

Reverberating Losses: “What Happens When We Forget to Remember?”

Karen Frostig

From forests to ancestral letters and from open graves to the streets of Vienna, Frostig uses her sensibilities as a memory artist to engage audiences in a series of interactive, multi-media experiences that call out fresh ideas about memory and responsibility.

Fear

As a child, I often retreated to the nearby woods as a place of solitude and comfort, in weathering the familial storms that dominated my childhood years. We lived in a neighborhood of immigrants. Unlike our neighbors, my father did not cross the great Atlantic on his own accord, coming to America to start a new life. A highly educated lawyer with a Ph.D. from the University of Vienna, my father was arrested by the Gestapo in the spring of 1938 in an early round-up of Austria's intelligentsia. With the help of a Nazi neighbor, my grandmother secured his release on the condition that he leaves the country immediately. Embarking on a treacherous journey of escape, my father received temporary asylum in Lisbon, became stateless in Cuba, and eventually migrated to the United States at the end of 1939. Crippled with shame and guilt, and engulfed in silence, two small passport photos of his parents framed on the living room wall, were the only clues that something was awry. When I was a young teen, my father sat down with me, opening a small cardboard box to share a few pictures of his childhood in Vienna. The box quickly disappeared. My father died when I was 22. I found the box 20 years later, in my mother's basement after her death.

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Like the forest of my childhood, time creates a space of detachment, a cloak of protection that enables the retrieval of difficult memories. My story is about murder and forests, and about the past infiltrating the present. I ease the isolation that surrounds these lingering memories by making memory public. By displaying my memory to the public, I connect with others who carry difficult memories, searching for common ground. This process helps me to understand how trauma can be shared between people. Performative memory, with its emphasis on engagement, process and reflection, becomes the medium of choice. Telling my story in public to larger audiences, is a way of integrating my family history into collective memory. This way of interaction is indeed performative, as it prompts others to share personal stories about similar losses. Telling my story opens up a performative process of memory sharing which does something to the present. Memory becomes a transformative agent. Transcending time, these memories belong to public spaces as they are stories about our humanity.

The Trees

My first communal public memory project named *Earth Wounds* (2003), addressed the loss of 26 acres of woodland on the street where I live. Urban developers rescued the Andover Newton Theological School in Newton Center, founded in 1807 and facing bankruptcy in 1998, by converting the woods into an elite and exclusive, gated community. The destruction of the last green space in the city's center stirred feelings of loss and mourning for community members. I created a communal burial ceremony to honor the trees and the community members who had worked diligently to save the trees.

I invited the city's councilors, community activists, conservationists, and students with their teachers at the local school to participate in a ceremony that included reading poetic epitaphs written about the trees. We then went into the school yard to bury the commemorative scrolls with new seedlings provided by the city, in a dedicated act to heal the community. While I had conducted scores of community projects as an art therapist working within an institutional framework, I had never ventured into a community alone, as an artist. Propelled by a large and aching hole in my life, I pursued the destruction of the forest as an expression of personal sorrow. I wanted to save the trees as I had wanted to save my father as a child, confused about the shadowy presence that had seeped into our family life. I sought to recognize community members who invested time and political capital to rescue the trees. I also hoped to teach children at the local school about the importance of trees, and how their loss affects the whole community.



Karen Frostig, *Burial Ceremony Mourning Shroud* (2001).
Photograph by Bill Kipp.

By symbolically planting the broken limbs from demolished trees back into the earth, I attempted to impose the life cycle onto a hillside of destruction. Combining ritual with performance, I became attuned to a new identity as a memory artist dealing with concepts of erasure, prompting new insights about loss and meaning.

Prior to creating the ceremony, I witnessed the large, lifeless carcasses of tree trunks scattered across the ravaged hillside. The severed tree trunks reminded me of my family's Holocaust history and their callous murder into mass graves.

Instinctively, I created burial artifacts to be incorporated into the communal burial ceremony. I stitched a large mourning shroud to wrap individual tree limbs, symbolic objects coated with text and wax, which I prepared for burial. I tore strips of fabric attached to the mourning shroud to perform *Kria*, the Jewish ritual that honors the separation of life and death. While the ceremony was developed as a community event to honor the destruction of an urban forest, my identity as a Jewish descendant of Holocaust victims took on measurable significance.

Transitions

During the *Earth Wounds* project my aunt, who lived in London, died. After my father's death, she became the guardian of letters written by my grandparents to my father in exile, before their deportation to Riga. In 2004, I became the new keeper of the letters, spending the next two years organizing and translating them. I retrieved my father's box that I had placed in the back of a deep closet, which contained his documents. For the first time, I began to piece together my family's story of murder and disconnection that had been buried for so many years.

As late as 2004, Austria remained fixed in my mind as the Nazi haven. I heard about the "Waldheim Affair" in 1986 but did not realize the extent of Austrian soul-searching that had taken place during that time. Thomas Bernhard's play *Heldenplatz* (Heroes' Square) produced in 1988, galvanized political outrage, setting the stage for public introspection. In 1991, Chancellor Franz Vranitzky issued Austria's first public apology from within the Parliament. Artists, writers, and historians were now emboldened to speak openly about the past. In 1994, Austria passed the referendum to join the European Union, placing new international scrutiny on the nation's history of National Socialism. A restitution fund for victims of the Holocaust, spearheaded by Ambassador Stuart E. Eizenstat from the United States, was established in 1995 and Holocaust education, consistent with Germany's commitment to remember the past, formally began in 2000. Despite substantial progress, many Austrians remain cautious about memory. Some feel the memory of National Socialism has been sufficiently acknowledged, while others are committed to sustaining memory as an ongoing and active component of national identity. Headed toward a new era of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, coming to terms with the past, Austria's dark history of genocide was now a topic that could enter public discourse. The myth of having been Hitler's first victim was no longer sustainable. Or so it seemed.

Returns

I first traveled to Vienna with my father in 1969, following my cousin's wedding in London. The trip was very short. Overcome with agitation and despair, my father was incapable of talking about the devastating events that culminated in

the murder of his parents, some 30 years prior. His distress escalated as we approached the street where he grew up. He contemplated aloud, calling upon a neighbor. I learned later from my uncle, that this was the Nazi who intervened at the Gestapo headquarters in 1938, saving my father from deportation to Dachau concentration camp during the time of his arrest.

I returned to Austria in 2006 as a memory artist, intent upon finding traces of my family's life in Vienna, prior to 1938. I came upon three public memorials that failed to ignite my sensibilities about loss as a descendant of murdered Holocaust victims. Nostalgia for the celebrated Habsburg Empire with its multicultural legacy flooded the streets of Vienna. By contrast, I felt like a stranger, privately encumbered with memories of the past. In 2006, public memorials dedicated to the memory of the Holocaust were scarce, lacking any reference to Austrian culpability. Intent upon learning about my family's history *and* about Austria's primary role as a perpetrating nation, led me to dig deeper into the past. Recovering Austrian citizenship in 2007, became symbolic for reclaiming a piece of what had been taken. The process included documentation of my father's expulsion from Austria, his period of statelessness, and his application for citizenship in the US, understood as a desperate effort to rescue his family. Austrian at birth, citizenship became the most telling event that foreshadowed my work in Austria.

Plans for *The Vienna Project* grew out of a collection of experiences and perceptions regarding the absence of memory on the streets of Vienna. Creating a series of memory panels, I made frequent trips to Vienna and gradually became acquainted with artists, historians, city officials, and members of the Jewish community. They talked with me about memory. It was a mixed experience. People were polite and welcoming, but also guarded. Competition for funding pitted my work against other artists dealing with similar topics. Austrians also harbored a general wariness of outsiders. Trust issues dominated these early conversations: why was I there, what did I want, and how would I represent Austria to other Americans? As a returnee, my experience of searching for memory on the streets of Vienna was not unique. It matched many other descendants' experiences who would lament similar claims.

Memory in Vienna was both hidden and partial. It was about remembrance, not responsibility. The "absence of memory", however, was actively refuted by Austrian officials. In conducting research for an upcoming conference presentation, I met with a senior officer for the cultural council of Vienna. He showed me a book containing memory projects, funded by the city's cultural program, and explained that Austrians were now living in a "post memory" era (not to be confused with Marianne Hirsch's definition of post-memory). Books, films, and art exhibitions were still being produced, but large memorials were no longer needed. This sentiment conformed with national surveys indicating that the majority of Austrians felt they had sufficiently memorialized past

transgressions. Proclamations such as the one by the Austrian official had clearly been rehearsed and delivered many times. No longer a timid guest, I set out to pursue Austria's history of National Socialism with a vengeance.

I conducted extensive research regarding Vienna's history of National Socialism. I visited the three major memorials at Morzinplatz, Albertinaplatz and Judenplatz in Vienna's first district, as well as community-based sites, multiple archives, the central cemetery, and numerous memory plaques discreetly situated around the city. I also located the various addresses and collection houses where my family had lived before their deportation to concentration camps. By 2008, I had a new appreciation of the city's history and memory culture, ensconced on the city streets.

The three national memorials in the first district, existing before *The Vienna Project*, staunchly decried fascism, but repeatedly fell short of refuting the victim myth. Annexed into Greater Germany in 1938, technically Austria did not exist as a sovereign nation between 1938-1945. For decades, responsibility for crimes committed was ascribed to Nazis, who were branded German, not Austrian. Despite the efforts of German and Austrian historians who had revealed that Austria had a higher percentage of Nazi Party members than Germany and produced a disproportionate number of war criminals (Austrians comprised only 8 % of the population of Hitler's Reich, but represented over 13 % of SS members, 40 % of the staff at the Nazi death camps and over 75 % of Nazi commandos), and despite the fact that many men in key positions in the Third Reich had been Austrians (as Adolf Hitler and Adolf Eichmann, among many others; cp. David Art's *The Politics of the Nazi Past in Germany and Austria* from 2006) – many Austrians believed the history was more ambiguous. By contrast, Vienna's state sponsored public memory program lacked the specificity found in publications by these important authors. By failing to address issues of accountability in Austria's public memory program, memory in Austria remained duplicitous. Issues of responsibility separated from memorial culture in Austria, precluded overdue conversations about shame and trauma.

As an Austrian citizen, I could apply for Austrian grants to support my work. After four years of rejected applications and hundreds of meetings with Austrian bureaucrats, government officials gradually began to trust my motivations and started to support *The Vienna Project*, despite its critical leanings. In retrospect, the accumulation of rejections led to my determination to go deeper, to reveal what remained hidden from public view. I was intent upon creating a memorial project that would unequivocally speak about the past, bringing memory to the streets of Vienna. As project director and lead artist, I wanted to dispel any residual claims that Austria was "Hitler's first victim."

It is worth noting that my work was indebted to the work that preceded me. A number of Austrian historians and artists had tackled issues of responsibility for years prior to my arrival in Vienna. Historians, writers and poets had

published extensively on this topic – here I mention only Thomas Bernhard, Oliver Rathkolb, Robert Knight, Gerhard Botz, Matti Bunzl, Elfriede Jelinek, Robert Menasse, and Doron Rabinovici. Perhaps it was my naiveté as an American, wedded to my family’s tragic history and to my father’s personal anguish, further propelled by a lack of funding that fueled my resolve to investigate what I perceived in 2008 as Austria’s lackluster record of national memory. Nonetheless, I wanted to make a statement about memory in the public place, reaching out to new audiences, while capturing my particular point of view as a returning Austrian artist with an outside perspective. To be precise, I was an outsider holding Austrian citizenship and insider history.

My dual status as an American citizen and as a descendant of murdered Jewish victims complicated my work. While Austrian artists and writers understandably insisted on being paid by the government for their work, I was willing to work long hours for five years without compensation. This is not unusual behavior for artists working on activist projects in the US. Additionally, I did not want to accept money for the work that could be construed as profiting from my family’s history. My success as a fundraiser also stirred some resentment from other artists competing for the same funds. Despite these various tensions, the spirit of collaboration was also very strong. *The Vienna Project* coincided with Austria’s growing readiness to confront its past. This produced an uncanny opportunity to present two parallel narratives, one about my family’s history, and the other about public memory in Vienna, at the same time. Striving to create an accurate reading of the past, I included the histories of other minority groups also targeted under National Socialism.

Creating an inclusive memorial that represented multiple victim groups was consistent with my American disposition. However, such a mindset was at odds with Austria’s emphasis on harmony and unity, aligned with the values of assimilation. While members of the project team were eager to create a memorial that represented different victim groups, no one was enthusiastic about emphasizing the differences, possibly exacerbating hierarchies and frictions between the groups. Using databases that rely on Nazi documentation contaminates the very spirit of memorialization. The alternative, to erase victims’ identity, seemed equally problematic. By introducing group affiliations, I would in effect, be re-applying Nazi criteria onto victims’ names, mixing histories of hate onto activities of remembrance – perhaps an unavoidable outcome. I introduced font as an ideal mechanism for creating a non-hierarchical presentation of the different victim groups. I insisted and managed to convince project team members that creating a design-based solution was preferable to erasing the very identities that led to the victims’ murder.

The Vienna Project was about Austria’s history of perpetration and denial, asking public audiences to bear witness to Austria’s former history of murder of its minority groups and fellow Austrians. This history was about the prevalence

of home-grown hatred directed at one's neighbors, about the breakdown of community, and about asking the question: "What happens when we forget to remember?"

The Vienna Project

Opening in 2013 and closing in 2014, the memorial project was coined a "performance of the archives." Conceived as a participatory, generative, process-based performance of memory, the project was intended to make memory visible on the streets of Vienna. 75 years after the "Anschluss" in 1938, 38 memory sites located in 16 districts of Vienna were selected by historian Jerome Segal to represent seven victim groups experiencing different forms of persecution, including humiliation, exclusion and aggression, as well as instances of resistance and rescue, between 1938–1945. These groups represented Jews, Roma and Sinti, physically and mentally disabled, persons persecuted on political grounds, homosexuals, Jehovah Witnesses and Carinthian Slovenes. Slovenian partisans constituted the largest group of Austrian resisters.

On the morning of October 24, 2013, pedestrians encountered sprayed street stencils containing the project's axiom "What happens when we forget to remember / Was passiert, wenn wir vergessen uns zu erinnern?" at the 38 memory sites while enacting their daily routines. Identifying major institutions noted as complicit with Nazism, starting with the Parliament and the Opera House, the University of Vienna, the Natural History Museum, hospitals, and various deportation sites, the stenciled sprays would be seen as a series of discontinuous messages on public sidewalks, mimicking memory's fleeting presence. Appearing as a collection of open-ended questions in ten languages to include Yiddish, Romani, Slovenian, Polish, Russian, Turkish and Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian to encompass present-day minority groups living in Austria, as well as German, English and Hebrew, the question conveyed a message about responsibility. The bridge between the past and the present was made implicit.

The Vienna Project focused on setting the record straight. The project's 38 memory sites represented a bold critique of Austria's history of complicity with National Socialism between 1938 and 1945. The project addressed the nation's record of murder and genocide directly, without reservation. *The Vienna Project's* smartphone app provided visitors with carefully researched, factual data and statistics in German and English, informing about the crimes of exclusion, humiliation and aggression that took place at the 38 sites. This information could be accessed at each site, bringing the compromised history of each site forward. The decentralized design of *The Vienna Project* allowed a variety of interactive performative events to happen simultaneously and sporadically across the city, communicating the message that in 1938 Nazism was everywhere. By delivering this message in public spaces to contemporary audiences throughout the city, I

hoped that this painful past would once again be confronted. Unlike publications, exhibitions and academic symposia, coming upon the street stencils created immediate access to the project's primary message, that memory breeds ideas about accountability.



Karen Frostig with Waltraud Jungwirth and Liza Schluder, Stencil Sprays in front of the Parliament (2013). Photograph by Christian Wind.

Developed as a participatory model of memorialization, *The Vienna Project* contained nine different modules: video installations and projections, stencil sprays, a memory map, performance art, interactive games, oral history video interviews, a Reading Marathon, guided tours and Holocaust education. The Holocaust education program was tied to the 38 memory sites representing the persecution of seven different victim groups. The Holocaust education program, developed by Kate Melchior linked the memory sites to the history, and could be accessed using the Smartphone app by teachers and students outside of Vienna. The Smartphone app was instrumental in reaching new audiences through our social media network. Many of the performances, such as the *Memory Games*, *Erasure* and *Plant a Pansy* required active participation. Johanna Taufner coordinated the social media program and used technology to announce the date, time and place of each event.

Every performative event was unique, engaging audiences in a participatory experience. For example, *Memory Games* led by Nina Prada entailed a selection of picture cards from a deck of cards, prompting a free-association exercise to Holocaust memory. On Holocaust Remembrance Day, I created an exercise about erasure. I printed the phrase “What happens when we forget to remember?” onto one hundred erasers. Participants were invited to erase stereotypical images derived from National Socialism propaganda posters, and hate speech directed at Jewish victims. Instead of “erasing” people in a symbolic action, the exercise stimulated new conversations about the language of hate as the focus of erasure. In another performance event, Andreas Brunner, co-Director of Qwein, Center for Gay and Lesbian Culture, provided a historic overview of Austria’s treatment of homosexual victims under National Socialism. Following his presentation, participants were invited to plant potted pansies in Resselpark, the site of multiple arrests of homosexual victims. The event coincided with staged plantings for the international “Pansy Project,” protesting hate crimes directed at gay populations.



Karen Frostig & Elisabeth Wilding, *The Naming Memorial*, Hofburg, 18 October 2014.
Photograph by Christian Wind.

Ideas about duration and process are central to concepts of performative memory. Building on Happenings and the Fluxus movement, performative encounters are designed to promote fresh conversations between performers and audience members, as well as between members of the audience. Conversations

and cooperative actions are integrated into the performance as extended content. In this environment, notions of detached observation tied to traditional performances are deemed circumspect. Ildiko Meny, curator of the performance art program, facilitated public conversations which were taped and uploaded to the smartphone app. Discussion generally appeared constrained and risk averse. Whether this had to do with the public nature of the performative space, the sensitivity of the topic or individual inhibitions was difficult to determine.

Closing events occurred on 18 October 2014 at the Austrian National Library at the Hofburg in Austria's first district. *The Naming Memorial*, the project's culminating event, occurred in the courtyard outside the library. Austrian video artist Elisabeth Wildling produced the slides containing thousands of victim's names. Lasting for six hours, 91,780 names of murdered Austrian victims representing seven persecuted groups as well as dissidents were projected onto the freshly restored walls of the buildings surrounding Josefsplatz. Collected from seven different databases, the names were organized into a single alphabetized listing. The use of font preserved the different group affiliations within the larger inclusive presentation.

The memorial provided a nighttime vigil of remembrance, under the canopy of an open sky. The inclusive intention of the memorial project was especially potent in these final moments. The overall design of the memorial did not erase difference nor did it produce antagonistic divisions between descendants. Around 250 participating audience members, representing multiple victim groups, came together for the first time.

Turns

In 2017, my life's work took an unexpected turn back to the Andover Newton Theological School's hillside. The oldest seminary in the United States with a long and distinguished history, the school capitulated to a second and final round of bankruptcy. The school sold its campus to a local billionaire investor, who promised to retain current zoning laws. The terms of sale required that Andover Newton Theological School clean-up a neglected oil spill on the hillside. The clean-up entailed cutting down more than 100 mature trees at the site and removing 750 tons of contaminated soil. Hillside eradication took place a few feet away from my front door.

During the *Earth Wounds* project, I learned that my grandparents had been shot into mass graves in the Bikernieki Forest. Forests, that had hitherto been my refuge, were now tainted with an unspeakable horror. Memory about genocide concerns individual biographies tethered to a collective history of remembrance and responsibility. The two performative memory art projects, *Earth Wounds* and *The Vienna Project*, referencing distinctly different histories, were now indelibly entangled within my psyche.



Andover Hillside 24 July 2017. Photograph by Karen Frostig



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