

# THE PALACE OF MEMORY

a work-in-progress

## INTRODUCTION

This book has been published to accompany the short film *The Palace of Memory* and is a working compilation of anonymous memories concerning or somewhat related to Ukrainian House / the former Lenin Museum in Kyiv. These texts are intended to act as a trigger for further recollections, either directly or indirectly. The last part of the book has purposely been left blank for you, as the reader and viewer, to add your own contributions. The project is a work-in-progress which can only be completed by, with and through the participation of others.

Vicki Thornton

## THE PALACE OF MEMORY

### 1.

I remember seeing the building being constructed. It was a long time ago: these images are in black and white. A man, one eye closed, surveying. A black cross in the centre of my field of vision. The Philharmonic building overlooking the endless void below. Diggers moving the earth, loaded trucks rolling down the man-made hillside. Steel mesh rising up from the wet earth, obscuring and framing the landscape. I watched through this strange perspectival grid wondering how long it would take to draw such a scene. I also remember the blue and yellow wrapped around the building. I heard someone describing the sculpture underneath but couldn't picture it again, no matter how hard I tried. I remember walking to the very top of the building and watching two soldiers silently patrolling in military fatigues.

2.

As far as I remember, the first time I visited this strange 'loophole' was in 2006. There was an art fair there and many galleries were exhibiting artists' work. I was a student at the time and couldn't buy an entry ticket so I said I was from the media. Circle after circle, almost like Dante. Red velvet, concrete and marble. Everything emphasising the strange coincidence of your presence. It looked almost as though some solemn feast had just ended. I didn't know the word "panopticon" back then, but probably my sense of uneasiness was not because of the lack of transparency, but rather because of the invisibility. In the cavity at the centre (in which, I later found out, used to house a monument to Lenin and whose debris later became a tombstone) ,was a black piano. A local well-known pianist was playing it. Although everyone was fussing around, I really wanted to believe that the musician noticed me standing near, leaning against a column and listening to his music.

3.

Regarding Ukrainian House, the first memory I have of the place was when I went to some concert or literature event there in the early 2000s or late 90s. Since then, I've been there several times accidentally, so to say: at some Indian/Asian/Oriental culture fair, to buy incense sticks or to look for some Buddhist workshop. I've often seen banners on the front of the building advertising cat fairs, clothing fairs, etc. There is never much of interest happening.

The most it drew my attention was in January-February 2014 when it was taken by Maidan protesters, then by police, and then by protesters again. There was an Open University of Maidan, an aid centre for protesters from outside the city and for AutoMaidan. A place for protesters to rest. I remember giving some money there which had been sent to me by a Polish friend in support of Maidan.

Last year I remember a documentary film was shown there about a Canadian journalist traveling through Ukraine during the Holodomor, a robot war competition for teenagers, and some social/cultural presentations at the Ukrainian Crisis Media Centre.

4.

It was freezing outside and we came inside just to get warm. I remember there being a book fair and buying a few pamphlets. When we came back the next day to buy more, the hall had been transformed into a Christmas market. We bought a few small sweets from a woman in a side room: I found one in my coat pocket the following winter.

Spring. We'd been running around the city, jumping on and off trolley buses. We circled the square three times before going in. A girl put stickers on our coats as we entered. We wandered upstairs and watched a game being played between groups of children. You photographed everything but I just watched - I remember thinking that this small moment couldn't be fixed.

## 5.

I never heard about the Lenin Museum in my childhood. I was small and had never been to Kyiv. I think if I would have gone to Kyiv during that time, it would have been unlikely that my parents would have taken me there. I first visited Ukrainian House as a student. The first large Kyiv Art fairs and book exhibitions were held there in the 2000s.

In 2004, Ukrainian House was occupied by revolutionaries during the Orange Revolution. I remember it being very quiet inside the House, although there were lots of people there. They were sleeping everywhere: on the stairs, on the escalator, and the small rooms were completely covered with mattresses. It was warm and stuffy, all the smells mixed together: smoke, sandwiches, shoes, clothes, the smell of trains... Guards stood at the entrance keeping order. In general, that winter, I often remember provocations - people were very afraid of this. My friends told me that they went to Ukrainian House to take photos – everyone was sleeping, they began photographing and someone shouted: “provocateurs!”. They were immediately surrounded, and for a long time had to prove that they were artists and were taking photos only for artistic purposes. In 2013-2014, there were also headquarters and revolutionaries living there. Now it is quite empty and very little happens there, except for during the conflict in 2016, when the Soviet sculptural relief on the façade of the house was dismantled during the decommunisation programme in Ukraine.

## 6.

With Ukrainian House, I have no childhood memories, the first time I went there was when I came to live in Kyiv in the early 2000s. However, I do remember a story that my friend told me. When the building ceased to be a museum of Lenin during Perestroika, and was decommunised for the first time, a huge statue of Lenin, which stood inside in the centre, was defeated. My friend's parents saved a granite thumb and Lenin's finger had been gathering dust for many years on a shelf in his workshop.

At one time in Ukrainian House there were exhibitions of contemporary art. But, like many other premises that started to be rented out, often this led to an absurd and unpredictable set of activities. In the winter of 2014, around Ukrainian House was one of many serious confrontations - in late January it was stormed by protestors. Before that, there had been government forces inside there for a while. In front of the House in the centre of European Square (one of the main points of confrontation) , there were several lines of barricades, 'Berkut', internal troops, and behind them the Museum of Ukrainian Art. The house was right behind the lines of protestors so was strategically important. I remember when I got there for the first time after the assault, there was a huge mountain of mattresses in the centre of the atrium. People were warming themselves and



## THE PALACE OF MEMORY

sleeping there: there was serious frost outside on the streets.

I also remember my unsuccessful attempts to interest foreign artists who came to Kyiv last winter and were rather sceptical about everything that is happening here. We went to Ukrainian House and found ourselves surrounded by underwear: there were pants, toweling dressing gowns, bras and such like everywhere. An 'exhibition' of consumer goods - a format especially popular in the late 90s and early 2000s in former Soviet cultural institutions. In the House of Cinema, the UFO: such exhibitions were also held regularly there. This time in Ukrainian House, several floors were tightly packed with plastic boxes, inside which were mountains of textile goods. All this against a backdrop of walls lined with granite and under a dome of yellow and blue ribbons.

7.

I remember the place as a film set. We sat in the fake café with the real curator. My friend spoke about visiting as a child and seeing the now-invisible collection. Portraits made of maize, corn and rice. The curator sipped his coffee from a plastic cup. We could see everything next time, he said. The Ambassador of Russia in Turkey had just been shot. It was not a good day for us to have come. We really did want to go down, we tried several times. We'd heard stories from people who had. They told us of those 'treasures' buried deep underground. But it was too dangerous. There'd been a serious accident just that morning. Mould spores were emanating rapidly from the dank and dripping earth above.

8.

Trying to think about Ukrainian House (the former Lenin Museum) in Kyiv, I caught myself on one vital detail – my mind and memory seem like they have persistently erased any visual or tactile contact with this building for at least the last five to seven years. It is as though my mind has categorised this building as some sort of “trauma” that should be unseen and avoided. Why? When I started to think about this, I remembered two episodes from my childhood.

The first was from around the time I was about to start school, around 5 years old. It was summer, we were on a walk in the city centre and, for some reason, we decided to visit Ukrainian House. It was really hot, I remember this feeling of searing asphalt and the inevitability of the sun... and then suddenly so cold and huge, the granite floor of Ukrainian House. And nothing inside. The security guard told us that there was nothing inside that day, the trade expo will start next week, or something like that. So frustrating and still an unanswered childhood question of mine: why guard and deny entrance to a building with nothing inside?

The second memory was from when I was around 6-7 years old. My parents and I went to Ukrainian House for some trade show to buy a jacket (or jeans?) or something like that and... in the chaotic mess of this trade show, I saw an escalator! Not in the

## THE PALACE OF MEMORY

metro! It was such a pure joy and revelation for me – as though someone had realised his whim and taken this fantastic mechanism from the underground and installed it exactly where he wanted – in a building! And I could play on it! This added to my general impression of the building as someone’s freaky, but fully-realised fantasy.

Coming back to today, I think my mind has erased all images of Ukrainian House because I feel embarrassed about the current state of this building – the former Lenin Museum, renamed Ukrainian House, destined to be just a ‘b-quality’ venue for numerous, ugly trade shows, strange exhibitions and official events, and always with some huge and exquisitely glamorous advertising banner on its façade. Parallels to the hopes and disappointments of contemporary Ukrainian history? Maybe.

But what I am really looking forward to seeing realised in Ukrainian House is the first state museum of contemporary art – by now, I think this building really deserves an injection of critical, active thinking.

9.

The place, for me, was experienced more in the second-hand. The city was a whirlwind of different histories told across the built environment. And it felt like I was encountering most of these for the first time. So perhaps the emptiness I felt was apt. This absent space had already become something in my mind through others' recollections. Even the visit I did make is somewhat blurred. An orchestra playing through unobtrusive speakers. Something classical. The evident potential for conference or event, hinted at in the stacks of chairs and tables and expansive open floors. Carpeted echo protection. Sunlight coming in through the plate glass windows. It felt like I shouldn't be there, that I was invading its breathing space, its empty pause.

EPILOGUE

I went into the yard of a five-storey building to pass through to the main street. There were poplar trees in straight rows. There were car tyres half-buried in the ground, like small fences. Paths diagonally crossing the yard in a much more convenient way than those perpendicularly asphalted. Puddles on the driveways. Heating pipes running over the ground. And it was a town with such a kind of set. It reminded me of my hometown.

It had exactly the same type of buildings, same trees, same grass, same metal playground constructions and an almost empty sandbox with dirt in it, and puddles on the driveways in the same spots. A table in the yard with two benches where I'd seen older guys playing dominoes or cards.

I had a very strange feeling. It looked exactly like my hometown and absolutely familiar, yet I've never been here before. Like an alternative history in action. I felt homely and like a newcomer all at the same time. My childhood happened in this location, but with different people, and in another space. I looked around in search of shops and corners that I remember from my childhood. I couldn't find any, of course, but I had the feeling that they were always somewhere near. Just around the corner.

THE PALACE OF MEMORY