

## **Artistic Ploy against Forgetting**

Petra Löffler Stadtrevue (City Revue) Cologne 5/99

Parallel to the German Army exhibition Bettina Flitner, Doris Frohnäpfel, Mona Yahia and Tanya Ury delve into the unconscious components of contemporary history.

Even in the Rhine metropole tempers were raised before the documentary "Extermination War. Crimes of the German Army 1941 to 1944" could be shown at the Cologne City Museum. Exhibition makers and museum directors came under ideological fire not only from conservative politicians, but also the Right Wing, who wanted to stop the German Army exhibition being shown at all costs. The documentation not only serves to correct a myth. The aggressive rejection betrays moreover how acute racist motivated violence still is today.

This is the point that the exhibition „Menschen wie Du und Ich“ (People like You and Me) takes up. The initiative came from Tanya Ury, the artist who lives in Cologne. Parallel to the German Army exhibition Bettina Flitner, Doris Frohnäpfel, Mona Yahia and Tanya Ury present works on Holocaust themes and racism in the rooms of the City Museum's permanent collection. The four artists have placed path markers among the very localised history exhibits that not only assert themselves in the museum context but make interesting connections with the historical exhibition pieces. Bettina Flitner erected her photo series „Was ist rechts?“ (What is Rightwing?) as a slide projection installation in such a way that the portraits of Rightwing youths were projected onto the wall exactly above a vitrine containing a Hitler youth uniform with dagger and all. Flitner's slide projection portraits appear most bizarre in this environment – the youths' statements sound so very like Nazi propaganda.

Mona Yahia's vitrine objects also merge imperceptibly into the museum landscape. But her multiples are far from being harmless souvenirs. Commemorating the subsequent company celebrations of the Aryanisation of Jewish firms the word "Jubiläum" (Jubilee) has been printed in blood red with Nazi typescript on traditional beer-mats – on the back however, are photos of Jews being humiliated. The idyll of the photo series "KZ-Tours" (Concentration Camp Tours) is also deceptive: The leaflet shows flowery views of concentration camps that make demands on the familiar picture postcard views of the same locations of horror. The artist uncovers suppressed history with such household objects.

Mona Yahia reveals the shocking ignorance exposed in the routine dealings with everyday things. Accordingly, she produced a piece of soap in 1987 with a text from a commemorative plaque in the Berlin goods train station Grunewald that remembered Jews deported by the Deutsche Reichsbahn (the former German Railway under the Nazis) and was repeatedly desecrated. During the exhibition "Die Reise nach Berlin" (The Journey to Berlin) the multiple was placed, as an ordinary piece of soap for visitors to use in the museum washrooms - an artistic ploy against forgetting.

Doris Frohnäpfel also focuses in with a talent for location. Even more so than with the photo series "Race-Make-Up" that comments on political showcases such as Checkpoint Charlie with the agency of self-portrait and masquerade, the piece "Unter Menschen" (Among the People) references the ubiquity of racism. The artist presents a series of amateur photos from the 30's in slow succession on a monitor: half-timbered houses decorated with swastika flags, a family standing in front of an ocean liner, New York street chasms, American First Nation folklore – it is not clear whether the images speak of an emigrant fate, or are merely nostalgic tourist photos. The ambivalence of the private photograph is demonstrated with this coincidental rubbish tip find, which even when unintended always remains as piece of period document. The title of the work

“Unter Menschen“ (Among the People) is therefore ambiguous and can quickly be misread as „Untermenschen“ (the German Nazi term for “Inferior Person”).

Tanya Ury's is the most conspicuous of the artworks. You come upon her video installation as soon as you enter the exhibition. Tent-like constructions hang from the ceiling made out of thousands of small plastic bags like an over-dimensional shower curtain. The bags contain the artist's hair, from hair loss, collected daily each bag dated from 1993. This installation revives the visual memory of concentration camp cruelties towards the Jews in an unnerving manner – of shorn heads and poison showers. Tanya Ury has arranged three monitors presenting her performance „Golden Showers“ as a video installation under the plastic tent. The artist had an art restorer coat her body with gold leaf, as a second protective skin - the process was filmed. The layer of gold leaf covers the body with a protective shield suggesting its inviolability as an icon.

For Tanya Ury and Mona Yahia the Holocaust is a part of their biography, the memory of the fates of their families in Nazi Germany. Tanya Ury makes this particularly clear with „Die Gehängten“ (Hung Up) that consists of a walkman with noose. On a cassette recording she tells of her family. The connection with the painting “Die Gehängten“ (The Hanged Ones) by the Cologne artist Bert May, part of the City Museums collection, is not coincidental. He painted it in 1945, to commemorate the death of forced labourers that the Gestapo had publicly hanged a year earlier. The four artists' confrontation with the Holocaust and racism makes this more than an accompanying exhibition to the German Army exhibition. The artistic positioning goes further than merely presenting facts and documentary images; it probes into unconscious components and the way we relate to history today. (English translation Tanya Ury)

„Menschen wie Du und Ich – Vier Künstlerinnen zur Ausstellung ‚Vernichtungskrieg‘“ (People Like You and Me – Four Artists comment on the exhibition ‘Extermination War’”, Kölnisches Stadtmuseum (Cologne City Museum), Zeughausstr. 1-3, Thur 10-20, Wed-Fri 10-17, Sat/Sun 11-17 hours, until 24.5.1999