DIE MAUER - the negative horizon (A walk through time)

Archeology-Video by Rotraut Pape
1992 • Beta SP • 110/28 min • stereo

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When the Berlin wall fell on November 9, 1989, its disappearance was already in sight. Therefore I walked along the western side of the wall with a camera one week later, on November 17. The tour starts in Kreuzberg, follows the painted wall by the sides of the streets. All cross streets have become dead-ends. A couple of months later, I do the same walk a second time, the eye of the camera firmly attached to the wall and what it hides. Then again in summer and a fourth time in November 1990, exactly one year later. While the wall is almost untouched the first time, the second time all its splendour is gone. At the Brandenburg Gate tourists armed with hammers and chisels climb through man-sized holes onto the former death-strip. One year later, the wall is gone. A last remainder stands fenced-in on the commemorative Prince Albrecht grounds, the ruins of the Gestapo Headquarter.

With its four eyes, the camera follows the wall and its traces through time, documents its disappearance and the on both sides appearing - hopefully positive - horizons.

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In her four channel video work, Die Mauer/Negative Horizon, Rotraut Pape utilises the boundaries of the 'old' Berlin Wall to document a walking tour of the once divided city. Walking around the wall (once the site of a division and of a privileged form of spectatorship —surveillance), her video-camera halts at strategic, perhaps whimsical moments, alighting on souvenir sellers, 'wall-ghetto' dwellers, and details of the wall itself. Pock-marked, graffitied, punctured (with twisted steel poking out of gaping holes), the wall appears as a memorial to cold-war antagonism and a wounding division within a once homogenous urban culture. To walk the wall, in Pape's treatment (post-'89), is to work the image of a 'defaced' logistics of perception and division, to create (in Virilio's terms) an image block, "which is both a contamination and a communion." (Colin Hood)

CH Could you tell us about this idea of 'archaeology video' in relation to Die Mauer/The Negative Horizon. You talked about archaeology as documenting the destruction of the wall, rather than reconstructing, or what conforms to a conventional practice of archaeology, and you also talked about it in terms of assisting in the disappearance of the wall. Could you elaborate on that.

RP This archaeology idea can be found in different layers inside the film. First of all you have the archaeology on the surface of the wall: every little thing written there would refer to something complex about our culture during a specific time. The wall was a mirror that reflected its surroundings, only if you knew how to read the information, how to put it together in your head. The video shows the wall at four times during one year (89/90). The last time I filmed it, it was gone. It's like an inverted archaeology. As a normal archaeologist you find pieces of pots, you get them out, you put them together. Here it's the other way around, the Wall was literally beaten into pieces by millions of people from all over the world. After November '89 Berlin became the latest place of worship, where busloads of pilgrims turned around in circles. New relics for a modern time, charged with a romanticism of disillusion, these chips of concrete have made their way into people's apartments and pockets. To offer them to one another has become a new ritual—having your own share of history.

CH In some ways though the disappearance of the Wall has made it more precious. It's become aestheticised through its slow destruction.

RP The wall as a symbol, as the key link between the 80's and the go's was multiplied by all those small portions of it spread out over the whole planet. It's the aesthetics of politics. I wanted to make a real objective point in my film. When I understood what was happening, I walked along the wall with the eye of the camera attached to it, to keep myself from forgetting. From time to time the camera just slides off a little and looks at something funny
happening along the way, but I wanted to film just the wall, to note this physical aspect of it. In other films about the Wall it either looks like an oversized gay comic strip, or they show you the death strip at night with watchdogs and watchtowers flooded with greenish neon light. But they never show you the real thing. My film walks along the wall for one hundred and eleven minutes, right through the center of Berlin, there are eight or ten minute-stretches with the Wall on the right barely painted and a couple of bushes on the left. With this monotony you start getting the message of what it meant in everyday life.

CH: Why the performance aspect in Die Mauer/The Negative Horizon? Why for example do you maintain the live commentary in relation to it and why don't you incorporate that commentary into the soundtrack?

RP Normally I show this film without 'travelogue'. The commentary is something I do from time to time but I won't do it often. The commentary changes with the people watching the film. It's far more interesting to talk along with the film in Australia, than in some place in Germany. Totally different thoughts popped up while I was doing it at Experimenta in Melbourne. The film changes with these different commentaries. It's a very meditative work—very hard to get into and I like the idea that it's a film that you really have to work on while you see it—it's not given to you. I like it a lot without me talking. It gets very hypnotic and draws you into your own thoughts.

CH So ideally Negative Horizon was moving to a kind of video book genre?

RP Well I always wanted to do a book to go with the video. It's interesting to know for example, that the only remaining 200 meter stretch of the wall stands now fenced-in on the commemorative Prince Albrecht grounds, the ruins of the Gestapo Headquarters where Erich Honnecker spent some time in prison in 1935. That sort of information should be printed to be read along with the video. It's more of a tape that one should own, one should be able to stop it and rewind or fast forward it. It's such a marathon to look at the whole thing in one viewing.

GF What determined the two hour length?

RP The length is determined by geography. The walk started in Kreuzberg at the river Spree, followed the wall by the side of the streets. After about seven kilometers around the center of East Berlin the wall crosses the same river to continue on the other side—again no bridges—so that's where the film ends. Also it's the most interesting stretch of the wall, you come from the outskirts of Kreuzberg (the hippie-freak area), past Checkpoint Charly (carrying weapons off-duty is prohibited), and the Brandenburg Gate (the tourist hang-out), to right behind the Reichstag where the new German government will soon move into. The artwork changes with the surroundings.

CH Are you thinking of staying in Berlin to document the construction of Berlin as the new capital?

RP I keep on filming the same walk but only once a year now. It has been decided that no trace of the Wall is to remain to remind people about this latest German invention. All plans to integrate the wall into architecture and urban styling seem to have failed. It's amazing how fast this scar becomes invisible. Soon it will be impossible to detect the former course of the Wall throughout the city. Life is growing from the two sides of the border at such a speed—but I'm sure that they will dig around another ten years or so before they have all their new lakes filled with water and their new skyscrapers, before the final look will be achieved.

Interview by Colin Hood and Gabrielle Finnan, Australia 1993