

## Performative Commemoration of Painful Pasts

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In latter decades it has become evident that wars, genocides, terrorist attacks, and other atrocities cannot simply be dismissed as events of the past. On the contrary, their memories continue to haunt contemporary societies. Many recent projects have attempted to commemorate these kinds of historical events in more effective ways, not least by promoting a higher degree of active participation among audiences. Such commemorative strategies can be captured by the term ‘performativity’, which was investigated by academics as well as artists and museum practitioners at the conference ‘Performative Commemoration of Painful Pasts’ in Stockholm.

The organizer, TANJA SCHULT (Stockholm), has a research project together with DIANA POPESCU (London) on performative Holocaust commemoration. Three years ago, they organized the conference ‘Holocaust Memory Revisited’, which resulted in the volume *„Revisiting Holocaust Representation in the Post-Witness Era“*.<sup>1</sup> Schult had noted that performative practices are frequently employed as commemorative strategies, not only when it comes to Holocaust commemoration. The new conference can thus be regarded as a further step ahead by looking at a wider context. Consequently, the presentations were characterized by a vast geographical range and constituted a melting pot of interdisciplinary approaches. Schult’s ambition was thus to widen our understanding of the function and meaning of performativity when it comes to commemoration of painful pasts.

The conference included practically oriented workshops and visits to the studio of artist KATARINA EISMANN (Stockholm) and a theatric play, *„Dreamlands“*, by the

Malmö Community Theatre – performed by and based on the experiences of young asylum seekers. The welcome reception of the conference was accompanied by a workshop led by artist GUY KÖNIGSTEIN. As a socializing event it set the tone for the conference. During the following days there were also special sessions called *„Why Performativity? Artist’s Experiences“*. The first one was led by Königstein as well, who put attention to the flexible and subjective character of collective memory, something that may be used – and abused – by state authorities. However, this provides opportunities for counter movements. Aspects of activism were underlined during the conference: commemoration interpreted not just as contemplation, but as a practice that can make a difference. The conference title can thus be slightly deceiving since it did not solely focus on the past, but also on the future. The other artistic workshops included a discussion between FRANÇOISE DUPRÉ (Birmingham) and MARIA SUNDSTRÖM (Umeå) over their performative art projects, dealing with memories and the legacy of World War II and the Holocaust, but also a session with MARIEKE BREYNE (Ghent), who discussed her site-specific performances in South Africa.

In the opening remarks of the conference, PETER GILLGREN (Stockholm) spoke over a former employee at Stockholm University: art historian and Holocaust refugee Felix Horb. In his last will Horb stated that he wanted a funeral where no one should speak. This brings Theodor W. Adorno’s famous dictum – ‘to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’ – to mind. It is possible that Horb wanted the commemoration at his funeral to be performed with other means than words. Gillgren thus wished to make the conference participants attentive to the unspoken, although not discouraging them from using words in their presentations. A similar aspect was examined later on by SRDJAN ATANASOVSKI (Belgrade), who argued that a commemorative performance in central Belgrade, 20 years after the Srebrenica massacre, managed to open up a space of silence as a platform of re-

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Popescu / Tanja Schult (eds.), *Revisiting Holocaust Representation in the Post-Witness Era*, Basingstoke 2015.

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flection through an intervention in the sonic fabric of the city. How to construct new spaces for reflection and thus develop alternative strategies of commemoration was a central question during the conference.

The first key note lecture was delivered by ANNIE COOMBES (London). Discussing the „Monument of the Women of South Africa“, she claimed that gender is a critical component in performative art projects. The monument, together with other projects, for example the use of so called ‘memory boxes’ in order to produce personal narratives, can thus be regarded as attempts to embody a new type of sensitivity that highlight the role of women in the South African liberation movement. Such performative strategies have opened up new space for political activism on the ground that may contribute to the envisioning of a new future beyond the legacy of apartheid and the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

How to invoke alternative futures was further discussed during the following session, alongside with the question of how to deal artistically with absence. CATERINA PREDA (Bucharest) touched upon such issues by looking at commemorative performances after the demise of the military dictatorships in Chile and Argentina. Presentations then followed by CLAUDIA MANDEL KATZ (Costa Rica) and FORTUNATA CALABRO (London), who both focused on the Guatemalan artist Regina José Galindo. By highlighting her artistic work, which often exposes the female body and makes use of public space, important issues of power and biopolitics were raised, but also the question of how to deal with the shock effects that might occur through re-enactments of past acts of violence.

The second session dealt in different ways with embodied experiences of walking and listening. MAAYAN SHELEFF (Jerusalem / Tel Aviv) reflected on the guided tour as a strategy of commemoration and on its potential of undermining nationalist narratives, calling for a more active construction of meaning that audiences may contribute to. TOVI FENSTER and RONI RACHEL SCHLESINGER (Tel Aviv) presented a performative project in which they have conducted an audio-visual walk in Jaffa, where

participants encounter both a Jewish and a Palestinian narrative, presented as equal, and get to reflect upon how such performances might promote Israeli-Palestinian recognition. Strategies of walking and listening have also been deployed by LUIS C. SOTELO-CASTRO (London) in a project that invites participants to walk and listen to a testimony of a youth with background of fighting in the Colombian armed conflict. In his presentation, Sotelo-Castro raised important questions on how commemoration practices are shaped by media technologies. The role of media was further underlined by SAMUEL MERRILL (Umeå) in his analysis of the 10th anniversary of the 7/7 bombings in London 2005. This commemorative event saw a mobilization of participants on social media that called on them to walk on the site of the bombings in order to perform an embodied act of remembrance. Such forms of medialization in connection to performative commemoration would, however, have deserved additional discussions during the conference.

In the second key note lecture, ANANDA BREED (London) discussed tensions between commemoration on the levels of state and individuals. In particular, she focused on the tour of the Kwibuka flame of remembrance that was performed during the 20th commemoration of the Rwandan genocide. In the following session, MALGOSIA WOSINSKA (Poznan) spoke about how commemorative strategies in Rwanda have been influenced by narratives and memory practices related to the Holocaust, something which has received critique since it might blur the real historical differences between the genocides. In an alternative way, the Rwandan commemoration could be situated in a post-colonial discourse. The importance of applying postcolonial perspectives was stressed by DE-VALERA N.Y.M. BOTCHWAY and MARGARET DELALI NUMEKEVOR (Cape Coast) in their presentation of a performative music and dance project that they produced and staged in order to come to terms with the painful past in Ghana. They also emphasized that one should not forget that almost all such areas have painful pasts, either with precolonial, colonial or postcolonial backgrounds. Just like Wosinska’s, this presentation under-

lined the importance for scholars to be sensitive to the local character of commemoration.

Local perspectives were further explored in the fifth session. CHRISTINE VIAL KAYSER (Paris / Poitiers / Warwick) made an attempt to assess the impact on audiences of artistic projects relating to traumas through examples from India (Shilpa Gupta) and China (Ai Weiwei). In her presentation, Kayser stressed the importance of distinguishing between how local and more distant international audiences are affected. NAOMI ROUX (Cape Town) focused on a local form of performative memorial practice when she examined the work of former young activists in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. By looking at their strategies she asked questions about the potential of performative acts when they fall outside of 'official' commemorative spaces. Fights for legitimacy of marginalized memories were also highlighted by OKSANA MOROZ (Moscow), who analyzed how Russian performance art can work effectively in contesting autocratic strategies.

In session six, TARA KOHN (Flagstaff) demonstrated how reframing of photographs, and thus the practice of re-vision, got incorporated into 20th century Jewish strategies of processing trauma and displacement. LARISSA ALLWORK (Leicester) did also discuss the use of photographs as performative strategies, paying special attention to what Marcel Duchamp has called the role of the spectator in the 'creative act'. In JAN BOROWICZ's (Warsaw) presentation, the spectator also stood at the centre. Commenting on the video *80064* – which several participants at the conference found provocative – Borowicz highlighted the role of passive bystanders and Polish memory of the Holocaust. The session was closed by Diana Popescu's paper on Ruth Beckermann's film installation, „The Missing Image“, in Vienna. Popescu emphasized the effects that may come from the dislocation of archival documentation to an unusual place. As this conference showed, spatial aspects are integral elements to take into account when examining commemorative practices. Vienna was then revisited in the last key note lecture by KAREN FROSTIG (Cambridge, MA/Waltham, MA). In „The Vienna Project“

she has developed a new kind of public art memorial that simultaneously, and through the use of interdisciplinary and interactive methods, represents multiple victim groups of the Holocaust.

The seventh session started with PHILIPPA HOBBS' (Johannesburg) presentation of tapestry weaving practices among women in South Africa, which have been little understood so far. The meanings of the tapestries are often encrypted, but, according to Hobbs, this ambiguity can be operationalized in order to oppose dominant narratives and strengthen voices that have been marginalized. NIKOLA BAKOVIC (Gießen) analyzed the caravan ritual „Train of Brotherhood and Unity“ in Slovenia and Serbia, as a performative medium for processing a traumatic past. As such, it received a metaphorical meaning, but also served a practical purpose by promoting trade agreements. That performative acts of commemoration might serve different purposes was demonstrated by MAGDALENA WALIGORSKA (Bremen), who examined collisions between German and Belarussian memory cultures by looking at the Belarussian Holocaust memorial in Trostenets.

Session eight saw a presentation of the Serbian educational program 'Museum of the Past for the Future' by MAŠA AVRAMOVIC (Belgrade). In particular, she discussed how young people can be made active participants in commemoration practices, but also how to avoid passivity toward prevailing memorials. The last paper was presented by ANCA DOCZI (London). Based on her own drama technique, 'Memodrome', that stages personal memories, Doczi reflected on how to open up new strategies of commemoration while also paying attention to challenges that emerge in our present global context, where a steady stream of traumatic events might not allow sufficient time for commemoration.

The integration of global, comparative perspectives into the research on commemoration of painful pasts was indeed characteristic of this conference. This was highlighted in the concluding session, where the key note speakers also stressed that memory is not static. Therefore, it is important to reflect on whose job it is to remember. They also pointed out

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that many questions were still unanswered, for example the role of scholars in commemoration practices. It was additionally remarked that issues of gender and ethnicity could have been further explored. That goes for the term performativity too. What it actually means could have been investigated more explicitly, but still, it was touched upon in so many different ways that the participants without doubt left the conference with a wider understanding of its function. In a world where an increasing number of painful pasts refuse to leave the present in peace, commemorative practices must be further discussed. Enhanced knowledge in these matters might contribute to a different future. For such a purpose, this conference provided a creative point of departure.

#### **Conference Overview:**

Welcome Note and Opening Remarks

Tanja Schult (Department of Culture and Aesthetics, Stockholm University)

Peter Gillgren (Department of Culture and Aesthetics, Stockholm University)

#### *Keynote Lecture I*

Annie Coombes (University of London): Performing the Past, Building the Future. Women's Collaborative Art Practices in South Africa

#### *Session 1. Performing the Body*

Caterina Preda (University of Bucharest): Performing the Memory of the Dictatorship in Chile and Argentina

Claudia Mandel Katz (University of Costa Rica): Violence, Memory and the Indigenous Body in Guatemala

Fortunata Calabro (London): Regina José Galindo. Who Can Erase the Traces?

#### *Session 2. Embodied Experiences – Walking and Listening*

Maayan Sheleff (Jerusalem/Tel Aviv): The Guided Tour

Tovi Fenster/Roni Rachel Schlesinger (Tel Aviv University): The Home as a Contact Zone. Performative Strategies and Practices in Promoting Israeli/Palestinian Recognition?

Samuel Merrill (Umeå University): Walking Together – Walking Alone. Mnemonic Performances and Social Media during the 10th Anniversary of 7/7

Luis C. Sotelo-Castro (University of East London): Performing Listening in Colombia's Post-Conflict Context

#### *Session 3. It sets my Teeth on Edge – Sonic Interventions as Performative Practices*

Srdjan Atanasovski (Institute of Musicology, Belgrade): Silence and Noise of Belgrade. Sonic Experiences of Srebrenica Commemoration Performance

#### *Why Performativity? Artist's Experiences, Part I*

Guy Königstein (Foundation of Elastic Commemoration)

#### *Key Note Lecture II*

Ananda Breed (University of East London): The Flame of Remembrance. Performances of Commemoration and Memory

#### *Session 4. Acknowledgement and Reconciliation through Performative Practices*

Malgosia Wosinska (University of Poznan): My Trauma. In my Gallery. Unofficial Strategies of Post-Genocide Identity Commemoration in Rwanda

De-Valera N.Y.M. Botchway/Margaret Delali Numekevor (University of Cape Coast): Audience Aesthetic Sensitivity and the Painful Past in Ghana. Tales from the Nkrumah's Vision of One Africa: 'The Reality'

#### *Session 5. The Importance of the Artist's Entanglement*

Christine Vial Kayser (Institut Catholique de Paris/Poitiers University and IESA/Warwick University): Assessing Artistic Investment with Traumatic Events. Case Studies from India and China

Naomi Roux (University of Cape Town): 'We are the Dying Hearts'. Political Activism and Performative Memorial Practices in South Africa

Oksana Moroz (Russian State University for the Humanities): Russian Art of Action. Fight

for Cultural Memory

*Session 6. Seeing and Seeing Again – Performing the (Archival) Photograph – to What End?*

Tara Kohn (Northern Arizona University): Translation and Re-Vision. On Seeing and Seeing Again

Larissa Allwork (University of Leicester): Reframing the Photograph. Confronting the Nazi Past through Post-Duchampian Artistic Performance Strategies

Jan Borowicz (University of Warsaw): The Perverse Gaze of the Polish Bystander of the Holocaust

Diana Popescu (University of London): 'The Missing Image' in Albertina Platz. Public Art as Historical Re-enactment and the Performance of Perpetrator Memory

*Why Performativity? Artists' Experiences. Part II*

Françoise Dupré (Birmingham School of Art-BCU): Practicing Memory through Social Practices – The Dora Project

Maria Sundström (Umeå): The Wiedergutmachung Project – Reconstructing the Past. A Pilgrimage through Family Heritage

*Key Note Lecture III*

Karen Frostig (Lesley University/Brandeis University): Performing the Archives. Art, History, and New Models of Memorialization

*Session 7. Processing Traumatic Pasts – Ritual Practices Revisited*

Philippa Hobbs (University of Johannesburg): The Warp as Bulwark. Tapestry Practices and Performance at Rorke's Drift

Nikola Bakovic (Justus-Liebig University): Railways of Reminiscence. 'Train of Brotherhood and Unity' as Exodus Re-enactment in Socialist Yugoslavia

Magdalena Waligorska (Bremen University): Staging the Forgotten Past in Public Space – The New Belarussian Holocaust Memorial in Trostenets

*Session 8. New Challenges Need New Prac-*

*tices*

Maša Avramovic (University of Belgrade): 'Museum of the Past for the Future' from Young People's Perspectives

Anca Doczi (University of East London): Memodrome. An Applied Drama Technique

*Why Performativity? Artists' Experiences. Part III*

Marieke Breynne (Ghent University): Masks, Puppets and Performative Objects in Relation to Trauma, Reconciliation and Performance in South Africa

*Concluding Session. How Effective Are Performative Strategies When it Comes to Commemorating Painful Pasts?*

Tagungsbericht *Performative Commemoration of Painful Pasts*. 14.06.2016–17.06.2016, Stockholm, in: H-Soz-Kult 13.08.2016.