

AN OBJECT, NOTHING MORE

■ Is Berlin's Holocaust memorial nothing but a battle of materials?

An interview with Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock, who propose a bus line to remember.

The decision in the competition to design Berlin's Holocaust memorial is being received differently. For some, Simon Ungers' steel girder minimalism creates an ideal empty space to commemorate the victims. On the other hand, such mammoth memorials no longer seem contemporary and also seem to overshoot the mark. Instead of symbols, information and contexts are required, especially in the case of the mass murder of the Jews. Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock already realized a memorial in the Bavarian Quarter of Berlin in June 1993, which confronts the viewer more with traces of the past in the visualization of facts than with abstract objects. They have placed small pictographic signs plus documentation texts in various places, which refer, for example, with the image of an office stamp, to the decree that during the Nazi period Jewish civil servants were dismissed from the civil service. An active museum in public space: for the Holocaust memorial, they had planned a bus transfer on the site that would lead to the concentration camps and a Berlin trip to the sites of Jewish life.

taz: Your proposal to set up a bus service instead of the memorial made it to the final round of the competition. Doesn't that surprise you?

Renata Stih: I have to say that the discussion that preceded the call for proposals provoked us. It was supposed to be another state monument, bigger and more pompous than the Neue Wache. In addition, there was the presumptuous tone of the initiative group, which acts as if it could represent an entire country and instrumentalize the people. This was to be countered by a counterpoint to the discussion. It was clear to us at the time of submission that the design would never be realized.

Frieder Schnock: We wanted to create a contribution to the discussion as participants of the competition.

Stih: Basically, we thought that you can't participate in something like that. But you have to make a statement with something of such an importance. After we did the monument at Bayerischer Platz, it demanded it; after all, it's also about responsibility. The concept came about during a visit to Weimar, when Paul Maenz gave his art collection to the city. He said that for him Weimar was the most German city, and that was because of its historical lines: Goethe, Bauhaus, Nietzsche, Buchenwald. The day after the inauguration we went to Buchenwald, and it was a shock to see how disconnected it was from the city with the tourist hype and the marzipan goethes. Then, in contrast, the absolute clear-cutting at the top of Buchenwald. Suddenly it was clear to us that you have to get people to go there, even those who are afraid of it.

The concept was to create a context between the city and places like the Wannsee Villa. Good work is being done there on site with modest exhibitions and an extensive archive, including keyword computers. And then the view across to the Wannsee lido, where Jews were forbidden to enter. Of course we also thought of "Topography of Terror". For me, there is no better institution to remember than their active museum. This is also done with all modesty, if not humility - everything that this competition for the great Jewish memorial lacked. We always call it the final monument, to glorify

probably those who were in charge of the initiative. For me, it is more a Lea Rosh memorial than one in memory of the victims.

From the beginning, Ms. Rosh had the Israeli memorial Yad Vashem as a model, which she wanted to see installed on a similar scale in Germany. Did this fixation shape the competition?

Stih: Yes, it's peculiar. There are often women who take on a cause in an incredibly maternal way. But one problem was also the strategy of inviting certain international artists.

Schnock: The effort was to play it safe, to get something in any case. A purely technocratic view: We need a result, and then we have to realize it. It's not about discussion processes.

Even at the beginning, the question remained open as to whether a monument, a memorial or a museum should be built. Your design has eluded these possibilities. Basically, the commemoration at "Bus Stop" remains immaterial.

Schnock: That's exactly what we want to convey. Of course, we had to make formal concessions to the competition in order not to be immediately kicked out. Nevertheless, we tried to undermine the specifications. It's just an additional offer, because the memorial sites in Berlin do most of the work anyway.

Stih: We have the "Topography of Terror" and a Jewish Museum, hopefully soon. I wondered at all why Amnon Barzel, who on the one hand comes from the modern art scene and on the other hand will head this museum, was not brought in during the consultations.

Schnock: In any case, he is an expert on modern art, as the former director of the Museum of Modern Art in Prato.

Stih: The peculiar thing about the whole story is that, apart from Harald Szeemann, no expert from the contemporary art scene was in the jury. For example, I would have liked to see Jean-Christophe Ammann asked, who runs a completely different museum in Frankfurt that's not possible here in Berlin. People who somehow include a social environment in the way they present things. And that hasn't happened, it has basically become a historian's competition.

Doesn't that have to do with the fear that contemporary art doesn't provide enough reverence to historical facts, but produces independent signs?

Schnock: I think, in fact, that's exactly what was wanted. They wanted an object, nothing more.

Stih: For us, it was a question of the psychology of the task: Who do you reach? And how? You have to see what appeals to a younger generation, how they approach things. And in that case, I can only say: Who is this monument actually for? Is it for the people who may be dead in ten years, or is it really for the following generations, so that they can deal with history? You can't tell me that a sixteen-year-old today feels guilty for acts that his grandfather may have committed. The general assignment of blame doesn't work, people reject it, and then it hasn't reached anyone. The question is how to avoid such things; that is a demand on democracy, as Beuys put it. I am very unhappy that he is no longer alive, otherwise we would have a very different discussion. Why weren't Esther and Jochen Gerz, Hans Haacke or even Baudrillard invited, and above all - why was the competition limited to Germany and not announced Europe-wide? After all, the whole of Europe was affected.

In the press release on the decision, the statement was made that the monument was 50 years too late. For this reason, too, the result should reach back into the past in its aesthetic form and not be oriented toward the topicality of art.

Schnock: Just like the advertising film for the fundraising campaign. It's certainly timelessly bad. It could just as easily have been made in 1945 and 1955. One could have expected more professional marketing from a media initiative.

But the memorial is not about aesthetic sophistication, but about the connection with history. How else can one address generations that have already forgotten, if not through their aesthetic understanding? A contradiction lies rather in the fact that these generations, including Lea Rosh, were also formed in a time when art had a great deal to do with processes of discussion.

Stih: One should not forget that the previous Monday also saw the inauguration of the monument to the burning of books by Micha Ullman, and that is completely unpretentious.

Schnock: There is also a comparable approach to our design. The starting point are simple circumstances: How do I get to Sachsenhausen? Do I take the subway or the S-Bahn? From Berlin, you have to change trains three times on this trip and walk quite a distance. That's why it's perfectly logical for us to say that there's the bus. It can only be a matter of conveying the places and events intelligently, which hardly seems solvable to me with a pathetic monument. There was criticism of our design, for example, that the buses would also travel to concentration camps where there is nothing left to see. But it is not the image that is decisive, what one makes of the camp, but the will to take the time to get on the bus and start the journey.

Unlike the division between a memorial for Jews and one for Sinti and Roma, "Bus-Stop" does not distinguish between the victims.

Stih: Even during the call for proposals, I was alienated by the certainty with which the victims were assigned their places: Jews here, Sinti and Roma a hundred meters away, and the homosexuals at Nollendorfplatz. Just as the jury totally cut itself off from the public and retreated to the Academy of Arts. Instead, whole neighborhoods could have been included in the discussions. Why weren't the entries presented and discussed publicly before the jury's decision?

In contrast, your design runs the risk of resembling too much of a tourist enterprise.

Schnock: What's so wrong with tourists? They at least look at things more intensively than people who have lived in the place for decades. The core of the offer is that people become aware of contexts: If you go to Hanover, it's Bergen-Belsen, just as Dachau belongs to Munich and Flossenbürg to Nuremberg, Breslau and Groß-Rosen, Danzig and Stutthof.

Stih: People should discover that there were camps all around them. Who knew that in the Berlin district of Neukölln there was a kind of collection point, and that in the Bavarian quarter there were so-called "Judenwohnungen", where people from all over Berlin were crammed together. What is to be built now is a miserable battle of materials. I believe that this monument will be dismantled in twenty or thirty years, just like these monuments to Lenin that were made for eternity. At some point they will say: of course we commemorate the victims, but not like this. And then they'll make it smaller, trim it down or green the area. I don't know what size has to do with the idea of commemorating victims.

Schnock: Very one-dimensional is the reference to the railroad tracks aimed at by Simon Ungers with the double-T-beams. There the German railroad company would be perhaps a quite direct contact to become conscious of the responsibility and to put in the folders "Your Train Attendant / Ihr Zugbegleiter" references to the places, which one passes. If one travels from Hanover to Bremen, then one should also know how one could reach Bergen-Belsen. As for our design: 1995 is the anniversary for 100 years of the omnibus. A company like Daimler-Benz could certainly do some active mourning work there.

Your concept is strongly based on museum education in its intention to gather as much multi-layered information as possible.

Schnock: We took as our starting point what a major role intelligent mediation plays in the modern museum. It is immensely important that people can find background information on the spot. Now we have to be careful that we don't fall behind this museum pedagogy with this Holocaust memorial.

Strangely, no one has considered what role the site of the memorial will play for media such as television. After all, it's in the center of the capital.

Stih: Indeed, the U.S. Embassy has looked at this very aspect. They advised the jurors that every time you photograph the new American Embassy, you also have this monument in your sights. But perhaps this neighborhood was also a purposeful consideration when choosing the monument's location.

The interview was conducted by Harald Fricke