

Postscript by Publisher

Imagining spaces as a strategy for survival

Spatial order and sequence are the best memory aids. To remember a story line or individual portions of a speech, one should choose a familiar location, for example a house with its single rooms. Each room is connected to certain images (objects, story lines, people) one would like to remember. In an imaginary visit to the house, the speaker steps from one room to the next and can remember his story, space for space and image for image. In his *Rhetoric for Herennius*, Cicero explains that the best means to remembering a speech – which of course could not be written and was spoken freely in front of the people – consisted of using spatial imagery as a mnemonic device. “Those who have mastered mnemonic devices are able to connect the things they have learned with specific places, and thanks to the help of these places, they can say these things from memory”. (*Cicero, Rhetoric for Herennius, III; XVII-XIX*) “He who would like to train this ability must therefore choose specific places and create mental pictures of the things he would like to hold in his memory, and attach them to consciously chosen locations. In this way, these locations’ sequence will retain the ordering of the material, the images of the things, but also designate the things themselves, and we can use the locations instead of the wax board, the images instead of the letters.” *Cicero, De oratore, II, LXXXVI, 351-354.*

Seeing images in one’s head, seeing them, requires an active visual acuity that is no longer so self-evident in today’s society. As is generally known, our visual capacities in the everyday media world are constantly weakened by the invasion of images and symbols: We no longer really see, we visualize, which means we deal with machines, television, posters, magazines, video clips, etc, ... which translate the world into a simple language of signs and symbols. Nothing more than the actual phenomenon of visualization can be seen. (see Paul Virilio, *la Machine de vision*, Paris 1988) Those who no longer see are no also no longer capable of fantasizing images and whoever is no longer able to fantasize images can no longer spatially orient himself. And whoever can no longer orient himself is lost, physically as well as mentally.

Imagine a person, Herman Wallace, who has spent 38 years in the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola (USA), 35 of them in isolation. Spurred by the American activist and artist Jackie Sumell, he “sees” his ideal house from the six square-meter cell in which he spends 23 hours a day. This is what the project “The House that Herman built” describes. Herman Wallace was convicted for bank robbery in 1970 and thereafter repeatedly convicted for his activities and involvement as a member of the Black Panther Party. With him, two additional prisoners from the Angola prison, Robert King Wilkerson and Albert Woodfox, were convicted for a murder they did not commit.

Robert King Wilkerson, who was acquitted five years ago, is the voice that reads the letters from Herman Wallace. “The House That Herman Built” is not only an art project, but is also the result of the solidarity of people engaged in the release of the “Angola Three” and who are in daily postal contact with them. Wallace’s German pen pals – Susanna Klatt and Sigrid Davies, who have conducted a brisk correspondence with Wallace – took part in the June 2006 opening of Jackie Sumell’s installation at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart, Germany. Four years in the making, “The House That Herman Built” consists of 267 pages of letters, 39 drawings, two architectural models, a 1:1 model of Herman Wallace’s cell, a 3-D animated film and this book, in which the project’s background and a portion of the correspondence between Sumell and Wallace is printed.

My thanks goes to the activist and artist Jackie Sumell, for sharing and realizing this segment of the project under the auspices of her Akademie Schloss Solitude fellowship. Final thanks go to the main protagonist, Herman Wallace. He is living proof that an individual person’s survival is directly related to his striving toward a higher goal (the fight for African-American rights). The images, the spaces that Herman Wallace imagines in his prison cell are, at the same time, proof that he lives, thinks and never gives up hope. It is from these images, which he creates in exchange with other people outside, that he gleans the very power that keeps him alive. He shares them here with us.

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