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DEALING WITH THE PAST IN THE PRESENT: WHY DISPLAYING THE ART OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS IS IMPORTANT

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The importance of using art therapy to help people who have experienced severe trauma is, by now, well documented. Not being either a therapist or a psychologist, but a museologist, someone interested in the role of museums and exhibitions in society, I am not going to dwell on the psychological benefits of expressing traumatic experiences through art. Instead, I wish to explore how this kind of art, when it refers to forms of trauma experienced as a direct result of state-sponsored violence, is both a testimony to what occurred, a form of historical evidence and, at the same time, an insight into the ongoing legacy of that trauma down through the generations.

Understanding this legacy, I want to suggest, is part of a process of reconciliation in which listening is important as well as part of a process of working towards the prevention of future forms of state-sponsored violence towards those who are seen as different. For in recognising how, for those who experienced such trauma, the past is not a distant time, but, instead, a living entity in the present we are forced to think about our own place in the relationship between past events, the present and the future.

None of the artworks on display in this exhibition were produced during the Holocaust itself. They do not, therefore, have the status of being a document from the time itself. Instead, what they offer is a working through of memories and the trauma associated with that time. In this they are very different from the historical record of contemporary photographs, which, while they document the horror and the crime, cannot convey the subjective experience of the victims. In their intensely personal nature, the artworks begin to express, as Saba Feniger (1996) – a volunteer survivor curator who collected many such artworks for the Holocaust Museum in Melbourne explains – not only the horror but also how it felt being subjected to it. The works, she says, ‘are a human commentary on an inhuman period in history’. And yet, because they are based on memories, these artworks are also understood by the survivors as offering a form of testimony. For Feniger, ‘the artists share a history in what they have witnessed and remembered, their art providing a visual and concrete testimony for the future while we still have living witnesses to the human tragedy of the Holocaust.’

Testimony is of course a very important practice for Jewish communities in the aftermath of the Holocaust. As James Young (1994) has argued in his book Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning, for Holocaust survivors the most important form of memorialisation was that of the testimony. Testifying to the existence of the Holocaust and its impact on Jews, maintaining the memory of those killed and speaking their names, denied the perpetrators their final victory. To forget, to allow nothingness to fill the void, would have let them win.

The process of testifying, however, also created a collective memory which has had its own traumatic impact. Seen as a totality, the works in this exhibition are as much about these collective memories and their impact as they are about individual memories of the Holocaust. In order to understand the relationship between these different forms of memory and their expression in the artworks in this exhibition it is useful to consider the relationship between memory and trauma. For most of us, memories are brought out through narrative – we tell stories about particular people, places and experiences from our past. In doing so we use
the past tense, placing these memories within a temporal framework in which the past is clearly differentiated from the present. We can call this narrative memory.

For those who have suffered trauma however, memory can manifest itself in other ways. In a phenomenon Charlotte Delbo, a poet and Holocaust survivor, called ‘sense’ memory, it is emotions that are remembered (in Bennett 2002). Furthermore, they are remembered not through narrative but viscerally – literally through the senses and inscribed on the body of the survivor. Furthermore, the visceral, immediate nature of these memories breaks down the temporal distance found in narrative forms of memory. The distinction between the past and the present collapses. Expressing such ‘sense’ memories is literally to relive the past in the present by feeling it in the deepest recesses of one’s body.

The third form of memory is what Jacob Climo (1995), discussing the experiences of children of survivors, calls ‘vicarious memory’. This term refers to the ways in which the second generation or those who were not there, remember the Holocaust through a cultural repertoire of images and embodied behaviours.

In the case of the artworks in this exhibition, we can see that child survivors have expressed, for the most part, an emotional legacy that is redolent with affect – that is with expressions of pain, disorientation and fear – and that these sensations reflect emotional states of loss, grief and lack of identity. For example, Nina Stone, a child survivor who lost her childhood, sense of security and Jewish identity by becoming separated from both her parents and having to conceal her true identity while hiding in an orphanage, expresses her sense of disorientation and anger at her loss in her drawing Lost Years by filling her head with angry red circles to indicate her pent up emotions. It is as if her head is full of these repressed emotions which she gets rid of by writing them out on paper. It is possible to see her words in this drawing as a physical manifestation of the pain in her body, a literal physical mark that has a parallel in her being. Most of her other drawings in this exhibition express through colour, her emotional and artistic struggle to find the delicate balance between a dark vision of humanity and the hope of living in peace with the world and herself. It is as if she is constantly walking on a tightrope, an experience which no doubt expresses her lived reality as a child fleeing Nazi persecution.

Hetty Lubliner-Frankenhuis, a very young child during the Holocaust, also expresses her flashes of memory through sensorial means. Fear, pain, disorientation and emotional loss are expressed in her work which represents physical experiences such as being told to hide in a well; the fear and disorientation of arriving in Theresienstadt and seeing the guards with their dogs, the men in uniform, the bright lights and eyes peering at her; and lying in a cold steel cot at Theresienstadt. All of these are intensely physical memories that she uses to express her emotional state at the time and the legacy this has left in her person and in those around her.

The children of survivors are less likely to express their trauma through the expression of physical memories that embody emotional states than through a repertoire of cultural symbols
that embody the experiences of their parents' generations and the impact such experiences had on them as the second generation. In this sense, such memories are vicarious—they are second hand. But this does not mean that these memories did not leave their physical and emotional impact on the second generation. They too can register the legacy of the Holocaust on their bodies and mental landscapes. As Jacob Climo (1995) has argued, the second generation inherited their parent's trauma through a repertoire of embodied behaviours, many of them an indirect way of expressing their experiences during the Holocaust itself. While there was a conspiracy of silence, a fear of talking about their experiences during the Holocaust so that their pain could not take over their lives, their experiences came through nevertheless as 'their mannerisms, body language, attitudes, perceptions, and melancholia betrayed them and set the tone for transmitting their feelings to anyone near them, especially to children' (1995: 184). The result, in his case, as with many others, was that his childhood 'was instilled with Holocaust images and fears' (179).

In the artwork of the second generation of survivors then, we find the use of a number of symbols that recur throughout, and which have come to symbolise the Holocaust: candles lit for the souls of the departed, symbolising the loss of family; images of those who did not survive; representations of events that were not directly experienced but are known through collective memory—such as Ruth Rich's depiction of the mass killings on the Russian front by mobile killing machines, or the use of an image of her elder brother Henius who did not survive in her painting Henius, My Missing Link; or the images of the death trains. Such artworks help to narrate the Holocaust from the point of view of those who have lost a link to their own past as a result of it but who did not necessarily live through it themselves. The memories are vicarious rather than sensory.

Many of the paintings in this exhibition however, point to the ways in which the second generation, who did not experience the Holocaust directly, were still directly affected by it. Many of the artworks by the children of survivors express not only a collective memory, but also their own sensorial memories of the after effects of genocide. Simonne Kanat's work, for example, is a direct sensorial expression of her experiences as a child confronting the knowledge of the Holocaust. Her fear and incomprehension are palpable. Anita Bental's work is another example of the powerful impact of the combined effect of the survivors' conspiracy of silence and their repertoire of embodied behaviours on the second generation. In her case, their fears and experiences were registered in her own body as a child through such things as a fear of showers and skin problems. Her artwork, done as an adult, clearly shows what it was like to live with the constant but repressed presence of the Holocaust in the home.

From the point of view of a non Jewish viewer, the way which these artworks communicate sense memories may be more important than the psychological distinction between child survivors and children of survivors. In having the courage to express such memories and then to offer them to the general public, these artists are doing more than releasing their own fears and traumatic experiences. Their artworks are testimonies of the direct and indirect trauma inflicted by state sponsored
violence. In placing this testimony in the public realm, in this case through an exhibition, the artists are giving their audience a gift that also comes with a request. In accepting their invitation to look into their lives and sense their pain, they are also asking us to allow them to interrupt our lives, to invade our own sense of security and wellbeing by momentarily paying them some attention. While we may never be able completely to understand or experience their pain, the request for our attention brings with it, as Roger Simon (2006: 188) has argued, “the possibility of learning anew how to live in the present with each another, not only by opening the questions to what and to whom I must be accountable, but also by considering what attention, learning, and actions such accountability requires.”

References:


