

ART AS 'AWARENESS OF HISTORY'

Sigrid Sigurdsson's "In Face of The Silence"

by Michael Fehr

I.

I remember, that is both the present tense and the presence of the past in the here and now. It is precisely this quality of the past which historiography cannot grasp. Whatever form of narration or methodical reasoning it adopts, it aligns the present in the past or the past in the present *I remember* or even *I am making history* are theoretically and practically impossible for historiography to grasp. They are Clio's blind spot. Consequently, where historiography speaks of the past as the past, i.e. about something it does not want to be itself, the substantiation of its interest in knowledge must be left to other disciplines and authorities. But where historiography and historical awareness are not only based on ethics, politics or the market but also wish to reflect their conditions, they must refer to aesthetics and the medium of aesthetics: Art.

For only aesthetics, regarded as a theory of sensory perception, and only art, regarded as a practice guided by aesthetics, offer the conceptual and practical means to reveal history's characteristic structure. This structure is essentially determined by the problem of a fundamental non-identity which historiography generally resolves in a linear chronology of events, analogous to the linear temporal flow of language. But however varied such chronologies may be and however efficient the various forms of narration, it remains an indisputable fact that historiography deprives history of its characteristic structure as the past in the here and now. By contrast, fine art - as a fundamentally non-chronological and non-linear subject, as a timeless event - has developed many different ways of reflecting the concept and portraying time: admittedly at the expense of its results not being as directly communicable as concrete language.

This question, the illumination of historiography's blind spot, is central to Sigrid Sigurdsson's work. Above all with her three-dimensional construction „In the Face of Silence“, she has found a form in which she can make the non-simultaneity of the historical a concrete and fruitful source for an 'Awareness of History'.

II.

"Not everyone is present in the same Now". This is the opening sentence of Ernst Bloch's analysis of the motives for large sections of the population supporting the National Socialists. From it he developed the problem of "non-simultaneity and the obligation to its (multi-layered) dialectics" ❶ What Bloch demonstrated in his essay, namely a concrete relation to the past in the Here and Now, and the courage to distinguish the present according to its motives and motivations, is what I should like to call 'Awareness of History' and what I also believe Sigurdsson has achieved with „In the Face of Silence“.

"Awareness of History" is intended to denote that between the nonreflected assimilation of the past into the here and now: between tradition and the awareness of tradition derived from it on the one hand and historical awareness on the other, i.e. the form of historical knowledge which does not concede that the past carries any obligations for the present, there may be a third relationship with history - a realisation that the past, however it is understood and treated, affects the present and therefore has to be consciously integrated into it. Consequently, 'Awareness of History' is reflective, like a psychoanalytically enlightened awareness: it refers to what may be not here and now but which profoundly determines the Here and Now.

This insight is easy to acquire but difficult to execute. For it faces each one of us with the question of how far the past is binding on the individual. 'Awareness of History' does not release the rememberer into the realms of unquestioned given fact, where an individual's personal history is just anecdotal decoration, nor does it render personal experiences,

singular and special events anonymous in an academically drawn historical context, in a "great narration" or a "linguistic game" of whatever kind and whatever legitimacy, to name just two current distinctions. 'Awareness of History' compels us rather to discuss what status the individual had or has in collective events and where personal responsibility for overall development lies or could lie, not only in one specific individual case but with the example of a general individual case, i.e. in a concrete and realistic manner.

Under the motto *The task is to broaden the eventful here and now*, Bloch distinguished between the false and the genuine non-simultaneous contradiction, between the latter and the simultaneous contradiction and in both cases between the subjective and the objective factor. That is to say, this analytical model gives us at least six different antagonisms which act in parallel while having not only a different range and a different age, but are also of different strengths and develop at different speeds. For ease of comprehension one can imagine this complicated structure like a kind of geological formation, i.e. like shifting strata of different material, buckling and over- or under-layering each other. But however one describes the structure of these antagonisms, the most important aspect of Bloch's model is the fact that these are interactive autonomous units which have their own inherent laws and their own intrinsic value.

III.

Broadening the eventful here and now: one can also regard this as the guiding principle behind Sigrid Sigurdsson's construction „In the Face of Silence“. Beginning with her own biography, she collects all kinds of material and documents - letters, photos, postcards, newspaper cuttings, forms, plans, maps, diagrams and other records of this century - and arranges them, often annotated with sketches or texts, in very different ways in books and showcases. After a four-year compilation phase (1989-1993), „In the Face of Silence“ is therefore now a room defined by its room height, subdivided into 380 compartments, a *lieu de mémoire* currently housing about 730 books, book objects and showcases which, at a rough estimate, contain about 30,000 documents, drawings and objects and which are used by visitors: they can be taken out of the compartments, placed on specially provided tables, examined or read there and afterwards replaced into any of the free compartments.

„In the Face of Silence“ thus gives the impression of a mixture of archive, library and cabinet of relics, but this construction has no fixed arrangement apart from the fact that the shelves are divided up into compartments. Its use by visitors consists in a constantly changing sequence of books, book objects and showcases on the tables and the shelves. „In the Face of Silence“ thus appears to be less an archive than an equivalent to the function of a (collective) memory, particularly if one looks at the details, in other words, if one begins to read the books and compare their content. But in Sigurdsson's „In the Face of Silence“ one can recognise not only the construction of an equivalent to memory and its workings. It is rather the reflection of and artistic reaction to the evolution of *lieux de mémoire*, i.e. of places of memory, which take the place of a *milieu de mémoire*, a vital and living memory: A grand attempt to develop a *lieu de mémoire* into the crystallisation point of a *milieu de mémoire*.

„In the Face of Silence“ derives the potential for such a development from an internal dynamic force which distinguishes the room fundamentally from archives and other typical places of memory. This dynamic force derives from various factors, of which I shall mention only the most significant.

It should first be noted that „In the Face of Silence“ is a constructed *lieu de mémoire*, an artificially created place of memory and remains recognisable as such; „In the Face of Silence“ is not a relic of a destroyed tradition, not a memorial to an event or person, not any kind of monument intended to serve "a regulated memory in so far as (it) attempts to fix a very specific view of the past" ⑤ but a construction in which remnants of the process

of historication, the rubbish of historiography so-to-speak - namely what it has not been able to take into account or perceive for whatever reason - are collected and arranged.

But not arranged - and this is the second important factor - according to the customary taxonomies or criteria of historiography, but according to aspects and with methods which are developed out of the material itself; so that, contrary to normal archiving and academic processing, it is not the identical or comparable features of the collected material which emerge but rather its own intrinsic value and its own inherent characteristics, i.e. what makes it special, and not comparable with something else. The result is that these remnants, the rubbish historiography, produce a surplus of meaning which - not covered or restrained by historiography - reaches the user of „In the Face of Silence“ directly and activates his own powers of recollection.

But the crucial element for this process - and this is the third important factor - is the fact that the material collected in „In the Face of Silence“ has been recognisably processed by the artist into a highly concentrated conglomerate with the intention of actually exceeding the visitor's perceptive capabilities in order to demonstrate through this experience "that the past must be forgotten if it is not to become the grave-digger of the present". ④ The work achieves this objective as a physical aggregation of unprocessed historical and source material, of official documents, anonymous and personal stories, of vestiges and scraps of "great narratives", of academic, artistic and private reflections on this and other material, finally as a developing and self-reflecting construction, i.e. as a concrete "history sculpture" which can be physically entered and used, but which in the process conveys the experience that it is in fact impossible to explain ourselves and our situation in historical terms. But this experience does not, as one might assume, produce a sense of resignation or despair in the face of the overwhelming quantity and impenetrability of the assembled material. On the contrary, „In the Face of Silence“ liberates its user from the idea that only important subjects can participate in the historical process and sets personal and private memories against official history. For in „In the Face of Silence“, "the subject of history (can regard) itself as the creator of history" ⑤ and thus not only see the "fate of history" preserved within it but actually preserve it.

Finally, as factor number four, there are two further elements or strategies which permit one to speak of „In the Face of Silence“ as an attempt to develop a *milieu de mémoire*. These are the "visitors' book" and the "travel books". The "visitors' book" lies together with writing material on one of the tables ready to receive spontaneous comments by visitors/users. This book, which was initially empty, thus represents not only the respective present and at the same time the history of „In the Face of Silence“ in the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum or in other places where the work has been shown; via the "visitors' book", users' comments are directly incorporated into „In the Face of Silence“ since the volumes written by visitors (currently about 3,000 pages) are stored on the shelves and can be read like all the other books. In addition, the "visitors' book" is also the gateway through which major contributions by visitors, sometimes whole bundles, reach the artist for

processing. The idea of opening up „In the Face of Silence“ by means of "travel books" was conceived not least as a response to the intense interest expressed by users in making their own contributions to the development of „In the Face of Silence“. In 1993, five hundred books, each comprising 150 or 300 empty sheets, were integrated into the work according to the following concept: The "travel books" are loaned to interested persons (or institutions) with the request to fill them over a period of about two years with material and texts of their own choice and return them to the artist who will in turn incorporate them into „In the Face of Silence“.

By opening up her work in this way, Sigurdsson has finally created the pre-requisites for a *milieu de mémoire*, although this also means that „In the Face of Silence“ will gradually escape her control: it will develop from a personal to a public room. It is precisely this aspect of the work which makes it significant for the *lieu de mémoire* into which it is integrated, namely the Museum.

IV.

„In the Face of Silence“ is dependent on the (art) museum for practical reasons, but not in its conception. This work can therefore have an effect on the museum as an institution which is regarded as the classical place of remembering and remembrance. In the light of the above, it is likely to have become clear what the point of reference is between „In the Face of Silence“ and the Museum and how this work differs from the Museum's customary exhibits. While museums are historical entities which generally have highly a complex structure, this structure does not usually become the subject matter since this would impede its functionalisation for different purposes. To put it another way, wherever possible - also in art museums - the contingency and heterogeneity of collections is suppressed and an attempt is made to present the material in academically legitimised taxonomies. This normally seems to be the only way to assert the value and importance of the material: by using it, stripping it of all coincidences and personal references, as evidence of more or less abstract *canones* and presenting it as an anchor for certain sections of the "great narrative". But this means that most museums are in fact representation machines which point via the material stored inside them to something outside themselves; i.e. they function like pictures through which one looks, like through a window, into an illusory room, into history, the history of art or some of its fields; which are mostly laid out as perspective constructions which draw the viewer inside them and thus not only conceive him not as an historical subject but also tend to uproot him, in a similar way to the media.

Sigurdsson's „In the Face of Silence“ is proof that it is nevertheless possible to design museums differently, namely as rooms which present the fiction we require to find our bearings in the world, as fiction; and as rooms which comprehend the viewer as an historical subject and emancipate him vis-à-vis history. The most important aspect here to my mind, although possibly also the most difficult aspect of the work to convey, is the fact that it emphasises the process of forgetting while imparting the experience that some knowledge can only be preserved if one does not touch it.

- ❶ Ernst Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, Frankfurt 2/1992, p. 104 ff.
- ❷ For the terms "*lieu de mémoire*" and "*milieu de mémoire*", see: Pierre Nora, *Zwischen Geschichte und Gedächtnis*, Berlin 1990
- ❸ Jens Kuhlenkamp, note on the terms "monument" and "living environment", in: Aleida Assmann, Dietrich Harth (Ed.), *Kultur und Lebenswelt als Monument*, Frankfurt am Main 1991, p. 28
- ❹ Friedrich Nietzsche, complete works in three volumes, Vol. I, Munich 1962, p. 213
- ❺ Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, Frankfurt am Main 1973, Vol. II, p. 813