

Hope in white ruins

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS



Video still from Lida Abdul, *White house*, 2005, 16mm film transferred to video. Courtesy of the artist.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, artists responded to the changes in the modern city with a mixed sense of awe and excitement. Modernity was ushered in by the power of new industrial technologies. The sweeping socio-economic changes pushed many earlier urban structures to the side. The damage was often justified by the promise of efficiency, mobility and sanitisation. Many remained skeptical of such a blind faith in progress, but even artists who had been critical of capitalism's impact on society still believed that the machine age could be harnessed to produce a new utopia. The wars that put machines to work in the most violent ways almost destroyed this dream. Arnold Schoenberg's atonal music and Karlheinz Stockhausen's serial structures were both responses to the ruins of the two world wars. Similarly, artists such as Constant (Nieuwenhuys) surveyed the damaged urban centres of Europe and constructed images, models and maps for his

imaginary city project, New Babylon.¹ Out of the ruins of Europe new aesthetic forms emerged.

However, by the end of the twentieth century the glow of the machine age was becoming tarnished and contaminated. The promise to lift ordinary people above the ground and onto higher levels sank into the filthy mud of accumulated waste and pollution. Cities like Detroit and Manchester, the birthplace of the industrial revolution but now devoid of any production, were reduced to places that inspired music bands like MC5 and New Order who sang about the dream of leaving the ruins and desolation of post-industrial wastelands. The radical task of the artist shifted from dreaming the new utopia to dealing with the dystopia that surrounded urban life. Artists such as Julie Bargmann and Stacy Levy began their practice in the form of a 'clean-up' operation. Yona Friedman also stressed that the task of the artist shifted from invention to re-cycling, from expressing a new vision for the future to developing

new ethical collaborations to deal with the legacies of the machine age.

Ruins defy the cliché that, here at last, is a place where time and things have stood still. For ruins are like way stations, where convergence and departure operate according to a slower and rougher schedule. Artists often returned to ruins not for sentimental reasons, but perhaps because they took inspiration from the possibility that forgotten histories and alternative ways of being could still be found within the contradictions of these abandoned zones. There is also the possibility that these zones offered an even more general space: the location for contemplation and reflection. I imagine that these spaces prompted other unconscious connections, enabling artists to think through the un-thought thoughts of our time. These were breathing spaces in which attention was allowed to wander.

To contemplate the meaning of these places is neither an opportunity for nostalgia, nor an exercise in sighing at the cruelty of fate. The visual power of ruins runs deeper in our modern unconscious. It is no coincidence that Freud often used archaeological metaphors to depict the processes of the mind. The image of layers of earlier cities buried under every city was, for Freud, a powerful metaphor for describing the dynamic of change and repetition, waste and accumulation, desire and memory that also occurred in the mind. He also considered that the fascination with ruins was akin to the attraction to the death drive. He suggested that this instinct was so powerful in the mind because it contained a dim memory of the inorganic state that preceded all life. As if this dark, disordered and formless point of origin, from which living forms have departed, is also an irresistible source to which we strive to return. Hubert Damisch observed that Freud struggled with his own metaphor. For Freud, the traces left in cities were not just an analogy, with which the processes of the mind could be compared, but also a common place. Knowing that Freud recognised the limits of the archaeological metaphor but refused to renounce it, Damisch speculates:



Video still from Lida Abdul, *White house*, 2005, 16mm film transferred to video. Courtesy of the artist.

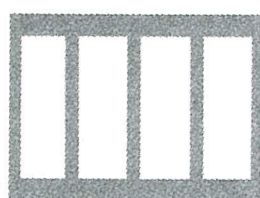
But why did he find it necessary to evoke visual images, figuration, in this connection if not because the mind itself must, at one time or another, have passed the same way, have found its place in them.²

Freud himself was fond of visiting ruins, and an obsessive collector of antiquities. Upon entering his office, one patient felt that he was being transported into a 'sanctuary of long vanished epochs'. Freud admitted that he had 'sacrificed a great deal for my collection of Greek, Roman and Egyptian antiquities ... and read more archaeology than psychology'.³ It is pity that he never addressed in direct terms the significance of his own obsession, as this may have drawn more light on the analogy that he drew between the work of the unconscious and the ruins of ancient cities. It might have also helped unpack another unresolved question: what is the role of memory and trauma in art? In relation to our psychic development, Freud

presented a case about the dynamic role of memory – but how do we transpose this model to other social processes and creative gestures?

Walter Benjamin's fascination with ruins was equally alluring. He compared the effect of allegory in the realm of thought to the presence of ruins. Again the meaning of ruins is approached indirectly but also given an open field to resonate within. Benjamin suggests that the creative power of representation – allegory – has the appearance of a ruin. This is not to say that the ruin represents death. It is not a void. The allegory always appears damaged, incomplete and heavy with the marks of history. After Benjamin we can ponder the life form of the ruin as well as the bombed status of art. Does art only add more rubble to history? Does language ever fill the crater caused by violence? Does the thunder of war resonate in the silence of its victims? Can the survivors cleanse the pile that remains?

These questions ruffle the boundary between art and the political. If we assume that memory is active and radial, then it also puts the relationship between art and architecture into motion. Lida Abdul, I assume, would agree



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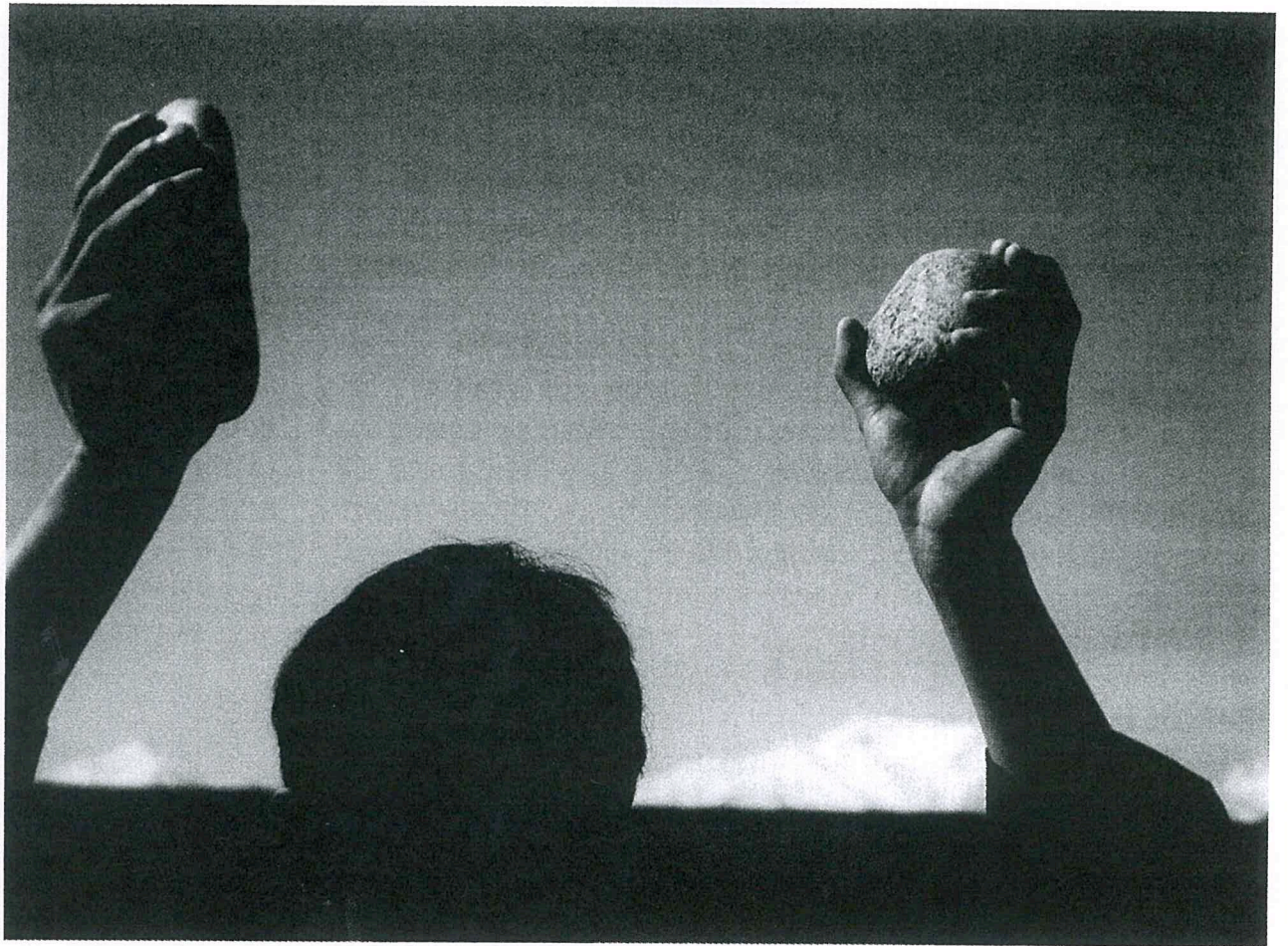
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with the proposition that memory and architecture are interlinked; she would recognise that buildings are at once innocent symbols and deadly targets. Architecture becomes a target in war not simply because it is a reminder of a given past, but because it is also a statement about the possible claims in the present – and in a metaphorical sense, it is also through these abstract shapes that we shape our images of the past and the future. In a sense architecture is a real target because it is moving, and in this way it becomes threatening. Architecture is on the move when the story of its origin is fused with a specific narrative about destiny. Architecture makes the past a living force, insofar as it represents an aspiration to embody a way of living in the here and now. In this activity, memory and aspiration merge.

The destruction of buildings is therefore also an attempt to halt the flows of architecture: to cease its claims on time and space. It is the most violent act that aims to efface the marks that others make in order to say, 'this is how we live and where we want to be'. Returning to a site after the bombs have fallen is an act of defiance against the war. To even remember what was there before the rubble, and to pick up a single stone, is a step towards re-entering the culture that war suspended and attempted to eliminate. It is a way of restarting the clock and redrawing the boundary. Against the death drive there is also a compulsion to return to a location where things once had meaning and security – the place we call home.

The vehemence of destruction in wars, revolutions and rebellions can therefore be explained as interwoven with the creative desire to reshape the meaning of place. Abdul's work takes us to some of the most brutal acts of symbolic violence. For instance, the Taliban's demolition of the Bamiyan Buddha was a cynical attempt to erase a symbol of a different faith. After the colossal sculpture was systematically dynamited, only the frame survived. In the massive rock face stood this empty space that was clearly defined, like a coffin. Abdul recognises that these acts of aesthetic destruction are also leaps into the boundless rage that demands focus through humiliation, punishment and blinding against the other's living presence. This need to attack culture is therefore deeper than the destruction of a specific historical trace. It assaults not just the past, and the physical claims to the present: it also seeks to obliterate a collective will to shape posterity. However, the survival of the frame also remains as a spectre, a trace line that defines a presence by the space that it once filled. Inside this space there is still a resonance. By inviting men to clap inside this space



Video still from Lida Abdul, *Clapping with stones*, 2005, 16mm film transferred to video. Courtesy of the artist.

in *Clapping with stones* 2005 Abdul is able to not only record the echo shaped by absent Buddha, but also to provoke a memory of its violation.

Abdul's work begins in the ruins of war but her aim is not to document its brutal realities. Her work faces the consequences of actions that are made by combatants as they seek to obliterate the enemy. She recognises that the intention is to destroy not only the signs of life, but also the capacity of survivors to return, reclaim and rebuild the place in which they feel 'at home'. It is here that uricide meets ethnocide: the murder of the city and its citizens meets the disabling of a culture. Today warfare is more than just murder and exile; it is also evisceration of the survivor's capacity to live a normal life. It seeks to render everyone in a state of paralysis, in which they remain gripped by fear. Abdul is conscious that even in the midst of war it is the women who are among the first to return to reclaim the ruins. For instance, the anti-Nazi activist, Ruth Andreas-Friederich, provides this account of the compulsion to repair homes during the massive bombing of German cities by Allied forces:

We repair because we must repair because we couldn't live another day longer if one forbade us the repairing. If they destroy our living room, we move into the kitchen. If they knock the kitchen apart, we move over into the hallway. If we can only stay 'at home'. The smallest corner of 'at home' is better than any place in a strange place. For this reason all who have been driven out by bombs return home someday. They work with shovel and broom, with hammer and pliers and pick-axes. Until one day over

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the bombed-out foundations a new 'at home' exists. A Robinson-Crusoe lodge perhaps. But it is still 'at home'. The last thing one saves from a burning house is a pillow because it is the last piece of 'at home'.⁴

With a similar dignity Abdul does not let the story of Afghanistan's bombings end in silence. In quiet and modest gestures she begins a process of cleansing and articulations. Buildings appear in her video *The white house* like the broken and rotten teeth of giants; the rubble of stone seems to have merged with the contours of the landscape. The destruction of the buildings is intended to produce these very associations. To see them in the mythical proportions of a giant, or to see them as being flattened into the elements of nature, is to strip them of their human and cultural reality. In *The white house*, the depiction of herself was not an attempt to reclaim the heroic position, but a more disturbing image of both the futility of violence and the double displacement of women in war.

In *War games (What I saw)* the video revolves around another singular gesture. It involves three horsemen in a battle with the remnants of large stone building. The horses are tethered to the building with massive white ropes. Under the heel of the stirrupless riders the horses pull with all their might. The horse's necks thrash as their mouths grimace open with the signs of strain. The image of these horses straining to make the crumbling building yield begin to superimpose with each other. The sight of the struggle begins to blur. However, in the background the remnants of the building remain firm.

It is unclear if the men have returned to demolish a building that they once owned, or whether they are seeking to complete the task of destruction. The gesture of renewal competes with the image of ongoing vengeance. Starting again and erasing the past may have totally different motivations, but in one sense the effect is the same. The haunting ambiguity is also expressed in the sound track. It raises and then fades into silence. It comes from somewhere in the landscape and yet seems to have no direct association with any of the actors. The sound leaves you with a foreboding sense that threat or hope could come from any point. The title of the video suggests an act of recollection, or testimonial, and yet, the structure of the video suggests a more ambiguous claim about the past. The blurring and overlaying of the images creates another sense of struggle with memory.

Abdul resists this kind of monumentalising of the trauma of war. I imagine that she wants to reclaim the normality of everyday life, rather than conjure some

version of the epic resistance or resign herself to the cruel fate of nature's cycle. Hence the gesture of painting white every surface of a pile of stones is not a futile or heroic act. It is the aesthetic act of cleansing. It defines the moment and place in which life can start again. Whiteness here, as it is on the exterior of many people's homes or its use along the edges of the pathways that lead to the home, is a declaration of luminosity. One person paints a surface so that others can recognise a space, or follow the sign. Amongst the ruins, Abdul is producing an aesthetic encounter with the remnants of meaning that is parallel to the effect that Walter Benjamin found between allegory and the fragments in language. To order things is one of the first signs of life. As is also evident in the video *Dome* that Abdul has taken in her recent trip to Afghanistan, to find a quiet spot in the middle of semi-destroyed building and look to the sky is at once an act of hope and one of defiance. It does not need a fist to rage against a burning sun. The head that tilts back and gazes into an infinite blue sky is also an act of resilience. Abdul's images and her own gestures are about the hope that survives and strives to nestle into the most uncanny space of our time home.

Notes

1 This juxtaposition between the modernist vision of utopia and the dystopic spaces of post-industrial landscapes was powerfully staged in *Documenta XI* in Kassel, Germany, in 2002.

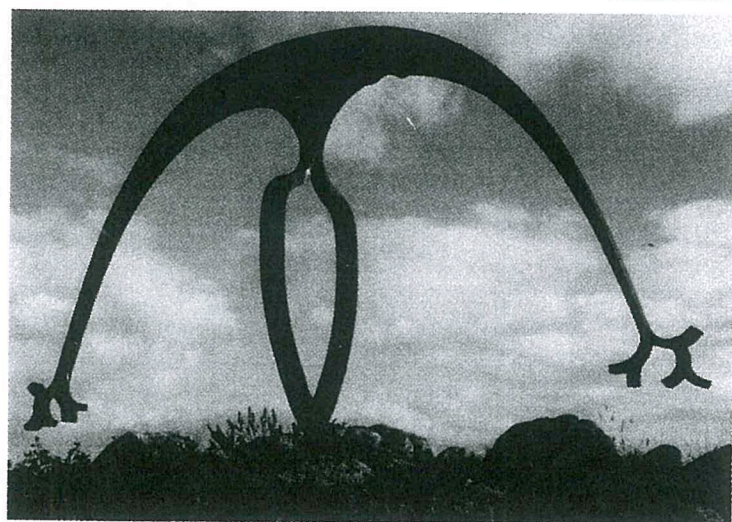
2 Hubert Damisch, *Skyline: The Narcissistic City*, Stanford University Press, 2001, p114.

3 See Janine Burke, *The Gods of Freud*, Random House, 2006.

4 Cited in AC Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, Bloomsbury, 2006, p102.

Lida Abdul's work was included in the exhibition The unquiet world held at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, from 27 May to 23 July last year.

Nikos Papastergiadis is Associate Professor and Reader in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. He has written widely on contemporary art practice, theories of migration and mobility. His most recent book is *Spatial Aesthetics: Art, Place and the Everyday*, Rivers Oram Press, London, 2006, and co-edited with Scott McQuire, *Empires Ruins and Networks*, Melbourne University Press, 2005.



Greg Johns, *Horizon Figure*, 2001, Corten steel, 236 x 345 x 400 cm.
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