

Treblinka Wlodawa Zamosc Neuengamme

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A tightrope walk between Art and Memorial

Minsk Auschwitz Belzec Bergen-Belsen

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nek Brcko Buchenwald Chelmno Opole Ra-

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Groß-Rosen Mittelbau-Dora Modliborzy-

ce Natzweiler Salaspils San Sabba Sobibor

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*Nisko Opatow Maly Trostinec Mauthausen**

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On the example of the Memorial for Austrian & Jewish Victims
of the Shoa in Vienna and the Holocaust-Memorial in Berlin

” I think all good art can be a commentary on the world as it is. I think if it can do that, if it can make people think, then it’s really done its job. [...] That is what art and culture is there for. “

Rachel Whiteread

Abstract

The following paper will elaborate on the basis of the memorial by Rachel Whiteread in Vienna, Austria and the memorial by Peter Eisenman in Berlin, Germany the meaning and position of memorials within the field of art. It will analyze the interplay between the memorials and their surroundings and the influence they had and still have among society. Furthermore it will respond to the artists personal execution of the topic, naming the Jewish persecution by the Nazi Regime. After all the paper will end by comparing the two memorials in terms of their appearance, meaning and reputation. The Conclusion will summarize and draw a line back to the initial research question - Can a memorial be assigned to the field of art, or can we distinguish a memorial as 'art to remember' and assign it to a separate, own field independent of art?

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Figure 01
The Jewish Memorial
The memorial opposing the
Lessing monument in the Jewish
Quarter in the heart of Vienna



Introduction

History taught us many things. We learn from our successes, our achievements, our discoveries but overall we learn most from our mistakes. They recall that certain periods or certain incidents should not be repeated - can't be repeated. Memorials as well as art are used to capture mentioned happenings. They transmit through an object one part of History, helping us humans not to forget about our past. Always recalling, reminding and warning us to be a better version of ourselves.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines a memorial “*an object, often large and made of stone, that has been built to honor a famous person or event*” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Art on the other hand is defined as “*the making of objects, images, music, etc. that are beautiful or express feelings*” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

Both definitions include an object. Art nevertheless, not necessarily is revealed by an object, as it also includes other art forms like for example music, which expresses itself by intangible sound and melodic tones.

But just because both definitions include to express themselves through an ‘object’, does that automatically mean they can be assigned to the same field? Or moreover, is a memorial always a subcategory of art? Can we distinguish a memorial as ‘art to remember’ and assign it to a separate, own field independent of art? If so, what defines this field?

The following paper will elaborate and try to give an answer to these questions. On the example of the memorials of Rachel Whiteread [Figure 01] and Peter Eisenmann [Figure 14], who have each dedicated a memorial to the capital cities of Austria and Germany, I will analyze the meaning, the materialization, the context in which the sculpture is placed and the impact it has on its surrounding as well as the thoughts of people and the deeper meaning and connection to the past.

Both memorials are assigned to the topic: The Jewish persecution by the Nazi Regime. Capturing such an event, shaped by trauma, pain and anger, is a challenge if not almost impossible. But both artists, in very different ways, formulated and translated the topic into a tangible, real-life object. Whilst Rachel’s memorial in Vienna, hides amongst the historical buildings of the city, not seeking for any attention, Peter’s memorial in Berlin is situated along one of the main streets, in the center of happening requesting pedestrians to interact with it. There is no right or wrong, no good or bad when it comes to analyzing the work of an artist. Especially not when his work is dedicated to an event that is influenced and formed by so many different aspects. But what can be compared and analyzed are the different approaches and implementations they have decided to take.

Chapter I

The Jewish Quarter in Vienna, Austria

Atmosphere, Location and History

In the heart of Vienna, situated within the first district is the Jewish Quarter. A small, well hidden space framed by historical, stucco decorated facades. Five pedestrian paths meander their way to the square, which used to be the center of the Jewish community in the middle ages. The ambience is surprisingly peaceful and calm. Only a small number of tourists seem to be crossing this area. It's quiet. No traffic sounds or any other distracting noises disturb the atmosphere. One hardly dares to speak, not wanting to interrupt the soothing ambience.

But the appearances are deceptive. The Jewish Quarter is shaped by tragic historical and humanitarian events. In the center of the space, where now the Memorial for Austrian & Jewish Victims of the Shoa in Vienna can be found, once used to be the biggest Jewish Synagogue of Europe, the Or-Sarua-Synagoge. Destroyed in 1421 by a fire, the Synagogue was left in debris. During that time the Jewish population of Vienna was confronted for the first time with racial discrimination in form of expulsion, assassination and captivity. This occurrence is known as the "Wiener Gesera". (Der Judenplatz, n.d.) Knowing this, the seemingly peaceful atmosphere which appeared to be so soothing, begins to falter. How can a space formed by terror seem so innocent?

The discovery of the synagogue was only in 1995, when the idea for a memorial for the Austrian & Jewish Victims of the Shoa in Vienna was born. During excavations the leftovers of the synagogue were found, revealing the tragic events that had happened here. To preserve as much history as possible, the remaining pieces of the synagogue were made accessible for the public through the Jewish museum, located within the Jewish Quarter. On top of the remains the memorial of Rachel Whiteread was built. A reminder, a symbol and a memory for the 65.000 jewish victims murdered during the Shoa. (Planet Vienna, n.d.)

Figure 02
Map of the 1. district of Vienna
The map shows the positioning
of the Jewish Quarter within
the first district of Vienna as
well as several main buildings



Figure 03
The Lessing Monument
Situated opposite of the Jewish
memorial. A statue of Gotthold
Ephraim Lessing

The Lessing Monument

Multiple different Restaurants and Cafés fence around the memorial and the opposite Lessing monument [Figure 03], adding daily life and variety to the space. The two objects, the Jewish memorial and the Lessing monument, are situated in the center several meters apart from each other. They organize the space around them, making it impossible to oversee or not interact with it.

Looking at the two statues' appearance and comparing them in terms of volume and scale they couldn't differ more. Whilst Rachels memorial is a modern interpretation of a memorial, considering materialization and form, the Lessing monument seems very traditional. A figure made out of metal placed on a base almost the size of the statue itself. It faces towards the Jewish memorial, gazing at it and creating an invisible connection between the two objects.

It is dedicated to the German poet Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who is the most important German author of the age of enlightenment in the 18. hundreds. (Münnich, 2021) Likewise the entire Jewish Quarter, the Lessing monument had to face several deep hits. Only 4 years after the revealing of the first Lessing monument in 1939, the national socialists confiscated the statue or moreover the metal of the statue for armament purposes. After a new reveal of another Lessing statue in 1968, the city of Vienna moved it back to its original location in the Jewish Quarter where it can be found to this day. (Wien Geschichte Wiki, 2021)



(Praefcke, 2009)

Figure 04
Model of Nameless Library
Wood, glass, model paste and paint



(Phipps, 2010)

Chapter II

Reasons and Intentions

Initial Phase, Reputation and Objections

The idea for the Holocaust memorial in Vienna was seeded in 1994 by an austrian-jewish architect, publicist and author named Simon Wiesenthal. He, as a survivor of the Holocaust himself, saw the need for a new, more meaningful memorial for the city of Vienna. The already existing one, by Alfred Hrdlicka, was in his opinion not appropriate enough to what it represents and stands for. (IDEA Journal, 2010)

His wish led to the mayor of Vienna who after all organized a competition in which in total ten different artists were invited. Five of them, Austrian origin, the other five came from abroad. Peter Eisenman, the artist of the Holocaust memorial in Berlin, also competed alongside Rachel Whiteread for the memorial in Vienna. The City made it very clear that the new memorial can't be a sculpture of figurative nature. Therefore it had to be abstract or at least had to allow scope for interpretation.

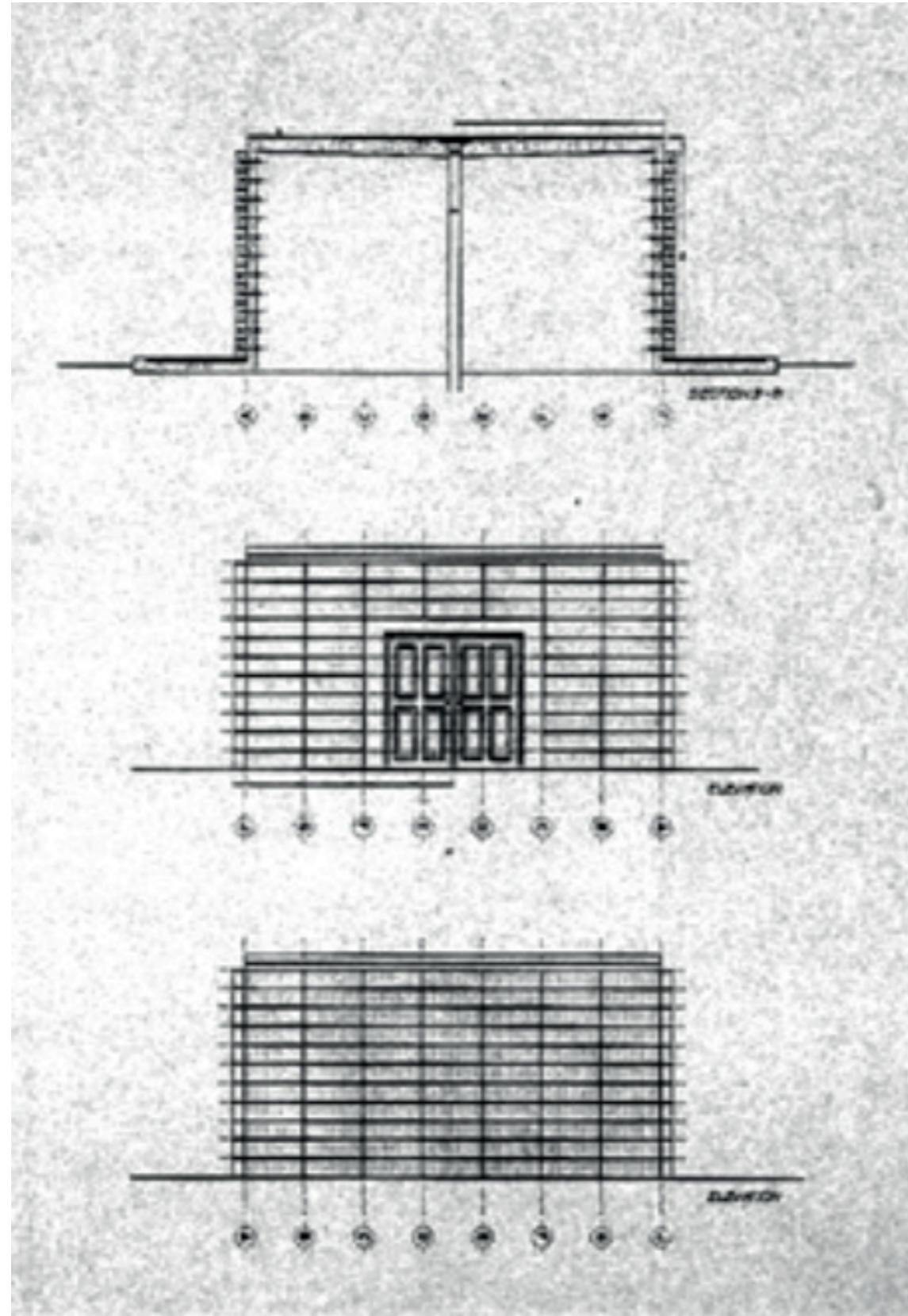
The announcement of Rachel Whiteread being the winner of the competition led to a flood of controversial opinions upon the city. Objections came from not only political, cultural, economic and religious sides but also bordering shop owners and local residents reacted with antipathy and incomprehension. Their resistance even made them draw up a petition named 'Anti-Whiteread', signed by almost 2000 Viennese citizens. Their justification was based on the worry of potential upcoming business decrease, car parking issues and security concerns in terms of Neo-Nazi harassment and violence. Furthermore the memorial was also judged in terms of its meaning. It was said it's "*too cryptic to accept, it has precipitated an unresolved controversy.*" (IDEA Journal, 2010, p. 29) The abstractness of its appearance hinders the understanding of society and creates rather confusion than clarity, as said in the Idea Journal. (IDEA Journal, 2010)

After all obstacles, relapses and resistance from several parties and fields of the City Vienna, the memorial was yet finally revealed in October 2000 and ever since evokes mixed opinions and feelings upon the society. Nevertheless it must be said that memorials don't intend to excite or aim to be admired. They are living, immortalized memories. Any interaction or reaction is neither good nor bad. As Simon Wiesenthal said:

*It is important that the art is not beautiful, that it hurts us in some way.
(IDEAS Journal, 2010, p. 28)*

Figure 05

Section and Elevation
Section shows the water drainage
derived through the inside, center
of the memorial



(Atelier One, 1996)

To state something is beautiful or something is ugly, particularly in the field of art, is very daring. It's said out of a personal, subjective point of view and therefore is influenced by one's taste, cultural background, religious beliefs, time, age and knowledge. That the memorial of Rachel caused confrontation between several parties, amongst the artist her/himself, is no individual case. Almost all memorials as well as monuments utter reactions like that - and that's crucial. Their intentions are to evoke confrontation, communication and a dialogue between the society itself but also between the object and the observer.

The memorial out of a constructional point of view

The design process of the memorial can be described as tedious. Around five years in total from the initial thought, the first sketch until the final reveal of the sculpture.

Throughout the design process Rachel was supported by two further parties. The model [Figure 04], that in further process was exhibited to the public as a reference, was done by Simon Phipps. His model was a wooden object with glass and model paste details. Finishing it off by beautifying it with paint. The drawings [Figure 05] were made by the architectural office 'Atelier One'. The set handed in for the competition included "a ground plan of Judenplatz Square and the memorial site, sections and elevations, foundation details and wall details of book fixings, and ground and roof plans." (IDEA Journal, 2010, p.27).

The drawings show undetected, hidden insights into a space that apart from these simple line sketches would never be seen by anyone. Invisible parts are made visible, revealing a hollow space with nothing inside but a dark, mysterious void. Disrupted only by the water drainage - a technical functionality - cutting through the center of the space. Furthermore the drawings elaborate on the scale and the dimension of the memorial. An axial grid subdivides the facade into equally large rectangles - the books as seen from an observer perspective on the outside. The rectangles make it easy to calculate the height and the length of each facade side. They also prove that the memorial is not as one might assume square but rather a concrete rectangle with its longer side protruding into the Jewish Square.

Chapter III

The Artist Rachel Whiteread

Growing up with Rachel Whiteread

Rachel Whiteread is a Phenomenon. Known for casting out the unnoticed, nondescript parts of daily life objects, including bathtubs, mattresses, doors, floors or even windows she manages to make the invisible visible. She embraces unvalued parts of objects and therethrough excites and demands our imagination.

She was born 1963 in London. Always surrounded by art ever since being a child. Today she is one of UK's most famous contemporary artists. Furthermore she is the first woman ever to win the Turner prize in 1995 for her cast in concrete of an entire Victorian terrace House in London [Figure 09]. (Blythe, 2020) The prize is awarded solely to British artists with focus on contemporary art. (Tate, n.d.)

Rachel was influenced by several different moments and people throughout her life. One of them was her mom. As in many cases, having a parent who works within the same field of practice, can be challenging and demanding. The relationship with her mom, who is an artist herself, nevertheless over time shaped and inspired Rachel as a person and her works today. A key moment to mention is an exhibition in 1980 called 'Woman's Images of Men' curated by her mom, Patricia Whiteread. Rachel herself says it was "*an important contributor to her formative interest in art.*" (Blythe, 2020, par. 1). In 1985 she graduated with a BA in Fine Art Painting at Brighton. After that she decided to postgraduate in sculpture at the Slade School of Fine Arts in London. Although her Master was all about sculpting, molding objects and forms, getting to know different materials and their properties, she herself admitted that she didn't really do sculpting until she left college. (Art Basel, 2021) Rachel never elaborated on this statement any further. Nevertheless we can assume, on the basis of her work progress and her self-reflection on it, that she first had to find her personal, individual ,artistic style' to feel content within the field of sculpting.



(Robertson, n.d.)

Figure 07
Ghost, 1990
Cast of an interior space
including a fire place, a window
and a door

Working Process

The working process of an artist is fairly hard to put in words. It differs in many ways, is influenced by routines, and inspirational sources. Being creative needs time and space. Space to think, be playful and in many cases also fail. Fail to realize what the next, correct step will be. What drives them is the process itself and not just the final outcome. A very personal and intimate journey full of emotions, feelings and setbacks.

Rachels safespace is her studio. Referring to it as “*just me and the studio*” (Art Basel, 2021) it is a familiar space where she feels comfortable and surrounded by a pleasant, soothing atmosphere that inspires her and her work. Because she is so eager to work by herself, sealing off from any distractions, most of her works are divided into several separate pieces. It allows her to work independently. Later in the finishing process it then all comes together, joining the separate pieces to a whole, complete sculpture. Throughout her career, Rachel has created multiple sculptures in all sizes, scales and materials. From resin to rubber, concrete or plaster. She reinterprets the traditional use of the materials and therefore gives objects new identities.

Not necessarily one of her most famous works but definitely the most meaningful one is the sculpture ‘Ghost’ [Figure 07] from 1990. Rachel refers to the sculpture as the art work that “*turned her way of thinking on its head*” (Art Basel, 2021). It was her breakthrough and gave her international recognition.

Ghost is a negative of an everyday room. It includes a fireplace, a door and a window as well as a mold of a light switch. Seemingly unspectacular in what it represents, what makes it so special is the simplicity of what it reproduces. It’s ripped out of a daily life scenario. Anyone can refer to it. What Rachel tried to do is “*mummify the air in a room.*” (National Gallery of Art, 2009) She plays with the position and the perception of the viewer. Similar to the Jewish memorial in Vienna, the observer has the impression of knowing what he’s looking at. But the appearance is deceptive. The longer he analyzes the object the more confused he becomes. It is not ‘just’ a room, it’s the imprint of it. The unvalued parts that are taken for granted and barely ever receive recognition are now the main attraction.

Although Rachel is mostly known for her sculptures, she also has a passion for drawing and painting. The first time she really felt this enthusiasm for this field of art was in Berlin in 1992, where she lived for one and a half years. What triggered this spark of excitement was the space she was able to work in. Her first drawing studio. A light flooded, warm space composed of five consecutive rooms, connected and at the same time disconnected by large two winged doors.

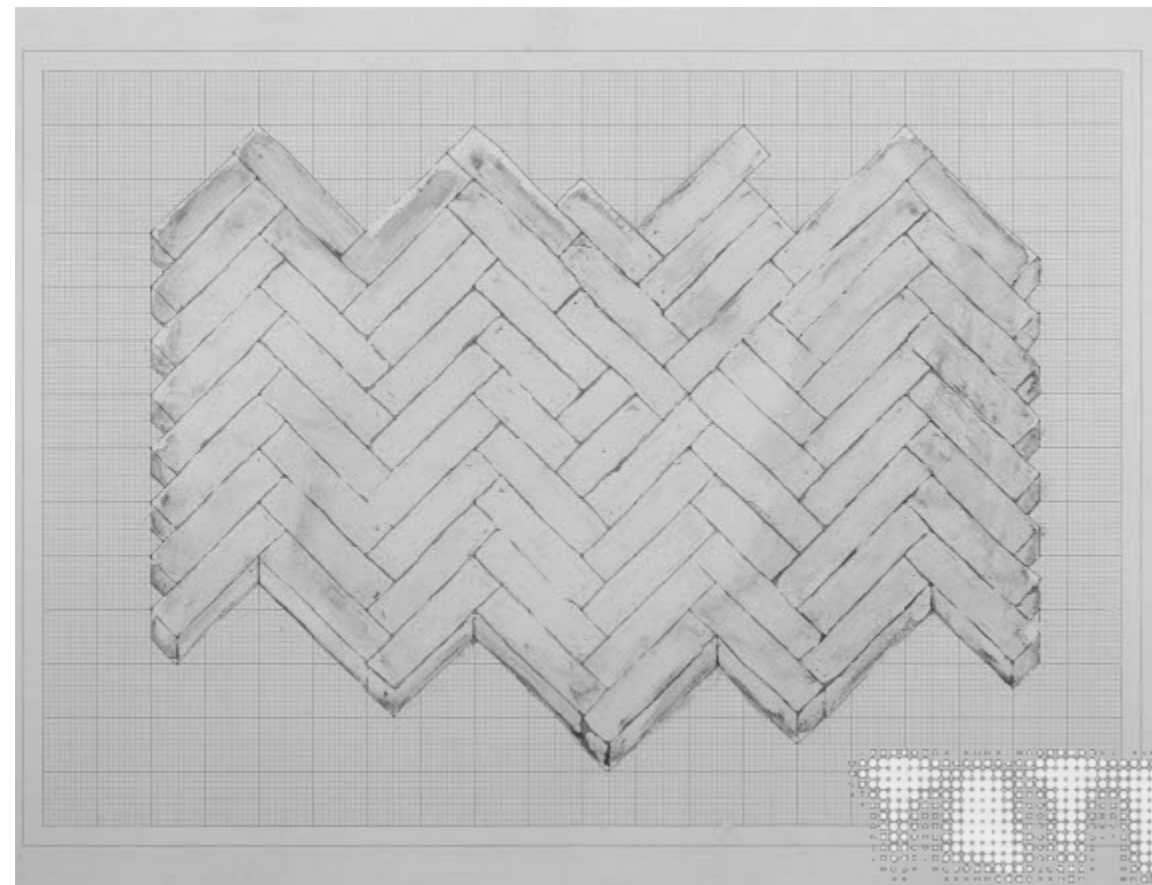


(Keam, 2017)

Figure 09
Ghost, 1990
Concrete cast of an entire
Victorian House in London

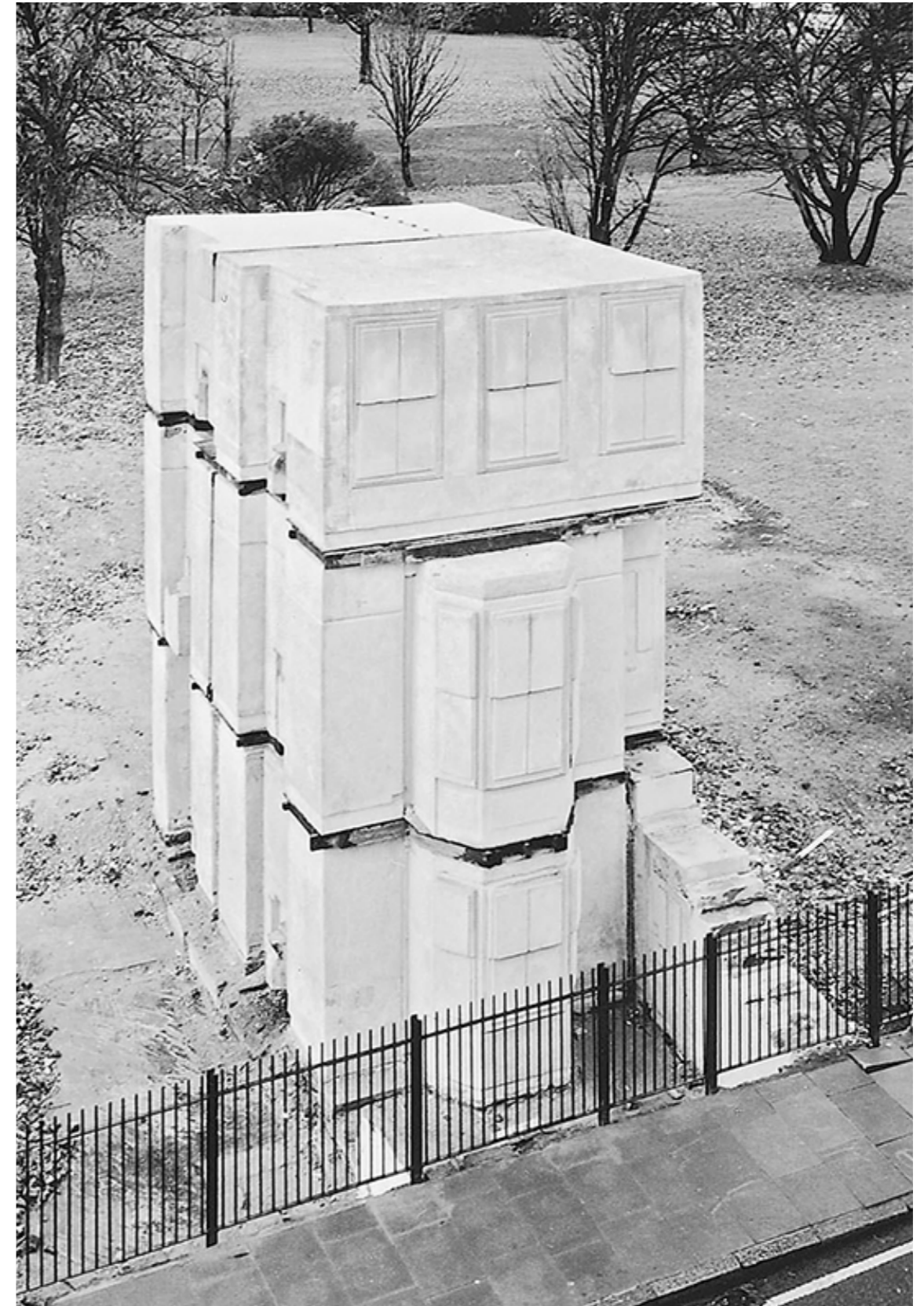
Interesting enough to see how important the working environment is, especially for Rachel. It nourishes her creativity and enables her to create astounding art pieces. A series of works that she developed during this period of time are drawings of the wooden herring-bone parquet in the studio. The drawings elaborate on the symmetry and the repetition of the pattern of the flooring as well as how the light gets reflected into the room, bestowing it with warmth.

Whilst *Study (Blue) for "Floor"*, 1992; *Correction fluid, ink, and watercolour on paper* [Figure 08] and *Study for "Floor" (Brown/Black)*, 1993; *Ink on paper* were painted during her time in Berlin, *Black and White Floor*, 2001; *White ink on black paper* was developed several years later, when she already lived back in the UK. (Tate, 2010)



(Tate Images, n.d.)

Figure 08
Study (Blue) for „Floor“, 1992
Correction fluid, ink, and watercolour on paper



(Takac, 2020)

Figure 10
The Memorial in context
*The memorial raised on a one-
staired pedestal in between
traditional, stucco decorated
buildings*



Chapter IV

The Vienna memorial by Rachel Whiteread

Approach and appearance of the Memorial

The Jewish memorial in Vienna almost seems like a foreign body situated in-between historical, with stucco decorated buildings. A modern block, symmetric and clear in its form, was placed in the center of a space shaped by history, time and tragedy. Where once the Synagogue was located is now a concrete cube raised on a pedestal. (Blythe, 2020) The dimension and proportion is comparably small considering the surrounding buildings. Rachel Whiteread's memorial seems to be a stranger at first. But at the same time this unexpectedness attracts attention and forces pedestrians to stop and take a closer, more precise look at it. What is this misplaced figure doing in the middle of the space?

Looking at the memorial from further away the viewer can barely recognize what exactly the sculpture represents. Its surface seems uneven, carved by a convex and concave surface structure. Several equally large gaps divide the walls into smaller fields. A comparatively large two-winged door elucidates on front- and backside of the memorial. A slight increase through a pedestal accentuates the importance of the sculpture in its surrounding.

Walking closer towards the memorial, more and more details are revealed. The walls depict books placed neatly in a library and the supposedly gaps are the negative of shelves themselves. The viewer is given the appearance to have solved the mystery of the sculpture. A concrete library. But the closer one analyzes the sculpture the more questions arise. Why a library in the first place? What do all these books mean and how do they relate to the Shoa in Vienna? How can I enter? Can I enter?

Rachel Whiteread is a master in playing with the perception of the viewer, giving seemingly obvious and daily objects a deeper meaning. The viewer, whilst analyzing the object, starts losing track of his position as an observer. He starts questioning the position of himself towards the sculpture but also the overall meaning of the object he is looking at. (Pauls, 2009)

The door which had to be the entrance to the inside of the concrete block is sealed and the books that seemed to be orderly placed in the shelves are looked at from the backside, not the spine. Something seems to be different about the supposedly ordinary library sculpture. Where are the outer walls? Slowly the viewer realizes that the outer walls are missing and the perspective from which we as observers look at the library is not as one would assume from inside the room, but from the outside. We, the viewers ARE the walls. We are passive observers looking into the core of the room which is impenetrable. (Pauls, 2009)

Figure 11
Detail of the casted books
Taking a closer look at the walls
of the sculpture the books as
well as the shelves can be clearly
identified



It's very common for Rachel to make her works inaccessible. She therethrough triggers the imagination of the viewer, forcing him to complete her work on his own. She stimulates creativity. By 'locking up' the core of the sculpture and blocking every possibility to enter, the viewer has to complete the missing, unknown part of the concrete sculpture. Observers have the chance to build up a personal relation to the memorial but also to the story it conveys.

Deeper meaning of the Memorial

When Rachel was to design the memorial for the Jewish victims of the Shoa she was confronted with one main question: *"Kann man sich dieser Aufgabe mit einem gegenständlichen Kunstwerk nähern oder ist sie nur in einer ungegenständlichen Form lösbar?"* (Pauls, 2009, p. 43) Meaning, can the commemoration and the admonition of such a terrible event be captured in a figurative sculpture? Or can only a non-figurative, abstract sculpture express the deeper meaning of this historical event, as it allows for more free thinking and interpretation?

It's hard to say whether there is a right or wrong to this question as there are many different approaches towards the commemoration of the Jews all around the world. But what there is to say is that Rachels memorial in Vienna, combines both - figurative and non-figurative. By designing an object which seemingly reveals its meaning at first sight, the observer is given the belief of knowledge. But the key to understanding the deeper meaning is - time. Time for analyzing the object and time to process and think about Rachels intentions. Therethrough the knowledge we thought we had, slowly gets taken away and turns into confusion and uncertainty.

The memorial in Vienna is not the only work of Rachel, that includes books as a key motive. Another example is the pavilion for the Biennale in Venice in 1997. The pavilion exhibits an enclosed space with negative moldings of books lined up in shelves on the wall. Rachel used this exhibition as a practice for the memorial in Vienna.

The difference between the pavilion and the memorial in Vienna is how the books are represented. In the pavilion the negative of the spaces between book and shelf have been casted only showing the imprint of the books in the material. In the memorial though Rachel molded the books whilst the empty spaces between book and shelf are exhibited as a negative [Figure 11]. One reason why she changed the method could be the importance she tries to assign to the book. She uses them as a symbol for the Jewish population as the population of books and wisdom. A symbol for tradition and history. The library, moreover the books, represent the loss of knowledge caused by the expulsion and murder of the Jews. Books prevent memories from getting lost over time, so does the memorial. (Pauls, 2009)

Figure 12

Detail of the door and inscription on the floor

The inscription on top of the pedestal is the only written information revealed on the memorial



In a catalog concerning the Eindhovener Exhibition in 1992 it says:

“Rachel Whiteread’s work has much to do with images of memory, which are intangible, mental reconstructions. Just a memory never coincides with the original event, so her works vary greatly from the objects from which they are cast: they are animate.” (Debbaut & Essink, 1992/93).

By perpetuating the tracks of Jewish history in the form of books, Rachel preserves the memory of the tragic happening during the Shoa in Austria for the public.

Another aspect that sets the memorial apart from previous works of hers is the source of inspiration. Rachel’s works are usually inspired by personal objects or scenarios she has experienced throughout life. Works like *Ghost* from 1990 or *House* from 1993 find their origin in one of many daily life experiences she had. Objects and even entire rooms are casted in gipson or concrete, representing in an abstract, modified way, a part of her life. The memorial in Vienna though can’t be linked to any personal memories of her. It’s fully dedicated to the Jewish population in Austria and solely serves as a reminder of what has happened. The sculpture represents a fictitious room that can’t be equated to any existing room in reality. Everything concerning the memorial is made up, an imaginary space. The books as well as the two-winged door [Figure 12] are casted out of a formwork purely designed for the sculpture. Even the, for visitors not visible, rosette at the ceiling of the room comes from Rachel Whiteread’s own property.

What does that mean? Why did she change her way of working for this specific assignment? Was it because it is a memorial and not a “regular” artwork? What role does the positioning within a public space play?

Andrea Schlieker sums up Rachel’s memorial with the following words:

“In Whiteread’s gesamten künstlerischen Werk klingt die Erinnerung an nunmehr unwiederbringlich verlorenes an. In gewisser Weise verkörpern ihre Skulpturen die Quintessenz dessen, was wir unter einem Mahnmal verstehen.” (Schlieker, 2000, as cited in Pauls, 2020, p. 47)

She says that Rachel’s memorial is a summary, the quintessence of what we see as a memorial. It represents and embodies the loss and the tragedy of history.

Figure 13

Casted books as walls
All four walls are a repetition of
the same book cast in the exact
same arrangement. Only the front
wall is interrupted by a
two-winged door



Interaction with surrounding space

Different to previous works of Rachel, where she sets a relation to a personal matter or an object, the memorial in Vienna does not refer to anything at all. In a way, everything about the sculpture is made up by Rachel herself. As Pauls explains it:

“Das Mahnmal steht für eine Raumidee und nicht für einen realen Raum. Es variiert die Idee eines Raumes in einem der Nachbarhäuser.” (Pauls, 2009, p. 46)

Meaning the memorial stands for an idea of a space but not for a tangible, real space. What Rachel tries to express by that is the arbitrariness of the space. She herself explained that she wanted people to imagine that this room within her memorial could be located in any of the houses surrounding the Judenplatz. The size and the proportion are inspired by an average room in one of the Viennese Gründerzeit buildings. Again she challenges the observer’s imagination, trying to build up a personal and unique relation between observer and the sculpture.

The Jewish memorial for the Shoa in Vienna was Rachel’s first and only memorial ever made. The difference between a memorial and a sculpture not only lies in the deeper meaning of the object itself and the tragedy it carries with it, it also differs in the positioning within its surrounding space and the relation it tries to create with it. The majority of memorials are placed within a public space, making them accessible and visible for everyone. The sculpture thus intervenes in the surrounding space, changing its appearance and perception. It might ask the surrounding and the visitor to interact with it, to be a part of the experience and the memorial itself. But it can also be a passive object, an object that solely by its presence and appearance triggers emotions, feelings and memory.

Vienna’s Jewish memorial tends to be more of a passive object of commemoration. A concrete block. Rectangular and geometric. Not accessible. Situated in the heart of Vienna and sheltered by historical facades, demarcating it from the bordering spaces, it seems like the buildings around it create a shelter that protects the sculpture from everyday life. Deliberately the memorial has been uplifted slightly by a pedestal. One step upwards separates Vienna’s ground from the memorial, building a hurdle that everyone needs to take to have a closer look at it. The step creates awareness, telling the observer that this is where the memorial starts - physically. Mentally the beginning of the memorial starts way before the memorial itself. The surrounding space is part of it. The concrete memorial is a representational immortalization of what the entire square conveys. Sadness, terror, horror but also beauty and awareness of everything that had happened.

As a pedestrian crossing the Jewish Quarter, there is no way around the memorial. In any case you are confronted with its appearance. Even sitting in one of the Restaurants or Cafés around it, the view will always lead you back to the memorial.

Chapter V

The Berlin memorial by Peter Eisenmann

A memorial for Berlin

A memorial for Berlin. A City whose past is directly connected to one of the most tragic happenings in human history. A challenge and a chance at the same time. But how is this assignment to be tackled? Where to start and where to end? Is there an end? How can we immortalize the scar left in human history?

Peter Eisenman was the winner of a two round public competition in which over 500 participants took part. The entire process took over one decade. 1997 a jury finally announced a winner as well as the location, form and message the memorial should convey. After another intense and controversial 8 years of designing, changing and adapting the design, in 2005 the memorial was revealed to the public.

On a space of approximately 19.000 qm a field of 2711 concrete columns attract pedestrians' attention, dragging them into a maze of silence and forlornness. Changing heights and angles combined with a ground that almost imitates the movement of a wave, underline the feeling of uncomfot. It's an interactive public place of memory and exchange.

Although situated in the center of Berlin, right next to a busy main street and in the middle of all happening, entering the field feels like entering another world. It's quiet, no distracting sounds or noises. Only the chattering of people and their crunching feet on the ground. Kids are playing hide and seek in between the massive pillars, workers having lunch on top of the lower-leveled blocks, even some come by to sunbathe or just overlook the field of massive, gray concrete. It seems like people have accepted the memorial as part of the city structure and see it as a naturalness. But does this acceptance lead to a downplay of the true meaning of the memorial - commemoration, reminding and warning?

Figure 14
Overseeing the Berlin memorial
From the West side of the memorial (street side) the concrete columns are the lowest. They rise in height the further one enters the field



Figure 15
View in corridor
Standing in between the columns the view of the observer is limited in one direction. Sounds and noises although come from everywhere

Public Reputation

From the start the opinions on the memorial were gaping in two opposite directions. Whilst some understood the deeper meaning of Peter's thoughts and intentions, and therefore praised the abstract execution on the design, many reacted with incomprehension and confusion. (Berlin.de, 2022) They questioned the interpretation of him on the subject and criticized the lack of information it conveys, the missing inscriptions as well as plaques or religious symbols. (Craven, 2019)

It is said that the memorial does „not present historical information about the Nazi campaign against the Jews.“ (Craven, 2019, par. 1). It seems random and arbitrary and in public opinion misses the target.

It was, and for some still is, hard to accept that the abstractness and the space Peter created was to interpret an own story and build an own connection to the past. He wanted it to be a place for everyone and not just for one specific target group. As he explained in an Interview to Spiegel online:

„The world is too full of information and here is a place without information. That is what I wanted.“ (Craven, 2019, par. 15)

He purposely avoided inscribing the pillars or adding any kind of explanation to the space. Visitors should be able to let their thoughts run freely, wherever they might take them. After all though, it was decided that there needs to be some sort of explanation to the memorial and to the Jewish history. Under the memorial today is an information center, divided in four separate spaces that carry the burden of the Jewish population during the Nazi Regime. (Craven, 2019)

Experience and Perception

A jungle of concrete pillars, neatly arranged creating a maze where one can only get lost. Lost in thoughts and lost in time. Completely isolated from the outer world, the memorial gathers around the visitor swallowing him and his beliefs.

There is no official entrance, there is no predetermined path through the field, there are no time limits or opening hours. It's all left up to the people and the decision they take. Who visits it and how they perceive the memorial depends on one's personal story. Peter wanted it to be indefinable. Everyone approaching the memorial interprets it differently. There is not ONE definition but thousands.

It's exciting to experience the effect the memorial has on one. Entering the field and diving deeper into the massive slabs, you can feel how the surrounding city vanishes. Noises and distracting sounds are absorbed, even the view limits to one narrow axis. The columns start becoming taller and more oppressing. In some parts of the field you almost feel like they will collapse upon you, burying you underneath their debris.



Figure 17
View in corridor
Not only are the walls of the columns angled but the floor too is sloped causing irritation and a disturbing feeling

The uneven ground combined with the tunneling walls make you feel dizzy, make you almost stumble. An anchor of comfort is looking up to the sky, grounding you again. At some point you realize what this feeling, caused by the memorial, implies.

The feeling of being lost, alone, helpless, desperate and scared are one of many feelings the Jews must have felt when they were deported to concentration camps, when they were abandoned from their homes and expelled out of their country. Different to that though is, being a visitor at the memorial is temporary and we can always escape. Being a Jew during the time of Nazi Regime was enduring, their was no exit that they could just walk out of. Peter once said in an interview:

“I want a field of otherness where people understand that to have been a Jew in Germany was ‘other’ and what it is like to be other in space and time.” (Louisiana Channel, 2020)

But although the memorial carries a lot of weight with it, it also conveys a calming, peaceful atmosphere. Maybe it's the quietness or the way the light enters the field and gets reflected on the sleek surface. Maybe it's the way we move through the narrow corridors, touching the cold concrete while passing it. Maybe it's the many different voices and chatter of people, not knowing where they come from. Or maybe it's all of that together.



Figure 16
Rain on concrete column
The columns appearance changes synchronically to the weather. As seen in the picture rain dripping down the concrete evokes a oppressive feeling



Figure 18
View into the sky
Standing in between the columns
of the Berlin memorial by Peter
Eisenman



Chapter VI

Comparison of the two memorials

General

Now having a broader perspective on the two memorials in terms of their appearance, meaning and reputation we should also take a closer look at the connection and disconnection, the similarities and differences and compare them with each other. Furthermore we should elaborate on the question if they can be assigned to the field of art after all, or if we have to distinguish them.

Although both memorials are dedicated to the same topic, the Jewish persecution by the Nazi Regime, the execution and interpretation by the artist Rachel Whiteread and Peter Eisenman differ in many ways. A memorial, unlike an art piece, is a public accessible object, dedicated to a specific event or person. That means that the artist can't solely act in their own interest but also has to take general opinion into account. Furthermore, dissimilar to art, memorials or monuments are often commissioned by the government, limiting the artist and giving him certain borders and deadlines. Nevertheless the room for interpretation is huge and therefore the outcome varies on many levels.

However as mentioned in the introduction, the one thing memorials as well as monuments have in common is the message they want to convey. As Aristotle once formulated it:

„tragedy [can] educate by appealing to people's minds, feelings, and senses. If a tragedy shows how a good person confronts adversity, it elicits a cleansing or 'katharsis' through emotions of fear and pity.“ (Freeland, 2002, p. 32)

Aristotle addresses these words to art in general, surprisingly though they can be equated with the deeper meaning of memorials as well. What we feel as a viewer when we are confronted with memorials, let it be Rachels or Peters, can be compared to a time travel into history. We travel back to a specific character, a time period or, as in the case of the memorial in Vienna and Berlin, to an incomprehensible and shameless event that still, almost 77 years later, evoke feelings that are hard to manifest in words. Inhumane, ruthless, barbaric, betrayal, loss over all - inconceivably. That's the one thing all memorials independent of scale, appearance, material, location, event have in common. They provoke us as observers and give us a feeling of uncomforness and shame. A reminder and a warning.

Figure 19
Inscription on pedestal
Names of concentration camps on
the foot of the memorial in Vienna
by Rachel Whiteread



Comparison in terms of appearance and location

The first district in Vienna is the jewel of the City. Adorned by imposing buildings that reach back to the 14th century, it's an enormous tourist attraction to people all around the world. Within the first district though, well hidden from all the bustle, in between beautiful five leveled 'Gründerzeit' buildings, is the Jewish Quarter. A quiet, peaceful space where time has seemed to stop. Situated on it is the Jewish memorial of Rachel Whiteread. It is so well concealed that if one doesn't know about it or specifically asks to find it, he wouldn't. As if it is only meant to be seen by those who put an effort in finding it. Once found it displays itself in a very reserved, if not even a shy attitude. It doesn't scream for attention or invites the viewer to interact with it at first. It just stands there on a one leveled pedestal, waiting for the observer to come closer, analyze and interpret it. The imprints on the surface of the pedestal don't give further information of the meaning of the memorial. It's a concatenation of places and a short description to whom the memorial is dedicated to [Figure 19]. But what places? The places of all concentration camps where Jews have been deported and murdered. But other than that no information about the meaning, the dedication or the artist can be found. The observer is left in the dark, invited or moreover requested to find his own way to enlightenment and the meaning of the memorial. Rachel designed a memorial with two ways of interacting with it. On the one hand, it represents itself as a block of concrete, impenetrable, inaccessible. Cold, hard and a little distant. On the other hand though, it interacts with the observer on a mental level. It stimulates our imagination and our perception, asking for more than just one quick look at it. The memorial wants to irritate, to attract attention and curiosity.

Peter Eisenman's memorial in Berlin takes a completely opposite approach. Where Rachel's memorial in many ways is diffident, Peter's memorial calls for attention and sensation. The location, bold and present, chosen by the authorities of Berlin, is in the middle of the vibrating city. Situated along the main street 'Eberstraße' that leads to the famous Brandenburger Tor and opposed by Berlin's biggest park arrangement, the 'Großer Tiergarten', the memorial brags for attention and acknowledgement. It wants to be interacted with, entered, walked through, touched and felt by whoever passes the area. Where Rachel's memorial is quiet and shy, Peter's memorial is loud and provoking. Unlike the memorial in Vienna the memorial in Berlin has no written indications or information placed on the site or on the object. In an interview Peter explained he purposely did not want any inscriptions on the columns or anywhere else because this would limit the notion and imagination of the visitors. Everyone, Jews, Germans, children, adults, tourists should see whatever they feel like seeing in his work. There is no right or wrong to it, no bad or good thought. It's a personal experience and therefore can't be judged by anyone. (Louisiana Channel, 2020)

But other than that there are barely any other similarities between the two. Peter's memorial is unlike Rachel's, exhibited in a very abstract appearance. His translation of the

Figure 20
Aging of the memorial
Moss on concrete column



event into an object are simple concrete columns in different scales and angles. Nothing more. No symbols casted into the concrete. The surface of the pillars are sleek. Some have developed cracks from the changing weather circumstances in Germany. On some nature has taken over and wrapped a thin layer of moss around them [Figure 20]. Although seen so controversial at the beginning during its reveal, it seems like the memorial became an inevitable commodity of the city. Unlike Rachels memorial which intends to be a passive object exhibited on a pedestal in the center of a space, wanting to be observed rather than physically interacted, Peters memorial adjusts to its surrounding fitting in smoothly, inviting anyone passing to become an active part of it. The experience and understanding of its meaning can only be fully perceived when entering the maze of concrete. Losing track of time and space whilst wandering through the field of nothing and everything, is part of the process of appreciation. One might feel lost and confused, another might have an enlightenment. It's not about what kind of feelings are being evoked. It's more about the feelings in general, that are created and that make people wonder where it comes from and why do I feel the way I feel right now?

Figure 21
Collage
Jewish memorials around the world



Conclusion

Rachels and Peters memorials are figurative and tangible objects that represent a moment in history, recalling to people's minds. They both are abstract in their appearance, not wanting to do the commemoration for us, but with us. They take the first step into a direction of realization but leave it to us, as observers, to find the path ourselves. The final destination is mourning, processing and accepting. Accepting that what has happened must stay in the past for good and can't be retold in the future ever again.

Likewise a painting or a photograph, a memorial manifests certain happenings. They all archive a moment, an idea or an image, sometimes incomprehensible for the observer, but always with a purpose. But still, the question is to be answered, whether this mutuality assigns them all to the same field.

Is it art after all?

In the book, *But is it art? An Introduction to Art Theory* by Cynthia Freeland, art among other definitions and explanations is described as follows:

Art includes not just works of formal beauty to be enjoyed by people with 'taste', or works with beauty and uplifting moral messages, but also works that are ugly and disturbing, with shatteringly negative moral content. (Freeland, 2002, pp. 28-29)

What she defines is what very often falls in oblivion. Naming that art is not only about beauty, it's not only about aesthetics or composition. As observers we are allowed to dive deep into a world with no limit to interpretation and meaning, no right or wrong and no good or bad. Art is a field where people's personal, subjective life-story merges with the art piece itself. We see what we want to see, and whenever we want to see it. It might depend on how we feel that day, how the light hits the surface and gets reflected into another direction, who stands next to us, who we talked to just before we analyzed the art work. There are thousands of factors that influence our interpretation of the given and it's a constant, ongoing, changing process that never ends. Humans learn every single day. We develop over time and collect impressions and experience throughout our lives. They change us as a person and make us grow. But they also teach us that nothing is eternal.

Considering the mentioned criteria and what the purpose of art is, it's hard to distinguish a memorial as not part of the art field. Assigning it to a separate strand of art, naming 'Art to remember' it still over all is art. Although a different kind of art. Defined by terror, cruelty, sadness, pain, relief, hollowness and inhumanity. A memorial is not just an object or a sculpture for the public. It's a warning. A daily reminder, a sign of what humans are

Figure 22

Names of places of concentration camps where Jews have been deported and murdered throughout the NS Regime

Treblinka Wlodawa Zamosc Neuengamme Nisko Opatow Maly Trostinec Mauthausen Minsk Auschwitz Belzec Bergen-Belsen Stutthof Theresienstadt Trawniki Gurs Hartheim Izbica Kielce Kowno Lagow Riga Sabac Sachsenhausen Jasenovac Jungfernhof Kaiserwald Lodz Lublin Majdanek Brcko Buchenwald Chelmno Opole Ravensbrück Rejowiec Dachau Flossenbürg Groß-Rosen Mittelbau-Dora Modliborzyce Natzweiler Salaspils San Sabba Sobibor Treblinka Wlodawa Zamosc Neuengamme Nisko Opatow Maly Trostinec Mauthausen

capable of. Memorials are meant to make us shiver, create a void within us, make us feel cold and depressed for a moment of realization. That's what also differentiates them from paintings and photographs. Memorials have a mission. By placing them within the public space and not in an enclosed room, they reach out to whoever passes their way. They don't speak to a specific class in society and they don't belong to someone specific. They can't be bought or owned. It's art for everyone.

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