

English version of text, 'Konspirative Wohnungen als potenzielle Erinnerungsorte' in *Geheime Trefforte des MfS in Erfurt*, Eds Best, H, Heinrich J and Mestrup , pp. 107 – 144 (Landesbeauftragten des Freistaates Thüringen für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes, Erfurt 2006)

'Conspiracy dwellings it's Potential as a Counter-memorial'

Pam Skelton

Background to the project

Initiated by Pam Skelton and Joachim Heinrich as multidisciplinary collaborative research, this project combines expertise in visual arts, history, statistics and sociology in an investigation of Stasi conspiracy dwellings active in the city of Erfurt from 1980 -1989. Working with local partners in science, government and culture, the project is an investigation of Stasi surveillance patterns in a model city in the former GDR, using as source material (after they have been made anonymous) a dossier of conspiracy dwellings found in the Bureau for Records for the Ministry of State Security , of the former GDR.

I met Dr. Joachim Heinrich for the first time in December 2002 when he was participating in a conference on public health and air pollution at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. I had been developing a series of art/science exhibitions at the School in which contemporary artists responded to research undertaken there. (1) One exhibition titled 'Smog' was showing at the time of Dr. Heinrich's visit. By chance, we sat next to each other at the conference dinner table. It was during our conversation followed by subsequent meetings and discussions over the coming months in London and Erfurt that the first ideas of the Conspiracy Dwellings project gradually emerged and took shape. It was clear from early on in our discussions that as collaboration it would benefit from being set up as a multi-disciplinary project composed of a team of artists and a team of scientists. Joachim Heinrich has been our common link. This publication marks the outcome of the results of the first part of the scientific study and as the art partners we are delighted to have the opportunity of contributing.

This paper presents a short overview of the art project to date from a contextual point of view, and includes some of the reasons why it is important

to do so. For the visual artists who are contributing to this project, the overall objectives are to consider and re-cover a view of a city under the surveillance of the Stasi. It is currently estimated that there are 199 streets containing several hundred secret meeting places which were active from 1980 – 1989 distributed throughout Erfurt. The very idea of it being possible to navigate a city from the position of its conspiracy dwellings was a sobering and compelling thought prior to 2005. Following the recovery of the files in 2005 and the creation of a database, the conspiracy dwelling files are now the subject of 'research' and their visualisation has become a reality. To begin to have a grasp on the ubiquity of these secret meeting places, what they looked like, how they functioned and how their trace today still invisibly inscribes the history of the city is a task, which has inspired the visual artists working on this project. A collaboration such as this not only offers artists the opportunity of working directly with archive material but provides the opportunity for artists and scientists to consider methods and means of dissemination not normally at their disposal.

Art for arts sake?

Science, politics, social debate, memory, art, the archive: all have an important role to play in the work of many contemporary artists. Germany is no stranger to the problem of the artist working with memory and history even when the subject of investigation is still sensitive and history is still contested. Since the 1980s, artists have energetically used strategies of engaging with remembrance and commemoration, orientation and meaning in the memory of the Holocaust and National Socialism. Of particular interest from the mid 80s are the counter monuments (Gegen-Denkmal), a term coined by artists Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, and works by Hans Haacke and Horst Hoheisel to name but a few. In the work of Jochem and Ester Shalev - Gertz, the concept of the counter-monument resulted in interventions. Their public sited artworks in Germany and abroad challenged the role of the traditional memorial that suppress memory rather than help to facilitate it according to Gertz. (2) Art is indeed capable of touching raw nerves and can be used as a powerful tool for excavating social and political

realities. While Gerz and others created counter-monuments in the 80's as memory markers of National Socialism, two decades later, a more recent history gradually comes into focus. Potentially as dangerous as conjuring up demons though, the ethical issues that surround the Stasi archive demand that they are handled with care in any re-working or transformation from text to image. Totalitarian dictatorships were not the first to recognise the power of the image, but their example clearly demonstrates how seriously they understood arts power to influence and subvert meaning. The Stasi files effectively demonstrate the extent that the MfS were in fear of their own population and history resonates here in an unsettling way with post 9/11 politics and the threat to civil liberty, which accompanies the threat of global terrorism. Therefore, while the MfS archive and the conspiracy dwellings files that we are concerned with here are vital to our project, the files themselves can also be seen as corrupted evidence: corrupted in the sense that they contain information that was used as a weapon against the people. In using the Stasi archive to re-construct a picture of what had once been a very secret manifestation of state surveillance a re-framing of history necessarily occurs. In re-framing history, art unmasks a specific detail of the history of the German Democratic Republic that some might still consider problematic, the visualisation of the conspiracy dwellings. Over the last year there have been many discussions with our project collaborators on the subject of ethics with the result that the art project follows in tandem with the recommendations of our collaborators. Nevertheless, the artists involved in this project must remain vigilant at all time too, despite the fact that the location of the dwellings remains a study of the facades of buildings and not a study of the occupants.

Today, the conspiracy dwellings can be seen as a ruined edifice of the past in the present. However, unlike Jochem Gerz's Holocaust counter-memorials they do not address the memory of the absent members of a destroyed community, but the memory of Stasi surveillance viewed through the lens of post-communism. Today, in the unified Germany where a restructuring of national identity is evidently underway, a levelling of memory may even prevent 'the will to remember'. (3)

Philosopher, Peter Osborne the convenor of the recent conference at Tate Britain, 'Spheres of Action: Art and Politics' suggests that the decline of political cultures in the 70s and 80s has driven politics and social debate away from its traditional haunts to the 'art world'. The post-war democratic model in the writing of Habermas, the politics of transparency, terror as a force against normality, have exerted a profound influence on modernist and post-modernist art and therefore have a major part to play in the contextualisation of art and culture. The 'art world' is now an important platform where intellectuals debate the political and social issues of our time and where art is a living mediator between history and memory. (4)

The City as document and art

The city is a complex architectural and social structure, a network and a repository that both reflects and hides its history within its public and private domains. The conspiracy dwellings can be found in every area and district of the city. They are situated in the utopian housing developments in the suburbs that converge on Moscowa Platz, Berliner Platz, Roter Berg and Rieth in the North; Herrenberg, Wiesenhügel, Melchendorf in the South. They are found in the medieval buildings such as the Registry Office in the old town, the library and many other places. They appear in the shopping precincts, in the 19th and 20th century bourgeois villas, in the 70s tower blocks on the Yuri Gagarin Ring. Situated in every neighbourhood yet hidden within them the conspiracy dwellings are shrouded in many guises as vestiges and traces and as clusters of intensity within the fabric of the city. What kind of relationships can be implied between the conspiracy dwellings and the local environment that contained them?

The Conspiracy dwelling project falls within the category of context based art and together art and document prove to be a form that artists increasingly use these days in their work. (5) What does this mean? In this case, it means that we must accept art as a practice inevitably anchored in history and geography as well as memory. It is interesting to consider the interpretation and impact

of art on life, when using art practices as a medium of critical engagement, particularly when art and document remain closely linked to public and personal memory. The MfS archive itself continues to shed important light on the psychology of manipulation, terror and fear in a control society and provides a unique opportunity to further knowledge and understanding of the mechanics of a totalitarian dictatorship.

Exhibitions of the project, Erfurt – London, 2007.

The forced shedding of memory as in the case of the people in the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic where the old was demolished in favour of the new must create complex relationships of memory to history. In addition, the records held by the Stasi Archive further complicate the disruption between memory and history and may destabilise what can still be seen as contested histories. For this reason, it is necessary to consider the impact that this may have on the local community. When outsiders descend on a city to study an aspect of a sensitive history their presence can be viewed with suspicion by locals and rightly so. The alliances with local organisations, artists and the curators of the Kunsthhaus Erfurt will we hope minimise these pitfalls. In investigating different positions and different ways of considering the conspiracy dwellings, varieties of approaches emerge. In this project we see them as images on a map, a film portrait of a city; walks, debates, screenings and a website. What will be the effects of the artworks when they are made and finally seen together and how will they interrelate and speak with each other and to the people of Erfurt? The conspiracy dwellings project touches upon the relationship between surveillance, cartography, archives, community, history and personal and collective memory. The artists each bring their own interests and perspectives to the conspiracy dwellings but we will have to wait until 2007 to judge how successful they will be as interventions into this fragile space of history.

Footnotes:

1. The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine is a Research Centre for Public Health. Since 2000, the School has hosted a series of art exhibitions and events. Art@lshtm <http://www.lshtm.ac.uk/art/>
2. See, 'The Countermonument, Memory against itself in Germany', in Young, James E. *The Texture of Memory, Holocaust Memorials and Monuments*, Yale University, 1993. pp. 27 - 48.
3. McAdams, James. A, *Judging the Past in Unified Germany*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p.1.
4. From Peter Osborne's introduction to the conference *Spheres of Action, Art and Politics* 10th December 2005, Tate Britain. Peter Osborne is the Director of The Centre for Modern European Philosophy, Middlesex University. Boris Groys is Professor at the School of Fine Art, Karlsruhe, Peter Sloterdijk is Professor of Philosophy and the Rector of the School of Fine Arts, Karlsruhe and Peter Weibel is Director of the Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe.
5. Boris Groys, 'Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation' in *Documenta 11_Platform 5: Exhibition*, Hatje Cantz Publishers, Ostfildern-Ruit 2002, p. 109.

Notes and project information

Members of the team Joachim Heinrich, Tina Clausmeyer and Pam Skelton have met in Erfurt to conduct fieldwork in July 2003, 2004 and 2005 and since 2004 the collaboration with Dr. Heinz Menstrup and Professor Heinrich Best at the Frederick Schiller Universität. The artists group C.CRED joined the team and visited Erfurt in 2005. In the summer of 2004, the Conspiracy Dwellings files were made available and the initial task of locating and documenting began. Monique Förster and Tely Büchner from the Kunsthaus Erfurt have provided substantial support for the exhibition in Erfurt. Since 2003 Frau Edel and Frau Menke from the Aussenstelle Erfurt der Behörde für die Unterlagen des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit der ehemaligen DDR has been actively helping to obtain relevant images and archived documents. Meetings in July 2005 with the Landesbeauftragte des Freistaats Thüringen für die Unterlagen des Staatsicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR, Frau Hildigund Neubert, her Referentin Dr. Andrea Herz

(historische Aufarbeitung) and her Stellvertreter, Dieter Seidel organised for us a visit plus guided tour to the current documentary exhibition of KW's im geografischen Gebiet der BStU-Außenstelle Suhl unter Leitung von Frau Sigrun Gänßler. The following local and state departments have provided maps and information regarding the re-numbering of house numbers and the change of street names: - Erfurt Stadtentwicklungsamt – Abteilung Thematische Karten, Stadtarchiv Erfurt and the archive of the Thüringer Landesamt für Vermessung und Geoinformation.

Presentations of the Conspiracy dwellings

Pam Skelton, January, 2004 presented the initial research for *Art Detective – Akte KW* at 'Out of the Box' – a study day for research students, London College of Communication, University of the Arts, London.

Pam Skelton, October 2004, delivered an illustrated lecture on '*Conspiracy Dwelling, the Stasi Ring Unveiled*' at 'The Visual Archive' History, Memory and Make Believe, a seven week seminar series, Tate Modern, London.

Pam Skelton and Tina Clausmeyer, August 2004, delivered a presentation '*The Third Archive*', ISEA – the International Symposium of Electronic Arts, Tallinn / Helsinki.

Pam Skelton, November 2004, delivered a lecture on '*Conspiracy Dwelling, the Stasi Ring Unveiled*' at this four day conference 'The Politics of Cultural Memory', Manchester Metropolitan University.

Tina Clausmeyer, November 2004, delivered a lecture on '*Mapping Conspiratorial Spaces – Visualization of Stasis' secret meeting places from 1980-89 in the former GDR*' at the two day colloquium 'Authoring the City', Jan van Eyck Akademie, Maastricht.

Institutions involved

Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts, London, UK; Photography and the Archive Research Centre, University of the Arts, London, UK; Jan van Eyck Akademie, Post-Academic Research Institute for Research and Production Fine Art, Design and Theory, Maastricht, NL)

The exhibition will be launched in Erfurt in summer 2007 by Kunsthaus Erfurt, and in autumn 2007 and in England, at South Hill Park Arts Centre from where the exhibition will tour the UK.

The Art Team: Pam Skelton, Tina Clausmeyer, C.CRED – Collective Creative Dissent (Ola Stahl, Kajsa Thelin, Carl Lindh)

Tina Clausmeyer is a German artist currently based in Berlin / Maastricht, working as a researcher at the Design Department, Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht, who contributed to this project from its onset. Her work is context-based and produces counter-cartographies of the city of Erfurt in forms of systematic photographs, inventories, maps and the WWW. She investigates the former structures of surveillance exposed by the invisible network of conspiracy dwellings, today. Currently, Tina is in the process of curating an international conference on 'The State of Secrecy' – secret networks and art in Berlin, 2006. The Jan van Eyck Academie generously supports her outcomes with regard to this project. Further information www.janvaneyck.nl and www.metahaven.net.

C.CRED, (Collective Creative Dissent) is a London based artist collective operating as an event-based platform for the development of critical forms of dialogue and conviviality, self-organized modes of collective learning, and collaborative forms of artistic and political intervention. The overriding concern of the collective is to foster links between art and aesthetic practices and the wider socio-political contexts in which they are situated. For the conspiracy dwellings project C.CRED will develop a cartographical model through which to explore the affective dimensions of surveillance and social control collaboratively with a number of locally based groups and individuals. For further information, see <http://www.ccred.org>.

Pam Skelton lives and works in London. She is an artist, curator, writer, and Senior Lecturer at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts, London. Pam initiated the conspiracy dwellings project with

Joachim Heinrich. With a special interest in European history and trauma, her artworks link site to memory and event through an interrogation of space, event and history. For the conspiracy dwellings project Pam is constructing a video portrait of the city of Erfurt from the perspective of the conspiracy dwellings and the landscape that contained them. For further information, see <http://www.scicult.com/artists/pamskelton>.