

Problems in Holocaust Art (Washington 18-20 Dec 05)

Nancy Buchwald

Call for papers for proposed session:
Association for Jewish Studies Conference

Dec. 18-20, 2005, Washington, D.C.

Centrifugal Forces: Problems and Issues in Holocaust Art

This session will examine the cultural, religious, intellectual, and ethical anxieties which surround both the creation and reception of visual representations of the Shoah in fine art, whether in painting, sculpture, print, multimedia installation, artist's books, performance, comix, film, and/or photography.

Echoing the Second Commandment prohibition on graven images, many scholars, including T. W. Adorno, Saul Friedlander, Geoffrey Hartmann, Claude Lanzmann, and Jean-Francois Lyotard, among others have described the Holocaust as a singular Event, a complete historical, intellectual and theological rupture with the past, including past modes of depiction. Does the Holocaust possess an almost sacred ineffability which deflects any representation of it? Lanzmann famously claimed: "The holocaust is unique in that, with a circle of fire, it builds a border around itself, which one cannot transgress, because a certain absolute kind of horror cannot be conveyed." Conversely, other scholars such as Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi have sought to combat the inward-turning motion of what she terms a "centripetal imagination" of the Holocaust with a "centrifugal narrative" which "provides an infinity of mobile points of departure and access." Ezrahi's Barthian language proves particularly apt to describe art which seeks to record/depict aspects of the Holocaust for different purposes and for different audiences-survivors, witnesses/bystanders, perpetrators, and second-and third-generation children of survivors.

Are depictions of the Holocaust necessarily an ethically corrupt practice since the artist must adopt previously established-and therefore potentially inauthentic- pictorial conventions? Can-and should-the apocalyptic incommensurability of the Shoah be re-presented for those who never experienced the horror of the camps? Or do artists have an ethical and moral responsibility to create images as a means to witness, mourn and

work-through the trauma of the Shoah? Are postmodern strategies of irony, distanciation, fragmentation, appropriation, ambiguity, what Janet Wolff terms an "art of indirection" most suitable to depictions of the Holocaust?

This session seeks three to four 20 minute papers which explore, from a variety of disciplines and methodological perspectives, the problems and concerns which artistic representation of the Holocaust incurs for either/both creator and beholder. Papers might discuss the topics listed below:

- whether nonrepresentational art/abstraction is better suited to the depiction of the Shoah than more representational and/or narrative styles
- gender in Holocaust art, for instance in the work of Judy Chicago, Roee Rosen, Ellen Rothenberg, Charlotte Salomon, and Nancy Spero
- an emphasis on haptic/tactile qualities as well as the solicitation of the viewer's corporeal response in the work of Magdalena Abakanowicz, Audrey Flack, Gabrielle Rossmers, and Ellen Rothenberg
- artist as archivist in the work of Shimon Attie, Christian Boltanski, Frederic Brenner, and Rudolf Herz
- memorials (such as those at Birkenau, Majdanek and Treblinka) and "counter-memorials" to the Holocaust, like Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock's Bus Stop-The Non-monument and Rachel Whiteread's Holocaust Memorial
- the proliferation of Holocaust art which combines word and image, especially in the work of children of survivors; papers might discuss Alice Lok Cahana, Terezin: Children's Poem, I Still Believe, Arie Galles' Fourteen Stations, Morris Louis, Ben Shahn, Joan Snyder, and Jeffrey Wolin
- the mobilization by second and third generation artists of Marianne's Hirsch's notion of "postmemory" and "identification-at-a distance," artistic and ethical concerns arising from the representation of an event/experience to which the artist has no immediate access
- the role of Hollywood films like Judgement at Nuremberg, Schindler's List, Life Is Beautiful, and Jakob the Liar in the creation of a popular (American) (post)memory of the Holocaust
- the impact of institutions like the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. and the Jewish Museum, Vienna and Berlin in embedding the Holocaust in the landscape of national memory
- how-or should-artists avoid imbuing representations of the Holocaust with aesthetic beauty whose enjoyment could potentially temper the art's traumatic content; should art about the Holocaust always possess a didactic

and/or memorial content? Is Janet Wolff right in arguing for the role of beauty in Holocaust representation?

-Jewish artist's appropriation of Christian symbols like the crucifix in order to communicate Jewish suffering in the work of, for instance Marc Chagall, Arie Galles, Aharon Gluska, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko

-the burden of memory and testimony in German art as encompassed in the landscapes of Anselm Kiefer

-the emergence of the (concentration camp) landscape of torture and extermination as body/character in the second-generation art of James Friedman, Henning Langenheim, Simcha Shirman, Susan Silas, and Debbie Teichholz

-the impact of the internet, for example, the newly unveiled website which provides a virtual electronic tour of Auschwitz or Vera Frenkel's "Body Missing" site

Please submit cv and 500 word abstract to nancy@gargoylefolk.com or mail to: Nancy Nield Buchwald, 555 Evening St., Worthington OH 43085 by Tues., April 12, 2005.

Reference:

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