

Introduction

Framing the Holocaust: Contemporary Visions

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This collection of articles, like previous volumes in the New Perspectives on Jewish Studies series, explores the boundaries of current Jewish studies scholarship. Rather than trying to determine what are sometimes posited as true, legitimate, or authentic meanings, this volume, like the previous ones, asks: What are the mechanisms, techniques, and discursive practices through which these meanings have been made and what specific forms of identification do they foster or exclude? A recurring concern is how cultural representations and the meanings attached to them are produced and disseminated.

Building on scholarly work on representation and the Holocaust, this volume seeks, like many of those earlier works, to contribute to the emerging field of Jewish cultural studies. In contrast to the majority of discussions concerning the representation of the Holocaust, which focus on literary and historical representation, this book focuses on the visual. The

cross-disciplinary structure of the volume was intended to encourage our contributors to reflect on some of the basic assumptions of the various fields in which they were trained. In dialogue with one another, artists, architects, art and architectural historians, curators, cultural critics, literary scholars, and religious studies specialists challenge one another to highlight issues often rendered invisible by the disciplinary assumptions of their respective fields. Furthermore, an objective of this book is to situate these cross-disciplinary discussions on the visual representation of the Holocaust within the context of Jewish studies.

Informed by contemporary critical perspectives, the book directs a series of questions widely discussed in cultural studies to the visual representation of the Holocaust: What are the processes by which the past is remembered and represented in the present? What is the relationship between memory, history, and visual culture? How does the representational work of art resemble or differ from that which is performed by and in literary or historical texts? To what extent and in what ways do these representational processes challenge some of the normative assumptions about the Holocaust within Jewish studies or notions of the aesthetic in the field of visual culture? What difference do the physical or geographical locations where works are

displayed make in terms of how they are seen or understood? How do particular kinds of spatial arrangements, forms, and sites of representation position the viewer so as to encourage or discourage, include or exclude specific interpretations? To what extent do these works challenge prevailing notions of Jewish history and Jewish identity?

Impossible Images: Contemporary Art after the Holocaust evolved out of "Representing the Holocaust: Practices, Products, Projections," a conference held at Lehigh University on May 21-23, 2000. The conference brought together Jewish studies scholars, historians, art historians, and scholars of literature as well as artists and curators. A primary goal was to open up a critical space for the kinds of interdisciplinary conversations about the visual arts and the Holocaust that are now at the heart of this collection. Like the volume, the original conference invitation asked participants to consider a similar set of questions and how they informed their work.¹

It was at this conference that the editors first met, and it was here that most of the contributors presented early versions of their essays. This unusual multidisciplinary gathering in a Jewish studies context highlighted the conveners' concern that Jewish studies scholars critically engage with works of visual culture and the representational problems that this entails. We

have included a selection of works by those artists who presented at the conference at the end of this volume.²

Dialogue and cross-fertilization also inform the work of the editors, coming as we do from different fields of inquiry and crossing academic and disciplinary as well as geographical boundaries. Shelley Hornstein comes to Holocaust and Jewish studies from her work in theories of visual culture and the disciplines of art history and architecture. Laura Levitt and Larry Silberstein come to visual culture and the Holocaust through their work with Jewish religious, literary, and philosophical texts. Laura's approach is an outgrowth of, among other things, her extensive work on gender and American Jewish identity. In contrast, Larry's engagement with representational practices and their effects is informed by his extensive reading in French poststructuralist philosophy and British cultural studies, an approach that he has recently applied in his study of postzionism in Israeli culture. In her most recent work Shelley is concerned with issues relating to how architecture and place capture memory and the theoretical issues that relate to aesthetics, architecture, and place.

As we have already indicated, *Impossible Images: Contemporary Art after the Holocaust* builds on scholarly work on the Holocaust and representation.³ These Jewish studies

discussions have often focused on the problematic of representing what many consider to be the unrepresentable. Recognizing that there already exists a growing legacy of creative works that engage the Shoah, we undertake to probe the processes by means of which these works have come into being and how they function in particular contexts. The authors, focusing on specific works of visual art, and in one instance a musical composition, pose a number of important questions about representation that, while often raised in discussions of culture, are less frequently asked in Jewish studies discussions. These questions include: What is made visible, what is concealed, and what is obscured by specific kinds of artistic production? How and in what ways do these artistic works continue to unravel some of our assumptions about the role of the Holocaust in the present? What effects do geographical and cultural contexts have on the ways in which visual works are viewed, how they are shown, and the kinds of exhibition spaces that are used? How do responses to works differ according to the audience? What is the relation of memory and visual representations of the Holocaust to the formation of contemporary Jewish identity?

A highlight of the conference out of which this volume grew was Art Spiegelman's powerful keynote presentation. Spiegelman held forth on the context, conditions, and creative processes

that resulted in his now-classic *Maus*. This work was one of the first to open up a new space that shattered boundaries between language and visual culture in relation to the Holocaust. As his comments that evening, like his work, make clear, all representations of the past are already acts of the present.⁴

Unravelings, Contexts, Locations

Several of these essays may be viewed as thought experiments, bridging disciplines and fields in an effort to grapple with what it means to represent the Holocaust or its resonances in and for the present. Several authors question some of the operative assumptions in the field of Jewish studies in order to better address these questions. They are particularly concerned about the ways in which the conceptual and representational frameworks we deploy directly shape the kinds of knowledge we produce. Taking it as a given that all knowledge is culturally constructed, *Impossible Images: Contemporary Art after the Holocaust* draws our attention to assumptions that are commonly taken for granted in Holocaust scholarship. Of particular concern is the notion that memory and history can be anything but partial and constructed in the present. The collected essays also make explicit the ways in which context matters. They thus seek to

make explicit how and in what ways the places where an artist works shape what he or she produces; how and in what ways the space or place in which a work of art is exhibited and how it is identified or named influence what is seen or not seen; how and in what ways calling attention to certain details in a visual work, a gesture, a color, an icon, can change the meaning assigned to the work as a whole.

For example, seeing a monument at Yad Vashem is different from seeing and reading about it on a web site (Stier), or hearing Hitler's taped voice appear to speak Hebrew in Jerusalem before an audience of Israelis at the Israel Museum differs from hearing Hitler's same taped and manipulated voice at the Jewish Museum in New York (Azoulay). Other issues addressed in the volume include: What does it mean for someone in a place and time far removed from the site and time of the events being represented to remember and represent these events? How, and in what ways, does the physical structure of a museum exhibition shape or encourage particular understandings of history while discouraging or precluding others? Who controls the space in which a memorial is situated (Bonder)?

At stake in all these discussions is the difficulty of approaching the legacy of the Holocaust visually. At a 2002 exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York, *Mirroring Evil*,

curated by Norman Kleeblatt, the floodgates opened to an enormous controversy.⁵ The controversy demonstrated the specter of morality and propriety that is raised when the unwritten codes relating to visual images of the Holocaust are transgressed. Who gets to own these images or who has the right to construct or display images that invoke this past? What are the boundaries of what can be represented, and who has the right to display or to play with these evocative images?

As many of these essays explain, works of visual culture relating to the Holocaust are often the site where issues of obscenity, and propriety, and aesthetics are tested. Is it obscene to ask viewers to identify with Nazi imagery, to be invited to play with images of the Holocaust, to color in coloring books, or to play with Legos (van Alphen)? Who is the viewer as he or she goes through an exhibit at the Israel Museum (Azoulay)? Can one imagine being Eva Braun reflecting on the final days of her life with her lover Adolf Hitler, as Roe Rosen asks us to do in his piece *Live and Die as Eva Braun*? Is it morally or aesthetically legitimate in a play about the Holocaust and contemporary Israeli life to position Israeli actors as perpetrators and Palestinian actors as victims (Katz-Freiman)?

Impossible Images: Contemporary Art after the Holocaust also raises questions about Israeli national identity and the

Holocaust. It explores the ways in which the Holocaust informs contemporary Jewish identity in the United States (Friedman), in Canada (Hornstein), and in Western Europe, and the complex issues that the Holocaust poses for non-Jews.

Specific Organization

There are any number of ways of reading these essays. As we have already suggested, the issues they raise overlap and intersect at various points. One may read them in relation to pedagogy and the role of museums in telling the story of the Holocaust. Here Susan Derwin's essay may be read together with those of Ernst van Alphen and Ariella Azoulay. One might also reflect on the haunting memory of the Holocaust discussed by Michelle Friedman in relation to Oren Stier's reading of icons. Additionally, one might connect the taboos of identification raised by Norman Kleeblatt in conjunction with the dramatic production discussed by Tami Katz-Freiman. The model of groupings we propose is only one of many different possible pathways through this material. Although we cluster the essays in a particular order, we encourage readers to experiment by reading them in other configurations, using any of the various broad themes we have suggested or others of their own choosing.

I. Geographies of the Heart: Places/Spaces of Remembrance

All the essays in this section address issues of Holocaust memory in places far removed from where and when those events took place. These essays include Shelley Hornstein's "Archiving an Architecture of the Heart" and Michelle Friedman's "Haunted by Memory: American Jewish Transformations." Both these essays explore how certain architecture, while seeking to anchor in a physical place memories that have no place of their own, actually subvert permanence and objecthood. It concludes with Julian Bonder's "A House for Uninhabitable Memory," an essay about his own attempt to build a place for this kind of memory at Clark University and the controversy that this entailed.

II. Israel and the Politics of Memory

While Israel is clearly another place far removed from the site of the events of the Holocaust, the founding of the state was imbricated in most Jewish discourse relating to the Holocaust shortly after the end of the war. Ariella Azoulay, in "The Return of the Repressed," explores the recent "return" of a powerful subject that has been "repressed" in Israeli imagination: the

engagement with Nazi culture. She does this by examining works by Israeli artists that incorporate images and likenesses of Hitler in a culture where his name and image have been virtually absent. In "Racism and Ethics: Constructing Alternative History," Sidra Ezrahi explores the ways in which Israelis' understanding of the Holocaust continues to shape the ways in which Israelis view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the effects of these ways of seeing on contemporary Israeli politics.⁶ In "'Don't Touch My Holocaust'—Analyzing the Barometer of Responses: Israeli Artists Challenge the Holocaust Taboo," Tami Katz-Freiman explores the controversy over who has the right to "touch," that is, artistically engage, the Holocaust in contemporary Israel.

III. Transgressing Taboos

In this section, Ernst van Alphen, in "Holocaust Toys: Pedagogy of Remembrance through Play," explores the sacralizing of the Holocaust, also discussed by Tami Katz-Freiman and Adi Ophir. What does it mean, van Alphen asks, for artists to invite viewers to "play" with the Holocaust? In his essay, "The Nazi Occupation of the 'White Cube': Piotr Ukla ski's *The Nazis* and Rudolf Herz's *Zugzwang*," Norman Kleeblatt, like van Alphen, explores the discomfort that is produced in viewers of popular cultural

representations of the Holocaust. Looking carefully at Piotr Ukla ski's *The Nazis*, Kleeblatt asks us to reflect on the ways in which the Nazis have been glorified in popular culture and raises the provocative possibility that the legacies of avant-garde and fascist aesthetics may be more closely related than we might want to believe.

We end this section with a now-classic essay by Adi Ophir. Although not focusing on questions of visual culture, "On Sanctifying the Holocaust: An Anti-Theological Treatise" serves to make clear some of the dangers that result from sacralizing the Holocaust and its visual representations. Drawing our attention to the importance of engaging imaginatively and critically with the legacy of the Holocaust, the chapter challenges the reader to render visible in his or her own social contexts those political and cultural processes that help to make possible fascistic forms of life in the present.

IV. Curating Memory

"Holocaust Icons: The Media of Memory," by Oren Stier, and "Sense and/or Sensation: The Role of the Body in Holocaust Pedagogy," by Susan Derwin, pointedly raise the question of how museums authorize certain ways of seeing while inhibiting others. How are

the images we see in museum settings constructed? What images or objects are selected for us to see, and in what order are we asked to view them? These chapters make explicit the ways in which mechanisms of control operate to create ways of seeing and not seeing. More specifically, they analyze how, in Holocaust museums, these operations close off certain discussions about the Holocaust while authorizing others.

Notes

1. These included some of the following questions: How are memory and awareness of the Holocaust being transmitted and produced through representational practices? What are the diverse visual genres being used and to what effect? What are the distinct problems confronting artists who seek to represent the Holocaust? What are the visual strategies being used by contemporary Holocaust museums and memorials to convey something about this past? And what are the intended audiences for these works?

2. Larry Silberstein thanks Oren Stier and Stephen Feinstein for their valuable assistance in conceptualizing and structuring the conference. Speakers who contributed to the conference but whose work is not represented here include Art Spiegelman, Peter

Novick, Stephen Feinstein, Michael Berenbaum, Barbie Zelizer, Edward Lucie-Smith, and Andrea Liss. We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of all those who both attended and presented at the conference in shaping these discussions. Echoes of Peter Novick's important book, *The Holocaust in American Life*, are also evident in some of the articles in this book. Novick, too, made a major contribution to the conference, providing a broader cultural context within which to situate the proliferation of visual representations of the Holocaust, particularly in the United States.

3. This scholarship has raised crucial questions about the limits of representation, using literary and critical theory. It has challenged the limits of historical discourse and the importance of memory. Some important works in this growing field include: Sidra Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); James Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); and the ongoing discussions in the interdisciplinary journal *History and Memory*. Also important to this volume is the work of James Young on Holocaust monuments

and memorials. This work helped open up Jewish studies to discussions about the work of visual culture more generally. See, for example, James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); James Young, ed., *The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History* (New York: The Jewish Museum, and Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1994); James Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

4. Art Spiegelman's address was entitled "Maus: Packing Memory into Little Boxes." Norman Kleeblatt's original presentation for the conference was entitled "Art after *Maus*: Contemporary Art and the Imaging of Nazism." This title came from Kleeblatt's working title for the exhibition that he was then in the process of putting together, which became *Mirroring Evil*.

5. We have included Ernst van Alphen's essay on Holocaust toys that he delivered at Lehigh University at the "Representing the Holocaust" conference. This essay has since been published in a somewhat different form in *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*, ed. Norman Kleeblatt (New York: The Jewish Museum, and New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), the catalog for the *Mirroring Evil* exhibit at the Jewish Museum, March 17-June 30, 2002. The exhibit included many of the works van Alphen discusses

in his essay. We have also included an essay by Norman Kleeblatt that discusses two of the works that he, as curator, included in *Mirroring Evil*.

6. While Sidra Ezrahi chaired a session but did not present a paper at this conference, the editors wish to acknowledge her important contributions to the conference. Although written for another occasion and focusing on literature, her chapter, like Adi Ophir's, offers an incisive statement of the political effects of representational practices. Both these chapters help to highlight the social and political implications of the other essays in this volume.