

# DAVID SITTLER

## **The Challenges of the Culture of Remembrance**

How are Nazi crimes to be remembered when those who remember in the strict sense have died? For some time now this question appears to be a central issue and the only common constant in all cultures of remembrance dedicated to the Holocaust. Apart from the clear worldwide moral condemnation, which isolated anti-Semitic denials actually indirectly confirm, there can be no single or even definitive answer – neither from history nor from art.

For all the differences in their respective fields of activity, for historians and artists alike public remembrance is always a matter also of stimulating reflection on common and personal responsibilities and answers to the Holocaust as a crime against humanity perpetrated by Germans. Rather than an overview of the current positions and discussion in Germany regarding the culture of remembrance, this paper addresses characteristic problems that concern every form of the culture of remembrance since National Socialism.<sup>1</sup>

### *(Re-)Territorialisation and (De-)Personalisation*

In Germany a wider remembrance of the mass crimes committed by the Nazis now extends far beyond Auschwitz and the gas chambers in Europe's "far east", and thus emerges from a sort of national background of remembrance. This exhibition, too, combines works on Auschwitz with works on the Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp outside Nordhausen. The camp administration and a number of Auschwitz prisoners were relocated to Nordhausen from the advancing Soviets – so the locations were more closely linked historically than has previously been perceived in Germany's culture of remembrance. Nordhausen as the starting point therefore corresponds to the "re-territorialisation" – in terms of the culture of remembrance – of Nazi crimes in Germany. It also stands for the implementation of the Holocaust in provincial Germany and the manifest involvement of the entire population and its long suppressed awareness of those events. Since the 1990s this has resulted in a two-fold official admission: firstly, the public acknowledgement that Jews were also exterminated on the territory of what is present-day Germany; and secondly, the establishment and redesign of memorials at the sites of concentration camps within Germany, a process supported by the institutions and monitored by historians. This more recent focus on such historical sites of crimes has enabled greater scientific and public involvement with the perpetrators in mainstream society.<sup>2</sup> The Mittelbau-Dora Memorial is a model example of a concept that corresponds to the above. Moreover, the Memorial attempts, in a conscious bid to appeal to today's generation, to convey the dominance of the gruesome and inhumane everyday life within the utopian megalomania. The presentation of the historical information takes a critical and demystifying look at the often

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<sup>1</sup> For a good, concise overview see i.a. Christoph Cornelißen: [http://docupedia.de/zg/Erinnerungskulturen#cite\\_note-42](http://docupedia.de/zg/Erinnerungskulturen#cite_note-42), last visited on 17.11.2010

<sup>2</sup> The historian Michael Wildt outlined this new programme a few years ago with *Tätergeschichte als Gesellschaftsgeschichte* [the history of the perpetrators as social history].

stereotyped prior knowledge and half-knowledge that visitors may have, for example the technology-fetishist expectations and perceptions of the “rocket camp” influenced by films, computer games and the internet.<sup>3</sup> Complementing this approach, the artistic works also examine not just the material traces but also the artists’ own feelings towards the site’s structure, subjectively as well as in an explicitly reflective way.

For a long time the history of public remembrance in Germany was also one of partial remembrance, aimed at relieving the burden, and therefore of forgetting: “The depersonalisation of the perpetrators was also underpinned by their personalisation: Hitler, Himmler [...] The perpetrators, too, did not remain simply unnamed; rather, they were presented evasively and deviatingly.”<sup>4</sup> It is just as important to put a face on the victims, the accomplices, the accessories and the perpetrators as it is to provide space and leave room for the unnamed, as Paul Altmann’s project in particular shows.

*There is no collective memory:*

The artists appear united in their scepticism towards the notion of a collective memory, widespread in the discourse on remembrance. That notion implies more than certain extant social and media-related conditions for remembrance. They prove in different ways that the process of remembering remains incomplete if there is no personal involvement – for example with the visit to a memorial site. Accordingly, public remembrance does not work automatically. The work of remembering is an individual task that has to be performed based on a person’s own experiences and perceptions. It cannot and should not be contrived.

A (secondary) memory, one that is kept alive, can only be a memory actively visualised by each generation. Even the permanence of the material traces cannot be relied upon. One has to recognise and reflect on the way in which they change and their ephemeral nature. Remembrance does not require a social collective, national context. The appropriation and tradition can be understood more as a multi-subjective memory that applies to all human beings and includes people in the memory who have no degree of kinship, close or otherwise, with the perpetrators or victims. They can however opt to be part of that remembrance by engaging with it. The public representation of the victims and of previously overlooked groups of victims together with the institutional commemorative rituals remain right and proper, regardless. Neo-fascist and far-right trends show that, for all the remembrance, there is no collective memory in which the experience of the Holocaust is so lastingly engraved that a recurrence appears inconceivable. All that is common (and collectively accessible) are the meanings<sup>5</sup> of language- and other media-related elements and the locations in which the various perspectives intersect. Yet for all that, the trans-subjective factuality of the crimes committed in Nazi labour and death camps remains, and it is a point of reference even for the seemingly “purely aesthetic” discourses. It is important to posit different answers side by side, even if they are indirect and subjective answers. Indeed, it is only with the acceptance of considerable differences and

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<sup>3</sup> Arich-Gerz, Bruno, *Mittelbau-Dora: American and German. Representations of a Nazi Concentration Camp*, Bielefeld, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Rupnow, Dirk, *Vernichten und Erinnern, Spuren nationalsozialistischer Gedächtnispolitik*, Göttingen, 2005, p 256.

<sup>5</sup> As James E. Young has already stated: Ders., *The Texture of Memory, Holocaust Memorials and Meanings*, Vienna, 1997, p 17.

differentiations that one can do justice from the outset to the various perspectives of victim and perpetrator groups and attempt at the same time finally to break free of perpetrator categorisations.

### *Imagining the unimaginable*

The suffering to be remembered is accessible to us only as a secondary experience and therefore (again) difficult to imagine. So remembering that suffering also involves a personal reflection of one's own humanity, including its abysmal depths, depths plunged to during the Holocaust on a scale difficult to grasp either then or now – and which terrifyingly have opened up again even today in new genocides. To this extent, questioning the humanity of every individual affected also concerns us, who belong to later generations. Remembrance also consists of “having to think of the unthinkable, learning to speak the unspeakable, and trying to imagine the unimaginable”. Art in particular now has the task of making the “insoluble nature of a remembrance that affords meaning [...] an aesthetic topic in itself”<sup>6</sup>. What's more, art can also sustain a feeling of anxiety that stems from such a horrific event or from the fact that even the perpetrators partly suspected that anyone listening to or reading about the reports of such hideous crimes would not be able to lend credence to them.<sup>7</sup> So observing the perspective of victim and perpetrator does not in any way entail qualifying or playing down the guilt; rather, it allows an unsettling ability to imagine something that is initially absurd beyond any historical-situational logic and perception, and therefore unimaginable. The generational distance can also be regarded as an opportunity for a greater distancing that allows us to recognise and likewise remember previously unexplored or insufficiently explored tragic dimensions (e.g. the dual role as victim and collaborator) in their multi-layered atrocity.

### *Thoughts about future remembrance*

The work of the research community is by no means completed, not even in the sense of a more accurate, more complex historical reconstruction – nor can it be. As the late historian Reinhart Koselleck remarked a few years ago in his reflections on the culture of remembrance, we who remember need to learn to communicate the challenge that there is no definitive answer. This exhibition is proof that his hope that secondary remembrance, too, is not slipping away has, in a small way, just been realised.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Formen und Traditionen des negativen Gedächtnisses*, in: Ders. Vom Sinn und Unsinn der Geschichte, Aufsätze und Vorträge aus vier Jahrzehnten, published by V. Carsten Dutt, Berlin 2010, pp. 241-253, p. 250 and p. 251.

<sup>7</sup> Rupnow, p. 59.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Koselleck, p. 253.