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Ethics and Aesthetics: Boris Lurie’s Railroad Collage and Representing the Holocaust

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Introduction

In 1963 the Russian born, American-based artist Boris Lurie produced Railroad Collage,1 (fig. 1), a mixed media collage juxtaposing an enlarged copy of the iconic Liberation photograph from the concentration camps of Nazi Germany with the symbol of 1950s America, the pin-up girl. It is immediately shocking. It is not just the act of seeing photos that have become cultural markers in the context of soft pornography; it is as much the juxtaposition of emaciated, brutalised bodies, piled haphazardly, alongside the voluptuous and tantalising curves of the woman’s bottom.

The image interacts pressingly with considerations of the representation of the Holocaust: should artists represent it, or is it something too terrible? Can it even be imagined, and hence represented? How to avoid issues of insensitivity, voyeurism, even sadism in its representation? Yet it also relates to a more personal coming to terms with the Holocaust. For having been confined in the Riga ghetto, Lurie spent four years in Nazi concentration camps as prisoner 95966, in Buchenwald from 1944 until the war’s end.2 What does this knowledge bring to the image? Does it make it more acceptable? Where does it situate the viewer? How does it relate to preconceptions of

1 While most literature, and Lurie’s own book NO!art: pin-ups, excrement, protest, jew-art dates the collage to 1963, in a letter to the author 10th June 2005, Dietmar Kirves wrote that ‘The date is between 1959 and 1963, nearer to 1959. It is difficult to get [the] exact date of origin by Boris Lurie’.

‘survivor art’? Yet Lurie was not only a survivor, and his art should not only be seen in these terms. For together with Stanley Fisher and Sam Goodman, he was a founding member of the movement NO!art. As the name suggests, this was a highly politicised movement, polemical both in terms of contemporary society and the art world. How does Lurie’s use of Holocaust imagery relate to this?

This dissertation falls into three chapters. The first sets out issues surrounding the representation of the Holocaust: the questions of ethics and aesthetics considering in particular issues of language and the Sublime. The second begins by looking very briefly at issues of survivorship, and the questions trauma and memory entail. It will then turn to the work of another survivor, Zoran Music, as offering a very different and ‘appropriate’ approach to representing the Holocaust. It will look particularly at Lurie’s use of documentary photography in the context of the expectations of memory, ‘postmemory’ and remembrance. The final Chapter explores more closely the juxtaposition of images of the Holocaust and pin-up girl in relation to sex and death. It will consider issues of voyeurism and transgression, before situating the image in the context of Lurie’s NO!art movement; its relationship to the historical background of the avant-garde, as well as to the contemporary context of Abstract Expressionism and Pop art. Issues of consumerism and exploitation invoke the ‘Americanisation’ of the Holocaust, an idea that will lead to my conclusion of the interaction of the transgressive and shocking with the society it is trying to change.

3 Hilene Flanzbaum explains the complexity of ‘the Americanisation of the Holocaust’ thus: ‘On one level, the phrase simply groups the many ways that the Holocaust has been represented in American culture; on another, it is political and theoretical quicksand, providing all the pitfalls of postulating about history, nation and ideology’. Flanzbaum (ed.), The Americanization of the Holocaust, (John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1999), p. 2 These critiques of the place the Holocaust has come to occupy in American society are not something I want to go into: increased public and government preoccupation dates largely from the 1970s – Henry Greenspan dates it to 1978 (p. 45)– long after Railroad Collage was made. However I think it is important to recognise how it affects today’s viewer. Flanzbaum points out its double-meaning: that while Michael Berenbaum uses it to explain the American Holocaust Museum’s attempt to make the story accessible to very different people from throughout the country, for some ‘it automatically signals America at its worst: crassness, vulgarization, and selling out’, (p. 5). Awareness of a somewhat ambiguous approach to the Holocaust is thus part of today’s viewer’s mindset. I have used ‘the Americanisation of the Holocaust’ as opposed to Norman Finkelstein’s term of ‘Holocaust Industry’. Finkelstein takes a more extreme view of the ideological construction of ‘the Holocaust’, seeing it as ‘an indispensable ideological weapon’ through which ‘one of the world’s most formidable military powers, with a horrendous human rights record, has cast itself as a “victim” state, and the most successful ethnic group in the United States has likewise acquired victim status’. Finkelstein, The Holocaust Industry: Notes on the
I: Representation and the Holocaust

‘The judge who sits over the murderer and looks into his face, and at one moment recognises all the emotions and potentialities and possibilities of the murderer in his own soul and hears the murderer’s voice as his own is at the next moment one and indivisible as the judge, and scuttles back into the shell of his cultivated self and does his duty and condemns the murderer to death’.4

The Holocaust5 is considered a key turning point in the history of the twentieth century.6 While its atrocities are shocking on their own terms, it has become symbolic of the darkness of the human soul. As the quote suggests, its events are difficult to come to terms with for any generation, the field of art offering one arena for such activity. Yet the debates that have raged over the decades as to how to represent it stand as witness to both the complexity of the Holocaust, as well as that of art. For questions about what the Holocaust means, how, even should it be represented, demand a re-evaluation of art, its role and possibilities.7 Yet in itself, such an idea is highly problematic.8

5 The term ‘Holocaust’ was not adopted until the late 1950s. It has been criticised for its generic reference to disaster, as well as its theological implications. It derives from the Greek meaning ‘whole burnt’, and the strong sacrificial overtones are also seen as inappropriate. The Jewish word ‘Shoah’ is often preferred. It references the destruction of Israel by surrounding nations. While a sense of divine retribution and judgement are still implied, there is also a stress on desolation and metaphysical doubt. Young, James Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*, (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1988), pp. 86-87. I am going to use the term Holocaust throughout as most relevant to the society in which Lurie produced his work.
7 Jeremy Varon suggests it has become ‘a kind of limit case’ to test the strengths and weaknesses of the interpretive strategies of various discourses. Varon, ‘Probing the Limits of the Politics of Representation’, *New German Critique*, 72, (Autumn, 1997), p. 84
After all what does it mean to discuss art through the lens of the Holocaust? Perhaps such a question, like so many debates on this subject is unanswerable. While it might seem that such extreme human behaviour demands clarity in moral judgements at the very least, it is difficult to reach such a standpoint. Before examining Lurie’s work, it is important to cite the varying moral and ethical positions of a selection of writers, helping to situate Lurie in the wider context of representation, the Holocaust, and its consequences. This is not just for understanding of Lurie, but of how the viewer comes to such art today.

In 1949, four years after the liberation of the camps, Theodor Adorno set out a sentence that has shaped subsequent discussions of representing the Holocaust: ‘to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’. Appearing to point out with devastating clarity the irrelevance of art after the Holocaust, its original context gives a more nuanced meaning, part of the concluding paragraph of the essay ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’. From his Marxist perspective, Adorno sees culture as ‘isolated, unquestioned, dogmatic’, placed ‘at the will of the market’, and thus implicated in the fate – and guilt – of the system. It is in this sense that to write poetry is barbaric. To continue such forms supports the reified vision of culture as both apart and innocent, and thus allows its implication in the events to be ignored. For Adorno the Holocaust marked a decisive break in the positivist Enlightenment thinking that had determined Western thought since the eighteenth century and lay at the basis of its culture, standing as testament to its complete failure. ‘[T]hese traditions


9 Varon, ‘Probing the Limits’, p. 107


11 Adorno, Prisms, p. 19

12 Adorno, Prisms, p. 22

13 Adorno, Prisms, pp. 25-26
and their spirit lacked the power to take hold of men and work a change in them’. Yet despite its crisis it remained deeply necessary. ‘[T]he man who says no to culture is directly furthering the barbarism which our culture showed itself to be’ Adorno thus sets out the double-bind of culture. Utterly, basically necessary, it is yet deeply problematic. From a debate on whether art should even exist comes instead the need for a form capable of expressing this ambiguity.

While a debate rooted in the humanising potential of culture might seem old fashioned today, it is tied up in guilt and culpability. Adorno’s poignant question ‘How can one live after Auschwitz?’ suggests just how contaminated by atrocity the world seemed. Thus George Steiner saw language as having reached breaking point. ‘Use a language to conceive, organise and justify Belsen; use it to make out specifications for gas ovens; use it to dehumanise man during twelve years of calculated bestiality. Something must happen’. This question of language at its limits has dominated debates. As historical distance has intervened, so debates over the very possibility of art have given way to consideration of post-Holocaust culture in terms of the functions and deployment of language, and its implications. The debate has shifted from the shocked realisation of Steiner in the 1960s ‘The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason’, to more theoretical debates on how language can express this.

In 1990, the philosopher Berel Lang’s investigation of language set out as key a basic dichotomy between historical and imaginative discourses: the difficulty of reconciling what had happened with what could be seen as the prerogative of art, and arguing the latter as fundamentally inadequate to

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15 Adorno, Negative Dialectics, p. 356
16 George Steiner comments on the paradox of a man being able to ‘read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, …play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day’s work at Auschwitz in the morning’. Steiner, Language and Silence, (London, 1967), p. ix
17 Rolf Tiedemann points out that while the question of guilt could be seen as particularly pressing for him as a German Jew, it was a more universally felt sentiment. ‘Introduction’, ‘Can One Live after Auschwitz?’ A Philosophical Reader, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2003), pp. xi-xii,
18 Steiner, Language, p. 101
19 Steiner, Language, p. 123
20 Berel Lang is Professor of Humanities, writing from the position where boundaries between disciplines are blurred.
represent the Holocaust. Based in the ideas of ‘literary space’, ‘literary particularity’ and ‘literary abstraction’, the figures of speech establish a space between the writer and event, pointing to the contingency between the event and how it is written about, and thus underlining the writer’s choice. Built into the representation is the recognition that this is one means of representing the subject among many, a plurality he argues inappropriate to the Holocaust. Ernst Van Alphen criticises this reading of the metaphor. Rather than an improved substitute for something that could be stated literally, Van Alphen suggests it expresses what the literal cannot. So arises the central importance of the imaginary to the subject of the Holocaust, and the importance of art. James Young sees metaphor as inherent to our access of facts: ‘to think, to remember, to express events is to do so archetypally, or not at all’.

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22 ‘Literary space’: figures of speech establish space between writer and event, pointing to contingent relationship between event and representation; ‘literary particularity’: all utterances are perspectival, but in representation the choices made are an integral part; ‘literary abstraction’: representation works to frame the subject, a process of estrangement separating the events from the specifics of context. Lang, *Act and Idea*, pp. 142-144

23 Lang, *Act and Idea*, pp. 143-144 It is also based on the view of literature as governed by human motivation and individual consciousness, inappropriate to represent the denial of individual consciousness that the Holocaust entailed, p. 144

24 van Alphen, *Caught by History*, p. 28

25 Jacobowitz and Hornstein suggest that debates surrounding issues of representing the Holocaust are bounded by what can be imagined. However, they argue that language is not limited to what is known. Representation is not the same as reality, and has always been recognised as the active play between creating a fictional work and making reference to real events. They stress that the essays of their book emphasise the role of aesthetics in providing an arena for issues otherwise unseen or unspoken in more traditional forms of historiographic practice. Shelley Hornstein and Florence Jacobowitz (eds.), *Image and Remembrance: Representation and the Holocaust*, (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2003), pp 3-4

26 For him the problem of the metaphor lies in the Nazi’s literalisation of it, citing a German’s soldier’s description in a letter home of the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto as the extermination of vermin. This makes it difficult for metaphors to be understood as metaphorical today, for example the Palestinians threat to turn the sea red. Young, *Writing and Rewriting*, pp. 90-93
Debate over the merits of the imaginary and historical remain unresolvable: as Lyotard points out, ‘To signify is one thing, to name another, and to show still another’.27 Taking up the problem of language, the literary historian Van Alphen has taken a semantic approach. He moves away from the isolated question of representing the Holocaust, arguing that it should be situated within the problem of representation itself. ‘The problem, in short, is not the nature of the event, or any intrinsic limitation of representation per se, but the split between the living of an event and the availability of forms of representation with which the event can be (re)experienced’.28 Questions of representation are thus situated in the age-old debate of how to translate life into art, the difficult task of finding ways to represent problematic constructions of subjectivity and self.29

Yet does this take us too far away from the horrors of the event? Does focusing on the translation of experience into art occlude the extremity of the Holocaust? It is an issue that surfaces in the writings of Jean-François Lyotard in the 1980s and 1990s. Influenced by the thinking of post-modernism and deconstruction, he looked at the implications of the premise that there is no absolute code of knowledge.30 Thus he introduces the différend, ‘the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put in phrases cannot yet be’.31 Famously he


28 His view is based on the premise that survivors could not experience the events of the camps as they lived them, as language offered no terms to do so, as being as important as the subsequent inadequacy of language. Van Alphen, *Caught by History*, p. 44

29 Van Alphen sets out four basic representational problems: ambiguous actantial position (neither subject nor object of events); negation of actantial position (or subjectivity); lack of plot or narrative frame to give coherence; the available plots or frames as unacceptable, not doing justice to their role in events. *Caught by History*, p. 45. For he sees a key discrepancy between the reality of the Holocaust and the terms provided to both experience and then express them.

30 ‘Reality is not what is “given” to this or that “subject”; it is a state of the referent (that about which one speaks) which results from the effectuation of establishment procedures defined by a unanimously agreed-upon protocol’. Lyotard, ‘The Diffrénd, the Referent, and the Proper Name’, *Diacritics*, (Fall, 1984), p. 4. Thus he points out the difficulties of establishing the ‘reality’ of the gas chambers as killing machines. For if they killed there could be no survivors to testify. ‘Therefore, there is no gas chamber’. This issue is particularly relevant in the wake of Revisionist theories, which disclaim that the Holocaust actually happened.

31 Lyotard, ‘The Diffrénd’, p. 7. ‘A case of diffrénd between two parties takes place when the “regulation” of the conflict which opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the injustice suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom’, p. 5
offered the analogy of an earthquake, which destroyed the instruments of measurement yet nonetheless the survivors could recognise its great seismic force. Hence representation must strive to show the unrepresentable, even as it acknowledges that it cannot be represented. Art ‘does not say the unsayable, but says that it cannot say it’.

It is here that the historian Saul Friedlander situates his ‘new discourse’. For he identified a new phenomenon in representations of Nazism and the Holocaust that emerged from the 1970s onward, characterised by the ‘unease’ engendered in the viewer. This ‘new discourse’ attempted to bridge the insurmountable distance between language and events, forcing the viewer to confront the past through the imagination, re-evoking the Nazi atmosphere of the aesthetic and death. While such works demonstrate the attraction of Nazism, Friedlander underlines the risks: the viewer confronts its attractions, but there is no room for rational interpretation, free or effective political action, moral or legal responsibility. Can the problems of language really be overcome by art? We return to the central problem of representing the Holocaust: ‘The Holocaust in its enormity defies language and art, and yet both must be used to tell the tale, the tale that must be told’.

The importance of representing the Holocaust is rarely contested, the means to remember and record what happened, crucial in undermining the perpetrators’ attempts to hide it, and as a

32 Lyotard, ‘The Différend’, p. 14
33 Lyotard, Heidegger, p. 47
34 Friedlander was writing almost twenty years before Van Alphen, but more or less contemporary to Lyotard’s postmodern period.
35 Friedlander, Kitsch and Death, p. 20
36 Friedlander, Kitsch and Death, p. 93. The distance between language and events protect the viewer. For example, the use of scholarly language blocks the emotional response, the habitual structures of the imagination hide the bare significance of words. Friedlander, Kitsch and Death, pp. 90-91
37 Because of very different political, social and economic conditions he is not suggesting that it could occur again, but highlights the problems in exposing viewers to Nazism’s attraction. Friedlander, Kitsch and Death, pp. 128-130
39 Friedlander, ‘Introduction’, Probing the Limits, p. 3
warning to future generations.\textsuperscript{40} ‘The functions of this art are thus specifically to upset the spectator; to force him [sic] to confront a truth he would rather ignore; and to render this truth in such a way that he will understand both the act depicted and the moral lesson to be derived from it’.\textsuperscript{41} Yet the question remains of how to achieve this. As Ziva Amishai-Maisels points out, ‘…in some scenes they had to pick their way carefully between the Scylla of shock and revulsion and the Charybdis of aesthetic enjoyment and acquiescence to the spectator’s grosser instinct’\textsuperscript{42} For the depiction of horror is always fraught with difficulty: how can it be represented avoiding the traps of voyeurism or sadism? Susan Sontag\textsuperscript{43} sees the simulation of atrocity as risking making the audience passive, reinforcing witless stereotypes, confirming distance and creating fascination.\textsuperscript{44} It can thus easily backfire, an issue that dominates any discussion of actual imagery. Thus Young asks ‘Must the banality of evil, once depicted lead to the banalisation of such images, and become a banal art?’\textsuperscript{45} Indeed representation could threaten the very core of its supporting argument: once narrated it risks no longer being the horror that it was, and enables forgetting. ‘Only that which has been inscribed can, in the current sense of the term, be forgotten, because it could be effaced’.\textsuperscript{46} Thus the idea of silence has been seriously discussed. For it answers the defects of language, and avoids the terrible risk of re-objectifying the victims. Indeed Glenn Sujo sees silence as a mark of respect for the dead.\textsuperscript{47} Yet it remains impossible to turn away from the necessity of representation.


\textsuperscript{41} Amishai-Maisels, \textit{Depiction and Interpretation}, p. 36.

\textsuperscript{42} Amishai-Maisels, Depiction and Interpretation, p. 49

\textsuperscript{43} Sontag, (1933-2004) was a radical writer, particularly important in the 1970s/80s who engaged critically with the issues of war and photography.

\textsuperscript{44} Sontag, \textit{Under the Sign of Saturn}, (Faffar, Strauss and Giroux, New York, 1980), p. 139

\textsuperscript{45} Young, ‘Foreword’, p. xvi

\textsuperscript{46} Lyotard, \textit{Heidegger}, p. 26 This is stressed in Young’s writings on monuments, which he argues actually allow the public to avoid confrontation, and forget.

\textsuperscript{47} Glenn Sujo, \textit{Legacies of Silence: the Visual Arts and Holocaust Memory}, (exh. cat., Imperial War Museum, London, 2001), p. 82. He was writing in a catalogue ‘on survivor art and experiences.
As one survivor pointed out, ‘silences are forms of negation and abdication of our conscience towards Hitler’s crimes’.48 We are thus redirected to the unanswerable yet unavoidable question of how to give form to such horrors.

Sontag raises the key problem that the representation of evil merely valorises or beautifies it,49 a traditional problem of art and morality.50 Van Alphen underlines the problem of art’s redemptive function: the artist’s ability to create an eternal object subordinates the horrors of history to a transcendent art.51 Yet beauty need not be negative. In 1965 Jean-Paul Sartre argued for the importance of Beauty, ‘the flesh and blood of art’, to seduce the viewer into active engagement with atrocities from which they would rather run away.52 Beauty is not necessarily at odds with an appropriate representation of the Holocaust: it is a question of approach.53 Thus an artist who worked overlooking a concentration camp was merely ‘negligent’ in painting a compote; the ‘real sin’ lay in painting the concentration camp as though it were a compote.54 While acknowledging the limits of representation to prevent atrocity, he suggests it is inevitable: ‘No one in 1961 can speak of men without mentioning torturers’.55

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48 Isaac Celnikier in letter to author, 14th April 1999, quoted in Sujo, *Legacies of Silence*, p. 16
49 Sontag sees the display of atrocity as risking being tacitly pornographic. Sontag, *Under the Sign*, p. 139
50 Originating in Plato’s *Republic*, art has been criticised as morally problematic because of its ambiguous relation to the ‘truth’. Lang, *Act and Idea*, p. 117
51 Van Alphen, *Caught by History*, p. 19. But he also questions as to whether it is really possible to define the function of art as ‘redemptive’.
52 For too literal a depiction of atrocity risks disgusting the onlooker to the point of alienation: they flee rather than engage with the work. Jean Paul Sartre, ‘The Unprivileged Painter: Lapoujade’, *Essays in Aesthetics*, (Peter Owen, London, 1964), p. 72. This is within the context of an argument for abstraction as the most suitable means to represent the Holocaust, indeed the only way to capture the total meaning of the human condition. I don’t want to consider question the merits of abstraction over figuration. It is too specific a debate, irrelevant to Lurie’s work.
53 For example he sees Titian as failing: his use of beauty eliminates torture from the canvas. Sartre, ‘The Unprivileged Painter’, p. 73
54 Sartre, ‘The Unprivileged Painter’, p. 74
55 The reference to 1961 refers to French actions in Algeria. But it could be argued to be equally relevant to the Holocaust. ‘The Unprivileged Painter’, p. 87
Beauty is an issue that has surfaced more recently, in the context of the late twentieth-century ‘return to Beauty’. Rooted in an understanding of the anti-aesthetic, traditional dichotomies have been overturned. Thus Janet Wolff argues that visual pleasure need not signify the abandonment of politics and critique. Beauty’s traditional paired term of the ‘Sublime’ has also re-entered critical discussion, and is seen as particularly suited to the extremity of the Holocaust experience.

Famously defined by Edmund Burke in 1757 as ‘Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling’, it offers a site to engage with inexplicable human behaviour. As with beauty it is problematic. It is a category rather than a precisely defined concept, based on the response it evokes in the viewer; and has been much criticised as mere spectacle. Yet Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Judgement of 1790-93 saw it as dependent on the awakening of reason, so rooting it in moral response and judgement. It thus

56 Janet Wolff quotes Elaine Scarry’s On Beauty and Being Just. Beauty ‘far from contributing to social injustice…or even remaining neutral to injustice as an innocent bystander, actually assists us in the work of addressing injustice’. She argues that the successful ‘return to Beauty’ reflects an understanding of the anti-aesthetic movement, rather than longstanding conservative resistance to the politicisation of art and post-modern art practice. Wolff, ‘The Iconic and the Allusive. The case for Beauty in Post-Holocaust Art’, in Jacobowitz and Hornstein (eds.), Image and Remembrance, p. 166

57 Gene Ray sees it as emerging ‘incognito’ in key twentieth century texts – Heidegger’s ‘The Origin of the Work of art’ of 1935-36, and Benjamin’s 1936 ‘Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’. The late twentieth century has seen a slow return to its name. In the eighteenth century it was based in a sense of human impotence before the power of nature, in the twentieth century it is associated with the terrors of man-made catastrophe. Ray, The Use and Abuse of the Sublime: Joseph Beuys and Art after Auschwitz, (PhD Thesis, University of Miami, 1997), pp. 18-24


60 Ray, The Use and Abuse, pp. 16-17 This Gene Ray sees as having informed its uneasy relationship with critics, something he criticises as based on the misunderstanding of the difference between the hit of the sublime encounter, and the reception of sublime objects. Ray, The Use and Abuse, p. 52

61 Zemel, ‘Emblems of Atrocity’, p. 211 For the sublime is based on the intermingling of pleasure and pain. Pain from the breakdown of the imagination as it tries to present the unpresentable; pleasure from the reminder of the superiority of reason to the imagination. It thus entails a recognition of the transcendent ‘moral freedom’ of human destiny. Ray, The Use and Abuse, p. 26
offers a way to confront an event scarcely imaginable in magnitude, without situating it outside human value systems.62

More recent inquiries into representing the Holocaust underline the problems of clear cut answers to the questions raised. They instead acknowledge the importance of the continued posing of such questions, and of representation that seeks to raise the viewer’s consciousness of these questions. This approach must be set into the context of the prevailing trend of postmodernism over the last decades, argued as particularly useful to the subject of the Holocaust.63 By making us aware of the dilemmas inherent in representation per se, it enforces awareness of the complexities in representing the Holocaust;64 its refusal of absolutes supporting a more open and questioning stance. Central too is its confrontation with what escapes established historical and artistic categories of representation.65 Yet its refusal to delineate issues such as ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ makes it problematic.66 After all, the Revisionist stance is rooted in questioning the reality and truth of the Holocaust. If language itself is opaque does postmodernism take us too far away?67 While Lurie’s work of the 1960s lies outside the boundaries of postmodernism, Norman Kleebatt stresses the overlap of his strategies with those of the postmodernist programme.68 It is essential that the viewer understands the way Lurie’s images both tie in with, and yet are very different from the work of today; the way our expectations are very different from those of its original audience.

In 1980, Maurice Blanchot wrote that ‘The disaster is the improperness of its name and the disappearance of the proper name (Derrida); it is neither noun nor verb, but a remainder which

62 Zemel, ‘Emblems of Atrocity’, p. 212. Zemel mentions the Abject as a category of the Sublime, which with its position at the limits of self dissolve, based on sensations of horror and disgust, makes it particularly relevant to the work of Boris Lurie, p. 215

63 Varon, ‘Probing the Limits’, p. 89

64 This is particularly useful given its growing institutionalisation within the museum. Norman Kleebatt, ‘The Nazi Occupation of the White Cube: Transgressive Images/Moral Ambiguity/Contemporary Art’, Mirroring Evil, p. 13

65 Postmodernism is notoriously difficult to define, but usually recognised as key is the multiplicity of voices, and the destruction of the traditional positions, narratives and absolutes of Modernism.

66 Varon, ‘Probing the Limits’, p. 89

67 Friedlander, Probing the Limits, pp. 4-5

68 Norman Kleebatt, ‘The Nazi Occupation of the White Cube’, Mirroring Evil, p. 4
would bar with invisibility and illegibility all that shows and is said’. The dilemma facing attempts at representation lies in making visible what the disaster would bar, in overcoming both the improperness and the disappearance of the proper name. Andreas Huyssen suggests the idea of ‘Mimetic approximation’, which recognises the otherness of the event, yet relieves its horror through remembering. Yet is there any ‘right’ way to represent the Holocaust? What comes out of this debate is not an answer. Rather it is the importance of work that make the viewer aware of the ambiguities and problems of its representation. While this is strongly rooted in contemporary thinking – my own position in a post-postmodernist and deconstructivist world, it is the firmly ambiguous slant of Lurie work that makes it so interesting. For while strongly driven, polemical even, as befitting its creation in the early 1960s, it still has the potential to make the viewer ask questions, however uncomfortable, about representing the Holocaust.

II: Railroad Collage and discourses of History, Memory and Trauma

‘This writing of survival is itself gripped by the shame of not having succumbed, by shame of being able to still bare witness and by the sadness engendered by daring to speak’. As Lyotard suggests, the lot of the freed survivor was not easy. Lawrence Langer stresses that the language of survivorship misleads. Words such as ‘liberation’, suggesting freedom and life are a ‘verbal enchantment’, too easily dispelling the horrors of the death-camp experience, and the difficulties of post-war life. Not only were there the practical difficulties of creating a new life in

70 Andreas Huyssen, ‘Monument and Memory in a Postmodern Age’ in *The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History*, (exh. cat., The Jewish Museum, New York, 1994), p. 16
71 It is the recognition of the impossibility of the task that Monica Bohm-Duchen sees as at the heart of the best Holocaust representation, '50 years On', *After Auschwitz: responses to the Holocaust in Contemporary Art*, (exh. cat., Royal Festival Hall, London, 1995), p. 103
72 Lyotard, *Heidegger*, p. 44
73 Lawrence Langer, ‘Remembering Survival’ in G. Hartman (ed.), *Holocaust Remembrance: the Shapes of Memory*, (Blackwell, Oxford and Cambridge, Mass., 1994), p. 70. He quotes Joseph Brodsky: ‘liberation is just the means of attaining freedom and is not synonymous with it’, pointing out that Freud had developed the idea further. In an attempt to
a world transformed by the war, there were also tricky psychological issues: how to come to terms with what they had suffered, issues of trust, of remembering, of becoming human again. There was also the dilemma of whether to speak of the horrors they had seen. In the previous chapter, I set out debates on the representation of the Holocaust. Here I will tighten the focus, starting to look at the work of Lurie in terms of a ‘survivor’ art. While it is impossible to specify the particular psychological or emotional impact on Lurie, I will look briefly at discourses of memory, trauma, and repression. I will then look at the work of another survivor, Zoran Music, in terms of offering an ‘acceptable’ expression of the Holocaust experience, strikingly different to Railroad Collage.

In her exploration of the influence of the Holocaust on art, Amishai-Maisels stresses the essential divide between survivor and non-survivor art. While generalising, it points to the huge divide that existed in the post-war world. Robert Lifton sets out five psychological affects on the survivor: 1) death imprint; 2) death guilt; 3) psychic numbing; 4) suspicion of counterfeit nurturing; 5) struggle for meaning. The return to a ‘normal’ life was not only a theoretical or conceptual question, but a literal challenge. Yet it was not just a question of re-orientation to the post-war world, but of situating what they had been through in terms of their new, ‘liberated’ lives: the meshing of past and present. For the injunction ‘to remember’ is particularly powerful in the context of the Holocaust, not just to prevent its recurrence, but in terms of Jewish history. Used repeatedly in the Hebrew bible, it relates to the traditional view of the events of history as disclosing the workings of

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75 Underlying her study of art and the Holocaust is the basic distinction between survivor and non-survivor art. She sees the crux of the difference in that non-inmates were interested in symbolising the Holocaust as a whole, as opposed to revealing everyday life. Amishai-Maisels, Depiction and Interpretation, p. 14.

76 1) the indelible images the camps had left; 2) why did I survive? as well as feelings of debt and responsibility to those who died; 3) the diminished capacity to feel; 4) the problem of relating to others; 5) the struggle for meaning in life, ‘The Concept of the Survivor’, Joel Dimsdale (ed.), Survivors, Victims, Perpetrators. Essays on the Nazi Holocaust, (Hemisphere Publishing Corporation, Washington, New York and London, 1980), pp. 117-123
God, in which destruction and redemption are dialectically linked. Yet for the survivor in the post-war world it was not always so simple: how could the Holocaust be understood in terms of punishment and reprieve?

The instability of memory, ‘refractory, selective, fluid’, also played a part. For thinking on memory has increasingly stressed the inter-dependence of past and present, the way memory is determined by the values of the society in which it is raised. Thus James Young points to historical memory and ritual commemoration as a re-figuring of present lives in light of a remembered past. The past helps us to understand the present, even as the present moulds the way we see the past. Indeed he suggests the horrific idea that the Nazis used traditional symbols of Jewish persecution – the yellow star, the ghetto – in order to situate their persecution in terms of the centuries’ old traditions of the same, its very different character concealed in the way it was figured. Huyssen also sees past and present as inter-linked, the act of remembrance both shaping our links to the past and defining us in the present. An anthropological given, the value of memory is dependant on society.

An important precedent for much of the late twentieth-century work on memory was the writing of Maurice Halbwachs, and his idea of ‘collective memory’, which he saw as governing the access and images of individual thought. ‘[T]here exists a collective memory and social frameworks for

77 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi points out that while memory is always treacherous the Hebrew Bible is unconditional, commenting that ‘Remembrance is always pivotal’. Yerushalmi, Zakhur, Jewish Memory and History, (University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 1982), p. 5. Destruction and redemption are always linked. p. 23
78 Sujo, Legacies of Silence, p. 92
79 Young, Writing and Rewriting, p. 84
80 Young, Writing and Rewriting, p. 92. For example an announcement in Lodz, November 16th 1939 stated that ‘We are returning to the Middle Ages. The yellow patch once again becomes a part of Jewish dress.’ The injunction for Jews to wear distinguishing dress dates back to 1215 to the Fourth Lateran Council, under Pope Innocent III. ‘Jews and Saracens of both sexes in every Christian province and at all times shall be marked off in the eyes of the public from other peoples through the character of their dress’. Both quotes from http://history1900s.about.com/library/holocaust/aa031298.htm.
81 Huyssen ‘Monument and Memory’, p. 9
82 Maurice Halbwachs died in Buchenwald in 1945. He published two key texts on memory, Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire, (1925), and La Mémoire Collective, (1939).
memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection’. It is not just the act of recollection that is enabled: these frameworks also shape the past. Reconstructed rather than preserved, it is formed in accordance with the predominant thoughts and values of society. So memory is never innocent, always implicated.

It is interesting to consider the remarkable growth of interest in memory over the past decades. James Young questions the real function of memorials. Do they aid memory, or are they merely a sop to the conscience? Does the increasing concentration on memorialisation and the past actually allow us to sidetrack what happened? Geoffrey Hartman sees modern public memory as very different from Halbwachs’ ‘collective memory’. While he agrees that increased interest in the Holocaust is implicated in contemporary society, he sees a significant shift in its nature. Memory is no longer the living deposit of the ‘collective’, but has become part of academic and written histories. Thus he asks ‘is public memory still memory when it is increasingly alienated from personal and active recall?’ This problem of memory in the late twentieth society is an idea examined by Pierre Nora, who between 1984 and 1992 published ‘Les Lieux de Mémoire’, an exploration of the construction of the French past. Nora differentiates between history as the societal organisation of memory, and memory as ‘social and unviolated’, based on the premise that

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84 Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, p. 40
society has lost true ‘memory’, and is left merely with attempts at its recreation. Thus he sees lieux de mémoire as part of a conscious construction of personal and national identity, the result of the loss of naturally stimulated memory.

So Lurie’s imagery must be situated in the context of early 1960s American society, where immediate post-war remembrance, had given way to an enforced moving on from the horrors of the past: the Holocaust a subject ‘that nobody touched at the time’. Aside from wishing to forget such horrors, the economic boom and increased international co-operation between America and Europe meant it was an uncomfortable issue to explore; anti-Semitism still lingered; and there was a general feeling that the past needed to be left behind so people could get on with their lives.

There were also more particular issues. Aaron Hass suggests American Jews turned survivors into an ‘Other’ as protection against anything similar happening to them, even blaming them for becoming victims. For the issue of victimisation sat at odds with the post-war climate of

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88 ‘On the one hand, we find an integrated, dictatorial memory – unself-conscious, commanding all-powerful, spontaneously actualizing, a memory without a past that ceaselessly reinvents tradition, linking the history of its ancestors to the undifferentiated time of heroes, origins and myth – and on the other hand, our memory, nothing more in fact than sifted and sorted historical traces’. Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire’, Representations 26, (Spring, 1989), p. 8

89 Nora’s much quoted: ‘There are lieux de mémoire, sites of memory, because there are no longer milieux de mémoire, real environments of memory’. Nora, ‘Between Memory and History’, p. 7

90 Henry Greenspan points out that there were significant amounts of survivor testimony in the immediate aftermath of the war. ‘An Immediate and Violent Impulse: Holocaust Survivor Testimony in the First years after the Liberation’, in John Roth and Elisabeth Maxwell, eds., Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an age of Genocide, (Palgrave, Hampshire and New York, 2001), p. 108

91 Lurie’s own comment, ‘Boris Lurie – Not Mince Matters’, interview with Boris Lurie by Megakles Rogakos and Janos Gat, Manhattan September 23, 2000, p. 1, www.no-art.info. It later gave way to an increased focus on the Holocaust past, beginning in the 1960s and ongoing today. A key impetus was the Eichmann trial of 1962. Amishai-Maisels, Depiction and Interpretation, p. 91


93 Aaron Hass, ‘Holocaust Survivor Testimony: the psychological implications’, in Roth and Maxwell Remembering for the Future, pp. 127-128. Peter Novick shows the complex influences at work in forming the stance of the American Jews in the 1950s, pp. 90-123
Existentialism and individual choice, intensifying feelings among survivors that they somehow deserved what had happened.\footnote{The belief in their guilt Langer sees as a tendency of the survivor, a result of the particularly effective German demonisation of the Jews as sub-human. Langer, ‘Remembering Survival’ in Hartman, Holocaust Remembrance, p. 75.} Alongside events such as the Eichmann trial, this climate of denial was overturned by the growing realisation that the survivors’ generation was dying out. Thus more recent years have seen a focus on remembering,\footnote{A large part of this has focused on recording survivors’ testimony. Projects such as the Yale’s Fortunoff Archive for Video Testimony, begun in 1979 have received increased awareness with the director Steven Spielberg’s launch of the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation in 1994. Such projects ensure that a record of what happened to individuals is kept, but also offers a strategy to confront and help resolve past scars.} now considered a positive means for the survivor to take control over a time when they were forced into the position of passive victim.\footnote{Hass, ‘Holocaust Survivor Testimony’, in Roth and Maxwell, Remembering for the Future, p. 132. Langer ‘Remembering Survival’, in Hartman, Holocaust Remembrance, p. 72. Rather more sceptically Peter Novick points to the shift in attitudes towards victim-hood from the despised to the embraced: ‘the cultural icon of the strong, silent, hero is replaced by the vulnerable and verbose antihero’. Novick, The Holocaust in American Life, (Houghton Mifflin, Boston and New York, 1999), p. 8 In his book, Novick sets out to explore why the Holocaust has become such an important defining event for American Jews, emphasising the importance of the question ‘in addition to “why now?” we have to ask “why here?”’ p. 2 Novick’s arguments offer a rare critique of the growing centrality of the Holocaust and cult of victim-hood, referencing issues such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and changing political climate of America. However, it is a very difficult subject, and Novick’s book remains contentious. I would stress that both Lurie and Music had direct experience of the Nazi concentration camps.} Thus Amishai-Maisels points to the potential of personal catharsis in Holocaust art.\footnote{Amishai-Maisels, Depiction and Interpretation, p. xxxi}

Yet memory is not always intentional, as Walter Benjamin underlines in his exploration of Marcel Proust’s mémoire volontaire and involuntaire.\footnote{Benjamin, ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’, Illuminations, (Pimlico, London, 1999), pp. 154-155. While he sees Marcel Proust’s À la Recherche du temps perdu as an exploration of Henri Bergson’s formulation of memory as a matter of choice, he points out the immanent critique. For Proust, memory is not a matter ‘free choice’, but of chance. ‘It is a waste of effort for us to try to summon it, all the exertions of our intelligence are useless. The past is hidden outside the realm of our intelligence and beyond its reach, in some material object…which we do not suspect. It depends on chance whether we encounter this object before we die, or do not encounter it’. Marcel Proust, In Search of Lost Time: The Way By Swann’s, (ed.) Christopher Prendergast, (Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, London, 2002), p. 47} While the first is a conscious act, the second is
involuntary: memories are raised by certain objects, events, voices – Proust’s iconic madeleines.\textsuperscript{99} While forgetting might have attracted the survivor, it is clear that for most this was impossible. Importantly Benjamin points out that the two come together when contents of the individual past combine with the material of the collective,\textsuperscript{100} an important idea in ‘survivor art’ where the wider concept of the Holocaust is mediated by the personal experiences of the artist.

I would like to develop the idea of the involuntary surfacing of memory in relation to trauma, defined clinically as ‘an event outside the range of human experience’.\textsuperscript{101} Outlined by Freud in 1920 as ‘any excitations from the outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield’,\textsuperscript{102} it has ongoing impact on the individual, the original trauma often re-evoked by later events.\textsuperscript{103} Memory thus stops being a discourse about modern and postmodern societies, the social and the individual, and instead becomes part of a deeply problematic psychological phenomenon, starkly inscribed in the survivors’ present. Looking at ‘International Responses to Trauma’, Yael Danieli points to its all-encompassing effects. While having drastic and tragic impact on lives, threatening life and property as well as injuring the psyche, it results in short (acute), life-long (chronic), and intergenerational effects.\textsuperscript{104} Critical for Cathy Caruth is its communication to others.\textsuperscript{105} Indeed Hartman even considers the issue of ‘secondary trauma’: the

\textsuperscript{99} However it is still dependent on the mind. While recollection may be evoked in the chance encounter, it must be explored and developed by the intellect. ‘It is clear that the truth I am seeking is not in the drink, [the tea accompanying the madeleine] but in me. The drink has awoken it in me, but does not know that truth… It is up to my mind to find the truth’. Proust, \textit{The Way by Swann’s}, p. 47

\textsuperscript{100} Benjamin, ‘On Some Motifs’, p. 156

\textsuperscript{101} Laura Brown cites the definition from the American Psychiatric Association’s 1987 \textit{Diagnostic and Statistical Manual} in ‘Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma’, in Caruth, \textit{Trauma}, p. 100


\textsuperscript{103} Yael Danieli, ‘International Responses to Trauma’ in Roth and Maxwell, \textit{Remembering for the Future}, p. 67

\textsuperscript{104} Danieli, ‘International Responses’, p. 63

idea that visual imagery of the Holocaust or other disasters can itself engender ‘shock’. Trauma gives another layer to the work of survivors. While it would be presumptuous to claim their work as catharsis, in coming to talk and expressing what they had been through, it does interact with clinical conceptions of dealing with trauma.

I will now look at the work of Zoran Music. Imprisoned in Dachau from 1944-1945, he is a survivor who offers an ‘appropriate’ treatment of the Holocaust. For while there are murmurings as to the suitability of his aestheticised treatment, the fact that he is a survivor tends to override such qualms. Indeed arguably it allows the viewer to empathise with the camp experience. In coming to understand how bodies can become objects of beauty, Music offers an effective strategy to explore the horrors of absolute human degradation without too literal a depiction encouraging fascination. His work becomes a ‘ritual of mourning’ for both artist and viewer for the fate of the victims, alive and dead.

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106 He points to the prevalence of psychic numbing accompanied by fascination. Hartman, The Longest Shadow, pp. 152-154

107 Caruth, ‘Introduction’, p. 9


109 Estera Milman sees Lurie as having ‘crossed a line that placed his work outside our normal expectations of the iconography of “victim-hood”’. Milman, ‘Notes on the Aesthetic of Doom’ (2001), www.no-art.info, p. 20

110 ‘Was it possible that the serenity and gentleness of these works, that I took for a gift of Nature, had in fact been bought by so much grief, such extreme horror?’ (War es möglich, dass die Heiterkeit und Sanftmut dieses Werks, die ich für eine Gabe der Natur Hielt, in Wahrheit mit so viel Leid und so vielen Greueln erkauf werden mussten?) Jean Clair cited in Jorge Semprun, ‘Ich habe es gesehen’, Zoran Music, (Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, 1997), p. 63. Translations are mine throughout, unless otherwise stated. The problem of aestheticisation is suggested by Bohm-Duchen, who comments that it is the most understated of Music’s works that are the most successful, ‘Fifty years on’, p. 104

111 These little mountains of corpses fascinated me. It’s difficult to explain now. What happened is that little by little you gave in to the nightmare of the camps’. Peppiaott, ‘Interview One with Zoran Music’, Paris 1987, in Zoran Music, (2000), p. 21

Music risked his life to draw in the camp, but once released, he turned away from his experiences, and back to the landscapes that had intrigued him before his capture. He looked particularly to the landscape of Venice, and the Dalmatian hills of his childhood. Yet even so his Holocaust experience is drawn on by critics: ‘If the light danced with such frenetic gaiety in the lagoon, was it not partly in contrast to the darkness of the concentration camp that loomed behind?’ Spies also points out that with hindsight Venice landscapes can be read differently: the emphasis is not on the city, but on distance, dispossession and the loss of reality. Spies sees his abstract landscapes of the 1950s and 1960s as an ironic take on the prevailing abstraction and its absence of engagement, following the atrocities of the war. Spies also points to prevailing shame of the survivor, and the impact of the post-war climate of silence, ‘Zoran Music l’Intouchable’, p. 30.

Key to the exploration of his camp experience is the involuntary surfacing of memories. ‘Later, when I could no longer hold things in, when the memories of the camp surged up inside me, I began to paint them, many years after’. Remembering is thus situated away from the uncomfortable subjects of collective repression, and personal trauma, becoming instead a personal catharsis more open to the viewer’s understanding. By becoming central to his artistic vision, the

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114 Spies sees his abstract landscapes of the 1950s and 1960s as an ironic take on the prevailing abstraction and its absence of engagement, following the atrocities of the war. Spies, ‘Zoran Music l’Intouchable’, p. 29. However, it seems curiously at odds with Music’s self-professed unhappiness, when he felt himself a failure for not succeeding in his experiments with abstraction.

115 Spies also points to prevailing shame of the survivor, and the impact of the post-war climate of silence, ‘Zoran Music l’Intouchable’, p. 30


118 Collective repression was particularly criticised in Germany, with the student generation of the 1960s highly critical of their parents’ reaction to the Nazi past. While the effect on Music is obviously deep, in his return to the subject at a time of increasing awareness of what had happened, the viewer can see him ‘coming to terms’ with the experience. Also key is that there is no sense of revenge: ‘I’m not trying to make some rhetorical statement when I paint the cadavers. There’s no sense in protesting.’ Peppiatt, ‘Interview One’, p. 23 This again suggests some sort of personal closure, making it easier for the viewer. We are left to dwell on futility and horror, but in a way that focuses on the victims rather than the perpetrators.
horrors of the experience become somewhat bearable,\textsuperscript{119} the bravery of the individual subsumed into the heroic narrative of the concentration camp creator. Art transcends, or redeems the horrors. This is strengthened by Music’s highly intuitive conception of painting. ‘I wait in the darkness for things to happen. Often they are things that have been coming together for a long time, memories that have surfaced from oblivion, images in which only the essential remains’.\textsuperscript{120} Music’s work thus sits within the traditional mystification of the creative act, allowing its magic to separate the imagery from the horrors on which it is based.\textsuperscript{121}

Yet in pointing to how critical interpretation of Music has situated his experience within mythologised narratives of art’s transcendance, I am not underestimating the power of his images. Thus in a canvas of 1971, (fig. 2), four heads lie, their faces distorted in the grimaces of rigor mortis, the expressions emphasised by the silhouette effect of the black background. Thrown back, they seem to emit a final agonised scream.\textsuperscript{122} Their bodies dissolve into the canvas, only the hands and arm of a central figure are drawn firmly, crossed over the chest in a gesture reminiscent of protection that resonates with the viewer’s own experience. Yet despite the horror, the viewer is aware of the contrast of canvas and paint. For Music uses the interlayering of different textures to create the image: the thick dark wash behind the heads sharply receding into infinite and terrible depth, the odd highlight of white that turns bare canvas into a suggestion of bodies. It is incredibly beautiful; delicate, precise in the handling, and yet horrendous. Jean Clair sees it in terms of the essence of the artist’s mark,\textsuperscript{123} reflected in Music’s own comments. ‘[M]y way of seeing had

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\item\textsuperscript{119} ‘But without the experience of Dachau, he would not have become the painter that we know, who astonishes and moves us, who gives us strength through the power of his vision and the restrained mastery of his formal perfection’. (Aber ohne die Erfahrung von Dachau wäre er nicht der Maler geworden, der uns in Erstaunen setzt und bewegt, der uns Kraft gibt durch die Kraft seiner Vision und die verhaltene Meisterschaft seiner formalen Perfektion), Semprun, ‘Ich habe es gesehen’, p. 63
\item\textsuperscript{120} Peppiatt, ‘Interview Two’, p. 35
\item\textsuperscript{121} Although perhaps this is the only way possible for him?
\item\textsuperscript{122} We are reminded of Music’s story that when drawing the piles of bodies, one died in front of him. Peppiatt. ‘Interview One’, p. 22
\item\textsuperscript{123} ‘To draw is to mark out the frontier, its to insist on our essence, its to mark out the small portion of space and time by which we exist in the eyes of others: its to defend one’s integrity, one’s biological and spiritual identity’, (Dessiner, c’est alors marquer la frontière, c’est insister sur notre essence, c’est délimiter cette petite portion d’espace et de temps par
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changed completely. My experience of death had transformed my experience of life. I was only interested in images that were stripped down to their essence.” 124 He uses the instinctual tension between beauty and horror, 125 to literalise the ‘tragic beauty’ of the corpses.

Supported by this delicate beauty, I originally understood the title in optimistic terms, an affirmation that humanity does and can continue. Music’s intent was far bleaker. The title was in response to a Czech friend in the camp who had claimed that such a thing could never happen again: ‘I realised it was not true. We are not the last.’ 126 Knowing this, the viewer is implicated in the fate and pain of the shadowy figures; it also reflects the impetus of Music’s disillusionment with the world of the 1970s. 127 This shifts the tone away from art’s transcendence, embodying a specific message to its viewers. Thus Michael Gibs on suggests that his work is not mere witness to a shadowy past, but demonstrates that such horrors are part of (the viewer’s) reality. 128 Yet the viewer’s discomfort is very differently achieved to Lurie’s angry and aggressive rhetoric.

In Railroad Collage of 1963 the viewer is again faced with a pile of bodies, but to totally different effect. For it is a literal pile: Margaret Bourke-White’s iconic image of the Buchenwald dead, a jumbled mass of corpses tossed higgledy-piggledy on a railway truck, over which is pasted a woman. Seen from the back, she is almost nude, her buttocks framed by a sheer suspender belt, cheekily peeking over the pants she pulls down. While her face cannot be seen, her head is tilted almost imperceptibly towards us, emphasising her titillating invitation. Above and to the right, rough and marked canvas can be seen, four squiggles forming a pattern in the top left corner. The contrast is startling. Not only between canvas and photographs, the artist’s mark and the camera’s mechanical eye, but also the grotesque shifts between the emaciated bodies, and the enveloping

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124 Peppiatt, ‘Interview One’, p. 22
125 Spies, ‘Zoran Music l’Intouchable’, p. 32
126 Peppiatt, ‘Interview Three’, p. 50 We are reminded of Ronnie Landau’s horrifying list of international inaction in response to the many massacres since 1945. Landau, ‘The Nazi Holocaust: its Moral, Historical and Educational Significance’, in Bohm-Duchen After Auschwitz, p. 23
127 Amishai-Maisels, Depiction and Interpretation, p. 95
128 Gibson, ‘Zoran Music en Perspective’, p. 20
invitation of the woman’s flesh. Not just between the well fed and cared for body against an anonymous jumbled pile; but between woman as sex symbol, part of the ‘meat market’ and the literal ‘meat’ of dead human flesh below. There is no way the viewer can escape to the beauty of the work. Any beauty of the corpses, however ‘tragic’, is refused by the gratuitous bare flesh above. Equally there is no room for admiration of the artist’s technique. While the message is ambiguous: does he offer criticism of society, of himself, of pornography? There is no mistaking the anger and feeling evoked, emphasised by the cut of the montage technique.\(^\text{129}\) The images sit uncomfortably: the diagonal of the cart cut across by the square of the pin-up, emphasising the jarring dichotomy of their juxtaposition. The bodies are not even allowed the individualised horror permitted by Music: we can barely see their faces, a ragged heap of bones, scarcely human.

The collage questions how we look, both at the bodies and the pin-up girl. It demands how we are supposed to reconcile the post-war world of the pin-up with the preceding atrocities of the Holocaust. ‘Look at all the carnage of the War! And what we ended up with is the ass of a pin-up girl’.\(^\text{130}\) The viewer is confronted with the incongruity of survivor life: surrounded by a new world of opportunity and plenty, yet haunted by the emaciated corpses of the past.

It is the vividness of the photograph’s literal encounter on which Lurie’s image relies, evoked by Sontag in the description of her first view of the liberation photograph. ‘Nothing I have seen – in photographs or in real life – ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously.’ Yet almost immediately following, she voices her fears. ‘[L]iving with the photographed images of suffering…does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. It can also corrupt…Images transfix. Images anaesthetise’.\(^\text{131}\) Despite the widely recognised power of the

\(^{129}\) Brigid Doherty: ‘the capacity to induce trauma inheres specifically in the form of photomontage, where the beholder’s traumatic experience is, so to speak, already embodied in the composite image of a figure whose parts do not match’. Brigid Doherty, ““See: We Are All Neuasthenics!” or, The Trauma of Dada Montage’, Critical Inquiry 24, (Autumn, 1997), p. 84. While relating specifically to a court case in the 1980s, and used by Doherty to argue a relation between the trauma of the First World War and the Dada technique of montage, I would suggest that similar ‘trauma’ can be found in the abrupt juxtaposition and absolute discrepancy of the images Lurie joins together.

\(^{130}\) Boris Lurie suggests one possible interpretation of Railroad Collage. ‘Boris Lurie – Not Mince Matters’, interview with Rogakos and Gat, p. 5

photographic records of Liberation, there is lingering distrust. I will look at issues of voyeurism and victimisation in the next chapter. Here I want to concentrate on the way they were used and presented. For an increasingly small number of images were favoured, creating emblems of suffering, and inhumanity.  

First though is the problematic issue of truth and realism, the longstanding debate over the mechanical aura and verisimilitude of the photograph that has raged since its inception in the nineteenth century. From the early question of whether an art form or record, photography’s use has been dogged with debates on indexicality and truth, manipulation and framing. Yet Andrea Liss argues that Holocaust photography challenges the boundaries between the photograph as objective document and as subjective memento. I do not want to enter into debates on the ‘truth’ value of the photograph; only to consider such issues as they inform the argument: how the photographs emerged and were used, and the meanings with which Lurie was playing. Barbie Zelizer suggests it is important to investigate why one memory at a particular time and place retains authority over others, why these memories were constructed as they were, the Liberation photograph the symbol of this memory.

While photography appears a medium particularly appropriate to call up the past, offering a potent material connection between image and subject, present and past, its limitations must also be

132 Zelizer argues that their role in remembrance to help stabilise and anchor collective memory’s transient and fluctuating nature, has worked to the extent that they have become the event’s primary marker, Remembering to Forget, pp. 5-6

133 Zelizer, Remembering to Forget, p. 5


136 Seeing photographs as the vehicles of collective memory, she defines their function as facilitating cultural, social, economic and political connections, establishing social order, and determining belonging, exclusivity, solidarity and continuity. Zelizer, Remembering to Forget, p. 5

137 In Roland Barthes’ personal study of ‘what photography was “in itself”’, he stresses that ‘in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there...And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the noeme of Photography’. Barthes, Camera Lucida, (Vintage, London, 2000), pp. 76-77
recognised. Aspects such as two-dimensionality or framing betray the insurmountable distance between viewer and viewed,\textsuperscript{138} as well as opening it up to appropriation, as for example in its use by the media. That the liberation photograph is ‘not the Holocaust per se but a partial depiction of its final phase’ is easily overlooked,\textsuperscript{139} their transformation into icons of suffering has reduced our ability to recognise a multifaceted reality.\textsuperscript{140} For the photographs are schematic. There is often little known about them: who is shown, the circumstances in which they were taken.\textsuperscript{141} This decontextualisation is drawn out by Lurie. The pile of bodies, continuing outside the photograph’s frame are shockingly anonymous next to the single figure of the woman, on whom so much care and attention is lavished. Yet Lurie is also drawing on their iconic reputation, the shock of the viewer’s encounter enhanced by his debasement of those ‘negative icons’.\textsuperscript{142}

Liss stresses that although the Holocaust photograph has been made to assume the burden of bearing witness to the events, this is merely the surface element in a deeper, more complex structure of meaning.\textsuperscript{143} For they were originally part of the Allied propaganda campaign, disseminated and figured through the media.\textsuperscript{144} Unusually it was not just a selection published:\textsuperscript{145} a seemingly endless progression of images dominated the newspapers as the armies moved towards

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\textsuperscript{139} Zelizer, \textit{Remembering to Forget}, p. 86  \\
\textsuperscript{140} Hirsch, ‘Surviving Images’, p. 226  \\
\textsuperscript{141} Zelizer, \textit{Remembering to Forget}, p. 7. She stresses the way they were used in the media at the time, and subsequently. While reporters’ narrative progressed chronologically from camp to camp, the photos were presented with little regard for exactly when and where taken, the same image used to illustrate different writings, often without regard for actual camps or events mentioned. Indeed they were even miscaptioned. The individual photograph’s status as evidence has mattered less than its ability to document what the Nazis had done p. 93  \\
\textsuperscript{142} ‘Photographic images of Nazi atrocities have become one of the negative icons of the twentieth century’. Bohm-Duchen, ‘The uses and Abuses of Photography in Holocaust-related Art’, Jacobowitz and Hornstein (eds.), \textit{Image and Remembrance}, p. 220  \\
\textsuperscript{143} Liss, Trespassing through Shadows, pp. 8-9  \\
\textsuperscript{144} Zelizer points out that their use in the media was complicated by the profession’s failure to have reported on the camps before liberation. Zelizer, \textit{Remembering to Forget}, p. 154  \\
\textsuperscript{145} Photographs of the war were still heavily censored at this point.  \\
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Berlin. This was both to demonstrate that it had indeed happened, but also testified to the photographers’ difficulties in creating images of what they found. Yet this aspect has been simplified over the years into what Zelizer identifies as two favoured narratives. One is the story of survivors, implying a muted hope in the future, while in the other the Holocaust’s industrial nature emerges. So the difficulties and complexities of witnessing and the fluidity of stories has gradually disappeared.

Zelizer sees the iconic status of the Liberation photographs as having paralysed many to the point of critical inattention, against which Lurie’s collage works dramatically. He refuses to conform to mainstream narratives, underlining the inadequacy of our perceptions of the Holocaust, and stressing the limitations of the photograph, and their deployment. Emphasising the complexities of the Holocaust story, he refuses to allow the viewer immunity from the violence shown. Through the shock of the encounter of the pin-up girl with Holocaust dead, the viewer is refused any such inattention. The bodies cannot be ignored as revered icons of suffering, Lurie refusing the tendency of the Liberation photograph to become an instance of ‘forgetting to remember’.

Marianne Hirsch relates the continued re-use of a few photographs to the idea of ‘post-memory’, the second generation’s response to the traumas of the first. This ‘post-memory’ is immediately problematic, situated in a basis of displacement and vicariousness; recollection replaced with

146 Zelizer points out how the photograph’s use in propaganda had impacted their apparent ‘verisimilitude’ to some extent. Zelizer, Remembering to Forget, p. 145. She also emphasises the importance of the continuing struggle between journalists and photographers as to which was more effective, and the impact of war and the liberation photos on the originally subordinate status of photography as illustration. The Liberation was the first time photographs took centre stage. pp. 16-48

147 Zelizer, Remembering to Forget, pp. 160-161

148 Zelizer, Remembering to Forget, pp. 160-161

149 Zelizer, Remembering to Forget, p. 1. This ‘critical inattention’ could be extended to the way they have emerged in art. Thus Bohm-Duchen comments that such works ‘have a distinct tendency to appear second hand and inadequate, crude, over-explicit and predictable’, ‘Uses and Abuses of Photography’, Jacobowitz and Hornstein, Image and Remembrance, p. 221

150 Zelizer emphasises that by the 1950s Liberation images were no longer aimed at moving collectives to take responsibility for what they saw. Zelizer, Remembering to Forget, p. 169
projection and creation.\textsuperscript{151} Yet it offers a model to read the continued re-use of certain images: for the second generation the trauma of the photograph is not desensitising, but a means to connect to the traumas of the first.\textsuperscript{152} Indeed because trauma is always belated, she suggests that it is only through succeeding generations that events such as the Holocaust can be worked through.\textsuperscript{153} The obsessive repetition of iconic photographs makes them both familiar and yet estranged, allowing the viewer to move beyond the shock of first seeing them and to reintegrate the traumatic experience.\textsuperscript{154} It is this re-integration that Lurie refuses, focusing instead on ensuring the traumatic ‘cut’ of his collage cannot be resolved.\textsuperscript{155}

Thus the problems of memory seem particularly heightened in Lurie’s image. While I investigated Zoran Music’s work in terms of an ‘acceptable’ confrontation with his Holocaust experience,\textsuperscript{156} Lurie offers a subversive alternative, drawing particularly on the ‘negative icon’ of the Liberation Photograph. Hirsch looks to Jill Bennett to support her more positive reading of the iconic photograph. For Bennett argues the photograph communicates emotional or bodily experience by evoking the viewer’s own, speaking from the body’s sensations rather than merely representing the past, and thus supporting their power for successive generations.\textsuperscript{157} While few viewers can fully empathise with either image, this quality of bodily empathy is crucial to \emph{Railroad Collage}’s powerful juxtaposition. The viewer \emph{feels} the shocking disparity between the bodies: emaciated

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{151} Hirsch, ‘Surviving Images’, p. 220
\textsuperscript{152} Hirsch, ‘Surviving Images’, p. 218
\textsuperscript{153} Hirsch, ‘Surviving Images’, p. 222. This relates to Caruth’s view of the inter-subjectivity of trauma.
\textsuperscript{154} Hirsch, ‘Surviving Images’, p. 242
\textsuperscript{155} Rainer Rumold is unusual among most commentators on \emph{Railroad Collage} in being underwhelmed by the experience. ‘Hence, to be honest, Boris Lurie’s images shocked me no more nor less than others’. Instead he comments on the way such images have been suppressed by the culture industry, which perhaps points to his interest in a Marxist perspective. Certainly I believe that even amidst today’s cultural saturation of images and violence, Lurie’s work continues to provoke shock. Rumold, ‘NO!art and the Dialectic of Enlightenment, Negative Aesthetics and Moral Visuality’, www.no-art.info, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{156} While I recognise my reading of Music’s work is one-sided – I have used it very specifically as a counterpart to Lurie’s – I hope it still manages to suggest its complexities, and does not undermine the very powerful impact on the viewer.

\textsuperscript{157} Hirsch, ‘Surviving Images’, p. 225
\end{flushleft}
corpse and buxom pinup girl. In this chapter I have focused on the subversive aspect of the juxtaposition, the way Lurie undermines traditional readings of the photograph and ‘survivor’ art. In the forthcoming chapter I will look more critically, considering issues of voyeurism, victimisation, and the problems of the ‘gaze’. Here it becomes more difficult for the contemporary viewer: Lurie’s use of the pin-up girl is not just subversive and shocking, but highly problematic.

III: The ‘Pin-up’, NO!art and the art world

‘But there are so many different types, and at different times I like different types…It is very confusing. Dressed, undressed, lingerie or bikini, baby doll gown or nothing at all. Do you like them adolescent or mature, the spring, summer, or overripe in the fall? The sporty type or the savage type?’

In the catalogue Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art, Young asks where the line stands between the historically inquiring and erotically preoccupied gaze, a question particularly relevant to Railroad Collage. In this chapter I will examine the more problematic issues raised by the use of the pin-up, the implications of pornography juxtaposed with the piles of the dead, arguing that through the uncomfortable interrogation of questions of exploitation and the gaze, Lurie offers ironic criticism of both society and representation. I will then look briefly at NO!art’s

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159 Exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York, 2000. Hailed as controversial and extreme – they provided psychologists to help people deal with the experience – it aimed to move beyond the usual representations of the Holocaust to look at art that looked to the perpetrator’s experience. Young, ‘Introduction’, p. xv

160 Young is referring to a project comparable to Lurie in its combination of pornographic imagery with that of the Holocaust, although made in the 1980s and forming one part of a wider-scale project, Gerhard Richter’s Atlas. Young, ‘Introduction’, Mirroring Evil, p. xvii
collective period,\(^{161}\) the movement of which Lurie was a founding member, amidst the pillars of post-war culture, Abstract Expressionism and Pop art.

Lurie’s use of photography immediately references a problematic gaze; the common equation of camera and gun reflecting the photograph’s view as totalising and lethal.\(^{162}\) ‘Like a car, a camera is sold as a predatory weapon…To photograph people is to violate them’.\(^{163}\) Yet Hirsch draws attention to a shift in critical interpretation, which more recently has recognised a multiplicity of looks,\(^{164}\) drawing on Lacan’s distinction between the look and the gaze: ‘I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides.’\(^{165}\) While the gaze is external, situated in ideology and forming the image from outside, the ‘look’ is local, contingent, and mutual, the viewer part of a network of looks within and beyond the photo.\(^{166}\) Yet how far can this network extend when the image is a heap of bodies, historically ignored? An uncertainty reinforced by the reference to exploitation in the image of the pin-up, where there is no reciprocal relationship, the display of the naked body purely for the spectator’s pleasure.\(^{167}\) This is not to equate the

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\(^{161}\) NO! is usually understood to run from 1959 – 1964. Lurie considers it still to be active, preferring this time to be known as the ‘collective’ period. Milman, ‘Notes on the Aesthetic of Doom’, (2001), p. 4

\(^{162}\) This equation is rooted in the way photography has been used over the last century, and shifts in critical interpretation. Photography was often used in the early days as an anthropological tool of classification, implicated in an imperialistic tourism; and its documentary usage has been criticised for continuing this construction of the photographic subject as ‘other’. Wells, *Photography*, pp. 68-72

\(^{163}\) Sontag continues ‘…it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder’. Sontag, *On Photography*, pp. 14-15

\(^{164}\) Hirsch, ‘Surviving Images’, p. 232

\(^{165}\) Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, (Vintage, London, 1998), p. 72. Lacan stresses that the gaze is not really the individual’s control of the world but is situated within the field of desire, pp. 84-86. He uses Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*, with its anamorphic skull, to illustrate the individual’s illusory control of the scene: the vanity of an understanding of the arts and sciences undermined by the insistence of mortality. ‘It is, in short, an obvious way, no doubt an exceptional one, and one due to some moment of reflection on the part of the painter, of showing us that, as subjects, we are literally caught in to the picture, and represented here as caught’, p. 92

\(^{166}\) Hirsch, ‘Surviving Images’, p. 233

\(^{167}\) How far the pin-up is exploitative can obviously be debated. While possibly not recognised as such in the early 1960s, in 1973 Thomas Hess commented that the pin-up ‘is, in fact, a man-made object disguised as a girl’. Hess, ‘Pin and Icon’,
Confronted, the viewer is also implicated. In 1975 Laura Mulvey wrote on the phallocentrism of the cinematic gaze, a criticism that extends to the pin-up, where similarly the erotic is coded in the language of a dominant patriarchal order. While Mulvey’s feminist-orientated arguments are anachronistic to Lurie, strikingly relevant is their deconstruction of the codes shaping what we see.

Alongside the uncomfortable parallel of ‘meat markets’, the juxtaposition of pin-up girl with dead bodies highlights the gaze. While the psychoanalyst Lacan stressed the look’s mutuality, Mulvey, as befits an early feminist, examines how the individual’s look is predetermined in the patriarchal coding of the cinematic image. Key to this is Scopophilia, the pleasure in looking, where people

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168 Rumold emphasises the parallels between Lurie’s work and Adorno’s writing on the ‘Culture Industry’, but suggests that the identification of anti-Semitism with the exploitation and commodification of the woman’s body, overlooked in writing, is unavoidable in art. So shocking is the visual form, it is repressed before institutionalisation, at the point of viewing. ‘No! Art and the Dialectic of Enlightenment’, p. 4

169 According to Mulvey, the female is the passive bearer of meanings imposed by the Male, and as such the leitmotif of the erotic spectacle, playing to and signifying male desire. ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1989), pp. 14-15

170 Feminism is here understood as the way women are marginalised and excluded from discourses, the patriarchy as determinant. I am concentrating specifically on Holocaust imagery, within the collective period NO!art, 1959-1964: feminist critiques only really emerged in the early 1970s. Rumold suggests that although figuring issues that would emerge in Feminism, Lurie’s work is by no means ‘proto-feminist’. Rumold, ‘No! Art and the Dialectic of Enlightenment’, p. 3

171 ‘The magic of Hollywood style at its best…arose, not exclusively, but in one important aspect, from its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure’. Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure’, p. 16
are transformed into objects through a controlling and curious gaze. This has disturbing implications for our response to the bodies. Liss stresses the way the photograph stigmatises and holds apart the subject and object of view, the image’s horror translated into the codified positions of pathetic and privileged. By only being able to see ‘victims’, people become objects. Indeed she worries the photographs are so extreme that the obscenity adheres to the bodies, and not the perpetrators. The pin-up, too, is dependant on the codified positioning of viewer and object, and in bringing them together, Lurie forces us to recognise problems of looking. We are made acutely aware of two very different yet equally anonymous types of objectified bodies and the viewer’s role in their construction as ‘others’.

Impaired, the lingering attraction exercised by the pin-up is critical to the force of the juxtaposition. While Railroad Collage problematises the voyeuristic approach to girl and bodies, it also uses the morbid fascination evoked, a sentiment echoed in Lurie’s explanation of his exorcistic deployment of the pin-up. This uneasy relationship with the female body is also found in his 1950s series of Dismembered Women. Matthias Reichelt interprets their deformation as corpse-like, a response to the ghetto deaths of Lurie’s mother sister and grandmother. However they also resonate in terms

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173 Liss, Trespassing through Shadows, p. 4

174 Liss, Trespassing through Shadows, p. 6

175 While writing from a feminist perspective, Carol Duncan argues the fixed positioning of such imagery and the way it works to confirm male identity and superiority. ‘Pornography affirms their manliness to themselves and to others and proclaims the greater social power of men’, ‘The MoMA’s hot Mamas’, (1989) in The Aesthetics of Power: Essays in Critical Art History, (Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 203

176 ‘And gradually the girlies from the studio began to invade my bedroom... I longed for that supreme imaginary moment, when I would crown the queen of them all...I tried to select, to eliminate, to discard, to crown. I did not succeed. ---And then at last I had to act. Something had to be done to stop this monstrous growth...I grabbed the girls from the walls. Onto the canvas they went, around them and over them the paint. They were smothered in it, peeled off, new girls replaced the losses...Gradually it began to happen. Paintings started coming off the walls’. Lurie, ‘Les Lions Show Introduction’, p. 21 This explanation demonstrates the lure of the pin-up girl to Lurie and his aggressive reaction to them, his language clearly hostile. They are reduced to invading objects: he cannot work until he has mastered them, first through the action of choice, and then by literal physical control, through their deployment in his art.

of Mulvey’s argument of the cinematic treatment of the female body as fetish.178 Thus in Dismembered Women: The Stripper of 1955 (fig. 3), the viewer is both repulsed and desires. The woman’s body, lumpen and grotesque, reclines in a traditional seductive pose. She wears a wide brimmed hat and high-heeled shoes but is otherwise naked - a modern version of Cranach’s Venus? Yet the shoes, the dark lips and the detached interrelation of body parts seem overly exaggerated.179 Seen within this tradition, it is clear that the equivocal approach to the female body found in Railroad Collage was a common theme in Lurie’s work. Self-implicatory through the artist’s fascination with the pin-up, this extends to the viewer.180 It is no objective critique of the voyeuristic gaze: the viewer themselves an accomplice in the uneasy play of emotions.

Estera Milman stresses this ambiguity as key, contrasting Railroad Collage with a previous interpretation of the subject, the 1961 Flatcar Assemblage, 1945, by Adolf Hitler, (fig. 4). A biting critique of art, as much as attitudes towards the Holocaust, it is based on the juxtaposition of ‘art speak’ and genocide, so requiring the viewer’s specific knowledge of art-world discourses.181 Turning to sex, and the more widely recognisable figure of the pin-up makes Railroad Collage more widely comprehensible. We are reminded of Jacqueline Rose’s view of the mutual

178 ‘[T]he fetish is a substitute for the woman’s (the mother’s) penis that the little boy once believed in – and for reasons familiar to us – does not want to give up.’ Freud, ‘Fetishism’ (1927), On Sexuality, vol. VII Penguin Freud Library, ed. James Strachey, (Penguin, London, 1991), p. 352 For if the woman’s lack of penis threatens him with the danger of castration, the fetish is the symbol of both his triumph over and protection against this threat. Mulvey identifies a similar strategy on the screen: either through the substitution of a fetish object, or the female body itself becoming the fetish. Thus in Joseph von Sternberg’s films ‘The beauty of the woman as object and the screen space coalesce; she is no longer the bearer of guilt but a perfect product, whose body, stylised and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film, the direct recipient of the spectator’s look’. Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure’, p. 22

179 The context of the fraught situation of women in society at this point is also important. For there were continued campaigns to push women back into the home to make jobs available to the men returning from service, as well as increasing unease about absolute gender differentiation. David Cateforis, Willem de Kooning’s “Women” of the 1950s: A Critical History of their Reception and Interpretation, (PhD Thesis, Stanford University, 1991), p. 19

180 Rumold, ‘No! Art and the Dialectic of Enlightenment’, p. 7

181 Milman, ‘Aesthetic of Doom’, p. 17 Lurie references Duchamp’s famous ‘found object’ strategy. This is particularly important given the context of the early 1960s, where it was beginning to play a key part in the construction of ‘Neo-Dada’. Lurie comments critically on the myth of the artist-creator, highlighting the hermeneutics of the art world, through the shock of relocating artistic strategies to bear on actual events.
relationship between the visual and sexual, and the concomitant sense of self.\textsuperscript{182} For while \textit{Flatcar Assemblage} is powerfully critical, it is the references to sexuality that sit so forcefully uncomfortably with the Holocaust dead.\textsuperscript{183}

This combination of death and sex as undermining accepted behaviour references the thinking of Georges Bataille, a writer whose ideas of transgression, and attempts to separate art and behaviour from bourgeois morality were key to the Surrealist movement. Particularly relevant to Lurie was his association of sex and death in \textit{Eroticism}, published in 1957. For Bataille argues that the juxtaposition of sex and death goes beyond the confines of an ‘aberrant sensuality’. He roots it more centrally as ‘the basis of our images of life and death…we cannot reflect on existence without reference to this truth’.\textsuperscript{184} It is inscribed within our struggle with the inescapable isolation of the individual.\textsuperscript{185} Yet Lurie plays with the suggestion of more deviant forms of eroticism and sexuality. Jessica Benjamin sees rational violence, mingling love with issues of control and submission – longings denied by society – as permeating all sexual imagery in our culture.\textsuperscript{186} Issues of

\textsuperscript{182} Jacqueline Rose’s argument relates specifically to the idea of sexual difference. ‘A confusion at the level of sexuality brings with it a disturbance of the visual field’, p. 226. However it is based on a paralleling of sexual identity with a belief in the certainty of language, and the way upsetting one is reciprocal. ‘The link between sexuality and the image produces a particular dialogue which cannot be covered adequately by the familiar opposition between the formal operations of the image and a politics exerted from outside’. Rose, \textit{Sexuality in the Field of Vision}, (Verso, London, 1986), p. 231. This idea of sexuality as deeply rooted in the psyche goes towards explaining the sharp impact of this work, and supports Milman’s view of the shift from art-world discourse to one more universally significant.

\textsuperscript{183} In a 2005 article, Lurie is quoted as saying of his strategy: ‘When you combine extremes like death, or injury, and all that with sexual aspects, it shocks even today…In other words if you use pin-up girls in order to comment on serious things, it’s confusing’. David Katz, ‘Boris Lurie: Uneasy visions, uncomfortable truths’, \textit{The Villager}, (Vol. 74, No. 42, 2005), p. 1

\textsuperscript{184} Georges Bataille, \textit{Eroticism}, (Marion Boyes, London and New York, 1987), pp. 11-12

\textsuperscript{185} The gulf exists, for instance, between you, listening to me, and me, speaking to you. We are attempting to communicate, but no communication between us can abolish our fundamental difference…It is a deep gulf, and I do not see how it can be done away with. None the less, we can experience its dizziness together’. Bataille, \textit{Eroticism}, p. 12. It is in the experience of the gulf that eroticism lies, allowing the individual to draw close to the continuity of death and yet ultimately to cheat it.

\textsuperscript{186} As a psychoanalyst, she traces the master-slave relationship to experiences in early infancy, when the child attempts to differentiate itself as an individual from those around. J. Benjamin, ‘Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination’, in A. Snitow et al. (eds.), \textit{Powers of Desire}, (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1983), pp. 281-296
submission and control are obviously central to most forms of pornography. Yet she also highlights the idea of acceptable and denied longings key to Railroad Collage. For Lurie is not just questioning ideas of the gaze, but draws on the secret frisson of excitement of the forbidden. It is not just a means to implicate the viewer in the construction of the other, but in its violation of accepted taboos, he interrogates us on the very being of those others.

This idea of transgression is central to Julia Kristeva’s writings on abjection, defined as ‘what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.’ While Bataille sees the process of eroticism as finally controlling the urge for continuity: the violation of the taboo maintains it, Kristeva underlines its threat. For it makes us brutally aware of the fundamental lack on which the self is built. Writing some twenty-five years after Bataille, she draws on Lacanian psychology of the establishment of self to see abjection in terms of the continual pull faced by the child in the differentiation of self from the mother. Through the ‘polluting’ objects of excrement and menstrual blood it becomes linked to the maternal, and to the fear of the generative powers of the archaic mother, an argument that has

187 Particularly interesting is her view that the male way of establishing and protecting individuality dovetails with what is defined as rationality by Western Culture. A view of the patriarchal privilege of the erotic similar to Duncan, but approached from a different angle. Benjamin, ‘Master and Slave’, p. 295

188 In refusing the viewer an exterior moral position Lurie prevents us from putting ourselves outside the possibility of the Holocaust atrocities. I am not suggesting he infers our culpability, but forces us to question what part we might have played.


190 ‘The transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it’. Bataille, Eroticism, p. 63

191 ‘all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded’, Kristeva, Powers of Horror, p. 5

192 The continual pull between needing to show the self as distinct from the mother, and yet continually yearning for the sense of continuity she offers. Kristeva, Powers of Horror, p. 13

193 While menstrual blood is a clear signifier of sexual difference, excrement references the experience of maternal authority in sphincteral training. The idea of proper-clean and improper-dirty is thus mapped out by the mother, and as a precondition of language references the early threat of female authority. Kristeva, Powers of Horror, pp. 71-72 The loathing of defilement that comes with the Symbolic (and male) order is thus ‘protection against the poorly controlled power of mothers’. p. 77
parallels with Klaus Theweleit’s view of the fascist construction of the female body as threat.\footnote{Klaus Theweleit’s discussion of the body is part of an investigation of the fascist psyche, undertaken during the 1970s. Based on psycho-analytical theories of the self-differentiation of the individual, he understands the fascist construction of the male body as the means to keep an illusionary wholeness of body intact against the threat of fragmentation. Thus the acknowledgement of the body as soft, pliable, full of unconscious and uncontrollable desires, is identified with the female. Theweleit, \textit{Male Fantasies, vol. I and II}, (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987 and 1989)}

Lynda Nead interprets the representation of the female body as a regulation of the threat she poses, the threat of the body as fluid, soft, filled with holes.\footnote{Lynda Nead \textit{The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality}, (Routledge, London and New York, 1992), p. 6} Surrounding the pin-up, symbol of male control with corpses ‘the utmost of abjection’\footnote{Kristeva, \textit{Powers of Horror}, p. 4} Lurie undermines this comfortable regulation, impacting directly on the viewer’s certainties. For central to \textit{Railroad Collage} is the transgression of rules, not just the societal taboos of sex and death, but through the Holocaust, the ultimate example of the transgression of humanity itself.\footnote{‘Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility…Abjection…is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady, a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it…’ Kristeva, \textit{Powers of Horror}, p. 4} Thus Reichelt stresses the way the work balances on boundaries: between advertising and information, joke and earnestness, good and evil.\footnote{Reichelt, ‘Boris Lurie: Werke 1946-1998’, p. 393} Occupying the space of boundaries, Lurie disturbs the deeply rooted ideas that govern the conception and shoring up of the viewer’s self. This disturbance of boundaries is also seen in his conception of art. Nead comments that ‘The framed image of a female body, hung on the wall of an art gallery, is shorthand for art more generally; it is an icon of western culture, a symbol of civilisation and accomplishment’.\footnote{Nead, \textit{The Female Nude}, p. 1} Carol Duncan comments more scathingly on the patriarchal privilege of objectifying male sexual fantasy as high culture.\footnote{Although as with Nead, obviously her feminist stance must be acknowledged. Carol Duncan, ‘The MoMA’s hot Mamas’, p. 199} With its ironic displacement of the female nude through the adoption of the mass cultural phenomenon of the pin-up, Lurie subverts the carefully drawn boundaries of culture.\footnote{This is particularly ironic given the reciprocal relationship of the pin-up to art: for pin-ups drew stylistically on modes of high art. Hess, ‘Pin-up and Icon’, pp. 224-225.} Indeed he violates its privilege: for Nead sees the
female nude as a metaphor for creation itself, separating and ordering to produce a rational coherent subject.\textsuperscript{202} In the pin-up, a form ‘drenched with art, but from which the [a]esthetic has been drained off’,\textsuperscript{203} Lurie comments ironically on the cultural sanctification of the female nude and its erotic potential.\textsuperscript{204} In ‘polluting’ the art form with the blatantly erotic, he interrogates art as objectified male fantasy. We are no longer able to accept the pin-up as innocuous pornography: the construction of the female as playful, non-threatening yet sexualised body for male consumption is no longer natural. I am not arguing for a sustained feminist critique, rather that Lurie’s ironic commentary forces the viewer to reassess the assumptions of society and art.\textsuperscript{205}

For Lurie interrogates the art-work itself, his transgression applies equally to the (albeit instable) boundaries between ‘art’ and mass culture: the infamous construction of high and low.\textsuperscript{206} Breaking accepted codes of practice with the insertion of mass-culture into the confines of ‘art’, he points to the instability of the construction, and its intended audience.\textsuperscript{207} Hal Foster comments on the problematic ideological closure too often found in discussions of the meeting of High and Low: through the narratives of sublimation, the vulgar low is refined into the sophisticated high, or the exhausted high is reinvigorated by the carnal low.\textsuperscript{208} Both narratives are refused by Lurie, who

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{202} ‘T]he female nude, then, is not simply one subject among others, one form among many, it is \textit{the} subject, \textit{the} form’; Nead, \textit{The Female Nude} p. 18
\item \textsuperscript{203} Hess, ‘Pin-up and Icon’, p. 225
\item \textsuperscript{204} Nead discusses Kenneth Clark’s \textit{The Nude} in terms of the control of the erotic potential, which he sees as key to the nude’s success. Nead, \textit{The Female Nude}, p. 17 However the pin-up’s mimicking of high art (see note 205) makes this control of the erotic itself unstable.
\item \textsuperscript{205} It is interesting to note that Nead sees the regulation of the female body across culture – debates on what constitutes pornography or art – as a form of social control. Nead, \textit{The Female Nude}, p. 84
\item \textsuperscript{206} Lurie himself commented that ‘The idea that we expressed was to open up limitations of art. Aesthetic art limits itself to areas that should be reworked and other areas that should not be touched. We were against it and wanted to incorporate all things, even down to the dirt on the sidewalk. Include, not exclude. Even personal feelings that might not be appropriate in polite society.’ Alan Murdock, ‘Interview with Lurie’, (March, 1999), www.no-art.info
\item \textsuperscript{207} This extends to the way it was shown, the movement largely showing in its own spaces. ‘We did our own shows regardless [of the established galleries]. There were a lot of cooperative galleries for artists to show or to get the work out. There was a very big audience, a high attendance in these small galleries, though not a lot of sales of work.’ Murdock, ‘Interview with Lurie’
\item \textsuperscript{208} Hal Foster, ‘Armor Fou’, \textit{October}, (Spring 1991), pp. 96-97
\end{itemize}
concentrates instead on the tension of the juxtaposition. For the boundaries are blurred by the pin-up's place alongside the concentration camp imagery: to debate the merits of the pornography of the nude seems inappropriate when confronted with a heap of bodies. Yet at the same time, it is demanded. Lurie creates a multi-faceted web of tensions that play on the dichotomies of the image. Tensions of 'art', the iconic witness photograph of the Holocaust, and the pornographic pin-up compound the tensions between the images. It is not just the visual contrast but the associations called-up: the serious juxtaposed with the playful, the horrific with the tantalising.

Lurie's interrogation of the traditions of art must be situated more specifically in the context of Abstract Expressionism. It is interesting that the critic Thomas Hess, associated with the Abstract Expressionists, but supportive of NO! recognised a further element of critique in *Railroad Collage*: of de Kooning's use of the pin-up. Hess argues *Woman I* (fig. 5) is a powerful criticism

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209 Foster comments on the work of Max Ernst and Hans Bellmer that 'though they may appear to sublimate low into high, neither is involved in a desexualisation. On the contrary, desublimation is the order of the day: a psychic regression...Posed against bourgeois identity, they are also posed against Oedipal subjectivity...' Foster, 'Armor Fou', p. 96. Written to coincide with and as criticism of the 1990 MoMA show 'High/Low', the article explores the Fascist tendencies of their work in their constructions of the body, within the accepted notion of fascism as antitype to modernism. This view of their work in terms of desublimation rests on their use of the sexualised body, relying on the tensions created to complicate the resolution of the high/low dichotomy, which I argue applies equally to Lurie.

210 Lurie's interest in the constructs of high and low is reflected in his use of material. For while by the 1960s collage was the well-known prerogative of the avant-gardist, NO!art went much further, most notably in the 1964 'NO!Sculpture Show/Shit Show', where the sculptures were made of excrement.

211 Lurie wrote in 1970 that: 'We opposed the mute inefficient chest-beating of the Abstract Expressionists, the mystifications of their [a]esthetic, their refusal to be open and concrete, "to name names", the covering of their strong emotions in effect with [a]esthetic sophistries – a fear to confront truth in its totality', 'Shit No!', (1970), *NO! pin-ups, excrement*, p. 58

212 Hess is listed as an associate in a footnote to the interview 'Boris Lurie – Not Mince Matters', interview with Boris Lurie by Megakles Rogakos and Janos Gat, Manhattan September 23, 2003. www.no-art.info, 23rd March 2005, writing the preface for the Italian show the Galleria Schwarz in 1962. Milman stresses that although a critic for *Art News*, his authorial voice is more informed by Beat rhetoric than that of the art critic. Milman, 'Aesthetic of Doom', p. 4

213 Hess' essay 'Pin-up and Icon', forms part of a book tracking woman as sex object from the eighteenth to twentieth century. He claims de Kooning was the first to introduce the pin-up into 'high' art. Hess, p. 228
of the contemporary situation of American women as reflected in the pin-up. Yet de Kooning’s images have proved controversial. Sharing Railroad Collage’s ambiguous approach to the female body, there is a striking difference in its sublimation of the ‘low’. So the cigarette advertisement mouth is subsumed in the gestural extravagance of de Kooning’s style, overwhelmed by the iconic mass of the figure, the swathes of paint, the proliferation of brushwork, an emphasis on the artist Lurie refuses. His only use of paint, the four repeated marks in the left corner, sits uncomfortably within the collage: it is the photographs that hold the eye, and not the artist’s mark. The viewer cannot escape the content of the work by concentrating on the aesthetic components.

Different too is his insistent referencing of the external world. While Woman I marked a return to the figurative in de Kooning’s oeuvre, it was much criticised by his Abstract Expressionist peers, renowned for their apolitical investigation of the dematerial. Lurie’s combative approach to a suppressed subject offers an alternative approach as much to the concept of art as to its practice.

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214 Hess claims de Kooning uses the pin-up as symbolic of the debasement of women: their inferior social status, their exploitation as sex objects and yet simultaneous elevation to the figure of the goddess-doll. Hess, ‘Pin-up and Icon’, p. 230.

215 Hess acknowledges de Kooning’s lack of explicit support for the feminist movement, and the ambiguity of the imagery, but still argues them as social criticism. Hess, ‘Pin-up and Icon’, p. 233. An alternative view is given by Duncan, writing almost twenty years later. Describing Woman I as ‘a big, bad mama – vulgar, sexual and dangerous’, she argues that her place at the entrance to the Abstract Expressionist room in MoMA ritualises the spiritual ordeal of the artist-hero. Woman I’s powerful affront is thus just another forum for male domination and control. ‘The MoMA’s Hot Mamas’, p. 199. David Cateforis explores critical responses over the years, from the immediate formalist views to the feminist. Willem de Kooning’s “Women” of the 1950s: A Critical History of their Reception and Interpretation, (PhD Thesis, Stanford University, 1991).

216 Hess even argues it should be considered within the non-figurative tradition, pointing to de Kooning’s claims that using the female body as opposed to complete abstraction allowed him greater freedom to develop the importance of paint. Hess, ‘Pin-up and Icon’, pp. 228-229.


218 It is interesting to read Lurie’s comment in 1999 that ‘What people called un-aesthetic was the content that came out, because you can have immediacy in Abstract Expressionism. What came out with this [NO!art’s] immediacy is what
David Cateforis stresses the institutional drive to interpret de Kooning’s use of the advertisement as pre-emptive of Pop.\textsuperscript{219} Lurie’s interest in the mass media products of a consumer society was certainly close to the Pop aesthetic; NO!art is even used as the counterpart to Pop’s celebration of American consumer culture.\textsuperscript{220} However Milman stresses they should be seen as ‘parallel phenomena’.\textsuperscript{221} Both movements draw on similar sources, blurring boundaries between high and mass culture. Both also have an ambiguous relationship with consumer culture: less biting than NO!’s nihilistic criticism of society and the art world, Pop is not utterly complicit.\textsuperscript{222} For Milman, it is when Pop became Abstract Expressionism’s successor in the art world that NO! differentiated itself so sharply.\textsuperscript{223} While most commentators stress the marginalisation of NO! she situates this amidst a wider marginalisation of Happenings of the period,\textsuperscript{224} stressing they were ‘very real players’ in the New York art scene.\textsuperscript{225} Thus she emphasises the institutional construction of Pop

people objected to. And it was not merely objectification to the work, it was a different approach. People didn't see where it fits into the edifice of art.’ Murdock, ‘Interview with Lurie’

\textsuperscript{219} These were part of attempts to situate the Abstract Expressionists within the History of Modern Art. Cateforis, \textit{Willem de Kooning’s “Women” of the 1950s}, p. 20

\textsuperscript{220} In a key early text on \textit{Pop Art}, published in 1966, Lucy Lippard commented that ‘A second non-Pop vein, which specialises in social protest, should be mentioned, if only to dispel confusion by placing it properly outside Pop art…these Assemblage or ‘Doom’ artists are the political satirists Pop are not. They are all that Pop is not, and proclaimed themselves ‘anti-Pop’ in 1964’. Lippard cited in Milman, ‘Aesthetic of Doom’, p. 8

\textsuperscript{221} Milman, ‘Response 1 to David Katz’, March 1 2005, www.no-art.info

\textsuperscript{222} Andy Warhol’s series of disaster pictures: \textit{Car Crash}, \textit{Plane Crash}, \textit{Suicide}, \textit{Tunafish Disaster} and \textit{Electric Chair}, begun in 1962.

\textsuperscript{223} Milman, ‘Aesthetic of Doom’, p. 9 Yet at the same time a distinct difference between the two ‘movements’ must be acknowledged. Writing in 1970 Lil Picard commented that ‘Dirt is uncomfortable in life and in art and that’s the reason you liked, if you are honest enough to admit it, clean Campbell soupcans, clean Marilyn Monroes, clean Brillo boxes, that Mr. Clean Warhol, when he appeared on the dirty Doom-No & Protest – Sky.’ Lil Picard, ‘Yes and No Thoughts, Process of a Contribution to the Issues of the Past’, (1970), \textit{NO! pin-ups, excrement}, p. 50. Picard is described by Lurie in ‘About the Authors’ as ‘Artist, happening organizer and art critic reporting to the German press from New York, veteran of the post World War I Berlin and post World War II New York art scenes’, p. 108

\textsuperscript{224} Milman, ‘Response 1 to Katz’

\textsuperscript{225} Milman, ‘Response 2 to Katz’, (March 5\textsuperscript{th} 2005), www.no-art.info. Clayton Patterson’s heated response to Milman’s letter defends Katz’s description of the 1960s art world as based on Lurie’s own conversations about it. Patterson also criticises Milman’s contextualisation of Lurie’s work in terms of the art scene which he sees as developed to the point of overlooking the importance of the subject of his work. Patterson, ‘Response One’, (March 3\textsuperscript{rd} 2005)
over Neo-Dada, as cool, ironic and non-confrontational. It is here that NO! refused alignment with Pop.

So the cultural ancestry of political and social protest of Dada becomes important, key to the institutional suppression of NO! There are certainly strong parallels: their anti-aesthetic criticism of the institutions and values of both art and society, growing particularly from disillusionment with war. Yet it is not only institutional drive that affects this, the extent to which it has become an issue within internal feuds over the identity of the movement must also be acknowledged. The question of an artistic heritage is thus implicated in the practice and values of the art world. In 1961 Lurie himself stressed that any such parallels were unimportant ‘These labels are neither true nor important in today’s context’. Milman stresses the problems of categorical terms, criticising Kathy Rosenbloom’s interview with Lurie in the early 1970s from which NO! emerged as the ‘avant-garde of the counterculture’, which she sees as a short-sighted hybridisation of the avant-

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226 Key was the 1962 MoMA symposium on Pop art, which refused the term Neo-Dada in favour of Pop, because of the overtones of political and social engagement. Milman, ‘Aesthetic of Doom,’ pp. 7-8

227 Lurie himself, wrote in 1970 ‘NO! art is anti Pop-art: (Pop-art is reactionary - it celebrates the glories of consumer society, and it mocks only at what the lower classes consume - the can of soup, the cheap shirt. Pop-art is chauvinistic. It sabotages and detracts from a social art for all).’ ‘Statement for the Exhibition “Art and Politics”’, (1970), NO! pin-ups, excrement, p.89

228 Rumold links Lurie’s work to the self-conscious strategy of political criticism of George Grosz. Rumold, ‘No! Art and the Dialectic of Enlightenment’, p. 6

229 For as referenced in the disagreement between Patterson and Milman in note 225, the association of Dada within ‘art history’ has proved problematic. This problem can be seen earlier. In 1970 Lurie commented that what had begun with Dada, was beginning to reach completion, suggesting his own place within this tradition. ‘Shit NO!’ (1970), p. 57, replacing his earlier statement in 1960 on the importance of not reading them in terms of labels, ‘Les Lions Show Introduction’ , (1960), p. 39 In 1999, when asked about Milman’s link of NO! with Dada, Lurie replied that ‘If we used any Dada means it was not towards a playful experimenting, which Dada did. It was meant and turned out in personal expression and social criticism.’ Murdock, Interview. It is interesting that included in NO!art: pin-ups, excrement, protest, jew-art is Arturo Schwarz’s 1970 outline for a projected text, which traces NO!’s heritage from the Social Realists of the ‘30s, and the Surrealists of ‘40s, rather than Dada, p. 67

230 ‘When viewing this show, please avoid applying aesthetic labels; do not call us realists, neo-dadaists, surrealists. These labels are neither true nor important in today’s context…In a time of wars and extermination, aesthetic exercises and decorative patterns are not enough’. Boris Lurie, ‘Involvement Show Statement’, (1961) in NO! pin-ups, excrement, p. 39
gardes’ utopian mission with the revolutionary idealism of the late 1960s.\textsuperscript{231} This is not just the problematic concept of the ‘avant-garde’;\textsuperscript{232} nor of ‘hybridisation’.\textsuperscript{233} Rather it acknowledges the very different context and intents.\textsuperscript{234} For post-war the failure of the utopian avant-gardes was only too clear. There was widespread disillusionment with politically motivated art, while Existentialism stressed the irrelevance of anything outside personal choice and responsibility.\textsuperscript{235} The pre-war avant-garde firmly believed in the possibility of art to achieve change in society. They had seen the values of the past overturned in the slaughter of the First World War, and wanted to mould the direction in which the world moved.\textsuperscript{236} While \textit{Railroad Collage} and NO! must be situated in terms

\textsuperscript{231} Milman, ‘Aesthetic of Doom’, p. 20

\textsuperscript{232} The use of the term ‘avant-garde’ encompasses a wide variety of artists from the nineteenth century on. Understood very broadly in terms of radical change and innovation, the extent of social and political engagement varies widely. Susan Suleiman suggests that ‘the hallmark of an avant-garde practice or project – or dream – is the attempt to effect radical change and innovation both in the symbolic field (including what has been called the aesthetic realm) and in the social and political field of everyday life’, Suleiman, \textit{Suversive Intent: Gender Politics and the Avant-Garde}, (Harvard University Press, 1990), p. xv. However Peter Bürger points to its support of the traditional mystification of art as ‘autonomous’, Bürger, \textit{Theory of the Avant-Garde}, (Cambridge. Mass., 1968), p. 39. There is also the extent to which the meaning of a practice changes over time. Lurie himself saw Dada curbed by its deployment in the art world. ““Dada” was only “outside”, if at all, for a very short time: the Museum of Modern Art in New York promoted it from the very inception of the museum (together with surrealism), so I doubt that it could have constituted a serious threat to the status-quo.’ Interview with Max Liljefors, ‘Boris Lurie and NO!art’, \textit{Heterogénesis}, 44, (July 2003), www.heterogenesis.com.

\textsuperscript{233} Hans Belting commented on the problem of words such as hybridisation. Not just on the difficulty of establishing what exactly it means, but the way that such words have become a code in contemporary art discourse. It is the problem of merging two different and anachronistic sets of periods and ideas that is relevant here. Lecture given by Belting, Courtauld Institute of Art, 11\textsuperscript{th} May, 2005

\textsuperscript{234} Here I would point to Lil Picard, writing in 1970: ‘No, Lil, - I think you lie to yourself, you are trying to convince yourself that Boris Lurie and Sam Goodman, judged historically today, are a post World War II edition of an European, especially German, art trend of post World War I. I don’t think one can judge the March Tenth Street art that way. I think, retrospectively judged the ideas of these artist were a rebellion, but not so much an “artistic” rebellion as a personal and political one’. ‘Yes and No Thoughts’, p. 49

\textsuperscript{235} Amishai-Maisels, \textit{Depiction and Interpretation}, pp. 70-73 Dore Ashton stresses that the 1950s and ‘60s differed from both later protest movements, and the pre-war avant-garde because there was no belief in the possibility of art arousing vital change. Ashton, ‘Merde, alors!’ (1969), \textit{NO! pin-ups, excrement}, p. 56

\textsuperscript{236} In contrast to this Ashton commented of NO! that ‘One betrayal had followed another, and what had once been zestfully suggested – that art was a perpetual revolution – seemed to them a paltry idea in the face of Korea, Algeria, McCarthy and the struggle in the South’. ‘Merde, alors!’ , p. 54
of the complex subversive tradition of the avant-garde, the differences of context are vital. For NO! sat uneasily within its contemporary society, pre-dating the wave of protests of 1968 and beyond, consciously raising the non-discussed issues of society. Key to its self-definition is the specificity of the group and their highly individual voice of protest. Inevitably it drew on the past, but its perceived distinction from the art world and its strategies was central to the message of NO!

Conclusion:

‘It is extremely difficult to produce a kind of art that histories will pass over in silence, that the art magazines will dismiss, that will embarrass collectors and be offensive to most other artists’.238

In conclusion I would stress just how problematic is Railroad Collage. While I have explored some of the complexity of issues at work, what is inescapable is the extent to which the viewer is appalled. It is no mere titillating eroticism, but equally its impact should not be over-sanitised. It relies on a dark and baffling interlocution of themes.

In my introduction I raised general questions on the representation of the Holocaust, before setting out my intent to look at Lurie in terms of the inappropriateness of his image. What has become clear is the complexity of this inappropriateness, drawing on society and the viewer’s expectations of both art and the survivor; tapping into debates on photography, and women; interrogating the very constructs of self, and the illusions of culture and the art world. Lurie problematises the representation of the Holocaust, but equally, disturbs the viewer’s gaze. Clayton Patterson criticised Milman’s attention to the wider context of Lurie’s work as diverting attention from its subject and message.239 Yet what is clear is that Lurie intended the work not just as commentary on the Holocaust, but a critique of society and the art world, their values and practice.

237 ‘The origins of NO!art sprout from the Jewish experience, struck root in the world’s largest Jewish community New York, a product of armies, concentration camps, Lumpenproletariat artists’. Lurie, ‘Preface’, NO!pin-ups, excrement, p. 13

238 Brian O’Doherty, ‘Introduction’, NO! pin-ups, excrement, p. 17

239 Patterson, Response to Milman, (March 3rd 2005), www.no-art.info
Central to Lurie’s approach is shock and the overthrow of boundaries. While this can be linked to the long-standing practice of the avant-garde, it is also key to the Holocaust as subject matter. Many would argue that the very extremity of the events should preclude such representation, but there is also a prevalent fear that we become numb to what happened. It is certainly true that mere shock is not necessarily helpful. But *Railroad Collage* is not just a spectacle of shock. It forces an interrogation of basic ideas and assumptions, working to undermine the defensive mechanisms occasioned by the subject matter.

Jacqueline Rose traces Kristeva’s discussion of the use of language by the avant-garde as highlighting a critical problem: that shock, while battering against values, does not necessarily mean change.\(^\text{240}\) In 1962 Lurie wrote ‘You ask if artists should be responsible world citizens. I definitely think they should’, pointing to a belief that art should interact responsibly with world events.\(^\text{241}\) It is hard to argue convincingly that the question of the value of Holocaust representation lies in the artist’s intent. But Lurie’s work, however reliant on, goes beyond mere shock, educating the viewer by making them think. While it uses problematic strategies: the secret thrill of pornography and violence, a potential objectifying and voyeuristic gaze, it is the ambiguity of the work that finally triumphs. For the more the viewer looks, the more equivocal *Railroad Collage* appears. It breaks, without re-forming, values and boundaries, poses rather than answers the multifaceted questions on representing the Holocaust, going beyond a mere disruption of language.

Yet these shock tactics must be contextualised within the self-conscious artistic strategy of ‘NO!’ Thus I would turn to two strikingly different photographs taken of Lurie in his studio, one almost contemporary to the *Railroad Collage*, from 1962, (fig. 6), the other from 1977, (fig. 7).\(^\text{242}\) In the first, the artist is perched in shirtsleeves on the top of a stepladder against a retreating succession of attic skylights. Confidently surveying his domain, he is apparently unaware of the camera, which looks admiringly up, a scene clearly reminiscent of the heroic Abstract Expressionist artist.

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\(^{240}\) Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, p. 147 The importance lies not in the disruption of language per se, but in articulating the psychic processes which language usually glosses over.


\(^{242}\) While the exact circumstances in which they were taken are unknown they are in the book that Lurie authored together with Seymour Krim, and which by his own admission, he spent 29 years trying to have published. Lurie, ‘Preface’, *NO! pin-ups, excrement*, p. 13
second ironically alludes to the self-moulding of the artistic persona. The scene is obviously staged. The artist, in a pork pie hat (a nod to Joseph Beuys’ trade-mark bowler?) and leather jacket, is stooping, bowed under the weight of a large sack, marked with the infamous symbol of the yellow star of David. This clearly alludes to the cast out figure of ‘the Jew’, it firmly underlines his status as an alternative artist, and the unorthodox issues with which he works. The detritus in the background, even the site of the studio – Sixth Street, emphasises his ‘alternative’ credentials. It is an ironic commentary on ‘the artist in his studio’, explicitly drawing on and yet subverting the way such a persona is created.

I will end with a quote from Primo Levi. As the inmates awaited the arrival of the Russian soldiers, inhabiting a camp abandoned by the Germans and all order, he debates what they should do with a ‘shameful wreck of skin and bones’, the fellow-prisoner who had fallen dead from his bunk in the middle of the night. He comes to the conclusion that ‘The living are more demanding; the dead can wait’, a sentiment which might be said to underpin Railroad Collage. For while Lurie refuses to allow the Holocaust to be ignored, he insists lessons be learnt for his (and the viewer’s) own time. Yet it is no glib call for a future Utopia but points to how embarrassingly little we have learnt, to the intricacy and problem of the Holocaust both within and outside representation.

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243 We think of Lurie’s stress on the importance of the movement’s Jewish identity, ‘Preface’, p. 13
244 Flanzbaums essay ‘The Imaginary Jew and the American Poet’, which charts the way post-war writers took on the idea of the identity of the Jew as part of the anti-bourgeois, anti-establishment creative persona is particularly interesting in this context. The Americanisation of the Holocaust, pp. 18-32
245 Lurie himself commented ‘What else should and can an artist who has something to say do but “play the exhibition circuit”?’ ‘Letter to Mr. Hess’, p. 65
246 Primo Levi, If this is a Man, (Abacus, London, 2005), p. 178
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