Postmodern Representations of the Holocaust: a Case Study

Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art

For Dr. Olivier Asselin
By Anja Bock
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Is the Holocaust funny?
Does it make for a good story?

Just posing these questions – just opening the possibility that someone might actually say yes – confounds our deepest sense of right and wrong. Inarguably, the murder of six million Jews during the Third Reich is a historical fact too barbaric for humour’s definitive return of the quotidian. And the very magnitude of the event obliterates all possibilities of measure, yet alone nuanced discussions of taste. In the words of Menachem Rosensaft, “The Holocaust is not an intellectual exercise.”

But perhaps “we” are not who we think we are, for how else can we account for burgeoning box-office sales of innumerable Holocaust “flicks” ranging from One Survivor Remembers to Life is Beautiful, not to mention Broadway spoofs like Springtime for Hitler and an episode of The Twilight Zone. No matter what individual intentions may be, the mere existence of this colourful spectrum attests to the absence of black and white certainties. And these flicks are by no means an anomaly. They are matched by comparable convulsions in other cultural apparatuses: museums and monuments are popping up everywhere across Europe and America; exhibition attendance is at an all time high; novels, biographies, poetry and history books related to the Holocaust are selling out; college courses are over-enrolled; and yet studies indicate that the generation of Americans now beginning to hold office, make policies and teach, etc., is unlikely to associate “Warsaw ghetto” with the Holocaust, and is more likely to identify Anne Frank than

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1 Menachem Rosensaft, as quoted in: Christopher Elam “Who’s the real Jew?” Arkrush.com. [Menachem Rosensaft is the founding director of the International Network of Children of Jewish Holocaust survivors.]
Adolf Eichmann. The sound-bytes are all stored, let’s say, but the hard-wiring of the Holocaust is awry.

Philosophers, cultural critics, historians and artists alike have turned their attention to this phenomenon in an effort to understand its current political significance and its implications for historical truth and memory. *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*, which was on exhibit at the Jewish Museum in New York from March 17 to June 30, 2002, was one such effort: it brought together thirteen international artists, all in their 30s and 40s, who appropriate images from the Third Reich or use its iconography. According to Norman L. Kleeblatt, the exhibition curator, “these provocative works use Nazi-era images to probe issues at the center of prevailing cultural and aesthetic discourses, among them desire, commodification, and spectatorship.” The exhibition catalogue caused a stir at a reading at the Jewish Museum in late November 2001. This was brought to the attention of a Wall Street Journal reporter who contacted outraged survivors and Jewish scholars. Controversy ensued. Headlines screamed: “JEISH MUSEUM SHOW, FULL OF VILE CRAP, NOT TO BE FORGIVEN.” Boycotts were called. Picket-signs on opening day read: GENOCIDE IS NOT ART. For several months *Mirroring Evil* was in the papers, followed by reviews in the specialized press. The questions it raises about the uses of Holocaust imagery are unresolved: is this work critical of the imagery it appropriates? Or does it consort with “evil” to increase its stronghold? Who can speak for the Holocaust? And how?

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In order to understand the controversy surrounding *Mirroring Evil*, it is crucial to understand, first, the various modes in which the Holocaust has been represented – documentary realism and the “reality effect”; allusion, evocation and distanced realism; postmodern irony and appropriation – and, secondly, the specifics of the exhibition – the curatorial framework and the art it contains.

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Holocaust survivors frequently say two things: “I was there” and “I could not believe what I saw.” This incredulousness that engulfs the Holocaust, even for those who witnessed it firsthand, bespeaks the limits of representation: the experience pushes out all other truths yet is itself unimaginable.\(^5\) In the decades immediately following the war, establishing the historical record was (and remains) paramount. Only the blunt, bare facts were admissible: numbers, dates, testimonies, photographs, etc., compiled as objectively as possible. Interjecting a personal voice in this process or using an expressive form would lend these facts to interpretation and thereby distort them. If there is even a question of form, there is a question of pleasure: compositional considerations fall within the domain of the aesthetic. By holding this potential, form arguably distracts from fact, at best, and perverts fact, at worst. Documentary realism was considered the only appropriate and ethical response to the Holocaust and those who could not offer firsthand testimony remained silent.

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Yet even now, with a sound historical framework in place, the facts are no more comprehensible. We know what happened in vivid detail but the question lingers, how could it be possible? The Holocaust exceeds our means of representation: there is a “non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension.” The record has been compiled; its facts are proven, but how do we transmit it? No means suffice to wrap the methodical extermination of Jews into a neat communicable bundle.

The hierarchical opposition between fact and form, realism and figuration, has been called into question by philosophers who have argued that every record of history, even the archival, is also an interpretation of history: it is written from a particular point of view with a particular agenda and organizes events in a particular way. It is not neutral. It is a commemorative form and, like all commemorative forms, it operates within the configuration of language. Testimony, as well, is dependent on narrative structures: the past is not simply there in memory; it must be articulated to become memory. History and testimony cannot present factual reality transparently; they represent it according to given means. Undergirding this argument is the postmodern tenet that history is a textual problem that can be contended with in an abstract space. This opens the door to the assertion that acts of commemoration create the facts retrospectively, that there is no truth outside of language. But it is important to distinguish what happened – the Holocaust – from how it is passed down over time. A study of history, James E. Young argues, must necessarily be a study of both: “in this way, historical inquiry might remain

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6 Ibid.
7 James E. Young At Memory’s Edge (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 11.
a search for certainties about substantive realities even as it is broadened to encompass the realities of history’s eventual transmission.”

Perhaps it would be more accurate to call realism and figuration opposite as they are two manners of relating to factual reality, but neither is congruent with factual reality. In the words of Robert Scholes,

> It is because reality itself cannot be recorded that realism is dead. All writing, all composition, is construction. We do not imitate the world, we construct versions of it. There is no mimesis, only poeisis. No recording, only construction.

When it comes to representing the Holocaust, “poeisis” is deemed “barbaric.” To indicate seriousness and sincerity, therefore, artists continuously attempt to rehabilitate “mimesis”:

> Documentary realism has become the mode of representation that novelists and artists must adopt if they are to persuade their audience of their moral integrity – that is, of their reliance on cognitive intentions and their rejection of aesthetic considerations.

**Adopting** documentary realism as a *mode*, however, is not the same as working within it. Adopting implies a choice of means – an aesthetic decision. In the realist mode, testimony is a figurative trope. Regardless of whether or not one has firsthand experience, anyone can use it to generate a “reality effect.” It is not mimetic, strictly speaking, but it employs what James E. Young calls the “rhetoric of fact,” which is to be distinguished from fact itself. In the realist mode the opposition between fact and form collapses but the tension between them is retained – and exposed – in favour of fact.

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11 This alludes to Adorno’s famous statement that “Poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” This does not mean that poetry should not be written. It means that in light of WWII, “culture” and “lyricism” can no longer be separated from the “barbaric”: the barbaric is within culture.
12 Ernst van Alphen, 20.
13 This is a term originally used by Roland Barthes, as discussed by Ernst van Alphen, 20-4.
14 Ernst van Alphen, 21.
Art Spiegelmans biographical “novel” Maus (1973) is a good example of the connection between the realist mode of representation and documentary realism: the comic-book medium makes it explicit that the story is constructed, frame by frame, but the motif of the tape recorder signifies that this construction is faithful to testimony. Spiegelmans also includes two photographs, which emphasizes that these characters did in fact exist. The one of his father, however, is staged: he is wearing his prisoners garb in a souvenir shop. This reveals what Maus cannot do – what not even Spiegelmans father would be able to do – offer an unmediated view into historical reality. Mediation is inevitable and necessary. In the words of Geoffrey Hartman: “it enables experiencing, it allows what we call the real to enter consciousness and word-presentation, to be something more than trauma followed by a hygienic, and ultimately illusory, mental erasure.”

Mediation enables transmission.

With regard to the merciless photographs that document Nazi atrocities, mediation, which is an act of figuration, is also ethically imperative. Most of these images were part of the Nazi’s meticulous archives and to pour over them now can be seen as a sort of pornography, as Boris Luries work suggests, which further degrades the victims: “squeezing beauty or pleasure from such an event afterwards is not so much a benign reflection of the crime as it is an extension of it.” Furthermore, continuously disseminating this imagery threatens to make the horror familiar and common, thereby desensitizing bystanders to its magnitude and trivializing its uniqueness. Realism can arguably derealize reality and produce what Geoffrey Hartman calls an “unreality effect.”

A massive realism which has no regard for representational restrain, and in which depth of illusion is not balanced by depth of reflection, not only desensitizes but produces the opposite of what is intended: an *unreality effect* that fatally undermines realism’s claim to depict reality…

Lastly, if we accept that testimony operates within pre-given narrative structures, realism can be seen as an act of repression: it grants cohesiveness to the real which is not possible in the real.

Given these reasons, it can be argued that figuration should become the privileged term over realism: “art creates an unreality effect in a way that is *not* alienating or desensitizing.” This inversion of terms, however, does not sever the tie between them. As with the “reality effect,” the tension must be retained – in the favour of fact. The inversion allows for the realist mode to be *extended* in order to depict what cannot be depicted – the complete witnesses and the void left by their absence. Saul Friedlander describes this mode precisely:

> A common denominator appears: the exclusion of straight, documentary realism, the use of some sort of allusive or distanced realism. Reality is there, in its starkness, but perceived through a filter: that of memory (distance in time), that of spatial displacement, that of some sort of narrative margin which leaves the unsayable unsaid.

This “allusive” or “distanced” realism prevents the desensitization and derealization that documentary realism risks. It also suggests that the Holocaust can be known negatively “in the cracks and tears of the stories we tell.” By revealing its limits – its inadequacy in face of its subject – figuration allows the unrepresentable to seep through the veil of representation. In this way, figuration can attest to the lacuna of the Holocaust.

18 For example, stories implicitly rely on a past-present-future structure, which may contradict lived experience, as in Charlotte Delbo’s literal statement, “I died in Auschwitz but no one knows it.” As quoted in Geoffrey Hartman, 154.
21 Ernst Van Alphen, 35.
Most art that takes the Holocaust as its subject (as opposed to “Holocaust art”) falls into this category of allusive or distanced realism. For example, the work of Barnett Newman, whose “intransigently reduced yet heroic abstraction,” can be thought of in relation to the Holocaust; or the early work of Gerhard Richter, whose blurred *Uncle Rudi* (1965) obscures what this German officer was doing during the war. Christian Boltanski, who declared that all of his work is “more or less about the Holocaust,” evokes the dim vaults of history’s memory by presenting black and white portraits and family snapshots in a non-hierarchical arrangement. These photographs are not of actual victims but the allusion is explicit: too many nameless faces, too many lives lost. Most Holocaust monuments also use a distanced realism to represent the Holocaust. The list is long; take for example Sol LeWitt’s *Black Form Dedicated to the Missing Jews* (1987). It is a bleak reminder, he says, “that without Jewish children in town, the monument would mark the end of generations.” *Black Form* is an absent monument for an absent people.

If this reticence to represent the Holocaust by direct means is taken to the extreme, however, if it becomes a refusal to represent, then the Holocaust assumes a mystical quality and becomes an Absolute, like God, Truth or Evil - terms without dimension or form. The Holocaust is catapulted out of human history into a transcendental realm where it remains unanalyzable by human terms. This claim that the Holocaust defies all historical comparison evinces a static conception of history in which healing has no place – only preservation. Claude Lanzmann’s nine-hour film *Shoah* (1985) is striking (and polemical) because it participates in this refusal while using

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23Boltanski is also a good example of how real horror is turned into an artistic style: younger artists now appropriate his aesthetic but without the Holocaust as referent.
documentary realism. I have posed these as opposites but their impetuses are not necessarily different: both attempt to manifest a historical truth without authorship. Lanzmann’s foreclosure of all narrative in Shoah opens a perpetual, terrible present – it grounds the mystical in the soil and memory of Europe but leaves it to be absolutely other.

Let me underline, however, that the semiotic impossibility of representing the Holocaust, which may initially appear to support the static conception of history, contains within its definition a semiotic possibility. In Remnants of Auschwitz, Giorgio Agamben writes:

This means that testimony is the disjunction between two impossibilities of bearing witness; it means that language, in order to bear witness, must give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness. The language of testimony is a language that no longer signifies and that, in not signifying, advances into what is without language, to the point of taking on a different insignificance – that of the complete witness. 25

Testimony contains a paradox: those on the inside of the event were exterminated and those on the outside were excluded. But the testimonial effort creates a connection between the inside and the outside of the event, “between two impossibilities of bearing witness.” Even if the complete witnesses were able to testify, their testimony would not signify the horror in full: it would just be emerging from the incommunicable abyss, giving it form in part. Agamben insists, however, that testimony must be borne: language must incessantly test the “unsayability” of the Auschwitz to prove its “sayability” (not vice versa). To claim absolute unsayability – to break the tie between the possibility and impossibility of testimony – would be to confirm the Nazi agenda of total desubjectification: it would mark the success of Nazism to irreconcilably separate subjects from their ability to speak.

25 Giorgio Agamben, 39.
But witnesses will soon be extinct and the question must be asked: how can the conduit be maintained? What will constitute memory if not testimony? Both documentary realism and distanced realism operate within the logic of testimony, directly or indirectly, and thus maintain the essential connection between the unsayable and the sayable. Since the 1970s, however, the number of Holocaust representations is increasing exponentially, constituting what has come to be called the “Holocaust Industry.”

Fact is only a concern in this dazzling myriad, not the generating principle. At every turn, how it is passed down threatens to eclipse what happened. The process of coming to know cannot be separated from the knowledge and representations of the Holocaust are an ineradicable part of Holocaust memory. This is alarming if we think of entire generations without access to firsthand stories of the atrocities of WWII to mediate the proliferating (often glamourous) images of Nazism: pop icons will be their primary history lesson, and the irony of these characters – and the horrors of the Holocaust – will be lost to them.

When it comes to representing this “vicarious past,” as James E. Young calls it, the “memory-act” itself must be revealed as part of the rhetoric of fact. However, due to the problematic nature of many popular Holocaust representations, exposing the “memory-act” also necessitates a critique of the representations on which it is based. Therefore the objective of many postmodern representations is twofold: to engage with the memory of the Holocaust in a meaningful way and to critique the representations by which the Holocaust is commemorated.

The two-forked tongue of the postmodern mode breeds ambivalence: it no longer works solely to

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26 This phenomenon has been attributed to various causes: the moratorium on such images has gradually lifted; the absolute distinction between “good Jew” and “evil German” has dissolved in light of “banalization” of evil consequent to the Eichmann trial; the diachrony of history has been transformed into the synchrony of the archive, altering the relationship between past, present and future; etc.

27 Ibid., 1.

28 Ibid., 9.
represent historical reality as is; it works also to reveal the cultural machinations that have massaged the facts over and over again. To create a “meta-” representation of the Holocaust that calls to question its sources of knowledge while aiming to establish knowledge itself, postmodern artists work from an even greater distance. This distance is often generational but it is primarily conceptual and is extenuated by their artistic techniques of appropriation and irony. Postmodern work typically skims the representational surface of its subject to reflect it against itself and willingly oscillates between exploitation and empathy, complicity and critique.

Many postmodern works do not heed the imperative to maintain the tension between historical reality and its representations in favour of fact – they favour form. Such representations show just how close vicariousness is to forgetting. But many other postmodern works still operate within the logic of testimony, albeit at an extenuated distance. These works try to rebuild the connection between Holocaust imagery and its referent by stressing the mediating veil of language to the point of cracking or tearing. This “stressing” can be seen in the typical postmodern stance of self-referentiality, which undermines pretenses as they are being proposed. It is arguable that in revealing its elaborate rhetoric of fact, which begins with an analysis of the representational surface, postmodern work depicts the conundrum of historical knowledge: interpretive frameworks belong to the present and reveal as much about the current moral and political currency of the past as they do about the past itself. All representations of history are also interpretations of its facts, and so when representations proliferate so do our tools of comprehension. In their appropriation – critical or collusive – of previous commemorative forms,
postmodern meta-representations reveal aspects of historical reality that may have gone unnoticed (such as the “discovery” of the Nazi’s enduring sex-appeal\textsuperscript{29}).

Considering postmodern means, however, the tension with this end is acute. In the postmodern mode everything seems to be possible, even in relation to an event that confounds possibility. It cannot be assumed, however, that the artistic language for representing the Holocaust is created only in response to the question of how to best transmit its memory. It is also of question of what seems to be possible within the discourse of art itself.\textsuperscript{30} In 2002, long after “the end of art,” the discourse is pluralistic and the toolbox is quantitatively bigger then ever before. It is a free game of semiotic play where Hitler and Duchamp become interchangeable and crosses can sprout hooks again.\textsuperscript{31} No license is required. This is the most troubling thing – not that artists need to acknowledge their remove, nor that the machinations of the holocaust industry need to be addressed, but that there seems to be no limits. The distinction between the real and the representational are becoming evermore difficult to discern.

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All of the art in the contentious \textit{Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art} exhibition operates in the postmodern mode. Intentions and techniques vary but common is the imagery of the Nazi era. The most reproduced and reviled work in the exhibition is Alan Schechner’s internet work


\textsuperscript{30} For example, in post war decades, abstraction expressionism was dominant. Because of its affinity with surrealism, its non-figurative means, and its universal claims, abstract expressionism lent itself well to representing the Holocaust.

\textsuperscript{31} I am alluding to Rudolf Herz \textit{Zugzwang} (1995) and Mischa Kuball \textit{Hitler’s Cabinet} (1990), respectively. Both are included in \textit{Mirroring Evil}.
titled *It's the Real Thing: Self-Portrait at Buchenwald* (1993). It is a “textbook” example of the postmodern mode and its resulting ambivalence. Schechner has digitally inserted himself into a famous photograph by Margaret Bourke-White of prisoners in the barracks at Buchenwald immediately after their liberation in 1945. “It’s a moving work,” the curator states, especially if you know the context: the artist lost relatives in the Holocaust. “That photograph of the liberation is part of his history…He wanted to see what it would be like to be in that space. He is collapsing historical distance.”

However, Schechner – robust, upright, and with a full head of hair – stands in stark contrast to the sunken cheeks, shaven heads and desolate expressions of the prisoners. His distance from the event is further exacerbated by the gleaming can of Coca-Cola that he holds up for view. If empathy is his intent, it is quickly precluded: *Self-Portrait at Buchenwald* is definitely not the real thing. The inclusion of the Coca-Cola makes such an imaginative leap impossible, thereby breaking the “reality effect” and returning Schechner to 2002 and the inmates to their secondary prison of reification.

The curator explains that these young artists are vigilant about popular culture and the images that have shaped them. But how vigilant are they about the effects of their own imagery? Schechner has placed himself in an image that is at once cliché and every Jew’s nightmare of the camps. Even though it is an indexical record of a real historical event, due to its over-use, it has become a signifier of the Holocaust in general and has an iconical function. Schechner alone is not accountable for this draining of significance; however, he is accountable for using the image yet again and further derealizing it. Schechner states:

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33 Ibid.
By manipulating and using these images I wish to raise awareness as to how they are often manipulated and are always used with an ideological bias. In typical postmodern fashion, he employs the tactic he wishes to criticize in order to reveal it as a tactic. In this case, Schechner is using a Holocaust image to call attention to the ideological use of Holocaust images, which he states are often used to support Israeli military aggression in the Middle East. Does his own ideological bias forgive him the same (mis)use?

Current political issues constitute Schechner’s subject, not the Holocaust and not its imagery, but these issues are not well articulated in the work: the bright red Coca-cola dominates this otherwise black and white scene. Note that it is a diet Coke, for increased irony. The analogy Schechner’s digital ploy makes between contemporary cultural ideals and the brutally enforced “natural reduction” of Holocaust victims is extreme. The catalogue description states:

> The Coke can draws parallels between brainwashing tactics of the Nazis and commodification. Just as much of Europe succumbed to Nazi culture because it was the dominant paradigm, so does our contemporary culture succumb to consumerism… In this way, Self-Portrait at Buchenwald delivers us directly into the psyche of the complicit Nazi…

To this claim, Ron Rosenbaum sarcastically remarks, “Right: Drink Coke; Kill Jews – same thing.” But there is some connection. Malcolm Quinn writes, “to separate what Nazism did to others from what it did to maintain its self-representation as Nazism is to miss the point.” Fascist imagery continues to be used in advertising as an appeal to paradigmatic “idealism,” and Nazism, like Coke, was in “big business” – but in industrial killing, not nutritionless beverages! To propose that there is a direct correspondence between contemporary consumerism and Nazism is, first, to brush aside 19 centuries of anti-Semitism as the driving force behind the

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35 Alan Schechner, [http://www.dottycommies.com](http://www.dottycommies.com)
37 Ibid.
40 As made evident in Maciej Toporowicz *Eternity* #14 (1991) included in *Mirroring Evil*. 

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Holocaust and, secondly, to trivialize the actual horror of Nazi crimes. Interacting with Schechner’s website or drinking Coke does not turn us into little Nazis, as the catalogue would have it. This emphasis on the collusive guilt of the viewer, and the assumed innocence of the artist, deflects any discussion of the artwork’s dubious position between complicity and criticality.

The assertion that “in our capitalist, bourgeois world we are, all of us, potential and actual perpetrators” reveals more about the curatorial strategy of the exhibition than it does any of the individual work. Clearly stated in the catalogue is the curator’s intent to shift the viewers’ attention from the victims’ experience to the perpetrators’ methods and establish an empathetic identification with the latter. This intent is manifest in the mirrored entrance designed for the exhibition: MIRRORING EVIL is written on the wall behind us and rights itself in the mirror when we look at our own reflection. This little gimmick – our image caught in the silver together with “evil” – makes explicit the one-way directive that is maintained throughout the entire exhibition, both in structure and in tone. Upon entering the first “context” room, which was dimly lit and ashen in colour, the viewer is faced with a warning, an entire wall of text, and a video compilation of clips taken from various movies and theatre productions that feature Nazi characters. Between clips, the video proposes questions that viewers are to consider as they go through the show:

- Who can speak for the holocaust?
- How has art used Nazi imagery to represent evil?
- Why must we confront evil?
- What are the limits of irreverence?
- How has art helped break the silence?

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42 “Visitors may find some or all of the works of art in this exhibition offensive, as the artists make use of explicit sexual content and Nazi imagery. We recommend that children under 13 not attend this exhibition unless accompanied by an adult.”
To laugh at the cabaret dancers in frilly Nazi-plumes, in this context, is to commit a grave immoral deed: popular culture may make continuous spoofs of the Holocaust but fine art is held to a different standard. And the audience is held to a different standard: whereas the entertainment industry presumes the “masses” have the intellectual independence to distinguish between Hogen’s Heroes and actual Nazis, within the sanctified space of the museum, it is deemed necessary to instruct us.

This tone – that the museum knows better – belies the main organizing principle of the exhibition. In his catalogue essay titled “The Nazi Occupation of the White Cube,” Norman L. Kleeblatt writes:

> Each artist puts the viewer in the uncomfortable terrain between good and evil, seduction and repulsion. If we dare engage in their discomfiting art, we are forced to confront the very process of moral and ethical decision making. Using a variety of media and aesthetic strategies, they catalyze a process of self-doubt that, in many cases, is just short of chilling. [my italics]③

The “chill” entered Kleeblatt’s office about five years ago when Zbigniew Libera’s dealer proposed that the Jewish Museum purchase LEGO Concentration Camp Set (1996). The work provoked a “lively, divisive discussion”④ among committee members and consequently the work was acquired as an “educational tool.” Other work crossed his desk, namely Kuball’s Hitler’s Cabinet (1990) and Tom Sachs’s Manischewitz Luger (1996), which were also acquired, and the question of how to contextualize this “new generation” became pressing. An advisory group was formed in order to “help shape the interpretive context.”⑤ “We had to figure out how to mediate this work,” Kleeblatt states, “especially since the art is cool and conceptual, and the

③ Norman L. Kleeblatt, 13.
message is hot.”46 The exhibition was originally scheduled for the spring of 2001 but, due to dissenting voices among the museum’s membership, it was postponed for a year in order to build an extensive educational framework that would ensure that the artwork – and the Jewish Museum’s interpretation of the artwork – would be understood.

The curator’s sensitivity to the issues embedded in this work and his goal to bring these issues to the fore of discussion are evident and indeed admirable. And certainly there is a need to contextualize this work for an audience that, probabilistically speaking, will have had little exposure to earlier artwork that represents the Holocaust in the postmodern mode. But I am distinguishing the goal of the exhibition from how it took shape within the exhibition spaces. The interpretive framework the curator ultimately chose – “hold[ing] the viewer captive to situations in which any sense of moral certitude seems impossible” [my italics]47 – is both an over-interpretation of the individual artworks and an under-estimation of the viewers’ cognitive abilities to make basic connections and draw basic conclusions.

At every turn, the Jewish Museum tries to instill moral ambiguity in its visitors – to make us “complicit” with “evil” – while making every effort to ward off such ambiguity itself. The catalogue was released many months prior to the exhibition in order to stake out the museum’s official position, likely because it knew that the artwork itself speaks of concerns too diverse to be contained by its singular objective. Considering the ambiguity on which most of the work pivots, these interpretive directives are necessary to prevent “criticality” from sliding into “complicity,” lest the museum slides along with it. Due to this fear of ambiguity, text

46 Norman L. Kleeblatt, as quoted in Robert Atkins.
47 Norman L. Kleeblatt, 4.
overwhelms the work: there are a total of 20 essays as well as two didactic-panels per piece, each with a selection of quotations from noted critics and academics. Before leaving the gallery spaces, the viewer must traverse a second “context” room. Similar to the first, the walls are covered in text, and there is another video. This time the compilation is of various responses to the exhibition: well known critics, curators, historians, artists and Holocaust survivors all offer their expert opinion. These citations do not necessary work in concert, which seems to support of the claim that multiple interpretations are possible, but the video has a self-exculpatory function. It effectively states, whatever pain you may feel results from facing this new consumer trend, not from the artwork itself, which is only the (brave) messenger. The Jewish Museum rehabilitates the work as shock therapy, inuring the shock of the work itself.

There is an implicit moral hierarchy in Mirroring Evil: viewers are to identify with the “masses” (naïve and inherently prone to brainwashing), while the Jewish Museum identifies with the “daring” artists: together they play the satirist who remarks on the masses’ follies and thereby rises above them. This implicit condescension is evident in the selection of the work as well as its framing. Take for example Zbigniew Libera’s LEGO Concentration Camp Set and Alain Séchas’s installation, Enfants Gatés (Spoiled Children) (1997), which both use the metaphor of childhood. By contemplating such toys, viewers supposedly “regress to our own childhoods and become vulnerable in the toys’ presence.” Supposedly viewers imagine playing “death-camp.” Supposedly viewers become “participant[s] in the construction of destruction.” But then the artist’s clever use of irony allows us “to regain our adult intelligence and recognize what the

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49 Norman L. Kleeblatt, as quoted in Robert Atkins
boxes represent."^50 We become repelled by our complicity. If we have “dared” to “engage in such self-indicting activity,” we will have seen the LNIY (little Nazi in you).^51 Perhaps it is innate: Séchas’s *Enfants Gatés* features plastic kittens that have sprouted the characteristic signs of Hitler before they are even out of the pen. They look as if at play with human-like toys scattered at their feet, but of course they are rigid, like porcelain, and infinitely reproducible. If we “dare,” we will see that we, too, harbour innate sadistic desires: *Mirroring Evil* is a test that no one passes.^52 It is structured to undermine the viewers’ intellectual independence – to hold them “captive” – to strip them of their agency at a moment in history when intellectual rigour and responsibility is urgently needed to establish new sources of political agency (lest WWIII begins with a cry for the massive purge of “evil”).

According to the exhibition brochure, the art in *Mirroring Evil* is “prompting us to re-examine our understanding of the forces that produced the Holocaust.” These forces have been very carefully examined by very many historians, but are reduced in this exhibition to a simple analogy with contemporary advertising techniques, as discussed in relation to Schechner’s work. In no way does this exhibition address Nazism in its historical form: it addresses how Nazi imagery is used by contemporary artists toward their own ends, not how imagery is used by Nazi artists toward fascist ends, then or now. The catalogue suggests that this artwork “brings us face to face with the killers themselves”^53 but the artwork does not have this ambition. Regarding his

^50 Norman L. Kleeblatt, 131.
infamous Prada Deathcamp (1998), which is a model of Auschwitz constructed entirely of designer shoeboxes, Tom Sachs states:

My agenda isn’t about making a point about the Holocaust. I don’t think any of the artists in the show are trying to make a point about the Holocaust. We’re mostly in our 30’s and 40’s, and we have a certain distance from those events… I’m using the iconography of the Holocaust to bring attention to fashion. Fashion, like fascism, is about loss of identity.  

This “certain distance from those events,” and the process of redirecting Holocaust imagery toward other ends, is what is offensive in this work, not its ability to convey “the forces that produced the Holocaust.” Sachs (and several of his co-exhibitors) attempt to compress the wide-ranging deeply felt pain of the Holocaust into a single dose of shock-value to further his own causes. If he were using shock-value to re-realize the historical reality contained within the images, that would be one thing, but to capitalize on their traumatic resonance is another: go work for Benetton.

One of the failures of artwork like Sachs’s is that it is drawing on a referent too powerful for his superficial brackets: instead of thinking about Prada’s trend-setting power, we think of millions of bodies in unmarked graves. Nazi imagery, as Susan Sontag points out, “seems impervious to deflation by irony or over-familiarity.” By trivializing and fetishizing Nazi imagery, the work is supposed to show how such imagery is trivialized and fetishized, but the two-forked tongue of irony is silenced by the roar of the real. This attests to the enduring capacity of the appropriated images to signify and their resistance to new inscriptions: “for a vast majority of people on this planet, a swastika isn’t simply what is tidily referred to in artspeak as “a loaded symbol” – it is piled bodies, decimated families and silent rage.” The masses are still responsive and the assumption that we are not only indicates the artist’s own depravity. Artwork fails to have shock-

54 Tom Sachs as quoted in Deborah Solomon “Designer Death Camp” March 10, 2002.
55 Susan Sontag. 101.
56 Christopher Elam.
value and fails to be shock therapy when the original shock still resonates. What is shocking about the artwork is its arrogance and ignorance. It expects the high praise of “transgressive” for what is ultimately a conservative gesture. Trivial shock is a comic strategy that alters nothing.

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This leads me to ask: were the protestors of Mirroring Evil truly offended? Or were they trying to determine how history’s greatest trauma is to be understood?

The work in Mirroring Evil operates at the junction of two disparate discourses: Holocaust history and contemporary art. Because art is considered the nemesis of veracity, it is deemed inappropriate but inevitable, and to some degree necessary. To what degree is the dividing question. Mirroring Evil drove a wedge into the Jewish community between those who think new approaches are needed to reveal new insights into Nazi atrocities – those who have a dynamic understanding of history, and those who think the Holocaust is incommensurable and beyond representation – those who have a static conception of history. Detractors of the exhibition, who have emanated primarily from survivors and their families, react with raw emotion to the appropriation of Holocaust imagery: “There is such a thing as intellectual anthrax. The exhibition ridicules the Holocaust and desecrates Holocaust imagery.”

Diplomatically, Rabbi Irwin Kula insists that “The artists involved and those

59 Ernst Michel as quoted in Carol Strickland. [Ernst Michel is the Executive Vice President Emeritus of United Jewish Appeal Federation of New York]
most opposed actually agree” and that “protestors do not grasp that the artists are just as aghast at the misuse of Holocaust imagery as they are.”  That is, protestors fail to see the irony; they fail to step back and look from a critical distance. This “misunderstanding” constitutes the Jewish Museum’s line of defense: if you were comfortable with the language of conceptual art, you would see it as we do, daring and transgressive. “But for those less at home in the languages of contemporary art,” the catalogue explains, “the possibility that form – especially the strange and new – might overwhelm, or even become the content of such work, will lead some to suspect the artists’ motives.”

When did form become irrelevant? It seems to me that the controversy was precisely about bringing the artistic language of “studied superficiality” to consequence. Form matters; it always has: it is political de facto. Of the ironic postmodern mode, Richard Goldstein writes:

The mark of postmodernism is its production of objects that shimmer with ambiguity… They transgress even as they critique transgression; they delight even as they disturb because they please. These works can’t be said to have moral meaning, so when their therapeutic purpose is proclaimed by artist and critic alike, that official reading is only one of many. Take the Lego concentration camp. It can be read as a trivialization of the Holocaust or “a critique of how Hitler came to power,” as Frost suggests. But there’s a third possibility, one that often applies to pomo art: The work is sadistic. Indeed, the best pieces in this show can be seen as a laugh at the expense of pain, and their impact may well depend on the existence of horrified witnesses to the event they represent.

Menachem Rosensaft writes, “I deeply resent any satirizing of their [Rosensaft’s grandparents, parents and siblings] death or desecration of their memory” [my italics]. In these statements it is the artistic language that is questioned, not because they “didn’t get it,” but because they did

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60 Rabbi Irwin Kula, as quoted in Carol Strickland. [Rabbi Irwin Kula is President of the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership]
61 James E. Young (2001), xviii
63 Richard Goldstein “The Jewish Museum Puts a Therapeutic Frame Around Transgressive Art About the Holocaust: Managing the Unmanageable” The Village Voice March 6-12, 2002.
and they didn’t like it. The debate over the integrity of the work in *Mirroring Evil* was not between art elites and the “less at home” masses. What constitutes “art” was not the issue and there was no appeal to the First Amendment. The controversy was about the rhetorical language of the artwork and the theoretical language of the catalogue, which are both resolutely postmodern and, in the words of Ron Rosenbaum, substitute “a simplistic moral relativism for a real engagement with the issues.”65 *Language does not operate independently of ideology.* (Lest we forget that it was the lure of an aesthetic that mobilized Nazism; lest we forget that “final solution” is actually genocide.) To use a postmodern formal and theoretical language is to align oneself with postmodern ideology – with deep skepticism toward all notions of truth and an extreme relativism in regard to ethics. Such theory has caused heated debates within Holocaust studies, because the Holocaust *is* a truth outside of language: it cannot be reduced to a textual problem. In the words of Saul Friedlander:

> It is the reality and significance of modern catastrophes that generate the search for a new voice and not the use of a specific voice which constructs the significance of these catastrophes.66

Historians do not create the facts retrospectively – *it happened*. And it is our collective responsibility to decide how it is passed down.

There were several other exhibitions in New York that season that featured art using Nazi imagery,67 none of which were boycotted or picketed. As Menachem Rosensaft makes clear, “The outrage is that a respected, mainstream Jewish cultural institution should be legitimizing

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65 Ron Rosenbaum.
66 Saul Friedlander, 10.
the trivialization of the Holocaust.”  

Context matters. The museum’s director, Joan Rosenbaum, states:

We provide a context that the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim can’t… The presence of our permanent exhibition, which locates the Holocaust in Jewish history, and the fact that we are an art museum that interprets Jewish culture, provides a context that lets us take risks and deal with daring works. We show this work precisely because we are the Jewish Museum, because it is part of our mission, which is to look at everything about Jewish culture that is expressed through art.

The assumption that the museum’s gallery spaces have some memory of their previous exhibitions, creating a safer environment to encounter this ambiguous work, is a fair assumption that allowed for other challenging exhibitions, such as *Too Jewish: Challenging Traditional Identities* (1996), to be (more or less) accepted. All detractors admit that the Jewish Museum has an outstanding record and reputation. What sparked the controversy was that the director would “dare to invite the viewer into the world of the perpetrators.” Artworks that depict the perpetrators of Nazi genocide violate the ancient Jewish injunction against writing the names of enemies, whether biblical persecutors like Haman or modern anti-Semites.

Menachem Rosensaft states, “The Jewish Museum is now placing on a pedestal a bust of the individual who brutalized my mother and murdered my aunt.” He is referring to Christine Borland’s *L’Homme Double*, which is one of the most thought-provoking works in the show. Borland hired six different sculptors to mold a portrait of Josef Mengele based on two photographs and a written description. The results vary, frustrating their factual base and proving the difficulty of representing anything *as is*. By commissioning six portraits instead of one, Borland guarantees that the representation will fail to pass as realism: artistic language, and

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68 Menachem Rosensaft.
language in general, is inadequate to represent historical reality. The exhibition brochure states that Borland is exploring the contradiction between Mengele’s good looks and his unspeakable deeds. Is this a contradiction? Appearances say nothing of moral character, nor do portrait busts. *L’Homme Double* demonstrates that our cultural obsession with putting a face on “evil” brings us no closer to understanding, or purging, its sources: evil is impossible to codify. But in the context of *Mirroring Evil*, we come looking for Nazis and we get Mengele: end of discussion.

*Mirroring Evil* was portrayed in the press as “the Jewish *Sensation* with weaker work”71 Although the Jewish Museum denies that it intended to mount an exhibition in the “shock tradition” (it even released a two-page bulletin enumerating “Key Distinctions between *Mirroring Evil* and *Sensation*”), the curatorial rhetoric belies it. Furthermore, considering that an important factor in the selection of artists for *Mirroring Evil* was their previous record of scandals and cancellations, the controversy could not have come as a surprise: it could only have been awaited. What separates *Mirroring Evil* from its predecessor is that is also intellectually ambitious. It is not about drawing crowds: another Chagall or Pissarro exhibition would yield greater revenues; it is about a genuine engagement with a pressing issue: how to transmit the memory of the Holocaust. Eleanor Heartney states that, “what their work has in common is the notion that the Holocaust has seeped into our culture and invaded our imaginations in ways that make us all its heir.”72 The fact that we are all it heir makes us all responsible for its transmission. Norman L. Kleeblatt embraces this responsibility wholeheartedly. Despite his overbearing insistence on the viewers’ vulnerability to propaganda – which effectively disempowers the “masses” further – this insistence points to his concern for the political future.

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of both Holocaust images and Holocaust descendents. Unfortunately some of his artists are not as responsible: they have lost their response-ability.

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The controversy surrounding *Mirroring Evil* indicates that the “we” that delimits conceptions of right and wrong is no longer a cohesive social body: there is no “our,” no black, no white, just shades of gray ad infinitum. The discussion of how to represent the Holocaust has broken down into a state of relativism too extreme to maintain the conception of a coherent intellectual community. Certainly in an age ever more leaning toward fundamentalism, relativism is crucial – there can be no more “final solutions.” And it is in the gray-zone between absolutes that ethical questions can be negotiated. But in their extreme form, both the dynamic and the static conceptions of history allow for the dissolution of responsibility. Although postmodern representations work to reveal and critique the ideological construction and function of Holocaust imagery – they address *how it is passed down*, they lack an effective theory of agency that could empower viewers to take political action – they do not address what *can* happen.

James E. Young urges:

> It is not enough to ask whether or not our memorials remember the Holocaust, or even how they remember it. We should ask to what ends we have remembered. That is, how do we respond to the current moment in light of our remembered past? This is to recognize that the shape of memory cannot be divorced from the actions taken in its behalf, and memory without consequences contains the seeds of its own destruction.73

The question of who can speak for the Holocaust, and how, is incessant and will undoubtedly generate more controversy. But to this question we need to add – *why*. The Holocaust *is* and intellectual exercise: history belongs to the present but points to the future.

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73 James E. Young (1993), 15.
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