

SHORT REVIEW

Manuport

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The spatial installation *Manuport*, prepared for a group exhibition *Unplugged* at Gallery Rudolfinum in Prague, consists of four fragments – material residues found in a specific location of Prague's Holešovice district. Main elements of the installation are physical objects that were moved from places of their original occurrence. Shortly afterwards, sites of their origin underwent a complete transformation as a result of development construction activities. The title refers to an anthropological term *Manuport* – in its exact meaning a natural object, displaced from its original location by human activity, while the transport is initiated on the basis of the aesthetic relationship to the object, that has not been further modified.

The installation is being constantly activated by the performance of repetitive activities related to the character of individual exhibited fragments. The central motif is a granite stele – a pedestal under the former bust of Karel Aksamit.¹ This one and a half ton stone, which was found uprooted from the ground including its geological subsoil at the time of the beginning construction work is placed in a horizontal position on a rotating deposit within the gallery installation. Instructed actors spin it at regular intervals. When set into motion by human power, stone weightlessly rotates for about ten minutes on a supporting bearing. Thus it acquires a new way of movement – rotation around its vertical axis – and could resemble a compass needle looking for a new direction after an electromagnetic storm. While the stone rotates, the actor sits atop the elevated position reading the script into a tin can, from where the text is being silently transmitted by a taut steel rope into a defunct loudspeaker. Thus, its lost signal is potentially capable of further activation.

State of the explored locality on June 11, 2017

The place of interest is located on private property, yet it is accessible without any apparent restrictions during the compound's opening hours. It has not served its original purpose for two decades and no other institutionally defined program has been held there.

The locality is out of use and is gradually dilapidating. The once paved structures of the stand cascade are eroded by the growing vegetation turning them into ruins.

The central clay court is becoming overgrown from its peripheral parts towards the center. Its original clearly defined rectangular shape is gradually changing into an organically rounded ground plan.

The four slanted steel truss girders of the central lighting are corroded. The light bodies on its ends in the height of seventeen meters are missing, and so are the power mains.

The natural decomposition of the artificially formed structures is happening over the course of time due to weather conditions and general entropy. The half-life is accelerated by occasional small-scale human vandalism.

Satellite images of digital maps portray the locality from above in a state of advanced ruination with visible high-grown self-sown vegetation. However, they suppress the plasticity of the terrain of the particular spot. It is this plasticity that becomes the determining sign, which is revealed after a physical encounter.

The epicenter – the very tennis court – is hidden from horizontal view upon arrival by the raised bank of the surrounding stands. One can walk up several steps to the highest topographic level of the site only to walk down again to a twice as deep crater of the stadium.

It is this elevation divide that provided a specific spatial experience. The moment of ascent and the physical disposition of the bank created a boundary, contrasting the two halves of the space. Reaching the upper edge revealed the reality of the quiet forgotten place with uncontrolled vegetation whose growth currently represented its only obvious program.

A short panoramic view from the position of the top dead center over the entire locality was instantly followed by descent into an unknown yet subconsciously safe zone of heterotopy. The everyday urban environment with its functions and programs remained outside the surrounding bank. The newly revealed microworld was open for inspection like an urban landscape in a Petri dish.

State after the probe

On March 11, 2018, I noticed construction works in the given locality as the beginning of the future construction of a complex of multi-story apartment buildings. In the first stages of ground and demolition work, the stadium stands were destroyed. The defensive walls fell.

The slow transformation of the locality, which had been observed as Brownian motion of particles earlier, was followed by a heavy blow dealt to the Petri dish by the demolition hammer. In the clearly structured program of subsequent construction stages, there is no space for sentiment.

Retrospective find

Shortly after the groundwork began, before the compound was closed and the area became inaccessible to the public, I went to the location again. The first stage of construction annulled the original structures and reached an accelerated spatial amnesia.

The original context of the place gradually lost its apparent meaning and its previously plastic terrain now reminded of a waterworn sand beach. The tidal wave caused an artificial terrain levelling and its recoil washed up several fragments which became essential finds in my research.

Data collection

All depicted objects were eventually obtained and saved from final elimination. Permission to collect these was based on a quick personal negotiation with the compound administrator, the construction manager and the construction workers. Direct personal contact got around formal processes of official negotiation, whose results would certainly only arrive after the irreversible elimination of the objects of interest.

The main elements of the Manuport installation include physical objects, material residues which were removed from their original locations. Shortly after, these underwent a complete transformation as a result of property development and construction activities. The above mentioned fragments were deposited in my studio with the help of my friends as souvenirs from a walk of several years.

#1 The steel construction close to the midfield line in the middle of the court lost its ergonomic seating elements, however, it was still functional as a structure enabling a partial top view. At the time of the find, the white construction for the umpire was still in its place, like a chess king figure, although the defensive formation of the stands had been broken by the hydraulic power of the yellow-black knights.

#2 The granite stele used to be a pedestal for a previously removed bust of Karel Aksamit. It was torn out of its original place with its bed plate and a large soil ball with geological sedimentation layers. This revealed the hidden yet always present context – the interconnection of the past and the current state. At the time of the find, the stele had already been separated from its original context. The interconnection with the under-soil maintained the vertical position of the entire object, however, the upper edge of the stele was higher than originally intended for observation in the average height of human gaze.

#3 The sign with the compound's name Locomotive Prague Sports Club used to be placed over the entrance gate. The spatial typography of the inscription, made of wooden battens with metal edges, was

removed, as was the gate. A fragment was found on a pile of rubble designed for disposal. Only a part of the original inscription was preserved: "motive". Motive as a promise of new reality.

#4 The pressure wave of the construction detonation hit the hall of the Feron storehouse in Holešovice district several hundred meters away. After all of the debris was removed, the last fragment of the original construction remained on the site. The steel central girder carries a loudspeaker whose residual signal is potentially capable of further activation.





Photo credit for the visual documentation, Martin Polák, 2020.

Note

- ¹ Karel Aksamit Stadium (currently Locomotive Prague Sports Club).
Street U Průhonu, Prague 7 – Holešovice.

Brief context of the site

The Karel Aksamit Stadium sports complex was built following the construction of “Na Plynárně” sports grounds in 1955. It was opened during the European Volleyball Championship in 1958. At the time of its active use, the complex provided a background for professional matches of the Czechoslovak volleyball competition. Karel Aksamit (1897 – 1944), after whom a stadium was named, was a First Republic promoter of sport, an official of proletarian physical education organizations, a member of the Communist Party and an active figure in the anti-fascist resistance. His life ended with forced suicide when caught by the Gestapo, lives of other members of his family were brutally ended by the Nazis during the occupation for active participation in the Czechoslovak domestic resistance.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

How to cite this article: Moravec, T. 2020. Manuport. *MaHKUscript: Journal of Fine Art Research*, 4(1): 3, pp. 1–5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/mjfar.82>

Published: 21 October 2020

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