

After Auschwitz

Responses to the Holocaust in Contemporary Art



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Northern Centre for Contemporary Art, Sunderland
in association with Lund Humphries, London



Fifty Years On

Theodor Adorno's much-quoted maxim – to which the title of this volume and this exhibition implicitly refers – that 'to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric', raises profound moral issues that artists in any medium would be foolhardy to ignore. The complex relationship between culture and barbarism, and the dangers inherent in the aestheticisation of horror, are indisputably issues of continuing relevance. We should remember, however, that the words were penned in 1949,¹ when the shock of the camps was all too raw. Yet even then, as other essays in this catalogue show, artists, both survivors and those less directly affected by the Holocaust, felt compelled to grapple with the subject in their art. These days, in a world witnessing a disturbing resurgence of tribal nationalism, neo-Fascism and anti-Semitism, there seems to be an ever-increasing number of visual artists, Jews and non-Jews alike, working with the theme. All this suggests that artists both then and now subscribe less to Adorno's striking but ultimately dismissive claim, than to survivor Elie Wiesel's memorable admission of an irresolvable paradox: 'How is one to speak of it? How is one not to speak of it?'² Indeed, an acknowledgement of the complexity, not to say the impossibility of the task in hand lies at the heart of the best and most powerful art created on the subject. That, and a conviction that art's ability, or otherwise, to deal with the most significant event of the twentieth century can be seen as a crucial gauge of art's credentials in post-war society.

For many artists born since the Second World War it is no longer enough to reproduce the images of horror – the barbed wire, the crematoria, the skeletal survivors, the emaciated corpses – in a doomed attempt to re-create a sense of how it was. It may indeed be the case, as many have claimed, that only those who lived through the Holocaust themselves have the right to speak (in whatever medium) on behalf of those who did not survive. Yet, as George Steiner has so forcefully put it, even those of an older generation who did not experience the Holocaust at first-hand have a

right to confront it on their own terms: 'because the black mystery of what happened in Europe is to me indivisible from my own identity. Precisely because I was not there, because an accident of good fortune struck my name from the roll'.³ A post-war generation has its own concerns and obligations: not just to look backwards in mourning or nostalgia (although the need to mourn persists), but to grapple with the contemporary significance of the Holocaust, 'which is not the event itself, but *memory* of the event, the great distance between then and now, between here and there'.⁴ To this day, and in spite of the huge numbers of words and images devoted to the subject, the Holocaust (for which the word 'Auschwitz' stands only as a symbol, justifiably the most notorious part of a far more complex whole) defies complete understanding, yet constantly compels us to try to understand.

Media coverage of the numerous other catastrophes, both natural and man-made, that have occurred since the Second World War has, sadly, inured most of us to the reality of suffering. If a corpse, a distraught mother, an orphaned child caught by the camera fail to move us as they should, the chances of our responding adequately to their realistic depiction in bronze or paint are slimmer still. Even in the immediate post-war period, sincere attempts by artists to re-create 'how it was' paled into insignificance beside the documentary evidence – those terrible photographs taken at the liberation of the camps, which, in Susan Sontag's words, 'gained the status of ethical reference points'. Yet, as Sontag herself admits, even these are 'in danger of losing their emotional charge'. 'At the time of the first photographs of the Nazi camps, there was nothing banal about these images. After thirty [and how much more, after fifty!] years, a saturation point may have been reached. In these last decades, "concerned" photography has done as much to deaden conscience as to arouse it.'⁵

Yet the challenge of those corpses remains. For survivor artists such as Zoran Music, Isaac Celnikier and Ronny Abram, they continue – not surprisingly, for

*Cat. numbers refer to the
List of Works in
Exhibition on p.157*

these are men who actually witnessed the grim reality at first-hand – to be little short of an obsession. The problems, however, of communicating the sheer scale of the suffering, and of avoiding any hint of dubious eroticism, persist. The most moving of Music's post-war images are, it seems to me, the most understated, those which merely hint at the vast numbers of victims, depicting a few in detail and hesitantly sketching in the contours of the rest. The generic title of these works, *We Are Not the Last* (see Cats 44-8 and Col.Fig.34), renders their message both universal and contemporary, without, however, detracting from the specificity of the original source material. The undeniable, almost sensual beauty of the handling of paint (or the graphic medium, as the case may be) remains in necessary and poignant tension with the horrific subject-matter. Thinking again of Adorno's famous maxim, might it not be the case that just *because* German culture did not prevent German barbarism, some might conceive it a duty of post-Auschwitz society to nurture culture's redemptive role, to prevent further barbarism? Another survivor featured in this exhibition, Daisy Brand, who, like Music (and so many other Holocaust survivors), repressed her need to confront the past until relatively recently, has spoken of her – possibly utopian, but undoubtedly sincere – belief in the power of art to restore the balance between good and evil, hope and despair. There is little doubt that the making of art directly related to the artist-survivor's wartime experience fulfils a cathartic, and hence positive function for that individual, as Kitty Klaidman, also featured here, has confirmed.

Artists who use the all-too-familiar images of heaped-up corpses at second-hand run further risks. When, for example, the American Protestant artist Robert Morris bases his baroque, apocalyptic compositions (see Col.Fig.28) on the well-known photographs of camp victims already mentioned, the dangers of sensationalising and eroticising the subject-matter, however unintentionally, are hard to avoid. Natan Nuchi, the Israeli-born child of a Holocaust survivor,

seeks to escape this danger, and more generally the stereotypical and predictable, by isolating single figures and setting them against a sombre, abstract and spatially ambiguous backdrop, so that they become iconic and emblematic. The source of these images is unmistakable and specific, their implications universal. The Holocaust victim becomes all victims, Christ-like in his suffering,⁶ his nakedness the ultimate challenge to the post-Renaissance Western tradition of the heroic male nude (See Col.Fig.54).

Art which relies too faithfully on other aspects of the Holocaust known to most of us only through photographs often runs the risk of seeming clichéd and stereotypical, incapable of provoking a fresh response to the subject. Emaciated figures in striped camp uniform complete with yellow star, brutal Nazi guards, watchtowers, railway tracks, barbed wire – all these, although indisputably a quintessential part of the Holocaust landscape, have become over-used to the point of losing all power to shock. However deeply felt and expressionistically handled (as in the work of survivors David Bloch and Edith Birkin, and 'empathisers' such as Bruce Carter, Andrew Aarons and Marlene Miller), the necessary grotesqueness of the imagery tends only to repel, its predictability and over-explicitness, forming – although one hesitates to say this – a kind of 'Holocaust kitsch'.⁷

Other artists have sought to address the central problem of rendering the de-humanised human body by less historically specific means. The well-meaning attempts of artists of a naturalist or expressionist persuasion (sculptors such as George Anthonissen and Deborah Sperber and painters and graphic artists such as Philip Zuchman, Armando, Selma Waldman, Roger Loewig and Jerome Witkin) to adapt an existing vocabulary of anguished human forms to provide a commentary on the suffering endured in the Holocaust too often lead to imagery that, while frequently powerful, tends to be somewhat predictable, crude and over-explicit.

More successful (because less explicit) are works

Col.Fig.66 Ellen
Rothenberg, *The
Combing Shawl*, 1993,
text of the *Diary of
Anne Frank* printed on
vellum, graphite,
aluminium and steel
brackets, 350 combs
cast in various metals,
1.83 × 1.07 × 2.44 m
(Cat.56)



romantic melancholy that some might see as inappropriate to the subject. More incisive and telling are those which highlight the apparent ordinariness of these places today, the way in which the sites of unspeakable atrocities have been rendered anodyne, fit for tourist consumption. (English photographer Robin Dance works in a similar, even more low-key mode.) This unsavoury, yet perhaps inevitable transformation of concentration camps into tourist attractions has concerned other artists too: Monia Yahia, for example, has gone so far as to create a fold-out series of colour picture postcards of the death camps entitled *KZ [Konzentrationslager or Concentration Camp] Tours* – a brazen act of irony that, sadly, rings all too true.

Although the names of many camps (Auschwitz, Dachau, Buchenwald and others) have become almost household words, there are some – smaller, more remote – that are only today coming to light. The most recent photographs in Langenheim's *Memorials* series were taken in Belarus and Latvia: one of the most striking and ironic of these depicts the site of a former extermination camp, Maly Trostenets, which now serves as a dumping-ground for discredited Soviet memorials (see Cat.38). English artist Pam Skelton, in her recent video installation piece *Dangerous Places – Ponar*, juxtaposes filmed images of the site of a little-known execution site in Lithuania as it appears today – empty and apparently innocuous – with the recorded voice of one of its few survivors recalling, as he revisits it, the terrible ordeals suffered there. Interspersed with the images of the camp is fragmentary footage of life among the ruins in present-day Vilnius. Little further commentary is needed.

Since the early 1980s, Rumanian-born, Canadian-resident artist Peter Krausz has concerned himself with similar issues, producing painterly meditations on the nature of evil and suffering as evidenced in the sites of cataclysmic political and human events – sites that serve (in his own words) as repositories 'for the personal and collective, conscious and subconscious, memory'. (The evil perpetrated by the Soviet regime

in Siberia exercises him almost as much as do the crimes of the Nazis.) Many of his mixed-media works are monumental in scale, ambitious in intention and prone to a certain grandiloquence. More eloquent than these is a series of small-scale paintings on copper he produced in the late 1980s: entitled *Night Train*, this is a sequence of sketchily rendered, ordinary-seeming landscapes inspired by the Claude Lanzmann film *Shoah*¹¹ – 'the documentary about the Holocaust and the banality of evil. I would like the paintings to be seen as from the windows of a train moving through a banal, sometimes pretty landscape. But to what destination?' Another work, *De Natura (Humana)* of 1992, is similarly devastating in its simplicity, comprising a series of deliberately out-of-focus, unnaturally green colour photographs of a naked man in a public shower. What could be more ordinary? Except that once we absorb what showers signified in the Holocaust, even a shower can never be ordinary again. (The same can hold true for other aspects of the everyday environment, be it chimneys or trains, as Lily R. Markiewicz has intimated in some of her video pieces.)

The young British painter Sally Heywood, on a residency in Berlin in 1990 (just after the Wall came down), was, she tells us, so struck by a domed building close to where she was living that she started painting it – well before she realised its historical and emotional significance. When she discovered that the building in question (ruined but in the process of being restored) had been the main synagogue in that part of the city, 'I had to look no further for my work in Berlin'. The personal recollections of the older people, both Jewish and non-Jewish, who accosted her as she was drawing on the street, her strong awareness of German neo-Nazism and Germans' reluctance to face their own past, an almost visionary experience of seeing a red glow emanate from the building on a cold winter's night (evocative, as she later realised, of the burning of synagogues on Kristallnacht in 1938) – all this compounded her perception of the site, so that the synagogue became for her a symbol of Berlin

today. The result in visual terms is a series of strongly coloured, abstracted and painterly images stylistically reminiscent of the work of David Bomberg and Frank Auerbach, but more intense and apocalyptic in their implications (see Col. Figs 58 and 59).

The role of landscape and architecture as innocent or complicitous witnesses to the horror of the Holocaust has proved a fruitful line of enquiry for many other artists too. The best known of these is probably Anselm Kiefer, whose explorations of the legacy of Nazism from a German point of view have proved both compelling and controversial. Most directly focused on the Holocaust is the series of monumental mixed-media canvases he produced in the early 1980s, entitled either *Margarete* or *Shulamith*. The titles pay homage to the extraordinary poem *Todesfuge* or *Death Fugue* written by survivor Paul Celan in a concentration camp in 1945 (and published in 1952), which is rhythmically punctuated with references to ‘your golden hair Margarete ... your ashen hair Shulamith’, and ends with the following lines:

a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete
he sets his pack on to us he grants us a grave in the air
he plays with the serpents and daydreams death is
master from Germany

your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith

The Aryan maiden Margarete’s golden hair metamorphoses into straw, with its ironically idyllic landscape references; while the dark hair of the Semitic Shulamith is turned ashen by the crematoria ovens. Significantly, the power of each archetype is dependent on the existence – real or implied – of the other: painted images of Shulamith frequently have straw added to them; while a painted black line or curve may echo the shape of Margarete’s abstracted straw locks. In one monumental canvas, *Shulamith* of 1983, tribute is paid to the suffering of the Jews by replacing the torches in the Funeral Hall for the Great

German Soldiers (designed by Kreis in c.1939) with a seven-flamed Jewish memorial candelabrum. Just as the two women are inseparable in Celan’s poem, so Kiefer believes that by destroying its Jewish population, Germany destroyed part of itself; and in symbolically reuniting the two in his own work, attempts to right a terrible wrong. He returned to these themes in the early 1990s with a series of book works entitled *Shulamith*, in which real hair poignantly and shockingly alludes to the Jewish victim.

Many view Kiefer’s preoccupation, not to say his fascination with the Nazi past, as deeply and necessarily suspect. It is certainly true that his paintings do not readily reveal their meanings, that ultimately they retain a disturbing ambiguity. It is, I would argue, precisely this underlying tension that makes his work so interesting. The glamour and allure of Nazism has exercised a number of other artists too – Jewish ones included. David Levinthal’s deliberately soft-focus colour photographs of models of Nazi leaders involved in rabble-rousing ceremonies are disquieting in the extreme, while Maciej Toporowicz’s manipulated photographs (displayed in 1994 on the streets of New York) take a thought-provoking and critical look at the way the idealised image of the nude so beloved of Nazism has survived into our own time in countless advertisements – those for Calvin Klein in particular.

Melvin Charney has addressed himself to an area of cultural enquiry that, regarded almost as a taboo subject, has gone unanalysed for far too long: namely, the death camps as extreme examples of modern architectural thinking. In particular, he has explored the disconcerting similarities he noticed between the architectural layout of the camps and images of the Temple of Jerusalem as depicted by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French and German visionaries (see Col.Fig.55). The implications of these similarities are disturbing in the extreme, raising important questions about the relationship between architecture and humanism, politics and religion, idealism and terror. Other drawings by Charney, of a more dramatic, even

apocalyptic nature, evoke a nightmare world, predominantly and symbolically red in hue, in which railway lines and chimneys, Piranesi-like, dominate the cityscape, and lurk behind Renaissance façades.

The small-scale ceramic sculptures of Daisy Brand are also obsessed with architectural forms (see Col.Figs 60 and 61). In her case, however, the obsession is deeply and directly rooted in first-hand experience: as a young teenager, she survived no fewer than seven camps in one year, including Auschwitz. Significantly, the empty corridors, the gates, the railway tracks that recur as leitmotifs in her work speak more eloquently in their unpeopled state of the suffering that took place there, and of the strength of her memories, than the occasional, slightly stereotypical figure of a guard or hunched waiting figure. These recurrent architectural elements combine with elegantly stylised, symbolic motifs, such as scrolls and banners abstracted from the striped uniforms of the camp inmates, to create exquisitely crafted, suggestively textured works which are heartbreaking in their restraint, their ability – against all the odds – to create beauty out of hell.

Kitty Klaidman's preoccupation with architectural forms also has an autobiographical basis. As a child in Czechoslovakia, she spent a year of the war in hiding with her family in the storeroom of a gentile farmhouse. Returning there only recently, she has produced a haunting series of paintings inspired by her complex memories of that time. Many of the images allude not to the cramped space in which she was confined, but to the attic space above their heads, reached, on special, rare occasions, by a stepladder, an embodiment of hope and the promise of freedom (see Col.Figs 62 and 63). Ghostly white wraiths, abstract yet anthropomorphic, infuse and illumine the sombre spaces. As with Daisy Brand, abstracted architectural forms stand as metaphors for extreme human experiences and evoke them more powerfully than any figures could. Klaidman has in fact produced a smaller-scale series of photographic collages of a more

explicitly figurative nature, in which she pays homage both to her own childhood and, above all, to the people who made it possible for her family to survive. Although more intimate and extremely poignant, these works lack the originality and the suggestiveness of the purely architectural images.

Klaidman's daughter Elyse is also a painter. Interestingly, it was her own experience of visiting Czechoslovakia in her mother's company in the late 1980s that turned her artistic attention to the latter's wartime experiences. While Kitty was painting the woods that surrounded the farmhouse and which had such intense personal significance for her, Elyse Klaidman – of necessity at one remove from the experience – painted portraits, based on old photographs, of family members she never knew. Both women, haunted in different but related ways by the same architectonic elements, then felt compelled to depict the Czech farmhouse that had given the mother shelter. More vividly coloured and emphatic in their handling of paint (she favours oil, Kitty acrylic), the daughter's paintings are paradoxically both more emotional and more detached from their subject than her mother's renderings of similar motifs (see Col.Fig.64).

As father and son, artists Roman and Ardyn Halter offer another fascinating case history. Roman Halter is a survivor, whose paintings and stained glass images derive from a deeply felt humanitarian impulse to convey the horror and the pity of his own wartime experience, and that of so many others who were never able to tell the tale. Like many artists of an older generation, he dwells particularly on the suffering of women and children in order to highlight the tragic pathos of his subject. Sentimentality, however, is averted by a strong graphic awareness. Ardyn Halter is primarily a landscape painter, but in 1981 felt compelled to tackle the subject of the Holocaust in his own way. The result was a series of large-format canvases (now in the permanent collection of the Lohamei Haghetaot Museum in Israel) which combine painted

representations of pre-war family photographs with jagged, gothic German script comprising Nazi euphemisms about the annihilation of the Jews, often superimposed on the images like a prison grille. As with Elyse Klaidman, one senses a (no doubt psychologically necessary) distancing from the trauma of the parent's experience.

Photographers Naomi Salomon and Judah Ein-Mor, in their apparently matter-of-fact representation of artefacts displayed in museums devoted to the Holocaust, provide an effective commentary on the way such objects are both unbearably vivid and impossibly distant. Anyone who has visited Auschwitz or Majdanek, or even the new US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC will testify to the extraordinary impact made by the huge piles of objects – suitcases, shoes, combs, spectacles, even hair – that once belonged to the victims and are now on display there. Not surprisingly, many artists have worked with this most eloquent of visual evidence, although the relics themselves possess such power that the artist may be hard pressed to produce anything more memorable. Survivor Elsa Pollak, for example, in her monumental clay sculpture *All that Remained* (1985-9, Yad Vashem Art Museum, Jerusalem), replicates in this most fragile of materials a mound of victims' shoes. A number of Lena Liv's complex and allusive mixed-media constructions also incorporate a poignant – although, in her case, barely conscious – reference to these same shoes. Piles of discarded clothes are similarly resonant, as the work of Christian Boltanski, Lily R. Markiewicz and even Stuart Brisley (whose work is *not* specifically concerned with the Holocaust) testifies.

The worn leather suitcases left behind by the victims have caught artists' imaginations in a similar fashion. Since the late 1970s German artist Raffael Rheinsberg has created installations comprising huge piles of real suitcases, both in a gallery and more subversively, in a 'non-art' setting – for example, in front of the Frauenkirche in Munich. In some of his pieces,

the suitcases are left open to reveal their contents: in most cases, an assortment of humble household objects, in others, large numbers of the same items (clothes hangers, rags, corks), immediately suggestive of displacement, dislocation and annihilation. In his monumental *Western or Wailing Wall* of 1993 (Col.Fig.67), Fabio Mauri manages in a brilliant leap of visual imagination to create a wall of these suitcases (disconcertingly Mondrian-like in their geometric configuration), which alludes not only to the Western or Wailing Wall in Jerusalem but to other walls (the Berlin Wall comes immediately to mind) and to other refugees and other victims. An even more recent work comprises a smart, if old-fashioned leather suitcase inscribed in gothic script '*dieser Koffer is arisch*' ['this suitcase is Aryan'] – another arresting gesture that tells the story of discrimination and persecution from a different, but equally illuminating angle (Cat.43a). Of aristocratic Italian parentage, Mauri was deeply traumatised during adolescence by the mysterious disappearance of his Jewish neighbours, but later succeeded in channelling that trauma into a relentless exploration of the meaning of Fascism and anti-Semitism, both past and present, in the form of conceptually-based installation and performance work.

An essentially conceptual approach also characterises the work of Dutch artist Henk Heideveld who in 1990 on Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) took it upon himself to trace a white line along a railway track from west to east, the direction so many Dutch Jews were forced to travel. According to the artist, he was prevented from completing the 24-kilometre trail he had envisaged by the police, who literally stopped him in his tracks at 12.15 pm. German artist Gunther Demnig made a similarly propitiatory gesture when between 1990 and 1993 he executed his *Spurenlegen* (Leaving Traces) project, in the course of which he inserted commemorative stones into the pavements of Cologne. In 1994 he embarked on his *Stolperstein* (Stumbling Stone) project, which involves inscribing the birth – and when known, death – dates

of German Jews deported by the Nazis, and the names of the camps to which they were sent, on concrete plaques, which will then be installed in the form of paving-stones at the addresses where those people once lived. Jochen Gerz's 1993 project *2146 Stones: A Monument against Racism* in Saarbrücken was in part similarly motivated, with the important difference that since in his case no physical trace was left of the politically provocative and emotionally charged act, disturbing questions were deliberately raised about the whole memorialisation process. Other so-called 'anti-monuments', by Gerz and his wife Esther Shalev-Gerz, Horst Hoheisel and Hans Haacke, most of them (perhaps not surprisingly) in Germany, also belong more to the realm of conceptual art than to that of traditional memorial sculpture.¹²

Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock have together produced seemingly innocent images to be posted in public places. Only when one reads the accompanying text (in German) does one realise, with a shock, the political, historical and human implications of their work. A schematised rendering of an academic mortarboard, for example, is accompanied by the words: 'No promotion for Jews 15.4.1937'; while a pretty little cat accompanied by the text 'Jews are no longer allowed to keep pets 15.5.1942' reminds us of another of the Nazi edicts, some more devastating than others, which collectively and progressively served to strip *German Jews of their livelihood, their dignity – and ultimately, their lives.*

Whether projects such as these can in fact be subsumed under the name of art remains a moot point. Although there is a danger that a primarily conceptual approach can lead to too much detachment and too little emotion, at its best it produces work that is both cerebral and from the heart. In her installation and video pieces, Lily R. Markiewicz, the child of Holocaust survivors, has evolved an understated but powerful symbolic vocabulary to explore the complex issue of post-Holocaust Jewish female identity. Although herself a secularised Jew with a sophisti-

cated grasp of feminist and linguistic theory, her work contains numerous allusions to traditional Jewish ritual practices. In the defiantly titled installation *I Don't Celebrate Christmas* of 1990 (Col. Fig. 69), for example, the shrouded mirrors allude on one level (as confirmed by an explanatory text reflected in a mirror above the viewer's head from an unseen source) to the orthodox Jewish practice of covering a mirror with cloth after a death; on another (as confirmed by the photograph of the artist in the act of unveiling – or is it veiling? – a blackened mirror) to the mirror as traditional Western symbol of female vanity. A second photographic panel depicts the darkened, blurred yet reflective surface of a pool of water, adding yet further tantalising ambiguities. The neat piles of folded cloth on the floor likewise contain multiple references: not only to the on-going need to mourn (the use of cloth to cover mirrors is here compounded by a troubling awareness of the piles of clothes left behind by Holocaust victims) and to other traditional Jewish ritual practices such as covering the bread on the Sabbath, but also to female domesticity.

Any sense of detachment in the presentation of these complex ideas is dramatically countered by the mirror that confronts the viewer at the entrance to the installation and brands him or her with the name 'Jew' inscribed at chest-level on its surface, thus colouring one's entire perception of the piece. Other works by Markiewicz employ similar shock tactics: in the tape/slide piece *Silence Woke Me Up Today* (1989), for example, the text is for the most part oblique and allusive, so that the word 'Jew', when it is uttered, comes as a rude shock. Much the same is true of one of Markiewicz's most recent works, *Places to Remember II*, based on her earlier book of almost the same title. In this piece, suggestively abstracted and fragmented photographic images of sand flowing through hands and into a bowl are accompanied by a cyclical, ambient voice recording, which for the most part deals in poetic and non-specific terms with issues of dislocation and alienation; but by the unexpected and abrupt

inclusion of the word 'Jew' roots the haunting generalities in a highly specific context – that of the 'second generation' attempting to come to terms with the legacy of the Holocaust.

American installation and performance artist Ellen Rothenberg's works also tease the intellect from a specifically female point of view. Since 1990 she has given artistic expression to a long-standing preoccupation with the real-life figure of Anne Frank (the young Jewish-Dutch girl who in hiding wrote a diary which – unlike its author – survived the war) in the form of her *Anne Frank Project*, a tripartite installation consisting of *A Partial Index* (1991), *A Probability Bordering on Certainty* (1993) and *The Conditions for Growth* (1994). Her realisation, after reading the critical and unexpurgated version of the *Diary* (published in English in 1989), that earlier editions had eliminated nearly all references to the young girl's burgeoning sexuality and her troubled relationship with her mother, as well as to the family's German origins and the fact that now, in Amsterdam, they were in hiding from the Germans, prompted Rothenberg to explore the complex ways in which Anne Frank has been mythologised, turned into a kind of Jewish saint stripped of both cultural specificity and individual complexity. In technically inventive and thought-provoking ways, Rothenberg's work invites us to reassess the situation.

A Probability Bordering on Certainty, for example, includes an old-fashioned vitrine, displaying several neat piles of visiting cards, each printed with the words 'Anne Frank, author' in different typefaces – an ingenious reminder of the ways in which identity can be manipulated and constructed. Another vitrine contains a pile of pink erasers, each one with the word 'guilt' inscribed on it in gothic letters – a striking gesture that smacks perhaps too much of a conceptual joke (the piece is actually titled *Guilt Erasers!*), but nevertheless gives pause for thought. *The Combing Shawl* (Col.Fig.66), which forms part of the same installation, is aesthetically the most resolved of its

component parts: the combing shawl of the title refers to the cape used by Anne when combing her hair; the strands of text (excerpts from the *Diary*) cascade to the floor like women's hair, and the floor is strewn with metal combs, alluding not only to the combing shawl but also (as discussed above) to the huge piles of combs and other artefacts once owned by victims of the Holocaust and now displayed in museums.

By the obvious yet ingenious act of inscribing ordinary pencils with Anne Frank's name, another young American artist, Melissa Gould, has explored the troubling implications of Anne Frank's elevation to the status of an icon – and a tourist attraction. Gould, like Rothenberg, is technically inventive and conceptually nimble in her explorations of certain aspects of the Holocaust. A real scrubbing brush, for example, is inscribed with the words 'Souvenir Wien 1938', and two toothbrushes are inscribed with the names Israel and Sara: a darkly ironic reference to an incident in that year when the SS compelled Austrian Jews to scrub the streets of Vienna with their own toothbrushes. (Sara and Israel were the middle names forced upon Jews in the Nazi period.) Another piece of 1993 by Gould, called *Schadenfreude* (literally, the joy one experiences at another's misfortunes), utilises images from a 1935 German encyclopaedia to create what the artist, with characteristically black humour, calls a 'Nazi Wallpaper Store'. Innocuous at first glance, a closer examination of these images reveals a deeply ironic and tragic dimension. Schematic renderings of lampshades and soap, for instance, look innocent until one remembers that the Nazis actually used human remains in the making of these objects; as does the image of two boys somersaulting, except that together their bodies form the shape of a swastika. Combined with the repeated image of hands sewing on an armband, these serve as a sobering reminder of the appeal of Nazism to young people and the strength of the Hitler Youth.

If aspects of the work of Markiewicz, Rothenberg and Gould reveal a preoccupation with gender-linked

issues, in Nancy Spero's work a feminist preoccupation is absolutely central. Spero has long been known for her wall-pieces, which use text and photographically based images to expose the suffering of women throughout history and in every culture, portraying them both as victims and heroines. Recently, she has turned her attention to the brutalities perpetrated by the Nazis on women who were themselves Jewish or consorted with Jews. *Masha Bruskina* (1993) pays homage to a young Jewish partisan hung by the Nazis, without them realising that she was in fact a Jew; while *The Ballad of Marie Sanders*, of 1993 (Col.Fig.68), pays tribute to the courage of a young Aryan woman who was killed for sleeping with a Jew.

One of the relatively few other artists to concern themselves primarily with the suffering of women in the Nazi era is Yocheved Weinfeld. Born in Poland in 1947, the child of survivors, she spent her first ten years in Poland, haunted by her European past, before her family emigrated to Israel. Since the 1970s much of Weinfeld's work has taken the form of a series of powerful and disquieting mixed-media images, in which she projects herself into the past, casting herself into the role of Holocaust victim. Although both Spero and Weinfeld undoubtedly feel strongly about their subject-matter, the latter's work possesses an urgency and intensity far removed from the more cerebral and indirect approach adopted by Spero.

Photographs of children now grown-up or dead can act as powerful reminders of mortality in any circumstances. If we know that they show children who almost certainly perished in the Holocaust, their poignancy becomes hard to bear. The two works entitled *Altar to the Chajes High School* (Fig.78) and *The Festival of Purim*, which form part of a series called *Lessons of Darkness* produced by French artist Christian Boltanski in the late 1980s, knowingly tread a fine line between sentiment and sentimentality. In both works, over-enlarged and deliberately blurred photographs of Jewish schoolchildren taken just prior to the outbreak of the Second World War are incorpo-

rated into structures reminiscent of a Catholic altar (Boltanski himself is half-Jewish, half-Catholic) – albeit of an unorthodox kind, made up of tin boxes and electric light bulbs! Although some doubt has since been thrown on the authenticity of Boltanski's photographic source material, the poignancy and power of the work persist.

Russian-born, Italian-resident artist Lena Liv also incorporates images of children into her work. In her case, the photographs hark back to an earlier, inter-war period, and rely for their power on a more generalised sense of the loss of childhood as a metaphor for other forms of loss, including the loss of life in the Holocaust (see Col.Fig.71). More lyrical and carefully crafted than Boltanski's constructions, Liv's mixed-media pieces also rely more on poetic allusiveness. A decorated ball (fashioned, like all the objects in her work, out of hand-made paper pulp) is one of several recurring leitmotifs – held by the child in *Memoria di Arianna*, for example, solemnly, hieratically, like a holy grail (see Cat.39). A toy horse fulfils a similar function, acquiring, like the ball, the status almost of a talisman – one, however, that lacks the power to work the ultimate magic, to halt life, and death, in their tracks.

Susanna Pieratzki is a young German-Jewish photographer whose work focuses not on children as such, but on parents, and her own position as the child of two Holocaust survivors. The series of posed black-and-white photographs she took in 1991, entitled *Parents* (Cat.52), is perhaps the most intimate and personal of all the work included in the current exhibition – which, if we compare it with the far more cerebral work of another second generation artist, Lily R. Markiewicz, goes to prove that it is as difficult to generalise about the art produced by the children of survivors as it is about anything else. In this series, Pieratzki has depicted both her parents in a sequence of symbolically significant poses and accompanied by symbolically significant props, and has given each image a title and a number that speaks of an elemen-

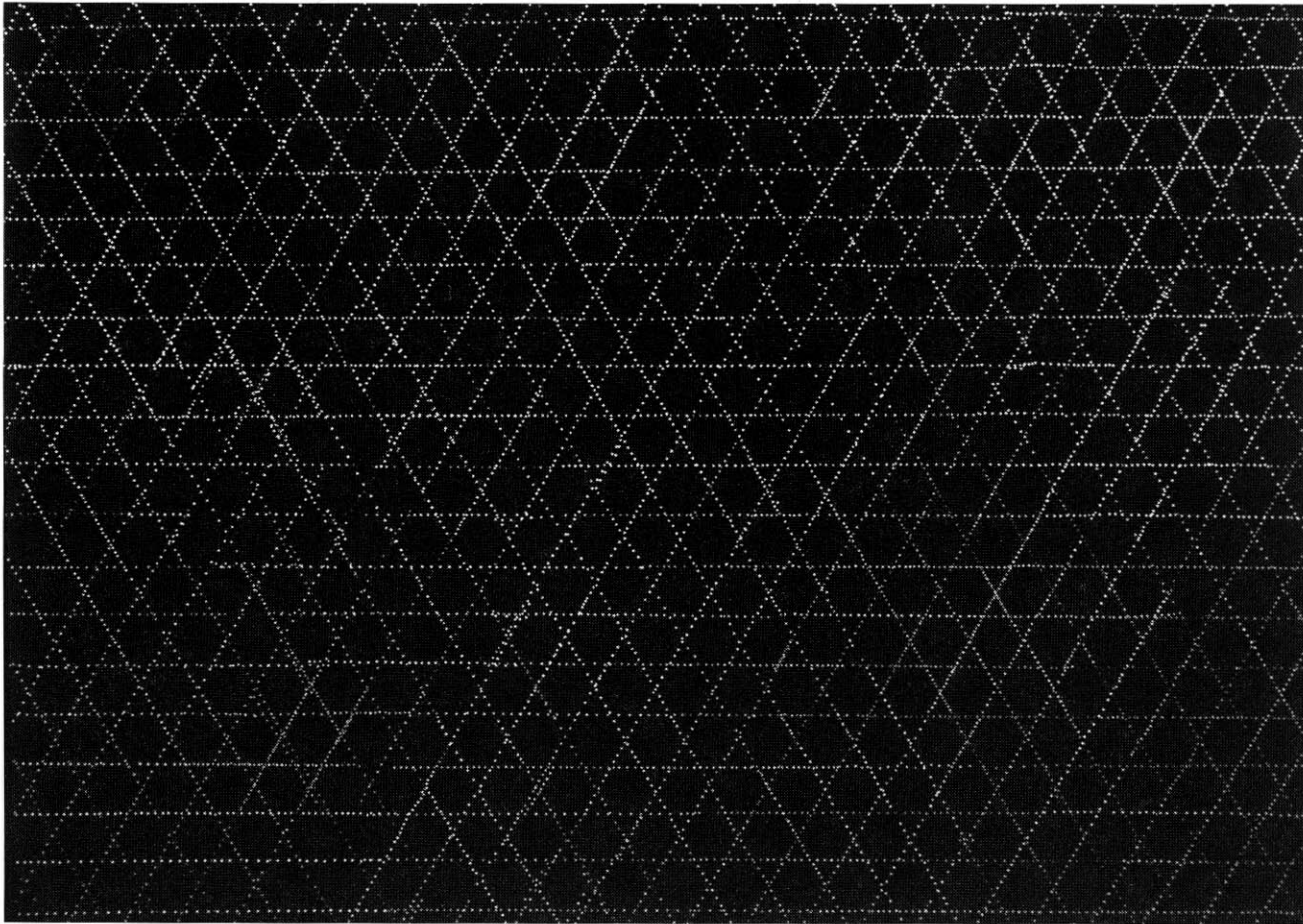


Fig.30 Amanda Guest, *Untitled*, 1993, pin-pricks in paper (backlit), 76 × 56 cm

tal life-cycle. *Birth*, for example (Fig.79), shows her father in profile like a Renaissance duke, sad but noble in his suffering, two small shoes resting on his head. The image is an arresting one in visual terms alone; but once we know that the shoes allude to the birth of his daughter Susanna (they reappear in an openly elegiac image called *Remembrance*, the last in the series) it becomes almost unspeakably moving. The same is true of *War*, which depicts her father in striped pyjamas (ordinary enough, but the association with a camp inmate's uniform is hard to avoid) facing away from the camera, eight wire hangers dangling behind his back (the number of hangers is a reference to the eight siblings Pieratzki's father lost in the Holocaust). On another level, the images speak eloquently of two human beings who have survived the Holocaust and managed to retain a great inner strength and beauty, in spite of, perhaps because of, their great inner sadness; and of the daughter's immense respect and tenderness for the parents she can perhaps never fully understand.

John Goto, like so many of the artists discussed in

this essay, employs photography and text to further his own exploration of the significance of the Holocaust. Non-Jewish, although of Eastern European descent, he visited the so-called model ghetto of Theresienstadt or Terezin near Prague in 1983, taking a series of 'straight' black-and-white documentary photographs that were later to serve as a kind of prelude to the series of mixed-media images entitled *Terezin* which he produced in the late 1980s (see Col.Fig.65). Terezin was remarkable on a number of counts: most relevant here is the fact that a disproportionate number of those held prisoner there were artists and intellectuals. Actively encouraged by the Nazis, who held Terezin up as proof to the world that the Jews were hardly suffering at all, the inmates created a lively cultural life within its walls – until, that is, most of them were deported to the death camps.

Goto has chosen to focus in particular on the extraordinary figure of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, an artist trained at the Bauhaus who acted as art teacher to the children of Terezin. References also to Kafka and Rembrandt and artists such as Karel Fleischmann

and Bedrich Fritta, who actually worked in Terezin, combine with excerpts from contemporary and post-war texts about Terezin to give expression to Goto's primary preoccupations: namely, an investigation of the way our knowledge of the past is constructed, and above all, of the deeply complex relationship between culture and barbarism. The latter, unsurprisingly, is an issue that exercises many other artists: Pam Skelton's 1993 series of paintings *Dangerous Places – Goethe's Oak*, for example, explores the unresolvable paradox that Buchenwald embraced the site of the poet Goethe's favourite tree. In his 1993 installation *Phoenix*, French artist Jean-Sylvain Bieth reconstructed a library ironically comprising books both banned and 'recommended' by the authorities in occupied France – all of them interspersed with jars containing mysterious and sinister-looking substances. Heinrich Heine's famously prophetic observation that where 'books are burned, people burn also' is never far away.

American artist Susan Erony has confronted the implications of Heine's dictum head-on in a series of mixed-media images, *Memorial to the Jews of Lodz*, which actually incorporates fragments of burnt Hebrew texts which she found discarded in the ruins of the one remaining synagogue in the Polish town of Lodz. American book artist Deborah Davidson uses fragments of text embedded in hand-made paper to pay tribute both to the suffering of her own mother's family in Italy and to the fate of the Italian and Sephardi Jews in general (see Col. Fig. 70). Her work is poetic and allusive, elegaic in mood but never sentimental.

Some artists, wary both of over-conceptualising and over-sensationalising the horror of the Holocaust, have avoided figurative references altogether in favour of total abstraction. It is a striking fact that the only contemporary artworks to feature in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC are completely abstract canvases or sculptures by well-known artists such as Sol LeWitt, Richard Serra and

Elsworth Kelly. While the actual works differ very little from the artists' usual productions (and could thus be seen as not having any real relevance to the Holocaust), it is surprising how appropriate *in situ* these abstract images seem. Perhaps, in the face of the overwhelming visual documentary evidence contained in the museum, any other kind of art would seem impertinent.¹³

The Israeli artist Moshe Kupferman, himself a survivor, has evolved a restricted but eloquent repertoire of abstract grid forms that work on many levels simultaneously. Although in no way simply illustrative of his wartime experiences, the forms in his paintings do nevertheless evoke a sense of enclosure and incarceration countered by a certain lyricism in the muted colour harmonies. Unequipped with any biographical information about the artist, however, the viewer would be forgiven for missing such references. Survivor Nettie Schwarz Vanderpol has recently turned to the unusual medium of embroidery to express her own coming to terms with the past. Many of her images are completely abstract; but unlike Kupferman, she supplies a verbal commentary that makes the link with the Holocaust quite explicit – a fact which makes the images easier to understand, but ultimately weakens their symbolic and imaginative power. American artist Mindy Weisel is deeply aware of being the child of survivors; yet when faced with her colourful, quasi-abstract paintings, the references to the Holocaust are often so oblique as to be almost invisible. Lee Waisler has evolved a rather too elegant vocabulary of abstract forms to allude symbolically to the Holocaust: once again, however, recourse to a vocabulary which is too arcane renders the work inadequate to the task of communication, and formalism triumphs.

Amanda Guest's small-scale paper works make eloquent and poignant use of the abstract yet symbolically rich form of the Star of David. One work, for example, consists of a yellow cut-out star pierced with thread and wire (a reference, surely, to the infamous

Yellow Star that Jews were forced to sew on to their clothes); another creates a seemingly abstract pattern through the repetition of the star form created by tiny pin-pricks in the paper (Fig.80). Annette Lemieux, an essentially conceptual artist, occasionally works in an apparently abstract mode. In *Points of Departure* (1990), for example, a grid of dots deployed across the picture surface turns out to have been created with cigarette butts; in *Devouring Element* (1990-1), the space between the densely interlocking burn marks creates a pattern of swastikas. The latter is the more historically specific in its references; yet the former work is probably the stronger, just because it is more open-ended.

How, then, is one to create an artwork that is both unequivocally about the Nazi Holocaust yet of relevance today, that is neither too narrow nor too wide in its references, neither too obvious nor too oblique? There are no answers – only a compulsion to go on trying. To quote Wiesel again: ‘It has all been said, yet all remains to be said.’¹¹

Notes

1. T. W. Adorno, ‘Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft’, article of 1949, published in 1951, republished in *Prismen: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* (1955, 1963, 1969). English translation *Prisms: Cultural Criticism and Society* by S. & S. Weber, (Neville Spearman, London, 1967; MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1981).
2. Elie Wiesel, title essay in *One Generation After*, (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1971, originally published in French in 1965).
3. George Steiner, ‘A Kind of Survivor – for Elie Wiesel’, in *Language and Silence*, (Faber & Faber, London, 1979).
4. James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1993).
5. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1977).
6. The frequent tendency of artists and other cultural commentators to link the Holocaust victim with Christ has already been noted by Ziva Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation: The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts*, (Routledge, New York, 1981).
7. For a thought-provoking analysis of this phenomenon (though mainly in other media, and with the emphasis on

the widespread fascination with Nazism itself), see Saul Friedlander, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1984).

8. See R. B. Kitaj, *First Diasporist Manifesto*, (Thames & Hudson, London, 1989).
9. It has also been published in book form: see Judy Chicago, *The Holocaust Project*, (Viking Penguin, New York, 1993).
10. See Ronnie Landau’s essay in this catalogue for a more detailed discussion of this point.
11. The contrast between Lanzmann’s 1986 film *Shoah* and Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* is a telling one. Spielberg, product of Hollywood that he is, has produced an historical epic, complete with hero and plenty of dramatic and tear-jerking incidents, clearly believing that only an imaginary reconstruction of events could evoke a vivid sense of how it was for a wide, ill-informed and probably incredulous public. Lanzmann, on the other hand, is convinced of the inadvisability – not to say the impossibility – of reconstructing the past in this way. His own film contains no documentary footage whatsoever, and relies primarily on the verbal recollections of individuals (perpetrators as well as victims) who lived through that time. Most fine artists, particularly although not exclusively of a younger generation, favour a more cautious and oblique approach than Spielberg, preferring – like Lanzmann – to confront the Holocaust by way of the present.
12. This type of work is discussed in more detail in James Young’s essay in the present catalogue.
13. See Ken Johnson, ‘Art and Memory’, *Art in America*, November 1993 for a thoughtful discussion of the issues raised by the Museum’s choice of artworks.
14. Elie Wiesel, ‘Readings’ in *One Generation After*, op.cit.

Monica Bohm-Duchen (MA Courtauld Institute of Art) is a London-based freelance writer, lecturer and exhibition organiser with a special interest in the issue of Jewish identity in twentieth-century art, and the experience of immigration and persecution. The institutions for which she has worked include the Tate Gallery, the Royal Academy of Arts and the Open University; the publications to which she has contributed include *The Jewish Quarterly*, *RA Magazine*, *Art Monthly* and the catalogue of the Ben Uri Art Society Permanent Collection. She co-curated *Art in Exile in Great Britain 1933-1945*, an exhibition held in Berlin and London (at the Camden Arts Centre) in 1985-6, and acted as researcher and assistant selector for *Chagall to Kitaj: Jewish Experience in Twentieth Century Art* (Barbican Art Gallery, London, 1990). Her monograph on Marc Chagall is to be published by Phaidon Press.

THIS IS A TIME OF LIGHTNING WITHOUT THUNDER,
THIS IS A TIME OF UNHEARD VOICES,
OF UNEASY SLEEP AND USELESS VIGILS,
FRIEND, DO NOT FORGET THE DAYS
OF LONG EASY SILENCES,
FRIENDLY NOCTURNAL STREETS,
SERENE MEDITATIONS.
BEFORE THE LEAVES FALL,
BEFORE THE SKY CLOSES AGAIN,
BEFORE WE ARE AWAKENED AGAIN
BY THE FAMILIAR POUNDING OF IRON FOOTSTEPS
IN FRONT OF OUR DOORS.*

The stories now were set in lands inhabited by beings from another time and culture. They were dark and exotic. There were bearded rabbis from Lithuania called the Hassidim and there were alchemists from Cordoba and Ashkenazim and Sephardim. Some lived in shtetls, others in ghettos and one became a sabre-rattling Cossack caught up in pogroms.

The Israel of the 1960s was heady with nationhood. The Jews lived in the land of Israel but the land of Israel was for Israelis. A chance invitation to a Shabbat supper at the home of a rabbi and his family in Jerusalem's Mea Shearim was preceded by a shaking, nodding service in the synagogue and it reminded me that the world of Shalom Aleichem and Isaac Bashevis Singer still held firm. A visit to the Jerusalem monument and museum with its exhibits and its tablets carved with black acid tears, and the eternal flame to the unquenchable memory of the numberless dead, brought me back to the present.

The narrative paintings from 1989 were conceived as a 'direct response' to Levi's writings and to accompany accounts from literature, film and personal journeys. I attempted to use the paint both as pigment and as subject matter and I wanted the subject itself to exist in 'paint-time', that is, in a time neither biblical nor contemporary.

Although I was at once angered, inspired and of course quite impotent in daring to comment on this unimaginable historical episode of Jewish history, I thought that these icons – no matter that they seemed inadequate – might act as paint signs to the continuing presence of man on this earth, as witnessed by Primo Levi as both survivor and creator.

MICK ROONEY
September 1994

* 'Waiting, 2 January 1949', from *The Collected Poems of Primo Levi*, translated by Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann, published Faber & Faber Ltd, 1988.

Ellen Rothenberg
Born USA 1949.
Lives and works in Chicago.

See *Ellen Rothenberg*, Tufts University Art Gallery, Aidekman Arts Center, Medford, Massachusetts, 1994.

NOTES ON 'THE COMBING SHAWL'

The Combing Shawl is a sculpture from the Anne Frank Project, a three-part installation series based on the life and writings of Anne Frank.¹ This series is not a documentary por-

trait of a person or a time but focuses on contemporary issues through the historical lens of the Diary. The installations reflect on the individual identity of Anne Frank, the person behind the myth separated from the accumulated cultural history of the Diary, the plays, movies etc. The installations contain objects which require an alternative reading to the way history, artifacts and documents are conventionally considered. Some refer to actual historical artifacts from Anne Frank's life. Others are newly fabricated or 'false' artifacts. By presenting various kinds of documentation, the distinctions between truth and fiction, denial and falsehood, and our assumptions about history become sharply delineated.

I began working on The Combing Shawl while living in Berlin. This provided a certain proximity to the events of the Second World War in Europe and enabled me to research historic sites and archives in Germany as well as at the Anne Frank Institute, the Anne Frank Museum, the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation, and the State Forensic Science Laboratory in The Netherlands.

My intention in creating this work is not that of a historian or documentalist. I speak as an artist, about an experience of the Diary that is personal and contemporary. However, the archive, the museum and the forensic laboratory, unlikely sites for the aesthetic imagination, are precisely the sites where the issues of identity and its traces meet the limits of representation.

¹*The Combing Shawl* refers to an item of clothing belonging to Anne Frank: a small silken cape which she wore around her shoulders when combing her hair. It is one of the few personal effects of Anne Frank to survive the war.

My sculptural work *The Combing Shawl* has the text of the *Diary* as 'hair'. Surrounding the text on the floor are combs cast in aluminium, bronze and magnesium bronze. The casting sand and small bits of metal from the casting process remain adhered to the surface of the combs.

Shirley Samberg
Born USA 1920.
Lives and works in New York.

When asked to write about my sculpture, it is always a dilemma. What to say?

With an artist it is always the material that speaks. When asked to create a stage-set, I started gathering supplies. Burlap was one of the materials. It was very malleable and to me appealing. I had been welding at the time and needed a change. The challenge of using fabric with wood and earth elements appealed to me. The images seemed to spring from sources deep within me that I wasn't aware of. The dark and brooding sculptures took on a life of their own. I worked with a compulsion I didn't know I possessed. One figure emerged after another. Those who saw them were moved by the dark well-spring of grief. Grief for the loss of loved ones. Grief for the Holocaust. Grief for war, poverty and homelessness ... and the list goes on ...

SHIRLEY SAMBERG
September 1994