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Performative Holocaust Commemoration in the 21st Century

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Performative Holocaust Commemoration in the 21st Century

Performative practices have become a prominent feature of Holocaust memorialisation over the last two decades but remain significantly under-researched. This introduction provides a critical framework for this Special Issue's contributions which all explore various examples of performative practices in Holocaust commemoration.

Performativity in contemporary artistic and educational Holocaust memorial projects includes audience participatory strategies which aim to transform individuals from passive spectators into socially and morally responsible agents. This introduction contextualises these practices in relation to the performative value of the pledges of 'never forget' and 'never again' uttered by survivors shortly after the liberation of the concentration camps. It further illustrates how these practices are employed by newer generations of memory agents motivated to endow the survivors' pledges with new urgency. Lastly, it is argued that theoretical approaches informed by performativity and coupled with empirical research into audience reception can help us gain a better understanding of what performative Holocaust commemoration means and what it does.

Keywords: Holocaust memory, commemoration practice, performativity, audience participation, audience research

The Legacy of the Holocaust Imperatives

At the beginning of the 21st century, the moral imperatives ‘never forget’ and ‘never again’ belong to the standard repertoire of Holocaust commemoration. As the Holocaust moves further back into the annals of history, these imperatives call for a new critical interrogation. What do we do with these precepts, and what are they doing with us? If taken seriously, how can they be rendered significant in the 21st century?

Facing the imminent shift towards a post-witness era, it is important to recall what ‘never again’ and ‘never forget’ meant for those who first uttered them. In their book *Memory and Forgetting in the Post-Holocaust Era: The Ethics of Never Again* (2017), the sociologists Alejandro Baer and Natan Sznajder remind us of one of the earliest commemorative oaths publicly performed by World War II survivors.¹ Following their liberation by American troops, survivors in Buchenwald displayed signs stating ‘never again’ in the various languages they spoke. On April 19, 1945, they gathered to commemorate the dead at Buchenwald’s *Appellplatz* and made the following pledge:

We will not stop fighting until the last perpetrator is brought before the judges of the people! Our watchword is the destruction of Nazism from its roots. Building a new world of peace and freedom is our goal. This is our responsibility to our murdered comrades and their relatives.²

After the oath had been read aloud, survivors raised their hands and proclaimed: ‘We swear!’³ The tone of the performance echoed the ideological convictions of its enactors, most of them former political prisoners. It is worth remembering that in the period immediately after liberation, the ‘never again’ of the former resistance fighters and the ‘never again’ of the surviving Jews did not necessarily mean the same. However, in subsequent decades, the ‘Holocaust has transcended the framework of anti-fascist

partisan and Jewish memory and has been universalised,' as Baer and Sznajder underline.⁴

Undoubtedly, the survivors' pledge affirms the authority of performed speech to produce a new reality, as proclaimed by the philosopher John L. Austin in his influential *How to Do Things with Words* (1962).⁵ Austin's fundamental insight that words are not only descriptive but have the capacity to do something – to bring into being what they name – resonates powerfully with the survivors' public pledge. When uttered in the appropriate context by authorised persons, and taken seriously by the receivers, speech acts can in fact influence the world. Voiced by the survivors and witnessed by the liberators at the site of state terror, the oath transformed the very status of the former prisoners from victims into agents of memory endowed with a clear vision of a better future.⁶ Their pledge acted as a performative which demanded, and still demands, active remembering with the aim of transforming perception, behaviour and identity on a personal, national and even global level.

Set against the crimes committed during World War II, the survivors' pledge to build a 'new, democratic, and peaceful world'⁷ not only transformed their individual lives, but also created the very foundation upon which global Holocaust memory still rests. It may have taken over five decades since the end of World War II to institutionalise this pledge,⁸ but the global culture of Holocaust memorialisation initiated by survivors has not been without important consequences. Palpable bodies and legal frameworks for intervention were established through the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and the International Criminal Court of Justice in 2002. Their pledge has motivated countries all over the world to teach younger generations about the Holocaust, to commemorate its victims, and to prevent similar

crimes from happening again. Inspired by this pledge, national and international agents of Holocaust education and remembrance share a common mission to reject all forms of racial violence and discrimination, and to strengthen democracy, human rights and the peaceful coexistence of citizens within pluralistic societies.⁹

Today, ‘never again’ is frequently expressed in a wide range of settings: in official ceremonies, in museums and memorials, and in the school curricula of many countries throughout the world. When voiced collectively, this pledge creates a sense of belonging to a global moral discourse and transnational community of memory.¹⁰ However, in light of the wars, ethnic cleansings and genocides that have occurred since 1945, the Holocaust imperatives are at risk of becoming hollow responses devoid of performative power. For a growing number of critics ‘never again’ is an empty pledge, an overused mantra which lacks transformational and political authority.¹¹ The sceptics’ concern about the pledges’ loss of meaning at a moment of a fundamental generational shift has in fact motivated contemporary agents of Holocaust education and memorialisation to reinvest the ‘never again’ with meaning and to translate it into artistic or educational initiatives that demand action. The contributors to this Special Issue are concerned with how the pledges are implemented through audience participation and audience engagement, and what the effects of these practices are upon audience members.

Performative Dimensions of Holocaust Memorialisation

A useful frame for working with the performative dimensions of the Holocaust memorial culture is provided by performance scholar Diana Taylor in *The Archive and*

the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas (2003). Taylor distinguishes between ‘the archive of supposedly enduring materials (i.e. texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge’. According to Taylor, ‘the repertoire...enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short all those acts usually thought as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge.’ As Taylor further argues, these embodied acts ‘reconstitute themselves, transmitting communal memories, histories, and values from one group/generation to the next.’¹²

The contemporary repertoire of Holocaust commemoration encompasses multiple forms of embodied acts such as ceremonies, events and speeches, journeys to former concentration camps and memorials, visits to monuments, museums and art installations. Memory agents such as museum curators, artists, theatre practitioners, grassroots and (non-)governmental organisations involved in educational work, architects and design companies hired to stage Holocaust exhibitions, resort to a wide range of practices to transmit these embodied acts and to enact both ‘never forget’ and ‘never again’ in their mission to make the public aware of the Holocaust. Many of these practices have a pronounced performative dimension: members of the audience are summoned to take an active role, and are endowed with agency, as informed participants, as active collaborators and as responsible social agents.

Against this background, in the context of this Special Issue, the term ‘performative’ is employed in two main ways. It serves to describe a certain repertoire (following Taylor’s interpretation) of Holocaust memorialisation, namely the audience participatory and the performance-like character of memorial actions and the performances of visitors. And it serves to indicate the performative force of memorial

actions, namely the impact on audiences, and the transformative potential of such practices (as elaborated by Austin).

Performative practices in Holocaust commemoration are not new but connect to the audience participatory art movements of the 1960s and 1970s such as Minimalism, Fluxus, Happening and Performance art.¹³ Inspired by these movements, creators of public memorials in Germany in particular and beyond, employed participatory strategies to make visible aspects of history that have been repressed from collective memory. Artists such as Jochen Gerz, Esther Shalev Gerz, Horst Hoheisel, and Gunter Demnig (to name but a few) wanted to trigger processes of confrontation with this particular past and raise self-critical awareness. Their public art projects had nothing to do with the now common edutainment,¹⁴ an audience participatory and pedagogical approach employed in museums since the 1990s to create pleasurable experiences for learners.¹⁵ Instead, these works intended to invite visitors, both from Germany and abroad, to take their roles in society as social and moral actors more seriously. Such active subject positions can be reiterated in various Holocaust memorial practices developed since the 1980s in memorial museums and in commemorative ceremonies, as shall be briefly illustrated with emblematic works. These are taken from countries with an active culture of Holocaust commemoration, but similar projects appear in other national contexts. The chosen works help to acknowledge the early artists' contributions towards making performative practices an established form of Holocaust commemoration within the field of art and education.

As is widely known, artists Esther Shalev-Gerz and Jochen Gerz addressed visitors as active social subjects in relation to their *Monument against Fascism* in

Hamburg-Harburg (1986). An inscription near the base of the monument contained the following message, in seven languages:

We invite the citizens of Harburg, and visitors to the town, to add their names here to ours. In doing so, we commit ourselves to remain vigilant. As more and more names cover this 12-meter-tall lead column, it will gradually be lowered into the ground. One day it will have disappeared completely, and the site of the Harburg monument against fascism will be empty. In the end, it is only we ourselves who can rise up against injustice.¹⁶

Over a period of 7 years, the surface of the column, lowered periodically until it sunk completely into the ground, and it was filled with signatures but also disturbing responses. Some notes condemned Fascism, others were acts of vandalism and some called for violence (as e.g. ‘death to fascists’). For the most part, visitors’ signatures remained illegible, a scribble which disappeared each time the column was lowered further. Nevertheless, art critic Irit Rogoff appreciated the clashing reactions ‘as a form of active engagement rather than the expected one of a pious genuflection’.¹⁷

More importantly the Gerzes’ monument marked the beginnings of a participatory art memorial practice in the context of Holocaust commemoration.¹⁸ It acknowledged and framed audience reactions as part of what the monument itself sought to achieve. This practice trusted ordinary members of the public to act as responsible social actors, co-creators and owners of public memory, rather than just be silent witnesses to acts of remembrance initiated by the state or state institutions such as museums and memorials.

Audience participatory memorial designs of this kind have increased since the late 1980s. Among later participatory initiatives, one of the most emblematic and enduring works is Gunter Demnig’s *Stolpersteine* (in English: Stumbling stones or blocks). Initiated in 1992, this memorialisation best renders the collaborative dimension of many

projects from this period. As stated on his webpage, the artist ‘remembers the victims of National Socialism by installing commemorative brass plaques in the pavement in front of their last address of choice’.¹⁹ The ‘stumbling stone’ contains basic information as the victim’s name, date of birth, date of deportation and, if known, the place of death. This simple yet poignant memorial gesture has spread from Germany to 23 other European countries. Anyone can take part and sponsor the laying of a commemorative plaque. Individuals, families, schools, and local communities become agents of commemoration as they undertake archival research into the fate of victims of National Socialism predominantly of Jews but also of Roma and other persecuted groups.²⁰ Once information about their fate is retrieved, Demnig is invited by local organisers to permanently embed the ‘stumbling stones’ into the pavement.

Art historian Mechtild Widrich has referenced such collaborative practices using the concept ‘performative monument’. She explains, ‘the monument, seen as an authoritarian obstacle to action, turns into the performative monument, an object or site that contractually binds its audience in self-aware acts of commemoration’.²¹

Memorial museums since the 1990s have addressed their visitors as active subjects. One well-known case is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC (USHMM), a key agent of Holocaust education and memorialisation. Upon entry to the permanent exhibition which opened in 1993, visitors are invited to act as witnesses to the past. They are presented with a six-page ID card, which states on the cover: ‘For the dead and the living, we must bear witness.’²² The card introduces visitors to the story of one individual and invites them to pay more attention to aspects of the exhibition’s historical narrative associated with that individual. According to Vivian Patraka this practice ‘offer[s] thousands of people the opportunity to change

from spectator/bystander to witness'.²³ But such practice has also raised criticism. Museum scholar Anna Reading noted that 'activity in the museum is not the same as agency'.²⁴ Symbolic actions in museums such as this one may be only a gimmick, a form of edutainment, and may not be reflected in participants' actions in their real lives. Also, performance scholar Susan Bennett is doubtful whether 'contemporary cultural consumers want/need to be part of the action'. She further highlights the challenges of measuring impacts using scholarly methods, stating that 'outcomes can be coerced as much as inspired and their pedagogical impacts hard to measure.'²⁵ While Bennett has a point, we argue (as will be developed further), that the only reasonable way to test this opinion is exactly to delve into the challenging field of audience research and endeavour to gain some insight into visitors' experiences and long-term reactions.

In 2009, the USHMM took a step further in the direction of visitor activity with the exhibition *From Memory to Action: Meeting the Challenge of Genocide*.²⁶ This exhibition invited visitors to make pledges of commitment, by providing written answers to the question: 'what will you do to help meet the challenge of genocide today?' In most cases, the visitors' responses began with a personal promise 'I will...'. For instance, visitors have promised: 'I will educate myself so I will not be able to plead ignorance'; 'The Holocaust Museum opened my eyes. I will help people,' or 'I will teach my students in 10th grade English about genocide'.²⁷ Ten months after the exhibition's opening, more than 4,000 individuals among those who visited, asked to receive e-mail updates and information about contemporary genocide. An evaluation study of the exhibition's impact on visitors stated that it had 'social action-oriented effects' and acted as 'a powerful catalyst for on-going action in the spaces of visitors' home communities'.²⁸ This example shows the growing scholarly awareness of the

importance of audience reception, and that these studies demand follow-up investigations over a longer time period. Without wanting to exaggerate the social impact of such projects, the handwritten statements projected on a digital wall made the personal commitments to stand up against injustice visible to new visitors, thus increasing their performative potential. Their very publicness led to these statements becoming pledges to be actualised by their authors. To illustrate this point further, the USHMM highlights the centrality of visitors' participation and agency in their online materials, as follows:

In a constantly changing world, with assaults on truth rising just as we lose our best teachers, the survivors, the Museum is leading an urgent campaign to keep Holocaust memory alive as a relevant, transformative force in the 21st century – inspiring people everywhere to confront hatred, prevent genocide and promote human dignity. But we can't do it without you.²⁹

While it remains debatable whether the survivors really are the best teachers of this history, the statement makes clear: we are confronted with an essential turning point, the disappearance of eyewitnesses, and the emergence of generations with no personal experiences of the Holocaust but who are asked to hold on to its commitments. Consequently, we need to learn more about what all well-meant commemorative projects do for those who encounter them.

Calls to become agents do not only appear in public art or in memorial museums. A plethora of grassroots initiatives³⁰ by local cultural organisations invite audience members to take part in staged performances of memory, as for instance in performance-based commemorative events designed in Poland by the Grodzka Gate-NN Theatre Centre in Lublin. *Mystery of Memory* actions (from 2000 to the present) and *Letters to Henio* annual memorial campaigns (since 2005) use authentic memory spaces

of the former Jewish community in Lublin to stage symbolic commemorative performances with the help of young people, as well as of survivors and of rescuers.³¹ It is hoped that participations can mobilise young people to become more aware and appreciative of the Jewish heritage of their home towns and more capable of accepting and embracing difference.

As demonstrated, the pioneer work from the 1980s onwards laid the foundation for today's established practices of commemoration. The examples invoked above illustrate key strategies of audience participation and their potential to provide audiences with agency. This participatory practice appeals to ordinary people's potential to be agents of change within the societies they live in. Thus, in this Special Issue, audience participation is perceived as a process of internalisation of the Holocaust imperatives made apparent through a performative practice. The contributors to this volume will address more recent initiatives which endorse performative dimensions. In their chosen case studies, listeners to survivor testimonies, visitors to memorial museums and memorials, as well as participants in educational campaigns, move beyond mere spectatorship and endorse active subject positions, as performers of memory, witnesses to the past, agents of commemoration, and as responsible social actors.

What Do Performative Practices Do? Scholarly Observations

Given the presence of audience participatory strategies in Holocaust commemoration since the late 1980s, scholars of Holocaust memory have attempted to provide an interpretation of the effects of these practices. As early as 1990, the influential scholar of Holocaust memory, James E. Young, noted that public commemorations can

transform participants' perceptions of time. Young observed that *Yom Hashoah*, Holocaust Memorial Day in Israel, has a performative dimension as it is staged as a performance, created through rituals, moments of silence and ceremonial gestures and is endowed with a performative power as it 'turns time itself into a memorial space'.³² In a study on Holocaust memorials from 1993, Young noted the 'fundamentally interactive, dialogic quality of every memorial space'. Here, he more clearly linked performativity to the agency of visitors, stating that 'public memory and its meaning depend not just on the forms and figures in the monument, but on the viewer's response to the monument.'³³ Public memorials, he further argued, can create self-sustained and unregulated civic memorialisation, since, 'once created, memorials take on lives of their own, often stubbornly resistant to the state's original intentions.'³⁴ Young highlighted therefore the agency of audience members who are free to choose how to participate and what messages to draw from their participation. The performative force can also trigger in audiences a vivid connection between the present and the past. Oren Baruch Stier (2003) alluded to this response when he argued that cultural mediations of the Holocaust make the 'distinction between then and now, here and there, disappear'. Stier further noted that 'it is the performative quality of how an aspect of the Holocaust is contextualised that gives it its vibrancy and lends the illusion of immediacy'.³⁵ A similar view emerges in Marianne Hirsch's reflection on the performative regime of historical photographs. According to Hirsch, historical photographs retain an 'embodied dimension' since 'they give rise to certain bodily acts of looking...that render material the past that we are seeking to understand and receive.'³⁶ Following Hirsch's reasoning, such artefacts are performative when they construct an embodied connection with the past. Lisa Costello added a new layer of interpretation to the performative force of

memorials when she described Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (2006) as a 'layered memorial activity that performs in every Holocaust genre to create a temporally fluid, Bakhtinian dialogic between the author and the subject (memory), the event and the audience (history).'³⁷ In this case, the performative power is attributed to the way in which this work establishes dialogic processes with the receivers.

The referenced scholars capture key characteristics of performative Holocaust commemoration, namely the potential to create vivid and embodied connections between the past and the present, to lend a sense of immediacy and urgency to the past, and to engage audiences more actively in processes of memorialisation. What they however do not provide is empirical evidence into whether audience members do in fact experience performative practices in the described ways.

The Importance of Audience Reception Studies

The lack of research into audience experiences spurred our current research project, *Making the Past Present: Public Perception of Performative Holocaust Commemoration since the Year 2000*. Despite the growing number of audience participatory works, there remains a limited body of empirical, (auto)ethnographic or audience research work aimed at understanding the motivations, emotional and cognitive responses, and the longer-term impacts of participation in these projects. Why had not more been done to address the long overdue question of audience reception in Holocaust contexts? Are we anxious to learn that these practices fail, implying a proof of our incapacity to render the Holocaust imperatives significant? If agents of Holocaust memory are serious about 'never forget' and 'never again', and regard audience participatory practices as an effective tool to implement these moral imperatives,

educators and researchers of public memory must take on the challenge to address what exactly these practices do, and to investigate what the enduring effects of such memorial projects are.

Research on how visitors decode and recode their experiences has also been slow to develop, because these types of studies are time-consuming, expensive, and cannot be applied in straightforward ways to the audience engagement policies of museums, public education programmes or to artistic practice. In the case of art works especially, but not limited to this field, there are additional methodological difficulties regarding the measurement of (long-term) effects. However, the drive towards civic participation, human rights education and social inclusion, which continues to inform education and memorial work in museums and local communities, implies that there is a greater need to understand audience members' perceptions and experiences. Hence, a genuine understanding of these participations should include investigations of motivations, perceptions, beliefs, expectations and impacts, if we wish to obtain answers to what performative practices do and if they work in the intended way.

Although critical engagement with the audience reception of Holocaust artistic practices remains scarce, exceptions do exist. Studies by Irit Dekel and Quentin Stevens inspired our research but also indicated that more needs to be done. Both used photography and ethnographic methods to observe how visitors behave and interact with each other at *The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* in Berlin.³⁸ Chaim Noy and Sharon Macdonald investigated comments left by visitors at Holocaust museums and memorial sites, such as the Holocaust Museum in Florida and the Documentation Centre of the former Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg.³⁹ Their studies illustrate how discourse analysis and other sociolinguistic methods can be

applied to the examination of visitor books. Some research into narratives constructed by guides at museums and concentration camps and their assumed impacts on audience members also exists.⁴⁰ However, these studies focus on interviews with guides and on observations of guided tours and tend to invoke audience reactions in an inconsistent, anecdotal manner therefore, lacking a methodical and considered approach.

Given the large number of memorial museums and public memorials around the world, alongside the rich body of work on the aesthetic, political or national functions of memorialisation, the small number of visitor studies remains surprising.⁴¹ In the few critical investigations of audience engagement available, there appears to be a clear thematic focus on issues such as ‘empathy’ and ‘identification’ with the persecuted groups as central emotional responses.⁴² Without doubt, participation in public commemorations produces a range of emotional responses, yet there is a lack of understanding concerning how visitors rationalise feelings and endow them with meaning. For example, it is not yet known how difficult emotions, such as anger, disbelief, distress or outrage shape visitors’ attitudes to learning and commemoration.

We acknowledge that Holocaust commemoration based on performativity places significant pressure on audiences, since many projects which invoke the Holocaust intend to provoke powerful emotions and to challenge visitors to ask difficult questions. They may destabilise visitors’ perceptions of history and their understanding of the relationship between the past and the present. Other projects are ambitious in their aim to endow visitors with a critical apparatus with which to question moral stances, and prior beliefs or knowledge. However, as our research had proven, the public often seems ready to face even the emotionally challenging works of art.⁴³

Against this background, future research might address the following questions: Do audiences respond as the initiators have intended? Do participants undergo emotional and bodily experiences that result, as many initiators expect, in their transformation from passive witnesses to active participants? Or, given the difficult and demanding subject matter, do visitors reject engagement? These questions have no simple answers, and there are certainly no straightforward methodological approaches to capture public responses to such questions. Creative approaches are needed to gain a better understanding of the participants' experiences of exhibitions, public art, installations and commemorative ceremonies. These can include both traditional and technology-enhanced methods of data collection, a combination of qualitative and quantitative interpretation of data and special attention to ethical considerations as well as to researchers' biases. Due to the variety of Holocaust commemorative projects, there is also a need for research approaches which, for example, combine methodologies from social sciences with insights from psychology and psycho-social studies and apply discourse and content analysis derived from sociolinguistics. Audience research conducted in the field of museums and of public art shows that a multi-method approach is very effective for retaining the nuance of audience members' opinions, levels of engagement, attitudes and perceptions of a subject matter.⁴⁴ The high level of inter- and transdisciplinary skills required by the above-mentioned approaches is of course a challenge. But Holocaust and Genocide Studies can provide this platform given its pronounced inter- and transdisciplinary character.

All these concerns inform in great measure our current research project to which this Special Issue is closely linked. Our work employs observational and survey-based methodologies to chart the impact of a range of performative practices expressed in art

and memorial initiatives throughout Europe and is intended to identify new directions in the empirical study of Holocaust commemoration. Although participatory elements have been part of Holocaust commemoration since its early beginnings, through survivors' public gatherings at the murder sites, it remains to be seen if the current participatory trend will further intensify or dissipate. The questions raised by this collection of articles will hopefully, in the years to come, spur new investigation into these unresolved matters.

Scope and Themes of this Special Issue

This Special Issue invites scholars to interrogate the functions of the performative within Holocaust commemoration. In so doing, contributors have innovatively drawn upon existing philosophical considerations of performativity (Austin 1962; Butler 1997),⁴⁵ on understandings of performance in relation to performativity (Patraka 1999; Taylor 2003, Fischer-Lichte 2008),⁴⁶ and on critical insights emerging from visual and participatory arts (Hantelmann 2010; Bishop 2006)⁴⁷ as well as the concept of performative monument (Widrich 2014).⁴⁸ These hitherto separate ways to think about performativity are brought closer together to assist this inquiry into performative Holocaust commemoration.

Inspired by Austin's lectures on the performative, the contributors to this volume join a broader research effort to gain understanding into what audience participatory practices of Holocaust commemoration do in memorial museums, sites of memory, public art, and public ceremonies. Each contributor proposes a case study of a commemorative initiative, be it a local, a community grassroots or a contemporary art initiative, which endorses a performative dimension. The focus remains on how the works impact audiences and on how we as researchers can conceptualise and understand

such impacts. To better understand how the Holocaust imperatives of ‘never again’ and ‘never forget’ are implemented, we have encouraged all authors to undertake audience reception studies whenever possible.

Rachel E. Perry opens this Issue with an account of what performances as reenactment meant and did for Holocaust survivors in the period immediately after their liberation from the concentration camps. Based on extensive archival research conducted at Yad Vashem’s and in the USHMM’s collections of camp photography, Perry draws attention to the many functions reenactment fulfilled for the survivors’ generation. The fact that survivors themselves used reenactment (nowadays a genre associated with edutainment) to document the history of persecution, to commemorate, or to work through trauma, necessarily shifts our perception on the potential of this genre. Importantly, this performative practice predates the current hype surrounding reenactments in contemporary art and living history projects. Perry frames several contemporary art reenactments through the lens offered by the survivors. She invites us to consider this practice in contemporary art anew, not less critically, but with a broader understanding of its documentary, therapeutic and commemorative functions. Thus, her reading of early forms of survivor reenactment in relation to contemporary provocative art projects, offers a nuanced and more complex take on a genre most commonly regarded as a counterproductive or a cheapening tool of commemoration. Perry’s account leads to a critical exploration into the role of performative strategies based on embodied forms of memorialisation.

Laura M.F. Bertens discusses how performance, the photographic media and visitor participation can counterweigh the invisibility of permanent memorials through the case study of Janet Cardiff’s and George Bures Miller’s site-specific and audience

participatory video installation *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk* (first presented at dOCUMENTA 13 in 2012). *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk* invites participants to perform a secondary form of reenactment when guided by Cardiff's recorded voice through Kassel's train station, from where German Jews were deported to camps in Eastern Europe. Bertens illustrates the benefits of an artistic approach which allows participants to use new technologies to 'see double', namely to allow themselves to be drawn into the work and to maintain a critical distance to it. The author claims that participants are educated to understand the performative nature of memory, referring to the notion that memory is constructed anew for everyone who takes part in the commemoration process. At a crucial moment in history, when first-hand witnesses and their memories will be accessed solely through mediation, the author trusts that subsequent generations of artists will act as guides to future participants in the commemoration of the past.

Maria Magdalena Dembek questions participatory art's ability to convey loss and the 'out of reachness' of the past and of its people. Dembek argues that performative methods can not only make visible but also reenact and confirm pre-existing stereotypes. Her analysis of the participatory art project *The Cut*, administered by POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, lays bare what she calls the 'oppressive dynamics of social and spatial relations' that continue to haunt Muranów, the former site of the Warsaw ghetto. Dembek investigates how the tool of participation is used in contemporary memorial art, by whom, and asks what power relations are reproduced and reinstated. In the process of unravelling participatory art's traps, the author also affirms its potential. She illuminates the blind spots of Polish memorial culture, as for instance some Polish people's physical and discursive appropriation of

former Jewish sites. Here, audience participatory work is effective because it allows a revision of the established and, in many ways, problematic Polish memory culture.

Kerry Whigham explores how visitors' embodied engagements can facilitate transmission of knowledge. He looks at how several educational initiatives at the former concentration camps Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald and Ravensbrück in former East Germany invite visitors to develop a personal connection with these sites' pasts. Whigham investigates to which degree these initiatives lead to powerful embodied forms of knowledge transmission. The author sees great potential especially in Ravensbrück's educational approaches. Its *Forum of Generations*, a programme which brings together young people and survivors with the aim of building lasting personal relationships, creates what the author calls 'communities of memory'. The traditional role of survivors as storytellers and of visitors as listeners is discarded, as both groups are invited to develop friendships rather than relate as teachers and learners. This article conveys that inquiry-based learning strategies, reversal of roles, and visitor-generated questions or scenarios for learning are very effective. Thus, such projects can serve as inspiration for similar approaches in the future, even if they can no longer offer personal meetings between survivors and later born generations.

Exchanges, also reversals of roles and of frames of memorialisation, are particularly prominent in **Liat Steir Livny**'s account of a recent Israeli example of Holocaust commemoration called *Remembrance in the Living Room*. Livny traces in detail the development of this performative commemoration, which resembles Ravensbrück's call to endow visitors with more agency, in that it invites younger generations of Israelis to design and lead their own commemorative events. The author underlines the need to find effective forms of commemoration if the commitment of

‘never forget’ is to remain genuine in the future. This practice appears to emulate official memorial forms in its reliance on survivor testimonies, but it also challenges official ceremonies as it creates alternative spaces for participants to express their thoughts and feelings, to voice opinions, to debate and to remember. There is no authorial voice or strict structure to be followed, which means that the outcome of these gatherings can be difficult to anticipate. Livny stresses the innovative character of this commemorative practice, which allows younger generations of Israelis, as well as other age groups and non-Jewish participants, to determine how they wish to engage with this history.

This Special Issue closes with an article by **Lisa Peschel** together with **Alan Sikes** on the relationship between collaborative theatre making, memory and the transmission of knowledge among theatre students at universities in the UK and the US. Peschel’s and Sikes’ students participated in projects of revival and performance of a script titled *Comedy about a Trap*, written and performed by Jewish prisoners in the Terezín Ghetto. This article describes the collaborative processes devised by students to enable them to work through the meanings of the play, and to engage in what is called ‘performance pedagogy’. As the analysed students’ responses show, the performative approach of co-writing and performing is an effective one, as it creates a space where students can encounter the specific historical circumstances of the Jewish prisoners and invites them to consider how they embody and translate the messages of the play into the present.

The collected articles in this Special Issue begin a long-overdue conversation across disciplinary divides about the function, *modus operandi* and the impact of a wide range of performative practices in contemporary art and memorial culture that

commemorate the Holocaust. Together, the articles provide valuable insights into the effects of performative commemoration practices on current generations of audiences. This volume also points out that further scholarly commitment is required to gain a fuller picture of how audiences in general, or specific groups in particular, engage, are affected by and make sense of their visits to Holocaust memorials and of their participation in grassroots commemorative events, performances and art initiatives. The Holocaust imperatives attest to the pressing need to reach an understanding of what performative practices in Holocaust commemoration do with us and what we are doing with them.

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Notes

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1. Baer and Sznajder, *Memory and Forgetting*, 9.
 2. See “Oath of Buchenwald”, proclaimed on 19 April 1945 by the liberated inmates, a copy of the original document of the prisoners’ speech is available on the Buchenwald Memorial

Museum's web page, <https://www.buchenwald.de/en/471/>. Accessed June 17, 2017. This quote also appears in Baer and Sznajder, 9.

3. Quote translated from the German by Schult, this document is available at <https://www.buchenwald.de/en/471/>. Accessed June 17, 2017.

4. Ibid., 11.

5. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.

6. For an in-depth reflection on the transformation from victim to survivor status see Schult's article "From Stigma to Medal of Honour and Agent of Remembrance."

7. This phrase is included in the "Oath of Buchenwald", available at <https://www.buchenwald.de/en/471/>. Accessed June 17, 2017.

8. At an official political level, this institutionalisation can be traced to 1990, when members of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance signed the "Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust", pledging commitment to research, education and commemoration of the Holocaust.

9. This well-known phenomenon is discussed among others, by Levy and Sznajder, *Holocaust Memory in the Global Age*, and Kroh, *Transnationale Erinnerung*.

10. Arguments reiterated by Baer and Sznajder, *Memory and Forgetting*, 1-28.

11. The slogan was subjected to criticism especially in the aftermath of the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda. Gourevitch noted, 'The West's post-Holocaust pledge that genocide would never again be tolerated proved to be hollow, and for all the fine sentiments inspired by the memory of Auschwitz, the problem remains that denouncing evil is a far cry from doing good', in *We Wish to Inform You*, 70. Similar opinion articles in the international press include Singer, "The Never Again has become an Empty Phrase" available to read on <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.759158>, and Krauthammer, "Do we Really Mean Never Again", available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/charles-krauthammer-do-we-really-mean-never-again/2015/01/29/25447c92-a7f4-11e4-a06b-9df2002b86a0_story.html. Accessed June 21, 2017. See also Henryk M. Broder's *Vergesst Auschwitz!*

12. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 19, 20, 21

13. The major authors dealing with these movements' relationship with societal impacts include: Karpow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, and Widrich, *Performative Monuments*, 144-193.

14. Edutainment is an approach to education aimed primarily at children and youth. It is mostly associated with science museums, but which has also been employed by museums of culture

and history. Edutainment is characterized by an uneasy alliance between public education and entertainment. It uses play, games, interactive displays and hands-on activities to transmit knowledge to the public. It has been criticized because it addresses the public as a consumer of knowledge. On the possibilities and risks of this approach, see Balloffet, Courvoisier, and Lagier, "From Museum to Amusement Park: The Opportunities and Risks of Edutainment," 4-18.

15. Since the 1990s, public participation is connected to the changes in British and North American museums' views on audience engagement. Museums redefined their roles in societies, as not just institutions of authority, but as organisations inclusive of publics of all backgrounds, and receptive to the opinions of the public. The participatory turn in museums is documented by Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, and Black, *The Engaging Museum*.

16. Statement retrieved from Esther Shalev-Gerz's website <http://www.shalev-gerz.net/?portfolio=monument-against-fascism>. Accessed August 20, 2018.

17. Rogoff, "The Aesthetics of Post-History," 133.

18. Cf. Widrich 9, 145, 161.

19. See the official site of the project, <http://www.stolpersteine.eu/en/home/>. Accessed January 25, 2018.

20. Hesse, *Stolpersteine*.

21. Widrich, 144.

22. Words uttered by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel; and engraved in stone at the entrance of the USHMM.

23. Patraha, *Spectacular Suffering*, 11. The question of witnessing in museums is further mentioned by Bennett, *Theatre and Museums*, 43, 50-60.

24. Reading, "Digital Interactivity in Public Memory Institutions," 73.

25. Bennett, 60.

26. Further information on this exhibition can be found on the USHMM's web page link: <https://www.ushmm.org/information/press/press-releases/united-states-holocaust-memorial-museums-new-exhibit-from-memory-to-action->, accessed on 1 July 2017. For a critical account of visitor reactions to this exhibition see Sather-Wagstaff and Sobel, "From Memory to Action", 179-191.

27. Responses cited by Carter, "Out of the Box and into the Fold," 251-254.

28. Sather-Wagstaff, and Sobel, n.d.

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29. See statement on USHMM's website <https://www.ushmm.org/support>. Accessed October 12, 2016.
30. Across the UK, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust (a charity established by the British Government) sets out yearly memorial themes, which then provide a thematic focus for memorial initiatives developed by a wide range of community organisations, theatres, schools, artists and cultural institutions. Performance has become one common memorial genre used by teachers and students, but also by local theatre groups. Various examples can be found on the organisation's web page <https://www.hmd.org.uk/what-is-holocaust-memorial-day/local-hmd-activities/>. Accessed September 12, 2018.
31. Further information can be found on the organisation's web page, <http://teatrnn.pl/en/>. Accessed September 12, 2018. See Popescu's current research into these memorial practices "Performative Environments of Polish Memory", and "A Eulogy of a Different Kind."
32. Young, "When a Day Remembers: A Performative History of "Yom ha-Shoah", 438. See Jean's article on the performative dimension of Yom Hashoah, "Disruptive Silence: Air-Raid Sirens and Holocaust Remembrance in Israel".
33. Young, *The Texture of Memory*, xii-xiii.
34. *Ibid.*, 3.
35. Stier, *Committed to Memory*, 45.
36. Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory," 117.
37. Costello, "History and Memory in a Dialogic of Performative Memorialization," 22.
38. Stevens and Franck, *Memorials as Spaces of Engagement*, and Stevens, "Visitor Responses at Berlin's Holocaust Memorial: Contrary to Conventions, Expectations and Rules," 34-59. Dekel's monograph, *Mediation at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin*, and article "Ways of Looking: Observation and Transformation at the Holocaust Memorial, Berlin," 71-86. Also see Dalziel, "Romantic Auschwitz": Examples and Perceptions of Contemporary Visitor Photography at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum," 185-207.
39. Noy, "My Holocaust Experience was Great!' Entitlements for Participation in Museum Media," 274-290; and Macdonald, "Accessing Audiences: Visiting Visitor Books," 119-136.
40. Jackie Feldman's works focus on tour guides and on event organisers such as his influential study on Israeli youth visits to former concentration camps in today's Poland, *Above the Death Pits, Beneath the Flag*; on guided tours at the Jewish Museum Berlin see Feldman and Peleikis, "Performing the Hyphen: Engaging German-Jewishness at the Jewish Museum Berlin," 43-59.
41. See Katarzyna Stec's research on audience reception. Stec shared her papers "The Sociological Portrait of the Contemporary Visitors to the Memorial Sites of the Former Nazi

Death Camps” (2010) and “Die Symbolik und Bedeutung der Gedenkstätte Auschwitz-Birkenau aus der Perspektive moderner junger Menschen” (2011) [The Symbolism and Importance of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial from the Perspective of Modern Young People] with Schult. In these papers, Stec refers to several studies by Polish sociologists who have conducted similar work as for example Jolanta Adamska and Marek Kucia.

The conference “Museum and Their Publics at Sites of Conflicted History”, POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, 13-15 March 2017, included a series of panels focusing on visitor studies at sites of difficult heritage. These panels focused mainly on museum exhibitions and memory sites. This was an important start for the development of visitor studies in relation to the Holocaust. The Conference programme can be viewed at http://www.polin.pl/sites/default/files/geop_206x206_druk_07_03_350sztuk.pdf. Accessed July 1, 2017.

42. Trezise, *Performing Feeling in Cultures of Memory*, Heckner, “Identification and Second Witnessing in the Age of Postmemory,” 62-85; Agnew, “History’s Affective Turn: Historical Re-enactment and its Work in the Present,” 299-312.

43. As shown for Christoph Mayer’s artistic audio walk in Gusen, see Schult, “Citizens as Walking Memorials”, which builds on extensive audience reception studies.

44. For museum and heritage studies, see the volume by Jackson and Kidd (eds.) *Performing Heritage*, Gosselin and Livingstone (eds.), *Museums and the Past*; articles by Smith, “Changing Views? Emotional Intelligence, Registers of Engagement and the Museum Visit” and Sandell’s monograph *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*. For public art research, see volume by Krause Knight and Senie (eds.), *A Companion to Public Art*.

45. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*; Butler, *Excitable Speech*, and “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.”

46. Patraha, *Spectacular Suffering*, Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*.

47. Hantelmann, *How to Do Things with Art*, Bishop, *Participation*.

48. Widrich, *Performative Monuments*.

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