

# THE IRRESISTIBLE CALL OF THE FUTURE

## On Zinny & Maidagan's *Compartment/Das Abteil*

By Ranjit Hoskote

I.

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 Museum as an exhibition space. Built in 1927, the Zollamt was an anomaly on arrival: it was the only modernist building in the city's medieval 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, 'Compartment/ Das Abteil' (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' (ISP of the 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 art-works 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 *Compartment/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."<sup>1</sup> 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"<sup>2</sup>. 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'.<sup>3</sup>

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?

## II.

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 Jorge Luise Borges or Herman Melville; 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 "Compartement/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 "Compartement/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 "Compartement/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 Walter 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.<sup>4</sup> Zinny & Maidagan perform productive recursions of Benjamin's 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.

### III.

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."<sup>5</sup>

Klee, who makes an appearance in "Compartement/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 "Compartement/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 “Compartement / Das Abteil” could attend to Thesis VIII in Benjamin’s aphoristic 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.”<sup>6</sup> 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.

#### IV.

Zinny & Maidagan trawl a variety of reference points from the realms of architecture, painting, cinema and public life into the ambit of “Compartement /

Das Abteil”: the triptych of paintings rendered in reverse on Plexiglas, comprising ‘Nude Descending / A Displacement’, ‘Untitled’ and ‘A Shift / A Ship’, revisit the pictorial dissidence of Marcel Duchamp while also attending to the displacement of the customs office by the cultural space, invoking – as also in ‘Département des Aigles / Zollamt 1927 / Displacement’ – the mercantile ethos of the river trade on the Main from within a zone now consecrated to the arts, underscoring the vexed yet inevitable contiguity of commercial transaction and aesthetic reflection. The key cultural developments of 1927 are referenced in a series of works rendered in critical homage to, among others, Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s *MR Armchair*, Hermann Oberth’s *Verein für Raumschiffahrt* (Society for Space Travel), *das Neue Frankfurt*, and Walter Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk* (Arcades Project, begun in 1927 and still unfinished at his death 13 years later). These works focus on the prehistory and the afterlife of these ‘new beginnings’, inviting us to engage with these ideas about modernity and modernism.

We trace the graph of these ideas, which touch upon every conceivable domain that the human species could possibly inhabit: from the home and the workplace to the garden and the street, the city and the cosmos. In dwelling on them, we dwell also on the evolving aesthetic and political frameworks of the inter-war years, within which they were shaped; and within which we must now re-historicise them, following Zinny & Maidagan’s cues. Many of these ideas revolve around the most basic condition of modern existence: urban life, with its attendant themes of the optimal contemporary life, the remaking of the city, the relationship between technology and freedom, the struggle between antagonistic classes inextricably bound to one another by the relationships of production, and the politics of radical change.

Given Zinny & Maidagan’s long-standing preoccupation with architecture as a point of intersection between freedom and oppression, as expressed in the volition of mobility and the fixities of structure, it is not surprising that these themes should be addressed

directly through the 1920s debates on urban life and the architectural options facing Weimar Germany. We find ourselves, on pursuing this line of inquiry, among prophecies and ironies. Take, for example, the architectural and interior design projects of Mies van der Rohe as well as the cinematic figuration of architecture and the metaphorisation of the urban condition by Fritz Lang: both architect and filmmaker made imaginative proposals for the re-making of their world. In Mies' work as well as Lang's, we find tropes of impossibility but also figures of dawn: Zinny & Maidagan mediate them through a glossary of utopian, heroic or redemptive forms, visionary wagers on human perfectibility, which are held in counterpoint by the presence of a set of sculptures that are reminiscent of pop-up comic-book ruins.

As a young man, Mies van der Rohe believed that architecture could express the will of its time, before the notion of such a collective or preordained will became discredited on its adoption by Nazi ideologues. His sleek austerities, like those of his colleagues Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier (who had been his fellow apprentices at the Berlin office of Peter Behrens between 1908 and 1911), helped re-format the public imagination, nurturing an appreciation of the forms of the Machine Age. Under the ministrations of these masters of what would soon be called the International Style, Modernism manifested itself as a confident and relentless neo-classicism. Insisting on a purity and minimalism of structure and effect, it enacted an erasure of all prior forms of architectural expression between classical antiquity and itself, dismissing these as accretions, decorations, encrustations.

From 1926 to 1932, Mies was vice-president of the Deutsche Werkbund, an association of architects and designers who believed in aligning art with industry in the production of well-designed mass housing and everyday objects. In 1927, under Mies' direction and including contributions by a phalanx of architects and designers such as Marcel Breuer and Mart Stam, the Werkbund held the benchmark exhibition, 'Die Wohnung' ('The Dwelling'), with the Weissenhofsiedlung,

an experimental housing estate built in a Stuttgart suburb, as its centrepiece. In the same year, Mies designed the MR Armchair, executed in tubular steel and painted cane; still in production, it incarnates the notion of comfort just as much as its creator's Barcelona chair of 1929, also still in production, embodied an easy and unfussy elegance.

Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson meditated on the typology of the *Siedlung* in their 1931 manifesto, 'The International Style', published to accompany the celebrated exhibition of contemporary architecture that they curated at the invitation of Alfred H. Barr for the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Hitchcock and Johnson's proclamations resonated with Miesian ideas: "Whether the architects' work be a single elaborate country house, a public edifice, or a residence colony of apartments or small dwellings, the application of aesthetic principles of order, the formal simplification of complexity, will raise a good work of building to a fine monument of architecture. Whether the design be for a single filling station or for a whole city quarter, quality of architectural thought will count for more than money spent or on fine materials. [...] An architecture, aristocratic rather than puritanical, may rise on an Acropolis in all the luxury of Pentelic marble and yet will also grace with distinction the factory and the *Siedlung* [...] The symbolical expression of function by allusion to the past, which the half-modern architects at the beginning of the century developed, has ceased to be necessary."<sup>7</sup>

## V.

In collocating their references to the *MR Armchair* and to *Metropolis*, Zinny & Maidagan re-open a vibrant climate of discussion in Central Europe during the late 1920s.

The visually arresting image of a curved glass tower in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, which opened in German cinemas on 1 January 1927, was based on a much-published design for a glass skyscraper by Mies. Lang was already pointing to the dark side of Utopia in his cine-

matic phantasmagoria, which was set in a multi-level industrial city of the future: above loom the towering buildings and entertainment districts reserved for the elite while below them stretch the catacomb-barracks where the slave workers live. The scenography of the film is saturated in the political and architectural debates of the time. Dietrich Neumann writes: "For anyone familiar with architectural debates in the Weimar Republic, the central view onto the skyscrapers in *Metropolis* combined an exaggerated version of the dark streets of American cities with the notion of a central tower that had played such an important part in recent discussions and that represented the most conservative contemporary approach to skyscraper design and town planning in Germany [...]. In the central square is a monument with a huge gong that calls [the slave workers] to work, a symbol of repression. Significantly, the base for this gong was modelled on Walter Gropius' dynamic monument for striking miners who had been shot dead in Weimar during riots in 1921."<sup>8</sup>

In the same vein, commenting on the discussions from which the set designs of Erich Kettelhut for *Metropolis* emerged, Neumann observes: "But how was a future city of oppression and exploitation to look? Kettelhut made use of several sources. In the film, the memory of the biblical Tower of Babel is revived in a dream sequence obviously based on Pieter Bruegel's famous painting of 1563. [...] [Kettelhut] devoted much attention to the tower in the background, finally giving it an overwhelming, massive, threatening form. This transformation appears to have been a reflection of contemporary debate in Germany. The massive forms of the monumental structures often cited in this context awakened memories of German imperialism, and interestingly, *Metropolis* was celebrated as a national demonstration of strength. [...] Kettelhut's preparatory work demonstrated that set design had to create more than just a background. It had to accompany the plot, underlining and commenting on it, and, beyond that, could refer to contemporary architectural debate. The young director and film critic Luis Buñuel was the first

to recognise that the sets for *Metropolis* succeeded in this way. After the Spanish premiere in 1927, he wrote, 'Now and forever the architect will replace the set designer. Film will be the faithful translator of the architect's boldest dreams.'<sup>9</sup>

## VI.

By choreographing a series of encounters between the diverse tendencies of the event horizon they have focused on, Zinny & Maidagan remind us that the belief in the optimistic and regenerative potencies of industrial modernity which underwrote the 1920s was held in counterpart by the dark and destructive aspects of the same economic and political forces. Sometimes, they could coexist in the same person or spectrum of ideas; and the same phraseology could serve agendas that we would not today regard as having been in any way related.

Through the 1920s, on pages illustrated with the imposing profiles of ocean liners and the sleek aerodynamic lines of civilian triplanes and military biplanes, Le Corbusier rhapsodised about the straight line, the Mediterranean abundance of light, and the necessity of strict regulation. You couldn't even change in the bedroom, in Corbusier's manual of the new home. He declared that a modern city "lives by the straight line, inevitably; for the construction of buildings, sewers and tunnels, highways, pavements. The circulation of traffic demands the straight line; it is the proper thing for the heart of a city. The curve is ruinous, difficult and dangerous; it is a paralysing thing. The straight line enters into all human history, into all human aim, into every human act."<sup>10</sup> On this page, which faces a page that carries fragments of the grid-based street maps of Minneapolis and Washington, he goes on to invoke the Chicago and New York that dominated the imagination of European architects of his generation: "We must have the courage to view the rectilinear cities of America with admiration [...]. The winding road is the result of happy-go-lucky heedlessness, of looseness, lack of concentration and animality. The straight road is

a reaction, an action, a positive deed, the result of self-mastery. It is sane and noble."<sup>11</sup> The obsession continues in a hymn to the new Paris of his dreams: "Paris is a dangerous magma of human beings gathered from every quarter by conquest, growth and immigration; she is the eternal gipsy encampment from all the world's great roads; Paris is the seat of a power and the home of a spirit which could enlighten the world; she digs and hacks through her undergrowth, and out of these evils she is tending towards an ordered system of straight lines and right angles; this reorganisation is necessary to her vitality, health and permanence; this clearing process is indispensable to the expression of her spirit, which is fundamentally limpid and beautiful."<sup>12</sup>

Le Corbusier's rhetoric is not far removed from that of his right-wing contemporaries who were, in the 1920s, calling for a polity cleansed of communities that they regarded as a source of pollution, debilitation and disease. Indeed, his obsession with a psycho-social hygiene could have been mistaken by careless readers for that of Alexis Carrel (1873-1944), a surgeon and Nobel Prize-winning scientist who was a leading proponent, during the 1920s, of the most virulently Fascist ideas of social and biological engineering. A supporter of the Vichy regime, Carrel could write without the slightest self-doubt in 1935 that "[e]ugenics is indispensable for the perpetuation of the strong. A great race must propagate its best elements. [...] Of course, the reproduction of human beings cannot be regulated as in animals. The propagation of the insane and feeble-minded, nevertheless, must be prevented. [...] By an appropriate education each one should be made to realise what wretchedness is in store for those who marry into families contaminated by syphilis, cancer, tuberculosis, insanity, or feeble-mindedness. Such families should be considered by young people at least as undesirable as those which are poor. [...] The establishment of a hereditary biological aristocracy through voluntary eugenics would be an important step toward the solution of our present problems."<sup>13</sup>

By contrast with the authoritarian Corbusier and the vicious Carrel, Hermann Oberth seems almost domes-

tic in his apparent lack of interest in the political, dottily eccentric, the ultimate mad scientist. This Transylvanian German pioneer of rocketry, who co-founded the *Verein für Raumschiffahrt*, the Society for Space Travel, in 1927, began his journey in speculative enthusiasm. Although rooted in an inexhaustible wonderment about the possibility of cosmic self-extension through travel between worlds, his imagination was eventually harnessed to the brutalities of mundane life in a polity dedicated to 'total war'. Oberth was recruited into the department for the design, testing and production of long-range weapon systems by the Nazi State, between 1937 and 1944, a project headquartered in the Baltic village of Peenemünde; there, Oberth took his place alongside scientists like Wernher von Braun on the Nazi rocketry programme. After World War II, absolved of the stigma of their NS-era activities, Oberth and von Braun, with many of their colleagues, were absorbed into the US space programme, where they conducted the preparatory work that sustained the race for space of the 1950s and the moon flights of the 1960s.

## VII.

Many of these European figures shared an intriguing obsession, compounded of alternate fascination and repulsion, with America. Together with their mania for a beauty born of economy and regularity, an order that negates all dissidence and a monumentality that articulates spectacular transcendence, there went a magnetic pull towards authoritarian creeds that could guarantee such order, regularity, monumentality and spectacular transcendence.

Mies' transitions were especially surprising and disappointing. Having designed an inspiring memorial to the martyred Spartacist revolutionaries Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in 1926 (which the Nazis destroyed on coming to power), he designed the German Pavilion at the Barcelona International Fair for the Weimar Republic in 1929; but in 1935, the same hand that had drawn the hammer, sickle and star for the Liebknecht-Luxemburg memorial sketched in the eagles

and swastika banners that defined the German Pavilion at the Brussels International Exposition. Perhaps it was just as well that he left for the USA in 1938. Unlike him, Corbusier remained in Europe and, after Paris surrendered to the advancing German armies in June 1940, briefly explored the possibility of commissions from the collaborationist Vichy regime before retreating to the Pyrenees for the rest of World War II.<sup>14</sup>

Within the dream of absolute perfection there is always the virus of an obsession with purity. It leads to the excision of all that is regarded as less than perfect. While considering this tense and vexed relationship between the quest for perfection and the obsession with purity in many conceptions of the utopian and heroic Now / New, it struck me that the virus of the NS period lingers even in the programmatically de-Nazified German language of today: even in such words as *Abteil*, which carries within it the ghost of the *Sturmabteilungen* or SA, the first vanguard shock-troops of the Nazi Party; and in words like *Einsatz*, popularised by association with the *Einsatzkommando* or *Einsatzgruppe* formations of the Waffen-SS, which succeeded the SA.

### VIII.

Analysing Zinny & Maidagan's 2007 production for the Sala Rekalde, Bilbao, '*La Costa, El Ataque, Lo Mismo*' ('The Coast, The Attack, The Same'), Mónica Amor observes: "[Here] urban memory, as a stabilising signifier that generates a process of identification between the city and its inhabitants, is eroded. Here unities are substituted by traces, the traces of a peripatetic visitor who is more interested in the urban vulnerability of psychogeography than in the institutionalised memory of archives and history. Uninterested in taming the recalcitrant nature of the city, Zinny & Maidagan's work suggests unresolved zones of complexity [...]"<sup>15</sup>

In "Compartement / Das Abteil", Zinny & Maidagan impart an enabling complexity to our experience of the site, layering on the traces while bypassing the official histories and the visible signs of history's passage, meanwhile attending to all that is inaudible and invisible.

"Compartement / Das Abteil" thus functions all the more effectively as a chronogram, a time capsule, a stage in the multi-stage, slow-release rocket of history.

Any exposition of Zinny & Maidagan's work must try and retain a balance between the substantial materiality of their art and the conceptual projects it undertakes in what I have called, earlier in this essay, an archaeology of historical consciousness. To them, the work of art is a crucible, efficacious in its alchemies of cognition and dazzlement.

Having made lengthy detours of the narratives that these works open up, I return to the sensuous apprehension of the works themselves. They meld painted and unfaced surfaces in constructing their models and collages. They use cardboard, aluminium and bronze in their ensembles, each element speaking of a different territory of the senses. Often, it is the medium that generates the necessary bridge between the realm of concepts and the realm of politics; since the medium carries, within it, the histories of labour and exploitation, craft and ingenuity, effort and grace. Zinny & Maidagan emphasise simple but delicious movements taken from the everyday life of objects and surfaces, from crumpled pages, clothes thrown casually over a chair, and rolls of canvas standing in a corner, yet translated into abstract and deviously beautiful forms that provoke us into as-yet-unnamed sensations of axially turning space, still-standing time, shifting relationships to the here and now.

Like their fellow Italian, Lucio Fontana (1899–1968), Zinny & Maidagan never forget that the simplest of incisions, folds or crimps can transform the nature of space, time and consciousness. Since coincidence, verging on a Borgesian serendipity or a Jungian synchronicity, attends all the activities of Zinny & Maidagan, it was, of course, in 1927 that the Argentinian-born Fontana returned to Italy after 22 years in Argentina, to study with the sculptor Adolfo Wildt.

Spending time with the art of Zinny & Maidagan, we find ourselves arcing across to another source of avant-garde ideas in the 1920s: Constructivism. We think of El Lissitzky's 1930 account of the reciprocal

influences that had emerged among the newly liberated arts of the Soviet epoch, and especially his assessment of the distinctive contributions of Kazimir Malevich and of Wladimir Tatlin: "In the course of this work, two clear and definite conceptions [...] have been crystallised. 'The world is given to us through sight, through colour' was the first conception. 'The world is given to us through touch, through materials' was the second. In both cases the world was a geometrical order. The first conception [that of Malevich] demands no more than pure spectral colour confined in abstract form within the rational ordering of geometrical elements – a plane geometry of colour. A world of crystalline organicism. This world emerges within an endless visual space. Its further consequences were the renunciation of the colours of the spectrum and the renunciation of the planimetric figure that finally remained (black and white). Painting was thus superseded and gave way to pure volume formation. The architectonic character of this stereometric formation was immediately understood. Thus painting became a transfer point for architecture. A new asymmetric equilibrium of volumes was set up, the tensions of bodies were expressed in a new dynamic way, and a new rhythm was established."<sup>16</sup>

Tatlin's way, committed to touch and materials, in Lissitzky's account, "required not merely observation but also the tactile apprehension of things. The specific qualities of the respective materials served as a starting point for the development of the form [...] [Tatlin] assumed that intuitive artistic mastery of the material led to discoveries on the basis of which objects could be constructed irrespective of the rational, scientific methods of technology. [Tatlin's 1920 Monument to the Third International] is one of the first attempts to create a synthesis between the 'technological' and the 'artistic' domains. The attempt to create a completely new architecture to break up volume and establish spatial penetration externally and internally already finds expression here."<sup>17</sup>

Malevich's almost yogic passage from painting to architecture, and Tatlin's intuitive synthesis of the technological and the artistic, both find embodiment in

the studio practice of Zinny & Maidagan, as manifested in the scale of forms that they produce, whether collage, model, sculpture, assemblage, theatre space or painting. Significantly, Zinny & Maidagan prefer to retain the liberty of the provisional while engaging critically with historical themes and materials, in their choice of form. In a deliberately counterintuitive back-flow that reverses the accepted movement from the stage of preparation to that of completion, they insist on the meticulous articulation of forms that suggest the draft, the prototype, the beta release, the exploded diagram. Thus, they keep the provisionality of all constructs in play, and activate diverse conversations about the potential significance of artistic interventions among the increasingly receptive and interactive, increasingly transcultural publics for global art – an art that is global, not because it is generic and easily accessible everywhere, but because it releases itself through empathy and affinity to the locations where it finds and makes itself, involving itself in the predicaments of the site and re-fashioning itself continuously through such acts of communion, participation and exploration.

*Bombay, January 2010*

#### Notes & References

- 1 Le Corbusier 1986. p. 191
- 2 Juan Maidagan, In conversation with the author: Gwangju, 14 August 2008
- 3 Juan Maidagan, In conversation with the author: Gwangju, 14 August 2008
- 4 Margaret Cohen, 'Benjamin's Phantasmagoria: *The Arcades Project*', in Ferris 2004: 210
- 5 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in Benjamin 1968: 257-258
- 6 Ibid.: 257
- 7 Hitchcock and Johnson 1966: 94
- 8 Dietrich Neumann, 'Before and After *Metropolis*: Film and Architecture in Search of the Modern City', in Neumann 1999: 34
- 9 Dietrich Neumann, 'Metropolis', in Neumann 1999: 96-98
- 10 Le Corbusier 1987: 10
- 11 Ibid.: 10
- 12 Ibid.: 25
- 13 Carrel 1948: 274-277
- 14 Filler 2007: 88
- 15 Mónica Amor, 'Architectural deviations and subjective dislocation in the work of Dolores Zinny and Juan Maidagan', in Quincoces: 53
- 16 El Lissitzky, extract from *Russia: The Reconstruction of Architecture in the Soviet Union (1930)*, in Bann 1974: 142
- 17 Ibid.: 143

#### Selected Bibliography

- Bann, Stephen ed. *The Tradition of Constructivism*. New York: Da Capo, 1974.
- Benjamin, Walter. Trans. Harry Zohn. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.
- Carrel, Alexis. *Man, The Unknown*. West Drayton: Penguin/ Pelican, 1948.
- de Botton, Alain. *The Architecture of Happiness: The Secret Art of Furnishing Your Life*. London: Penguin, 2007.
- Ferris, David S. ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Filler, Martin. *Makers of Modern Architecture: From Frank Lloyd Wright to Frank Gehry*. New York: New York Review of Books, 2007.
- Foster, Stephen and Kuenzli, Rudolf eds. *Dada Spectrum: The Dialectics of Revolt*. Iowa City: The University of Iowa, 1979.
- Hitchcock, Henry-Russell and Johnson, Philip. *The International Style*. New York: W W Norton, 1966.
- Kuenzli, Rudolf and Naumann, Francis eds. *Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996.
- Le Corbusier. *Towards A New Architecture*. New York: Dover, 1986.
- Le Corbusier. *The City of To-morrow and Its Planning*. New York: Dover, 1987.
- Neumann, Dietrich ed. *Film Architecture: Set Designs from Metropolis to Blade Runner*. Munich/ London/ New York: Prestel, 1999.
- Rybczynski, Witold. *Home: A Short History of an Idea*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987.
- Quincoces, Fernando ed. *Dolores Zinny & Juan Maidagan*, La Costa, El Ataque, Lo Mismo. Bilbao: Sala Rekalde, 2007.