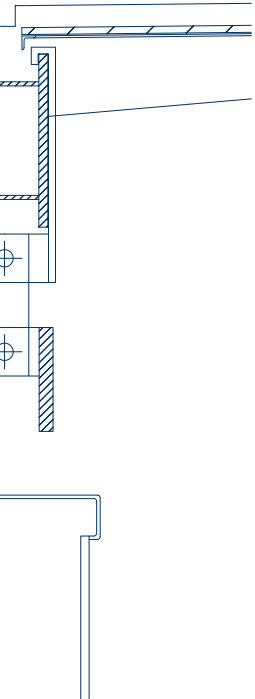


RELOCATING THE PAST: RUINS FOR THE FUTURE

AHMAD GHOSSEIN



URO is a department of KORO - Public Art Norway. URO produces temporary art projects in public space.

Introduction

On the 22nd of July 2011 Norway was hit by two sequential terrorist attacks against the government, the civilian population and the Workers' Youth League (AUF) summer camp. These attacks resulted in the loss of 77 lives. The first was a car bomb explosion in Oslo's government quarter that killed eight people and injured over 200, many of them severely. The second attack occurred less than two hours later at the summer camp. A gunman opened fire at the participants, killing 69 of them and wounding over 100. The police arrested Anders Behring Breivik, a Norwegian right-wing extremist, and charged him with both attacks.

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VG daily newspapers display panel was standing close to where the car bomb exploded in the first terrorist attack. The panel's glass surface was fractured by the shockwave from the bomb at 3:25 pm 22nd of July 2011, since then it has remained untouched, still bearing the pages from that same day.

In 2012 URO was approached by Lebanese artist Ahmad Ghossein when he came to realize that the panel was about to be lost from history. To save it, we decided to move the panel from outside VG's building to a new temporary location on the opposite side of the street. Since VG wanted to remove the panel and replace it with a more functional digital display, this project was initiated to preserve the panel as an object of historical significance.

Art in connection to an event like the one we commemorate by preserving VGs newspaper panel as a frozen time capsule from the 22nd of July, is not without risk. If the artist acts without considering the whole context, it might come across as alienating and even inappropriate. It can be felt as an attempt to aestheticise a collective trauma, a disrespectful interference in a vulnerable process.

The relocation of this newspaper panel was initiated by an artist. This rescue-mission simultaneously reflects a recent historical event as well as our present and future understanding of this event. Arts privilege in many contexts is the ability to give critical outside perspective, but there are times and situations where caution, respect and understanding must be the starting point for art and an artist's presence. This is the situation we now find ourselves in. In an art context the complex ethical and aesthetic issues regarding representation and depiction when dealing with an event like this would be central. But this is not an art object, nor would it be able to function like one, that would

be impossible. This is an artist engaging in society from an outside perspective, making us act to save this physical trace, or imprint, for posterity. The artist's motivation, willingness to act and the action itself is what is most important.

Facilitating and conducting actions like these represent something unique in KORO's activities. By preserving an authentic and unaltered object it is possible to actualize history and initiate deeper discussion. The role of art and the artist can be understood as transposing content into symbols through acts. In this publication writers and participants in public debate have contributed with important, thought-evoking texts that discuss the various perspectives through which to view the project. Philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen reflects on why physical witnesses in time are important as references bound to place. Social anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen writes that VG's newspaper panel could also be read as a monument over the chance events that govern our lives, and the fundamental unpredictability of existence. Art critic Kjetil Rød interviewed Ahmad Ghossein about growing up in a country at war, and his thoughts on the artist's societal role in the public sphere. Walid Sadek writes about the antagonisms of monuments and ruins, from the perspective of Beirut, and gives his thoughts on the project in the form of a letter to the artist.

We would like to thank all those involved, everyone who took action with such little time, ignoring inherent limitations in the respective systems they work within and thereby saving the newspaper panel. We want to especially thank Ahmad Ghossein, who courageously and by his own initiative worked to save this imprint of an event we must never forget. From now on it is up to the people to decide if the panel should be permanently grounded on this site.

URO - Bo Krister Wallström & Kristine Jærn Pilgaard



22nd of July 2011

Arne Johan Vetlesen (NO) is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Oslo. He works within the fields of Ethics and Social Philosophy, with a special interest for the significance of emotions with regards to moral and also evil and its many manifestations. Vetlesen actively participates in public debate and has published several books, like *Perception, Empathy and Judgment* (1994), *Closeness* (1997) and *Evil and human Agency: understanding collective Evildoing* (2005).

As late as the 1970s it was still possible to hear accounts of visitors at Auschwitz who would stumble on partially buried tin cans left by the camps prisoners. Sometimes the cans contained drafts for letters that had never been sent. Letters about the life – or death – in the camp.

It is a distinctive and compelling experience to be confronted with material evidence of how it was and how it felt in a place where defining and traumatic events have taken place. It is likely that this experience is independent of the actual reach the disaster in question had, such as who and how many were affected and what kind of actions preceded it. Why does it feel so strong to be confronted with a disaster's *there and then*?

To stumble on a tin can in Auschwitz thirty years after a prisoner buried it is like crossing time, bridging the current *here and now* with the *here and then*. Distance in time is an objective fact, time has passed. But distance in time could be subjectively repealed as long as location is constant: it happened here. Connection to place – ground zero, if you will – gets experiential precedence over actual distance in time.

The tin can possesses an aura of the kind the philosopher Walter Benjamin concerned himself with, that is to say a distinctive authority, made captivating by its properties as something – an object – with a specific history, a particular origin in time and space. Even if Benjamin's term was meant for objects – artefacts – of an aesthetic character, 'aura' in the sense of 'distinctive appeal' could be applied to things of a non-aesthetic character.

For example something as prosaic as a glass newspaper display panel.

The newspaper edition in question reads a date that could be as prosaic and unremarkable as the display case itself: 22nd of July 2011. This is all that is needed to completely shift our perception of what we are dealing with, because the glass is broken. It was broken by an act of terror that left its signature in the midst of everyday life, thereby changing it irreversibly.

When we say, write, or read this it is from a specific perspective, a place in time: *after* the terrorist attack. What this partially destroyed panel and its newspaper edition does is to mark a *before* – in a sense a *last* before: the last newspaper a VG worker had time to put up before Norway was struck by the worst act of terror in the nations peace-time history.

To regard this panel today, in its ruined and therefore authentic condition, as damaged rather than intact, to regard it as attacked, just as so many others that afternoon – is to stand in a *here and now*, a retrospective one, and maintain a contact – confrontation – with a *here and then*. That contact is so direct since the two different moments in time share an actual place: it happened precisely here. I have a part in, an access to, the moment it happened because my placement on the world, in the world, is precisely where it happened. That access is not abstract, not fictional or of the imagination but concrete, physical: here.

Let these thoughts be the first step towards an explanation of how this broken newspaper panel became a unique document of this act of terror. Reformed – deformed – *by* that terror and subsequently a document to its actual existence as a power used to destroy one kind of reality so another could emerge in its place. The panel stands – again not metaphorically or aesthetically, but physically – on the point, no, *as* the point between a Norway before the reality of terror and as such innocent, ignorant, and a Norway after: a changed – damaged – Norway.

You could question, given the force and range of the attack, whether there aren't enough of these markers in the physical landscape. Enough solid evidence to mark the cut between before and after, in conjunction with an unchanged here; perhaps even so many as to the make the VG panel seem superfluous, not spectacular enough for posterity.

The answer is no. Because following disaster everything it left damaged is fixed again, thereby erasing all traces, meaning: the initial imprint the force of this terror left on all it touched, destroyed, twisted. That people – victims – are removed from the crime scene is one thing and could not be otherwise; just as blood has been removed from streets and walls, windowpanes have been repaired and replaced, buildings are torn down and/or restored so they can once again house people and offices. That normality is restored – if not quite mentally speaking then at least as much as possible out there in the physical, tangible world – is just how it has to be.

But not everything must or should be like this. Restored normality, physically executed and expressed, means the removal of all traces of the event: even at ground zero when all that was damaged, disfigured and scarred has been removed, repaired, covered up – even here you will not be in touch with what happened at that time, in this place. You will know that yes, it was here, even if you can no longer see it, but this knowledge is fragile and transient. Without something tangible, something that bears the mark of the event, it is purely intellectual knowledge, abstract.

In one place a tin can, in another a newspaper panel. That which is concrete, physically given and sensually accessible is what hits hardest and has the power of expression; that can bear witness and act as a reminder. That stands there and does precisely that whether you like it or not, regardless of your intentions. The panel stands there, damaged – yes, but intact in its insistence on the action that was done to it, and to so much and so many others that day. Here.

Soon the last witness to the concentration camps will disappear from time. Inevitably the same thing will happen with regards to 22nd of July 2011. When that time comes, physical witnesses will become even more important. Only they can take over and be – in the concrete as opposed to the mental space – a sedentary reference to the fact that it happened, how it happened and how real it was: the reality of intentional destruction.

An intentional destruction that shall not be allowed to nullify everything that preceded it, to remove it from the landscape by forcing out the creases so that nothing broken can remain.

There will be enough commissioned memorials, statues and plaques. Books will be written and images will exist. Cards collected from the many roses that were laid down in front of the cathedral and many other places throughout the city will be safely stored in the national archives. All this will seem like expert propagation, presentation and facilitation to anyone who might eventually seek it out.

A partially shattered glass newspaper panel, still standing in the place where it was broken, is something else. Untouched, unfacilitated. It remains where it has always been. Someone tried to blow it up, tried to blast a whole world – or at least a nation with an idea of what kind of nation it wanted to be, what kind of people it would like to shelter – into pieces. All and everyone that was affected is gone – either from death or because their – in this case the thing's – ruin did not fit into this new normality that had to distance itself from the destruction of the old one, at any cost.

If possible the panel can defy this understandably craved for restoration to normality, to new hard-earned safety. But something *has* happened: there is a before and there is an after. With its literally cracked glass surface, the damaged panel stands on a fissure, it freezes time, that time is/was 3:25 pm 22nd of July 2011. Insisting on taking us back mentally, via the physical, it remains steadfast: "Here I stand. Damaged, yes. But as a witness I am intact, a scar that never heals". It can be uninvited, unexpected; some never knew it was there until they walked right into it. Others had not passed it in a long time and had forgotten it existed. Everything else surrounding it, at ground zero, shows what came after. Gives precedence and reserves all rights to the force that removed all traces and replaced (literally) damage and contortion thereby (again literally) removing all pain or at least all actual reminders of the reality of pain, the pain of reality, right here – with us, amongst us. The panel that still stands, and still pains by standing. And that will remain standing, for that reason.



Thomas Hylland Eriksen (NO) is a writer and Professor of Social Anthropology. He has written books on many subjects, but one of his main interests is the relationship between identity and globalisation. Some of his English titles are *Ethnicity And Nationalism* [1993/2010], *Globalization: The Key Concepts* [2007] and *Flag, Nation and Identity in Europe and America* (2007, ed. w/ Richard Jenkins). In 2012 he wrote a novel for young adults called *Det som står på spill* (*That which is at stake*) that has its starting point in the terrorist attacks on 22nd of July 2011.

A monument to the uncertainty of existence

In Benedict Anderson's famous book on the emergence of nationalism, *Imagined Community*, the memorial to an Unknown Soldier is a central symbol. As put forward by the title, national communities are characterized by the fact that they are imagined. This is not to say that they are imaginary, but that they are abstract in a specific way. Participants must actively use their imagination to evoke them. Even if you never meet more than a small fraction of the members of a nation's community, you may still feel a kinship to all of them, a sense that you have something significant in common.

As suggested by nationalistic terminology, a nation's great emotional power comes from its potential to affect kinship and family. Terms such as "mother-tongue" and "fatherland" are regularly spoken unflinchingly. Leaders overcome by emotion, nationalistic pathos and pride might address their followers as brothers and sisters with the same ease people use first-person plural during national sporting events. Metaphorically we are one big family, you and the millions of people you will never know. In nations like Norway, the battle is not about whether nationalism has a right to life in our century, but about what kind of nationalism should be encouraged – an ethno-cultural version where only the descendants of Vikings or someone resembling Vikings are true members of the nation (think of the statements that claim Oslo will have a majority of foreign citizens by 2040) or a republican version where place, not blood, creates community.

The Unknown Soldier is the anonymous young man who bravely gave his life defending the nation's borders. No one knows who he was, or rather: He was everybody and nobody's son, brother and lover. Anderson sees these monuments to the Unknown Soldier as a highlight of abstract identification: You can visit them, lay down your flowers and cry sad tears over the loss of an abstract person who fills you with emotion since he incarnates the nation, your metaphorical family.

These memorials are found in many countries, the tombs are devoid of physical content but all the more loaded with sacral abstractions. Some years ago a student grilled his hotdog on the eternal flame in the Tomb of an Unknown Soldier at the Triumphal Arch in Paris, he was consequently arrested and given a surprisingly strict sentence. Claiming it was a joke did not help. You can joke about God, but not the Republic.

It must be coincidence that Norway is one of the few countries missing a memorial to an Unknown Soldier. A simple explanation could be Norway's absence from the First World War. The country does have its share of World War II Memorials, but these are usually monuments with names that give them local significance, thereby losing some of their universal message.

Perhaps the VG newspaper display panel could become Norway's answer to the many solemn and possibly antiquated memorials that exist around the world commemorating the Unknown Soldier? If so, this would demand some contemplation

regarding its possible future significance. In itself, of course, it means nothing. No object has any other meaning than what man projects upon it. But people are different. An ambiguous symbol like this VG newspaper panel will undoubtedly come to mean many things. Here are my thoughts. Others will have theirs.

Memorials and ceremonies were created for the sake of collective recollection. They are especially important in times of crisis, when the need for fellowship is strong. Their function is to remind us of historical battles, sacrifices and heroic deeds. Simply put, the things that are worthy of collective commemoration. As it happens national mythologies are especially concerned with violence, war and death. A nation needs its victims, if not to stress the importance of keeping the troops in line, to remind us that safety is not a given. Even in Norway, with a national history that is not especially violent, the lyrics 'All the fights fathers have fought / and the mothers have wept' take a central position in our national anthem, followed by the assurance that 'The Lord has quietly moved / so we won our rights'. The famous conclusion to the whole historic run-through in the national anthem is 'Even we, when it is demanded / will for its peace make camp'. In short, when the time comes, be prepared to do your part.

In the 19th century it still made sense to turn to war in such a context. When Bjørnson wrote the lyrics for the national anthem, wars of conquest were still fought, even in Europe. Today if you asked people what is most at stake, it would not be the military defense of national borders, even though this could easily change in the uncertain future. Still violence remains central to national identity. Something got broken for most of us when the first images of dead victims from Utøya and the government buildings were published. These dead were unknown soldiers, anonymous, but more real than the abstract soldier at Champs-Élysées. All though most of us who saw these images didn't know the victims, we still felt like we knew them all. Among both dead and survivors there were youth from all across the country, with both minority and majority backgrounds. This diversity becoming a grotesque but especially pertinent comment to those who inspired the terrorist, meaning those who regard Muslim immigration as a betrayal of the national concept, of democracy and freedom.

The VG panel in Akersgata is a self-made monument. There are subtle associations to the shot-out walls of Sarajevo, the NATO bombed buildings in central Beograd (which until recently were left unchanged as memorials), damaged bridges and burnt-out tanks, all of which could be infused with meaning as 'readymade' artworks. But this newspaper panel is fundamentally different than all of those. It is no relic of war; on the contrary it is an afterthought, a side effect and a contradictory reminder of the shock that struck the country on that dark and rainy day in July 2011.

It looks quite shocked standing there, the panel. It was itself created by a shock wave and the contrast between the content on the pages and the event that made this

edition of VG become an object of historical significance could hardly be bigger. Headlines and articles are easily readable through the broken glass. They address a population that is happy to be on holiday, but displeased with the Nordic weather. With the mandatory double-spread 'Soon there will be beach-weather!' and the entire 22nd of July edition struggles to keep up a serious façade. Those of us who live in a nation drugged by the social and economical benefits of oil suffer year round from this unbearable lightness of being. We can hardly believe it when we learn how the government treats asylum-seeking children and we have trouble understanding that Norway is a part of the problem and not the solution to global climate change. So, when this is the state of things in January – the most serious month of the year – you can easily imagine the mental state of the nation towards the second half of July. On the 22nd of July 2011 Norway was the world's best country and according to the pages of VG, a country unworried and untouched by the troubles existing beyond its borders. Thanks to the right initiatives and an excellent idea from Ahmad Ghossein, this glimpse of wealth-induced drowsiness will stay indefinitely, in contrast to the naked evil that sent shock waves through the country and through this VG panel. Hanne's donkey "will always start", the red-haired famous lady will always be extremely passionate, 6 out of 7 will always be dangerous (what is actually meant by *dangerous* matters little, as the picture shows) and the Prince of Labour will always be ready for a EU fight. Thinking about it, the spread on beach weather will stand the test of time most of all; in VG the weather is always about to get sunny, even in November.

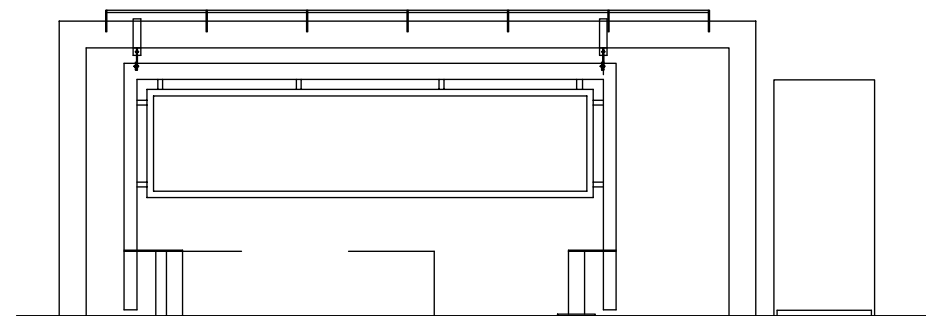
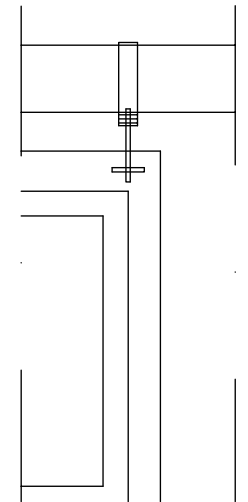
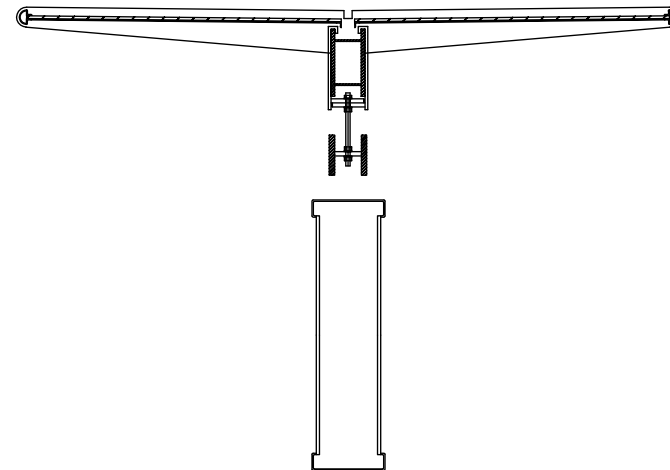
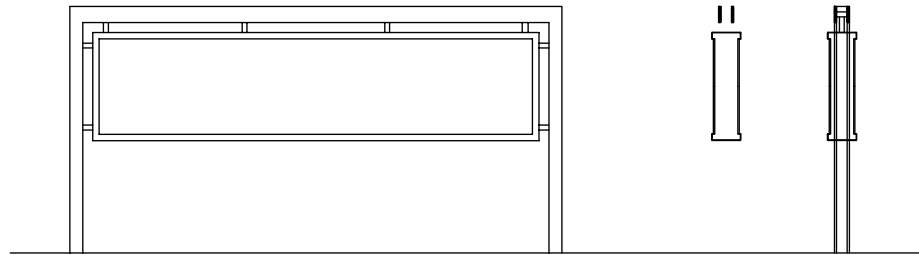
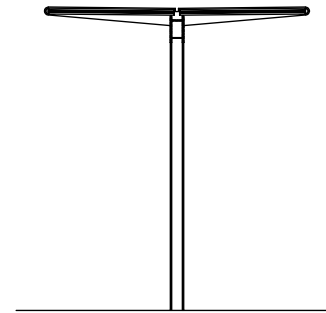
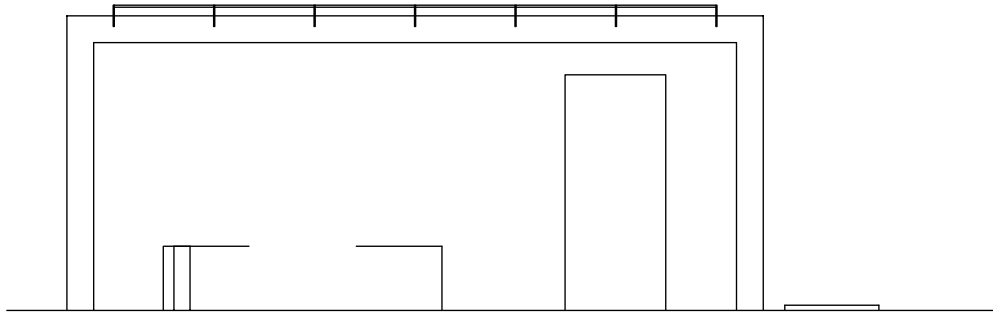
When foreign colleagues or journalists come visit me and we stroll through the parts of central Oslo that were damaged by the terrorist attack, we always stop in front of the VG panel. I translate some headlines and explain the context; Yes, July is the primary holiday month above all others for Norwegians and the whole country is practically closed down during the last two to three weeks of this month. The newspapers are barely published. And sure, we call this period in the press *cucumber time* because the annual cucumber harvest is the most exciting thing they can find to write about. And absolutely, the police were completely unprepared for the terrorist attack and acted accordingly. Typically, I add, the debate post 22nd of July was more about police mistakes and the terrorists traumatic childhood than about the political hatred that motivated him and where he may have cultivated it.

The lesson to be learned from all this is not that the press and public should be alert, on guard, suspicious and worried all year. No one says it is. To my knowledge no one reacted to beach-ready weather making VG headlines once again in its summer papers in 2012. Even if the papers had written page after page about a right-wing extremist threat against national security in those weeks and months leading up to 22nd of July, it would not have prevented this terrorist strike. It is hard to imagine how it would be at all possible to protect oneself against an attack of this nature. Breivik, with his ordinary

background and anonymous looks, could have been the Unknown Soldier, but the inverse. We made him and when we least expect it, it could happen again.

Speculations did not run wild during those first hours after the bomb went off in Oslo city centre. On the contrary, most people seemed to agree that fanatical and brutal Muslims must be behind this attack. Experts were called in to TV-studios, speculating. Some went so far as to say that the attack was textbook Al-Qaida. Others mentioned Libya, while still others warned against hasty conclusions. An admirably calm political philosopher actually suggested it could have been a gas explosion in central street Grubbegata where roadwork and digging was taking place. One furious politician was put on air saying 'this is an attack on Norway' (she did not repeat that sentence the next day when it became public knowledge that the terrorist had actually been a member of her party for several years). But most spoke about 'Muslims' in these intense, confused afternoon hours. Stories emerged, like the girl in a hijab with a job in Oslo city centre, who usually commuted in the tram but on this particular day, was picked up by her father because he did not want her to take risks. Speculations flourished online about what Muslim groups could be held accountable. And all experts agreed that there must be an organization behind it, that this strike against the state of Norway was professionally done and likely executed by a group of highly trained terrorists.

This panel is perhaps most precisely read as a monument to the element of chance that shapes our lives and to the fundamental unpredictability of existence. From one day to the next we went from being annoyed at a terrible summer to wondering if democracy had any future at all. We had met absolute evil in a country that had long marketed itself as a gross exporter of goodness and when the dust settled, we were left knowing that, when we least expect it, something similar could happen again. The VG panel from July 22nd 2011 says nothing about the Unknown Soldier, he who gave his life to protect the nations borders against foreign enemies. Instead it tells the story of an inner enemy who broke our idyllic existence with the blood of others, the monster that could emerge at any time, anywhere. A monster that is harder to talk about than both the Unknown Soldier and an external enemy, because we created it ourselves.



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REV	DATO	ENDRINGEN GJELDER	SIGN.	KONTR.
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Stillingenierene HAUG OG BLOM-BAKKE AS Rådgivende ingeniører i byggeteknikk M.R.I.F.				
Christian Krohgs gate 34 0186 OSLO Tlf: 22 98 90 10 Faks: 22 98 90 29 E-post: epost@hbb-bygg.no Internett: www.hbb-bygg.no				
OPPDRAG KORO Flytting av VG-monter		TEINET AV: ØOP 13026	KONTR. ØOP 12.06.2013	
TEINET Oppriss busskur og vg-monter Oppriss sammensatt		FILNAVN: Plan 8 - alle byggeoppdrag	MÅL: 1: 50 / 1: 20	
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Walid Sadek (LB) is an artist and writer. His work investigates the violent legacies of the Lebanese civil war and endeavors to structure a theory for a post-war society disinclined to resume normative living. He is Associate Professor at the Department of Architecture and Design at the American University of Beirut.

To Ahmad Ghossein

As you pursue your project in Oslo and with you implicitly carry Beirut, allow me to stay in Beirut and think this city which seesaws between the dilemmic two horns of monumentalized ruins and ruined monuments. For within the thorny purview of your project, Beirut looms as the inevitable and troubled future of Oslo. If your city of choice offers you the opportunity to attempt a suspension of an object between the embalmed time of the ruin and the hubristic eternality of the monument, it is in Beirut, our fateful city, that we must consider not the success or failure of such a suspension but rather ways to exit the two horns of the dilemma which keep us bent on instrumentalizing the past either to the glory of a historicizing power or in the name of a relentlessly eroding natural time, somehow discriminating and capable of vindicating the forgotten names of the fallen. What the consequences of your project call for, here in Beirut, is a conceptualization of the ruin against the monument; not in the sense of two forces acting in opposition along the same linear temporal axis, for that would provide little else than a reiteration of the dilemma, but rather of positing the ruin as forthcoming, as opening a time to come, not from an unbeknownst and hoped for future, but built by those who survive the exorbitant pressures of the purported epic but essentially false struggle between the monument and the ruin.

To begin this work, we must unpack the nearly axiomatic dilemmic dyad of the monument/ruin by showing that the two terms overlap and even conflate in upholding a linear construction of history. How ruins are complicit is less obvious as they are traditionally set against the monument and on the side of the defeated – or in the least the wounded. And yet ruins do function as components of ideological apparatuses and as such must be theorized as *premature*¹: Ruins are acts of framing the past as a settled past and as such are both claims to a linear history kept on course and symptoms of an anxiety in the face of an allegedly unnameable downward sloping process of decay. A successful ruin is an accomplished act of framing which retreats to foreground an object of aestheticized dilapidation proffered as instructional, auratic or contemplative but never as current. For an object to be read as a ruin it must already be set back and away from any destabilizing sense of urgency. In fact, ruins play their ideological role most fully when employed to expedite the withdrawal of the negative from the present. In other words, the catastrophe that may inhabit the present and bind it tight to the crushing weight of its own unyielding presentness must be swiftly evicted and efficiently framed as a ruin lest our resident belief in a planned and better future be hindered and jeopardized. The ideological organization of linear historical time, when making and preserving

ruins, raises questions as to the moment of he who frames a ruin and the time of those who live the wreck that a ruin is not. The framing of wrecks into ruins thus becomes a matter of maintaining a political investment in the narrativization of the past as linear history. The ruin is a temporal marker of a past that is now firmly in the past and a future that begins again from a present freed of negativities: *The present wreck when turned into a ruin is no longer the temporal site of the catastrophe. It merely dons its form.* The ruin as a frame is therefore premature because it stunts the expansion, wayward and indeterminate, of the catastrophe and its wreckage. Premature is this frame because it prohibits the labour of mourning, possibly interminable and unproductive. But also, premature is this frame because it cruelly binds us to an aspirational future before whose deferred arrival we stand hoping and infantilized.

Recall if you will, the two postage stamps issued by the Lebanese government in 1958, two years after a devastating earthquake hit the shores of Lebanon on the 16th of March 1956 causing 130 deaths, displacing innumerable families and provoking substantial material destruction.² The postage stamps were a form of taxation to the benefit of the earthquake's victims and their use was obligatory on all inland mail and all outgoing mail to Arab countries.³ The two stamps form a revealing visual diptych: the first represents a bereaved mother with her two young children set against the rubble of a home and in the distance the faint silhouette of a mountain all under the bold heading of *Ighatha wa Ta'meer* (Relief and Construction). The visibility of this first stamp calls for urgent action to assist those who live in the ruin which still occupies the present of the young nation-state two full years after the natural catastrophe. The second stamp is noticeably dispassionate; it represents builders and architects raising a new house out of the well-studied lines of an architectural drawing which lies open beneath it with the same heading reduced in size and moved to the upper left hand corner. When read syntagmatically together, the first stamp, I argue, sets up and makes possible the resumption of history as represented in the second. And this, the first stamp does, by framing wreckage in the past. In other words, the ruin is not to be found in the visual configuration of the stamp. Rather, the ruin is the stamp itself. The stamp necessarily misrecognizes and frames the past as a past from which the nation is already walking away, as evidenced in the second stamp, to continue its planned march towards a greater future. This 1958 stamp fulfils the task of 'prematurely' releasing the present of its negativities as it maintains a humanitarian sympathy towards the wounded past that is already other to the present of the ruin. It is important to note that the Lebanese nation-state of 1958, while still able to generate a premature ruin of the earthquake, would fail to do the same of the civil-war which ravaged the social fabric of the na-

tion during that same year. No such stamps were issued as the nation-state was clearly divided and marked by several belligerent and exclusionary monuments.⁴ But before moving on to the ostensible second component of the dyad, namely the monument, and delve further into local history, allow me an excursus into the significance of Georg Simmel's essay "the Ruin"⁵ published in 1911 as a late attempt at finding a resolution within the European tradition to the dyad monument/ruin. For it is in his text that we read most clearly the implication of the ruin and the monument in safeguarding linear history.

Simmel considers that the age-old enmity between the necessity of nature and the will of the spirit, or between ruination and edification, is founded on the assumption that human wilful intention is constantly threatened by the unworking of nature. Accordingly, the ruin is a nostalgic spectacle of man's work undone; a spectacle possibly punctuated by flashes of dread as the endurance of time alone looms triumphant over every human endeavour. In this regard Diderot's views on ruins have become exemplary: *"Everything comes to nothing, everything perishes, everything passes; only the world remains; only time endures. How old is this world! I walk between two eternities."*⁶ But this is precisely the assumption that Simmel argues will always obfuscates a deeper truth that nature is a common root at work within human purposiveness and non-conscious natural forces. And it is the ruin as a form which clearly manifests the unity of both. A unity which will continue to appear accidental and meaningless for as long as we persist in apprehending ruins as the form of our crumbling intentions. But in accepting the agency of Nature acting through the two opposing tendencies of ruination and edification, of life and death, we stand outside nostalgic formalism and recognize in the ruin the synthesis which overcomes the terms of a false and ancient enmity: *"In this form [the ruin], we thus feel the vitality of those opposing tendencies – and, instinctively sensing these antitheses in ourselves, we notice, beyond everything merely formal and aesthetic, the significance of the configuration in whose serene unity they have their synthesis."*⁷ The ruin for Simmel is no longer one term in a dyadic struggle but rather the unity which exposes the ultimate falsity of that epic struggle. His proposition is anti-dialectical because in it the ruin is the revelation of what we should have always known. The ruin is the form of a return home, to the *"good mother"*⁸, where *"two world potencies – the striving upward and the sinking downward – are working serenely together, as we envisage in their working a picture of purely natural existence."*⁹ For Simmel, the ruin is a paradisiacal foundation, lost to be recovered. It promises not only a vindication of a non-dialectical linear history but more so its re-enchantment.

It seems to me that Simmel's attempt to end the epic dilemmic dyad monument/ruin

is indicative of a larger historicist malaise. The claims of a linear history always put back on its proper course, while forcedly efficient, do not propose any convincing theory on the manipulation of temporalities by societies and the pressures of time on social organization. To pursue a critique of historicism requires an unpacking of the dyad monument/ruin as employed in the service of an ordered history. What I have argued premature ruins do to wreckage must be extended to monuments that do similarly to forgetting. In their overlap as sentinels of historicism, the ruin and the monument relieve the present of the past: the ruin by anchoring the past to the past and the monument by robbing memory of forgetting. In that respect, the many monuments which mark the divided territory of Lebanon are efficient. For each is an opaque marker of a selective memory reduced to commemorate an event, remember the enemy and practice a coming revenge. But even a national and apparently non-vengeful monument, such as the current martyrs' monument in the centre of Beirut, still performs the crucial task of robbing memory of its complex labour, a labour which may lead to forgetting. And what monuments fear most is the complexity of remembering precisely because to forget is not to be without a memory. Forgetting is neither amnesia nor oblivion. Rather, it is the transformation of the past through a dynamic remembering which destabilizes the tenets of realist and homogeneous historical representation. *Forgetting is non-linear remembering and as such does not monumentalize.* Accordingly, nation-states as well as militarized sectarian groups avoid memory unless reduced to commemoration, a putting on record.

The inauguration of a cast-bronze monument by the Italian Marino Mazzacurati (1907-1969) in 1960, during the presidency of Fouad Chehab, was an attempt for the Lebanese nation-state, emerging from a bitter civil-war, to reassert its hegemony and visually respond to the Beq'ata monuments built to commemorate an impossible Lebanese nation and the need to expand and evolve towards a Pan-Arab nationalism. But this new martyrs' monument installed in the centre of Beirut was also intended to efface an earlier monument sculpted by Youssef El Howayyek (1883-1962) which commemorated the martyrs who fell on the 6th of May, 1916 and inaugurated on the 2nd of September, 1930, during the French mandate. El Howayyek's monument was removed on the 4th of May 1951¹⁰ following a long public controversy which lasted for years and which gradually succeeded in denigrating it as a symbol of defeatism, sectarianism and effeminacy.¹¹ El Howayyek's stone-cut monument has since been relegated to quiet idleness as part of the sculpture collection of the privately owned Sursock Museum in the district of Ashrafieh in Beirut. Retired, the monument has shifted its symbolic significance from a past and purportedly nationalist emblem to a contemporary pensive monument, open and irresolute.

Looking at its formal composition tells us much about its fate: It represents two women, a veiled Muslim and an uncovered Christian, with their arms extended and hands lying on a *mirmada* or urn said to contain the ashen remains of the martyrs.¹² Their hands do not touch but rather communicate through the space of the dead, namely the urn. Such formal choices are significant because they stage the contiguity of two unnamables: the two not-yet-widows¹³ who linger and the ashen remains of the martyrs that occupy still the space of the urn and therefore cannot be said to be completely inhumed or abolished. This may not seem sufficiently remarkable were we not to emphasize that the later Mazzacurati monument fully departs from the sculptural components of the first monument. For not only does it replace the patient stay of the two mourners with an avowedly triumphant composition made of an ascending spiral of partially clothed figures summing toward a female figure of freedom, it also abolishes all traces of corpses even if only the implied contents of an urn. It is therefore tenable to posit that El Howayyek's monument was not only replaced but also evacuated. The mourners were made to graduate into exalted figures of a triumphant nationalism while the urn was emptied and dispersed into a number of cenotaphs for the Unknown Soldier, the first of which was constructed in the vicinity of the National Museum and inaugurated in 1949 by President Beshara El Khoury.¹⁴ El Howayyek's monument was denigrated precisely because it could not sustain itself as an expression of liberated nationalist aspirations. For in the specifics of its sculptural components, it is disturbingly un-accomplished and inadequately nationalist. In it, mourning weighs heavily still with the unfinished or not-yet-abolished corpse. It is a crowded monument absorbed in the actuality of death's remains and consequently un-behooving the upward drive of transcendental nationalist aesthetics. While the later Mazzacurati monument claims and stages a closure of mourning through the liberation of the nationalist ego, El Howayyek's soliloquizes.

The ousting of El Howayyek's inadequate monument was inevitable considering the impatience of nation-states with protracted mourning. In this regard, monuments and ruins come to expedite the relocation of the past in the past and to instrumentally reduce it to commemorative ciphers. This is an act of violence committed in the name of linear history against the vicissitudes of social organization within time. Against such violence, the ruin must be conceptualized to defend the possibility of a non-linear history, a labyrinthine temporality. Such is in part the critique Jalal Toufic articulated in a lapidary essay titled "Ruins".¹⁵ For the author, ruins are places haunted by the living who inhabit them precisely because the practice of living as dwelling by mortals turns every place into a ruin. Ruins are what mortals do as they live. And just as ruins are not intentionally constructed, they also cannot be

intentionally eliminated. For ruins exist in an anachronistic, labyrinthine temporality, “becoming manifest at least in flashes”¹⁶, and would remain so even if reconstructed, demolished and replaced by another building. The consequences of Toufic’s proposal proffer ruins as a haunting of every reconstruction project. And if an act of violence is required to reposition ruins within linear history then an equal act of violence is necessary to peg mortals as productive and consumptive subjects within that same history. Linear time is inimical to ruins as it is also to the living of mortals. Yet, Toufic’s ruins remain symptomatic of the living of mortals under the ideological crush of reactionary reconstruction projects. What calls still to be theorized is a ruin which comes forth as the labour of a surviving which carries the weight of a knowledge gathered from within crises, a labour which dialectically appears and recedes, figures and pre-figures, to keep the possibility of sounding a counter-factual future against a materially present but unsummonable depth of experience.

Walid Sadek

Beirut 23/06/2013

Notes

- 1 I borrow this term from Michael Roth but expand it to include all ruins which act as frames that organize, order and legitimate a linear construction of history. See Michael Roth (with Claire Lyons and Charles Merewether), **Irresistible Decay: Ruins Reclaimed**, published by the Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1997, pp. 1-23.
- 2 The daily **Annahar**, 19th of March 1956, p.1.
- 3 Joseph Hatem, **Lebanon Illustrated by its Stamps**, Beirut: Éditions Dergham, 2009, p. 169.
- 4 One notable but seldom discussed example is the Beq’ata martyrs’ monuments financed and supervised in 1959 by Kamal Jumblat as a memorial to those who fought in the 1958 civil-war against the Western backed central state of Lebanon. For copious research see Lucia Volk, **Memorials and Martyrs in Modern Lebanon**, Indiana University Press, 2010, pp. 81-91.
- 5 Georg Simmel, “The Ruin”, **The Hudson Review**, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Autumn, 1958), pp. 379-385.
- 6 John Goodman (ed.), **Diderot on Art**, Vol. II, Yale University Press, 1995, p. 198.
- 7 Simmel, p. 381.
- 8 Simmel, p. 382.
- 9 Simmel, p. 383.
- 10 The daily **Al-Hayat**, 5th of May 1951, p. 2.
- 11 See for example the article in the daily **Al-Hayat**, 1st of May 1951, p. 2.
- 12 See Nazih Khater and Mohsen E. Yammine, **Yakzat Al Hajar** (The Stone’s Awakening); sculptures by Youssef El Howayyek photographed by Manoug, with an introduction by Ghassan Tuani, Beirut: Dar An-Nahar, in French and Arabic, 2004, p. 45 of the Arabic text.
- 13 Although the two women are often reductively called “the two weepers” (i), I propose “not-yet-widow” not because it can be assumed that they are wives of the fallen but due to their patient stay and absorption in the unfinished remains of the dead which precludes their return to the normative world of the living. See Ghassan Tuani and Fares Sassine, **El Bourj**, Beirut: Dar An-Nahar, in French and Arabic, 2000, p. 32 of the Arabic text.
- 14 The daily **Al-Hayat**, 7th of May 1949, p. 1.
- 15 Jalal Toufic, (**Vampires**): **An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film**, revised and expanded edition (Sausalito, CA: The Post-Apollo Press, 2003), pp. 67–74.
- 16 Toufic, p. 72.

Kjetil Røed (NO) is an art critic and writer. He regularly writes for newspaper Aftenposten, art magazine Billedkunst and kunstkritikk.no. Røed also contributes to Le Monde Diplomatique and Frieze Magazine.

Ahmad Ghossein (LB) is a filmmaker and video artist, graduated from Oslo Art Academy. He has directed several documentaries, short films and videos and was awarded the Best Director Prize at the Beirut International Film Festival 2004 and best short film in Tribeca Doha Film Festival 2011. His work has been screened in different film festivals, Museums and galleries around the world like Berlin Film Festival, Oberhausen Film Festival, MoMa and New Museum in New York, Oslo Kunsthall, Home Works in Beirut and Dubai Film Festival.

Relocating the Past: a conversation

– I started noticing how people stopped and read the news in the VG panel as if nothing had happened. Their faces were unaffected, ordinary. When I approached them and told them that this, in fact, was the news from 22nd of July 2011, the day of the terrorist attacks, some actually refused to believe me.

I am sitting with the Lebanese artist Ahmad Ghossein at the coffee shop nearby the VG display panel in glass and metal which was destroyed when Breiviks bomb detonated.

He is telling me about the origin of his project *Relocating the Past: Ruins for the Future*. As we talk, passersby stop and consider the crisp yellow pages marked by time, still telling the most mundane of stories: innocence and a news drought. The summer heat is discussed, of course. The differing price tags of strollers. Little did we know what was about happen.

Ghossein had realized the importance of keeping the panel intact, with its abundance of fractured patterns: Not, primarily, as a work of art, but as a reminder of what happened - and, perhaps, is still happening.

– *Do you think of this as a 22/7-monument?*

– No, this is not a work designed to remember the catastrophe, like, for instance, the Holocaust-memorial in Berlin.. It's not supposed to be a noble work, a sculpture destined for eternity,

ethereal, untouchable. I think of it as a gift to the people - they can do whatever they want with it. When it is installed my work is done.

– *Will it still be located here, outside VG?*

– No, it will be relocated to the bus-stop, outside the government-building a few meters down the road. Actually it will only be attached loosely to the ground, so if someone wanted to remove it or destroy it, it is entirely up to them. I want people to decide for themselves what to do with it. When the work is in place, it is up to the people. The work will in any case be the focal point for something collective, I imagine, regardless of whether it is destroyed or not. Maybe someone will protect it against others. Maybe it will fall down and shatter. I do not know.

– *How do you think this gift will be received? What should the Norwegian people do with it?*

– That is what I am looking forward to. How the work will be received. Its actual use is not for me to define. Be that as it may, it is, however, hard not to notice the lack of a thorough public debate about Breivik and what he represents after 22/7. A natural consequence of an act like this would, from my point of view, be to unearth the roots of what happened. But a discussion like this only took place to a limited extent. Today people walk by this place as if nothing has happened.

– *This thoughtlessness, the fact that people act as if nothing happened, as you say – no doubt this would be totally different if it had been Muslim terrorists?*

– Exactly. And that's part of the point. It's easy to relate to a fanatical Muslim as something else than the Norwegian community. The mythologies and stereotypes are there, ready to be put into use. But Breivik was "one of us", grown up in western part of Oslo, in an anonymous middle-class home surrounded by the upper echelons of society. He was average in most ways. Many Norwegians would identify with him. That one so similar to oneself should turn out to be a high-strung killer is hard to handle. That's probably why the public debate never happened. We do not want to admit that he is one of us. Perhaps we don't want to know.

– *You describe the work as a readymade. Some will react to this use of aesthetic terminology in relation to such a brutal reality. This is too far beyond Duchamp, to put it like that, right?*

– Not really. The way I see it the artist has a responsibility in society. He should not isolate himself in an ivory tower, but comment on and contribute to current public debates. Looked upon this way the concept of the readymade is just one of many techniques for addressing issues that concern others. I consider art to be a medium for doing other things.

– *I see. A part of what's interesting about the work, I think, is exactly how it shows a variety of media and techniques to be useful in connection with a traumatic event. The work can, for instance, be presented as a photography, exposed by the blast itself. But it can also be described as a documentary*

work, tracking the lines in what happened through the fractures in the surface of the glass. Last, but not least, it can be described as a sculptural essay on 22/7 repeating what happened again and again at the moment of the viewer's inclusion.

– Indeed. It is also theatrical in this sense. When one moves around it, the document's connection with the original event is re-enacted while keeping the distance intact: It is literary or narrative in the sense that it tells a story in cooperation with the individual onlooker. When one considers the work, the viewer is dramatized within the discrete, but hands-on frame of the of the bombings after-effect. First when the underlying date and event is discovered, then when the event is mediated through the object.

– *Perhaps the work is first and foremost a montage between then and now? I imagine it to be a charged connection-point between two different layers of time breaking against each other without converging. Maybe we can describe it as a way of framing the fact that 22/7 is not yet understood? That the friction between then and now is formulated as a sort of imperative to integrate "22/7" in our time, in our now?*

– Well, at least we can talk about a co-existence of different time-layers and how the first one demands legitimacy, understood as a thinking-through, within the space of the other. When people stop and refuse to understand the fact that it is in fact news from 22/7, it also signals that we are all prisoners of the moment and the habits that structure our daily reality here

and now. The work, on the other hand, discloses a layer of something unknown, something traumatic, underneath the familiar surface: In the location of the expected news of today, a major piece of news suddenly returns as a repressed trauma.

– *Maybe we could describe the work as a Trojan horse, where one smuggles in what one is obliged to reflect on into the centre of the web of everyday reality's most regulated habits? What you think is safe, turns out to be a moral obligation to think...*

– You are onto something there. It may be a *punctum* in public space, a perforation of normality and forgetful habit. It's in the margin of what you do without thinking about it; it is neither the site where art is expected, nor is it a site where you expect a peep-hole towards a horrible event. That's why you might be struck, moved or confused. Since you perhaps are not granted the privilege to prepare yourself for a "monument" or "art."

– *I can't avoid thinking about the philosopher Jaques Ranciere here. Like you he is preoccupied with the duties of an intellectual. But he is also interested in how art is not isolated, but part of a general way of perceiving, a politics of sensation, where something is important and other things not. To question these forms, and who administers them, is essential, he claims. Could we talk about a rearranging in your work also, a rearranging that relocates both the common sites of public space and art and, in this way, makes us more aware of how we perceive things?*

– At least I believe you could describe it as a relatively literal cut through different layers of time and space. It's not just a readymade because it made itself, or because it's not assisted, only moved somewhere else; it is also a readymade through its cultural and social rawness. It is not wrapped up in an institution or a frame which can help the viewer tune in on the aesthetic.

– *The literal here, the peep-hole towards 22/7, as you call it, complicates the work in a productive sense, I think: It is a democratic work because it insists on thinking through the unthought. Or?*

– Yes. But it is also a democratic work because it addresses the collective, the people. It's a call to intellectual labor, a mutual effort which does not exist yet, at least not sufficiently so. It's not, as I said, a monument, since monument freeze moments in time. In addition, the real monuments of the past are in people's heads, not in public space... It is the life of the object which interest me here, people's reactions, not it's status as a piece of art.

The conversation has ended, Ghossein has left. At the moment there are a few teenagers standing by the display. They look confused. But, perhaps more so because of the extent of the newspaper-pages' decay? – one has even fallen down from the wall. One of the youngsters points at the crumbled piece of paper and looks at the others, questioningly.



27th of June 2013



28th of June 2013

Participants

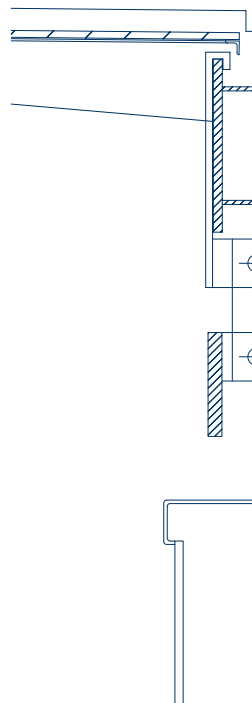
Ahmad Ghossein, artist
 Fredrik Qvale, conservationist
 Morten Løvseth, architect (Bus shelter)
 Halgeir Kårstein, architect (VG display panel)
 Øistein O. Pettersen / Haug og Holm-Bakke AS, civil engineer
 Lars Dugbø / Olaf E. Eriksen AS, construction
 Cato Nystuen / Østlandske Montasje, steel
 Arve Nesvang / Sandvika Glassmesterforretning AS, glass
 Produced by URO - Bo Krister Wallström & Kristine Jærn Pilgaard

Thank you - VG / Ann Mari Ågotnes & Bjørn Brogård,
 Martin Edelsteen, Marianne Hultman, Will Bradley, A K Dolven,
 Stephan Wright, Helle Siljeholm, Merete Røstad, Thomas Hylland
 Eriksen, Kjetil Røed, Walid Sadek & Arne Johan Vetlesen

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Print & paper - Fladby AS, 100g Scandia Ivory, offset-print
 1st Edition - 1000 copies
 Editors - Kristine Jærn Pilgaard & Bo Krister Wallström
 Designer - Hanna Høiness / Ego Design
 Translation - Thora Dolven Balke
 Proofreaders - Inger Ulstein & Justin Swinburne
 Photo credits - Aleksander Andersen/NTB scanpix (page 5)
 Ahmad Ghossein (page 10-11)
 Alette Schei Rørvik (page 32-33, 34)

Published by URO / KORO
www.koro.no



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