

We don't need no water

A reflection about City on Fire by Thyra Hilden and Pio Diaz

Rome was not build in one day, but it could go tumbling down in one second from nuclear powers and advanced warfare technology. To read our heritage we turn to the architectural monuments. The Colloseum, Pantheon and the Trevi Fountain, are all common symbols. They stand for values and wars won. What difference would it make if these cultural monuments were to be destroyed?

It happened once that the city of Rome was burning for a whole week in the summer of 64 AC. It is not certain what started this fire, but the ruling Emperor, Nero, was blamed by the public. Nero then held the Christians responsible and ordered known Christians to be thrown to the lions. Whatever motives, whomever responsible - what happens to the cultures that are being attacked in the name of culture and democracy?

The art of Pio Diaz and Thyra Hilden is not aggressive and destructive, they do not demolish what cannot be replaced. Their art is a symbolic burn, their fire is an illusion to tickle the citizen's of Rome on a New Year's Eve. They seduce the public to reflect and wonder by the use of strong and beautiful images. They make believe the Trevi Fountain has caught fire, strange as it seems, because the fountain pictures Neptune in control of the water supplies of the cities. The Trevi Fountain is known by most. If not for its value as an ambitious Baroque architectural project, then for Anita Ekberg's dip in the Fellini film *La Dolce Vita* from 1960. Tourists of today visit the monument to throw coins in the fountain and pray for fortune.

By projecting live burning flames on the Trevi Fountain and other famous architectural monuments, the artists interact with cultural icons and provide us with a statement to make us feel the power of destruction and consider the aggressiveness of culture.

It seems obvious to enact City on Fire in Rome. All roads lead to Rome, the cradle of European culture. They say people

with culture never go wrong, and it is true that the strong beauty of the past makes us proud and aware that we are at the top of a long evolution. We need to know our past to understand the present and learn from failures of the history of mankind. Yet, some times the past feels like a heavy burden to carry. Culture and knowledge of the past can limit your expressiveness in the present, and culture and cultural production bears an element of destruction. The pupil will have to exceed the mentor and personalize tradition. But the artists Thyra Hilden and Pio Diaz do not want to destroy the classical monuments, they are artists, and as such they encourage reflection on contemporary destruction and loss of roots. They are not political terrorists or radicals - like the Italian Futurists.

Destroy the past - Future is never wrong

Some one hundred years ago a group of Italian intellectuals formed the ideas of destroying the proud monuments of the past. They glorified industrialization and loved cars and planes for their speed. They believed man had proved to be in control over nature, and they saw destructive powers as an artistic expression: tradition is nothing, future is all. These artists had no patience. They were inspired by modern warfare and supposedly lay the foundation for Fascism later to be accepted by the general Italian public. The group goes under the name the Futurists and counts Milanese painters like Boccioni, Carrà, Russolo, Balla and Severini. In the *Manifesto of Futurism*¹, the poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti declared:

“We will fight with all our might the fanatical, senseless and snobbish religion of the past, a religion encouraged by the vicious existence of museums. We rebel against that spineless worshipping of old canvases, old statues and old bric-a-brac, against everything which is filthy and worm-ridden and corroded by time. We consider the habitual contempt for everything which is young, new and burning with life to be unjust and even criminal².”

¹ First released in Milan where the movement was based and later published on the front of the French paper *Le Figaro*, February 20 1909.

The Futurists had strong faith, justified cultural destruction and wanted all old things gone. Umberto Boccioni wrote the *Manifesto of Futurist Painters* in 1910 with these famous words:

“We will glorify war—the world’s only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman. We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind, will fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice.”³

Futurists would probably hate the fact that American soldiers in Iraq today are provided with the song *Fire Water Burn* by *Blodhound Gang*. It goes: “The roof the roof the roof is on fire. We don't need no water let the motherfucker burn. Burn motherfucker burn”.⁴ This is the sound track for combat groups in action to excite destruction. It is easy to imagine how this song makes the adrenalin pump and produce a real life simulation of a computer game ... Target in sight ... Target locked ... Target destroyed ...

Myths of Creation do speak of destruction. You will have to tear down to build up, but destruction comes in different forms. You can either nurture or attack, so it is not easy to decide whether it is brutal to cut down the rose, remove the bad. And when it comes to culture, whom is to decide what is weed. Whatever religion, it is still questionable whether we are to accept that Taliban warriors disintegrate statues of Buddha in Afghanistan. Similar events have taken place around the world through all times. It seems cultures act aggressively to develop and expand. In the wake of the Cultural Revolution in China great things disappeared, but later it was the statues of Mao that were to be taken down by the people. Paradigm shifts are often brutal to architectural monuments and other cultural icons. Just think of the book treasures that have been burned as *Entartete Kunst* during WW2 and by Christians and other religious movements who feared the power of literature and culture and wanted to remove cultural products that did not fit their

³ Article 9 and 10 in *Manifesto of Futurism* by F. T. Marinetti, 1909. In Italian: “Noi vogliamo glorificare la guerra - sola igiene del mondo - il militarismo, il patriottismo, il gesto distruttore. Noi vogliamo distruggere i musei, le biblioteche, le accademie d'ogni specie e combattere contro il moralismo, il femminismo e contro ogni viltà opportunistica o utilitaria”.

⁴ In the film *Fahrenheit 9/11* it came out that American soldiers in Iraq get music samples of heavy rock and the like to listen to.

ideological scheme. The images – the burning illusion – by Thyra Hilden and Pio Diaz, bring to mind all these disruptive and aggressive cultural turns.

Keep it simple

Destruction – a clean past – can be collective as well as personal. The large scale collective destruction of the past, suggested by the Futurists, proves an awkward link to contemporary Feng Shui, which is a rip off from an Eastern philosophy about simple living, now promoted in lifestyle magazines telling us how to tidy up and take control over our lives. According to Feng Shui, we will find greater happiness and less friction if we throw away the things we do not need and tidy our homes and workspaces.

There is something very tempting about this idea. We have all at some point tried to start from a fresh. Or we have deeply wished it to happen, while actually repeating limiting patterns. Minimalist Art also speaks of the Tabula Rasa, the idea of having a virgin white canvas for thinking and acting. The quintessence being Robert Rauschenberg's Erased Dekooning from 1953⁵. One artist making a statement by carefully erasing the art of another famous artist.

Could you write off material life and destroy your most dear belongings – or all your belongings? Artist Michael Landy⁶ did. At shopping-busy London Oxford Street, he arranged a thorough break down of all his belonging. Small things like clothes, records, books, and porcelain were more easy, but there was also a car and all the furniture - plus art works by himself and those given to him by fellow artists. Nothing was spared. Artworks by Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin and the like were all crushed down to tiny chips. The art project looked like a factory with workers intensively crushing things in a special rig for several days. The project wished to question consumerism.

City on Fire, by Thyra Hilden and Pio Diaz, celebrates all these issues about power of cultural heritage and the beauty of destruction. But they keep their statement as a subtle intervention and yet prove powerful impact. Their statement is images only. It is the time and the place that makes it

⁵ Robert Rauschenberg's Erased Dekooning is part of the MoMA collection, NYC.

⁶ The project Breakdown by Michael Landy came about spring 2001 with support from Artangel and supported by The Times.

strong. Live burning flames projected on the old marble makes you wonder. Stone cannot burn, of course. But the film projection on this infamous monument gives you a feeling about a major Ground Zero with destruction of cultural monuments. Would it make life easier if you had no past?

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