

Eastern Exterminating

By Adam Lerner,

The above photograph harkens back to 1912 when the Russian authorities ruling Poland at the time erected the Eastern Orthodox Alexander Nevski Cathedral in Piłsudski Square, Warsaw. Seeing it as a glaring symbol of Russia's power and beliefs, the Polish government destroyed the cathedral in the early 1920s, a few years after Poland regained independence. In 2010, Daniela Kostova, a Bulgarian-born artist living in New York, constructed an image of the church, displaying the massive picture on its original site. She presented a photograph of her re-creation in an exhibition in the basement of a grand old hotel on Piłsudski Square, not far from where the church once stood

The second photograph, created by Eastern Exterminating, a South Florida pest extermination company, depicts the company's fumigation in Germany of a 400-year-old church, which was infested with termites. The company was brought in because of its ability to create tents over complex structures to more effectively eliminate pests.

Both photographs tell a story about Eastern exterminating.

They both reference acts of purging but they present very different ways of eliminating unwanted elements. In the unmerciful eyes of the eponymous Józef Piłsudski, leader of the newly independent Poles in the early twentieth century, the beliefs that the Russians carried with them when they built the cathedral were inseparable from the architecture. The onion domes and ornamentation organically expressed its invasive quality and the building was destroyed because fumigation was not seen as a viable option. By contrast, the Eastern Exterminating company of South Florida was able to effectively eliminate the pests and save the building from destruction.

But the photographs tell more than stories of destruction.

Kostova's reconstructed image of the Nevski Cathedral is striking for its scale and its grandeur, which is emphasized by contrast to the lithe figure of the artist herself in the middle ground of the photograph. The size of the image suggests an impressive dedication of resources for the sake of a symbolic act. At the scale of the plaza itself, once the seat of Poland's royal authority, the image on the scaffold has the magnitude to enter the public imagination. To the Warsawians who know the story of the building's demolition, the image is a giant specter saying, "You tried to destroy me when I was only a few years old and now I've returned to haunt you."

But the photograph is a fiction. There was never any scaffolding on the plaza. No massive fabric print of the cathedral was ever made. Kostova collaged the plaza, scaffolding, and the giant picture of the cathedral in Adobe Photoshop. To make it even more believable, she created a video falsely documenting pedestrians and bicyclists going about their business in front of the colossal image.

The fictional quality of Kostova's exhibition was weirdly appropriate for its venue, the Europejski Hotel. Warsaw's oldest hotel, renovated during the communist era, Europejski advertises itself as "John Le Carre with a dash of 2001 Space Odyssey," and a lobby that is "straight out of Dr. Strangelove." With fantastic irony, the hotel framed its surreal combination of regal ornamentation and space-age design as an artful experience.

In this context, Kostova was able to enact her own play of the imagination. Obscured by a cloud of fiction, her exhibition was not just about the reappearance of beliefs thought to have been eradicated. Rather, it was about the way that images make apparent and transport ideas. The picture of the Nevski Cathedral appeared in the basement at human scale, instead of being seen in monumental form in the broad light of day. It appeared, not as a spectacle, but as a powerful image. Its enormous scale was manifest in the imagination, not in the physical world.

When Warsawians saw the photograph in the exhibition, they were unsettled. Their response was something like: "Could I really have missed such a scandal? The Catholic Church would have been outraged and the public would have been thrown into a tizzy by this reminder of Russian influence. Surely, this would have been a national event." More of an underground force than a media event, some visitors appreciated the artistic gesture of the exhibition. Others were rattled by it.

By disorienting her audience, Kostova made the photograph appear as a photograph, not just as the document of an event, pointing out the power of images to carry ideas. In other words, she demonstrated the image-quality of ideas. As a way of reading history, her project served as a reminder that the 1912 cathedral was destroyed because of its image-quality, an unalterable picture of Eastern Orthodoxy and symbol of Russian influence. Unlike the digital image, this was a picture that could not be doctored because it was inseparable from the stone mass. Kostova's project revealed how, removed from the light of day, the image of the cathedral maintained its vitality over the course of a century.

A 94-year-old Warsawian named Szymon Bojko helped Kostova highlight the subterranean life of the cathedral image. As a small child, Bojko witnessed the demolition of the building first-hand and kept a postcard of the cathedral in his possession his entire life. It might have had been tucked away in a drawer when he a young man, pressed in a book through the Nazi occupation and the long period of communist rule and may have sat out on a shelf in the post-1989 period. Bojko cherished the souvenir postcard, but he lent it to Kostova, who framed it and included it in the exhibition.

The disintegration of a massive cathedral into minute images carried by individuals is suggestive of the work of termites, whose primary ecological function is to break down mass. Termites feed on dead plant matter and turn it back into soil. For them, the 400-year-old church in Germany was a just pile of dead trees. Eastern Exterminating prevented this natural process from taking its course.

By preventing the disintegrating forces of nature, tent fumigation functions a little like art. Because it involves the human will to intervene, at its base, art is a disruption in the natural ecology. Kostova's photograph was meant to serve as a disruption in the way that Warsawians think of their history. It was meant to stop people in their tracks, so to speak.

In their respective work, both Kostova and Eastern Exterminating stop the ordinary flow of things.

By isolating a space where it is possible to stop normal, though not necessarily desirable, patterns of behavior, Eastern Extermination's fumigation tent is similar to an art exhibition. Separating a space from its greater environment, an exhibition fills the room with a different kind of air. It says that what's inside these here rooms needs to be treated differently from what's inside those rooms in the building across the street. This is a space to pause and reflect on history and the power of ideas.

But, more than symbolically, Eastern Exterminating created an artful tent. With its neat rows of multi-colored stripes, its not implausible that it would be mistaken as a work of contemporary art. After Christo and Jeanne-Claude wrapped the Reichstag, in 1995, a local townspeople might have been reasonable to wonder if the artists had chosen to wrap something in their town as well. Since tent fumigation is not as common in Europe as it is in the United States, someone could easily have thought it was some kind of strange decoration for a festival. At the very least, it would not immediately appear as something practical.

It is not obvious why Eastern Exterminating made such a beautiful tent. It would have required much less effort to build a monochromatic tent. There would have been no need to worry if the vertical seams of the vinyl strips aligned. Using different colors, the stripes need to be perfectly parallel. However, the company made the extra effort because they are not just interested in creating a temporary structure. Like Kostova, they are interested in the image-quality of their structures.

According to Anna Bowen at Eastern Exterminating, using colored vinyl is simply the way they've been doing things since 1988, when her father created the business.

The color scheme that Eastern Exterminating used in Germany was determined by the vinyl supplied by a local company. In the United States, they use red, white and blue.

Regardless of color scheme, the enterprise of saving buildings is especially admirable work in light of the history of Piłsudski Square. In addition to the cathedral, the giant plaza once also boasted two seventeenth-century palaces, deliberately destroyed by the Germans in World War II. It saw more of the usual share of destruction as it changed successively in the course of one century from Saxon Square to Piłsudski Square to Adolf Hitler Platz to Victory Square and back again to Piłsudski Square.

The political history of the square touches upon the main difference between the photographs of Kostova and Eastern Extermination: one begins with the story of human destruction and the other natural decay.

But the different means of destruction provide similar opportunities for creation. The energy required for Kostova to construct her photograph was nothing less than the effort involved in destroying a stone cathedral, the act which enabled the construction of a new image pixel by pixel. Similarly, among many other forces, countless termites made it possible for Eastern Exterminating to produce a captivating image of a multi-colored church.

As an aside, the Europejski Hotel, which witnessed all of the cycles of destruction and creation on Piłsudski Square, states on its website that guests do not have to worry about "Big Brother," reassuring them that the rooms are not bugged.

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Bio: Adam Lerner is the Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver and Chief Animator in the Department of Fabrications. Most recently, he co-organized with Elissa Auther the exhibition *West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965-1977*, accompanied by a book of the same name published by the University of Minnesota Press. His writings can be found at AdamLernerInAmerica.com.