

Provoking Taboos: Representing Holocaust Art Today

Dr. Julia Faisst

Abstract:

Since the mid-1990s, representations of the Holocaust in the visual arts, literature, and popular culture have undergone a paradigm shift, becoming both more transgressive and more scandalous. How and why should artistic and cultural representations of the Holocaust arouse today precisely the kind of emotional provocation that is peculiar to its subject matter? These are the main questions that the artist testimonies and scholarly essays collected by Sophia Komor and Susanne Rohr in *The Holocaust, Art, and Taboo: Transatlantic Exchanges on the Ethics and Aesthetics of Representation*, invite their readers to grapple with—in utterly engaging and thought-provoking ways.

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The Holocaust has become, as the Hamburg Americanists Komor and Rohr point out in their thoughtful introduction to *The Holocaust, Art, and Taboo*, "part of a semiotic universe of images circulating the globe, a kind of iconography of horror that art can avail itself of" (p. 10). Put more provocatively, the Holocaust today is an "aesthetic event" (Rohr, p. 165). Consequently, art since the mid-1990s engages less with the question of whether the Holocaust can be represented at all, but reflects on how it has been depicted. Its agenda is to lay bare, critique, or overturn the rhetoric of a mediatized Holocaust—not without creating yet more metafiction.

Thoroughly testing the limits of representation, contemporary Holocaust art is prone to causing scandals. The public indignation it frequently brings about, however, is vital in stirring up valuable discussions about the nature of aesthetic and ethical representation. A case in point is the 2002 exhibition "Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art" which was held in the Jewish Museum in New York and caused much controversy at the time. This exhibit provided the impulse for the international Hamburg University conference on contemporary Holocaust art in 2008, and the collection that stands as its impressive result. Compellingly, *The Holocaust, Art, and Taboo* provides models and tools for evaluating art that radically breaks taboos—art that is not unethical, but that makes the Holocaust seen and heard in the first place.

In witty ways, the volume performs what it proposes through its overall design and use of graphic elements. The subtly chosen cover image, part of Ruth Liberman's 2002 *Word Shot* series, depicts shot-through German words "whose sound [the artist] hated" (p. 44). Not immediately recognizable as Holocaust art, this word-image poses precisely the kind of questions the collection tackles: Is the Holocaust nothing but a word? What counts as (Holocaust) art? What makes a Jewish artist Jewish? And does art, in its "avant-garde impetus" (p. 11), have no choice but to break taboos? A second photograph lures the reader into beginning to imagine some answers. Here, a dwarf (this prototypical German medium of comical portrayal) who is giving a Hitler salute not only perfectly embodies the notion of taboo, but also, literally, casts a long shadow on the possibilities and limits of Holocaust representation.

The texts of the volume—of very high quality and perspicuity throughout—are organized in equally effective ways. Nine academic inquiries into American (mostly) and European Holocaust representations in the visual arts, theatre, literature, and popular culture are framed,

on the front end, by a "Testimonies" section conveying the perspective of the provocative artist who may or may not be considered Jewish; and, on the latter end, by two essays on "Theorizing the Holocaust" and a personal epilogue. Giving space to a great variety of artistic forms and scholarly discourses, from the perspective of both practitioners and academics, the book thus offers multifaceted approaches to the reading of Holocaust representations in diverse and, in some cases, as yet underexposed media and genres. These include film comedies (Susanne Rohr), bestselling novels (Hilene Flanzbaum), and mainstream superhero comics (Ole Johan Christiansen and Thomas Plischke).

The artist testimonies of Liberman and Anna Adam reveal fascinating insights into the fashioning of the Jewish artist's identity, the artistic process, and the role of the recipient. The fact that her Jewish identity was ascribed to her only upon her move to Germany is what allowed Adam to find out "just how far exactly [she] could go" (p. 25). Tellingly, her self-satirical exhibitions, such as *Feinkost Adam*, earned her the name of both "Jewish provocateur" and "anti-Semite." In Adam's view, the art of provocation proves successful when an artist "manages to let people fall into the trap of their own fantasy, because then, it is they themselves whom they are accusing" (p. 27). For Liberman, similarly, works of art are about "a viewer's own awareness, fears, assumptions, and comprehension" (p. 38). Her piece *Untitled Book* transgresses bookbinding conventions and makes text illegible in order to activate the reader's imagination to fill in the gaps. This illegibility of content, arguably the most adequate way of representing what is incommunicable, stirs the desire to find out more about the text, as well as its context.

The crucial role the recipient plays in making meaning out of Holocaust memories is central to many of the essays as well, not least because "imagination may be more powerful than actual video or photographic witness" (Flanzbaum, p. 131) in a culture oversaturated with violent images. Philippe Codde's "Postmemory, Afterimages, Transferred Loss: First and Third Generation Holocaust Trauma in American Literature and Film" finds one solution to the problem of an audience desensitized by an ever more popularized Holocaust in appealing to its "post-memorial imagination" (p. 70). Codde transfers Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" onto the third generation reader, as this reader must actively reconstruct—and thereby confront—the complicated fictional layers of, say, Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Everything Is Illuminated*. Meanwhile, Andrew Weinstein ("Taking Abjection to Holocaust-Related Art") sees potential for recipient activation—and, of course, resistance—in the Kristevian abject. Its unsettling quality, he argues, manages to enact historical reality so that it generates a "Holocaust effect" (p. 76). The latter elicits a visceral reaction on the part of the recipient, and thereby forces him or her to emotionally respond to the events represented.

Reality staged as a traumatizing effect is also the topic of Andrew S. Gross's astute essay "'After Auschwitz': Adorno, Postmodernism, and the Anti-Aesthetic." As Gross puts it, the (traumatic) real makes its comeback in contemporary fiction, biography, and theory in an attempt "to counter commercialization with the one experience that cannot be commodified: trauma" (p. 220). This, again, puts the responsibility (and burden) of Holocaust representation on the recipient, who is asked to reenact the impossible: personal trauma. For representation, as

Sabine Sielke states in "Troping the Holocaust, Globalizing Trauma?," is not simply a matter of mediation, but of "remediation" (p. 237)—pointing both to itself and to our self-conception.

In a brilliant move, the collection closes with Heinz Ickstadt taking on precisely this role of the recipient—in addition to that of the Holocaust scholar who is not always unambivalent about his subject matter. In "Why I Don't Like Holocaust Studies Yet See No Escaping From It," he interweaves an autobiographical account of growing up in post-war Germany and marrying a Jewish American woman with a discussion of the challenge of Holocaust mediation. By way of a deeply personal take on the importance of laughter in Holocaust representation ("an effort to make remembering [the Holocaust] a challenge to all certainties," p. 260), he provides the ultimate reasoning for why one should engage with both Holocaust studies and art in the first place. One needs to stretch the limits of representation in order "to be challenged, to be provoked and shocked out of the 'security of conscience' which discourse provides, so that we may truly re-member the past [...]. To disrupt and to create risk has always been the function of the work of art" (p. 262). In one equally dense and elegant sweep, he buttresses Rohr's poignant claim: we may resist the notion of the Holocaust as an "aesthetic event," yet "we are forced to realize that this is the only form in which the Holocaust can ever appear for later generations, be it within the specific rhetoric of historiography, the formal language of documentation, the literary aesthetic patterns and norms, or others" (p. 165). The claim to Holocaust memory today, as this book demonstrates, happens in terms of the imagination, indeed.

All in all, these broad-ranging and important essays shed a discerning light on the current state of academic discussions on contemporary Holocaust art. They may well spur further investigations into respective arts and genres, and moreover into media that transgress their own boundaries (as the performative sculpture-objects Norman Kleeblatt describes in "Theaters of Memory: Art and the Holocaust" already do.) This even more inter-medial approach to Holocaust representation would prove an exciting extension of the lines of inquiry opened up in this volume, and help explore further the role of taboo-breaking artistic modes such as irony, the carnivalesque, and the absurd in representing that which does not defy aesthetic mediation, but is, ethically speaking, improper.