

## Dark Visitations: The Possibilities and Problems of Experience and Memory in Holocaust Museums

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Comprehension of the narrative and its meaning is not only an intellectual but also an emotional experience. The emotional effect of the narrative in the museum exhibition is comparable to that of the narrative in novels, plays or motion pictures. All of them are based on plot. The plot triggers identification, which envelopes us mentally and focuses us to relate to the meaning of the story line. What we would have done had we been given their situations, we ask ourselves. Just as we do when reading a novel or viewing a theatre performance or feature film, we identify with the protagonists. Being gripped by the plot, projecting ourselves into it, identifying with its heroes and developing resentment towards its villains, we get emotionally involved. This emotional involvement opens us to educational influence.<sup>1</sup>

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Founding Director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

The 1990s saw the opening of a number of major Holocaust museums and exhibitions, most notably the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington DC, the Jewish Museum Extension to the Berlin Museum, The Simon Wiesenthal Centre's Beit Hashoah Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, the Imperial War Museum's (IWM) Holocaust Exhibition in London and, closer to home and on a smaller scale, the Sydney Jewish Museum. These museums attempt to answer a question central to their ongoing *raison d'être*: how are post-Holocaust generation visitors supposed to "remember" events they have never experienced directly?<sup>2</sup> Many of these new Holocaust

museums address the question of sustaining memory through a “performative” approach in their exhibitions; they employ a variety of immersive and emotive display strategies aimed to operate on affective as well as cognitive levels, producing moving experiences for visitors. Holocaust artefacts are pivotal in these strategies; they can enable post-Holocaust generation visitors to empathic identify with Holocaust survivors and victims. However, are these powerfully emotional and sometimes disturbing encounters actually desirable? Moreover, to what extent might they be ethically problematic? Might affective displays merely engage visitors in the morbid thrill of what J John Lennon and Malcolm Foley call “dark tourism”?<sup>3</sup>

Paul Ricoeur states that we have a “duty to remember” the Holocaust, which presents “an ethico-political problem because it has to do with the construction of the future: that is, the duty to remember consists not only in having a deep concern for the past, but in transmitting the meaning of past events to the next generation.”<sup>4</sup> Holocaust museums, of course, are presently amongst the most important and effective media for this “transmission of meaning.” In recent years, museum theorists in general have recognised the vital function of memory. The evocation of memory is identified as being central to the representation of the past events and social spaces that museums present and interpret.<sup>5</sup> For Holocaust museums, this function of memory takes on an additional ethical cautionary responsibility: to never let the Holocaust happen again. As Richard Kearney argues, “the ethical remembrance of genocide” of the Holocaust is “indispensable,” so that “the horror of moral evil” can be “retrieved from oblivion.”<sup>6</sup> To the extent that we might subscribe to humanistic values (and, despite moot academic contestations, most of us fundamentally do), the “duty to remember” the Holocaust seems a sustainable pious abstract principle. On the other hand, *how* we remember and, moreover, how we go about “transmitting the meaning” of memory remains an open debate. While this central principle has manifested in ongoing discourses about the Holocaust, additional ethical caveats have arisen around it. The most influential of these qualifications is perhaps Elie Wiesel’s “unwritten etiquette,” as Edward Linenthal calls it.<sup>7</sup> Wiesel insists that the Holocaust *cannot* be understood or explained (famously, “how is one to speak of it? How is one not to speak of it?”),<sup>8</sup> that it was a unique and historically-transcendent event, and that it was a fundamentally Jewish event.<sup>9</sup> Of course, not everyone committed to the duty to remember the Holocaust necessarily subscribes to Wiesel’s particular extended ethical framework. As Linenthal points out, during the formative conceptualising stages of the USHMM, enormous friction existed between Wiesel and Michael Berenbaum, deputy director of the President’s Commission on the Holocaust.<sup>10</sup> Berenbaum continuously argued for

a more ethnically-inclusive interpretation of the Holocaust and its victims, which Wiesel vehemently opposed.<sup>11</sup> In the later stages of the Museum’s implementation, however, the idea of *authenticity* emerged as the most commonly-agreed ethical caveat upon the duty to remember. Importantly, in response to Holocaust denials by revisionist historians such as David Irving, and right wing academic organisations such as the Institute of Historical Review, the value of authenticity in Holocaust museums has been substantially raised. The traditional and implicit fiduciary responsibility of museums in general, as trustees of material culture, now comes with the additional obligation to act as repositories for material evidence of crimes against humanity. Indeed, as Linenthal notes, “one of the oft-cited justifications for the museum’s [USHMM] existence was to refute the claims of the Holocaust deniers.”<sup>12</sup> This is why, according to Jeshajahu “Shaikha” Weinberg, the founding director of USHMM, each of the Museum’s 26 000 artefacts was vetted for sound provenance:<sup>13</sup> “Using authentic artefacts and photographs, the Museum itself would constitute historical evidence of the Holocaust.”<sup>14</sup> To this end, the principle of “historical reliability” left no room for the slightest doubt.<sup>15</sup> So, contentious extended ethical frameworks or “unwritten etiquettes” notwithstanding, Holocaust museums presently work under two accepted core ethical imperatives: the onus of remembrance and the onus of credibility.

These ethical imperatives become more crucial as survivors of the Holocaust reach old age and memories of lived experience permanently give way to recorded historical narratives. Unresolved decades-old questions and debates about how the Holocaust is *represented* inevitably transform into questions of how it is to be *remembered* when it is out of living memory. While the onus of remembrance and the onus of credibility are common to Holocaust museums, the ways in which they become reified in display strategies, narratives and practices is much more debateable, opening up points of tension and contradiction between these two ethical imperatives. Practically, the onus of remembrance has been interpreted overtly by many of the recent Holocaust museums as an imperative to increase visitor numbers and to create powerful and lasting impressions upon them.

Holocaust museums are thus on the leading edge in the development of exhibition practices and strategies that aim to produce immersive experiences. For example, USHMM attempts to draw upon the affective capacities of artefacts, dioramas, simulations, multimedia, sound, light and architecture. The architecture of the Museum’s building emulates the forms of the barracks and watchtowers of Auschwitz. James Ingo Freed, the building’s architect, describes it as “a resonator of memory”<sup>16</sup> and Weinberg says, “[t]he monumental four-story atrium known as

the Hall of Witness... evokes an immediate emotional reaction. People speak of feelings of fear, loneliness, helplessness, almost of panic, but also of holiness."<sup>17</sup> The Museum's actual exhibition hopes to further immerse the visitor in an intensive affective and cognitive experience through techniques of simulation, such as the reconstruction of concentration camp barracks and the cast copy of the infamous and cruelly ironic sign, "ARBEIT MACHT FREI" (work brings freedom), from the entrance to Auschwitz. The sign is suspended above the visitors, who must walk beneath it as they work their way around the exhibition. In doing so, they echo the subjective positions of those that walked beneath the original sign during the Holocaust. The movement of many new Holocaust museums towards adopting this emphatically experiential approach can be seen as part, which can be seen in context of a general democratising of knowledge throughout the twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> Chakrabarty argues that nineteenth-century museum display practices were didactic and intellectually authoritarian. This ideology manifested in museums actively discouraging experiential and embodied engagements of visitors with objects. Visitors' phenomenal experiences with objects were thus suppressed by certain display techniques (such as glass cabinets) and directed towards non-bodily, physically-removed cognitive contemplation. In the latter decades of the twentieth century, however, the monovalent authority of the museum has broken down and their narratives are now recognised as being contestable. Knowledge is no longer singular and sanctioned by the institution, but is multifarious and negotiable. As Andrea Witcomb argues, these days "visitors themselves have an active role in the process, becoming co-authors in the production of meanings."<sup>19</sup> According to Witcomb, this current attitude is manifest in changes in exhibition technologies: the glass cabinet gives way to more experientially-engaging displays. This has two important and related democratising functions: it breaks down the traditional one-way flow of knowledge by allowing meanings and narratives to be negotiated between visitor and museum, and it brings visitors into a more intimate spatial relationship with museum objects in which the information gained is experiential as well as cognitive. Chakrabarty refers to this more experiential approach as "performative," which relates to "the domain of the embodied and the sensual."<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Shoshana Felman talks of a similarly "performative" approach, beyond the cognitive, in teaching about the Holocaust; that is has the capacity to "transform" rather than merely "transmit a passive knowledge."<sup>21</sup> In contrast to the active discouragement of visitors to engage physically with artefacts that characterised museums in the past, many museums now attempt to lead visitors to the conceptual and analytical via the sensory and experienced. As Chakrabarty says, "[f]or the politics of experience orients us to the realms of the senses and the embodied."<sup>22</sup>

This rise of experiential modes of engagement in museums has prompted a reinvestment in objects and their physicality. In new Holocaust museums, artefacts play a particularly significant role in producing the intensity of visitors' experiences. The exhibition at USHMM includes a section of paving from Chlodna Street, which was once inside the Warsaw Ghetto. The banality of these cobblestones, with such horrific associations, forges a powerful material link with the historical narrative of the Ghetto. Similarly, the exhibition includes trunks of trees actually taken from the Rudniki Forest in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union, where Jewish partisans sheltered, a Polish cattle car that was used to transport prisoners to death camps, upon rails from Treblinka, and a large mound of shoes from Majdanek that were confiscated from prisoners by the Nazis. The importance of the physicality of objects in creating strong affective experiences was understood clearly in the planning of USHMM. Liliane Weissberg conveys an anecdote from Miles Lerman, formerly the National Campaign Chairman and Chair of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, in which he was asked to pose for a photograph holding a child's shoe from a Polish camp. Lerman was "devastated" in the moment in which he held the shoe in his hand. Weissberg points out "an object like a shoe should aid identification and bridge time." But Lerman did not speak about any shoes, but the shoes of a child whose innocence was made palpable by an object. "Innocence and victim hood came into one's grasp. The Museum [USHMM] wanted to repeat this experience, even if the objects were beyond the visitor's reach."<sup>23</sup> Like USHMM, the IWM's Holocaust Exhibition in London chose to adopt what Andrew Hoskins calls a "purist" approach,<sup>24</sup> drawing heavily upon Holocaust artefacts to produce intense affective experiences. Although often protected by barriers or glass, many of the IWM's exhibits allow visitors to relate to the objects fairly intimately within their own space. Andreas Huyssen suggests that the materiality of museum objects has become particularly vital in our current cultural conditions: "the museum object, formerly criticised as deadening reification, takes on a different role in a culture dominated by the fleeting image on the screen and the immateriality of communications."<sup>25</sup> Indeed, despite the prevalence of interactive multimedia technologies in museums such as the Museum of Tolerance (which publicly projects itself as a "high tech, hands-on experiential museum that focuses on two central themes through unique interactive exhibits"),<sup>26</sup> objects remain indispensable to conveying experience and memory. Timothy W Luke argues that the multimedia interactive displays of the Museum of Tolerance are "often weightless."<sup>27</sup> He notes:

There is also an array of Holocaust artefacts displays [in the Museum], including correspondence from Anne Frank, a bunker from the Majdanek

death camp, and Nazi accoutrements. These low-tech displays on the Nazi Party and Nazi Terror, however, house one of the museum's most riveting exhibits: a standard issue G-98 Mauser rifle.<sup>28</sup>

Luke concludes that "[o]f all the high-tech experiential moments in this theatre of cruelty, none approaches the impact of this one simple, static exhibit."<sup>29</sup>

I recently encountered a similar Mauser Karabiner 98k carbine during an excursion to the Sydney Jewish Museum with a group of postgraduate students, which lead me to consider the peculiar capacity of objects to convey certain kinds of memory and experience, in potently affective ways. This particular Mauser was manufactured by Steyr-Daimler-Puch in 1943 at a factory in the north of Austria, using a slave labour workforce of between 1200 and 2000 prisoners from the Mauthausen system of concentration camps. The rifle has been used extensively and it is estimated to have fired 30 000 rounds. It is a cruelly-ironic material manifestation of the brutality of the Nazi regime, which forced labourers to produce the instruments of their own oppression and destruction. At this cognitive level, this is a highly significant and meaningful object. During the class visit, however, its affective potency was made explicit. As part of a behind-the-scenes tour of the Museum, the curator, Jane Wesley, brought a number of artefacts out of the storeroom and placed them on a table in front of the students. As the Mauser was taken from its packing and placed amongst the other artefacts, the atmosphere in the room noticeably changed. The tension amongst the students was palpable. Some later expressed their unexpected distress in encountering this object. The Mauser is such a powerfully affective object that it has remained locked away in the storeroom and has never been displayed publicly.<sup>30</sup> However, in what ways are such encounters meaningful for a post-Holocaust generation, such as that of my students? James E Young similarly asks, "beyond affect, what does our knowledge of these objects have to do with our knowledge of historical events? More specifically, what do we understand of the killers and victims through their remains?"<sup>31</sup>

For survivors of the Holocaust, an object like the Mauser has the capacity to evoke direct memories of experiences of events. In an encounter with the same Mauser, David Benedikt, a Holocaust survivor and volunteer guide at the Sydney Jewish Museum, recalled being present at mass executions, where squads with similar rifles would kill fifteen people at a time. The Mauser, in Benedikt's own words, "is something that holds a memory."<sup>32</sup> The Mauser also sparks vivid traumatic memories for other Holocaust survivor guides at the Museum;<sup>33</sup> for many of them, it is too horrific to display.<sup>34</sup> For the postgraduate class who encountered the Mauser, which was introduced simply as "a Nazi rifle made in a concentration camp," its physical presence also evokes *something* – but what?

Of course, the students' experiences of the Mauser are different to that of Benedikt or other Holocaust survivors. For a Holocaust survivor the Mauser comes embedded in lived experience; for a post-Holocaust generation, the Mauser is contextualised by historical narratives.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, such objects *do* have the capacity to momentarily rupture narrative for post-Holocaust generations, with affective consequences. At the IWM's Holocaust Exhibition, a similarly affective object provides a shocking rupture in the Exhibition's narrative flow. A marble dissection table, used in Hitler's T4 program and found at a psychiatric hospital in Kaufbeuren-Irsee, is placed at the top of the stairs that lead visitors from the Exhibition's upper to the lower floor. As Suzanne Bardgett, the Exhibition's project director, describes it, this "deeply disturbing object" provides a "physical and historical 'crisis point' between the Exhibition's two floors."<sup>35</sup> The table is positioned at the top of the stairs, to the left of visitors as they descend. It combines the unavoidable physical rupture of the exhibition narrative (moving from one floor to the next) with the object's potential to punctuate visitors' experiences. Andrew Hoskins talks about these moments of rupture in this Exhibition as "event time," which is "to be within a time-frame of an event that seems to 'punctuate' history because of its extraordinary and/or catastrophic nature is literally to be in a 'time out of time.'"<sup>36</sup> This experience of time is similar to what Walter Benjamin calls "shock experience"<sup>37</sup> such as with "fear, revulsion and horror."<sup>38</sup> He relates this to his idea of *erlebnis*, a kind of rupturing experience that is differentiated from *erfahrung*, which relates to more accumulated and continuous experience.<sup>39</sup> Taking his cues from Marcel Proust, Benjamin closely associates the rupture of *erlebnis* with "involuntary memory" and *erfahrung* with "voluntary memory."<sup>40</sup> "Voluntary memory" is the common understanding of memory in which we recall episodes of narrative experience from the linear and historically contextualised narratives of the past. It is memory that operates at a more cognitive level and so is more easily articulated, as Benjamin says "voluntary memory... is at the service of the intellect."<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, involuntary memory is when an event experience is triggered, effectively bringing the event experience into the present. Benjamin's example of involuntary memory is the oft-cited passage from Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* in which the narrator encounters a "madeleine," a small tea cake, the taste of which evokes a vivid involuntary memory.<sup>42</sup> Until the moment that they are recalled, involuntary memories are compressed into the spaces between narrative experiences. They are often recalled by sensory encounters with objects, like Proust's madeleine, which act as a mnemonic. These highly subjective, unique, complex and enmeshed associations exist within us, in what Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* calls "carnal formulae." These memories are

us as much as they are ours. As Paul Crowther says, they are “not so much mental ‘pictures’ or memory-images,”<sup>43</sup> but are rather layered and ingrained in our habituated embodied interaction with the world. In the moment in which it is recalled, involuntary memory repeats past experience of an event within present experience. The experience effectively causes a momentary temporal collapse—hence Hoskin’s idea of “event time.” As Esther Leslie says, “involuntary memory provides an unexpected, shocking link between an experience in the present and one in the past. It disrupts linearity, confounds temporality.”<sup>44</sup> Ernst van Alphen similarly argues that this kind of memory “does not know that distance towards the event.”<sup>45</sup> Like Benjamin, van Alphen argues that we can make similar distinctions between these different kinds of memory associated with different orders of experience. Narrative memory, van Alphen says, “consists of mental constructs which people use to make sense out of experience. Current and familiar experiences are automatically assimilated or integrated in existing mental structures,”<sup>46</sup> while “traumatic memories” “take the form of drama, not narrative.” He says, “narrative memory is retroversive, it takes place after the event. A traumatic memory, or better, re-enactment, does not know that distance towards the event.”<sup>47</sup>

With artefacts, Holocaust museums attempt to recreate an element of the event experience of victims and survivors for those who were not present at those events, but in order to make this possible, event experience, which van Alphen calls “failed experience,” is effectively rehabilitated into narrative experience—which it never was. The unfathomable depth of shocking event experiences are converted into the flatness of words. In translating event experience into verbalised cognitive information, that experience becomes narrative and linear. A survivor’s encounter with an artefact might trigger episodes of event experience, but how can post-Holocaust generations access more-than-cognitive information about the event experience? As with Proust’s description of the madeleine, we cannot *actually* experience the memory it evokes for him, of Aunt Léonie’s “old grey house.”<sup>48</sup> Although visitors can never access the memories of other’s experiences, however, their engagements with objects *can* be such that they resonate with those experiences. This present-day echoing of experience brings visitors into an empathic relationship with those subjectivities of the past. Take, for example, the shoes amongst those piled up at a number of Holocaust museums. They are not merely “shoes,” but “footless shoes,” as Young notes, “in great loose piles, these remnants remind us of the lives that once animated them.”<sup>49</sup> When visitors engage with these shoes, they partially reanimate them through empathic identification. The physical encounter with these shoes may well recall everyday lived experiences with shoes, which are,

after all, banal personal effects in the Western world. These profoundly abject shoes also appeal to our familiar lived and embodied habits. This illustrates the ways in which objects, unlike two-dimensional images or textual descriptions, can be meaningful because of how they relate to the habits of our embodiment. Through this functional parallel, visitors connect empathically with the murdered owners of these shoes. For visitors, this empathy ruptures an otherwise simple narrative experience of the object. It is no longer safely located within a linear history. Instead, the object is momentarily ripped from its distanced historical context. In this contiguous spatial relationship, the time between the visitor’s present and the past of the “event” is effectively compressed.

The meanings of these kinds of empathic experience of objects are, however, sometimes unpredictable. Visitors’ encounters with objects are subject to the volatility of meaning inherent in the dynamism of spatial relationships. In other words, while an object’s meanings are determined by social and temporal contexts and therefore not fixed in time, its meanings are also profoundly influenced by our spatio-bodily relation to them.<sup>50</sup> From moment to moment, as we move within the space we share with an object, our shifting perceptions alter that object’s meanings. Engaging an object like the Mauser gives a clear understanding of this. The meanings of the Mauser are radically altered by the ways in which our bodies relate to a range of the objects’ perceived possible functions—its meaning changes, depending upon our physical position in relation to it. If we are positioned at the butt-end of the Mauser, we engage with the object in a functional relationship that appeals to our habits, with the trigger habitually inviting a finger. Positioned at the muzzle-end, however, the meaning of the rifle is quite different. From one position to another, the meaning of our engagement with the Mauser makes the profoundly significant shift from a parallel with perpetrator to that with a victim.

Although we might empathise with the prisoners that actually encountered these objects during the Holocaust, these empathic relationships are not based on fixed individual subjective identification. We might identify at an individual level, but the anonymity of the past subjects that encountered these objects means that their subjectivity is also interchangeable and generalisable. This interchangeability enables a politics of experience by disabling a politics of identity. In doing so, this politics of experience also enables a politics of pity. According to Luc Boltanski, the “unfortunate” “must be hyper-singularised through an accumulation of the details of suffering and, at the same time, underqualified: it is he [sic], but it could be someone else; it is that child there who makes us cry, but any other child could have done the same. Around each unfortunate brought forward crowds a host of replacements.”<sup>51</sup> Walking through the cattle car at USHMM, the

threatening encounter momentarily concretises museum visitors as surrogates of the victims. It is not, however, an individual subjectivity with which visitors empathise, but generalisable and interchangeable subjectivities. Of course, unlike the actual prisoners that visitors' positions parallel, there is no involuntary memory to intrude into the present, no traumatic event experience to resurface. Quite obviously, the encounters of post-Holocaust generations with Holocaust artefacts can never equate with the lived experience of Holocaust survivors and victims. The momentary empathy, however, effectively collapses time in the imagination of visitors, and this in itself ruptures the continuity of narrative experience. Although that rupture is not caused by a direct memory of a Holocaust event experience, it is an event experience in itself. That is to say, the post-Holocaust generation visitor's moment of empathy ruptures cognitive historical narratives of the Holocaust and, in that moment, the narrative experience that insulates them from the event is ruptured. For Holocaust museums, whose stock and trade is the discoursing of history through memory, the affective capacities of objects play a vital role. In a discussion about the Sydney Jewish Museum's Mauser, John Weiner, one of their survivor guides, emphasises the vital visceral power that objects can have:

There are some museums where the objects speak to the intellect. It is important to speak to the gut. Documents speak to the eyes, photographs speak to the imagination, but objects speak to the gut. They bite into you.<sup>52</sup>

The ongoing attitude shift in many museums makes these kinds of encounters with objects more possible. The shift towards a more subjective and negotiable understanding of knowledge opens up a less didactic approach to narrative. This in turn allows narratives to be multifaceted, fragmented and even ruptured. As Chakrabarty points out, this approach to knowledge also correlates with a greater valuing of experience in comparison to disseminating cognitive knowledge and manifested in greater degrees of experiential engagement in the museum space.

With visitors streaming through Holocaust museums in their millions and engaging in intensely emotional experiences (according to the Bardgett "there is no doubt that our visitors are profoundly affected"), is the onus of remembrance unproblematically met?<sup>53, 54</sup> Ironically, it is perhaps as a result of their success that these museums attract the strongest criticisms: ultimately, are these museums merely "the latest incarnation of the tourist destination," as Linenthal suggests.<sup>55</sup> If the shift of museums towards more experiential engagements with visitors makes them more like theme parks, as some commentators suggest, are Holocaust museums morbid theme parks of death?<sup>56</sup> Timothy W Luke argues

that the USHMM acts like a "lost province excised from Disneyland—it is a Nightmareland, not Fantasyland; Downerland, not Adventureland; Yesterdayland, not Tomorrowland – wrapped up in streamlined perfection."<sup>57</sup>

J John Lennon and Malcolm Foley coined the term "dark tourism" in the late 1990s in response to the "ethical dilemma" inherent in what they perceive as an increasing interest in the consumption of tourism products relating to tragedies: "The concept [of dark tourism] embodies remembrance, interpretation, the simulation of experiences, and the critical importance of reproduction/duplication and the presence of various forms of media at specific locations."<sup>58, 59</sup> More recently, Lennon and Foley question both the intention and effects of the USHMM: "museums are obliged to win and reward the attention of the visitor. Museums are an entertainment form as well as an educative one."<sup>60</sup>

"It is possible," Linenthal similarly asks;

that the Holocaust and the bombing in Oklahoma City have become desirable market commodities in the never-ending quest to produce—and in the hunger to consume—the most experientially authentic and subjectively intense version of 'the real'."

Do we really need the manufactured intimacy of such experience to learn what seem like the most basic lessons about processes of dehumanisation and murder?<sup>61</sup>

Linenthal wonders if Holocaust museums merely "stir voyeuristic and pornographic impulses." Holocaust museums, however, might be accused of more than merely pandering to the consumption of images of suffering. They trade in intense emotional experiences that move their visitors, often to tears.

Is this transmission and consumption of intense emotional experiences necessarily ethically problematic? As Lennon and Foley point out, the question of intention is important. We know the intention of a museum like USHMM is to make us "identify with the protagonists" as its Founding Director, Jeshajahu Weinberg, states.<sup>62</sup> The powerful empathic experiences we can have through objects, however, can be highly contingent and dynamic. As with an encounter of the Mauser, looking down its sights towards the space of the victim, we might enter the empathic space of the perpetrator. This potential to identify with the perpetrator unleashes a whole raft of further questions and debate. Museums can contextualise objects within interpretive frameworks that they direct, but, as Linenthal notes, intentions cannot necessarily determine effects:

Why do we assume that such emotionally charged spectacles will lead visitors to the kinds of social engagement envisioned by the creators? Might

they be just as likely to produce an even greater appetite for the horror spectacle, a lust for vicarious immersion in the sadistic abstraction of others' annihilation?<sup>63</sup>

Indeed, if Holocaust museums can generate empathic relationships with those who suffered they may also generate empathy for perpetrators, despite any righteous intentions. Moreover, is such identification with the perpetrators necessarily contrary to the onus of remembrance or, as van Alphen suggests, might this too have potential pedagogical functions that have yet to be properly explored?<sup>64</sup> USHMM attempts to direct empathic identification more firmly by distributing individualised ID cards to visitors, each carrying the identity and story of one particular victim or survivor. Visitors follow the story of the person on their own particular card as they move through the narrative of the exhibition. From the point of view of a visitor whose empathic response is as any Holocaust museum intends, there is still the difficult issue of commitment. As Luc Boltanski argues, the "politics of pity" inherent in Holocaust museums problematises what he calls "the question of commitment."<sup>65</sup> Visitors commit the time and (often) entrance fees, and within those hours in the museum they often invest in a meaningful and intense experience of the museums resources. The "surplus" of this investment, however, is not entirely clear; what do Holocaust museums meaningfully produce in the longer term? If Holocaust museums fulfil their intentions, and visitors are compelled by a sense of universalistic humanitarianism to pity, then what does this pity produce? And, if the visitors commit their pity, what *else* are they then being asked to commit? Ironically, the experiential approach, which can enable an intense empathic identification with those who suffered in the Holocaust, can also function to isolate the Holocaust from our everyday experience of our world, in the here and now. Visitors to the Holocaust museums enter a space that, while being about real events, people and place, is displaced and spatio-temporally re-imagined. They are effectively disconnected from the psychogeography of Washington DC, London or Berlin and the present, and enter the rarefied space of the Holocaust, within World War II and the 1930s and 1940s. Within this imaginary space-time, the Holocaust becomes a kind of Baudrillardian hyperreality that draws a certain cultural value from other signs—movies, television dramas, documentaries—but remains isolated. Within this spatio-temporal capsule, visitors are shocked, disturbed and affected, lessons are learned, and sincere commitments are demanded of them. Once outside the Museum, however, nothing can substantially bind visitors to those commitments; many visitors discard their victim/survivor ID cards as they leave USHMM. Ultimately, Holocaust museums cannot impose monovalent

readings on objects, ensure particular kinds of identification from visitors or *demand* commitment, since that is fundamentally what characterises the fascism against which they are opposed.

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#### NOTES

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- 9 Linenthal, *Preserving Memory* 4.
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- 11 *Ibid* 1–56.
- 12 *Ibid* 171.
- 13 Weinberg, *The Holocaust Museum in Washington* 187.
- 14 *Ibid* 57.
- 15 *Ibid* 153.
- 16 James Ingo Freed, quoted in Weinberg, *The Holocaust Museum in Washington* 25.
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- 28 Ibid.
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The *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* is the refereed journal of the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand.

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Art & Ethics, Volume 4, Number 2, 2003 and Volume 5, Number 1, 2004

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ISSN 1443-4318

Masthead design concept by Greendot Design  
Printed by Southwood Press

# Art & Ethics

Volume 4, Number 2, 2003, and Volume 5, Number 1, 2004

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## CITATION

This issue may be cited as: volume 4, number 2, 2003, and volume 5, number 1, 2004 and follows on from the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, vol 4, no 1, 2003.

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