

Forest and War

Abstract by Sonya Schönberger
for the conference

Cartographies of Dead: The Afterlives of Urban Remains

This project investigates the interwoven legacies of war, memory, and ecological transformation within the forests of Brandenburg, surrounding Berlin. Long utilized as spaces of militarization, concealment, and destruction—through successive wars, totalitarian regimes, and ideological shifts—these landscapes also endure and regenerate beyond human temporalities. Through an artistic research approach, the project seeks to understand how these forested sites embody both heritage loss and ecological resilience.

Positioning forests as active agents rather than passive witnesses, the project employs a mixed-methods methodology encompassing site visits (for example Halbe and Belower Wald), visual documentation, and interviews with local experts and witnesses. A central concern is how the apparent serenity of these landscapes today can obscure their violent pasts—sites of terror, forced labor, and execution often remain unmarked or visually erased. As vegetation reclaims these grounds, a false sense of closure or forgetting may emerge, especially in the context of shifting political narratives.

Brandenburg is particularly compelling due to the unique legacy of the GDR, whose approach to fascist memory diverged from that of West Germany. Many significant sites were only acknowledged or uncovered in recent decades, contributing to a fragmented and politically charged memory landscape. The project critically questions the celebratory narrative of "Deutsche Erinnerungskultur" (German memory culture), especially in light of contemporary right-wing movements that threaten to erode collective remembrance.

Through an essayistic, filmic form, this work reactivates overlooked narratives embedded in forested terrain, highlighting the tension between ecological regeneration and historical erasure. It also examines how militarized ecologies continue to shape collective memory, perception, and spatial practices. Some clips of the work-in-progress will be presented, alongside reflections on the process of uncovering, witnessing, and narrating these contested and living heritage sites.

Sonya Schönberger is a Berlin-based artist whose practice deals with biographical ruptures against the backdrop of political or social upheaval. The source of her artistic exploration are the people themselves, who tell about it in biographical conversations. This is how some archives were created, but also already existing, partly found archives flow into her work. In 2018, she initiated the "Berliner Zimmer," a long-term video archive based on the stories of people in Berlin in collaboration with the City Museum of Berlin. This archive contains over 200 interviews and has the perspective of running for a hundred years.

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