

## “D’ont Touch My Holocaust”

### Analyzing the Barometer of Responses Israeli Artists Challenge the Holocaust Taboo

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*“The national museum in the eternal capital of the Jewish people should encourage many exhibitions attesting that we are indeed liberated from the traumas of the past. If the Israel Museum could get hold of the bones of Holocaust victims, they could invite kindergarten children to build castles. Perhaps the Israel Museum should also import hair from Auschwitz to hang on it postmodern works.”<sup>(1)</sup>*

This sarcastic and radical response, published in *Ma’ariv* on January 19, 1997, by Holocaust survivor, Knesset member, and journalist Joseph Lapid, following the controversial exhibition of Israeli artist Ram Katzir at the Israel Museum, reflects the problematic nature, the hypersensitivity, and the intricacy of the current Holocaust discourse in Israel.

In this essay, I delve into the pressing issues of this highly delicate discourse. I attempt to locate the very root of its problematic nature, wherefrom all taboos and paradoxes stem pertaining to the discourse of Holocaust representation in contemporary Israeli art. The Zionist ethos is informed by two fundamental notions “Holocaust and Heroism” and “Negation of Exile” that are crucial to the understanding of the problematic nature inherent in Holocaust representation in Israel. In the following paragraphs, I trace the implications of these two perceptions on Holocaust representation in art, and attempt to categorize and classify modes of Holocaust representation in contemporary Israeli art in light of, or in relation to, the public sensitivity toward the manipulative use of the Holocaust. In order to elucidate some basic concepts relating to the Israeli “black hole”, I examine some strategies employed by current Israeli artists who are communicating Auschwitz<sup>(2)</sup> in their work. Thus, the essay explores several artistic projects executed in recent years and attempts to scrutinize and analyze “the barometer of responses” that invisible imaginary super-apparatus that measures the sensitivity of the Israeli public and determines what is included in and what is excluded from the canon of Israeli art.

The first part of the essay provides historical background to help us understand the paradox, the taboo, and the turning point that occurred in the 1980s, when the maturation of Israeli society led to a readiness to reopen the wound and second-generation artists began to break the conspiracy of silence. The second part of the essay focuses on various artistic strategies, discussing specific recent projects that challenge the Holocaust discourse. I raise basic questions pertaining to the boundaries of representation: What kind of artwork makes people lose their temper to the point where they protest, demonstrate, and create road blocks, and what kind of project goes down quietly, stirring up no storm at all?

I present eight artistic approaches: estrangement, humor, and irony (**Ram Katzir** and **Roe Rosen**); identification with the victim (**Shimon Attie**); emphasis on the biographical element (**Haim Maor**); emphasis on sentimentality and protest against the commercialization of the Holocaust (**Natan Nuchi**); the conceptual (**Simcha Shirman**); spirituality and the Jewish link (**Moshe Gershuni**); the model of denial and negation of the very option of “Holocaust art” (**Joshua Neustein**); and the radical model (***Arbeit Macht Frei***).

The heated debates revolving around the work of these artists and the spectrum of responses they evoked led me to examine the three greatest taboos of the Holocaust discourse in Israeli society: linking the Holocaust with the Israeli-Arab conflict, employing humor and irony in the context of the Holocaust, and shifting the gaze from the victim to the victimizer. This essay sets out to measure the endurance and flexibility of the yardstick of acceptance or rejection as it applies to Holocaust representations in art.

### **The Holocaust and Israeli Art: The Paradox and the Taboo**

There is no denying the sweeping presence of the Holocaust in Israeli public life – on television, in ceremonies, memorials, books, political demagoguery, and even on the street.<sup>(3)</sup> As an Israeli and as the daughter of Holocaust survivors, I can attest that the Holocaust has always been there, breathing down our necks, as a looming threat that may descend upon us once again, and after 1967 as a pretext for Israel’s military power and its charged relations with the Arab world. Over the course of time, the official memory of the Holocaust, supplemented by the trauma of local wars, has intensified the country’s anxiety, transforming it into an ideological instrument justifying the oppression of others.<sup>(4)</sup>

In light of the overwhelming presence of the Holocaust in Israeli cultural and political life, it is surprising that up until the early 1980s the Holocaust was entirely excluded from the canonical and hegemonic discourse of Israeli visual

art.<sup>(5)</sup> Much has been written in recent years about this paradox and about the taboo regarding Holocaust representation.<sup>(6)</sup> Theodor Adorno's famous aphorism, "There can be no poetry after Auschwitz", is one of the most widely cited phrases in this context, which indicates how problematic silence is and how complicated it is to break that silence. Moshe Zuckermann, an Israeli historian who has studied the public discourse of the Holocaust and published numerous essays about the difficulties inherent in representation of the Holocaust in Israel,<sup>(7)</sup> focuses on three obstacles:

*First, the risk of hurting survivors' feelings. When the act of representation goes beyond the survivor's private experience, or as may be the case within the framework of artistic representation, when the historical inferno is subordinated to modes of structuring and modeling relying on principles of alienation, aesthetic estrangement, and irony; naturally, this is a particularly sensitive nerve in Israeli society. Second, there is the danger (just as typical in Israeli society) of the horror's inflationary use for various purposes, inappropriate usages, which, due to their vulgar instrumental nature, desecrate the memory of the dead, and in a political context also the memory of their status as the victims of extreme oppression. Third, the paradox emerging from Adorno's very words: How can there be cultural representation of that which culture itself collaborated in generating or at least failed to prevent. Not to mention the fact that such representation . . . embeds some measure of pleasure?<sup>(8)</sup>*

Up until the early 1980s, Adorno's assertion appears to have been carved in stone in the visual arts in Israel, providing a good pretext for avoiding the subject. Representation of the Holocaust was perceived (by the elitist milieu) as trivialization and erosion of its memory. The main argument was that the documentary images of the horror were all too familiar and all too accessible. Why would one choose to represent it in art?

Reluctance to touch upon this sensitive nerve has to do with the fact that for many years the words "Holocaust and heroism" were virtually inseparable in Israel. Our Independence Day is part of a sequence of three days during a single week: Holocaust Remembrance Day, IDF Memorial Day, and Independence Day. The linear arrangement of these three days was aimed at producing a narrative structure with a clear message and a happy ending. The sequence "Holocaust, heroism, and revival" corresponds to the historical record as follows: The nearly annihilated nation defended itself, defeated its enemies, and built its own country. This was the ideological formula in the days following the establishment of the state, heroic days of nationality and patriotism. In order to raise the people's spirit during the country's early days, it was necessary to repress individual experiences of the Holocaust. Instead, it was perceived as a time of national destruction, a genocide that resulted in

redemption. The memory of the Holocaust became a ritual aimed at uniting the people and not a tool for historical understanding.<sup>(9)</sup>

Another crucial concept for understanding the problematic nature of Holocaust representation in Israel is the “Negation of Exile,” as discussed by historian and scholar Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin.<sup>(10)</sup> Krakotzkin’s major argument is that the ideology of the negation of exile has guided the Zionist approach toward various aspects of the extermination of European Jewry. The preoccupation with Jewish identity was considered obsolete. In Israel, the notion of the “Jew” is associated with the concepts of “diaspora” and “Exile,” representing the negative aspects of our history. The Israeli is the positive “new Jew,” the “ex-Jew,” an antithesis to the image of the passive, Diaspora Jew, who went to the slaughter like a lamb.

This ideology, which nurtures the Zionist ethos, may also account for the exclusion of the Holocaust from the discourse of Israeli art.<sup>(11)</sup> Likewise, the desire to construct and establish a distinct Israeli identity unrelated to the Diasporal identity, underlay the hegemonic ideology of the artistic avant-garde. An absurd situation was created - the extreme manifestation of the destiny of the Jewish people is entirely absent from the canon of Israeli art. For Israeli artists to this very day, the term “Holocaust artist” is derogatory, smacking of kitsch, sentimentality, and anachronism (unless the artist employs post-Zionist critical strategies such as humor and irony - a recent trend).

In other words, the Holocaust touches upon such a sensitive public nerve in Israel that discussion of the quality of works dealing with it has been virtually absent. The difficulty and pain involved in the very preoccupation with the trauma have made discussion of the works problematic as well. A matter-of-fact critique of a work which makes an explicit statement of pain or memory was considered insensitive. Thus, the art created by survivors was pushed to the margins and was never accepted as legitimate by the elite. It was “not modern enough”: neither abstract nor conceptual, neither sophisticated nor universal. Rather, it had narrative, figurative, and symbolic (“too Jewish”) content and had not dealt with the language of art itself. It was regarded as obsolete.<sup>(12)</sup>

### **The Turning Point**

Since the 1980s there has been a shift, and the Holocaust now makes a strong showing on the Israeli cultural agenda. A new understanding of the Holocaust seems to be in evidence, judging by the considerable increase in academic research alongside various productions in theater, film, television, literature, and popular music. Several factors have come together here. With the fall of the Soviet bloc, increasing numbers of Israelis started going on “root

trips” to Eastern Europe. For more than fifteen years now, youth expeditions have been sent annually to the concentration and death camps in Poland. Many Holocaust survivors have begun telling their stories. This need to talk corresponds to the need to listen. With the publication of the testimonies of survivors who have written their own personal stories, the Holocaust has acquired autobiographical features. Specific details have gradually emerged from the black hole. No longer a silent, faceless crowd, its victims are actual people - my grandmother, your aunt.

The taboo was gradually challenged in the visual arts too.<sup>(13)</sup> Second-generation artists began expressing their anxieties. By 2002 they had already taken the subject to different realms, deepening the Holocaust’s layers of meaning and linking them to other fields of discourse such as memory, racism, and the body. During the 1990s, in line with postmodern and post-Zionist trends the Holocaust has ceased to be repudiated as subject matter; it has a new legitimacy, as can be seen in the way it is confronted by second-generation artists.

This readiness to reopen the wound must be perceived as an integral part of the maturation of Israeli society. It is a sign that society is no longer perceived as monolithic. Art is no longer expected to speak on behalf of the national collective whole. Its voice has split into a multiplicity of personal, individual, stratified, dynamic, conflicted, and contradictory voices.<sup>(14)</sup>

However, the subject is still not the *bon ton* in art. There has not yet been a single large-scale group exhibition in a major Israeli museum dealing specifically with the Holocaust. To date only one book by an Israeli has been published about art and the Holocaust,<sup>(15)</sup> and a mere fifteen of the artists mentioned in it are Israeli.<sup>(16)</sup> One feels that preoccupation with the Holocaust leads down a dark road, which only a handful have managed to cross safely. The fact that the conference for which this essay was written took place at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, rather than at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem reaffirms that we are probably not ready yet.

### **The Barometer of Responses**

Over the past fifty years the threshold marker, the barometer that measures the sensitivity of the Israeli public, seems to have become more flexible, changing in response to the spirit of the times and circumstances. The dynamic of the responses, both those of the general public and of the art world (which are generally opposed to one another), is like a seismograph reflecting trends and the national mood. Where exactly does one cross the line? Which image is permitted and which forbidden? What is considered disgraceful and what decent? What is desecrating and what purifying? At what point does the threat of censorship or loss of public support loom? And,

conversely, what ensures acceptance by the elitist Israeli art establishment?

Two recent projects at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem offer a principal test case, having triggered passionate responses and challenged the status quo regarding Holocaust representations in Israel. The first was Ram Katzir's site-specific installation *Within the Line* (winter 1997), based on the concept of coloring books with Nazi images; and the second was Roe Rosen's interactive installation *Live and Die as Eva Braun* (fall 1997). By critically viewing the importance of the Holocaust in the formation of Israeli identity, both shows caused a scandal and infuriated many Holocaust survivors to the point that the Minister of Education was called upon to cancel the exhibitions. One of the most radical responses is quoted at the beginning of my essay. The other, by Haim Dasberg, a Holocaust survivor who responded to Ram Katzir's project, reflects the difficulties in turning the gaze from the victim to the victimizer:

*What do I care about the murderer? After all that I have been through, do I still have to explain, understand, and relate to the way the poor bastard became a murderer? If the museum wants to deal with the lesson of the Holocaust, let it screen documentary films, display authentic photographs and paintings inspired by the horror. But where do they get the nerve to make playful use of a picture where a Jew's side-locks are being shaved off? . . . They are taking our open wound and treating it lightly.*<sup>(17)</sup>

An analysis of the response to these installations raises several questions and quandaries: Was it the fact that these exhibitions were presented at the Israel Museum, the very heart of the establishment, the official national museum of the State of Israel, that triggered the public response? At the same time, another artist, Orchedea Yeminfeld, exhibited in the Jerusalem Artists' House a swastika made of human hair, eliciting no response whatsoever. Who is allowed to touch upon the subject at all? Who has the license to represent the inferno? Does the fact that an artist belongs to the group of "second generation" that someone in his/her family "was there" automatically grant him the right to speak?<sup>(18)</sup> Does a non-Jewish artist have the right to deal with the Holocaust?<sup>(19)</sup> And what is the "boiling point"? What is most infuriating? What makes people lose their temper?

It seems that the three taboos that may not be broken (as far as the general public is concerned) are: (1) making an analogy between the Holocaust and the ongoing Israeli-Arab conflict;<sup>(20)</sup> (2) employing rational unsentimental strategies, such as humor and irony; and (3) turning the gaze on the victimizer rather than on the victim. Ram Katzir and Roe Rosen's projects forced the viewer to participate in a dialogue (in Rosen's case, an erotic dialogue; in Katzir's case, an ostensibly innocent one) with the victimizer. The disapproval

of these works was based on the perverse relations forced on the viewer, an objection to the manipulation that has transformed viewers into “Nazi collaborators,” so to speak.

### **Shimon Attie: Rejection of the Non-Israeli**

In 1991 the American Jewish artist Shimon Attie slide-projected portions of pre-World War II photographs of Jewish street life in Berlin in their present vicinity. Screened for an evening or two, these projections could be seen by local residents, drivers on the street, and passers-by. By using slide projection on location, fragments of the past were introduced into the visual field of the present (for a discussion and illustration, see Michelle Friedman’s essay in this volume). Thus, parts of long-destroyed Jewish community life were visually simulated, momentarily re-created. By attempting to renegotiate the relationship between past and present, the project sought to violate the collective processes of denial and forgetting.

This project, entitled *The Writing on the Wall*, was shown in major museums worldwide, among them the New York Museum of Modern Art,<sup>(21)</sup> and yet it was rejected by all the major Israeli museums. Since arguments about quality are not relevant here, this puzzling rejection raises the question of “license”: Who is qualified to touch our Holocaust? I can only conclude that the project was perceived by Israeli museum curators as “too Jewish,” “too Diasporal,” “too sentimental.” Attie’s point of view and the representation of the victims were inconsistent with the perception of “Holocaust and Heroism.” Moreover, the project requires no ironic or subversive post-Zionist gaze. But most of all, Attie’s project clashes with the “negation of Exile” ideology. Israel prefers to remember the gas chambers rather than the richness and intricacy of prewar Jewish life in Europe. And—beyond all this—the fact that Attie was not Israeli disqualified him, as if to say, “We don’t need any external experts on this matter” (in other words, in Israeli terms he had no “license”).<sup>(22)</sup>

### **Haim Maor: Qualified Acceptance**

Haim Maor, the son of survivors, began dealing with the Holocaust as early as the late 1970s. He was not really accepted into the canon, although he was born in Israel (1951) and has even exhibited his work at the Israel Museum. For more than twenty years, he has been delving intensively into the black hole of the Israeli collective consciousness, extracting materials for his art. In his oeuvre he combines these materials with biographical elements.

Maor first referred to the Holocaust, directly and chillingly, in an installation he mounted in a bomb shelter in Tel Hai in 1983 entitled *Message from Auschwitz-Birkenau to Tel Hai*. Tel Hai is a settlement in the Galilee, in northern Israel, etched into the Zionist collective memory as the ultimate symbol of heroism and sacrifice. The installation was a walking tour from light

into darkness: The viewer walked in through the entrance door of a school building under construction, passed through empty classrooms, walked down some stairs into a long and narrow corridor, and arrived at Tel Hai's central bomb shelter. The viewer experienced a sense of suffocation triggered by the descent into the unventilated shelter and seeing the image that appeared on the shelter's wall—a combination between Tel Hai's mythological courtyard building and the building through which one enters Birkenau. The surprising similarity between the buildings' silhouettes and the fact that on the way out the viewer noticed the showers, always found in Israeli bomb shelters, was highly disconcerting.

In 1988, following a visit to Poland and Germany, Maor presented an exhibition at the Israel Museum entitled ***The Face of Race and Memory***, where he first revealed his private history as a son of Holocaust survivors. It was a kind of private exorcism touched by a sense of persecution and humiliation alongside illuminating observations about how we imbibe racist prejudice. Maor displayed photographs of his family and himself alongside photographs of his German friend Susanna, her family, and friends. The use of visual conventions of frontal or profile portrait was reminiscent of mug shots, Nazi studies of racial theory, and the photographs taken by the Nazis in the camps. The similarity between the two families shattered the viewer's basic racial stereotypes. The same portraits appeared in a separate room, this time painted on wooden boards, reminiscent of the painted portraits found in the ancient tombs of Fayum in Upper Egypt. Here he applied a different kind of classification based on transformation from realistic painting to broken, faded painting, from memory to oblivion.

One of Maor's most powerful works is the 1992 ***Light Number*** - the numbers tattooed in 1942 on the arm of his father, survivor of the Birkenau camp, engraved on a copper plate: 78446. The copper plate was illuminated from the back. The light emanated from the tiny holes, creating an aura around the entire plaque. Maor transformed the act of skin tattooing, intended to bestow a technical identity on the person while eliminating his or her singular human identity, into a metaphysical symbol with spiritual connotations associated with alchemy. By magnifying the private number and its tattoo in the copper, Maor created a magical object which projects the finite nature of mortality, while simultaneously hinting at the generation of new life. No one in Israel was disturbed by Maor's work. But neither was he praised or considered a member of the elitist milieu. His work contained a harmless dose of biography and criticism. His point of departure was identification with the victim, and his "license" derived from the fact that he was the son of survivors.

### **Simcha Shirman: Documentary Manipulation**

Simcha Shirman, a well-known Israeli photographer, was born in Germany in

1947 to Holocaust survivors of Polish origin. His work was also received in Israel without controversy. In the early 1990s, when he was forty-three, Shirman traveled to Poland and Germany and started exploring the effect of his parents' Holocaust trauma on himself. Only then did he begin to include images directly linked to the Holocaust in his works, signing them with his initials: SS. His works manifest a desire to transform the bleeding wound, the emotions, and shame into an unsentimental semiotic system.

In 1999 Shirman represented Israel at the Venice Biennial with an explicit Holocaust piece entitled *History as Memory*. In two of the four spaces allotted to the Israeli Pavilion, he constructed an installation combining objects and photographs. The subtitle of his installation was *Polish Landscape, German Landscape*. The space was split into two separate areas: the lower level was an area of purification, and the upper level, of hunting. The site of purification - the bathroom - was a white, sterile, alien space projecting claustrophobic medical sterility. Impressed on the tiles was the German sign from Auschwitz, bearing the command "Be Civilized!" Three urinals were attached to the shiny porcelain walls, and above them three portrait photographs - two authentic, black-and-white portraits of the victims, and one color portrait of the artist.

At the center of the upper level - the hunting ground - Shirman mounted a sniper rifle cast in aluminum, its site aimed at three monitors projecting an image of the flow of visitors on the lower level. Here Shirman employed role reversal between the hunter and the hunted, between murderer and victim. The viewers photographed on the lower level thus played the role of the hunted, and when they arrived at the upper level they became the hunters. In the same space, Shirman also presented two series of black-and-white photographs, *German Landscape and Polish Landscape*: hunting towers in Germany and watchtowers from Auschwitz. Here too he was interested in the point of view of the watchman/hunter as well as that of the victim/hunted. These are images deeply engraved in the Israeli collective consciousness, although the collective memory has been emptied of emotional content.

This, incidentally, was one of the objections of the Israeli art world to Shirman's project. Many rejected the very idea of presenting Israeli artists through the cliché filter of "Memory and Holocaust." They maintained that it was tacky and sentimental and that it would further isolate Israeli art on the international art scene. Indeed, the exhibition received very little coverage in professional magazines in Israel. Thus, the exhibition in Venice does not necessarily indicate Shirman's acceptance into the Israeli canon.

### **Moshe Gershuni: Acceptance**

An entirely different case, that of acceptance, is presented by Moshe Gershuni, who was among the first to link Israeliness and Jewish identity. The

presentation of his works in the late 1970s and early 1980s relegitimized the connection between Israeli visual art and Jewish identity in general and with the Holocaust trauma in particular. Gershuni is neither a survivor, nor second generation. He is a sabra (born in Tel Aviv in 1936), a modernist with roots in the current Tel-Aviv-based artistic community, which speaks no Yiddish nor shows much interest in the Holocaust.

Gershuni's work deals with mourning, lamentation, consolation, and forgiveness, and the permanent presence of Jewish suffering and discussion of victims and sacrifice. In 1982 he was quoted as saying: "I am a Jew! Yes, with all the mystique that it may imply. I am Israeli because I am Jewish, otherwise there is no reason for me to be here of all places."<sup>(23)</sup> This was the first time a secular artist had identified himself in such a way, trying to articulate the connection between being a Jew and being an Israeli.<sup>(24)</sup>

Gershuni referred to the Holocaust via two key images: The swastika and the yellow Star of David. The swastika emerged in several of Gershuni's works during the 1980s. One of the first was *In My Heart's Blood*, an installation created for the 1980 Tel Hai Biennial, also shown at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and later developed for the 1982 Venice Biennial. Gershuni filled the entire room with bloodstained plates arranged on the floor in the shape of a swastika. The accompanying plaque read, "My wonderful red is your precious blood." Throughout the 1980s, Gershuni challenged divine justice after the Holocaust. Thus, for example, in the 1987 work *Glory and Eternity, Mightiness and Majesty*, and a year later in *Justice Shall Walk before Him*, he displayed four cracked ceramic plates, on two of which he painted swastikas. On the other two he wrote, "Justice Shall Walk before Him" a verse from a prayer recited at a Jewish funeral. By juxtaposing the reverent text and the swastikas, Gershuni undermined God's glory after Auschwitz. The same may apply to the 1988 work *And Where Are All the Jews?* in which he inscribed this horrifying question on a ceramic plate. Gershuni's later works, such as the 1995 *All-Merciful God*, with dark eye sockets next to the line from the Kaddish prayer, were similarly perceived as a lamentation.

Analyzing the barometer of responses, it is interesting to ask why Gershuni was accepted, even embraced, by the Israeli art world, without stirring up any antagonism on the part of the so-called "Holocaust protectors," despite his breaking of the taboo, and despite the distinct Jewish motifs, the discussion of Diaspora, and the use of Yiddish. The key to acceptance appears to be to find the right dose of sentimentality, complexity, and concept. In Gershuni's case, it helped that his work was not exactly "about the Holocaust," that it was intellectually layered, and, most importantly, that it was congruent with the spirit of the times. The change in Gershuni's work occurred at the right place at the right time: He reflected the values of the Israeli elite, representing the

intellectual bon ton of the early 1980s.(25)

### **Joshua Neustein: Total Denial**

Another response (in this case from the artist's point of view) is that of denial. ***Domestic Tranquility, Bne Brak***, a site-specific installation made for the Herzliya Museum of Art by the New York-based Israeli artist Joshua Neustein in 1999 did not provoke any scandal. Moreover, it was never meant to be associated with the Holocaust. It was the fifth project in the series ***Ash Cities***, which Neustein, a Polish-born survivor, started in 1996.(26)

***Domestic Tranquility, Bne Brak*** was composed of ten tons of powdery moist ashes which covered the three-hundred-square-meter museum floor as a relief, forming a map of the orthodox city of Bne Brak, with all its streets and prominent ***yeshivas***. The scale was such that it allowed viewers to walk through the city streets. A large crystal chandelier was suspended from the ceiling very close to the surface of the relief, and at the entrance was a monitor featuring a video piece in two parts: In the first part, Neustein himself was seen facing a field of sunflowers, reading an excerpt from a speech by President Yitzhak Ben Zvi in Hebrew, Arabic, and English.(27) In the second part, one saw a young woman in modest traditional attire diligently ironing scribbled pieces of paper, possibly those of the speech, bringing to mind the use of "laundered words," namely, euphemisms and, of course, "domestic tranquility."

As mentioned, Neustein's work, powerful and provocative, did not conjure up any demons. According to the artist, it had nothing to do with the Holocaust. I was fascinated by the consistent denial and the "laundered perceptions" Neustein himself enforced on his viewers.(28) After all, the installation was entitled ***Domestic Tranquility, Bne Brak***. Bne Brak is the largest orthodox city in central Israel. It is often compared to the pre-Holocaust ***shtetl*** -the Eastern European Jewish village. Its numerous yeshivas bear the names of Jewish seminaries wiped out in the Holocaust. It is a city where the spoken language is still Yiddish. Neustein introduced a chilling link between a Jewish city made out of ashes, with the chandelier clearly invoking the Jewish-European context. Nonetheless, not a single word in the exhibition's textual material implied any connection with the Holocaust.(29) Only one critic read the work as directly linked to the Holocaust.(30) Other critics, following the artist's lead, preferred to read it as referring primarily to the current state of affairs in Israel, with Bne Brak symbolizing the polarization between the secular and the religious in Israeli society. It is interesting to examine the artist's attempt to shift the reading of his installation from the historical to the political, from the local to the universal. In one of our recent (virtual) discussions, Neustein wrote to me:

*Reading ***Shlom Bayit Bne Brak*** as a Holocaust piece would defeat the*

*purpose of the installation that addresses current traumas and not history and memory. I am a supporter of Adorno's famous dictum. In a sense I am "anti-memorialist." . . . There is nothing in my lexicon that has privileged insight into the Shoa. Shoa has a rightful place in the study of history, sociology, politics and other disciplines. I do not make Shoa art, it is not do-able.*

This attitude reflects the reluctance of Israeli artists to be associated with the label "Holocaust art" as well as their desire to speak in universal terms.

### **Natan Nuchi: Voluntary Exclusion**

One who has entirely excluded himself from the canon of Israeli art, consciously and voluntarily, is Natan Nuchi - one of the few artists who has dared look at Holocaust representation straight in the eye, dealing with the subject in a direct, refined manner long before such discussion was possible. Nuchi was born on Moshav Nahallal in the Jezereel Valley and left Israel for the United States in 1969, when he was seventeen. He currently lives and works in New York. He is a quintessential second-generation artist. Observing his paintings from 1986 to 1994, one cannot misread the image, the theme, and the context - elongated nude figures, Giacomettian, as though hovering in midair, floating in thick dark space like ghosts, like *Muselmann*. These are meditative works calling upon the viewer to keep silent in the presence of a single central image - that which is left of the human figure: skin and bones.

In 1994 Nuchi wrote about the significance of the Holocaust in his work: *The Holocaust meant for me an authentic, primal realm, that as a subject matter for art defied prevalent trends of ironical and tongue in cheek preoccupation with appropriation and inauthenticity. The photographic imagery from the Holocaust seemed to me to be among the most extreme in the pool of images that exist in our culture . . . and although with the passage of time these photographs tend to lose their power to move us, my position as an artist is that images of human suffering are still the truest, most enduring and most honorable approach to the Holocaust in art. . . . The large scale image of the single naked . . . white skinned powerless male goes against consumerist and capitalistic ideals of optimism, and activism. . . . Mortality, vulnerability and being victimized are either repressed or kept in low profile, and can be generally tolerated in the art of this society, only if the aesthetic pleasure, such as metaphor, beauty, form, richness of texture and material etc. can surpass the harshness and pain of the subject matter.(31)*

In 1997 Nuchi radically changed his artistic direction. In a project entitled *The Holocaust and the Market*, he expressed his discontent with the commercialized marketing of the Holocaust.(32) The installation consisted of two walls covered with photographs of book and video covers dealing with the Holocaust found in major book and video chainstores in New York. Along the

wall, on a real shelf, the artist placed authentic photographs of the piles of corpses documented by the camera of an American soldier in Buchenwald. Through this juxtaposition, Nuchi strove to confront representations of the Holocaust at the national level in museums and official memorial sites and representations of the Holocaust on the market.

According to Nuchi, photographs depicting heaps of corpses and mass executions are immediately identified as belonging to the Holocaust; however, none of them appear on the book covers. They are usually concealed in the inner pages, if included at all. The competition for the consumer's attention and pocketbook transforms the book covers into ads designed to seduce the consumer. A book cover with the word Auschwitz written in elongated, embossed golden letters against a black background is as seductive as a pretty box of chocolates.(33) The typography and design are subordinate to the same marketing terms, the same advertising language and consumer ideology as other commodities on the market. The harsh images violate the rules of the marketplace and are perceived as emotional extortion, invasion of privacy, contempt of suffering, kitsch, or pornography.(34) The Holocaust has become yet another subject among other subject matters (Holocaust, sports, cookery, business), without any hierarchy of importance, or yet another holocaust among other holocausts, all equally significant those of the Cambodians, the Armenians, the Gypsies, the homosexuals, the Jews, the Aztecs.”(35) Thus, to each of the two groups of photographs, Nuchi added a title, a label, as in a library index: The Holocaust as merchandise / The Holocaust for the middle class / The Holocaust for the rich / The Holocaust on sale / The Holocaust as best seller / The Holocaust as Oscar winner, and so on.

Nuchi's social critique escalated to such great anger and discontent that he himself crossed the line toward the very tactics of “ironic play and intellectual witticism” he had dubbed inappropriate. This is especially evident in his recent work, *The Holocaust in Hollywood*, 2000, in which he replaced the well-known Hollywood sign with a Holocaust sign. The underlying idea is that the capitalistic filter has transformed the Holocaust into the story of the individual fitting into the pattern of Hollywood action movies in which the individual triumphs against all odds. According to the capitalist myth, with initiative, effort, and a little bit of luck, anyone can become a millionaire. This formula is applied to survivors' stories too, as in Spiegelman's comics series *Maus* and Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. In both cases, the survivors, the story's protagonists, endure against all odds, while everyone around them dies.(36)

### **Arbeit Macht Frei: Contradictory Responses**

I would like to conclude this discussion with the convention-breaking theater performance *Arbeit Macht Frei from Toitland Europe* by the Acre

Experimental Theater Group, which was an extreme case of contradictory responses. More than any other artistic project, *Arbeit Macht Frei* is one of the most powerful experiences offered by Israeli culture in recent years,(37)conjuring up old demons.

It is a multimedia production that took three years of preparation, and is performed by a group of actors directed by David Ma'ayan - a five-hour performance without a script, based on the personal experiences and life histories of each of the actors. It is an overwhelming event, during which the audience participates, is led through narrow corridors, crowding into suffocating rooms and eating dinner.(38)

It begins with a visit to the Ghetto Fighters' Museum, a memorial museum on Kibbutz Lohamei Hageta'ot (Ghetto Fighters' Kibbutz) established by Holocaust survivors after the war. The participants are taken on a ride in a tourist bus, accompanied by an actress-soldier (from the "memory corps"). The leading characters in the scene are Zelma and Chalid, who guide the viewers on this museum visit. Zelma (actress Smadar Ya'aron), represents the victim, the one whose memory was excluded from Zionist discourse. In broken language, she comments on the exhibits in the museum, guiding the viewer toward new insights, as when she analyzes Fascist aesthetics or presents photographs of the ghetto, and asks the audience about other present-day ghettos. Later on Zelma is replaced by Chalid (actor Chalid Abu Ali), who guides the visitors on their tour of a miniaturized model of Treblinka. Chalid provides a meticulous explanation of the extermination procedure. The Palestinian actor's identification with the suffering of the Jews challenges the Zionist monopoly over the memory of the Holocaust. Chalid's participation in the ritual of remembrance furnishes it with an added significance, providing the viewer with a new perspective on various aspects of Israeli reality.

One of the outstanding parts of the performance, back in the theater halls, is the piano piece played by the same Zelma from the museum, now playing the role of a Holocaust survivor who raises her son, Moni, to be a living torch to Holocaust memory. In one scene she tries to trace the structure of German and Hebrew popular songs and children's songs. In a chilling manner, she demonstrates the psychosis of nationalism both in Germany and in Israel. Later the event evolves into a multimedia spectacle linking the commemoration ceremonies familiar to every Israeli with other ritual events associated with Independence Day celebrations and the Arab-Israeli conflict. The well-known narrative of Holocaust-heroism-revival is shattered. In the final climax Zelma and Chalid unite into a single memory, first in a torture scene where Chalid is riding a torture apparatus while one of the women from the audience is whipping him, and later in a moving Pieta-like scene.

***Arbeit Macht Frei*** offers no single clear message, but rather introduces new ways of discussing the Holocaust as the most important factor shaping Zionist consciousness, as the root of our national neurosis. It demonstrates the paranoia fostered on the Israeli public, the cynical abuse of the Holocaust, and the moral permission it ostensibly gives us to abuse others. It criticizes the Holocaust industry, the obsessive memorization, and the imperative to remember, and discusses the danger of transforming preoccupation with the Holocaust into a ritualistic substitute.

Back to the “barometer of responses,” ***Arbeit Macht Frei*** injected a new argument into the discourse: The play received the first prize in the Acre Festival and won sweeping acclaim, superlatives that have not been heard for years in the Israeli press. Public debate was triggered only when the group was invited to the Berlin Festival. The Ministry of Education, which also supported the theater financially, voiced its reservations about going to Berlin. This in turn triggered a wave of responses in the press. The usual voices were heard, such as: “Why air our dirty laundry in public, let alone in Germany!” The main argument was that we must appear “united” in a foreign setting. “The Germans will feast on it. It will clear their conscience.” In other words, never mind such offensive talk at home, but why outside? In front of the Gentiles? Particularly the Germans? Most controversial was the association made in the play between the Holocaust and the ongoing conflict with the Arabs: “Why does the naked Jewish woman have to caress a naked Arab against the backdrop of television sets blasting Independence Day songs?” As I understand they wanted to torture us, but there is a limit.”(39)

In conclusion, the projects, works, and cases presented here (and many others which I could not include in the confines of this essay) reflect the intricate discourse revolving around the manner in which the Holocaust is presented in Israeli art, introducing new ways of discussing the Holocaust as our national neurosis. These works raise questions about the lessons of the Holocaust: how does it happen that instead of learning the lesson of human love and the struggle against racism and nationalism, the opposite lessons are drawn? The dynamic barometer of responses highlights the problematic nature of these grave issues in Israel. What is accepted? What is rejected? What constitutes the limit? Where exactly does one draw the line?

## Notes

"Don't Touch My Holocaust," the title of this paper, is drawn from a documentary by Israeli filmmaker Asher Tlalim about *Arbeit Macht Frei*, a theater performance by the Acre Experimental Theater Group.

1. Yosef Lapid, "Museum Stupidity," *Ma'ariv*, January 19, 1997.
2. Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, "Representing Auschwitz," *History and Memory* 7, no. 2 (winter 1995): 121.
3. For example, all the streets in my neighborhood, bear the names of Jewish communities that were annihilated in Europe: Lodz Community Street, Warsaw Community Street, and so on.
4. The concept of the "perpetual victim" and the famous mantra "the whole world is against us" were fostered by the Zionist ethos and became a common cliché. Sitting with my family in my parents' home on the eve of Holocaust Remembrance Day, after watching a videotaped interview about my mother's life in Hungary during the war (produced by the Spielberg Archive), I realized that the message she wished to convey to her children and grandchildren was "Keep this country safe, don't let it happen again." For a profound discussion of the instrumentalization of the Holocaust in Israeli rhetoric, see Moshe Zuckermann, "On Anxiety in Israeli Political Culture," in *Anxiety* (Ramat Gan: Museum of Israeli Art, 1994): 77-81.
5. In this context I would like to clarify my use of the term "canonical art." There is a distinct hierarchy within the Israeli art world: two major museums, a single professional art magazine, and a handful of theoreticians and scholars outline the discourse's boundaries. Although Holocaust representations have been present in Israeli art throughout the years, they were excluded from the canon and considered inferior. The reasons why certain voices were silenced while others were encouraged are addressed later in this essay.
6. This essay does not purport to be a historical overview; rather, it is an attempt to clarify some basic concepts related to the current Holocaust discourse in Israel. For a comprehensive and current discussion of the subject, see Dalia Manor, "From Rejection to Recognition: Israeli Art and the Holocaust," *Israel Affairs* 4, nos. 3 and 4 (spring-summer 1998): 253-77. See also Roe Rosen, "The Visibility and Invisibility of Trauma: On Traces of the Holocaust in the Work of Moshe Gershuni and in Israeli Art" (in Hebrew), *Studio Art Magazine* 76 (October-November 1996): 44-62, and Sarit Shapira, "Scorched Link," in the catalog *Burnt Whole: Contemporary Artists Reflect upon the Holocaust*, curated by Karen Holtzman (Washington, D.C.: Washington Project for the Arts, 1994): 3-7.
7. For his major publication on the Holocaust in public rhetoric during the Gulf War, see Moshe Zuckermann, *Shoah Baheder Ha-atum: Ha-"shoah" Ba-itonut Ha-israelit Bi-tekufat Milhemet Ha-mifratz* (Shoah in the Sealed Room: The "Holocaust" in the Israeli Press during the Gulf War) (Tel Aviv: n.p., 1993).
8. Moshe Zuckermann, "Steven Spielberg: There Were No Rehearsals in the Death Camps" (in Hebrew), *Shishi Tikshoret/Tarbut*, February 16, 1996, 16-17.
9. On the dangers of nurturing the Holocaust myth, see Adi Ophir's essay, chapter 9 in this volume.
10. Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, "Exile within Sovereignty: Toward a Critique of the 'Negation of Exile' in Israeli Culture (Part II)" (in Hebrew), *Teoria U-vikoret* (Theory and Criticism) 5 (fall 1994): 113-32.
11. In the historiography and criticism of Israeli art, there is another approach discussing, not the absence, but the presence, albeit implicit and subliminal, of the Holocaust in Israeli art. According to this approach, high-quality works of art created in Israel "infiltrated" the black hole of the Holocaust in spirit and atmosphere, rather than in specific images or metaphors. For this interpretation, see Shapira, "Scorched Link," 3-7.
12. For a comprehensive analysis of the exclusion of the Holocaust from the "modern" discourse, see Manor, "From Rejection to Recognition," 256.
13. There were certain Israeli artists who dealt with the theme of the Holocaust in their works even before the early 1980s. One of them is Yocheved Weinfeld, a second-generation artist, who in the late 1970s was the first to present feminist-oriented works saturated with Holocaust memories and Jewish identity. At that time her work was not interpreted as Holocaust-oriented, but rather as a radical feminist statement. Art historian and scholar Gannit Ankori was the first to take the "politically incorrect" direction, maintaining that "anything that smacked of the Eastern European Jewish Diaspora was considered regressive, virtually taboo." For a further discussion of Weinfeld's work, see Gannit Ankori, "Yocheved Weinfeld's Portraits of the Self," *Woman's Art Journal* (spring-summer 1989): 22-27. On the gradual process of acceptance and legitimacy of the Holocaust as subject matter, see Manor, "From Rejection to Recognition," especially 274 n. 18.
14. For Holocaust Memorial Day in April 2000, a group of young people conceived of a commemoration ceremony of their own as an alternative to the formal institutional ceremonies. The youngsters' need to create and constitute for themselves new, more critical, and more open frameworks for understanding the Holocaust and the very feasibility of such ceremonies indicate the extent and scope of recent change.
15. Ziva Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation: The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1993).

16. For this and other calculations, see Manor, "From Rejection to Recognition," especially 273 n. 2.
17. Haim Dasberg, quoted in Yehuda Koren, "What's Wrong with This Picture?" (in Hebrew), *Yediot Ahronot*, January 17, 1997.
18. Ram Katzir, for instance, had to harness his "license" and that of the other "license holders," who assisted him on his project, when responding to the scandal created by his work: "Whoever thought this exhibition was a joke or a prank is very much mistaken, and this mistake offends me, insults the memory of my family members who perished in the Holocaust, and deeply hurts the feelings of many survivors who live in this country. During the work on the project I sought the assistance of dozens of survivors, historians and propaganda researchers." See Ram Katzir, "Who Refuses to Look?" (in Hebrew), *Kol Ha'ir*, January 24, 1997.
19. Public debate was recently provoked by a study that set out to prove that Roberto Benigni's film *Life Is Beautiful* is a quintessential anti-Semitic movie. This debate touched upon the question of whether a non-Jewish artist has the right to deal with the Holocaust. See Kobi Niv, *Life Is Beautiful, but Not for Jews* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: N. B. Books, 2000).
20. A notable case where a possibly inappropriate analogy was made occurred when London-based Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum exhibited a work made of bars of Nablus soap in the East Jerusalem Anadil Gallery. Nablus is known throughout the Arab world for its olive oil soap industry, and the most self-evident reference here was to Palestinian history. Still, Jewish Israelis who saw the work could not avoid making associations with the Holocaust.
21. For a comprehensive review of Shimon Attie's work, see Norman L. Kleeblatt, "Persistence of Memory," *Art in America* 88, no. 5 (June 2000): 97-103.
22. A totally different case is that of Christian Boltanski, whose works were shown at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem as part of the permanent collection in the International Art section for many years. Boltanski, the most celebrated contemporary artist whose oeuvre deals with the Holocaust, was embraced by the Israeli art community because his work alludes to the Holocaust in a nonspecific way and is universal in nature.
23. Moshe Gershuni, *Kav* 4/5 (November 1982): 18 (in Hebrew), as quoted in Manor, "From Rejection to Recognition," 263.
24. For a further discussion of Gershuni's Holocaust-related images, see Manor, "From Rejection to Recognition," 263-64; and Rosen, "The Visibility and Invisibility of Trauma," 45-51.
25. The popularity of German Neo-Expressionism, the yearning for authenticity, and the search for identity underlay the metamorphosis in Gershuni's work in the early 1980s. For a further explanation, see Rosen, "The Visibility and Invisibility of Trauma," 45.
26. The four previous *Ash Cities* were *Light on the Ashes*, at Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA), Winston-Salem, North Carolina, 1996; Ash-Map of Poland and Germany, *Geographiestunde*, at Gropius Bau, Berlin, 1997; Ash-Map of Warsaw and the Wisla, *Polish Forests and Other Drawings*, at Zacheta National Gallery of Contemporary Art, Warsaw, Poland, 1998; and *River of Ashes*, Center for Contemporary Art, Cleveland, Ohio, 1998.
27. The speech, calling for brotherhood between different ethnic groups in Israel, was delivered by Yitzhak Ben Zvi in 1953 and appears on the 100 shekel notes.
28. In 1969, two years after the Six-Day War, Neustein presented an installation consisting of 17,000 pairs of boots piled in heaps at the Jerusalem Artists' House. They were Arab soldiers' boots bought from a merchant in the Occupied Territories. This project, undertaken in collaboration with Georgette Battle and Gerry Marx, was perceived as dealing with "the idea of displacement, of removal, transmission and migration" and vehemently denied any affinity or even the slightest association with the Holocaust. See Amnon Barzel as quoted in the catalog *Joshua Neustein: Polish Forests and Other Drawings* (Warsaw: National Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zacheta, 1997), 76. Nevertheless, the exhibition was closed down because it was considered offensive to Holocaust survivors.
29. Wendy Shafir, ed., *Joshua Neustein: Five Ash Cities*, with essays by Arthur C. Danto, Hilary Putnam, and Kristine Stiles (Herzliya: Herzliya Museum of Art; Chicago: Olive Production and Publishing, 2000).
30. Smadar Sheffi, "The Center Is Shifting North" (in Hebrew), *Ha'aretz*, February 17, 2000, 3.
31. These quotes are drawn from an unpublished work by Natan Nuchi, "Statement about the Relation of My Work to the Holocaust," August 1994.
32. The installation was created for *Y-ZKOR: Shoah and Memory in Art*, a group exhibition (Ami Steinitz, curator) at Ami Steinitz Gallery, Tel Aviv, March-April 1997.
33. Paraphrase of an excerpt from an unpublished work by Natan Nuchi, "The Holocaust and the Market," 1997.
34. Ibid. Nuchi alluded to Susan Sontag, who wrote, "The display of atrocity in the form of photographic evidence risks being

tacitly pornographic." See Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1980), 139.

35. Nuchi, "The Holocaust and the Market."

36. Ibid. Historian Moshe Zuckermann also refers to the commercialization of the Holocaust, yet he questions the efficacy of "high art" (such as the "scientific knowledge or meticulous documentation à la Lanzmann's Shoah") in dealing with the memory of the Holocaust vis-à-vis patterns of oblivion and natural processes of forgetfulness. See Zuckermann, "There Were No Rehearsals in the Death Camps," 17.

37. *Arbeit Macht Frei from Toitland Europe* by the Acre Experimental Theater Group was presented in Acre between 1993 and 1996.

38. The following description of *Arbeit Macht Frei* is based on Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin's luminous analysis in "Exile within Sovereignty," 122-24.

39. For this and other responses, see Sarit Fuchs, "On the Ongoing Public Debate concerning *Arbeit Macht Frei* Traveling to Berlin," *Ma'ariv*, January 1992.

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