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## « Text, Image, Thought: Walter Benjamin and Contemporary Art »

Haus am Waldsee, Berlin. October 31 2004 - January 30 2005

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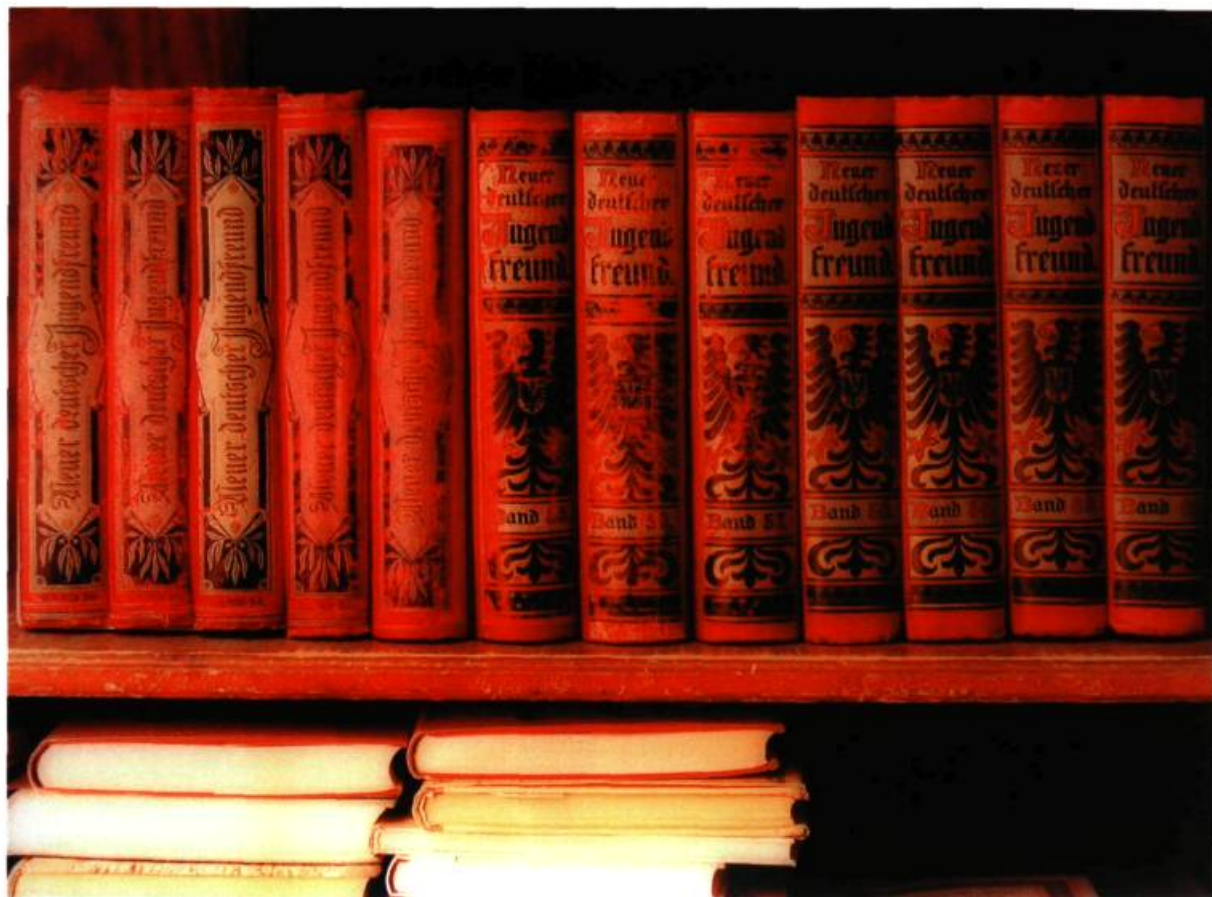
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## ACTUALITÉS/EXPOSITIONS

Berlin

### « TEXT, IMAGE, THOUGHT : WALTER BENJAMIN AND CONTEMPORARY ART »<sup>1</sup>

Haus am Waldsee, Berlin. October 31, 2004 – January 30, 2005

What Benjamin said and wrote, had the sound as if it came from a secret. The power he received from evidence.

Theodor W. Adorno<sup>2</sup>

The exterior board with its large, orange letters read AURATRANSFER. The sign board functioned both as an invitation to the exhibition and as rite of passage into Walter Benjamin's world of thought on aura, dialectics, history, progress, montage... ! There were no texts to read, only exquisite visual articulations probing into his life and ideas. The premise on which the show was organized was Benjamin's thinking in pictures – hence the title, reflecting his unique constellations. His famous thought-images include the chessboard exemplary of the battleground of history, where detour is method, and the angel of history, seer of past and future.<sup>3</sup> To walk through the exhibition was to read Benjamin anew, while being reminded of his importance for current cultural life. I saw two streams of thought, two artistic approaches converging. One was allegorical and tied to

the melancholic-traumatic, the other was an archival approach that builds monuments and attempts to connect what cannot be connected, except through art, thus dialectical and hopeful. What follows is a discussion of select works of art in which these two streams are the strongest, having the potential to absorb the beholder into complex networks.

The sign board was placed on a shed belonging to Volker März's installation *Auratransfer-Jedem sein Benjamin* (2004), which also included a group of terracotta figures, en miniature, bearing Benjamin's physiognomy and hallmark glasses – offered for purchase. Each could have his or her Benjamin as flâneur with hands in pockets, as traveller with a suitcase, or naughtily sexualized. One figure, lying on its back with a book over its face titled *The Judgment* was already purchased, replaced by a photograph of the collector and her treasure. I doubt Benjamin would have approved of such funny-looking collectibles. Yet an auratransfer may be even tied to such uncanny figures. Aura, which is immanent to the authentic work of art, is lost when replicated or re-fashioned, turning into perception. The potential in



März's sculptures lies in the perceptive faculty of the collector. "Aura," in Benjamin's words is a strange "weave of time and space"<sup>4</sup> having future possibilities of cognition, breakthroughs.

Walking toward the main entrance, one either had to step on or walk around März's small *3 sec bronze-brain*, which the artist advised, "is placed to your feet at the most distant point from where your own brain is in your body, so that you can tread on it, or respectfully bend down and stroke it." A Cartesian reversal of body over mind, the tiny brain yields to philosophical reflection from the bottom up.

Once inside an intense play of mourning and joy begins to unfold. Portraits of Benjamin are shown in homage and so is Dani Karavan's video of the *Memorial Passages* (1994/2004) in the town, Port Bou, where Benjamin's journey ended. Photographs by Gisèle Freund, a compatriot friend of Benjamin, depict him reading, writing, thinking, in Paris's Bibliothèque Nationale. It was here where this fugitive Jewish intellectual left, hidden for posterity with the help of Georges Batailles, his later manuscripts: *The Theses on the Philosophy of History*, *The Arcades Project* and *Berlin Childhood circa 1900*.

He emigrated from Berlin in 1933. After Berlin, Paris had become the most important location for his intellectual activity. He fled Nazi-occupied Paris in 1940 with the intent of travelling through Spain to New York. He was assigned to teach at the Institute of

Social Research, which Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno transferred from Frankfurt, in 1934. Horkheimer supplied Benjamin with emergency exit papers. Unfortunately border guards in Port Bou refused him passage. In despair, Benjamin took an overdose of morphine on September 26, 1940.<sup>5</sup>

In the room installation *What if he had arrived* (2004) Lutz Dammbeck speculates on future possibilities, had Benjamin made it to the United States of America. Xeroxed papers pinned to the walls outline fictive involvements. Computer science, cybernetics and hypertext systems would have become the focus of his inquiry. He would have met Timothy Leary, participated in the effect of experimental drugs while also researching the authoritarian personality. Horkheimer and Adorno would have helped him enter a social life. Notably, these men are referenced in Dammbeck's images and texts, with no apparent trace of Benjamin. As one reads the modules and tracts in the dimly lit room, the awareness of Benjamin's absence becomes so intense to the point where emotions are mobilized and the burden of history felt. The installation then becomes a place of mourning for a future that never was. This allegorical script foregrounds the traumatic and performs through affect. But converging is the archival approach that takes workday material – sampled information, visual and other – and builds monuments, as here, to Benjamin.<sup>6</sup> Archival art is concerned less with absolute





origins than with secondary traces, selected objects manipulated in a gesture of alternative knowledge. Hal Foster terms it “pin-board aesthetic,” that uses materials or strategies that are neither database nor interactive but more radical and therefore active, often strained by the medium as in montage. “These artists are drawn to unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects in art and in history.”<sup>7</sup>

*Begegnung in Svendborg 1938, Searching for Memory I* (2004) was Sabine Shirdewahn’s DVD projection, shown in continuous loop. Walking into the small room was like entering a private movie theatre, and stepping out of the windowless monad into a sun-filled garden. There, Bertold Brecht and Walter Benjamin are sitting playing chess. It is early summer judging from the foliage, a gentle breeze is blowing, birds are chirping and the two men sit silently. The leaves are moving albeit jerkily as does the tablecloth. The attentive observer will see that eventually Brecht will turn his head and move his left hand while Benjamin remains still, reflecting his detour ( ? ) in this digital feat. This is sheer delight ! “Whenever Benjamin and Brecht met up in Svendborg, Denmark [from 1934 to ‘38,] there was immediately an atmosphere of familiarity between them,” wrote Horkheimer.<sup>8</sup> “They would play chess,” Shirdewahn notes, “without a word, and after finishing a round, they would get up and have their conversation.” The latter excerpt is taken from Horkheimer’s correspondence and reworked like the photographs on which *Begeg-*

*nung* (Meeting) is built. Remarkable is the montage using media of black and white archival photographs, 8 mm film footage shot on site in Svendborg in 2004 and a soundtrack, all transferred on DVD.

The technique of montage, which Benjamin had recognized as a way of arresting the viewer into dialectic processes and therefore critical thinking, is achieved doubly here. In parallel to the historical demand, which issues from the men and their contribution to the world of art and thought, the artifice of production also calls attention. The slightly blurred image, the jerky movements and bird songs, point to the digital process involved that allows such aesthetic trajectory, such a new access into the past. Looking back, in Benjamin’s understanding, was looking at knowledge. Susan Buck-Morris suggests that perhaps Benjamin’s most important contribution was to redeem aesthetics as a central cognitive discipline, a form of secular revelation (experienced by the beholder in moments of *jetzt-zeit* of cognition) where art takes on the privilege science held for so long: as carrier of truth.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, on Brecht’s *Three Penny Opera* dealing with art as construct so as to confront society with reality (truth), Benjamin remarked: “To question reality is to construct, is to use artifice. Art is therefore necessary.”<sup>10</sup> But where does the artifice reside in photographic work : in the manipulative processes (digital or otherwise), in selective capture with the camera or in the beholder ? Richard Schütz’s pho-





tographic series *Jetzt/Zeit* (2000–'04) ponders that challenge, and affectively (mis)leads, at first. Standing in front of *Fundus des Fiktiven*, I was initially convinced that I was looking at a digitally built image that shows fragments of landmark architecture in Berlin with fictive additions. In reverse I saw *Abspann der Geschichte* (End titles) as a documentary shot of the opening of the Berlin Wall, providing a view into the eastern, communist part, albeit late. The wall opened in 1989, why this vestige now? It was this belatedness that triggered inquiry. The explanation is that the photographs were not built by the artist but capture an already constructed locality, as in *Fundus*, and actual remnants of the Berlin Wall with its famous graffiti, as in *Abspann*. Both urban locations served temporarily as movie sets, each for a different film. These the artist framed. Importantly the photographs were taken with a mirror-reflex analogue camera (using slides) to emphasize a more traditional development process.

Employing the camera as passerby turns the artist into the flâneur akin to the one Benjamin was. The attentive flâneur is captivated by urban impression but with an intellectual alertness: observing, recording all the while formulating work, which articulates the search to comprehend the historical reality of the new metropolis. Benjamin deposited his observations first in *Städtebilder* (Pictures of Cities) and later in the *Arcades Project*. In *Städtebilder* he advises the flâneur first to denote reality not for contemporary view-

ers but as contemporary event and to thus integrate the denotation into a dialectic historical realm. Only then does the work take on significance. Secondly, the attentive flâneur looks for reality in which truth can be located (8). In this pursuit, the artist declares his work as critical discourse of which *Kapitale Portale* is a stark example. The photograph shows the famous and often-recorded Potsdamer Platz, in Benjamin's time a hot spot of the modern metropolis with its large sign boards, later the site of fascism, then Soviet occupation, now a site showing the traces of a past void clashing with skyscrapers, the new Arcades as Benjamin would call them, the artifice of the post industrial era. Glass and steel were also the building material of the Arcades in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris in which Benjamin saw the symptoms of progress and decay, of never-ending newness of commodity and construction. A travel guide to Paris used by Benjamin calls the Arcades: "a new discovery of industrial luxury, glass-covered streets with marble tiles... with the most elegant shops, the world of the Arcades, a small world within."<sup>11</sup> These most-celebrated arches of modernity fell soon into decay because new constructions were built, new sites explored. The artist evokes that kernel of decay immanent in the new architecture, of which Benjamin spoke.

Schütz presents us with an artifice – art – to initiate a revelation, which occurs in *jetzt-zeit*. He points to a city's search for identity, which it does not yet have, struggling with the demands of the West to build







and construct while burying the traces of a communist past, which is closely tied to the individual's search for identity in the huge metropolis. The wide, royal boulevards in the luxurious city, as Benjamin described his Berlin, were short-lived in actual time and in Benjamin's own perception. The modern city, the urban ideal, turns in his later writings into a melancholic labyrinth where the individual is searching for spatial coherence and locatedness, a problem so well articulated by Schütz. He denotes the tension between the allegoric-melancholic and the dialectic-hopeful in compositions where architectural movie sets and business sets of a late capitalistic urbanism (utopia ?) coincide. The artistic method, then, is

both a historical and philosophical 'montage,' representing not an all-encompassing totality but selected, specific historical materials, perspectives found in experimental construction, or an actual site in the urban landscape, framed for a new reality.

Aura Rosenberg focuses on the same city, but as memory, found in Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood*, which she visualized. These include *Die Farben/Schokolade*, relating to Benjamin's experience with chocolate, and *Neuer Deutscher Jugendfreund* (1999-2002), a lexicon the young Walter received annually. "One could purchase chocolate in those days placed "cross-wise" in tiny packages. Each was wrapped in colourful, foil... I can still feel the sweetness on which my eyes rested.





It was more the sweetness melting in my heart than on my tongue (70).” Just as intensely as Benjamin experienced the moment, the photograph isolates the chocolate and blows it out of proportion to effect seeing/feeling from a child’s (Benjamin’s) perspective. Oversized, also, are the books. Benjamin describes how upon receiving a new edition he would open the decorated cover page, leaf through it quickly and stop in the rooms of hunting weapons and ammunition: “There, I spent the first night.” (98) Benjamin’s library, his intellectual wine cellar as he called it (lost during the war) was to be safe-kept by Brecht in Svendborg. The books photographed are from Berlin’s State Library, substituting emphatically in recall.

Recalling in exile his Berlin childhood to which he could not return was Benjamin’s auratic *retour* to the mother city for momentary fullness, plenitude.<sup>12</sup> Peter Szondi described such intense moments as *auratic*, perceived in the distance through the uniqueness of the experience. He also saw *Childhood* not as a melancholic longing for the past. The openness of the text, the incompleteness (of a life) do not to endow it with the weight of the past but with expectations for the future<sup>13</sup> – of which the exhibition is a fine example. Szondi’s utterances echo Benjamin’s angel of history, the messianic-hopeful. Unlike the more poetic angel in Poe and Rilke, Benjamin’s angel of history, as outlined in *The Theses*



is an analytical tool for dialectic engagement and evidence for historical materialism.<sup>14</sup> Rosenberg presents this complex issue in two photo-works: *Angel of History (Bode Museum)* and *Angel of History (Spree)*, which situate the angel locally through language (*Bode Museum* and *Spree* are a museum and a river, respectively) and globally (through newspaper clippings bearing English lettering). Dumped into the picture space via digital montage and archival ink-jet are heterogeneous fragments already technically processed, based on her own photographs taken in Berlin and from the mega archive, the Internet. Remnants of ancient and recent civilizations accumulate in the capital-city-turned-garbage-dump. Juxtaposed are images of police beatings with local architecture, tombstones, cellphones, beer cans, cigarettes, ruins of a bombed Berlin after WWII, consumer goods, and heaps of trash from our Western hedonistic culture. References to speed, sensation, high tech and the shock of destruction form a contradictory unity. And into it is flying a white, beautiful angel, her wings spread.

Benjamin saw his (masculine) angel "move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring... his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned to the past. [H]e sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage. [T]he angel would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise. [T]his storm irresistibly propels him into the future, to which his back is turned... [T]his storm is what we call progress."<sup>15</sup>

Benjamin was not against progress, but he did recognize its dangers and related blindness in a society enslaved by capitalism. He did not espouse history as linear, resting on the fullness of meaning of a unified whole. This is a view tied to the Hegelian synthesis where Modernity is characterized by linear cumulative time, a development without barbarity of culture and production. It sees science, technology and rational values promoting progress. Benjamin's vision gives (Post) Modern<sup>16</sup> history meaning based on Marxist evolutionary and historical interpretations. For him the destruction of the appearance of totality (narrative, fullness) and historical specificity act as a condition for the return of the catastrophic, but with the recognition of destruction as a critical force.<sup>17</sup> In this understanding the fragment found in the ruins takes on significance, for it must be analyzed and dialectically positioned to totality. Out of the abyss rises the cognitive potential. Only in this dialectic process can we understand the catastrophic, receive a spark of hope from the past, which has a secret affinity with the present moment of danger as presented in *Angel*. The historical materialist whom the artist becomes in producing such an archival monument takes her sources from evidence, selects and puts the fragments into new constellations. She blows up and

destroys the conformist beautiful whole, the thread of progress and linearity by showing us the underside, the broken – society, city, environment – while giving ample space to the angel the bearer of knowledge, our connection to the future.

To engage with the angel of history is to actualize history and contemporary art, to visualize the catastrophic, to affront and impose on the viewer just as much as he or she can bear. We have to change what the angel will see in the future and avoid catastrophe. That is our responsibility.<sup>18</sup> In pursuing this goal the artist disturbs the aesthetic field and intervenes in surpassed time theoretically, as historical materialist in a dialectic process, and formally through montage, to jolt us out of our complacency, as Benjamin would have liked it. To him art had revolutionary potential.

MARIA ZIMMERMANN BRENDL

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Sincere thanks go to Dr. Nina Roy, Nicolas Roffet, Detlev Greenkorn and Fred Rapp.
- <sup>2</sup> Peter Szondi, *Städtebilder*, (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp), 1963, ii.
- <sup>3</sup> In the fall of 2004, the Benjamin Archive initially fragmented in Frankfurt, Paris and New York was transferred to Berlin.
- <sup>4</sup> He first articulated ideas on the concept of aura in *A Small History of Photography*, 1931.
- <sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, who in October 1940 searched for his grave, unsuccessfully, wrote of the site: "This is one of the most fantastic and beautiful places I have ever seen." Momme Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin: a Biography* (London: Verso), 1997, 251–261.
- <sup>6</sup> Thomas Hirschhorn has built monuments to Spinoza, Bataille und Deleuze. Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," October 110, Fall 2004, 8.
- <sup>7</sup> Foster, 4.
- <sup>8</sup> This was Helene Weigel and Brecht's exile. A postcard by Benjamin to Horkheimer dated 1935 reads: I spent pleasant hours with Brecht and have great fun with Weigel's two children. Apart from which the current events in the world provide distraction. It is easy to follow here by means of the radio. Horkheimer Correspondence in Brodersen, 219, 303.
- <sup>9</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute* (London: The Free Press), 1977, xiii.
- <sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt i/M.: Suhrkamp), 1972, II, 384. Detlev Schöttker et al., *Schrift, Bilder Denken: Walter Benjamin und die Künste* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp), 2004, 23.
- <sup>11</sup> Burckhardt Lindner in Norbert Bolz und Bernd Witte eds, *Passagen: Walter Benjamin's Urgeschichte des XIX Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink), 1984, 36 ff.
- <sup>12</sup> Erhard Schütz, "Benjamin's Berlin: Wiedergewinnung des Entfernten," in Schöttker, 42.
- <sup>13</sup> Andreas Isenschmidt, "In mancher Hinsicht ein Glaubensbekenntnis: Peter Szondi's Benjamin Rezeption," in Schöttker, 88–90. Szondi's commentary in *Städtebilder*, 96–97.
- <sup>14</sup> Michael Löwy, "Against the Grain: The Dialectical Conception of Culture in Walter Benjamin's Theses of 1940," Leo Steinberg ed., *Walter Benjamin and Demands of History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press), 1996, 206 ff.
- <sup>15</sup> Translated by Patrick Camiller, in Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity* (London: Sage), 1994, 41. Benjamin describes Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, 1920, which he owned (Israel Museum, Jerusalem).
- <sup>16</sup> See Bryan Turner's introduction to Buci-Glucksmann's *Baroque Reason* where he discusses Benjamin and Postmodernity.
- <sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des Deutschen Traversspiels* (Frankfurt a/M.: Suhrkamp), 1966, 195 and Buci-Glucksmann, 223.
- <sup>18</sup> Composer Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf argues such in relation to his musical theatre: *Angelus Novus* of 2000, in Schöttker, 235 ff.