

Ponte Rotto

As Ana Rewakowicz prepares plans for a temporary intervention at the site of the Ponte Rotto - Rome's 'broken bridge' - an opportunity arises to consider Rome's cultural past alongside its present. The artist - who has worked for twelve years with inflatable objects and their relationship with architecture - the body and the environment works with temporary structures which encourage the audience to interact with their environment and with each other. The artist's exhibition at the Polish Institute allows for reflection on the relationship between Rome and its environment via the display of an installation, two videos and a series of photo-drawings, all of which are made in support of the long term planned augmentation of the Ponte Rotto via a temporary completion of its missing wings. Similar to Rewakowicz's *Green Line Project* (2006) - a 350 metre long line made in biodegradable material and stretching from the island of Lauttasaari to mainland Helsinki - the Ponte Rotto project aims at a simple contemporary intervention within a timeless landscape. In Rome - the Eternal City - such a working method enters a particular context as the temporary is measured against the ancient.

Rome is a city somehow displaced in time. The relaxed attitude of its inhabitants and its tendency to look backwards whilst resisting change meet with a public completely beholden to 21st Century communication technologies and the latest fashions. Yet this displacement is crucial to Rome's particular equilibrium: Its existence as an ancient city seen refracted through the lens of an advanced modernist present and unable to give up either its past or its potential future, as it makes the consistent claim to be a city for contemporary culture. This is perhaps what it means to be the Eternal City.

One could describe this temporal displacement as a state once removed from reality, for the *bella vita* - which relies on a kind of deferral of the future as the present remains beholden to a dreamed of past - is not beauty as simplicity, or ignorance as bliss. It is, rather, a laboured and complex way of being which involves a mixture of deception, an unspoken agreement to settle for the less than perfect should things not turn out right, and a kind of binding code of silence. The *bella vita* - so often associated with Italy - is not much spoken about in Italy itself, perhaps in part because beauty itself is something that once identified loses its mystifying capacity.

The timeless edifice of beauty crumbles at the moment in which its being embedded in temporality is revealed. As such, seeking after beauty admits that beauty itself is fundamentally flawed, for what is eternal cannot need seeking as it would be eternally present. And yet beauty must be laboured and requires a very specific approach to a subject, building, person: to life itself. It requires a kind of heavily concentrated suspension of concentration, which holds at bay the framing forces of past and future in order to open up the present as the sole temporal reality.

In the moment of beauty, or the moment at which – as Kant had it in his Critique of Judgment – the critical faculties of the mind are held in suspense, unable to discern what it was they were seeing or hearing requires a particular type of framing of one's surroundings. It requires an attention to folly, or an appreciation of a kind senselessness in nature or architecture, for to be able to make sense would be to rationalize

In Rome, such follies exist in abundance. Indeed, it is characteristic of the *bella vita* and the way in which it must by necessity be presented as effortless that the folly is a symbol of Roman life, which can be seen in the adoration that locals have for The Belvedere Torso, the Pasquino – a 3rd century Hellenistic statue unearthed in Rome in the 15th Century – and the Ponte Rotto. It is precisely the effortless nature of these objects – for what is ruined cannot be described as laboured – which chimes with the notion of beauty as beyond naming.

The problem identified in the argument thus far is over how precisely to draw attention to beauty and its abundance without framing it and thereby ruining it by so doing. What is needed, in thought, or in artistic practice, is a framing, which serves not to detract from the framed object.

The Ponte Rotto – or ‘Broken Bridge’ – is among Rome’s most anonymous monuments. It does not do anything or stand for anything. It is unmarked by tourist signs and goes unnoticed by the majority of tourists, and whilst it is an icon for many locals, many others pass it by without thought. This gives an opportunity for Rewakowicz to explore the human dimension of ‘landscape’: a genre defined by its contact with humans. In one of two videos on display at the Polish institute (title, 201-) the artist tells the story of people whose lives are connected to the bridge, even though it will never serve its original purpose for them.

Also known as the Pons Aemilius or Ponte Emilio - in its original Italian and Ancient Roman forms – the Ponte Rotto is the oldest stone bridge in Rome and was opened in 174 A.D, although a wooden bridge had existed on the same site since 179 B.C. History. Subject to continuous damage and restoration, its Eastern half was destroyed in a flood in 1598, it was replaced by the adjacent Ponte Palatino (Palatine Bridge) in 1886.

In a city which puts its history on show, stratified in layers the stone structure itself, the Ponte Rotto's remaining arch would be fairly unremarkable if it wasn't positioned, as it is, at the Southern end of Rome's *Isola Tiberina* (or Tiberina Island), one of two islands along the river Tiber. Being framed in this way allows for a reflection on its form either from the island or from the Ponte Palatino. Situated here it is possible for the passer by to contemplate the Tiber's rapidly shifting currents as they appear to ebb away at the remaining arch of the broken bridge as if water and stone are caught in a perpetual parting embrace giving to each other a breath and form which is consistently transient.

Ana Rewakowicz's proposal, to temporarily complete the bridge using 100% recyclable material reflects on the coming together of present past and future in an erasure of the distinction between

'now', 'then' and what is to come. It represents a framing which aims to highlight the broken-ness of the bridge and as such is less of a pointing to beauty than a guiding of the viewer towards what is important: i.e. the 'now', which must not be sought in a perpetual striving for the new, but is found in an openness to our connectedness to our wider environment. Rewakowicz's temporary artistic intervention points precisely to the imperfection of the bridge and to a city, which finds its contemporaneity in its daily openness to the past renewed daily through the perception of its living subjects. Rewakowicz's projected Ponte Rotto project is a timely intervention, which enquires as to where Rome might position itself in a rapidly changing world and within a global art context.

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