

A Stab in the Heart of Linz's Lethargy
By Stella Rollig

Admittedly, we at the O.K Center for Contemporary Art in Linz are neither the first nor only ones to have chosen the subject of urban space. This ever-expanding theme has brought on numerous debates and developments with lasting effects on our living conditions. The city has become the setting for a radical restructuring of economic and social conditions: the enforcement of economic interests together with the public administration's (no longer arguable) maxime of budget cuts is obviously leading to the rapid reduction of unregulated public zones, retail trade, and small businesses. Control mechanisms and surveillance systems are being improved and expanded, promoting an increase in sales and the growingly paranoid pursuit for security.

As an average Austrian city with approximately 200 000 inhabitants, Linz is a perfect model case. While the steel industry was its main influence from national-socialist times until the eighties, Linz is now re-branding its image with themes like youth, future, culture, and new media. Current development projects include shopping malls, cultural buildings, and office space. 'Linz lebt auf' ('Linz is life') is the city's new official slogan. And before that? What kind of deep sleep is Linz awakening from?

History has imposed the burden of being the Führer's favorite city on Linz. But this heritage is virtually non-existent in the city's self-presentation. From time to time visitors ask me where they can find out something about the nazi period in Linz. Well, definitely not in the cityscape or in any public institutions. This is something the exhibition also wants to deal with: the determination of public issues, the power to define a city's identity. Who is entitled to make a statement, to challenge identifications? Who decides what is worth commemorating?

The work of the French polyglot and - to use a term that inevitably pops up as soon as someone gets involved in local or national subjects - 'foreign' artist Michael Blum is a stab in the heart of Linz's lethargy. As an initial step of his project, he announced his intention to erect a monument commemorating a certain historic event. The historic event: In the school year of 1904/05, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Adolf Hitler visited the same high school, but not the same grade. That's it. There is no documentation of any personal encounter between the two fourteen year-olds, there is no evidence that one ever explicitly remembered the other. Nonetheless, this - at least noteworthy - coincidence started a veritable dispute among historians due to the publication of the book "The Jew of Linz. Wittgenstein, Hitler and Their Secret Battle for the Mind" by the Australian author Kimberly Cornish, which appeared 1998 in London and was translated to German shortly afterwards. Cornish claims that the personal encounter of these two teenagers triggered Hitler's hate for Jews and consequently caused the Holocaust. The main objection to this chain of causalities is that it derives the Holocaust from a personal moment while ignoring the historical, political, ideological, and social context.

Blum utilizes Cornish's thesis of the encounter and invests the venture capital of his artistic enterprise into this speculation. He names the monument "The Birth of the 20th Century" and asks, "How would you envision the Monument to the Birth of the 20th

Century?" in a letter that was sent to approximately 400 people in Linz, Austria, and all over the world. Politicians, scientists, and artists are among the addressees who were asked for suggestions.

Ever since Robert Filliou's concept of letting formerly opposing nations exchange war memorials (the unrealized "Commemor", 1970), or Jochen Gerz's and Esther Shalev-Gerz's slowly sinking "Hamburger Mahnmal gegen Faschismus" (1986-1993), the monument genre has given artists the opportunity to challenge the political predominance over topics and methods of collective memory. Michael Blum's monument follows this tradition, even though it will never be erected in Linz's cityscape. It's a "Kommunikationsskulptur" (communication sculpture), made of the correspondence that developed from Blum's initiative: of resistance, doubts, questions of authenticity, refusal, as well as fundamental questions on memory culture. It's form is the display in the exhibition and later a book. Isn't that just what we were missing? A Monument about the treatment of history.

Translation German to English: Margarethe Clausen.