Episode 7: Memory: Stih & Schnock

Samantha Rose Hill: (00:58)
I'm Samantha Rose Hill. This is Hannah Arendt: Between Worlds, a podcast from the Goethe-Institut and Brooklyn Institute for Social Research.

A few years after the Berlin Wall came down, city officials launched a competition for a work of public art, honoring the memory of Jewish citizens of Berlin who were murdered in the Holocaust. Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock won the competition and instilled *Places of Remembrance*, a permanent street exhibition documenting the antisemitic laws and decree imposed by the Nazis. The exhibition is composed of 80 brightly painted signs, a fixed to lamp post throughout the city with short text to describing the specific anti-Jewish laws.

Renata Stih: (01:46)
You know, it's not offensive, but it's there. And that creates an uncomfortable feeling, including this information. And then we connected these texts with objects, objects of memory.

Samantha Rose Hill: (02:03)
In the *Human Condition* Hannah Arendt talks about how art is a form of work that helps to fabricate the world that we inhabit. We make the world with our hands and art can be used to help us remember the past. How do we remember the past today? Do we remember something as horrific as the Holocaust? In this episode with Renata and Frieder, we talk about what it means to make a memorial, and the work of remembering in history, and how we can create immediacy in the present moment to help understand the past, while shedding light on the present.

Frieder Schnock: (02:48)
If you are emotional, for sure you can create something in your studio and hopefully someone will react to it or buy it, whatever. But if you really want to connect to society, you really have to know what this society is about.

Samantha Rose Hill: (03:01)
The 20th century cultural critic Walter Benjamin appears in our conversation as a companion in thinking. Benjamin was a dear friend of a who also served as inspiration for Renata and Frieder's approach to making this memorial.

Renata Stih: (03:20)
How do you build up, you know, the passersby, what do they do?

Samantha Rose Hill: (03:25)
Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock are a Berlin based artist duo. Their works deal primarily with collective memory in society. Please join me in welcoming Renata and Frieder!

So let's start in Berlin. I wanna go back to, but in 1993, you won an open competition to design a Memorial for Jewish people from Berlin who had been murdered in the Holocaust, and it's titled *Places of Remembrance*. Can you maybe tell our listeners a little bit about this piece and how you thought with Arendt or perhaps against her and in designing this Memorial in the Schöneberg, a neighborhood where she once lived?

Renata Stih: (04:29)
Yes. Um, well, uh, Schöneberg is a very kind of diverse area and, uh, has a huge history despite looking so boring nowadays. It hosted the West Berlin Senate until the wall came down in '89. And also it's the place where John F. Kennedy visited in '63 and spoke that really famous sentence "Ich bin ein Berliner" on the balcony of Schönenberg town hall. And in '67, that's where the student revolution started because the shah of Persia came with his, secret police and they started beating up students who were demonstrating against the shah. And so, uh, it's, it's a, quite a vibrant, should I say, vibrant area when you walk around today? Uh, of course what you see is our Memorial very much. So it's an overlay over a whole urban structure and, um, uh, it's, uh, 80 signs installed on lamp posts. And on one side you see a text and on the other side, you see a picture that relates somehow to the text.

Samantha Rose Hill: (05:38)
Can you give us an example of, of what a, what one of the images and the text might be?

Renata Stih: (05:44)
Yeah, well, they are anti-Jewish laws and regulations, which we took and rewrote and put it in a snappy shortened language like headlines, and then we installed it on lampposts like, that's like a usual way of doing things with advertisement and so on. I mean, New York has that too. And in, in Berlin it was quite common turn of 19th century to have this kind of installation. And that's what we picked up and spread it out over that area. And so these 80 signs. Proof actually that there is evidence, you know, we would love to expose things in public space and say, well, this is the crime that has been committed. Nobody can say they didn't know.

Samantha Rose Hill: (06:30)
There's an immediacy to these signs. You wrote them in the present tense. So they're quite arresting when you're walking down the street and suddenly you see a sign that says, "Jews are not allowed to buy food between four and five o'clock in the afternoon."

Renata Stih: (06:45)
That's true. That was on purpose. It was this immediate, as you say, immediacy. And I can tell you when we installed the first signs in the streets, though, we had permission it, all this, you know, or public permits, what you need, administrative permits, somebody called the police and it, it was an uproar. It was a shock to people and they thought we were putting up antisemitic slogans. And then of course the whole thing calmed down and, and the discussion started, but it came as a shock to people. And what we did with this present tense and the text was that we also said the actual date underneath when this regulation or law was released. So you have this

sandwich system, that's how we call it, a double layer of things. And you can really walk this urban environment and create your own Memorial that way. Right, Frieder?

Frieder Schnock: (07:43)
Yes, it needed some days to install the signs. And our two workers were not convinced that there is a need for this Memorial and when they put up a cat and on the other side of that sign, there is a text, ”Jews are not allowed to have household pets.” And the date underneath is, um, February 15th, 1942. And, uh, someone opened the window and yelled down to us when we were installing designs, “Go away, Jewish pigs!” and our workers were completely shocked. And the date is special because it's five days before the Wannsee conference. And for sure there is one guy involved, uh, where there's a close link to Hannah Arendt because Eichman was, uh, the guy who wrote the protocol of the Wannsee conference, um, meeting. And for sure they were talking about the so-called “final solution”. And, but Eichman, uh, on the other hand was really involved in the whole process. Because if you have such a regulation that, uh, Jewish families can have no more dogs or cats, it means the deportation will be easier because the neighbors will not complain. If there is an animal in an empty apartment that has no food and no water because the family is gone. So first the, uh, animals have to go and then the people can be deported

Samantha Rose Hill: (09:25)
When these signs initial went up around the neighborhood, um, in Shöneberg, and it's just it, that neighbor it's, so it's so unsettling to me, Gisele Freund lived there, as you said, Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Einstein. And as we know, some of these, some of these people did not survive the war. I'm wondering how tourists, how people in the neighborhood interacted with these signs walking through the streets? Aside from the antisemitic remarks, which are, were horrifying that you received while you were installing them. But in terms of explanation of explaining the kind of logic, the slow progression of the deprivation of human rights, the daily humiliation that the Jewish people were forced to suffer, how it became a politicized act to go and buy a loaf of bread. How did you, how did you curate the conversation that unfolded after the exhibition went up?

Renata Stih: (10:30)
The Memorial when it was installed and inaugurated had its own life beyond us, you know. And that's actually what artwork does. That's what Max Beckman once says, you create an artwork and then it goes to a museum and then it's not yours anymore. It becomes public property. Of course, it's our copyright and all that. And we are continuously working on things that relate to this work. We showed it at the Jewish Museum in New York. There is also an installation with an artwork that relates to the Memorial at Princeton University, East Pine Hall. But it's also, you know, schools use it in their own way. Or Michael Moore quoted it in one of his films to kind of suggest that a similar Memorial on slavery should be done on Wall Street and so on. So these things have, people have their own thoughts about it. And I have to say that very little has been damaged, probably because it's nine feet, installed nine feet high. We should also say that there are three major map signs. We work a lot with mapping systems forever and ever. And maps is something that really interests us. And here we have a double layered map, one from ‘33 and

the other from ‘93, the year of the inauguration. And so people can see also how this urban structure has changed due to war and bombing. And then it didn't get rebuilt the same way.

Samantha Rose Hill: (12:14)
So there's a dialogic element to the installation work that you do. You don't just make art objects that people look at. I'm thinking of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, which is also in Berlin. AMemorial I've always found very troubling. I don't like it. I'll just say that. And I mean, we can talk about taste or not, but there's, you know, when you see these signs and places of remembrance, you're taken aback, you're actually physically forced to stop and think, as Arendt might have said, about what it is that you are encountering. A familiar place becomes unfamiliar, or your work *Bus Stop* also is a work that is physically and mentally and psychically, emotionally engaging your audience. And so I'm wondering how you think about that process of curating the interaction between the people who are going to come into contact with these objects, um, while you are creating them?

Renata Stih: (13:19)
Conversation. Yes. I mean a dialogue. It's probably because we have to create a dialogue, Frieder and I, when we work on things. And believe me, we thoroughly disagree on many things. Yeah. And it takes a long time till we agree on this big project. So we have our own areas where we work on. And then on these kind of public activities, we have to connect our forces because it's like making a film, you need a team, you need to rethink it. And if I hate one thing, it's stupidity. I mean a lack of intelligence in something or dejavu art or, you know, these things that are just decorative and repeat themselves endlessly, like at art fairs, it's just boring. So the thing is, yes, the conversation with an audience is, of course, based on, somehow innocently, on Benjamin’s theories. How do you build up, you know, the passersby? What do they do? How do you walk? And very often I thought, of course, Frieder and I are familiar with Benjamin and very much so with his work. We live basically in the area in Tiergarten where Benjamin lived and every, like every three houses, Benjamin had a room or something. And, uh, and, and that's where we live. And many scholars come by and say, oh, wow, you live here in Benjamin's area, close by Machteburger platz. And, uh,

Samantha Rose Hill: (14:47)
I have pictures of myself there.

Renata Stih: (14:48)
Oh, you did?

Samantha Rose Hill: (14:50)
I didn't know I was so close to you.

Renata Stih: (14:54)
You. Yeah, no, definitely. Uh, and so, um, uh, and, and of course we followed Benjamin’s trace. I mean, that's what you also do, you follow throughout Europe. That's what we did. We went to Portbou and looked at the area and it's very moving. I have to say, when you think that one of

the most important thinkers, for sure, an impossible person, the more I know about Benjamin, the more, I think it's good that I didn't know him in a way. But I love what he said and what he thought. And very often, I think, what would he say about the reproducibility of things when he would see how Frieder and I work together on an image digitally that we connect from two images, one of Frieder's, one of mine, or put other things in there and layer it over.

Renata Stih: (15:59)
And he recognized it, of course. And of course you can reproduce it a million times and multimillion times today because you do it digitally and you throw it out and the, on the web, and then people can approach it or not. So it's quite an interesting dialogue with Benjamin. But my thing about Benjamin is his memories of childhood. I had also a wonderful childhood and went for walks with my grandparents and my parents, and I loved repeating and repeating over and over the streets, the houses and everything I saw. I'm a typical town child, I would say. Nature is okay, but not too long.

Samantha Rose Hill: (16:41)
When Arendt met Benjamin in Paris, in exile. You know, of course, they were first cousins through her first marriage to Gunther Stern, but when they really met Benjamin was writing *Berlin Childhood* around 1900. And it's very easy to imagine them having conversations in his tiny flat about it. But I think one of the things that you're touching on that of course was very much at the center in some ways of Benjamin's work on art in the age of mechanical reproducibility and author as producer in the storyteller and Arendt's work on the crisis of culture, iis the commodification of art in modernity and the way in which that not only devalue experience and kind of foreclose spaces for critical engagement and thinking, but is also in a way dehumanizing and turns us away from the world that we share in common.

Frieder Schnock: (17:46)
That message on to the next generation. And that's why we picked images that have links to child book illustrations. So we wanted kids to ask their parents or their grandparents, "Why is that image there? Why is that cat up there?" And they have to come up with an explanation and the story and the same is true to the *Bus Stop* project you mentioned already our project for the Memorial to the murder Jews in Europe, we said people have to take their time and go to the places that are all over Europe, not only Sachsenhausen, not only Buchenwald, places of hard labor, places of death marches. And when you go on such a trip, for example, to Poland, to Gross-Rosen or to Auschwitz, you might feel the need to talk. And dialogue is back again. Because when you go together with someone, either you walk in the Bavarian Quarter, or you sit on a bus, you can talk about what you have seen, what you experienced and what you think about. And, uh, that's the background. And as you said, a dialogue is really important.

Samantha Rose Hill: (19:10)
There's also in both of these exhibitions, an element of movement. Um, and now you've put Benjamin in my mind, which is, which is, you know, and we're talking about Arendt, but Benjamin means not gonna leave now. Um, but in Arendt's essay on Benjamin, that was published in a couple of places, um, which she originally wrote in German. Um, she talks about

the flaneur and both of these exhibition pieces have a lot to do with movement. , um, unlike a gallery space where you're standing in front of a painting, or you go and stand in front of a wall or a sculpture, um, these require that you, uh, walk that you get on a bus that you go somewhere. Can you talk about the importance of movement and thinking?

Renata Stih: (19:52)
Well, moving and thinking always impressed me in cloisters because you walk in squares and then you can cross and you by a fountain in the middle, and then you take another way. Cloisters are the quintessential think tanks, I think till today. Yeah, they are. And I always thought when I was sitting at school and we were sitting behind each other, I thought how stupid we should be walking in squares in a cloister and have total silence. The other thing is really silence. And I think that's why it's wonderful to walk in a park and to experience this kind of sound of trees and, you know, uh, you alone with your thoughts and these kind of movements of nature. I mean, park is civilized nature, so it's not too bad. However, it is such a thing that you walk and you think is probably something very liberating, liberating.

Renata Stih: (20:56)
It sets ideas free. Um, that was also sort of an idea for the Bavarian quarter because they wanted to have a Memorial stable, you know, a Memorial on the Bavarian square, in the middle of the Bavarian quarter. And Frieder and I looked at it and it was like a reconstructed square with mishmash sculptures and fountains and some weird old benches. After the war, you know, they redid it. And, uh, there are two subway lines. There is a noisy street and so on. And I mean, if you have such a place, why would you do that? There is already a sculpture. So why would you do that? And so we said, no, we'll spread it out. And we will make it unavoidable. Uh, you know, really directly translated from German. People will have to face it over and over again, if they want to. Because what Frieder always points out is you have to raise the head a little bit and then you see the sign.

Renata Stih: (22:08)
Any people live there for years, they, they don't see it because it's hanging a little bit higher and it's also not too large. So, you know, it's not offensive, but it's there. And that creates an uncomfortable feeling, including this information. And then we connected these texts with objects, objects of memory, if you want. They relate to a lot of stories from our friends, from our families. There is a lot of things are built in. The book has to be written about it still. But there are also banal you know, you have an ashtray, you have, whatever, a powder dose, and just things, daily things.

Samantha Rose Hill: (22:58)
These are familiar images, there's a rich materiality to them, which you've juxtaposed, perhaps in this Benjaminian, Brechtian fashion. That's very jarring. That's very political and kind of unsettles that invitation to look at these images when you encounter them.

Frieder Schnock: (23:21)

And as we found out that today most of the people are looking on the smartphones only. We are glad to have an app for, or the Memorial and with the app, it's easy for people to experience the Memorial from far away. You can use it while walking and, uh, there are translations in different languages. And, uh, so if you cannot read German, you click it and you get a translation and you can make your way.

Samantha Rose Hill: (23:52)
And you're, you're forcing people who are constantly looking down while they're walking these days to look up.If you download exactly the app

I wanna come back to dialogue for a second because Renata, you brought up silence and silence is very important to Arendt. She talks about thinking as the silent dialogue of thought. The two in one conversation that I have with myself. As a kind of space where the self consciousness can engage with the conscience. Can you maybe talk a little bit about, more about silence? I'm curious, yes, the importance of silence and dialogue and art?

Renata Stih: (24:51)
Well, I like silence cuz I'm an only child. So I think silence is wonderful though. I never have silence. I usually have three screens on two without sound and one is with sound. And then I can, you know, just to have like an overview. Media and film is one of my passions, let's say. I teach it and I write about it and we also do videos. So, uh, programs or whatever, but silence is of course wonderful. When you, when you read and when you think then you come to a conclusion. You know, we found out that, Albert Einstein who lived in Harberland Strasse number four in the Bavarian Quarte that first of all, nobody could disturb him while he was working and so on, he, they would just give him some food and he would eventually come out once and so on. But he also had some secret “chambre de bonne”, you know, rooms where he would silently meet his mistress. I think he was a sexaholic if I'm not mistaken.

Samantha Rose Hill: (25:56)
Him and Adorno

Renata Stih: (25:58)
Yes, but it's a very, it's a very interesting, uh, story about him. And, you know, you wander around the Bavarian Quarter you think, where were these rooms where, you know, Einstein would just sneak in to meet someone? No, but silence is something that comes with, as I said with thought and with creating a concept. I mean, you can't fill yourself up with images and with sound and whatever, but then when, and you come out with it, it, you have to be silent. So Frieder and I tend to work each of us in his own space. And then we come together and discuss it. And then if we don't come to a conclusion, we go to our space again. And then we come together again, it's basically like that. And sometimes I collect material on email and send it to him. Despite the fact that he's not far away.

Renata Stih: (26:54)

I mean, this are just, I think this new kind of media exchange conversation is simply made from me. I was always waiting for it to have such a multi, multiple possibilities to do things. So you can have a conversation, but in silence, you don't have to speak. You can't just think and then send it over and you get an answer. And then you, you come out and do things together.

I was also thinking about, when did I meet Hannah Arendt first? This is actually an interesting story because I think my generation, somehow Hannah Arendt was very important. Of course, we learned about Eichmann trials everywhere in Europe, you would learn that at school or everywhere in free Europe. And so I remember the Gunther Gaus' interviews. Tthey were shown on German public television over and over again. Maybe I didn't understand everything as a little girl, my parents spoke about it. But she smoked.

Renata Stih: (28:01)
She was a chain smoker. She smoked and Gunther Gaus smoked. And they were both in a cloud and it was like a caricature. And of course my parents being intellectuals smoked too. And so I, as the younger age, I started smoking and then later I gave it up. All my grand aunts, everybody who was thinking was also smoking. Thinking and smoking was one thing. And so years later, Frieder I think has similar memories of, of Gunther Gaus interviews. Frieder and I studied photos of German immigrants in America and believe me each and everyone was holding a cigarette. These black and white photos were always with a pose. And it was always with a cigarette not only Hannah Arendt but I'm just looking at Max Beckmann, Hedy Lamarr, Gropius and, and Mies, of course, Mies van der Rohe, and Billy Wilder.

Renata Stih: (29:09)
I mean, they all smoked in every photo. So we created a series on smoking. The series is called "Smoking Immigrants", and that's where we connect space and place and person. And it's, uh, and of course. Hannah Arendt, we, we, we did several on Hannah Arendt because she smoked everywhere, uh, and wherever Riverside drive and yes, Riverside drive, of course, we went there and looked at the house, but, but actually, I mean, I'm sure she smoked in the park and, and everywhere. So a bunch of collectors have ordered these and, and we have even, uh, central park and, uh, written over it Hannah Arendt smoked here because I'm sure she,

Samantha Rose Hill: (29:49)
Riverside Park. Riverside park was the park where she used to go sit and watch people. She wrote a poem. She wrote a poem about it in 1943.

Samantha Rose Hill: (30:12)
I wanna talk a bit about the relationship and the tension between politics and art. And this is a, a debate that is ongoing in our contemporary society today, should art be political? And it is an often controversial conversation. I think it's in "The Crisis of Culture," Arendt says that the common element that connects art and politics is that they're both phenomena of the public world. But the artist works alone in isolation to create and then put something in the public world while politicians, people who engage in political action, are actors and speakers who go out into the street and, and speak and act and protest. So they're, they're similar, but they're different

activities in the way that she breaks them down. And I'm thinking since you were talking so beautifully about smoking, I'm thinking about how Arendt guarded her work day. You know, she wouldn't even take lunch appointments with people until she was done writing.

Samantha Rose Hill: (31:22)
She would sit in her study at 370 Riverside Drive and lay on her couch and she would smoke and think, and then she said that she wouldn't write, she wouldn't go over to her typewriter until she could take dictation from herself. So there's the relationship between smoking and thinking, but also her writing, which was very political, is happening in this kind of private space. Your work, which is very political, you're sitting alone in silence together separately in conversation. Should art be political? Does art have an ethical obligation to contribute to the public sphere?

Frieder Schnock: (32:02)
If you want to have an impact on society, you really have to know the society. You have to go out, you have to meet people. For example, the Bavarian Quarter, we did recordings with a hidden mic. We were asking stupid questions to the flaneurs, to the passers by to learn some what they know about history, what they know about the Jewish population in this area. Uh, that's one example. And for example, for *The Bus Stop* project, we went to the Wannsee conference's research center and looked up the material, because during that time you didn't have Wikipedia, whatever. You really had to go, go for the books and, and look for the files and, and put, uh, the stuff together. And to have an impact on society. And you better have good data. And, um, if you are emotional, for sure, you can create something in your studio and hopefully someone will or buy it, whatever. But if you really want to connect to society, you really have to know what the society is about.

Samantha Rose Hill: (33:07)
I'm wondering if we can kind of complicate the term society because Arendt draws this distinction between society and politics. And I think part of what she was worried about in the 1960s was the socialization of political life, the kind of reduction of all art objects into objects of mass consumption. And she talks about how modern art started as a rebellion against society. Is there a distinction in the way that you are thinking about society and politics, would you disagree with Arendt's critique there?

Renata Stih: (33:50)
Well, I think that's where we learned to do what we are doing, you know, in the sixties. I mean, they went out and did all kinds of things that were unconventional, that were new in the art world. It included performance and music, sound, all kinds of things. And also political activities. When you think of Joseph Beuys, who surely with his methods is quite crucial for our work, wouldn't you agree Frieder?

Frieder Schnock: (34:21)
Absolutely. But it was a time of pop art too. And that I guess is the reason why Arendt came to such a conclusion. But if you look at, for example, the Beatles and you think about it as, as pop, uh, there are always different side steps and, um, pop can be aggressive too. And if we look at

the pop artists, um, we have, uh, different figures there and, uh, it's not always the same. They are individuals. And, uh, even if we give it a label nowadays and say, this is pop art, but, uh, some is really critical. There's a critique against capitalism and you can do it with this pop art. Absolutely.

Renata Stih: (35:08)
Absolutely. Well, uh, Rauchenberg is one of those artists, right? He's a very well educated multilayered artist who brings in all kind of issues that, uh, was, um, kind of occupying society's, uh, and that, and that you can see in his collages, in his lit lithographs or other prints, you know, so, uh, I, I think he's one of those who are very, uh, where the meaning and the political message comes before the image different to Warhol where the image comes before the political image, but still, uh, you know, if you, if you show, uh, dollar bills or if you show cans, uh, and, uh, uh, or an icon like Marilyn Monroe, it is also a political statement. I think good art is always political. I mean, if you go back to Renaissance, you see how Pier Della Francesca, how he covered up a political message inside a biblical story. And it was obvious to people who knew about, you know, the background story, but it was also a beautiful painting. Now, today it's very often not beautiful anymore. We have another definition of beauty.

Samantha Rose Hill: (36:23)
What, how do you understand the definition of beauty to have changed?

Renata Stih: (36:26)
Oh, well, it's, you know,, let's say till the 19th century, it had to be painted beautifully. Proportions had to be the exact and so on. And then shifted slowly once Impressionists took the single pixels apart in a painting and showed them. And then after that it was deteriorating more and more into shape and color, and beyond that. And then the use of photography. And the experience with war, the documentation of war that gave our art push, thing. I'm just saying that because Frieder and I took our colleagues from Berlin University to the new National Gallery yesterday, where we, which is now newly renovated, beautiful, like never before and got a whole like lifting, but the best way and has a new art installation which goes exactly into detail into topics of the 20th century. It's a museum of the 20th century. And so there are pockets and you walk into these times and see how artists react to it and all around. You have some media installations because film and photography, as I said, were so important. And nowadays it's just part of it. We are so used to running images that, uh, Pierce Brosnan, you know, the James Bond interpreter said, “I love to paint because it gives me some stability. It is something I don't have to do with many other people, like making a film.”

Samantha Rose Hill: (38:02)
But I'm thinking about the relationship between history, remembrance, the creation of art objects, which always have a shapeliness to them, an appearance in the world, and the use of public space in particular. So when we're talking about something like pop art, we're not necessarily, uh, talking about something that is telling a story about something that happened in the past or when we're talking about kitch. Um, and I think this was part of the distinction that Arendt was perhaps trying to draw between high art in a way, and commodity culture where art

and poems have the ability to record stories and give voice to human experience. And there's different kinds of experience, but for her it was about the creation of meaning.

Frieder Schnock: (39:07)
I agree completely. And, uh, because, um, when we mentioned pop art, for sure, we thought about the sixties and, uh, one of the major events in the sixties was the Vietnam War. And if you'll think about art linked to the Vietnam War you can name a lot of artists who did, uh, great stuff and brought images to the public in a different media, whether it's photography or print or film. It's something you cannot say pop art is, uh, low or whatever. They had an impact on daily life, absolutely.

Renata Stih: (39:46)
Yes. Vietnam is something that Rauschenberg also quoted in many of his collages, also racial topics. He was very, very strong about it. And then on the other hand, in, in Germany, you have Gerhard Richter who took his whole family apart and brought history into his rather realistic pictures. And I have to,

Frieder Schnock: (40:12)
Wolf Vestell

Renata Stih: (40:13)
Wolf Vestell was this political, uh, artist in Berlin. You still see his sculptures with a high, uh, let's say critique on capitalism and on a lack of solidarity in society and so on. But I have to come back to Joseph Beuys who was one of the first people to track down those relationships between humans and nature pointing out that we are ruining our environment. And that was what he did at a Documenta with this project “7,000 Oaks”, which he wanted to be planted. And he managed worldwide, basically, even in Japan, they planted some. So he, you have all these different layers, maybe, I guess, Hannah Arendt wasn't so well informed. She was in academic circles, but probably not in circles with artists and also critical collectors. You have very intellectual collectors who want to have of a certain kind of art of surrounding them

Samantha Rose Hill: (41:22)
Something nourishing. You've brought up Joseph Beuys a couple of times. And I think, you know, maybe that in part cuts to a distinction that Arendt wants to insist on that I'm hearing you disagreeing with, which is that action is something that we do through speech in a public space. And it's something that we do in concert with one another. And for her, the idea of what it meant to act in the world in that way was different from what she termed “work” in T*he Human Condition*, homo favor, what it is that we can make with our hands. And that for her includes architecture, the creation of art objects and the writing of poems. But I hear in the way that you're talking about Beuys and others, this idea that the creation of an art object is a form of action. And it's not just a form of action. You understand it to be a political act that perhaps speaks or doesn't speak. And I think that's something that Arendt would have fundamentally disagreed with.

Frieder Schnock: (42:31)
Yes, the field is much more open. Art as activity. Think about Occupy Wall Street. If you hold up a sign, if you do picketing, it's all a link to performance. Uh, so the field of art is much, much wider. It's it's not only linked to object. If it's stable, if it's like a Memorial, like the Bavarian Quarter, we are lucky that it's there. And we always hear the question, how long will this exhibition be up? And we say, hopefully forever, as we might need lamp posts for a longer while. And, uh, so it's tricky the whole issue.

Samantha Rose Hill: (43:08)
But so I wanna just ask maybe, uh, and you can, you can decline to answer this question if you want, because I know it gets into controversial political territory today. But here you created this incredibly provocative exhibition posting antisemitic statements around Schöneberg. Today in the United States, people are tearing down Civil War memorials. They're taking down statues of Thomas Jefferson. And I'm curious how you think about the contemporary conversation around memorials and what their function is, or should be, politically within society?

Renata Stih: (43:49)
This installation is a memorial and so memorials are there to be forever. That's how they are created. They are there to kind of symbolically depict a certain moment in time. Our memorial, which we created goes beyond that. It is kind of shifting. That's why Frieder said, we tried to think what would be in years, how would future generations talk to each other? And that's why we also using language in the arts. You often have just images. We didn't, we use image and text or text and image, and then you can relate to it. And as I said, evidence, we have a proof that the crime happened and it's also of course, dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust. But it is also, let's say, a synonym for other human rights issues. You can see when you thoroughly look at it, that in all parts of the world where, human rights are threatened or neglected, same laws come up again.

Renata Stih: (45:04)
I mean, we have that rather often that people, for example, at the Jewish Museum in New York, we installed this work with a video in 2003 and a guard came to us and she said, you know, my mother was from the South and she experienced this. She was Black and she was not allowed to sit on certain benches and she was not allowed to drive in the front of the bus. And we are very familiar with such laws and regulations and she reflected about it. She was a guard at the museum and it was a really valuable conversation with her. And so that, that is how she adapted to it. And she said, every day I walk in and I look at your video of all the eighty signs I am reflecting about what does it have to do with my own past and my family? And we were absolutely moved about it.

Renata Stih: (46:05)
So I think our memorial doesn't glorify a man on a horse. That is a different thing. When you look at yeah, a man on that's usually a memorial. A memorial for a writer or a poet is a man on a chair with a book in its hand, looking down and pigeons, sitting on the head of these, you know, statues and high up and so on. I love those when I was a kid, cuz I always thought, oh, what did

they do there up there? And then you have those warriors who created war or fought for some cause or were sent out to do something. Many of these are questions nowadays or even destroyed. But that is of course completely different from how we approach the moment of memory. We are storytelling people. And we tell a story, not only a story, it's no imagination. We take evidence and we bring it out there in public and you can read it if you like it or not. And

Samantha Rose Hill: (47:10)
It's perhaps what Walter Benjamin might have called a dialectal object?

Renata Stih: (47:15)
Probably. And I think it is a dialectical object. Yeah, true! You know, the problem with the Memorial was it was in German and uh, installed in '93. Um, public art was not meant to be also a book, which we did with it and also be translated into another language, what we wanted to do English. And so, uh, this kind of, uh, reaction with the app, is we are now producing many languages. We are producing one after another and they will be, uh, uploaded and people will be able to read them. And uh, and that's actually the right thing to do. It approaches so many areas, particularly in Europe, uh, but also outside of Europe. So I think it's a good, it's a good way to do it. Yeah. The app is, is an answer. And for all these people who love to hold a device in their hand and feel lonely otherwise because they don't smoke anymore. So now they're holding this device in their hands,

Samantha Rose Hill: (48:25)
The cell phone has replaced cigarettes is what you're saying.

Renata Stih: (48:28)
Yeah. That is also something about loneliness nowadays where people feel okay if they have a machine in their hand, you know.

Samantha Rose Hill: (48:37)
But it's also turned everyone into an artist. Everyone has become a photographer. Everyone has become a portrait artist. Everybody has become a video artist. Um, and self-publishes on social media platforms. How do you engage with this kind of democratization of technology? Does it figure into your work? And now the hands are being thrown up in the air for people who can't see us!

Renata Stih: (49:07)
I mean, it's about let people be creativ!. People who are creative, they don't fight. People who sing don't make wars. You know, this is my answer. Let them be creative. That's wonderful. And then people,

Samantha Rose Hill: (49:21)
Hannah Arendt liked to dance.

Renata Stih: (49:23)

She liked to dance. See? Ah, yes. Good. We, uh, used to dance too.

Samantha Rose Hill: (49:28)
This was lovely. Thank you so much. Thank you. Okay,

Renata Stih: (49:32)
Samantha, it was a blast. Thank you very much.

Samantha Rose Hill: (49:34)
Yes, it was for me. Bye bye.

Hannah Arendt:Between Worlds is a co-production of the Goethe-Institut and the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research. It was produced and edited by Lisa Bartfai. Music by Dylan Mattingly. And it was hosted by me, Samantha Rose Hill. We have more episodes for you on thinking with Hannah Arendt now. Until next time!