

The Past in Public Space:

“Der Jahrhundertsritt”, A Lieu de Mémoire As an Urban Intervention of Memory

Julia Friederike Pank

Leiden University, Faculty of Humanities, Campus The Hague

Turfmarkt 99, 2511 DP Den Haag, The Netherlands

Email: j.f.pank@umail.leidenuniv.nl

Abstract

Sites of memories do not always take the form of a memorial or museum – objects placed in the midst of the urban space, like the sculpture “Der Jahrhundertsritt” in a shopping street of Leipzig, Germany, serve just as well (or better) to trigger the memory of past events and relate them by direct encounter to the immediate present. In what ways do encounters with the sculpture serve as a stepping stone for a memory culture which confronts and interrupts the stream of passersby? How does it relate to its surroundings, what are the reactions with which the artwork is met? This article explores the potential of this specific lieu de memoire conceptualized as an urban intervention in bringing the past to the present, analyzing how awareness for the past-present-future continuum is raised in the mundane, yet historically delicate context of Leipzig’s inner city as a shopping street that used to be the site of the Peaceful Revolution of 1989.

Keywords: lieu de memoire; urban intervention; memory culture; collective memory



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Leipzig_-_Naschmarkt_%2B_Der_Jahrhundertschritt_01_ies.jpg

Introduction

Der Jahrhundertsritt is an artwork which thematizes the appalling as much as fascinating extremity of twentieth-century developments. The sculpture, a tall man with long legs, a shifted head, and an inescapable message was brought into being in 1984 by the East German artist Wolfgang Mattheuer, and found its way into Leipzig's public space in 1999¹. Its themes bear resemblance to Hobsbawm's 1994 book "Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century"; both reflect upon the time span between 1914 and 1991, between World War I and the fall of the Soviet Union, and engage with fundamental questions of society, politics, and ideologies that the short century raised, and largely failed to answer.

The sculpture, given its location in the midst of Leipzig's bustling city center, will be treated as a lieu de memoire, a symbolic site of memory that comes to replace and represent the milieu de memoire where the historical events that are referred to actually took place (Kolstrup 1999: 115). Furthermore, based on its strategically interruptive placement on one of the busiest shopping streets of the city, the sculpture will be analyzed as an urban intervention, which is the utilization of spatial power to create experiences and generate certain behavior through art works in public space which go beyond aesthetic enhancement and give new social significance to space (Pinder 2008: 731).

¹ - Additional copies of the sculpture have also been placed in Halle, Berlin and Bonn (Lindner 2005: 308).

Collective memory, and certainly the triggering of remembering in public space through urban interventionism, is fundamentally linked to an effect in the present moment, and intertwines remembering the past with imagining alternative futures (Rose-Redwood et al. 2008: 161). The “urban memory” (ibid 162) of Leipzig is particularly sensitive to the Monday demonstrations and the Peaceful Revolution of 1989 which entailed the fall of the Wall and German reunification, but is for this reason perhaps overly focused on this recent historical event, therefore neglecting the remembrance of other, more distant pasts. *Der Jahrhundertsschritt* is consequently often read in limited ways and its significance reduced to the realm of GDR politics and society, despite the fact that his symbolism clearly also bears reference to both World Wars and the Third Reich and a timeless significance for present (East) German society and politics.

The Past as a Stepping Stone

The ways in which *Der Jahrhundertsschritt* refers to and re-creates memories of the past can roughly be divided into five elements. The left leg, impatiently striding forward, reminds us of the pace and eagerness with which twentieth-century developments were overrunning people all over Europe, and especially in Germany. In contrast, the left foot in a heavy soldier's boot appears to hold back the boisterous ambition of the other leg, signifying the struggle to move forward after the hardships and bewilderment of two World Wars, which simultaneously formed the basis for and obstacle to efforts to ideologically and politically move on. The two arms symbolize the subsequent ideological struggles to offer re-identification to the German people: a clenched left fist opposes the right arm's fascist salute. Lindner observes that the extremities of this body diverge so heavily that they seem to tear it apart and detain the consolidation of a stable core, as a consequence of which the head is about to sink into the disrupted body, which denotes the “headlessness” of twentieth-century agents (2005: 301).

Importantly, the artist himself emphasized that his work is “as ambiguous as our century”, allowing and encouraging a multiplicity of readings (qtd. in Lindner 2005: 301). This statement can be considered from two angles. First, in the GDR context, refraining from all too clear ideological-political assertions was often a lifesaving strategy especially for artists who wanted to prevent the banning of their works. At the time of its production, the sculpture was exhibited at State Art Exhibitions in Leipzig and Dresden, where it was received as a provocative “explosive charge”, yet simultaneously ranked as the most important artwork of the national exhibition (ibid. 300, 306). It was then predominantly interpreted as depicting twentieth-century ideological struggles in critique of Fascist and in favor of Socialist forms of dealing with the past and imagining the future, denying or downplaying SED-critical readings (ibid. 303).

Second, refraining from insisting on an original intention or message of an artwork is also a central element of meaning generation in urban interventions. They give space to a multiplicity of understandings and narratives that can be formed and altered contingently, and which enforce, neutralize, or even counteract previous ones (Rose-Redwood et al. 2008: 163). Art in the urban space is thus both a source of memory and a site of negotiation, as it creates brief moments of a shared experience among those who are present and form a temporary, haphazard collective in which “new meanings, experiences, understandings, relationships and situations” are created and “prevailing norms and ideologies” are contested (Pinder 2008: 730).



Source: https://www.tripadvisor.de/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g187400-d8408915-i176711528-Jahrhundertschritt-Leipzig_Saxony.html

Because of its location, *der Jahrhundertschritt* interrupts consciousness alive. the urban flow and provokes moments of *Innehalten*² in the otherwise high-paced urban stream of people. Beyond that, he also seems to invite the passersby into the neighboring Zeitgeschichtliches Forum, a center for critical engagement with German and European history after the World Wars, with the ambition to foster contemporary societal discourses in multidimensional, interdisciplinary ways. Entering it would require a conscious decision of the individual, presupposing interest, motivation and time to do so – aspects that all too often lack in contemporary societies. A telling remark can be read on the wall behind the sculpture: *Warnung! Geschichte kann zu Einsichten führen und verursacht Bewusstsein*³. Especially in times of “historical amnesia” (Rose-Redwood et al. 2008: 161), where people are less inclined to deliberately educate themselves about and reflect upon political, societal and ideological histories and their relevance for the present, it is all the more important to stir up instances of remembering and critical thinking through other, more subtle means. An unexpected urban intervention can be an alternative strategy to trigger memory and keep historical

2 - to pause and think for a moment

3 - Warning! History can lead to discernment and causes awareness.

Lessons (to be) learned

Without the imperative presence of *Der Jahrhundertsritt* on the avenue, the flow of everyday life at *Grimmaische Straße* would perhaps continue without a halt, but through the placement of this odd eye-catcher, every passerby experiences a moment of interruption as their gaze stumbles upon the sculpture. This urban intervention of memory paints an additional layer of meaning onto the facade of public space in the present, in which the passersby are all too often solely concerned with their individual purpose and direction of the given moment, unaware of anything outside their subjectivity. However, this sculpture reminds them where we are coming from as a German society - and perhaps provokes the reflection on where we might be heading. *Der Jahrhundertsritt* teaches us that collectively remembering the twentieth century must go beyond the mere commemoration of the two world wars as two isolated events, as their significance stretches over an entire century, if not beyond. It reminds us not only of the developments and events it bears reference to, but also of the immense importance to emphasize the continuum of past and present and the intertwinedness of the two, instead of merely looking back at a distant, disconnected past. Mattheuer's artwork invites us to utilize the remembrance of concrete happenings as a stepping stone for reflecting time and again on the fundamental questions of humanity and society, questions which will not cease to be relevant, neither for the contemporary nor any coming present.

Bibliography

Geyer, Michael, and Michael Latham. "The Place of the Second World War in German Memory and History." *New German Critique* 71 (1997): 5-40. Web.

Kolstrup, Soren. "Wings of Desire: Space, Memory and Identity." *P.O.V. A Danish Journal of Film Studies* 8 (1999): 115-124. Web.

Lindner, Bernd. "Das Zerrissene Jahrhundert. Zur Werk- und Wirkungsgeschichte von Wolfgang Mattheuers Plastik 'Der Jahrhundertsritt'." *Studies in Contemporary History* 2 (2005): 300-308. Web.

Pinder, David. "Urban Interventions: Art, Politics and Pedagogy." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 32.3 (2008): 730-736. Web.

Rose-Redwood, Reuben, Derek Alderman, and Maoz Azaryahu. "Collective Memory and the Politics of Urban Space: An Introduction." *GeoJournal* 73 (2008): 161-164. Web.

Winter, Jay. "Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning." *Oklahoma Humanities*, Fall 2014: 35-38. Web.

