

text + work







2. *Combat Kids.*

## **WITNESS**

An Odyssey with Otto Freundlich

By Michael Roberts

With a contribution from David Evans

text + work

Childhood is measured out by sounds and smells and sights,  
before the dark hour of reason grows.

*John Betjeman.*



3. Pisspot.

## **WITNESS**

An Odyssey with Otto Freundlich

Michael Roberts

It's hard to describe that shared feeling but we all knew we didn't want to go there. There, the other side of the fence, not so far from our homes, dens and playing fields was this place, a place the gang didn't want to explore. Sure there was plenty of curiosity, but this was tempered with a sense of fear. We just didn't want to go there. That boundary into Bergen Belsen wasn't to be crossed for many years.

I was brought up a so called 'army brat' in that everywhere was home but nowhere was in particular. My father, a regular in the British Army, served two postings at BFPO 30 Hohne which had been a former Wehrmacht camp. During WW2 the adjacent land became a POW camp for 20,000 Russian soldiers most of whom perished over a single winter before the place became a full blown concentration camp when the systematic brutality and eradication of civilians began in earnest.

When the boundary was eventually crossed, when I one day crawled under the fence, the place didn't offer much in the way of anything scary, in fact it was a bit of an anticlimax. It was just empty space. No buildings, lots of open ground.

What was to make the lasting impression was found some time later in the camp museum. A film was running, showing the local population being escorted around the rotting heaps of bodies with the bulldozer scraping and pushing the corpses into the pits. A blown up photograph of a Military Policeman, with his ramrod bearing, marching away the 'Beast of Belsen'. His piercing, controlled look said 'One step out of line, one untoward twitch and I'll blow you away with this revolver.' I've never forgotten that day and also that look. The pictures of our quarters and camp being used as a temporary hospital for the sick and dying. Now the heaped mounds covered in heather with the inscribed numbers made sense.

Forty years later, in the spring of 2010, Tate Modern had a show of Van Doesburg and the International Avant Garde. I remember seeing a black and white reproduction of an abstract painting by an artist signing the monogram O.F. At the time it didn't ring any bells. So much art, so many artists, but there's always this instinctive curiosity about work and their makers. It stuck.

A few months later, idly wasting time on the Net, I found myself at the site of a small south coast auction house looking at page upon page of not so interesting art when the picture just popped up. It wasn't planned, thought out, no rhyme or reason to it but there it was, hard and fast.

'Abstract gouache study, bearing initial 'F', mounted and framed, 39cm x 24cm. 100/150'.

On screen it looked interesting, radiantly beaming in from a different universe from the preceding tedium of Labrador gun dogs and twee cottages by the babbling brook.

'F', 'F' now that seemed familiar. Where on earth had I seen it? Otto Freundlich's name came to me. There was a rush of unexpected adrenalin followed by intense excitement.

As an art student in the early eighties, art from Germany's inter war years had major currency, it was much discussed. This was also the period after the tsunami of 'The New Spirit in Painting' show at the RA whose shock waves were still reverberating throughout the country's art schools. Outside the studio, Britain was in turmoil. Thatcher was spoiling for a fight. These were formative days.

Freundlich and that famous poster for the *Degenerate Art* show. This Goebbels inspired touring art circus was used to 'educate' the hapless German population of the corrupting influence of modern art. Germany, the Nazis, the Bauhaus, Otto Dix, the Max Beckmann triptych show, way back when at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, this was all beginning to fit!

At the British Library and the National Art Library at the V&A I



4. Tin Man/Bergen Belsen



5. Untitled. Otto Freundlich.

checked out every book they had on Freundlich and was soon convinced the painting was by him. The clincher was a preparatory drawing that had sold some years before at a French auction house. New worlds were opening up, the pace was quickening and things were starting to snowball but as yet the work hadn't actually been eyeballed.

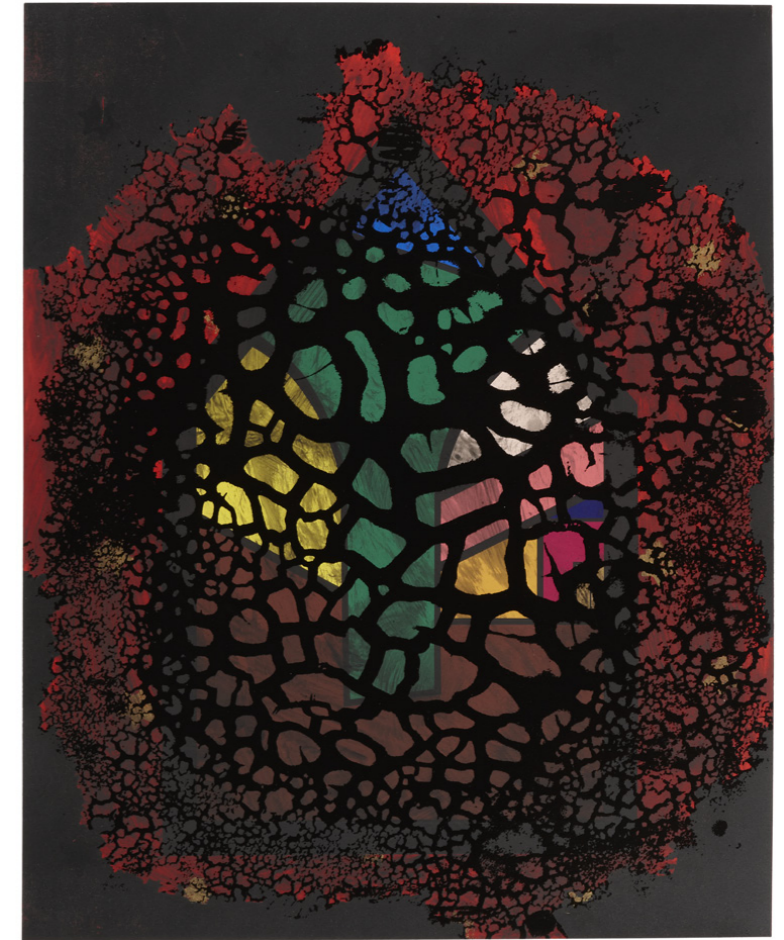
Walking through the door of the auction rooms, there, slap bang in the middle of the back wall, at perfect eye level, was the painting. Even from a distance of thirty metres it looked good.

To the right of the back wall was a small room the contents of which contained a real shock. Hanging from ceiling to floor were two thin Nazi swastika flags like you see in war films strung out on the front of buildings. All around was 'memorabilia'. 'Juden' arm bands, SS death skull head badges, ration books, number tags for slave labour. Shocking, toxic. My first thought was, 'It was those bastards who did for him'. But the work was by Freundlich, no question in my mind. Now all I had was a long anxious week to the sale and the no small matter of money.

The auction house was another jolt. Standing around in the car park nervously waiting for the painting to come up, I overheard a conversation. Two guys had flown in that morning from Tel Aviv especially to bid for the paintings. They'd come for the Freundlich, I was sure. My Freundlich.



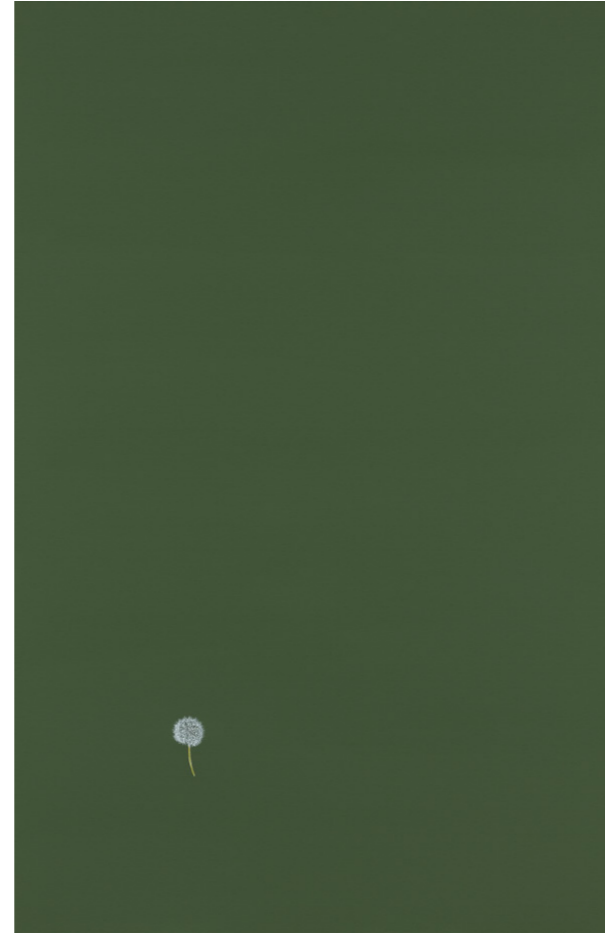
6. Burn It Fucking Down.



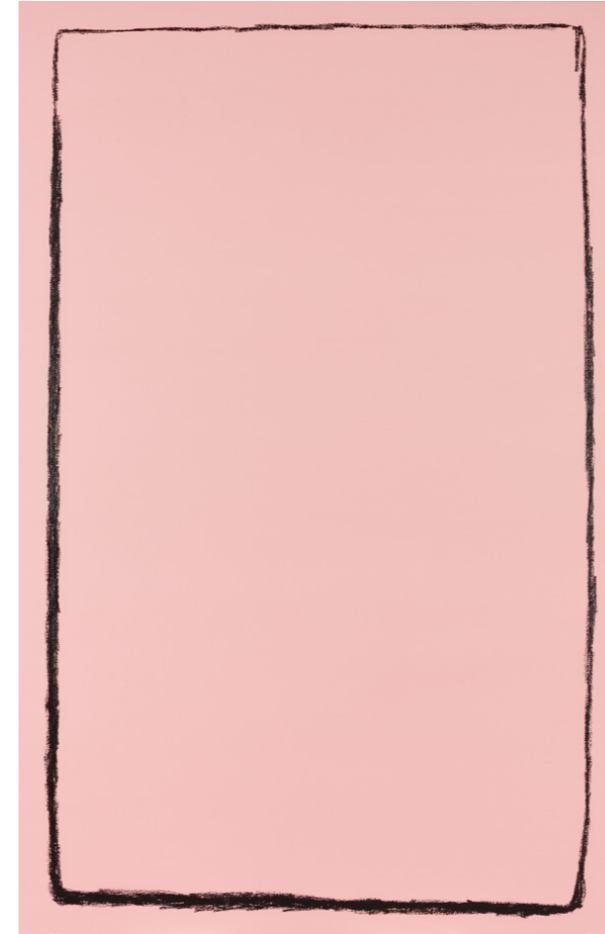
7. They Came And Smashed Otto's House.



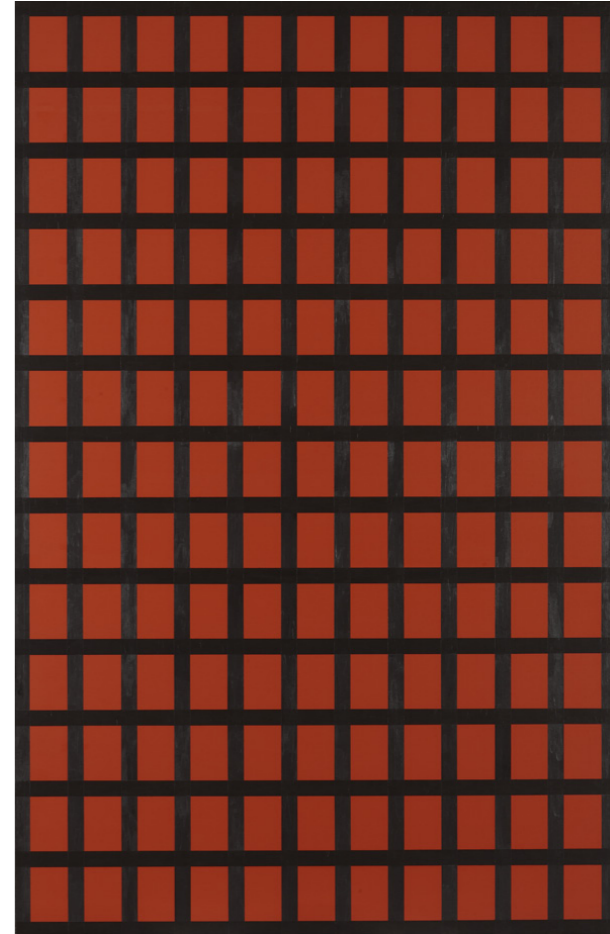
8. Dead Man.



9. Boundary.



10. Cell.



11. Transport.





12. *Boundary Kids.*



13. *Bulldozer of Death.*

I made an agreement with myself as to how high I could go and that I would be resolute. But within seconds of the work coming up my figure had been left way behind in the dust and I was yet to even make a bid. The battle was being fought at a fast and furious pace, in the auction house and over the Net. Eventually one of the unseen bidders fell away and I found myself raising my arm. There was a little jousting back and forth and then rather to my amazement I found I'd won. The elation, wonder and out of body sensation was consummate.

On paying for my spoils of war, a very old man came up, introduced himself and said he was a buyer and seller of wristwatches. He told me he liked the look of the work and asked me what I knew about it and I explained my hopes and dreams. He thought that the 'F' painting and a small naïve South American landscape, bearing a Hebrew inscription and bought by the boys from Tel Aviv for £12,000, list price £150, had come from 'someone from the community, a refugee'. The resonances seemed to deepen.

'Too easy to fake?'. 'The paint's too thin?', were some of the responses to the painting from London's leading auction houses. In my blinding naivety it hadn't occurred to me that these auction houses wouldn't see what I could definitely see. I had to get the work authenticated and this had to be done in Paris. Through a museum in Pontoise, devoted to

Freundlich, I was given an introduction to Madame Edda Maillet, Secretary General of Les Amis d’Otto Freundlich, some sort of swanky arts centre, I assumed. I couldn’t have been more wrong. It was a nursing and residential home for older Jews.

Life can be full of surprises and wonder and the following few hours were to prove no exception. Waiting in the lobby was Madame’s daughter who had driven especially from Frankfurt for this meeting accompanied by an elderly collector of Freundlich and they were joined by a Parisian collector also of some years. My welcoming committee. After introductions and greetings we were joined a little later by Madame. Some people just have ‘it’ and this tiny, power-packed, charming, elegant and beautiful woman has it by the bucket load. At the age of 88 she still radiated a wry considered energy that puts a lot of younger people to shame.

The committee had agreed amongst themselves that before looking at the work we would all go for lunch. First things first. We moved on to a nearby restaurant where my hosts ate very sparsely and then ordered up massive knickerbocker glory ice creams. I couldn’t help but think that the ‘game’ was well and truly theirs. Back at the Rothschild Foundation, Madame’s room was sparsely furnished. There seemed to be very few personal belongings just a bed, a desk an easy chair and a stand alone bookcase full of box files. The moment of truth had arrived. ‘Bon’, she said, and with a clap of her hands, beckoned me to open my parcel.

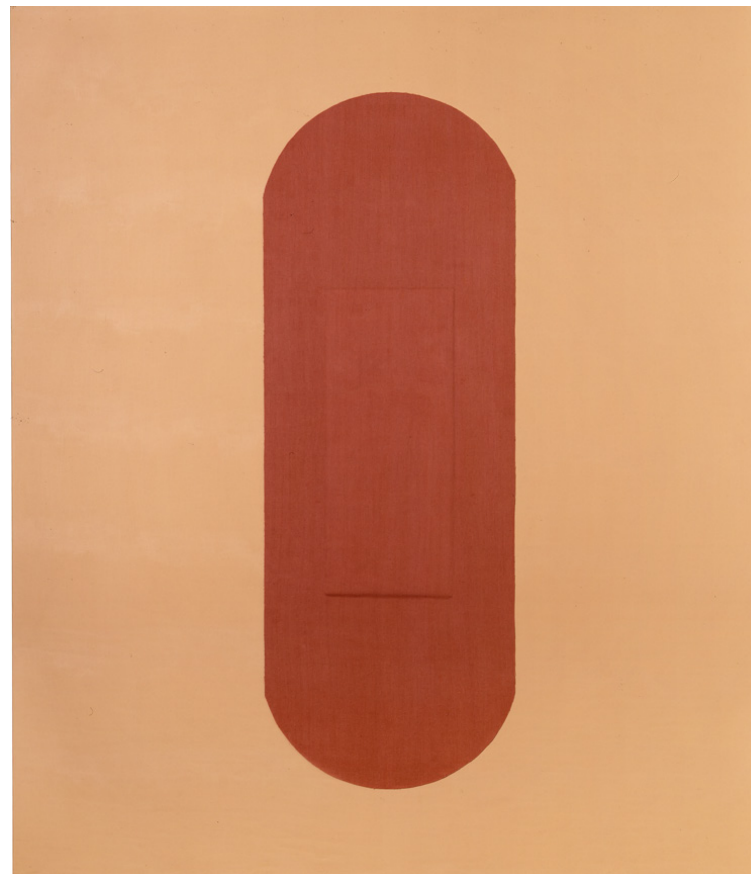
Madame looked at the picture carefully, then opened a file and showed the room a photo copy of the same preparatory drawing I had seen online. This heavy, heavy, weight I’d been carrying then just melted away. As I was grilled gently but firmly on how I had come by the picture, I told them this story

Without too much further ado and with the slight feeling of being railroaded, I was then piled into a taxi with the rest of the committee and rushed across Paris to visit a paper restorer. The painting had been stuck down with acidic glue onto low grade card and the combination of the two was proving to be a nasty cocktail for the work’s health. The point was that, within a few hours of my arrival in Paris, the work had been validated, a not so small conservation bill had been agreed upon, and I had been given a lesson in priorities.

Now I had time to reflect on boundaries and as I did so I felt I should go back to the camp. The consequence of idly surfing the Net had taken me into the world of art auctions. In Paris Edda Maillet told me how she witnessed her mother being arrested, the terrible separation and subsequent liquidation of her and other family members in Auschwitz. I’d read about Otto Freundlich hiding in the Pyrenees being denounced to the police, arrested and deported to Sobibor death camp where he died within an hour of his arrival. As a practising artist, I’d struggled all these years to find the fertile ground to fully utilise and explore my memories and now, through the ‘gift’ as Edda called the painting, I

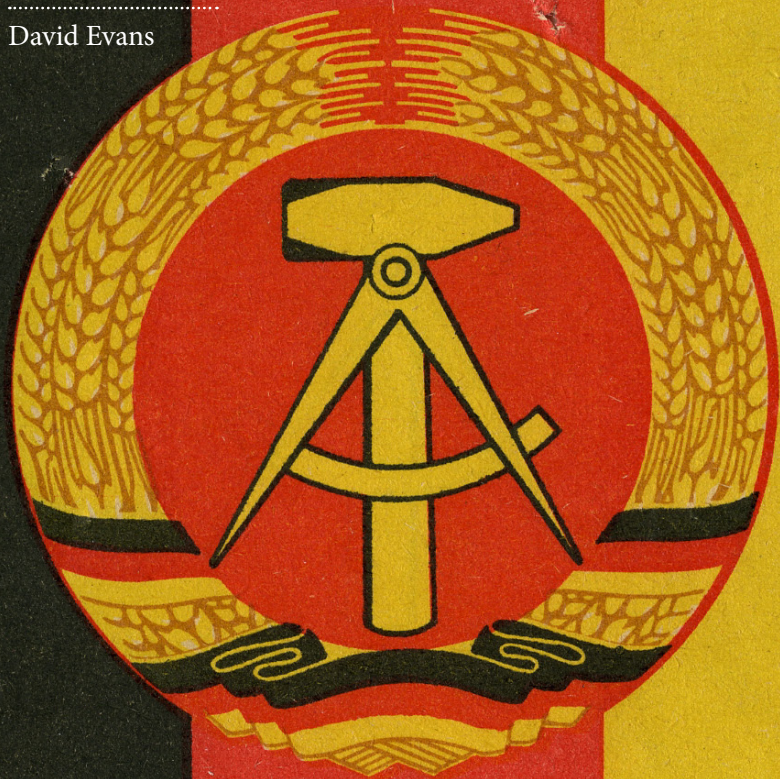
had been given an opportunity to do just that, to channel them all into a body of work.

At the camp, getting out of the car, the first thing was the unexpected smell of the land. It had just lightly rained but now the sun was fully out. The smell was of pine and birch trees, heather and sandy soil, so particular to this area, the Lüneburger Heide. It all came back to me. Times of long warm days by the pools, foraging in the endless woods, gangs being formed and broken, county fairs with air-rifle galleries, paprika spit-roasted chicken, innocent times. The next thing was the sound of live rounds being fired. The artillery ranges are still active, the military are still there. This was a return to a place where boundaries were crossed and lives forever changed. This is a place of indelible memories. This was a journey that was never planned.



**SOME TIME IN EAST BERLIN**

David Evans



Heiner Müller, *Mauser* (Berlin: Deutsches Theater, 1991).  
Photograph: Wolfhard Theile



### **Bunting**

I found this bunting in a gutter in East Berlin in October 1989. The Party had planned to celebrate 40 years of Marxism-Leninism in the German Democratic Republic. The party did not go according to plan.

### **The Stone Breakers**

In the late eighties, a Professor of Art History at Humboldt University, East Berlin, published a history of proletarian art. The cover shows a reproduction of Gustave Courbet's now lost painting from 1849 called *The Stone Breakers*, treated in the book as a major achievement in the pre-history of Socialist Realism. In November 1989, photographs of individuals banging away at the Berlin Wall with their hammers traversed the globe. Here was another example of how to philosophize with a hammer.

### **Postage stamp**

Walter Benjamin's literary montage *One Way Street* was written in Berlin in the late twenties. One short fragment deals with the humble postage stamp, rarely scrutinized, yet for Benjamin, laden with cultural significance. Certainly, stamps could provide the starting point for an insightful history of the former German Democratic Republic. Many are pro-Soviet and anti-Fascist, of course. But many also register a sustained attempt by the GDR to

present itself as the 'better' Germany – rightful heir of Weimar Modernism, for example.

### **Berliner Ensemble**

Poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht is an obvious example of what has been termed *Weimar in Exile*. He made his reputation in twenties Berlin and quit Germany in 1933, the year that Hitler came to power. He only stepped on German soil again in 1951, settling in East Berlin. The Party quickly realized the use value of such a famous cultural figure. He was allowed to create his own company – the Berliner Ensemble – that was based in the same theatre where *The Threepenny Opera* had premiered in the twenties. When the Ensemble began to tour abroad, they were widely acclaimed. But Brecht died in 1956, and the once innovative theatre slowly became stuck in a rut, continuously showing the 'classics' for Western tourists. The flyer that I picked up in 1989 is symptomatic, with Picasso's *Peace Dove* seeming as stale and uninspiring as yet another performance of *The Threepenny Opera*.

### **Mauser**

But thankfully it was not just the 'greatest hits' at the Berliner Ensemble. Heiner Müller was also given a platform. He trained with Brecht in the fifties; ran into trouble with the authorities in the sixties; but was given considerable leeway

by the eighties because of his international reputation. Many claim that Müller took on the mantle of Brecht. Not entirely wrong, but a bit too reverential! I prefer the image of Müller chewing Brecht and then spitting him out! I saw Müller's stunning production of his own play *Mauser* at the Deutsches Theater in the newly unified Berlin in 1991. The stage sets had been designed by sculptor Jannis Kounellis with a circular railway track as a dominant feature. For me, the track evoked history as mind-numbing eternal recurrence, rather than the simplistic progressive teleology promoted by the East German state.

### **The Finitude of Freedom**

In 1990 Heiner Müller and artist Rebecca Horn co-curated an exhibition in which international artists, including Kounellis, were invited to respond to different locations in East Berlin at a time of rapid transition. Hans Haacke was one of the participants and decided to customize a recently de-commissioned watchtower, overlooking what was once known as the 'death strip' between East and West Berlin. He added a Mercedes logo on top and lines from two of the company's recent publicity campaigns on the walls: *Art will always remain art* and *The readiness is all*. He called his work *Freedom is now going to be sponsored – out of petty cash*.

Ominously, Haacke warns that the dictatorship of the commodity may well be more insidious than the dictatorship recently relinquished.

### **Postcard**

I am sure I bought this postcard in East Berlin in 1986. It depicts the Lenin monument unveiled in the neighbourhood of Friedrichshain in 1971 and demolished in 1992. I was reminded of it recently whilst looking at a little book by Sophie Calle called *Souvenirs de Berlin-Est* (Actes Sud, 1999) about monuments from the Communist era. One chapter deals with this very monument. A photograph of the Lenin statue provides a conclusion to a chapter that opens with an image of what has replaced it – a circle of large round boulders designed to represent the United Nations. In between are reminiscences of citizens about the old monument, collected and edited by the artist. One person recalls 'a sort of Jesus sculpted in stone'; someone else comments that a German like Marx would be have been more appropriate than the 'foreigner' Lenin; another admits to only having 'vague memories'; and so on. Calle's project is simple but profound. It confirms that even the most sustained attempts to generate and impose a collective memory usually fail. The lesson taught is rarely the lesson learnt.

## **BIOGRAPHY:** Michael Roberts

Michael Roberts work is concerned with boundaries, both personal and public, examining the points of tension where the inside and outside of ourselves meet and where memories of the past make sense of experiences in the present.

This body of work springs from a fascinating story that took Michael on an unexpected journey back to his childhood. It is a combination of painting, print and photography.

Michael Roberts trained at the Royal College of Art and Nottingham Trent University. He has shown extensively including with Fred and Mann and the Cut Gallery in London

## **BIOGRAPHY:** David Evans

David Evans is the author of the catalogue raisonné *John Heartfield: AIZ / VI 1930-38* (New York: Kent Fine Art, 1992), based on research in archives in East Berlin from 1986 to 1991. Recent publications include *Appropriation* (London: The Whitechapel Gallery / Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2009) and *Critical Dictionary* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2011).

David Evans is a Senior Lecturer in the History and Theory of Photography at the Arts University College at Bournemouth.

## **LIST OF WORKS:** Michael Roberts

Cover: *New Man* (detail) 2011. Silkscreen on paper. 70 x 56 cm. Edition of 10.

1. *Boundary/Bergen Belsen*. 2011. Lambda Print, 16 x 24 cm image size. Edition of 5.
2. *Combat Kids*. 2000. Acrylic, fabric on canvas, 186 x 156 cm.
3. *Pisspot*. 2000. Acrylic, ground glass on canvas, 186 x 156 cm.
4. *Tin Man/Bergen Belsen*. 2011. Lambda Print, 16 x 24 image size. Edition of 5.
5. *Untitled*. Otto Freundlich. Lambda print 39.5 x 25 cm.
6. *Burn It Fucking Down*. 2011. Watercolour and ink on paper. 56 x 70 cm.
7. *They Came And Smashed Otto's House*. 2011. Silkscreen, 24ct gold leaf on paper. 70 x 56 cm. Edition of 10.
8. *Dead Man*. 2011. Acrylic, felt on linen. 176 x 113 cm.
9. *Boundary*. 2011. Acrylic, silkscreen on linen. 176 x 113 cm.
10. *Cell*. 2011. Acrylic, oil stick on linen. 176 x 113 cm.
11. *Transport*. 2011. Acrylic on linen. 176 x 113 cm.
12. *Boundary Kids*. 2011. Silkscreen on paper, 70 x 56 cm. Edition of 10.
13. *Bulldozer of Death*. 2011. Silkscreen on paper, 70 x 56 cm. Edition of 10.
14. *Plaster*. 2000. Acrylic, fabric on canvas. 186 x 156 cm.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Michael Roberts would like to thank the following:

Edda Maillet, Anne Steinbrenner, Theo Weiss, Monique Duchateau.

Lucy Bainbridge, Paula Beetlestone, Alain Couillaud. Stuart Hands, Stephanie James, James Joughin, Jeff Leyshon, Adam Lowe, Stacy Shanahan, Susan Stockwell and Toto.

*In memory of Piers Wardle*

### Credits

© 2011, copyright of the texts resides with text+work, the Arts University College at Bournemouth and authors, including the right to reproduce. The Arts University College at Bournemouth holds the intellectual property to text(s) and respects all moral rights. Images copyright resides with the artist Michael Roberts and named agencies and copyright holders, photography by Paula Beetlestone, Stuart Haygarth and Jeff Leyshon. *Otto Freundlich* by Factum Arte/ Madrid.

*Disclaimer:* The text/essay in this publication reflects the view of the author, and not necessarily those of text+work, the Arts University College at Bournemouth and editors.

Every effort has been made to trace the copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the necessary arrangements will be made at the first opportunity.

No part of this text/essay may be reproduced in any material form (including photocopying or storing in any medium by electronic means and whether or not transiently or incidentally to some other use of this text/essay) without the written permission of the copyright holders.

A catalogue record of this publication is available from the British Library:

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

ISBN: 978-0-901196-48-4

*Edited by:* Stephanie James and Violet McClean

*Design and Layout by:* Phil Jones, [pjones@aucb.ac.uk](mailto:pjones@aucb.ac.uk)

*Published by:* text+work, The Arts University College at Bournemouth

*Produced by:* text+work, The Gallery, The Arts University College at Bournemouth

*Printed by:* Dayfold Ltd

A Limited Edition of 1000 essays is printed for this text + work event.



TheGallery



## **WITNESS:**

.....  
An Odyssey with Otto Freundlich

Exhibition open from: 18 November – 23 December 2011

For all related events please visit [www.aucb.ac.uk/thegallery](http://www.aucb.ac.uk/thegallery)

**TheGallery**

The Gallery, The Arts University College at Bournemouth, Wallisdown,  
Poole, BH12 5HH