



CHTO DELAT (What is to be done)



55th International
Exposition
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d'Art
Grand Palais

Steel-Lives, Still-Life
Norayr Kasper

A collateral event for the 55th International Art Exhibition, June - November 2013



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(What is to be done)

a refusal to compete with a slogan

Vencie Biennale 2013



Freedom of criticism is undoubtedly the most fashionable slogan at the present time, and the one most frequently employed in the controversies between socialists and democrats in all countries.

V.I Lenin (What is to be Done 1901)

Forget Matisse, concentrate on Delacroix. To listen to the photographer Norayr Kaspar talk about his photographs and his journeys into Armenia's steel past is to enter a still life before it has arrived. He will move, wistfully, get carried away with talk of flowers and rabbits, skulls of planted rocks; this is the fading beauty and the lost relevance, he implies, indicating the dead matter of life at its last moments. When it matters! We have no choice however but to get carried that same way. To use a phrase from Jorge Semprun, the corpse will go on dying certainly, and the haunting familiarity of these images will pull at a history some of us can never have, some of us can no longer recall. We are, ultimately, as wounded as the steel, the plants; the ruins of progress oxidising and falling into hands unknown and indiscrete. The faces holding onto a story that sweats, a narrative that glistens with concentrated labour, with all types of conspiracies of hope and deception. What is to be done? Yet we must refuse to compete with the slogan.



'Freedom' is a great word, but under the banner of freedom for industry the most predatory wars were waged; under the banner of freedom of labour, the working people were robbed.

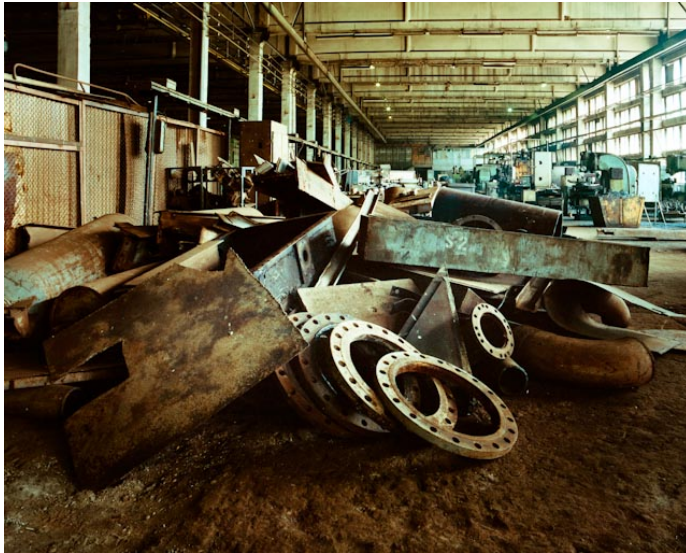
Kaspar will recall Delacroix without necessarily realising it: *Still Life with trophies of Hunting and Fishing* (1826-1827). Trophies is a precise word and we can juggle with it across one hundred and fifty years, across terrain that needs more attention given it than others, across countries that need more attention than others, Armenia, across slogans that have sometimes curated art into an impasse. Then, at a moment when the trophies are distant, untouched, it becomes difficult to discern the feeling of self-abandonment and indifference. Painting flowers, captured beauty, are always transformed by labour. The inanimate, even commonplace object is about to transform and be transformed. Flowers share that special democracy with steel. History shares it too when it hides itself from its own passing.



Steel-life, Still life invites the passing that we cannot quite grasp. The man-made has only its own still life to contend with before it dies. Phoenix in amongst the ashes of disinformation and sorcery. Ah, we have seen these images before, the young digital beings announce, these internet users will say, unable to read detail from background and background from detail. Vision has been hijacked by the very looseness of attention. Art has not been innocent in this process either. Even 1989, the year, the life that was still broken for a whole year, is now virtual and unknown as it fights with the reality it must and surely does leave behind. Walls, classrooms, control panels and machinery, the new jewellery, silk books: all compositions arranged by the arranger invisible to all. Who put the steel in this way, who set the tableaux, who edited the un-editable, who put the remnants out and left them for any of us to enter Harold Brodkey's Church of St Death and the Ease of leaving true Meaning behind?



These are not landscapes. We speak not of the painting but of the detail of a modern still life holding within its careful precision of these Armenian steel plants a micro gallery of lost relevance and creative residue, a wish to break once more the two dimensional barrier. No glass bowls of shattered dreams here, no vases of the tall stem thrashed across the face. Flowers can whip, trophies can slash and betray as they are betrayed again and again. Trophies as great as steel. Suitable to their original place in tombs, it is still believed, just as food objects, these familiar worlds depicted here would, in the afterlife, become real and available for use by the deceased. Steel must always be ready for its next life, decoratively reduced to paper towel containers, sanitary napkin holders before being reborn again in Formula 1 cars, in new factories of another dreamworld and catastrophe, that mass utopia after the one before. The greatness of the Armenian steel industry once in service to the USSR turns and turns again at the flick of the hand. These are emblems in the homes of the steel men and women, still tending the machine that will never quite go away.



The modern use of the term freedom of criticism contains the same inherent falsehood. Those who are really convinced that they have made progress in science would demand not freedom for the new views to continue side by side with the old, but the substitution of the new views for the old.

To venture into photography today, to take on its frailty and ambiguity, to dance with its solitude surely invites caution. But why would more caution be invited today? Is it the freedom of criticism, still that most fashionable slogan that so scares us in this our infinite present time? Is it only in the eyes of those tired and still plagued with meaning that warns us off, that sees to it that we can still read into images something that is not there? Even to ask the question implied in the question mark after 'still life'? Are we so manipulated by our own infinities, so unforgiving at the world's looseness today that we have to agree with Harold Brodkey that we may not only have entered that church but we now actually dwell in spaces that ease us out of true meaning?

And still, we refuse to compete with the slogan. It is not the seasons depicted here by the light, by the scale, it is the shadow spaces of material history. Let us not be fooled by revisions that invite us into the spaces through which untold sweat has glistened. Just what are we to do with symbols of morality in today's world? And what is our position in the earthly paradise once promised by The Union? All steel here is the skull and the remains of language, *omnia mors aequat*. As death makes all equal but obviously some more equal than others.



Photographs, more than anything else, used to have that knack of answering back with propriety, with grace in the grain, and generosity in the frame. Kasper tempts such past in this untouchable present. No longer is history untouched, justice revealed, even though the photograph is still capable of life, but only just and delicately so. Images can be digitally and commercially pimped today and that may be where our problem lies; we wish to bring betrayed language to a dignified 'existence' that has to squeeze through, use other means. How can we chide ourselves when our children chide our world so brutally, so indifferently yet so deservedly, and by so doing they erase the history necessary to remember the fragile dust, the broken classrooms, the damaged industry of once-progressed nations?



We have no right cautioning the image even if we wish to caution ourselves, asking something outside of us to mean more than it can. A life can only re-insert itself through mourning yet photography is perhaps the sovereign critical tool that can still challenge this obscenity. We splinter worlds when we think of the factory that turned its steel into munitions and milled shells and bombs to keep nations alive to fight another day.

The cry heard today, 'Long live the freedom of criticism', is too strongly reminiscent of the fable of the empty barrel.



These fabled worlds of the empty barrel can do nothing but hold a repertoire of a forgotten world contrary to media frenzy, curatorial dogma and - for once - beyond slogan and discourse. Contrary to the doomed, uneven Capital, photographs can and will creep back to awaken us. Is this what photography can do: unfinished, agonisingly redundant in its own creative residue? To the woman who no longer escapes from this photograph, so intimate has steel become to a life lived and worked for so many years. Some of these people: do we know them, would we recognise them from their faces? And what if they turned and looked straight through us? Some of these lives laboured like countries, like states, like systems until they dropped. Some survived the unevenness, the evil dread that crept behind the eyes, even at their child's bedtime, until a new hammer - or what passes for a hammer today is forged - and a new cycle is drawn aside to swathe through the latecomers, the tragedians of the 20th Century mass utopia that forgot how to lock it open.

The elegiac mixes with the mundane in these Steel Lives. The shutter chooses its own speed to shut out the unnecessary when we think we know what the image already tells us: a still life! Yet, fooled by our insight, fooled by the clichés of criticism, slogans and the revolutionary struggle, we are crafted once again by vision that is never a pre-vision, never a world once existing without pain. Steel remains to be worked, lost to decades of retreat and exile. If we have the patience, if we blind ourselves just that much that is necessary, we might slowly learn to re-analyse the worlds.



We are marching in a compact group along the precipitous and difficult path, firmly holding each other by the hand. We are surrounded on all sides by enemies, and we have to advance almost constantly under their fire.

The tardy, they say, the good for nothing, they say; but now they are on the streets in cities where once being on the streets was unforgivable. First they took Manhattan, then Berlin. They took Cairo and then Tripoli. More *soon than now*, it will be Moscow. Only then will the world remember the capital of Armenia, only then the world will realise how hard it is to leave true meaning behind. It is, they say, the metaphor that survives, the steel of our imagination that will confound this moment of zero history. Men with new wives, wives with new contracts, worlds will new tools will build again, and awake to what is to be done. Then our refusal to compete will be complete.



Roger Connah © 2013 (Curator Steel Lives-Still Life / Norayr Kaspar Venice) Skira 2013