

Catalogue text by Harald Fricke

*A camp for the global player*

Jens Haaning's proposal for redeveloping the old synthetic fibre factory grounds in Fürstenberg / Havel.

Connections to Fürstenberg are favourable. There is a train from Berlin almost every hour. From West Berlin it takes just under two hours, from Lichtenberg Station in East Berlin only one hour, and by car it takes about the same time. Fürstenberg am Havel lies in the midst of the Mark Brandenburg lake district, less than 100 kilometres from the new German capital. By the turn of the century it had already become a popular recreational resort for Berliners: Theodor Fontane wrote his most famous novellas in Fürstenberg, and today Günther Grass has retired to his country seat there. It has ancient 13th-century monasteries, endless footpaths for leisurely walks and a museum park where old steam engines and workshops are exhibited.

All this is described in the Fürstenberg tourist guide. Ever since the end of the Second World War, however, the town has also represented the very embodiment of Nazi brutality, for not far away is Ravensbrück, between 1938 and 1945 the largest concentration camp for women and children, where more than 120,000 women were interned. After the Russian army had liberated the camp, the government of Eastern Germany set up a memorial in 1959. Since then, exhibitions have been arranged, usually on the general theme of forced labour under National Socialism. Not until 1997 was an exhibition mounted – entitled "We were just nobody" – to document the particular fate of 1,100 prisoners who were transferred in the autumn of 1944 to the Daimler–Benz factory in Genshagen. Siemens was another big German firm that recruited forced labour from Ravensbrück.

Numerous artists have exploited the concentration camp theme, many of them former prisoners who have used their own experiences as a starting-point – during the period of the German Democratic Republic the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands) erected a sculpture in the area as a memorial. In January 1998, a landscape planning competition decided the future shape of Ravensbrück. Three architects are now to draw up a new plan to convert the 50,000-acre area into a memorial; the locations of the prisoners' barracks (which no longer exist) in the main camp are to be indicated by expanses of black clinker, and where the Siemens workshops formerly stood, the flooring slabs (which have been preserved) are to serve as a reminder of forced labour. The architects have decided on a field of blue flowers to represent the grounds of the so-called youth concentration camp, and the area occupied by the extermination camp established in 1944 will also be left open.

Whereas the concentration camp area is to be retained as a memorial, the future of another site is uncertain. The industrial area that also lies on the outskirts of Fürstenberg is in a state of delapidation. Although originally established in 1911 for the manufacture of synthetic fibres for petroleum wicks and worsted cloth, munitions were being manufactured here even before 1933 in violation of the demilitarization of Germany imposed after the First World War. During the Nazi period, this continued on a huge scale, the largest

company being Montan AG, which mainly used forced female labour from Ravensbrück. After the war the Soviet army set up a repair workshop for military vehicles on the site.

So what is to be done with it? Within the framework of a project organized by the Berlin curator Christoph Tannert, the Copenhagen artist Jens Haaning has explored the possibility of redeveloping it. Unlike Ravensbrück, Haaning is trying to reorganize the grounds, not merely as a monument or locality in which to remember National Socialist rule, but also to incorporate the notion of seeing Fürstenberg as having an identity of its own and of restoring to it a function in its own right beyond that of just representing horror. Will it be possible? Or does the tremendous historical stain leave no other interpretation open?

Haaning's proposal, which he has entitled *Das Faserstoff-Projekt* and drawn up in co-operation with VERTEX, a group of architects in Århus, envisages converting the district into a time-share estate. People from all over the world should be able to come here to work, live and relax together. The plan is to build 400 apartments, swimming-pools, half-a-dozen restaurants, discotheques, tennis courts and a marina down by the lake. The proposed transition is undeniably stark: from a factory run on forced labour to an international resort, a camp for holiday-makers from all over the world...

However, those who are familiar with this Danish artist's other works know that Haaning's interest lies neither in transfiguration nor in preservation of the status quo: most of his projects are rather more closely linked to the question of how social intervention influences an infrastructure. In 1996, for example, in the Dutch town of Middelburg, he placed, in the local Kunsthalle, a sewing workshop where handkerchiefs, towels, summerdresses etc. were produced throughout the duration of the exhibition. However, the employees of the workshop were immigrant workers, with the result that the project also shed light on the problems of a world market undergoing radical changes. As Dutch firms have goods manufactured in low-wage countries, the resultant unemployment in their own country becomes linked up with the granting of political asylum to foreign workers. In this way, government animosity towards foreigners conceals the deregulating interests of multinational companies.

In 1997, in an exhibition in Berlin Haaning similarly linked this dovetailing of market and discrepancy models: a travel agency was set up in the Galerie Mehdi Chouakri, which as a result of the tax laws only needed to deduct 7 per cent in sales tax on its bookings – after all, the office was a work of art and as such not subject to the full rate of 15 per cent. Haaning based his creation on this difference in price: suddenly the air ticket was a ready-made art object though liable to lose its artistic value the moment a customer actually used it. However, with every ticket, a certificate could be issued confirming that the purchase did indeed represent a work of art. In this way the art value became relative, whereas the corresponding commercial value of the air ticket was made all the more tangible.

These various considerations have come to the forefront once more in *Das Faserstoff-Projekt*. The work takes advantage not only of the site-specific revaluation of the district by way of art, but also demonstrates the extent to which problems imposed by history affect the present. For the very reason that Fürstenberg labours under such a historical burden, the quality of the memory or recollection must be apparent in everyday life. After all, the town tries to advertise itself in brochures and postcards as a "lakeside town". This is its

only perspective. When the Soviet army withdrew, the business life of Fürstenberg came to a standstill. Many shops had to close, because all the soldiers, their potential customers, had returned to Russia.

Against this background, the time-share estate project fits in with local conditions and at the same time redefines them. During the National Socialistic period, nobody took offence from the fact that the town was right next to a concentration camp, but now it must adjust itself to the changes that have taken place in Eastern Germany since the transition to reunification. Suddenly, even this idyllic spot, with its murky past, could find itself exposed to a situation in which external conditions – a united Europe under the influence of globalization – might affect this small town's life. After reunification, despite all the national euphoria, Germany must come to terms with its European neighbours. In this way a particular paradox has struck Haaning: although there is much talk of a reawakened national identity, there is very little the Germans seem to be able to do with their country. For example, he finds the lack of promotion of domestic tourism strange. This is furthermore a symptom of monumental schizophrenia – the more strongly one's national mentality is fixated on an imaginary centre, the more one's own reality must be suppressed from the field of vision. For this reason, holiday-makers in search of the exotic are probably often the most rabid racists.

In factual terms, this redefinition in the form of a time-share estate concept represents a change of awareness. Seeing that the number of offences committed against foreigners has increased enormously in recent years, especially in the former German Democratic Republic, a town like Fürstenberg also has to learn, through redevelopment of the fibre factory grounds on an international scale, to disassociate itself from this regrettable racism, which is now almost a normal state of affairs in the provincial atmosphere of Eastern Germany. The process itself is the goal: all of a sudden the integration of foreigners would become a necessary process in order for the town to retain its own, newly established infrastructure – otherwise its self-definition as a business location would be endangered.

Jens Haaning is aware of the smouldering conflicts between international and nationalistic opinion-making that exist in a reunited Germany. By calling his project a time-share estate he makes this contradiction in the present a focal point. However, his proposal also reflects the debate about raising monuments and memorials. After all, living with memories depends above all on the ability to come to terms with everyday life. Every injustice that takes place here and now within this framework also reveals whether one has learnt anything from history or not. Not until the project has been realized will it emerge whether *Das Faserstoff Projekt* will be perceived as a helping hand for reconciliation or as a bone of contention. One could wish that any memorial intended to make us remember the terrors of National Socialism would possess this quality.

Published in the catalogue of the project Exhibition without exhibition, by Tilo Schulz, Germany, 1999. Translated from German by David Hohnen