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Polish Art of/on/in the Shadow of the Holocaust

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Abstract

In this text, I will reflect on how Polish art history can better account for work made during the Holocaust or addressing this historical event. This article explores the profound problem still troubling Poland's "out of joint" art history by virtue of its resistance to truly reckoning with the Holocaust of the Jews. Our discipline's established categories and methodologies still fail to properly acknowledge the Holocaust's impact on the development of modern art. I therefore make an appeal for rewriting the history of modern art in the region anew, this time centering the Holocaust and other traumas associated with the war. After all, it was not formal impulses that catalyzed major turning points in art, but rather, the traumas and shock of the Holocaust, the absence that came in its wake, and the suppression of its memory. Hence the need to devise a new epistemological framework and to generate new research that will take as its point of departure what Luiza Nader has described as the "suffering and pain of the other, Polish society's entanglement with the Holocaust, post-war anti-Semitism and 'neutralized' anti-Semitism." [56]

To arrive at such a framework, we need to fundamentally revise the categories embedded in modern art history and the periodization perpetuated by publications and textbooks. The first step must be to dismantle the myth that art about the Holocaust "was woefully misguided." Next, we must overcome one of modern art history's most entrenched paradigms, namely that which divides twentieth-century art into the avant-garde and everything else. The third and final step is to interrogate the established chronology of Polish art history and its watershed years: 1945, 1955, 1989.

[56] Nader, *Afekt Strzemińskiego*, 364.

In this text I will reflect on how Polish art history can better account for work made during the Holocaust or addressing this historical event. In 2010, I diagnosed Polish art historical discourse as being "out of joint"¹ by virtue of its reluctance to place the genocide of the Jewish people at the center of its thematic concerns, or to reckon with this event's impact on the trajectory of modern art. I believe this problem is no less pressing today. For these reasons, the history of modern art within the region needs to be written anew, this time centering the Holocaust and other traumas associated with the war. After all, it was not formal impulses that catalyzed major turning points in art, but rather the traumas and shock of the Holocaust, the absence that came in its wake, and the suppression of its memory. As Luiza Nader has written, "to date, art history in Poland has not yet

reevaluated its concepts, structures, paradigms, hierarchies of value and periodization to thoroughly account for the Holocaust (...).”²

What is needed is therefore a new epistemological framework³ that would recognize the Holocaust as a pivotal event for the development of Polish art in the mid-to-late 20th century. My claim is this: to arrive at such a framework, we need to fundamentally revise the categories embedded in modern art history as well as the periodization perpetuated by scholarship and textbooks. The first step is to dismantle the myth that art about the Holocaust was “woefully misguided,”⁴ something which was gradually seeded and reinforced by publications that attempt to qualitatively evaluate such work. Next, we must reject one of modern art history’s most entrenched paradigms, namely that which divides twentieth-century art into the avant-garde and everything else. The third and final step is to interrogate the established chronology of Polish art history together with its ratified watershed years: 1945, 1955, and 1989.

Existing terminology also needs scrutiny. What concepts should we use to discuss art made during World War II and the Holocaust, and in the years or decades that followed? How might we describe contemporary art that refers back to this historical event? Should we speak of art “of or from the Holocaust, or perhaps art in the face of the Holocaust?”⁵ Or maybe we should say art about the Holocaust, or in the shadow of the Holocaust?

The underestimation of the Holocaust’s impact on Polish art is the result of many factors, such as avoidance of the event in art historical discourse. Books on Polish post-war art written during the socialist period make scarce reference to the Shoah, relying instead on turns of phrase like “times of contempt,” “the nightmare of occupation,”⁶ “the cataclysmic Second World War,” “the wartime pogrom,”⁷ “psychological and moral devastations” and “Nazi dehumanization.”⁸ Yet even during the war and in the years that followed, there was no shortage of art that expressed the specific hardships of the Jewish people by depicting the liquidation of ghettos or marking the disappearance of Jewish Poles in other ways. These works, however, were, for the most part, passed over in silence. This silence can be attributed to the communist regime’s manipulation of the memory of the Holocaust⁹ and perhaps also to the growing aversion to Jews and Jewishness that continues to haunt Polish society today.

The dominant attitude in scholarship (and one that is still reinforced in contemporary research) suggests that most art made during the war “clings to traditional conventions and fails to express more than banal pathos.”¹⁰ Added to this is the pervasive sentiment, mentioned above, that art responding directly to wartime atrocities was “woefully misguided.” Despite these judgments, we can identify several examples of Polish art from the post-war avant-garde, and even by those who did not self-affiliate with the avant-garde, that are moving, distressful and profound responses to

the war and the Holocaust. Work made in captivity in the camps as appeals for human dignity still retain the power to profoundly move the viewer today. Yet despite all this, work made before 1945 in concentration camps and related environments has been largely passed over by scholarship.¹¹

Absence

A second problem to be addressed is the lack of attention to artists' backgrounds. The complex Polish-Jewish identities of many assimilated artists (such as Alina Szapocznikow) have never been properly reckoned with. Nor is there mention of the disappearance of so many Jewish artists from the Polish art scene. World War II disrupted the careers of so many artists who had been active in the interwar period. In 1939, a vast number of Jewish artists in German-occupied territories were resettled into ghettos and subsequently, between 1942–44, into concentration or death camps. I name here only a few of the many who died in the camps: Aleksander Riemer, Artur Klahr, Fryc Kleinman, Henryk Langerman, Józef Malerman, Henryk Selzer, and Mojżesz Rynecki. Stanisław Osostowicz, who was part of the Cracow Group, was killed during the bombardment of Warsaw in September of 1929, while Szymon Piasecki, another artist associated with the group, enlisted in the Soviet Army and died on the front. On November 16 of 1942, in a retaliatory action following the shooting of a Gestapo officer, Bruno Schulz was shot and killed. During the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943, Gela Seksztajn, who had made drawings of ghetto life, was killed.

Some artists survived the Holocaust by leaving Poland before the outbreak of the war, often settling in France (such as Mela Muter, Ludwik Lille, Henryk Berlewi and, from the Cracow Group, Sasza Blonder and Berta Grünberg). Others moved to England (Jankiel Adler, Marek Szwarc, Henrk Gotlib and Franciszka and Stefan Themerson) or to the United States (such as Zygmunt Menkes and Icchak Lichtenstein). Still others, who found themselves in Red Army-occupied areas, were resettled into deeper regions of the Soviet Union. The artists who lived out the war there include: Mieczysław Berman, Mojżesz Boruszek, Maurycy Bromberg, Józef Fajngold, Tomasz Gleb, Chaim Goldberg, Karol Piasecki, Leon Lewkowicz, Hanka Lewkowiczówna, Marek Oberländer, Natan Rapaport, and Dorota Szenfeld. Some artists who survived the war in the West or in Russia never returned to Poland.

A significant number of artists, like Jonasz Stern, Alina Szapocznikow, Izaak Celnikier, Halina Ołomucka, Sara Gorszejn, and Sara Gliksman, survived the nightmare of the ghettos and camps, where they lived face to face with death. Others, like Henryk Streng/Marek Włodarski, Erna Rosenstein and Stefan Artur Nacht-Samborski, survived by hiding or by changing their surnames and procuring new identification papers. Most of those who lived out the war in “Aryan areas” were assimilated artists, such as: Henryk Kuna, Elżbieta Hirszbeżanka (Malinowska), Zofia Woźna (Bella Lesser), Maria Gross, Ida Brauner-Wohlman (Wolnan) and Henryk Ehrmann.¹² The

circumstances facing non-Jewish Poles were less dire, for they were not the first demographic group slated for extermination. However, they too felt the impact of the Holocaust and the brutality of war. Some of them were sent to concentration camps, where many were killed or traumatized.

We must take full measure of how the Holocaust and war transformed the map of Polish art, given the staggering numbers of pre-war artists who were killed or fled the country. The Jewish artists who survived and remained in Poland were scarce. Those who did stay had to contend with a profound void in the place of the community they had lost.¹³ A portion of these survivors eventually left Poland due to an atmosphere of mounting anti-Semitism. From 1956–58, the following artists were among those who emigrated: Izaak Celnikier, Henryk Hechtkopf, Sara Gliksmanowa, Szejna Efron-Szenkman, Chaim Goldberg and Leon Engelsberg.¹⁴ The many Jewish artists who were killed or who emigrated left behind a void, an absence, a lack. This is yet another dynamic that needs to be processed: scholarship needs to reckon with why so little survived of the interwar period's diverse multicultural landscape.

Due to the gravity of the ethical catastrophe of World War II and the Holocaust, many artists who survived the war chose silence as a means to forget about their traumas. Others took up the task of attesting to the atrocities they had witnessed. However, the political transformations that followed the war significantly delayed the process of heeding these artists' testimonies, so many of which have been interpreted belatedly in the present day.¹⁵

It seems imperative to first remember who these artists were and to undo the persistent erasure of so many artists' Jewish backgrounds. On the other hand, it is also important to avoid categorically distinguishing the artists of these testimonies on account of their family history. As Jarosław Suchan writes in his introduction to the volume *Polak, Żyd, artysta. Tożsamość a awangarda* [Pole, Jew, Artist: Identity and the avant-garde], what is needed is not to belabor the details of "who was and was not Jewish. The dangers and problematic implications of this stigmatizing maneuver need not be reiterated."¹⁶ Rather, we need to take account of how Jewish experiences were expressed and reflected in art. We should also remember that several artists of Jewish background identified as Poles and situated their work in the domains of Polish, international or global art. This is particularly true of artists of the avant-garde such as Henryk Berlewi and Teresa Żarnower.¹⁷

In the interwar period, several organizations worked actively to promote and support the work of Jewish artists (examples include the Association of Jewish Artists in Poland based in Warsaw, the Association of Jewish Painters and Sculptors in Cracow, and the Jewish Association for Promoting the Fine Arts in Warsaw).¹⁸ Artist groups were also active in Lodz, Vilnius, Lviv and Białystok. In 1919 in Lodz, the literary art group Jung Idysz [Young Yiddish] was founded by Mojżesz Broderson, who was joined by artists like Marek Szwarc, Jankiel Adler, Wincenty Brauner and

Henryk Barciński.¹⁹ A related group, Jung Wilne, was founded in Vilnius in 1927 by painters such as Benicjon Michtom, Rachela Suckewer, Szejna Efron, Lejb Zameczek and Rafael Chwoles.²⁰

These groups worked to make space for Jewish art on the cultural scene and to reinforce its connection to the broader Jewish cultural tradition. We must remember, however, that Jewish artists in Poland hardly constituted an ideologically homogenous scene, for artists subscribed to both leftist and nationalist programs (mainly Zionism and Yiddishism). Jung Vilne was oriented toward Yiddishism and worked to preserve continuities with the Jewish cultural tradition of East Central Europe while maintaining an anti-Zionist and leftist stance. Of the Jewish artists active in the Second Polish Republic—a number exceeding 500—most participated in the Jewish and Polish cultural scenes nonexclusively.²¹ Of the artists associated with the Jewish avant-garde who contemplated Jewish nationalist art in the wake of World War I, many combined Hasidic and Jewish symbolism with expressionist forms. As early as 1921, in good part thanks to El Lissitzky's visit to Warsaw, several of these artists embraced the new paradigm of cosmopolitan art and aesthetic themes that pervaded art movements throughout Europe.²²

With all this in mind it is difficult to identify any singular tendency that might confirm the distinctness of Jewish art. We therefore need to be critical of all attempts to group artists together under reductive identities. After all, it was the Nazis who asserted the precedence of bloodline and descent, while the majority of Polish artists making work about the Holocaust (Jewish and ethnically Polish alike) were reluctant to define their identities by ethnic criteria. Some, like Marek Szwarc, called themselves Catholic Jews, while the majority of those associated with the avant-garde were non-orthodox Jews.

When we discuss Polish art of the Holocaust, we must therefore be cautious in our usage of ethnic (or religious) categories. Most importantly, we should investigate how Polish artists that were Jewish, Christian and atheist all responded to this intersectional subject and gave in to the need to create—a need that was blind to ethnic and religious boundaries.

The Need to Create “In Spite of All.”

While the war disrupted so many artistic careers, it did not put an end to artistic activity altogether. Art was made in ghettos, camps and prisons. In fact, it was precisely in these inhumane conditions that some were first initiated into the world of art. In captivity, artists absorbed and recorded their surroundings. They made portraits of fellow prisoners, keepsakes, and other decorative objects. They did this to preserve the memory of these events, but also to leave behind testimonies, and even to allow themselves a moment of solace—an escape from the reality of the camps. Art was a way to endure and protect one's humanity.

Here we must pause to avoid reductively identifying art from the camps with art of the Holocaust, or assuming that the collections of museums at former camps refer exclusively to the Shoah. It is important to clarify that art of the camps is not necessarily art that depicts the Holocaust directly. Rather, its primary aim is to portray the camp environment. This does not imply that the art has no connection to the Holocaust, for it referred to these events through certain motifs or by portraying experiences common to those forced into situations of relentless, life-threatening danger. Undoubtedly, all this work was made in the shadow of the Holocaust. We should also bear in mind that work from this period was typically made in concentration camps (and sometimes prisons) rather than death camps or killing centers. In the camps, art was also commissioned by Nazis (as in the well-known case of the Auschwitz Lagermuseum). Art was also made to document living conditions in the camps to assist resistance efforts.

Work was made by professional and amateur artists alike. Its value need not be measured solely by artistic criteria, for we can also see the work as historical artifacts that speak to the need to create art “in spite of all,”²³ even in conditions of absolute abjection. Artists often adopted an eye-witness point of view as a strategy for retaining the objectivity usually attributed to photography. For the same reason, many used a naturalist idiom in their work. However, their own cultural contexts influenced their work, for most scenes could not be drawn right away, in real time, and were therefore made in hiding, in the barracks, and often under cover of night. As a result, what the artists witnessed firsthand was inevitably then subject to their imaginations.²⁴

While art historians often insist on the categorical discreteness of art, in this case, the claim seems unfounded, for artists were often trying to report on what they had witnessed. Karol Konieczny, who was imprisoned in Buchenwald and died there in 1945, had the following to say about making art in the camps: “My drawings are not made to be analyzed or critiqued as art. Here, the aesthete will find no fodder for his research.”²⁵ Scholarship on this work should therefore disregard modernist fixations on fluency of skill or formal and stylistic perfection, for in the context of work “of, from, and in the face of the Holocaust” (Luiza Nader’s formulation), these metrics are inadequate if not outright inappropriate.²⁶

Moreover, to analyze this art, it becomes necessary to overcome the deeply entrenched binary that separates that which is avant-garde from everything else (e.g., realism, naïve art, art brut, amateur art). In the case of art brut, for instance, Anna Markowska has shown how the mode has been overlooked: “To date, something has prevented us from updating our definition of what qualifies as art to reflect recent lessons from humanism, empathy, and critical thought.”²⁷ Perhaps we are also missing what Luiza Nader, speaking of contemporary Polish art history, refers to as affect, and by extension, a perspective that would come with “the task of listening closely to

silence, pain, death, indifference, anger and hate, which coincides with the challenge of constantly exposing oneself to humiliation and blame, as well as the pursuit of intimacy, care, friendship, a will to live, and solidarity in and through art.”²⁸

For both realist and avant-garde art from during and after Holocaust, the Muselmann is a recurring figure that has come to stand for Auschwitz as a whole. This figure connotes the degradation of both life and death and the abjection of humanity by the Nazi death machine. However, to interpret art about Auschwitz through the lens of the Muselmann, we must first reckon with the work and reception of Giorgio Agamben,²⁹ which introduces a new and encompassing perspective on work made in the camps and later on, including realist work that may seem unrelated to the avant-garde.³⁰ To date, the history of modern art has, for the most part, limited its focus to avant-garde work, which it views positively. This has come at the expense of all other kinds of work, which are deemed unimportant or even unequal to the task of grasping the terror of the Holocaust. Here the phrase “an artistic mistake”³¹ comes to mind.

Post-war artists portrayed this traumatic history from the perspective of those who experienced or witnessed the hell of the camps firsthand. Such works point toward tragic past events and are assigned the function of mourning or grieving those who were killed. It is important to emphasize that some artists, even those associated with the avant-garde, turned away from its stylistic conventions and embraced realism or expressionism, or perhaps combined motifs from different modes.

Post-war Polish art by artists impacted by the nightmare of the camps features recurring figures of nonhuman beings, the undead, human corpses, marionettes, and effigies. Many artists who lived through the camps made no direct reference to them in their work. However, as Marcin Lachowski has argued, this catastrophe still marks their art.³² With the passing of time, some artists were finally able to address the subject by expressing their own harrowing experiences or trying to somehow illustrate the tragedy of the Holocaust. One notable example is Jonasz Stern’s *Pit* from 1964, which directly references the experience of surviving execution. Another interesting case in this regard is a series by Stern devoted to the tragedy of his home village Kalush, made toward the end of his life in 1985 and 1988.

Periodization

Recent scholarship has devoted increasing attention to the Holocaust’s significance for Polish art. Take, for instance, Katarzyna Bojarska’s extensive, landmark article *Obecność Zagłady w twórczości polskich artystów* [The Presence of the Holocaust in Polish Art] available to read on the website of the Adam Mickiewicz Institute.³³ Another valuable contribution is Marcin

Lachowski's *Nowocześni po katastrofie* [Moderns in the Wake of Catastrophe].³⁴ Piotr Piotrowski discusses the war's impact on work by artists like Andrzej Wróblewski and Tadeusz Kantor in *Znaczenia modernizmu. W stronę historii sztuki polskiej po 1945 roku* [Meanings of Modernism Towards a history of Polish Art Post-1945].³⁵ In 2010, my own book *Podróż do przeszłości. Interpretacje najnowszej historii w polskiej sztuce krytycznej* [Journey into the Past: Interpretations of Recent History in Polish Critical Art] was mainly devoted to contemporary art that addresses the Holocaust.³⁶ Jacek Małczyński has written extensively on art with regard to landscapes of the Holocaust.³⁷ Other recent books discuss artists whose work somehow alludes to the Holocaust or can be said to have emerged in its shadow.³⁸

Unfortunately, art history's canonical periodization and conceptual toolkit have not yet been properly interrogated. Certain dates have been enshrined as art historical watersheds, such as 1945 (and sometimes 1944).³⁹ This moment signals the end of World War II and a "clean slate," so to speak, for the post-war Polish art scene. According to the established periodization, there is therefore a conspicuous gap coinciding with the years of the war: 1939–45.⁴⁰ Perhaps as a result, art made in the camps, and the wartime work of avant-garde artists, have been brushed to the side. Another overlooked dynamic consists of commonalities between artists who began to produce artistic testimonies during the occupation (like Władysław Strzemiński), but finished them after the war (one notable example is Felicjan Szczęsny Kowarski's *Ghetto* series, which he began in 1943). Some artists did not revisit their wartime experiences or early artistic efforts from during the war until the last years of their lives (this is true, for instance, of Józef Szajna).

Other milestone dates need scrutiny as well, even the seemingly straightforward interval of years associated with socialist realist doctrine: 1949–55. In the years immediately following the war, there was a great push to rebuild the country and return to normalcy. This was also a period of relative freedom in art, during which many tried to pick up the thread of the avant-garde. This hiatus of relative freedom ended with the imposition of socialist realist doctrine in 1949. These new constraints dismissed the suffering of war victims and instead championed heroism and projected an optimistic vision of socialist reality. What followed was the systematic rejection of all art that did not conform to socialist realist standards. However, this does not mean that artists who witnessed the Holocaust or were impacted by wartime traumas simply ceased to make art that addressed the ghettos or Jewish suffering. Take, for instance, Marek Oberländer's series of lithographs *Nigdy więcej getta* [No More Ghettos] from 1953, Bronisław Wojciech Linke's series *Kamiene krzyczą* [The Stones Cry Out], (1946–56), and the two existing versions of Izaak Celnikier's painting *Getto* [Ghetto] from 1949 and 1955. We should therefore ask: is the caesura of 1949 relevant for the specific grouping of works tied to the Holocaust and war?

The symbolic endpoint of socialist realism is often tied to the 1955 exhibition *Przeciw wojnie – przeciw faszyzmowi* [Against War–Against Fascism], which is often referred to by the name of its host institution “Arsenal.” The show sought to demonstrate that socialist realist optimism was an artificially imposed fantasy, and that its conventional themes did not correlate to artists’ actual interests and needs. According to most scholarship, the show was dominated by wartime traumas to a fault. Scholars have therefore downplayed its impact by virtue of its apparent lack of avant-garde elements.⁴¹ The exhibition included works by Marek Oberländer, Andrzej Wróblewski, Izaak Celnikier, Jerzy Cwiertnia, Jan Dziędziora, Tomasz Gleb, Barbara Jonscher, Teresa Mellerowicz, and Jerzy Potrzebowski among others. Their works were critiqued for their alleged banality, brutal expressionist imagery, and for amounting to little more than painterly journalism. The artists themselves were likened to “barbarians.” Others wrote that the exhibition fixated on settling accounts with the distant [!] years of the war⁴² and used wartime subject matter as a vehicle⁴³ for painterly journalism and for smuggling foreign elements into “our” aesthetic tradition:

An unexpected outbreak of brutal expressionism: a naïve masquerade that tries to portray the cruelties of the war through horrendous ghostlike figures parading from canvas to canvas—figures out of Goya, Nolde or Ensor. To drive home the work’s “purity” of content and status as “pure” anecdote, color has been replaced wholesale with a muddy substance into which all figures, objects, and landscapes are uniformly submerged.⁴⁴

From this description, an image of the abject reality of horror begins to emerge. This horror, which likely stemmed from unprocessed trauma, was something that contemporary critics (or, for that matter, scholars who have written about the show since) were not yet ready or able to comprehend.

And yet, take the words of Mieczysław Porębski, critic and theorist of the Grupa Krakowska [Cracow Group], who was imprisoned in Gross-Rosen during the war: “When one returns from the concentration camp, this is no real return, for it has become clear that the whole world is such a camp. (...) From this world, then, there is no return.”⁴⁵ With these words in mind, Anna Markowska has remarked that modern artists who lived through the horrors of World War II emerged from the war with a feeling of defeat.⁴⁶ Avant-garde formal tendencies were no longer equal to the traumas, memories, and experiences they had gone through. For artists, it was no longer important to maintain one’s position on the very front line of the avant-garde (although for others, like Tadeusz Kantor, this became a kind of obsession—of course, this too can be seen as a kind of “sublimation”). Both variants of optimism—avant-garde and socialist realist—must have seemed alienating. Even the Arsenal show indicates the extent to which artists were still immersed in wartime traumas, sensitive memories, and unfinished grieving over those who had died.

Perhaps this explains why the exhibited work disturbed scholars oriented toward avant-garde optics, who quickly issued accusations of formal regression. Even when relief finally came in the form of a return of the avant-garde, the specters of catastrophe still haunted Polish art (as in the work of Kantor, Szajna and Hasior). In this sense, the Polish avant-garde can be described as paradoxical by virtue of its persistent fixation on the past. Lachowski suggests it was in a state of constant crisis: “Modern art, inscribed with wartime and post-war traumas, does not reflect the scale of wartime experiences so much as it grasped the sense of a post-catastrophe world.”⁴⁷

The next established milestone is 1989, but in this context, this too is subject to doubt. The Holocaust seems to reappear in art of the 1990s and at the beginning of the 21st century. Certain works can be associated with postmemory discourse, deconstructionist thought, and other critical approaches to history. In the 1990s, in Poland but also worldwide, the art world witnessed a resurgence of art about the Holocaust. In many cases, the new work broke with earlier conventions and dismissed the imperative to be “appropriate.”⁴⁸ In place of the pathos of earlier depictions, the constant obligation to be “appropriate,” and the mandate to maintain silence, new work introduced irony and experimentation, often to shocking effect. Some work even had a nihilistic edge (as in the case of Zbigniew Libera’s already iconic work *LEGO: Obóz koncentracyjny* [LEGO: Concentration Camp] from 1996). The primary function of work from this wave was to think critically about memory and the mechanisms by which it is appropriated and institutionalized. While this work used new conventions to portray this subject, this does not mean it retained nothing from earlier paradigms. To the contrary, even this work was a kind of return to the past. For so many critical contemporary artists, the Holocaust continues to be a significant and still unprocessed subject.

These observations all suggest that the Holocaust, along with the war’s other ramifications, disrupt art history’s vision of modern art as a linear progression. Yet even theorists like Porębski, who recognized that the whole world had, in a sense, become a concentration camp, still clung to the notion of art’s autonomy and resisted the idea that art had been tainted by the Holocaust. We might therefore propose that the modern art discourse provided no outlet for articulating trauma or pervasive absence, for the autonomy of art and modernism were enabling myths that preserved the notion that art was safely isolated from the disastrous past. In a sense, in line with Geoffrey H. Hartman’s claim, the memory of the Holocaust resurfaced in a postmodern world.⁴⁹

Conclusion

It seems the case that art of the Holocaust has developed in phases that correspond to the three stages of remembering World War II as outlined by historian Robert Traba.⁵⁰ According to Traba, the years 1944/45–49 were a time of “living memory,” when the memory of the war was still

charged with emotional contact with the traumatic events. The 1950s–70s marked a period of “legalized memory,” which entailed a specific ideological monopoly over memory (one that privileged suffering solely at the hands of Nazi occupants and the ultimate victory of People’s Poland). This process also had a nationalist dimension, for the martyrdom of the Polish nation was elevated at the expense of Jewish victimhood. The period following 1980 witnessed the “reanimation of memory,” and in the 1990s, there was yet another resurgence of interest in the Holocaust that gradually reconstructed the memory of these events.

Art made during and immediately after the war consisted of direct testimonies, expressions of a great anti-humanist calamity, and grief over Holocaust victims. Also present was an acute feeling of absence impossible to articulate. Here it is worth citing Marek Oberländer, who began to make paintings about the Holocaust in the last years of his life: “I had no reason to paint anything other than this. Now, I can rid myself of the nightmare that is destroying my nature and causing me to die every day (together with those I have lost).”⁵¹

As early as 1955, some artists made work that explicitly commented on the plight of the Jewish people, although their efforts often drew criticism, as we have seen in the case of the Arsenal show. Nevertheless, as Michael C. Steinlauf has argued, after 1948 the memory of the Holocaust was systematically suppressed. Władysław Gomułka’s rise to power coincided with mounting nationalist and anti-Semitic sentiments. The “Jewish question” returned in the context of infighting between members of the Polish United Workers’ Party. As a result of rising anti-Semitism, in 1955–57, approximately 27,000 Jews emigrated from Poland, settling mainly in Israel. In those years, the country again lost many Jewish artists, which seemed to finalize an already gaping void. Art history in these years seemed unaware of the genocide of the Jews. The predominance of the avant-garde paradigm stifled artists’ freedom to explicitly express the traumas of the Holocaust. When these traumas did surface, they tended to be obscured or transformed into spectral figures and degraded human forms reminiscent of the Muselmann of the camps.

If we look at later testimonies by artists like Izaak Celnikier and Jonasz Stern or work by artists of the generations following the Holocaust (like Ewa Kuryluk or Krystyna Piotrowska), the term “reanimation of memory” seems to apply. To describe how the memory of the Holocaust has continued to impact later generations, Marianne Hirsch has proposed the term “postmemory.” This refers to a strong and intricate form of memory that need not arise from firsthand experience but is mediated through artistic creation and the imagination. Postmemory is especially relevant for descendants of Holocaust survivors. It refers to events that cast a tragic shadow on the lives of survivors and their offspring from generation to generation. These events are so intense that they overshadow other kinds of memory. At the same time, they will never be fully processed or

comprehended.⁵²

In the Polish context, alongside what we might call postmemory, other narratives emerge that can be described as post-testimonies. This term can describe work that references a particular firsthand experience of the Holocaust—one that still needs to be processed. In Poland, not much time has elapsed since people began speaking of the Holocaust as a unique event that specifically targeted Jews. Still “these issues are not yet obvious for Polish society. On a map of pain and abjection, many would be hard pressed to designate the sites of the Holocaust.”⁵³ Zofia Wóycicka has suggested that our greatest problem may be our unprocessed grief for these victims. This grief was suppressed by the communist regime and expunged from the discourse of public memory, which had a different vision of who the real victims were.⁵⁴ As Jan Błoński wrote in his seminal essay “Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto” [The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto], (1987), there is no such thing as a passive spectator of the Holocaust.⁵⁵ All who came into contact with these crimes were somehow tainted, and this experience needs to be critically worked through. This process began, after great delay, in the 1990s. This subject matter was similarly late to enter Polish art historical discourse. Hence my insistence that rewriting this discourse is essential.

Translated by Eliza Rose

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1. Izabela Kowalczyk, “Zwichnięta historia sztuki? – o pominięciach problematyki żydowskiej w badaniach sztuki polskiej po 1945 roku” [Broken Art History? On the Omission of Jewish Issues in Polish Art History after 1945], *Opposite*, no. 1 (2010). <http://www.opposite.uni.wroc.pl/2010/kowalczyk.htm> (accessed: 03.10.2020). ↩
2. Luiza Nader, *Afekt Strzemińskiego. “Teoria widzenia,” rysunki wojenne, Pamięci przyjaciół—Żydów* [Strzemiński’s Affect: “Theory of Seeing,” Wartime Drawings, In Memory of Friends—Jews] (Warsaw–Łódź: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 2018), 364. ↩
3. Nader, *Afekt Strzemińskiego*. ↩
4. I am paraphrasing Krystyna Czerni’s words from: *Art from Poland 1945–1996*, exh. cat., eds. Jolanta Chrzanowska-Pieńkos et al., trans. Marzena Beata Guzowska et al. (Warsaw: Galeria Sztuki Współczesnej Zachęta, 1997), 259. ↩
5. Luiza Nader, “Polscy obserwatorzy Zagłady. Studium przypadków z zakresu sztuk

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6. Aleksander Wojciechowski, *Młode malarstwo polskie 1944–1974* [Young Polish Painting 1944–1974] (Wrocław, Warsaw, Cracow, Gdansk, Lodz: Zakład Narodowy imienia Ossolińskich, 1983). ↵
 7. Bożena Kowalska, *Polska awangarda malarska. 1945–1980. Szanse i mity* [Polish Avant-Garde Painting (1945–1980): Opportunities and Myths] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1988). ↵
 8. See: Krystyna Czerni, *Nie tylko o sztuce. Rozmowy z profesorem Mieczysławem Porębskim* [Beyond Art: Interviews with Professor Mieczysław Porębski] (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1992), 90, 69. ↵
 9. See: Michael C. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997). ↵
 10. Anda Rottenberg, *Sztuka w Polsce. 1945–2005* [Art in Poland: 1945–2005] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Piotra Marciszuka STENTOR, 2006), 9. ↵
 11. The first publication to deal with art made in the camps is Janina Jaworska’s book “*Nie wszystkich umrę...*” *Twórczość plastyczna Polaków w hitlerowskich więzieniach i obozach koncentracyjnych 1939–1945* [“Not all of me will die...”: Polish Works of Art in Nazi Prisons and Concentration Camps 1939–1945] (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1975), although this book does not analyze the work I mention here. Other scholarship on the subject includes: Jürgen Kaumkötter’s *Śmierć nie ma ostatniego słowa. Sztuka w tragicznych latach 1933–1945* [Death Doesn’t Get the Last Word: Art in the Tragic Years of 1933–1945] (Cracow: MOCNA Muzeum Sztuki Współczesnej w Krakowie, 2015) and Agnieszka Sieradzka’s *Lagermuseum. Muzeum Obozowe w Auschwitz* [Lagermuseum: The Auschwitz Camp Museum] (Cracow: Universitas, 2016). Work made in the ghettos is the subject of recent scholarship, such as Magdalena Tarnowska’s *Artyści żydowscy w Warszawie 1939–1945* [Jewish Artists in Warsaw 1939–1945] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo DiG, 2015). ↵
 12. See: Renata Piątkowska, “Żydowskie życie artystyczne po Zagładzie” [Jewish Artistic Life after the Holocaust], in *Następstwa zagłady Żydów. Polska 1944–2010* [The Aftermath of the Holocaust. Poland 1944–2010], eds. Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska and Feliks Tych (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2012), 342–343. ↵
 13. Magdalena Tarnowska, “Żydowskie środowisko artystyczne w Warszawie w latach 1945–1949” [The Jewish Art Scene in Warsaw (1945–1949)], *Pamiętnik sztuk pięknych*, no. 9 (2015): 34. ↵
 14. Piątkowska, 354. ↵
 15. One notable example is Luiza Nader’s book *Afekt Strzemińskiego. “Teoria widzenia,” rysunki*

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16. Jarosław Suchan, “Polak, Żyd, artysta” [Pole, Jew, Artist], in *Polak, Żyd, artysta. Tożsamość a awangarda* [Pole, Jew, Artist: Identity and the Avant-Garde] (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 2010), 2, 4. ↵
 17. Suchan, 19. ↵
 18. The Polish names of these organizations were: Stowarzyszenie Żydowskich Artystów Plastyków w Polsce, Zrzeszenie Żydowskich Malarzy i Rzeźbiarzy w Krakowie and Żydowskie Towarzystwo Krzewienia Sztuk Pięknych. See Piątkowska, “Żydowskie życie artystyczne...,” 339–341. ↵
 19. See: Jerzy Malinowski, *Grupa “Jung Idysz” i żydowskie środowisko “Nowej Sztuki” w Polsce 1918–1923* [The “Jung Idysz” Group and the Jewish “New Art” Movement in Poland 1918–1923] (Warsaw: Polska Akademia Nauk, Instytut Sztuki, 1987). ↵
 20. Joanna Lisek, *Jung Wilne—żydowska grupa artystyczna* [Yung Vilne: A Yiddish Art Group] (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2005). ↵
 21. Piątkowska, 341. ↵
 22. Jerzy Malinowski, “Awangarda żydowska w Polsce,” in *Polak, Żyd, artysta...*, 28, 29. ↵
 23. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). ↵
 24. Ziva Amishai-Maisels, “The Complexities of Witnessing,” in *After Auschwitz. Responses to the Holocaust in Contemporary Art*, ed. Monica Bohm-Duchen (Sunderland: Northern Centre for Contemporary Art; London: Lund Humphries Publishers, 1995), 31, 32. ↵
 25. Amishai -Maisels, 31. ↵
 26. Nader, *Polscy obserwatorzy Zagłady*, 172. ↵
 27. Anna Markowska, “‘Jakby nie wiedział, że sztuka już istnieje.’ Twórca *art brut* w poszukiwaniu swojego miejsca” [“As if Art Didn’t Exist”: An Art-Brut Artist in Search of his Place], in Anna Markowska, Alicja Klimczak-Dobrzaniecka et al., *Dlaczego malują? Twórczość chorych psychicznie ze zbiorów dr. Andrzeja Janickiego* [Why Do They Paint? Works of Mentally Ill from Dr. Andrzej Janicki’s Collection] (Wrocław: Museum of Architecture, 2015), 9. ↵
 28. Luiza Nader, “Afektywna historia sztuki” [Affective Art History], *Teksty Drugie*, no. 1 (2014): 14–40, manuscript made available by the author. ↵
 29. Giorgio Agamben, *The Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive (Homo Sacer III)*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002). ↵
 30. See: Izabela Kowalczyk, *Podróż do przeszłości. Interpretacje najnowszej historii w polskiej sztuce krytycznej* [Journey into the Past: Interpretations of Recent History in Polish Critical Art] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo SWPS Academica, 2010). ↵

31. See: chapter “Auschwitz versus Auschwitz,” in Piotr Piotrowski, *Sztuka według polityki. Od Melancholii do Pasji* [Art after Politics: From Melancholy to Passion] (Cracow: Universitas, 2007), 127. ↩
32. Marcin Lachowski, *Nowocześni po katastrofie. Sztuka w Polsce w latach 1945–1960* [Moderns in the Wake of Catastrophe: Art in Poland 1945–1960] (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2013). ↩
33. Katarzyna Bojarska, *Obecność Zagłady w twórczości polskich artystów* [The Presence of the Holocaust in Polish Art], Culture.pl, published May 29 2007, http://www.culture.pl/pl/culture/artykuly/es_obecnosc_zaglady (accessed: 01.15.2020). ↩
34. Lachowski. ↩
35. Piotr Piotrowski, *Znaczenia modernizmu. W stronę historii sztuki polskiej po 1945 roku roku* [The Meanings of Modernism: Towards a History of Polish Art Post-1945] (Poznań: REBIS, 1999). ↩
36. Kowalczyk, *Podróż do przeszłości*. ↩
37. Jacek Małczyński, *Krajobrazy Zagłady. Perspektywa historii środowiskowej* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2018). ↩
38. See, for instance: Gilles Rozier, *Mojżesz Broderson. Od Jung Idysz do Araratu* [Mojżesz Broderson: From Jung Idysz to Ararat] (Lodz: Wydawnictwo Hamal, 1999); Dorota Jarecka, Barbara Piwowarska, *Erna Rosenstein. Mogę powtarzać tylko nieświadomie / I Can Repeat Only Unconsciously* (Warsaw: Fundacja Galerii Foksal, 2014); Luiza Nader, *Afekt Strzeмиńskiego...*; Piotr Słodkowski, *Modernizm żydowsko-polski. Henryk Streng/Marek Włodarski a historia sztuki* [Jewish-Polish Modernism: Henryk Streng/Marek Włodarski and Art History] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie, 2019). ↩
39. Wojciechowski. ↩
40. One notable exception is Maria Zientara’s book *Krakowscy artyści i ich sztuka w latach 1939–1945* [Cracow Art and Artists (1939–1945)] (Cracow: Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Krakowa, 2013). ↩
41. Piotrowski, *Znaczenia modernizmu*, 46. ↩
42. Kowalska, 92. ↩
43. Janusz Kęmbowski, *Dzieje sztuki polskiej. Panorama zjawisk od zarania do nowoczesności* [Events in Polish Art: An Overview of Trends from its Origins to Modernity] (Warsaw: Arkady, 1987), 109. ↩
44. Wojciechowski, 57. ↩
45. Krystyna Czerni, *Nie tylko o sztuce. Rozmowy z profesorem Mieczysławem Porębskim*, 51. ↩

46. Anna Markowska, *Sztuka w Krzysztoforach. Między stylem a doświadczeniem* [Art at the Krzysztofor Gallery: Between Style and Experience] (Cracow–Cieszyn: Stowarzyszenie Artystyczne “Grupa Krakowska,” Uniwersytet Śląski Filia w Cieszynie, 2000), 209. ↵
47. Lachowski, 8, 9. ↵
48. Stephen C. Feinstein, “Zbigniew Libera’s Lego Concentration Camp: Iconoclasm in Conceptual Art About the Shoah,” *Other Voices*, vol. 2, no. 1 (February 2000), <http://www.othervoices.org/2.1/feinstein/auschwitz.html> (accessed: 15.05.2020). ↵
49. Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 3. ↵
50. Robert Traba, “Symbole pamięci: II wojna światowa w świadomości zbiorowej Polaków. Szkic do tematu” [Memory Symbols: World War II in the Collective Consciousness of Poles—A First Attempt], *Przegląd Zachodni*, no. 1 (2000): 54. ↵
51. Marek Oberländer, “Notatki ze szpitala” [Hospital Notes], in *Marek Oberländer: wystawa malarstwa 27 X 1997–20 II 1998*, eds. Anna Wrońska and Joanna Stasiak (Warsaw: Galeria In Spe, 1997), 19. Cited in: Piątkowska, “Żydowskie życie artystyczne...,” 358. ↵
52. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 22. ↵
53. Sławomir Buryła, “Prawdy niechciane i potrzeba ich społecznej artykulacji” [Undesirable Truths and Social Articulation], in *Pamięć Shoah: kulturowe reprezentacje i praktyki upamiętnienia* [Memory of the Shoah: Cultural representations and commemorative practices], eds. Tomasz Majewski, Anna Zeidler-Janiszewska and Maja Wójcik (Lodz: Oficyna, 2009), 325. ↵
54. Zofia Wóycicka, *Przerwana żałoba. Polskie spory wokół pamięci nazistowskich obozów koncentracyjnych i zagłady 1944–1950* [Mourning Interrupted: Polish Debates over Nazi Concentration and Death Camps (1944–1950)] (Warsaw: Trio, 2009). ↵
55. See: Jan Błoński, “Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto” [The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto], in Jan Błoński *Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto* (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2008), 30–31. ↵

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