

Feminine Genius
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AGORART

Action and Narration in the Public Space

“L’entraide, c’était la parole.
On n’avait rien d’autre à donner.”

(Yvette Levy, Holocaust survivor)

“Quelle histoire faut-il raconter aujourd’hui?” The question was asked by French artist Esther Shalev-Gerz, and was answered by 155 inhabitants of the Parisian district Aubervilliers, the quarter Belsunce in Marseilles, and the Swedish town Skoghall. What story must be told today?

Hannah Arendt, one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century, emphasized the importance of stories and their relationship to politics. Political action “produces” stories “as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things,” she writes in *The Human Condition*.¹ But the tragedy of our times, for Arendt, is that we have lost the world in which politics can take place, the public realm where human beings can act and speak in concert, where stories can be born and narrated. Her whole work could be seen as a kind of obituary: she mourns politics lost, regrets the disappearance of the public realm.

This paper is an attempt to look at contemporary art in light of Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the modern world. Using the art of Esther Shalev-Gerz as an example, I will try to show that the public realm has not altogether disappeared, that there is still room for politics in the Arendtian sense of the term, and that there is, thus, still hope for a future where stories continue to be born, narrated, and remembered.

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 184; henceforth HC.

Action and the Public Realm

In her magnum opus, *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt carries out a genealogy of labor, work and action, respectively, in order to show how our modern notion of the political is based on a blurred understanding of action as such. Her main claim is that, since the Greeks, a displacement has taken place, substituting the private for the public, with “the social” as its most evident result. In our modern era we envision society as a gigantic household, based on economic rather than political structures, resulting in a world where a few chosen leaders take care of all political decisions while the large majority, the people, are more or less reduced to casting their vote on Election Day. This fact, that we have blurred the distinction between labor, work and action, and that our states therefore function as households, undermines political action as such.

What, then, is political action according to Arendt? Being political is to *act and speak in public*. Plurality is the ontological condition of politics. “Action and speech go on between men [sic!].” (HC 182) Action, as distinguished from fabrication (work), “is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act.” (HC 188) Our worldly interests thus literally constitute “something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together.” (HC 182) This in-between is not tangible, it cannot solidify into tangible objects, but it is nevertheless *real*, and Arendt calls this public reality “the ‘web’ of human relationships.” (HC 183) Action “always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries.” (HC 190)

Action is what constitutes the public realm. It “not only has the most intimate relationship to the public part of the world common to us all, but is the one activity which *constitutes* it.” (HC 198, my emphasis) The *polis*, properly speaking, “is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be.” (HC 198) In ancient Greece, Arendt’s prime example of a time when politics were still understood in terms of action, “not Athens, but

the Athenians, were the *polis*.” (HC 195) The public realm is thus not necessarily a physical space. It has no limits: “Wherever you go, you will be a *polis*.” These famous words indicate that the *polis*, for the Greeks, was something much more complex than just a public *space*: It was the manifestation of subjects speaking and acting in concert. Action and speech “create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere. It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the term, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me.” (HC 198)

Actors and Spectators

Action is thus a common affair: It takes place in public when people act and speak in concert. One of its conditions is hence that there are people around to witness it. Without an audience there is no action. And without spectators there are no actors. It is only when I “appear” to others that I become an actor in the strict sense of the word. “With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth,” Arendt writes. (HC 176) What happens, through this “second birth,” is that one, as a result of being looked at, becomes a “who,” rather than a “what.” To act, to take initiatives, to begin (*archein*), to set something in motion (*agere*), is not only the beginning of *something*, but of *somebody*. It is a creation.

This is why the public realm, as we saw, is a “space of appearance.” By acting in public, we reveal our distinct uniqueness to people around us. Speech and action are revelatory, hence transcending mere productive activity. And this appearance is what constitutes reality: “The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves.” (HC 50)

But the “who” revealed through speech and action is only visible to others, never to oneself. Arendt compares it to the Greek *daimón*, “which accompanies each man through his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters.” (HC 179f.) We are thus, and this may seem paradoxical, dependent on the

presence of others in order to be unique. The spectator is just as important, if not more so than the actor herself.

Towards the end of her life, Hannah Arendt got increasingly interested in the relationship between politics and aesthetics. Her last philosophical work was an intended three-part project entitled *The Life of the Mind*. She lived to complete only the first two parts, *Thinking* and *Willing*, writing only the title page of the third part, *Judging*. Her (incomplete) trilogy was written in the wake of Immanuel Kant's three Critiques, and while writing it she was giving lectures on Kant's political philosophy at the New School, using the *Critique of Judgment* as her main text.² While it is most commonly the *Critique of Practical Reason* that has been viewed as Kant's political corpus, Arendt sees the seed for a radically different political philosophy in his third Critique, in the section on *Aesthetic Judgment*.

Just like beauty is said to be in the eye of the beholder, the importance and meaning of an occurrence is for Kant "exclusively in the eye of the beholder, in the opinion of the onlookers who proclaim their attitude in public." (KPP 46) For the actor, "the decisive question is thus how he appears to others; the actor is dependant on the opinion of the spectator." (KPP 55) This resonates well with the Arendtian notion of politics as a kind of "performance" or "spectacle." And it is a spectacle that, in line with her understanding of the human condition of plurality, exists only in the presence of an audience. The public realm, consequently, "is constituted by the critics and the spectators, not by the actors or the makers." (KPP 63)

The advantage of the spectator is that "he sees the play as a whole, while each of the actors knows only his part or, if he should judge from the perspective of acting, only the part that concerns him." (KPP 68f.) The actor is thus partial, per definition, while the spectator is impartial. Impartiality, or "disinterest" as Kant calls it, is the most important condition for all judgments. It is what makes it possible to judge with the interest of

² Published as Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992); henceforth KPP.

others in mind, to develop a sense of “community,” which makes it possible to enlarge our mentality, to be a “world citizen” or, rather, a “world spectator.” (KPP 58) And this, in turn, adds the notion of *responsibility* to the human realm.

Enacted Stories

The disclosure of the “who” through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, “always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt.” (HC 184) It is only in this “medium” that action can be real, and although the contradictive wills and needs of the people in the web make action unpredictable and risky, it is also through this web that action is able to “produce” stories “as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things.” (HC 184) Even the greatest forces of intimate life – passions, thoughts and senses – lead an “uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized [...] into a shape to fit them for public appearance.” (HC 50) This transformation commonly occurs in *storytelling*, and generally in “artistic transposition of individual experiences.” (HC 50)

Action and speech “are indeed the two activities whose end result will always be a story with enough coherence to be told, no matter how accidental or haphazard the single events and their causation may appear to be.” (HC 97)

These stories may then be recorded in documents and monuments, they may be visible in use objects or art works, they may be told and retold and worked into all kinds of material. They themselves, in their living reality, are of an altogether different nature than these reifications. They tell us more about their subjects, the ‘hero’ in the center of each story, than any product of human hands ever tells us about the master who produced it, and yet they are not products, properly speaking. (HC 184)

Action in public thus produces stories, but “nobody is the author or producer of his own life story.” (HC 184) In other words, “the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer.” (HC 184) The full meaning of the story, moreover, “can reveal itself only when it has ended,” often only when all participants are dead, and the actions reveal themselves fully “only to the storyteller, that

is, to the backward glance of the historian.” (HC 192) What the storyteller narrates must thus “be hidden from the actor himself,” just like his “who,” or his *daimón* are visible only to others, only to the spectator. And even though the story is a direct result of the deeds of the actor, it is not him, but the storyteller, “who perceives and ‘makes’ the story.” (HC 192) Or, as Julia Kristeva puts it in her book on Hannah Arendt:

We must acknowledge that the actor himself, no matter how heroic his exploits themselves may be, cannot constitute wonderful action. Action is wonderful only if it is *memorable*. And where should we search for memory? The spectators are the ones who ‘accomplish’ history, thanks to a thought that follows the act. This accomplishment takes place through *recollection*, without which there is simply nothing to recount. It is not the actors but the spectators [...] who make the polis a productive place to organize *memory* and/or *history* and *stories*.³

Memory is thus crucial for the survival of political life. “Without remembrance and without the reification which remembrance needs for its own fulfillment,” Arendt writes, “the living activities of action, speech, and thought would lose their reality at the end of each process and disappear as though they never had been.” (HC 95) The disappearance of politics can thus partially be explained as a kind of “forgetfulness.” In *Between Past and Future* Arendt writes that the “tragedy” of our modern times began when “it turned out that there was no mind to inherit and to question, to think about and to *remember* [...] and without this thinking completion after the act, without the *articulation* accomplished by *remembrance*, there simply was no story left that could be told.”⁴ No stories without storytellers. And if action is not remembered, it has little or no value.

The risk, then, with beginning something in the public realm is that we lose control, even over our “own” stories. We can never be sure of what the results of our initiatives are going to be, since the human condition is plurality, since “not one man, but men, inhabit the earth,” (HC 234) and since there is no way of predicting the reaction of the spectator. This is the frailty of human affairs, the uncertainty of acting in concert. Action is always a process, it “has no end,” (HC 233) and it is hence irreversible and unpredictable:

³ Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt, Female Genius*, volume I (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 72, my emphasis.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 6, my emphasis.

“men never have been and never will be able to undo or even to control reliably any of the processes they start through action.” (HC 232f.) The actor, in this sense, is not merely a “doer,” but “always and at the same time a sufferer.” (HC 190)

The Greeks created the *polis* as a “remedy for this frailty.” (HC 196) Its twofold function was, first of all, to “multiply the chances for everybody to distinguish himself, to show in deed and word who he was in his distinctness,” and, secondly, to “offer a remedy for the futility of action and speech,” that is, to render them “immortal,” to prevent them from being forgotten, to make the deeds and stories “imperishable,” to create a kind of “organized remembrance.” (HC 197f.) The inherent diversity of the public realm is thus both that which robs us of control, and that which saves our stories from perishing. In the public realm we are always both dependent and free. This is the core of the human condition, the paradoxical nature of political freedom.

Art: Work or Action?

It is tempting to draw parallels between Hannah Arendt’s notion of political action as a kind of storytelling and the storytelling we see examples of in art and literature. For Arendt, “theater is the political art par excellence,” since it is only in theater that “the political sphere of human life” is transposed into art. (HC 188) Theater, for Arendt, is the only art form whose sole subject is “man in his relationship to others.” (HC 188) Theater is obviously the art form that most easily can be understood in Arendtian terms. It is a spectacle, it involves actors (almost always more than one), there is direct and tangible interaction between actors and spectators, and it is based on repetition and imitation rather than reification.⁵

⁵ Theater, or drama, was also the most famous art form in the Greek *polis* (that Arendt so much admires). And it is no coincidence that the very term *drama* (from the Greek verb *dran*, “to act”) indicates that play-acting actually is an imitation of acting. Aristotle already mentions that the word *drama* was chosen because *dróntes* (“acting people”) are imitated. (*Poetics* 1448a28, quoted from HC, p. 187 n11).

Visual art, by contrast, belongs to the realm of *work* rather than *action*, and is based on *reification* as a means for making thought tangible and durable. “Because of their outstanding permanence, works of art are the most intensely worldly of all tangible things.” (HC 167) Poetry is the most human and least worldly of the arts, since its material is language and since its end product remains closest to the thought that inspired it. Poetry (like music) does not result in tangible *things*, whereas painting, sculpture or architecture are based on reification and materialization. The artist, then, is a *homo faber*, someone who “works upon.”

But even if the artist himself is defined in non-political terms, as a worker rather than an actor, acting and speaking men need “the help of the artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all.” (HC 173) The artist, for Arendt, functions as a historian, as someone who reifies the memories of glorious acts, who makes them immortal. Homer as the ultimate artist. The artist as a scribe.

But what would Hannah Arendt have had to say about conceptual art? What about performance artists, artists who work in the public space, art based on political actions, on interaction, on processes rather than physical matter? With the art of Esther Shalev-Gerz as an example, I will now raise questions about the relationship between art and politics, introducing art *as* action, rather than *reification* of it.

Art As Public Space

In 1979, the city of Hamburg started a public discussion about raising a monument against fascism. Seven years later, Esther Shalev-Gerz and Jochen Gerz completed the piece: A column, twelve meters high and one square meter at the base, was erected in a busy square in the city. The surface of the column was covered with a thin layer of lead, and passers-by were invited to sign their names as a gesture and manifestation against fascism. As the surface was covered with signatures, it was gradually lowered into the

ground, so as to create space for more inscriptions. In 1993, after seven lowerings, the column vanished completely and only a plaque remained in the ground: “In the long run, it is only we ourselves who can stand up against injustice.”

The column, during the seven years that it was still visible, became a kind of public forum. In a place where people were literally *passers-by*, anonymous faces, passing each other without further notice or attention, it became a space for reflection and active participation, a space where, if only for a moment, people could stop and see each other, engrave their names, look at the signatures, tributes, insults or graffiti of others, make a standpoint, leave traces behind. And during the years when the column was visible the political situation in Germany changed – the fall of the Berlin wall, the reunification, the resurgence of neo-Nazis – leaving the column as a kind of memento of contemporary Germany. Social change and experiences were cemented into the ground and into the memory of the citizens of Hamburg. The traces on the column were like rings of a tree; evidence of time passed, perforated in lead and in the collective memory of the participants.⁶

This piece of art, or this monument, has little in common with the reifying and solidifying work of art that inhabits Arendt’s thought. The very idea of it is its own non-existence, its disappearance as object. It completely lacks the “outstanding permanence” that Arendt ascribes to works of art, it is based on a process rather than on the stabilizing function of tangible things, and it *creates* rather than *inhabits* a space, reflecting its own location and becoming, one could say, a “portrait” of Hamburg between 1986 and 1993. Moreover, it questions the very notion of memory that monuments traditionally are constructed to evoke. Or, as formulated by the artist herself: “we simultaneously evoked the past and the

⁶ In this sense, the monument against fascism shares the structure of the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, where people not only pray but leave little messages to God in the cracks of the wall, creating a patchwork quilt of wishes and prayers; a diverse testimony of our contemporary society. The difference between these two examples though, and this is crucial in light of Arendt’s political philosophy, is that the testimonies of the Wailing Wall remain secret, hidden on folded notes, hidden to the public. And since the messages do not appear to others, they do not entail responsibility (more than possibly the responsibility toward God); they do not reveal an actor. The Harburg monument, on the other hand, was visible and constituted a space of appearance, in the strict sense of the word (although, in its final “resting” state, it became hidden/secret too).

present, installing ‘forgetting’ in a place meant for ‘remembering’ and thus establishing, in the memory of each participant, through the act of public participation, a fleeting, subjected and fragmented memory.”⁷

Ultimately, the *Harburg Monument Against Fascism* created a space within which people could act, and through this action they expressed a collective responsibility. The “I was here” that emerges from the act of leaving one’s name behind is a commitment, a trace visible to others, a publicly pronounced statement. And while the column as such disappeared, it left traces in the memories of passers-by who, at least for a moment, revealed themselves in the eye of the other, were part of an event and stood up against injustice. Their public discussion replaced the monument form as such, and the disappearing column became a sort of reinvention of the notion of public art: not art *in* public, but art that seeks to make a public space *exist*.

Portraits of Stories

So, what story must be told today? The people in Aubervilliers, Belsunce and Skoghall offered a diverse and unpredictable collection of stories – some true, others fictive – that were filmed and shown in public spaces. Each exhibition included a series of still portraits, double-exposed with two faces, reminding us that each story includes a narrator and someone who listens, that plurality is the human condition, that there is no such thing as an autonomous subject in the realm of human affairs.

These “portraits of stories,” as Shalev-Gerz calls them, could be seen as an alternative kind of monuments. While traditional monuments serve to commemorate glorious events or war victims, these portraits are celebrations of the everydayness of contemporary life. They are testimonies of personal experience, not so much based on trauma or glory, but rather on the uniqueness and value of each and every individual story. Floating between

⁷ Esther Shalev-Gerz, “Approaching Public Space.”

fiction and fact, they undermine historical categorization and give privilege to the Arendtian notion of history as a series of *events* (“history is a story of events and not of forces or ideas with predictable courses” [HC 252]).

What happens in these portraits is that individual memory becomes collective memory, memory shared. And through the stories that are told a “who” is revealed to those who listen. What we witness is a kind of *becoming* through speaking, a “stepping out” in the public, an unveiling of identity. This not only questions the traditional notion of monuments and history, but also establishes a new notion of the portrait – no longer a reified copy of a human face but a perpetual presentation and sharing of human stories, memories, and histories.

This technique of portraying could be traced back to a Jewish tradition dependent on remembrance rather than reification. In Judaism, Shalev-Gerz has commented, we cannot rely on images but have to *remember*. The second commandment warns against making “graven images.” The world must be represented through *memory* rather than *image*. We witness this every year during Passover when we, over and over again, remember and tell the story of our people escaping slavery in Egypt. Narration becomes constitutive of the people as such. It gives an identity and a sense of belonging. For Esther Shalev-Gerz, as well as for Hannah Arendt (both Jews who at some point left their home countries and experienced being foreigners), narration and the expression of memories become ways of marking a territory, creating a space, a home.

The very idea of letting people tell whatever story they want also undermines the notion of authority and control of the artist. Shalev-Gerz creates a context, a frame one could say, but the participants are the ones who decide what content and meaning to fill it with – they paint the picture. This not only questions the traditional role of the artist, but also inserts and exposes her to the unpredictability and frailty of the public realm. Like the Arendtian actor, she starts a process without knowing where it will lead, takes the risk of facing the human condition of plurality, acting in concert but, at the same time, establishing traces and inserting action in our collective memory, immortalizing it, saving

it from perishing. Similarly, the people telling “their” stories, by telling them in public, give them away; give up their ownership, their authority. Do these portraits belong to the artist? To the narrators? To the people who commissioned the piece? Shalev-Gerz questions the very idea of artistic and personal property and authority – notions that have little meaning in the “web” of human relationships.

Between Telling and Listening

In the exhibit *White Out*, created for the Swedish Historical Museum, place and memory are put into dialogue, defining place or territory in terms of those who interact with and inhabit it. Two peoples, the Swedish and the Sámi,⁸ share a space, the country of Sweden. As her point of departure, Shalev-Gerz chose quotations reflecting *similarities* between the two peoples (more often described as *different*), and points of *inspiration* (the Swedes have oppressed the Sámis for hundreds of years but, as it turns out, have also been inspired by their culture), as expressed in historical documents, fiction, political speeches and newspaper articles. The quotations were presented next to photographs of archive boxes from the Historical Museum, boxes containing over 23 million collected objects that are not available for the public to see. The content of these boxes reflects the typical content of historical museums – history as archive, memory completed.

Having done her research, Shalev-Gerz read the selected quotations to Åsa Simma, a Sámi woman living in Stockholm, having experienced both traditions, synthesizing her two identities, embodying their contradictions. Two video projections face each other in the installation: one of Simma in her modern Stockholm apartment, responding and reacting to the quotations; the other of her listening to her own responses in headphones, on top of a mountain in Karesuando, northern Sweden, in the landscape where she grew up, the landscape of her ancestors, of her personal memories.

⁸ Indigenous people of northern Scandinavia and Russia. Also known as Lapps.

The installation was experienced from the space between the two screens – between telling and listening – the archive boxes fading behind a more dynamic manifestation of memory and history: lived experience, enacted stories, pains and pleasures of the past as experienced in the present. History is never completed, memory never permanent. And identity can never be put into an archive.

This installation, where Åsa Simma became the spectator of her own story, questions the distinction between actor and spectator, as formulated by Hannah Arendt in the wake of Immanuel Kant. Who tells the story here – the artist, in choosing certain quotations and in choosing the subject matter of the exhibit, or Simma, in reflecting upon the quotations? And who is listening – Simma, reacting to her previous reflections, or the audience, witnessing both screens, the archive boxes and the quotations on the wall? Modern technology makes it possible to become your own audience, to distance yourself from the act of speaking. Most people can relate to the uncanny feeling evoked when listening to their own voice on a tape recording (is that really what I sound like?), or watching themselves on video (is that really how I look, how I move?). Is what we hear or see our *daimón*, that which is usually invisible to us? Does the distance actually add a new dimension to our self-perception? And, most importantly in this context, does it add a dimension of “disinterest” or “impartiality,” or are we just as partial hearing our own stories no matter what the distance is? But then again: can any Swedish audience be impartial in their perceiving of this installation, given that it evokes their own personal memories and relationship to the subject matter? Is Shalev-Gerz not, after all, the most impartial spectator in this context, being an outsider without any personal relationship to Sweden, Swedish history or identity?

Similar questions are evoked in another piece accomplished in Sweden: *First Generation*, a permanent work installed in Botkyrka, a suburb of Stockholm heavy with immigrants. Again, a group of people was asked to participate, all first generation arrivers in Botkyrka, whether foreign immigrants or migrated Swedes.⁹ They were filmed replying

⁹ Thus diminishing the difference between foreigners and Swedes, who both are not originally from the place they now inhabit.

to a set of questions: “On your coming to Botkyrka: What did you lose? What did you find? What did you get? What did you give?” The questions were also etched into the stone steps of the building inhabiting the exhibit (Fittja Multicultural Center), posed to all that enter, some of which were Swedes visiting Botkyrka for the very first time. Outside the building, visible only in the dark of the evening (creating a sense of impermanence to a permanent piece), are large projections of close-ups of the narrators, as they listen to their own testimonies and answers. An eyebrow here, the corner of a mouth there. Bits and parts of facial expressions – surprise, recognition, sadness or joy – as the sounds of their own voices, inside the building, make up a collage of personal stories, a monument over the experience of being new to a place.

In this installation we no longer know which voice belongs to which face. This adds a kind of universality to the particular, an important characteristic of aesthetic judgment, as Arendt and Kant understand it. Every unique experience becomes a shared experience. But this is not to say that the inhabitants of Botkyrka are presented as one anonymous mass – a reduction common to the generalizing descriptions of foreigners or strangers – on the contrary they are celebrated in their very uniqueness, through the projected images that create a sense of intimacy, of creeping under the skin of the other. Again, we are reminded that a portrait is not a single affair, that there is always already at least two – a narrator and a spectator – involved in the creation of a complex image, a “who.” And again, we encounter an ambiguous relationship between narrator and spectator: the narrators, in this case “outsiders” or “newcomers,” embody the distanced and “disinterested” role of the spectator.

Judgment and Responsibility

This spring, the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz was commemorated with an exhibit at the City Hall of Paris. Esther Shalev-Gerz was invited to interview sixty survivors, asking them about their life before the war, the arrest and deportation, their time in the camp, and their present life. These last testimonies were presented on

sixty individual screens, unedited, the shortest two hours and the longest nine hours in length. Headphones on, seated at four long wave-profiled tables running through the room, each visitor could hear the stories at their own pace, leaving room for reflection.

This kind of unmediated narration is the only way, according to Arendt, in which we can even try to understand the tragedy of the Holocaust. It is “through the narrative itself,” Kristeva writes, “and not through some particular understanding, analysis or rationalization of that narrative, that Arendt believes we will be able to contemplate the horror of the Holocaust.”¹⁰ Narration as a way of remembering, but also as a way of grasping the ungraspable.

At the end of the exhibit room, three big screens were showing an edited version of the testimonies, where all the talking had been left out, leaving just the moments of silence, the in-betweens, the instants of reflection dividing words. A raised eyebrow, tearing eyes, lifted shoulders, smiles. The moments of remembrance, condensed and repeated, showing the silence between words that disappear in written testimonies, adding a human dimension and emphasizing the very moment of bringing the past into the present. Frozen, but yet dynamic time. A bridge between past and future.

As people were watching these testimonies, sometimes pausing to look at the bigger screens, they were constantly reminded that they were not just watching but that they were also being watched. The shape of the tables exposed people to the gazes of each other, making them aware of their own visibility as well as the presence of others. This undermines the “we did not know what was happening,” securing a shared “we know, we are aware,” turning the audience into “world citizens” or “world spectators” in the Kantian sense, guaranteeing a common sense of *responsibility*.

The importance of responsibility is also evoked in a monument proposed by Esther Shalev-Gerz for the victims of the Nazi Military Justice at the “Murellenberg” in Berlin-Charlottenburg. A “philosophical walk” guides the visitors to the former execution site.

¹⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, p. 96.

Along the way hang double-sided flags, one side carrying short life stories of those who were convicted because they had a different opinion, the other carrying the stories of their judges. The proposed monument reminds us that judges and convicted are irrevocably linked, that they are inseparable. Everybody, Shalev-Gerz comments, is responsible to name the ones responsible. We are encouraged to encounter judgment as part of our democratic responsibility, acknowledging the consequences of our own personal judgments. This, Esther Shalev-Gerz and Hannah Arendt both seem to say, is crucial for the survival of the public space, and prepares ground for new stories to be told.