Kenotic Embodiments: Theological Reflections for a Violence-Critical Art of Memory in Europe

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Abstract
Memory practices fulfill a specific function within political communities: they refer to events, persons, biographies, lives and bodies in the past in order to offer identification in the present and to point a specific way into the future. The ambivalence of these practices lies in a hidden problem of violence: when bodies and biographies are accessed within political memory agendas that serve specific aims, they are reified and become a means to establish, legitimize and preserve political order and power. As such, memory practices form metonymies of political communities in their treatment of bodies in the horizon of an anticipated future. The following article highlights this problem of violence in memory practices and their end-means relations. Taking the art action *Look for us!* by the Centre for Political Beauty as starting point, the article problematizes the ways memory cultures make use of the past. It outlines modalities of an alternative culture of memory that remains critical of the instrumentalization of bodies in political agendas. Drawing from theological repertoires, it offers criteria for the analysis and the design of violence-critical, kenotic cultures of memory.

Key-Words
memory, art, violence, aesthetic-political intervention, critique, restraint, openness, insovereignty, embodiment

Certain forms of memory practices are characterized by a hidden problem of violence.[1] This problem appears when reference is made to persons in the past, their lives and bodies, in order to realize specific political and social purposes. Bodies and biographies then become reified and are reduced to a means in political agendas. An example where this problem has recently come to light in the German public is the art project *Look for us!* (Zentrum für Politische Schönheit 2019b) by the *Centre for Political Beauty*, performed in Berlin in December 2019 and January 2020. The artists set up an installation in the government district in Berlin that contained the ashes of Holocaust victims. By their aesthetico-political intervention, they intended to warn against new-right radicalization in national and international contexts and to call for clearly human rights-oriented polit-

1 The following text is a shortened and modified version of Kern, Christian (2022): Politische Performance und Gewalt. Überlegungen zu einem Ethos des Protests aus performanztheologischer Perspektive. In: *Crosscultural Studies in Religion and Theology 1, no. 1 (2022), DOI:10.25598/csrt/2022-15 (forthcoming)*.

ics. However, in the intense public debate that the action provoked the accusation was raised that the artists would disregard the dignity of the dead. Was this not an abusive instrumentalization of the dead, their lives, and their bodies?

The problem of violence discussed in relation to the art project is of general scope, for the art action touches on the question of how people, bodies, and lives are dealt with within state structures and their ways of projecting collective futures with reference to the past. Also in modern European state structures, their biopolitics, their practices of memory and representation, bodies are accessed to achieve specific, desirable goals, and the eventual physical violence that may accompany it is repeatedly legitimized by the achievement of these ends – a problem of violence in end-means relations.

The following article discusses this problem. Its aim is to shed light on how memory practices appropriate the past, and to outline basic characteristics of memory practices that remain critical towards the reification and instrumentalization of bodies and biographies. The text proceeds as follows: First, it briefly reconstructs the activities in the context of *Look for us!* and elaborates the problem of violence that subliminally characterizes it. It then asks for a modified kind of memory that confronts the problem of violence critically and develops some basic characteristics of such an alternative culture of remembrance. The latter becomes possible in practices that embody an ethos of restraint, risking an open reference to the past, in the horizon of an undetermined future. Where such a non-teleological encounter with the past takes place, the persons involved in the memory practice are changed. They lose the sovereignty of a planned, anticipated future, move into an open space, and are possibly transformed by the encounter with the past. What takes shape, then, in and by this transformative reference is a kenotic form of memory embodied in non-determinative forms of memory practice. Theology in the horizon of Jesus' disappearance on Easter morning offers a repertoire and gives impulses for such a kenotic art of memory.

1. *Look for us!*

The action *Look for us!* by the Center for Political Beauty was a hybrid composition of different artefacts and practices, with three elements forming the core. The first element is a grey column made of stone, which was installed in January 2019 by the artists' group in the government district in Berlin, within sight of the Reichstag, on the site where the so-called

Kroll Opera House had stood in the 1930s. There, after the Reichstag fire in 1933, the conservative ruling elite had gathered and handed over the political power to the NSDAP. The column contained – as the artists explained – the ashes of people who had been killed in the Holocaust and whose human remains had been scattered in anonymous mass graves around concentration camps across Europe. In cooperation with different scientists, prior to the official start of the action, the artists had conducted research in order to identify such sites and take soil samples to prove that human material was indeed present there. These human remains had then been integrated into the orange sphere in the grey memory column, making it part of the installation.

The second element of the action was a publication, a memory book (Zentrum für Politische Schönheit 2019a). The artists had not only located mass graves and collected mortal remains, in the tradition of the Jewish historian Emanuel Ringelblum, they had also brought together written messages that people in the Holocaust had written down before their extermination and hidden in various places. The memory book bundled these messages as a legacy for posterity. The title of the project "Look for us!" was taken from one of these messages and quotes one of the silenced voices.

The third element of the action was less material, but discursive: the public debate. The action provoked an intense national and international public discussion, in which art critics and politicians participated, as well as the Yad Vashem Committee Jerusalem, pointing out that the commitment to critical memory is important, but that the dignity of the murdered always has to be respected. A group of Jewish activists launched a counteraction and attempted to uninstall the column at night (Nachtkritik 2020). One of the main points of criticism that came up repeatedly in different variations in the course of the discussion was: Is it not infringing and disrespectful to deal with memory and specifically with the physical, mortal remains of people in this way? Is this not a kind of abuse of bodies and life stories?

The intense discussion and criticism provoked a reaction on the part of the activists. They came out with a statement to the public, clarified their motivation and intention (the fight against new-rights radicalization and their commitment to human rights), and formulated an apology (Tagesspiegel: Zentrum für Politische Schönheit 2020). At the same time, they emphasized once again the political urgency of the question: Where does critical memory of the past really take place? Where do people today really and efficiently face the challenges of human rights violations in

the past and present? Later, the artists organized the deinstallation of the column and handed over the ashes to Orthodox rabbis for burial.

Look for us! is not the first provocative aesthetic-political action of the Center for Political Beauty. Since 2010, the group of artists has repeatedly carried out activities with a comparable impact on the public. The goal in each case is to initiate political debate about how human rights and human dignity are realized or violated, regarding for example refugees, asylum seekers in Europe, and the Mediterranean Sea as a European mass grave (Ruch 2015). The artistic activities are understood as an impulse to remind today's society of the greatness and beauty that human beings are capable of when they build a society of free and equal people that realizes human rights. With the means of provocative, even aggressive performance art, inspirations for social, political changes are to be stimulated, which strive for this realization. The Center's "aggressive humanism" (Ruch 2013) wants to initiate social, political change by means of provocative art projects that, despite all provocative border transgressions, claim to be free of violence.

2. *Violence in end-means relations*

The concept of the Centre for Political Beauty plausibly expresses a rejection of violence, but do the artists really succeed in sustaining it in *Look for us!*? My thesis is that a hidden problem of violence haunts the art project and that it is not able to realize its claim of non-violence. The intensity of the public debate and many of the reactions to *Look for us!* can be explained by the fact that critics gain a sense of this hidden dimension of violence and begin to articulate it.

This hidden dimension of violence, probably unintended by the artists, can be traced by reconstructing the action's mode of operation, i.e., the way it intervenes in the public space. For this, first of all, the location of the installation is important, the Kroll Opera House. The art project takes place in a specific topographical location and within a specific structure: in the government district in Berlin. The place where *Look for us!* is set up is part of a wide 'network of memory' in Berlin, a network of different places, objects, buildings, and practices by which the past is remembered. All together, they form a memory-topography, a silent memory-culture, in Foucaultian terms: a memory-dispositive.

On the grounds of the Kroll Opera House, the installation now does something special: it marks a blank space, a gap in the memory-dispositive. Something is missing here, namely a visible reference to the role that

conservative parties played in the seizure of power by the NSDAP in 1933. The installation draws attention to the *void* of this place. It reveals the history of power that resides here in a hidden way, which dominated the place in the past, and which also infects the present. This blind spot is connected by the artists/activists to developments in current politics in Germany and worldwide: that conservative politicians are once again sympathizing and beginning to cooperate with radicalized forces. The art project warns against this tendency, reminds of the history that has so far been omitted here, and seeks to stimulate a critical stance of the public in regard to recent political developments. By doing so, *Look for us!* marks a second gap. By presenting the anonymous ashes of persons murdered in the death camps, it refers to the Holocaust and draws attention to those lives that were extinguished, destroyed, made invisible. By means of the ashes, their annihilation is represented and embodied. Annihilated bodies become truly present and form a widely visible sign of warning.

It is in this aspect that, in a more hidden way, a moment of violence appears and begins to mark the scenery. The installation *Looks for us!* makes present the bodies of the murdered. It refers to them as bodies in the past and exposes them in the present as a warning for the future. In other words, it *accesses* them. The German word for access – *Zugriff* – is instructive in this regard. It says that something is actively grasped, that something is taken hold of and fixed in a specific way. The syllable "zu" indicates that it is not about an open form of grasping, but about a closing, a kind of fixation that encloses the object. A body is fixed and arrested.

This access to and fixation of bodies in *Look for us!* is linked to a second aspect: a strategic one. The human remains in the grey column become part of an artistic arrangement, of an own order of things, by which certain goals are to be achieved. They are meant to break up the topography of memory in the government district and to initiate change in public debates and mentality. A hegemonic memory dispositive is to be broken open and a political debate about radicalization tendencies within current politics is to be initiated. In this way, the ashes of the dead become part of an action that provocatively and strategically aims to certain political goals. In this sense, the installation makes use of killed bodies and the lives associated with them. The hidden dimension of violence lies, from my point of view, in this teleological framing or determination of the bodies of the dead. They become part of an end-means relation in which they are accessed and made an instrument of a political agenda. A form of physical violence is exercised by *Look for us!* that is indirectly legitimized by the political goals the art project wants to achieve.

In this aspect of violence, *Look for us!* goes beyond a purely German perspective and touches on questions about Europe and what Europe is made of. It touches on a problematic side to a typical narrative that is often told in relation to Europe: Europe as a peace project resulting from the experiences of World War II. The memory of World War II and its victims, especially the monstrous destruction of lives in the Holocaust, plays a central role also in Europe's current self-narration. Given these experiences, Europe is narrated as a peace project in which European people and nations unite to form a new social and political organization. Europe as this project refers to the dead of World War II and gains justification from there (Von der Leyen 2019[2]). But by narrating and legitimizing Europe in this way, something similar to *Look for us!* happens, at least as a tendency. The dead of the past, especially murdered people in the Holocaust, are accessed in the context of a political agenda. They are remembered and represented, and this remembrance aims to justify, affirm, legitimize the political body "European Union" – its political power. Where "Europe" is narrated as a peace project in reference to the lives of the past, it practices – at least potentially – an appropriation of lives, histories, and annihilated bodies that serve political goals. In such forms, the narration is not free of certain teleological violence in regard to the remembered lives and represented bodies.

Against this background, it becomes clearer that memory practices are ambivalent. The reconstruction of their inherent violence reveals a dilemma. Of course: On the one hand, it is really necessary and significant that we refer to these lives, represent them, remember them, and draw consequences from their fate for the shaping of contemporary communities. This is imperative because of the power of annihilation that speaks from the destruction of their lives. On the other hand, it seems equally necessary and obligatory not to reproduce again the violence of access to their bodies and lives. It seems necessary not to make them again resources of political agendas, not to use them again as objects of legitimization of political power – however beautiful and promising the political perspectives may look like. The dilemma, then, consists of the need to refer actively to the past and pick it up, to *do* something with it in order to draw lessons from it. At the same time, this would have to be done without any grasp and fixation of lives, bodies, histories. But how would such a reference to the past be possible without grasping and accessing it ”usefully”.

2 Cf. the paragraf „The promise of Europe“ (Das Versprechen Europas) of this speech.

As becomes clear, in *Look for us!* and the debate it has sparked, we encounter a far-reaching problem that plays out in other political arenas as well, far beyond Germany. We encounter a fundamental problem in the modern organization and legitimation of political structures and polities in general: the access *to* and use *of* bodies, the inherent violence that appears when bodies are put to use, as well as its legitimation by the goals of the respective agenda seeks to achieve.

In contrast to this, then, the question is raised: How can we deal with this tension – with this aporia of memory? How should we position ourselves here? Certainly, it would not be a solution to simply dispense with cultures or narratives of memory. If the active reference to the past were to be given up, the history of violence would also be faded out. At the same time, it seems to be absolutely necessary to resist the temptation of reproducing violence in the strategic use of bodies for the legitimization of political communities and power.

I see a possible way of dealing with this tension by a shift of perspective. We may not be able to resolve it completely, but we can get into a productive relation with it. If it is not an option to renounce memory and the active reference to lives and bodies, then we can ask a modified question: Not *whether* a commemoration takes place, nor simply *where* it takes place, but *how*. The question shifts from the place to the *form*, the *mode* in which memory is practiced. *In what way, in what form, in what modalities could remembrance take place and get into a critical distance to violence*? Could we not think about forms of memory, particular practices of memory that refer to the lives and deaths of people in the past, while maintaining a critical distance to the violence that can occur in this reference? Could memory be practiced, embodied, performed in ways that resist the inner grip on bodies in strategies without becoming memoryless?

In the following reflections, I would like to explore these questions and name three basic modalities of such a violence-critical art of memory: an ethos of restraint, a moment of indeterminate openness; a moment of surprise and transformation.

3. *Modalities of a violence-critical memory practice*

The first modality of such a critical memory culture would be a moment of restraint. I take this idea from Judith Butler and her reflections presented in her *Performative Theory of Assembly* (Butler 2016) and *The force of non-violence* (Butler 2020: 122-124). Butler does not develop a performative political theory in general and abstract, but repeatedly refers to particular

actions, gestures, or performances in concrete situations. In these activities, people respond to given circumstances, including political conflicts and power relations. Butler identifies a specific attitude or ethos in these practices, an "ethos of restraint" (Butler 2017: 171–191, esp. 190). In these practices, a certain attentiveness or mindfulness operates in relation to the violence of which the respective cultural, political, social situation is characterized. They are imbued with the attitude of not reproducing the given violence but resisting it.

One example Butler refers to is the gathering of protesters in Tahrir Square in the Arab Spring of 2011, where people not only discussed orally their political claims but also practiced other, non-verbal forms of political action and expression, like singing, dancing, playing music, cooking together. As a concrete example, Butler points to a mantra that was chanted repeatedly during the assemblies on Tahir Square: "silmiyya" (Butler 2016: 121-123),[3] which literally means "remain peaceful." As such a mantra, it does not only express a willingness to distance oneself from violence but also physically realized it in the act of singing itself. The singing of meditative songs can contribute to an atmosphere and physical disposition of peacefulness in which violence is less likely to take hold. The mantra is a vocal expression of readiness for peace and at the same time its performative execution, amid a situation marked by violence.

These observations about the ethos of restraint enacted in concrete practices of protest can be applied to practices of memory. Could we not practice memory in a way that is also characterized by such an ethos? This becomes possible where people take the risk of turning to the past, knowing that it is necessary to refer actively to lives, bodies in history. What is also necessary, then, is that the remembrance is carried out in a way that actively resists the inner grasp of the past as a usable object of political action. Such an art of memory would resist the temptation to appropriate the past within a strategy or teleology of memory and to make use of it for political purposes. This way of remembering would be filled with the awareness that a given situation is permeated with violence, but, at the same time, it would be marked by the decision not to reproduce this violence: *I will not use you. I will not kill you by making you a factor/an ins-*

3 Cf. also Birringer, Johannes: Standing Still Dancing in a Circle: Performance Dissent and Failed Gestures in Public Protest. In: Gržinić, Marina; Stojnić, Aneta (ed.): Shifting Corporealities in Contemporary Performance. Cham 2018, 89–102 and Burt, Ramsay; Hafez, Adam: Revolutionary Performances. In: Gržinić, Marina; Stojnić, Aneta (ed.): Shifting Corporealities in Contemporary Performance. Cham 2018, 61–85.

trument of my political agenda. As a result, such a culture of remembrance would take on a more contemplative character. It would look at the past and remember it, without reducing it to a political means.

If we accept this moment of restraint as a basic ethical modality of memory practices, then a second aspect emerges with it: an open reference to the past. If memory is framed in a way that rejects the purposive access to bodies, then the relationship to the past changes fundamentally. Past continues to be referred to, it continues to be represented. But this reference and representation are not made a function within an agenda that runs into an anticipated, planned, programmed future. Reference to the past is not used as an anticipation of a specific, politically planned world. Rather, the practice of memory moves into an open space. In this space, it prepares the ground for an open way of encountering the past without purposing it within an organizational, programmatic access. It allows the other to appear in a way that is non-determined, not directed or programmed towards particular ends. The past is simply there, in all its undefined openness. In this way, a memory practice that escapes an expedient fixation creates a setting, a scenery, for an alterity-sensitive commemoration.

This aspect then leads to a third characteristic: transformative insovereignty. When the practice of memory opens a space that rejects a fixation of the past and resists the programming of the future, it loses its inner sovereignty. Instead, it becomes an experience and gesture of *exposure*. In our confrontation with the past, we are exposed to a reality that is different than our planificatory access would like it to be. The more the planificatory access to the past is abandoned, the more insovereignty emerges, because we expose ourselves to an open space of encounter. We do not access the past and take possession of it in order to realize plans for the future, but rather encounter it openly that possibly changes, transforms us.[4]

As becomes clearer here, this experience is not a harmonious, peaceful, uplifting experience, for it deprives those who engage in such memory practice of the security of historiographical agendas and the safety of the routines of memory. Rather, it is an imposition that can be unsettling because it leads to an open situation where the routines and grids of

4 It is this movement beyond – or suspension of – end-means-relations that Butler identifies, in reference to Walter Benjamin, as the core of non-violent gestures and practices, cf. Butler, The force of nonviolence, 125.

memory no longer apply. The presence is possibly haunted by something other.[5]

In biblical language, we might call this form of memory practice *kenotic embodiment*. It is a kind of memory that, as indicated, remains open, resisting the grasp of the past as a means to the end of planning for the future within politics of memory. Instead, it exposes itself in a particularized situation and risks being changed as a result. One's own practice of remembering and representing is broken open, taking on other bodily, gestural, linguistic forms. Such a form of *kenotic memory* can be distinguished from another form of memory, which could be called *hermetical*. Memory practices become hermetic when they close themselves off to open encounters and access the past in order to plan a specific future. Both the past and the future will then be fixed and closed off within a determined program of memory. Kenotic memory practices, on the other hand, expose themselves to the other and are changed thereby. They do not practice a programmatic stance, but rather a kind of contemplative one, resisting auto immunization to the unforeseeable. Achille Mbembe sensitizes to such a culture of remembrance when he reflects on his relationship to Ausschwitz in a recent interview:

> "In the face of the Holocaust, my attitude has always been one of silence, meditation and prayer. This attitude is based on my reading of texts by Emmanuel Lévinas, Herman Cohen, and above all Franz Rosenzweig's 'Stern der Erlösung'. In the depth of African and also other forms of spirituality, I have been able to gather the courage to face the night that has fallen upon the world in places like Auschwitz." (Aguigah 2020)

4. *Easter theology and practices of memory critical of violence*

We can find traces of such an art of memory in Christian practices of faith as well. I would even say that the Gospel of Jesus is, at a very basic level, such a violence-critical, open-ended practice of memory, as can be seen especially in the Easter Gospels. The latter can be reconstructed as a critical kind of memory that displays the characteristics mentioned above. The texts of the New Testament, especially the narratives of the passion

5 This form of memory is related to the practice/experience of "Eingedenken" mentioned in Benjamin, Walter: Über den Begriff der Geschichte. In: Benjamin, Walter (ed.): Gesammelte Schriften. 9. ed. Frankfurt am Main 2019, 691–704, esp. 704.

and of Easter morning, reflect an experience of violence: the crucifixion of Jesus. The experiences of Jesus' passion and cross are not only signs of his death but are representations of the power of the Roman Empire. In his passion, Jesus becomes, in a sense, a passive object of these encroachments of power, and is exposed on the cross. The presentation of the crucified in public is a way of making public use of his body and making it an effective sign of a political agenda. It is aimed at controlling Jewish insurgents and their political movements.

The biblical text and those who refer to it confront this reality and power. The text itself does not do so by calling protesters to arms and violent resistance. It does not do so by calling for the formation of a counter-power or by presenting a counter-agenda in which the disciples might refer to Jesus as a hero. There is no hero commemoration performed here, like right-wing groups do it in cemeteries in Saxony (Kulturbüro Sachsen e.V. 2021: 39–47) these days. On the contrary, the biblical texts simply speak about an empty tomb. They speak about an empty space, about a disappeared body and a strange figure that always appears only in passing. The unavailability and untouchability of this figure are emphasized: "Do not hold on to me" (John 20.17).

In other words: At the centre of the Gospel, there is a void or non-representable reality that leaves the disciples somewhat unsovereign. They fail to fix Jesus conclusively. Jesus cannot be hold and identified, neither his body nor his destiny can be grasped once and for all. At the same time, the reference to this non-determinable void initiates a multiplicity of practices that refer to Jesus without enclosing him. A vitalizing dynamic of plural representation emerges, multiple references and embodiments take shape (in the form of biblical texts, ecclesiastical traditions, the *loci theologici*…). The experience of absence and unavailability give shape to the belief in the resurrection of Jesus in multiple ways. They all represent him as a plural sign (Certeau 2009: 77-115), without any one of them being able to really fix the one all are looking for.

This way of referring to the death of Jesus in the belief in his resurrection is a critical memory in the sense mentioned before; a kenotic embodiment. It is marked, first, by an ethos of restraint, an inner resistance of fixing and making use of the killed body. There is, second, a moment of indeterminate openness. An empty space appears on Easter morning that cannot be closed and filled. On the horizon of the empty tomb, no fixation of the body takes place. Therefore, this body cannot serve as a reference point for successful planning of the future; the withdrawn body does not serve as the basis of a teleological agenda. Rather, whoever believes in the resurrection of this person is placed in an open space. If there is not a fixed

plan, then, people are exposed to open futures that they cannot simply anticipate teleologically.

The Christian Gospel is a kenotic form of memory. Testimonies of faith in the light of Easter morning embody and practice a violence-critical ethos of memory that resist using killed bodies as a means of political agendas. This culture of faith can provide inspiration for memory practices of our time. Within our political communities, it raises, again and again, the critical question of how we make use of bodies and lives in agendas, reduce them to means of political action, or face them with a violence-critical, contemplative stance, pleading for the inviolability of bodies, both living and dead.

5. Conclusion

The preceding reflections have shown that memory practices in political contexts are not neutral or innocent *per se*. When they refer to bodies and biographies in the past, they are at least tempted to fix them and reduce them to a means for the achievement of political ends. Bodies and lives in the past then become a resource to produce, legitimize, and maintain political power. The debate around *Look for us!* represents an example in which this power of access (*Zugriffsmacht*) critically emerges. In it, we touch on the fundamental question of how bodies are accessed in societies to organize and develop political communities into a planned future. However, the more the problem of violence in end-means relations is made critically visible, the more constructive impulses emerge. The question is raised in which *other ways and modes* (heteromorphies) the past can be represented which become critical of this violence, resisting the temptation of instrumentalization. In this regard, the preceding reflections offer a *critical lens* for the analysis of memory practices on our contemporary political cultures in Europe. Furthermore, with the characteristics elaborated, they offer *concrete criteria* for the development of cultures of memory critical of violence, whether at the regional, national, or European level. In what ways practices of remembrance appropriate the past? Do they practice a dominant grip on bodies and biographies in the present for the realization of a planned, determined future? Or do they have traces of a *kenotic culture of memory*, characterized by a corresponding openness and insovereignty? Religious traditions, as shown, offer concrete forms that can contribute to such a violence-critical culture of memory in Europe, whose history has more than once been profoundly marked by the abuse of bodies and the destruction of lives in the name of a planned, promised

future. There is nothing trivial at stake here. For in negotiating the mode of memory, it becomes possible – and at the same time urgent – to reflect on the fundamental ways in which we seek (or fail) to grasp, fix, and operationalize ourselves as political bodies.

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