

[Balakirsky Katz on Hoffman-Cortius, 'Judenmord: Art and the Holocaust in Post-war Germany'](#)

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Kathryn Hoffman-Cortius. *Judenmord: Art and the Holocaust in Post-war Germany*. London: REAKTION BOOKS, 2018. 400 pp. \$57.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-78023-907-1.

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With the propensity to narrate the Holocaust through the mediums of photography, film, and museums—mediums that rely on visibility—there is a concomitant need for serious scholarly study on the art of Holocaust history. The 1990s were the heyday for this research. In that decade, we were given Stephanie Barron's *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991), Ziva Amishai-Maisels's *Depiction and Interpretation: The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts* (1993), James Young's *Texture of Memory* (1993), Monica Bohm-Duchen's *After Auschwitz: Responses to the Holocaust in Contemporary Art* (1995), Matthew Baigell's *Jewish-American Artists and the Holocaust* (1997), Nelly Toll's *When Memory Speaks: The Holocaust in Art* (1998), and, just as the decade ran out, Barbie Zelizer's *Visual Culture and the Holocaust* (2000).

The effect of these magisterial works was, as Margaret Olin so eloquently put it, a “transformation of the Holocaust from a recent memory into an historical catastrophe like the French Revolution, an event that severs time into a before and after, and becomes the test of all historical and representational theories,” which runs the risk of seeing “Holocaust effects everywhere ... ordering our experience.”[1] In response to this critique of a retrospective projection of the Holocaust on everything related to European and eastern European Jews, subsequent scholars by and large preferred more atomized, single-artist surveys that assume that each artist's vision is personal and singular. In the proliferation of valuable research on single artists, monuments, and museums since the productive 1990s, we have lost sight of the roadmap for the production and consumption of images and objects related to the Holocaust, especially those that circulated immediately after the war in the country that perpetuated the Holocaust.

This is why Kathrin Hoffmann-Curtius's volume, a translation of her 2014 *Bilder zum Judenmord*, is such a revelation. Hoffmann-Curtius trains her perceptive eye on images that take the “Judenmord”—her preferred term for the mass murder of Jews that she leaves untranslated—as their subject. Imbibing the lessons of earlier encyclopedic studies that attempted to contain the chaos of images and narratives into a collective experience, Hoffmann-Curtius treats the images that constituted the postwar culture industry in which the mass murder of Jews was brought into collective consciousness in Germany one at a time.

With meticulous research in German museum archives that preserve largely neglected artwork and related materials, the volume offers us a broad field of artistic images, from the well-trod works of

Joseph Beuys and Gerhard Richter to the lesser-known visions of Otto Pankok, Lea Grundig, Ludwig Meidner, Werner Tubke, and Wolf Tübke, as well as former camp inmates that had hitherto been treated only as eyewitness accounts. Hoffmann-Curtius ignores traditional art historical schemata, pure iconographic readings, stylistic orderings, and quality criteria for a historically contextual analysis of the representation of the murder of Jews when the majority of the population stayed silent on the subject. With its nonhierarchical and wide-ranging image bank, *Judenmord* is primarily a study of the multidetermined psychology of perception, representation, reception, and memory of genocide.

In the preface to the English edition, Hoffmann-Curtius writes that she “has more clearly elaborated the various phases of the reception of the Nazi regime in Germany” (p. 7), which necessarily effected the production of images on the *Judenmord*. I found this addition to the analytic field the most useful part of the book. This book offers as close to a comprehensive treatment as we have seen of the visual world that these artists occupied while they were producing and exhibiting their work in the immediate postwar period. Hoffmann-Curtius is as concerned with the reception of these works as she is with the creative process inherent in art production, mapping German art exhibition in the postwar period with rich and complex analyses. It appears that every exhibition on every relevant artist has been treated here in its immediate cultural context. It is an encyclopedic coverage that never gets tedious or repetitive: these are not cookie-cutter artistic careers and exhibitions. Each artist and exhibition—and the author’s astute discussion of each—seems to move the conversation deeper into the murky and multilayered work of memory.

These historical guideposts are not only clarifying (a clarity that most art histories have eschewed), but what is truly astounding is her treatment of the politics of an art world that had claimed its independence from the political sphere at midcentury. We learn that artists in West Germany tended to avoid representing the *Judenmord* in favor of avant-garde pictorial languages, leaving documentation to the mediums of photography and film to sort out. Hoffmann-Curtius argues that even the abstract color painters who came out of Germany at the time could not escape political commentary because “the colours yellow and brown came to be overwritten with a new significance” (p. 19). We get an indelible recreation of the artistic scene in East Germany, where artists did exhibit artistic expressions of atrocities against Jews but were largely overlooked by the West because they were made in realist styles deemed outdated by art historians at the time. Beyond style, there was an emphasis on the subject of the fallen resistance fighters in what she argues was a way to impart the civic value of resistance to the new state of the GDR.

Indeed, one of the justifications for this deep dive into those artists who took up the subject of the *Judenmord* is Hoffmann-Curtius’s thesis that part of the work of Holocaust memory was part and parcel contemporary identity work. When those artists who did take up the subject of mass murder exhibited their work to the public, it was as much about the then-recent past as it was about creating the founding narratives of the new West German FRG and the East German GDR. Her work demonstrates that the redefinition of citizenship in the postwar era was formed, like adolescence itself, in reaction to the competing German state. In this contest of individuation—a shared contested space—both states blocked the acknowledgment of the murder of the Jews in their own ways and both states produced artists that went against the grain in their own ways.

Judenmord does not present its images within a set of contextual historical data points but rather as images that created those data points. Hoffman-Curtius excavates the circulating images that artists

used as the basis for their art. For example, she selects and reads the work of Werner Tübke and Willi Sitte in relationship to perpetrator photographs, such as the Stroop Report on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in which the SS demonstrated their victory in 1943 and the massacre at Lidice that the German death squads documented in photography. She investigates the work of Peter Edel against the backdrop of American “re-education” media in the West—the poster bulletins, leaflets, photographs of piles of corpses, ovens opened up in the crematoria and “living skeletons,” compulsory visits to the liberated camps—that brought the genocide to German consciousness in West Germany (with which they flooded the FDR). Likewise, she considers the figurative work of artists in the GDR in relationship to the promotion of the Soviet socialist realist aesthetic.

One of the most fascinating aspects of her visual analysis is the primacy—and limitations—that photographic technology played in the Allied “re-education” of West Germany in the immediate postwar period. It is one of the book’s contentions that photographic technology may have succeeded in revealing to the German people the effects of their racial doctrines but that the oppressive images had their limitations, which required artists to interpret and present. The former Buchenwald inmate Jorge Semprun described how the Allied films that he was made to watch in “the quiet of the movie theatre ... these intimate images became foreign to me....They ceased being my property and my torment.” The film clips alienated the spectator from the memory of his experience, and “what was really needed was commentary on the images, to decipher them, to situate them not only in a historical context, but within a continuity of feelings and agitations” (p. 33). This is a tall order but *Judenmord* succeeds in doing just that. Throughout the volume, Hoffmann-Curtis pauses in the chronological march of artists and contextual history to interrogate the ethics of representation, particularly the ways that “those observing were made into, and were accused of being, witnesses to inhuman acts” (p. 16).

Hoffmann-Curtis opens her postwar analysis with the depiction of the human figure as it developed in 1945-49. She travels between art and the photography here with the observation that artists translated the grotesque photographic referent in ways that preserved the humanity of its subjects. Artists such as Horst Strembel, Teo Otto, Peter Edel, and Otto Pankok struggled to find the part that remained intact of those bodies that were so brutally dehumanized and recorded in photography.

The chapter on human figuration is followed by a lengthy treatment of an early series of prints that became the source of what would become the primary symbols of collective memory: yellow stars, packed railway trains, stacked wooden bunks, living skeletons, and smoking chimneys. But here too, the author dives deeply into the circulating mass images to identify which specific news items artists Lea Grundig, Ludwig Meidner, Willi Geiger, Jerzy Zielezinski, Fritz Ketz, and Teo Otto based their early pictorial cycles on in the immediate postwar period. At the same time, many artists reached for landmarks in the art historical canon, particularly religious paintings on panels as an indictment of the notion of historical progress and “Western civilization.”

The volume pours a great deal of attention on the decade following the founding of the two German states in 1949. Here, too, documentary photography and film play a central role, such as the films *Nuit et Brouillard* (*Night and Fog*) and *Sterne* (*Stars*). The critical apex of this chapter is its discussion of the competition for an international memorial at Auschwitz, which analyzes the entire process for selection, including an analysis of some of the rejected submissions.

The Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt am Main in 1963-65 looms large in the book as the event that led to a public reckoning and, with it, the production and consumption of images of the murder of the Jews. It was a turning point in the politics of memory. This chapter brings back figurative painting with images that make the first attempts in the late 1940s seem mild—even naively hopeful—compared to the eroticized studies of violated bodies.

Least useful to the English edition is the addition of a chapter on pre-WWII representations of antisemitic violence, beginning with Hartmann Schedel's woodcut with its descriptive title "Burning Alive of Jews" from 1493 and quickly pivoting to those images made by Jewish artists such as the famous early twentieth-century works by Samuel Hirszenberg, Jakob Steinhardt, and Max Liebermann. In a book that has so aptly expanded the analysis beyond the iconographic, this chapter is flattened by its central question of "whether this German history of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism is also reflected in the drawings and paintings that were made after 1945" (p. 22). Despite its overall conscientiousness to experiential presentness and linear chronology, this chapter falls into the trap of the "Holocaust effect" with its question of prehistory. In one of the most concrete examples of this perceptual confusion, Hoffmann-Curtius sees the "same gesture by a boy terrified to death" in the famous photograph from the 1943 Stroop Report on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in an etching by Lea Grundig from the 1930s (p. 25).

Rather than step out of the individual artists that she has so intricately parsed to offer us a theoretical conclusion or roundup of the revealing case material, the volume leaves us, poetically, at Gerhard Richter's studio as an exemplar of an artist who collages photography into his paintings, the past into the present. There, Richter supposedly works alone without a commission and forethought of the future, and "it is left up to the viewer to relate the specific colours white-grey-black-green and red to Birkenau and the mass murder of the Jews, to interpret the canvases as scraping away at the layers of history and to reflect on his or her shreds of memory" (p. 317). While some readers may yearn for a firmer conclusion to the narrative she wields so expertly in the rest of the book, I found it a fitting place to stop, where Richter's creative autobiography wakes my internal cynical voice. I see this as Hoffmann-Curtius's personal conclusion to having done the grueling research that resulted in her startling and sensitive volume, *Judenmord*: she has expertly led the reader to conclusions that have been aptly demonstrated and supported by a wide variety of sources, but she nonetheless leaves room for a continued investigation between the *Judenmord* and the Self.

Note

[1]. Margaret Olin, "On Not Introducing George Segal," *Judaism* 49 (2000): 464.

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