuminated from without; in short, in a space where everything can mean anything else, but never the thing itself, memorials are always already destroyed, even if they are physically intact: one can think of the countless monuments and memorials left behind by the then victorious Saddam Hussein, or of the act of the destruction of his statue in Baghdad, one of the first acts of the new Victors, or even the two moments of the ultimate destruction of Saddam-the-icon, Saddam-the-monument-builder, when he was captured and medically examined like a sick animal, or when his head snapped upon his execution.

Designing a memorial for the Iraq war is an impossible task. If I were to accept the endeavour, I would be compelled to make a promise I cannot keep; I would be compelled to establish a unity where I see none; I would be compelled to speak a language that I'm trying so hard to unlearn: the language of the Victors.

And if I were to return to the beginning of my investigation, I would say that this impossibility is precisely what prompted the Hungarian refugee to assault Reg Butler's winning model in 1953, and probably it is also the reason why another model was not made and the monument remained un-constructed. It is not very hard to spot the catastrophic in Hungary's recent history: 1953 was the year that Imre Nagy became prime minister, and he too could not keep his promise because of History's cruelty. In 1956 Soviet troops invaded the

republic which believed for a moment that it could escape history's verdict, and with what little hope that remained before the invasion was completed, this desperate plea for help was heard on one of the country's radio stations, addressed to the United Nations:

«This is Hungary calling. The last remaining station.

Call to the United Nations: Early this morning, the Soviet troops launched a general attack on Hungary.

We are requesting you to send us immediate aid in the form of parachute troops over the Trans-Danubian provinces».

Do not let the precision of this request deceive you: in catastrophic times, «parachute troops» can mean anything... and in fact, the Hungarians might have been asking for wingless angels falling from the sky and carrying liberty and hope. But they got nothing. Their only revenge was a retrospective one, in the form of a Hungarian refugee destroying a memorial commemorating the freedom they were promised. But then again, did he really prevent a memorial from being built or did he just physically destroy something that was already destroyed? Or, to put it another way: is shooting a cadaver considered a murder?