



Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej (Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe)

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Victims of the Holocaust in Museum Exhibitions. New Ways of Representation

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Opublikowany online: 30.06.2017

Sposób cytowania: A. Ziębińska-Witek, *Victims of the Holocaust in Museum Exhibitions. New Ways of Representation*, „Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej”, 14 (2016), z. 2, s. 135-152.

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Victims of the Holocaust in Museum Exhibitions. New Ways of Representation*

Abstract: Museums of the Holocaust appeal to powerful emotions, since their objective is to offer a moving experience that confronts visitors with difficult questions, or even takes them to the limits that defy comprehension. These exhibitions do not deal with affirmative history but with events that no one would like to identify with. One of the most important problems is the representation of the victims without using drastic and brutal images. Paradoxically, the difficulties and doubts related to the necessary task of representing the Shoah force museums of the Holocaust to embrace new forms of portraying the past and resort to the latest exhibition strategies capable of emotionally involving the public. In my paper, I would like to show how Polish exhibitions create new forms of narration, combine multiple discourses, search for new modes of communication (including artistic expression) and confront viewers with difficult knowledge. I would talk about two examples: so-called *Central Sauna* in Auschwitz-Birkenau and *The Primer* installation at Majdanek Museum.

Keywords: Holocaust, museum, representation, historical exhibitions, memory studies.

The change of the paradigm of commemoration and representation of the past which takes place nowadays in Poland sets new tasks for museums of the Holocaust. The difficulties and doubts related to the difficult task of representing the Shoah cause museums of the Holo-

* This article is based on research funded by the National Science Centre (research project number 2014/13/B/HS3/04886).

caust to embrace new forms of portraying the past and resort to the latest exhibition strategies capable of cultivating empathy of the public. Such exhibitions create new forms of narration, combine multiple discourses, search for new modes of communication (including artistic expression) and confront viewers with difficult knowledge. The present article describes two examples: the so-called *Central Sauna* in Auschwitz-Birkenau and *The Primer* installation at Majdanek.

1. The Central Sauna in Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum

By the authority of the resolution of the Parliament of the Polish People's Republic of 1947 the area of the former Nazi camp Auschwitz-Birkenau was declared a memorial to the martyrdom of the Polish nation and other peoples and an infrangible space as such.¹ In the museum, as in all other memorials created in the areas of the former death and concentration camps, the main component of a narrative matrix is the area itself as well as the post-camp relics. The latter include buildings and material remains such as barbed wire fences, watch-towers, barracks, charring facilities, gas chambers and crematories. 'With this concept of a martyrdom memorial,' Irena Grzesiuk-Olszewska writes, 'visitors are not simply passive receivers but they are dragged into a paratheatrical space arrangement and become co-actors experiencing what the author-director of that individual performance forces upon them.'² However, we cannot forget that the place is, above all, a cemetery. It contains graves and ashes of hundreds of thousands of murdered people of different nationalities, most of them Jewish, and the priority of the museum is to preserve the memory of the victims and to care for their graves.³ A separate group of artefacts consists of objects belonging to the prisoners and the camp documentation. A permanent exhibition has been arranged in the post-camp

1 *Przewodnik po upamiętnionych miejscach walk i męczeństwa. Lata wojny 1939-1945*, Rada Ochrony Pomników Walki i Męczeństwa, ed. Cz. Czubryt-Borkowski, Warszawa 1988, p. 84.

2 I. Grzesiuk-Olszewska, *Polska rzeźba pomnikowa w latach 1945-1995*, Warszawa 1995, p. 19.

3 The monuments were erected in Treblinka and Chelm in 1964, in Sobibor in 1965, in Brzezinka (Birkenau) in 1967, in Sztutowo in 1968, in Majdanek – 1969, *ibidem*, p. 44. A permanent exhibition and a monument in the area of the death camp in Belzec were made available to visitors in 2004.

barracks of the Auschwitz I camp. What makes the most shocking impression is the presence of glass showcases filled up to the ceiling with artificial limbs, glasses, toothbrushes, suitcases and women's hair. This way of commemoration seems controversial. How do we perceive victims and perpetrators through those remains? According to Young, in a perversely ironic way, they make us see victims exactly like the Nazis intended, i.e. as ruins of a destroyed civilization. We get to know the victims only by their absence, through the moment of their extermination. Piles of objects remind us not about the lives that animated them but about their dramatic disruption. When the memory of people is reduced to scraps of things which belonged to them, the memory of their lives, relationships, families, education, tradition and community is irrevocably lost. The adoption of that way of showing artefacts threatens us with the situation in which murderers themselves commemorate their victims.⁴

The creators of a new exhibition in the building of the so-called *Central Sauna* on the premises of Birkenau applied a new concept of commemoration addressing the risk of instrumental treatment of victims, the risk Young strongly emphasized. Since the beginning of the existence of the museum, the area of the former camp in Birkenau where the Nazis built four huge crematoria with gas chambers has had a profile of a reserve. There were no exhibitions there. Visitors had access to authentic camp objects as well as to the ruins of the blown up gas chambers, crematoria and combustion pits where the bodies of those killed with gas had been burnt. In 1967 in the Birkenau area, the international monument to the victims of Nazism was erected. In 1990, the Preservation Commission of the International Council under the leadership of Professor Bohdan Rymaszewski univocally defined the basic preservation principles binding for all actions aiming at maintaining post-camp facilities in proper condition. The principle of preservation of the existing state was adopted, assuming that 'a place where everything must be true cannot be, even partly, a model or an arrangement. There cannot be introduced any artificial stresses nor strengthened speculations. Generally speaking, as far as the whole

4 J. E. Young, *The Texture of Memory, Holocaust Memorial and Meaning*, New Haven and London 1993, pp. 132-133.

complex is concerned, preservation actions should not allow any new elements of the contemporary town to create a unity with the camp.⁵ In October 1997, the museum announced a closed competition for an artistic and architectural arrangement of the interior of the building of the former Sauna. The aim of the competition was to find an optimal creative concept for the building arrangement, taking into account the character of a historic object and preservations of its architectural substance. On the 2nd of May, a design by Barbara Borkowska and Jacek Stoklosa was selected for accomplishment.⁶

The bath-disinfection building called the Central Camp Sauna in the division BIIG (The Station /The Disinfection Facility) was opened by Nazis in December 1943. It was an integral element of the intensively extending Birkenau camp in connection with its new role of a pivotal extermination centre, and a place of plunder of victims' property as well as the point of concentration, exploitation and transportation of the slave labour force to Germany. It was mainly a reception facility where prisoners, both men and women, destined to be placed in the camp went through the initial procedure. From December 1943 until January 1944 tens of thousands of Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners had gone through the Sauna. In mid-1944, during the period of particularly intensive transports, a few thousand people per day were taken for disinfection. Numerous groups of prisoners transferred from Auschwitz to other camps underwent disinfection in that place. As a part of a *standard delousing*, prisoners staying mainly in the BIID section in the so-called Birkenau men's camp were led to the Sauna.⁷

'A sauna is a bath and a bath is a place of bathing,' Władysław Niessner observes. 'A bath in the culture of the world symbolizes mainly purification, renewal, rebirth, return to the source of life, to the primary water habitat, to the primitive matter. A bath is a subconscious willingness to come back to the mother's womb, relaxation, feeling of

5 W. Niessner, *Sauna jako obiekt architektoniczny, jego zachowania i konserwacja*, in: *Architektura zbrodni. Budynek tzw. centralnej sauny w KL Auschwitz II-Birkenau*, ed. T. Świebocka, Oświęcim 2001, p. 164.

6 T. Świebocka, T. Zbrzeska, *Projekt aranżacji wnętrza budynku byłej łaźni obozowej w Birkenau i wykorzystania go do celów upamiętniających i informacyjnych*, in: *ibidem*, pp. 199-200. Sauna was opened to visitors in 2001.

7 A. Strzelecki, *Historia, rola i działanie centralnej sauny obozowej w KL Auschwitz II-Birkenau*, in: *ibidem*, pp. 13, 21, 37.

safety and security, a moment of forgetfulness, lack of responsibility. A bath is also a universal ritual consecrating the most important moments of life, the impregnating and fertilizing force. In the religions of the East and the West (it is) the force consecrating body and soul. (...) The Sauna was supposed to be and became for thousands of people the realization of the way to non-existence, a cruel process of transformation of a living human into a camp number. Although it did not become the vestibule to death for everybody, it played a role of debasement of the human being.⁸ In order to make it possible for visitors to understand what happened in that place, the authors of the winning concept suggested that the visitors should follow the same route, leading through the same interiors where both newcomers and prisoners directed for bath and disinfection would walk. A novelty in comparison with the exhibition in Auschwitz I was the idea that all rooms and halls should be described in a very laconic way and contain only the most important information. The principle of supplying visitors with as many facts as possible was abandoned. A special atmosphere of a place that appeals to emotions was created instead. It was assumed that all information carriers and their contents should be unobtrusive so that they can provide visitors with information but they should not overwhelm the interiors and their specific architecture.⁹ The direction of movement is marked by a special platform protecting the original floor. 'We decided,' Niessner writes, 'that the Sauna floor was one of the most valuable, authentic elements of the building. In spite of much damage, it makes a moving document, preserving the traces of a huge number of people stepping out of it into non-existence. It is a silent witness to a horrifying practice, the essence of the way of torment. In the religions of the world, the elements of the road, travel, pilgrimage, reincarnation, an underground or aerial travelling mean spiritual moving forward, entering the esoteric sphere. (...) In case of the Sauna, this conventionally measured, straight, barely 200 meter route, where tens of thousands of people were chased, symbolizes the road to hell.'¹⁰

8 W. Niessner, *op. cit.*, pp. 176-177.

9 T. Świebocka, T. Zbrzeska, *op. cit.*, pp. 196-197.

10 W. Niessner, *op. cit.*, pp. 180-181.

In almost all accounts of prisoners that concrete floor of the Sauna stuck most in their memories. It was where their clothes were thrown during humiliating undressing. They were chased barefoot on its cold surface. It was where they would sit for hours waiting for whatever was to happen. Out of all the components of the Sauna, its floor – 1600 square meters – was acknowledged as the most important *relic*. Therefore, technical actions were limited to the minimum. The surface was cleaned from dirt and refuse accumulated throughout the years, the crumbings of damaged edges were removed, but wastage and rifts were preserved.¹¹ After walking on a special platform, through all the rooms in the building, the visitors are familiarized with other elements of the exhibition. These are photographs taken before the Holocaust, confiscated from the people sent to the camp. The collection consists of about 2400 individual and group photographs. They were found after the war in the area of the former camp at Auschwitz.¹² They show people in familiar situations: celebrating births, being in love, admiring the beauty of nature, participating in important events from their private, professional and social lives. That seems to follow Young's suggestions, the more so since it was possible to identify some people and reconstruct their biographies. Each identified picture deprives the murdered of their anonymity, gives them back their identity and enables visitors to identify with individual victims. It is difficult to identify with somebody who was devoid of any characteristics distinguishing them from other prisoners by Nazis' exertions. It is much easier done by looking at pictures taken in everyday situations. Moreover, it brings life back to the victims, the life they led before the Holocaust. It does not let people perceive them solely by the fact that they were in the camp, by their suffering and death. It signifies their life and their identities before the camp. Finally, the authors of the concept pushed into the background the task of supplying visitors with the extensive detailed information in exchange for giving them an opportunity to experience and feel the climate of the place.

It has been known for a long time that all mimetic attempts to transmit the experiences of concentration camps prisoners fail to succeed.

11 Ibidem, pp. 192–193.

12 T. Świebocka, T. Zbrzeska, op. cit., pp. 197–198.

No matter how many facts are given, we are not able to come closer to the trauma experienced by thousands of people. It often results in failing into kitsch, pomposity or shallow sentimentality. In fact the limits of realistic representation of what happened in the camps became known in immediately after their liberation. Soldiers were unable to imagine what those places had been like. Possibly the attempt to create the mere climate of menace and hopelessness means more than the attempt to give plenty of information because it might cause the so-called secondary experience of the past giving rise to melancholy and nostalgia. It seems obvious that we face the necessity of changing forms of museum transmission in order to incite the work of our memory, to create new sensitivity and historical awareness.

2. The Primer

2. The State Museum at Majdanek was founded just after World War II on the grounds of the former concentration camp at Majdanek near Lublin (now a part of Lublin). The first historical exhibition was opened in 1945; the latest (the fourth) was launched in 1996. 1969 saw the unveiling of the Monument to Struggle and Martyrdom and the Mausoleum by Wiktor Tołkin, one of the main exponents of Polish monument sculpture. At present, partially reconstructed prison barracks house the exhibition entitled *Majdanek in the System of Concentration Camps*. The exhibition includes the camp bath barracks, gas chambers, prisoner field III, the former utility warehouse, and the crematorium. The concept of the exhibition is geared to convey the authentic experience of the victims and inspire a sense of authentic bond with the past by taking advantage of the actual location and relics of the camp. The exhibitions must not be more important than the camp grounds; they must not eclipse or dominate the camp with modern techniques. On the contrary, they should play an auxiliary role, as their task is merely to help visitors discover the camp's history.¹³

13 The same applies to the grounds of the former Nazi camp Auschwitz-Birkenau, see: V. Knigge, *Teren byłego obozu a wystawa historyczna*, in: *Chronić dla przyszłości. Międzynarodowa Konferencja Konserwatorska, Oświęcim 23-25 czerwca 2003 roku*, Oświęcim 2003, pp. 115-116.

On the 19th May 2003 the State Museum at Majdanek opened the exhibition/artistic installation *The Primer* dedicated to the children incarcerated in the camp (according to Edward Balawejder, the then-museum director, children made up 6% of the total 200 thousand prisoners of Majdanek).¹⁴ In his project, Tomasz Pietrasiewicz, the author of the exposition, tells the story of four children: a Pole – Janina Buczek Różańska, a Bielarussian – Piotr Kiriszczenko and two Jews – Henio Żytomirski and Halina Birenbaum. All except for Henio Żytomirski survived the Shoah. Those four children and their fate are meant to symbolically reflect the number and the situation of children of different nationalities who were incarcerated at the Majdanek concentration camp.

Barrack 53, where the exposition is located, has been divided into two parts, each representing two different worlds: a normal childhood and the world of concentration camps. The element that joins the two realities (at the same time revealing drastic differences between them) is the title *Primer*. ‘Of course, it’s a great simplification,’ Pietrasiewicz says, ‘since a four-year-old child doesn’t have much to do with the primer, but for me it has become a general metaphor of childhood. It is particularly true of those times [...] after all, there were no thousands of colour children books back then but just that one so characteristic book. The primer taught children to recognise and name the world. It dealt with the most fundamental and most important concepts for every human being [...]’¹⁵ Another element from the *normal* world is a blackboard.

In the camp, children had to learn a new primer that included previously unknown concepts: transport, hunger, a gas chamber, death. In this part of the barrack, Pietrasiewicz put the frame of a freight car as a symbol of the Shoah and concrete wells fixed in the ground. ‘Looking inside, we can only see darkness. The wells are empty; you only hear the voices of the children I’ve chosen. From the depths, from the entrails of the earth, from that hell, they are telling you about their

¹⁴ G. Józefczuk, *Głosy ze studni*, Gazeta Wyborcza Lublin, 20.05.2003, p. 4.

¹⁵ All quotations of Tomasz Pietrasiewicz have been drawn from an interview conducted by the author of the article in April 2005.

childhood. Those who speak are the ones who've survived the hell; one well is silent. Henio is silent.'

Along the walls of the barrack, there lie clay tablets on which fragments of camp memoirs have been recorded. The texts on the tablets are arranged in such a way as to reflect each stage of the camp experience.

The exhibition also includes a separate information section (directly at the barrack entry) where the visitor can consult catalogues and find historical facts concerning, among other things, the lives of the protagonists of the exhibition. Other elements of the information section are small boxes containing transparencies of the Majdanek children's faces. Looking inside through an opening, the viewer can see only one face at a time. Identical boxes placed by the back wall of the barrack contain no photographs. Looking inside, we see the space beyond the room. 'The faces are gone because what remains of those children is in the air, in the landscape, where they dissolved. In the ash, earth, dust.' The barrack is in semi-darkness, and a loudspeaker plays the hubbub of children's voices (recorded in a corridor of a Lublin school).

From the moment we cross the threshold of the barracks, we realise that Pietrasiewicz's project is not a classic historical exhibition. The basic principles of building a historical exhibition – irrespective of its kind – remain the same for all museums: first of all, the exhibition must agree with the latest findings of history as a scientific discipline (it must reflect facts and historical phenomena as well as the basic methodological assumptions of history). The requirement that the exhibition should meet scientific standards involves further consequences: among other things, the collection must be presented in such a way as to convey logically structured information that systemises and organises knowledge, as well as to provide visitors with impressions. In order to achieve these objectives, the structure of the exhibition scenario as well as the grouping and arrangement of the exhibits should ensure that they form a cohesive and lucid whole, where individual presented phenomena are connected by causal, temporal and spatial relationships, and where the secondary, subordinate subjects spring from the central topic of the exhibition.¹⁶

16 P. Unger, *Muzea w nauczaniu historii*, Warszawa 1988, p. 18.

An important question in constructing a historical exhibition is the use of authentic objects. In most cases they represent a specific concept/vision of history, but are treated with reverence despite their usually limited artistic value. According to some scholars, an exhibit simply has to be authentic since it is the authenticity that determines its value as a material document for research.¹⁷ Authentic objects legitimize the accompanying descriptive captions, lending the whole narrative the appearance of being objective, scientific and true.

Actually, Pietrasiewicz's exhibition conforms to none of the above principles since from the very beginning the author deliberately rejected all the 'clichéd' solutions, as he calls them, characteristic of historical exhibitions. First of all, he did not use a single authentic object from the museum collection so as not to induce facile emotions: 'When a visitor to an exhibition sees original things from Majdanek, such as children's shoes or clothes, he no longer sees anything else. He can't stop asking: Wow! Is it authentic? Authentic shoes? Authentic this? Authentic that? Of course, certain emotions are much easier induced through an encounter with something real and authentic, but I didn't want that, I found it too simple. I developed my concept within a certain symbolism so I needed something else.'

Children's shoes, clothes and toys belong to the standard *repertoire* of objects traditionally used in the Shoah representations commemorating children. Pietrasiewicz's exhibition lacks also other characteristic elements that the viewer accustomed to specific forms of museum narration might expect: photographs, maps, charts, mock-ups and statistical data. What is authentic, however, are the witnesses' accounts, which Pietrasiewicz likens to *holy scripts*. 'I understood I didn't want to have any photos or captions in the camp section, the only comments can be the holy words from the Gospel, that is the witnesses' accounts, I knew I would use no other text. My decision not to use photographs here is connected with the fact that drastic Majdanek photos showing heaps of corpses cross a certain border of the victims' privacy and intimacy. As viewers we should not cross it, or even be put in a situation where we cross it unwittingly.'

17 J. Świecimski, *Wystawy muzealne*, t. 1: *Studium z estetyki wystaw*, Kraków 1992, pp. 66-67.

The layout of the few objects used is another contravention of the above-listed rules of composing an exhibition. The plaques are fixed to the floor, it is difficult to read the texts, and the semi-darkness in the room does not make the task easier. 'I deliberately made it inconvenient for the viewer, I didn't even light it well because I thought: if you go there, you must focus and concentrate – it's something more than just a sterile, well-lit exhibition – of course we know how to make it all readable – but I wanted just the opposite: an anti-exhibition. You'll have problems reading, you must bend down, but you can touch everything, I thought I would make you kneel because you can't read anything while standing.' Thus, the viewer – if they wish to fully comprehend the exhibition – is obliged to behave in ways that contradict their notion of a traditional museum exposition. It poses a certain difficulty to them and involves a confrontation with their expectations since the ways of telling traumatic stories have become common and trivialised by now, conforming to the prevalent convention. The symbolism of certain elements of the exhibition (concrete wells, plaques, boxes with openings) is by no means obvious and calls for reflection. For Pietrasiewicz, the principles of lucidity or accessibility are certainly less important than the search for new methods of representing the subject.

Does this way of organising the exhibition represent a critical weakness? Some judged the exhibition as controversial or even brutal as it 'played on the children's emotions'¹⁸ but, as a whole, it did not become the subject of deeper analysis. I will, therefore, begin with a fundamental point: no exposition – even if it were exceptionally clear and chock-full of authentic objects – it is not a static whole representing another whole (reality), but rather a space where at least three separate factors are involved: the creators of the objects, the curators who exhibit them, and the viewing public. There are two key observations to make here: firstly, all three factors are active; secondly, each of them is guided by different rules, which means the factors are not compatible in terms of their structures. The creator understands the object (and

18 M. Mizeracka, *Nawet chłopcy płaczą*, *Dziennik Wschodni*, 23.09.2004. It is worth observing that the exhibition is open to persons over 14 years of age, but – as Tomasz Pietrasiewicz emphasises – it should be viewed with a specially appointed guide.

his culture) spontaneously and directly, frequently without a rational self-awareness. He is a classic participant in the given culture. On the other hand, the objectives of the curator's activity are complex. They include organising a good exhibition and educating the public, and also presenting a specific concept (of culture or history). There is nothing wrong about it, but we should keep in mind that these objectives and determinants are entirely different from those of the object's creator. The third active factor is the viewer, that is the person who wishes to understand the object in functional or/and teleological terms. In the cultural sense, he has much in common with the curator (to a different extent) but their assumptions are by no means identical. These three factors interact in the intellectual sphere, where the viewer establishes some contact with both the curator and the creator of the object.¹⁹

The result of such an encounter is not entirely predictable in the sense that the creator of the exhibition cannot be sure if the vision he has created has been understood according to his intentions. Nor is it clear to what extent the exhibition achieves its educational objectives, and though it may serve to develop viewers' imagination, it does not necessarily speed up changes in human attitudes and mentality.

The number of objects is not decisive, either. According to research by John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, an exposition may contain dozens (or even hundreds) of objects, and yet the visitor will only view some of them. It depends on what he finds most attractive visually or intellectually, or quite simply on what catches his attention. It can be the colour, shape, size or illumination of the object, or any other criteria of his own. The same applies to the captions – in practice only some visitors read them, partially in most cases, and none reads all the texts.²⁰ We might assume that – paradoxically – when few objects are exhibited, they are viewed all and more carefully than when their number is greater.

Pietrasiewicz's exhibition can be faulted for lacking the *aura* produced by the exhibits' authenticity. It is worth pointing out, however, that in the case of historical exhibitions – particularly those concern-

19 M. Baxandall, *Exhibiting Intention. Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects*, in: *Exhibiting Cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. I. Karp and S. D. Lavine, Washington and London 1991, pp. 36-37.

20 J. H. Falk, L. D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience*, Washington 1992, pp. 70-71.

ing the Shoah – what matters most is the uniqueness of the object's story rather than the object itself. There is nothing particularly noteworthy about a bowl found in a camp, until we gain the knowledge that puts the object in a specific context (owning a bowl in a camp frequently meant survival). Therefore, objects (whether authentic or not) lose their significance when the visitor lacks appropriate knowledge or does not accept the underlying aesthetic or cultural values.

The lack of objects will constitute a particular constraint in the case of exhibitions that traditionally focus on them (object-driven exhibitions). When artefacts are the centre of attention – when they control the way the exposition develops, inform its subject and determine the modes of presenting the subject to the public – the lack of an object means that a given issue will remain unrepresented or under-represented. In such cases curators face a choice. Firstly, they could postpone the exposition until all requisite objects have been gathered. The point is that each object should be authentic and presented in proper historical surroundings. Secondly, they could create an exhibition excluding the issues they are unable to substantiate with authentic objects. In this case, it is the objects that determine which issues should be included and which excluded. The last solution is to depart from the concept of an object-driven exhibition and create a representation driven by the historical problem rather than available objects.²¹

That is exactly what Pietrasiewicz did in *The Primer*. In his view, the authority of a presentation does not derive primarily from objects. It is the event (and its authenticity) that is crucial, not things. While viewing an exposition the visitors participate in the space-time of the event and become the co-creators of its social significance. It must be emphasised that a direct encounter with an authentic historical object does not deepen the comprehension of a given historical event, process, or mechanism. Obviously, an object can be a source of information but it is never the information itself.

One more question remains - in my opinion the most important one. The question is how the subject of the exhibition affects the way it is organized/constructed. Exhibitions on the Holocaust belong to

21 S. R. Crew and J. E. Sims, *Locating Authenticity. Fragments of a Dialogue*, in: *Exhibiting Cultures*, pp. 165, 167.

the genre of so-called *difficult exhibitions*. The term *a difficult exhibition* (introduced by Jennifer Bonnel and Roger I. Simon) refers to such an aspect of visitors' experience that poses a significant challenge to their interpretative powers (for example, when the exhibition does not offer a simple ending of the story, presenting multiple perspectives instead). *Difficult* exhibitions are also those that provoke in the viewer negative emotions, unpleasant and awkward feelings of grief, anger, shame or horror, or even uneasiness caused by identification with the victims of violence. A special case is a potential repetition of trauma in persons who had been the victims in the past. Occasionally, it leads to accusations that the museum exploits human pain in creating sensationalized versions of violence and suffering.²² Problematic is not only the representation of the other's experience, but also the encounter with the otherness of knowledge. It applies to those moments when the knowledge appears as extremely strange, difficult to understand or downright incomprehensible. At such times we face the limits of our ability and also willingness to comprehend. On encountering such knowledge (represented by the exposition), we experience partial understanding mixed with perplexity and confusion; fear and suffering of the other mixes with our distress and anxiety. Such experiences may trigger self-defence mechanisms, which may consist in distancing oneself from the other's experience, or in belittling that experience.

Difficult exhibitions have to convey a heavy, or even crushing, message. They are also expected to elicit an emphatic reaction from the public. Bonnel and Simon introduce the concept of an *intimate encounter* as a model of contact with such an exhibition. The called-for *intimacy* does not consist in getting to know the other (in the sense of identification), but rather in opening up to the singularity of his experience and the accompanying, potentially unpleasant, emotions. This involves the act of accepting the other and striving against the impulse to reduce his experience to something accessible and comprehensible. Intimacy can also be understood as an awareness of the capacity to unsettle the self, to revise one's relations with the past and

22 J. Bonnell, R. I. Simon, *Difficult Exhibitions and Intimate Encounters*, *Museum and Society*, July 2007 5 (2), pp. 65-85.

one's environment. In such terms, history is not merely the knowledge of the past and the evaluation of its historiographic significance, but the sense of *dwelling* with the past.²³ This is not to say we feel exactly what the victims felt. Dwelling with the past is a process of reacting/ becoming more sensitive, reaching out to the other, without losing our otherness as individuals.

The use of authentic objects, especially personal ones (like a children's toy or shoe) would only render the experience more extreme. Pietrasiewicz avoids such solutions, reducing the danger involved in the process of the viewer's identification with the victims, which offers hope that the process of empathy and solidarity (desirable in this case) will occur.

The critics of the exhibition mistook a *difficult* exhibition for a *controversial* one, namely, such that – for instance – gives precedence to the suffering of one group over the suffering of another. The Primer is not a brutal play on emotions, and it is not meant to reconstruct the victims' experiences; it is the exhibition itself, its symbolism and peculiar language that are the subjects of experience.

However, the critical remarks levelled at the exhibition point to another problem: the trivialization of evil in the sense of the language we use to talk about it. Pietrasiewicz is aware of that situation: 'The whole affair was ridiculous in as much as I've been accused of having done something drastic, and that's not true; please, show me where. I kept telling them: Folks, right next to here there are barracks, pictures of a heap of corpses, the crematorium, isn't that drastic?'

Tomasz Pietrasiewicz is an artistic innovator. His creation does not have to be perfect but it involves a protest against the existing situation and the limitations of language that become apparent, especially when it attempts to convey traumatic human experiences. Of course, we might exclude The Primer from the category of historical representations and call it an *artistic installation* (Pietrasiewicz himself tends to use this term) but the result would be to reinforce the belief in the factuality and objectivity of museum exhibitions as contrasted with the subjectivity and fictionality of artistic projects. We should bear in mind, however, that both are created by the curator (or the artist),

23 Ibidem, p. 69.

and the choice of means they use to represent an authentic event is not in itself so fundamental an issue as to justify claims about different cultural functions of these discourses.

Conclusions

The museum itself cannot be considered to present the past as it really was, nor should it be treated as a storehouse of knowledge, where the progressive and cumulative efforts of its employees combine to produce an informed understanding of the human and natural world. Neither is it a privileged institution; it does not explain anything as it requires explanation itself; it is a social construct full of action and interaction, that produces cultural statements (exhibitions, posters, etc.). The museum actively creates knowledge and its creations should be understood as a product and not as a discovery.²⁴ Museum exhibitions constantly change. In fact, they are expected to do so since our perception of history changes as well. The most important function of historical museums is to involve people in thinking about history. It should be kept in mind that museums, even those located in authentic places, rarely provide clear answers, and even when they do, it is only to the most basic questions. Their function is rather to *translate* a complex reality, turn it into a more comprehensible one.²⁵ Of course, to a historian to *explain* means to *describe in greater detail*, but we already know that an accumulation of facts does not bring us closer to understanding events as extreme as the Shoah.

During their functioning, death camps and extermination were one thing. Places and events were strongly connected with one another. When the murderers were gone, places remained, marked with blood but silent. With time, places and events gradually grew distant. Places where crimes had occurred stayed ever-present, real in their physical state, but events that took place at a different time seem to belong more and more to a different world. Only a conscious act of memory is able to reconnect those places with their historic past.²⁶

24 S. M. Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections. A Cultural Study*, Washington D.C. 1992, p. 258.

25 T. L. Craig, *Reinterpreting the Past*, *Museum News*, January/February 1989, pp. 61-63.

26 J. E. Young, op. cit., p. 119.

Many years after the end of WWII, people are no longer surprised by the realistic (or even naturalistic) language used to describe the Shoah (incidentally, no degree of realism can ever convey the experience of the Holocaust). Post-war generations do not remember the actual events, but they remember numerous historical narratives, novels and poems, photos, films and video testimonies which they could read and see. My research on Holocaust exhibitions suggests that aesthetic categories traditionally employed in representations of the Holocaust in museums (horror, beauty, pathos) are inadequate and come short of expectations. It is, therefore, necessary to develop new categories, new strategies and new exhibition concepts that would be better suited to the imagination of the contemporary audience. Artists, writers and architects coming from post-war generations do not try to present the events which they did not experience themselves, but they portray their own memory and connections to those events (imagined, actual, and implied) which are understandably mediated. This post-memory, or memory of the witness's memory, remains an unfinished, ephemeral process, not aiming at giving final answers to questions.

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