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### **“Warsaw Accuses”: Ruins On Display**

(Diss.: Art in Crisis: Artistic Practice from Poland of the Decade 1939-1949)

The first exhibition organised in liberated Warsaw took place in the National Museum and opened on the 3rd of May 1945, a symbolic date, marking the anniversary of the first Polish constitution proclaimed in 1791. The exhibition was titled “Warsaw Accuses” (“Warszawa oskarża”) and presented a vast array of diverse artefacts ruined or destroyed by the Nazis. It’s main aim was to demonstrate to the broader public both the scale and the consequences of the purposeful destruction of Polish culture and national heritage. The exhibition was to expose the fact that the destruction of material culture was not just a side effect of war but planned and administrated plundering, connected to the racial policy of the Nazi regime. The Biuro Odbudowy Stolicy (Bureau of the Capital’s Reconstruction), together with the National Museum, were the two main organisers of the exhibition, they emphasised the role of culture in maintaining national identity, while simultaneously revealing the agenda of the wartime destruction in working against that identity.

In fact the project achieved much more than this immediate goal, as it defined and framed the understanding of Warsaw’s ruinous cityscape for decades to come, by endowing it’s omnipresent rubble with substantial meaning. The exposition operated on two simultaneous levels: on the one hand it focused on the irreparable damages, on the other hand it emphasised the need to rebuild the capital and underlined the potential lying dormant in surviving objects. It presented artefacts taken out from the rubble, such as pieces of architectural decoration, or columns, as kernels for a new life.

The exhibition was designed by important architects: Jerzy Hryniewiecki, Stanisław Zamecznik and Jerzy Staniszkis, all of whom were at that time engaged in the rebuilding of the city. Through various, often radical, museological practices, such as re-staging the mounts rubble of Warsaw in the museum’s space, the exhibition transformed worthless “piles of stones” into ruins as such. The role of the destroyed objects was unprecedented, since they were supposed to render visible a tragedy far greater than their own destruction. Referring to

the text from the catalogue, they were endowed with the task to engender “a particular community, captivating in its pathos, a community of living Polish people and dead objects”. The National Museum became then a model realisation, one which made the idea of rebuilding the city and life in Warsaw not only imaginable but also tangible. The aim of the exhibition was to create a vision of the past, as much as inspire hopes for the future, it strove to enable people to perceive the recent past as history, or to put it in other words; to recognise ruins amongst the omnipresent rubble. This is why by turning the exhibited objects into mute witnesses also feelings became objectified and could become instead objects of study. The presentation will provide a critical analysis of the strategies employed but the organizers of the exhibition and discuss their affective and historical consequences.