

“My intervention would be to sell my *Siegessäule* souvenirs there as a way of confronting visitors with the monument’s traumatic past”

E-Mail-Interview with Aura Rosenberg, looking back at her exhibition [Berlin Childhood + The Angel of History](#) at RL16 in Summer 2022.

Interview by Barbara Buchmaier, December 2022

Barbara Buchmaier: Looking back at your exhibition *Berlin Childhood + The Angel of History*, which was on view last summer at RL16 on the 2nd floor and in which you showed several works with reference to texts by Walter Benjamin, I would like to come back to you with a few questions.

We showed 24 motifs from your well-known photo series *Berlin Childhood (1996–2001)* – a multi-layered work that reflects not only Walter Benjamin's now historical view (of Berlin, among other things) – but also your own as a history-conscious artist and mother. The publication on this, which was produced after your eponymous exhibition in the daadgalerie in 2001, was also on display in the exhibition.

How was it for you to see your Berlin photos again, more than 20 years later, in Berlin-Mitte? What thoughts, what feelings did you have?

Aura Rosenberg: I was gratified to see them hanging together again after so many years. The exhibition's setting, a gracious bourgeois apartment like one that could have belonged to Benjamin's family,* amplified their latent content: Benjamin's rebellion against his comfortable upbringing and the insecurity of his adult life. In *Winter Morning*, Benjamin describes his resentment about waking early for school and his wish to sleep in; a wish fulfilled later in life when, unemployed, he can sleep as long as he wants. He cautions us to be careful what we wish for.

When I shot these photographs, Walter Benjamin, his memoir *Berliner Kindheit*, and Berlin were all new to me. I fell in love with the city and was discovering it through Benjamin's texts – literally following his footsteps from one place to another, thrilled to see how they linked up. It made me feel an uncanny closeness to the man himself. I felt the same presence when I became friends with his granddaughter Chantal.

Seeing the photos now, I sense how much time has passed. My attachment to Berlin remains deep but has matured. And the photos have become something like the relics in Benjamin's arcade study; they too are imbued with a temporal index. For example, in 2001, when I photographed the *Love Parade* heading to the *Siegessäule*, I meant to contrast it with the Sedantag military parade that marched along the same route. Benjamin's parents compelled him to attend this celebration every year – and he hated it. In 2010 after the disastrous deaths in Duisburg, authorities canceled the *Love Parade*; its founder said it would never take place again. But, this year, it was revived as *Rave the Planet*.

* The apartment-like space of RL16 on the 2nd floor is registered and used since many years as business premise and not as an apartment.

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To make these images, I often photographed my daughter Carmen growing up in Berlin, reenacting Benjamin's texts. It's, of course, poignant to see pictures of her as a little girl. Now she's an adult with a baby of her own. I'm glad that we could explore together not only Benjamin's childhood but also, in some ways, her own grandfather's. Since my dad fled Germany with his family in 1939, his interrupted childhood is a subtext to this project. When he visited Berlin, he and Carmen spent a lot of time with each other. This project introduced Carmen to her family history and to making art, to an understanding that art can grow out of personal experience. This all resonated with her and may have influenced her decision to become an art historian.

BB: "New York Childhood": You yourself grew up in New York, where you were born in 1949. What memories of your own childhood came back to you while reading Benjamin and working on the photos for *Berlin Childhood*? Do you still remember?

AR: I grew up in Washington Heights, a New York City neighborhood that real estate brokers now call Hudson Heights. Before this, it had become known as "Frankfurt on the Hudson" because so many German/Jewish refugees settled there after arriving in the U.S. Eva Hesse grew up there too. When I first came to Berlin, the city's bakeries, its gardens, and some undefinable quality of life all reminded me of Washington Heights.

BB: I would also be interested to know how you mastered the challenge of having to write 42 texts for your photo and text book, which is based on Benjamin's "model/master" *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, after you learned that it was not possible to take over Benjamin's original texts directly (for copyright reasons). How did you go about it?

AR: Initially, I wanted to feature Benjamin's entire text with my photos. Although I considered the photos autonomous works, I wanted to pair them with his words. Several publishers tried to get the rights but did not succeed, which was disappointing. Without full publishing rights, my solution was to quote as much as was allowed from each text and then add my account of making the photos. Using this approach, I could include details of contemporary Berlin life and allusions to my family. When we finished the book, my publisher, Gerhard Steidl, said he preferred doing it the way we did.

BB: Your photo series *Berlin Childhood* is already completed, but the work on the eponymous film series – in the exhibition you've shown some of them on a flat screen – is still ongoing (since 2012). For this series you cooperate with the artist Frances Scholz and with Chantal Benjamin, the granddaughter of Walter Benjamin and her daughter Lais. How many films are there already and what are the further plans? And how does the cooperation work?

AR: With my book finished, I thought I was done working with Benjamin's memoir. But not long after, I received an email from Chantal Benjamin suggesting we meet. We became friends; when she had her daughter, Lais, I started shooting little home movies of them. But *Berliner Kindheit* was always in the back of my mind.

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Eventually, I proposed that we begin filming more directly from Benjamin's writing. Doing all forty-two texts, however, was more than I could handle alone. I asked the Köln artist Frances Scholz if she would collaborate with me. Lais became central to the project. Although she enacted Benjamin's texts, her experiences were often the reverse of his, highlighting the differences in their circumstances and upbringing. She frequently added sometimes surprising analyses of his writing. And her narration of the texts puts his words into her voice. Chantal was also important, preparing Lais for our adventures and coaching her to narrate the films. Chantal has good intuitions and has contributed some of her own footage. Lais's dad, Marcelo de Souza Campos Granja, helped as well.

Frances and I work on other projects while making the films, so our progress with *Berlin Childhood* is often interrupted. But this project's protracted time has become a facet of the films. We see Lais at different stages of her childhood; the technology evolves from early video shot on tape to digital footage using cameras with ever better resolution. All this material, montaged together, embodies time in a literal way.

At RL16, Frances and I presented twelve films. Frances made some; I made some, and some we made together. We have about another ten underway. We still have lots of material to edit. Sometimes, we even tweak the finished films with new footage. Meanwhile, Lais has grown up.

BB: In the exhibition at RL16, but also elsewhere, you repeatedly showed specimens (exemplars) from your edition *The Missing Souvenir* – miniatures of the famous Berlin *Siegessäule (Victory Column)* – which you produced for the Berlin Biennale in 2004. At that time you had found that there were no souvenirs of this monument, which Benjamin had already reflected on ambivalently ...

If you were invited today to make an artistic intervention at the *Siegessäule*, would that be an interesting challenge for you? And what could you, hypothetically, imagine doing?

AR: As you say, there are no *Siegessäule* souvenirs in Berlin – or if there are, they're extremely rare. My souvenir represents the monument before Hitler and Speer altered it by making it taller, broadening its base, and moving it from the Reichstag to the *Große Stern* in the Tiergarten. They placed the *Siegessäule (Victory Column)* on an East/West axis through Berlin that German troops were supposed to follow on their return from Russia. I haven't been inside the monument since photographing it in 2001. At that time, the gift shop only sold angel figurines representing the *Goldene Else*, the goddess of victory. My intervention would be to sell my souvenirs there as a way of confronting visitors with the monument's traumatic past. Seeing a model of the *Siegessäule* as it first was might make them aware of all this. And that the souvenir can truly convey a memory.

BB: So perhaps it would be the first souvenir with an educational mission! Thank you very much for your time – for the insights and the inspiring and beautiful exhibition last summer.

AR: Thank you Barbara for your interest in this work and for your attention to the smallest details of the exhibition. Thanks also to Margit and Christoph Behrend for their support.