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 Adam Mazur
 

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## Negative Testimonials. Photographic Representation of Holocaust Memory

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DOI:10.18318/td.2015.en.2.6

The twentieth century has seen the decline of art based upon the classical ideals of beauty and the correspondence between form and subject. Beauty became an ambiguous category considered suspicious and kitschy. From the present perspective it becomes obvious that its devaluation within art was instigated not only by the avant-garde movement, but was considerably influenced by such modern experiences as the two world wars and the Holocaust. The avant-garde emerged in resistance to a culture founded upon the cult of beauty, as well as power and war. In this respect Hitler was correct in calling the (non-beautiful) avant-garde art “degenerate,” or simply “Jewish.” Art after the Holocaust is undergoing an identity crisis, although it is not the Holocaust itself that is at its center. However, Adorno’s influential and blatantly overused remark on the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz turned out to be equally fallacious when applied to art. Simply put, the Holocaust is a problem of the group of artists who decide to take on the subject.

Art dealing with the Holocaust can be best described by referring to its two basic models: the one employing traditional means of representation, and the other shunning tradition to explore new possibilities of talking about Shoah. The first model is evidently inadequate for

**Adam Mazur** (Ph.D.) is an art critic, art historian, curator, and the editor-in-chief of *Szum* magazine. He is also an assistant professor at the University of Fine Arts in Poznan. He has curated several exhibitions such as “Red-Eye Effect” (2008), “Missing Documents: Photographs of Polish Transformation After 1989” (2012) and “Entoptic Screening” (2016). His published books include *The Histories of Photography in Poland 1839-2009* (2010), *New Phenomena in Polish Photography after 2000* (2012), and *The Depth of Field: Essays on Polish Photography After 1945* (2014). Among most recent exhibitions are Martha Rosler’s solo show at CCA Ujazdowski Castle (2014) and Artur Żmijewski’s new works on view at PGS Sopot (2015).

the task at hand. Naïve realism, dripping with abominable metaphysics, leads straight to kitsch when used to depict the Holocaust. Of course the category of kitsch is not restricted to the art of the Holocaust, as it can be encountered in any of the movements in modern art. Holocaust and kitsch have until this day proved to be a fascinating but poorly researched subject. It is worth mentioning that kitsch in Holocaust art is not simply reserved to cheap mementos manufactured for the sake of tourists visiting the extermination camps.

The second model breaks with traditional art and references the avant-garde heritage. In this case a search for new forms has coincided with the taking up of a topic previously unknown to culture. Artists dealing with the Holocaust refer to the avant-garde experience of abstractionism (Mark Rothko, Anselm Kiefer, Roman Opalka, Jonasz Stern, Tadeusz Kantor, Mirosław Bałka), utilizing the potential of art that rejects narrativity. On the other hand, Holocaust art makes use of visual testimonials from the Shoah on an unprecedented scale; predominantly of photography (Gerhard Richter, Christian Boltanski, Borys Mikhailov, Zbigniew Libera). The avant-garde's use of photography is particularly interesting due to the emerging tensions that are not only of formal but also of ethical nature.

Władysław Strzemiński (1893-1952), a painter, theorist of Unism, founder of Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, is undoubtedly among the most inspiring artists who combine in their work abstraction and photography. It was during war-time, which he spent in Łódź in dire circumstances, that he created drawings referring to the experience of Unism that were – in their themes and titles – a reaction to the war and the Holocaust. The series *Deportations* [*Deportacje*, 1940], created in the course of the ongoing displacement of both Poles and, mostly, Jews from Łódź, and the following *Faces* [*Twarze*, 1942] and *Cheap as Mud* [*Tanie jak błoto*, 1944], became for Strzemiński the cornerstones of a profound cycle *To My Friends the Jews* [*Moim przyjaciółom Żydom*, 1945]. The cycle consists of ten collages constructed from photographs documenting the Holocaust and drawings that were faithful repetitions of works from the preceding war series. The cycle draws its power from Strzemiński's skillful conjoining of the avant-garde heritage of photomontage with Unist stylistics. The tension between the delicate and abstract suggestive of shape, between drawing and the documentary photographs, as well as showing the ghetto's liquidation, the extermination camps and the portraits of the Jews, all trigger a storm of associations, which, however, resist easy interpretation. Further difficulties arise from the lack of numbering of individual works within the set. The character of Strzemiński's work is well described by art historian Andrzej Turowski:

The technique of double collage, used by Strzemiński, that utilizes images from the press and the artist's own works compels us to view the

cycle *To My Friends the Jews* as an attempt to express the totality of the artist's wartime experience combined with the tragedy of the Holocaust. Furthermore, this procedure introduces the aspect of memory into the composition's structure, making memory itself a metaphorical axis of the narrative. The concepts of trace, emptiness, reflection and loss, well known to us from Strzemiński's wartime works, now become part of a new image, through which they gain a photographic representation together with a mnemonic dimension, wherein the Shoah must be reconsidered.<sup>1</sup>

The Holocaust has been apprehended by Strzemiński from a peculiar standpoint of a friend – a person accustomed to the daily hardships of the occupation and deeply touched by the Holocaust, but in a way remaining beyond the events taking place. This rupture is underscored in the works of Strzemiński by the use of two techniques – drawing and photography, where the drawing depicts the particular perspective of the (Polish) painter sketching a portrait or landscape, and the photographs depict the perspective of a (German) photographer documenting the ghetto's liquidation.

The poetic titles, which are a kind of auto-commentary accompanying the image, inscribed on the verso side of the collages are a completely separate matter: *With the Ruins of Demolished Eye Sockets. Paved with Stones like Heads; The Empty Shinbones of Crematoria; A Sticky Spot of Crime; Following the Existence of Feet Which Tread a Path; I Accuse the Crime of Cain and the Sin of Ham; Veins Strung Taut by Shinbones; Stretched by the Strings of Legs; Vow and Oath to the Memory of Hands (Existences which are not with us); and Father's Skull.*<sup>2</sup>

The Holocaust was also an important topic in the photography and painting of the German artist Gerhard Richter (b. 1932). Although for him the war was merely a distant childhood memory, it influenced his whole life. Raised and educated in the German Democratic Republic, the young painter decided to escape to the West, and after many years he received praise as one of the foremost contemporary artists. Besides the abstract paintings, in the early 1960s, Richter began creating the *Atlas* – a remarkable work composed of hundreds of sheets filled with thousands of press clippings, family photographs, drawings and sketches, many of which serve as source images for his photorealistic paintings that constitute the second branch of Richter's work.

1 Andrzej Turowski, *Budowniczość świata. Z dziejów radykalnego modernizmu w sztuce polskiej* (Kraków: Universitas, 2000), 228.

2 [translator's note] The English titles of works from the cycle *To my Friends the Jews* after: Władysław Strzemiński 1893-1952: *On the 100th Anniversary of His Birth* (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 1994), 196-197.

This personal rendition of Germany's post-war history, considered in light of the painter's biography, would not be credible if it omitted the Holocaust.

The Holocaust appears at the beginning of the *Atlas*, on sheets 16–20, directly following trivial newspaper and album photographs – images from extermination camps are presented alongside pornographic images. Both the camp and pornographic photographs have been altered by Richter, so that they seem out of focus and partly discolored. According to Helmut Friedel, a renowned critic of the *Atlas*, the unfocused pictures were supposed to ease the process of transposing the images onto canvas by obscuring the individual features of prisoners and models.<sup>3</sup> Despite this the effort to blunt the documentary edge of the photographs was futile and the Holocaust images have not been painted until this day, despite the fact that most of the photographs from the early *Atlas*, including the pornographic ones, have long ago attained their painted counterparts.

Although presenting album photography alongside images of the Holocaust is not unheard of in artistic practice, the pornographic wedge driven in between the other two groups of images remains troubling for critics even today (Friedel, rather unconvincingly, writes about the “relationship between violence and society: the everyday tragedy and the violence present in history”).<sup>4</sup> Accusing Richter of merely trying to cause a scandal is nonsensical, as for many years the *Atlas* remained a personal sketchbook and was not publicly exhibited. Contrasting themes from such divergent orders within a single narrative that is the *Atlas* can be viewed, like in the case of Strzemiński, as an attempt “to express the totality of the artist's experience combined with the tragedy of the Holocaust.” Also in the *Atlas* the artist “introduces the aspect of memory into the composition's structure, making memory itself a metaphorical axis of the narrative.” Andrzej Turowski's words can serve as an interpretative key that can open the meanings contained within Richter's work, in which, mirroring Strzemiński's example, “photographic representation simultaneously constitutes a mnemonic dimension, wherein the Shoah must be reconsidered.” It is noteworthy that for painters such as Richter and Strzemiński rethinking Shoah does not necessitate painting it. On the contrary, photography that has been artistically retouched (a technique that has only recently, that is in the 1980s and 1990s, become accepted as art) allows to introduce the theme of the Holocaust into art by a side entrance.

3 Helmut Friedel, *Reading Pictures: Possible Access to Gerhard Richter's Atlas* (Exh. cat., Mar. 31 – May 27, 2001; Sakura: Kawamura Memorial Museum of Art, 2001), 25–32. Compare: Gerhard Richter, *Atlas der Fotos, Collagen und Skizzen* (Exh. cat., Apr. 8 – June 21, 1998; Cologne, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus Und Kunstbau München, 1997).

4 Friedel, *Reading Pictures*, 27.

Gerhard Richter's aversion to painting the representations of the Holocaust from photographs might have many sources. The artist approached the problem once again in the mid 1990s, when he was working on a commission for the Reichstag's main hall (sheets from 635 to 656). Attempts to recreate the Shoah on a monumental scale within an official and highly symbolic space withered once more. Ultimately, in the images intended for the Reichstag, Richter settled for an abstraction coloristically corresponding to the unified Germany's national flag. This inability to directly (photographically) address the Holocaust can be elucidated by shifting attention to another of Richter's works. The photographic image titled *Uncle Rudi* [*Onkel Rudi*, 1965] is an oil on canvas portrait of a young smiling man dressed in a wartime Wehrmacht uniform.<sup>5</sup> Similar to Richter's other paintings that refer to keepsake photographs taken by ordinary Germans (possibly common German soldiers) before and during the war, also *Uncle Rudi* is an exercise in recalling and rethinking the suppressed past. The innocent family memento – the faded photograph of kinfolk kept inside a desk drawer – when recast in the context of art becomes a symbol of the guilt repressed in the memory of many Germans, both Eastern and Western. In Richter's case, as in Strzemiński's, we can ascertain an external point of view of the painter, who witnesses the Holocaust. Nevertheless it is not the compassionate perspective of a friend from *To My Friends the Jews*. In his pieces Richter contemplates the Shoah from the standpoint of a potential perpetrator. The very same photographs from the ghetto and extermination camps carry very different meanings for Richter and Strzemiński.

Documentary photography of the Holocaust constitutes the core of the Frenchman Christian Boltanski's (b.1944) art. His creative output has little to do with painting. In his artworks he uses – like Richter, only on a larger scale – commemorative photographs, often anonymous group portraits, to create on their basis quasi-religious spatial arrangements that share their aura with church altars and reliquaries. In addition to altars devoted to anonymous, unremarkable individuals, many of which are tributes to Shoah's victims, Boltanski creates spatial installations directly referring to the Holocaust, such as *Réserve, Canada* (a chamber filled with worn clothes, densely lining the walls). On the one hand, Boltanski strives to commemorate those deceased and murdered during the Holocaust, but on the other, exposes the fictitious aspect of Shoah's remembrance. It is not obvious whether the photographs are authentic or counterfeit, just like the biography of the artist who purposefully

5 Compare *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting* (Exh. cat., Feb. - May, 2002; New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 2002); *Gerhard Richter Survey* (Exh. cat.; Cologne, ifa-Galerie Stuttgart, 2001), 20-21.

deceives the critics and art historians attempting to study his life. In effect the altars, reconstructed within gallery and museum spaces, that memorialize the alleged victims turn out to be a practical ersatz of Holocaust memory, worth as much as the audience is willing to pay. The artist deliberately alludes to the associations between sanctity and the church, particularly the Catholic Church with its distinctive interior design, at the same time proclaiming his personal lack of faith and openly declaring the falsity of those facts that he himself provides. What is more, he compares the artist to a “false prophet” who solicits money in return for his services.<sup>6</sup>

All of Boltanski’s art, as he himself claims, concerns the Holocaust.<sup>7</sup> Many viewers take the artist’s words at their face value, and interpret his artwork in the context of Shoah. Although, when it turns out that among the sentimental photographs the portraits of the perpetrators cannot be discerned from the portraits of victims, the mystical aura slowly gives way to a reflection upon one’s own expectations of Holocaust art. The privileged connection with the murdered victims turns out to be equally impossible, even ridiculous, as would be kneeling before Boltanski’s altars inside a gallery. The naïve faith in photography, as well as the artist’s sincerity, seems to be a lapse in judgment when facing someone who, like Boltanski, masterfully exploits the public’s demand for commemorating the Holocaust. Discreetly “memory preserved in photography” becomes a collective ritual, not in the least different from attending church, and the intermingled photographs, displaced from their historical context, of the victims and perpetrators are reduced to a remnant of an event that nobody – no matter what the effort – seems to truly remember. Not even the artist.

The “mnemonic dimension, wherein the Shoah must be reconsidered” (although viewed from two different perspectives, of Strzemiński and Richter) revealed through its photographic representations, turns out to be fictional in Boltanski’s art. The aesthetic fiction of photographic altars which incites remembrance can be comprehended in various ways (also “seriously”), akin to the essentially disparate experience that can be acquired from this art. However, it is certainly impossible to negate the fundamental truth of the conspicuous severing of ties with both the victims and the perpetrators of the Holocaust. The connection with the events belonging to the historical order, which the genocide of the Jewish people was, has ultimately become mediated

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6 Tamar Garb, *Rozmowa z Christianem Boltanskim* [Interview with Christian Boltanski], press materials accompanying the exhibition *Christian Boltanski Revenir* in the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw, Sept. 15 – Nov. 11, 2001.

7 After Ernst van Alphen, „Zabawa w Holocaust,” trans. Katarzyna Bojarska, *Literatura na Świecie* 1-2 (2004): 217-243.

through culture, and therefore by art. The shift that has occurred is even more pointedly illustrated by a project titled *If I were a German* completed in 1994 by Ukrainian photographer Borys Mikhailov (b.1938). The series, which consists of approximately thirty photographs, is described by the curator of the artist's Warsaw exhibition as follows:

Together with his wife, Vita, and fellow-artists [...] Mikhailov has played and photographed scenes from the time of World War II. In these tableaux set in an idyllic Ukrainian landscape they pose in the nude or dressed in Nazi and Soviet uniforms. The pictures are mostly erotic, even perverse, and it is not always easy to distinguish the oppressors from their victims. In burlesque scenes Jewish women seduce and are seduced by German officers. The eroticism allows to question the historical relations, allowing for the roles to be reversed. The actors switch identities playing Germans, Jews and Russians; fate decides who is the victim and who is the oppressor.<sup>8</sup>

Mikhailov, himself of Jewish descent, shocks by incorporating the themes represented in Richter's *Atlas* into one short cycle. Nevertheless, the contrasting of album photography, pornography and the memory of the Holocaust in *If I were a German* takes place on a completely different level. In Richter's work we are dealing with transposed but ultimately still documentary objects, in Boltanski's art it is fiction disguised as document; Mikhailov does not even try to conceal the completely fictional character of the prearranged and photographed scenes. Unveiling the pretentiously pornographic side of the Shoah, he does not contradict, but expands the previously mentioned "mnemonic dimension, wherein the Shoah must be reconsidered." The arbitrariness of roles assigned by the photographer to particular models, and the openly erotic content subvert the official, monumental image of the Shoah, which turns out to be equally hollow when confronted with Mikhailov's "homespun" Holocaust. The process of demystifying the Holocaust, already noticeable in Boltanski (more in his words, than his works), becomes even more evident in Mikhailov. The *Testimony of the Negative* – the title of Boris Mikhailov's exhibition in the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw – turns out to be a hollow, ironic slogan: the negative does not attest to anything, maybe besides what the artist demands. In this sense Mikhailov's work would be better suited by the title *Negative Testimonial*.

8 Ewa Gorzdek, „Testimony of the Negative,” in *Testimony of the Negative*, trans. Kuba Weccsile (Exh. cat., Mar. 5 – Apr. 18, 2004, Warsaw: Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw, 2004).

Among the artists who are presently engaged with the issue of the Holocaust it is worth naming Poles Zbigniew Libera (b.1959) and Robert Kuśmirowski (b.1973). Libera gained notoriety for his work *Lego. Concentration Camp* (1996). His work was also showcased at the New York exhibition *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*, at the Jewish Museum. The artwork itself is a set of building blocks with which one can, as the title suggests, build an extermination camp. Aside from the three seven-box sets the artist prepared several photographs depicting various “moments” from the camp’s daily life. Juxtaposing the “innocent” toy blocks for children with the Shoah shocked and aroused the interest of both the critics and the general public. Libera’s controversial artwork was mentioned by Piotr Piotrowski in his book on Polish contemporary art, titled *Meanings of Modernism*:

Let us imagine an unsettling event, when a child plays with a Lego set prepared this way. Any person with at least a trace of sensibility will notice the inherent horror. For this reason many viewers contested the work [...]. The artist was even accused of designing toys that promote violence and abuse the memory of the victims of the Nazi terror. The only thing these accusations seem to prove is simple ignorance and a lack of understanding for the work that borders on malice. Such opinions invite dissent. Libera unmasks – by drastic means, no doubt – that it is mass culture, a part of which we all are, that manipulates the atrocity by commoditizing it.[...] Consumer culture confuses our ethical compass. We buy plastic replicas of guns for our children to play with, we watch thrillers, and finally somebody had the bright idea to build a supermarket right outside KL Auschwitz. Libera is not merciless, the human condition is.<sup>9</sup>

The artist’s critical attitude towards popular culture, especially to its visual aspect, is evident in the photographic series titled *Positives*, which was exhibited in 2004. Libera alters famous, iconic photographs of tragic historic events, so they contain a different, positive message, while still retaining the original’s formal features. There is a “positive” version of a well-known concentration camp photograph among the pictures. It depicts well-nourished prisoners dressed in pajamas, who smile at us from behind the barbed wire fence. A simple, but sacrilegious act of reversing the emotional force of the horrifying camp photographs points to new ways of thinking about the Holocaust. Libera’s photograph refers to the modern viewer’s fear of

9 Piotr Piotrowski, *Znaczenia modernizmu. W stronę historii sztuki polskiej po 1945 roku* (Poznań: Rebis, 1999), 246.



the traumatic experience of fully recognizing the tragedy of the Holocaust, described by American writer and art critic Susan Sontag in her essay *In Plato's Cave*:

Nothing I have seen – in photographs or in real life – ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, it seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after, though it was several years before I understood fully what they were about. What good was served by seeing them? They were only photographs—of an event I had scarcely heard of and could do nothing to affect, of suffering I could hardly imagine and could do nothing to relieve. When I looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying.<sup>10</sup>

Sontag describes coming into direct contact with the nature of an atrocious event through photography, which seems impossible to repeat today. Not only due to the loss of credibility (“innocence”) by the photographic “document,” but also due to the inevitable passage into the realm of popular culture and the trivialization of the Holocaust, also in art. The condition of the contemporary museumgoer viewing the Holocaust is well illustrated by Robert Kuśmirowski’s work prepared for the catalog of the 2004 Fritz Bauer Institut exhibition<sup>11</sup> commemorating the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial. The photograph, printed on page 623 of the catalog, depicts the artist standing before a prison building and covering his face, as he tries to avoid the camera. After a close reading of the publication it turns out that the gesture is not random – it is a repetition of an evasive gesture that one of the accused Auschwitz SS-officers, at first glance an unassuming decent German, made forty years ago. Kuśmirowski, just like Libera, turns to archival photographs, although not to the iconic images of the twentieth century. The artist does not “substitute” emotions contained within the historical trifle-image. By reproducing the gesture and composition, while digitally aging the photograph, so that it resembles the original in the smallest of details, the artist gets “mistaken” by the viewer for the SS-officer, who was “apprehended” by the photographer. The misidentification of the artist as the

10 Susan Sontag, “In Plato’s Cave,” in *On photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001) 20.

11 *Auschwitz-Prozess 4 Ks 2/63. Frankfurt am Main*, ed. Irmtrud Wojak, (Exh. cat., Mar. 28 – May 23, 2004, Haus Gallus, Frankfurt am Main; Cologne: Snoeck, 2004).

accused perpetrator lasts only a brief moment, just like the gesture caught on the photograph. Kusmirowski's work does not reveal anything aside from a hollow gesture. As we cannot make out the face of the perpetrator, and we do not see the faces of the victims or the artist, it is not surprising that we also cannot see the Holocaust.

*Translation: Rafał Pawluk*