

Exhibiting the Holocaust

By: Rachel Perry



During the tenure of my Sharon Abramson Research Grant, I studied “Crimes Hitlériens,” a massive exhibition held at the Grand Palais in Paris in the summer of 1945. Over the course of my research, I quickly became aware that this exhibition was part of a much broader phenomenon. Hundreds of exhibitions were mounted across Europe and the United States in the immediate postwar period that sought to tell the story of the recent past. Whether meticulously planned or ad hoc, permanent or temporary, travelling or site specific, organized by individuals, communities, institutions or nations, these first exhibitions were crucial in the formation of Holocaust memory. Yet very little research has been conducted on these exhibition histories. Because exhibitions are ephemeral, they have not received the kind of scholarly attention that permanent monuments and memorials have. Because few of them were photographed or documented, they have disappeared from the public record, along with a host of other performative, time-based, bodily interventions.

Already on the day after liberation, the process of Holocaust “museumification” was initiated. Political prisoners and Allied soldiers organized site-specific exhibits in the concentration camps of Dachau, Buchenwald, Auschwitz and Majdanek. Small, low-tech, DIY exhibitions were mounted in the Displaced Persons camps by Jewish survivors such as Tzvi Kaddushin/George Kadish. Within a month of the end of WWII, impressive blockbusters opened in museums and public venues across Europe organized by the Ministries of Information. International organizations such as the United Nations War Crimes Commission sponsored the *Nazi Crimes* exhibition in London in December 1945. And special interest groups, such as the Communist Fédération nationale des déportés et internés résistants et patriotes (FNDIRP), organized more unconventional “train-exhibitions” that traversed France and Belgium, stopping in 71 train stations and displaying works of art made by the inmates as well as ashes from the crematoria and models of the camps.

After teaching a graduate seminar on the topic, I am now preparing an edited volume titled, *Exhibiting the Holocaust: Histories, Practices and Politics in the Immediate Postwar*

Period, 1944-1949. This volume begins the work of writing monographic, source-based case studies on these early initiatives. Based on archival research and close visual analysis of remaining photographic documentation, each essay tackles one exhibition history, analyzing its design and content as well as the social and political discourses underpinning it. Reconstructing these exhibition histories can tell us a great deal about how different nations, communities, and individuals chose to remember, and what they privileged and understood about the war. Was the Jewish tragedy marginalized in them? Where, when and under what circumstances was it foregrounded? How were objects, images, text and technologies deployed and to what end? What were the curatorial strategies and techniques of presentation used? And how were they received by their public? Although most of these exhibitions were short-lived, many of the practices they employed set a precedent for curatorial strategies still in use in Holocaust and heritage museums (tombs of ashes and piles of material goods). Which practices were abandoned (mannequins for instance) and why? Did they participate in the Allies' wider denazification program and prepare the ground for legal issues of war crimes? How were they shaped by national needs and political demands? By answering some of these questions, my research hopes to offer a more nuanced understanding of exhibitions as a neglected but important medium of early Holocaust memory. I am extremely grateful for the Sharon Abramson Research Grant and thank the Holocaust Educational Foundation for supporting my research.

Rachel E. Perry received her doctorate in Art History at Harvard University. She teaches in the Weiss Livnat Graduate Holocaust Studies program at the University of Haifa on Visual Culture. The recipient of an EHRI Fellowship at the Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris, she was a Senior Research Fellow at the Yad Vashem International Institute for Holocaust Research. Her articles have appeared in many peer reviewed journals including October, History and Memory, Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne, Revue 20/21ème siècle, Holocaust Studies: a Journal of Culture and History, French Cultural Studies, RIHA and Art Bulletin. In 2018, she curated the exhibition "Arrivals, Departures: The Oscar Ghez Collection" at the Hecht Museum and authored the catalogue A Memorial to Jewish Artists, Victims of Nazism. Her most recent article is "Nathalie Kraemer's Rising Voice: Letting the Silences of History Speak," Ars Judaica (March 2020).