

Mit Den Toten von Krems / With the Dead in Krems

Death is a disappearance. It's a suppression so perfect that at the pinnacle utter silence is its truth. Words can't describe it. Here obviously I'm summoning a silence I can only approach from the outside or from a long way away.

—Georges Bataille, **Guilty**

For the past twenty years, my art has played upon and challenged conventional images of masculinity and male sexuality. My work articulates the range of fears and anxieties that men have concerning their own bodies -- fear and anxiety for which there is no collective language of expression. From elements of autobiography, physicality, and the possibilities offered by manipulation of the image, I have constructed and reconstructed a mutable corporeality. Through various media, but most centrally through photography, I create malleable images of the body which give that body a less determinate presence, reflecting an equally unmoored sense of identity. These vulnerable and unconventional images present agonized deformations of the "given" body which can be read as painful, or darkly humorous, or both.

For several years, I considered but opted not to apply to the Artist in Residence Program in Krems. In re-examining my reticence, I keep returning to an event that occurred during my otherwise tranquil first trip to Berlin in the summer of 1997. My lodging there was located directly across from a drinking establishment that catered to older male patrons, and as Berlin was in the midst of a heat wave at the time, the bar's façade was open to the night air. During my first evening at the hotel, laughter from across the street, accompanied by the patrons' drinking songs, entered my room through an open window. The combination of sound, image and proximity triggered an intense and uncontrollable Pavlovian response, and despite my jet-lag induced exhaustion and the oppressive humidity, I spent the remainder of that night sleepless and drenched in a cold sweat. Although, I am not interested in traversing the all-too-familiar terrain of my Judaic roots or uncovering familial history made invisible through the passage of time, experiencing what I perceived as a stereotypical German moment, and conditioned by years of Hebrew School attendance, I found that the slogan used to frame the intensive enculturation of my youth -- "Never Forget" -- was given new meaning.

Once I decided to apply for the residency, I conducted Internet searches on the Jews of Krems to investigate their history with the town and ultimately their fate, hoping to know what to expect from my six-week stay there. Information was scarce, but one night I came across a reference to a massacre that occurred in Krems in 1349, after the Jews were accused of poisoning the town well. On the same Website, I read about a Jewish cemetery and contemporary monument that purportedly commemorated the 1349 event. I say 'purportedly' because several residents of Krems had responded to the article to refute the event, the monument, and the existence of any Jewish cemetery within Krems. A heated hyperspace exchange followed, complete with the bravado, name-calling and

prejudice often exhibited in anonymous online interactions. Both sides were adamant about their positions, and there was no room for a middle ground or neutral perspective. Having never set foot in Austria, I had no idea which side was closer to the truth; but I became fascinated by the viciousness of the exchange, and I checked the site daily for new entries. Like many historical truths, or the collective consciousness capable of erasing the most unpleasant aspects of its own memory, one day the site simply vanished. However, I had witness the exchange and now had first-hand experience of the extreme divisiveness this topic could create. As to whether there really was a Jewish cemetery in Krems, or why someone would vehemently deny its existence -- were the residents of Krems somehow implicated by its existence? And lastly how quickly and quietly the erasure of memory and history can occur -- I could expect to find answers only by visiting the place in question. In the meantime, I was prepared to have the fears instilled by my Hebrew School education fully confirmed by one short stay in a tourist town along the Danube.

The day after arriving in Krems in 2004, I began to search for the Jewish cemetery. My approach was basic and systematic, since several cemeteries were marked on the tourist map that came with my apartment. As Krems is a small town, I quickly ruled out every site shown on the map. In the process, though, I discovered that many grave sites displayed images of the dead. As Roland Barthes states in the beginning of *Camera Lucida*, *One Day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's younger brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: I am looking at the eyes that looked at the Emperor.* During the course of this project I became infatuated with the images of the dead and how they transcend history. I also became suspicious of the motivations behind the decision of one's final and eternal representation. Many of the residents who had died in the '70s had images depicting a soldier in brown shirt uniform, which I interpreted as showing their willing participation in the final solution, and as proof that they were still committed to an ideology of hatred. Before I was able to resolve these feelings and further my search for the elusive Jewish cemetery, a reminder of my own mortality interrupted my stay and I immediately returned to the USA for treatment, lest I take up permanent residence within the Krems cemetery myself.

I returned to Krems in 2006. Despite my deep-rooted suspicions and what I now consider misinterpretations of my encounter with the grave markers. With two years of reflection, I concluded that I was misinterpreting the grave markers. I was as culpable of distorting history as were the Austrians who sought to "bury" the cemetery and all its memory represented, by simply erasing it from the map of the city. I reduced the uniforms depicted on the gravesites to political affiliation, rather than acknowledge the personal experience of the dead. The markers were not intended as monumental gestures towards an ideology, but acknowledgments of a life-changing event for the young men who encountered and survived it.

By 2006, the existence of the Jewish cemetery had been confirmed by several sources, although to protect the grounds -- or so I was told -- the “gate” to the graveyard was permanently locked. To obtain a key and gain entry required signing an entry log at a local car dealership. When I finally visited the cemetery, I discovered that both sides of the online argument that first piqued my interest were correct and in reality the cemetery only half existed. It was a ruin, an extinct burial ground that was slowly being reclaimed by its surroundings. Walled in for protection, it was also hidden from memory and inaccessible to all but the most persistent seeker. The monument that existed behind the walls was not intended to mark the 1349 massacre. It was a Holocaust memorial for the exiled and murdered Jewish residents of Krems. Commissioned and designed by Hans Kupelwieser in 1995. Although, Kupelwieser is a well-known Austrian artist, and Krems has a dedicated contemporary art scene, the existence of Kupelwieser's sculpture -- was not know by anyone I was acquainted with who either worked or lived in Krems.

With the Dead in Krems is a site-specific installation involving two locations: the abandoned Jewish cemetery in Krems and a neighborhood cemetery in Stein. It is intended as a gesture to symbolically reunite the lost Jewish community with the rest of the town. *With the Dead in Krems* is my attempt to bring together these disjunctions, by presenting the cemeteries and surrounding communities as integral parts of a whole. The installation is best displayed in a small self-contained gallery or an alcove with three distinct walls. Two of the walls display projected videos, one for each of the cemeteries. Between the two walls, fifty to sixty tombstone portraits from both cemeteries are hung in a straight line, intermingled and unidentified. Each image is encased in Plexiglas with the same six-inch height and slight variations on a four-inch width. As Roland Barthes suggests in *Camera Lucida*, the photograph is not intended as a solid representation of what was, or what has ceased to be. It serves as a reminder of the world's ever shifting state of being. We look into the eyes of the dead and might never reconstruct their personal histories or separate out their identities based on religion or race. This small collection of images, located between two spaces that are geographically close but conceptually far apart, makes whole a space that has long been divided. Cemeteries, monuments, political ideologies, and memory are not permanent; histories get erased and changed all the time. Documentation and reflection leads to discourse that are never vocalized. At present *With the Dead in Krems* is intended for Austrian audience, and I hope to exhibit the installation in Austria before considering other locations or venues.