



JEWISH-AMERICAN  
ARTISTS AND THE  
HOLOCAUST

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# Jewish-American Artists and the Holocaust

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limited to making works only about perpetrators, victims, and survivors. Purists might object, but their objections boil down to the following proposition: There is only one way to deal with the Holocaust, and it does not include using it as a point of departure for something else. Artists might respond by saying that more and yet more of the same leads to a creative dead end as well as a removal of the Holocaust from history. That is, it cannot be considered in evolving contexts, especially by people who were born decades after the event and who have no personal memory of it or family connections to it.

Two installations, among others, test these assumptions. *From Adler to Zylber* by Melissa Gould (born in 1958) is a wall installation composed of thirty-four sheets of black-bordered white paper, each three feet square. Each contains a name and an image based on the name. "Tauber," for example, from the German word for "dove," is accompanied by a large bird of prey in whose beak there is a tiny human form. The names comes from a document that she found in a book by Nazi-hunter Serge Klarsfeld, of French Jews sent to Auschwitz in late 1942, which included, by sheer coincidence, her grandfather's name. The circumstances of his death had previously been unknown to the family. So the work in part is a memorial to her grandfather. But it also alludes to the fact that the death of these people could not be mourned properly. But what is the proper way? One way is not to limit the names to their "nameness" but to allow them to be used as points of departure for the artist's imagination, based on source material from textbooks, fairy tales, and encyclopedias. The victims are acknowledged and accorded proper respect, but their names provide a new kind of life in which the creativeness of art becomes a substitute for life itself.<sup>41</sup>

In her *The Anne Frank Project*, composed of two related installations, *Partial Index* (1990–1991) and *A Probability Bordering on a Certainty* (1992–1993), Ellen Rothenberg (born in 1949) found in Anne Frank a surrogate to confront the Holocaust. But she also found in her subject ways to deal with the problematics of choice in difficult circumstances, of identity, and of feminist concerns (fig. 37). And she sought ways to evoke in the viewer multiple responses to both the Holocaust and the varying ideas she brought to the works. The works, then, are not limited to the Holocaust but certainly grow from it.

*Partial Index*, a wooden room about forty by twelve feet, refers to the secret annex in the industrial building where the Franks were hid-

den from 1942 to 1944. Along one of the short walls is a floor-to-ceiling bookcase that recalls the concealed entry to the secret rooms. It is lined with a wallpaper design of photographs of Anne and her sister, Margot. Twelve doors fill the long wall. Inside are reproductions of archival materials that hang from the ceiling, interrupting the viewer's space, implying that documents, of value or not, can either guide or distract. One can also find images of pages from Anne Frank's diary and other historical documents, along with such objects as a radio or a rag that *might* have been there. These "false artifacts" offer other ways to think about Anne Frank, in human terms rather than as an abstraction. There is no logical order to the placement of these items, just as there were no reasonable choices for European Jews. Wallpaper designs on close inspection prove to be images of lice, telegraphing Anne Frank's death from typhus. There are references to Nazi regimentation and persecution, and to Anne Frank's physical presence as well as her writing. There are also specific references to her sexuality, as revealed in the most recent, unpurgated edition of the diary, which are intended to provoke multivalent responses having to do with different aspects of the Frank family situation and of Anne in particular. Once again Anne as a human being, not as a murdered child author, is brought into the foreground for the viewer to contemplate.

*A Probability Bordering on a Certainty*, a separate installation that has been exhibited with *Partial Index*, is composed of particular forms that add up to a more direct, physical connection to Anne Frank. The title itself refers to the conclusion of a Dutch report, which answered in bureaucratic language a question raised about the writing of the book: Did Anne Frank write her diary under the conditions described in the book? Rothenberg chose the title because it suggests both the impossibility of being certain about memory as well as our inability to reduplicate Anne Frank's experience. To that end Rothenberg includes a false artifact, a set of business cards that state: "Anne Frank, Professional Writer," in several languages. These cards suggest Anne Frank's future had she lived. One of the most powerful objects in this installation is the "Combing Shawl," made up of the text of the first version of the diary, reproduced in the *Critical Edition* of the diary, printed on twenty-nine twenty-two by nine-inch strips of vellum coated with graphite. They are layered in the form of a gigantic cape, through which can be seen hundreds of metal combs. The piece refers to Anne Frank's combing shawl,

which was found in the hiding place after the family was caught, one of the very few objects remaining of her physical presence, but which also alludes to her shaved head in Bergen-Belsen, where she died.

Another object in this installation, "Das Wesentliche (The Essence)," refers to the history of the manuscript. It consists of forty-four leather belts tightly wound around a foam-wrapped pillar. Between the belts, the foam bulges suggestively, perhaps erotically, and relates to passages (stamped on the belts) excised from the initial published version of the diary, in which Anne Frank describes her genitalia in considerable detail. Rothenberg here subsumes the innocent girl known to the public within a much more complex young woman. "By reconstituting this fully developed sense of self—including sexuality—to the lost girl, Rothenberg's work restores Anne Frank's ability to act, her agency. [Rothenberg's] is a proto-feminist Anne Frank, self-aware and self-analytical to the point of rebellion, a feisty young woman who acknowledges and seizes control of her female identity."

Rothenberg explained: "My intention in creating this work is not that of a historian or documentalist. I speak as an artist, about an experience of the diary that is personal and contemporary."<sup>42</sup> Rothenberg's various interrupted narrative sequences, the several allusive images, the projections into the future, and the intentional misrepresentations provoke the viewer to think of the fate and unfulfilled future of one individual caught in the Holocaust. We are to think about her from the points of view of the German authorities, of the travails of being in hiding, of the physical and intellectual remains of that individual, of her unfulfilled possibilities, and of any feminist implications that might ensue. What emerges is not a complex linear narrative but a multifaceted text about the Holocaust and some of its ramifications that has no single resolution.

Anne Frank's diary, along with the writings of Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi, all legacies of Auschwitz, are among the most best-known works to emerge from the Holocaust. The latter two authors also became famous public personalities, Levi serving in the late 1980s as the subject of a group of paintings by Larry Rivers (born in 1923). Throughout his career Rivers has turned to Jewish themes, most notably in his three-part *History of Matzah*, painted earlier in the 1980s, which is a visual history of Judaism in vignette form. The Levi paintings, however, are focused directly on the Holocaust. Based on photographs of the author,

is not: Should one aestheticize or should one not aestheticize? It is not an either-or proposition, but rather one in which concerns of composition, line, shape, and color become the means by which the subject is presented and that allow it to carry a necessary conviction and—of equal importance—the compelling psychological weight artists have invested in it. From this point of view, strictly formal analyses or descriptions of such works are insulting.

Nor does the subject matter lend itself to current postmodern sensibilities. Perhaps one might say instead that the use of Holocaust imagery is a way to avoid such sensibilities. For if we assume that postmodernism is characterized by a sense of irony, a willingness to deny authorial responsibility through open-ended formulations, a desire to manipulate means and materials to suggest levels of unfixity in regard to content and form, then most works by these artists are decidedly not postmodern. Ellen Rothenberg's *The Anne Frank Project* is a notable exception because of the multivalent responses it is intended to provoke (fig. 37). One might wish to argue that this work is among the most stylistically and conceptually advanced works using Holocaust imagery, quite different from the more traditionally responsive works of the other artists, but its meanings are in no way totally open-ended. It is about Anne Frank—her life, her times, and her possibilities. It is not morally ambiguous or neutral; neither is it just about process and viewer response to process. Postmodern techniques and devices of presentation are present but the purposes of the work are focused.

Nuchi related an anecdote about browsing in a bookstore that may help to explain why so many other Jewish-American artists turned to Holocaust themes in the late 1970s and 1980s:

It was quite a sobering experience, standing in the bookstore, browsing through art magazines, looking at works by contemporary American artists, and then moving on to the Judaica section to look at pictures from the Holocaust. The artists' preoccupation with the "non-authentic" and all-knowing irony forever hovering over the works, the Jasper Johnsian chess games and iconographic crossword puzzles, the quotations and recyclings of images from the history of art and their fusion with popular and pornographic images, as well as all this cultural rumination, as sophisticated as it was, seemed to me like

some mental fatigue. But as far as the photographs that came to us from the Holocaust are concerned, I believe they are among the very few images in our culture which cannot be treated with irony. In the mid-80s, it seemed that there wasn't an image high or low that was not fair game for recycling, appropriation, or simulation and for arbitrary coupling with other images.<sup>63</sup>

Assuming that other artists went through a similar thought process, finding a viable subject matter able to bear the weight of personal statement, heartfelt commitment, moral argument, clear authorial voice, community engagement, and communicability became important, even imperative. Given the ways in which Jewish-American artists had begun to think about themselves, their connections to Judaism, their thoughts about the dying out of the survivors, and the general situation of Jewish people in the country in the 1970s, it becomes easier to understand why so many turned to Holocaust imagery. They had come to better terms with the sense of their own Jewishness at the same time that they rejected various aspects of postmodernism.

Most would probably agree with Pier Marton, who said: "As a non-religious Jew, you have only a tradition of martyrdom. I don't say that one needs to become religious. But to look at this huge body of Jewish knowledge and not do your best to pass it on, to honor it, is another type of murder."<sup>64</sup> In their different ways these artists are honoring and passing on that body of knowledge—both as a means of self-identification as Jews and as a way to identify with other Jews, and in the hope that their images will become part of the heritage that is passed on to future generations.