Contemporary Artists Reflect on the Holocaust

BURNT WHOLE

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Essays by

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The Presence of the Holocaust in Contemporary American Art

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While a good deal of study has been devoted to the treatment of the Holocaust in film and literature, visual art on the subject has been relatively little discussed. And what literature exists has mainly centered on the works made in the concentration camps or by survivors after the war. The burgeoning generation born after the war, but still dealing with the cultural memory of the Holocaust and its aftermath, has received less attention, and American artists treating the Holocaust from not only a historical distance but a geographical one have received less still.[1]

The first artworks on the Holocaust were made in the camps by inmates who wanted to leave a record of them. Generally speaking, these may be regarded more as historical documents than as art. After the war, artists who had survived the Holocaust or had witnessed it from a distance began describing and interpreting it retrospectively. The long roster of American artists in this category includes Frank Stella, Larry Rivers, Robert Morris, Audrey Flack, Joan Snyder, Louise Fishman, R. B. Kitaj, Louise Nevelson, and George Segal.[2]

To deal with the Holocaust in art raises important aesthetic questions. In the U.S., early critical discussions typically began with the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno's statement in the mid 1950s that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."[3] Some believe Adorno was referring to all art, and suggesting that to derive aesthetic pleasure from art in the post-Holocaust era is abhorrent to the memory of the six million Jews killed. Others think he was referring only to art about the Holocaust, and arguing that to the extent that such art, no matter how well meaning, engages the viewer in an aesthetic experience, it creates a barrier distancing us from the Holocaust's horrors. The statement might also imply that art cannot describe the reality of the camps—that attempts to re-create the feeling of Auschwitz will always be inadequate.

The literary critic and historian George Steiner took up Adorno's position when he wrote that silence is the most tempting response to the Holocaust, since no vocabulary can describe the unimaginable.[4] The Italian survivor Primo Levi similarly writes, "We become aware that our language lacks words to express this offense, the demolition of man."[5]

The discussion has changed direction since these early remarks. In a later essay, Adorno recanted his earlier argument: "Perennial suffering," he wrote, "has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems."[6] And in 1984 Steiner too agreed that enough time had passed for artists to have to deal with the massacre of the Jews.[7] Adorno and Steiner, admittedly, were still talking about the generation that had lived through the Holocaust. But in the mid 1980s, at the time of Steiner's shift in sentiment, the political climate in Germany was changing. Historical revisionism was reaching its "intellectual salience";[8] as symbolized by Ronald Reagan's visit to the Bitburg cemetery, a "symmetric vision of the past" was being articulated, in which Jews and German soldiers were equated as victims, and Nazis and Allies were both held responsible for atrocities. Auschwitz was made to equal Hiroshima.[9] A more extreme revisionism denied that the Holocaust had even occurred. New strains of aesthetic discourse emerged in response to this disturbing trend,

and many artists felt a responsibility to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive.

Today, nearly fifty years after the Holocaust ended, art's treatment of Auschwitz is increasingly falling to the generation born after the war—no longer to witness, perpetrator, or bystander but to inheritor. This was inevitable, for a majority the Holocaust is now a historical event rather than a personal recollection. What visual language can deal with that cultural memory?

While there are American artists who paint the atrocities of the camps, most avoid them, and use archival photographs sparingly: they realize that media exposure has desensitized viewers to such images. As long as twenty years ago Susan Sontag wrote that there was nothing banal about the first photographs of the Nazi camps, but that "after thirty years, a saturation point may have been reached. In these last decades, 'concerned' photography has done at least as much to deaden conscience as to arouse it."[10] Aware that scenes of brutality may have a certain thrill for the viewer, many artists choose not to exploit this power to manipulate emotions. As Saul Friedlander remarks, the "Nazis' attraction lay less in any explicit ideology than in the power of emotions, images and phantasms."[11] Artists employing these techniques to deal with the Holocaust may become guilty of using techniques analogous to those of the Nazis.

The inmates' and survivors' goal of documenting the past largely limited their response to a realist style. As the Holocaust fades in time, the realist idiom seems limiting. Many artists prefer to approach the subject indirectly or from a conceptual perspective. Scenes of the camps made long after they were liberated may aestheticize brutality and become pornographic. An indirect approach is less problematic: the aesthetic experience is decentralized, and cooler imagery creates a distance that allows for mediation. It also allows us to search for and recognize genocide and ethnic hatred in today's world.

The American artists in this exhibition are not a homogenous group. Some were born or raised outside the U.S.; ***Burnt Whole*** includes artists originally from South Africa, Poland, Canada, and Germany. Some are children of survivors, some are assimilated Jews or non-Jews with no direct family link to the Holocaust. Some come to the Holocaust as part of a personal search for identity, others see the event as one demanding constant examination. As Americans, all live far from the Holocaust's location. The American national psyche is relatively unburdened by the Holocaust in comparison with the German or the Israeli. Perhaps this distance allows for a freer approach to the subject, and a greater willingness to tread into difficult terrain.

"Holocaust icons"—images that have entered our visual vocabulary as signs for the Holocaust—appear in many works in the exhibition. One cannot look at images of barbed wire, watchtowers, railroad tracks, and piles of anonymous corpses without recalling Auschwitz.[12] Employed to recall the Third Reich, the swastika and other symbols of Nazism overlap the Holocaust imagery.

The railroad track and train travel are central motifs in Daniel Faust's grids of photographs. Train travel in his work can be seen as representing a journey through time, from the past to the future: once one has left the station of embarkation, it becomes part of the past, a memory, a type of death; the destination, on the other hand, represents the future. In the Holocaust, though, the future, like the past, signified death, for the future was the death camp. Time collapses into itself in Faust's work; past, present, and future

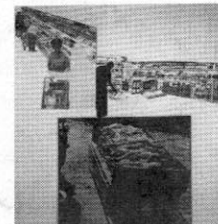
are one. Faust's work may be seen as referring to the Holocaust, but also as using a Holocaust icon as a more general metaphor for death.

Annette Lemieux uses Holocaust imagery as a metaphor for the evils of contemporary life. In *A Walk of Snipe,* 1992, she uses a documentary photograph of a stack of corpses from the Holocaust. Superimposed over this photograph are images of boot soles, the mark of the oppressor. Here, the corpses also refer to the genocidal wars of the present day. This work can be compared to John Baldessari's use of stacked corpses in *Inventory,* 1987, which examines the contemporary needs both to consume and to kill on a mass scale, articulating the "mass culture" (as opposed to the popular culture) of late capitalism.

Another Holocaust icon is the identification patch worn by the inmates in the camps. Steven Evans' concern in *Composition in Pink, Black, and White,* 1986–88, is homophobia and the prejudice against those with AIDS. By employing pink triangles (which gays had to wear in the camps) in his works, or making pink a dominant color, Evans associates contemporary and Nazi homophobia.

Anna Bialobroda too creates a relationship of subject and "other," through cropped images of ashen faces that gaze back at the painting's viewer. In some images, the painted figure's gaze at the viewer seems accusatory. The faces are in the upper halves of the paintings; the lower halves show the word "Exit," recalling signs in theaters and other public spaces—the way out in case of fire. Here, though, the painted space is claustrophobic, the exit blocked. The paintings are tall and narrow, and their design, when they are taken as a group, echoes the stripes of the concentration-camp uniform.

Turning the Jew into the "other" is also a subject of Howard Halle's *Beauty plus Pity,* 1993–94. The work's title comes from a lecture by Vladimir Nabokov on Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis," a story that prefigures the Nazi program of making the public see Jews as "vermin." Halle conflates Nabokov's drawings of the bedroom of Gregor Samsa, whom Kafka describes turning into a insect, with drawings detailing the machinery of genocide from Jean-Claude Pressac's book *Les Crématoires d'Auschwitz.* As they try to render the fictitious on the one hand and the scarcely believable on the other, the drawings, when taken together, become a metaphor for the problem of representing the Holocaust. If Kafka's fiction was realized in the Holocaust, that event in turn is threatened with being metamorphosed into fiction by the historical revisionists.



JOHN BALDESSARI
Inventory, 1987
Color and black-and-white photographs, acrylic, masonite
97 x 97½ inches
Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery

Ellen Rothenberg's *A Probability Bordering on Certainty: Guilt Erasers,* 1993, like *Das Wesentliche,* mentioned below, is part of a larger installation. In *Guilt Erasers,* the word "guilt," in the Gothic script favored by the Nazis, is printed on each of hundreds of rubber erasers. The erasers are placed in a large vitrine, with plenty of space left over—as if to say that there is plenty of room for the future erasing of history. The Orwellian power to control history is the issue in Rothenberg's work. As Chancellor Helmut Kohl remarked, "In a country without history, he who fills the memory, defines the concepts, and who interprets the past wins the future."[13]

In *A Probability Bordering on Certainty: Das Wesentliche (The essence),* 1993, Rothenberg explores the issue of the authenticity of historical documents. Those of us who, reading Anne Frank's diary, trusted it as an account of a Jewish child's life during World War II were deceived: in 1986 a complete text of the diary was published, revealing that previous editions had been edited by Anne's father

and by the German translator. Passages dealing with Anne's sexuality, and with her angry feelings toward her mother, had been censored. By incising those missing passages into 44 belts that she straps around foam to suggest the contour of a body, Rothenberg speaks both of men's fear and repression of feminine sexuality and of controlling the past by manipulating its documents. Commissioned with authenticating the handwriting of the diary, the Netherland State Forensic Science Laboratory concluded "with a probability bordering on certainty."

The reliance on historical documents is also addressed in Vivienne Koorland's *Last Letters from Stalingrad,* 1991, which presents letters purportedly written by German soldiers trapped at Stalingrad before surrendering to the Russians. With the recent opening of Russian archives, however, German historians have discovered that the letters are forgeries, most likely a product of the Nazi propaganda ministry. Koorland has rewritten the letters in a handwriting of block letters rather than cursives, which unintentionally reinforces the forged quality of the letters. The work presents history as less fact than human construction and interpretation. The reliance on documents to understand the past is held suspect.

Ronald Jones's *Monster* series, 1993, treats children as the innocent victims of political agendas: Cambodian children murdered by the Khmer Rouge, black children by the Ku Klux Klan, Jewish children in the Holocaust. With the help of a forensic scientist working from a photograph of a boy called Arnold who died in one of the camps, Jones has made a bronze bust showing Arnold at the age he would have been today had he survived. The head is set near a planter and a few scattered bones, connoting a cemetery or memorial park. Children have come to epitomize the innocence of the Holocaust's victims; their loss also represents a loss of the contribution they would have made to society.

Many people express concern about the exploitation of the Holocaust by artists, filmmakers, and fiction writers for their own gain. Susan Silas's *Untitled,* 1994, addresses this issue by proposing an anonymous letter, like a blackmail or ransom note, addressed to Anselm Kiefer. Written in German, the letter reads in translation, "Dear Mr. Kiefer, what's twenty years of loneliness your work has made you free." In this ironic allusion to the Auschwitz slogan *Arbeit Macht Frei* (Work makes you free), "work" refers to Kiefer's artwork on the Holocaust and the Nazi period, work that has propelled him to art-stardom. Some American art historians and critics have been troubled by the ambiguity of Kiefer's work: is he criticizing or exploring the German past, or is he glorifying it? When Germans make a similar negative critique, however, U.S. critics have wondered whether they would be critical of anyone trying to deal with this past and bring it into the open.[14]

The theme of identity after Auschwitz is explored by Art Spiegelman in his Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novels *Maus: A Survivor's Tale,* 1986, and *Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began,* 1991. Here Spiegelman, the founder of the magazine *Raw*, tells the story of his parents' lives in Nazi-occupied Poland, and their survival of Auschwitz. His aesthetic device is a literal cat-and-mouse metaphor—the Nazis are drawn as cats, the Jews as mice. The books have as much to do with Spiegelman's own identity as a child of survivors as with his parents' ordeal. Using comics to tell the story, mixing painfully sharp text and narrative with images reminiscent of childhood, he creates a distance from the terror and pity of the Holocaust that paradoxically makes the past vivid.

Mindy Weisel was born in Bergen-Belsen after the war ended, when this former concentration camp became a camp for displaced

persons. Her parents had survived Auschwitz. Weisel explores her heritage indirectly, through abstract paintings that suggest landscapes. *Lost Flowers,* 1979, features a series of repeating numbers—the identification numbers that the Nazis burned into her father's arm. The work's dark palette suggests the emotional tenor of Weisel's life as she grew up in the dark shadow of the camps. Over the suggested landscape of *Ancient History,* 1989, looms the bare articulation of a watchtower. Here the color is brighter, perhaps suggesting some kind of coming to terms with the past, and a testament to the possibility of spiritual renewal.

The American artists in ***Burnt Whole*** deal with a variety of issues, from cultural memory to late-twentieth-century society. Some are concerned with how memory of the Holocaust will endure as survivors die, others with whether or not the lessons of genocide have been learned. Concerned about art's inadequacy to deal with these issues in a meaningful way, these artists remain compelled to address the rupture that the Holocaust represents in Western civilization. Perhaps their geographical and historical distance from the event enables them to deal more convincingly with this overwhelming subject, and opens new realms of critical discourse for future generations.

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Notes

1. To my knowledge, the most comprehensive study of the Holocaust in art is Ziva Amishai-Maisels's *Depiction & Interpretation: The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts* (Tarrytown: Pergamon Press, 1993), which concentrates mainly on earlier artwork, and provides a bibliography. The material on American art consists mainly of articles on individual artists and a few catalogues of group exhibitions, for example Vivian Alpert Thompson Mercer, *A Mission in Art: Recent Holocaust Works in America* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1988) and Peter J. Baldaia, *Wrestling with History: Trachtman, Erony and the Theme of the Holocaust* (Newtonville, Mass.: Newton Art Center, 1992).
2. Other American artists would include Leon Golub, Nancy Spero, Sol LeWitt, Hans Haacke, Philip Evergood, Edith Hauptman, Mark Berghash, Judy Chicago, Susan Moss, Kitty Klaidman, Hannelore Baron, Sherry Zvares Sanabria, and Jerome Watkin. The list of younger American artists who have addressed this subject is just as long: Jonathan Borofsky, Beryl Korot, Melissa Gould, Mary Frank, Tobi Kahn, the Starn Twins, Troy Brauntuch, Michael David, June Ahrens, Susan Erony, Ellen Sollod, James Friedman, Debbie Teicholz, Joel Shapiro, Jock Reynolds and Susan Hellmuth, Grace Graupe-Pillard, Kenneth Shorr, and a number of others.
3. Theodor W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," 1955, *Prisms,* trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (London: Neville Spearman, 1967, and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), p. 34. Adorno emigrated to the United States in the late 1930s. His expression "after Auschwitz" suggests a break in Western civilization comparable to the Christian use of "A.D.," the difference being that the Christians were marking the coming of the Messiah and Adorno the end of time. The Holocaust, for Adorno, represents the end of Enlightenment and Modernism.
4. See George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New York: Atheneum, 1970).
5. Primo Levi, see Irving Howe, "Writing and the Holocaust," in Berl Lang, ed. *Writing and the Holocaust* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988), 186.
6. *Negative Dialectics,* translated by E.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 362.
7. See Stephen Lewis, *Art Out of Agony: The Holocaust Theme in Literature, Sculpture and Film* (Toronto: CBS Enterprises, 1984), pp. 55-56.
8. See Saul Friedlander, "Historical Writing and the Memory of the Holocaust," in *Lang, Writing and the Holocaust,* p. 71.
9. Ibid., pp. 71-75.
10. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1977), pp. 20-21. Also, see Amishai-Maisel's discussion on the painting of atrocities, pp. 35-36, in *Depiction and Interpretation.*
11. Friedlander, Saul, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), p. 14.
12. For a discussion of Holocaust imagery in art see Amishai-Maisels *Depiction & Interpretation,* part II chapter 1, "Primary Holocaust Symbols," and her bibliography in footnote 285. The iconography of war and its impact on culture were explored in relationship to World War I by Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford University Press, 1975).

13. Helmut Kohl, quoted in John J. Simon, "The Ravens Stir: German Culture and the Authoritarian Tradition," *Argonaut 138* series 2 (1993):115.

14. For discussions of this aspect of Kiefer's work see Andreas Huyssen, "Anselm Kiefer: The Terror of History, the Temptation of Myth," *October* 49 (September 1989): 25-45, and Jed Perl, "A Dissent on Kiefer," *The New Criterion* (December 1988): 14-20.