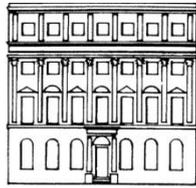


German Historical Institute  
London



BULLETIN

ISSN 0269-8552

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*The Dresden Archive Project: Exhibition by British Artist Alan  
Turnbull*

Exhibition Report

German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol 35, No. 1  
(May 2013), pp134-136

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*The Dresden Archive Project.* Exhibition by British artist Alan Turnbull, held at the German Historical Institute London, 22 Nov. 2012 to 12 Apr. 2013. The exhibition was supported by a research grant from Newcastle University's School of Arts and Cultures.

The Dresden Archive Project, an exhibition by artist Alan Turnbull,<sup>1</sup> ran from November to April at the German Historical Institute London. The archive itself is the artist's personal collection of images capturing the city's history. Its inventory consists of postcards, photographs, and printed ephemera relating to Dresden, beginning around 1870, when Saxony still had its own king, and ending in the 1950s, with Dresden a ruined city passing to Soviet control.

The project is an act of remembrance of the city of Dresden that was lost in the firestorm of February 1945. Instead of displaying the apocalypse, however, the exhibition concentrated on the city and its life before the tragic bombings happened. Using February 1945 as the point of reference for events to come, the display of the city, its buildings, its people, and traces of their everyday lives gains its poignancy through the lingering sense of loss that draws through the whole exhibition and Alan Turnbull's artistic work with the material. The forty-two works on show, comprising photographic digital prints and a series of related etchings and collages, were all exhibited at the German Historical Institute for the first time. The exhibition was unusual in displaying both historical documents located in their historical background, and works of fine art based on this material.

At the opening of the exhibition at Bloomsbury Square, director Andreas Gestrich welcomed the artist and introduced him to an invited audience. In the following talk, Alan Turnbull explained the background of his work and how this project had evolved from its

<sup>1</sup> Alan Turnbull lectures in Fine Art at Newcastle University's School of Arts and Cultures. He is the recipient of numerous Arts Council awards and has worked in various international public collections, including Harvard University's Permanent Collection; the Vladimir Nabokov Museum, St Petersburg; UCL London; and Dresden City Council. His recent exhibitions include Schatten Gallery, Atlanta 2010; Tsvetaeva Museum, Moscow 2009; the Vladimir Nabokov Museum, St Petersburg, 2008 and 2005; and the North House Gallery, Essex, 2007. His work has featured in exhibitions at numerous international venues including Nagoya, Japan; Munich; Hamburg; Florence; Milan; London; and Chicago.

beginnings as a collection of postcards to become an extended series of etchings, collages, and digital prints. Alan Turnbull first visited Dresden in 1994 while co-directing a music theatre piece as part of the city's cultural festival. In spite of the short duration of his stay, the city made a strong impression on him, particularly as the signs of the past were more in evidence than in the cities he knew in the west of Germany. From then he began collecting postcards of Dresden, initially in a casual way, throwing them into an old shoebox, but increasingly with more intent and purpose. As the collection grew over the years, he began to notice 'variations on a theme': the railway station photographed many years apart in the 1890s and the 1930s; the same scene at different times of year showing ice-skating and then a boating scene at the Zwingerteich; and variations of advertising cards from the same hotel, two postcards written by the same person and posted on the same day in April 1905.

The artist's close scrutiny of even routine-looking postcards revealed to him figures emerging from the shadows and faces peeping out of windows. Giving examples from among the works in the exhibition, he drew attention to greatly magnified scans of postcards which offered a fascinating glimpse of life at that time: a shy gardener hiding from the camera; portraits of Dresden soldiers on their way to the front; cyclists in the Große Garten. It was this kind of almost forgotten everyday life experience that gave him the idea for his artistic work with the material, and an exhibition of historical documents. As an artist not an academic historian, he stressed that his approach to the exhibition was to display the documents and images as mementoes and relics of a time long past, guided by aesthetic criteria rather than the principles of designing a historical exhibition. By showing postcards and enlarging details and individual faces taken from street view postcards, he was able to bring the human aspect of these historical images back to life. Many of these detailed views were included in the exhibition; for instance, the portrait of a young girl wearing pearl earrings that he described as an image of innocence and hope. In the same way, he began to create prints and drawings from the archive material, taking as his subject matter the people whose faces peer out from the postcards. Among his works are some incorporating fragments of different images and collages into his prints of nineteenth-century engravings of birds, which he used as symbols representing something of beauty that was now gone.

## Conference Reports

The pictures on show included two sequences of digital prints, 'Portraits' and 'Scenes', in which highly magnified scans allow the viewer to examine details overlooked in the postcards. In another work, *The Ghosts of Dresden*, numerous images are accompanied by a brief text which is often at odds with the innocent image. We learn, for instance, that the first time Dresden's architectural monuments were floodlit was on the occasion of Hitler's visit to the city in May 1934. The etchings and collages on display, small in scale and delicate in execution, provided an interesting contrast to the photographic works. In some of these works the artist has used actual archive material, printing his etchings on old letters which bear postmarks of Dresden, thus giving the images a patina of age as well as a delicacy of colour. Asked to describe the work, the artist said: 'This material is fragmentary and associative in nature. The central theme is the awareness of loss, but also the potential for renewal. In making many of the artworks, for instance, I often found myself obliterating one image in order to allow another to emerge. The aim of the work here is to create a picture for the imagination.'

The exhibition received favourable notices, including a lengthy and thoughtful review by Ulrike Zitzisperger, 'A City's Spirits Unextinguished', in the *Times Higher Education* (29 Nov. 2013). Commenting on how the artist has made something both intimate and challenging from his study of postcards, she remarks: 'By artistically juxtaposing the daily and banal with the force of history, Turnbull makes tangible what is otherwise hard to grasp.'

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