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## “THE ART OF MEMORY :ART AND PEDAGOGY IN MEMORIAL MUSEUMS”

### Abstract

During the Second World War works of art – mostly drawings - were created by people who were persecuted by the Nazi regime. These pictures and small art objects are an unusual expression of both the desperate situation of persecution and of the will to survive. In the educational work of the memorial sites, these works of art serve today as evidence and can be used as educational tools to create sympathy for the victims. The lecture offers an overview of the art that was created during the period of Nazi persecution and of the possibilities and limitations of using it today in the educational work of the memorial sites for the victims of National Socialism, which work to strengthening human rights and for a permanent - and social - peace.

“As important as scholarly research of the Holocaust is, artistic confrontation is at least as equally important. As the distance to the event increases, this becomes even more important since the emotional dimension involved in conveying history is just as important as knowledge of the brutal facts. Authors, composers, painters and directors help us to understand, to re-experience what they suffered through or the atrocities experienced by others. Artistic expression aims at making the unimaginable graspable – particularly for those who didn't live through this period.”<sup>1</sup>

In his speech in the Reichstag, Bundestag President Thierse expressed what many people who deal with the Nazi period and the crimes that were committed during that time no doubt claim for themselves: They strive to achieve the most complete understanding of the magnitude of the crimes that were committed during the Nazi period. Wolfgang Thierse's words express the hope that art can achieve things that (historical) scholarship cannot.

Art – this essay addresses for the most part the fine arts – can express things that cannot be described through historical discourse or scholarship. The drawings of the former Auschwitz and Buchenwald prisoner Jozef Szajna are a good example of this. His rows of thumb prints

<sup>1</sup> Wolfgang Thierse: Speech on January 27 – Day of Commemoration of the Victims of National Socialism, quoted from: *Bulletin der Bundesregierung* No. 08-1 from 27.01.2003.

suggest heads and the lines beneath them can be interpreted as striped prisoner jackets showing the uniformity that the SS imposed on the prisoners. By using his personal and unique thumb print the artist also expresses the effort to preserve the individuality of each prisoner. With brilliant simplicity and poignancy this little drawing portrays the system of concentration camp imprisonment.

But this one example also leads to another point: without knowledge of the historical context, the importance of the drawing can not be appreciated; Without basic knowledge of the development of 20th century art it is not possible to fully value the work of this art student from Krakow.

Generally speaking, the attempt to convey emotional experience without knowledge is a risky undertaking because it leads quickly to false associations and leaves the viewer feeling helpless and alone with the emotional intensity without providing him with the tools necessary to process the experience. Furthermore, placing document and scholarship, or cognitive learning, in opposition to artistic design, or emotional learning, makes no sense. Besides the fact that cognitive learning is always tainted by emotions, I know of only a few educational sites where emotions so clearly influence learning – in all its different meanings – to the degree that they do at the memorial sites where National Socialist persecution occurred. Integrating the fine arts into this learning process makes the confrontation with history even more difficult because it involves a whole other level of communication that can only be correctly understood and used when the relevant background information has been provided.

Memorial museums integrated fine arts into their documentary exhibitions from the very beginning. It was never an issue whether the survivors created the artwork during the time of their oppression or after their liberation as a special part of the healing process. Later, works made by artists without any personal experience of the Holocaust as a way of approaching the Nazi crimes through artistic expression were also added to the memorial museums' permanent exhibitions. But the drawing and paintings were usually integrated into the historical exhibitions as evidence or as a special kind of historical source. The artwork was not selected based on its special artistic quality but to illustrate areas of the concentration camp history for which no photographic material was available. They often addressed the theme of prisoner daily life but also special punishment, acts of murder and the vast numbers of dead bodies in the camps.

There was no thought paid to the special situation in which the works were created: for example that the artists worked under life threatening circumstances or that people driven to express themselves creatively through sketches, prints and other kinds of art despite their incarceration possessed especially strong characters.

There was no discussion of the fact that although prisoners tended to use figurative representation, in many cases they also integrated early 20th century artistic developments into their work.

Showing art in the memorial museums was always the source of heated debates and remained undesirable. Tadeusz Skymanski, a former concentration camp prisoner who worked at the Auschwitz Memorial Museum since 1947, in charge of its art collection, put together a small permanent art exhibit in the seventies, but it remained closed to the general public. This exhibit addressed for the first time the very diverse conditions under which art was produced in a concentration camp – for example, that prisoners who had artistic training were forced to work for the SS. Dinah Gottliebova was forced to create portraits of Roma twins for the experiments of the SS doctor Mengele. Other prisoners made paintings to document the vast construction work in the camp. In addition to working under relatively good conditions, these prisoners were provided with materials which they were occasionally able to smuggle out. Prisoners could work half legally when they had received private commissions from SS men. The privileges that they received were necessary for survival. But the majority of the artwork was created illegally. It was extremely difficult to obtain drawing materials, to secure a hiding place and preserve the works for the postwar period.

But even in the postwar years, the art was not appreciated as a form of documentation or resistance – a fact that was stressed by the historian Sybil Milton<sup>2</sup>. Most historians were not trained to evaluate visual sources for historical research and had an especially hard time with art. Even survivors were not interested in having much attention paid to the material. They argued that the unfathomable magnitude of the tragedy could be belittled by the fact that it was still possible to draw in spite of everything.

Three developments over the last decade were primarily responsible for changing the attitude toward art created in the camps. For one, the history of the mass crimes of National Socialism were researched, documented and evaluated from many different perspectives. Secondly, as the work in memorial museums became more professional, experienced art historians and curators familiar with the subject were hired – at least to work on temporary projects. And thirdly, as the historical events continue to slip farther into the past there has been an increased willingness to address new topics and try new approaches. The appeal to visiting groups interested in special educational programs and resources has also broadened.<sup>3</sup>

In memorial museum seminars the subject has also remained on the periphery. Although as early as 1987 in the newly opened youth meeting center, experts and memorial museum staff from the nine German federal states participated in the first international memorial museum

<sup>2</sup> Sybil Milton: Kunst als historisches Quellenmaterial in Gedenkstätten und Museen; in: Wulff E. Brebeck et al (Red.), aaO., p. 44 – 63.

<sup>3</sup> See here also: Wulff E. Brebeck, Nicolas Hepp, Thomas Lutz (Ed): Über-Lebens-Mittel. Kunst aus Konzentrationslagern und in Gedenkstätten für Opfer des Nationalsozialismus; Marburg 1992 ; Thomas Lutz: Kunst und Gedenken, in: Informationen, Ed. Studienkreis Deutscher Widerstand, No. 57, May 2003, 28 Jg., p. 33 – 36.

seminar which dealt with the topic of art and memorials. The first time that art was the central focus of a national memorial museum seminar was in 1993 in Breitenau near Kassel. Interest in this topic of discussion was sparked by the memorial museum's newly opened exhibition. Still today it is the only one in Germany that uses artistic, associative means to address the history. Another national memorial museum seminar took place in May 2004 in the city's youth guest house that, in connection with a research project to register the collected artwork of the Dachau concentration camp memorial museum, also focused on this topic.

Memorial museums curators maintain that "art by people who were persecuted by the National Socialists" is generally collected. These collections are made up of works that were created in Europe between 1933 and 1945. Most of the works are by trained artists but some were done by amateurs and children. It is important to keep in mind that artists who fell victim to the persecution machinery of the National Socialist regime were subjected to technical limitations that hindered their artistic potential.

"Art on the subject of National Socialist mass murder" poses a separate and distinct complex. This subject is broadly defined. Unlike the first category, which is limited geographically and chronologically to the individual experience, these works are more cosmopolitan and are not subject to limits in style or material.

The two areas occasionally overlap, for example, when survivors recreate their lost pictures from memory after the war or when they painted pictures in their own personal style, particularly just after liberation.

In all the memorial museums that collect art, aesthetic criteria are applied when artwork falls under the second category,.

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum was the first memorial museum which had the financial means to purchase meaningful contemporary artwork for its museum art and set out explicitly to do so. The opening of the museum's exhibition almost ten years ago had an international impact on the style of future exhibitions and also influenced the use of artwork on the exhibitions of already-existing memorial museums. Not only paintings, also other handcrafted objects such as bookmarkers, games or artistically handled everyday objects are displayed with greater care in exhibitions today. Consideration is taken to carefully present the original object in its historical context and with acknowledgement of the conditions under which it was created. Objects are no longer used solely as illustration in a false historical context and the use of copies or even replicas is viewed critically.

Buchenwald was the first memorial museum to think about establishing its own art department. Plans in the eighties to establish an independent art exhibition provide a good example of how the discourse on the evaluation of art in concentration camps and its pictorial content evolved. In the first papers there was still a strong alignment to the political concept of antifascism, but

the later revised exhibition that was shown in 1998 in the restored former disinfection building was given the title: "Means of Survival – Evidence - Artwork, Pictorial Memory." It shows pictures and drawings by prisoners of the Buchenwald concentration camp and artistic works related to the subject that were created by 1995 by survivors and their offspring.

Art is a special form of confrontation and appropriation, in this case of the crimes of the National Socialists and the dignified commemoration of the victims. In order to understand the art, it is necessary to understand both the historical and the art historical references. Only then can a complete picture of the history can be formed.

What is clear is that art can be used to draw new audiences. The opening of the permanent exhibition of the Breitenau memorial museum near Kassel over ten years ago showed this to be true. It is the only exhibition in a memorial museum that approached the historical events by using an artistically designed, associative exhibition. More people can be reached if they are left not only to deal cognitively with the fine arts but also encouraged to use art themselves as an expression of their confrontation with the subject. This kind of exhibition also appeals to people who do not express themselves well verbally. And furthermore, visitors can learn new artistic techniques and find new ways to express and perceive themselves. Finally, pedagogical work that uses art encourages social learning because when applied within a group, the active participation creates a new dynamic. The change in methodology and the involvement of the individual puts demands on memorial museum pedagogy today that can be met by integrating art as one of a number of possible approaches to the topic.

In a number of memorial museums, some of which are presented in this book, art pedagogy is by now being offered as an educational resource. In addition to the increase and wider range of educational programs, another positive development is that greater thought is being put into educational art programs and they are improving in quality as a result of the improved professionalization of the educational work. But despite all of this, this subject will hardly become a fashionable trend in the future since the generally ill-equipped educational departments in the memorial museums lack the trained staff that could integrate the different contexts - historical, aesthetic and personal- into this challenging educational method.

The question today is no longer whether art educational programs should be created but how they should be created. One risk of an inadequately planned and executed educational program is that art remains on the periphery and is reduced to mere illustration. Too much emotion can lead to an uncritical use of art. But an extreme aestheticism, in which art is supposed to function as a form of comfort is also problematic. The use of the term "art of the Holocaust" makes this clear. An informed and sensitive handling of art in educational work of memorial museums is essential if clichés are to be avoided<sup>4</sup>.

4 Guido Fackler addresses this risk in his lecture "Art in memorial museums – Current observations

As the work of memorial museums becomes more professionalism and co-operation between museums increases, there remains the hope that art museums will also find the artwork of Holocaust survivors worthy of exhibition. While memorial museums are open to art, art museums have yet to show an interest in historically significant art. It would be an extremely positive development that would be mutually stimulating to all sides would art museum also show an open-mindedness to the subject.

The current discussion on art and education in memorial sites suggests a changed mindset. Educational work in memorial museums has become more open, diverse and independent. New museum pedagogical concepts are being tried out and further developed. Interdisciplinary methods, in particular, are increasingly practiced. Art pedagogy is a demanding method of dealing with the Nazi atrocities at the historical sites – a challenge that if attempted would certainly lead to new findings in museum pedagogy, but which would also raise new questions and draw new visitor groups.