

Assembling Bittersweet Testimonies for Posterity

Essay by Maja and Reuben Fowkes

Back then, in the warm afterglow of the revolutions of 1989, the divisive histories of the twentieth century seemed to have come to a definitive end. The prospects of pluralistic democracy and the rebirth of civil society gave a tailwind to the forces of cultural and economic globalisation that would soon transform the world even more fundamentally than the long decades of the Cold War. The upward trajectory reached new heights with the ostensibly amicable expansion of the European Union to the East, setting a course of economic integration, convergence of living standards and consolidation of democratic norms. Today this optimistic vision has however been replaced by a more dystopian outlook marked by increasing rates of emigration, the revival of historic hostilities and an alarming wave of populism, illiberalism and xenophobia. With the exhibition *Eastern Sugar* Ilona Németh investigates the pathologies of transition, uncovering their roots in the flawed mechanism of privatisation mired by asset-stripping and systemic nepotism during the headlong rush from the dissipation of late socialism to the unruliness of feral capitalism.

Along with the exhortations to embrace free trade and open markets came practices of protectionism, tariffs and trade blocs that distorted the level playing field idealised by neo-liberal globalisation. The recent history of the Slovak sugar industry, as this exhibition makes clear, was entangled in these contradictory processes. It was not just inherited technological and financial disadvantages but exclusion from the common market that bankrupted local sugar production in the 1990s, with communist-era refineries snapped up by savvy Western investors for a song. After 2004 when the situation was reversed, the foreign owned sugar beet industry in Slovakia was eligible for European subsidies and protected by tariffs from the competition of sugarcane from the Global South. In another twist, tens of millions of Euros of compensation were paid to multinational consortiums as a reward for discontinuing sugar manufacture at their Slovak refineries, leading to the physical dismantling of only recently modernised sugar factories. This followed reforms to the European sugar industry designed to reduce over-production in response to a decision by the World Trade Organisation that the system of EU quotas and import barriers unfairly restricted global free trade. It is the bittersweet emotional, social and material residues left by cold financial calculations made on distant spreadsheets to which Németh gives tangible form in this show.

The choice of sugar as the prism through which to examine the multiple upheavals of the last three decades brings with it deeper historical associations that go to the heart of the project of modernity. It was indeed through a sugar trade based on the enslavement of more than 12 million Africans from the 17th to the 19th century that much of the Western capital was accumulated to drive the industrial revolution and the forging of na-

tion-states. As cultural anthropologist Walter D. Mignolo has underlined, there was a 'darker side to Western modernity' based on imperial injustices and exploitation, with colonial power underpinning even enlightened visions of the modern world. An apt metaphor for the entanglement of colonial legacies with modern culture could be found in the fact that London's Tate Gallery was established with a financial donation and art collection of a sugar baron. It was also the same Tate & Lyle that was co-owner of the Eastern Sugar company in Slovakia, posing a question about the neo-colonialist dimension of the takeover of ex-socialist industries. Németh's project is however not aligned with the populist programme of anti-globalisation that has swept the political systems of Eastern Europe in recent times. It rather takes a critical stance towards the fact that the economic transition was managed and carried out in the interests of elites and not for the benefit of ordinary citizens.

Singular artistic approaches, as evident in this show, can act as a vehicle to pierce the economic abstractions of financial engineering to illuminate the effects such transformations have on individual experiences and the life of communities. In equal measure, by conducting interviews with managers and executives Németh draws attention to the role of actual persons rather than generic institutions in making crucial decisions with enduring consequences for the social issue. In difference to socialist nostalgia, which is coloured by longing for the security and bygone certainties of the old regime, the term nostalgia originally stood for homesickness, or the psychological distress caused by uprooting and displacement. The communities affected by the closure of the sugar refineries were afflicted by a similar sense of loss caused by the erasure and derelict state of the industrial landscape that once formed familiar vistas. The anxiety caused by the disappearance of a tactile mode of labour-intensive agriculture that entailed physical contact with soil and plants was further accompanied by missing the sounds and smells of the factory and noting the absence of the rhythms of seasonal labour that were once punctuated by moments of rest and celebration.

The antidote to the social effects of deindustrialisation and deprivation from the rewards of manual labour is provided in this exhibition context by the opportunity to take part in the making of traditional sugar loaves. Transforming the central gallery space into dedicated manufacturing and packaging stations, the artist provides visitors with the rare chance to experience forming conical towers of sweetness, sharing in the satisfaction of starting and finishing a simple manual task. This workshop activity also has a direct social impact in giving a temporary respite and paid work to individuals suffering from chronic unemployment as a consequence of the same economic processes. It also offers a means to work through feelings of anomie in a complex technological world ruled by automation and the rise of



Lonnie van Brummelen & Siebren de Haan: *Monument of Sugar – how to use artistic means to elude trade barriers*, 2007
16 mm film-essay, 67 min., colour and b/w, silent, 1 sugar cube approx., courtesy of the artists, archive of the artists



artificial intelligence. The exhibition indeed stands as a warning about future encroachments on working lives heralded by technological advances that are on course to further sideline the human element in production processes. In another gesture of inclusiveness, Ilona Németh opens up a space in her exhibition for comparative insights by her fellow artists, Jeremy Deller, Harun Farocki, Lonnie van Brummelen and Siebren de Haan, who thematise issues of factory rituals, the transformation of labour and the widespread effects of the manipulation of globalised trade.

An alternative entry point to the show leads through a self-contained Museum of Sugar which gathers material residues of the rich social and technological history of a now closed chapter in Slovakia's industrial past. While in the early 1990s a sense of jubilation accompanied the opening of the first McDonald's restaurants and branches of IKEA across Eastern Europe as symbols of the capitalist future, today the legacy of the transition is more accurately captured by abandoned factories and destitute provincial towns. In that regard, Németh's take on the historicisation of the post-communist transformation takes the form of an anti-monument that can be grasped through architectural fragments of derelict factories or the remnants of lino flooring from the reception building of the former sugar refinery in her home town of Dunajská Streda. Furthermore, these material remains are activated in the exhibition through conversations, shared memories and collective work that help articulate the contested heritage of Eastern Sugar. Shining a light on the social consequences of political and financial decisions inevitably leads to the question of responsibility, and while it establishes a compelling diagnosis of the roots of the present crisis, this project is also directed towards exploring possibilities for the prevention of such procedures in the future.

MAJA AND REUBEN FOWKES are art historians, curators and co-directors of the Translocal Institute for Contemporary Art, an independent research centre focussing on the art history of Central Europe and contemporary ecological practices. Their curatorial projects include the *Anthropocene Experimental Reading Room*, the *Danube River School*, the conference on *Vegetal Mediations*, as well as the exhibition *Walking without Footprints*. Recent and forthcoming publications include Maja Fowkes's *The Green Bloc: Neo-Avant-Garde and Ecology under Socialism*, a book on Central and Eastern European Art Since 1950, as well as numerous chapters and journal articles on topics such as performative re-enactments, de-schooling the art curriculum and the ecological entanglements of deviant democracy. Reuben Fowkes is an editor of *Third Text* and they are regular contributors to magazines and artist publications. They have given numerous guest lectures and conference papers and are founding members of the Environmental Arts and Humanities Initiative at Central European University.

Lonnie van Brummelen & Siebren de Haan: *Monument of Sugar – how to use artistic means to elude trade barriers*, 2007
16 mm film-essay, 67 min., colour and b/w, silent, 1 sugar cube approx., courtesy of the artists, archive of the artists