

Steven Nyanga: How did it all start ?

Michael Blum : Originally, Stella Rollig invited me to think of a possible project in Linz, for the O.K Centrum where she was one of the curators. Later, when the 'Open House' exhibition project was on its way, my proposal naturally inscribed itself in it. I could have developed something in many different directions, but Linz was not a city like any other one. It was the beloved city of Hitler – not his birthplace per se, but the one that, opposed to cosmopolitan Vienna that rejected him so badly, became the geographical center of his mythology. On top of it, there were personal reasons related to my recent relocation to Austria. I don't want to define the project in biographical terms, but one shouldn't underestimate the personal context in which things take place. On many levels, I knew I had to take a clear position and deal with history from a local perspective in some way.

SN : I've never been in Linz, but I imagine that it has changed a lot since WWII, hasn't it ?

MB : Yes and no ... I'm always fascinated with how one can grasp a transitional phenomenon at a given moment. For instance, when I was in South Africa last year, it was a real challenge to my mind to grasp the now in-between what had been done and what was still to be done 10 years after the fall of the Apartheid regime. In this case, a decade allows the whole society to dramatically change, and at the same time, one easily gets the feeling that not much has changed : political power has obviously changed hands, but economic power hasn't. This could metaphorically apply to Linz. On one hand, the city and the society have dramatically changed ; on the other hand, similarities hit the visitor upon arrival. Like the Main Square, which seems to look the same way it did on photographs when Hitler made his triumphant come-back in 1938, an odd and ever-present reminder.

SN : I think we'll need a few decades before substantial change has been brought to the whole population of South Africa, but I understand your comment about capturing a transition. How did it inform your focus on Hitler and Wittgenstein ?

MB : To focus on Hitler in Linz seems quite obvious, because of the Führer's megalomaniac obsession with it ; he constantly worked on a new design for the city and even had an architecture model with him in the Berlin bunker in 1945.

SN : But Wittgenstein ?

MB : At one point, I remembered a review of Kimberley Cornish's book « The Jew of Linz ». I had read it when the book came out. A quick search showed that the O.K Centrum and the school that both boys were attending were only a few blocks apart. I remember discovering this proximity with fear, satisfaction and an amazing excitement. The fact that hardly anyone in Linz, really, seemed to be aware of the common schooling of Hitler and Wittgenstein eventually convinced me that I had touched a sensitive spot.

SN : Was Wittgenstein from Linz ?

MB : Not at all, he should have never found himself in Linz. He was the son of one of the

wealthiest men in Austria. His father had decided, as a symbolic gesture, to send his son to a regular school in regular Austria, and it happened to be the Realschule in Linz...

SN : What was the relationship between both boys like ?

MB : Well... Hitler was in 3rd grade while Wittgenstein was in the 5th – despite their births within the same week of April 1889 ! No irrefutable proof of any kind of relation ever surfaced, but hints do exist. On such a basis, even the least creative person can't prevent speculating, don't you think ?

SN : Gosh, yes ! ... Were you intending to speculate or did it happen in the process ?

MB : The speculative potential is what attracted me at first. The fact that two teenagers, who both were to shape the upcoming century in rather different fields and manners, might have met or at least noticed each other – not to say more - I found particularly mind-blowing. Of course, you might argue that coincidences are extremely common if only you pay attention. But in a society which proves more and more commemorative, with an almost fetishist focus on the very site of events, even when meaningless, the silence around this particular one doesn't go unnoticed. Yet speculation appeared to be an efficient strategy to touch upon topics hiding behind the Hitler-Wittgenstein encounter, like the construction of history, especially in regard to the nazi period, without a direct, judgemental or didactic approach. That's why I used the highly controversial thesis of Kimberley Cornish ; not because I believed in it, but for its speculative possibilities. That's also why I used the idea of a monument, to trigger what we have associated with this concept, our mental representation of it. Speculating on this was a highly provocative way to establish contact with people, which was what the project was about.

SN : Was the project only about communication ?

MB : I don't want to wear the old hats of relational aesthetics, but communication was clearly the medium. Martin Sturm, the O.K director, once mentioned the term « Kommunikationsskulptur », which is the kind of oxymoron that suits the project pretty well. The communication part was capital, that's why I've spent a lot of time on it, for example responding to all the people who got back to me, on a daily basis. It was fascinating to see the huge spectrum of responses and how a given topic could trigger such different ideas.

SN : How have you dealt with this multiplicity ?

MB : As different as the answers were, there were constant themes, topics or points. In the end, I decided to display the contributions along five main themes that were recurrent, which were lines in the exhibition and will become chapters in the book. But, despite their variety, it was important to treat them all equally, to avoid any form of judgement. A badly laid-out apology note by Jacques Chirac's chef de cabinet receives as much attention as Simon Morris' substantial essay on Gustav Metzger..

SN : You were mentioning earlier that many people in Linz didn't know about the Hitler-

Wittgenstein story. How come ?

MB : The nazi period in Linz has been addressed only very recently. In 1996, the city decided to commission a serious historical work. Five years later, the result came out : two big volumes that considered the subject from many different viewpoints, like administration, school, health, church, economy etc... The book is excellent and provides valuable and detailed information. One can only regret that it hasn't come out in the Sixties... As Germany always admitted its responsibility and, as a nation, acted accordingly (at least the FRG, the GDR was locked in its official version of anti-fascist struggle), Austrians have been comforted by their leaders in the belief that they had been victims with no responsibilities whatsoever – which doesn't help a fair retrospective understanding.

SN : Did you see your role as fixing this problem ?

MB : Certainly not ! I'm far less ambitious, or aware of the limitations of such an enterprise. I wanted to deal with it, contribute to the memory discourse from a local perspective, but not on a scientific level. I rather see my role as a clumsy and stubborn researcher who, like in a slapstick movie, gets to reveal the true nature of his surroundings by acting unconsciously.

SN : In the multitude of responses to your letter, the critical or angry ones don't seem to come from Linz though.

MB : That's right, except the director of the school, who turned me down. She was probably thinking that I would harm the reputation of her school by digging in the past. It became very clear that the school did not wish to be associated with this project and silence, as ever, was the fastest way towards memory loss...

SN : It seems that you've been pretty harshly criticized by other correspondants too. What is it due to ?

MB : If you read all the correspondance, you can find various reasons for it. The most superficial one is that « Hitler » has become a worldwide trademark for « absolute evil », hence the difficulty to address it. And language is like a mine field: the term « revision » of history should ideally apply to the healthy re-reading of past myths while, instead, it applies to historians who deny the Holocaust, and beyond, to all kinds of reactionary thoughts. In this context, it proves very difficult to even look back and question. Then, there were more specific reasons for critical feed-back: the reduction of history to a single event, the absurd concept of a century, the erection of a monument – which were all meant ironically but haven't always been perceived as such, the use of a dubious picture, the Middle-East debate ...

SN : I remember someone writing about your bad methodology and historical approximations. Doesn't it bother you ?

MB : You see, I'm an artist, not a historian. I'm usually very reluctant to emphasize the artist as a special figure in society – artists are just regular and often boring people, far

from the romantic myth ! But in this case, I think the distinction is capital. It means that I'm free to consider history from a non-scientific perspective. That's exactly the reason that had led me to drop my history studies : to look at things in a way that was freed from academic obligations. In this case, my artist status allowed me to imagine, which is the last thing for a historian. A lot of misunderstandings came from that. The common schoolyear is a good example : was it 1903/04 or 1904/05 ? The historian would say 1903/04, based on the school records. The artist might write 1904/05, which is a mistake borrowed from Kimberley Cornish. But if you look at things more closely, you find out that Cornish took it from Ray Monk, one of Wittgenstein's most respected biographers – not flawless either. Opening up the fabric of history, with its different paths, layers, viewpoints and mistakes, was at least as interesting as providing a historical truth - that hardly exists anyway.

SN : Is it why you did this piece of self-critique, the maze-like source-mapping displayed in the exhibition ?

MB : Yes, but it wasn't planned in the beginning. After receiving a fair amount of critical responses, in particular regarding my use of Cornish's thesis, I knew I had to do something about it. This led me to operate a critical re-reading of my own letter, by listing all problematic points, and to provide available sources – often contradictory. More than a proper response, it was a way to provide a basis for current and upcoming debate.

SN : You haven't spoken of the monument so far ...

MB : I guess because the monument was to trigger discussion and reflexion, not seriously meant to be displayed on a Linz piazza – even though some of the proposals are worth realization !... To tell you the truth, the monument is ... the book. A thousand copies circulating, that's the monument.

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