

ONE SOUND OF THE HISTORIES

BY ISAAC CHONG WAI

What is the future in the past? And what is the past in the future?

These two questions address how an imaginary past as “future” locates itself in the real past through the body, as a method to figure out the utopian projections of possible futures, where time is shown in space through context, history, memory and the body. I would, therefore, address performance as the applicable medium to deal with history and memory in public space.

My research started from the history of Weimarplatz, which was formerly the Gauforum,¹ built as one of the most important structures for the National Socialist Party in Weimar. In 1937, the foundation stone was laid for the “Hall of the People’s Community,” which was housed in the site, and the square was named “Adolf Hitler Square” (Platz Adolf Hitlers). During the Allied Occupation of Germany, it was renamed “Karl-Marx Platz,” which was then kept under the reign of the German Democratic Republic. After the regime’s fall it remained nameless until 1999.² And now, in its current incarnation as Weimarplatz, the absence of people has become the present view of the square, which is blocked from public access. Looking at the past and the present of the Weimarplatz, one is led to address the function and dysfunction of its architectural structure: what kind of events, symbols and social activities could and can take place there now? With regard to forbidden and applicable activities concerning our body in public space throughout history, the distance of time becomes compatible and suggests reconciliation and dissension between individuals and time. For this, an imaginary past is created through art in the hope of shaping possible fragments of utopia.



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ISAAC CHONG WAI, *One Sound of the Histories*, 2015, photo of performance at Weimarplatz, Weimar, Germany. Photo by Ronny Ristok. Courtesy the artist.

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ISAAC CHONG WAI, *One Sound of the Histories*, 2015, photo of performance at Weimarplatz, Weimar, Germany. Photo by Iva Kirova. Courtesy the artist.

ONE SOUND OF THE HISTORIES

On August 30, 2015, numerous people were invited to line up in a stringent formation at Weimarplatz and tell stories of their life, as part of my performance entitled *One Sound of the Histories*. All participants, as living sculptures, stood and searched for their memories and told their stories from diverse times in the past. Through the telling of personal memories, the present and past became interwoven in this particular place to create a unique moment in history.

In the early preparations for the performance—as part of my MFA program in Public Art and New Artistic Strategies at Weimar’s Bauhaus-Universität, and the Kunstfest Weimar—I had to obtain permission to stage it at the Weimarplatz. Some concerns were raised by the city and the art festival about the use of the space. When the city read my proposal, they thought the performance was a demonstration, because numerous people were invited to stand together at the square. If my work had been a demonstration, the city would probably not have granted me the permission. Opening up the space for a demonstration would have obliged the city to accept similar requests from other parties, including far-right neo-Nazis. We explained to the city that the performance was not a demonstration, but a piece of art. With the support of Danica Dakić, Christian Holtzhauer and Anke Hannemann, the performance was granted permission to be staged.

After receiving the permission, I started doing promotion to gather participants, and that in itself became part of the artwork. I talked to random people asking if they would join the performance; I delivered flyers on the street and to mailboxes; and I did public announcements at radio stations, on social media and newspapers, and at events. I got many different comments from people. Some told me that they would participate, because it was important to deal with brutal history and that the work was interesting. Some told me that they disliked the work or found it inappropriate, because of the way that it reminded them of Germany’s Nazi and communist past. I managed to talk with many people, and opinions often focused on the individualistic aspect of the work or the aesthetic and choreography of the performance.

I didn’t hire people for the performance, because, for me, it was very important that the participants wanted to share their own personal stories for the purpose of creating the “sound” of history. If I had involved money, the work would have been dishonest. Instead, in exchange for their participation in the project, participants later received a limited edition art print of my work.

On the day of the performance it was around 36 degrees Celsius, and many people contacted me to say that they were not able to come due to the heat. I became very nervous, because I didn’t know if anyone would really come. I was delighted to see that, in the end, almost 70 people came out to join the performance—some of whom I knew and others I had never met before.

When it was time to start the performance, people lined up and entered the square gradually. I told the participants that once they heard me telling my own story, they could also start their performance. And, as soon as they saw me exit, they could either leave or stay until they finished telling their own stories. During the performance, I basically could only hear my own voice. Sometimes, I could make out some words, but I didn’t really understand what people were saying. They related memories from various moments in time, and it was as though many different pasts were trying to fill up the site and its history. I asked the participants to speak in the language they felt most comfortable with, so I heard English, German, French and other languages that I was not able to identify. I started by talking in English about my past. I mentioned my mother and father and then I talked about how my brother had been bullied in the past, jumping from one topic to another. I also talked in Cantonese—my mother tongue—about my family, friends and experiences. Some were painful, while others were interesting or banal. In talking about my own story “spontaneously” and in fragments, I realized that these are the times that I remember and want to talk about, imprinted in my mind as things that changed and shaped my life. Surrounded by people and many different sounds, I still focused on my own personal stories. I started to make many facial expressions and bodily movements; I was so concentrated on my past that I didn’t feel self-conscious. I remembered, however, that there was a breeze during the performance, which was very nice and gentle and a welcome reprieve from the heat. The breeze also carried our voices, as well as our histories, across the site. It came only once during the whole performance, but it was subtle and beautiful and perhaps even magical.

Time actually passed very fast after around the 16-minute mark. In the end, I left the square with a smile. I still don’t know why I smiled, but I did. Then people started leaving at their own pace, and various emotions and uncertain applause filled the space. After the performance was over, some participants talked to me about how they felt and what stories they told during the performance. I appreciated their generosity, trust and openness. It was a privilege to have the chance to listen to their stories, and I was very touched. Some stories were about death or injustice, others were about love, friendship or gratefulness for one’s existence. Some stories were about struggles to have a better life or dreams for the future. They were beautiful, honest and human.

THE REHEARSAL OF THE FUTURES

Though the performance has been completed, the fact that it happened will continue to exist in the past and future. This is one of the reasons I propose performance as the medium to deal with history, because its time-based form, intention to challenge the status quo and relationship to body and public space are ambiguous and not conformed to the construction of history. Our body during performance occupies a place—through outline, thickness and weight. “It is the mirror and the corpse that assign a space to the profoundly and originally utopian experience of the body,”³ and is meant for rehearsing possible futures. In this sense, the body plays an important role as the medium of utopia. It serves as an incorporeal body in which utopia is projected in no-place while experience and imaginary past enter our body.

Regarding the break of times, I would also like to ascribe the term “reconciliation” to the moment between past and future as a timeless aspect. I intend to use fragments of history, which are reenacted in various ways, to suggest reconciliation between us and the past. I have focused my point of view on things that echo the attitudes of people in the present in order to question and respond to problematic events in history. With the tragic history of the Holocaust and the symbol of Nazism haunting the Gauforum, what should we actually do with its past? Instead of breaking its present status as a dead square, the medium of performance can deal with the square’s history in a more precise and vital way. What kind of monument should be built to remember something that is so evil? Are we ourselves able to create what Spanish artist and historian Jorge Otero-Pailos calls “monumentaries”?⁴ Is the body a frame or supplement of documents that show the past? I think, in my work, our body is the document. Without reconciliation, I believe it is impossible to have utopian projections, because there is no space for the future if we don’t produce it. In short, if we don’t produce imagination—which is one of the elements of reconciliation, and a rehearsal of the future—there is no future. Hereafter, I would like to discuss how *One Sound* took place, and how it remains continuous in a metaphysical and conceptual way.

In gathering numerous people into the blocked-off square, as a symbolic reference to National Socialism, I realized that the “imaginary past” that I was creating in the work was an investigation into today’s representation of the Gauforum. In searching for the *raison d’être* of its architecture, I looked at the history of why this space was originally built and how its structure, name and function changed throughout time. I investigated the idea of appropriation of space—how our body appropriates or reappropriates the *raison d’être* of architecture(s) according to event or politics—and how performance, as a medium, actualizes history. What event should

be made in order not to forget the past and could be used as a form of cultural memory?

This square with its buildings shall give the strongest impression of the newly-awakened sense of community and be a symbol for the space-creating powers of the people. On this square, the Führer and the people shall unite in celebration. Clearly, the size of the square should reflect the size of the community that created it; it therefore follows that it should be designed on a scale that only a community that lives according to National Socialist principles can envisage.

—Bruno Nowack, *Official gazette of the Thuringian, Minister for National Education, 1937*⁵

The current function of the Gauforum is to be “remembered”—to serve as a reminder against the rise of the Nazis and the Holocaust. Yet during the reign of the German Democratic Republic, the square was named after Karl Marx and used to celebrate Communism and its conquering of the nation’s Nazi past. After the reunification of East and West Germany, the Gauforum encountered a crisis in terms of its value as a “memorial site.” In 1999, on the occasion of Weimar’s selection as that year’s European Capital of Culture, the Gauforum was renamed “Weimarplatz,” projecting onto it a democratic trajectory, and giving back the site to the city and its people. In 2005, it was renovated as a shopping mall and redesigned to prohibit people from gathering at the square.

With regard to the complexity of the histories involved in the square, I placed focus on three layers of time for my work: first, the history of the Gauforum; second, its renovation in 2005; and third, the people talking about their personal stories at the site in 2015. If what French historian Pierre Nora suggests is true, then memory is engulfed by history,⁶ and the reason that *lieux de mémoire* (“memory space”) has to be created is that memory deals with the discontinuity of history. My performance, therefore, created *lieux de mémoire*, in which the “misuse” of space—juxtaposing the original political functions of the space with the participants’ use of the site to speak about their personal histories—countered its history. In this case, I see our bodies as the *lieux de mémoire*, wherein our memory crystalizes and re-interprets histories. Conceptually, referring to our personal stories as “histories” provokes the reconstruction of history. But how, then, could we create a space where people are able to intervene or interweave with that history?

I am not suggesting opening up the square to public access, nor criticizing the architectural structure’s current state as a memorial that simultaneously ignores, negates, respects and materializes the past. In the performance, the reintroducing of different human voices in this huge, desolate space led to the materialization of memory, while using personal past to find the position of individuals within history. When I talk about the position of individuals, I mean the attitude, responsibility and identity



of individuals under the hegemonic power of history. We are implanted with the idea that there are certain histories that we have to remember—through school books, anniversaries, monuments, family, media and so on—which reconstruct an incomplete past to create the foundation of what we perceive as memory. But how does this direct us to construct our cultural identity and memory? In my performance, personal stories were delivered through a time-based medium. They neglected the history of the space itself, but ultimately showed our inability to escape from history, which was the concept of the performance.

THE FRAGMENTS OF THE PAST AND THE CONSTITUTION OF THE FUTURE

In the conceptualization of this work, I addressed fragments of the past and the use of space, contextualizing them within the present to negate the *raison d'être* of the square's architecture. History plays an important role in shaping and modifying space, which our body perceives differently according to distinctive spatial context. In short, the fragments, which are no longer appropriate in present time, were exploited to work against themselves through a certain rapprochement formed by the performance.⁷ In this approach, personal stories became materials to connect time and to create space between the past, present and future. "An existing space may outlive its original purpose and the *raison d'être* which determines its forms, functions and structures; it may thus in a sense become vacant, and susceptible of being diverted, reappropriated and put to a use quite different from its initial one."⁸ To reappropriate a space, our body needs to deal with layers of time and the representation of its architecture. In the performance, the representational space of the architecture was reexamined along with its *raison d'être*. At the end of the performance, the architecture embraced the absence of sound and body. However, there were differences before and after the performance with respect to the representation of space: many layers of time and personal stories gave rise to a strata of history. These differences are related to the title of the work—*One Sound of the Histories*. But where is this "sound"? The sound of the dismantling of buildings, shops and houses due to the construction of the Gauforum, the sound of Nazi speeches, the sound of war, the sound of reconstruction, the sound of personal stories and the sound of silence? In this work, "one sound" was a reference to not only the personal stories spoken by people but also the sound of the past and the future. In order to hear the sound of time—to reconcile with the past and to form utopian projections—under the constantly changing political situation concerning body, space and time, as well as history and memory, we should strive to create our own time and future. This is a concept that is similar to one addressed in a favorite quote of mine: "Argue, as much as you want and about whatever you like, only obey!"⁹ We are to argue our position in history and question individualism and collectivism.

Again, though this performance piece has been completed, it is continuous. It is a performance about the past and also the future. We performed, and reclaimed our histories, to see the future in the past and the past in the future.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude toward the MFA Public Art and New Artistic Strategies at Bauhaus-Universität, Kunstfest Weimar and Burger Collection. I would also like to give thanks to Monique Burger, who supported my work by participating in it and giving me the chance to share it with more people, and Danica Dakić, Christian Holtzhauer and Anke Hannemann, who made the performance possible. I am grateful for everyone who supported this project by participating, coordinating or helping in its production, because I know this is not something that I could have done by myself.

(Opposite page)
ISAAC CHONG WAI, *One Sound of the Histories*, 2015, photo of performance at Weimarplatz, Weimar, Germany. Photo by Ana Cayuela. Courtesy the artist.

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Information:

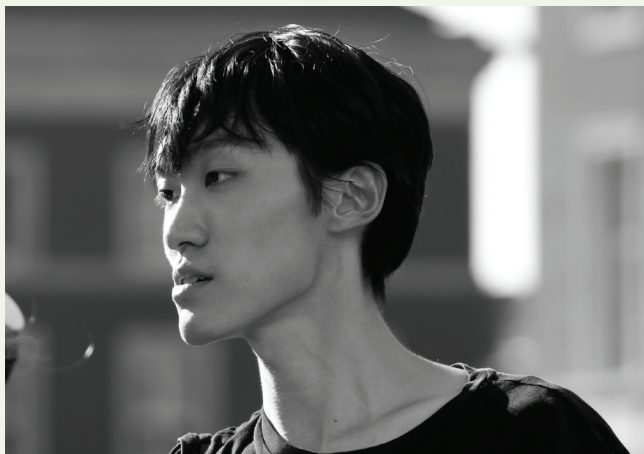
The performance was well documented, and I consider its video footage to be part of the work's production. The recording of all the voices during the performance is in the video, with none of the stories removed. In the video, we cannot really identify the story of each person, mostly voices overlapping other voices. You can view a short version of the video at this link: <https://vimeo.com/147536333>

The final version of the video will be exhibited in Weimar in late January or early February 2016. For more information, please visit: chongwai.tumblr.com

Portrait of Isaac Chong Wai.
Photo by Ana Cayuela.

Biography:

ISAAC CHONG WAI is a Berlin-based artist from Hong Kong, with an MFA in Public Art and New Artistic Strategies from the Bauhaus-Universität in Weimar, Germany, and a BA in Visual Arts from the Academy of Visual Art at Hong Kong Baptist University. He works with diverse media, including performance, site-specific installation, public art, video, photography and multimedia. He is one of the participating artists at Urban Heat, a four-year project by the Festivals in Transition Network, supported by Creative Europe from 2015 to 2018. His works were shown at the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin, the Kunstfest Weimar and Serbia's Macura Museum in 2015, and selected for the 2014 Moscow Biennale for Young Art. His video work received an honorary mention at the 2nd OZON International Video Art Festival in Katowice, Poland, in 2013. He was awarded the first runner-up prize for the Hong Kong Contemporary Art Award and the Professor Eva Man Best Honours Project Award in 2012. Chong had a solo-exhibition at the Academy of Visual Arts Gallery in Hong Kong in 2011.



¹ Gau: old German for tribal district or region used by the Third Reich to demarcate an administrative district. Forum: old Roman for market place, courthouse, but used in German as a reference to a meeting place for discussion. Norbert Korrek and Daniel Thompson, "Chronology of the Former Gauforum Weimar," accessed October 15, 2015, <https://www.uni-weimar.de/mfa/test/gauforum.html>

² Sandra Starke, "Weimar: Rally – NS Architektur" (2011), accessed October 15, 2015, http://www.klassik-stiftung.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Bildung/Lehrer_und_Erzieher/Stadtrallye/Tour_NS-Architektur_dt.pdf

³ Michel Foucault, "Foucault le Corps Utopique" ("Utopian Body"), radio lecture delivered in 1966, trans. Lucia Allais, in Caroline A. Jones, ed., *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 233.

⁴ Jorge Otero-Pailos, "Monumentaries: Toward a Theory of the Apergon," *E-flux*, October 1, 2015, accessed November 2, 2015, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/monumentaries>.

⁵ Starke, "Weimar: Rally."

⁶ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire," *Representation*, no. 26 (1989): 18.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 167.

⁹ Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" in *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 58–64.