

12 January 2010

The Irresistible Call of the Future

On Zinny + Maidagan's '*Das Abteil/ Compartment*'

Ranjit Hoskote

1.

As in any reflection on the art of Dolores Zinny and Juan Maidagan, we begin with the site.

The Zollamt, as its name suggests, was the main customs office of Frankfurt am Main from the late 1920s to the 1980s. It now stands across the street from the Museum für Moderne Kunst, and serves the MMK as a project space. Built in 1927, the Zollamt was an anomaly on arrival: it was the only modernist building in the city's mediaeval old quarter, centred around the Römerberg; the other modernist buildings of the 1920s, which formed what is called the 'New Frankfurt', *das Neue Frankfurt*, were situated in other districts. And so matters remained until World War II came to an end in May 1945, when the Zollamt was among the few structures left standing in the *Altstadt*, most of which had been destroyed in the devastating Allied bombardment of Frankfurt. Through an unexpected turn of events, the Zollamt became an anomaly all over again, for a different reason: having previously been too new for its old surroundings, it was suddenly too old for its new environment. It became that paradoxical object: a relic of the modern in the midst of the gradual reconstruction and restoration of the old quarter between the 1950s and the 1980s. And yet, precisely as an isolated relic of the modern, it carries within itself the promise of *renovatio* that inspired many of the avant-gardes of the 1920s, the Constructivists, the Surrealists, the contending exponents of Art Deco and the pioneers of the International Style, the enthusiasts of rocketry and interplanetary travel, the melancholy elegists of the future metropolis in cinema and

the optimistic visionaries of the high-rise and grid-mapped city of tomorrow. The Zollamt embodies the guiding premise of these diverse and often mutually antagonistic movements: that the modernist object is charged with the mandate of transformation; that it incarnates the irresistible call of the future, irrespective of its present context.

At least four of the elements from which Dolores Zinny and Juan Maidagan have developed their richly complex and compelling constellation of sculptures, models, collages and interventions, 'Das Abteil/ Compartment' (December 2009-February 2010) at the MMK Zollamt, are already present in this brief narrative about the site. First: the date, 1927, as a point of anchorage in history, around which a variety of events, personae, proposals and perspectives are constellated. Second: the dramatisation of newness as a shifting horizon of newness, brought into play by the destiny of the building in relation to its changing historical and topographical contexts. Third: the spectral presences of diverse aesthetic and political avant-gardes, which have accompanied the building through its change of purpose, as it has transited from being a node of bureaucratic regulation to a site of cultural production. And fourth: the belief, favoured by the 1920s avant-gardes, in the modernist architectural or art object's capacity to dominate and transform its surroundings with its own confident newness; a belief that Zinny + Maidagan do not relay as an unexamined legacy, but with which they engage critically.

In this, their first museum exhibition in Germany, Zinny + Maidagan amplify and elaborate the artistic mode of site-specificity to a remarkable degree of intensity. Their approach is tuned to the changing velocities of the psyche across the shifts and turbulences of an 83-year period; it is responsive to the deposits of momentous historical change. Zinny + Maidagan articulate, by means that are abstract as well as material, analytical as well as lyrical, a multi-layered chronotope that bypasses the inadequate and too-often merely descriptive categories of 'state', 'style', 'period' or '*Zeitgeist*'.

*

In addressing an exhibition venue, Zinny + Maidagan expand the notion of site by negotiating sensitively with a series of intersecting

relationships between built form and polity, histories premised on State policy and narratives woven around artistic idiosyncrasy, ideological overtones and poetic undertones. They have developed this as a key strategy in a series of installations, including 'Crossed Cities' (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1996), 'Offside' (The New Museum, New York, 1999), 'Curtain Call' (50th Venice Biennale, 2003), 'Semantic Gap' (Lund Konsthall, Lund, 2004), 'Deviation' (2nd Seville Biennale, 2006), and 'Sculpture Stage, Screen and Collages' (7th Gwangju Biennale, 2008). Looking back over their transcultural trajectory, we find ourselves standing with them at a series of thresholds of aesthetic stimulation that leads to political insight. Zinny + Maidagan demonstrate that the magical entrances to the secret continents of knowledge – knowledge concerning unstable borders, interior landscapes of disquiet, tremors of disrupted identity, plural inheritances across ethnic or national lines – can be located anywhere on a planet whose diverse societies have been interconnected by the processes of uneven but transfiguring globalisation.

I use the trope of the threshold, the *limen*, with good reason. Zinny + Maidagan's artistic method does not simply re-format the circulation of meaning within a museum through a system of citations and allusions; it also creates thresholds where the individual consciousness is, so to speak, ambushed by the phantoms of a collective unconscious, subliminal contents that have been repressed in the interests of a routinised normality. These pauses or interruptions, programmed into their sculptures, assemblages and installations, allow Zinny + Maidagan to prompt intuitive recognitions and involuntary transitions among their viewers. The performative mode comes into play when they choreograph a sequence of stimuli and await the pattern of responses; in some deep and precise sense, their meticulously conceived and realised artworks are props in a theatre of research into spectation, its reflexes and practices, its contents and contexts – a theatre in which the viewers are the unwitting, unrehearsed actors.

Even when they work in a strongly mnemonic or retrospective register – seemingly looking back, as they do in *Das Abteil* – Zinny + Maidagan propose their work as anticipations or preludes, preparations for potential acts of theatre. These acts are momentous

with political import even when they seem effortlessly simple: a viewer walking in and taking a particular stance towards a curtain-like composition; a viewer puzzling over an arrangement of wedges; each perhaps imagining what she or he might do with these as backdrop or stage.

The dynamic unpredictability of the movement of an individual through institutional space has often served Zinny + Maidagan as a starting point. They would very probably agree with Le Corbusier's 1923 observation about the behaviour of spectators responding to architectural ensembles: "The human eye, in its investigations, is always on the move and the beholder is always turning right and left, and shifting about. He is interested in everything and is attracted towards the centre of gravity of the whole site." [1] Zinny + Maidagan would emphasise the aleatory and elusive dimensions of such an experience, noting, in Borgesian spirit, that "the real is built on the text of accidents" [2]. Chance is factored, as an organising principle, into their theorising of the manner in which an art-work yields up its meanings through the productive transactions among 'player-spectators'. [3]

In previous projects, Zinny + Maidagan's interest in mapping the invisible political topographies of institutional sites by means of adroit interventions – a closed door, an open window, a sight-line, a solid curtain that does not quiver – has led them to dramatise such questions as: At what point, and by what tacit acceptance of the contract of space, does the viewer become a viewer? How do surfaces such as the façade signal that they can convey meaning but also withhold significance? How can the actor ignore the script and yet continue to provide intuitive testimony to her or his predicament? Can the contingencies of a walk through a museum prise open cultural assumptions and renew, through de-familiarisation, historical contents that are normally hidden from view?

*

2.

The crucial manoeuvre in Zinny + Maidagan's poetics of site-specificity is an archaeology of historical consciousness, pursued

through the act of gathering together a system of references, objects, gestures and hints. This assemblage is then deployed variously in their work: as a dictionary of allusions, a survey of forms, a programme of possible uses, or a runway of obstacles and epiphanies. The medium of the exhibition assumes several, simultaneous avatars in their treatment: it is at once an accomplished *mise en scene* and a space for work in progress; at once a proposal for an experiment and the laboratory where the experiment is to take place.

The scale of Zinny + Maidagan's research is accordion-like: it can be opened up to be as capacious and encyclopaedic, or compressed to be as taut and indicative, as they wish. They call upon a range of ancestries or affinities for the present, whether by resort to fantastic or epic narratives such as those of Borges or Herman Melville or Borges; or by using isolated details to signpost vanished epochs, with a metonymic matter-of-factness that drains them of heraldic aggression, as with the ceremonial eagles of imperial Germany; or by citing the chromatics and scale of Colour Field initiatives, in homage to a take on the cosmos that was both metaphysical and architectural in tenor; or by diagramming the processes of haptic encounter, intuitive recognition and participation in an interactive space, as when they lay out the components of an uneven stage, a parabola curtain-wall or an unexpected break in a façade, and invite the performance of viewing.

In reflection of Zinny + Maidagan's poetics, I would like to dwell here on some of the multiple resonances that *Das Abteil* invokes, as it develops itself around the talismanic moment of 1927. I will attend, specifically, to some of the utopian and redemptive conceptions of modernity that they retrieve from that epoch and offer as a legacy to the present.

In *Das Abteil*, Zinny + Maidagan de-crypt the reserve of potentialities held within such a fortuitous datum – quite literally, since the words share an etymological root in Latin – as a date. This talismanic moment, as I have called it, opens at the behest of the artists: so that the temporalities that have long been frozen within the inherited but neglected archive of architecture, neighbourhood and public memory are released, transformed into current and public urgencies. Zinny + Maidagan's procedures are not documentary in nature: they do not

record, in detail and through thick description of the Rylean or Geertzian order, the deep horizons of the New/ the Now that thus emerge; instead, they aim to activate the consciousness of the viewer through the lighter but no less vital and effective devices of allusion, citation, invocation and allegory. We could see *Das Abteil* as a concentric conceptual structure, with the date as a magnet around which the artists develop a cycle of works, around which, in turn, a charged field of ideas, proposals and encounters is formed.

Zinny + Maidagan's poetic strategies find a distinguished model in the kabbalistic parable that Benjamin deploys in 'On the Concept of History' (1940), where he observes that the mystic (and his secular or profane counterpart, the 'revolutionary historiographer') bears the responsibility of *tikkun* or 're-collection', the gathering together of the attributes of the Divine, originally held in sacred glass containers that were shattered by the advent of evil, so that the Divine wholeness is scattered, in shards, episodes and fragments, across the universe. [4] Zinny + Maidagan perform productive recursions of Benjaminesque modes when they archive memories that have been elided, forgotten or damaged; when they collocate fragmented experience into extended spatial meditations; and when they chart, by allegorical means, varied desires and expressions that have been repressed or maimed. In my reflection on their present work, accordingly, I will perform a parallel recursion on their philosophical and artistic positions, so as to assess how the dominant visions and preoccupations of the late 1920s in Germany could speak both to that historical moment, as well as to our own.

*

3.

Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', written in the spring of 1940, a few months before he killed himself on 26 September 1940 after realising that there was no escape from the Third Reich, is now a canonical text. But all readers of sensitivity have noted its instability of meaning, its internal ambiguities and reversals of stance, its author's violent confrontation with his Marxist inheritance and his impassioned embrace of messianic ideas drawn from his Jewish legacy. These features highlight it as a classic text of

futuristic speculation, replete with every emotion that the thought of the future can summon up. Revolutionary hope springs from the future that is desired but never comes; anxiety from the unwanted future that seems at hand; and terror from the future that was feared and is all too violently realised. These contrasting anticipations fuse in the figure of the Angelus Novus, the ‘Angel of the New’ whom Benjamin borrowed from Paul Klee and turned into the Angel of History, and whose presence irradiates Thesis IX. The Angel’s face is famously “turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.” [5]

Klee, who makes an appearance in *Das Abteil* through a reference to his painting ‘Dream City’ (which, with its stacked, spectral planes and interpenetration of architecture, vegetation, landscape and cosmos, also maps onto Benjamin’s idea that Western civilisation had fallen into a dream sleep with the consolidation of capitalism, and expressed its true desires through the phantasmagoria of consumption, spectacle and the ephemera of entertainment) often allowed his paintings to pivot around the experience of the accidental hero, the bewildered survivor who has received a message of great import but not-yet-decipherable significance. In considering the effects of *Das Abteil*, we find ourselves asking whether the viewer, sketching a path through the protocols of white-cube viewing with fresh impulses sparking through her or his subjectivity, is not also a similar figure at the threshold of illumination.

Perhaps such a viewer of *Das Abteil* could attend to Thesis VIII in Benjamin’s sequence, which precedes the advent of the Angelus Novus. “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule,” writes Benjamin. “We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realise that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency...” [6] I would speculate

that Zinny + Maidagan have just such an enterprise in mind: to re-appropriate the idea of emergency from those controlling elites who would promote the commerce of war, the spread of surveillance and the regulation of mobility under the banner of a global 'war against terror'; and to give it back to the citizens who are their viewers and interlocutors, as a renewed vigilance against precisely such an insidious curtailment and expropriation of the scope of liberty. Zinny + Maidagan's appeal to the past is rooted neither in documentary zeal, as I have said, nor art-historical nostalgia, nor even simply in the productive desire to generate a richly hybrid genealogy for the transcultural selves that they are. Rather, I propose that their need to excavate the past springs from a Benjaminesque political need to grasp a vital set of memories just as they are about to disappear, because they so acutely illuminate the present in a moment of great danger.

For the radiance of the utopian ideas of the 1920s concealed an underlying darkness of spirit. It is true that the architect, the aviator, the scientist and the space traveller were the heroes of the modernist projects of the 1920s; it is true that courageous wagers were placed on the heroic conceptualisation of the New/ the Now in domains that ranged from the scientific to the spiritual, the fictional to the technological. But this was also the Golden Age of the cranks, with pseudo-scientific charlatans and pseudo-mystical demagogues on the march, appealing to the wounded pride of a Germany broken by the defeat of the Prussian Empire and the punitive reparations mandated by the Peace of Versailles. If the Bauhaus, the *neue Sachlichkeit* and various Dada manifestations flourished during this period, ultra-nationalist and even psychopathic doctrines such as those associated with the Thule-Gesellschaft, the NSDAP and Carrelian eugenics were also gaining momentum.

The hopes and dreams of the finest artists, scientists, philosophers and dreamers active in 1927 were calibrated delicately between the parentheses that define the Weimar period. On one side, we have the rival terrors of the years immediately following the end of World War I, with the chaotic and brutal confrontations between the *Freikorps*, the Spartacists and the Munich Soviet Republic. On the other side, we have the seizure of State power by the Nazi machine in 1933, and its inauguration of a ghastly counter-modernity, during which were

unleashed the pathologies of a State built on paranoia but claiming to incarnate the popular will, a process that led to the triumph of an ideology based on ultra-totemic notions of identity and culminated in the industrialisation of genocide.

Our talismanic 1927 marks, therefore, a fragile *Lichtung* between periods of sinister shadow. In Zinny + Maidagan's account, evolving from Benjamin's revelation, we will always be in 1927. It is our predicament, they appear to suggest as they fuse the horizons of the 1920s and the present, to forever inhabit that fragile *Lichtung* between periods of sinister shadow. It is, apparently, our destiny to be repeatedly confronted with utopian and dystopian impulses; yet also to renew ourselves by looking indefatigably for ways of extending the liberal, compassionate and creative capacities of the individual subjectivity against the pervasive threats of repression and amnesia.

*