Concrete Doesn't Burn, it Crumbles.
Text by Brad Feuerhelm, 2020
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Struggle is often written in the foundation of our city's (un)natural architecture. In our rural areas, it is marked by temporary institutions-the grass, trees, fields and clearings bear the organization of bomb craters and sweeps of forest shoulder a mane of trees cut in half directly proceeding the finality of traumatic event. The institution of struggle, of war, of anxiety place the rural into a theatre in which bludgeoning hammers fall from the sky, the rhythms of machine gun strafe cut men like trees, in half and from the moment of capitulation the land begins its soft unimposing efforts of rebirth. Grass covers land once veiled by mud and artillery shrapnel, trees grow upright, tendrils reaching towards the heavens and finally, the earth overtakes the trauma that the land had bore witness to. WWI and WWII are evident reminders of this-the lowlands of Europe now green and Edenic, their carpet hiding the unexploded ordinance under foot.

In cities, the hallmarks of trauma, war and struggle are manifest if you look for them, particularly in Europe. Countries such as America, Canada, Morocco, and the the Philippines to name but a very few have avoided most of the traumatic embossing through their ability to avoid sponsorship to the violence of war. In the case of Manila, the Philippines capital, the city found a way to re-grow out of its decimation. It cleared its rubble and rebuilt. Cities like Berlin, Warzawa, Belfast, and Budapest all bear the signature bullet wounds and bombastic bite marks of the Twentieth Century European experience. They partially rebuilt, but also carried their pre-war architectural legacy forward when possible with cement and scaffolding. It is impossible to lose the cratered shadows that adorn The Reichstag and the Olympic Stadium in Berlin, nor to completely obfuscate the pock marks left on the façade of the Hotel de Ville in Paris. These wounds are both memories and prophecies of a possible and likely future yet ill-defined that serve as both medals to the valour of existence and awkward scars that may be worn again in the distant years.

Bertrand Cavalier's Concrete Doesn't Burn (FW:Books, 2020) points out the conundrum of how our civic monuments, streets and architecture act as a vessel for history. In suggesting that concrete does not burn, Cavalier is pointing out that its very presence in the post-war economy suggests an urbanity that wishes not to be erased through its material value or reduced to easily to rubble such as the lost bricks of Berlin. Concrete doesn't burn, which is why it is also very hard to eliminate from our environment. It is the material that the successive post-war generations are perhaps most aware of. It suggests urbanity itself with all of its immovable associations. Cavalier's book does feel urban with an emphasis on wandering the streets, meeting young people quite disarticulated from their grandparents war. The cities

almost look complacent and yet, there are signs of the current trend towards anxiety and a brooding oncoming dystopia.

In reading the press release again and to pit the images against the conceptual framework, I would suggest a slight disconnect and that is my only real criticism of the book as it feels slightly forced and not entirely as if the manifestation of the concept was born until after the assembly of images, which is still an applicable methodology. There are perhaps three images within that speak to the press writing, which is as follows…

Bertrand Cavalier investigates how political upheaval becomes visible in the urban landscape and how this affects the lives of the people who live in it. He photographs places that have been marked by armed conflicts in the past. For inhabitants, this is often no more than the backdrop against which they live their lives. However, politics have a way of subliminally impacting on people's habits and dictating behaviour. By photographing the townspeople in their own context, Cavalier reveals their true connection with their environment.

Perhaps in terms of re-built architecture, council housing, etc. a further case could be drawn out, but council states themselves exist from a pre-war state of municipal design and brutalism is subservient to elitist utopian ideals of civic planning. There are a few quasi-brutal examples within that fit Cavalier's book that elaborate a commonality between urban planning and the postwar necessity of its landscape. If I were to contrapuntally argue in favor of the conceptual framework, it would be to suggest that Cavalier's images reflect an architecture that desires to limit the visible scars of war and resistance. The book overall feels apathetic in all the best ways in its examination of architecture and inhabitant. It is coarse and its ability to convey its moody extension of its claimed concept is successful. When I point out the disconnect, it is not to speak poorly of Cavalier, whose book is full of brilliant images.

What is important and where I am much less skeptical is the veracity of Cavalier's skill as a portraitist. I mention portrait in the widest sense of the therm to incorporate people, but also the living organism of the cities themselves. The photographs are excellent, studied and flourish in the trending re-birth and examination of Michael Schmidt's career of which some of us are overly familiar. I am also reminded of Stephanie Kiwitt's Maj and the formal interests of Geert Goiris and a number of post-war German artists and perhaps the acute architectural studies of Pino Musi. I am held rapt by the smooth pacing of the book which is emphasized with breaks between images-this is an understated and potent tool of editing that ostensibly Cavalier and Hans Gremmen used it to keep the work flowing, but to also keep it from becoming a grey sludge. The blank pages add emphasis throughout like piano keys and the overall design and size is smart and

compelling.

I feel the post-war and the anxiety in it. It is perhaps part imagined as to be his age and to understand the bitter nostalgia of conflict in the cities he has visited seems either far too prescient or far too reaching. I would suggest the book is more of a premonition than a reflection. It is hard to tell, but the whole of the effort is great and his due rightfully claimed. I look forward to seeing the artist's next moves as this speaks highly for a first effort. I suspect Cavalier has much to offer particularly when his conceptual framework matches closer the verbiage it is associated with. There is a strong pulse within the book, a pathos rent from a desire to understand our contemporary motivations in a world spinning out of alignment with the palpable taste of iron and smoke pervading the air. Highly Recommended.