

## Between Anaesthesia and Analgesia

### Transformational Aesthetics in Jakob Roepke's Compact Collages

Saadi Nikro

Man kann, was hier ausfällt, im Begriff der Aura zusammenfassen und sagen: was im Zeitalter der technischen Reproduzierbarkeit des Kunstwerks verkümmert, das ist seine Aura. Der Vorgang ist symptomatisch; seine Bedeutung weist über den Bereich der Kunst hinaus. Die Reproduktionstechnik, so ließe sich allgemein, formulieren, löst das Reproduzierte aus dem Bereich der Tradition ab. *Indem sie die Reproduktion vervielfältigt, setzt sie an die Stelle seines einmaligen Vorkommens sein massenweises.*

Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin  
1961a, 152f  
[My emphasis]

(One might subsume the eliminated element in the term »aura« and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the techniques of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. *By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence*).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin  
1999, 211-244  
[My emphasis]

This *pharmakon*, this »medicine«, this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence.

Jacques Derrida, *Plato's Pharmacy*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Derrida 1981,  
70. [Emphasis  
in the original]

## I

That the work of art has been led to abstract itself from the social circumstances of its production, giving itself up to forms of aesthetic judge-

ment, interactively implicates how the work itself transforms aesthetic taste. This interactive exchange between the transformative aspects of the work and how it comes to be aesthetically valued informs a basic exigency that European modernism ushered in and has carried ever since: once we define the significance of art in terms of how it constitutes and inventively foregrounds transformative ways of seeing and valuing, rather than its mimetic capacity to re-present that which lies outside its frame, then the work of art is going to have to more consistently make innovation its defining principle – innovation becoming the defining exigency of Modernism as such (as Baudelaire in 1863 had perceptively observed in his essay *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne*, 'The Painter of Modern Life'). Hence the many 'fleeting', 'transient', and no doubt 'contingent' (to use Baudelaire's famous terms) manifestos of the early twentieth-century, noisily announcing one artistic movement or another.

And yet as Walter Benjamin keenly suggested, the capacity of art to transform itself and the standards by which it is judged also relates to revolutionising the techniques it (re)productively employs. Such techniques, for Benjamin, cannot be restricted to questions of aesthetic judgement or taste, but have broader social and ideological implications – a central theme informing his famous essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. Concentrating his argument more on the development of film, particularly its technique of montage, Benjamin argued that technical innovation and its application to artistic practices brought about transformations in perception. He tended to view this positively, adapting Brecht's notion of *Verfremdungseffekt* or shock-effect to explain how the arts, primarily film, could induce a critical questioning of the cult employment of art (its use in political ritual), and potentially »mobilize the masses«.

We can say that this rendering strange of the familiar assumes, in the first instance, a specific passivity, a condition of numbness or insensibility, and employs an aesthetic mode to overcome this anaesthetic condition. In other words, it is significant that Benjamin employs an analeptic (transformative) notion of aesthetically mediated experience to combat an anaesthetic notion of aesthetically mediated experience – the poison is also constitutive of the remedy, the *pharmakon* works as both venom (numbness) and cure (awakening), as both cure and venom, as Derrida has well pointed out.

Over the years Benjamin's essay has attracted much scholarly fervour, and I want here to contrast a few of Benjamin's insights towards a consideration of the work of the Berlin artist Jakop Roepke, more specifically his collages. My interests, I have to say, are much more modest than Benjamin's, as I am not so much directly concerned with an ethical, moral, historical, ideological or auratic understanding of art, or else its practical value in bringing about critical awareness of social circumstance – themes that have by now been well canvassed in respect to Benjamin's oeuvre. To my mind Roepke's collages, obsessively circling around the interrelated themes of passivity and transformation, between anaesthesia and analepsia, do have an effect of inducing a creative response from the viewer, unsettling any passive reception. In fact I would even say that this *Verfremdungseffekt*, if I can use this term more closely to the sense of what Freud called *das Unheimliche*, both informs the structure and design of the collages, as well as reaches out to the viewer who is unwittingly constrained to articulate a creative response. Central to this is the capacity to employ narrative as a condition of transformative self-awareness, to gather and collect shards of experience through temporal association. Along the way I would also like to explore how Roepke's collages, the very technique or craft of putting them together, challenge Benjamin's thesis. To play with his words, the collages, we could say, substitute a unique existence for a plurality of copies – an existence that reverberates well into the *temporary* scene of their viewing.

## II

Roepke has been exhibiting his collages now for well over a decade, and has garnered local and international recognition, as his work shuffles around European galleries. At the critically acclaimed Barcelona International Art Fair (SWAB) in the Spring of 2008 he was awarded the prize Artist of the Fair. Some of the collages are included in the MacLaren collection of Surrealist and Symbolist art in London. Roepke's recent exhibition, November 1 to January 9 2009-2010 in Gallery Jarmuschek+Partner in Berlin, is titled *Musterhaus und Tintenbudel*. *Muster* suggests a sample or model, perhaps a simulacrum. The second term in the title is a neologism, suggesting a messy and slapdash use of ink. His sixth or seventh at Jar-



Fig. 1: Jan Roepke, Collage No. 233.

muschek since 2002, the exhibition, like those before it, brings together previous and new works.

The exhibition displays Roepke's minimalist, repetitive style – all the collages structure the interior confines of mostly singular rooms. With regular, contrasting colours at once vibrant though uniformly dull, the walls have varying floral, chequered, or lined patterns, setting them off from the floors. The three or four cut-out and assembled human figures remain constant, though given various poses and actions with which to carry, and perhaps work through, what seems like their confinement. These figures are hardly ever presented in repose, but always seem to be carrying out one action or another, though with an intention or aim that

is difficult to discern. They are occupiers of a space that seems always to be only potentially inhabitable, never quite realising the intimacy and familiarity that mostly defines a sense of being at home.

Almost miniature, almost the exact size of a CD casing, the collages carry no titles. Each collage is nominated by a consecutive number, forming a series that now reaches almost 1,000. Strangely enough the numbers sit oddly along the edge of each frame, as a sort of impossible title that references a particular collage so that it may be singularly identifiable, though also signifying an absence of reference with any identifiable logic. In looking for a title, and then finding only a number, viewers are left to wonder just why they looked for a title in the first place. Moreover, almost without exception, the collages are seldom exhibited as a consecutive series, but rather randomly (perhaps even mischievously on Roepke's part) selected, so that montage comes also to inform their public exposure. Perched on narrow strip-like shelves running along the walls, the randomness is sometimes belied by a spatial configuration of themes, as a particular collage on one wall may be placed so that it relates to another facing it on an opposite wall.

I like to call the collages *compact* not only because of their size, but also because the bits and pieces are flattened out to the surface, and hence better dissimulate their fragmentary characteristics. The term ›collage‹ comes from the French, and signifies *pasting*. It can also be traced to the Greek term for *gluing*. As a *pasting* it has a late etymology, from the early twentieth-century. As a modernist technique it is related to the work of the cubist painter Georges Braque, as well as Pablo Picasso. For both Braque and Picasso collage foregrounded a collision of different materials and their signifying capacities, thereby giving emphasis to how technique and association have more to do with the production of meaning than reference and representation. The collision is easier to discern when bits and pieces stick out from the surface of the work. Emphasising process rather than finished product, collage gave rise to a veritable explosion of experimentation in the twentieth-century. Arguably, one could suggest that installation is also a practice of collage, very often including the apparatus (camera, projector, hammer) itself within the parameters of what is exhibited as the work.

Roepke himself likes to call his work ›collage paintings‹, as very often he applies paint to either touch up a particular figure or give a colour

gloss to a wall or floor. The human figures themselves, while photocopied in black and white, are often cut up and reassembled, aligning a head or arm or leg so as to achieve the suggestion of a particular action or position. Scenery glimpsed through windows and sometimes doorways, depicting trees and buildings, are cut-outs from books, as are the many animal figures populating the collages. The paint is sometimes applied to achieve an effect, such as bubbles or water, or else shadows given off from the human and animal figures.

The collages are innovative, it seems to me, precisely because in maintaining the bits and pieces at the level of surface they manage to foreground concepts of fragmentation and collision, process and artifice. Collision of signifiers was a technique adapted by expressionists in literature, though the surrealists also employed incongruity to simulate an association of symptom. Both motifs can be found in Roepke's collages. But it is above all the compression to surface that gives them a semblance of compactness, a tension carried over into the scene of their viewing. Made up of fragments, the bits and pieces never seem to dissolve their particularity into the whole, but draw attention to the gaps and fissures they constitute in being placed within proximity. The minimalist, repetitive refrain structures a peculiar altercation between retreat and renewal, passivity and action, a numbing fall out of time and a ponderous effort to gather oneself through the transformative capacity of temporal association.

The collages are quite theatrical, presenting a stage and characterisation for which it is precisely the spatial contours of the rooms that inform the potential of significance, not merely the imaginary actions the characters are caught performing. Characterisation, I should add, is not limited to the human form, but extends into a semblance of the inhuman, but which nevertheless is also invested with emotional and imaginary value, albeit free from mythological or archetypal association. The many scenes staged by the collages – Roepke describes them as ›film stills‹ – encourage a viewing that must make up its own story, narrate a sequence of events in which the figures and movements can take their place, can be somehow made sense of. Symptomatically, they lead the viewer to indulge in personal memory, drawing out images and associations that mostly lie dormant as the tremor of past experience.

This is reflected in Roepke's keen interest in what people have to say about his work (which he often scribbles in a small pocket notebook), or more precisely his fascination with the associations viewers articulate – very often associations that have to do with childhood experiences. This fascination on the artist's part is quite admirable, suggesting as it does a certain openness in which he relates himself to not only how the collages are interactively perceived, an instance itself of the incompleteness woven into the collages, but also how he practices his art, the crafting of fragments. From the comments he has made I have a sense that the collages are put together without any preconceived idea or distinct motif, so that the arrangements carry a tenor of spontaneity. This process has a certain affinity with some aspects of Surrealism, especially the notion and practice of automatism. And yet with Roepke's collages there is never quite a suggestion of a privileged access to unconscious processes, free from symbolic conventions of understanding, but rather an active engagement of such processes, represented by the human characters suspended in movement.

Central to this is how the collages manage to draw attention to the gaps and fissures, the discontinuities and ruptures that potentially foreground the labour of temporal association itself. Thus to speak of Roepke's art is also to speak of an undeniable artifice, or craftiness – the craft of putting the collages together, in a way that the semblance of wholeness and unity, of completeness and equilibrium, of form itself, has always to be situated through a productive and affirmative exchange with fragmentation, with the clamour of force. The minimalist, repetitive style is employed as a compressed anaesthetic force barely containing murmuring impulses of transformation, of stories multiplying their potential sense and value.

### III

I have suggested that Roepke's collages substitute a unique existence for a plurality of copies. The technique of putting the collages together, of gathering different materials and locating them on a common surface, and hence of *producing* a unique existence, puts into an ordinary, transformative use various materials, figures, and images that are otherwise

infinitely *reproduced*. I emphasise these two related terms so as to better approach both the *Pharmakon* complex informing Benjamin's thesis and the way in which Roepke's collages can be read to call this complex to account. As I mentioned above, Benjamin regards technical innovations in art, the work of art *as* infinite reproduction (not the infinite reproduction of an original work of art), as having a capacity to stimulate (awaken) critical awareness of circumstance. And yet the term *reproduction* (*Reproduzierbarkeit*) itself suggests a structure, a static configuration, a numbing affect through repetitive exercises of habit and routine. It hardly suggests a departure, a beginning, a temporalisation, a movement or action *that understands itself*, locates itself, as a departure or beginning. It is in this sense that what Benjamin regarded as potentially having a *remedial* effect, the aesthetic employed as shock-effect, could equally have the opposite effect, work more as a *narcotic*.

In order to somehow break out of (or break into, break apart) this complex, I want to suggest, we need to attend to tension itself, and not its recuperation through a form of transcendence of contradictory terms. The intensive altercation of anaesthesia and analepsia informing the collages, particularly the transformative potential I want to foreground and hang on to, can well be approached through the analogy of driving an automobile. As most drivers know, the car is a great place for daydreams, where one experiences a peculiar circumstance of movement while remaining still. Beyond this corporal circumstance, while driving a car one is confronted with a series of images – billboards and advertising, or else people on the sidewalks – that mostly do not have any causal, temporal link between them. Consequently, it is easy to switch-off, suspending any effort to make sense. We can call this a *falling-out-of-time*, or else a *fall-into-time* (I think of the popular Arabic description of losing consciousness and self-awareness as a »fall-into-time«) and observe how this fall works like a narcotic, inducing a numbing affect, interiorised as a range of fractured, aberrant images drifting through one's thoughts. We can say that in falling-out-of-time, one falls out of an assumed capacity to employ narrative towards manufacturing an understanding of self, circumstance, and event, marking-off beginnings and endings, locating one's sense of self. In other words, to fall-out-of-time involves a fracturing of the capacity to position oneself as a point of reference.

The term *analepsia* is close to *analegein*, to collect, gather-up. A *gathering*, I think, presupposes a *scattering*. Both terms are porous, suggesting leaking and absorption, a thought that is always under threat of slipping away, its intensive force announcing itself as an aberrant trace, as a series of disconnected images. If narrative processes of re-collection enable a gathering of images, a gathering of self which, in the first instance, can be *retroactively* positioned as the originator of this process, then the possibility of fragmentation is not simply an alternative, but rather an integral aspect of the gathering itself, the realization that the gathering/scattering of self has always been on its way. The fall-out-of-time, the fall into fragmentation, constitutes the very potential for a gathering of self. It is here that we can better appreciate how the poison can itself be a remedy, the ailment converted into a currency of rehabilitation, though only by travelling through the fracturing force of anaesthesia.

This has some bearing on how one manages to make sense, or not make sense, of that which remains beyond temporal disclosure. One may always be constrained to miss an encounter with the real, hence its suspension from the order of narrative, but perhaps the real never misses an encounter with the self. As Lacan points out in respect to what he calls the »function of the *tuché*«, or what I have otherwise called the fall-into-time, »Is not the dream essentially, one might say, an act of homage to the missed reality – the reality that can no longer produce itself except by repeating itself endlessly, in some never attained *awakening*?«<sup>4</sup> The real, we can say, to play with Lacan's suggestions, is both *apprehended* and a source of *apprehension*, an apprehending of self and a circumstance of apprehension as fear or anxiety. To my mind it is precisely this interplay of numbness and fear of regeneration that structures the tension woven into Roepke's collages.

But I have gone ahead of myself, and would like to return more directly to the collages themselves. In producing a unique existence by interrupting processes of infinite reproduction does not mean that the collages, in Benjamin's terms, regain an auratic presence and manage to sustain links to a social tradition. It also doesn't mean that the collages elude any form of reproducibility. In fact a quick look through the internet demonstrates that they are well represented at different web sites of art dealers and exhibitors. Indeed, it wouldn't be difficult to download copies and further reproduce them, perhaps framing and hanging them

<sup>4</sup> Lacan 1978, 53-64. My emphasis.

up on a wall, as has been the fate for many of the works of the Modernist painters. Roepke himself has recently put together a catalogue of his collages, giving them over to the practice of reproducibility. To be sure, we can also remark how the culture industry and the commercialisation of art are only viable through techniques of reproducibility.

Much of the walls and floors in the collages are made of Origami paper, first used centuries ago for paper folding practices in Japan. Since the middle of the twentieth-century the practice has become popular around the world, while the paper itself has developed many designs of pattern and colour. The other paper Roepke uses is *Vorsatz*, or endpaper, the unwritten sheets that come before a title page or immediately before the back cover of a book, usually glued onto the inside of the covers. While endpaper these days is mostly blank, it used to have variously coloured woodblock or marbled patterns, and as such can still be acquired.

The cut-out male figures come from a 1920-30's book on yoga, and from a late nineteenth-century German book on self defence, which Roepke found some years ago in a derelict house. The book's title, *Lehrbuch der Methodischen Körperstählung*, invokes two central aspects of the sport of self defence, especially that of Jiu-jitsu. These are the work of making the body strong, and undertaking this work through method. It is interesting to consider how in the collages these photocopied and reproduced figures carry over a physical sense of action and movement that the art of self defence more practically involves.

Jiu-jitsu places an emphasis on strength as a practice of yielding, or at least flexibility in the way in which the body attunes itself to a practice of self defence, mostly without the use of weapons. This pliancy or flexibility allows the body to orient itself around a dynamic of movement.

<sup>5</sup> Lindsay / Kano (1888) Jiu-jitsu's »main principle is not to match strength with strength, but to gain victory by yielding to strength«. <sup>5</sup> One should not use strength to resist the force of an opponent's tactic, but rather be flexible enough to manoeuvre around the strength of an opponent. Jiu-jitsu is thus also known as »the spirit of the willow tree school« – by bending its branches the willow tree prevents itself from breaking, precisely because it yields to an adversarial force (wind, rain), thereby giving itself a chance to manoeuvre around this force.

In yielding to, rather than directly opposing, an opponent emphasis is given to skill rather than strength, the body learned and fashioned

through movement. This is possible in part by employing the space around one, co-ordinating movement through the gaps and fissures that lie between the adversaries and the physical constraints surrounding them. An interesting aspect of this is how the body is trained to employ space as a potential vehicle for its movement. In employing space as the stage for movement many of the manoeuvres are designed to shift an opponent from their centre of gravity, disturbing their equilibrium.

This sense of space as a constitutive, responsive vehicle sustaining actual and potential movement informs the fractured composition of the collages. Each figure is poised, ready to play the parts assigned by their multiple viewing, as time and space come to be invested with a capacity to become meaningful. The cut-out figures are never fixed with a semblance of equilibrium, with composure or repose, but seem as though they have been apprehended, caught on the run. As such they approach the semblance of movement informing the sculpted figures of Rodin, who, according to Rilke, almost always preferred that his models move around the room, rather than take up one pose or another.

#### IV

Inside or outside, the animal is part of the burrow-machine. The problem is not that of being free but of finding a way out, or even a way in, another side, a hallway, an adjacency.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Deleuze /  
Guattari 1986,  
7f

Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari,  
*Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*

Increasingly Roepke's characters have had to share, or perhaps protect, their confinement with other forms of life, bearing the insistent trace of an outside that often announces itself as a surreal intrusion – a mammoth charging in through a window (fig. 2), a pod of whales beaching themselves through a doorway (fig. 3), a large serpent gliding in through a crevice for what looks like a pat on the head, or else a Tyrannosaurus Rex indifferently wandering in and out of the room (fig. 4). This insistent intrusion serves to suggest how the inside can never be self-contained, can never be defined according to inward reflection, but must entertain

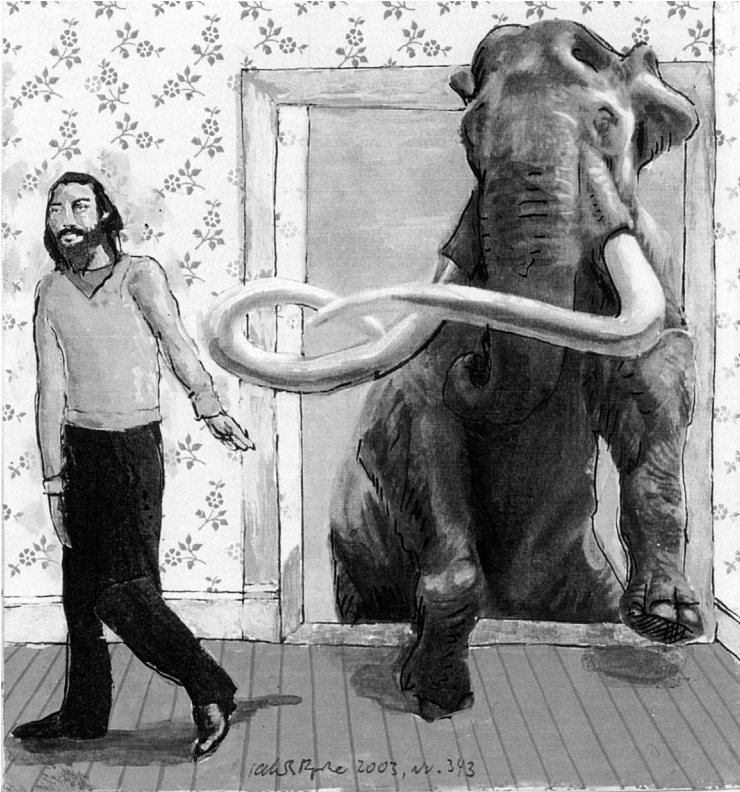


Fig. 2: Jan Roepke: Collage No. 343.

that which intrudes with all its apparent senselessness, and whose contingency affords an opportunity for reconfiguration.

There is an almost regular presence of aquatic animals in the collages, such as seals, sharks, and dolphins. There are also land animals: dinosaurs and snakes, leopards, elephants, and giraffes. Large frogs sometimes make an appearance, either quietly sitting on a wall or else sitting at the feet of one of the characters with what seems like a tender embrace of his leg. Interestingly, there are almost no images of domestic animals, such as dogs or cats. Birds and farm animals are depicted, and also images of butterflies. In one collage Donald Duck wraps his arm around one of the

characters, in what seems like an impossible dance (fig. 5). This inclusion of the famous cartoon character, juxtaposed against the many other animal images, induces the thought that it is almost impossible for us to regard Donald Duck as an »animal«, as his character is too much invested with human characteristics.

To a lesser degree we could say this about the other animal images as well, which precisely because of their imagined non-domesticity puts into relief the way in which domesticity »territorializes« (to use a central term of Deleuze and Guattari in their study of Kafka) how being human

Fig. 3: Jan Roepke: Collage No. 341.



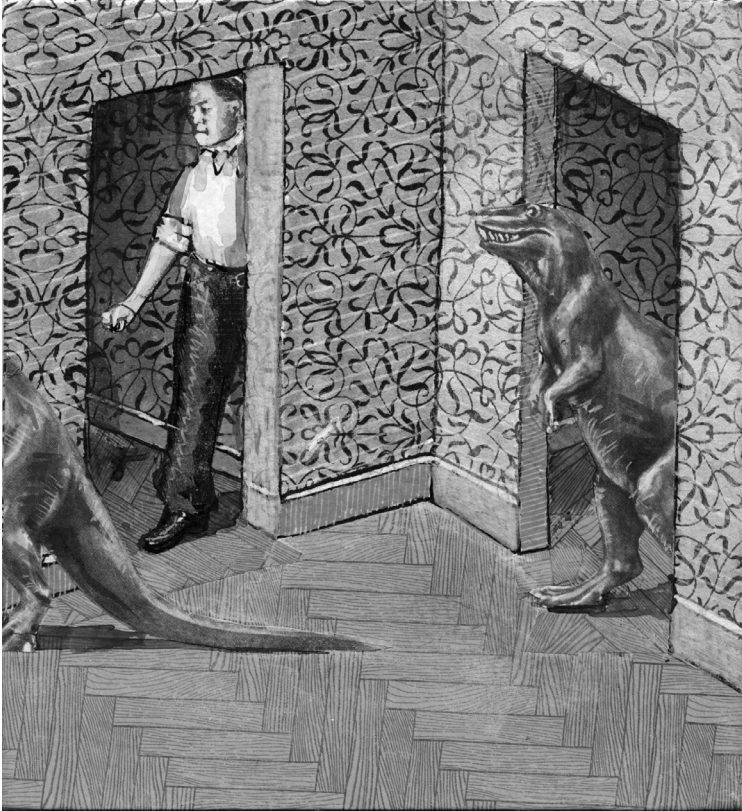


Fig. 4: Jan Roepke: Collage No. 604.

is imagined and played out as a site of social exchange. Thus Deleuze and Guattari's preferred term »becoming«, as opposed to the more static connotations carried by »being«: »becoming animal«, »becoming human«. Most of us learn domesticity lessons as children, through the many mediums that depict animals with human qualities. Such images work as assemblages of territorialization precisely by essentialising those qualities that are to be learned if one is to become human, as one learns how to channel and manage desire according to predominant forms of sexual and gender identification.

We can venture a reading of Roepke's collages to suggest that they turn this around into a potential of what Deleuze and Guattari call »de-

territorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs«, in a manner similar to what they enthusiastically say about Kafka, whose »animals never refer to a mythology or to archetypes but correspond solely to new levels, zones of liberated intensities where contents free themselves from their forms as well as from their expressions, from the signifier that formalized them. There is no longer anything but movements, vibrations, thresholds...«.<sup>7</sup> How else are we to appreciate Roepke's seemingly domesticated frog (which doesn't quite look as though it is about to turn into a prince charming; fig. 6) if not as a »nonsignifying sign«, whereby a dog would be more conventionally chosen as a metonym for processes of domestication, for the homeliness of home. Again and again, Roepke's collages

<sup>7</sup> Deleuze /  
Guattari 1986,  
13

Fig. 5: Jan Roepke: Collage No. 589.





Fig. 6: Jan Roepke: Collage No. 261.

include images of animals shorn of their domestic and archetypal associations – the only animal-image that can partake in a form of social interaction (dancing, in this case) is Donald Duck (collage 589; fig. 5).

It is significant that the character embraced by Donald Duck recoils in horror against the expression of domestication, whereby many of the other animals, including the oversized frog, are almost fondly entertained and accepted. The surreal intrusions are sudden, perplexing in their insistence for some form of acknowledgement, inducing the characters to respond in one way or another. The intrusions play a part in keeping

the characters in motion, whose self-awareness is to be acted out, rather than merely contemplated. As inside turns out and outside in there can be no final escape from whatever bothers these characters, no definitive exchange between one state of being and another, but only a constant departure from or back to the self – the self that can never finally elude, definitively overcome, the constraints of its Othering, but must work through such complexes as potential sites for transformation.

Deleuze and Guattari are keen to demonstrate the political dimension of Kafka's work, against an interpretive propensity to aestheticise and romanticise. And yet this is somewhat blunted by their underestimation of gender, which cannot be adequately thought apart from assemblages of (de)territorialisation in Kafka's work. In the collages the characters are all men, suggesting a site of homo-social interaction. This confinement of domestic anxiety to the orbit of masculine desire betrays a feminine body/imaginary conspicuous by its absence, and could be regarded as the flip side of an influential textual terrain that constitutes the feminine as precisely a site of domestic confinement – Richardson's *Pamela: Or Virtue Rewarded*, being an early, eighteenth-century example.

The interior (private domain) has tended to constitute a site of feminisation, whereby the exterior (public domain) is where the masculine realises itself, answers its universal, ethical calling, as Hegel would have said. To be sure these days gender theory has moved beyond positing sex and gender along the lines of a binary opposition between inside and outside, private and public, though also recognising how such oppositions (we can include other basic binary assemblages such as reason/passion, mind/body, culture/nature – all of which carry gender implications) maintain their constitutive materiality. We need here to recall Lacan's basic point about desire, concerning which it works as a vehicle for the symbolic maintenance of identification. I subjectively learn to identify myself as boy or girl when the big Other objectively desires me as boy or girl, giving myself up to this gathering of my self. Or as Lacan says: »Man's desire is the desire of the Other«<sup>8</sup> To some extent the collages are caught up with such assemblages of gendered and sexualised gathering, most notably by the glaring absence, the barely concealed presence, of the feminine. I would suggest that this absence/presence is written over many of the walls in the collages – the garish wallpaper constituting a retrospective peek at the domestic scene of the 1950s and 60s.

<sup>8</sup> Lacan 1978, 235

And yet to approach an understanding of selfhood as a site of reconfiguration is perhaps one of the larger stories that can be told about the collages (though this is not to deny the many stories that can be told for each one). Exchange between outside and inside, within and beyond these rooms, or else between the collages and their viewing, constitutes the potential of a temporal site where selfhood undertakes continual flight not from one state of Being to another, but rather from any form of Being itself. Following Gianni Vattimo's approach to Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche, we can say that this exchange is better defined as a *Verwindung* (an undergoing), rather than an *Überwindung* (overcoming), so there can never be a pure form of deterritorialisation uncompromised by planes of (re)territorialisation, to again adapt Deleuze and Guattari's terms. In respect to metaphysics, Vattimo writes: »...the fact that we speak from within this framework indicates that what is at stake is not so much an

<sup>9</sup>Vattimo 1988, 52 *Überwindung* as a *Verwindung* of metaphysics<sup>9</sup>. In the very immobility of Roepke's cut-out figures there can be no final movement from inside to outside, from one state of Being to another, but rather a »healing« (Vattimo's term) that *undergoes*, rather than *overcomes*.

In his *The Poetics of Space*, in the chapter ›The Dialectics of Outside and Inside‹, Gaston Bachelard offers us an image of a spiral to somehow suggest this movement: »The spiraled being who, from outside, appears to be a well-invested center, will never reach his center. The being of man is an unsettled being which all expression unsettles. In the reign of the imagination, an expression is hardly *proposed*, before being needs another expression, before it must be the being of another expression«.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Bachelard 1994, 214

## V

*Wouldn't it be simpler if we just put the stateroom in the trunk.*  
Groucho Marx, *A Night at the Opera*.

Intrusions from the outside have the effect of giving further relief to the interior, whose sparseness, or unhomeliness, give them a feel of hotel rooms – the characters just never seem to occupy the interior space as though they were at home. The human figures – sometimes solitary, sometimes a couple, less frequently a crowd of four or five – never look as

though they inhabit their space with any intimacy. Uniformly dressed in black trousers and white, overly starched shirts, the austere male figures betray a tension between themselves and the space around them. Or we could say that the sparseness of the rooms suggest a temporary situation in which desire for the world outside sifts through the tremors of anxiety – a desire for, though fear of, potential regeneration.

One of Roepke's earlier collages, from 2003, has the human character in flight towards the window, bearing on his back the wings of a butterfly (this image is repeated in at least one other collage, though with another of the human characters), suggesting a metamorphosis and release from the interior confines (fig. 7). The image, like Roepke's work gener-

Fig. 7: Jan Roepke: Collage No. 315.



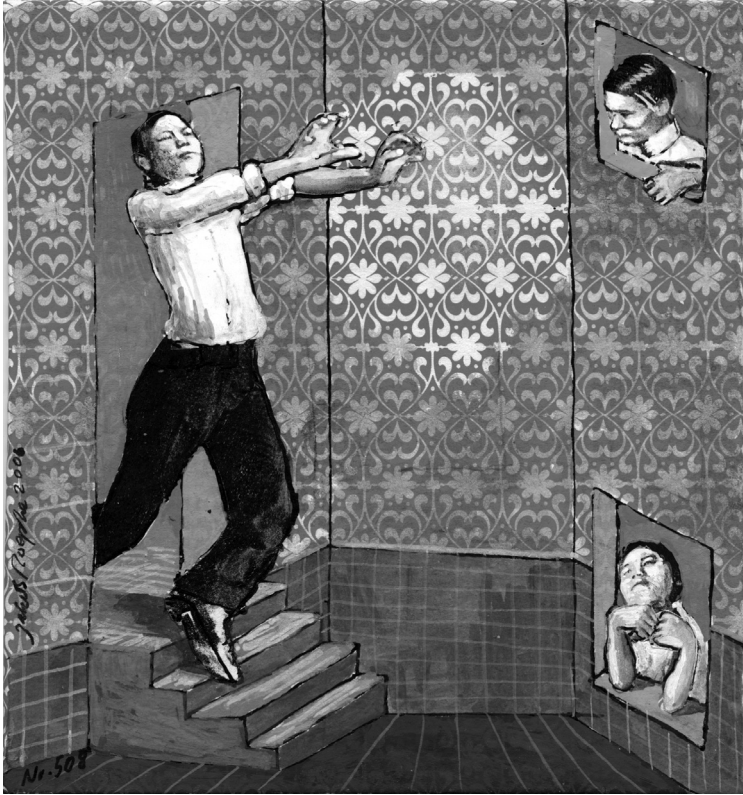


Fig. 8: Jan Roepke: Collage No. 508.

ally, simulates the theme of tension between outside and inside, retreat and renewal, obsession and consummation, as well as the more obvious theme of transfiguration.

A former exhibition of Roepke's collages in 2009 is titled *Kammerwunder und Jammerkunde*. Each of these terms is a neologism, made up of two words. *Kammer* signifies chamber or house, and has about it a sense of enclosure. It is used for a professional association or the upper or lower house of a parliament. In many of the older Berlin apartment houses it refers to a very small room connected to the kitchen, where dried foods are stored, like a pantry. *Wunder* is close to the English wonder, though with a sense of the extraordinary, as in a

miracle. *Wunderkammer* signifies curiosity cabinet, also associated with museum or art gallery. *Jammer* carries a sense of misery or wretchedness, while *kunde* means news or proclamation, as well as bearing witness. The neologisms are quite appropriate, capturing the mix of wretchedness, regeneration, and wonder performed in the rooms.

One of the images I like best in Kafka's *The Trial* is when Joseph K first visits the court chambers and discovers that the ceiling is so low that everyone has to walk around stooped with a bent head, not unlike the way in which Groucho Marx tends to deport his cinematic persona. The scene, as so often with Kafka, is a mix of tragi-comedy – courts are theatres for absolute seriousness, the seriousness of the law and its tragic consequences for desire, although here the chamber comes across as a circus. In his most expressionist moments Kafka renders the homeliness of space unhomely, housing certain terrors that usually remain concealed through familiarity and domesticity. Kafka's surrealist strategy is not so much to simulate symptoms, to simply reveal an underlying, hidden dynamic, as though 'the unconscious' could be depicted without the intrusion of signification, but to un-conceal, to transform the familiar and habitual into a site of imponderable wonder. In this sense the most significant actions in his novels often happen in doorways and halls, in passageways and points of entry/exit. His rooms are self-contained though always opening onto other rooms, small cubicle like enclosures, or kammers, bearing a semblance of forsaken desire, of desire channelled into the domesticating vigour of the law and bureaucratic procedure.

In much the same way the rooms presented in Roepke's collages very often include small aperture-like openings onto other rooms, barely glimpsed as a piece of wall or floor. In one collage a human character comes through a doorway, his arms stretched out in front of him, ready to stumble on the few steps leading down into a small kammer-like cubicle. On the opposite wall are two small, square windows, each of which frames the head and shoulders of other characters (fig. 8). Another collage presents a character stumbling into the room from a window, on his way out through another, with what appears like ferny christmas trees growing out of his body. The effect is all the more startling when we consider how utterly formal the men look in their black slacks and starched shirts, as though they had just come home from a long day in some bureaucratic office (fig. 9).



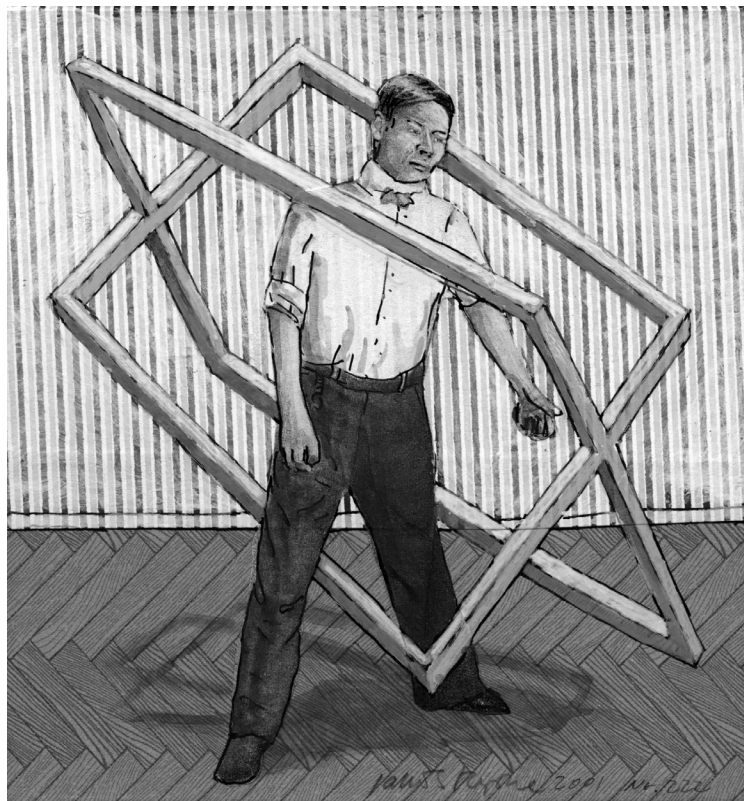
Fig. 9: Jan Roepke: Collage N0. 707.

The puzzling effect is also borne by bizarre geometrical shapes, often carried by the human figures as a sort of entanglement, or a restrictive burden. Like the numbers that designate each collage, these geometric shapes suggest an unmistakable will to logic, to the straight jacket of form, though always in tension with a certain force that irretrievably eludes, let us also say provokes, sense and understanding. It is interesting here to note that these geometrical shapes and their entwined characters are confined to rooms with no apertures or openings to the outside or other rooms, no windows or doorways. Such collages with geometrical shapes and self-enclosed rooms have a certain frequency, spanning no 21 from 1996 and no 630 from 2007, as well as nos 192, 194, 222, 224,

268, 626, 627, 629. It is as though the will to logic can only be experienced as suffocation, thwarting a capacity to imaginatively entertain the distending force of alterity (fig. 10 / fig. 11). Besides these geometrical contraptions there are also bubble-like images employed as assemblages of constraint (a good example of which can be found in collage 582, from 2007; fig. 12).

This play with logic rebounds on the capacity to stand before and view Roepke's work, interrupting the gaze of a viewer puzzling over potential meaning. As the very force or emotional investment of desire eludes any form of symbolic relief, the capacity to see, to locate understanding, and to initiate value judgement is shifted from a plane of reference to a plane

Fig. 10: Jan Roepke: Collage No. 222.



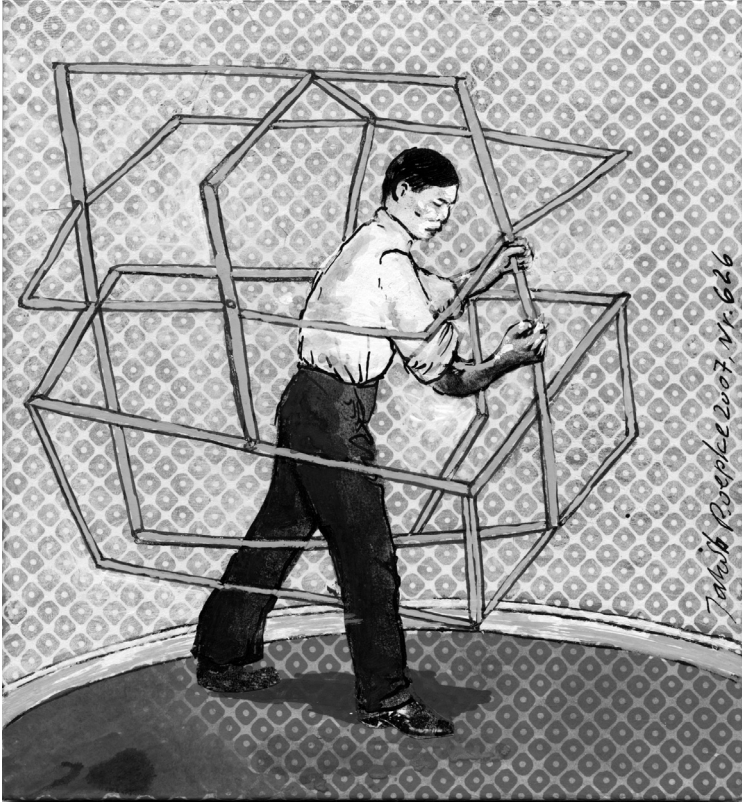


Fig. 11: Jan Roepke: Collage No. 626.

of association. The real is consequently divested of its apparent obviousness, foregrounded as a convention, whose potential significance bears an entanglement with particular ways of seeing, valuing, and imagining. As with Kafka, in Roepke's collages it is not a question of *knowing* the significance of action and circumstance, of *knowing* how law and bureaucracy domesticate desire, but rather a matter of *telling*, of *Kunde*, of articulating a story that can be told and heard, a story that is just as much symptomatic as it is retroactively constitutive.

To my mind, the tension animating Roepke's collages does not lie between, and hence define, a set of oppositions – interior/exterior, rational/

irrational, conscious/unconscious, surface/depth, force/form, animal/human, original/copy, reality/illusion, reference/association. The tension rather works as a force of unconcealment, drawing attention to the way in which sense and value are produced, technically manufactured. This is especially the case when we consider the very material and practice by which the collages are put together. So that rather than try to explain or interpret the tension, it may well be more productive to gauge its efficiency, its energy, its very practice as a craft, an art, or perhaps its artifice. So that between force and form lies not a mediating tension, but rather a technique whose repetitive practice stages tension as itself an art.

Fig. 12: Jan Roepke: Collage No. 582.



We could say, then, that the collages simulate tension, disguise it, dress it up, concentrate it as an intensive field of productive force. Tension, here, cannot be transcended or exhaustively relieved, but is employed to disrupt any concept of an ahistorical form (whether mythological or archetypal). This is to say that any conceptual form of understanding by necessity implicates blindness to tensions underlying, and potentially disrupting, its stake in order – tensions that have the potential to draw historical understanding back to the realms of finitude.

## VI

Das wahre Bild der Vergangenheit huscht vorbei. Nur als Bild, das auf Nimmerwiedersehen im Augenblick seiner Erkennbarkeit eben aufblitzt, ist die Vergangenheit festzuhalten.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin  
1961b, 270

Walter Benjamin, ›Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen‹<sup>11</sup>

(The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin  
1999b

...back to the realms of finitude – here, we are not talking about a rupture that escapes time, that can only be understood synchronously, or structurally. Indeed, it has to be said that through the artifice of assembly the collages insist on the potential of temporal association, inducing their viewing to inventively come up with some sort of story. The story takes up fragments that are more like leftovers, remainders that elude assimilation into the larger picture, into the various categories defining either a smooth passage of time or the discontinuity of certain periods. The temporal associations of these fragments are always potential, never quite actual, having to nurse the many symptomatic mis-fits crowding the gaps and silences. The telling of a story is constrained to approach the fragments retroactively, so that the remainders work as reminders, their significance extending into a future that has always yet to resolve the many contingencies that come to inform both itself and that which eventually comes to be viewed as past. In a certain sense the collages set a trap: as viewers, every *time* we tell a story, we tell a story of fractured *time*, so that we place our selves within reach of a fragmented past beco-

ming retroactively present, and simultaneously reassert the formal value of temporal association.

We can extend a notion of *puzzlement* to better conceptualise this temporal juncture of fracture and fragmentation, and suggest some associated connotations. Etymologically, *puzzlement* carries a suggestion of fragmentation, as when we think of a *jigsaw puzzle*, which relates to a merry dance (jig), as well as the cutting up of a whole (jigsaw). To be puzzled is to be confronted with an intractable *rupture* or *gap* (Freud's *Unheimliches*) that does not immediately lend itself to the horizon of common understanding, or else does not respond to the symbolic networks by which its ideal significance gains sense and value. To be puzzled is to become *bewildered*, or led astray, beyond the confines of domestication. Beyond the labour of imaginary identification or symbolic appropriation *puzzlement* entails an experience of trauma, of an implacable *dis-integration* that refuses to give itself up to its *gathering*.

The etymologically related term *bewilderment* signifies a seemingly untamed region where convention suddenly loses its capacity to maintain a semblance of composure and harmony. No doubt much has been invested in positioning notions of *bewilderment* – »the unknown«, »nature«, »the wild« – with reproductive moralising values of regeneration, especially when we think of Rousseau and the romantics. But I am thinking more of *bewilderment* as a puzzling experience related more to an actual/potential fragmentation, whereby the capacity to domesticate that which is encountered as a seemingly senseless stammer of *disassociation* reaches a sort of limit, where the fiction of a pre-discursive basis is confronted with the labour of its narrative associations.

This is to say that the capacity of selfhood to maintain equilibrium is suddenly, traumatically confronted with the force of fragmentation, with those gaps and fractures that indeed render selfhood possible. So it is important to keep in view that equilibrium is not maintained by eluding fragmentation, but is rather possible only by sifting the self through fragmentation – fragmentation being a constitutive aspect of equilibrium as such. So that rather than posit, say, what is called ›the unconscious‹ as an essential force that must be tamed through reason and conscious reflection, it would be more accurate to say that equilibrium – maintaining a gathering of oneself, of not falling apart – is only possible by developing a capacity to process fragmentation, is only possible by developing

an unconsciousness. Here, we have returned to the collages, whose very technique of cutting and pasting somehow simulates this processing of fragmentation.

It seems to me that we can relate the experience of standing before a work of art in a gallery as an example of this sense of puzzlement. For most of us, in that initial moment when we stand before and view of a work of art, we experience some discomfort and disorientation, at least before we can manage to decide something about the work (the use of an unexpected colour, perhaps an unusual brushstroke, size and positioning of the frame, etc). This discomfort relates to our initial inability to assert our capacity to assimilate that which eludes the terms of understanding. This bewilderment is only exacerbated when the work of art before us is structured in a way that representation itself is somehow thematised or foregrounded, so that one is constrained to consider the act of viewing as a constitutive aspect of the work itself. As I have been trying to suggest, Roepke's collages are all the more radical because they not only foreground this, by now, conventional aspect of any contemporary work of art, but because by suspending time as an instance of fracture they induce an interactive awareness of the value in (re)collecting fragments through the telling of stories – the telling and hearing of storytelling being a primary vehicle for the maintenance of social exchange.

## VII

...Berlin – and with it all of this memorial-crazed Germany – is opting for invisibility. The more monuments there are, the more the past becomes invisible, and the easier it is to forget: redemption, thus, through forgetting.

Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts*.

Can we say that this emphasis on the telling of stories as a site of transformation is a *symptomatic* engagement of recent German, and especially Berlin, history? Or more specifically, an elusive engagement of a particular post-Wall Berlin experience of coming to terms with rupture and fragmentation, if we are to appreciate how the collapse of the Wall brought about not only unification (rapture) but also unanticipated forms of dis-

integration (rupture)? For it seems peculiar that Roepke's obsession with miniature and repetition should be conceived in an environment when the city itself became something like a huge canvass devoted to the patching up of fragmentation, re-collecting the past through the constitutive framework of present unification. This public outlook and exposure, expressed by the monument, can be contrasted to the more introverted atmosphere of the collages, dominated as they are by the often grotesquely coloured *walls* that structure the rooms. Beyond the doubling of unification and fracture (rapture and rupture), the minimalist, repetitive style of the collages suggest that transformation cannot take refuge in symbolic identification, but remains contingent on new and emerging scenarios, maintaining the present as an open site of criss-crossing stories.

On a grander scale, the theme of reconfiguration is captured by the wrapping of the Reichstag for fourteen days in June 1995. A monumental feat of engineering, the wrapping had been artistically imagined and planned for well over two decades. Built in 1894, the Reichstag had been almost destroyed on a number of occasions, but whose basic structure managed to endure. The artists, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, used something like 100,000 square metres of polypropylene fabric to drape the building, with rope of the same material to support the wrapping. As stone was transformed into an undulating surface, it may have seemed as though something inside was struggling to come out, suggesting a metamorphosis and exposure to the outside world. The artists seem to have taken the transfiguring historical significance of the Reichstag and reconfigured ephemerality as public spectacle.

Allegorically, perhaps, we can say that the wrapping transformed an exterior surface into a vanishing interiority, only to again be exposed to the outside – the wrapping transformed the Reichstag into something *that could be revealed*, rendering a static object available for emergent, subjectifying orientations of anticipation, of potential change and renewal. In his fascinating book on the Baroque, Heinrich Wölfflin elaborates on an aesthetic he calls »painterly style« or »painterly disorder«, which he defines as »an illusion of movement«, or »the dissolution of the regular«. Baroque painterly style, he writes, »does not convey *a state* of present happiness, but a feeling of anticipation, of something yet to come, of dissatisfaction and restlessness rather than fulfilment. We have no sense of release, but rather of having been drawn into the tension of

<sup>13</sup> Wölfflin 1964, 38 [My emphasis] an emotional condition«. <sup>13</sup> This relates to an aesthetic in which what is revealed is always »partially hidden«, so that »the effect is an impression of transitoriness«.

In an essay on the wrapping of the Reichstag, Huyssen observes its ephemeral characteristics, towards a sense of an »anti-monumentalism« that foregrounds how the present retroactively renders past events meaningful, and how this may well serve to maintain a sense of the past as an open terrain of dialogue. As he says about the wrapping: »The transitoriness of the event itself – the artists refused to prolong the show upon popular demand – was such that it highlighted the temporality and historicity of built space, the tenuous relationship between remembering and forgetting«. <sup>14</sup> For Huyssen, however this tenuous relationship is conceived, however it may be fashioned into particular ways of rendering past events past, there is always more that can said, more that can be potentially heard. This is to say that memory »is always more than the prison house of the past«.

<sup>15</sup> See [www.stolpersteine.com](http://www.stolpersteine.com) When walking though my neighbourhood in Mitte I come across what at first sight appear as strange small brass plates set into the stone and concrete footpaths. No more than perhaps 6 centimetres square, the brass plates – called *Stolpersteine*<sup>15</sup>, or stumbling blocks – record the names, ages, and deportation destination of German Jews, Sinti and Romani people, members of the Resistance during World War II, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christians in opposition to the Nazis or the disabled who had lived in adjacent buildings. It was the Cologne based artist Gunter Demnig who began in 1995 to install the first Stolpersteine, without a permit, in Cologne and then in the Kreuzberg neighbourhood of Berlin. Meanwhile the list of cities that have stolpersteine now extends to several countries and hundreds of cities and towns.

In standing over the plates and reading their inscriptions I cannot help wondering about the lives of these people, in respect to the locality of their residence. Suddenly, one is faced not with the fate of an anonymous collectivity – a collective trauma subdued through or conflated with its symbolic representation – but rather with the possibility of learning how a particular person or family lived before and through this collective fate. In other words, the person or family is not only defined by collective terms of reference, but also in respect to their particularity, to the place where they lived, the streets they walked through, the parks

they visited. The plates, of course, do not tell such stories, but somehow they encompass the potential of acquaintance with lived memory.

Where monuments tend to assert the pastness of the past, miniature and repetition suggest a past that is yet to be passed, and that can still in many ways be passed on, as a range of stories informing historical understanding. Roepke's collages, to be sure, are not designed to directly address such dilemmas, but I can't help thinking that the way in which they suspend the flow of time engages a viewing that must attend to temporal association through the gaps and silences in which trauma clamours for some sort of recognition, precisely through the telling and hearing of stories. Between anaesthesia and analepsia, between the numbing fall-into-time and an emergent sense of potential transformation, the gaps and fissures woven into the collages simulate the restless stammer of temporal (dis)association.

## Bibliography

- Bachelard, Gaston: *The Poetics of Space. The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*. Translated by Maria Jolas. Boston 1994.
- Benjamin, Walter: Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit. In: Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminationen*. Frankfurt a. M. 1961, 136-169. [Benjamin 1961a]
- Benjamin, Walter: Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen. In: Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminationen*. Frankfurt a. M. 1961, 269-281. [Benjamin 1961b]
- Benjamin, Walter: The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. In: Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminations*. Translated by Harry Zorn. London 1999, 211-244. [Benjamin 1999a]
- Benjamin, Walter: Theses On the Philosophy of History. In: Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminations*. Translated by Harry Zorn. London 1999, 255-266. [Benjamin 1999b]
- Deleuze, Gilles / Guattari, Félix: *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature*. Translated by Dana Polan. Minneapolis 1986.
- Derrida, Jacques: *Dissemination*. Translated by Barbara Johnson. Chicago 1981.

- Huyssen, Andreas: *Present Pasts. Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford 2003.
- Lindsay, Rev. T. / Kano, J.: *Jiu-jutsu. The Old Samurai Art of Fighting Without Weapons* (First published 1888). <http://judoinfo.com/kano6.htm> [24.04.10]
- Lacan, Jacques: Tché and Automaton. In: *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York 1978, 53-64.
- Vattimo, Gianni: *The End of Modernity. Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture*. Translated by Jon R. Snyder. London 1988.
- Wölfflin, Heinrich: *Renaissance and Baroque*. Translated by Katherin Simon. London 1964.