MOURNING, ABSENCE, AND TRAUMA: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE HOLOCAUST IN CONTEMPORARY ART AND ARCHITECTURE

Milton S. Katz
Kansas City Art Institute

Although several renowned artists like Marc Chagall, Ben Shahn, Morris Louis, Leon Golub, and Jacques Lipchitz confronted the Holocaust in a number of evocative works during World War II and immediately afterwards, there followed a period of approximately two decades in which the Holocaust was largely neglected. This was understandable, since artists followed the lead of many Holocaust survivors in choosing to remain silent about the event. Rico LeBrun, a non-Jewish artist, however, insisted, "The Holocaust was a subject that no serious artist could neglect." In the last two decades we have come to witness an extraordinary amount of literary and visual art about what is referred to in Hebrew as Shoah. The Holocaust has become a preoccupation for many international artists and almost a sacred challenge to translate those historical events into a visual display for museums and memorials throughout the world. To do this, however, visual artists like their literary counterparts, had to invent new symbols and new metaphors. Primo Levi understood this well when writing about his experiences he stated, "Daily language is for the description of daily experience, but here is another world, here one would need a language of the other world." Shaping a new aesthetics of suffering and pain, contemporary art about the Holocaust has evolved from Theodore Adorno's insistence on a scream, to a language of mourning, absence, and trauma. The void and gap that marked a break with civilization became a defining metaphor of Holocaust art and architecture.

We will examine a number of American, European, and Israeli artists and architects from different backgrounds who bring to the subject their unique perspectives because of their relationship to the event. These artists fall into 3 groups:

1. Holocaust survivors who continued to work as professional artists and whose work lies somewhere between visual memory and metaphoric memory.

2. Children of survivors, sometimes called "the second generation," whose art is a medium for expressing their special relationship to the Holocaust and to their parents. In their work they explore questions of memory, absence, presence, and identity.

3. Artists not directly connected with the Holocaust who have developed a sensitivity toward the subject and attempt to understand the event through their creations. These artists confront the Holocaust from a variety of motives, and some of them use the Shoah in a universal attempt to penetrate the nature of man and woman, and to investigate a number of postmodern issues probing the limits of representation and a critique of our consumer culture. Media used by these artists include painting, sculpture, photography, graphic design, needlepoint, and multimedia installation.

A document that survives from the art jury committee of the Vilna ghetto from March 16, 1943, indicated approval for exhibiting 27 sketches from "S.Bak (9 years old). Since then, Samuel Bak's entire life has been involved with the difficult memories of the Holocaust and he has emerged as one of the most accomplished Holocaust survivor artist in the United States. Although he began as an abstract expressionist, since the 1970s his art has turned into surrealistic metaphors in an attempt to deal with his survival as evidenced by this painting "The Last Movement" completed in 1996. His work may be likened to a healing art or reflect the deep tragedy of the powerlessness of ghetto existence. Explaining his art, Bak declared, "I have chosen the way of creating images of a seeming reality, imbuing them with a multitude of
layers, from clear and unknown symbols to the most private and intimate feelings of a world that has its own apparent logic.”

The figures in Polish artist Issac Celnikier's paintings articulate the conflict between the reverent silence of grief and the aching need to bear witness. Following the liquidation of 1943 of the Bialystok ghetto in which he sought refuge, Celnikier was subjected to a barbarous and prolonged internment in a series of Nazi camps at Stutthoff, Auschwitz, Sachsenhausen, and Flossenbarg. Re-establishing life after the war in Prague, and then in Warsaw, he forged a distinctive pictorial language steeped in the traditions of European figurative art, with which he hoped to communicate the universal experience of human suffering. The cycles of monumental canvases painted in the 1980s, of which Uprising 1983-84 is one of the most powerful, expresses his outrage and sorrow at the killing of innocent civilians by the occupying armies of the Reich. This work recalls the destruction of the Bialystok ghetto and the inhabitant's courageous revolt in August 1943. At first glance the viewer see a painting filled with cries and frenzied movements of the human throng, then later we begin to distinguish the individuated human forms from the confusing orgy of violence. The appearance is that of wounded flesh, scars inflicted on the surface of the canvass.

Out of 15,000 children brought by the Nazis and their accomplices to Terezin ghetto and later deported to Auschwitz, only 100 survived. Helga Hoskova-Weissova was one of them. Liberated from Mauthausen by the American army in May 1945, she returned with her mother to her home in Prague where she studied at the Academy of Fine Arts, and several years returned to join its faculty. Like most Holocaust survivors, she struggled to forget her days in the camps, but in the 1960s found herself attempting to come to terms with her grief through expressionist paintings. Thirty years later, she returned to her haunted memories in an even more pronounced and symbolic way. One of her favorite works, Memento, completed in 1993, depicts the still raw emotion of the artist as the eyes filled with sorrow remember the dead children's shoes strewn all around her.

Gabrielle Rossmer evaded the Holocaust by coming to America from Germany just before the outbreak of World War II. While she and her immediate family escaped from Bamberg, Germany, her grandparents did not and perished in the Holocaust. Rossmer was invited to return to Bamberg in 1991 to install a sculptural ensemble that recalled her own family’s emigration from Germany and the horrors of her grandparents’ deportation and extermination. The exhibition took the title In Search of the Lost Object (1991) and was installed in the Municipal Museum that formerly had been the Judenhaus, the very place of the grandparents house arrest. There are many objects of her families’ history in the installation, but the lost object is the one most dear that cannot be retrieved. Rossmer’s individual loss becomes the tragic episode through the power of her art, and also a metaphor for all displacement and similar suffering.

Edith Altman’s father was arrested in Germany and detained in Buchenwald Concentration Camp in the days after Kristallnacht in November 1938. Eventually, he was released and, after many desperate encounters, the family immigrated to Chicago. Reclaiming the Symbol /The Art of Memory (1992) is an attempt to confront the symbols used by the Third Reich to empower and to terrorize. The work strives to reclaim the star, the cross, and the swastika to their positive use. The swastika may well be the earliest known symbol, the solar wheel, the movement and power of the sun, the origin acting upon the universe, and a positive symbol before the Nazis used it. "By taking the swastika apart, by deconstructing its meanings and disempowering it," explains Altman, "I hope to change its fearful energy. In a spiritual or mystical sense, I am exorcising the evil memory of the swastika, in hopes of healing our fear.”

Gerda Meyer-Bernstein came from Germany to England in the 1939 children’s special emigration at the age of 15. Later she immigrated to Chicago. Her installation piece Shrine
(1991) is an extended meditation on the meaning of Auschwitz and the people who ran it. Set in a darkened room with hay strewn on the floor, the installation evokes the bleakness of the camp environment. Barbed wires line the walls, with photographs of the crematoria and appelplatz (roll call square) behind the wire. This is the world that Elie Wiesel called "the kingdom of night," and these haunting words are well understood in the darkness and silence of the installation. Shrine evokes the claustrophobic environment of the cattle cars used by Nazis to transport their victims to the concentration camps, and that feeling is emphasized through repetition of photographs of the ovens on the left wall of the installation. On the right wall are photos of the infamous commander of the Auschwitz camps, Rudolph Hoess, who was tried by the National Tribunal of Warsaw, found guilty and executed at Auschwitz in April 1947.

The two most significant non-Jewish artists who experienced the camps and survived to have outstanding careers are Jozef Szajna and the Croatian artist, Zoran Music. For more than three years, Szanja was a Polish inmate at Auschwitz. Later he was imprisoned at Buchenwald. Now in his eighties he still remains haunted by the Holocaust experience. He offers a chilling explanation: "I am cut off from the halter—Death is in me, and I have to sleep with Her." Following liberation on April 15, 1945 by American forces, the landscape of Auschwitz became a central motif in his artistic and theatrical career. Szanja's most important work is Reminiscences, a memorial to Polish artists killed by Nazi terror. First winning critical acclaim at the Venice Biennial in 1970, this installation has been reproduced, and since 1998, has been on display at the Buchenwald Museum in Germany. The focus of the exhibit is a series of cutouts, suggestive of the frontal photographs taken of prisoners at Auschwitz. Dominating the debris and cutouts is a prison photograph of Ludwig Puget, an art professor who advocated non-collaboration with the Nazis and perished at Auschwitz. In this installation, Szanja's pessimistic post-Auschwitz worldview becomes very clear. As he has said of his work: "There is a world of great silence, consisting of a forest of old easels, standing up like guillotines; crosses made up of half burned silhouettes and unfinished sculptures, dusty photographs and concentration camp numbers."

A survivor of Dachau, Zoran Music, continued to be haunted by the Holocaust experience and created a powerful series of drawings entitled "We Are Not The Last," first completed in 1970. Here the artist did not pinpoint blame, but bemoaned the continued cruelty of humankind, unable to learn from the past, sinking repeatedly to the level of the Nazis. Music stated this position by having his Holocaust dead rise up to accuse us and to warn us that we too will become corpses if we are not careful. In a 1973 work, these mounds of corpses rise and deflate, collapse or decompose, to become an ocean of flesh. The despair and anger expressed through these images, what he called "the eternal landscape of universal suffering," also resounds in his explanation of them: "How often did we say in Dachau that such things should never be repeated in this world. They are being repeated. This means that the horrible is in Man himself and not only in a specific society. I had a need to speak out on this once and for all."

For second-generation artists, their subject is not the Holocaust as much as how they came to know it and how it has shaped their lives. Art Spiegelman's use of the comic book is both an innovative and problematic form of art used to convey the Holocaust experience. Many survivors found Maus with its depictions of Jews as mice and Germans as cats something that came close to blasphemy. Yet, the work has won numerous awards and continues to read as a sensitive and honest reflection of a second generation trying to come to terms with his parents Holocaust experience. Maus grew out of a comic strip Spiegelman did in 1971 for an underground comic book; a three-page strip that was based on stories of his father's and mothers that he recalled being told in childhood. What the artist calls "realistic fiction" Maus I was published in book form in 1986, followed by Maus II in 1993. As the artist was entering himself into the story, he needed to incorporate distancing devices like using animal mask faces. The way the story got told and whom the story was told to is as important as his father's
narrative. The result is an engaging, and, at times, brutally honest depiction of father and son, and how both struggle to come to grips with a scarred and tortured past.

After finishing art school in San Francisco, Shimon Attie moved to Berlin in the summer of 1991. Walking the streets of what was the Jewish section of the city that summer, he wrote that he felt the presence of the lost community very strongly, even though so few visible traces of it remained. Attie’s memory and imagination had already begun to repopulate the Scheunenviertel district of East Berlin with the Jews of his mind. The Writing on the Wall project grew out of his response to the discrepancy between what he felt and what he did not see. The artist has written that the purpose of his work was "to peel back the wallpaper of today and reveal the history buried underneath." Over the following year, Attie projected the images of Jewish life before the Holocaust from photographs he found in his research back into present day Berlin. Each installation ran for one or two evenings, visible to local residents, street traffic, and passerby. During these projections, Attie also photographed the installations themselves in time exposures each lasting from three to four minutes. The resulting photographs have been exhibited throughout the world. After Berlin, he completed complementary projects in Dresden, Amsterdam, Krakow, and Copenhagen where his row of nine underwater light boxes in one of the canals commemorate Denmark’s heroic rescue of its Jews during the Nazi occupation across the sea to safety in Sweden.

Audrey Flack was the first American photo-realist painter to have her work accepted in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in 1966. Knowing that sooner or later she would have to confront World War II and the Holocaust, she made a painting of Adolph Hitler in 1963-64 and then World War II (Vanitas) twelve years later. She chose to base her central image on Margaret Bourke-White’s famous photograph of just liberated inmates posed behind a barbed wire fence at Buchenwald. In the lower part of the painting, she included some words by Rabbi Nachman of Bratislava, one of the intellectual giants of early Hasidism, concerning belief in the presence of God as a means to mitigate despair. In a glaring contrast Flack placed around the former prisoners bright colored pastries, jewels, a blue butterfly, a red candle, and a blue jar in order "to tell a story, an allegory of war... of life... the ultimate breakdown of humanity," and to include violent contrasts of pure evil and "beautiful humanity... of opulence and deprivation.

The overall effect was shocking when the painting was first exhibited. Flack’s vanitas was designed to remind heedless, narcissistic humanity of its moral transience.

Jeffrey Wolin, a professor at Indiana University, has developed a unique photographic approach to the Holocaust. A Guggenheim Fellowship involved photographing and videotaping Holocaust survivors. His 1993 photographs show survivors such as Hungarian born Maria Spitzer as they look today, for the most part in the safe and normal environment of their homes or workplaces. However, the menacing past experiences, traumas and suffering, plus the persistence of memory, is imposed on the photograph by a textual narration of the person’s history. The stories are intimate and recall the absolute horror of the person’s humiliation, near destruction, and survival.

Susan Erony learned about the Holocaust working in the civil rights movement. She spent three and half years focusing her artwork on the Holocaust and trying to answer the question: How can extreme discrepancies in the quality of existence be such a reality of the human condition? She went to Eastern Europe three times between 1990-1992, photographing concentration camps, Jewish cemeteries, like this one in Prague, and German steel plants. Erony collected remnants from Jewish synagogues in Poland and the Czech Republic, talked with Holocaust survivors, children of survivors, Polish resistance fighters, and Germans born after the war.

Judy Chicago’s Holocaust Project: “From Darkness Into Light,” with photography by her husband Donald Woodman, completed in 1989, is a large multi-media exhibit that engendered
a storm of controversy for its universalist approach to the subject. Chicago is a feminist artist who places the Jewish experience of the Holocaust in a larger global and historical context of power and powerlessness, and raises a series of questions about the relationship between the Holocaust and contemporary events. Her project concludes with a work entitled "Rainbow Shabbat," a large stained-glass work whose center panel extends the Friday evening Jewish Sabbath meal into an image of international sharing and global peace across race, gender, class, and species. Chicago has all the people seated turn their heads towards the praying woman, "as if to suggest," she writes, "that the structure of male dominance that now oppresses the planet must make room for a profound change, one in which women's voices can truly be heard, along with those of everyone who shares this tiny globe." The centers of the rainbow side panels contain yellow stars. The humiliating badges Jews were forced to wear are transformed into glorious symbols of courage and the power of the human spirit. Sandblasted into the window, in Hebrew and English, is a prayer based on a poem by a Holocaust survivor. These words, which embody the goal of the Holocaust Project, read: "Heal those broken souls who have no peace and lead us all from darkness into light."

Although this project is viewed by many to be a work of major importance as it has been exhibited throughout the world, it also receives its share of criticism. Many people resent the link the project makes between the Holocaust and other forms of oppression, insisting that the Shoah was a unique event in world history and should not be compared to anything else. Critics also maintain that in our struggle to universalize the oppression and human suffering, we not only lessen the importance of the Holocaust, but trivialize it as well.

Like many other artists, George Segal was reluctant to deal with Holocaust imagery when he was asked to design a piece called the Holocaust for a site in San Francisco overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge. Not wanting to reproduce German savagery, Segal posed a heap of corpses so that a 6-sided Star of David and a cross became apparent in their overall configuration. Further, a woman holding an apple lies with her head in man's abdomen, which, in turn, has his arm on the central figure, invoking images of Eve, Adam, and God. Among the figures there is also a young boy protected by an older man, suggesting Abraham and Issac as well as the persistence of civilized values in an uncivilized world. The Eve figure suggests regeneration and survival, also exemplified by a single figure standing near a barbed wire fence, the only standing person in the entire composition.

The Holocaust Memorial in Miami Beach, Florida, designed by award winning international sculptor and architect Kenneth Treister and dedicated in 1990, begins with a sculpture of a mother and two nestling children fearful as the signs of the Holocaust first appear. The work is framed by Anne Frank's well-known message... "That in spite of everything I still believe that people are good at heart." In the middle of this memorial, there is a 42' high bronze sculpture of Love and Anguish, an outstretched arm, tattooed with a number from Auschwitz, rises from the earth, the last reach of a dying person. The work also depicts close to 100 figures in different family groupings. Bronze tormented figures precariously clinging to the skin trying desperately to escape. Here families try to help each other in a final act of love, all expressing the mixed emotions of terror and compassion. The final sculpture depicts the same mother and two children who started the journey... now dead... framed by the haunting words of Anne Frank, "ideas, dreams, and cherished hope rise within us only to meet the horrible truths and be shattered." To represent the void left behind by the "people of the book" as Jews are sometimes called, Israeli born artist Micha Ullman, designed a monument for Berlin's Bebelplatz to commemorate the infamous Nazi book burning of May 10, 1933. Today the cobblestone expanse of this square situated between Humboldt University and the famed Opera House is empty except for the figures of people who stand there and peer down through a ground level window into the ghostly white, underground room of empty bookshelves. A steel tablet set into the stones simply recalls that this was the site of some of the most notorious
book burnings and quotes a German-Jewish poet Heinrich Heine's prescient words, "Where books are burned, so one day will people be burned as well."

Of the European artists born in the closing days of World War II, two standout in the creative ways they confront the Holocaust in their respective works. The most renowned of the new German painters, Anselm Kiefer, was born in the Black Forest as Allied troops stormed through it during their final drive to crush the Third Reich. Thus he grew up in the immediate post-war years when many Germans tried desperately to suppress memory of their Holocaust past. As a young artist, he was intent upon exploring what he saw as the "tension between the immense things that happened and the immense forgetfulness." A monumental work, Germany's Spiritual Heroes, was created in 1973. On six strips of burlap sewn together, Kiefer drew perspective lines to form a deep theatrical space. The viewer is placed at the entrance of a cavernous room, slightly off center, engulfed by wooden beams. The interior is at once a memorial hall and crematorium. Eternal fires burn along the wall as if in memory of the individuals. This highly flammable wooden room is in danger of burning, and with it Germany and its heroes will be destroyed. Kiefer's attitude towards his country's heroes and their Holocaust past is both sharply biting and ironic. These great figures and their achievements are reduced to just names, recorded not in a marble edifice but in the attic of a rural schoolhouse.

One of the most famous works of art to emerge out of the Holocaust ashes is Paul Celan's lyrical evocation of the Nazi death camps, "Fugue of Death." In the early 1980s, Kiefer created two paintings which take as their source, if not their subject, the figures of German and Jewish womanhood who structure and haunt Celan's poem. Much of the transformation in the painting Sulamith is found in he power of the name, a biblical Jewish name that is born in the "Song of Songs" and comes to rest in the fugue of death. With the conferral of the name, the application of ash to the canvas, and the evocation of the Hebrew Bible and Celan's poem, the darkened chamber is transformed, transfigured, translated into a site of Jewish memory, a Holocaust memorial in painterly form. On the surface, the painting seems to represent the interior of a piece of Nazi architecture—a massive monument to death. Kiefer turns Celan's poetic image—your ashen hair Sulamith—not into an image, but into the name alone inscribed in small white letters in the uppermost left hand corner of the painting.

In the works of France's Christian Boltanski memories of the Holocaust appear to be immensely disturbing, deeply ambivalent, and largely unresolved when "documented" with fictitious evidence of a long suppressed past. Amassed in Boltanski's "archives" and "altars" we find somber, melodramatic installations composed of blurry old school portraits, faded articles of children's clothing, and time capsules in the form of rusted biscuit tins, with the whole illuminated by small exposed lights. The Monument series is pivotal in Boltanski's work, partly because in 1984 he began to explore his own Jewish heritage (Father is Jewish, mother Catholic), at the same time exploring our personal and cultural ideas of memory, memorials, and monuments. The use of these fragile materials in his monuments suggests life's fragility and the lost lives of those who have disappeared from the earth through genocide.

Two installations evoke the Holocaust directly by using images of specifically Jewish children. For Chases High School Boltanski used a photograph of the graduating class of a private Jewish school in 1931 that he found in a book on Jews in Vienna. The installation consisted of 18 blurry black-and-white close-ups of each of the students. The artist rephotographed the students individually, enlarging their faces until they lost their individual features. As an effect their eyes became transformed into empty black sockets while their smiling mouths turned into grimaces of death. These overexposed photographs, presented in tin frames perched on top of a double stack of rusty biscuit tins, were over lighted by extendable desk lamps, evoking those that are used in interrogation rooms. His series Jewish School of Grosse Hamburgerstrasse in
1938, completed in 1991, includes works based on photographs taken at a Jewish school in Berlin. Since it is more than likely that most or even all of the represented Jewish students did not survive the Holocaust, his art produces a terrifying effect by reenacting principles that are defining aspects of the Shoah: a radical emptying out of subjectivity as a road leading to the wholesale destruction of a people.

Another installation that evokes the Holocaust referentially is one that he gave the title “Canada”—the euphemistic name the Nazis gave to the warehouses that stored all the personal belongings of those who were killed in the gas chambers or interned in the labor camps.

"Canada" here stands for the country of excess and exuberance to which one wants to emigrate. Here Boltanski exhibited 6,000 second-hand garments. The brightly colored clothes were hung on nails on all four walls covering every inch of the room. This installation not only brought to mind the warehouses in the concentration camps, but also the sheer number of garments evoked the number of people who died in the camps and whose possessions were stored in "Canada".

Disturbing questions of representations and moral integrity surround the recent exhibit "Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/ Recent Art" at the Jewish Museum in New York City. This exhibition focused on the works by 13 internationally recognized artists, often two generations removed from the Nazi era and descended from families of both victims and perpetrators. Employing the language of conceptual art, these highly controversial images challenge us to confront the faces of evil and to question how images shape our perception of evil today. Nazism represents an obsession for the contemporary imagination. Years ago, the German artist Gerhard Richter, openly broached the question as to whether the popular dissemination of Holocaust images amounted to a new, respectable kind of pornography. As we view the works, please consider whether the Jewish Museum has broadened the arena of discourse of Holocaust representation thereby deepening Holocaust consciousness in our collective memory, or whether, as Thane Rosenbaum argues in Tikkun, the Jewish Museum is unintentionally legitimizing Holocaust desecration, and providing cover for anyone wishing to do the same.

The works in the show that proved most controversial tend to employ reconfigured images of the Holocaust to extend postmodern's consumer critique. Tom Sachs, an American Jewish artist, investigates the way consumer culture works against personal identity, especially marketing and advertising. For Sachs, these objects reflect the most controlled corporate identity since National Socialism. Giftgas Giftset, with its designer Xyklon B gas cans, and Prada Deathcamp (1998), are especially troubling. With these two works, the assertive conflation of supposed "good" and outright "evil" tests our sense of propriety and our ability to separate aesthetics from history, morality from lifestyle.

Following the path of David Levinthal's seductive photographs of Nazi toys, Polish artist Zbigniew Libera's LEGO Concentration Camp Set (1996) forces us to confront the tension between innocence and aggression, playfulness and terror. The work is a series of seven boxes in an edition of three. On each box are pictured three-dimensional miniatures that the artist has built. Libera photographed the self-constructed models and then refashioned the images into a standard juvenile friendly packaging. The miniatures represent nothing less than the most horrific and morally debased architectural complexes even built. Among the structures the artist made and photographed are models of barracks and crematoria. Aggregate objects, including body parts and clothing, appear on the side of one box.

Alan Schechner digitally manipulates photographs of Jewish Holocaust victims to draw uneasy parallels and point out differences between the Nazi era and the present. In “It's the Real Thing—Self Portrait at Buchenwald” (1993), the artist digitally inserts his own images into a
now famous Margaret Bourke-White photograph taken when the Jews were liberated from Buchenwald in April 1945. Bourke-White’s black and white photograph documents the horrors she witnessed—men with sunken cheeks, shaven heads, and desolate expressions, wearing ragged stripped uniforms. By introducing himself—a second generation English born Jew, round face, well fed, and with a full head of hair—into the picture, the artist collapses the space between history and the present. Coming to terms with the ironic shock and perhaps even terror over the manipulation, we are left to ponder Schechner’s presence among the survivors, to connect him and ourselves, one or more generations removed from the Holocaust, with the victims and their sufferings. Another disturbing image is the inclusion of a Diet Coke can, centrally placed and the only element depicted in color. The irony of the robust artist among gaunt, malnourished survivors becomes embarrassing in the presence of a symbol of our culture’s self-indulgent body consciousness. Just as much as Germany succumbed to Nazi culture because it was the dominant paradigm, so does our contemporary culture succumb to consumerism. Given such recent findings that the Coca-Cola company collaborated with the Nazi regime in the 1930s, Schechner’s image invokes how removed and complacent we have become from the devastation of the Holocaust.

Another theme revolved around what writer and critic Susan Sontag labeled "Fascinating Fascism," the strange mix of seduction, repulsion, and eroticism that underlies so much of Nazi-inspired imagery. Polish born Piotr Uklanski’s “The Nazis” (1998) reflects a practice related to postmodern art that intellectually scrutinizes and visually reframes representations from mass culture. Prompted by an article in Arena magazine about best-dressed actors, and by his realization that a number of these actors had been shown in Nazi attire, Uklanski tracked down photographs of movie stars dressed for roles in which they personify Nazis. Equating Nazi with male, the artist powerfully illustrates how post World War II society eroticized the Nazi uniform, thus linking banality and evil with Hollywood glamour and extravagance.

In the series “Economical Love” (1998), Austrian artist Elke Krystufek depicts male sexual exploitation by reappropriating some of the imagery Uklanski had already appropriated. She collaged elements of Uklanski’s celebrity Nazis onto her large-scale painted and photographic nude self-portraits. Like Uklanski, Krystufek places the viewer in close complicity. In particular, she puts one in the untenable position of being a voyeur and colluding with the Nazis. At the same time, she makes the viewer the object of both her gaze and that of the Nazis.

One of the most disturbing and compelling works in the exhibit is titled “Live and Die as Eva Braun” by Israeli artist Roee Rosen (1995). When first shown at an exhibition at Jerusalem’s Israel Museum in 1997, the piece became the center of a furor that eventually involved the Israeli Museum of Education. Various critics labeled the work as sensationalistic and declared that this work turned the Holocaust into pornography. “Live and Die as Eva Braun” consists of a set of numbered narrative texts written by the artist and printed on narrow fabric banners. The banners are accompanied by a heterogeneous group of drawings that incorporate Nazi references apparently inserted into traditional children’s book illustrations. The texts are addressed to the viewer, who is invited to assume the role of Hitler’s lover as she shared a last tryst in the bunker before their joint suicide. As the narrative unfolds, the viewer is both inside and outside the story, enjoying a lover’s embrace and preparing to submit to death, while simultaneously observing the scene with horrified fascination. Mixing innocence and guilt, Rosen presents cheerful little frauleins dancing with little storm troopers, Fascist eagles perching in storybook skies and swastikas lurking in innocuous landscapes.

Finally, in the most abstract work in the show, German artist Mischa Kuball uses light to explore contrasting ideas of image and symbol, the sacred and the profane, power and powerlessness. The corpelike shape of “Hitler’s Cabinet” (1990) is made of inexpensive wood, unpainted, and unadorned. Each of the four ends of the cross is pierced with rectangular openings, through which 35-milimeter slides are projected onto the floor. Creating ghostlike,
fan shaped forms; these images are stills from German films in the 1920s and 1930s. When lit, the stills transform the pressed wood cross into a swastika, a symbol today forbidden by German law. Here the artist reminds us that the symbols, images, and implications encoded in a wide range of German films between the wars reflected the aspirations and fears of the German people and helped to prepare them for the rise of Hitler and the Nazi movement. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C., designed by James Ingo Freed and completed in 1993, is an evocative work of contemporary Holocaust art. At first glance the building seems benign. But all is not what it seems. Everywhere the building contains elements of concealment, deception, disengagement, and duality. The curved portico of the 14th street entrance— with its squared arches, window grating, and curbed lights—is mere facade, a fake screen that actually opens to the sky, deliberately hiding the disturbing architecture of skewed lines and hard surfaces of the real entrance that lies behind it. This motif of contrasting appearance and reality is repeated throughout. The Museum’s first floor holds the Hall of Witness, a large, 3-story, sky-lit gathering place. The elements of dislocation that are first introduced outside the building reappear here. The building employs construction methods from the industrial past and offers an ironic criticism of early modernism’s lofty ideals of reason and order that were perverted to build the factories of death. Design features that fill the Hall of Witness and recur throughout the building directly summon the tragic themes of the Holocaust. Crisscrossed steel strappings seem to brace the harsh brick walls against some great internal pressure. Inverted triangle shapes repeat in windows, floors, walls, and ceilings. The Hall’s main staircase narrows unnaturally toward the top, like receding rail tracks heading to a camp. Exposed beams, arched brick entryways, boarded windows, metal railings, steel gates, fences, bridges, barriers, and screens— “impound” the visitor, and are disturbing signs of separation. Everywhere there are dualities and options. The play of light and shadow, black and white, along with contrasting wide and narrow spaces arouse contradictory notions of accessibility and confinement. The entire Hall is defined by unpredictability and uncertainty. Altogether, the interior suggests a departure from the norm, informing visitors that they are in a profoundly different place. It is an environment that stimulates memory and sets an emotional stage for the Museum.

Just as the architecture of the building draws much of its power from the history of the Holocaust, so the four site specific works of art, displayed in and outside the building, evoke emotion and reinforce the memorial function of the Museum.

Richard Serra’s monolithic sculpture, entitled Gravity, is a 12-foot square slab of steel that weighs nearly 30 tons. It is wedged near the black granite wall at the bottom of the stairs to the Concourse level of the Hall of Witness. Tipping slightly, it impales the staircase. The steel finish has been left in its raw, industrial state, which compliments the factory-like surfaces of the Hall of Witness. The sculpture cuts the stairs asymmetrically, destabilizes the space, and forces a rift in the flow of visitors as they descend the stairs—a disquieting process of forced separation.

Visitors encounter Ellsworth Kelly’s work in the third floor lounge after touring the exhibition sequences that recount the escalation of Nazi violence between 1933 and 1939. In contrast to the dimly lit exhibition spaces, the lounge is high ceilinged and filled with light. On two opposing walls are Kelly’s four wall sculptures, collectively entitled Memorial. Kelly’s sculptures create a constant interplay of light and shadow and change throughout the day. The artist has likened the sequence of three equal forms to memorial tablets that, in the anonymity, bear the names of all victims of the Holocaust.

After visitors have viewed the exhibition chronicling the ghettos and the death camps, they enter the second floor lounge to encounter a wall drawing by Sol LeWitt, entitled “Consequence”. Five large squares dominate the long wall. Each square is bordered in black, and contains a central gray square outlined with a band of white. In between the white and
black contours are subtle colors of varying hues. LeWitt describes the square as the most stable and implacable of forms. The rhythmic patterns of squares within squares invites introspection, while the repetitive gray areas centered in the fields of color suggest absence—lives, families, and communities made vacant as a consequence of the Holocaust.

Joel Shapiro’s abstract “Loss and Regeneration” poignantly addresses the disintegration of families and the tragedy of lives interrupted by the Holocaust. His work, situated on the Museum plaza, consists of two bronze elements that engage in symbolic dialogue. The larger piece is a towering, abstract, tree-like form that suggests a figure. Approximately 100 feet away, a smaller, house like structure is precariously tipped upside down on its roof. The work memorializes the children who perished during the Holocaust, and is accompanied by an excerpt from a poem written by a child in the Terezin ghetto in Czechoslovakia: "Until, after a long, long time, I’d be well again. Then I’d like to live And go back home again." Shapiro likens the overturned house to the subversion of the universal symbol of security, comfort, and continuity. The larger figure is conceived as an emblem of renewal, a metaphor for cycles of life and death, the experience and the overcoming of anguish, the possibility of a future even after all has been lost.

In what Professor James Young describes as "the uncanny arts of memorial architecture," here we have the recently completed "Jewish Museum" in the capital of a nation that not so long ago systematically and murderously voided itself of Jews, making them alien strangers in a land they had considered "home." This challenging and extraordinary work of art was designed by American architect Daniel Libeskind, born in Lodz in 1946 to the survivors of a Polish Jewish family decimated in the Holocaust. The jagged shape of the Jewish Museum as a broken Star of David presents a disquieting extension to the Baroque facade of the old Berlin Museum from which it extends. Three basic ideas formed the foundation for the museum’s design; first the impossibility of understanding the history of Berlin without understanding the enormous intellectual, economic, and cultural contributions of its Jewish citizens; second, the necessity to integrate the meaning of the Holocaust, both physically and spiritually, into the consciousness and memory of Berlin; and third, only through acknowledging and incorporating this erasure and void of Jewish life can the history of Berlin, Germany, and Europe have a human future.

Libeskind calls his project "Between the Lines" because it reflects two lines of thinking and organization, and about relationship. One is a straight line, but broken into many fragments; the other is a tortuous line continuing indefinitely. Cutting through the form of the Museum is a Void, a straight line whose impenetrability forms the central focus around which exhibitions are organized. In order to cross from one space to the other, the visitors traverse over 30 bridges opening into the Holocaust Void-space, the embodiment of absence. An external space enclosed by a tower, it is lighted only indirectly by natural light that comes through an acutely slanted window up high in the structure, barely visible from the inside. The deconstructivist building architecturally embraces something quintessential to German-Jewish history and culture, the void points towards that which is absent, has vanished—but still must be made present. Here we witness the creative genius of the artist who strives to articulate the dilemma Germany faces whenever it attempts to formalize the self-inflicted void at the center—the void of its lost and murdered Jews.

One installation “Shalekhet (Fallen Leaves)” by Israeli artist Menashe Kadishman can be seen in the accessible Memory Void and two other Voids. More than 10,000 faces cut from sheet steel lie like autumn leaves on the floor. Welding seams, burn marks, and rust give each face its own physiognomy. In the context of the Jewish Museum, this installation is first of all a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust; but the artist also understands his work as a universal message and the reference to autumn as hope for new life the following spring.
The only way out of the building is through the Garden of Exile, which consists of 49 concrete columns filled with earth, each seven meters high, spaced a meter apart. Forty-eight of these columns are filled with earth from Berlin, their number referring to the year of Israel’s independence in 1948. The 49th column stands for Berlin and is filled with earth from Jerusalem. They are planted with willow oaks that spread out over the gardens of columns into a great, green canopy overhead. While the columns stand at 90-degree angels to the ground plate, the plate itself is tilted in two different angels so that one stumbles about as if in the dark feeling like you’re drifting at sea without any support. We are sheltered in exile on the one hand, yet still somehow thrown off balance by it and disoriented at the same time.

Perhaps it is only fitting that we conclude this presentation in the land of Israel. There are numerous outdoor works of art at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial and Museum in Jerusalem. A recent creation, The Valley of the Communities, was designed by the architectural firm of Lipa Yaholom and Dan Zur. This massive work spread over some 2.5 acres highlights the names of thousands of Jewish communities destroyed by Nazi Germany and its collaborators and the few that suffered but survived in the shadow of the Holocaust. The task of the artists was to create a monument to ruin, an act which required the "construction" of the "destruction." Therefore nothing was built above ground; instead it was excavated out of the earth. This evocative memorial resembles a concentration of huge open graves gaping in the ground. It is as if what had been built up on the surface of the earth over the course of a millennia—a 1,000 years of European Jewish communal life—was suddenly swallowed up. On the glaring bright Jerusalem stone walls the names of some 5,000 communities have been engraved—symbolically embedded forever in the very bedrock of Israel.

In the preface to one of his works, English writer Joseph Conrad defined Art as "an attempt to render the highest justice to the visible universe, to find in that universe, in matter as well as in the facts of life, what is fundamental, enduring, essential." Although deeply disturbing and intensely problematic, I believe that Holocaust art aids in this exalted effort by helping us to come to terms with the catastrophic event and at least consider, and perhaps even challenge, the conditions which allowed it to happen.

Artists and Artworks Discussed

11. Audrey Flack, "World War II (Vanitas)," 1978.
29. Elsworth Kelly, "Memorial,"
30. Sol LeWitt, "Consequence,"
31. Joel Shapiro, "Loss and Regeneration,"
34. Lipa Yaholom and Dan Gur, "Valley of the Communities," 1998, Yad Vashem, Israel.