



Looking into the 'mirrors of evil'

James E Young, author of a paper to be read at the 2002 Australian Society of Archivists conference, reflects upon *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*, a contentious exhibition presented by The Jewish Museum in New York, from March to June 2002. The questions he raises are relevant for Australian archives, museums and other holders of cultural materials that document contested or traumatic events

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A notorious Nazi once said that when he heard the word 'culture' he reached for his revolver. Now it seems, every time we hear the word 'Nazi' we reach for our culture. It is almost as if the only guarantee against the return of this dreaded past lies in its constant aesthetic sublimation in the art, literature, music and even monuments by which the Nazi era is vicariously recalled by a generation of artists born after, but indelibly shaped by, the Holocaust.

Until recently, however, this has been an art that concentrated unrelievedly on the victims of Nazi crimes, as a way to commemorate them, name them, extol them, bring them back from the dead. By contrast, almost no art has dared depict the killers themselves. As we've now discovered in *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*, a new generation of artists sees things a little differently.

Rather than repeating the degrading images of murdered and emaciated Jewish victims, thereby perpetuating the very images the Nazis themselves left behind, I find that these artists have turned their accusing gaze upon the killers themselves. The only thing more shocking than the images of suffering victims for these artists, is the depravity of the human beings who caused such suffering. To the traditional art that creates an empathetic nexus between viewers and concentration camp victims, these artists would add an art that brings us face to face with the killers themselves.

Rather than allowing the easy escape from responsibility implied by our traditional identification with the victims, these artists would challenge us now to confront the faces of evil, which, if the truth be told, look rather



↑ Piotr Uklanski, 'The Nazis' (detail),
166 C-prints, 1998

more like us than do the wretched human remains the Nazis left behind. In the process, we are led to ask: Which leads to deeper knowledge of these events, to deeper understanding of the human condition? Images of suffering or of the evil-doers who caused such suffering? Which is worse? The cultural commodification of victims or the commercial fascination with killers? These artists let such questions dangle dangerously over our heads, and in the end, I have to say over their own. It may also be true that not all of this art or the artists can bear the weight of the questions they have posed.

As the Jewish Museum has made very clear in the dissenting (and affirming) voices of survivors included as part of the show's installation, such questions constitute the very reason for this exhibition. These questions are asked explicitly in wall panels by survivors, artists, and rabbis in a talking heads video, and they are implied in a fascinating compilation of popular cultural film and television clips, from *The Producers* and *Hogan's Heroes* to *The Twilight Zone*. What's worse, 'Springtime for Hitler', Mel Brooks' song from *The Producers*, or art that self-consciously examines such a phenomenon? On Broadway in New York this spring, it was possible to pay \$150 for the right to laugh at Hitler's shenanigans in *The Producers*, but it was not possible to laugh at art that mocked or questioned this right.

Polish artist Zbigniew Libera's Lego concentration camp, attracted more than its share of the exhibition's negative attention. But in fact, having been widely shown in exhibitions around the USA and Europe (one even co-sponsored by the New Jersey State Holocaust Education Commission), this piece has already done

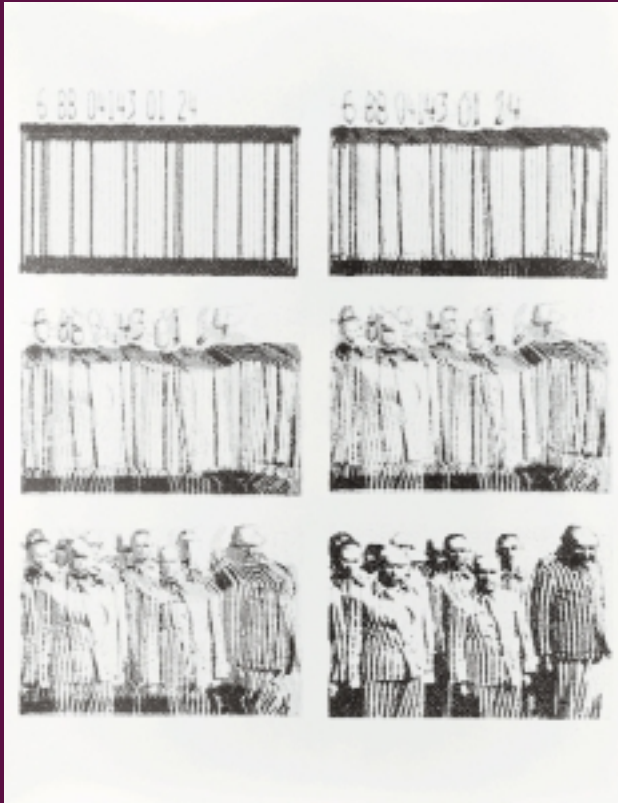
much more than provoke outrage among viewers: it has also provoked dozens of thoughtful reflections on just how Auschwitz is ever going to be imagined by anyone born after the terrible fact. Like Art Spiegelman's comic based *Maus*, it has also taken a seemingly low form of art and used it to address the artist's own tortured relationship to a place and events he never knew directly. And like artist David Levinthal, who, when

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asked why he took photographs of Nazi toys instead of the reality itself, replied that the toys, fortunately, were his only reality of Nazis, Zbigniew Libera similarly recognises that his only connection to Auschwitz is an imagined one. Outraged critics asked what's next, a Lego recreation of the World Trade Center's destruction? What would the families of the murdered firemen think of that?

At which point, I recalled how I'd stumbled upon my two young boys, aged five and 7, up early one morning at work on a Lego memorial to the World Trade Center. This after we'd taken pains to protect them from nearly all the media's images of the destruction. I also recalled the night, some two weeks after the September 11 attacks, when I heard our seven-year old Asher screaming at his younger brother from the other room: 'But Ethan, you have to fall down when I crash into you — that's the tragedy of the World Trade Center, that the towers fell >

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← Alan Schechner, 'Barcode to Concentration Camp morph', digital image, 1994

do it again'. I don't think any of us should be ashamed for fantasising about an apology from Hitler, especially not the artists whose job it is to show us what we were only imagining.

For a generation of artists and critics born after the Holocaust, their experience of Nazi genocide is necessarily vicarious and hyper-mediated. They haven't experienced the Holocaust itself but only the event of its being passed down to them. As faithful to their experiences as their parents and grandparents were to theirs in the camps, this media-saturated generation thus makes as its subject the blessed distance between themselves and the camps, as well as the ubiquitous images of the Nazis and their crimes they find in the commercial mass media. These are their subjects, not the events themselves.

But for many survivors, whose families were murdered and whose lives were permanently scarred by the Holocaust, it is impossible to see images of either

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down when the planes crashed into them'. Do our kids trivialise these events the moment they all too reflexively try to get their imaginations around them? Do we therefore proscribe such events altogether, thereby relegating them to the unimaginable, despite the historical fact that someone, somewhere had to imagine such events in order to perpetrate them?

The work of Boaz Arad, another of the exhibiting artists, is a fantasy of a different order, reflecting an Israeli Jew's simple need for an apology from Hitler for what he did. By cutting and remixing original film clips of Hitler's speeches, the artist literally forces Hitler's own guttural utterances into a Hebrew sentence, so that we see Hitler gesticulate and proclaim in his own voice, *Shalom Yerushalayim, ani mitnatzel* (Shalom, Jerusalem, I apologise.). People laughed when the American artist Bruce Naumann proposed that Germany's Holocaust memorial simply be composed of a tablet with the words, 'We're sorry for what we did, and we promise never to

the killers or the victims without a literal and visceral connection to their personal experience of events. When these generations overlap, the breach between them is clear and perhaps unbridgable. As the survivors' generation passes, however, these events will pass out of the realm of personal experience and into that of imagination only.

If nothing else, this show exposes this generational fault line as never before. For us in the next generation, part of what we recall must be just this divide, so that we never mistake our experiences for those of the survivors themselves.

James E Young is Professor and Chair of the Department of Judaic & Near Eastern Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He is the author of At Memory's Edge, The Texture of Memory and Writing and Rewriting Holocaust. In 1997 he was appointed by the Berlin Senate to the Commission which chose the design for Germany's national memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe