

Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art Case Study: the Jewish Museum, New York City

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PREFACE

This case study describes the artistic and dialogic intents and outcomes of *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art* March 13 through June 30, 2002, an exhibition organized by the Jewish Museum, an art museum located in New York City.

The intent of the Jewish Museum in organizing this exhibition is best captured in a statement that describes the institution's belief that *Mirroring Evil* would function as:

. . . springboard for dialogue about the complicity and complacency toward evil in today's society. The museum will show work by . . . artists who have eschewed the deeply entrenched Holocaust imagery that focuses on the victim. Instead, they use images of perpetrators—Nazis—to provoke viewers to explore the culture of victimhood . . .¹

This case study will contend that the exhibition, combined with the Jewish Museum's laudable interest in facilitating dialogue on a complex and difficult subject, made it the ideal site for arts-based civic dialogue. In an era of declining attendance and support for art museums in this country, the successes and challenges experienced by the museum can serve as a learning opportunity for those cultural institutions that seek to expand their engagement with the public beyond the normal public programming model of expert panels and interpretative materials.

Mirroring Evil included 19 works by 13 younger artists who examine the representation of National Socialist images by mass culture, interpreted through the consciousness of a generation that had not even been born when the events of the Holocaust unfolded. It is certainly not new for artists to explore the notion of evil through the lens of the Holocaust. What is unusual is to situate their exploration within the context of imagery that attempts to explore the forbidden character of the perpetrator. Holocaust art has been confined, in most cases, to the memorialization and sacralization of the victims and their stories. *Mirroring Evil* offered artists, only four of whom are Jewish, the opportunity to shift the perspective and examine the perpetrators as a means to identify the distinguishing characteristics of evil. The result, as is often the case when the ground beneath our feet begins to shift, could be dizzying.

¹ This case drew substantially upon reports by the Jewish Museum to Animating Democracy.

This case study will examine several features of this project: the institutions and individuals involved, the planning process from curatorial intent to exhibition design to dialogic opportunities, brief descriptions of the artwork, the nature and effects of the arts-based civic dialogue, and finally an analysis of the public reception and the controversy that erupted before the exhibition ever opened its doors.

THE PARTICIPANTS

The Jewish Museum was founded in 1904, with a gift of 26 Jewish ceremonial artworks by Judge Mayer Sulzberger to The Jewish Theological Seminary. The museum continues to use its collection to explore Jewish culture and over the years has taken its place among the major cultural institutions of New York. The Jewish Museum reaches out to diverse populations, within and outside of the Jewish community, through a collection of more than 28,000 objects, including paintings and sculptures, works on paper, photographs, archaeological artifacts, ceremonial objects, and broadcast media. It is also committed to public programming that serves as both audience development and cultural outreach. Since 1957, the museum has been located at Fifth Avenue and 92nd Street, along New York’s prestigious Museum Mile. In 1993, an ambitious expansion increased the gallery space and permanent exhibition spaces, and added classrooms and an auditorium for educational programs.

Norman Kleeblatt, the Jewish Museum’s Susan and Elihu Rose Curator of Fine Arts, has been a curator at the Museum since 1981. During the last twenty years, he has played a major role in the direction of the Museum’s exhibition program and the development of its collection of modern and contemporary art. In his work as a curator, Kleeblatt has never been wary of investigating a topic that is seen as taboo. He curated *The Dreyfus Affair: Art, Truth and Justice* (1987), an exhibition that presented visual art produced in France at the end of the 19th century during the time of the trial and imprisonment of Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish military officer who was falsely accused of treason. The virulent anti-Semitism of that time was reflected in the material shown in the exhibition. Yet Kleeblatt was not seeking to shock Jewish audiences. Rather, he was intrigued with the role that artists had played in supporting the perpetrators of the affair, as well as in some cases Dreyfus’s defenders. Kleeblatt used the historical artwork to examine the role of the media in documenting as well as in fermenting the crisis. He writes:

The Affair established for the first time in history a new role of social and political activism for writers, artists, and academicians, setting the pace for the involvement of the same groups in the ever more pressing and harrowing dilemmas of the twentieth century. . . . This was an era that thrived on information (the more skewed and sensational, the better) and materialism (which grew ever more commercialized and accessible). And it frequently fused and confused these two.²

In 1991, Kleeblatt turned to an exploration of Jewish identity in the exhibition, “Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities.” This exhibition explored the question of when, where, and how Jewish artists would choose—or perhaps be invited—to participate in the postmodern discourse on identity-based representation. The exhibition invited 23 young Jewish artists to:

² Kleeblatt, “The Dreyfus Affair: A Visual Record.”

... recast their Jewish past in the matrix of postwar America, including both positive and negative aspects of growing up as a white *Other* in what was formerly seen as the munificent melting pot. Few pay attention to earlier Jewish pasts—the shtetls and ghettos of Europe or New York’s Lower East Side, places about which previous generations still wax nostalgic. And the Holocaust, which occupies a central position within the construction of contemporary Jewish identity, is addressed ambivalently or critically, if it is addressed at all.³

These two exhibitions reflected Kleeblatt’s belief that the Jewish Museum should present work that addresses timely and often difficult social issues. His commitment to the open discussion of even controversial social issues is further represented in *Mirroring Evil*.

The Jewish Museum Staff is an outstanding team of museum professionals who worked with Kleeblatt in conceptualizing and implementing both the exhibition and the accompanying public programming. Working with Kleeblatt as part of the curatorial team was Joanna Lindenbaum, assistant curator of the exhibition. Lindenbaum and Kleeblatt worked closely together, with the latter serving both as mentor and colleague to his younger counterpart. Lindenbaum should be credited for her willingness to conceive new ways of collaborating with other departments and particularly in forging a collegial dynamic with her counterparts in the education department. From the outset, the team was determined to forge a new model of how a museum could work with this challenging material and to fully integrate the public programming within the curatorial plan. They began by including Carole Zawatsky, the Director of Education, as a critical member of the team. Ignoring what can be an impenetrable hierarchy within museums, curatorial, educational, and public programming staff worked together to assure a seamless plan to accomplish the common goal of exhibiting, contextualizing, and interpreting the artworks. While there were occasional clashes, the Jewish Museum developed an interdepartmental model that was predicated on mutual respect and a commitment to internal dialogue. This new way of working represented a significant accomplishment of the project, which staff believes will continue in the future.⁴

In addition to Kleeblatt, Lindenbaum, and Zawatsky, the museum team involved in the project included: Ruth Beesch, Deputy Director for Program, and Ann Scher, Director of Communication, as well as many other members of the staff who were involved at various stages of the planning. Museum Director Joan Rosenbaum was frequently involved and played an important role in supporting and communicating the curatorial vision to trustees and others in the community.

The Collaborators were comprised of institutions that were selected based upon the museum’s interest in developing programming for adults, school groups, and educators, and to provide opportunities to involve others within the city of New York in the process of framing the civic issues inherent within and tangential to the exhibition. In particular, the museum reports that the National Center for Jewish Learning and Leadership played a key role in defining those issues that might arise within the very diverse Jewish community as well as other potential audiences who would be drawn into dialogue through the artists’ work. The collaborators and their contributions included:

³ Kleeblatt, “Passing Into Multiculturalism,” *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities*, p.7.

⁴ In a conversation with Lindenbaum in November 2003, she reports that the dialogic and collaborative model established during *Mirroring Evil* continues to work well on subsequent projects. She commented that since *Mirroring Evil*, the entire staff recognizes that education is not about classes for children, but rather about integrating educational and interpretive materials throughout the planning for every exhibition.

The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership (CLAL) is a think tank, leadership training institute, and resource center; its activities are dedicated to building a Jewish life that is spiritually vibrant and engaged with the intellectual and ethical challenges of the wider world. CLAL's faculty represents an unusual mix of rabbis from every denomination, and scholars from an array of disciplines. Working with established and emerging volunteer leaders, rabbis, and Jewish professionals, CLAL has earned a reputation for provocative programming that embodies the principles of pluralism and helps to revitalize institutions. JM staff reports that CLAL played a key role in the framing of issues. The JM team met with CLAL staff regularly to discuss issues pertinent to the exhibition and this engagement was seen as particularly helpful in framing approaches to engaging both Jewish and non-Jewish communities.

Facing History and Ourselves engages students of diverse backgrounds in citizenship education. Civic education encourages the skills, promotes the values, and fosters the ideals needed to sustain a democratic society. Peter Nelson from Facing History and Ourselves worked with Michelle Asche, the JM Manager for School and Outreach, to provide advice and comments regarding the educator guide; and he participated in the planning for the teacher workshops.

The Vera List Center for Art and Politics at the New School University, founded in 1992 with the generous support of philanthropist Vera List, is the university's vehicle for debate, discussion, research, and reflection concerning the complex and vital relationship between politics and the arts. Committed to ensuring the future of democratic culture, the Center serves as a forum for those seeking an open analysis of relevant issues. Toward this end, the Center develops public lectures, courses, symposia, publications, research activities, and focused study groups.

The New School University, formerly the New School for Social Research, established in 1917 by a group of New York City intellectuals, is committed to and organized around principles of social and political change.

The Humanities and Social Science Library of The New York Public Library presented a lecture about anti-Semitism and music.

PLANNING ACTIVITIES

From the beginning, the goal was to organize an exhibition of contemporary art and an accompanying catalogue to stimulate dialogue around the issues raised by the artists in their work. Within this approach, it became necessary to design a series of extensive educational and public programming components in order to deal with the underlying issues the project might raise. It was also considered important that the overall project include interpretative materials to deal not only with the wide variety of media being used by the artists but also to address content issues in a way that served as outreach to the museum's multiple audiences. These interpretive materials included:

- two videos commissioned to contextualize the work in an aesthetic and historical frame of reference;
- a series of text panels, labels, and artists' statements;
- an exhibition catalogue.

Inclusive Planning

Different from past exhibitions, the Education Department collaborated with the Curatorial Department to interpret the issues and ideas of the works of art and the exhibition as a whole. The engagement among the core staff and other departments of the museum was extremely helpful in formulating the planning process. In a thoughtful and insightful final report, the museum notes that the exhibition provided the opportunity to design and implement an innovative methodology for the institution's departments to work together toward a common goal.

Responsibilities and functions within the institution shifted during the course of the *Mirroring Evil* project. Each and every department of the museum participated in the planning or implementation. . . . Throughout the planning stages, the curatorial team worked much more closely with the education, public programming, and public relations departments of the museum than for past exhibitions.

After more than three years of planning, several civic issues were identified as arising both from the collective conceptual framework of the exhibition and from the individual artists' work. The process itself was described as highly dialogic, and the JM report notes:

. . . the project evolved and transformed, changing and improving time and again.

This commitment to an inclusive and collaborative process served the museum well, not only in its success in developing the exhibition and its interpretive materials, but also in forming a cohesive team that was broadly representative of the institution.

Ultimately, after much discussion and debate, the following issues were stated as the core questions of the exhibition and its public programming:

- **Who can speak for the Holocaust?** Can only survivors speak? How can subsequent generations gain understanding and apply the lessons of the past?
- **How has art used Nazi imagery to represent evil?** What happens to our understanding of history as film, television, and other art forms convert the Nazis into symbols?
- **What are the limits of irreverence?** To what extent may artists overstep the bounds of taste, in confronting facts that are outrageous and terrifying? Do some art forms work against themselves?
- **Why must we confront evil?** What are the dangers of ignoring the past or being complacent about the present?
- **How has art helped to break the silence?** When reality seems to be unspeakable, how may art open a dialogue and keep memory alive?

The individuals who worked to frame these questions did so from a point of view that reflected the underlying core values of the project. First, each question was designed to promote dialogue rather than shutting it down. This value was apparent throughout the museum's public programming. Second, while the questions were designed to be as straightforward as possible, they were also intended to touch on many other civic issues inherent to the project. According to the Interim Report:

. . . For example, the question, "Who Can Speak for the Holocaust?" raises the issue of relativization of the Jewish Holocaust and what can be learned in terms of other

Holocausts. And the question, “Why Must We Confront Evil?” raises questions of victimhood within the Jewish communities as well as in other minority communities.

The staff recognized that the evolving dialogue that led to the formulation of these questions resulted in a deeper understanding of the issues on the part of the artists and staff as well as the various collaborators, advisors, and partners. From July to November 2000, Kleeblatt and Lindenbaum convened various community leaders to advise and assist with the development of the interpretive strategies and to aid the construction of civic dialogues. Carol Zawatsky played an important role in designing and implementing these meetings. She envisioned these gatherings as a resource to elicit feedback on potential community responses to the exhibition. Participants included museum and other educators as well as lay leaders from the Jewish community and those involved in the study of the Holocaust. Throughout their deliberations, the various committees consciously employed a dialogic model in their discussions. The advisory committees examined the exhibition’s imagery and its multiple associations and interpretations. All the responses and feedback were evaluated and taken into careful consideration during the planning stages, and several were incorporated as major components of the projects. The advisory groups were divided into three distinct populations, and their comments were instrumental in the museum’s design of the exhibition and the interpretative materials that accompanied it.

Scholar Meetings: Kleeblatt notes that scholar’s meetings are often used for complex exhibitions organized by the museum. In this case, the discussions focused on:

. . . the meaning and history of art and literature related to the Holocaust, the primacy of memory culture, and the urge of these artists—reflected also in the writings of a number of academics and critics—to move beyond the reverential. There were also those who considered an urgent need to find some relevance for teaching about World War II and the Holocaust in light of the tragedies and violence that continue to take place today.

Board of Director Meetings: Staff reports that the members of the Jewish Museum Board played a vital role in preparing for the exhibition. Staff met collectively, and in many cases individually, with board members to review the conceptual framework for the exhibition, to familiarize them with individual works of art, and to assure that they would be well prepared to field questions and concerns from donors, members, and others in the community. Moreover, many trustees provided input on the project’s issues, the interpretive methods, public programs, as well as actively supported public outreach by bringing visitors to the Museum.

Community Advisory and Advisory Board Meetings: Prior to the opening of the exhibition, Zawatsky met with approximately 20 individuals including survivors, scholars, religious leaders, and children of survivors to review the images, as well as their associations and interpretations, and to discuss the issues relevant to the exhibition. All feedback and ideas exchanged in these meetings were taken into careful consideration during the planning stages of the project. Regarding the input of the advisory board, the staff notes that this group played an instrumental role in the idea to produce a “Talking Heads” video that would capture the diverse points of view regarding issues explored in the exhibition. Zawatsky writes that “. . . this video would pave a way for our visitors to experience, to a degree, the spirit and dynamics of the conversations that had taken place in more intimate settings.

In addition, the museum believed that an introductory video was necessary to set the stage for what visitors might expect to see within the exhibition. In comments captured for the Interim

Report, Maurice Berger, a nationally-recognized cultural critic, shared his vision for the introductory video:

. . . I was asked to produce a video that would help set some of the exhibition's central issues in a social and cultural context. I realized that the content of the exhibition was controversial in nature and suggested creating a video that would remind viewers that many of the exhibition's central issues—the nature of the Holocaust and Nazism and the seduction and repulsion of violence and evil—have long been examined by the culture at large. . . . The five-minute video I produced contains clips from popular films and television programs of the past fifty years—fragments from popular culture that ask us to reflect upon our own relationship to the central questions and issues of the exhibition.

Based on advisor meetings, the museum decided not to produce an exhibition audio-guide and not to make the website a major component of the dialogue. Listening to an audio-guide might distract from dialogue and original thought within the galleries. Instead of engaging in the works of art, the public would be passive rather than actively involved. Staff decided not to hold public dialogues on the museum's web site due to the excess of misinformation about the project that circulated in and out of the press prior to the opening of the exhibition.

Junior Staff Dialogue Meetings: Lindenbaum convened meetings to capture the responses of a younger generation, born in the 1970s and 1980s. It is interesting to note that all of the participating artists were at least one generation removed from the Holocaust and under 38 years of age. Lindenbaum reported on the museum's interest in engaging in dialogue with younger people, and this effort began with the Junior Staff, defined as those under the age of 32. The outcomes of the dialogue reflected its diversity, from religious to nonobservant, and from grandchildren of Holocaust survivors to Germans, African Americans, and others. There was no unanimity of point of view, although the works in the exhibition disturbed many of the members of the younger group. Lindenbaum reports:

Contrary to what we had expected, many members of this younger group were very disturbed by the works and the subject matter. A heated discussion developed about whether or not it was appropriate for the artists to single out specific consumer brands and about whether the group's Jewish participants should respond differently from non-Jewish participants to the issues at hand.

This dialogue resulted in a major constructive idea, one that impacted the overall organization of the exhibition: this group preferred to be asked questions within an exhibition as opposed to being given close-ended information.

In each case, the museum staff reports that these engagements with various segments in the community were critical to their work. Kleeblatt used his scholar meetings to stimulate his thinking and initially to identify participants who might make a contribution to the catalogue. Zawatsky writes that dialogue with the community strengthened her own convictions regarding the importance of the exhibition. Both Zawatsky and Lindenbaum note that concrete suggestions made by various outside groups were later incorporated into the design of the exhibition.

Curatorial Intent

In his catalogue essay, Kleeblatt begins with a discussion of the transgressive nature of the work of Anselm Kiefer, a German artist whose paintings consistently utilize iconic images from

Germany's national socialist past in his paintings. Kleeblatt draws upon the work of cultural theorist Andreas Huyssen, whose analysis of Kiefer's work offers a possible rationale for why this post-war artist continues to navigate the treacherous boundaries of the taboo in reminding Germans of a past they'd rather forget.

The issue . . . is not whether to forget or to remember, but rather how to remember and how to handle representations of the remembered past at a time when most of us . . . only know that past through images, films, photographs and representations. . . . To say it in yet another way, Kiefer's haunted images . . . do not challenge the representations of those who refuse to face the terror of the past; rather they challenge the repressions of those who do remember and who do accept the burden of fascism on German national identity.⁵

Kleeblatt's catalogue essay is significant in giving evidence to his interest in the role of art in demystifying the realm of the forbidden and taboo, particularly as it pertains to how those taboos form Jewish identity. He is most eloquent, however, when he describes the paradox inherent in the early work of Boris Lurie, a Russian-born Buchenwald survivor. In a series of large-scale collages, *Saturation Paintings-1959-64*, Lurie both entices and repels the viewer's gaze through the conflation of images of emaciated survivors and licentious pinups of the same era. Like the *Lustmörd* paintings of Weimar Germany, Lurie's work taunts the viewer with its voyeuristic seduction, the forbidden glimpses into the basest landscape of the human soul. Kleeblatt wonders why these images continue to shock even after the far more sexually graphic work of Mapplethorpe or the religious transgression of Serrano would seem to have desensitized our collective capacity for outrage. He reflects on the question of transgression and art:

Lurie collages crossed boundaries. But who sets these boundaries, and who dares to traverse them? Not least, who has a right to?⁶

The underlying spirit expressed in the question "Who has the right?" is repeated in one of the core questions of the exhibition, namely, "Who owns the holocaust?" Kleeblatt's answer is the essence of this exhibition. He selected the work of artists who:

. . . use Nazi imagery—the ultimate signifier of evil—to mirror moral and ethical issues that resonate in contemporary society. Each artist puts the viewer in the uncomfortable terrain between good and evil, seduction and repulsion. . . . They surround viewers with the unmentionable, bring them close to synecdoches for evil, then leave them to ponder the inexorable complexity of ethics.⁷

Kleeblatt was prescient in his understanding that positioning the viewer in the terrain between good and evil, surrounded by icons of the unmentionable, often leaves him or her free to actualize the work through the lens of an individualized and eccentric definition of transgression and taboo. Hence, every depiction of evil is a potential assault and every incursion through the boundary into the realm of the forbidden must be punished. Such was often the case with the reception and response to *Mirroring Evil*, and a critical question for consideration is whether the museum's ensuing steps toward mediating and interpreting the work as well as design of the dialogic program was successful in its adherence to the curatorial vision and intent while

⁵ Andreas Huyssen, "Anselm Kiefer: The Terror of History, the Temptation of Myth," *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. New York and London: Routledge, 1995, p. 215.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

attempting to ameliorate the genuine pain and sense of betrayal experienced by some constituents.

The Artists

Mirroring Evil includes 19 works by 13 artists, four of whom are Jewish:

Boaz Arad (born 1956), Israel: *Hebrew Lessons* (2000) splices together segments of film and sound bites from some of Hitler's public speeches, ending with a video of Hitler saying "Shalom Yerushalayim, ani mitnatzel," Hebrew for "Hello Jerusalem, I apologize."

Christine Borland (born 1965), Scotland: *L'Homme Double: Keeping One's Hands Clean: Six Commissioned Portraits of a Perpetrator* consists of six plaster busts of Nazi doctor Joseph Mengele, each created by a forensic sculptor who worked from blurry photographs and descriptions given to them by the artist.

Rudolf Herz (born 1954), Germany: *Zugzwang* (1995) consists of a 1932 portrait of Hitler and a 1912 portrait of Marcel Duchamp, both created by Hitler's official portrait photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann. Herz wallpapers one room of the gallery with these images, repeated like a checkerboard. The title is a chess term describing apposition in which any possible move will make the situation worse. The viewer is asked to look at these two iconic figures, the dictator and the Dadaist as interpreted and homogenized by the lens of the camera.

Matt Kollishaw (born 1955), England: *Burnt Almonds: Gustav & Helga* feature two reticular light-box photos showing Nazi officers and half-dressed women in a theatrical recreation of Hitler's suicide bunker.

Elke Krystufek (born 1970), Vienna: *Economical Live* is made up of elements of Nazi images and contemporary nude images collaged into a large-scale painting.

Misha Kubball (born 1958), Germany: *Hitler's Cabinet* consists of a large plywood cross. From the end of each wooden beam, lighted projections of German film stills are cast onto the floor, creating the overall image of a swastika.

Zbigniew Libera (born 1959), Poland: *LEGO Concentration Camp Set* is a set of seven boxes with the familiar toy company logo floating above images for an imaginary toy concentration camp.

Roe Rosen (born 1963), Israel: *Live and Die as Eva Braun* (1995) seeks to depict the final moments in the infamous Hitler-mistress's life, complete with her premonition of descending to hell.

Tom Sachs (born 1966), United States: *Giftgas Giftset* (1998) consists of "designer" Xyklon B gas cans decorated with Chanel, Hermès, and Tiffany and Company logos.

Allen Schechner (born 1962), England: *Self-Portrait at Buchenwald: It's the Real Thing* is a web-based work that inserts the artist into a Margaret Bourke-White photograph of Jewish inmates in Buchenwald. He's standing in front of them, dressed as they are but looking well and healthy and holding a can of Diet Coke.

ARTIST INVOLVEMENT IN EXHIBITION PLANNING AND PROGRAMS

“Planning *Mirroring Evil* also affected the institution in its approach to working with artists. Again, because of the difficult, sensitive, and controversial nature of the project, those artists invited to show in *Mirroring Evil* were much more involved in this exhibition than in others. Their increased participation is due in part to the Animating Democracy Initiative, which required three artist letters of commitment for the grant application. This prompted the Museum to involve some of the artists very early on in the interpretation of the exhibition, as well as the ideas of civic dialogue and exchange between diverse participants. Each of the artists was brought to New York for preparatory round table discussions prior to the exhibition, and to participate in the interviews of the talking heads video. Their ideas and suggestions were taken into consideration in the exhibition planning, its interpretive components, and surrounding programs. The Museum staff hope the meeting, the exhibition, and all *Mirroring Evil* programs have created an impact on the artists and their practices. Going forward, the Museum anticipates using the relationship with artists as a model, and to incorporate and consult with artists in its future projects. The Museum has gained the understanding that it is essential to incorporate artists' ideas, backgrounds, and thoughts into its exhibitions. In addition, *Mirroring Evil* became an important experience for the artists.”

—Joanna Lindenbaum, Associate Curator

“One critical comment that more than one art pro made was that the textual and pedagogical apparatus surrounding *Mirroring Evil* was excessive, interfering with the work, and seemed overly defensive. While I could identify on a personal level with this sentiment, the passionate (and often aggressive) reactions to the exhibition provided ample proof that this apparatus was justified. Not only were the issues charged enough to have many outraged voices prior to the opening, but more importantly the discursive ambitions of curator Norman Kleeblatt were remarkable in the courage to tackle complicated and volatile issues—and to do so in a way that engaged a wide array of individuals as well as making it tangible to the strictly art public. In this sense, I believe the show was an all too rare demonstration of art's capacity to transcend its elitist (and often insular and obfuscated) realm, and do so without compromising its complexity and integrity. This extraordinary success, I believe, resulted in an intense engagement of so many—from holocaust survivors to art critics—in the dialogue, and also in a long-term process of thought, experience, and conversation that continues still, and will continue long after the exhibition closes.”

—Roe Rosen, *Mirroring Evil* artist

“Participating in the exhibition, *Mirroring Evil*, was a unique and stimulating experience for me. The premise behind the exhibition was brave, exciting, and inventive, and, in addition, the input and support of the Animating Democracy Initiative allowed a range of different kinds of dialogue to emerge. Many of these dialogues are, to say the least, uncommon within the traditional format of a group show. Most unique was the opportunity to meet with and engage in dialogues with my fellow artists in the exhibition. This is the first time I have been involved in a meeting of this nature, and it allowed introducing both the artists and their ideas. Very often, in the process of curating and criticism, the artist's voice is lost in the interpretations of others. Being able to hear first-hand from the artists provided everyone with a deeper and more informed understanding of the exhibition's works. In addition, the meeting also included the Museum representatives and those of the funding agencies, many of whom under normal circumstances would not have direct contact with artists prior to the show.

I know that the show was attacked by some in the art world as over-contextualizing the art and ideas behind the show, however I believe this to be not just false, but elitist. It is a product of those in the art world who do not want work that deals with real issues and are also not interested in the responses of general audiences. They have no interest in bridging the possible communication gap between the artist and the public. They would much rather see the continuation of an art that is ghettoized and is the private domain of a select few. The Jewish Museum, by opening up these gateways of communication both through the exhibition and in the range of supporting initiatives, provided a powerful model for a more democratic and responsive art institution.”

—Alan Schechner, *Mirroring Evil* artist

Alain Séchas (born 1955), France: *Enfants Gâtes* includes four perfectly aligned posts upon which sit toy cats, with Hitler hairstyles and mustaches and swastika baby rattles. One is surrounded by mirrors to the left and right, creating the illusion of an infinite army of Hitler cats.

Maciej Toporowicz (born 1958), Poland: *Eternity #14* places Nazi imagery of perfection and the body next to reproduction of these same images in Calvin Klein advertisements.

Piotr Uklański (born 1968), Poland: *The Nazis* (1998) compiles 147 photographs and illustrations of actors portraying Nazis in films, including virtually every major Hollywood figure of the past 50 years.

Exhibition Design

The museum team worked with two separate consultants to design the exhibition: architect Dan Kershaw, and architectural artist Allan Wexler. The intent was to produce a design that would actively engage the visitor with individual artworks and the issues the artists had chosen to address. The designers used a variety of strategies including text panels, subdued warm gray tones for the wall areas, and a small contemplative area that served as the entry to the exhibition. Kershaw's comments in the Interim Report reveal that the design was intended to offer opportunities for reflection as the visitor moved from piece to piece:

Initial plans for the exhibition included centrally located "safe rooms," places for visitors to examine the emotions included by the arts, hear or read responses by a variety of commentators, as well as express reactions at computer terminals and response books. After many shifts and adjustments, these rooms were split into a pair of bracketing zones, at the exhibition's entrance and exits.

The design of any museum exhibition is a cooperative process, involving aesthetic, educational, didactic, and security considerations. This particular project anticipated and included far more individual voices and strong opinions. The entire planning and design processes were punctuated by a series of town meeting-type forums, each of which included dissenting as well as encouraging voices from diverse fields. These dialogues aided the process of defining the order and continuity to the exhibit's plan and addressed the fine points of label location and content.

The exhibition was accompanied by a series of carefully crafted text panels that began by restating the core questions raised by the exhibition. Next, an explanatory text panel was designed to accompany each work and included a quote from a scholar, journalist, community member, or survivor. The panel adjacent to Roee Rosen's work is indicative of the high quality of these interpretive materials:

Roe Rosen (Israeli, b. 1963)
Live and Die as Eva Braun, 1995
Mixed media on paper
Courtesy of the Artist, Tel Aviv; Doron Sabag, Tel Aviv; and Eugenio Somaini, Milan.

Through images and texts, Roe Rosen invites us to enter a hallucinatory nightmare, in which we are to imagine ourselves as Adolf Hitler’s mistress, Eva Braun. The place is Hitler’s Berlin bunker, during the final moments of the Third Reich. The time is immediately after Braun’s final sex act with the dictator, when—according to mutual agreement—Hitler will kill her and then commit suicide.

How could Braun have participated in this infernal history? What could her mind have been like? In trying to picture her view of the world, Rosen has created images that initially seem benign. With scalloped edges and simplified forms, they look as if they had come from old photograph albums or children’s books—and yet their substance is perverse and morbid.

Through images that are outwardly naïve, sentimental, and charming, we enter a mental space where moral judgment is suspended and brutality becomes seductive. This is how it feels, Rosen suggests, to cavort knowingly with evil.

“Whether imagined in his bunker or out of his bunker, Hitler is today all around us—in our loathing, our fears, our fantasies of power and victimization, our nightmares of vile experience and violent endings. All of which is to say that he has surfaced as a dark presence in the turbulent underside of our dreams and is increasingly to be found in precisely those fictions that are about power, politics, pornography, and mania.”

Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *Imagining Hitler*.

Text panels at the end of the show ask visitors to consider the core questions once more before leaving the museum. These include quotes from scholars and writers, as well as quotes lifted from the media surrounding the project prior to its opening. This captured the public discourse from before the show opened and included differing points of view about the major issues surrounding the exhibition.

The museum staff placed the “Talking Heads” video in the space at the end of the exhibition. Here the viewer could choose to watch interviews expressing diverse and often opposing points of view of the artists, museum staff, scholars, survivors, and others. Carole Zawatsky writes of this video:

The video was meant to end the exhibition by adding diverse dialogic viewpoints. It was intended to frame a viewer’s discussion on the artists, their intent, and that of community members facing the manifold issues raised by the exhibition as well as the

individual works of art. The video was a means to provide visitors with the experience of multiple voices and to help create a setting where they could potentially hear their own voices echoed back.

The museum also produced an exhibition catalogue and brochure to document the project. Catalogue essays were commissioned from leading Holocaust and art history scholars. Along with an introduction by Norman Kleeblatt, each essay offered an in-depth examination of issues pertaining to the artwork and the exhibition. These issues included childhood and evil, representation and the Holocaust, institutional responsibility in exhibiting controversial work, and the ramifications of “trying on” evil. The book also included an in-depth entry on each of the artworks in the exhibition and how each contributes to and advances a multiplicity of possible dialogues. The museum reported an interesting effect of the media’s response to the catalogue on exhibition interpretation:

The media used the book as a weapon with which to ignite a dialogue that became a controversy months before the exhibition opened. Though much of what transpired in those pre-opening months could be understood as a “debate,” the media discussed many of the same issues that had been for years at the heart of the exhibition planning stages. For example, by debating whether or not the Jewish Museum should be mounting the exhibition, the topics of “Who Can Speak for the Holocaust?” and “What are the limits of representation?” were of prime significance. Quoting the media on text panels throughout the exhibition incorporated many of their ideas and comments, and this was also shared with the general public during the pre-opening months.”

The exhibition brochure was meant to inform the public that the project, with a varied menu of educational and public components, was conceived as more than an exhibition. It featured the entire scope of the project by listing and explaining each of its components, each of the institutional partners, and a roster of dialogue opportunities through a calendar of public programs.

The Warning Text

As already noted, the exhibition generated significant controversy before it ever opened. Holocaust survivors demanded that four of the works be removed from the exhibition, a demand that the museum rejected. During the negotiations, CLAL played a significant role in crafting a

“Everyone came to *Mirroring Evil* with a different strong point of view and everyone came. Visitors came because of the publicity; they came because they were curious; they came because they were hostile; they came because they were intrigued . . . and their questions and comments, in tone and substance, reflected the visitor’s viewpoint on entry. No one was unaffected; no one left unchanged. The exhibit, text panels, and docents made the point of the exhibit. The points were understood. The visitors, for the most part, ‘got’ the exhibition. As a docent, the tensions were perceptibly high. I, too, partook of the publicity, the intrigue, the hostility, and the uncertainty of the public’s response. I know *Mirroring Evil* was a success by the attention the visitors paid, and by their questions and thoughtful responses at the end of the tour. *Mirroring Evil* was an educating experience for all participants.”

—Linda Sterling, Docent

compromise that would address the concerns of the survivors and their families while protecting the integrity of the museum. Ultimately, the decision was made to post the following warning that included directions on how to leave the exhibition prior to entering the section where some of the work that was identified as most disturbing was located.

*Some Holocaust survivors have been disturbed by the works of art shown beyond this point. Visitors may choose to avoid these works by exiting the door to the left.*⁸

This decision was applauded by some in the mainstream media and the Jewish press as evidence of the museum's interest in ameliorating the genuine pain that some survivors felt at being asked to view the works. At the same time, this text and the interpretation offered through videos, wall texts, and labels, taken in concert with the opportunity to avoid certain works of art, could be seen as attempts to intervene in the viewer's experiential engagement with the artworks. The issue of the role of interpretation in preparing the audience, defusing negative responses, or explaining artistic, curatorial, or institutional intentionality is an on-going discussion in the cultural community, and the experiences from this exhibition offer opportunities for new research on this controversial, multifaceted discourse.

Dialogic Intent and Design: From December 2001–March 2002, the museum organized a number of staff training and dialogue opportunities. The JM describes the structure and function of these trainings:

This [staff training and dialogue opportunities] enabled the entire institution with an opportunity to learn and engage in the exhibition and project as a whole, to discuss the issues, to pose questions, to familiarize themselves with [the] art, and to voice their concerns . . . Subsequent training sessions focused on empathy and dialogic opportunities in which several methods to manage the general visitor as well as long-standing museum members and supports that would voice their disapproval of the exhibition or the museum.

These sessions were instrumental in helping to frame the issues that were seen as relevant and important to the Museum and its staff. The staff reports that these discussions allowed them to voice their concerns regarding vandalism and safety and were seen to have been critical to the project. The project Interim Report, which was submitted weeks into the exhibition's controversy, provided an important insight that arose from the staff meetings:

. . . At times the general mood became one of helplessness that resulted from the museum not having any prior antecedents in the area of public controversy and from not having anticipated the quantity and quality of responses the museum and staff would have to process.

As part of its dialogue program, the Museum developed an *Education Guide* that served as a curriculum resource for educators who were interested in bringing their students to the exhibition as a way to integrate the artwork into the class curriculum. Michelle Asche, Manager for School Programs and Outreach, describes the functionality of the Education Guide:

The guide was designed to assist teachers in their intentions towards incorporating themes from the artwork into their class curriculum . . . with historical background, related quotes, questions, follow-up activities, a glossary of terms, and a selection of readings.

Three Educator Seminars were designed to offer teachers the opportunity to see the exhibition and address its themes through dialogue with their colleagues prior to bringing their students. Teachers were required to attend a seminar prior to bringing their students to the exhibition.

⁸ The three pieces located on the other side were Libera's *LEGO Concentration Camp*, Sach's *Giftgas Giftset*, and Schechner's *Self Portrait at Buchenwald*.

The workshops were planned with Peter Nelson from Facing History and Ourselves. The museum also put a system in place that allowed it to respond to every letter or telephone call through one of several form letters that were developed in response to visitor concerns. In addition, 15 student groups (294 participants in total) and 84 adult groups (1,029 participants in total) requested private tours of the exhibition and discussion with the education or curatorial staff.

“Every spring, I teach a four-week unit on the Holocaust. The students read the novel *Night* and visit the Jewish Museum and the Museum of Jewish Heritage. This year, I was able to take advantage of the *Mirroring Evil* exhibit as a way of concluding this unit. Even though *Mirroring Evil* is not a Holocaust exhibit per se, I felt this was a wonderful way to apply what students had learned to this exhibit.

Before taking the students, I attended an educator's workshop with Peter Nelson and Michelle Asch. It was evident at this workshop that the exhibit created intense dialogue and debate with many of the teachers present. Some educators were very against the idea and would not take their students. I believe that impassioned debate is what all good exhibits should do and I was hoping I could foster this dialogue with my students. Most memorable to me at the workshop was Peter and Michelle's discussion of the Lego boxes. They both made me see the juxtaposition of the innocence of toys with the evil of a concentration camp. I knew that this was one of the pieces that would interest students the most. Many of them still play with toys!

The exhibit did not need a lot of scaffolding with the class that I took. Michelle accompanied us and began with a group discussion of the “Nazi” actors. Students led a discussion on some of the problems that may arise when Hollywood interprets history.

I then let them explore on their own for 30 minutes and told them to report back to the group on the piece that really caught their attention. Thirty minutes of free time in a gallery is usually too long for high school students; however, *Mirroring Evil* was engaging them.

Again, the most useful aspect of *Mirroring Evil* was that it provoked insightful debate among my students. One student in particular was not too happy about going. She had read the newspaper articles on the controversy prior to going and had made up her mind. After the trip, she told me she was really glad she came and felt empowered to make her own formed opinions about *Mirroring Evil*.”

—David Bally, teacher and participant in the School Program

PUBLIC DIALOGUE

The original plan called for a series of public panels and forums that included speakers and respondents followed by questions and answers from the audience. Examples of these programs included:

March 14, 2002—Encountering Evil: An Artists’ Roundtable featured four artists: Kuball, Libera, Borland, and Rosen, moderated by Karen Michel. There was some concern that the questions from the audience would be difficult to handle, and the JM decided to ask the audience to write the questions on index cards that were then handed to the moderator. This allowed the moderator to have some control over the tone and content of the questions that she focused on: the “trajectory and context for the work on display vis-à-vis an entire career . . .”

March 21—The Root of All Evil panel participants changed, as two of the three original speakers cancelled for health-related reasons (Robert J. Lifton and Marguerite Feitlowitz). Shortly before the exhibition began, Rob Rosenbaum withdrew in objection to the content. The panel was reconstituted to present Melvin Bukiet, author of *While the Messiah Tarrys*; Burton L. Visotsky, of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America; and James E. Young, of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. The final report dated September 18, 2002 includes a statement by Aviva Weintraub, Director of Media and Public Programs:

Ordinarily in such a case, the Museum would have cancelled the program, contacted people who had ordered tickets, and issued refunds. However, under the circumstances, I felt strongly that canceling a program would be misinterpreted in the press . . . We did offer refunds to anyone who was disappointed at not seeing the original speakers; approximately three people asked for a refund.

Karen Michel also moderated the second panel and writes in the final report:

Discussion was lively, noncombative, and generally led participants and audience to a sense of understanding, not blame.

April 11—Transgressive Commodities: A Symposium in Response to the Exhibition *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art* was originally comprised of: James Young, Professor of English and Chair of Judaic Studies, University of Massachusetts, Amherst; Lisa Saltzman, Associate Professor of History of Art at Bryn Mawr College; James Young; Alan Schechner, one of the artists from the exhibit; and Emory University Professor and renowned Holocaust scholar Deborah Lipstadt, Dorot Professor of Modern Jewish History and Holocaust Studies & Director of Jewish Studies. Dr. Lipstadt withdrew her support for the show and chose not to attend.

April 25—The Banalities of Evil, a panel held at the New School, focused on Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, as well as her *Origins of Totalitarianism*, to provide the background for our re-examination of some of her controversial speculations on the nature of radical evil and “the banality of evil.”

May 28—Moral Ambiguity in the Representation of Evil was the first of three public forums in which the format was designed to allow speakers and audience to engage in a more interactive conversation. Joanna Lindenbaum reports that this was the most successful of the three forums, although only 40 people attended. Ellen Handler Spitz, who contributed an essay for the exhibition catalogue, participated in this forum and writes:

As is often the case in such gatherings, there were one or two highly vociferous attendees who seemed to need to dominate. However, we managed to find ways to curtail their “long-windedness” sufficiently, I think, to provide time for others to express themselves. One aspect of the discussion that intrigued me was that the exhibit came to be used by many as a jumping-off place for a discussion on related [issues] (i.e. children’s education and contemporary politics and definitions of good and evil). Few people seemed to want to discuss the works of art themselves.

June 13—Screening of *The Night Porter* at the New School drew a large and diverse audience. A pre-film talk by Susannah Heschel outlined a variety of issues raised by the film. After the screening, the dialogue addressed issues of how many Nazis, particularly former SS officers, were able to lead normal middle class lives in post-war Vienna.

In March of 2002, the museum added an additional component in the form of daily public dialogues. Mohini Shapero was hired as the facilitator for the daily dialogues and for the more occasional dialogues for targeted constituent groups. The decision to add a daily dialogue

component and to hire Ms. Shapero came late in the planning for the exhibition. In March 2002, Ruth Beesch wrote to project director, Barbara Schaffer Bacon, requesting additional financial support to expand the dialogue component of the project. Ms. Beesch positioned her request in the context of the heated controversy that had arisen prior to the exhibition's opening:

As you know, we have been attempting to engage a number of those opposed to *Mirroring Evil* . . . by inviting them into the museum for a dialogue. Unfortunately, it has been a deaf dialogue thus far, but it has made us realize that we need a safe place within the museum (and outside of the exhibition galleries) to encourage dialogue on a daily basis for visitors to the exhibition.⁹

A total of 67 one-hour dialogues were offered, in which approximately 475 visitors participated. Groups ranged in size from one to thirty participants. While the facilitator did not gather demographic data, anecdotal reports suggest that the participants spanned a wide spectrum of age, ethnicity, and background. Survivors were described as among the most eloquent participants, and their feelings about the exhibition ranged from anger to appreciation. Ms. Shapero described her strategy to structure the daily dialogue activity:

My strategy was always to begin by centering the discussion on the art and then proceeding to more general associations and concerns, often refocusing attention on particular works as a way of grounding a conversation that threatened to devolve into grandstanding. This was a constant challenge . . . The exhibit, after all, was the common experience that brought all of us together; it formed a communal link between diverse participants in the group. By returning to the shared experience of the exhibit, and encouraging visitors to ground their remarks in the particulars of that experience, I was usually able to contain and redirect more general provocations into constructive channels—into genuine dialogue.

Interestingly, she also notes that she began her experience as facilitator convinced that she should employ a formal structure for managing the dialogue activities. She developed dialogue guidelines, including an index card activity that asked each visitor to write down the piece that had the greatest impact. After collecting the cards, she read them aloud as a stimulus to the dialogue activity. Ultimately, she learned that this rigid format, while effective in some situations, was not always appropriate.

Through experience, I discovered that it was important to adapt this structure . . . Indeed responding to the particular audience with flexibility and sensitivity was the most crucial element to running a successful dialogue . . .

In assessing the success of this component of the dialogue program, it is important to note that the issue of daily dialogues had, in fact, been explored several months prior to the request to Animating Democracy for additional funding, but for logistical and space reasons, it had not proven feasible.¹⁰ While it is certainly true that this element of the dialogue project was instituted as a reaction to pressure from media controversy and the concerns of Holocaust survivors, it was nevertheless an important step forward in the museum's attempts to craft a truly open environment where visitors could express their responses to the exhibition and its content. Information gathered from the final report and through discussion with the museum

⁹ Letter dated March 4, 2002 from Ruth Beesch, Jewish Museum, to Barbara Shafer Bacon, Director Animating Democracy Project.

¹⁰ In fact, in January 2002, this strategy had also been discussed with the Jewish Museum by their colleagues at the Andy Warhol Museum, another ADI Lab participant that had used the strategy of daily dialogues and "safe spaces" with great success in their project, *Without Sanctuary*.

staff indicate that it was successful in addressing some of the concerns around offering space for visitors to discuss their feelings with others. Of course, the flaw in this approach lies generalizing anything from the responses of this self-selected population. However, taken as one stream of dialogic activity among many, it appears to have met its objectives.

As a partner in *Mirroring Evil*, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership (CLAL) organized three dialogue programs. The first, on March 20, 2002, was a program for approximately forty Jewish community leaders and philanthropists. The evening combined a private viewing of the art together with Museum curators and a chance for participants to reflect, in small groups facilitated by CLAL faculty, on the issues the art raised for them, as well as for the institutions and communities in which they are involved. The second, held on June 3, 2002, was a public event at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at the New School University. Called “Is Nothing Sacred in a Consumer Culture? Images of the Holocaust in the Age of Advertising,” this program was designed to spark conversation around two of the exhibition’s particularly provocative pieces, Alan Schechner’s *It’s the Real Thing: Self-Portrait at Buchenwald*, and Maciej Toporowicz’s *Obsession*. The third program was held on June 11, 2002. For this event, CLAL brought rabbis and religious leaders from other faiths—as part of CLAL’s Religious Leaders Symposium—to the Museum for a viewing followed by facilitated dialogue, focusing on the issues the art raises for religious communities and institutions.

These efforts challenged CLAL to structure such forums in new ways—through engaging particular pieces of art, as well as the controversy around them; and through playing the role of mediator between, on the one hand, the exhibition and the museum, and, on the other, various segments of the Jewish community. (See the sidebar for CLAL’s thoughtful analysis of these arts-based dialogues.)

THE CONTROVERSY

Conversations with the Jewish Museum staff during and after *Mirroring Evil* reveal an organizational culture that has encouraged the staff to engage in open, sincere, and introspective examination of every phase of the exhibition from the initial decision to explore this highly sensitive subject matter to the responses to the controversy that erupted months before the exhibition ever opened. Norman Kleeblatt reports that the museum’s decision to schedule *Mirroring Evil* to run for three months rather than the normal four was made in recognition that the difficult subject matter might be problematic for some of its constituents.¹¹ There is also no doubt that the media played a role as a stimulus to controversy and as a tool for those who were interested in disrupting the exhibition for their own purposes.

An in-depth analysis of the media reception regarding the exhibition is beyond the scope of this case study. However, the media did play a role in stimulating public discussion (perhaps a more descriptive term than dialogue in this case) regarding the exhibition. There is always the hope that the media will serve as the portal to the marketplace of ideas where free exchange of diverse points of view can lead to knowledge and understanding. Sadly, there were only rare occurrences where the discourse around the exhibition added much to the public’s understanding of the intentionality of either the artists or the museum. Rather, it soon became clear that much of the New York media served as the purveyor of a generally unproductive

¹¹ Conversation with Norman Kleeblatt and Joanna Lindenbaum, January 12, 2002, at the Jewish Museum.

THE NATIONAL JEWISH CENTER FOR LEARNING

AND LEADERSHIP'S REFLECTIONS ON ITS PARTNERSHIP WITH THE JEWISH MUSEUM

As CLAL's Vice President, Rabbi Brad Hirschfield, observed in an Op-Ed for *The Jewish Week*, the exhibition raised profoundly important ethical questions that hit vital nerves in Jewish communities and that highlighted deep generational and ideological divides. CLAL has always provided forums for discussions that respect and confront these divides. The work we did with The Jewish Museum/Animating Democracy Initiative on *Mirroring Evil* challenged us to structure such forums in new ways—through engaging particular pieces of art, as well as the controversy around them; and through playing the role of mediator between, on the one hand, the exhibition and the museum, and, on the other, various segments of the Jewish community.

Exploring how best to spark conversation around visual art was an apt project for us, given that we are always looking for new methodologies—from using traditional Jewish texts in new ways to future-oriented debates that take their cue from modes of thinking pioneered in the business world—to open up people's thinking and to stimulate real exchange of ideas about critical ethical questions. In fact, we have been giving a good deal of thought, in other contexts, to the potential of art—including music, film, and theater—to help us build meaningful programming.

We knew from the beginning that the questions the art in *Mirroring Evil* posed about “ownership” over the Holocaust, the power of media to narrate, distort, and persuade, and the processes of identification with perpetrators or victims could make for explosive reactions. The question, with each constituency, was how best to balance “framing” the conversation (including introductions by CLAL faculty as well as commentary by panelists and curators) so that it would remain focused while, at the same time, leaving room for open, participatory conversation. Indeed, we felt that conversations in which participants were urged to focus more closely on the particularities of the art would ultimately be more open than purely free-ranging discussions, which could end up merely rehashing familiar controversies about “Holocaust representation” or “Holocaust memory” in familiar, general terms.

By the time the exhibition opened, this balancing act between framing and openness had been further complicated by the controversy that played out in the press, which sparked interest in the exhibition but, in a sense, threatened to overshadow the art itself and to pre-set the terms of the discussions. For each program, we tried to build in time for setting out some central questions (not necessarily those deemed most interesting in the press coverage); contemplating the art; pooling participants' reactions; and facilitating discussion and debate in small groups. In each, we experimented with the order and balance of these components.

. . . With regard to the framing/openness issue, the public program, which was the most ambitious and multifaceted of the three programs, seemed to work particularly well. In part, this was, we think, as Norman Kleeblatt observed in his remarks that evening, because the event actually brought the art outside the space of the Museum into a more neutral setting (this was possible, too, because of the mobile nature of the two pieces). Perhaps it was also because the conversation was focused around particular pieces of art, and particular themes; perhaps it was because we designed the event so that groups of participants had time to share their own reactions with each other before hearing from the panel of speakers; the speakers' ideas, in turn, then served as additional fodder for the second segment of the groups' conversations.

The public program, as the most complicated of the events and the one that enlisted the involvement of the most outside people, was productive for us in another unexpected way. It was something of an experiment for us, as most of our programs tend to be geared toward particular constituencies. We were quite pleased with it, however, and would like to undertake more such programs in the future.

Before the program, we held a meeting for curators, speakers, and facilitators—some of whom had worked with us in other contexts, some of whom were joining us for the first time—to meet each other, view the art, and discuss the goals and methods of the program. The meeting turned out to be one of the most interesting conversations we convened in the course of the grant. It was a diverse and lively group of people, and both the conversation about the two works of art and the conversation about the program's design were thought-provoking and productive. We had already done a good deal of careful planning, and deliberately left room for input from speakers and facilitators as well. Though this more democratic approach demanded more time from those who participated, taking everyone's experience and ideas into consideration made, ultimately, for a stronger program.

discourse and did not address the complex social, cultural, and aesthetic issues raised by the exhibition.

All of this evokes the memories of the turbulent 1990s, a period that has come to be known as the “culture wars.” It was a decade when contemporary art was at the center of a well-orchestrated campaign by the religious right designed to erode support for public funding for the arts. In this case, the media controversy began with one incendiary spark from an unlikely source, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter who appeared to purposefully generate a climate of misunderstanding and controversy that raged in the three months before the exhibition ever opened. It was a battle over art that no one had yet seen. It was a controversy about the idea of an exhibition and as such it allowed all sides to construct their bunkers and take their positions notwithstanding any real reception or analysis of the artworks involved. It was, therefore, the quintessential art world controversy.

Joan Rosenbaum, Helen Goldsmith Menschel Director of the Jewish Museum, released a statement just prior to the opening of the exhibition in March 2002:

We recognize that there are people, some of them Holocaust survivors, who may not wish to view this exhibition, or who, in viewing it, may be angry or distressed. However, as an art museum that presents all of Jewish culture, we reaffirm our commitment to showing works of contemporary artists who have used images of the Nazi era to make a powerful and timely investigation of the nature of evil.¹²

What could have precipitated such an extraordinary statement by the leader of a cultural institution? In some sense, the statement reflected the fact that the Jewish Museum’s exhibition did not appear in a vacuum.

In October 1999, *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*, an exhibition that included ninety paintings, sculpture, photographs, and installations by forty-two artists, opened at the Brooklyn Museum. One week before the scheduled opening, Republican mayor Rudolph Giuliani told the Brooklyn Museum of Art to cancel the exhibition or lose its annual \$7 million City Hall grant. Giuliani was particularly offended by the work of Chris Ofili, *Virgin Mary, Elephant Dung*. The mayor had not seen the exhibition himself, but made his decision based upon an examination of the show’s catalogue.

It may have been inevitable then that when the media learned that the Jewish Museum was planning to organize an exhibition of work that utilized Nazi imagery, comparisons to *Sensation* would begin to surface. Michael Kimmelman of the *New York Times* writes in his preview article:

Detractors see it as just another “Sensation,” but pushing the buttons of Jews this time instead of Roman Catholics . . . This time it’s Jews who are asking why the Jewish Museum, of all places, should present art that offends Jews.¹³

The pre-opening discourse that swirled around *Mirroring Evil* was precipitated by a reading from the exhibition catalogue at the museum in late November, where several Holocaust survivors became agitated at the proposed content. Lisa Gubernick of the *Wall Street Journal* learned about the survivors’ response, and her January 10, 2002 article began with the opening salvo of what was to become a theme of the media coverage:

¹² Quoted in Michael Elkin, “Constructing a Controversy,” *Jewish Exponent*, Philadelphia, PA, April 11, 2002.

¹³ Michael Kimmelman “Critic’s Notebook; Jewish Museum Show Looks Nazis in the Face and Creates a Fuss,” *New York Times*, January 29, 2002.

An art exhibition headed for New York could become the next art-world “Sensation.” That 1999 exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art featured a painting of the Virgin Mary splattered with dung, drawing fire from Catholics, including former mayor Rudolph Giuliani, among others. This show’s exhibits include LEGO concentration camp kits, swastika-bedecked kitten figures and sculptures of notorious Auschwitz doctor Josef Mengele—and is all the more controversial given its setting: the Jewish Museum.¹⁴

Other New York media outlets picked up the story. *New York Times* Art Critic Michael Kimmelman in January 2002 stated:

It has not been lost on officials at the Jewish Museum that sight unseen the show has probably infuriated some of the people who have helped make *The Producers* Broadway’s hottest ticket . . . All is not fair in the culture wars. Such is the burden on a museum tackling touchy work.¹⁵

Sarah Boxer’s interview with Norman Kleeblatt in the *New York Times* on February 6 offers the curator the opportunity to set forth his aesthetic and conceptual point of view. Much of the article restates the intentionality described in Kleeblatt’s essay, but at the close of the piece, the writer raises a series of highly provocative questions in response to Kleeblatt’s assertions that the participating artists are vigilant in their exploration of how Nazi imagery has been appropriated by popular culture. The writer poses the questions:

The artists may be vigilant about the images that have shaped them but how vigilant can they be about the effects of their own imagery? And how vigilant can a curator really be? Indeed, how can anyone tell the difference between the work of a real Nazi sympathizer and a hip contemporary artist playing with the fire of popular culture?¹⁶

Kleeblatt responds:

“I wouldn’t show any neo-Nazi works,” Mr. Kleeblatt said, recoiling as if singed by a flame. “I am responsible.”¹⁷

New York newspapers offered space to a variety of individuals to express their strongly held views. In the February 4, 2002 edition of the *New York Post*, Menachem Z. Rosensaft, founding chairman of the International Network of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, wrote an Op-Ed under the title “The ‘Art’ of Desecration.” The piece begins with language that was inflammatory even for the notorious rhetorical excess that characterizes the *Post*:

At first glance, it seems nothing more than yet another example of tastelessness masquerading as culture—the crass, in-your-face, vulgarity that now routinely replaces talent as an effective means of attracting readers, viewers, and audiences . . . I am not shocked that there are artists who ridicule the Holocaust and demean the experiences of its victims. Nor would I have been particularly surprised if an exhibition like “Mirroring Evil” had been sponsored by the Holocaust-denying Institute for Historical Review or some other anti-Semitic outfit. The outrage is that a respected mainstream Jewish cultural institution is legitimizing the banalization of the Holocaust.¹⁸

¹⁴ Lisa Gubernick, “Coming Museum Show With Nazi Theme Stirs New York’s Artworld,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 10, 2002.

¹⁵ Michael Kimmelman, “Jewish Museum Looks Nazis in the Face and Creates a Fuss,” at Website, www.hysterics.art.pl/art/art.html, January 29, 2002.

¹⁶ Sarah Boxer, “Man Behind a Museum Tempest: A Curator’s Defense of Nazi Imagery,” *New York Times*, February 6, 2002.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Menachem Rosensaft, “The ‘Art’ of Desecration,” *New York Post*, February 4, 2002.

And so the stage was set for what will be the most commonly heard complaint from Holocaust survivors and those who represent them. How could the Jewish Museum do this to us? Their contention arose from an expectation that they have come to expect that they may be assaulted from without, but to have that which they hold most dear assailed by their own is the gravest form of insult and injury.

The January 18, 2002 “Forward Forum,” a feature of the Jewish newspaper, *Forward*, presented two texts under the title of “Demystifying Nazism, or Trivializing its Victims? A Debate.” The first text, “How Pseudo-Artists Desecrate the Holocaust,” again gave voice to Menachem Rosensaft. The second, by catalogue contributor Professor James E. Young, was titled. “Museum Show Truthfully Probes Society’s Fascination with Evil and the Second World War.” Both individuals would become familiar spokespersons for the opposing points of view of the exhibition, Rosensaft in his call for a boycott and Young as one of the defenders of the conceptual framework chosen by the museum in which to situate the work.

Rosensaft closes his statement with a message:

The Jewish Museum now has a choice to make. It can admit that it has made a mistake and withdraw this ill-conceived exhibition, or it can reap the dire consequences of going ahead with it. If “Mirroring Evil” opens March 17 as scheduled, Holocaust survivors and their families, as well as others with similar moral sensitivities will not remain silent. Loud demonstrations and pickets may be the least of the museum’s problems.¹⁹

He goes on to say that the problems he foresees will be the damage to the museum’s reputation, but for many who read the missive, the threat was far more serious. The claim that demonstrations and pickets may be the least of the museum’s problems was read by many as a serious threat, and the museum took extraordinary security measures throughout the exhibition.

James Young’s piece begins with a restatement of the curatorial intent of the exhibition:

Until recently, most “Holocaust art” has concentrated, understandably, on the victims of Nazi crimes—as a way to commemorate them, name them, extol them, bring them back from the dead . . . for a new generation of artists, some of them Jewish and Israeli, the only thing more shocking than the images of suffering victims is the depravity of the human beings who caused such suffering . . . These artists challenge us to confront the faces of evil, which, if truth be told, look rather more like us than the victims the Nazis left behind.²⁰

Young reminds the readers of their responsibility to face the critical questions raised by these artists regarding the role of evil in society and also regarding the role of a cultural institution to exhibit these works in a respectful context that avoids sensationalizing the very evil it seeks to expose. To do so, however, requires participation.

In the end, viewers of the exhibition and readers of its catalogue will have to decide for themselves—but only after they have actually seen the exhibition.²¹

It is clear that this “debate” added little to the opportunities for dialogue. The reader does not know whether Professor Young and Mr. Rosensaft had the opportunity to read each other’s pieces prior to publication, thereby offering a “call and response” format for the debate. The

¹⁹ *Jewish Forward*, January 18, 2002.

²⁰ James Young, “Museum Show Truthfully Probes Society’s Fascination with Evil,” *Forward*, January 18, 2002.

²¹ *Ibid.*

texts do seem to reflect that each had a script to follow, Mr. Rosensaft emotional and righteous, Professor Young, cool and academic, and this format would continue in the parallel streams of discourse that were to follow in the weeks and months ahead.

It was not only the Jewish Press that wondered about the role the media played in precipitating and manipulating the controversy. From Los Angeles, the *Los Angeles Times* art critic, Christopher Knight, had his own theory about how the media functions in its relationship to the art world:

It was, in fact, a business bible that kicked off the ruckus over the Jewish Museum show. The *Wall Street Journal* ran a story on the front page of its second section on January 10, nine full weeks before the exhibition opened. It began, “An art exhibition headed for New York could become the next art-world ‘Sensation’” . . . As a rule of thumb, news stories report what did happen not what could happen. A sensation story saying that “Mirroring Evil” could become a media scandal is what is known as a self-fulfilling prophecy.²²

The controversy spilled over into the media outside of New York City as exemplified by a piece in the Sunday February 24, 2002 *Washington Post* by Alan Cooperman, “Art or Insult: A Dialogue Shaped by the Holocaust.” Cooperman outlines the critical questions raised not by the artwork but by the protests that took place before the show even opened.

Are there places where art simply should not go, events that are too raw to be depicted in a painting, too far-reaching to be reduced to the confines of a photographic frame? Beside the issue of each work’s technical merit, whose standards of acceptability should apply and what is the curators’ responsibility? Looking ahead, how will we react when the events of Sept. 11 are held up for reflection in the watercolors, novels, or video clips of future generations?²³

Other reviewers expressed a far more sympathetic view of the exhibition. Simon Houpt, writing in the *Globe and Mail* from Toronto, Canada on March 20, 2002, begins his review by comparing *Mirroring Evil* not to *Sensation* but to *The Producers*.

Some cultural coincidences are too piquant for words. Sunday afternoon, New York’s Upper East Side neighborhood rage with the shouts of angry protestors trying to shame visitors going to the opening of the hotly contested exhibition *Mirroring Evil* at the Jewish Museum. Meanwhile only a couple of kilometers away, Matthew Broderick & Nathan Lane sailed through the final performance of their year-long run in Mel Brooks’s *The Producers*, a Broadway musical that takes enormous pleasure in those hilarious clowns of the 20th century, the Nazis. Cheers and a standing ovation greeted their final bows.²⁴

²² Christopher Knight, “The Evil that Museums Do,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sunday April 7, 2002.

²³ Alan Cooperman, “Art or Insult, A Dialogue Shaped by the Holocaust,” *Washington Post*, February 24, 2002.

²⁴ Simon Houpt, “Review,” *Globe and Mail, Toronto*, March 20, 2002.

“The Museum’s public relations campaign was an effort to gain the support, or at least the tolerance, of those people who did not instantly make up their minds about *Mirroring Evil*. The Jewish Museum’s staff and its public relations consultant, The Kreisberg Group, made every effort to moderate the tone of these broadcasts and articles, to protect the Museum’s image, and to supply journalists with material that would make the Museum’s messages about *Mirroring Evil* a part of the news stories. The Museum’s messages were consistently and widely disseminated; open-minded audiences were provided with the contextual information they needed to judge *Mirroring Evil* for themselves; the Museum ensured that objections to the exhibition were answered appropriately in public outlets; the curatorial integrity of the Museum and the value of its commitment to contemporary art were upheld. To an extent, these efforts were successful—however, the controversy on the whole proved to be uncontrollable. It influenced for the worse much (not all) of the other exhibition coverage.”

—Anne Scher, Director of Communications, The Jewish Museum

CONCLUSIONS

When an art museum ventures into taboo subject matter as part of its intent to facilitate a deeper understanding of complex issues, the waters can become treacherous. From the outset, there was an understanding that the work chosen for *Mirroring Evil* was challenging not only in its choice of subject matter but also in the cool, highly intellectualized manner in which it approached its emotionally charged content. The Jewish Museum staff and trustees were acutely aware that their normal public programming would not suffice, and they were eager to explore new strategies to encourage civic dialogue that would begin with the artworks and evolve toward an exploration of the consequences of society’s complicity in the face of the unspeakable. The museum offered its audiences the opportunity to experience art being created by a new generation of artists, who sought to break through old boundaries to address this difficult, yet timely, subject. The rewards of programming of this kind lie in the possibility that while audiences may well be initially offended; at the same time, they may also be receptive to new ways of thinking. Museum leadership crafted critical questions that framed the interpretive materials, public programs, and civic dialogue activities. The dialogic approach was also evident in the museum’s commitment to find new ways of working within its own walls, including establishing communication between and among departments and across traditional institutional hierarchies. Unfortunately, the Museum’s efforts to create free and open exchange of ideas were somewhat hampered by an over-zealous media and a variety of players, many of whom were eager to have their 15 minutes in the spotlight. As is often the case, many who expressed the most strident criticism announced with equal fervor that they had made their judgment without ever seeing the exhibition.

It is tempting to question whether the compromises made by the Jewish Museum in responding to the concerns expressed by Holocaust survivors were congruent with its mission to explore Jewish culture and engage in cultural outreach. In the post culture wars environment, we drift easily into our respective scripts, casting all the players in an art controversy as villains or heroes depending upon one’s political point of view. The lessons from *Mirroring Evil* reveal that whether one’s worldview demands that “Artists must always be completely free to express their views,” or that “Arts organizations must never transgress into forbidden territory,” reality rarely resides comfortably within the boundaries of “always/never” land. Norman Kleeblatt acknowledges the museum’s initial instinct to defend and protect itself from the turgid rhetoric of media pundits, politicians, and demagogues—all of whom were willing exploit Holocaust survivors for their own

purposes. The instinct was to close ranks, build a bunker around the building and focus efforts on damage control. Kleeblatt believes that the decision to enlist CLAL to facilitate a face-to-face dialogue with those opposed to the exhibition helped the staff come to understand that, for the survivors and their families, the representation of the perpetrators of evil within the walls of the Jewish Museum was both a betrayal of trust and an effort to diminish the enormity of their suffering.²⁵ It is from this perspective, rather than from one of capitulation and expediency, that the impulse toward compromise was born.

It is important to acknowledge *Mirroring Evil* is only the first step in the Jewish community's efforts to examine the nature of the evil and the responses to it that have so formed its character since the Holocaust. An examination of the social, political, and art historical scholarship that is now beginning to emerge as part of the critical response to the exhibition will reveal whether the discourse will continue. Nevertheless, the Jewish Museum clearly believes that it weathered the storm. Perhaps this is best captured in the remarks of Director Joan Rosenbaum, when she writes:

[We now have] the knowledge that the public is willing, if they will come to the exhibit, to engage in a dialogue with the works, with each other, docents, scholars and educators. We found an eagerness to read, understand and form opinions and communicate them among those people, who in spite of the press, were willing to come to the door. This is stimulating knowledge and gives us inspiration for other exhibitions that will keep this dialogue going. The museum was "opened up" in an unusual way.

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²⁵ January 12, 2004 conversation with Norman Kleeblatt and Joanna Lindenbaum.