Editorial Board

Introduction

This collection represents a part of the papers read at the conference *Art and the Holocaust: Reflections for the Common Future*, held in Riga on July 2–3, 2019. The conference was the first stage in a project of the same title, which also included two seminars devoted to the evolution of memorial art and an exhibition of works by Jewish artists of the interwar period, many of whom were victims of the Holocaust. The project was conducted by the Riga Jewish Community and the Museum *Jews in Latvia* in cooperation with the Romans Suta and Aleksandra Beļcova Museum, the University of Rostock, and a number of other organizations. Funding was secured within the framework of the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Commission, with support at various stages of the project provided by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia, Boris Lurie Art Foundation, and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

At the conference, papers were presented on the following subjects: the fate of artists during the Holocaust and the impact of the Holocaust on their work, depiction of the Holocaust by non-Jewish artists, the Holocaust in photography, art in internment facilities, the art of Holocaust memorials, and other topics. The present collection contains papers dedicated to visual arts, created both during the Holocaust as well as in response to it.

Almost 80 years separate us from the Catastrophe, from those tragic events. The art of the Holocaust has come a long way since then: from being forbidden or at least invisible, unexhibited, as it was at the time of its creation, during the war years and immediately after, to becoming artefacts in the collections of specialized museums where they are found today. Speaking about the art of the Holocaust, we must understand that in different historical circumstances the respective artists might have never 'met' on the pages of the same publication; however, the Holocaust became a defining fact in their biography – many of them died, while for others the Holocaust became an important theme in their art, as well as in their dialogue with contemporary society decades after the tragedy.

A key thesis of the conference was Theodor Adorno's statement that creating art after Auschwitz is barbaric.[1] This thesis has been the subject of many debates. Some

[1] 'To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric' – Adorno Th.W. *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft // Adorno Th.W.*

believe that depictions of the Catastrophe are unacceptable, as there is no single photographic document of death in a gas chamber. Only eyewitness accounts are valid, but in this case they are impossible, since nobody survived the gas chambers. Furthermore, images are inferior to the power of human words – they are 'images without imagination' (for more, see the article by Eckhart J. Gillen). However, if we approach this problem from the point of view of psychology, the contradictions are less evident. The therapeutic practices of psychologists show that people who have been mentally traumatized are first only able to visualize the traumatic experience, long before they can talk about it. Overcoming trauma is possible only in a dialogue with the traumatized inner 'I', and it is precisely images, including works of art, that are the assistants guiding one on the path to healing. Likewise, when it comes to works created during the Holocaust, many of those were also created with a kind of therapeutic aim – to maintain the illusion of a normal life, to continue the artistic process that began before the war. Many of these works do not contain anything visually related to the Holocaust; however, the context of their creation allows them to be also attributed to the art of the Holocaust.

The works of artists examined and presented at the conference and in the articles of this collection can be theoretically divided into several categories. A significant portion of the art of the Holocaust is made up of portraits, posters, propaganda material, graphics, etc. that were commissioned by Nazi authorities or ghetto officials. Nowadays, the surviving documentary evidence of such commissioned works presents a special interest to researchers (see the articles by Irmina Gadowska and Teresa Śmiechowska on Warsaw and Giedrė Jankevičiūtė on Vilnius and Kaunas). In this case, methods of social art history make it possible to illuminate individual details of the artists' existence in the ghetto, their socioeconomic situation, and explain the mechanisms of survival in those unbearable conditions. Besides these commissioned works, the artists painted portraits of their loved ones and acquaintances who were also there, in the ghetto, and drew sketches depicting the everyday life and reality in the places of internment. Of course, in addition to artistic value, these works also have documentary and historical value, but for the authors themselves this creative output became a kind of psychological way of survival. Some of the works by their contents and positive emotional mood – bright, saturated with light and colour – were in no way associated with the grim reality of life in the ghetto, but thereby expressed the artists' desire to escape that reality (for instance, Tadeusz Bornstein and Gela Seksztajn; for more and particular examples, see the article by Magdalena Tarnowska).[2]

Gesammelte Schriften. Frankfurt; Darmstadt, 1997. Bd. 10/1: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I. S. 30.

[2] Even though there are no articles on the representation of the Holocaust by non-Jewish artists among the articles presented in the collection, it is important to mention that there were such cases (for instance, Andrzej Wroblewski's series of paintings 'Executions', 1949, or Aleksandra Beļcova's drawings of Riga Ghetto that were presented at the conference).

The art of the Holocaust also includes works created in the post-war decades, while not all authors of these works were victims of genocide. For them and for the formation of the iconography of the art of the Holocaust as a whole, the preserved photographs in which crimes were documented or life in the camps and ghettos was recorded, have been of great importance. Such is, for example, the so-called 'Stroop Report' on the suppression of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. The 30 photographs attached to the report prepared by SS officer Jürgen Stroop have become textbook images of the Holocaust. Artists Gustav Metzger (1926–2014), Samuel Bak (1933), and Nir Hod (1970) have used these photographs or their fragments to create collages. The documentary material was utilized in a similar fashion by Boris Lurie (1924–2008). In the early months and years following the war, he created traditional paintings, which documented his experiences. However, he quickly moved on to a new method: his collages, including those that used photographs of the Holocaust, resemble literal shards of fragmented memories, chaotic, mixed with the artist's impressions of the post-war life in the United States. This is how the shocking contrasts of imagery appeared in his works, where pin-up photos and modern advertising coexist with documentary photos from concentration camps. The path of Boris Lurie, in a sense, confirms the aforementioned typical scenario of overcoming psychological trauma – the transition from images to words, from fine art to exploits in literature. His novel House of Anita is an attempt to rethink and reconcile himself with the tragic past.

But this appeal to photography was more than just a search for an expressive formal solution. Behind it, there is a deeper meaning, related to the very essence of the phenomenon of photography, the essence of the photographic image, and Eleonora Jedlińska in her article most appropriately refers to the ideas of Roland Barthes. Photography, according to Barthes, is a certain 'certificate of presence', a super-confirmation of reality, 'a new type of evidence'. In this case, it documents facts of incredible cruelty – so horrible that it is simply impossible for a regular person to fully grasp their scale. However, the fact that those are actual people depicted in the individual photos allows the viewer to perceive their tragedy on a more personal level. The Catastrophe takes on a face; it ceases to be abstract. Consciously or not, it was precisely this goal that the artists pursued by using photographs and their fragments in their works.

The fact that many works of art were created at a time when society was not interested in hearing about the Holocaust is an important aspect – and the reasons for that could be very different. In Western Europe and the United States, the post-war years was a period of overcoming difficulties and rapid economic growth, and tragic events were deliberately pushed to the periphery of public consciousness. This came to be one of the factors that influenced Boris Lurie. The artist had a hard time coping with the feeling of alienation and being misunderstood in a society focused on consumption and hedonism. In Eastern Europe, however, the art of the Holocaust, to some extent, remained in the shadows due to reasons of a political nature, including the compli-

cated relationship of the regimes with the surviving Jews. In official art, emphasis was placed on perpetuating the memory of the anti-fascist movement (the problematics of this issue are examined in the article on GDR in the 1940s–1970s by Jenny Gaßer and Katrin Schmidt). The situation in the USSR was somewhat similar: the memorials and monuments that arose in the post-war years often failed to mention the Jewish origin of the victims, whereas many works of visual art were created within the boundaries of unofficial culture and were hardly available to general public.

Summarizing the papers and articles presented at the conference and in this collection, we can conclude that researching the art of the Holocaust provides a number of challenges of both objective and subjective nature. First, there were not that many works of art as well as related photos and archival documents to begin with, and even fewer have survived to this day. At the same time, even materials related to one artist are often kept in different institutions in different cities and countries and may be scattered all over the world. Among difficulties of a subjective nature there is the fact that the artists of the Holocaust, with rare exceptions, were not the leading representatives of national art schools. They were not stars of the first magnitude, many of them died at a young age, before being able to reveal their talent to the fullest. Second, many of the artists did not leave behind any theoretical or memoir texts that could clarify the context of many works and their place in art history beyond the framework of the art of the Holocaust. Third, the ideological, political, and social taboos that existed in the first post-war decades considerably delayed not only the creation of art, but also its research.

The art of the Holocaust is a testimony to the Catastrophe, a reminder and a warning to the living and future generations. There are still many blank spots left in the study of the biographies and creativity of the artists of the Holocaust, and it is likely not all of them will ever be filled, but that should not be an obstacle to exploring it.