

Aesthetic Commentary on »Sorry for Nothing«

For a basic framework for understanding Philip Kojo Metz's *Sorry for Nothing*, we can turn to the following general definition of a work of art: "it is through its form that the work of art is a living center of reflection."⁽¹⁾ With this definition, Walter Benjamin sought to give expression to a double relationship: on the one hand between the work of art as a human aesthetic practice and thinking in general; on the other, between the work of art and the evolution of human beings in society, i.e. history. It is no coincidence that this latter relationship, between art and history, belongs to the reflection and observation of works of art. Indeed, it is what informs their two constituent sides: *form* and *content*.

In the case of *Sorry for Nothing*, both sides are associated with a singular phenomenon that is becoming more controversial from day to day: Germany's colonial history. Although the outward expression of the artwork has a purely aesthetic or formal value, on the other hand its constitutive content is history; history is what the viewer is required to think about via aesthetic reflection. In a general sense, therefore, Philip Kojo Metz's work is the aesthetic expression of Germany's colonial history. This raises two related questions, however. What particular concept of history can be drawn from *Sorry for Nothing*, and how can the work serve as a medium for expressing German colonial history?

The best way to approach the questions of what has been expressed and how it has been represented is perhaps to discover a nomenclature through which the artwork reveals itself to the audience. Without a doubt, *Sorry for Nothing* is the expression of *artistic irony*. If one wanted to briefly define the concept of irony in the current context, it would suffice to state that the concept of irony is the irony of the concept. That is, any attempt to understand irony unavoidably leads to the impossibility of understanding it.⁽²⁾ Luckily, our task is not to explain why irony will always be incomprehensible from a theoretical point of view – a proposition that on its face seems utterly absurd. Rather, the task at hand is to view the aesthetic form of Philip Kojo Metz's work as an ironic materialization of historical content. And that is why – since there is no better way to understand one irony than by way of another – we claim that *Sorry for Nothing* is so full of historical content, so materially rich, that it has disappeared. True, the work has become pure form, but it is in no way invisible. Nothingness can also be perceived. In this way, *Sorry for Nothing* succeeds, in the realm of contemplation, in thoroughly transforming history into both the material content of art and the aesthetic form of artistic representation.

Germany's colonial history finds its aesthetic expression in the relationship between the form and content of this work of art. But what is crystallized there? Which version of Germany's history is materialized and manifested in the artwork? To answer this question, it helps to note the harmony between *Sorry for Nothing* and the Berlin Palace. A few remarks about the latter's history may help us to understand both the cultural project that has now been initiated and the place this work has in it.

On November 9, 1918, from a balcony of the Palace, Karl Liebknecht proclaimed the end of one era and the beginning of another, namely the end of the German Reich and the beginning of the Weimar Republic. In 1950, not content with the building's democratic repurposing, Walter Ulbricht, supreme leader of East Germany, ordered the remaining ruins to be destroyed, in order to wipe out all connection to the monarchical Prussian regime. Despite the Palace's republican political makeover, he could not stand its imperial stink. The building's current goals are still in the service of history, but by way of an aesthetic mode of expression: the new agora is supposed to unite the various cultures of the world. In other words, this agora attempts to redeem the past.

These historical moments cannot be ignored. For they are the historical steps that now dialectically inform Kojo Metz's work. Were one to give a short summary of the Palace's history, these three moments would have to be in the foreground: the Reich, the Weimar Republic, and finally the deconstruction of the Reich. Therefore, the work tends to represent an age in which history reflects on itself in order to dissolve its own original foundations. And this final, deconstructivist step is of great importance, as it cannot be traced back to the denial of the past. Here, art integrates history into itself.

Sorry for Nothing was unveiled in October 2019, before the space was officially opened. It took about a week for the sculpture, packed in four large boxes, to be transported there. After the boxes were brought into the Palace, they were stacked on top of one another (as can be seen in the accompanying image). At the opening, people arrived as the boxes were being taken apart. As was then evident – and as the title of the work had announced – there was nothing in the boxes. The sculpture was its own unveiling. Not the empty space but rather the unveiling as such was the artwork.

Various speeches were given during the unveiling. They not only put the concept behind the artwork in the context of the new Berlin Palace but also highlighted the truth embodied in the work, namely human suffering. This suffering was caused by an enlightened reason, which in its fight for freedom and equality exploded its own goals and interests by making human beings its slaves. For this reason, the irony of *Sorry for Nothing* reflects the irony of the history of freedom.

However, Kojo Metz's artistic irony is not limited to the fact that the unveiling itself was the artwork. Rather, this unveiling is a revelation whose subject is nothingness, a revelation that pervades and aesthetically embroils German colonial history. The simplest thing one could think about this communication between the artwork and German colonial history is that the work represents a chapter that has not yet been written. The empty space expressed by *Sorry for Nothing* would therefore also expose an unwritten chapter in the documentation of the historical archive of the German colonial era. This nothingness or empty space would thus represent an unwritten chapter of historical consciousness, namely that written by the slaves themselves. In this way, the work would highlight an historical element that is always uncomfortable; it would be a kind of escape path allowing history to express what it could not express in its annals.

Although this interpretation of the artwork may be valid in most cases, it does not allow us to understand its form or its inner life. If a work of art is in its form a living center of reflection, reflection about the artwork cannot only exist as a historical memory. If one only viewed the artwork in historical terms, one would not only lose sight of the work but would also lose the ability – as paradoxical as this may certainly sound – to manifest and actualize the historical evolution that is the content of the work. For we would understand the artwork solely in terms of elements disconnected from its aesthetic autonomy, and in this way Kojo Metz's work would not do anything more than represent an empty space in Germany's history. What this artwork represents in an aesthetic sense is the unification of the dissolution of art with the unveiling of its truth. This ironic dissolution of art, as Walter Benjamin would agree, is doubtless its preservation, its integration into the whole, and finally what guarantees its truth. Artistic irony, then, consists in the formal indestructibility of art via its material destruction. While the concept behind the artwork always has a historical context as a condition for understanding it, the idea of art that is expressed in an artwork is radically different. It may even be foreign to it.

As Friedrich Schlegel says, "We must elevate ourselves above our own love and be able in thought to annihilate what we adore, otherwise we lack ... the sense for the infinite."³ It is nice to be able to create

a work of art, no doubt about it; but much nicer, indeed sublime, is its destruction, for that is where the work reaches its perfection. To the very extent that the work consists in its own unveiling, it does not point to the infinite but rather manifests it materially through its peculiar negation. Every work that achieves its disintegration or, in other words, its immanent critique, immediately becomes the guarantor of its truth. And here, the life of reflection is the place where an aesthetic indifference can be born; the autonomy and independence of the work, although it has vanished in its peculiarity, can be claimed as a condition for being able to lift the veil in contemplation.

Whenever history itself is expressed aesthetically in a work of art, the dissolution of the work will have powerful effects on that history. Since the representation of the artwork consists in the destruction of its materiality, the upshot is the disintegration of the historical pillars that have dialectically brought the artwork into material existence. It is therefore necessary to view the work from the point of view of its autonomy, even to the point where its historical context becomes foreign to it.

From this point of view, we have clearly reversed the structure of the initial interpretation. The work does not represent Germany's historical empty space but rather, on the contrary, the empty space of the work itself is the present and presence of history. From this perspective, it becomes impossible to think of *Sorry for Nothing* as the expression in which historical evolution is manifested via its progress. On the contrary, since this work does not show an empty space in history but rather history itself in its emptiness, the chronological continuum is interrupted. It is a moment when history stands still, a kind of inner distortion through which it is possible for thinking to be freed from the prejudices and the traditional historical schemes that have nourished the suffering that this work expresses through its silence and emptiness.

This work is the representation of human suffering; its form of expression is silence. One could thus ask how this irony might be edifying for the future history of Germany. In what way does the historical basis of *Sorry for Nothing* put us in dialogue with our present? To repeat, German history is aesthetically represented by the silence inherent in human suffering. This opens up a horizon of reflection and historical self-awareness where the goal of the new Berlin Palace project is located. But the problem doesn't end there. Must this work fulfil a political function? How can this interweaving of cultures relieve the suffering that the work expresses? Seen from the point of view of its autonomy, the artwork shows us only the silence of suffering. To assign this work a political function would mean to kill its innocence and irony, or rather its truth. Is it possible to encourage political engagement in relief of human suffering? Is it possible to seek to begin a cultural and political revolution through art? That would lead not only to the subjugation of art, but also to the subjugation of the suffering it contains. If *Sorry for Nothing* is the actual manifestation of history, who would dare to ask the victims of reason to make a social compromise?

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(translated by Patrick Baker)

(1) Benjamin, W., "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism," trans. D. Lachterman, H. Eiland, and I. Balfour, in *Selected Writings*, ed. M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings, vol. 1: 1913-1926 (Cambridge, Mass./London, 1996), pp. 116-200, at 156.

(2) See de Man, P., "The Concept of Irony," in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis/London, 1997), pp. 163-184.

(3) Quoted in Benjamin, *loc. cit.*, p. 163.