Struggling in Time and Space

Socialist Architectures in Russia's Borderlands

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It is Elian's interest in architecture, historiography and geopolitics that motivated her *Border Theories* project and her approach to Kaliningrad, Sakhalin and Biro-bidzhan. The histories of all three of these Russian territories are connected to international conflicts and power struggles that entailed a re-formation of the area's architectural landscape, and much else of their identity besides. Kaliningrad got its Soviet name after World War II, when the formerly Prussian Königsberg was taken over by the Soviet Union, and at about the same time the Japanese Karafuto became the Soviet Sakhalin. In the second half of the 20th century Kaliningrad and Sakhalin were emptied of German and Japanese residents, and filled with Soviet pioneers. Birobidzhan had already been started as a Soviet experiment in the 1930s under the banner of the new Socialist Jewish Homeland. At the end of the 1940s, however, it was hit by Stalin's anti-Semitic campaigns. Soviet ideology was projected upon the formerly German, Japanese and Jewish sites which became the subject of architectural experiments where plans and visions were tested, and where ideas of the future were concretised and truths constructed.

While calling into question any partial national history of Kaliningrad, Sakhalin and Birobidzhan, Elian carefully scrutinises the territories' architectural landscapes and their development over time. She begins with the idea that architectural landscapes incorporate ideology and searches for ways to make that visible, employing an idiosyncratic set of research methods ranging from archival and literature research to field trips, from which the photographs in the *Border Theories* publication (and exhibition) are the result. Her research methods connect to interdisciplinary academic approaches like cultural analysis of which Mieke Bal wrote that, 'by selecting an object, you question a field'.[1] When selecting the architectural landscape of Kaliningrad, Sakhalin and Birobidzhan as the object of her research, Elian interferes with the historiography of these areas written to date. *Border Theo-*

ries provides us with multilayered, montaged views on Kaliningrad, Sakhalin and Birobidzhan and aims at doing justice to the territories' complex and contested histories which call for and encourage critical debates.

Elsewhere in this book Hester van Gent discusses historical facts in relation to the architectural plans reproduced in this publication from archival materials, while, in the following, I wish to illuminate the points of departure of Elian's artistic practice by focusing on her approach to the architectural landscapes through which usually invisible, ideological aspects come to the fore.

Examining Architectural Landscapes

On first glance, Elian's photographs of Kaliningrad gave me the shivers. Not only do they depict the city covered by a blanket of snow, they are also almost entirely devoid of people who seem to have escaped from the cold behind the doors of run-down socialist apartment blocks. In the Kaliningrad photographs buildings have taken over the stage, sometimes accompanied by dormant trees. The buildings tell a story about the attempt to organise life in strictly socialist ways. However, nothing of Communism's idealisation of community life is apparent; instead, its passion for equality seems to have forced people to withdraw behind the walls of somber buildings. Some of these buildings are unfinished projects that appear to have been on hold for a long time, many are in a gloomy state of decay. Work in public space is interrupted. On several photographs crude bridge pillars are lined up looking like lonesome letters of an alphabet. Once they were intended to support a roadway, but now they appear to be waiting for the moment to become meaningful.

Alongside images of Kaliningrad, the *Border Theories* publication also includes a series of photographs taken in

the border area of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, the capital city on the island of Sakhalin, located between the Sea of Japan and the Sea of Okhotsk, close to Japan. Since at least the 19th century Sakhalin has been a contested territory, inhabited and claimed in part by Russian and Japanese communities. At the end of World War II Russia occupied the island completely and most of the Japanese people were expelled. In contrast to the images taken in Kaliningrad, Elian's Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk photos are dominated by lush green woodland scenery, which here and there shows traces of human interventions such as abandoned houses or dusty paths.

A similar kind of struggle with the environment also marks the third element of *Border Theories*, the series of photographs and the reproductions of archival materials about Birobidzhan, a town in southeast Russia, close to the Chinese border. Birobidzhan is named after the region's two largest rivers: the Bira and the Bidzhan. It therefore comes as no surprise that many of Elian's photographs are river landscapes, wetlands occasionally crossed by rusty oil or gas pipes. The city's skyline appears in the background of some landscape images, but it is only from time to time that the photographer's gaze advances towards, yet never enters, a building. Birobidzhan, like all places photographed in the framework of *Border Theories*, is geographically located in Russia's borderlands.

Elian's photographs are accompanied by a selection of archival materials, such as blueprints bearing witness to the Soviet's plans for new city structures and architectures, which were supposed to overwrite or wipe out the area's non-socialist past. A common thread connecting the images of Kaliningrad, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and Birobidzhan is the examining gaze with which Elian approaches the historically charged architectural landscapes of these settlements. The *Border Theories* publication enables us to compare the Soviet's plans with the situation as Elian encountered it during her field trips. Figuring out which political and cultural motives are responsible for the architectures' current state is a complex task in which *Border Theories* nevertheless gets involved.

Conveying Experience

Over, more or less, the last quarter century, the geographical area of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics has become the site of a new kind of conversation in which *Border Theories* interferes. The historical events that preceded and allowed for this are straightforwardly couched in the terms Glasnost, Perestroika and the fall of the Iron Curtain. When the USSR's system of government was replaced by a purportedly democratic system, the means of production were privatized and the Party's power overthrown, 'postsocialist' discourse came about. At first this discourse concentrated on the consequences for the lives of people inhabiting the areas of the former USSR. Then, over time, 'postsocialist' discourse became critical of, as the scholars Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery put it, 'the socialist past and of possible socialist futures; critical of the present as neoliberal verities about transition, markets, and democracy were being imposed upon former socialist spaces; and critical of the possibilities for knowledge as shaped by Cold War institutions'.[2] In short, 'postsocialist' discourse critically explores socialist archives and addresses questions related to becoming other than socialist. By means of artistic research, Elian's *Border Theories* contributes to 'postsocialist' discourse.

Artistic research distinguishes itself through, as the literary scholar and art historian Hilde van Gelder poignantly formulated it, 'a complex combination of words and images that creates an indirect reflexive effect radically

different from any reflection seen within a specific discipline'.[3] In contrast to more traditional forms of research, artistic research combines literary interpretations of objects with visual ones; images play a significant role, not so much as illustrations of facts but more as conveyers of experiences. Elian's images depict architectural landscapes and buildings with uncertain pasts and futures; they frame a temporal condition from the subjective position of a photographer whose working method might be compared to what Walter Benjamin inconclusively described as historical materialism. 'The historical materialist,' Benjamin wrote, 'cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time takes a stand and has come to a standstill. For this notion defines the very present in which he himself is writing history … historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past'.[4] In a similar way *Border Theories* does not draw conclusions but temporarily interrupts the course of time, by means of photography, in order to take a closer look at the architectural landscape and the process of transition in which it is caught. It testifies to Elian's unique and detailed experience with the cities' architecture, an experience she shares with us by means of this book.

In my view Elian constantly succeeds in making the decaying buildings photographed look respectable. Her photographs do not come across as documents that give a definite view of the state of things. Some rather look like romantic landscape paintings that stage an instantaneous sublimity. She generates such effects not by using digital manipulations, but through the positioning of her camera, her choice of viewpoints and her ways of framing co-determine the appearance of the photographic results. Driven by the desire to achieve neutrality, she works with natural light and attempts to capture the objects as she sees them at the moment the photo is taken. Nevertheless her images do not stage reality, but details of it caught in a story about socialist ideals and their concurrent presence and absence in Russia's border zones, as encountered by an interested outsider. With an eye to the cities' contested histories, as visualised through the archival material that Elian adds to her photography, she presents her work as being neither complete, nor entirely objective or absolute, but as part of a continuing story. The photographs do not conclusively present the architectures as failures or successes. Nevertheless, *Border Theories* challenges the Soviet's socialist ideals that inspired the architectures of Kaliningrad, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and Birobidzhan.

The Architecture of Soviet Utopia

With *Border Theories* Elian continues her research on the architectural conceptions of ideal cities that as such exist only in form of stories or blueprints. Modernist architectural blueprints for ideal cities, like Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's plan for Chaux or Le Corbusier's plan for La Ville Radieuse, theoretically draw on the tradition of literary utopian conceptions of ideally organised communities such as Plato's *Republic*, Thomas More's *Utopia* or Aldous Huxley's *Island*. Elian's long-standing fascination with utopian architectural experiments definitely motivated her choice to interrogate the past and the current condition of Kaliningrad, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and Birobidzhan. By choosing to focus on the three cities' architectural landscapes, she relates them to her earlier work on cities such as Brasilia (Brazil), Cumbernauld (Scotland), Zen (a neighborhood in Palermo, Italy), Tapiola (Finland) or Cité Modèle (Brussels, Belgium). Like these cities' designs, the blueprints of Kaliningrad, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and Birobidzhan draw on a utopian grand narrative about the manageability of societies, but they do so according to socialist principles formulated by the Soviet regime.

The current state of Kaliningrad, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk

and Birobidzhan is obviously marked by the old Socialist orientation towards the future. Each place was (re-)built on the basis of arguments that were either radically critical of the past or the present.

The Soviet manipulation of the present can be illustrated with the example of Birobidzhan. In the 1920s Jewish people became a bête noire for Bolshevik authorities, in this case represented by people like Mikhail Kalinin, who came up with the idea of building Birobidzhan as a 'Jewish socialist city'. Socialists like Kalinin perceived Jews as alienated from present-day Russian culture, and motivated them to move to the outskirts of the country where, in addition, the new settlement could function as a border post against Chinese invasions. 'According to Soviet policy', the scholar of Jewish culture Boris Kotlerman writes, 'each people should develop its own socialist culture in a designated area. It should also manage its own economic policy so that "inefficient" populations could be gainfully employed'.[5] Between the early 1930s and the present, various architects, among them the former Bauhaus director Hannes Meyer, made plans for the 'Jewish socialist city', but political and financial support was inconsistent and so the development plans were only sporadically realised, if at all.

The Soviet socialists' critical attitude towards the past is manifested in buildings like the Communist Party Executive Hotel in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. The hotel was erected in the 1950s on top of the Shinto temple complexes of the Japanese people who had to abandon Sakhalin after World War II. The Shinto temples, however, had been created only 50 years earlier when, as a consequence of the Portsmouth Peace Treaty following from the Russian Japanese war, Japan gained Southern Sakhalin from Russia.[6] In 1907 the Japanese government decided to establish a new prefecture in Southern Sakhalin, and the Shinto temples built on top of the Asahigaoka Mountain came about as a part of these plans. Since, after World War II, the entire island of Sakhalin became Russian, the Soviets seized the chance to settle old scores, and so the wooden architecture of the Shinto temples gave way to the socialist structures of the Communist Party Executive Hotel.

A similar way of settling up with the past occurred in 1968 when Soviet authorities decided to build the House of Soviets as a central administrative building on the spot once occupied by the Königsberg Castle. This act marks a continuation of the socialists' break with the past that in 1946 had already been symbolised through the name change from Königsberg to Kaliningrad (after Mikhail Kalinin).

That in Elian's photographs the House of Soviets in Kaliningrad does not look as bedraggled as the Communist Party Executive Hotel in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk has to do with the fact that, only about four years before she took the picture, the building's facade had undergone a makeover for the occasion of the celebration of Kaliningrad's 750th anniversary. In preparation of the ceremonies, to which Vladimir Putin had invited international delegations, the city's ill-kept architecture underwent partial renovations. The House of Soviets profited from this, although the budget allowed only superficial repair of the building which had actually never been finished and which remains practically useless up to this day. After the celebrations there were rumours that Putin's neo-conservative government was considering the demolition of the House of Soviets and rebuilding the castle. With such a reconstruction Kaliningrad's contemporary city planners would be responding to the fashionable nostalgia for the past that recently drew tourists, particularly Germans, to the city .[7] Nowadays Soviet architecture is apparently considered unsuited for such a commercial exploitation. The utopian optimism that motivated its creation, and the dismal outcome of the optimism, is all too present, and provokes mixed feelings in many Russian contemporaries rather than the nostalgic admiration that attracts German tourists to the former Königsberg.

Incorporating Histories

By outlining the dynamics between the construction of buildings under the flag of socialism and the concomitant destruction of older architectures, Elian provides us with a montaged view of the changeability of Russia's border landscape. The questions about the role and function of socialist architectures that *Border Theories* prompts are not formulated solely by Elian, but are posed in dialogue with the architectures. In a way, her photographs reprise the questions that the architectural structures call upon. These questions concern the political motives that produced the architectures. They inevitably enforce the undermining of the idea of historiography as a closed procedure. The questions remain incorporated in the buildings. The history of Kaliningrad, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and Birobidzhan cannot be told in conclusive terms because, just like the cities' architectures, their histories are in constant development. *Border Theories* visualises the stratification of the past and illuminates the ways in which landscapes are prone to political manipulation.

With *Border Theories* Elian suggests that the architectural landscapes of Kaliningrad, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and Birobidzhan, and their current condition, reflect aspects of the invisible ideologies that structure these places. The focus is on the transformation that takes place between the outlining of blueprints and the building of structures in designated ways and environments. Using photography, Elian scrutinises this process of transformation by looking at the ways in which architecture resides in the course of time. While exploring the possibility of transforming ideals into matter, she directs attention to the question of how such attempts at transformation happen to be perceived either as failures or successes, but does not become involved herself in judgments of this kind. The fragmented histories related to the buildings owe their present-day appearance to plans developed by architects working at the behest of authorities with different and changing political agendas. In accordance with these agendas the cities' development has either been fostered or put on ice.

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