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Mediums of Resistance

When Art Historians Look at the Art of Ghettos and Camps

In 1977 the art historian and critic Douglas Crimp organized the group exhibition *Pictures* at Artists Space in New York. One of the works on display at the gallery was Troy Brauntuch’s *1 2 3*, three photographic enlargements of drawings Hitler had made before the First World War. Going back on the show two years later in the article “Pictures” (art journal *October*, Spring 1979) Crimp stresses the ordinariness of the original sketches. He adds in footnote: “Perhaps even more surprising than the banality of Hitler’s paintings is that of the art produced inside the concentration camps.” The comment referred to the exhibition *Spiritual Resistance: Art from Concentration Camps, 1940–1945* that had been held at the Jewish Museum of New York in 1978.1 What is surprising is that an art historian such as Crimp, early proponent of cultural studies, dismisses so easily the wide array of experiences covered in *Spiritual Resistance*. The artists presented in the exhibition came from Poland, France, Czechoslovakia, Italy, Austria, Belgium and Russia. Some were born in the 1870s, others in the 1910s. Some were self-taught; others had studied with Rodin and Matisse or exhibited with Picasso and Mondrian. Some belonged to avant-garde movements such as Surrealism and Blaue Reiter; others were conservative artists. That Crimp subsumes under an overall “banality” such a diversity of backgrounds, hence of artistic renderings of the Nazi terror, says a lot. It illustrates how difficult it is to reflect art-historically on drawings and paint-

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Anmerkung: This article was made possible (in part) by funds granted to the author through a Leon Milman Memorial Fellowship at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The statements made and views expressed, however, are solely the responsibility of the author.
ings produced in the extreme conditions of ghettos and camps. Being at the same
time work of art, evidence of crime, historical document and object of memory,
they are situated at the conceptual limits of the discipline.

Obviously Crimp did not intend to produce any substantial approach to
works of art made during the Holocaust. His footnote in “Pictures” has more to
do with his radical engagement, like his *October* colleagues, in promoting post-
modern practices in art. The works shown in *Spiritual Resistance* are collateral
victims rather than initial target in his attempt of liquidating the modernist
artistic legacy. In such a light, Crimp’s comment seems marginal to Holocaust
studies. Yet, the chapter takes it as starting point because it brings to the fore
conceptual issues that are still relevant today when dealing with visual records
of Nazi atrocities: the tension between documentary and aesthetic value; the
relation between event, biography and language; the articulation of artistic,
moral and political demands. Through these themes, the chapter reflects on the
interplay of Holocaust historiography, the art of Jewish resistance, and postmod-
ernism from the late 1970s until the present day. It tries to define what changes
affected these categories over the past decades and to what extent these changes
in turn impacted on our understanding of both the artistic production of camps
and ghettos and the notion of “Jewish resistance”. The chapter examines two
phases. The first one goes from the late 1970s until the mid-1990s. It concerns the
recoding of “spiritual resistance” (the term Miriam Novitch, a Holocaust survivor
herself and curator of the Ghetto Fighters’ House Museum in Israel, used from the
1950s onward) into “art of the Holocaust” and then “Holocaust art”. The second
phase starts in the mid-1990s and continues throughout the 2000s. It concerns
the recoding of the notion of “work of art” into “artistic representation” of the
Holocaust. Through the analysis of these two phases, the chapter aims to shed
light on the cultural and intellectual construction of the reception of Holocaust
documents, and the role a visual history of the Holocaust might play in the study
of Nazi criminality.

**From “spiritual resistance” to “Holocaust art”**

The first re-conceptualization of the art of ghettos and camps occurred in the
late 1970s when postmodernism began to spread across disciplines. In this new
context “spiritual resistance” became the “art of the Holocaust”. From the imme-
diate postwar until then, works of art depicting the Nazi terror had been consid-
ered a reliable visual record. For the organizers of the exhibition *Extermination
and Resistance: Historical Records and Source Material* (Ghetto Fighters’ House,
Israel, 1958), it was not a problem to present “drawings and sketches dating from the actual time of the Catastrophe” alongside notes by Immanuel Ringelblum and the Rabbi of Sanik. The divide line ran rather between oral history and archive material. With the advent of postmodernism it moved and came to separate texts and images of the Jewish resistance, pointing to a hierarchical order wherein the written word prevailed over the visual in terms of authenticity, objectivity, and documentary quality. This change took place in a tense context. The postmodern discourse generated an atmosphere of relative meanings (“anything goes”) wherein one version of history seemed as good as another. Holocaust scholars, who feared denial would thrive on such a ground, felt obligated to re-assert the documentary status of their material. Works of art did not easily lend themselves to this enterprise. Who could say whether what they depicted was “real” or “imagined”? Against such a backdrop, the recoding of “spiritual resistance” into “art of the Holocaust” was the preliminary step taken by art historians willing to tackle this issue and push the epistemological legitimacy of the works of art they defended. What emerged out of this process was not a fixed category but a field open to interpretations and methodologies.

Banal and unique

In the late 1970s, Crimp is not the only one to point to the “banal” aspect of the artistic production of camps and ghettos. Mary Louise Parke, an early Holocaust art historian, shares his assumption. In her PhD thesis (1981) she argues that: “a large amount of works made from the camp experiences could almost be called


bland, neutral, or un-dramatic descriptive illustration”. She does not relate it, as the *October* art critique would have it, to a lack of artistic experiment from Jewish inmates. Crimp manifests – if we read his comment with postmodernist aesthetics in mind – his surprise at the fact that the novum in history that was the Holocaust did not register into a new artistic language. For Parke, this is precisely this “banality” that warrants the documentary value of the works. Jewish artists depicted only what they saw because the scheme to which they and their fellows were submitted was so hideous that they could not imagine it beyond their daily experience. Writing on the subject a few years ago, the art historian Janet Wolff argues in the same way:

Scholars of Holocaust art have pointed out that the tendency among witness-artists [...] was to produce more or less realist documentary works. The foremost imperative was to record and provide testimony. In addition, for those who were subject to the trauma of the ghettos and the camps, the prevailing response was a loss of affect – a psychological state, which translated into the dispassionate mode of documentary realism.

Interestingly, the positions of Crimp and Parke, however opposite, point to a same idea, that the oft-quoted passage of *The Differend* (1983) by Jean-François Lyotard, encapsulates. The philosopher compares the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis to:

an earthquake [that] destroys not only lives, buildings, and objects but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes directly and indirectly. The impossibility of quantitatively measuring it does not prohibit but rather inspires in the minds of the survivors the idea of a very great seismic force.

It strongly resonates with Parke’s claim that: “Holocaust art cannot successfully be compared with any existing school of thought or individual work of art.” She suggests that it be better studied “as a completely separate body of work,” thereby turning it into an isolated object with no connection whatsoever to earlier forms of visualization. “Since it was produced in a vacuum, it can only

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9 Parke, Holocaust Art, p. 3.
be evaluated within that vacuum.”10 Nelly Toll, herself a Holocaust survivor and artist,11 preceded Parke in this line of reasoning. In her first study Without Surrender (1978) she declares:

Traditionally, the study of art history is based on scholarly inquiry into chronology, influences, descriptive characteristics, and stylistic evolution. A final critical analysis is based on the evidence of this accumulated research. The art of the Holocaust resists this type of study. Because of its unique roots and the circumstances under which it was executed it does not fit the traditional demands of the discipline of aesthetics.12

This approach replicates within the realm of art history the concept of uniqueness of the Final Solution. It is on a par with historiographical discussions of that period, as Holocaust scholars confront “attempts by others to diminish the event for apologetic or revisionist purposes”.13 The “vacuum” theory advanced by Parke and Toll serves a twofold objective. It blocks both comparisons with outside works of art produced in similar conditions (extreme violence, war, internment) and any possibility of evaluation inside the “art of the Holocaust” itself. Parke and Toll erect a protective fence around the latter on the basis of “the moral and historical weight of its subject”.14 They advocate an ethical relation that leaves no space for aesthetical judgment on “good” or “bad” art. This specific stance, however justified, deprives the works from an essential dimension. The men and women who created them resisted Nazi extermination as individuals and artists. In this respect the story related by Véronique Allemany-Dessaint, curator of the exhibition Créer pour Survivre (Fédération Nationale des Déportés, France, 1996) is enlightening. She based her selection of works for the show on the “authenticité de la démarche” of their authors. Some survivors who were professional

10 Parke, Holocaust Art, p. 143.
11 She was born in Lwow, Poland, in 1935. From early 1943 to July 1944, she and her mother hid with a Polish family. Her watercolors were created in this period. She emigrated to the United States in 1951. She studied art in Rowan College and Rutgers University (Rosen, Philip/Apfelbaum, Anne: Bearing Witness. A Resource Guide to Literature, Poetry, Art, Music, and Videos by Holocaust Victims and Survivors. Westport (CT) 2002, p. 85).
artists were displeased with such a criterion and expressed their reluctance to being exhibited alongside amateurs. The regime of exceptionality Parke and Toll design for the “art of the Holocaust” – once more, not dissimilar to Lyotard turning the Shoah into a transcendent event “not presentable under the rules of knowledge” – could function for a while. But on the long term would it not turn this artistic production into mere ‘curiosity’ instead of a field of study?

Re-connecting art, history, and the Holocaust

This latter point is a major concern in Art of the Holocaust (1982). For authors Janet Blatter and Sybil Milton, the “vacuum” position is not tenable. Milton eloquently stresses its effect:

Unfortunately, very little has been done with [the art of the Holocaust]. Most museums have either ignored it or promoted only small token exhibits. Art historians, with few exceptions, have reacted to the subject with indifference... Libraries and archives have given Holocaust art low acquisition and cataloguing priorities, until recent media and educational interest forced critical reexamination. Furthermore historians have rarely made use of the evidence presented in these pictures for their own investigation of the Holocaust.

Institutions and academia fail with regard to the specificity of the artistic production of camps and ghettos, because they share the “commonly held view that these works are either artistically or historically significant but not both”. The challenge for Blatter and Milton, thus, is to elaborate a scientific discourse that acknowledges the unstable categorization of such works and proposes new instruments for dealing with it. It means the long-term building of the “art of the Holocaust” as a field of study able to interact with other disciplines and trigger new areas of research.

Therefore, the establishment of methodologies and classifications is a critical step. It brings to the fore the question of the relation of the “art of the Holocaust”

18 Blatter/Milton, Art of the Holocaust, p. 21.
to art history in general. This is not so much a question of analytical frameworks, as demonstrated in Milton’s rather classical discussion of artistic genres (e. g. portraiture, landscape) as a question of position on the spectrum of Western culture. In postwar years it was not rare to compare paintings and drawings made in camps with works emblematic of a long-established iconography of atrocity, such as Picasso’s Guernica and Goya’s Disasters of the War. Such references, obviously, are irrelevant to art historians like Toll and Parke. Others, however, show more moderate positions. In The Living Witness (1982), Mary Costanza defines the “art of the Holocaust” as a form of “humanistic art” and integrates it into a history of “social protest, stream of consciousness, social conscious art, social commentary and others”.19 In her view victims-survivors have much in common with Daumier, Grosz, Rivera, Cranach, Michelangelo, and of course Picasso and Goya.20 Milton does not agree on such comparisons since these artists, unlike Jewish “victims-artists”, were not struggling for their survival when they created their works. However, she and Blatter make a point of understanding the artistic production of camps and ghettos in relation to past iconography, considering for instance the influence of artistic movements prior to Hitler’s rise to power on the way Jewish artists depicted the Nazi terror.21

Is the artist a “camera” recording objectively every detail or an expressionist conveying what life in the camps and ghettos looked and felt like?22 If so, what constructs his or her worldview? This is an issue that James E. Young raises in Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust (1988): “Each victim ‘saw’ – i. e. understood and witnessed – his predicament differently, depending on his own historical past, religious paradigms, and ideological explanations.”23 Young points to a complex temporality of interpretation:

First, how events of this period were grasped in the archetypes and paradigms of other epochs during the Holocaust; second, how particular aspects of the Holocaust began to figure other parts of this time within the period itself (i. e. how the Holocaust became its own trope); and third, how images from the Holocaust subsequently came to figure other, unrelated events and experiences for both victims and non-victims, Jews and non-Jews.24

21 Blatter/Milton, Art of the Holocaust, p. 22.
24 Young, Writing and Rewriting, p. 84.
In this line of study, and a significant contribution to the analysis of “the archetypes and paradigms of other epochs”, we find Depiction and Interpretation: The Influence of the Holocaust on Visual Arts (1993), the work Ziva Amishai-Maisels published after twenty years of research. The art historian tries to situate the “art of the Holocaust” within the history of Western art. She refers to a long chain of tradition including medieval Christian imagery of the suffering of Christ and martyrs, Goya, Ilya Repin, Daumier and Bruegel among others:

These comparisons raise important questions concerning camp art and the workings of the minds of the artists. One must, in fact, bear in mind that despite their conscious aim of reporting the facts coldly the artists were not born in the camps. On the contrary, each of them brought with him his own cultural background, previous knowledge, and often even practice of art. Before even they arrived in the camps they had digested iconographic and stylistic traditions that would stand them in good stead when they sought to maximalize the expressive and communicative power of their witness report.25

Amishai-Maisels turns “spiritual resistance” into one of the categories of the “art of the Holocaust” along with official art (ordered by Nazi authorities), art as testimony and art as catharsis.26 In each category, she looks for “prototypes”, conscious and unconscious representations that allow artists to deal with the task of representing overwhelming situations. Her reflection on issues of style (abstract vs. figurative) and limits of the “prototypes” points to the problem of the communication with the spectator. What is at stake in this discussion is the future of the “art of the Holocaust”: How do works of art communicate with audiences fifty, sixty, or seventy years after the event? To what extent do they nurture “follower art” on the same subject?

The advent of “Holocaust art”

In Art of the Holocaust Blatter and Milton establish a distinction between “the art of the Holocaust” (works created in 1939–1945 by victims of the Nazi regime) and “the Holocaust in art” (any art depicting or alluding to the Holocaust, made during and after World War II). The distinction is also known in institutional terms as “period art” (i.e. works created in 1939–1945 by victims of the Nazi regime in occupied Europe) and “post-period”. The two categories begin to increasingly interact. This can be seen for instance in the exhibition To Feel

25 Amishai-Maisels, Depiction and Interpretation, p. 10.
26 Amishai-Maisels, Depiction and Interpretation, p. 4.
Again (Yad Vashem, Israel, 1983) presenting works by young Israeli artists alongside the “art of the Holocaust”. The curator Irit Salmon-Livne explains in the catalogue that it is “an attempt to add a new link to the chain”, and to connect “the collective national trauma [with] fragments of stories heard and absorbed”. What kind of relation do these artists have with the art of victims-artists becomes a pressing issue throughout the 1980s. This development marks the emergence of cultural memory issues onto the realm of the Holocaust. Survivors begin to age, and these are now their children who show an active concern in preserving their stories. More and more artists deal with the subject, thereby reflecting an increased popular interest in the history of the Nazi regime. The mini-series Holocaust is aired in 1978. The playwright Robert Skloot stresses around the same period the “outpouring of political novels, television spectacular, coffee table picture books, church sermons, university courses, literary essays, theatre pieces, hip journalism, and pornographic films on the Holocaust theme”. This is a turning point, the beginning of a phenomenon (memorialization) that keeps expanding over years. Many scholars are aware of the importance of the process set in motion, and of the necessity to start conceptualizing it early on: How is an event such as the Holocaust mediated to people who have no direct knowledge of it?

How to create generational transmission is a question that haunts “the art of the Holocaust” as well. In Recent Holocaust Works in America (1988), Vivian Alpert Thompson suggests that it be based on affect. She coins the term “empathizers’ art,” which she describes as an “art produced by those who have empathized with the victims”. Somehow pre-figuring Marianne Hirsch’s well-known concept of “post-memory”, she explains that empathy is “so deep that some of [the artists who are not survivors] have taken on characteristics normally attributable to survivors”. Milton takes the idea further. In the text she wrote for the catalogue of the exhibition of Alice Lok Cahana, From Ashes to the Rainbow (Los Angeles, 1987) she expresses the conviction that “the Holocaust in Modern art will

27 Hana Shir and Roni Hameagel.
31 Born in Hungary in 1929, Alice Lok Cahana is a Holocaust survivor. She has had an important artistic career in Israel and the United States.
be an ever expanding field".\textsuperscript{32} She advocates joining the “art of the Holocaust” and “art about the Holocaust” in forming “a new socially critical contemporary artistic tradition”.\textsuperscript{33} A decade later, she re-defines the concept as a “new, socially critical tradition of ethics in art”.\textsuperscript{34} This definition resonates with the claim Berel Lang makes in the realm of historiography:

Far from marking a rupture of or within, the Holocaust is open to – indeed demands – historical, and so morally historical, analysis and understanding. In other words, it must be placed in a historical field that joins its pre-Holocaust antecedents to the post-Holocaust aftermath. Indeed the Holocaust as an event provides notable evidence for the claim of this continuum, which can thus also be read as a moral history.\textsuperscript{35}

Can we, on similar terms, read it as a moral art history? The question is much debated at the turn of the millennium, as the relation of Western civilization (for which art history seems to serve as metonymy) to the Holocaust is more than ever an object of scrutiny. With the advent of critical “Holocaust art” (another way to say post-Holocaust moral art history), art historians cannot but engage in articulating anew their practice.

\section*{Artistic representations of the Holocaust and Warburgian paradigms}

The second re-conceptualization of works made in camps and ghettos occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s in the wake of a major paradigm shift in Holocaust studies: the advent of trauma studies and memory studies. The works of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{35} Lang, Berel: Holocaust Representation. Art Within the Limits of History and Ethics. Baltimore 2000, p. 143.
\end{itemize}
Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Cathy Caruth on witnessing were central to this development. In *An Event Without A Witness: Truth, Testimony, and Survival* Laub argued that being inside the event made unthinkable the notion that a witness could exist. Nobody, he explained, could step outside the Nazi system and observe the event from that exterior vantage point.

Against all odds, attempts at bearing witness did take place; chroniclers of course existed and the struggle to maintain the process of recording and of salvaging and safeguarding evidence was carried on relentlessly. [...] However, these attempts to bear witness could essentially not be met during the actual occurrence. The degree to which bearing witness was required, entailed such an outstanding measure of awareness and of comprehension of the event [...] that is was beyond the limits of human ability (and willingness) to grasp, to transmit, or to imagine. There was therefore no concurrent “knowing” or assimilation of the history of the occurrence. The event could thus unimpededly proceed as though there were no witnessing whatsoever, no witnessing that could decisively impact on it.37

As seen above, the argument of psychological numbing had already been used for some time. Yet, in the way Laub expressed it, it attested to a new kind of encounter with the postmodern discourse. Drawing after post-structuralism, semiotics and deconstruction, trauma studies proceeded from a critique of referentiality and the subject. This development could not but reflect in art history. Traumatic witnessing challenged the rather traditionally defined category of “Holocaust art”. To take it up, art historians had to revise both this category and the nature of their expertise in relation to Nazi atrocities.

**New temporalities of interpretation**

Writing on the work *Life or Theater* by Charlotte Salomon (1917–1943), the art historian Ernst Van Alphen deplores the ongoing opposition between historical and documentary value of the work on the one hand, its artistic autonomy on the other hand.38 However familiar it sounds (let us think about Blatter and Milton), Van

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36 See: Felman, Shoshana/Laub, Dori (eds.): Testimonies: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History (New York 1992); Caruth, Cathy: Trauma: Explorations in Memory (Baltimore 1995) and ead.: Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History (Baltimore 1996).
Alphen’s analysis indicates a radically changed conceptual environment. In tune with Laub’s view, his interpretation of the “documentary vs. aesthetic debate” sheds a new light on the question of artistic language. Victims could not experience the event itself because there was no available symbolic order that could help them to figure it out and express it. This absence is precisely what defines the event as traumatic. The philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy puts it even more simply: the Holocaust is “une crise ultime de la représentation”. This signals a major paradigm shift for “Holocaust art”. One no longer talks about “works of art” but about “artistic representations”, thereby altering the nature of the discourse. Concurrently, “resistance” becomes a quasi-psychological category deciphered through notions such as trace, repressed, and return. The resistance of the event to being depicted gets increasingly mingled with the resistance of the (artistic) image to being interpreted. As Dora Apel suggests, a new temporality emerges out of this entanglement:

This is especially true with representations of the continuing trauma of the Holocaust, which refuses to be historicized as an event safely ensconced in the past, and continues to drive a compulsion toward forms of reenactment by those who did not experience the original events, in response to the trauma experienced through intergenerational transmission.

In an intellectual environment bent to Walter Benjamin and the Theses on the Philosophy of History (1940), the critical iconology of the German art historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929) proves a source of inspiration for art historians dealing with visual records of the Holocaust. Warburg’s Ikonologie des Zwischenraumes (Iconology of Intervals) and Nachleben (Afterlife) of images respond to Benjamin’s theory of history as constellation. Both refer to an “in-between space that ties together the present and past”. They ground new temporalities of interpretation that make “historians and critics accountable for the present as well as the past” and sustain “a more integrated approach to an event that was never easily delimited in time and space”. The Atlas Warburg developed in the 1920s

39 Van Alphen, Caught by History, pp. 44–45.
43 The Atlas (also known as Mnemosyne Atlas and Bilderatlas) consisted of sixty-three 150 x 200 cm sized wooden panels covered with black cloth. Warburg pinned on them all kinds of images and continuously changed their arrangement in search for new connections in his study of the evolution of human gesture in the mimetic arts from classical antiquity to the early twentieth century.
becomes a template for art historians. Based on visual juxtapositions, it revolves around *Pathosformeln* (pathos formulas), a concept initially indicating a repertoire of recurring figures embodying movement and nowadays synonymous with representational patterns.

The book *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum* (2007) is a good example of a pathos formulas-based reading of representations of the Holocaust. The enterprise of the art historian Griselda Pollock, who juxtaposes photographic and artistic representations of Holocaust atrocities with Renaissance paintings of Hell, resonates with the work of Ziva Amishai-Maisels on cultural and artistic “prototypes”. Pollock’s application of “psychological aesthetics” would certainly suit the author of *Depiction and Interpretation* as it implies digging into the “pictorial unconscious, a memory formation of deep emotions that were held in recurring patterns, gestures and forms in images that survived across the differences of time and space”. There is, however, more to Pollock’s resort to pathos formulas. She uses them to open a breach in the fabric of academic art history and question the conditions of the practice. Is “the Greco-Christian European tradition of art still possible, or has history, the Holocaust shattered it”, Pollock wonders. Academic art history – her shortcut for Western culture – has been much compromised with the Holocaust. Therefore there is a need to radically break from it. As it goes against the usually progress-oriented frames of academic art history, the anachronistic reading of images involved in pathos formulas provides such a possibility. What Pollock advocates on such a basis is art history practiced as a continuous breaking of instruments of measure (we might recall Lyotard on this point). For these reasons, she cannot let a category such as “Holocaust art” be reconstructed:

To create a new, museal category in which is emerging increasingly in contemporary publishing and exhibitions, *Holocaust Art*, is to reveal precisely the failure of art history as a discipline to understand that historical events like the Shoah ruined and changed the conditions of our practice, ethically as well as politically.

Pollock rejects this easy closure offered by “Holocaust art” because it is at odds with the task she assigns to post-Holocaust art history: theorizing “both the

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46 Pollock, Encounters, p. 171.
47 Pollock, Encounters, p. 148.
individual trauma of those who suffer the event and the socio-cultural trauma of the societies in which it happened.”

**New mediums of resistance**

What makes Warburg popular among present-day art historians is not only his anachronistic vision of art history. His use of a variety of visual elements (e.g., photographic reproductions from art books, posters, stamps, press clippings, drawings, leaflets, maps) fits a discipline dramatically transformed by postmodern aesthetics and discourse. Warburg’s techniques of montage and non-hierarchical treatment of images opens up a methodological path for art historians willing to analyze photographic and filmic mediums. So equipped, they reassess their expertise on representations of Nazi atrocities. In the process Jewish resistance is no longer seen (only) through works of “Holocaust art” but (also) through non-artistic images of the Holocaust to be approached via combined phenomenological and aesthetic readings. This new situation raises the question of the role art historians might play in the historiography of the Holocaust – all the more so as the latter field too is going through changes. The discussion “German history after the visual turn”, on the academic forum H-German in 2006 points to the growing integration of visual sources into the study of German history, especially the Third Reich and the Holocaust. Yet, as Paul Betts, one of the forum participants, underscores, “what to do with images and image-making” remains a “thorny problem” for many historians. More than ever, it seems, a greater interaction between Holocaust historiography and cultural history is needed.


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archival images and how art historians could contribute to reading “pictorial testimonies”.\textsuperscript{51} The intervention of Didi-Huberman generates analytical changes at several levels, in the nature of the image and the role of the present-day viewer. The “testimonial importance” of the photographic image demands, according to Didi-Huberman, that one goes beyond defining it only through its informational value as evidence. Against Lanzmann, he defends the idea that archive images possess “the emotional power of survivor testimony”. They invite the beholder to imagine because they too have “the capacity to vehicle the feel of events”.\textsuperscript{52} This is why their materiality, and not only their content, must be addressed. Didi-Huberman gives the example of the abstract-like black frame on the Sonderkommando pictures, indicating that some photos were taken from inside a building, possibly the gas chamber. Many reproductions crop this black mass so that only the view in the window frame is preserved. This cropping denies a central dimension in the act of witnessing performed by the Sonderkommando members. It erases the dangerous conditions in which the men photographed the process of extermination. Against it, one must see the photos as sequence: the photographer (probably Alex, a Greek Jew) first hides in the gas chamber, then goes out in the open and takes the photos as fast as he can while the other members watch out. Only in such a sequential way does one understand the pictures as a “visual event” and give them back their full phenomenological power.\textsuperscript{53}

The impact of Images Malgré Tout is to be considered in a context of reappraisal of the Sonderkommandos within the broader discussion on Jewish resistance. In the 1960s the historian Ber Mark produced a heroic framing of the Sonderkommando members. While he acknowledged the presence among them of individuals without much moral strength, he emphasized those of the members


\textsuperscript{52} Chare, Nicholas: Auschwitz and Afterimages: Abjection, Witnessing, and Representation. London 2011, p. 81.

\textsuperscript{53} Didi-Huberman, Georges: Images Malgré Tout. Paris 2003, pp. 50–52. In the same ways, Didi-Huberman denounces the retouching of the naked women on their way to death. When the photo was reproduced in the first anthology of Polish photography in the late 1990s, the editor of the collection, the Polish photographer Jerzy Lewczynski, enlarged the face and inserted it in the top right-hand corner of the frame. The caption read: “Worth noticing is the upward (heaven-bound) movement, on the diagonal line of the photos. The face of the beautiful woman in front can be almost clearly seen.” He seemed to ignore the photos had been taken by a Jew and the faces of the women had been retouched. See: Struk, Janina: Photographing the Holocaust. Interpretations of the Evidence. London/New York 2004, p. 194.
who were part of resistance cells and/or had performed acts of resistance.\textsuperscript{54} In his recent study on afterimages of Auschwitz, Nicholas Chare explains that such a narrative excluded specific documents. There were, for instance, personal letters wherein members expressed their concern that “many of their deeds would be later viewed as far from valiant”.\textsuperscript{55} As cultural theorist Susie Linfield reminds her reader:

It is the Sonderkommandos, Primo Levi wrote, who represent “an extreme case of collaboration” and yet dwell in the “grey zone” beyond judgment; it is the Sonderkommandos who embody “National Socialism’s most demonic crime [...] an attempt to shift onto others — specifically, the victims — the burden of guilt, so that they were deprived of even the solace of innocence.” And it is the Sonderkommandos, Levi charged, who were recognized by the SS as “colleagues, by now as inhuman as themselves [...] bound together by the foul link of imposed complicity.”\textsuperscript{56}

This is a dramatic shift away from a conception of “spiritual resistance” as a belief in indomitable mankind toward an understanding of resistance as survival, including “grey zones” of compromise and collaboration. Such a shift draws our attention to duration — how acts of resistance in the past continue in the present. In this respect, the survival of the Sonderkommando members, eyewitnesses of the planned disappearance of a whole people, belongs with the afterlife of the pictures they took in Auschwitz on that day of August 1944. When Didi-Huberman posits the task of imagining what happened there as the only ethical way to honor the memory of both the victims and the Sonderkommando members, he calls to the responsibility of the viewer today. With this act of imagination, however small it appears in the face of Nazi-engineered destruction, one does not look passively at the photos but actively appropriates them in an affective way, thereby turning “images of resistance” into “images as resistance” to forgetting.

\textbf{Conclusion}

From the late 1970s to the present-day, the frames by which the artistic production of ghettos and camps is analyzed and interpreted went through many changes. As postmodernism began to spread across disciplines, challenging narratives and

\textsuperscript{55} Chare, Auschwitz and Afterimages, p. 79.
standpoints, the concept of “spiritual resistance” gave way to a new notion, the “art of the Holocaust”. The latter received different interpretations, ranging from an isolated category of art (corresponding to the uniqueness of the Holocaust) to a field of study in the making and necessitating new methodologies. During this first phase, the “art of the Holocaust” was re-positioned within Western art history and linked to earlier iconography of atrocity. Reflecting nascent concerns about generational transmission, art historians also related it to works of art made after 1945. This development led to the more integrated category of “Holocaust art” as a new ethical tradition. A second phase of re-conceptualization began in the wake of trauma studies. In this context, work of art was recoded into artistic representation and analyzed through notions of witnessing, trace, absence, return. Art historians produced new temporalities of interpretation that allowed them to both question the conditions of their practice (some considered academic art history compromised with the Holocaust) and expand their field of expertise to non-artistic documentation of Nazi atrocities. Doing so, they positioned themselves to becoming partners, alongside historians, political scientists and literary scholars, in establishing an inter-disciplinary visual history of the Holocaust.