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Exploring the Domestic and Benign: The Materiality of Perpetrator Spaces

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Abstract: This paper explores how three art projects I made at and in response to Nazi sites can facilitate discussions and engagement with Europe's conflicted past. Art offers a medium through which to explore some of the more controversial narratives and 'many truths' that exist concerning the crimes of the Nazis in a way that might not be permissible in a purely historical context. I explain how my practice has developed to focus not solely on traumatic pasts, but on how we look at perpetrators in a contemporary context using familiar material culture. This position allows me to unsettle prevailing paradigms that may omit perpetrators' personal lives as part of the complete story of the camps. In the art projects discussed here, a variety of contexts, audiences, and frameworks were developed to confront challenging aspects of perpetrator life and, in particular, the problematic nature of including their narrative in the history of the Nazi camp system. Three projects will be presented and I will describe how the work was developed and conceived and discuss its intended impact on the audience. The three cases address efforts to use historical material alongside conceptual art to invite the audience to consider new ways to tackle less prevalent paradigms in Holocaust discourse, related to some of the more ordinary aspects of the perpetrators. It will also demonstrate how art offered the means to explore wider questions beyond the fields of science and remembrance to engage the public in new theories and narratives.

Keywords: Contemporary Art, Atrocity Heritage, Cross-Disciplinary, Installation, Practice as Research, Falstad Centre, Camp Westerbork, Treblinka.

Introduction

In this essay, I will first outline the key considerations in the making of art that explores the materiality of perpetrators' spaces within the context of the Nazi camp system. Next, I will discuss three artworks/exhibitions I created in response to these spaces and how each connected with the context of the specific sites that they relate to. Each was an attempt to draw out materials and concepts that would result in further discussions on those aspects of perpetrator lives that do not pertain to their crimes, presenting the audience with a humanising characteristic that could challenge established ideas on the

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representation of evil and its aesthetics. My particular approach was to investigate what may be considered the overlooked, the sidelined, or the liminal, either in physical content or in the context of memory culture. Two of the works discussed were situated or developed as a direct response to a site: the commandant's house at Falstad concentration camp situated in the village of Ekne, Norway, and artefacts from Camp Westerbork Archive in the Netherlands. They were re-created and displayed in an installation as part of the Westerbork Project, 'The Memory of Camp Westerbork'. The third work I discuss is a collaborative project exploring a requisition letter linked to the construction of the Treblinka death camp in Poland that reveals details of the material lives of perpetrators.

As the Holocaust stands as one of the darkest and most horrific events in human history, and as we grapple with the immense scale of the atrocities committed, it is crucial to explore how contemporary art can serve as a powerful medium for engaging with and memorialising this profound tragedy. Contemporary art, with its ability to challenge conventional narratives and push boundaries through visual representations, installations, and performances can shed light on the complex and often uncomfortable truths surrounding the perpetrators of the Holocaust.

The relationship between contemporary art and the perpetrators of the Holocaust is a complex and multifaceted topic. While the atrocities of the Nazi regime have been the subject of scholarly and artistic exploration,[1] the specific examination of domestic and benign perpetrator materiality through the lens of contemporary art is a more recent area of inquiry, with previous depictions of Nazi perpetrators focusing more heavily on 'animal and monster imagery'.[2] Whatever the motivation for such work, as Nicholas J. Saunders has stated, 'arguably more than any other kind of cultural matter, the objects of war provide opportunities for exploring the ways in which the dead and the living find proximity via materialities and places'.[3] This allows space for obtuse, physical evidence to reveal insights into individual experiences of

1 Dora Apel, 'Trespassing the Limits: Mirroring Evil — Nazi Imagery/Recent Art at the Jewish Museum', *Other Voices*, 2.3 (2005).

2 Diana I. Popescu, 'Representing Infamous Others: Perpetrator Imagery in Visual Art', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 321–331 (p. 325).

3 Nicholas J. Saunders, 'Memory and Conflict', in *The Material Culture Reader*, ed. by Victor Buchli (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 175–206 (p. 178).

violence.[4] The duality of experience an artwork may offer in the form of confrontation and reflection is crucial, as it allows us to better understand, via ordinary objects, what underpinned some of the more perfunctory mechanisms that fuelled the Holocaust.

Representing the Perpetrators

Scholars have observed that the portrayal of images of atrocity presents significant challenges, as they have the potential to create a discord between form and content, separating and recontextualising the suffering portrayed. Furthermore, such images are frequently criticised for their perceived re-victimisation, aestheticization of suffering, compassion fatigue, and exploitation.[5] In response to these concerns, certain artists have chosen to redirect their focus towards the material presence of the spaces and objects involved in such acts, rather than depicting the actual violence or its victims. For example, *Prada Deathcamp* (1998) by artist Tom Sachs[6] is a cardboard and wire model of a killing centre on a flattened Prada hat box, referencing the remains of Nazi camps and relating this to the fashion industry, connecting the means to influence a choice on personal attire with the means to normalise racial hatred. More recently, Natalia Romik's 'Hideouts' (2022) displays results from her inquiry into a hideout at the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw, resulting in an exhibition of the physical proprieties of survival during the Nazi occupation of Poland and Ukraine. This alternative approach offers a method of engaging with the legacy of the Holocaust, shifting attention from the victims to the broader context and infrastructure that facilitated the genocide. By examining the aesthetics of violence and the psychological landscapes depicted, we gain insight into the significant role materiality plays in shaping collective memory and trauma.

4 Gilly Carr, Marek E. Jasinski, and Claudia Theune, 'The Material Culture of Nazi Camps: An Editorial', *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 22 (2017), 423–429.

5 Paul Lowe, 'Traces of Traces: Time, Space, Objects, and the Forensic Turn in Photography', *Humanities*, 7.3 (2018), 1–18.

6 Tom Sachs, *Prada Deathcamp*, 1998, cardboard and wire model, 9 July 2015, <https://arthur.io/art/tom-sachs/prada-deathcamp> [accessed 11 December 2024].

The Role of Materiality in Contemporary Art Practices

Materiality serves as a critical component in contemporary art. The tangible aspects of artworks supposedly reshape the viewer's experience and interpretation. As Michael Parsons states, 'visual metaphors can be different from linguistic ones, in that they can often be read backwards and forwards and in that several metaphors can co-exist in the same work without creating confusion. For these reasons, visual metaphors can be more suggestive and ambiguous than linguistic ones'.[7] Elaborating on meanings from our experiences grants artists the opportunity to manipulate materials in a way that evokes specific historical or emotional connotations, allowing for a multifaceted exploration of these complex themes.

Important ways in which materiality influences contemporary art include:

- Evocative materials: Artists may select materials that resonate with historical significance, or that purposefully do not challenge established norms.

- Textural and material engagement: The texture of an artwork can evoke visceral reactions, enhancing the narrative and thus creating feelings beyond academic comprehension.

- Lens-based media: The integration of lens-based media, such as photography, can provide a stark juxtaposition against physical materials and, in some cases, we are only left with photographic evidence of the material culture.

Below I will describe the methodologies I used at both memorial sites and in response to an archived historical document. Responding to these stimuli necessitated a range of methodological responses which I will attempt to describe and elucidate.

7 Michael J. Parsons, 'Interpreting Art Through Metaphors', *International Journal of Art & Design Education*, 29.3 (2010), 243.

Falstad Commandant's House – Dinner Set

Figure 1. 3D print (left) and original gravy boat (right) in the Commander's House at Falstad. (Copyright. Ingeborg Hjorth)

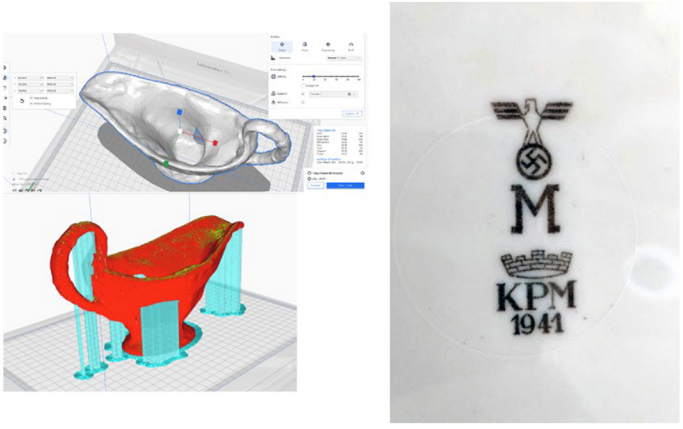

Figure 2. Rendering of the gravy boat for 3D printing (left); The insignia found on the base of the dinner set (right). (Copyright. Ingeborg Hjorth)

During a residency at the Falstad Centre in Norway, I was presented, by way of the physical archive, a dinner set with Nazi insignia that may have been used by the commandant(s) of Falstad. I found these objects intriguing because they were both functional and mundane, yet also represented evil and terror by way of the insignia and manufacturers' stamp that set them apart from conventional dining sets. Additionally, I could not ignore the fact that they appeared to be well-maintained and were reportedly acquired in the early 1980s and used by a Norwegian family in the post-war years. I wanted to explore how the dinner set, as a regular domestic item, could be a representation of evil in its everyday normality. I questioned our expectations of what perpetrators should look like and whether humanising them feels uncomfortable because it brings them closer to us and makes their actions feel possible rather than alien and other. Here, it is achieved through the translation of form, often using forensic, archaeological processes but allowing technology to influence the transfer of object to image, and ultimately back into an object. I used an iPad and 3D Photogrammetry software to create a digital 3D object from a series of photographs. However, due to reflective surfaces not being easily picked up by the software, errors and glitches were created, leaving areas of the dinner set scan empty or warped. These imperfections became a metaphorical or poetic moment in the object, allowing the viewer to fill in the psychological gaps with their own narratives, connecting metaphorical and literal space in the reproduced objects. The fact that the dinner set was an ordinary, domestic item suggests that life in Nazi-occupied Norway, at least for the commandant and senior officers, was one of routine and convention. This idea is something that the artwork distorts, but it serves as a reminder of who may have been using these items, which, without wider context and understanding, might appear to belong to a normal domestic household. This idea ties into the concept of the everyday and normality of the perpetrators' lives away from, but so close to, mass murder and internment. This is very much in line with Primo Levi's reaffirmation of normalcy in perpetrators: 'Monsters exist, but they are too few in numbers to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are the common men'.[8]

8 Primo Levi, *The Reawakening* (New York: Scribner Book Co, 1996), p.228.

Supply/Request Exhibited: UniQube Gallery, Staffordshire University, and Stockport War Memorial Art Gallery. A Collaboration with Prof. Caroline Sturdy Colls

Figure 3. Supply/Request installed at Stockport War Memorial Art Gallery.

Figure 4. Detail of rail spikes requested in Eberl's requisition list. UniQube Gallery, University of Staffordshire.

In much of the literature and recollection pertaining to the Holocaust, there are allusions to the notion that the Nazis were somehow 'superhuman', functioning as an industrialised machine capable of destroying their adversaries and the evidence of their crimes. There exists a prevailing belief that the Nazis successfully eradicated all physical remnants associated with their activities at Treblinka, but archaeological research has debunked this.[9] This prompted me, in collaboration with Caroline Sturdy Colls, Professor of Holocaust Archaeology and Genocide Investigation at Huddersfield University, to recognise the importance of incorporating these issues into artworks to stimulate discourse that challenges these perceptions.

The focal point of the 'Supply/Request' artwork/installation was a requisition list authored by Irmfried Eberl, the inaugural Camp Commandant of the Treblinka extermination camp, along with items unearthed in the waste pit situated in the SS living quarters of the camp. For the purposes of this essay, I will specifically address the requisition list. The list, archived at the Wiener Holocaust Library in London, comprises a request for commonplace items, predominantly materials for building structures in which he and his fellow SS officers resided while perpetrating the murders of hundreds of thousands of individuals. The artwork features contemporary representations of items from this list and photographic evidence of the SS-owned objects, which were discovered during archaeological excavations of the camp's waste pit. The latter are showcased within a museum-style enclosure to delineate the items uncovered at the site and those that, due to their finite nature, exist solely within the list. While the presentation of these mundane items is relatively unadorned, the work is underpinned by profound theoretical considerations regarding the lives and actions of the perpetrators. The audience is compelled to grapple with the discomfiting idea that these men were preoccupied with trivial, material possessions—encompassing shower components, construction materials, and, notably, wallpaper samples—while constructing one of the largest mass killing sites in the world. Additionally, it illuminates facets of the social life they enjoyed within the camp through the discovered objects.

9 'Finding Treblinka Project', *University of Staffordshire*, n.d, <https://www.staffs.ac.uk/research/projects/finding-treblinka-project> [accessed 10 October 2024].

The Memory of Camp Westerbork Exhibition 'Everything Will Be Okay in the Morning', Camp Westerbork, Netherlands.

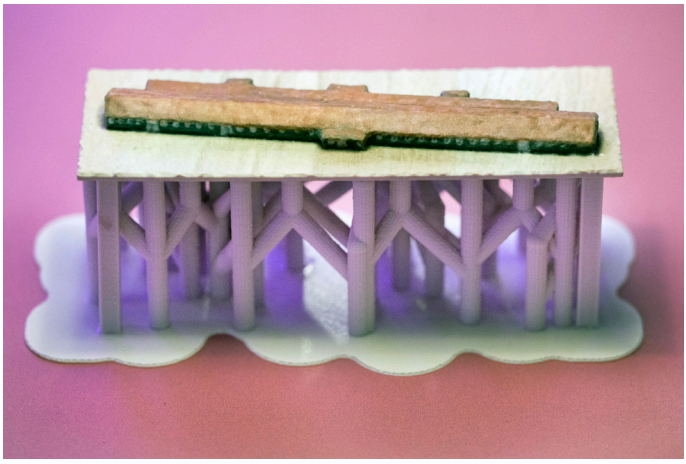

Figure 5. 3D Barracks detail.

Figure 6. 'Everything Will Be Okay in the Morning' installation at Camp Westerbork, 2023.

'Everything Will Be Okay in the Morning', an installation that included an artwork of 3D barracks, raises questions about the situation at Camp Westerbork, the place from which more than 100,000 Jews, Sinti, and Roma were deported, where thousands of Moluccans 'temporarily stayed' for more than two decades, Indonesian Dutch were 'received' and given military training, and where Dutch people who were suspected of collaboration were interned.[10] The artwork engages with the material archives and history of the camp to establish a position that addresses the past while also pointing towards possible futures. This was achieved through a combination of media-based artworks, installations, and curatorial strategies.

The neon signs in the installation 'Everything Will Be Okay in the Morning' serve as visual and textual prompts for contemplation. They allow for a rethinking of the space, time, and movement of people through Camp Westerbork throughout its history, a contentious issue in Dutch culture despite the material evidence being present in the onsite archives. The neon signs light up according to the length of time each group stayed in the camp, adding a layer of spectacle and humility to the work. The installation could be considered a 'Khora', existing as 'potential for irony that destabilizes supposedly firm concepts and opens up space for possibilities'.[11]

Within the installation, I placed the work '3D Barracks', featuring a 3D print made from the scan of a barracks' model, built within the camp in the period 1942-1945 when Westerbork was a transit camp. I chose the object as evidence of human presence, a handmade object representing the opposite of what it would become in a 3D print, adding to the distance by the real and recreated. The work connects an initial response, likely that of an internee, with the history of the barracks as a signifier of the camp's history, often synonymised with pieces of the barracks Anne Frank stayed in which are displayed at the camp, having previously been used for storage on a farm in Veendam since 1957. This notion of the surrogate is confounded in the metaphor of the barracks, as when the Anne Frank barracks was about to be dismantled and taken back to Westerbork to form part of the permanent exhibition, it was

10 'Westerbork Memorial', *Herinneringscentrum Kamp Westerbork*, n.d, <https://www.kampwesterbork.nl/en/> [accessed 10 October 2024].

11 Ana Letunić, 'Traversable Heterotopia of Difference: reflection accompanying Nina Kurtela's work "KHÔRA"', *Nina Kurtela* (2017), <http://www.ninakurtela.com/presstext/> [accessed 27 October 2024].

significantly destroyed by an arson attack.[12] This ongoing connection with the different contexts of the barracks as both a practical solution, that was then adopted by perpetrators to facilitate their crimes, links the materiality of the camp with ideas that go beyond its borders or the physicality of its existence. Only with the knowledge of the historical past does the barracks' role in perpetrating Nazi crimes come to light, as the structure itself is not specifically designed for internment. Its role in enabling the preparators to commit their crimes can only be understood when this repurposing is revealed. Whilst the object may not be an item that directly connects with perpetrators, its representation of the apparatus and modes of operation of transit and interment offers insight into how the perpetrators organised and committed their crimes.

Final Thoughts

As outlined in this essay, art can be a tool for continued discussion when made in collaboration with other disciplines and, if nothing else, it can be a mirror for the audience to look at oneself and the world around them. As argued here, the works I have produced deliberately avoid implied meaning, putting the viewer in what Norman L. Kleeblatt describes as 'the uncomfortable terrain between good and evil, seduction and repulsion'.[13]

At Falstad and Westerbork, the issue of the perpetrators remains a contentious one due to political pressures and debates about collaboration. Whilst artists set out to address this topic via practice-based research and interdisciplinary work, this topic was still complicated by restrictions placed upon access to archive materials and debates over the incorporation of such discussions into memorial museum exhibitions. From experience, artists confront the legacy of Holocaust perpetrators by challenging audiences to reflect on the intricacies of guilt, memory, and responsibility, transforming the practice into a profound commentary on material existence. To do this successfully, they must accept and understand their own position and the limitations of the materials that are left, and that we are faced with a series of tensions

12 'Anne Frank Barracks Fire was arson', *DutchNews*, 23 July 2009, <https://www.dutchnews.nl/2009/07/anne_frank_barracks_fire_was_a/> [accessed 27 October 2024].

13 Norman L. Kleeblatt, 'The Nazi Occupation of the White Cube: Transgressive Images/Moral Ambiguity/Contemporary Art', in *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*, ed. by Norman L. Kleeblatt, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), pp. 3–16 (p. 13).

when studying the camps: between past and present, remembering and forgetting, and live human actors and the material record.[14] In my own practice, the recognition of this distance forms part of the content and method of engagement. I want audiences to not only think about the Holocaust but to think about how, why, and where they are looking at it. As Dorota Golańska identifies, 'by weaving together the representable (narrative/symbolic/semiotic) and the unrepresentable (traumatic/bodily/material), the sites deny a purely representational logic, producing instead intensive singular events that are never fixed or unwavering'.[15]

I propose that because art operates in liminal spaces, meaning those that are peripheral or sidelined, the artist can encourage the viewer to think the unthinkable and consider notions that may not be permissible in other fields or forms of dissemination. One example being to consider the Nazi Other as a relatable human rather than someone who shares little with our own lives and values. In my own practice, I approach this by working with material culture that is relatable and recognisable in function and use, even to a contemporary audience, presenting the materials in a way that they are not imbued with the raw emotion of witnessing extreme human suffering. However, this is not without risk, as highlighted by Jamil Khader: 'one of the most contentious problems in post-Holocaust artistic and literary production has been the ethical implications of representing acts of radical human evil, or more specifically, the (in)humanity of the Nazi Other'.[16] By addressing ordinary activities of Nazi perpetrators, we are invited to make connections to our own lives; the work reminds us that the Holocaust was a human atrocity. By examining material traces, art not only memorialises but also challenges the ethical implications of representation, thereby inviting ongoing reflection on the legacies of atrocity. In the context of remembrance, this needs to be tempered with other factual materials, as there is the risk of trivialisation or relativism. Art without empathy that deals with any issue relating to the Holocaust must not under-emphasise the suffering endured.

14 Adrian T. Myers, 'Between Memory and Materiality: An Archaeological Approach to Studying the Nazi Concentration Camps', *Journal of Conflict Archaeology*, 4.1-2 (2008), 231–245.

15 Dorota Golańska, 'Bodily Collisions: Toward a New Materialist Account of Memorial Art', *Memory Studies*, 13.1 (2020), 74–89.

16 Jamil Khader, 'Humanizing the Nazi?: The Semiotics of Vampirism, Trauma, and Post-Holocaust Ethics in Louise Murphy's The True Story of Hansel And Gretel: A Novel of War and Survival', *Children's Literature*, 39 (2011), 126.

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