

# Holographic Engagement with the Holocaust: Memory, Space and Material Culture in Vienna

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*The relative emptiness of the museum functions as a cue to what is not there; the mingling of time frames breaks down conventional notions of historical periods; the use of highly contemporary media and design point more toward the future than the past.*

– Reesa Greenberg<sup>1</sup>

How is memory shaped differently in a post-Holocaust Jewish museum? According to the Vienna Jewish Museum's chief curator, Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek, "The turn to the old classical museum tradition is not possible after Auschwitz."<sup>2</sup> Both the Jewish Museum in Vienna and Rachel Whiteread's nearby Holocaust memorial acknowledge the crucial relationship between memory and negative space. I would like to address the political and social reactions to their construction of memory. How do the museum and the memorial landscape reflect the specific history of Vienna? In his essay "Memory and Monument," James Young says "The usual aim in any nation's monuments ... is not solely to displace memory or to remake it in its own image: it is to invite the collaboration of the community in the acts of remembrance."<sup>3</sup> Through protest, debate and memorial dialogue, a consciousness is established. This essay will examine how Vienna's Jewish Museum and Holocaust memorial by Whiteread employ unconventional approaches to motivate atypical and active processes of visitor engagement as part of their memorialization of the Holocaust.

Since its renovation in 1996, Vienna's Jewish Museum has questioned the boundaries of Holocaust representation and the audience's subsequent placement in the memorial act. The Holocaust is included in all of the museum's permanent exhibits on its four floors. The viewing experience is multi-temporal and multidimensional: the rendering of time is constantly shifting and past and present come together. The museum has hosted many fascinating temporary exhibits such as *The History of Jewish Sports and Music and Poetry: Selected Items from the Manuscript Collection of Stefan Zweig and Martin Bodmer*, but what has come to be of crucial interest to scholars, the Viennese Jewish community and Austrian state officials alike are the permanent "anti-exhibits."

The first anti-exhibit is housed as part of the second floor permanent display. A room within a room contains "twenty one free-standing transmission hologram plates conveying a synoptic history of the Jews in Vienna."<sup>4</sup> The holographic representation consciously distracts from the narrative scope. For example, dealing with the theme of expulsion involves "juxtaposing a 17<sup>th</sup> century Viennese Torah curtain with a film box of Billy Wilder's movie, *Some Like it Hot*. The former item signifies the expulsion of Vienna's Jews in 1670, while the latter involves Austrian Jewish emigration in the wake of the Nazi rise to power."<sup>5</sup> The holographic approach constructs the partiality of history. Depending on the visitor's physical viewpoint, objects appear and then disappear again, elusive, like the past. As the viewer becomes part of the display, seen by others from outside the glass walls or mirrored by the panels near the holograms inside the chamber, past and present merge. History, constantly changing, is rendered from the diverse perspectives of those who choose to provide an interpretation. The Vienna Jewish Museum was aware of this effect and

sought to extend the boundaries beyond projecting an historical interpretation onto an object. According to Curator Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek, "The medium of the transmission hologram emphasizes history's withdrawal. Furthermore, it raises doubts about the absolute expressive value of the historical item and the concept of 'true historical reconstruction.'"<sup>6</sup>

Known by the title "A Viewable Storage Area," the museum's second anti-exhibit is a mind-boggling arrangement of thousands of ritual Judaica objects. Individual authenticity is overcome by the mass display. The collection is arranged according to object type ranging from Torah crowns to Kiddush cups. The sheer abundance of the objects represents the present-day void of a once flourishing community. Overwhelming presence emphasizes absence, and the identity of certain objects as stolen items invokes the 1938 pogrom. According to Reesa Greenberg, "Viewers are simultaneously invited in to see what the museum has amassed and are intruders in a mausoleum dedicated to the former owner of what is on display."<sup>7</sup> The purpose of the display is thus not celebratory or educational, rather a way to substantiate the lives lost.

I would argue that the point of the anti-exhibits is not to produce an aura of fascination such as a conventional artifact display would convey through a proposed authentic rendering of a collection. These anti-exhibits reflect a central goal of the museum, the dynamic active engagement of remembrance. Heimann-Jelinek replied in an interview that "Rather than being imagined as a 'school' where one would go to 'obtain passive information,' the exhibits are designed to foster an active ongoing process of critical reflection. The refusal of these anti-exhibits to issue 'ready answers' is thus part of a larger strategy that frustrates the viewer's expectation for authoritative narratives."<sup>8</sup>

In order to grasp how the Jewish Museum and its anti-exhibits have critically engaged their audience, the obvious approach would be to analyze reactions of the viewers themselves. Public support of the museum as an institution and support for its displays are inevitably two different issues. Of his interactions with Museum visitors, anthropologist Matti Bunzl notes:

For Adam, for example, Vienna's Jewish Museum contributed more than any other institution to the 'dismantling of stereotypes', while Hans went even farther in his analysis, crediting it with the unprecedented 'normalization' of Jewishness on account of its adoption by a 'state run and public establishment.'<sup>9</sup>

But many reactions to the anti-exhibits are critical and often skeptical. The new displays have been described as "cold and analytical," and one visitor said, "This museum is lacking a soul."<sup>10</sup> Others longed for a celebratory representation of Vienna's Austrian Jewish cultural icons such as Sigmund Freud. And an American visitor found the memory of the Holocaust portrayed in Vienna to be inferior to that evoked by the Holocaust Museum in the United States.<sup>11</sup>

Do museum audiences want their perceptions of the past to be challenged or affirmed? In the case of Austria, I would argue that a museum embedded in contemporary discourse and debate could uphold a critical awareness of the past in the present, through endeavors such as the Jewish Museum's anti-exhibits, as opposed to the limited ideological and static representation of a forgetful monument or a traditionally authoritative museum. A museum's value to a community is not only based on the collection it accumulates, preserves and interprets. Susan Crane clarifies this notion in the following words: "Museums are more than cultural institutions and showplaces of accumulated objects: they are the sites of interaction between personal and collective identities between memory and

history, between information and knowledge production."<sup>12</sup> The Jewish Museum's anti-exhibits actively insist upon a critical engagement with the past.

Just as the presentation of the Holocaust in the Jewish museum is resonant and pervasive, a similarly powerful sense is evoked by Vienna's first Holocaust memorial to Austria's 65,000 Jewish victims. Created by Rachel Whiteread and unveiled in 2000, the memorial sits in a residential square known as Vienna's Judenplatz. It lies to one side of the square, directly above the archeological site of a medieval synagogue, near the Jewish Museum.<sup>13</sup> The monument resembles an inside out library. Incisions in the concrete represent rows and rows of books "forever lost, forgotten or never written in the first place".<sup>14</sup> There is a set of closed doors without knobs, presumably leading to a void or alternately, preventing egress. Confronting the Austrian state's complicity in the Holocaust, names of the concentration camps where Austrian Jews were killed are listed on the platform supporting the monument.

The Whiteread memorial employs negative space and void as means to evoke emotions. It refuses to establish boundaries between monument and audience, but rather engages the audience by assigning the task of interior visualization. In an interview, Whiteread spoke of her principal outlook on a memorial: "I don't thinking looking at a memorial should be easy. You know it's about looking; it's [also] about challenging; it's [also] about thinking. Unless it does that, it doesn't work."<sup>15</sup>

The holographic engagement of the Jewish Museum's anti-exhibits and the Whiteread memorial demonstrate that experiential truth is as valid as the conventional approach of authoritative museum narration. In the contemporary context of Austrian history, the museum and the Whiteread memorial are sites of inclusive engagement with their audience. They also indicate an active reversal of postwar Austrian hegemonic construction of the Jewish community as an invisible entity. Rather than subordinating the Austrian-Jewish experience through a dominant narration of national suffering, they acknowledge and construct Jews as the principal victims of Nazism. This reflects James Young's call for a critical approach to memorials acknowledging that "memorialization occurs not merely within these icons, but between the events and icons, and then again between icons and ourselves."<sup>16</sup> Thus it is my belief that the Whiteread memorial and the anti-exhibits of the Jewish Museum turn to us to manifest remembrance in the reflective space within ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Reesa Greenberg, "The Jewish Museum, Vienna: A Holographic Paradigm for History and the Holocaust," in *Image and Remembrance: Representation and the Holocaust*, Shelley Hornstein and Florence Jacobowitz, eds., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003, p. 248.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>3</sup> James Young, "Memory and Monument," in *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*, Geoffrey Hartman, ed., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986, p. 105.

<sup>4</sup> Greenberg, p. 243.

<sup>5</sup> Matti Bunzl, "Of Holograms and Storage Areas: Modernity and Postmodernity at Vienna's Jewish Museum," *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 18, issue 4, November 2003, p. 438.

<sup>6</sup> Greenberg, p. 243.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>8</sup> Bunzl, "Of Holograms and Storage Areas..." p. 441.

<sup>9</sup> Matti Bunzl, *Symptoms of Modernity: Jews and Queers in Late Twentieth-Century Vienna*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, p. 181.

<sup>10</sup> Bunzl, "Of Holograms and Storage Areas..." p. 444.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 445.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Crane, ed., *Museums and Memory*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 12.

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<sup>13</sup> Beneath the Vienna memorial lie the remains of a synagogue where in 1421 a Vienna pogrom led a group of Jews to lock themselves into the synagogue, and then set it alight. The placement of the Whiteread memorial within the square ties it to medieval, modern, and contemporary issues.

<sup>14</sup> Bunzl, *Symptoms of Modernity*, p. 220.

<sup>15</sup> Craig Houser, "If Walls Could Talk: An Interview with Rachel Whiteread," in *Rachel Whiteread: Transient Spaces*, Berlin: Deutsche Guggenheim, 2001, p. 61.

<sup>16</sup> Young, p. 112.