Death Masks for the Living: Art and Atrocity

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Dedication

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Abstract

Death Masks for the Living: Art and Atrocity

By

Naomi Tarle

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art

Beyond ghettos, death camps, mass graves, gas chambers, crematoriums, memorials, museums, artifacts—beyond the Holocaust as a finite event, the Holocaust exists. Horror persists outside individual and collective memories and histories. The Holocaust is eternal and unimaginable. Loss of individuals instigates loss of family, which instigates loss of community, which instigates loss of sites. This accumulation of loss highlights the validity of history. Does history exist beyond place and artifact? Do communities exist beyond their own histories? Do individuals exist beyond their own memories? My work probes these questions.

The void acknowledged by art objects compelled by genocide, draw on biblical narratives, bread, salt, used books, shoes and sweaters; elements inherently fraught with history and therefore well disposed for manipulation and transformation. Materials such as bread and salt carry their own historical, religious and cultural connotations. Second-hand materials bear unknown histories and emphasize the individual within a community. In varying degrees of close proximity, individuals become families, communities, and
societies. Single items become ‘group’ rather than ‘individual’ when bound or gathered. Historically loaded materials and process intensive approaches provide insight into the motives and ongoing consequences of the Holocaust. How these materials interact with each other through processes such as salt crystallization and bread baking generate specific as well as inclusive interpretations. Through the illumination of a specific type of loss, history becomes tangible. These works make the incentives and consequences of the Holocaust, and all genocides, current and present.
Introduction: Personal and Familial Historical Context

My grandparents’ stories of their youth in Vilnius and their trials fighting as partisans against the Nazis during the Holocaust fill the memories of my childhood. I listened to my grandfather’s stories and tried to remember every word and inflection. After he died, my grandmother began to tell her stories and once again I listened. These stories have shaped me, and similar stories have shaped all the children and grandchildren of survivors. The Jewish people are more than the Holocaust, but it is imprinted in our memories, and remains a defining factor of our actions.

Growing up with the knowledge that most of my father’s relatives were killed in the Holocaust, I cannot recall a time I was unaware of the Holocaust and how my family was affected. This knowledge led me to my first obsession and my current pursuits. As a young adult I visited the public library to search through as many books as I could find about the Holocaust, from memoirs to realistic fiction to histories to poetry, from Elie Wiesel to Isaac Bashevis Singer to Paul Celan.

As a child I could not understand the consequences of surviving, the lingering memories of war mixed with the sweet memories of childhoods in Vilnius. As a young adult, I had difficulty reconciling the stories of these partisans fighting the Nazis, hiding in forests, losing loved ones and their home, with the gentle, quiet image of my grandparents. This is the source of my endless questions and desire to comprehend. How do regular people become extraordinary, and am I capable of such action? My grandmother played in the Yiddish theatre in Vilnius before WWII and continued to act, recite poems and perform in the Vilnius Ghetto. She later joined a group of partisans and fought against the Nazis, as did my grandfather.
Vilnius used to be called the Jerusalem of Lithuania because it was the spiritual, intellectual and artistic center for Jews in Eastern Europe. By the end of World War II this legacy had ended. Astonishingly, these cultural and artistic activities survived in the Jewish Ghetto until its liquidation. My grandmother played in the Yiddish theatre before and after the formation of the Ghetto. The Ghetto became a place where art, music, writing and theatre were created in a time of war. Small instances of beauty survive even during the most evil episodes of history.

A single art object or a single poem can’t contain a history, but an entire canon does. Holocaust art made by survivors and their children is prevalent, but not art by grandchildren of survivors. As the generation of survivors and witnesses to the Holocaust pass away, it is essential to continue interacting with this specific artistic lineage, and recording the micro and macro details and traumas, lest they be lost. In an interview at Yad Vashem, Jacques Derrida said:

> It is certain that those who were adults at the time of the Shoah have a relation to it quite unlike that of subsequent generations. It is not only a question of chronological contemporaneity; the time span from one generation to the next, that is to say, twenty five, thirty years, is also a time of the work of mourning, a time during which the personal, the collective and the political unconscious works, and we know that with such monstrous traumas time means a great deal. As to the question of forgiveness…without the Shoah having been forgotten, there may be a period of the attenuation of the suffering, a distancing of the suffering which is not a forgetting, but which is nevertheless a sort of weakening of the pain that permits other gestures. (6)

Each generation must mourn. Each must take its place as a descendant of atrocity and purveyor of memory. Creating art is how I engage with this lineage and renew the memory. My goal is for my objects to personify both the horror and trauma as well as the infinite qualities and ongoing pertinence of the Holocaust.
Historical and Philosophical Context

The term genocide was coined after the Holocaust during the Nuremberg Trials. My work dwells on motives, consequences and small resistances of all genocides, while my personal catalyst for investigation is my familial connection to the Holocaust. These works are a reflection on the Holocaust as well as a reaction to the current rise in anti-Semitic related violence around the world. My work reflects on continuing atrocities, using the Holocaust as a personal touchstone: from the Charlie Hebdo massacre to ISIS beheadings to the Rwandan genocide. In the famous words of Emil Fakenheim, “The holocaust is the rupture that ruptured philosophy.” Even before WWII, William James, wrote about the concept of the ‘other,’ a theory that attempts to explain the inherent motives for ethnic cleansing. In *On Some of Life’s Ideals*, James wrote about “the blindness with which we all are afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves” (3). James does not write on the genocide spawned by differences in race and ethnicity but sees the same disregard for human suffering within the class system. He revels in the thought of peace, where people see others in themselves: “If the poor and the rich could look at each other in this way…how gentle would grow their disputes, what tolerance and good humor, what willingness to live and let live, would come into the world!” (94). Obviously James had no idea what the future held when he published in 1912. Emmanuel Levinas delves deep into this question of responsibility to the ‘other’ after the end of WWII.

After the liberation of the camps as the world became aware of the Nazi atrocities, many philosophers attempted to write new philosophies to explain how ordinary people could become monsters. A well-known experiment conducted by Stanley Milgrams in
1960 demonstrated how obedience leads everyday citizens to dismiss their moral inclinations. In Milgrams’ book documenting the experiments, *Obedience to Authority*, he states, “Voices of morality were raised against the action in question, but the typical response of the common man was to obey orders…A substantial proportion of people do what they are told to do, irrespective of the content of the act and without limitations of conscience, so long as they perceive that the command comes from a legitimate authority” (180,189). In *The End of the World: A History*, Otto Friedrich writes, “The evidence of Auschwitz…has demonstrated that men (and women too) are capable of committing every evil the mind can conceive, that there is no natural or unwritten law that says of any atrocity whatever: This shall not be done. It has demonstrated that men can also bear and accept every evil, and that they will do so in order to survive” (333).

Levinas states that the moral and ethical responsibility to the ‘other’ is foremost in human beings, coming before the pursuit of truth. Without explicit references to the Holocaust, it is nonetheless assumed that the Nazi atrocities are in direct violation of Levinas’ ethical writings. In other words, the ‘self’ might feel a moral duty to help the ‘other’ but this is not necessarily reciprocated. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas states, “In war, beings refuse to belong to a totality, refuse community, refuse law…they affirm themselves as transcending the totality, each identifying itself not by its place in the world, but by its *self*” (222). Levinas’ philosophy is a philosophy of ethics that exists only because of the Holocaust.

In an interview, Derrida said that the problems concerning the Holocaust and philosophy afterward, are problems that have been with us so constantly, and have marked our memory, have marked our attention even when we're not paying attention,
even when we don't explicitly think of them. The Shoah or the Holocaust has marked our experience so ubiquitously, that it is difficult both to isolate it as a topic and then…to assemble all the reflections that have not ceased accumulating ever since. (1)

Everything after must be analyzed in the shadow of the Holocaust. Unlike Levinas, for Derrida, contact with the ‘other’ does not evoke connection to or an opening towards the ‘other,’ but an altogether different and negative experience. Robert Eaglestone says of Derrida, “If deconstruction provides no answers, it does at least, perhaps, offer a way of doing post-Holocaust philosophy, a philosophy of cinders” (28). Cinders is one of Derrida’s most overtly Holocaust-related writings. Parallel themes, speech versus writing and memory versus history, are bound together and elucidated by the phrase “There are cinders there, cinders there are” (3). Beyond philosophical or biopolitical themes, Cinders is a prose poem about incineration, sacrifice, what is gone yet present, what is dead yet alive:

Cinder, this old gray word, this dusty theme of humanity, the immemorial image had decomposed from within, a metaphor or metonymy of itself, such is the destiny of every cinder, separated, consumed like a cinder of cinders (13)…Being without presence has not been and will no longer be there where there is cinder and where this other memory would speak. There, where cinder means the difference between what remains and what is, will she ever reach it, there? (21-23).

When what remains is as delicate as ashes, how does one interact? Is something essential lost, or does an essence remain? What is remembered when the physical has dissolved? Where does connection reside and where does memory live when the body is gone? The questions that Derrida asks, I attempt to answer through my objects.
Process & Meaning

Process and Titling

Art and writing are my modes of elucidating the incomprehensible. The combination of repetitious, process-based work, and natural processes are essential in my work. I collaborate with physical processes by making salt water and allowing crystals to form, and baking flour, salt and water. My art practice is comprised of repetition and multiples, chemical and ritualistic processes. In Souls on Fire, Elie Wiesel said, “Repetition in Judaism is not repetitive but revelatory” (Wiesel). The parallel between multiples and the repetition of process creates layers of meaning and a visual environment of historical relevance. Specific materials and access to meaning by various traditions and disciplines create layered ideas.

To create work, I employ a generative process. By working in a multiplicative way, creating large amounts of work in short periods, I create an environment where each piece becomes cumulative and responsive. After a significant number of objects have been produced, I step away from actively making to contemplate and evaluate. After time away from hands on work, I can clearly parse out objects that embody conceptual underpinnings of a specific loss brought on by atrocity.

I hold an MFA in creative writing and have always used writing as a way to further engage with my visual work. Titling is an integral part of my process and is part of the visual work. The object and title elevate each other, creating dialogue and engagement. Titles act as ideological extensions of the objects. My objects are visual poems, and the titles are the first and last lines of those poems. The title and visual ideation collude to form content. When I create an object, writing the title fulfills the
object as if it were a question to be answered. When the title is created first, the object is made in response to the words. Each object and title are created to stand alone, yet when combined generate a dialogue that enhances possible interpretations.

**Objects of Loss**

The objects in this body of work embody the void left by people. They are the physical representation of a specific loss inherent exclusively to the Holocaust. The losses derived from the Holocaust begin with the individual, migrate to families, entire communities and sites, and finally into future generations. The Holocaust left a gaping wound that no amount of time may heal. The significance of remembering is present in every cultural act of violence since the Holocaust. The Holocaust is the measure by which all other atrocities are measured.

**Instances of Creation**

Art and resistance can be sustained during atrocity. Remembering the small but vital acts of creation throughout the Holocaust justifies the act of creation after the Holocaust. In *The End of the World: A History*, Otto Friedrich writes, “The evidence of Auschwitz has demonstrated just as conclusively that men will sacrifice themselves for others, sometimes quite selflessly” (333). Details of color and texture in my objects denote resistance through creative acts. Music, theatre, literature and art created and performed in Jewish Ghettos, stand as an affirmation of the importance that art plays a significant role in people’s ability to resist persecution and retain humanity in inhumane circumstances. The act of art making, in all forms, is generative, an affront to and the opposite of death.
Materials & Description of Work

Bread

_Crisp apples for Fall. Bad apples in Winter_ is an installation comprised of bread. A simple bread recipe of flour, salt and water is baked inside used shoes. After baking, the shoe is cut away and the resulting bread becomes the object. The bread is the negative space made positive; it’s the missing body symbolically remade. In _Feed and Quarry, Rustle and Signal_, used sweaters are not baked, but flour and water are used to make a mortar that is applied to the sweaters and in some cases adheres them to one another.

Bread is historically, culturally and religiously significant. From the beginning of agriculture, bread has dominated the world: “Long ago Occidental man acquired a definite preference for raised bread…bread reigned over the ancient world; no food before or after exerted such mastery over men” (Jacob 17). In his book _Six Thousand Years of Bread: Its Holy and Unholy History_, H.E. Jacob discusses cultures throughout time and the world and their connection to bread. Bread influenced religion, government, trade and technology. Judaism uses bread in ceremonies from Shabbat Challah to biblical offerings of show-bread, to the unleavened bread that the Hebrews made as they fled ancient Egypt. For Catholics, bread can be made into the body of Christ. In ancient Greece, bread was a religious item in the cult of Demeter. The same goddess who gave bread also had power over the soul: “Demeter, giver of bread and goddess of the fields, and founder of the law, the family, and the state…she had power over the realm of the dead; she was who decided the resurrection or destruction of a soul” (63). From Rome to the new world, religions and cults elevated grain and bread beyond a foodstuff. Wars were won and lost because of it, environments altered, legends and tales written. The
Grimm brothers of legend wrote about a dead child with worn shoes, whose mother “took the whitest flour she had, made a dough, and baked the child shoes of bread” (145). Bread resonates in every land, time and culture. None have a history without bread. At the end of the book, Jacob writes, “Hunger means insanity. Everywhere” (378). In May 1943 President Hoover told Jacob, “World peace means a piece of bread…the first word in a war is spoken by the guns—but the last word has always been spoken by bread” (380). H.E. Jacob himself understood the significance of bread, beyond his research. He writes:

In Buchenwald concentration camp we had no real bread at all; what was called bread was a mixture of potato flour, peas, and sawdust…nevertheless we called it bread, in memoriam of the real bread we had formerly eaten. We loved it and could scarcely wait for it to be distributed among us. Many died there without ever tasting real bread again…Bread is holy. And bread is profane. (380)

In my work, by making bread in shoes, the body becomes bread, becomes a sacred object, and becomes irreverent to death. The shoe-breads embody the loss with physicality of form. Loss is no longer solely an intellectual fact, for the bread makes loss tangible and physically declarative.

Salt

To wake renewed the way the sea loses its salt is an installation consisting of salt-encrusted sweaters pulled over the tops of three- to four-foot vertical railroad ties. The sweaters are repeatedly soaked in saltwater, creating clumps of crystallization as the water evaporates. Lakes become recluse in anticipation of us are salt-prints made with silver nitrate and a sodium mixture.

Salt is essential for human life: “The earliest written record of salt production in China dates to around 800 B.C.” (Salt 19). Too much salt can destroy life and vegetation.
Salt preserves, cures and pickles. Control of salt mines and lakes of salty waters have started wars. From China to Africa salt was used for centuries as payment, salary and taxes. Cities were founded not only near sources of water but close to saltworks; in the alpine mountains in Austria, “Three prehistoric miners have been found, trapped in their dark ancient work sites…leather sacks for hauling rock salt on their back” (Salt 53). The ability to preserve food changed the way humans lived. Every culture has a history of salted and pickled foods, allowing groups to travel, grow and spend time on pursuits other than growing and capturing food.

Salt is a spiritual tool that spans cultures and religions. People are described as being ‘the salt of the earth’ in the Bible, Catholics use salt in purifying rituals, and salt is added to offerings and used in Jewish ceremonies. In the Torah a ‘salt covenant’ or ‘covenant of salt’ is written twice, as well as Lot’s wife becoming a pillar of salt. Buddhists use salt to repel evil spirits and Pueblo people worship the Salt Mother. From salted meat, to pickled vegetables, to religious sacrificial offerings, from war to economic growth, to travel and human expansion, salt, like bread has a significant role in human history. In my work salt is a multi-layered metaphor. The salt encrusted on the sweaters acts as a surrogate for the physical body, replacing what the body needs to survive and what could preserve it after death. Salt is the casket for a lost body and the impression left behind, ever recyclable, ever recurring, ever present. In my salt prints, the images burned into the book covers by sunlight are of herded animals, often used as sacrifices in the bible. They are simultaneously their own saltlick and sacrifice, as well as another instance of multiples. Salt is used at both ends of the process. It conditions the paper before exposure and development and fixes it after. In this way the salt becomes a
metaphor for birth and death. It is the bookends, the first breath and the last; without it the image would not exist. Salt is necessary for the physical process as well as the analogy of the significance of salt to physical bodies.

**Second-hand Materials**

The images that comprise the series *Lakes become recluses in anticipation of us* are printed on the inside of used book covers. In addition to flour and salt, second-hand sweaters are used in both *To wake renewed the way the sea loses its salt* and *Feed and Quarry, Rustle and Signal*. Although in *Crisp apples for Fall. Bad apples in Winter* the final object consists only of bread, the process involves used shoes. Used objects imply an anonymous history, a starting point that is individualized yet lost. Second-hand materials create a platform for making, void of specifics but historically rich. Used materials represent lost populations and the inevitable swap of individual histories for overarching facts. The essence of a person remains, but the history is re-invented through process and creation.

As the victims were led to their deaths, the Nazis took and piled their belongings. Huge piles of shoes, clothes, glasses, gold teeth, and suitcases were documented before being redistributed to citizens. Museums use piles of these artifacts in displays to show the amount and the horror of the Holocaust. The items are personal yet indistinguishable from one another. They are sacred yet tainted by evil. My groupings and piles of various objects create the same sense of the sacred and unease. When I bake bread in used shoes, the shoes become the husk, and the body is represented by the final art object: the bread.
The shoes no longer need to be present, because the remnant is implied by the bread. When salt is applied to the used sweaters, the sweaters become not only the husk but the body as well.
Conclusion

Art is how I resist forgetting the stories, how I connect with the histories of my grandparents and a time and place lost under newly constructed cities. I now recognize the act of creating art and fighting against oppression and annihilation are both invaluable forms of resistance. I believe the heart of human culture requires art to sustain community. A poet and mentor in my creative writing MFA program at Boise State once asked me if I believed that poets were historians, or if I believed in the ‘poet-historian’ as he put it. All art plays a vital role in the movement and vitality of societies. I am an artist and a poet who experiences culture by revitalizing history. History is cyclical and therefore forever current and present for those willing to look, but it must be part of a diligent practice. The Holocaust must not become a fixed point, a single episode, a list of items and names. In Derrida’s words:

For what is a date? A date is an instant, but it is also a place, it is the irreplaceability of the event. And so, somehow, even though any event, however modest, bears a relation to the name and the date, nevertheless from this point of view [the Holocaust] is presumably an abysmal experience that the members of my generation, of the generation preceding mine cannot get around. What will it be in the future? I don't know. [The] question about the date, the signature and the generation, lead me to think, with some horror, that perhaps, in two or three generations, all this will have been relativized, if not forgotten, and that the Shoah will find its place as one episode, among so many others, of the murderous violence within humanity: there have been other genocides before or after, the Bible is full of horrifying violence, of nations who destroy one another. So one knows that perhaps, in the future, this will be, if not erased or forgotten, at least classed, relativized by being classed. (10-11)

For the Holocaust to remain relevant, especially in the light of current events, it must never be viewed as finite. In a recent article in The Atlantic titled Is it Time for the Jews to Leave Europe? Jeffrey Goldberg writes, “The Shoah served for a while as a sort of inoculation against the return of overt Jew-hatred—but the effects of the inoculation, it is
becoming clear, are wearing off. What was once impermissible is again imaginable. Memories of 6 million Jewish dead fade, and guilt becomes burdensome.” The slogan, ‘Never Again’ that many adopted after the Holocaust, does not only refer to never allowing another Holocaust, but never forgetting history, the extent of evil, obliviousness, and complacency. The Holocaust ruptured history, the ripples of which will be felt throughout all future generations, and therefore the Holocaust is forever happening, now, today, this moment. For this reason, my objects will always be relevant, old and new, sacred and evil, memory and loss.
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Appendix A

*Images of Work*

Title: *Crisp apples for Fall. Bad apples in Winter.*
Medium: flour, salt, water
Size: dimensions variable, elements life size
Title: *To wake renewed the way the sea loses its salt*
Medium: used sweaters, salt, railroad ties
Size: approx. 4’ x 1’ x 6”
Title: *Lakes become recluse in anticipation of us*
Medium: salt prints on used book covers
Size: 7” x 5”
Title: *Feed and Quarry, Rustle and Signal*
Medium: Used sweaters, flour, salt, mortar, used books, lint, pin, safety pins
Size: approx. 2” x 2” x 1”
Title: Read Me
Medium: used book cover, wool
Size: approx. 10” x 14” x 1”
Title: *Emergency Prayer Cube*
Medium: used books, ribbon
Size: approx. 2’ x 3’
Title: *Death Masks for the Living*
Medium: wool, ribbons
Size: approx. 10’ x 10’
Title: *Ashworks*
Medium: Kozo paper, ink, ash
Size: 5” x 7”
Title: Lot’s wife has no name
Medium: salt, 18 teddy bears, red light
Size: approx. 10’ x 10’ x 5’
Title: *As Dried Moths*
Medium: used books, glue, ink, ash
Size: approx. 3’ x 6’
Title: *Landscape 1*
Medium: aquatint, etching, drypoint on Fabriano paper
Size: 7” x 9”