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Review:

Looking Jewish: Visual Culture and Modern Diaspora, Carol Zemel

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Looking Jewish: Visual Culture and Modern Diaspora, Carol Zemel
(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), ISBN 978-0-253-
00598-4, pp. 216, \$45.

Carol Zemel begins her book by describing a chance encounter with a stack of remaindered copies of Roman Vishniac's *A Vanished World* in a bookstore in Amsterdam that opened up a new direction in her scholarly research. Known for her important and transformative work on Vincent van Gogh and feminist studies in later nineteenth-century European art, Zemel's volume registers a personal decision to turn her attention to Jewish studies in art history and visual culture, and a cultural-historical moment in which it became possible to inflect the social and feminist histories of art with questions about Jewish presence and difference. One historic marker of this possibility was the prestigious international annual gathering of art historians under the auspices of the College Art Association in Boston in 1996. There, Catherine Soussloff chaired the first ever session in that organization's history to consider "Jewish Identity in Modern Art History". (The papers from this panel were published by the University of California Press under that title in 1999).

In the British context, the moment can be dated precisely to May 1994, when Bryan Cheyette, Laura Marcus and Warren Chernaik of the University of London proposed a conference titled *Modernity, Culture and "the Jew"*. Expecting a small gathering, they found themselves hosting an extremely large event that brought together scholars, artists, thinkers, writers from a wide range of disciplines seeking a common space to articulate what Cheyette and Marcus, in their introduction to the proceedings published by Polity in 1998, referred to as "a rereading of European history against the grain of Jewish history". Within a year of the *Modernity, Culture and "the Jew"* conference, the leading feminist art historians Linda Nochlin and Tamar Garb presented an audacious art historical intervention in the form of a collection of papers they had solicited under the title, *The Jew in the Text: Modernity and the Construction of Identity* (published in London by Thames and Hudson in 1995). Yet at the time this extraordinary volume on literature and the visual arts by well-known international scholars made little impression. Its remaindering is one of the mysteries of this moment. Evidently, it came too soon for the kind of recognition it deserved.

Back in New York, at the Jewish Museum, Norman Kleeblatt curated an exhibition in 1996 with the provocative title: *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities*, which came with a significant catalogue comprising valuable essays. To draw American and international artists into a single show under the umbrella of their Jewishness and insist, as Kleeblatt did, that the complexity of such contemporary issues as ethnicity, difference, and identity were being examined playfully and profoundly in contemporary visual art, was clearly a high-risk undertaking. Yet it was rendered viable by the prevailing terms of cultural debate on multiculturalism and diversity in which a new, hyphenated “Jewish” self-description was now possible that differed greatly from earlier twentieth-century tropings of Jewish outsidership and race, such as those associated with the “No Blacks, No Jews, No Dogs” signs on houses and hotels. Karin Brodtkin has tracked the changing place of Jewishness in Americanness as a way to make greater sense of the issue of race in America in her study, *How Jews Became White Folks* (Rutgers University Press, 1999).

The titles of these events and collections all register the complexity of this field and the conditions in which it became possible. Jewish studies have a long history reaching back to the German moment of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* at the beginning of the nineteenth century. But the academic focus of this legacy has been on history, theology, and language. The idea of Jewish cultural studies and the place of Jewish thinkers and artists in the very formation of the tools with which we think cultural studies awaited deeper cultural shifts; shifts that altered an age-old otherness vis-à-vis a hegemonic Christianity as the backbone of European identity, and created a field of intelligibility for “ethnicities” (multiculturalism) and difference/particularity (feminism).

Carol Zemel’s new book emerged, as the author admits, out of that moment and its deeper imperative to locate the contemporary sense of “identity” in relation to the longer histories of “modernity” and the varied political and social cultivation of subjects by that modernity (bourgeois or proletarian), and to the personal histories of families who traversed a major fact of modernity: diaspora. In this book, Zemel argues that it is not a matter of personal identity that drove her studies, inflected as they are with her own fascination with an “over there” from which she came as a child of immigrants to Canada. She offers a truly cultural and art historical investigation of the concept of diaspora as a dimension of lived experience and subjectivity that is examined in diverse ways through visual cultural practices and forms.

Taking her cue from the Jewish American, American Jewish artist who long resided in Britain, R. B. Kitaj, Zemel places her book under the sign of his concept of Diasporic Art. This is not an art defined by given identities. It is a way of being in the world and making cultural interventions that arises from a condition of singular importance, but not at all exclusive, to modern Jewish experience. It is a *mentalité*, a consciousness, a register of the elective affinities that can be activated precisely by a subjectivity that is not tied down, but neither is it footloose. It is a different way of inhabiting memory spaces, imagined places, and the shifting ground of social and cultural modernity.

Of Zemel's five studies, three look to Europe and its pre-Shoah – yet modern – registrations in photography (Alter Kacyzne, Moshe Vorobeichic, Roman Vishniac) or visual art and writing (Bruno Schulz). The fourth focuses on images of gendered Jewishness in mid-twentieth century popular culture and contemporary feminist rewritings, and the final chapter returns to negotiations of diasporic aesthetics in contemporary art.

Zemel begins by situating her project as a kind of memory work that reaches through family histories stretched between French Canada and Eastern Europe. The first three chapters are revealing readings of bodies of imagery that adumbrate the major issues of modernity and diaspora. Zemel also has to confront the historiographical challenges of expanding the discourse of art history that has, historically, fashioned our understanding of the art of the past through the figure of the nation, an often territorial space within whose boundaries a unified cultural identity unfolds over time. Where was the place for those groups who could not be folded into such homogeneous notions of a 'national spirit in art'? Thus Zemel is attempting to create a model that refuses the idea of national art histories with their "sequestered ethnic pockets" and instead promotes a reading of interactive cultural life in relationship to "a contiguous but different society" (p. 1). Further distancing herself from art history's conventional categories of styles and movements, she embraces the semiotic-cultural vision of visual cultural approaches to the image: "My purpose here is to call attention to image production as a signifying practice of Jewish Diasporic life" (p. 4).

The immense value of the book and its finely crafted analysis operate most strongly in that theoretical space. Zemel weaves a depth of scholarship into the focused analyses of what her selected groups of images – paintings, drawings for newspaper series, and photographs – can do to

engage the complexities and ambivalence of Jewish modernities in the first part of the twentieth century, notably in relation to that vast sprawling world of Jewish life and culture in the East, which was so definitively destroyed during the mass murder of the Shoah. Yet the effect of her whole beautifully argued analyses of the photographic series by Vishniac or Alter Kacyzne and Moshe Vorobeichic (or Moshe Raviv and Moï Wer, in Polish Moïse Werebeischyk) is to prevent that loss from blinding us to their “work”. She concludes her long and probing chapter on Vishniac’s work, so often now framed as a photographic memory book of the destroyed world of the *Ostjuden*, as follows: “For diasporic Jews, who continue to fashion our own forms of acculturated community, the mythic memory of premodern Jewish life carries a haunting melancholy, as if this is the Jewish imaginary we cannot put to rest. The photographic achievement of *A Vanished World* rests on the psychic and historic depth of its fascinations. Looking at Vishniac’s beautiful and elegiac images, the challenge for the viewer is not to narrow the shape of Jewish memory or too firmly fix the loss.”

Why? All the images she has so carefully situated and studied speak in fact to an earlier loss “produced by modernization, assimilation and its ambivalences” (p. 103). These extraordinary studies of a “premodern Jewish life” turn out to be precisely already modern, and all the more so for the critical reconstruction of the mobile social, cultural, and geopolitical positions from which their creators were making them. The artists in question, less famous than artists such as Chagall, the canonical Jewish artist from the shtetl celebrated by modernism, were also part of modernist aesthetic communities, from the Bauhaus to Paris. With the probing study of the visual art of the one artist who stayed at home, Bruno Schulz, these first three chapters form the heart of the book, the site of its delicate articulation of detailed visual analysis and richly informed cultural theory, and the ground for this book’s contribution to both historiography and art history.

The concluding two chapters shift the reader into the North American field of the twentieth century, the negotiation of what might be called the American Jewish dialectic, which is played out in popular culture and literature. Having explored, in the Schulz chapter, the complexity of the gender representations of Jewish masculinities and eroticism, the issue of gendering becomes prominent in Zemel’s study of the emergence and effacement of the trope of the endearing *Yiddishe Mama*, her replacement by the grotesque of the overpowering, castrating Jewish Mother and her

frigid and materialistic daughter, the Jewish Princess. The troubling emergence of these stereotypes in novels, film, and television, written largely by Jewish men such as Philip Roth, is balanced by readings of more subtle work and less destructive typologies by a generation of artists, Jewish and feminist, such as Eleanor Antin and Rhonda Lieberman. (Lieberman featured in Kleeblatt's *Too Jewish* show in 1996). This is matched by readings of the contemporary painter Ken Apteckar's image-text paintings exploring diasporic American masculinity through knowing appropriations of Old Master paintings.

The final chapter again engages Kitaj's paintings but also focuses on Ben Katchor's graphic novels, notably, *The Jew of New York*, and Vera Frenkel's profoundly important installation and video work of 1992, . . . *from the Transit Bar*. By virtue of the range of work and, indeed, of what we have to admit is the resulting complexity of these new media and art forms, the analyses of these works feel too fleeting, each artwork or artistic practice deserving and demanding more substantive close reading to achieve the same kind of depth and revelation as the work undertaken to bring the artists and works of the earlier chapters into theoretical and cultural alignment with major issues. Kitaj's declaration to "Paint it Jewish", for instance, seems far removed from the ways in which Frenkel carefully created, through the forms of video and installation she pioneered, a shared space for many intersecting narratives of displacement, movement, foreignness, exile and forced migration. Kitaj's recognition of Jewish history, his identification with Walter Benjamin and Jewish thinkers, arose in relation to his perplexity before his memory of a childhood playing baseball in Ohio while European Jewry was being murdered – an account he himself gives of his "awakening".

This is far from the experience of Frenkel, a child survivor of the Shoah moving from Central Europe via Leeds to Montreal, whose bedtime story was the endlessly repeated and never fully remembered story of her mother's escape from Bratislava, alone with her blonde and blue-eyed toddler daughter. Frenkel's ability to make her own twentieth-century Jewish story of flight and displacement a starting point for listening to and entwining other stories of migration and its severed sense of belonging, forced or elective, points to a new condition, urgently relevant to the current situation of mass migration and refugee crises in Europe and, differently posed, in North America. These are no longer issues that can be fully grasped through the key terms Zemel so effectively deploys in

earlier chapters: nation-narration, imagined community, or assimilation and acculturation debates.

Zemel reads her final three artists under the sign of allegory, which, she concludes, is the core of her understanding of a “diasporic aesthetic” of layered references and multiple dimensions of past and present. This comes closer to the difficulty of speaking of conditions that are predicated on ruin and fragment. Her book offers, therefore, an invaluable contribution to the post-1990s engagement, intellectual, theoretical, cultural, and art historical, with the modern moments of Jewish presence as a complex element of modernity and its post-conditions. By refusing the traps of identity and essence, documentary and testimony, in favour of multifaceted historically and theoretically enriched readings of aesthetically fashioned images as systems of meaning making, Zemel adds a major work to this rich literature.

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