

# The Monument is Invisible, the Sign Visible.

## Monuments in New Perspectives

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WERNER FENZ

The many arguments – the one in the title is, as you know, from Robert Musil – for and against different forms of memorial are linked by a central question: Is it (still) possible today to represent or at least repeatedly refer to the monstrosities of Nazi rule, the terror of a dehumanizing regime, the construction of concentration camps and their machinery of daily annihilation on the basis of the images of these horrors that were passed onto us after the fact? Can the representation of maltreated bodies, emotionally laden and expressively rendered in stone and bronze, function as an appropriate symbol of something that really happened? We are living in a time when images and their use are undergoing a radical transformation, above all, in the electronic media, which is resulting in a general desensitization to bodies that have been tortured and killed. Without in any way wanting to detract from the respect that is due to those individuals who have suffered such horrible fates, the question must be asked as to whether the artistic reflection of the almost endless array of imagery referred to above, or a small segment of it, can/should continue to be utilized as a method of commemoration and remembrance. In recent years, we have seen concepts emerge that are diametrically opposed to this kind of “petrification” of one of the most shameful chapters in our history.

For instance, Esther and Jochen Gerz created a lead-plated pillar in a Hamburg suburb on which passersby could inscribe their names. The *Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial* designed by Rachel Whiteread is a work in cast concrete suggesting a library and was the winning submission in a competition that specifically called for non-figurative designs – a specification requested by, among others, Vienna’s Jewish community. These and numerous other examples illustrate the decisive shift that has taken place within memorial culture.

Three examples from Styria and Graz (realized by Helmut & Johanna Kandl, Jochen Gerz and Nasan Tur) will show the completely new perspectives of so-called monuments.



is what makes this work a new and important contribution to memorial culture. It was clear to the artists from the outset that the building, as a fragment, would not only be included in the installation, but would in fact constitute its starting point and central focus. This is not a project about construction, but about supplementation with minimal means, which are skillfully and unerringly implemented. This supplementation is done in a way that makes the contemporary reference highly visible. Illuminated lettering in a clear font, which is diametrically opposed to the grotesque script of the Nazis and has been chosen deliberately to resemble the kind of signs to which we are accustomed, combines both content and admonition.



*Helmut und Johanna Kandl, "WÄCHTERHAUS", Institut for Art in Public Space, 2009*

The information is concentrated in the largest of three available rooms. One wall features a brief description of the location and what happened there, while on the wall opposite a screen provides pictorial and textual information. The latter confronts us with human rights abuses that are happening now, with violence, and with attacks on minorities in a wide range of situations. Historians and representatives of human rights organizations are working with the artists to ensure that this presentation in the *WÄCHTERHAUS* is constantly updated. This arc of connections, which has been extensively discussed among the scholars involved, is one of the means by which this "memorial signpost" has liberated itself from a "static character" and all previous forms of representation.

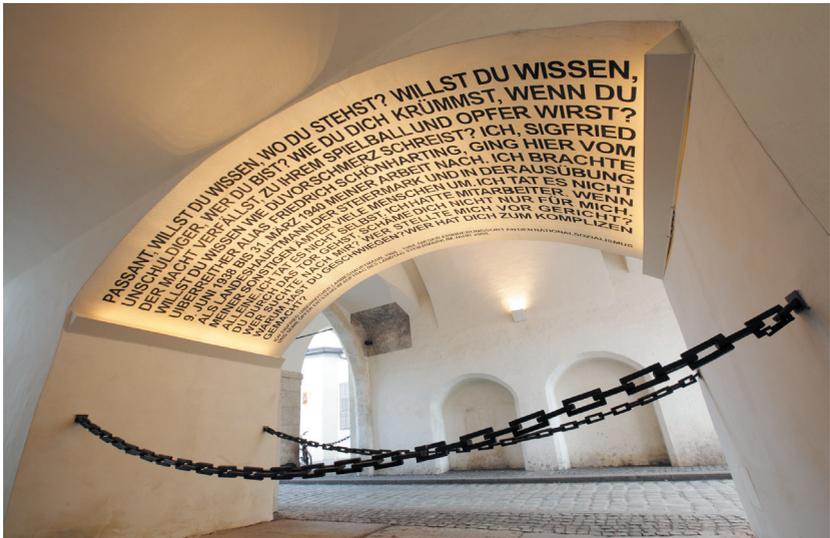
In a very direct sense, Helmut & Johanna Kandl have established a groundbreaking artistic form of memory. Its significance extends far beyond the concrete geographical and historical locus and establishes a new memorial typology – the

designation of an area using an available object that is loaded with memory. This object is neither reconstructed nor “improved.” It is simply structurally maintained – a word with a dual meaning, a duality with which this artist duo works in many ways: past, present, watch house and guardhouse, securing memory and positioning it in the present.

## JOCHEN GERZ: SIGFRIED UIBERREITHER (2008)

In 2008, the Styrian government and parliament decided to publicly recall the National Socialist abuse of power embodied by Sigfried Uiberreither, the one-time Provincial Governor and Gauleiter of Styria. Jochen Gerz dedicated himself to this task in response to an invitation from the Institut für Art in Public Space Styria. In the first part of his work, Uiberreither poses questions inside the gate of the city castle. He asks passers-by and visitors to the city questions at the site of what was and still is the seat of the Provincial Governor; questions of a National Socialist criminal on the complicity and silence of the others, the majority, not only back then at the time of the crimes, but also afterwards. Uiberreither himself is addressing us with the final declaration: “Without you I would never have become Sigfried Uiberreither”. The questions confront us with the responsibility to intervene in the “course of things” and to draw on courage that has been all but lost.

In 63 Jahre danach (63 Years Afterwards), the second, very intensive part of recalling the past, Gerz began a work process with the public that evolved over the course of several months. What Gerz did was screen the public and integrate key



Jochen Gerz, “Sigfried Uiberreither”, Institut für Kunst im öffentlichen Raum, 2009

groups and institutions – academics, politicians and readers – into a multistage process. Their collaboration took place on the print media level. He won over the *Kleine Zeitung*, one of the two large newspapers in Graz, for an extensive, engaged media partnership. This was the only way in which he could put his concept into action. Everyday photographs from the Nazi period – “We are already familiar with the SS officer with his arm raised in salute” (Gerz) – were selected by academics from different disciplines and published in several installments. Readers were then asked to select the ones they considered the best. All the regional parliamentarians were persuaded to compose texts for the photos. Finally, twenty-four text/image combinations were selected, of which twelve were to be displayed in Styria and twelve in Graz at locations chosen by readers (We couldn’t get permission for 2 of them in Graz and 4 in Styria; decisions in 5 cases were based on political reasons). This type of approach makes the artist into a kind of director who ensures that the course of the process is followed and his plans are carried out. Each of the double panels, which presented the material published in the newspaper on one side and the selected photo and text on the other, was subtly designed to keep it as simple as possible. The inclusion of the parliamentarians – a clear parallel to Haacke’s Reichstag project – and the newspaper readers was planned in such a way that the participants were not exploited for an idea that was transformed into art in a grandiose way. That would have obscured the context and undermined the transparency. In other words, the art form was reconcilable with the form of communication, and the participants saw themselves confirmed in their roles as actors who did more than provide a foundation for a complex aesthetic creation. Nevertheless, the art revealed itself to be nothing less than art, even if, in this visually stripped-down form, it reached the limits of what many people view as art in a captive, well-known tradition.

Unfortunately, there is not enough time to deal with other projects by Jochen Gerz and his ex-wife Esther in detail, although they were more or less the first ones to emphasize the invisibility of the monument. But still, I have to mention two of them:

1/ Once again, Hamburg-Harburg: Esther and Jochen Gerz (unlike Alfred Hrdlicka with his “anti-monument” at Dammtorplatz 17) chose a radically different monument concept. Theirs, a 12-metre high, lead-clad pillar, pushes for its own supersession. In the words of the artists: “We invite the citizens of Harburg and visitors to the city to add their names to ours. The monument exhorts us to be vigilant and to remain so. The more signatures the rod of lead bears, the more it will be sunken into the ground until it finally sinks completely after an indeterminate period of time, leaving empty the space once occupied by the Harburg Monument against Fascism: For in the long run, nothing can rise up in our place against injustice”. The monument now rests in the earth, sunken; its upper section is still visible in a glass shaft next to the metropolitan railway station entrance.

2/ In Graz, the competition entry *Die Gänse vom Feliferhof* (The Geese of Feliferhof = a training grounds of the Austrian army) was unanimously chosen by

the jury following a discussion. Even though the Austrian army has lost the courage to implement this concept, it is still considered one of the most important contributions towards a renewal of monument culture. (The Feliferhof shooting range is still used by the armed forces. It is linked to the violence of the Nazi regime in Styria in a number of ways. From September 1941 until the final days of the war, many executions were recorded and observed here by eye-witnesses.)

Four flagpoles have been placed in a straight line, across the field. The white flags bear simple, yet conspicuous red slogans: Death is the Price of Courage – People who Betray their Country are Decorated – Barbarism is the Soldier's Bride – We, too, are called Soldiers.

This concept is based on the same conviction as the one expressed in Hamburg: that responsibility – the responsibility for remembering – cannot be delegated. Consequently, the flags, as an aesthetic symbol, merely form a semiotic framework, for they are re-installed every time the Feliferhof is used. They are issued to a group of recruits who raise them mechanically. When the recruits leave the firing range, they have to remove the mobile symbols and store them away: for the printed flag fabric marks the presence of the soldiers. In this way, the presence and absence of the flags depend upon the presence and absence of the soldiers. Therefore, the symbols of memory and, hence, of the memorial as a project are related to a practical activity. The legibility (and effectiveness) of the symbols does not depend on what is being remembered (or is to be remembered) or not. Thus, the present/presence (not only that of the flags) is dependent on the consciousness of memory and the willingness to remember.

## NASAN TUR: BULWARK AGAINST THE SOUTH-EAST?

Facts:

1/ There is a long tradition which reached its well-known culmination during the Nazi era: Graz, die "Stadt der Volkserhebung" (City of the People's Revolt), as a "Bulwark against the South-East". The most powerful radio station in Central Europe was built not far from the city in order to reach the so-called Untersteiermark (Lower Styria), which had ceased to be part of Austria at the end of the monarchy in 1918. As we know, foreign people – and the Nazis decided who was a foreigner – were treated as enemies or inferior people in the 1930s.

2/ The Landeszeughaus (Provincial Armoury), which houses the largest existing original armoury dedicated to the enemies from the South-East, is – as it is written in the folder, the flyers and the introductions on the web explaining the concept of the project – an important vehicle of social narratives revolving around the notions of "border fortress", "bulwark" and "defence against the Turks" – narratives with a long history that are highly relevant to the current day situation.

3/ As artists did in their concepts in the 1990s (system critical art), the Zeughaus and CLIO, an association for history and work in education, initiated the idea to think about possibilities for foiling the tourist attraction like a prepared mirror in an art piece. As part of a competition, the Institut for Art in Public Space invited four renowned artists and one artist group from that geographical, cultural and political area (Bulgaria, Turkey, Bosnia and, from Germany, a second generation Turkish artist), which is still widely treated today as a synonym of danger and menace. The most important point was not to create a branding for the collection, but calling for signs in the city thus people were going to be confronted with the social and political issues of the present concerning the construction of images of the enemy.

International competition: We were lucky to have two prominent representatives of the South-East, women curators from Croatia and Serbia, among the members of the panel of judges. After some enthusiastic discussions, the panel of judges decided (by majority vote) to propose the project:

NASAN TUR (the German-born Turkish artist)

*Der unbekannte Ritter / The Unknown Knight*



*Installation view Landeszeughaus*

Foto: J. J. Kucek

Let me share some of the jury's statements with you, because the declarations describe the artistic concept of Nasan Tur very clearly and explain why the majority liked it:

Quote: “At first sight, Tur’s *The Unknown Knight* looks like a rather naive, although witty, idea. The artist intends to insert another “monument” into Graz, a city which already has a wealth of historical monuments. The first question is: who today in the age of “art in public spaces” needs another “monument”, which is to be produced in the rather old-fashioned material bronze? Does Graz need it? Upon closer examination, however, Tur’s simple idea appears to possess complex layers of meaning and is therefore open to multiple readings.

The jury is of the opinion that Nasan Tur’s project corresponds best to the intention of the competition and its main guideline: “The point is to break up the current narratives about war, frontier and ‘imaginary’ enemies in a collective self-image of Styria, Austria and Europe by means of an artistic intervention”. Tur’s proposal challenges the collective memory invented and re-invented throughout the history of Graz, and his gesture should be situated in a wider (theoretical) context. Over the past thirty years, the historical discipline has finally accepted the fact that “historical writing is a construction, perhaps as imaginative as any literary creation”. In contrast to traditional historical methodology which insists on “pure facts”, contemporary historians are aware that “social events are ‘constructions’ rather than descriptions isomorphic with some ‘objective’ reality”.<sup>1</sup> This conclusion seems particularly relevant when analyzing how the national past of a respective nation (or rather a nation-state) has been “remade” throughout the centuries. In this long process, historical “realities” have been forgotten and replaced by myths, now acting as the “real past”. As is well known, the invention of an “enemy” is the constitutive element of every nationalist ideology, regardless of which historical period we observe.

With these remarks in mind, it could be said that *The Unknown Knight* is meant to initiate the process of “inventing the past”, a past that never existed. This “new” past has yet to be invented as the artist plans to include a workshop with children in the project with the aim of creating new myths, legends and stories about the “Unknown Knight” (The fact that the “knight” is a figure that features in so many Hollywood movies from science-fiction films to contemporary fantasy films could provide additional material to stimulate the children’s imagination).

The “Knight” is a project that relates to the historical context of Graz (Styrian Armoury), which Tur exploits on several levels. On an ideological level, he questions male bravery, militarism and, implicitly, patriotism by offering two figures of the “unknown knight” (one appears as a monument in the Griesgasse, and the other as a sculpture on the roof of the Landeszeughaus). On a visual level, Tur plays with the exhibits in the Styrian Armoury.

In this project, Tur also employs the usual channel through which a museum functions today, namely the museum shop, in which the multiplied versions of the “Knight” would be on sale (in paper armour, however), together with picture books illustrating the new legends coined by the children.” (25 March 2011), end of quote

1 | Janet Abu-Lughod: On the Remaking of History: How to Reinvent the Past, 1989.

Stereotypes such as Graz as a “Bulwark against the (South-)East”, “the Turks” as a “historical enemy”, which continue to influence attitudes even today and are repeated without thinking or used purposefully. Nasan Tur’s winning project of the international competition *Bulwark against the (South-)East?* challenges collective memory. Starting from the Landeszeughaus, the Provincial Armoury, the German-Turkish artist confronts the existing myths that are used to construct images of the enemy with the legend of the “Unknown Knight”, invented together with schoolchildren in Graz. On postcards and in picture books, the aim is to carry tidings of the “Unknown Knight” out into the world and subsequently to inspire other legends.

For his interventions in public space, Tur deliberately falls back on the traditional bronze monument, adding breaks in terms of form and content: the “Unknown Knight” – the artist himself – appears as an inadequately armoured, vulnerable, anti-heroic figure that fails to comply with common narratives.

For all this, the project is not one that politically challenges collective memory of Austria’s past, nor does Nasan Tur – unfortunately – address the topics of xenophobia and racism directly. However, by questioning the mechanisms and workings of collective memory, particularly the myth of the “enemy from the (South-)East” in current society, Nasan Tur generally (although not radically enough for me) joins those artists – some of their works we have seen before – who argue that the politics of memory have to be defined in a new way: looking to the past from the point of view of the present and incorporating the mode of acting, the overview on the urgent problems in society and breaking up the public’s customary practice of perception.

