

# THE STADIUM AS PRISON

MARCIN DUDEK  
AND THE ARENA AS  
INTERMENT CAMP



*The snow had started again by the time I'd checked into Hotel Rus in Kyiv. The car park was full of vans bearing the logo of Unicef and the receptionist had shown me the underground shelter for when the ping ping of the air raid app goes off. I threw open the window blinds of the bedroom, edging open the catch, wanting to let some fresh air in. I was pleased with my room on the 14th floor: the window perfectly framed the Olympic stadium below. An oval pocket, a colosseum amid the contested urban landscape.*

**I'M RECALLING THIS** scene to Marcin Dudek, a Polish artist who is as fascinated with the role stadiums have played in war as I am. I'm back home in Brazil, he's in Brussels, where he lives. I tell him that there's something about the framing of that view, of looking down on the stadium, that brought home the melancholy of his own collaged paintings of arenas. Each painful work an abstract aerial view of a sports stadium in a moment of national trauma. He tells me he is planning a trip of his own to Ukraine: I told him how I'd bought a Shakhtar Donetsk scarf in Maidan Nezalezhnosti, the central square in Kyiv, off a woman selling them metres away from a sea of photographs of dead young men, fallen at the front. Shakhtar have played at the Kyiv stadium in

exile since 2014 and the Russian occupation of their home region in eastern Ukraine, their own stadium now abandoned, with weeds and time overtaking the pitches and terraces. We talk about how since Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Kyiv's terraces have fallen silent too, matches played without supporters as the threat of missile strike remains ever present, with bunkers prepared for the teams should they be needed mid-match

'The arena is always a place that records history, it attracts the extremity of a place in a particular moment,' Dudek says. 'It has its roots in the Colosseum of course, so it has been a macabre place from the beginning. It was always a destination for drama and life's theatre.' When he comes to Ukraine, Dudek will do as he

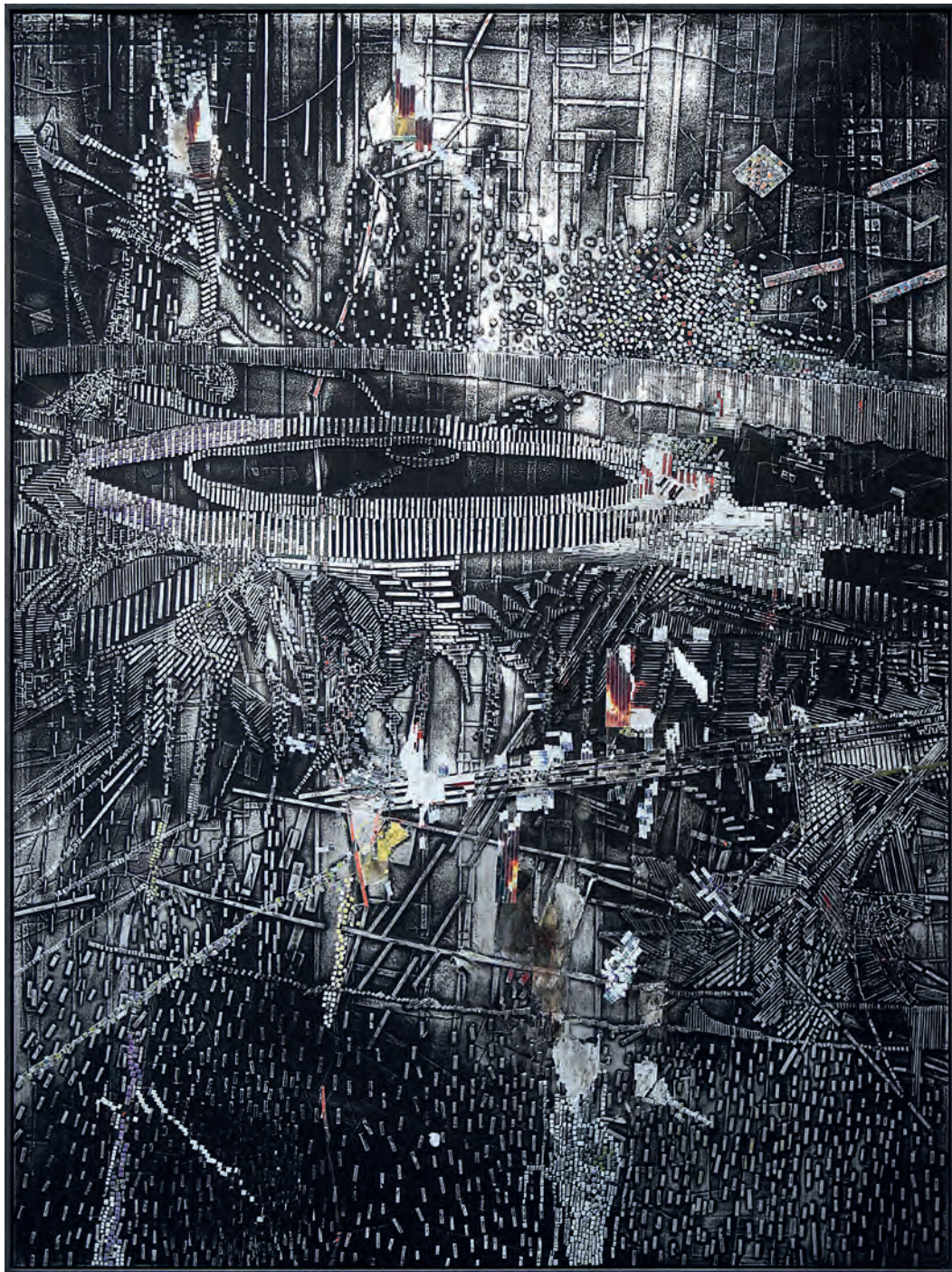
always does when making these works; he will scour archives and books for photographs, map the area, annotate the history and then collect material from the site: loose bricks, a rubber band perhaps, a bit of wire from a fence. Any detritus that might portray the DNA of the building. These he will collage together on the surface of the painting: sometimes whole, but more often ground to a fine powder and mixed in the palette. His found images will be transferred onto medical tape and then pressed onto the surface of the work, often as parallel lines of repetition, giving an architectural or woven quality to the composition.

'I Walked Around its Edge Above' is one of Dudek's earliest works in this vein, a work in acrylic paint and medical tape on wood and aluminium: a portrait of the 10th-Anniversary Stadium in Warsaw, a memorial, since it had been pulled down a few years prior. 'I spent my youth in stadiums, trying to find my place in this huge bowl of people. In Krakow, where I was born, I was going to games from the age of nine, but all around Poland too, to the 10th-Anniversary Stadium in Warsaw, to grounds in tiny towns that were basically two slopes and a fence.' In that 2018 work, the stadium, an abstract pyre of lines,

as if the people, the surrounding area and the architecture itself has been fused into a single monster, is rendered as silver scratches on a black background. Dudek describes how the building itself carried the archaeology of Polish history, constructed from the ruins of Warsaw after the German bombing; an oval excavated in the razed city, in which bodies lay underneath the repurposed rubble, a place in which football matches and political rallies alike played out. 'I'm of a generation in Poland that can remember the last bits of communism and the beginning of Western capitalism. After the fall, the streets around the Warsaw stadium turned into the biggest market in Europe. Imagine this 1990s capitalism euphoria, all the fake brands, the incredible dynamics of East and West meeting in the shadow of that architecture.' The painting has a frantic quality, a sense of confusion, one that perhaps reflects the political flux.

As Germany razed Warsaw to the ground at the start of World War II, Walter Benjamin was in Paris. 'I do not know how long it will still physically be possible to breathe this European air,' Benjamin, who was German Jewish, wrote to Theodor Adorno. 'It is already spiritually impossible to do so after the events of the past weeks.' It was not the Nazis





'I Walked Around Its Edge Above'

who came for the Marxist thinker first, but the French government, spooked by the aggression of their neighbour. Placards began to appear across the city, ordering all German men of fighting age to report to the Stade de Colombes, seven and a half miles northwest of central Paris (since renamed the Stade Yves-du-Manoir): possible enemies of the Republic. Bring a blanket and soap, the notice's proclamation continued ominously. A year earlier, in 1938, the stadium had hosted the World Cup Final between Italy and Hungary; now hundreds of German émigrés filed through the doors. Benjamin was kept for ten days, the French authorities feeding these possible enemy agents a diet heavy on liver pâté. Others were incarcerated in the Stade Buffalo, the Paris velodrome named after American showman Buffalo Bill Cody. Benjamin didn't stay long in Colombes: after just over a week he and 300 other émigrés were transferred to a camp near the town of Nevers, in the centre of France, partially by train but mostly marched on foot, a particularly arduous journey for Benjamin, who had a heart condition. A fellow detainee, the poet Hans Sahl recalled, 'A *wandervogel* spirit behind barbed wires swept rooms with straw brooms, hung wash out to dry, organised lectures

comparing Freud and Jung, Lenin and Trotsky. A community that began to function was soon fashioned from the void; from chaos and helplessness emerged a society.'

Benjamin's treatise 'Excavation and Memory', published after his suicide in 1940 as the options of escape from Europe disappeared, describes how memory is the tool with which we perceive the world. 'It is the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging,' the philosopher wrote. Dudek completed several works in which stadiums, like those in which Benjamin was detained, became repurposed as prisons, arenas for trauma as much as sport, the artist's layering of imagery and sources somehow reflective of Benjamin's ideas. 'These are the natural consequences of the scale of the building,' the artist says. 'They are not just some anonymous random building, but the centre of the city; they attract attention, they drag in the energy of whatever is going on around them, and that might well be war.'

Dudek's 'Black Stadium' takes its title from the nickname for the main football stadium in Raqqa, Syria. It was built in 2006 on the





'Black Stadium'

edge of the city but soon became engulfed by urban sprawl, its moniker attributed for its stone walls stained by pollution. It soon became grimly appropriate during the city's takeover by Isis.

From a distance, Dudek's representation of it has the appearance of a Robert Ryman-ish monochrome, the Black Stadium here has paled to ghostly cream: greys rust through a canvas of dirty white. Get up close to the work – study the material like the researcher examines dirt on a dig – and it becomes apparent that Dudek has layered strips of photographs to make up a textured surface. The source material is rendered largely anonymous in its fragmentation, but the artist explains he collected all the pictures and archival material of the stadium he could find. 'I started to create a map or a storyboard of this history.' The stadium was repurposed first by Islamist militias as both a prison and a Sharia committee and court, and then by Isis as a detention centre specifically for what the group called 'high-security' captives. 'And then I started cutting these pictures and applying them to the surface of the collage,' Dudek says. 'It was as if these pictures were bombarding the surface of the collage, creating this composition.' The halls built under the stadium's

stands, once meant for gymnastics, karate, judo, became spaces for violent interrogation and indefinite imprisonment: Dudek calls these memories the 'compressed data' that informs his work.

A jailer in Raqqa told researchers for the Isis Prisons Museum, an online initiative to preserve this history, that the stadium was chosen because it was large enough and covered by a canopy (the engineer in charge of the original construction of that canopy, with cruel irony, ended up imprisoned in the underground cells), but also that the nature of the stadium's architecture meant it felt fortified, its walls judged able to withstand potential battles or any attempts to breach the cells, its relatively small and few entrances and exits easy to guard. Throughout the height of the civil war, the building remained in operation, despite being the target of airstrikes by both the Assad regime and then Western international forces.

This unique bit of urban architecture can work both ways, as Dudek points out. 'During the Rwandan genocide, the stadium became a place of refuge and escape from terror.' In 1993, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda set up its base in the Amahoro National Stadium in Kigali. Dudek's work based on



those events, 'The Empty Circle', is extraordinary, with its layers of image transfer and ground metal creating a turbulent scene. Grey concentrates to black in some parts. The top right corner of the landscape, 1.6 metres on the longest side, has a gritty texture of degraded newsprint, while the bottom left is all Jackson Pollock-like speckles. Hints of the original imagery can be divined on the right side of the work – seating, the stadium walls peaking through the busy assemblage – but they are obscured by Dudek's habit of sanding and hacking at the surface of the painting, a mirror to the violence inherent to the subject matter. Yet this explosion of detail evaporates as the eyes close in on the painting's centre spot, the point where football games once kicked off. Here, just a smudge of white remains.

For 12,000 mainly Tutsi displaced people who risked a route through opposition militants during the genocide, this smudge was a refuge. 'The emptiness inside the stadium is also a comment on the lack of reporting around the Rwandan genocide,' Dudek has written of the work. 'The only image from 1994 represented in the work is a low-resolution photo reflected underneath the sanded, wounded panel which hosts the arena. The photograph

is manipulated to be even more grainy and incomprehensible, creating a scrambled view of events.' After the war, much effort was made to rehabilitate the site in the minds of the Rwandan public, one small part in a vast project of reconciliation. Football returned, but the stadium also hosted ceremonies, film screenings and memorials that aimed to heal the trauma. A banner, the words of which Dudek has recreated in his painting, was stretched across the exterior of the building: 'Together we prosper'. The stadium did not need a new name, even if amahoro, Kinyarwanda for 'peace', was one that hung limply during the conflict. But how to rehabilitate a trauma site – returning it to its intended use for recreation and sport, but not forgetting what occurred – is a frequent concern. How do you make room for ghosts on the terraces?

The Estadio Nacional, in Santiago, Chile, was used the far-right regime of Augusto Pinochet as a prison and torture centre. Now, visible every time players line up before a match, there's a small section of empty seats. Along the wall runs the Benjaminesque phrase '*Un pueblo sin memoria es un pueblo sin futuro.*' A people without memory are a people without a future. The seats are reserved for those who didn't



'The Empty Circle'





'Stadion'

survive. The morning after the 1973 American-backed coup that brought the murderous right-wing dictatorship to power, thousands of leftists were rounded up. First they were taken to another stadium in the city, Estadio Chile, but Estadio Nacional became the more permanent prison for 40,000 political prisoners and, for some, including the folk singer Victor Jara, an execution site. Dudek's 2022 painting is slightly different from the previous works. It is done in oil, but retains the transfer of images, which range from a picture of a pre-Columbian figure stationed at the stadium's entrance, sketches of the site by the lawyers investigating Pinochet's abuse and of a tunnel running beneath the stadium. But these are barely apparent in the murky swirl that circulates a dark oval in the centre of the composition (the pitch lines are just about apparent). There are a couple of burn marks on the surface, which could be a nod to the burning of evidence, but perhaps also to the torture that occurred in the arena. It's like we're looking at a satellite image of a tornado, a weather map of history that sweeps up everything around it. Yet the black centre is piercing like a bullet hole, like the 44 that riddled Jara when his body was eventually found. There is a sense of sublime to the work;

a horror that not only something like this could happen, but that it could happen in a place designed for leisure and euphoria. Stadiums were designed too for spectacle – all the way back, as Dudek notes, to Roman times – and it is evident that these structures were chosen as places of repression not just for pragmatic reasons of space and architecture, but because they sent a chilling sign to those spectating beyond. For authoritative regimes, the slaughter and imprisonment of apparent subversives like Jara, in such a high-profile and well-loved setting, poses a challenge to the populace: whose team are you on?

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