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The Way of The Shovel

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Scott Hocking, *Rusty Sputnik*, 2013, installation view as part of 'The Way of The Shovel'

On the face of it, there is something contradictory about the idea of a 'historiographical turn' in contemporary art; a phrase coined by Dieter Roelstraete, curator of 'The Way of The Shovel'.

Contradictory, in so much as 'contemporary' seems to imply an art of its time, while 'historiography' suggests rearview mirror orientation towards the past and the philosophy of history itself.

The archeological, research-based practices of many of today's artists present something of a puzzle that becomes increasingly complex the more you contemplate it: are today's artists – who are so invested in history, both in form and content – simply nostalgic reactionaries? Was Francis Fukuyama, the political scientist who famously declared 'The End of History' at the close of the Cold War, correct after all? Are artists only left to dig through the rubble of a future-less present? Conversely, is it possible that, in digging through the past, we might come out the other side of the present? It made clear that all histories are in fact lived in the present.

A survey of 34 contemporary artists whose work addresses historical and archeological materials and practices, 'The Way of The Shovel' grew out of Roelstraete's eponymous 2009 essay, published in e-flux journal. The exhibition appeared to be structured around a series of dialectical oppositions, one of which – that between waking and dreaming – has been prevalent in discussions about history since Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) famously proclaimed history to be the nightmare from which he was trying to wake. Setting the dream-work in motion was Stan Douglas's trance-like *Overture* (1986). Deceptively simple, the piece is comprised of a turn-of-the-century-film of the Canadian Pacific Railroad coupled with a voiceover reading the opening lines of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913). Like the novel itself, Douglas's film has a hypnotic effect, producing a visceral sensation of time's passage as we dip in and out of railroad tunnels and darkness and into the picturesque landscape of the Canadian Rockies.

If *Overture* connects film history and landscape with Proustian memory, then Lene Berg's film, *Stalin by Picasso or Portrait of a Women with Moustache* (2008), awakens a history that has passed from public consciousness with a kind of melancholic poesy. It is often forgotten that Pablo Picasso, one of the poster-boys for capitalism in art (due to the astronomical price tags on his paintings) was, in fact, a member of the French communist party. So great was Picasso's standing that – according to a CIA boss from the time, quoted by Berg – the cultural Cold War was, in a sense, a battle for Picasso's mind and allegiances. Berg's piece draws on Joseph Stalin's death in 1953 and the ensuing uproar caused by the publication of Picasso's supposedly feminized portrait of the Soviet leader in the French communist paper *Les Lettres Françaises*. Resembling a slowed-down animation of drawing and collage, the film has a light touch that lends poignancy to the dilemma of an artist caught in the maw of history's vexing and cruel power struggles.

Daniel Knorr's *State of Mind* (2007) considers the material and immaterial traces of history. Rock-like objects made from

pulverized Stasi files, the works are particularly resonant in light of recent US intelligence-gathering practices that seem to know no bounds. What will an archeology of the 21st century look like now that our lives are lived increasingly online? Not all questions relating to history must involve fear and trembling, loss and regret. Matter – and its relation to the invisible psyche – can be funny, as Jason Lazarus’s photographs, *Above Sigmund Freud’s couch* and *The first time I saw my father unconscious (the pillow my sister placed under his head, May 24th, 2008)* (both 2008), remind us.

The tension between history and the contemporary wasn’t so much resolved in ‘The Way of The Shovel’ as it was deepened and elaborated. The show suggested that the contemporary art museum becomes properly contemporary when it harnesses the ability to present what sociologist Maurice Halbwachs called ‘collective memory’. In his 1952 book on the subject Halbwachs wrote: ‘Our recollections, each taken in itself, belong to everybody; but the coherence or arrangement of our recollections belong only to ourselves – we alone are capable of knowing and calling them to mind.’ The artist as historian in this sense, then, is the keeper or, perhaps more accurately, the instigator of collective memory: its writings, materials, images. The artist gives the audience the tools with which to dig.

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