

# Simulacrum



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Eef Veldkamp is an engaged artist and a researcher at ArtEZ University of the Arts where he also teaches. Delving into the concepts used by actors in the arts, he wonders about the condition of arts today. Through artistic and philosophical research methods he develops subversive textual interventions that dare the reader to think into other realities. In his artistic practices he uses the premises handed over by his research into a range of political topics to develop 'counter-systems' which are aesthetic infrastructures that attempt to intervene on the fabric of our reality by introducing so-called 'art on batteries': art that does.

# Memories of Ideological Landscaping *Not to Mention:* Damnatio Memoriae Eef Veldkamp

## The Sisyphian Boulder

When Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to push a boulder upon a mountain for all eternity, it had only been understood in terms of *his* suffering: those cunning gods thought this to be the most useless activity they could come up with (and

they couldn't have been more wrong!). In the wake of every ascent, comes decline: sending a boulder down the mountain crushing all in its path. Although discussion can be made on the size of this 'boulder,' it must be of scale, and even if not, the slope will magnify the stationary force tremendously by the bare act of acceleration when coming down. Arguably – seeking its lowest point – the boulder weighs more coming down than it does going up. It is in the light of this weight, the 'struggle towards heights is enough to fill a man's heart,' as Albert Camus (1913-1960) invites us to believe: 'one must imagine Sisyphus happy.'<sup>1</sup> This weight is easily forgotten and is enough to trample all those who inhabit the valley beneath: that lowest point to which the boulder will drop to discharge its force. And because this 'mountain' is unspecified by grace of the myth, it must regard *all valleys*.

Let's imagine what happens every time Sisyphus' boulder comes down; let's imagine the repeated horror of the villagers; the improper scars that tear the slopes. 'Design by destruction[!]' – we might need to yell to he whose alias is 'the craftiest of man,' the able artisan with his 'earth-clotted hands' – is a landscaping force often ignored.<sup>2</sup> It is a force that Sisyphus has not aggrandised, or at least his divine judges had not [Fig. A]. The gods 'had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.'<sup>3</sup> These gods – however – did not only punish Sisyphus, but also those in his wake, which is all there is. Nor turned the punishment out to be 'futile,' the opposite has proven to be true.

The worst punishment for Sisyphus must be the uncompromising coming-of-knowledge and repetition of this fate: that of the liminal-forgotten but omnipresent destruction of his hard labour. The 'absurd hero,' with his 'hatred of death, and his passion for life' must have somehow known what Baudrillard paraphrases in the aftermath of 9/11: 'they did it, but we wished for it.'<sup>4</sup> He adds – accurately – that 'if this is not regarded the event loses a symbolic dimension.' We have to cognise Sisyphus' boulder coming down, every time, repetitively. If it is not the symbolic dimension of this destruction, why bother about its memory at all? Unfortunately, for Sisyphus, he has lost the ability to kill himself (being already dead, and because he escaped death once, the gods will

certainly keep a close eye on him). He can never forget, for he is incapable to do so. So forth, we cannot commemorate the destruction caused by his boulder, for it still rolls and will keep rolling for eternity to come.

‘Myths are made for the imagination to breathe life into them, and as everything that breathes in, it also breathes out: myths are made to breath imagination into life.’<sup>5</sup> Sometimes the most imaginative way to make something is to destroy something. Nothing seems more ‘creative’ to our Sisyphian-era than destruction. It is above all the progressive momentum of iterability – when meaning disintegrates by the destruction of endless repetition – that forces us to sometimes *remake* the meaning of what is. Hence, we need to follow the itinerary of the boulder: there where in its path only the contamination of wringing surfaces will be found. Let’s follow the trace of destruction, the path in the wake of the decline of the Sisyphian Boulder, and see where it leads us.

### Sisyphian Landscaping

The disintegration of the necessity for having memory is accelerated when what is remembered remains *present*, so that there is no need for the memory to be cognitively and constantly underscored because the token to that memory still remains. No street is named after a living person; no statue stands of anyone who still does; no perfume is made of a flower that blooms eternally. What is present does not need re-presentation in the same manner as that which is gone needs re-presentation to make it appear again, and for that fact needs to be haunted with memory of what it re-presents. This must be most evident to the Palestinians in the Valley of Jordan, located on the itinerary collision course of Israeli State that projects itself as if it were a force like gravity; as if it were a necessity; insurmountable. Destruction is war, but it is also landscaping, and therefore landscaping is war, war on memory. Eyal Weizman (1970) notes, whilst speaking of the Israeli invasion of *Jenin Refugee Camp* in 2002 – the ‘Palestinian ground zero’ – that the *Tsahal* picked the dis-course of construction as war strategy.<sup>6</sup> This invasion was the first time ‘bulldozers were integrated into the battlefield.’<sup>7</sup> After working straight through residential housing – whereby the domestic became the new ‘city walls’ – ‘the [D9] bulldozers collapsed the heart of the camp onto those (remaining) fighters’ [Fig. B & C].<sup>8</sup>

This evolution of the Sisyphian Boulder, negates forces of gravity and takes its destiny into its own hydraulic claws overturning up from down at the touch of a joystick. After the Israeli State

#### ENDNOTES:

1. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, translated by Justin O’Brien (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2005), 119.

2. Eyal Weizman, “Israel: The architecture of violence,” *Aljazeera*, 00:00:25, filmed by Ana Naomi de Sousa, accessed on 20-02-2020. 00:13:30.

3. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 115.

recognised the usefulness of this strategy, ‘the fleet of bulldozers grew,’ adapting special army cladding and even the acquainted desaturated camouflage-green: shedding its well-known aposematism of fluorine yellows and reds and its retroreflectors.<sup>9</sup> Such ‘unpleasant attribute[s]’

a bulldozer expressed publicly to illustrate its itinerary in order to ‘escape[s] a great deal of experimental “tasting”’, say of unlucky passers-by.<sup>10</sup> Through adopting ‘general aggressive resemblance’ camouflage, the bulldozer became what it warned for: dangerous. Henceforth the passers-by became the target. Aggressively ‘constructing,’ or rather, ‘destructing’ if you’d prefer. As biologist Edward Poulton (1856-1943) notes about this kind of camouflaged creature, it ‘passes undetected by resembling some common object which is of no interest to its enemies or prey respectively’, through adopting the appearance that ‘harmonises well with their surroundings, enabling them to approach their prey.’<sup>11</sup> Bulldozers now contrast like aposematism the construction site itself, and blend into warzones, by which warzones become construction sites and vice versa. All zones can be made a warzone if there is a bulldozer present, merely stemming from the bulldozer’s aesthetic metamorphosis.

The Sisyphian Boulder now blends in with the mountain, so it seems that the mountain drops onto the valley, insurmountably, flattening anything. The new floorplan of *Jenin* formed a heatmap of lowest resistance, flushing the ‘dozers in like predators onto prey: the destruction marking a path of a Sisyphian boulder, digging and dumping through the topography until it is all smeared out. Gaza is mutilated, over and over again, but it is not killed and will never be.<sup>12</sup> Its tissue is scarred, until there is only scar tissue and the token disappears for *all* there is, is token and so forth memory disintegrates. What took place still takes place in the illegalised Palestinian village of *Al-Araqib* in current Israel, that ‘has been demolished over 170 times over the past sixty years.’<sup>13</sup>

### The Sisyphian Trace

[...] shift the struggle into the symbolic sphere, where the rule is that of challenge, reversion and outbidding. *So that death can be met only by equal or greater death.* Defy the system by a gift to which it cannot respond except by its own death and its own collapse.<sup>14</sup>

The practice of *damnatio memoriae* – the decree of erasing all proof of existence – for landscaping *is* the Sisyphian Boulder, in as much as it is the eraser for bureaucracy, although none of

4. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 116. Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism* (London: Verso Books, 2012), 13.

5. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 116.

6. Weizman, “Israel: The architecture of violence,” 00:25:00, 00:13:20.

7. Weizman, “Israel: The architecture of violence,” 00:14:25.

8. Weizman, “Israel: The architecture of violence,” 00:14:00.

9. ‘Warning colours.’ The use of contrast, colourful (marks on), scent and sound by certain animals to warn other animals of their dangers to prevent becoming hunted, for example signifying toxicity or being sick.

10. Edward Ragnall Poulton, *The Colours of Animals* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1890), 21.

11. Poulton, *The Colours of Animals*, 19-20, 72.

12. Simon(e) van Saarloos, *Herdenken Herdacht: een essay om te vergeten*, (Amsterdam: Prometheus/Nieuw Licht, 2019).

13. “Destruction and Return in Al-Araqib: Ground Truth,” in *Forensic Architecture*, 27-06-2017, accessed on 14-04-2020. <<https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/destruction-and-return-in-al-araqib>>

14. Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit*

of *Terrorism* (London: Verso Books, 2012), 25-26.

15. David Freedberg, "Damnatio Memoriae: Why Mobs Pull Down Statues," *Wall Street Journal* (Eastern edition) 16-04-2003, accessed on 26-04-2020. 10.

16. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 115.

17. Nasir Behzad and Daud Qarizadah, "The man who helped blow up the Bamiyan Buddhas," in *BBC Afgan*. 12-03-2015, accessed on 26-02-2020. <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-31813681>>

18. Matthew Power, "Rebuilding the Bamiyan Buddhas," in *Slate*, 23-07-2004, accessed on 25-02-2020. <<https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2004/07/dispatch-from-afghanistan-rebuilding-the-bamiyan-buddhas.html>>

19. Nasir Behzad and Daud Qarizadah, "The man who helped blow up the Bamiyan Buddhas" in *BBC Afgan*, 12-03-2015, accessed on 26-02-2020. <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-31813681>> *Emphasis added.*

20. [allegedly] The Rediff Interviews, 12-04-2004, <<https://www.rediff.com/news/2004/apr/12inter.htm>>

21. [allegedly] *The Rediff Interviews.*

22. [allegedly] The Rediff Interviews.

both will erase completely. Erasing always leaves stains, even if it regards the denial of a human life but that stain must be memory itself. This trace cannot be erased, for it is the product of erasing; you cannot erase erasing. You can only forget it. The trace is the negation of being imprinted into being. However, as art historian David Freedberg (1948) notes, the paradox of erasing does not deny the damnatio memoriae of the Sisyphian Boulder, that attempts rigorously to 'eliminate *even* the memory of the past by removing its symbols,' which henceforth must be aggressive and both impossible, and even more aggressive because it is impossible, leading to an aggression surpassing the possible: an attempt to erase erasing.<sup>15</sup> Hence the Sisyphian Boulder must leave a scar, a scar that spreads by the gods-induced 'futile and hopeless labor' of endless repetition until *all* tissue is scar, sublimating its quality as a symbol of destruction. Now forgetting is impossible, for all there remains, is *only* and *fully* token.<sup>16</sup>

Mullah Mohammed Omar (1960-2013), former leader of the Taliban, gave the order for the destruction of the *Buddhas of Bamiyan*, as a false token of humanitarianism, in 2001. Mirza Hussein, being held prisoner by the Taliban at the time, noted that 'initially, the statues were fired at for several days using anti-aircraft guns and artillery.'<sup>17</sup> Omar following his first order, concluded this had indeed damaged them, however, it 'did not obliterate them.'<sup>18</sup> He had at least enriched the sandy ground with brass, but he had not turned the sandstone sculptures into it. Thereafter, Hussein and his peers were forced to turn to more corrosive chemistry and drill dynamite into the Buddhas – taking 25 days to completion, or rather, demolition. The first run of explosions only demolished the Buddha's legs, but this merely enriched the symbolic side of the destruction of symbols, now that his acts were aesthetically subjected to an 'international chorus of condemnation,' chanting in unison.<sup>19</sup>

Omar whilst detecting hypocrisy in the response of the West, has allegedly said to motivate his actions by noting that 'foreigners came to me and said they would like to conduct the repair work of the Bamiyan Buddha that had been slightly damaged due to rains.'<sup>20</sup> Omar was shocked by this mission, because 'I thought, these callous people have no regard for thousands of living human beings — the Afghans who are dying of hunger, but they are so concerned about non-living objects like the Buddha. This was extremely deplorable.'<sup>21</sup> Subsequently he 'ordered' for the destruction, unveiling the resentment that 'had they [the foreigners] come for humanitarian work, I would have never ordered the Buddhas'

destruction,' for we all know that the urge to repair is a perfect excuse to destroy.<sup>22</sup> 'Intentionally destroying the Buddhas of Bamiyan,' *The Guardian* attempts to put into perspective that the destruction must have more accurately been a near childish response to 'the Taliban regime [that] became increasingly unpopular internationally,' whilst Omar repeatedly argued that 'America itself is the biggest terrorist in the world.'<sup>23</sup>

After receiving protest from the prisoners that Omar held in captivity, not only for being treated inhumanely but also in disagreement with the Taliban's cultural warfare, Omar allegedly responded in the only proper way he could: 'what are you complaining about? We are only waging war on stones.'<sup>24</sup> Of course, following not too many anniversaries of the destruction, the West came up with ideas to rebuild Bamiyan, sending the boulder back to the top, but of course 'experts cannot agree on the best way forward,' and so the Sisyphean trace must once more lead downwards.<sup>25</sup>



**Fig. A.**

**Fig. A.** Markus Hell. "Boulder smashes through Italian farm." BBC News. January 31, 2014. Source: AP Photo.

**Fig. B.** Eyal Weizman and Ana Naomi de Sousa. "Rebel Architecture: The Architecture of Violence." Al Jazeera English. September 2, 2014. Screenshot of video by the author via YouTube. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybwJaCeeA9o>>

**Fig. C.** *Destruction of the site by the Taliban.* March 21, 2001. Photograph. 356 x 280. Source: CNN.

23. Sandy Gall, "Mullah Omar obituary," in *The Guardian*, 30-07-2015, accessed on 27-02-2020. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/30/mullah-omar>>

24. [allegedly] *The Rediff Interviews.*

25. Frédéric Bobin, "Disputes damage hopes of rebuilding Afghanistan's Bamiyan Buddhas," in *The Guardian*. 10-01-2015, accessed on 27-02-2020. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/10/rebuild-bamiyan-buddhas-taliban-afghanistan>>



Fig. B.



Fig. C.