

Constructed memories as cultural icon

Emotionally charged historical events consist of parts of our collective memories and contribute to the identity of a place, and also to the identity of the people who have somehow identified themselves with the place or event, claims Jan Assmann.¹ His standpoint is the point of departure taken in understanding how historical events are assimilated by the artworks of Gerard Richter (Dresden, 1932) and Thomas Demand (München, 1964).

Subsequently, the insights of Didem Ekici are used in order to understand the function of commemorative monuments. In the way they are conserved, but they are also sometimes destroyed or rebuilt. Ekici demonstrates how the relationship with societal developments has changed the culture of collective memory over the years.² Both theorists show how historical identity is interwoven with the collective past. However, both Ekici and Assmann are unable to provide satisfactory insights into the role of global technological developments as they apply to the preservation of collective memories for the future.

Central to this argument is the question: Why do collective memories as cultural icon lose their meaning over time?

Two artworks, *Cycle, October 18, 1977* (1988), by East German (-born) artist Gerard Richter (Dresden, 1932),³ and *Office*, (1995), by the younger West German artist Thomas Demand (München, 1964), have been selected to help understand how collective memories are processed. Both artworks present different perspectives on how collective memories function within society, and bring strategies to light as to why one memory is cherished (cultivated) while the other is concealed or forgotten.

Both Richter's artworks – consisting of a series of fifteen black and white paintings– as well as the photographic artwork made by Demand, serve as examples in the discussion on the representation of 'reality'.⁴ Taking into consideration that both artists made use of published photographs, I will first explain how press photographs function in the construction and conservation of collective memories. According to Susan Sontag, a photograph is always the result of a meeting between the event and the photographer, and photographs – including press

¹ Assmann, pp. 130-131

² Ekici, p.26

³ In 1961 Gerard Richter fled the former DDR, and has become famous for his paintings, which were based on photographic material both from his personal family albums as well as magazines and newspapers. In: Mehring, p.29

⁴ Richter brings in his paintings (known for its competitive role with paintings in the 19th century) photography together with painting. The use of grey oil paint is a reminder of this.

photographs - give form to the tensions that exist between taste and conscience.⁵ The social function of a press photo attaches cultural value to the preservation of collective memories.⁶ Both Richter and Demand 'copy' press photographs in order to construct the artwork. Richter literally makes paintings of the photographs, although in his paintings the original image has been blurred; Demand builds a three-dimensional cardboard model reconstructed from a photograph, in order to then photograph his reconstruction.

Richter's artworks are analyzed according to Assmann's theory, and Demand's works according to Ekici's theory, in order to gain insight on how different strategies are used to construct collective memories. However, since the beginning of the digital age, the culture of collective memory has gone through some important changes. Regardless of the fact that the internet offers an unending source to quench our thirst for information about specific histories, confidence in the western world has become tense.⁷ Cultural consciousness has not been improved upon by the advent of new media.

First, I will be discussing some of Richter's artworks in order to illustrate how he is able to take the original meaning behind a collective memory and transforms it into a universal memorial icon. Next I will explain Demand's work to show how his work process gives insight into the cultural value of an icon. Both artworks present different strategies as to how the culture of collective memory functions, loses content or changes through time and give insight into the workings of a cultural icon.

Blurred images and Changed Context

Under the title *Cycle, October 18, 1977*, Richter presents a monumental work of art that consists of fifteen paintings. The date of the artwork commemorates a series of events that culminated on the 18th of October 1977. I will give a brief summary of these events.

Starting in 1970, West Germany had been afflicted by terroristic attacks by the German terror organization Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF). The Rote Armee Fraktion, otherwise known as the Baader-Meinhofgruppe, had evolved from a radical movement of leftist students. October 18, 1977 commemorated the hostage taking of a Lufthansa airliner by a group of Palestinian terrorists demanding the immediate release of certain imprisoned RAF members. At the same

⁵ Sontag, pp.12, 15

⁶ Benjamin, pp. 21, 41, 42.

⁷ Huyssen, p. 24.

moment, the three RAF members – who had been convicted to life imprisonment – were found dead in the highly guarded Stuttgart-Stammheim prison.⁸ In addition, the since September the 5th kidnapped Schleyer, President of the Conference of Employers' Associations and Federation of German Industries was also found dead by police on October 18th.⁹ *Cycle, October 18, 1977* (1988) commemorates different moments, called '*fixed points*' by Assmann, that survive as a collective memory. What has been summarized in *Cycle* as one moment, actually took place over a time span of several years, in which the arrests, suicides, murders, and the RAF-funeral all had taken place.¹⁰ '*Fixed points*' are like anchored points on a timeline, to which cultural memories of historical events are attached. Assmann sees cultural memories as 'islands of memories', calling them '*figures of memory*'. These '*figures of memory*' function independently of the actual moments from which they are derived. Postage stamps, posters, habits etc. function as '*figures of memory*'.¹¹ The press photographs collected by Richter, which came from magazine articles about the Baader-Meinhofgruppe, are a reflection of societal testimonies.¹² As cultural memories they form the basis for *Cycle*, as a fully completed cycle.

In which way does each individual painting of the series *Cycle* function as a '*figure of memory*'? *Youth Portrait* shows the rather vague portrait of a painting based on a photograph of one of the most important leaders of the RAF, Ulrike Meinhof. It seems that Meinhof is portrayed much younger in the painting than she would have been in the photograph.¹³ It could be that this change symbolizes youth, as is suggested by the title. The 'youth' – the viewer cannot clearly see whether the painting is of a young man or woman – of the 1970's identified itself with progressive student movements, that stood for leftist utopias and rebelled against the neo-capitalistic consumption society. In particular they were looking for recognition for the horrors

⁸ The period before this was known as the "German Autumn" and was characterized by attacks, murders and kidnappings. The RAF had declared war with the imperialistic system of the German Federal Republic, writes Claudia Wahjudi in her article, 'In the Shadow of the 70's. A Forbidden Exposition in Berlin', In: *Metropolis M*, no.3, 2004.

<http://metropolism.com/magazine/2004-no3/in-de-schaduw-van-de-jaren-zeven/> Retrieved March 22, 2013.

⁹ Due to his Nazi past, Schleyer had become a target for Baader-Meinhofgruppe. From 1933-1945 he was in the SS, and known as a persecutor of leftist students.

http://www.uitslandweb.nl/naslagwerk/Geschiedenis/BRD+Ostpolitik+en+RAF_x003a_+1966-1982/RAF+en+Duitse+Herfst.html Retrieved March 24, 2013

¹⁰ Borchardt-Hume, p.165

¹¹ Assmann, p.129

¹² Richter had over 100 photographs related to October 18th, 1977, collected from magazines, newspapers and books, en brought together in his image collection Atlas. Borchardt-Hume, p.166.

¹³ Borchardt-Hume, p.165

that had occurred during Germany's Nazi past.¹⁴ As a '*figure of memory*', the portrait evokes nostalgic memories of an ideological youth culture.

Confrontation 1, 2 and 3 are based on the arrest of Gudrun Ensslin, the lover of the RAF leader Andreas Baader. These three works are based on a press photograph of Ensslin, dressed in prison clothes, in the Stuttgart-Stammheim prison. The three works present an image of a woman full of life. As a sort of 'film reportage', the portrayed moment (1972) is repeated three times. Just as in *Youth Portrait*, time plays a role here as well, yet in these three works the 'frozen' moment seems to suggest 'movement'.

The blurring of the details in the portraits - Richter considers these works to be 'neutral' – makes them open to interpretation.¹⁵ In everyone's personal world (of experience) there exists a person that reminds them of one of the figures suggested in the paintings.¹⁶ The '*figures of memory*' act as a shock of recognitions in *Confrontation 1, 2 and 3*: "it could have been someone from their own surrounding".

The majority of the paintings fall under the theme Death. For example *Dead 1, 2 and 3* show close-ups of the deceased Ulrike Meinhof, *Man Shot Down 1 and 2* show the deceased Andreas Baader, in *Hanged* the hanged body of Gudrun Ensslin is portrayed. The images are blurred in such a way that the mood suggested evokes memories of unpleasant situations. Nightmarish images of past traumas or as seen via the media ensure recognition, identification and a connected group mentality, but are not necessarily directly connected with the history of the RAF. The titles of the artworks push certain associations in a certain direction; however each person's memories are individual.

The repetition of some works is noticeable. Different to *Confrontation 1, 2, 3*, *Death 1, 2, 3* is portrayed in three separate paintings. The minor differences between the paintings *Death 1, 2 and 3* (could) interpret the same moment of death. There are no other points of view used in the portrayal of the death mask. The repetition can be seen as one point of focus. Just as on TV, the high or low point is continually repeated in order to emphasize the severity of the event. The two versions of *Man Shot Down* serve to

¹⁴ Foster, p. 658

¹⁵ Borchardt-Hume, pp. 165, 166

¹⁶ The leaders of the RAF at the time were from small West German intellectual milieus. In Borchardt-Hume, p. 169. " 'If 'acts of faith' are unavoidable' as the artist observes in his most revealing conversations with Benjamin Buchloh 'they 're one of us' then how can we pursue faith without falling in the trappings of orthodoxy and ideology?' " In: Borchardt-Hume, p. 168

emphasize in the same way. The repetitions within the series can be understood to show the level of importance the artist himself has placed on these specific events.

The large painting *Funeral* (200 x 300 cm) the RAF funeral pictures the moment as it was covered by the media, when – for many – the terrorist attacks in West Germany had come to an end. The funeral ceremony as commemorative moment lends itself to reflection and allows for remembrance. The concrete background of this event is blurred by Richter in such a way that the collective memory as ‘*figure of memory*’ is transformed into a metaphor. The artwork does more justice as a metaphor for “*Vanitas*”. The viewer becomes reminded of his or her own mortality, as with the 17th century ‘*vanitas*’.¹⁷ By blurring specific (visual) clues, the viewer is thrown back into his or her own feelings of humanity, sorrow, mourning, suffering, remembrance. Memories of death and the dead, associations with worldly sorrow are unavoidable, because we have become used to seeing consoling portrayals of ‘suffering and death’ over the centuries.

Finally, *Blanket* is the most puzzling work of the entire series. This painting has little in common with the other fourteen, due to its more abstract appearance. Background information suggests that this work has been painted over.¹⁸ The action of the painting over conceals the context. On the black background of the canvas seems to be an imprint of a blanket drenched in white paint. The resulting paint texture shows traces of paint in a vertical composition. If it is true that *Blanket* is about an over-painting, then the ‘*figures of memory*’ are literally covered. The meaning of *Blanket* reveals itself in the action. The traces of paint conceal themselves, just like in the other paintings, but in *Blanket* the paint creates no illusions. That’s why *Blanket* is a symbol of the strategies surrounding the collective culture of memory. The covering up or loss of information shows how original meanings are lost and change into new meanings, which are independent of the collective memories. In the entire series the subject is gradually blurred, until the texture of the paint is all that remains.

The catalogue *Gerard Richter Panorama* rightfully reports that the memories of the terror attacks are told by the media, and that thanks to Gerard Richter’s *Cycle, October 18, 1977* (1988), these collective memories are taken out of their mass media context.¹⁹ The subtitles of

¹⁷ “*Vanitas*” is a term used in Art History that can best be described as an allegoric still life. The still life (often with references to death) reminds one of the transience of life.

¹⁸ Borchardt-Hume, p. 165

¹⁹ This insight is cited in the catalogue by Astrid Proll, a former RAF member-turned-photo editor. Borchardt-Hume, p. 166.

the fifteen works are of little help in reconstructing the collective memories. The vague images could indicate the phenomenon of ‘forgetting’, or indicate that the historic context as ‘concrete account’ becomes lost over time. The ‘*fixed points*’ of the collective memory are merged into one history, with the date as the main title of the series. When Assmann explains how cultural memories have become references, thanks to the ability to reconstruct using contemporary framework, a collective memory from its own time and from its own perspective gains its own value.²⁰ Richter’s *Cycle, October 18, 1977* (1988) is a good example of this.

Photographs as “Empty” Memory

Photography leaves an indelible source of memories on the collective memory. What once was, has been documented in photographs since the 19th century. As a result it appears that longing for earlier times – without taking into account the historical context – modifies the present.²¹ Photographs can endure, and give us a representation of places or events from the past. By use of photographs, things can be reconstructed.²² Demand bases his artworks, similar to Richter, on media images of emotionally charged historical events. However, the Demand’s *modus operandi* is significantly different to Richter’s. In his art, Demand shows photography’s failure in its characteristic ability to register the world. “*Every photograph is a result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface. (...) The photograph is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object.*” – Rosalind Krauss.²³ Demand proves the opposite in *Office*, while the representation to the photographed object is being discussed. *Office*, can be described as an artwork that came into existence largely as a result of technological actions. The sharply-focused, large-format, color photograph shows an office space that was left in great haste. The image’s space is dominated by a chaos of papers. The photograph represents a reality yet there is something strange going on with this picture. The depiction of a ransacked office space containing a meeting table covered with blank papers, four chairs, a bookcase, part of a desk - tells us nothing about what kind of an office it is. The office space calls to mind associations with bureaucracies and government institutions. Susan Sontag suggests that a photograph must always expose a visual clue that our perception recognizes as the identification of a subject.²⁴

²⁰ Assmann, p. 130.

²¹ Ekici, p. 25.

²² In her text, Ekici refers to Walter Benjamin “The works of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” In: Arendt, Hannah ed. *Illusions*, (New York: Stocken Books, 1986), p.220.

²³ Krauss, 75.

²⁴ Sontag, p. 77.

In the case of Demand's *Office* this does not occur. The artwork is a recognizable image, but there is no way of knowing to what is being referred. The '*figure of memory*' in the image of a ransacked office space suggests a break-in. According to background information Demand makes use of archive material in which the plundered Stasi-headquarters was shown after the collapse of the DDR in October, 1989.²⁵

Using source material (the photograph) Demand literally recreates the image in a life-sized three-dimensional cardboard scale-model, which, from one certain camera standpoint, is the same as the archive photograph. Once the appearance is exactly like to the source, the artist takes a photograph of the model. Without any post-processing, the photograph is the result of *one* 'direct' shot. Once a complete duplication is achieved, the architectural model is destroyed. Nothing remains to remind us of how the model (ever) looked. The absence of concrete clues on the blank papers, the absence of every trace of humanity, but also the absence of every reference to the 'past' guarantees a feeling of 'alienation'.²⁶ Demand shows a photograph without history, and guarantees that photography becomes a vehicle for the awareness of looking anew as a form of witness statement.²⁷ By creating a *reconstruction* of a representation, Demand addresses the problem of how the past is recorded in photographs.

By reconstructing the photographic source, the tension between the identical likeness between the representation, and the *representation of the representation*, is enhanced. Nowhere is the original 'true' source to be found. In fact, *Office* carries with it a double simulacrum, because the point of departure is a photograph, and therefore a representation of a reproduced subject.²⁸ The similarity of the photograph (source), and of the photograph (source) to the model, and of the artwork to *both* representations, is – however similar in their representation, not the same. The examples are still different in material, spatiality (two-dimensional and three-dimensional), and in format. What should be considered as original and what as replica is called into question. Even the memory of the historical event on which the artwork is based is undermined. The moment portrayed in *Office* shows itself as 'frozen': present and past have become 'virtual' in the physical appearance of the photographic artwork.

²⁵ Fried, p. 200.

²⁶ Fried rightfully refers to Barthes, "...which also means the least suggestion of pastness, of historicity, of the 'that has been' in which Barthes saw the "*noème*" of photography." In: p.201

²⁷ Fried, p. 201

²⁸ The simulacrum as a similar appearance, like a 'tromp l'oeil'. Frederic Jameson calls appropriation without accounting for its historical meaning a 'pastiche'. How something is literally appropriated or imitated, in a nostalgic manner. Jameson, p. 1849

Office shows how powerful the standpoint from which the photograph is taken can be. The viewer is presented with an artwork that he or she is able to view from only one perspective. In this case, the standpoint of how the photograph of the office space was taken is forced onto the viewer. This forced standpoint strengthens the idea that cultural memories are approached from only one perspective. Demand's *modus operandi* in which he controls all phases of the artwork under the watchful eye of the camera, recalls memories of the controlling functions of the government. In this way Demand critiques the way in which collective memories are used to manipulate societal responsibility.

What Demand actually brings to light is how the historical context of a collective memory becomes rigid and gradually disappears - is literally taken over by, and equated to the source - yet the object has become nothing more than a '*trompe l'oeil*'.

Conclusion

Regardless of their differences to each other, both artworks show how the past is reflected and allow us to think about the function of the collective memory. Richter's and Demand's (self) reflection of the past leads not only to the awareness of media manipulation but also as to how collective memories are employed for societal goals. In this way it is apparent that the culture of historical memory no longer functions as 'wise lessons to keep us from repeating the same mistakes twice'. All new media is aimed at the preservation and archiving, and to objectifying. However, the collective memory is still subject to major change: through politics, generations, and the individual. It can never be stored and preserved in monuments.²⁹

Richter presents how 'stable information' deforms and disappears in the images of *Cycle October 18, 1977* (1988). '*To construct sense and meaning, the paintings insist, we have to recognize that ambiguity and contradictions are at the heart of the human condition,*' stated by Richter.³⁰ By ridding the 'memory' from its frames of reference, issues of humanity such as defeat, grief, pity, culprits and victims, and what can be considered as 'good and bad', are emphasized. It seems that *Cycle* possesses qualities that allow it to function as a cultural icon. When I visited the exposition *Panorama* in Centre Pompidou (Paris) last summer, I became aware of the impact the work must have had when it was first shown in the modernistic Esters

²⁹ Huyssen, p.27.

³⁰ Statement by Richter, In: Borchardt-Hume, p.170.

Haus in Krefeld, in the beginning of 1989. Not long afterwards the Fall of the Wall became a fact.³¹ The impact on the public's perception has now been changed into a universal icon.

Demand shows in *Office* how the collective memory is used to achieve strategic goals. He questions the function of the replica (in *Office*), since in our current culture of mass consumerism; 'nostalgic' memories are portrayed as reproducible objects. The reproduction of 'historic' places, landscapes, buildings, theme parks, from an historic context ensures that anything can become a tourist attraction. The 'historic' place is rebuilt, without its credibility being called into question. The 'original context' is lost. The distinction between what is 'real' and 'fake' has to be assumed, because there is no way of knowing how it 'really' was. Insights into how collective memories are propagated as cultural inheritance (from a forced perspective) indicates how few different possibilities for reflection are offered. Collective memories solidify over time. Then it becomes obvious how the collective memory has become the cultural icon as consumer good, through new information technologies, media politics, and marketing. This, without asking from which perspective the cultural icon is originated. In this sense, *Office* shows - almost literally - how the view of the past disappears through a loss of meaning. It suggests a 'hyper reality' that gives insights into the functioning of the collective memory as commodity. In the 'clean' representation of the representation – as a reduced history – Demand shows how a cultural icon can be reduced to a 'souvenir'.

In closing we ask ourselves which strategies remain to evoke a cultural identity in a globalizing world?

³¹ Borchardt-Hume, p.166.

Literature List

- Assmann, Jan, Collective Memory and Cultural Identity, In: *18 New German Critique*, No. 65, p. 128.
- Benjamin, W. *Het kunstwerk in het tijdperk van zijn technische reproduceerbaarheid*. (Henk Hoeks, vert.) Boom, Amsterdam, 2008 (1985, oorsp. 1974).
- Borchardt-Hume, Achim, 'Dreh Dich Nicht Um': Don't Turn Around, Richter's Paintings of the Late 1980s. In: *Gerhard Richter Panorama, A retrospective*, Cat. Tate Modern, London, Nationalgalerie, Staatliches Museen zu Berlin, Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris, Tate Publishing, 2011, p. 166.
- Ekici, Didem, The Surfaces of Memory in Berlin. Rebuilding the Schloß. In: *Journal of Architectural Education*, © 2007, ACSA, pp. 26, 27.
- Foster, H, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, David Joselit, *Art since 1900. Modernism, antimodernism, postmodernism*, Thames & Hudson, London, Second Edition 2011 (2004), pp. 656-660.
- Fried, Michael, Without a Trace: Art of Thomas Demand. In: *Artforum*, March 2005, pp. 198-203.
- Gelder, van H. en H. Westgeest, Representation in Photography: The Competition with Painting. In: *Photography Theory in Historical Perspective*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 18,19.
- Huysen, Andreas, Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia. In: *Public Culture*, Vol. 12, Number 1, Winter 2000, Duke University Press, pp. 21-38.
- Jameson, Fredric, Postmodernism and Consumers Society. Pastiche Eclipses Parody, In: V.B. Leitch (red.) *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Second edition. New York. London. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2010, 2011, pp. 1848-1851.
- Krauss, Rosalind, Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America. In: *October*, Vol. 3 (Spring, 1977), pp. 68-81.
- Mehring, Christine, East or West, Home is Best: Friends, Family and Design in Richter's Early Years. In: *Gerhard Richter, Panorama, A Retrospective*, Cat. Tate Modern, London, Nationalgalerie, Staatliches Museen zu Berlin, Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris, Tate Publishing, 2011, p. 29.
- Sontag, Susan, In Plato's grot. In: (vert. Scheepmaker, H. 1979): *Over fotografie*. 1973, 1974, 1977. pp. 12, 15.
- Sontag, Susan, De Heroïek van van het Kijken. In: (vert. Scheepmaker, H. 1979): *Over fotografie*. 1973, 1974, 1977. pp. 71-92.

Digital Sources:

<http://metropolism.com/magazine/2004-no3/in-de-schaduw-van-de-jaren-zeven/>

visited on March, 22, 2013.

http://www.duitslandweb.nl/naslagwerk/Geschiedenis/BRD+Ostpolitik+en+RAF_x003a_+1966-1982/RAF+en+Duitse+Herfst.html.

visited on March, 24, 2013.

http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3ATA%3AE%3AT3%7CA%3ATA%3AE%3AT3&page_number=7&template_id=1&sort_order=1

visited on March, 22, 2013.