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DEFLATIONARY TACTICS WITH THE ARCHIVE OF LIFE: CONTEMPORARY JEWISH ART AND POPULAR CULTURE

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This paper discusses art works by Suzanne Treister, Deborah Kass and Doug Fishbone. It considers the importance of their work for contemporary Jewish identity within the terms of wider conceptual questions that preoccupy contemporary art. These concerns are challenging the perceived structures of power, the "performance" of subjectivity and the questioning of authenticity. A deflationary aesthetic is central to the critique of these structures of thinking fuelled by an interest in the relationship between Jewish subjectivity and popular culture that underpins all of these art works.

I argue that popular culture plays a key role as a constituting factor in the production of contemporary Anglophone subjectivity. I use the case studies to develop the argument in the three artists' specificities and the way they all question the idea of authenticity as a stable source of self-understanding. Suzanne Treister questions history and our relationship with historical events, specifically the Holocaust. She also explores questions of the relationship between structures of power and narratives of history. Debora Kass considers the representation of Jewish women, power and iconicity. Doug Fishbone, a younger artist, takes on self-hate as a transformative tool and as a motif that destabilizes Jewishness as a category, especially in an age of the accelerated post-internet-derived subjectivity.

I **Introduction: contextual factors**

The artists whose work I look at here, Suzanne Treister, Deborah Kass and Doug Fishbone all make work that emerges out of the appropriation of various forms of popular culture as axiomatic in their constitution of Jewishness.

I have chosen these artists because they offer me a way of thinking that does not try to recuperate a metaphorical Jewish home or access to an

authentic past (of the “I matter because my parents died in the Holocaust” variety) that is so common in Jewish Anglophone cultural discourse but, rather, situates a Jewishness within the common terms of reference for contemporary artists of structures of power, performativity, subjectivity and history. A deflationary aesthetic is important for questioning authenticity, hierarchies of victimhood and offering a radical forward-looking subjectivity through their work that eschews essentialist certainties.

The art represents broadly two ways in which to question the terms of representation in the visual field: problematizing the received account of the past and the authority of those versions of history through the notion of ‘the archive’, and questioning the subject through the invention of “personae” in art.

One of the defining features of popular culture is its contemporaneity. This is in direct opposition to the supposed stable timelessness of so-called high culture or what is termed the canon. In art there is a well-debated[1] discussion of the polar positions demarcated by high art and low art, central to the formation of a canon, that are pitted against the seeming fluidity or flattening out of hierarchies.

However, more pertinent to my argument are the ways in which popular culture has purchase on the conceptualization of contemporary Jewish identity and what this leverage might mean for this identity. One obvious example of the impact of popular culture on artists, art and Jewish identity is the central role of Jews in the construction of Hollywood,[2] and the importance, particularly in the United States, of the relationship between Jews and comedy.

The very contemporaneity of popular culture makes it an unstable category (my parent's popular culture is not the same as mine) and today's popular taste is tomorrow's retro kitsch. It is not surprising then, for a diaspora community, by definition the product of instability, to imagine itself as if through the shifting lenses of popular culture. However, I would go further than this to suggest that popular culture is one of the key producers of contemporary Anglophone Jewish subjectivities not only through Hollywood figures such as Woody Allen but also, in the UK, by Jack Rosenthal's plays,[3] the BT adverts featuring the actress Maureen Lipman from the 1980s, Sacha Baron Cohen's Ali G and Simon Amstell's Grandma's House .[4]

In psychoanalytic terms, Judith Butler [5] has argued that "the subject is produced in discourse".' (Bell, 1999,164), suggesting that there is no fixed or stable core of the self. Thus you are not born "you" but that you become you through your interaction with the world in an ever-developing and changing way. Instability in this discourse is utterly central to the constitution of the subject. In this sense Identity is an effect of the way we live our lives, our rituals and interactions.

If identity is understood as an unstable process then art, too, is provisional, and reveals something relevant to our sense of self encountered in the viewing. In sum, there is something central to our identity, formed through our relationship with popular ~~(and other)~~ culture. It forms us as much as the way we form it. The very ephemerality of popular culture perhaps speaks to diaspora communities like an echo of their own formation through being forced to move repeatedly. In other words, popular culture speaks to Jews because of their historical unrootedness.

The three artists whose work I discuss respond to these ideas through their uses of mediated imagery, video, and the deflationary in ways to be elaborated later in this article.

In his classic text, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* Andrew Ross (Ross 1989) claims that there is a profound relationship between the immigrant experience and popular culture. Popular culture has a role as an Americanizing agent and through ambivalence (another unstable state). He argues that the immigrant is promised much (in the US) and achieves much, but is expected always to be grateful. There are obvious parallels with the British Jews and the Jewish experience of assimilation throughout the 20th Century (See Steyn 1999). The appropriation that all these artists employ to make the work exemplifies the legitimating power of the public sphere through which to affirm their Jewish identity through a shared, but borrowed, artistic language.

The Jews' expectation of equality is then matched by the lack of parity they have with the so-called WASP community, and belies the impossibility of full assimilation in a culture that is over-determined by race, ethnicity and religious belief. Assimilation also needs to be addressed in relation to class as in "the American Dream" (and increasingly the global neo-liberal dream) and to be middle class encapsulates such ambition. Yet intellectuals have often had recourse to popular culture as a way of identifying with the working classes as a counter move against what they see as bourgeois power.[6] In this argument, popular culture not only identifies intellectuals with the working classes but also defines them as separate from that very class. After all, they are the tastemakers with cultural capital and use it for their own

empowerment rather than for the empowerment of the working classes who provide the fodder to reinvigorate high culture. Thus the use of popular culture foregrounds the bifurcated nature of the artist as being homeless in class terms, neither at home within bourgeois culture nor in the working classes. I would suggest that this is another link with the figure of the Jew who is bifurcated in terms of his or her Jewishness, neither black nor white, neither at home nor a complete stranger.[7]

In considering the instability and repetition of popular images or stereotypes as a way to think about identity or what I might call, in a more positive vein, reiterative provisionality (what is provisional is only ever for-the-moment and to be changed later), Walter Benjamin in the *Storyteller* pits the experiential and interpretative value of storytelling through repetition and assimilation against the verifiability of information, such as journalism. Benjamin argues that a story "does not expend itself" unlike information. Information, he states, is ephemeral and overrun by the next latest news bulletin. The value of storytelling is ongoing, and he likens the storyteller to teachers and sages (Benjamin 1999, 83-107). Thus, to draw out some more common threads, the instability of the narrative, as offered by Benjamin, opens up productive possibilities for understanding one's place in the world that the certainties of knowledge do not. Furthermore, while a narrative has an unstable meaning (as opposed to the stability of facts) as it can be adapted in every telling by the narrator, it is in the very flexibility of its instability that confers its temporal durability, with obvious implications for an appropriation-derived art form.

Each of the artists I discuss below reworks and rethinks populist motifs in order to reassign the meaning of being Jewish today. They are not providing facts or “information” but commenting on the narrative of Jewishness. And more, particularly in the absence of Jewish ritual or Halakha, narratives of Jewishness, which are primarily drawn from popular culture, become a central and most prevalent form in the constituting of a secular Jewish identity today, as these artists that I explore below exemplify and demonstrate through their working practices. In this way Kass, Fishbone and Triester add richness to the idea of reiterative provisionality as a part of Jewish experience that offers a much-needed transformation of thinking in so-called mainstream Anglophone Jewish cultural narratives.

II. **The Archive**

The curator Okwe Enwezor has set out the reasons for the predominance of artworks that use archives, viewing the archive “as an active, regulatory and discursive system” (Enwezor 2008,11) and as a fruitful source of artistic enquiry. Here I am using the idea of the archive not as a museum deposit but as ”found” material that may be appropriated by the artist and drawn together to create a self-formed repository of motifs for specific conceptual purposes. This idea of an archive is close to the way Enwezor explains it as a conceptual entity as much as a material one and it is in this way that I am deploying it as a tool through which to view the work of Fishbone, Kass and Treister.[8] They create archives by bringing objects or images together into their own collection or image-producing toolbox, as well as using already established museum archives in which to intervene in

various ways, and through this approach, they claim, artists hold the world up to scrutiny by means of a non-didactic commentary.

An artist working with an archive can produce work that has many different types of outcome. It is merely the starting point and yet it defines the work. The artist scrutinizes an archive and makes the work in response to it, often with a view to questioning the formation of historical narratives and the canon. An artist may use a range of archival material. To give two examples: Deborah Kass uses an archive of Andy Warhol's images that are in the public domain and Doug Fishbone creates an archive from internet images. The internet in this case is an archive in itself. Working with archives destabilizes notions of the canon or high art and the attendant hierarchies of art forms that are constituted through the idea of a canon.

The use of the archive in art can be a way of re-animating the past, using objects to point to different futures. For an artist thinking about the representation of Jews it can be a way to re-consider anti-Semitism, stereotyping and certainly the trauma of the Holocaust. Emerging out of institutional critique, the archive is seen by artists as a way of bringing history to the people (which re-inscribes their separation from "the people") and a flow in the opposite direction of appropriation of popular culture for artistic production and consumption. At best, the archive can be used to take charge of history, to look forward with some kind of agency, challenging stereotypes and hegemonic discourses; at worst (and the worst seems to me the most common) it can be used as an agent of re-investment in nostalgia or victimhood. Conversely, Kass, Treister and Fishbone use the material in different ways, but each uses the material drawn from popular culture as an

object of transformation through the use of a persona. It is the transformative aims in the work of these artists that make them viable case studies.

II: Persona work

What brings the three artists together is that they all create personae in their work as a comment on Jewish ontology and as a device that implies a condition of passing[9] These artists are part of a wider trend that includes an illustrious roster of earlier Jewish artists, particularly women, working through personae such as Eleanor Antin, Lyn Hershman Leeson and Claude Cahun [10].

Persona work problematizes the link between the neutral and the normative or hegemonic (that is, white) in advertising and cinema, where the normative as white is constantly re-inscribed (Phelan 1993, 60-67). This is why inventing identities has been a useful device for Jewish artists as an expression of both the elision of their non-normativity and their desire for acceptance. The persona forces the viewers to question who they think they are seeing. In other words, if the viewers cannot tell whom they are looking at in the moment of looking they cannot then lose themselves in the image. [11]

Through the discourse of emancipation and assimilation Jews have lost their absolute (that is, corporal) difference and so can be subsumed into society but are then merely tolerated in order to maintain the hegemonic order.[12] (Brown 2006,75). Importantly, the language of tolerance creates an obstacle to equality through its subjugating language (“I tolerate you”), and at the same time shows by example the point where equality ends. (75)

Passing has a particular role to play as an example of how the body can be “split and domesticated” through the destabilization of the gaze, in situations where you cannot be sure of who you are looking at. Through the example of passing, Brown brings homosexuals and Jews together as racialized bodies (Brown 2006,75). Passing is an effect of the subordination of being tolerated because of the impulse to hide the non-normative self at the same time as it is a gesture towards equality through the inability of the viewers to really know whom they might be seeing. I would speculate that the predominance of women, gay and Jewish artists (and those who would claim to traverse those categories) who enact others are working at the fault lines of tolerance, using popular culture to subvert its regulatory power. Suzanne Treister, Doug Fishbone, and Deborah Kass work at these fault lines. That they all create a persona in their work and all use popular culture as a device for their art is a testament to the ambiguity of their position as Jewish artists.

Suzanne Treister

Suzanne Treister emerged as a painter in the 1980s but moved more towards multimedia in the 1990s. Her work encompasses many forms that include drawing, the internet and video (http://ensemble.va.com.au/tableau/suzy/).

Since the 1990s much of her work has incorporated references, implicitly and explicitly, to Jewishness in various manifestations. Treister intentionally overloads the imagery and information, and is concerned with history, subjectivity and structures of power through various devices

employed by the persona of her time traveller Rosalind Brodsky (1995 -2010)[13].

She is a prolific artist so I will focus on videos that through a persona (or personae) destabilizes the certainty-in-looking that essentializes the subject through the assumption of being able to tell exactly what is being looked at. This operates in a similar way to destabilizing the idea of a canon through interrogating the archive.

Treister's videos are funny. Like Fishbone's, they are also notable for their homemade aesthetic. In Treister's case, this aspect of her work is intimately linked to the everyday socialization and self-empowerment of the Other that was particularly identified within many of the second-wave feminist debates in art. She uses a low-fi visuality to contrast with the high-technology futuristic concepts that send up the B-movie genre of the Cold War, paranoid American sci-fi. Her work becomes deflationary, bursting the bubble of high-art pretension through the ironic use of popular iconography.

Science fiction has had a particular resonance as a popular counter-hegemonic form and speaks not only of being out-of-time and out-of-place, of "race consciousness as earthbound and anachronistic" (Gilroy 2000, 344) but also in its actual impossibility constitutes a refusal to accept the status quo or the dominant narratives of history. As such, the popular culture that Treister's work draws from is pertinent to an exploration of a post-Holocaust Jewish identity where changing the narrative may be one way of overcoming trauma and reconciling the othering of racism and the ambiguities of tolerance, as discussed earlier in relation to the splitting of the subject to render it controllable. The point of her using popular culture here rather than

actual existing archives of the Holocaust, is to rethink its impact on her life as a Jew. For a Jew born in the aftermath of the Holocaust its impact has been so profound, yet ambiguous, as to render it unassimilable except as an absurd gesture. The exploration lends agency to the viewer in its deflationary humour in contrast to a more serious documentary approach such as Susan Hiller's 'J Street Project'[14]. "[B]arred from ordinary humanity…artists seek, like Sun Ra, another mode of recognition in the most alien identity they can imagine" (Gilroy 2000, 348). Treister's work increasingly deals with conspiracy theories, the preserve of popular culture and, I would argue, a preoccupation with the powerless. The lack of distinction in recent work such as *Hexen 2* (2009) between the dystopian paranoia of the conspiracy theories and the political agency that science fiction might afford exposes her own ambivalent relationship to what she conceives as the structures and agents of power in the world. This aside, the transformation that much of her work proposes is achieved by the combination of failure and wish-fulfillment in her art, particularly through the low-fi, homemade look in the work that was prevalent in a strand of the 1990s generation of British artists as an iconoclastic gesture.

For example, *Ghost of Maresfield Gardens* (1998), is a video written by Treister's father, in which he acts the ghost of Sigmund Freud and his wife acts Freud's daughter Anna. Freud, (Treister's father in a sheet), is telling Anna (Treister's mother in a sheet) how Rosalind Brodsky goes back into the past to tell Freud about the Holocaust, entreating him to go to England, thus saving his life. The juxtaposition of Freud as a historical figure in his grand North London study, faithfully preserved as it was, and the speaking sheets,

offer a ridiculous and hilarious slapstick that deflates and equalizes through humour and the aesthetic of the amateur[15].

In *Rosalind Brodsky's Time Travelling Cookery Show: Episode 1: Pierogi* (1998), a woman stands in her kitchen and unmakes a cake. She is dressed anachronistically in a silver dress of man-made fabric with a retro-futuristic helmet on her head. The dress is styled in nineteenth-century fashion and her face obscured by the helmet. The unmaking of the German Black Forest cake to make Polish Pierogi is a funny, inverted metaphor for the destruction of Polish Jewry: "I originally invented this recipe for a time travelling journey to try and rescue my Polish grandparents from the Holocaust," she states. The references in this piece to cheap homemade cable-channel forms of reality television is unmistakable in the tacky costume and home style sets that also point towards the inclusivity of popular culture for Jews, where to be amateur and in bad taste is an equalizer that reveals what is at stake in the deflation of humour.

In both works, what could be mawkish becomes amusing: the lighting is flat, the closeups wobble, the costume homemade. The viewer is completely aware of the construct of the video: this is an absurdist aesthetic that does not assimilate the Holocaust even while it attempts to satisfy a redemptive desire. The desire played out in the videos is both personal and social. It is, on the one hand, to find and save her (Treister/Brodsky's) grandparents and, on the other, to bring into view the influence on the contemporary of the great figures of modernity by soliciting their attention in fiction (by Treister, using the cipher of Brodsky).

For Treister, the fact of being Jewish explicitly informs the relationship to her working methodology overall, and unlike many other art practices, brazenly backtracks on some of what she would see as the rationalist ideas of Wissenshaft des Judentums.16 Treister foregrounds the folkoric and the ritual, as part of a panoply of tools to comment on what she sees as structures of power, and with humour rather than didactic judgement, romance or nostalgia. For example, in the spoof sci-fi essay film, Operation Swanlake (2004), constructed through photographic stills and drawings, Treister invokes the figure of the Golem. Through "alchemical research" drawings, links are sought and drawn between many seemingly unconnected events and places. In 2028, the Golem helps the fictional Institute of Militronics and Advanced Time Interventionality in its research on sound waves for the Psychotronic transmitter an imaginary absurd instrument that extracts sound waves from images and objects and uses them to communicate with the universe using black hole energy.

At stake in the inflection and transmission of Jewish folklore and ritual, asserts Jonathan Boyarin (Boyarin 1994), is that Jews are not counted as other because they are seen to be from within Europe17 and Europe's relationship to postcolonial subjects who are seen as other. The practice of Judaism is a productive alternative to the search for origin or victimhood in the postcolonial debates, as Boyarin sees them. Also in true Benjaminian spirit, it foregrounds the present and future, rather than the past. The temporality of Jewish identity as handed down through the rituals and practices of Judaism, is juxtaposed with the geographically placed post-colonial other, such as "immigrants or refugees from some place worse but more loved than here" (J BOYARIN, 424-428). Treister, however, refuses to reject the seemingly idiosyncratic specificity of her own historical and geographical legacy and instead transforms it through contact with the present and the imagined future: she does not assimilate her work into the universal (like, say, Mark Rothko) but instead transforms the notion of origin, which is usually geographically understood, into a link between popular culture and folklore (passing down ritual to the present) in Operation Swanlake as in other works. Through a secular artistic practice she gives life to Boyarin's claim of the need to think about Jewish identity as transmitted through the handing down of

tradition in time rather than in geographically contingent post-colonial discourses, where agency is about claim to place or belonging (Jonathan Boyarin, 1994).

Moreover, Treister even plays with time, through the idea of time travel. She sees this as giving her choices, gaining the power of agency, and she has fun with her travels. Brodsky journeys through time to be psychoanalyzed by the heroes whom Treister herself cannot access in reality: Freud, Lacan, Kristeva, Jung and Melanie Klein. She visits the Russian Revolution and the Holocaust, invoking characters and historical people, not in order to revel in a lost past but to transmute history, making it into something that is not fixed, through which she (Brodsky/Treister) can change and therefore alter the fate of her family by rescuing them through going back in time) if only in her imagination. In fact, in Treister's typical deflationary way, Brodsky rarely achieves what she sets out to, often arriving in the wrong place. For example, according to her online time travelling diary, instead of arriving at the Russian Revolution, she arrives on the set of *Dr Zhivago* by mistake and enjoys the night life of Madrid, where it was filmed.[18] She also arrives on the set of *Schindler's List* when aiming to rescue her grandparents from the Holocaust. Importantly the time travelling figure here effectively acts as a "de-territorializing" motif, that is, a motif with no particular attachment to any ancestral home of origin[19].

Popular culture in this work replaces the motifs of authenticity as site of home: instead of arriving at the Holocaust she arrives on the set of a film of the Holocaust. The site of trauma thus becomes deflected through humour and popular culture. The aim, I would argue, is to overcome the contemporary nostalgia for roots and equally to overcome trauma through

the magic of Hollywood[20] and it is not insignificant that Hollywood was so often a safe haven for Jews in its "golden age" that is referenced in Treister's piece.

However, as Brodsky always travels through films, personae and appropriated motifs rather than actual sites of atrocity, she does not evoke witness, she neither finds the real Holocaust nor rescues her grandparents- nor does she expect to. The lack of utopian fulfillment in her work, the deflationary humour and aesthetic around Jewish history and tragedy is where the work is contemporary. It presents a challenge to dominant trends in the Jewish subjectivity of, say, Judy Chicago or Rachel Lichtenstein and has more in common with the sitcom than the concerns of contemporary neo-minimalism, for example, one of the prevalent paradigms in art.

Deborah Kass

Deborah Kass is an artist who lives and works in New York. Her work first

emerged in the 1980s and has long been concerned with patriarchy in the visual arts and the representation of women through art history. Kass habitually uses popular culture in her work, incorporating catch phrases, and taking motifs from Pop Art, although her most famous work is the Warhol Project. In this body of work Kass appropriates the work of the quintessential Pop artist in the popular imaginary to explore her relationship with Jewish, Lesbian and female identity. This pioneering project of the 1990s in the American art world was to put the Jew into the picture, or as she states, she puts herself into the picture. Kass was part of a larger loose grouping of

American artists who brought “play” into their work through the use of popular culture (Kleeblatt 1996). I interpret this idea of ”play” as a deflationary gesture as it makes light of what is usually elevated. She made visible what was once invisible through a multiple appropriation of superstars: Warhol, who made deflationary images of other superstars and icons such as Marilyn Monroe and the Queen of England, and the other superstar, a Jewish woman, Barbra Streisand. Streisand stood out to Kass as a Hollywood star who owned her Jewishness rather than choosing assimilation as many did in Hollywood, by keeping her “Jewish nose” and her name. These works, called the *Barbra Series*, use the highly recognizable iconography and methods of Warhol but repeatedly insert the image of Barbra Streisand. An iconic series (within an iconic Barbra series) is Barbra as Yentl from the film of the same name. The collective title of these paintings is *My Elvis*.

Kass made a whole series of Yentls, inspired by Warhol’s Elvis series, and close in form to Andy Warhol’s *Triple Elvis* (1964), retaining much of the format of the originals. Kass replaced the figure of Elvis with the figure of Yentl. The Elvis who is gun-toting, macho and defiant is replaced by a quietly bold Yentl, standing with one arm in her pocket, the other “armed” with her siddur (prayer book), looking out at the viewer, announcing,” this is who I am”.[21] The image has been transformed from that of patriarchal machismo to a memory of covert power and a testament to the bravery of ”passing”. The Elvis is overlaid in the print as if in a quick edit of a film whereas the pace of the Yentls is slower, they are individually placed, sometimes merely touching as in *TripleYentl* (*My Elvis*) (1992), or not touching at all as in *Double Double*

Yentl (*My Elvis*) (1992)[22], which re-inscribes their iconicity while still referencing the cinematic. Slowing down the pace of the image allows the viewer to take in the full extent of the reference, the making of an icon, the erotic charge, the cross-dressing. What is inspiring about this work is not just that Kass made a Jew iconic but that she made a Jewish woman iconic.

Jewish women in popular culture have been much derided, depicted as controlling or overbearing (Prell 2000). A recent and notable example from a long line of possible examples is the popular ABC, television series *The Goldbergs* (2013-) where the young protagonist and narrator habitually refers to his mother as "smother"'. In contrast, here we have a Jewish woman being at her most Jewish as Yentl, positioned as a figure to be admired. The Yentl image figures as a powerful icon[23] and this is further complicated by the feminization of the male Jew in Western discourse and the acclaiming of different tropes of manhood in traditional Eastern European Jewry (Boyarin 1997).

It is, therefore, important that Kass has chosen the image of Streisand from the film *Yentl* (1983) through whom to represent the image of the Jew in the picture. *Yentl* was a labour of love by Barbra Streisand, who produced, directed and acted in the film. It is based on Isaac Bashevis Singer's story about a woman who was so desperate to learn Talmud that she pretended to be a male in order to be able to do so. It was not the original Singer text but the film that was the spur to the KASS ARTworkS.; Just as in Treister's Brodsky series it is not the Holocaust itself, nor authentic witnesses such as Primo Levi, but the Hollywood rendition of *Schindler's List* that was the point of reference: popular narratives that stand in for the real and allow for the

assimilation of trauma and oppression.

Kass's work, analogous to Treister's Brodsky character, for example, is not about authenticity but instead celebrates the inauthenticity of popular culture. What is important here is the way popular culture is the defining cultural reference for her work. In borrowing from the camp and cult film instead of a canonical writer, Kass celebrates the parvenu and the place of Jews as parvenus, with popular culture as the defining source. Thus popular culture constitutes a contemporary Jewish sense of self as expressed in these paintings. More recently Kass has produced a commissioned piece of public work Oy/Yo (96 H x 195 L x 54.5 W inches), a large painted aluminium word that reads Oy from one side and Yo from the other[24]. It is situated below the Brooklyn Bridge and looms over a key site in the folklore of both Jewish American history and African American New York history. This is a public testament to the central position and co-evolution of Jewish and Black vernacular cultural forms that have also been so central to the constitution of mainstream American culture. It is writ large in this piece both literally and metaphorically.

Yet in the appropriation of these popular tropes is also a critique that aims to transform the Jewish female figure into one that inspires a sense of power in the world. In the *Yentl* series the Barbra figure becomes a powerful persona through the image of the active, gun-toting male cowboy referenced from the Warhol painting. Kass is commenting here on Warhol's use of the hetero-normative cowboy as an icon of manhood. In the *Yentl* paintings Kass becomes the powerful woman she wants to be. Art becomes the wish fulfillment of emancipation here. However, she does not forget the oppression

that popular culture represents. Even in its mass appeal or, to invert it, the mass appeal itself demonstrates its roots in oppression, as Kass states, "I always refer to that Adrienne Rich quote: 'This is the oppressor's language, yet I need it to speak to you'".'[25] Kass is ever mindful of the oppressor's language in this work through subverting Warhol and his language as a white male. By choosing Warhol as the icon to appropriate Kass is foregrounding a critique of Warhol in his work, his playing with fame and the icon, with the power of celebrity, money and class. By keeping "My Elvis" in the title, for example, which is the reference to the original icon, she is acknowledging her homage to Warhol. Paradoxically, her work is as much a tribute to Warhol as it is a critique of the white men who dominate the art world. Thus she owns Jewishness as a Jew and painting as a woman, using them to create a new context. Jewishness offers the same slippage here as with gender, the work simply swops one for the other: Warhol for Kass, Elvis for Barbra, Chairman Mao for Gertrude Stein.

In Kass's reworking of Warhol, with the meaning reinvested in the originals, which were themselves taken from popular imagery, she is producing an identity for herself through icons that define her identity as gay and Jewish. This is a different Jewish from the assimilationist Jew, the suburban Jew and so on. According to Kass a more positive view, a proud Jew, with a distinct cultural language – "Jewtude".

Many Black artists have put their own image in their work as a statement of visibility, "now I am here", but Kass has put a media-produced icon in the picture, whose vision of Jewry, as played out in Yentl, is a kitsch construct or queering of Jewry, a representation hidden behind clichés of Jewishness (the shtetl life). At the end of the Streisand film, Yentl is seen singing on a ship bound for the United States

where she can be truly free, so not only is the "old country" sanitized but the "new country" holds hope and solution. Although according to Kass herself Yentl is merely camp I would hope that in the multi-visibility and repetition of Yentl in Kass's paintings and her use of Warhol there is, as with the "original" works, both a reinvestment and de-investment of the image and its baggage.26 Popular culture and the Hollywood image are both generative points of self-inscription for her work and identification as a Jew.

V: **Doug Fishbone: Anti Semite and Jew**

Doug Fishbone is interested in the possibilities of a subject that can neither be pinned down nor contained. He makes videos where his voice narrates shaggy dog stories over still images, as a riff on the stand-up. He also performs live. The narrator, usually the voice of authority, in Fishbone's work becomes the trickster. He cites artist Sarah Morris: "the most interesting narrator is one you can't trust."[27] In this way, like Kass, he uses inauthenticity working it as a camouflage in which a persona can operate. His films from 2003 until 2005 follow the same format of a multitude of disconnected internet-derived images displayed in fast succession, while a voiceover tells seemingly disconnected stories, jokes, asides. Like Treister, Fishbone creates a world with no apparent logic outside of the tale it weaves, and work that is lo-fi and deflationary through the use of imagery that degrades and undermines. However, unlike both Treister and Kass, Fishbone's intention is to shock the viewer out of assumptions about themselves through the use and juxtaposition of anti-Semitic and generally distasteful imagery. Kass and Triester use popular culture in a more redemptive way.

In Fishbone's first film The Ugly American (2003), there is no redemption, only the relentless Lenny Bruce-inspired alienation and self-hatred. The persona formed through the narration could be seen as an inversion of Jean Paul Sartre's definition of the anti-Semite (Sartre, 1948), who mimics the Jew's attributes out of a fear of change. It is just this anti-Semitic philistine that Doug Fishbone (a Jewish man) gives voice to. However, this is not a nihilistic project and could be seen through the classic Debordian "detourenement: which could be understood in this context as a radical re-use of the imagery in a way that turns the meaning in the opposite direction of that intended by its original user.28. In other films such as Towards a Common Understanding he uses Yiddish and Jewish jokes, binding his Jewishness into the narrative. He is the shlemiel, telling bad jokes, the insufferable bore positioning himself as a Jew, yet also, in the imagery, pushing the limits of the acceptability of the Jew. For example, in this film he asks the viewer "Can you see anything hidden?" while showing an elephant with six legs, then the International Monetary Fund insignia that shifts to contain an anti-Semitic stereotypical image of a Jew, all in a couple of seconds. His tactics are shock tactics yet like Treister he does not self-exoticize nor explain Jewishness in the work, using the stereotype and the collision of brutal imagery as an absurd device.

The world he creates is made of composites images of stereotypes of Jews, the Magen David symbol, Hebrew words, photographs of the shtetl, Israeli soldiers and Jewish celebrities. He juxtaposes these with images of pornography, "trailer trash", animals smoking, hammer and sickle and other symbols of ideology. However, it is not the individual images that create the overall meaning in the work. The imagery is so fast moving that the effect is a buildup of these fragments into a reeling sense of vertigo as the viewer struggles to achieve some kind of meaning that remains elusive.

Fishbone repeatedly plays the imbecilic but fragmented fantasist replete with homespun philosophy. The character knows the world through his inability to understand the world he creates. This is the projection, a

delusional fantasy of a putative YouTube subject, the obsessive, distrustful but authoritarian conspiracy theorist scouring the net for clues that offer no conclusive answer and no real self-reflection. Yet if the work, in my description, sounds distasteful or boring, it is not. It is compelling for the viewer conversant with American popular culture, with a particular kind of Jewishness that many of us have encountered through Woody Allen, Lennie Bruce or Jackie Mason (despite their differences from each other). Fishbone owns this Jewishness, wearing it lightly through his humour and he brings it into the arena of art, as well as embracing the enjoyment of telling stories. Rather than opting for a nostalgic evocation of these characters he subverts them through the juxtapositions.

Through a disjunction of imagery and sound he reveals the way popular culture allows us to continually re-form and reclaim the way we think about ourselves, especially in the light of a memory of ever shifting conditions. It exudes a kind of "love it or hate it, it's mine" ethos which by using anti-Semitic tropes in the way he does, takes ownership of anti-Semitic history while also addressing the politics of victimhood. He does this through a deflationary tactic by setting up false expectations and constant self-contradiction in order to jolt the viewer out of complacency. For example, *Everybody Loves a Winner* opens with a Chagall painting *I and the Village* and while Fishbone is recounting, "There's an old Jewish saying that asks…" several anti-Semitic images flash past. The narrator continues, "When does a hunchback rejoice? When he sees someone with larger hump. You know, that's kind of how I feel about life"; Then there is an image of Woody Allen, then "There's another Jewish saying…" Suddenly, in the same register, a

political comment is embedded through images in quick succession: a Moretti beer label, the Lubavitcher rabbi, an anti-Semitic stereotype again, the IDF beating someone up (two in succession) then Ariel Sharon meeting George Bush and a State of Israel Bonds advertisement while the narrator offers another Jewish saying in Yiddish, translating it into English for the viewer's benefit, segueing to "Back in the old days, scientists used to think the world was flat." The homespun philosophy always inexplicably sinks into the muck (Fishbone's term) of pornography: vomiting people, off-color jokes sometimes repeated, such as "a gorilla walks into a deli and asks for a pastrami sandwich…"[29] Throughout his work of this period (2003-2006) the images and the narration are at odds, creating meanings antipathetic to each other. The *schadenfreude* expressed in the joke "when does a hunchback rejoice?" is undercut by "you know that's how I feel about life". Fishbone's narration is brutal but spoken with a homely familiarity as if he is your friend telling you something you're bound to agree with. It is a persuasive voice.

Each of the films, while having a different thrust, has some common features in the telling. It is striking that the works make a call to being out-of-time, like Treister's "what if what we think now turns out to be as silly in the future as our past seems to us today?" he repeatedly asks in his films. He thereby questions the authority of the contemporary and our place within it.

Part of the importance of this work is the refusal to be tolerant or tolerated. Like the character Ali G created by Sacha Baron Cohen, its seeming imbecilic naivety and offensive material belies a sophisticated critique through the persona it constructs (Garfield 2001). Some examples are the continual and seamless, but knowing, shifts in discursive register

between philosophical musings and pornographic imagery, scientific skepticism and French philosophers, Jewishness and anti-Semitism, or to put it differently, his work registers the shifts between popular culture and canonical academic references.

There is no single subject in these films: as I argue through Treister, the subject is constituted through the viewer's inability to tell what or whom exactly they are looking at. This is a post internet-accelerated subjectivity[30]that finds itself unable to decide on how to be itself or who that might be. It is a different voice from that of Kass which operates through a singular appropriation of Warhol. Each speaks to the way that popular culture has been transformed through the internet and therefore how we, as Jews, might start to see ourselves differently. These works decentre us and constitute us as if through the sheer volume of discursive, internet-derived material presented in the films, which in these works is unassimilable. I would suggest that Fishbone's work from this period is offering us a vision of ourselves as Jews understood through the internet as an ever shifting, ever re-constituting, identity that is not stable nor clear exactly about what kind of Jew one is nor why Jewishness might have any importance at all.

Conclusion

This text looks at three artists who all use popular culture in their work as a form of enquiry into their Jewish identity. The way each of these artists uses popular culture points to how it is possible to speak for their generation, which lexicon is available and how the dialectic between art (as exemplified

by these artists) and culture (that is, their understanding of what Jewishness might mean) is constituted in concrete terms.

In each of these artists' work popular culture is harnessed as a way to deal with a troubled history and to deflate the more usual portentous modes of Jewish artistic expression, such as Judy Chicago's recent work or Shimon Attie's work made in Berlin in the 1990s, to name two prominent examples of nostalgic sentiment that aim to find a Jewish "home" that constitutes the Jewish subject through ethnic insiderism and a sense of victimhood that elevates Jews through a legacy of ongoing trauma. Fishbone, Kass and Triester all posit subjectivity as an ambivalent and ongoing negotiation of self in relation to the world around them. They do this through a humour that disarms, using disjunctions in absurd and awkward combinations that ask questions about what it is to be Jewish now. Whatever they do with history or historical figures, the focus is on contemporaneity, flux and ambiguity through the use of popular culture and personae as ciphers of inauthenticity: to be a Jew is to be a construction of double consciousness, a construction to be lived through and owned nonetheless. Central to these questions is the acknowledgement of the bifurcated position of Jews as both victim and a subject of privilege, as both other and insider. In terms of art, popular culture can be seen as a site of cultural production that contains within it a parallel ambivalence: it profoundly underpins the sense of self of the contemporary subject while at the same time is still considered in some quarters to be a second-class relative of "real art". Ambivalence is key to the paradigm of popular culture that is so central to configurations of Jewish experience and identity.

Suzanne Treister, Deborah Kass and Doug Fishbone assume no moral authority but view the world through the imperfection of the popular culture they appropriate. Kass identifies her Jewishness through probably the most famous outsider whose name is fused with Popular Culture: Andy Warhol. Warhol was rich and powerful but as a gay man from a working-class background he was an outsider to the celebrities of his artistic gaze, whom he created as illusive personae in his work. Through appropriation Kass's

works speaks to the impossibility of reaching a true self, however identifiable it seems and, moreover, celebrates the state of outsiderness that Warhol's success affords. By attempting to travel back to the reality of the Holocaust, and instead finding herself caught up on the set of *Schindler's List*, Treister offers an elegant cipher of the unreachability of the real relating to the Shoah and through this fumbling deflationary misfire -- ending up on the film set rather than in the Shoah itself -- she complicates those tropes of Jewish identity predicated upon absence and victimhood. While Treister is the comedic meddler with the grand narrative of history, and Kass the camouflager of the "self", Fishbone, the youngest of the three, goes even further. Like all these artists, his work could be considered anti-humanist in the way the subject is caught within the contingencies of history, unable to act effectively. But with Fishbone all positions are refused. Instead the films collapse into a mediated mulch of equivalences that constitute an implicit critique of looking back, and eschewing any idea of being Jewish as special or elevated. While Fishbone liberates the Jew from the past he traps us within the smoke and mirrors of mediated imagery where to know oneself is to know nothing: a lesson in the dangers of taking popular culture too seriously. Deflationary tactics in art are a way of deflecting ethnic insiderist tendencies and posing questions about why our identities still matter in the contemporary world.

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[1] A few key texts are Clement Greenberg, 1939, Drucker2006, Adorno, 2001.

[2] Barry Curtis and Claire Padjakowska, 1995

[3] Jack Rosenthal's plays are popular in that they were commissioned and broadcast to a wide audience through the populist medium of television. This does not preclude serious intent. See Garfield 2016 for an analysis of the work of Rosenthal in relation to British Jewish Masculinity. See also Sue Vice (2009) for the definitive work on Rosenthal.

[4] See for example, Rachel Garfield 2016,

[5] After Jacques Lacan

[6] I'm thinking here of artists such as Andy Warhol or Larry Rivers in the US context or Damien Hurst or Tracey Emin in the UK context, who instead of hiding their provenance as working class and infiltrating the Oxbridge set and changing their accents (or the US equivalent), held on to their working class identities. The prevalence of "mockney" also attests to the importance of popular culture and its perceived working-class roots.

[7] Bryan Cheyette) wrote about the bifurcated position of Jews in British culture (Cheyette 1997, 106-126).

[8] He states, for example, that a camera is an archive producing machine., (Enwezor, 2008, 12)

[9] Passing is when a member of a minority group can and does hide their minority status, merging into the majority community, historically this is a term that applied mostly to the black communities. More recently the term has expanded to be used as referring to Jews, gays and other groups.

[10] Lisa Bloom, 2006 writes about Eleanor Antin and the elision of Jewish Identity. I discussed this in relation to Ali G in Rachel Garfield (2001).

[12] Although of course this is more problematic than that. See Boyarin (1994), Azoulay (1997) and Garfield (2001).

[13] Her work does not only consist of "Rosalind Brodsky."

[14] This work is a book, photographs and video that make an archive of all the street names in Germany that pertain to Jews – Judenstrasse, Judengasse, etc.

15 Susanne Treister, "Ghosts of Maresfield Gardens" (also a component, part of the DC ROM "No Other Symptom – Time Travelling with Rosalind Brodsky," 1999). Medium: video; duration: 7:00; date 1998.

[16] *Wissenshaft des Judentums* was a nineteenth-century movement to westernize Jewish culture and belief through rationalist analysis of its tenets and literature.

[17] This assumption that Jews are from Europe is itself an example of racist thinking, or at least of "western" hegemony. Only the Ashkenazi communities are from within Europe. The very large Sephardi community are neither white nor from Europe. Boyarin (1994) also argues this, as does Azoulay (1997).

[18] http://ensemble.va.com.au/tableau/suzy/diary/diary.html

19 Suzanne Treister

Title:"Rosalind Brodsky in her Electronic Time Travelling Costume to rescue her Grandparents from the Holocaust ends up mistakenly on the set of Schindler's List, Krakow, Poland, 1994"

(Also a component part of the CD ROM "No Other Symptoms - Time Travelling with Rosalind Brodsky", 1999)

Medium: Archival giclée print

Dimensions: 70 x 50 cm

Date: 1997

[20]In a similar way to *The Wizard of Oz* being made at the outset of World War II.

[21] If one brackets the gender-bending aspect, as it would be too complex for this text to explore and merits its own text. These paintings are close in thesis to Daniel Boyarin's book on Jewish masculinity, *Unheroic Conduct* as being distinct from Christian-derived masculinity.

22 Deborah Kass, Double Double Yentl (My Elvis). 1993. silkscreen and acrylic on canvas, 182.9 x 365.8 cm (each canvas)

[23] This becomes even more explicit in her series, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Women* (1994-5)

24 Deborah Kass, OY/YO. 2015. painted aluminum,243.8 x 518.2 x 152.4 cm

[25] Interview with Deborah Kass and Mary Anne Staniszweski, June 1998, quoted in Staniszweski .1998, 25

[26] Hal Foster, 2001, 132. In his analysis of Warhol's use of repetition Foster states "the Warhol repetitions not only reproduce traumatic effects; they also produce them." 340
Foster was talking particularly about the silk screens such as *White Burning Car*, While, he argues, the poststructuralists read Warhol as disinvesting meaning from the symbols through reiteration, (and Thomas Crow argues that Warhol is outraged by the "complacent consumption" of America) Foster, through a Lacanian reading, states that the object is both deinvested and reinvested with
meaning.

[27] Interview with Deborah Kass by the author 2001

[28] Guy Debord of the Situationist International was a writer and film maker who developed ideas around the politics of the sign and has been very influential in much art that claims to be political in aim.

29 Doug Fishbone, Megillah Gorilla. 2008. Digital Giclee Print. A2 (59.4 x 42.0 cm): edition 4 plus 1 AP

[30] For key texts on Accelerationist Subjectivity see Shaviro (2010), Noys (2014) or Mackay and Avanessian, (2014).