

*Doppelgängers*

Esper Postma

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## Archaeology of a Post-History

Geologists conduct borings and archaeologists make sections in the ground to gain knowledge of the past from material evidence. And if they are lucky, they can trace the course of time in the layers, almost as with the annual rings of a tree trunk. In urban areas, however, the sequence of deposits is often disturbed or even destroyed, making it harder to read the historical processes. But these structures below ground elude our everyday perception, anyway. The aboveground building structures that we see show hardly any sedimentation. Their historicity is more like the model of a palimpsest, on which texts are repeatedly erased so that the writing surface can be newly inscribed again and again.

On ancient papyrus, traces of prior text were disturbances that pointed to the earlier use of the paper. But the nature of overwriting has experienced a fundamental transformation with the unfolding of modernity in the 19th century. Because of the ruptures tradition was undergoing everywhere, a new consciousness of history developed that sought to limit the losses or even reverse them. Museums were founded, protection of historical monuments ensued, the homeland preservation movement arose, and historicism developed.

One no longer contented oneself with historicity as the transmission of remnants of the past; instead, history became a field of action to be actively shaped. While utopian thinking devoted itself to the future, historical thinking aimed at the image of the past, which was to be constructed and formed – not only in historiography, but also to be made visible in historicizing monuments in space. The founding of the German Empire in 1871 thus triggered a redesign in Berlin and elsewhere that reshaped “historic” symbolic sites or even created new ones in order to convey a new, heroic image of the country’s own past. History writing became a means of social engineering, pursuing identity-political goals by inventing a fictitious, distorted historical background. Modernistic counter-movements to this sought to replace this rooting in history with a rooting in the present and pleaded for a radical commitment to contemporaneity as the anchor for identity. The overwriting of existing reality radicalized to the point of *Tabula rasa* (the blank slate). After the rupture of civilization from 1933 to 1945, this became the dominant practice, but the yearning for historicity returned. Now the principle of *Tabula rasa* was applied against itself, and the last text on the palimpsest of the city was erased to allow previously erased texts to reappear. Put more precisely: to synthesize an idealized origin from the selected depictions of the past. And the more the constructions of identity in our societies differentiate and multiply, the louder resounds the call for an identity-focused, homogeneous core.

II

What we perceive in a city today as historicity is seldom the sedimentations over time, transmitted traces from the past. Embodiments of images of history have taken their place. We are confronted with a picture puzzle in which we often hardly know how to distinguish whether we are dealing with an actual historical artifact or with an object that represents a certain – more or less real or fictional – moment of history. It seems as if we had liberated ourselves from the linearity of time and can clear away artifacts in the city as a museum or bring them forward from the arsenal of memory, in accordance with present-day desires. Solely the sluggishness of this rearranging prevents us from arriving at arrangements of urban exhibiting that are more consistent, an exhibiting that focuses on the city’s symbolically important sites, anyway.

III

Esper Postma’s installations turn to this complex issue with laconic sobriety: how can these constellations, shaped by the conflict of opposed forces, be untangled? How can the underlying conflict be represented? Since chronology as a structure of order has long since been destroyed, Postma leaves the idea of a linear temporality behind. In *Mirror Stage*, the model of a Prussian eagle on the windowsill of the Berlin Palace is juxtaposed with a fragment of the façade of East Berlin’s former Palace of the Republic. Is the ornament a representation of the Palace façade of the 18th century or its reconstruction in the 21st century? Does the fragment of the façade of the Palace of the Republic refer to the 20th-century building or its possible future reconstruction? Two artifacts that repeatedly alternated in a process of production and obliteration, without ever meeting, suddenly encounter each other. What was once chronologically separated is synchronously present. The position of the sculptures toward each other suggests a duel. The artifacts themselves became actors on the stage on which the artist brings the historical drama to play. And with the work’s title, Esper Postma refers to Jacques Lacan’s theory of the formation of self-consciousness and the self. Hardly less significant for German identity conflicts is the theme of the second work in the exhibition named *Roundabout*, which addresses the naming of the street that for almost 200 years formed the center of political power, first in Prussia and then in the German Empire. Here, a quasi-circular model of time takes the place of a linear time. Almost like a Möbius strip, the spiraling sculpture shows the repeated renaming of the street as an endless loop. The beginning and the end merge as one. The synchronization of what is not contemporaneous in a common, ahistorical present shifts the mutually exclusive determinations of identity into coexistence. What becomes apparent or is eliminated is no longer left to the randomness of current power relations. Here in the space of art it is possible to leave behind the bitterly fought-for unambiguity in the urban space and to provide scope for the conflict of identities. Only that makes the underlying structure of the conflict recognizable; ultimately, this shows a more apt image of our existence than all the idealized fragments present in the city’s space, in which what is respectively suppressed and extinguished can appear solely as phantom pain.









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