

LIANE LANG



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**MONUMENTAL
MISCONCEPTIONS:
A JOURNEY THROUGH
SCULPTURAL BUDAPEST**

**27TH SEPTEMBER - 3RD OCTOBER 2010
THE GALLERY SOHO, 125 CHARING CROSS ROAD, LONDON, WC2H 0EW**

FELLOW TRAVELLERS

95 x 120 cm

2009

c-type photographic print



TREAD

95 x 120 cm
2009

c-type photographic print



STARING DOWN HISTORY

Liane Lang both revivifies and complicates our view of historical sculpture. She photographs or films casts of female bodies interacting with statues and settings, and in doing so prompts a series of questions about the style, scale and purpose of these sculptural testaments to the past, and the space, both physical and social, that they occupy in the here and now.

Lang's first series in this increasingly rich and complex body of work was *Casts* (2006-07), in which her figures engaged often provocatively with the casts used for drawing at the Royal Academy Schools, where she studied. *Spectres* (2007) continued this classical theme, as Lang was let loose among the plaster casts in a museum at Heidelberg University.

In *Monumental Misconceptions*, the historical works with which her figures interact are far more loaded culturally. These are the forgotten, unwanted, dismembered and despised socialist realist sculptures found at two Budapest sites - the Memento sculpture park, a suburban wasteland which became the repository for sculptures which were discarded as Hungary purged itself of the Soviet era, and the running track at Népstadion, a football stadium in eastern Budapest, where several socialist sculptural groups remain in situ.

Lang's title for the group is consciously ambiguous. There are numerous misconceptions at play - those of the original commissioners of the sculptures, who erroneously believed that these vast, bombastic

monuments would be beneficial to their aims; Lang's own misconceptions - deliberate and otherwise, as she admits - as she places her figures in play with the statues. And then there are our own misconceptions as viewers, complicated by Lang's interventions, which can inject humour, pathos, tenderness and much else besides into images that might on their own encourage only antipathy.

Lang's first aim is to make a simple gesture informed by her immediate visual response to the existing sculpture. But she also attempts to understand the forces exerted on the artists working under these regimes. So while Lang's humour and satire might at first stand out, she is conscious of these works' moral and cultural weight. In the three minute looping film, *The Track* (2010) and the accompanying photographs, Lang reflects the complexity of her material in the sheer variety of moods and tones she conjures. One of her figures appears mischievously to be on the brink of putting her hand up the trouser leg of a young comrade who holds forth to two studious companions, while another woman is trampled under the feet of onrushing footballers, and a hand on a dismembered arm struggles to wave in the grip of a soldier's hand.

Lang exposes the simplistic idea that because these sculptures served oppressive and murderous rulers, they should be hidden from view or destroyed. As she says, "Objects have their own life, and need to be really looked at. That is what I try to do - to stare them down."

Ben Luke, London, 2010

LIANE LANG: MONUMENTAL MISCONCEPTIONS

In his *Secret History*, the ancient Roman writer Procopius tells the story of the violent death of the emperor Domitian. Seeking revenge for Domitian's monstrous behaviour while in power, his adversaries murdered him and hacked his body to pieces. Later, his widow appealed to the Senate to be allowed to recover Domitian's body so that she might make a monument to the inhumanity of those who had carved him up. Procopius recounts how she gathered the pieces of her husband's body, stitched them back together and presented the gruesome assemblage to the sculptors, requesting that they make a statue portraying her husband's tragic end. They did so and the statue was erected in the street leading up to the Capitol.

Procopius's account of the statue's genesis is almost certainly apocryphal. Rather than being modelled on a reassembled body, it is more likely that the statue itself was reassembled after the Senate ordered its destruction. The story nevertheless draws attention to a psychic slippage between the natural body and its sculpted representation that is a recurring feature of historical writing on sculpture. Other versions of that slippage are a common occurrence in contemporary art but are rarely handled with the subtlety and acuity that Liane Lang brings to bear on her photographic interventions.

Lang's interest in sculpture is multi-faceted. She's clearly drawn to what one might term the ontology of sculpture, to its propensity to hover

on the boundaries between nature and artifice, between the living and the dead, the animate and the inanimate. Her use of sculpted human figures as the *dramatis personae* for her compositions (she often uses gymnasts and trapeze artists as models) and her choice of photography as the governing medium, complete a trio of intersecting concerns that alight on sculpture's metaphysics.

Lang's decision to stage a series of photographs at the Memento Statue Park just outside Budapest offered an opportunity to play with a range of themes both formal and ideological in content. The dressed (and occasionally undressed) figures she juxtaposes against the now redundant Soviet-era statues might at first glance be mistaken for real people. The realisation that the posed figures are synthetic manikins adds another layer of meaning to the image.





RUNNERS

We might, for example, look at the work entitled Grave and not immediately notice the seemingly real human figure lying among the ranks of sculpted fallen soldiers. Closer inspection confirms this dressed female figure as a synthetic interloper, filed among the effigies of the dead. Is she dead or merely sleeping? Of course, her realism notwithstanding, she is no more real, nor less dead, than her neighbours, who, like her, are also mere representations. Such playful semantic doubling is central to Lang's work.

In some cases Lang positions her imported protagonists in such a way as to emphasize the inert, static nature of the standing monumental figure with which they're made to interact. In others, she responds to the histrionic gestures of the colossal political statue by instilling a sense of passive calm into the pose of the accompanying manikin.

The meaning of many of these images resides in the counterpoint between the stillness of the statue (the stillness of all statues) and the illusion of arrested movement in the imported synthetic figures. We might take this to signify the paralysis of the individual political will when confronted by the active power of the state. It's a theme dramatized in the work entitled Runners, which nods obliquely to the tyranny of state health and fitness programmes central to so many totalitarian regimes.

During the Soviet era, the state apparatus of militarized repression and control had a magnifying effect on the already scaled-up political statue, its

symbolic power made greater by contrast with the vulnerable human bodies over which it towered. Lang's photographs remind us how, when decoupled from the tyrannical state apparatus which brought them into being, and which they came to symbolize, the grandeur and rhetorical force of the Soviet-era statue suddenly gives way to a sense of frailty and pathos. Conversely, once liberated from the yoke of repression, the human body - or its representation in Lang's scenography - is free to express a range of attributes, both real and symbolic, formerly denied it under Communism.

Lang is at her most innovative and insightful when inserting her fabricated human figures into a statue's immediate or surrounding space. She has undertaken versions of this approach using the cast collections of London's Royal Academy art

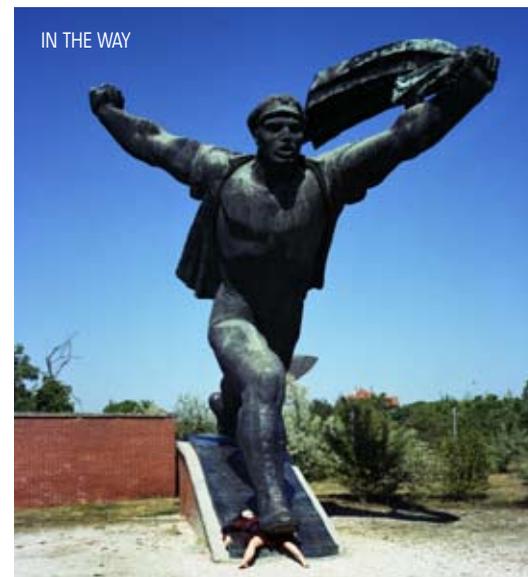
school where the graceful addition of synthetic limbs to canonical works from the history of art exert a melancholy poetic charge. In each case, her photographic technique, compositional instinct, sensitivity to lighting and attention to detail, are of critical importance in the success of the final images.

When deployed at the Memento sculpture park, Lang's synthetic collaborators engage in a symbolic rephrasing of Soviet-era political rhetoric. More often than not - as in Grand Gesture, for example, in which a female figure dangles from Lenin's outstretched arm - the juxtaposition pokes fun not only at the high-minded political message the statue strove to communicate, but at the

overblown sculptural grammar deployed to that end. Some of Lang's works thus operate on the level of political satire. Yet there is a subtle ambiguity at play here as well. The colossal striding male figure that tramples the prostrate female form in the work entitled In the Way reappears in Tread, where the focus is now on the statue's crushing foot. The former work seems to mock the grandiose idea of collective political destiny as enshrined within Communist dogma, while the latter becomes a more generalized but no less eloquent signifier of tyranny per se and its indifferent obliteration of the individual citizen.

Lang is a film-maker as well as a sculptor and photographer. This is evident from the mise en scene of the Monumental Misconception series, many of which have a marked surrealist quality. In true Surrealist fashion, the sardonic element invariably disguises a rich freight of subliminal meanings and messages. Nowhere is this more wittily apparent than in Difficult Territory, where a female figure parodies the statue of the despised Hungarian Communist politician Ferenc Münnich (1886-1967). The statue was toppled in 1990 during the upheaval of post-Communist regime change. In the process, the figure's legs were broken off, leaving the impression that Münnich is sinking into the concrete, his arm outstretched in supplication. The female figure, her own foot embedded in the greater earth, might stand as an emblem of the Hungarian people, indifferent to the plight of their former rulers.

Tom Flynn, London, 2010



IN THE WAY

GRAND GESTURES

120 x 95 cm

2009

c-type photographic print



DIFFICULT TERRITORY

65 x 80 cm

2009

c-type photographic print



THE PARACHUTIST

120 x 95 cm

2009

c-type photographic print



RUNNERS

80 x 65 cm
2009

c-type photographic print



ALEXA CSIZMADIA...

...is an art historian and critic based in Budapest. She facilitated Liane Lang's artist residency at Memento Sculpture Park in 2009.

“THE MOST CONSPICUOUS THING ABOUT MEMORIALS IS THAT ONE DOES NOT NOTICE THEM. NOTHING IN THE WORLD IS AS INVISIBLE AS MEMORIALS. YET THEY ARE UNDOUBTEDLY ERECTED WITH THE PURPOSE OF BEING SEEN”

(ROBERT MUSIL, DENKMÄLER, 1920)

LIANE LANG, BUDAPEST

Sculpture traditionally has a unique connection with history as well as a symbolic power and an impactful, often fractious relationship with its surroundings. Liane Lang is able to put these considerations in brackets and concentrate solely on the formal qualities of the object, thereby re-animating it and opening it up to new interpretations. She investigates existing sculptures and monuments with the aid of cast figures made in her studio and she is not shy about working with iconic works or monuments. The added figures are temporary transmutations of the original sculptures and the result is recorded photographically or on video. The artist could be described as an agent or catalyst, a liberator of forgotten or overlooked objects.

The reinterpretation and re-contextualisation of artworks has been common practice particularly since Postmodernism, but somehow this didn't happen as vigorously in the field of sculpture as compared to other media. Lang previously worked in the safe terrain of studios and museums, but during her residency in Budapest she ventured to public spaces and approached the monumental sculptures left behind from the socialist period. Her life-size casts bring the grandiose and heroic monuments down to earth and add new light and human scale to them. The introduction of human scale is a simple but powerful way to highlight the unbalanced relationship of the common people and the ruling party in an undemocratic society. Lang's approach is formal, but when she is working with historic monuments she cannot escape the historic

interpretations. This friction is at the centre of her practice.

She approached the monuments of the Socialist period in Budapest in a way that would be impossible, or at least improbable, for Hungarian artists. Her work is located on the demarcation line between her position as a spectator and the local sensitivities. The monuments of the Socialist period are displayed at the edge of Budapest in the Memento Park, visited mostly by tourists, since most Hungarians don't feel nostalgic about that period and are unable to approach it with irony. Most Hungarians are still too close to exhibit an objective and unbiased interpretation in a post-Socialist country where socialist realism was a blanket under which the individual artistic approach and critical art work was hidden or suppressed for decades.

After the political transition of 1989, the sculptures were deprived of context and ended up in a neutral theme park-like environment. The intention of the architect Akos Eleod, was to create a Sculpture Park to remember the past, and make sure that the mistakes of that past would never be repeated. But in fact, what happened was that the sculptures were just moved off the radar screens of local people and became a somewhat dubious tourist attraction. These embodiments of an ideology are considered merely as sculptures. Digestion of the past still has to happen, and the fact that these monuments were removed from view doesn't seem to help this process. The politics-free concept of the display proved to be an obstacle.

Furthermore, in the Memento Sculpture Park visitors become confused about how to behave properly. Most of them take and pose for pictures with the statues.

Slavoj Zizek pointed out that Stalinism was never rejected in the same way as Nazism. A theme park-like display based on the art of the Nazi period (National Socialism) is simply unimaginable. Meanwhile the works from Socialist Realism are still in a vacuum, as it is demonstrated by the Memento Park and according to Hedvig Turai in this vacuum "everybody is 'free' and at a loss as to how to relate to the Socialist past".

Liane Lang feels at home in strange in-between spaces, where objects deprived of meaning can be found. The politics-free presentation provided a fertile and unrestricted working environment for the artist who created an interface where cultural tropes can collide, where the classical meets the contemporary, the eternal bronze giant meets the ephemeral object, the subtle gesture. In Budapest, she worked with diverse "material" from XIX century memorials to the Socialist Realist public sculptures. Her work demonstrates that these sculptures have many more layers than is at first apparent and opens a new debate on how embedded these objects are in their historical background and the political present and how much contemporary art can do to facilitate memory and rescue the objects of our collective traumatic past for future examination.

Alexa Csizmadia, Art Historian

SUPPORT GROUP

120 x 95 cm

2009

c-type photographic print



THE FALLEN

65 x 80 cm
2009

c-type photographic print



LIBERTY

120 x 95 cm

2009

c-type photographic print



DANCERS

80 x 65 cm
2009

c-type photographic print



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thanks...

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