

Wrapping the Reichstag

Re-visioning German history

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Whoever emerges victorious participates, to this day, in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. As is always the case, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures. The historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror.

Walter Benjamin,

Thesis VII, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'

Public events in Germany are meticulously scrutinized by intellectuals at home and abroad. The burden of the Nazi past and the reverberations attending the fall of the Wall equip events, in Berlin especially, with super-charged political and historical significance. This is not a recent phenomenon. Berlin has long been a privileged site for divining historical change. In his *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci, echoing Pirandello, labels Berlin the capital of a futurist Europe because the city's fabric and customs offer no resistance to Americanism.¹ Berlin, in the interwar writings of Kracauer, Bloch and Hessel, is the vanguard city of modernity, existing in empty, ahistorical time.² Speer and Hitler did not succeed in flattening 'leftist-Jewish' Berlin in order to rebirth it anew as Germania, but they, together with the allies, made some contributions to oblitative cityscaping. Postwar, Berlin switches to become the pre-eminent city of historical reminders: traces of discomfiting political histories mark themselves on the architecture, in its forms, in bullet holes and bolt holes; traces are deposited in the memories of inhabitants, in their secret knowledges, as well as in miles of secret police files.

Susan Buck-Morss and Gordon Finlayson are recent contributors to the tradition of political-historical divination in Berlin, which seeks to interpret its architecture and street furniture. Buck-Morss, invoking

a structuralist-Marxist model of supersessive historical periods, reads off old propaganda placards the structural implosion of the GDR, effect of a *discontinuity* between economic base and ideological superstructure.³ In contrast, Finlayson's probe into street-naming in Berlin mobilizes a revised 'Hegelian notion of history' in order to defend history as a *continuous* though multi-stranded unfolding, which is rationally, subjectively motivated – or it is not at all. The Berlin authorities' refusal of multiple, continuous histories leads to history's sad return to us as myth, a West-authored grand narrative, which enforces a univocal interpretation of the events of twentieth-century history – presently legible on East Berlin's brand new street signs.⁴

My flâneurish augury in contemporary Berlin alleges that the process at work in the new German capital involves an occlusion, less of the historical gaze than of the political glare. I witness not just history's cancellation by myth, but rather the attempt to *re-vision* history, through public stunts and projects which are manifestly entwined with political authority. History and historiography are both rent by conflict. Such an assertion is not designed to fall in with the fashionable orthodoxy which points out that there are multiple versions of history, but rather to insist that there is a history which is officially endorsed, and it is, of course, the version which best suits the political visions of those in power. The tradition of the oppressed is overwritten. The ruling power – consciously and openly – flexes its musculature, mobilizing spectacular and boastful resources to impose a certain reading on history. This visioning of proud self-promotional power has been busily undertaken in contemporary Berlin.

Memory, history and the East

Once the Berlin Wall had almost all been sold off in fragments and its scar was disappearing under technological and organic growth, a façade was hung in front of the Palast der Republik, the requisite Eastern bloc

People's Palace, located in the centre of East Berlin. The Palast der Republik was an asbestoid block, built on the site of a Prussian royal palace. The Hohenzollern palace, damaged in the Second World War, was torn down in the 1950s on the orders of the GDR ruling party. A façade which appeared in 1992 obliterated the features of the Palast der Republik, and faked, using mirrors, the re-appearance of the Hohenzollern edifice, causing a delusion–illusion which even straightened a crooked road. The façade was temporary, but outlasted its intended life span by a year and acted as an advertisement for those lobbying to rebuild the Prussian palace. At the old–new palace, the past reappeared as thrill, a semi-serious attempt to revise Berlin's architectural history, or the history of the German capital. Such an architectural folly accompanied a wider historical revision which was becoming increasingly prevalent in the new–old capital Berlin. In this period the ex-GDR history museums put signs up: 'Closed for historical revision'. The very suddenness of the emergence of the façade and all its aggressive assertions of return, restitution and erasure were indicative of the strange self-obliterating course of the virtually bloodless East German revolution.

In Romania, where martyrs had been made in the street-fighting of 17–22 December 1989, years later wooden crosses and candlelit plaques still punctuated the cities, and street names had been altered to accommodate new calendar days of significance, relating to the days of upheaval. In (West) Berlin the boulevard which had been named Street of 17th June, commemorating a previous East German uprising in 1953, was altered temporarily and unofficially to the Street of 9th November, in reference to the day of the wall-breaching. It reverted swiftly to its former name. Perhaps because that date is overburdened with German historical significance: simultaneous anniversary of the cessation of the monarchy, of Hitler's Munich *Putsch*, of *Kristallnacht*. Evocation of 9 November forces acknowledgement of German historical crimes which are better buried, and is thus an unsuitable date for forging tradition. But its avoidance in official memorials may also be related to the fact that 9 November 1989 was an unpredictable day of demands and change from below, a day of precisely those disruptive traces which the process of establishing Greater German equilibrium set about effacing.

The day which entered the German calendar as commemorative bank holiday is 3 October, the day in 1990 when parliament affirmed unification. Historical annotation of that sort emerges from above. The opportunity to acknowledge the *Wende* (political turning point) was not taken up in the street-renamings in the East of the city. The renamings lurched back into the

past. Eradicated were names tainted with Communist Party adherence, though not membership of the SED: Lenin became Landsberger Allee, Clara Zetkin turned into royal Dorothea, Liebknecht was overlaid by Schinkel. Karl Marx Allee became, at its plush city end, Hegelallee. A whole contracted history of significances.⁵

The East German revolution deposited few memorial traces. There was scant recognition of the event in itself, or the events of the autumn of 1989 *in toto*; in part because the ruling class of the new unified Germany manoeuvred to use the *Wende* as an opportunity first to celebrate and then to erase the acknowledgement of 'people-power'. In subsequent years it has become apparent that the revolution ended in an attempted restitution, a return to a 'before', amalgamated out of Weimar social democracy and Prussian militarism. Erasure of November 1989 has a part to play in the 'normalization' of the German relationship to Germany's past. Germany is reconstituted, its interrupted and torn history forced back into continuity and unity. Germany reconstituted presents a version of German history which hopes to compound the democracy of Weimar with the potency of Prussia. Expunged and defined as un-German are two dictatorships made equivalent: forty years of Communist rule, twelve years of Nazi rule. The parading of historical continuity overwrites the Nazi past, and the GDR past, as well as the revolutionary events of 1918–23. If it acknowledges these deviations, these – as CDU/CSU politician Schäuble phrased it – 'disruptions' and 'wounds' in German history, it ostracizes them as illegitimate.⁶

After the end of the Second World War, various destroyed sites in the two German states were left unreconstructed and uncleared. Ruins remained, such as the broken-spired church in the centre of West Berlin, or, in the East, the damaged churches of Dresden or the street gaps made by bombs. While there may have been economic contexts for the preservation or non-clearing of the ruins, undoubtedly they also functioned ideologically. The ruins emanated loss and guilt, symbolic and tangible tokens of the broken and destructive nature of German history and the broken, destroyed lives of people in Germany, the ruination of European Jewry and much more. These ruins were incomplete but eloquent memorials. Five years after (re)unification, the wreckage began to be repaired. In Dresden, the Frauenkirche, destroyed in the British firebombing raids in 1945, lay weed-tangled for fifty years, its destruction caused by the allies, the victors; but its symbolic meaning unloaded the responsibility for its destruction onto the barbarous Nazi regime. Restoration of the church began in the autumn of 1994; once it is

made whole again, the possibility exists of erasing the past, or guilt about the past. The rhetoric surrounding the rebuilding of the church – as conveyed by the money-appeal advertisements – echoed the rhetoric surrounding the (re)unification of Germany: making the country whole, and rebuilding, re-forging the past as a continuous whole, unbroken by war and the Nazis, or by that other manifestation of totalitarianism, the GDR.

Memory, history and the West

The process of historical re-visioning has not been confined to the new Federal *Länder* of the East. Old West German intellectuals of the New Left, such as Botho Strauß or Rolf Hochhuth, infected by what Diedrich Diederichsen terms the ‘amnesia coinciding with unification’, have recently begun their own revision of the relationship to the German past.⁷ In so doing they pursue lines of argument not far removed from those laid down by Ernst Nolte and others in the infamous historians’ controversy of 1986. The controversy was reanimated in Germany in 1994, stimulated by legal machinations around the Auschwitz Lie. Questions resurfaced about the intellectual emancipation from what is perceived as a specifically German burden of history – the heavy weights of the Holocaust. The past that will not pass away, as revisionist historian Ernst Nolte had labelled it, seemed about to be legalistically negotiable.⁸ To make the past pass away is bound up with the dual process of re-visioning of German history and a re-forging of a phantasmatic German identity. The inquiry into German national identity coincides with new functions for Germany in the world scene: its military participation in a new world order and its key role in a single European Union, buffering one vulnerable edge of a foreigner-unfriendly fortress Europe. If the project of the European super-state fails, Germany’s demanding future role may involve asserting economic domination eastwards.

The normalization process seeks to efface unwholesome traces of a past that will not pass away. An irony hard to overlook is that it is a remnant of an ideologically bankrupt and financially bankrolled avant-garde, which carried out some of the groundwork of normalization through the provision of a stunt that provided a marker for the new history. The stunt paradoxically denoted a new beginning and a resumed continuity with the pre-‘totalitarian’ past. On the old borderline between West and East, at the Reichstag – future powerhouse of a unified Germany – a spectacle participated in the historical re-visioning. In 1995, a year dubbed the ‘year of memorials’, the Bulgarian artist Christo got the go-ahead to carry out a project first dreamt up twenty years ago: wrapping the Reichstag.⁹ As the

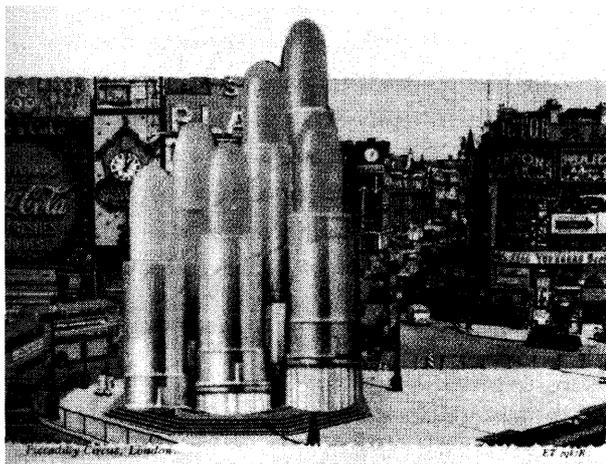
year of memorials played out, a peculiar process of forgetting was set in motion, and Christo’s Reichstag-package became the receptacle for a new series of national fictions.

Christo

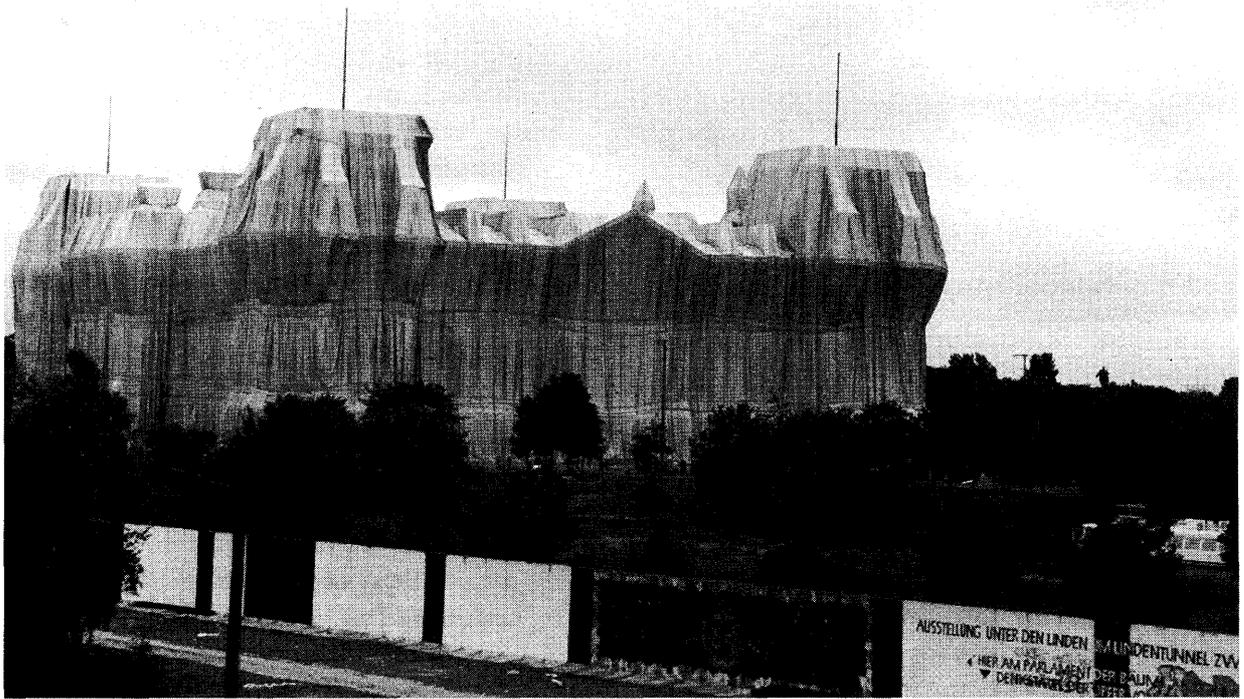
Christo Javacheff began producing installations at the end of the 1950s, often in the form of wrapped packages. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, he assembled installations, including *Iron Curtain – Wall of Oil Drums* (Paris, 1962), *Wrapped Tree* (Eindhoven, 1966), *Wrapped Fountain* (Spoleto, 1968), *Wrapped Museum for Contemporary Art* (Chicago, 1969), *Valley Fence* (Colorado, 1970–72), *Running Fence* (California, 1972–76). Since the 1980s his projects have become more and more grandiose. Most notorious were the pink plastic *Surrounded Islands* around Florida in 1983, *Wrapped Pont Neuf* in Paris, and the 3,100 *Umbrellas* (Japan, USA), completed in 1991.

Christo began his art practice as a devotee of an avant-garde Paris art grouping, *Nouveau Réalisme*, founded in 1960, and supported by Yves Klein, Arman, Daniel Spoerri and Nicki de Saint-Phalle. The neo-Dadaist group’s aim was to overcome the ‘gap between art and life’ by reflecting on the world of modern consumption and the mass media. They produced ‘action-spectacles’ and embraced *décollage* by subverting and defacing advertising posters. Christo emerged as an artist committed to iconoclastic art which, in its avant-gardist sublation of the split between art and life, critiqued the gallery space and its reinforcement of social hierarchy. The neo-Dada avant-garde subverted the pomposity of buildings, or, like Claes Oldenburg with his series of ‘Proposed Colossal Monuments’, acted to undermine the reverential function of the public monument.

Comparing Christo with Oldenburg is instructive. Claes Oldenburg, from the late 1960s onwards, magnified objects – a button, a cigarette, a plug.



Claes Oldenburg. Lipsticks in Piccadilly Circus, London. 1966



Enlargement underlined its and our reification, and amplified utopian investments in banal commodities, encouraging audiences to see anew through this blasting out of endless circulation. Many of his 'Proposed Colossal Monuments' were unrealizable, such as the giant *Lipsticks in Piccadilly Circus* (1966) or *Proposal for a Monument to the Survival of the University of El Salvador: Blasted Pencil (Which Still Writes)* (1983).¹⁰ Christo's projects, in contrast, have tended over the years to achieve realization, if after some delay. Project documentations show countless photographs of Christo with high-ranking politicians, seeking support and permission for his art-events. The projects have aroused minimal political controversy – despite their monumentalism – for their aestheticist aspirations dispense a blank surface, onto which the ambitions of the ruling political power, whose assent is often required, can be projected.

According to the 1993 press release, Christo's *Wrapped Reichstag* project was to look something like this:

For a period of two weeks, the richness of thousands of square meters of silvery fabric, together with the ropes securing it, will create a sumptuous flow of vertical folds highlighting the features and proportions of the imposing structure, revealing the essence of the building's architecture.¹¹

On 25 February 1994 Christo's art-act was discussed in the Bundestag for an hour and a half; 295 members of

parliament voted in favour of the wrapping, 226 against. The supporters' arguments had claimed that the project would discharge a radiant, beautiful signal mobilizing courage, hope and self-confidence, and would indicate a 'new beginning in Berlin without spending one penny of taxpayers' money'.¹² Conradi's closing sentence in his statement to parliament was designed to sway the wavering with an untrumpable logic. He summarized the role that Christo's art act could fulfil: 'It is good for the building, for the German parliament and German democracy, at home and abroad.'¹³ The statement intimated the process of healing.¹⁴ Such beneficent effects could, of course, be located on various levels. Decisive in the winning of the debate, as the parliamentary protocol documents, was the promise of tourist hordes descending with jingling pockets on the new capital, as well as the promise of a global media blitz of images of peace to erase the media-memories of Rostock, Mölln, Solingen, Hoyerswerda.¹⁵ The healing also referred to the ideological panacea, the heart-warming effects of art. All the better for the German state, which gets an ideology-enhancing freebie in an art which presupposes its own commodification by self-financing through pre- and after-sales of project memorabilia, managed by the Christo Business Limited. Paid for by Christo, the outlay was recouped by the selling of mementos and icons: photographs, scale models, lithographs, and fragments of cloth. Like the Berlin Wall before it, when whole pre-'89, and, as James E. Young describes it, a Christo-esque intrusion into the landscape, and once fragmented after its fall, the

Wrapped Reichstag's clothing breaks up into mini-commodities, souvenirs.¹⁶ The Berlin Wall was material, a gruesome border. Its dematerialization was a poignant event. Unlike the Wall, a material substance which cut through Berlin for twenty-eight years, the *Wrapped Reichstag* project seems to negate materiality. Its material-ness – literally, its existence as material – is cancelled by its daytime effect of erasure and its nighttime effect of translucent immateriality. Christo's 1993 press release states:

Fabric, like clothing or skin, is fragile. Christo's project will have the unique quality of impermanence. The physical reality of the *Wrapped Reichstag* will be a dramatic experience of great visual beauty.

The shortness of the event – for two weeks only! – is conflated with the frailty of the wrapping material – which is, in actuality, not fragile but high-strength, fire-retarding and, like its steel undergirding, *made in Germany*. In achieving – through draping – the look of immateriality and translucency, the Reichstag is obscured in a strangely literal aestheticization of politics. The immateriality is a fraud. Once commodified, this project and all its saleable trimmings become distinctly material. Indeed, it opened up a whole new season for the commodity. All over Berlin shop windows mimicked Christo's grand art-commodity with their own particular

mini-versions. The packing theme was taken up by two billboard advertisements: for West cigarettes (see cover) and Berliner Kindle beer, 'masterpiece of the Berlin art of brewing' (below).

The extraordinary event, so hoped its supporters in parliament, would demonstrate to the world the values of tolerance and détente which reside in this new greater Germany, the initial emergence of which had caused such hyped concern on the international scene.¹⁷ Germany has continually to prove its commitment to democracy.¹⁸ The seeming iconoclasm of the *Wrapped Reichstag* stands as evidence of a tolerant disposition, and as visual proof of Western freedom. Analogies could be drawn with the CIA sponsorship of abstract expressionism in the USA in the 1950s, as part of America's strategy during the Cold War with the Soviet Union. The *Wrapped Reichstag* provides ocular, unmissable proof that the constricting state dogmas of artistic socialist realism, which affected GDR art, and Nazi realism, West Germany's inflicted artistic burden, are inapplicable in contemporary unified Germany. Free-world artists are allowed to play with political power, alarming reactionaries who think that the dignity and symbolic import of the political institution is being mocked.¹⁹ But, in the end, it would seem that the reactionaries had little to fear. The art-act is drawn into contemporary political discourses, and encircled by an industry of revisionist history writing – in the media and



in the marquees which surrounded the *Wrapped Reichstag* and were open until midnight dispensing history lessons and mementos. A monster street festival controlled from above took place.

Christo's *Wrapped Reichstag* can be hitched tightly to the official language of commemoration. The wrapping began – that is, became the focus of (inter)national media attention – on 17 June, a politically loaded day in the (West) German commemorative calendar. This was the day, in 1953, when building workers struck against their government in East Berlin. The West German ruling class claimed this event as a holiday for their people. The event was affirmed as confirmatory of the system in the West. A major boulevard which flanked the Sedan Day victory column was renamed Street of the 17th June. All this despite the fact that West German radio, during the first day of the uprising and the subsequent day, broadcast anti-strike messages across East Germany. That the *Wrapped Reichstag* project began on this day counters Christo's stated wishes in a 1986 interview:

It is very important that the building have its own dimension, its own calling, its own times, not related to any other event.

It is precisely this autonomy which becomes impossible, through the already existing significances of previous commemorations, abiding political traces. Art does not occur in empty space, but in contexts. Christo's context was the fall of the Wall and unification. Artworks are charged by the historical, cultural and political contexts in which they come into being. Given this, the meaning of an artwork is not dependent on an artist's intentions. However, a living artist has some awareness of the uses to which any particular artwork is put. The tragic fate of Christo – the avant-gardist, as the press kept labelling him – is to become an alibi for restoration. The wrapping of the Reichstag was not a subversive art-act, but a state act, an act of state. Quite unlike the Weimar avant-gardists, who had put it precisely arsy-versy. The outrages of art were to be visionary preludes to the revolutionizing of history and politics. In Christo's narrative it seems as if revolutionary history knocked down the Berlin Wall, in order that the Reichstag might be wrapped, in order that modern(ist) art might happen, legitimately – without danger or critique.²⁰

Christo's artwork is drawn into discourses of national



vaunting. A history of cultural spectacle and national promotion can be traced through Walter Benjamin's studies of the nineteenth century. In the 1935 exposé of the *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin points out how the world exhibitions, with their displays of machine technology and art, military canons and fashion, offered up a phantasmagoria of politics.²¹ Each year the exhibition-spectacles outbid the previous year in special effects, as ocular proof of capitalist progress. As part of the new imperialism, national pavilions and national grandeur were promoted. Patriotism became a marketable commodity, or generated its own purchasable range. Benjamin points out that the world exhibitions were places where the commodity was moulded into commemorative object. It becomes a saleable historical event as souvenir, substituting for memory. Later, in 'Central Park', noting the lack of childhood memories in Baudelaire's work, Benjamin remarks more generally on the impingements of commodity culture on consciousness. Memory withdraws in favour of mementos, markers of the self-alienation of people, who inventorize their past as dead possessions and whose experience has atrophied.²² Experience which has died off is resold as commodities. In the world exhibitions, the commodity was put on stage in bizarre settings that were literal versions of metaphors which Marx used to pinpoint the commodity's elusive status in bourgeois ideology: the commodity is other-worldly, divine, 'mist-enveloped' and 'mystical'. Benjamin takes this to mean that commodified culture is experienced by receivers as if behind veils, shrouded in ambiguity, obscured behind a fantastic wrap. Auratic art, in a Benjaminian sense,

offers up metaphorically – though in Christo’s case, actually – the idealizing presentation of a veiled artwork, enveloped in a shell or shroud. Benjamin’s insight into a fetish-based experience of modernity anticipates a critique of the auratic physicality of Christo’s project – and its pre-event and post-event generation of commodity-relics.

Commodification, indeed the configuration of a commodity aesthetics, acts to detach objects from historical, social and political contexts, contributing to the erosion of historical memory through ensnarement in myth.

A mini-tour of the Reichstag

Christo surrounded his project with interviews and commentary as part of the public-relations campaign necessary to mobilize politicians’ and public support. Christo’s interviews, touching on issues such as the rejoining of Germany and the reanimation of the parliament – create a myth of the Reichstag. His simulated disappearance of the Reichstag could translate into image the desire to wipe out the burden of German history. But the disappearance of the site of German power is only an illusion. The wrapping envisages that the Reichstag’s temporary obliteration is prelude only to its dramatic and forceful return, as the proper and legitimate home of the Greater German parliament.

Christo’s 1993 press release for the project states:

Today, more than ever, the Reichstag demonstrates the encounter between the East and the West, the past and the future.

What lies behind the innocuous word ‘encounter’? What lies at the seemingly seamless juncture of the encounter of the past and the future, made geopolitical in the form of the old parliament building? Christo’s press release continues:

The Reichstag stands in an open, almost metaphysical area, that brings to mind its turbulent history since its inauguration in 1894. In 1933 it was burned, in 1945 it was almost completely destroyed, and in the 1960s it was restored. The Reichstag has continually undergone changes and perturbations, but has always remained a symbol of democracy.

Christo’s denotation of the site of a symbol of democracy as an open, strangely metaphysical area evokes the language of fairy-tales and fantasies, rather than the language of history and historical specificity. Though summoning up the historical residues of the Reichstag as site of resistance to anti-democracy, he shifts quickly into

assertion of a postwar to post-Wall interpretation of the building, in order to justify his project. Asked in the course of one interview how the Reichstag has changed since 1989, he responded that in 1989 the Reichstag was a sleeping beauty.²³ The unification of Germany reimbues the structure with life. The Reichstag becomes a symbol of wholeness, of resurrection and reuniting. The physical action of wrapping could be seen as an erasing and bandaging. Both these activities have their part to play in the new history. Erasure is a part of revisionism. Bandaging or binding together suggests the restorative act of unification. The ritual of wrapping reaffirms the marriage vows between the torn halves of a broken land. Jeanne-Claude Christo, the artist’s wife, manager and treasurer, asserts, maintaining the coy theme, in an interview in *Stern*, ‘The wedding dress must fit the bride perfectly.’²⁴ In the *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin remarks that the nineteenth-century interior dresses up space in atmospheric costumes to intoxicating effect.²⁵ Christo dresses up an exterior, and hints, in the 1993 press release, at the sanctifying powers of the shroud.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, for example, in weddings and other ritual celebrations, veiling has a sacred or joyful message. The use of fabric on the Reichstag follows this classical tradition.

In the Christo debate in parliament the contending sides fought over the symbolic value of the Reichstag. Christo was clear that the Reichstag ‘has always remained a symbol of democracy’. The asserted symbolic value of the Reichstag was mobilized to justify the project and its emergent politics. This claim to symbolize democracy needs dissection.

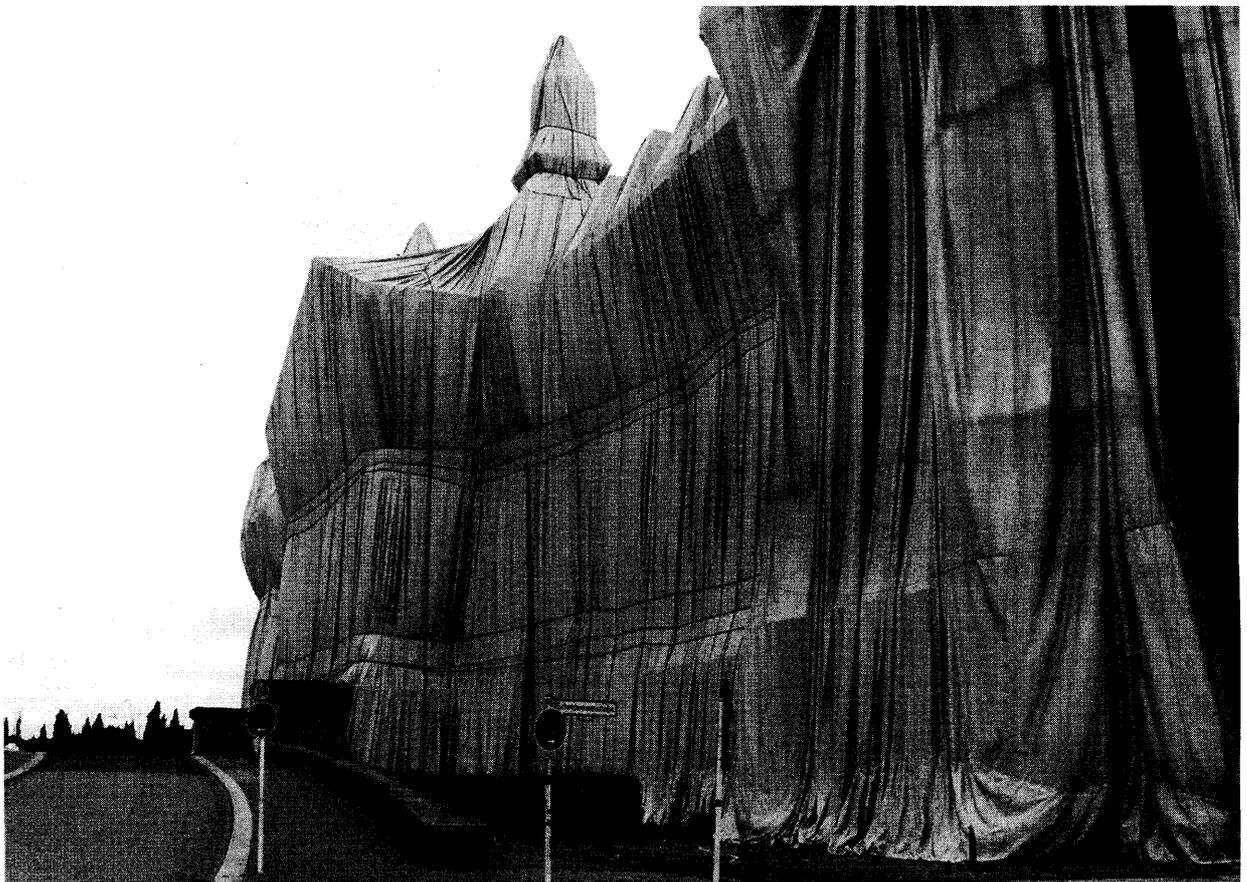
The Reichstag, designed by Paul Wallot, had its foundation stone laid in 1884. It was a grandiose space for the staging of what Rosa Luxemburg described as ‘diplomatic gambling’ by the Prussian military monarchy.²⁶ One of its particularly world-historical decisions was to vote for war credits in 1914, sponsoring a modern mass-army carnage at the front, the popularity of which, as the years went on, diminished such that disaffection with the constitutional monarchy occasioned revolutionary outbreaks in Kiel, Munich, Berlin and elsewhere, as the war ended.

In November 1918, in the revolutionary days during which the Weimar Republic was proclaimed, it is arguable that the symbol – or perhaps something more concrete, like the ‘site’ – of democracy was not at the Reichstag, but elsewhere in Berlin, if not dispersed across Germany. However, the official Reichstag schoolroom propaganda, commenting on the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of the republic, puts it this way:

Was Germany to be turned into a socialist soviet dictatorship, as the extreme Left was demanding? Or was the country to become a parliamentary democracy based on free elections? In those crucial days of crisis, reaching their climax on the morning of 9th November, the Reichstag building and its forecourt formed the stage for an historic drama. Scheidemann's balcony appearance turned the scales decisively in favour of a republic. A return to the monarchy was now no longer possible. But the conflict with the workers' and the soldiers' soviets and the extreme Left in general had by no means been resolved. The political stage between the palace and the Reichstag building – around the Brandenburg Gate – was still fraught with revolutionary unrest. Troops loyal to the republic camped in the parliament building. Machine guns were positioned on the corner towers. In this hour of crisis Friedrich Ebert, the leader of the majority Social Democrats, acted with exemplary statesmanship. Unswervingly he stuck to his advocacy of free elections to a constitutive assembly. The extreme Left fell back on its last resort – armed insurrection. As the election campaign got underway bloody street battles broke out, clashes so fierce that it took troops to quell them.²⁷

In this glorifying history lesson, the moment of a splitting of the meaning of democracy, the fact of contradictory class demands occurring in different parts of the city, is not acknowledged. What indeed happened in those days of street fighting? The proclamation of the Weimar Republic from a window of the Reichstag by Philipp Scheidemann, who had been pulled away from his sausages under duress, was an act purely reliant upon the revolutionary wave that was sweeping Germany. The proclamation of a republic from the Reichstag served as an act of containment of democratic will. It was hurried precisely because the revolutionary leader Karl Liebknecht was on the point of proclaiming, from a balcony of the Royal Palace, a soviet socialist republic to the amassed crowds. It was frantic because Ebert, the chancellor, social democrat but monarchist, refused to condone it. It was as an act of continuing containment of workers' democracy from below that the repression continued in the ensuing months, demanding as sacrifice the lives of Luxemburg and Liebknecht in January 1919.

Michael S. Cullen (who sent Christo the inspirational postcard of the building in 1971) relates that the Reichstag fell into a 'Sleeping Beauty sleep' through the Nazi years, though it was used for exhibitions such as 'The Eternal Jew' or 'Bolshevism without its Mask'.²⁸ The strange sleep continued for some time. From 1971 – still bereft of a directly political-legislative role – the



Reichstag housed an exhibition called 'Questioning German History'. This exhibition, tendering the official line of a very West Germanized history, was a requisite stop on every schoolchild's requisite trip to Berlin.

Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out how traditions are invented and imposed from the top down and reinforced through national education systems. Invented tradition's most visible moments, he argues, include the unveiling of vast stone monuments to national heroes and nation-forgers. That invented tradition is selected, fictional and strategic is pointed out by Hobsbawm, in his detailing of the story behind the Siegesallee, which was built in 1896–1901 and commemorates the Berlin Sedan victory. The monuments represent exclusively the Hohenzollern princes.²⁹ Similarly, Christo fetishizes the moment of unveiling of the Reichstag. At the moment of its unveiling, proclaims Christo, the Reichstag will be born anew. It will, as Christo himself insists, be re-perceived (indeed re-visioned), regenerated and reanimated as the site of German rule. Like a circulated rumour, the afterwards of this artwork is part of it. Because of when and how it occurs, it becomes part of the invented tradition which embellishes the projects of nation-forgers and erects monuments to victory – in this instance, the victory of West Germany, perceived as the ideological victory of capital and democracy. The paradoxical exploit of beginning history anew and resuming continuity finds strange articulation in the idea of revision: re-visioning is the project of the formalist avant-garde; revisionism is the province of reactionaries or conservatives. Future and past are compacted.³⁰

The afterwards of Christo's artwork is already written into the design. After the wrapping, the rebuilding of the parliament commences. The rebirth of the Reichstag is analogically the rebirth of Germany. An architectural competition, launched in 1992, to redesign the new governmental quarter of unified Berlin, including the Reichstag, and eventually won by Norman Foster, had stated in its brief that the designs should take account of the transparent nature of German democracy. Foster's winning design crowns the Reichstag with glass. The Reichstag was to be placed on an open podium beneath a huge canopy, supported by twenty-five stainless steel columns, each fifty metres high. Recession has deflated the project. Now a smaller canopy appears, but wide spaces and much use of glass fulfil the brief of demonstrating metaphorically more open government. The architectural brief was suffused with a subtext insisting on the architectural translation of openness. This insistence on openness within architectural briefs is reiterated in many of the new state projects – and generally interpreted as the need for glass. Critics

discussing the appearance of the new German Museum of History in Bonn reiterate these themes, pointing to the transparency of the building – the use of glass to reflect the transparency and openness of German democracy. Inside the museum an anodyne version of German history parades – West-fixated and wunderwirtschafted. In retrospect it may be seen that Christo's wrapping project prefigures the new Reichstag and its assertion of openness, in its generation of an illusion of glassy translucency.

Façades and historical memory

Adolf Loos, the anti-ornamentalist architect and writer of *Ornament and Crime*, and Karl Kraus, the satirist and editor of *Der Fackel*, conducted campaigns against the anachronistic cultural institutions of the Hapsburg Empire.³¹ Their aim was the demolition of façades – metaphorical and actual. Loos had written a pamphlet in 1898 called *Potemkin's City*, in which he derided the pretentious façades of Vienna's Ringstraße. The title refers to the Russian general Gregory Potemkin, who, instructed to organize New Russia, had constructed whole villages out of cardboard and canvas, in order to delude Catherine the Great into thinking that progress was occurring in the Ukraine.³² The façades of the Ringstraße are equally spurious, making modern apartment blocks look like the townhouses of aristocrats. The Baroque stucco or Tuscan stone façades are nailed on to cement. It is all fake. In response to Loos's architectural critique, Kraus raised the premature futuro-modernist battle cry, directed at intellectual pretensions: 'I smash in the façades and make tabula rasa.'³³ All traces of the past, especially corrupt fake versions, are to be eliminated. Kraus and Loos are desperate to wipe away the traces of a hypocritical, imperialist past. For Kracauer, writing in the space between the shell-shocking attacks on the psyche of the First World War and the run-up to Hitler's supremacy, a shift occurs in the evaluation of historical memory as it is made concrete on buildings. Berlin, mythological site of flux and impermanence, is perceived by him in the 1920s and 1930s as a city with an unhistorical nature, permeated by a formless disquiet. Kracauer's fear was that, in the commodity-led progression of the twentieth century, traces of history and memory are eradicated from the streets. *Straße ohne Erinnerung (Street without Memory)* (1932) exposes the frenzied fetish of novelty which permeates the atmosphere. The ever-prevailing actuality is an unhistorical presentness. Amnesia in the city is Kracauer's permanent phobia. The stripping of ornament from the façades signals for him a frightening loss of memory:

The ornaments, which formed a bridge to the past, have been stripped from many houses. Now the plundered façades remain with nothing to fix them in time. They constitute the symbol of the unhistorical change which is occurring around them.³⁴

Kracauer voices the fear that the mad, alienating pace of modernity eradicates memory; that very eradication is a marker of spiritual homelessness and a portent of danger. Loos and Kraus regard the architectural ornamental façades as fakes which provide an illusion of historicity. The 340m x 30m metal girding and royal yellow canvas mock-up of the Berlin castle at the *Palast der Republik* could be an extreme modern version of Potemkin's city and the Viennese town houses. But, though a vision of a potential future, it indicates restitution. Kracauer sees the modernist repression of ornament on façades as the repression of history. Christo's façade, his swallowing up of the exterior, obliterates historical traces, to replace them with an empty canvas onto which can be projected the new history, the new beginning which relies upon a rewritten past. The actuality of history as it has been is burnt out of memory by the wrapping.

Due to timing, Christo's artwork became a memorial to unification; not so much a memorial to the act of wall-breaching, as the idea of a return to normality, a resumption of history. It might better be called, then, an anti-memorial, because of the erasure it facilitates. Of course, the idea of the anti-memorial, the memorial as a concretion of increasing oblivion, might be the very essence of the memorial. A relationship between materials and forgetting has been noted. Boltanski, in a discussion of Holocaust memorials, remarks that a monument to the Holocaust would have to be fragile. It would need to be so frail that it must be changed every week, so that it never becomes unseen. Each re-erection necessitates a repetition of the prayer. The fragility of the monument repeats the fragility of memory. Boltanski's vision is paralleled by Lenin's secular *Plan of Monumental Propaganda*, presented to Lunacharsky in 1918. Lenin drew on *Civitas Solis* by Tommaso Campanella, a Renaissance utopian. In Campanella's ideal town, the walls were to be decorated with frescoes, providing a visual education in natural science and history. Lenin declared that short, expressive inscriptions were to be placed in significant places, on suitable walls or on special constructions. These inscriptions were to contain the most basic Marxist principles and slogans and tightly worked-out formulations evaluating historical events. More important than these slogans, he asserted, were 'statues', which would not be 'of marble, granite

and gold incised lettering' but 'modest, and let everything be temporary'.³⁵ Christo's art-work – ever echoing its avant-garde, revolutionary derivation – appeared temporary, but was assured its place in the history books: not only through its mass reproduction in numerous mementos – aimed generally at the decorators of doctors' surgeries and banks – but also through its becoming permanent in the mythic memory of a new greater Germany, governed by a new parliament.

There is a certain sadness attached to art's uselessness – although that uselessness can also be claimed as the basis for art's marking of the site of utopia or its critique of functionality, reason and business efficiency. But, in this particular context, sadder still is the art which insists on its autonomy and yet becomes the trappings of a spectacular act of state power-mongering. The Reichstag is a present 'to the German people', as states the lettering above the portico, a slogan forced on an unwilling Kaiser as a First World War public-relations exercise. The *Wrapped Reichstag* is a present 'to the German people', wrapped by Christo, and, in effect, a gift to the German state.

Notes

1. See Gramsci's 'Americanism and Fordism', in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1982, p. 316.
2. See, for example, Kracauer's *feuilleton* essays in *Straßen in Berlin und anderswo* (Das Arsenal, Berlin, 1987); Bloch's *Spuren* (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1985) and *Heritage of Our Times* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991); and Franz Hessel's *Ein Flaneur in Berlin* (Das Arsenal, Berlin, 1984).
3. See Susan Buck-Morss, 'Fashion in Ruins: History after the Cold War', *RP* 68, Autumn 1994, pp. 10–17.
4. See Gordon Finlayson, 'Naming, Myth and History: Berlin after the Wall', *RP* 74, Nov/Dec 1995, pp. 5–16.
5. Finlayson relates elements of this process in some detail. His conclusions beg questions. He operates within the logic of the ruling power he critiques, seeking out the great and the good to honour with street names. The problem for him is the issue of who counts as good, who deserves to be preserved; and he hopes rational debate can sort that out. He insists on Dimitroff's validity as street-name candidate, because of his 'enormous significance to the history of modern Germany'. But Hitler, too, was of enormous significance. This raises the question: should a street name honour great figures or should it act as a plaque which hopes to prevent historical amnesia? Neither of these functions can be discharged in a value-free manner; each simply mirrors the volition of the politically dominant or politically organized.
6. For Schäuble's comments, see his contribution to the debate preceding the vote on whether or not Christo could wrap the Reichstag. This, the 211th Session of the Bundestag, appears in M. S. Cullen and W. Velz, eds, *Christo, Jeanne-Claude: Der Reichstag den Deutschen Volke*, Bastei Lübbe Verlag, Bergisch Gladbach, 1995.
7. See Dietrich Diederichsen, 'Spiritual Reactionaries after German Reunification: Syberberg, Foucault and Others', in *October*, no. 62, Fall 1992, p. 66. Hochhuth has been

- energetic in his support for the founding of a museum memorial for the anti-Semitic nationalist Ernst Jünger. Playwright Strauß aroused controversy in 1994 with his views on anti-Semitism and German taboos.
8. See Ernst Nolte, 'Vergangenheit die nicht vergehen will', in *Historikerstreit*, Piper Verlag, Munich, 1987, pp. 13–62.
 9. *Jahr der Gedenkstätten* was a label coined because 1995 presented numerous days of remembrance, many of which were extensively covered by the media: fifty years since the bombing of Dresden, the liberation of Auschwitz and other camps, and the end of the war.
 10. For a discussion of this piece and El Salvadorean state repression, see Coosje van Bruggen's 'Blasted Pencil: Repression and Resistance at the University of El Salvador, 1968–83', in Germano Celant, ed., *A Bottle of Notes and Some Voyages*, Northern Centre for Contemporary Art, Sunderland, 1988.
 11. Excerpted from Christo's 1993 press release, reprinted in Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Christo – The Reichstag and Urban Projects*, Prestel, Munich, 1993.
 12. See the debate's opening statement by Peter Conradi (SPD) at the 211th Session of the Bundestag, in Cullen and Volz, eds, *Christo, Jeanne-Claude*, p. 226.
 13. *Ibid.*, p. 228.
 14. He used the German formulation *gut tun*.
 15. See Cullen and Volz, eds, *Christo, Jeanne-Claude*, pp. 227–8.
 16. For James E. Young's reference to the Berlin Wall and Christo, see his *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust, Memorials and Meaning*, Yale University Press, New Haven CT and London, 1993, p. xii.
 17. The idea of détente is suggested by Freimut Duve in his supportive contribution to the parliamentary debate.
 18. When asked in an interview what the Reichstag project had taught him, Christo replied: 'that Germany is a truly democratic country. It was the first time in the world that a parliament had debated art and voted' (*Der Tagesspiegel*, Special Supplement on *Wrapped Reichstag*, June/July 1995).
 19. See the 211th Session of the Bundestag, in Cullen and Volz, eds, *Christo, Jeanne-Claude*, pp. 226, 245–50.
 20. This is a theme through Christo's numerous interviews – often in the form of an assertion that since 1989 the Reichstag has gained an autonomy, neutrality or a new lease of life. In *Stern* 46/94 he declares that before 1989 the wrapping would have been a 'provocative' act, but now represents transition to the next phase.
 21. See *Gesammelte Schriften [GS]*, 6 vols, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhauser, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, Vol. V.1, pp. 50–52; *Charles Baudelaire*, New Left Books, London, 1973, pp. 164–6.
 22. See 'Central Park', translated by Lloyd Spencer, *New German Critique* 34, Winter 1985, p. 49.
 23. See *Tip* 1/95, p. 7. Benjamin, too, had associated the relics of the nineteenth century with Sleeping Beauty. His *Passagen-Werk* was to be a Marxian retelling of the fairytale in which Sleeping Beauty is awoken from the nightmare–dream sleep of capitalism's commodity phantasmagoria. He writes: 'Capitalism was a natural phenomenon with which a new dream sleep fell over Europe, bringing with it a reactivation of mythic forces.' See *Passagen-Werk* in *GS*, Vol. V.1, p. 494.
 24. See *Stern* 46/94, p. 50.
 25. See *Passagen-Werk* in *GS*, Vol. V.1, p. 267.
 26. See Rosa Luxemburg, *The Junius Pamphlet*, A Young Socialist Publication, Sri Lanka, 1992.
 27. See the handout *The Reichstag in German History*, distributed at the Reichstag.
 28. See Cullen and Volz, eds, *Christo, Jeanne-Claude*, p. 300.
 29. See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984, p. 278.
 30. Various architectural projects combine the new with elements of the old. Plans exist for the reconstruction of the Wertheim department store on Leipziger Straße, exactly as it was prior to bombing in the Second World War. It would be a complete replication, which entails using nineteenth-century building techniques. The plans are taken straight from the city archives, but show a proposal for a future building. Sony's major new development by the Potsdamer Platz incorporates the restored façade of the Esplanade Hotel into a new structure. Commentary has also focused on the possible return of the Prussian dome atop the new Reichstag. Due to its historically symbolic significance, the dome's reappearance has been a greatly contested issue which has caused many problems for Norman Foster. (See the short résumé of various plans and arguments in Cullen and Volz, eds, *Christo, Jeanne-Claude*, pp. 283–5, 307–12.
 31. See Edward Timms, *Karl Kraus: Apocalyptic Satirist*, Yale University Press, New Haven CT and London, 1986, pp. 115–28.
 32. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
 33. *Ibid.*
 34. Siegfried Kracauer, 'Straße ohne Erinnerung', in *Straßen in Berlin und anderswo*, p. 18.
 35. See Catherine Cooke et al., *Street Art of the Revolution*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1990, p. 13.

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