



Press Release

## The Invisible Camp

# AUDIOWALK GUSEN

An art project by christoph mayer chm. dealing with the memory and life on the grounds of the former concentration camps Gusen I and II

[www.AUDIOWALK.gusen.org](http://www.AUDIOWALK.gusen.org)

**AUDIOWALK GUSEN - Opening of the international version (English synchronisation) within the framework of Ars Electronica Festival 2007**

September 6 - 11, 2007, Linz / Upper Austria

Free shuttle-service from Linz to Gusen (20 min.), daily 2.30 pm and 4 pm

Info, reservation & departure: ARS ELECTRONICA Infocenter, Pfarrplatz 6, 4020 Linz

**AUDIOWALK GUSEN TALK with Prof. Aleida Assmann and christoph mayer chm.**

Sunday, September 9, 11.30 am - 1 pm, Mobile Ö1 Atelier, Linz mainsquare

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Information on the Gusen camp complex: [www.gusen.org](http://www.gusen.org)

The **AUDIOWALK GUSEN** addresses the obliviousness of a region, the location of the concentration camps Gusen I and II during the time of the Nazi dictatorship. Pursuing the **AUDIOWALK GUSEN**, a voice in your earphones will lead you through a pleasant residential and recreational landscape where no traces of its terrible past are visible. The 90 min. audio collage of sounds and voices creates a virtual space in the head of the listener, who will be able to perceive the discrepancy between the seen and the heard. It evokes the reality of the concentration camps but also the post-war problems of dealing with history and memory. You will listen to survivors and local witnesses who lived in Gusen back then and now. Former SS-members and soldiers who worked at the concentration camps in Gusen also get their say. The **AUDIOWALK GUSEN** is neither a scientific historical project nor a „memorial“ in the traditional sense. As an art project, it creates a space for experiencing radical „dissonance“, by confronting the conflicting identities of the place, the forgotten history and - your own self.

The artistic concept was conceived by **christoph mayer chm.** who was raised in St. Georgen an der Gusen and now lives in Berlin. He has been putting together the **AUDIOWALK GUSEN** in co-operation with the **project group „Ein so genanntes Nebenlager“** (“a so-called secondary camp”), the cultural society “Tribüne St. Georgen” and the Memorial Committee Gusen since 2005. Support for the project comes from the National Fund for the Victims of National Socialism, the Ministry for the Interior, the Federal State of Upper Austria, the communities of St. Georgen and Langenstein a.o. As of autumn 2007, there will be - apart from the original sound version (mother tongue and interview partners speaking dialect) - dubbed versions in English and in standard German.

*The **AUDIOWALK GUSEN** demonstrates that the camps, where annihilation through work was common practice, existed amidst a world of ordinariness and every-day life that included boat trips, dances and sex - creating an even more horrific effect than staged memorials relying on emphasising the terror and the brutality. That ordinariness will permit any kind of crime to be committed, watched and tolerated by perfectly ordinary people - all of that depicts the Holocaust as an historical event that did not take place in a distant, somehow unreal black and white Nazi reality, but also here, now, in colour, with perfectly ordinary people, in Gusen. The **AUDIOWALK GUSEN** leads you through the vanished camp, which suddenly reappears in the voices of perpetrators, victims and residents with a presence that is more compelling than watchtowers, fences and sheds could ever be.*

(Harald Welzer, Professor for Social Psychology at the University of Witten-Herdecke (Germany))

## Gusen



View of the concentration camp Gusen I. © National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington, D.C.

The complex of concentration camps in Gusen has been more or less marginalized in the consciousness of the Austrian population, by the public memorial culture and in scientific discourse. The three parts of the camp (Gusen I, II and III) were located on the territory of the communities of Langenstein, St. Georgen an der Gusen, Luftenberg and Katsdorf (Perg district, Upper Austria) from 1940-1945. Under the name „Concentration Camp Mauthausen / Quarter Gusen“, it was separated only by a few kilometres from the concentration camp Mauthausen and in respect to size as well as number of victims, it was definitely comparable to the camp Mauthausen. Both camps shared an administrative centre in St. Georgen/Gusen.

As a part of the Nazi extermination machinery within current Austrian borders, Gusen I and II had an extremely high death toll and were known as „camps of no return“. About 37,000 of the approximately 120,000 camp victims who perished within present-day Austrian territory had to die in and around the camps Gusen I, II & III: mainly political opponents of the Nazi regime from all over Europe and during the last two years of the war also many Jews who had been deported from concentration camps like Auschwitz, among them many children. They all died of the “work” and camp conditions, of malnourishment, diseases or fell victim to SS-members and their capos: being bathed to death, from freezing to death, being drowned, beaten to death or killed by poisonous gas.

More information on the history of the Gusen camps is available on the website of the Gusen Memorial Committee: [www.gusen.org](http://www.gusen.org)  
The Gusen Memorial Committee is a non-government organisation working locally as well as internationally. Their voluntary work includes looking after the concerns of Gusen survivors and their families and ensuring a dignified remembrance. In addition, they promote research of the concentration camp complex.



Today's „Gartenstraße“ („garden street“) in Gusen, shortly after Gusen I und II had been freed by US troops, in May 1945  
© National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington, D.C.

## AUDIOWALK GUSEN - Facts and Background Information

*„And I've been coming here since 1996 and had to realise: there is nothing, only the memorial. And I walk along this road, reach this garden and know: this is where block 24 was, my block.“*  
(Fjodor Solodovnik, Moscow, former prisoner of the Gusen concentration camp)

*„It's so peaceful here now, isn't it? So quiet ... Hard to believe, almost like it's no longer true.“*  
(a contemporary witness from St. Georgen an der Gusen, who lived next to the camp)

Those who walk the AUDIOWALK GUSEN, will hear what no longer is visible. Apart from the Memorial built in 1960 by the Italian group of architects B.B.P.R. (Gian Luigi Banfi, Lodovico Barbiano di Belgiojoso, Enrico Peressutti and Ernesto Nathan Rogers) and the visitors centre which opened in 2004, there is hardly anything left to remind the onlooker of the atrocities committed on Gusen soil.

On the contrary: The sheds of the camp Gusen I between 1940 and 1945 have been replaced by a typical Austrian housing estate. Where SS members and their capos used to torture people to death, you will now see children playing in front yards. The embankment where trains transported about 10,000 prisoners day in and day out in shifts from the camp Gusen II to the underground mines „B8 Bergkristall-Esche 2“ not far from the centre of St. Georgen, now is part of the Danube cycling path through the lovely countryside of the scenic Mühlviertel.



Today's „Gartenstraße“ („garden street“), between 1940 and 1945 seemed by the barracks of Gusen I and II.  
© christoph mayer chm

A discrepancy, which, for years, had been bothering the artist christoph mayer chm. who grew up in St. Georgen and now lives in Berlin: „I learned to play the piano in the former SS-kitchen barrack. The building where I fired my first shot at a local festival, used to serve as the SS firing range“, the artist remembers. In dealing with the details dug up by the research of the Gusen Memorial committee, the project AUDIOWALK GUSEN slowly started to crystallise in his mind.

The 90-minute audio installation is supposed to „enable recollection and to recall the place's memory with the help of the listening visitor“, hopes christoph mayer chm.. The AUDIOWALK GUSEN reconstructs the cruel history - and the missing recollection - with numerous interviews with the few contemporary witnesses that are still alive. These flashbacks recall the topography of the camp for those wandering - wearing headphones - through the region fraught with history.



christoph mayer chm. (to the left) with Stanislaw Leszynski, a survivor of Gusen I, where „his“ shed used to be (block 23). © Jens Alpermann

## The Voices of Perpetrators

Even though hardly any research has been conducted on perpetrators in Austria, the project team succeeded in integrating the perspective of former SS-members and guards who had worked in Gusen. The audio-collage collects voices of residents who now live on the former camp ground - and there still are smouldering conflicts regarding post-war history, dignified remembrance and what to do with leftover buildings from the camp. With the listener following the traces of what happened, connecting the buildings and places of the present to the personal recollections of survivors, s/he will „once more be able to read, like the writing on the board that wasn't wiped off properly“, says christoph mayer chm..

**Aleida Assmann, the well-known philologist and cultural scientist (University of Konstanz, Germany), is the chairwoman of AUDOWALK GUSEN. She writes about the project:**

*On the AUDIOWALK, the ground sways below our feet, we face the abyss. Behind the walls and facades in sight, there is a different kind of reality opening up. The pictures of this different reality lead us to the limits of what we are able to imagine: you will have to produce them in your own head. We hear residents, former prisoners, SS-staff, people who were born after the war and those who moved there later. Voices that accompany us in different languages, accents and vibes, that don't just come together in a simple history lesson. They confront us the complexity of what happened, which cannot be reduced to a simple denominator. History cannot be simply processed and then shelved. It is let loose with an abundance of fragments and episodes, of impressions, memories and opinions. Each listener will have to confront the voices in his own way.*

## The Realisation



Mr. J. C. (centre) with his son (left) and christoph mayer chm. in one of the Gusen quarries where he was forced to work as a prisoner. © Jens Alpermann

The AUDIOWALK GUSEN is easy to follow for the listener and walker. You start at the visitors centre at the Gusen Memorial where you pick up your audio equipment. The audio collage will lead the listener through the area and give detailed instructions on where you are at any given moment. The AUDIOWALK GUSEN will need neither signs nor „stations“ or electronic navigation.

Visitors of the AUDIOWALK GUSEN will not only listen to the voices of contemporary witnesses and victims while walking through today's Gusen. Kai-Uwe Kohlschmidt composed a sound track integrating material he recorded on location. This amplifies the discrepancy between the prevailing „ordinariness“ and the historical burden of this region. Our eyes and ears perceive the inconceivability - the horror as well as the attempt to forget.

Ars Acoustica expert **Andreas Hagelüken** dramatised the audio collage by setting different voices against each other without attempting to pass judgement. They come together in the listener's head as a „virtual discussion“, involving the listener. This distinguishes the AUDIOWALK GUSEN clearly from audio guides available at museums and other tourist locations where the listener is presented with a completed line of thought. The AUDIOWALK GUSEN attempts to set an example for a future concept of memorial culture, emphasising open dialogue instead of serving up preconceived notions of what is correct.

## Objectives and Questions

The AUDIOWALK GUSEN seeks the confrontation with the people who still live on the former camp's ground and in the few remaining building, though without blaming them. They live e.g. in the former camp brothel or in the „Jourhaus“, the entrance building through which thousands of prisoners entered the camp Gusen I, only to hear the camp commander announce that the only way out was through the chimney of the crematorium.

The AUDIOWALK GUSEN puts its finger in the wound of Austrian post-war history: How come the memory of the camp in Gusen was so completely repressed in public consciousness? Why had Austrian history departments - contrary to their foreign colleagues - avoided the confrontation with the camps in Gusen? Why had the memorial in Mauthausen not made sure that Gusen was remembered in a dignified way? Why was the underground mine system at St. Georgen - built by prisoners under unbelievably cruel circumstances - not accessible to the public as a memorial? Why can former camp inmates not enter them even though they were used commercially until recently? How is life in a place that is so fraught with history?

Questions addressing the public and politics, the AUDIOWALK GUSEN will be asking after **Saturday, 5 May 2007** gently but persistently. Questions for which the communities of St. Georgen an der Gusen and Langenstein would like to have answers, and therefore they have supported AUDIOWALK GUSEN with all the means they could afford.

## The Team

### **christoph mayer chm.**

Idea and artistic realisation, head of project

Born in Linz / Upper Austria. University of the Arts, Berlin (class of Rebecca Horn), Academy of Arts Vienna (master class of Michelangelo Pistoletto and Heimo Zobernig). Worked in the field of experimental dance. Studies abroad in North America, Japan, Syria. Conception and realization: Art and museum projects in psychiatry / psycho therapy Zschadraß, Germany (permanent exhibition), numerous solo and group exhibitions in Austria and abroad, among others Secession Vienna, Shanghai Spring Art Salon, Centro d´arte Contemporaneo Santiago de Compostela, Gemäldegalerie am Kulturforum and Sophiensäle, Berlin.

### **Andreas Hagelüken**

Co-director, dramaturgy, audioproduction

Works as radio author, journalist und free-lance editor in Berlin and Freiburg. Awards among others 1992 for the project „Music in concentration camps“ with the project team by the same name.

### **Kai-Uwe Kohlschmidt**

Composition and sound effects

Works as a composer for film, radio play and theatre music in the Spreewald. Singer in the band Sandow. Several working journeys to Treblinka, Sobibor, Auschwitz and other concentration camps. Received the Prix Marulic and was nominated for the German Film Award.

Jörg Theil: Outdoor sound recording

Studio Mitte - Jörg Höhne, Robin Pohle, Sven Serfling: Sound design

Carsten Richter: Fooley artist

Rudolf Haunschmied, Gedenkdienstkomitee Gusen, Bertrand Perz: History Consultants

Luis Wohlmuther: Organization

Clava Grimm: Psychological Counselling

die jungs kommunikation: Public Relations (<http://diejungs.at>)

Lisa Shoemaker: Translation

## Partners and Supporters

The AUDIOWALK GUSEN is supported by:

- National Funds for the Victims of National Socialism
- Federal Ministry for the Interior
- State of Upper Austria
- Community Langenstein
- Community St. Georgen an der Gusen
- Memorial Committee Gusen
- Kulturverein Tribüne
- a. o.