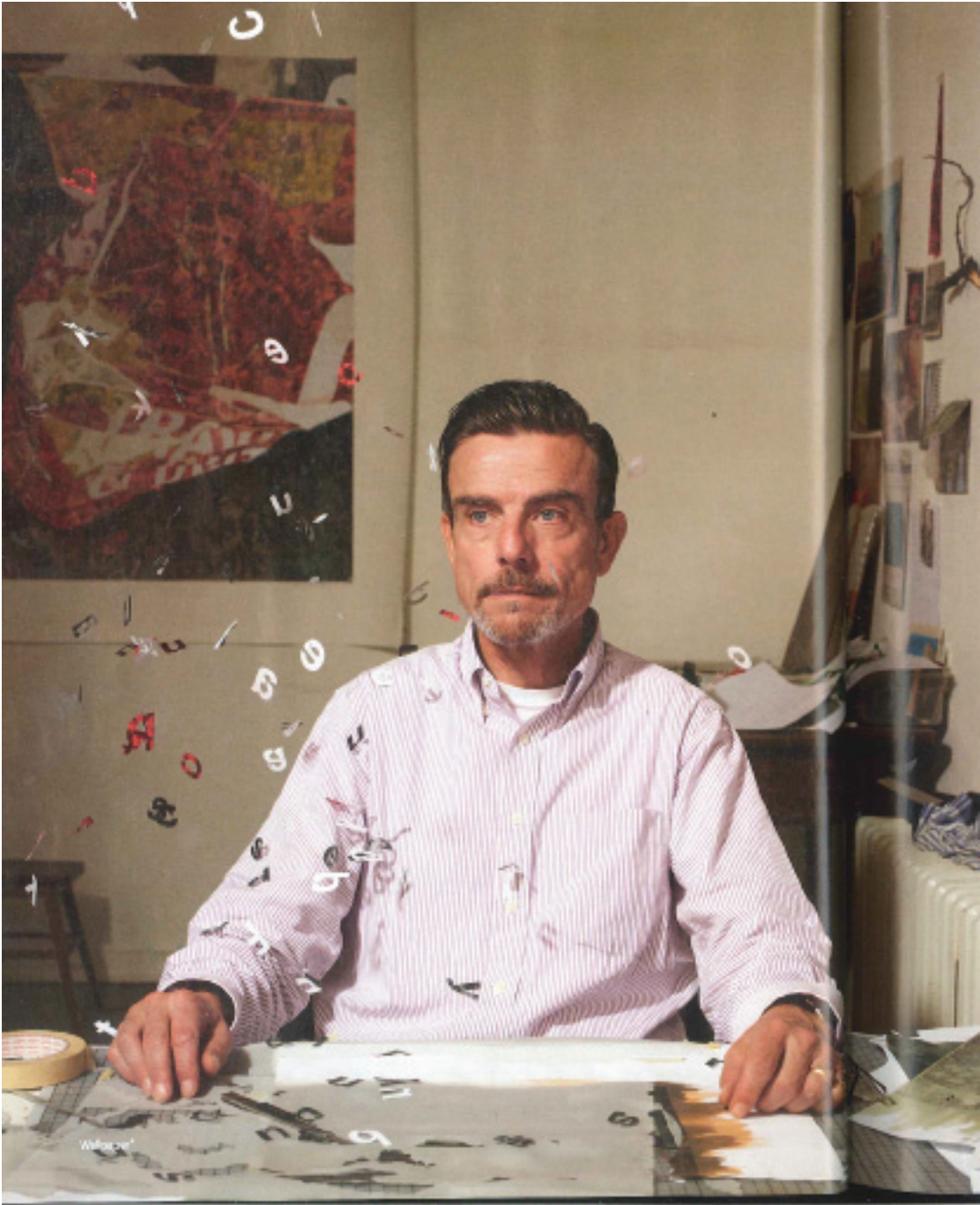


Wallpaper*

*DESIGNINTERIORSFASHIONARTLIFESTYLE



Paper trail

How artist Marcel Odenbach, whose hyperrealistic collages are assembled from tiny images to reveal a subject's latent history, found himself working on Sigmund Freud's couch.

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Imagine if Sigmund Freud's couch could reveal all that it has lived through - the repressed memories and desires of those who lay on it, the budding science of psychoanalysis, the Nazi annexation of Austria, the climate of anti-semitism that forced Freud to pack his worldly goods and flee Vienna. He escaped to London, where the couch still stands in his home, now the Freud Museum. Its Latest exhibition pairs the original couch with a life-sized, two-dimensional replica by German artist Marcel Odenbach. From afar, it appears to be an exact rendering. But close up, one sees that it is a collage of small images, symbolising Freud's history and Europe's past, from 16th-century synagogues to nudes by Sigmund's grandson Lucian Freud. It is the couch's own subconscious, risen to the surface.

A German artist who first made his name with video, Odenbach is something of a collage himself. His father came from the Netherlands, his grandfather from Paris, and his German-Belgian mother's ancestors formerly lived in the Congo. Born in 1953 in Köln, he spent a privileged childhood in a house filled with art, books and family members speaking myriad languages. All he knew was that he was different from other kids. 'I had this weird name, Marcel,' he recalls. 'I hated it, because I wanted to be Hans or Peter, but not Marcel.' The tables turned when he started going abroad. 'When I travelled in the 1970s, I was always the German. I was the one everybody hated, who had to be responsible for what Germans did.'

Odenbach has a patrician face, with intense blue eyes, and a skinny body - often, he says, he gets lost in his work and forgets to eat. Many of his family members practised art as a hobby, but he was the only one to pursue it as a profession. Odenbach first followed his father's advice and received a proper education, in architecture, a discipline which still plays a role in his creations. German art schools of the 1970s

didn't interest him anyway, since they were too conservative for his tastes. Once he discovered the work of Bruce Nauman and Richard Serra, he decided video would be his primary medium, often mixed with performance art and drawing.

After finishing his studies he sold a pile of drawings to a collector and used the proceeds to buy himself a camera, a huge, clumsy thing with tape on an open wheel. He became a pioneer of video art in Germany, teaching himself by performing in front of the lens. 'I was interested in editing, and there were no facilities,' he says. 'So I shot something, then pushed the pause button, then changed the set then started again. That was editing.' Unlike many other video artists, he has always been interested in the content of the tape than the accessory equipment. He often mixes new and archival footage, using the soundtrack to heighten the emotional experience.

From the start, Odenbach's work was political, looking at identity (both individual and cultural) and how one's sense of self develops in social or historical context - in his case, what does it mean to be a German born in the 1950s? He grew up in a generation for whom the war was a taboo subject, not even mentioned in school. So he did his own research into his nation's history and his family's experience. Two of his great uncles married Jewish women who committed suicide together during the war. Others told him to move on: 'In my family, nobody wanted to talk about the war anymore. They'd say "No, it's enough, why do you have to bring this up?"'

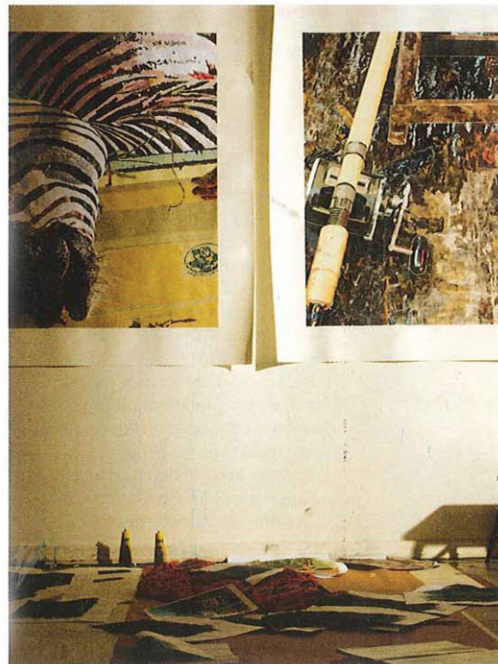
He has never stopped bringing it up. A recent video, *Turning in Circles* (part of the Freud Museums show), was made after spending ten days visiting concentration camps with a couple of friends from Israel. One in particular stood out: located in the suburbs of the Polish city of Lublin, and with a massive, spaceship-



like Soviet-era memorial. In Odenbach's video, the camera does a slow, claustrophobic revolution around the structure, then two youths wander through it, wondering with a laugh whether a memorial has to be made from 'unfriendly concrete.' Growing up next to this monolith, they have come to consider it their playground, just like Odenbach played as a child in the ruins of post-war Köln.

The artist still makes Köln his primary residence, living in a converted 19th century power station. But he also owns a house in Ghana, which he shares with a Belgian artist Carsten Höller. Africa has long held a strong fascination for him, personally and as an artist. In 2004 he revisited the Rwandan genocide with a video titled *In Still Waters Crocodiles Lurk*. The first flickering images reference Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, in which a troubled actress has lost her ability to speak. In his video, boys open their mouths to yell but there is silence. 'They survived the genocide by lying under the dead bodies of their parents in churches. They're completely traumatised,' he explains. 'I told them, "Why don't you let everything out and shout?"; They couldn't shout, there was nothing coming out.' He worked with them all day, until the police showed up and arrested him for filming negative images of the country.

Odenbach's collages might be less



PASTE MASTER

Top, Odenbach's *Probeliegen* collage uses symbolic images dyed and cut to depict Freud's couch, and is currently on show at Hampstead's Freud Museum. Above, large-format collages – including one picturing a slaughtered zebra – hang in the artist's Köln studio

risky to produce, but they are just as complicated. When he reads a magazine or newspaper there is always a pair of scissors at hand. In his studio, he has stacks of clippings he has cut out and arranged by theme, from sports to the American Civil War. He then photocopies and dyes them, cuts them into shapes and painstakingly pastes them on his paper canvas. The result offers a near-photographic quality from a distance, filled with light and brilliant colour, and a second layer of imagery and meaning that emerges as one approaches.

Spread on his studio floor is his latest work in progress, next to a book opened to a picture of a sunlit deck and empty chairs overlooking mountains – Adolf Hitler's terrace. Odenbach has traced it in pencil, nearly seven square metres in size, and started filling it in with images denoting the roots of fascism in Germany. The furniture will be made out of glued copies of old letters he has found, written from the Gestapo to his great uncle when they took away his architecture licence.

Odenbach and an assistant will work on the collage eight hours a day for nearly three months. 'Sometimes I have the idea I could send it to China, where a hundred people do it in a week,' he says. 'But I have to do it myself.' Of course, there are artistic reasons. But I also realised a long time ago that art is like doing something instead of going to a shrink. Art is mirroring your soul to the public.