

Excavating Tempelhof airfield: objects of memory and the politics of absence

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Seeking to critically engage with German post-war politics of memory through a study of material culture, this paper examines the political implications of absence for archaeological work. More specifically, it confronts the problem of the lacuna of the archive of the Holocaust and explores how we can productively engage the archival absences that animate the present. Introducing first results from archaeological excavations at a former forced labour camp at Tempelhof airfield in Berlin, Germany, I discuss how archaeology, by investigating what remains after the Holocaust, may allow us to manifest absence, loss and historical silence. Analysing the role of objects of memory in storytelling and history writing, I also lay out how tender a task an archaeological study of the Nazi past is, pointing out where our work may risk to misappropriate history.

Keywords: historical archaeology; politics of memory; material culture; Holocaust; storytelling; Nazi labour camps

[A] fractured horizon looms in which to make one's way as a spectral agency, one for whom a full 'recovery' is impossible, one for whom the irrecoverable becomes, paradoxically, the condition of a new political agency. (Butler 2003, 467)

1. Introduction

Several years ago, the Jewish Museum in Berlin had on display a neatly folded linen towel that Margarete Kuttner had packed for her 16-year-old son Paul, who left Berlin in February 1939 as part of the *Kindertransport*. Margarete Kuttner was deported to Auschwitz where she was killed in late February 1943. Arrived in London, Paul Kuttner never unpacked his towel. The towel was part of the museum's permanent collection, but was removed to its depot for conservation reasons. There it rests folded as it was on the day when Margarete Kuttner placed it into her son's suitcase (Figure 1). What remains is what Assmann (1992, 20)

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Figure 1. Linen towel with initials ‘M.K.’ for Margarete Kuttner (photo: Jens Ziehe, Jewish Museum Berlin, Paul Kuttner Trust).

calls ‘[d]as Gedächtnis der Dinge’ (the memory of things) – an object that conjures up not only past lives, but also the irreplaceable loss of life. As a result of the ways in which the towel was attended to and sustained – in this case most importantly by a sort of non-practice, that is, by what was *not* done with it (it was *not* unpacked, *not* unfolded, *not* used) – the towel sits squarely at the limit between life and death, between past and present. Recognising it to be much more than a mere relic or an object of empty contemplation, the towel embodies an absence that can be felt as physically as any presence (Bille, Hastrup, and Sørensen 2003; Buchli and Lucas 2001).

Studying the Nazi past, archaeologically or otherwise, is a decision that impacts a number of subjects, ranging from the survivors of the Nazi Holocaust to the generations born after the Second World War. Importantly, it also concerns those who can no longer speak because they, like Margarete Kuttner, did not survive the Holocaust. Exploring the role of material culture in archaeological analyses of sites of Nazi crimes, this paper makes absence a focal point. Agamben (1999) has pointed out that the archive of the Holocaust, while containing numerous testimonies and eyewitness accounts, nevertheless forms around a lacuna, because there is no complete witness. Such witness would be the one who has encountered the whole truth, but she/he is also the one who did not survive the Holocaust (‘the drowned’ in Levi’s [1996] account).

At pains to recognise the partiality of all perspectives, I find the intimation of a complete witness problematic, especially so because the absence of the complete witness may provide justification for those inclined to question the ‘truthfulness’ of the experiences of survivors. Yet, I believe that Agamben draws our attention to something of central importance. Taking a cue from Crossland’s work, the absence that I trace throughout this paper does not inevitably imply the loss of life, but rather refers us in a more general sense to ‘the seizure of people

from networks of social and family relationships' (2002, 123). Forced labourers, such as the men and women deployed at Tempelhof, were pulled out of their familiar environments by coercion, leaving a void among those who stayed behind and themselves experienced painful and traumatic losses.

An archaeological project that deals with a history of loss, absence and trauma, as introduced in this paper, has to be politically accountable towards the subjects of our inquiry – those who were the targets of a brutal politics of racism, exploitation and industrialised genocide. Instead of trying to recover and represent that which has been lost, our goal should be to mark the losses we are confronted with, to summon the presence of the absence of the Holocaust archive. If absence were made manifest by that which remains, working with material culture could allow us to engage in a process of memory work that does not understand absence as lack. Rather, absence becomes the stipulation for an active politics – 'the condition of a new political agency' (Butler 2003, 467) – that resists trivialisation as well as saturation of memory (González-Ruibal 2008, 258), by which I mean an overabundance of social meaning that may entail commodification and alienation.

Against this background, the paper introduces some of the findings from archaeological excavations conducted in 2012 in the area of a former Nazi forced labour camp at Tempelhof airfield in Berlin.¹ Besides responding to a recognised need for a historical archaeology, which is thus far not an established discipline in the German university system, the project's main concern is an engagement with the Nazi history of Tempelhof airfield, which is often bracketed from public discourses. For Pollock and Bernbeck (Forthcoming), the excavations at Tempelhof are therefore *Sichtbarmachungen*, rendering visible those things that might otherwise have been left to neglect or decay. In addition, while the available historical sources are important documents that are integrated into the ongoing archaeological work, they do not typically speak of the daily life of the prisoners and labourers who were forced to work at Tempelhof for a growing military industry. Archaeology may then help us to better understand what I call, for lack of a better word, the quotidian aspects of life in the camp – 'from eating to personal hygiene to connections (if any) to families and communities back home' (Pollock and Bernbeck Forthcoming).

The *Sichtbarmachungen* at Tempelhof involved the recovery of a large amount of archaeological objects. The quality of these objects, as well as the fact that only a relatively small number of items can with certainty be assigned to the context of the forced labour camp, constitutes the analytical basis for my deliberations apropos the role of objects in engaging archival absence. Following Fowles (2010, 28), I argue that this absence is itself object-like, which is to say that it has its own 'distinctive affordances and material consequences that are not only prior to meaning but can, of their own accord, direct the process of signification'. In other words, we encounter the absence that is so palpable in the archaeological record at Tempelhof not as something immaterial or as an actual thing, but as the materialisation of practices and non-practices, of things that have and have not been done (cf. Meyer 2012).

As I demonstrate in this paper, recognising the vital role of absence in processes of signification will eventually unsettle the idea that the archaeological record must be complete and our memories of the past whole in order to be historically meaningful. This allows us to reconsider some foundational assumptions regarding historicity (*sensu* Trouillot 1995) and the temporality of the archive, thus conveying how memory gets reworked over time (cf. Moshenska 2006). However, I also recognise that there are limits to memory and narrative, and in the last section of the paper I address issues of power in the construction of historical narratives and personal recollections, which cannot be severed from ethical and political problems entangled with our archaeological praxis in the field.

2. Forced labour at Tempelhof airfield

Tempelhof airfield is publicly known as the ‘gate to freedom’ due to its role during the Berlin airlift in 1948 and 1949. The excavation project, however, focuses its attention on a much darker chapter of German history. On 1 May 1933, the Nazis celebrated a newly declared national holiday, the ‘Day of National Work’.² Tempelhof airport was used for a massive propagandistic event with hundreds of thousands of participants (Assatzk 2012; Coppi 2012). The following day, in a cynical twist of its supposedly pro-worker ideology, the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP; National Socialist German Workers Party) banned all unions, arresting union members and functionaries. On 10 May 1933, the Deutsche Arbeitsfront (DAF; German Labour Front) was founded as a surrogate union, with the aim of organising German workers as well as assuring their ‘social hygiene’ and the aesthetic appearance of the workplace (Aly, Chroust, and Pross 1994). In this function, the organisation provided the tableware for workplace canteens, which had to carry the uniform label ‘Amt Schönheit der Arbeit’ (Bureau Beauty of Labour) (Zentek 2009). A number of fragments of this tableware were found during our excavations (Figure 2), suggesting that these dishes belonged to the factory



Figure 2. Porcelain shard from the manufacturer Hutschenreuther (photo: Jessica Meyer, Landesdenkmalamt Berlin).

branches of the airplane manufacturers at Tempelhof. Not only German workers, but foreign and forced labourers too had to comply with the regulations of the DAF (Budraß 2001, 43).

Only two months later, in July 1933, the Gestapo established a detention facility in the former military prison Columbia-Haus, located at the north-western edge of the airfield. In December 1934, Columbia-Haus became a concentration camp under the control of the SS. Between 1934 and 1936, around 10,000 political and ideological opponents of the Nazi regime were imprisoned, tortured and killed there (Pollock and Bernbeck [Forthcoming](#)). By the end of 1936, most prisoners were moved to the newly built concentration camp Sachsenhausen in Oranienburg, north of Berlin. The Columbia-Haus was demolished in 1938 in the course of the construction work for the new monumental airport terminal designed by architect Ernst Sagebiel.

In 1939, before the new airport building was completed, the company Weserflug GmbH, under the supervision of the Reichsluftfahrtministerium (Ministry of Aviation), began using parts of the building complex for the maintenance, repair and refurbishment, and later also for the production of airplanes (Wenz 2000). By then, the company had already been closely cooperating with the airforce in the licensed production of the *Sturzkampfbomber*, a type of dive-bomber, at its headquarters in Bremen. The plant at Tempelhof accounted for 90% of the total production of this type of dive-bombers in Germany by October 1944 (Pophanken 2000, 116). It was not until after the beginning of the Second World War, however, that the Weserflug GmbH started using forced labour. Historical documents show that forced labourers began working at Tempelhof airfield in the autumn of 1940, most of them having been deported to Germany from Poland and other, mostly Eastern European countries. While Weserflug's Tempelhof plant employed about 1000 workers in late 1940, its workforce increased to more than 4000 by 1944. Half of these were foreign workers (a company directory lists 20 different nationalities), comprising both men and women as well as enlisted and conscripted civilians (including 86 Jewish civilian workers), but also French and Russian prisoners of war (Heisig 2012, 46). Due to the relatively high number of foreign labourers at the Tempelhof branch of the Weserflug GmbH, the company decided to build four camps on the airfield that housed the workers in simple wooden huts.³ According to Heisig, each of these camps was for different groups of workers, who were spatially segregated based on their legal status (such as civilian, POW, foreign/German) (2012, 50).

A lesser noted, largely unpublished aspect of the history of Tempelhof airfield is the deployment of forced labour by Lufthansa, which was founded in 1926 and until 1933 was known under the name Deutsche Luft Hansa AG. The old airport at Tempelhof, opened in 1923 and located in the north-eastern part of today's airfield, was Lufthansa's home base. With the beginning of the Second World War, Lufthansa greatly reduced its civilian air transport activities and took over major maintenance and installation work for the Luftwaffe, which was carried out in the

hangars of the old airport, where a control workshop was located, and in the new airport building in a maintenance workshop (Budraß 2001, 10; cf. Pollock and Bernbeck [Forthcoming](#)). Like Weserflug, Lufthansa used forced labour at Tempelhof airfield, mainly workers from Poland, the Ukraine and the Netherlands, as well as a number of conscripted Jewish workers from Germany who were later deported to concentration camps (Budraß 2001). The workers deployed in the Lufthansa control workshop were housed in a camp adjacent to the north of the old hangars. The camp (in the following ‘Lufthansa camp’), which existed from 1942 to 1944, was made up of several *Wohnbaracken* (accommodation huts), a kitchen and a mess hall (potentially for use by Germans only), a privy, a lavatory and a boiler room. The Jewish workers, who were not living in the camp, had to use a separate toilet, called the ‘*Juden-Abort*’ in Lufthansa documents, which was located at the eastern end of the old airport (Budraß 2001, 42).

3. Excavating the Lufthansa camp

During the 2012 archaeological campaign, nine trenches were excavated in five areas (Areas 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6), uncovering a total of 1220 m². My discussion focuses on the results from the excavations in Areas 1 and 2, where remains from the Lufthansa camp were uncovered, including an air-raid shelter running north to south that was located just west of the accommodation huts within the camp ([Figure 3](#)).⁴

In Area 1, Trench 1 and Trench 2 yielded material remains that date from the primary context of the forced labour camp, with Trench 1 cutting the western-most end of a hut that had a width of 12.5 m. Trench 2 cuts the northern wall of a second hut located slightly to the south and contained construction debris related to the Lufthansa camp. From a cost and construction report⁵ dating from September 1942, it is known that the Deutsche Lufthansa AG functioned as the building contractor, planning a camp that would consist of three accommodation huts, measuring 12.5 m × 52.5 m each, as well as a somewhat smaller *Wirtschaftsbaracke* (utility hut), measuring 12.5 m × 41.25 m. The camp was originally intended to house 300 people, occupying a total area of approximately 2400 m².

A construction plan⁶ also from 1942 indicates, however, that the actual ‘residential’ area of the camp consisted of four long huts and one slightly shorter hut (42.5 m in length), all intended for housing workers and oriented approximately in east-west direction. In addition, a *Wirtschaftsbaracke* (41.25 m in length) was located east of the accommodation huts and oriented in north-south direction. According to the construction plan, this building, designated *Ausländer-Wirtschaftsbaracke*, was intended specifically for use by foreign workers. An aerial reconnaissance photo⁷ from March 1945, when the huts were already demolished, largely confirms this outline of the camp, clearly showing the foundations of the four long huts. The difference between the initial construction estimate and the finished project is proof that the building contractor cut costs by constructing more huts for the available money, resulting in a sparsely equipped camp.⁸

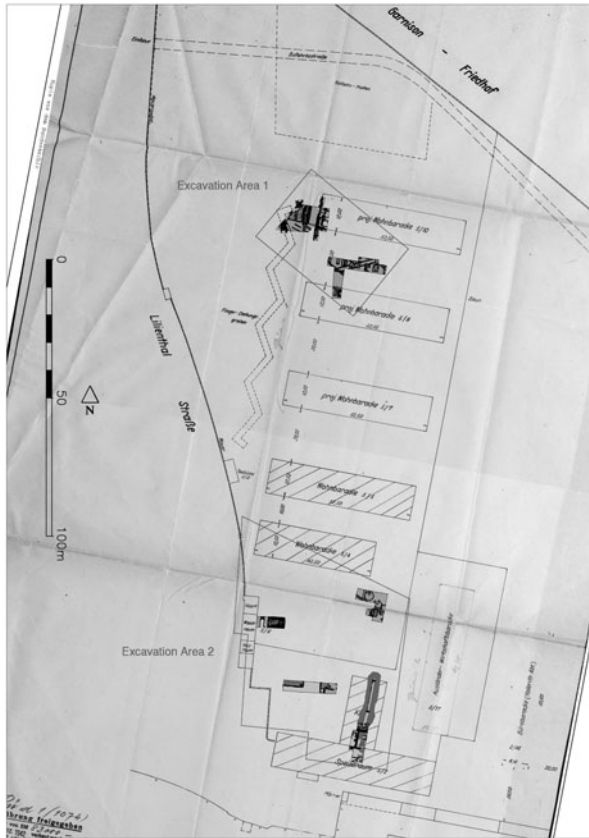


Figure 3. Construction plan for the Lilienthal camp from 1942 (source: Bundesarchiv).

In this context, it is noteworthy that some of the archaeological objects we unearthed can provide us with an idea of how the huts were constructed. Thus, we found a large number of nails measuring about 100 mm; the tips of the nails were bent over at about 80 mm. It is likely that the nails were used for constructing the walls of the huts. As far as we know from excavations at other forced labour camps,⁹ the walls were typically built from wood and sometimes tarpaper was added as insulation. The nails we found suggest that the walls of the huts were not very strong, probably only about 80–90 mm thick; the protruding ends of the nails that were knocked over must have served to fasten the tarpaper (Figure 4).

The cost report also provides some information on the construction and design of the huts. It mentions, for example, concrete floors, heating, light, running water and sanitary installations. Our archaeological research indicates the presence of utilities (water, electricity and sewage) in the hut we excavated in Trench 1. Inside the hut, along the western and southern foundations, we found remains of ceramic sewage pipes that date to the original context of the



Figure 4. Two iron nails from Area 1 (photo: Jessica Meyer, Landesdenkmalamt Berlin).

camp. However, at this point we cannot provide any information on the distribution of utilities within a complete hut, their presence within the other accommodation units and ultimately whom the utilities served. Further, shattered remains of bricks as well as three small brick platforms were unearthed. While the bricks might predate the huts, perhaps belonging to the context of a nineteenth-century cemetery, it cannot be ruled out that the platforms served as foundations for posts that subdivided the interior of the buildings; indeed, a similar situation has been documented for the medical hut in the concentration camp Mauthausen (Dejnega and Theune [Forthcoming](#)).

Some artefacts provide us with information regarding interior installations. Among these are fragments of glazed tiles (mainly of light brown and yellow colour shades) that could be mantle pieces from ovens or *Kochmaschinen* (kitchen stoves).¹⁰ Historical sources document that in concentration camps each hut was usually equipped with an oven (cf. Dejnega and Theune [Forthcoming](#)). Although no similar documentation exists for forced labour camps, the tiles we found suggest that some of the huts in the Lufthansa camp might have had an oven or a similar installation. Several pieces of large hollow bricks (measuring approximately 0.4 m × 0.4 m × 0.4 m) could also stem from an oven or chimney. However, because these building parts were not found inside the hut, but out of context in Trench 2, it is impossible to say whether these bricks actually belonged to the camp.

Approximately 10 m west of the hut, the excavations revealed parts of an air-raid shelter that ran roughly north to south. The air-raid shelter consisted of a zigzag slit

trench lined with an approximately 2-m high, box-sectioned tunnel constructed from prefabricated, reinforced concrete beams. During the excavations, the air-raid shelter was cut in two places, the northern cut having exposed a shallower, horizontally built concrete structure that appears to be the entrance to the shelter.

The excavations in Area 2 in the southern part of the Lufthansa camp concentrated on three contexts, which include a waste pit (Trench 3), a fire-fighting pond (Trenches 4 and 5) and the kitchen hut with adjacent mess hall (Trench 6). While Trenches 3, 4 and 5 revealed a large volume of artefacts, most of which can with certainty be dated to the time of the US American occupation in Berlin, the findings from Trench 6 are linked to the Lufthansa camp and thus also to the huts in Area 1.

Trench 3 was a waste pit or dump, located roughly between the southernmost accommodation hut and the kitchen. Its stratigraphy reveals that the pit underwent at least two phases of deposition, separated by a layer of solid sandy loam. From preliminary analyses, it appears that these two phases indicate the use of the dump first by the occupants (maybe the kitchen staff) of the Lufthansa camp, mainly for kitchen waste, including a large quantity of animal bones and broken dishes. The later phase of usage can be attributed to US American soldiers, who disposed of waste there, including a high amount of sanitary items; many of these objects bore American brand names or labels designating them as belonging to a 'pro-kit' that was issued to each American soldier by the United States Medical Department during the Second World War.

The fire-fighting pond, which seems to have belonged to the eastern hangars of the old airport, was only built after 1940 and was not destroyed during the war. Our excavations cut the pond in two places, that is, on its western edge (Trench 4) and on its south-eastern corner (Trench 5). Based on the finds from Trenches 4 and 5 – not just tubes of toothpaste or shaving cream, aftershave bottles or tins of shoe polish with American labels, but also pieces of English-language newspapers and soldiers' identification tags – it appears that the pond was similarly used as a garbage dump by the United States Army stationed in Tempelhof after the end of the Second World War. In addition, the pond contained a considerable amount of building-material waste and old machine parts, such as shards of window and safety glass; scrap metal, including metal fittings, screws, nails and bolts; batteries; locks; and paint buckets.

The excavations in Trench 6 cut through two building complexes, a kitchen hut extending north to south and an adjacent mess hall that was built perpendicular to the kitchen hut. While these two buildings are not mentioned in the cost report from 1942, they were (or became) part of the Lufthansa camp too, as indicated by the construction plan in [Figure 3](#), but they were not completely destroyed during the war. The mess hall apparently consisted of one storey only. The kitchen hut was cut lengthwise from north to south in the course of the excavations, revealing a basement. The walls inside this basement were completely stripped away at some point, likely indicating the reuse of building materials. It appears that during the building's demolition, the massive

reinforced concrete slabs of an air-raid bunker that was part of the building collapsed into the basement. Further alterations were made once the building was demolished, when a large ceramic sewer pipe and smaller metal water pipes were laid through the southern part of the kitchen, cutting the building in east-west direction.

Based on the bomb-strike pattern on the aerial photograph from 1945, we must assume that the Lufthansa camp was severely damaged during air raids. As our excavations revealed, the remaining parts of the huts were stripped down to the foundations. Photographic evidence of the clean-up by the US Army at another camp on the Tempelhof airfield after the war suggests that some of the building materials were later reused (Ed Collins, personal communication). While the demolition must have been mainly a response to the air-raid damage, we cannot assume that the only reason the camp was not repaired was a lack of resources. Without arguing that this is proof of a sense of wrong among the perpetrators, the demolitions at Tempelhof could also have been an attempt at silencing history. In that case, if we consider what remains and what does not remain, the objects we encounter may present to us the things we cannot remember, which manifest in various kinds of absences that I trace in the next section of the paper.

4. Experiencing absence

The structures that were excavated at Tempelhof yielded a large number of archaeological objects.¹¹ As already mentioned, only a few of these artefacts were found in contexts that can with certainty be attributed to the Lufthansa camp. This refers us to the problem of what Bernbeck (2005, 113) has described as ‘political taphonomy’, suggesting that the processes by which cultural materials accumulate and preserve in the archaeological record can indicate past power differentials. As a result, ‘people who are marginalised in life are often represented by only ephemeral traces in the material record, in notable distinction to the more powerful whose archaeological footprints are often gigantic in comparison’ (Pollock and Bernbeck [Forthcoming](#)). In addition to constituting such ephemeral traces, many of the objects we found at Tempelhof appear themselves marginal, if not to say out-of-place, in the larger context of forced labour. Shards of window glass, bottle caps, buttons and leather fragments are archaeological objects that cite a seemingly familiar world now absent. Despite their everyday character – or rather, precisely because of it – these objects have a particularly strong ability to elicit affective responses in us. Found in contexts ‘other than those in which the dominant cultural tradition would apply them’ (Beaudry, Cook, and Mrozowski 1996, 277), the objects make manifest that which is missing from life in the camp as a result of a web of violence and terror (cf. Theune 2010).

In the following, I introduce a selection of finds from our excavations at Tempelhof and explain how they make present, in exemplary ways, an object-like absence. Importantly, absence is not just there, representing or symbolising a history of loss and trauma, but it results from materialised practice, and more

specifically from the various ways in which humans interact or do not interact with things. Absence, I contend, conveys itself to us through experiences of void, forgetfulness and loss.

4.1. *Absence as void*

The experience of void refers us not to a loss of things that have once been there, but to things entirely missing, that is, a non-existence of things or what we may call ‘non-things’ (Fowles 2010, 25). Non-things are encountered as negative spaces where the presence of some objects marks the absence of others – a view that parallels Trouillot’s (1995) notion of mentions and silences as co-constitutive parts of a historical narrative or archive. I argue that at Tempelhof, void was clearly defined by a relative lack of personal(ised) items that could have belonged to the forced labourers, which is, of course, also an issue of preservation and political taphonomy (see above).

We know of such items from other sites, where excavations yielded a series of artefacts that clearly display a makeshift character, indicating how things had been turned into personal objects. Among the finds from Buchenwald, for example, is a ‘ruler-comb’ – a comb someone had cut out for her/himself from a plastic ruler (Shalev-Gerz 2006). At the concentration camp Sachsenhausen, archaeologists excavated a small heart carved from a piece of wood; and a star that was cut from a thin metal sheet with a small hole in one tip, so that it could be hung up using a string or ribbon (Theune 2010, 6). For archaeologists, these finds convey not only a sense of everyday life, but they are also considered testimony to the self-determination of people who faced absolute physical and emotional deprivation. The resilience of those who endured life in the camp is maybe most immediately evidenced by improvised objects that were essential for a person’s survival, like utensils for eating. Thus, at Sachsenhausen someone had used a discarded piece of plastic to fashion a knife, and a spoon had been forged from a broken metal handle (Theune 2011, 557–558; cf. Myers 2007).

Because the non-existence of certain things, such as personal(ised) items, is revealed only by the existence of other things, my discussion needs extension. After all, we did recover a large quantity of objects during our excavations at Tempelhof that looked quite impersonal to the unaccustomed eye, such as mass-produced bottles, porcelain dishes or fragments of tiles, most of which do not bear obvious traces of handling beyond their manufacture and their use in intended-for contexts. This observation builds the basis for my reflections on the forgetfulness¹² of things in the next section.

4.2. *Absence as forgetfulness*

As described above, we can well imagine that the personalised items from Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen might have given hope or comfort to a person in the past, but many artefacts from Tempelhof appear unnervingly neutral.

Building materials such as nails, screws and bolts are seemingly uninvolved things, while other finds, such as slag or pebbles, may not even be considered artefacts at all if we understand this term to refer to objects that have been manipulated by humans. They are, so to speak, characterised by a lack of traces of human practice. Yet, I argue that these things had a significant and active role to play in the historical processes we study.

This is not to say that the artefacts we found did something or made people in the past do something. In fact, I am far from a Latourian perspective that grants agency to material culture or understands things as ‘actants’ (Latour 1994, 33). I also find it futile to assign to an object the role of a co-culprit when we talk about the crimes committed by human agents. It is politically irresponsible to suggest that a thing – such as a gun – has the ‘potential to take hold of passersby and force them to play roles in its story’ (Latour 1994, 31). But it is true that we involve objects in our actions and that they can be enabling or disabling for human practice, so that object and subject are linked in what Latour calls a symmetrical translation. As he writes, ‘You are another subject because you hold the gun; the gun is another object because it has entered into a relationship with you’ (Latour 1999, 179). Seemingly neutral artefacts can become alarmingly oppressive in a larger context of violent practice – the nails holding up the wooden walls of a flimsily built hut that can hardly protect against the cold of a harsh Berlin winter; the pebbles on the stony paths between the huts whose sharp edges cut into the insufficiently soled shoes of a prisoner.

The forgetfulness of things unfurls at the moment when this context changes and with it our experience of the objects. In other words, what is absent today is the social context of an object’s deployment, including the motivations of those who decided to build flimsy huts. When we interpret the excavated artefacts as nothing other than unengaged things, their part in the story does not convey itself to us.

4.3. *Absence as loss*

Although it is true that very few personal items have been found at Tempelhof, a number of finds exhibit clear traces of having been manipulated by an individual. These objects, however, were later lost or forsaken and finally got buried in the ground. And while the life cycle of the lost or forsaken thing has been interrupted, the artefact, once unearthed, still bears conspicuous traces of past human practice. In a reversal of the circumstances encountered with the non-things and the forgetful things described above, it is now the existence of an object that manifests the absence of a person – an absence that we experience as loss.

At least one such item has been found during our excavations, although it cannot with certainty be assigned to the context of the Lufthansa camp because it was collected from the fire-fighting pond in Area 2. However, it is possible that this item was discarded from the camp. The object is a fragment of acrylic glass, in which someone had drilled a flower pattern and inscribed the name ‘Ursula’ twice, one time only half-completed. One edge of the glass shows additional

traces of drilling, resulting in an irregular outline (Figure 5). A second name was scratched onto the back of the glass, suggestive of the signature of someone called '[J]ames', with a drawn-out 's'. This signature displays a different handwriting from the cursive of Ursula, maybe by a US soldier who found the glass fragment in Tempelhof, later adding his name to Ursula's.

The names on the glass are residues on a long gone object now recovered. We do not know who Ursula and James are (were), or whether they knew each other, and all they have left behind is merely a faint trace of their memory etched into the glass (cf. Olivier 2011). Just like the people in a photograph, they are there and simultaneously not there. This is the memory of loss – a memory of two 'absent makers who are remote in time and space, yet simultaneously active and present' (Latour 1999, 189).

5. Rethinking the archive

The agreed-upon focus in history and archaeology on those things that are present transmits to us, not unexpectedly, a notion of the archive as a storage place

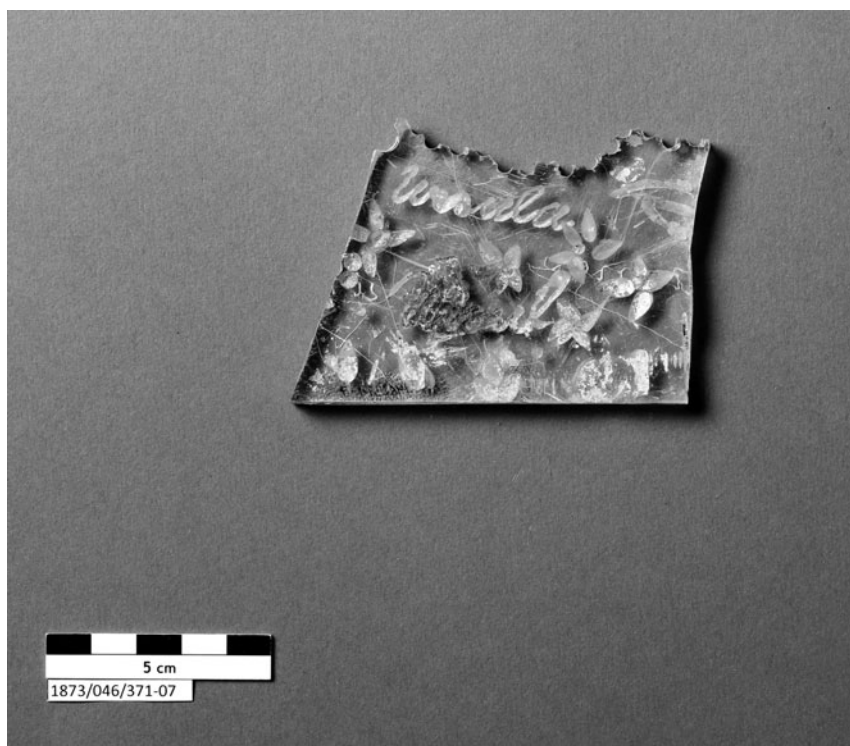


Figure 5. Fragment of acrylic glass with drilled flower pattern and the name 'Ursula' (photo: Jessica Meyer, Landesdenkmalamt Berlin).

containing information on a series of events that have a clearly defined temporality, meaning each event happened prior, or subsequent to (and because of), another event. My proposed shift of focus towards absence allows me to reconsider this idea of temporality and reassess the associated understanding of historicity, according to which historical processes are best described by way of a more or less coherent narrative. Proposing instead that the archive forms around voids, losses and forgetfulness, the presence of absence in the archive makes itself felt through the lack of a stringent sequential temporality, through anachronisms, and through the shattering of direction in history (cf. Butler 2003).

In response to this insight, my reflections on the history of Tempelhof are an attempt to not reproduce the kinds of narratives that require consistency. Moreover, because the absence of the archive is found between recollection and oblivion – between what has and has not been said, between what is and is not remembered – absence is in quite fundamental ways also about what we can potentially say or remember. If the goal is, as I have suggested at the beginning of this paper, not to represent absence, but to make it manifest, the question to pose at this moment is how to engage the future possibilities of the archive in politically accountable ways? How do we speak about the losses we encounter, the voids we are confronted with and our own as well as others' forgetting?

This, of course, has every bit to do with the power of historical narration and storytelling (cf. Moshenska 2010). I am aware that 'historical traces are inherently uneven, sources are not created equal' (Trouillot 1995, 47) – no matter whether they manifest absence or document presence. As I cannot divest myself of agency, in this paper I undoubtedly favour some archaeological traces over others, foreground certain cultural meanings and not others, pick out some historical events as significant but not others. While I maintain that the archaeological objects we have excavated are indeed retrieved from the liminal space between remembering and forgetting, an overshadowing concern is nonetheless that my perception of what constitutes an absence in the archaeological archive of Tempelhof derives from my expectations of what we *should* have found during our excavations, that is, of my own imaginations of the past.

The presence of objects as documents or data that inform us about the past is always constructed and archaeological processes of recovering, collecting and classifying artefacts are always selective; inadvertently, such practices create a hierarchy of value among objects that is both ideological and authoritative (Hamilakis 2010). Yet, the arguments against the production of coherent historical narratives voiced by a growing number of archaeologists (especially among those who study the contemporary past) are not merely intended as source criticism. Their focus on what González-Ruibal describes as 'the inherently partial, fragmentary, and therefore uncanny nature of the archaeological record' (2008, 251) reflects a political desire not to overcome a painful history, but to conjure up its ghostly presence instead.

Here an imminent risk remains, however, having to do with the danger of political misappropriations of a history marked by loss, trauma and absence.

Indeed, to recognise the fragmentary nature of the archaeological record brings into focus the issue that there are always as many stories as there are storytellers. Can we recount every single story or should we collapse a diversity of memories? González-Ruibal (2008, 250) argues decidedly against the need for multivocality and the introduction of ever more voices, stories and perspectives. He is right to contend that stories as such are not empowering. Indeed, stories can have the opposite effect when the telling of a story has a heavier toll on its teller than on the listeners, especially when a story intensifies trauma through recall (cf. Srivastava and Francis 2006). What is more, when we deal with the history of the Nazi Holocaust, there is the imminent danger that the circulation of revisionist stories brings about further victimisation. While in both of these cases our concern is for the survivors of the Holocaust, yet another aspect of misappropriation pertains to those who did not survive, especially if our stories are merely externalised representations of a painful history – a history that is ‘theirs’ more so than ‘ours’.

This being said, issues of power over representation loom particularly large in archaeology given that the discipline revolves around constructions of a scientific practice as objective and an object-driven research technique. Excavation is at the core of this, as of any, archaeological project. The project at Tempelhof airfield is nevertheless committed to go beyond ‘what is there’ and grapple with the problems of void, forgetfulness and loss that I have outlined above. The approach is multidisciplinary and includes the collection of oral histories from former forced labourers as well as an ethnographic study of processes of scientific knowledge production (cf. Davidovic 2009; Davidovic-Walther 2011).¹³ In addition, students who are part of the project are encouraged to keep diaries, in which they record their personal reflections on our work at Tempelhof. These diaries in particular throw into sharp relief how on a personal and emotional level we may be deeply affected by the realisation that we excavate contexts marked by absences and voids, while as archaeologists we feel the need to continue to produce coherent historical narratives that centre on the presence of certain things and people. Thus, the diary entries criticise in particular how scientific techniques of sorting, counting and measuring the fragmentary vestiges we are left with create a false sense of presence, and that by doing so they transform past subjects, now absent, into objects (cf. Bernbeck 2010).¹⁴

This only demonstrates that if we want to engage in politically accountable practices of summoning the absences contained in the archaeological archive, we must be careful not to seize a painful heritage and repackage it as an archaeological commodity. As I have argued, objects that manifest absence are particularly important in this context, because of the negative spaces they embody – that is, they speak not to what happened but to ‘what has been prevented from ever taking place [...] the sum of thoughts unthought, of unfelt feelings, of works never accomplished, of lives un-lived to their natural end’ (Gross 2001, xv). In manifesting that which has been denied to or taken from others in the past, such objects make it impossible for us to decouple recollections of the past from issues

of oppression, exploitation and disenfranchisement in history. Consequently, the objects – and the absences they hold – have the potential to become points of reference for collective activism in the present and future, responding to political violence by turning privatised pain into a shared experience of struggle and survival (Crossland 2002; Eng and Kazanjian 2003; González-Ruibal 2007).

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Notes

1. The excavation project, which was initiated by Susan Pollock and Reinhard Bernbeck, is being conducted as collaboration between Freie Universität Berlin and the Landesdenkmalamt Berlin since 2012. The project is funded by the Berlin Senate and supported by the Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung und Umwelt. The first excavations at Tempelhof airfield were carried out over a period of eight months in the summer and autumn of 2012. Between June and December 2012, I participated in the project as a research associate, being primarily responsible for the documentation and initial analysis of the archaeological artefacts. The second season of archaeological work at the site began in the spring of 2013 and was still ongoing at the time of completion of this paper in September 2013.
2. A 'Labour Day' had first been advocated in 1919 by the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the German Democratic Party (DDP) and some members of the Center Party (Zentrum), but the relevant legislation did not find a majority in parliament.
3. Not all workers of the Weserflug GmbH were housed in the huts on Tempelhof airfield, however. Some foreign civilian workers, and otherwise mostly German workers, lived in tenement buildings in Berlin, mainly in the districts of Moabit and Neukölln (Heisig 2012, 50).
4. The contexts from Trench 2 in Area 1 are not discussed in detail here, because with the exception of a small piece of a foundation wall belonging to one of the accommodation huts, they seem to mostly predate the Lufthansa camp by about 70 years. The majority of remains uncovered in Trench 2, including the outlines of former graves, stems from a time when the area was used as a military cemetery, starting in around 1870.
5. Beate Winzer of the Berliner Geschichtswerkstatt e.V. has kindly directed our attention to the cost and construction report from the Bundesarchiv (federal archives) (BArchiv R 4606/4891, Akte III Rü d 1 [1073]).
6. In Figure 3, the AutoCAD plan that was generated during our excavations has been plotted over the original construction plan (BArch R 4606/4891, Akte III Rü d 1 [1074]).

7. The aerial reconnaissance photograph can be accessed through the historical imagery view of Google Earth.
8. The value of integrating different types of historical sources, including archaeological information, is particularly apparent here. In addition to the cost report and the construction plan (both documents dating from 1942), a plan of the whole airfield from 1943 exists (TU Berlin Architekturmuseum Inv.-Nr. 42544). This hand-drawn plan by Ernst Sagebiel on a scale of 1:4000 shows a total of six accommodation huts.
9. See, for example, the excavations at a former forced labour and external concentration camp next to the factories of the Dreilinden Maschinenbau GmbH, a subsidiary of the Robert Bosch AG in Kleinmachnow, southwest of Berlin (Antkowiak 2003). In Kleinmachnow, the wooden walls of the huts were constructed on top of a brick course, which was laid on concrete strip foundations.
10. *Kochmaschinen* were common features in German open-plan kitchen-living rooms until the 1950s. These were stoves that were clad with tiles, had two cast-iron cooktops of adjustable size and were heated with wood or coal; the ash could be removed through a hatch on the side of the stove.
11. Because the analysis of the recorded artefacts is ongoing, I cannot yet provide data on the exact number of finds or their distribution across the site. The estimated number of finds ranges around 18,000 objects and it is clear that the density of artefacts varies considerably between different excavation areas, with Area 1 yielding a relatively low number of finds compared to Area 2.
12. Reinhard Bernbeck, having read an earlier version of the paper, suggested this term to me.
13. The ethnographic project is carried out under the direction of Antonia Davidovic of Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel.
14. Moshenska, who excavated a Nazi POW camp in Silesia, had a similar experience when survivors of the camp who came to visit the site ‘appeared to find the bagging and labelling of finds particularly discomfiting and repeatedly challenged us about it’ (2006, 63).

Notes on contributor

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