Material Losses

by Elke Grenzer

[T]hought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its "banality."
—Hannah Arendt[1]

The growing proliferation of images, memorials, and exhibitions devoted to visualizing the Nazi destruction of European Jewry in Berlin and the controversies surrounding their materialization can be understood within the context of the city's relation to the problem of the trace. If the notion of the trace with respect to the past makes reference to the conflict between the mark of the event and its erasure in time, it also points more deeply to what Hannah Arendt hints at as the "nothing" that thought encounters in its attempt to understand the evil of Nazism.[2] Sixty-five years after the implementation of the Final Solution, the problem of the untraceable trace is not just the (il)legibility of the event's inscription in the present, but also the initiation of an unprecedented event set in motion by the extermination of Jews in the gas chambers of concentration camps. In the aftermath of attempted genocide, it is the fact of the annihilation of the trace as a human endeavour that stands as an absolute in relation to the event itself. This ontological transformation is implicit to the debates surrounding commemoration and can be registered by the various usages of Shoah and Holocaust and the way they circulate as primary relations to questions of representation.

In what follows I want to address the implications of these positions and some of the limits they impose in the country that was responsible for initiating and implementing the atrocities of the Final Solution. Specifically, I want to consider how Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock's Places of Remembrance (1992-1993),[3] which is located in a former German-Jewish neighbourhood in the Schöneberg district of Berlin, uniquely brings to the surface conflicting views surrounding the image as a question that concerns the status of the trace and the implications for an ethics of visual culture that emerge.

Part art installation, part memorial, Stih and Schnock's work displaces the traditional monument through a decisive strategy that includes an engagement with circulating notions of what form a modern memorial should take. The artists, in response to the Schöneberger bizirksverordneten versammlung (BW) decision to commemorate the more than six thousand Jews that were the direct victims of the growing anti-Semitism and implementation of the Final Solution, chose to subvert the traditional language of memorials by creating a topographical site of memory that points to the incremental ways in which Nazi law encompassed the lives of its German Jewish citizenry and how their successful deployment depended upon the tacit compliance of non-Jewish Germans.[4] Their proposal created a memory infrastructure that mapped eighty signs onto the neighbourhood as a way of accentuating the absence of any remaining mark of what was once a spatial and upper middle-class paragon of assimilated Jews in Berlin. The signs consist of illustrations in the idiom of a simplistic, readable visual language that characterize modern advertisements and familiar signage with either a Nazi edict or an account of a former inhabitant on its opposite side. Following Arendt, we might think of the banality of evil as not simply a pedestrian form of evil or as an "ordinary occurrence," but the catastrophe of non-thought that the memorial attempts to access. Photographs and discussion reflect upon the necessity of understanding the problems fundamental to the representation of the German participation in the Final Solution.

Shoah

Although varied in its invocation, a Shoah position[5] can be generally understood as a representational practice that takes up the problem of exposing the limits of representation. In some senses it is a representation that struggles with the possibility of the end of alterity, of anti-representation. This

project, closely identified with the director Claude Lanzmann and his film *Shoah* (1985), is grounded in the notion that the singularity of the event and its horrific character cannot be communicated through the same means in which suffering was produced and recorded by the Nazis. The aesthetics of the Shoah (here I am referring to a continuum that cuts across art and modern Judaism) coincides with a suspicion towards literal depictions of murder, either through images or words, as ways of capturing or touching the thought of the event by those who suffered it at that time. The work of Shoah memory is an articulation of destruction that "constructs itself around an absence, a void, and the annihilated and tries to make absence felt."[6]

The horror of the atrocities committed by the Third Reich and its fellow travelers, and the incapacity to articulate it in a way that registers a common world, preserves a tension between putting experience into words and language and the graphic spectacularizations that subsume the sanctity of the dead. What Shoah dramatizes is the gap between language and thought and how the experience of a horrific occurrence silences any recapitulation, preserving the inexpressibility and ineffability of atrocity. For Lanzmann, the obscenity of understanding resides in attempting to overstep this gap. He writes, "not to understand was my iron law during all the eleven years of the production of Shoah...[it was] the only way to not turn away from a reality which is literally blinding."

Renouncing the power of the image as a representation of the experience is part of orienting in the way of Shoah. Yet, in the face of this environment, Shoah nevertheless recognizes that the experience must be preserved and represented in some shape if it is not to be lost. By diverting from graphic depictions, the Shoah emphasizes the sound and hearing of the Hebrew Old Testament, participating in an antipathy towards images, while cultivating its own notion of representation as anti-representation.

Curiously, the Shoah orientation is most influential in the approach to building significant memorials sites in Berlin. What is striking about the way in which these architectural initiatives are described is the manner in which post-structuralist building aesthetics are easily joined to notions of the past as an "untranslatable signifier." For example, Peter Eisenman, architect of The Holocaust Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe (1998-2005), asserts that his "monument will establish a different view of memory...because it doesn't speak" ; and Daniel Libeskind affirms that The Jewish Museum "represents another kind of architecture, it's not an architecture that follows certain lines, it's an architecture...which traverses another zone." In each of these claims, the foregrounding of architecture's capacity to articulate the limits of representation frames the Shoah as coterminous with a breach in language, a breach that in some senses informs the representational code of the (post) modernist artist.

The communicative function of these sites expands upon the double inheritance of a modern project that is inseparable from the event of the Shoah. In her classic essay, 'Schindler's List' is not 'Shoah': The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism and Public Memory", Miriam Hansen develops the Shoah position as a method that self-consciously preserves inaccessibility. It is, in her words, an "hermetic écriture":

> ...the breach inflicted by the Shoah has not only put into question, irrevocably, the status of culture as an autonomous and superior domain...it has also radicalized the case for a type of aesthetic expression that is aware of its problematic status-the nonrepresentational, singular, and hermetic écriture to be found in works of high modernism.

If we consider that the Shoah preserves tracelessness as an event that defies sensible understanding, then perhaps it is not unusual that filmmakers, artists and architects would position themselves as uniquely aligned with this project of representation as a meaningful engagement that finds its deepest expression in the attempt to render the status of aesthetics as a condition of the production of art.

Holocaust

The Holocaust seems to confuse the speaker with the event that is addressed, but it actually preserves the contemporary understanding of the Holocaust as an Enlightenment project that aims to secularize the fundamentalist presuppositions of the Shoah conceptualizations. In this sense, the Holocaust as a speaker reaffirms the tactile power of images of the event, as edifying and informative, and even more as an education in the present. The Holocaust welcomes the visual representation of the event on the grounds of the photojournalistic notion that a picture is worth a thousand words. It is a secularization provided by a proliferation of images of the atrocity as a palpable and vital experience in the present that can inspire a rethinking of both present and past.

If the architects of memorials in Berlin rely on abstract representations that are dependent upon the contemporary language games within post-structuralist architecture, the exhibition spaces themselves continue to depend upon the legibility of the Holocaust as enlightenment—as an occurrence that is pedagogical in its capacity to represent the dynamism of the event that can be recorded and marked in specific detail as the basis for a learning experience. This model depends upon correcting what was seen as absent under conditions of Nazism, namely, the ability to forge an empathic relation to the suffering of the victims. Here, authentic footage of the concentration camps and images of victims' corpses are deliberately displayed in order to supply for the viewer a vivid image of mass annihilation in its most concrete expression.

Art Installation as Intervention

Stih and Schnock's installation begins from the assumption that the representation of the past has to be done in the material city of the present in ways that are palpable and relevant, yet preserving the ambiguous relation to the image. Their emplacement of eighty double-sided placards throughout a former German-Jewish middleclass neighbourhood is a strategy for calling into question a commonsense understanding of the present day civic experience of the neighbourhood. The placards visualize Nazi laws passed from 1933-1945 in connection with recognizable, everyday objects and advertisements. One side of the placard consists of Nazi edicts, with simple graphic designs that make reference to familiar advertisements, brands, objects and public signage on the other.

In this neighbourhood, where 6,000 of the former 120,000 Jewish inhabitants were sent to their deaths in concentration camps, Stih and Schnock attempt to evoke an understanding of Nazism as an ordinary event, and to show how it was integrated into the existing fabric of German society at that time. In this neighbourhood where fully integrated middle and upper-middle class Jews were purged, the story of complicity in this destruction is told through the everyday manner in which Germans destroyed German Jewry, not as foreigners, but as bourgeois neighbours. The installation forces a consideration of the event of Nazism by contemplating how even in this neighbourhood where Jews and Germans appeared to live side-by-side in relative stability, the crime of extermination could be committed.

The installation proceeds by looking away from the original event and from the spectacle of its representation (by looking away from the image as in Shoah), as part of a project to recreate the insidious erosion of civic life that occurred as a seen but unnoticed feature of Nazism. That is, Stih and Schnock used this neighbourhood as a mirror image of the degeneration of public culture in Berlin, an image that displayed the growth of Nazism at the national level through the local detail of perceptible changes in the most mundane routine affairs of a Berlin neighbourhood. In this way, the installation recuperates the place of the image as testimony, mobilizing a visual regime that calls into question the place of sight and vision in connection to re-imaging an ethical point of view that remains relevant to understanding the complicity of Germans beyond those that participated in the basest violence.

The Edicts

The deliberate emplacement of the edicts in the existing fabric of the neighbourhood makes visible the structure of the everyday life of the neighborhood, its pedestrian activities, routines and habits that mark the round of mundane activities. Here, the Nazi decrees designed to limit the activities of Jews, both spatially and temporally, bind together the contemporary places and settings of the neighbourhood with the past. Interdictions that limit practices such as shopping, playing in the park, going to school, and working are situated on lampposts alongside of present-day shops, parks, schools, churches, and beside street-level neighbourhood legal and medical offices:

"In bakeries and cafés, signs must be posted stating that Jews and Poles may not purchase cakes. Feb. 14, 1942"

"Aryan and non-Aryan children are not allowed to play together. 1938"

"Jewish children are expelled from public schools. Nov. 15, 1938"

"Prohibition of all school attendance. June 20, 1942"

"Jews may no longer work as independent craftsmen. November 12, 1938"

"Jewish women cannot be certified as midwives. December 21, 1938"

The very significant and large scale political matters in the development of Nazism are then revealed in the legal order less in the way of constitutional decisions, spectacular trials or major crimes against citizens, but through a ritual structure of interdictions applied to mundane activities of everyday life. Despite their diversity, the edicts shape the neighbourhood itself as a subject, dramatizing the vulnerability of Jews arising from a process that unfolded in the usual and familiar places and routines in which normal things are done.

Read as a narrative, the edicts in the neighbourhood dramatize the chronological development of Nazism as a mundane trajectory of interdictions. Moreover, the signage makes reference to the character of monitoring and surveillance of any public sign, bringing attention to the fact of their "commonness" as shared objects to which neighbours are expected to be mutually oriented. As an encyclopaedia of interdictions, the edicts function as a legitimate order that pervades the heterogeneity of the demands by offering grounds for their enforcement.

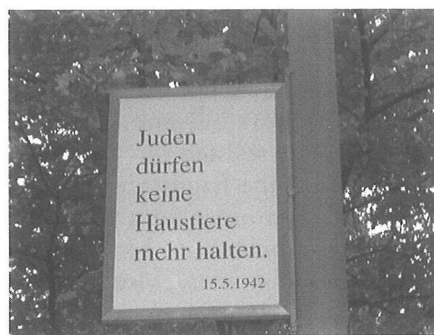
The edicts stratify time, space and activity in ways that produce a hierarchical vision of the type of work and the category of workers inhabiting the neighbourhood. Over time the edicts show the limitation of the freedom of Jewish doctors, lawyers, notaries, teachers and civil servants, making reference to an ideological vision of those occupations whose liberality is anticipated as a danger to a closed society. In this way, the narrative of the edicts exhibits an increasing violence that strikes at the neighbourhood's fundamental and ancillary activities (sport groups, filmmakers, chess associations, choral groups). As in Borges' encyclopaedia, the apparently ad hoc and irrational system of classification travesties legality by varying the content of those identified as offenders. What the installation permits us to see is the strategy through which Nazism abandons the neighbourhood to make sense of the edicts itself, not simply by marginalizing people, but by exposing the way in which the law conceals the amount of violence it can permissibly initiate against whomsoever it decides to make its victim.

Thus, what the installation begins to reveal is how Nazi law tries to make individuality a normative question by first producing an accord artificially. For example, the prohibition that Jews cannot smoke produces the possibility for infraction by permitting Germans to avoid identifying Jews as individuals, but as simply those anonymous members who offend against the law. The criminalization of behaviours does not confront Jews directly as individuals qua Jews; rather, Nazism exploits the law by using the majority to enforce it while avoiding a direct exposure of its ideological agenda.

The textual presentation of the law in the form of edicts on street signs vividly reinstates the Nazi vision of "social change" through the implicit narrative of the signage. In their use of the neutrality of law to dramatically objectify the growth of marginality in the neighbourhood, Stih and Schnock invite us to see how the law operates virtually. If law and order is taken to be an indication of civic progress and freedom from tribalism, and if the edicts display the tacit, collective acceptance of the hatred of strangers, the dramatic textual cancellation of citizenship demonstrates the virtuality of the category of citizenship as an embodied subject and the radical proximity upon which the neighbourhood depends. The use of the law in order to invade all spaces to identify and seek out Jews by defining actions in such minute detail ensures that any form of inaction itself can become an infraction. In this way, the law exceeds the requirement of a face-to-face encounter through its virtual capacity to decide upon guilt and innocence in absentia. In the sense that an edict is an imperative, its placement in the neighbourhood illustrates how the absence of a deliberative process induces inaction itself to become actionable as a violation. This is made especially vivid by the contents of the edicts that inhibit when, where and how Jews were expected to carry on the mundane business of existence. Rather than being grounded in History, the unspoken trace of communal accord presupposed in every edict actually produces a violation of the trace itself as a register of civilized collective life.

The Images

If the edicts represent the complicity of neighbours acting in accord both implicitly and explicitly within the neighbourhood, the illustrations on the opposite side of the signposts refer to the common sense ways in which everyday objects make reference to a shared culture. Here the sketch of a cat alongside of the decree "Jews are no longer allowed to keep pets," an improvised hopscotch board drawn in chalk on the other side of the prohibition that "Jews and Aryan children are not permitted to play together," use recognizable images in order to question the presumption of shared images, jolting the passer-by to imagine the vibrancy of the Bayerischer Viertal prior to the interdictions and to consider the consequences of the successful enforcement of these laws for the present-day neighbourhood that is now devoid of Jews.



Tying together the urban spectator interpolated by city signage and advertisements to Nazi decrees that explicitly stripped Jews of their rights restages the neighbourhood as a critical field, foregrounding the seemingly neutral objective language of the law with the seen but unnoticed signposts of German society that persist as recognizably normal, despite the atrocities committed. The images rendered on the signposts conjure a prosaic picture of everyday life, far removed from the iconic representations of the Holocaust. What is most disturbing about the juxtaposition of the images with the edict is that the illustration is never commensurate with the decree. If the idea of the law is its reasonableness and enforceability, part of what makes this installation work is the simultaneous depiction of common signs and objects alongside of the law, in a way that accentuates the absurdity of enforcing both. Thus, the artistic standpoint in relation to the Nazi past is repositioned here not simply as a surrealistic rendering, but one that generates the question of how could people simply go about their daily affairs and participate in the monstrous machinery of Nazism at the same time.

The Art Installation as a Redefinition of the Public Space

The status of the installation as public art objectifies and visualizes what was seen to pass without question as part of the commonsense understanding of the neighborhood. By creating an installation, the artists publicize the normal impression of the neighborhood as a place. By collecting the dispersed fragments that existed in the form of legal edicts designed to marginalize and ultimately dispose of Jews, effectively condenses and dramatizes the operationalization of Nazi law from the vantage point of the pedestrian.

Detailed attention to the textual representation of the law alongside of a recognizable visual language of publicity encourages a re-visualization of the neighbourhood's relation to its past through a defamiliarization of the present. For example, the sign "Jews in Berlin are only allowed to buy food between four and five o'clock in the afternoon (July 4th, 1940)," is placed outside of a present-day locally-operated grocery store, making vivid the accumulation of minutiae that made the Final Solution possible and rationalized as unnoticed.

Stih and Schnock's installation is unlike a typical memorial that brings people to a single site where spectators become legible as part of the site itself. The conventional model of a public monument is resisted by inducing the question of how a public is made possible even under conditions of the fragmented modern metropolis. There is a stark contrast between Vito Acconci's view that, "[i]n order for a public space to be a gathering place, where all the people are gathered together as a public...to be seen and read as a public, it needs a gathering point." In contrast to the identifiable monument, visitors must walk through the neighbourhood in a way that makes them indistinguishable from the private residents, thus addressing the problem of the isolated, private character of civic life at the level of the neighbourhood. Visitors become part of the "memorial" by being brought into contact with the neighbourhood alongside locals. By bringing the footsteps of the inhabitant together with the tourist, an uncanny connection is created that echoes the ties between the present-day neighbourhood and its past.

The Banality of Evil

If the contrasting views of the Shoah and Holocaust depend, on the one hand, on preserving the inaccessibility of the event, and on the other hand, of disseminating the event as secular and showable, Stih and Schnock's art installation alternatively makes use of the local detail of a contemporary German neighbourhood to disclose the intimate structure of the phenomenon of Nazism. The growth of Nazism, neither outside of history nor simply a spectacle of trauma, is refracted through the prism of thoughtlessness and routinization of everyday life that marks the condition of the bourgeois citizen.

The attempt by the Shoah approach to protect the event as semi-sacred echoes the charge of voice appropriation that preserves a special place for the epistemology of the victim that can only be imagined, yet never be fully known. In contrast, Stih and Schnock's installation raises the problem of the place of public life in addressing the gap between the trace and its extinction by locating it as a question that resides with the citizens that inhabit the spaces of the city.

In contrast to co-opting the Holocaust attempt to preserve the remembrance of pain and suffering on the part of those who were persecuted, Stih and Schnock offer to expose the "thinking" of the perpetrator-the unstated and unspoken grounds that animated all who fell under the spell of Nazism by linking the culprits to the silent majority who assented by virtue of oriented indifference. Nazism, in their hands, becomes less an appropriation of its sensationalism in order to elicit identification with the victims, than a formulation of the hardening of intellectual arteries that maintained a depersonalizing relationship to those marked as outsiders—a collectivization that could only occur

as part of an incremental silence. The project of the installation to exaggerate the local and domestic character in which citizens were stripped of their citizenship creates an opening for reflecting upon the seen but unnoticed features of the normal environment in the neighbourhood.

Part of the innovativeness of this installation is its capacity to locate the place of the neighbourhood in the city and its relevance for public life, while pointing just as unequivocally to the normal and busy people of the material city. Its ability to exaggerate the various ways in which the topography of the capitalist city includes "its fate in a history of modernity that encompasses both mass production and mass extermination," shifts the terms of the debate from representing or not representing, to the conditions inherited by the trace and its disappearance.

Acknowledgements

All photographs were taken by Mareike Barmeyer. Her images are designed to be more than illustrations; they are examples that attempt to deconstruct Stih and Schnock's method.

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NOTES

1 Hannah Arendt, "A Daughter of Our People: A Response to Gershom Scholem" *The Portable Hannah Arendt,* ed. Peter Baehr (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 396.
2 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).
3 Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock. Places of Remembrance [art installation] (Memorial in the Bavarian Quarter, Berlin-Schöneberg, 1992-1993); see also *http://www.stih-schnock.de/.* Date available: August 31, 2010.
4 For a complete account of the history of the site, particularly Andreas Wilcke's historical research into the Jewish inhabitants of the neighbourhood, see Wiedmer's essay on the artists' website. *http://www.stih-schnock.de.*
5 My usage of Shoah makes reference to a triple contingency: Lanzmann's canonical nine hour film *Shoah* (USA: New Yorker Films, 1985); the specifically Hebrew enunciation of Shoah as the event or "catastrophe" (this alludes to the Jewish Genocide and the desire to hold it apart from any comparative context, thus as a singular event that exceeds the experience of Sinti, Roma, Homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses) and is specifically differentiated from the Christian origins of the word Holocaust (see "The Holocaust: Definition and Preliminary Discussion", on Yad Vashem's official website); and as the subject of discourse that relates directly to questions of representation.
6 Florence Jacobowitz, "Commemoration and Sites of Mourning," *Visual Culture and the Holocaust,* ed. Barbie Zelizer (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 8.
7 Claude Lanzmann, "The Obscenity of Understanding: An Evening with Claude Lanzmann," *Trauma: Explorations in Memory,* ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 219.
8 Simon Houpt, "Building a different view of memory," *The Globe and Mail,* 7 February 2001, R:1.
9 Daniel Libeskind, Interview by author, video recording. Berlin, 1999.
10 Miriam Bratu Hansen, "'Schindler's List' is not 'Shoah': The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism and Public Memory," *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (1996): 302.
11 Here I am attempting to suspend the ethical distinction made by Jean-François Lyotard (2004) and his position that the invocation of Holocaust as a way of naming the event is itself a form of violence, if only to activate the question of how the use of the Holocaust as terminology points to a contested discourse. For example, see in particular Gillian Rose's plea for "Holocaust ethnography" [*Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 41].
12 For a discussion of a critique of this view as "both trivializing and sensationalizing," refer in particular to pages 300-303 in Hansen's article "'Schindler's List' is not 'Shoah': The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism and Public Memory," *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (1996).
13 Wiedmer ["Remembrance in Schöneberg," *Orte des Erinnerns: Ausgrenzung und Entrechtung, Vertreibung, Deportation und Ermordung von Berliner Juden in den Jahren 1933 bis 1945; Denkml in Berlin Schöneberg (1993). Places of Remembrance: Isolation and Deprivation of Rights, Expulsion, Deportation and Murder of Berlin Jews in the Years 1933 to 1945; Memorial in Berlin-Schöneberg (1993),* eds. Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock (Berlin: Haude & Spenersche Verlagsbuchhandlung GmbH, 2002), 7-11] points out that Stih and Schnock had deliberately omitted the particular date of this decree as a way of creating a perspective that purposefully dissolved the borders between past and present. Due to what she cites as "the spontaneous and vehement reactions of the public" (Ibid., 9), the dates were later inserted into the placards. The public demand for the presence of the dates of the decree reflects an interesting concession between the artists and the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, especially since neighbours objected to the notion that the decree might be read as a present day ordinance with the power to command compliance.
14 Vito Acconci, "Public Space in a Private Time," *Art and the Public Sphere,* ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 163.
15 Miriam Bratu Hansen, "'Schindler's List' is not 'Shoah': The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism and Public Memory," *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (1996): 302.