

THE MEMORY OF MODERNISM:
ABSTRACT ART AND THE HOLOCAUST

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PhD Thesis

2002

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, particular American abstract art works are examined in order to ask how they might relate to Holocaust memory. I ask how references to the Holocaust might be in play for their viewers, how abstraction throws into crisis the very notion of reference and memory. Detailed archival research is combined with an engagement with theoretical approaches to abstraction and to Holocaust representation.

The thesis begins with an introductory first chapter examining prevailing approaches to post-war American abstraction. I ask why New York Jewish critics developed Modernist criticism in the wake of the Holocaust – how an approach to art that sought to dismiss possible relations between art works and historical content might itself have been prompted by historical factors. I proceed to outline how abstraction will be considered in the rest of the thesis.

Chapter Two focuses on Morris Louis's 1951 *Charred Journal: Firewritten* series. I ask how these works relate to the Nazi book burnings, how the viewer is encouraged by their titles to develop interpretations of the works which slip away when their formal abstraction is considered. Chapter Three looks at Barnett Newman's *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* (exhibited 1966). I ask questions about the significance of the metaphor of the crucifixion at this moment, and how the installation of the paintings at their exhibition created a space of loss. Chapter Four examines Louis Kahn's proposed Holocaust memorial (1966-72) for New York's Battery Park – a grid of glass cubes. How does the abstraction of Kahn's proposal affect what might be meant by a Holocaust memorial? How does the materiality of the proposed memorial affect the viewing process? The next chapter looks at Frank Stella's *Polish Village* series (1970-74). I ask how these can be considered in connection to photographs of Polish synagogues destroyed in the war that Stella had seen in the book *Wooden Synagogues*. What is the significance of Stella's work at the moment of the collapse of modernist painting? In the final chapter, I examine commissions by Richard Serra, Sol LeWitt, Joel Shapiro, and Ellsworth Kelly made for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. (1991-93). I chart the history of the commissions, and ask how the works function in the space of the museum. The thesis ends with a short epilogue about Jeff Wall's work *The Holocaust Memorial in the Jewish Cemetery* (1987).

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ACRONYMS AND FREQUENTLY CITED SOURCES

- AFPSP Art for Public Spaces Programme in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
- MoMA The Museum of Modern Art, New York
- USHMM United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
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FOREWORD

What is the memory of Modernism? The project of remembering Modernism, by which I mean the critical paradigm of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, is frequently pursued by art historians. Usually this serves the purpose of recalling what Modernism excluded. In establishing a rigorous discursive framework to support and define Modernist works, Modernist theorists shut out of this frame areas of study such as Surrealism and Pop, at the same time as they precluded methodologies of study arising from phenomenology, psychology, or the theoretical approaches to late capitalism. Modernism also forgot memory, blocking out from the accounts of abstract art works any notion that the art work might prompt memory of something outside Modernism. If Modernist theory had a form of memory, it was a kind of amnesia, or perhaps a selective memory – art works could remember other art works (a Morris Louis painting could remember a Pollock), but never anything outside the frame of Modernism. But looming over Modernist theorists was a different kind of memory – the memory of the Holocaust. In my act of remembering Modernism, I ask why Modernist critics might have forgotten this kind of memory, how Modernist, abstract art works might relate to such a memory, what memory, in relation to abstraction, might mean.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.

'It is, of course, more than time that we all began to make a real effort to digest the fact of Auschwitz psychologically, if only to eliminate a source of self-hatred that – unlike its other sources – is not deeply rooted in the fabric of the larger American society that surrounds us. But if the "positive" Jews don't want to start the necessary discussion, none of us others seems to want to either. Not only is the mind unable to come to terms with the dimensions of the event and so resolve some of its oppressiveness, and not only does it prefer to remain numbed in order to spare itself the pain; as I have just said, the mind has a tendency, deep down, to look on a calamity of that order as a punishment that must have been deserved.'¹

In November 1950, some five years after he had begun to work as Associate Editor at *Commentary*, Clement Greenberg published his first major article for the journal – the polemical essay 'Self-Hatred and Jewish Chauvinism: Some Reflections on "Positive Jewishness".' In a typically polished manner, Greenberg mapped in four sections the torn terrain of post-war American secular Jewish identities. He located 'Auschwitz', and 'the fate of the six millions' (some of the many terms used to address recent Jewish suffering before the establishment of the term – indeed the concept of 'the Holocaust'²), as the

¹ Clement Greenberg, 'Self-Hatred and Jewish Chauvinism – Some Reflections on "Positive Jewishness"' *Commentary* (November 1950) p.430. In his chapter 'Silences in the Doctrine' (in *Clement Greenberg Between the Lines* (Paris, 1996)), Thierry de Duve has discussed this essay, thinking about the Greenberg's relationship to Jewishness in parallel with his relationship to kitsch. Though de Duve's discussion is fascinating, my interest focuses on its concern with the psychological effects of 'Auschwitz' on Jewishness.

² For a discussion of the formation of the term, see Peter Novick's *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston, 1999). Previous writers who have not considered the linguistic formulation of the category 'the Holocaust' have mistakenly suggested it was not negotiated at this early period. Deborah Lipstadt, for instance, has stated that 'An examination of Jewish periodicals [in the 1950s and 1960s] reveals few articles on the Holocaust.' ('America and the Memory of the Holocaust, 1950-1965' *Modern Judaism* 16 (1996) p.195). Saul Friedlander writes of 'the 15 or 20 years of "latency" that followed the war in regard to talking or writing about the Shoah, particularly in the United States'. ('Trauma, Memory, and Transference', in Geoffrey Hartman (ed.), *Holocaust Remembrance* (Oxford, 1994) p.259. And yet when

pivotal cause of both ‘self-hatred’ and ‘chauvinism’. Where some ‘negative’ secular Jews endeavoured to disassociate themselves from the Jewish community, others affiliated themselves more than ever, and in so doing, berated ‘self-hating’ Jews for their cowardice. Greenberg was concerned with exposing ‘chauvinism’ as just a more deceptive form of Jewish self-hatred. The ‘positive’, chauvinist Jews, just as much as the self-hating Jews, were unable to accept their Jewishness with any resolution, and their Jewishness was also defined by their confused response to Jewish persecution. Other than their vocal nationalism, ‘positive’ Jews had nothing to offer the large number of secular urban American Jews. There was, however, a third way: Jews should just accept their Jewishness without either shying away from it or proclaiming it. This acceptance would be a matter for the individual, and not for the community, and it required Jews to resist the compulsion ‘to indulge our feelings about Auschwitz’ in public, and instead to ‘do so only temporarily and privately’.³

As the reader paged through the essay, he or she would have found themselves addressed and positioned in a number of different ways. Greenberg’s pronouns shifted as he constructed the audience. The essay opened with a generalisation, calling the reader to an activity of introspection (‘One looks into oneself and discovers there what is also in others’⁴) immediately made concrete by apparently honest, self-exposing confession ‘I have become persuaded that self-hatred in one form or another is almost universal among Jews.... And that it is not confined on the whole to Jews like myself’⁵. The reader is posed as a kind of confessor; next, they are addressed as a partisan audience, sure to accept Greenberg’s analysis, flattered as part of an ‘us’ composed of reasonable *Commentary* readers implicitly addressed in contrast to the ‘them’ Greenberg went on to target – the ‘positive Jews’: “Positive Judaism” has been with us for quite a while now; ‘Chauvinism, or rabid nationalism, history tells us, is a means of usually compensating

The Commentary Reader-Two Decades of Articles and Stories was published in 1966, the first of its seven sections was titled ‘The Holocaust and After’. None of the eight articles in this section carried the term ‘the Holocaust’ in its title.

³ Greenberg, op. cit., p.429

⁴ Ibid., p.426

⁵ Ibid., p.426

for a sense of collective inadequacy or failure.⁶ Lest Greenberg's audience begin to question the manner in which the essay divides Jews, and become resistant to the main claims of the text, the pronoun, without shifting, changes emphasis: now Greenberg describes the problem of 'self-hatred' as an affliction for all Jews, and 'negatives' and 'positives' are momentarily united, addressed together as 'we'. 'We Jews have known something of this kind of self-preoccupation for a long time'⁷; 'Have not some of us become too quick to hate and too intemperate in our abuse of fellow Jews who disagree with us?'⁸ Yet Greenberg's vision is of Jewishness lived outside of communal practices, a Jewishness of the individual. Again, then, the dominant pronoun shifts. Now Greenberg talks about himself. 'What I want to do is accept my Jewishness more implicitly, so implicitly that I can use it to realize myself as a human being in my own right, and *as a Jew in my own right*. I want to feel free to be whatever I need to be and delight in being as a personality without being typed or prescribed as a Jew or, for that matter, as an American.'⁹ Here, the reader is positioned not so much a confessor as a fellow subject, encouraged to agree that like Greenberg, he or she should live their Jewishness as an individual.

Greenberg's essay manifests an extraordinary sensitivity as to how to address and construct a reader. However, if Greenberg's point is that Jewishness should be a matter for the individual, the individual and not the group, then how can this point be made in a public article written in a public journal - an article, indeed, which constructs the reader as different kinds of audience so carefully? Initially, we might hope to resolve this contradiction by claiming that Greenberg's subject matter was simply so compelling that it demanded attention. *Commentary*, after all, had been initiated precisely to re-negotiate Jewish identities and Jewish culture in the wake of destruction. 'In the midst of this turbulence and these whirlwinds', wrote Elliot Cohen, in his inaugural editorial, 'we light our candle, *Commentary*.... With Europe devastated, there falls upon us here in the United States a far greater share of the responsibility for carrying forward, in a creative

⁶ Ibid., pp.427-8

⁷ Ibid., p.428

⁸ Ibid., p.429

⁹ Ibid., p.432

way, our common Jewish cultural and spiritual heritage.¹⁰ After five years of editing other's articles about contemporary Jewishness - including, for instance, Harold Rosenberg's 'Jewish Identity in a Free Society'¹¹, finally, it would seem, despite his expressed reluctance about making Jewishness a public matter, Greenberg *had* to have his say. And yet this was hardly an outburst, but a strategically written piece. This only makes the contradiction that arises from the article's very prescription against public address more curious.

Greenberg's historical claims in the essay were typically assured. He provided a confident analysis that set his description of chauvinism in a historical context. Precedents showed how other peoples had become chauvinist after historical disasters and defeats – the Germans, for instance, both after Napoleon, and later after 1918. It was 'painful' for Greenberg to use such a comparison to describe what was happening to the Jewish people, but he did so nonetheless.¹² The rise of Jewish nationalism – the emergence of the problem that concerned Greenberg – was only very recent; this essay written, if not published, within two years of the creation of the Israeli state. And yet Greenberg treats contemporary trends with as much mastery, as much historical understanding, as he does historical events. The present, in other words, is as clear to Greenberg as the past. This is not to say that Greenberg professed to understand the meaning of 'Auschwitz' itself, but rather, his essay expressed confidence in the task of analysing its effects. The meaning of 'Auschwitz' itself was still opaque; an opacity that could be clearly asserted at the heart of the essay. With absolute certainty, Greenberg could be assured that 'Auschwitz' could not be understood. What emerges then from this reading of the 1950 essay is a strange set of paradoxes. Here is a public essay which demands that Jewishness be engaged in private, a confident historical analysis of the effects of 'Auschwitz' which professes an inability to analyse 'Auschwitz' itself. An argument is asserted and at the same time undercuts its own prescriptions.

¹⁰ Elliot Cohen, 'An Act of Affirmation' (Opening Editorial) *Commentary* (November 1945) pp.1-2. Greenberg is listed as Managing Editor on the masthead. The literature on the Jewishness of the 'New York Intellectuals' includes discussion of their reactions to the Holocaust. See for example Chapter 8 of Alexander Bloom's *Prodigal Sons – The New York Intellectuals and Their World* (Oxford, 1986).

¹¹ Harold Rosenberg, 'Jewish Identity in a Free Society' *Commentary* (June 1950) pp.508-514

¹² Greenberg, op. cit., p.428

In recent literature, those who have been as interested in this essay as in Greenberg's art criticism have noted that his writings on the work of Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Morris Louis, Jules Olitski, Adolf Gottlieb, and others, included no discussions of this terrain.¹³ There is no apparent investigation of the possible ways that an artist's ambitions might be related to their subject position as a Jew, as an immigrant or the child of immigrants, as 'a kind of survivor', to use George Steiner's term of 1965¹⁴, living in the wake of 'Auschwitz' at a moment when Jewish identities are so torn. The most obvious explanation has been that Greenberg's failure to address such questions represents the assimilationist tendencies of a 'negative' Jew. To facilitate Greenberg's own cultural assimilation, to ease his entrance into dominant American culture by proclaiming the very triumph of American culture, the Jewishness of these artists could not be discussed.¹⁵ And yet at least according to the terms of Greenberg's own essay, this argument would have to be discounted. Any kind of critical account which might have directly stressed 'Jewishness' in the work of these artists would have fallen into the trap of 'positive' Jewishness, the flipside of self-hatred. Earlier in 1950, Greenberg edited S. Lane Faison's review of Karl Schwartz's *Jewish Artists of the 19th and 20th Centuries* – a compendium of artists all born Jews. Schwartz's aims were simply to indicate 'the fallacy

¹³ There is a growing literature that examines the question of Jewishness in relation to Greenberg's Modernism. This literature includes Susan Noyes Platt, 'Clement Greenberg in the 1930s: A New Perspective on His Criticism, *Art Criticism* Vol. 5 No. 3 (New York, 1989) pp.47-64; Lisa Bloom, 'Ghosts of Ethnicity: rethinking art discourses of the 1940s and 1980s', *Socialist Review* Vol. 24 No. 1+2, 1994 pp.129-164; Margaret Olin, 'C[lement] Hardesh [Greenberg] and Company - Formal Criticism and Jewish Identity' in *Too Jewish- Challenging Jewish Identities* (New York, 1996) pp.39-59; Juliet Steyn, *The Jew - Assumptions of Identity* (London, 1999); and Louis Kaplan, 'Reframing Self-Criticism - Clement Greenberg's "Modernist Painting" in the Light of Jewish Identity' in Catherine Soussloff (ed.), *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History* (Berkeley, 1999). Kaplan's essay has a useful overview of the previous literature. At times, this literature suffers from an imbalance: the subtleties of Greenberg's art criticism are reduced in order to comment on his prescription of abstraction, or on his tendency to sidestep the Jewishness of Modernist artists. Louis Kaplan notes how writers examining the question of Jewishness discussed Greenbergian Modernism without paying attention to the concept of self-criticism: in a fascinating article, he notes how the 'war-torn' language of early essays such as 'Towards a Newer Laocoon' takes on 'ghastly overtones when one considers the precarious situation of European Jews around 1940' (pp.183-184), and how this language is replaced by the idea of self-criticism, a concept then displaced from essays on Jewish identity to essays on Modernist art. My own interest is in the nuanced effect of the Holocaust on Greenberg's criticism.

¹⁴ George Steiner, 'A Kind of Survivor' in *Language and Silence - Essays 1958-1966* (London, 1967)

¹⁵ Margaret Olin, for example, has argued that Greenberg sought to describe artists such as Rothko or Gottlieb as 'definitively American' (Olin, op. cit., p.50), and that Greenberg's reluctance to articulate how their Jewishness might affect them should be seen as part of a 'post-Holocaust scenario, in which Jews sought to demonstrate their American identity' (p.50-1).

of the frequently heard assertion that the Jew is actually untalented in art', but for Faison, this 'badly written...book without a subject' was merely 'a piece of nationalist propaganda'¹⁶ – manifesting exactly the kind of 'chauvinism' which concerned Greenberg.¹⁷ Perhaps Greenberg considered the Modernist artists as authentically Jewish, living their Jewishness in the successful manner he envisioned towards the end of the 'Self-Hatred' essay. A few months before that essay, Greenberg had written a short catalogue text for The Jewish Museum for a retrospective of the work of Arnold Friedman. Here, in a situation where Jewishness had to be addressed, Greenberg managed to deal with it by establishing its irrelevance in terms of art criticism.¹⁸ 'Like Pisarro and Soutine, Friedman took himself for granted as a Jew, but he made no particular point of it. He was also very American, looked like a frontiersman, and talked like a Yankee. But he made no particular point of being American either... I knew him as a man for three years and never met an artist whom I liked as much *qua* man.'¹⁹ If, as Greenberg wrote some months later in the 'Self-Hatred' essay, 'one of the primary goals of human striving' is 'self-realization'²⁰, then Friedman, neither proud nor self-hating Jew, is the ideal Jew, the individual, self-realised Jew.²¹

This might suggest a new way of thinking about Greenberg's approach to the 'Jewishness' of Modernist artists: rather than Jewishness being a matter that Greenberg

¹⁶ S. Lane Faison, 'What is Jewish Art' *Commentary* (March 1950) p.299

¹⁷ It should be noted that Schwartz's book appeared in the wake of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York, 1948), a text which prompted many Jews to defend the existence of authentic Jewish culture. For an early American response to Sartre's book, see Harold Rosenberg, 'Does the Jew Exist' *Commentary* (January 1949). See also the special edition of *October* 87 (Winter 1999).

¹⁸ At this early moment in the history of The Jewish Museum, the vast majority of exhibitions (Friedman's being an exception) showed work by 'Jewish artists some or all of whose work featured Jewish or biblical themes.' (Julie Miller and Richard Cohen, 'A Collision of Cultures' in Jack Wertheimer (ed.), *Tradition Renewed. A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary Volume II* (New York, 1997) p. 339). As Miller and Cohen make clear, it was in part through the advocacy of Meyer Schapiro that in the late 1950s, the museum began to 'display contemporary art regardless of whether or not it had any Jewish content.' (p.340). Schapiro's involvement with early plans for the museum is documented in The Jewish Theological Seminary, The Joseph and Miriam Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism, Record Group 25 [R.G. 25] Jewish Museum Records, ca., 1943 – 1980.

¹⁹ Greenberg 3, p.20

²⁰ Greenberg, 1950, op. cit., p.432

²¹ A comparison of Chagall and Soutine, made in 1953, supports the argument that Greenberg considered resolved Jewish identity would only manifest itself in art through the invisibility of obvious Jewish content. Soutine was 'too Jewish... to put his East European Jewishness on show as something exotic and picturesque. Yet if such a thing as Jewishness can be made palpable in art, I find more of it in Soutine's than in Chagall's.' (Greenberg 3, p.159)

repressed, it was something that needed no address precisely because to address would have been to proclaim it. To concentrate on artists' work, rather than their Jewishness, was both for the critic himself to live out through his writing a resolved Jewishness free from self-hatred and chauvinism, and to account, in a manner appropriate to the artists themselves, for artists who themselves lived out their Jewishness without making 'a particular point of it.' Yet Greenberg's ideal of self-realised Jewishness often seems just that - an ideal, and certainly not one lived out by his own rather contradictory responses to the Holocaust. The nature of Greenberg's own negotiation in public of the terrain of Jewish identity would suggest that this terrain cannot just be deemed irrelevant to the project of discussing Modernist work. After all, the situation in which Greenberg's own writing occurred was the same one in which the work of these artists was produced and received. The project of addressing Jewishness and 'Auschwitz' – a project in which despite his reservations, Greenberg himself engaged, might equally have been one which engaged artists.

2.

'... Bloom's approach is essentially uncompromising, and the chances are that his honesty will force him to transcend his present style with its limitations and fight through to a clarity that will still permit him to say effectively what he as an individual must say and what he as a Jew in the face of recent events may want to say.'²²

Although in the 'Self-Hatred' essay, Greenberg argued that Auschwitz has to be digested by the individual in private, there are instances, such as this 1946 comment on Hyman Bloom, where he had conceded that artists might seek to address it. Even here, the task of 'saying' something is figured as a responsibility for the individual, and a mere option for the 'Jew'. Greenberg rarely discussed Bloom, but his name did emerge at the end of 'American Type Painting', when, in mid-1955 Bloom was showing at the Whitney, and showing paintings, to use Hilton Kramer's description, with 'explicit Jewish themes – synagogue scenes, rabbis [...] mutilated corpses and putrefied limbs...inspired by the spectacle of Hitler's massacre of the Jews.'²³ (We can note again in passing that phrases such as 'recent events' and 'Hitler's massacre' still stand in for what would later be termed 'the Holocaust.') Bloom might indeed have been saying what 'a Jew ...may want to say', but by 1955 Greenberg no longer sanctioned this project. His hopes that Bloom would transcend his style had not materialised: together with other artists who made explicit, figurative reference to Jewish and historical subject matter, Bloom was pitted as a negligible artist, hardly competition for the Abstract Expressionists. '[B]y comparison with such of their present competitors for the attention of the American art public as Shahn, Graves, Bloom, Stuart Davis (a good painter), Levine, Wyeth, etc. etc., [the Abstract Expressionists'] success as well as their resonance and "centrality" is assured.'²⁴

²² Greenberg 2, p.53

²³ Hilton Kramer, 'Bloom and Levine: The Hazards of Modern Painting – Two Jewish Artists from Boston' *Commentary* (June 1955) p.586

²⁴ Greenberg 3, p.234

Though Greenberg sidelined Shahn, Bloom, and Levine, ‘American-Type Painting’ is another text that can be deployed in questioning the argument that Greenberg simply avoided engaging with the Jewishness of artists. ‘Jewish expressionism’,²⁵ is raised as a precedent for recent abstract work, but only as one precedent amongst many, such as German and Russian expressionism. The Jewishness of Newman, Rothko, and Gottlieb is no more or less in play than the ‘Germanness’, ‘Dutchness’, ‘Romanianess’ of Hoffman, De Kooning, Gorky. If the collective impact of these elisions discourages us from throwing a spotlight too brightly on Greenberg’s apparent failure to address Jewishness, and allows us to see that America, in ‘American-Type Painting’, is less a new nation for the critic to laud than a recognised gathering place for all exiles, the kinds of elisions in play in this essay, as elsewhere in Greenberg’s work, have provided space for the work of revisionist art historians. While some problematically cast Greenberg rather too simply as ‘negative’ Jew, others investigate the work he sidelined. The work of an artist such as Bloom is exactly what might interest such historians, and precisely those who want to investigate ‘Holocaust art’ as a genre with a number of themes. In *Jewish American Artists and the Holocaust* (1997), Matthew Baigell organises and historicises such themes, concentrating on work that is figurative and that makes use of a traditional symbolism.²⁶ There is more interesting work to be done on artists such as Bloom, Harold Paris, Abraham Ratner, Rico Lebrun, and on the support their work gained from Jewish curators such as Peter Selz, and such work could proceed with a more theoretical, and less straightforwardly descriptive direction. Nonetheless, it is not such work that will be of concern here. I want to consider how particular abstract works might represent the Holocaust.

When seeking to consider abstraction in this manner, the problem of Greenbergian Modernism is not only that it fails – explicitly – to relate the question of Jewish identities after the Holocaust to the work of abstract artists. The very formulation of abstraction was one which could not sanction the possibility that abstraction might represent, in some manner, historical and mnemonic content. The meaning of abstraction in Greenbergian

²⁵ Ibid., p.219

²⁶ See also Ziva Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation - The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts* (Oxford, 1993)

Modernism hardly needs rehearsing. I do not wish just to position Greenbergian Modernism as an opposing approach to my arguments about abstraction as a form of representation. It is important to consider how Greenbergian Modernism itself – through its very inability to conceive art as engaging with historical and mnemonic content – might represent the effect of the Holocaust. Modernism is a response to history which demands that history be put to one side. We might probe this possibility by looking at Greenberg's essays on Kafka, for it is these essays which can be examined to consider how Greenberg posits a relationship between art and contemporary history, between art and memory.²⁷

The three Kafka essays (one of which was significantly revised) amount to a subtle analysis of what Jewishness might mean for a writer, how the universal significance, and the question of the Jewish meaning of a text are linked²⁸, and how ‘the Jewish relation to history’ might be conceived²⁹. Kafka is Greenberg’s model of the secular intellectual modernist Jewish artist. In part, Kafka’s Jewishness emerges through his resistance to his family’s more religious Jewishness, in part, Kafka’s Jewishness is located in a form of writing.³⁰ The most significant aspect of Greenberg’s work on Kafka is his analysis of a Halachic sensibility in the writer. For the post-exile religious Jew, as Greenberg explained, history had stopped, to be continued in the Messianic age. Gentile history was meaningless, but life gained its purpose through the adherence to the Halacha, which related the everyday to the infinite. Greenberg explained Halacha as ‘the rational derivation...and application of Jewish religious law on the basis of precepts found in the Pentateuch.’³¹ The secular Jew, though no less a real part of Gentile history, no longer has faith in the legislation of Halacha, but replaces it with ‘neo-Halacha’ - ‘middle-class

²⁷ These are ‘Introduction to “The Great Wall of China” by Franz Kafka’ in *Greenberg 2*; ‘The Jewishness of Franz Kafka: Some Sources of His Particular Vision’ in *Greenberg 3*, revised as ‘Kafka’s Jewishness’ in *Art and Culture* (New York, 1961); and ‘At the Building of the Great Wall of China’ in *Greenberg 4*.

²⁸ See his claim that ‘The more Jewish Kafka is, the more universally human he becomes. That is the paradox and - platitude - of great art’. (*Greenberg 2*, p.102)

²⁹ *Greenberg 3*, p.206

³⁰ In the 1955 essay, Greenberg writes that ‘Kafka’s form is Jewish, too’: he finds it difficult to create drama, but ‘makes it more difficult for himself by proceeding, as Halacha does in evolving and deciding law, with a patient, if selective circumstantiality that belongs more to description and logical exposition than to narrative.’ (*Greenberg 3*, pp.208-9)

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.205

ordinariness, routine, prudence, sedentary stability, application to daily tasks...’³². This comes with the cost of ‘claustrophobia’, but neo-Halachic life, unlike religious life, is also porous to ‘history’s menace’, so ‘doom’ lurks around Kafka’s characters.³³ For Greenberg, Kafka’s stories begin with the intrusion of threatening, gentile history into the routine of the characters, and their reaction to this intrusion, their attempts to re-establish their neo-Halacha. Greenberg sees Kafka’s characters torn between the impulse to act - to make themselves historical agents, and the feeling of being subject to a history beyond their control. Greenberg did not describe Kafka’s writings as representations of history, but he was interested in the prophetic character of Kafka’s work - ‘His dread was confirmed as senselessly and arbitrarily as he divined it would be’.³⁴

For Greenberg, religious Jews block off history through adherence to Halacha, and Kafka’s middle-class characters block off the threats of gentile history with the wall of their middle-class codes. Perhaps Greenberg’s Modernism can itself function in this manner. This has been Susan Noyes Platt’s suggestion: inasmuch as Modernism proceeds by setting up a progressive art historical narrative, and a set of criteria by which to determine the importance of art works within this narrative, Modernism might function as a kind of Halacha. Modernism, formulated once history has become oppressive, might act as a kind of “fence” against history³⁵. For Platt, this does not so much mean that Modernist criticism prevents the discussion of paintings that engage explicitly with historical subjects, such as the Holocaust.³⁶ Platt is more interested in thinking how Modernism’s neo-Halachic legislation formulates a high-art sphere in which abstraction

³² Ibid., p.205

³³ ‘His heroes are haunted by anxiety and dread, not because they see the approach of doom - which by the very fact of *approaching* would give them the chance to cope with or at least assume responsibility for it - but because they feel its unmotivated presence all around them - lurking, so to speak, in the very furniture of their furnished rooms.’ (Greenberg 2, p.102)

³⁴ Ibid., p.103

³⁵ Greenberg 3, p.205

³⁶ This does, at times, seem an effect of the Modernist approach. In 1946, Chagall’s exhibition at MoMA included *White Crucifixion*. Harold Rosenberg explained that ‘the crucified one is a Jew, not the Son of God, but the human victim of violence’. (‘Chagall: Jewish Modernist Master’ *Jewish Frontier* (April 1945).) Greenberg could only remark about the painting that it had ‘an amazing unity’ (‘Review of an exhibition of Marc Chagall’, Greenberg 2, p.84). Much later, describing Picasso’s *Charnel House*, Greenberg supplied a characteristically compelling analysis of form, leaving all question of historical content to one brief final comment - that the painting ‘should be lyrical, for it is an elegy.’ (‘Picasso Since 1945’ Greenberg 4, p.236)

becomes a means to ‘save high culture from social catastrophe’ ‘a ‘security blanket against the threatened obliteration of all culture’.³⁷ Without wanting to launch into the debate about high and low art, what is useful from the parallel of Modernism with Halacha is the suggestion of Modernism as a kind of protection from the world, which, like neo-Halacha, comes at the expense of claustrophobia. Like Kafka’s neo-Halacha, Modernism also acknowledges ‘history’s menace’ exactly by its attempt to keep it at bay.

The problem with this argument, though, is that Greenbergian Modernism does not exactly function as a set of rules: the more one considers Greenberg’s different responses to different kinds of abstraction, the less formulaic Modernism becomes. Yet the argument does usefully relate Modernism to the question of memory: Modernism becomes a kind of willed-amnesia. At the end of *Art and Culture*, the collection which began with ‘Modernist Painting’, Greenberg published a 1956 revision of his second Kafka essay, and, in its final lines, he tackled the question of memory explicitly. ‘Might not all art begin to appear falsifying to the Jew who looked closely enough?.... Does not art always make one forget what is literally happening to oneself as a certain person in a certain world?’³⁸ For Greenberg, the ultimate indication both of Kafka’s modern character, and of Kafka’s Jewishness, is that his work, by asking these questions, doubts the very function of ‘all art’. I would like to read these comments back onto Greenberg’s Modernist criticism, with its self-confident historical schemas, its elimination of doubt. Let us imagine, for a moment, that these comments are reflections on Greenberg’s own work. Greenberg here acknowledges that art – and Modernist art in particular, is falsifying, and amnesiac. Perhaps even the condition of art is its amnesia. However, an art form that is amnesiac can flip around, and curiously serve the demands of memory. Jean-Francois Lyotard – whose own formulation of abstraction we will consider later – has written that ‘Only that which has been inscribed can, in the current sense of the term, be forgotten’.³⁹ Combining this insight with Greenberg’s final comments about Kafka, we

³⁷ Noyes Platt, op. cit., p.59

³⁸ We might couple these questions with a statement from the third Kafka essay, where Greenberg writes ‘Religion dissolves into culture, and culture is seen as humanity’s effort to keep the formless at bay. Culture is also illusion: illusion piled upon illusion.’

³⁹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the jews”* (Translated by Andreas Michel and Mark S. Roberts) (Minneapolis, 1990) p.26

could posit that abstraction for Greenberg actually holds what is to be remembered in perpetual play. Modernist abstraction resists inscribing history as image (as a realist painting would) and thus prevents the oblivion of that history. A Modernist painting allows its viewer to forget ‘what is literally happening to oneself as a certain person in a certain world’, but as it is so evidently amnesiac, it actually causes the forgotten to be kept in perpetual play, and even, counter-intuitively, serves as a constant reminder of what it forgets. This might be an interesting approach to abstraction, but this formulation discounts the possibility that there might actually be a mnemonic function to any particular abstract art work itself.

3.

"Radical", "unprecedented" – my feeling about that kind of hyperbole is that the two people whose very *form* of speech was hyperbole were Michael [Fried] and Phil [Leider]. I think it was partly the basis of their mutual recognition, a kind of badge worn by Jews from New York.⁴⁰

As the discourse of high Modernist criticism developed, any possibility that an abstract art work might be considered to represent the Holocaust was closed off. However, this is not to say that the development of Modernist criticism itself was unconnected to the besieged Jewish identities of its protagonists. As *Artforum* turned into a *Commentary* for the 1960s, attention was diverted from wider analysis of post-war Jewish culture and focused on Modernist art, but the language of art criticism remained a kind of witness to that culture. Rosalind Krauss concluded the above comment by saying that Michael Fried and Philip Leider 'loved each other ...not just because they admired each other's intelligence but because they were both telling the same Jewish joke.'⁴¹ Jokes, of course, might mask a kind of anxiety. Thinking about the Jewish joke in the context of pre-war Europe, Greenberg, still Fried's mentor at least in the early part of the 1960s, had written that 'Humour became ultimately the only psychologically satisfactory way in which one could answer a situation permanently exposed to irrelevant catastrophes.... The Jewish joke may have been, paradoxical as that sounds, the only way aside from Zionism in which the Jew divined the future that awaited him at Auschwitz.'⁴² Before the war, humour masked the Jew's anxiety about history, yet predicted the future. After the war, the 'joke' that was Fried's hyperbole might be said to remember the past. The hyperbole of his criticism seems to be witness not only to Jewish anxiety about the situation within a host country (as is suggested by Krauss's comment, in the fear that they be ignored, the New York Jew engaged with secular culture had to shout), but also to a kind of post-

⁴⁰ Amy Newman, *Challenging Art - Artforum 1962-1974* (New York, 2000) p.152. Leider was editor of *Artforum* from 1962-1971.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.152

⁴² Clement Greenberg, 'The Jewish Joke: Review of Royte Pomerantzen, edited by Immanuel Olsvanger' *Greenberg 2*, p.186

Auschwitz anxiety. In the wake of destruction, the urgent project of constructing a sphere of autonomous cultural activity demanded the language of hyperbole.

It is not that Jewishness or the Holocaust is any kind of key to explain Fried's Modernism. I am exploring these issues rather to give a sense of the complexity of the relationship between high Modernist theory and questions around these matters. There is an already exhaustive literature around Fried's text 'Art and Objecthood'.⁴³ Most accounts of the essay examine its genesis in Fried's response to Minimalist art of the early to mid 1960s. Another kind of immediate context was Fried's correspondence with Leider about Leider's perception of the most recent threat to the Jewish people: the escalation of Arab armies on Israeli borders. In May 1967, the month that the article was being prepared for publication, Leider wrote to Fried that:

'I can't escape two propositions - 1. The idea that those of us who were not killed got away scot free is unthinkable. 2. The idea that the primary fact of my life is the Atlantic Ocean is intolerable.

I have to find out how you accommodate yourself to the idea that the simple existence of the Atlantic Ocean and a meaningless accident of immigration gives you the luxury of choices denied to other Jews in Israel....'⁴⁴

Leider was asking how Fried reconciled himself to his situation as a kind of 'accidental survivor' of the Holocaust for whom, by virtue of one, rather than another movement of immigration (to America rather than Israel), there was not an imminent threat. Fried's response to Leider is still protected; Leider's letter, however, does serve to show, very interestingly, the extent to which questions relating to the situation of post-war Jewishness, if never examined explicitly on the pages of *Artforum* (until 1975), were

⁴³ Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' *Artforum* (June 1967) pp.12-23. For discussion of this text, see Fried's own essay 'An Introduction to My Art Criticism' in *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago, 1998); his, and Rosalind Krauss's discussions in the section '1967/1987: Genealogies of Art and Theory' in Hal Foster (ed.), *Discussions in Contemporary Culture* (New York, 1987); and more recently Briony Fer's work on Carl Andre and Eva Hesse; and most recently, James Meyer's *Minimalism - Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven, 2001).

⁴⁴ Amy Newman, op. cit., p.276

discussed in private between its Jewish writers. We can ask whether the shadow of the Holocaust that Leider invokes prior to the publication of 'Art and Objecthood' might in some way haunt the article.

'Art and Objecthood' continues to affirm Modernist painting by situating it against 'literalist' art. Fried saw in literalist art a threat to the autonomous abstraction of Modernism, a threat figured initially in the part the spectator's body now played in their experience of the work. Though critics of this essay would contest his conflation of the work of Tony Smith and, for instance, Donald Judd, it was Smith's comments from the December 1966 *Artforum* that prompted many of Fried's concerns. Smith complained about the limits of Modernist painting, hoping to produce an art experience that would live up to his drive on the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike. After his drive, Smith 'thought to myself, it ought to be clear that's the end of art. Most painting looks pretty pictorial after that.' Another of the experiences which had excited Smith was described just after this: 'There is a drill ground in Nuremberg, large enough to accommodate two million men. The entire field is enclosed with high embankments and towers. The concrete approach is three sixteen-inch steps, one above the other, stretching for a mile or so.'⁴⁵ For Smith, such a site provided not only the impetus for his work, but pointed towards the extension of his kind of project through the making of 'artificial landscape[s]', such as would be built in the years following the publication of these comments. Though he quoted these lines in 'Art and Objecthood', Fried did not tackle them directly, but it is interesting to posit that Smith's invocation of Speer's Nuremberg stadium as a kind of ur-place for post-pictorial, literalist art, might have been extremely problematic.⁴⁶ Prompted in part by reading Smith's comments about the theatrical, symbolic centre of Nazism, Fried attacked the theatrical character of minimalism.⁴⁷ Fried

⁴⁵ Samuel Wagstaff, 'Talking with Tony Smith' *Artforum* (December 1966) p.19

⁴⁶ In comparison, an indication of the problematic memory of Germany for Fried's editor is evidenced in Mel Bochner's recollection of Leider's reaction to Bochner's first show in Germany. 'When I mentioned to Phil that I was having a show in Germany, he was horrified. "But Mel, you're Jewish", he said. "Your grandmother will turn over in her grave." (Amy Newman, op. cit., p.243)

⁴⁷ John Coetzee has recently described Walter Benjamin's analysis of the theatrical nature of Nazism. 'What is original in Benjamin is his claim that politics as grandiose theatre, rather than as debate, was not one of the trappings of fascism, but fascism in essence.' ('The Man who went Shopping for Truth' *The Guardian*, 20 January 2001). The connection between fascism and theatre was made explicit in the pages of *Artforum* in one of the only articles on architecture in this period. In 1970, Berhnard Leitner discussed

sensed that through its admission of the bodily experience of the viewer, minimalism opened art up into the terrain of spectacle.⁴⁸

For Smith, the ‘end of art’ was spelled out by his experience in sites like Nuremberg, but of course what Smith meant here by the ‘end of art’ was totally different from what was meant by those, like Adorno, who saw the end of art spelled out in the history attached to those same sites. Fried, unlike Smith, was still convinced by Modernist painting; like Smith, however, he did not consider that history had legislated for any ‘ending of art’. Famously, Fried claimed Modernist abstraction afforded a viewer a moment of ‘grace’. This religious term closes the essay, but a religious reference also opened it. Fried had quoted a passage from Perry Miller’s *Jonathan Edwards* which considers the theological proof of God through the evidence of the continuity of the world. Edwards, a Calvinist theologian writing in the 18th Century, posited that ‘if all the world were annihilated... and a new world were freshly created, though it were to exist in every particular in the same manner as this world, it would not be the same.’ Yet, as we know the world *is* the same, we know it has *not* been annihilated, and through this indication of continuity, the existence of God is manifest. ‘Every moment [we] see the proof of a God as we should have seen if we had seen Him create the world at first.’⁴⁹

James Meyer explains the function of this passage as allegorical: ‘Edwards’ creation narrative, placed at the head of “Art and Objecthood”, reads as an allegory of modernism and modernist painting in particular.... The Edwards epigraph implies that it is only when painting’s destruction is conceivable that painting is capable - under considerable pressure - of renewal.⁵⁰ Yet what if we were to read this quotation without this allegorical implication? In other words, what if we were to take Fried’s introduction of

Speer’s recently published autobiography *Inside the Third Reich* (New York, 1970). Leitner quoted Speer recalling the commission for Nuremberg: ‘The victorious spirit of the party has to be expressed even in the architectural stage set.’ Leitner doubted Speer’s claim not to have been interested in Hitler’s policies, asking ‘Did he really lack any relationship to the theme as he keeps telling us in his book? Any stage decorator knows the show for which he has to make the backdrop.’ (*Architecture as a Weapon: Hitler’s Speer* *Artforum* (December 1970) p.54)

⁴⁸ In her 1990 essay ‘The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum’, Rosalind Krauss considers the way that Minimalist art paved the way for the spectacle-art museum. *October* 54 (Fall 1990) p.14

⁴⁹ Michael Fried, 1967, op. cit., p.12

⁵⁰ James Meyer, op. cit., p.236

the problem of the annihilation of the world seriously, as a problem introduced through the veil of a Calvinist source? In Edwards' model, it is the experience of the world's continuity that assures us that the annihilation of the world has not taken place, and of God's existence. For Fried, it would be the Modernist art work that has the function of assuring us that that world has not, in fact, been annihilated. The Modernist art work affords a moment of 'Grace': Meyer goes on to describe the first moment of 'Grace' as 'the rainbow sighted by Noah after the destruction of the Flood'⁵¹. We might consider that the project of the Modernist work (in the post-Auschwitz, and post-religious world) was to assure its viewers of continuity, that the rainbow-like works of Modernist painting, experienced as moments of Grace, had the function of showing that the destruction had not been total.

Fried's religious plea for Modernism, though seemingly referencing Calvinist - rather than Jewish thought, seems involved in the complexity of post-Holocaust aesthetics. Modernist art was a sign of the survival of culture after Auschwitz. Recalling Leider's challenge that Fried answer what it meant to 'get away scot free', it was perhaps in theorising and cementing this cultural renaissance that Fried rose to the challenge of his accidental survival of the Holocaust. Once more, though, there was no space within this formulation to conceive any notion of historical representation in abstraction: once more the very conditions of Modernism were premised on the notion of abstraction as non-representation.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.236

4.

'To a Jew living in New York, there is no reason why a Torah scroll should be more significant than a Minimal sculpture.'⁵²

This is Max Kozloff, writing in *Artforum* in 1975 – a critic whose own work has recently been called 'Talmudic'.⁵³ We might perform a kind of Talmudic reading of Kozloff's own statement and against its intended sense, note that in the pages of *Artforum*, a 'Minimal sculpture' – or indeed a Modernist painting – had not merely become more significant than the Torah, but had replaced it as a source of interpretative enquiry and value. Though the exchange that Kozloff's idea highlights marks a turning away from Jewish texts and Jewish history to art criticism, I have suggested that it is unsatisfactory simply to argue that Modernist criticism ignores the traumas of recent Jewish history. Modernist criticism rather posits abstraction as a wilful means to amnesia, as a sign of cultural continuity after a cultural rupture. Nonetheless, it is clear that Modernist critics such as Greenberg and Fried would not describe a relationship between abstraction and Jewish experience. The idea of 'Jewish experience' was however placed onto the art critical agenda by the Avram Kampf's 1975 Jewish Museum exhibition 'The Jewish Experience in Art of the Twentieth Century' – an exhibition that included alongside works by Soutine and Chagall paintings by Rothko and Newman. Kozloff's statement was part of a review of this exhibition. Robert Pincus-Witten's review 'Six Propositions on Jewish Art' constituted the most sustained engagement with the problem of abstraction.⁵⁴

⁵² Max Kozloff, 'Jewish Art and the Modernist Jeopardy' *Artforum* (April 1976) p.47

⁵³ This is Peter Plagens, in the course of differentiating John Coplans from Kozloff by calling the latter 'more talmudic.' Remembering the Jewish environment of the journal, Plagens, who is not Jewish, could even call himself 'an outsider'. (Amy Newman, op.cit., p.345). The question of being perceived as an 'outsider' could also impact on the Jewish critics' interaction with non-Jewish friends and colleagues. An interesting anecdote, in this respect, is Robert Pincus-Witten's description of Robert Smithson's funeral, where an 'outsider' attempts to become an 'insider'. He writes that 'The mass [was] celebrated in Latin. Joseph Masheck was the only one of the rare celebrants from 'our world' who came forward to receive communion.' ('Naked Lunches' *October* 3 (Spring 1977) p.115) Masheck became the editor of *Artforum* in the late 1970s.

⁵⁴ Robert Pincus-Witten, 'Six Propositions on Jewish Art' *Arts Magazine* (December 1975) pp.66-69

There had been earlier attempts – and rather begrudging attempts at that – to think through a kind of relationship between abstraction and Jewish experience. When The Jewish Museum initiated what would be a seminal programme of exhibitions of Modernist art with the 1957 show ‘Artists of the New York School - Second Generation’, Leo Steinberg had sketched a relationship between Abstract Expressionism and Jewish experience, but without indicating any firm correspondence. Steinberg, it seems, was seeking to justify why The Jewish Museum should play host to the exhibition, so his attempts to draw some links between abstraction and Jewish experience were perhaps conditioned by this circumstance. Both modern art and Jewry, he argued, are ‘masters of renunciation’; Jewry is an ‘abstract nation, proving, as did modern art, how much was dispensable’; like ‘modern painting, Jewish religious practices are remarkably free of representational content’; ‘it is hard to be a modern painter’, and hard to be a Jew.⁵⁵ The relationship between abstraction, and Jewishness or Jewish history, then, was a matter of vague correspondences - certainly no one abstract painting could relate to this history. Eighteen years later, once the programme of Modernist exhibitions had been abandoned to make way for shows such as Kampf’s, Pincus-Witten provided a completely different analysis – indeed, a definition: ‘Jewish art is inherently abstract’.⁵⁶

‘Six Propositions on Jewish Art’ emerged from Pincus-Witten’s recent research on abstraction in Israel, a critical project that came at the end of a period when he produced in *Artforum* early texts on postminimalism.⁵⁷ His review began by outlining that this former interest had enabled him to consider how ‘such issues [as] Judaism [and] Feminism may be abstractly embodied’.⁵⁸ He went on to criticise Kampf for producing an exhibition that ignored this insight from recent art, and that preferred to consider art only as a product of historical experience. The exhibition, he argued, should have been called

⁵⁵ Leo Steinberg, ‘Introduction’ in *Artists of the New York School - Second Generation* (The Jewish Museum, New York, 1957) pp.7-8

⁵⁶ Pincus-Witten, 1975, op. cit., p.66

⁵⁷ See Robert Pincus-Witten, *Postminimalism* (New York, 1977). See bibliography for articles on Israeli art.

⁵⁸ Pincus-Witten, 1975, op. cit., p.66

'Jewish Illustration in the Art of the Twentieth Century'.⁵⁹ Pincus-Witten then proceeded to back up his definition that 'Jewish Art is abstract'. Jewish abstraction had historical sources: the anti-iconicism of semitic and Sephardic tradition, its 'scrupulous application of the Second Commandment'⁶⁰, later enforced through the centrality of the book in the Ashkenazi tradition. Secondly, 'Jewish abstraction does not entail a belief in the consonance of Abstraction and Modernism'⁶¹ - indeed, to make such a claim would only continue the argument of the Degenerate art exhibition. Pincus-Witten argued that Jewish artists working in New York after the Holocaust, 'in anguish over the organised destruction of Judaism', 'glimpsed an earlier primordial consciousness of abstraction embodied in Judaism'⁶², and thus made absolutely abstract works as a kind of project of cultural retrieval and consolidation, a reaffirmation of, and re-bonding with, an essential Jewish aesthetic. This involved a 'cleansing away' of three decades of modernist compromises between 'abstraction and representationalism'.⁶³ Jewish abstraction, finally, was embodied in process. For examples of 'ethnic-identity-as-process', (curiously sidestepping any of the artists he had written about such as Hesse, Bochner, Serra, or LeWitt) Pincus-Witten turned to Israelis Moshe Kupferman and Joshua Neustein.⁶⁴

According to these arguments, there was an historical impetus leading post-war Jewish artists towards abstraction. Abstraction is considered as an essential Jewish aesthetic, its adoption by Jewish artists after the Holocaust a project of cultural consolidation and renewal. This historical argument might be contested: artists such as Rothko or Newman worked as much out of recent European tradition as in retrieval of any ancient aesthetic. There are other problems with this argument - it suggests that modern artists have respect for religious law. Rather than encountering the tradition of the second commandment as a

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.67

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.67

⁶¹ Ibid., p.67

⁶² Ibid., p.68

⁶³ Ibid., p.68

⁶⁴ An interesting parallel with Pincus-Witten's text is William Seitz's *Art Israel: 26 Painters and Sculptors* (New York, 1964), a catalogue for an exhibition organised by MoMA but held at The Jewish Museum. Just as Pincus-Witten had not addressed the question of Jewishness to the work of LeWitt, Serra, Bochner, or Hesse, Seitz had not considered it in relation to Abstract Expressionists. However, he was able to locate as a 'recurrent theme' of many of the Israeli artists 'the tragic, an intensely felt identification with Jewish tradition and its recent trials.' (p.7)

prescription, inasmuch as the tradition is constructed through discourse, a Jewish artist might rather negotiate such a tradition. The Jewish artist might make work knowing how the second commandment has been construed or misconstrued - but they encounter this not as divine law but as a discursive formulation. What should be clearest, however, is that though Pincus-Witten's argument contrasts the Modernist approach to abstraction by introducing the matter of cultural or ethnic identity, it retains the notion of abstraction's incapacity for reference. Abstraction might have an ancient foundation, but this foundation is the law against figuration. Abstraction might be Jewish, but individual abstract works cannot in any way refer to Jewish experience, or relate to memories of Jewish experience. Looking at individual works, this relation is what I will set out to explore.

5.

'Celan "after" Kafka, Joyce "after" Proust, Nono "after" Mahler, Beckett "after" Brecht, Rothko and Newman "after" Matisse, these second in line, incapable of the achievements of the first in line (I am citing almost at random), but capable because of their very incapacity; they are enough and have been enough to bear negative witness to the fact that both "prayer" and the history of prayer are impossible, and that to bear witness to this impossibility remains possible.'⁶⁵

Jean-Francois Lyotard named the two abstract painters who had been included in 'The Jewish Experience in Art of the Twentieth Century' in his 1988 book *Heidegger and "the jews"*. Their names come after a litany of writers, and though Lyotard does not treat any particular work or group of works (since he is 'citing almost at random') his is an important discussion of abstraction in the context of Holocaust (non)representation, and the last important discussion of abstraction I want to treat before outlining my own approach. Newman and Rothko act in this text as emblems for what Lyotard claimed was a post-Holocaust condition. Abstraction does not represent 'Jewish experience': it acknowledges the contemporary impossibility of representation.

In *Heidegger and "the jews"*, Lyotard considered the post-Holocaust condition of representation addressing questions about how memorial practices might proceed. His arguments about abstraction had been developed in articles about the sublime. The Jewish ban on iconic representation that was the foundation of Robert Pincus-Witten's argument had been raised in 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde', an essay published in *Artforum* in 1984.⁶⁶ Lyotard discussed the 'Jewish law banning images'⁶⁷ during a section describing Kant's arguments about the sublime. As Lyotard represents Kant, the ban is an acknowledgement of the disparity between Idea and representation. 'Infinity, or

⁶⁵ Jean Francois Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the jews"* (Minneapolis, 1990) p.47

⁶⁶ Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde' *Artforum* (April 1984) pp.36-43

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.40

the absoluteness of Idea,⁶⁸ cannot be presented. By banning representation of God (what, for Jews, stands for ‘Infinity, or the absoluteness of Idea’), the Jewish law, though admitting that the tools of representation are impoverished, actually bears witness to the presence of infinity. Though this argument was outlined while explaining the Kantian sublime, it seems to inform Lyotard’s sublime: the ‘sublime’ seems less to stand for a thing (e.g. God, or a volcano) as a dynamic of representation. In front of the ‘absolutely immense object’⁶⁹ that cannot be represented (God, a volcano), the challenge of representation is not simply avoided and ignored. Rather, avant-garde art’s task is to ‘bear witness to the inexpressible.’⁷⁰ The existence of the ‘absolutely immense object’ is witnessed by the agent of representation admitting their inability to represent it. This means that the ‘absolutely immense object’ is both acknowledged and held off.

Lyotard introduced two important ideas that were not present in the former theorisations of the sublime – firstly, the idea of an impending end. In other discussions of the sublime, the ‘absolutely immense object’ that cannot be represented is God, or a natural disaster. In Lyotard’s discussion, it was a condition of looming finality - the threat that ‘nothing will happen’.⁷¹ At times in Lyotard’s text, it seems that this threat is the condition of what is elsewhere called postmodernity - the cultural dead-end, the ‘desert of thought’⁷² in which no more new progress can be made; at other times, the threat that ‘nothing may happen’ seems to describe the rather more general ‘misery that the painter encounters with plastic surface’⁷³ - that moment at the beginning of the work, where there might be doubt whether anything can be made. This threat might be general, referring to the threat of death, the ending of the subject’s time; or cultural - referring to the perceived end of civilisation.

Lyotard’s second claim was that since Manet, avant-garde artists have acknowledged the threat that ‘nothing might happen’, and have produced work that might be thought about

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.40

⁶⁹ Ibid., p.40

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.37

⁷¹ ‘...nothing will happen, that words, colors, forms, or sounds will be absent, that some sentence will be the last, that one day the bread will not arrive....’ Ibid., p.37

⁷² Ibid., p.37

⁷³ Ibid., p.37

as operating this dynamic of the sublime, witnessing this threat and holding it off at the same time. For Lyotard, artists from Manet to Newman, Dan Flavin and Agnes Martin abandoned the project of representing nature or reality ('the art object would no longer bend itself to models'⁷⁴), concerning themselves instead with 'testifying on behalf of the indeterminate'⁷⁵. This process entailed avant-garde art's becoming abstract, but the abstraction that concerns Lyotard is broader than the Modernist idea of abstraction. Where Greenberg's modernism involves the articulation of the essential conditions of the medium, Lyotard's abstraction is that which foregoes narrative, depictive, or symbolic representation, which acknowledges the impossibility of representing the unrepresentable, which witnesses the unrepresentable by not representing it. Lyotard's avant-garde thus includes abstraction, but the question of medium is unimportant: he is as interested in a Dan Flavin installation as in a Barnett Newman painting.

The condition of finality was sensed before the Holocaust, but after it, it was particularly acute. The Holocaust is not directly treated in 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde', but later in *Heidegger and "the jews"*. Lyotard conceived the Holocaust as the epitome of the condition; like the condition of finality in general, the Holocaust was, for Lyotard, unrepresentable. The Holocaust has the position as the unrepresentable not just because of its scale; rather, Lyotard theorised it as the attempt to destroy what is already unrepresentable, already forgotten - the attempt to destroy 'the jews' - that category already outside western thought and representation. Lyotard was concerned with how memorial practices, such as history writing, or cultural representation, might occur. As touched on before, he argued that the recording or representation of the Holocaust, rather than guaranteeing its memory, actually guarantees its oblivion, since 'Only that which has been inscribed can, in the current sense of the term, be forgotten'.⁷⁶ In order to save the destruction from this fate, it cannot be simply recorded. However, 'One *must*, certainly, inscribe in words, in images. One cannot escape the necessity of representing. It could be a sin to believe oneself safe and sound. But it is one thing to do it in view of saving the memory, and quite another to try to preserve the remainder, the unforgettable'

⁷⁴ Ibid., p.41

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.41

⁷⁶ Lyotard, 1990, op. cit., p.26

forgotten, in writing.⁷⁷ We can now see how Lyotard could pose abstraction as a solution to this condition: avant-garde abstraction witnesses the unrepresentable by not representing it; and so post-Holocaust abstraction witnesses the unrepresentability of the Holocaust by not representing it.

There are two pertinent problems with Lyotard's arguments. By making the Holocaust the archetypal example of what cannot be represented, by placing it as the ultimate cause of the sense that 'nothing may happen', Lyotard sidesteps its historical specificity. Dominick LaCapra has disagreed with Lyotard's 'appropriation of "the jews"' because it 'obliterates the specificity of the Jews as a complex historical people.....'⁷⁸ Lyotard's entire theorisation of the Holocaust is questionable: 'Lyotard ...intensifies Lacoue-Labarthe's tendency to "trope" away from specificity and evacuate history by constructing the caesura of the Holocaust as a total trauma that is un(re)presentable and reduces everyone (victims, witnesses, perpetrators, revisionists, those born later) to an ultimately homogenizing yet sublime silence.'⁷⁹

The second problem involves Lyotard's approach to abstraction. His scepticism about conventional kinds of memorial practices can be taken into consideration when thinking about abstraction as a form of memorial, and certainly Lyotard's argument usefully complicates the way we might think of memorial - a true memorial must preserve the 'unforgettable', but can only do so by refusing to put what is to be memorialised into the realm of memory, as that realm always flips into the realm of forgetting. However, for the art historian, Lyotard's approach to abstraction lacks specificity. In *Heidegger and "the jews"*, 'Newman and Rothko' function as names, their kind of painting (rather than any particular paintings) standing in general for a condition of post-Holocaust non-representation. In the *Artforum* text, when discussing avant-garde art outside of the specific context of the Holocaust, Lyotard is equally non-specific. Art works function as illustrations, and the actualities of any given work are not discussed: any Martin painting or Flavin installation would support his argument. This is a condition of a certain kind of

⁷⁷ Ibid., p.26

⁷⁸ Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust - History, Theory, Trauma* (Cornell, 1996) p.98

⁷⁹ Ibid., p.97

theoretical writing, but if problematic for the art historian, it is particularly problematic in terms of my approach. Following Lyotard's formulation of abstraction, one cannot account for how contingencies particular to a specific abstract work – such as its title, its setting – might allow that work to be described as a particular representation of the Holocaust, rather than simply a mute witness to its unrepresentability. In this respect, it seems actually that Lyotard's approach to abstraction, despite the specificity of their formal vocabulary in relation to particular objects, accords with the approaches of Greenberg, Fried, and Pincus-Witten. Unlike Lyotard, but also unlike Greenberg, Fried, and Pincus-Witten, I will argue that abstraction is a form of representation rather than non-representation, that specific works of art can form representations of the Holocaust.

6.

‘It is difficult to defend yourself against retributions for an unknown. There is no preparation. To keep good faith with yourself, to understand yourself requires truthfulness, sincerity, a moral effort. Is that possible if part of your identity cannot be revealed?

When I was five years old I would ask my mother: What are we, who are we, where are we from? One day she answered me: If I tell you, you must promise never to tell anyone, never. We are Jewish. Jewish people are being burnt alive for being Jewish.

I was raised in fear, in deceit, in embarrassment, in denial. I was told not to admit who I was, not to admit what I was.⁸⁰

Richard Serra’s statement records a childhood lived under the conditions Clement Greenberg described in ‘Self-Hatred and Jewish Chauvinism’. ‘The mind has a tendency ... to look upon a calamity of that order as a punishment that must have been deserved’, Greenberg wrote.⁸¹ Perceiving persecution as punishment, the Jewish subject – such as Serra’s mother – denies her Jewishness, afraid and ashamed. Serra’s words describe a childhood experience but suggest the long lasting resonance of that event. It is hard to imagine such a text appearing alongside work that Serra might have produced before the 1990s, and indeed outside of the circumstances of a commission, but this of course is not to say that Serra *had* to accept the commission, or to publish such a text – these were carefully chosen words printed in a carefully constructed catalogue. The catalogue accompanied the exhibition of his 1992 work *The Drowned and the Saved* in the Stommeln synagogue in Germany, and took the form of a series of images Serra collected of other synagogues destroyed during Kristallnacht.⁸² (*figs. 1 and 2*)

⁸⁰ Richard Serra, catalogue statement, *The Drowned and the Saved* (Synagogue Stommeln, Germany, 1993), unpaginated. This book is a post-Holocaust version of *Wooden Synagogues* (Cf. Chapter 5)

⁸¹ See note 1.

⁸² Serra’s commission was one in a series of works made at this location. See *Art Projects – Synagoge Stommeln* (Ostfildern-Ruit, 2000) which documents all the projects made for the synagogue. On Serra, see Stefan Germer, ‘Richard Serra – The Drowned and the Saved’ in that publication.

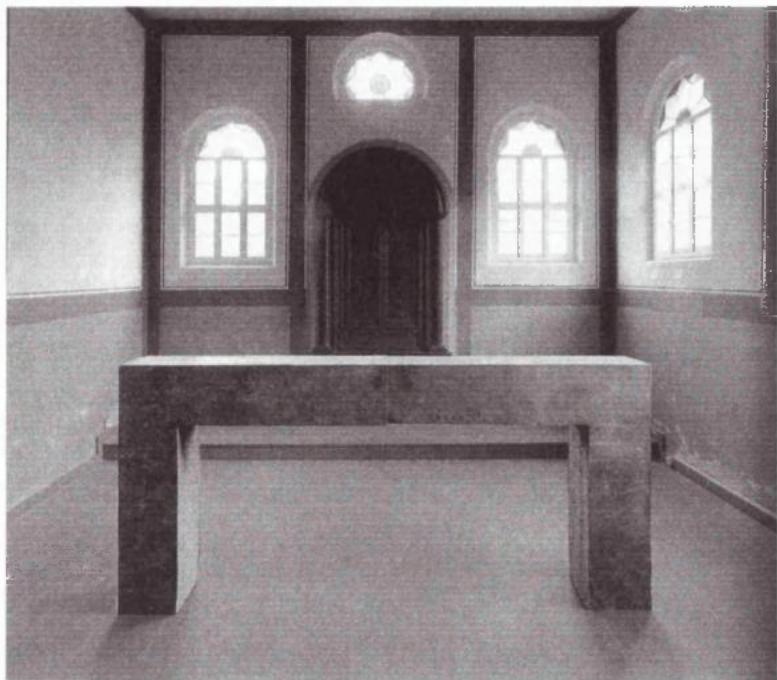


Fig. 1

Richard Serra, *The Drowned and the Saved* [installed in Synagogue Stommeln, Pulheim, Germany], 1992
Each bar: 56 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 61" x 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (142.9 x 154.9 x 34.9 cm)
Forged weatherproof steel two right-angle bars



Fig. 2

Bruhl Synagogue on Kristallnacht
(from Richard Serra, *The Drowned and the Saved*, ex. cat., 1992)

Serra's confession – and the way it mediates the encounter with the work itself - serves as a means to introduce my approach to abstraction, but first, I want to deploy the text to account for the choices I have made as to which works to discuss. Serra's text makes clear that an engagement with history is never simply a matter of referencing historical "subject matter", or expressing an established and secure identity. Rather, histories and identities, negotiated in the text, are negotiated in making and exhibiting the work. Introducing *The Drowned and the Saved*, the text nonetheless implies that the work was made with the *intention* of negotiating the memory of the Jewish persecution. Questions relating to identity and intentionality have been important for me in two ways: firstly, in limiting the scope of this project. There might be many ways to describe abstraction as a response to the Holocaust – and we have considered, for example, Pincus-Witten's and Lyotard's accounts. The works to be discussed in this thesis are specific works occupying an unusual place within each artist's oeuvre, as they were *intended* to negotiate this history. Lack of intentionality accounts for why work by Eva Hesse and Mark Rothko has not been examined. The great proportion of artists discussed in this thesis were Jewish immigrants or children of immigrants, artists for whom the Holocaust had the status not just as a foreign event, artists who might have grown up distanced from obvious engagement with Jewishness, but, as Serra's text indicated, artists for whom such distance was not unproblematic. The same is true for Hesse and Rothko, and both left anecdotes and enigmatic comments about the Holocaust. Rothko reacted angrily on hearing that Meyer Schapiro had burst into tears when recalling the destruction of European Jewish culture during a lecture at Columbia, considering Schapiro 'sentimental'⁸³. Eva Hesse famously said that Carl Andre's 'metal plates were the concentration camp for me.'⁸⁴ There will be interesting ways to think about their work in relation to their experience as immigrants, but neither artist made specific works to negotiate the 'concentration camp' in the deliberate way that I explore in this thesis, and thus their work falls out of its scope. Since Serra's commission for a German synagogue is serving as a means of introducing my interests, it should be noted in passing that

⁸³ James Breslin, *Mark Rothko* (Chicago, 1993) p.325

⁸⁴ Cindy Nemser, 'An Interview with Eva Hesse' *Artforum* (May 1970) p.59

Rothko proposed to a German curator the project of making paintings for ‘a very small chapel of expiation’ to be erected Germany ‘in memory of Jewish victims’.⁸⁵ This would be the only way that Rothko would show work in Germany – the project, however, did not materialise, and so there is no work to discuss, no clue as to how Rothko’s paintings for a Holocaust memorial of his design would have departed from his other work.

Though intention and identity will be useful as means of confining the number of works to be considered, they will not confine the *way* the works are considered. Reconsidering the importance of intention and identity does not mean returning to a biographical mode of art history, and this enquiry will not explain away art works as originating in any kind of crisis of ethnic identity.⁸⁶ However, intentionality and identity are not merely important as a means of limiting the work considered: the second reason why these matters are important to me is that intentions mediate the kinds of meanings viewers make of abstract works. Artist’s intentions are represented for the viewer at the site of the encounter with the work in the form, for instance, of a catalogue statement like Serra’s. Many of the works that will be discussed were made as commissions, and here intentions are manifested in representations of the literal negotiations between artists and commissioning organisations that take place in the process of making the work – negotiations sometimes concealed, but sometimes reported around the work. Having acknowledged all this, it might still feel somewhat strange to be addressing work such as Serra’s through questions of intentionality. Serra’s own work has been central to a reading of abstraction that locates works’ meanings not within the realms of authorial intention but within the realm of the viewer’s encounter – through consideration of the viewer’s phenomenological and psychoanalytical engagement with the work. Poststructuralist theory would lead us to be sceptical of making much of intention and biography, and while by raising the question of biography I will question some of the closures of the poststructuralist account, this scepticism will be in play in my thesis.

⁸⁵ Werner Haftmann, *Mark Rothko* (Zurich, 1971) p.IX

⁸⁶ Michael Leja has considered identity without returning to a model that considers art works as products of subjective expressionism. His *Reframing Abstract Expressionism* (New Haven, 1993) compellingly examines how subjectivities are formed through discourse. Though I do not treat this literature in this project, it would be interesting to consider how the ‘modern man’ discourse which Leja explores was accompanied by a literature on Jewishness – texts such as William Herberg’s 1951 *Judaism and Modern Man*.

Indeed I take as crucial many of the theoretical insights post-structuralism has provided, and in describing the meanings of abstract art works, I will be interested in thinking through notions of meaning that have emerged – often in discussions of Holocaust representation – in writings by figures such as Maurice Blanchot and Emanuel Levinas.⁸⁷

Art historians such as Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss have opened up the study of abstraction to the insights of poststructuralist theory. As well as rethinking the question of intention, another departure marked in my approach to abstraction regards the possibility of taking literary meanings suggested by titles and artist's statements seriously – not as securing the meanings of works, but as affecting the way viewers make meanings of works. One way in which the poststructuralist approach to abstraction accords with the Modernist approach regards this matter of literary meaning. Certainly, Rosalind Krauss has shown an extreme scepticism about such meaning, no more than in her 'combative' – to use a phrase recently deployed to describe Jewish *Artforum* critics of her generation⁸⁸ – dismissal of E.A. Carmean's argument about Pollock in her 1982 essay 'Reading Jackson Pollock, Abstractly'.⁸⁹ In a more recent essay on Pollock, Krauss has described Lee Krasner's reaction to the article which elicited the 1982 text. E.A. Carmean's 'efforts to link Pollock's black paintings not just circumstantially but thematically... to an abortive church project by Tony Smith' caused Krasner to complain 'First it was Carl Jung and now ... it's Jesus'. Krauss writes that 'The opening syllable of that name was given a protracted moan; but the second snapped the word shut: *Je-e-e-zus*. It was not Jewish rage that sounded behind her pronunciation – although there was some of that – but high modernist exasperation.'⁹⁰ I hope to have indicated already that the spheres of 'Jewish rage' and 'modernist exasperation' are not so separate, that the principle determining that

⁸⁷ In her recent study of Anselm Kiefer, Lisa Saltzman argued that art historical enquiries informed by poststructuralism are themselves historically shaped. 'The history of catastrophe and genocide...has given shape to the ontological and epistemological doubt articulated so acutely within poststructuralism.' *Anselm Kiefer and Art after Auschwitz* (Cambridge, 1999) p.7

⁸⁸ This is Max Kozloff's description of Jewish *Artforum* critics. Amy Newman, op. cit., p.368

⁸⁹ See Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986) pp.221-242

⁹⁰ Rosalind Krauss, 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture' in Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel (eds.), *Jackson Pollock – New Approaches* (New York, 1999) p.155. Robert Hobbs has recently described Krasner's 'Gray Slab' paintings of the mid-1940s as marking the effect of the Holocaust. Since these were destroyed, they do not allow for the kind of enquiry I pursue, which proceeds from visual study of works. (Robert Hobbs, *Lee Krasner* (New York, 1999) pp.64-69)

abstraction should be considered apart from ‘thematic’ content was a principle forged by Modernists themselves negotiating Jewish history. The residue of this principle remains in the work of Krauss. In another essay on Pollock, she writes dismissively that ‘pretensions to “literature”’ that arise through Pollock’s titles, ‘are easily explained’, since the titles were not Pollock’s own.⁹¹ I draw attention to this not to contest this particular reading of Pollock, but simply to suggest that poststructuralist accounts of abstraction still tend to hold apart from the realm of meaning any notion of literary meaning. To return to Serra’s *The Drowned and the Saved*, here is a sculpture deliberately titled after a Primo Levi memoir, a book which itself negotiates the fate of art in Auschwitz.⁹² Just as the viewer encounters the sculpture with the knowledge of Serra’s catalogue statement, so too this title is available to them, and any complex account of the meanings of the work itself must take into consideration the interplay between Levi’s text, the title, and the work.

If poststructuralist accounts of abstraction fail to make much of titles, they do foreground the importance of site. Again, it has been works by Serra, and by artists of his generation, which have persuaded critics and historians to recognise the importance of site in the development of artistic meaning. To consider the meanings of *The Drowned and the Saved*, it is crucial not just to think about the sculpture’s placement in the architectural setting, how, for instance, its dimensions relate to the scale of the synagogue hall. Stommeln Synagogue is also a building associated with a particular history, and the viewer encounters the work aware of the historical, as well as architectural dimensions of the building, perhaps after a journey to this place of memory. Meanings that become available during the encounter are also mediated by the setting. The point seems so obvious that it hardly needs stating when thinking about *The Drowned and the Saved*; in different but related manners, it will be important to consider how site and the placement of works within a site alters the generation of meanings. We will think about the setting

⁹¹ See ‘Horizontality’ in Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless* (New York, 1997) p.95

⁹² Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (London, 1989). Levi discusses how intellectuals negotiated their ideas about the purpose of culture while prisoners in Auschwitz: ‘Reason, art, and poetry are no help in deciphering a place from which they are banned.’ (p.115) Levi also discusses the experience of the German philologist Amery-Meyer, whose language was corrupted by the use made of it in Auschwitz. Amery-Meyer suffered ‘just as a sculptor would suffer at seeing one of his statues defouled or mutilated.’ (p.109) It is interesting that Serra’s work was made after the destruction of *Tilted Arc*.

of Louis Kahn's proposed Holocaust memorial, the placement of work by Serra, Sol LeWitt, Ellsworth Kelly, and Joel Shapiro in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, but equally, we will consider how the installation of a series of paintings by Barnett Newman in the Guggenheim played a part in determining the meanings of that series.

The Drowned and the Saved is a sculpture in two parts – two inverted L shapes whose short sides stretch vertically from the floor, and whose longer sides meet each other at their ends, propping each other so each half is prevented from falling forward. The meeting of the two halves creates a bar, dividing space above it from space below. The sculpture dramatises principles of balance, weight, load, and gravity. This is the syntax of Serra's sculpture, syntax in use for over twenty years before this work was made. The use of regular L shapes has an even longer lineage: one of Minimalism's most famous works is of course Robert Morris's *L Beams* (1965) (*fig.3*). Though identical, the beams' different placement unsettles the viewer's mental grasp of their sameness. Memory and time are in play in Morris's work: the memory of the unitary shape ruffled by different arrangements and infinite new aspects on the beams during the time the viewer walks around them. Yet if we endeavoured to discuss historical time, or the memory of the Holocaust, it would seem necessary to take a work like Morris's *Untitled* (1987) (*fig.4*), made six years before *The Drowned and the Saved*, with its silkscreened photograph of corpses in a concentration camp pit. Unlike Morris's *Untitled*, and like his *L-Beams*, *The Drowned and the Saved* would at first discourage the discussion of any content other than that relating to material, balance, weight, gravity. This is only the case if the work is taken as merely comprising its physical structure. Here is Hal Foster: 'There are those who span the bridge, who pass over it, the saved, and those who pass under it, the drowned. These two passages, these two fates, are opposed, but they come together as the two beams come together, in support.'⁹³ If the first comment about this kind of reading is simply to mark its difference from those we might have become accustomed to in the accounts of Serra's *October* champions, what is important, and not stated but implicit in

⁹³ Hal Foster, 'The Un/Making of Sculpture' in *Richard Serra – Sculpture 1985-1998* (Los Angeles, 1998) p.26

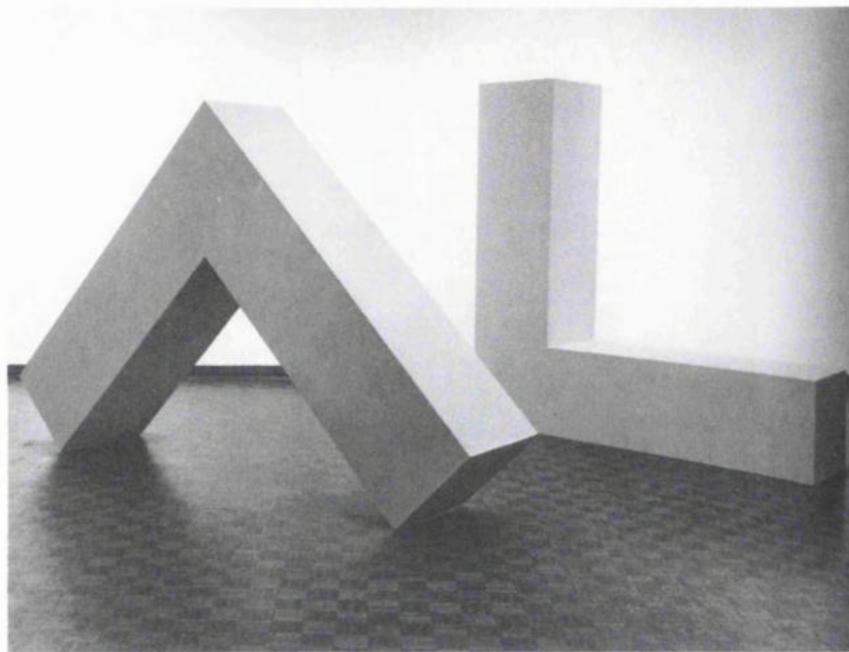


Fig. 3
Robert Morris, *Untitled (Two L-Beams)*, 1965
Each unit: 96" x 96" x 24" (243.8 x 243.8 x 61 cm)
Painted plywood

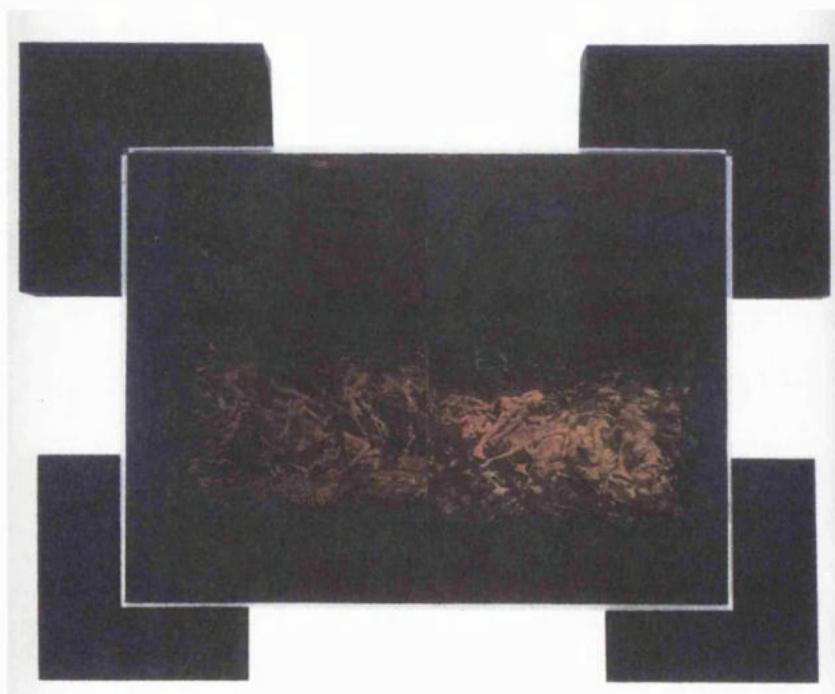


Fig. 4
Robert Morris, *Untitled*, 1987
101 ¼" x 124" (257 x 315 cm)
Silkscreen and encaustic on aluminium panel and painted cast fibreglass frame

Foster's account, is the generation of meaning, the viability of such readings, is prompted not just by the material structure of the sculpture itself, but by the contingencies of statements, titles, catalogues, placement. *The Drowned and the Saved*, encountered in a resonant site, its title resonating with the catalogue statement and its images of sites similar to Stommeln Synagogue, begins to acquire a kind of meaning that though founded on the syntax of gravity, weight, load and balance exceeds the kind of meaning such syntax can secure.

Serra, unlike Morris, was not compelled to abandon abstraction in order to negotiate historical subject matter. This simple point serves to indicate that for all the works I will be looking at, the artist, though working against critical formulations about abstraction, expands the possibilities of abstraction rather than being constrained by them. However, I will also be considering how the condition of meaning is affected by the work's abstraction. Meanings arising through contingencies are never secured; they are never inherent in material or form, and abstraction further serves to unsettle them. Meanings even arise through the contingency of the viewer's – or rather of several viewers' – fleeting presence. In 1997, Carl Andre also made a work for Stommeln Synagogue. (*figs.5-6*) *The Void Enclosed by the Squares of Three Four and Five* revisits the notion of the void, a notion omni-present in his work (for instance *Cuts*, 1967), but now recast with the inevitable expanded sense of absence. The void in this work frames the now empty space of the *bimah*, the platform where the cantor and Rabbi would once have stood. Another kind of floor sculpture begins to be in play as Andre's tiles are viewed – the horizontal gravestones found not in synagogues but on cathedral floors.⁹⁴ This might make of the viewer a subject in mourning, so that the act of looking down now at the same time becomes an act of looking back. But imagine the viewer looking up: Andre's work dramatises the synagogue floor, framing the tile structure running at angles to the grid of its arrangement, but the work also dramatises space above the floor. For the duration of the installation, this space is filled with people. Like Serra, Andre wrote a text to accompany his work:

⁹⁴ This resonance might suggest a new way of thinking about horizontality in Andre's work, and about the notion of mourning in relation to the emptying of sculpture.

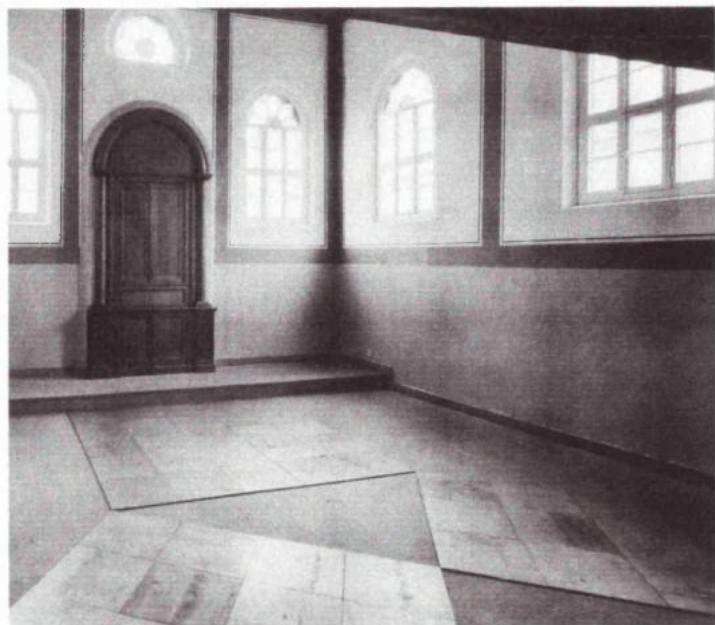


Fig. 5

Carl Andre, *The Void Enclosed By The Squares of Three Four and Five*, 1997
50 plates, each 19 3/4" x 19 3/4" (50 x 50 cm)
Iron

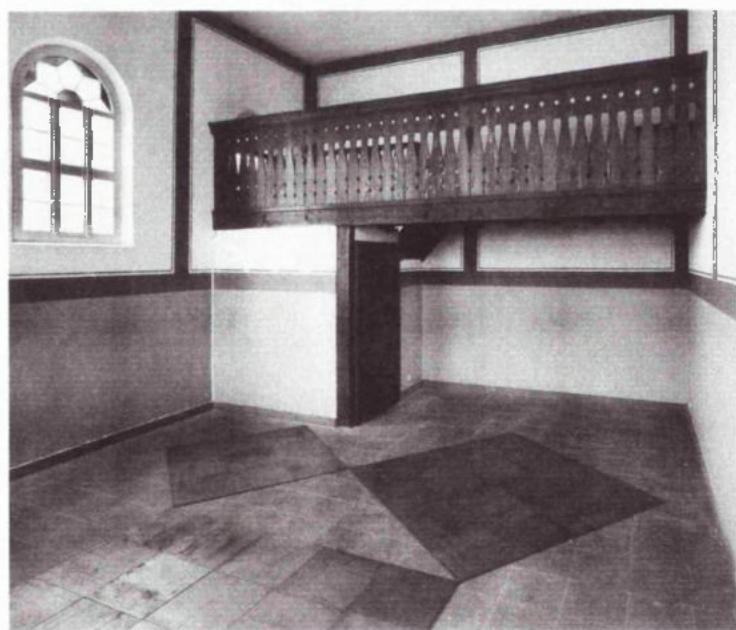


Fig. 6

Carl Andre, *The Void Enclosed By The Squares of Three Four and Five*, 1997

'Every work of art is haunted by its absence. The small, austerely beautiful, half-hidden synagogue of Stommeln is haunted by the absence of its *minyan*.'⁹⁵

To see the work, viewers re-enter the synagogue, forming a new *minyan*, a new, temporary community, visible to each other over the tiles of the sculpture, re-inhabiting the haunted space. The momentary presence of the people in the synagogue is part of the meaning of the work, a momentary part: as Andre's text suggests, meaning is ghostlike - art works are *haunted*. This condition of meaning seems a condition of abstraction, and this is what makes abstraction so fascinating in terms of the haunting of Holocaust memory.

⁹⁵ Carl Andre, catalogue statement, *The Void Enclosed by the Squares of Three Four and Five* (Synagogue Stommeln, Germany, 1997)

CHAPTER TWO: MORRIS LOUIS'S *CHARRED JOURNAL: FIREWRITTEN* SERIES

1. The Modernist Morris Louis

The notion that the viewer of an abstract painting might generate meanings from it that relate to the Holocaust would seem to be no more unlikely than in front of a work by Morris Louis. Louis, born Maurice Bernstein in 1912 to immigrant Jews living in Baltimore, is perhaps the artist whose association with high Modernist criticism is least contested. Whereas the work of Pollock or Newman has been mobilised in arguments by those contesting a Modernist position, Louis now seems to stand for Modernist orthodoxy, and as Modernist criticism has been set aside, so too Louis's work has been waylaid. Louis is known primarily for three series of paintings made between his 'breakthrough'⁹⁶ encounter with Helen Frankenthaler's *Mountains and Sea* in 1953, and his early death in 1962 - the 'Veils', the 'Unfurleds', and the 'Stripes'. (figs.7-9) Though once considered the work of 'one of America's greatest painters'⁹⁷, these are now often housed in museum storerooms: exemplary of this is the rehang of Tate Modern, in which Louis's work has yet to be displayed.

Louis's 'mature' work was introduced in Greenberg's essay 'Louis and Noland', published in *Art International* in May 1960⁹⁸, and in various texts by Michael Fried

⁹⁶ The notion of a 'breakthrough' was first posited by Greenberg. Louis's experience of Frankenthaler's painting 'led [him] to change his direction abruptly.' (Clement Greenberg, 'Louis and Noland', *Greenberg 4*, p.96). Michael Fried was more concerned with theorising the breakthrough, since he saw it as emblematic of the typical career path of many Modernist painters. He wrote of Louis's pre-1953 work as a 'term of apprenticeship', necessarily longer for Modernist artists than for traditional artists. Louis had made a 'radical departure from his previous work' - his post-breakthrough works 'amount to a repudiation of [previous] work and its underlying assumptions.' Finally, in a passage particularly emblematic of Fried's concerns, he wrote that it was tempting 'to describe Louis's breakthrough as one in which *painting itself* broke through to its future.' (Michael Fried, *Morris Louis* (New York, 1971) pp.12-13) If Greenberg's and Fried's accounts of the breakthrough clearly witness their critical terms of engagement, as we will see, these ideas about a breakthrough might be contested in the light of the reconsideration of the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings.

⁹⁷ Barbara Rose, 'Quality in Louis' *Artforum* (October 1971) p.62

⁹⁸ Clement Greenberg, 'Louis and Noland' *Greenberg 4* pp.94-100

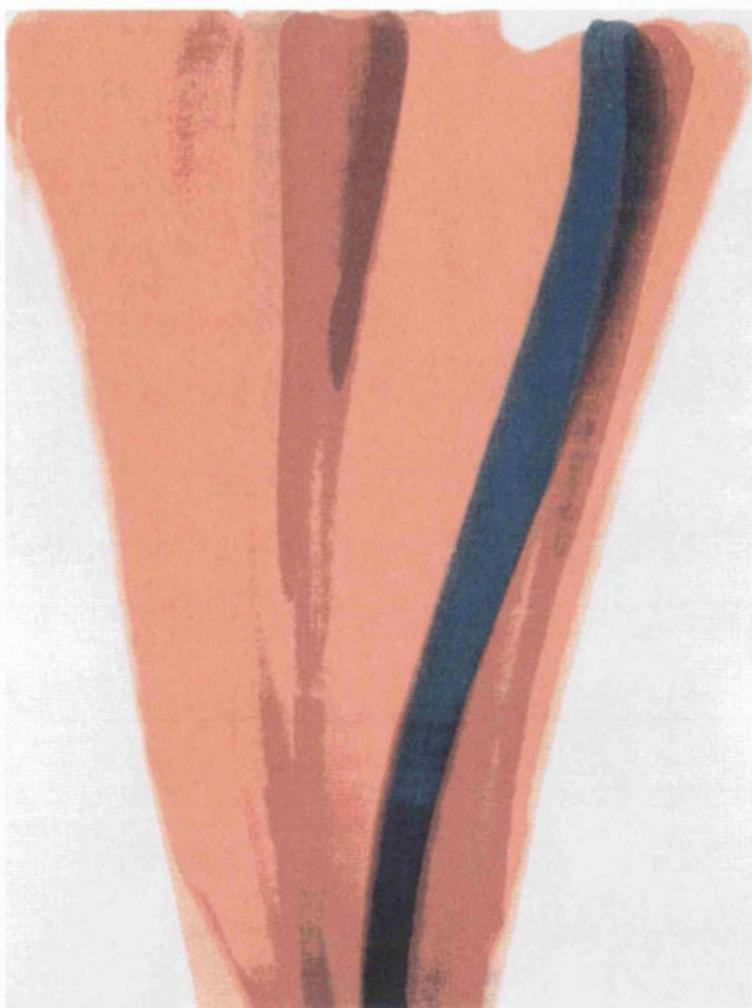


Fig. 7
Morris Louis, *Beth Chaf*, 1959
11'7" x 8'6 1/2" (353.1 x 260.4 cm)
Acrylic resin on canvas

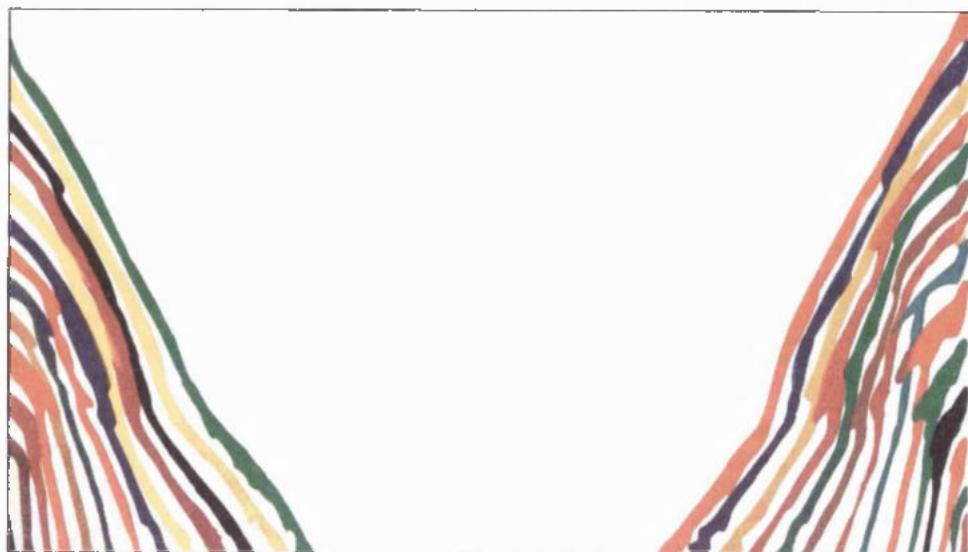


Fig. 8
Morris Louis, *Alpha Lambda*, 1961
8'6 ½" x 15' (260.4 x 457.2 cm)
Acrylic resin on canvas

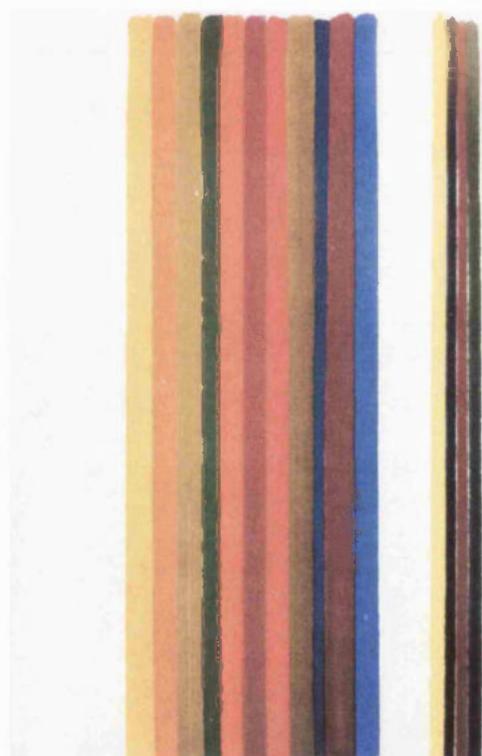


Fig. 9
Morris Louis, *Albireo*, 1962
6'10" x 4'4¾" (208.3 x 134 cm)
Acrylic resin on canvas

published throughout the 1960s and revised for his 1971 monograph.⁹⁹ Looking at these accounts helps indicate how Louis's work was described, and, through them, I will introduce my concerns. Greenberg's article marked the first time for many years that he had written on a little-known artist. It started with an analysis of the problem of 'provinciality.' Before the war, American artists such as Thomas Eakins had always seemed provincial when set on the world stage. Now, New York was producing too many young artists who exhibited internationally, and who appeared to escape the trap of provinciality, but whose achievement was minor. Louis and Kenneth Noland, though literally living in the cultural provinces (both lived in Washington D.C.), were able to distance themselves from the changing fashions of New York painting, and achieve major, non-provincial work.

That Greenberg's comments on Louis are introduced with this argument already raises an interesting problem in relation to the possibility that an art work might engage with questions relating to Jewishness. Greenberg's desire for a non-provincial art speaks less of a hope for a dominant 'American' art and rather more of a Jewish critic's reluctance to sanction minor nationalist styles (such as the provincial American art of Eakins), his hope for a pan-national, universalist art. Certainly, according to this agenda, the least likely kind of work to attract critical attention would be work engaging with possibly 'provincial' Jewish cultural subject matter. Greenberg's account of Louis proceeded by securing the artist's Modernist status. The notion of autonomous arts was raised to explain why Louis had abandoned his early style: this had been Cubist, and therefore 'sculptural'. Louis's 'revulsion against Cubism'¹⁰⁰ was thus an advance in the service of Modernist painting. The terms in play in this account are sculpture and painting: clearly the idea of a relation between painting and writing is shut off. The other remarks concerned Louis's ability to make colour 'optical'. This analysis was extended in Fried's account, but for Fried too, the notion of medium was crucial in explaining Louis's achievement.

⁹⁹ Michael Fried, *Morris Louis* (New York, 1971). Fried's earlier texts on Louis included 'The Achievement of Morris Louis' *Artforum* (February 1967), an essay which had accompanied the first major retrospective of Louis's work, organised by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1967.

¹⁰⁰ Greenberg 4 p.97

Whereas Greenberg charted Louis's development from sculptural painting to Modernist painting, Fried considered Louis's achievement in subsuming drawing to the demands of painting. For Fried, Louis's 'Veil' paintings, the first after his 'breakthrough', marked an extension of Pollock's achievement against drawing. Pollock had freed line from the traditional role of drawing - delimiting the outlines of objects - but his interest in figuration had led to paintings such as *Out of the Web*. In the 'Veils', Louis managed to overcome the figurative, shape-making role of drawing, but through his technique, he enabled a new kind of figuration to occur in the process. When canvas was stained with successive waves of acrylic paint placed on top of each other, the contours of each wave were visible through each other as a kind of shape-forming figuration.¹⁰¹ The 'Unfurled' paintings, meanwhile, also overcame drawing: the rivulets running down the bottom corners did not mark the perimeter of shapes, but seemed '*all* perimeter'¹⁰². It was their positioning against the central expanse of blank canvas, however, which gave these lines a special significance. Fried quoted Greenberg's comment that 'The first mark on a surface destroys its virtual flatness.'¹⁰³ For Fried, these lines seemed to play out the '*firstness of marking*'¹⁰⁴: these paintings were about what happens when a mark is made on the surface - the mark announces itself as figure, against the ground behind. Since this ground was so expansive, the untouched canvas at the centre of the 'Unfurleds' seemed like an 'infinite abyss': 'One's experience of the Unfurleds can be vertiginous.'¹⁰⁵

Fried concluded his essay by thinking through the consequences of Louis's process. This process was another part of Louis's overcoming of drawing. 'Louis's eschewal of traditional drawing amounted to the refusal to allow his hand, wrist, and arm to get into his paintings.'¹⁰⁶ Fried continued: 'this, I suggest, amounted to the refusal to allow himself to get into his paintings in what he felt was the wrong way.'¹⁰⁷ Where other artists of Louis's period might have sought to abandon expressionism through choosing

¹⁰¹ Fried, 1971, op. cit., p.22

¹⁰² Ibid., p.32

¹⁰³ Ibid., p.32, quoting Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting' Greenberg 4 p.90

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p.33

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p.33

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p.40

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p.40

to paint recognisable configurations (Jasper Johns) or serial configurations (Stella), Fried was claiming that Louis's process enabled a kind of distance: the artist's hand was totally separated from the canvas, with the brush no longer even present as a dripping stick. 'Louis's paintings, more than those of any previous painter, give the impression of coming into existence as if of their own accord, without the intervention of the artist.'¹⁰⁸

There are two important points to extract from Fried's account to introduce the concerns of this chapter. In more than one place in his text, Fried discusses the empty canvas through the metaphor of the page. The empty space of the 'Unfurleds' has the 'original blankness (the blankness, one feels, of an enormous *page*).'¹⁰⁹ Louis's paintings, meanwhile, are 'wholly abstract embodiments or correlatives of ... the will or impulse to draw, the make one's mark, to take possession, in characteristic ways, of a plane surface.'¹¹⁰ The idea of the *page* (as opposed to canvas) would seem to invoke the mark on it as a mark of writing. Though he tempts this invocation, as a Modernist, Fried thinks of the first mark on the 'page' as a visual mark, the mark that initiates a figure/ground relationship, and that creates optical space. The impulse to 'take possession' of the page can thus only be the impulse to mark it with visual content, a kind of content which does not exist prior to the marking. However, if the implications of the canvas *as page* were followed in the most obvious manner, the first mark on it would then be considered as a written (not drawn) mark. Then, rather than having a status as the initiators of visual content, these first marks would initiate content associated with writing. The first mark would signify the impulse to make meaning, to represent.¹¹¹

The second point concerns Fried's idea of 'getting into his paintings in.... the wrong way.' The wrong way that Fried claims Louis avoids is the way of emotive, gestural

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p.40

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p.32

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p.35

¹¹¹ Fried's account of the drawn mark keeps out of consideration of that mark as writing. A related, but different rejoinder to Fried's position seems suggested by Michael Newman's account of the relation of drawing and memory. In his essay on Avis Newman, 'Memory and Matter' in *Avis Newman* (Camden Arts Centre, London, 1995) Newman, following Derrida, thinks through another originary story about drawing - Pliny the Elder's story of Butades' daughter. Before her lover departs on a journey, she draws his silhouette on the wall behind him. Where, for Fried, drawing makes new, seizing the plane as one's own, here, drawing is an act of preservation at a moment of loss.

action painting. The right way, enabled by Louis's process, is the way of impersonality, of the minimal 'intervention of the artist.' A third way of getting into the paintings, and a way closed off in Fried's account, would be to find a way of enabling the concerns of memory and politics - not personal or emotional concerns, so much as those which address a subject of history - to play a part in the making and meanings of the work. These concerns, which could threaten a painting with the undesirable fate of appearing 'provincial', have little to do with the dynamics of visual space, with the 'first' mark as the first seen thing, and rather more to do with the mark as writing.

In order to shift attention to the possibility of writing, I will be addressing the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings of 1951, work made just before Louis's 'breakthrough', and work considered 'immature' by the modernists. The *Charred Journal: Firewritten* series was painted in 1951 and exhibited in April 1953 at the Washington Workshop, a small artist-run institution where Louis had gained a teaching position in 1952. The notions of the 'page' and of 'writing', kept separate in Fried's account, are jointly written into their titles, which spoke also, through the word 'journal', of a personal sphere of interest, quite distanced from the Fried's idea of 'impersonality'. It is not quite that Fried passed over these works because of problematic content, though I am suggesting that this kind of content was impossible to sanction. Primarily, they are passed over because the only way that Fried could write about these paintings was through the idea of the visual mark - through drawing, not writing, and consequently, his account addresses their form, not their possible meanings. They were clearly 'influenced' by Pollock, but 'Pollock remains exactly that, an influence'¹¹². They did not announce, as the Veils would, Louis's extension of Pollock's experiment with drawing, and thus remained 'of minor importance'¹¹³. Having seen that the idea of the 'firstness of marking' was raised to address Louis's 'mature' works, we can now think about what marking might mean in the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* series.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Fried, 1971, op. cit., p.13

¹¹³ Ibid., p.13

¹¹⁴ In addition to Fried, other writers have discussed the paintings without sustained comment. Dore Ashton, for instance, has written that the series shows 'Louis brooding on a highly charged emotional theme.' *Morris Louis* (Padiglione d'arte contemporanea, Milan, 1990) pp.18-19. The exception is Mira Goldfarb-Berkowitz, who organised an exhibition of the paintings for The Jewish Museum, New York in

1998. Berkowitz published a small exhibition pamphlet, based on her M.A. thesis on these paintings, *Sacred Signs and Symbols in Morris Louis: The Charred Journal Series, 1951* - CUNY 1993, copy from CUNY library, New York. While her research and mine make use of many of the same documentary materials (indeed her biographical attention to Louis's early career is much greater than mine), our procedures are very different. In her MA thesis, the series is treated unproblematically as a 'statement in support of all victims of social injustice' (p.31) with a 'pervasive theme' (p.79). Titles are treated straightforwardly, with no attention to the idea that they might not guarantee meaning, and 'signs and symbols' are read with ease. Little attempt is made to reconstruct the encounter with the paintings, or to probe how the surfaces might generate and frustrate the development of associations. In this study, these paintings will not be considered as a 'statement' - indeed, they seem to play out the problematic of making straightforward meaning. I do not think that symbols can be read or deciphered straightforwardly. Instead, I understand that Louis was interested in the abstract nature of these paintings, and in their inability to be deciphered. Another of Goldfarb-Berkowitz's contentious claims is that abstraction functions for Louis as a means of universalising the theme of the Holocaust. Although, like her, I claim that the series relates not just to the past but to the time of its making, and McCarthyite censorship in particular, I see abstraction not as a language which allowed the Holocaust to be generalised, but as the language of the most advanced art of 1951, and the language which allowed the artist to create objects without fixed meaning.

Goldfarb-Berkowitz also adopts a problematic idea of Jewish identity, writing, for instance, that the series indicates how Louis 'may have been seeking to re-identify with his roots', and that it 'attests to the fact that he was proud of and devoted to his heritage, and considered his Jewishness a fundamental part of his identity.' (p.58) I do not conceive Jewish identity as monolithic and secure, and nor do I argue that a Jewish subject can establish a secure allegiance to 'Jewish identity'. Jewishness is constantly negotiated, a fraught area of subjectivity, and particularly so after the Holocaust.

2. Paintings and Process

The *Charred Journal: Firewritten* series comprises seven small canvases around 35 inches high by around 30 inches wide, each differentiated by a number or letter - these are I, II, IV, V, A, and B. The seventh painting is listed in *The Complete Paintings* simply as 'Charred Journal' - for sake of space, I will refer to it as 'C' (*figs. 10-16*). Alongside the enveloping expanses of Louis's later work, these paintings might seem frail and insubstantial. Their surfaces, however, reveal a complexity that requires sustained description. While a spectator might see the canvases as flat surfaces, description must prize the surface apart, working as inverse archaeology from the bottom layer of paint upwards, and thereby reconstructing the various techniques Louis practiced. The first strata of paint is a coloured under-layer. In his post-'breakthrough' years, Louis would work directly on raw canvas, but in 1951, he primed his surfaces. A light monochrome coat would here have sufficed to seal the holes in the weave, but what is seen - particularly when close up - is a range of tones. These vary between paintings: in *Charred Journal: Firewritten II*, they are yellowy brown, in *IV*, salmon pink. In *Charred Journal: Firewritten B*, they are a light sky blue. All of these pigments are pale and subtle, and all of them appear to the viewer where the next layer of paint, a black, fails to cover the surface. Once the underlayer was dry, Louis applied black acrylic with a knife or a brush, and rather than covering the entire surface, the brush marks leave gaps through which the coloured underlayer is seen. These gaps are both between strokes, and between bristles, suggesting that the brush was either not loaded with paint, or was somewhat dry when it touched, and moved down the canvas. The strokes are always vertical, so that the black resembles the carbon trace a candle marks on a wall. They leave the surface looking dirty rather than covered, looking patchy and chary.

The next stage of the process was the construction of grid lines. These become increasingly clear to sight as one moves back from the painting. The grid lines lie over the black layer in three paintings: *IV*, *B*, and *C*. Here, the grids have been made by pouring a dark black in thin lines across and down the surface. The lines stretch to all four edges of the canvas, dividing the surface into unequal squares. They are deliberately

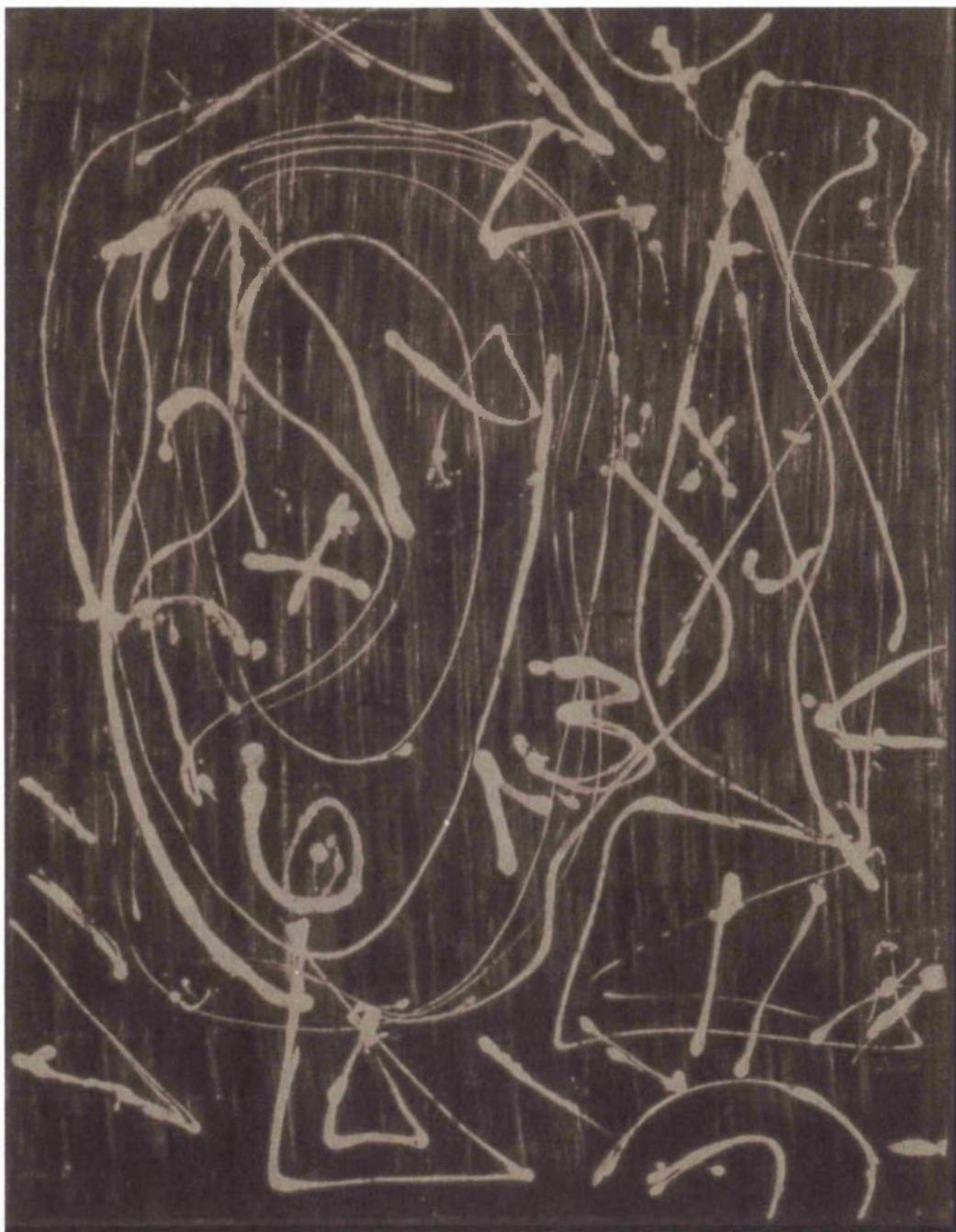


Fig. 10
Morris Louis, *Charred Journal: Firewritten I*, 1951
39 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 30" (99.7 x 76.2 cm)
Acrylic resin on canvas

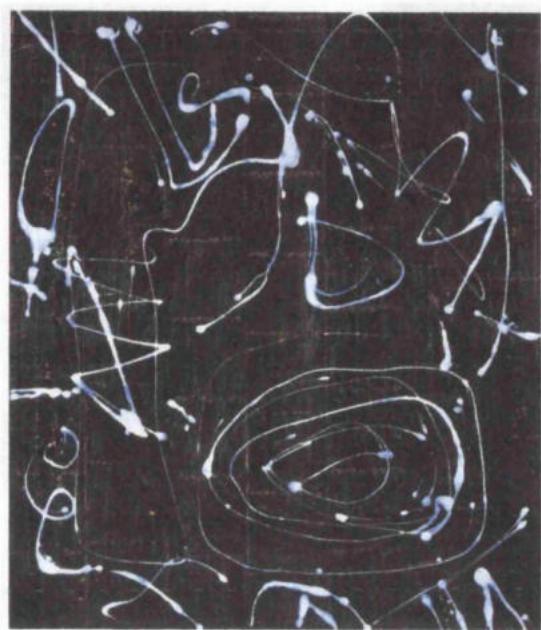


Fig. 11

Morris Louis, *Charred Journal: Firewritten II*, 1951
35" x 30" (88.9 x 76.2 cm), Acrylic resin on canvas
Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark

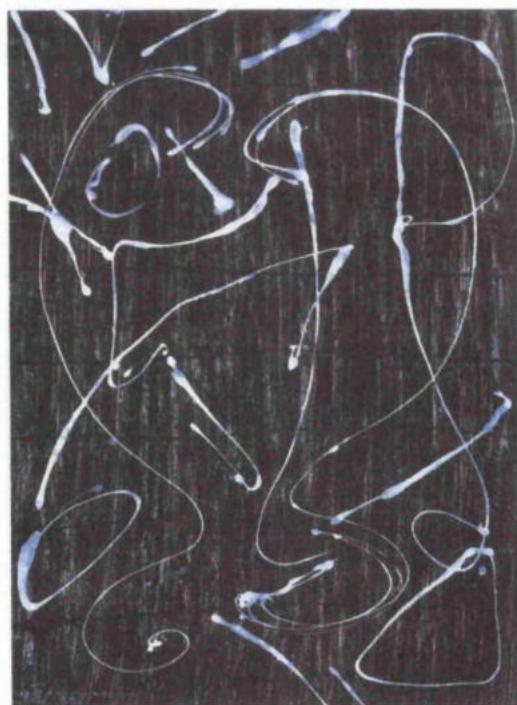


Fig. 12

Morris Louis, *Charred Journal: Firewritten IV*, 1951
35 1/4" x 30" (89.5 x 76.2 cm), Acrylic resin on canvas
Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark



Fig. 13
Morris Louis, *Charred Journal: Firewritten V*, 1951
34" x 26" (86.4 x 66 cm), Acrylic resin on canvas

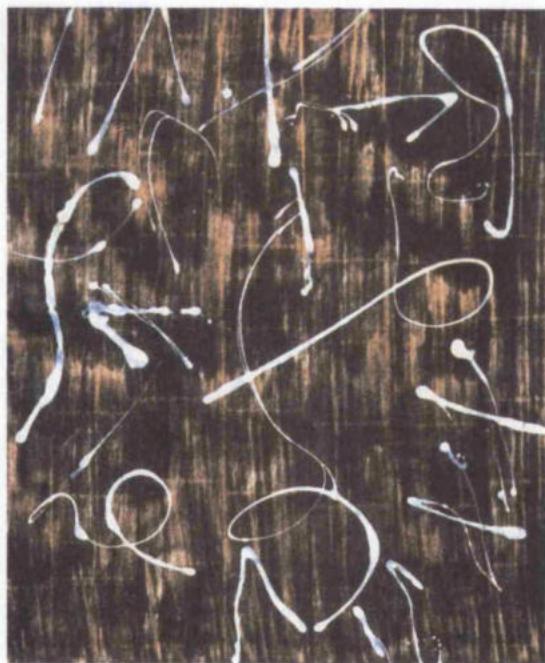


Fig. 14
Morris Louis, *Charred Journal: Firewritten A*, 1951
36 1/8" x 30" (91.8 x 76.2 cm), Acrylic resin on canvas
Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark



Fig. 15

Morris Louis, *Charred Journal: Firewritten B*, 1951
36 1/8" x 30" (91.8 x 76.2 cm), Acrylic resin on canvas
Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark



Fig. 16

Morris Louis, *Charred Journal: Firewritten [C]*, 1951
29" x 26" (73.7 x 66 cm), Acrylic resin on canvas

wavy, their thickness never constant. In *B*, some verticals are allowed to split, and before rejoining, they momentarily appear as double lines similar to Brice Marden's recent cracked calligraphy. In the other four paintings, the grid has been marked quite differently. Here, patches of the underlayer of paint stretch across or up the surface. These grids have been made by the removal, rather than the addition, of paint, and the lines' colours are the yellowy and salmon hues described before. Leon Berkowitz, who ran the Workshop, described the extraordinary procedure Louis employed. After 'pressing lengths of toilet paper into the wet paint of the background'¹¹⁵, he said, he removed the paper and with it, the black paint. If this gives a sense of Louis's experimentation, the painstaking nature of the procedure is exposed when we notice that in these four paintings the horizontals are not straight, but broken up between the verticals. Short lengths of paper must have been pressed individually between the vertical lines, carefully removed, and then placed again in between the next two verticals, still along a horizontal, but at a slightly higher or lower level. The top layer of paint is the white acrylic swerving around the surfaces. Once the black was dry, and the grids complete, the canvases would have been lifted from their easels, and placed on the floor. Bending low down over the canvas, Louis then must have poured white paint, using an instrument that enabled him to control the flow without over-precision: the white lines differ in their width, suggesting that paint flowed at different speeds as he moved the pouring instrument over the surface. Louis must have been close to the paintings when he poured the white paint: there are very few instances where we see splash marks at the beginning of a strand, a necessary consequence of pouring from a distance.

In each painting, rather than being concentrated in the centre or towards one edge, the white lines cover the surface. But though there are several lines across each painting, they do not dominate or crowd the surface as much as traverse it with a fairly regular density. The number of individual pourings differs between paintings: in *V*, and *C*, Louis poured around 10 different trails of white paint across the surface; in *I* and *H*, there are at least double the number of individual pourings. Compared, however, to a Pollock painting

¹¹⁵ Diane Upright Headley, *The Drawings of Morris Louis* (National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., 1979) p.51

such as *Number 26A, 1948: Black and White* (1948) (fig.17), there is in all the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings a sparsity of poured lines, so that whereas Pollock blotted out most of the underlying canvas, the black ground of these paintings is never eclipsed. The sparsity of lines also means that each line can be distinguished separately, read as a character would be. Each painting contains a variety of long lines and short lines, angular jolts and graceful curves. There are collections of lines which seem to resemble recognisable configurations- the number three (*I*), a zigzag (*II*), a triangle within a triangle (*I*), a spiral (*II*), a cross (*V, A*) -and collections that look like a chaotic mess. There are moments where a line is followed by another, bending with it as it copies its contours (*IV*), and moments when white lines - for instance the two longest in *Firewritten IV* - seem to mirror each other across an invisible line of symmetry. A final feature of the white lines is revealed when really close to the surface. The white paint, though slightly raised from the surface, has a rather weak consistency, and is somewhat transparent. The black beneath it is always visible.

This kind of description provides as accurate as possible an account of appearance and process. As was clear from the account of Fried's text, the issue of process has always been important in descriptions of Louis's work. Robert Morris had a different interest in Louis's process to Fried. In his essay 'Anti Form' (1968), Morris was championing artists who attempted to use materials in non-associative ways, bringing out what Morris argued was their essential physical properties. Pollock was a kind of figurehead, as he 'was able to recover process and hold on to it as part of the end of the work.'¹¹⁶ Louis 'was even closer to matter in his use of the container itself to pour the fluid [and] used directly the physical, fluid properties of paint.'¹¹⁷ Rather than the consummate Modernist painter, Louis could momentarily be seen as an alternative precedent for the 'process' artists. But what was shared in Fried's and Morris's accounts was the importance of impersonality in process, an impersonality which blocks out expressionism, but which also blocks out the possibility of other kinds of meaning.

¹¹⁶ Robert Morris, 'Anti Form' *Artforum* (April 1968) p.35

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p.35



Fig. 17

Jackson Pollock, *Number 26A, 1948: Black and White*, 1948

6'9 7/8" x 47 7/8" (208 x 121.7 cm)

Enamel on canvas

Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

Though looking at process for different reasons, both Fried and Morris restrict their understanding of process to the physical activity of making a painting. The actual conditions of Louis's post-'breakthrough' processes have been described,¹¹⁸ but have remained obscure on account of Louis's unwillingness to accept studio visits. His widow, herself restricted from entering Louis's studio, has provided accounts of his daily routine: 'He rose very early, worked every day - often seven days a week - until early afternoon when he was obliged to stop to allow the canvas to dry. He seemed never to run out of ideas, and was halted from time to time only by a non-delivery of cotton duck or paint or by a strained back. He could scarcely tolerate these interruptions and was always in a fury to get back to work.'¹¹⁹ Still, here, we have the notion of the artist in private (and bodily) consort with materials. However, another account from Marcella Louis Brenner redescribes Louis's working day: 'He was an avid newspaper reader. He would get up very early in the morning, come downstairs, drink very strong coffee which he made in a white coffee pot, read the paper with great understanding. He was an excellent prognosticator of political events. As a matter of fact uncomfortably so...'¹²⁰ Brenner's remarks might seem an appropriate place to begin a re-description of the process of painting the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* series. Rather than imagining an artist at work with materials, we are forced to think of an artist who starts his days with actual journals, whose thoughts and 'prognostications' might not end at the breakfast table, but might be brought into the studio. The story introduces the vexed and massive question of the impact of world events on the process of painting - an impact we will look at later. It also helps introduce an extended notion of process, and we will be thinking about the titling and exhibiting of work as a part of this extended process.

The precise circumstances of how Louis gave titles to his work are not known. Information comes in the form of memories, provided in the mid-1970s, over twenty five years after the paintings were made. Leon Berkowitz recalled that while Louis painted at

¹¹⁸ See 'The Technique of Morris Louis's' in Diane Upright, *Morris Louis - The Complete Paintings* (New York, 1985)

¹¹⁹ Archives of American Art, Morris Louis files, reel 4990, 0153. Marcella Louis Brenner to Mr. Foster, 31 August 1970. Foster had written to enquire about Louis's working methods.

¹²⁰ Archives of American Art, Morris Louis files, reel 4994. Interview with Marcella Louis Brenner for WETA TV documentary, 11 January 1966

the Washington Workshop, Louis and Ida Berkowitz, his wife and the co-director of the Workshop, would have 'naming sessions. For several days he would free-associate, and then came those titles like *Tranquillities*, *Charred Journal: Fire Written*, and so on.'¹²¹ Diane Upright, after interviewing the Berkowitzes in 1975, wrote that 'Ida encouraged Louis to talk about his feelings during the execution of the works.'¹²² Neither story is very helpful in establishing precisely how, or at what point in the process of making the work, the title was conceived; nor is it possible to know whether the free-associative process of titling applied in the same way to different series of works made in the years Louis worked at the Workshop. In any case, it seems from existing chronologies of Louis's career that he had completed the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* series before he joined the Workshop in 1952.¹²³ This would suggest that the naming sessions that took place with Ida Berkowitz related to the titling of the paintings of 1952, and not to the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* series of 1951. The actual verbal makeup of the title suggests this further. 'Charred Journal: Firewritten' hardly has the whimsical, poetic feel one might expect of a title generated in a free-association session, such as is evidenced, for instance, in the titles 'The Tranquillities', 'Within-Without', or 'Vertical Vertigo', all 1952 works exhibited with the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings in 1953. Rather, 'Charred Journal: Firewritten' seems an awkward collection of words - a past participle and noun positioned across a colon next to another verbal adjective, 'firewritten', this an invented word, somehow a shortening of 'written by' or 'in fire'.

Both Berkowitz's, and Upright's accounts, moreover, are provided from the position of Modernist orthodoxy - one from a high Modernist artist, another from a Modernist scholar. Earlier in her text, Upright quoted William Rubin's remark that 'As with certain other modern artists, titles were of little interest to Louis, who preferred them to numbers simply for reasons of convenience. Many of the titles of his works were suggested by friends.'¹²⁴ Rubin's comment related to a minor controversy that had flared up in 1971 after Joseph Masheck had, as far as Rubin was concerned, misunderstood the significance

¹²¹ David Tannous, 'Those Who Stay' *Art in America* (July/August 1978) p. 78

¹²² Upright, 1985, op. cit., p.37

¹²³ Louis had been offered teaching at the Workshop after Jacob Kainen had recommended he see Leon Berkowitz. Shortly before he died, I interviewed Kainen who had few memories of Louis.

¹²⁴ Upright, 1985, op. cit., p.36, quoting William Rubin, 'Letter to the editor' *Artforum* (March 1971) p.8

Louis's late titles. For Rubin, making too much of Louis's titles was problematic, both on account of the facts of Louis's late practice, and on account of his Modernist sympathies. Rubin was right in arguing that Louis had ceased titling works himself in his late years; the generic names for his late series - the 'Veils', etcetera, *had* been provided by friends. Yet the title was a problem for Modernism in general, introducing the possibility of non-visual content into the meanings of the work.¹²⁵ At worst, a title could suggest to a viewer a literary meaning of a visual work.

Throughout the rest of this chapter, I will be arguing that the title might provoke a viewer to make meanings of an abstract work in a more complex manner than that feared by Modernist critics. What is important to stress now in relation to the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* series - before we come to consider what a viewer might have made of them - is that Louis, aided or unaided, did have agency in the writing of this title. Indeed, it is not only the complexity of its associative possibilities (which I will be thinking about) that suggests a greater degree of deliberation than is suggested in the accounts of Berkowitz and Upright, but its awkward verbal makeup.

The most important indication of the significance of the title to Louis involves the circumstance of the exhibition of the paintings. Louis's 1953 exhibition was his first ever

¹²⁵ Reviewing a posthumous exhibition at Lawrence Rubin, Joseph Masheck wrote 'surely the very title of such a work as Louis's *Saraband* (1959) is meant to suggest the irrevocable dance gesture in time quite as much as a *Nijinsky* by Kline, or any Pollock "polka". (*Artforum* (September 1970) pp.78-79). Some months later, Masheck posited that 'the "Veils" ... may, in their collective title, refer not only to their appearance but also to a concept of Schopenhauer's which was taken up by American artists around the turn of the century (it appears many times in John La Farge's *Considerations on Painting*: the "veil" of Maya, which separates the self from the selves of others).' ('Albert Stadler' *Artforum* (December 1970) p.78). When Rubin replied that he had coined the term 'Veil', and that Louis had not been interested in titling work, Masheck was unfazed: this only proved the appropriateness of the title. (Joseph Masheck, 'Letter to the editor' *Artforum* (May 1971) p.10). Though the critics debated over late titles, Rubin's voice did prevent the sustained consideration of the significance of earlier titles. Masheck's readings do seem slightly hasty: he seems to apply them to works, rather than think about title and painting putting pressure on each other. Though it is only a speculation, it is possible that Rubin feared the possibility that critics would read the 'Veil' series through the Hebrew letters of their titles, and that, in the aftermath of Thomas Hess's then recent work on Barnett Newman (see Chapter 3), and Werner Haftmann's just-published Rothko catalogue (see note 85), Louis might be described as another Jewish mystic. The 'Veils' were, indeed, titled after Hebrew letters (*Dalel Kuf, Beth Tet*, etc.), but only because Louis's widow needed a system of non-associative designation - the 'Unfurled' series uses Greek letters. (Upright, 1985, op. cit., p.37). Though they seem unimportant in the terms of this study, these debates do give a sense of why the 1951 paintings were not studied.

solo exhibition, and the first which would grant him press coverage. The paintings were the first on show at the Workshop, and the first listed in the small pamphlet, a pamphlet which contained a brief paragraph on Louis's work written by Leon Berkowitz. Berkowitz recorded artistic influences and praised formal innovations. 'One is sometimes reminded of Miró's sureness of control, sometimes of Klee's finality of linear statement.'¹²⁶ The *Washington Post* review of the exhibition, however, states that the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings were 'based, according to the artist, on the book burnings of the Nazis'.¹²⁷ Louis must have found time at the opening to speak to his reviewers, to supply information not found in the pamphlet, and only (as we shall explore) suggested by the paintings' titles. It was not so much, then, as a critic like Rubin would contend, that the titles were too much, unnecessary, and unfortunate supplements to the proper visual content of the work. Rather, the title was not enough, and had itself to be supplemented by this comment. Perhaps there was anxiety that the significations of the paintings would be missed. Perhaps Louis had wanted the information to be included in the pamphlet, and was making up for its absence. Whatever the circumstances, though, the event this story relates itself constitutes another part of the process by which a work is introduced to its audience. The story requires us, as it might have required the readers of the *Washington Post* review, to re-insert into the imagined idea of Louis in the studio an ongoing sense of purpose during the construction of the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* series, a desire for the paintings to have historical meaning, and not just appearance.

¹²⁶ Leon Berkowitz, 'Statement on the artist' *Paintings by Morris Louis* (exhibition pamphlet) (Washington Workshop for the Arts, Washington D.C., 1953)

¹²⁷ Leslie Judd Portner, 'Art in Washington: One a Newcomer, One a Veteran' *The Washington Post*, 12 April 1953, p.L3

3. 'Reading' the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* series

We should turn now to thinking about what meanings their original viewers might have made of the paintings. Here, the problem of historical spectatorship arises. An encounter with the paintings today is conditioned by hindsight of the history of modernist art, by theories of interpretation and spectatorship that have developed since the 1950s. Not least, the encounter is affected by the institutional circumstances in which the paintings are located - the paintings are divided today between the Jewish Museum in New York, and the Louisiana Museum in Denmark, who received them from Louis's widow in recognition of Danish support for Jews during the Holocaust. The historical spectators - and it is necessary to retain a notion of the plurality and diversity of possible historical spectators - were conditioned by other circumstances, no less determined, but different. Some of the meanings such spectators were able to generate were available because of historical contingencies: they might not, for instance, have been as readily available to viewers of the paintings in 1970. Some of the meanings were available to viewers with particular kinds of knowledge determined less by historical situations, and more, for instance, by ethnic background. Fixing whether actual viewers actually 'read' the paintings in the manner I describe is less important than acknowledging the nature of this terrain of often contradictory meanings, and the availability of a multiplicity of meaning.

We can start, though, with an imagined historical spectator and what might have been their expectations of abstract painting in 1953. This spectator would have seen the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* series in the Washington Workshop Center of the Arts. Though the institution's primary function was to offer courses such as 'Ceramics for Beginners', 'Understanding Music', and Louis's own 'Oil Painting', it was also the venue for cutting-edge art in Washington D.C. Familiar with the Workshop programme, and with recent advanced painting, an historical spectator might have expected many things of abstract art. Knowing the work of Jackson Pollock, they might have desired a surface to deliver what Greenberg had described in 1949 as 'a sumptuous variety of design and

incident'¹²⁸. Eagerly awaiting Willem De Kooning's debut Washington exhibition - it opened at the Workshop a month after Louis's closed - they might have looked forward to a 'an uncrowded canvas' with 'heavy somatic shapes'¹²⁹ - again, Greenberg's words (*fig.18*). But in 1953, Modernist theory was not yet entrenched enough for viewers to expect of abstraction *only* surface. Though Greenberg did not see the relevance of symbols for the quality of a painting, writing about an exhibition by Adolph Gottlieb in 1947, he had attended to 'the "symbols" [he] puts into his canvases'. Though these had 'no explicit meaning', they called up, in the spectator, 'racial memories, archetypes, archaic but constant responses.'¹³⁰ A painting might contain symbols that conjured 'racial' memories, then, but these were never specific. A work might even relate to recent history. Recalling paintings such as *The Escape Ladder* from his *Constellations* series, works made under the shadow of Spanish fascism, Joan Mirò had spoken of his use of a ladder-like grid in a *Partisan Review* interview of 1949 as a form that meant 'escape' (*fig.19*). Mirò stumbled over his terms, calling the form, within three sentences 'nostalgic', 'plastic', 'symbolic' and 'poetic'¹³¹. Louis, who participated in the 1930s in the pro-Republican movement, had recently used Mirò's metaphorical form. A painting called *The Ladder* of 1949 shows such a one stretched across its surface (*fig.20*). But if this brief context reveals that the symbol still had some currency within abstraction, and that a spectator might have anticipated some vague symbolic referent, the idea that an abstract painting could refer to a specific historical moment, a particular trauma such as the book burnings, would have been, and indeed remains, extremely problematic.

But perhaps a painting with an explicit symbol might. In 1951, Louis had also made *Untitled (Jewish Star)*, the only painting of that year other than the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings that he allowed to survive (*fig.21*). Though he had exhibited it at the Workshop in a group exhibition some months before his solo show, this painting was - importantly - never part of the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* series. Yet, unlike all the rest of Louis's oeuvre, it is constructed in exactly the same way as the *Charred Journal*:

¹²⁸ 'Review of Exhibitions of Adolph Gottlieb, Jackson Pollock, and Josef Albers' *Greenberg* 2 p.286

¹²⁹ 'Review of an Exhibition of Willem de Kooning', *Ibid.*, p.229

¹³⁰ 'Review of Exhibitions of Hedda Sterne and Adolph Gottlieb', *Ibid.*, p.188

¹³¹ James Johnson Sweeney, 'Mirò: Comment and Interview' *Partisan Review* XV No.1 (1948) p.67

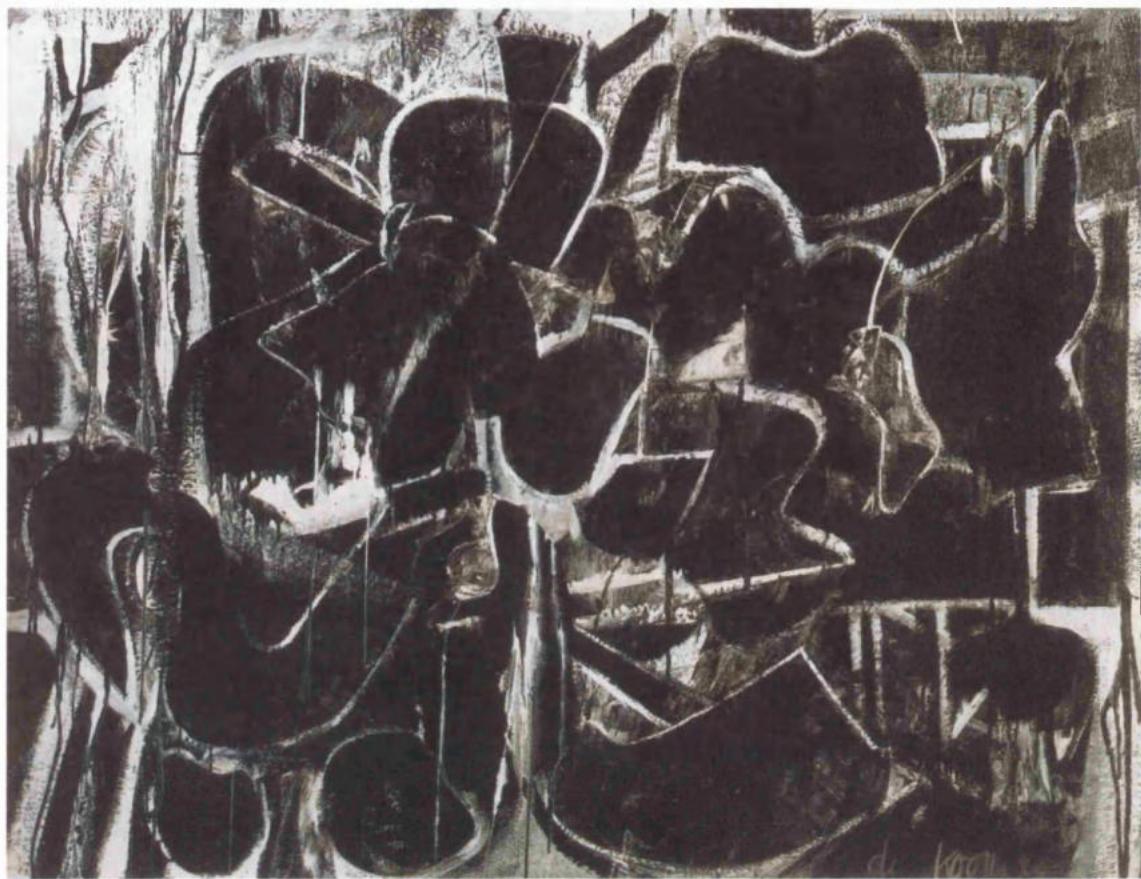


Fig. 18
Willem de Kooning, *Painting*, 1948
42 5/8" x 56 1/8" (108.3 x 142.6 cm)
Enamel and Oil on canvas
The Museum of Modern Art, New York



Fig. 19
Joan Miró, *The Escape Ladder*, 1940
15 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 18 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (40 x 47.6 cm)
Gouache, watercolour and ink on paper
The Museum of Modern Art, New York



Fig. 20
Morris Louis, *The Ladder*, 1950
15 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 23 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (39.4 x 59.7 cm)
Acrylic resin on canvas

Firewritten paintings, except for the presence of strokes of orange and yellow paint above the black acrylic as well as below it. The painting's significant difference, though, is that its white lines form the well known configuration of two interlocking triangles.¹³² 'Racial memories' were certainly conjured here, but unlike Gottlieb's symbols, it was specifically Jewish memory that was in play. The presentation of the Star of David might very well have enabled a spectator to recall the history of the Holocaust, through the recollection of Nazi laws decreeing that the Jew wear the yellow star. In 1949, Gershom Scholem had investigated 'The Curious History of the Six Pointed Star', and, stressing its non-religious history, he recognised that its contemporary meaning grew from its having been the 'badge of shame for millions of our people'. Hitler had

'compelled them to wear it publicly on their clothing as the badge of exclusion and of eventual extermination. Under this sign they moved along the road of horror and degradation, struggle and heroism. If there is such a thing as a soil that grows meanings for symbols, this is it. Some have said: the sign under which they went to destruction and to the gas chambers deserves to be discarded for a sign that will signify life. But it is also possible to think in the opposite fashion: the sign that in our days was sanctified by suffering and torture has won its right to be the sign that will light up the road of construction and life. "The going down is the prelude to the raising up"; where it was humbled, there will you find it exalted.'¹³³

Scholem's text posited that the star might suggest light as well as death, that it could be used as a symbol of cultural optimism as well as memorial, and perhaps this is true of the star here, surrounded as it is by a halo of yellow and orange. But if this painting - like Jasper Johns' *Star* of 1954 (fig.22), itself commissioned by a Jewish friend who had fled

¹³² The configuration of interlocking triangles had emerged in many of Louis's drawings of the period. This, in itself, is unsurprising: Louis's drawings contain all sorts of lines and shapes. What is important, though, is that having made these drawings, some of the shapes were recognised as holding specific meaning, and one with a particularly nuanced meaning was painted onto canvas. See catalogue entries D159-163, D353, D418, D420, D482 in Upright Headley, 1979, op. cit.

¹³³ Gershom Scholem, 'The Curious History of the Six Pointed Star' *Commentary* (September 1949) p.251

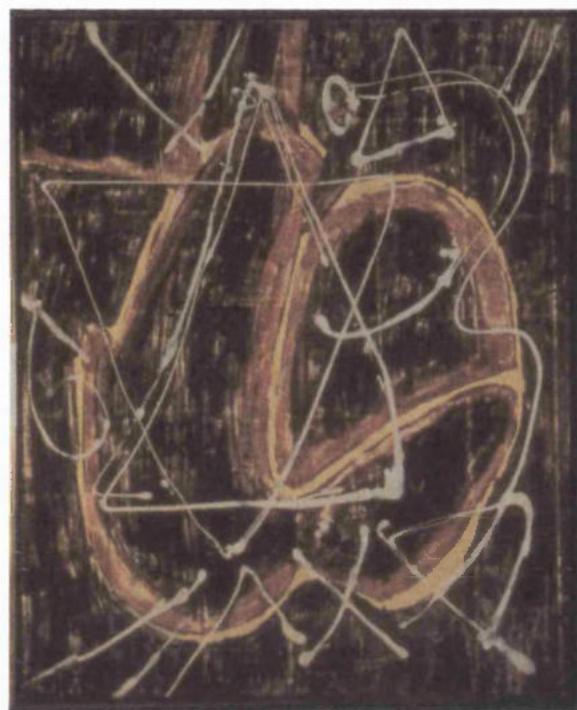


Fig. 21
 Morris Louis, *Untitled (Jewish Star)*, 1951
 34" x 28 ½" (86.4 x 72.4 cm), Acrylic resin on canvas
 The Jewish Museum, New York



Fig. 22
 Jasper Johns, *Star*, 1954
 22 ½" x 19 ½" x 1 7/8" (57.2 x 49.5 x 4.8 cm)
 Oil, beeswax, and house paint on newspaper, canvas, and wood with tinted glass, nails and fabric tape
 The Menil Collection, Houston

Nazi persecution¹³⁴ - points both backwards to a traumatic history and forwards to tentative but much desired senses of optimism and unashamed pride, and while doing so suggests the multiple potentials, rather than the redundancy of the symbol, these readings seem of little help when we return to the starless surface of the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings.

It is interesting to think about the significance of the absence of the star in the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings. Maurice Blanchot, whose text *The Writing of the Disaster* will later be considered, probed the etymology of the word 'disaster', revealing that 'disaster' means the absence of the star, de-astro, and the coming of 'night delivered of stars'¹³⁵. Were we to take this insight into account to provide an interpretative possibility for the relationship of starless paintings to the disaster of the Holocaust, we would have to acknowledge that this kind of intertextual reading was hardly possible for historical spectators, even if they had seen the *Untitled (Jewish Star)* previously. But keeping with an ideal spectator, we can posit different possibilities for the absence of the star. Perhaps the star had posed a problem by being a symbol that was 'too Jewish'. This is not entirely to suggest that the public declaration of ethnic identity was difficult for Louis - his widow stresses he never shied away from Jewishness¹³⁶ - but we might remember Greenberg's argument of 1950 about 'positive Jewishness'. Overt proclamation of Jewish identity was, Greenberg had indicated, just an inverted form of self-hatred: this might be the problem of painting a Jewish star, a problem resolved in the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings. Alternatively, the problem of *Untitled (Jewish Star)* might have been that, in allowing its spectator to recall Nazi persecution, the star excluded the memory of other, non-Jewish victims, who might be admitted to the memorialising possibilities of the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings. The absence of the star might reveal a hesitancy about the employment of the symbol *per se*, a hesitancy we might even detect on the surface of *Untitled (Jewish Star)*, which, it should be stated, presents its star only tentatively, in juxtaposition with indecipherable collections of white lines. The roots

¹³⁴ Kirk Varnedoe, *Jasper Johns - A Retrospective* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1996) p.124

¹³⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* (Translated by Ann Smock) (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1995)

p.5

¹³⁶ Marcella Louis Brenner Interview

of this hesitancy are divided. Totalitarian reliance on the organising power of the symbol might have made any use of symbols problematic after the Holocaust. Just as for some survivors, the German language was forever tarnished, so too symbolic language was problematised. From the perspective of art practice, any use of a symbol on a surface was increasingly difficult. Though, as we have seen, Johns could paint *Star* as a commission the year after the exhibition of the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings, this was only months before his *White Flag* (1955) strategically emptied out the symbol, posing its abstraction as a counter to its obvious ‘meaning’. So the Magen David in *Untitled (Jewish Star)* might signal the swansong for the symbol that would be absent from advanced painting then on.

These are possibilities, but I want to suggest that the absence of the star opens a space of indeterminacy. The *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings relate to the Holocaust through their very refusal of the direct symbol, through the possibilities created by the spectator’s inability to establish a straightforward connection of surface - through symbol - to history. This is an argument to which we will return, but before exploring this space of indeterminacy, it is necessary to describe how interpretative possibilities might have been built up during the encounter with the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings.

The most obvious springboard for interpretative activity would seem to be the perception of the predominance of black paint on the surface. Confronted by blackness, we might imagine that the historical spectator of the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings, recognising the colour of mourning, was caused to consider an object of mourning. The context for such painting was, after all, the memory of the well-publicised strategies of Picasso’s *Guernica*, whose ‘shock lies in the very fact that color is totally absent. The black, grey and white treatment of a particular theme serves to give it great force.’¹³⁷ These last words are Louis’s, and they might allow us to consider how viewers made meanings from his works. Nevertheless, we should not forget that the viewers of the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings would also have seen colours present on their surfaces. There is a further problem with any argument that positions blackness in these

¹³⁷ Upright, 1985, op. cit., p.11

paintings as a straightforward signifier of mourning: at this precise time, black and white painting, rather than indicating gloom, was the *mode par excellence* of advanced artistic practise. In 1948, writing on Willem De Kooning, Arshille Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb and Jackson Pollock, Greenberg had commented that 'By excluding the full range of color, and concentrating on black and white and their derivatives, the most ambitious members of this generation hope to solve [...] the problems [of painting] involved.'¹³⁸ In 1950, there had been an exhibition at the Samuel Kootz Gallery, 'Black or White: Paintings by European and American Artists', which included Hans Hofmann, William Baziotes, Mark Tobey and Bradley Walker Tomlin, and for which Robert Motherwell wrote the catalogue essay.¹³⁹

If these circumstances cause us to question the simple significance of blackness as a mourning color, we can still think about the associative possibilities of black paint in order to think about the generation of meanings during the encounter with the paintings. It is through the series' title that the black paint gains its importance: the title provokes the associative interpretations that the series offers for its viewers. The words 'Charred Journal' tempt the connection of the canvases' blackened surfaces to the idea of a burnt page, and the consequent bond between the delicate underlayer colours with that which was burned. This metaphor might actually be grounded in resemblance, for, next to the very different black surfaces made by the various painters just mentioned, the look of a burnt page here is courted: Pollock's, Still's, Kline's, or Motherwell's blacks might appear reflective, textured, intense, or dull... but never so much like charred paper. Through the connection of surface to the burnt page, a link (which is always necessarily frail) is established to the Nazi book burnings, and the spectator is provoked to ruminate on this event.

But of course, neither today, nor in 1953, would the book burnings be recalled as a *unitary* event. The significance of the book burnings was that they would be remembered at once as a specific moment in the history of Nazi persecution - a night of bonfires in

¹³⁸ 'Review of an Exhibition of Willem de Kooning' Greenberg 2 p.229

¹³⁹ See 'Black or White', in Stephanie Terenzio (ed.), *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell* (New York, 1992) pp.71-72

May 1933 (*fig.23*) outside Berlin University reported with minimal attention in Washington, and rather more focus in New York¹⁴⁰ - and at the same time, as an incident with much wider significance. It was not just in the 1950s that they held symbolic significance: as soon as they occurred, their symbolism was recognised. On 11 May 1933, the editor of *The New York Times* wrote that 'They certainly symbolise something! Such an exhibition of the new national spirit, silly and shameful as it seems, bespeaks a mass-movement plainly touched with insanity.'¹⁴¹ In a cartoon from *The Nation* published a week after the event, the incident was understood to embody the threat posed by Nazism to the enlightenment, configured through the presence of the Bible, the history of German-Jewish achievement, the European intellectual tradition, and recent American cultural contributions to it: Jack London, and *The Nation* itself lie in the flames (*fig.24*). In 1953, with twenty years of historical hindsight, the symbolic significance of the book burnings would have been felt to be far, far greater.

Two overlapping spheres of interest must be examined to probe what the memory of the book burnings might have suggested for a spectator in 1953. The first sphere is that of the secular Jewish intellectual, and the second, that of the leftist, anti-Stalinist American. Though Louis, and the majority of his viewers, might be positioned within the overlap, it is helpful, for a while, to unfix the spheres.

For the secular Jewish intellectual, the memory of the book burnings contributed to an ongoing cultural anxiety only epitomised most forcefully by the fires. Under what Blanchot has termed 'the surveillance of the disaster'¹⁴², writers were busy interrogating the fuller implications of the cultural exclusion evidenced most concretely in May 1933. Immediately after the book burnings, Nazi legislation had prevented Jews from publishing in German and from using the Gothic typescript. Such laws were premised on notions that just as Jewish blood infected the Aryan body, so Jewish use infected his

¹⁴⁰ See 'Germans Set Fire to Liberal Books', *The Washington Post*, 11 May 1933 p.5; 'Nazi Book-Burning Fails to Stir Berlin' and the editorial 'Book-Burning Day', *The New York Times*, 11 May 1933 p.1 and p.12. The writer of the news story in the *Times* quoted Goebbels' proclamation that 'Jewish intellectualism is dead', but seems to have underestimated the significance of the event, calling it 'childish', and writing of the 'ripples of amusement that went through the outside world.'

¹⁴¹ 'Book-Burning Day', *The New York Times*, 11 May 1933 p.16

¹⁴² Blanchot, op. cit., p.4



Fig. 23
The book burnings



Fig. 24
"The Burning of the Books", cartoon from *The Nation*, 17 May 1933

language. Of the many kinds of debates prompted by the Holocaust that took place in the Jewish journals after the war (and in later chapters, we will look at debates around the synagogue, and around ‘Jewish art’), one of the most fascinating revolved around the questions raised by these laws - questions of the diasporic Jew’s relationship to writing, language, and literature of their host countries.

In 1953, the widespread nature of the premises that led to the book burnings were increasingly clear. Sartre’s *Anti-Semite and Jew*, widely discussed after its American publication in 1948, recalled those who ‘declared a Jew forever incapable of understanding a line of Racine.’¹⁴³ If Sartre’s text highlighted the pervasiveness of cultural anti-Semitism, it was also a symptom of the problem, as his schema left no space for authentic secular Jewish culture. Commentators such as Harold Rosenberg, whose responding article ‘Does the Jew exist?’¹⁴⁴ attempted to find such space, had barely recovered from Sartre’s text, when later in 1949, they were forced to negotiate a local offence. The Bollingen Poetry award for that year was awarded to Ezra Pound, and in the wake of the award, *Commentary* published a symposium entitled ‘The Jewish Writer and the English Tradition’. Intellectuals who had once sidelined reservations about anti-Semitism in literary culture now met this threat head on. Clement Greenberg’s brother Martin Greenberg expressed the situation of the culturally excluded Jew most forcefully, writing ‘To use a language and not to own it, to live with a literature and not to possess it - this is only to say that I am a Jew.’¹⁴⁵ The secular Jewish intellectual subject, already riven by the multiple allegiances to Jewishness, to America, to tradition, and to progress (those rifts Clement Greenberg had described), was unable even to ‘own’ the language with which to communicate these rifts. Martin Greenberg’s comment even suggests that in protesting Pound’s award, the Jewish intellectual was compromised by the condition that the means of protest (the English language) and object of protest (literature in English) were not really felt to be the Jew’s to start with. Alfred Kazin, meanwhile, questioned whether to burn Pound’s book, and concluded: ‘No, no: there have been too

¹⁴³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York, 1995) p.24

¹⁴⁴ Harold Rosenberg, ‘Does the Jew Exist?’ *Commentary* (January 1949) pp.8-18

¹⁴⁵ ‘The Jewish Writer and The English Tradition, Part II’ *Commentary* (October 1949) p.363

many books banned and burned already. We have been too long on the *index expurgatorius* to make one of our own.'¹⁴⁶

The book burnings were invoked in 1949 only to be discarded as an impossibility, a reaction to a threat that might be suited to barbaric regimes, but never to Jews. With the invocation and refusal of a book burning in America, we come to the second sphere of history, for books *were* burned in the States at this time, though not by enraged New York Jews, but by American librarians. Under the politics of McCarthyism, a politics centred not twenty minutes from Louis's studio, librarians were known to destroy books whose presence might suggest their un-American affiliation. A 1959 study on censorship records a librarian telling the researcher 'in a self-pitying way [...] "Did you ever try to burn a book. It's *very* difficult."'¹⁴⁷ Whether Louis knew of such events is unsure. His wife was a school principal, and perhaps encountered pressures to censor reading lists. However, in interview she indicated that though each day brought more news of old friends now hounded by the House UnAmerican Activities Committee, she had never known of actual book burnings in early 1950s Washington¹⁴⁸, and indeed, the examples were extremely rare.

It is more likely that Louis knew of the McCarthyite reaction to contemporary artists and art critics. In 1949, for instance, Congressman George Dondero of Michigan had suggested that newspapers exercise 'proper supervision' and 'start cleaning house in the smaller compartments of their organisations' to rid themselves of art critics glorifying 'the vulgar, the distorted, and the perverted' work of artists who themselves constituted a threat to the state.¹⁴⁹ This 'hysteria' had drawn Peyton Boswell of *Art Digest* to invoke the book burnings. Ridiculing Dondero's claim that 'it is not my purpose to suggest that newspapers should clap censorship on their art critics', Boswell exclaimed 'Like hell

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p.368

¹⁴⁷ Marjorie Fiske, *Book Selection and Censorship: A Study of School and Public Libraries in California* (Berkeley, 1959) p.48

¹⁴⁸ Marcella Louis Brenner Interview.

¹⁴⁹ George Dondero, quoted in Peyton Boswell, 'A Plea for Tolerance' *Art Digest* 1 June 1949 p. 7

Dondero doesn't want censorship! What else does he mean by 'proper supervision'? In other words, do as Hitler once did with "degenerate" modern art and burned books.....¹⁵⁰

It is unlikely that Louis would himself have shared common political ground with Boswell, but, against the McCarthyite threat, like him, he seems to have found the memory of the book burnings compelling. Where Boswell invokes this memory directly, though, Louis seems to have been more reticent. I want to suggest, through the terms the Chicago-based Jewish philosopher Louis Strauss used in 1952, that the idea of Nazi book burnings was invoked to share, through 'private communication' with 'trustworthy and intelligent readers'¹⁵¹, a critique of McCarthyism. And Louis was not the only artist on the left to use the strategies Strauss had articulated in his book, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451* of 1950 described a dystopia in which firemen hunt libraries to burn. For those reading 'between the lines', Bradbury's symbolism was an indictment of the present.

Provoked to recall the book burnings, historical spectators of the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings might have been reminded of the cultural anxieties facing contemporary Jewish intellectuals, and of the more tangible threats bearing on those - including artists - whose sympathies lay on the left. For some spectators, as for Louis, both these burdens were felt at once. One of the only historical spectators who recorded memories of the paintings was the acrylic paint maker Leonard Bocour, and his response seems to locate the series' significance exactly within the overlap of these concerns. Remembering that Louis's 'whole gang was very, very left', he goes on to state that Louis 'did a whole series of paintings called the *Charred Journal: Firewritten paintings*. And I have one of them. [...] It was all black and white really. And, as I say, he was aware of the world he lived in and he was certainly anti-Nazi.'¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p.7

¹⁵¹ Louis Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago, 1952) p.25

¹⁵² Archives of American Art, Morris Louis Files, reel 4993 p.1434. During this interview, Bocour tried to recall if Louis had been a member of the John Reed Club. Bocour did not think so, and indeed, there are no precise records to indicate the specific political affiliations of Louis in this period. Though such detail would be of importance to other scholars, it is less significant in this enquiry.

Like the surface of the paintings (and unlike Bocour's description), the experience of the encounter was never so black and white, but before turning from the black paint to the white, we should take a moment to posit another dimension of the rhetoric of the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings. They might prompt memories of the human disaster, at the same time as thoughts of a cultural and political one, since the burning of the books acts as a metaphor for the burning of bodies. Through the ancient naming of Jews as 'the people of the book', through the resonance of Heine's prophetic words 'Where they burn books, they will burn people', through the knowledge that traditionally, Jewish artists could only be scribes, the hand-made Jewish book is bound up with the body, and though these phrases plunder Jewish history, all the destroyed bodies of the Holocaust - Jewish and non-Jewish - seem tentatively addressed through the memory of the book burnings.¹⁵³

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I mentioned earlier that the white lines on the paintings could have suggested a kind of writing. As has been indicated through the comparison with Pollock, each line is far more distinct than the swirls covering Pollock's paintings. A line might be crossed by itself as it loops round, or by another, fresh line dripped on top of it, but each line always remains individual, and has its own shape. We might remember that this very distinction is what troubled Fried when he considered these paintings as inferior to Pollock's: these lines did not perform the job of the drawn line in Pollock's painting, which was to efface its own identity, bounding not shape, but eyesight. But though each white line can be read apart from the other white lines, and from the background, it is also immediately clear that these lines are not recognisable characters from any linguistic script. There are, as has already been said, triangles and spirals and crosses, but these recognised configurations are never far from swirls and angled lines that elicit no kind of recognition.

¹⁵³ Mira Goldfarb Berkowitz also used the Heine quotation in the pamphlet produced for the Jewish Museum exhibition to draw attention to the connections between burning books and burning bodies.

Just beneath the layer of white paint, there are the grid lines, constructed at times by dripping black paint across the surface, at times by removing the layer beneath. If read symbolically, the grid might have suggested the frame of a pyre, such as the frames that the books were hurled onto in May 1933.¹⁵⁴ This would make of the white lines a kind of burnt writing, akin to the script in the burnt books. Perhaps the white lines are inscribed in memory of the destroyed letters. According to Pliny's story of Butades' daughter¹⁵⁵, she drew the outline of her lover's shadow to remember his shape before he was lost to her; here, the possibility that the white lines might have a mnemonic function is complicated by the books' fate. Louis's lines cannot trace the shape of the letters in the burnt books. Rather than retaining the shape of the lost letters to hold onto their memory, these letters might invoke the memory of the burnt letters through their inability to keep their shape.

We might also recall that the grid could have suggested a ladder, like the one stretched across Louis's painting of that title. For Miro, the ladder was associated with the idea of 'escape' from the conditions of fascism. If a kind of escape ladder, the grid might metaphorically protect the letters from charring, a block between them and the fires. This would be to introduce the possibility that the white lines could have suggested renewed, rather than ruined, writing. Such a possibility is strengthened if we return to the precise words of the title, 'Firewritten', for, just as the words 'Charred Journals' triggered a rich associative constellation of ideas, so too might this phrase.

If fire would normally be thought to destroy writing, as it did in 1933, then what could 'firewriting' mean? Some sense is made of this word through Jewish texts. Louis himself might have supplemented his sketchy awareness of Jewish history with research on the origin of Jewish writing when working in 1934 on *The History of the Written Word* (fig.25), a Public Works of Art Project mural for a Baltimore school library, which featured images of a rabbi holding a Torah, and after the war, there was a growth of

¹⁵⁴ My thanks to Dr. Tom Gretton for this suggestion.

¹⁵⁵ See note 111.

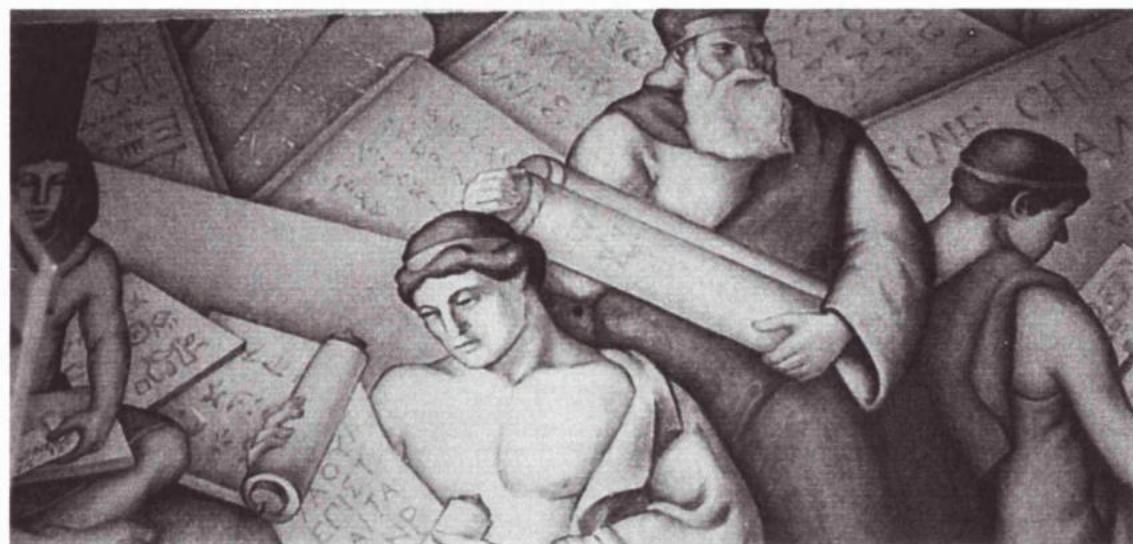


Fig. 25

Maurice Bernstein (Morris Louis) et al, *The History of the Written Word* [detail of panel 1], 1934
Mural

interest in such texts, particularly in mystical texts such as the Midrash and Kabbalah.¹⁵⁶ In early Midrashim, and Kabbalistic commentaries on them, the origin of the Torah is discussed again and again.¹⁵⁷ The Torah is not formulated as a historical narrative, as the five books describing the story between the creation and the arrival in Canaan, nor is it a literal object - an actual white parchment inscribed with letters of black ink. However, both these formulations are in play in a wider notion of the original Torah. According to some mystical texts, at its origin (long before the events it describes), the Torah consisted of both the words of the Torah, and all the interpretations of them. Some origin myths concern the ways through which the written Torah (the books) and oral Torah (the future interpretations) became distinct, and it is here that the notion of firewriting becomes significant, for the written Torah was thought to burn before God in letters of white fire on the black fire of the oral Torah, letters which were not, at first, recognisable.

Various different Kabbalistic texts describe different versions of these myths, some associating the oral Torah with white fire, the written one with black. What is important is not to pinpoint a precise point of Kabbalistic scholarship, but rather the notion that firewriting is associated - even through a lay understanding - with the creation of the book, rather than with its destruction. Indeed, white fire is the original form of writing in the original book, the *medium* of writing. It is also important to note that the myths themselves are clearly extremely visual, describing the origin of the book through the distinction of figure and ground that occurs when white fire is seen against black, but also when black ink stands out against white parchment. Turning back to Louis's paintings, the myths seem first to inform the way we could now think about the mark as a figure against a ground. The myths provide an alternative origin for the conception of the 'first mark' with little to do with Greenbergian flatness. More importantly, through the myths, the white lines become suggestive of the renaissance of writing. The Jewish book, as well as being destroyed by flames, was born in flames.

¹⁵⁶ One indication of this growth is Barnett Newman's interest - the interest of a lay atheist, not of a newly committed religious Jew. Newman used 'White Fire' and 'Black Fire' in titles of paintings made in 1954.

¹⁵⁷ See Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (New York, 1996) pp.44-50

In the process of thinking about the white lines on the surface of the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings, the memory of this legend of firewriting encourages for the viewer the development of a precarious optimism. Looking back at the discourse of post-Holocaust Jewish intellectuals, we can see that the desire for optimism was desperate, and continually expressed. In his 1945 editorial for the first issue of *Commentary*, Elliot Cohen hoped that the new journal would be a crucible for a Jewish renaissance, and described the establishment of the periodical as an 'act of faith', the lighting of 'our candle' in 'the midst of this turbulence and these whirlwinds'.¹⁵⁸ If this metaphor shows another way in which fire - here a candle of faith - suggests optimism rather than destruction, unlike the word 'Firewritten', Cohen's is a general, even Catholic metaphor, and not a Jewish one. In relation to the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings, the yearning for *some kind* of Jewish optimism is evidenced as much by the regenerative suggestions of the particular myths in play as by the very fact, despite the damage done to Jewish culture, of the continued use and availability of such myths. The white lines can be considered through other myths.

If the word 'Firewritten' establishes a connection between the white lines and a Kabbalistic notion of the origin of the written Torah, the arrangement of the lines on the canvases might recall a Hasidic text which imagines that before creation, the Torah 'formed a heap of letters', an 'incoherent jumble'¹⁵⁹ that arranged itself into words as the events it described took place. Through another suggestion of the origin, rather than the destruction of the book, again there is an idea of rebirth. A third myth is better known to secular Jews. When Moses saw the Golden Calf, he destroyed God's tablets. The letters on the tablets flew away since they were indestructible. Describing the paintings, Louis's wife said he had tried to 'capture the effect of letters and symbols rising like ashes from the surface of a burned page'.¹⁶⁰ Perhaps, as it seems from this memory of Louis's intention, there is the suggestion that once again, like God's letters, the writing burned by Nazi fires would not be destroyed, but would fly away unharmed. Or conversely, to sidestep the problematic recollection of Louis's intention while retaining the suggestion

¹⁵⁸ Elliot Cohen, 'An Act of Affirmation' *Commentary* (November 1945) p.1

¹⁵⁹ This is discussed in Scholem, 1996, op. cit., p.76

¹⁶⁰ Upright Headley, 1979, op. cit., p.52

of the Moses myth, there is the idea that the letters that flew away at Sinai *reappear* after the book burnings across the blackened pages of Jewish history, perhaps to form a new Torah.

For a spectator familiar with these myths, interpretative possibilities abound, and well they might, for their encounter takes part in a tradition of Jewish hermeneutics. After all, the Biblical commentator Rashi, who, extraordinarily, is listed as a ‘prominent maternal ancestor’¹⁶¹ in Louis’s own CV, likened ‘the various interpretations offered by the rabbis for a single biblical verse to the sparks that fly when a hammer is struck upon a rock.’¹⁶² If here there is another sense of the positive, energetic power of fire, striking this metaphor, we note that interpretation does damage. Something is chipped to make sparks. The rabbis as hammer - the verse as rock - both? What is damaged, metaphorically, in the attempt to read the white lines through Jewish myths, is the accuracy of the former description of the surfaces. Though we might argue that the layering of paint suggests that moments of creation are superimposed on moments of destruction, or that the grids function metaphorically to protect the white lines from the blackness, the surfaces instead might push one to think that if Louis wanted to develop suggestions of optimism through his play with Jewish myths, the careful deployment of paint tempered those suggestions. Not only is a spectator unable to see white lines without sensing the blackness around them: on account of the transparency of the white acrylic, blackness is also always visible below.

The sense of optimism is also tempered by the stasis of the various paintings. We might sharpen this point about stasis by thinking about how the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* series relates to the idea of a Modernist series. Like Modernist series, there is no narrative or thematic progression from one painting to the next. Spectators might know that God’s letters escaped destruction on Sinai, but it is clear that from painting to painting, the white lines do not fly away. They might know that the Torah started as a jumble of incoherence, but then, across the canvases, white lines become no more distinct, no

¹⁶¹ Archives of American Art, Morris Louis Files, reel 4988, p.0021

¹⁶² See Jonathan Boyarin, *Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory* (Minneapolis, 1992) p.xvii

nearer to recognisable letters. However, unlike a Modernist series of paintings, such as Frank Stella's black paintings, there is no formal device that compels the next painting, and the next. This lack of a deductive logic might generate the assumption that there *may be* some kind of narrative or thematic progression. The cumulative effect of the various paintings is, then, to tempt the possibility that there might be a progressive movement starting from an originary moment, but to deny a sense of progress.

4. ‘Absent Meaning’

Flying sparks disappear as soon as they are seen. The same might be said for the interpretations developed in the encounter with the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* series. I am not just thinking here of the attempts to read the unreadable white lines, but of all the readings that have been described. Many are triggered by the works’ titles, highly associative textual fragments indeed, but absent (unlike the unreadable white lines) from the works’ surfaces. Addressing the history of titles, Stephen Bann quotes Proust, for whom a ‘name sanctioned by memory can become [like] “one of those little balloons in which oxygen [...] has been enclosed.”¹⁶³ Proust’s metaphor visualises the potential of the titling name, but the balloon is pregnant with problems as well as suggestions. When the balloon is popped, like Rashi’s sparks of interpretation, Proust’s oxygen disappears, immediately indistinguishable from its surrounds. I am stepping into what earlier I called the space of indeterminacy, for this is the space into which the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings place their spectators.

How might we consider this indeterminacy? We might wonder why Louis made these paintings, when he knew that a viewer, in front of abstract canvases, would always necessarily sense all meanings disappear, no matter how they were prompted with imposing and extraneous text. Perhaps Louis made these despite their fluctuating failure, despite the doubts he had about the sense of using titles *at all* simply because of the inescapable necessity of somehow addressing the Holocaust, which inescapably addressed him. It is useful to recall another contemporary intellectual forum to give a sharpened sense of this necessity. The symposium ‘Under Forty’, published in *Contemporary Jewish Record* in 1945, asked young Jewish writers ‘do you feel you are any different to your Christian colleagues?’ A novelist called Albert Halper replied ‘Alas, my friends, I am different. Hitler has made me different.... When I now sit down to write a story [...] with yesterday’s headlines still printed on my brain, I hear the cries of five

¹⁶³ Stephen Bann, ‘The mythical conception is the name: Titles and names in modern and post-modern painting’ *Word and Image* Vol. 1 (1985) p.178

million expiring Jews outside my window.'¹⁶⁴ These words are crude, even vulgar, but maybe the same can be said of Louis's paintings. If we stopped here, we would conclude that the paintings never bear the burden imposed by their titles, that the wish for them to do so marks them out as overreaching and desperate, but well-intentioned nonetheless, that the paintings themselves are merely witness to the competing, but irreconcilable claims on Louis in 1951 - to be an advanced artist, *and*, as a Jew on the left, to address a charged subject. Conceived this way, the paintings seem to concur with Louis's widow's memory of their creation: she recalls that these paintings marked a caesura, a pause in the progress of a career heading towards proper abstraction.

Instead of reaching this conclusion, it is more interesting to posit that we have here not a momentary abandonment of abstraction, but an intelligent manipulation of its conventions and abilities, and of its impossibilities. We can start by rethinking the manners in which the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings evoke other abstract painting. The grids that cross their surfaces relate to the grids of Modernist painting, the trailed lines to Pollock's practice. Perhaps this relation might not just mark an influence, but an attempt to negotiate Modernism from within, to turn such painting towards the cultural subject matter of the book burnings. However, if there is a kind of use made of Modernist painting, we should also consider that as much as this use puts a kind of pressure on the normal autonomy of Modernist painting, the conventions associated with abstract painting put a pressure on the kind of readings that might be made of the 'writings' on the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings.

At this point, it is appropriate to remind ourselves of aspects of Fried's account. Fried would not even begin to read the title in order to explore the possible meanings of a work, but nor did he 'read' the white lines, not even as unreadable letters. Fried saw the markings in Louis's later paintings as figures against grounds, in those cases as coloured figures against the white ground of raw canvas. The *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings, in Fried's terms, might embody a tonal reversal - white figures form figures

¹⁶⁴ 'Under Forty: A Symposium on American Literature and the Younger Generation of American Jews' *Contemporary Jewish Record* (February 1944) p.23

against black grounds - but no essential reversal of significance. The Modernist approach would stop there, and though we have challenged the adequacy of stopping there, it is important now to remember that, as much as the notion of reading and writing can broaden an approach to the paintings, the notion of seeing holds all this in check. As much as they suggest charred pages, the paintings are abstract canvases. The Modernist account unsettles the meanings that have been explored, but the indeterminacy of meaning itself has significance. We can think more about the fluctuation of meaning and meaninglessness, about the ways meanings are suggested, and vanish. The significance might be that this dynamic is the way in which the paintings most forcefully - and at the same time most subtly - address the Holocaust.

Maurice Blanchot's book *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980) provides some ways of thinking through this indeterminacy, through the notion that indeterminacy itself might be a means of Holocaust representation. Blanchot's book is itself a fractured text, one consisting of paragraphs sometimes as short as a single sentence, sometimes set in different type faces as if to give a visual sense of contrasting voices. In it, Blanchot addresses how the disaster impinges on written attempts to represent it. For Blanchot, the disaster is at once abstract and specific: at times, it is named simply as 'the disaster', but at other times, it is described as '*The holocaust, the absolute event of history - which is a date in history - that utter-burn where all history took fire, where the movement of Meaning was swallowed up.*'¹⁶⁵ As for the writing of the disaster, in the text, the phrase seems both to refer to all writing, and to writing after the disaster. For Blanchot, writing always involves the writer giving up their ability to control meaning: 'to write is to renounce being in command of oneself or having any proper name'¹⁶⁶; 'To write is to be absolutely distrustful of writing, while entrusting oneself to it entirely.'¹⁶⁷ However, Blanchot seems to suggest that 'under the surveillance of the disaster', writing recognises its condition more acutely. After the disaster, 'To write is perhaps to bring to the surface

¹⁶⁵ Blanchot, op. cit., p.47

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p.121

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p.110

something like absent meaning, to welcome the passive pressure which is not yet what we call thought, for it is already the disastrous ruin of thought.¹⁶⁸

As a condition of his argument, it is impossible to untangle the general from the specific. However, several strands of thought seem suggestive in the context of the discussion of Louis's paintings. The first might be Blanchot's concentration on the fragmentary, his understanding that the writing of the disaster is ruined, in fragments. 'The disaster de-scribes'¹⁶⁹. The white lines, that unreadable script on top of Louis's paintings, themselves might be a kind of 'writing of the disaster'. Whether we follow suggestions that they are damaged by the flames of the book burnings, or rising from their ashes, as they appear on the surfaces, they are fragmented. They are a kind of writing that does not accomplish writing's task - they cannot be read.

A second strand is Blanchot's interest in etymology and origins.¹⁷⁰ This itself parallels Louis's own evident interest in origins: both Blanchot and Louis, perhaps, prompted to this interest by the sense of ending imposed by 'the disaster', share the sense that there is a requirement of a re-beginning. In one passage in a section concerned with origins, Blanchot discusses the work of the prehistorian Leroi-Gourham. Leroi-Gourham described 'the first evidence of writing as a series of "small notches" arranged at regular intervals.'¹⁷¹ Blanchot's main interest for introducing this is to complicate the implications of this evidence.¹⁷² However, in this discussion, Blanchot also draws from Leroi-Gourham the conclusion that 'Design and inscription, art and writing, [are] not distinct from each other. One more affirmation: "If there is a point about which we can

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p.41

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p.7

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p.107-113

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p.111

¹⁷² Whereas, for Todorov (also quoted in this section), 'one could not conceive of the origin of language without positing first off the absence of objects', Leroi-Gourham concludes that his evidence 'amounts to making language the instrument of liberation with respect to lived reality.' Blanchot, however, writes that 'One can say: such is the requirement, in language, of the process of *signification*. It does not just disqualify the "object", "the lived"; it excludes the very significance of signification, in an extreme movement which ultimately escapes, while remaining nonetheless in operation.'

now be certain, it is that written signs begin, not as naive representations, but as abstractions.”¹⁷³

This might introduce the possibility of another canny dimension of Louis's paintings. Louis's interest in the origin of letters, though not an interest grounded in the field of abstract painting, might in fact be characterised as an interest in the origin of another kind of abstraction. This abstraction is not a convention of recent painting. Rather than being characterised by self-referentiality, by the inability to have connections to external referents (as a Modernist might have it), this abstraction would be rooted in its having abstract connections to referents, as do the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings.

Following this last suggestion of Blanchot's text seems momentarily to resolve the tension earlier described, the tension which was located in the conflicting demands of the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings to be read and to be seen. Rather than the Modernist account disrupting the readings that might be made of the paintings, suddenly, we are again reminded that the Modernist history of abstraction itself forgets other starting points. Other strands of Blanchot's text take us back into this tension, and help most clearly to theorise it. In a fragment, Blanchot writes that the disaster is what cannot be put into words, ‘*When all is said, what remains to be said is the disaster. Ruin of words, demise writing, faintness faintly murmuring: what remains without remains* (the fragmentary).’¹⁷⁴ Here, there is the sense that the disaster does not merely challenge attempts to represent it. Representations are not merely in fragments, ruined; rather, the disaster always ‘remains to be said’ - it is always beyond meaning.

The most interesting strand of Blanchot's thought is his contention that the disaster refuses meaning. If the disaster were where ‘meaning was swallowed up’, there is a ‘danger that the disaster acquire meaning’¹⁷⁵, and a related injunction to ‘keep watch over absent meaning.’¹⁷⁶ The writing of the disaster cannot represent or respect the disaster if

¹⁷³ Blanchot, op. cit., p.111

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p.33

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p.41

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p.42

it allows it to acquire meaning: absent meaning must always be present. Thinking back to the paintings, then, and retaining the tension between the Modernist account of them and the account which reads them, we can say that it is not just that the writing on them is indecipherable, but that even their meaning as 'indecipherable writing' collapses when they are seen (rather than read) as drawn white lines on a black ground.

I am suggesting that a dynamic of viewing the paintings establishes the guard over absent meaning. The *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings are objects which cause their viewers to create meanings while constantly forcing these viewers to witness the breakdown of associative, symbolic, metaphorical suggestions. In the encounter, as the viewer constructs and forgets meaning, as the paintings' status as readable pages and abstract canvases wavers back and forth, the spectator is increasingly aware of the impossibility of fixed meaning, even of the absence of secured meaning. In this context, then, the failure of the surfaces to cement fixed links to the Holocaust is only a necessary part of the wider success of the series to form a much stronger relationship to the Holocaust. What is represented in the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings is as much the history of the Holocaust and the contemporary significance of that history, as its incomprehensibility, its very resistance to representation, the terms of the impossibility of its representation. For the viewer of the paintings, the process may be a frustrating one, but perhaps they are finally put through the lesson Blanchot invokes when he writes '*Learn to think with pain*'.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p.145

5. Re-Viewing the Late Work

After the success of the Workshop exhibition, Louis was delighted. In a letter, his wife exclaimed ‘it all came out so well that we are more than pleased.’¹⁷⁸ But no matter how well it all came out, Louis was, that very week, on the cusp of abandoning the kind of painting he had shown at the Workshop. Seven days before the Workshop opening, Louis had made a rare visit to Manhattan where, accompanied by Noland and Greenberg, he had seen Helen Frankenthaler’s *Mountains and Sea*. As we have seen, according to Greenberg and Fried, this was the moment of breakthrough.¹⁷⁹ The sight of thinned acrylic stained into the very fabric of Frankenthaler’s canvas triggered the creation of huge numbers of paintings in a tiny variety of configurations: the ‘Veils’, the ‘Unfurleds’, the ‘Pillars’. If we accept the premises of Greenberg’s and Fried’s arguments, this was indeed a pivotal point. However, after addressing the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings, paintings which they passed over as unimportant, and whose possible meanings and conditions of meaning, however we might figure them out, they avoided, it is important to re-examine the ‘breakthrough’ moment. We should probe Louis’s apparent abandonment of the strategies at play in the *Charred Journals: Firewritten* paintings a little further.

Perhaps Louis thought these strategies too frail, and preferred to develop his formal experiments rather than further pursuing an impossible task. Perhaps, in taking Greenberg’s continual advice, he also began to agree with his friend’s cautions, expressed, as we recall, in the 1950 essay ‘Self-Hatred and Jewish Chauvinism’ that ‘No matter how necessary it may be to indulge our feelings about Auschwitz, we can do so only temporarily and privately’.¹⁸⁰ Perhaps this forty year old artist, who had barely sold a work, sensed that the clients of dealers like Samuel Kootz and Andre Emmerich might not tolerate paintings ‘based on the book burnings.’ We cannot, and should not, be sure, but hesitantly, we might now revisit later works, finding them not at the end of

¹⁷⁸ Archives of American Art, Morris Louis Files, reel 4988, p.0076. Marcella Louis to unspecified person [‘You all’], 15 April 1953

¹⁷⁹ Clement Greenberg, ‘Louis and Noland’ *Greenberg* 4 p.96 and Michael Fried, 1971, op. cit., p.11

¹⁸⁰ See note 1.

Modernism's cul-de-sac, but at the beginning of a different path. We might, indeed, exchange the idea of the 'breakthrough' for a more complex formulation of the simultaneous discontinuity and continuity of earlier concerns.

Curiously, a letter from Louis to Greenberg gives strength to this argument. By 1954, Louis was in regular correspondence with Greenberg, receiving advice on dealers, and discussing issues of painting and 'culture patterns'¹⁸¹. In June 1954, Louis wrote that 'I don't care a great deal about the positive accomplishments in [other artists'] work or my own since that leads to an end. I look at paintings from the negative side, what is left out is useful only as that leads to the next try and the next.' We hear, in these words, the self-challenging voice of an artist who refuses to rest on any success, fuelled by the never-ceasing need to move on. Already, there is a sense that rather than making about-turn changes, or 'breakthroughs', Louis might have worked on each painting project, seeing the faults in each, and moving on to the next. This letter is supposedly written a year after a 'breakthrough' - but the manner of artistic work Louis describes gives no sense that he worked in revolutions, turning his back on his entire career to date. Louis continues: 'Too, I can't help but wish, right or wrong, to take issue with those whose fetish is promoting painting from the stomach, orgasm, or mouth. The psychology becomes a conformity to the mode of bad taste which rivals the good Anglo-Saxons, and the difference adds up to the sameness of focus.'¹⁸²

Reading this private letter, it is hard to tell what Louis means by 'the Anglo-Saxons', what is at stake in this complaint about the conformity of their 'good' taste. Communicating, as he was, with another Jewish intellectual, it might be that he was sharing assumptions about their relationship to a non-Jewish cultural establishment perceived as closed-minded and conservative. Though Greenberg wrote to Louis on the headed paper of *Commentary*, there do not seem to be any direct discussions between the two on Jewish matters. However, perhaps in protesting 'painting from the stomach, orgasm, or mouth', Louis was not just complaining about certain modes of

¹⁸¹ Archives of American Art, Clement Greenberg files, N70-7R 0502-3. Morris Louis to Clement Greenberg, 1 June 1954

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

Abstract Expressionism. The kind of painting he implies as an alternative to emotive expressionism would be a painting from the brain, a cerebral kind of practice, the kind of practice that would lead to the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings, but that might also lead to what came after.

If later paintings are now thought of as evidencing such an approach, we can begin to think about them anew. The cerebral work that might have taken place in making the ‘mature’ paintings could be considered as the work of continued cultural regeneration after cultural destruction. Louis’s ‘mature’ work manifests the same spirit of hope, the same spirit of a longed-for post-Holocaust Jewish renaissance sometimes suggested by the white lines of the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings. Looking at the ‘Unfurled’ and ‘Pillar’ paintings, we can agree with Michael Fried that the ‘*firstness of marking*’ which they dramatise witnesses the ‘impulse to make one’s mark’, and yet suggest that this impulse is not created by some primeval, essential urge, but by the demands of a particular historical moment. Looking at a Veil painting such as *Beth Chaf*, we might think that the leap from firewriting to its flame-like washes of pigment is not, perhaps, so great.¹⁸³

¹⁸³ At a very late stage in my research (December 2001), I was alerted by James Meyer and Mel Bochner to an installation by Mel Bochner made at Via Tasso in Rome in 1993. Between 1943 and 1944, the building had been used as an S.S. prison. Bochner’s work consisted of three floor sculptures made from burnt matches placed on army blankets. In each case, all the matches together formed the shape of a Star of David. The placement of the individual matches within the outline differed from work to work. In *Yiskor (for the Jews of Rome)*, the matches are scattered and pushed into the star shape; in *Yahrzeit (for the Jews of Rome)*, the matches were arranged in gates (four vertical matches crossed by a fifth); and in *Yisgadal (for the Jews of Rome)*, the matches were placed in triangular units. Though Bochner’s work was made around the moment of Richard Serra’s and Carl Andre’s commissions for Stommeln Synagogue (see Introduction), in later research, I hope to consider Bochner’s work in detail, relating it to the discussions in this chapter around titling and the symbol, and around fire and writing.

CHAPTER THREE: BARNETT NEWMAN'S THE STATIONS OF THE CROSS – LEMA SABACHTHANI?

1. Presenting Jewishness

In 1954, the year after Morris Louis exhibited his *Charred Journal: Firewritten* series, Barnett Newman made a painting which he titled *White Fire I* (fig.26). This was the first of four paintings Newman made with that title, the last made some fourteen years later. He also made a painting called *Black Fire I* in 1961, and though this is given a number, there is no *Black Fire II*. If we were to expect some consistency of painterly incident uniting the *White Fire* paintings, such as we find between Louis' *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings, we would be frustrated. In the context of Newman's surfaces, what becomes dramatic incident in *White Fire I* is the seepage that occurred under two strips of masking tape that had been placed near its right. Blue paint had been laid down between the tapes, but when these were removed, it had travelled under the tape: the fuzzy edges of this band contrast the sharper edges of a pink band to its left. It is also around absent masking tape that painterly incident occurs in *White Fire II* (1960), but here, for different reasons: after sticking a broad band of masking tape down the centre of the canvas, Newman dabbed around this with his brush before removing the tape, to leave a gap surrounded by expressive incident. In *White Fire III* (1964) (fig.27), a thin strip of tape was placed just before the edge of the left area of paint, which had terminated in a scuffy, brushy manner. Once removed, the tape left a firmly delineated band of raw canvas, whose sharp edges contrast the scuffed area to their right. Like this painting, *White Fire IV* (1968), dramatises the tonal difference between raw canvas and white paint, but here there is neither brushy incident, nor any seepage: its centre is a section of raw canvas, flanked by sections of white paint, the edges of which are crisp. Were we to look for similarities between one 'White Fire' painting and other works by Newman, then, we would have to ignore titles, and concentrate on contemporaneous paintings. *Right Here* (1954), like *White Fire I*, is dominated by a white section, and flanked towards one side by a blue area; *Profile of Light* (1967), like *White Fire IV*, is divided into thirds, and has a vertical axis.

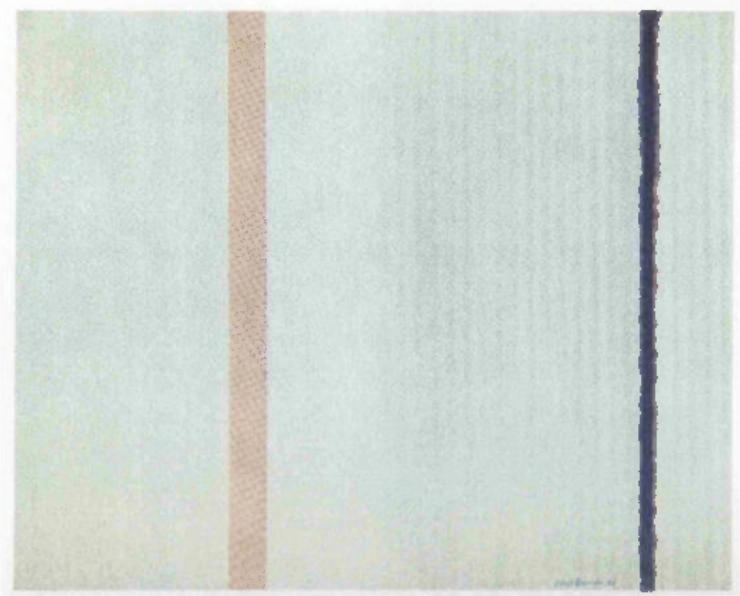


Fig. 26
Barnett Newman, *White Fire I*, 1954
47 7/8" x 59 3/4" (121.6 x 151.8 cm), Oil on canvas

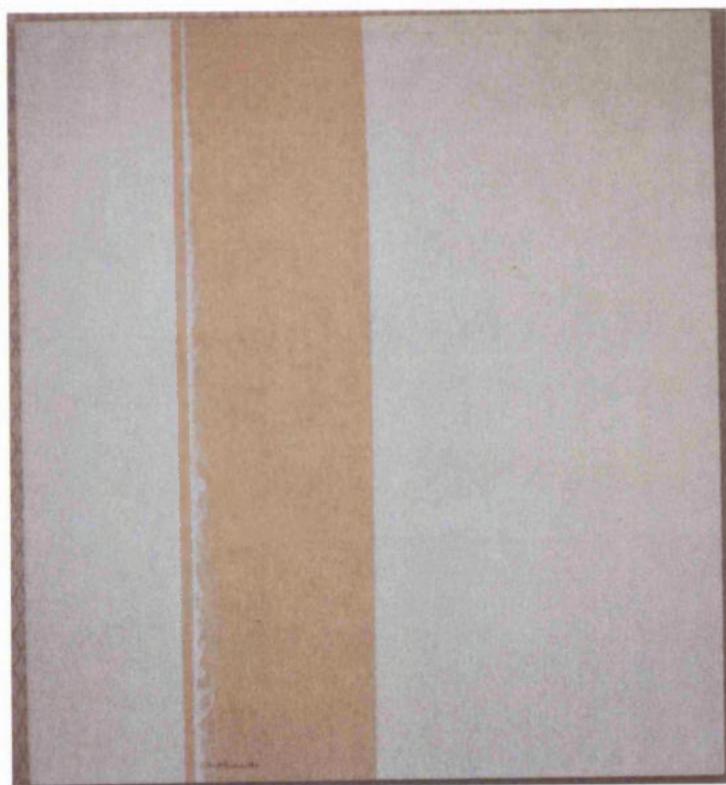


Fig. 27
Barnett Newman, *White Fire III*, 1964
80" x 72" (203.2 x 182.9 cm), Acrylic on canvas

These contrasts and similarities make one sceptical about the nature of the relationship between Newman's *White Fire* paintings and ideas, generated by their titles, around 'firewriting', and the birth of the Torah. Newman's titles invoke the same Kabbalistic legends discussed in relation to the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings, but Louis' interest in these legends was sustained. In his series, Louis seems to have invoked ancient legends around white and black fire to address, through the memory of the destruction of Jewish books, the wider destruction of the Holocaust, and the contemporary possibility of regeneration. Spread through fourteen years, never exhibited together, of divergent sizes and colour, no such ambition seems present in Newman's 'series'. How might one account for these works?

Where Louis' references to Jewish myths were largely passed over, in the first posthumous text on Newman, Thomas Hess made it his task to account for Newman's interest in such matters. He attempted to reveal secret meanings of Newman's works, whose subjects and forms he set about illuminating through discussion of Kabbalistic texts. Yet when it came to a painting such as *White Fire*, Hess could not make any specific interpretations, writing, rather blandly, that '*White Fire* and *Black Fire*, two of Newman's later titles, refer overtly to Jewish mysticism and to a passage in the Jerusalem Talmud (fourth-sixth century A.D.) which discusses one of the central issues of Kabbalist thought, the genesis of the bible itself.'¹⁸⁴ Hess neither related the passage, nor its contemporary resonance to the specific *White Fire* paintings.

The birth of the Torah was a legend to which Newman could return for titles as he wished, whether in 1954 or 1968. Certainly, this is how his widow accounted for his titles. Writing in 1995 to describe the circumstances around Hess' 'incorrect' interpretation of Newman's work, Annalee Newman suggested that the intermittent nature of Newman's return to a title such as 'White Fire' would be absolutely unsurprising, since it was in keeping with his eclectic, and 'poetic' approach. The only significance of such titles was that they indicated Newman's 'fanciful' titling procedure:

¹⁸⁴ Thomas Hess, *Barnett Newman* (MoMA, New York, 1971) p.82

'the *only* connection that exists between Barnett Newman and the Kabbalah is that Newman used kabbalistic language for the titles of several of his works. He did so, I am certain, because the language was poetic and fanciful. Let's not forget that Newman also used language from the Old Testament, the New Testament, and Greek epic and myth, and he made reference to numerous other sources, such as American transcendentalism, in his titles.'¹⁸⁵

And yet, though the *White Fire* paintings should not be considered as attempts to address the Holocaust, though the titles should not be examined to reveal a 'secret' meaning, neither should these titles be treated simply as fanciful choices. Their presence indicates that Newman (like Louis) was interested in their being read. This point might seem obvious, but should be emphasised. By using a title, Newman does not merely anticipate that his audience reads titles, but constructs his audience (and it is important to stress his agency in this construction) as one which reads as well as one which sees: whatever they make of the title, the 'viewer' is to do more than just view. The titles also constitute one of the ways in which Newman publicly presented his Jewishness. It is not so much that he gave paintings titles in order to present his Jewishness, but that in doing so, as much as indicating anything about the paintings, Newman represented something about himself. At the very least, this 'something' was that he was an artist who, as well as interested in painting, was interested in Jewish religious and literary traditions.

However Newman might have engaged with Jewishness in private is not the issue here - Newman's beliefs, observance, exact affiliations are not under scrutiny. Rather, I am interested in noting that in public, Newman chose, in part through these titles, to present himself in a particular way - as an amateur scholar, comfortable enough with a religious literature to be able to use it. The suggestion that Newman was concerned with his public image is hardly surprising for anyone familiar with his career: unlike Louis, Newman was

¹⁸⁵ Annalee Newman, 'Barnett Newman and the Kabbalah' (Letter to the editor) *American Art* (Spring 1995) p.117. Annalee Newman was responding to Matthew Baigell's article, 'Barnett Newman's Stripe Paintings and Kabbalah, A Jewish Take' (Spring 1994). Baigell had argued, as I do, that Newman's use of titles did not spring from a religious Jewish scholarship.

extremely concerned with self-presentation. But in terms of his Jewishness, this kind of self-presentation is doubly representative. First, it is representative of the wider condition of the secular Jewish intellectual, who must live out their Jewishness in public, pronouncing Jewishness where deemed desirable, and distancing themselves from other constructions of Jewishness which they resist. Second, the specific nature of Newman's self-presentation is symptomatic of the situation of the *post-Holocaust* secular intellectual Jew, who is compelled more than ever by the force of recent events to declare in public a kind of affiliation to a tradition that has almost been wiped out¹⁸⁶; indeed Newman addressed the mystical, or Kabbalistic (rather than the legal, or Halachic) aspects of that tradition, the aspects that speak of creations and origins rather than the laws that might govern daily life.

A discussion of the role Newman played in the construction of an audience and his alertness to his public presentation of his Jewishness can be expanded in reference to Newman's participation in the exhibition 'Recent American Synagogue Architecture', held at The Jewish Museum in 1963, and organised by Richard Meier. Newman's participation in this exhibition has been documented in detail.¹⁸⁷ Until now, Newman's work on the project is not thought to have predated Meier's approach in 1963: according to Armin Zweite, for instance, Meier had 'heard of Newman's criticism of post-war synagogue architecture'¹⁸⁸, and so asked him to make a model for the show; Newman complied (*figs. 28-29*). Documents discovered in the archives reveal that Newman's text about synagogues (published in the 1963 catalogue), was initially written in 1951.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ See, for instance, Lionel Trilling's response to the symposium 'Under Forty' *Contemporary Jewish Record* (February 1944) pp.3-37

¹⁸⁷ See 'Model for a Synagogue' in Armin Zweite, *Barnett Newman, Paintings, Sculptures, Works on Paper* (Ostfildern-Ruit, 1999) pp.236-254

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, p.236. Zweite took his information from conversations with the sculptor Robert Murray, who helped Newman make the model for the synagogue.

¹⁸⁹ In the Barnett Newman Foundation, I found that the file containing Newman's text is labelled 'Project for a Synagogue, 1951', and that the typed text inside is dated 1951. This earlier date has not been remarked on in the Newman literature, but according to Heidi Colsman-Freyburger at the Foundation, it would be extremely unlikely that the file had been misdated: Annalee Newman, who organised Newman's papers, was extremely meticulous.

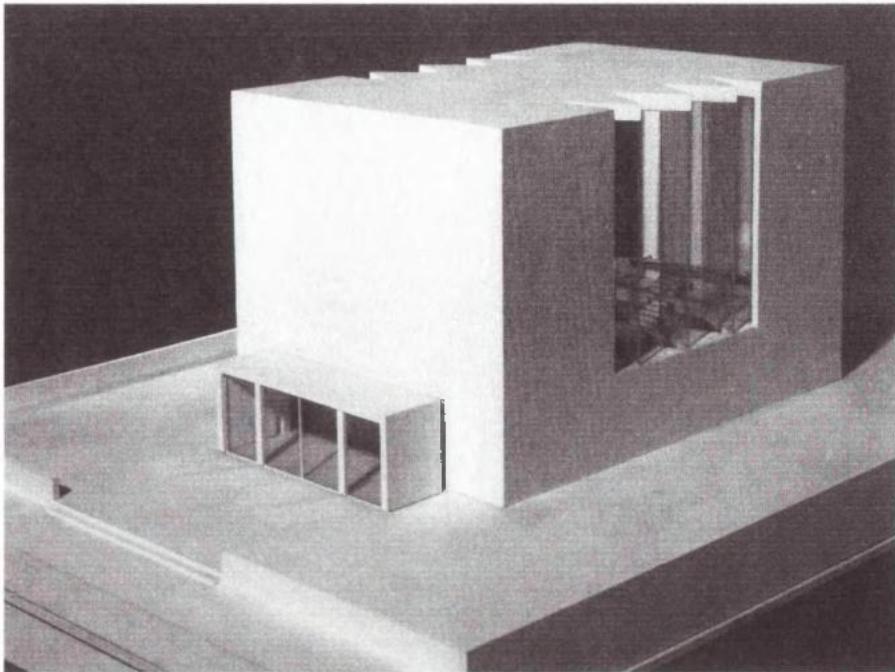


Fig. 28
Barnett Newman, *Model for a Synagogue*, 1963
Exterior

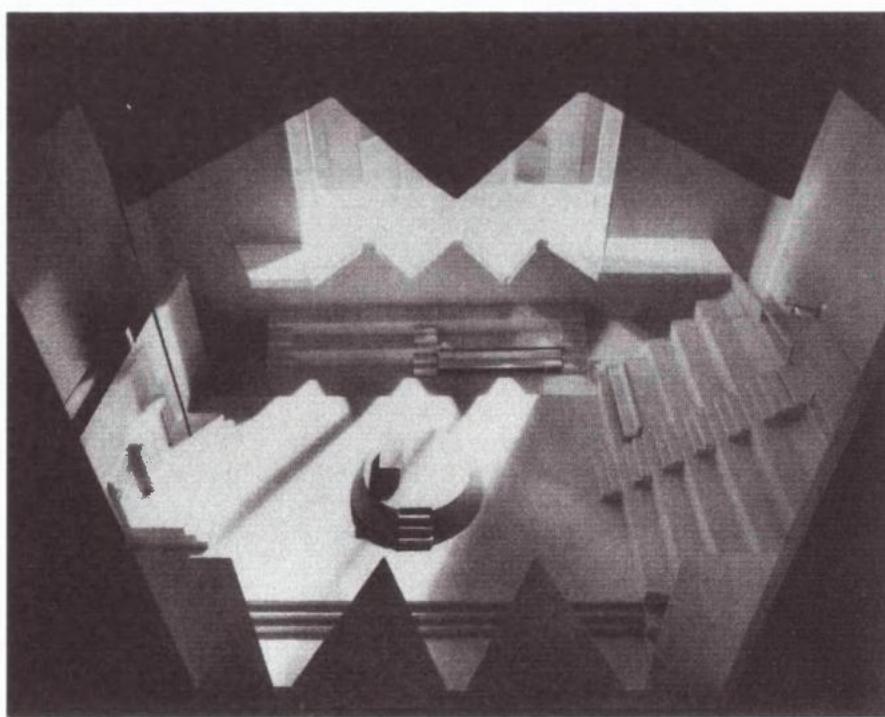


Fig. 29
Barnett Newman, *Model for a Synagogue*, 1963
Interior

The fact that Newman planned the text far earlier than has been thought has far-reaching implications. It now seems that Newman began this project without being prompted, and secondly, he did at a time much closer to the end of the war, in a context where the widespread revival of the synagogue was being described as an effect of the growing consciousness about the events in Europe.¹⁹⁰ Newman seems to have waited until Meier's approach to develop his ideas, for a platform through which they would gain as much publicity as possible. The earlier date suggests more about Newman's strategies of constructing a particular audience for his work, and about the experiences this audience were expected to have. The audience would consist of exhibition-visitors, who would encounter Newman's ideas in a specific context, and as much through the actual fabric of the synagogue model as through its setting and proximity to other works (in this case, other synagogue models), as through accompanying texts, such as the one Newman had written in 1951, now present in the catalogue.

By participating in the 1963 exhibition, Newman would again present himself in public as a cultured Jewish intellectual, engaged with issues facing post-war Jews, - as a kind of 'renaissance man', even, able, though known as a painter, to contribute an architectural design to an exhibition. Indeed, rather more so than any other of the participants, this was the role which Newman was creating for himself. Other participants were taking part as professionals - they were practicing architects, and so participated to show models of completed projects, or to promote uncompleted ones; Newman was just participating as an engaged intellectual, and had no hopes of realising his design. The circumstances around the work once again indicate the compulsion, after the Holocaust, to engage

¹⁹⁰ Paul and Percival Goodman (who also contributed to the 1963 exhibition) described the opportunities for Jewish artists to make works for the many synagogues being planned across the States, and the impetus for these new buildings. 'Suddenly there occurred the fact that six million Jews were slaughtered in three of four years, just because they were Jews. We do not know in what ways other groups would react to such a happening, but among the Jews it seems to have had the following effect: they became aware of themselves as a physical community, a congregation.... The reaction has been the sense of the co-presence of a certain identity and certain rudiments of a tradition, what we are calling the sense of being a physical congregation.' ('Modern Artist as Synagogue Builder' *Commentary* (January 1949) p.52.) The article was one of many which addressed the relation between the effects of recent history, and the growth of interest in the synagogue. Will Herberg noted that arguments connecting 'the shattering experience of demonic anti-Semitism' to the revival of the synagogue were 'commonplace'. ('The Postwar Revival of the Synagogue' *Commentary* (April 1950) p.315). Janay Jadine Wong has written an account of the commissions of works by painters and sculptors for these new synagogues. See 'Synagogue Art of the 1950s, A New Context for Abstraction' *Art Journal* (Winter 1994) pp.37-43

publicly in issues around Jewish culture. The nature of the proposal itself involves a further series of convolutions.

Newman imagines a synagogue as a baseball pitch, substituting a traditional religious Jewish architectural environment for the ultimate all-American space: this itself might speak of a wish to present himself as both engaged with popular American and religious Jewish culture. Newman's text is infused with Kabbalistic notions of place: 'The synagogue is more than just a house of prayer. It is a place, *Makom*, where each man can be called up to stand before the Torah to read his portion.'¹⁹¹ This text again highlights Newman's wish to make public his interest and familiarity with Kabbalistic concepts. It also reveals that Newman was rather more interested in demonstrating this interest than he was with religious requirements: his notion of '*Makom*' does not accord with the requirements of a synagogue. In traditional Judaism, prayer is a communal activity, and can only take place with a *minyan* of ten men. In traditional synagogues, men are called up to read at the platform (*bimah*) together, so that four or five congregants surround the table where the Torah rests: this *bimah* is thus an *extension* of the communal space of the synagogue floor. Newman, however, describes the *bimah*, or platform, as 'the mound, where, under the tension of that 'Tzim-Tzum' that created light and the world, he can experience a total sense of his own personality before the Torah and His Name'¹⁹² - in other words, a place separated in function and concept from the floor, a place where an individual has an utterly private experience. Whether Newman here reveals ignorance or misunderstanding, a lack of concern, or rather a wilful resistance to a traditional notion of the synagogue, we cannot tell. However, like his very engagement with the problem of the synagogue, Newman's decision to shift emphasis onto the individual seems a symptom of a post-war intellectual climate.

There is already the strong sense that Newman wished to control how Jewishness was publicly presented; this is made palpable through a story again involving The Jewish Museum. The year after the Synagogue show, The Jewish Museum organised a debate

¹⁹¹ 'Statements by Architects on the Architecture of the Synagogue', in *Recent American Synagogue Architecture* (The Jewish Museum, New York, 1963) p.24

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p.24

titled 'The Jew as an artist'¹⁹³. This was chaired by Dore Ashton, and the three panellists were artist Paul Brach, writer Arthur A. Cohen, and curator Peter Selz. Since notes of the talks have not been kept, we do not know what was said. However, Ashton, who recalls Newman's presence that night, remembers the evening as stormy.¹⁹⁴ Three days after the event, on 18 January 1965, Newman wrote to the interim Director, Hans van Weeren-Griek:

'This is to express my disgust at the Jewish Museum's sponsorship of the [...] debate 'What About Jewish Art'. ... I cannot emphasise enough the repulsion I feel.... What the Jewish Museum has done is to compromise me as an artist because I am Jewish. Please therefore, notify all concerned not to ask me to cooperate ever with any of your shows since you have made it impossible for me to show my work in your Museum.'¹⁹⁵

Though we cannot be sure whether any of the speakers had addressed Newman's own work (against his wishes) - whether Newman was responding to a specific claim, or to a more general suggestion about Jews as artists, we might remark upon the extremity of this response (as did others¹⁹⁶) - especially in the light of Newman's recent contribution to The Jewish Museum's exhibition programme. We can also not be sure whether Newman knew that The Jewish Museum was planning a retrospective¹⁹⁷ (which would have been the largest venue to host an exhibition of his work to that date), but it seems

¹⁹³ The only existing information about this debate in the Jewish Museum archives are the letters sent to the participants in November 1964 inviting them to be on the panel. No tape recordings were made. These letters are found in Box 'Director/Admin, 1964-5, Box 3, File- JWS Chronological Correspondence, July-November 1964.'

¹⁹⁴ Conversation with Dore Ashton, December 2000

¹⁹⁵ Barnett Newman Foundation, Hans van Weeren-Griek files. Letter from Barnett Newman to Hans van Weeren-Griek, 18 January 1965

¹⁹⁶ Newman's patron and friend Ben Heller was surprised by Newman's response to The Jewish Museum. He wrote to Newman saying 'I cannot quite understand the depth of feeling to which [the debate] seems to have driven you.' (Barnett Newman Foundation, Ben Heller files. Letter from Ben Heller to Barnett Newman, 21 January 1965) Heller attempted to meet Newman to discuss the matter, but whatever the outcome, Newman did not (during his life) show at The Jewish Museum again.

¹⁹⁷ Jewish Museum records from 1964 indicate that a retrospective of '12-15 large works' was planned to follow the Jasper Johns show. ('Proposals of the Exhibition Committee', Box: Director/Admin, Subjects A-Z, 1962-1966, File: F-G General 1964).

from a later interview that he did¹⁹⁸, and that his refusal 'to cooperate' was, indeed, made at the cost of a very important career opportunity.

In his letter, Newman mistitles the debate, exchanging the museum's 'Jew as artist' for his 'Jewish art'. The slip may reveal the trouble the debate posed. Any labelling of his *art* as 'Jewish' would ghettoise it, misrepresenting the universality of its access. Labelling (even if carried out by Jews) might also have been too reminiscent of other kinds of defining processes - the 'degenerate art' label only the most obvious. The very prospect of this kind of definition of the work was intolerable. While Newman's distaste for definitions might speak more of his historical situation, the incident further indicates that rather than considering Newman as a 'Jewish' artist 'expressing' his Jewish identity in public, we have to think about Jewishness for Newman as something that is carefully, strategically presented. We see here what happens when there is a loss of control as to how Jewishness was presented in public.¹⁹⁹

The incident also speaks further about the notion of an audience. Newman's sensitivity reveals how much he thought debates of this kind *could* inform the way an audience approached his work: rather than risk showing work in a location which might encourage viewers to make particular kinds of readings of his work, he would give up exhibition opportunities there. Finally, the incident suggests that for all Newman's aspirations towards a universal significance for his work, he was aware that its primary, immediate audience - whose reception of it was thus important to control - was specific, made up primarily of New York intellectuals, just the kind of people who would so happily attend

¹⁹⁸ In 1966, in conversation with Alan Solomon, director of the Jewish Museum in the early 1960s, Newman made reference to being asked by the Jewish Museum for a show. (Archives of American Art, Alan Solomon files, reel 3923, Frame 0295. Transcript of Barnett Newman interview, 20 March 1966 (henceforth 'Solomon Interview'). Alan Solomon was interviewing Newman for a television programme broadcast on 12 July 1966 as part of the U.S.A. Artists series on National Education Television. The interviews with Solomon were heavily edited before being broadcast, with several of the comments most interesting for my purposes cut. This is the first use of the full typescript of the interview in a study of *The Stations of the Cross; Lema Sabachthani*.

¹⁹⁹ There are many other instances where Newman made pronouncements in relation to Jewishness: importantly, though, these were on his terms. In 1967, he participated in the First Congress on Religion, Architecture, and the Visual Arts. He described his ideas of a sense of place through reference to 'the Jewish medieval notion of Makom', before making reference to a passage to the Passover service. Again, Newman's approach to the texts in question reveals a fascinated rather than a scholarly approach to Kabbalistic texts. 'Response to the Reverend Thomas F. Matthews' *Newman* p.289

a Jewish Museum debate. Keeping in mind the particularity of this audience is helpful, for it allows us to posit that some intended meanings of his works might be directed to them.

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These three discussions provide ground for beginning to rethink questions both around Newman's Jewishness, and around Newman's 'viewer'. Newman's Jewishness emerges as constituted by a series of self-presentations - even as a series of roles that Newman chose or chose not to perform: yes to Jewish intellectual-artist-architect; yes to scholar; no to maker of 'Jewish art'. Aware that viewers always did more than view his paintings, he constructed an audience as one whose encounter with the work would be filtered through a number of connected activities, including reading of titles, exhibition statements, as well as simply going to particular institutions to see exhibitions.

Though I have considered how the Holocaust impacted both on how Newman presented his Jewishness, and on what he chose to present, there has been no indication so far that a particular work might itself have any kind of relation to the Holocaust, or the situation of the post-Holocaust American Jew. However, I will now be probing how the Holocaust was caught up in the referential possibilities of *The Stations of the Cross - Lema Sabachthani*, a series made between the late 1950s and mid 1960s and exhibited together (and without any other paintings) at the Guggenheim between April and June of 1966. To consider the possible meanings that could be generated in the encounter with this series, it will be important not only to think about paintings that were seen by spectators in the context of an expanded sense of viewing I have discussed, but about their the various texts (including the title) that were presented during their exhibition, and about the spatial arrangement of the paintings at this exhibition. Though, thus far, Newman has been characterised as playing a variety of roles, what might emerge in this discussion is how Newman constructs a tragic role for his audience, one through which they negotiate a

memory of the Holocaust.²⁰⁰

²⁰⁰ The relation of Holocaust memory to Newman's series has not been discussed in previous accounts of the works. These include Lawrence Alloway's 1966 catalogue essay and Thomas Hess's 1971 text. In existing publications, Yve-Alain Bois has not tackled the series, though undoubtedly his forthcoming catalogue raisonné will provide a new angle on the works. In my MA thesis, *Painting a Place of Mourning: Barnett Newman's The Stations of the Cross* (University College London, 1997) I addressed the series through the notion of Holocaust memory, and though my terms of reference have developed (as will be detailed where appropriate), this chapter builds on that research. Since then, Sarah Rich has completed a thesis on Barnett Newman which includes a chapter on the series. She has kindly sent me a version of this that will be published. ('Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross*'). Rich's account is a fascinating investigation of the question of Jewish identity in relation to the work. Rich writes that 'Rather than say that they [the paintings] are Jewish, and rather than say they are not Jewish, I would prefer to wonder about the ways in which Jewish identity pulses as a possibility in the series, while the series also, through formal means, challenges the operations by which we try to locate identity. *The Stations* makes use of religious identities to both suggest and destabilize the means of judging identity.' Rich thinks the problem of religious identity in relation to the series through attention to a social context - one that examines the mid-60s notion of the 'death of God'. Rich is also interested in Derrida's complications of writing and identity. My own approach to the series continues to be guided by the question of their specific post-Holocaust situation. Importantly (see note 210), I am less interested in the 'death of God' than in the notion of a breakdown of communication between man and God. I am also more interested in the viewer, and how meaning is generated in the encounter with the paintings through the viewer's problematic relationship with the title, and through the installation. I am particularly interested in the function of *Be II* in this respect, a painting not considered in Rich's account.

2. Addressing *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*

The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani is a series of fifteen paintings made between 1958 and 1966. The first fourteen paintings are all 78 inches high by 60 inches wide, and their surfaces, where painted (there are large areas of raw canvas) are covered with various black and white paints. These are individually titled *First Station* to *Fourteenth Station*. A fifteenth painting is titled *Be II*. This is slightly larger (80 x 72 inches), and has a thin band of cadmium red paint at its left edge.

Newman painted the two canvases that were later to be called *First Station* and *Second Station* in 1958. These, as well as the *Third* and *Fourth* paintings will now be described in some detail (*figs. 30-33*). This is necessary to give a sense of the task set for their viewers, whose role, in part, was to attend to the detailed differences between the paintings in the series. If all of Newman's individual paintings required and rewarded close viewing (indeed, Newman had famously demanded that his paintings 'be seen from a short distance'²⁰¹), this kind of viewing was particularly imposed by the subtle relationships between each of the paintings. It is also important to describe the first four works in detail as they were the ones Newman himself viewed at the critical moment when he addressed them sometime in 1961, by giving them a title, and deciding, looking back over them, they *were* a series - the first 'Stations of the Cross', now to be supplemented by more paintings.

The *First Station* was made on raw canvas, one of the first times Newman had painted without preparing his ground. On its left edge, a black band was laid down very flatly. The centre of the canvas is unpainted and incident is concentrated around the right side. Newman painted around a strip of masking tape before removing the tape. Some strokes moved upwards around the tape, some traversed it in horizontal swipes. Some were made when the brush was freshly loaded, and others seem like the smears of a dried brush. These markings dramatise the white zip of raw canvas left underneath the tape, which

²⁰¹ 'Statement for exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery, 1951' *Newman* p.178

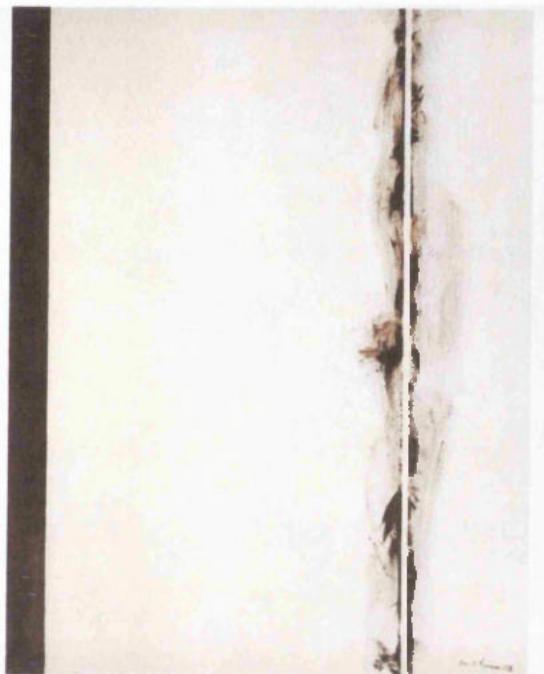


Fig. 30

Barnett Newman, *First Station*, 1958
78" x 60" (198.1 x 152.4 cm), Magna on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection

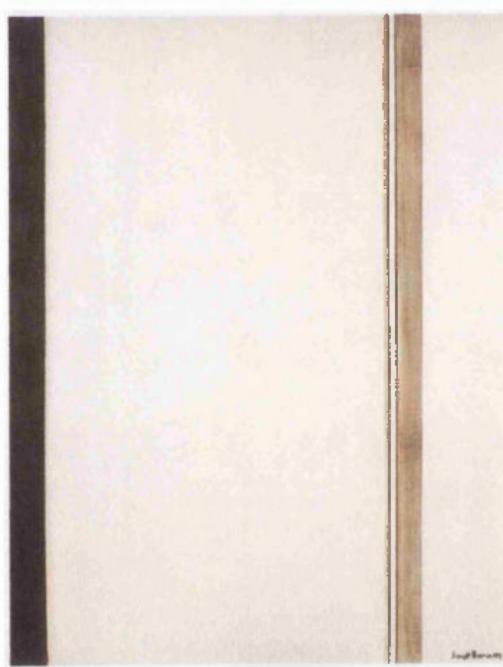


Fig. 31

Barnett Newman, *Second Station*, 1958
78" x 60" (198.1 x 152.4 cm), Magna on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection

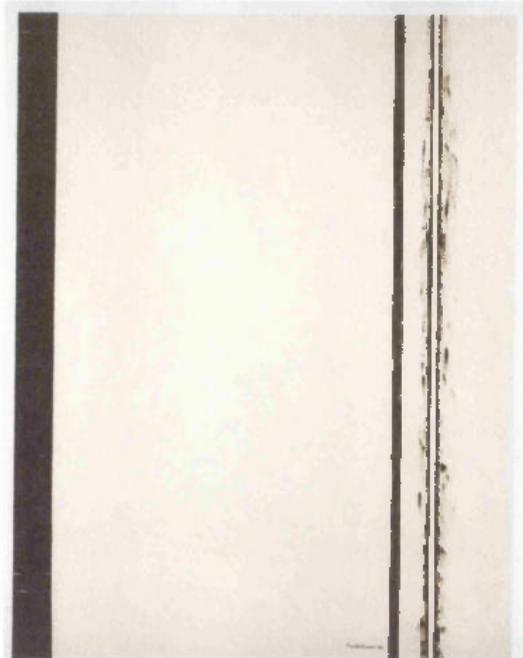


Fig. 32

Barnett Newman, *Third Station*, 1960

78" x 60" (198.1 x 152.4 cm), Oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection

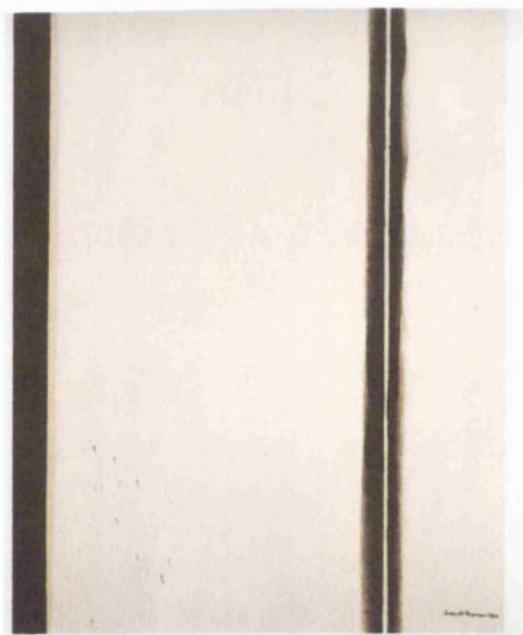


Fig. 33

Barnett Newman, *Fourth Station*, 1960

78" x 60" (198.1 x 152.4 cm), Oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection

unlike those in later paintings, has sharp lines: no paint has seeped under the tape while it was down. Given the context of his own work, the paint strokes read as extremely gestural. *Within* the zips of former work (such as *End of Silence*, 1949), Newman had employed such strokes, but these had never come outside the zips into the main body of the painting. With this in mind, we could go further and suggest that the strokes in the painting might have looked 'like gestural painting', like the kind of 'expressive' paint handling that belonged less to Newman's painterly language than to that of others.

Paint handling in the *Second Station* is extremely different. The structure is similar, with incident on its right side organised around a removed band of tape, but here, painterly detail is quiet, and brushwork, gentle. Black paint has been watered to a browny grey, and applied in consistent strokes that move down the canvas, following the direction of the band. Either before or after the tape was removed, the very edges of the white space were emphasised by the thinnest of black lines, obviously painted with the kind of care and slowness that serves as counter to the speed of gesture in the *First Station*.

Untitled, these two paintings remained in Newman's studio. Between 1958 and 1960, Newman made other works (including many drawings), and in 1960, painted two more canvases again sized 78 x 60 inches. The painting later called *Third Station* was more complex than the first two. Here, though the left side still had a flat band of black, there were two areas of incident on the right. Nearest to the centre of the painting, Newman produced a band of black, this time by taping two bands of masking tape and painting the gap between them, before removing the tapes. The exposed canvas was not entirely covered with paint, though: the brush moved deliberately to leave some areas, towards its sides, unpainted. To the left of this band, this strategy is reversed. As in the *First Station*, a tape has been laid down and painted around. This time, the strokes, though seemingly just as quick, come in short jabs, as if punching the tape at regular intervals down the canvas.

Just as the *Third Station* recalls the *First*, the *Fourth Station* recalls the *Second*. Once again, paint has been laid down around masking tape in downward strokes, thinning out

as they get further from the tape. The paint here is blacker than the *Second Station*, and it has seeped under the masking tape, so the thin white line that appears where it was laid down is not straight, and, in places, is thinned even further, almost bisected. The blackness of the surrounding paint creates an illusion whereby this line of raw canvas appears whiter than the raw canvas elsewhere on the surface. At the left edge of the canvas, there is a solid black area, just like the first three paintings. Here, however, the paint has separated, so the canvas at its right edge is stained, darkened to a faint yellow.²⁰² The strangest incident in this painting, however, occurs towards its centre: some time during the painting of this work, Newman chose to alter - even to spoil - the main area of this raw canvas in a manner that he had not adopted in any of the paintings thus far, and, in fact, in no paintings he ever made to that date. Presumably having dipped a small brush in wet paint, he flicked it towards the bottom left of the canvas. Emphasised by the otherwise empty raw canvas, drops of paint appear clearly, less like drips (there is none of the slowness of the drip), and more like the splash marks one sees in the work of Sam Francis.

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At the 1966 exhibition, these four paintings were separated from the rest of the series. The arrangement reflected the circumstances of the establishment of the series, for, as has been mentioned, it was only after painting these four canvases that Newman looked back on them, and addressed them by giving them a title and declaring them the first works in the series. We can ask now what Newman saw in these paintings that he addressed, and how the terms of his address opened up various meanings in connection to what he saw.

When Newman addressed his work, he had before him four paintings that looked different from his other work. Newman later described the lack of colour as a deliberately

²⁰² In many of the paintings, the separation of black Magna paint causes an oily yellow stain on the canvas adjacent to a black area. Tom Learner, a Tate conservation scientist who has written a paper called 'Magna', stated in conversation with me that this separation would have occurred quite quickly, and certainly before the paintings were exhibited in 1966. Considering the subtle tonal shifts in all the paintings, it is likely that these accidental changes contributed to the desired visual content rather than detracting from it. Certainly Newman would have seen these changes, and he did not choose to conceal them.

self-imposed decision. 'I had been working a lot with colour, and I felt that perhaps I was being intoxicated and beguiled with what happens with color for me.'²⁰³ It seems he had begun the paintings in an attempt to empty out the visual pleasure that had not only 'intoxicated' him, but those few critics who had applauded his work.²⁰⁴ Though the series was initially motivated by this impulse, when he looked back over the four works, Newman might not have sensed the loss of colour, so much as the multiplicity of tonal affects that *had* been created despite the loss of colour - or, rather, as much as he recognised that the self-imposed limitations he had set himself had been respected, he recognised that he had painted with variety within such confines. Here were washed out grays and darkened blacks, raw canvas looking dull and raw canvas looking bright. Years after naming his series, Newman spoke about colour with Thomas Hess, attributing the absence of other colours to the project on which he was working, namely, painting the Passion. 'If you examine the problem of color, it's interesting to me that with a large, tragic theme of this kind - for example, when Picasso did *Guernica*, he couldn't do it in color, he did it in black and white and gray. I couldn't make a green Passion or a red one. You wouldn't have me make a purple Jesus or something like that. It had to be black and white. The compulsion was absolute.'²⁰⁵ This comment indicates that the restriction to black and white was considered a necessity once the 'meaning' had been determined, but Newman here forgets that it was only after thinking about black and white paintings that he determined that he was making a 'Passion'.

At the moment he did look at the four paintings and determine this, the paintings would have also represented a variety of formal effects, achieved again within the limits of a self-imposed system. Here, again, the logic of the system was restrictive: make a painting with a band down the left, and an area of incident to the right of centre. Looking at the paintings, Newman might have seen that, despite this restriction, they represented almost

²⁰³ Solomon Interview, p.2

²⁰⁴ In the text for Newman's 1958 Bennington College exhibition, Greenberg wrote that Newman had 'enlarged our sense of the capacities of colour' (*Greenberg* 4 p.55). He discussed Newman in 'American-Type Painting' (1955) and 'After Abstract Expressionism' (1962). The only suggestion as to Greenberg's possible reaction to the *Stations* comes from 'Louis and Noland' (1960), where he writes that Noland's 'pictures lose more in black and white than most pictures in our time do; in fact they lose almost as much as Barnett Newman's do.' (*Ibid.*, p.99) He might have referred here to paintings such as *The Voice* (1950), but it is possible that he had seen the first two paintings of *The Stations*.

²⁰⁵ 'A Conversation: Barnett Newman and Thomas B. Hess' *Newman*, p.277

the full range of possibilities that his painting - and other s' - had opened up since his 'breakthrough' in 1948. Some of these possibilities were the accidental results of process: painting over a tape might leave a sharply delineated line, or one whose boundaries are blurred by the seepage of paint. Some were the results of rather more deliberate actions - the difference between the horizontal jabs in the *Third Station*, and the vertical washes in the second. Some of the possibilities, finally seem to have been less those established by Newman's own techniques, so much as by the more general language of abstract painting then established - the splash marks in the fourth painting, for instance.

Finally, Newman had in front of him four paintings whose size was equal, and equal not just to each other, but equal to the human size. The restricted size of these paintings might have represented a kind of closing off of the possibilities afforded by breadth: Newman had been praised for large paintings which seemed to envelop viewers. He had, of course, also made very narrow paintings, but with these, scale seemed to exceed their actual size, particularly because the sense of height was so powerful. Rarely had works related to intimately to the human scale.

Newman spoke more about this series than about any other work.²⁰⁶ In his statements, Newman variously related that, looking at the four paintings, 'the kind of tension and intensity that I thought I was getting was for me the beginning of a series, which I then realised would be the 'stations'',²⁰⁷ that 'When I did the fourth one, I used a white line that was even whiter than the canvas, really intense, and that gave me the idea for the cry. It occurred to me that this abstract cry was the whole thing - the entire Passion of Christ',²⁰⁸ and that 'It was while painting them that it came to me (I was on the fourth one) that I had something particular here. It was at that moment that the intensity that I felt the paintings had made me think of them as the Stations of the Cross. It is as I work

²⁰⁶ Newman published a statement in the exhibition catalogue, another in *Art News* (May 1966) pp.26-28, 57 (Newman p.189-190.) Newman gave interviews to the anonymous writer of the article 'Unanswerable Question', *Newsweek*, 9 May 1966, p.100; to Thomas Hess, whom he spoke with at the Guggenheim on 1 May 1966 ('A Conversation: Barnett Newman and Thomas B. Hess' *Newman*, pp.273-286); and to Alan Solomon (see note 198).

²⁰⁷ Solomon Interview, p.3

²⁰⁸ *Newsweek*, 9 May 1966, p.100. It should be pointed out that this might be a misquote: Newman did not 'use a white' paint on this canvas: rather, the raw canvas between two black bands looks whiter than the raw canvas in the centre of the painting.

that the work itself begins to have an effect on me. Just as I affect the canvas, so does the canvas affect me.²⁰⁹

The slight differences in these accounts indicate that Newman was not fully able to give or control an exact representation, as he might have wished, about the circumstances around what he termed a moment of realisation of meaning, and what we might rather think of as a moment of address - of giving meanings to the works. Nevertheless, we can follow a kind of account: according to these statements, it was 'the intensity' of the paintings that 'affected' him. He equated this intensity with 'the abstract cry'. This 'cry' was equivalent to 'the entire Passion of Christ'. This equivalence prompted the decision to make 'The Stations of the Cross', and to title his series *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*. It was never, then, a matter of iconography, but of affect.

If Newman sensed intensity in the four paintings, by naming them with an allusive title, he was clearly doing more than naming 'intensity'. He was associating the paintings with a chain of ideas associated, at that historical moment, with the intensity of the Passion. Or, to set this out slightly differently, by addressing the paintings in this manner, Newman brought to bear on them a host of meanings available through the contemporary notion of 'the Passion' and 'the Stations of the Cross'. These meanings, as we will explore, were later available to the viewers of the paintings - indeed, meanings were available whether or not Newman was interested in them. For now, though, it is important to think what Newman himself meant by associating the intensity of the paintings with the Passion and 'the Stations of the Cross'. This means scrutinising Newman's texts, thinking about what exactly he did and did not say about the associations, why, for instance, he decided to name his series *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* and not simply 'Lema Sabachthani?', or 'The Passion'.

Newman was always clear what he *did not* mean by the Passion. The Passion was not a series of events, nor was it the moment of the death of God.²¹⁰ Christ's Passion was a

²⁰⁹ Newman p.189

²¹⁰ In her work on *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*, Sarah Rich has drawn out a context around the idea of the 'death of God'. I prefer to locate the series as a kind of engagement with the memory of the

single event, the moment where, as a human, rather than God, Christ asks the reason for human suffering. Newman's catalogue statement begins '*Lema Sabachthani*- why? Why did you forsake me? Why forsake me? To what purpose? Why? This is the Passion. This outcry of Jesus. Not the terrible walk up the Via Dolorosa, but the question that has no answer..... *Lema?* To what purpose - is the unanswerable question of human suffering.' In *Art News*, as well as reiterating this notion about 'the cry of *Lema*', Newman describes the Passion as 'not a series of anecdotes but ... a single event.' And in *Newsweek*, he said 'I'd always been disturbed by those last words... They gave Jesus the touch of being very much the son of man - not divine. Because, as I see it, that cry - 'Why has Thou forsaken me?' - that was the cry of a man, of everyman who is unable to understand what is being done to him.'

Newman's Passion is a moment of breakdown, of failed understanding, when the meaning of human suffering is unclear to Jesus-as-everyman.²¹¹ In this last quotation, Newman acknowledges that this moment is not unique to Jesus (but shared by everyman), but in other texts, he noted that other Biblical characters had asked this question as well. The catalogue statement read: 'This question that has no answer has

Holocaust, rather than with mid-1960s notions of 'the death of God', notions which were sparked in part by Cold War anxieties. Some Jewish theologians, rethinking theology in the aftermath of the Holocaust, *did* speak about 'death of God' theology (notably Richard Rubenstein, in *After Auschwitz - Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (New York, 1966)). Newman seems to have had little interest in this idea. His 1967 speech on the occasion of Jackson Pollock's Museum of Modern Art retrospective included the comment about painting during the war: '... to coin a modern phrase, painting, a quarter of a century before it happened to God, was dead.' (Newman p.191). Newman's flippant use of the phrase suggests he considered it as just that - a modern phrase. Newman's conception of the Passion pointedly ignored the matter of Christ's death and resurrection, but specifically focused on the 'single moment' of Christ's humanity rather than divinity. It is important to note in this context that Newman did not permit *Be II* to be exhibited with the title his friend Tony Smith had given it in 1962 - 'Resurrection'. Clearly, Newman was as disinterested in the idea of 'Resurrection' as in the notion of 'Christ's Death'. Of course, though, the idea of the Stations of the Cross might have prompted viewers to consider the death of God, and with that in mind, the context Rich maps out is important.

²¹¹ The notion that the Holocaust caused a breakdown of communication between man and God (as opposed to the death of God) was articulated by Seymour Siegel in a rabbinical conference that took place in New York in 1964. Quoting Martin Buber, he asked 'Can one still speak to him, can one still hear his word?' ('Theological Reflections on the Destruction of European Jewry', *Conservative Judaism* (Summer 1964) p.6). For Newman (if not for a religious, believing Jew such as Siegel) this breakdown of understanding does not have a prerequisite of a relationship between man and God - it is a breakdown in understanding of how suffering happens in the enlightened world. The notion of a breakdown is also discussed by Julia Kristeva in her account of Holbein's Dead Christ in *Black Sun - Depression and Melancholia* (New York, 1989). Kristeva describes Holbein's figure as 'a man who is truly dead... Christ forsaken by the father ("My God, my God, why have you deserted me?") and without the promise of Resurrection.' (p.110)

been with us for so long - since Jesus - since Abraham - since Adam - the original question.' According to the Biblical texts, if not the popular notions of their stories, neither Adam (when expelled from Eden) nor Abraham (about to sacrifice his son) had, actually, asked this question, but the Psalmist had, and Newman elsewhere made reference to the Twenty Second Psalm: 'the psalmist does ask, "God, why hast thou forsaken me?"²¹²

The question 'Lema' has an Old Testament heritage. Why then did Newman not just title his paintings 'Lema sabachthani?', and declare the series complete? There are, in fact, two distinct questions here. The first addresses Newman's choice of referring to a Christian narrative rather than any of these Old Testament moments, and the second question (which will be held in suspension for a while) considers his choice to make fourteen 'Stations of the Cross' - he could, after all, have called the four paintings 'Christ's Passion - Lema Sabachthani', and have declared this four-part series complete.

I want to suggest that when Newman looked at the four paintings, he addressed them by giving them a title that referred, for him, not just to an 'abstract cry', not just to a general sense of human despair, but to historically specific catastrophes - the catastrophes of recent history. By relating the intensity of the paintings to Christ's Passion (as opposed to Adam's cry, for instance), Newman, whilst still opening up universal, non-specific suggestions, might have been able to partake in an established metaphor that was being used to address the Holocaust, a metaphor used to invoke the 'unanswerable question' imposed by the Holocaust. He would also have engaged in a kind of strategy that artists - throughout art history - had employed: the use of the Christian narrative as a means of addressing contemporary suffering.

In 1964, once he had already chosen to make use of the metaphor of Christ's Passion, Newman visited Europe, and, though avoiding Germany, he travelled to Colmar near its border to see Matthias Grunewald's Isenheim altarpiece. Two years later, discussing *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*, Newman told Alan Solomon that

²¹² Newman p.284

'I think Grunewald's Crucifixion is maybe the greatest painting in Europe, but one of the things that intrigues me about the Grunewald is the act of active imagination on his part. That he was not illustrating so much the Christ in terms of the legend, but since he was doing it for a hospital of syphilitics, that he was able to identify himself with the human agony of those patients, that he was willing to turn the Christ figure into a syphilitic. Now this of course is one of the boldest things that anyone could have done. Yet I think this is part of his genius.'²¹³

Grunewald's Crucifixion seems to have confirmed for Newman that his strategy of using the Christian narrative as a means of addressing contemporary suffering, had a precedent, and one, indeed, of 'greatest' importance. Later in the interview, Newman stressed the necessity of 'presenting something new in relation to the story of Jesus. It's always been identified with something else.'²¹⁴ Newman's frame of reference here is art historical, but it is interesting to note that this kind of strategy of using an old story to address recent history has an accord with traditionally Jewish modes of remembrance. In *Zakhor*, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi has written of the ways in which, particularly during the middle ages, new disasters that befell the Jewish people were remembered not through the initiation of new memorial rituals, but through their superimposition on old ones. The *Akedah* (binding of Isaac) would be used to describe a Jewish mass suicide during a period of persecution; a fast day commemorating one historical disaster would be used to commemorate another, new disaster as well as the old one. 'Medieval Jewish chronicles tend to assimilate events into old and established conceptual frameworks.... It is important to realize that there is also no real desire to find novelty in passing events. To the contrary, there is a pronounced tendency to subsume even major new events to familiar archetypes, for even the most terrible events are somehow less terrifying when viewed within old patterns rather than in their bewildering specificity.'²¹⁵ Yerushalmi

²¹³ Solomon Interview, p.7

²¹⁴ Ibid., p.23

²¹⁵ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor - Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (New York, 1989) p.36. Addressing the writing of the Talmud, Yerushalmi is interested in the way 'The rabbis seem to play with

suggests here that the use of an archetype is a protective measure, where Newman spoke rather of using the Crucifixion in order to impose some relevance on it. Though the use of the story of Jesus had a particularly nuanced motivation, there is still a kind of correspondence between Newman's practice and traditionally Jewish memorial strategies.

By the time Newman brought this story to bear on his paintings in 1961, the ideas and events around Christ's Passion and Crucifixion had been used as a metaphor to address the suffering of Jews and other groups under Nazism for almost thirty years. The Crucifixion had been used as a form of address in both visual art works, and in a variety of different kinds of texts. Ziv a Amishai-Maisels has written most extensively about 'Christological Symbolism of the Holocaust', citing numerous examples of artists using Crucifixion scenes.²¹⁶ In 1933, for instance, the German artist Otto Panok painted *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me*, and 'gave Jesus the features of his friend Karl Schwesig, who had been arrested and beaten up by the SS in 1933 for being a Communist and active anti-Fascist.' (Panok was later attacked for painting Christ as Jewish). The visual image of the crucifixion was not just mobilised by artists hoping their works would engage with current events. The idea of the crucifixion informed the approach of those photographers who documented these events. At the liberation of the camps, one photographer represented a corpse as a Christ-figure by composing an image in which the arms spread vertically down the plane of the photograph, like a bright white band against a grey ground (*fig.34*). The re-publication of this image in 1960, according to Amishai-Maisels, prompted American artists, such as Harold Paris, to make more use of the metaphor of the Passion.²¹⁷

time as though with an accordion, expanding it and contracting it at will.' He continues: 'Barriers of time can be ignored and all the ages placed in an ever-fluid dialogue with each other.' (p.17) This suggests another correspondence with Newman's Passion. The Passion, for Newman, can be characterised not just a metaphor through which reference slips from one meaning to another, but a temporal construct in which moments of history are squeezed together. The notion of temporal compression also accords with the temporality of the experience of the installation of *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*.

²¹⁶ Ziv a Amishai-Maisels, 'Christological Symbolism of the Holocaust', in Y. Bauer (ed.), *Remembering for the Future - Volume II: The Impact of the Holocaust on the Contemporary World* (Oxford, 1989) pp.1657-1671, and *Depiction and Interpretation - The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts* (Oxford, 1993).

²¹⁷ Gerhard Schoenberner, *Der Gelbe Stern* (Hamburg, 1960), p.196. One of the figures in George Segal's 1984 sculpture *The Holocaust* mimics the pose of this victim.

This image might have been known by Americans earlier, at the end of the war, and may have been amongst those Newman had seen when he wrote about ‘the photographs of German atrocities’ in 1945.²¹⁸ Though paintings such as Panok’s might not have been familiar to Americans, Chagall’s use of the Crucifixion in paintings such as *White Crucifixion* (1938) (fig.35), which had been included in the 1946 Museum of Modern Art retrospective, had been widely discussed. The painting showed a Jesus as Jew, surrounded by burning synagogues, weeping rabbis, shtetl dwellers clutching torah scrolls.²¹⁹ Some American critics had failed to note Chagall’s metaphor, writing that ‘the Christ symbol is foreign to the daily life of Eastern Jewry from which his best works are derived’²²⁰. But for most, including Newman’s friend Harold Rosenberg, the intention of Chagall’s analogies had been clear. Rosenberg wrote ‘In his Crucifixions painted during this tragic period, [Chagall] depicts a world flying apart in chaos, houses overturned, ships sinking, Jews fleeing in every direction. The crucified one is a Jew, not the Son of God, but the human victim of violence.’²²¹ Herbert Howarth, writing in the same publication some years later, was even more insistent: ‘Lest there be any doubt about the analogy, Chagall defined his meaning by drawing the Jewish phylacteries on the arms and forehead of the naked Christ on the cross. Christ, being Jewish, comes to stand for him as the Jewish people. His analogy says, as it were: In the European holocaust Jewry has undergone a new mass crucifixion.’²²²

²¹⁸ ‘Surrealism and the War’ Newman pp.94-96. Newman discusses works by Picasso and Ernst in relation to what he called the surrealism of photographs of German atrocities.

²¹⁹ *White Crucifixion* had been presented to the Art Institute of Chicago after the 1946 exhibition. Newman might have seen the painting again when he visited Chicago in 1955.

²²⁰ Milton Klonsky, ‘Review of *Marc Chagall* by Lionello Venuri’ *Commentary* (December 1945) p.91

²²¹ Harold Rosenberg, ‘Chagall: Jewish Modernist Master’ *Jewish Frontier* (April 1945) pp.26-33 Considering the confidence with which Rosenberg described Chagall’s use of the crucifixion in this text - written for a Jewish readership, it is fascinating how reticent he was when he recalled his friend Newman’s use of the crucifixion. ‘To my mind, the title *The Stations of the Cross* was a mistake, and I argued against it with Newman on the ground that an event held sacred by a cult...ought not to be appropriated by outsiders and given changed meanings.’ (Harold Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman* (New York, 1978) p.73). Somehow (perhaps mindful of his readership) Rosenberg had changed his attitude on how ‘an event held sacred by a cult’ might be used. Needless to say, he did not relate Newman’s use of the Passion to the ‘tragic period’ of the Holocaust.

²²² Herbert Howarth, ‘Chagall’s Christ’ *Jewish Frontier* (May 1948) pp.16-17



Fig. 34
Photograph of camp victim published in Gerhard Schoenberger, *Der Gelbe Stern*

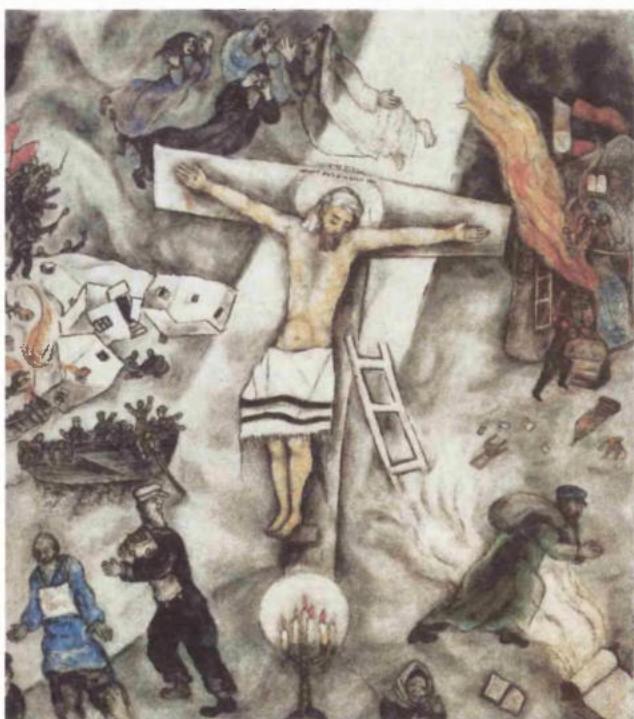


Fig. 35
Marc Chagall, *White Crucifixion*, 1938
55 1/8" x 45 3/8" (140 x 115 cm), Oil on canvas
The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Alfred S Alshuler

In the United States, artists such as Abraham Rattner and Seymour Lipton (who, like Newman, showed at Betty Parsons Gallery), used 'Christological symbolism'. In 1942, an exhibition of 'Modern Christs' had taken place at the Puma Gallery in New York, and, as Maisels writes, by the late 1950s, this 'most obvious [of] symbols' had become 'so common' as to prove problematic to the originality of American Jewish artists, who nonetheless continued to employ it from 1960-61, when 'the Eichmann trial...led to a resurgence of clear Holocaust imagery' employing the crucifixion.²²³

The metaphor of the Passion as a means of addressing the Holocaust had currency in historical, literary, and theological texts. One of the earliest substantial reports published in New York about the events in Europe, for instance, had been titled 'The Passion of a People'²²⁴, and one of the first poems from the Warsaw Ghetto to be published in New York ended with a reference to 'the cry of the crucified'²²⁵. In 1960, a Catholic theologian, John Lenz, remembered in his *Christ in Dachau* that after the American liberation, the S.S. road had been renamed 'The Way of the Cross'²²⁶. In France, Emmanuel Levinas, writing in 1961, attempted to consider 'the Passion lived out by Judaism between 1940 and 1945'²²⁷, while in Britain, Ignaz Maybaum's *The Face of God at Auschwitz* (1965) made frequent parallels to the crucifixion: 'The Golgotha of modern mankind is Auschwitz. The Cross, the Roman gallows, was replaced by the gas chamber.'²²⁸

²²³ Ziva Amishai-Maisels, 1993, op. cit., pp.192-193. Reports of the Eichmann trial were published, and widely discussed in New York in 1961, and contained references to the events around Christ's crucifixion. Harold Rosenberg complained that Eichmann had been given the opportunity to defend his actions. Eichmann's main defence involved his 'conception of himself as Pontius Pilate' passing sentence, but without assuming responsibility for his actions. ('The Trial and Eichmann' *Commentary* (November 1961) p.370) Eichmann's self-affiliation with Pilate aligns the condemned Christ with the Jews, and this metaphor shocked Rosenberg. New Yorkers were reminded of its offence by Hannah Arendt, who repeated it at the head of three of her articles published in the *New Yorker* in 1963: 'Eichmann felt like Pontius Pilate and washed his hands in innocence.' Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem - A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York, 1963) p.135

²²⁴ Zachariah Shuster, 'The Passion of a People: Anno MCMXLII' *Contemporary Jewish Record* (February 1943) pp.23-36

²²⁵ From 'The Funeral' by M.J.. This was one of the handful of poems collected by A. Glanz-Leyless, and published in the article 'Poems from the Warsaw Ghetto' *Contemporary Jewish Record* (April 1945) pp.129-136

²²⁶ Amishai-Maisels, 1993, op. cit., p.187

²²⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Jewish Thought Today' (1961) *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Translated by Seán Hand) (Baltimore, 1990) p.162

²²⁸ Ignaz Maybaum, *The Face of God After Auschwitz* (Amsterdam, 1965) p.36

Around 1960-2, at the exact juncture when the Eichmann trial was forcing Americans to witness the events of the Holocaust, the metaphor of the Crucifixion, used as a means of addressing the Holocaust, had been established internationally, and had an ongoing currency.²²⁹ The Holocaust posed ‘the unanswerable question of human suffering’, and the idea of Christ’s Passion (the single moment where *he* posed that question), could be used to address the Holocaust. There is no existing text, however, in which Newman directly relates his idea of the ‘Passion’ to the Holocaust: he never declares that Christ’s suffering *stands for* the suffering of Jews, in the same way as Harold Rosenberg, for instance, had written that ‘The crucified one is a Jew, not the Son of God, but the human victim of violence.’ This silence might only be an impediment to the argument of this chapter if we suppose that Newman *would* have been inclined to specify the working of the metaphor, or *could* have specified this working. Though one might say that the metaphor was sufficiently established for Newman to have to ‘explain’ it, I would prefer to think that Newman’s silence reveals the impossibility of talking in particular manners about his work. It was only really possible, in public, to address the work through the universal language of his statements, and it was only really desirable to use this language, so as to open out reference, rather than closing it off.²³⁰ At one rare moment, with Alan

²²⁹ There are many reasons for the use of this metaphor, stretching beyond its most obvious signification, that Jews suffer unjustly as did Christ. In the early period of Nazism, the presentation of Jesus as a Jew might have served to remind Christian Germans of their bonds with Jews. Speaking at a Rabbinical conference in New York in 1964, the theological Jacob Agus suggested that Jews died ‘as the initial sacrifice of an anti-Christian crusade’ (*‘God and the Catastrophe’ Conservative Judaism* (Summer 1964) p.13). With this in mind, the metaphor would have warned Christians that the object of Nazism’s attack was only primarily Judaism, but actually, the entire Judeo-Christian tradition. Another dimension of the metaphor, more appropriate to considering its function after the war, is described by Shoshana Felman in her account of Paul Celan’s *Todesfuge* (a poem first translated into English by Clement Greenberg). Felman writes that Celan ‘forces the language of Christian metaphysics to *witness* in effect the Holocaust, and be in turn witnessed by it.’ (Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony - Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and Literature* (New York, 1992) p.30. This formulation would make Christianity a kind of guilty party. If it was intended, Newman’s use of the metaphor of the crucifixion does not seem, as I have been suggesting, to partake in these kind of specific motivations. Rather, in more universalist terms, the Holocaust would be invoked through the metaphor of the crucifixion as an instance of breakdown, a memory which demands a question that cannot be answered.

²³⁰ It is not that Newman was unable to make any direct references to the Holocaust. His references are usually cloaked in universalising language, but in 1952, whilst discussing Duchamp’s effects on aesthetics, he asked ‘Will the modern aesthetician who takes this position [equating the beautiful with the functional], if he’s confronted with the parchment lamps that were made from the skins of Jews killed by the Nazis, just criticise [them] on the grounds that it’s pretty good work?’ (*Newman* pp.245-246.) Newman’s ability to launch from the discussion of Duchamp’s work to this rhetorical question is extraordinary, but the

Solomon, he was able to describe his ideas around the contemporary meanings of the crucifixion. Newman argued that ‘the nails of the Romans’, if compared to events ‘going on in Vietnam, or the sort of things that happened in Hiroshima’, diminished in their horror, ‘So that if we’re going to measure the pain, I think the pain was terrible for Jesus, but it somehow - I suppose maybe this is blasphemous - but it seems mild compared to the kind of physical pain people suffer today.’²³¹ This comment - in which Auschwitz is still unmentioned - was excised from Newman’s television interview, and references to Hiroshima and Vietnam do not find their way into Newman’s other texts around *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*. These cuts seem to have occurred less because of their blasphemous nature and more because of their problematic specificity.

There are other indications that the title held particular meanings for Newman. But the question of pin-pointing Newman’s intentions, in any case, ignores the possibility that the existence of the crucifixion metaphor broadened the signifying potential of the title and texts for viewers whether or not Newman was aware of it. At this stage, it is to Newman’s viewers that we should turn to attempt to sense how *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* organised not just a chain of references, but a particular kind of spatial experience.

important point for my discussion is that direct reference to the Holocaust was not desirable in relation to his own work.

²³¹ Solomon Interview, p.8

3. A Place of Loss

The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani was not only the title of the series. As the title of the exhibition at the Guggenheim, it was printed on wall panels, in the exhibition catalogue, in press releases, and newspaper reports (fig.36). Newman's viewers were also exposed to a number of other representations of his ambitions for this series of paintings - whether in the form of his own carefully written, and carefully placed statements, his interviews, Alan Solomon's television programme, Lawrence Alloway's catalogue essay, or in the form of newspaper reports and reviews of the exhibition. Newman's concern with self-presentation was no more in evidence than here, which was hardly surprising - the exhibition was the high point of his career to this date. Newman could not, of course, control the public reception of the exhibition, though he did try - when critics complained about his work, he responded by writing to their editors. Substituting a detailed account of the exhibition for a sustained attack on Newman's whole career, Max Kozloff described Newman's 'moralistic packaging' of his work as 'unconvincing' 'bombast'. He suggested that Newman's title was best ignored, as it was too ridiculous to even warrant attention. 'Painters will always insist upon the right to have the most farfetched ideas, or advance the wildest claims about the content of their work. To fail to see some accord between these faceless abstracts and the story of the Via Dolorosa is as inevitable as it would be false to make an issue out of it.' - which, by writing this, of course, Kozloff was doing.²³² Newman responded to Kozloff by giving him 'a lesson in art criticism'. He quoted in full a poem written in support of his 1958 Bennington College exhibition by his friend Howard Nemerov, a poem that had been printed in the same publication as Kozloff's review.²³³ A more bitter row followed the publication of John Canaday's review in *The New York Times*.²³⁴ Condemning the exhibition less on the grounds of the paintings, than on their titles ('When they are called 'The Stations of the Cross', you can't make it work.'), Canaday wrote that Newman, Lawrence Alloway, and the Guggenheim, had effectively hung themselves. In the one paragraph in which he

²³² Max Kozloff, 'Art', *The Nation*, 16 May 1966, p.598

²³³ Archives of American Art, Thomas Hess files. Barnett Newman to Carey Williams, Editor, *The Nation*, 8 June 1966

²³⁴ John Canaday, 'Art: With Pretty Thorough Execution', *The New York Times*, 23 April 1966

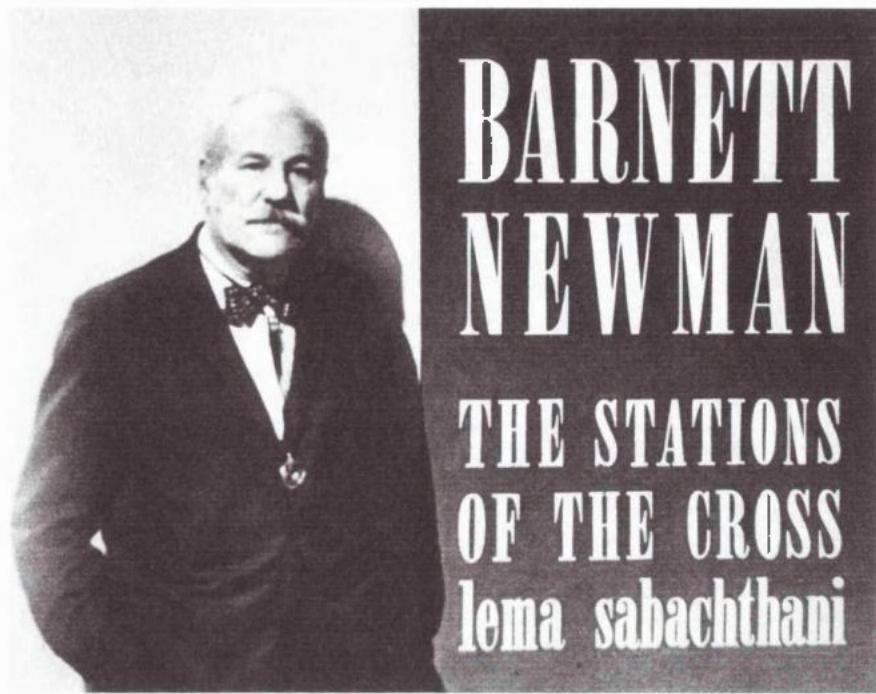


Fig. 36
Newman in front of exhibition announcement



Fig. 37
Installation plan of *The Stations of the Cross – Lema Sabachthani* at the Guggenheim

addressed the actual paintings, Canaday wrote each canvas ‘consist[s] of one or more vertical bands of black or white, like unravelled phylacteries.’ Newman, who considered his position for over a month, wrote a four page letter to Canaday’s publisher, accusing Canaday of anti-Semitism. ‘What do you make of his remarks that turn the ritual phylacteries into an epithet? Is he attacking Jesus because he was a Jew and had to wear them or is he attacking me because he knows that I am also a Jew? This is not the first time he has engaged in racial slurs....It is not inappropriate at this time to mention again the religious slur that was able to transform the crosses of Calvary into the gallows for us.’²³⁵ Elsewhere, I have considered how Newman’s response might indicate that he did have in mind meanings relating to the Holocaust.²³⁶

Kozloff’s and Canaday’s reviews represent reactions to the exhibition, but they are also representative of particular conditions of what was possible and not possible to write about art at that moment. They highlight the point that we will not find any ‘truthful’ records of any viewer’s encounter with the works - rather, written representations of encounters, conditioned by the contingencies such as writer’s expectations of their readers, or their places of publication. Kozloff’s and Canaday’s reviews in *these* publications witness the conditions of middle-brow journalistic art criticism. Though Kozloff’s resistance to Newman was probably rooted in his affiliation with younger artists, and Canaday’s, in his resistance to contemporary practices, both writers found Newman’s exhibition perfect bait for a sustained attack. If the point needed restating, the reactions also prove - though from the position of hostility - that viewers *did* read the texts around the paintings, that the experience of the exhibition included the encounter with textual material. This kind of comment was not restricted to newspapers: one private correspondent sent Newman a telegram congratulating him on the exhibition, but wishing

²³⁵ Barnett Newman Foundation, *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* files. Letter from Barnett Newman to Mr. Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, President, The New York Times, 28 May 1966

²³⁶ As I have argued in my MA thesis, it is suggestive that Newman responds so forcefully to Canaday’s comment, and that he takes the opportunity to underline a key factor in the metaphor of the Crucifixion - that Jesus was a Jew. Newman also seems to berate Canaday for doing exactly what he was doing: transforming the crosses of Calvary into something else. Though elsewhere uninterested in the relation of the series to a post-Holocaust context, Sarah Rich has also considered Canaday’s review and Newman’s response, suggesting that Canaday’s use of the metaphor of execution might have been intended as a reference to the Holocaust, and that Newman’s use of the pronoun ‘us’ in his letter identified himself with the suffering of the wider Jewish population.

Newman had not made so many statements.²³⁷ The correspondent had wanted to see the paintings alone, apart from any textual material. Such viewing conditions had been impossible.

Another reviewer called the exhibition 'an adventure in emptiness'.²³⁸ Emily Genauer was also offended at the rhetoric that was part of the exhibition, but her phrase can be used against her intention: it highlights the aspect of the exhibition that will be foregrounded in this section. Kozloff was adamant that the series had little to do with what was normally thought of as 'the story of the Via Dolorosa' - and he seems to have been right. However, the exhibition had everything to do with 'an adventure in emptiness.' It is essential to think about the way the *installation* of *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* affected the manner in which meanings could have been generated - and not only the manner in which they were generated, but what these meanings were. An 'adventure in emptiness' was set out for their viewer. It is possible, in fact, to bring back into discussion one question that was left hanging over from the last section. I asked not only why Newman chose, in 1961, to refer to a Christian, rather than an Old Testament reference to breakdown, but why Newman chose to make fourteen 'Stations of the Cross' - he could, after all, have called the four paintings 'Christ's Passion - Lema Sabachthani', and have declared this four-part series complete. The reason, it seems, is that where four paintings might be seen together, perhaps on single wall in a gallery, a series of 'Fourteen Stations' had to be spread out: they required a kind of viewing that involved movement: they made an issue of space.²³⁹

²³⁷ Barnett Newman Foundation, *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* files. Telegram from Barrie C. McDonnell to Barnett Newman, 3 May 1966.

²³⁸ Emily Genauer, 'Christ's Journey on Canvas', *New York Herald Tribune*, 20 April 1966.

²³⁹ Few contemporary or recent commentators have addressed the importance of the way *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* was installed. Sarah Rich has touched on the question of place, but less in terms of the specific arrangement of the paintings in the Guggenheim, and more through a consideration of Newman's idea of Makom. (Rich, op. cit., p.7) One notable exception is Robert Smithson, whose unpublished essay 'The Pathetic Fallacy in Esthetics' briefly addressed the way Newman's work involved 'an anthropomorphising of space.' Though he did not explicitly write about the installation, Smithson argued that the spatial dynamic of *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* dramatised the viewer's body and was therefore an affront to what he considered as true abstraction. (Jack Flam (ed.), *The Collected Writings* (Berkeley, 1996) pp.338) It is precisely this drama that I consider the important, and little recognised aspect of the ambition of *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*.

The first four paintings were set apart from the others, installed in two bays on Frank Lloyd Wright's spiral ramp. The next ten were arranged in an open room that was entered after a short staircase. On the east wall hung the *Fifth* to the *Eighth Stations*, on the South Wall hung the *Ninth* to the *Thirteenth Station*, and alone of the West Wall was placed the *Fourteenth Station*. Outside, further down the ramp, was *Be II* (fig.37). Before considering the kind of experience the viewer would have had as they walked around this space it is important to differentiate my argument from the main existing text which tackles the issue of perception and meaning in relation to Newman's work - Yve Alain Bois's essay 'Perceiving Newman'.²⁴⁰

Bois concentrates on Newman's 1948 breakthrough painting *Onement I*, asking what it was about this work that set it apart from Newman's paintings to date, what it was that announced it as a breakthrough, a kind of agenda for the rest of Newman's oeuvre. Where previous paintings had attempted to express or illustrate a pre-existing idea about 'origin', with *Onement I*, and all the work that followed it, the 'meaning does not lie in anything prior to its embodiment in a painting'.²⁴¹ If, like previous works, the meaning of *Onement I* still concerns 'origin', that is because of the relationship of its form to the embodiment of its perceiver, not because of any kind of symbolic or narrative illustration. In this painting, Newman chose to 'actualize...something like an 'originary perception' - the very constitution of a perceptual field via the declaration of its bilateral symmetry - something that only our own embodiment can give us access to'.²⁴² Bois is careful to differentiate his reading from the 'existential and humanistic reading' that would see '*Onement I* as a kind of cryptic portrayal of man'.²⁴³ 'Newman's painting does not depict man, even "abstractly", it pursues a sort of phenomenological inquiry into the nature of perception, that is, into that which in itself makes something like a man possible'.²⁴⁴

Unlike Bois, I am interested in probing the historical conditions that would cause an artist like Newman to set about an inquiry about origins in the first place. Bois's essay begins

²⁴⁰ Yve-Alain Bois, 'Perceiving Newman', in *Painting as Mourning* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993) pp.186-196

²⁴¹ Ibid., p.190

²⁴² Ibid., p.195

²⁴³ Ibid., p.194

²⁴⁴ Ibid., p.195

with Newman's 1967 recollection that 'In 1940, some of us woke up to find ourselves without hope - to find that painting did not exist... to start from scratch, to paint as if painting never existed before.'²⁴⁵ Yet Bois considers the problem of which Newman speaks as a painting problem only. In other, similar statements, made around this same time, Newman was more explicit about these problems. In 1966, he told Alan Solomon that 'the feelings I had at the time of the War in '41 was that the world was coming to an end. And to the extent that the world was coming to an end, the whole issue of painting, I felt, was over because it impossible to paint flowers, figures, etcetera, and so the crisis moved around the problem of what I can really paint.'²⁴⁶ However Newman's breakthrough is characterised, the conditions prompting Newman's impulse to distrust what might be termed lyric painting and to 'start from scratch' should be noted as post-Holocaust ones.²⁴⁷

A second point of difference revolves around the question of just how emblematic the 1948 breakthrough is for the rest of Newman's career. Bois' representation of this moment of realisation does not correspond with what we have discussed of another moment of 'realisation' - the moment in 1961 when Newman addressed his paintings. Following Bois, we could argue that this moment shows again that 'meaning does not lie in anything prior to its embodiment in a painting': after all, it was only in viewing his paintings that Newman claims to have 'realised' their meaning. But, as we have seen, this moment involved associating the works with a host of other meanings, and, as a consequence, it involved a decision to paint other paintings. The after-effect of the

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p.187. This is from Newman's statement at the 'Artists Symposium' held for 1967 MoMA Pollock retrospective (*Newman* pp.191-2). Interestingly, one of Pollock's drawings from this time, *War* (1944), included an image of a crucifixion. (Kirk Varnedoe, *Jackson Pollock* (MoMA, New York, 1998) p.196)

²⁴⁶ Solomon Interview p.13

²⁴⁷ Benjamin Buchloh is more prepared than Bois to consider this kind of context. Nevertheless, he has differentiated between American and European painters, passing over the possibility that Jewish American artists, whose parents had come from Europe, might be as affected by events in Europe as Europeans. Buchloh addresses Simon Hantai's work of 1948 (the same year as *Onement I*): '...the question has to be asked whether European artists of the moment of 1948 faced a historical horizon of specifically European postwar limits and prohibitions that was fundamentally different from their American peers. Clearly it must have been impossible to judge whether the pursuit of lyrical poetry after Auschwitz was not any less barbaric than the pursuit of lyrical poetry, as Adorno would notoriously argue in 1954. Historical concerns of this order do not appear to have affected the work of Americans in Paris at that time, such as Sam Francis or Ellsworth Kelly.' 'Hantai, Villegle, and the Dialectics of Painting's Dispersal' *October* 91 (Winter 2000) p.27

moment of realisation is embodied in the later *Stations*, paintings initiated with their meanings already decided, paintings designated before they were begun as the next, and the next painting in the already-existing series.

Despite these important points of difference, I want to take from Bois' account his central contention, that it is in the process of 'perceiving Newman' that meaning is generated. This is also to follow Newman's own comment that his work was 'full of meaning, but the meaning must come from the seeing'.²⁴⁸ For Bois, the kind of meanings that could be generated in the process of perception were those which necessarily had to do with perception, with 'the seeing'. Bois, for instance, takes Newman's comment that 'the self, terrible and constant, is ...the subject matter of painting', and juxtaposes it with quotations from Merleau-Ponty and Lacan about selfhood and its foundation through aspects of perception.²⁴⁹ I will be suggesting that in the process of the perception of *The Stations of the Cross – Lema Sabachthani*, the 'fullness' of meaning could be generated as well.

Let us now return to the Guggenheim, and to the viewer's experience of the installation of *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*. It is important to keep in mind that the 'adventure' about to be described is not so much that of an actual viewer, as that which the installation attempts to plot. Of course, paintings do not literally impose the conditions through which they are seen, and a real person in a gallery is free to move around it as they wish. But it is still possible to think of the way in which an installation organises movement.

The viewer of the exhibition, initially faced with the over-sized letters of the series title, began their encounter with the paintings themselves on the Guggenheim ramp (*fig.38*). This strip of ground stretches along the same axis of the horizontal plane of paintings installed in its bays. The space organises a viewer's movement: looking at paintings becomes an activity of walking along close to the works, rather than moving backwards

²⁴⁸ This comment comes from an interview with Dorothy Gees Seckler, first published in *Art in America* (Summer 1962). *Newman*, p.251

²⁴⁹ Bois, *op. cit.*, p.195

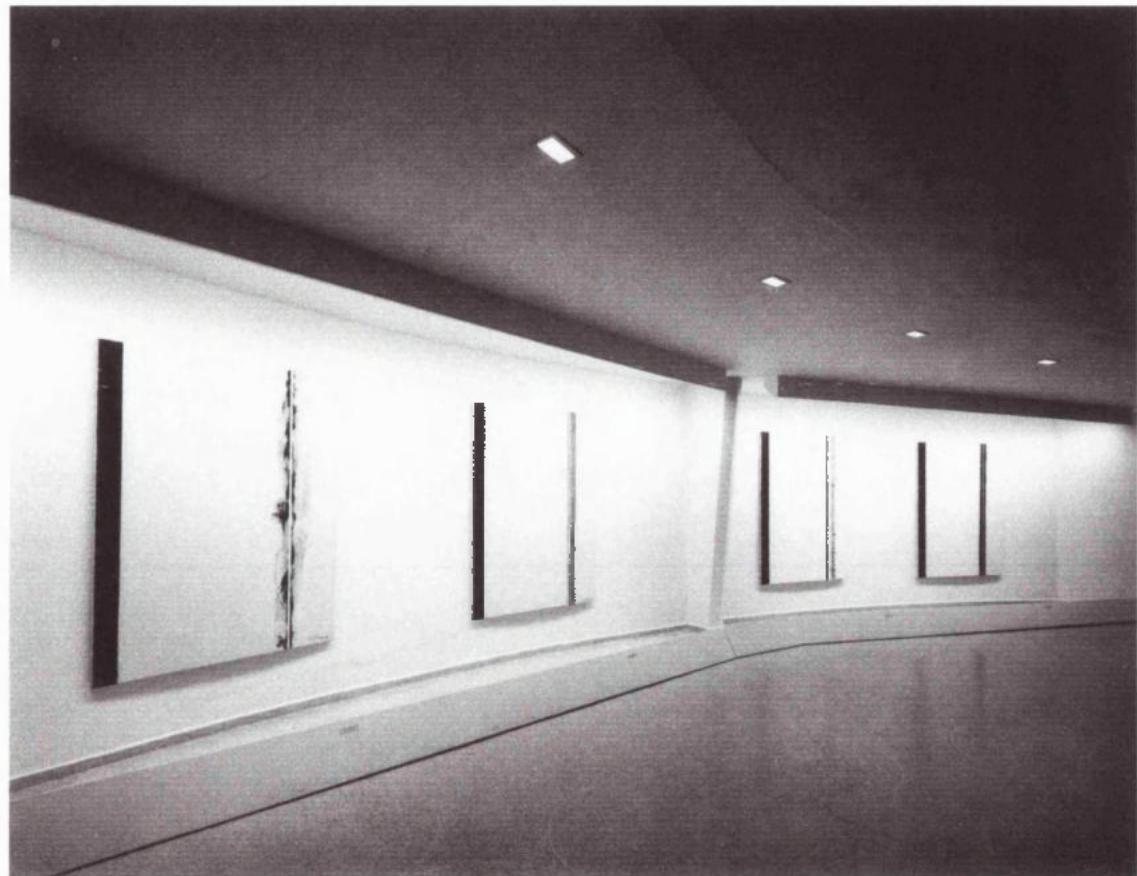


Fig. 38
Installation photograph on ramp showing *First to Fourth Stations*

and forwards before them. This space encouraged the kind of close viewing Newman had demanded of his viewers in 1951, whilst also encouraging the viewer to look to the next painting onwards. The viewer was drawn to look at the *First Station* from a short distance, but as well as seeing its surface in detail, in the periphery of their vision was the *Second Station*, and just beyond them (glimpsed with a turn of the head), the *Third* and *Fourth Stations*. At this angle, these paintings (which were those they were about to move to view) were seen obliquely, but their left edges, which could have been seen from an almost perpendicular angle, were painted, and acted to declare their presence. Along the side of the second painting, for instance, there are scruffy, upward strokes.²⁵⁰

As the viewer moved from the *First Station* to the *Second*, and then to the *Third* and *Fourth*, available to them were the same qualities of ‘intensity’ described before now with the knowledge that these paintings were being associated with ‘the Passion’ and all its references. Viewed close up and in turn, the distinctions between paintings were palpably clear. Earlier, I mentioned that the *Third Station* recalls the *First*, that the *Fourth* recalls the *Second*. I considered this idea of ‘recalling’ while thinking about four paintings in a studio, and the similarities and differences between them. Addressing their installation, the idea of recollection is more complex. As the spectator moved, before their eyes were new paintings they had not already looked at. The new paintings were viewed with the paintings that had just been seen in the moment-ago of recent memory. The *Fourth Station* is seen with the *Second* in mind, and therefore experienced in relation to the *Second*, and in contrast to the *Third*. This means that already, if we plot the movement of the spectator as forward (moving from *First Station* to *Second Station* and so on), a forward movement that mimics the forward progression of time (they see the *First Station* and then the *Second Station*), the linearity of these movements is utterly scattered by the criss-crossings of anticipation and memory. The paintings that are about to be seen are partially seen before they are reached, and when they are reached, those

²⁵⁰ There are paint marks on the left edges of all but the *Thirteenth Station*, and no painting at all on the right edges of all but the *Tenth*, *Thirteenth* and *Fourteenth* Stations. If the presence of paint on the stretchers suggests that Newman considered the visual content of the stretchers a part of the visual experience of the installation, the fact that painting occurs on the *left* suggests that Newman imagines a viewer proceeding around the installation in the same sequence as the paintings. I am grateful to Katherine Tuma of the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. who encouraged me to look more closely at these stretchers.

that have been seen are remembered. The paintings force a kind of viewing which requires memory: the phenomenology of perception includes the act of recollection.

After these paintings, the spectator had to climb up the steps to enter the main room of the installation (*fig.39*). By this point, though it was possible to step back from the paintings into the centre of the room, the practice of close viewing had been normalised by the experience on the ramp. Coming before the *Fifth Station* (*fig.40*), again, they had other paintings (ones to come) in their peripheral vision. Again, the paint work that was visible on the left sides of the stretchers (and rarely on the right) would have brought those paintings they had yet to reach into this vision. On the *Seventh*, for instance, there are brush strokes which arc between one edge of the stretcher - the wall plane - and the other - the canvas plane - there despite the absence of black paint at the left edge of the canvas. As the 'future' movement continues (they would have seen what they were about to view) so too the web of memories is further tangled as they continued around.

The *Fifth Station* has its drama on its left side - the first time this has happened (in order for this sense of 'first time' to be achieved, the four before have to be recalled). Paint has been dragged out of the thick black band into the raw canvas at the centre, in short, scuffy horizontal strokes (like those in *Third Station*) which, rather than fading out, come to a blotchy stop, as the brush was pressed into the canvas before being removed. There has been no painting around masking tape (like the first four), and instead to the right there is a very thin line (like those either side of the missing tape in the *Second Station*). Now onto the *Sixth* (*fig.41*). The left black area is sharply delineated and not brushed out (unlike the *Fifth*), and to the right, a black band has been made by filling in the gaps between two strips of tape (like in the *Third Station*). The tapes have left a yellowish residue, and the black paint seeped underneath them (like the seepage in the *Fourth*). And so on: as each new painting is approached, each one already seen is remembered, details no longer seen in the actual visual field recalled in the memory.

There were two more walls with paintings in this room, but already some ideas can be assembled about the viewer's experience. If, with the symmetry of *Onement I*, Newman



Fig. 39
Installation photograph with couple behind Newman

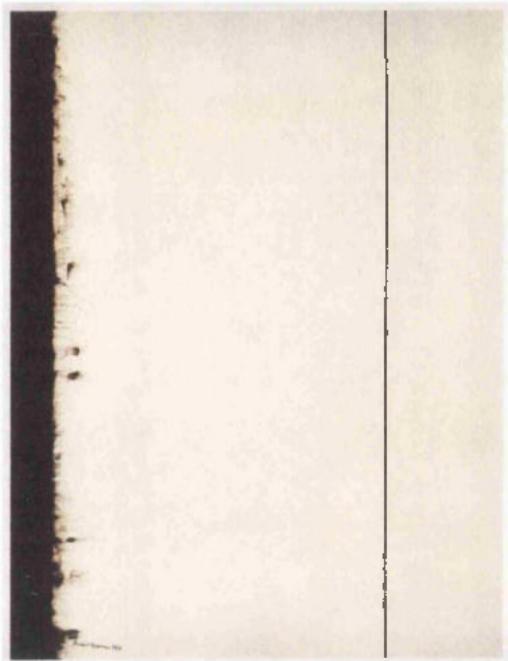


Fig. 40

Barnett Newman, *Fifth Station*, 1962
78" x 60" (198.1 x 152.4 cm), Oil on canvas
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection

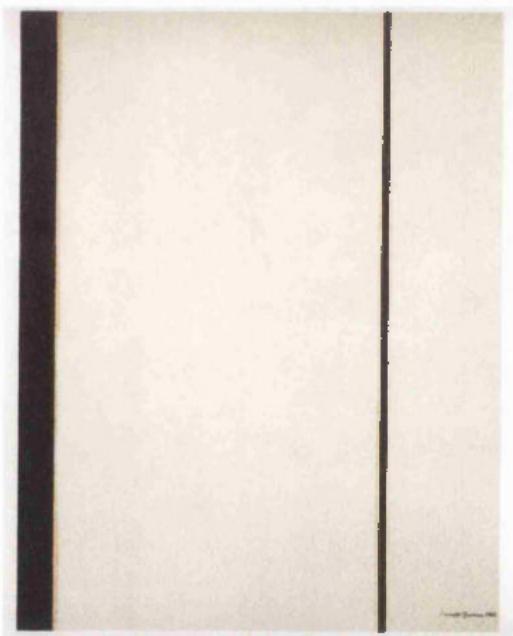


Fig. 41

Barnett Newman, *Sixth Station*, 1962
78" x 60" (198.1 x 152.4 cm), Oil on canvas
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection

did not illustrate ‘origin’, but actualized ‘originary perception’, then is it possible to suggest that through enabling the kind of experience I am describing, Newman did not illustrate what he thought of as the Passion, but somehow activated it? That the full ‘meaning’ of the Passion was available through the ‘seeing’? We can think first about time. Newman’s ‘Passion’ is a single moment, but it might seem that the temporality of the experience of the installation cannot be equated with singularity. Despite Newman’s statements that the Passion was not ‘the terrible walk’ but ‘a single event’, the installation is experienced over time and by walking. However, it is possible to describe two kinds of instantaneity that resolve this apparent impasse. In literal terms, paintings are seen at one moment. The viewer saw other paintings, and their edges, while in front of the actual painting they viewed. We can call this ‘literal’ instantaneity, and couple it with mnemonic instantaneity. Each painting was seen with all the others in mind. ‘Literal’ instantaneity seems to refer more to the bringing of paintings about-to-be-seen into the present, and mnemonic instantaneity brings paintings just-seen-and-remembered into the present. Together, these two kinds of instantaneity collapse (or superimpose) past and future time into the ‘single moment’ of the present.²⁵¹

As well as the ‘single moment’ of the Passion, the installation also created a sense of place. In literal terms, once in the main room, the viewer was surrounded. Whereas, in front of an expansive painting like *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-51), the viewer might feel enveloped, as if the flat plane of the canvas bends around them, here, the viewer actually could have seen that to their sides, and behind them, there were other parts of the work. However, this literal sense of place is less significant than the psychological sense of place. The viewer did not just stand in a spot which was actually flanked by other works. They had been caused to construct a ‘network’ of relationships between these works, and so wherever they stood, they were caught in the midst of this network. This

²⁵¹ These two kinds of instantaneity can be compared with Mel Bochner’s idea of ‘simultaneity’. (‘The Serial Attitude’ *Artforum* (December 1967) pp.28-33). Bochner defined simultaneity as ‘A correspondence of time or place in the occurrence of multiple events’ giving as examples Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*, where different moments of a continuous narrative sequence are superimposed onto the same place (the picture plane) and Johns’ 0-9 paintings, where integers (elements of a serial) are ‘superimposed’. The temporality and actual space of viewing is not considered. Newman’s achievement of a ‘single moment’ of time is not a collapse of different times or locations in the actual space of the picture plane, but a creation of a singularity of experience, and a sense of actual space.

'psychological' sense of this place might have intensified their physical sense of place, and also allows us to think about unity of the sense of place between the ramp (where the 'literal' sense of place was less possible) and the room (where they were, literally, surrounded).

The installation of the Stations organised a sense of time and of place for viewers. Though this time may be the time of 'the instant' (the temporality Newman associated with the Passion), and this place may be a place where they sensed being surrounded, it remains to be considered how these senses might make the viewer into the person asking 'the unanswerable question'. For this to happen, the viewer would have had to feel not only that they are in a place and time, but that this is a specific place and time, constitutive of a particular kind of experience.

The sense of the specificity of place was secured by the remaining paintings in the room, for these, coming after those described so far, cemented a sense of loss (*fig.42*). Painterly content had, so far, been very nuanced - the slightest differences demanding attention and registering as important contrasts between paintings in the series. Even such nuances were emptied out of paintings such as the *Eighth Station*, whose two, equally broad black bands, one at the left edge, and one towards the right, stretch down the canvas without dramatic signs of process, with almost perfectly straight edges (*fig.43*). The *Ninth*, *Tenth*, and *Eleventh Stations* even dispensed with black paint. Here, white paint took the place of black, imposing the tonal contrast of white paint and raw canvas in place of the chromatic contrast of black and white (*fig.44*). Black paint returned in the *Twelfth Station*, or rather a dark gray, painted over a black layer (*fig.45*). While the two deliberate drips at its left side were reminiscent of the *Fourth Station*, the gray tone might have seemed like a promise of a new kind of content, but the final two paintings were the most sparse in the series. The *Thirteenth* simply reversed the form of the *Eighth*, black paint in place of its raw canvas, and visa versa, straight lined edges with no brushwork visible (*fig.46*). The *Fourteenth Station*, alone on its own wall, was sparer still. Rather than contrasting white paint with raw canvas, Newman used two kinds of white (*fig.47*). The main body of the work is an undifferentiated expanse of white paint, free of all

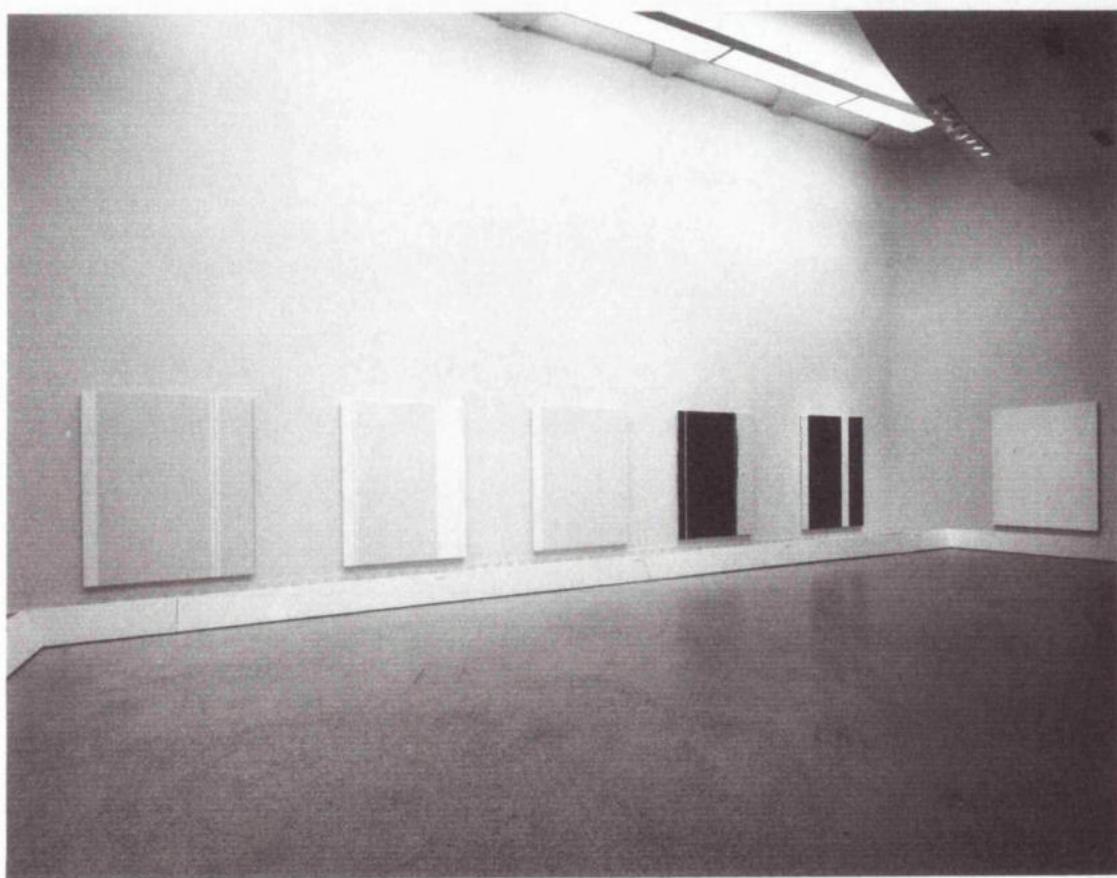


Fig. 42
Installation photograph with *Ninth to Fourteenth Stations*

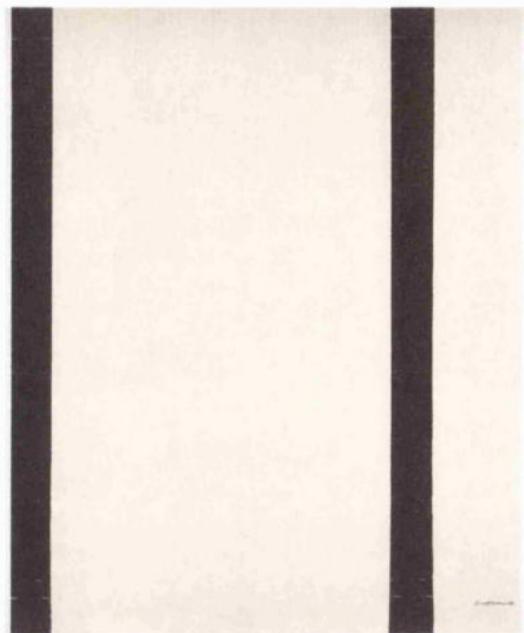


Fig. 43

Barnett Newman, *Eighth Station*, 1964
78" x 60" (198.1 x 152.4 cm), Oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection



Fig. 44

Barnett Newman, *Ninth Station*, 1964
78" x 60" (198.1 x 152.4 cm), Acrylic polymer on canvas
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection

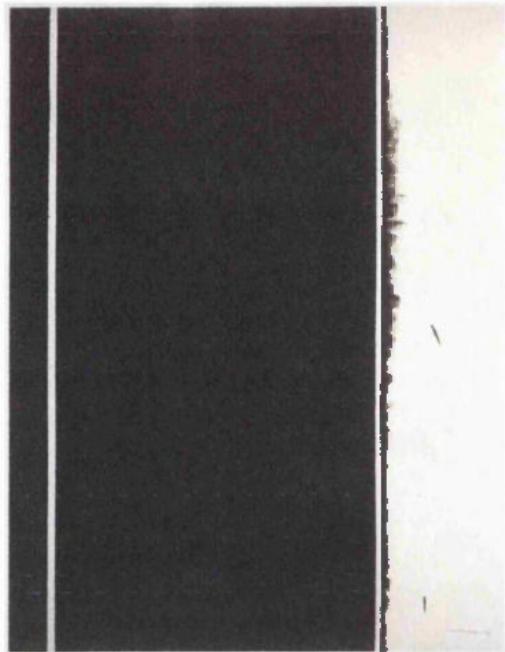


Fig. 45

Barnett Newman, *Twelfth Station*, 1965

78" x 60" (198.1 x 152.4 cm), Acrylic polymer on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection

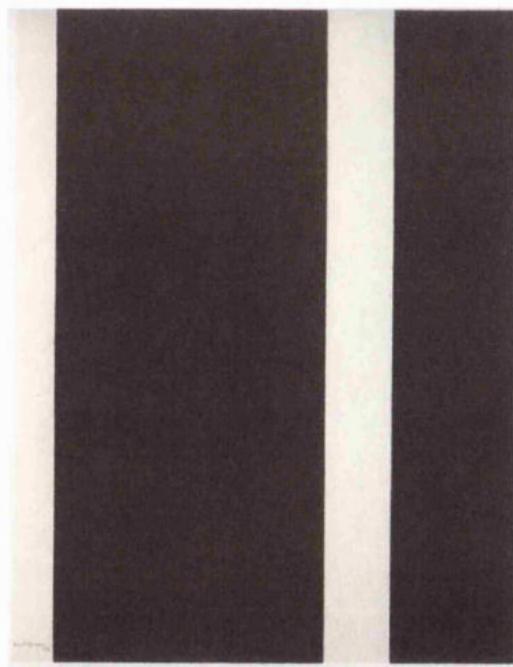


Fig. 46

Barnett Newman, *Thirteenth Station*, 1966

78" x 60" (198.1 x 152.4 cm), Acrylic polymer on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection

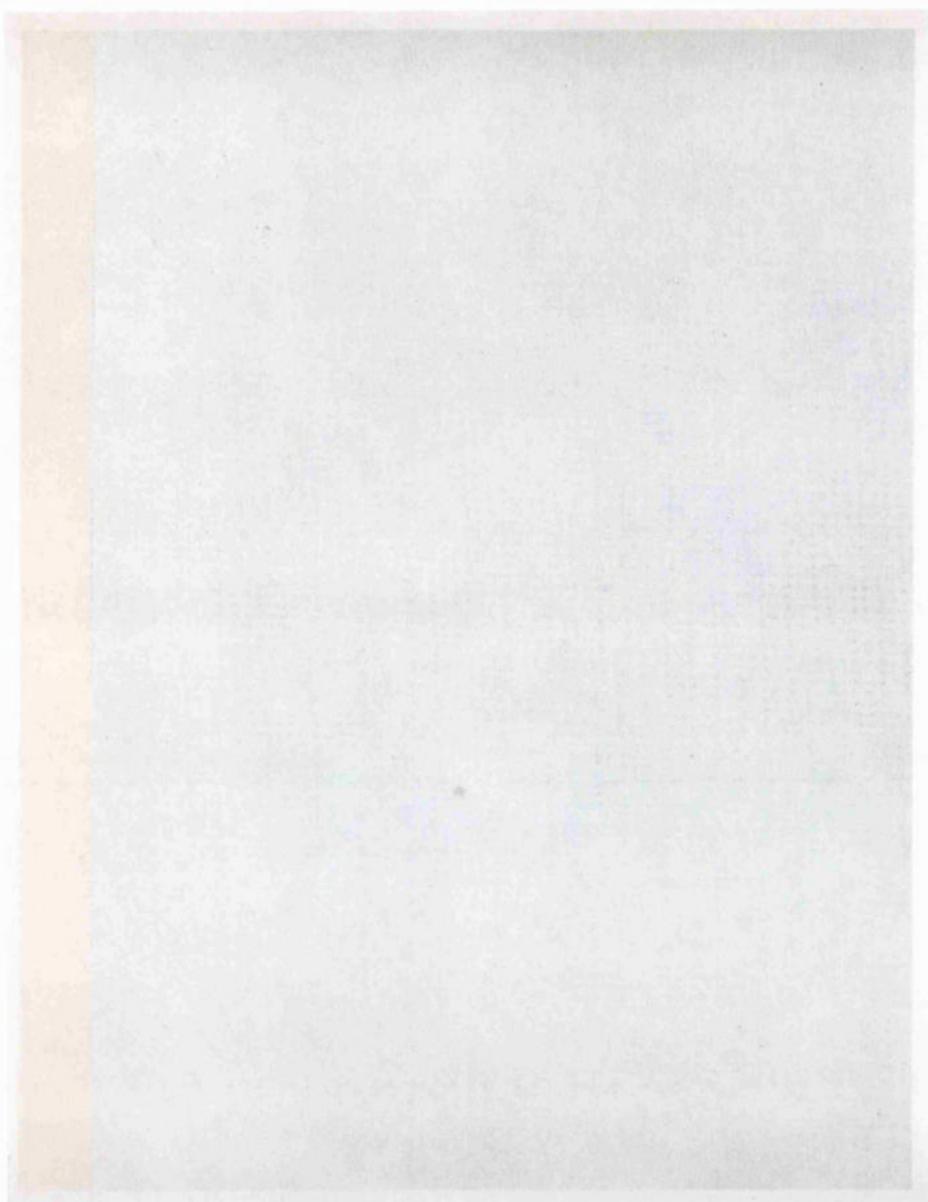


Fig. 47

Barnett Newman, *Fourteenth Station*, 1966

78" x 60" (198.1 x 152.4 cm), Acrylic polymer on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection

brushmarks or value contrasts. Along about six inches of the left side there is an area of dirtier white, up until a sharp line separating it from the main area of white. It is an extraordinarily blank painting, emptied of the minimal incidents that might have engaged the viewer in front of some of the other *Stations*. Seen with those earlier paintings in mind, its sparseness is more apparent still.

Throughout his career, Newman made several statements about the sense of place that he wished to establish for the viewers of his paintings. ‘One of the nicest things that anybody ever said about my work’, he told David Sylvester, ‘is when you yourself said that standing in front of my paintings you had a sense of your own scale.’²⁵² Following Sylvester, some, including Bois, have thought about the ‘sense of place’ in the general terms of Newman’s comments here. What a viewer comes to sense before the painting is a kind of awareness about their being positioned before it, their embodiment felt through the painting’s play with the lateral extent of their field of vision. But Newman was also insistent on differentiating kinds of places: ‘Some places are more sacred than others, and that depends, it seems to me, on the quality of the work of art, on its uniqueness, on its rigor.’²⁵³ We have seen how the installation at the Guggenheim might have achieved a sense of place. The loss of painterly content on the surfaces just seen might have been countered by a gain in specificity of the sense of place achieved. The sparseness of these paintings, and the sense of reduction of their processual, formal, and chromatic content (which, in the last two paintings becomes most apparent) added to the sensation of place. Though I would not want to think about it as a sacred place, the place becomes one of sparseness, one of loss, one where reduction is felt.²⁵⁴

²⁵² ‘Interview with David Sylvester, 1965’ *Newman* p.257

²⁵³ ‘Response to the Reverend Thomas F. Matthews’ *Newman* p.289

²⁵⁴ As I suggested in my M.A., the black and white paintings might have reminded Jewish viewers of the appearance of the ‘Tallit’ - a white shawl, striped with black strands. Chagall’s Jesus wears one in his *White Crucifixion*, and the viewer, surrounded by the *Stations*, might have been similarly cloaked. Newman’s oeuvre would discourage a reading which suggests that visual symbolism plays a part in the generation of meaning, but this cannot be discounted. John Canaday, after all, related the black stripes of the paintings to ‘unravelled phylacteries’ (Chagall’s Jesus also wears these). Newman was disgusted with this description, because he detected its anti-semitic basis - whatever Canaday’s motives, his comment does indicate that symbolic readings could be attached to the look of the paintings. The idea of the paintings as a kind of tallit strengthens the suggestion that Newman provided not only a sense of place, but a sense of a particular kind of place. Tallit are worn during prayer, and cover the male body when it is buried. If the

Is this to say, though, that the viewer was placed into the position of asking the question they read before entering the installation, 'Lema Sabachthani?'? Newman's viewer might have sensed the temporal character of Newman's Passion, and their presence in a place of loss, but could they be pushed in the process to ask such a question, a question which, as we have seen, addressed itself not just to a general sense of breakdown, but the crisis of breakdown after the Holocaust? This, I am arguing, was indeed Newman's ambition of the series - not to illustrate or express the Passion, so much as to make its viewer experience it - in other words, for his paintings to achieve their meanings through the process of their being viewed. But we are not yet finished, and nor is the series. One of the most significant ways of achieving this ambition was through the effect of the final painting, *Be II*.

paintings bring them to mind, the place of their installation does indeed become both sacred as well as deathly.

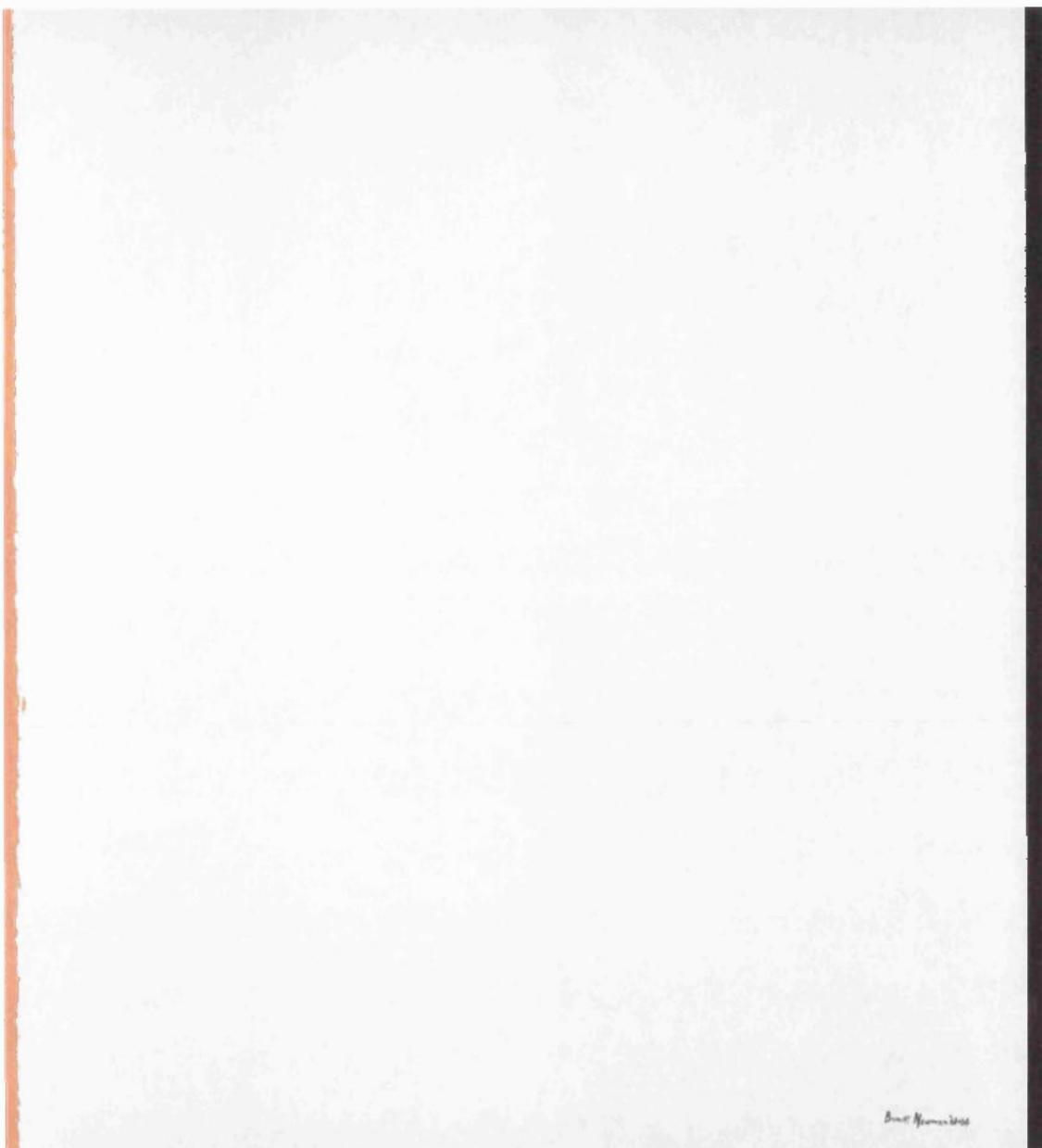


Fig. 48

Barnett Newman, *Be II*, 1961-64

80" x 72" (203.2 x 182.9 cm), Oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection

4. Be II, Awareness, Tragedy

Be II (fig.48) was installed outside the ‘High Gallery’, further down the ramp. It was placed as an end point in the installation - the last painting to which the installation directed the spectator. Though its difference in size from the *Stations* is quite small, *Be II* represents a large shift of scale, feeling much broader, certainly now broader than an armspan. Its central width is white, somewhat more gloopy paint than the thin white in the *Stations*. To its left there is a very thin band of cadmium red, and at the right, a band of black. The red seems actually to have been the first layer of paint on the canvas, and seems to have covered the entire canvas: in current lighting conditions, it seems to be present underneath the main body of white paint. Having overpainted a red plane with white paint, Newman taped over the section of it on the extreme left of the canvas, revealing a remaining band when the tape was removed. This band was then repainted, with thicker slabs of paint, which have been applied unevenly along its length.

Many commentators considered *Be II* as a final point in terms of the meaning of Newman’s work, some even suggesting that it offered a cheery resolution to the sombreness of the series.²⁵⁵ Such an argument would rely on the appearance of colour, and the widening of breadth, as offers of visual pleasure to uplift the viewer, and bring them away from the bleakness of the *Station* paintings. We can question this. Paying attention to very close detail, it appears that cadmium red may have actually been overpainted by the central expanse of white paint. What remains of the red (even though restated by a second coat) is merely a thin band on the left: and this, in any case, balanced by the black at the right. This is hardly a field of rich pigment, such as is found in *Whose Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue I* (fig.49), a painting made by Newman in the same year as the exhibition.

²⁵⁵ Walter Barker wrote that *Be II* ‘would certainly have Newman replying to the “Is God Dead” question with an unmistakable and cheerful “No, not quite!”’ ‘The Passion without the Image’, *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, 12 June 1966

Though the slightness of chromatic content should qualify any notion of the painting's cheer,²⁵⁶ *Be II* did represent a change in formal content. How are we to conceive the significance of this change?²⁵⁷ Rather than a 'happy ending', one might think *Be II* as a kind of re-beginning, as a moment of confirmation or awareness. Before *Be II*, one painting was seen through the remembered images of the others. With *Be II*, all would be remembered at once. Where chromatic and formal spareness were previously sensed, with the slightest appearance of colour, this spareness would be remembered, emphasised, even more apparent. It was only with the appearance of light, so to speak, that the spectator might properly sense the dark. We can also consider that in literal terms, *Be II* would have been glimpsed by the spectator as they looked at the first four *Stations* before going into the room.²⁵⁸ As well as an ending that was a re-beginning, *Be II* was an 'end point' seen from the beginning, a suggestion of what was to be missing from the room, a confirmation of the emptiness to come.

Glimpsed at the beginning, viewed at the end, as well as causing its viewer to register the spareness of the other paintings, to become aware of their starkness, *Be II* might also have prompted a more distant memory. The cadmium red in *Be II* recalls the use of this colour in several of Newman's most significant paintings, including *Onement I* (fig.50).

²⁵⁶ The architecture of the Guggenheim, with which Newman engaged, suggests a further reason to contest the idea of an uplifting end. Reaching *Be II*, the viewer was descending the spiral. Connecting the physical and metaphorical notions of descent seems rather literal, but we will see later when thinking about the architecture of the USHMM that its exhibition is organised around a downward spiral.

²⁵⁷ In my M.A. thesis I approached *Be II* through Julia Kristeva's notion of 'the beautiful'. For the melancholic, Kristeva writes, the beautiful is 'inseparable from the ephemeral and hence from mourning', and functions as 'an artifice, an ideal.' If *Be II* comes as the moment where aesthetic beauty is introduced into the series, this might not, therefore, be a resolution so much as a kind of false hope. (Kristeva, op. cit., pp.97-99) Another theoretical framework I employed was Jean Laplanche's notion of retranslation, which complicates Freud's account of the work of mourning. Whereas for Freud, the mourner's work reorders the present until a resolution is reached, for Laplanche, the entire past is reordered at the same time: 'the loss necessitates the work of a reordering of my existence.' (Jean Laplanche, *Seduction, Translation, Drives* (London, 1992) p.173) As each new work in the installation of *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* is encountered, the past experience of the installation is reordered: this takes place with a particular force when *Be II* is seen. I considered this process of re-ordering as akin to what Laplanche calls 'retranslation', and approached the spectator as a subject whose experience paralleled Laplanche's account of the work of mourning. In this text, I am trying to think more through the terms in which Newman addressed his work - the terms of tragedy and awareness. It is not so much that Kristeva and Laplanche are no longer helpful to think through *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*: rather, my inquiry is now deliberately more historical.

²⁵⁸ Jeremy Lewison, commenting on my M.A., reminded me that *Be II* would have been visible from the beginning of the exhibition. I am interested, though, in thinking about the way the installation organised the way it was seen. *Be II* was very much the last painting to which the viewer was directed.

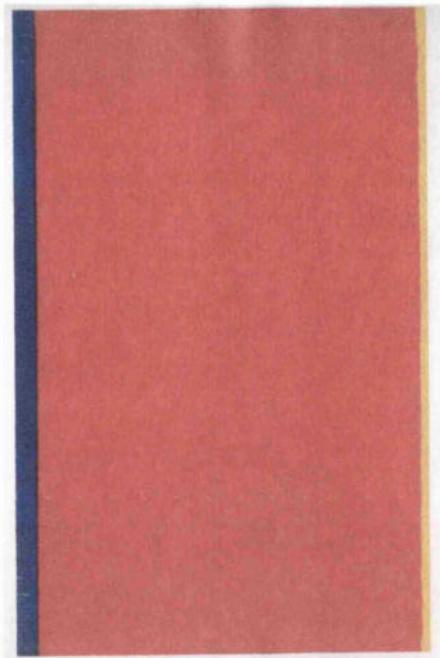


Fig. 49

Barnett Newman, *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue I*, 1966
75" x 48" (190.5 x 121.9 cm), Oil on canvas



Fig. 50

Barnett Newman, *Onement I*, 1948
27" x 16" (68.6 x 40.6 cm), Oil on canvas
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Annalee Newman

Even the texture of the cadmium red recalls the central zip of the 1948 painting: as Newman repainted the strip in *Be II*, adding on dabs of colour, so it began less to resemble the flatly painted ground of other paintings, and more the brushyness of that central zip. Recalling *Onement I*, the viewer of *Be II* would be made aware of the starkness of the *Stations* paintings in relation to earlier works. Between painting *Onement I* and declaring it complete, Newman wrote a text called 'The New Sense of Fate'. *Be II* acts in the installation of *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* to produce a moment of awareness, and in this text, Newman considered awareness as that which distinguished tragedy from terror.

The text addresses the difference between Greek art's attraction to beauty and Greek poets' interest in tragedy. While many Jews were using the notion of tragedy to describe the Holocaust²⁵⁹, Newman argued that American artists must engage in the terrain opened by Greek tragedians rather than artists. Newman explained his sense of the tragic in contrast to the surrealists', who 'identified tragedy with terror'. 'The war the surrealists predicted has robbed us of our hidden terror, as terror can exist only if the forces of tragedy are unknown. We now know the terror to expect. Hiroshima showed it to us. We are no longer, then, in the face of a mystery. After all, wasn't it an American boy who did it? The terror has indeed become as real as life. What we have now is a tragic rather than a terrifying situation.'²⁶⁰

The primary interest of this text might be in its demonstration of Newman's willingness to relate an aesthetic sensibility to a historic circumstance. More specifically, Newman identifies awareness as the marker of the tragic sensibility. Awareness is achieved by the acquisition of knowledge (by 1948, the events of the war were becoming known), and produces a sense of responsibility - Newman articulates the sense of guilt Americans might have after Hiroshima. These aspects of the concept of awareness might have been carried over into the strategies which operated in *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*.

²⁵⁹ For instance, in a memo dated 26 June 1946, Meyer Shapiro, discussing plans for the Jewish Museum, wrote of the 'tragic experience of the Jewish people' (Ratner Center R.G.25 1/3)

²⁶⁰ Newman p.169

Be II, in functioning to as a moment of awareness, reveals the schema of *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* to be one modelled on Newman's notion of tragedy. A moment akin to terror (inside the place, and at the single moment) is followed by a moment of realisation or awareness. Newman indeed described *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* to Thomas Hess as having 'a tragic theme'. As far as the spectator is concerned, we might say that they are cast as a kind of tragic subject - experiencing the moment of despair, before becoming aware.

In 1948, the awareness of recent events prompted a new kind of responsibility. By 1966, the knowledge of the history of the war had broadened, especially after the Eichmann trial. The idea of responsibility had also changed. Americans were becoming aware of the former irresponsibility that enabled their government to stand by, to use the title of a 'chronicle of American apathy' written in 1965, 'While 6 Million Died'.²⁶¹ The remembrance of old wars brought a kind of responsibility in relation to new ones (and we can remember that Newman made reference to Vietnam whilst relating the Passion to contemporary suffering). In more general terms, having survived the Holocaust accidentally ('The idea that those of us who were not killed got away scot free is unthinkable', as Philip Leider wrote to Michael Fried²⁶²), Jewish Americans, as much as remembering it, as much as asking the difficult questions imposed by this memory, had now to take a kind of responsibility in relation to this survival.

Perhaps Newman's most far-reaching ambition with *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* was to create a place, though an installation of abstract paintings, where a viewer might not only be placed to ask 'Lema Sabachthani?', the question posed by the Holocaust. Aware of their situation, even of their survival, and becoming a tragic subject, they would also be aware of their responsibility in relation to the cause of such despair. Speaking about a 'sense of place' in 1967, Newman prefaced his remarks (quoted above) with the comment that 'It's only after man knows where he is that he can ask himself

²⁶¹ Arthur Morse published his research in a series of articles in *Look* magazine, later collected as *While 6 Million Died* (New York, 1967). See also George Steiner, op. cit.

²⁶² See note 44.

'Who am I?' and 'Where am I going?'. If a viewer was to experience a 'sense of place' before Newman's work, this was never just to be a phenomenological experience, but the grounds of a moral one. Of course, a critic like Max Kozloff distrusted the 'moralistic packaging' of Newman's work, dissuaded, perhaps, by a pomposity in his rhetoric, but we might now consider Newman's ambitions for the viewer not as a feature of bombast, but as a moral ambition, an ambition demanded by the necessities of their historical moment. After giving viewers the sense of a place of loss, making them aware of that place - after pushing viewers to ask questions related to the disaster of the Holocaust - and then making them aware of the conditions of survival - the works set up the possibilities for a responsibility in connection to this awareness. Holocaust memory is at play in *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* - but the project of Holocaust memorial is not constructed as a project involving the acquisition of knowledge about history, or the recollection of historical detail. Holocaust memorial instead requires the subject's repositioning of themselves with regard to the demands of memory.

5. Memory and Identification

In Louis's paintings, black paint conjured burnt pages, white paint, firewriting. Here, black paint does not conjur the wood of a cross, nor white paint the cry 'Lema Sabachthani'. Though the suggestions of the title are in play in the way the paintings signify, they are not, then, in play in relation to parts of the paintings, so much as what the paintings stand for in terms of aesthetic loss. The titles set up the encounter with the series, producing a kind of suggestion to the viewer as to the content of the paintings. The primary difference in terms of the generation of meaning has less to do with the question of the relationship between the title and the work and rather more to do with space and installation. Louis's viewer might have encountered the paintings in any order. Newman's installation produced the environment in which the question asked in his title would be generated.

Another point of difference is the nature of remembrance. Louis's viewer was prompted to think about past events in relation to the present, but these memories, if extremely pertinent, were always held at a distance. Newman's viewer became a kind of tragic subject - asking *the* question of Holocaust survival. In his statements on *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*, in keeping with the chain of references to the Crucifixion, Newman referred to 'the first pilgrims [who] walked the Via Dolorosa to identify themselves with the original moment'.²⁶³ The process of identification is the process the viewing subject goes through, themselves becoming the tragic subject, asking 'Lema?' This process resonates with another historically Jewish mode of remembrance. The paradigm moment of identification occurs in the Passover service, where the celebrant is instructed to tell themselves that *they* had come out of Egypt. Describing such rituals, Yerushalmi has written that 'whatever memories were unleashed by the commemorative rituals and liturgies were surely not a matter of intellection, but of evocation and identification'.²⁶⁴ Having survived the foundational catastrophe of Jewish Biblical history, Jews remember this catastrophe through telling themselves that *they* survived. I

²⁶³ Newman, p.188

²⁶⁴ Yerushalmi, op. cit., p.44

am not suggesting that the viewer of Newman's series was to imagine themselves in the camps - this is not the kind of identification that was either sought or deemed possible: rather, the viewer identified with the question imposed by the camps, the question imposed *for them*. This difference in modes of remembrance might be re-characterised: Louis's viewer is perhaps a subject in mourning, remembering what was lost, and attempting to re-begin. Newman's viewer is a tragic subject, thinking about *their* own predicament.

These are some differences between the kind of relationships between abstraction and Holocaust memory in the two series discussed this far. What seems shared is the complexity of the relationship. It was helpful to consider Blanchot's concept of absent meaning to theorise the insecurity of the suggestions in play through the surfaces and the titles of Louis' work. As there is no comparable link between surfaces and titles in the first place in *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*, it is hardly appropriate to think about the notion of the insecurity of this link. And yet it is still important to recognise that since there is no inherent relationship between the surface of a painting in Newman's series and Holocaust memory - since this relationship is established only though thinking through its relationship to other paintings, through titling and installation, in other words, through contingencies - the relationship is one which is insecure. Writing on Chagall's use of the Crucifixion, one critic, we might recall, insisted 'Lest there be any doubt about the analogy, Chagall defined his meaning by drawing the Jewish phylacteries on the arms and forehead of the naked Christ on the cross.'²⁶⁵ Clearly, whatever meanings I have suggested of Newman's work are themselves full of 'doubt', never 'defined'. Newman himself never conceived the process of generating meanings as one of defining, constraining, excluding the possibilities of doubt.

At the same time, it is important to note the manner in which Newman did seek to control a kind of experience of *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*. Paintings were not allowed to do their job alone, so to speak; we have seen that Newman aimed to create an expanded experience for the viewer, and one that would include their experience of

²⁶⁵ See note 222.

space, time, and text, as well as their visual experience of the paintings themselves. Briony Fer has suggested that Mark Rothko's 'increasing attempts to make environments for his works' can be seen as 'a means to totalise experience'.²⁶⁶ For Fer, this bears witness to the precarious situation of painting in the 1960s. I would locate Newman's attempt to control experience (if not meaning) less as an indication of the compromised situation of painting, and rather as another sign of his post-Holocaust situation that caused the kind of anxiety requiring Newman to take such control.²⁶⁷ So, just as it is possible to consider meanings of *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* in the way I have been doing, the entire project, taken as a whole, witnesses the conditions of its making. Newman's self-presentation through *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* also continues to bear witness to his historical situation. In the course of the exhibition, Newman made pronouncements mobilising a range of Biblical, liturgical, and mystical Jewish texts, attempted to address the question of a critic's anti-Semitism in *The New York Times*, whilst all the time striving to universalise the possible meanings of his work. Once again, these convoluted moves seem to witness the position of the secular post-war Jew.

The questions of self-presentation and of installation have introduced the intertwined factors of the public and of space. In the following chapter, I will be moving from a description of how an artist might structure a spatial experience to an account of an architectural space, commissioned by public organisations for a civic public. The space in question was one commissioned as a Holocaust memorial: Louis Kahn's *Memorial to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs*.

²⁶⁶ Briony Fer, Unpublished talk on Mark Rothko delivered at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2001

²⁶⁷ Of course had Rothko's plans to paint a Holocaust chapel in Germany been successful (see note 85), it would be interesting to compare this with the environment of Newman's *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*.

CHAPTER FOUR: LOUIS KAHN'S MEMORIAL TO THE SIX MILLION JEWISH MARTYRS

1. Synagogues, Museums, Modernism, Monuments, Memorials

As well as Barnett Newman's model, Richard Meier's 1963 exhibition 'Recent American Synagogue Architecture' included Louis Kahn's plans and model for the proposed Mikveh Israel Synagogue, a project on which Kahn was working for a Philadelphia community. Like Newman's, Kahn's synagogue was then unbuilt (it remained so), and so his contribution also marked a kind of special case in the exhibition. Kahn's design for Mikveh Israel contrasted with Newman's synagogue plan, in particular in the way Kahn activated the community, where Newman dramatised the role of the individual, and Kahn's concern with community will be of concern later. However, there is an interesting link, less between the designs themselves than between the thinking processes behind them. Kahn's project was characterised by his ambition to address first principles. Instead of starting with practicalities and attempting to find a way to combine study, prayer, and meeting spaces in one edifice, Kahn separated these spaces from each other. As he did, he attempted to make each embody the essential character of its use, asking what, in essence, 'study', 'prayer', or 'meeting' were, and conceiving structures accordingly. Characteristically, Kahn commented that 'I must be in tune with the spirit that created the first synagogue. I must rediscover that sense of beginnings through beliefs.'²⁶⁸ Many commentators have considered the question of 'beginnings' in relation to Kahn's entire oeuvre,²⁶⁹ but in this context, we might foreground another kind of root for Kahn's search for origins. Just as we can historicise Newman's fascination with Kabbalistic notions of origin (a fascination manifested in his design), so we should locate Kahn's interest in

²⁶⁸ David Brownlee and David DeLong (eds.), *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture* (New York, 1991), p. 364.

²⁶⁹ Stanford Anderson argued that Kahn's fascination with the misty foundations of English history caused him to seek essences. 'Public Institutions: Louis I. Kahn's Reading of Volume Zero' *Journal of Architectural Education* (September 1995) pp. 10-21. Joseph Burton argued that Kahn's process was rooted in his mother's interest in the Romantic movement, his own visits to Egypt, and the fact that a relative had been a Jewish mystic. 'Notes from Volume Zero: Louis Kahn and the Language of God' *Perspecta* 20 (1983), pp. 69-90.

'beginnings' as a post-war interest. These beginnings were always, as we have also discussed in relation to Morris Louis's work, re-beginnings.

If Kahn's and Newman's contributions were different kinds of exceptions, 'Recent American Synagogue Architecture' itself was an exception in The Jewish Museum's programme of the 1960s: it was the only exhibition to foreground an encounter between Jewish and modernist visual culture. In this chapter, I will be thinking about another encounter, and one that also occurred in New York, but outside The Jewish Museum. I will be looking at Kahn's proposal for a *Memorial to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs*, a proposal initiated three years after Meier's exhibition. Commissioned in 1966, designed, presented and modified in 1967, exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art in 1968, progress on Kahn's project deteriorated in the early 1970s, until his death in 1974 put a close to attempts to build the memorial. Though - as we will see - the memorial went through many changes, in its first form it comprised a platform, with three steps, on which would stand nine blocks of solid, transparent glass. The blocks would be square sections, and would be fractionally higher than they were to be wide. They would be arranged in a regular 3 x 3 grid, with the space between the blocks equal to the space within them (*fig.51*). Before coming to this proposal, however, it is worthwhile staying for some time, as it were, with The Jewish Museum. In order to consider the significance of Kahn's *Memorial*, we need to think about the way Jewish New Yorkers became active as cultural patrons. We will also need to pay attention to previous Holocaust memorial proposals in New York, and to contemporary abstraction. All three of these areas can first be examined through the lens of The Jewish Museum. We can first tackle the issue of patronage.

Apart from 'Recent American Synagogue Architecture', other contemporary exhibitions organised between 1957 and 1971 under the directorships of Alan Solomon, Sam Hunter, and Karl Katz tended to abandon any kind of ambition to address Jewish cultural questions. Exhibitions showcased modernist artists without any intention of suggesting the possible relationships between modernist art works and recent Jewish history. When Morris Louis was represented in another 1963 exhibition, 'Towards a New Abstraction',

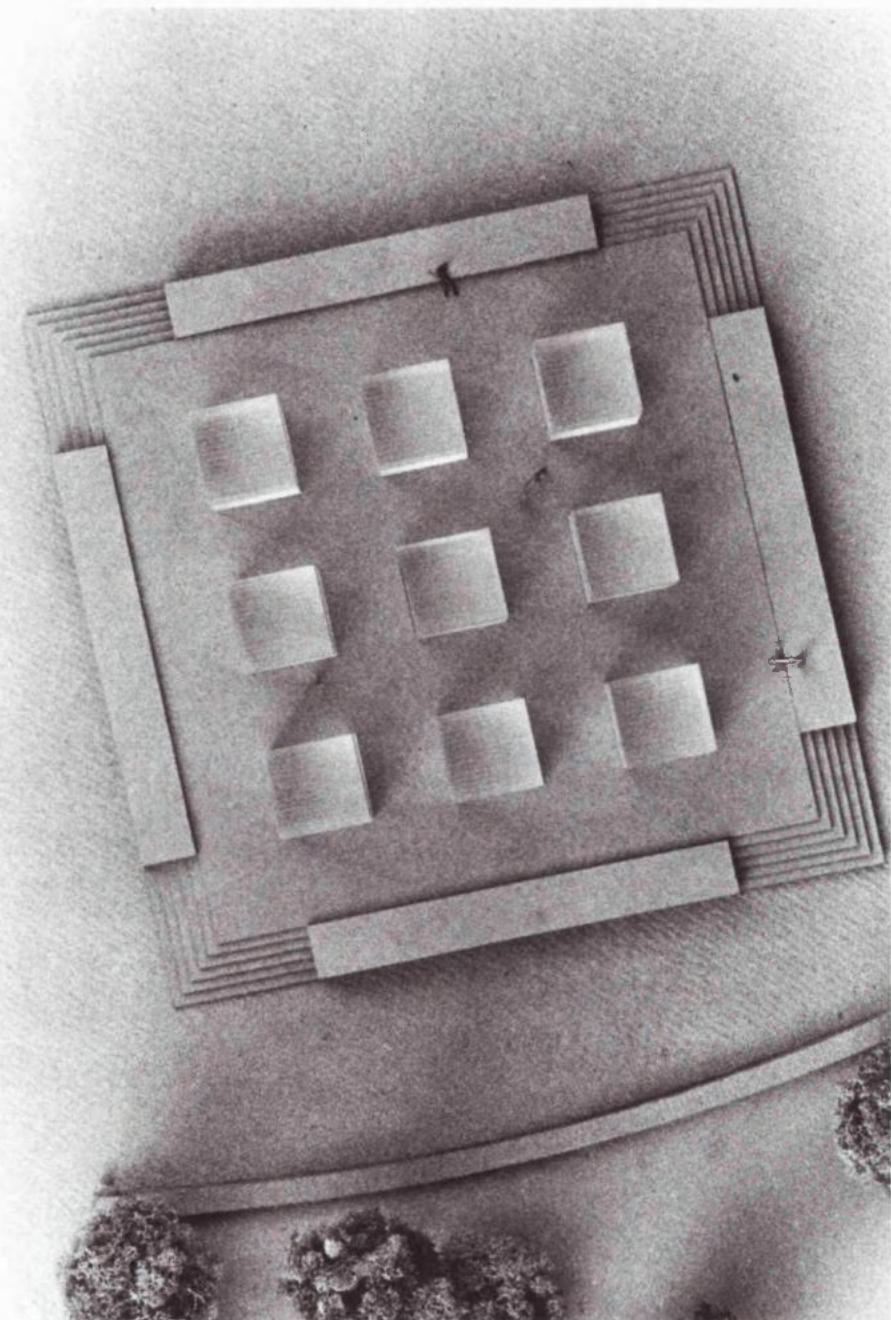


Fig. 51

Louis I. Kahn, *Memorial to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs* (Nine Pier Model), 1966-72

Photograph by George C. Alikakos

Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania, and Pennsylvania Historical and Museum
Commission

it was not by the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings; Newman was included in 'Black and White' (also 1963) alongside Robert Motherwell and Robert Rauschenberg - represented, then, as a painter working in these colours, colours stripped, precisely, of symbolic meaning. 'Recent American Synagogue Architecture' stands out from the other exhibitions mounted at the time, then, but it also stands as an emblem for the programme as a whole. The exhibition publicised the extent to which Jewish communities had been patrons of advanced architecture: the museum programme itself represented the most visible form of this kind of patronage.

The impetus to build new synagogues between the late 1940s and early 1960s was directly related to the effect of the memory of the Holocaust on American Jews.²⁷⁰ How though, we might ask, was The Jewish Museum programme between 1957 and 1971 itself related to the question of Holocaust memory? It has been argued, as it was at the time, that the programme demonstrated the proper role of Jews in diasporic societies.²⁷¹ If we accept this argument, the programme might be characterised as somehow memorialising the cultural work of destroyed Western European communities. This argument positions Jewish patrons as altruistic: the gain sought through patronage was positive affiliation with advanced culture. In demonstrating an urgent impulse to have this affiliation, the programme might also be said to witness a kind of post-Holocaust anxiety: after cultural exclusion, Jews were more desperate than ever to cement a place in the host culture.

When it ended in the late 1960s, while supporters of the modernist programme publicised the argument for the role of Jews as patrons²⁷², the programme was accused of having had an amnesiac function. Reflecting on the effect of a decade of exhibitions of modernist art, Alfred Eris wrote to *The New York Times* and asked readers to 'Imagine, if you please, a nation which loses one-third of its number...vast amounts of Jewish artistic and historic treasures destroyed... [and yet] The Jewish Museum in New York keeps

²⁷⁰ See note 190.

²⁷¹ Arthur A. Danto, 'Postmodern Art and Concrete Selves – The Model of the Jewish Museum' in *From the Inside Out – Eight Contemporary Artists* (The Jewish Museum, New York, 1993)

²⁷² Arthur A. Cohen, 'Museum of Mausoleum', *The New York Times*, 7 February 1971, pp. D 21, 23

most of its Judaica in cartons...²⁷³ The modernist programme, according to Eris, had amounted to a wilful attempt to box up Jewish history. Prior to the programme, however, the museum had represented this history through exhibitions of contemporary work. In 1948, for instance, the Museum devoted a room to an exhibition of Jo Davidson's and Eli Jacques Kahn's proposal for a Holocaust memorial for Riverside Park. 'Their design depicted a heroic resistance figure, a religious Jew in supplication, and a man helping an injured comrade, along with a slumping dead figure.'²⁷⁴ According to the art critic Heinz Politzer, this 'reveal[ed] all the worst features of sentimental nationalism.'²⁷⁵ Subsequent proposals for New York Holocaust memorials hardly seemed to progress the high cultural ambitions of those who would later support the Museum's modernist programme. Such proposals included Erich Mendelsohn's 1951 memorial with its 80-foot high pylon of the Ten Commandments (*fig.52*), Nathan Rapoport's 1962 proposed sculpture of the Polish Jewish martyr Artur Zygelboim (*fig.53*), and Neil Easton's 1965 proposal of a 30 foot high bronze statue of Cain and Abel. (One of the reasons Jewish organisations objected to this was the implication that Nazis and Jews were brothers.) These proposals, none of which were ever realised, were not themselves exhibited at The Jewish Museum, but in the years they were conceived, the building itself became a proposed site for the establishment of a Holocaust memorial for New York City.²⁷⁶

In 1958, the year after 'Artists of the New York School - Second Generation' and the initiation of the modernist programme, The Jewish Museum began the process of expansion through the building of the Vera and Albert List Wing, an extension to the Warburg mansion. When plans for the wing began, the nature of its function was still undecided. Dr. Louis Finkelstein, the president of the Jewish Theological Seminary (the Museum's parent body), had been in communication with Michael Zagayski, an immigrant from Europe, and the owner of one of the most important collections of Jewish

²⁷³ 'A Jewish Jewish Museum?', *The New York Times*, 28 February 1971, p. D23

²⁷⁴ Rochelle Saidel, *Never Too Late to Remember* (New York, 1996) p.49. Saidel's book describes the history of early proposals for New York.

²⁷⁵ Heinz Politzer, 'The Opportunity of The Jewish Museum' *Commentary* (June 1949) p.590

²⁷⁶ I have been directed to the material concerning Michael Zagayski by Julie Miller, who did not include this information in her published work on the Jewish Museum. (See note 18). I am very grateful to her for her archival help.

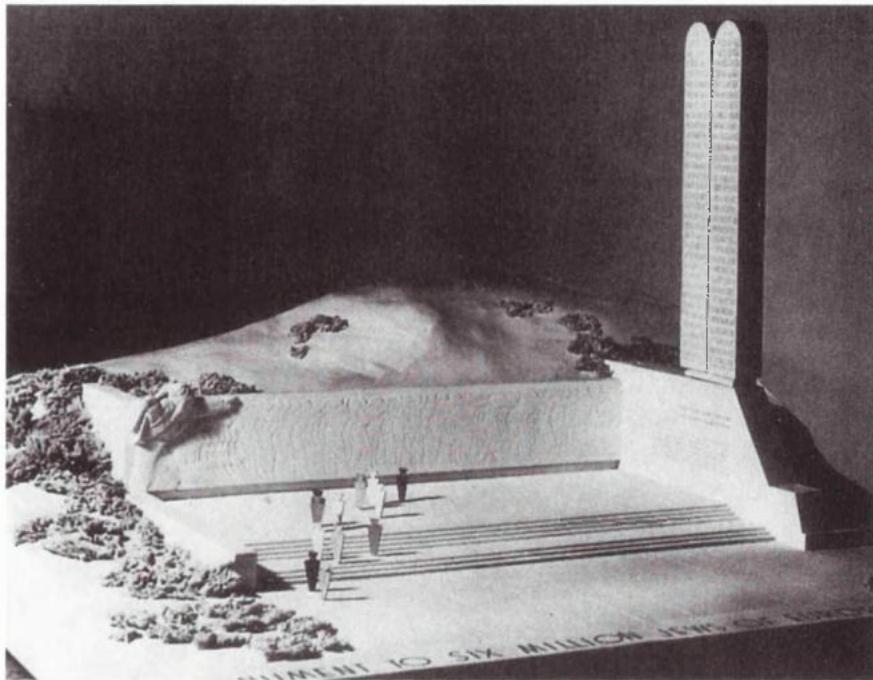


Fig. 52

Erich Mendelsohn and Ivan Mestrovic, Holocaust Memorial proposed for Riverside Park, Manhattan, 1951

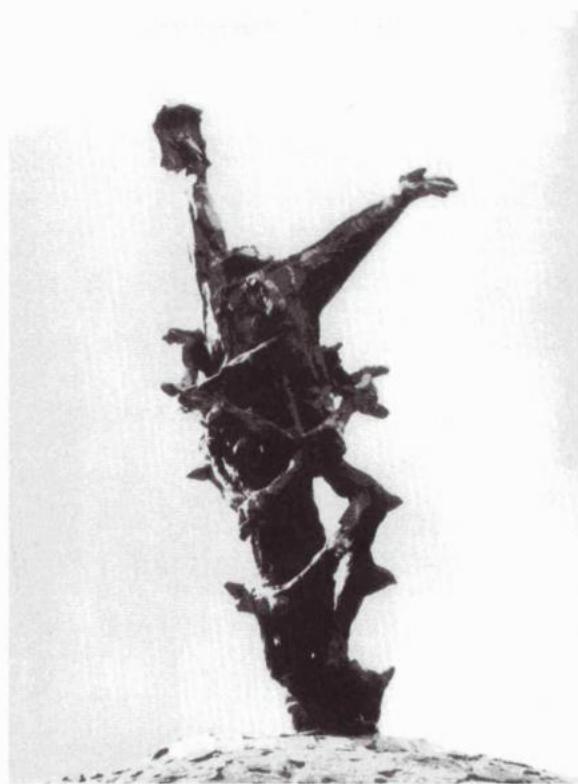


Fig. 53

Nathan Rapoport, Design for Zygelboim Holocaust Memorial for Riverside Park, Manhattan, 1962

silver in the world.²⁷⁷ As Zagayski recalled in a letter, his idea was ‘to erect a memorial in the City of New York to the Jewish Hitler victims.’ [sic] Zagayski’s letter continues: ‘At a meeting attended by friends of the Seminary, it was proposed and agreeable to me that a Memorial, a separate and individual building was to be erected upon land donated by the Seminary with funds donated by Albert List to house my collection of Judaica.’²⁷⁸ Zagayski also hoped the building would include a chapel of sorts. Yet the Lists were not simply interested in donating funds for the construction of the new building; they wished to play a part in determining its function. List promised \$0.5m for the construction, but on the grounds that one floor of ‘the Memorial Building’ be ‘available for contemporary shows’. He also stipulated that ‘No temple is to be housed in this building.’²⁷⁹ When a lawyer acting for the JTS told Zagayski of this condition, and that the JTS ‘did not want the entire building which is to be erected to be the Memorial’, Zagayski ‘appeared deeply shocked... He said that this represented a change in position on the part of the Seminary.’²⁸⁰ As Zagayski recalled, the plan to include contemporary art in the new wing amounted to ‘a minimization of the Jewish tragedy.’ The memorial would not be ‘a separate and individual memorial that the public would see and remember[,] but would rather appear to be a “swept under the rug” recognition that some Jews had been killed.’²⁸¹ Zagayski thereupon ceased his plans to work with the JTS and Jewish Museum to create a memorial, refused to donate his collection to the Museum, and began working towards a memorial with other bodies and organisations instead.²⁸²

This story shows the extent to which the institution was dependent on its patrons. Yet, given the choice between creating a Holocaust memorial, and wing that would be part-Holocaust memorial, part contemporary art space, the institution chose the latter, and

²⁷⁷ The earliest document of contact is Dr. Louis Finkelstein’s letter of 16 June 1958 to Jakob Michael, in which he notes that ‘the Seminary has committed itself to the concept of creating a Yizkor memorial for the martyred Jews of Europe’, and that the Seminary was working with Michael Zagayski to raise funds for this. Letter from Dr. Louis Finkelstein to Jakob Michael, 16 June 1958, Ratner Center, Zagayski papers 1-10

²⁷⁸ Letter from Michael Zagayski to Dr. Louis Finkelstein, 3 April 1964. Zagayski papers, 1-12

²⁷⁹ Letter from Albert List to Dr. Louis Finkelstein, 7 September 1960. Zagayski papers 1-11

²⁸⁰ Letter from Morton Pepper to Dr. Joseph Kauffman of the JTS, 11 October 1960. Zagayski papers 1-11

²⁸¹ Letter from Michael Zagayski to Dr. Louis Finkelstein of the JTS, 3 April 1964. Zagayski papers 1-12

²⁸² Despite this row, the museum did exhibit Zagayski’s collection in 1963, and continued to work to acquire parts of it.

what it ended up getting was simply contemporary and non-contemporary art exhibition spaces. In one way, therefore, it can be said that the most innovative museum exhibitions in New York in the 1960s took place at the expense of, indeed *in the place of*, a Holocaust memorial in the city. Perhaps the most famous of these exhibitions is 'Primary Structures', running between April and June 1966 while Newman's *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* was installed some streets away. The exhibition included work by Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Dan Flavin, and Sol LeWitt (fig.54). Though the questions of memory I have addressed were not, at the time, discussed in relation to Newman's work, memory was an important concept addressed in Robert Smithson's response to *Primary Structures*. As has been suggested, the programme of which the exhibition was a part itself might represent a kind of cultural amnesia; for Smithson, works in it encouraged a different kind of amnesia. In 'Entropy and the New Monuments', Smithson wrote of minimalist sculpture that 'Instead of causing us to remember the past like old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future.'²⁸³ Forgetting the future meant being mired in the present. In Judd's, Morris's, Flavin's, and LeWitt's work, 'past and future are placed into an objective present'.²⁸⁴ Smithson's account also addressed 'the much denigrated architecture of Park Avenue known as "cold glass boxes"'²⁸⁵. Smithson, who was less concerned with attacking this architecture than relishing the atmosphere it produced, saw it as influencing the work of the artists considered: it 'helped to foster the entropic mood'.²⁸⁶

If Smithson described minimalist sculptures in The Jewish Museum as 'new monuments', the graveyard for old monuments, so to speak, was some miles away in Battery Park. The park included 'a tasteless war memorial which consists of a series of huge granite slabs bearing alphabetical lists of those lost at sea in World War II'.²⁸⁷ This stood nearby the Wireless Operator's Memorial, the Verrazano Statue, the Castle Clinton National Monument, the Emma Lazarus Memorial, the Walloon Monument, the Ericsson Statue,

²⁸³ Robert Smithson, 'Entropy and the New Monuments' *Artforum* (June 1966) p.26

²⁸⁴ Ibid., p.26

²⁸⁵ Ibid., p.27

²⁸⁶ Ibid., p.27

²⁸⁷ Samuel Kaplan and Gilbert Tauber, *The New York City Handbook* (New York, 1966) p.338 and 404

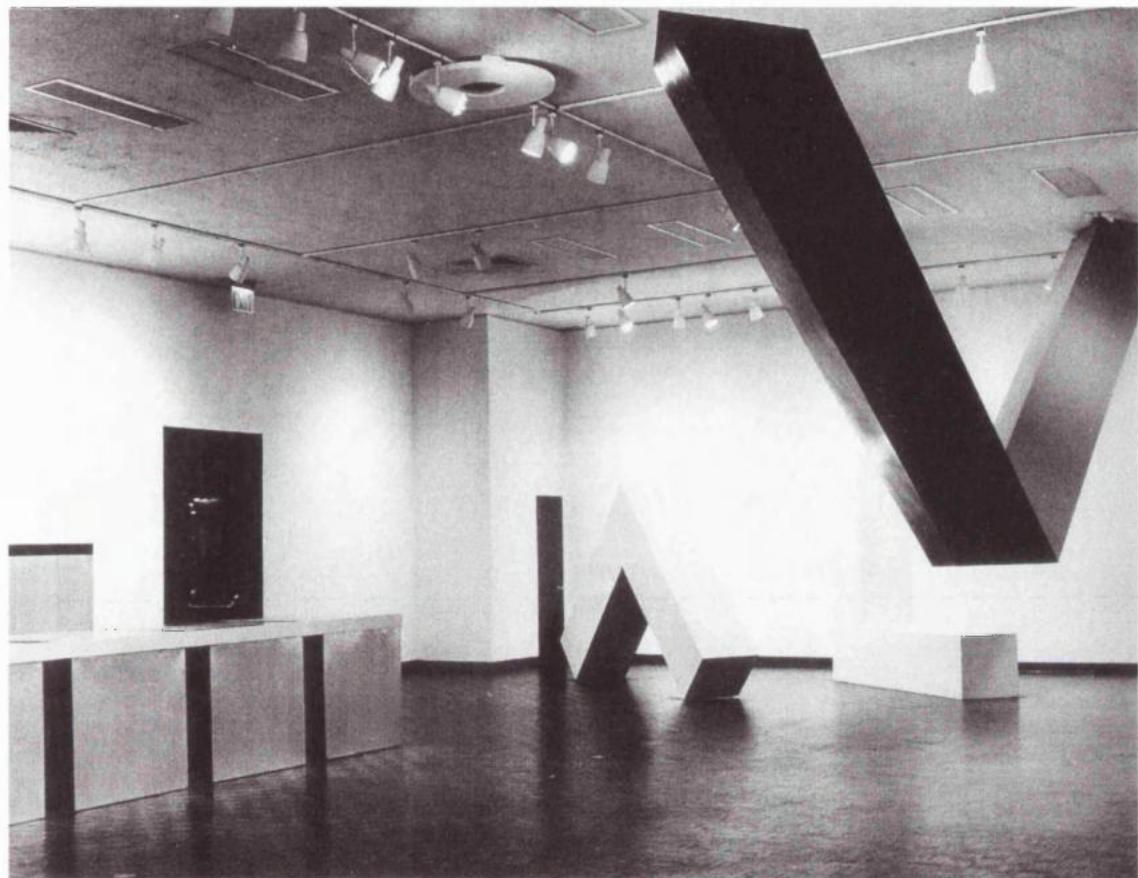


Fig. 54

Installation view of *Primary Structures* at The Jewish Museum, New York, 1966.
Left to right: Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1966; Robert Morris, *Untitled* (2 L-Beams), 1965; Robert Grosvenor,
Transoxiana, 1965

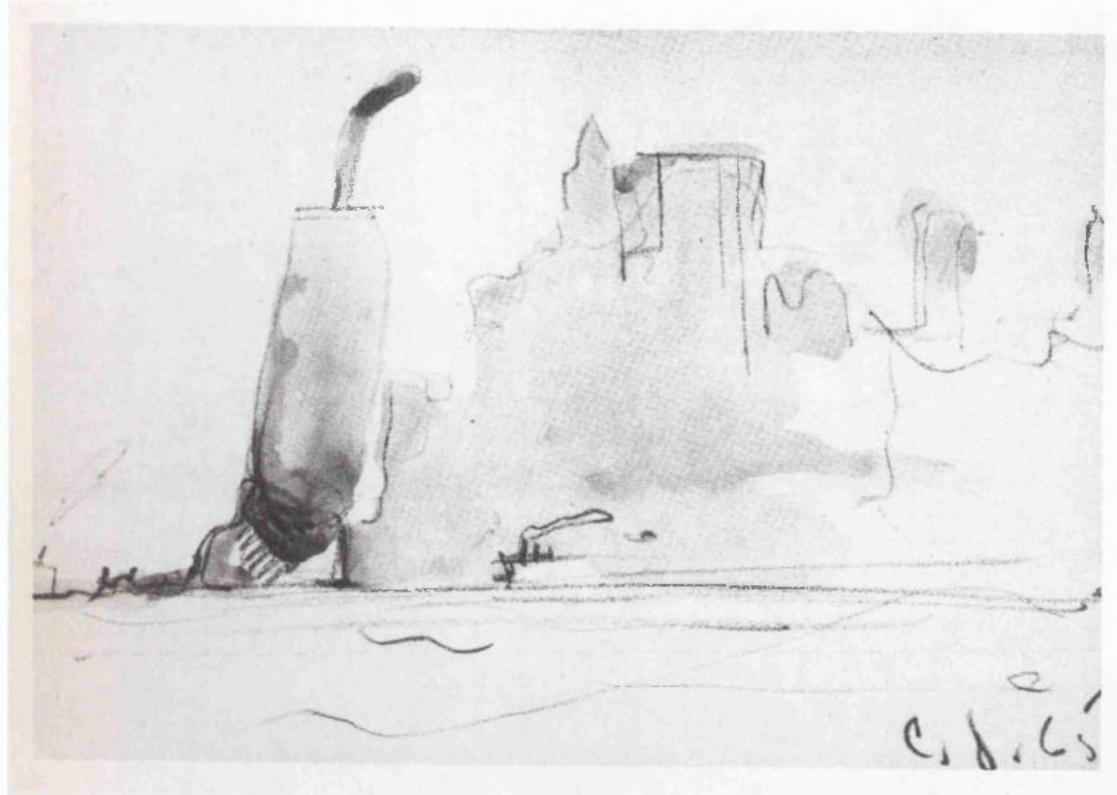


Fig. 55

Claes Oldenburg, *Proposed Colossal Monument for the Battery, New York: Vacuum Cleaner (East River View)*, 1965

12" x 17 3/4" (30.5 x 45 cm)

Crayon and watercolour

and the Coast Guard Memorial.²⁸⁸ In 1965, Claes Oldenburg, whose own take on the monument we will return to, proposed a new monument for the park. In his drawing, a giant vacuum cleaner towers as high as the skyscrapers, leaving the park tidy and bare. (fig.55)

We return now to Louis Kahn, for Battery Park was also the intended site for his *Memorial to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs*. Other commentators have been concerned with why Kahn's *Memorial* was never built.²⁸⁹ We have heard so far the voices of Michael Zagayski and Alfred Eris - both Jewish New Yorkers concerned that the Holocaust, and pre-war, European Jewish culture be remembered, both resistant to modernist art, and rather more in favour of a traditional memorial museum with artefacts. Such voices contributed to the project's failure, but though this failure will be examined, I am more interested by the temporary acceptance of Kahn's proposal, albeit in a changed form. During the late 1960s, this proposal was *approved* by a number of constituencies, and accepted as constituting a Holocaust memorial: this acceptance is what I explore. It is for this reason that I have touched on the kind of material passed over in the last few pages. The commission of Kahn's *Memorial* represents another aspect of the patronage by Jewish organisations of advanced art in New York in the 1960s. With this commission, however, the memorialising needs of the Jewish community and the ambitions of abstraction were not kept apart. Jewish patronage does not go all the way in explaining the proposal's acceptance. I am also interested in thinking how Kahn's proposal puts both the form and function of 'old monuments' in crisis.

Before looking at the history of the commission, it is first important to explain some theoretical and methodological points that arise because of the difference of the subject

²⁸⁸ Andrew Hepburn, *Complete Guide to New York City* (New York, 1964) pp. 112-115

²⁸⁹ See Saidel, op. cit., and Susan Solomon's work, which has been invaluable. In her PhD thesis she considers it in the context of Kahn's other proposals for the Jewish community, paying particular attention to his communication failures with Jewish clients. (Susan Solomon, *Secular and Spiritual Humanism: Louis I. Kahn's Work for the Jewish Community in the 1950s and 1960s*, PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania, May 1997). Solomon also published an historical account of the proposal in *Louis I. Kahn - In the Realm of Architecture* (op. cit.). Her comments at interview have also been helpful. (Susan Solomon Interview) Like Solomon, my research makes use of Kahn's archives. Though this means that we address some of the same material, I am much more interested in probing the meanings of Kahn's proposal as an abstract memorial, in particular in the penultimate section of this chapter.

matter of this chapter to those that come before and after it. The memorial brings with it a different set of critical and theoretical questions to those that exist around modernist art.²⁹⁰ Holocaust memorials have been considered in separated art historical studies.²⁹¹ It is legitimate to ask whether an architectural memorial can be considered in the same manner as modernist abstraction, and whether the very notion of abstraction, considered in relation to art, is quite different to what may be meant by abstraction when addressing an architectural proposal. These matters will not be resolved, but hopefully will provide a productive tension in this chapter. I will be considering, for instance, how Kahn was commissioned as an 'artist', but I will also be thinking about Kahn's proposal through the disputes that took place in architectural discourse around terms such as 'transparency' and 'monumentality' (terms disputed in quite different manners in art critical discourse). As has already become clear, another context for this proposal is the art historical moment of the mid-late 1960s, a moment at which artists were investigating the question of the memorial, and at which the space of abstraction became literal as well as optical, both through installations of paintings (such as Newman's), and, more obviously, the objects of minimalist sculpture.

Kahn's proposal - in its original form - moved away from the figurative and symbolic language that had characterised other Holocaust memorial proposals to that date. There is, therefore, the same kind of distance between it and those former proposals, as exists between Richard Serra's *The Drowned and the Saved* (for instance) and Robert Morris's *Untitled*. (figs. 1 and 4) Just as the abstraction of modernist art works imposes a problem when considering how viewers might make meanings that relate to the memory of the Holocaust, so too an abstract memorial poses this problem: how, and what does a viewing subject remember when negotiating a grid of glass blocks? What does memory mean here?

²⁹⁰ See Adrian Forty, 'Introduction', in Adrian Forty and Susan Kuchler (eds.), *The Art of Forgetting* (London, 1999). See also Andreas Huyssen, 'Monument and Memory in a Postmodern Age' in James Young (ed.), *The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History* (New York, 1994)

²⁹¹ See James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, 1993)

Two methodological points: in probing the possible meanings of series of paintings by Morris Louis and Barnett Newman, I examined the material and decision-making processes leading to the exhibition of the paintings, and the possible viewing experiences of the paintings' spectators. With Kahn's *Memorial*, the nature of this enquiry changes. It is more relevant to examine the literal process of negotiation between client and architect, keeping in mind that whatever documents do record stated intentions only witness strategic moments where Kahn presented ideas to those whose favour was required to bring the project to fruition. As we know, the project was *not* brought to fruition, which means that the question of viewing is also necessarily different: there are, and have never been any visitors to the *Memorial*. However, sufficient visual representations of Kahn's proposals exist, including plans, models, photographs of models, and drawings - some of which include representations of viewers - and, most recently, computer simulated images.²⁹² Through these, it is possible to imagine how the proposal structured the viewing experience of those who were to come into its space. Later on in this chapter, this viewing experience will be considered to question how it related to the space's function as a memorial. First, we will examine how Kahn was commissioned, thinking about the precise terms of his task, his answer to the challenges set, and the reception of his proposals.

²⁹² See Kent Larson, *Louis I. Kahn, Unbuilt Masterworks* (New York, 2000). See below for discussion of Larson's images.

2. The Terms of Kahn's Commission

In late 1966, Kahn received two letters from David Kreeger, chair of the Art Committee of the Committee to Commemorate the Six Million Jewish Martyrs (henceforth 'Committee'). This was an umbrella group consisting of 28 organisations, ranging from the huge and powerful American Jewish Committee to the small interest groups, set up in 1965 to commission and erect a Holocaust memorial for New York.²⁹³ The first letter told him 'The sponsors would like to create [...] a monument with educational and artistic value for our generation and future generations, and for people of all faiths and backgrounds.'²⁹⁴ On 28 December, the aims of the memorial were made clearer:

'The monument is envisioned as one which will reflect and evoke the emotional, psychological, and historical impact of the tragedy of the period, for Jewry as well as for all humanity. It should also deal with man's struggle to retain his dignity under the most horrendous circumstances, and express hope for a better future where man will not merely survive but prevail. Because it is meant for the general public, we hope the monument will be of the highest possible artistic integrity and one with which all generations will be able to readily identify.'²⁹⁵

There is an immediate impression of the high ambitions of the Committee, and the consequent contradictions in their demands become evident. These result from the unresolved approaches to the four main questions raised by the memorial - what was to be remembered?, why was it to be remembered?, and by whom?, and by what method?

²⁹³ Kreeger, an art collector and philanthropist, had been appointed by the Committee to be the chair of the Art Committee that would commission a memorial.

²⁹⁴ The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania. Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Box P-36 (Hereafter 'LIK36'), File E. Letter to Kahn, 1 November 1966

²⁹⁵ LIK36 File E, Letter to Kahn, 28 December 1966

Starting with the first, we can consider the then current lack of definition of the concept we now call ‘the Holocaust’. In the mid-1960s, the category ‘the Holocaust’ was in the process of formation, on the way to becoming the self-contained and separate whole that is understood (if not always accepted) by the term now.²⁹⁶ The unformed nature of the category is witnessed by the semantic fluctuation in the correspondence Kahn received during his work. Above, it is referred to as ‘the tragedy’, but elsewhere, the terms ‘the holocaust’, ‘the Nazi holocaust’, and ‘the Jewish Catastrophe’ are all used.²⁹⁷ The consequence of this imprecision means Kahn’s task was both new (before this time, memorialising projects tended only to directed to specific incidents such as the Warsaw Ghetto uprising), and somewhat blurred. Kahn had to tackle something being shaped, but whose shape was amorphous, and abstract.

The letters reveal conflicting ideas about the purpose of the monument. It was required, firstly, to be ‘educational’. The second text does not give a clear idea of information to be imparted, but expressed the vague hope that the monument ‘reflect and evoke’ the subject. The request to conjure ‘the emotional, psychological, and historical impact of the tragedy’ might have also seemed an ill defined demand. In 1950, Greenberg had written that ‘It is... more than time that we all began to make a real effort to digest the fact of Auschwitz psychologically’. Yet Greenberg admitted that no one wanted ‘to start to necessary discussion’²⁹⁸: in 1966, the ‘psychological impact’ was still neither widely discussed, nor cemented. The request that the monument enable positive lessons to be drawn was also problematic. Man’s ‘dignity’ in adversity should be stressed, as well as ‘hope for a better future.’ These intentions were current in the discourse dealing with the purpose of Holocaust education. Albert Friedlander, in a journal editorial sent to Kahn while he researched the proposal, concluded that all the pieces published in the journal (by Bruno Bettelheim, Abraham Heschel, and Elie Wiesel) ‘share one hopeful aspect:

²⁹⁶ See note 2.

²⁹⁷ There was also semantic variance when naming the ‘victims’ of the Holocaust. Many terms, such as ‘victims’, were employed in the textual material accompanying the commission; ‘martyrs’ was privileged. ‘Martyr’ introduces the notion of exchange: martyrs die for a higher goal. This term witnesses 1960s hopes about the purpose of Holocaust discourse, but is only a representation of history. It can also be argued that victims died for no other purpose than the realisation of Nazi policy.

²⁹⁸ See note 1.

they stress man's ability to enter the realm of moral action.²⁹⁹ It is still assumed today that educating about the Holocaust leads to moral improvement. However, such a belief is a construct, and one which in 1966 was only recently established.

It is worth pausing to consider some silences. The monument was not intended to accuse. It is an important silence. The most recent failed attempt to build a memorial in New York prior to Kahn's was initiated by the Arthur Zygelboim Memorial Committee, which intended to erect a figurative statue by Nathan Rapoport of Zygelboim throwing himself off a building in protest at world apathy. This had been rejected by the New York City Art Commission³⁰⁰ because 'It does not seem to be desirable to confront children with sculpture of such distressing and horrifying significance.'³⁰¹ This stated reason belies the real threat of the sculpture, which targeted adults, and not children, scrutinising *their* behaviour during the war years. Kahn's task was implicitly to avoid such taboo, and by doing so, to provide something the city could accept.³⁰²

There was another silence in the original documents around the commission – a silence as to the identity of the monument's immediate, contemporary users. It hardly required stating that the monument's purpose in part to allow actual survivors to remember their experience, to facilitate their remembrance of their specific bereavements. Whereas the purpose of Rachel Whiteread's Vienna monument, erected in a city with very few survivors, has little to do with personal mourning, we can assume this of 1966 monument, since many of the constituent bodies of the Committee were survivor

²⁹⁹ Albert Friedlander, 'Editor's Page' *Dimension* (Spring 1967) p.3. This was sent to Kahn by Moshe Davidowitz of New York University. (LIK36 File E. Letter to Kahn. 15 May 1967)

³⁰⁰ The Art Commission was appointed by the New York Mayor, then Mayor Lindsay, responsible for ratifying public art. In this period it was headed by Robert E. Blum, a Brooklyn Civic Leader, and its members included artists Adolph Gottlieb and Seymour Lipton, who had replaced Eleanor Platt. (*The New York Times*, 8 and 9 February 1967) Its archives are in City Hall, New York City.

³⁰¹ Eleanor Platt quoted in William Farrell, 'City Rejects Park Memorials to Slain Jews', *The New York Times*, 11 February 1965, p.9

³⁰² The mid-1960s saw the beginnings of the investigation into 'bystanding' and 'world apathy' (See note 261). The accusation of Arthur Morse's 1967 *While 6 Million Died* also characterised some of the testimony literature Kahn received from Vladka Meed during his research for the monument (LIK36 File E. Letter to Kahn 24 April 1967). *The Janowska Road* by Leon Weliczker Wells (London, 1966) recounted the wish of those that perished that the world should know about their fate. He concluded with the weighted question: 'Does the World Care?' (p. 307). Kahn's task, as we are seeing, was to answer in the affirmative and push aside the uncomfortable issue of whether this answer *had* been true.

organisations.³⁰³ Of course, this is the most difficult rationale to account for. Why, after all, do those directly affected, those who remember their past and their dead every day, need a public monument? And how would any monument be cathartic for them, be of any 'use'? We know survivors campaigned for a public monument, but to satisfy their needs was clearly a different task. They required no education, needed no moral improvement, might have scorned the urge for optimism. Despite the difficulty of their requirements, it will be argued later that Kahn's proposal addressed this purpose more than any others.

In thinking about the reasons for the monument, we have already touched on the problem of an audience, since it comprises at one end survivors, and at the other, children of the future. Kreeger's text places a revealing stress on naming 'the general public' as the target audience. We can detect between the lines an anxiety that any memorialist envision a purely Jewish public. A Jewish memorial for a Jewish public would not only run against the sincere hopes of the Committee that the Holocaust should be remembered universally. It would also be strategically problematic. For the memorial to be built (let alone successful), the committee knew that civic authorities had to favour it. This was not simply a matter of avoiding taboo, but also of avoiding specific ethnic content. Previous projects, such as Eric Mendelsohn's giant tablets of stone, had floundered at the Art Commission, and more recently, Nathan Rapoport's *Scroll of Fire*, with its overt Jewish symbolism, had failed to gain approval lest it set a 'highly regrettable precedent', allowing other ethnic groups to remember their own persecution.³⁰⁴ Yet no matter how he resisted imagining a Jewish audience, Kreeger did not entirely dispense with mentioning 'Jewry'. And indeed, though a universal audience was imagined, the Committee was made up entirely of Jewish groups. If gentiles were the monument's targets, no room for their representatives had been made on the Committee. With this in mind, it is hardly surprising that once Kahn had set to work, there would be pressures for him to Judaise his proposal.

³⁰³ Many commentators have argued that survivors did not want public memorials in the quarter-century after the Holocaust. Vladka Meed, however, has mentioned at interview that these arguments misrepresent her experience - on the contrary, survivors such as herself campaigned hard for memorials, such as Kahn's, in the 1960s. (Meed Interview)

³⁰⁴ Eleanor Platt quoted in Farrell, op. cit., p.1

Kreeger's letter finally displays a curious logic about how the aims of the monument would be achieved. The audience would be the general public, and therefore the monument should be something of the 'highest possible artistic integrity'. In 1966, contemporary art of the 'highest possible integrity', exhibited in particular institutions, and theorised by particular critical discourses, was rarely envisaged either as having a direct educational purpose, or as having a general civic audience. It was for exactly these reasons that the Jewish Museum programme drew criticism in the late 1960s from those concerned with education and the expansion of its audience. Nevertheless, all efforts were made by Kreeger to gather the authors of the discourse and the directors of the institutions into his art committee to choose the artist for the monument. Though there is now evidence that this elite grouping never met, the fact they were publicly listed in documents relating to the commission indicates both the reluctance the Committee must have felt about being seen to commission an artist - like Nathan Rapoport - outside the modernist mainstream, and their desires, as Jews, to be seen as patrons of high modernism.³⁰⁵

³⁰⁵ The listed members of the Art Committee included the publisher Harry Abrams, museum directors Rene d'Harnoncourt, Sam Hunter, Sherman Lee and Thomas Messer, art historians H. Harvard Arnason and Meyer Schapiro, architects Percival Goodman and Philip Johnson, and journalist Emily Genauer. (These were listed in an attachment to a letter to Kahn from David Kreeger (LIK36 File E, 18 November 1966), and on the wall panel at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Records of this panel are to be found in the archives of MoMA's Architecture Department.) David Finn, of the public relations company Ruder and Finn, was also listed. At interview, he said he was never present at any meetings, and did not know his name had been placed on the wall panel in the MoMA exhibition of Kahn's model. He also contacted his friends Thomas Messer and Sam Hunter, who similarly knew nothing of the Art Committee. (Finn Interview)

3. The History of the Commission

These contradictions and tensions directly anticipate the crises that cluttered the history of the commission. This history is marked by a pattern of success and failure: the commissioning body's artistic ambitions were fulfilled with the civic acceptance of Kahn's proposal and its enthusiastic reception at the MoMA exhibition. However, the proposal encountered severe criticism from Jewish groups at various stages both within and outside the Committee. These attacks seem integral to the eventual collapse of the project.

The first stage of the commission is the period between 12 April 1967, when Kahn was chosen, and 5 November 1967, when he presented his initial proposal (the version that will concern me in the final section) to the Committee at the New York Hilton. There is little information recording Kahn's feelings about the commission, and we cannot know exact details of his research: there are records of the books sent to him, but one cannot tell if they were read. Vladka Meed, Secretary of the Committee, and chair of the Jewish Labor Committee, provided these. Kahn met her that summer, and asked about her wartime experience. She has said that 'he was very serious, very dedicated', that he 'felt very comfortable in the Jewish atmosphere'.³⁰⁶ Such a description accords with other letters to Kahn which indicate his enthusiasm about the project: Leonard Meiselman of Collaborative Workshops wrote in May that 'What you were able to communicate verbally about your concept for the Memorial [...] was very exciting'³⁰⁷, and Moshe Davidowitz of the School of Continuing Education at New York University wrote to him that 'It was indeed a pleasure to meet with you last week and to discuss the various aspects of your most intriguing proposal for the monument'.³⁰⁸

Davidowitz was writing after a meeting at which he had discussed with Kahn the use of glass and light in the Jewish tradition. During the summer, Kahn's initial proposal for a

³⁰⁶ Meed Interview

³⁰⁷ LIK 36 File E. Letter to Kahn, 15 May 1967

³⁰⁸ LIK 36 File E. Letter to Kahn, 14 August 1967

grid of nine glass piers had materialised. There are no documents outlining how he came to this idea, and it is significant that it was only after choosing glass that he researched any resonance the material had in the Jewish tradition. Davidowitz later posted him the report of a recent archaeological discovery - 'A Huge Slab of Glass in the Ancient Necropolis of Beth She'Arim.' That Kahn checked this reference at all indicates he sensed some kind of Jewish symbolism would be demanded of his proposal. That he checked after making a decision, however, indicates that his concerns with such symbolism were only after-thoughts.³⁰⁹ Furthermore, he persisted with glass despite the fact that the discovery revealed no clues as to the actual 'intended use' of the ancient slab.

The authors of the Beth She'Arim piece were Robert Brill and John Wosinski of the Corning Museum of Glass, an adjunct of the Corning Glass Works, and Kahn travelled there on 5 September to continue his research. Marshall Meyer's memo (Meyer was the project architect) gives a detailed account of the day.³¹⁰ Kahn was shown a variety of glass, and was instructed about cost, casting methods, and color. We can tell from the memo that Kahn was hoping for absolute colourless transparency, and for solid blocks of glass. Total clarity was an option with fused silica, but the material was too expensive. 'Ordinary glass' was cheaper, but too green, and 'optical glass', a 'warm straw color' was 'more acceptable.' A solid block was also out of the question. Not only would it take too long to anneal, but, with its increased density, it would be too highly coloured. The compromise was to make hollow blocks, and to neutralise or decolorize the glass by 'adding ingredients which give complimentary color.' With these added constraints in mind, Kahn returned to Philadelphia.

On 5 November, two months after the visit to Corning, Kahn presented his initial proposal to the Art Committee of the Committee to Commemorate the Six Million Jewish Martyrs at the Hilton in New York. One main critique followed his presentation. For

³⁰⁹ Manfredo Tafuri's contention that, for Kahn, 'history is only an *ingredient* to be manipulated,' and that 'he uses it to justify choices' seems to have some backing here. (*Theories and History of Architecture* (London, 1980) p.56) However, while Kahn might have sought to use Jewish history to justify a choice, his use of architectural history is integral to the function of the memorial.

³¹⁰ LIK36 File E. Memo, 6 September 1967

Abraham Duker, Director of Libraries at the Yeshiva University, the problem was that of abstraction or what he termed ‘universal symbolism’. Underlying this worry was Duker’s fear that the proposal was, in his terms, insufficiently Jewish.³¹¹ Duker conceded that to use ‘only Jewish [...] symbolism is unfashionable, and may also be inadequate or parochial’. Nevertheless, he asked for several changes.

Duker’s reworking of Kahn’s proposal began by altering numbers. Whereas we can surmise Kahn’s choice of nine piers resulted from a geometric logic, Duker, grounded in a Jewish numerological tradition, approached numbers as symbols, objecting to nine’s connection to ‘the period of gestation’, and opting for six. We might assume Kahn would have considered and rejected such simplistic reference to the six million, but Duker argued that no other number ‘is more pertinent.’ He continued in this vein, requesting the piers should be of different heights ‘representing persons of different ages - children, youths, men, women’. His final demand was less subtle still: colourless transparency should be replaced by ‘multi-colored glass, solid black for the bottom half, even higher, then changing gradually into grey and ending with white or the color of a flame, signifying a memorial light or hope, as the onlooker would be free to interpret it.’³¹²

It is strange that Duker managed to retain any hope of interpretative freedom. His letter evidences a desperate urge for direct symbolism, an anxious fear that Kahn’s proposal amounted to a blank. But no matter whether Kahn had been to blame for an inadequate presentation, Duker’s propositions completely destroyed the nature of Kahn’s work. The only suggestion taken on board was about numbers: after the November meeting, Kahn relinquished the nine-pier plan. In the revised model presented at a second meeting on 3 December, however, there was, in addition to the six pillars, a central seventh.

According to the account written eight years later by August E. Komendant, Kahn’s engineer, it was Komendant himself who proposed the seventh pillar. Back in

³¹¹ Kahn might have argued that the absence of iconic symbolism in his proposal guaranteed its ‘Jewishness’, according to the tradition of the Second Commandment. This would have been to take one typical - but much debated- line within the discourse surrounding ‘Jewish art’. I prefer to locate the absence of icons as a means to create a different kind of memorial.

³¹² LIK36 File B. Letter to Kahn, 13 November 1967

Philadelphia, Komendant recalled, Kahn was unhappy about the connections he was asked to make between the piers and the Jewish dead, so Komendant suggested a seventh pier, explaining his choice "Six million dead, yes, but from the death and ashes arises new life - the seventh cube symbolises that new life. All the other cubes are dark, lifeless, and the center one should be illuminated."³¹³ In the account, Kahn embraces Komendant's idea with jubilation: 'Kahn's face brightened and he said, "August, your horse sense solved my dilemma. I knew from the beginning that something was wrong in the six-cube design, so the most important part - the life itself, hope for the future- was missing which makes the memorial of the dead significant."'³¹⁴

Komendant positions himself here as Kahn's inspiration. If his recollections are somewhat self-promoting, we might also doubt Komendant's ability seamlessly to relay a long-passed conversation. As will become apparent, the inclusion of the central pier seems in many ways to run against the precise character of the earlier model: it seems more likely that Kahn integrated the chapel as a means of avoiding the symbolism of six piers, and as a strategic way of satisfying the pressurising demands of his clients.

After the presentation of the revised model in December, Kahn received a second letter providing further indication of these pressures. At the heart of this critique was the argument that the mood of the memorial was problematic. Joseph Lichten, in opposition to Kreeger's earlier notions of 'hope for a better future', felt Kahn was providing 'a sensation of peace', encouraging visitors to consider the 'events' in a 'calm, disassociated manner.' Lichten hoped the memorial would provide for 'people who mourn every third member of their household', 'some expression of their own lives, their own experiences, their seeming humiliation'. He knew 'even a genius artist would not be able, in an art form, to present pulverised human bones or soap made from human bodies', and he resisted asking for any realism, accepting, instead, that the proposal be changed to incorporate a central pillar, a chapel which would be hollow, text-covered, and which therefore would 'embrace all of the thoughts which I have conveyed in this letter.'³¹⁵

³¹³ August Komendant, *Eighteen Years with Architect Louis Kahn* (New York, 1975) p.172

³¹⁴ Ibid., p.172

³¹⁵ LIK36 File E. Letter to Kahn, 8 January 1968

Like Michael Zagayski, then, Lichten conceived of a Holocaust memorial that would include a religious space.

The desired character of the central pillar was determined at a meeting on 20 January 1968. Minutes note that 'The shrine is to be of the same material as the six pillars, but with some lilac in its color. The walls of the shrine are to have several suitable inscriptions in Yiddish, Hebrew and English, both on the outside and on the inside. The ceiling of the shrine is to bear some artistic Jewish symbol.'³¹⁶ The desire for textual and symbolic material might indicate the urgency of the commissioners's needs for direct meaning. Though it seems Kahn accepted these requirements, and though they seem far more tempered than Duker's earlier requests, I hope to show later how the imposition of texts and Jewish symbols were as profound a misreading of the nine-pier plan as Duker's. Now, though, we can begin to see how the revised memorial fared as it encountered the artistic institutions and critics whose favour Kreeger had so earnestly sought.

Unlike previous memorial proposals, Kahn's gained immediate acceptance by the City of New York Department of Parks³¹⁷, and the Art Commission³¹⁸. Documentation of their approval does not include any comment on the proposal, other than some written concerns from the Art Committee about the precise positioning of the memorial in the space of Battery Park. The exhibition at MoMA, however, did yield more textual material.³¹⁹ The first significant text is Kahn's own press release, dated 3 May 1968. This cannot give us indications of Kahn's actual feelings about his proposal, or the new changes to it: the text was strategic, written to convince a public.³²⁰ Kahn writes that in response to a 'prevailing desire to give the Monument a sense of the ritualistic', the

³¹⁶ LIK36 File B. Minutes of meeting, 20 January 1968

³¹⁷ LIK36 File E. Letter to Kahn, 22 March 1968

³¹⁸ LIK36 File E. Letter to Kahn from Elliot Willensky, 19 April 1968 enclosing copy of Art Commission resolution dated 17 April 1968.

³¹⁹ MoMA was a strategic venue. Other venues might have been better attended: placing the model in MoMA, however, enabled its associations with the perceived qualities and values of 'high art'. The exhibition ran from 17 October to 15 November 1968.

³²⁰ Susan Solomon has argued that the press release evidences Kahn's repeated failure to communicate his ideas successfully to his Jewish clients. Kahn gives insufficient support to his choice of abstraction, articulating his ideas instead according to his expectations of criticism, and therefore loosing the opportunity to celebrate to proposal for its merits. (Solomon, 1997, op. cit., pp.357-361)

center pier was ‘given the character of a little chapel’, which was to be inscribed. ‘The one, then, the chapel, speaks; the other six are silent.’³²¹

This passage was quoted in a wall panel hung beside photographs of Battery Park which lined the room containing Kahn’s model in the MoMA exhibition (*fig.56*). The panel also listed the members of the Art Committee, whose names, placed without their consent, gave significant endorsement to the proposal. The strategy worked: the proposal was applauded in the press, and specialist architectural journals included favourable reports³²². Ada Louise Huxtable’s review in the *New York Times* was the most compelling.³²³ Kahn’s ‘cool, abstract, poetic, powerful and absolute statement of unspeakable tragedy’ was for her one of the ‘great works of commemorative art in which man has attempted to capture spirit, in symbol, for the ages.’ ‘The design is beautiful’, she continued, ‘and chilling. There is about it a silent, almost frozen formality, a crystalline sense of the eternal emptiness of death.’ We might recall that Robert Smithson had also made use of the metaphor of temperature in describing the “cold glass boxes” of Park Avenue, and like Huxtable, he also associated crystals with a kind of eternity.³²⁴ But Huxtable did not locate an entropic or inert mood in Kahn’s proposal so much as a sublime sense of eternity. This sense was held in check by the dynamism of light play - the monument was also a site of movement and life: ‘The glass rectangles reflect another kind of eternity, the changes of weather, light and season.’ Without attempting to resolve the contraction that seems to arise from the simultaneous claims for frozenness and change, Huxtable concluded with words that highlight how the proposal was received at once as art and as architecture: ‘This is architecture, and at the same time, sculpture, and it is symbolism of the highest order, timeless and contemporary. Mr Kahn weds poetry and philosophy to form.’

³²¹ LIK36 File D. Kahn’s press release, 3 May 1968

³²² Wolf Von Eckhardt, ‘A Memorial to Slain Jews That’s Fashioned of Light’, *The Washington Post*, 10 November 1968, p. B2; ‘Expressing the Unspeakable’ *Time Magazine*, 25 October 1968, p. 78; ‘Louis Kahn designs a Memorial to Six Million Jews’ *Architectural Record* (November 1968) p. 36; ‘Lest We Forget’ *Architectural Forum* (December 1968) p. 89; ‘Monuments to Ponder’ *Progressive Architecture* (December 1968).

³²³ Ada Louise Huxtable, ‘Plan for Jewish Martyrs’ Monument Here Unveiled’, *The New York Times*, 17 October 1968

³²⁴ See note 286.

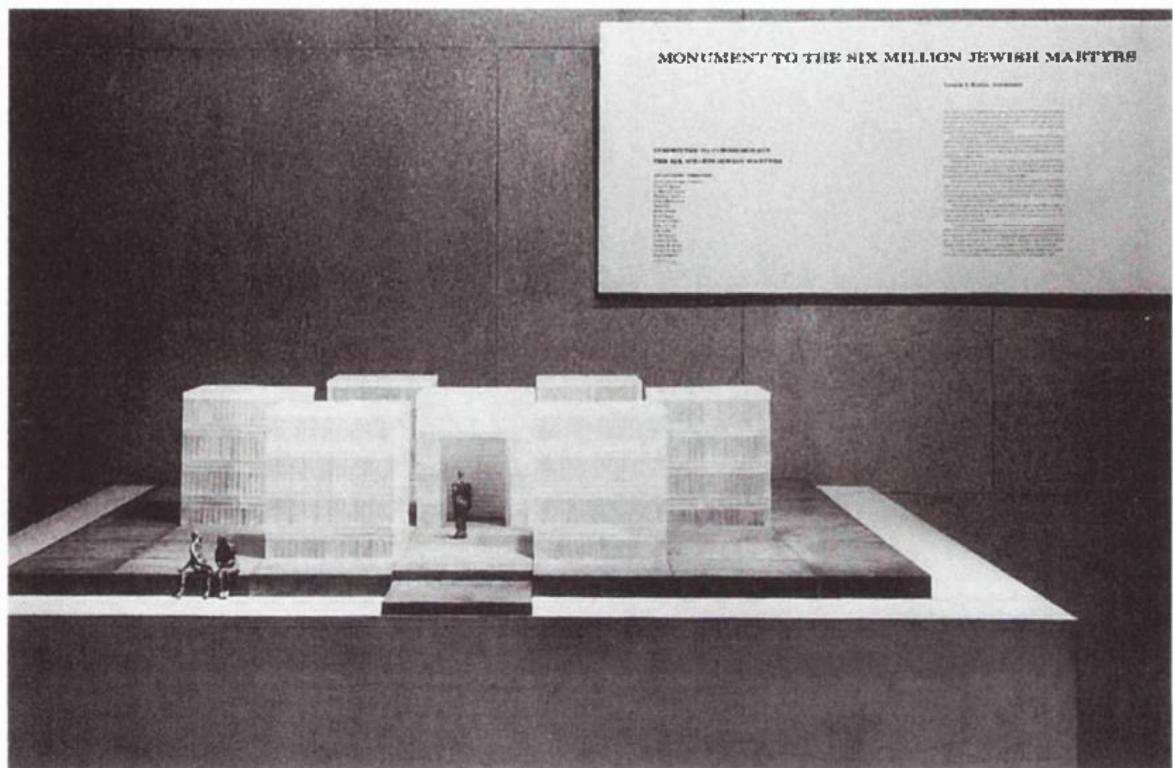


Fig. 56

Louis I. Kahn, *Memorial to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs* (Installation view of the model at MoMA),
1966-72

Photograph courtesy The Museum of Modern Art, New York

This appraisal must have satisfied Kreeger. Huxtable was a significant critic, and had launched severe attacks on other architectural plans for Lower Manhattan.³²⁵ However, the voices of the general public equalled with their derision the strength of Huxtable's commendation. Alexander Raynes wrote to *Jewish Currents*, recounting his 'shock' after his visit to MoMA. Raynes had asked a museum official "You really believe that these six frozen masses of glass will tell the story of the genocide and tortures committed by the Nazis? Those who will visit this tiny *Ohel* [the chapel] - will they get the full meaning of the inhuman suffering and resistance in those days?" Arguing that 'nothing would be better' than Kahn's proposal, Raynes feared that 'History, no doubt, will blame all of us for this sickening situation.'³²⁶ His sentiments were mirrored in a letter sent to New York's Mayor Lindsay by the Independent Jewish Senior Citizens of the Berkeley Area: 'Should the present glass model be erected as a monument to the Six Million Nazi victims it will be to the everlasting shame of the City of New York. It will be a gross insult to American Jewry. It will slander the memory of the dead. Posterity will not believe such callousness possible so soon after the holocaust. You will not, we trust, permit this to happen.'³²⁷

History did not blame Alexander Raynes, posterity did not have to consider callousness: between 1968 and 1974, the plans for the memorial disintegrated. Kahn continued to search for ways of reducing these costs, for instance, reluctantly introducing steel frames to hold up the glass piers. Meanwhile, criticism of his plans continued. A letter from Jesse Reichek extended the complaints about Kahn's desire to make the memorial non-accusing, and demanded on behalf of 'the 6 million Jews, 9 million Pakistani refugees, 25 million blacks in Rhodesia, 30 million blacks in South Africa, the millions of American Indians, millions of American black slaves, millions of Vietnamese, millions bombed in Dresden, Regensburg, etc., half a million killed in two days in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the twelve thousand arrested in Washington in two days' that Kahn's memorial 'be

³²⁵ See in particular 'Singing the Downtown Blues' in Ada Louise Huxtable's collection, *Will They Ever Finish Bruckner Boulevard?* (New York, 1972)

³²⁶ Alexander Raynes, 'Monument to 6,000,000' in Letters Page, *Jewish Currents* (April 1969) pp. 38-41

³²⁷ Art Commission Files, City Hall, New York. Letter to Mayor Lindsay, 22 May 1969

accusing.³²⁸ This letter dramatically indicates the manner in which the Holocaust became a compelling focus of memory in order to address contemporary crises.³²⁹ It is interesting that this pressure was brought to bear on Kahn. While other people were pressuring him to incorporate a Jewish symbol - a menorah - into the roof of the chapel, Kahn was being asked to 'instruct us as to the meaning of the inhumane', to tackle the entire history of global violence.

Kahn's death terminated the project conclusively, but its collapse by then was complete. The reasons include the aftermath of the six day war, which deflected funds towards Zionist causes, and the lack of structural unity in the Committee, whose member bodies could barely co-ordinate the payment of Kahn's \$18,000 expenses in 1971, let alone raise further funds for construction.³³⁰ The most important reason, though, was surely that the irresolution that we have seen existed from the beginning could be mined by those outside the Committee (and the Art Committee). Complaints like Raynes', with their demands of narrative content and simple symbolism, had, after all, much in common with the concerns of Abraham Duker. Since opposition from without could echo that from within, the proposal seems to have been destined to live its existence in the drawings, models, photographs, and texts now stored in archives in New York and Philadelphia, rather than as glass blocks by the Hudson. It is to these various texts I now return, in order to consider how Kahn's proposal made meaning as a memorial.

³²⁸ LIK 36 File B. Letter to Kahn, 1 February 1972

³²⁹ In the cases of Louis's and Newman's series, as we have seen, Holocaust memory was also intertwined with contemporary concerns, whether related to McCarthyism, Hiroshima, or Vietnam.

³³⁰ Material regarding these payments is in the American Jewish Committee files in their archives in New York. In coordination with David Kreeger, the AJC Executive Vice President Bertram Gold spearheaded the drive to collect promise monies from the various organisations that had made up the Committee. There are also some letters in LIK36.

4. Re-reading the Memorial

The changes that the Committee sought to impose after Kahn presented his initial proposal actually help to highlight its characteristics, and, from my viewpoint, those aspects which made it most interesting. In this section, I will be attempting to make sense of Kahn's initial proposal of nine solid blocks of glass *as a memorial* - how it might have constituted a space where the activity of remembrance could take place, indeed what kind of an activity it structured as 'memorial'. Kahn's proposal - as is now clear - was quite different to what was thought of as a memorial at the time, and yet - no matter how Kahn was forced to change it - his initial design for him constituted a response to the task set. Momentarily, at least, this was what the *Memorial to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs* should be. Though we should remember that they were strategic, we can ask how this was so by starting with his statements about the proposal.

Kahn gives prominence to the function of light in his proposal. Light would allow the monument to transmit to the viewer a sense of life and hope. 'The Monument will get its mood from the endless changes of the light of day and of night...'³³¹ Abraham Duker, we might recall, proposed that Kahn build a structure that symbolised candles - sources of flickering light. Kahn was instead proposing not a symbol of light, but a material through which light play would be physically sensed. Light play, Kahn hoped, would meet the requirement that the monument express 'hope for a better future': by dramatising changing light, a sense of hope would be transmitted. We might question the traditional foundations of Kahn's statements - traditions then being questioned by 1960s artists such as Dan Flavin.³³² Kahn links light to metaphysical, rather than just to its physical properties, equating changing light with the idea of hope and life, and their continuity

³³¹ LIK36 File D. Kahn's press release, 3 May 1968

³³² Though Flavin might have contested metaphysical associations with light, there is still debate around whether to associate light with physical or metaphysical qualities, a debate recently staged in texts recording the reception of Rachel Whiteread's *Watertower*. Some descriptions uncannily echo Kahn's description of his project. Jeffrey Deitch stated that 'The most extraordinary aspect of it is how it changes; it is different at every moment, in every light condition, every time of day.' Molly Nesbit writes that 'In its clarity it accepts the sky's every mood'. See Louise Neri (ed.), *Looking Up- Rachel Whiteread's Water Tower* (New York, 1999) p.192 and p.108

after the Holocaust. With the intention that his memorial produce a cathartic experience, light is treated as it is in the Judeo-Christian tradition, from God's understanding of light as 'good', to Jesus' transfiguration.³³³

Rather than investigating Kahn's *Memorial* simply through these traditional equations between light and hope, we can move away from the rhetoric with which he addressed the proposal, and consider the *Memorial* through various other discursive frameworks.³³⁴ Oddly enough, the best place to start might precisely be with an earlier text by Kahn - his essay 'Monumentality.' This essay was written for a 1944 symposium chaired by Paul Zucker. In the texts around Kahn's Holocaust commission, the word 'monument' and 'memorial' are interchangeable. One of the notable features of the 1944 symposium was how far separated were the concepts of *monumentality* and memorial. Monumentality was deemed to be an architectural quality connected to civic glory. Siegfried Giedion urged that 'The people want buildings representing their social, ceremonial and community life. They want buildings to be more than a functional fulfilment. They seek the expression of their aspirations for monumentality, for joy and excitement.'³³⁵ Such emphasis on 'joy' is at odds with the kind of monument we are discussing, but a further problem is that of the connection of memory and monumental structures. The participants in the symposium were far more comfortable thinking about the memory of the future than the memory of the past: a monumental building was not one which recalled the past, but one which would enable someone in a later generation to recall the time that it had been built.

In 'Monumentality', Kahn was similarly unconcerned with the connection of monumentality and memory, preferring to think about its temporal significance outside of linearity. Monumentality was *timeless*: 'a spiritual quality inherent in a structure which

³³³ Kahn did not want to use light as a symbol of mourning. *Yarzeit* candles are lit by Jews on the anniversaries of family deaths, and their use has been manipulated in Holocaust memorials, such as Moshe Safdie's 'Children's Memorial' (1987) at Yad Vashem. Safdie worked in Kahn's office in the early 1960s. Christian Boltanski is also interested in this use of candles.

³³⁴ This approach has been guided the helpful dictionary section of Adrian Forty's recent *Words and Buildings - A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (London, 2000).

³³⁵ Siegfried Giedion, 'The Need for a New Monumentality' in Paul Zucker (ed.), *New Architecture and City Planning - A Symposium* (New York, 1944) p.552

conveys the feeling of its eternity'.³³⁶ With less emphasis on glory, he concurred with the fellow participants that monumentality should serve civic needs ('the school, the community or culture centre'), but was more specific on how it was to be achieved. New materials ('steel, the lighter metals, concrete, glass, laminated woods, asbestos, rubber, and plastics') should be employed, and modern needs respected. 'Structural perfection' must be sought in order to achieve 'impressiveness, clarity of form and logical scale.' There was a particular emphasis placed on the enclosure of vertical space: Kahn argued that the monumental building made use of roofing structures such as 'the Roman vault, the dome, the arch', creating a sense of generosity that could also be 'emotionally stirring'. Most idiosyncratic was his contention that monumentality required attendance to 'the meaning of a wall, a post, a beam, a roof and a window and their interrelation in space.' This kind of statement expresses a conception of essences, as if these fundamental ingredients of architecture have implicit ideal relationships.

Within this discursive context, the proposed *Memorial* begins to appear not so much the confirmation of, as the antithesis of monumentality. Essential meanings and relationships of the very tools of architecture (walls, roofs, etc), were *not* articulated in the proposal. On the contrary, these relationships break down. The column-like piers did not support roofs: this lack of vertical enclosure was another anti-monumental feature. These piers might be conceived as walls, but they did not divide space. They were not windows, but nor were the gaps between them. What begins to cohere in the absence of Kahnian monumentality is the sense of its dissolution: not so much the idea of deconstructed architecture, or of a ruin, as an idea of constructedlessness. This is to argue that one of the significations of the proposal was that it questioned the very possibility of architectural monumentality. Kahn seems to have indicated that the Holocaust posed problems to his very idea of monumentality, and to have encapsulated this insight in the actual design. Anthony Vidler, writing about Rem Koolhaus' 1989 competition entry for the French National Library, has asked whether its use of transparency suggests 'A crisis of

³³⁶ This and following references from Louis Kahn, 'Monumentality' in *ibid.* pp. 577-588

confidence in monumentality?³³⁷ We will later consider the notion of transparency - for now, we might say that the proposal as a whole seems to articulate such a crisis.

Kahn's proposal refuses the traditional features of the monument. These had also been discussed at Zucker's 1944 symposium. 'There is probably nothing in the world of man-made things so open to criticism as the civic monument'³³⁸. Paul Goodwin highlighted the use in monuments of easily accessible symbols: 'The use of a *trade-mark* in countless repetition has proved valuable with the eagle, the swastika, the fasces, the hammer and sickle, politically speaking.'³³⁹ In a monument to its victims, such ready employment of the tools of fascism might be contested. However, by the mid-1960s, many proposed and completed Holocaust memorials precisely used such tools. One of these was designed by Nathan Rapoport and was situated close to Kahn's office in Philadelphia. Susan Solomon has posited that Kahn might have actively resisted the language of this work.³⁴⁰

Of course the very function of the traditional memorial was, at the moment of Kahn's proposal, under scrutiny in the work of avant-garde artists. During the Vietnam War, growing more distrustful of their ideological role and their manifestation of state power, Claes Oldenburg proposed a new kind of monument which made transparent the function of the traditional monument. Smithson, we recall, in describing 'new monuments' was confident that 'old monuments' caused us to 'remember the past'.³⁴¹ Oldenburg's proposals remembered what the old monuments forgot. In 1965, for instance, he proposed a monument that took the form of a sleek, black box, the archetypal form of minimalist sculpture, but one which would have a different kind of function - *Proposed Colossal Monument for the Intersection of Canal Street and Broadway, New York: Block of Concrete Inscribed with the Names of War Heroes* (fig.57). Oldenburg's proposal made literal the obstructive presence of traditional memorials in urban environments. His giant cube, positioned at a busy crossroads, would also cause endless car accidents, so a

³³⁷ Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992) p. 220

³³⁸ Philip Goodwin, 'Monuments' in Zucker, 1944, op. cit., p.589

³³⁹ ibid. p.599

³⁴⁰ Susan Solomon, 1997, op. cit., p. 344. Solomon quotes Sybil Milton's description of Rapoport's work: 'The florid and heavy-handed work combines biblical motifs with the Holocaust: an unconsumed burning bush, a dying mother, Jewish resistance fighters, a child with a Torah, and a blazing menorah.'

³⁴¹ See note 286.



Fig. 57

Claes Oldenburg, *Proposed Colossal Monument for the Intersection of Canal Street and Broadway, New York: Block of Concrete Inscribed with the Names of War Heroes*, 1965

16" x 12" (40.6 x 30.48 cm)

Crayon and watercolour

mounting pile of carnage would block out the inscribed names (whose subjects would be forgotten anyway), re-presenting the destruction of war in quite a new manner.

Oldenburg was making transparent the manner in which memorials remembered some historical details while forgetting others. The traditional war memorial, for instance, remembered heroism and victory at the expense of barbarism. The role of Jews during the Holocaust was not the subject of debate, as might have been the activity, for instance, of the Americans in Vietnam, and, though he appropriated many other kinds of monument, in his proposals Oldenburg never targeted Holocaust memorials. However, the same problems that drew Oldenburg's attention in other monuments existed in memorials such as Rapoport's, which emphasised resistance heroism while forgetting other, less 'heroic' victims. Kahn may have known Oldenburg's work through *Perspecta*³⁴², and though his proposal has nothing of the satirical qualities of Oldenburg's approach to the monument, nonetheless it represents a resistance to the same kind of bombastic monument Oldenburg questioned. The lack of any 'trade-mark' in Kahn's initial proposal speaks also of a kind of resistance to using the tools of fascist architecture, a refusal to control what should be remembered, making memory something that takes place undirected. Kahn resisted using a symbol around which to organise memory, but by doing so, the *Memorial* witnesses the historical conditions which made this resistance compelling.

The notion of memory was in play in architectural discourse in the 1960s, and not only in discussions around memorials. It was possible to argue that a built structure could generate memory. However, such memory did not extend outwards to enable the recollection of events external to architecture. Architecture, rather, could recall its own past. It was in part Kahn's achievement to make this so. Whereas architects of the amnesiac International Style 'banned history'³⁴³, Kahn remembered it, without ever delving into the kind of eclecticism or pastiche for which Philip Johnson would later be

³⁴² *Perspecta* 11 (1967) contained a range of texts that seem fascinating in relation to Kahn's memorial commission: Neil Welliver's essay 'Monumentality', an account of Philip Johnson's Kennedy Memorial (see note 353), and texts by Robert Venturi. The issue contained a portfolio illustrating work by Judd, Flavin, Morris, and Oldenburg. Oldenburg provided a statement on his War Memorial.

³⁴³ Vincent Scully, 'Jehovah on Olympus - Louis Kahn and the End of Modernism' *A+V Monografias* 44 (1983) p. 97

criticised. The Richards Building therefore could be ‘reminiscent [...] of San Gimignano and Siena’³⁴⁴, or could ‘embody something of Kahn’s direct experience of Egyptian architecture’³⁴⁵. Theorists such as Kenneth Frampton and Manfredo Tafuri have contested how exactly these references function³⁴⁶, and why Kahn employed them. In this discussion of an actual memorial work, what is important is simply that we recognise that this is how architects understood the idea of architectural memory.

As a glass structure, the proposal invokes the use of glass in the German architectural tradition, and the utopian rhetoric that accompanied its use. Paul Scheerbart, for instance, had written in 1914 that ‘If we want our culture to rise to a higher level, we are obliged [...] to change our architecture. [...] We can only do that by introducing glass architecture.’³⁴⁷ ‘The new glass environment will completely transform mankind.’³⁴⁸ Just over a decade later, Arthur Korn collected the various uses to which the material had been put in his 1926 book *Glass in Modern Architecture*.³⁴⁹ His rhetoric was not as florid, but many assumptions were intact. Glass was the architectural material that signified societal honesty and openness, and so its use was to be encouraged. These associations were still in play in the 1960s. In 1963, Colin Rowe and Robert Slutsky published their paper ‘Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal’ in *Perspecta*. Transparency was first explained through the connotations of ‘clarity’. Traditionally, transparency was associated with a moral realm characterised by honesty, ‘the absence of guile, pretence or dissimulation’.³⁵⁰ We might argue that it was these associations that made glass so appropriate to the memorial - and we will come back to the possible connections between transparency and morality. But to return to the notion of architectural memory, we can think through Kahn’s use of glass in a different manner. Vincent Scully observed that in

³⁴⁴ Vincent Scully, *Louis Kahn* (New York, 1962) p.28

³⁴⁵ Joseph Masheck, ‘Kahn: The Anxious Classicist’ in *Building-Art: Modern Architecture Under Cultural Construction* (Cambridge, 1993) p. 131

³⁴⁶ Kenneth Frampton *Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996) p.217 and Manfredo Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture* (London, 1980) p.56

³⁴⁷ Paul Scheerbart, *Glass Architecture* (London, 1972) (First published 1914) p.41

³⁴⁸ Ibid., p.74

³⁴⁹ An English translation was published in New York in 1968.

³⁵⁰ Colin Rowe and Robert Slutsky, ‘Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal’ in Colin Rowe, *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995) p.160

Kahn's other 1960s buildings, he specifically avoided the material, and therefore 'triumphed over the International Style by the subordination of glass or its total elimination.'³⁵¹ Here, by reversing this trend, his proposal recalled the dreams of Dessau, and lamented their destruction under Nazism.³⁵²

The inverse of the argument that a structure remembers architecture is that a structure forgets architecture. Kahn's proposal seems to consign fascist architectural space to oblivion. Kahn resisted employing symbolic forms; another means of forgetting fascist architecture was through differencing his proposal from its scale. In 1966, Philip Johnson published his proposals for the Dallas Kennedy memorial, which would consist of a cube, open at its top and along two facing side slits. Designed to stand 30 feet high, Johnson said of it 'You can't see Dallas.... you can't see anything but the sky. You are forced into an attitude of reverie.'³⁵³ (*fig. 58*) Rather than towering over the envisaged visitor, forcing their attitude, the height of Kahn's piers related to the human size, as is represented in the drawings showing people moving about the memorial (*fig. 59*). At this point, we can introduce the hypothetical visitor in Kahn's memorial. Up until now, the meanings of the proposal have been considered as if the *Memorial* were an active subject: how did the glass capture light play?, how did the *Memorial* accord with notions around monumentality, how did it challenge the idea of the monument?, how did the proposal mobilise the memory of other architecture? All these arguments suggest a critical significance for Kahn's *Memorial*, but of course, the *Memorial* was conceived as a space in which human subjects would walk, move, sit, look, wander. We should now ask what kind of a space the *Memorial* was, paying attention to its location, its organisation of space, and its materiality.

³⁵¹ Scully, 1983, op. cit., p.98

³⁵² These memories of glass, and its use in buildings such as Bruno Taut's Glass Pavilion (1914), Gropius' Dessau Bauhaus (1925-6), and Mies' Barcelona Pavilion (1929), seem far more significant than any memories of the Jewish use of glass. As noted, Kahn only tried to research its ancient Jewish use after choosing glass. Alexander Gorlin argued that it was the structure, not the material, of the memorial that held Jewish memories, since it alluded to the Temple of Solomon. 'Biblical Imagery in the Work of Louis I. Kahn - From Noah's Ark to the Temple of Solomon' *A+U* 176 (May 1985) pp. 83-92. The use of glass in early twentieth century architecture seems rather more in play.

³⁵³ *Architectural Record* (January 1966) p.42

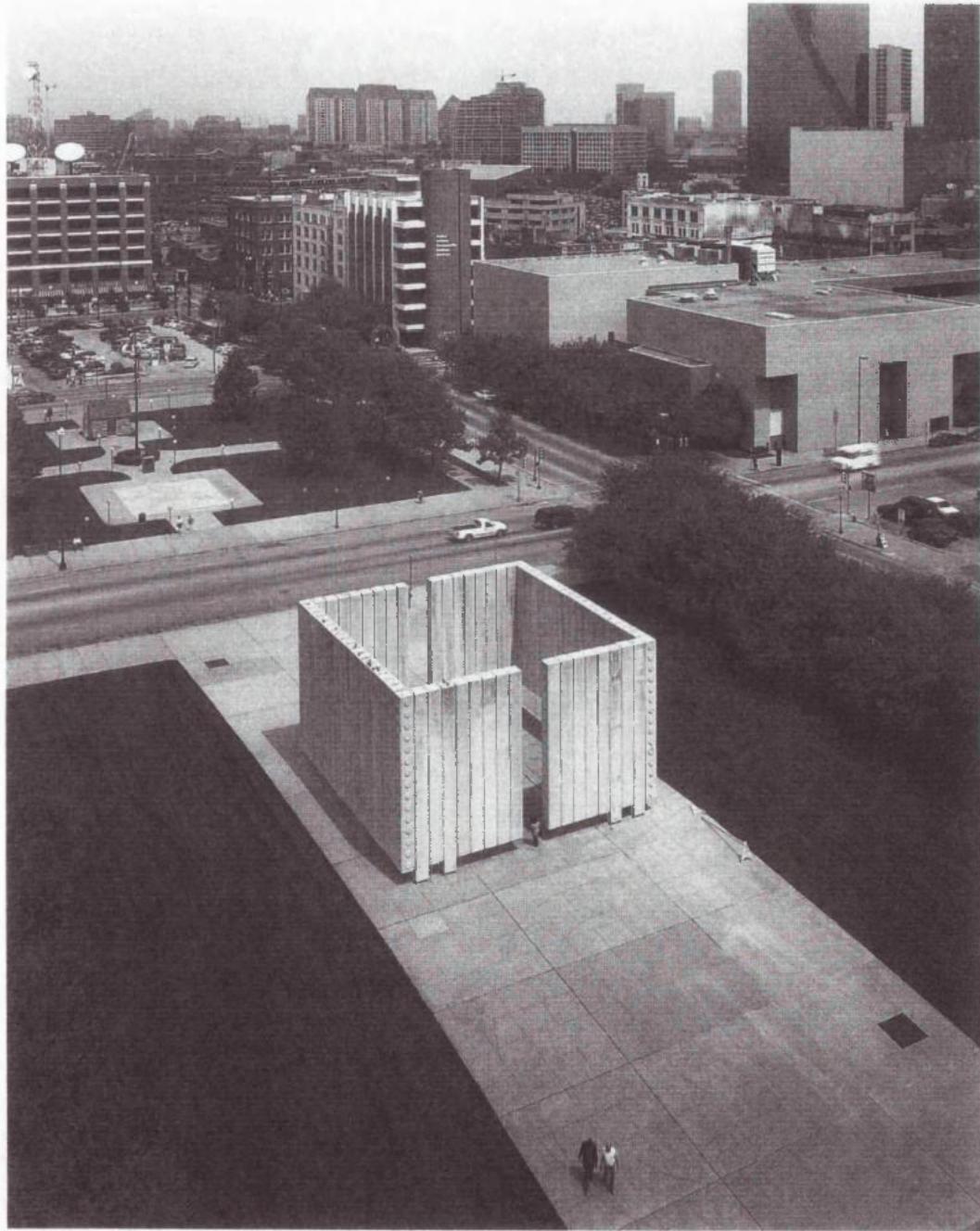


Fig. 58
Philip Johnson, *John F. Kennedy Memorial*, Dallas, 1970

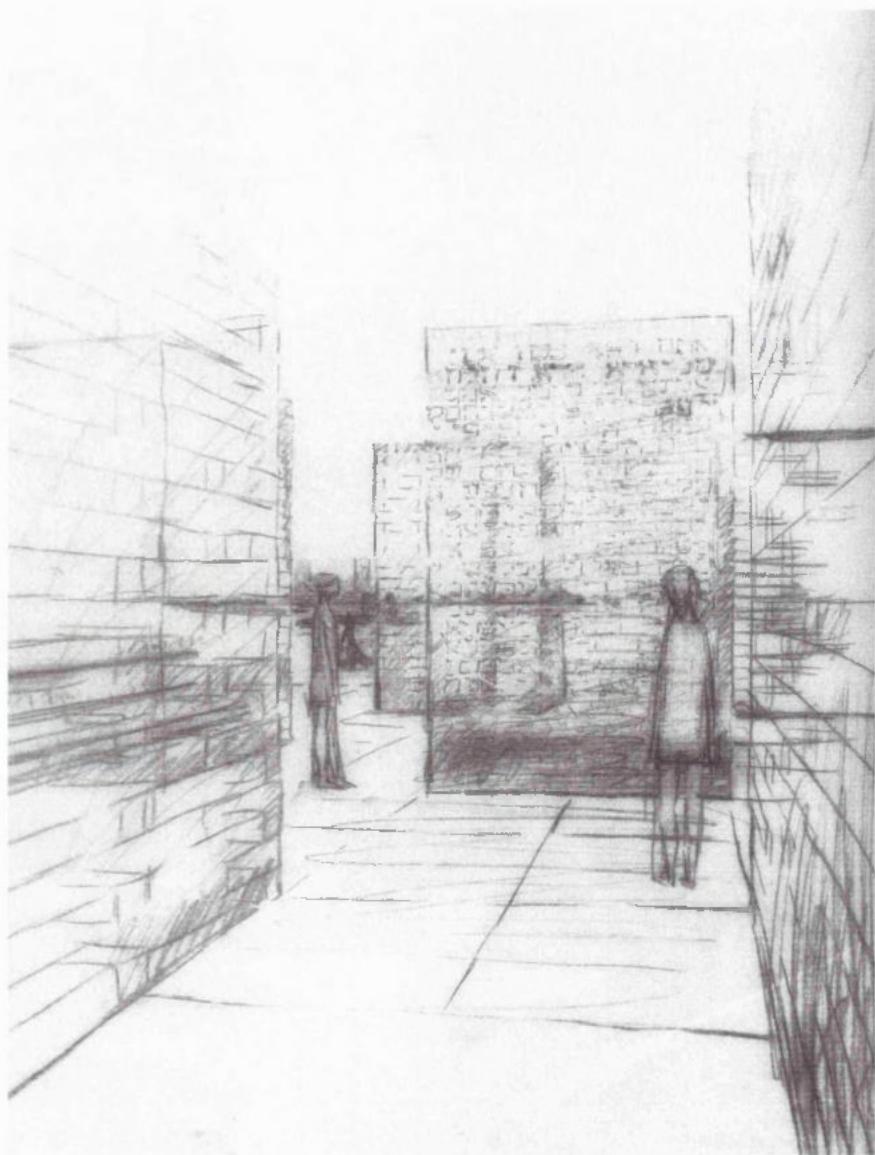


Fig. 59

Louis I. Kahn, *Memorial to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs* (Drawing 690.37 showing people around the memorial), 1966-72, Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania, and Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission

The *Memorial* would have made a virtue out of the necessity that was the crowded space of Battery Park. As we have seen, the park was teeming with monuments, but was also a highly symbolic location, a place which afforded a view to two symbols of immigration - the Statue of Liberty, and Ellis Island. On the horizon was the Atlantic. We might even say that Battery Park was the place where a visitor could look east towards Europe. This, of course, was already a memorial activity. For those who might use the memorial, whether survivors, or recent American immigrants like Kahn³⁵⁴, looking east was looking back.³⁵⁵ Kahn's *Memorial* facilitated such retrospection: rather than blocking the surrounding environment from view, the *Memorial* allowed these sites to enter its space. There is an emphasis on this usage both in the photographs of models which show surrounding structures (most of these photographs are directed towards the water, emphasising one background - the bay - at the expense of another - the financial district (*fig.60*)), and in Kahn's press release, which speaks of the symbolic significance of Battery Park, and the proximity of nearby historical monuments. The transparency of the blocks, and of the spaces between them would provide a 'sense of dematerialisation', allowing the structures like the Statue of Liberty 'to enter the Monument'.³⁵⁶ These are not framed dramatically by the *Memorial* - the *Memorial* avoids spectacle - but simply visibly present.

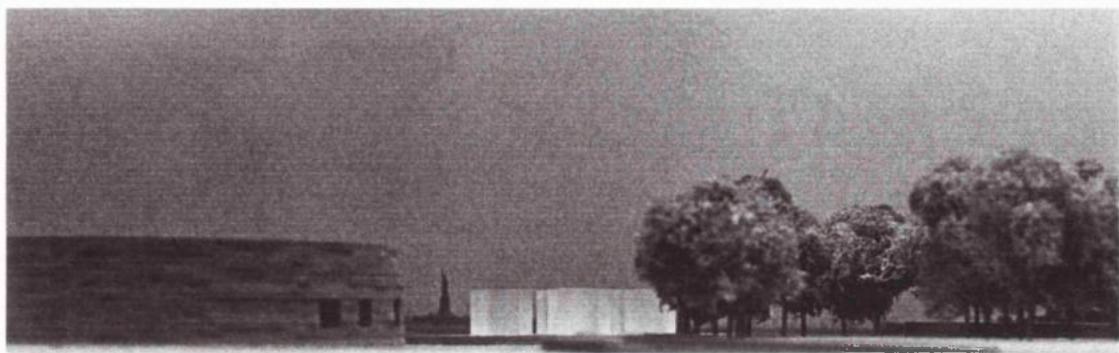
This describes something of the significance of the view to the outside from inside the *Memorial*, and the argument makes use of one kind of transparency - the transparency that allows various visible structures, in Gyorgy Kepes's words, to 'interpenetrate without an optical destruction of each other'³⁵⁷ - the Statue of Liberty, and the view to the Atlantic, in other words, occupy the same visual field as the glass blocks of the *Memorial* itself, so, in fact, the distinction between outside and inside the *Memorial* is undone. The phrase comes from Rowe and Slutsky's discussion of 'phenomenal transparency' - the

³⁵⁴ Vincent Scully intertwined Kahn's own identity as immigrant with his identity as American, writing that his career followed 'an American archetype: [beginning as] Jewish immigrant child in the slums of Philadelphia at the beginning of the century...' *American Architecture and Urbanism* (London, 1969) p.214

³⁵⁵ In an earlier version of this work, I compared the view to the east and the past in Battery Park to the view to the west and the future dramatised in Kahn's courtyard at the Salk Institute. 'A Space for Public Memory: Re-reading Louis Kahn's "Memorial to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs" *New Voices in Jewish Thought* Vol. 3 (Autumn 2000) pp. 88–117

³⁵⁶ LIK36 File D. Kahn's press release, 3 May 1968

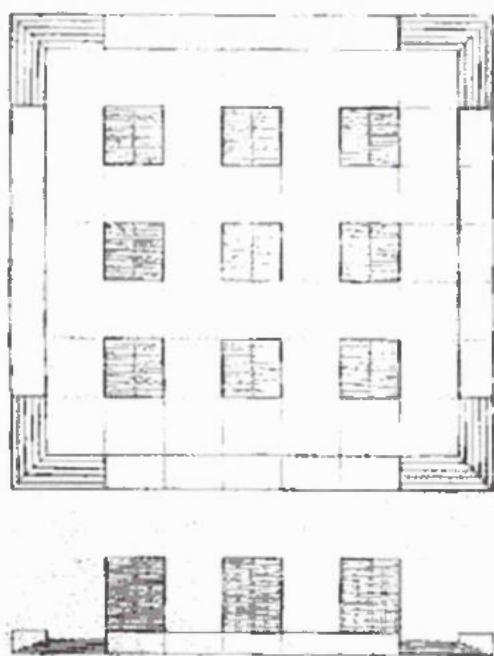
³⁵⁷ Gyorgy Kepes, quoted in Rowe and Slutsky, op. cit., p. 161

**Fig. 60**

Louis I. Kahn, *Memorial to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs* (690/K12 6p.3) (Photograph of model with (L-R) Castle Clinton, Statue of Liberty, Memorial, Trees), 1966-72

Photograph by George Pohl

Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania, and Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission

**Fig. 61**

Louis I. Kahn, *Memorial to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs* (Plan and section of Nine Pier model), 1966-72

Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania, and Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission

kind of transparency with which they were really concerned. Though they do not take into account some of this historical and geographical contingencies which I contend make the spatial experience of the *Memorial* specific, their ideas are nonetheless very useful, for they help us think about the space inside the *Memorial*, rather than the view from it. Rowe and Slutsky differentiated literal transparency (discussed above in relation to architectural memory) from 'phenomenal transparency'. As transparency gives rise to 'contradiction of spatial dimensions'³⁵⁸, they concluded that 'the transparent ceases to be that which is perfectly clear and becomes, instead, that which is clearly ambiguous.'³⁵⁹ In elaborating the architectural function of this kind of transparency, they were not concerned with material (and its actual transparency), but with the organisation of space. A structure which seemed to suggest a certain spatial order from one perspective, but which exhibited, on experience, a different one, embraced the ambiguity that characterised phenomenal transparency. Their central example was Le Corbusier's villa at Garches, whose facade suggested a spatial order contradicted by its plan.

A bird's eye view of Kahn's nine-pier model makes a sense of order immediately evident - a three by three grid, blocks evenly arranged, the spaces between them equal to their dimensions (*fig.51 and 61*). The phenomenal experience would have been quite different, firstly, on account of the endless reflections between blocks, the glinting and ever-shifting light play. Rather than nine distinct units appearing laid out in a grid, there might have sometimes appeared to have been more, sometimes less, but never a definite number of blocks.³⁶⁰ Blocks would be seen through each other (*fig.59*), they would be reflected in each other's surfaces, and these surfaces would also hold reflections of reflections. The proposal's lack of a symbolic centre would also destabilise a sense of order. When Kahn was eventually persuaded to create a ceremonial centre, he spoke about the commissioning body's 'prevailing desire to give the Monument a sense of the ritualistic.' Unlike the revised model, with its imposed central chapel, Kahn's original nine-pier model was rigorously non-hierarchical. The middle pier was in no way differentiated

³⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 160

³⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 161

³⁶⁰ In considering light play, I will be thinking about the piers as solid colourless glass blocks, as first intended by Kahn.

from the outlying piers. Rather than envisaging a subject who would walk through the outside towards the centre as if in a ritual, with the initial proposal Kahn structured the viewer's journey more loosely. Journeys around it would have gone on and on without a definite sense of direction or order.

A sense of spatial continuity and ambiguity might have also resulted from the kind of light play in the *Memorial*. Kahn claimed light enabled the proposed memorial to avoid a sense of accusation. A stone structure such as the granite slabs that made up the Battery Park naval monument would cast a 'defined shadow'. A glass pier would not block light, but instead cause the paradoxical phenomenon of a 'shadow [...] filled with light.'³⁶¹ The argument relies on a hope that different kinds of shadows cause different emotional responses. Dark shadows are linked to the sense of accusation. In other buildings by Kahn, 'definite shadows' are employed, yet without any ensuing sense.³⁶² A kind of shadow cannot have a fixed meaning, but we can think about the contingency of this project: in a space designated as a memorial, to avoid definite shadows was in part to avoid creating the sense that the material of the memorial has a kind of power over the spectators. A concrete block would cast a shadow over a spectator - a glass block would cast light around them. There is another way to address the question of shadows - a way that addresses the notion of space with which I am primarily concerned here. Through using glass instead of an opaque material, Kahn avoided highly defined spaces of dark and light. This meant the entire space occupied by the Memorial would be more *unified*, more fluid even: the spaces where there were 'shadows filled with light' were far more like the spaces where there were no shadows at all than they would have been had the shadows been 'defined'. This unity might be said to affect the way the space could be negotiated by visitors. Instead of seeming like a divided space that could be explored part by part, and so in its entirety (first one part, then another, then the last), the unity of space would also mean that exploration could just go on and on.

³⁶¹ LIK36 File D. Kahn's press release, 3 May 1968

³⁶² See, for instance, the images of Kahn's Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, in Brownlee and DeLong, op. cit., pp. 214-231

The first proposal imagined a space that would have seemed unified, centreless, going on and on. Perhaps inside it, time would have appeared to be slowed down, and there is a kind of appropriateness of this slowness to the task of a memorial, as slowness might engender the contemplative attitude important to facilitate the process of memory. We might recall again, though, that Smithson described the idea of extended time, and of endless reflections, as bringing about the inertia of the 'entropic mood.' The kind of present he sensed in minimalist sculpture and in the architectural glass boxes of Park Avenue was an endless one. 'The kind of infinity that was interesting [to Smithson] did not have a capital 'I' and was not Sublime but made one lose one's bearings by the sheer persistence of repetition.'³⁶³ I do want to consider a kind of infinity in relation to Kahn's first proposal, but one with little to do with the entropic mood Smithson described.

In the last few paragraphs, the spatial experience in the *Memorial* has been considered as if there were a single visitor: what would they see of the surrounding environment? how would their knowledge of ordered space be disrupted by experience, what would it have been like to wander around this space? Something of the visual aspect of this experience is captured in recent representations of Kahn's memorial in Kent Larson's *Louis I. Kahn - Unbuilt Masterworks*. Larson has constructed digital images of views from inside the *Memorial*. As fascinating as his images are, they represent the *Memorial* as *image* (figs.62-63). The photographs cannot represent the sense of movement around the space that I have attempted to describe. But more problematically, the digital pictures forget that this was a public memorial. They show the space empty of other visitors. Any viewpoint in the *Memorial* was to include other people. To consider the proposal's greatest significance, we have to start thinking less about an imagined viewer, and more about viewers as a collective body.

One aspect of the proposal of interest in this respect is the way it put memory on show. In the mid-1960s, we can assume that while remembrance was a daily private activity for Holocaust survivors, there was little opportunity (and, it has been argued by many,

³⁶³ Briony Fer, 'Some Translucent Substance, or The Trouble with Time', in Carolyn Bailey Gill (ed.), *Time and the Image* (Manchester, 2000) p.73

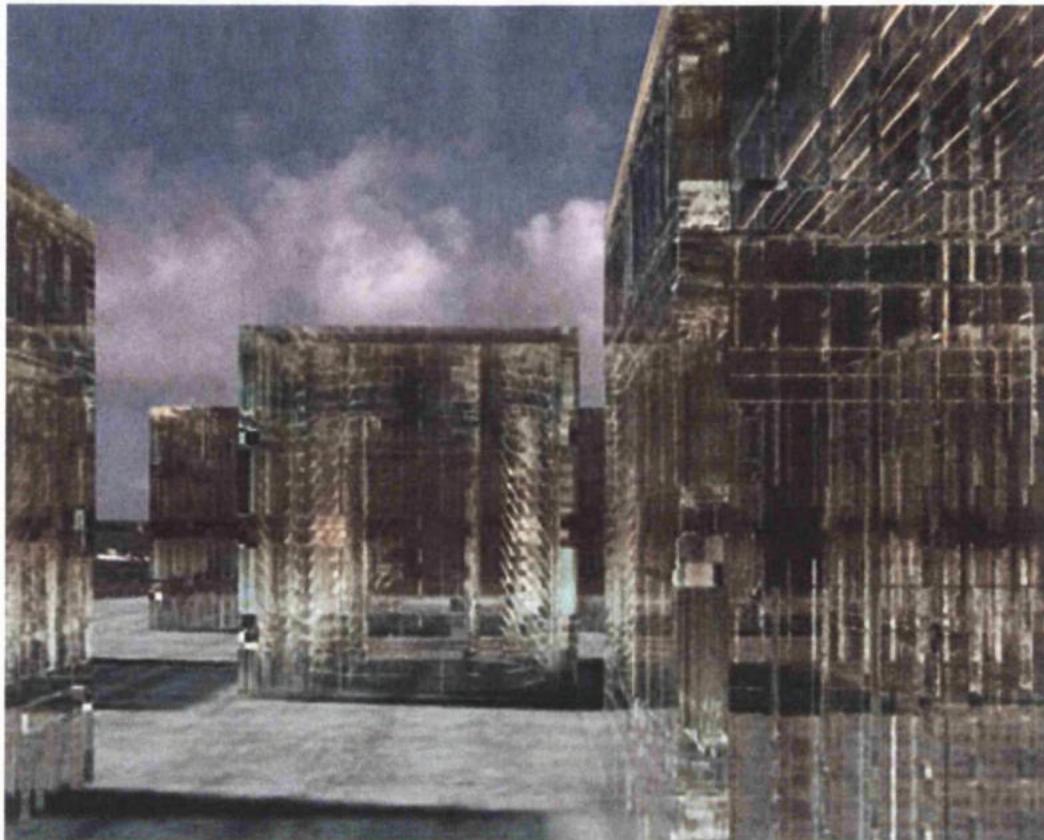


Fig. 62

Louis I. Kahn, *Memorial to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs* (Digital reconstruction of view of Seven Pier proposal looking toward New York Harbor), 2000
Kent Larson, *Louis I. Kahn – Unbuilt Masterworks* p. 119, fig. 141



Fig. 63

Louis I. Kahn, *Memorial to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs* (Digital reconstruction of view of nine-pier proposal with corner benches looking toward Castle Clinton), 2000
Kent Larson, *Louis I. Kahn – Unbuilt Masterworks* p. 115-16, fig. 139

demand) for public memorial. The commission therefore required Kahn to create an environment for a new activity, and to facilitate this newness, easing the transition of remembrance from the private to the public sphere. While the structure refrained from intimidating its visitors, its transparency helped to emphasise that remembrance was now public. The proposed memorial would have offered up its visitors to be seen at the same time as its piers and the views beyond. Kahn drew further attention to the public nature of remembrance through the use of a platform: having made a special journey to Battery Park, visitors had to mount steps to the platform so they actually occupied the same space as the piers, becoming a part of the memorial.³⁶⁴

The proposal allowed the activity of remembering to be seen by those outside the memorial. How though would we imagine what took place between people within it? Visitors would see other visitors through the piers, and this might have caused a strange sensation, as they sensed others doing what they were doing, which was looking through the glass at themselves. In a literal manner, they would have had to make decisions about privacy and space - whether to stand near others, to give them space, to walk different paths through the space, and so on. These decisions are made in all kinds of spaces where a private activity is placed in public.³⁶⁵ The centrelessness of the initial proposal would have heightened the awareness of the presence of the other. Since the proposal did not structure a path of movement towards a central space, moving around and around the piers meant moving around other people.

We can also question how the materiality of the *Memorial* might have affected the process of seeing other people. The glass would have been partly translucent, not concealing anything at its centre, allowing the viewer to see inside and through it. It would also have been partly reflective, mirroring the face of the viewer on its surface, even mirroring the reflection of their backs that were cast from the reflections on the surface of the block behind them. In many contemporaneous minimalist sculptures,

³⁶⁴ This is very different from the kind of viewing imagined of the subject of memorials such as Nathan Rapoport's Warsaw Ghetto monument, since only the statues occupy the plinths. More recent monuments, most famously Maya Lin's Vietnam memorial, like Kahn's require the visitor to occupy their space.

³⁶⁵ Vito Acconci later mined this territory when approaching visitors' 'personal space' in *Proximity Piece*, performed at the Jewish Museum in 1970.

mirrored surfaces were deployed to reflect a *part* of the viewing subject's body. As a viewer walks through the grid of Robert Morris's *Mirror Cubes*, for example, the surface of the sculpture itself takes the shifting images of the viewer's feet, and dramatically heightens their awareness of their movement around the work (*fig.64*). The difference I want to foreground is not just a matter of the size of the reflection, the literal fact the whole body, rather than a part of it, would be reflected in Kahn's piers. The kind of process I want to describe in relation to the *Memorial* does not merely address self-awareness, an abstract, non-social phenomenology, but addresses the sense of the viewer's awareness of other people. The glass would have increased the viewer's awareness that this was an environment filled with other people. This function of reflectivity has been articulated by the critic Brian Hatton in his account of a real built structure, Dan Graham's *Star of David Pavilion* in Schloß Buchberg (*fig.65*), which, like Kahn's, makes use of both transparency and reflectivity.

'Our beholding is no longer a simple matter of contemplating an object, for the object now comprises both the prism itself and that which is seen through it or 'in' it - including ourselves.' Furthermore, 'the 'we' is important, for the full valence of the prism is activated in the company - co-attentive, differently engaged, or introspective - of others. The pavilion reminds us how subjectivity is intrinsically reciprocal; we become ourselves through being, *inter alia*, the responsive objects of each others' gaze.'³⁶⁶

The reflectivity and transparency of glass draws attention to the very activity of looking. The process of looking is a process which sensitises the viewer to the presence of others; looking is not merely seeing others; it is being seen as well - a reciprocal activity, like subjectivity itself. The spatial and material fabric of the *Memorial* therefore would heighten an awareness of looking, and of looking as a social activity. Its fabric would

³⁶⁶ Brian Hatton, 'Star of David Pavilion' in *Dan Graham- Architecture* (Camden Arts Centre, London, 1997) pp. 45-46. Holocaust memory may also be in play in Graham's Austrian pavilion, but this has not yet been considered.

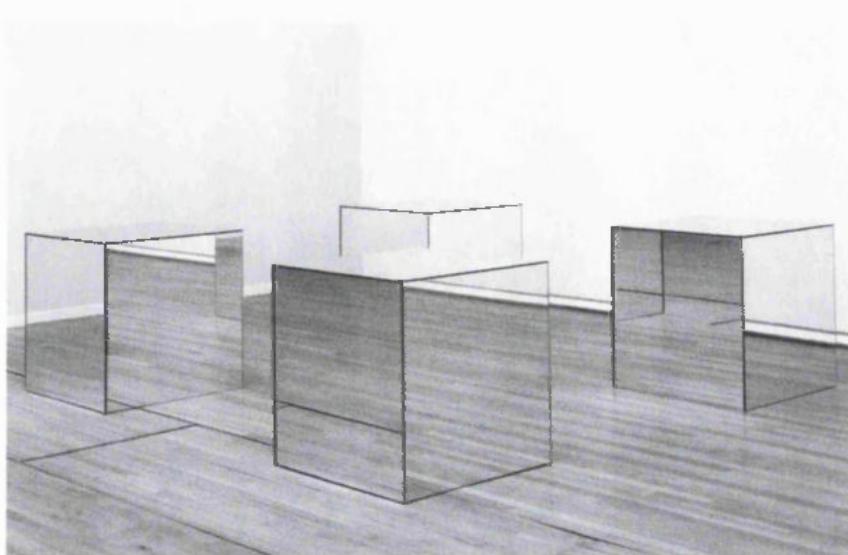


Fig. 64
Robert Morris, *Untitled (Mirrored Cubes)*, 1965 / 1971
21" x 21" x 21" (53.3 x 53.3 x 53.3 cm)
Plexiglas mirrors on wood, four units
Tate Modern



Fig. 65
Dan Graham, *Star of David Pavilion for Schloß Buchberg*, 1991-1996

heighten an awareness of others. This awareness would facilitate meeting. Kahn's environment would become a place for congress.³⁶⁷

After meeting, it might not be too far fetched to imagine that conversation would take place. The Committee sensed the absence of words in the initial proposal, and demanded they be inscribed in the chapel space. But of course, words were to be present in the *Memorial* - not physically present, but through the physical presence of people talking. There is a remnant of this idea in one representation of the Seven Pier model: Kahn positioned human figures sitting with their backs facing the piers (*fig.66*). Their *position* indicates that the activity of memory took place in the environment of the whole monument, and not within the confines of the chapel. Their *activity* indicates that memory was not just conceived of as a private thought process taking place in public, but as a communal activity. Unconditioned by statuary or symbols, stories would flow as memories are shared. The painful past would be recounted, and negotiated.³⁶⁸ If the *Memorial* would encourage meeting, then that is to say the present was not the entropic present Smithson associated with 'cold glass boxes' and the destruction of memory, but a present enlivened by meetings, by sharing memories.

We can introduce here a kind of infinity that does seem relevant to a description of the *Memorial*. This is not the sublime infinity of death that Huxtable sensed in her *New York Times* review, not the entropic infinity Smithson wrote about, but the infinity of the Other. This notion is derived from the work of Emmanuel Levinas, who, around the time

³⁶⁷ Kahn had always been interested in creating such spaces. See, for instance, his plans for the redevelopment of Philadelphia published in *Perspecta* 2 (1953), and his discussion of the lamentable evolution of the village green into inhumane city halls in his essay 'Architecture: Silence and Light' (*Writings, Lectures, Interviews* (New York, 1991) p.256). Sarah Williams Ksiazek has investigated his early work through his concerns about such issues, outlining his attempts to create 'civic spaces that would inspire a sense of communal identification and encourage civic participation.' *Changing Symbols of Public Life: Louis Kahn's Religious and Civic Projects 1944-1966 and Architectural Culture at the End of the Modern Movement* (PhD thesis, Columbia University, 1995) p.5

³⁶⁸ Despite everything we have seen of Kahn's ambivalence towards using symbolic Jewish forms, what emerges here is a memorial in which the activity of remembering would have many connections to kind of remembrance Yerushalmi has described as being central in the Jewish tradition. He outlines how Jews tell stories to each other in calendar festivals. Remembering for Jews is an oral process, rather than a visual one, and Kahn's proposal continues this trend. (Yerushalmi, op. cit.) Since the time of Kahn's proposal, oral memory has been in play in other Holocaust memorial projects. This has been due to different reasons – the ageing of the survivor population, and the threat of denial.

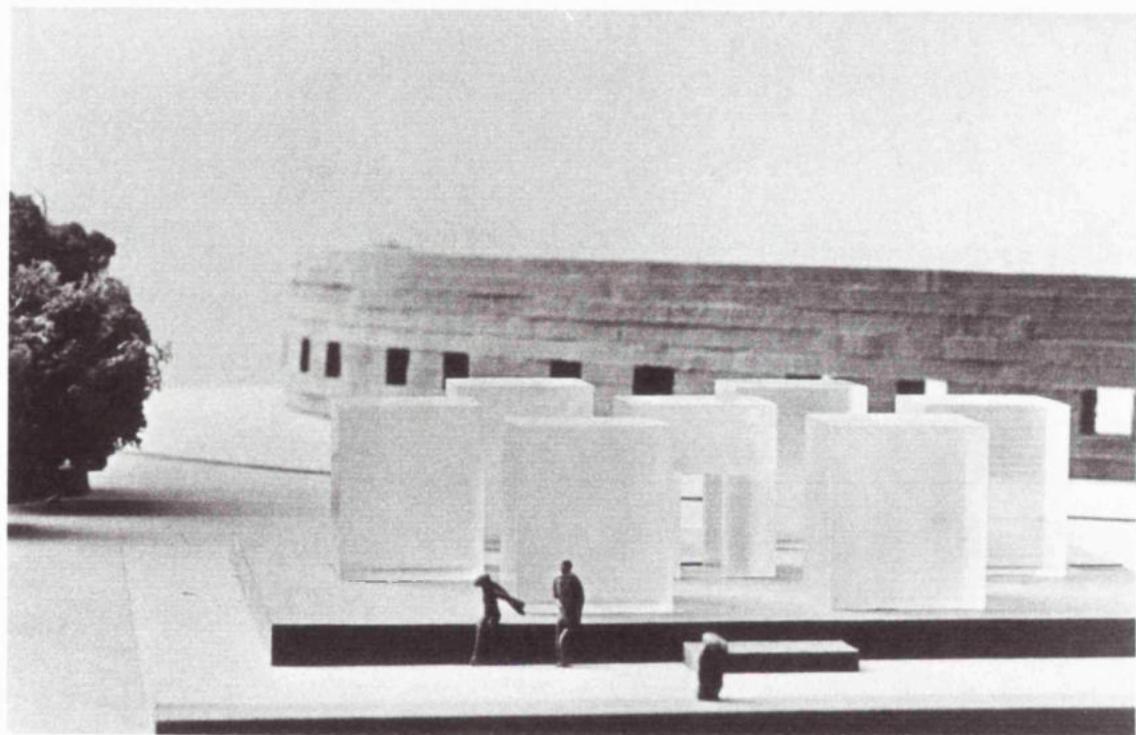


Fig. 66

Louis I. Kahn, *Memorial to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs* (Seven Pier Model), 1966-72
Photograph courtesy Vladka Meed, New York

of Kahn's *Memorial*, was interested in theorising the moment of the encounter with the Other. (Coincidentally, Levinas was also born in the Baltic States, five years after Kahn). For Levinas, the moment of the encounter with the Other was the moment of ethics: the moment when the 'infinity' of the Other was realised; their absolute irreducibility, the absolute and unconditional obligation the subject had to the Other.³⁶⁹ Whereas other philosophers, notably Sartre, had considered the encounter with the Other as the moment when the subject realised he was placed under threat, Levinas disagreed: 'The first revelation of the other, presupposed in all the other relations with him, does not consist in grasping him in his negative resistance and in circumventing him by ruse.'³⁷⁰ Levinas instead perceived the encounter as the moment when the subject realised his infinite obligation to the Other. For Levinas, this was an asymmetrical relationship: the subject did not ask what obligation the Other had to him - it was an irrelevance. Levinas described the moment of the encounter with the Other through his idea of the face. 'The epiphany of the face is ethical.'³⁷¹ Despite Levinas' visual descriptions of the face ('There is first the very uprightness of the face, its upright exposure, without defence'³⁷²) - the idea of *seeing* the face is metaphorical. In a late interview, Levinas made it clear that he was not actually talking about *seeing* the other: 'The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that.'³⁷³ Indeed, there is a critique in his work of the centrality of vision, particularly since vision seems to be associated with control. This is a part of his wider critique of panoramic, totalising philosophies.³⁷⁴ A vision of total control is offered by fascist architecture, but it is unavailable in Kahn's *Memorial*, where a kind of vision of ambiguity persists, as ordered space cannot be judged, as light play ceaselessly destabilises order. The materiality of the *Memorial*, as I have suggested, emphasises the presence of the Other. It is therefore interesting to posit that by creating a space where the

³⁶⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, 1992) (First published 1961)

³⁷⁰ Ibid., p.197

³⁷¹ Ibid., p.199

³⁷² Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Translated by Richard A. Cohen) (Pittsburgh, 1999) (First published 1982) p.86

³⁷³ Ibid., pp.85-86

³⁷⁴ Aadrian Peperzak has written that 'Western thought and practice in [Levinas's] view are marked by a striving for totalization, in which the universe is reduced to an originary and ultimate unity by way of panoramic overviews and dialectical syntheses.' Adriaan Peperzac (ed.), *Emmanuel Levinas, Basic Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1996) p. x.

encounter with the Other is so greatly emphasised, Kahn establishes the conditions for the encounter with the Other in which Levinas was interested. In creating this kind of space, Kahn imagined a memorial where memory would be generated for the sake of the present and the future. What was remembered would be as much the past, the experience of the individual, as the obligation of the present: the individual's responsibility for the Other. In the remembrance of this responsibility, the visitor is engaged in a bond Nazi ethics forgot.³⁷⁵

³⁷⁵ Tamra Wright's recent study *The Twilight of Jewish Philosophy: Emmanuel Levinas' Ethical Hermeneutics* (Harwood, 1999) has described Levinas' description of the encounter between the Self and the Other as a kind of post-Holocaust ethics.

5. A Legacy?

Kahn's *Memorial to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs* was never built. There was no Holocaust memorial in Battery Park during the 1970s, but the locations around the Park could still inspire the questions that might have been raised by visitors to the *Memorial*: in 1979, Georges Perec made a film on Ellis Island, and found himself addressing what it meant to be a Jew. Rather than 'a sign of belonging, a religion, a praxis, a culture, a folklore, a history, a destiny, a language', being a Jew meant for Perec 'an absence rather, a question, a throwing into question, a floating, an anxiety, an anxious certainty.' Behind this uneasy lack of fixity was the memory of persecution, 'another certainty, abstract, heavy, insupportable: that of having been designated as a Jew, and therefore as a victim, and of owing my life simply to chance and to exile.' Though Perec might be at home in many countries including America and France, 'one thing alone in this almost limitless range of possibilities was forbidden to me, that of being born in the land of my ancestors, in Poland, in Lubartow, Pulawy or Warsaw, and of growing up there in the continuity of a tradition, a language and an affiliation.'³⁷⁶

Rather than conceiving a memorial with signs of belonging, with written language, with symbols derived from Jewish culture, history, or folklore, Kahn's *Memorial* amounted to a 'throwing into question' - questioning everything about what a memorial might be, but emerging not so much with a space of anxiety, as a space of delicate congress; where the 'absence' of easy 'sign[s] of belonging' might encourage the possibility of actual meeting. The very approach to the *Memorial* itself might thus in one way reflect the positions and the needs of the post-Holocaust Jew, acknowledging that life is determined by chance, throwing everything into question, seeking a real community. Kahn's approach, however, could never gain the practical and widespread support he needed: eventually, in 1997, a Holocaust memorial was erected in Battery Park, but it took the shape of a museum. The 'Museum of Jewish Heritage - A Living Memorial to the Holocaust' could be said to be an expanded version of the 'chapel' Kahn's

³⁷⁶ Georges Perec, 'Ellis Island: Description of a Project' in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (Translated by John Sturrock) (Harmondsworth, 1997) p.136

commissioners envisaged, and, to recall Michael Zagayski's challenge for the Jewish Museum, just the kind of Memorial he had hoped for.

Kahn's *Memorial* seems a kind of original for the 'countermonuments' discussed in particular by James Young. Young is interested in projects such as Jochen Gerz's and Esther Shalev-Gerz's disappearing Harburg monument (1986), a column which slowly sank into the ground, on whose surface visitors had been encouraged to inscribe graffiti, and Hans Haacke's Graz project (1988) in which the artist recreated a Nazi monument, eliciting a set of responses from the local community - responses which for Haacke were part of the project.³⁷⁷ Of course the cultural requirements for monuments in Germany in the 1980s were totally different from those determining Kahn's commission, but Kahn's *Memorial* does seem to imagine a rather less literal form of interactivity, a lesser reliance on gimmick. While the attention paid here to the notion of the encounter with the Other might help put some pressure on Young's account of the countermonument (he passes over Kahn's project with minimal attention), I would prefer to locate a kind of unacknowledged and unintended legacy of Kahn's *Memorial* in the work of artists investigating social space - some, like Vito Acconci, through performance, others, like Dan Graham, and recently Rachel Whiteread and Liam Gillick, using structures and materials that relate to Kahn's proposal.

xxxxxx

Over the course of this chapter, several concerns have emerged which extend earlier discussions. Kahn's resistance to the symbol has a resonance with Louis's practice in the *Charred Journal: Firewritten* paintings, in which the symbol of the Star of David is *not* used. Like Newman's installation, Kahn's *Memorial* requires us to think about a relationship not only between abstraction and memory, but about the viewer's negotiation of space and the process of memory this negotiation generates. Just as I have argued that Newman's installation envisaged the viewer as a tragic subject whose encounter with the question raised by the Holocaust would lead to a moment of moral awareness, so the

³⁷⁷ See Young, 1993, op. cit., pp. 28-37 and 97-104

question of ethics relates to Kahn's *Memorial* - though here the stress is less on a private moment of questioning, and rather on a public encounter with the Other. We are now going to return to painting, but the notion of building will remain in play. We have been addressing the architecture of memory: thinking next about Frank Stella's *Polish Village* paintings, we will address the memory of architecture.

CHAPTER FIVE: FRANK STELLA'S POLISH VILLAGES

1.The Paintings

In the summer of 1970, as plans for the *Memorial to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs* were becoming increasingly fraught, Kahn's one-time champion Richard Meier gave his friend Frank Stella a book called *Wooden Synagogues* (fig.67). Published in 1959, this amply illustrated volume contained the last images of seventy-one 'monuments of Jewish culture', photographed during an architectural survey in the 1920s and 1930s, and destroyed in Poland during the war.³⁷⁸ The synagogues were ordered alphabetically, without privileging the 'quality' of one building over another. The book interspersed line drawings of plans and elevations with photographs, and where only a sketch of a building existed, this was used to represent it. Though most photographs showed the entire building, several concentrated on details, taken from perspectives that emphasised the angularity of the architecture, pitched diagonally across their surfaces (figs.68-71). The English edition contained an introduction by Dr. Stephen Kayser, who had then been Director of the Jewish Museum. 'This book commemorates martyred buildings', he wrote. Remembering the now-destroyed inscription above the gates of the Jablonow synagogue, he continued 'This book intends to open still another gate, that of remembrance'.³⁷⁹

Meier gave this book to Stella in the months after his 1970 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, an exhibition organised by William Rubin. Between 1970 and 1974, Stella produced a series of abstract works known as the *Polish Villages* - each named after a synagogue illustrated in the book. There were up to four versions of each 'synagogue', all using the same configuration, but using different materials. By 1974, the

³⁷⁸ Jan Zachwatowicz, 'Introduction' in Maria and Kazimierz Piechotka, *Wooden Synagogues* (Warsaw, 1959) p.8. In the 1920s, Oskar Sosnowski of the Polish Institute of Architecture instigated a project to record the rural synagogues. Many photographs were taken, mostly by the art historian Szymon Zajczyk, and archived. Though (along with the buildings) some of these documents were destroyed during the war, there were still enough photographs to assemble *Wooden Synagogues*. The main text by Polish architects Maria and Kazimierz Piechotka was written in the 1950s.

³⁷⁹ Stephen Kayser, 'Introduction to the English Edition' in ibid., p.5 and 6. Kayser worked with Meier on the 1963 Jewish Museum 'Recent American Synagogue Architecture'.



Fig. 67
Front cover of *Wooden Synagogues*, 1959



Fig. 68
Zabłudów Synagogue, detail of east elevation (from *Wooden Synagogues*)



Fig. 69
Sidra Synagogue, detail of west elevation (from *Wooden Synagogues*)

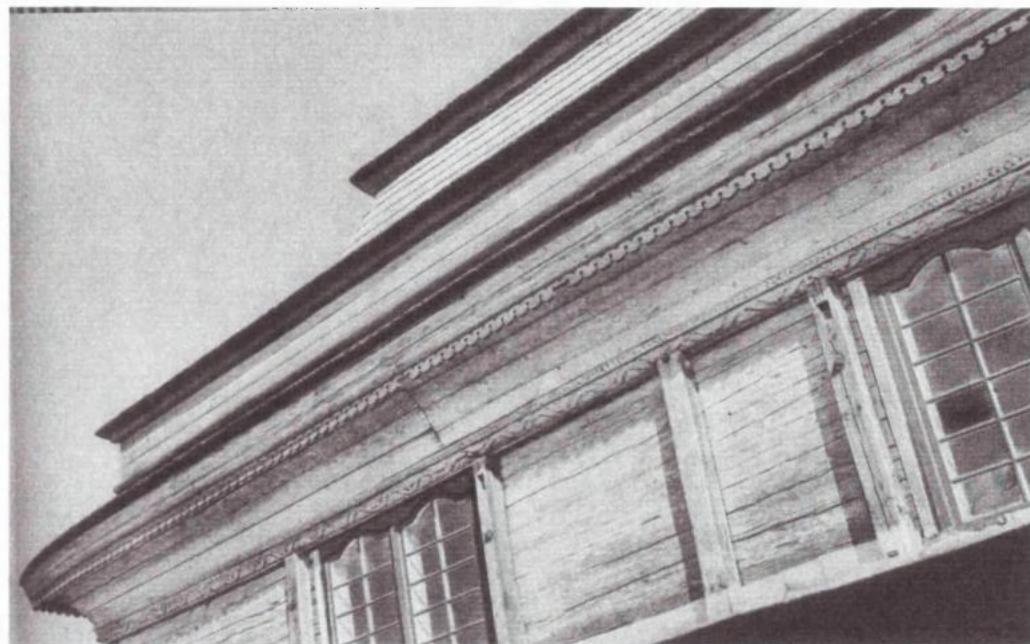


Fig. 70
Grodno Synagogue, detail of north elevation (from *Wooden Synagogues*)



Fig. 71
Janow Sokolski Synagogue, detail of south elevation (from *Wooden Synagogues*)

series numbered some 130 works. Many were included in an exhibition of 1978 organised by Philip Leider, and in Stella's second MoMA retrospective in 1987, again organised by Rubin.

It would be impossible to describe any one of the *Polish Villages* as representative of the entire series, in the same way that such a description might have served for works in earlier series by Stella, such as the *Black Paintings*, the *Purple Paintings*, or the *Protractors*. The only common feature is that each work is composed of a number of connected monochrome sections. A given work, such as *Felstyn III* (fig. 72), might have dull colour juxtapositions: its various sections are different hues of beige, olive, orange and brown. Another - like *Kamionka Stumilowa III* (fig. 73) - abandons such subtleties: a pink area lies adjacent to an orange one that is flanked by grey. All the works in the series have irregular external and internal shapes. Some, again like *Felstyn III*, have occasional verticals or horizontals along their perimeter, suggesting the axis of a regular rectangular painting - others, such as the *Janow Sokolskis* or the *Pilicas*, have no horizontal or vertical edges at all. The normal rectangular axis is further invoked *within* the perimeter of some works, such as *Chodorow II*, with its central white shape (fig. 74); *Piaski III*, however, has no such invocations, and consists instead of several interlocking shapes (fig. 75). *Odelsk I* offers the illusion of depth: between the central yellow triangle and the underlying black section, a grey strip runs along its left side, suggesting, if this is read as a shadow, that the yellow section lies further away from the wall than the black; such illusionism is entirely absent from other works (fig. 76).

There are also significant differences between the various versions of the works of the same title, relating to the materials that Stella used, and the kind of structures that he built. Leider and Rubin have given the clearest account of the evolution of the various versions.³⁸⁰ 'Version One' would be made on a thick canvas-covered stretcher, whose sections, all of which were on the same plane, would be covered with thin, glued-down materials, such as cut-sections of felt, or second layers of canvas. 'Version Two' was

³⁸⁰ Philip Leider, *Stella Since 1970* (Fort Worth, 1978) pp.10-12 and William Rubin, *Frank Stella 1970-1987* (MoMA, New York, 1987) pp.32-34

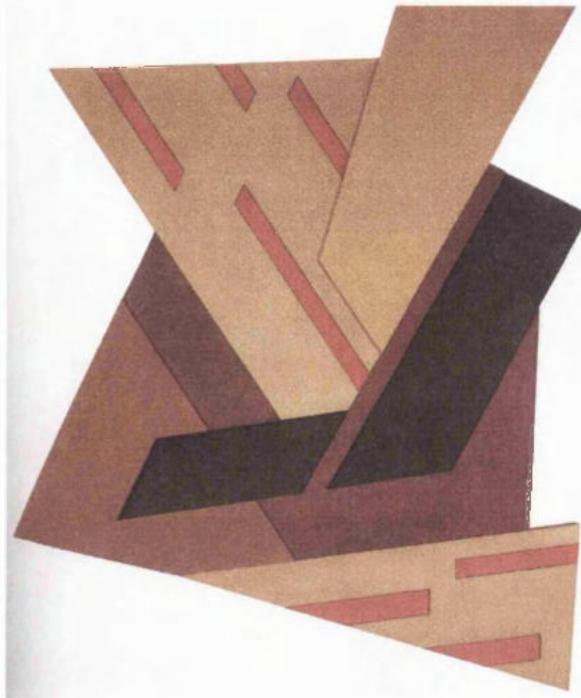


Fig. 72
Frank Stella, *Felsztyn III*, 1971
8'10" x 7'6" (269.4 x 228.6 cm), Mixed media on board
Collection Barbara Jakobson

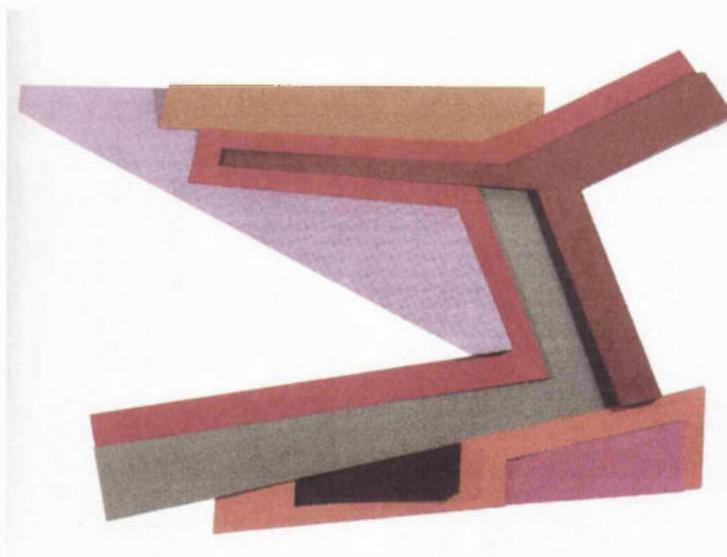


Fig. 73
Frank Stella, *Kamionka Strumilowa III*, 1972
7'4" x 10'4" (223.5 x 315 cm), Mixed media on board

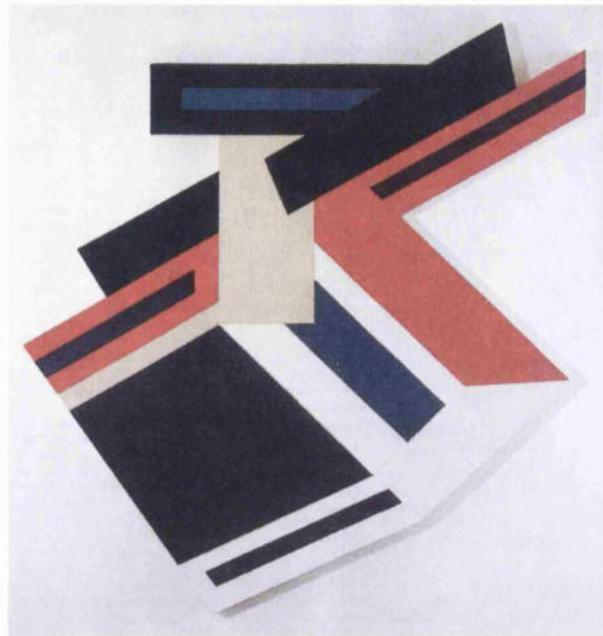


Fig. 74

Frank Stella, *Chodorow II*, 1971

9' x 8'10" (274.4 x 269.3 cm), Felt, paper, and collage on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection

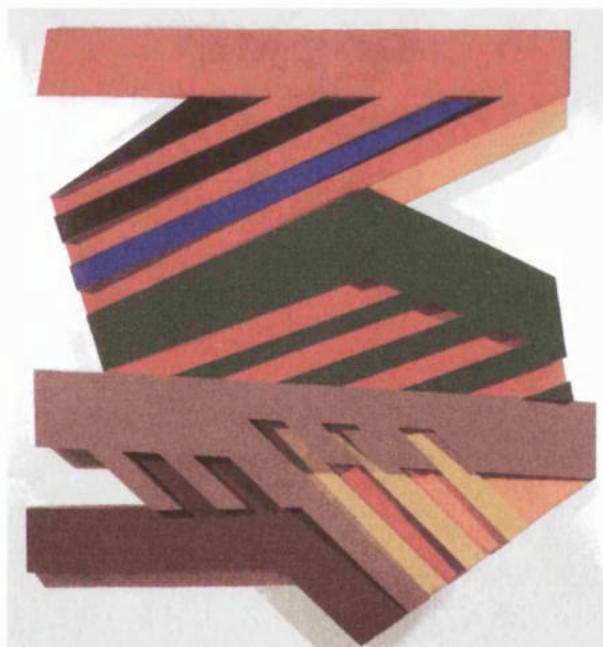


Fig. 75

Frank Stella, *Piaski III*, 1973

7'8" x 7' (233.7 x 213.4 cm), Mixed media on board

made on a wood support, on one plane, and though its internal divisions would match ‘Version One’, a different colour scheme would be employed, and a greater material diversity would be sensed on its surface: in addition to the materials of ‘Version One’, various boards were mounted onto the sections, so that some were slightly higher or lower than others. ‘Version Three’ would again replicate divisions, while changing colour arrangements. This time, however, the sections would veer off the vertical plane. From the side of *Felsyn III*, then, one sees that while some sections lie parallel to the wall, others cut into each other, meeting and tilting away from this plane at oblique angles, casting shadows on the adjacent sections into which they cut. Some works, finally, were executed in a fourth version. These, like *Nasielsk IV*, were unpainted wood reliefs, made of different wooden parts, which intersected in the same manner as in the third versions (fig. 77).

We have seen how the activity of remembrance was shaped in the abstract architectural space envisaged by Louis Kahn. Working from a book that opened ‘the gates of remembrance’, we might wonder if Stella too was hoping to open such a gate. Many years after he had completed the series, he was quoted as saying that ‘The Polish Village series was about more than “the synagogues that were destroyed”; [it was] “about the destruction of an entire culture.”³⁸¹ In this chapter, we will consider how these works might have addressed this destruction - in what ways they too shaped a kind of remembrance, and, if not, how they might be placed.

It is worthwhile highlighting the extent to which Stella would have been familiar with this ‘culture’. Unlike the majority of artists, architects, critics, and curators who have been discussed in this thesis so far, Stella was not a Jewish immigrant, or the child of Jewish immigrants, but an Italian American Catholic born in New England. Not being a Jew hardly discounted Stella from having an interest in this culture, or from having a concern with the cultural destruction of the Holocaust. However, it is helpful to indicate how close Stella was to the kind of secular Jewish cultural milieu mapped out so far. Peter Plagens has recently spoken of being an ‘outsider’ in the world of the Jewish

³⁸¹ William Rubin, *Frank Stella 1970-1987* (MoMA, New York, 1987) p.40

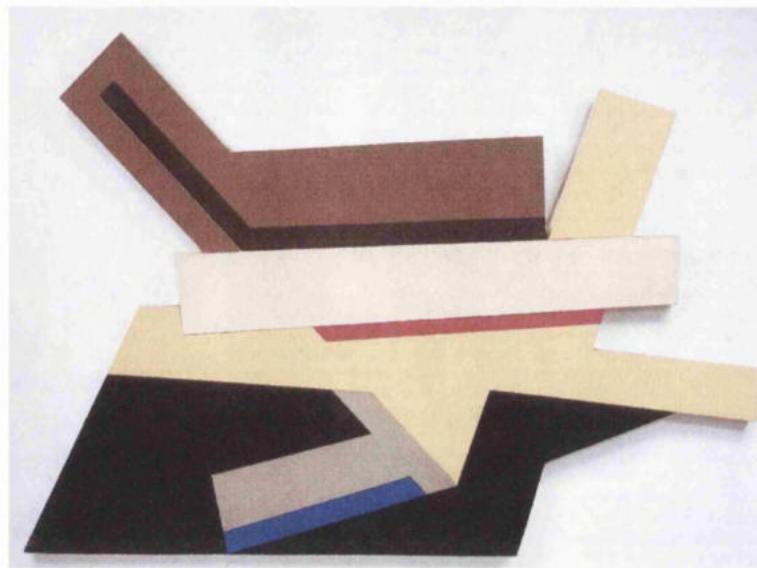


Fig. 76
Frank Stella, *Odelsk I*, 1971
7' 6" x 11' (228.6 x 335.3 cm), Mixed media on canvas

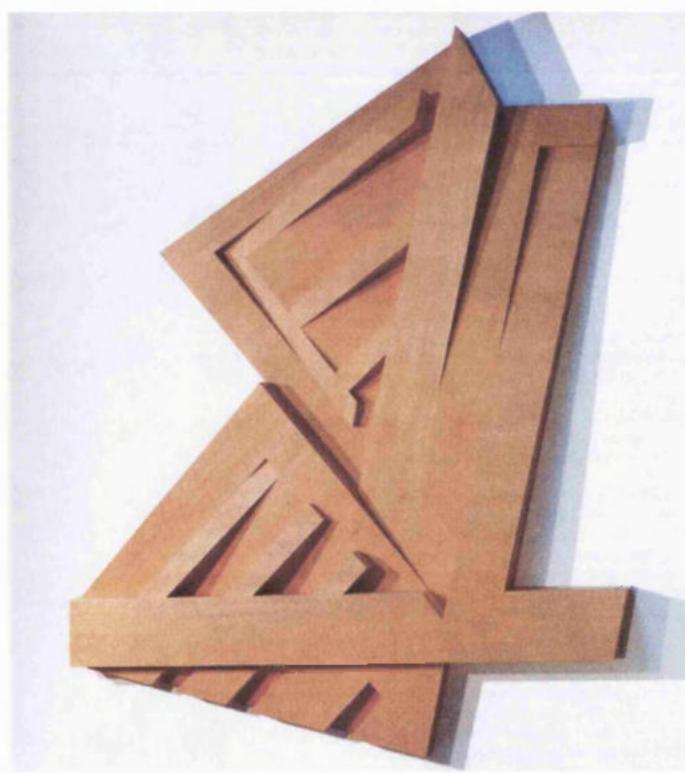


Fig. 77
Frank Stella, *Nasielsk IV*, 1972
9' 2" x 7' 5½" (279.4 x 227.4 cm), Unpainted wood
The Art Institute of Chicago, Grant J. Pick Fund

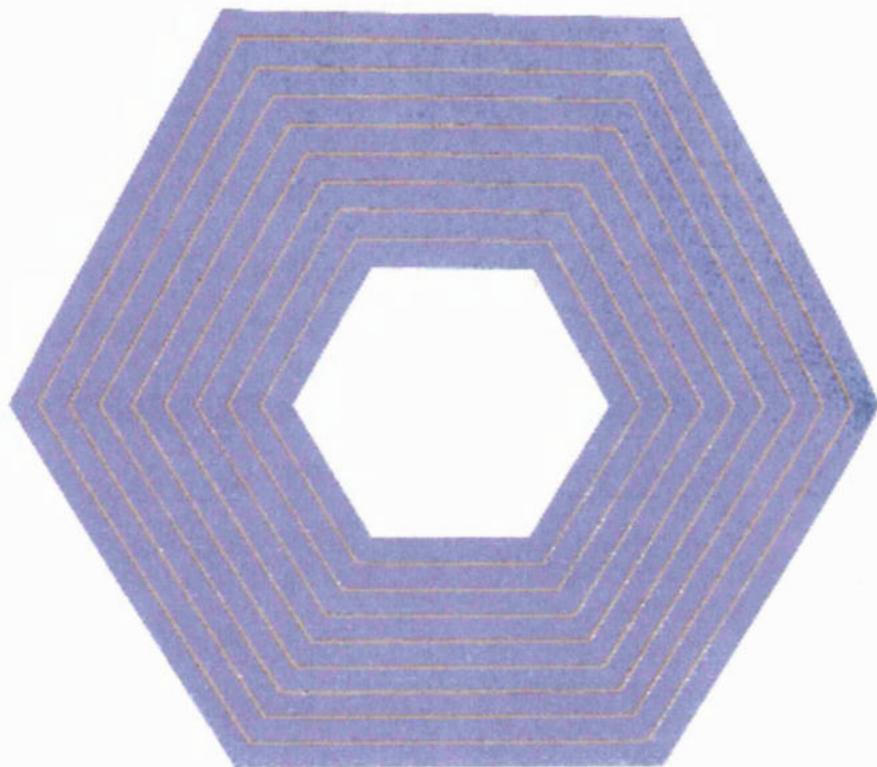


Fig. 78
Frank Stella, *Sidney Guberman*, 1963
6'5 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 7'5 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (196.2 x 227.3 cm)
Metalic paint on canvas

Artforum critics³⁸²; Stella - also surrounded by Jewish critics, dealers, and artists - might have sensed this less. Throughout the 1960s, he was married to the critic Barbara Rose, whose own recent recollections suggest her troubled response to the memory of the Holocaust. Around the time of her and Stella's marriage, Rose travelled to Berlin 'because the thing I was most afraid of was Nazis, so I went to live with them.'³⁸³ Later, her approach to the Vietnam War was shaped by a sense of responsibility sharpened by memory: 'I saw the Vietnam War as a horrible travesty, and I felt I had to do whatever I could to stop it. And I also thought I didn't want my children [Stella's children] to have to grow up with the idea that I didn't do anything like the "good" Germans.'³⁸⁴ Rose has even discussed her critical approach as informed by her Jewish upbringing: 'At the particular strict synagogue where we [Rosalind Krauss and Rose] were both confirmed, all issues were moral issues. Isn't it incredible that the art critical dialogue was focused on moral issues?'.³⁸⁵

Though my discussion of the *Polish Villages* will consider their political moment, and their possible 'moral' significance, I am not raising biographical details to suggest any direct relationship between Rose's situation and her husband's work, rather to give a sense of Stella's closeness to Jewish culture. This closeness seems particularly compelling in relation to Stella's explanation in 1970 of the purple painting of 1963 titled *Sidney Guberman* (fig. 78). Talking to Rubin, who was preparing the MoMA catalogue, Stella recalled why he had given the painting this name:

Stella: 'Sidney Guberman. He's a hexagon.'

Rubin: What makes Sidney Guberman hexagonish?

Stella: He's a Jewish figure, the classic Jewish figure. He's a Jew and Ivy Club [member] at Princeton, and he's a goy Jew and that was a 6-pointed star rounded off, the points had been lobbed off.³⁸⁶

³⁸² Amy Newman, *Challenging Art* (New York, 2000) p.345

³⁸³ Ibid., p.60

³⁸⁴ Ibid., p.301

³⁸⁵ Ibid., p.440

³⁸⁶ The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Department of Painting and Sculpture: Frank Stella Collection File [Interview] [Henceforth 'Stella/Rubin Interview']. The papers documenting Stella's conversations with

There are many surprising points here: Stella's comfortable use of the Hebrew word 'goy' (a word meaning 'nations', which, in Yiddish, came to be a rather offensive word for a gentile, and a word a Jew might not want to use, for fear of offending a gentile); Stella's acknowledgement of first-hand experience of the condition of Jewish self-hatred that Greenberg has addressed in relation to the impact of Auschwitz in 1950. It is also interesting to think about Stella's partner in this dialogue. Stella could articulate what a 'classic [assimilated] Jewish figure' was like; but it is far less likely that the assimilated Jewish art critics themselves could then describe their own situation. Though, thirty years on, Rose can introduce the question of identity to consider her critical approach, such questions were very much sidelined at this earlier moment.

The most obvious point of interest of this dialogue, of course, is that it raises the questions of the title and the symbol, and before looking at the *Polish Villages*, it is also important to have a sense of the debate around these issues in relation to Stella's work. Though flippantly, Stella speaks of a direct relationship between work and title, indeed between the shape of the work and the character of the individual named by the title. Not only does Stella play with the symbol of the Star of David (a surprising link now emerges between three paintings by Louis, and Johns, and Stella - see *figs.21-22*), but alters this symbol to represent a self-hating Jew. It hardly needs saying that these kinds of meanings were not articulated in the contemporary accounts of Stella's paintings. Shape was form, to misquote the title of Fried's most detailed essay on Stella - not symbol.³⁸⁷ Writing with completely different interests about the 'impure-purist' surfaces of Stella's purple paintings, Smithson had described the 'repulsive' aspect of the works, and found that the 'inaccessible surfaces deny any definite meaning in the most definite way'.³⁸⁸ The symbolic meanings suggested by Stella's comment would not have interested Smithson, but nor would they have even entered his mind.

Rubin before the 1970 retrospective are in disarray. They are unpaginated, stapled together out of order. Some are simply transcripts of Stella talking; others include Rubin's questions.

³⁸⁷ See Michael Fried, 'Shape as Form' *Artforum* (November 1966) pp.18-27

³⁸⁸ Robert Smithson, 'Entropy and the New Monuments' *Artforum* (June 1966) p.30

The very possibility of relating titles to works had been discounted primarily through the force of Stella's own published comments - his notorious claim, made in a 1964 interview with Donald Judd and Dan Flavin, that 'What you see is what you see.'³⁸⁹, and by Carl Andre's earlier assertion that 'Frank Stella's painting is not symbolic.'³⁹⁰ Modernist critics were content to go along with these suggestions, setting aside any possible relationship between work and title. In the 1970 catalogue, Rubin wrote that 'Stella would be horrified at the idea that a viewer might use [titles] as a springboard to content'³⁹¹, and yet - as we are seeing - in the conversations leading to this catalogue, Rubin had had to discuss titles extensively. He was particularly surprised when Stella explained that he did not title a work after making it, but during the process, and that though Stella could not always explain why a particular title was given to a particular painting, the process was 'fairly definite'.³⁹² Should anyone else swap the titles of two works, he would change them back until they were right again. Rubin told Stella that 'this opens up a possibility of a real misunderstanding about the titles, because people always want to look at a title as if it's a handle to the picture'³⁹³, and Stella conceded that this 'could be a disaster'.³⁹⁴ The worst-case scenario, in other words, would be that a viewer would imagine a direct relationship between work and the referent of a title - the kind of association that Stella himself makes talking about *Sidney Guberman*. The consensus agreed between Stella and Rubin was to leave discussion of titles out of the catalogue.

Rubin's resistance to discussing titles marked his Modernist approach, and was typical of his criticism - the year after this conversation, he argued against an approach to Louis that made an issue of titles³⁹⁵. But though this resistance is characteristic of the anti-literary bent of Greenbergian Modernism, with reference to Stella, we might contend that the resistance was exacerbated by the problematic associations of some of the titles Stella had given to his *Black Paintings*. Much of Rubin's conversation had centred on the

³⁸⁹ This was from a 1964 radio broadcast with Dan Flavin and Donald Judd. The interviewer was Bruce Glaser. Reprinted in James Meyer (ed.), *Minimalism* (London, 2000) p.199

³⁹⁰ Dorothy Miller, *Sixteen Americans* (MoMA, New York, 1959) p.76

³⁹¹ William Rubin, *Frank Stella* (MoMA, New York, 1970) p. 45

³⁹² Stella/Rubin Interview

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

³⁹⁵ See note 125.

paintings *Die Fahne Hoch!*, *Reichstag*, and *Arbeit Macht Frei* - and we will be discussing some of the points raised in this conversation through the chapter. With their references to Nazism, these were particularly problematic titles, and had posed problems for Stella's friends. Philip Leider, for instance, had told Stella in 1966 that, when looking at *Die Fahne Hoch!*, 'For some reason, I found I could not avoid, by the way, making certain terrible associations.'³⁹⁶ Yet Leider did avoid making any associations in his publications on Stella: in a catalogue of 1978, Leider would quote Rubin's caution against making anything of titles.³⁹⁷ Leider not only failed to do justice to his earlier experience: like Rubin, he also failed to imagine that a viewer might consider the title in a complex manner that could initiate a more intricate encounter with the work.

These debates - leading from Stella's cognisance of Jewish cultural issues, to Jewish critics' resistance to thinking about particular titles that might address such issues - serve as a kind of background for this chapter. It is necessary to lay out this ground to explain why and how the titles of the *Polish Village* series have not, so far, been closely considered in relation to the works.³⁹⁸ And yet in many ways, these debates are red herrings, for I am not going to be arguing for any kind of relationship between one work in the *Polish Village* series (*Grodno*, for instance), and the synagogue after which it was named (*figs. 79 and 80*) - a relationship of the kind that might persist as far as *Sidney Guberman* is concerned. Nor am I even going to be interested in the kind of relationship between text and image that I explored in the chapters on Louis and Newman. Stella's titles might prompt a consideration of what the relationship might be between the works in this series, and 'the destruction of an entire culture' - but the nature of the relationship has little to do with the impact of the titles themselves during the viewing process.

³⁹⁶ The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Department of Painting and Sculpture: Frank Stella Collection File. Typescript of interview of Frank Stella by Philip Leider at San Francisco Art Institute, 15-17 April 1966.

³⁹⁷ Leider, op. cit., p.102

³⁹⁸ The exception is Carolyn Cohen's brief essay in the pamphlet accompanying the exhibition 'Frank Stella: Polish Wooden Synagogues - Constructions from the 1970s' held at the Jewish Museum, New York in 1983. Cohen wrote that 'What was obliterated in the worst chapter of modern history, found an unlikely incarnation in the monumental, architectonic constructions of the *Polish Village Series*'. Cohen described the formal character of the works, but did not consider at length what the relation between the works and the subject of *Wooden Synagogues*.

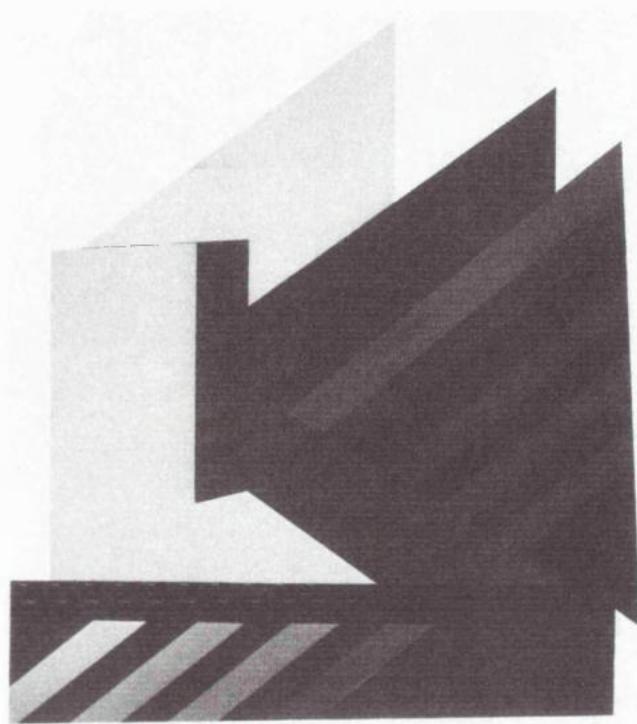


Fig. 79
Frank Stella, *Grodno I*, 1973
112" x 90" (284.5 x 228.6 cm), Mixed media



Fig. 80
Grodno Synagogue, view from the northwest (from *Wooden Synagogues*)

2. Memory As Art History

The relationship between the *Polish Villages* and the ‘destruction of an entire culture’ signalled in *Wooden Synagogues* begins with the gift of a book. No records indicate why Meier gave it to Stella.³⁹⁹ We might assume Meier noticed some formal similarities between some of the images and Stella’s work to date. The organisation of wooden planks in the cupola of Grodno synagogue (*fig.81*), for instance, resembles the organisation of colour bands in Stella’s *Cato Manor* (1962) (*fig.82*) and indeed the way the photograph flattens the actual spatial recession of the cupola is a conceptual inverse of the way the *Concentric Squares* present the illusion of depth. Meier may have been prompted to noticing this similarity during Stella’s MoMA retrospective and this sense of resemblance might account in part for why Meier gave Stella the book, but it does not entirely explain Meier’s own interest. He was fascinated by the synagogues - in his catalogue to ‘Recent American Synagogue Architecture’ he had referred to the ‘marvellous Polish buildings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.’⁴⁰⁰ *Wooden Synagogues* was more than just a collection of historical architectural images - it was a record of a culture that had been destroyed, and just one record of the more general cultural destruction that took place under Nazism. Meier’s interest in the destruction of pre-war artistic culture extended from the fate of folk architecture to the collapse of avant-garde architectural culture.

By 1970, Meier’s work had also been presented at MoMA. This was alongside the work of Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves, Charles Gwathmey and John Hejduk in the 1969 Conference of Architects for the Study of the Environment - a conference which produced the book *Five Architects*. One approach to Kahn’s *Memorial* was to think about how it remembered the use of glass in pre-war avant-garde architecture. This notion of memory was importantly in play at the 1969 conference, for the works presented were evidently indebted to the architecture of the pre-war avant-garde, and none more so than Meier’s, with its close relationship to Le Corbusier. This closeness was possibly

³⁹⁹ Both have declined my requests to interview them.

⁴⁰⁰ *Recent American Synagogue Architecture* (Jewish Museum, New York, 1963) p.7

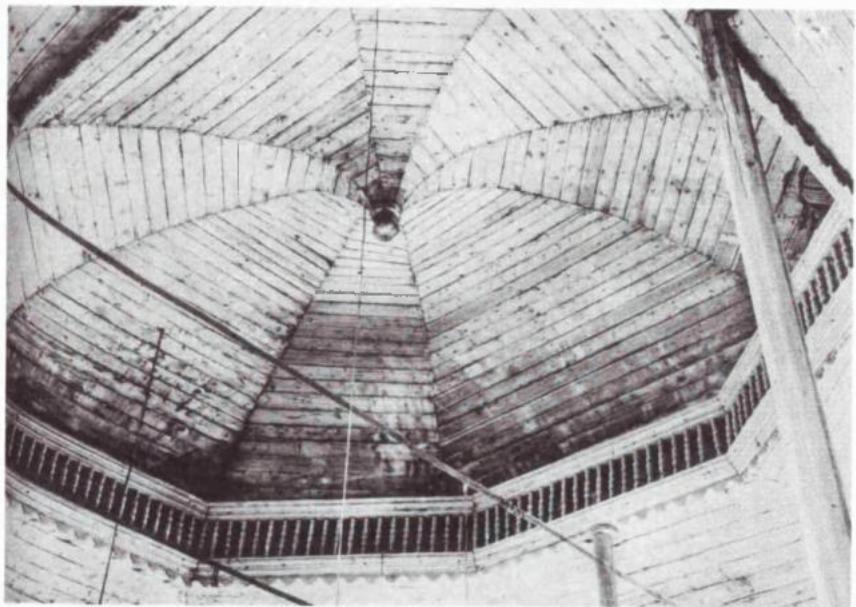


Fig. 81
Grodno Synagogue, view of cupola (from *Wooden Synagogues*)

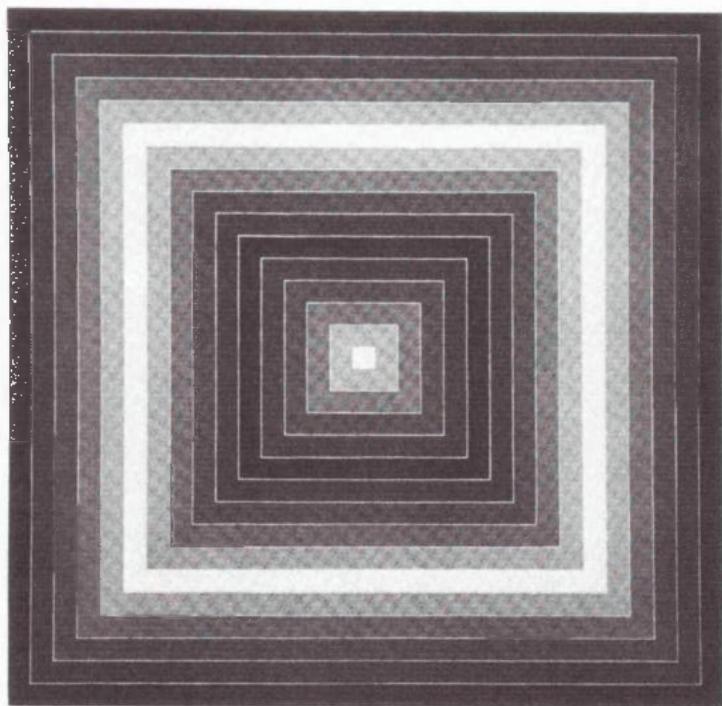


Fig. 82
Frank Stella, *Cato Manor*, 1962
7'1" x 7'1" (216 x 216cm)
Alkyd on canvas

problematic: Colin Rowe anticipated the criticism that he thought would follow the conference, and articulated it before it could be made: ‘We are here in the presence of what, in terms of the orthodox theory of modern architecture, is heresy. We are in the presence of anachronism, nostalgia, and, probably, frivolity. If modern architecture looked like this c. 1930 then it should know like this today; and, if the real political issue of the present is not the provision of the rich with cake but of the starving with bread, then not only formally but also programmatically these buildings are irrelevant.’⁴⁰¹

Rowe’s point, though, was to argue against this imagined attack. Rather than hoping for an ever changing, ever evolving architecture, it was important, he argued, to look back and develop the propositions of the past. ‘How permissible’, he asked, ‘is it to make use of precedent; and therefore, how legitimate is the argument that the repetition of a form is a destruction of authenticity?’⁴⁰² Meier’s work, he implied, was authentic, indeed, its authenticity would derive from the way it made use of the past. Rowe dismissed the possibility that work such as Meier’s would simply appear to be wallowing in nostalgia, memorialising architectural culture for the sake of memory alone: memory, rather, would serve the present.

The terms of the debate around Meier’s work help open up one way of thinking about Stella’s. If an aspect of the significance of Meier’s buildings is in their remembrance of the pre-war avant-garde, then perhaps too this is an aspect of the significance of Stella’s paintings. There are differences as to how the memory of the avant-garde functions in Meier’s and Stella’s works, but let us first explore Stella’s work through this notion of memory.

It is clear that the *Polish Villages* do not call to mind the look of the synagogue buildings in the same way that Meier’s work might call to mind the look of pre-war architectural structures. There are some photographs of the synagogues, though, which *do* have a formal similarity with the *Polish Village* paintings. These are not images of whole

⁴⁰¹ Colin Rowe, ‘Introduction’ in *Five Architects* (New York, 1975) p.4

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, p.7

buildings, but detail photographs, ones indeed which were composed to emphasise diagonals (*figs. 68-71*) (ones, possibly, which, in representing the buildings, also betrayed the artistic tendencies of their own moment of the 1920s and 1930s.⁴⁰³) These similarities alert us to a kind of resemblance between the *Polish Villages* and other art works that does seem relevant, and relevant in the light of the context of the kind of memories which we are considering. The formal organisation of the *Polish Villages* calls to mind the language of constructivist abstraction. Few early critics noticed the formal invocations of constructivism, despite recent publications documenting its history⁴⁰⁴, but after two important exhibitions in New York in 1971, the similarities became more apparent.⁴⁰⁵ In 1978, Leider noted that in the *Polish Villages*, 'strong identities with Russian Constructivism - materials, relief, dynamic clusters of planes - emerged. Similarities to certain of Malevich's architectural drawings, affinities with Tatlin's painted reliefs, Liubov Popova's "architectonic paintings", etc., became inescapable.'⁴⁰⁶

The key question was the significance of this invocation. Leider conjured an extraordinary hypothesis for imagining the possible political significance of Stella's paintings: he posited as an imaginary spectator of the works a dissident Soviet artist of the 1970s. 'Viewed through [their] eyes', the works would invoke a repressed cultural heritage, and indicate the loss of an art 'which was once free and is free no more.' Leider thus conceded that 'political meaning' might arise from the memory of constructivism, but these works triggered a lament for lost liberties only for imagined Russians, not for actual viewers in New York.⁴⁰⁷

Setting aside this imagined viewer, though, it is possible to think that the invocation of constructivism had a significance for a real audience of the work. Indeed, Leider briefly

⁴⁰³ See note 378.

⁴⁰⁴ See Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art* (London, 1962) and George Rickey, *Constructivism: Origins and Evolution* (New York, 1967).

⁴⁰⁵ 'Russian Art of the Revolution' showed at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in the summer of 1971. 'Art in Revolution: Soviet Art and Design since 1917' was held in the New York Cultural Center in the autumn. The latter included reconstructions of Tatlin's corner reliefs.

⁴⁰⁶ Leider, op. cit., pp.102-3

⁴⁰⁷ Leider might nonetheless have been thinking about contemporary Jewish persecution. Many Russian dissidents were, after all, Jews, and it was at this moment that American Jewish communities began to campaign for the freedom of Russian Jews.

admitted that like contemporaries such as Dan Flavin, Stella had been drawn to the ‘entire moral, artistic and political ambience for which that period of history of abstraction has come to stand.’⁴⁰⁸ Perhaps, then, like Meier’s work in general, Stella’s series would recall the loss of the avant-garde signalled by the wider crisis of totalitarianism, and thereby remember the wider moral and political ambitions of the avant-garde. To argue this, though, would be to say that the particular destruction of *Jewish* culture is not in play in Stella’s work: rather, it would seem, Stella’s *Polish Villages* invoke constructivism and recall a general sense of the loss of a utopian cultural spirit. However, the encounter with constructivism offered an indirect means of addressing the destruction of Jewish culture as well as a means of addressing the fate of constructivism itself. The demise of constructivism is usually associated with Stalinism, but like the wooden synagogues, this avant-garde was a cultural victim of Nazism. This is nowhere made clearer than in the concluding lines of Alan Birnholz’s account of El Lissitsky’s *Prouns*, published by Leider at the timely moment of 1969. ‘The Abstract Kabinett like so much of Lissitsky’s work, was destroyed by the Nazis in 1936 in their war against ‘Bolshevist’ art’.⁴⁰⁹ The use of a constructivist language allowed Stella to invoke the destruction of the wooden synagogues by invoking, through a kind of art historical bypass, a parallel cultural victim of Nazism.⁴¹⁰

The significance of the architectural discourse around Meier’s own work has not been exhausted - in particular, we will later think about the importance of raising a memory of a former avant-garde at a particular moment. For now, though, it is important to extend the discussion of just how the *Polish Villages* related to the ‘destruction of an entire culture’. So far, we have been thinking about an enclosed kind of memory - one art work recalling another. There are many other modes of recollection in play here.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., p.102

⁴⁰⁹ Alan Birnholz, ‘El Lissitsky’s Prouns, Part II’ *Artforum* (November 1969) p.73

⁴¹⁰ Stella’s interest in Lissitsky was made manifest in his 1982 series of lithographs after Lissitsky’s *Had Gadya* illustrations. This series presents a further engagement with eastern European Jewish culture, and another instance in which the memorial of that culture proceeds through an art historical bypass. It is interesting to note in passing that in 1916, three years before beginning the *Prouns*, Lissitsky had travelled in White Russia to make architectural drawings of rural synagogues not dissimilar to the Polish buildings. The *Had Gadya* illustrations derived in part from this research, and so Stella’s later work indirectly returns to the terrain of the *Polish Villages*.

3. Memory As Process and Symbol

As the first new paintings after Stella's retrospective, it comes as little surprise that when they were exhibited (at Lawrence Rubin and Kasmin in 1971, and at Leo Castelli and Knoedler in 1973), the *Polish Villages* attracted a great deal of critical attention. It is also unsurprising that none of this attention focused on the possible relationship between the paintings and the wooden synagogues. Nonetheless, close attention to the contemporary criticism yields other ways of thinking through this relationship.

There were three main kinds of observation. Firstly, there were critics who attempted to differentiate the various works in the series on the grounds of their comparative success or failure.⁴¹¹ A second line of enquiry probed the formal relationship between these works and earlier paintings by Stella. Though John Elderfield explained the 'bewildering' turn the work had taken as a desperate attempt to create a 'radical look',⁴¹² others, such as Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, assimilated the series with what had come before by stressing that 'Stella's work has always had to do with the material condition of painting'.⁴¹³ Elizabeth Baker, with sharper focus, accounted for the fact that, whereas differently coloured areas had previously been separated by bands of unpainted canvas (from the gaps between the black stripes on 1958 right to the Protractor paintings of 1969), now, colours met each other at their very limits. However, where, in a Noland painting, such meeting would cause 'optical fluctuation', in the paintings she described, the dulled colour schemes prevented this from happening.

The most interesting accounts asked how this series related to the tradition of abstract painting, before considering what critical issues these works posed to project of modernism. Baker wrote that the paintings 'seem to suggest frozen ideograms of Action Painting's gestural vigor' and compared the look of some paintings to 1930s Art Deco architectural details. She maintained that 'they do not break any new theoretical

⁴¹¹ April Kingsley and William Rubin, whose accounts I will return to.

⁴¹² John Elderfield, 'UK Commentary' *Studio International* (January 1972) p.30

⁴¹³ Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, 'Frank Stella etc' *Artforum* (February 1974) p.67

ground'.⁴¹⁴ Irving Sandler felt otherwise. Prompted by the 'three-dimensionality of the components', he inserted the works into a trajectory instigated by Cubism, and concluded that they raised 'the important question concerning abstract art now: What is the potential of a relational esthetic?'⁴¹⁵

By arguing this was their crucial relevance, Sandler indicated that now, more than before, Stella was moving away from the kind of practice Donald Judd had called for when, in 1965, he had articulated the bankruptcy of the part-to-part relationship. Though Judd had proceeded to eliminate such concerns through the creation of 'specific objects' that were 'neither painting nor sculpture'⁴¹⁶, those artists who sympathised with his critique had justified the continuing production of relational paintings by creating works in series. Through making a series, the painter avoided privileging the choices about the relationship of parts within a given work, staking a work's importance rather on the relationship between its arrangements and those in other works in the series.

It was this context that Rosalind Krauss (in her high-modernist youth) mapped out in her account of the *Polish Villages*, which explained their importance in a different manner to Sandler. She argued that in Stella's *Protractor* paintings of the late 1960s, rather than the series acting as a ground against which the importance of a given work within it could be judged, the idea of series began to permeate each individual work. One *Protractor* painting could contain within it six permutations of the semi-circular unit that characterised all the *Protractor* paintings, while another might contain two. At this point, a problem arose. Whereas, justified through its relationship to others, each Noland target insisted on its own 'position in space and time', its 'copresence' with the spectator, a painting that contained a series appeared simply as a diagrammatic idea.⁴¹⁷ The point Stella had reached in 1969 was thus 'inimical to painting'.⁴¹⁸

⁴¹⁴ Elizabeth Baker, 'Frank Stella, Revival and Relief' *Art News* (November 1971) p.88

⁴¹⁵ Irving Sandler, 'Stella at Rubin' *Art in America* (January-February 1972) p.33

⁴¹⁶ 'Specific Objects' *Arts Yearbook 8* (1965). Reprinted in Donald Judd, *Complete Writings* (New York, 1975) p.181

⁴¹⁷ Rosalind Krauss, 'Stella's New Work and the Problem of Series' *Artforum* (December 1971) pp.41-2. Krauss here might have made an implicit reference to Rubin's diagrams of the Protractors on pp.136-137 of his 1970 catalogue

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.42

Krauss recognised that the *Polish Villages* raised ‘questions about the viability of the very notion of painting in series’.⁴¹⁹ Not only was every ‘Village’ far more different from each other than each *Protractor* painting; ‘from version to version [...] the coherence implicit in the very idea of “version” is drained.’⁴²⁰ But Krauss’ argument proceeded with describing what for her were the ‘best’ paintings - and significantly, these were all ‘Version Ones’. *Chodorow I*, with its central rectangle described above, contained a literal centre, and causing a viewer to focus on this midpoint, the work metaphorically demanded that it (as an individual art work) be the centre of attention. *Odelsk I*, meanwhile, created the illusion of depth through the false ‘shadow’ of the triangle (again, described above). It offered the suggestion that it might be better seen from the side, only to remind the viewer that the correct viewing position was, in fact, frontal: with this strategy, again the work emphasised its own importance, demanding the viewer stand before it. With these complex accounts, Krauss made her claim for the significance of the ‘best’ *Polish Villages*. A return to proper modernist painting, Stella’s new work ‘insisted on the singleness-of-aspect of painting itself’⁴²¹, and ‘asked us to grasp the work of art with the kind of immediacy with which we experience our own inner states’⁴²²... ‘Stella seems to want to ground painting itself in the terms of an experience which is manifestly sensuous.’⁴²³

Some years later Krauss compared *Die Fahne Hoch!* with Johns’ *Flags* in *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, a book whose own title carries multiple meanings.⁴²⁴ But in her 1971 essay, though the most complex analysis of the *Polish Villages*, she had paid no attention to the possible relationships between the works and the destroyed synagogues after which they were named. Like Sandler’s, Leider’s, Rubin’s, and that of other members of the

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., p.41

⁴²⁰ Ibid., p.41

⁴²¹ Ibid., p.43

⁴²² Ibid., p.43

⁴²³ Ibid., p.43

⁴²⁴ Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977) p.262. The cover of Krauss’s book featured a ‘passage’ by Bruce Nauman.

'oldtime Jewish sect called American art criticism'⁴²⁵, hers was a curious silence. But in now considering the nature of these relationships, I do not want to relinquish the complexity of these accounts, but to draw lines of argument from them.

Krauss, as we have seen, explained how Stella's new series departed from modernist seriality. From the privileged perspective of the historian, Hal Foster asks different questions about seriality. In 'The Crux of Minimalism', after describing serial production as the characterising form of advanced capitalism, he argues that '*not until minimalism and pop is serial production made consistently integral to the technical production of the work of art*'.⁴²⁶ Furthermore, their seriality is indicative of 'the penetration of industrial modes into spheres that were once removed from them'.⁴²⁷ If this retrospective argument is coupled with Krauss's contemporary observation that Stella's series departed from modernist seriality, a new consideration of the process of the *Polish Villages* emerges. By deliberately departing from seriality, Stella distinguished his new working process from serial production, affiliating it instead with a former phase of manufacture - a pre-industrial one. Rather than relating (with whatever degree of complexity) to then contemporary production, the works recall the modes of production that characterised synagogue building: the creation of a unique, handmade, crafted structure. Krauss indicated how each work declared its uniqueness, but we remember now that she could only deploy the first two versions of the works in her argument. What lay between versions was *building*, and if we leave Krauss standing in front of *Chodorow I* to step to the side of *Felstyn III*, we begin to see how Stella highlighted the affinity with building through emphasising the constructed, material character of the works. Certainly, this quality was palpable for their earliest critics. Returning to their accounts, we see, for instance, Jeanne Siegel focusing on 'Version Threes', writing that their 'projections afford an opportunity to expose and highlight a complex array of materials - felt, painted canvas, laminated plywood, corrugated cardboard, construction board'.⁴²⁸ John

⁴²⁵ This is Max Kozloff's phrase, from his review of the 1975 Jewish Museum exhibition 'The Jewish Experience in Art' - 'Jewish Art and the Modernist Jeopardy' *Artforum* (April 1976) p.44

⁴²⁶ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996) p.63

⁴²⁷ *Ibid* p.66

⁴²⁸ Jeanne Siegel, 'Reviews and Previews' *Art News* (February 1973) p.78

Elderfield, looking at a different exhibition, complained that the works 'cannot help but insist their being carpentered', which he saw as their weakness.⁴²⁹

This is to indicate that one mode of relation between the *Polish Villages* and the wooden synagogues involved the process of their making. Process is not usually considered as having referential possibilities – indeed in the period Stella's paintings were made, the project of making process transparent in the finished art work was set against the possibilities of metaphor. Nonetheless, to question this approach to process, we can turn back to Stella's own practice, and the repetitive processes that went into making the *Black Paintings*. The common reading of this process has been that it marked a kind of attack on the possibilities of expressive, gestural, compositional painting: Stella simply painted one stripe after another, until the painting was complete. Such a reading would even be bolstered by photographs of Stella painting *Getty Tomb*, made by his friend Hollis Frampton in 1959 (*fig.83*).⁴³⁰ The photographs record Stella from behind, face and expression of no concern to the project of recording the making of the painting. Each photograph is taken from the same position, with Stella's body shown workmanlike, just as far from the canvas as his brush required, no nearer or further, and, finally, *still* - there is none of the blur we see in Namuth's photographs of Pollock. 'What you see is what you see': the kind of readings of process supported by these photographs were the predominant ones that persisted in the criticism of Stella's work, but just prior to the 1970 retrospective, and the *Polish Village* paintings, Stella had described another kind of significance of this early process. Explaining to William Rubin why one painting had been called *Arbeit Macht Frei* (*fig.84*), Stella said the words were:

'A Nazi slogan, or maybe just a German slogan that was used unfortunately over in one of the concentration camps, which was [Arbeit Macht Frei] (work makes free), I guess, which is another pun on the whole business - making these kind of paintings is also very laborious. It's very repetitive - four or five coats of doing the same thing and the kind of

⁴²⁹John Elderfield, 'UK Commentary' *Studio International* (January 1972) p.31

⁴³⁰See Carl Andre and Hollis Frampton, *12 Dialogues* (New York, 1981)

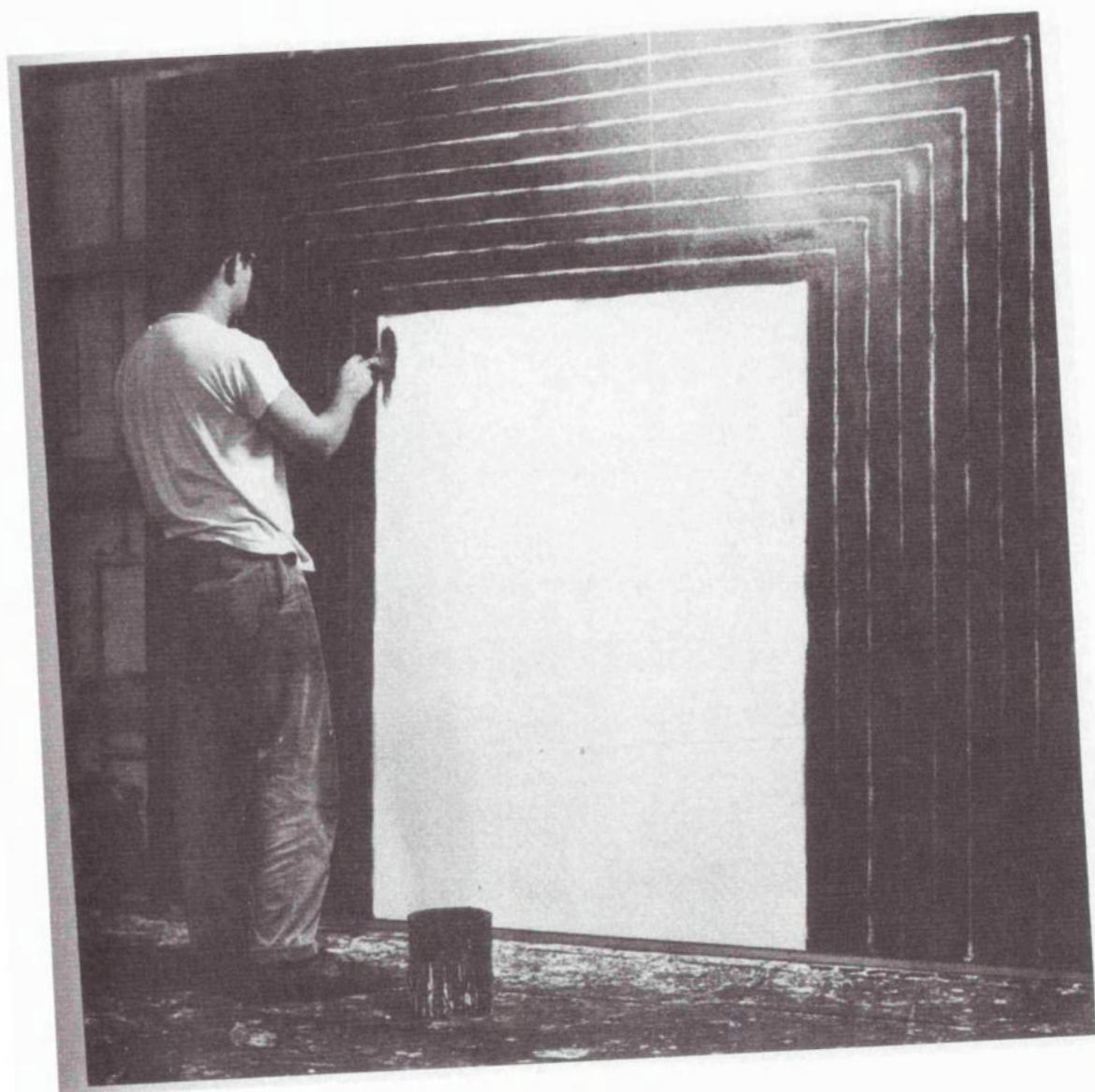


Fig. 83

Hollis Frampton, Frank Stella in his Studio working on Getty Tomb, 1959

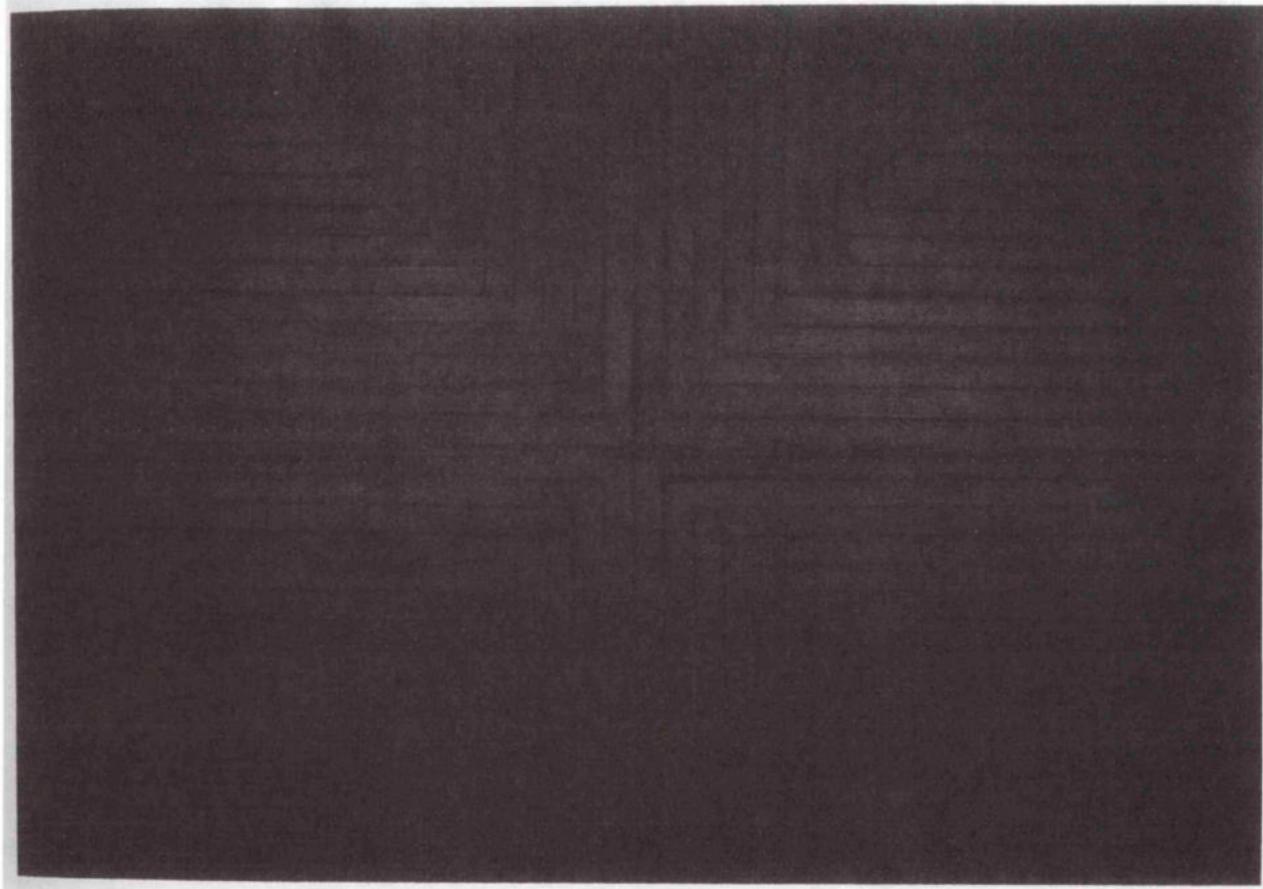


Fig. 84
Frank Stella. *Arbeit Macht Frei*, 1958
7' 1" x 10' 1 ½" (215.9 x 308.6 cm)
Enamel on canvas

mechanical process so there's a play, I guess, on also the work process in making the picture.⁴³¹

Though it might seem surprising that Stella would use the inscription on the gates of Auschwitz as a flippant pun, his comment highlights the way process could always relate to something beyond itself. Foster, as we have seen, related the serial production of minimalism to post-war production, but here, the repetitive labour and mechanical process of making the *Black Paintings* is related to the most extreme form of labour in industrial society, the labour in the work camps. For Robert Morris and others making work in the late 1960s, 'process art' usefully laid bare the labour of the artist⁴³²; for Maurice Blanchot, the labour that took place in the camps laid bare the conditions of industrial modernity in general. The concentration camps were 'emblems wherein the invisible has made itself visible forever. All the distinctive features of a civilisation are revealed or laid bare.'⁴³³ The false promises of the slogans "Work liberates", as declared in the camps, reveal the false promises of labour at large. The ultimate form of work in the camps, as he wrote, 'consists of carrying stones at top speed from one point and piling them up in another, and then in bringing them back at the run to the starting point.... [N]o act of sabotage can cancel work, for its annulment is work's very own purpose. And yet labour retains a meaning: it tends not only to destroy the worker, but more immediately to occupy, to harness and control him and at the same time perhaps to give him an awareness that to produce and not to produce amount to the same - that the one and the other alike are work....'⁴³⁴

Blanchot's reading of work in the camps might open up a new way of thinking about process in regard to the *Black Paintings*. In Stella's comment, quoted above, he says that painting them was repetitious labour, and so somewhat like the work in the camps; we might now go further, and argue that process in the *Black Paintings* (and not just the one

⁴³¹ Stella/Rubin Interview

⁴³² See Robert Morris, 'Anti-Form' *Artforum* (April 1968)

⁴³³ Blanchot, op. cit., p.81-2

⁴³⁴ Ibid., p.82

entitled *Arbeit Macht Frei*) does not simply represent a critique of other ways of making a painting, but represents the absurdity of labour in modernity - an absurdity only symbolised most clearly in the camps. Stella, with house paint and worker's clothes, mimics the form of modern labour, a labour that will never meet its promise to set the labourer free. We should, however, return to the *Polish Villages*. With regard to them, the point is simply that if the process of making the *Black Paintings* could be related by Stella to the repetitive work of Auschwitz prison labourers, then it is less surprising to suggest that the singular, non-repetitive, craft and building work of making the *Polish Villages* (carpentry, choosing colours and materials, cutting, sanding, gluing, nailing, joining... etcetera) might relate to, and memorialise the activities of the synagogue builders whose descendants later died through the repetitive work of the camps.

There might be another kind of relationship between the *Polish Village* paintings and the wooden synagogues, and one which rather than relying on process, re-examines form. It is useful to return to contemporary critical accounts of the works, although once again they merely suggest what the relationship might be without actually describing it. As has been mentioned, some accounts differentiated various *Polish Villages* in terms of success. There was remarkable consensus between April Kingsley and William Rubin. Successful *Polish Villages* were those that gave a sense of 'architectural stability', rather than appearing to be 'in a state of unsettled flux'⁴³⁵ (this was Kingsley comparing *Nasielsk III* to *Glinne II* (fig.85) in the Castelli show.) For Rubin, a satisfying painting conveyed the securing implication of the rectangle, such, as we have seen, did *Chodorow* or *Felstyn*. A work such as *Targowica* (fig.86), however, 'failed sufficiently either to imply the necessary axiality that guaranteed stability or, if implied, to lock itself sufficiently to it.'⁴³⁶ Side-stepping these judgements on quality, both accounts reveal that in some works, Stella courted the look of 'flux' or 'instability' by the creation of a non-anchored shape.

⁴³⁵ April Kingsley, 'New York Letter' *Art International* (April 1973) p.54

⁴³⁶ Rubin, 1987, op. cit., p.41

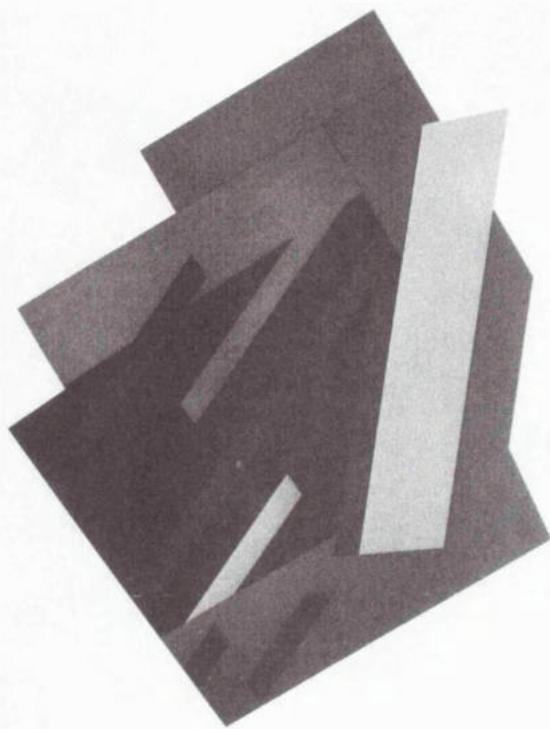


Fig. 85
Frank Stella, *Glinne II*, 1972
9'10" x 7'4 1/2" (299.7 x 224.8 cm), Mixed media

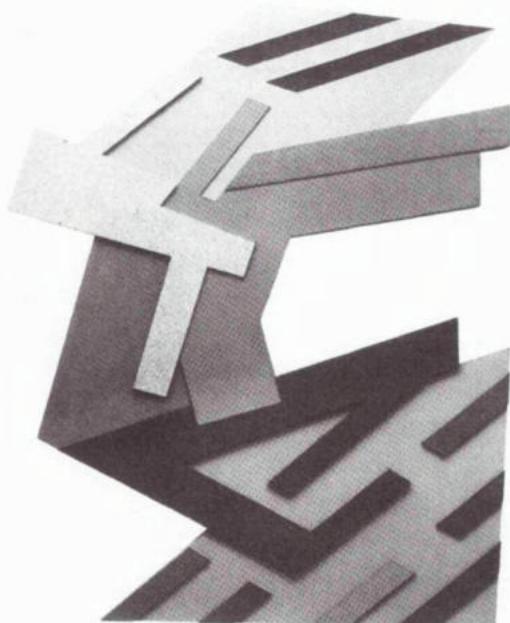


Fig. 86
Frank Stella, *Targowica II*, c. 1973
10'2" x 8' (309.9 x 243.9 cm), Mixed media on board

Other critical accounts are saturated with the vocabulary of contortion. While Krauss felt that the use of different materials 'disrupts the literal continuity of the picture surface',⁴³⁷ Elizabeth Baker elegantly described their 'their sense of compressed opposing strains' before writing that 'their jagged and irregular angularities, filled with non-sequiturs and curious disjunctions, at times have the look of proliferating crystalline structures under heavy metamorphic pressures.'⁴³⁸ Joseph Masheck, reviewing a later exhibition, seems to have attempted to capture their feel in his writing: 'With the aggressiveness of [their] sharp, ripsaw lurches, [the third versions] seem like hard-edged painting gone apeshit.' These were, he said, 'exploded paintings'.⁴³⁹

We can recall that *Sidney Guberman* took the form of a sliced Star of David. Though none of the *Polish Village* paintings attempt to look like the synagogues, there might nonetheless be a residual element of symbolism. With their painted slabs twisted and distorted into radical configurations, the *Polish Villages* upset the orderly geometries of Stella's past paintings. Through this distorted appearance, the works evoke the imagined look of flattened architecture, avoiding depiction, yet imaging destruction.

⁴³⁷ Krauss, 1971, op.cit., p.41

⁴³⁸ Baker, 1971, op. cit., p.88

⁴³⁹ Joseph Masheck, 'Frank Stella - Castelli Gallery...' *Artforum* (April 1973) pp.80-1

4. The Wooden Synagogues

In a review of George Loukomski's *Jewish Art in European Synagogues* published shortly after the war, Louis Lozowick recalled the actual destruction of the wooden synagogues in the following story:

'A short time ago I heard a traveller, recently returned from Poland, tell the now familiar tale of Nazi depredation, violence, inhumanity. One thing caught my ear especially. "From time to time," he said, "climbing over the rubble piled high where a house of worship used to be, you discover a piece of wood carving, from the *Aron* perhaps, a twisted metal candlestick, a painted slab....'⁴⁴⁰

The real painted slabs of the broken buildings were immensely dear to many people - Meyer Schapiro, for instance, hoped in 1946 that there would be 'models of the outstanding buildings of Jewish history' in the Jewish Museum.⁴⁴¹ Making models of wooden synagogues would be one form of cultural preservation - another would be saving the actual slabs themselves. Lozowick commented:

'I read of so many millions and tens of millions of dollars spent on charity here and abroad - couldn't some pennies be spared to salvage the few remaining relics of a rich cultural heritage, while there is still time?'⁴⁴²

Lozowick had also been drawn to the buildings the year before, when he had indicated that the synagogues were *the* prime example of an authentic 'Jewish art'. We saw earlier how Robert Pincus-Witten argued in the mid-1970s that the authentic Jewish art was abstraction. Before this time, there was a greater scholarly consensus around the

⁴⁴⁰ Louis Lozowick, 'Synagogue Art' *Menorah Journal* (Autumn 1948) p.384

⁴⁴¹ Meyer Schapiro, quoted in Minutes of the Museum Committee of the Jewish Museum, 1 October 1946. Ratner Centre, R.G.25, 1-2. Schapiro was involved with plans for the Jewish Museum between 1946-47.

⁴⁴² Lozowick, op. cit., p.384

contention that the wooden synagogues were ‘the only real Jewish folk art in history’,⁴⁴³ the only properly ‘Jewish’ art to have emerged during the diasporic period. The urge to find this kind of example might itself have been prompted by the cultural insecurities of post-Holocaust Jews, but it is still important to grasp why the wooden synagogues were held in such high regard.

Whereas elsewhere, Jews had built synagogues resembling the religious edifices of their host nations, the wooden synagogues were ‘a truly original folk expression’ whose ‘originality does not lie alone in the exterior architecture, it lies equally in the beautiful and intricate wood carving of the interior.’⁴⁴⁴ It was not simply their beauty and originality that accounted for the synagogues’ significance. In many Diaspora countries, Jews had been banned from architectural work, and so had commissioned gentile labourers to construct their buildings. The wooden synagogues, however, ‘were built... from the modest contributions of tailors, carpenters, leather makers, shoemakers.’⁴⁴⁵ Loukomski emphasised that they ‘constituted a collective effort. The whole population participated in the construction.’⁴⁴⁶ We might say, then, that it was a kind of indexicality that marked their specialness: Jewish labour was somehow marked in the buildings. Or, recalling one argument raised to address Stella’s paintings, the *processes* of building the synagogues signified, and guaranteed their importance. The synagogues were also significant on account of their function. In the introduction to *Wooden Synagogues*, Stephen Kayser described the bond, once built, between the edifices and their communities:

‘If there ever was a truly close relationship between a house of worship and its populace, it lay in the affection which the inhabitants of an Eastern European Jewish country community felt for their synagogues, the home of their souls. Their love and devotion built it, embellished its interior,

⁴⁴³ Stephen Kayser, op. cit., p.5

⁴⁴⁴ Louis Lozowick, ‘What, then, is Jewish Art?’ *Menorah Journal* (Winter 1947) p.107

⁴⁴⁵ ibid, p.107

⁴⁴⁶ George Loukomski, *Jewish Art in European Synagogues* (London, 1947) p.37

flocked around it and felt divine protection under its shadow in time of peril.⁴⁴⁷

Stella might have been unaware of the earlier attention the wooden synagogues had generated, but he cannot have failed to realise how they had come to stand as a kind of symbol both for the destroyed Jewish heritage, and for the destroyed communities whose members had constructed them. By 1970, it was increasingly clear that the project of Holocaust memorial was often conducted by American Jews through an oblique process. This involved the growing discourse around a lost (and frequently romanticised) shtetl culture. The discourse included both academic studies, such as Mark Zboorowski's and Elizabeth Herzog's 1964 *Life is With People*, and popular musicals: *Fiddler on the Roof*, by 1972, had become the longest ever running Broadway performance⁴⁴⁸.

The acknowledgement of the centrality of the wooden synagogues raises a question around Stella's works. If the synagogues were so important, then perhaps they did demand a concrete form of memorial - such as the retrieval of their parts as Lozowick hoped, or the construction of models - as Schapiro hoped. *Wooden Synagogues* was a different kind of memorial. It was particularly poignant, and this poignancy was in part derived from its character as an objective, architectural study. The images it contained were not made in the context of impending destruction - they were just representations of buildings, and not of their history (*figs. 87 and 88*). It did not have the sentimental character of other photographic collections of eastern European Jewish life published after the war, and because of its objectivity, for those who resisted sentimentality, the book was all the more moving.⁴⁴⁹ It would have seemed a kind of memorial despite itself: readers in the 1960s would have inevitably thought of the destruction of the illustrated buildings, but not because of any kind of intention on behalf of those who had originally researched the book before the Nazi period.

⁴⁴⁷ Kayser, op. cit., p.5

⁴⁴⁸ Stanley Green, *The World of Musical Comedy* (London, 1974) p.368

⁴⁴⁹ Roman Vishniac's *Polish Jews* (New York, 1947) was felt by Harold Rosenberg to be 'too artistic and too spiritual.' It 'has in it something of the false funeral oration that conceals the true beauties of the dead by detaching them from the body that was once alive.' ('Pictures of Jews' *Jewish Frontier* (November 1947) p.30) There is no attempt to represent people in *Wooden Synagogues*.



Fig. 87
Odelsk Synagogue (from *Wooden Synagogues*)

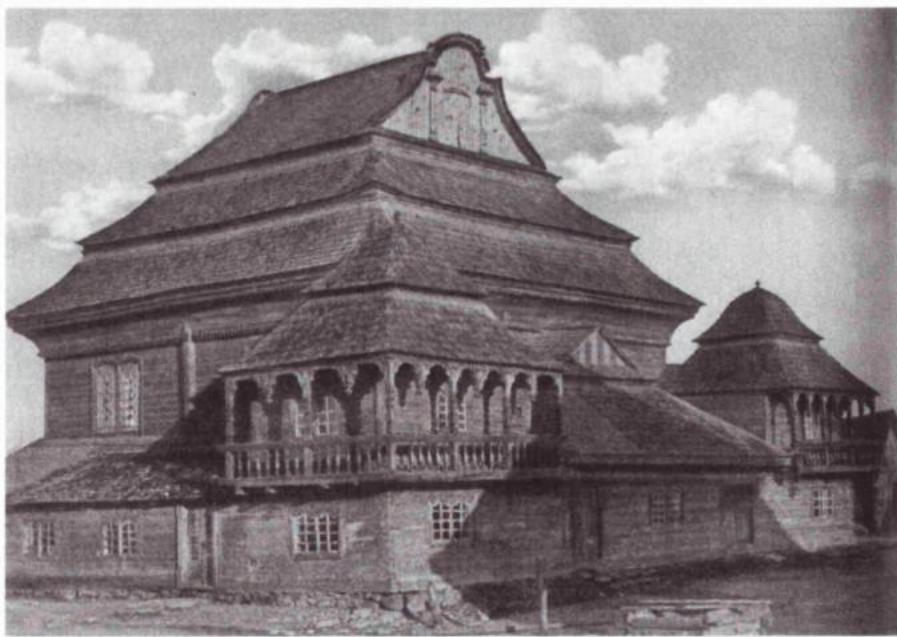


Fig. 88
Wolpa Synagogue (from *Wooden Synagogues*)

In contrast to these kind of memorials, Stella's paintings might appear at once too oblique and too deliberate. They do not immediately call the synagogues to mind; but they have none of the accidental poignancy of *Wooden Synagogues*. There has, indeed, been a kind of anxiety as to how to approach them. When exhibited at the Jewish Museum in 1983, the exhibition extended over Holocaust Day, at which time the museum traditionally held a memorial exhibition. The director, Joan Rosenbaum, wrote to Stella asking if a plaque could be added that day. It would 'indicate that we are honoring the anniversary of the holocaust with the showing of this exhibition.' But Rosenbaum was anxious to assure Stella that she did not 'wish to misconstrue your works [...] as though they were created as a Holocaust memorial'. Her hesitancy seems to have prevailed: the letter was never even sent.⁴⁵⁰

Rosenbaum's decision seems well-judged: Stella's paintings do not memorialise the Holocaust. Where early critics passed over any relationships, I have outlined three modes of relation between Stella's paintings and the memory of cultural destruction - thinking about the memory of constructivism, the importance of process, and the symbolism of flattened architecture. Nevertheless, these arguments combine only to suggest that there is a kind of relationship. In no manner would a viewer be caused to remember the synagogues when in front of the works: and so far I have not raised the figure of the viewer in the same way as this figure has been considered in relation to Louis's, Newman's, and Kahn's work. The significance of the *Polish Village* paintings might, however,

lie

elsewhere.

⁴⁵⁰ Letter from Joan Rosenbaum to Frank Stella, 4 November 1982. Marked 'Never Sent'. Jewish Museum Archives, Frank Stella file.

5. Politics and Painting

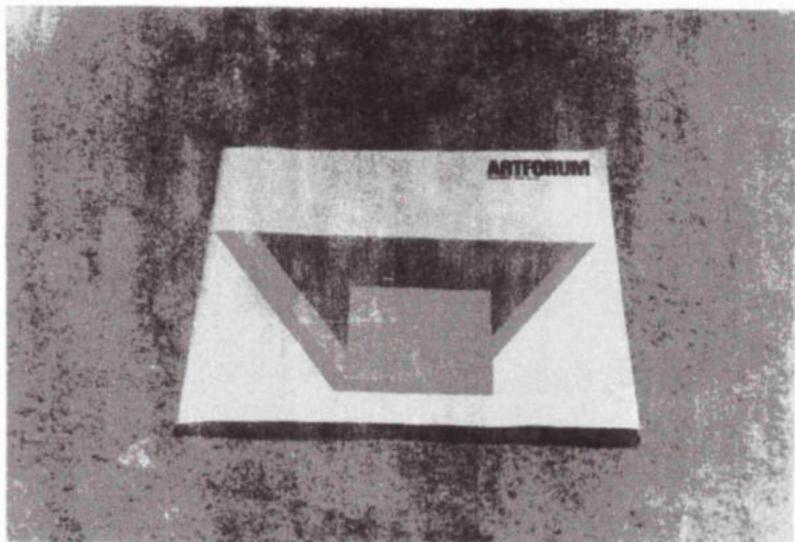
The summer of 1970 - the moment just before the series was started - represented the triumphant zenith of Stella's career to date, as, on the occasion of his retrospective, William Rubin celebrated his 'breathtaking'⁴⁵¹ progress during the 1960s. Yet a month after Stella's retrospective closed, another MoMA curator, Kynaston McShine, introduced his exhibition, *Information*, with the following, now famous, jab at painting:

'...If you are living in the United States, you may fear that you will be shot at, either in the universities, in your bed, or more formally in Indochina. It may seem too inappropriate, if not absurd, to get up in the morning, walk into a room, and apply dabs of paint from a little tube to a square of canvas. What can you do as a young artist that seems relevant and meaningful?'⁴⁵²

Few of the contributors to 'Information' answered this question in as blunt a manner as McShine had posed it, but then few he had chosen were able to question his caricature of painting in any case, as they worked with photography, text, installation, and film. John Baldesari, however, was included, and we can turn to one of his paintings now. *This is not to be looked at* (1967-8) (fig.89) - displayed on its surface a silkscreened image of the *Artforum* whose cover showed Stella's *Union* (1966), and whose pages contained Michael Fried's 'Shape as Form'. Baldesari presumed an audience who would get its joke, and the joke came in part from the ambiguity of '*This*' - was 'this' *Artforum*? Fried's criticism? Stella's painting? Baldesari's verb also demands attention- if not to be *looked at*, then perhaps the moment demanded that painting wrestle free from its play with opticality so it could be *thought about* instead (like Baldessari's painting). Setting this question aside for now, we can appreciate that the problem facing Stella in 1970 was not just that his medium - painting - was under attack; *his* painting in particular was a

⁴⁵¹ Rubin, 1970, op. cit., p.149

⁴⁵² Kynaston McShine, *Information* (MoMA, New York, 1970) p.138. For a recent account of this period (and one which does not locate significant political content in abstraction), see Francis Frascina, *Art, politics and dissent* (Manchester, 1999).



THIS IS NOT TO BE LOOKED AT.

Fig. 89

John Baldessari, *This is Not To Be Looked At*, 1967-68

59" x 45" (149.9 x 114.3 cm)

Acrylic and photo-emulsion on canvas

focus of this attack. His work stood for the criticism that had heralded it, having featured on more *Artforum* covers and in more articles than that of any other artist. Baldessari's conflation of the three possible referents of 'this' was therefore an accurate observation as well as a joke.⁴⁵³ Once controversial and groundbreaking, Stella's work, along with that criticism, was now represented at best as a joke, and at worst as irrelevant and aloof.⁴⁵⁴

Stella was not impervious, however, to the political climate: on 22 May 1970, a week before its scheduled close, he shut down his MoMA retrospective in sympathy with his 'co-workers' participating in the 'New York Art Strike against Racism, Sexism, Repression, and War'.⁴⁵⁵ The gesture was one strategy by which an artist could answer McShine's question. But closing a painting exhibition might even be read (against Stella's intentions) as a confirmation of McShine's attack: the only way to make painting's activity critical was to cease its display. Though his other activities evaded this trap, they did not involve a change in his work: later that summer, after participating in the 'Emergency Cultural Government', a committee trying 'to keep shows out of U.S. government hands during the duration of the war'⁴⁵⁶, Stella contributed a silk-screen made 'specifically for Referendum 70' - an auction in support of pro-peace politicians⁴⁵⁷. The work was one whose difference from the other offshoots of the *Protractor* series lay only in the nature of its financial beneficiary.

The demands of the historical moment are witnessed in other kinds of gestures by abstract artists, and we can look, for example, at the responses of Stella's co-participants in the 1964 interview. In 1968, Judd had placed an advert in *The Aspen Times* calling for the government to 'End the Killing in Vietnam', and to 'Negotiate Withdrawl NOW!' At

⁴⁵³ Amy Newman counts three Stella covers and seven solo feature articles on Stella during this period. (op. cit., p.530)

⁴⁵⁴ Peter Plagens has commented recently that 'I didn't have any conscious idea that what was needed now, at this moment in the early 70s, is a criticism of the institutions with a broader, more political, sociological take, and let's get outside Michael Fried telling us "what stripe in Stella goes over what" sort of thing.' (Amy Newman, op. cit., p. 377). Even in retrospect, then, Stella's work and Fried's criticism of the mid-late 1960s are conflated as representing everything the political situation did not require.

⁴⁵⁵ 'Met Museum Adds Hours in Evening', *The New York Times*, 22 May 1970, p.40

⁴⁵⁶ Elizabeth Baker, 'Pickets on Parnassus' *Art News* (September 1970) p.64

⁴⁵⁷ This is illustrated in the advert for the auction. *Art News* (September 1970) p.65

the bottom of the page, Judd explained that the War Resisters League (of which he was a member) ‘wrote these ads and suggests that they be run as often as possible. It’s about all anyone can do.’ These final words do not just record desperation in the face of political catastrophe: they indicate, by implication, that one thing Judd could *not* do was to register his protest in his art work.⁴⁵⁸ Flavin adopted a different strategy. In 1971, he contributed to the Whitney Biennale a work which he named *Untitled (To the young woman and men murdered in Kent State and Jackson State Universities and to their fellow students who are yet to be killed)*. This text propelled Joseph Masheck to complain in *Artforum* that despite its ‘virtue’, such references ‘cannot be applied to works of art like decals’. The title seems to have condemned the work: Masheck concluded by stating that ‘it does not look like we have a particularly impressive Flavin here.’⁴⁵⁹

These pressures and gestures open a new way of thinking about the significance of the *Polish Villages*, the series which, as we know, followed the summer of 1970. The ambitions for the series register the pressures of its moment, the pressure to turn painting towards a new kind of content. Where Judd refused to let his work be changed by his protest, and where Flavin used a title as a protest, Stella’s *Polish Villages* steered a different course. It is through their very fabric, their fabrication, that the works aimed to relate to the memory of destruction (how effectively they do so is not here the issue). Raising the memory of the destruction of the *Polish Villages* became a means of addressing then contemporary destruction – namely of the peasant villages of the Vietnamese. We can recall at this point that the memory of the Holocaust affected Barbara Rose’s approach to Vietnam, that the Holocaust was raised strategically by both Louis and Newman, and that Louis Kahn was asked to make his *Memorial* address the Vietnam War.⁴⁶⁰ We can also recall Colin Rowe’s arguments about the architecture of the *Five Architects*. Rowe had imagined the voice of an imagined opponent of the work

⁴⁵⁸ *The Aspen Times*, 29 August 1968 p.2-C (Reprinted in Judd, op. cit.) This resistance even finds its way into the very appearance of this advert. Other protest adverts made famous use of the juxtaposition of image, coloured texts, and typography (the best example being the Art Workers’ Coalition’s ‘Q: And Babies? A: And Babies’), Judd’s advert is inelegantly set, and unimaginatively illustrated. It is as if this is deliberately *not* an artistic product.

⁴⁵⁹ Joseph Masheck, ‘Sorting out the Whitney Annual’ *Artforum* (February 1971) p.70

⁴⁶⁰ See note 231 and note 328 on Newman relating the Crucifixion to Vietnam and on the pressures placed on Kahn to address the war.

displayed at MoMA in 1969, a voice which would argue that 'if the real political issue of the present is not the provision of the rich with cake but of the starving with bread, then not only formally but also programatically these buildings are irrelevant.'⁴⁶¹ Written from MoMA the following year, McShine's contention that painting might 'seem too inappropriate, if not absurd' oddly echoes this imagined attack. Rowe was suggesting a deeper significance of the work under consideration, a significance to be achieved through memory. Achieving this now seems to describe Stella's ambitions.

The significance of the *Polish Villages* is in the way they address a challenge that abstract painting faced at the crisis moment of 1970. But the strategies of the *Polish Villages* are not only in their acknowledgment of referentiality. In important ways, they also restructure Modernist viewing habits. To see how, we will look back to the moment of the apparent invincibility of Modernist painting at the beginning of the 1960s, the moment Stella himself recalled in his interview with William Rubin in 1970. Stella explained some of the reasons why he had made reference to fascism in the titles of his works. Stella named *Die Fahne Hoch!* after Horst Wessel's Nazi marching song meaning 'The Flag on High', and recalled 'the way the Nazis would drape their flags around the plaza from high up on the buildings. It was the vertical drop idea of a flag being placed that way rather than the flag flying.'⁴⁶² (*fig.90*) Just as his comments on *Arbeit Macht Frei* seemed relevant to considering process in all the *Black Paintings*, so the reference to fascism helps us think about the kind of viewing they all organise - not just the viewing organised by *Die Fahne Hoch!*. Stella spoke of 'wanting to have some of the kind of control that an architectural situation imposes [with] the paintings'.⁴⁶³ He also said that 'what was specifically involved in these pictures aside of certain associative kinds of things was a kind of fairly straightforward aesthetic relationship that the artist bears to a kind of totalitarian thing and particularly a kind of totalitarian esthetics, and by this I mean essentially the question of fascist architecture'.⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶¹ Colin Rowe, 'Introduction' in *Five Architects* (New York, 1975) p.4

⁴⁶² Stella/Rubin Interview

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

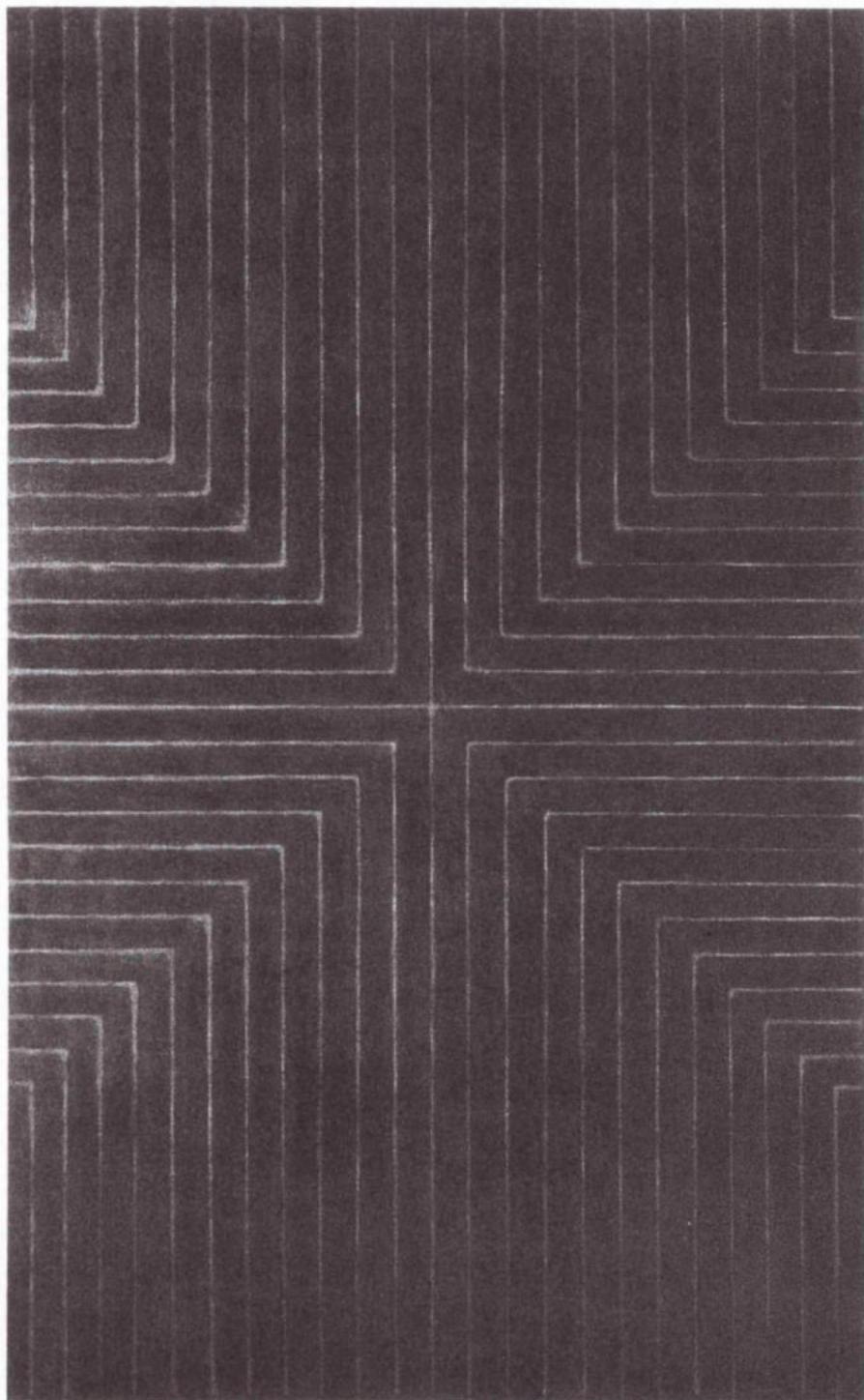


Fig. 90

Frank Stella, *Die Fahne Hoch!*, 1959
10'1½" x 6'1" (308.6 x 185.4 cm)
Enamel on canvas
Whitney Museum of American Art

The paintings aimed to exercise a control over their viewers. When looking at *Die Fahne Hoch!*, the viewer places themselves in front of its centre, and their eyes are directed to the meeting place of the cross at its centre. As this is above eye height, they look up, as if standing to attention before a draped flag. Other paintings have different configurations, but the point remains: they impose one viewing position only, and from that position, they yield all their visual content.⁴⁶⁵ ‘You have limited access... the access that the painting gives you.... It’s a kind of controlled vision, and it’s a particularly structured vision.’⁴⁶⁶

What seems interesting, then, is not so much any meaning of the painting that the title might suggest, but the way the title exposes how associations were made between the viewing conditions Stella set in train through the paintings and the power of Fascist architecture. The title is a moment of transparency – Stella acknowledging painting’s ambitions for power. Paintings that seek to exercise control in this manner might just be representative of a youthful bravado. Addressing Stella’s early career when reviewing the 1970 retrospective, Leider seemed to suggest this point, oddly echoing Stella’s own linguistic choices. Leider wrote of the ‘blitzkrieg manner of Stella’s attack’ and his ‘raid’ on the shaped canvas, before describing the Irregular Polygons as ‘explicitly violent.’⁴⁶⁷ Stella himself had talked about the need to exercise a kind of authority through his moves as an emerging artist. ‘All artists face a problem, which is they have to have a certain kind of authority, they have to deal with authority in some kinds of way in terms of their own work.’⁴⁶⁸ So the authority the *Black Paintings* seek may just betray the artist’s insecurity - the need to be authoritative to gain notice. Or, to locate them in a wider context, the quest for authority witnessed in the *Black Paintings* might betray the crisis

⁴⁶⁵ Is it difficult to judge if the two suggestions from Stella’s 1970 comments on the *Black Paintings* that I have explored are complimentary or contradictory. I have suggested that the process of their making could stand as a kind of metaphor for the labour of the death camps, itself an emblem of labour in modernity; and that the process of viewing them stands as a kind of metaphor for being under the control of fascism. Perhaps, to put the two together, we might think that the paintings impose a control over both artist and viewer, that Stella explored through a kind of double move the question of fascism. It is interesting that this exploration was characterised as a kind of high point of modernist painting.

⁴⁶⁶ Stella/Rubin Interview

⁴⁶⁷ Philip Leider, ‘Literalism and Abstraction, Frank Stella’s Retrospective at the Modern’ *Artforum* (April 1970) p.50

⁴⁶⁸ Stella/Rubin Interview.

that abstract painting faced at the very point it reached its zenith - the trouble that would prompt moves both towards its abandonment and its conservation - Judd's call for works that were neither painting nor sculpture, Rothko's attempt, as Briony Fer has recently argued, to save painting by repetition.⁴⁶⁹

I want to stay with the idea of viewing, with the notion that a painting might impose the conditions of its viewing on its spectator as would fascist architecture, for these concerns will soon be those taken to address the *Polish Villages*. If the *Black Paintings* imposed controlled conditions, then in Stella's work over the next ten years, the play with the spectator became more and more complex, but authority was never quite given up. We might actually say it was shared; the paintings began to be made in a way so that they were 'literally responsive to the same conditions of time and space as was the beholder'.⁴⁷⁰ Metallic paint, for instance, was employed so that the surface of the painting would register and reflect the light source in the room in which it, together with its viewer, was placed. There were increasingly intricate games with the illusions of optical space - the inner squares in the *Concentric Squares* appeared to recede behind the plane of the canvas surface, the *Running Vs* appeared 'as folded planes, buckling away from the wall and projecting into the viewer's space'.⁴⁷¹ What was important, though, was that these were only ever illusions, this was only ever optical space. The paintings, in other words, still controlled how they would be seen, even if the spectator was offered an experience which encouraged their side-to-side movement in front of the surface, rather than their alert stillness before it. The paintings played with frontality, but this play always ended by stressing the secure co-presence of the viewer before the flat surface of the work. So, when Rosalind Krauss asked, in the middle of a highly-polished account of them, 'When we see a painting, does it occur to us that we are only seeing one aspect?', the answer she intended was a definite 'No'.⁴⁷²

⁴⁶⁹ Briony Fer, Unpublished talk on Mark Rothko. See note 266. I hope to have indicated that the question of the relationship between the *Black Paintings*, and the fascist references of their titles, is more nuanced than that proposed by Anna Chave. ('Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power' *Arts Magazine* (January 1990) pp.44-63) Chave did not have access to the Stella/Rubin interview.

⁴⁷⁰ Rosalind Krauss, 'On Frontality' *Artforum* (May 1968) p.44

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., p.44

⁴⁷² Ibid., p.43. We have seen that Krauss maintained this position (in front of the paintings) when writing on the *Polish Villages*.)

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It is interesting that the other essay generated in response to the 1969 presentation of Richard Meier's and his colleagues' architecture took as its subject not memory and politics, but frontality and rotation.⁴⁷³ Kenneth Frampton detected in all the buildings under consideration a play between these two spatial concepts. When looking at John Hejduk's House, he wrote, 'one is presented with a series of planes...[and] this layering of frontal planes is reinforced as one approached the house. Once within the spine, however, this frontalization collapses like a mirage into the axis of its labyrinthine organisation.'⁴⁷⁴ Frampton also contrasted these experiences in Meier's Smith house. 'There is a strong contrast between the blank, frontal, landward facade [(fig.91)] and the tendency for the house to "rotate" around its center on the other three sides. Thus, the whole of the house when viewed from the seaward side, appears to consist of overhangs, glazing elements, beams, staircases, etcetera, that are all exploding diagonally outwards [(fig.92)]. There is a real disassociation between these forms tending to "blowout" from the centre and the frontalized planar system within the interior.'⁴⁷⁵

The vocabulary recalls descriptions of the diagonals of the *Polish Villages*, the accounts of 'exploded paintings'. The kind of *experiences* Frampton described alerts us to the point I now want to raise. The space of the *Polish Villages* was not optical, but literal. A viewer was afforded one aspect from the front, but an entirely different one as they moved around the painting. Parts cast shadows over other parts - actual shadows, not illusions of shadows. From the 'rotated' position at their sides, elements of the paintings were visible that were simply unavailable from the front, which is to say that the view that had been seen from in front 'collapse[d] like a mirage'. If the *Black Paintings* aimed to impose the control that fascist architecture imposed, and if Stella's painting ever since retained an aspect of that control, then these works renounced all control. They did not demand that their viewer stand in one fixed position to take in their visual content, nor

⁴⁷³ Kenneth Frampton, 'Frontality Vs. Rotation' in *Five Architects* (New York, 1975)

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., p.9

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., p.11

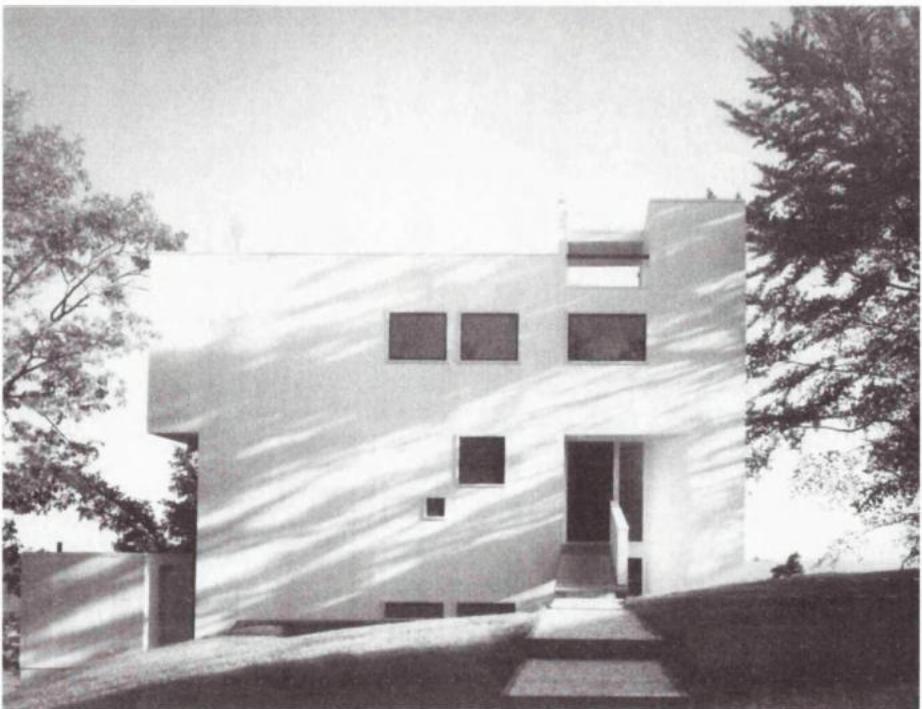


Fig. 90
Richard Meier, *Smith House*, 1965, view from entrance

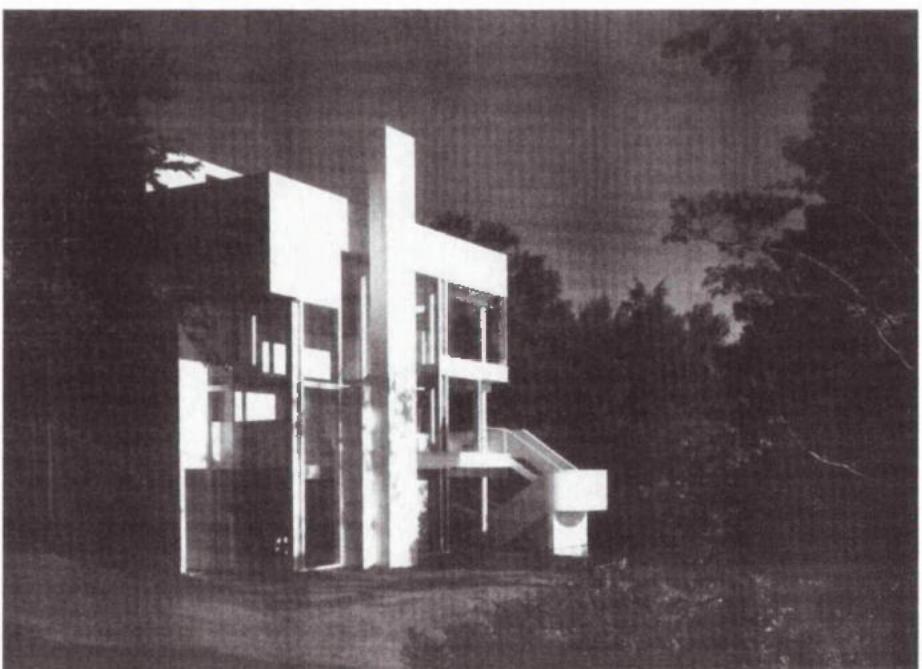


Fig. 91
Richard Meier, *Smith House*, 1965, view from water

did the viewer ever control them from one position. Compared to the kind of visual experience previously on offer from Stella's paintings, this experience could not be associated with security, but with anxious doubt, a doubt reflected in the contemporary accounts. John Elderfield described the experience of looking around the sides of the works: 'One is never sure whether certain gaps between the applied materials is intentional or not or whether the revealed corrugated paper on the sides is supposed to be part of the painting'.⁴⁷⁶

What can we draw from this? First, it would seem that the 'totalitarian aesthetic' in play in the *Black Paintings* was finally cast aside. What is compelling is that it was cast aside in the course of making works that respond to the 'destruction of an entire culture' carried out by totalitarian powers. We could say that the project of addressing destruction required a dismantling of the kind of visuality of control that had so far been associated with Stella's paintings.⁴⁷⁷ This would mean that the *Polish Villages* do not just admit a kind of referentiality into Modernist abstraction; they take apart a kind of visuality in play in Modernism. The two projects could, in fact, be linked: in the process of viewing them, John Elderfield had a difficulty in judging what is 'part of the painting', but we could say that this doubt introduced the wider question - 'what was part of the project of painting?' Or, to imagine the *Polish Villages* answering, so to speak, Baldesaari's *This is not to be looked at*, they would say 'this is not just be looked at; but looked around, and, in the process, thought about.'

Mel Bochner has presented the moment of the *Polish Villages* in dramatic terms. 'The formalist school - the Frieds, the Greenbergs, and their minions - were all saying, "There are conventions and, by God, you should follow them. It's good for you, and it's better for society. Stay inside the framing edge." Stay inside the framing edge meant *obey* the boundaries. And we were saying, fuck the boundaries.'⁴⁷⁸ Though Bochner's own work clearly suggested that the way out of the framing edge had to involve an abandonment of

⁴⁷⁶ Elderfield, op. cit., p.31

⁴⁷⁷ There is a clear parallel here with Kahn's *Memorial* and the way it forgets Fascist architecture by renouncing an attempt to control the viewer's movement.

⁴⁷⁸ Amy Newman, op. cit., p.401

the literal frames and canvases of painting, we can now see that Stella's *Polish Villages* also refused to stay inside the metaphorical framing edge of Modernism.

It is interesting that this refusal was staged for the viewer at the literal framing edge. While thinking about the kinds of discourses that frame the art work, that determine what is properly considered inside and outside it, and what questions can and cannot be addressed to it, Derrida asks what a reading of a painting would be like that 'turns its literal limit into an external limit, takes its thickness into account, makes us see the picture from the side of the canvas or the wood'.⁴⁷⁹ The *Polish Village* paintings perform this kind of operation. The process of 'seeing the picture from the side' forces the viewer to unframe Modernism, indeed to unframe any single discourse that would aim to describe (or define) them, to set their limits. This, indeed, explains why it has been important not to consider the *Polish Villages* as straightforward 'Holocaust memorials'. If they could be said to generate one stable meaning, though this were not the one which Modernism expected, then we would only be exchanging one kind of closure for another, mimicking the closure of meaning that Modernist discourse required. This is why it has been important to think about the *Polish Villages* through so many different contexts - form, process, materials, contemporary criticism, the Vietnam War, Jewish Art, architectural discourse, titles... Once the frame of one discourse cracks, all of these contexts must be in play. This inability to fix one frame exposes the fragile condition of meaning after the Holocaust. The *Polish Villages* are about the 'destruction of an entire culture', but the 'entire culture' in question seems as much to be Modernism as the culture symbolised by *Wooden Synagogues*.

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In earlier chapters, I have considered the way in which the memory of the Holocaust might be in play as the spectator encounters abstraction, or how the abstraction of a memorial space puts into crisis what is meant by memorial. In this chapter, the emphasis has changed – this chapter has concerned the way the memory of the Holocaust might

⁴⁷⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago, 1987) p.74

impose upon the project of Modernist painting, so that the theoretical discourse of Modernism can no longer serve as a model either for the making, viewing, or criticism of the abstract work. This argument has been made from an art historical perspective: what has been clear is the way this point was not made explicitly by contemporary critics.

In many ways, the subject matter of the next, and final chapter, marks a turn-around. It concerns a highly visible encounter between abstraction and Holocaust memory: the commissioning of abstract art works for the most visible site of Holocaust memory in the United States – the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington D.C. However, the chapter also constitutes a continuation of earlier concerns – in particular, my concern with space and memory. In the chapter on Newman, the space considered was the space of installation; in the Kahn chapter, I thought about the abstract space of the memorial, and in this chapter, I have been thinking about what happens when one steps around the side of the painting. In the last chapter, the space will be that which the artist attempts to organise with the work, the space of the architectural setting, and the space of the institution.

CHAPTER SIX: THE ART FOR PUBLIC SPACES PROGRAMME IN THE UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

1. ‘Art Amongst the Corpses’⁴⁸⁰

With James Freed’s ‘Hall of Remembrance’ as a backdrop – a structure built to recall the vertical space of the Polish Wooden Synagogues⁴⁸¹ - President Clinton, Elie Wiesel, and countless other dignitaries declared the USHMM open on 22 April 1993 (*fig.93*). Its architecture and exhibitions drew praise in numerous publications, but one element of its programme attracted universal, and visible criticism. On the front page of *The New York Times* Michael Kimmelman attacked the Art for Public Spaces Programme (AFPSP).⁴⁸² In question were four newly commissioned works, paid for privately and situated in prominent positions inside and outside the museum. These were by Richard Serra, Joel Shapiro, Sol LeWitt, and Ellsworth Kelly. In his criticism, Kimmelman was joined by Paul Richards,⁴⁸³ Ken Johnson⁴⁸⁴, and many members of the public who wrote to the museum. Some writers disputed the very presence of the art in this institution, the very existence of the AFPSP, while others contested the ability of these particular *abstract* art works to function successfully.

The first kind of argument is exemplified in a letter sent to Sara Bloomfield, then Executive Director of the Museum, in 1992. A museum donor wrote to withdraw her financial support after ‘learning of [the] decision to commission abstract art for its walls.’ It was not abstraction *per se* that was at issue, though: “‘Distractions’ of any kind have no place in such a building.’ The donor drew a parallel with the orchestras that played Mozart in the camps, concluding that this was ‘the analogy that the presence of “art” on

⁴⁸⁰ Please see section in bibliography about archives and interviews in relation to this chapter.

⁴⁸¹ James Freed commented that the wooden synagogues were ‘very beautiful, very articulate. These structures were not like cathedrals, but more like working spaces. These images and others that we saw [while researching] had a residual, lingering presence in our minds, and that’s partially what our building is about.’ ‘The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’ *A+U* 11:278 (1993) p.91. First published in *Assemblage* No. 9 (June 1989)

⁴⁸² Michael Kimmelman, ‘Making Art of the Holocaust: New Museum, New Works’, *The New York Times*, 23 April 1993, p.1, 24

⁴⁸³ Paul Richards, ‘Obscene Pleasure: Art Among the Corpses’, *The Washington Post*, 18 April 1993, p.G1

⁴⁸⁴ Ken Johnson, ‘Art and Memory’ *Art in America* (November 1993) pp.90-98

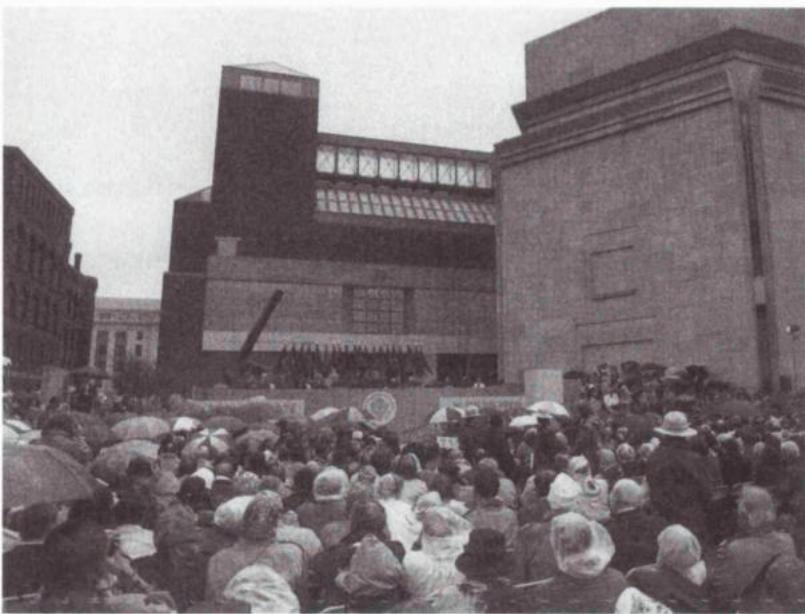


Fig. 93
Opening ceremony at the USHMM

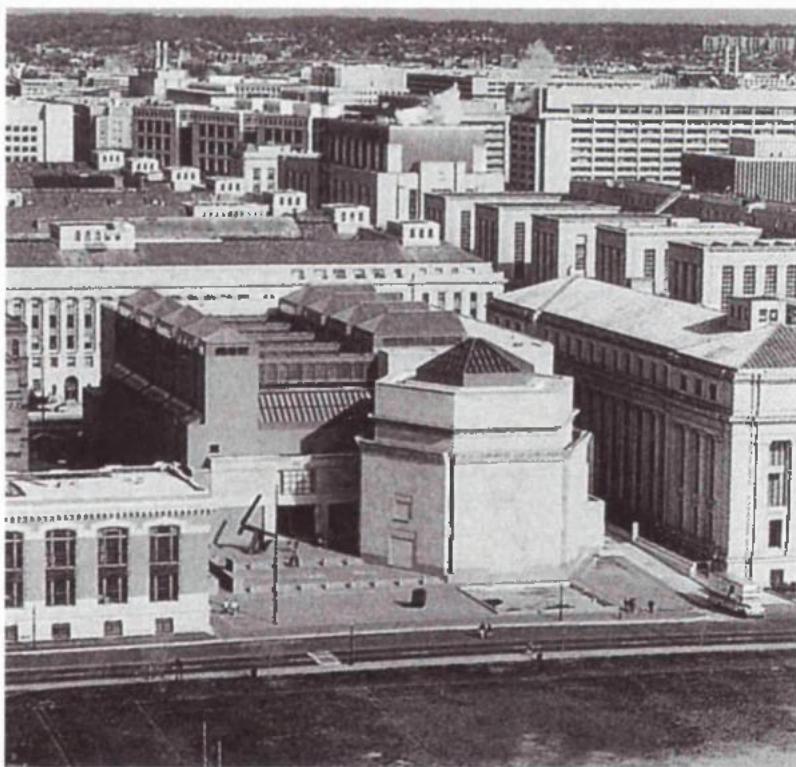


Fig. 94
Aerial view of USHMM with Hall of Remembrance to right and Shapiro's *Loss and Regeneration* at bottom right

the walls of the Holocaust Museum evoked in my mind.⁴⁸⁵ Such thoughts were echoed later in Paul Richards' article, 'Obscene Pleasure: Art Amongst the Corpses'. 'There is art in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.', he began. 'There needn't be.' In the course of this text, Richards disputed the programme, arguing that 'The Holocaust itself beggars the museum's site-specific art', that the art is 'unnecessary. No, it's worse than unnecessary. It distorts and misguides.' The art works were sacrilegious, trivialising the Holocaust, diminishing the museum's content. Most peculiarly, Richards argued that the art works' presence was at the expense of other displays that might have been included in the narrative of the museum, displays on other genocides: 'That white-on-white abstraction made by Ellsworth Kelly may well be spirit-calming, [...] but if we're venturing dilutions of the museum's central theme, why not include images of... slave ships stuffed with bodies, pyramids of skulls.' Though the exclusion of such material was certainly a focus of controversy, faulting the AFPSP for this exclusion was strange indeed.⁴⁸⁶ Kimmelman argued that 'no artwork related to the Holocaust can equal in its visceral impact the sight of an actual railroad car on which Jews were transported to Auschwitz.' He did not exactly state that 'no artwork' would have been preferable to what had been commissioned, but nonetheless, like Richards, he had a problem with the AFPSP as a whole, complaining in fact that these works were not sufficiently visible, but mere 'footnotes' in the museum, and that there was too much 'bustle' in front of them.

The arguments which addressed the particular works (rather than AFPSP) were launched, in the main, through letters sent to the museum, and by Ken Johnson. Herzl Emmanuel wrote to Harvey Meyerhoff (Chairman of the Council)⁴⁸⁷ stating that the commissioned art 'is commonly referred to as minimalist... There is no way this kind of purist art can logically cohabit with the Museum's staggering array of artefacts...',⁴⁸⁸ Mark Strauss, a survivor who had offered his own work to the museum, 'appeal[ed] to the public, to whom the Museum belongs, to see "white-on-white" rectangles and other minimalist

⁴⁸⁵ Letter from Brenda Levenson to Sarah Bloomfield, 6 December 1992

⁴⁸⁶ A continual debate during the establishment of the USHMM involved the extent to which other genocides should have representation. For those who saw the Holocaust as a unique, sacred event, such representation was problematic.

⁴⁸⁷ The Council was the main political and fundraising body behind the USHMM.

⁴⁸⁸ Letter from Herzl Emmanuel to Harvey Meyerhoff, 9 March 1993

nothings and decide for themselves whether these have relevance to Holocaust [sic] or any meaning at all.⁴⁸⁹

Strauss might have preferred more expressive, figurative works, but it is hard to imagine he would have been content with Robert Morris, Anselm Kiefer, or Christian Boltanski. These names were posited by Ken Johnson as ‘artists [who] have directly addressed the Holocaust in their work’. Johnson also mentioned others who had dealt with ‘questions of power and evil’ (he named Robert Longo and Ed Kienholz), and artists who ‘have combined interests in issues of politics and morality with innovative ideas about the possibilities of public art.’ (Barbara Kruger and Hans Haacke)⁴⁹⁰. All these artists would have been preferable to those commissioned. Though quite distant from Strauss in taste, Johnson revealed shared doubts about abstraction. ‘[A] mode of art that normally focuses on formal, perceptual or immediately cognitive concerns may not be the most appropriate approach for creating a genuinely convincing memorial’⁴⁹¹. Johnson put the choice of the commissioned artists down to the lamentable caution of those who commissioned them.

What should be clear by now, though, is that even if caution had prompted these choices, controversy had not been avoided. If this controversy provides ample ground for consideration, in launching a discussion of the AFPSP, I want to be clear that I am not interested, primarily, in answering the first set of complaints, those that questioned the very existence of the programme. My concerns will rather be directed at considering how these particular works might function in this context. Thus far, my enquires about works of modernist art and architecture have suggested that there are, in specific instances, powerful relations between abstraction and Holocaust subject matter, that ‘a mode of art that normally focuses on formal, perceptual or immediately cognitive concerns’ might not do so at the expense of content, indeed that content might be entwined in the works’ normal formal, perceptual, or cognitive concerns.

⁴⁸⁹ Letter from Mark Strauss to Jeshajahu Weinberg, Director, 6 June 1993. Strauss publicised his complaints: Weinberg’s files contain letters from U.S. Congressman Frank R. Wolf and Senator John Warner, both of whom wrote to the museum on Strauss’ behalf to pursue his objections. Weinberg’s replies laid out the history of the AFPSP, defending the commissioned works. (Weinberg files, 1997-014 Box 3 Director of the Museum. Records of the Museum Director Jeshajahu Weinberg 1979-1994. Permanent.)

⁴⁹⁰ Johnson, op. cit., p.98

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., p.95

The placement of abstract work in the USHMM sets up a public and direct confrontation between abstraction and Holocaust memory. The programme affords me the opportunity to consider the responses of the individual artists, and the meanings of the particular works they made. It will also enable a more general discussion about how the relationship between abstraction and Holocaust memory might have developed since the period of the early 1970s, when Frank Stella's *Polish Village* series was completed. I will first look at the history of the AFPSP. This will extend earlier discussion about the role played by American Jewish institutions in the patronage of modernism.

2. The History of the AFPSP

By 1993, the USHMM was a multi-faceted institution. Physically, this was a new building in Washington D.C. by James Ingo Freed, positioned between the Bureau of Printing and Engraving (to the south) and the Auditors building (to the north), with entrances on 14th and 15th Streets, just off the Mall (*fig.94*). The plaza outside the 15th Street entrance looked onto the Washington Monument. The internal spaces were divided into five principal areas: a massive atrium ('The Hall of Witness'), a temple-like memorial space ('The Hall of Remembrance'), exhibition galleries, archival/library/office spaces, and finally, a theatre.⁴⁹² Conceptually, the institution comprised this physical entity with its memorial spaces, a narrative exhibition about the Holocaust, an archive and research centre, and a 'Committee on Conscience' which might advise the government of the United States about future genocidal issues. The art works were located on the plaza outside the 15th Street entrance, inside the Hall of Witness, and at two points in the exhibition galleries, at positions along its narrative.

These 'parts' had grown to form the USHMM during the period since 1978, when President Carter appointed a commission under Elie Wiesel to make recommendations for a national Holocaust memorial⁴⁹³. At that moment, there was no indication of the eventual shape of the institution: its geographical location and physical embodiment had yet to be determined⁴⁹⁴. It was not clear whether it would comprise a memorial, a

⁴⁹² See Adrian Dannatt, *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* (London, 1995). Architectural reviews include: Herbert Muschamp, 'Shaping a Monument to Memory', *The New York Times*, 11 April 1993, Section 2, pp.1, 32; Jim Murphy, 'Memorial to Atrocity' *Progressive Architecture* (February 1993) pp.60-79.

⁴⁹³ The USHMM was initiated by President Carter when he announced a 'Commission on the Holocaust' on 1 May 1978, on the thirtieth anniversary of the establishment of the State of Israel. Edward Lennenthal has discussed the links between the initiation of the institution, and Carter's desires to satisfy American Jews sensitive both to his pro-Palestinian approach to Middle East questions, and to the non-existence of a national Holocaust memorial. Lennenthal's study *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (New York, 1995) is the most complete history of the institution, and I will not rehearse this history here, other where it bears on the history of the AFPSP. Lennenthal looks at many issues relating to architecture, changes in personnel, and artefacts, but makes no mention of the AFPSP.

⁴⁹⁴ Though debates between a location in New York or Washington D.C. were concluded in favour of the latter in 1979, the final location of the museum was only determined in 1981. Over the next five years, various proposals were put forward about converting the building that already occupied this space - it was

museum, an archive, or some or all of these. The history of the AFPSP was not, therefore, simply a history of choosing art works to go in particular places in the building. Rather the AFPSP grew at the same time as the institution.

There had always been plans that visual arts would play some part in the institution. Between 1 May 1978 and 27 September 1979, when Elie Wiesel reported back to President Carter, many individuals had considered what a memorial might be. Julius Schatz of the American Jewish Congress (who would later play a role in the AFPSP, and who had been involved in Louis Kahn's commission) conceived the institution at this juncture as a park rather than a building. 'In the park, I see a place of public gathering, exhibition and performance, where the year around art may be displayed, music, drama and dance performed, and symposia held in memory of those who fell.'⁴⁹⁵ The report, however, suggested a building rather than a park, and made no specific mention of the display of art. However, we do find the following recommendations:

'The museum must be of symbolic and artistic beauty, visually and emotionally moving in accordance with the solemn nature of the Holocaust.'

'The museum would present the Holocaust through pictorial accounts, films, and other visual exhibits within a framework that is not merely reportorial but analytic, encouraging reflection and questioning.'⁴⁹⁶

These suggestions clearly pave the way for the later commission of art as a compliment to the architecture, and as a counter to the more straightforwardly narrative or 'reportorial' components of the museum.

only in 1986, after James Freed had been introduced to the project, that the idea of a new building was cemented. (see Li *nenthal*, op. cit., Chapter Two)

⁴⁹⁵ Schatz, 15 February 1979, quoted in Li *nenthal*, op. cit., p.59

⁴⁹⁶ From 'Section III. Proposals and Projects: Specific Recommendations' in Report to the President - President's Commission on the Holocaust', 27 September 1979. Reprinted by the USHMM, July 1999, p.9 (This is a small pamphlet known as 'The Brown Book')

During the 1980s, museum staff began to archive art proposals in a registry of Holocaust-related art. This registry would serve as a possible source of work for eventual inclusion in the museum, and as an educational resource for Holocaust art researchers. By the mid-1980s, the 'Committee for Collections and Acquisitions' was in charge of the programme. Its primary responsibility was the collection of artefacts for the narrative exhibition, but one of its members, Susan Morganstein (Director of Special Exhibitions from 1986) had a key interest in visual arts, and began to develop the AFPSP. Discussions in committee minutes centred on responses to gifts, and ideas as to the eventual character of the art in public spaces began to crystallise around such debates. At a meeting in December 1988, Susan Morganstein stated that works created by people during the Holocaust would be accepted by the museum as artefacts without consideration of aesthetic quality. However, as she noted, the acceptance of post-period work 'presents a unique and difficult dilemma. Are we to treat these works strictly as historical records, as memory pieces, aesthetically, or by all the above criteria?'⁴⁹⁷

It was now, of course, possible to consider 'public spaces', because by the late 1980s, Freed had been hired as architect, and a clear idea of the structure of his building (and its spaces) was emerging. Having worked with artists in previous projects, Freed was enthusiastic about including art works in the building. As we will see, his ideas about the purpose of art work in the building changed. However, in 1989 he indicated that he saw art works as having a ceremonial function in the museum - they might be focal points in wreath laying ceremonies.⁴⁹⁸ Other comments reveal a preference for overtly symbolic art: 'He foresaw something representative of life, such as a tree of life, but he reiterated that he was not necessarily recommending representational works.'⁴⁹⁹ By July 1989, it was possible to name seven sites at which art would be placed.⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁷ Committee of Collections and Acquisitions, 1 December 1988

⁴⁹⁸ Committee on Collections and Acquisitions, 1 June 1989 p.4 (Berenbaum files)

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid, p.6. Freed also suggested that Christian Boltanski assist the exhibition designers on the arrangement of an installation of photographs taken in the Ejszyszki ghetto, an installation through which the visitor passes twice, and which is followed in the journey around the museum by the rooms containing Kelly's and LeWitt's works. Though Boltanski was never directly involved in this installation, its arrangement recalls his practice.

Freed's early hopes that the art work have a symbolic function should be considered in the context of his more general approach to the question of symbolism. Several registers of architectural communication are offered in the building at once - symbolic communication is only one. As much as there are overtly

Over the next year, two important developments took place. Firstly, in order to decide how to proceed, members of the Committee for Acquisitions and Collections conducted research on various models of public art acquisitions and commissions, such as those used by other federal institutions, other Holocaust museums, and various art museums.⁵⁰¹ Secondly, the Committee for Acquisitions and Collections nominated a ‘Subcommittee for Art for Public Spaces’ whose express purpose was to address the question of ‘Art for Public Spaces’, and whose task it was to compile long lists of possible candidates. By this moment, it was emerging that artists were to be well known figures, differentiated in terms of stature from amateur artists.⁵⁰² There was no decision at this point, however, that all chosen works would be newly made - the names of deceased artists such as Louise Nevelson and Eva Hesse were discussed in committee meetings.⁵⁰³ While it was a general premise that a new work of art would only be commissioned if the artist had previously shown some interest in addressing the Holocaust⁵⁰⁴, no clear distinctions were made at this point between modes of address: the names of abstract artists were posited alongside those whose work was figurative.⁵⁰⁵

referential uses of architectural structures (such as the ‘watch towers’) and materials (such as red brick strapped by iron - a feature related to death camp ovens), Freed’s building also makes meaning through creating atmospheres with spatial and light effects, and through its questioning relationship to its neoclassical architectural context. These divergent architectural methods seem to exist in tandem with each other, each offered as a possible response to the task of building a Holocaust Memorial Museum.

⁵⁰⁰ A document dated 14 July 1989 names these sites, together with the kinds of works sought. In addition to the three places where work was put (the Serra space was not named), this document names four other places, with suggestions for kinds of work. These were ‘A monumental bas-relief in the Hall of Witness, on the upper part of the wall to the right of the 14th Street entrance’; ‘A work of art on glass, on each of the two grid walls in the Hall of Witness, in front of the 14th Street entrance (etchings?)’; ‘A vertical sculpture with small circumference on the bottom platform of staircase [sic] leading from Hall of Witness to Concourse’; ‘A work of art inside the tower space from 5th floor down to 3rd floor.’ The APPSP was initially planned as being more visible than it became.

⁵⁰¹ Minutes, Committee on Collections and Acquisitions, 1 June 1989, p.7 (Berenbaum files)

⁵⁰² It was during Anita Reiner’s comments (see note 507) that an indication of ‘quality’ first became apparent: ‘We want the acquisitions for our public spaces [...] to be of a quality consistent with and equal to our neighbours.’ We might deduce from this that staff were now differentiating the work of professional artists (whose work might be included in the National Gallery or Hirshhorn) from that of amateur artists, including the many survivors whose submissions included heavily symbolic, figurative proposals.

⁵⁰³ Minutes, Committee of Collections and Acquisitions, 3 April 1990, p.5; Minutes, Committee of Collections and Acquisitions, 16 May 1990, p.11

⁵⁰⁴ Previous Holocaust-related works did help Serra, Shapiro, and LeWitt gain commissions. However, the choice of Kelly suggests this kind of background was no longer, at that later stage, considered a prerequisite for the commission.

⁵⁰⁵ On a ‘long list’ presented and discussed on March 8, 1990, for instance, names (listed in groups according to the space in which their work might go) included George Segal, Leon Golub, Anselm Kiefer,

We have noted Freed's ideas about the function of art during this period. Other opinions emerged in the course of the committee discussions. In March 1990, Hadassah Rosensaft, a survivor, hoped for a narrative work of sculpture that would 'come from the heart and express emotion'.⁵⁰⁶ Anita Reiner 'suggested that when the artists were selected, [...] the Committee meet with them, tell them [...] stories, and they could translate the stories into art. She recommended deleting Richard Serra from the list.'⁵⁰⁷ Other members of the committee countered these ideas: museum director, Jeshajahu Weinberg argued that 'there will be a lot of narrative in the Museum and that we needed artworks to balance the narrative - a counterpoint.... We shouldn't rule out non-figurative art just because some people would not understand it - that it would still have emotional impact'.⁵⁰⁸ Despite Weinberg's plea, the question of accessibility did haunt discussions. The possibility of including abstract work was greeted both as a means of extending access, and feared as an alienating presence: while one figure at the 8 March meeting mentioned that children 'react to abstract art',⁵⁰⁹ another argued that 'most of the visitors to the Museum would not know a lot about abstract art. He asked if the Museum wanted to speak to 1% of the visitors or 99%'.⁵¹⁰ The notion of percentages was raised once more at a later meeting on 16 May: Ms. Lauder, underlining the fact that 'this project will be very visible', stressed that 'we must aim toward the top 10% of museum visitors'.⁵¹¹

It would be misguided to read this hope as indicative of an elitist attitude in the committee. Committee minutes give no suggestion that the museum wanted to acquire art work that would only be of interest to art connoisseurs. Rather, this 'top 10%' might be considered to be those who would spend time in the museum, who would be open and

Jonathan Borofsky, Robert Morris, Jim Dine, Larry Rivers, Christian Boltanski, as well as Louise Fishman, Richard Serra, and Joel Shapiro. Interestingly, during this discussion, two of the few names taken off the list were Serra's and Shapiro's. Kelly and LeWitt were not mentioned.

⁵⁰⁶ Minutes, Committee for Collections and Acquisitions, 8 March 1990, p.4

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid, p.6

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid, p.7 At a later committee meeting, Weinberg added to this argument, hoping that 'art would provide visual relief to people going through the exhibitions.... this art will almost be like a part of the interior architecture.' (Committee of Collections and Acquisitions, 16 May 1990)

⁵⁰⁹ Minutes, Committee for Collections and Acquisitions, 8 March 1990, p.8

⁵¹⁰ Ibid, p.5

⁵¹¹ Minutes, Committee for Collections and Acquisitions, 16 May 1990, p.11

sensitive to all its eventual components - from gruesome photographic images, to precise architectural details. Nevertheless, what does seem significant here is that the museum staff and committee members, amongst whom there were only a few conversant in contemporary art matters, felt considerable cultural pressure to acquire work that would stand up to their art museum neighbours, indeed that would advertise their institution as a place of excellence. The main consideration in acquiring art work was to match the import of the institution with the serious work of serious artists, but these kinds of pressures cannot be forgotten.

These various factors lead to the next main stage of the AFPSP: the partial delegation of the project. Research into other acquisition/commission procedures had indicated that other institutions employed art professionals to run procedures, and independent juries to choose artists.⁵¹² In 1990, the USHMM followed suit.⁵¹³ Nancy Rosen was appointed as an independent administrator of the programme in June, with the role of mediating between the museum, the jury, and later, the artists and installation teams.⁵¹⁴ In the autumn, possible names for this jury were nominated and invited.⁵¹⁵ Since museum staff invited only one juror with extensive research interests in Holocaust related art (Ziva Amishai-Maisels), it seems clear that they were seeking guidance rather from those whose expertise lay in the history of modernism. Later, critics of the AFPSP complained about the delegation of the project: 'This group [of curators and scholars] evidently had great powers of persuasion for they succeeded in prevailing on the committee to

⁵¹² See Minutes, Committee for Collections and Acquisitions, 8 March 1990, p.9 and 3 April 1990

⁵¹³ A proposed procedure for these delegations was submitted to the Ad Hoc Committee from the Committee on Collections and Acquisitions on 28 June 1990. This recommended procedure was largely followed from then on.

⁵¹⁴ Rosen worked as a curator during the 1970s before starting to work as 'an independent curator and fine arts advisor to corporations, developers, private collectors and non-profit organisations' (Nancy Rosen C.V., Weinberg files).

⁵¹⁵ By 16 November 1990, the following had been invited onto the jury (then current institution listed): Nan Rosenthal (National Gallery of Art); Susan Delahanty (Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston); Howard Fox (Los Angeles County Museum of Art); Gary Garrels (DIA Centre); Ziva Amishai-Maisels (Hebrew University, Jerusalem); Ned Rifkin (Hirshhorn Museum); Marc Rosenthal (Guggenheim Museum). The letter confirming the acceptance of a jury position was unspecific about the purpose or kind of art sought, stating simply that 'the Museum complex will be distinguished by a number of contemporary art works conceived and commissioned expressly for this site and context.' (Letter from Barbara Diamonstein Spielvogel to Susan Delahanty, 11 January 1991). This is the earliest dated document I have found which makes clear that all works for the AFPSP will be newly commissioned. However, the jury did still discuss briefly the possibility of acquiring Barnett Newman's *Zim Zum* for the programme.

completely disavow their own convictions.⁵¹⁶ However, while the external curators did shape the eventual commissions, they did not overturn an already-coherent set of plans for the art works. As we have seen, prior to this point, there were no homogenous 'convictions' about the content of the AFPSP shared by those who had considered the matter. This jury was hardly a rubber stamp for the selection of abstract works. Though some of its members such as Gary Garrels and Marc Rosenthal did go on to organise major exhibitions of abstract art, they were working on other projects as well.

Jeshajahu Weinberg introduced the first jury meeting on 17 April 1991. 'Art for Public Spaces was not an integral part of the story, but a counterpoint to the story. It was not complimentary but compatible with the character of the museum.'⁵¹⁷ Clearly, then, at the point of the commencement of the jury's work, it was determined that the narrative of the 'story' would be conveyed by the exhibition displays, and not the art work, even though some of the art work would be positioned in the midst of those displays. To give the jury a sense of the displays and of the architecture of the museum, they were then taken around a mock-up of the exhibition, and then around the construction site, and shown where the art works would be sited.⁵¹⁸ They began considering artists for each of the sites, but first an interesting general discussion took place concerning artists' nationalities. Though jurors had been told that they would be choosing artists 'without regard to religion, race or nationality'⁵¹⁹, an immediate debate sparked about a possible approach to Rebecca Horn and Anselm Kiefer, names present on the short list prepared for the meeting. Some members felt that nationality should not, indeed, be a factor in their considerations - others suggested the positive value of commissioning German artists. A decision to restrict commissions to American artists eventually prevailed.⁵²⁰ Though this option was not determined at this meeting, it was suggested here as a path of sensitivity (any commission of a German artist was said to risk offending survivors). The

⁵¹⁶ Letter from Herzl Emmanuel to Harvey Meyerhoff, 9 March 1993

⁵¹⁷ Jury Minutes, 17 April 1991, p.2

⁵¹⁸ By this time, the number of sites under consideration had been reduced to five. Plans for 'bas relief' and 'etched glass' works had been abandoned, while the Tower Space (which became the 'Tower of Faces') was to be filled by the exhibition design team.

⁵¹⁹ Jury minutes, 17 April 1991, p.8

⁵²⁰ This was not decided at this meeting - Kiefer's name remained on short lists in the following meetings, and indeed he was approached during the summer of 1991, but declined to submit a proposal.

eventual choice of American artists accords with plans to establish for the museum an American identity - its display, for instance, opens with an image of G.I.s liberating camps.⁵²¹

From this point onwards, the best way to describe the history of the AFPSP is to separate out the different procedures that developed in regard to the separate sites⁵²² The first site under deliberation was not, in fact, designated for an actual art work, but rather for a collaborative project. At the 15th Street end of the Hall of Witness, Freed was building a black granite wall. From early on, he had hoped that this wall would contain a crack (*fig.95*). This would be one of the more brutal metaphoric elements in the building, and Freed had written about it in 1989: 'The crack in the granite wall is a bit banal. I'm bothered by the literality, but I think we have to go through with it. We intend to take hammers and go at it with them. I don't want to make a drawing. I want to go ahead and smash it.'⁵²³ Later, not knowing how such a crack might effectively be implemented, Freed hoped the jury would suggest an artist who would be contracted as a "design consultant/collaborator"⁵²⁴. Prior to the April jury meeting, it had been decided that three names of possible 'collaborators' be proposed.⁵²⁵ The jury would rank these, and the top ranked individual would be approached and invited to meet Freed. If the meeting went well, they would be enlisted. If not, the second preference would be invited. At the April meeting, the jury were told that 'Mr. Freed absolutely felt there had to be some depiction of moral breakdown'.⁵²⁶ They decided to approach Richard Serra, who was brought to

⁵²¹ The four chosen artists were also all men, and all but Kelly were Jewish. The jury considered proposals by Ann Hamilton and Jackie Winsor, but chose not to commission them. It is hard to determine whether the question of Jewishness played a part in the choice of Serra, LeWitt, and Shapiro. Though Nancy Rosen, Susan Morganstein, and jury members have said that this was not a factor, Nan Rosenthal admitted that this 'probably didn't hurt.' (Rosenthal Interview) While their Jewish background might not have been a significant factor for those that chose them, undoubtedly it played a part in the artists' decisions to accept commissions.

⁵²² In addition to the four sites where work was commissioned, the jury considered a fifth. Lawrence Weiner submitted a proposal for a text sculpture to be placed on the iron girders on the platform at the 14th Street end of the Hall of Witness. There is insufficient space here to consider this, and other unsuccessful proposals, but I will be discussing this and the reasons for its rejection in further work on the AFPSP.

⁵²³ Freed, op. cit., pp.93-4

⁵²⁴ Memo from Susan Morganstein and Nancy Rosen to Albert Abramson and Jeshajahu Weinberg, 30 January 1991 (Weinberg files)

⁵²⁵ In a fax to the jury members dated 8 February 1991, Nancy Rosen named these as Robert Morris, Richard Serra, and Rebecca Horn.

⁵²⁶ Albert Abramson to the jury, Jury Minutes, 17 April 1991, p.15

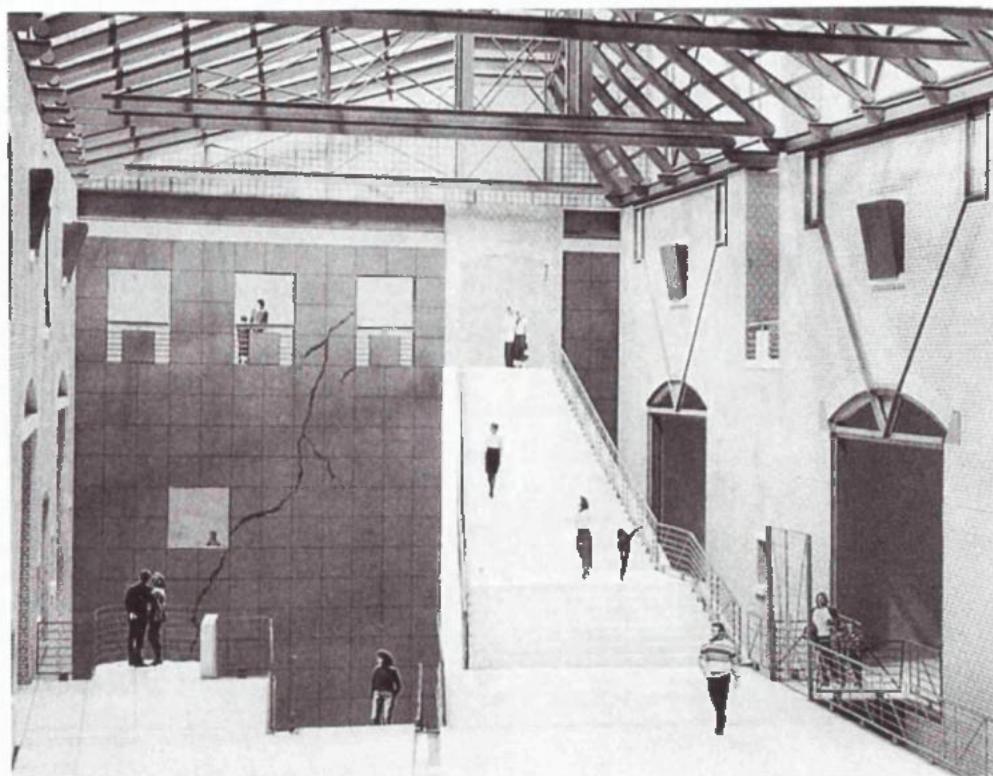


Fig. 95

Image from Model of The Hall of Witness, looking from 14th Street entrance towards 15th Street, showing proposed crack in granite wall

Washington to meet Freed. As we will see when we discuss Serra's eventual work, the idea of a cracked wall was relinquished as a result of this meeting. Instead, a new work by Serra was proposed in the stairwell facing this wall, and presented to the jury at their second meeting on 24 June.⁵²⁷ The idea was accepted, and the fabrication begun. On 19 September, Serra ordered steel from his usual suppliers, Lukens, and the slab was delivered to Washington, and eventually lowered into place through a gap in the skylight of the Hall of Witness, deliberately left open for this installation.

The commission for the work outside the museum on the 15th Street plaza was entirely different. Barbara Diamondstein-Spielvogel had called this space 'an antenna to the world'. She 'reiterated the central role the sculpture would play in the public identification of the Museum.'⁵²⁸ Because of its location, any proposal would have to be accepted by the Washington D.C. Commission on the Fine Arts, the body responsible for ratifying public art proposals. Before the jury was convened, it had been decided that there would be a closed competition for this site: four artists would be invited to prepare maquettes. The museum committee prepared a shortlist out of which the four would be picked. This was discussed at the June jury meeting.⁵²⁹ Four artists (some of whom had not been on the shortlist) were approached in the summer.⁵³⁰ They were introduced to the site (whether through a model in Freed's office in New York or in Washington D.C.), and presented proposals with maquettes at the third jury meeting on 11 November. Jonathan Borofsky's proposal was quickly rejected (a monumental pair of hands holding a ruby, under which the visitors would pass), and debate centred on the other three, less symbolic proposals.⁵³¹ Joel Shapiro's was chosen, and in April 1992, Shapiro and Freed successfully presented the proposal to the Commission on Fine Arts. The work was fabricated and installed.

⁵²⁷ This presentation, jointly given by Richard Serra and James Freed, was variously described to me as the most exciting moment in the history of the AFPSP.

⁵²⁸ Minutes, Subcommittee Meeting of the Committee on Collections and Acquisitions, 18 January 1991, p.2

⁵²⁹ A shortlist dated 18 January 1991 names Magdalena Abakanowicz, Anthony Gormley, Robert Morris, and as alternatives and other consideration, Jonathan Borofsky and Mark di Suvero; and Tony Cragg, Sol LeWitt, and Ursula von Rydingsvald.

⁵³⁰ These were Jonathan Borofsky, Martin Puryear, Walter de Maria, and Joel Shapiro.

⁵³¹ Gary Garrels mentioned debating between Walter de Maria and Joel Shapiro. (Garrels Interview)

The third and fourth spaces were equivalent. They were situated above one another in rooms at the 14th Street end of the building. The museum's exhibition galleries circled around the Hall of Witness in a double downward spiral, and these two spaces were situated at the foot of the two staircases where one descended one floor to the lower one. Both these spaces occurred at moments along the narrative of the exhibition, and in museum documents, they had variously been described as 'lounge' spaces, or as 'passages', as 'important place[s] to pause and pass through'.⁵³² While the precise contents of the exhibition either side of both these points was not known when the art for these spaces was being considered, it was clear both to the jury, and to the artists, that the first would come after displays on the rise of Nazism, the second after displays about the Final Solution.

Works for these rooms neither affected the architectural structure nor required external ratification, so final decisions on the artists were less urgent. The jury considered artists at the June meeting. They shortlisted three artists for each room, with a small number of alternatives.⁵³³ All these individuals would be invited to submit proposals, which would then be decided upon at the November jury meeting. During the summer, attempts were made to approach the artists. Some immediately declined⁵³⁴, while others began to work on proposals. In November, Ellsworth Kelly's proposal was accepted for the first lounge, and fabrication and installation work ensued. However, the jury were not content with the two proposals offered by Sol LeWitt and Jackie Winsor for the second lounge. LeWitt's proposal was for a structure, and we will return to it later. In early 1992, Rosen conducted discussions with jury members about this room. Some jurors hoped for 'work that might be more "readable"/accessible than the Serra and Kelly, which are so pure-abstract', while Nancy Rosen herself encouraged the jury to think of new names 'to get away from

⁵³² Letter from Susan Morganstein to Ann Hamilton, 1 August 1991. In a draft letter to Ellsworth Kelly dated 24 October 1991, the purpose of the space is described 'It is the intention of the Council that Room A provide an opportunity for visitors to sit and to reflect within their circulation of the Museum's permanent exhibition and to serve as a place for quiet conversation, silence, or contemplation.' (Weinberg files)

⁵³³ For 'Room A' (the upper lounge), the jury invited proposals from Ellsworth Kelly, Anselm Kiefer, Richard Long, and listed as alternates, Martin Puryear and Frank Stella. For 'Room B', they invited proposals from Sol LeWitt, Ann Hamilton, Dan Flavin, and listed as alternates, Jackie Winsor, Richard Hamilton, and Mel Chin. (Memo from Susan Morganstein to Albert Abramson, 6 August 1991)

⁵³⁴ Anselm Kiefer and Dan Flavin declined to participate. (Memo from Susan Morganstein to Albert Abramson, 6 August 1991)

the established male candidates'.⁵³⁵ A new list of possible artists was compiled, and the jurors were asked to indicate which of these should be invited to submit proposals.⁵³⁶ However, by June 1992, it was clear that Lounge B would neither receive a 'more readable' work, nor one by a 'less established' candidate: LeWitt was re-invited, though this time the jury specified that he propose a wall drawing rather than a structure.⁵³⁷ He submitted four macquettes for wall drawings⁵³⁸, of which one was chosen. LeWitt then supplied detailed instructions for the priming of the wall⁵³⁹, and sent his assistants to install the work.

By early 1993, all four works in the AFPSP were being installed. The progress of the programme had been reported to the Council by Julius Schatz at bi-annual meetings,⁵⁴⁰ and payments had been raised. The previous November, details of the programme, including the identity of the four artists, had been announced to the public. *The Washington Post* reported it with the headline 'Abstract works secretly commissioned'.⁵⁴¹ Although I will be considering the question of abstraction for the rest of this chapter, it is worth pausing here for a moment to ask how it had come to pass that all four of the works were 'abstract'. We have seen that when the programme was delegated to the jury, there had not been specific instructions to consider the works of abstract artists as opposed to others, but rather, general directives had been given as to the museum's hopes for the programme as a whole. We have also seen that, after this time, although many abstract artists had been approached, so too had artists such as Anselm Kiefer, Ann Hamilton,

⁵³⁵ Memo from Nancy Rosen to jurors, 17 April 1992

⁵³⁶ This list included Helen Frankenthaler, Vija Celmins, Susan Rothenberg, Robert Morris, and again, Sol LeWitt, though this time, a wall drawing, rather than a structure, would be invited. (Memo from Nancy Rosen to jurors, 17 April 1992)

⁵³⁷ Memo from Nancy Rosen to Albert Abramson and Jeshajahu Weinberg, 9 June 1992

⁵³⁸ Letter from Nancy Rosen to Ann Farrington, 29 October 1992 (Weinberg files)

⁵³⁹ See 'Memo from Nancy Rosen: Re Art for Public Spaces, Installation Schedules and Specifications', 12 January 1993. (Weinberg files)

⁵⁴⁰ Julius Schatz reported to the Council on the development of the AFPSP. On 13 November 1991, he had told the Council that 'We hope it [the AFPSP] will enhance the Museum aesthetically. More importantly, we hope that it will make a contribution of speaking to the larger American community about the Holocaust through an artistic medium.' (Minutes, United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 13 November 1991, p.63) (Council Files). The following spring, Schatz reported that 'I have found this [overseeing the AFPSP] to be one of the most rewarding aspects of my own personal life in the many years that I have served in public and Jewish public service.' (Minutes, United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 13 May 1992, p.50) (Council Files)

⁵⁴¹ 'Holocaust Museum to Acquire Art - Abstract Works Secretly Commissioned', *The Washington Post*, 14 November 1992, p.D1

and Jonathan Borofsky. No specific discussion around abstraction had taken place at the jury meeting in April 1991, and because minutes of the June and November jury meetings were not taken⁵⁴², it is impossible to know if there was such a discussion then. This seems unlikely - the jury, rather than discussing whether to contact 'abstract' artists, appear to have deliberated about which serious artists might respond to an approach to make a proposal. That the majority of these worked primarily with abstraction seems to have been a result of what jurors had been told about the museum, the architecture, and the hopes for the AFPSP. Meanwhile, it was only when the jury could review proposals such as Jonathan Borofsky's that their inclinations towards abstraction could be confirmed as a trend, and furthermore, it was only when they rejected such a proposal that their decision (as a whole) could be described as one in favour of abstraction.

The works themselves were formally revealed at a press viewing on 13 April 1993. Before this press view, Nancy Rosen considered how it should be run. Though the works by Serra and Shapiro would be visible outside the exhibition, Rosen was concerned that the programme might not make sense to the press if journalists were taken straight to the other art works. She requested that they be lead through the museum, replicating the experience of future visitors. 'The choice of abstract art for those rooms was so centrally based on the impact of the permanent exhibition and its images, documents, archival objects. I really feel that people will not really understand the choice of Kelly and LeWitt without at least a bit of that experience.'⁵⁴³

We are now coming to address the works themselves, and it will be important to keep in mind Rosen's concerns. The architecture, and the structuring of the exhibition within the architecture determines a pathway for the visitor. This means that the works are encountered in a particular sequence, and at particular stages along the exhibition narrative. Though in part conceived as caesurae at points along this narrative, they also operate within it. It is important to understand how the possible meanings of the works are partly contingent upon their placement, upon their relationship with the visual and

⁵⁴² The decision not to take minutes was made to guarantee the privacy of the jury deliberations.

⁵⁴³ Fax from Nancy Rosen to Ann Farrington and Susan Morganstein, 29 March 1993

other materials around them. It is also important to pay attention to their situation to see whether they might disrupt or challenge the predominant representation of the Holocaust in this museum as a narrative. What will be of interest throughout the following discussion is both the way the surrounding location affects (and infects) the possible meanings of the works, and the way the artists negotiated this location. ‘My problem’, according to Richard Serra, ‘was to stay within my language, knowing that it was going to be subverted by the context, to deal with my content as sculpture, even knowing that it was going to be misinterpreted...’⁵⁴⁴ We will be thinking about the way content was ‘subverted by the context’, but we will also question one aspect of Serra’s comment. We will ask if the context might be seen to have altered the usual practice of these artists. This does not only mean that they anticipated future ‘misinterpretation’. We will ask whether these artists, in the project of making work for this particular place, though keeping to their ‘language’, might ^{have} altered their vocabulary.

⁵⁴⁴ Serra Interview

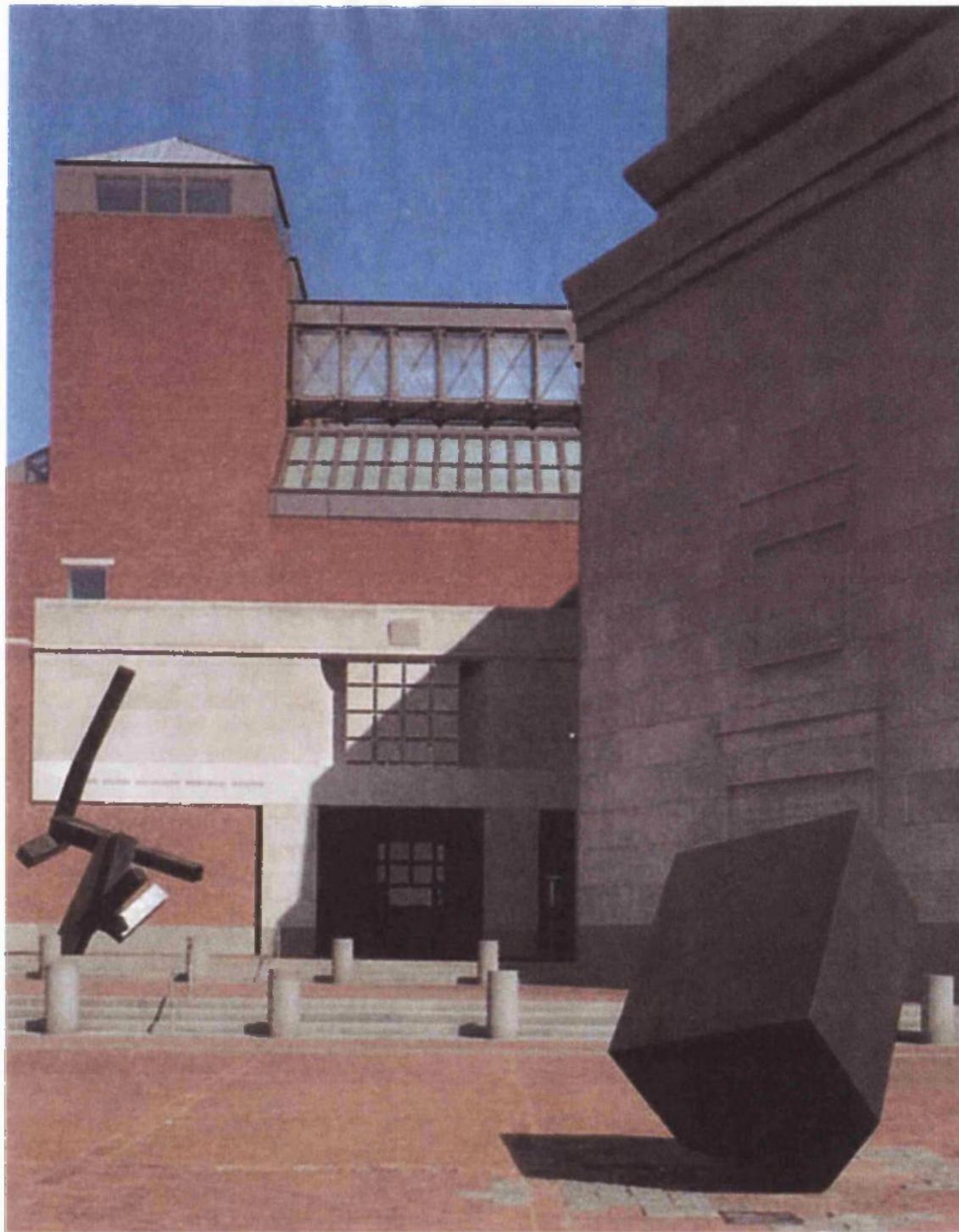


Fig. 96

Joel Shapiro, *Loss and Regeneration*, 1993

Figure: 25' 9" x 17'8" wide x 12' 9" deep (784.9 x 538.5 x 388.6 cm); House 9' high x 7'8" wide x 7'8" deep
(274.3 x 233.7 x 233.7 cm)

Bronze

U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington

3. The Works

Joel Shapiro's two-part *Loss and Regeneration* stands at the 15th Street entrance of the museum, arranged over the space of this three-tiered plaza (*fig. 96*). Furthest away from the entrance, and just in front of the large, windowless facade of the Hall of Remembrance, is a geometric form whose shape resembles a generic 'house'. This is tipped over, so that only one corner of its 'roof' is in contact with the ground. Beyond it, some two levels higher, a larger structure rises. This is a more complex form, assembled from nine oblongs of different thicknesses. Approaching it, the shape can take on the appearance of an angular tree, and the momentary form of a 'stick man'. If this illusion is kept in mind, the 'stick man', or figure, would appear to be falling, its 'head' tipping downwards towards the left (if one sees it with the building behind), and an 'arm' raised upwards to balance the fall. The 'off-balance' look is most powerful in front of the work. One recognises that the structure is not free-standing, that to maintain its toppling look, it must be supported by concealed elements.⁵⁴⁵ Both parts of the work are large in size, but their scale diminishes next to the rise of the museum behind, and the monumental height of the Washington Memorial in front (*figs. 97 and 98*). This setting can make both parts seem small, even dwarfed. Shapiro spoke of his work as a 'foil' to the obelisk behind it.

Shapiro received the invitation to submit a proposal with enthusiasm. This would be an extremely high-profile commission, and one in which he had an interest. He had previously participated in a competition for a memorial in Dusseldorf,⁵⁴⁶ and remains convinced of the need for Holocaust commemoration. He has said 'The Holocaust was something that happened, in the middle of the twentieth century, in the most cultured place in the world, there was a collaboration of silence, and I think that is an important thing to keep for the record.'⁵⁴⁷ Yet the commission did not ask for a memorial: there was

⁵⁴⁵ The reliance on such invisible elements is, of course, a part of sculptural practise that has been critiqued in the work of Richard Serra, whose works balance themselves, and engage the body not through illustrating off-balance figures, but through suggesting an off-balanced spatial experience. The huge gulf between Serra's and Shapiro's practices will be evident through my discussions.

⁵⁴⁶ See Hendel Teicher, *Joel Shapiro* (New York, 1998) pp. 18-19

⁵⁴⁷ Shapiro Interview



Fig. 97
Joel Shapiro, *Loss and Regeneration*
(view of 'house' with Washington Monument behind)



Fig. 98
Joel Shapiro, *Loss and Regeneration*
(view of 'figure' with Washington Monument behind)

no specified job for the work to do.⁵⁴⁸ The freedom given by the museum allowed the artist to work as he pleased. Shapiro was glad that his work would not have to compete with the inner contents of the museum. His context was the architectural facade to the east, and the mall to the west. In preparing his proposal, Shapiro built a model of the facade, and began to situate pieces in relation to it. In an early model, Shapiro positioned the 'house' on the wall of the Hall of Remembrance, but Freed was unwilling for a sculpture to be attached to his building. In this earlier version, the 'figure' in the work had no outstretched arm. If it can be said to have evoked a gesture, the nature of this gesture was less open to discussion.

Of the four works made for the museum, Shapiro's work has prompted the most interpretative comment.⁵⁴⁹ Critics have been drawn to search for the symbolic meaning of the two parts, taking the work as an illustration of an idea about the Holocaust. The 'house' is considered a symbol for domestic destruction – both as an introduction to, and a reminder of the displays the visitor will encounter about the loss of home suffered by the victims of the Holocaust. Yet the metal itself cannot answer speculation as to what kind of a 'house' it might represent, and a number of options have been posited: 'While it could signify an overthrown Jew's house (or a sort of upended Ark of the Covenant), it might equally represent an overthrown building in a concentration camp.'⁵⁵⁰ The second of these possibilities seems a little wishful (not least because so few camp buildings were 'overthrown'), but nonetheless, the passage illustrates how the work provides such options. James Hall continues: 'What it does say, however, is that we live in a world where people have been violently displaced.'⁵⁵¹ For Hall, the sculpture *speaks* a message that is related to the Holocaust and to other historical crises: the house might suggest any displacement - from 'overthrown Jew's house' to houses overthrown by Jews.

⁵⁴⁸ At interview, Shapiro commented 'they didn't give me instructions that it had to be a memorial or it had to be Holocaust specific for that matter.' A draft letter to the artists who were making proposals for the site stated simply that the museum was seeking work that would 'evoke important ideas and emotions about the Holocaust.' (Letter drafted by Nancy Rosen, 11 August 1991. Weinberg files)

⁵⁴⁹ See the section 'Memory' in Teicher, op. cit.

⁵⁵⁰ James Hafl, 'Joel Shapiro: The Art of Over-Stretching' in *Joel Shapiro - Sculpture 1974-1999* (Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Litchfield, 1999) p.13

⁵⁵¹ Ibid., p.13

The tree/figure offers similar possibilities. Shapiro described some of the symbolic readings that can be made through thinking of the work as a tree: ‘The “tree” embodies cycles of life, death, anguish, the overcoming of anguish - and possibilities of a future’.⁵⁵² Those who have preferred to imagine a figure remark upon the problem of fixing its gesture. It might be stumbling, or it might be rising. ‘The lurching motion of the figure has something gallantly balletic about it, and something painfully awkward.... The desperate gesture of the figure’s raised arm can be seen imploring or angrily defiant.’⁵⁵³ Dualities crowd around the figure: is it doing one thing, or another? The alternative meanings are not obscure: the work might illustrate the hopelessness of the victim, their resistance to oppression, or (economically), both situations at once. What remains secure in such readings, and on both sides of the possibilities they offer is the notion that the figure stands for the ‘human’ element in the narrative of Shapiro’s work, and a human figure with whom one may empathise, witnessing its struggle, and reacting emotionally to it.

Shapiro said his primary task was ‘trying to find some form that would communicate’⁵⁵⁴. The kind of communication considered so far seems to have promoted this work to the jury: it was clearly a direct and accessible work for one of the most public spaces in the country. While the need to communicate directly might be prompted by the demands of this geographical and institutional situation, this mode of sculptural communication seems to have little in common with the strategies developed by Shapiro’s generation of post-minimalist artists. Michael Brenson, however, has argued that Shapiro’s sculptures ‘reflect an aversion to hard-core ideology and group thinking that is characteristic of Shapiro’s Post-Minimalist generation, born during World War II and the Holocaust, when totalitarian destruction was fuelled by obedience and generalization.’⁵⁵⁵ This contention elides the actual difference between Shapiro’s project and that of other post-minimalists, such as Serra. Shapiro’s return to quasi-figurative sculpture might,

⁵⁵² Joel Shapiro, ‘USHMM Proposal’

⁵⁵³ Peter Schjeldahl, ‘Joel Shapiro Now’, in *Joel Shapiro- Sculpture and Drawings* (Pace, New York, 1993)

p.5

⁵⁵⁴ Shapiro Interview

⁵⁵⁵ Michael Brenson, ‘Joel Shapiro and Figurative Sculpture’, in Hendel Teicher, op. cit., p.10

nonetheless, be situated as a response to, and even a critique of the problematic prescriptions of abstract sculpture. Brenson seems to locate this response as part of a positive, liberal, post-Holocaust project – and there are implicit in his argument problematic assumptions about abstraction which this thesis endeavours to help to overturn. And the way I want to extend discussion of Shapiro's work is through its closeness to, rather than distance from his early work, in short through the questions of process and abstraction.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, like his contemporaries, Shapiro produced works which revealed the methods of their own fabrication - indeed which made this revelation their *raison d'être*. *Loss and Regeneration* might seem to involve a return to both a more traditional material (bronze), and a more traditional fabrication procedure. However, close viewing still reveals the history of process. Shapiro could have made the two forms with clean, smooth metal surfaces: instead, both have been made by casting from wood. The pieces were made quite differently: the house was made by building a plywood model, filling it with plaster, and then casting from that mould, and its surfaces show the thin striations of the plywood's grain (*figs. 99 and 100*). The figure was made at a sawmill, assembling cut logs into oblongs, and casting from them. Its surface is traversed by the regular curving lines of the saw's teeth (*figs. 101 and 102*).

These marks are extremely visible, but what effect do they produce? The very indication of the fabrication process humanises the work. Whereas a smooth metal sculpture might have held power by concealing the processes of its making, this work is clearly the product of labour. The surfaces rendered by the process might also contribute to the pieces' meaning: the house becomes a wooden house, whose archaic and vulnerable materiality is in accord with the idea of it as a pre-war 'Jew's house'.⁵⁵⁶ The figure, however, bears the signs of violence, its skin everywhere cut. Inasmuch as it represents a tree, this is a tree whose wood is scarred.

⁵⁵⁶ In this respect, the distance between Shapiro's and Rachel Whiteread's approaches to casting shortens. Like Whiteread, Shapiro is interested in the way casting remembers the cast object. By casting books for her Vienna Holocaust memorial, Whiteread chose objects with specific cultural meanings, whose memory would contribute to the way the work as a whole provoked memory. The thin plank of plywood is also used here as an object which produces associations.



Fig. 99
Joel Shapiro, *Loss and Regeneration*
(surface texture of 'house')



Fig. 100
Joel Shapiro, *Loss and Regeneration*
(surface texture of 'house')

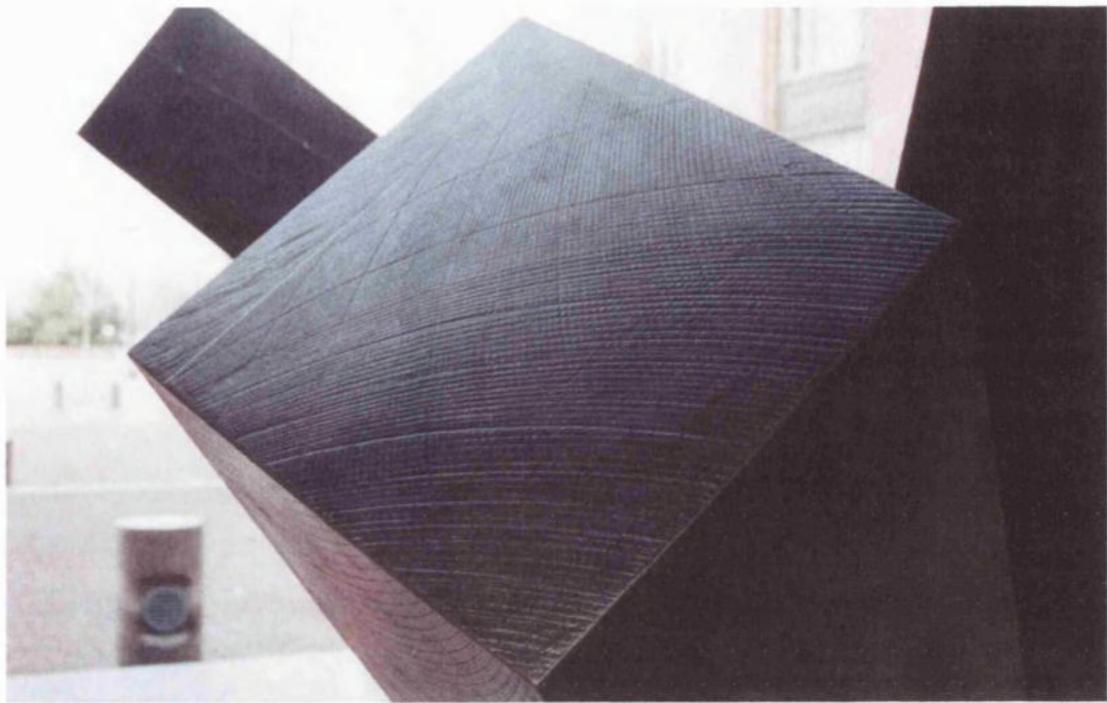


Fig. 101

Joel Shapiro, *Loss and Regeneration*
(surface texture of 'figure')

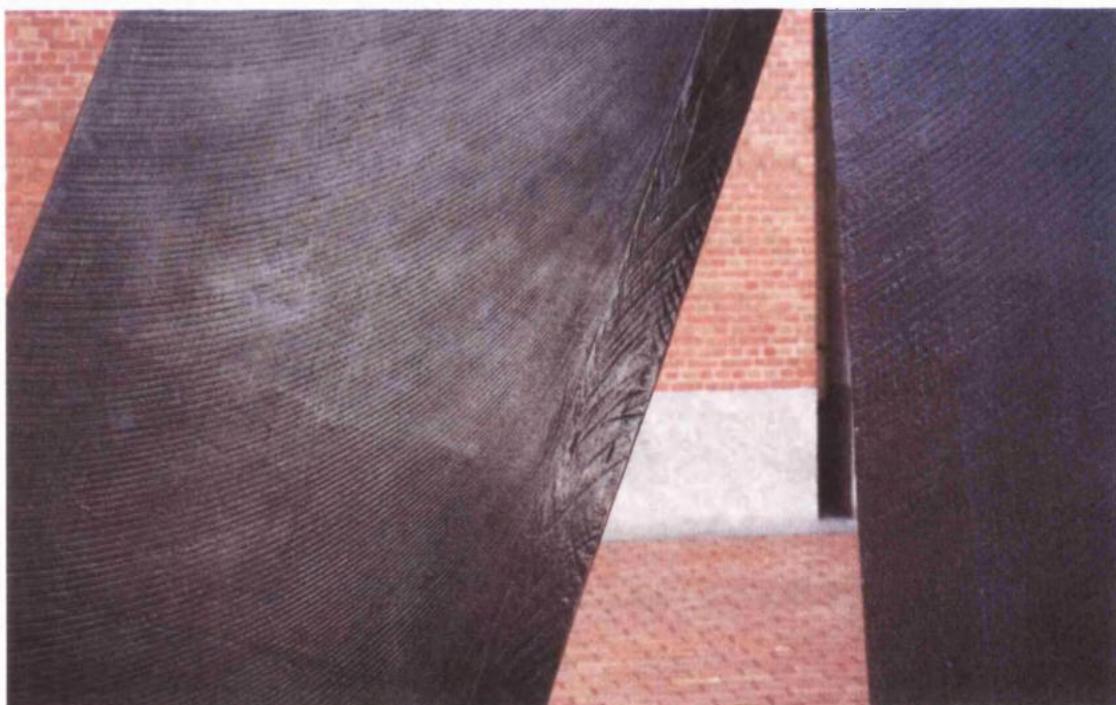


Fig. 102

Joel Shapiro, *Loss and Regeneration*
(surface texture of 'figure')

This is to read symbolic meaning into process. Another argument might be that the revelation of process reduces the potential of the work to carry symbolic meaning. The revelation of process might destabilise readings of the work, so that instead of the sculpture being a ‘house’, or a ‘figure’, it becomes rather a bronze cast of an original wooden assembly. This is one effect of the surface of the works, and one which I want to relate to a discussion of the work’s abstraction. What is often forgotten in accounts of Shapiro’s piece is precisely its abstraction, another carry-over from his work of the late 1960s. A ‘figure’ *might* be visible from one position around the work, but more frequently, the viewer just sees a complex structure of oblongs - one which consists of three more parts than the six which would normally depict torso, head, and limbs. The ‘house’ may also be seen as ‘house’, but it too might be more honestly described as a geometric structure. This ‘house’ neither looks like one someone inhabits (there are no doors, for instance), nor is this ‘figure’ anything like an actual body. Commenting on George Segal’s *The Holocaust* (1984) (*fig.103*), for which he cast human bodies, Shapiro has said that the presentation of a ‘series of corpses’ is something you ‘can’t do’.⁵⁵⁷ *Loss and Regeneration* represents as much a resistance to figurative, symbolic sculpture as it seems to veer towards it.

This resistance does not just amount to a distancing of the work from a strategy chosen, for instance, by Segal. The wavering abstraction of Shapiro’s piece creates an important tension. Now it’s a figure - now it’s not (*figs. 104 and 105*); now it’s a house - now it’s not. This dynamic is what is most interesting about the work. The most immediate approach to the work takes its meaning to be the collapse that is the Holocaust, and sees it as figuring collapse - the collapse of domestic security, the collapse of the human figure. Yet as one circles the work, these very interpretations themselves collapse. Figure and house become bits of bronze: material as material, and shape as shape. Though abstraction might not always be best thought through the binary that pairs it with ‘figuration’, here, this binary is useful - as the work’s abstraction throws the meanings produced by its figuration into doubt. Rather than being introduced to the museum with a

⁵⁵⁷ Shapiro Interview

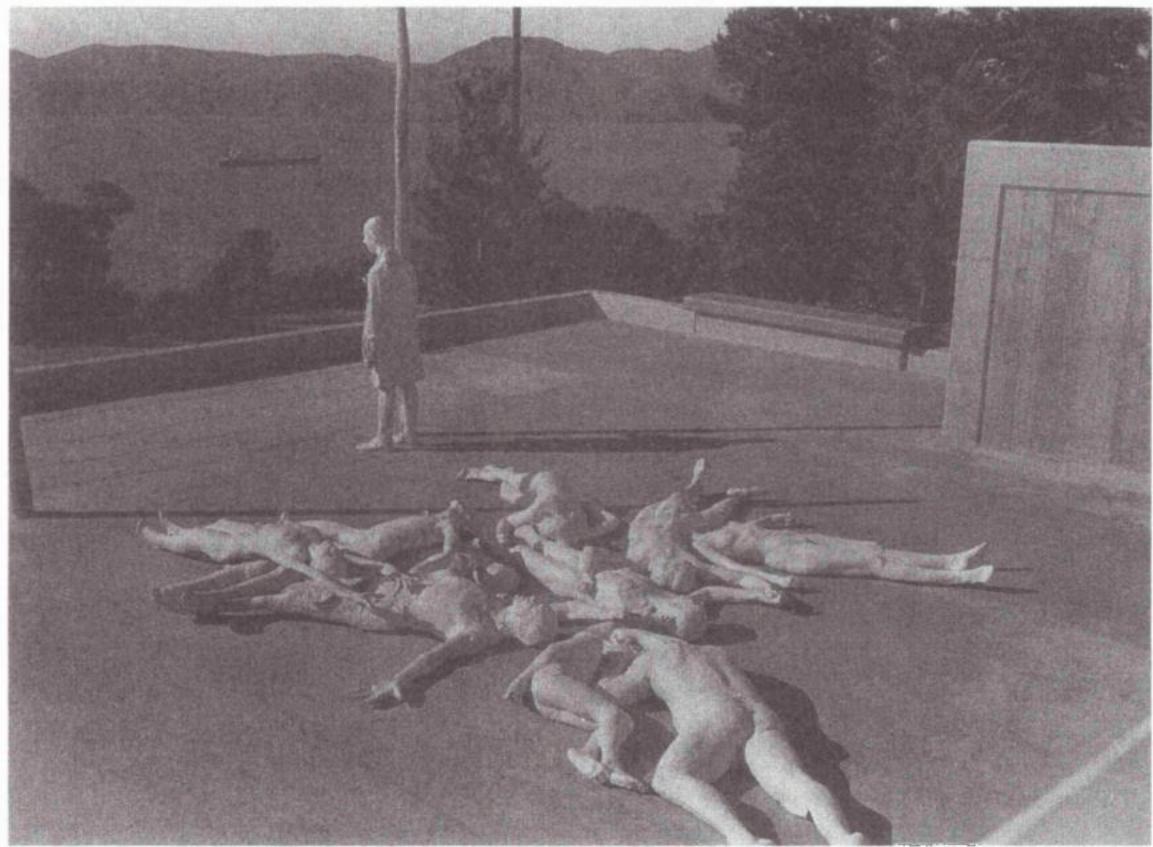


Fig. 103

George Segal, *Holocaust* [At the Legion of Honor in San Francisco, view towards Pacific], 1983



Fig. 104
Joel Shapiro, *Loss and Regeneration*
(figure looking like figure)



Fig. 105
Joel Shapiro, *Loss and Regeneration*
(figure not looking like figure)

coherent symbol, the viewer receives a message whose very communication breaks down as it is being given. This would seem an appropriate introduction to the museum.

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Beyond Shapiro's sculpture is the entrance to the Hall of Witness, a huge atrium topped by a twisted skylight, and flanked to the sides by red-brick walls, and at its ends, by black and white granite (*fig.106*). Visitors proceed to the exhibition via lifts. On entering the lifts, the doors shut, and an audio recording begins - an American GI describing the discovery of a concentration camp. The lift rises and stops: the doors facing those entered now open like theatre curtains, revealing a huge black and white photographic image (*fig.107*). American soldiers stand by a pier where charred corpses have been placed. If the approach to this image is theatrical, its presence in the narrative is filmic - like the narrative of so many films, the exhibition story begins at its end, an ending brought about by Americans. Stepping to the side, visitors come back to the real beginning: to the period of the rise of Nazism.

Ellsworth Kelly's *Memorial* is positioned after the first lap of the narrative, in a room reached after a flight of steps that leads down to the second lap. By this moment, visitors have seen artefacts and images documenting the period leading up to the beginning of the war. Most of the space they pass through has been darkened, but to travel from one half of the exhibition galleries on the south side of the building to the other on the north, visitors pass over a bridge (*fig.108*). In natural light for the first time since entering the lift, visitors look above to the towers on top of the north side and below onto the Hall of Witness, and its skylight. The bridge seems both inside and outside the museum, affording a view onto the place where the visit began. Its glass walls are covered with names of the towns whose communities were destroyed: 'Felstyn', 'Nasielsk', 'Chodorow'....

The passage through the north side proceeds through exhibits representing the response of Americans to early news from Nazi Germany – reports, for instance, of the book



Fig. 106

The Hall of Witness, looking from 15th Street entrance towards 14th Street. (Serra's *Gravity* is at the bottom of the steps running down at bottom centre of the photograph)



Fig. 107

The scene at the opening of the elevator doors – American soldiers view charred corpses at Ohrdruf Camp

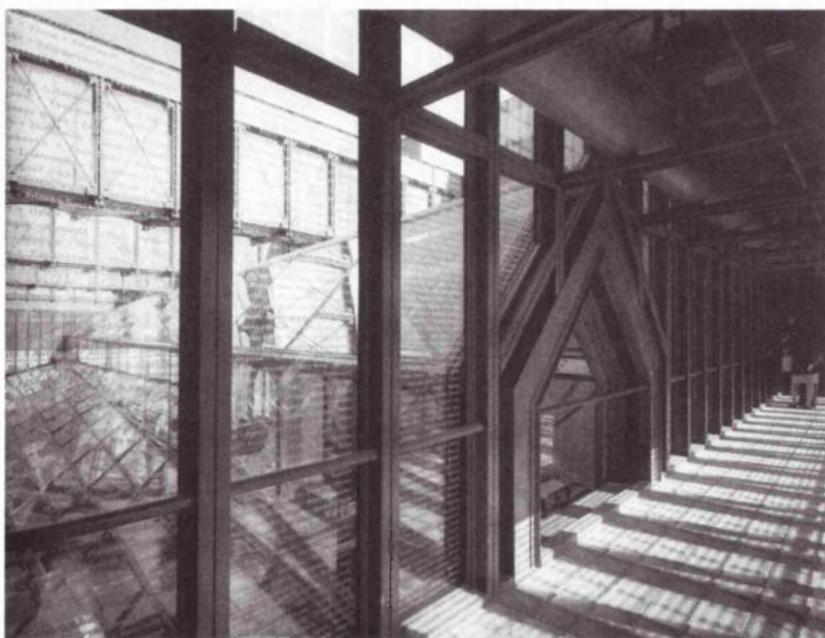


Fig. 108

Bridge over Hall of Witness from south exhibition galleries to north exhibition galleries with names of destroyed communities on glass.

burnings. Visitors enter the Tower of Faces, a photographic installation of hundreds of images of Jewish families from the ghetto of Eishishok. The photographs cover four walls (*fig.109*). The walls are seen to drop to the level below. After passing through, steps descend to the lower level. Above the stairs is a triangular window, affording the first uninterrupted look of the sky beyond the museum. This window is situated on the wall of the room which contains Kelly's four-part work.

The first visible part is the largest: a huge arc, stretching from the end of the wall at which viewers enter right over to the far end of this wall, near the exit through which they proceed to rejoin the museum's story (*fig.110*). The arc is situated opposite a wall which backs onto the Hall of Witness behind it. On this wall are three rectangular panels, spaced at even intervals (*fig.111*). The supports of the work are very thick, held out from the wall by around six inches by circular bolts visible from the sides. As reliefs, the works are separated spatially from the wall, though in colour, they are almost identical to it: all four parts of the work are white, slightly brighter than the wall against which they are seen. Were they lit as Kelly desired, the works would almost disappear into the walls, hardly (unlike Kelly's other work) announcing their presence.⁵⁵⁸ Their surfaces yield nothing to the scrutinising eye. The fibreglass supports show no traces of any brush work. There is not even the canvas weave visibly present in Kelly's other white monochromes.

When asked to submit a proposal, Kelly's first response was to question why the museum approached him when he would not be providing a work with narrative or symbolic content. He was told that such content was not expected. The museum wanted something that 'would apply to a more 'spiritual' context'⁵⁵⁹, that would serve a place set aside for 'quiet conversation, silence, or contemplation'.⁵⁶⁰ Kelly's first idea was to make three monochrome panels painted red, yellow, and blue. This idea was discarded: Kelly felt

⁵⁵⁸ The current lighting casts a strong shadow onto the wall below the works. Meanwhile, their top edges are less distinct, appearing to blend into the wall behind. Kelly is not content with the present lighting which, unknown to him, had been installed before his works were positioned. He would prefer an even lighting that eliminated the downward shadow and that gave an equal distinction between work and wall at bottom and top. (Kelly Interview). James Freed, however, let me know that he would happily change the lighting to suit Kelly's wishes. (Freed Interview)

⁵⁵⁹ Kelly Interview

⁵⁶⁰ Letter from Sara Bloomfield to Ellsworth Kelly, 24 October 1991



Fig. 109
The Tower of Faces with photographs of Eishishok



Fig. 110

Ellsworth Kelly, *Memorial*, 1993

Curve: 108" x 324½" x 2" (274.3 x 824.2 x 5 cm), Wood and fibreglass
U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.

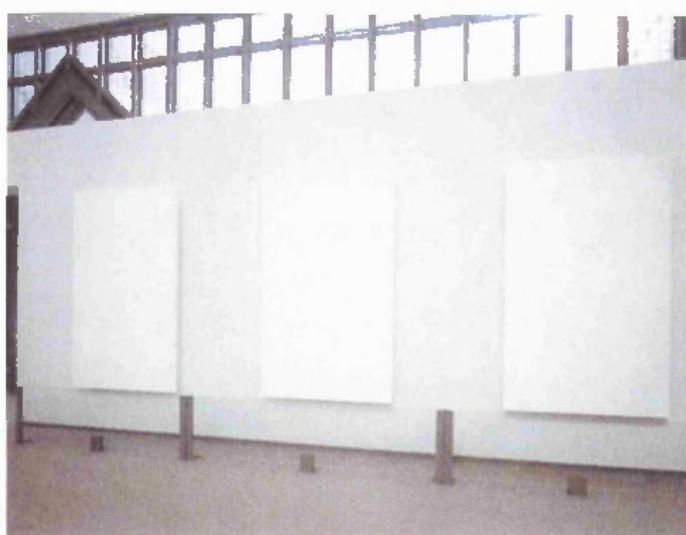


Fig. 111

Ellsworth Kelly, *Memorial*, 1993

Rectangles: 9' x 64" x 2" (274.3 x 162.6 x 5 cm), Wood and fibreglass
U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.

'colour was too personal, too [much] about me. Colour has its own memories.'⁵⁶¹ The choice to work in white (which, contrary to the indication of this statement, Kelly would describe as a colour) was therefore not immediate, but made in order to eliminate subjective associations, and open the work up for the visitor.

Carter Ratcliff has written that 'while other artists grapple with issues, Kelly provides the eye with opportunities to luxuriate'.⁵⁶² This work might deny visual luxury, so that it comes to stand for an aesthetic renunciation. To compound this suggestion, we can recast the analogy between painting and speaking to which other writers have been drawn. Yve-Alain Bois described Kelly's work through the idea of the summons: Kelly enunciates shape and colour.⁵⁶³ Might the panels of *Memorial* fail to announce, might they be a series of empty statements, a summons of nothingness? We could even posit that, rather than declaring an unusual shape, the repetition of the familiar rectangle amounts to a kind of stutter. *Memorial* finds itself tongue-tied with nothing to say.

Kelly, however, does not say that white was a means of respecting the gravity of this setting, or to withhold visual pleasure. But while insistent that this choice of white produces a *lack* of symbolic opportunity, emptying out the associations primary colours might possibly produce, after this discussion of their whiteness, he continued: 'When I made them blank, they looked like memorial tablets that don't have names on them'.⁵⁶⁴ Even for the artist, then, a rigorous non-symbolic account of the work is hard to sustain. From the emptying-out of (primary) colour, Kelly reaches the idea of the work's 'blankness', and from blankness, it is a short metonymic shift to the symbolic idea of an empty memorial tablet. Meaning thus seeps into the work, and Kelly's own thoughts are echoed in comments by critics. For Linda Nochlin, the 'whiteness refer[s] to the loss and memory: the always blank page of history ...'.⁵⁶⁵

⁵⁶¹ Kelly Interview

⁵⁶² Carter Ratcliff, 'Ellsworth Kelly's Curves' in Diana Waldman (ed.) *Ellsworth Kelly* (Guggenheim, New York, 1996) p.57

⁵⁶³ Yve-Alain Bois, 'The Summons' in *Spencertown – Recent Paintings by Ellsworth Kelly* (London and New York, 1994)

⁵⁶⁴ Kelly Interview

⁵⁶⁵ Linda Nochlin, 'Kelly: Making Abstraction Anew' *Art in America* (March 1997) p.77

It is unsurprising that these three panels are taken for ‘tablets’, pages, or implicit in Susan Morganstein’s description of the work as a cemetery, gravestones.⁵⁶⁶ These readings are conditioned as much by their colour as by their shape, and, like colour, the shape of the entire work has attracted symbolic interpretation. While the panels are connected to death-markers, the fan is often described as a contrast. Rather than suggesting death, it suggests life; rather than being immersed in the logic of the building, it suggests a way out. According to Diane Waldman, ‘the triptych suggests a memorial to those who perished in the Holocaust, while the fan shape, placed higher on the wall than the three panels, suggests transcendence’.⁵⁶⁷ One reason for a description of its ‘transcendent’ quality is that the fan is the first place in the museum where a non-angular form is so highly visible. It comes as a break from both the diagonals of the Hall of Witness skylight, and from the grid displays of the exhibition, thus ‘transcending’ the atmosphere the museum has so far produced.

It is difficult to assimilate these symbolic readings into an account of Kelly’s work. In his early career, he hoped to launch a journal called *Concrete*, through which he would promote an art with ‘no metaphor (no transformation), no transcendence (no abstraction), no representation (only presentation) - “just the facts, ma’am”, as plain as possible.’⁵⁶⁸ Symbolic readings, extraneous to ‘the plain facts’, are prompted both by the previous visual experiences in the museum’s narrative thrust, and by the architectural experiences to this point. Such attachments occur whether or not the artist likes them, but might have been anticipated when a decision was made to place a work here. Whatever Kelly’s response to these attachments may be, he is in agreement with the two main notions that arise from such associations: first, that the work (in particular, the panels) might act as a memorial, and second, that the work (in particular, the fan) provides a prompt for a spiritual experience. In its status as a memorial, the work looks backwards, while in its status as the prompt for spiritual thought, it looks forwards, or at least outwards.

⁵⁶⁶ Morganstein Interview

⁵⁶⁷ Diane Waldman, *Ellsworth Kelly* (Guggenheim, New York, 1996) p.36

⁵⁶⁸ Yve-Alain Bois, *Ellsworth Kelly - The Early Drawings* (Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Mass., 1999) p.18

Thus we find ourselves with two problematic terms: 'the memorial', and 'the spiritual'. There is no doubt that they crowd around Kelly's work. Unlike the three other artists, Kelly chose to call his work *Memorial*. 'My paintings are memorials to the suffering, [to] the concentration camps'⁵⁶⁹. He has spoken of its 'mystery'. Others have found it 'very spiritual'.⁵⁷⁰ But what might the 'memorial' and the 'spiritual' mean here?

Kelly's irregular shapes are often based on 'already-mades'⁵⁷¹ - on abstract motifs found in the world, whether the triangle of a woman's scarf, or the shadow cast by a branch against a trunk. As such, many works by Kelly might be 'memorials' to the objects whose shape they inherit. Yet Bois – to whom we owe the account of the early period of Kelly's work – has also written that 'one cannot memorize a Kelly.... our neurons cannot store its specifics, which means they cannot store anything that matters to it'.⁵⁷² Since there is nothing peculiar about the shape and colour of *Memorial*, we can memorize this particular work, but still we might ask if this idea of memory has any connection to the idea of a cultural memorial that Kelly's title suggests? We could posit that contrary to his usual practice, Kelly might have searched for shapes on which to base this work - perhaps looking for actual gravestones. Yet this was not the case. The connection, therefore, between the physical status of the work and its function as a memorial is one constructed only through language and context.

We encounter other problems when thinking about the idea of the 'spiritual'. The term is hardly present in contemporary art discourse, banished because of the mythic status its attachment granted to the making and experiencing of art objects, not least during the moment of Abstract Expressionism.⁵⁷³ In a secular world, to describe a work as spiritual would show a failure to find proper analytical tools of description. The 'spiritual' has

⁵⁶⁹ Kelly Interview

⁵⁷⁰ Nancy Rosen, for instance, has said that while the panels have 'very strong connotations [with] monuments', the fan is the 'more graceful element' and is 'very spiritual'. (Rosen Interview)

⁵⁷¹ Yve-Alain Bois, 'Ellsworth Kelly in France: Anti-Composition in Its Many Guises' in *Ellsworth Kelly: The Years in France, 1948-1954* (National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., 1992) pp.16-17

⁵⁷² See Bois, 1994, op. cit., p.39

⁵⁷³ Many accounts of Kelly have pitted his work against the expressive ambitions of 1950s American painting. See Bois's work in particular. The exhibition *Ellsworth Kelly: The Years in France, 1948-1954* took place in Washington D.C. at the time of Kelly's USHMM commission. As a curator at the National Gallery, jury member Nan Rosenthal would have been aware of Bois' arguments.

specific art historical connotations which contribute to its problematic status. It connotes Kandinsky's and Mondrian's dreams of the possible unity between art and spirituality deeply implicated in the history of the European avant-garde. Such dreams collapsed during the mid-century, in the precise context commemorated in this museum. Thus, though the 'spiritual' aspect of Kelly's work might be that which points forward, the very word looks back, and its history throws doubts on its very possibility.

It is too easy, perhaps, to say that Kelly's work is a blank page on which to write, but certainly we are left without a stable sense of its significance. Does *Memorial* stand for a refusal of the aesthetic, or an affirmation of purity? Might it provide opportunity for memory? If it enables spiritual thought and contemplative reflection, then what does that mean about the use of abstraction in this museum, this museum's reading of abstraction? Such questions cannot be resolved, and for now they will be suspended until a general discussion of the four works.

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Sol LeWitt's *Consequence* is positioned in a space below Kelly's *Memorial*. It comes after the most gruelling leg of the exhibition. Artefacts, replicas, photographs and films continue the exhibition narrative, covering the ghettoisation and concentration of Nazi victims, through to their elimination. Exhibition designers organised a physical as well as a visual experience for visitors. Beside a wall size photograph of a bridge which spanned from one section of the Lodz ghetto to another, visitors pass over a bridge, a replica of the one photographed (*fig.112*). Some time later, after viewing an expansive plaster model of a gas chamber (complete with miniature figures shown dying) (*fig.113*), they walk through a cattle truck (*fig.114*). Visitors then cross another bridge to the north galleries directly below the first. This time they are closer to the Hall of Witness, where the visit began, but further from that moment in time. Again, the glass of the bridge is covered with names - the first names of individual victims.



Fig. 112

Bridge walkway flanked by photograph of bridge in Lodz Ghetto. Cast of section of Warsaw ghetto wall at end of passage.

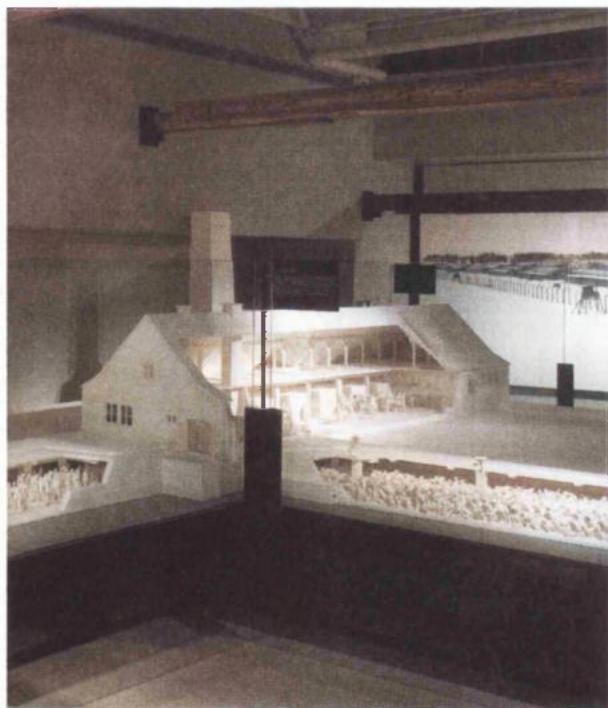


Fig. 113

Scale model of gas chambers and crematoria in Auschwitz by Jan Stobierski

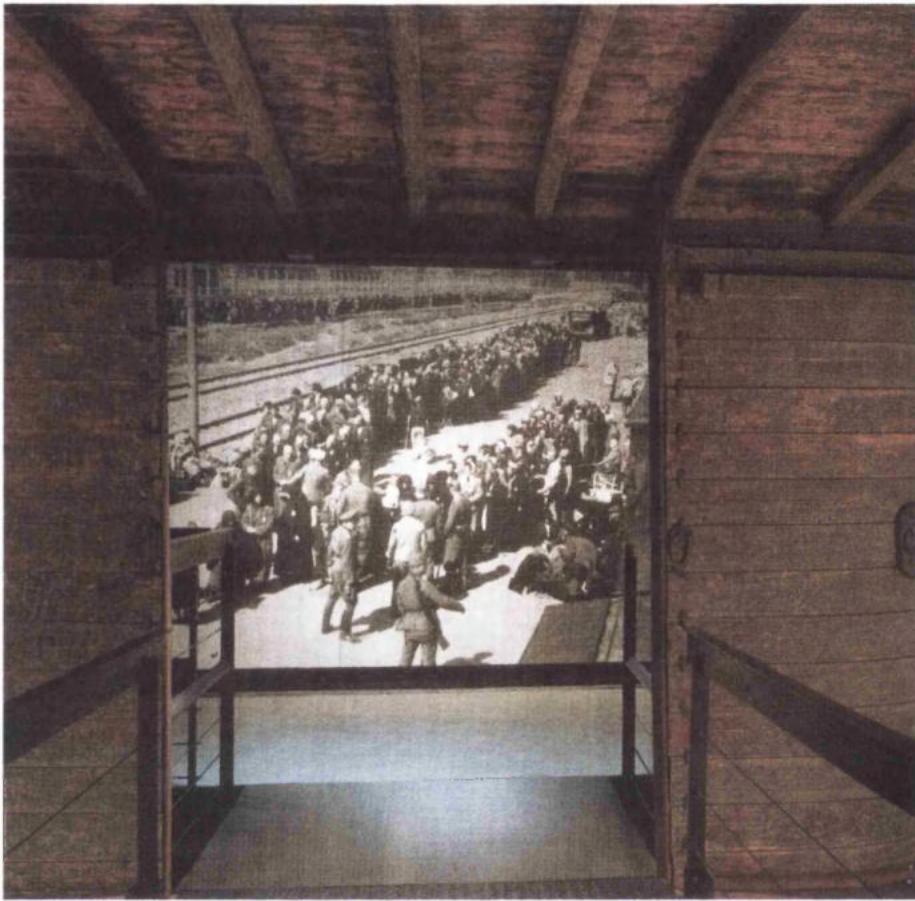


Fig. 114
Passageway through a railcar used to transport Jews to death camps

The north galleries contain displays of framed photographs - survivors with their camp tattoos, Roman Vishniac's images of Polish Jews. Behind a barrier is a wall sized image of a room whose floor is a field of hair. Visitors pass through the bottom section of the 'Tower of Faces' - more and more photographs from Eishishok. This time, a wall panel describes with cutting brevity how, in two days, an SS mobile killing squad destroyed the 900 year old community. Just after this point, stairs lead down to the last level of the museum's exhibition display. LeWitt's wall drawing covers the entire left wall of the space at the bottom of the steps.

Consequence (*fig.115*) runs just over 16 metres, reaching 3.4 metres high. It has five square sections, each separated by a thin black border which also runs along the top and bottom of the wall. In the middle of each section is a gray square, just over a metre wide. These squares are framed by thin white lines (6 cms), which in turn are framed by sections which reach to the black border. These sections are about half as wide as the gray square, and each is coloured differently. From left to right, the colours run a brownish red, purple, mustard, blue, and orange. Each colour is a result of a different layering of washes of four inks: the primaries, plus gray (*fig.116*). These washes were applied onto the wall with rags, and since the rag drags across the wall unevenly, the colour surface is slightly differentiated, or mottled. Over a short time, the different washes that build up a section are perceived, partly because in a given area a spot of yellow is visible next to a spot of blue. But if specific colours become evident, with more time, the difference between all the colours in *Consequence* dissolves. As the eye relaxes and grows accustomed to an area of colour, the distinction between it and the neighbouring sections diminishes. Sometimes, the sections blend into one gray colour field.

LeWitt's first proposal for this space was utterly unlike *Consequence*. A museum document describes it as 'a wall-like sculpture with an irregular ("broken") top edge, made of black, concrete blocks to be stacked along the long diagonal wall of the room.'⁵⁷⁴ Without LeWitt knowing it, this proposal had parallels with Freed's ideas for cracking the black granite wall of the Hall of Witness. Like Freed's broken wall,

⁵⁷⁴ Memo from Nancy Rosen to Albert Abramson and Jeshajahu Weinberg, 9 June 1992

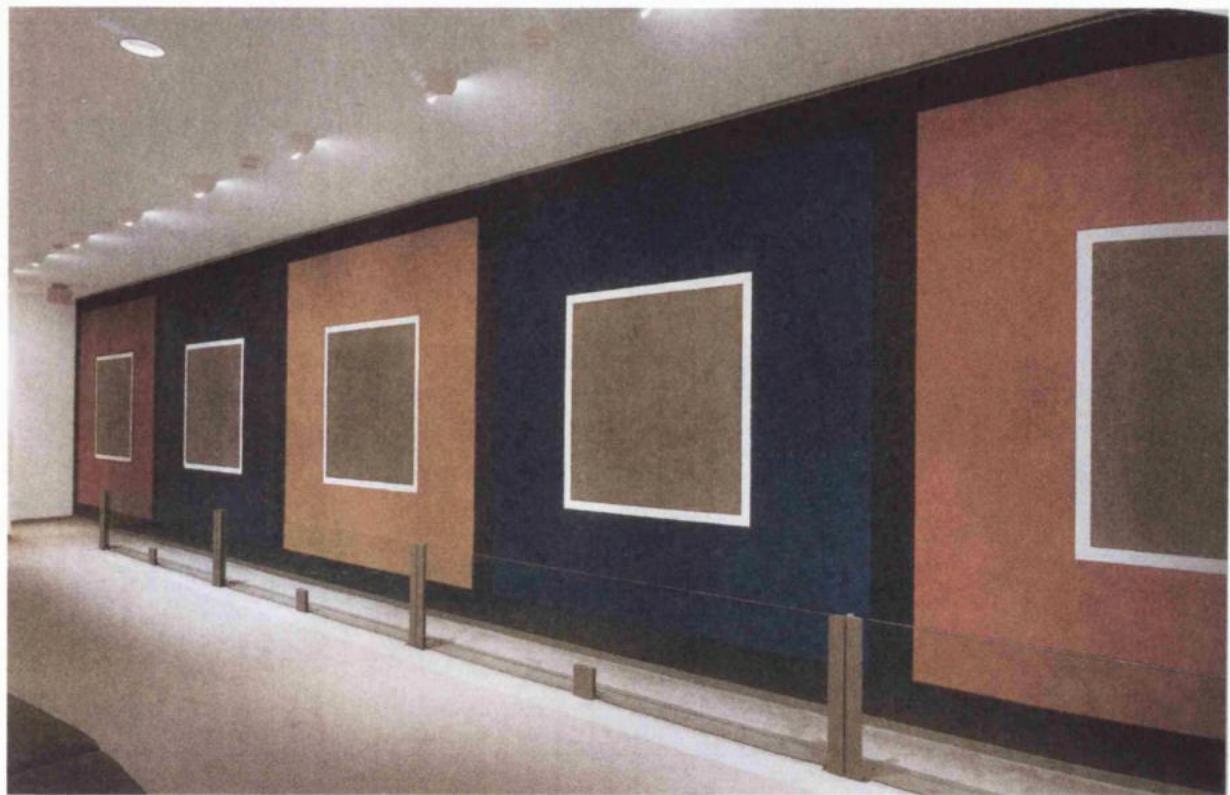


Fig. 115
Sol LeWitt, *Consequence*, 1993
11'6" x 53'9" (350.5 x 1638.3 cm)
U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.

C E R T I F I C A T E

This is to certify that the Sol LeWitt wall drawing
number 720 evidenced by this certificate is authentic.

Wall Drawing #720
Consequence.

(The wall is divided vertically into five equal squares,
each with a gray square within a 2.5" (6 cm) white border.)

Color ink wash

The interior squares are gray, gray, gray. The borders are
the white wall. From Left to Right 1-5. The backgrounds are:

1: gray, red, red, red, red, red, red, red, red;
2: 1/2 gray, red, blue, red, blue;
3: 1/2 red, 1/2 gray, yellow, yellow, yellow, yellow,
yellow;

4 - gray, blue, blue, blue, gray, blue, blue;
5 - 1/2 gray, yellow, red, yellow, red, red, yellow;

First Drawn by: Sachiko Cho, Kei Tsujimura

Varnished by: John Hogan

First Installation: The United States Holocaust
Memorial Museum, Washington, DC

March, 1993

133.75 x 645" (340 x 1638 cm)

This certification is the signature for the wall drawing and must
accompany the wall drawing if it is sold or otherwise transferred.

Certified by

Sol LeWitt

© Copyright Sol LeWitt

Date

Fig. 116
Sol LeWitt, Certificate for *Consequence*, 1993

LeWitt's never came to fruition. The proposal suggests LeWitt's first inclinations were towards a symbolic use of both colour and shape. Though (with no visual record) it is difficult to say much about this proposal, it does relate to his earlier use of black concrete blocks in his work *Black Form Dedicated to the Missing Jews* (1987) (fig.117).⁵⁷⁵ The earlier work functioned both as symbol/image (the gravestone), as a visual blockade (the sight lines to the baroque building behind were interrupted) and a physical one, interrupting movement across the space. The broken wall proposal, however, could not be circumnavigated. It would just have been sensed as image.

When this broken wall was rejected, LeWitt 'asked several times if he could submit alternate proposals.'⁵⁷⁶ Since black forms and broken walls were not requested, four maquettes for wall drawings were submitted to the museum, of which the one described above was chosen. It is hard therefore to attribute the choice of this *particular* wall drawing rather than one of the others to the artist alone. Nevertheless, this does seem to be the drawing LeWitt preferred. Another was similarly divided into five sections, but each contained a different shape. LeWitt has spoken about his preference for the squares: 'I thought I would prefer myself to have the squares all the same, to have the progression be less diverse.... to keep the area in a calm and not very aggressive mode. I thought it would be more apt to have the same figure in each one - which is a square within a square -and then just change the colour from square to square.'⁵⁷⁷

We should think about the 'aptness' of this particular wall drawing to its context. LeWitt suggests here that aptness consisted in the comparative non-aggressivity of *this* drawing, as opposed to another. What LeWitt means by non-aggressivity and calm should not,

⁵⁷⁵ See James Young, *The Texture of Memory* (New Haven, 1993) pp.17-19. The memory of this piece might have been one of the factors that played into the jury's decision to contact LeWitt. His decision to accept the invitation might have been affected by the contrast with the history of his German work and expectations around this more friendly project.

⁵⁷⁶ Memo from Nancy Rosen to Albert Abramson and Jeshajahu Weinberg, 9 June 1992

⁵⁷⁷ LeWitt Interview. With LeWitt's contemporary work in mind, it becomes both harder and easier to make specific claims about *Consequence*. Other drawings are made by the same inks, but *Consequence* uses colour (specifically, gray) differently. Though the 'square with a square' structure is also used in other drawings (e.g. *Wall Drawing 665*, 1991, Castello di Rivoli, Turin), this structure can be differentiated from the less sober 'continuous form' works of the later 1980s, and the 'loopy' works of the late 1990s.

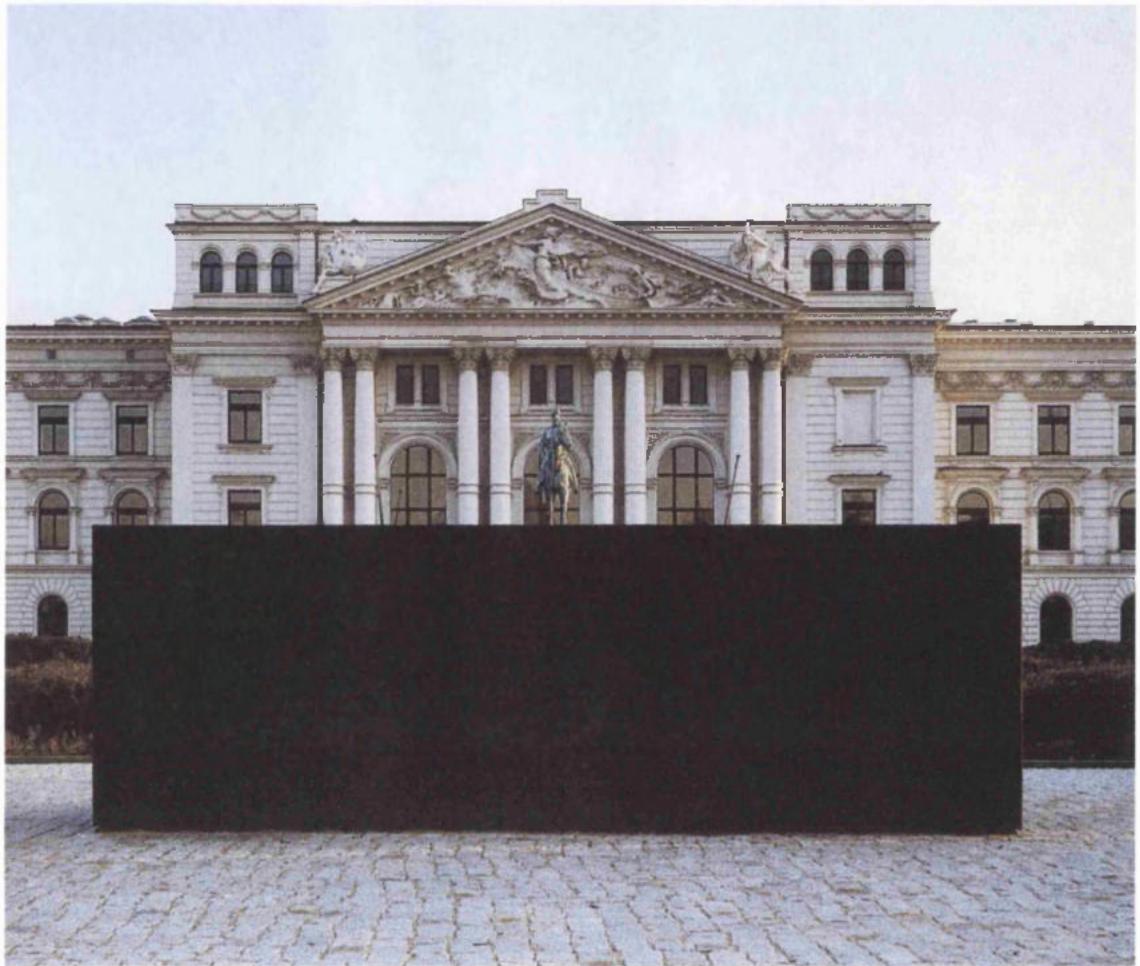


Fig. 117
Sol LeWitt, *Black Form Dedicated to the Missing Jews*, 1987
Hamburg-Altona, Germany

however, be conflated with a sense of absent content, nor with the idea of transcendence. *Consequence* hardly acts as a visual balm, a soothing moment of release for the visitor.

LeWitt – as we might expect – is reluctant to describe any possible referential suggestions of his work. *Consequence*, he contends, was the product of ‘purely technical and formal idea[s]’. Asked if he agreed that the work establishes a mood, LeWitt replied ‘That’s a perception that you might have and that I might have too. It wasn’t a mood piece, except to say that the idea of the museum itself and the contents were a determinant to the kind of thinking that I was doing’.⁵⁷⁸ Once more, then, we see a tension: recalling Serra’s words, the artist tries to keep within their language, and LeWitt, of course, was part of a generation which sought to undo the expressive moody language of Abstract Expressionism. Once more, however, the context of the commission plays a part in determining their response. Both the formal and chromatic arrangements of *Consequence* seem apt to its context. It is hard to decide whether this aptness arises because of decisions (even unacknowledged ones) made about form and colour, or whether it is the contingencies of the context that infect the work, so to speak, prompting readings that could not be made of similar wall drawings.

Consequence is extremely gray. Central gray squares dominate the drawing: they are its constant, repeated (one is tempted to say, in spite of the colours around them) across its length, each visually emphasised by the bright (but thin) bordering band of white. Grayness also permeates the surrounding colours. Each is made from different washes of combinations four inks - but the only ink present in each coloured section is gray. Though gray cannot be seen alone in these coloured sections, its presence is evident. It spoils the colours - muddying the otherwise bright red of the furthest left section, dirtying the orange at the other end. Gray takes on metaphoric potential - unsurprisingly, since, from the opening image in the museum’s display, one has been made to look at black and white (or rather, gray) photographs, and to think of fires, charring, ash.⁵⁷⁹ Susan

⁵⁷⁸ LeWitt Interview.

⁵⁷⁹ The first photographic image, we might recall, shows a pile of charred corpses. While LeWitt might not have known the precise content of the exhibition, he knew that it would, primarily, be photographic, and that these photographs would picture such images.

Morganstein has said that 'Coming where it [the drawing] does in the exhibition, it is almost like the smoke has poured out.'⁵⁸⁰ As she acknowledged, such associations are not those that usually accompany a LeWitt wall drawing, but are inevitable here.

The formal structure of *Consequence* is one of squares within frames. This is not a progression of even 'squares within squares' - were that the case, each of the four sections would either be equally thick, or would change in thickness according to a set rule (diminishing or increasing from the centre by a half each time, for instance). *Consequence* instead contains two thin parts (the white, the black) and two thick parts (the grey, the coloured area). This arrangement mimics a framed photograph. Such photographs (seen in the Tower of Faces) are the immediate visual precedent in this context. These photographs tend to be bordered by a thin white frame which in turn is bordered by a slightly thicker black frame, which is actually the colour of the support. Prompted by the memory of these images, it is again unsurprising that the wall drawing might be said to appear like a series of emptied portraits, where, in the absence of the sitter, only grayness is framed.

It seems that it is the colour and form of *Consequence* that contributes to its aptness. For the visitor who stops, sits, and looks at it, the work might elicit thought as well as establish a mood. But this space is a passage, connecting one floor with another, one section of the exhibition's narrative to the next. As much the work has a role to play in providing an image to look at for those that stop, the place in which it is situated has the role of moving visitors along. The role of the work, and the role of the space might seem to be in a relationship of conflict. But rather than resolving this conflict, the work might be considered to exacerbate it, emphasising the problematic of its own position in the middle of a narrative.

We might think these considerations through addressing the title *Consequence*. In the context of the USHMM, the idea of 'consequence' has dark implications. Whereas a 'sequence' of events does not necessarily include an idea of causality, the prefix

⁵⁸⁰ Morganstein Interview

introduces it. Thus the ‘consequence’ of the Nazi rise to power was the establishment of racial laws, and so on. Yet ‘consequence’ does not merely imply a cause-and-effect notion of historical change. As a word enunciated in the USHMM, it would seem to suggest as its referent, ‘the Holocaust’. Thus, the Holocaust is the *consequence* of.... modernity, technology, Nazi policy, American ambivalence to news from Europe, human behaviour, etcetera. Now, if the work (not just its title) addressed this notion of ‘consequence’, we might say that it accepted its position in the middle of the exhibition narrative, contributing to whatever notion of consequence the wider narrative wished to promulgate. But though the title of LeWitt’s wall drawing might in itself prompt thoughts about the issues suggested just now, there is nothing in its form or in LeWitt’s oeuvre to date which would back up these thoughts. One colour no more ‘leads’ to another than one shape ‘leads’ to the next. ‘Consequence’, indeed, was not a title offered by LeWitt, but provided only when his was rejected. LeWitt would have preferred ‘Progression of Coloured Squares’.

What is the difference between these two titles? The first elicits associations in line with ideas of historical change, and the second is more simply descriptive of the work. We can mobilise this other title to think about the work as having a critical impact against the museum’s narrative thrust. The exhibition, as a whole, represents its subject by telling a story progressing from one section to the next. ‘Progression of Coloured Squares’ describes a sequence that has no connection to narrative: the ‘progress’ between one horizontal section and the next is only to do with a change of colour. The work would seem to form a kind of interruption to forward movement, exchanging movement for repetitive stasis.⁵⁸¹ It might be a kind of mire. Moving towards and past it, the viewer sees a structure which stays the same, a structure whose logic is unlike that to which they are now accustomed. So though placed in an architectural position where the narrative movement of the museum might be made compelling (a passage), the work may be seen to undermine the very idea that the Holocaust can be represented adequately through such

⁵⁸¹ Briony Fer has written about the relationship between repetition and temporality, describing, with reference to the work of Eva Hesse, an ‘endlessness [that] is not only spatial but temporal.’ (Briony Fer, ‘Some Translucent Substance, or The Trouble with Time’, in Carolyn Bailey Gill (ed.), *Time and The Image* (Manchester, 2000) p.75

a narrative. It might even represent the Holocaust not through narrative, but as mire. Describing an early exhibition of his work, Smithson wrote that 'LeWitt's show has helped to neutralize the myth of progress.'⁵⁸² Here, the work refuses one kind of narrative progression perhaps while proposing that a wider idea of progress is a myth.

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The final section of the museum's narrative returns visitors to the content of the first photograph (the liberation of the camps) and to the Hall of Witness. In addition to more artefacts and more filmic and photographic information about the end of the story, there is an amphitheatre where visitors sit just before leaving the exhibition to watch films of survivor testimonies. Its walls are Jerusalem stone (*fig.118*). Flanking this is a wall made from facsimiles of Eastern European Jewish gravestones (*fig.119*).⁵⁸³ After emerging from the exhibition, the visitor's passage is no longer so strictly structured. They can proceed towards the Hall of Remembrance, a hexagonal space (for the six million, the Star of David), where benches surround an open and empty floor. Along one side, there is an 'eternal' flame. Other candles can be lit along its walls, which are marked by the names of prominent death sites, and Biblical texts. Alternatively, or after a time there, visitors return into the hulk of the Hall of Witness. They come out at the top of a staircase which descends into the main concourse of the Hall of Witness, and doubles back on itself (*fig.120*) to go further down to a services area. At the bottom of this staircase, intersecting it, an apparently square, large steel slab rises up: Richard Serra's *Gravity*.

The experience of viewing *Gravity* is structured by the architectural context. Viewers cannot approach it from below, or walk up to it along a horizontal plane from afar: the architecture organises a route towards and around it. The work was made with this route in mind, and so to describe it, it is necessary to account for the changing viewpoints of it organised by its setting. From the top of these stairs, it is hard to determine what position

⁵⁸² Robert Smithson, 'Entropy and the New Monuments' *Artforum* (June 1966) p.27

⁵⁸³ This wall is a replica of a Holocaust memorial made in the Remu synagogue cemetery in Krakow. Gravestones used by the Nazis for various purposes were reassembled and formed together to form the memorial.

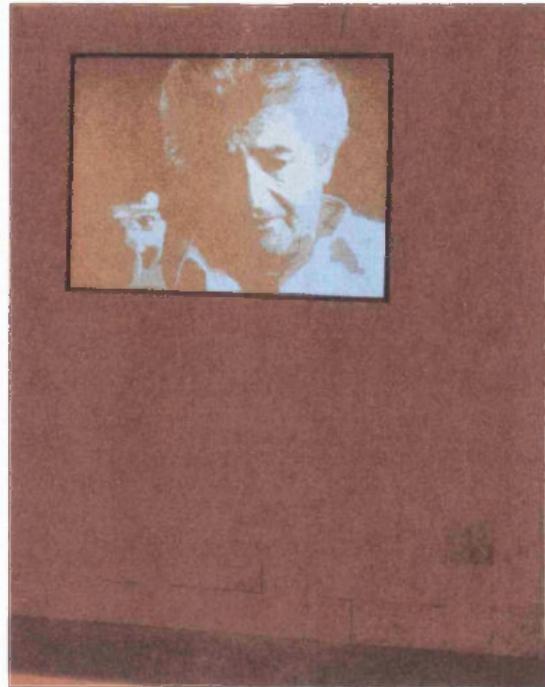


Fig. 118
Amphitheater with testimony film playing; walls made from Jerusalem stone

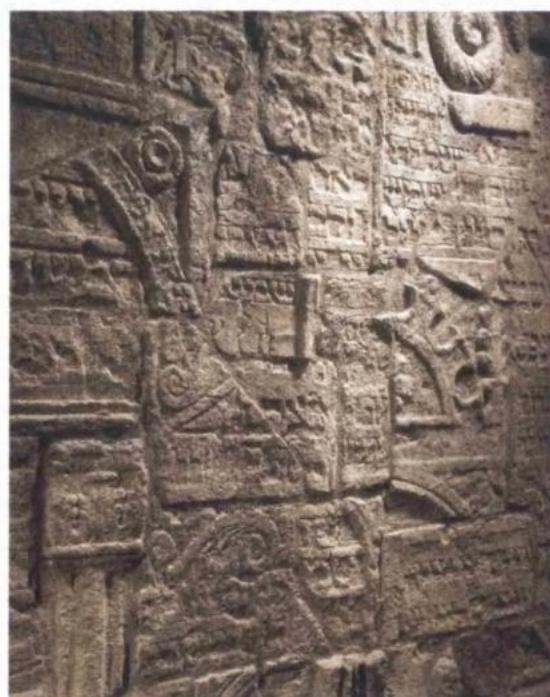


Fig. 119
A cast of the memorial from the Remu Synagogue's cemetery in Krakow made with fragments of tombstones broken by Nazis.



Fig. 120
15th Street end of Hall of Witness. Serra's *Gravity* is at bottom of these steps.

is actually occupied by the piece. *Gravity* appears small in scale, dwarfed both by a huge black granite wall that rises the full height of the west end of the Hall of Witness, and by two flanking red brick walls which extend along a north-south axis (*fig.121*). *Gravity* seems to stand upright (at 90 degrees to the floor), but as the viewer descends their sense of this upright position slips: *Gravity* appears to be tilting downwards to the floor to the right (*fig.122*). Further down, the illusion is corrected: there is a place on the stairs where viewers face *Gravity* along the axis of its diagonal direction, so they can tell that it is, indeed upright (*fig.123*) At this point, the viewer gains an accurate sense of its spatial position, and it also becomes clear why it has appeared to lean. This is because the corner of the stairs tilts away from the corner of the walls beyond it, and *Gravity* is aligned along the intersecting axis of the wall's corner (so that it would intersect this corner if it were extended), while cutting into the staircase off *its* corner. As the viewer descended, the vertical axis of the piece has been judged in changing relation to these corners, and thus the illusions of leaning. (*fig.124*)

A few steps down, the viewer reaches the sculpture's edge. Here *Gravity* seems to tilt to the left (*fig.125*). The edge is marked by horizontal scrapes showing where the slab was cut. The surface of the square plane is polychrome and complex. Though, in the main, a dark gray, there are areas of rusty brown. These areas seem to have been made by scratches or by unknown eroding agents. The bottom of the right side, and the left side, are marked by a grid-like pattern. At the top right corner of the left side is a digital print of numbers. These details might sustain attention, although none are the result of any activity carried out by Serra. The artist just orders the material from his suppliers. Since he knows how differentiated its surface can be, it is misleading to call these accidental details unintentional.

The most dramatic aspect of *Gravity*'s placement is perceived at ground level. *Gravity* pitches into the floor. The top corner, nearest to the descending viewer, is ever so slightly lower than the corner that has been furthest away. This is not visible during the descent but looking at the work from the side, it is clear that the slab is sunk into the ground. Its bottom edge does not lie flush with the floor - the bottom corner of the piece is just above

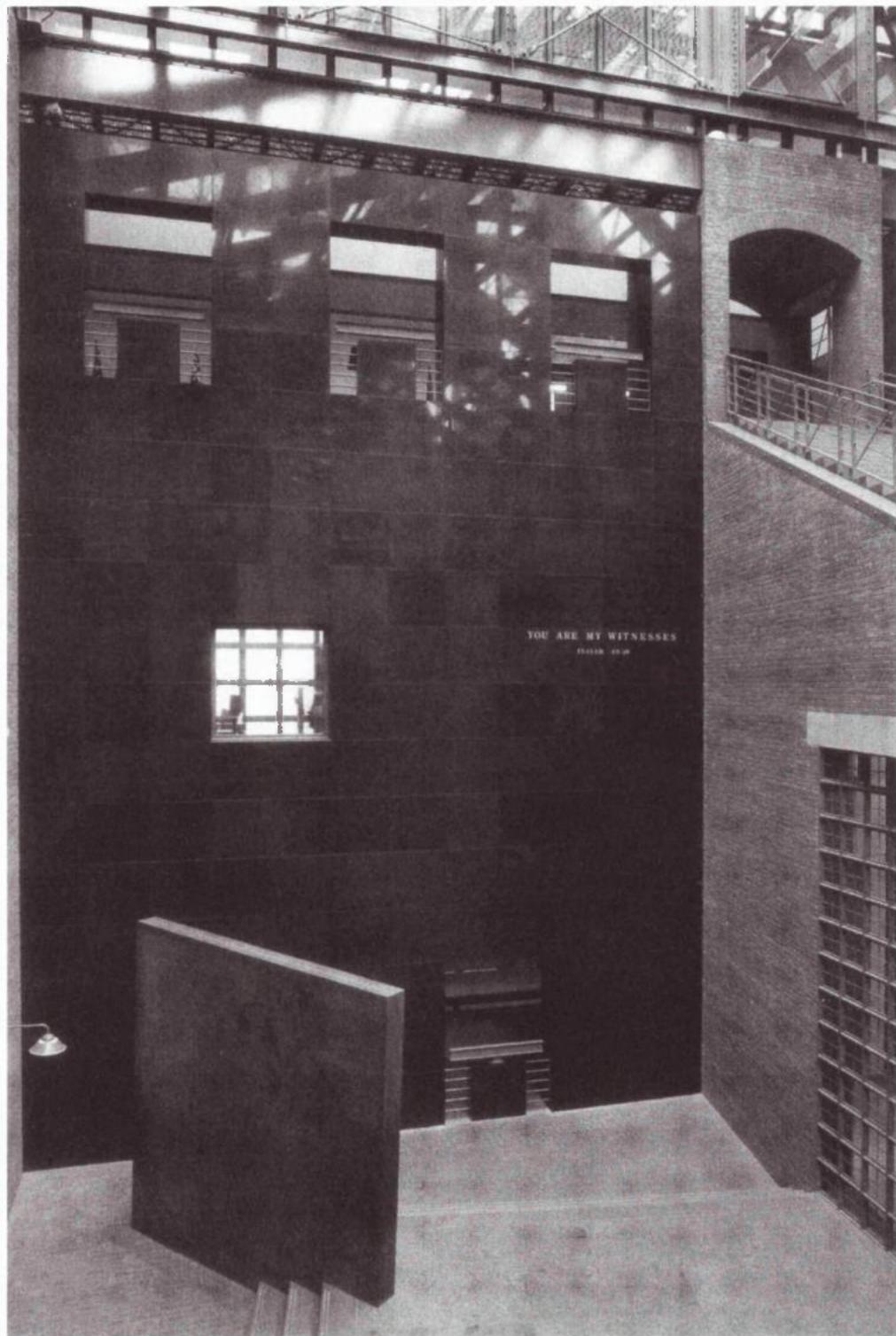


Fig. 121
Richard Serra, *Gravity*, 1993
12' x 12' x 10' (365.8 x 365.8 x 304.8 cm)
Weatherproof steel
U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.

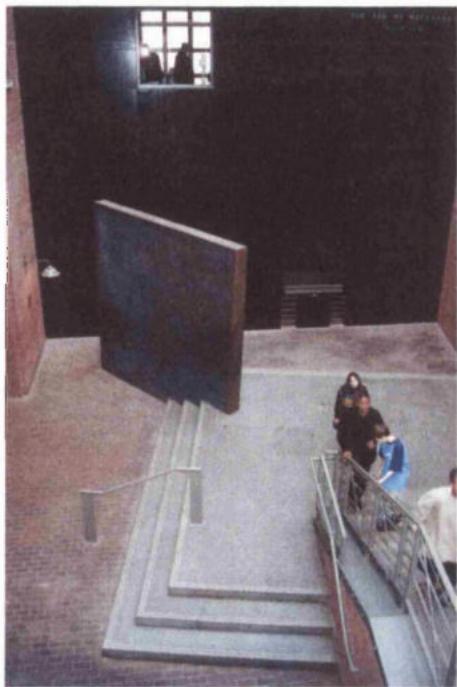


Fig. 122
Richard Serra, *Gravity*
(view from balcony near top of stairs)



Fig. 123
Richard Serra, *Gravity*
(view from halfway down stairs facing sculpture at thin edge showing how sculpture cuts into stairs off the
stairs' corner but is positioned along an axis bisecting meeting point of two walls beyond)

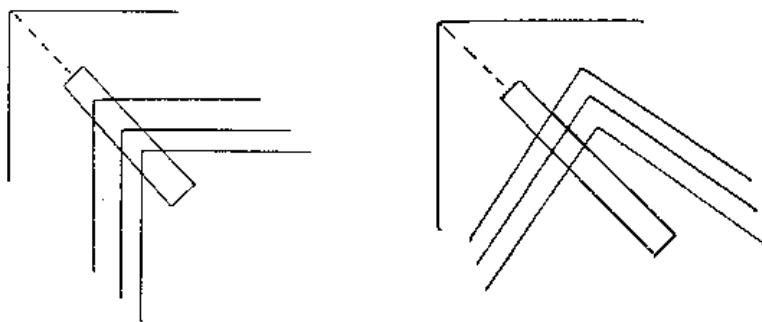


Fig. 124
Diagram of *Gravity*

showing expected placement of steps and sculpture in relation to wall corner beyond (L) and actual placement of steps and sculpture (R)



Fig. 125
Richard Serra, *Gravity*
(view from near bottom of stairs showing *Gravity* seeming to tilt to left)

ground, by around a mere centimetre. (*fig.126*). The sense of sinking is strongest from a position away from the slab to its right, since the downward pitch is set against the vertical rise of the walls behind. (*fig.127*). The visual fact of the stairs also makes this pitch seem more pronounced: because the stairs block the bottom right corner from view, it seems to be further beneath the ground level than it is. This illusion is heightened: since the stairs are a ‘rising’ ground level, they make more of the corner lie under the ground.

Gravity is an extraordinarily complex sculpture, and so it is surprising that the work came about through Freed’s hope to find an artist to help achieve ‘some depiction of moral breakdown’,⁵⁸⁴ The black granite wall, we recall, was to be cracked, (*fig.95*) and though Freed thought this idea ‘a bit banal’, though ‘bothered by the literality’, Freed (through the jury) bought Serra to Washington nonetheless. Serra co-operated with this request. It is important to note this: when asked to help implement the crack, fully aware of the symbolic nature of the idea, rather than refusing, he came to Washington to meet Freed. ‘I don’t know if I would have done if I wasn’t Jewish’, Serra has said.⁵⁸⁵ This project came at a moment between Serra’s work on *The Drowned and the Saved* and his later participation on a proposal with Peter Eisenman for a Berlin Holocaust memorial.⁵⁸⁶ If these projects suggest the importance (at least during the 1990s) of the subject to Serra, we can also note that he has withdrawn from the Berlin proposal, partly because of changes demanded by civic authorities, and partly ‘even though I felt it should be made, I thought I would be doing a parody of my own work and of Judd and Andre.’⁵⁸⁷ The USHMM project, it appears, would not be such a parody – Serra could at least try to ‘stay within [his] language’. Quite clearly, though, this language did not permit the symbolism of the cracked wall. When approached about the crack, Serra did not feel that he could provide the technical solutions sought. ‘I didn’t really understand how you could, without cracking the piece after it was up the wall, construct a crack and then put it together.’⁵⁸⁸ More importantly, he was also sceptical about the project: ‘It was going to be an artifice that would not ring true in terms of what it was supposed to symbolically represent. Nor

⁵⁸⁴ Albert Abramson to the jury, Jury Minutes, 17 April 1991, p.15

⁵⁸⁵ Serra Interview

⁵⁸⁶ See James Young, *At Memory’s Edge* (New Haven, 2000)

⁵⁸⁷ Serra Interview

⁵⁸⁸ Serra Interview



Fig. 126
Richard Serra, *Gravity*
(detail of bottom corner slightly raised above ground level)



Fig. 127
Richard Serra, *Gravity*
(view from bottom of stairs to left of sculpture showing it pitching into the ground)

did I think that you could make a symbol or a sign for the memorialisation of the Holocaust by making a crack in the wall. It just seemed to be a pseudo-art convention that wasn't going to fly.⁵⁸⁹ Serra's scepticism must have reinforced Freed's - but others working on the project were also dubious.⁵⁹⁰ Nancy Rosen has suggested that this doubt was exacerbated by the architectural activity at that time, when postmodernists were employing brash symbols (such as cracks) in projects with far less serious goals.⁵⁹¹ These various factors led to the abandonment of the crack. Serra proposed a new work, and began to establish its proportion. He describes the working process as follows:

‘It was made just by simply trying to figure out what the dimensions had to be once I had located that space in collaboration with Freed. I worked out what I really wanted to do, which was to impale a large weight into the bottom of the staircase, to give that whole shaft a kind of ballast to it. In terms of its size, Freed and I, with poles and strings, in the shaft, figured out how big it ought to be. At one point we thought that 13, 14, 15 feet was too big, and so finally we got it down to what it ought to have been - which was 12 by 12 feet and 10 inches, and that was all worked out in a couple of days of actually visibly on site making a mock-up.’

The very placement of the piece performed one function of the crack without touching the wall’s surface: by blocking the sitelines to the granite wall, the sculpture interrupted the visual cleanliness of the wall. But Serra’s description of this process seems to empty out the kind of symbolic content Freed hoped would be communicated by the crack. Nevertheless, *Gravity* might convey some of the content for which Freed had aimed.

⁵⁸⁹ Serra Interview

⁵⁹⁰ ‘There was concern that the “crack” might [...] look either contrived or fashionably “deconstructed”.’ (Minutes, Subcommittee for the Art in Public Spaces of the Committee on Collections and Acquisitions, 18 January 1991)

⁵⁹¹ Serra encountered related architectural tendencies in Washington D.C. in 1978 working with Robert Venturi on a proposal for Pennsylvania Avenue. His proposal for Federal Plaza was rejected, and Venturi proposed two pylons that would frame the Treasury building. Withdrawing from the project, Serra compared these pylons to Fascist architecture. See ‘Richard Serra’s Urban Sculpture’ (Interview with Douglas Crimp) in Richard Serra, *Writings, Interviews* (Chicago, 1994) pp.138-39; Jeremy Gilbert Rolfe, ‘Capital Follies’ *Artforum* (September 1978) pp.66-67 and Benjamin Forgey, ‘The Continuing Battles of Pennsylvania Avenue’, *Washington Star*, 11 April 1978, p. D2. Given the fate of this project, the opportunity to work on a site of Holocaust memory in the capital might have proved more interesting still.

Some, indeed, have found in it precisely the kind of symbolism Serra was at pains to avoid.

Gravity has been described as a grave stone, and the digital marks on its surface have been said to symbolise the tattoos imprinted on the skin of concentration camp prisoners.⁵⁹² The first association is prompted by the work's title, and offered by its appearance. We could assume Serra has no interest in the second: he leaves such marks on the surface of his steel pieces not as symbols, but rather as means (a legacy of his earliest work) to leave the process of fabrication visible.⁵⁹³ However, as Freed has noted, Serra might well have anticipated such a symbolic reading of the mark: 'You put that stamp on 20000 places and nothing would happen. You put it there, and you expect it to happen. If [Serra] didn't want it there, he would erase it.'⁵⁹⁴

Other symbolic readings are prompted by the way the work structures movement around it. Ralph Grunewald wrote that 'Like those unfortunate family members who were forced to separate from one another, so too will visitors need to separate as they move around the massive steel sculpture.'⁵⁹⁵ Adrian Dannatt, combining an account of the work's appearance with a description of the movement around it, has articulated a different analogy: 'Around this metal wall the visitor is faced with another decision, to go one way or the other, to avoid its headlong violence. The wall is openly cold and cruel, an elemental force that cannot be negotiated with or appeased.'⁵⁹⁶ Here, the work becomes itself a symbol for the Holocaust: it is cruel and must be confronted, just like the Holocaust in this place.

These kind of analogies seem problematic - not least because of the heavily anthropomorphic language (in the second) afforded to a piece of steel. But *Gravity* certainly tempts analogies. Some less problematic ones arise because of its placement. As

⁵⁹² Dannatt, op. cit., p. 15

⁵⁹³ Serra has always been interested in the way a work records its history. Early processes involved manual and bodily manipulation of material; now material is ordered from steel mills.

⁵⁹⁴ Freed Interview.

⁵⁹⁵ Ralph Grunewald, 'Architectural Symbolism and Other Features of the USHMM' (Internal museum document), 23 March 1992.

⁵⁹⁶ Dannatt, op. cit., p.15

it pitches down, wedging into the steps, there is the impression that the steps are holding it in place, and that, were they not to clamp it, it might pitch further down, or even topple to one side. There is a sense of the *fragility* of its position and fragility becomes the subject of analogy: just as the stasis of the piece is fragile, so too is the memory of the Holocaust. Or even - just as the piece could collapse, so could the museum itself.⁵⁹⁷

Such readings are available, but like the descriptions of Kelly's paintings as 'memorial tablets', or LeWitt's sections as 'empty frames', they seem prompted by contingencies, and are not the kind of descriptions which usually accompany Serra's work.⁵⁹⁸ Serra might regard referential, symbolic, and narrative readings as inevitable 'misinterpretations'. However, what is intriguing, and ultimately successful about *Gravity* is the way that Serra does keep to his language, the way this language actually contributes to the setting.

Let us reconsider the sculpture. We have noted how it causes spatial confusion, seeming to change position, tipping one way, then the other, aligning with the corner of the steps, then the corner of the wall, creating at once symmetrical and asymmetrical divisions. These effects build up an overwhelming sense of spatial insecurity. This sense works both against, and with its setting. *Gravity* unsettles the rectangularity offered by the grids of the granite wall, the rectangular windows, and those other elements of the Hall of Witness which regulate space. At the same time, the effect of *Gravity* is heightened by, and heightens the effects of elements of the setting such as the diagonal skylight, and offset angles, which, without *Gravity*, would have already created a strange space. Hand in hand, so to speak, *Gravity* and The Hall of Witness fix viewers in a warp.

Approached while descending, *Gravity* also exacerbates a sense of descent. This happens partly because its weight appears as an image. The appearance of a mass at the bottom of the stairs emphasises its 'bottomness'. The emphasis on descent is also due to the weight

⁵⁹⁷ Susan Morganstein suggested that 'If you and I could jump on it enough, it would smash down, and the whole building would be destroyed. It's a piece about the fragility of the stasis we have.' (Morganstein Interview)

⁵⁹⁸ See *Richard Serra - October Files* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000)

being ‘impaled’: the weight appears as if it has fallen, or been sliced into the stairs from above. This imagined ‘fall’ becomes a kind of surrogate for viewers’ movements – not only is the sculpture in the location to which they are headed, but it appears to have got there through the same downward movement they are making. Serra wanted to give the ‘whole shaft a ballast’. If *Gravity* fixes the bottom of the space, making the decent to its ‘bottomness’ more apparent, this effect would seem to be at odds with the way it unsettles spatial security. In fact, both effects are achieved together, neither simultaneously, nor in sequence, but at different moments as viewers proceed.

These two factors would seem to amount to a description of the work in line with critical thinking on Serra’s work, James Freed’s comment that Serra ‘[didn’t] want any reference to the Holocaust’,⁵⁹⁹ and with Serra’s own statement that ‘In confronting the site I wish to create a field force so that the space is discerned physically rather than optically.’⁶⁰⁰ But how neutral, or non-referential, are the spatial effects caused by *Gravity*? They speak not just of space, but of context.⁶⁰¹ They affirm and heighten the ‘gravity’ of the place. Serra’s title, though punning, is not flippant – what it emphasises is how the metaphoric notion of the word is conveyed *through* the physical. Serra has twisted an engagement with gravity, pursued through his entire career, so that what is engaged *now* is subject matter through sculpture. Freed’s hopes for a work about ‘breakdown’ are therefore achieved by the piece – though the wall has not been cracked, the breakdown that was the Holocaust is nonetheless represented. Serra once said that his sculptures ‘do not relate to the history of monuments. They do not memorialise anything. They relate to sculpture and nothing more’.⁶⁰² Here, through sculpture, a memorial atmosphere is heightened.

In concluding the discussion of this work, we can address some more important statements together with Hal Foster’s reading of *Gravity*. Talking to Peter Eisenman – the

⁵⁹⁹ Freed Interview

⁶⁰⁰ Dannatt, op. cit., p.15

⁶⁰¹ Such spatial effects are not offered by Serra’s contemporaneous works. *Intersection* (Basel, 1993) or *Snake* (Bilbao, 1996) are much more concerned to generate spatial play through their own means only (rather than through their relation to nearby walls or steps). As well as this, the surprises that mark the passage through these works amount to a joyous, exciting experience, rather than to a grave one.

⁶⁰² Serra, op. cit., p.135 (Interview with Douglas Crimp)

architect with whom he would collaborate on the Berlin Holocaust memorial - Serra spoke eloquently about the tradition against which modernist sculpture staked itself.

'The historical concept of placing sculpture on a pedestal established a separation of the object from the behavioural space of the viewer. "Pedestalized" sculpture invariably transfers the effect of power by subjugating the viewer to the idealized, memorialized, or eulogized theme.'⁶⁰³

Serra's discussion echoed Rosalind Krauss's analysis of modernist sculpture. Before the modern period, 'The logic of sculpture, it would seem, is inseparable from the logic of the monument. It sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolical tongue about the meaning or use of that place.' However, '[t]he modernist period of sculptural production ... operates in relation to the loss of site, producing the monument as abstraction, the monument as pure marker or base, functionally placeless and largely self-referential.'⁶⁰⁴ Foster sees *Gravity* as marking a resolution to the tension that seems to exist between Serra's and Krauss's comments, and the work. Though previously Serra questioned the "pedestalized" history of sculpture, *Gravity* represents 'a manifestation of the copresence of the sacral and the secular'⁶⁰⁵. The viewer moves around the piece, experiencing it spatially (the mode of secular sculptural experience all of Serra's work enables), while they are also 'stilled by the plane' so there is 'an arresting of the viewer before the work' (a 'sacral' experience).⁶⁰⁶

However, the achievement of *Gravity* is that it *maintains* the secular *against* the pull of the sacral, while expanding the potential of secular sculpture, so that it might now produce an experience that contributes effectively to a memorial environment without compromise or regression. This achievement is all the more significant given the claims

⁶⁰³ Serra, op. cit., p.141 (Interview with Peter Eisenman)

⁶⁰⁴ Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' in *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986) pp.279-280

⁶⁰⁵ Hal Foster, 'The Un/making of Sculpture' in *Richard Serra: Sculpture 1985-1998* (Los Angeles, 1999) pp.26-7

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid., p.26

made in the USHMM about the sacred (rather than historical) character of the Holocaust. Though Foster contends that viewers see the work as image (viewers are 'stilled'), this is not its primary function: viewers walk around *Gravity*, seeing it from its thin edge, and not frontally. However, if a viewer does take time to scrutinise surface, though this is hardly undifferentiated, it is resolutely non-symbolic. This sense is tightened if we pay further attention to context. Foster suggests that with *Gravity*, 'there is another icon in play: the memorial wall'.⁶⁰⁷ Yet, as a wall, *Gravity* insists its steel surface in contrast to the other symbolic memorial 'wall' surfaces that surround it. The exhibition included of a wall of gravestones, of a wall of Jerusalem stone, even a reconstruction of the wall of the Warsaw ghetto. The immediate visual context for *Gravity* is a black granite wall whose shiny surface is so reminiscent of the materiality of the nearby Vietnam memorial, and a red brick wall whose materiality here, as throughout the building, suggests the cities of once Jewish Europe. What you see with *Gravity* is what you see - steel as steel. The work contributes to the memorial space, but refuses to make symbolic use of material, adding an unassimilable, difficult substance to the physical environment, and the imaginary, of the USHMM.⁶⁰⁸

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid., p 26

⁶⁰⁸ It should be said that Foster also sees the work as refusing to raise the Holocaust 'to the oppressive status of the sublime or the divine.' (Ibid., p.27). As far as a conclusion is concerned, then, my reading of the work is in agreement with Foster's. However, by paying more attention to the precise context, it has been possible to contest aspects of his argument.

4. Thoughts Towards a Conclusion

'The predominant feature of today's academic Holocaust industry', according to Slavoj Žižek, is the

'elevation of the Holocaust into metaphysical diabolical Evil, irrational, apolitical, incomprehensible, approachable only through respectful silence.... the Holocaust is referred to as mystery, the heart of darkness of our civilisation; its enigma negates all (explanatory) answers in advance, defying knowledge and description, noncommunicable, lying outside historicization - it cannot be explained, visualized, represented, transmitted, since it marks the Void, the black hole, the implosion, of the (narrative) universe.'⁶⁰⁹

Žižek criticises the manner in which this construction of the Holocaust serves 'aggressive Zionists', but his belligerent language betrays other targets. Elie Wiesel was perhaps the individual most publicly associated with the creation of the USHMM, writing the Report to President Carter that initiated plans for the museum in 1979 and dedicating its opening with President Clinton in 1993. Žižek's relentless list echoes (sometimes perfectly) Norman Finkelstein's description, in *The Holocaust Industry*, of Elie Wiesel's 'sacralization of the Holocaust':

'The Holocaust is effectively a "mystery" religion. Thus Wiesel intones that the Holocaust "leads into darkness", "negates all answers", "lies outside, if not beyond, history", "defies both knowledge and description", "cannot be explained nor visualized", is "never to be comprehended or transmitted", marks a "destruction of history" and a "mutation on a cosmic scale.''⁶¹⁰

⁶⁰⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (London, 2001) p.66

⁶¹⁰ Norman Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry* (London, 2000) p.45 discussing Peter Novick, op. cit., and quoting Elie Wiesel, *Against Silence* (New York, 1984) and *All Rivers Run to the Sea* (New York, 1995).

Another target of Žižek's criticism would seem to be Jean-Francois Lyotard, who, to recall one critique of his position, exhibited a 'tendency to "trope" away from specificity and evacuate history by constructing the caesura of the Holocaust as a total trauma that is un(re)presentable and reduces everyone (victims, witnesses, perpetrators, revisionists, those born later) to an ultimately homogenizing yet sublime silence.⁶¹¹ It was Lyotard, we might recall, who conceived abstraction as witnessing the Holocaust through the refusal of representation: 'What art can do is bear witness not to the sublime, but to this aporia of art and to its pain. It does not say the unsayable, but says that it cannot say it.'⁶¹²

Around the time of Lyotard's comments, that is ten years prior to the debate around the 'Holocaust Industry', and just before Serra, Kelly, Shapiro, and LeWitt were commissioned to make work for the USHMM, Rosalind Krauss described the way the display of art from the 1960s in the Panza collection amounted to 'an historical recoding of Minimalism in the direction of privacy, interiority, spirituality... an act of redefinition [which] fails to do justice to the aspiration of the sixties'.⁶¹³ Krauss's comments speak of one change in the fate of abstraction between the 1960s and 1990s, but another which has become clear in the course of this chapter is that abstract artists are now commissioned to take part in major projects in sites of cultural memory, often accepting such commissions while directly acknowledging and negotiating their own cultural identities. In the course of this thesis, we have looked at earlier examples where Holocaust memory was implicated in the work of abstract artists. Such projects were previously passed over by high Modernist critics - they are now acknowledged and highly visible.

Putting Žižek's and Krauss's comments together might serve as a way into a conclusion both about the placement of abstraction in the USHMM, and about the thesis as a whole. Though neither addresses the USHMM, their comments would help formulate a critique of the AFPSP. Abstraction might be another 'sacralization of the Holocaust' – abstraction might seem another kind of representation which refuses to visualize, communicate, or

⁶¹¹ See note 79.

⁶¹² Lyotard, 1990, op. cit., p.47

⁶¹³ Rosalind Krauss, 'Overcoming the Limits of Matter: On Revising Minimalism', in *American Art of the 1960s* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1991) p.140

explain the Holocaust. Furthermore, the AFPSP might represent another use of abstraction, so that whatever the different ‘aspirations’ of these four artists might once have been, now their work is used to soothe a passage through the museum, to provide opportunity for contemplation, for ‘spiritual’ rest. Even though there might be a necessary place for pause, the use of a LeWitt wall drawing, or a Kelly monochrome, represents an emptying out of all the radical content of such work.

This kind of critique cannot be ignored or resolved. The history of the AFPSP showed that the works were commissioned as a result of different interests, through the support of different individuals. Some people working for or with the USHMM did indeed hope that the works would allow moments of respite, giving spiritual content to the narrative, even functioning as symbols of positive creativity, proofs of the ‘aesthetic genius of the human imagination’⁶¹⁴. This phrase comes from the Report to the President, at a moment where the authors, under Wiesel’s chairmanship, described the content of the institutions that made up the Smithsonian, and the future place of the USHMM within it. This is a part of a passage about the works of art in the Hirshhorn and National Gallery, and of course we should not forget that some people were interested in securing commissions that would match the kind of work shown in those institutions. Yet others were aware of the ‘aspirations’ of artists of this generation, had a critical and involved engagement with post-war art, and might have hoped that the works would not just serve an audience proceeding through the main part of the museum, but shape that audience, so that the audience emerged with a multifaceted approach to how the Holocaust might be represented, and what Holocaust memory might mean. What is certainly clear is that despite the fact that some people associated with the museum strongly disapproved the choice of work, those who supported it could come to a consensus about the work even if they had divergent attitudes towards its purpose and effect. In making some concluding points about the importance of the work in the museum, I certainly do not wish to negate the criticism discussed here, to deny the possibility that the commissions might represent a reading and a use of abstraction. But rather than concentrating on these criticisms, I want to draw some arguments about the critical function of abstraction in this setting. We

⁶¹⁴ Report to the President - President’s Commission on the Holocaust, p.11

have considered each work in turn, so their differences are already apparent, and the following remarks are not meant to unify them. However, it is important to consider them together.

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When James Freed first spoke about the reasons for placing art in the USHMM, he hoped that works would fulfil symbolic and ceremonial roles. It was perhaps the contact with the four commissioned artists that changed his mind – we have seen what happened when he met Serra. In any case, his recent explanation of the purpose of the work is very different. He argued that when visitors encounter the art works, they come into contact with the kind of contemporary cultural production that exists *outside* the museum, and remember that this culture exists. For Freed, it was not so much that the presence of art works illustrates the *difference* between ‘art’ and ‘the Holocaust’ as polar opposites in twentieth century history and culture. Rather, by causing the viewers to remember cultural production *outside* the museum, by enabling the outside to come in, the placement of art works would disqualify the possibility that the museum might become a world in itself, cut away from reality. This was a threat: the Holocaust would then be represented as a kind of ahistorical bad dream, an ‘abstract world’⁶¹⁵, which one might enter and leave (Freed anticipates the problem Žižek describes). The art works thus had the function, for Freed, of giving the museum ‘a kind of legitimacy’⁶¹⁶. Viewers would know that the art works were a real product of contemporary culture, and by juxtaposition, the Holocaust, like the art works, would also be shown to be a real product of human culture, a proper subject of historical enquiry and thought. The art works, slices of reality, would make the Holocaust real.

Freed’s analysis might seem to confront some of the possible criticisms that could be raised at the museum and at the AFPSP. It is not the idealism of his ideas that I want to contest (certainly they are open to question), but we can note that this argument is not

⁶¹⁵ Freed Interview

⁶¹⁶ Freed Interview

premised on any particular aspect of the art works commissioned. It seems, from Freed's perspective, that any serious art work would fulfil the role he imagines: we might think of some of the other names that were raised – Anselm Kiefer, Ann Hamilton, Jonathan Borofsky – works by any of these artists would remind the attentive and knowledgeable visitor of culture outside the museum. I want to think what might be important about the commissioned works as abstract works.

One idea to which Freed's comments alert us is that of the boundary. The art works are both inside and outside the narrative of the museum; for Freed, their liminal status is more compelling still - they open the museum up to the world outside it. The process he describes might go both ways: we can posit a visitor from the USHMM arriving before another LeWitt wall drawing in the National Gallery some five minute walk away, bringing the memory of the context of *Consequence* into this space. The boundary has been in question throughout this thesis, though in a different manner to the way Freed conceives it. We have seen throughout both that an autonomous, purely formal art practice is adapted when artists address the Holocaust, and that the formal, optical meanings of the abstract work are always disrupted from outside, by the contingencies of titles, settings, statements. The meanings of the abstract works that have been considered are never fixed or stable, but disrupted, with, or without the artist's intent. It is to this aspect of disruption - which I think is a mark of the condition of post-Holocaust meaning - that I want to draw attention to think about the importance of abstract works in the USHMM.

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In 1989, before the commissioning of the works, Freed remembered Wiesel's suggestions in the report to President Carter about the USHMM. 'Wiesel said this is a building that should disturb. At the same time, it must not be a reconstruction because that would devalue the Holocaust; a reconstruction would be a Disneyland – clean, cute, no

tension.⁶¹⁷ Despite Freed's hopes, however, the USHMM has been criticised for making the Holocaust into a spectacle. Richard Serra, for instance, echoing Freed's language without knowing it, described the museum as a 'Disneylandia'.⁶¹⁸

In 1990, Rosalind Krauss described another facet of the re-reading of minimalism. 'The revision of Minimalism such that it addresses or even works to produce that new fragmented and technologized subject, such that it constructs not an experience of itself but some other euphorically dizzy sense of the museum as hyperspace, this revisionary construction of Minimalism exploits what was always potential within Minimalism.'⁶¹⁹ Krauss, who here seems to acknowledge Michael Fried's earlier reservations – reservations which I suggested were partly prompted by Tony Smith's interest in the spectacle of Nuremberg - argues that minimalism opened up the possibility of the art museum as spectacle. However, it is possible to posit that the works in the USHMM – some of which derive from minimalism - act as a resistance to spectacle, a prevention of Disneyland.

From the moment the lift doors parted like theatre curtains, to the moment they emerge into the Hall of Witness, viewers are caught up in the visual regime of the museum. No matter how tempered its planners had hoped it to be, the exhibition made use of theatrical devices in a 'dizzying' narrative. Against the insistent lure of the narrative, of the spectacular, there are the abstract works.⁶²⁰ In some ways, one might say that these works *take on* specific aspects of the exhibitions' use of spectacle, recasting them: Shapiro's 'figure' against the clay figures in the gas chamber model, Kelly's and Serra's walls against the facsimiles of ghetto and gravestone walls, LeWitt's passage against the passages over the 'ghetto bridge' and through the cattle truck.

⁶¹⁷ Freed, op. cit., p.91. In her recent essay on William Kentridge, Krauss has recalled that Walter Benjamin wrote about the "usability of the Disney method for Fascism" in an early draft of the 'Work of Art' essay. Rosalind Krauss, 'The Rock: William Kentridge's Drawings for Projection' *October* 92 (Spring 2000) p.32

⁶¹⁸ Serra Interview

⁶¹⁹ Rosalind Krauss, 'The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum' *October* 54 (Fall 1990) p.14

⁶²⁰ In her essay on Kentridge, Krauss has written that 'in the age of spectacle, it is impossible for the memory of apartheid not to be itself spectacularized.... As we are learning from the Holocaust, it is extremely hard for the business of memory not to be exploited to the point of becoming itself a business.' (Krauss, 2000, op. cit., p.27). I am claiming a similar status for the AFPSP as Krauss does for Kentridge.

The abstract works interrupt the narrative, but rather than thinking about them merely as caesuras, we can think about them as punctures. They refuse the representation of the Holocaust through graphic image and steady narrative. It might be that they afford important opportunity for contemplation, but though some might want to see this opportunity as enabling an unhampered, soothing, spiritual experience (the kind of experiences which, if they were all that were available, would amount to a use of, and for some an abuse of abstraction), I would want to return to the idea of abstraction that has been formulated throughout this thesis. The contemplative opportunities the works enable might be more complex.

Instead of imagining that it is a blank contemplation that occurs before the works, we could posit that the works require difficult, challenging, even painful thought. Partly, this is precisely because of the lure of symbolic readings imposed by contingencies: I have considered readings of Shapiro's sculpture as a body, Kelly's paintings as a cemetery, LeWitt's wall drawing as empty frames, Serra's slab as a gravestone. The context tempts all of these readings, while the works do nothing to secure them, and everything to resist securing them, keeping watch over 'absent meaning'. The experience of the works can become difficult, as meaning, before them, is in a permanent state of flux. The works teach us to 'think with pain.'

The works also unsettle the very notion of Holocaust memory. Unlike the artefacts, photographs, films, texts, they do not provide clues as to what is to be remembered. They leave one asking, indeed, 'what am I supposed to remember *here*?' In revealing this to be such a difficult question, they ruffle the smoothness of the very notion of a memorial museum. At other places in the museum, though 'the Holocaust' is not an easy thing to remember, the process of remembering itself can seem too apparently easy: remembering is simply a matter of learning and thinking. In front of the art works, the *process* itself of remembering is shown to be difficult. This difficulty is not just a result of the generic abstraction of the works, but of specific features, such as the repetitive structures in LeWitt's and Kelly's works, structures which rather than 'leading back', trap one in a kind of endless present, where the past-recalled-to-the-present temporality of memory is

exchanged for the temporality of infinite sameness. Just as this trap was a kind of rebuff to the progressive narrative of the museum, so to it is a kind of trap for memory.

Lyotard's notions of the Holocaust as sublime, and of the abstract work as recognising the impossibility of Holocaust representation have both been contested in the course of this thesis, which has made a case for abstraction as a form of Holocaust representation. Nevertheless, it is to one of his insights that I wish to turn to conclude discussion. 'One must, certainly, inscribe in words, in images. One cannot escape the necessity of representing. It could be a sin to believe oneself safe and sound. But it is one thing to do it in view of saving the memory, and quite another to try to preserve the remainder, the unforgettable forgotten, in writing.'⁶²¹ If only what is inscribed can be forgotten, then might the works preserve the remainder, saving memory?

⁶²¹ See note 39

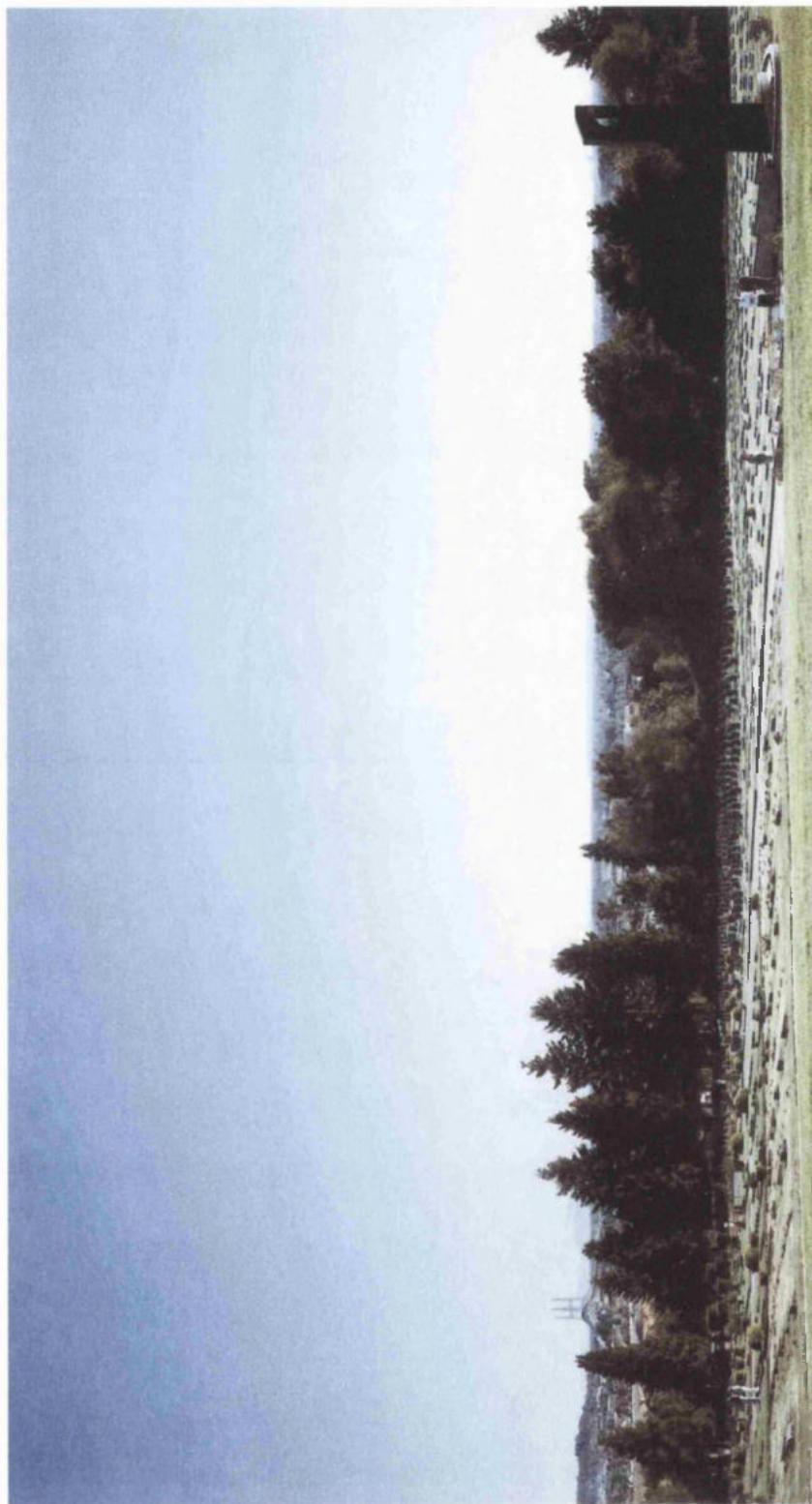


Fig 128

Jeff Wall, *The Holocaust Memorial in the Jewish Cemetery*, 1987
46 7/8" x 85 1/8" (119 x 216 cm), Transparency in lightbox

EPILOGUE: JEFF WALL'S THE HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL IN THE JEWISH CEMETERY

It is late afternoon on a cloudless day (*fig.128*). A white haze over the horizon reaches to a deep blue above. There is nothing in most of the photograph save this blue expanse: detail crams into the bottom third. Here is a cemetery, stretching laterally across the image. Trees rise at its border, planted to fence it from the city beyond. Gravestones towards the back are vertical, the more recent slabs stretching (like floor sculptures?) at mourners' feet. Though witnessing changing memorial fashions, both old and new are arranged in a grid, a grid which marks the modernity of this place. This is nothing like the tumbledown Jewish cemeteries of old Europe, where trees grow over stones, where subsidence, roots, and gravity cause gravestones to lurch diagonal (*fig.129*). These other cemeteries, in the historical lands of persecution, bear witness to the Holocaust, though they do not house its dead. There, graves are filled by older generations, but their dereliction speaks of the lost communities, of children who could never come back to mourn, or to tend the family plots.⁶²²

The Vancouver cemetery speaks of a kind of survival. Here lies a Jewish community whose children lived to care for the graves. It is well kept, adorned with topiary, intersected by neat gravel paths. The children are here in the picture, dotted around singly or in pairs, seven in all, one on a bench, the others standing over graves looking down. No one is looking at the black structure towards the right (*fig.130*). It dwarfs the gravestones and mourners, rising to the horizon, touching the sky. Though the trees owe their presence to the community, the structure calls attention to the other obviously man-made break on the horizon – a bridge that looks like Gaudi's Sagrada Familia, its spires reaching into the blue. But how man-made is the black structure? It looks more like a monolith, an unknown and unknowable form. It is hard to tell its shape: it is angular and sleek, catching light evenly across its left side, and somewhat strangely: should this side not be in shadow?

⁶²² These cemeteries have of course recently become 'tourist Mecca[s] for Jews from all over the world'. (Linda Nochlin, 'Starting with the Self', *The Jew In the Text* (London, 1995) p.9.) Their dilapidation, now courted, can become aestheticised.



Fig. 129

Hannah Collins, *In the course of time II*, 1994
103 ¼" x 230" (262 x 584 cm), Photograph on paper mounted on muslin
Tate Modern

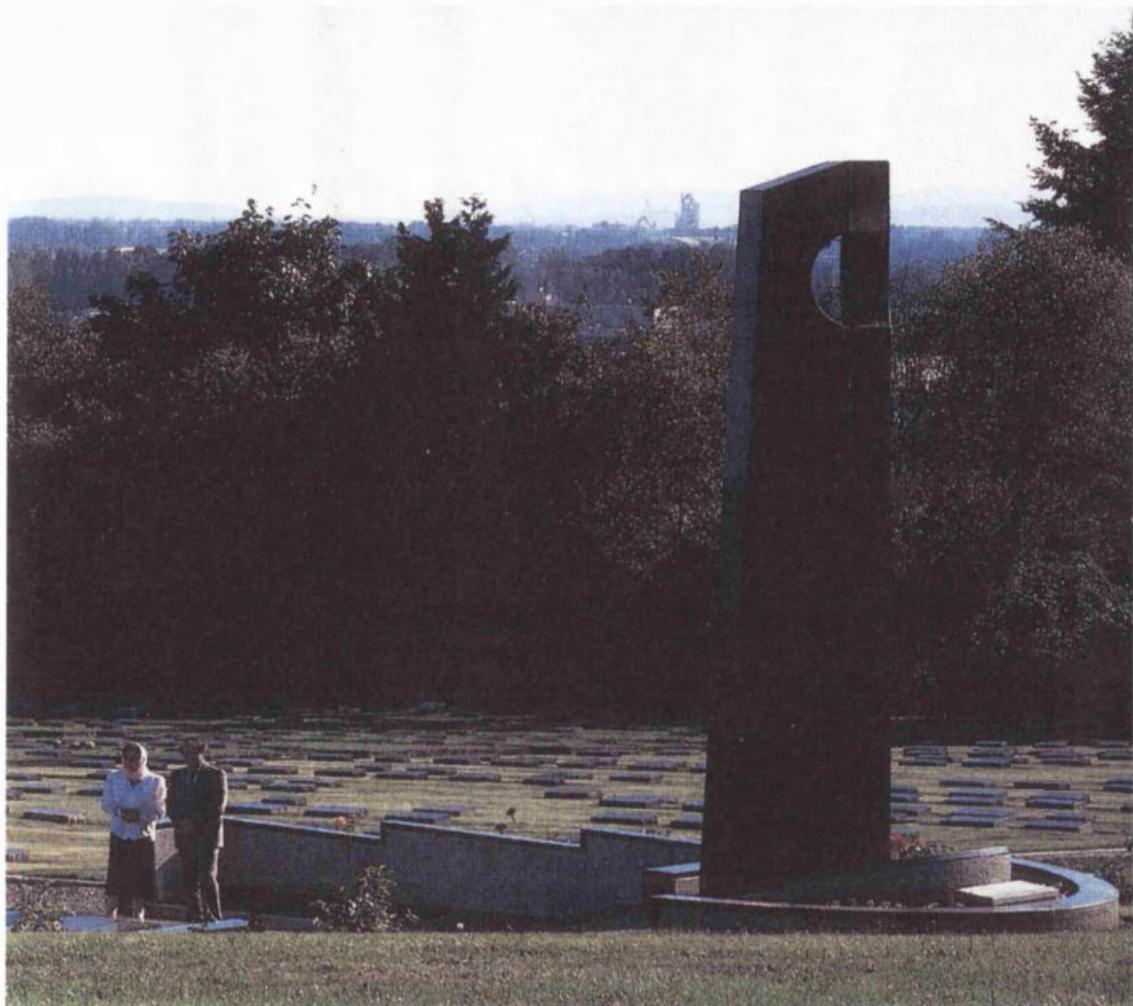


Fig. 130
Jeff Wall, *The Holocaust Memorial in the Jewish Cemetery*, 1987 [detail]

Here, on the far side of the world, the Holocaust is represented by a black form. The Holocaust - Modernism's forgotten? Modernism's memory?, Modernity's 'heart of darkness' (or is that a kind of myth?) - is balanced by the bridge of progress. Is the black form a bridge to the past?

Jeff Wall made the photograph in 1987, the very year the memorial was put up, returning to the changed landscape of the same Jewish Cemetery he had photographed in 1980 – the cemetery where his parents would be buried. 'The memorial itself, Wall feels, is wrong.... "It is the same as a war memorial. It stands up above the horizon in order to triumph. The Holocaust was not such an event."⁶²³ To emphasise its monumental, imposing scale, Wall took the photograph from far away, so the vertical structure breaks the horizontality of the rest of the image. But this vantage point meant cutting out what might also seem wrong about the memorial.

'The Monument was to consist of two 15 feet black granite columns spaced apart to symbolise the Jewish nation shaken by atrocities, at the base were to be the names of 17 of the most heinous death camps and in front of those camps was to be a Star of David with an eternal light representing our unfaltering faith in Judaism. At the top of the columns were to be three doves representing eternal hope. In front of the Monument was a Memorial Plaza of names inscribed in granite of loved ones of Vancouver survivors who perished in the Holocaust.'⁶²⁴ (*fig.131*)

We have seen this kind of symbolism before. Remember the pressures put on Louis Kahn, or James Freed's initial plans for a cracked granite wall. Do doves, stars, broken granite slabs, inscriptions....really safeguard memory? (Lyotard: 'Only that which has been inscribed can, in the current sense of the term, be forgotten.') And if columns and emblems do bring memories, are these not also the memories of the totalitarian regimes which put them to such effective use? (Serra: 'Venturi wants two enormous pylons of axis with the Treasury...' Crimp: 'Like the Nuremberg Rally lights'.⁶²⁵)

⁶²³ Michael Aizenstadt, 'A Conversation with Jeff Wall', *The Jewish Western Bulletin*, 15 March, 1990

⁶²⁴ Board of Directors Meeting of the Vancouver Holocaust Centre Society, 11 August, 1986, p. 2

⁶²⁵ See note 591



Fig. 131

J.S. Lutsky Architecture Incorporated, Vancouver Holocaust Memorial (photograph), 1987



Fig. 132
Tony Smith, *New Piece*, 1966
6'11" x 12' x 14'2" (210.8 x 365.8 x 426.7 cm)
Painted steel
Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, New Jersey

But Wall's photograph does not ask us to scrutinise the problematic symbolism of the monument. These details are too distant, and they are also blocked from view. Wall represents the memorial from behind. It looks like nothing more than a kind of minimalist sculpture, like a Ron Bladen, or a Tony Smith (*fig.132*): the 'New Monuments' used to remember the past.

In the model of Louis Kahn's Holocaust memorial, two figures, pictured in conversation, have their backs to it, but are still represented engaged in the act of remembering (*fig.66*). In the architect's drawing for the Vancouver memorial, a small group is pictured looking up to it (*fig.133*). In Wall's photograph, the couple with their backs to the structure seem deliberately placed. They are remembering private loss in public, but their presence, so close, emphasises the absence of anyone in front of the structure. Perhaps the juxtaposition makes transparent the myth of 'public memory' – memorials serve a purpose in ceremonies, maybe, but are invisible on a day like the one pictured. Or perhaps it is the utter visibility, the looming, black, overbearing monumentality that makes this memorial invisible to the mourners.

I am not invoking this photograph to probe Wall's relationship with minimalism, nor to introduce the question of photography and Holocaust memory. Of course, in its play with horizontality and verticality, Wall's photograph engages legacies of modernist painting. Clearly, Wall shares Claes Oldenburg's and Robert Morris's early scepticism about traditional monuments. Wall's photograph is witness to the continued interest of artists in questions around the monument, and the Holocaust, but what primarily interests me concerns the way abstraction is in play. For Wall, turning the memorial into an abstract sculpture seems one way of representing its fault. I hope to have questioned such a representation of abstraction.

In his description of what was wrong with the memorial, Wall said 'As a Holocaust memorial it should be a hole.'⁶²⁶ This, it should be noted, it itself a sculptural idea. But what kind of a hole? Not, presumably, an open grave? Oldenburg and Morris both

⁶²⁶ Aizenstadt, *op. cit.*



Fig. 133

J.S. Lutsky Architecture Incorporated, Vancouver Holocaust Memorial (drawing), 1987



Fig. 134

Claes Oldenburg, *Placid Civil Monument*, Central Park behind the Metropolitan Museum, 1 October 1967

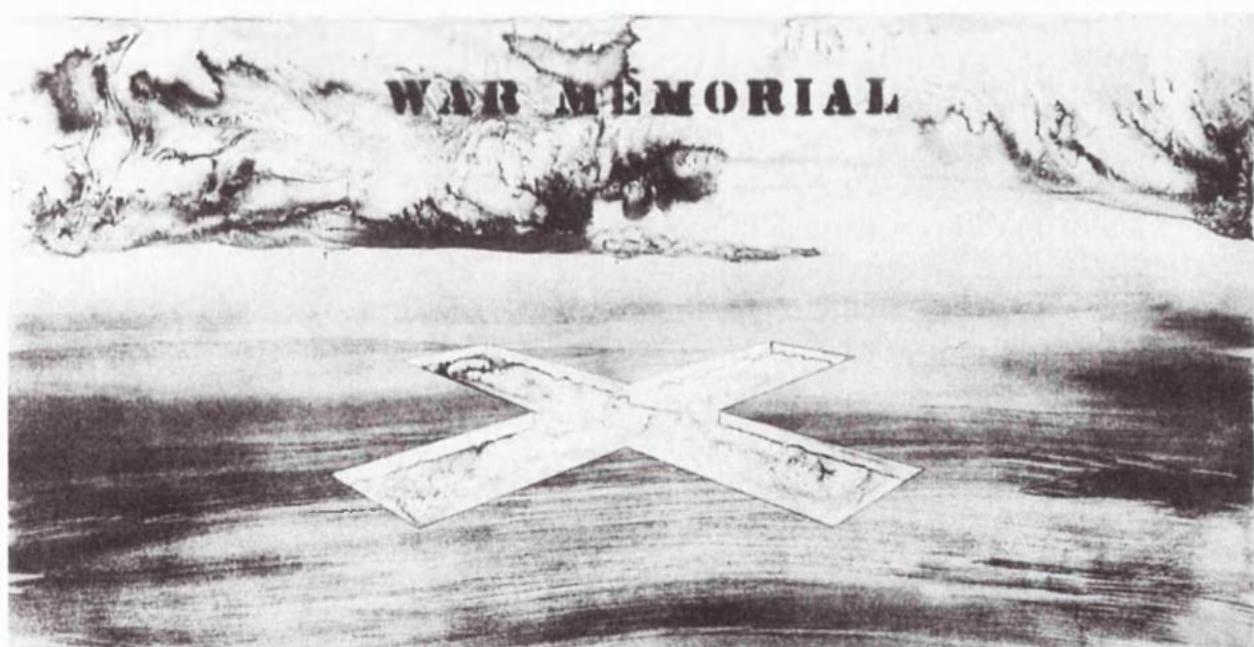


Fig. 135

Robert Morris, *War Memorial: Trench with Chlorine Gas*, 1970
Lithograph

imagined ‘memorials’ as open graves, but these seem too symbolic (*fig.134 and 135*). Wall’s own work, *The Flooded Grave* (1998-2000) presents the grave as a site of fantasy. So a hole, maybe, in representation. A hole does not mean an absence of meaning, though. A hole is defined by what surrounds it, requiring substance around it to make it a hole. Could we think of the substance as meaning, the space contained as its absence? The dynamic of the hole is the dynamic of Holocaust representation I have explored, the dynamic of abstraction.

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Morris Louis

Archives of American Art

Morris Louis Files

Clement Greenberg Files

Barnett Newman

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Files relating to:

John Canaday

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Ben Heller

Thomas Hess

Howard Nemerov

Harold Rosenberg

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Project for a Synagogue, 1951

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The Stations of the Cross

including

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John Canaday

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Louis Kahn

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American Jewish Committee Archives, New York City

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Frank Stella

The Museum of Modern Art, New York City

Department of Painting and Sculpture: Frank Stella Collection File

Archives of American Art

Frank Stella

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

The archival material on the Art for Public Spaces Programme is stored in two places in the USHMM.

- 1) The 'Art for Public Spaces' files. This is a filing cabinet full of documents, and the principal source of my archival material.
- 2) The USHMM institutional archive. This is the formal institutional archive of the museum. This contains boxes of documents. Those that I have consulted include Jeshajahu Weinberg's files, Michael Berenbaum's files, and the Council Files.

The minutes of different meetings of a particular museum committee are not collected together in these archives. For instance, one might find the January 1991 minutes of a 'Committee for Collections and Acquisitions' meeting in the Art for Public Spaces files, and the February 1991 minutes of this same committee in Jeshajahu Weinberg's files.

Unless specified as coming from 'Weinberg files', 'Berenbaum files', or 'Council Files', all museum documents come from the Art for Public Spaces files.

Epilogue: Jeff Wall

Information from Vancouver Holocaust Education Center, Holocaust Center Society for Education and Remembrance.

3. INTERVIEWS

General

Norman Kleeblatt, New York, 21 April 1999
Robert Rosenblum, New York, 10 June 1999
Robert Pincus-Witten, New York, 11 June 1999
Max Kozloff, New York, 20 December 2000
Amy Newman, New York, 5 December 2000

Morris Louis

Marcella Louis Brenner, Washington D.C., 27 May 1999
Andrew Hudson, Washington D.C., 27 May 1999
Jacob Kainen, Washington D.C., 14 December 2000

Louis Kahn

David Finn, New York, 22 February 2000
Vladka Meed, New York, 23 February 2000
Susan Solomon, Princeton, New Jersey, 12 February 2000

USHMM

Sara Bloomfield, Director of USHMM, Washington, D.C., 15 December 2000
James Freed, USHMM Architect, New York, 19 December 2000
Gary Garrels, AFPSP Jury Member, New York, 18 December 2000
Ellsworth Kelly, Artist, New York, 14 November 2000
Sol LeWitt, Artist, New York, 28 November 2000
Susan Morganstein, former Director of Special Exhibitions, USHMM, Washington, D.C.,
New York, 12 December 2000
Nancy Rosen, AFPSP project administrator, New York, 16 November 2000
Nan Rosenthal, AFPSP jury member, New York, 1 December 2000
Richard Serra, Artist, New York, 4 January 2001
Joel Shapiro, Artist, New York, 15 November 2000
Lawrence Weiner, Artist, New York, 18 December 2000

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Funding

Arts and Humanities Research Board
 UJIA
 Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture
 University College London Graduate Travel Fund

General

In addition to all those listed in the interview section to whom I am extremely grateful, I would like to thank the various individuals working in artist's estates, archives, libraries, museums, and other institutions.

These include Hindy Kisch who helped me access exhibition files at The Jewish Museum; Julie Miller for directing me to the Zagayski files in the Ratner Center at the Jewish Theological Seminary; Kirsten Degel at the Louisiana Museum, Diane Upright who spoke with me about her research on Morris Louis and helped me access Louis's widow Marcella Louis Brenner; Heidi Colsman-Freyburger, Jane Bobko, and Sarah Henry at the Barnett Newman Foundation for their frequent assistance in accessing files; Molly Donovan and Kathryn Tuma at the National Gallery, Washington D.C. for help with research on Barnett Newman; David Abel at the Guggenheim Museum for providing installation photographs from Newman's 1966 exhibition; William Whitaker, Julia Converse, and Matthew Pisarski at the Architectural Archives in the University of Pennsylvania for help accessing Kahn archives; Staff at City Hall for help accessing information on Louis Kahn; Miriam Tierney at the American Jewish Committee for help accessing files on Louis Kahn; Laura Rosencroft at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, for help accessing exhibition files on Frank Stella; Paula Pelosi and Frank Stella for allowing me to see a *Polish Village* work in Frank Stella's collection; Erin Rother at Knoedler Gallery, New York for help accessing illustrations of the *Polish Village* series; Barbara Jakobson, New York for allowing me to visit her private collection to view Stella's *Felstyn III*; Jeff Carter at the USHMM for his great help accessing files; Nancy Rosen and Susan Morganstein for supporting my research on the USHMM and for putting me in touch with other interviewees; Nina Krieger at the Vancouver Holocaust Education Center for information relating to the Vancouver Holocaust memorial.

Academic

Many thanks to Dr. Briony Fer and Professor Tamar Garb for encouraging me to continue research after my M.A. and for their advice, support, and kindness throughout the time of my research. It is thanks to their help that these three years have been so enjoyable. Thanks to Juliet Steyn for her comments at my upgrade. Many thanks also to other members of the History of Art Department at University College London and

fellow PhD students with whom I have discussed my work including Simon Baker and Amy Mechowski.

Personal

My family, David and Sharon Godfrey and Sarah Godfrey, and partner Rachel Lewis have been unbelievably loving and supportive throughout the last few years, assisting me in so many ways. Special thanks to my father, for taking me to see Barnett Newman's paintings at an exhibition at the Tate in 1986 and igniting my interest in art, my mother for instilling her fascination with Jewish culture, my sister for encouraging me and for her enthusiasm about my project, and Ray for putting up with my frequent visits to the United States and coming round countless galleries, and not minding too much when our Valentines Day trip to Paris turned out also to be a trip to the Rothko retrospective. Thanks also to Ray's parents Dvora and Michael Lewis for encouragement and for technical advice with scanners and printers!

Thanks also to Professor Carmel Schrire, Nina and Reuben Steiger - my family in New York and Princeton for being so warm during my research trips. Finally, thank you to my late grandmother Sylvia Schrire who gave me her copy of *Wooden Synagogues* before she died.