

Deciding Itself

Margus Ott

The following musings are largely based on the motif of the recent work by Tarvo Hanno Varres, namely the corners. In his last exhibition at the Tartu Art House (*Shadow of a Flame*, with Kirke Kangro, 26.09–18.10.2015), this motif was represented in series of photographs *Unavailable Memory (The Corners of Brussels)*. Brussels is one of the most important places in Europe, but the photos depict rather ordinary street corners. And most photos have not been taken in broad daylight, when the streets are busy, but in twilight or during the night. Tarvo has invaded Europe to highlight the hidden things in plain sight - night-time street corners.

First, it must be kept in mind that a corner is nothing angular. A corner is a place where we turn around, behind the corner - or at least we are presented with the option to do so; and perhaps only soldiers in their special training take corners in an angular manner, while we naturally **curve** around the corner. Therefore, corners - house corners - channel arched traffic flows. In the latest exhibition, the majority of photos were indeed placed in an arched formation in the centre of the exhibition hall, with their backs to each other - although they did not arch 90 degrees like a complete angle, a 'right angle', but only a little, bending the trajectory of visitors in the hall.

However, it is exactly because of this option of turning that we often don't see the corner itself, we do not notice it - because we are focused on what is behind the corner (and we take even less notice of the corner when we keep moving on the main road). We can look for street numbers and house numbers to get our bearings but in terms of the objective of our further intentions - the direction we are looking for and in which we are going, the corners are only the bearers of a symbol (name, sign, surveillance device). We sometimes look at facades for what they are, but a corner is something extraneous in the truest sense of the word. Obviously there are many buildings where it is the corners that are emphasized but the mundane corner of a mundane house is usually upstaged.

Because of this turning, the possibility of a change in direction, the corner also represents hesitation, delay, slowing down. We slow down on a street corner - especially if we are in a strange place - study our surroundings, reflect on how to move forward. As such, the corner is a place of decision-making and as such, a decisive, strategic place. However, the thing about decision-making is that it remains outside (psychological) time. Deciding itself does not exist *for me*. I am always in the time either before the decision - when I plan, intend, consider acting - and then *I have not acted yet*. Or already after the decision - *I have already acted*. And the more important the decision, the more clearly we feel that the moment of the decision is beyond our experience. I am always either before or after, in memory or intentions, but I am never in the turning point. I either have not begun turning yet or have already turned. The one turning is *myself*, or rather - it *is* myself or it *is* me. This moment is my own time. Thus, deciding and turning bring out a significant gap; on the one hand, 'self-images' that are either in the past or in the future, but never in the 'decisive moment' or the present itself. On the other hand, the 'selfness', which constitutes this dividing present or moment of decision. In order to make a decision, to turn, I must let go of my self-image for a moment - but that decision does not come from my self-image, but the entirety of me, *myself* - and trust myself to transformation. *For me* it is always either 'not yet' or 'already'. The corner of a building is like a spatial metaphor for this temporal split, moment of selfness.

This image is supported by the above-mentioned fact that the corners of buildings are usually not the most widely present parts of space, instead they are something extraneous - like selfness is 'outlying' or 'between', remaining between two self-images (future-past). A corner structures our life arches, walking curves, but the breaking point of the corner itself remains unavailable to us. A corner remains in the twilight both because of the time of photographing as well as its character. That is why we also don't **remember** the corner, what remains between - we have no memory image of it. Just like Proust will never regain lost time, but in certain special moments (reminiscences) we are offered a new kind of sense of time between the present and past moments (which offers us a peculiar pleasure, joy), in Tarvo's works we will also not attain our state of being in between, however, highlighting the corner as a symbol of being between things, a new sense of time (and space) opens up to us.

In his earlier works, Tarvo has also depicted indoor corners. White walls, white ceiling - although in different tones. A clean corner. An indoor corner is directed inwards, structures the internal 'space' of myself, creates dimensions where I can put things and myself (and in a way, 'my things' are myself). Or coming at it from a different angle: if the outdoor corner (potentially) sways our movements in one or other direction, the indoor corner carries out an endless selfreflection, as if embodying the moment of selfness and the gap between self-images. I reflect back from all walls, pictures, until this multiple reflecting back gathers momentum and becomes independent of them, delving into 'myself', the gap within

myself, chasm, abyss. It is when I am 'by myself' or between myself. Whereas outdoor corners open distances, the indoor corners open the gap within myself. In this sense, the indoor corner is a base for the outdoor corner.

His latest exhibition only has outdoor corners and perhaps the distinction between indoor and outdoor corners is not that important. The state of being in between is what counts. This can be linked to the titular work of the exhibition *The Shadow of a Flame*, where a strong light is cast on a lit candle, so that the flame of a candle casts a shadow. This shadow falls on a square piece of white cardboard on the wall, where the light from a halogen lamp forms a circle. Usually the flame lights the circle but remains in the shadows, invisible as a source of light. In the light of a stronger lamp the shadow of the flame becomes visible. It is a minimalistic masterpiece, depicting something that is hard to depict. There are barely perceptible lines here, distinctions, joints, and this leads us to more sophisticated levels of understanding ourselves and the world, melting the angular, metric, juxtaposing, and taking us to the penetrating, the merging. The corner's shadowy state of being between things does exactly the same, interrupting the utilitarian daily life for a moment.

The contradistinction of light and shadow is common in the history of thought, but Zhuangzi is one of the few to pay attention to the finer nuances: "The penumbra questioned the shadow. "Just now you were moving, now you've stopped. Just now you were sitting, now you're up. How is it you've no settled control?" The shadow answered, "Is it because there is something upon which I depend, or that what I depend on has something upon which it depends too? Am I dependent on a snake's sloughed skin or a locust's tossed away wings? How can I tell why I am as I am? How can I tell why I'm not as I'm not?" (2.13)

In a similar fragment (27.6) the shadow says that it does what it does without knowing why it does it. According to Zhuangzi, this unknowing does not mean lack of knowledge, instead it is a higher form of knowledge that integrates the unknowing, the imperceptible or the corner's shadowy state of being between things, the shadow and the penumbra. Tarvo's work can be illuminated in very different ways, this is merely one of them; usually, our knowledge is like the flame that illuminates something but as a flame it remains in the shadows, invisible. However, a certain attitude or shift is possible, bringing out the shadow of this flame of consciousness itself: it is the perspective of the Way, or to use the words of Heraclitus, the cosmic 'ever-living fire' (Fr 30).