

**DEPT. OF REMEMBERING
TWO FROM BERLIN**

By Jane Kramer

The Berlin conceptual artists Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock stopped in New York recently to install a show at the Jewish Museum, and while they were here they spent some time at Ground Zero—and took up an old argument about what they'd do at the site to keep memory alive instead of, as Stih says, “memorializing it” or, as Schnock puts it, “shutting the dead away.” Stih and Schnock are acute travelers through the thorny semiology of their own city. They didn't enter the competition to design a 9/11 memorial, but their thoughts on memorials are instructive. “Bavarian Quarter,” the subject of their Jewish Museum show, consists of eighty silk-screened aluminum signs, banded onto lampposts that wind through an old Berlin Jewish neighborhood, chronicling the accumulation of small proscriptions—against things like owning pets, buying eggs, and using park benches—that slowly and insidiously pushed Berlin's hundred and sixty thousand Jews out of the life, and the mind, of the city. Memorials like that are as intimate as they are powerful, and that's what many New Yorkers want their 9/11 memorial to be.

Listening to Stih and Schnock have an argument about art—“A discussion,” Renata says; “Anything Renata wants,” says Frieder—is like chaperoning the creative process. This argument began last winter, in the Berlin loft where they brainstorm at the same long table they use for dinner parties, making it hard to know precisely when marital banter meets that process. What you do know, though, is that the argument is serious, the result of a total, almost consuming collaboration (“We need a wife,” Renata says), and not Serious, since they've shopped together, cooked together, and will be doing the dishes together later. Frieder is a lanky, brown-haired Saxon in requisite Berlin black, and Renata is a small, platinum-blond Croatian in requisite Berlin black—except for her shoes, from a collection of exceptionally

lurid footwear, which tend to be orange, puce, or iridescent green. The couple are in their forties. The world they inhabit runs the gamut from Herrprofessordoktoren to the regulars at their local bar, which caters to disabled transvestites.

Frieder announced at once that he and Renata carry different images of New York City in their heads. “I see the view from the ferry,” he said. “All the tall buildings.” Renata sees “the narrow streets running between them.” Frieder thinks the important thing about the twin towers is that there were two of them, and that this offers him a clue about how to commemorate the people who died in them: “A memorial has to say, ‘You are someone. You have someone else in front of you right now. You will not be alone.’” Of course, as Renata said a few days later, at a friend's apartment, it's by no means certain what kind of buildings will go up at Ground Zero, and this makes choosing a memorial for it a fairly blinkered undertaking, at least to two Berlin artists who've been through the Holocaust-memorial wars at home, and whose own “anti-monument” proposal there—a simple bus shelter, with a timetable of buses leaving hourly along the “routes” of Nazi Germany, including the ones to the death camps—was arguably more pertinent than the five acres of jutting stone slabs that the city is getting from the architect Peter Eisenman.

Frieder said, “For me, the memorials are here already, in the victims' homes, in the firehouses, in the stores where you go to buy something and next to the window there's a shrine, with flowers and a photograph.”

Renata said, “Frieder, you're talking schmalz! You also need a strong sign, a central sign. That's reality.”

Last winter in Berlin, Stih and Schnock had tossed around the idea of a memorial using the letters “US,” for “us” and for “United States”—something to announce that we are an immigrant country, that the American dream is about “us,” all of us, everywhere, maybe even in the U\$ of a world trade center. Now Frieder isn’t sure. “Bush said, ‘This happened to us.’ Unfortunately, he stopped including the rest of world in 9/11.” What interests Frieder and Renata is finding a way to commemorate while avoiding the politics of “us and them.” They invent outrageous, impossible, complicated gestures. Sending the Statue of Liberty back to France was one—“Suppose they refuse to accept it?” Renata said—or putting her to sea, to wander forever like a Flying Dutchman, or draping her in black, or, for that matter, draping every New York building and monument designed by a foreigner in black. Frieder said, “We thought of asking Christo to wrap the statue, but that’s too arty.” Renata said, “Maybe you just remove her. See what happens.” To which Frieder added, “Then see what happens if you remove the Seagram Building. What would Manhattan look like if it tried to be ‘pure’ American?”

“You see, Frieder starts plain: he goes from the quiet concept to the shocking,” Renata said when they were back in Berlin, picking up the argument on their new speakerphone. “Frieder is more minimalist than I am. I’m the fantasist. I go from shocking to plain.” She went on, “There’s no recipe. You start from scratch every time.” The extraordinary response to their signs and their bus stop has convinced her that a memorial for New York has to involve the same “bumping into yourself” experience. “I see it as people crossing paths, turning a corner, coming across a photograph of someone, or a place to sit and reflect—a place that collects those ‘memory stickers’ and says, ‘Live with me!’” Frieder said, “Right now, you have all those surveillance cameras at the site. There’s a way to turn this around. You might include images of people confronting the images of people who died on 9/11. You’d see yourself in the picture. Refractions of connection.” It was time to set the table. “I see putting a touch of the Statue of Liberty there, too,” Renata told him. “Maybe an arm sticking out. Refractions of aggression. A bit like a graveyard, or maybe more like a chapel, a circle of silence where there’s no traffic, a place where, somehow, grief is protected.”