

Teach ‘the Holocaust’ to the Children – The Educational and Performative Dimension of ‘Your Coloring Book’ – A Wandering Installation

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Abstract

The article explores the pedagogical dimension of contemporary visual art which takes the Holocaust as a main subject of representation. It asks how a work of art can offer a viable alternative to the already existing methods or practices of Holocaust education, whose traditional aim is to endow the apprentice with an ‘absolute knowledge’ of the Holocaust. The article analyzes the characteristics and the effectiveness of a ‘performative’ approach to teaching about the Holocaust, which relies on an element of interaction and on critical self-reflection, by undertaking a close analysis of *Your Coloring Book*, – an art installation created by Israeli artist and representative of the third generation after the Holocaust, Ram Katzir.

Zusammenfassung

Im Artikel wird die pädagogische Dimension jener zeitgenössischen Kunst untersucht, die sich dem Holocaust als künstlerischem Hauptthema widmet. Der Beitrag fragt danach, wie ein Kunstwerk eine gangbare Alternative zu den bereits existierenden Methoden der Holocaust-Bildung darstellen kann, deren traditionelles Ziel es ist, den Lernenden mit einem ‘absoluten Wissen’ über den Holocaust auszustatten. Die Besonderheiten und Wirkungsweise einer ‘performativen’ Herangehensweise, den Holocaust auf Interaktion und kritischer Selbstreflektion basierend zu unterrichten, werden dargestellt. Dies geschieht anhand einer genauen Analyse von *Your Coloring Book* einer Kunstinstitution des israelischen Künstlers und Vertreters der Dritten Generation Ram Katzir.

Introduction

When asked to speak about an art installation, Holocaust survivor and playwright Patya Dagan recounted an anecdote whose significance for the future of Holocaust remembrance can hardly be overlooked.

A friend of mine made a photograph of a bench on which were left two glasses of wine, and I said to him, this is a very sad picture. He asked: Why is it so sad? Well, there were two people on a bench, they were drinking wine, and suddenly the Gestapo came, some German soldiers, they took them and all that was left was this bench and the two glasses of wine. He said, you are abso-

lutely crazy, there were two young lovers, they were drinking wine, they put the glasses on the bench and then they left. I understood at that very moment how different the reactions of a survivor, somebody who went through all that harm, are from somebody who did not. Talking about this installation is very much reminding me of that bench.¹

Patya Dagan pointed to a drawing of a solitary bench in a park on whose edge one can distinguish the German words “nur für”. It is well known by Dagan’s generation what this meant, – namely the Nürnberg Racial Laws of 1935 issued by the Fascist regime against the German-Jewish population. This particular one is forbidding Jews to sit on public benches, reserved “nur für Arier”, for Aryans only. The art project which made Dagan ponder over the unassailable gap in the memory and understanding of the Holocaust, extending between survivors themselves and post-Holocaust generations is entitled *Your Coloring Book*.

In 1995, Dutch Israeli artist Ram Katzir, a young graduate of the Rietveld Academy of Art, was invited to make an exhibition at the Casco Project Space in Utrecht, the Netherlands. Located on the same street as the former offices of the Dutch Nazi party, the building used to host during 1942-1945, a printing house of the Dutch Nazi newspaper. Intrigued by the fact that this space did not show any signs telling of the past, the artist felt compelled to create a work of art that would reveal its dark history. Katzir designed a children’s coloring book as the central piece of an installation that would become, as described by its author, a “wandering” project. The installation travelled for two years, 1996-1998 to “places where people would rather not see the book,”² namely to cities in Europe with a specific historical relation to the Holocaust; Amsterdam, Enschede, Kraków, Vilnius, Berlin and Jerusalem, in Israel. In each location the exhibition assumed a slightly different character, causing a gamut of emotional responses which developed, in most cases, into public discussions. The visitors, mass media and the local government expressed divergent opinions or standpoints touching upon sensitive issues such as the collaboration with Nazism, or more universal concerns regarding Holocaust remembrance and education. The project concluded in Amsterdam’s Museum of Con-

1 Dagan Patya: Interview. In: *Your Coloring Book*. A documentary film. Phantavision Film Production, Amsterdam 1998.

2 Ram Katzir quoted by Stigter, Bianca: I want to go to places where people do not want to see the book. In: *NRC Handelsblad*. 1997, 21 February.

temporary Art with an exhibition documenting an array of responses from participants of the previous exhibitions.

Two aspects brought to the forefront by *Your Coloring Book* will be tackled within the confines of this article. The first deals with the theme of performativity as evinced by the changing conceptual framework underlying the work of art, and as manifested through the visitors' manifold reactions. The second touches upon the question of the potential of visual art to supply alternatives and critical viewpoints to Holocaust education. I suggest that Ram Katzir's installation introduces a new dimension to the practice of Holocaust education, stressing the idea that active self-reflection can function as an effective means of teaching the lesson of "never again Auschwitz".

The case of *Your Coloring Book*

Your Coloring Book proposes the following scenario, – an exhibition space occupied by school desks on which there are placed coloring books and a bundle of crayons. The shiny image on the cover printed in color, illustrates the principle of the standard coloring book, meaning that outlined drawings should be filled in with a colored pencil. The cover shows the same drawing as on the first page inside the book. A field with flowers, a tree and a blue sky frames the image of a fawn sniffing the fist of a man wearing tall boots, seen from the knees up. Although there are no prescriptions with regard to how one should approach the coloring book, most visitors take a seat and open the book.

The book once opened reveals thirteen simple, and a few of them idyllic drawings, depicting various scenes of a family gathering at picnic: A group of pupils saluting their teacher with hands raised upwards, a crowd of young boys and girls queuing in front of what looks like train carts, an officer holding a pair of scissors, a group of youngsters singing, their hands protruding vigorously as if reaching outside the frame of the drawing, towards the visitor; a solitary bench in a park, a kind of laboratory containing large containers, pots and cases, a pile of travel suitcases on which one could read dates and names of unknown people, airplanes in flying formation, and finally a fatherly figure reading to his children from what appears to be a fairytale book.

The visitors start coloring within the lines of the sketchy images, which seem harmless at first glance, but as the pages are turned a slight sense of doubt about their origin appear, as Nazi signs and associations begin to emerge. If one pays close attention to the drawings, one can distinguish that

there is a small Star of David attached on a child's coat waiting in line in front of the train cart, or the fact that the airplanes are arranged in the shape of a swastika, and that the children's salute looks very similar to the Nazi *Heil Hitler*. Unless one looks on the last page of the book, one cannot figure out that the drawings are reproducing historical photographs depicting scenes from Nazi propaganda and persecution against the Jews.

What initially seemed to create an innocent fairytale setting collapsed revealing a darker story. The man on the cover of the coloring book could be identified in the historical source as Adolf Hitler, the father reading bedtime stories turned into Joseph Goebbels, the propaganda minister reading to his daughters Helga and Heide, while the family gathering portrayed the ideal Aryan family. The suitcases belonged to Auschwitz victims, the cheerful crowd was welcoming Hitler to the Bükierberg rally in Germany, the pupils were saluting their teacher with the *Heil Hitler*, the officer represented an SS-man cutting the side-locks of an orthodox Jew, the children were queuing in front of a train that would deport them from Lodz Ghetto to a concentration camp, while the large objects were storage containers of human bodies used for anatomical experiments, near Danzig.

The artist worked with images taken from a National Socialist propaganda book entitled *Deutschland Erwacht: Werden, Kampf und Sieg der NSDAP*³ consisting of real photographs printed on cigarette cards by Cigaretten Bilderdienst over a period of seven years, but also archival material from the Yad Vashem archives in Jerusalem. The photographs were selected because "they had the same kind of world Disney allure. They looked very sweet and attractive, but actually what was behind them was different,"⁴ clarifies the artist. The relation between the original photographs and their copy as reproduced in drawing by Katzir is not accurate. The artist withholds vital visual information, drawing the visitors unto working on a scene whose meaning they do not understand completely, creating at the same time a feeling of discomfort and suspicion. It is no wonder then, that those visitors who do not check the historical evidence on the last page of the book, may experience a feeling of having been duped into doing something they would never knowingly have agreed to do.

As they pass the exhibition threshold the visitors find themselves confronted with a multitude of choices. They can seat themselves on the benches,

3 Title in English, Germany awakes: Rise, Battle and Victory of the NSDAP. Germany 1933-1940.

4 Interview with Ram Katzir by the author. Amsterdam 2009, 12 October.

leaf through the coloring book, select an image and start coloring, or they can walk along the rows of benches, opting not to intrude or interact in any manner with the book. They might as well inform themselves on the content of the exhibition, realize what it proposes, and reject or accept the challenge. It is however clear that by the time they have decided to step in, they have already crossed the line of “not knowing” the significance attached to the images. There are different approaches to coloring and interpreting the outlined drawings, among which the art historian Gary Schwartz has identified the following:

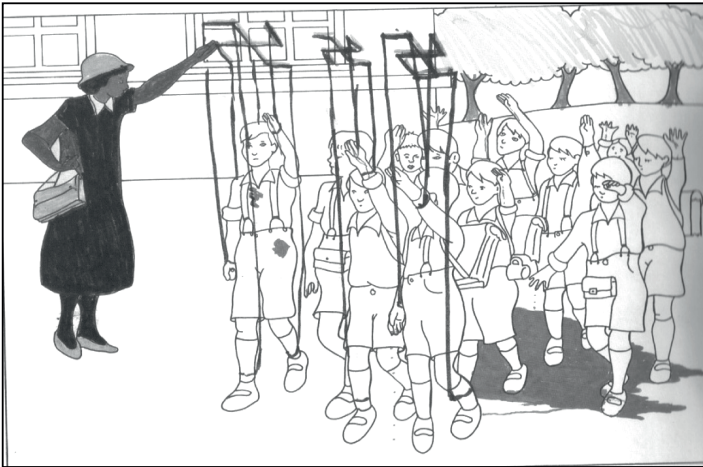
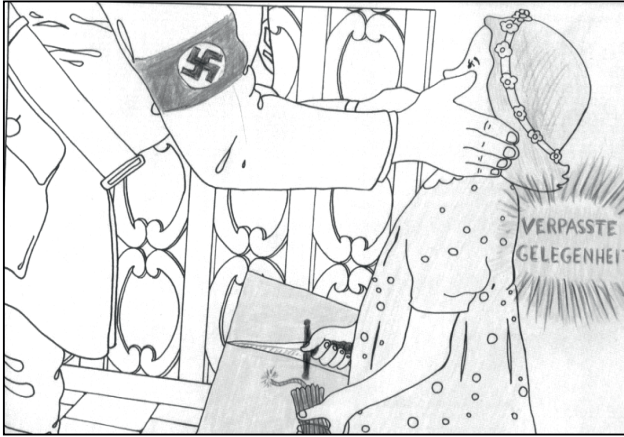
Correct coloring, in natural shades, inside the lines, creative coloring, with witty and shocking emendations to the normative forms or meanings of the images, treating the printed outlines as a catalyst for a colored drawing with no relation to the image, or writing insults, defacement.⁵

There are visitors who choose to write their own revolt against the outrageous reality portrayed by the pictures. After having colored the image of the children being led to the deportation trains one visitor added as if in a desperate attempt to save them from death, the following text “Children Stop! Don’t enter this train! It will bring you to gas chambers, to death!” Another participant expressed his or her sorrow by writing on the image the question “where have all children gone?” a word play with the German song “Sag mir, wo die Blumen sind?” written by composer Max Colpet. Feelings of compulsive anger and pain are made visible in a documentary film recording the public’s responses to the exhibition. A woman begins to color in a picture of a man feeding a deer. All she sees of the man is his boots. Soon, the woman is sobbing, and violently covering the drawing with red color, she then stabs it with black ink in a desperate act of vengeance. A video camera zooms in on her face as other people in the classroom stare at her, embarrassed and unsure of how to act.

Other visitors contribute with critical reflections upon Nazism and the workings of propaganda, as one can tell from the colored image of the portrait of the members of the ideal Aryan family, each wearing a black Hitler’s moustache. One participant turns the drawing showing a young girl offering flowers to Hitler into a scene of retaliation, entitled “a missed opportunity”. The image (Fig. 1) is left uncolored, with the exception of a drawing of a red and black

5 Schwartz, Gary: Teach it to the Children. In: *Your Coloring Book. A Wandering Installation*. Stedelijk Museum. Amsterdam 1998, p. 35.

Nazi armband attached on the man's arm. Instead of flowers, the young girl holds a knife in her hand and a bunch of dynamite.



Another colored drawing (Fig. 2)⁶ depicts children stained with blood, on whose hands raised in the Nazi salute, the visitor attached black swastika-

6 Fig. 1 reproduces a drawing colored by an anonymous participant in the exhibition in Berlin, while Fig. 2 represents the original drawing of an Israeli visitor of the exhibition, at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. In: *Your Coloring Book. A wandering installation.* Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 1998. Images reproduced with the permission of the artist.

shaped handles elevated into the air but also tied with strings to the children's ankles, turning them into puppets that are being manipulated by their teacher to obey the Fascist doctrine.

An anonymous visitor from Israel gives a familiar interpretation of the Holocaust, which attests to the concept from "destruction to redemption" on which the Israeli national consciousness was founded. On the image representing Joseph Goebbels reading propaganda stories to his daughters, the participant drew small figures of Holocaust survivors, wearing concentration camp pajamas and carrying flags of their Diaspora home countries. They are marching upwards towards the top of the image where one can see a man waving the Israeli flag triumphantly in the air. Other visitors projected their own history onto the images: Alluding to problematic issues such as gender or race, by adding for instance pink triangles on the uniform of soldiers, turning them into gays or by coloring the Aryan family black. Thousands of other creative reactions⁷ of visitors from Europe and Israel find their place in the coloring books designed by Katzir. While some have been part of the concluding exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam others are being securely stored in the artist's personal archive.

The colored images showing the multifarious interpretations given by the visitors, point to the fact that Ram Katzir's project has transgressed the borders of the gallery space, impacting on the lives of its audience. They attest to an interactive or performative element whose manner of functioning is worth examining in detail.

On performativity

Since the 1960s the sphere of visual art has embraced elements of theatricality and performance, transgressing the boundaries set up by traditional art criticism. Art theorists Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson explore art as a social practice, supporting the idea that a work of art does not contain a stable set of meanings since its interpretation is dynamic and contingent on its subject and its context. The artwork is no longer viewed as a "static object with a single prescribed signification, that is communicated unproblematically and without default from the maker to the alert, knowledgeable and universalized

7 An approximate number of three thousand copies of *Your Coloring Book* have been available to the public in each one of the exhibition locations.

viewers,” explain the authors. Both the artist and the viewer or interpreter is caught up within the “complex and fraught operations of representation, entangled in inter-subjective spaces of desire, projection and identification.” Interpretation does not reveal itself naturally at the moment of contact with the artwork, but it is worked out as an “ongoing, open performance between artists and spectators, with meaning circulating fluidly in the complex web of connections between artists, patrons, collectors, and between both specialized and non-specialized viewers.”⁸

The term “performative” as used in this context draws attention to the “open-endedness of interpretation, which should be understood as a process rather than as an act with a final goal.” The act of interpretation itself is a kind of performance in the sense that it is affected by the interaction with various subjects, being influenced by “institutional and discursive stagings and more broadly construed social and political situations.”⁹

Katzir’s project signifies as a result of a process of immersion within a specific geographical context, which possesses its own Holocaust commemoration practices, national historical discourses, and collective memory narratives. The participants of *Your Coloring Book* react according to the historical, social and cultural context of their provenance. Responses depend not only on their individual background but also on the specifics of each country’s historical understanding of the Holocaust.

In the Netherlands, the artist intended to draw attention to the Dutch collaboration with Nazism, and to the notion of shared responsibility of historical guilt, by designing an exhibition space where the visitors were seated at picnic tables, being forced to look each other in the eyes and experience a feeling of togetherness. The public’s response did not concur with the artist’s intention. The local media described the exhibition as an educational project for adults which speaks about what the Nazi did.¹⁰ It did not arouse protests since “a lot of the reactions dealt with the fact that the Germans were horrible,” recalls the artist.

In Vilnius the project was received with a high degree of suspicion. People reacted in a defensive way by reasserting their own victimhood, which over-

8 Jones Amelia; Stephenson Andrew: *Performing the Body, Performing the Text*. London 2003, p. 1.

9 *Ibid.*

10 See Stigter, Bianca: *A disconcerting coloring book by Ram Katzir: education for grown-ups. Nazi horrors reduced to a frightening fairytale*. In: *NRC Handelsblad*, 1996, 22 April.

shadowed their country's complicity with Nazism. An article published in the local press speaks of the public's response to the project which contradicts with the artist's proposal. The mirrors on the exhibition walls were meant to force the participants to glimpse at themselves and feel guilty for the murder of the Lithuanian Jews. Instead, they had the opposite effect, having only reinforced the feeling of being victims. "That glimpse in the mirror," argues the journalist, "makes you feel like the victim. It evokes memories of postwar deportations, confiscation of farmers' properties, murders of our brothers in the forests and damp KGB cellars. The best part of Lithuanian society as well as other nationalities in Lithuania were killed, deported, or forced to emigrate."¹¹

In Kraków people were made to feel as being part of the exhibition even though they did not participate in the coloring of the images. It happened by means of sound. As one walked in through a long, dark corridor one could hear his or her footsteps or voice a few seconds later, as if one relived the past once again. The exhibition also alluded to the fact that "there is no business like Shoah business. You can go to Auschwitz and you can go to where *Schindler's List* was filmed, it becomes flattened. What was someone's life experience turns into a book, which turns into a film, which turns into a T-shirt"¹² laments the artist.

The images of Nazi propaganda are inscribed in the collective subconscious of the German people, a fact which the artist attempted to stress by creating an exhibition space where one could sense that these images are "part of the air that we are breathing." A video projector concealed in the lamps hanging from the ceiling, projected an animation film of the drawings being turned into historical photographs. The invitation to the exhibition was written on beer mats, while the tables resembled the beer hall tables, referring to the beginnings of National Socialism whose doctrine emerged during the social gatherings in the Bavarian beer halls. Despite the refusal of several institutions to host the exhibition, it was accepted by Haus am Kleistpark art gallery, whose director Katharina Kaiser saw the project as an opportunity for developing a public discussion about the memory of the Holocaust, which had been initiated on the occasion of the construction of Peter Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. The German public responded to the haunting feeling produced by the installation in symbolic ways, projecting on the images

11 Miksioniene, Ruta: The installation has failed to resist the pressure of horrible reality. In: MUZA Malunas, 1997, 15 April.

12 Interview.

various interpretative signs, such as skulls onto faces, or tying a swastika-shaped necktie around the deer's neck. *Your Coloring Book* became the theme of a symposium held in the House of the Wannsee Conference, which tackled the issue of the culture of memory, the validity and limits of Holocaust representation.¹³

Unlike Berlin, where the discussions were the most "intellectual"¹⁴ in Jerusalem the event was perceived as emotional and personal. Misrepresented by the Israeli newspapers, the exhibition took on tragic connotations, stirring the anger and revolt of Holocaust survivors, who were made to believe that the installation was dealing with their painful memories in a lighthearted and playful manner. Survivors were genuinely horrified by the pictures. Haim Dasberg's response is one of the most radical:

What do I care about the murderer? After all that I have been through do I still have to explain, understand, and relate to the way the poor bastard became a murderer? If the Museum wants to deal with the lesson of the Holocaust, let it screen documentary films, display authentic photographs and paintings inspired by the horror. But where do they get the nerve to make playful use of a picture where a Jew's side-locks are being shaved off? [...] They are taking our open wound and treating it lightly.¹⁵

The question of who has the right to engage with the Holocaust, and in what manner one has to do it in order to receive institutional authorization was raised by The Holocaust Survivors' Organization, whose director John Lemberg declared:

You color in fragments, sometimes a whole picture of children, without realizing what they are actually doing. Sometimes they are going to their death. Other times, you will later see, they are saying *Heil Hitler*. There was horror and shock. [...] The feeling is that a national institution is giving legitimacy to the travesty of the Holocaust. Children can innocently color in these pictures

13 See Stepken, Angelika: Malzeit, the Israeli artist Ram Katzir in Berlin. In: Neue Bildene Kunst. 1998, March.

14 Interview.

15 Dasberg Haim quoted by Koren Yehuda: What's wrong with this picture? (Hebrew). In: Yediot Aharonot. 1997, 17 January.

and this will have a tremendous emotional effect on their parents and grandparents.¹⁶

The reactions were hardly uniform. There were survivors such as Anna Levin, who characterized Katzir's artistic endeavor as "contributing with a very important viewpoint to one of the underlying features of Nazi Germany," while the former director of the Israel Museum, Martin Weyl said on television, "this is an artist from the third generation who dares to raise questions that my generation was afraid of."¹⁷ For the first time in the Israel Museum's history an exhibition was accompanied by a visitor's book, which kept a record of the public's reactions. Among the many responses, one visitor qualifies the project as "a brilliant analysis of a gruesome deception" while a survivor writes "absolutely ridiculous".¹⁸

Katzir's project was mostly described as controversial. There are manifold reasons underlying this claim, including the idea of legitimacy, which states that the memory of the Holocaust belongs to the survivors, they alone have the right to approach this topic. Another line of thought suggests that only commemorative institutions of Holocaust remembrance such as Yad Vashem can convey understanding of the Holocaust to younger generations. The Israeli public debates prompted by the installation alluded to the fact that there are limits or restrictions, with regard to what is appropriate or not, what stories can be told, and from whose point of view. Katzir's artwork does not claim to speak in the name of the survivors, nor was it aimed at them, but rather at those "young Israelis whose connection to the Holocaust seems to be ever more distanced," suggests journalist Helen Motro. The installation is seen as "a valuable contribution to the understanding of a complex phenomenon". Motro explains:

The exhibit exists for all the others, Jewish or not, to whom the Holocaust is becoming a remote historical icon, divorced of emotional content. Thus, the argument that an exhibit may be 'shocking' or 'upsetting' to survivors is a ludicrous justification for stifling it. [...] The viewer as active participant coloring 'within the lines,' is compelled to examine his connection to otherwise remote

16 Lemberg John quoted by Tsur, Batsheva: Holocaust survivors Protest Coloring Book Exhibit. In: Jerusalem Post. 1997, 22 January.

17 Stigter, Bianca: I go to places where people do not want to see the book. In: NRC Handelsblad. 1997, 21 February.

18 Bouman, Salomon: Exhibition in Jerusalem arouses strong emotions. In: NRC Handelsblad. 1997, 21 February.

events. Katzir's exhibit erases the distance between viewer and the viewed, forbidding complacency.¹⁹

The meaning-making of *Your Coloring Book* by its visitors reflects an ongoing process of negotiation between different and conflicting perspectives and positions. Performativity as a term defines this process. A critical strategy within visual culture, performativity recognizes interpretation as a "fragile, partial and precarious affair". Meaning is understood as a "negotiated domain, in flux and contingent on social and personal investments and contexts".²⁰ Since interpretation of *Your Coloring Book* lacks fixity, it can be imagined as a performance during which the work of art acquires meaning through the encounter and interaction with the spectator.

"When I was looking at the museum," recalls Ram Katzir about the construction of the exhibition space at the Israel Museum, "I saw the sticker in the archeological department, this sticker separated people from the artwork. This is the artwork, do not cross the line. I thought it would be wonderful to make people part of the artwork."²¹ Katzir draws the audience into complicity by using as strategy of engagement, dynamic identification with the act of coloring, which exposes reactions shaped in accordance with the spectators' various historical or ideological affinities. The artist tempts the spectators to enter in a "dialogical" space with the artwork, seen as a "floating signifier", and addresses their imaginative and critical potential, by asking them to engage in the challenging process of attaching meaning – which "never dwells in one place."²²

Katzir's work demonstrates how installation art has moved from what theorist Hal Foster described as "medium specific" to "debate specific",²³ namely a form of art that does not belong to any traditional mediums of artistic representation. Instead, this form of art is defined in terms of the message it conveys by any kind of means. The new art expression predicts "a shift from objective critique towards a new subjectivity which emphasizes uncertainty and

19 Motro, Helen: Shock Art. In: Jerusalem Post. 1997, 26 January.

20 Jones Amelia; Stephenson Andrew, p. 32.

21 Interview.

22 Jones Amelia and Andrew Stephenson Andrew, p. 32.

23 Foster, Hal quoted by Oliveira, Nicolas de: Installation art in the New Millennium. The empire of the senses. London 2003, p. 14.

brings both artist and viewer together in a discursive environment”,²⁴ explains art critic Nicolas De Oliveira.

Katzir instills a sense of familiarity, directing the viewers towards an activity which produces a certain emotional and intellectual effect. The audience is encouraged to experience the artwork in an “open-ended manner and become authors and generators of their own meanings.”²⁵ The artist confesses that for him “coloring was a bit of a metaphor of filling it with content.” *Your Coloring Book* does not remain in the sphere of the art world alone, an object of art within the context of art, – the art gallery that opens towards the contemplative eyes of the viewers. Instead, it intrudes into the lives of its viewers, who are no longer the witnesses to the effect of art but those who give shape and content. It encourages the viewers to assume responsibility for their acts by appropriating the images they colors in, transgressing thus the borders of contemplation and becoming the masters of the images.

There is a clear difference, explains the artist, between those who “came and looked at it like a sculpture, and had a very formal approach to it,” and those who “actually sat and took part, for whom it was a much more emotional experience.”²⁶ The process of coloring envelops the one who is producing it, creating an immersive and solitary experience. Indicating a withdrawal into the self, the “immersive” becomes a condition of viewing. Art critic Ina Blom describes the “immersive mode” as an experience in which “the subjective awareness appears to merge with the artwork, so as to create a sensation of a new, more powerful, experience of totality”.²⁷ *Your Coloring Book* relies on its visitors’ willingness to collaborate, by means of undertaking the activity of coloring. It turns into a “space of exchange and interactivity”, and a catalyst which generates “communicative processes.” This conforms with French art theorist Nicolas Bourriaud’s understanding of art “as a state of encounter”, in which the artist is no longer viewed as “an over-specialised aesthetic object maker”, but someone who “provides rather than produces not aesthetic, but critical-artistic services”.²⁸ Due to its interaction with the viewers, the artwork turns into a “cognitive tool”, and a way of generating meaning.

24 Oliveira, p. 14.

25 Ibid., p. 17.

26 Interview.

27 Blom Ina quoted by Oliveira, p. 49.

28 See Bourriaud, Nicolas: *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon, 2002; and Berlin Letter about Relational Aesthetics. In: Berlin Biennale, 2001 2, p. 40.

There is no authorial voice to decide upon which interpretation is viable or legitimate. *Your Coloring Book* becomes an open arena on which meanings are permanently and “performatively” negotiated between the artist and his viewers, seen as representatives of their own historical and cultural environments. Ram Katzir’s project and the debates it engendered, gave sound, shape and dramatic form to various modes of feeling, thinking and remembering the Holocaust within their local and historical specificity, reinforcing its performative dimension.

The possibility of education

But how is *Your Coloring Book* an endorser of the process of teaching about the Holocaust? What constitutes the educational effect of this artistic experiment? To perform implies to take part in something by means of doing. Coloring creates a lived experience for the one engaged in this activity. A lesson is best learnt when there is a direct involvement on the part of the apprentice. Katzir reflects upon the impact of education which employs lived experience as a pedagogical method of conveying understanding, stating that “teaching from experience is much more productive than teaching from reading”.²⁹

The idea of responsibility which is experienced by actually taking part in something is crucial. The control over pictures that belong to the realm of the documentary is in this case passed on to the participant in the exhibition. The visitor is invested unknowingly with a moral responsibility over images that document Nazi propaganda and persecution against the Jews. Unlike teaching the Holocaust in school, where the person in possession of knowledge initiates the process of teaching, by giving information, detailing on aspects that receive less coverage in the textbooks, or producing answers which are hardly ever contested by the pupils, the coloring of the images in Katzir’s book places the visitor-apprentice in the situation of finding answers for himself or herself. It delegates on the participant the responsibility to construct and control the “faith” of the truncated images. By coloring an image portraying Nazi propaganda one takes upon oneself the responsibility of mastering that image.

What *The Coloring Book* proposes is problematic for the viewer who has been educated to “master” information about the Holocaust, by identifying images appertaining to the historical event, and not to become the “maker” or the

29 Interview.

“agent”, someone who is directly responsible for the meaning of the images. The transition from a passive form of knowledge acquisition to an active mode of experiencing a fragment of historical truth is what the actors in Ram Katzir’s performative act have to undergo. Accustomed to see images of victimization and victimhood from a distance, the responses of the viewers, now giving color to such images are disturbing, alarming, and highly emotional.

The 1980s witnessed an avalanche of visual, literary, and pop-cultural representations of Jewish persecution, from which the general public drew their knowledge of the genocide. But, is mastery of historical information, by identifying images of extermination camps, or taking part in commemorative trips to Auschwitz sufficient in order to convey the basic and only message, that one should prevent by all means, any act of discrimination against another human being? Since traditionally the documentary, the memoir or the testimony are viewed to be more effective and morally legitimate ways of teaching about the Holocaust, art becomes a problematic medium, since it pertains as the Dutch art historian Ernst Van Alphen suggests, to the realm of the “imaginative”.³⁰ Prevailing conceptions of Holocaust teaching rely on what Shoshana Felman sees as Hegel’s philosophical didacticism which, allegedly, defines Western pedagogy. It refers to the acquisition of “absolute knowledge” described as “the exhaustion – through methodical investigation – of all there is to know, the absolute completion – termination – of apprenticeship. Complete and totally appropriated knowledge becomes in all sense of the word mastery.”³¹ Katzir’s work proves the contrary, as it does not rely on the kind of learning about the Holocaust communicated by a legitimate “voice” – a conveyor of knowledge who supplies his or her pupils with a type of learning described by Alphen as a “linear, cumulative and progressive learning, which leads to mastery over the object of learning.”³² Within this framework, knowledge of the Holocaust presupposes holding an expertise in the subject of the Holocaust, being infallible at recognizing images, mastering dates and numbers, places and people. Even though this type of mastery is essential in order to get a grasp of the historical event, it is by no means exhaustive. Learning by repetition, even

30 See Van Alphen, Ernst: *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in contemporary art, literature and theory*. Stanford 1997; *Holocaust Toys. Pedagogy of Remembrance through Play*. In: *Impossible Images, Contemporary Art after the Holocaust*. Eds. Shelley Hornstein, [Laura Levitt, Laurence J Silberstein]. New York 2003, p. 164.

31 Felman, Shoshana: *Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and Interminable*. In: *Yale French Studies*. 1982 63, p. 28.

32 Van Alphen, *Holocaust Toys. Pedagogy of Remembrance through Play*, p. 164.

in the case of such a subject leads indeed to mastery, but also to overfamiliarity, indifference and ultimately boredom. Katzir attempts to give a sense of novelty to images that have become so familiar that their power to move has been robbed away. The younger generations are confronted with what Van Alphen labels as “an overdose of information and educational documentary material”, whose long term effect is “emotional ignorance”. The critic proposes the following:

One needs to devise subtle ways which, without putting aside the historical knowledge, can produce a kind of felt knowledge of the emotions these events entailed. Mastery is then no longer an epistemic mastery of what happened, but a performative mastery of the emotions triggered by the happenings. Only by working through on the level where knowledge is not ‘out there’ to be fed to passive consumers but ‘felt’ anew every time, can the participants of a culture keep in touch with the Holocaust.³³

Identification with the victims of genocide, or making the viewers imagine how it felt being victimized is already a common pedagogical tool of Holocaust remembrance. It is meant to create empathy towards the survivors and victims of the Holocaust, so that persecution against other people would not happen again. But to what extent is this method still effective? What happens when the viewers are put in the situation of having to engage in a personal manner with images of the perpetrators, as *Your Coloring Book* proposes? What will they learn when they are invited to give shape, form, color and meaning to Nazi leaders, or members of the Nazi Youth?

Van Alphen rightly notices that “as creators of the perpetrators the visitors become complicitous in the possibility of the Nazis – but not of course, with the real, specific and acting Nazis.” The visitors are drawn into a performance, in which “they actualize, shape, and color, in other words, generate Nazi characters.”³⁴ Concurrently they are able to manifest their own feelings, contradictions and frustrations for having been misled into taking part in such a performance.

What is the effect of such an experiment? How does it become an educational act and not a traumatizing reenactment? The performative act of assuming responsibility for the colored image of the perpetrator has a much broader effect on the ways in which the Holocaust is being remembered. Literary critic,

33 Ibid., p. 176.

34 Ibid.

Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi, draws attention to the emergence of a “new relativism” manifested in the performative arts of the 1990s, which “challenged the rituals of consent in the commemorative spaces”.³⁵ Within the educational sphere, the consensus states that the Holocaust should be approached as an object of study that can be mastered, and therefore worked through in relatively fixed ways.

In exchange, the performative approach to Holocaust education initiated by Ram Katzir proposes, what Ezrahi refers to as “an ongoing reflexive encounter with the past as a moving target”.³⁶ One is made aware of the fact that the past, as recorded in images, has a performative value attached to it, in the sense that it takes the viewer to invest meaning into the image, and create a sense of immediacy and urgency. Katzir’s drawings bring to the fore the awareness that the past is shaped by the present, but also that there is an individual responsibility to understand at intellectual and emotional level how propaganda works, and how human factors can often lead to the Holocaust.

The ultimate lesson one has to learn is that the Holocaust should not happen again. How can one teach such lesson? What *Your Coloring Book* might teach is that there is no monolithic memory or identity of the Holocaust victim, or of the Nazi perpetrator; that both positions can be interchangeable and that doing “evil” is most of the times a consequence of what often starts as a harmless thing. Imagining the Nazi signals the “beginning of a new ethical rhetoric”,³⁷ in which demonizing the Nazi is no longer a viable alternative for historical understanding. Instead, becoming aware of the potential for evil lying in all of us is a much harder task, worth undertaking even with the risk of failure. *Your Coloring Book* draws attention to the ability to do evil and to the easiness with which one can act out a barbaric gesture. At the same time, it alludes to the fact that this weak trait of the human condition can be recognized and treated as long as one knows its workings. The artist proposes an unusual form of teaching about the Holocaust, by reflecting primarily upon the weaknesses of the human nature.

Ram Katzir raises awareness to what influential Frankfurt school scholar Theodor Adorno, in the essay *Education after Auschwitz* names; “the fundamental conditions that favor the relapse into barbarism”. Every debate about the

35 Ezrahi, Dekoven Sidra: Racism and Ethics: Constructing Alternative History. In: Impossible Images, Contemporary Art after the Holocaust, p. 126.

36 Ibid.

37 Ezrahi, p. 125.

ideals of education fades and becomes “trivial and inconsequential” in comparison to the single ideal of education – “never again Auschwitz”. Adorno argues that one is able to work against the repetition of Auschwitz if one “comes to know the mechanisms that render people capable of such deeds, one must reveal the mechanisms to them, and strive by awakening a general awareness of those mechanisms, to prevent people from becoming so again.”³⁸ It is what Katzir strives to accomplish, by drawing attention to the dangers of propaganda and ideology, and demonstrating in a performance in which the visitors are the actors, how manipulation works. Only by being duped into becoming the victims of a manipulative act, can the viewers come to realize the possibility of being liable to manipulation. Since there is a great difference between lived or direct and intellectual or mediated experience, the artist chooses to teach a lesson about self-reflection by using an unconventional method which possesses its own risks of being harmful. When speaking about the reactions of the viewers, Ram Katzir reminds us that *Your Coloring Book* “touched upon a certain innocence in us. There is this place where we are so open and receptive to get authority as something good, and then this can be abused. When you communicate with people on that level, things can come out.”³⁹ The large number of people who participated in the exhibitions in Europe and Israel, the quality and many-sidedness of their contributions showed that the subject proposed by Katzir touched a sensitive chord. Not all visitors were receptive to the artist’s proposal. Some were too traumatized to engage with the material, while others confronted with it involuntarily, through the coverage in mass media and described it as a cold shower. Others however, saw it as an opportunity for self-reflection.

Adorno argues that “the only education that has any sense at all is an education towards critical self-reflection. One must labor against this lack of reflection, must dissuade people from striking outward without reflecting upon themselves,”⁴⁰ and reminds us that childhood is the time when all personalities including those who commit atrocities in later life are formed.

It is no wonder then that Katzir’s coloring book addresses the child in us, the one receptive to both good and evil. Visual art can provide us with an alternative. It does not, however, offer solutions. What it does offer is another

38 Adorno, Theodor: *Critical models: interventions and catchwords*. Trans. Henry W. Pickford. New York 1998, p. 193.

39 Interview.

40 Adorno, p. 195.

point of view, perhaps unexpected. *Your Coloring Book* encourages a performative reflection on the possibility of self-determination and of non-cooperation, but also to an equal degree on the risks of giving in to manipulation and barbarism.