The image features a collection of numerous dark, textured, hand-shaped objects scattered across a light-colored, textured surface. These objects vary in size and orientation, some appearing as clenched fists and others as more open, palm-up hands. The overall aesthetic is somber and evocative, with the dark tones of the objects contrasting sharply with the lighter background. The objects have a rough, almost organic or weathered appearance, suggesting they might be made of a material like wood or stone, or perhaps are casts of real hands.

IMPOSSIBLE EVIDENCE:
CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS VIEW THE HOLOCAUST



I M P O S S I B L E E V I D E N C E :
C O N T E M P O R A R Y A R T I S T S V I E W T H E H O L O C A U S T

MELISSA GOULD

ELLEN ROTHENBERG

NANCY SPERO

ART SPIEGELMAN

CURATED BY JILL SNYDER

ESSAYS BY ANDREA LISS

AND JILL SNYDER

FREEDMAN GALLERY

ALBRIGHT COLLEGE

READING, PENNSYLVANIA

November 4-

December 18, 1994

Introduction: Jill Snyder

From the beginning of the twentieth century, modern artists have tapped a rich vein that flows between the visual and verbal realms. With astonishing acuity, the Cubists explored the slippages that occur when words stand in for objects, or vice versa, and produced a vital new visual syntax. In their quest for the origins of preconscious thought, the Russian Futurists exploded the word, breaking it down into disassociated sounds and floating morphemes. In the wake of the 1917 Revolution, their experiments fueled an emergent industry of applied art which blossomed in response to the revolutionary call for new modes of communication. Agit-prop, revolutionary art's ultimate achievement, brought verbal art forms into the service of politics with a proliferation of slogans, posters, and street theater.

While these early twentieth-century hybrid genres opened up fertile terrain for much of art that followed, an uneasy balance between the dictates of pure visual expression and the political tendencies of verbal art has persisted throughout the years. But it is not just the words, or their political intentions, that have troubled purists; it is the collapse between aesthetic boundaries and the resulting conflation of visual and verbal symbols that is most perplexing. In the name of hybridization, Robert Rauschenberg's combine paintings, Laurie Anderson's multi-media spectacles, Jenny Holzer's sloganeering poster art, and Hans Haacke's altered product advertisements characterize a confusion among mediums that has figured conspicuously in much recent art.

It is worthwhile here to consider Craig Owens' seminal essay *The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism*,¹ in which he introduces allegory as the single unifying impulse behind the new stylizations of post-modernism. Appropriated imagery, hybridized compositions, and narrative structures, these striking deviations from the seriality and visual austerity of their minimalist predecessors partake of irony and overt social criticism. Classics of this form include Haacke's *The Right to Life (American Cyanamid)*, which pairs the familiar image of a Breck Girl with a subtext that criticizes its parent company American Cyanamid, or Holzer's *Truisms*, whose poster format adopts the look and feel of a political campaign but confronts the viewer with contradictory messages. By turning the familiar back on itself, Haacke and Holzer's works illustrate Owens' definition of allegory as the rewriting of a primary text in the form of a critique.² One result of this transformative tactic is its impact on the viewer; no longer can we say exactly *what* an image means, but must ask *how* it means. Like the detective with only a few clues, we confront an image and must unravel its references, question its authenticity, expose its falsifications, determine its context.

Allegory, then, in both verbal and visual forms, establishes a sense of estrangement on the part of the viewer. Most important is an attitude conveyed that disrupts or disturbs the viewer's sense of the relationship between past and present. The artists in *Impossible Evidence*, an exhibition of contemporary art exploring the Holocaust, confront this breach. Melissa Gould, Ellen Rothenberg, Nancy Spero and Art Spiegelman each address the incapability of documen-

tary forms to preserve Holocaust memory. By using text, narrative, and photography in ways that question the objectivity of "fact," they draw the viewer's attention to history's inevitable subjectivity. Central to each of these artists' strategies is the adoption of a pseudo-documentary format that subjects the straight form to transgressive and subversive uses. Hence, the title *Impossible Evidence* places an emphasis on the paradoxical within their approach.³ Most evident are the intrusions on documentary's assumed authority. Spiegelman's use of the debased comic-book form to recount his father's survival from Auschwitz, Gould's invented lexicon of obituary pictograms, Spero's pairing of a "real" torture victim with a foreboding Bertoldt Brecht poem, and Rothenberg's cropped Nazi propaganda photographs explode documentary forms to create deeper and more complex structures of meaning.

Recently, the facticity of the documentary form has been undermined, most notoriously by "soft" news programs which create simulated versions of actual events. However, the inherent vulnerability of factual evidence is not new news. As James Young has pointed out in his book *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*,⁴ distinctions between history and fiction are blurred by the "inescapably literary character of historical knowledge."⁵ In traditional terms, however, there exists a prevalent dichotomy between history as a set of eyewitness accounts, record of events, and objective facts, and fiction as a poetic, and therefore subjective, act of interpretation. Young asserts that these opposing paradigms not only are simplistic but altogether



FIGURE 1
Melissa Gould
Floor Plan 1991
Installation, Ars Electronica Festival
Linz, Austria

miss the interpenetrations of history, culture, and literature. It becomes painfully clear, Young states, that "it was not 'the facts' in and of themselves that determined actions taken by the victims of the Holocaust — or by the killers themselves; but it was the structural, mythological and figurative apprehension of these facts that led to action taken on their behalf."⁶ For some recent scholars of the Holocaust, historians and literarians alike, its truths are revealed through a complex understanding of both the historical and interpretive forces that shape knowledge.

The four artists in *Impossible Evidence* signal awareness of their role as cautious interlocutor of history by adapting post-modernism's hybrid forms and deconstructive impulse. Whether through ironic play with their subjects, such as Spiegelman's depictions of camp victims as cartoon characters and Rothenberg's appropriated photographs of the "ideal" German woman under the Third Reich, or through fragmentation, such as Gould's displacement of names from deportation lists and Spero's horrific documentary photograph paired with Brecht's lyric lament, these artists have produced new idioms to depict the monstrous. Their respective approaches are necessarily open-ended and loaded with the unresolved and mixed feelings brought to the task of making meaning out of such enormous suffering, without reducing or trivializing the memory of the dead. Disruptions in both narrative and documentary forms demonstrate the insufficiencies of either medium to fully recover this grotesque episode. By embracing the paradoxical, Gould, Rothenberg, Spero and Spiegelman each tackle the moral dilemma set forth by guest essayist Andrea Liss when she explores how it is possible to find or create true representations of an event as incommensurable as the Holocaust.

Melissa Gould has always been obsessed with the past, both in its physical remains and in that which can no longer be seen. Her art, an invented form based on conceptual models, is dedicated to "the memory, both personal and collective, of lost spaces — places weighted by tragedy, places that no longer exist."⁷ In 1976 Gould first began to explore imaginary spaces by creating large-scale architectural blueprints of former dwellings in outdoor sites. The eroding effects of nature on these ghost presences together with unpredictable human intervention eventually consigned each to memory. A more specific and intimate encounter with history occurred in 1986 when the artist gained permission to photograph the inside of "Mussolini's Embassy," presently housing the Italian Consulate in Berlin. The detritus of this decaying site and its particularities — an old film reel tossed aside, peeling wallpaper, a couch bursting open with horse hair — effected a Proustian chain of associations leading her to imagine the decadence of Mussolini's last film screening. Gould's palpable response to history became further carved into her aesthetic.

Gould's ritualized interest in an unreal world conjured between the imagined past and factual present led to her first monumental work. *FLOOR PLAN* (figure 1) emerged from her response to the two-volume set *Synagogen in Berlin* which documents the original architectural diagrams of the 34 synagogues that had stood in Berlin in 1933. In 1991, on the occasion of the Ars Electronica festival in Austria, Gould recreated the skeleton of an actual size blueprint along the shores of the Danube. *FLOOR PLAN* reconstructs the destroyed synagogue at number 16 Johannisstrasse. Measuring 57 by 80 feet, it is composed of

no fluorescent light tubes of various sizes which are imbedded slightly below ground level. Conceived and presented with American composer Alvin Curran's audio installation *Notes from Underground*, the ghostly lights, together with the sound of looming human voices, create a fusion of real and surreal that informs all of Gould's work.

More recently, Gould has fashioned a synthesis of history through an invented lexicon of contemporary gestures and signs. *From Adler to Zylber* (plate 1) is a lexical arrangement of an obituary pictogram cycle based on names of European Jews from an Auschwitz transport list. The simplicity of its repeated format recalls the Jewish tradition of naming as a means of bearing witness. *Schadenfreude* (a German term meaning the pleasure taken in others' suffering) (plate 2) shifts the emphasis from lexical to visual signs. Taboo subjects, such as Gould's Nazi wallpaper sampler that includes *Nose Frieze*, a child's hand rendering a racist drawing of a Jewish nose, *Purzelbaum* (somersault), a swastika formed from the juxtaposition of two tumbling German youths, and *Trag oder Schlepp?* (Carry or Drag?), whose images blur the distinction between forced and voluntary labor, are domesticized to convey the insidiousness of racist representation. It is through such shuffling between the factual and the poetical that Gould strikes a stance between cool objectification and personal engagement, between irony and sentiment. It is here that her moving art stands as a necessary obstacle to the resolution of immeasurable loss.

The work of Ellen Rothenberg spans many different modes of creative expression. Performance, object making, and

installations have demarcated a career that, while tackling a broad array of social, political and personal subject matter, has centered on a set of questions, set forth in a recent catalog essay on the artist: "How is identity constructed? How do societal perceptions and expectations of ethnicity and gender shape an individual? How do people remember? Do we learn from history?"⁸

Questions lie at the heart of Rothenberg's work. The form of her work is constructed around fragments whose multiple associations resist easy resolution. Rothenberg's installations appear as a string of non-linear references that can be reconfigured in different combinations. Meaning is arrived at through a cumulative process. Over a four-year period beginning in 1990, the artist created *The Anne Frank Project*, a series consisting of three parts, *Partial Index* (1990-91), *A Probability Bordering on Certainty* (1992-93), *The Conditions for Growth* (1994). In an extended exploration of this historical figure, Rothenberg grapples with Anne Frank not as heroine, but as a complex construction of multiple parts. There is the adolescent Anne Frank of the diary, the historic Anne Frank whose authenticity is challenged by neo-Nazi groups, and the symbolic Anne Frank, female, Jewish, victim. Rothenberg enters this narrative through the use of artifacts and documents, both "real" and invented. In so doing, she calls into question the relationship between reality and representation.

At the heart of the installation, *A Probability Bordering on Certainty* (figure 2), are fragments of text from the handwriting analysis that determined the authenticity of Frank's diary. Undertaken by forensic scientists in the face of chal-

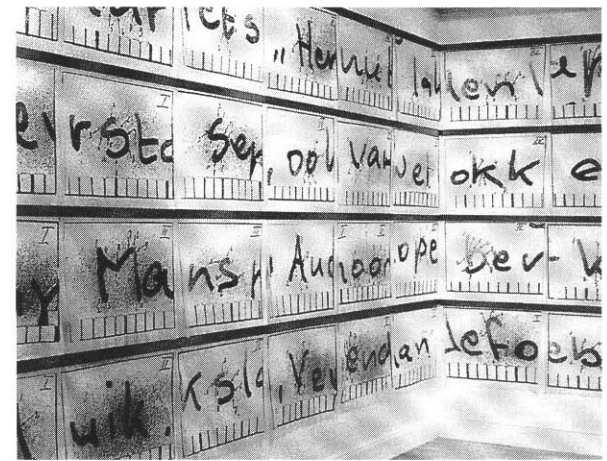


FIGURE 2

Ellen Rothenberg

Handwriting Analysis from A Probability Bordering on Certainty 1993

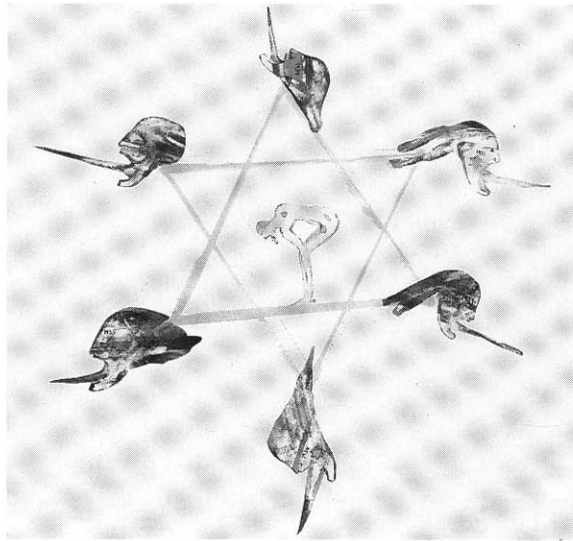


FIGURE 3
Nancy Spero
Holocaust 1968

lenges by neo-Nazi groups to "prove" the existence of the Holocaust, their conclusion of authenticity — "a probability bordering on certainty"— serves as a powerful metaphor for the ultimate unknowability of both history and science, as art historian Whitney Chadwick has noted.⁹ Enlarged to read as abstract markings rather than semantic signs, the unintelligible elements fuse with the fragile silk tissue that forms their mount. By rendering her document to a barely visible trace, Rothenberg evokes the improbability of recuperating objective knowledge from the "unrelieved actuality"¹⁰ of the Holocaust. As a whole, Rothenberg's deliberate deconstruction of Anne Frank's history into discrete elements counters the flat-footed documentary approach so carefully erected by neo-Nazi revisionist historians.

Rothenberg's most recent installation, *Feminine Youth* (plates 3 and 4), realized for the Freedman Gallery's exhibition, deals with issues that surround anti-Semitism. Rothenberg is especially interested in the state-sanctioned molding of ideal types, in this case the "ideal woman". Through the appropriation of propaganda photographs produced by the Third Reich profiling mandatory work organizations for German women, Rothenberg exposes the careful manipulation of symbols in the construction of social ideals. Her close-cropped focus on the women's ample female forms, their uniforms tagged with swastika emblems, together with their assigned roles of nurturing and creating, deconstruct the process by which the Nazis sought to naturalize social ideologies of femininity. Compared with these essentialized visions of the feminine, Rothenberg's cast wax hand fragments and torched steel footprints, like piles of hair clippings, eyeglasses, and shoes, present a stark and vivid

contrast of parts to whole. Headless dress forms donning aprons stand as witnesses in silent parody of their idealized photographic counterparts. In *Feminine Youth*, a carefully orchestrated ensemble of parts, Rothenberg deconstructs history as evidence and renders it back to the viewer as mediated experience.

Bombs exploding vile excretions, scenes of carnage and destruction, planes and helicopters mirroring surreal acts of war: such images began to populate Nancy Spero's paintings in the late 1960s. From Vietnam, Spero's art segued through her free and universal association to other wars, other oppressions. Images of the Holocaust emerged shortly after the first appearances of Spero's bomb paintings. Now crematoria spewing victims and swastikas metamorphosing into gargoyles became the subjects that conveyed the power of hatred, disgust, and rage. (figure 3) This art, which Leon Golub has referred to as "terse and savage . . . promiscuous, obscene, intemperate, spastic and irrefragable,"¹¹ also marks a defiant posture that has continued throughout the artist's long and distinguished career as social activist, feminist, and chronicler of, especially, female victims.

Since the late 1960s Spero has devoted herself to work that gives voice to events passed over in silence by the mass media. Early works displaying the torture of women stemmed from Amnesty International newsletters that document case histories of violence done to politically engaged women. In these works Spero developed the form that has since come to characterize her work. Evidentiary information, such as documentary photographs and oral testimony, coincide with an inventory of actual and imagined images of

women throughout the ages. By establishing a lexicon capable of traveling through time, Spero is able to suggest a brutal cycle of trauma and oppression that connects the past to the present. Her lexicon also commingles the mythic and factual. Thus, in a recent series devoted to Masha Bruskina, a female victim of the Third Reich, the hanged partisan is venerated by Egyptian mourning women. (plate 5) Spero's recurrent concern for the abused victims of oppressive regimes is also present in *The Ballad of Marie Sanders*, *The Jew's Whore* (plate 6) which pairs the documentary image of a bound and gagged nude female figure that was found amongst the papers of a Gestapo agent with a poem written by Bertoldt Brecht in 1934-6.

Spero's expressive language, while using factual reports, counters the notion of documentary. The artist wards herself from the dangers of illustration through subversion, stating, "In my art, information and imagery are taken from all sorts of sources, including art history, and I retranscribe them, incorporate them to unsettle original intentions, to jolt if possible."¹² Spero's intention here, to recast history through the unassimilated directness of emotional encounter, marks the artist's signature co-opting strategy. The jump-cut technique of Spero's lexicon in *The Ballad of Marie Sanders*, *The Jew's Whore* poeticizes the objective "fact" of the photographic past, and, via Brecht's poem, rehumanizes the "butcher's meat."

Art Spiegelman's celebrated *Maus* project, a 269 page two-part comic book chronicle of his father's survival from Auschwitz, lends doubt to the objectivity of history. In the comic book format Spiegelman has found an appropriate

distancing device to filter both his father's traumatic experience and the ensuing cataclysm that separates father and son. In a fragmented narrative structure that supplements the past with the present and the author with his father, Spiegelman preserves the discontinuities of the violent events his father has experienced as well as their disturbing impact on himself. Spiegelman maintains a self-conscious awareness of the reciprocal exchange between his own life and his father's throughout the narrative. Indeed, Vladek's experiences in Auschwitz are punctuated with a parallel plot that narrates the difficulties Spiegelman experiences in undertaking this project. In discussion, Spiegelman has emphasized that the way the story got told and who the story was told to was as important to him as his father's narrative.¹³ How Spiegelman tells the story expresses as much about his own delicate human emotions as about Vladek's traumatic experience, and so the past continually frames the present.

Maus grew from a 1971 comic strip titled *Prisoner on the Hell Planet* (figure 4) based on stories recalled from Spiegelman's childhood. With "humanoid-types"¹⁴ rather than the pseudonymous mice and cat characters of *Maus*, *Prisoner on the Hell Planet* sets forth Spiegelman's autobiographical saga by detailing the suicide of Anja, his mother. Spiegelman published successive stages of this project in *Raw*, an experimental comic book magazine which he co-founded, between 1980 and 1985. *Maus I (A Survivor's Tale. My Father Bleeds History)* was published in 1986. *Maus II (A Survivor's Tale. And Here My Troubles Began)* followed in 1991. Some 1,500 independent drawings constitute the entire *Maus* project.



FIGURE 4
Art Spiegelman
Prisoner on the Hell Planet; A Case History 1972
Copyright © 1972 Art Spiegelman
Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York.

The relationship between the fascinating preparatory material and the finished pages illuminates the multivalent sources from which Spiegelman drew to transform Vladek's story from oral to written history. (plates 7 and 8) In the process of his research, Spiegelman referenced old magazines, war comics, snapshots taken of his parents' native Poland, archival Holocaust material, drawings by camp inmates, and Nazi memorabilia. Spiegelman significantly reduced the dozens of hours of interviews with Vladek to arrive at the final result. He was careful to preserve the disjunctiveness of Vladek's emotional experience and the cadences of his speech. *Maus* ultimately is a distillation of many disparate parts; its fragmented narrative form, says the author, "leaves more in the control of the reader to understand, to apply the reader's intelligence, and to pull out of the material what the reader will."¹⁵

Like Spiegelman, all the artists in *Impossible Evidence* suspect the data of history and document that doubt in the hybridization of history and poetry. The result is an art that reimagines the past and brings its horror into the present.

1 Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (NY: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), pp.203-235.

2 *Ibid.*, p.205.

3 I would like to thank Andrea Liss for the use of this title which is taken from a talk presented at the College Art Association, New York City, February, 1994. Liss's "(Im)Possible Evidence: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum," was included in the panel "Art History as Evidence." For further reading on the inherent paradoxes in Holocaust representation, see Liss's "Contours of Naming: The Identity Card Project and the Tower of Faces at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum," *Public 8* (1993), pp.108-134, and her forthcoming dissertation, "Trespassing Through Shadows: History, Mourning and Photography in Representation of Holocaust Memory," for the doctorate in Art History at the University of California, Los Angeles.

4 James Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

5 *Ibid.*, p.7.

6 *Ibid.*, p.4.

7 Melissa Gould, "Rooms of Memory: The Evolution of an Idea," unpublished biographical note on FLOOR PLAN, 1991.

8 Elizabeth Brown quoting Ellen Rothenberg in "Reading The Anne Frank Project," in the exhibition catalogue for *The Anne Frank Project* (University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1993), p.2.

9 Whitney Chadwick, unpublished portion of a manuscript published as "The Conditions for Growth" in the exhibition catalogue for *Ellen Rothenberg* (Tufts University Art Gallery, Medford, Massachusetts, 1994).

10 Robert Storr, "Making Maus," brochure essay for *Projects 32: Art Spiegelman* (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1992).

11 Leon Golub, "Bombs and Helicopters: The Art of Nancy Spero," in the exhibition catalogue for *Nancy Spero: Works Since 1950* (Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, 1987), p.39.

12 Marjorie Welish, "Word Into Image," *Bomb*, Spring 1994, p.44.

13 Graham Smith, "From Micky to Maus: Recalling the Genocide through Cartoon," *Oral History Journal*, Volume 15, Number 1 (Spring, 1987), p.30.

14 *Ibid.*, p.32.

15 *Ibid.*, p.30.

(Im)Possible Evidence

Andrea Liss

To approach the realm of the *Shoah* is necessarily to confront both the possibilities and the impossibilities of representing the horrific magnitude of the incommensurable.¹ The incomprehensible events of the *Shoah* would seem to defy any measurable relation between the real and its representation. In any representation, there is always a gap between what is to be signified and its signifier, but the gap the Shoah produces in understanding transforms that distance into an abyss. Understanding the cruelty and the hatred of Hitler's regime, its calculated campaign to exterminate the Jews of Europe and to decimate millions of Communists, Catholics, Romas (Gypsies), homosexuals, political dissenters, the handicapped and the mentally retarded has been so wrecked as to defy traditional historical attempts to explain.

Indeed, the events of the *Shoah* are so difficult to approach that they overwhelm the mind's ability to fathom them. As Saul Friedländer urgently phrased it, we need to envision a new category of the sublime in relation to the *Shoah* "specifically meant to capture inexpressible horror."² Philosopher Jean-François Lyotard attempts to find "phrasing after Auschwitz" through a rethinking of the sublime based on negative presentation. Lyotard's attack on the rationalist logic that embodies Western philosophy is directed toward the revisionist assaults of so-called historians, most notoriously Robert Faurisson, who claim that the man-made mass murders never occurred because they cannot find a single witness to the gas chambers.³ Lyotard harbors a crucial point: the non-phrase which is silence is a resounding sentence. In the face of the revisionists' self-proclaimed victory

based on the materiality of supposedly factual evidence, Lyotard counters not with hard facts but with the reality of the referent through its very immateriality, its immeasurability. Hence, his powerful metaphor of the earthquake:

Suppose that an earthquake destroys not only lives, buildings, and objects but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes directly and indirectly. The impossibility of quantitatively measuring it does not prohibit, but rather inspires in the minds of the survivors the idea of a very great seismic force. . . *Mutatis mutandis*, the silence that the crime of Auschwitz imposes upon the historian is a sign for the common person. . . (that) something which should be able to be put into phrases cannot be phrased in the accepted idioms.⁴

The articulation of new idioms is precisely the task that faces the artists represented in this exhibition.

What is at stake is formulating idioms that can bear witness to the historical silence that the *Shoah* produces. To admit to the near impossibilities of addressing this history does not mean the project of evidence, of bearing witness, has deceived itself. An instance of such an acknowledgement is Claude Lanzmann's film, *Shoah* (1985), a relentless chronicle told through contemporary interviews with perpetrators and survivors. As Lanzmann elucidates his approach,

I have precisely begun with the impossibility of telling this story. I have made this very impossibility my point of departure.⁵ There is an absolute obscenity in the very project of understanding. Not to understand was my iron law during all the eleven years of the production of Shoah. I had clung to this refusal of understanding as the only possible ethical and at the same time the only possible operative attitude.⁶

Indeed, what would it mean to create representations of the *Shoah* that would render it too understandable? Among the many dangers would be to place the events in the framework of the historically assimilable. If the *Shoah* could be falsely assimilated through too facile explanations, it risks being explained away. The impulse may well be to do the events justice, but the gap between the acts of cruelty and their vindications is too vast for justice to fall into its normal place. The stories, memories and histories call for reconfigured approaches to the incisions and traces of the incommensurable. It is not a matter of negating the possibility of retelling or of refuting narrative. It is out of respect for the trauma of the events and the inabilities it signals that care must be taken not to cover over the experience in the paradoxical effort to communicate it.

Conceivably, a representation of the *Shoah* could be compared to a traumatic event, one that leaves its painful traces not only through the memory of the horror, but through the energy invested in not remembering. As literary critic Cathy Caruth writes,

Trauma does not simply serve as record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned.⁷ The flashback or traumatic reenactment conveys, that is, both the truth of an event, and the truth of its incomprehensibility.⁸

The workings of trauma signal a warning to those who would attempt to represent the *Shoah*. Its protective mechanisms, which attempt to ward off access to the memory of the events for the individual, can be interpreted as a sign to be on guard against equating disclosure of the events with lucid

understanding. For Saul Friedländer "working through" the historical events of the *Shoah* involves

rendering as truthful an account as documents and testimonials will allow, without giving in to the temptation of closure. Closure in this case would represent an obvious avoidance of what remains indeterminate, elusive and opaque.⁹

Friedländer's warning to historians is also imperative for artists: representations of the *Shoah* must maintain an aspect of traumatic reenactment, deeply imprinted on the psyche but beyond understanding.

The paradoxes of trauma dovetail significantly with postmodern approaches to representation. It is precisely postmodernism's concern about what is often excluded, what stories do not fit into the master narrative, that invests its thinkers, writers and artists in what Friedländer aptly refers to as the indeterminate, elusive and opaque. That is, postmodernists acknowledge that closure, the final word on the event, would be in vain. Yet it is crucial not to confuse difficult attempts to represent the *Shoah* and other traumatic events with an *a priori* set of assumptions that no retelling is possible. The question is not that there are no facts, that there is no truth: rather, the dilemma lies in formulating approaches that acknowledge the difficulty of representing the (unreal) realities. When postmodern warnings about representation are brought to bear on the *Shoah*, it places an even greater pressure on the ethical demand to bear witness.

With the passing of survivors and direct witnesses, we are confronted not only with the dilemma about the appropriate form of representation, but also the problem of who can

legitimately give voice to the events. Questions of authenticity and the transference of memory constitute the very problems that underlie the discipline of history. If the indirect chronicling of history is an inevitable distance, then the abyss in understanding the *Shoah* produces only widens that gap. The artists in this exhibition, Art Spiegelman, Nancy Spero, Melissa Gould and, to a lesser degree, Ellen Rothenberg speak in the name of the victims. These artists offer their representations of the realm of the *Shoah* with the acknowledgement of the near impossibility of their work, but they do not turn away from the task.

Friedländer offers the act of self-aware commentary as a way to guard against facile explanations while striving toward historical linkages. The necessity for commentary, as he describes it, underlies cartoonist Art Spiegelman's allegorical chronicles in his books, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale. I. My Father Bleeds History*, 1986 and *Maus: A Survivor's Tale. II. And Here My Troubles Began*, 1991. His serious comic books tangle remarkably well with the dilemma of confronting the enormity of the events through chronicling and documenting while allowing the individual voices of survivors to puncture through the historical narrative. At the same time, Spiegelman's orchestration of his risky venture guards against an assimilation or reconciliation between the worlds of the past, of Auschwitz and that of his father Vladek's guarded present in Rego Park, New York. The comic book format of his tales signals that the world of the *Shoah* turned reality inside out. Spiegelman uses the term "realistic fiction" to refer to his approach,

Although I set about in *Maus* to do a history of sorts I'm all too aware that ultimately what I'm creating is a realistic

fiction. The experiences my father actually went through, there's what he's able to remember and what he's able to articulate, and what I'm able to put down on paper. And then of course there's what the reader can make of that. *Maus* is so many steps removed from the actual experience, they're so distant from each other that all I can do is hint at, intimate, and try for something that feels real to me.¹⁰

Spiegelman's self-aware commentary about the discrepancies between his father's ability to witness and his inability to translate that witnessing nonetheless weigh toward the reality of the events. So much so that when *Maus* appeared on the *New York Review of Books* list under the category of fiction, Spiegelman insisted that it be switched to the non-fiction list. Indeed, the Pulitzer Prize committee invented a special category for *Maus*, suggesting the impossibility of categorizing it as either "fiction" or "non-fiction."¹¹ Yet it is the very differences between these genres and how they dovetail with the unrealizable testimonies of the *Shoah* that make *Maus* so compelling. In *Maus*, Spiegelman constantly brackets his self-reflexivity and the difficulty of the project. The opening pages of the second book find Spiegelman musing to his wife Françoise, "Just thinking about my book. It's so presumptuous of me. I mean, I can't even make any sense out of my relationship with my father. How am I supposed to make any sense out of Auschwitz? Of the Holocaust?" (p.14) And then he creates another puncture in the narrative, saying to Françoise, "You'd never let me do so much talking without interrupting if this were real life." (p.16)

Spiegelman's manipulation of the different levels of realism embedded in pre-Holocaust family photographs is intrinsic to the ways the past and the present never quite overlap

and how documentary and more "imaginative" modes of representation commingle in the construction of memory and history in his epic tale. *Maus II* opens with a dedication to Richieu, Spiegelman's parents' first son, who perished during the war and to Nadja, the artist's daughter. This dedication is accompanied by an arresting photographic portrait of Richieu. This portrait is at once dreamy and vivid, a photograph embedded in yet out of time. Richieu's simultaneous presence and absence haunts the ensuing tale of Vladek's survival in and out of Auschwitz as it hovers almost defiantly between this story and that of pre-camp life retold in *Maus I*, dedicated, tellingly without an image, to Spiegelman's late mother Anja. By introducing the massive history through the singularizing dynamic of a photographic portrait, Maus invests in the reader's empathy to navigate through the overwhelming dehumanization. The photograph of Richieu thus functions as the shifting marker for the cruel intersection between intimate and historical memory as well as the figure for Spiegelman's discomfort with his storyteller's role as distant brother and second son. Spiegelman muses about Richieu, whom he refers to as his ghost brother: "I didn't think about him much when I was growing up. He was mainly a large, blurry photograph hanging in my parents' bedroom . . . The photo never threw tantrums or got in any kind of trouble. It was an ideal kid, and I was a pain in the ass. I couldn't compete." Tellingly, the *Maus* stories end with Vladek recounting the particularly cathartic if not romanticized account of how he was reunited with Anja after the war. In the frame that closes the book, Spiegelman unfolds the telling of the past as a translucent page that inevitably covers over the present. His father confuses him with his first son. "I'm tired from talking, Richieu, and it's enough stories for now."

Toward the end of *Maus II* Vladek presents a treasure trove of family photographs to Art. "I put here a box what you'll be happy to see. I thought I lost it, but you see how I saved!" An unbelievable Art cries out, "Mom's diaries?!" "No, no! On those it's no more to speak. Those it's gone, finished." The final denouement of the mother's lost journals inaugurates the outpouring of the family snapshots. Here the stories about Anja's family that Vladek had been recounting throughout the historical narrative are made more intimate. These pages where the comic genre depiction of photos overwhelms the frames are potentially the most psychically charged in the book (pp.113-116), competing on a level of poignancy where the horrific retellings elsewhere arrest the senses more brutally. It's as if we forget we are looking at anonymous little mouse faces, an approachable artificiality brought to a consummate level of understaged humor when Vladek tells Art that Anja always thought her son resembled her commercial artist brother Josef, although the two appear as identical little mice. Spiegelman exploits other photographic clichés in this tight sequence, including blocking out the faces of people later deemed inadmissible to the family archive, including one of Josef's girlfriends who was said to have liked money too much. These mundane moments of photographic culture help carry the most difficult stories into representation.

Vladek is represented only once through the reproduction of an actual photograph (p.134). It is soon after the war and he is trying to make contact with Anja. He sends her a strange portrait; he seems healthy yet is dressed in a camp uniform. Vladek tells his son that he "passed once a photo place what had a camp uniform — a new and clean one — to make souvenir photos." Tellingly, through its hyperreal-

ism, this staged photograph appears intangible and otherworldly in relation to the family snapshots rendered through cartoon drawings in the earlier sequence.

Within *Maus'* different photographic registers, it is crucial that no photograph of the artist feigns his presence on the book jacket. To complete the comic book's compelling narrative realm, Spiegelman appears as a man in cartoon form wearing a mouse mask. He does not hide that he is the liaison between the realm of the present and that of the trauma. The only time real photographs are employed — that is, as photographs from reproductions and not drawn in the cartoon genre — is to provoke the irreality of the zone between these two worlds. In areas where actual photographs appear, including Richieu at the opening of the book and Vladek in the "souvenir" snapshot, they appear uncannily unrelated to the realm being described in the continuous narrative. Indeed, the comic book format maintaining the structure of *Maus* stands in for what documentary photographs usually narrate. In the books, the entire realm of representation is turned upside down, or rather, inside out. Spiegelman's use of his mother's and father's precious few pre-Holocaust photographs creates a place of arrest or a buffer zone outside of documentary time. The photographs could thus only be staged as strange harborings from another world. *Maus'* biographical genre and its employment of family snapshots do not attempt a comprehensive recounting of the traumatic history; their specificity participates in its incomprehensibility. Spiegelman thus draws the reader into the narrative in a personal way; one is held captive, so to speak, by a miniaturized artificiality that intimately overwhelms the participant.

Nancy Spero's recent work focuses on particularized circumstances of atrocity during the *Shoah* and, as with her powerful bodies of previous work, on the lives of women. Masha Bruskina was a Jewish partisan from the Minsk ghetto who took part in Resistance activities. On October 26, 1941, she was hung and her body left on display at the gates of a yeast factory in Minsk. In Spero's installations of Masha Bruskina, begun in 1989, she incorporates a newspaper reproduction of a photograph of the young woman showing her from the back, her hands tied and the noose around her neck. Marie Sanders was a Gentile German who was publicly humiliated, tortured and marched down the street by the roll of drums before being murdered for having sexual relations with a Jewish man. This woman's "crime" and its mob punishment were not isolated cases in Nazi Germany, but were state-sanctioned acts of intimidation. A photograph of a bound and gagged naked woman found in a Gestapo officer's pocket was the awful genesis for the color stamp of the more generalized woman Spero employs in her project, *The Ballad of Marie Sanders, The Jew's Whore*, begun in 1991. The images that stand in for the acts of violence done to these women are horrific, but Spero does not employ them to horrify the contemporary onlooker. She mitigates the violence of the images while respecting their indispensability to document the crimes. To ward against the images becoming sole icons of suffering, without any harboring in the specificities of the events, Spero interweaves documentary and poetic texts as crucial visual elements. The newspaper photograph of Masha Bruskina is accompanied by a clipping from a *New York Times* story on the woman's identity, "Was the Partisan a Jew?" and the stamp of Marie Sanders comes into vivid relief as it is surrounded and sometimes partially covered

by the reproduction of Bertold Brecht's haunting poem "Ballad of the Jew's Whore, Marie Sanders," which he wrote between 1934 and 1936. The large-scale lettering of text and its direct application on the gallery walls play on the immediacy of street proclamations, from death sentences issuing from official agencies to clandestine graffiti. Spero's installations are moving because their public scale and historical specificity do not exclude the intimacy with which she approaches the histories of the people being both documented and mourned. In *Mourning Women: Masha Bruskina*, for example, Spero layers handprinting and delicate printed paper around the newspaper photograph. This artistic act caresses the photograph, bringing to it a human touching and caring. Spero's acts of mourning, that embrace pathos as well as political specificity, are in alliance with the Latin American tradition of the lamenting mothers or the mothers of sorrow, who keep the memory of their martyred children in public view. Like these women, Spero does not allow state-sanctioned acts of hatred from the past to become but nameless horror in the present.

Melissa Gould's project, *From Adler to Zylber*, is borne from a single extraordinary document: the transport list of Convoy #42 France-Auschwitz containing 1,000 names. The names were those of French Jews and other Jews who were hoping to flee Nazi-Occupied Europe, who were rounded up at Drancy, France and sent to the extermination camp at Auschwitz on November 6, 1942. The artist came across this vital document "accidentally" among the pages of Serge Klarsfeld's book, *Le mémorial de la déportation des Juifs de France*, in the library of the Jewish Community Center in Berlin while she was working on a project about the 34 destroyed synagogues that used to dwell in Berlin before 1938.

On this list Gould uncovered the name of her grandfather, whose circumstances of death had until then been unknown to her family.

From Adler to Zylber is a simple and eloquent installation composed of 34 sheets of 3 by 3 feet white paper: each has a name taken from the transport list written in Gothic characters and is accompanied by a corresponding image. The compositions are framed by a heavy black border in the tradition of Italian death announcements. Gould creates the images from pre-World War II European children's school books, fairytales and lexicons; yet the coupling of the pictograms with the names is designed to do much more than simply illustrate. For example the name Dreifuss, which resonates with the scandalous case of French nineteenth-century anti-Semitism, is accompanied by an image of a fox caught Christ-like in a trap. Tauber, the German word for dove, is pictured with an enormous bird of prey whose beak clutches a tiny human figure. Gould's subtle lexicon of cruelty ironically de-naturalizes the act of naming. Until the early nineteenth-century, last names were not the usual custom for Jews. Traditionally, the father's first name was simply added to his child's first name, as in Meyer ben Jacob or Jacobson. But as anti-Semitism increased, people had to buy their names. If they had money, they could acquire a good name; otherwise, they were often given derogatory ones. Gould's *From Adler to Zylber* acknowledges the utter sadness and unaccomplished mourning that the names on the transport list represent. However, her lexicon of mass-murder does more than passively mourn; it also acts as a provocative testimonial to the history of hatred imbedded in naming.

Ellen Rothenberg's installation, *Feminine Youth*, 1994, intervenes in the customary notion that photographs have a simple relation to the scenes they index, that they simply mirror reality. Although her previous work dealing with women and the *Shoah*, *The Anne Frank Project*, begun in 1990, focused on the rhetorical conditioning of truth and its exclusions in the construction of the Anne Frank mythos,¹² *Feminine Youth* employs documentary material more convincingly to point to its function as propaganda. Varying sizes of photographic reproductions of women laboring at benign domestic tasks form the nucleus of the installation. This constellation of photographs lay bare the Nazi ideology that obsessively strove to equate the good mother/woman with all things round, warm and edible, to naturalize the *Kinder, Kirche* and *Kuchen* propaganda, to eradicate the freedoms of women won in the 1920s and to dictate the home as her proper battlefield. Rothenberg crops many of the photographs, losing the specificity of the young women's faces in order to focus the viewer's attention on the brooch engraved with the Nazi swastika ensignia pinned at the collar of each woman's dress: their enforced medal of conformity as members of the mandatory work organization for German women during the Third Reich, the *Bund deutscher Madel*. The photographic images of the supposedly pure presence of proper femininity are accompanied by objects of bodily fullness: headless dressmaking mannequins and aprons suspended from the wall. In this installation, Rothenberg counters this material fullness with rusted steel footprints and cast fragments of arms, hands and fingers — objects that signal the women's spectral others.

The four artists in *Impossible Evidence* relentlessly question traditional historical presentations of documentary evidence. Spiegelman confronts the *Shoah* through the sublime artificiality of the comic book genre and the shock of photography's traumatic realism. Spero reinvests difficult documentary imagery with the political specificities and pathos of the individual victim. Gould inflects individual naming and mourning with indictments of history's coercion. Rothenberg's accentuated presentation of seemingly benign photographs makes implicit references to the dehumanization the Nazi's performed on women, from bodily torture on the state's "enemies" to psychological enforcement of its own kind. These varying approaches are necessarily uneven and far from conclusive. What is crucial is that they suggest approaches — tentative passages and partial access — rather than claiming mastery over the impossible.

1 To approach the representation of the events is also to confront the difficult act of naming. The English word "holocaust" perversely conveys the sense of a burnt offering, as if those who perished senselessly are now to be metaphorically consigned to a legacy of sacrifice. *Sho'ah*, from the Hebrew, or more commonly written in English as *shoah* is a term that already existed to refer to historical precedents of destruction of the Jewish people. As James E. Young points out, although *shoah* still resonates with the concepts of divine retribution, it tends more toward implications of metaphysical doubt than toward religious meanings of punishment. For an extremely detailed historical and theoretical analysis of naming the events, see Young's chapter "Names of the Holocaust," in *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp.83-98.

2 Saul Friedlander, "The 'Final Solution': Unease in Interpretation," *History and Memory* 1:2 (Fall/Winter 1989), p.75, footnote 14. In Friedlander's compelling essay, he discusses the dilemma facing the historian attempting to interpret the "Final Solution," a complex of events that defy historicizing comprehension.

3 For a discussion on the history of "revisionism" in relation to the *Shoah* and the often strange commingling of the far left and the far right in these affairs, see especially Pierre Vidal-Naquet, "Theses on Revisionism," in *Nazi*

Germany and the Genocide of the Jews, ed. François Furet (NY: Schocken Books, 1989), pp.304-319.

4 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988), pp.56-7. Lyotard's earlier thinking on this subject appeared in "Discussions, or phrasing 'after Auschwitz,'" which was first presented as a lecture in 1980 for the colloquium, "Les fins de l'homme; a partir du travail de Jacques Derrida," at Cerisay-la-Salle. It was translated by Georges van den Abbeele and first published as *Working Paper* no.2, 1986 for the Center for Twentieth-Century Studies, University of Milwaukee. It is reprinted in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Cambridge, Ma. and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp.360-392. This essay appears in Lyotard's *The Differend* as part of the chapter "Result." In keeping with the tone and structure of *The Differend*, "Result" differs from "Discussions" in its more rhetorical insistence on the linking of one notice to another (all of them are numbered).

5 Claude Lanzmann, "Le lieu et la parole," in Bernard Cuau, et al., *Au Sujet de Shoah — Le Film de Claude Lanzmann* (Paris: Belin, 1990), p.295.

6 Claude Lanzmann, "Hier is Kein Warum," in *ibid.*, p.279.

7 Cathy Caruth, "Introduction," special issue on "Psychoanalysis, Culture and Trauma: II," *American Imago* 48:4 (Winter 1991), p.417.

8 *Ibid.*, p.420.

9 Saul Friedländer, "Trauma, Transference and 'Working through,'" *History & Memory* 4:1 (Spring/Summer 1992), p.52. Reprinted as "Trauma and Transference" in his book *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp.117-137.

10 Graham Smith, "From Micky to Maus: Recalling the Genocide through Cartoon," *Oral History Journal* 15:1 (Spring 1987), p.28.

11 Marianne Hirsch, "Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory," *Discourse* 15:2 (Winter 1992-93), p.28, footnote 2. This lucid essay focuses on the crucial role of photographs in *Maus* as well as Spiegelman's attempt to recover his mother's lost legacy. For a discussion attentive to issues of gender and autobiography, see also Nancy K. Miller's essay, "Cartoons of the Self: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Murderer, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*," *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* 12 (November 1992), pp.43-54.

12 For discussions of Rothenberg's related projects see the recent exhibition catalog from the Aidekman Arts Center (Medford, MA: Tufts University Art Gallery 1994) with essays by Johanna Branson, Dan Eisenberg, Cindi Katz, Lynne Cooke and Whitney Chadwick and the exhibition catalog from the University Art Museum (Santa Barbara: University of California, 1993) with an essay by Elizabeth A. Brown.

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PLATE 3

Ellen Rothenberg

Detail from *Feminine Youth* 1994

installation; cast wax elements, torch-cut steel footprints,
framed photographs, linen aprons, dress forms, and wood tables

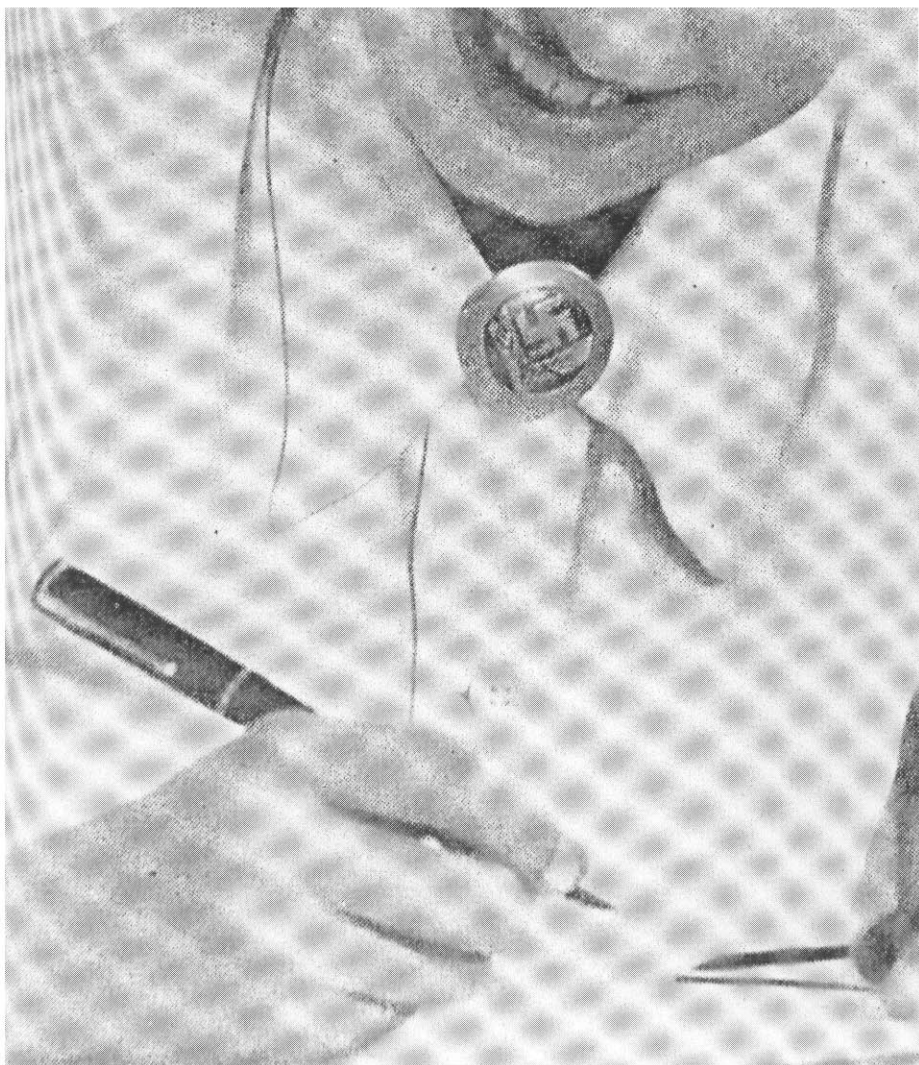


PLATE 4

Ellen Rothenberg

Detail from *Feminine Youth* 1994

installation: cast wax elements, torch-cut steel footprints,
framed photographs, linen aprons, dress forms, and wood tables