

**Zoltán Kékesi, *Haladék - Holokauszt-émlékezet a kortárs képzőművészetben* [Respite - The Memory of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art] Budapest: Kijárat, 2011. 225 pp.**

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Just a few months ago, Péter György published an essay in the *Magyar Narancs* weekly about what he believes to be the most painful problem of contemporary Hungarian society: the lack of common understanding of the country's past. This deficiency affects the way the memory of the Holocaust is treated by the Hungarians. According to György, one of our urgent tasks is to acknowledge that the Holocaust is part of the history of the whole of the Hungarian society and that it is, as he says, our common heritage. György also offers a way to awaken this shared acknowledgement of the past: by socially and historically engaged works of art that can bring catharsis to the viewers and thus offer them "trauma therapy." György is right that there have been only a few attempts by contemporary artists to radically address present-day Hungarian society's failed cognizance of the past. Many of us still remember the 2004 exhibition titled *Elhallgatott Holokauszt* [The Silenced Holocaust] in the *Műcsarnok* Art Center, which presented works by contemporary Hungarian artists. We must also mention the paintings of Csaba Nemes, or the recently opened exhibition of contemporary visual artists reflecting on the Holocaust of Roma people. But there is still much that contemporary Hungarian art can do to awaken our understanding of the past and thus enhance our sense of social responsibility in the present.

This issue becomes all the more acute as we begin to learn about the plans of the Hungarian government to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust in 2015. Here I have to refer to another recent article by Péter György in *Magyar Narancs*, in which he warns that the name of the new Holocaust Center soon to be opened in Budapest - *Sorsok Háza* [The House of Fates] - has connotations that preserve the mythical understanding of the past instead of fostering its contemporary and more truthful understanding. This is why I believe that Zoltán Kékesi's book, *Haladék - Holokauszt-émlékezet a kortárs képzőművészetben* is relevant for Hungarian readers, even though it is not about works by Hungarian artists (though the fact that Kékesi does not deal with Hungarian works is itself a meaningful lack), and it points to the same need as pointed out by Péter György. Zoltán Kékesi's book is an illuminating recent contribution to both Holocaust studies and art theory in Hungary, and its discussions can further inspire today's renewed art of remembrance.

Kékesi's book borrows its title from Harun Farocki's documentary project. Farocki's source material is the black-and-white film which was shot at the transit camp of Westerbork in Holland in 1944 by Rudolph Breslauer, an interned Jewish photographer. The film was ordered



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by the camp commander, and was meant to show the world that this Dutch camp was a safe place where the "residents" were engaged in factory production. In reality, in transit camps the execution of the prisoners was only postponed for a while, until they were transported to the sites of extermination. Rudolph Breslauer's death was also postponed for a few weeks, as long as he worked on this propaganda material, but after the film was finished, he too was executed. This short while is the *haladék* [respite] referred to in Kékesi's title, meaning a limited and artificial life prolongation period that gave camp inmates like Breslauer an illusory sense of relief and hope that their lives were spared.

Kékesi is interested in contemporary archival art that plays with our sense of the respite, here meaning the illusion, produced by the archival image, of the past as still existing. Apart from Farocki's *Respite* (Germany and Holland, 2007), Kékesi also discusses Romuald Karmakar's *The Himmler Project* (Germany, 2000), Eyal Sivan's *The Specialist* (Israel, France, Germany, Austria, and Belgium, 1999), Artur Zmijewski's *80064* (Poland, 2004), Omer Fast's *Spielberg's List* (Poland, 2003), and Yael Bartana's *Polish Trilogy* (Poland, 2007-2011). Kékesi also writes in detail about Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* in the first, introductory part of his book, where he considers Lanzmann's documentary film a landmark work of art radically representing what Annette Wieviorka called "the era of the witness." *Shoah* became an emblematic film precisely because it displays the traces of trauma exclusively through testimonies, as Lanzmann refused to use archival images even though he did insert learned academic discourse in his film (mainly by Raoul Hilberg). The works of Farocki, Zmijewski and the others already designate the next phase after the era of the witnesses, but according to Kékesi we need to talk about Lanzmann's *Shoah* first to understand the turn that later took place in the art of remembrance. In Kékesi's interpretation, *Shoah* is groundbreaking as it claims that every testimony is embedded in the political discourse of its time, in this case the institutionalized Holocaust remembrance in Poland and Israel. The theoretical framework Kékesi applies for examining the political aspects of artistic works involves Jacques Rancière's *Dissensus – on Politics and Aesthetics* (2010), which discusses the ability of art to produce a critical, counter-political viewpoint, as well as Giorgio Agamben's understanding of biopolitics. Kékesi's observations of Lanzmann's *Shoah* as embedded in the political discourse of its time and place(s) serve as an important point of departure when Kékesi turns to Fast and Bartana. Kékesi is a very sensitive and attentive interpreter of images. What makes his accounts special is how he exposes and describes the ways in which the films reflect power structures. When discussing the "Treblinka Song" scene in *Shoah*, Kékesi draws our attention to the interaction between Lanzmann and ex-Unterscharführer Franz Suchomel, showing how their communication can be viewed in changing power frameworks and how Suchomel's speech reflects the oppressive power once held by the Nazis. The issue of interview dynamics will return, though in an entirely different way, in Kékesi's discussion of Zmijewski's *80064*.

Although Lanzmann refused to work with archive materials, the archive itself has gradually grown into an essential pool for collecting testimonies. As the temporal distance between the Holocaust and our time grows and there are less and less live witnesses among us, we are forced to rely on archived materials to understand the experiences of victims and survivors. The archive is not a neutral space, though, but rather a part of the political discourse. Kékesi turns to Jacques Derrida's understanding of the archive when he says that archiving is an act of canonization which once again - just as the stored and studied events did - involves power

and hierarchy. Farocki, Karmakar, Sivan and Zmijewski use archival materials or images in order to reflect on the status and function of the archive, whereas Fast and Bartana create "pseudo-archival" materials to display the political process of canonization and the construction of institutionalized national remembrance. Farocki's device for exposing the hierarchical structure behind the Westerbork propaganda images is the "Cut" sign. Karmakar reconstructs Himmler's more than three hours long "Poznan speech" by having actor Manfred Zapatka read the full text of the speech and thus enliven this document's terrible content. Eyal Sivan makes use of the three hundred and fifty hours long footage recorded during the Adolf Eichmann Trial in Jerusalem in 1961, of which he focuses on the scenes with the jury. Thus Sivan exposes how the power structure affected the prosecution discourse and how this discourse was mediated by the original footage. According to Kékesi, Sivan's *Specialist* is in fact a "moral critique" of the trial (141), which resulted in Sivan's being criticized for taking an anti-Israel standpoint, as the Eichmann trial is considered a formative event in the creation of Israeli collective memory and identity.

Zmijewski's *80064* is no less provocative, as in this project the filmmaker persuades an old Auschwitz survivor to reconstruct the number tattooed on his arm, thus shaking or questioning the issue of authenticity, because the renewed number both strengthens and obliterates the old, original one. Needless to say, this act does not serve any of the "regular" purposes of Holocaust related art: it is neither therapeutic nor helpful in preserving an authentic testimony. Zmijewski turns the traces of past survival into a sign of submission in the present, says Kékesi. It is a very disturbing project, which evokes the most complex emotions in the viewers and bar them from identifying with any side. Kékesi's conclusion is that the powerful message of Zmijewski's work concerns the lack of solidarity in society. He also claims that the social pattern or the marking system that defined the roles of oppressor and oppressed in the Holocaust have not changed in the last seventy years.

Karmakar, Sivan and Zmijewski are pointing in their works at new ways for the viewers to take moral stances. Compared to the literary and film art of the era of the witness, contemporary archival art is able to use or embed the findings of perpetrator scholarship and thus evoke a new sense of responsibility, says Kékesi. The last two works Kékesi analyzes - Omer Fast's *Spielberg's List* and Yael Bartana's *Polish Trilogy* - both deal with the anomalies of remembrance in present-day Polish society. Fast interviews Polish stage workers who participated in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993). This video project presents the ways the locals relate to one of the settings built for Spielberg's movie: the reconstruction of the Plaszow concentration camp. Bartana's project is not rooted in everyday reality, but it is most realistic in the way it reproduces the fears and desires underlying present-day Polish political thinking. Topography is central for both artists: for Fast who locates his work in Krakow as for Bartana who is dealing with sites of memory in Warsaw.

Zoltán Kékesi's outstanding book is important for Holocaust Studies in Hungary and Central Europe in many ways. Kékesi introduces recent and most provocative works of art that deal with questions of Holocaust remembrance, and he applies the latest theoretical frameworks in his interpretations. Kékesi is an excellent viewer and we can learn a lot from his accounts of images, scenes, movie sequences, and settings. Still, the most important claim of Kékesi's book is that the preservation of the past is inevitably embedded and entangled in the power structures of the present. In other words: while viewing the Holocaust as the event in which bio-political

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subordination was realized at its utmost, we are also made aware of the ties between this conclusion and today's social conceptions and manners of remembrance. Together with the works of arts he writes about, Kékesi is also directing our attention to a new, critical sense of responsibility that we need to endorse nowadays. There is a lot we can learn from contemporary archival art, and there is just as much that we can learn from Zoltán Kékesi's *Haladék*.