

**MOORE
IN AUSCHWITZ**





Ewa Toniak

There is nothing less visible in the world than a monument.

Everyone will ascertain this who makes their way to the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp in the Polish city of Oświęcim. The monument situated at the end of the Birkenau railway line running among crematories, in the vicinity of the venue where during the Second World War Jews were brought to in cattle cars and underwent the selection process into life or death, does not get etched on memory.

Located on a low hill paved with granite setts, it does not attract attention. Its half-obelisk, half-abstract form does not refer to anything but itself.

The words of Robert Musil from over seventy years ago perfectly reflect its absent existence and intuitively reveal the idea of monuments that is

difficult to accept even nowadays: their invisibility. “Undoubtedly, they are built to be visible — he wrote — or even to attract attention. At the same time, they are permeated with something that deflects attention”.²

Deflection of attention begins with angular forms alternating with the shapeless; it is difficult to find any symbolic equivalent for them. The vertical, massive element composed of two giant granite blocks posed on one another ends suddenly and breaks into over a dozen of other elements. Its “invisibility” was inherent already in the sheer concept of the monument erected in 1967. As one of its co-authors, Italian sculptor Andrea Cascella wrote, it was by principle meant to “renounce clamour and abruptness”, thus becoming a sheer “element of the camp’s landscape”.³

Inconsistency or incoherence of forms which rise above paved steps decipher the conflict that lies at the origin of the monument’s creation as a consensual version of three projects prepared in 1958 for the Competition for the International Monument to the Victims of Fascism in Auschwitz-Birkenau by three multinational teams. Two Italian and one Polish.

Establishment of this memorial monument lends itself to comparison with the construction of the Memorial to the Victims of Fascism in Berlin. It was equally multi-staged and equally difficult to settle. The president of the competition’s Jury in 1957–58 was Henry Moore (his photographs, deprived of display contrast, suspended somewhere between black and white, register “the great silence of Birkenau”, which Cascella mentions as well).

One of the main roles in the process was played by Tadeusz Hołuj, Polish prisoner of Auschwitz, member of the International Auschwitz Committee.

The other protagonist was Oskar Hansen, Polish architect. His and his team's never built *Monument-Road*, accepted unequivocally during the second stage of the competition, proposed private memory ceremonies instead of the ritual of official commemoration. Kilometre-long asphalt road intersecting (and crossing out) the former Birkenau camp, absorbed everything on the way: parts of barracks, latrines, barbed wires would remain inside it forever. Like in Pompeii. The area outside the road, absorbed by nature, would be subject to slow atrophy. "Road — as Hansen wrote — is a venue of spontaneous gestures. If someone should like to leave a card with a name or an angel figurine, they can do it just next to the road. What is outside the road should be left to the course of the passing time".⁴

The Monument-Road was never built since it was too abstract an expression of the traumatic past — according to the International Auschwitz Committee consisting of former prisoners.

There may have been other reasons as well.



As the eminent Polish theatre critic Grzegorz Niziołek wrote, the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp played a role of the primary scene for the construction of Polish identity after the war.⁵ It played that role particularly in the 1960s (at the end of which the Birkenau monument was erected), “when it ultimately acquired the status of a universally recognised and the most important symbol of Hitlerite crimes in the world”,⁶ and the annual, commemorative celebrations adopted for the needs of propaganda can nowadays be regarded as a “compensatory spectacle devoted to Poland’s position on the international political scene”.⁷ The topos of the national Calvary — as Niziołek indicates — was revived at the expense of passing over in silence the extermination of European Jews.⁸

Ideologised discourse on the memory of Auschwitz was deconstructed during the same period by the Polish theatre.

One of the authors of the play that unmasked the abuse of memory by cultural practices was Tadeusz Hołuj.⁹

Today, it is difficult to visit Birkenau without a guide.

If you are lucky enough to have a sensitive guide, they will tell you the story of several thousands of stones which pave the slightly sloping terrace around. According to the locals, the underside of each stone is engraved with a name and a surname of one of Birkenau’s prisoners. Similarly to Saarbrücken, where Jochen Gerz ordered his students to engrave the names of Jewish cemeteries, non-existent or destroyed after the war, during the “guerrilla commemorative action”, thus creating the first counter-monument. And unlike in the courtyard of the castle — the former seat of Gestapo in Saarbrücken, the invisible monument in Birkenau, a phantasmal counter-monument at the feet of the official one, came into being unintentionally. It returns unknown names to unknown victims. It gives them back their subjectivity. It belongs to the social memory of the venue

- 1 Robert Musil, *Monuments in:* Posthumous Papers of a Living Author", (Hygiene, CO: Eridanos Press, 1987), p. 61
- 2 Id.
- 3 Tadeusz Łubieński, *Pamięć i Hold*, „Polska”, vol. 7, 1967, p. 34. Many thanks to Agata Pietrasik for indicating the source.
- 4 Czesław Bielecki, Pragmatyzm utopii: Hansen., „Architektura”, 31.3., p. 14
- 5 Grzegorz Niziolek, *Polski teatr Zagłady. Scena Pierwotna*, „Dialog”, 1/2010, p. 17.
- 6 Id. p.17
- 7 Id. p. 17
- 8 Id. p. 18
- 9 Grzegorz Niziolek indicates Hołuj's „Puste Pole” (*Empty Field*) staged in 1965 in the People's Theatre in Cracow by Józef Szajna. Op.cit.p. 28

Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius

‘His sculpture *King and Queen* is, for me, unacceptable’.

**Moore, Hansen and the
Auschwitz Counter-Monument**

When, over a decade ago, I was exploring the shifting roles played by Henry Moore in Poland, I focused on his status as the emblematic modern artist from the West. If Stalinism, in the early 1950s, framed Moore as one of the leading exponents of degenerate western formalism, then post-1956 criticism, accordingly, cut out for him the role of a Cold Warrior, capable of overturning all the evils of socialist realism in Poland, and that with just one victorious exhibition, staged by the British Council and touring five Polish cities in 1959/1960.¹ And yet, barely a year before this spectacular success, Moore’s visit to Poland in April 1958 to chair the International Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial competition, passed almost unnoticed in Polish media

and art criticism. Moreover, his role in this large international competition was treated with an equal silence by the Moore scholarship in the West.² The mainstream currents of western art worlds kept underplaying the significance of the Auschwitz competition (1957–59), as if it was doomed to be compromised by Communist powers in Poland, both politically and aesthetically. According to the Cold War hierarchies, it was the International Competition for a Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner, organised by the ICA in London in 1953, which was assigned the position of a ground-breaking event, due to nominating as the winner a radically modernist design by Reg Butler. Much was made of the ‘modern form’ serving as an emblem of freedom and western values.³ As it happened, Henry Moore played the leading role in both of these competitions; moreover both of them, for not so very different reasons, failed in terms of the realization of the winning design which in both cases was perceived as ‘too abstract’.

I would argue that the Auschwitz-Birkenau competition of 1957, which attracted 426 entrants from all over the world, deserves much more attention in the current debates about the unrepresentability of guilt and the strategies of memorialisation. It gave rise to the design of the first ‘Counter-Monument’, ‘aesthetically skeptical of the assumptions underpinning traditional memorial forms’, distrusting public displays of craftsmanship and ‘cheap pathos’, to repeat the words of James Young.⁴ Although the ‘genre’ of counter-monuments, ‘conceived to challenge the very premises of their being’, was



defined by Young in the context of German revisionist monuments of Holocaust built from the 1980s onwards, the *Road-Monument*, proposed by the Polish architect Oskar Hansen and his team, should be seen as constituting the prototype, a Counter-Monument *avant la lettre*. Even more interestingly, some precepts of Hansen's radical idea of the *Road-Monument*, based on his socio-aesthetic theory of the Open Form, could, arguably, be traced back to Hansen's visit to Britain and his forgotten meeting with Henry Moore in his studio in Perry Green, in 1949.⁵ In a way, their second 'encounter' in Auschwitz nine years later, even if not face-to-face, was a consequence of the first, reversing however the parameters of their relationship by 180 percent.

In this text I want to compare those two meetings, both in the context of the notion of the 'open form' which, under its purely formal guise, was an aesthetic aim shared by those two artists, and in relation to their different approaches to artistic autonomy and the potential and functions of modern art in public spaces.⁶ What follows is a sequence of images documenting encounters between the artists, and between the works themselves, spanning the period of ten years.

In 1948 a young and confident architectural student from Poland, a visionary urban-planner to-come, left his country to study architecture in Paris with Pierre Jeanneret, Le Corbusier's cousin and collaborator. He also managed to find a place for himself in the atelier of Fernand Léger. In 1949, Hansen took part in the International Congress of Modern Architecture in



Bergamo, during which event he boldly attacked Le Corbusier for going commercial by designing textiles instead of cities. His uncompromising stance won him an invitation to the CIAM International Summer School in London in the same year and, subsequently, the first prize in the competition for a housing settlement for 5000 inhabitants.⁷ The final reward was his visit, with a group of other Summer School participants, to Perry Green, recorded above. By that time Henry Moore had been turned into 'England's most notable sculptor'. Visits to his studio, known as 'Hoglands', located in an old house in a picturesque Hertfordshire village, 30 miles outside London, especially those organized by The British Council for foreign artists and critics, acquired a special status of promoting British art abroad.⁸ In Hansen's interview of 1986, he reported:

We went together, three or four of us, Belgians, Italians and I. What struck me during this meeting? Moore's incredible unpretentiousness. Both in his appearance, and in his working environment. He resembled rather a shoemaker and his shirt was far from clean. He kept his sculptures in a small garage and his young assistant, an Australian, helped him to move them out, on wheeled platforms. Even if the cottage he lived in might have been Gothic [sic], it must have been very unhealthy.⁹

There are several snapshot photographs in the Hansen collection which record this visit. One of them is a ritualized image of the famous sculptor

surrounded by his tribute-paying guests, posing in the vicinity of the studio, with a wicker fence in the background and a white plaster cast of the *Family Group* for the Barclay School in Stevenage, peering from behind. The same plaster cast is portrayed on its own on another photograph; it was an important commission from Hertfordshire Education Authority, preoccupied with the idea of social engineering through building architecturally innovative schools and through fitting them out with modern sculpture.

There is, however, one more picture in the set: a striking image which might have prompted Hansen to remember this meeting especially, listing it as a formative experience in the interview noted above. It shows a stylish young man, in profile, looking closely at a small bronze, standing on a plinth. This must have been the moment when Hansen broke away from the rest of the group, stopping by this particular work, one of the numerous versions of the *Family Group* (1947, LH 247),¹⁰ to study it closely on his own. The image implies his prolonged engagement in the act of looking, long enough to allow an anonymous photographer to catch this moment of contemplation. The sense of wonder and an almost physical desire is suggested by the movement of Hansen's right hand, laid on the plinth next to the sculpture, as if wanting to touch and caress its shiny surface; his left hand, in counterpoint, is buried in his jacket pocket. Hansen's gaze is fully focused on the sculpture, but his facial expression does not give anything away.

The extract from the above-mentioned interview suggests that the young architect's encounter with Moore as a person was an important event in his personal development. He agrees that he owes to Moore some important clues for the future principles of his utopia of the Open Form. He also claims that it was the structurality of Moore's sculptures that impressed him, and above all, the way in which Moore strove to abolish the boundaries between the mass and the space that surrounds it, by means of opening up the mass, by streamlining it and perforating it with holes.

*There are some elements of the Open Form, but, even so, all [Moore's] work remains object-based. There is some progress, as in [the work] of Katarzyna Kobro. What I have in mind is that we do not deal just with a sculpture as something solid, but also with the air which penetrates it. If I were to name a sculptor who inspired me, then, undoubtedly, Moore's search for the continuity of interior and exterior in his sculptures as well as their structural character, that sculptor would have been him. him. Having said that, his sculpture King and Queen is, for me, unacceptable.*¹¹

Hansen's final claim on the 'unacceptability' of *King and Queen* asserts the independence of his own avant-garde project of the Open Form. It would not only do away with 'objecthood' altogether, but would also transplant this concept from the level of aesthetics to that of a purposeful project of building a new, an 'open society', in which urban planning, architecture and design

would empower the inhabitants and would make them active participants in the shaping of the space and the world around them.¹²

It took Hansen a while, however, to arrive at the precepts of Open Form. After his return to Poland in 1950 it must have been a shock for him to witness an uninhibited vilification of Henry Moore as a leading representative of formalism, and even to spot an image of one of his *Reclining Figures*, photographed in Moore's garden, set against the uncannily familiar wicker fence, in a documentary film that was tearing to pieces the "degenerate art of imperialism".¹³ Despite this unhindered derision, Moore's sculptures were regularly reproduced in the popular press and in illustrated magazines in Poland, in order to poke fun at them. And, as I argued earlier, not only did this practice secure their visibility during the Stalinist period, but it also paved the way for the artist's triumphant return as 'the discoverer', 'the demiurge', 'the greatest sculptor of our time' during the Thaw, and especially on the occasion of his first retrospective, staged by the British Council in Warsaw and four other Polish cities in 1959/1960. By that time, 'a streamlined asymmetric shape pierced by an irregular hole became a stereotyped idiom of modernity', though it was also rendered trivial precisely by the number of times it was reproduced.¹⁴

It was likewise the time, when Hansen's revolutionary concept of the Open Form, the origins of which he himself traced to Moore's sculptures, had been fully worked out and published as a manifesto, as well as being

delivered as a paper during the CIAM meeting in Otterlo in 1959.¹⁵ Its most remarkable demonstration, even before it was issued in print, was Hansen's Road-Monument for the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial, submitted in 1957, together with a team that comprised his wife Zofia Hansen, Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz, Julian Pałka, and Lechosław Rosiński.

As written by Piotr Piotrowski in his analysis of the *Road-Monument*, *'Hansen's design turned upside down the authoritarian attitude characteristic of monument art, preferred both by artists themselves and — perhaps first of all — by their sponsors and patrons. The idea of 'open form' which was the theoretical frame of the design, was an expression of utmost respect for the uniqueness of the place — its space and history, human memory and perception, as well as the presence of non-victims with all due solemnity.'*¹⁶

Road-Monument was designed as a 70 meter wide and 1,000 meter long tarmac road cutting diagonally through the concentration camp territory. It omitted the main gate of Birkenau, through which trains had transported the victims. No one was ever to pass through that gate again. The black road was to be laid across the remains of the barracks, petrifying and preserving their foundations, the chimneys, the barbed fence and the latrines. Having reached the crematoria, the road was to end abruptly among the fields and woodlands. Only the road was to testify to the horror of the crimes committed

on this site. Everything else was to be left untouched, according to the prisoners' wishes, and, unavoidably, the former camp would surrender to the invasive action of grass and weeds. Renouncing the traditional logic of sculpture and transcending the conditions of artistic production of his time, Hansen's *Road-Monument* was breaking with the idea of the 'closed form', avoiding any large centerpiece, and developing instead the concept of the site-specific intervention in the public space, in which the major part is to be performed by the viewer, unfolding in time, contingent, open to changes.

Henry Moore, who came from Britain to Poland to judge the competition, must have studied Hansen's project, shortlisting it for another stage of the contest from among the 426 entries submitted. He must have also examined Hansen's reformulated design even more closely six months later, in November 1958, in Paris. As widely reported, the jury voted unanimously in favour of Hansen's minimalist design, deprived of any vertical element. However, Hansen's project, critical towards the traditional celebratory form of monuments, was ultimately turned down by former Auschwitz prisoners, unable to identify with Hansen's conceptual expression of remembrance of their martyrdom. Although Moore, having called Hansen's design 'exceptionally brilliant', was eventually forced to justify its rejection, by pointing to a lack of 'emotional content'.¹⁷ When he was invited to participate in yet another stage of the project, Hansen refused, not wanting to contaminate his avant-garde concept with a figurative sculpture.

At the time of the International Jury's rejection of Hansen's *Road-Monument*, in November 1958, Moore had just completed his much-celebrated, modernist *Reclining Figure* for the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. Carved in Roman Travertine, the largest realization of his formula of the female nude to date, which has been customarily taken as the most suitable topic for experimenting with his notion of the 'open form', of sculpture which shapes the space surrounding it. Moore had grappled with this commission for a long time, aware of the challenges posed by the very institution of UNESCO, a 'symbol of Western cultural and political values'. As Margaret Garlake noted, 'monumental though it undoubtedly is, the *Reclining Figure* is hardly provocative. ... The UNESCO project closed a decade of work of socially engaged public artists in England'.¹⁸

In the context of the series of encounters between Moore and Hansen, it is symptomatic that the *Reclining Figure* was positioned in front of the same UNESCO building in September 1958, in which Moore, two months later, took the decision to turn down Hansen's *Road Monument*. The comparison of those two monuments shows that, in spite of their shared precepts of finding a new modern form, capable of expressing unspeakable suffering and profound human values, Moore and Hansen represented diametrically different approaches to the role of art in public space. If in 1958 Hansen's *Road Monument* transgressed the conditions of its own production, liberating itself from the 'logic of sculpture' and the 'logic of monument', pointing into the direction

of art as interactive intervention, Moore did the precisely the opposite. He elevated to the status of a public monument the very type of female nude he had invented in the late 1920s, monumentalizing it to a colossal size, spreading it out on the bench in front of a public building.

1 Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, "Dreams of Sleeping Beauty: Henry Moore in Polish Criticism and Media," in Fiona Russell and Jane Beckett (eds), *Henry Moore: Critical Essays*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002, pp. 195–220.

2 In spite of the activities of the international community of Auschwitz survivors, headed by Dr Herman Langbein, and supported by the international eminencies, such as Niels Bohr, Max Born, and François Mauriac. Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, "Oskar Hansen, Henry Moore and the Auschwitz Memorial debates in Poland", in Charlotte Benton (ed.), *Figuration / Abstraction: Strategies for Public Sculpture in Europe 1945–1968*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004, pp. 193–211.

3 Robert Burstow, 'The Limits of Modernist Art as a "Weapon of the Cold War": reassessing the unknown patron of the Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner', *The Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 20, No.1, 1997, pp. 68–80.

4 James E. Young, 'The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 1992, pp. 267–296.

5 Wojciech Włodarczyk, 'Rozmowa z Oskarem Hansenem', in Jolanta Gola et al (eds), *W kręgu Formy Otwartej*, exh. cat., Muzeum Akademii Sztuk Pięknych, Warsaw, 1986, pp. 11–46.

6 On Moore's understanding of the social status of public art, see Margaret Garlake, 'Moore's eclecticism: Difference, aesthetic identity and community in the architectural commissions 1938–1958', in Russell and Beckett, pp. 173–193. For Hansen's social mission of art, see a comprehensive volume about Hansen's work, designed largely by himself just before his death: Oskar Hansen, *Towards the Open Form / Ku Formie Otwartej*, ed. by Jola Gola, Warsaw: Fundacja Galerii Foksal, 2005; also Oskar Hansen, *Zobaczyć świat*, ed. Jola Gola, Zachęta Narodowa Galeria Sztuki, Warsaw / Akademia Sztuk Pięknych, Warsaw, 2005.

7 As reported in the interview, Hansen's success in Britain was followed by invitation from Ernst Rogers to join his team as assistant, which was denied by Hansen, determined

to return to Poland — Włodarczyk 1986. See also, Hansen's last interview with Joanna Mytkowska, published in Hansen, *Towards the Open Form*, 2005.

8 Jon Wood, 'A household name: Henry Moore's studio-homes and their bearings, 1926–1946', in Russell and Beckett, pp. 36–41.

9 Włodarczyk 1986, p. 18.

10 Now in the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; LH stands for the complete catalogue of Moore's sculptures: Herbert, Read, David Sylvester, Alan Bowness (eds), *Henry Moore: Complete Sculpture*, Vols. 1–6, London: Lund Humphries, 1944–1988.

11 Włodarczyk 1986, p.19.

12 Hansen, *Towards the Open Form*.

13 The film entitled 'New Art' was made on the occasion of the First All Poland Exhibition of Art, held at the National Museum in Warsaw in 1950, see Murawska-Muthesius 2002, pp. 201–206, ill. 9.3.

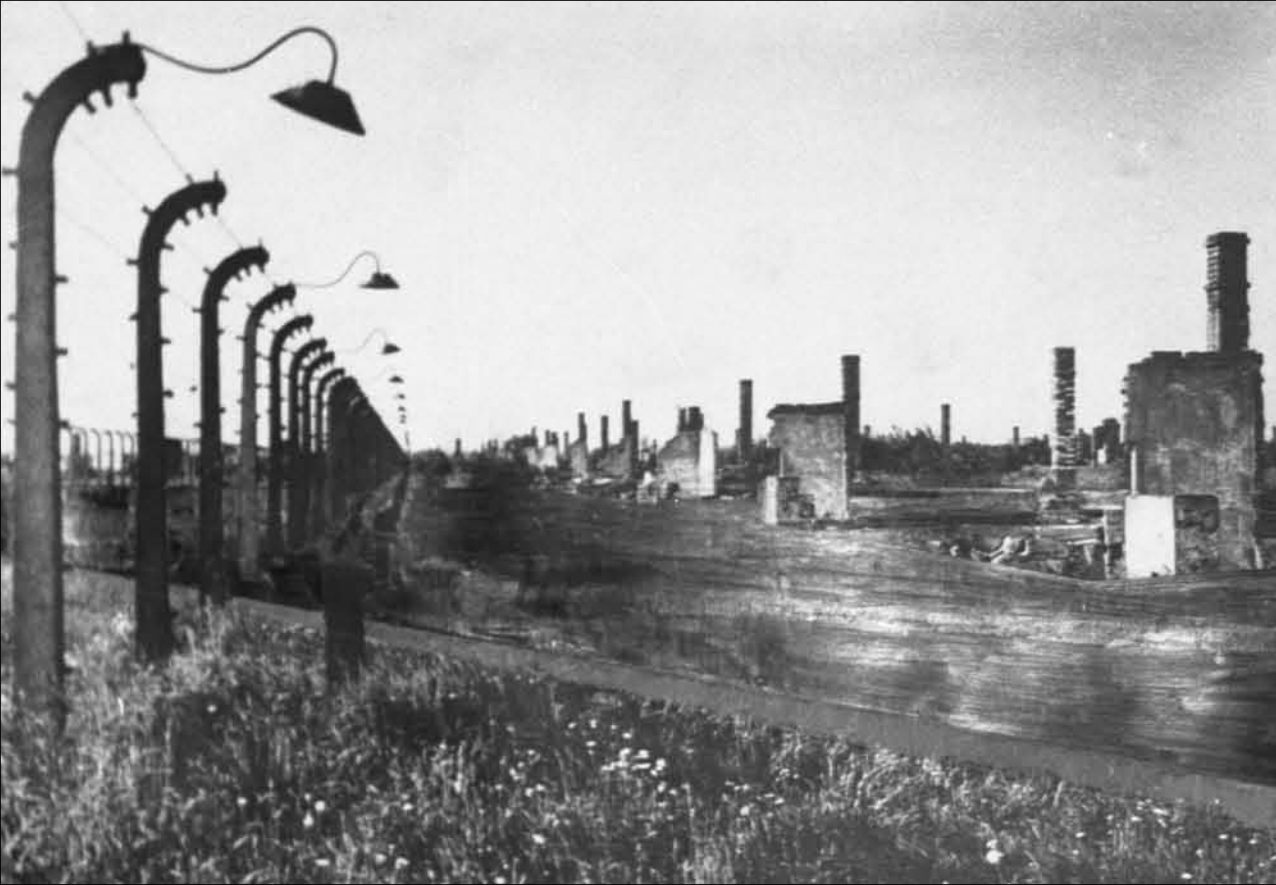
14 *Ibid.*, pp. 204–216.

15 Oskar Hansen, 'Forma Otwarta', *Przegląd Kulturalny*, Vol. 5., No. 5., 1959, p. 5. For its English version, see Murawska-Muthesius 2004, p. 272–273. Also Hansen *Towards the Open Form*.

16 Piotr Piotrowski, 'Auschwitz vs. Auschwitz', in Frank Grüner, Urs Heftrich, Hans-Dietrich Löwe (hrsg.), *Zerstörer des Schweigens. Formen künstlerischer Erinnerung an die nationalsozialistische Rassen- und Vernichtungspolitik in Osteuropa*, Cologne: Böhlau, 2006, pp. 515–530.

17 Henry Moore, *The Auschwitz Competition*, Auschwitz: State Museum of Auschwitz, 1964.

18 Garlake, p. 190.





Agata Pietrasik

Traversing Monumentality — Successive Designs for the Auschwitz Monument

The 1958 proposal for a “Road Monument” that was submitted by Oskar Hansen, Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz, Julian Pałka and Edmund Kupiecki, to a jury headed by Henry Moore, was undoubtedly one of the most radical and revolutionary monuments ever to be proposed in European art. What’s more the history of its development can be perceived as an archeology to later post-modern challenges to the very notion of a monument. This essay focuses on the processes which led to the creation of the Auschwitz monuments design in the context of site-specificity, emphasising the relationship of the proposed monument to the place of the former concentration camp in Auschwitz II — Birkenau.

The Site

Nowadays, Auschwitz functions more as a metonymy for the Holocaust, less as an actual physical space. It has become an abstract symbol of equally abstract suffering, rather than a specific geographic location. However in 1957, when the competition for the monument was announced, there was no such concept as the Holocaust, certainly not one present in public discourse, and the site was understood in a very different framework than it is today. It is thus my intention here to address the materiality of the camp, but understood as a disappearing materiality, an understanding that we will see is crucial to the proposed monument itself.

The site specified for a monument was the grounds of the KL Auschwitz II — Birkenau, the second main part of the camp, located in a village called Brzezinka around 3 kilometers away from Auschwitz I. This part of the camp begun to be built in 1941, and the area of the complex was around 140 ha. It was completely surrounded by electrified barbed wire. So too were inner sections of the camp, which contained, among other things: a Women’s Camp, a Hungarian Women’s Camp, a Men’s Camp, a Gypsy Camp, a storage place for confiscated items, referred to as “Kanada”, and varying numbers of gas chambers and crematoria. Birkenau is the site of the death of the overwhelming majority of Auschwitz victims, and after the war it became one of the significant parts of the newly created museum.

The museum was officially inaugurated by a legislation passed by Parliament on the 2nd of July 1947 that stated that the grounds of the former concentration camp, with its belongings, are to be preserved “for all time as a Monument to the Martyrdom of The Polish Nation and Other Nations”.¹ This legal statute turned museum, which is also in itself an inviolable national monument, thus raises the question: why was there a need to build another monument? And why in Birkenau?

In a 1945 news article written shortly after the liberation of the camp by the Soviet Army, Birkenau was described as “grey, cruel, long rows of barracks and wire, wire, wire, ditches and mud”.² This dramatic report encapsulates some of the most striking characteristics of the place, which later drew the attention of Oskar Hansen: its repetitive rhythm of horizontality, occasionally interrupted with the perpendicular elements of the oppressive architecture. This flat strip of land with its poor, mostly wooden barracks was very different than Auschwitz I which covered a much smaller area and where almost all the buildings were made out of brick.

Auschwitz I was the site of the first museum exhibition, presented in 1947. It consisted of a display of clothes, shoes, glasses, prostheses, and other belongings confiscated from the inmates. These piles of belongings, abandoned by the retreating Nazi’s, were presented in the barracks of Auschwitz I, the excessive amount of things confronting the viewer with the scale of the crimes committed here in a powerful way.³

No exhibition, however, was intended to be presented in Auschwitz II — Birkenau, where the wooden barracks were gradually decaying and unable to provide any shelter for the artefacts they contained. Although the place was very important for Auschwitz survivors, its entropy progressed. The alarming state of the camp was emphasised in an article titled the “Death of Birkenau” from 1957: “the whole city [Birkenau] has vanished and the women’s camp is a ruin about which nobody cares. The women’s camp was only a small part of the camp, but if only you could save at least that in its old shape. But now, only after two years, it is truly difficult to find traces of the real camp. Bent walls of the barracks, collapsed roofs, weeds growing inside of the barracks and a thick carpet of camomile , growing literally on every strip of land between the barracks — this is Birkenau today. In two years at the most Birkenau will disappear completely. The only thing that will stay will probably be... camomile. And the weeds. There’s a lot of them, too”.⁴

The anonymous author of the article (presumably a survivor herself) also expressed her dissatisfaction with the fact that Auschwitz I had become the most significant part of the museum. In her opinion choosing this part of the camp as the primary location was very exclusive as it hardly reflected the memories of the survivors, being rather the administrative centre of the camp.

Auschwitz I was more important however for political reasons — this was where Block 11, which served as a prison for most of the political prisoners of Auschwitz, was located. Emphasising the anti-fascist struggle of the political

prisoners (mostly communists) became a government priority and the main focus of the official narrative on Auschwitz in the 1950s.⁵

Auschwitz I was clearly a monument itself and hardly needed an additional commemorative structure. But, in the eyes of the former prisoners, the raw state of Birkenau needed a proper narrative. A monument was necessary, simply as an attempt to draw attention to the importance of the site.

The Competition

The main organiser of the competition for the International Monument of the Victims of Fascism, responsible for assembling the jury, gathering all the necessary funds, establishing the criteria and rules for the future participants, was the International Auschwitz Committee (IAC) — an organisation created by, and for, former prisoners of concentration camps. Even though international in its name, the Committee was largely reliant on the Polish Communist Party as well as the Polish Government itself.⁶

After long and arduous negotiations a jury was eventually established and the presence of Henry Moore as the head of the main judges was considered a huge success for the IAC. Moore had been one of the most influential figures of the art scene throughout the 1950s, and was certainly a leading sculptor of the time. Therefore his presence in the competition, even though marginalised later, had a huge symbolic impact, and made the competition

more credible and helped to encourage artists from the “West” to participate. Without Moore, the whole event would have run the risk of simply being considered a part of communist propaganda.

The IAC was precise in articulating their expectations for the monument, and made a point to clearly draw the framework under which artists were supposed to work. These requirements were formulated as follows:

- a) The monument cannot intervene in the reserve grounds of the former camp in Brzezinka, which is the site where the former prisoners used to live. The monument should be placed between the ruins of the crematoriums.
- b) The monument should be understandable for pilgrimages of the masses and for excursions.
- c) The monument should be functional and suitable for devotional practices, mass rallies, and the giving of honours.
- d) The memorial should be monumental, due to both its content and its location on the large, flat, area.
- e) Whatever symbolic meaning the monument conveys, its meaning should be characteristic of the whole issue (...) since according to the competition’s regulations the subject of the monument is the “Life, Suffering, Fighting and Death of the millions of victims”.⁷

Even though formulated laconically, and presented in numbered points, the criteria were rather blurry, especially for artists not accustomed with the official, highly plaintive, language. Instead of providing artists with the necessary guidelines they rather constituted a list of demands which were to be fulfilled. The organisers primarily emphasised the role of the monument as a “voice of the killed” and a “mass grave of 4 million dead”.

Despite these difficulties many artists decided to participate in the competition and ultimately 426 projects from all over the world were submitted, out of which 7 were chosen for the first stage of the competition.

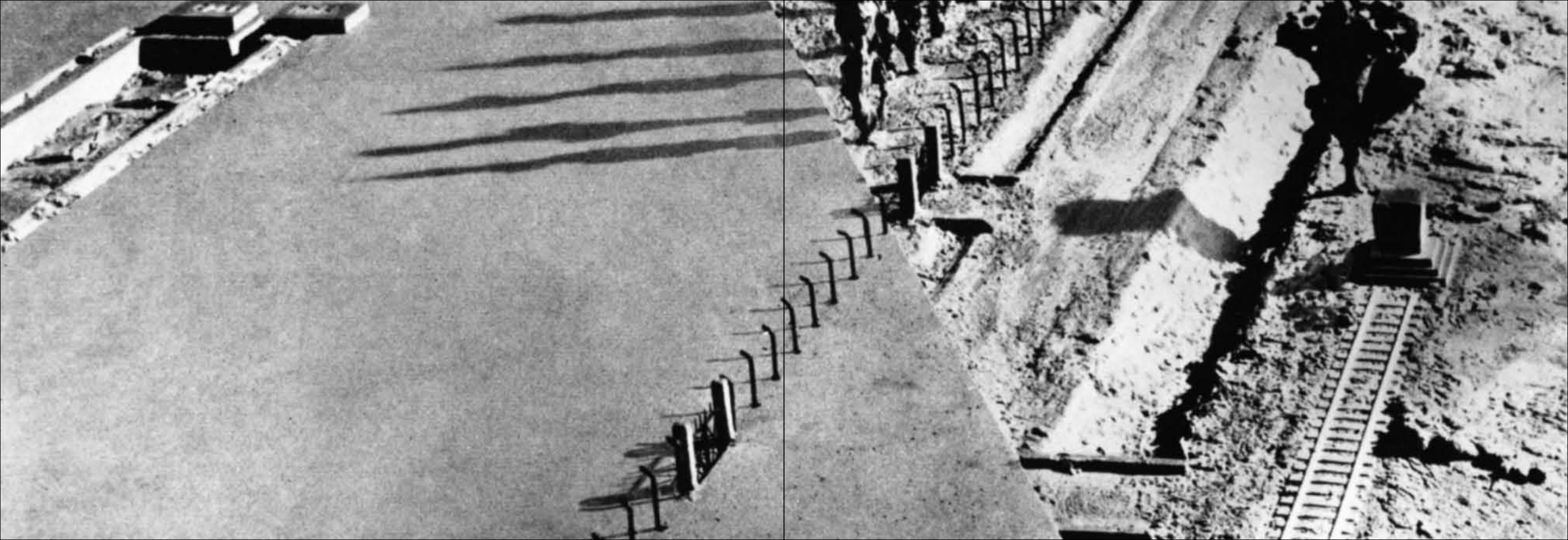
The Slab Monument

One of the proposals submitted in 1958 was by a Polish team created of various artists: Oskar Hansen (architect), Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz (sculptor), Julian Pałka (graphic designer) and Edmund Kupiecki (photographer), with contributions (drawings), from Zofia Hansen. Their design was titled “The Slab Monument” and consisted of a slab of petrified soil which was supposed to be placed at the end of existing railway tracks, in the space between the ruins of the crematoria. The soil was to be petrified according to electropetrification, a method newly invented by a Polish scientist Romuald Cebertowicz.⁸ A bay containing an urn with the ashes of inmates of concentration camps from all over

Europe, was to be sunk into its centre, functioning as a type of commemorative sanctuary.

The “Slab Monument” fitted very well to the expectations of both the organisers and the jury from both a pragmatic and a symbolic point of view. The monument would provide the desired organising central point where “pilgrimages”, manifestations, and the official giving of honours could take place. It also provided the site with an additional “international” dimension by bringing together the ashes of victims of the other concentration camps. This aspect was very much desired in the propaganda of the time, which painted a picture of Auschwitz as a site of the “international struggle against Fascism”.

The process of petrification presented by this team also had a very potent symbolic impact, especially in its particular location — between the crematoria, next to the ramp where new transports of inmates were disembarked and selected. Petrifying this strip of land turned it into a massive tombstone, making the ground impervious to the destructive impact of time, and leaving it as an obstacle for the future. Furthermore, it took its present moment as the last possible moment to memorialise the site, blocking its inclusion into a “now” of the future, always instead to remain displaced in time. Another part of the monument, however, offered a hope for exceeding this situation, a certain sense of transcendence, even if directed downwards, rather than upwards. The bay situated within the slab with the urn of the ashes.



The horizontal form of the monument was conceived within the site, leaving it physically uninterrupted. It changed, however, the spatial orientation of the site, gave it a certain direction: the potential viewer would travel along the railway tracks towards the monument.

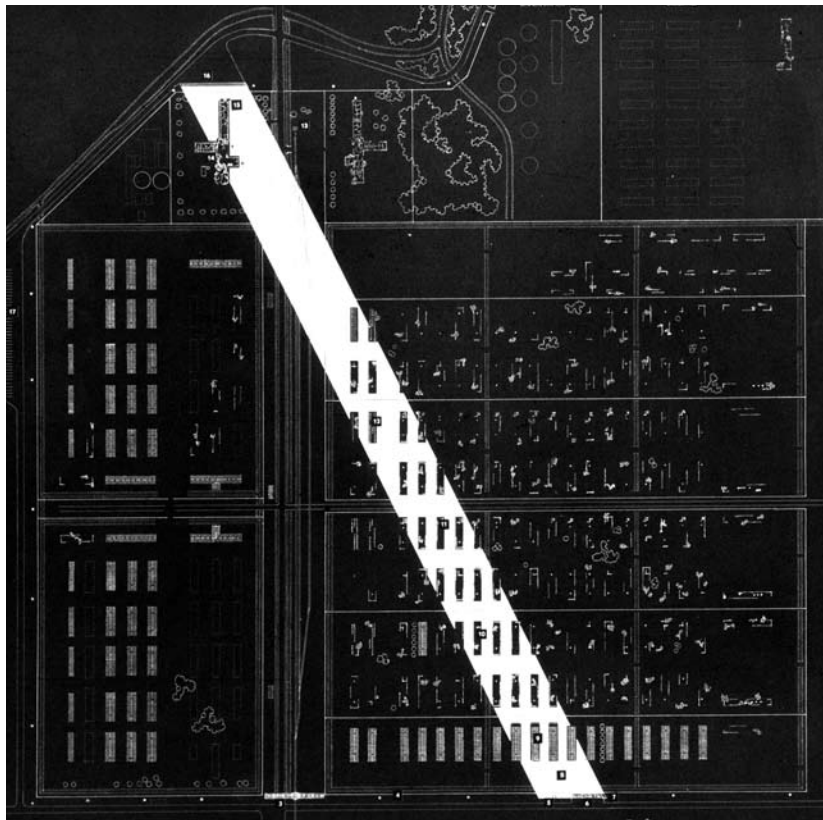
The Road Monument

The “Slab Monument” met with the general enthusiasm of the jury and the former inmates and was selected with 7 other projects to the second stage of the competition. However despite the warm reception of the idea, the team themselves concluded their project was not satisfactory. They believed it too passive and anachronistic, and therefore decided to redesign the monument.⁹ In one interview Oskar Hansen stated: “When we entered the competitions second stage, we started having doubts about the merits of our design. The Slab’s Christian or Jewish immobility, or even passivity, its anachronistic nature, made it impossible for it to become a contemporary, universal symbol. The project was increasingly alien to us”.¹⁰

Their next design shared some of the qualities of the first project but attempted to move beyond these perceived formal and ideological limitations. The “Road Monument” design which followed, and was introduced at this second stage of the competition, consisted of a black asphalt road which was intended to run diagonally across the camp. This road was to be about

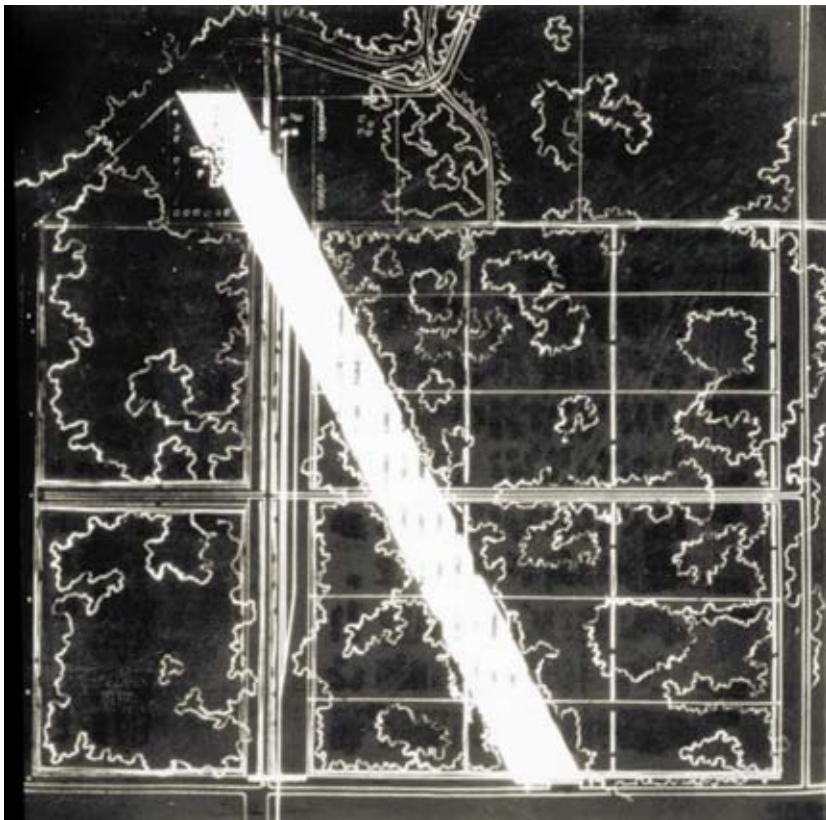
1 km long and 70 meters wide, with a conceptual framework that kept all the buildings and remains of the camp within the road preserved, but let everything outside of it decompose with time. The main entrance gate to the camp at one end of the road was to be closed so that no body could repeat the path taken by the inmates. However at it’s furthest end this same road led irrevocably to the crematoria.

Although, as a form of a trajectory, radically different from its precedent, the “Road Monument” was in some ways an evolution rather than a rupture from the original submission. The new design intensified some qualities of the “Slab Monument”, the petrified strip of land transformed into a road through wilfully neglected surroundings, reinforcing and greatly extending the area of preservation. The horizontality of the monument not only became more apparent but the most outstanding quality of the new project was its spacial engagement with the site ‘beyond’ itself. While the previous idea was limited only to a selected area, the “Road Monument’s” total span engaged the whole space of Birkenau. With this proposal the site, rather than being given a monument, was turned into one (much as Auschwitz I previously had been through very different means), and this happened not only through the singular decision of the artists but, significantly, through the existing processes of preservation and decay. It juxtaposed two labours: one of people to conserve the camp, and the other of nature to destroy it.



The road crossed out the architectural structure of the camp, refusing to accept its logic and creating the space for another perspective. The road, leading the viewer through the wooden barracks of Birkenau, pierced the former camp at its most neuralgic points, leading the viewer through that which the perpetrators wanted to erase. It reveals the undignified conditions of life in the camp, and makes the viewer see more than he or she originally would have by following the path alongside the railway tracks.

The presence of the original artefacts on the road confronted with the ruins outside of it emphasised the passage of time. On the other hand, moving through the interiors of the barracks, the road confronts the viewer very directly with the materiality of the camp, creating a space for an emotional engagement. The monument is, nonetheless, designed in such way that it prevents an uncritical emphatic engagement, in which one confuses one's own subjectivity with the subjectivity of the victim. The road does not repeat the path of the inmates coming to the camp, the visitor, walking on the road does not even touch the original ground of the camp, their own temporality is measured by the growth of nature surrounding the camp, at the same time there is enough room for a singular confrontation and a personal response to the site. The new project also rejected the idea of the bay, consequently removing the centralising point of the original premise. There was no way out, whether upward or downward, the road ended behind the crematoria and left the visitor in the forest growing just beyond them. The teams' new

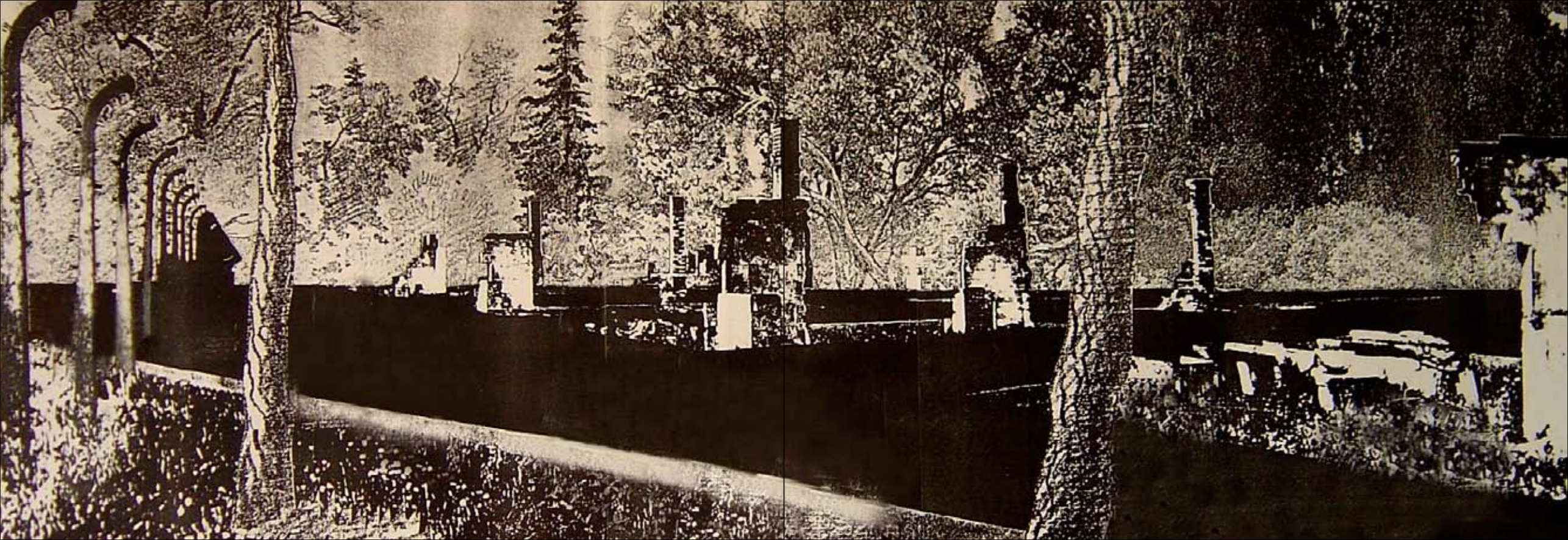


project was site-specific, unique, and worked within the discussed differences between the specificity of Auschwitz and Birkenau.

Even though it was a very careful response to the conditions of the camp, underlying the prisoners perspective, at its announcement this proposal proved most shocking to the former inmates who felt that the proposed monument threatened the physical integrity of the site, that which was precisely to be saved from the progressing degradation by the new monument. Seweryna Szmaglewska, one of the most famous Auschwitz survivors, expressed her negative opinion about the project declaring that

Hansens work can hurt the feelings of former inmates of Oświęcim [Auschwitz]. Why? The premise is too theoretical. We cross out the fascism — the authors appear to say. We draw a big, black, oblique, line on the plan of the camp. Never again Oświęcim! This is great for a poster, an illustration or a book cover, but the vision realised, transferred onto the vast area of the camp as a wide road covered by snow or soiled by mud during mass, multi-thousand, pilgrimages, can completely lose this meaning.¹¹

Indeed, it was the poster which became the most powerful representation of the project. The white road superimposed on the black plan of Birkenau, although conveying a very strong message, reduced the idea of the “Road Monument” to the gesture of crossing out the camp. This representation, which is the most commonly used visualization of the idea, made the idea



very abstract. The road depicted appears as a progressing continuous stripe, forming an uninterrupted whole. Looking at the photos of the unpreserved maquette there is no sense of this ongoing consistency. The road is more venerable, interrupted at many points by the barracks, by the barbed wire fence, and eventually, by the crematoria.

The designs formal radicality, expressed through the rejection of traditionally understood sculptural form, also met a lack of comprehension on the side of Henry Moore, whose closing remark on the competition was:

*(...) what has been attempted has been the creation — or in the case of the jury, the choice — of a monument to crime and ugliness, to murder and to horror. The crime was of such stupendous proportions that any work of art must be on an appropriate scale. But apart from this, is it in fact possible to create a work of art that can express the emotions engendered by Auschwitz? It is my conviction that a very great sculptor — a new Michelangelo or a new Rodin — might have achieved this.*¹²

It is not accidental that Henry Moore recalled two artists iconic for modernism. In his opinion artists confronted with the problem of representing Auschwitz should not look ahead and try to change the artistic paradigm under which they operate in order to make this more adequate to what is to be represented. On the contrary they should look back to the art of the canonical masters, whose level of artistic skill was a subject of nostalgic longing for

Moore. Moreover, from this short excerpt one can also see that Moore understood Auschwitz's memorial very differently than Hansen. For Moore it was a monument to crime and ugliness, commemorating the cruelty of the oppressor, for Hansen it was a monument to the suffering of the people who passed through this site.¹³

Epilogue

The former prisoners could not bear to imagine Birkenau being overgrown and rejected the idea of the “Road Monument”. As a consequence the jury enjoined a compromise according to which they selected three final projects that were supposed to be combined into a new project. Oskar Hansen withdrew from the compromise, the final result of which we see now at the end of the railways tracks in Birkenau. Looking at this memorial from the present-day perspective, it is quite easy to observe how much of it belongs aesthetically to a previous period, in the present it is almost displaced and inadequate. Comparing the archival material recording the monument shortly after its unveiling, one also cannot fail to notice the passage of time, the stones have turned from white to grey, the marks carved in them less emphatic. The monument is slowly fading away, as opposed to the camp which is very well protected.

1 Legislation from the 2nd of July 1947 r., *O utworzeniu Rady Ochrony Pomników Męczeństwa, Ustawa z dnia 2 lipca 1947 r. o upamiętnieniu męczeństwa Narodu Polskiego i innych Narodów w Oświęcimiu*, in: "Dziennik Ustaw", 1947, No 52, 264, 265.

2 S.D. Brzezinka ("Birkenau"), in: "Głos Ludu", No 65, 17.03.1945, p. 3.

3 Consult Jacek Lachendro, *Zburzyć i Zaorać...? Idea Założenia Państwowego Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau w świetle prasy polskiej w latach 1945–1948*, Oświęcim 2007, pp. 61–67.

4 *Śmierć Birkenau*, "Wolni Ludzie", No 6, 1.07.1947, p. 1. See also: Zofia Wóycicka, *Przerwana żałoba Polskie spory wokół pamięci nazistowskich obozów koncentracyjnych i Zagłady 1944–1950*, Warsaw 2009, pp. 252–259.

5 More on the politicization of Auschwitz in: Johnathan Heuner, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration, 1945–1979*, Athens 2003, pp. 79–108.

6 Op. cit., pp. 145–150.

7 *Sprawozdanie z wyjazdu do Paryża delegacji polskiej do biura MKO*, 1958, The Archives of the Collection Department in the Memorial and Museum in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

8 Irena Grzesiuk-Olszewska, *Polska rzeźba pomnikowa w latach 1945–1995*, Warsaw 1995, p. 101; and her article: *W Trzydziątą Rocznicę Międzynarodowego Konkursu na Pomnik Ofiar w Oświęcimiu*, in: „Rzeźba Polska”, 1986, pp. 113–118.

9 Jola Gola, *Ku formie Otwartej / Towards Open Form*, Warsaw 2005, p. 130

10 Op.cit.

11 *Przy Okrągłym stole „Życia” Nad Oświęcimskim Pomnikiem*, „Życie Warszawy”, No 305, 21 XII 1958, p. 2.

12 Henry Moore's speech from 8. IX. 1958, The Archives of the Collection Department in the Memorial and Museum in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

13 See J. Huener, op.cit., p. 157, Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, *Oskar Hansen, Henry Moore and the Auschwitz Memorial debates, 1958–59*, in: "Figuration/Abstraction Strategies for Public Sculpture in Europe 1945–168", ed. Charlotte Benton, pp.193–213.







Spis ilustracji

Kredyty wystawy

Colophon książki

