

# BETWEEN HISTORY

## An Interview

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**HOUSE OF AUSTRIAN HISTORY** You've been working with the House of Austrian History for almost a year now. How did your relationship with the museum and this collaboration come about?

**RUTH ANDERWALD** We were delighted that Monika Sommer invited us to work on this project. She knew our work in documenting building sites, for example the renewal of the Joanneumsviertel district in Graz.

**LEONHARD GROND** The project fits very well into our body of work. Not just observing and documenting this building site but also preparing artistically for the transformation processes are part of our artistic work and our research into change processes and memory.

**RA** Our first project in documenting a building site took place during the rebuilding of the south wing of the Landesmuseum Linz, in the form of a building-site newspaper, for the city's year as European Capital of Culture 2009. After a first visit we quickly became enthusiastic about the complex processes on the site, the destructive and constructive activities that characterise the cultural work of building. The building site is perceived as a diversion from the usual order, even though it's nothing other than coordinated strands of negotiations on the completion of an architectural form. This process of emergence also has destructive aspects that we – obsessed as we are with productivity – don't like to take into consideration. It takes up space, it produces noise, dust, makes things

unrecognisable. In short: it disturbs what we're used to. Nevertheless you have to grant space to this entropic exterior of order, its disturbance and destruction and its subversion, blurring and subjugation. The building site is a product of the collapse of the familiar and the precondition for the emergence of something new. As a zone of realignment, however, it also allows identity and spaces of identification to emerge. Museums as sites of art and culture are also perceived as canonical sites of order and sublimity. But the idea that museums, of all buildings, are supposed to be spared the dirt and noise is strange. It means that museums lose the option of offering their public an insight into the nature of their processes and thus opening up a space for identification.

**LG** The process of building is highly ephemeral and is constantly creating as a side-product, like you say, spaces for identification. For you as a team, that creates identification with the location; for the workers on the building site and for us as artists it creates identification with the location and the institution. When the public can perceive this process, it can participate in this identification process.

Over the course of our projects we've noticed that a building site evokes a lot of projections, all aimed at the anticipated event. There are ideas from politicians, funders, architects, the museum team. This creates for all involved a very concrete inner image of how the end product will or should look. But each person's image is ultimately never realised, even in a close approximation. This naturally leads to disappointments. In our work we start contrasting concrete pictures with these projections, even during the construction phase.

**RA** This is particularly important at a site where a new institution is being brought to life – that is, not where the existing institution is being altered, but where the building site is really the manifestation of an idea. In its process of becoming, the building under construction oscillates between an exterior from which it's not yet clearly distinguished and an interior that's not yet fully completed. This transition from the no-longer to the not-yet takes place in front of everyone's eyes. It's therefore the first, existential operation of the building: allowing itself to emerge in a process of spatial differentiation. The House of Austrian History needs to differentiate itself outwards and inwards, and in this process of differentiation it begins to demarcate itself increasingly from its surroundings.

At a historic site such as the Neue Burg, this is, of course, incredibly exciting. The Neue Burg is a labyrinth of corridors and rooms and courtyards and walls – of history. But it's also a labyrinth of responsibilities. So it's not easy to open up new rooms here that are dedicated to talking about history and thinking about history. The Neue Burg is a very vibrant, complex organism, to which a new organ is now being added. This is associated with painful processes, because it's a process of growth and change, and that naturally provokes fears.

**HDGÖ** Memory work is an important theme for you. What moved you to connect building-site documentation with memory work?

**RA** For us, the project *Dazwischen Geschichte* ("Between History") is part of a longer artistic research project into memory and forgetting. As human beings, we're

constantly dealing with remembering and forgetting, always surrounded by the remembered. The processes of recalling, discarding and storing impressions of which we are hardly conscious are always under way. We rely on our memory.

**LG** Memories are not just created by the existing memory work of the human brain but also through the memories that are distributed to our environment, to things, plants, pieces of architecture and landscapes. Objects, places, moments and rituals can transport memory beyond time and space and stimulate people to remember.

**RA** But this ritualised remembering needs a critical dimension. Just as memory is constructed, it updates itself with every new act of remembering and adds impressions and perspectives of the new remembering. This psychological process is also a physical one, as the neuroscientist and behavioural biologist Eric Kandel has been able to show with perfect clarity. It's really great that he of all people will open the House of Austrian History.

**LG** Our next building-site project is also about memorial and memory. We've been asked to document the renewal of the Austrian exhibition in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial. Again, this is a project with a very strong historical component and is also part of our artistic research into memory. In the Memorial it will also be about transitions and change, both in an architectural sense and in terms of Austria's image of itself.

**RA** For our work in the House of History, the processes of "Between", of transformation and growth, are important. When does this process of growth start?

What emotions does it produce? What memories does it form and what memories does it generate? How does the growth change and where does it stop? Because for the institution it never really stops. Even when the building site has disappeared, the rooms finally start to be used, and this usage itself once more changes the situation created by the building site.

**LG** For us, engaging artistically with building sites means permanent development. As artists, our form of memory and keeping-in-memory is the art, and in this project this has above all been photography, film and language. In her "Thinking Diary", Hannah Arendt made the following observation in 1969 on the connection between the art of language and thought: "Thought scoops its terms out of the visible in order to describe the invisible."<sup>1</sup> We let our films and photographs emerge in order to prompt remembering, reflecting and further thinking with the aid of visual language. In context with the building site and inspired by the processes of building, we remember the recent history and art history of Austria. We formulate this history in photos and videos. But, in our eyes, taking pictures represents a continuous modelling of reality. For example: we remember the construction of the Empire State Building in New York in the 1930s because of the sociologist and artist Lewis Hine and his socio-critical photographic documentation of the building site. He took that famous picture of the construction workers on the steel joist. This photo shapes our image of New York in the 1930s. His modelling of the reality of the times has become part of our memory of the past.

**HDGÖ** You also do research and art on the theme of "dizziness". Does that have a connection to the House of Austrian History?



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**RA** We've been working together since 1999 and are always confronted in our artistic work with the perspective of someone or other. In our works we always attempt to bring in more than one perspective to a subject. Because the space between the perspectives is a space of potential. It enables movement between clearly demarcated ways of seeing, attitudes and perspectives. But this space between ways of seeing also creates a certain vagueness or uncertainty that can be perceived as unpleasant.

**LG** This can be read in the context of our artistic research on dizziness as potential resource, which can be read about on our blog ([www.on-dizziness.org](http://www.on-dizziness.org)). Dizziness is an unpredictable movement that temporarily establishes an interim zone or a space of potential that permits synchronicity of inherently contradictory elements. In this sense, dizziness creates a "between" that favours the emergence of new possibilities.

**RA** At this point I'd like to mention the philosopher and sinologist François Jullien, whose ideas have supported our work for some years. In an edition of the French art magazine *Artpress 2* (46/2017) that Jullien curated, we have an item in which we show work including building-site photos. In his philosophy, Jullien tries to distance himself as far as possible from European thought and to immerse himself in Chinese thought – in other words, he completes a change of perspective to get a fresh view on the self.<sup>2</sup> But I'd like to discuss his book *The Silent Transformations*. In it, he compares phenomena such as the perception of seasons. In Europe, the "main" seasons – summer and winter – are firmly anchored: hot or cold. But in Chinese thought, the important seasons are spring and

autumn, because everything is in a constant state of change then. If you think of a tree in spring – it changes from minute to minute, but the changes are often so marginal that they evade our perception. And that also happens on the building site, because it too changes constantly, and these changes are often only marginal or only perceivable temporarily. But change is the *raison d'être* of a building site.

**LG** These zones of the "between", of transformation and transition interest us in all our works. We observe them on building sites, and that's what's so fascinating about them. Although the building site has something monumental, silent transformations are constantly taking place here. The building site is also a between zone, a zone of transition – that's what our project title refers to: *Between History*. So the result is this bridge from our dizziness research to our engagement with building sites.

**RA** I'd like to mention another paradox of a building site here. The building site is a busy, well-structured process that wants to put an end to itself. It's the manifestation of the desired change, but at the same time a cocoon in which the caterpillar becomes a butterfly and releases itself as soon as its task is complete. Afterwards it has disappeared and there's no more memory of it unless the process of building is perceived as worthy of remembering.

**HDGÖ** You work with two different media – photography and film. Are there different approaches adapted to these two media? How do they differ and what connects them?



**RA** Photography and film demand of us fundamentally different working methods. On the one hand we're working on the photo essay that addresses the change processes that are only temporarily visible. For the videos, we observe the building site with a little more detachment and with a view to the emerging institution – the House of Austrian History – and its function. We take the building site as a starting point, but juxtapose it with historical and art historical connections. For example, the video *Täter-in-Tat* refers very strongly to poetry after 1945 and at the same time to the transformation of the Austrian self-image away from the victim role to a role of responsible shared guilt. The video *Er-folg* contains a quote from the author Franz Innerhofer but with a punning feminist alteration:<sup>3</sup> “Success (*Erfolg*) has no dimensions. It's always just following (*folgen*). And he (*Er*).”

**HDGÖ** How do you develop your videos? Do you have specific approaches?

**LG** We come from experimental cinema. That's where our roots are, and you can feel that in our video work for the House of Austrian History. For each video we work out a specific subject area, and then we look for the right form. This means that we generate additional levels in the videos, an additional view, and we try to convey the building under construction to the public on different levels.



**RA** What connects the two works – the photo essay and the video series – is the location: the Neue Burg. As we've said, it's a historic site, which has really remained a fragment. After all, it was intended to become the *Kaiserforum*, the Emperor's Forum, but

because of the costs of the First World War, the emperor's plans were never implemented. So it was planned as a site of representation. Over the decades, the various Austrian forms of rule and government have felt represented here. In front of this backdrop, you're involuntarily reminded of how Austria has been governed. For us, Michel Foucault's *What is Critique* (1978) is important along with the question: “How do we want to be governed or how do we not want to be governed?” And also: What do we therefore have to remember?

The video works begin with the initial opening of the space and lead to the disassembly of the crane. All videos revolve around the building site, because if you want to make a building you have to build, but they always relate to questions of how we've been governed and how we don't want to be governed. The fifth video uses a quote from Pablo Neruda: “One minute of darkness will not make us blind.” The architect and resistance fighter Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky concludes her biography with that line.<sup>4</sup> She was also the first woman to complete an architecture degree in Austria.

**LG** The first video tells of the opening of the space, both in the architectural sense and as a space for imagination and projection, and relates to 1968. The second video has been given the voice of Emperor Franz Joseph as he talks about a new invention. For even though we reflect now on the reign of the Kaisers with such nostalgia, at the time people were extremely interested in progress. And at the same time there are links – including through the music – to Vienna as a city of film and Austria as a country of film. The third video connects building with *Tat*, doing and perpetrating. The fourth video is about the simplifying, seemingly logical mode of populism, using (paraphrased) quotes from Joseph Stalin and Hannah Arendt – about eggs.

**HDGÖ** About eggs?

**RA** Yes. “The Eggs Speak Up” That’s the title of a lecture by Hannah Arendt. When asked about the 1932/33 famine in Ukraine, Stalin is said to have answered with the proverb: “You can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs.” So he was presenting this famine as unavoidable collateral damage. And Hannah Arendt gave a lecture in response with the title *The Eggs Speak Up*. Today’s populism also creates absurd connections and disproportionate justifications and tries to generate a feigned logic. This must be critiqued.

**HDGÖ** I’m already excited about the video. How do you go about distributing your videos?

**RA** We want to put the videos on the internet, which of course also fits in as a theme with *Erinnerungskultur*, or culture of memory. But also for another reason: we’ve always worked in public space. Public space today is highly commercialised – but virtual public space is even more so. If we read an online newspaper, we don’t even notice any more that we’re bombarded with advertising from left, right and centre. That’s why we’re pleased to get the opportunity as part of this project to fill this highly commercialised space with art; with another type of aesthetic and content that maybe offers a little breathing space and gives something back. The House of Austrian History will therefore buy advertising space for the short art videos and designate the target groups for this “advertising”

while also being transparent about the criteria used in doing so. So the users will know what algorithm they fit into when they see the video.

**HDGÖ** So it’s another appeal to and confrontation with the viewer or user...

**RA** Exactly. Ultimately it also poses the question of what memory is on the internet. There’s a lot of discussion at the moment about the right to be forgotten. Because there’s an unbelievable amount of data saved on the internet, organised in a centralised or decentralised way, and that’s a big field of work – after all, currencies are now being generated from storage movements. But is a space for memory being created here? To what extent is cyberspace really a space of memory or simply storage space? What does this great archive in the internet mean? Who gets to control it? Who interprets it and how? Who governs it, and how do we want to see it governed? What will we even know how to remember?

**LG** That’s why it’s very important to use this kind of project to find a way into this virtual, public and commercial space. This is an experiment, and we believe that it’s necessary for our future to investigate these questions in many forms.

**HDGÖ** What phase of the building site in the House of Austrian History most strongly impressed or fascinated you? When you spend so much time on the building site and in the rooms, something connects you with it. Perhaps also processes that carry

you along with them emotionally. Is there a phase where you're particularly closely involved? Or do you function solely as observers with a documentary way of seeing?

**RA** You do develop a relationship to a building site. I always find it interesting when I'm on a building site for the first time. Everything is new, you haven't seen anything yet, and you have to anticipate. What will happen here? What will I turn my attention to now, and how will I carry out a repeat view of it? That was particularly exciting here.

**LG** Yes, here a modern exhibition space is being incorporated into an existing structure. When you look at how the workers are working: they work with hammers, chisels and spades, with tools known for centuries. We see an awful lot of hand craft on this building site – we hadn't experienced that before. When removing a wall, for example, the bricks aren't simply smashed and torn out, but checked and reused. The workers carry each brick away and lay it somewhere new. Another example: the rubble found under the parquet floor was removed, shovelled into crates, and then this material was examined and tested for harmful insects. Afterwards, this rubble was put back under the floor. The historic material remains – although transformed – in a conserved state.



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**HDGÖ** Is that something that distinguishes this building site from others?

**LG** Yes, definitely. Another theme of this building site is the so-called “breakthrough”. This is a theme that has stayed with us for a long time [*The “breakthrough” was the removal of the wall between the “Jünglingsplateau” area and the exhibition area in the*

*Garden Wing – editor*] It was almost a symbol of the building site. When the day arrived we were repeatedly on site at intervals of two to three hours. It was also amusing for us, because the workers found another wall behind the one they demolished. Also, two new walls had to be temporarily put up for dust-protection reasons. It certainly makes sense that in a building that represents so much history, there's a lot of hidden history. Even so much has been documented over the years, such as pipes and shafts, there's also a lot that hasn't been documented. And that's what's exciting: the unforeseeable.

**HDGÖ** To me the building site seems very organised.

**RA** I think a building site fundamentally needs a lot of organisation. But it's true; they work in a very considered way here. The logistics behind it is also impressive. They're working under great time pressure here, but with great awareness of the history and the site. But the site conceals unforeseen things.

**HDGÖ** What most impressed you about the building site? What stayed with you?



**RA** We've already spoken about the many different areas of responsibility in the Neue Burg. And there's a story about that: during the renovation for the House of Austrian History the floors in the assigned rooms were renovated. To do so, they had to open a door that separates two different areas of responsibility. So a date was coordinated at which the managers of these two areas would be present to open it. It turned out there

- 1 Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, Munich 2016, p. 728.
- 2 I believe that philosophy is faced now with the following task: to remove itself from its own history and to view itself anew based on traditions of thought other than those that it has itself developed. In contrast, this diversion through an outside will not only clarify its self-made pre-judgements, it will also move it towards returning to experience – to the “things themselves” – in order to think life, which philosophy famously avoids by shutting itself up in the academy. François Jullien, *Die stillen Wandlungen* (English translation of German version), cover text, Berlin 2010.
- 3 His book *Um die Wette leben* (1993) is prefaced with the following sentence: “Progress (*Fortschritt*) has no dimensions. It’s always striding (*Schreiten*) and forth (*fort*).”
- 4 Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, *Erinnerungen aus dem Widerstand. Das kämpferische Leben einer Architektin von 1938 bis 1945*, Vienna 2014.

was no existing key to this door. It hadn’t been opened for decades. So they had to find a carpenter who was able to carefully manipulate this old lock. But even then the door could only be opened a fraction because the room behind it was built slightly to one side. Doors that aren’t used become forgotten. They’re no longer perceived as an opportunity and disappear from consciousness. The threshold itself is a space of potential, a moment of transition that you have to use to refresh and confirm it; otherwise this intermediate space disappears. You have to cross thresholds to occupy rooms; otherwise they become lost to us. This applies both to political space, as Arendt writes, and to actual thresholds.

**LG** I think we have to remember doors and thresholds in a special way because they mean freedom, entering or leaving a room, separating or connecting rooms.

The interviewer was Irene Pitnauer-Wolfram.

