

BETTINA MATHES & AMIE SIEGEL

*Marching Up, Crawling Through and Coming Out—Public Art
in Germany*

Amie Siegel There are so many foreign artists who come to Germany in general and Berlin in particular to make public works of art and site-specific installations—as a German, what do you think of that?

Bettina Mathes That is a very good question, because it makes me wonder why Germans who are so utterly territorial are at the same time so eager to let foreign artists use their public spaces. Are we afraid of “speaking up” in public or are we even afraid of our public spaces because of all the buried history that remains hidden underground or untouched or goes unnoticed.

AS Maybe it’s guilt, which is a simple way of saying perhaps Germans prefer for others to do their work excavating their past for them, since it also gives the foreigners a chance to feel self-righteous and declarative, although one hopes the art works have more ambiguity than that, and the Germans can neatly distance themselves from that too.

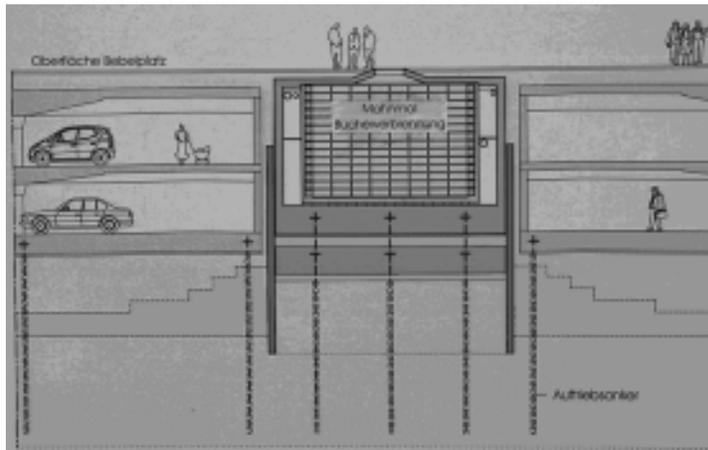
It’s fascinating how often “buried history” breaks out of its metaphor and becomes literal when speaking about Germans and public art. Think of the construction site that now surrounds and obscures the Bebelplatz book burning memorial by the Israeli artist Micha Ullman. It is a lit-up, sunken room of empty shelves—a library—visible from above through a glass ceiling, situated on the very site where the book burning took place in 1933.

As I’m sure you know, just recently however, Berlin’s city government decided to build an underground parking garage at Bebelplatz on the very spot where the memorial is although they claim it won’t effect the memorial, thus appropriating the very metaphor—burial and absence—that the artwork itself uses.



The Bebelplatz book-burning memorial

BM You're right, the construction site on Bebelplatz is all about the reality of buried history in Germany. In fact, I think that in Berlin, Germany's capital, where the Nazis planned and organized the murder of the Jews, "buried history" is a reality and a metaphor at once, in that Germans literally try to transform, to "carry away" the history buried in their ground. For me, Ullman's installation symbolizes not only Germany's buried history, but also the pained emptiness that the killing of the Jews has left in German society and culture, while at the same time resisting physical accessibility and therefore identification with the victims. But the current digging up of the ground and removal of its historical foundations, despite all the protest—even by Ullman, who wanted to remove his memorial—the senate went on with this plan for the underground garage and right now there is a huge construction site surrounding the memorial which itself cannot be touched, so now the site has become a symbol for Germany's need to get rid of its buried history. It is therefore not a coincidence at all that a parking garage replaces the sandy underground, since cars are, at least in Germany where the car industry is so prominent and important for the economy, the very vehicle for forgetting, for leaving the past behind.



Architectural diagram of the future Bebelplatz parking garage with memorial (*Mahnmal*).

AS Well it was Hitler who built the Autobahn, maybe he had that in mind . . . Actually, I'm fascinated by how there are no closets in German apartments, only wardrobes, but no actual built-in closets, it's like there's no place to put one's secrets, so they must go underground. It reminds me of a scene from Aviva Slesin's documentary, "Hidden Lives," when two older German women show the filmmakers where they hid a young Jewish boy when they had visitors or they thought he was in danger—in the closet!—and they still, fifty years later, had the same wardrobe and little chair that this quiet, frightened little boy had to sit on for hours, even days on end. One gets the sense the very thing that saved his life was also a shameful, humiliating and terrifying experience, possibly for everyone involved. It makes me think that Public Art in Germany is a kind of "coming out" of the past, public art is the country's closet, with its doors wide open. Only in the instance of the Bebelplatz memorial, it's the Senate that has neutralized the transgressive space between the closet (the hidden) and what lies beyond it (the public), with this latest use of the historic space as commercial space.

BM I would even go further and say that all of Germany is a closet—and that's why Germans don't have closets. But I would also say that German wardrobes are portable closets

that allow us to put our secrets in a secure place and take them with us wherever we go. Every time you move, your portable closet moves with you—and you don't even have to open it up and be confronted with the history hidden inside. If public art is indeed Germany's coming out—which I think it is—there seems to be at once a desire for this “coming out” and a strong need to repress what has been made public.

AS Susan Hiller's new show “Learning to Love Germany,” at the Volker Diehl Gallery in Berlin, includes a lovely and clever sound installation *What Every Gardener Knows (A Garden Carillon)* which is a very interesting example of just that phenomenon of repressing the past as it is made public. Hiller originally made the installation as a site-specific piece for Stadtpark Lahr, in the Black Forest. During a site-visit, already interested in Mendel, the father of eugenics, Hiller discovered that the garden included “a hall built to welcome Hermann Goering,” and composed a sound work that cunningly plays on the connection between Mendel's plant breeding and Goering's desired elimination of unwanted races, turning the garden into a “social metaphor.”¹ Hiller wrote an accompanying text for the show, but apparently when she received the catalogue for the show, her phrase “built to welcome Hermann Goering” was mysteriously changed to “built for the marching ups of the Nazis,” thereby eradicating the very connection which both inspired the piece and makes its site-specific nature so dynamic, since, as Hiller has pointed out, “it was Goering who proclaimed the racial laws at Nuremburg and who, as 2nd in command to Hitler, on 31 July, 1941 wrote to Reinhard Heydrich directly authorizing him to organize the “Final Solution” and the Lahr Hall (which is now the local Rathaus, forming one wall of the garden) was built to honor a visit he made to Lahr, from which point he possibly reviewed the troops.

BM: You know, in German, “marching up” is *Aufmarsch*, and then you imagine yourself as not even a participant but an onlooker, “over *there* are the Nazis, here I stand, but they intruded—from I don't know where—and I have nothing to do with it, I may be a victim too.” When I hear the word *Aufmarsch*, I have images in mind of the spectator, you are

always the spectator, the onlooker.

AS “Marching up” isn’t even an English phrase. Listening to your translation of the German definition, I agree that it seems a distancing device, especially for the curators or residents of the town in this instance.

BM When I heard the sound installation and learned about its “history”—both the historical site it responded to and the changes that the organizers made—it made me wonder if the purpose of public art in Germany lies in the art work’s ability to break through the numbness that is so characteristic of German public spaces. And I am not only talking about the spaces themselves—their somewhat sterile or utterly nostalgic quality—but also about the way people that inhabit this space respond to it, or rather do not respond to it. What Susan Hiller’s piece made very clear to me was that we need to open our eyes and ears even if we do not know what we shall see or hear, because only then will we be able to sense the reality of the history that we have buried underground or hidden in the wardrobe.

AS But, you know, when we start to talk about “experiential art,” then I start to get a bit nervous. I agree with you that friction with German public spaces, particularly that which aggravates our perception of history, is theoretically productive but it often devolves down into a kind of instant-recognition process of almost morbid sympathy. One of the things I like about Hiller’s sound piece is the way it uses the “other-worldly,” computer-generated chords—which seem to reference that final scene in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, the “dialogue” between the space-ship and the US Government—to express a passion for abundance and variety, one that exists in nature. It cleverly, and even joyously, turns the Mendel-cum-Goering nature-cum-race laws upside down. I find the piece both ironic and tender, a sort of post-modern humanism. But I wonder if I wouldn’t like it so much if it didn’t have that ironic, smart edge. During my time thus far in Germany I’ve traveled from being mildly annoyed to relatively disgusted with the heavy-handed, simplistic “literalization of experience” public artworks here tend to employ. In this I would certainly include Libeskind’s Jewish Museum

as a public work of art. Though people claim the building was more interesting when it was empty, and that may certainly be true, I think the building, with its “Holocaust Tower” and “Garden of Exile and Emigration,” presents an almost child-like vision of the past—one that we can crawl through, get scarily locked inside and walk around in, all in fun-house disorientation—so that our physical/emotional experience is one the architect/artist aspires to be akin to Holocaustal sufferings. I find that frighteningly dumb. But maybe that’s the point—to make us into silly children with no free will, suffering at the hands of a dictatorial authority that threatens our physical/mental existence.

BM I find it rather frightening when art that, with ever so good intentions, tries to wake you up from your numbness instead takes you to “dumbness” as is the case with the Jewish Museum. But I think that the productive power of public art lies exactly in its ability to make you see or know about a hidden, forgotten or even repressed history. Of course, one has to be wary not to create a piece of work that can be “accessed” as a kind of “immersive environment” where the “user” takes pleasure in entering a virtual reality that knows no past but is all about a never ending present and has very little to do with drawing attention to what has been repressed. During the debate over the building of the Holocaust Memorial, German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder said that he wanted “a memorial that people take pleasure in going to.” Clearly he envisions remembering the Shoah not as a painful process, but a joyful pastime. I am not arguing for what you call “morbid sympathy,” rather I am arguing for a critical distance that enables you to distinguish past from present, metaphor from reality.

AS Schroeder’s comment brings up another question about public art in Germany when the artwork seeks to engage the past—who is the artwork for? I naturally assume the artwork is for everyone, but Schroeder’s comment, aside from suffering from the dumbness we’ve talked about already, seems to suggest that Berlin is very aware that its Jewish-themed works—be they museums, permanent installations or temporary public exhibits—are a very big foreign tourist draw, even though most of them seem to be made by artists who have a

German spectator in mind. While Peter Eisenman's Holocaust Memorial commemorates "the murdered Jews of Europe," it is a memorial *in Germany*, for Germans to contemplate, and with all the kvetching over the memorial plans and details, people here seem to forget that. I love that story of the representative from Degussa² flying to New York City to consult with a Rabbi there about whether they should indeed continue to use the graffiti-repellent coating on the memorial "steles" and the Rabbi responded, "It's your business."

BM Indeed, the Holocaust memorial clearly is a memorial for the Germans, but at the same time Germans look at it from a tourist's perspective. That is to say, rather than allowing or enabling Germans to remember and mourn the killing of the Jews, the memorial begs for identification with the murdered Jews. It is like a visit to EuroDisney—only cheaper. And with the graffiti-repellent coating the steles will convey this exact kind of sterility and numbness that we have been talking about earlier.

AS How exactly does the Eisenmann memorial beg for identification with the exterminated Jews? And how does the graffiti-repellent coating create sterility in your opinion—because it prevents public "discourse" in the form of markings on the monument? I think we here in Berlin all know the anti-graffiti is to prevent the Neo-Nazi's from desecrating it, as they do most every Jewish site in Berlin from time to time, like the memorial for the deportation of the Jews on Grosse Hamburger Straße which gets toppled and spray-painted each year by the Neo-Nazis.

BM I think your two questions are related. Eisenman's memorial was chosen because its design, with the gigantic field of huge steles and the field's uneven, slanting ground, makes the visitor experience fear and disorientation just like the Jews did. But since the memorial is for Germany it enables the perpetrators to feel like the victims—and this is exactly what Germans have tried to prove ever since the end of the war: we are victims, too—or as member of parliament Martin Hohmann (CDU)³ very recently put it: the Jews are "a people of perpetrators too," a comparison which thus

suggests Jews don't have a right to claim they are victims. In addition to the architectural design of the memorial, which makes you feel you are entering another world, the anti-graffiti coating bestows upon this place a timeless, a-historical quality that enhances its unworldly presence. I know that the repellent is meant to protect the memorial from being desecrated by Neo-Nazis, but the Neo-Nazis won't go away only because they don't find places to spray-paint with their anti-Semitic and racist slogans. I guess what I am trying to say is that Germans should confront Anti-Semites rather than silence them. One has to talk to them, argue with them, continually show them that one does not share their beliefs and oppose their violent actions. From this perspective the memorial seems like a place that is "immune" to Anti-Semitism—but this immunity is deceitful, because an immune system needs to be in contact with the "enemy" in order to protect you. To try and create a stainless, immaculate memorial comes from the same logic that tried to achieve the "Final Solution." But as the history of Degussa, the company which today produces the graffiti-repellent and during the "Third Reich" produced Zyklon B, shows—there can never be a "final solution" of the past in Germany.

AS I do often wonder if abstraction in public art, particularly work that seeks to engage a political past or present, is a dangerous thing, not only because it's so unspecific as to run amok in a wash of "feeling," but also because the desire to replicate experience—such as the aspiration to disorientate in both Eisenmann's memorial and Libeskind's Jewish Museum—runs the risk of making the work into a thrill ride of temporary empathy, and a non-specific one at that. The feelings that evoke violent hatred of others, whether race-based or otherwise, are complicated and deserve more complex and careful examination. I don't think this means all public art (or even any art with a subversive, politicized intent) should thus render its materials and themes in a conceptual paradigm, but perhaps a more effective approach than the giant sculptural abstraction is in cracking open the details—I'm thinking now of Susan Hiller's work in the same show about the colored pencils still manufactured today in Nuremberg with skin-tone, race based names that reflect their colors: African Central, Spanish, Indian South, Chinese

Oriental, Pakistan, Mainland Chinese, Caucasian, Indian Asia North, American Indian, Egyptian North African, Chinese Oriental, Greek Mediterranean, etc . . . or even the art work at the Wittenbergplatz U-Bahn station here in Berlin which presents people entering the station with directions to trains going to Dachau, Auschwitz and Buchenwald . . . These works use relatively sparse, direct means that provoke complicated reactions. Your comments about perpetrators and victims and my feelings about abstraction and specificity in public-politicized art makes me realize that perhaps interesting, effective artworks come about in the opposite way of interesting, effective activism—you know the famous New Left aspiration of the 68ers, “the sacrifice of identity to achieve true effectiveness”? Well perhaps this sacrifice of the individual, the details, the synecdochic (the part that speaks to the whole), to the egoless collective is exactly what public art should avoid.

BM I would even say that most of the public art in Germany—at least those works that refer to the Nazis and the Shoah—purposefully seek to achieve what you have called the “sacrifice of the individual,” although I would say that the individual is made to disappear rather than being sacrificed. I think what a more detail-specific approach achieves is to remind us that “history” consists of histories, that everything is connected and that deeds do have perpetrators.

¹ *“Kill the weeds’ is the guiding principle of all manorial, municipal, suburban and Grundstück gardeners. When Mendel made plant breeding a science, gardeners were enabled to produce internally-consistent plant populations; this meant they could do more than merely eliminate weeds, they could also seek out weed-like (e.g., undesirable) traits existing within garden species and attempt to eliminate them as well. I could not avoid considering the garden as a social metaphor when thinking about the Lahr garden, which includes a Bismarck corner as well as a hall built to welcome Hermann Goering: words like exclude, purge, and eliminate in this context refer to more drastic means than pruning shears, hoes and weed sprays. Mendel’s system, lovingly constructed, has been the basis in the past not just of genetics but also of eugenics, the ‘science’ of breeding a perfect human population . . . My garden carillon, “What every gardener knows,” plays the system controlling the distribution of inherited characteristics discovered by Mendel. It is a code that celebrates patterns of sameness and*

difference, dominants and recessives, in a more profound and complicated way than at first may be appreciated, since it accounts for the transmission of invisible characteristics and the possibility of combining and recombining traits in complex and surprising ways. In contrast to church bells or the call of the muezzin, my carillon doesn't exclude anyone, since all of us, plants and humans, are composite patterns of inherited traits. Weeds and other undesirable or intrusive elements in the garden are composed of the same patterns. This is the song the garden is singing." (From Susan Hiller, 2003)

² www.holocaust-denkmal-berlin.de

³ Degussa, one of Germany's biggest chemical companies, produces the graffiti-repellent coating "Protectosil," which was applied to Eisenman's memorial "steles" (the 2,700 concrete slabs that make up the memorial) to protect them from being spray-painted. In order to show its commitment to the building of the memorial, Degussa largely discounted the coating for its use on the "Field of Steles." Shortly after the first steles were coated with the graffiti repellent, it was pointed out that the Degussa owned company "Degesch" had produced Zyklon B, the deadly gas used by the Nazis in the gas chambers, sparking a debate about the appropriateness of its use that continues as we write this.

⁴ Martin Hohmann is a member of the German Bundestag and until very recently was a member of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU). On October 3rd, 2003, German Unification day, he delivered a speech in which he described the crimes of the Bolsheviks during and after the Russian Revolution as, for the most part, instigated by and committed by Jews. He also called the Jews "a people of perpetrators" and compared their putative crimes to those of the Holocaust. After a week of strong public protest against his anti-Semitic speech, the CDU finally excluded Hohmann from the party. He is still an elected member of parliament.



the Bebelplatz in November 2003