

The Semantics of Bronze Castings

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'Marx-Engels Forum,' located at the heart of Berlin – those who stroll down this square can see the Saint Mary Church where <Dance Macabre> is housed, a fountain decorated with sculptures of Neptune, the red brick building of City Hall, and the twin steeples of St. Nikolai Church, the oldest church in Berlin. But the most striking sight of all is the 368m-high television tower. Under the reign of East Germany, the structure's towering height was the visual proof of socialist productivity. The socialist ideals met their demise, but the TV tower still stands high and mighty as the symbol of Berlin, bridging the gaps between East and West after the fall of Berlin Wall.

Until recently, the statues of Marx and Engels looked down upon this architectonic wonder of East German socialism, their backs turned against West Germany. One might say they testify to the autism of a certain system, infatuated with itself and trying hard not to turn its eyes to its superior counterpart – the reality in West Germany. Speaking of counterparts, a woman's statue stands on the West Berlin side, in stark yet uncanny contrast to those of these two men. This woman still holds her place, and calls out toward the Brandenburg Gate – the gateway to East Berlin - to "open the door." The two fathers of communism remained with their backs turned against this woman's outcry.

The statue of Marx and Engels is told to have been made by a sculptor called Ludwig Engelhardt (1924-2001) in 1985. Not much is known about the artist, except for that he went

on to study at an art school and became a sculptor after having learned woodcraft. However, a few of his works, including *< Lesender Arbeiter >*(1961) and *< Bildnis des Helden der Arbeit LPG-Vorsitzender Willi Schäfer >*(1964), are still found in certain towns within the former East German territory. A trace of artistry can be detected in the moderately simplified forms, but the statues of these two revolutionists stay within the range of Social Realism, the official doctrine during the Socialist days.

The production of the sculpture followed the general procedures of building a wire frame, molding out the form by adding clay, and producing a plaster cast into which bronze is poured. An interesting side note is that a rather well-known photographer in East Germany named Sibylle Bergemann (1941-2010) recorded the production and installation process of the monument in black and white photographs. The unfinished statue, with the painted walls of the atelier as its backdrop, bestows a strange and surreal impression upon the viewer, as if gazing at Magritte's paintings. Some of Sibylle's photos portray the completed statue hanging from a crane, being installed at their current positions at the Marx-Engels Forum.

Monuments erected as propaganda tend to lose their reason for existence once the system is dismantled. Is it not dramatic, how Lenin's once revered statue was pulled down by the hands of the angry mob and rendered scrap steel scattered among the debris on the streets? Despite the objections of those who harbor nostalgia for the past, symbols of the old system were often torn down in post-unification East Germany as well. Even these statues, having survived the fierce battle of symbolism, could not be exempt from the impacts of a subway construction plan laid out to pass right under the plaza. Last fall, the City of Berlin moved the statues to a more remote location in the park.

Location is not the only thing that had changed. The statue now gazes toward the West, its back turned against the TV tower. When I was visiting, the statue was trapped in a square fence, perhaps because the construction wasn't yet complete. However, the more radical change must have occurred in terms of the invisible – Meaning. This monument, once a testimony to the greatness of Socialism, is now fated to become an attraction for hordes of tourists pouring out of the newly built subway station. The statue, besieged by steel railings,

is now an equivalent to zoo animals sitting in cages as eye candy for our pleasure. One consolation is that bronze materials cannot suffer from this grave shame.

Han Sungpil produced two videos, <Amor Fati> and < Workers of all countries, Unite!>, portraying the entire process of moving the statue. The background music flowing through the scene in which Marx and Engels' statue is transported by a crane in <Amor Fati >, Beethoven's Symphony. No. 5, adds a parodic ring to the adverse fate of the statue. However, as the humanistic values the statue embodies is not one to be easily ridiculed, <Amor Fati > also appears to be celebrating the aesthetics of a heroic existence that silently bears all such scorn. The title may be referring to the realm of ambiguity where these two meanings intersect.

Han Sungpil's work, inevitably, forms a pendant to that of the East German photographer Sibylle Bergemann. Whereas Bergemann recorded the event of the statue's installation in black and white, Han Sungpil documented the statue's transference (or, in fact, removal) in video and photography. A quarter of a century stands between these two works. The event of the statue's transference leaves a strong impression in our minds; perhaps verging on the bemusement of a viewer who first witnesses Kinetic Art? Maybe even more powerful. Statues tend to be moved around for exhibitions, but they always belong to a specific corner of our minds.

The passive state of the statue, picked up and transported by a crane, has a certain ludicrousness to it. But from certain angles, the statue appears to be moving on without the aid of any external force, almost like Jehovah gliding along the surface of a still water, as if a spiritual being is wondering through the world. As a god, an idol, the statue holds certain grandeur. Was it Napoleon who said from the sublime to the ridiculous there is but a step? The contrast seen between two different portrayals of the scene could reflect the ironic feelings one must feel in witnessing the statue's transference.

Up to now, the artist has focused on the issue of "the relationship between the virtual and the real." In this light, the contextual position of his media work appears to be somewhat

different from that of his past works. However, the ties between past and present remain unshaken. This exhibition will be presenting a copy of the statue in Berlin, in addition to his two video works. He calls this copy '3D Photography - Reverse Representation.' Whereas photographs represent three dimensional objects on a flat plain, this piece revives the cubic qualities of a two dimensional photograph. Through this process, the artist's ongoing inquiry into the virtual and the real attains another dimension of depth.

In a way, this can be seen as a translation of trompe-l'oeil on a dust cover into an object in a three dimensional space. This copy of a statue diverges from its habitat and becomes isolated in the confines of the gallery, as does the uncanny and displaced advent of a trompe-l'oeil on a dust cover. In an empty white space, the statue will encounter the viewers, appearing to be disoriented in vacuum. This coordinate-less "transference," this "white-out" – what meanings could they generate? According to the artist, the work attests to the fact that "we live in an age of uncertainty, bereft of any sense of direction."

When Sibylle Bergemann photographed the statue, it was still asserting the historical victory of Socialism. By the time Han Sungpil came to the scene, the statue was already being paraded in front of tourists as a captive of triumphant capitalism. However, the once-relentless reign of capitalism now appears to be waning since the occurrence of the financial crises that had recently struck the entire globe. In its new home, what new meaning would the statue of Marx and Engels obtain? We don't know. As capitalism once jeered at them, they may stand to mock the chronic crisis capitalism had engendered. Meaning remains open, and history continues to unfold.

Postscript:

Sibylle Bergemann passed away in November 2010, right after this statue was moved.