

Dear Environment

Amelia Groom and Anna Zett

“Liebe Umwelt / Es gibt da etwas / das ich loswerden muss.” A figure begins spray-painting words into a large pile of rubble. “Dear environment / there is something / that I need to get rid of.” The ground is unstable, so the poem keeps falling away from itself—and the act of writing becomes an embodied performance where words are continually reshaped into other words. Artist and writer Anna Zett’s film Endarchiv (2019) is part of an ongoing research project Deponie (Dump), which includes video works as well as sculptural installations deploying piles of gravel and remnant ashes from industrially incinerated household waste. The project began as part of a series of exhibitions at District Berlin, where several artists were invited to conduct research at the Robert Havemann Archive of opposition movements in the German Democratic Republic (the former Soviet Bloc state of East Germany, which existed from 1949 to 1990). Zett focused their research on materials in the archive that came from the GDR’s underground environmentalist movements—going on to explore the techniques and effects of various practices of dumping and disposal, in the environment as well as in social and psychological realms. Central to the project’s concerns are questions about incomplete processes of forgetting, and the inherited violences and toxicities that cannot be so easily disposed of. As one line of the shifting and ephemeral landfill poem reads, “Die Deponie vergisst nichts”—“the dump forgets nothing.”

Amelia Groom: Anna, can you tell me about the title of the project, Deponie, translated as “Dump” in English?

Anna Zett: The German word for disposal, used widely in relation to waste of all kinds, is “Entsorgung.” A literal translation of this composite would be: Dis-care, Un-care, Un-worry. To dispose of something means moving it out of my sphere of concern. This doesn’t mean it’s gone, it’s just that I no longer need to care about it. What I am ridding myself of won’t cease to exist, but who cares? Somebody else. The planet maybe, God, the state, professionals, care-workers? Not me at least. All I need for “discare” to work is a border to separate here from elsewhere. In a world without borders one cannot get rid of anything.

The border that divided Germany after the Nazi-dictatorship and the Holocaust also helped to get rid of things. On a symbolical level

this might have been its main purpose. I'm very interested in what the division of Germany meant for acknowledging this horrendous terror regime and the mass murder that was enabled and committed by the majority of the German population. Psychologists like Annette Simon have tried to analyze how the post-war interim existence of two Germanys made it possible to remember the past, while not having to take full responsibility for it. Each side could acknowledge this history on a factual basis, while saying at the same time: "look at those horrible people over there in the other Germany, they are still Nazis. They failed to break with the past like we did." Both countries reserved the new beginning exclusively for themselves. This national split allowed each group to dispose of the unbearable guilt to the other side; it allowed the group to "unworry." This is a long story, though, of course.

In the "Dump" project I'm looking more specifically at how this symbolic disposal was accompanied by a material disposal, at least in one direction, from the West to the East. Starting in the late 1970's, when plastic packaging exploded in the West, there was this secretive one-way garbage export operation, which is very interesting to me on all levels. In the underground environmentalist movement of the GDR, finding out about these dumps sparked serious outrage. The allegedly anti-capitalist GDR allowed their capitalist national twin to deposit toxic waste and household garbage on their territory in exchange for Western currency! For one thing, this showed how broke the GDR really was. Symbolically, it also undermined everything the GDR stood for, and threatened the ideological security that the border had offered its citizens. So, of course the government tried to do it all secretly, via an organization directly subordinated to the chief of the secret service. The realization that the wall was closed to people but open to garbage made the wall a total fake. It had officially been built as an "anti-fascist protection wall," but if it couldn't protect the GDR from the waste of its superior national twin anymore, what was the point? That's not exactly how people put it at the time, that's my story. It's my explanation for why I got interested in dumps and the cross-border garbage trade.

AG: How do these ideas of dumps and deposits also factor into your relationship with historical and archival research?

AZ: The place where I found out about the largely forgotten drama of the cross-border garbage trade was the Robert Havemann archive of the GDR Opposition, which consists mostly of paper documents—many of them reproduced with ancient versions of copy machines, since electronic copy machines were not accessible to the public in the GDR, so

dissident content could neither be printed nor copied properly. Looking through these faded papers, doing what they call “artistic research,” I used an associative method, rather than a systematic one. I was looking for something that touches me emotionally in some way. I grew up in the GDR and ex-GDR, so some of the language was familiar and brought me in contact with old feelings. For someone unfamiliar with this history, the archive would probably feel more like a dump, a pile of files that are largely meaningless, since the system that these political subjects were engaged in, has itself been disposed of. The entire GDR was put on the dump of history, so everything that took place there between 1949 and ‘89 is not supposed to be alive anymore. Just like actual garbage dumps I think archives are very important historical sites, but the work of remembering and forgetting will need to take place in a body and between bodies in space.

AG: One iteration of the project was an exhibition in the Zionskirche, a church in Prenzlauer Berg which was important to these underground opposition movements in the 1980s. Political meetings were held there, and the “Umweltbibliothek” (Environmental Library) was hidden in the basement with banned publications relating to environmental and human rights issues. In 1987 the Stasi raided the site and arrested all 7 activists present, which sparked massive protests in solidarity. One part of the church has these lingering traces on the floor, where protesters had painted banners, and left-over marks from their slogans can still be seen. Can you comment on the presence of historical ghosts throughout the project?

AZ: The exhibition at Zionskirche was very much responding to the site. The church often hosts exhibitions, but they are normally not site-specific, so they tend to cover rather than communicate with the space. In the gallery of the church, residues of these slogans from 1987 were preserved under an acrylic glass, accompanied by a framed text and photo about the incident. I didn’t want to add much more to this part of the space, I wanted it to be empty, for people to notice this quasi-archaeological exhibit. All I did was place bits of incineration ashes from household waste onto the glass, partly retracing the red letters underneath, partly just leaving the material in piles.

The installation was on view for a month, and it gradually evolved over time. The audience, mainly tourists, interacted with these piles of ashes. Slowly but steadily, they destroyed the installation and used the ashes to write their own words onto the acrylic glass. Even though I knew my laissez-faire style of installation would encourage interaction,

I was still surprised that in the end actually all of the pieces and piles had been touched and moved. The floor exhibit was now covered again, overwritten by words like STRENGTH and other generic terms. This showed me how hard it is to make tourists care about marginal histories. Mostly they aren't that interested, they have their own agenda, and they have kids with them who want to play. It made me think about the consequences of making work that invites touch and interaction.

Also, the apparent lack of understanding for this work showed me that history mostly is a ghost, never occurring twice in the same form. Particularly with a history that honors the modernist ideals of disjunction and revolution—and (East-)German history is full this stuff. The concept of communism itself was introduced to the world as a haunting spectre. Any obsession with a radical new beginning calls ghosts to the surface, I think—and ghosts tend to be misunderstood, since they don't have bodies to communicate.

AG: Usually when we say something is “written in stone,” the idea is that it has been permanently fixed—but in your film, when the performer writes into the pile of rocks, the effect is the opposite; as soon as the words are inscribed, they are already falling away—and it becomes an image of the instability of language...

AZ: My work is often concerned with the material base of verbal language. Language is not simply an abstract symbolic medium used for representation, it is a reality to encounter. Listening, speaking, reading and writing are physical experiences. Language is part of the world I inhabit, like the air I breath, the street I walk on. When I was a teenager I started doing a kind of cut-up poetry, where I would cut whole phrases and words out from the headlines of a specific newspaper from one specific date, and puzzle them into poem-like sentences. Mostly I tried to express something personal using the public, political language of the newspaper. It takes a long time to find depth this way, so I would sit with it for hours and hours. I forced myself to abide by the rules of German grammar, so that the main creative process would happen inside of me and not by chance, on paper. I wanted the words to really enter me before I made them mean something out there.

My relationship to verbal language is still equally intimate and physical somehow, even if the scale and the forms of interaction keep changing. The performance on this pile of gravel was a direct response to my archival research and my struggle with logocentrism—which was one cause for the devastating environmental politics of state socialism. I was looking for a way to play with the power of symbolic language

while also acknowledging its dependence on the material word. In my view, verbal language is as unstable as any other man-made technology, because it depends on physical media, like stone, paper and electronic storage, but first and foremost it depends on physical human bodies that put themselves in situations of dialog and communication. As an artist I am mostly interested in situations where meaning cannot be controlled top-down, but emerges dialogically through improvisation.

AG: The poems that are spray-painted into the unstable rubble are themselves unstable—the words are chipped away at, and twisted into other meanings. “Lerne die Sprache der Macht, aber lass sie im richtigen Moment wieder los” is over-layed and partially erased into “Verlerne die Sprache der Macht, Lass sie sich auflösen,” so that what started out as the instruction to “Learn the language of power” has become “Unlearn the language of power, let it dissolve”...



Credit: Anna Zett, “Endarchiv” Video Still 2019

AZ: Unlearning has played an important role in my personal development. Education is about learning how institutions, sciences, ideologies, empires, and markets work, and what is required from us to help them function. Afterwards you might find yourself in need of some unlearning. Not in order to return to some former state of purity—it’s more about letting go of those learned procedures and judgments which will prevent you from remaining open to the experiential world out there and within yourself. I’ve realized it’s crucial to let go of control and open up to genuine embodied contact once you have gained some basic intellectual or professional orientation. That’s also why the performer

in this kind of land-art-poem is trying to contact “the environment” directly, using hands, feet, and the whole body.

AG: The poem begins with this direct address, “Liebe Umwelt.” What does it mean to write to rather than, say, about the environment?

AZ: The address is kind of a joke. Who is the environment, and what makes you think it understands words? It’s a little tragi-comical—the letter writer is both apologizing for needing to get rid of something, and at the same time refusing full responsibility for it. “It wasn’t me,” they write. They don’t seem to understand that a non-human living system like the planet, or your local biotope, cannot process human excuses and explanations. Are most of us really being much more sensible, though, in our political efforts to stop the climate crisis and the current mass extinction event?