

TRAGÖDIE | BUYOUT | TRAGEDY
AUFKAUF |

[INTRODUCTION]

[Fig. 0, Logo]

[Greetings, introductions, thanks]

This prepared statement is a part of the second iteration of *Buyout / Tragedy*, delivered at the Rathaus Zittau on July 2nd, 2016.

I started curating and making art around the same time. Perhaps consequently, I find producing an artwork to be a curatorial act at heart, at least in terms of the underlying logic. *Buyout / Tragedy*, for instance, is organized around a fixed proposal or a score, which stipulates that it be shown "with or without accompanying texts or illustrations." It can intrinsically be reformulated in different contexts and with different materials. In this manner, it exists somewhere between an artwork and a curatorial project.

This "accompanying text" contains five sections, which will address, sequentially:

1. Origins;
2. Christian Gottlieb Priber;
3. Paradise;
4. Architecture; and
5. Erasure.

PART 1: Origins

[Fig. 1, *Proposal*]

Buyout / Tragedy was first conceived as a literary work, inspired by the setting descriptions from the extant Greek tragedies. These works usually contain a scene description, often before the first act, which articulates a sense of place—but these descriptions tend to be sparse, rarely longer than a sentence or two. Place is not so important, since these are dramas about characters, with the “set” often comprising no more than the *skene* – a simple architectural backdrop.

Buyout / Tragedy exists as a counterpoint in which we look at the site, not the characters. It considers what a tragic play would look like, if it were composed only of settings. This proposal first appears as in Fig. 1, written on stationery from the Hotel Shangri-La: “a new work – a tragedy without characters, dialogue, or plot, in which only the landscape remains.”

As a first attempt, consider the tragic playwright Euripides. “On the coast of the peninsula, a desolate mountain side. A river is visible in the distance. The time is the dusk of early dawn, with radiance in the darkness. The road up the mountain leads far away to the right. All is silence.” If one were to take liberties in editing and combining *Hecuba*, *Electra*, *Alcestis*, and *Rhesus*, this is all that would remain.

PART 2: Christian Gottlieb Priber

[Fig. 2, *Plants*]

Buyout / Tragedy was first installed in 2015 as part of the exhibition *Kingdom Paradise* at the ACC Galerie Weimar. This first iteration drew heavily from the life and records of 18th century German utopianist Christian Gottlieb Priber.

Priber relocated to America to start a new society among the Native Americans based on the principles of civil, economic, and political equality. Priber worked with the Cherokees for about six years, from 1736 to 1742, encouraging them to make peace with neighboring tribes, to trade with both the French and British, and to adopt the principles of his “Kingdom of Paradise.” In the utopia, marriages were open, and children were raised communally. The society welcomed debtors, felons, and slaves, and most crimes were tolerated. It’s a desire for wilderness of a certain kind, contained and managed. And, it’s in many ways a fantasy of the noble savage, a disregard for the agency and history of the native population. Regardless, Priber’s advocacy of economic independence for the Native Americans undermined British commercial interests in the area. For interfering in their trade relations, the British arrested Priber in 1743. The exact charges are unknown, but Priber was detained in the barracks at Ford Frederica, Georgia, where he died in captivity.

Buyout / Tragedy touches on two components of Priber’s life. First, the scattered and fragmentary textual and historic records regarding his activities. In the textual records, Priber is a mysterious man. The authors disagree about his origins, his agenda, and even his name, which is recorded in five distinct forms. Furthermore, while Priber is recorded as having written a manuscript on the “Kingdom of Paradise” and created a Cherokee dictionary, both are lost. The second component is the spatial particularities of Priber’s utopia, founded in exile in America. Perhaps, like the records, his optimism was scattered, spread throughout the soil of America. That thought continues later, in Part 5.

The various textual remnants of Priber’s life were the basis for the artwork *Portals*. In Fig. 3, the first portal, a continuous circle inscribed on the wall depicts the title of Priber’s doctoral thesis: *Qvam De Usu Doctrinae Juris Romani*. Priber’s text concerns the application of Roman law in German government, and points towards his early interest in the mechanics of society. In the *Portal*, these words are reproduced in gold and ash in the motif of an eclipse. The *Portal* serves as a continuous prayer to achieve Priber’s aspirations, if only for a moment.

Installed opposite was the second *Portal*, Fig. 4. Here, a similar circle of text reads, “761 F2d 1013 *Vizbaras v Prieber*.” The Prieber referenced is not the 18th century German utopian, but a Maryland police officer, Edward Prieber, whose subordinate officers in 1982 restrained a mentally disabled man until he asphyxiated. The subsequent U.S. court ruling served to legitimate the use of deadly force by police officers so long as they believe it lawful – even when, in fact, it is not. This *Portal*, the broken portal, acts as a dark mirror against the idealistic aspirations of Christian Gottlieb Priber and the promise of early America. Whereas Christian Gottlieb Priber was abused by state power, Police Lieutenant Edward Prieber perpetuated that injustice. Thrown back and forth between the two, we’re torn apart by the failures of our institutions, and of our imaginations.

PART 3: Paradise

[Fig. 5, *Like-Kind*]

“The time of the day when the sun waves goodbye, it’s a time that casts magic on nature. Wonderful colours make up the backdrop against which the celestial traveler leaves its daily scene. A divine glow fills the sky, while the sea, the clouds and the horizon sparkle with purple red light. The sun flies away for its nighttime migration and time stands still as if this moment was never to come again. Words are not enough to describe what the senses feel. Only the hearts beat faster and the minds take long, imaginary trips.”

That text is an excerpt from "Admiring the Sunset," which was a webpage on visitgreece.gr, the official Greek tourism website. It was posted in 2013, following the site's near-complete hiatus between 2008 and 2010.

Characters arrive late, after the scene is fully formed. And though tragedy befalls a character, it rises out of a site. The built environment and the cultural landscape are visibly constructed, yet the natural terrain is constructed too: forged out of language, out of the way it is discussed, represented. Oscar Wilde, renowned aesthete, said until men painted sunsets, no one found them beautiful.

Paradise could be written as an architectural history, organized around impracticality: the ability and willingness to divert more and more resources into shimmering glass towers, floating cities held aloft by their displaced borders. The contemporary urban landscape is produced out of real estate zoning and global investment. A pristine city, freely replicating. But this paradise comes with disproportionate access, an unpalatable economic reality of this modern-day Shangri-La that must be psychically exorcised. Unbounded wealth — a bank on every corner! “What a tragedy.” An expression that indicates the absence of meaning and an inability to engage. Or, a purifying incantation.

PART 4: Architecture

[Fig. 6, *Tragic Landscape*]

The tragic landscape is unlike the sublime landscape, which has been categorized extensively, and can be identified readily per rigorous art historical criteria. Of course, arrogance has always been easy to find and to understand. The tragic, though, is a slippery endeavor. As an experiment, a tragic landscape could be diagrammed through negative space. In Fig. 6, a painting depicts an architectural site viewed in perspective, mapped in gesso on a plywood ground, with the site's edges bleeding gold. The building's plot is represented as an absence, as a zone of erasure, something incomprehensible in pictorial representation.

If we abandon formalism and abstraction as investigative techniques, we might examine the physical sites of tragedy to locate remnants of what happened there. We might consider the state of Georgia, where Christian Gottlieb Priber was imprisoned and ultimately died.

Fig. 7 concerns Georgian architecture. These pages are from a contemporary document published by the Historic Preservation Division of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. This document categorizes the historic styles of houses in the state. "Architectural style," the guide tells its readers, "is the design of the overall form: the proportion, scale, massing, symmetry or asymmetry, and the relationships among parts such as solids and voids or height, depth, and width. Sometimes floor plan and interior layout, as well as construction materials and techniques, also play a part in the definition of style. A style often reflects the needs and tastes of the time and place in which it appears. Styles built during a particular time and in a particular location may contribute to an understanding of the culture of that period."

In the American South, marble fireplaces aren't uncommon in large, old houses. The Americans had a taste for European finery. They loved their fireplaces – the European marble and the taste it bestowed upon them. Look at those fireplaces now, though, and you'll notice that they're all run through with cracks. The Americans never received the finest marble, as the Europeans knew they couldn't tell the difference. The Americans loved it all the same, the fools.

Fig. 8 is a site plan, using the tiles one would use to renovate a condo. One tile, it's an object. It's material out of place. With two, though, it becomes a landscape, a site that narrates itself. From ancient sculptures, to mantels, to Manhattan bathrooms perched a thousand feet in the sky. Class, taste, development – it's a history carved in marble.

In Greek myth, there's a tale about the founding of Athens. In the story, Athena and Poseidon compete to become the deity of the newly formed city. Challenged to provide the best gift for its citizens, Poseidon brings forth a spring of sea water. Athena, who follows, splits open the stone of the Acropolis, producing the first olive tree, and winning the divine contest.

What was Athena thinking? Cracked marble – it's not worth a thing.

PART 5: Erasure

Or, a return to Priber.

[Fig. 9, *Fort Frederica - Nomination*]

At Fort Frederica, remnants of the military stonework remain in ruins carefully excavated, archived, and preserved by the National Parks Service. In 1976, Fort Frederica was added to the National Register of Historic Places. In its nomination, the site is noted for its significance in the *military* and *social/humanitarian* categories. The justification reads, in part:

“The settlement offered hope to the unemployed in Great Britain, and freedom to persecuted Protestants emigrating from Germany. It was a planned community in that people with a variety of vital skills and crafts were represented among the first colonies. Humanitarian considerations, including the deplorable conditions in British prisons, influences James Oglethorpe in his decision to establish a colony in Georgia. The fort and fortified town of Frederica, established in 1736, declined after Oglethorpe’s regiment was disbanded in 1749. A fire in 1758 destroyed most of Frederica’s buildings, and the few remaining soldiers withdrew from the fort in 1763, leaving the site abandoned.”

Priber isn’t mentioned, not that it would be expected. He was only a prisoner, after all. But Frederica is where Priber’s utopia ended. It’s unclear how long Priber was kept in captivity after his seizure in 1743: historians place his death between one and eight years later. Priber might have lived at Frederica longer than he lived among the Cherokee.

[Fig. 10, *Untitled Portrait*]

Priber’s “Kingdom of Paradise,” and whatever architectures it comprised, are no longer present. But, other structures exist. The Georgian landscape is strewn with houses, the ceaselessly abundant weeds that the soil was ultimately able to sustain. They’re the successful outgrowths of the site, though that comes with no moral high ground.

I have a hope for these houses: that in spite of themselves, they could perform a secondary function. That they could become a counter-monument to Priber’s aspirations, to our pasts and our futures that are constantly lost – a way of remembering the legacy of social inequality, racial inequality, and injustice in America.

It’s act five, but resolutions are never guaranteed.

That’s all.