



Aura Poenar

Reconstructing Communities In Spite of all Machinery of Disimagination

Abstract: This paper investigates the relationship between the real and art in the context of the issue raised by Theodor Adorno by the end of World War II regarding the impossibility of poetic language (which he later extended to culture) after the Holocaust. By observing a few case studies we try to understand how art is possible after the Holocaust and how the concept of community is reflected in contemporary art. We will see how the ephemeral nature of installations operates by dwelling on the language of fulgurances and gaps of history. We focus on the way in which the story of a community is told in spite of all machinery of disimagination and we thus try to determine who is given a face and who is denied a face when history is written, who is removed from its visibility, and how this removal is enacted.

Keywords: Displacement; Community; Exposure; Machinery of Disimagination; Shoah; Auschwitz; Installation.

AURA POENAR

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca
aurapoe@gmail.com
DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2017.32.08

The Machinery of Disimagination

When events pass something survives them.
We must see that which survives with the eye of an archaeologist, writes Georges Didi-Huberman following his visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau, now turned into a Museum of the Holocaust. When the camps were liberated by the Russians in January 1945 the question that remained lingering, and in a way still unresolved, was: *What to do with Auschwitz?* Should it be wiped out from the face of the earth to remove any trace of the atrocity, should it be abandoned and left to its own means, should it be kept as a place of remembrance and continuous interrogation as to how such an abominable place could have ever existed? The haunting question that French art historian and philosopher George Didi-Huberman is faced with during his visit to Auschwitz is what does this place tell him as a visitor. And the answer is unequivocally tormenting. This place today does not speak about Auschwitz since it is not able to show what this place actually was; it cannot tell anything about the people who died here. His experience is not singular. The camp as it operates today within



its neatly organized group visits and fixed duration tours of the surroundings does not allow for much reflection time. There is no sense of identity here that could help the visitor tune in to the memory of the place, no revelations as to how it must have been for the millions of people who died here, or as to how all that was possible under the eyes of the villagers of Oswiecim, Poland. Life has moved on here just like in any other place, houses have since been built on the site of huge common graveyards, locals see about their day-to-day chores without much thought of what this place stands for. And maybe at times they are annoyed by the never ending flow of tourists or frustrated by policy restrictions that might hinder the development of the city. Auschwitz has become a tourist attraction. And yet, whether its visitors are prepared to interrogate its precincts or are just busy taking selfies to have a proof of their visit to later show anyone ready to lend an ear, this place has its silent traces and shreds by which one should try and see beyond all that meets the eye. One should see beyond the functional organization of this place where panels meant to direct and guide the visitors are installed everywhere, overlapping their messages of warning and interdiction addressed to visitors to other interdictions belonging to a different time and an utterly different narrative. The redundancy and at times inadequacy of signs meant to recover a truth, to recall the narrative of this place is only surpassed by a feeling of absurdity in a place manipulated by so many adjustments meant to make it seem closer to the real it evokes. What can we still see and understand in this place, wonders Didi-Huberman following his visit to the extermination camp where his

grandparents had died too,¹ this *capital of evil*, this telltale place of the evil man has inflicted on man. When one enters this place with the eye of an archaeologist, writes Laurent Olivier, one understands an obvious truth, that “no matter how insuperable they might have been, events pass, only places and things are left behind, as that which is inscribed in matter is first of all an insistence to be there to endure as much as will last the materials from which things are made. Beams, concrete, scrap metal, all these industrial things.”²

On ne peut donc jamais dire: il n’y a
rien à voir, il n’y a plus rien à voir.
Pour savoir douter de ce que l’on voit,
il faut savoir voir encore, voir malgré tout.
Malgré la destruction, l’effacement
de toute chose.
Il faut savoir regarder comme regarde
un archéologue.
(Georges Didi-Huberman, *Écorces*)

The opening scene of *Shoah*³ follows Simon Srebnik, a survivor of the extermination camp in Chelmno, Poland, where Jews were first exterminated by gas. He is now 47.⁴ We watch him as he is sitting in a rowboat probably similar to one of the boats used on his work detail with the SS. He is singing. A soft-voiced melancholic, peaceful song. He is singing one of the Polish folk tunes he used to sing to his guards. He was 13 when he was sent to the Chelmno camp. His father was killed before his eyes in the ghetto while his mother was killed in a gas van in Chelmno. He was placed by the SS in one of the Jewish work details in charge with the maintenance of the extermination camp. The one thing that may have saved him was his extreme agility in



all the jumping and speed races that the SS organized to their amusement and entertainment for the prisoners allowed to move around with chains around their ankles only. That and his melodious singing must have kept him alive for so much longer than the other Jews placed in the work details. Two days before the Soviet troops arrived in 1945 the SS shot all the remaining Jews in the work details. Simon Srebnik was shot in the head, yet the bullet missed any vital brain centres. He was found by a Polish farmer and treated by a Soviet army doctor. Director Claude Lanzmann found him in Israel and persuaded him to accompany him back to Chelmno. The documentary film runs his story on the screen before the opening scenes which capture a scenery that bears no trace of the atrocities these surroundings had once witnessed. The camera fixates on Simon Srebnik's face, searching maybe for a connection, for an affect image, for a truth underneath and beyond this peaceful scenery. It maybe tries to replicate Srebnik's glance, show us what he is seeing and then, gradually reconstruct the narrative overlapping this place over time. An empty space withholding so much from the viewer, just like Srebnik's glance which seems far, far away, impossible to fathom. "The flames reached to the sky," he says, and the director repeats the words "to the sky" as if in a rhetorical question, as if to fixate the image. But there is nothing rhetorical here, "Yes," Srebnik retorts, and after a pause, "It was terrible." "No one can describe it. No one can recreate what happened here. Impossible! And no one can understand it. Even I, here now... I can't believe I'm here. No, I just can't believe it."⁵

Disbelief that he is there, disbelief that life could have continued after such

an atrocity, disbelief that he himself could continue to exist after all that. How is life possible after evil. Nothing answers back, nature does not answer back, all those places do not answer back, not even his memories, his recollections of the horror do not answer back. And life continues there to unfold, bearing no physical traits of the catastrophe whatsoever. It remains thus alien, impossible to understand, to fathom or to believe even to someone who had actually been there...

Theodor Adorno extrapolates this impossibility to everything that comes after Auschwitz. Immediately after the war he stated that writing poetry after Auschwitz had not only become impossible but was also obscene. He later expanded the idea from poetry to culture altogether, suggesting that maybe the right question should have been not how could one write poetry after Auschwitz, but how was our existence possible after Auschwitz: "Anything that unquestioningly asserts the positivity of existence – anything, for example, that claims to give a meaning to existence – has in Adorno's view become obscene."⁶ In *Negative Dialectics* "the problem became a more comprehensive one, and the question thus became focused on art in general and the relationship it bears to existence."⁷

The problem of representation which confronts and shapes the art of the second half of the twentieth century stems from an impossibility of memory and an impossibility to witness, an impossibility to contain the monstrous mechanisms of such a machinery of annihilation which went to such lengths as to annihilate all memory, all possibility of imagination to such an extent so that the testimony of a witness would seem so unimaginable, so enormous, so disconnected,



so absurd, that no one would believe it: “If a Jewish member of the Resistance in London, working as such in supposedly well-informed circles, can admit that at the time he was incapable of imagining Auschwitz or Treblinka, what can be said of the rest of the world?”⁸ Language of the machinery of extermination avoids to contain and reflect facts, maintaining an appearance of familiarity through metaphors and euphemisms. The train tickets that the people deported to Auschwitz were paying for themselves, the rooms for undressing before the gas chambers, the veiled language commodifying people and facts in the instructions contained by official documents, the isolation of camps which could not be seen from above or outside as they were camouflaged with vegetation are all meant to maintain an appearance of normality. In the context of all the available archives, testimonies, footage filmed by the British and Russians on site, we still go back to this empty, deserted place trying to grapple something we feel is still eluding us. What is it that still survives here where more than a million lives have passed. How can a place which has seen so much horror speak so little about it?

J’ai posé trois petits bouts d’écorce sur une feuille de papier. J’ai regardé. J’ai regardé en pensant que regarder m’aiderait peut-être à lire quelque chose qui n’a jamais été écrit. J’ai regardé les trois petits lambeaux d’écorce comme les trois lettres d’une écriture d’avant tout alphabet. Ou, peut-être, comme le début d’une lettre à écrire, mais à qui?
(Georges Didi-Huberman, *Écorces*)

The film *Shoah* was commissioned in 1973 by a friend of Lanzmann’s in the Israeli

Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After seeing Lanzmann’s first documentary film *Israel, Why?* (1973) he suggested that Lanzmann should make a film about the Holocaust from the viewpoint of the Jews, “a film that is not about the Shoah, but a film that is the Shoah.” After a year of research on a subject which Lanzmann had thought he knew about inherently, he discovered that “what was most important was missing: the gas chambers, death in the gas chambers, from which no one had returned to report. The day I realized that this was what was missing, I knew that the subject of the film would be death itself, death rather than survival, a radical contradiction since in a sense it attested to the impossibility of the project I was embarking on: the dead could not speak for the dead. [...] My film would have to take up the ultimate challenge; take the place of the non-existent images of death in the gas chambers.”⁹

Film critic and historian Roger Ebert describes *Shoah* as a torrent of words. They talk and talk, he says, and yet, when it is over, the overwhelming impression is one of silence. “Lanzmann intercuts two kinds of images. He shows the faces of his witnesses. And then he uses quiet pastoral scenes of the places where the deaths took place [...] Cameras pan silently across pastures, while we learn that underneath the tranquility are mass graves [...] [this is] what this whole movie does, and it is probably the most important thing it does. It changes our point of view about the Holocaust. After nine hours of *Shoah*, the Holocaust is no longer a subject, a chapter of history, a phenomenon. It is an environment. It is around us. Ordinary people speak in ordinary voices of days that had become ordinary to them.”¹⁰



What Lanzmann's documentary film, *Shoah*, does is retrieve the narrative of a community by leaving aside any images of the past, any footage or photographs contained in the archives of the Holocaust and largely circulated, since what he is looking for is the testimony of the death chambers. By relying solely on the confessions and recollections of the people who had been there and had experienced firsthand the extermination camps he creates testimony-images, memory-images that violently recall the narrative visuality of the gas chambers. Events of the past are put into language by the present – through the actual presence of those who had been there and who now recall on camera a glimpse of the horrors they have witnessed – and through our present as we are being interpolated by these events and their memory. He thus achieves a form of narrative visuality which recalls the events of the past in a continuous present in such a way that these events and their narrative no longer belong to past, but to our present: "There may be no language for Auschwitz and the camps, but there is memory (or what the Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer calls 'the ruins of memory') and there is survival. [Charlotte] Delbo discriminates between two workings of memory among survivors: there is *memoire ordinaire*, which recalls the 'self' of now, according to whom 'the person in the camp at Auschwitz is someone else – not me, not the person here facing you.' Then there is *mémoire profonde*, 'deep memory' – according to which Auschwitz is not past at all, nor can it ever be."¹¹ The traces left by these events shape our understanding and perception of the world. In this view, what is the purpose of art in the wake of such unimaginable

events? Should it speak out for them or, on the contrary, aware of its limits, it should never try?

Missing Pieces of History

In his 1986 book of essays on life in the Nazi extermination camps,¹² Primo Levi writes that it is impossible for reason, art, poetry to help us understand the place from where they had been banned. The place he refers to is the extermination camp, a place conceived for the purpose of utter negation and annihilation of a community, and through that, of humanity altogether. And yet, despite this inability to communicate this space, it is art and culture that remain vital and to which we resort in order to take such totalitarian places apart, and, as Georges Didi-Huberman put it, to remember that no matter how efficient they are they will never be able to annihilate that *parcelle d'humanité* which Hannah Arendt deems capable of interrupting the machinery of destruction, regardless of how modest or incomplete it were.¹³

British writer and journalist Ed Vulliamy interviewed a few of the survivors of the Terezín ghetto camp near Prague, "a place of resilience and art in defiance of death" of which, he observes, survivors retain oddly enough happy memories, besides the predominant nightmarish and tormenting recollections. That is because the ghetto housed an impressive number of renowned Czech musicians, writers, and artists who continued composing, writing or performing in the wake of their imminent dispatch to Auschwitz: "...despite the everyday regime, rampant fatal disease, malnutrition, paltry rations, cramped conditions and the death of 32,000 people



even before the ‘transports’ to Auschwitz – Terezín was hallmarked also by a thriving cultural life: painting and drawing, theatre and cabarets, lectures and schooling, and, above all, great music. Among the inmates was a star pupil of Leoš Janáček; another was one of the most promising composers from the circle of Arnold Schoenberg. ‘Many of us came from musical families, and there were very great musicians among us,’ recalls Mrs Weissová-Hošková, one of the survivors interviewed by Vulliamy.¹⁴ Helga Weissová-Hošková recounts how they were only allowed 50 kilos of luggage and how they brought their musical instruments with them into the camp despite the fact Jews had been forbidden to own musical instruments. Music and art was their last resort in the hell they had been plunged into: “My father told me that whatever happens, we must remain human, so that we do not die like cattle. And I think that the will to create was an expression of the will to live, and survive, as human beings [...] There were four phases in the cultural life of Terezín, she says. First, that of great creative resistance; second, that of the Nazi toleration of the cultural life; third, the manipulation of our art by the Nazis; and finally, when it was all over, the mass killing of almost everyone involved [...] In 1944, the SS actually ‘beautified’ the horror they had created at Terezín and invited the International Committee of the Red Cross to visit the camp and see a performance of the children’s opera *Brundibár*, written by one of the camp’s leading prisoner-composers, Hans Krása. A propaganda film was made, entitled *The Führer Gives a City to the Jews*, featuring the performance. But the shocking truth behind the film of the production of *Brundibár*, which was applauded by the

Red Cross, is that apart from two, all the children in the cast were sent, soon after the concert and photograph, to the gas ovens of Auschwitz.¹⁵ One would think that in a time where there are so many media outlets available it would be difficult to speak of the idea of invisibility of people. And yet, as theorist Georges Didi-Huberman remarks, people are not – as we should expect – more visible than they have ever been, nor are they better represented, but quite on the contrary, people are “exposed to their own disappearance.”¹⁶ The example of the propaganda film illustrates a double exposure which Didi-Huberman explains in terms of *underexposure* and *overexposure*. People are underexposed when they are not included in our mechanisms of seeing, when they are not contained in the narrative and visual language of media for example. On the other hand overexposure achieves the same result. Too much exposure can be blinding. One will not be able to see anything else beyond the extreme noise and impending immediacy of overexposure: “Les peuples sont exposés à disparaître parce qu’ils sont – phénomène aujourd’hui très flagrant, insupportablement triomphant dans son équivocité même – sous-exposés dans l’ombre de leurs mises sous censure ou, c’est selon, mais pour un résultat équivalent, sur-exposés dans la lumière de leurs mises en spectacle.”¹⁷ Where people are exposed to their disappearance discourses coagulate so that, while we no longer see anything, we could still believe that everything remains accessible to us, that everything remains visible and under control, explains Didi-Huberman.¹⁸ How does the narrative of a community removed from visibility coagulate within a world which is out of joint? How



could these people further appear and retain a face aesthetically, historically, politically in the grasp of the machinery of disimagination?

On peut penser que la surface est ce
qui tombe des choses:
ce qui en vient directement, ce qui
s'en détache, ce qui en procède donc.
Et qui s'en détache pour venir traîner
à notre rencontre,
sous notre regard, comme
les lambeaux d'une écorce d'arbre
(Georges Didi-Huberman, *Écorces*)

When French sculptor Bruno Catalano left Morocco in his childhood he remembers how he felt that a part of him was gone and would never come back. A feeling his later years of being a sailor continued to reinforce. His series of sculptures *Missing Pieces*,¹⁹ which depicts people on a journey, suitcase in hand, with a central part of their bodies missing, dwells on the idea of how leaving places stirs in us a feeling of displacement. The artist deems this as inevitable; everyone has missing pieces in their life that they will not find again. It is impossible not to extrapolate such an individual experience to that of the dozens of millions of displaced Jews, people of all ages, removed from their homes, either by force or driven by fear in places where they could hope to escape their pursuers. It is impossible not to wonder how they coped with their missing pieces, and how the things that they chose to pack and bring along in their suitcases on the prospect of deportation were meant to preserve pieces of their identity that they had already been stripped off even before their journey had begun. It is impossible not to wonder

whether the thought that these pieces devoid of life or memory would be in fact the ones that would survive them had maybe then crossed their mind; the fact that these belongings would be most likely the ones to carry their story further and speak on their behalf when they would no longer be able to do it themselves. It is the muted, silent story of these traces, of these inanimate objects that survived the camps of deaths. Many prisoners of these camps trusted such belongings to the earth, buried them in recipients accompanied maybe by handwritten notes on scraps of paper. They were entrusting their memory to the earth in the hope these messages would later be found and would witness and speak in their place. Such personal objects were thus carrying and communicating not only missing pieces, but missing bodies, missing identities in the monstrous machinery of mutilation and annihilation. On the other hand, the unconceivable lengths to which the Nazi regime went in order to wipe any trace, any remnant of what happened in these places of death were meant to make sure nothing would remain, no trace upon which one would start searching for missing pieces. They wanted to simply erase them out of history.

So how does this installation work in relation to its search of its missing pieces? The artist insists on the fact that while it could extend to the idea of being in search of one's historical place and identity, its meaning will be different for everyone. How else, what is art if not a constantly mobile dialogue in the making, with issues of past and memory and its relationship to present being raised? What happens when entire lives become missing pieces in the fabric of history?



Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde

Since art is connected to the real, to history, to our place and identity in the world, to the memory of that, it cannot remain distant or aloof. Giving a voice to discontinued narratives, putting back the pieces together, bringing forward the gaps, the obliterated faces, the missing pieces of history is not only the responsibility of the historian but also of the artist. It is no wonder that the artistic language of the 20th century understood to bring forward its fractures, conceptualizing on its dislocated spaces and sense of history. During his visit to Auschwitz, Georges Didi-Huberman meditates on the similarity between the way we use images and language today. To him an image is a pellicular surface, but not in the idea of a veil which hides something underneath. He thinks an image is more like a skin which rather than concealing, it detaches, it peels off. Images are therefore not a misleading lie about the real but an extremity which comes off like the bark of a tree. A certain solidity of knowledge can be acquired, he thinks, only by putting together many such extremities.²⁰ It is what Aby Warburg intended by his *Mnemosyne* project, creating an atlas of images by bringing together in a discontinuous montage such extremities, images that rather than striving to convey a revelation of (art) history, are meant to serve as a starting point in how and what we think about history and our place in the world. When images and language are not capable to contain the whole truth, to render the real in its entirety, it does not mean that we will stop using language, explains Didi-Huberman, but quite on the contrary.

This is what lies at the basis of the polemic between Didi-Huberman and Lanzmann on how we should treat the images of the Holocaust. While Didi-Huberman believes that we should understand and judge images in their fragmentary and discontinuous narratives, Lanzmann feels that any image of the extermination camps is false because it cannot contain and render the truth, the essence, the entirety of what the Holocaust was.

In *Images malgré tout*, Georges Didi-Huberman discusses four photographs taken secretly by a member of the *Sonderkommando* in Auschwitz in August 1944. These four photographs snatched from Auschwitz were also four “refutations snatched from a world that the Nazis wanted to obfuscate, to leave wordless and imageless,” observes Didi-Huberman.²¹ How can one render such a world devoid of words and devoid of images? Primo Levi talks about a hell made by humans with the purpose of making the language of their victims disappear: “It is an obvious assertion that where violence is inflicted on man, it is also inflicted on language.”²² On the one hand it is the isolation by itself that imposes silence, on the other hand, observes Didi-Huberman, there is the jargon of the camp, the veiled, euphemistic language and the effect of terror stemming from this “perverse misappropriation of the German language and therefore of the German culture,” the continuous lie through the choice of words revolving around the horrendous action plan of the Final Solution designed by the Nazi regime: e.g. SS is short for *Schutzstaffel* which denotes protection, or the neutral connotation of the adjective *sonder* which refers to something unique, special, or the



cynicism of that which in fact lies at the heart of an expression like *Sonderbehandlung*, special treatment, which actually means putting to death by gas: "What the words seek to obfuscate is of course the obliteration of human beings, the very program of this vast laboratory. To murder was not nearly enough, because the dead were never sufficiently 'obliterated' in the eyes of the 'Final Solution.' Well beyond the privation of a grave (the greatest insult to the dead in antiquity), the Nazis concentrated, rationally or irrationally, on 'leaving no single trace,' and on obliterating every remnant... Which explains the insanity of Aktion 1005, when the SS had the hundreds of thousands of cadavers buried in common graves exhumed (by future victims of course), in order to cremate them and to disperse or reinter their ashes in the countryside. The end of the 'Final Solution' [...] called for a new enterprise, which was the obliteration of the tools of the obliteration [...] After the Liberation, you could find yourself in the very place from which the four photographs were snatched a few months earlier, and see nothing but ruins, devastated sites, or 'non-places'."²³

The four photographs as well as all written messages buried by the prisoners of these camps of death manage to burn as many holes in the veil of invisibility, in the absence of an image, in the impossibility and incredulity of language, in the absence of a *corpus delicti* to prove to the rest of the world an existence, a horror which nobody was capable to imagine. These holes are the ones that contain a glimpse, which open a doorway and begin to articulate towards a history that disappeared with the bodies that were put to death and then rendered to total annihilation.

The holes make the story visible; the gaps, the absence, all that was removed act as just as many interpolations. It is no wonder that art has been searching for its visual language in these non-places, in that which remains fragile, ungraspable, in the absence, as is the case of Bruno Catalano's voyagers or, as we will further see, the shoes of Japanese artist Chiharu Shiota or, for that matter, the Shoes on the Danube bank in Budapest, Hungary, conceived by film director Can Togay and created in solid iron by sculptor Gyula Pauer in 2005, a memorial in the honour of the Jews who were shot here in 1944-45. As a staggering number of Jews were being pushed to the Austrian border in a death march, around 20,000 were cruelly shot along the banks of river Danube. The Budapest memorial comprises sixty pairs of true to life shoes of men, women, and children in the style of the 40s sculpted in iron in minute detail as a reminder of all the victims who were forced to leave their shoes behind as they were shot into the river. Missing bodies, carried away by the water, which are recalled by the gap signaled by the shoes left behind, scattered as if the people had just stepped out of them.²⁴ These shoes present themselves to the viewer with a reflexive meditation on what can be brought into visibility and what cannot. They stand for a form of appearance that retains a mechanism which conceals and removes from visibility in order to show something. It is not a matter of bringing forth a discursive structure, a narrative meant to give a discourse the last word retained by irrefutable images, but, as Didi-Huberman observes considering Walter Benjamin's question on the *readability of images*, it is a matter of placing images and words in a critical



relation of reciprocal disturbance: “Parler de la lisibilité des images [...] c’est dire aussi que les images sont susceptibles de conférer aux mots eux-mêmes leur lisibilité inaperçue.”²⁵

A Way of Being Both in Memory and in Disappearance

Since people are *exposed to their disappearance* both in (the employment of) language and images, the solution lies in the resilience through language and images against such use of language and images.²⁶

Hannah Arendt explains the concept of appearance in terms of a double meaning retaining a double gesture as it conceals the content while pushing forward the surface: “L’apparence a pour double fonction de dissimuler l’intérieur et de révéler une surface.”²⁷ Thus Hannah Arendt analyses the political apparition of people through the filter of four paradigms: *faces, multiplicities, differences, intervals*.²⁸ *Faces* imply that people are not abstractions, they are made of speaking and acting bodies. They present and expose their faces. *Multiplicities* accounts for a countless crowd of individualities (individual movements, individual words, actions, desires) of which no concept could make a synthesis.²⁹ When people are taken away their faces and are thus stripped of their individualities, they are threatened by complete disappearance, by their removal from visibility.

The work of the Japanese artist Chiharu Shiota deals with the haunting traces that the human body leaves behind. Her work revolves around objects caught in the suspended time of the human passage, left behind as a silent reminder of individual bodies and faces, of personal memories and

narratives. Her *Dialogue from DNA* installation of 2004 for the Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology in Krakow, Poland, brings together hundreds of shoes collected by the artist, where each shoe is tied to a handwritten note about its owner. Subsequently the concept is revisited for various galleries in Germany and Japan. The project is recreated with the title *Over the Continents* in which hundreds to thousands of shoes are further collected by the artist and tied to as many strands of red yarn extending from each shoe and brought together in a fixed point into a corner of the room. The idea came to the artist when, returning to Japan from Germany, where she was living, she put on her older and once very familiar shoes and found that they no longer fit the same way as they used to: “I was thinking, what is this gap between my feeling and my shoes, and I wanted to know.”³⁰ To her, personal objects such as shoes become a sort of second skin which preserves the imprint of a person, therefore by bringing these highly intimate objects into her art she investigates how familiar and intimate objects gain and lose meaning, exploring issues of memory and loss and what it means to be alive. “It is concerning the absence of the body,” curator Carol Huh says about the installation, “and how objects can resonate with some sort of absence [...] It’s a highly accessible work because it involves every day objects, very familiar objects, but a kind of object that you don’t think very much about when it’s in use [...] But when it is taken out of use, when it’s non-functional, it starts to take on a different kind of meaning.”³¹ The Japanese artist often uses in her projects everyday objects like beds, window frames, and shoes, or destroyed objects



like a burnt piano reduced to silence and wrapped in black string as in a cocoon in order to explore the relationship between life and death and to question the access to the memories found in these objects. Art is connected with the real, it doesn't come from nowhere. It contains time, it is made of layered stratified time. By imprisoning her objects in a very intricate web, Shiota's installations immerse the viewer in frozen moments of time. "The objects Shiota chooses to enclose in string environments exaggerate the absence of a figure. Pianos, tables, beds, chairs and wedding dresses all imply a being [...] Shiota weaves a net around everyday objects, giving them a distilled presence. Shiota however, imprisons her objects, and in doing so references the casualties of war. The Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum in Poland holds thousands of personal items taken from camp prisoners during WWII and displays them en-masse. They hold symbolic meaning as a representation of the hundreds of thousands of people who were killed during this time [...] *From Where We Come and What We Are* by Shiota is an installation made from suitcases stacked to create a wall that reaches the height of the gallery ceiling. The repetition of object again infers wartime references, but here another notion is introduced to Shiota's work. Being an 'international' citizen, Shiota is somewhat displaced. Having not yet put solid roots down in Berlin, Shiota is still a Japanese national living away from home. The suitcases refer to this trans-cultural displacement. *From Where We Come and What We Are* is another example of the absent, but implied body in Shiota's body of work."³²

The memorial on the Danube bank or the installation of shoes collected by the

Japanese artist perform on different levels what the *Missing Pieces* of the French sculptor were meant to expose. They retrieve the missing pieces of a narrative, they retrieve individual stories, they bring individualities into visibility by playing out, through negative reconstitution, the very instrument depriving them of their individuality. They denounce their generalization and homogenisation: the shoes do not remain an indistinguishable mass but instead, they fill like a specter the place of the absence, taking the place of their absent owner and thus they reactivate, through this individual gap in their common narrative, that very narrative. A narrative which seeks to recover by the exploration of these gaps of memory and history the very place of a community, of a common experience and history. By playing on these specters, by recalling individualization through fractures, through that which is missing, people are restituted their differences. Hannah Arendt considers that a political appearance is possible only in the context of the manifest apparition of differences: "Penser la communauté et la réciprocité de ces êtres différents revient, donc, finalement, à penser l'espace politique comme le réseau des intervalles qui ajointent les différences entre elles."³³ According to Arendt politics comes into being in the space between people; in other words, it comes into being in an intermediary space (interval) and constitutes itself as a relation.³⁴

When only space retains the memory of all life that was lead to and stopped short there, what makes this history speak to us in its full unadulterated terror over time? How to grasp such a huge gap of time in a narrative that can bring and keep into presence



that which remains the irrepresentable, but which, nonetheless, should never remain the unimaginable, as Georges Didi-Huberman insists when exposing his view on how we should deal with the images of the Holocaust? The French author shares with Hannah Arendt and Primo Levi the refutation of Auschwitz as unthinkable or unsayable. To know we must imagine, he explains: “We must attempt to imagine the hell that Auschwitz was in the summer of 1944. Let us not invoke the unimaginable. Let us not shelter ourselves by saying that we cannot, that we could not, by any means, imagine it to the very end. We are obliged to that oppressive imaginable. It is a response that we must offer, as a debt to the words and images that certain prisoners snatched, for us, from the harrowing Real of their experience. So let us not invoke the unimaginable. How much harder was it for the prisoners to rip from the camps those few shreds of

which now we are trustees, charged with sustaining them simply by looking at them. Those shreds are at the same time more precious and less comforting than all possible works of art, snatched as they were from a world bent on their impossibility. Thus, images in spite of all: in spite of the hell of Auschwitz, in spite of the risks taken. In return, we must contemplate them, take them on, and try to comprehend them. Images in spite of all: in spite of our own inability to look at them as they deserve; in spite of our own world, full, almost choked, with imaginary commodities.”³⁵

Since images are neither *absolute speech* nor *pure silence* they speak of that which is impossible to tell entirely, argues Didi-Huberman. The lesson of such art installations employing objects and images as a form of testimony is that instead of focusing on how images might fail us, we should pay attention to what they reveal.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allard, Joulie. *Le personnage en politique. Secret et apparence chez Hannah Arendt*, Annales de l'Institut de philosophie, Paris, Vrin, 2011
- Arendt, Hannah. *Qu'est-ce que la politique? (1950-1959)*, trad. S. Courtine-Denamy, Paris, Le Seuil, 1995 (éd. 2001)
- Badiou, Alain. *Five Lessons on Wagner*, translated by Susan Spitzer, London, New York, Verso, 2010
- Brody, Richard. “Witness. Claude Lanzmann and the Making of *Shoah*,” *The New Yorker*, March 19, 2012 Issue
- Brossat, Alain. “Postface. Résister dans la langue,” Victor Klemperer, *LTI, la langue de IIIe Reich. Carnets d'un philologue (1947)*, trad. É. Guillot, Paris, Albin Michel, 2006
- Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Écorces*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 2011
- Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Essayer voir*, Paris, Minuit, 2014
- Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, Trans. Shane B. Lillis, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008
- Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Peuples exposés, peuples figurants. L'oeil de l'histoire 4*, Paris, Minuit, 2012
- Levi, Primo. *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), London, Abacus, 2013
- Olivier, Laurent. “Auschwitz-Birkenau ne peut pas mourir,” *Le Monde*, 14.12.2011
- Reeves, T. Zane. *Shoes Along the Danube: Based on a True Story*, Durham, Strategic Book Group, 2011
- Vulliamy, Ed. *Terezín: music from a Nazi ghetto*, The Guardian, 13 June 2010



NOTES

1. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Écorces*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 2011.
2. Laurent Olivier, "Auschwitz-Birkenau ne peut pas mourir," *Le Monde*, 14.12.2011, http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2011/12/14/auschwitz-birkenau-ne-peut-pas-mourir_1618120_3232.html#j58zGJ4qpYmu4XmG.99.
3. Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah*, 1985. A nine and a half hour documentary of the Holocaust in which Lanzmann interviews survivors, witnesses, and ex-Nazis whom he had to film secretly, all the while not using a single frame of archive footage.
4. The interviews for *Shoah* were filmed during the 1970s.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Alain Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, translated by Susan Spitzer, London, New York, Verso, 2010, p. 40.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
8. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, Trans. Shane B. Lillis, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008, p. 19.
9. Richard Brody, "Witness. Claude Lanzmann and the Making of *Shoah*," *The New Yorker*, March 19, 2012 Issue, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/03/19/witness-5>.
10. <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/shoah-1985>.
11. Ed Vulliamy, "Terezín: music from a Nazi ghetto," *The Guardian*, 13 June 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jun/13/terezin-ghetto-jews-holocaust-vulliamy>.
12. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), London, Abacus, 2013.
13. See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Essayer voir*, Paris, Minuit, 2014, p. 10.
14. Ed Vulliamy, "Terezín: music from a Nazi ghetto."
15. *Ibid.*
16. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Peuples exposés, peuples figurants. L'œil de l'histoire 4*, Paris, Minuit, 2012, p. 11.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
19. *Missing Pieces* is a series of surrealist sculptures by artist Bruno Catalano which were installed during the month of September 2012 in the streets of Marseille for the European Capital of Culture 2013.
20. Georges Didi-Huberman introduces his works *Écorces* and *L'œil de l'histoire. Atlas ou le gai savoir inquiet* for Éditions de Minuit. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0-jhLbdCqk>, Accessed October 12, 2016.
21. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, work cited, p. 20.
22. Primo Levi, *Les Naufragés et les rescapés. Quarante ans après Auschwitz* (1986). Apud Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, work cited, p. 20.
23. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, work cited, pp. 21-22.
24. T. Zane Reeves, *Shoes Along the Danube: Based on a True Story*, Durham, Strategic Book Group, 2011, p. 190.
25. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Peuples exposés, peuples figurants. L'œil de l'histoire 4*, work cited, pp. 17-18.
26. Alain Brossat, "Postface. Résister dans la langue," Victor Klemperer, *LTI, la langue de III^e Reich. Carnets d'un philologue* (1947), trad. É. Guillot, Paris, Albin Michel, 2006.
27. Joulie Allard, "Le personnage en politique. Secret et apparence chez Hannah Arendt," *Annales de l'Institut de philosophie*, Paris, Vrin, 2011.
28. Hannah Arendt, *Qu'est-ce que la politique?* (1950-1959), trad. S. Courtine-Denamy, Paris, Le Seuil, 1995 (éd. 2001), p. 39.
29. See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Peuples exposés, peuples figurants. L'œil de l'histoire 4*, work cited, p. 24.



30. Max Kutner, "What's in a Shoe? Japanese Artist Chiharu Shiota Investigates," August 28, 2014, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/whats-shoe-japanese-artist-chiharu-shiota-investigates>.
31. *Ibid.*
32. <https://maddymurphy.wordpress.com/2011/05/20/resonating-memory-chiharu-shiota-and-others/>
33. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Peuples exposés, peuples figurants*, work cited, p. 25.
34. Hannah Arendt, *Qu'est-ce que la politique?*, work cited, p. 42.
35. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, work cited, p. 3.