

THE HOLOCAUST AND THE QUANDARY OF REPRESENTATION: EXAMINING JANET WOLFF'S "THE ICONIC AND THE ALLUSIVE"

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ABSTRACT

Anyone who does not directly participate in an event or an era can only receive externally mediated versions of those realities. In one realm, this mediation falls to the hands of artists and, in turn, their curators; their assumed roles as messengers of truth in its various forms weighs heavily, in direct proportion to the historical and sociopolitical significance of the subjects represented. In "The Iconic and the Allusive: The Case for Beauty in Post-Holocaust Art," Janet Wolff argues in favor of abstraction and allusion over realism as more effective means of conveying the Holocaust to contemporary audiences. This essay reviews Wolff's assertions, pointing out its merits but ultimately exposing the limitations of Wolff's theory, which arise primarily from a lack of attention to divisions within the sphere of "Holocaust art."

INTRODUCTION

The realities of the Holocaust are by now largely beyond debate. Concrete evidence, eyewitness accounts, and painstaking Nazi documentation – that which the Reich could not destroy in time – have soiled the pages of history, leaving stains as certain and permanent as they are offensive. If the Holocaust has left relatively few factual questions, however, it has left in its wake many daunting and perhaps even more urgent questions of representation: what can or should be said about it, by whom, and in what way? What can or should be accomplished by such efforts? How should posterity be exposed to Holocaust horrors – if at all – and most importantly, who decides? In "The Iconic and the Allusive: The Case for Beauty in Post-Holocaust Art," Janet Wolff explores the artistic dimension of the representation debate. The article presents a compelling case for "allusive realism" and beauty in Holocaust art while investigating prejudices and illustrating general issues surrounding the genre; Wolff's rationales and conclusions, however, ultimately rest on narrow approaches to definition and perception that prevent a comprehensive treatment of the genre.

THE RUSES AND RISKS OF REALISM—AND AN ALLUSIVE ALTERNATIVE

Wolff begins by acknowledging a "long-standing" personal bias regarding artistic representations of the Holocaust – a "preference for abstract or allusive art [and] a strong dislike of too-literal figurative work" (153-4) – and the questions involved in determining whether or not the roots of such a disposition lie in a foundation more veritable and universal than personal taste. In naming these questions – of "moral judgment", "aesthetic judgment", and "political efficacy", with examples of each (156) – she provides a concise framework through which readers inexperienced in art criticism can filter their own wandering, abstract, and perhaps even unconscious hesitations and uncertainties in their consideration of Holocaust art. Such facilitation is especially useful given the nature of the representation debate: the debate smolders with controversy precisely because the representation of the Holocaust, one of the most appalling events in human history, is of serious significance to the world at large – all have a stake in what they see and why.

Indeed, both Wolff and her ideological opponents – those who push straight realism as the only acceptable form for Holocaust art – recognize the importance of its accessibility to a wide audience. Her

opponents see in this issue of accessibility a reason to support realism: the general public likely prefers figurative art, and moreover, the comprehension of modernist or abstract art requires more “cultural capital” and critical knowhow than is found in the average viewer (Wolff 160). Wolff counters this claim, however, by acknowledging the danger of “dismissing the popular aesthetic” but condemning “the presumption that certain aesthetic forms are beyond the grasp of an uneducated populace,” citing the resounding effectiveness of Maya Lin’s abstract Vietnam Memorial over its figurative counterparts – the wall is far better known and, apparently, more widely appreciated than the heroic bronze sculptures later commissioned specifically to satisfy traditional taste (161). She also emphasizes the pliability and directive capability of the environment in which art is viewed: the potential problems of obscurity in any work are “easily ... remedied by the wall text, the catalogue, and the context of display” (163).

Wolff continues to reject iconic and figurative Holocaust art on grounds relating not to the artist or the artistic process but to the relationships forged between average viewer and finished product. Work that is realist and thus literal, she says, imparts to the viewer a false sense of “closure” and completeness in comprehension, a “belief that he or she has now seen the object (the event, the moment, the Holocaust itself)” (158). In pointing out this impression as an unfortunate and total misconception, Wolff implicitly implicates lay readers: she pulls them from beyond the page and slides them under the microscope, encouraging them to probe themselves for such perceptions of definitiveness in Holocaust art and thus to contemplate – perhaps for the first time – their own roles in the present and future of Holocaust discourse.

In creating this illusion of closure and directness, Wolff says, realist art not only erroneously concludes the represented Holocaust story but also chokes the “dialogue between work and viewer” (159). Because most viewers, lacking “critical visual literacy,” tend to equate realism with “transparency ... [and] documentary practice” that preclude varied interpretation, a realist work will elicit from them a “passive reception” (Wolff 158) – the artist has seemingly condensed the events and stories into a neat factual narrative that is objective, complete, and thus acceptable to viewers as is, with no “work of ... making sense” required on their part (158). Though Wolff finds other faults in iconic post-Holocaust art, she ultimately dismisses the form because of this particular failure, in the context of the genre’s global gravity: “any art which addresses the world (to record and testify, to express shock and empathy, or to warn against repetition of events) must ... engage its audience in an active form of viewing” (159).

Wolff calls on Saul Friedlander’s idea of “allusive or distanced realism,” which entails neither attempted replication nor total abstraction, as a method for viewer engagement with Holocaust art (qtd. in Wolff 161). Because it is indirect, it avoids giving, in Bryan Cheyette’s words, the “sense that the history of [the] Holocaust can be contained,” instead encouraging viewers to recognize the absence of “reliable documentary form” and thus take upon themselves the work of interpretation (qtd. in Wolff 161). Cheyette, a literary critic, is arguing for a form similar to “allusive realism” in literature rather than in art. By invoking his words in her reasoning, Wolff reminds the reader of the scope and scale of the Holocaust representation debate: it is not simply a dispute among contentious art critics but an urgent issue with deep ethical and sociopolitical implications that encompass many other realms – precisely why she repeatedly emphasizes the necessity of viewer engagement, of “implicat[ing] the viewer in retrospection on Nazism and the Holocaust” (165). “Allusive realism” is to her the form that best accomplishes this goal.

A PLACE FOR BEAUTY

Many who oppose as Wolff does the “facile aesthetic” of realism, stressing the importance of viewer involvement and response, also reject aesthetic beauty in Holocaust art as a prohibitive obstacle to this goal (Wolff 165). They “fear ... that visual pleasure negates horror,” sanitizing atrocities and suggesting an acceptance of or transcendence over the nature of the events by “providing consolation in the encounter with beauty” (Wolff 165). This would result in the same sort of fallacious neat packaging as that performed by realist art, preventing a productive reaction from the viewer; the concept of beauty as a whole, in Kathleen Marie Higgins’s words, “seems at odds with political activism because it is not a

directly practical response to the world [and] inspires contemplation, not storm and fury" (qtd. in Wolff 167).

Wolff, however, argues that beauty can actually support the mission of engagement. Referring again to the work of a literary critic, she echoes the possibility for a "complex beauty of 'presence'" that serves quite a different role from that previously mentioned: it is a beauty that "is not a consolation for the threat of death, but a mark of its presence in life" (qtd. in Wolff 167). Any risk of trivializing or glossing over atrocity by invoking beauty can be avoided with an appropriately complex aesthetic – allusive realism, semi-abstraction. Cyril Reade accomplishes this in his sculpture *Minyan* (Fig. 1), which "begins its appeal to the viewer through the beauty of its construction" but is "indirect and irreducible to any simple formula" (Wolff 169).



Figure 1 Cyril Reade, *Minyan*, 1995

Visual pleasure invites engagement by attracting the viewer and then providing an incentive to delve into an intellectually and emotionally taxing interpretative process. This kind of beauty also "cannot be consolatory, given the subject matter of the work and the aggressive visibility of the act of destruction" (Wolff 167), both of which are clear in Reade's sculpture: a minyan is "the quorum of ten men required in Jewish law for any public worship", and the ground enclosed within the austere steel fence is littered with charred timbers (Wolff 169).

Cracks in the Façade

By finding a place – and an important place – for beauty in Holocaust art, it would seem that Wolff is allowing for the kind of 'artistry' and pictorial devices that appear in such works as David

Olère's *Gassing* (Fig. 2), which draws the viewer's attention with a fluid, carefully constructed composition that forgoes reality and plausibility for visual effect. The quasi-surrealist painting is also complex, imploring the now invested viewer to decipher its perversions of traditional imagery, among other things. Yet the work's title alone begins to betray an incompatibility with Wolff's prescriptions. The work directly depicts victims trapped and suffocating in a gas chamber – an almost familiar image that, for many, is inextricably tied to any mention of the Holocaust. An open container of Zyklon B unequivocally seals their fate; skulls and bones are piled in a panel on the right side of the painting, thought-provoking in their placement but hardly cryptic as symbols.



Figure 2 David Olère, *Gassing*

As such, *Gassing* – figurative, iconic, and in many ways direct – embodies the kind of “literal, illusionistic representation” Wolff cannot accept in Holocaust art (158). One finds it difficult, however, to reject the painting as proper Holocaust representation, even if one sympathizes with Wolff’s point of view. Especially troubling is the fact that Olère is a survivor of Auschwitz; moreover, he was a *Sonderkommando*, responsible for clearing bodies out of the gas chambers. Wolff does not absolve “witness-artists” like Olère from her proposed constraints. She cites Boris Taslitzky, who “abandon[ed] the naturalism of his wartime drawings in favor of ... expressionism” after the war, as an exemplar of survivors turning from realism and contests the notion that realism alone answers the witnesses’ “imperative to document or the commitment to confront and portray ... atrocities,” asserting that less direct forms – which are otherwise more desirable – can do the same (159-160).

Taslitzky’s story, however, is not a paradigm: Olère painted *Gassing*, along with many other figurative works, long after the last crematorium flames had been extinguished. So in the context of Wolff’s manifesto, he has no excuse – his use of the figurative and iconic came too late to be justified by

the “witness-artist’s” initial tendency towards such styles. Where does this leave him? Even if it were an undisputed fact that realism attempts to contain that which is uncontainable – and uncontainable even by those who lived it – one still balks at telling Holocaust survivors how they should express their emotions and memories. Indeed, Wolff does not sufficiently address art done by actual victims of the Holocaust; in general, her definition of Holocaust art is contradictory. Wolff claims to speak about post-Holocaust art, and in particular seems to focus on works done by those not directly involved; she does not specify this limitation of her theory, however, and though the subtitle of her article refers to “post-Holocaust art,” she uses that term and “Holocaust art” interchangeably within the text. It is in “*art of the Holocaust* [that] aesthetic imperative is compounded by a moral imperative”, thus requiring abstraction; though abstract works “can only operate as an adequate *Holocaust art* when ... aided by text or context”, when such is given, they “succeed as art of the Holocaust”, while realist works “fail” (165; emphasis added) – she cites as exemplar Morris Louis’s *Charred Journals*, a series from 1951. Looking at and treating Holocaust and post-Holocaust art in the same way, imposing the same prescriptions – worse, not even recognizing a distinction between the two – seems problematic.

By failing to draw this distinction, Wolff in effect declares that art based in the Holocaust, regardless of when it was created, must be abstract to be effective in display. She therefore forecloses space for the particular potencies of non-abstract works created during the Holocaust. These are works that would, according to her argument, be ineffective and even harmful to display in a Holocaust art exhibit, yet their exclusion from any such display seems unfathomable: they resonate poignantly and powerfully – not least because they were in fact created during the Holocaust rather than after it. What of the secret sketches and drawings, made by artists and ordinary people alike, in the ghettos and concentration camps? Some are realist – some were even made with the express intention to document. Should those works be omitted for their dangerous capacity to perform closure, to elicit passive viewer responses? Do their efforts to report conditions – to in some way contain the events of the Holocaust – constitute disingenuous and misleading attempts at the impossible? Because of the diversity of their creators, these sketches exhibit inconsistent levels of aesthetic quality. If they are rough and rudimentary, almost childlike in hand and scarcely beautiful, do they preclude efficacy because they fail to attract the viewer – the first step in eliciting an active response? What about artwork actually made by children, like the eleven- and twelve-year-old students of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis’s secret art classes? Some of the works were drawing exercises done purely to practice technique – exhibiting the most fundamental realism – and it is unlikely that any were created for posterity, but are these not also “Holocaust art” with complex implications valuable and affecting in their own right?

Clandestine works such as these constitute one of two main categories of art produced by victims during the Holocaust; the other category consists of those works commissioned and supervised by the Nazis – the only art that could be created safely in public view. Again, by neglecting to differentiate amongst “Holocaust art,” Wolff leaves many questions about whether or not it bears the same criteria for judgment. All Nazi-commissioned work is inherently realist; Hitler detested abstraction. These works attempt to “contain” – if that is indeed what realist works do – not simply Holocaust history but a blatantly false version of it: many pieces were produced as propaganda to convince the Red Cross, foreign statesmen, and even the Jews themselves that the Jews in the ghettos were happily thriving in comfortable, pleasant conditions. One could argue that the beauty in these works sanitizes violence like no other, bleaching it until only a bright, deceptive white of benevolent imagery remains. Nazi-approved art offends more than one of Wolff’s arguments – how, if at all, does it fit into her scheme?

Wolff seems limited not only in her approach to the art in such displays but also in her approach to the displays’ viewers. In particular, she fails to address the question of authenticity, a perennial issue of Holocaust representation: is there not the possibility that a work of art – especially post-Holocaust art – will turn away viewers and thwart active responses precisely because it is not literal? It is likely that at least some viewers will tie literalism to authenticity and truth; whether or not such an evaluation is justified does not affect its possibility. The risk of an allusive work being dismissed as unauthentic and presumptuous is perhaps even greater assuming the artistic illiteracy of the “lay” viewership on which Wolff focuses her attention. The assertion that Holocaust history cannot be contained in a simple and

simply reliable documentary form takes a few steps toward the authenticity question, but it is insufficient as an answer.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps it is unreasonable to press Wolff for “answers” in a debate so riddled with seemingly unanswerable questions. She does in the article make the issues more approachable, thus making them seem somehow more solvable, by breaking them down in a way “lay” readers can understand – a way that keeps readers from simply turning their eyes away from the debate in an effort to shield themselves from the horror of the Holocaust and the marshy black labyrinth of its wake. “The Iconic and the Allusive: The Case for Beauty in Post-Holocaust Art,” focused on wide audiences for both Holocaust art and for itself, illuminates artistic prescriptions in a way that helps the reader see what it is we do and do not understand – and why we seek to understand. Wolff must recognize, however, the diversities of Holocaust art in form, intention, and reception in order to solidify her arguments and truly paint a fuller picture.

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