



Eva Maria Stadler

## Michaela Melián: Herminengasse. Deportations 1938–1945

“Time and again, I am gripped by horror when I walk through the underpass.”<sup>1</sup>

It is “sinister constructions”<sup>2</sup> such as these that Siegfried Kracauer deals with in his book *Straßen in Berlin und anderswo*; for the most part critical of capitalism, its texts are an eloquent and vivid description of the interaction between architecture and society that results from human perception or aesthetical experience. The underpass is the epitome of the capitalist principle that is based solely on economics. The uninterrupted flow of paths and traffic transports people from A to B as quickly as possible. It is not only the “dreadful disconnectedness” that strikes horror in Kracauer’s heart, but “the opposition between the closed, robust system of construction and the melting human chaos . . . , people [as] parts and particles torn asunder, unrelated fragments of a whole.”<sup>3</sup> It may well be the unease elicited by an urban non-place, such as an underpass, that prompted WIENER LINIEN, responsible for public passages in the underground network, to commission an artistic solution for the underpass leading from Schottenring underground station to Herminengasse in Vienna’s second district.

German artist Michaela Melián was invited to conceive an artwork for this underpass. Her aim was most definitely not to find an answer to its architectural awkwardness, nor did she try to hide or mask it. On the contrary, Michaela Melián expands this spatial unease and tracks down the fate of hundreds of Jews who, from 1938 to 1945, either lived in Herminengasse or were accommodated there for a certain time.

For her artistic conception of the underpass, Michaela Melián provided the impetus to carry out comprehensive research into the fate of Jews who lived in Herminengasse in the period from 1938 to 1945. It was known that a thriving Jewish community had existed not only in Herminengasse but also in the entire second district, which was characterized by Jewish schools, cultural institutions, restaurants, and shops. What had not yet been subject to any or sufficient research was the fate of individual inhabitants during the Nazi era. The study carried out showed that 1,322 Jews had been registered in Herminengasse<sup>4</sup>, a typical Viennese street lined with multistory buildings dating from the Gründerzeit, between 1938 and 1945.

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<sup>1</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “Die Unterführung,” in id., *Straßen in Berlin und anderswo* (Frankfurt a. M., 2009), 52.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Roth, “Bekenntnis zum Gleisdreieck” [1924], in *Werke*, vol. 2: *Das journalistische Werk, 1924–1928* (Amsterdam and Cologne, 1990), 218.

<sup>3</sup> Kracauer, as note 1.

<sup>4</sup> The street owes its name to a quirk of Konrad Ley, the chief district councilor, who in the mid-nineteenth century named streets in “his” district after members of his family.



“The fate of individuals” must be researched, says Kracauer, so that history can be related to the historical period “from the bottom up.”<sup>5</sup> For history is “cataract-like, filled with cavities and bubbles.”<sup>6</sup> It is these historical cavities that are important to Michaela Melián, who, in her mural for Herminengasse, endeavors to capture “parts and particles torn asunder” with a crisscross of lines.

The line, or thread, forms a continuous artistic motif in Michaela Melián’s works. In her drawings, projections, and installation works, lines are literally sewn together, overlap each other, and make each other dance. Michaela Melián—a long-standing member of the band F. S. K.<sup>7</sup>—has a special relationship to music, which is not only reflected but also visually transposed in her works of art. The line assumes the role of a notation rather than of a transmitter between the imaginary and the symbolic, a “suture” in Lacan’s sense.

For her *Herminengasse* project, Michaela Melián started by assessing the research findings provided by Tina Walzer and her team on the deportation of the street’s inhabitants. It turned out that many more Jews had been registered there than previously assumed. More importantly, we may take it as given that many people were gathered in so-called “Sammelwohnungen” (communal flats) in preparation for the planned deportations. Based on these lists compiled using data provided by the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance and the Jewish Community of Vienna, Michaela Melián was able to identify 800 people who were deported from Herminengasse to different destinations. Melián reconstructs 800 individual fates by representing each individual with a line. A line that leads from the residential buildings of Herminengasse to the concentration camps. The artist bases her portrayal of registration data, deportation dates, and the number of people on sociological information diagrams. This approach included studying the work of American information scientist Edward R. Tufte<sup>8</sup>, in order to ground her depiction of historical events in data and facts but at the same time visualize the monstrosity of the administrative effort needed to carry out the deportations.

Melián lists the names of concentration camps in alphabetical rather than geographical order; buildings are not shown in a true-to-life manner but as bars in a bar chart. The result is a shocking crisscross of lines that transcend the dimensions of time and space and inexorably intersect. This web is superposed onto a network of grey lines illustrating the railway network, including stations and branch lines, of the time.

Michaela Melián has already explored the subject of National Socialism in several artworks, such as *Memory Loops* (2010), a virtual memorial to the victims of National Socialism that comprises three hundred audio tracks, and the slide installation *Föhrenwald* (2005), in which she tells the story of the Upper Bavarian camp that accommodated forced laborers and homeless Jewish refugees and extermination camp survivors. These works show the artist concerned with bringing history to the public

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<sup>5</sup> “Zwischen Warten und Wandern. Christine Voss über Siegfried Kracauer. Eine Biografie von Jörg Später,” *Texte zur Kunst*, issue 107, September 2017, 145.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> The band F. S. K. (Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle, in English “voluntary self-control”) was founded in 1980 and comprises Michaela Melián, Thomas Meinecke, Justin Hoffmann, Wilfried Petzi, and Carl Oesterheld.

<sup>8</sup> Edward R. Tufte wrote several classic works on information design, including *Envisioning Information* (1990).



in a way that places the spotlight on the cataract-like character of history, the dissonant clash of acts and events.

As sinister the lines are that sweep across the walls of the underpass and as outrageous it appears that the 800 lines come to such a criminal and violent end, as clear and vigorous is the opposition of Michaela Melián's wall drawings to the injustice of history.