

Meditations on History

German Video Artist Marcel Odenbach Mines the Veins of Memory and Memorial

Two young men roll in a field of wheat. A camera pans slowly around a cratered concrete façade. Just as you begin to tire of the obsessive focus on this densely textured surface, images begin to shift like ghosts from behind the wall. Faded archive footage shows hundreds of figures pouring out from a building under the command of a stern figure in a greatcoat. Are these, you wonder, some of the 18,000 Jews from the concentration camp of Majdanek, near Lublin, machine gunned to death Nov. 3, 1943. Minutes later the camera pans across the quiet landscape that was once the scene of this horror.

This sequence is part of the 2009 video work "Turning Circles" by the distinguished German artist Marcel Odenbach. The piece is an eerie meditation on the Majdanek Mausoleum, designed by Polish sculptor Wiktor Tolkin and erected in 1969 to mark the 25th anniversary of the camp's liberation. It bears all the hallmarks of this most thoughtful video artist, who, born in Cologne in 1953, repeatedly mines the veins of memory and memorial, trauma and forgetting.

This work forms part of a solo exhibition at London's Freud Museum (www.freud.org.uk). The exhibition opened Wednesday and is part of this year's 25th-anniversary celebrations of the museum. It is also, bizarrely, the first time that the artist, widely acclaimed in Germany, across continental Europe and America, has exhibited in London. However, as Mr. Odenbach remarked by telephone from Cologne, where he still lives, "Maybe this little show will gain more attention than if I had a show at Tate Modern."

The show's centerpiece "Probeliegen" (2008) is a huge collage representing Freud's famous couch, with its richly colored Persian rug and chenille cushions. Constructed from thousands of scraps of dyed and painted archive material—photographs, postcards, letters, newspapers, magazines, books—the vast image appears from a distance to be the symbol of the science of psychoanalysis. Close up, however, the tangled histories of Germans and Jews, of the Freuds in Vienna and London, both in the past and today, are glimpsed in fragments. Hard to navigate, the dark underbelly of 19th-century German and Jewish history, which was the breeding ground for Freud's ideas, offers a parallel for the painful hinterland of patients' psychological turmoil, which psychoanalysis coaxes into the light. "The furniture is representing the whole drama of Jewish history," Mr. Odenbach says.

In 1995, Mr. Odenbach represented Germany for the United Nations' 50th anniversary. It has been largely German and Jewish history that Mr. Odenbach circles so probingly in his video installations and paper works, though he suggests he uses German history "to explore something more universal—the question of personal identity."

"I am coming out of this generation when there was a big black hole in history," he says. "We had to discover the truth. Then, as a German, you have to ask, 'How was this possible? That the people became monsters?' Freud is so important for this."

Freud is also important to Mr. Odenbach personally. "You see his collection and it is like a collage itself—kitsch and valuable together, a German piece of

furniture with a Middle-Eastern cover." It reminds him of his grandparents' home and of his own complex family inheritance.

"My father was born in Holland, my grandfather in Paris, and my great-grandfather in Constantinople, born to an Austrian mother," he says. "My mother is Belgian but from Cologne. My family moved around for 200 years and everyone spoke five different languages. So I wanted to be German." And yet, he goes on, "My name is Marcel, a French name. So immediately I had the feeling of being different from other kids. I also have a Jewish background. So I was confronted with this history."

To complicate matters, one of his grandmother's cousins was the lawyer of Patrice Lumumba in the 1950s, later first prime minister of the Republic of the Congo, adding the bloody history of colonialism and a horror of racism to the mix of Mr. Odenbach's inspirations. "The work is really all autobiographical," he says.

Drawing was an early recourse. "I never went to art school. My father was a businessman. He wanted to be a musician, but he had to take over the business. So he wanted me to do a proper job also." Mr. Odenbach dutifully studied architecture, art history and semiotics in Aachen, between 1974-1979. "Already as a school child and student, I was very interested in different societies," he says. "In the 1980s, I went to South America, then I went to Africa, to work and travel. I was very interested in this very different idea of culture, of art and of how you live together." Today, he also shares a house in Ghana with colleague Carsten Höller.

Throughout it all, he was putting his thoughts in order—proposals for performances and video works, diary jottings, letters and quotations—as drawings on strips of paper. In 1976, he famously wrapped himself up in a 22-meter-length roll of paper, a collage of these texts and drawings, from which he tore himself like a butterfly from a cocoon, in a performance called "Liberation From My Thoughts." He soon turned to video, as part of a pioneering group of video artists in Germany in the 1970s, called the Alternative Television group, who used the medium to challenge the world view propagated by conventional broadcasters.

"I grew up surrounded by conceptual and minimalist art. These were my big heroes," he explains, "but as a younger artist, I had to do something different, because I had a different history." Most of his work combines archive footage with newly shot scenes, sequences laid side by side or one on top of the other, making us aware of how our viewpoint at any one time is radically influenced by the memories, historical imagery and contemporary media images that impinge on our vision. Collage offers an alternative release from this overcrowding, he says. "It is maybe a bit neurotic to make these collages. They each take three to four months, as there are so many processes. I am a manic collector of images. It took me five or six years to gather the images for the couch."

After a moment's reflection, he adds, "But then artists' work has a lot to do with therapy. There are always two layers: the surface image and then the new world opening up."