

# HONOURING THE MEMORY



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WALTER BENJAMIN, WHO HAD ESCAPED FROM GERMANY AND WAS ON THE RUN FROM THE GESTAPO IN FRANCE, HAD JUST CROSSED THE PYRENEES ON FOOT WITH OTHER TRAVELLERS AND HAD ARRIVED IN PORTBOU. THE DECISION OF THE FRANCO AUTHORITIES TO RETURN THE PASSENGERS TO FRANCE DETERMINED BENJAMIN'S SUICIDE.

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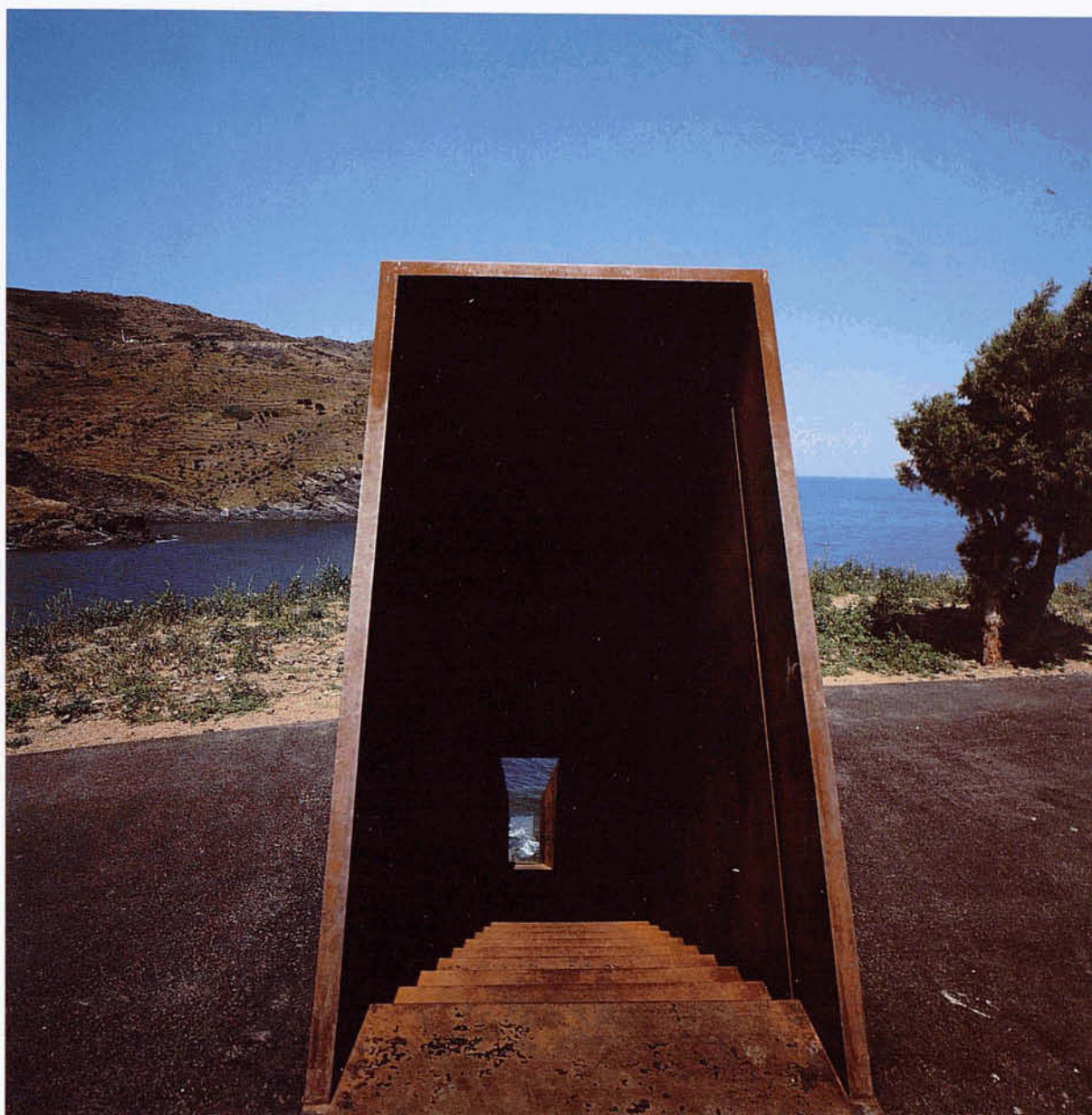
**O**n 15 May 1994, next to the cemetery in Portbou, a monument by the distinguished Israeli sculptor Dani Karavan was inaugurated, dedicated to one of this century's most influential thinkers: Walter Benjamin (Berlin, 1892 – Portbou, 1940). The monument is called "Passatges" ("Passages"), the title of one of Benjamin's own most important works, never completed, and was financed by the German Länder and the Generalitat de

Catalunya. For an explanation, we have to turn to History –with a capital "H", collective, both German and Catalan, and in fact European and global. Coinciding with the inauguration of the monument, the Generalitat de Catalunya published a bilingual –German and Catalan– booklet, *Catalunya a / Katalonien zu Walter Benjamin*, in which five Catalan poets and five Catalan photographers pay tribute to the thinker. In the same book, another student of Ben-

jamin, F.J.Yvars, gives a quick, all-round account of Benjamin's personality, and the volume is rounded off with a Catalan bibliography.

We might ask the reason for this monument. The answer, paraphrasing the Russian poet Akhmatova, is "bitter fame". Yes, indeed. Portbou is an international part of this bitter fame which the town itself suffered, because on 26 September 1940 it was a Catalan town subjected to the Spanish dictatorship of





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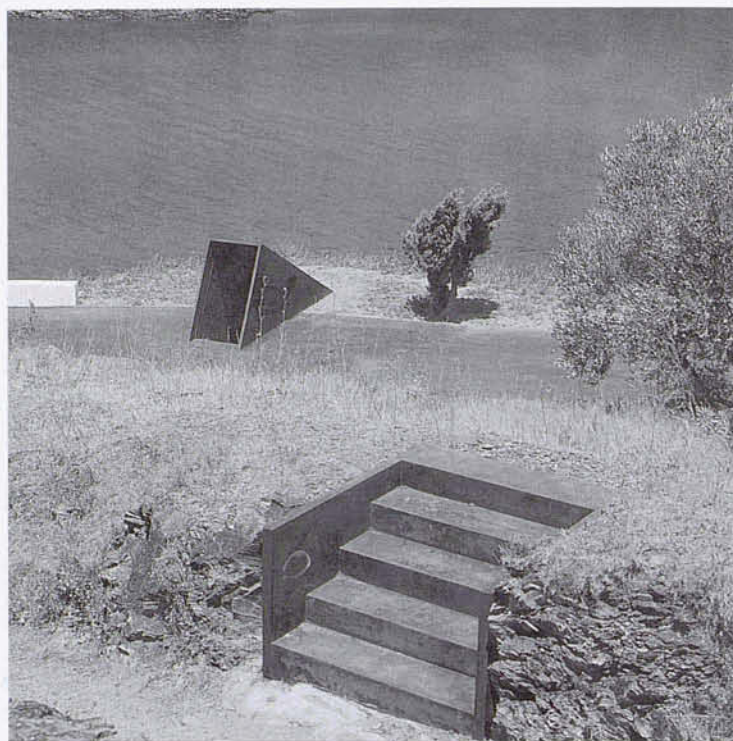
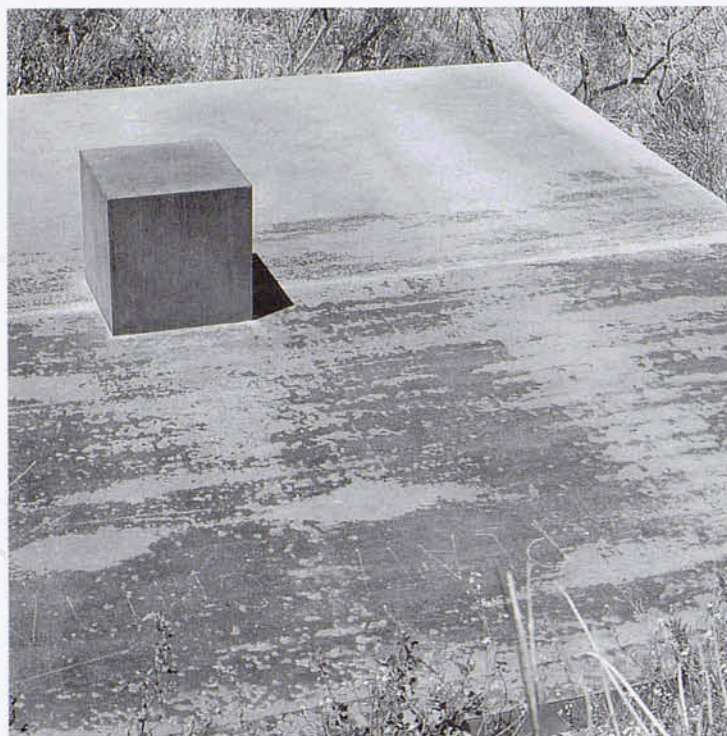
General Franco. Walter Benjamin, who had escaped from Germany and was on the run from the Gestapo in France, had just crossed the Pyrenees on foot and had arrived in Portbou, which was forcibly under the authority of the Franco regime. His idea was to reach Portugal and board a boat for the United States, the refuge of the Institute of Social Studies, better known as the Frankfurt School, which had also been forced to move from Germany to New York.

The decision of the Franco authorities to return the passengers to France determined Benjamin's suicide. He was buried in the common grave in the municipal cemetery of Portbou. An equally bitter parallel with the common grave in Vienna and Mozart's music.

Benjamin's death – "in passing", after crossing the Pyrenees on foot – and the unfinished *Passagen*, mentioned above, which was to be one of his greatest works, fully justify the monument – and

its current financing – by Karavan (also responsible for the monument to the Holocaust, in Israel). In addition, we can not forget our links with Europe, for better or worse, because although we formed part of a country which did not officially join World War II, its Fascist "interlude", not to mention the Hitler-Franco agreements, gave the hair-raising list of victims one that was very emblematic. When the Spanish dictatorship came to an end and democracy





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was restored, with Catalonia more and more Catalan again, thanks to her efforts and the favourable circumstances, in September 1990, fifty years after Benjamin's suicide, a stone was unveiled in the cemetery, over the common grave, with the thinker's words carved on it in two languages: "There is no record of culture that is not also one of barbarism". At the official unveiling a project was presented which has now been realised: Karavan's *Passagen*. Making use of the cliff over the Mediterranean, Karavan has designed a tunnel entirely in treated iron, of a texture that brings to mind the best of Tàpies, with steps that might well lead to an Egyptian burial chamber. But we come out over the sea, and if it were not for the steepness of the terrain blocking our way, we would be halted by a glass

wall where we can read Benjamin's words, again in two languages, "It is a more arduous task to honour the memory of anonymous beings than that of famous people. The building of history is consecrated to the memory of those who have no name". (I have yet to see the effect from the sea). A beautiful way to see the sea, to remember, to pay tribute. At the inauguration of the monument, the President of the Generalitat de Catalunya pointed out, as he does in the booklet mentioned above, that the event was "a cause for reflection and for awareness", and added that Benjamin was a man who also fled from "intolerance and incomprehension". He regretted that in Benjamin's "Passagen" he had not found in Catalonia the welcoming land she wanted to be and we want her to be. Apart from the monu-

ment's aesthetic beauty and the intellectual enjoyment one always gets from returning to an original and unclassifiable author like Benjamin, I have no doubt that it is also a monument for the future. An appeal not to forget, to one of the unknowns with which we are ending one century and starting the next: the attacks on the freedom and coexistence of all peoples of the earth. Benjamin was an obvious victim of a lack of freedom and understanding. Today, his memorial stands over a sea of culture and at times of barbarism, the Mediterranean, in a border town, Portbou, in a border country, Catalonia. Today, the recently inaugurated memorial to Walter Benjamin is much more than an item of aesthetic beauty; it is an emblem of what we could not be, are now, and must always want to be. ■