’Many of the dead would be very loud…if they knew they can still raise their voices here.’

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“Parla Memento Hedera”

On June 20, Simon Dickel met Christian W. Find and Hannes Hacke at the Alter St. Matthäus Kirchhof (Old St. Matthew’s Churchyard, Großgörschenstr. 12-14, 10 829 Berlin, Germany) in Berlin’s district of Schöneberg. The following interview took place at the cemetery’s Finovo café. It is very close to Christian’s sound installation “Parla Memento Hedera,” which first opened in 2012 with active support from Hannes. The installation is a greenhouse with an ivy plant. When visitors

go inside, they find a table with 16 buttons partly covered by ivy. Pushing them, they can listen to the original voices of 16 people whose graves are in the cemetery, including AIDS activist Hans Peter Hauschild and photographer Jürgen Baldiga, whose work courageously chronicles the AIDS crisis.

Could you first of all explain the sound installation's name?
Christian W. Find: "Parla Memento Hedera" is an ivy parliament of memories, whose name consists of three elements: Parla relates to parliament; Memento stands for the memento mori of medieval nuns and monks, a reminder of our mortality, even though the end is open; Hedera refers to Hedera helix, the scientific name for ivy. In this parliament different voices converge and engage in dialogue. It is about giving a voice to the thoughts and ideas of the people buried here in order to further pass them on. Listeners are invited to draw inspiration from those words. The voices emerge from ivy, a plant which symbolizes friendship. Ivy is an epiphyte, a plant that grows on other plants, while plant and host plant are mutually supportive. Ivy is said to have healing power, and it has been a sacred plant since ancient times. Even today ivy serves as medicine. And efeu, the German translation of ivy, is the name of a group organizing activities on the cemetery, such as guided tours. The letters of the group's name, EFEU, stand for four German terms which translate as preserve, promote, remember, and support. Ivy is a typical cemetery plant.

Which criteria have you considered in your selection of persons and sounds?
Find: The entire sound installation covers a total of 16 voices, with each voice lasting three to four minutes. All recordings are original voices gathered from several sources and archives. Exceptions are Hedwig Dohm and Minna Cauer; recording technology was simply not yet available during their lifetimes, and for this reason their voices are represented by read excerpts from their works. Hence, one is guided through an entire century during those approximately 60 minutes. I chose eight female and eight male voices to have an equal representation of gender.

Hannes Hacke: All of the voices are connected through this churchyard as the shared place of burial of the activists and artists, which means that to some degree the collective was formed arbitrarily. Some members had known each other, whereas others are separated by a span of 50 or 60 years between their respective lifetimes. All of them were politically active: for women's rights and the right to self-determination, for feminism, against racism, for gay and lesbian emancipation and against the criminalization of sexuality.

Find: The historical aspect has always been important to me. While editing the sound files, I realized that it is frightening how current those topics are, even Minna Cauer's ideas from the 1890s. Listening to the whole thing up to 2006, the year in which the last person passed away, is like a journey through time during which one recognizes the relevance of those contributions. The installation does not contain a single invalid statement. This reflects the concept of memento mori: to keep in mind that life goes on. The words of the dead will not become less important; instead the dead who spoke to us will keep on talking. We are supposed to use their words to further develop their ideas and concerns.

When Johannes and I were in the sound installation one year ago, we immediately got into a

conversation with two women. I was fascinated by the fact that, as a recipient, one has a bodily experience with all senses included, while at the same time, one is very open and communicative.
Find: Yes, such an encounter of listeners is the ideal scenario: Two or three people happen to come together in the greenhouse and start a conversation on the subject. I wanted to push the limits of an audio-guide's individualization.I've also enjoyed some great moments in the installation. Once a week I come by to water the ivy. At times, when I arrive with my watering can, I notice visitors in the parliament. Then I take a seat on the bench. I've already observed three situations in which people talked to each other for a longer period of time. This is great.

Is the sound installation's transparency of particular importance?
Find: I always emphasize the fact that the greenhouse is a core element of the installation. It symbolizes transparency, and, at the same time, it elucidates that in order to grow and flourish the plant of friendship has to be taken care of. This is why my major concern is whether the ivy looks good (laughs). In case it didn't, it would almost be worse than a failure of the technical system.

Please tell the readers of Visual AIDS about some of the parliament's artists and activists. Who were those people that approached the topic of HIV/AIDS?
Find: I knew half of them personally, mostly the men. When I got to know them at the age of about 30, those were all people that gave me courage. They had personality. All of them were subject to severe attacks but stood up to those owing to their self-confidence. There is Andreas Meyer-Hanno, for example, who was an opera director in Frankfurt and the founder of the first gay drama group called Maintöchter. Later on he founded the Hannchen-Mehrzweck-Foundation, into which he put his entire personal wealth. Our parliament has also benefited from this.

Hans Peter Hauschild was an AIDS activist who co-founded the Deutsche Aidshilfe. In the beginning, this organization was a small autonomous group without any government funding. In the sound installation one can listen to him talking about these early days, during which AIDS activists had to stand up to discrimination and middle-class moral attitudes. Another interesting aspect about Hauschild was his attempt to bring together religion and sexuality. He himself was a Christian, homosexual, and member of the Catholic Church. He consciously endured this tension and approached it in an offensive manner.

I also met Napoleon Seyfarth in the gay bar Burgfrieden, which still was in East Berlin at the time. He was always sitting at the counter with his own coffin already positioned in the bar's backroom. The coffin also served as a champagne cooler in his apartment. Napoleon's approach to the topic of AIDS was blunt and provocative, but at the same time very optimistic and passionate. For instance, when it was clear that he didn't have much time left, he staged his own funeral. He wanted to be involved and thus celebrated his funeral as his wedding. In order to make his lesbian friend get his widow's pension, he married her. The Catholic priest didn't have a clue, or so people say; he was just wondering about the fact that all guests were wearing black. One should also read his book Schweine Müssen Nackt Sein. He was founder of SchAM, a gay organization in the German city of Mannheim. I'm also from Mannheim. This is the reason why I have a closer tie to him. Jürgen Baldiga got my attention through his photography, which courageously chronicles the AIDS crisis.

Hacke: I also got to know Jürgen Baldiga through his photography. Particularly his photographs of drag queens had a strong impact on me, and they profoundly influenced me as a drag queen. For example, his portrait of Ichgola Androgyn, the owner of this café, who is sitting over there, and also, his portrait of Bev Stroganov, who also works at this churchyard. Moreover, my job at the Schwules Museum (Gay Museum), in which Baldiga's estate is kept, offers me a new access to him. Together with a photography historian, Baldiga's last partner, Aron Neubert, is administering his estate. Neubert also hosts a Baldiga Twitter account where he publishes Baldiga's diary entries.

I would like to address the topic of memory. Hannes, where do you see differences between this sound installation and the Schwules Museum?
Hacke: Due to the café Finovo and the EFEU organization there is already a distinct form of memory culture at this cemetery. The café is run by Ichgola Androgyn, one of the members of Ladies Neid, a West Berlin drag queen group that was engaged politically in the 1980s and 1990s in the ACT-UP movement and generated funds for AIDS assistance projects through various events. Café Finovo is named after Ovo Maltine, one of the members of that group, who is also buried here and also part of the installation. The EFEU Association also offers organized tours to the graves and they provide various folders with information on the people buried in this graveyard.

Listening to the original voices in the installation is something very special, since it provides a different access, a new encounter with the deceased. One's own voice and style of speaking express one's personality. This is what I find special and powerful about this sound installation; the fact that you actually listen to the people's voices, which influences your connection to them. Maybe the museum context is more standardized. Of course, the cemetery is also a place of ritualized memory forms. From this perspective, the sound installation marks a change in those traditional forms of remembrance at cemeteries. It is a different form of remembrance than, for example, to walk silently to the grave by yourself, to show your devotion, or to leave plants or stones. It is a new form of memory when people get together and talk in the sound installation. This is rarely the case in the context of a museum, in which, due to its institutional nature and implied conventions, one is still in a more distant situation. Is it a place of memory in the first place, or isn't it rather a place of documentation? Although emotions are certainly aroused during one's museum visit, cemeteries can provide a different emotional encounter.

Find: I associate museum with dust and boredom. As a child I was reluctant to go to museums. I also find the name "Gay Museum" paradoxical, since it is more of a gallery or exhibition hall. I always picture dusty and old books when I think of the word "museum" and its close connection to storage. In this sense, the Schwules Museum is not actually a museum, unless one fills the term with new meaning and introduces new didactic forms and exhibition concepts. This is the only way museums can become more interesting. However, something else is more important to me. I don't make art for museums or galleries. I don't care about pictures on gallery walls. For me, art always provides an intervention to public space in order to disrupt things, to break with established paradigms, and to irritate. At cemeteries, two things come together: they are semi-public spaces with a ritualized memory culture. It is in this setting that the sound installation produces sounds

and pierces through the notion of “silent memory”. This may of course cause irritation and demands sensitivity. For example, I tested the volume for a long time in order not to disturb those people that favor silence. Although I’m sure of the fact that, even today, many of the dead would be very loud, particularly those 16 voices covered in the installation. I’m certain that they would find it awesome, if they knew they can still raise their voices here. It thus breaks with traditional forms of memory culture at cemeteries, a place, in which memory is usually silent. This doesn’t apply to this sound installation. Here, you do hear voices. Here, you can listen to them. Those are the two aspects, which, on the one hand aim at creating a different form of memory culture, and, on the other hand, break with the conventional mourning tradition, which I find rather depressing.

Hacke: At the same time, it is a political intervention. There are specific personalities presented here who have stood for distinct political ideals and convictions. Activists’ statements from the last 100 years are brought into conversation and once again become relevant for people today. Much is achieved, if, out of all visitors that have listened to this sound installation within the last 4 years, 20 say: I will look up who this person was. I will further look into this. I find this exciting. How did they spend their lifetimes? It is both a public and political intervention, which certainly refers to memory culture. At the same time, it raises current issues. Many different people visit this place: relatives of the people buried here, tourists, and guests of the café. All of them can discover new aspects in the installation they haven’t thought about before.

Where do you see differences between an auditory and a visual approach to the topic of HIV/AIDS? Visual AIDS readers are probably more used to the latter.
Hacke: I like the process of remembering varies, according to whether one watches a movie or listens to a voice. When listening to a voice, one needs to create one’s own images. Needless to say, I am still moved by watching videos of early AIDS activism. When I am watching those videos, it is always a combination of enthusiasm, remembrance, and sorrow, since I know that most of them are no longer alive. I find it exciting to learn which political strategies they chose, which slogans they had, which forms of protest they engaged in, and how they approached the relationship between activism and care. Of course this is true for both auditory and visual forms. Nevertheless, due to the emphasis on one’s own images, the act of listening might evoke a different state in terms of remembrance than, for example, if one watches a movie. I am not sure whether it’s possible for me to accurately describe this. Seeing and hearing are different conditions.

Find: In contrast to the act of seeing, hearing definitely creates closeness and intimacy. Vision always refers to images, it constructs a counterpart. Seeing has a corrective, an almost censoring effect on the images stored in my own memory. A person’s photo quickly replaces my previous personal images of this respective person. In contrast, a person’s voice triggers my memory’s personal images. Solely hearing a voice is a very intimate moment, since it goes straight into me. Because hearing is the direct access to the heart. I process it differently. It is the same for me as you have said before, Hannes. I think it was a beautiful expression. It puts me in a different mood, namely not in the state of the seeing. Similar to smell and taste, hearing is an immediate sense, which somehow affects me more closely.

My last question refers to the future of this installation. This is going to be its last season. Do you have any plans to install and show it permanently?
Find: The sound installation has been set up for four summer seasons. I find this closure OK for now, since I hadn't planned it as a fixed memorial in the first place. Even though this will make me a little sad, because, meanwhile, I have developed a close connection to the parliament and its voices, and most of all to the ivy, which I water regularly. Since "Parla Memento Hedera" is not a monument, it is all right that it will become a part of the past itself. However, I don't exclude the possibility of re-installing it in a couple of years. At this point, I would once again like to warmly thank you, Hannes. Hannes was a great help in the research process for audio material and the selection of the female activists and their statements. He also helped me with the short biographies, since every pushed button renders a brief written description of each person. I would also like to thank the District Berlin Tempelhof-Schöneberg's Dezentrale Kulturarbeit, the Homosexuelle Selbsthilfe, Elledorado, EFEU, and last but not least the Verein Metropole Mutterstadt, which preserves Helga Sophia Goetze's heritage--she is also in the sound installation--and also allowed for the installation to be here two years longer than originally planned. It continues until September 27. Thanks also to you, Simon, for your great interest and the lovely interview.

Christian W. Find holds an MA in evangelical theology. He is an author, speaker, and editor of radio programs and features. As an audio-artist he is known under the name Baella van Baden-Babelsberg. Baella is the founder of the radio-laboratory radiOAton. Recent projects include "Durch die Blume" (with Tobi Möhring), a sound sculpture against homo- and transphobia, which is based on a spin dryer. Since 2010 it has been exhibited in city halls, libraries and festivals in Berlin, Bern, Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Liverpool. Since 2012, "Parla Memento Hedera" has been exhibited each summer. Baella is the initiator and one of the curators of the queer audio festival QuEAR!

Hannes Hacke is a trainee scholar at the Schwules Museum (Gay Museum) in Berlin. He holds an M.A. in gender studies and is the co-founder of the queer audio festival QuEAR!.

Simon Dickel is assistant professor of American Studies at Ruhr-Universität Bochum. He is the author of Black/Gay: The Harlem Renaissance, the Protest Era, and Constructions of Black Gay Identity in the 1980s and '90s (2011) and the co-editor of After the Storm: The Cultural Politics of Hurricane Katrina (2015). He is co-editing a book on queer cinema.

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