

Søren Lose
Tales from Paradise

Text by Mara Ambrožič

The fragment *is* the work of art.
This is the origin of the modern conception of the *non-organic* work.
Peter Osborne

The exhibition *Tales from Paradise*, which comprises a series of photographs, a video-narrative, and a collection of the artist's notes, is the result of research carried out by Søren Lose over the course of two travels to a small group of Caribbean islands which, at the time of commercial colonialism, were known as the Danish West Indies. Throughout the 18th and the early 19th century, fortunes were made by sugar cultivation and the trading of goods and people. The prosperous trade was depending upon the hard labour of slaves imported from Africa and ceased with the abolition of the atlantic slave trade in the first half of the 19th Century. Sold to the United States in 1917, the US Virgin Islands have gradually turned into a luxurious and much sought-after tourist destination, as well as coveted tax haven, where the weight attached to history has faded and feels so remote as to be of no more value or interest.

Without accentuating the point, but simply leaving the research open to events, the exhibition *Tales from Paradise* leads us to consider several themes of great interest¹: from the role played by any of the Western countries during the colonial era, to the perception of history - which is inevitably influenced by the perspective from which it is told, to the different outlook and view of reality held by a place's inhabitants as opposed to its visitors.

Shifting between these themes, Søren Lose undertakes an interrogative journey which then develops into a projectual *opus* encompassing multiple visions of the same place: the island of Saint Croix², whose dazzling tropical beauty hides a complex and tormented historical, social and cultural identity.

Through a video-narrative and a series of photographs of colonial ruins arranged together with a collection of notes recorded during the trip (or "meta-reflections capable of linking the different parts in unpredictable ways"³), the artist weaves a thread which creates a short-circuit between fiction and reality. As if the artist's intention was to create a sort of threshold between "what is to come" and "what is no more". A borderline space, which conserves its power to unite and to separate reality from fiction, but where reality is challenged. By showing itself as "different" (from what we know), it leaves us puzzled and disoriented, even when it hints at a well-known and even ordinary aesthetic repertoire. Thus we find ourselves immersed in a sophisticated game of opposites in which the perception of things is continuously moulded and re-moulded; as if, paradoxically, it was possible to capture their "spirit" only in their fragmentary unfolding, in the seemingly random juxtaposition and almost serial repetition. It may be said, therefore, that the recurring motif which marks the rhythm of all the works in *Tales from Paradise* is the fragment.⁴ A fragment that, nonetheless, exists only as part of a series, a collection of single tales, in which each element (be it a video, sentence or photograph), though self-contained, ought to correlate to the same

¹ Søren Lose's research and show has been commissioned by the Øregaard Museum of Copenhagen (which was donated to the State by J. Søbøtker, one of the largest plantation owners in the Danish West Indies) in the attempt to spark a debate that may establish a contact between past and present.

² Saint Croix is the largest of the three islands forming the US Virgin Islands. In the 18th century, the island played a major role in the economic development of Denmark, due to the prosperous sugar trading.

³ Cf. Søren Lose, email correspondence, 2011.

⁴ For an in-depth study of the Romantic notion of fragment from Friedrich Schlegel to Walter Benjamin, see Peter Osborne, *An Image of Romanticism: Fragment and Project in Friedrich Schlegel's 'Athenaeum Fragments' and Sol LeWitt's 'Sentences on Conceptual Art'*, in Verksted n.11, OCA Norway, Oslo, 2009, pp. 7-27.

manifold unity.

Already in the title, *Tales from Paradise*, there is the suggestion that the exhibition presents itself as a collection of fragments that work together within the same conceptual frame. Just as the notion of ruins or debris always refers to a plurality, so do the fragments, which may only exist as part of a constellation. In the same way, the notes, the video tales and the photographs claim their figural and formal autonomy in relation to a broader unitary structure.

It is not by chance that Søren Lose chooses to photograph the ruins of the Danish sugar factories and sugar mills in such a way that they neither succumb to the triumph of history, nor to that of nature; instead he deliberately chooses to represent them at an intermediate moment, in the fragile balance between persistence and decadence. Paying homage to Danish artist C.W. Eckersberg, who in the early 18th century painted Roman ruins in the same manner, in his twelve large-format photographs, Søren Lose portrays the ruins of Saint Croix surrounded by the beauty of a crepuscular landscape of melancholic sweetness. Because, in fact, it is in melancholy and in the shiver of decadence that lies the pleasure of ruin; a ruin that is a unique individual relict (like a fragment), but also an endlessly repeatable unit (like a postcard) which so often represents a tangible memento of pleasure. For this reason, without forgetting that today ruins are part of a generalized aesthetic, we ought to look at the series of photographs by Søren Lose – with the titles printed on the pictures like topographical prospects from the 19th Century – as an attempt to trigger that power of the image that can return these fragments to the realm of the visible and to history itself.

We may now be reminded of the work *Das Passagenwerk* by Walter Benjamin, a seminal author who dealt with the concept of the fragment. In *Passagenwerk*, the philosopher never really aims at demonstrating a claim but rather lets the phenomena speak about the historical life of modern-day Paris, with the sole purpose of “saving” them via their memory. This may also be seen in the video piece *Tales from Paradise*, composed of eight short circular tales, in which the traces of the past and individual stories emerge almost “by mistake” in all their accidental extraordinariness. With the simple aim of following and learning more about the heavenly beauty of the Virgin Islands, the spectator questioningly observes the sequence of actions, merely watching things unfold, as if the video were nothing but a means of recording, a tool for capturing the surrounding fragments.

This is the case, for instance, in the second tale, in which the colourful character of Liliana explains how a lifelong dream may be shattered over and over again by the sudden blast of a hurricane, which majestically sweeps away all one’s possessions: the past and the future, memories and hopes. In the fourth chapter, dedicated to the former hospital of Saint Croix that is now totally abandoned, the atmosphere is pervaded by short, crisp sounds, played by a Rastafarian guy practising in solitude, as if to give a sense of the time it takes to regain a consciousness of history and other things. Whereas in the last chapter, the nocturnal filming of the oil refinery seems to recall the unsustainable vision of Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, who in an invincible call towards a different future is still capable of looking at the past left behind in ruins.

In the unfolding of the eight tales, places and people are filmed in a documentary style, while a narrative voice recites historical texts written by 18th Century visiting noblemen. Suddenly, a dimension where everything ceases to be as was previously assumed appears to the viewer. From the streets of the main towns of Christiansted and Frederiksted to tropical nature, from the ruins to the wide deserted landscapes, everything appears in a different light, almost as if to indicate that what one had believed to know was nothing but the fictitious illusion of a naive spectator. The exotic and extraordinary character of Saint Croix is thus not shown or orchestrated by the artist in handsome bodies, crystalline waters, or in the deep blue sky; simply emerges like a phantom and a pure image at the intersection between one chapter and the next, between a silent tropical landscape and a percussion performance, as if they were merely commas punctuating the spaces between words.