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REMEMBERING THE DEAD BY AFFECTING THE LIVING

The case of a miniature model of Treblinka

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It has become almost axiomatic in contemporary museum literature that it is in highly interactive, mediated and experiential museums that the most successful affective experiences can be found. While it is true that some of the more experimental installations use contemporary media forms to generate affective responses from audiences, this chapter is interested instead in the affective power of objects and the role of interpretation in enhancing it.

While I have always had an interest in what I have previously called the irrational power of museums (Witcomb 2003) – their ability to make contact with audiences in ways that are beyond rational and didactic forms of narrative – the immediate genesis for the arguments developed in this chapter lies in my differing response to models of concentration camps in exhibitions dealing with the Holocaust. There is by now, a well established genre of models. The original model, by Mieczyslaw Stobierski, was first exhibited at Auschwitz as early as 1947 and later replicated by the same sculptor at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and the German History Museum in Berlin; it comprises a white, rather large replica, cut so as to reveal the inside of the gas chambers at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Didactic in aim, the models show the processing of thousands of people, from the queues waiting to get into the rooms where they are told to undress, to the cramming of people into the gas chambers and the subsequent cremations. Beautifully executed, such models are informative as to the processes used to industrially kill hundreds of people. In other words they show one version of what genocide looks like. But somehow, for me at least, the final feeling when viewing these models is one of numbness rather than comprehension. I understand the process and its impact in terms of numbers killed, but I have no means to understand the meaning of what happened because I cannot personalise it – despite the attention to detail and the historical veracity of such models.

There is, however, another model, of another camp, at a much smaller museum in Melbourne. This model, of Treblinka, at the Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre is completely different in its aesthetic and lineage. It is not white, it is not made by a professional sculptor or model maker and it is, comparatively speaking, much smaller. Multicoloured and almost ‘folksy’ in its depiction of the camp, the model is nevertheless intensely powerful in its depiction of both the process and the personal horror experienced there. Rather than numbness when viewing this model, my experience is one of intense grief. This chapter is an attempt to
understand why this is so well as to argue for the importance of such intense experiences in a museum setting.

My interest in the importance of affect as a basis for gaining emotional insights into past experiences in a museum setting first began when I read one of James Clifford's early essays, 'Objects and Selves' in which he used a poem by James Fenton about a child's response to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. *Please Sir, where's the withered hand?* asks the child. James Clifford (1985: 236) suggests that to be this child, is 'to ignore the serious admonitions about human evolution and cultural diversity posted in the entrance hall. It is to be interested instead by the claw of a condor, the jawbone of a dolphin, and the hair of a witch'. The possibility offered by the museum is the world of imagination and, by extension, of a potential for empathy by becoming other, if only momentarily. In other words, as Ross Gibson (2006) has put it, museums are spaces in which to have sensory experiences; they are spaces in which transformative experiences are possible because of the ability of objects to reach out and literally touch someone. If properly used, I want to suggest, this potential can be used to build tolerance because the motivation comes from within rather than being produced externally through didactic means.

![Figure 3.1](image-url) The model of Treblinka by Chaim Sztajer at the Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre, Melbourne (photograph by Andrea Witcomb, 2006)
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What is affect?

Affect is a pre-rational or pre-cognitive response to stimuli which can range from the pleasurable to the abject. According to psychologist Silvan Tomkins, there are nine affective states which are generated out of an initial interest in an object or experience. Initially, these affects are registered in physical, sensorial responses (in Best 2001: 209) – we crouch, peer, bend over, move around, wince, look intently and so on. What we experience is a variety of sensations or feelings such as pleasure, anxiety, excitement or disgust. The point here is that these sensations are not equivalent to emotions since they occur involuntarily. As Claire Colebrook (2002) in her analysis of Gilles Deleuze's work describes it, affect works through a range of proprioceptive sensations which are outside of rational processes of thought. This makes affect akin to the ways in which involuntary memory, as described by Proust's now famous description of an encounter with a madeleine biscuit, works. The object, in this case the madeleine biscuit, is not simply a memory aide facilitating the act of remembering or recognition. Rather, the madeleine actually causes the memory to take effect; it acts on its eater by causing an involuntary response which eventually gives rise to thought, in this case a memory. While involuntary however, such physical, visceral responses are productive in that they generate feelings which, when processed, can turn into emotional and eventually cognitive insights. As Best (2001: 220) puts it, affect is linked to signification, to the process of making meanings. This is a complex process in which 'affect is an originary trace, an inherited mapping of the body and its expressive potential, that becomes the stuff of significion. In turn, this catching up of affect into signification allows affect to signify or register this corporeal bedrock of meaning' (Best 2001: 220). Affect then, while experienced at the sensorial level, becomes part of the symbolic realm.

While the study of affect has been of most interest to art and architectural critics, the range of objects that can elicit affective responses is not limited to art objects. As Best points out, Tomkins' work makes it clear that while the range of affects is limited, the 'range of objects that elicit or provoke affect are not fixed or prescribed' (Best, 2001: 209). Tomkins' point that affective sensations can only be generated from an initial interest, however, has meant that art critics have had an interest in its study as it gives them the ground to argue for the transformative potential of art. This is because this initial interest in the object or experience comes from within the subject, giving him or her a 'motivational engine'. Affect therefore 'has the capacity to impel or move a spectator' (Best 2001: 209). In other words, it can lead to a transformative experience.

It is this understanding of the transformative power of affect that is important to understanding the transformative potential of museums. In being attentive to the powers of affect, museums can, as Janice Baker (2008) has argued, provide the space to do more than mere representation, more than facilitating the act of re-cognition. As she argues, 'without an affective experience, facts may be imparted and information about a subject or object accumulated but without leaving a strong impression. In re-cognition we receive what we largely expect to receive and remain contained within our usual thoughts' (Baker, 2008). Understanding affect, however, gives us an opportunity to engage with John Armstrong's (2004) argument that objects need to be understood to embody, rather than articulate, meaning. In other words, objects can do more than simply represent, in this case, the past.

I am interested in how this can be used to deal with contentious histories and difficult experiences. The historical advent of the Holocaust and the experiences of those who lost their lives during that time as well as those who witnessed and survived that experience is a case in point. How can these experiences be embodied, rather than represented, in objects? And can
the display of such objects generate an experience which leads to some form of alterity, to some kind of transformation?

While there is an extensive literature on the representation of the Holocaust in museum spaces and through memorials, it is striking that almost all of these discussions deal with spaces or objects which are highly professionalised in their approach and often have a national, or at least a governmental frame around their narrative. An example here would be the work of James Young (1993) who looks at the representation of the Holocaust in memorials and museum/memorials country by country, giving us one of the most comprehensive analyses yet of Holocaust representations. His main focus, however, is on examples from public spaces produced by professionals.

As a consequence, it is not surprising that he argues that the representation of the Holocaust, like memory itself, is never 'shaped in a vacuum' but always affected by 'national myths, ideals, and political needs' (Young 1993: 1) or the 'temper of the memory-artist's time, their place in aesthetic discourse, their media and materials' (ibid: 2). They are understood, then, to operate within the realm of rational narratives, within ideology, within public memory. Thus all of Young's examples come from memorials built for public display, following either a traditional injunction to remember on the part of Jewish communities or a nation's attempt to explain its past to its citizens.

Likewise, the majority of more recent discussions on the representation of the Holocaust, including my own, focus on the recent development of museums and specialist exhibitions dealing with the Holocaust in its entirety, such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, the new Jewish Museum in Berlin or the revamped Yad Vashem History Museum (Cole 2004; Hasian 2004; Witcomb 2003). The focus of these analyses is on debating the museums' effectiveness as pedagogical sites, deconstructing the ideological narratives that underpin their representations of the Holocaust. As Ernst van Alphen comments, this is largely because the focus, both in the practices of memorialisation themselves and in the scholarly literature about the Holocaust and how to remember it, has been shaped by a belief that

in the context of education and remembrance of the Holocaust it is a seemingly unassailable axiom that historical genres and discourses such as the documentary, the memoir, testimony or the monument are much more effective and morally responsive in the teaching of historical events than imaginative discourses are.

(van Alphen, 2001–02: 165)

According to Young (1993), the injunction to remember results in a visual culture of memorialising in which literalness or authenticity of representation is highly valued. Thus the first memorials were in the form of books known as Yizkor bikher, which were written by survivors who literally attempted to record the names of all those who died. These books came to be understood as equivalent to absent tombstones. The activity of reading them was understood as the creation of a memorial space. Later, physical monuments in space were created which functioned as aides-mémoire. Entire topographies of memorial landscapes were created. While the first of these were the camps themselves, particularly that of the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex, these were later extended to memorials away from the sites of atrocity, such as that of Yad Vashem, whose site is not only a landscape of memorials but a visible reminder for Israelis at least, that the Holocaust led to the creation of the state of Israel. Interestingly, given van Alphen's insight into the dominance of historical narrative in dealing with the Holocaust, Young (1993: 42) argues that attempts with Holocaust survivors to document and desire to document and desire to be a memorial (Fig. 3.2 An example of a public memorial)

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9) argues that attempts to memorialise the Holocaust via abstract sculptures are not so popular
with Holocaust survivors. This is because survivors, Young suggests, are more literal in their
desire to document and testify to the existence of the Holocaust in the face of Holocaust deniers.
To remember, for many survivors, cannot be divorced from the activity of testifying.

To remember while also testifying is one of the motivating forces for the early and continuing
desire to build miniature models of the concentration camps. The first of these at the Auschwitz
State Museum was made as early as 1947 by a Polish Jewish survivor, Mieczyslaw Stobierski,
based on archival research and interviews with SS officers. The most recent, that of the arrival
selection process at Birkenau, by Gerry Judah for the Imperial War Museum's Holocaust
exhibition in London, was also based on extensive research. Its aim was 'to be educational. It was
not to be a memorial' (Judah 2000).

The desire to testify and to do so through a realistic form of representation is very evident in
the Treblinka model, made not by an artist but by a carpenter, in order to remember his family
and document the place where they died. As with all models which are also miniatures, the
attention to detail is one of its distinguishing markers – from the physical infrastructure of the
camp, giving a detailed idea of the physical relationships between its different components to
the names given to streets, the location of plant screens, the false red cross on the roof of the so
called Lazarett (hospital) which was really an execution centre for unaccompanied children and
the sick, the position of the guards and their dogs, and the shocking attention to dismembered
and burnt bodies as well as to the fires which consumed the bodies.

Figure 3.2 An example of the attention to detail in the model (photograph by Andrea Witcomb, 2008)
But interestingly, this object’s impact reaches beyond that of providing a historical narrative as to what happened. Extending beyond documentation, beyond a personal testimony, the object also provides an opportunity for identification, for the building of a personal link. The way it does this has as much to do with the narrative surrounding it as with its aesthetic characteristics and what it is depicting. Resisting traditional categories of classification, this object is both an educational tool and an art object, though it was not made by an artist in a conventional sense; and while representing an unimaginable horror the object also has connotations of a child’s toy set, both because it is a miniature and because of its aesthetics which are rather like that of colourful cardboard cut-outs. The model was hand-made by one of 70 survivors from Treblinka, Mr Chaim Sztajer, in his living room in Melbourne over three and a half years. He began to make it when he heard that there was going to be a Holocaust Museum in Melbourne, and donated it to the Museum when it began to develop its exhibitions (Maisel 1993). Naive in form, outside of any formal ‘politics of memory’, it embodies one human being’s need to remember, document and communicate.

Treblinka² was a single-function extermination camp.³ Over 800,000 Jews were murdered there during its 13 months of operation. A few Jewish prisoners were forced to work as carpenters or cooks and so on while others were forced to deal with the dead bodies. Initially this meant removing them from the gas chambers and interring them in trenches; later it meant both disinterring the bodies of those buried, burning their remains in open fire grills and grinding any remaining bones for burial in the trenches, as well as burning the bodies of those murdered in the final months of the camp in order to cope with the numbers of those killed and the desire on the part of the camp’s leadership to destroy any evidence. These men were regularly shot to avoid the possibility that they could testify as to the camp’s existence.

Chaim Sztajer was one of 40,000 Jews taken to Treblinka from Częstochowa in September 1942, with his wife and two-year-old daughter. He was recognised by a Jewish prisoner who saved his life by telling a German guard that he was a good worker. While he was put to work sorting the belongings of those murdered, his wife and child were led to the gas chambers. It was only when he inquired as to when he would be seeing them, that he realised they were being killed. On 2 August 1943, Sztajer was part of an uprising whose aim was to destroy the camp so it could not be used. It was successful in so far as the workings of the gas chambers were disrupted, though there were only 70 survivors.

How do we attempt to understand this model of the camp? Clearly, it is part of a Jewish tradition to memorialise by testifying. A few Jewish prisoners were forced to work as carpenters or cooks and so on while others were forced to deal with the dead bodies. Initially this meant removing them from the gas chambers and interring them in trenches; later it meant both disinterring the bodies of those buried, burning their remains in open fire grills and grinding any remaining bones for burial in the trenches, as well as burning the bodies of those murdered in the final months of the camp in order to cope with the numbers of those killed and the desire on the part of the camp’s leadership to destroy any evidence. These men were regularly shot to avoid the possibility that they could testify as to the camp’s existence.

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The importance of the personal

Unlike other models of concentration camps, this one is impregnated with the emotions of its maker and his status as a survivor. By being made literally from the memory of one man, it becomes more than a re-creation and more than an interpretative tool. In some important though hardly perceptible way, this model becomes a link to the past by virtue of the fact that someone's memory and lived experience is embodied within it and given material form. This gives this model a different power from say that of a photograph, even photographs as powerful as those recently discovered in the so-called Auschwitz Album, which, taken by the perpetrators, document how the brutality of the camps was normalised as part of their everyday life. As Susan Sontag (2002) has so powerfully argued, photographs can act as a memento mori, as a souvenir of the dead, because of their status as a trace of their subjects’ former existence. This memento status makes them a tool, in that they become an aide de memoire. Their usefulness is that they help survivors remember, a point also made in relation to objects in museums by Marius Kwint et al. (1999), who comments that one of the relations between objects and memory supported by museums is the stimulation of memory through the act of recognition.

For those who had no experience of the Holocaust, however, such photographs are a document, a way of testifying to what happened because of the common-sense faith in the technology of the photograph to capture, through light, an imprint of what the photographer saw through the camera’s lens. In the case of photographs that recorded the everyday life of Jewish communities or individual people, photographs are used to record not only what was lost but also to generate poignancy about this loss. In fact, such images are frequently used to narrate and give presence, in the face of absence, to the lost world of pre-Holocaust European Jewry.

The model of Treblinka however, is not just a trace. Rather it is memory itself, made live by giving it material form. More than a memory aid, this model is memory itself. This knowledge greatly increases the affective power of the object. Recalling at the graphic, almost surreal representation of what occurred at the camp we are also flinching from the knowledge that this happened to a man who until his death in early 2008 could speak to you about it and openly cry in front of you. The dead are not anonymous people but his family and his friends.

This is quite unlike the commissioned models which, by the public nature of the commissioning process, have to be attentive to public rather than personal forms of memorialising. Part of this attentiveness is the need to pay attention to what we might call the politics of respect. It would be impossible to personalise the suffering and to pay attention to the gruesome detail, not only out of respect for the dead but because such detail is not respectable. While historically accurate, such models avoid the personal in order to gesture to the greater whole. The cost, however, is what I earlier referred to as a certain numbness, an inability to own or understand from within the enormity of what happened. We merely understand the facts because the professional models support the historical narrative that surrounds them. They work at the level of recognition, not at the level of embodiment.

This, for example, is the case with the model of the train platform in the Holocaust exhibition at the Imperial War Museum in London. The model represents the spot within the Birkenau complex where the selection of people according to their ability to work or not was made. It is thus an attempt to capture the point at which life and death decisions were made on behalf of thousands of people without their knowledge of what was occurring. According to the model's
maker, Gerry Judah (2000), the rationale was didactic. Based on extensive archival research, interviews and site visits, the model was meant to be historically accurate as to the process it represented and the site in which it happened. But the model was also commissioned for the role it could play in a more general narrative about the Holocaust, told in the images, objects and texts which surround it. Its affective power, which is one of awe at the extent of the numbers of people impacted upon, the cruel nature of the selection and the fascination posed by our knowledge of what awaited them in the gas chambers, is the result of the large size of the model, its whiteness, and the dark, sombre lighting and colour scheme which surround it. The effect is one of silence and respect for the dead.

The Tiebreak model, built in a private living room out of a personal desire to testify and memorialise as well as to display such a desire is entirely different. It is visually and physically assaulting to all the senses. Approaching it from the front, I was drawn to the colourful cut-outs of the women and children which reminded me of my paper cut-out dolls given to me by my godmother when I was a child. I only barely registered the more ominous signs of the dogs, guards and pile of clothes on the ground. Much more impressive was the greenery separating this reception area from the back of the camp which was not clearly visible from this angle. The name of the street those children and their mothers were in – Himmelstrasse (Heaven Street) – gave no sense of what was to come either. The name only became ironic as one turned the corner and was faced with the full horror of the camp’s purpose. There I recoiled, physically assaulted by what I saw – dismembered bodies made of plaster, half reminiscent of the plaster cast of human figures taken in miniature form as if to were the remains of a putting more bodies of their dogs on the ground grimaced while also per process of turnovers.

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Figure 3.3 The cut-out figures in Himmelstrasse lining up in front of the gas chambers (photograph by Andrea Witcomb, 2008)
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human figures taken from Pompeii, recording for posterity how they died. Only these were in miniature form as if toys. There were parts of bodies still smouldering away, bright red as if they were the remains of a burning piece of wood with the embers still alive; figures of prisoners busy taking these charred remains off for burial in pits, grinding the remaining bones in grinders or putting more bodies on the open air fires. And all under the watchful gaze of the guards and their dogs on the ground and from watch tours above. Fascinated and repelled by the scene I grimaced while also peering more closely at the scene and then looking away as if I could banish my position of onlooker.

The scene disrupted my subjectivity, my sense of who I was in relation to it – was I an innocent bystander horrified by the scene, pitying those who had died in this way and those who were forced to work in such conditions? Or did my gaze replicate that of the guards? By now, physically and emotionally shocked I sought help to comprehend this object, help which came in the form of a volunteer, who turned out to be Mr Sztajer himself. He simply told me he had made it, had been there and that it was an authentic copy of the camp. He also told me his wife and daughter had been killed there. He gave me a brochure on the model while I fought tears from streaming down my face wondering how he could stand there so calmly.

If it had been the result of a public commission the model would have been considered disrespectful in its invitation to look closely at its horrible details. But the almost indecent desire to look closely, to walk around it, to look into its internal spaces, to take in its depiction of gruesome activities and to be shocked, when coupled with the knowledge of its history, tears at the heart as well as the imagination, making it just possible to begin to understand the enormity of the grief for lost family, friends and entire communities.

The importance of this personalised attempt to both represent and embody memory is still there even in Mr Sztajer’s absence. As one second generation guide told me, Mr Sztajer used to stand at one corner of his memorial and look for long periods of time at it, using it to reanimate the past. In telling me this story, the guide explained that she thought Mr Sztajer was possessive, that he was really thinking that he rather wished he had not given the model to the museum but had kept it at home. Offering evidence for this theory she told me how upset he had been when the Museum decided to enclose the model in glass for its protection. She followed this up by explaining how surprised and moved she then became to learn from him just what it was that the model embodied for him. As he put it to his colleague, ‘you don’t understand, I am looking at my daughter’.

Mr Sztajer’s presence through the materiality of his model places the viewer in a unique position. Unlike attempts to recreate the experience of being a past victim by asking people to identify with a victim though the use of cards representing the identity of specific victims at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, or to walk through a simulation of the gas chambers such as that at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, this model asks you to imagine yourself as a potential victim, not an actual one. It is that request that enables the possibility of a transformation, of action to prevent future Holocausts. The model works by activating the expression of empathy in the present, rather than for past victims. Rather than offering an unrealistic claim to experience the past or, even more simply, information about the past, this model provides a glimpse into ongoing grief. The past is not, therefore, disconnected from the present.

This also means that unlike many public memorials, the Treblinka model is not an invitation to forget. Quite the contrary. While Young and other critics, such as Pierre Nora (1984), warn of the dangers of relying on external scaffolding such as memorials to do the work of remembering, suggesting that ‘in shouldering the memory work, monuments may relieve viewers of their
memory burden' (Young 1993: 5), this model of Treblinka does exactly the opposite. Rather than allowing the process of remembering to be removed from everyday life, this model suggests how memorial making can become a part of everyday life for both for its maker and his audiences, precisely because of its insistence on the personal.

The impact of the miniature on the affective power of the model
Sztajer's association of the model with the presence of his daughter also brings to mind what Susan Stewart (1984) has to say about the role of miniatures, though it also suggests a departure from her comments in significant ways. Stewart makes the point that miniature models are most frequently associated with children because of their association with dolls' houses, toy soldiers, model railway stations, as well as the more general association of the world of miniatures with children's stories such as *Tom Thumb or Gallivver's Travels*. In the case of the Treblinka model, this is doubly apt. The model acts as a technique for bringing his daughter back to life by embodying in a physical manner his memory and knowledge of her last moments. In a sense, by playing with the miniature at an imaginative level, Sztajer can re-enter the past. It is for this reason, perhaps, that he was so upset at the Museum's decision to encase the model in glass. The effect was to increase the distance between past and present by making it less accessible. In a real sense he was not as able to 'reach' his daughter. By making the miniature, Sztajer was also attempting to communicate with children. In his video-testimony for the Holocaust Centre's video-testimony archive, Sztajer made a point of saying he found it important though hard to communicate with children, thinking that it was important for them to know what had happened to his daughter (Mäisel 1993). In this context, the folk-like, cardboard-looking cut-outs that he hand-painted could be interpreted as part of an interpretation strategy to reach children by playing on the links between models and children's toys – though I cannot be sure that this was a conscious strategy on his part.

Stewart also points out that miniatures invite close attention, thereby inviting multiple significances. At the same time, however, they freeze a moment in time, collapsing many moments into one. In the case of the Treblinka model, Stewart's point is perfectly apt. Despite Mr Sztajer's claim of authenticity, he had to collapse the history of the camp's operation and its physical changes over time into one frozen moment. In a sense then, the model does not offer an exact replica at a particular point in time but a concentration of all that went on there over a period of time. It is accurate, in that all of it is true but it is not accurate in its representation of time. As Stewart (1984) explains it, miniatures offer a transcendental perspective, offering not only a complete, filled out point of view but reducing one instance to all such instances. They condense and embody meanings and thus enlarge them.

Miniature models use of the tableau as a method to represent and capture entire worlds also means that they invite action by asking the viewer to step into the model and make it come alive through imaginative play. This not only gives a tableau 'the power to etch itself in one's memory' but also gives us the power to invent our own worlds, our own associations. The Treblinka model is no exception, as we have already seen in Sztajer's own relationship to it. The model invites interest, in the way that Best, following Tomkins, suggested was necessary before affect can eventuate. Just like in the contemporary art installations that Best discusses in her article, affect is precipitated by the activity of corporeal movement around the object. We walk around the model, we gaze at it, we look deeply into its hidden spaces. In the process we recoil, we experience a sense of disgust, shock, horror, we are fascinated and repelled all at once. The horror is made even more palpable by the fact that, imaginatively at least, we can insert ourselves into that world and our audiences might not undoubtedly want an object, its meaning and even being object. While for Sztajer series of complex which excite interest of knowledge, ranking a place within Mr.

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into that world and play the role of either the victim or the perpetrator. The possible meanings
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undoubtedly wanted us to identify with the victims. Despite the narratives which surround such
an object, its meanings are unstable precisely because it operates at the limits of the politics of
respect and even beyond them. And yet it is, in part, this danger that makes it such a powerful
object.

While for Szajer it is his memory that activates the model and brings it alive, for us, it is a
series of complex layers working in combination with one another – its physical characteristics
which excite interest as well as disgust, the knowledge of what the model means to him as well as
our own knowledge of events. The unique combination that results from these very different sets
of knowledge, ranging from affect to emotion to cognition, combine to give us, as the audience,
a place within Mr Szajer's grief.

These associations make this miniature model different from models that Stewart discusses.
While she sees miniature models as freezing time and thereby erasing history, marking it off
from the present and framing it through nostalgia, an effect which is not disassociated from
the association with childhood, I see this model as allowing a link to be made between past and
present. This happens first of all by the model's invitation to look in detail, which inevitably
leads to sensations of shock and disgust that are felt viscerally. This then leads to an emotional
response, raised in part by our cultural knowledge of what happened and by the realisation
that this model was made by a survivor. It is his story that allows us to move beyond disgust,
beyond our initial proprioceptive responses to the object itself towards a process that internalises
our experience of the object and begins to create meaning. But this cannot occur without first
experiencing the physical shock of the object itself, made all the more palpable by the naiveté
of its production values, its use of colour – as opposed to the white of the professional models – and
the fact that it is a miniature model inviting us to look closely and attentively.

A useful discussion to advance our understanding of this object beyond Stewart's critique
of miniatures as inevitably tinged by romanticism and nostalgia because of their association
with childhood, is van Alphen's (2001–02) provocative and extremely interesting discussion
on artworks that use the notion of play to embody the Holocaust. Created by second- and
third-generation descendants of survivors, such artworks have caused intense debate, upsetting
many survivors. Rather than enter into a debate about morality and the role of taste within it,
van Alphen asked not whether such artworks were tasteful but rather whether they were useful,
whether they opened up possibilities that, it seemed to him, more didactic and historically
informed genres of representation had closed off.

While recognising that many survivors consider such art practices scandalous, van Alphen
argued for an understanding of such art practices as producing a space of engagement and
learning which traditional Holocaust pedagogies could not do. Thus van Alphen spends
considerable time describing the failures of traditional approaches which, he argues, assume that
mastery over content, mastery over historical narrative, will translate into mastery of the future.
Arguing against the notion that we need to know as much as possible about the Holocaust in
order to prevent it from happening again, van Alphen claims instead that we need a pedagogy
which allows for identification through imagination. Over-interpretation he seems to suggest,
appears to have deadened the historical archive rather than keep it alive. Nor does it deal with
the fact that the Holocaust has to be understood as a trauma, something that in its very nature
cannot be mastered.

Moreover, van Alphen supports the artists' contentions that contemporary audiences need
to identify with the perpetrators rather than the victims if we are to begin to understand how
the Holocaust could have happened. Interestingly he associates this need with the need to allow a space for affective experiences rather than cognitive ones, in the practices of Holocaust remembrance. The argument for the need to identify, however briefly, with the perpetrator rather than the victim is couched in terms of a distinction between ideopathic and heteropathic forms of identification where the former takes place by identifying with like and the latter with the other. The importance of momentary identification with the other is important for Holocaust education, he argues, if the goal is that of prevention in the future, for identification with the victim,

although useful to realise how horrible the Holocaust was, is also a way of reassuring visitors about their fundamental innocence... In contrast, soliciting partial and temporary identification with the perpetrators contributes to an awareness of the ease with which one slides into a measure of complicity.

(van Alphen, 2001–02: 16)

The Treblinka model is unusual within both conventional strategies for the representation of the Holocaust and the kinds of radical interventions discussed by van Alphen, because it sits across both of them. The model is easily understood as narrative, as personal testimony, as a form of remembrance, even a memorial. In so far as it works by establishing ideopathic forms of identification it works within a conventional form of didactics that frames the Holocaust as an 'apocalyptic inhumanity' (van Alphen 2001–02: 182). But in this case, this form of identification has a twist – it works in the present, not the past as discussed above. This means that it is not so easy for the audience to escape the net. We may not be identifying with the other but we are not uninvolved. For Sztajer himself, this involvement was even stronger and could be understood as what van Alphen refers to as an expression of traumatic memory. Using the French psychiatrist's Pierre Janet's work, van Alphen (2001–02: 185) argues that narrative forms of memory help people make sense of familiar experiences by integrating them into existing mental structures. However, with traumatic experiences it is not possible to do this. Instead, people either remember with particular vividness or resist integrating their experiences into any narrative at all. In the case of Sztajer, the intensity of detail and colour in his model would suggest that this object is an attempt to give embodiment to his traumatic memories in an extremely vivid manner which does not posit a distance from the event itself. It is this lack of distance that enables us to sense his grief and to be touched, that is transformed. For descendants of first-generation survivors, and indeed for non-Jewish people, this model affords the possibility of becoming linked into what Marian Hirsch (2001) termed a 'postmemory', whereby the children of survivors of trauma 'remember' their parents' or grandparents' experiences only through 'the narratives and images with which they grew up'. These however, are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right' (Hirsch 2001: 9). While such memories are familial, Hirsch argues that it is possible for the wider community also to participate in these forms of remembering, in a process of 'adopting the traumatic experiences – and thus also the memories – of others as experiences one might oneself have had, and of inscribing them into one's own life story' (Hirsch 2001: 10).

While Rick Crownshaw (2007) critiques Hirsch's concept by arguing that she ignores the historical context and therefore the ideological underpinnings of the photographs she discusses as her case study of how this memory works – those in the Tower of Faces at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum – the example of the Treblinka model show how the particular history of an object, rather than just its physical characteristics, can provide the

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material from which to provide a framework in which 'postmemory' might be able to function in ways which are both ethical and recognize historical context.

What then is the role of interpretation?

Clearly, some of the power of this object rests in its subject matter, which is made stronger by its naive and private rendition. One cannot judge it using standard art history criteria. But the flinching that takes place at its gory rendition of horrible experiences and practices is undoubtedly augmented by the knowledge of who its maker was. While that knowledge needs to be communicated, it is clear from the discussion above that care should be taken as to the form of this communication. While it would be easy to communicate it through a formal means of communication such as labelling or an audio or live guide, the danger would be the reduction of its emotional impact to what van Alphen calls narrative memory. To work at the level of affect, gaps need to be created to facilitate the enactment of memory - that of Mr Sztajer as well as the emotional involvement of the viewer.

This seems to me to indicate the need to think about how to use these objects in a display context. The object needs enough space to work its wonder, to affect people in a visceral, physical way. While it would be wrong to contextualise this object to the extent that it became a cog in a larger narrative, sufficient interpretation needs to be provided to turn this affective response into some form of understanding. Moreover, it needs to be provided in a form that enhances the ability of viewers to have a transformative experience which leads to greater understanding -- in this case the ongoing grief associated with the Holocaust. It seems to me that any future interpretation would do well to heed van Alphen's provocation that dramatic forms may be better at opening up a gap for the audience to engage with the memory of the Holocaust than, rather than close off that memory by articulating its meanings within a standard narrative about the Holocaust. Any artistic intervention, however, requires the full documentation of the object's history and meaning for its maker in a manner which allows the information to be used through a variety of media and forms. It is clear that this memorial cannot be fully understood if it is left to stand mute. The meanings may be embodied in it but they require explication.

Notes

1. This point is an important one given Noel Carroll's (2002) critique of an affect-oriented philosophy of aesthetics. Carroll argues that an affect oriented philosophy of aesthetics assumes not only a narrow range of affects, limiting these to the experience of pleasure but also narrows affect to aesthetic experiences. Only art can generate affect.

2. The information on Treblinka and on Mr Sztajer comes from a brochure produced by the JHRC which is available at the model itself.

3. The primary function of most concentration camps was not the extermination of Jews by gassing. Most were labour camps and some such as Majdanek and Auschwitz had a double function as labour/extermination camps. Treblinka was one of four camps that were entirely devoted to the process of exterminating mainly Jews by gassing.

4. This insight was gained in conversation with a volunteer guide.

5. It is interesting to note in passing that the notion of the 'Lost World' is not unique to the period immediately preceding the Holocaust. Indeed, as a narrative strategy, this notion was already prevalent at the turn of the century when Jewish museums displayed the culture of the shtetels in an ethnographic manner because there was a sense that such communities were already disappearing either through migration or through the process of gentrification. This is discussed in Roskies (1992).
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Figure 4.1 Buddha Day 200f by Chris Wiegbeck)