

Summer 2013

# A Sign Of The Times: Contemporary American Post-Holocaust Imagery And Post-Jewish Identity

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.mhrj-h83s>

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A SIGN OF THE TIMES:  
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POST-HOLOCAUST IMAGERY  
AND POST-JEWISH IDENTITY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Art History and Visual Culture

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Stacy Rebecca Schwartz

August 2013

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

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AND POST-JEWISH IDENTITY

by

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ART AND ART HISTORY

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## ABSTRACT

### A SIGN OF THE TIMES: CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POST-HOLOCAUST IMAGERY AND POST-JEWISH IDENTITY

by Stacy Rebecca Schwartz

The construction of American Jewish identity has historically balanced efforts to reconcile acceptance into majority culture with maintaining traditional Jewish heritage. Expression of Jewish identity in a “diasporic community” has often been anchored in communal rituals and sociopolitical events, especially the Holocaust, uniting an increasingly diverse community. Beginning in the late twentieth century, the figure of the “post-Jew” and post-Jewish identity emerged alongside pluralist multiculturalism as an alternate identity framework recognizing the hybrid character of Jewish American identity as a combination of inherited and selected elements.

This thesis examines the manifestation of post-Jewish identity in artistic responses to the Holocaust as reflections of a distinctly American perspective and discusses the iconographic language of the Holocaust as a *living identity* constantly re-formed and *informed* by individual experience and cultural surroundings. Third and fourth-generation Jewish American artists engage the visual language of the Holocaust by applying emotionally charged imagery in new ways. In so doing, they contemplate their own connection to the images that ground their understanding of the Holocaust. Stylistic and thematic shifts in post-Jewish works thus constitute efforts to navigate inherent tension between historical and experiential identity as well as the broader cultural transference of collective memory within contemporary society.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have seen completion without the guidance, expertise, and patience of my committee members and readers: Dr. Beverly Grindstaff, Dr. Dore Bowen, Dr. Marilyn Wyman and Dr. Anne Simonson. I'd like to extend a specific and heartfelt thank-you to Dr. Grindstaff, who has shown me the meaning of a truly extraordinary mentor.

An art history thesis would be simply words on paper without art to inspire it, and I would therefore like to thank all of the artists who have corresponded with me, allowed me to reproduce their works in print, and created and contributed to the discourse of post-Holocaust art and Jewish identity.

I'd like to thank my wonderful husband, Michael Foxman, who has lovingly supported and encouraged me "bird by bird" to cross the finish line.

I am extremely grateful to my colleagues at Jewish LearningWorks, who have been incredibly accommodating and encouraging during the thesis-writing process, and from whom I have learned a great deal about the dynamics of the Jewish community, specifically in the Bay Area.

Finally, I'd like to dedicate this work to my parents, Les and Beth Schwartz, who have been my loudest cheerleaders, wisest teachers, and truest of friends; and particularly my father, my first and most cherished mentor.

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## INTRODUCTION

The construction of Jewish identity in America has been a consistent effort to reconcile two conflicting desires: to be accepted into mainstream culture and to maintain traditional Jewish values and practices. The tensions inherent in structuring identity within both mainstream American and traditional Jewish cultures have prompted recent examination of contemporary Jewish identity as *post-Jewish*—a hybrid, highly individualized self-image grounded in the multiplicities of contemporary life. Pinpointing the characteristics of a definitive, specifically Jewish identity is challenging within an imagined, diasporic community with a population of increasingly recognized diversity. American Jewish identity has thus often been anchored in, and bolstered by, communal rituals and sociopolitical events—most profoundly, the Holocaust.

American post-Jewish artistic approaches to the Holocaust and the use of Holocaust visual language by American post-Jewish artists can be seen as a *living* identity continually redefined by individual experiences and cultural surroundings. Such developments parallel, and are intertwined with, the evolution of contemporary Jewish American identity. This thesis asserts such stylistic and thematic shifts in post-Jewish works constitute efforts to navigate inherent tensions between historical and experiential identity and to situate the broader cultural transference of collective memory within contemporary society.

Three exhibitions sponsored by American institutions form the core of the present discussion: *Witness and Legacy: Contemporary Art About the Holocaust*, first exhibited at the Minnesota Museum of American Art, 1995; *The New Authentics: Artists of the*

*Post-Jewish Generation*, by the Spertus Museum, Chicago, 2007; and *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art* at The Jewish Museum, New York, 2002. Equally pertinent to the artistic innovation of any individual artist concerning approach to Holocaust-related works is the presentation and reception of these pieces within American culture, whose discourse is prompted by the uniqueness of contemporary American Jewish identity since World War II and the expectations of creating and exhibiting such charged works in a country removed from the actual events. America's relative youth as a country and the overall acceptance of Jews as an ethnic group in the United States since its inception, in comparison to European countries, places such artists' works and their reception by the public, scholars, and other institutions within a unique context.

The term "post-Jewish" primarily derives from intellectual historian David Hollinger's concept of *postethnicity*. Rejecting strict definitions of the prefix "post" as the renouncement of a preceding movement in favor of a new one, postethnicity, like post-Jewishness, frames identity in "choice-maximizing ideals" that balance connections to natal communities with the encouragement of voluntary affiliations and the development of multifaceted identities.<sup>1</sup> Within the art world, a number of recent exhibitions have explored and encouraged a re-envisioning of the "characteristics" of Jewish identity and, by association, Jewish artwork. These include the Spertus Museum's *The New Authentics* as well as the Jewish Museum, New York's photography exhibition, *The Jewish Identity Project*. Works by artists such as Lilah Freedland

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<sup>1</sup> David Hollinger, "Communitarian and Dispersionist Approaches to American Jewish History in an Increasingly Post-Jewish Era," *American Jewish History* 95, no. 1 (March 2009): 23, accessed October 29, 2012, DOI: 10.1353/ajh.0.0119.

(Figure 1) and Dawoud Bey profile the postmodern, post-Jew as a young American of many ethnic and cultural combinations who represents a multitude of opinions and experiences, and who voluntarily associates himself or herself with the Jewish community.



Figure 1. Lilah Freedland, *dream as though you'll live forever, live as though you'll die today*, 1993. C-print, 24 x 20 in. Reprinted with permission from the artist.

*The New Authentics* curator Staci Boris cites “an apparent easing of the predicament of minority artists who have long been pressured—implicitly or explicitly—to work within certain thematic or stylistic parameters in order to be welcomed by the mainstream art world.”<sup>2</sup> While post-Jewish artists value the similitude of Jewish identity, ideally they also emphasize the diversity of that identity as having equal, if not greater value.

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<sup>2</sup> Staci Boris, *The New Authentics: Artists of the Post-Jewish Generation* (Chicago: Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies, 2007), 20.

Yet, recognizing the individual multiplicity of post-Jewish identity begs the question of how to define the collective Jewish community. Harvard professor Shaye Cohen states, “Whether the group in fact shares a common and unique origin does not much matter; what matters only is that the members believe that the group shares such an origin in a specific place at a specific moment.”<sup>3</sup> Though the Jewish community continues to assert the importance and centrality of Holocaust remembrance in contemporary Jewish identity, the question remains as to how, and how much, such a historical event should anchor that identity.

Along with personal identity, young Jewish American artists seeking connection with the Holocaust must answer to social expectations concerning “appropriate” treatment of the subject. American culture is often accused of simplifying, glamorizing, trivializing, even exploiting the Holocaust. While post-Jewish identity is perhaps broadening mainstream acceptance of cultural hybridism, post-Jewish artists continue to face opposition regarding acceptance of Holocaust-related works that fall outside the limitations of a tangle of confusing and often arbitrary social standards. The paradox of expecting complete factual accuracy in the narrative memory of the Holocaust and recognizing the incapability of traditional categories of conceptualization and representation to “properly” recount the events is paralytic to sincere artistic expression.

As the line of reasoning herein is rooted in the development of visual language over time through the appropriation of Holocaust imagery, it is fitting to examine these

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Chevlowe, “Photography and the Boundaries of Community: Framing Jewishness,” in *The Jewish Identity Project: New American Photography*, by Susan Chevlowe (New Haven: The Jewish Museum, New York and Yale University Press, 2005), 19.

artists and exhibitions through semiotic theory, in particular the works of Charles Sanders Peirce. Building upon the semiotic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure, Peirce stresses the importance of temporal context in the reading of signs. Signs may acquire new associations at any point due to a host of factors, some of which include geography, collective and/or personal experience, and socio-cultural surroundings at a given moment in time. Peirce differentiates between each individual act of signification and the *cumulative* definition of the sign, with the act of interpretation in each signification process involving referencing other signs, any internalized cultural “rules” of visual language, and accrued knowledge. Therefore, an accumulative definition of a specific sign is created each time that sign is decoded.

Approaching the code of Holocaust signs through Peirce’s principles further compounds the meanings of its imagery. The forms of many of these images existed before the Holocaust; many others, such as Margaret Bourke-White’s photographs of liberated concentration camps, are consistently re-presented alongside them—the tension and confusion inherent in their now-inevitable connectedness with this specific event. As there was no pre-existing “code” or set of imagery with which to logically comprehend and communicate such a catastrophe, even works by survivors illustrate the development of a thoroughly postmodern and complex system of Holocaust signs in which a very basic image, such as a set of train tracks, may present many meanings at once. Anne D’Alleva succinctly summarizes this concept through Roland Barthes’ seminal work, “The Death of the Author:” “The author [artist] does not imbue a work with organic unity, a ‘package

deal' with all the tools to understand the work; rather, the work of art 'is an artifact that brings together any number of codes available in the artist's culture.'<sup>4</sup>

This limited collection of visual symbols has become the basis for most contemporary Holocaust communication. Marianne Hirsch stated that "in spite of the vast archive of images (we have) inherited, a small number of specific images, or kinds of images, have shaped our conception of the event and its transmission."<sup>5</sup> A code of iconography has thus developed comprised of oral, written, and visual symbols, and built upon late and post-War illustrated newspapers, video reels, and documentary photographs, that has informed American collective understanding of the Holocaust since knowledge of the National Socialist "Final Solution" reached the United States. These sources, yielding very specific charged images, were later disseminated throughout the public sphere through cultural outlets such as film, TV, literature, and the visual arts.

Echoing Theodor Adorno's concerns regarding the limitations of language after the Holocaust, presenting and furthering accurate and respectful artistic accounts is often a critical concern. As Leiden University Professor Ernst van Alphen stated,

Unlike other art that can claim autonomy or self-reflexivity, Holocaust art tends to be unreflectively reduced to how it can promote education and remembrance. Art, teaching, and remembrance are thus collapsed without any sustained debate about the bond between these three cultural activities.<sup>6</sup>

Saul Friedlander and others have demonstrated the difficulty of historicizing such a catastrophic event within the realm of visual and language arts, of employing the

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<sup>4</sup> Anne D'Alleva, *Methods and Theories of Art History* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2005), 28.

<sup>5</sup> Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29:1 (Spring 2008): 116, accessed July 27, 2012, doi: 10.1215/03335372-2007-019.

<sup>6</sup> Ernst van Alphen, *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 185.

limited array of signs human visual and verbal communication offers, and how the translation of this past into contemporary media culture causes great controversy with regard to recording, expressing, and interpreting post-Holocaust works meant for public consumption.

American artists in the 1950s and 1960s struggled with how to represent the Holocaust, often choosing abstraction (for instance, in the works of Abstract Expressionists such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman) or avoiding the subject altogether. Within the 1970s-1990s, however, utilization of the pictorial language of Holocaust-related art greatly expanded through circulation in the mass media industry, and was strengthened by the production of works by Holocaust survivors. Recent scholarship pertaining to post-Holocaust art outlines the development of its imagery *generationally*, beginning with survivors, not only in *linear* time but with respect to the physical and temporal distance of the artist from direct experience. Due to their relationship to the event, each generation approaches the subject from a unique but intertwined perspective. A notable contribution to this framework is the *Witness and Legacy* exhibition, curated by Stephen C. Feinstein, featuring works produced by American artists in the last thirty years in three distinct generational groups: Holocaust survivors, children of survivors, and artists with no direct connection to the events.

The generational approach pairs well with the study of the formation of collective memory, whether temporally over generations, across geographic boundaries, within specific identity groups, or optimally, a combination of all aforementioned factors. From the foundational premises on collective memory by Maurice Halbwachs to more recent



scholarship by Andreas Huyssen and others, such viewpoints emphasize the complexities of postethnic culture, a symbiosis between the formation of collective and personal memory and the structuring of group and individual identity. A number of authors have specifically addressed the construction of Holocaust memory in American society, among them Harold Rosenberg, Clement Greenberg, James E. Young, Hilene Flanzbaum, Peter Novick, and Oren Baruch Stier. The dialogue between past and present, the reconciling of personal experiences and knowledge with cultural understandings and expectations, and the plurality of postethnicity contribute to a highly individualized yet deeply social framework for identity. Huyssen states that “time and space as fundamentally contingent categories of historically rooted perception are always bound up with each other in complex ways, and the intensity of border-crossing memory discourses that characterizes so much of contemporary culture in so many different parts of the world today proves the point.”<sup>7</sup>

The “first generation,” a cohort comprised of survivors, could include those such as Alice Lok Cahana and Netty Schwartz Vanderpol, who experienced the Holocaust as it unfolded. Survivors possess memories and experiences later generations of artists can comprehend only indirectly and often use art as a channel through which to process trauma. Their works are often characterized by biographical and documentary evidence, as well as already-iconic Holocaust imagery that functions as a visual summation of their memories. Survivor artists’ works typically represent specific thoughts and experiences.

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<sup>7</sup> Andreas Huyssen, “Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 21, accessed October 29, 2012, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/pc/summary/v012/12.1huyssen.html>.

Yet in reality, the impossibility of truncating and assigning memory to a single image, or series of images, complicates the integration of singular testimony into collective memory.

The “second generation,” a cohort comprised of children or relatives of victims, often carries the burden of memory of their parents’ experiences, but with a temporal and emotional distance. The Holocaust is embedded into their identity. They feel a profound sense of responsibility to act as a link between past and future, to bear witness to the Holocaust on behalf of their parents, to negotiate between the trauma of their parents’ lives and the present world in which they find themselves, and to be responsible for ethnic and generational continuity.

Aesthetically, second generation artists often draw from the visual devices of survivor artists, introducing further layers of meaning as they attempt to translate the received past into the present. Such artists overtly acknowledge that while they have very strong emotions regarding the Holocaust, what they are ultimately experiencing and creating is not memory itself, but what Marianne Hirsch calls *postmemory*. In Hirsch's description, “The scholarly and artistic work of these descendants also makes clear that even the most intimate familial knowledge of the past is mediated by broadly available public images and narratives.”<sup>8</sup>

Artist Art Spiegelman directly addresses the idea of postmemory in describing his noted graphic novel *Maus*, a retelling of his parents’ survival story:

Although I set about...to do a history of sorts, I’m all too aware that ultimately what I’m creating is realistic fiction. The experiences my father actually went

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<sup>8</sup> Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” 112.

through [are not exactly the same as] what he's able to remember and what he's able to articulate of these experiences. Then there's what I'm able to understand of what he articulated, and what I'm able to put down on paper. And then of course there's what the reader can make of that...<sup>9</sup>

Post-Jewish American artists, members of the third and fourth generations, continue to employ and build upon the lexicon of Holocaust iconography, engaging the Holocaust from a position grounded in postmodern awareness. In prior works, survivors and second-generation American Jewish artists explored the connotations of Holocaust imagery both as specific objects connected to direct memories of the Holocaust and as mental pathways to the familiar and understood. Post-Jewish representations of the Holocaust are situated firmly in the present, simultaneously understood through the lens of personal identification with the subject and immersed in the collective of Holocaust memorial culture. As members of a generation whose primary knowledge of the Holocaust is built effectively on collective rather than direct memory, processing the Holocaust necessarily involves not eradicating the past, but reframing the past within the present. Their geographic and temporal distance from the events, the limited number of extant survivors, and the attitudes of society and media, among other factors, affect how the Holocaust has been transferred to the current generation as both memory and idea.

Many works from such artists are deliberately provocative. The familiar imagery in these works is imbued with very strong emotional connotations whose discomfiting connections replicate the artists' own experiences with inherited memory. Works produced by post-Jewish artists indicate the desire for a significant shift in the

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<sup>9</sup> Art Spiegelman, "Art Spiegelman," *Oral History Journal* (1987), quoted in Stephen C. Feinstein, ed., *Witness and Legacy: Contemporary Art About the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company and Minnesota Museum of American Art, 1995), 38.

foundations of contemporary Jewish identity [e.g.] away from the Holocaust as the epitomic defining factor and connector, with similarly broadened understandings of Holocaust-related art. In producing works attuned to the complexities of Jewish identity and the role such a seminal event plays, post-Jewish artists contemplate their own connection to the images that ground their post-Jewish understanding of the Holocaust. However, such artists see the importance of recognizing and incorporating the past rather than breaking with it. Though a Holocaust survivor himself, Saul Friedlander pertinently expressed the potential benefits of exploring emotions and connections to the Holocaust regardless of the discomfort of such endeavors: “For my generation, partaking at one and the same time in the memory and the present perceptions of this past may create an unsettling dissonance; it may, however, also nurture insights that would otherwise be inaccessible.”<sup>10</sup>

The chapters that follow will discuss the connections between American Jewish identity and the Holocaust as expressed through visual media and illustrate the intimately intertwined and persistently developing nature of the Holocaust visual language. Chapter I will establish a basic foundation of Holocaust-related art in America since the onset of World War II, highlighting some of the major artists, themes and imagery within their contemporary socio-political milieu. Chapter II delves more deeply into the theoretical construction of symbolic language through semiotic theory, introduces the generational approach to post-Holocaust art, and applies semiotic analysis to works of art by first and second generation artists in the *Witness and Legacy* exhibition. Chapter III continues this

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<sup>10</sup> Saul Friedlander, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: Volume 1: The Years of Persecution 1933-1939* (London: Orion Books Ltd, 1998), 1.

examination into the third and fourth generations, the post-Jewish artists, with works from *The New Authentics* and *Mirroring Evil*, linking the construction of memory and the social factors of contemporary Jewish American identity with the manner in which these artists visually express their relationship with the Holocaust.

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Diffusion of Memory—A Piecework History of Holocaust Art In the United States

Defining a framework for Holocaust art is fraught with debate. Establishing the identity of the “Jewish” artist or labeling a work of art as the product of Jewish culture has become increasingly difficult in the twentieth and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, as the canon of Jewish art is often based in thematic or stylistic affinities associated with traditional Judaism. Many American Jews have attempted to strike a lifestyle balance between their heritage and the assimilation of the majority culture. Narrating the history of Holocaust art compounds this identity “crisis” with issues unique to portraying an event of such catastrophic proportions, particularly with regard to whom should be allowed to depict the Holocaust, what, if any, is the appropriate subject matter, and how the artist and the public should interact with such a work. Both Jewish and non-Jewish artists have addressed the Holocaust in their works either purposefully or subconsciously, and approaches to the subject are as varied, and sometimes controversial, as the opinions of their validity. Who should decide which works to include in the canon and which to leave out? Indeed, who decides the parameters of the canonical?

While limiting the discussion of Holocaust art history to artists working in the United States might appear to overlook the wealth of informative work produced elsewhere, it is the unique development of American Jewish imagery and identity that will be addressed in this thesis. The unique environment of American society into which the Holocaust has been integrated chiefly by the inheritance of Holocaust experiences

rather than firsthand exposure creates a fascinating and predominantly unexplored field of study. Despite the fact that the Holocaust has become a major topic of discussion both in mainstream American culture and within the art world, reference to such works in standard survey books, even Jewish art surveys, is often rare or understated. Survey volumes typically used in art history courses may mention an artist's identification as Jewish and a select few even present works with the Holocaust as subject; but rarely do such historiographic texts acknowledge on more than a perfunctory level the ongoing impact of the Holocaust in American experience. Jewish art survey books are often only modestly more informative, outlining European and Israeli artists, but typically giving very little attention to their American counterparts.

Two exceptions to this rule, and the main volumes from which the works in this chapter are drawn, are survey books by art historians Ziva Amishai-Maisels, the Alice and Edward G. Winant Chair for Art History at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Israel, and Matthew Baigell, professor emeritus at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey.<sup>11</sup> Amishai-Maisels' *Depiction and Interpretation: The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts* (1993) catalogs extensively the history of Holocaust art (primarily through the 1950s) across geographical and temporal boundaries. She insightfully organizes works thematically and symbolically, connecting artists through subject matter while also comparing and contrasting them through their varied experiences as Jewish artists. Baigell, who has penned a number of books on Jewish American art and identity,

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<sup>11</sup> While not specifically a volume of Holocaust-related works, Samantha Baskind's *Encyclopedia of Jewish American Artists: Artists of the American Mosaic* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007) is a valuable resource and thoroughly researched overview of Jewish American artists, including a number of artists referenced in this thesis.

more broadly covers the 1930s forward in *Jewish-American Artists and the Holocaust* (1997), focusing particularly on artistic responses in recent decades to avoid overlapping the material in Avishai-Maisels' extremely thorough tome. The crux of the historical overview that follows will be a combination of the symbolic focus of Maisels with Baigell's historical context. It should be clarified that while post-Holocaust "art" could include memorials, film, theater, and so on, this project will focus mostly on painting, sculpture, and mixed media works. Works typically produced through collaboration (i.e. films or theatrical performances) and/or requiring support of the public to create (such as memorials or even museums), while subject to similar (and potentially more rigid) social expectations as other Holocaust-related works, engender wider discussion than there is space for here. Moreover, the personal immediacy of individually-created works best illustrates the nuances of meaning in Holocaust imagery.

The foundation of Holocaust art in America is based, aptly, during the years of Nazi occupation in Europe in the 1930s to mid-1940s. Prior to this period, in the 1880s to the 1920s, European Jews immigrated to the United States to escape violent pogroms following the assassination of Czar Alexander II of Russia.<sup>12</sup> Seeking acceptance and safety, many of these Jews desired assimilation into the majority culture and to claim American identity over their traditional Jewish background. By the 1930s the political climate in which American Jews found themselves contributed greatly to their artistic responses to the growing conflict in Europe. The desire for assimilation was far too often met with the myriad forms of American anti-Semitism, much of which was a result of

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<sup>12</sup> Matthew Baigell, *Jewish Art in America: An Introduction* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 6.



persisting stereotypes about Jews. American Jews were often ascribed blame for the Great Depression, still fresh in the minds of the American people, due to the waves of Jewish immigration that took place just before and after the stock market crash, the subsequent fear that Americans would lose their jobs to such immigrants, and the fact that many American Jews were bankers.<sup>13</sup> For American Jews, fear of potential American fascism peaked as many prominent individuals and companies such as IBM and Ford were revealed to have links to the Nazi administration. Additionally, rather than focusing on the specific fate of the European Jewish population the American government under Franklin D. Roosevelt focused its efforts primarily on the overtly military impact of the war at large, specifically the conflict with Japan and inhibiting the overtaking of the European continent by Adolf Hitler. Many Jews thus felt safer aligning themselves with larger socio-political groups, speaking out as “anti-German” as opposed to “pro-Jewish.”<sup>14</sup>

Within the art world, non-Jewish critics such as Thomas Craven wrote harsh and often unmerited critiques of work emphasizing the “otherness” of Jewish immigrants; Jewish artists, in turn, were wary of expressing their concerns about their European counterparts in any obvious fashion for fear of losing public support.<sup>15</sup> In this social climate, few American Jewish artists during the period of National Socialism were outspoken in their protests against German anti-Semitism, often employing symbolic devices such as archetypal figures or biblical narratives that could go undetected by a

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<sup>13</sup> Marilyn Wyman, Jewish Art class notes (San Jose State University, San Jose, CA, Fall 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Baigell, *Jewish-American Artists and the Holocaust* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 15.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

general audience but were immediately translatable to the Jewish viewer. As many wartime Jewish artistic reactions to World War II were from those who had recently immigrated to the United States to escape the building violence, such oppressive conditions clearly impacted the artistic choices of these artists.

Some Jewish artists expressed their concerns regarding the war through portrayals of immigration and refugees. Increased immigration laws in the United States from the 1910s–1930s after World War I and the Great Depression made escaping to the United States from Eastern Europe a difficult and potentially perilous process. Obstacles to immigration were exacerbated by increasingly tightening immigration laws caused by work shortages after the Great Depression, American anti-Semitism, and other factors, exemplified by the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 limiting immigration quotas to roughly two percent of the population of the foreign-born of each nationality. The well-documented account of the SS *St. Louis*—a passenger ship carrying over 900 Jewish refugees from Germany refused anchor in Cuba, and ultimately returned to Europe where over half of the passengers were killed by the Nazis—reflects the extreme consequences of maintaining such immigration laws.<sup>16</sup> Artists such as Marc Chagall and Jacques Lipchitz managed to reach the states via Varian Fry, an agent of the Emergency Rescue Committee operating out of France, on the basis of their notoriety even after the Nuremberg Laws (passed in Germany in 1935) effectively closed the door on Jewish

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<sup>16</sup>For an overview of American immigration laws in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and their affect on Jews specifically, see Diane L. Linden, "Ben Shahn, the Four Freedoms, And the SS *St. Louis*," *American Jewish History* 86.4 (December 1998): under section "Immigration: Fighting Restrictive Quotas," accessed May 26, 2013, *Literature Resource Center, American Jewish Historical Society*. [www.ajhs.org](http://www.ajhs.org).

escape from the increasing legislative restrictions that would become the Holocaust.<sup>17</sup>

However, many of these artists grappled with feelings of guilt at leaving family and fellow Jews to suffer, of anger at the American government for halting immigration, and fear of American anti-Jewish sentiment.

One of the most prominent and enduring artists to address the complex emotions of flight was Ben Shahn (1898-1969), a Lithuanian-born social realist painter who immigrated to the U.S. in 1906. Shahn created a series of murals for a number of public buildings in the late-1930s and early 1940s addressing political events in Europe through depictions of Jewish immigration and American foreign policy decisions. In 1937 he painted a mural in the community center of the Jersey Homesteads agro-industrial cooperative settlement (now the small town of Roosevelt, New Jersey), a live/work community established specifically for Jewish garment workers during Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal overhauls.<sup>18</sup> The mural (Figure 2), which traces the immigration of European Jewish garment workers in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, documents their struggle to balance traditional Jewish identity and American acceptance.

Amid scenes depicting passage through Ellis Island and the subsequent transformation of Jewish quality of life from American ghettos and sweatshops to rural towns are two references to German anti-Semitism: a German soldier holding a sign reading (in German): "GERMANS, DEFEND YOURSELVES: DON'T BUY FROM

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<sup>17</sup> Varian Fry, *Surrender on Demand* (Boulder: Johnson Books, 1997), xiii.

<sup>18</sup> "History of Roosevelt, New Jersey," *Rutgers University Libraries*, accessed June 13, 2012, <http://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/rul/libs/scua/roosevelt/rstory.shtml>.

JEWS”]; and, to the left of the figure, a note pasted over a sign for a Dr. I. Koch stating, “ATTENTION JEWS: VISIT FORBIDDEN.”<sup>19</sup>



Figure 2. Ben Shahn, *Jersey Homesteads Mural*, 1936-1937. 12 x 45 ft. Art © Estate of Ben Shahn/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Aware that such exclusionary incidents occurred in Europe through regular reports in the American press (by 1937),<sup>20</sup> Shahn was clearly concerned as to the relative safety of the United States and the questionable decisions of its government. A number of Shahn’s other works in this period, including his mural *The Four Freedoms*, installed in the Woodhaven Post Office Branch in Queens, New York in 1941, express through symbolism Shahn’s outrage at the government’s inaction and indifference to the fate of immigrants. *The Four Freedoms’* design is a single image encapsulating four of the five freedoms granted in the First Amendment of the United States constitution: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, the right to form an assembly, and the right to petition the government. In *Jersey Homesteads* and *The Four Freedoms*, as in much wartime American Jewish art, Shahn cloaks strong political statements in imagery familiar and relatable to the American public. Both murals also convey the disappointment and fear many immigrants, like Shahn himself, were faced with upon coming to America with

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<sup>19</sup> Baigell *Jewish-American Artists and the Holocaust*, 9.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

hopes of a safer, more prosperous life, only to be confronted with the possibility of persecution and hardship.

Other prominent artists employed the refugee motif in works produced during the war years, but within an outwardly conventional pictorial context presenting encoded subjects decipherable mainly by fellow Jews. These works hearkened back to those such as Samuel Hirszenberg's *Exile (Golus)* (1904) (Figure 3), in which Eastern European Jews in conservative dress are depicted fleeing from pogroms.



Figure 3. Samuel Hirszenberg, *Exile (Golus)*, 1904. Image sourced from <http://www.eilatgordinlevitan.com>. Current location unknown.

The figures are a prototypical portrayal of later Jewish refugees: men with long beards wearing *ushanki* (Russian fur caps), often carrying bundles, and women with head kerchiefs and long skirts, sometimes carrying children.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ziva Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation: The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1993), 20.

Such figures, particularly those of men, invoke the stereotype of the “Wandering Jew,” a symbolic embodiment of the diasporic condition of Jewish life based in a medieval story of a Jew who mocked Jesus and was condemned to wander Earth for eternity.<sup>22</sup> While portrayals of the Wandering Jew have regularly been anti-Semitic, in Jewish works such figures convey the range of emotions associated with forcible rejection from one’s own nation: defiance, pride, vulnerability, and exhaustion. While Shahn’s immigrants in the *Jersey Homesteads* mural wear similar garb, the surrounding scenes place them within a contemporary context; in other pieces by artists such as Marc Chagall (1887-1985), William Gropper (1897-1977) and, more abstractly, Jacques Lipchitz (1891-1973)<sup>23</sup> the time and space in which the refugees travel is ambiguous.

Old and New Testament biblical imagery was used by many wartime Jewish American artists, presenting past Jewish suffering as a metaphor for, or prefiguration of, present conditions. Biblical themes, meant to pit good versus evil and hero against villain, as well as to illustrate the trials of man by god, gave physical form to the confusion, anger, and fear of Jewish artists watching the Holocaust unfold. Use of these themes also allowed artists to reach an audience outside the Jewish community. One of the most oft-used themes, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, was employed by Chagall in a number of paintings including *Yellow Crucifixion* (1942) (Figure 4).

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<sup>22</sup> Samantha Baskind and Larry Silver. *Jewish Art: A Modern History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 241.

<sup>23</sup> See in particular Lipchitz’s sculptures from 1941-1942, such as *Arrival* (1941), *The Exile’s Path* (1941), and *The Pilgrim* (1942). These works catalogue Lipchitz’s harrowing escape from Europe and the trials of adjusting to American life as a virtually penniless foreign Jew.



Figure 4. Marc Chagall, *La Crucifixion en jaune* (*Yellow Crucifixion*), 1942. Oil on canvas, 55 1/8 x 39 3/4 in. Image © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

Here, as in Chagall's other works of the same theme, Christ is pictured on the cross wearing *tefillin*, an instrument of Jewish prayer, overlapped on his right arm by an open Torah scroll, his eyes cast down to the chaos of burning homes and fleeing refugees. A similar, earlier work of 1938, *White Crucifixion*, also depicts Christ on the cross with a *tallit* wrapped around his waist and an inscription in Hebrew above his head reading "King of the Jews."<sup>24</sup> In this image, Christ is again surrounded by Jewish refugees attempting escape as Nazi soldiers set fire to homes and synagogues. Christ's original

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<sup>24</sup> Baskind and Silver, *Jewish Art: A Modern History*, 164.

identification as a Jew and martyr serve to remind viewers, whether Jewish or Christian, that they are connected to the victims, while the inclusion of specific Holocaust-related motifs places such pictures in context with contemporary issues.

Other biblical accounts, such as the sacrifice of Isaac, the trials of Job, and the battle of David and Goliath, as well as mythological stories (particularly that of Moloch, an Ammonite god to whom children were burned in sacrifice) acted as metaphors for the cataclysmic events and connected distant past to present.<sup>25</sup> The use of well-known biblical and mythical allegories to represent the Holocaust continued in American (as well as European) Jewish works after the liberation of the camps and acted as both a channel for expressing emotion at extreme events and as a mechanism for keeping distance from realistic portrayals of the Holocaust.

Following the end of the war and liberation of the concentration camps in 1945, images and stories of the atrocities of National Socialism flooded U.S. media outlets. War reporters broadcast from within the camps and official military evidentiary photographs, as well as searing images taken by reporters such as Margaret Bourke-White, documented the camps and their victims in a way previously prohibited by Nazi camp officers, who had often gone to great lengths to disguise the operations of the camps from foreign journalists. The shock felt by the American public in viewing the devastation of Europe's Jews, particularly the Jewish community, was palpable. For Jewish artists, the futility they encountered in fathoming the Holocaust increased upon

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<sup>25</sup> Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation*, 162.



seeing the reality of the Nazi plan and in knowing many of the articles previously printed in American newspapers were not only true, but often grossly understated.

How, as philosopher Theodor Adorno would posit in his landmark essay, can there be “poetry after Auschwitz?”<sup>26</sup> Less abstractly, how does society conceptualize the inconceivable and seek to capture in words or images that which in its enormity eludes adequate representation? Adorno’s inquiry questions not *whether* art after the Holocaust can be created, but rather *how* to represent, and to use representations of, the difficult subject of the Holocaust. Baigell reaffirmed Adorno’s concerns when describing the difficulty of communicating about the Holocaust through existing verbal and visual devices, writing that “the break in the logical development in Western history was too vast to incorporate into one’s thoughts.”<sup>27</sup> The root problem, therefore, is that of adequate representation even at the level of personal comprehension, combined with the limitations of current visual representation.

Though philosophical treatises concerning World War II by scholars such as Adorno and Jacques Derrida would not be written until the 1960s, their theories of an irreparable rupture of history and society and the end of social progress, reason and egalitarianism so important to Enlightenment thinking are reflected in Holocaust-related works of the late 1940s and 1950s. This is particularly true when examining the works of the Abstract Expressionists, a prominent group of post-war American artists active in New York that notably include Mark Rothko (1903-1970), Barnett Newman (1905-

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<sup>26</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms: Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967), 34.

<sup>27</sup> Baigell, *Jewish-American Artists and the Holocaust*, 19.

1970), and Adolph Gottlieb (1903-1974). Though the Abstract Expressionists cannot be grouped under one cohesive formal style, each used abstraction to varying degrees to convey deep emotion through space, line and color. When addressing the Holocaust, their works frequently reveal a struggle between reconciling the recent past and searching for a foothold in the unknowable future. The Abstract Expressionists, according to Amishai-Maisels, billed their work as opposing the use of art for political purposes because of the “failure of such art to effect changes during the 1930s.”<sup>28</sup> This disillusionment with art’s power to influence government actions, coupled with the continued desire of Jewish American artists to gain acceptance into mainstream society, would therefore seemingly reinforce the idea that Expressionist art did not approach the Holocaust. However, to these artists abstraction seemed the only appropriate channel through which to express the Holocaust in art after viewing the images of Jewish devastation in Eastern Europe. As the majority of these artists were either born in America or spent their adult lives in the States, their connection to the Holocaust was geographically removed.

As with Chagall, Lipchitz and others, Mark Rothko often painted semi-abstract biblical and mythological themes during the war years,<sup>29</sup> utilizing elongated figures, or, conversely, body parts that appeared truncated and situated next to or on top of one another. Rothko’s paintings became increasingly abstracted and emptied of clearly

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<sup>28</sup> Avishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation*, 262.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 264-265. See Rothko’s *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia* (1942) and *Antigone* (ca. 1938-1941) for examples of his mythological work; his *Crucifixion* (ca. 1933-1935), *Gethsemane* (1944), *Entombment I* and *Entombment II* (1946) for some of his works employing Christian symbolism. His decision to layer body parts or figures atop one another suggests that these works are about more than just Christ himself as one martyr, but represent many martyrs of different ages, hearkening back to Chagall’s use of the crucifixion as a symbol for the victims of the Holocaust.

defined figures beginning in 1946 and continuing into the 1950s, until his canvases came to consist solely of layers of frayed rectangles of color. This stylistic change was sparked by Rothko's decision to discontinue using mutilated figures in his works after seeing photographic records of the Holocaust. Feeling he would be committing a kind of sacrilege by rendering such horrific truths artistically, Rothko began to use color and shape to "act freely to represent a drama which could not be enacted realistically."<sup>30</sup> In other words, the artist came to express human emotion and create a *mood* rather than a specific sentiment. From Rothko's *Untitled* of 1948 (Figure 5), with its free-form shapes of red, black, and yellow to his *Untitled* (1959) of layered, jagged-edged squares in shades of red, his post-war works reveal a conflicting emotional state—a desire to cope with the Holocaust, but also frustration from attempting to describe it and evoking only silent, raw emotion.



Figure 5. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1948. Oil on canvas, 77 5/8 x 41 3/4 in. © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

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<sup>30</sup> Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation*, 266.

The ambiguities in both subject matter and title allude to a common feeling of inability and, perhaps, unwillingness, to describe the Holocaust. Of his decision to paint abstractly rather than figuratively, Rothko said:

I belong to a generation that was preoccupied with the human figure and I studied it. It was with the most reluctance that I found that it did not meet my needs. Whoever used it mutilated it. No one could paint the figure as it was and feel that he could produce something that could express the world. I refuse to mutilate and had to find another way of expression. I used mythology for a while, substituting various creatures who were able to make intense gestures without embarrassment. I began to use morphological forms in order to paint gestures that I could not make people do. But this was unsatisfactory.

My current pictures are involved with the *scale* of human feelings the human drama, as much of it as I can express.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, Barnett Newman created abstract and ambiguous works based in biblical concepts outlined in sixteenth-century cabalist Rabbi Isaac Luria's explanation of the creation of the world. Many of Newman's paintings, particularly those in his *Onement* series of the late 1940s-early 1950s,<sup>32</sup> utilize vertical stripes set against a colored background to represent the ray of light released by God to set the process of creation in motion, according to Rabbi Luria's writings.<sup>33</sup> The stripe, or "zip" as Newman called it, recalled both the birth of creation and the first human form. The titles for Newman's other zip paintings, with names such as *The Covenant* (1949) and *Joshua* (1950), were intended to guide the viewer in interpreting the works, though the

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<sup>31</sup> Mark Rothko, "Address to Pratt Institute, 1958," in *Writings on Art*, ed. Miguel Lopez-Remiro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 126.

<sup>32</sup> For an image of Newman's *Onement I* (1948), see the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, [http://www.moma.org/collection/browse\\_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A4285IA%3AAR%3AE%3A1&page\\_number=6&template\\_id=1&sort\\_order=1](http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A4285IA%3AAR%3AE%3A1&page_number=6&template_id=1&sort_order=1).

<sup>33</sup> Baigell, *Jewish-American Artists and the Holocaust*, 29.

symbolism would in reality be decipherable only to those with a working knowledge of the Bible equal to Newman's.

Baigell and others argue that while Newman's works do not expressly address the Holocaust, his zip paintings express his desire to figuratively re-create the world during a period of Jewish trauma and national revival upon the establishment of Israel in 1948.<sup>34</sup> The paintings reveal Newman's internal struggle with spirituality and society post-Holocaust; as Newman states, "Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or life, we are making [them] out of ourselves, out of our feelings."<sup>35</sup> Newman asserts the power of humanity (in particular, artists) to engage, like God, in creating something from nothingness, essentially placing the strength of God (whom, to many Jews, had not intervened when the Holocaust occurred) in the hands of man. The relatively simple composition of the zip paintings invokes a spirit of meditation and self-reflection, the striking zip lines against the background a visual and mental "disruption"—the interruption of the status quo that is both jarring and potentially enlightening.

Other artists depicted the devastation and perseverance of the Jewish people in a more figural manner. Beginning in the early 1940s with works such as Hyman Bloom's *Synagogue* series (1939-1940) and more prevalent after the war, Jewish artists such as William Gropper (1897-1977) and Ben-Zion (1897-1987) depicted Jews wrapped in *tallit* or *tefillin* praying or gesturing. Particularly with Bloom's works, the image of the praying Jew functions as an appeal to God to help the victims during the Holocaust as well as an expression of Jewish identity, and the general tone conveyed through his

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<sup>34</sup> Baigell, *Jewish-American Artists and the Holocaust*, 30.

<sup>35</sup> Barnett Newman, as quoted in Baigell, *Jewish-American Artists and the Holocaust*, 30.

Expressionistic brushstrokes and impassioned figures is one of deep spirituality and determination. Bloom's treatment of his Jewish figures post-war reflects the same emotional devastation expressed by his colleagues Ben-Zion and Gropper. His paintings of rabbis with *Torot*, in which elderly, hunched Jewish men are rendered in tones of gray aside bright colors, conveys a sickness, the extreme tiredness of the Jewish people after such an ordeal. Ben-Zion, too, turned to patriarchal figures in his series *De Profundis*, exhibited in 1946, stating his belief that these figures were the backbone of the Jewish nation and symbols of European Jewish courage in the face of anti-Semitism.<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, a series of paintings executed by Gropper after a visit to Poland in 1947 features portraits of skeletal rabbis in *tallit* with arms raised; whether in protest to God or in defiance of destruction is unclear (Figure 6). The overarching theme of these works is the continuation of communal memory and spirituality, however damaged, as well as a common symbol through which to express grief. Gropper's figure expresses several emotions— pain, grief, exhaustion, frustration, perseverance— and compels the viewer, as well, to question the plight and the future of the Jewish people.

While it has been previously stated that direct references to the Holocaust in art were mostly avoided in the years following the war, there were exceptions. Harold Paris and Leon Golub, both of whom had enlisted in the army and were stationed in Europe,<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Baigell, *Jewish-American Artists and the Holocaust*, 36. Baigell quotes Ben-Zion from the exhibition catalogue for the 1946 show: "If the patriarchic types of Jews have dominated my conceptions, it is because they were the backbone of the nation and its cultural source. It is their children and grandchildren, migrating to Western Europe and America, who contributed so much to the culture and civilization of their adopted countries. I chose them also because their humiliation was the deepest, for they had the strength of character and rare courage to keep their belief and mode of life inwardly as well as outwardly...."

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-45.

saw first-hand the effects of war and deprivation on European populations and cities.



Figure 6. William Gropper, *De Profundis*, 1945. Oil on canvas, 30 x 20 cm. Present location unknown, formerly Jacob Schulman collection, Gloversville, NY.

Paris had seen the camp at Buchenwald at its liberation and later created a series of prints entitled *Buchenwald* (1948-1949), in which figures with sunken faces and wrinkled necks and arms, outlined starkly in black against a white background, engage in prayer or raise their arms. In a later printed series of 1953, Paris created images of Moloch as a materialization of his concern for the forces of evil in man. Leon Golub was more direct in his approach, painting works “composed of figures vaporizing in flames, eviscerated and flayed ...,”<sup>38</sup> fleshy but igneous, as if melted. From his noted *Charnel House* (1946) to the *Burnt Man* series in the 1950s-1960s (Figure 7), these paintings held both personal and collective meanings for Golub. As an American Jew outside the direct realm of Nazi oppression or torture, Golub illustrated the confusion of his emotional

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<sup>38</sup> Baigell, *Jewish-American Artists and the Holocaust*, 46.

response as a Jewish “victim” while also addressing the violent horrors of the world at large, whether the Holocaust or another tragedy. Though both Paris and Golub used stereotypical figures (Jews in prayer and mythic stories for Paris, and damaged bodies for Golub), their works were nonetheless groundbreaking in their forwardness.



Figure 7. Leon Golub, *Burnt Man*, 1960. Lacquer on canvas, 81 x 73 in. Present location unknown.

A number of socio-political factors would renew public interest in the Holocaust in the 1960s forward and pave the way for more outward Jewish artistic responses to the Holocaust. The Civil Rights movement, followed by related liberation movements for women, homosexuals, African Americans, and other marginalized U.S. sub-groups encouraged many Jews, immigrant and native alike, to speak more openly about their Jewish identity and how the Holocaust affected them. Nationally, the U.S. appeared to



support Jewish efforts in backing Israel in the Arab-Israeli wars in 1967 and 1973.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, American Jews were increasingly aware that living memory was being diluted as Holocaust survivors passed away and the “sanctity” many felt was conferred upon the Holocaust was becoming being eroded by comparisons to other, more recent tragic events. In the entertainment sphere, the importance of communicating the memories of the victims spread outside the Jewish community to the public at large, particularly with the publication of survivor accounts such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1953) and *Night* (Elie Weisel, 1960), along with numerous television mini-series (such as “Holocaust” of 1978) and a persistent stream of World War II-related films.

The new post-war wave of European immigrants reopened debates about the core of Jewish identity and sparked questions about the face and the future of American Jewish identity, particularly the balance between maintaining Jewish traditions and assimilating into mainstream American society. Concerned about the diminished Jewish population after the atrocities and seeking to reinvigorate it, many in the American Jewish community sought a sort of unification, a public re-affirmation of Jewish life in the States. As Jews in previous decades had so carefully labored to be accepted into mainstream society, however, most traditional practices associated with Jewish identity (attending synagogue regularly, speaking Yiddish, or keeping kosher, for instance) were upheld by a small number in the population. Instead, as Baigell stated, “Acknowledgement and commemoration of the Holocaust were for everybody, and thus became one of the most visible signs of Jewish identity: it could be used at will and

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<sup>39</sup> Baigell, *Jewish-American Artists and the Holocaust*, 42.

when needed.”<sup>40</sup> While not every Jew could identify with the desire to keep kosher in the household or attend services every Saturday morning, all Jews could agree the Holocaust had occurred and that they, too, could have been in danger had they resided in Europe.

Holocaust art began to take a more direct, and sometimes personal, course as Holocaust survivors settled in America in the 1960s, either bringing their children or starting families afterward. The need to bear witness, to memorialize what happened, would become a major theme in art both of the “first generation,” those who lived through or were survivors of the Holocaust and of the “second generation,” the children of those survivors. It is difficult to organize the work of these artists by a calendar date or a stylistic “period,” as survivors and artists indirectly affected by the stories of their family members often created art in the same time frame. Additionally, American artists who knew of the Holocaust but had not experienced it personally, such as Harold Paris, continued to produce works with Holocaust subject matter. A more in-depth discussion of the complexities of grouping artists into “generations” can be found in Chapter II, which will be helpful in examining common themes in works after the 1960s, as well as to understand how the creations of the first generation are distinct from those of the second.

In piecing together the history of American works pertaining to the Holocaust, it is clear that individual artists confront the subject in a manner both deeply personal as well as in conjunction with greater socio-cultural issues. The plurality of Jewish American identity and the ways in which the Holocaust intertwines with other threads of

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<sup>40</sup> Baigell, *Jewish-American Artists and the Holocaust*, 43-44.

individual identity is apparent in the many directions post-Holocaust American art has taken. Building upon the relatively recent but already canonical framework structured by Baigell and Amishai-Maisels, which examines the development of this art through social, geographical and temporal relations to the Holocaust rather than linear time, we can begin to comprehend contemporary responses to the Holocaust as expressions of shifting American Jewish identity on both individual and collective strata.

## CHAPTER 2

### One and All—Individual Memory, Society, and the Semiotics of Post-Holocaust Imagery

It is clear from the previous outline of the history of post-Holocaust art in America through the 1960s that the personal identity and experiences of individual artists, in combination with the geo-cultural surroundings of each, contributed to the formation of their artistic representation of the Holocaust. Different social groups approach the Holocaust from unique perspectives. Responses of those who escaped from Europe during World War II or immigrated to America after the camps were liberated differ from reactions by their families, who grew up in the shadow of the events, which in turn differ from reactions of individuals who have no direct experience of the Holocaust.

Typical within the larger canon of art history and particularly true of post-Holocaust art, artists and stylistic periods rarely fit neatly into chronological categories. It is for this reason that art history scholars such as Ziva Amishai-Maisels analyzed these works according to “generations” dependent upon the artist’s geographic and psychological relationship to the Holocaust. A body of symbolic Holocaust language, continuously re-formed by both artists and viewers, has been established within the visual arts. First-generation artists grappled with how to channel transcendental experiences and accounts into sensory objects through available media and the lens of their specific historical moment. Second-generation artists dealt with the inheritance and translation of these experiences and accounts into visual expressions through the filters of time and presence. Third, fourth, and future generations engage the legacy of the Holocaust from

a postmodern, post-Jewish perspective that reflects the multi-faceted character of Jewish identity and the various roles the Holocaust plays in those identities. The sections in this chapter and the next will discuss the succession of these generational groups and the growing complexity of the pictorial language of contemporary post-Holocaust art in America as Holocaust memory is increasingly collectively activated.

### *Signs of the Times—Semiotics and the Complexities of Visual Language*

The pictorial language of Holocaust-related art greatly expanded during the 1970s-1990s, building upon public understanding of the events as informed by mass media and strengthened by the production of works by Holocaust survivors. As survivors settled in America, Holocaust became more directly engaged with the body of imagery that informs our basic visual understanding of the Holocaust today. Though most artists remained hesitant to use photographs of the liberated camps, they commonly used specific types of signifying images that, when identified in combination with other signs, become idiomatic of the Holocaust subject.

Some such signs are evocatively associated with the Holocaust: the yellow star that imposed arbitrary difference between Jews and non-Jews; sequences of blue tattoo numbers meant to wipe out one's humanity; even the Nazi party's iconic swastika emblem. Representations of train tracks, wooden guard towers, barbed wire and other infrastructural elements associated with the camps immediately call to mind the systems of state control exercised over prisoners. Other visual images, often called "artifacts"—mounds of shoes, suitcases, or other belongings confiscated at the camps—operate

similarly to the monumental piles of shoes, hair, and other belongings in the physical exhibitions of Holocaust museums. Such imagery evokes the mass industry of death, the objects' status as remnants of the nearly-obliterated European Jewish culture, or conversely, the reclaiming of Jewish individuality after Nazi attempts to destroy personal identity, even personhood, by painting Jews and other "undesirables" as *Untermenschen* ("sub-humans") threatening to corrupt the Aryan race. Biographical and documentary imagery of the camps, such as commemorative portraiture of family members who were victims or of Jewish-inhabited spaces during the war, are often seen in expressions of personal narratives or as tools for bearing witness.

Many of these signs existed before the Holocaust, including the Jewish star that represents Judaism and the 5,000-year-old symbol that would become the swastika.<sup>41</sup> Thus, tension and confusion are inherent in their now-inevitable connectedness with this specific event. The meaning of these signs, as with all signs, is interchangeable depending upon the intentions of the artist, the interpretation of the viewer, and the cultural references attached to a given sign.

Best explored through semiotics, the inherent multiplicity of meaning in signs is a crucial subject to the discussion of pictorial language as an indicator of the relationship between the Holocaust and contemporary Jewish identity. Semiotics, the theory of signs, is a rich and complex field of hypothesis across a breadth of socio-cultural domains, particularly language and the arts. The basic tenets of the theory reveal much about how

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<sup>41</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "History of the Swastika," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, last updated June 10, 2013, accessed June 19, 2013, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007453&gclid=CLaW0ebn8bcCFRHhQgodhwoAGg>.

signs in expressive works are interpreted individually and as a group. A sign is an image, object, word, or idea that represents something else.<sup>42</sup> Semiotics is a combination of *iconography*, the practice of identifying motifs and images (signs) in works of art, and *iconology*, which explains how and why these signs were chosen to represent specific ideas in a broader cultural and contextual setting.<sup>43</sup>

Signs exist both as singular, independent units and as pieces of a code or system in which their meaning is affected by their interrelationship. The production and interpretation of signs is reliant upon pre-existing codes and conventions for communication established in each society.<sup>44</sup> There was no pre-existing “code” or set of imagery with which to logically comprehend and communicate a catastrophic event such as the Holocaust, underscoring the problem of representation via sign. A complex system of signs combining documentary images, personal narratives, and cultural media has thus developed over time.

While the modern study of iconology and iconography has existed for centuries, the foundation of contemporary semiotic theory is typically accredited to Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914).<sup>45</sup> Working within the field of linguistics, Saussure outlined a dyadic schema of the sign: a physical image, word, etc., called the *sign* or *signifier* (in the

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<sup>42</sup>D’Alleva, *Methods and Theories of Art History*, 28.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

following example, “cat”); and a *signified* or *idea*, the interpretation or meaning of the signifier/sign (a small, furry, whiskered animal that meows) (Figure 8).<sup>46</sup>

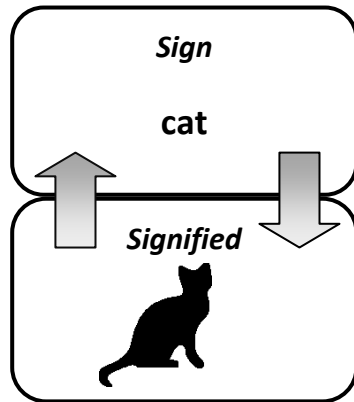


Figure 8. *Diagram of Ferdinand de Saussure's Theory of Semiotics.*

According to Saussure, without a corresponding *idea*, no sign has a specific inherent meaning: “*Sign implies signification, and signification implies sign.*”<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, in the Saussurean approach the *sign* and the *signified* are reciprocal in that the word “cat” and the image appearing in our mind are connected.

Yet assigning specific meaning to a sign is purely arbitrary, inasmuch as the word “cat” without its signifier could easily represent anything (a dog, a toaster, an automobile). A sign’s meaning becomes situated in its differentiation from other signs within the code, not positive, but *negative* in that meaning is created in the *differences* between signs rather than as a property of the sign itself. As Saussure describes:

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<sup>46</sup> Alex Potts, “The Sign,” in *Critical Terms for Art History, Second Edition*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Schiff (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 22.

<sup>47</sup> Saussure uses the example of a linguistic sign: “It is just as literally true to say that the word is the sign of the idea as it is to say that the idea is the sign of the word. The idea constantly fulfils (sic) this role, since it is likewise impossible to fix and limit a word materially within the sentence without an idea.” Ferdinand de Saussure, *Writings in General Linguistics*, trans. Carol Sanders and Matthew Pires (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 26.



There is no such thing as *a* form and a corresponding idea; nor any such thing as *a* meaning and a corresponding sign. There is a *range* of possible forms and possible meanings (which in no way correspond); in fact there are really only *differences* between forms and *differences* between meanings; moreover each of these types of *differences*...only exists as differences through their link with the other.<sup>48</sup>

Additionally, Saussure stressed that the signified is not the *actual object* to which the signifier refers (i.e. the word “c-a-t”=a personal pet cat), but a more general *concept*. The concept of “cat” as we understand it is based in cultural convention—English-speaking culture associates the word “cat” with that particular animal, therefore it is communally understood that the two are related. Still, the meaning of the word “cat” is not completely fixed. While the sign and signified may be connected by convention, the actual object of signification (what is interpreted) is variable dependent upon individual signification (for instance, someone who hates cats vs. someone with a pet cat). Saussure’s method was based in anti-realist notions of the world and the nature of truth: while realists would argue that the world exists in a certain way regardless of individual perception, anti-realists believe the world is constructed by perception; in other words, culture *creates* reality, rather than describing it.<sup>49</sup>

One of the primary difficulties with Saussure’s semiotic method lies in its insistence on complete detachment from the historical evolution of language. Saussure believed both the form and meaning of a sign to be constantly re-created as impacted by concurrent coexisting signs in the code, and only understandable by the user living in that particular historical moment. According to Saussure, when a sign’s meaning comes into

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<sup>48</sup> Saussure. *Writings in General Linguistics*, 24.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Hatt and Richard Klonk, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 203.

competition with another potential value, one value simply replaces another rather than creating a cumulative definition.<sup>50</sup> Thus, no residual meaning remains as the sign is re-presented over time.

Peirce built upon Saussure's dyadic theory, proposing a triadic process of signification meant to be applicable to *all* types of signs and which more directly addressed the relationship between sign and concept. Though Saussure's elements of *sign* and *object* are present in Peirce's theory, signification here is more *process* than structure.

Peirce's triangular theory is composed of three parts: the *representamen*, the form the sign takes (material or otherwise); the (*semiotic*) *object*, that to which the sign relates; and the *interpretant*, what the sign produces in the interpreter's mind (Figure 9).<sup>51</sup> As in Saussure's model, all three components of Peirce's model are essential to maintaining the semiotic code—they interrelate, mediate, and connect each other. Throughout signification, any of the three elements can become a sign in a potentially endless chain of interpretation.

Peirce's theory differs from Saussure's in that Peirce neither insisted upon the arbitrariness of signs (meaning there is at least some referential relationship between sign and object), nor the meaning of a sign as being defined purely by differentials.

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<sup>50</sup> "Meaning is simply a way of expressing the *value* of a form, a value which depends entirely on the forms that coexist at any moment, and that it is therefore quite pointless not only to try to trace this meaning in itself...but to even try to trace it in relation to a form, since this form will change, and with it all the others, and with these so will all other meanings..." Saussure, *Writings on General Linguistics*, 23.

<sup>51</sup> Hatt and Klonk, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods*, 210.

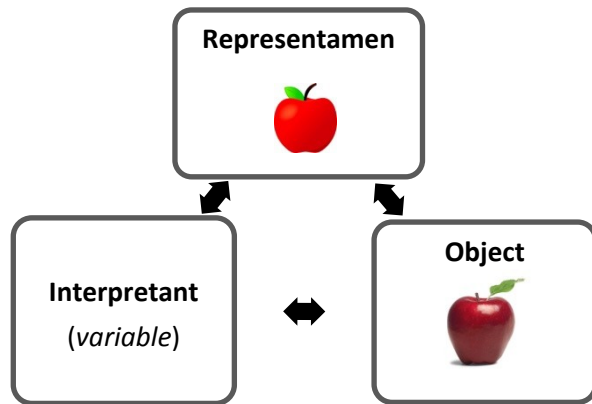


Figure 9. *Diagram of Charles Sanders Peirce's Theory of Semiotics.*

In Peirce's semiotic model, the form of the sign is grounded in the object (though not in absolutism), and the interpretant is determined by the effect of the sign on the viewer. Critical to this thesis, Peirce acknowledges the possibility of associating multiple, dynamic and accumulated meanings with a specific sign. A sign evolves through a three-step process: "Firstness is *possibility* (a *might be*), secondness is *actuality* (what *is*), and thirdness is *potentiality, probability, or necessity* (what *could be, would be, or should be*, given a certain set of conditions)."<sup>52</sup> In other words, firstness is the identification of a form with a set of properties (i.e. this form is red, round, and has a small stem)—not a *specific* form, but the recognizance of *a* form. Secondness involves identifying or isolating this red, round entity as something in *particular* (an apple) without accounting for any potential contexts of this entity. The final stage, thirdness, links the form of the

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<sup>52</sup> Floyd Merrell, "Charles Sanders Peirce's concept of the sign," *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics and Linguistics*, ed. Paul Cobley, (London: Routledge, 2001), 34.

sign with the form of the object via the interpretant, which places the sign within a particular context in the user's mind.<sup>53</sup>

It is the interpretant which is critical not only to this examination of post-Holocaust art, but to the study of signs itself. In Peirce's analysis, as in Saussure's, a sign's definition is unstable, constantly changing according to the previous experiences and personally-attributed meanings of signs to an individual viewer.<sup>54</sup> However, Peirce differentiates between the *cumulative* definition of the sign and any given reading of that sign. In every signification process, interpretation involves referencing other signs, internalized cultural "rules" of visual language, and accumulated knowledge. Therefore, a cumulative definition of a specific sign is created each time that sign is decoded, and the reference to a particular object reconstituted with each stage of signification:

As Peirce conceives it, the definition of the object may metamorphose from signification to signification. What is represented in a series of signs referring to the same object is not a static entity but what he calls a dynamic object, an ever-developing cumulative definition of it, to be distinguished from the immediate object conjured up in any individual signification.<sup>55</sup>

### *Visual Versus Linguistic Signs*

A work of art is not a static visual object, but a combination of signs. Even the act of identifying a painting as an artwork, an image that represents something else,

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<sup>53</sup>Peirce describes the process of signification thus: "There are three kinds of interest we may take in a thing. First, we may have a primary interest in it for itself. Second, we may have a secondary interest in it, on account of its reactions with other things. Third, we may have a mediatory interest in it, in so far as it conveys to a mind an idea about a thing. In so far as it does this, it is a *sign*, or representation." The Peirce Edition Project, ed., *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, Volume 2 (1893-1913)* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 5.

<sup>54</sup>Potts, "The Sign," 21.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 22-23.

qualifies the painting as a sign.<sup>56</sup> Dutch scholar Mieke Bal (b. 1946) emphasizes that “the work of art is an event—one that takes place each time an image is processed by a viewer.”<sup>57</sup> In the past, a Saussurian signification model has been used to “decode” meanings in art, such as Christian iconography, with the aim of “recovering’ a cultural code”<sup>58</sup> that will move the art historian toward a more precise understanding of the past. In art history, cultural context has often been seen as a form of foundation or certainty, yet the unlimited nature of semiosis precludes such notions. Bal and fellow theorist Norman Bryson have said,

Our observation is directed in the first place against any assumption of opposition, or asymmetry, between “context” and “text”, against the notion that here lies the work of art (the text), and over there is the context, ready to act upon the text to order its uncertainties, to transfer to the text its own certainties and determination.<sup>59</sup>

Systems of visual codes are difficult to structure. Arguably, while language can be broken down into a commonly understood set of words and phrases, there is no “dictionary” of visual signs, no singular code ensuring mutual and unequivocal understanding between artist and viewer.<sup>60</sup> Context can enhance the definition of a sign, “making it more rounded and complete. But what is also revealed by such supplementation is exactly the uncurtailability of the list, the impossibility of its closure.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Potts, “The Sign,” 21.

<sup>57</sup> D’Alleva, *Methods and Theories of Art History*, 38.

<sup>58</sup> Potts, “The Sign,” 21.

<sup>59</sup> Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, “Semiotics and Art History,” *The Art Bulletin* 73 no. 2 (June 1991), 177.

<sup>60</sup> Potts, “The Sign,” 25.

<sup>61</sup> Bal and Bryson, “Semiotics and Art History,” 177.

In reading visual signs, Bal stresses the necessity of analyzing both the image and the *interpretation* of the image, the reasons a viewer reads an image a certain way.<sup>62</sup> Doing so highlights both the active role of the spectator's interpretation and the work of art as "understood not as a given with meaning, but as an effect, a set of all possible readings."<sup>63</sup> Concerning Holocaust-related works, it is equally important to examine the *artist's* interpretation of the image, the impetus for combining certain signs and what meanings the artist attributes to them, as one of the many possible processes of signification *on par* with any spectator's, drawn from the web of cultural Holocaust representations available to any individual.

Understandably, the meaning of a work of art cannot be reduced simply to the artist's intentions. Following seminal works such as Roland Barthes' *Death of the Author*, semiotic art historiography typically places the creation of meaning in the spectator's hands, citing the loss of the artist's intention to an individual viewer's knowledge of the visual code. If culture creates convention, and convention grounds our shared understanding of the world, examining potential connections (or dissonances) between artist and viewer interpretations can enrich our understanding of how we disseminate and translate the code of post-Holocaust art. Additionally, the memorial nature of many Holocaust works raises important questions about the often at-odds relationship between the preservation or conveyance of individual memory and the status of the sign as defined by cultural conventions and spectator interpretation.

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<sup>62</sup> D'Alleva, *Methods and Theories of Art History*, 39.

<sup>63</sup> Hatt and Klonk, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods*, 215.

A certain disconnect between the artist's message and the viewer's understanding of a work is common, and often augmented by the protean definitions of signs. While addressing the context of contemporary post-Holocaust works over “generations” may seem a fallacious attempt to establish a precise and structured common understanding of Holocaust-related imagery, the goal is truly the opposite: to *broaden* the definitions of such images, and to uphold the notion that the shifting nature of signs and the cultural context of each contemporary moment can shed light on the new ways in which artists are approaching the Holocaust.

### *Witness and Legacy—Generations and Signification*

Though clearly the scope of contemporary Holocaust art stretches beyond a handful of exhibitions, this thesis examines three American exhibitions presented in museums within the last twenty years. This representative sample illustrates the generationally-oriented response to how the Holocaust affects, and is affected by, unique cultural identities. The works in these exhibitions illustrate some of the ways American Jews grapple with the idea of the Holocaust as the world transitions from the post-war period of direct contact with survivor families into a more historically-based narrative as presented by the community. The *Witness and Legacy* exhibition is discussed below, while *The New Authentics* and *Mirroring Evil* will be addressed in the following chapter.

The traveling exhibition *Witness and Legacy* showed at seventeen museums and galleries in 2002. The works in the exhibition span the first through third generations of post-Holocaust art and effectively establish a baseline for more nuanced discussions of

post-Holocaust American works. Curated by Paul Spencer and Stephen C. Feinstein, the exhibition featured pieces by American artists produced in the last forty years by three distinct groups: Holocaust survivors, children of survivors, and artists who have no direct familial connection to the events (often called “empathizers”). Feinstein explains in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue:

In addition to division by medium, [the exhibition] deals with what might be called ‘different generations’ of the Holocaust—artists from different backgrounds who bring to the subject their unique perspectives because of their relationship to the event.<sup>64</sup>

While the term “generation” implies a group of people of roughly the same age and experience over a span of time and each generation a separation by years, the “different generations” of artists to which Feinstein refers do not fit quite so neatly into temporal packages as the catalogue suggests.<sup>65</sup> In what group do we place European Jewish refugees who escaped before the onset of the Final Solution? Or Jews in the United States learning of the Holocaust from afar, and experiencing anti-Semitism in the states—are they “first generation” because they were part of World War II, or “third generation” because they had no direct familial connection to the Holocaust? Where should other close family members of victims such as nieces, nephews, or cousins, who are not “children of survivors” as “second-generationers are described,” be placed? How does

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<sup>64</sup> Stephen C. Feinstein, “Witness and Legacy,” in *Witness and Legacy: Contemporary Art About the Holocaust*, ed. Stephen C. Feinstein (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Lerner Publications Company and Minnesota Museum of American Art, 1995), 11.

<sup>65</sup> “One-third of the artists represented are Holocaust survivors themselves who have worked as professional artists. Children of survivors, sometimes called “the second generation,” make up the second group. The third group are artists not directly connected with the Holocaust who have developed a sensitivity toward the subject because of their humanitarianism and empathy and attempt to understand the event and convey it to others through art.” Feinstein, “Witness and Legacy,” 18.



one categorize third-generation artists, those with no direct familial connection but who may in fact still have a relationship with a survivor family member?

The above questions highlight that while a generationally-oriented approach to Holocaust art historical scholarship is innovative and illuminating, it is not without gray areas and complications. The Holocaust-related *experiences* of each individual artist inform their artistic expression as much as the era in which they live. Compressing all Holocaust-related artists into one of three generational groups may thus potentially oversimplify the diversity of works and artists in the genre. However, there are certainly overarching trends linking the works in each generation. A balance must be struck between fitting each artist neatly into a generational category and avoiding generational categories altogether in favor of the complete “uniqueness” of individual artists and their experiences, disregarding conventional pictorial and cultural understandings of the Holocaust. Care must be taken to examine both how the works of each artist fall within a specific generation and how their work diverges from conventions, with attention to the nuances of each artist’s specific relationship with the Holocaust. Though little has been written concerning how to incorporate artists outside of the basic categories of “survivor,” “child of survivors” or “empathizers,” it is perhaps best to both cross-examine works within a temporal frame (i.e. Holocaust survivors and members of the American Jewish community who lived through the war), *as well as* their subjective positions.

The “first generation,” as Feinstein identifies Holocaust survivors, could include those such as Alice Lok Cahana (b. 1929) and Netty Vanderpol (b. ~1929), who lived through the entirety of the Holocaust, as well as those like Edith Altman who were

fortunate to escape as children before the ghettoization of Europe, yet still bear trauma from their experiences. Holocaust survivors possess memories and experiences later generations of artists can comprehend only indirectly<sup>66</sup> and often use art as a channel through which to process their trauma through personal narrative, a collective call for memorialization, or both. Personal survivor narratives spanning media from paintings to installations have been considered essential to the continuance of the Jewish people and the memory of the Holocaust. These narratives straddle personal and collective memory, often functioning both as part of a healing process for survivors and as vessels for imparting their stories to the public. Many pieces are characterized by biographical and documentary evidence, particularly photography, as well as already-indexical signifiers of the concentration camps such as train tracks and barbed wire that function as visual summations of the horror of their memories.

Alice Lok Cahana, born in Hungary and a survivor of the Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen camps, was compelled to turn to Holocaust themes after revisiting her homeland in 1978 to find neither remnants of her Jewish community nor a memorial to commemorate it. Cahana's paintings, often dark and semi-abstract, reflect not only the internal pain and turmoil caused by her experiences, but also the plea to remember those who did not survive. The mixed-media collage *Selection: Abraham and Sarah in Auschwitz* (1991)<sup>67</sup> recounts the trauma of the selection process: the tracks in the foreground leading to agony and death; the thick black bars preventing escape. Central to

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<sup>66</sup> Feinstein, "Witness and Legacy," 11.

<sup>67</sup> For an image of Cahana's *Selection: Abraham and Sarah in Auschwitz*, see "Alice Lok Cahana," *Witness and Legacy*, <http://sunsite.utk.edu/witness/artists/cahana/index.html>.

the piece is a documentary photograph taken in Auschwitz-Birkenau, a testament to the reality of an unthinkable scene. The names Sarah and Abraham in the subtitle refer to the generalized biblical names given to concentration camp prisoners in place of their own, an act similar to dehumanizing prisoners with numbered tattoos.<sup>68</sup> Though the bold, jagged bars of black convey a depth of raw emotion, and the flattened spatial plane an immediate confrontation with what is behind them, there is a psychological distance between the work and the viewer, even between the work's subject and Cahana herself. As with many survivor artists, Cahana acknowledges her traumatic experiences and then contains them. Art historian Barbara Rose describes the formal structure of many of Cahana's Holocaust-related works:

The high degree of formal structure—the usage of grids as structure, the repetitions of the horizontals and verticals of the tracks and bars echoing the framing edge of the support as in a Mondrian, creates a stable, formalist structure—a rational container for material and feelings that far exceed the rational mind. This, too, is a kind of tour de force in Cahana's art: to use the metaphors of bricks and mortar, railroad tracks and roads built by slave labor as devices to keep the material depicted in the painting from spilling out in a non-artistic lack of control.<sup>69</sup>

In her abstract needlepoint works, Netty Schwartz Vanderpol condenses her memories into combinations of signs both universal to the visual language of the Holocaust and intensely personal. Born in Amsterdam and a classmate of Anne Frank, Vanderpol and her family were deported to the Westerbork and Theresienstadt camps

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<sup>68</sup> University of Minnesota Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, "Witness and Legacy-Teacher Resource Book, Lesson Six," under "About the Work," *University of Minnesota Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, presented by the Telfair Museum of Art, <http://www.chgs.umn.edu/educational/witnesslegacyteacher/lesson6.html>.

<sup>69</sup> Barbara Rose, "From Ashes to the Rainbow: The Art of Alice Lok Cahana," *Alice Lok Cahana* (artist website), <http://www.alicelokcahana.com/index.php?/-/essay-by-barbara-rose/>.

before being sent to Switzerland in 1945 in exchange for German war prisoners.<sup>70</sup> After hearing a speech in 1984 by Elie Wiesel on bearing witness, Vanderpol chose to address her experiences. The four needlepoint works included in the *Witness and Legacy* exhibition are part of a twenty-piece series entitled “Every Stitch a Memory,” with each work composed of fields of color or pattern overlaid by objects or motifs emitting an understated but emotionally charged energy. *Terezin* (1986) (Figure 10) presents a field of flecked grayish-green breached by a diagonal stretch of barbed wire, a yellow Star of David with the word “Jood” (Dutch for “Jew”), and the numbers “257” and “5”-her identification number and the number of the Dutch train transport she rode, respectively. Other pieces in the series feature concentration camp numbers, train tracks leading nowhere, or less direct Holocaust imagery such as broken mirrors.



Figure 10. Netty Vanderpol, *Terezin* (1986). Needlepoint, 15 x 22 in. Image courtesy of Facing History and Ourselves.

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<sup>70</sup> Feinstein, “Witness and Legacy,” 15.

Sensitive to the intimate, deliberate process of embroidery, Vanderpol juxtaposes the craft of needlepoint as a typical canvas for ordinary motifs of flora and fauna with the agonizing journey through the memories of her experiences. Her choice of title for the series and her description of the works as “textures of grief”<sup>71</sup> convey both the therapeutic and painstaking process of her technique and the layers of memory and personal meaning Vanderpol adds to already well-known imagery of the Holocaust.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is artist Edith Altman, whose utilization of the history of symbols is a process both of personal healing and a means of fulfilling the Kabbalistic notion of *Tikkun Olam*, or “repairing the world.” *Tikkun Olam*, as interpreted by twentieth-century mystic scholar Gershom Scholem, is the restoration of harmony and balance to the world as it was intended in the creation of the universe, a responsibility laid on the shoulders of humankind (any further discussion of this idea is best left to Kabbalistic scholars).<sup>72</sup> Altman, who as a child escaped with her family to Chicago after Kristallnacht, falls somewhere in between the first and second generations. Her installation *Reclaiming the Symbol/The Art of Memory* (1988-1992)<sup>73</sup> attempts to recover and reincorporate into society the symbols and colors appropriated by the Third Reich to fit its aims.

By illustrating multi-faith studies of the evolution of the symbol before its appropriation for Nazi values, Altman attempts to neutralize and peel away the negative layers of meaning now attached to these signs. She also weaves Kabbalistic numerology

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<sup>71</sup> Feinstein, “Witness and Legacy,” 15.

<sup>72</sup> Baigell, *Jewish-American Artists and the Holocaust*, 56.

<sup>73</sup> For an image of Edith Altman’s *Reclaiming the Symbol/The Art of Memory*, see Feinstein, *Witness and Legacy*, 41.

into the various pieces of the installation, replicating the chart of 32 colored triangles used to code prisoners at the camps (the same number of paths of life in the Kabala) with twigs bound with rope to symbolize both the forests in which many Jews were killed and the Jewish practice of binding *Tefillin* (leather straps fitted with boxes for holding prayers) around one's head and arms when beginning morning prayer.

Her installation illustrates the very chains of semiotic signification, tracing the meaning of the swastika across cultures and time periods. *Reclaiming the Symbol* identifies this process of signification, including Altman's own readings of these symbols (in fact, the work traces her specific research and angles on the symbol). Altman also makes an active attempt to alter the meaning of the symbol, exposing a deliberate re-signification (reinterpretation) of the particular symbol of the swastika. In recognizing her mind's subconscious connection of specific signs with the Holocaust and by understanding the complex histories of this imagery inside and beyond the scope of the Third Reich, she is also processing such readings in terms of her own context and analyzing them from an objective place. Ultimately, Altman hopes viewers can "redefine [their] relationships with these symbols"<sup>74</sup> and connect with the work in a positive process of contributing to *Tikkun Olam*. Her work attempts to combat the negative connotations of Nazi symbols by re-stating and re-inserting their previous meanings and by emptying the symbol of its power through reintegration into everyday life.

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<sup>74</sup> Yehudit Shendar, "And the Lion Shall Dwell with the Fish," *Witness and Legacy*, ed. Stephen C. Feinstein (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Lerner Publications Company and Minnesota Museum of American Art, 1995), 21.

Cahana, Vanderpol, and Altman draw from the same language of Holocaust signs for distinct purposes, each contributing to the complex web of meaning of Holocaust pictorial language and thus broadening the possibilities for interpretation in the mind of the viewer. Survivor artists often use symbols to represent specific thoughts and experiences, but the impossibility of condensing and assigning memory to a single image, or a series of images, complicates the integration of singular testimony into collective memory.

### *Second-Generation Artists and the Trauma of Postmemory*

Feinstein's designation of "second generation" refers to the children of victims, who often carry the burden of memory of their parents' experiences in conflict with a temporal and emotional distance from the actual events. For these "memorial candles," so-named by Dina Waldi, a specialist in the treatment of children of Holocaust survivors, the Holocaust is at the core of their identity inseparable from their daily lives. They feel a profound sense of responsibility to act as a link between past and future, to be responsible for ethnic and generational continuity, and to bear witness to the Holocaust on behalf of their parents.<sup>75</sup> The second-generation thus negotiates between the trauma of their parents' lives and the present world in which they find themselves.<sup>76</sup>

In addition to transmitting the memories of their parents, memorial candles often cope with their own emotional traumas; for instance, the pain for the suffering of their

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<sup>75</sup> Second-generation artist Wendy Joy Kupperman used the term 'memorial candle' in a self-description: "I bear witness. I inhabit the space of an altar, not as a burnt offering, but as a memorial candle lit at inception." Baigell, *Jewish-American Artists and the Holocaust*, 2.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

parents or the loss of family members or anxiety concerning their residence in a dual past-present world. In essence, the second generation experiences an extended form of survivor's guilt or "survivor's syndrome," exhibiting psychological characteristics of post-traumatic stress for events before their own time. This collapse of time has been explained in numerous ways. Literary historian Lawrence Langer uses the term "durational time" to refer to the ever-present memories of the camps in the minds of survivors, in which many of them are trapped, and "chronological time" to define the temporal space in which the remainder of society lives.<sup>77</sup> Marianne Hirsch similarly describes second generation identification with the Holocaust as *postmemory*, stating:

Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that can neither be fully understood nor re-created.<sup>78</sup>

Members of the second generation, then, often stand with one foot each in durational and chronological time, with their identity deeply intertwined with their parents' experiences.

In terms of aesthetics, second generation artists often draw from the visual devices of survivor artists, but expand the meanings of visual imagery even further as they attempt to translate the received past into the present. A number of the artists in the *Witness and Legacy* exhibition are of the second generation, among them Joyce Lyon, Art Spiegelman, and Debbie Teicholz. Second generation artists overtly acknowledge

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<sup>77</sup> Baigell, *Jewish-American Artists and the Holocaust*, 4.

<sup>78</sup> Marianne Hirsch, "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile," *Poetics Today* 17, no. 4, Creativity and Exile: European/American Perspectives II (Winter, 1996): 659, Duke University Press, accessed July 31, 2008, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1773218>.



that while they have very strong emotions and fears about the Holocaust, ultimately what they are experiencing and creating is not *memory* itself. In Hirsch's description, "the scholarly and artistic work of these descendants also makes clear that even the most intimate familial knowledge of the past is *mediated* by broadly available public images and narratives."<sup>79</sup>

This connection between past and present in the aftermath of the Holocaust is an oft-broached subject in contemporary Jewish art. Debbie Teicholz and Joyce Lyon, both children of survivors, confront the burden of memory after the Holocaust, specifically how such abnormal events could take place in a seemingly familiar world and how recollections of the Holocaust can be triggered by ordinary things. For Teicholz and Lyon, incorporating ambiguous photographs of train tracks or scenes of decaying landscapes expresses the persistent undercurrent of the Holocaust in daily life.

The train tracks and ploughed furrows (photographed in Budapest and Israel, respectively) in Teicholz's "Untitled" photomontage from *Prayer by the Wall* (1991) are neutral objects in themselves, taken from scenes of everyday contemporary life. With the ability of hindsight, however, they become charged pictures representative of how "disparate forms and associations might unexpectedly trigger Holocaust analogies in an artist's imagination" (Figure 11).<sup>80</sup> The sepia-toned images recall old photographs, destabilizing the sense of time within the work.

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<sup>79</sup> Hirsch, "The Generation of Post-Memory," 112.

<sup>80</sup> Baigell, *Jewish-American Artists and the Holocaust*, 77.



Figure 11. Debbie Teicholz, *Untitled from Prayer by the Wall*, 1991. Photograph, 35 x 64 in. Reprinted with permission from the artist.

In a series of painted landscapes entitled *Conversations with Rzeszow* (1991-1992), Lyon approaches the altered form of neutral spaces post-Holocaust and the subsequent induction of Holocaust memory from unrelated sources. Many of the paintings are scenes from Rzeszow, the town in Poland where her father was raised and from which he escaped before the war, interspersed with spaces from Minnesota and New York. Images of the ruins of concentration camps (*Chimneys at Birkenau II*, 1991) (Figure 12) are juxtaposed with natural scenes in the United States (*Mt. Oberg, Tofte, MN*, 1992) (Figure 13).

Lyon described the images as meditative, composed of many layers of meaning that could open multiple paths to understanding:

The metaphor of place becomes a means to explore many kinds of knowing: one's own direct experience and its limitations; what can be intuited; what it is possible to learn at a distance; and what finally cannot be understood.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Joyce Lyon, "Conversations with Rzeszow: An Artist's Journey," in *Absence/Presence: Critical Essays on the Artistic Memory of the Holocaust*, by Stephen Feinstein (Syracuse University Press, 2005), 114.



*"Whenever I write a sentence of this I feel the dead enter the room. I feel them crowding behind me to peer over my shoulder, to read what I have written, to grumble and complain. The theme of the dead's conversation is that I know nothing about it. There is no argument about this --certainly not from me.*

*I write a few more sentences, each intended to keep the dead from misinterpreting the last, and then I write more, explaining these, and my essay branches endlessly like some fantastic tree in which, as the dead watch without particular interest, I am quite free to hang myself. I rush immediately to explain to the dead that I mean only figuratively. Each metaphor confronts me with my ignorance of the fact..."*

Francine Prose, "Protecting the Dead"

Figure 12. Joyce Lyon, *Chimneys at Birkenau II*, from *Conversations with Rzeszow*, 1991. Oil stick, 43 x 60 in. Reprinted with permission from the artist.



*"Winter is a time of terror. In winter the woods and marshes become our enemies, the worst enemies of people in hiding. The trees shed their leaves and it's like being naked."*

Primo Levi, *If Not Now, When?*

Figure 13. Joyce Lyon, *Mt. Oberg, Tofte, MN*, from *Conversations with Rzeszow*, 1992. Oil stick, 30 x 88 in. Reprinted with permission from the artist.

Panels of text accompany each image, some of them taken from Lyon's private journal, others from books and films about Holocaust experiences such as Primo Levi's *If Not Now, When?*. The text panels function not as explanations for her works, but as their own form of commentary that can reinforce or even contradict Lyon's own experiences of the spaces she depicts. The quoted text is thus but one vital piece in the puzzle to forming understanding, a portion of the narrative available only from those who were part of the experience. The narrative of the Holocaust survivors so crucial to Lyon's exploration of these spaces and her father's memory becomes a jumping-off point for her own narrative:

What had been elusive that I finally came to understand was my place in the narrative. The work needed to be in the first person, needed to reflect my role as the American daughter in some sense the heir to what my father carried with him. My distance from the events themselves and the impossibility of comprehending limited but also delineated the territory appropriate for me to explore... In this context, the voice of the second generation becomes a first-person narrative. This is the place in which my experience is valid.<sup>82</sup>

Taken out of historical context, the scenes in Lyon and Teicholz's works are familiar; however, the now-inevitable association of such spaces with acts of genocide forces both artist and viewer to grapple with the inconceivable reality of the Holocaust conducted within familiar surroundings.

As the works of Teicholz and Lyon highlight the evolving relationship of already-iconic Holocaust images within a post-Holocaust world, Art Spiegelman directly addresses his status as a "memorial candle" and his own temporal distance from the sufferings of his parents. Spiegelman's notable two-volume work *Maus* employs the

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<sup>82</sup> Lyon, "Conversations with Rzeszow: An Artist's Journey," 112-113.

familiar format of the graphic novel in retelling his parents' survival story. Portraying Jews as mice and Nazis as cats, Spiegelman uses animals and the comic strip format as "distancing devices,"<sup>83</sup> for him a more subtle and appropriate approach to the Holocaust than other media. Spiegelman also narrates two stories simultaneously: firstly, of his parents' struggles during the Holocaust; and secondly, the process of interviewing his father as he is telling this story. At the time it was published *Maus* garnered much attention and a fair amount of heated criticism, both for its unconventional format (comics have often been considered "low" art) and for the manner in which Spiegelman portrayed his father. The cartoonish, satirical depictions of the various animal characters and the sometimes comical exchanges between Spiegelman and his father—who is often portrayed as irritable, stubborn, misogynistic, and even racist—diverge from the typically-expected serious tone of Holocaust works. The outrage sparked by *Maus*'s release was

...a matter of distinguishing between a specific body of factual 'contents' and a specific 'form' of narrative and of applying the kind of rule which stipulates that a serious theme—such as mass murder or genocide—demands a noble genre—such as epic or tragedy—for its proper representation.<sup>84</sup>

As mentioned in the introduction, Spiegelman described the situation of his temporal and emotional distance from the experiences of his father, and the inevitable alterations to his father's memory in *Maus*:

Although I set about...to do a history of sorts, I'm all too aware that ultimately what I'm creating is realistic fiction. The experiences my father actually went through [are not exactly the same as] what he's able to remember...Then there's what I'm able to put down on paper. And then of course there's what the reader can make of that...<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Spiegelman, "Art Spiegelman," quoted in Feinstein, *Witness and Legacy*, 38.

<sup>84</sup> Hayden White, "Historical Emplotment and the Power of Truth," in Saul Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 41.

<sup>85</sup> Spiegelman, "Art Spiegelman," quoted in Feinstein, *Witness and Legacy*, 38.

Spiegelman illustrates this in his *Final Drawing for Maus II* (c.1988-89),<sup>86</sup> wherein the left-hand panel depicts him speaking to his father about his separation from his wife upon arriving at Auschwitz, and the right-hand panel is a representation of the story he narrates. While Spiegelman places himself visually as a participant in his father's narrative, he acknowledges both the acceptance of his role as the torch-bearer of his parents' legacy and the inevitable gap between his father's memory and his own interpretation.

### *The Sacred and the Profane: Holocaust Representation in a Memorial Age*

The transition from the survivor artists of the first generation to the once-removed artists of the second has been the focus of heated debates about the "appropriateness" of the content of post-Holocaust art, and indeed the creation of such art entirely. Marianne Hirsch aptly describes this dilemma:

At stake is precisely the "guardianship" of a traumatic personal and generational past with which some of us have a 'living connection' and that past's passing into history...not only a personal/familial/generational sense of ownership and protectiveness but also an evolving theoretical discussion about the workings of trauma, memory, and intergenerational acts of transfer, a discussion actively taking place in numerous important contexts outside of Holocaust studies.<sup>87</sup>

The debate stems from the work of mid-twentieth century artists like Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko, and in a wider cultural movement, of philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Francois Lyotard, and Theodor Adorno. Adorno's oft-misinterpreted, yet iconic words of 1949, "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," function as a synecdoche

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<sup>86</sup> For image, see Spiegelman, "Art Spiegelman," in Feinstein, 38.

<sup>87</sup> Hirsch, "The Generation of Post-Memory," 104.

for culture as a whole, and for the failure of Western Enlightenment values of reason, art, and science to prevent the decline of society to such violent acts.<sup>88</sup>

Debates concerning the manner in which the Holocaust *should* be approached in the public sphere intensified globally in the 1980s alongside the erection of monuments, the growing popularity of its portrayal in film, television, literature and the visual arts, and the urgency of preserving memory as the number of survivors diminished. A central aspect of contention emerged and continues to be a sticking point in the Holocaust conversation: what constitutes ethical collective memorialization and historicization of the Holocaust, and how (if at all) can the Holocaust be integrated into the rest of world history's timeline? This debate was epitomized by the *Historikerstreit* or "Historians Debate" in Germany in the late 1980s in which German historians defended (mostly through printed newspaper articles) a number of theories as to the cause of the Holocaust, and how it should be integrated into the narratives of German and world history. Concerns about trivializing, idealizing, or romanticizing the Holocaust arose as spinoffs of this debate and as a result of mass media interpretations. Concerns about relativizing the Holocaust by comparing it to other tragedies or attempting to rationalize the events, as well as "polluting" the truth of factual accounts of the Holocaust with fictional or reconstructed representations, has enveloped the Holocaust as a traumatic event within a sort of sanctity (the concept of "sanctity" of the Holocaust will be developed further in Chapter III). A system of moral limits and expectations regarding the Holocaust has been put in place meant to determine public conduct.

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<sup>88</sup> Adorno, *Prisms: Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought*, 34.

Such issues of “moral limits” are the lynchpin of art historical debates about the aesthetics and even the suitability of post-Holocaust representation. In an American response to the *Historikerstreit*, noted historian Saul Friedlander convened a conference of leading historical scholarship at UCLA in 1990 centered around the historicization of the Holocaust and the ideological and aesthetic imprinting of the events in present and future generations. Of the conference’s subject, Friedlander stated: “Our central dilemma can be defined as confronting the issues raised by historical relativism and aesthetic experimentation in the face of two possibly contrary constraints: a need for ‘truth,’ and the problems raised by the opaqueness of the events and the opaqueness of the language as such.”<sup>89</sup>

The debates at the UCLA conference exemplified three key issues: the nature and (im)possibility of historical truth and meta-narrative (i.e. what constitutes a “truthful” narrative of the Holocaust); whether, in the wake of the Holocaust, an “event at the limits,”<sup>90</sup> previous theoretical discourses of history can be applied to the historical narrative post-Holocaust ; and how (or if) the Final Solution can and should be integrated into an overarching historical narrative ideologically, socially, and aesthetically. The most critical matter for Friedlander and others was presenting and furthering accurate and respectful accounts of the Holocaust that circumvent romanticism and kitsch. Friedlander defined kitsch as “adapted to the tastes of the majority,” a “neutralization of extreme

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<sup>89</sup> Saul Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), 4.

<sup>90</sup> Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 3.



situations (i.e. death) by turning them into sentimental portrayals.”<sup>91</sup> In his 1993 treatise *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, he specifically voiced concerns about the dissolution of the Holocaust into hackneyed, mish-mashed and schmaltzy representations. Friedlander described kitsch imagery as an overload of symbols that form a language of “accumulation, repetition, and redundancy,” a “massive use of synonyms” (a constant repetition and exchange of similar images) that reinforces the value of certain emotional responses.<sup>92</sup> The danger of kitsch, to Friedlander, lies not only in the possible reduction of Holocaust memory and knowledge to these tropes, but also in human responses to them, particularly a potential shift from horror and anguish to fascination, even sentimentality. Feelings of unease and discomfort caused by the juxtaposition of kitsch and themes of death is, according to Friedlander, a key sign of overstepped limits. Friedlander, like Adorno, questioned the capability of traditional categories of conceptualization and representation to “properly” narrate the Holocaust.<sup>93</sup>

Because translating an event so outside of normal limits of cognitive understanding into existing aesthetic media is such a difficult task, and parity with the events essential, some scholars argue that the Holocaust should not be represented aesthetically whatsoever. Others advocate free artistic expression as in any other art, and some, too, keep to the middle ground in which aesthetic expression is acceptable with specific boundaries. Even the approach of any given work conceivably has limitations; for instance, James E. Young states that work about the Holocaust must not be

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<sup>91</sup> Saul Friedlander, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, translated by Thomas Weyr (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, September 1993), 25.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>93</sup> Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation* 3.

redemptive in any fashion, and that it must adhere ethically to the memories of survivors.<sup>94</sup> Yet, such boundaries remain elusive—the mere variance of opinions on what constitutes “acceptable,” and who is entitled to make such decisions, renders judging what is right and wrong fairly impossible. What characterizes a “truthful” manifestation of Holocaust representation is hotly debated, though first-hand survivor accounts, artifacts, and, often, documentary photographs are typically deemed clear. Therefore, Friedlander argues that the limited forms available to us in terms of language or image make the choosing of such images and their assembly important in the interpretation of the Holocaust as subject.

Many first and second-generation post-Holocaust works are imbued with the emotions of the artist, be they the experiential narratives of Holocaust survivors or the inherited memories of ‘memorial candles,’ the first fully post-Holocaust generation. Semiotic theoretical trends toward primacy of the spectator, in keeping with Barthes’ “Death of the Author,” prompt further examination of the role of individual memory in Holocaust art and visual language, as well as the functions of the works themselves within contemporary society. Where, and how, is artist intention situated in these works and in the minds of viewers, if such intention is indeed ‘lost’ in the process of individual signification? There are no simple answers to these questions. However, the following chapter will delve into the development of the Holocaust visual code within third and fourth-generation American Jews, the “post-Jewish” generation, and explore the usage

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<sup>94</sup> James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 9.

and expansion of this visual language as based in cultural and experiential circumstances in parallel with shifting perceptions of Jewish identity.

## CHAPTER 3

### Post-Holocaust, Post-Jewish: The Holocaust as Memory, History and Idea

Works produced by third generation artists indicate a significant shift in the paradigm of post-Holocaust art. Such artists continue to employ and build upon the repository of Holocaust iconography, and their innovative, and at times controversial, approach to the subject within the last thirty years has refreshed public and scholarly discussions of the Holocaust. Specifically within the United States, numerous factors have contributed to how the Holocaust has been inherited in the third generation, including the geographical and temporal distance from the events, the dearth of living survivors, changing attitudes of society and the media, and most importantly, the transformation of Jewish American identity on both a personal and collective level. The exhibitions and related works discussed in this section epitomize some of these new approaches emerging from the position of the third generation and illustrate some of the key challenges contemporary society faces in discerning how to presently engage the Holocaust as historic subject.

#### *The Individuality of Collective Memory*

The most widely-accepted Holocaust narrative to date has been constructed from the interpretation and analysis of archival documents and photographs, survivor and witness testimonies, and accounts by prominent scholars in a variety of disciplines, which have then been disseminated through public memorial museums and monuments, school

curricula, and mass media outlets. In order to understand the how the Holocaust functions as a collective memory, it is essential to discern the nature of collective memory itself. According to French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945), this collective understanding, or “collective memory,” both informs, and is informed by, individual memory. A pioneer in memory studies, Halbwachs distinguished two types of memory: *individual* (known only from within a person’s mind, i.e. personal feelings and thoughts); and *collective* (external, socially-constructed remembrance influenced by societal norms, established histories, and modes of thinking). To Halbwachs, *all* memory is at least partially socially constructed. Though individual memory is truly known only in the mind of the person possessing a remembrance, personal memory is nevertheless influenced by cultural milieus and ideas that could not possibly have originated from an individual (words and images are not created in one mind alone, but are part of a larger social language).<sup>95</sup>

To Halbwachs, the creation and recollection of individual memories is impacted by the groups with which we are associated: while *individuals* remember, they draw on members of specific *groups* to contextualize memories or to recall forgotten information.<sup>96</sup> The process of creating memory is active, and is composed of many pieces involving not only the conjuring of an individual’s memory of the past in the present context, but also this memory in relation to the memory of the same event according to other individuals, in addition to the collective memory bank. Such groups

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<sup>95</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter, Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1980), 59.

<sup>96</sup> Lewis A. Coser, introduction to *On Collective Memory*, by Maurice Halbwachs (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 22.

can be formed from a finite event, such as a third grade classroom or a Spring Break trip, or an infinite length of time, as in a family unit or an ethnic group. These “groups” form the clusters of one’s identity; membership in them, and one’s relationship to them, changes over time as layers of personal experience and knowledge are added. Recalling a specific memory, like acting in a high school play, is potentially enriched by speaking to other members of the same cast: a fellow actor may remember the costume you wore, how full the auditorium was, where you missed a line, whereas you may have forgotten. As long as an individual remains connected to a specific group, points of “contact” remain intact, and shared data and conceptions are continually passed back and forth.<sup>97</sup> Similarly, applying knowledge gained in the present to *past* memories changes the perception of that memory and *builds upon* its meaning. Memory is therefore an active process constructed and constantly recalibrated as a result of social interaction and individual re-examination.

Individual and collective memory have a mutually informative relationship. Individual memory often precludes collective memory, but collective memory is often overlaid on individual memory retroactively to aid the person in situating that memory within time and space, therefore making it part of the collective milieu and altering the individual memory.<sup>98</sup> In turn, collective memory is a combination of individual memories in agreement on essentials that permit us to reconstruct a body of remembrances we recognize,<sup>99</sup> which Halbwachs likens to “comparing the testimony of

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<sup>97</sup> Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 31.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>99</sup> Coser, introduction to *On Collective Memory*, 22.

several witnesses,” with the memory of an individual being strengthened by the agreement of others.<sup>100</sup>

Collective memory is not, however, significantly more stationary in its foundations than individual memory, but responds to and is reshaped over time akin to individual memory. A given memory labeled “collective” does not imply everyone will recall such a memory identically; rather, because the makeup of individual identity consists of membership in many groups at the same time (with no two individuals exactly alike), one collective memory can be understood through many frameworks of individual memory, refracting collective memory through an individual lens. Andreas Huyssen, renowned professor of German and comparative literature at Columbia, stated,

I have argued elsewhere that we abandon or at least bracket the notion of collective memory altogether. This seems especially called for at a time when collective memory, mostly understood today as national memory, is inevitably shot through by group memories at the subnational or regional level, as well as by diasporic memory mixings encountered with the increasing flows of migration that challenge notions of cultural homogeneity.<sup>101</sup>

As individual memory is the past reconstructed by outside experiences or knowledge, so collective memory is in large part a “reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present, a reconstruction prepared, furthermore, by reconstructions of earlier periods wherein past images had already been altered.”<sup>102</sup> The composition of a collective memory (independent from any personal interpretation of that

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<sup>100</sup> Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 29.

<sup>101</sup> Andreas Huyssen, “International Human Rights and the Politics of Memory: Limits and Challenges,” *Criticism* 53, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 615, accessed October 29, 2012, doi: 10.1353/crt.2011.0037.

<sup>102</sup> Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 69.

memory) impressed on individuals is typically a characterization of societal norms and values in every epoch.<sup>103</sup>

There are some collective memories (for instance, the destruction of the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001) for which we have first-hand recollection through which to interpret mediated representations of the event. Individuals not in New York City on September 11th likely still experienced, in their own way, the live news broadcasts, followed stories from various media outlets, and turned attention to this watershed moment in American history.<sup>104</sup> For other collective memories of which we have no firsthand experience, which Halbwachs calls historical or “borrowed” memories, we must rely entirely on the memory of others to reconstruct.<sup>105</sup> Such “historical” memories could include the Battle of Gettysburg, or the Great Depression—and for many younger Jews, the Holocaust. Other than the diminishing population of Holocaust survivors, American Jews learn of and remember the Holocaust only indirectly, as imparted to them by their families, their community, or society. Thus, the Holocaust for many young Jews is an *idea*, or a reconstruction.

Even if a memory is not directly experienced, one can nevertheless share in the collective memory as a member of the particular social group(s) to which that memory belongs. Stating that such “borrowed” memories are “conceptions, symbols... I can imagine them but I cannot remember them,”<sup>106</sup> Halbwachs asks a key question: “How can

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<sup>103</sup> Coser, introduction to *On Collective Memory*, 25.

<sup>104</sup> Halbwachs does not make a clear distinction between events an individual is physically present for (i.e. being in the towers on September 11<sup>th</sup>) and being present in the *moment* of an event (i.e. being in New York City, watching the live broadcasts, etc.).

<sup>105</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 50.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.



currents of collective thought whose impetus lies in the past be recreated, when we can grasp only the present?”<sup>107</sup> For Halbwachs, the present generation connects with and reinforces collective memories through mentally reenacting and commemorating them. With the Holocaust in mind, Peter Novick similarly defines collective memory as belonging as much in the present as in the past: “We embrace a memory,” Novick states, “because it speaks to our condition; to the extent that we embrace it, we establish a framework for interpreting that condition.”<sup>108</sup>

Novick further describes collective memory as critically *ahistorical* (even anti-historical) in that understanding an event historically requires a certain emotional detachment from the event itself: a comprehension of the passage of time, an awareness and acceptance of the complexities of historical narrative, and the merging of multiple perspectives into a comprehensive account. Barbie Zelizer describes this analytical detachment:

Recognizing conflicting renditions of the past necessitates a consideration of the tensions and contestations through which one rendition wipes out many of the others. Memories become not only the construction of social, historical, and cultural circumstances, but a reflection of why one construction has more staying power than its rivals.<sup>109</sup>

By contrast, for Novick collective memory is situated in the present; simplified and singularly committed in its recollection, in some ways an “expression of an eternal truth.”<sup>110</sup> Novick seemingly separates the potential for heightened understanding through historical perspective from the continual re-fabrication of memory in the present (in

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<sup>107</sup> Coser, introduction to *On Collective Memory*, 24.

<sup>108</sup> Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), 170.

<sup>109</sup> Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 5.

<sup>110</sup> Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 3-4.

contrast to Halbwachs); Zelizer, while assenting that a collective memory is both fabricated and limited, recognizes the ability of knowledge gained about an event over time to redefine a collective memory. “Collective memories allow for the fabrication, rearrangement, elaboration, and omission of details about the past, often pushing aside accuracy and authenticity so as to accommodate broader issues of identity formation, power and authority, and political affiliation.”<sup>111</sup>

Questions of veracity and propriety abound concerning transmitting the legacy of a catastrophic collective memory such as the Holocaust. This is especially true in reference to the hazardous game of “imagining” such a seminal and emotionally-charged event. Maintaining the anticipated truthful and respectful memory of the Holocaust, be it in the arts, politics, or the social sphere, is extremely difficult in the media-saturated environment of the postmodern world in which images, words and ideas are constantly re-appropriated. Furthermore, current generations must wrestle with (or perhaps embrace) the inescapably incomplete narrative pieced together by fact, testimony and archival collections. As “memorial candle” artists have demonstrated, even within the second generation—those direct inheritors of memory—the memories of their parents have been necessarily filtered by their capacity to comprehend them, particularly through how they *imagine* such experiences to have played out. It is for this reason that projects collecting survivor video testimony, such as Yale University’s Fortunoff Video Archive or Steven Spielberg’s Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, are often

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<sup>111</sup> Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*, 3.

considered vital. But what are the moral boundaries expected of, or imposed upon, imagination?

The postmodern condition of continuously appropriated imagery and transferred memory spark legitimate concerns for Friedlander, Young, and others apprehensive of society's ability to maintain a truthful narrative of the Holocaust. Friedlander's issues with visual media and artistic license, the presence and use of kitsch, and the perils of moral ambiguity beg the question of how to reconcile the need to maintain the authenticity of the Holocaust story with the necessity of "filling in the blanks" with imaginative reenactment where direct experience or connection (either through survivor witnesses or respected historical accounts) is no longer an option. If present and future generations must piece together and decipher the language of the Holocaust visually, verbally, or in any other fashion, there will inevitably be gaps, regardless of the breadth of survivor testimony, archival documents, and scholarly work.

Noted art historian Georges Didi-Huberman's *Images In Spite of All* (2008) addresses the inability of even the most abundant Holocaust documentation to convey a complete narrative of the Holocaust. Didi-Huberman counters the oft-assumed principle of the archive (either one specific archive or the idea of archive as an international collection of items) as the most complete and accurate representation of truth, framing it instead as a disjunctive collection of documents and artifacts that can be combined in countless ways to form a "a single view of history out of many;" essentially, the collective memory. This "single view" is cross-checked by other evidence and subject to

revision at any time with the introduction of new information.<sup>112</sup> In this way, the combination of such “fragments of history” requires some freedom of imagination in piecing together a historical narrative that is inevitably limited, as well as accepting the notion that the archival document does not convey truth in *itself*, as it is subject to interpretation. Rather, its truth derives from the affirmation of its authenticity through other documents.<sup>113</sup> Didi-Huberman writes of images, “We ought to conceive of the montage as doing for the field of images what signifying difference did for the field of language in the post-Saussurian conception.”<sup>114</sup> Didi-Huberman further states that through the act of imagining (which we are forced to do because we were not there), we are made aware that we will *never* be able to fully grasp something in its entirety. This is true whether one is a Holocaust survivor or a seventeenth-generation post-Holocaust Jew.

Yet this dilemma raises other questions as well. What are the functions of post-Holocaust art as a genre—does it exist specifically to teach and to remember, as is often assumed? Or can this art be a legitimate expression of emotions, of an identifying relationship to the Holocaust, of the desire to promote dialogue, understanding, and learning about the event?

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<sup>112</sup>Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 121. Didi-Huberman states, “images become precious to historical *knowledge* the moment they are put into perspective, in *montages* of intelligibility. The *memory* of the Shoah should continually be reconfigured—and, one hopes, clarified—as new relationships are established, new resemblances are discovered, and new differences are underlined.” Ibid., 159.

<sup>113</sup> Barbie Zelizer also notes that the foremost, and errant, belief of the photographic medium is that what is *depicted* is unaltered truth – that artistic process did not factor into the production of a photograph. (Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*, 9). This idea is actually the crux of Huberman’s discussion in *Images in Spite of All*, in which he analyzes a collection of four photographs taken by inmates working in Auschwitz, hidden in a toothpaste tube, and how curatorial alteration and display effects their interpretation as representations of reality.

<sup>114</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 121.

## *The “American” Holocaust—Contemporary American Cultural Response*

Issues of distance and dislocation—both geographic and temporal—and memory as it relates to American interpretations of the Holocaust are particularly complex. Though the United States declared war on Germany in 1941 it is largely understood that the focus of the war campaign would be the defeat of the Axis Powers, as opposed to directly ending what would later be called the Holocaust. Mainstream American exposure to the Holocaust during World War II occurred primarily through news articles and politically-oriented magazines, which often relayed unreliable or filtered versions of the happenings in Europe.<sup>115</sup> Of course, the level of general understanding greatly increased after 1945 with the influx of survivor immigrants and the release of newsreels and photographs of the camps. Even then, however, Americans possessed only second-hand knowledge of the Holocaust. As Halbwachs would say, the Holocaust was already a “borrowed” memory.

The somewhat scarce scholarly writing on American cultural digestion of the Holocaust has often produced unsettling generalizations about America’s treatment of the subject that warrant both support and contestation. American culture is often accused of simplifying, glamorizing, trivializing, or exploiting the Holocaust—all of which *do* occur—though conclusions as to which invocations of the Holocaust commit such offenses is

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<sup>115</sup> Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 259: “Elsewhere, the American press, and even some Jewish and Jewish-owned newspapers (like the *New York Times*), underreported German atrocities in the 1930s and 1940s and misinterpreted their significance; they considered the reports exaggerated, like the atrocity stories manufactured during World War I, and they feared charges of parochialism.”

largely subjective. According to Oren Baruch Stier, “The overarching intellectual perception equates ‘Americanization’ with popularization and simplification, a ‘dumbing-down,’ if you will, of the complexities of the Shoah in favor of digestible happy endings.”<sup>116</sup> Alvin Rosenfeld takes it a step further:

It is part of the American ethos to stress goodness, innocence, optimism, liberty, diversity, and equality. It is part of the same ethos to downplay or deny the dark and brutal sides of life and instead to place a preponderant emphasis on the saving power of individual moral conduct and collective deeds of redemption.<sup>117</sup>

Hilene Flanzbaum invokes the example of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and statements by its former project director Michael Berenbaum that explain how “Americanization” entails, at least partially, adapting the material and spaces of memory to be relatable to all kinds of Americans, whether black, white, Jewish, non-Jewish, and so forth.<sup>118</sup> Yet, while scholars and public alike have formed strong case-by-case opinions of what can be considered “appropriate” treatment of the Holocaust, any overarching moral guidelines are widely arbitrary and based largely upon the stance of individuals or specific interest groups rather than overall assent.

However disparate American public opinion may be concerning representation and remembrance of the Holocaust, certain themes have been distinguished in the “American” approach supporting the notion of the Holocaust as *idea* versus, or in addition to, Holocaust as *memory*. According to some scholars, like Novick and Stier, the U.S. approach to the Holocaust is in many ways an assertion of American values, and

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<sup>116</sup> Oren Baruch Stier, “Holocaust, American Style,” *Prooftexts* 22, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 357, accessed July 6, 2009, doi: 10.1353/ptx.2003.0007, 357.

<sup>117</sup> Oren Baruch Stier, “Holocaust, American Style,” quoted from Rosenfeld, *Americanization of the Holocaust*, 122-123.

<sup>118</sup> Hilene Flanzbaum, ed., *The Americanization of the Holocaust* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 5.

hinges on a clear delineation of good and evil that positions the United States firmly within the side of good. The establishment of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. is often cited as a prime example of the phenomenon of anchoring the moral certainty of the Holocaust as the basis for pure evil from which society can only go upward.<sup>119</sup> The placement and prominence of such a museum in the nation's capital also proclaims the opposition of American values and Nazi values, as James E. Young states: "The Holocaust memorial defines what it means to be American by graphically illustrating what it means not to be American."<sup>120</sup> The museum, and by extension, the Holocaust, thus stand as marks of the violation of core American values, with the Holocaust as a symbol of evil more so than an actual event, and the role of the institution a reminder of the consequences of bigotry.

Stier also contends the American media in particular has created a set of "characterizations" of figures typically portrayed in Holocaust stories (movies, television, literature, or otherwise), a sort of *commedia dell'arte* of Holocaust representation. The basic "cast" includes the triad of perpetrators, victims, and bystanders as identified in Raul Hilberg's writings. As well as this essential triad, Stier also cites the roles of:

The 'liberator,' the 'resister,' the 'second generation survivor,' and the Holocaust 'revisionist' or 'denier'. These multiple characterizations add diversity to the classic trinity... thus broadening the possibilities for the retelling of Holocaust stories both for the creators of those stories and the characters within them.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 212-214.

<sup>120</sup> James E. Young, "America's Holocaust: Memory and the Politics of Identity," in Flanzbaum, *The Americanization of the Holocaust* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 73. Young also addresses this idea in his volume *The Texture of Memory*.

<sup>121</sup> Stier, "Holocaust, American Style," 358.

Such roles clearly define who is “good” and who “evil,” again with the implicit assumption that Americans should identify with those on the side of good. Americans thus overall prefer a clear distinction between perpetrator and victim, and in many cases, the glorification of the “good” or “heroic” and the complete dehumanization of the “evil.” If what Novick and Stier posit indeed comprises the “American” approach to the Holocaust, artistic expressions of it are unsurprisingly judged on how they fit into these standard categories of “good” and “evil.” Any gray area is, therefore, easy prey for attack. Holocaust-related art that explores the line between good and evil, asks the viewer to step into ambiguous identification, or delves into emotions expected of a particular “characterization” often contributes to the denouncement of such art as offensive or “kitschy.”

### *The Issue of “Uniqueness” and the Sacredness of the Holocaust*

In addition to walking the line between “good” and “evil,” for many artists issues of contemporary Holocaust representation are intensified by persistent discussion of the “uniqueness” or sacredness of the Holocaust, particularly the premise that it is a phenomenon so far outside the realm of human understanding as to be incomprehensible in scale, execution and human behavior (or lack thereof), and therefore incomparable. Prominent religious leaders, scholars, politicians, and citizens alike tend to singularize the Holocaust as the incarnation of the most extreme evil the memory of which is frequently invoked as a reminder—and a lesson—to “never again” allow genocide to be realized. The Holocaust as “sacred” event is discordant with its moral opposite as the incarnation of



evil, both being such extremes that “normal” human behavior and psyche could not possibly harbor. As a result of this perception of uniqueness, society has created and perpetuated a protective barrier around the Holocaust with unspoken boundaries concerning the invocation of the name “Holocaust” and any associated information.

Daniel Levy states,

The clearest sign that the Holocaust is unique is that it has its own name. There is the Holocaust, then there are all other massacres...as long as no other massacre gets its own word—they are designating the Holocaust as unique. The clearest sign that ‘the Holocaust’ is sacred is that using the term lightly can give offense...That is what it means to be a sacred word: to be somehow cut off from profane speech, to be surrounded by a charged space.<sup>122</sup>

Fairfield University’s professor of history and director of undergraduate Judaic studies Gavriel Rosenfeld attributes the origins of the term “uniqueness” as applied to the Holocaust as originating from its incomprehensibility, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s when the term *Holocaust* became synonymous with Nazi crimes against humanity.<sup>123</sup> Rosenfeld explicitly outlines the unfolding of the debate concerning uniqueness in the United States as, in some part, a reaction derived from the dual tendencies of historians to *historicize*, or contextualize, the Holocaust utilizing generalizing theories, and the increasing tendency to *politicize* or appropriate the Holocaust either by applying the term *holocaust* to other crimes, or by justifying political behaviors and positions in the name of the Holocaust.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, trans. Assenka Oksiloff (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 52.

<sup>123</sup> Gavriel Rosenfeld, “The Politics of Uniqueness: Reflections on the Recent Polemical Turn in Holocaust and Genocide Scholarship,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 13, no. 1 (Spring 1999), 30.

<sup>124</sup> See Rosenfeld, “The Politics of Uniqueness,” 33, for his thorough explanation of the five types of “politicization” of the Holocaust, which manifested in the 1960s and rapidly proliferated in the 1970s-1980s.

A prime example of this politicization is the *Historikerstreit*, which many scholars felt “normalized” and undermined the presupposed uniqueness of the Holocaust. The arguments by German historians Ernst Nolte and Andreas Hillgruber, which aimed to establish the Third Reich as one of many administrations that had participated in genocidal violence, approached the Holocaust as it pertained to the crimes of the National Socialist government and attempted to place Nazi crimes within a long history of genocides. Nolte and Hillgruber’s stance encouraged the reclamation of German history and pride. Scholars responding to Nolte and Hillgruber’s arguments, however, felt such comments diminished the severity and extremity of the Holocaust and “normalized” it to the degree that it would no longer be a black spot on Germany’s history.

A spectrum of responses to this debate over uniqueness erupted. Some scholars, such as Steven Katz and Deborah Lipstadt, defended the Holocaust’s uniqueness not only because of the Nazis’ focus on annihilating the entirety of a single population group (referring only to the Jewish population), but also in the highly-organized, methodical manner in which their plans were implemented. Historically, many scholars felt the “rupture” of human history and the idea of society’s derailment from Enlightenment values was both a cause and effect of the Holocaust that contributed to its categorization as a unique event. In comparing the Holocaust to other genocidal acts, such scholars focused primarily on the *differences* rather than the similarities (this is particularly true of Katz’s chronicle of historical comparisons to the Holocaust in *The Holocaust in Historical Context*).

Other scholars, such as Yehuda Bauer, Dominick La Capra, and Peter Novick have defined uniqueness as composed of many aspects. Rather than identifying the Holocaust as a unique occurrence severed from the rest of human history and atrocity, such scholars argue the uniqueness of *each* mass criminal act is a product of responses to particular cultural factors that yet in some ways resemble each other. While Bauer and La Capra both distinguish the Holocaust as unique, each also stresses that *all* acts of genocide are unique in their own manner, as well as being in some ways comparable. Bauer classifies the targeting of other social and ethnic groups during World War II and other mass crimes as acts of genocide, but he *also* asserts that the Holocaust is unique to other genocides in its deeply ideological basis and its intent to obliterate an entire people.<sup>125</sup> Bauer explains,

The Nazi motivations for killing the Jews consisted of, first, their view of them as Satan incarnate, out to control the world; second, their view of them as corrupting parasites and viruses whose elimination was a problem of world racial hygiene, in other words, a medical problem; third, the utopian dream of a new kind of humanity that would arise once the Jews were eliminated.<sup>126</sup>

Bauer later explains the linked relationship between the individuality and comparability of the Holocaust:

We differentiate for a pragmatic reason to facilitate the struggle against all [kinds] of murder. Just as we cannot fight cholera, typhoid, and cancer with the same medicine, mass murder for political reasons has to be fought differently than genocides and Holocausts...Acquiring knowledge makes clear the dialectic relationship between the particularism and the universalism of the horror. The Holocaust happened to a particular people for particular reasons at a particular time. All historical events are concrete in this manner: they happen with particular people for particular reasons at particular times. They are not repeated

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<sup>125</sup> Rosenfeld, "The Politics of Uniqueness," 36.

<sup>126</sup> Bauer, *Re-Thinking the Holocaust*, 45.

exactly but approximately and with the same characteristics of particularity. And that is exactly what makes them of universal significance.<sup>127</sup>

Like Bauer, Dominick La Capra sees both unique and comparable traits in the Holocaust. La Capra asserts that the Holocaust is both singular in its unclassifiable extremity and comparable in the sense that comparison is essential to comprehension. His concerns lie mainly in the process of comparison-La Capra shares the anxieties of other scholars with regard to the possibilities of “normalization” in discussing similarities with other historical events, and he strongly advocates discussing the *differences* between events as well as the similarities. However, La Capra also recognizes that insisting on the uniqueness of the Holocaust, while it may protect against unwanted normalization, may also potentially prolong the process of “working through” the Holocaust and actually *encourage* denial or repression.<sup>128</sup> Importantly, La Capra also recognizes the manipulability of the concept of uniqueness to fit specific goals or needs depending on the aims of an individual or group. Referring specifically to the *Historikerstreit*, he stated, “I have been insisting that a crucial issue raised by the *Historikerstreit* is how precisely the emphasis on uniqueness or comparability functions in the historian’s own context.”<sup>129</sup>

Peter Novick also asserts that each historical event resembles, and differs from, every other historical event in certain ways, which in effect means all historical events are unique and none are completely unprecedented. Thus, the idea of “uniqueness” is

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<sup>127</sup> Bauer, *Re-Thinking the Holocaust*, 67.

<sup>128</sup> Dominick La Capra, “Representing the Holocaust: Reflections on the Historians’ Debate,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 112.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

pointless, and teasing out only those aspects that are “unique” about the Holocaust ignorant of its similarities to other events is an “intellectual sleight of hand.”<sup>130</sup> Novick states,

The assertion that the Holocaust is unique—like the claim that it is singularly incomprehensible or unrepresentable—is, in practice, deeply offensive. What else can all of this possibly mean except ‘your catastrophe, unlike ours, is ordinary; unlike ours is comprehensible; unlike ours is representable.’<sup>131</sup>

In recent years, international genocide prevention as a front for American intervention, often in collaboration with official global political task forces, has moved to the forefront of American political agendas. Other mass crimes classified as “genocides” have become a joint focus alongside the Holocaust in sociopolitical discussions: for instance, America’s push for Turkish recognition of the Armenian genocide. By Jews and non-Jews alike, the Holocaust is often offered up as the irrefutable worst-case scenario against which other atrocities are analyzed; conversely, the Holocaust is cited as the ultimate lesson in “never again,” as a shock to the system that sensitizes us to other atrocities.<sup>132</sup> This dichotomous identification of the Holocaust as sacred and profane can be quite confusing to navigate.

While efforts in the United States to proactively combat and, idealistically, prevent genocide are both admirable and essential, the invocation of the Holocaust as an impetus for change, and the language with which it is often described, tend to reinforce the hierarchical structure of current genocide discourse. The attributed characteristics of singularity and sacredness were clearly illustrated in a single series of speeches given at

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<sup>130</sup> Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 9.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in 2012 during the annual Days of Remembrance. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, who introduced President Barack Obama, stated, “Never has one people been condemned by another people to total annihilation...The greatest tragedy in history could have been prevented...”<sup>133</sup> President Obama similarly stated in his address, “We must tell our children about a crime unique in human history. The one and only Holocaust-six million innocent people-men, women, children, babies-sent to their deaths just for being different, just for being Jewish.” The president then stated, “I’ve walked those sacred grounds at Yad Vashem, with its lesson for all nations—the Shoah cannot be denied.”<sup>134</sup>

The president’s address illustrates the widely-accepted perspective that in any given comparison of the Holocaust to other tragedies, this other event is implicitly overshadowed. Yet such a viewpoint also engenders a dismissal of other acts of mass crime. While it may seem clinical to attempt to evaluate and compare the causes and effects of mass atrocities as separately as possible from judgments of significance and emotional responses, it is precisely through this method that the Holocaust can be understood, and that knowledge can be gleaned concerning genocide prevention and response.

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<sup>133</sup> The White House. “President Obama Speaks on Preventing Mass Atrocities,” Streaming video, accessed February 1, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2012/04/23/president-obama-speaks-preventing-mass-atrocities>.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

## *American Jew/Jewish American*

Within the last few decades, Jewish Americans have expressed the seemingly paradoxical desires of asserting their particular Jewish identity while also acknowledging space for a cosmopolitan, interconnected composition of American identity related to, but separate from, multiculturalism. The notion of multiculturalism, according to noted American intellectual historian David Hollinger, grew rapidly in the United States in popularity in the 1980s–early 1990s, directed by tension from, and a rejection of, the narrowness of prevailing pluralist tendencies in American culture.<sup>135</sup> The *pluralist* view of identity categorizes individuals within a specific identifying ethno-racial group respective of inherited boundaries with the aim of maintaining independent cultural traditions, rejecting cosmopolitanism as a threat to identity. *Cosmopolitanism*, as a counterpoint to pluralism, lauds a dynamic and fluid identity built upon voluntary group affiliations and a wariness of traditional social enclosures. Rather than expecting members of specific identity groups to integrate into a dominant culture, as is expected in a pluralist structure, multiculturalism (ideally) lacks a requirement for a dominant (“mainstream”) culture in favor of placing all pockets of culture on equal footing. Bridging the gaps between pluralism, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, Hollinger conceptualizes *postethnicity*, a perspective which develops and applies cosmopolitan ideals within a “rooted” historical context in appreciation of a variety of kinds of ethnic connectedness.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 2.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

Recognizing that some factors of identity are by nature inherited (i.e. race/ethnicity) or ingrained (parentage), Hollinger's postethnic perspective "denies neither history nor biology, nor the need for affiliations, but it does deny that history and biology provide a set of clear orders for the affiliations we are to make."<sup>137</sup> Postethnicity allows for appreciation of traditional communities and heritage formed by history, blood and preconceived universal values while making room for new and diverse communities united through shared culture, religion, and/or other social factors.<sup>138</sup> To be postethnic is to recognize the multifaceted nature of one's identity as composed of many group affiliations simultaneously, both voluntary and involuntary, rather than identity seen as dictated by a specific set of rules delineated by a single identity group. Echoing Halbwachs' concept of fluid identity groups, Hollinger states, "a postethnic perspective recognizes that most individuals live in many circles simultaneously and that the actual living of any individual life entails a shifting division of labor between the several 'we's' of which the individual is a part."<sup>139</sup>

*The New Authentics: Artists of the Post-Jewish Generation*, the inaugural exhibition for the re-opening of the Spertus Museum in Chicago in 2007, explored this constructed nature of identity within a specifically Jewish context. Curated by Staci Boris, the exhibition featured sixteen artists whom despite widely divergent sociological backgrounds all defined themselves as (among other things) both "American" and "Jewish." Embracing the concept of a postethnic identity, and with it, the ongoing and

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<sup>137</sup> Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 13.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.



dynamic process of memory, *The New Authentics* pursues “the ever shifting, hazy, indistinct, yet so often assumed boundaries of Jewish identity...the Jew is no longer considered a stable and single ethnic, religious, or cultural category of analysis.”<sup>140</sup> This exhibition, borne of the new mission set forth by the Spertus Museum, reflected a conscious recognition of the complexities of contemporary Jewish identity, a *post-Jewish* identity based not exclusively on birth or participation in traditional Jewish practices, but also on elective identification with the group “Jewish.” As Spertus Museum director Rhoda Rosen states in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue:

We are establishing our new vision and programming at an historical juncture in America, when the multiculturalism of the late twentieth century, which encouraged respect for assumed circumscribed groups and singular identities, is being replaced by an understanding that identity has neither essential qualities nor clear boundaries but rather is permeable and constantly on the move.<sup>141</sup>

The artists of the post-Jewish generation (so named by the exhibition), born in America in the 1960s-1970s, exemplify the postethnic turn toward the recognition of elective identity and the breadth of cultural combinations pieced together to form personal and collective identification. Part and parcel with postethnicity, post-Jewishness emphasizes voluntary over involuntary affiliations (for instance, a person who converts to Judaism, or who was raised in a Reform community and chooses to practice Orthodoxy) while also appreciating the value of more traditional Jewish communities. Identifying as a “Post-Jew” does not necessarily mean casting off the traditions of old and advocating a “new” Judaism detached from its roots; rather, the post-Jewish perspective includes such identifying factors among many possible Jewish cultural practices from which an

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<sup>140</sup> *The New Authentics*, 16.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

authentic Jewish identity could be formed. Post-Jews typically no longer identify themselves primarily with their European Jewish roots, but see themselves distinctly as Americans: born and raised in America, their home and community are in the States.

While customs such as regular synagogue attendance, marriage within the faith, celebration of Jewish rituals and rites of passage, and adherence to dietary or clothing restrictions as dictated by the Torah (traditionally practiced by European Jews who emigrated to America) continue in Jewish life, the Jewish community has begun to accept alternative definitions of Jewishness in which individuals or families choose the cultural practices befitting their lifestyle and beliefs rather than following the prescriptions of the community. In this manner, not only is *individual* Jewish identity more open to diversity, but the Jewish community is compelled to embrace the evolving nature of its membership.

While condensing the history of the American post-WWII Jewish community into a few paragraphs oversimplifies the nuances of the various Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and other denominational groups active in the United States, it does offer some insight into how American Jews have asserted their identity publicly over time, particularly in balancing the “American” and “Jewish” strains of identification. The two decades after World War II (1940s – 1950s) are often touted as a “Golden Age” for American Judaism in terms of religiosity; many Jews felt that as the largest population of Jews in the world post-Holocaust it was their duty to reinvigorate and uphold Jewish practice and community, as well as to promote tolerance and unity.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 274–276.

Hallmarks of acceptance into mainstream culture, such as the popularity of movies and books by Jewish creators, support for the State of Israel, a willingness to unite under common causes (such as civil rights), and even a Jewish Miss America all signaled to Jews that they had “arrived” as members of American society and could once again more openly practice Judaism without fear of anti-Semitic backlash. However, studies show that it is possibly the *idea* of religion, rather than the practice itself, that was considered important to American Jews in the 1950s—demonstrated by the fact that only 26 percent of Jews attended services weekly and only 60 percent of Jews were synagogue-affiliated at the time.<sup>143 144</sup> Additionally, though observance of certain holiday traditions such as lighting Hanukkah candles, the Passover Seder, and attending High Holiday services was maintained, continuation of everyday laws such as keeping kosher and Shabbat declined markedly in the 1950s. Due at least partly to suburban expansion in the post-war economic boom, building new synagogues and Jewish day schools (attendance at day schools doubled between 1948 and 1958<sup>145</sup>), as well as interest in Jewish theology, Torah study, and religious thought, were the areas in which Jewish life most expanded.<sup>146</sup> Various surveys conducted in the last ten years by American institutions indicate that while being Jewish continues to be important to a large majority

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<sup>143</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 278.

<sup>144</sup> The American Jewish Committee, “AJC 2012 Survey of American Jewish Opinion,” *American Jewish Committee*, published September 27, 2012, accessed June 1, 2012, <http://www.ajc.org/site/c.ijjIT2PHKoG/b.685761/k.CB97/Home.htm>.

<sup>145</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 279.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 283. Though it is difficult to say how much impact American opinions of Communism had on Jewish interest in practicing religion, it is worth mentioning, as Sarna does, that secular Judaism, in fact secularism in general, were often seen as subversive. As a note of contrast to the Soviet Union and the purging of Jews in the 1940s, America deemed religion an “essential part of the American way of life”—only one percent of Americans in 1952 claimed secular status.

of those interviewed, the idea of “being Jewish” is not necessarily defined by attending services or observing rites of passage.

While the Jewish community in the immediate post-war decades appeared focused on *Tikkun Olam*, or “repairing the world,” in later decades many Jews (as a community and as individuals) would focus inward on the “Jewish world,” addressing problems facing Jewish Americans and fulfilling obligations to the Jewish community more so than global issues. As Jonathan Sarna has stated,

Whereas during the 1950s and 1960s universal causes like world peace, civil rights, interfaith relations, and opposition to the war in Vietnam dominated the American Jewish agenda, subsequent decades saw greater emphasis on issues of particularistic Jewish concern.<sup>147</sup>

In terms of Jewish identity, a sort of “diversity within unity” began to formulate in the 1970s (when a number of the post-Jewish artists in *The New Authentics* were born), particularly within the Reform and Conservative movements. This generation of Jews, largely fully-assimilated and contemporarily-minded, asserted the position of the individual and the family as the decision-makers in matters of personal Jewish practice and religion, as opposed to the traditional authority of rabbinical oversight. Spurred at least partially by the Six-Day war in Israel in 1967, which many Jews felt was another major threat to Jewish continuity following the Holocaust, the cross-denominational shift toward Jewish particularism encompassed more open and connected engagement with traditional Jewish rituals while simultaneously embracing a more relaxed, elective trend of Jewish services and lifestyle rooted in personal fulfillment and meaningfulness rather than community obligation. This late twentieth century “Jewish Renaissance” of

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<sup>147</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 307.

flourishing Jewish life and culture is paradoxical to concurrent concerns about assimilation, the climbing percentage of intermarried Jewish families (since 1985, the National Jewish Population Surveys reported as many as one-third of all American Jews living in mixed Jewish/non-Jewish households),<sup>148</sup> and overall shrinkage in number of the American Jewish population.

The acceptance of a broadening definition of “Jew” spurs the recurring question of who, and what, defines Jewish identity. The individualist trend within the Jewish community among young Jews, who do not wish to be *told* how to be Jewish, highlights the lack of a body of centralized Jewish leadership and the substitution of a more localized leadership through a synagogue, community center, or other institution rather than a single entity. This, in turn, causes contrasting or unclear guidelines for the practice of Jewish life, the theological and practical boundaries of the branches of Judaism (i.e. Orthodox or Reform), and leaves decisions about whom can be considered “Jewish” to, essentially, personal opinion. Deciding whether non-Jews can be called to read from the Torah, if Reform and Conservative Jews are truly considered Jewish (some Orthodox Jews would say no), or whether women should be allowed to have a Bat Mitzvah—such decisions are often made by individual institutions, and one can choose to be affiliated only with those whose theology and practice they support. While in some ways such a structure (or, perhaps, lack of structure) supports individual Jewish identity, it also raises concerns over further fragmentation of the Jewish community and, ultimately, the breakdown of Jewish unity entirely. There are no easy answers to such questions, and no

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<sup>148</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 362.

established Jewish authority to respond to them. The structure of the global Jewish community is, as it has always been, in flux—whether this malleability is a positive or negative feature is open for debate.

Undoubtedly, changes in the structure of the Jewish community have contributed to the Holocaust becoming such a unifying factor. In America the Holocaust, like Israel, has been a rallying point for Jews across the country; it is one of the few common causes that can connect a population so diverse in composition. From 1993 onward, surveys conducted by the American Jewish Committee state that roughly three-quarters of American Jews consider the remembrance of the Holocaust to be an “extremely important” or “very important” part of being a Jew (in 2011, this composed 86 percent of interviewees).<sup>149</sup> While younger Jews (here called post-Jews) continue to uphold this view, many are also wary of defining their Jewishness primarily through the Holocaust (and through victimhood).

At the same time, and particularly within the art world, young American Jews are exploring their emotional connection to, their questions about and their understanding of the Holocaust in a contemporary context. While the primary focus of *The New Authentics* is the expression of post-Jewish identity, a handful of artists chose to address the Holocaust in their works from particularized perspectives. Their inclusion among the other artists in the exhibition reasserts the continued presence of the Holocaust in young American Jewish identity and speaks to Boris’s previous statement of “an apparent easing of the predicament of minority artists who have long been pressured—implicitly or

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<sup>149</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 333.

explicitly—to work within certain thematic or stylistic parameters in order to be welcomed by the mainstream art world.”<sup>150</sup> The shifting, colorful nature of post-Jewish identity and the acceptance of American assimilation, as well as American attitudes toward the Holocaust, undoubtedly play into how young Jews process the events within their own worlds, while also reflecting changing attitudes into what constitutes “appropriate” artistic expression of the Holocaust.

The *Mirroring Evil* exhibition at the Jewish Museum, New York challenged the implicit parameters of Holocaust-related art and pinpointed a number of hot-button issues in creating and exhibiting such artworks. Comprised of works combining photographic documentation of Nazi war crimes, pop culture, and “assimilated” images, the exhibition featured nineteen works by thirteen artists within the United States and abroad, among them Israel, Poland, and Germany. The exhibition addressed the manifold issues entangled in the “packaging” and consumption of the Holocaust in contemporary American society, including but not limited to: the exploration of conceptions of evil and the figure of the perpetrator; the juxtaposition of good versus evil, especially the taboo, ambiguous realm between victim and perpetrator; the confrontation of images of Nazism and the ‘culture of victimhood’ often ascribed (by Novick and others) to the Jewish community; and a move “beyond the reverential”<sup>151</sup> toward a more exploratory body of Holocaust-related art.

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<sup>150</sup> Boris, *The New Authentics*, 20.

<sup>151</sup> Pearlman, Jeanne, “Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art Case Study: the Jewish Museum, New York City,” *Animating Democracy*, accessed July 8, 2012, <http://animatingdemocracy.org/publications/case-studies>, 6.

Joan Rosenbaum, Director of The Jewish Museum, described the exhibition thus: “In *Mirroring Evil*, the artists dismiss classicism, edifices, and memorial rituals. They replace them with a disquieting, demanding, and jolting approach, which asks us over and over again to look deeply into human behavior.”<sup>152</sup> Reesa Greenberg, a contributing scholar to the exhibition catalogue, commented:

The exhibition was unlike any exhibition in a Jewish Museum to date about art and the Holocaust. Before, imagery focused on victims of the Holocaust and the overall feeling tone was one of mourning. In *Mirroring Evil*, viewers were surrounded by Nazi imagery and left without any sense of certainty about how to respond to hitherto taboo images of Hitler, games about the Holocaust, and the sexual tugs of Fascism.<sup>153</sup>

*Mirroring Evil* thus highlighted the tension between socially probing works by newer artists, often conceived as “kitsch,” or non-art, the sanctity expected of the memory of the Holocaust, and the semiotic reintegration of taboo and/or fossilized symbols.

Kleeblatt’s intentions were apparent in the design of the exhibition; in fact, *Mirroring Evil* was planned as a gateway to public discussion, an entire program of educational and dialogical opportunities preempted by the engagement of the community in the planning process itself. Funding for *Mirroring Evil* was provided through a grant from the Animating Democracy Initiative (itself funded by the Ford Foundation), a four-year program of Americans for the Arts with a goal of “fostering artistic activity that encourages civic dialogue on important contemporary issues.”<sup>154</sup> A rigorous, multi-year planning process began within the walls of the Jewish Museum, where staff from all

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<sup>152</sup> Joan Rosenbaum, “Director’s Preface,” *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*, ed. Norman L. Kleeblatt (New Brunswick, New Jersey: The Jewish Museum, New York, under the auspices of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and Rutgers University Press, 2001), vii.

<sup>153</sup> Reesa Greenberg, “*Mirroring Evil*, Evil Mirrored: Timing, Trauma, and Temporary Exhibitions,” *Museums After Modernism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 104.

<sup>154</sup> *Animating Democracy*, [www.animatingdemocracy.org](http://www.animatingdemocracy.org), accessed August 3, 2012.



departments came together to frame the core questions that would guide the focus of the exhibition and any associated public programming. The questions, designed to promote rather than inhibit public dialogue, included:

- *Who can speak for the Holocaust?* Can only survivors speak? How can subsequent generations gain understanding and apply the lessons of the past?
- *How has art used Nazi imagery to represent evil?* What happens to our understanding of history as film, television, and other art forms convert the Nazis into symbols?
- *What are the limits of irreverence?* To what extent may artists overstep the bounds of taste, in confronting facts that are outrageous and terrifying? Do some art forms work against themselves?
- *Why must we confront evil?* What are the dangers of ignoring the past or being complacent about the present?
- *How has art helped to break the silence?* When reality seems to be unspeakable, how may art open a dialogue and keep memory alive?<sup>155</sup>

Rabbi Brad Hirschfield, Vice President of the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership (a collaborator with the Jewish Museum on the exhibition), stated, “We knew from the beginning that the questions the art in *Mirroring Evil* posed about “ownership” over the Holocaust, the power of media to narrate, distort, and persuade, and the processes of identification with perpetrators or victims could make for explosive reactions.”<sup>156</sup>

Alongside interdepartmental staff collaboration, the curators also held roundtable planning and feedback meetings with the artists of the show’s works, as well as with Jewish community religious and lay leaders, scholars, Holocaust survivors, children of survivors, critics and other persons of note to advise the curatorial staff and troubleshoot potential issues. An exhibition brochure for *Mirroring Evil* released to the media and the

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<sup>155</sup> Pearlman, “Mirroring Evil:Nazi Imagery/Recent Art Case Study,” 5.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 19.

public in advance of the opening date explained the show as a social project with many components, rather than simply a display of works, and educated audiences on the works they were soon to see.<sup>157</sup> A series of programs—public panels, forums, and gallery-tour discussions—were held to promote public discussion, with the exhibition intended as a jumping-off point for addressing larger social issues such as violence, politics, discrimination, and memory.

Despite such carefully-laid plans, *Mirroring Evil* was decried in the press and by swaths of the public long before the exhibition opened its doors. Pearlman’s case study states that “There is...no doubt that the media played a role as a stimulus to controversy and as a tool for those who were interested in disrupting the exhibition for their own purposes.”<sup>158</sup> New York media outlets, such as the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, immediately struck comparisons to a harshly criticized show at the Brooklyn Museum in October 1999 entitled *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*, for which then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani threatened, having seen only the exhibition’s brochure, to pull city funding for the museum if the show was not cancelled.<sup>159</sup> Many Holocaust survivors felt the exhibition was a betrayal of their suffering, a breach of their trust in the respectability of the Jewish Museum, and an insult to the memory of the Holocaust.

Yet, both the successful programming and the controversy surrounding the exhibition were springboards for honest, critical, and open discussion of social absorption

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<sup>157</sup> Pearlman, “Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art Case Study,” 13.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 20. Concerning the *Sensation* exhibition, Mayor Giuliani was specifically offended by a piece by Chris Ofili called *Virgin Mary, Elephant Dung*, which features a painting of the Virgin Mary incorporated with elephant dung.

of the Holocaust. What makes the planning and structure of the *Mirroring Evil* exhibition so important is the indication that society is engaging in new ways with the Holocaust and other events in the contemporary world. The locus of typical, satisfactory discussions about the Holocaust is changing course, though it seems there is difficulty throughout the path in finding entry points for such discussions and an open forum in which they can take place honestly and receptively. However, it is clear that many in younger generations are ready and willing to expand the avenues of conversation and exploration about the Holocaust, particularly within the art world. The deliberately incendiary works in *Mirroring Evil* and similar exhibitions, discomfiting in their use of familiar images with strong emotional connotations, replicate the experience of inherited memory in the contemporary world and function as both modes of emotional expression and as facilitators of intellectual discussion of larger social issues.

The works in *Mirroring Evil*, as well as *The New Authentics* and other shows featuring pieces by post-Jewish artists, also clear a path to exploring *why* such dissension occurs, what social and representational qualities prompt such heated responses. Reesa Greenberg offers a possible explanation for such dissension, in “that *Mirroring Evil* offered a different set of images from those already familiar from Holocaust museums and memorials, Jewish museums, and previous art exhibitions in North America about the Holocaust.”<sup>160</sup>

Yet Greenberg’s statement isn’t necessarily accurate—as has been established earlier, artists have been using images of perpetrators, documentary photographs, and

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<sup>160</sup> Greenberg, “*Mirroring Evil*, Evil Mirrored,” 108.

iconic symbols of the Holocaust for decades. Where the *Mirroring Evil* works, and other new works, deviate is a combination of factors: *how* they are utilized, with which other images they are juxtaposed, and a somewhat ambiguous manner of presenting the subject to the viewer. In a response to media criticism of *Mirroring Evil*, James Young pinpointed the use of imagery considered “taboo” as one of the troublesome qualities in the transition from memorial-based into exploratory-based Holocaust art:

Until recently, most “Holocaust art” has concentrated, understandably, on the victims of Nazi crimes—as a way to commemorate them, name them, extol them, bring them back from the dead . . . for a new generation of artists, some of them Jewish and Israeli, the only thing more shocking than the images of suffering victims is the depravity of the human beings who caused such suffering . . . These artists challenge us to confront the faces of evil, which, if truth be told, look rather more like us than the victims the Nazis left behind.<sup>161</sup>

Young and others also asserted the responsibility of society to confront the critical issues raised by the exhibition with the understanding that while viewers may be initially offended being positioned among “offensive” imagery, their willing engagement with such works may ultimately encourage them to be receptive to new ways of thinking.

### *“Something Old, Something New”*

Post-Jewish artists continue utilizing the iconic imagery of the Holocaust visual lexicon. In previous works, survivors such as Alice Lok-Cahana and Netty Vanderpol as well as second-generation American Jewish artists like Debbie Teicholz have explored the connotations of such imagery both as specific objects connected to direct memories of the Holocaust and as mental pathways to the familiar and understood. For post-Jewish

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<sup>161</sup> Pearlman, “Mirroring Evil:Nazi Imagery/Recent Art Case Study,” 22.

artists, exploration of the “ordinary” or “familiar” often leads in several directions: perhaps the presence of Holocaust meaning triggered in banal objects or spaces; the continued use of popular imagery (such as barbed wire or a certain photograph) once used in Holocaust media in reference to newer events; or even direct comments on the evolution of the images themselves in a media-saturated age. Post-Jewish representations of the Holocaust tend to be situated firmly in the present, simultaneously viewed through the lens of their personal identification with the subject and immersed in the collective of Holocaust memorial culture.

Shoshana Dentz’s (b. 1968, New York) *home lands*, *Fence I* and *Fence II* series, featuring stylized painted renditions of fencing, recall Teicholz and Lyon’s exploration of spaces of confinement; yet, Dentz’s works stem not from the memories of survivors, but from her own upbringing in an Orthodox Jewish community. Her choice of fencing as the theme for these works engages meanings both personal and political. Taught as a child to “equate the keffiyeh with the swastika,”<sup>162</sup> Dentz often incorporates the keffiyeh pattern of cotton headdresses commonly worn by Arabs with the pattern of chain link fence to symbolize her childhood fears (her inspiration from enclosures in the countryside, her Brooklyn neighborhood, and news images), as well as the tension of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict frequently leading contemporary global politics. The fences, rendered abstractly on large canvases, “allude to both psychological and political borders, containment, and power,”<sup>163</sup> positioning the viewer to have no sense of escape.

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<sup>162</sup> Sarah Giller-Nelson, “Shoshana Dentz,” in *The New Authentics: Artists of the Post-Jewish Generation* (Chicago: Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies, 2007), 73.

<sup>163</sup> Boris, *The New Authentics*, 30.

Throughout these works is an emphasis on the negative space between the links, and the space created between the work and the viewer, which function as reprieves to the feeling of inescapability. This suspended emotional space, ideally, prompts the viewer to “examine the symbolic relationship between physical barriers and the contested places they define.”<sup>164</sup> While any outward connection to the Holocaust in Dentz’s works is limited to the symbolic use of measures of entrapment and the associated emotions and questions it raises in the viewer, the artist explains that exploring the potential meanings of the fence motif was, in fact, her goal:

But, of course, any response is subjective: some people see it all as obstruction or containment, some see it as all as openings, some see the Holocaust or the wall being built along the Green Line, some see the parking lot fence down the street...I like the idea of all of those responses, and more, collectively hovering around in the viewer’s experience.<sup>165</sup>

Dentz’s *home lands #13* (2004) (Figure 14), featured in *The New Authentics*, is a diptych in neutral shades featuring undulating spirals of razor-wire fencing, interspersed with a chain of barbed wire and attached to a length of chain-link fence.



Figure 14.  
Shoshana Dentz,  
*home lands #13*,  
2004. Oil and  
gouache on canvas,  
70 x 140 in.  
Reprinted with  
permission of the  
artist.

<sup>164</sup> Giller-Nelson, “Shoshana Dentz,” 73.

<sup>165</sup> Monica de la Torre, “A Studio Visit with Shoshana Dentz,” *Bomblog* (blog), July 16, 2009, <http://bombsite.powweb.com/?p=3365>.

The fencing, receding diagonally into the distance with no end in sight, has been turned on its side in a discombobulating shift of gravity. Though Dentz's choice of chain link and razor wire fencing is taken from those found in inner-city American areas, the absence of any spatial context raises many questions for the viewer. Who raised these fences, and who is being kept out or in? Whose "home lands" are enclosed, and do such fences resolve anything?<sup>166</sup> Here, as in the other works in the series, Dentz addresses concepts of home and territory and the complicated relationship between land and people. The possible allusion to the keffiyeh pattern via the chain-link fence also raises issues of understanding the "other," Palestinian or otherwise, on the reverse side of the fence.

Dentz's related series *Fence I* is a continuation of the artist's investigation into the complicated interpretations of the fence motif. The works in *Fence I* (2003) originate from a single photograph of an aisle between two rows of concentration camp fence in Majdanek, Poland, a single spatial perspective through which Dentz explored the space from many angles. "I started imagining what it meant to be inside or outside those fences—physically first and then emotionally, psychologically, culturally and politically."<sup>167</sup> The expressionistic, almost incorporeal style of *Fence I, #1* (2003) (Figure 15) leads the viewer beyond the abstracted form of the fence itself and directs them to confront the confined space of the aisle.

In abstracting the source of the fence itself (the Majdanek camp) and approaching it from multiple mental pathways, Dentz attempts to remove the political reference and

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<sup>166</sup> Giller-Nelson, "Shoshana Dentz," 74.

<sup>167</sup> Carlos Motta, "Interview with Shoshana Dentz," *Carlos Motta, Artist*, accessed August 12, 2012, <http://carlosmotta.com/text/interview-with-shoshana-dentz/>.

emotional charge of the image itself and approach the “space between” the fence, leaving its meaning open to interpretation. “Instead of using a very clear and direct reference I am using the stand-ins for that, and by using the stand-ins other readings open up. The viewer isn’t directed on what to see or feel and brings their own life to their response to the image.”<sup>168</sup>

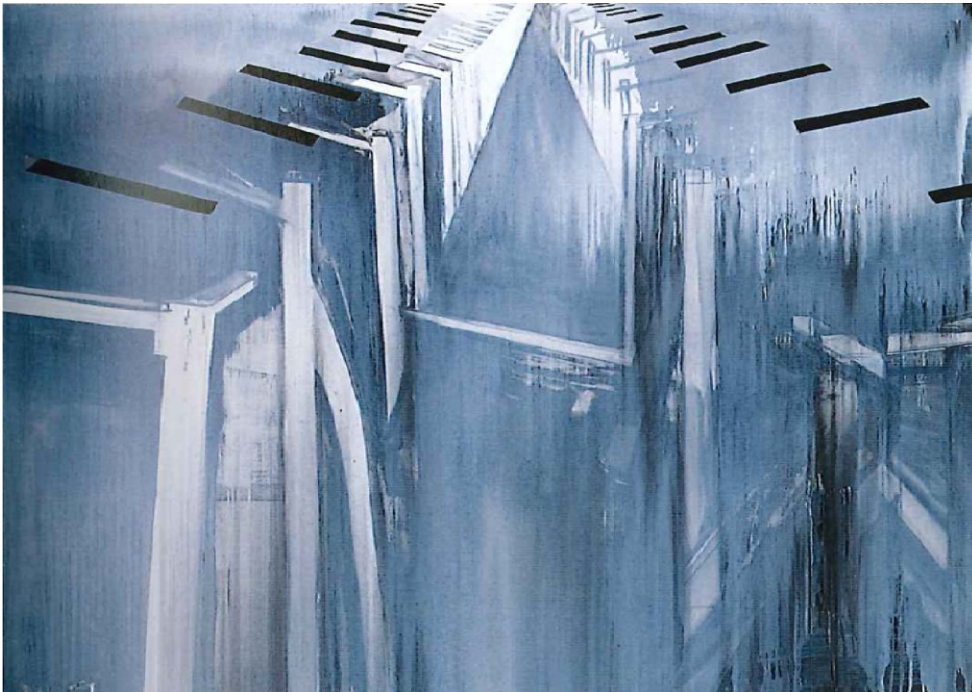


Figure 15. Shoshana Dentz, *Fence I, #1*, 2003. Oil on canvas, 54 x 70 in. Reprinted with permission from the artist.

Similar to artists such as Edith Altman, Dentz’s works are a personal as well as a public challenge to the encoding of images and our responses to them, as well as a call to move beyond encoded meaning to alternate, potentially illuminating understandings.

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<sup>168</sup> Motta, “Interview with Shoshana Dentz.”



Cheselyn Amato's work, exhibited in *The New Authentics*, also removes charged imagery from a specific context in order to explore its meaning. Amato's *Fabric Collage (Placemats, Napkins, and DeathCamps)* (2004), digitally-printed mixed-media piece (Figure 16) juxtaposes the bold colors and prints of table linens with an aerial photograph of a concentration camp.



Figure 16. Cheselyn Amato, *Fabric Collage (Placemats, Napkins, and DeathCamps)*, 2004. Inkjet print, 22 x 34 in. Reprinted with permission from the artist.

The blending of the fabrics, an element of “civilization,” and the photograph of the camp create uncertainty about the origins of the collage media, as does Amato's play with the formal elements of the camp photograph. The two-tone aerial view with its repetitive placement of buildings emphasizes line, color, and pattern rather than the horrifying

reality of the image itself; the plastic canvas overlay accentuates the geometric shapes like a grid drawing and echoes the modern patterns of the fabrics on the left-hand side.

This mixture of the banal and the extraordinary is, to Amato, a “transformation of ordinary material into something stranger and more meaningful...,”<sup>169</sup> and in some ways contrasts with the aim of Dentz’s work. While Dentz asks viewers to look *beyond* the implications of a charged image, Amato focuses on our understanding of familiar objects and images and how incorporating these elements in a manner other than their intended purpose can challenge this understanding. Yet, Amato’s work also exemplifies the idea that the ability of an object (or image) to be interpreted in more than one manner simultaneously can be potentially troubling, particularly with regard to the Holocaust in a media-saturated world. Amato’s works, and her process of creating them, speak to concerns of the Holocaust and its representation becoming diluted in the constant influx of symbols by which one is bombarded in contemporary everyday life. Rather than creating her collages from the materials themselves, Amato arranges her various materials on a scanning bed and prints a digital image, often reusing her materials and compositions in different works. The aerial camp image in *Fabric Collage*, for instance, is re-used in works for her series *Excavation/Exhumation: Cataclysm/Redemption Cycles* (2003) in composition with materials not used in *Fabric Collage*. In the works in which the aerial camp image is used, it is in the background, a sort of canvas for the other objects. “As the events of the Holocaust transition from memory to history, Amato’s

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<sup>169</sup> Lori Waxman, “Cheselyn Amato,” in *The New Authentics: Artists of the Post-Jewish Generation* (Chicago: Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies, 2007), 65.

receding image of a camp among layers of cheery textiles exemplifies the lure of moving on.”<sup>170</sup>

### *Traversing the Taboo*

“A notorious Nazi once said that when he heard the word ‘culture’ he reached for his revolver. Now, it seems, every time we hear the word ‘Nazi’ we reach for our culture.”<sup>171</sup>

~James E. Young, “Foreword: Looking into the Mirrors of Evil,” *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines taboo as “a prohibition imposed by social custom or as a protective measure.”<sup>172</sup> In post-Holocaust art, “taboo” representations can take many forms, including those found in the works of the *Mirroring Evil* exhibition. Any art deemed “kitsch,” comparisons of the Holocaust to other events, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and comparisons of mass production to the Nazi annihilation machine could all be considered taboo; yet one of the most common taboos in Holocaust art concerns the portrayal of Nazis.

Particularly in American social custom, the expectation of a clear delineation of perpetrator and victim, as well as a respect for the severity of the Holocaust and the suffering of its victims, restricts the use of Nazi imagery to carefully defined roles. Furthermore, the repression of potentially injurious Nazi imagery in American culture can be seen as a “protective measure,” a distancing mechanism to protect us from another

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<sup>170</sup>Boris, *The New Authentics*, 27.

<sup>171</sup> James E. Young, “Foreword: Looking into the Mirrors of Evil,” in *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*, ed. Norman L. Kleeblatt (New Brunswick, New Jersey: The Jewish Museum, New York, under the auspices of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and Rutgers University Press, 2001), xv.

<sup>172</sup> “Taboo,” *Merriam-Webster*, accessed August 24, 2012, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/taboo>.

Holocaust, from defaming the sanctity of the memory of the Holocaust, or perhaps even to protect ourselves from corruption. We repress images of Nazis not to forget, but to continue the process of remembering the victims by “condemning the torturers to oblivion.”<sup>173</sup>

It may seem that the increasing appearance of such volatile images is a recent phenomenon due to the ease of accessing and reproducing images in an increasingly technological age. Yet, images of Nazis in art have been produced since at least the 1930s, in America as well as in Europe. The fact that works portraying Nazis *exist* in post-Holocaust works is not a “new” development; rather, the change in course lies in the manner in which they are depicted within the works. According to art historian and contributor to the *Mirroring Evil* exhibition catalogue Lisa Saltzman, the works in *Mirroring Evil* continue already-integrated motifs and approaches by artists such as Robert Morris, Anselm Kiefer, and Gerhard Richter. Saltzman states in the *Mirroring Evil* exhibition catalog,

Even as the artists assembled in *Mirroring Evil* define their place in history, and in a history of postwar culture, by the forthrightness with which they explore and exploit the cultural imaginary and commodity that is the history of fascism and genocide, they are by no means the first.<sup>174</sup>

Though the issue hit a peak during the Eichmann trials, even during the war artists struggled with how to depict the figure of the Nazi, particularly because it was difficult to equate the often ordinary or “normal” appearance of Nazi soldiers in photographs and

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<sup>173</sup> Young, “Foreword: Looking into the Mirrors of Evil,” xv.

<sup>174</sup> Lisa Saltzman, “‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ Revisited: On the Ethics of Representation,” in *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*, ed. Norman L. Kleeblatt New Brunswick, New Jersey: The Jewish Museum, New York, under the auspices of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and Rutgers University Press, 2001), 62.

newsreels with the monstrosity of Nazi crimes. Therefore, “a straightforward depiction of Nazism was self-defeating as it revealed only the façade rather than the truth behind it.”<sup>175</sup>

Artists addressed this problem in various ways, a few of which will be touched upon very briefly here.<sup>176</sup> Some works, such as John Heartfield’s (German, 1891-1968) *The Face of Fascism* (1928) and Simon Wiesenthal’s (Austrian, 1908-2005) *Unmasked* (1945), utilized the idea of a literal “mask” as a device for showing what is behind the façade, often showing the face of Death behind a slipping mask. (The figure of Death itself was sometimes also used in place of a Nazi soldier). Animal symbolism, especially dogs, big cats, hybrid animal/humans and monsters portrayed as vicious predators illustrated the bestiality and brutality of Nazi behavior, as in Ben Shahn’s *Allegory* (1948) and Otto Dix’s *The Seven Deadly Sins* (1933). A number of Heartfield’s works, as well as those of American political cartoonist Arthur Szyk and others, painted Nazis, particularly Adolf Hitler, in a satirical fashion to mock National Socialism and defuse the power of the Nazi image. Still others chose to create scenes of Nazi soldiers in active violence against victims, such as William Gropper’s scene of two soldiers standing over a mass grave in *Your Brother’s Blood Cries Out I* (1943). A common thread binding such works together is the opposition of perpetrator and (a sometimes implied) victim, a clear delineation of enemy and sufferer.

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<sup>175</sup> Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation*, 207.

<sup>176</sup> For a thorough and fascinating examination of the types of symbolism used to depict Fascism, see Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation*, 207-236.

Such depictions of Nazis continued following the war, but new, more unsettling types of Nazi imagery emerged as the weight of the Holocaust began to sink in. Whereas during the war artists typically clearly distinguished between the oppressed and the “hate figure” to aid the spectator in differentiating themselves from the Nazis, post-war many artists combined them into one form to reassert the responsibility of the events on humanity in opposition to an anomalous force “in order to protect man from the recurrence of such an evil...they realized that evil is not something distinct from man, but a force at work within him that he must continually try to extirpate.”<sup>177</sup> A number of works by Francis Bacon (British, 1909-1992) engaged this notion of the possibility of evil lying dormant in man and, furthermore, on the ailing state of the world (including the suffering of victims *and* perpetrators) in the aftermath of the Holocaust. The grotesque, fleshy figures in Bacon’s *Crucifixion* (1965) distinguish between Nazi and victim only by the characteristic red, swastika-emblazoned armband on one of the figures. Conversely, works in Leon Golub’s “*Burnt Man*” series depict *victims* as molten monsters, their physical appearance reflecting inner anguish and suffering—no more recognizable as human than the face of a Nazi officer as malevolent.

Other artists continued to wrestle with the paradox of the perception and the reality of the appearance of the Nazi figure, particularly within the medium of photography or photo-realistic representation. Gerhard Richter (German, born 1932), who both had relatives killed by the Nazis as well as a few who participated in the Nazi party, painted a realistic portrait of his uncle, a young Nazi officer, in *Uncle Rudi* (1965).

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<sup>177</sup> Avishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation*, 225.

Audrey Flack's *Hitler* (1963-1964) re-presents a picture of a smiling Hitler and troops in Poland just after taking the country. In the 1990s, Christian Boltanski's sixteen-page book *Sans Souci* (1991) reproduced family album photographs from the everyday life of a Nazi officer.<sup>178</sup> The normalcy of images such as Richter's Uncle smiling as he stands in the street in full coat and uniform or the uncanny clash of the jovial expressions and gestures of Hitler and his men with the pallid, fleshy, shadowy faces and blank eyes in Flack's *Hitler* reflect the difficulty of reconciling the physical properties one would recognize as human with the inhuman acts this body potentially (or actually) committed.

Clearly, Nazi imagery and "taboo" representations have not been limited to American Jewish works; on the contrary, the majority of artists who addressed the Holocaust through Nazi imagery have until recently been of European origin, including survivors and second-generation artists (i.e. Christian Boltanski and Art Spiegelman). Yet, as the Holocaust has increasingly played a role in American Jewish communal identity, as well as American culture in general, such "problematic" images have been re-introduced into artistic modes of expression as tools for exploration beyond their previous usage as evidential context for archival storytelling or textbook Holocaust education. Though Americans continue to "reach for our culture" and sound the alarms when presented with potentially transgressive imagery, works like those presented in *The New Authentics* and *Mirroring Evil* have built a forum in which we can safely tackle Holocaust taboos, perhaps even renewing the ritual of Holocaust memory in the process.

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<sup>178</sup> Norman L. Kleeblatt, *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*, 8.

## *The Act of Play—Pathways to Understanding*

Like many artists before her, the works of American post-Jewish artist Collier Schorr play with the disagreement of normalcy and Nazi brutality, particularly in her photographic portraits of young men in various military uniforms (primarily American military and Nazi Wehrmacht uniforms). The photos, taken over twelve summers in Germany and featuring Schorr's German nephews and their friends, are staged in pastoral settings or the streets and fields of the small German town in which she worked. The photographs are complex works on their own: they touch on the concepts of national pride and history, identity, gender and masculinity, the manipulation of time, and most important to this discussion, the confrontation of the Holocaust in contemporary life. Yet Schorr's portraits are also part of a series of fictional/documentary works interspersing images of the German landscape, flowers, and people, a sequence amplifying the contrast between the prosaic settings of the photos and the physical appearance and associated identity of the uniforms in which the boys are clothed.

In part, Schorr's process of photographing the images of the young men in Nazi uniforms was a vehicle through which to confront her own Holocaust-related fears, as well as to discharge the emotional power of the Nazi icon. Schorr's process of photographing the boys is for her a cathartic sort of courtship, a way to confront the mythic figure of the Nazi:

That was the Jewish girl's boogeyman, you know, the big blond guy coming up the stairs. And so I had been courting that, getting closer and closer to it, to find out if it's really what I built it up to be and to make it more accessible somehow.



It is about control. It is about recreating a scenario that would have been extremely threatening and emasculating it in a sense.<sup>179</sup>

Most of the boys in Schorr's photos embody the blond, blue-eyed "Aryan ideal" and were chosen for those features. *Steffen, Barbarostrasse, Garden* (2001) (Figure 17), exhibited with the *New Authentics* show, for instance, is a close-up portrait of a seated, attractive young man in Nazi uniform lightly grasping a weathered helmet in his lap, a slight upturn at the corners of his mouth as he looks directly into the camera.



Figure 17. Collier Schorr, *Steffen, Barbarostrasse, Garden* (2001). Black and white photograph, 46 3/4 x 38 inches. Image courtesy 303 Gallery, New York.

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<sup>179</sup> "Collier Schorr: German Brutality and Roman Sensuality: Pictures of Soldiers in the Landscape," *Art:21*, Copyright Art:21, Inc., 2001-2012., <http://www.art21.org/texts/collier-schorr/interview-collier-schorr-german-brutality-and-roman-sensuality%E2%80%94pictures-of-sold>.

His neatly combed hair and tailored uniform, with its medals and decorations, and the undefined location of the sitter contrast uncomfortably with the boy's casual but pointed stare, the slight stiffness of his shoulders and the drape of his arms across the helmet, and the casual metal lawn chair in which he is seated. Like Boltanski's reproductions of German family photo albums in *Sans Souci*, the viewer is exposed to the mythic "monster" outside its typical habitat; incongruity and confusion abound as we try to reconcile the face of the young man with the imparted evil of his regalia.

While Schorr's subjects are chosen for their physical likeness to the Aryan ideal, there is an important distinction between the boys themselves and those they represent in Schorr's photographs. Schorr manipulates the viewer's concept of nationality, time, and perspective by employing the same young men in both American and German uniforms from different eras (as well as in some of her other series involving wrestlers), and by choosing ambiguous locations in which to shoot. In *Steffen, Barbarostrasse, Garden* the young man in Nazi uniform in a black and white photograph implies the passage of time as compared to a similar full-color image, *Andreas POW (Every Good Soldier Was a Prisoner of War) Germany* (2001). An ordinary figure is placed into a very charged scene, with the boys becoming a sort of troupe of actors. "There's an intentionality to it...if you saw him once as a wrestler and now you see him as a soldier...because of that repetition you understand that it's this exploration going on, it's not documentation simply."<sup>180</sup> The boys represent, in a sense, the body as icon, a representation *outside of a*

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<sup>180</sup> Michael Wang, "An Interview with Collier Schorr," *Harvard Photography Journal* 9 (2003). <http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/~hpi/schorrinterview.htm>, 3.

particular nationality which we see differently depending on the uniform worn. Schorr therefore confronts not the boys *themselves*, but the uniform, the image, and her perceptions of these fixations.

The artist also delves into the suppression of German history and identity evident in the boys, as well as within contemporary German culture as a whole. Like Gerhard Richter, many of the boys' relatives served in the Nazi army, and two of the boys are currently in the German army. Schorr captures the boys as they engage in a sort of role play wherein they can address their family and their country's own role in National Socialism. Through dressing them up in *Wehrmacht* uniforms in a country where such acts are illegal and place them into a landscape fraught with war and destruction, only to later don the American uniforms, the costumes of "heroes," Schorr states:

I wanted to lift open that Pandora's box, in a sense, and to put them back into the landscape to see what it would feel like, to see what they would feel like, and to sort of try to play out something that was less show business, less gigantic mourning session, less Steven Spielberg, where it's not about good and evil, it's just about the commonplace moment...<sup>181</sup>

The pastoral backdrops in Schorr's images and the candid capture of the young men as they 'play dress up' essentially allow them a safe space in which to tackle historical taboos and the censoring of their heritage. Furthermore, the "acting out" of a shared, often repressed history grasps at the possibility of accepting German nationalism and patriotism beyond the shadow of National Socialism.

It could be said that Schorr attempts to desensitize herself to such strong imagery; some might even argue, in pejorative terms, that she attempts to desensitize herself to the

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<sup>181</sup> Wang, "An Interview with Collier Schorr."

Holocaust. Yet rather than “normalizing” the Holocaust within historical discourse, Schorr’s aim is to comprehend the role it plays in her self-identity and, to a degree, to shift the centrality of her Jewish self-understanding away from her association as a member of a group persecuted during the Holocaust. One of the many goals of Schorr’s project was “to take away its power over me as a Jew so that I wouldn’t become more Jewish because of the Holocaust, or a certain kind of Jewish because of the Holocaust.”<sup>182</sup> The diverse lifestyle and belief systems of the American Jewish community inevitably create obstacles to a sense of collective belonging, and the Holocaust is one of few issues upon which all Jews can unite. While Schorr doesn’t aim to phase out the Holocaust as a piece of her Jewish identity (in fact, in some ways it very much consumes her), like many young Jews her goal is to form a Jewish identity within the present rather than the past, and to understand the Holocaust within the framework of contemporary life.

Collier Schorr’s photographs are thus the culmination of “role-playing” scenarios for her and her young subjects, the facing and dismantling of the specter of the Nazi and of now-forbidden emotional territory. Several other artists, especially within the *Mirroring Evil* exhibition, address taboos of the figure of the Nazi, the invisible line between victim and perpetrator, and the notion of role play. Polish (non-Jewish) artist Piotr Uklanski’s (b. 1968) *The Nazis* (1998) is an exploration of the typification and glamorization often present in filmic and television portrayals of Nazis and the subsequent romanticizing of the Holocaust itself. Like many of the artists in *Mirroring*

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<sup>182</sup> Wang, “An Interview with Collier Schorr.”

*Evil*, Uklanski learned about the Holocaust mostly from media, and his works often comment on intersections between art, entertainment, and cultural references.

*The Nazis* consists of 166 “headshot” images of film actors in German army uniforms, most from films about World War II. Like a leader of film, the images are wrapped in a single layer around the walls of the gallery. Among the many famous faces are Frank Sinatra, Clint Eastwood, Ralph Fiennes, and Max von Sydow. Uklanski counteracts the easily identifiable faces of the celebrities (whom many visitors tried to name as they walked through the gallery) with the uncertain function of the images themselves, as the artist purposefully omitted any accompanying text to explain the work.<sup>183</sup> Linking “Nazi banality and evil with Hollywood glamour and extravagance,”<sup>184</sup> Uklanski forces viewers into a gray area between invoking affection for their favorite actors and realizing that the actors impersonate, and potentially commodify, evil.

*The Nazis* was greatly inspired by Pop art, particularly the works of Andy Warhol. Like Warhol’s deadpan installations of Campbells soup cans in which individually-canvassed, silkscreened cans are distinguishable only through their soup variety,<sup>185</sup> Uklanski references commercialism and mass culture through the repetitious headshots of the various actors. His chosen images highlight the tropes of Hollywood portrayals of Nazis: monocles and eye patches, scars, gold-rimmed spectacles, and the quintessential Nazi cap; the stern yet handsome faces we so recognize as our favorite actors. Uklanski asserts that, like stereotypical movie “bad guys” such as gunslingers and mobsters,

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<sup>183</sup> Kleeblatt, *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*, 108.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 108. The *Mirroring Evil* catalog specifically references a Warhol exhibition of a series of Campbells soup cans at the Ferus Gallery, Los Angeles in 1962, in which the canvasses were exhibited in a single line around the gallery propped up on shelves.

Hollywood pop culture has created the “clichéd” Nazi: a specific set of characters, “mannerisms and short cuts that it resorts to quickly when it depicts Nazis.”<sup>186</sup> Tackling the allure of celebrity culture and its affect on Holocaust representation, Uklanski challenges viewers to critically examine how re-presentations of the Nazi figure in popular culture reflect on our collective incorporation of the Holocaust.

Both Schorr and Uklanski experiment with ordinary people in extraordinary costume in a manner that illustrates the complexity of our relationship to the Holocaust, a reality often encouraged to be ignored. The notion of “role play” as a channel through which to delve into Holocaust issues—whether by confronting or impersonating the figure of the Nazi—and the ability or interest in acting out such situations has and continues for many to be outside the limits of acceptable artistic Holocaust expression and engagement. Ernst van Alphen, a prominent Dutch literary professor with expertise in Holocaust literature, defines this as a battle between “historical discourse” and “imaginative discourse.” As opposed to historical discourse, a form of reference subordinate to reality (i.e. documentary works) that typically distance the audience safely from the world of Holocaust perpetrators, imaginative discourse often positions the viewer amidst the events, forcing them to interact with and reenact them.<sup>187</sup> The performative quality of such works, particularly in instances where the viewer is asked to step inside the mind of the perpetrator, can reveal much about the human condition and the capability of slipping

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<sup>186</sup> Waldemar Januszczak, “Dressed to Kill,” *Sunday Times* (London England), August 16, 1998: 10, *Academic OneFile*, accessed June 29, 2013, [http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.sfpl.org/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA72140775&v=2.1&u=sfpl\\_main&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w](http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.sfpl.org/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA72140775&v=2.1&u=sfpl_main&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w).

<sup>187</sup> Ernst van Alphen, *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory*, Introduction (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 1-15.

into dangerous acts or behavior in a mediated, controlled environment (the art object, and/or within museum walls). However, while the artist may be able to easily identify role-playing as a constructive act of “play,” individual viewers may resist such a pull into ambiguous and ominous territory, or even dismiss the work as intentionally sensationalist.

### *The Holocaust as Trope*

With the complications of contemporary media culture and the potentially endless understandings of Holocaust imagery the post-Jew, who learns of the Holocaust primarily through media, must warily navigate the surfeit of materials (visual or otherwise) composing the event’s collective, historical memory. The Holocaust as event and as idea has become in some respects a trope; the imagery that once directly referred to the events is now often a medium through which to address other sociopolitical ideas like commoditization, commercialism, and authenticity. Previously the symbolized, the Holocaust has become such a fixture in mainstream culture that in word, image, and idea it is often re-presented as a commentary on *other* aspects of society.

Similar to Schorr and Uklanski, Alan Schechner addresses the veracity of widely-disseminated images and the commodification of the Holocaust by manipulating and /or combining these images with others. The artist statement on Schechner’s website proclaims,

A central theme in my art has been a series of projects concerned with issues of the Holocaust. These images have taken a number of different forms from animation to installation, digitally manipulated photography to video projections. These works deal with a number of issues but are linked by my interest in how

Holocaust images are used, by whom and to what ends. Central to these works is my belief that all images exist in social and political contexts, and as such all images are ideological.<sup>188</sup>

Schechner's work, in some manner, is not truly about the Holocaust itself, but about visual culture. He could have easily used images from other atrocities, or other news events or issues. Simply put, the Holocaust as a historical event is one that comes with very high expectations within visual culture, and also with a high volume of visual reproduction. In reviewing Schechner's work, Lutz Koepnick stated,

On the one hand, he wants to direct our attention to the fact that photographic images-including those depicting the Holocaust-require contexts in order to assume meaning and carry messages. His is not a photograph aspiring to witness, mourn, or work through the traumas of the Holocaust. It does not aim at finding a new way of representing the unrepresentable.<sup>189</sup>

*It's the Real Thing-Self-Portrait at Buchenwald* (1993) (Figure 18), exhibited at the *Mirroring Evil* show, features one of Margaret Bourke-White's photographs of liberated prisoners at Buchenwald, superimposed by an image of the artist in a striped shirt, presenting a can of Diet Coke. The initially off-putting image works to "re-contextualize well-known imagery in order to destabilize the viewer's ordinary perception."<sup>190</sup> The Diet Coke can, Schechner's striped clothing—which echoes the prison uniform—and the background image itself signify mass industry in a medley of iconic images.

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<sup>188</sup> Alan Schechner, "Holocaust Art," *Alan Schechner*, accessed January 15, 2010, [www.dottycommies.com/holocaust.html](http://www.dottycommies.com/holocaust.html).

<sup>189</sup> Lutz Koepnick, "Photographs and Memories," *South Central Review* 21, no. 1, Politics and Aesthetics of Memory (Spring, 2004): 95. The Johns Hopkins University Press on behalf of The South Central Modern Language Association, accessed June 25, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40039828>.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*



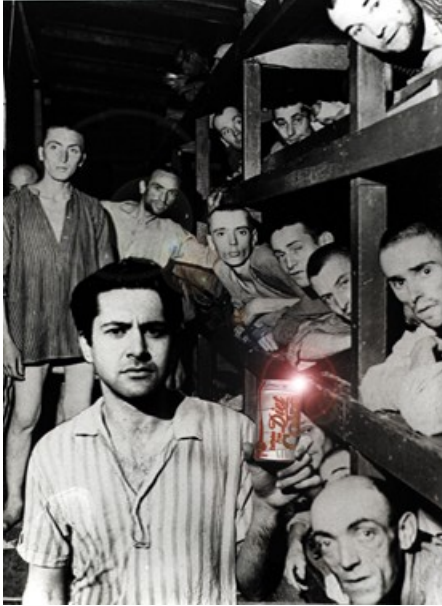


Figure 18. Alan Schechner, *It's the Real Thing-Self-Portrait at Buchenwald*, 1993. Reprinted with permission from the artist.

A number of Schechner's other works, including *Bar Code to Concentration Camp Morph* (1994) (Figure 19), address the connection between mass-produced images, mass industry and mass crime.

In *Bar Code*, a series of six images, beginning with a barcode, slowly transforms into a documentary photograph of a group of bare-headed men wearing the easily-distinguishable vertically-striped black and white uniform of concentration camp prisoners. The conversion of numbers to these figures addresses, on a larger scale, Nazi reduction of human beings to numbers in the concentration camps; more specific to Schechner's pursuits, however, the work "alludes in reverse to a specific condition of digital technology, which transforms images constituted in reality into bytes of

information, rhyming with the death camps as it transforms life into a sequence of numbers.”<sup>191</sup>

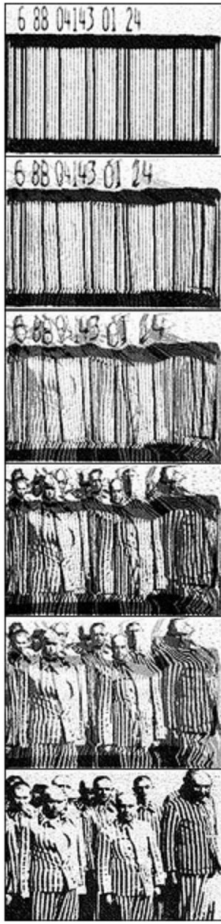


Figure 19. Alan Schechner, *Bar Code to Concentration Camp Morph*, 1994. Reprinted with permission from the artist.

Schechner’s manipulation of imagery so central to our understanding of the Holocaust directs attention to the manner in which Holocaust images have “become some of the most enduring commodities of postwar visual culture.”<sup>192</sup> Schechner *does* intend to shock his audience, but not, however, with meaningless sensationalism; anticipating the shocked reactions of viewers, he utilizes this response as a gateway to recognizing

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<sup>191</sup> Noam Milgrom-Elcott, “Bar Code to Concentration Camp Morph,” *Alan Schechner*, accessed June 16, 2013, [www.dottycommies.com/holocaust08.html](http://www.dottycommies.com/holocaust08.html).

<sup>192</sup> Koepnick, “Photographs and Memories,” 95.

how easily well-known images can be manipulated and reshuffled to present a completely different message.

Like many post-Jewish works on the Holocaust, Schechner's *It's the Real Thing* and *Bar Code* aim to inspire open dialogues about the integration of the Holocaust into contemporary collective memory and identity. His works, while provocative, inspire questions about how the Holocaust is re-presented in contemporary culture and what can be learned from such presentations, in some sense a "desacralization" of already-popular imagery for the purpose of discerning manipulations of these images for hidden agendas. Lisa Saltzman succinctly summarizes the tension induced by the blending of popular imagery and impactful events as illustrated in Schechner's works:

In many instances, that subject, their subject, comes to us from a domain of popular culture, from a field of representation many deem an entirely inappropriate form for such content. That is, such work presents to us what has already been represented, what has already been, in sources 'vulgar' and 'commercial,' not just depicted, but reified, packaged, commodified.<sup>193</sup>

The controversy surrounding Schechner's works is in some ways representative of the societal struggle to accept the historicization of the Holocaust. Holocaust imagery is iconic, the idioms of destruction and horror, and to permit the employ of such symbols in the expression of another idea is to admit the event is becoming integrated into history.

While a number of the Holocaust-related works in both *The New Authentics* and *Mirroring Evil* employ a number of images that are not *new*—they have been integrated into the iconographical language of the Holocaust over decades—what *is* new is their utilization in unfamiliar ways, and in the case of *Mirroring Evil*, in ways that are often

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<sup>193</sup> Lisa Saltzman, "Readymade Redux: Once More the Jewish Museum," *Grey Room* 9 (Autumn 2001): 100-101, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1262603>.

unsettling or ambiguous. Such works should not be arbitrarily discounted as sensationalist “kitsch” (though certainly those works exist), but rather as explorations of the feelings of curiosity, attraction, horror, imagination, and the countless emotions often expected to be repressed in deference to the Holocaust. As the meaning of iconic imagery changes not only over time, but from individual to individual, many images no longer carry simply the documentary connotations that have been expressed in the past; rather, they are often utilized on more conceptual terms that must be analyzed by the viewer. Many of the artists featured attempted to achieve a balance between affirming the Holocaust and critiquing their connection to it in an effort to ground their Jewish identity in the present day rather than the past.

## CONCLUSION

This work stems from an exploration of personal Jewish identity—a desire, as a young American “post-Jew” with no direct connection to the Holocaust, to understand my own reactions to cultural invocations of the Holocaust. In particular, I sought to think critically and objectively about representations of the Holocaust that often make others bristle (and to understand the nature of reactions to such representations); the yearning for knowledge and understanding of an event now historical and yet such a seminal underpinning of contemporary Jewish identity; and, ultimately, to examine how individual identification with the Holocaust is shaped by American culture.

I mentioned in my introduction David Hollinger’s concept of “postethnic” identity as recognizing both the transcendence of traditional heritage and the vast diversity of identity groups from which an individual may actively create their identity. For some Jews, being “Jewish” comprises only a small part of their identity, or none at all; others identify strongly with their Jewish identification, though not necessarily for traditional religious reasons. The entry points to Jewish engagement and the “portraits” of Jewish identity in the current era are more diverse than ever before. For the vast majority of American Jews, the Holocaust has thus been a unifying event for an otherwise fragmented community. While post-Jewishness ideally celebrates and embraces these differences, a dichotomy exists between the recent desire for asserting individuality in Jewish identity and the yearning for a common bond, a point of unity with which all of American Jewry can relate. While I was initially reluctant to label a group of people as “post-something,” which implies limits of a sort (similar to the concepts of modernism

and postmodernism), viewing the concept of “post” as a continuance or inheritance of the past within the present rather than a complete break with the past is well-applied to post-Jews.

The very present-centered focus of post-Jewish identity collides with the legacy of the Holocaust and the expectations surrounding its remembrance. While Jewish population surveys indicate that Jews as a whole agree the continuation of Holocaust memory is vital to Jewish survival and to Jewish identity, many younger Jews are wary of couching the majority of their identity in an event for which they have no personal experience. Therefore, wider acceptance in the Jewish community of different “kinds” of Jews contrasts with the often rigid, arbitrary rules of engagement with the Holocaust. Though passing on the legacy of the Holocaust continues to be a cornerstone of Jewish communal memory and education, addressing one’s emotions toward the events typically involves adhering to certain social standards. The connection young Jews feel with the Holocaust is often repressed in deference to how they “should” feel, or how they “should” react. This is particularly true within the art world, as I quoted from Ernst van Alphen:

Unlike other art that can claim autonomy or self-reflexivity, Holocaust art tends to be unreflectively reduced to how it can promote education and remembrance. Art, teaching, and remembrance are thus collapsed without any sustained debate about the bond between these three cultural activities.<sup>194</sup>

Holocaust-related art tends to be seen as a teaching tool, and as a vehicle to continuing the legacy of its memory, even outside of the memorial museum. While “teaching” can include an open dialogue about the issues such works provoke, and much

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<sup>194</sup>van Alphen, *Art in Mind*, 185.

Holocaust-related art serves this function, the thematic and stylistic choices of post-Jewish artists indicate a desire to address the Holocaust in ways with which they can directly relate in addition to, or even in spite of, how society expects them to relate. The role the Holocaust will play in anchoring the identity of future generations of Jews remains unknown, as does the answer to the question of how, or if, it is necessary in such a vibrant community to determine a “unifying” point unequivocally tying all Jews together, particularly a point that is situated in the past. Belonging to the group is, ideally and ultimately, in the mind of the individual above (or in opposition to) the consensus of the collective; the endpoint of identity is therefore, as Shaye Cohen says, “in the mind.”

As outlined in the introduction, three museum exhibitions and some of the works included in them were chosen as a “sampling” for this study in the development of post-Holocaust imagery. Each exhibition served a particular purpose, not only as a resource for collections of recent Jewish or Holocaust art, but also as studies for the evolution of Jewish identity and the Holocaust in American museums. *Witness and Legacy*, which included works from artists of all three post-Holocaust “generations,” provided an ideal starting point for discussing this particular framework of Holocaust memory and the temporal and cultural factors affecting corresponding visual engagement. *The New Authentics* offered an intriguing study of the diversity of Jewish identity as expressed in art, groundbreaking in that it is one of the first exhibitions known to the author as utilizing the term “post-Jewish.” Only a few of the works in *The New Authentics* dealt with the Holocaust—most of the works in the exhibition explored how Jewish identity interacts with other identity “groups” and larger social issues. *Mirroring Evil: Nazi*

*Imagery/Recent Art* was a groundbreaking exhibition not only in its impetus to forge an open, intellectual discourse concerning the how the Holocaust is activated as memory and idea in contemporary American culture, but also in the willingness of the Jewish Museum staff, the artists and advisory councils to display sometimes challenging, though intellectually stimulating, imagery without bowing to pressure from specific social groups. These three exhibitions illustrate three of the most critical points of this thesis, and the aims of each exhibition enrich the understanding of the others.

It was necessary to use an interdisciplinary approach in order to better understand the complexities of contemporary Jewish American identity and how the Holocaust is interwoven into it. As the present is inevitably rooted in the past, it was key to establish a basic understanding both of American Jewish identity from World War II to the present, as well as the associated history of Holocaust-related artistic production in America. Chapter I thus traced the history of Jewish Holocaust-related art in America in terms of overarching themes and symbolism.

Even within the first half of the twentieth century, certain themes and types of symbolism formed a basis for American Jewish responses to the Holocaust that would be modified as modes of expression for later decades through to the present day. Depictions of Biblical imagery as outlined by Ziva Amishai-Maisels, in part an import from Europe as artists like Chagall and Lipchitz escaped the Third Reich, would continue thematically in the works of Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko (whose works in the 1950s include at least one crucifixion scene) and even further forward by Leon Golub and others. While visually such works may have little in common, thematically these artists tapped into



nuanced forms of a similar expression: that of sacrifice, of shared suffering with non-Jews, through a subset of imagery universal enough to be relatable to non-Jews, and cataclysmic enough in its narrative to provide at least some outlet of expression for Jewish reactions to the Holocaust. This thesis, and the surveys of Jewish art that informed it, importantly take into account the sociopolitical factors that inform the usages and interpretations of this shared symbolism.

Applying Peircean semiotic theory to the works in these exhibitions allowed a view of the reciprocal relationship between imagery and identity. Peircean semiotic theory was an ideal framework for studying the Holocaust visual lexicon, as it is based in the accumulation of meaning over time as well as the individuality of each reading of a sign in context with cultural and personal factors. Individual and collective meaning of signs is, in effect, formed by a combination of previous definitions, cultural conventions and personal knowledge and experience. Complexities in the formation of the Holocaust visual language are compounded by the fact that imagery dealing with the Holocaust does not adequately encapsulate the events, and many typical images of the Holocaust were already understood to have meanings in a general context. Therefore, it is imperative to recognize with Holocaust imagery specifically that the imagery that is used to educate post-Jews about the Holocaust is already heavily laden with layers of meaning. Peirce's concept of signification as a *process* more so than a *structure* highlights the continually evolving understandings of the Holocaust visual code and allows a more objective, and ultimately more informative, study of works addressing the Holocaust.

In addition to semiotics, Chapter II also addressed the concept of “generations” of post-Holocaust art, as separated by temporal and relational distance from the actual events of the Holocaust. It is clear from *Witness and Legacy* that overarching thematic trends and approaches exist within each generation of post-Holocaust art, and that connections impacted by personal and cultural factors exist between generations of artists. Yet, certainly some works fall outside of these trends, and there remains a possibility that certain groups could be misplaced within this approach. Such groups could include American Jews who lived through the war but had no direct experience with the Holocaust, other close family members of victims, who are typically not mentioned, or refugees who escaped or immigrated before the war and who are therefore grouped with other American Jews (or excluded altogether).

The generational approach to post-Holocaust art is new enough to scholarship that it requires further clarity and a more intricate structure. While a generational approach may shed light on how the visual language develops over time and how it is related to one’s distance from the Holocaust, it is also clear with present and future generations in particular that their understanding of the Holocaust (the past) is tied into their understanding of the present—the two are inseparable. This is not necessarily true with the first two generations. Applying a generational methodology to future generations of Holocaust art may be more worthwhile from a cultural and individual standpoint, by placing the imagery within the larger nexus of contemporaneous media, than from the perspective of temporal distance from the Holocaust. Approaching post-Holocaust art generationally may be valuable in studying the first few post-war generations; however,

after the second or third generations, most Jews will experience the Holocaust historically and indirectly—so distance from the events will be a lesser factor than previously.

Nevertheless, the generational approach provides a compelling outline of the historical integration of Holocaust imagery in American Jewish art since the end of World War II.

Chapter III delved into the third and fourth generations of American Jews, the post-Jewish artists, and the many factors that contribute to their interpretations of the Holocaust. A discussion of the formation of collective and individual memory in the vein of Maurice Halbwachs illustrated the interconnected and yet very individualized nature of memory, and the role of the individual in forming a very specialized collective memory within their own mind. One's collective or "borrowed" memory of the Holocaust, similar to one's identity and to the formation of meaning, changes over time depending on gained knowledge and experiences. Thus memory is an *active*, not a static process involving the consistent recalibration of memory and identity and the consequent reshuffling of meaning. Memory therefore reinforces the multiplicities of meaning in signs.

Much of post-Jewish understanding of the Holocaust is situated firmly in the present, acquired through tailored curricula at schools and museums, community programs and commemorations, and mass media. If what Alvin Rosenfeld and Oren Baruch Stier say of the "Americanization" of the Holocaust is true (and it appears, at least in some instances, to be so), then a larger social friction exists between American culture and the Jewish community in re-presenting the Holocaust in contemporary life that engenders a sort of socio-cultural minefield for post-Jewish exploration and

understanding of the Holocaust. Young American Jews are expected to internalize and pass forward the legacy of the Holocaust, but they must also be wary of desacralizing or normalizing the Holocaust and guard against emotional expressions or investigations deemed beyond the realm of “acceptable” responses. Therefore, post-Jewish artists who step outside the lines of “appropriate” Holocaust representation are often arbitrarily or prematurely decried as contributing to the culture of sensationalism and kitsch so many see in mainstream American treatment of the Holocaust.

Yet, as I explained in Chapter III, post-Jewish artists generally and necessarily approach the Holocaust from within their own cultural surroundings, navigating out of the entrapment of durational time and into the chronological. A disjointed collection of shocking images and facts shape their understanding of the Holocaust, and the provocative nature of their works indicates this tension between familiar imagery with very strong emotional connotations (with which they are expected to identify) and the cognizance that the Holocaust is an inherited memory. Shoshana Dentz’s works continue Joyce Lyon and Debbie Teicholz’s sentiment of seeing the extraordinary in everyday surroundings, of imprinting a memory that is not one’s own. Collier Schorr’s portraits of young German boys in Nazi uniform confront the image of the Nazi soldier she was raised to fear and exposes and allows safe space for a mix of reactions—defiance, attraction, terror, curiosity—emotions so often repressed when reacting to Holocaust works. What results from the creation of these works is not an *absence* of memory, nor a dismissal of it, but a *reinvigoration* that offers a more intimate personal connection and a fresh perspective from which to continue the dialogue about the impact of the Holocaust.

Certainly, images of the Holocaust are effective on their own; but their re-integration into creative expression in genuine, thought-provoking ways activates a process of remembrance that brings the past into the present, and, as this process is repeated over generations, drawing the present into the future.

One of the most rewarding aspects of the field of art history is that finding answers to one's questions often requires delving into other fields. The interdisciplinary nature of art history is well-suited in its plurality to the study of post-Jewish identity and how memory, history, and experience are interwoven into the fabric of self-identification. It is clear that while post-Holocaust scholarship in multiple disciplines—among them sociology, the sciences, philosophy and politics—has proliferated in recent decades, in-depth cross-disciplinary study of the continued impact of the Holocaust has yet to become a regularity. A multifaceted method of studying the function of the Holocaust as a pillar of identity in Jewish art has only recently become a reality. This thesis has but scratched the surface of how artists in one country view the Holocaust; a more in-depth study of American works, or perhaps a cross-geographical study of parallel developments in post-Holocaust art, could shed more light on the particularities and universalities of post-Jewish identity and the Holocaust as a factor of it.

Ernst van Alphen's statement about the role of Holocaust art rings particularly true within the museum world. The art museum often serves not only as a "cabinet of curiosities," a collection of objects carefully curated to convey a particular narrative, but also as a forum for dialogue about pressing social issues. Cultural museums like the Spertus Museum have recently shifted their pedagogical focus to more broadly define

identity in general by frequently hosting exhibitions not necessarily rooted in religious or traditional identity factors, but in common values and community issues. Memorial museums, expectedly so, tend to focus primarily on transmitting narratives and forging connections to past events. Yet exhibitions dealing specifically with Holocaust-related art have, until the last few decades, focused mostly on the “teaching” and remembrance of the Holocaust, and in the past a handful of shows tended to make the rounds in museums across the country. It would be illuminating to study contemporary Holocaust-related exhibitions as mounted by different types of institutions—how they were conceived, planned, and ultimately received by the public; and the convergence of influences that direct, and ultimately form, part of public understanding of the Holocaust. As Ivan Karp states in *Exhibiting Cultures*, “Art museums, cultural-history museums, and natural-history museums have different justifications for their activities and radically different conceptions of how to use and present their collections.”<sup>195</sup>

At first glance, a number of Holocaust-related works across generations may appear to have little in common. Yet following the trajectory of the use of Holocaust-related symbols reveals the interconnectedness of all generations to the same basic visual understanding of the Holocaust. From the embroidered, stylized barbed wire in Netty Vanderpol’s *Terezin* to the abstracted, undulating forms in Shoshana Dentz’s *Fence* series; from the black stripes in Alice Lok Cahana’s *Sarah and Abraham in Auschwitz*, reminiscent of prisoner uniforms, to Alan Schechner’s digital manipulation of these stripes in *Bar Code to Concentration Camp Morph*—post-Holocaust American Jewish

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<sup>195</sup> Ivan Karp, “Part I: Cultural Representation,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington : Smithsonian Institution Press, c. 1991), 11.

artists draw from the same basic visual archive of the Holocaust in forming their works. In some cases, such artists appropriate literally an original image. Margaret Bourke-White's photograph was re-presented in anthropomorphic, comic form in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, as well as in collage form in Audrey Flack's *World War II (Vanitas)* (1976-1977). In other cases, the similarities are more thematic, as in explorations of feelings of displaced memory (present in many of the works discussed in this thesis), or an introspective approach to perceptions of Nazi government and the Nazi figure. Rather than signaling a *decline* in connectedness with the Holocaust, the continued utilization of such imagery in innovative ways by third and fourth generation artists indicates a *shift* in perspective toward a present-oriented, post-Jewish view of identity in which individuals own their specific relationship with the Holocaust.

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