

Autographs and Images Snapshots of Prague and Berlin

Julian Stallabrass

[‘Autographs and Images: Snapshots of Prague and Berlin’, *New Left Review*, no. 190, November-December 1991, pp. 83-9.]

The changing visual environment of formerly Communist countries, in flux under the pressures of capitalist enterprise and economic chaos is so provisional, its elements apparently so unwarranted, that it raises many questions in the mind of any visitor from the West. This essay is about some of those questions and was stimulated by witnessing the rapid changes occurring in Berlin and Prague. It is about the role which tourism, the creation of images and the writing of names play in the transformation. The East, now bearing the first marks of private commerce, can serve as a lens with which to examine the raw appearance of capital. It gives the lie to those who argued that the systems of the East and the West were essentially similar. While in some ways this analysis is subjective and visual, I shall argue that this is not in itself a fault. I should add that although this is an essay which calls out for illustration, there is a good -though extrinsic - reason why it is unillustrated, for half an hour before I was due to leave Berlin, my camera bag was stolen. Apart from the cameras - in principle, at least, replaceable machines despite the occasional Heideggerean sense of presence they give on malfunctioning - was the loss of the thirty or so rolls of exposed film, images of Prague and Berlin. These are doubly irreplaceable, for in addition to all the unrepeatable contingencies which make a photograph (the atmospheric conditions, the combinations of figures, the dispositions of objects and shadows) the subject of these pictures was largely the transient aspect of cities in the process of vertiginous change. No doubt these latent images will finish on the city dump, and this is curiously fitting, since they will be joined there - eventually - by many of their subjects. The reader will, I hope, forgive that this is to an extent an exercise in compensation. But it is not only that. The East, now a plane of intersection where the physical fabric of the old systems persists alongside the incursions of a shiny and self-confident West, throws difference into strong relief, and much of this contrast is based around the image and the signature, to which the practice of photography is intimately related.

Under Western eyes, the East has always been notable for a bareness against which any incident stands out more fully, giving the impression of a more palpable reality. This effect is readily apparent on Berlin's Museum Island at dusk where broad, empty vistas and bulky neo-classical buildings, whose stones still bear the marks of shrapnel, the Bodesmuseum and the Pergamon Museum, are separated by a railway line which runs over the river. There is hardly a trace of writing or commerce. The area, with its broad open spaces and its mix of bare neo-classicism and archaic modernity, is reminiscent of some scene from De Chirico. Such an apparent excess of reality spills over into surreality: as in De Chirico everything takes on a theatrical air, for culture (here an imperial architecture) is unmediated by the usual visual impedimenta (which provide it with the contrast and which situate it as antique) and the customary apparatus of labelling (which allows the identification and dismissal of the artifact).

Further clues to this sense of a tangible reality, a vision which echoes the unease aroused by high resolution photography, can be found inside the galleries. A comparison of the former West German galleries at Dahlem and the former East German Nazionale Gallerie brings out some of the similarities and the differences. They are the fragmented parts of a larger national collection, the division of which reflected a wider separation. To look at these museums is like examining identical twins brought up in different families. Similar are the green wall coverings and the ugly mix of strip and daylight, similar the frequent lapses of taste perpetrated by the Prussian kings. Very different though is their general ambience. Dahlem is a large, modernist gallery, a place of bureaucratic but somehow modest perfection, its pictures well placed in even light, its decor sparse. The Nazionale Gallerie exudes a dusty and archaic presence, where through the gaps in its curtains there is an unwarranted (and curatorially inadvisable) incursion of sunlight into its dark rooms. Many paintings do not appear flush to the wall but stand a little away from it. Such imperfections bring home the reality of the works, which appear as objects, actual things which might be handled, which might themselves change, and which might appear different in changed circumstances. The ideal perfection striven for in Western display, where painting appears as a fixed and immaterial apparition, actually debases the works, for wonder often comes out of an impression of the aesthetic emerging from the material, from a simultaneous realisation of beauty and matter. Contingency reveals beauty. In the West, the simultaneous grasp of this opposition is lost through the complete dominance of the visual in transcendental guise.

In Prague and old East Berlin, there is an unintentional privileging, through lack of control and through poverty, of incident, and a preparedness to let age manifest itself. The utopias of the East are less effective and comprehensive than those of the West, where (at least in show-piece areas) the past has been eradicated through the complete control of the environment. This is even the case when we are really in the presence of something old. An American friend once remarked on passing the Tower of London that, although it was of course in a sense genuine, it still felt like Disneyland. Incident and age are lost in the West, too quickly swamped in a comprehensive diversity or assimilated to commercial uses.

If it is the bareness of the East's visual environment which allows us full appreciation of contingency, the incursion of the West has multiplied such incidents. For the moment, many parts of Berlin and area form a surreal world of collage in which the Trabi plays a starring role. At a major junction in Potsdam sits one Trabi, gutted, its bonnet still attached but folded up to form a sign proclaiming, 'Gl•ck ist was man braucht' [Luck is what one needs]. In Tucholskystrasse, another, parked in the street, has become a little garden, its boot and bonnet filled with earth and planted, its interior lined with pots. Everywhere there are abandoned cars filled with junk, everywhere graffiti and refuse.

An obdurate reality is found in the gaps between planned conceptions. This is well illustrated in Prague where the infrastructure of mass tourism is far from fully established. Information is still hard to come by and arrangements difficult to make. The politically necessary change of street names causes further chaos. Prague's old streets were rhizomatic enough without this innovation. Prague's diverse, urban beauty brings home to Western tourists what they have lost: in the past it might have reminded us of what the processes of Hausmannisation, rationalisation, bombing and road building had done to our cities, for Prague retains much of its medieval street

pattern and a fascinating mix of architectural styles. Now it is likely to remind us of more modern and immediately commercial pressures. Areas of the city are succumbing to the commercial apparatus of plate glass, spot-lit displays and plastic signs, in addition to all the paraphernalia required to regulate mass private transport. The fabric of old Prague now lies beneath an epidemic of graffiti and fly-posting. The arcades are covered in posters, already sometimes producing a palimpsest of images and text, publicising touristic events. Other areas, especially the walls bordering the Vltava, are covered with bright graffiti acting as coloured locii for the offended eye of the tourist who surveys the famous scene towards the Castle. A guardianship of all the accessible surfaces of the city was beyond the powers of any tyranny, and the loss of control over the visual and cultural environment is not so much a product of political freedom, as a consequence of the ubiquitous and unbridled exercise of capital. The greatest graffiti artists, from whom the spray-can practitioners take their genre and their m, tier, are the giant corporations who strive to make their `handles' truly ubiquitous, perhaps most notoriously the Coca-Cola company, which boasts that the limits of the distribution of its logo mark those of human civilisation. An apparent reality recedes before the weight of writing, representations, consumer objects, signs, and dynamic, absurd juxtapositions, and is at least banished to a region above first floor level.

The bareness of the East not only shows us what we have lost but is a backdrop against which we can more clearly see what we are. Advertisements appear in ridiculous situations, provisionally placed on the side of tower blocks, trade names are plainly grafted onto system built blocks which, in themselves, exhibit no individuation. Here such practices seem manifest, blatant and questionable. Adverts are no longer subjects (more or less offensive, banal, or vulgar) but simply adverts: their medium becomes opaque and we see them as a genus. `Europe will be one' says one poster for clothing, echoing in a parochial way the united colours of the Benetton campaign. This may of course be seen in many places, but seemed particularly poignant above a shallow scrap of enclosed land where the most diverse and unimaginable rubbish had been dumped. Berlin is most charming in its supposedly fenced off areas, which in London would be quite impenetrable to the gaze (let alone the feet) but which here are almost as leaky and open as the Wall. Rusting cars, washing machines, cogs and other pieces of machinery, newspapers all mix in an aging parody of consumerism. One or two people inevitably will be picking amongst this refuse. Disposability is of course the concomitant of consumerism so advert and rubbish exist here not in opposition but in symbiosis.

Given Berlin's reputation as a centre of modernity, its similarity to ancient sites proves a shock. This similarity is found not only in the massive, reconstructed remains of classical monuments in the Pergamon Museum, but in the archaeological appearance of recent history in the city itself. Now the Wall is gone, the tourist may wander over the lumps of earth which mark the site of Hitler's Chancellery and bunker, and over much of the network of Gestapo and police headquarter buildings, the administrative centre of the Nazi state. In the area around the Martin Gropius Bau, cellars of the former Gestapo building have been opened up and form the exhibition space for a display called the `Typographie des Terrors'. Notices indicate areas where mounds of earth or faint lines mark the location of former buildings. This is a past which has had to be excavated as though it were the remains of some long dead civilisation. It is as if the fifty years which separate us from this past had been extended by the cataclysm of the war to form a break as complete as a geological period. This pressing, harassing reality, which breaks

through post-modern relativisms, is again found only in the scraps, in the gaps, and in the contingent.

The Wall too appears as ancient history. For now, most of it consists of open space, lumpy ground, overgrown with weeds and much populated by rabbits, where occasional fragments of metal, bits of wire and traces of masonry can be found. Sometimes there are more prominent reminders of what was once there, commemorative works of art, a decorated watch-tower offering a perilous climb, a few desultory and protected panels of the wall itself, but even these relics compete with the dumping of many other kinds of debris, motorbikes, cars and other consumer durables. Near Potsdammerplatz, it takes time to identify what look like rusting climbing frames stacked horizontally as the remains of watch-towers.

The apparent loss of reality (the loss of reference to the other) in the collapse of the Communist states is immense. Suddenly myriad objects are reduced to signs: the trappings of the East German military apparatus is for sale. While it is left to the Finnish government to indulge themselves in the purchase of heavy weaponry, the average tourist has to be content with the goods sold by the numerous hawkers at the Brandenburg Gate, Checkpoint Charlie and indeed even on the Charles Bridge in Prague. Here caps, fur hats, badges, telescopes, holsters, fob watches, daggers, belt buckles and even full uniforms may be bought. Many East German goods found unsuitable for this transformation have disappeared with astonishing rapidity. The few that remain no longer function as goods but as symbols of the fallen state. Second hand books are occasionally for sale at these stalls, not to be read, but as objects whose typography, paper, style of illustration and even subject matter, act as quaint and faded signs of a distant and no longer threatening otherness. Pieces of concrete, allegedly fragments of the Wall, are also still for sale. They are less often now chunks of masonry than slivers of painted concrete often encased in transparent plastic, as if in a reliquary, fragments of the true cross of capitalism, accompanied by certificates of authentication (which themselves need authenticating). It is ironic that the aura of these objects is solely dependent on the visual sign of their authenticity and that it is a manifest authenticity which is for sale (even if it's fake); a genuine but unpainted fragment of the wall could now hardly be sold.

Prague too has had to adopt the sign of the authentic. Its transformation into a realm of virtual reality is proceeding apace. The genuine soldiers at the Castle now dress in a cheery, pseudo-nineteenth century costume (designed by a friend of Havel's), march around the courtyards and streets, followed like the pied piper, by bands of tourists, all taking pictures. At times they play a cheery tune (composed by a friend of Havel's) which is supposed to sound traditional, but is actually reminiscent of the incidental music from Thunderbirds.

To capture and frame the visual aspect is to strive to bring home an authentic reality. In the Castle complex, Wenceslas Cathedral, a massive building, is literally full of tourists. It is difficult to move or to see. Discrete but shifting and interpenetrating pastel groups follow banners (usually a raised guidebook, leaflet or parasol) carried by their leaders, and negotiate the obstacles which support the building, surging and buckling in competition with one another. All of these people (myself included) are wielding some kind of image capturing device, from tiny compact cameras to intimidating, sophisticated video cameras. Why this hunger for images, why this urge to bring something back? Is it a bourgeois motive to appropriate and materialise

some fragment of the universe and bring it home, pasting it in the album or displaying it on the television. Why stand still and video things which don't move? What are all these images for?

Cameras and videos mechanisms increasingly take the initiative in making the picture: new machines sport auto-focus, auto-exposure (and sometimes auto-compensation), the selection of programmed preferences for particular situations, and the (idiotic) selection of focal lengths according to the distance of the subject. The point then is not manipulation, not the manifestation of the individual in the picture through work, but presence alone, for all these devices aim to produce a merely average perfection. While the various forms of computerised image manipulation have not reached the home, the photograph remains the ultimate guarantor of authenticity. All these images write the self onto the world's famous scenes, inscribing self over the urban vista of the Vlatava, onto the statues of the Charles Bridge and the vaults of Wenceslas Cathedral. The print is evidence of a presence in front of the object. Only the more literal require themselves or some loved one to be actually present in the image to provide palpable evidence of this. Before visiting the Cathedral, I had never understood the significance of a tourist I had witnessed in Mycenae who was photographing, against the walls of the city, pages of his illustrated guide book open to the appropriate page. Not merely 'I was there' is required, but 'I took this', and (as with graffiti) the action is a performance, an essential part of the act itself, which can be clearly seen by watching the exerting, earnest, often pushy, dances performed by the photographers and the video operators. The vast majority of the images brought home will be distinguished only by their mistakes, for the originality of the photographic image is sought only in the on-site performance its capture. This inscription of presence onto sites (unlike the inscriptions of graffiti) is itself mechanical and featureless: it is a mass produced and unindividuated form of identification.

What is apparent is the compulsion to cover every available surface with an ever-present name, an autograph which itself constitutes the message. Berlin is above all the city of graffiti and the destruction of the Wall has given its practitioners plenty of new scope for their activity. There is a distinction between the political graffiti seen mostly in the East and around the squatted buildings all over the city, and that of the mere signature. In the Marx-Engels Forum the statue of the two luminaries has sprayed on its base the legend, 'Wir sind unschuldig' [We are not guilty]: such graffiti is old fashioned in both its anonymous lettering and the import of its message. Much more representative is the hacked up and much daubed statue of Goethe in the Tiergarten, where this old practitioner of meaningful inscription is subsumed by the scrawled signatures of the new, black and blood red on the white stone of the sculpture.

Capitalist activity is marked by inscription, by the endless repetition of names, either literally or through the image. These names are important only as symbols of quality and guarantors of authenticity: the art market, far from being a marginal concern, provides the model for markets as a whole, for the name proves the product and in itself acquires value. Francis Picabia's painting *L'Oeil Cacodylate* (1921), where the signatures of famous celebrities - artists, writers and musicians - were collected, and where the value of the canvas was thus meant to be increased, was an essential comment on this production. It is in the nature of bourgeois creation that the name, while recognised as unique, cannot be much moved beyond: it is simply present. The signature and the logo are effective only when they appear as unique monads, when their style and its relation to other inscriptions remains unanalysed. Naming in the West pretends to

meaning, but where a diversity is so complete as to occupy all possible positions, even the genuine loses its aura as part of a panorama of seamless culture.

Berlin and Prague illustrate the importance of incompleteness and contingency. The seeds of opposition are there in many photographs, incidentally written into their particularities, for the delightful and unrepeatable concatenations of people and objects under a particular light is an almost unavoidable feature of these automatic images. In the Cathedral we approach an ideal where everything is recorded and archived, where one's most trivial or vulgar gestures are (incidentally) scrutinised from every angle by a hundred lenses. In the East, however, where (by a perspective effect) meaning still appears intact, and where the anti-phenomenological and anti-photographic thingness of objects is apparent, this is even more strongly felt when the camera is absent or malfunctioning. The approach of this essay has been subjective and phenomenological but this is to suit the methodology to its subject. The experience of the visual is precisely the experience of the tourist and the consumer. Capital is increasingly expressed through visual identities and through a writing of names where the effect is more dependent on recognition than reading. To describe the effect of these visual elements is crucial for it is not at the level of objective discourse which they are effective but at the level of subjective internalisation. It is our response which is the important thing.