

The Face of History

Notes on Sigrid Sigurdsson's Artistic Work on Historical Awareness

By Michael Fehr

One For All

In his withdrawal statement as chairman of the jury presiding over the competition to design a "Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe", Walter Jens noted with resignation that "the terror of all terrors cannot be got at by means of a monument as artistic counterpart", and went on to describe what he considered appropriate instead of a "macabre Reich-field-of-victims (Reichsopferfeld)" permitting "no counter-currents, no convincing means of distance, no creative forming and structuring e contrario". "First", he said, "the existing marks of terror...must be preserved. Second, the Topography of Terror should be completed in Berlin as a central sign. Third, we in Germany should at long last start coming to terms with that 'other' history not only in research institutes....In a small space, one that at the same time suggests wideness and openness, individuals should be commemorated in their poignant diversity - a life lived in dust here, under the open skies there - rendering collective death all the more ghastly."

Jens obviously no longer considers a serious artistic contribution meeting his specifications to be possible. However, his pessimism seems to me not only to reflect a conventional and preconceived notion of the possibilities of educational art, but also to derive from inadequate analysis of the cause making explicable why none of the drafts submitted for the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe was really able to convince.

The cause of the failure of the competition cannot be laid at the door of the artists; it was inherent in the nature of the task of erecting such a memorial. In fact, the problem lies not only at the stratum of the foundations upon which post-war German society in East and West was erected but rather derives from one of its vital elements: the myth, retailed in countless forms and basically accepted as the final explanation almost everywhere, that we owe Nazism and its consequences primarily to one person, Adolf Hitler, the Führer, and that basically the Germans were merely a people of Mitläufer - those who "went along". But this convenient story - still the determining factor in dealing with Nazism - was not intended to be exposed, and certainly not refuted, by the Memorial; rather, the story was to be left intact and, by a kind of back-projection or back-reflection, to be given a positive turn. Just as Adolf Hitler, one evil individual, led the German people into ruin, now one good individual, an artist, is to formulate in one grand gesture our guilt, the personal guilt of many individuals, thus disencumbering us of it once for all. Putting it another way, the most important reason that the competition was bound to fail is to be seen in the regrettably unaltered perspective of these events - a perspective that sees only victims - and also in the continuity reflected in first attributing individual guilt to, and then loading that guilt onto the shoulders of, One Person. This tenet is corroborated by the circumstance that an individual born late, without any relevant legitimation, invested with power alone, could be sure of success in taking upon himself the decision regarding the Memorial competition, thus making it on our behalf; and that in this presumptuous role he encountered no serious contradiction - not even in his cherished desire to leave the fulfilment of this task to a descendant of the sufferers instead of at least arguing that in this special case only the descendants of the perpetrators could be called upon. It emerges clearly that here again the intent is not to reflect on the causes of the annihilation of the Jews but to push collective responsibility away from ourselves and onto the shoulders of the One - and that precisely this transfer is in fact the underlying purpose of the task as assigned.

A Memorial anyway, in spite of it all?

The dimensions of the difficulty of erecting a public memorial calling to mind the crimes committed in the Third Reich manifest themselves immediately in our language. Memorials, in the logic of language, are always and only erected to or for something, are therefore always to be seen as setting a positive sign. A memorial "for" a crime makes no sense; it follows that there can be no memorial - or sign, to put it more generally - representing something negative without the sign's becoming a means of transmuting this negative into a positive. While verbal language can extricate itself from this dilemma by resorting to a negation of a positive - for example by such a construction as injustice - it is clear that this negation technique is practically precluded for artistic statements, above all for pictorial representations: Painting, drawing, sculpture are always first and foremost positive statements and are inevitably perceived as such. Thus in artistic representations of the dreadful, of atrocities or of disasters, it can never be ruled out that they will be perceived mainly as artefacts and appreciated for their artistic value (consider the treatment today of representations of the crucified Christ) and may achieve validity only as works of art. Thus the origin of the general difficulty in the fitting representation of terror and atrocities by means of pictures or sculptures may indeed lie here in this basic problem of the medium or of linguistic logic; but a memorial whose subject is a crime is nonetheless expected and required to prevent or at least decisively impede the annulling of its substantive importance by the inevitable process of aesthetization.

Another aspect that complicates the erecting of a public memorial recalling the crimes committed in the Third Reich is to be seen in the fact that - wholly apart from the many memorials at the locations of the crimes - there is a vast number of documentary accounts, scholarly studies and reflections covering the events in the Third Reich. This renders obsolete an important function of a memorial in the classic sense of the term - that of giving information at a prominent place about a particular event or a particular person. Thus the question arises: What if anything can a monument accomplish in the context of - or rather in competition with - the existing memorial sites and the wide range of available information? Moreover - and not least important here - a memorial by its very nature can only be conceived as bound to a particular place and as focusing more or less inevitably on only one aspect of the given subject.

It is precisely this last aspect - the fact that the task of a memorial to provide information can no longer be fulfilled in the classic sense today and most particularly not in this case - that points to the danger inherent in a conventional memorial: it can embody no more than a symbolic form of remembrance, can only be designed as a gesture, which may at most gain compelling validity as an aesthetic construct. This fact makes clear on the other hand what a memorial befitting the occasion must aim at: the establishment of a communications structure that is able to take the inconceivable dimension of the crimes that we Germans committed and permitted during the Third Reich and put it in human measure. Only when the inconceivable atrocities and the suffering are broken down into the dimensions of individual deeds and individual fates of which the inconceivable is composed, and only when instead of the ruling-power principle (which unfortunately also dominates the "coming to terms with" the disastrous past) a dialogue is established - only then can there be hopes of a sign that will effectively call to our minds the time of National Socialism and the crimes committed in its name.

Beholder – observer

"One's eye cannot take in without giving at the same time." This fundamental correlation, which Georg Simmel has observed in perception between individuals, also applies *cum grano salis* to the perception of pictures and is the explanation and reason for their power - even before the stage of cognition and possible appreciation of their contents. For in order to perceive a picture, I must view it as a *vis-à-vis*, I must deal with it, open

myself to it, make myself vulnerable to it and put myself at its mercy; I can grasp it only by letting it work on me.

Of course in the relationship between an individual and a picture there can never emerge the living link of dialogue giving eye-to-eye perception its essential and unique character. It remains the ideal albeit elusive model for visual interaction. But the relationship between individual and picture can indeed be a means of reflecting upon and experimentally analysing the living relationship of perception between individuals; for the most important factor in this interaction - the fundamental "involvedness" of the viewer - remains operative in the perception of pictures.

In general experience, this fundamental and indeed ineluctable involvedness in perception is usually subliminal, i.e. is not consciously registered, whereas on the other hand the producers of pictures quite consciously and deliberately aim at claiming, by means of this involvedness, the attention of the viewers, and use it to get across particular content and messages. While the typical attitude of a beholder is as a rule to try to "read" the pictures and infer from them their textual and literary content and to suppress, more or less firmly, anything that cannot be put into verbal language, the producers of pictures typically try to rivet the beholders' attention not by bare informational content but by invitations to the eye's ability to interact, i.e. by the pictorial elements that are not easily "readable" or inferable.

This paradoxical and complex relationship between beholders, pictures, and the producers of pictures is of course notorious above all in the advertising sector, but actually it is of far greater importance regarding pictures that are perceived in the context of politics or history. For in this context the point is not only the communication and perception of particular content and facts; the basic point is always power - the fact that power is exercised by means of pictures, and the way it is used.

I should like to outline the broad problem-area opened up by this question by citing only two vantage-points relevant to the topic: in regard to dealing with pictures portraying history, and to the two differing attitudes that an individual can take - as beholder and as observer - towards a particular group of pictures. For the politically motivated exercise of power by means of pictures is mainly concentrated on having control of pictures portraying history and as a rule is tantamount to also controlling the way pictures are perceived. What is involved here can be most easily recognised in the misbegotten efforts in which politicians themselves figure as picture-producers - for example the picture of the hand-holding statesmen Mitterrand and Kohl at Verdun, which was transmitted by the media to us, the witnesses of a historic moment, and which we were supposed to read as a document of reconciliation between the two states, in the sense of *pars pro toto* - but which, in marked contrast to both the intentions and the stage-managing, actually cast us in the role of observers in which we mainly perceived the embarrassing unfitness and the conspicuously forced nature of the gesture of friendship on display. What became experienceable in this picture as an open clash between iconography and performance is, in more general terms, the category-distinction between documents and monuments, a distinction the two politicians tried to override by appearing as monuments themselves.

Documents and Monuments

"A document is what we call a sign that is registered as such by an external observer; whereas a monument is a sign referring directly to an addressee." This distinction makes clear, that documents and monuments do not necessarily have different material characteristics, but rather derive their essence primarily from varying attitudes of perception, which can be characterised as observer-related (documents) and beholder-related (monuments). It follows that documents exist in a dialogue-relationship to the observer, whereas monuments form a monologue form of communication.

Especially in the context of forming politico-historical concepts it can be observed that pictorial documents are re-interpreted as pictorial monuments and are used to convey particular information and messages. That is to say, pictures which (at least in relation to their subsequently designated purpose) were produced without special intention and which basically permit various interpretations by various observers, are processed in a way that makes them appear to contain a message meant for a particular addressee. The pertinent techniques used for such picture-processing have, notwithstanding their wide range of differences and their diversity, one principle in common: They aim at transforming the picture's basic structure, which is open to dialogue, into a monologue structure, i.e. at prescribing a very particular reading of the picture. The simplest way to guarantee this - to name at least one example - is to add a title, a picture caption, which is used and taken to be a guide to reading the picture. Such a caption can direct attention to particular elements of the picture, but that is not the only factor at work here; even more important remains the fact that the addition of text seems to make the picture subordinate to that text and thus deprives the picture of its quintessential quality, that of a non-verbal construct.

Another consequence of the transformation of the structure of perception into a monologue structure is that the addressee- or beholder-attitude - the attitude that only takes and does not give - is reinforced and helped to prevail as the conventional mode of perception. Corresponding with this is the consumer-attitude, i.e. that of taking something and handing over an abstract counter in exchange, quite in line with the general materialisation of interpersonal relations in mutually offered perception. Finally, the beholder-attitude is also that which - since it is no base from which the world can be perceived - repeatedly demands new and ever stronger stimuli; the result is not only more and more deadening but also a tendency to lose sight of the world altogether: To put it pointedly, what are the ruins of a concentration camp compared with a Holocaust Museum equipped with modern media?

It is true that, notwithstanding all this, the observer-attitude still survives. But the field within which the individual can act credibly (not least of all in relation to himself) as observer is becoming more and more limited - to the sector that the professional observers of the media have not or rather not yet registered, i.e. basically that of private life. Transferring insights and experience gathered here to a broader context and showing them to advantage appears virtually futile, given the powerful spotlights trained on the spectacular side of events and individuals. To be sure, the professional producers of pictures have long realised this and are responding (for example with television game-shows and talkshows) to the need of communicating personal observation and experiences. But these shows too are merely a special format for monologue, a form in which communication as dialogue is encapsulated in monologue structures and offered as a special fillip for consumption without consequence or effect.

There is in fact only one social practice in which, at least in theory, observers are sought after and welcome - the field of artistic work. Artistic pictures have - at least they claim to have - a structure in which the characteristics of documents and monuments are unified. An artistic picture is always produced with intent, and always has, at least in the person of its creator, an addressee. But it is at the same time always the document of an activity, which cannot be completely controlled or rendered conscious. To put it in a formula, artistic pictures have inter-individual perception as their model. And just as this builds upon the ability of individuals to interact, the perception of such works of art presupposes the willingness of the perceiver to interact, to observe and to behold, no less than his willingness to reflect on precisely this changeover in the act of viewing. To the extent that works of art actually do have inter-individual perception as their model, this is expressed in their specific makeup - in painting, for example, emerging as the basic difference between pictorial material and pictures - and is just the element that prevents such pictures from being interpreted in terms of a monologue structure, i.e.

prevents their being used as a mere monument or at least impedes such an interpretation.

But it must be noted, alas, that even the art scene is increasingly submitting to the imperatives of the media society and that the specific possibilities of the artistic production of pictures are being given up. This can also be especially observed in the field of a new kind of history painting, where at one time small and carefully filled single boxes had to give way to entire sections of empty tins, much lead is sunk into the ground, detonation stands for documentation, or peas are to serve us as objects of identification. Here the concept of creative shaping *e contrario* is lacking indeed - if not the interest in dialogue altogether.

Vor der Stille (In the Face of Stillness)

Virtually unnoticed by the public and even in the art scene itself, the Hamburg artist Sigrid Sigurdsson has in the past decade developed an artistic approach to recent German history and in particular to dealing with the era of the Third Reich which is unparalleled and which gains special significance against the background of the continuing discussion about a central Holocaust Memorial in Berlin.

The fact that *Vor der Stille* has remained largely unknown lies in its form: it can scarcely be commercialised, it cannot be turned into monologue and is thus largely beyond the reach of media exploitation; moreover it is bound to certain localities, which in turn have had no spotlights trained on them. From this project, which will be described below (or more precisely, from the experience gathered in her work on the project), the artist has developed a proposal - Germany - a Memorial - a Research Task - which will not only "serve" in regard to the aforementioned requirements listed by Walter Jens, but actually fulfils those requirements.

Vor der Stille is a room in the Karl Ernst Osthaus-Museum in Hagen, in which since 1988 Sigrid Sigurdsson has presented documents on German history collected by her. The room is furnished all around with shelves in whose compartments are stored books, display-cases and book-related objects arranged by the artist. They comprise some thirty-thousand documents and objects of all kinds, as well as numerous creations by the artist. The room has the appearance of an archive and can in fact be used by museum visitors as an archive that has not yet been completely organised. Visitors, assisted by museum staff if necessary, can remove books from the shelves at random and look at them on the two large tables in the room. Some visitors spend hours in this room. Some come regularly to look at the books or read in them. Others spend only a short time, but most of these make a promise (unsolicited) to the museum staff to return and spend more time. Others write a note in the *Besucherbuch* (Visitors' Book), which is regularly inspected and annotated by the artist. Still others borrow a *Reisebuch* („Travelling" Book) and work in it at home, returning it later to the room.

Vor der Stille is arranged as a remembrance: The room has no hierarchy, no centre, and no fixed order except for the compartmentalisation of the shelves. Everything in the room is of equal worth and is presented without value judgements and is available without restriction to the visitor. However, not all the material is equally accessible; the shelves are so high that some compartments can be reached only by ladder. Other than that, there is only one criterion for distinguishing between the various items and material in *Vor der Stille*: whether the folios and display cases containing the material are removed from the shelves and opened or not. But whether a book is opened or remains closed depends on the visitors: that is their decision.

Thus even in its outward form *Vor der Stille* is conspicuously an installation entirely geared to dialogue with the visitor. It unfolds the wealth of its resources to the extent that the visitor becomes actively involved, i.e. decides to take a book or a display case

off the shelves and look at it. For the room makes available so many different kinds of personal, official, quasi-official, private and published documents and commentary, research and reflections of varying provenance from all conceivable sources - texts, letters, photos, drawings, printed matter, pictures, maps, finds and objects from this century - that at least one of these items reflects the visitors' interests and experiential horizon, attracts their personal interest, and causes them to devote further attention to the materials collected in the room. It can happen that one finds and sees many things which one knows nothing about or wants to know nothing about; one comes across things one wouldn't believe without actually holding them, or one finds one's own experience quite unexpectedly corroborated by someone else of whom one had never heard. Thus the room is suddenly filled with many voices, one hears the fathers' speech and the mothers' voices, or one sees in a clumsy drawing the fate of a lost child. Vor der Stille casts the visitor as observer and simultaneously involves him as beholder, lets him reflect on his role of observer and beholder, and enables him to respond to what he has taken in - in the Besucherbuch - right on the spot, or later in a Reisebuch, thus adding and contributing to the resources of this room of remembrance.

Sigurdsson's Vor der Stille is able to exert this effect (which can only be suggested here) upon the visitor because the room is not only a "picture" or "image" of a remembrance and can function and be used as remembrance - but also because the room is an artificially created place of remembrance and remains recognisable as such. Vor der Stille is not a remnant, complete with ready-made interpretation, of a destroyed tradition; not a memorial to or for an event or a person, no monument of whatever kind serving as a "regulated commemorative record to the extent that (it) attempts to fix upon a very particular way of seeing the past", but rather a construction in which remnants of the process of historisation - that which historiography eliminated (for whatever reasons) or did not or could not record, what in fact might be called the detritus of history - are collected and organised. Organised not by customary historiographical classifications or criteria but according to perspectives and means evolving from the material itself; so that - quite in contrast to normal archiving and scholarly historical appraisal - what emerges from the collected materials is not the "same thing" or something comparable, but rather in each case the idiosyncratic, the quintessential, the special, the non-comparable. Consequently there emerges from these remnants an abundance of significance which - unrecorded and uncontrolled by historiography - directly reaches the users of Vor der Stille and activates their own powers of recall. Crucial for this process is the fact that the material collected in Vor der Stille was perceptibly formed by the artist into a highly-condensed conglomerate, her aim being to transcend in actual fact the users' "graphic powers", and by this experience to demonstrate, as Nietzsche wrote, that "the past must be forgotten if it is not to be the gravedigger of the present". The project accomplishes this aim as a material aggregation of official documents and of anonymous and personal stories, of remnants and fragments from "big stories", of scholarly and artistic and private reflections on this and other material - and finally as an evolving and self-reflective construction, as a concrete historical stratum which one can enter and become a part of, joining the story as a kind of historical three-dimensional figure, thus finding out by direct experience that it is in truth impossible historically to explain ourselves and our situation. Contrary to what one might think, this experience does not give rise to resignation or despair in view of the overwhelming impact and impenetrability of the collated material. Instead, Vor der Stille liberates its users from the aspiration of taking part in the historical process solely as an important subject, and sets free personal and private experience and memories, sets them against official history and stories: In Vor der Stille, "the subject of history...can (comprehend) himself as the producer of history," thereby not only seeing the "fate of history" lifted from within himself but actually lifting it.

Braunschweig - A Town in Germany Remembers

With the experience gathered in the room called Vor der Stille as a point of departure, Sigrid Sigurdsson developed, from the mid-nineties on, her Open Archive plan (which initially functioned merely as a part of the Hagen room) into an independent form of artistic work. In a protracted process that cannot be described here, she achieved the initial implementation of this approach with the project entitled *Das Fragment ist ein kleines Ganzes* ("The Fragment is a Small Whole"), a candid research job on the "evacuation marches" in connection with the dissolving of the Stutthof concentration camp in the winter and spring of 1945. *Das Fragment ist ein kleines Ganzes* was completed in May of 1995 and exhibited in Gdansk, Hagen and Erfurt, and in 1997 was permanently located in the old Town Hall of Gdansk as the core display of the Museum der Erinnerung (Museum of Remembrance) there. Building on the success of this project (which surprised even well-wishers) the artist entered a competition sponsored by the town of Braunschweig for the erecting of a memorial in the Schillstrasse at the site of a former outpost of the Neuengamme concentration camp. Her proposal was to implement it not only as a building project but as an Open Archive entitled *Braunschweig - A Town in Germany Remembers*, and at the end of 1996 she was commissioned to do so. Since then the artist has been working on the implementation of this project. In November of 1997 the structural part of the memorial was publicly dedicated: a platform with three steps from which one can look over a wall onto the camp-site, now used by the German Post Office, and an inscription on a garage on the Post Office grounds reading *Die Zukunft hat eine lange Vergangenheit* (The Future Has a Long Past). The Open Archive will be opened to the public this November in an exhibition sponsored by the Cultural Institute of Braunschweig in the Herzog Anton-Ulrich-Museum at the Dankwarderode Castle. After the exhibition, texts from the Open Archive are to be selected by a jury and put on permanent public display on the two hundred blank plaques that have been put up on the walls of the site, and the Open Archive itself is to be housed in the "Invalid House" adjoining the memorial site.

Measured against the elaborate techniques by which data of every kind are collected about us today, Sigrid Sigurdsson's artistic strategy for building up the Open Archives in Gdansk and Braunschweig appears downright archaic: She hands out carefully designed manuscript-boxes containing a sheaf of blank paper and asks the recipients to write on the subject and to return the boxes and paper by a stipulated time. But this bare description of Sigurdsson's approach leaves out the heart of the transaction, which is the personal inter-action between the artist and the persons whose participation in the Open Archive she solicits. When the boxes are handed over, the respondents are told exactly how the documents they produce will be used and in what context they will be placed. Crucial factors in this sensitive process are the artist's personal credibility and integrity, and the courage she has to address other people directly about possibly long-repressed or traumatically encapsulated experiences, and not least of all her persistence, in the face of conflicting interests, in pursuing and achieving the goals she has set herself. On the other hand, her initiative (and she sees her work as no more than that) would be futile if her search for the historical roots of our society were not supported by other persons and institutions. Foremost among these is the Cultural Institute of the town of Braunschweig: It not only assumed the task of supporting the artist's work; its staff of women civil servants vigorously and effectively joined in the action in this difficult field, thereby setting in motion a process in the town of Braunschweig that is a model for what can be done in the way of public municipal cultural activity that goes beyond culture defined in terms of an event-calendar. In Braunschweig, over sixty persons and institutions and organisations have accepted the artist's invitation - officially supported by the town - and on the basis of their own recollections and notes and records are conducting research into what went on during the Third Reich, with the focus on the Neuengamme concentration camp outpost. The important thing in this process is that it is happening now, in our lifetime, making it possible in our life for reflection to happen and in fact producing it. For it is not *ex post facto* exoneration but only different action, purged by reflection, that can preserve us from a repetition of deeds we cannot undo:

"I am prohibited from indulging in the hackneyed diction of shock and dismay, or to hide behind the vantage point of history. I belong to a family which directly and indirectly profited from National Socialism. My grandfather was responsible for the use of concentration camp prisoners in the Büssing firm, which he headed. That hurts. I feel neither called upon nor competent enough to go into the ordeals of the prisoners and their families. Precisely because my own vocational and personal experience makes it possible for me to guess at the suffering of the victims, I fear the stale aftertaste left by words of understanding and pity spoken by a relative of the perpetrators. I admired and loved my grandfather. With his grandchildren he was kind, patient, generous and loving. Hardly believable that this man knew about and tolerated the crimes committed during the fascist regime in general and in the Schillstrasse in particular...."

Germany - A Memorial - A Research Task

In connection with the implementation of the project Braunschweig - a Town in Germany Remembers, and also in connection with the plan to erect a central Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, Sigrid Sigurdsson began developing in 1996 the proposal to waive the erecting of such a memorial and instead to implement the project Germany - a Memorial - a Research Task.

The project adopts Raul Hilberg's suggestion that we should "never begin with the big questions" but instead should "address ourselves to a precise spelling-out of details, in order to be able to combine them into a form, an overall picture, which would be at least a comprehensive description - if not an explanation - of what happened". The foundation of the project is a map of Germany showing the borders of 31 December 1937, which is still published and on sale today. All documentable camps and sites of detention and mass murder during the Nazi period are entered on this map. The corresponding survey - not conducted by the artist, based solely on published and unpublished documentation - will be accessible, in addition to the entries on the map, in a data bank, which will be regularly updated. The existing documentation on the map and in the data bank is both a "picture" of the present state of research and graphic evidence that there were far more concentration camps and similar installations than the officially known ones, many of these in places that go unmentioned in the pertinent literature.

Sigrid Sigurdsson sees the map and the data bank as a public research plan that she would like to set in motion. As for the form of research, the artist proposes the establishment of more Open Archives modelled on the Braunschweig prototype, and an Open Archive on Internet, in which more information and documentation is to be collected. The focal point will be in the area of memories but there will also be a kind of spin-off of collateral information of possible interest for relevant scholarly research. It is planned at a later time to hand over the map and documentation to an appropriate scholarly institution, which will be asked to take charge of organising this public research.

Thus the plan is for Germany - a Memorial - a Research Task to be implemented not only in lieu of a central Holocaust Memorial; rather, the proposal is to waive entirely the idea of a memorial in the customary form, and instead to establish a structurally different form of remembering and holding in remembrance: It centres on individual persons, and on the places of the crimes committed or suffered by them. It does not push away individual memories and narratives; on the contrary, it takes these as an occasion to reconstruct correlations anew or again, using individual experiences to illustrate and highlight them. History evolves out of individual acts and individual interests. These also put their stamp on memory and remembering. If remembering is to lead to an inter-individual awareness of history, and to our being able to live with our history, this can only happen by integrating the process of remembering into our lives, and only by an exchange between the individuals at the places to which the memories are joined.

(1998)