

ARTFORUM

Marcel Odenbach

ANTON KERN GALLERY/KIMMERICH

After beginning apparently sunnily with two teenage boys horsing around in a field, Marcel Odenbach's *Im Kreises drehen* (Turning Circles), 2009, quite quickly changes mood. The rest of the sixteen-minute video is a study of Majdanek, the death camp in Lublin, Poland, where more than seventy thousand people were killed by the Nazis during World War II. More particularly, it is a study of a Holocaust monument built at Majdanek in 1969; more particularly still, it is a study of a mausoleum, for the monument, designed by Wiktor Tolkin, takes the form of a giant marble bowl, the repository for a large mound of ash, with fragments of bone, left behind when the camp was vacated. This concave bowl is mirrored by a convex roof above it, a massive shallow dome supported by what seem like too few pillars. Symbolically and surely actually, to pass beneath this dome must be to feel a large sense of weight.

Odenbach trained as an architect, and *Turning Circles* is in part architectural analysis, an examination of the form designed to memorialize a terrible history. As such, though, even while its approach to Tolkin's building is something like intimate, the work seems incomplete. Through much of the video, full of dense blacks and grays, Odenbach's camera circles the walls of the mausoleum so closely that our sense of its plan is swallowed in the grain and texture of its marble surface. The letters of an inscription in Polish, translated as LET OUR FATE BE A WARNING TO YOU, are so large and near they're indecipherable—we'd have difficulty gathering them into words even if we knew their language. A more conventional yet useful study, too, might have compared Tolkin's work to other memorial architecture to isolate its tropes and judge their success. Instead, the monument seems almost the only thing in the world. Occasional glimpses into the neighboring fields and town seem to leach out and poison them.



If *Turning Circles* is constrained as architectural critique, though, it is effective on a level congruent with our hindered vision of it, our seeing but not seeing it. The question of how to remember the Holocaust is a profound problem, and *Turning Circles* is more a phrasing of that problem than a memorial in itself. Like a traditional epic poem, it begins its effort in medias res, at a present moment pitched between past and future. But where that poem would have returned to the past, Odenbach only indexes it—where a more ordinary movie, whether honorable or suspect, might try and fail to describe what happened in the camps, Odenbach treats that moment as unrecoverable. The two boys in the field, whom we later see exploring the mausoleum for their

interest and leisure, personify and predict the issue of the belated response, when what's manageable is a reflection on a reflection.

The show at Anton Kern Gallery also featured a collage, and there was a second video and a second collage at Kimmerich. Odenbach's collages are large and intricate. They begin with a photograph—at Kern, one taken at a trial of Auschwitz staff in Frankfurt in 1964–65—that Odenbach then reconstitutes as a kind of a jigsaw of small cutout reproductions of texts and pictures with a bearing on the overall image. At Kimmerich Odenbach showed a collage of Tiananmen Square, Beijing—a sea of flowers in preparation for the 2008 Olympics—and a video on Kolkata, India. Kolkata—formerly Calcutta—is a busy city of fifteen million people, but Odenbach's video, *Verstörte Orte* (Disturbed Places), 2007, evokes a quiet, traditional culture of rickshaw wallahs and sari salesmen, religious rituals and slow boat rides. Though *Disturbed Places* is another meditation on memory and narrative, on how we put together an understanding of a place or event, it flirts with touristic glamour, and does not fully avoid it; nor does the Tiananmen collage fully avoid the triumph of ingenuity over content. The potential of Odenbach's collages was better shown by the work at Kern, in which the difficulty of identifying and absorbing the myriad fragments that make up the image restates the problem, in *Turning Circles*, of a story that cannot be told, yet must be.

—David Frankel