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POETRY AND FICTION

Gartenhaus in the age of mechanical reproduction

Gotham looms half-size over Las Vegas. Tokyo families can wander an immense faux Holland. But Weimar, Germany, may have pushed modernity's tolerance for "authentic" replication to its endpoint. Celebrating the 250th anniversary of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's birth, sponsors spent \$1 million building a full-size copy of the garden house in which the poet and playwright lived and wrote for six years. Yet the original structure—a white two-story house with a steep, shingled roof—still stands, in full view of the replica.

In a practical sense, having two Goethe Gartenhauses will reduce tourist congestion at the site, says Folke Leiar, the head curator for Weimar's year as the official Cultural City of Europe. But from speakers of the language that gave us both ersatz and kitsch, we might anticipate a more ponderous motivation: Organizers intend the two houses (and a third, virtual-reality copy in a nearby park) to ignite ruminations on reality and fiction. Among the keynote speakers at the opening ceremony was Konrad Kujau, the man who sold the infamous fake Hitler diaries to Stern in the early 1980s and now runs a forgery gallery in Stuttgart. His inclusion is entirely in the spirit of Goethe, a keen appreciator of irony whose works repeatedly point out the tragicomic tricks people play on themselves in their search for knowledge—their foolish willingness to buy fakes and take appearance for reality.

Rather than meditating on the nature of authenticity, most visitors will likely come looking for mistakes in the replica. While in theory that impulse might force them to focus more closely on the original, finding differences could be difficult. The copy is nearly exact, since the town tracked down learned craftsmen to replicate the original construction methods, and even faked the wear patterns of the real house. But Leiar muses, "Are there some things you cannot copy? Is the air—the ambience—the same in both houses?"

At the end of the year, the second Goethe Gartenhaus will be dismantled like a Lego set, boxed, and shipped to a new owner (the Japanese government has expressed interest in buying it). Naturally, the original Goethe Gartenhaus will not go along with it, as it is built of stone. By that time the context would be lost on visitors anyway, for the replica will actually look older—while the landmarked original only allows 60 visitors per hour, the copy has started to show wear from its heavier traffic. Not to mention the marks left by less reverential visitors, such as the man who pulled one display case away from the wall to see its backing, then demanded to know when the piece was going into mass production.—*Marc Spiegler*