

Looking into the Mirrors of Evil

by James E. Young

A notorious Nazi once said that when he heard the word *culture*, he reached for his revolver. Now it seems, every time we hear the word *Nazi*, we reach for our culture. Thus do we seem to protect ourselves from, even as we provide a window into, the terror of the Nazi Reich. It is almost as if the only guarantee against the return of this dreaded past lies in its constant aesthetic sublimation—in the art, literature, music, and even monuments by which the Nazi era is vicariously recalled by a generation of artists born after, but indelibly shaped by, the Holocaust.

Until recently, however, this art also has been one that concentrated unrelievedly on the victims of Nazi crimes—as a way to commemorate them, name them, extol them, bring them back from the dead. By contrast, almost no art has dared depict the killers themselves. It is as if the ancient injunction against writing the name of Amalek, or against hearing the sound of Haman’s name, had been automatically extended to blotting out their images as well. Of course, such blotting out was never about merely forgetting the tormentors of the Jews. For by ritually condemning our enemies to oblivion, we repeat an unending Jewish curse that actually helps us remember them.

As we have now discovered in the New York Jewish Museum’s 2002 exhibition, *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*, a new generation of artists sees things a little differently. In my reflections here on this exhibition and its extraordinarily fraught reception in the weeks before and after its opening, I would like to explore both the questions such art raises for us now as well as this art’s limitations for plumbing the generational breach between what happened and how it now gets passed down to us.

In December 2001, almost three months before the exhibition was scheduled to open the following March 17th, an intrepid *Wall Street Journal* reporter got wind of

it at a New York dinner party. Even though there was no exhibition yet to review, a biting article soon appeared in the *Journal* that compared the Jewish Museum’s *Mirroring Evil* exhibit to the Brooklyn Museum’s *Sensation* exhibition, which included incendiary images of Catholic icons and which, as everyone knows, was actually a self-promoting Saatchi collection on tour. This new exhibition at the Jewish Museum, the article implied, would now be a Holocaust or Nazi sensation. With a little push from the *Wall Street Journal*, it also would become a journalistic sensation, as reporters from across the city began showing a handful of the show’s more provocative images to survivors and their children for reactions.

The reactions were predictably mixed, with some survivors glad that if Nazi imagery in recent art is going to be shown anywhere, that it would be in the context of a responsibly conceived exhibition at the Jewish Museum. Other survivors and their families, having been shown these images without any accompanying context, were provoked into condemning an exhibition that was still months away from opening. Still others—Jews and non-Jews, survivors and their families—simply had little interest in seeing how Nazi imagery is used in any context, artistic or not. When asked what he was going to do about the exhibition, the new mayor, Michael Bloomberg, answered simply that it wasn’t the mayor’s job to say what should or shouldn’t be shown in the city’s great museums. Fair enough. Nonetheless, suddenly a meticulously prepared exhibition on Nazi imagery in recent art officially was deemed “controversial”—months before anyone even had a chance to see it.

The charge was led by someone I have long

known and admired, Menachem Rosensaft, the founding chair of the International Network of Children of Jewish Holocaust Survivors and a member of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. He soon was joined by Brooklyn Assemblyman Dov Hikind, representative of the largest population of Jewish Holocaust survivors in America. Having viewed some of the more disturbing images from the exhibition, Rosensaft pronounced the show an irredeemable desecration and trivialization of the Holocaust. This exhibition, he wrote, “is in excremental taste. There can be no excuse,” he continued, “aesthetic or otherwise, for the crude desecration of the Holocaust inherent in the display.” He went on to say that he was not shocked that there are “artists, novelists, filmmakers and other pseudo-intellectuals who ridicule the Holocaust and demean the suffering of its victims.” The main outrage for him, however, was that “a respected, mainstream Jewish cultural institution should be legitimizing the trivialization of the Holocaust.”¹ At the end of this piece, which he wrote for the *Forward*, he promised that loud demonstrations and pickets would be the least of the museum’s problems if it went ahead with the exhibition and that the museum’s superb reputation would be compromised irreparably.

As one of the exhibition’s academic consultants, I was invited by the *Forward* to write a companion piece for Rosensaft’s essay, defending the exhibition and providing a rationale for it. Though neither of us had read the other’s article, they were printed side by side and titled, “Demystifying Nazism, or Trivializing Its Victims? A Debate.” For my part, I asked everyone with half an interest in this show—pro or con—to step back and consider an old curatorial axiom: “Hot topic, cool treatment.” The aim of this sober-minded show, I said, is not to inflame the already viscerally charged passions evoked in images of the Nazis and their mass murder of Jews. Rather, it is to explore very critically the ways a new generation of artists has begun to integrate images of the killers themselves into their work, much of it conceptual and installation art.² What I didn’t address is a fundamental difference between audiences for this exhibition, which slices at least two ways. For many survivors, whose families were murdered and whose lives were permanently scarred by the Holocaust, it is impossible to see images of either the killers or the victims without their literal and visceral connection to their personal experience of events. However, for the next generation and for all who were not there, such experiences remain vicariously imagined and remembered. While these generations overlap, the breach between them is clear and perhaps unbridgable. As the survivors’ generation passes, though, these events will pass out of the realm of personal experience and into that of imagination only. If nothing else, this show exposes this generational fault line as never before. For us in the next generation, part of what we recall must be

this divide, so that we never mistake our experiences for those of the survivors themselves.

“You can’t shock us, Damien,” say the words artist Elke Krystufek has pasted over one of her collage works. “That’s because you haven’t based an entire exhibition on pictures of the Nazis.” Is this to say that the point here is merely to shock? Or that in a culture inured to the images of vivisectioned animals, only the images of Nazis still can shock? Or is the artist after something else altogether? I think it is the latter. Rather than repeating the degrading images of murdered and emaciated Jewish victims, thereby perpetuating the very images the Nazis themselves left behind, artists like Krystufek now turn their accusing gaze upon the killers themselves. For these artists, the only thing more shocking than the images of suffering victims is the depravity of the human beings who caused such suffering. To the traditional art that creates an empathetic nexus between viewers and concentration camp victims, these artists would add an art that brings us face to face with the killers themselves. Rather than allowing for the easy escape from responsibility implied by our traditional identification with the victims, these artists challenge us to confront the faces of evil—which, if the truth be told, look rather more like us than do the wretched human remains the Nazis left behind. In the process, we are led to ask: which leads to deeper knowledge of these events, to deeper understanding of the human condition? Images of suffering or of the evil-doers who caused such suffering? Which is worse? The cultural commodification of victims or the commercial fascination with killers? These artists let such questions dangle dangerously over our heads and, in the end, over their own. And finally, it also may be true that not all of this art or the artists can bear the

weight of the questions they have posed.

On the one hand, victimized peoples long have appropriated their oppressors' insidious descriptions of themselves as a way to neutralize their terrible charge. Nevertheless, what does it mean to appropriate images of the Nazi killers into the contemporary artistic response to the terror they wrought? Is doing so a way to normalize such images, making us comfortable with them, bringing them back into the cultural conversation, denying them the powerful charge that even the killers themselves hoped to spread? Or is the result merely to redirect viewers' attention away from the effects of such terror to its causes?

Alas, these are the easy questions articulated so disturbingly by this exhibition of Nazi imagery in recent art. Tougher, more unsettling, and yes, even more offensive questions also are raised and openly addressed by both the works in this exhibition and by the catalog essays written by curator Norman Kleeblatt and others, including Lisa Saltzman, Ernst van Alphen, Sidra Ezrahi, Reesa Greenberg, and Ellen Handler-Spitz. To what extent, for example, are we even allowed to consider the potential erotic component in the relationship between Nazi murderers and their Jewish victims? What does it mean to "play" Nazis by building your own model concentration camp out of Legos? Is this different from "playing" Nazis in the movies? Were Nazis beautiful? And if not, then to what aesthetic and commercial ends have they been depicted over the years in the hunkish movie-star images of Dirk Bogarde, Clint Eastwood, Frank Sinatra, Max van Sydow, and Ralph Fiennes? What does it mean for Calvin Klein to sell underwear and cologne in the Brekerian images of the Aryan ideal? And if this is possible, is it also possible for a son of survivors, British artist Alan Schechner, to imagine himself standing amidst emaciated survivors at Buchenwald, drinking a Diet Coke? Is he merely adhering to the Passover refrain that enjoins us to remember these events as if we were there, as Michael Berenbaum has suggested? Or is this image an extension of the artist's other work, *Holocaust Bar-code*, which would critique the potential for commercial exploitation of the Holocaust by anyone, anywhere, including the artist himself?

Indeed, just where are the limits of taste and irony here? And what should they be? Must a depraved crime always lead to such depraved artistic responses? Can such art mirror evil and remain free of evil's stench? Or must the banality of evil, once depicted, lead to the banalization of such images and become a banal art? As The Jewish Museum has made very clear in the dissenting (and affirming) voices of survivors included as part of the show's installation, such questions constitute the very reason for this exhibition. These questions are asked explicitly in wall panels by survivors, artists, and rabbis in a talking-heads video, and they are implied in a fascinating

compilation of popular cultural film and television clips, from *The Producers* to *Hogan's Heroes* to *The Twilight Zone*. What is worse, Mel Brooks's song from *The Producers*, "Springtime for Hitler," or art that self-consciously examines such a phenomenon? On Broadway in New York that spring of 2002, it was possible to pay \$150 for the right to laugh at Hitler's shenanigans in *The Producers*, but it was not possible to laugh at art that questioned this cultural conversion of terror into entertainment.

It is also the case that the artists don't always help themselves. On the eve of the March 17 opening, a disastrous interview between art critic Deborah Solomon and artist Tom Sachs appeared in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*. "Tell me about your *Prada Deathcamp*, one of the more incendiary works in the show," asks Deborah Solomon. Its creator, Tom Sachs, answers agreeably: "It's a pop-up death camp. It's a sort of best-of-all-worlds composite, with the famous Gate of Death and Crematorium IV from Auschwitz. I made it entirely from a Prada hatbox." He goes on to describe what Prada means to him, mainstream hipness and a place where you meet everyone you have ever known in your life. To which, Deborah Solomon responds, "What does that have to do with Hitler?" And here Sachs did his best to suggest that the emperor of contemporary installation art was as naked as its crankiest critics long had suggested. With queasy stomach, I quote: "I'm using the iconography of the Holocaust to bring attention to fashion. Fashion, like fascism, is about loss of identity. Fashion is good when it helps you to look sexy, but it's bad when it makes you feel stupid or fat because you don't have a Gucci dog bowl and your best friend has one." To which an incredulous

Deborah Solomon can say only, “How can you, as a presumably sane person, use the Nazi death camps as a metaphor for the more coercive aspects of the fashion industry? It makes me think you have failed to grasp the gravity of the Holocaust.” I could not have said it better myself.

In fact, Sachs’s work and approach to it—puerile as it may be—also provides that negative benchmark of kitsch and shallowness against which the rest of the show’s art might be measured and more seriously considered. Much more compelling, even haunting, are the fantasies of Israeli artists Roece Rosen and Boaz Arad. Rosen’s unfettered novelistic imagination asks us to put ourselves in the place of Eva Braun during her last moments in the bunker in Hitler’s embrace. It is not a place many of us would want to go but Rosen allows for a suspension of judgment that permits us to get an intimate look at evil incarnate. Arad’s fantasy is of an entirely different order. It is not about Hitler the seducer of a woman or an entire nation but about an Israeli Jew’s simple need for an apology from Hitler. By cutting and remixing original film clips of Hitler’s speeches, the artist literally forces Hitler’s own guttural utterances into a Hebrew sentence, so that we see Hitler gesticulate and proclaim in his own voice, “Shalom Yerushalayim, ani mitnatzel” (“Shalom, Jerusalem, I apologize.”) People laughed when the American artist Bruce Naumann proposed that Germany’s Holocaust memorial simply be composed of a tablet with the words, “We’re sorry for what we did and we promise never to do it again.” I don’t think any of us should be ashamed for fantasizing about an apology from Hitler, especially not the artists whose job it is to show us what we were only imagining.

Another work, Polish artist Zbigniew Libera’s LEGO concentration camp, also attracted more than its share of negative attention. In fact, having been widely shown in exhibitions around the U.S. and Europe (one even cosponsored by the New Jersey State Holocaust Education Commission), this piece already has done much more than provoke outrage among viewers: it has stimulated dozens of thoughtful reflections on just how Auschwitz is ever going to be imagined by anyone born after the terrible fact. Like Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, it has taken a seemingly low form of art and used it to address the artist’s own tortured relationship to a place and events he never knew directly. And like David Levinthal, who when asked why he took photographs of Nazi toys instead of the reality itself replied that the toys were fortunately his only reality of Nazis, Libera similarly recognizes that his only connection to Auschwitz is an imagined one. Outraged critics like Menachem Rosensaft asked what might be next, a Lego recreation of the World Trade Center’s destruction? What would the families of the murdered fire fighters think of that?

I recall how I had stumbled upon my two young boys, ages five and seven, up early one morning at work on a Lego memorial to the World Trade Center—after my wife and I had taken pains to protect them from nearly all the media’s images of the destruction. I also recall the night some two weeks after the attacks, when I heard our seven-year-old screaming at his younger brother from the other room, “But Ethan, you have to fall down when I crash into you—that’s the tragedy of the World Trade Center, that the towers fell down when the planes crashed into them.” Do our kids trivialize these events the moment they all too reflexively try to get their imaginations around them? Do we therefore proscribe such events altogether, thereby relegating them to the unimaginable, despite the historical fact that someone, somewhere had to imagine such events in order to perpetrate them?

If these questions are problematically formalized in this exhibition’s artworks, they also are carefully elaborated in the exhibition’s catalogue essays. In this vein, art historian Ellen Handler Spitz explores the perilous border between inviolate childhood and absolutely violated children, that inner-world terror of children devastated by a cruelty whose name they cannot pronounce. What can children do with such trauma? Ernst van Alphen persuasively argues that to some extent the child has come to stand “for the next generations, who need to learn a trauma they have not directly lived,” who instead of talking about such terror, or looking at it, will necessarily “play-act” it as a way to know and work through it.³

In fact, all the writers here are acutely aware that publicizing and writing about works such as these may be regarded by some to be as transgres-

sive and disturbing as the art itself. In this vein, both the exhibition curator, Norman Kleeblatt, and literary historian Sidra Ezrahi have probed deeply into what Ezrahi presciently calls the “ ‘barbaric space’ that tests the boundaries of a ‘safe’ encounter with the past.” Here, in fact, cultural critic Reesa Greenberg reminds us that “playing it safe” is no longer a viable option for museums, curators, critics, or viewers when the questions at hand are necessarily so dangerous. For as art historian Lisa Saltzman shows in her reconsideration of the avant-garde, since “all the verities are [now] thrown into question,” such transgressions require an art that makes excruciating demands on both critics and viewers. It is almost as if the more strenuously we resist such art, the more deeply we find ourselves implicated in its transgressions.

For a generation of artists and critics born after the Holocaust, their experience of Nazi genocide is necessarily vicarious and hypermediated. They have not experienced the Holocaust itself, only the event of its being passed down to them. As faithful to their experiences as their parents and grandparents were to theirs in the camps, this media-saturated generation thus takes as its subject the blessed distance between themselves and the camps, as well as the ubiquitous images of the Nazis and their crimes they find in the commercial mass-media.

Of course, we have every right to ask whether such obsession with these media-generated images of the past is aesthetically appropriate. It may be that by including such images in their work, the artists somehow affirm and extend them, even as they intend mainly to critique them and our connection to them. Nonetheless, this ambiguity between affirmation and criticism seems to be part of the artists’ aim here. As offensive as such work may seem on the surface, the artists might ask, is it the Nazi imagery itself that offends or the artists’ aesthetic manipulations of such imagery that is so offensive? Does such art become a victim of the imagery it depicts? Or does it actually tap into and thereby exploit the repugnant power of Nazi imagery as a way merely to shock and move its viewers? Or is it both, and if so, can these artists have it both ways? By extension, can a venerable institution such as the Jewish Museum ever just hang such work on its walls without creating a space for it in the high-art canon? Can a museum ever show art in order to critique it without also implicitly affirming it as somehow great art that had to earn a place on the museum’s walls?

In some ways, these questions have assumed a greater prominence in the minds of both viewers and critics after September 11. The line between gallery and museum exhibitions has been blurring, encouraged by so much conceptual and installation art (and, let’s face it, inspired by Duchamp many years ago), much of it brazenly anticommercial. Now digging in their heels are the critics who had been harping for years that

the museum’s role as arbiter of what was worthy and deserving of cultural preservation had been all but eviscerated by showing art whose essence openly negated such curatorial aims. Their patience had been exhausted both by such shows (see the reviews of the Whitney Biennial) and by what they regard as a self-absorbed generation of artists more preoccupied with their handiwork than with a world outside themselves. Critics such as Michael Kimmelman at the *New York Times* grumpily admit to having reached the end of their patience with the repetitive plumbing of shock value for its own sake, with contemporary installation art’s repeatedly saying over and over again, “Look what I can do.” One week, Kimmelman extolled the retrospective of Gerhard Richter’s work at MOMA, one of the main conceptual forebears for this show; the next week, he excoriated the artists in *Mirroring Evil* who took their cue from Richter.

Clearly, something in all these works resonated deeply with Norman L. Kleeblatt, the Jewish Museum curator who conceived and organized this exhibition. As the child of German-Jewish refugees who barely escaped with their lives, and the grandson and great-grandson of Jews murdered in the camps, Kleeblatt had the courage to face the images of an evil that has defined his truncated family legacy and continues to shape his identity as an American and as a Jew, whether he likes it or not.

In mounting this exhibition, the Jewish Museum showed similar courage in the way it openly faces equally fraught institutional issues: Where is the line between historical exhibition and sensationalistic exhibitionism? Can any exhibition—even the most rigorously framed—or the artists, or curators, or even we as viewers objectively critique sen-

sationalist imagery without participating in the sensation itself? In the end, viewers of the exhibition and readers of its catalogue will have to decide for themselves—but only after they actually have seen the exhibition. Even so, the answers may depend on just how self-aware each of us is when it comes to understanding our own motives for gazing on such art.

In reference to Germany's Holocaust memorial problem, I once wrote that after the Holocaust, there could be no more "final solutions" to the dilemmas its memory posed for contemporary artists; there can be only more questions.⁴ For these artists, the issue was never whether or not to show such images but rather how to ask in them: To what extent do we always reobjectify a victim by reproducing images of the victim as victim? To what extent do we participate in their degradation by reproducing and then viewing such images? To what extent do these images ironize and thereby repudiate such representations? Or to what extent do these images feed on the same prurient energy they purportedly expose? To what extent does any depiction of evil somehow valorize or beautify it, even when the intent is to reveal its depravity?

For artists at home in their respective media, questions about the appropriateness of their forms seem irrelevant. These artists remain as true to their forms and chosen media as they do to their necessarily vicarious "memory" of events. However, for those less at home in the languages of contemporary art, the possibility that form—especially the strange and new—might overwhelm or even become the content of such work will lead some to suspect the artists' motives. Some people may wonder whether such work seems more preoccupied with being stimulating and interesting in and of itself than it is with exploring historical events and the artist's relationship to them after the fact. Some individuals may be leery of the ways such art may draw on the very power of Nazi imagery it seeks to expose, the ways such art and its own forms are energized by the Nazi imagery it purports only to explore.

Even more disturbing may be the question historian Saul Friedlander raised several years ago in his own profound meditations on "fascinating Fascism," in which he asks whether an aesthetic obsession with Fascism is less a reflection on Fascism than it is an extension of it. Friedlander asks whether a brazen new generation of artists bent on examining their own obsession with Nazism adds to our understanding of the Third Reich or only recapitulates a fatal attraction to it.

Nazism has disappeared but the obsession it represents for the contemporary imagination—as well as the birth of a new discourse that ceaselessly elaborates and reinterprets it—necessarily confronts us with this ultimate question: is such attention fixed on the past

only a gratuitous reverie, the attraction of spectacle, exorcism, or the result of a need to understand; or is it, again and still, an expression of profound fears and, on the part of some, mute yearnings as well?⁵

As the artists in this exhibition suggest, the question remains open—and not because every aesthetic interrogation of Nazi imagery also contains some yearning for "fascinating fascism" but because they believe that neither artist nor historian can positively settle this question. In fact, by leaving these questions unanswered, these artists confront us with our own role in the depiction of evildoers and their deeds, the ways we cover our eyes and peek through our fingers at the same time.

No doubt, some will see such work as a supremely evasive, even self-indulgent art by a generation more absorbed in its own vicarious experiences of memory than by the survivors' experiences of real events. Others will say that if artists of the second or third generation want to make art out of the Holocaust, then let it be about the Holocaust itself and not about themselves. The problem for many of these artists, of course, is that they are unable to remember the Holocaust outside of the ways it has been passed down to them, outside of the ways it is meaningful to them fifty or sixty years after the fact. As the survivors have testified to their experiences of the Holocaust, their children and their children's children will now testify to their experiences of the Holocaust. And what are their experiences? Photographs, films, histories, novels, poems, plays, survivors' testimonies. Their experiences are necessarily mediated, the afterlife of memory, represented in history's after-images.

Why represent all that? For this genera-

tion of artists, to leave out the truth of how they came to know the Holocaust would be to ignore half of what happened: we would know what happened to the survivors and victims but miss what happened to their children and grandchildren. Yet isn't the important story what happened to the victims themselves? Yes, but without exploring why it is important, we leave out part of the story. Is it self-indulgent or self-aggrandizing to make the listener's story part of the teller's story? This generation doubts that it can be done otherwise. These artists can no more neglect the circumstances surrounding a story's telling than they can ignore the circumstances surrounding the actual events' unfolding. Neither the events nor the memory of them takes place in a void. In the end, these artists ask us to consider which is the more truthful account: that narrative or art which ignores its own coming into being or that which paints this fact, too, into its canvas of history?

Notes

¹Menachem Z. Rosensaft, "How Pseudo-Artists Desecrate the Holocaust," in "Demystifying Nazism, or Trivializing Its Victims? A Debate," *Forward*, January 18, 2002, p. 18.

²James E. Young, "Museum Show Truthfully Probes Society's Fascination with Evil," in "Demystifying Nazism," p. 18.

³Ernst van Alphen, "Playing the Holocaust," in Norman L. Kleeblatt, ed., *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press and the Jewish Museum, 2001) 69.

⁴See James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000) for a study of these issues as they arise in more public art and architecture.

⁵Saul Friedlander, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984) 19.

Copyright © 2006 James E. Young

NOTE: Readers may use portions of this work in accordance with the Fair Use provisions of U.S. copyright law. Distribution of this article without express written permission from the copyright holder is expressly forbidden.