

## Heimrad Bäcker

### it is possible that they won't kill us and they might allow us to live\*

September 27, 2019, to  
February 16, 2020

Press conference:  
Wednesday, September 25, 2019,  
10 am

Opening:  
Thursday, September 26, 2019, 7 pm



Heimrad Bäcker, **Death Ramp to the Vienna Pit Quarry at Mauthausen Concentration Camp, 1970-75**  
mumok, gift of Michael Merighi

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Heimrad Bäcker started photographing the premises of the Mauthausen and Gusen concentration camps in the 1960s—long before remembering Nazi atrocities became a collective endeavor in Austria. The project became an extensive photographic record of the initially abandoned and later repurposed site: an inventory of a place in more than 14,000 photographs.

Bäcker, whose work as an author and publisher stands out in Austrian literature after 1945, saw Mauthausen and Gusen as realms of memory in the sense of the French historian Pierre Nora. Nora coined the phrase *lieux de mémoire* to describe places where collective memory becomes manifest, thus allowing a culture of remembrance and historically motivated identity formation to emerge. In contrast to Nora, Bäcker was not primarily interested in national concerns but rather in taking responsibility for one's knowledge and coming to terms with it.

In 2015, Heimrad Bäcker's photographic estate was donated to mumok by his stepson Michael Merighi. It comprises a body of work whose 14,000 individual items bear witness to a lifelong investigation of a place and the Nazi mass extermination it implies. In this exhibition, mumok will show a selection of about 140 photographs, notes, text-based works, and found objects. The photographs depict vacant facilities either overgrown by plants or deliberately given a new use. Often, these pictures feature gradual differences in the editing process and are mounted serially.

The images and texts provide insight into Bäcker's approach and can be seen as parallels of his text-based works *nachschrift* (1986) and *nachschrift 2* (1997), which aim to edify us about the Nazi regime and the Shoah as a "cognitive work about the genesis and structure of the Holocaust" (Thomas Eder). It is a collection of quotes from the perspective of perpetrators, victims, the accused, and the accusers, creating a narrative of annihilation by means of texts and language. Excerpts from *nachschrift* can be heard in the exhibition in a recording of Bäcker himself. The artist spoke of a "possibility of concretion" with regard to *nachschrift*. Its exclusively found pieces of text share a certain kinship with Bäcker's photographic search for traces and also make the found objects more accessible: items collected on the premises, be they small nails or larger wood or concrete fragments. Bäcker sought a form of narration that was based on verifiable documents. He refrains from "ideas and speculation," as he called it, to bring his texts and photographs of Mauthausen and Gusen into position, against forgetting.

The presentation of Heimrad Bäcker's oeuvre at mumok is juxtaposed with two works by contemporary artists:

*The sound work A Hellish Noise* (2015) by Tatiana Lecomte features the witness Jean-Jacques Boijentin, who, aided by the sound-effects artist Julien Baissat, recounts the unbearable noise in the tunnels of the Gusen concentration camp, caused by the heavy machinery used there.

Rainer Iglar's photo series *Mauthausen 1974* (1983), which he created as a twelve-year-old schoolboy during an excursion to the former concentration camp and rediscovered as an adult, shows the clash of the photographer's personal history and the history of the site. "This place is marked, it is not innocent" (Rainer Iglar).

To frame the groups of images, texts, and sound works and to create a focused situation within the white cube, the exhibits are presented in a spatial installation designed specifically for this purpose by Eva Chytilek and Jakob Neulinger.

**Heimrad Bäcker** (\* 1925 in Vienna, † 2003 in Linz), was an editor, writer, and photographer. He and his wife Margret endowed the Heimrad Bäcker Prize from the proceeds of his literary estate, which they sold to the Literary Archive of the Austrian National Library.

Curated by Marie-Therese Hochwartner, Nora Linser, and Susanne Neuburger.

The exhibition was developed in cooperation with KZ-Gedenkstätte Mauthausen / Mauthausen Memorial.

\* Quoted in Heimrad Bäcker, *nachschrift 2*, ed. Friedrich Achleitner and Thomas Eder (Graz: Droschl 1997), p. 5. Bäcker quotes the diary entry of an unknown author in the Łódź Ghetto from July 25, 1944, in: *Unser einziger Weg ist Arbeit. Das Getto Lodz 1940–1944*, Frankfurt: Löcker 1990, 268. Bäcker's works at mumok include a tablet with this sentence, which is also featured in the exhibition.

We wish to thank the mumok sponsors, Dorotheum and UNIQA, and our media partners Der Standard, Falter, Wien live, and Ö1.