

Future Memory / Social Bookmarking Qingdao

Artistic Interventions between Memory, Place and Transnational History

Dagmar Rauwald 2018

A small information panel, partly hidden behind a fence at a disused bus stop, recalls in a few sober words an event from the Nazi period. Its modest presence points to a larger question: How does a city remember histories that have never fully entered its public memory? The relationship between memory and urban space is never neutral. Places can preserve traces, but they can also conceal, marginalise or render histories invisible.

The project *Future Memory* takes the former site of the labour camp Langer Morgen in Hamburg as a point of departure. The camp was largely destroyed by bombing in 1945, yet fragments of its material history remain visible. In May 1944, more than 200 Chinese women were deported from St. Pauli to this site. Some were subjected to violence and torture; others did not survive the camp. Their history remained largely absent from the visible narrative of Hamburg.

The project responds to this absence through artistic intervention rather than conventional commemoration. In 2016, with the support of the Hamburg Ministry of Culture and Media, a performance by Liu Ding and an accompanying public discussion were realised in relation to the history of the camp. The artistic intervention sought to reactivate a place whose historical significance had become almost invisible.

Aleida Assmann reminds us that “when thinking about memory, we must start with forgetting” (Assmann 2008: 97). Forgetting is not simply the opposite of remembering. It is part of the mechanisms through which societies select what becomes culturally visible. A history can remain factually documented while nevertheless being absent from collective perception. The question of memory is therefore also a question of power: who or what is granted visibility?

Future Memory proposes art as a practice of activating such dormant histories. The aim is not to reconstruct the past or to create a definitive monument, but to establish a temporary situation in which the relationship between place, memory and responsibility becomes perceptible. James E. Young's concept of the counter-monument is useful here: the counter-monument resists the idea that remembrance requires a stable and authoritative object. It can instead create “memory against itself” (Young 1992: 267), leaving the process of remembering open and unfinished.

The project *Social Bookmarking Qingdao* extends this approach from Hamburg towards a transnational context. The term “social bookmarking” normally describes the digital practice of marking and saving significant information in virtual space. The project transfers this principle into the physical city: artistic interventions become bookmarks in urban space, marking places where historical, political and cultural reflection can take place.

The participating artists travel to Qingdao and encounter the city not as a fixed cultural object but as a layered historical landscape. Through meetings with local experts and through artistic research, histories, memories and contemporary realities become starting points for new artistic interventions. The artists do not seek to produce an exhaustive representation of Qingdao. Instead, they respond to particular sites and situations, creating temporary “social bookmarks” that connect place, perception and memory.

This methodology follows Michel de Certeau's understanding of the city as something continuously produced through everyday practices. “The act of walking is to the urban system what the enunciation is to language” (de Certeau 1984: 97). Walking, observing, placing, gathering and performing therefore become ways of writing alternative narratives into the city. The urban landscape is no longer merely the setting of history; it becomes an active medium of artistic research.

The connection between Hamburg and Qingdao also complicates the conventional distinction between local and global history. Both cities are shaped by migration, trade, colonial encounters and transnational networks, but these histories cannot be reduced to a single narrative. The artistic exchange creates a space in which different perspectives can meet without necessarily being reconciled.

The resulting *Social Bookmarks* are therefore not monuments in the traditional sense. They are open situations: moments of interruption that invite attention, conversation and reflection. Their value lies precisely in their temporary and relational character. They mark a place without claiming ownership of its history.

The exhibition in the former Viktoria Kaserne in Hamburg brings these encounters back into a shared space. The works become traces of a journey between places and histories, translating experiences from Qingdao into an ongoing dialogue with Hamburg.

Together, *Future Memory* and *Social Bookmarking Qingdao* propose a form of artistic memory work that moves between archive and lived experience, local history and transnational exchange, disappearance and renewed visibility. Their central question is not simply what should be remembered, but how places can become capable of remembering differently.

Memory here is not understood as a fixed image of the past. It is an active practice in the present—and a responsibility towards futures that have yet to be written.

Literature

1. **Assmann, Aleida** (2008): "Canon and Archive." In: Astrid Erll / Ansgar Nünning (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, pp. 97–108.
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3. **Young, James E.** (1992): "The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today." *Critical Inquiry*, 18(2), pp. 267–296.