Photographic Plates of Memory: 
Marian Kołodziej’s Return to the Labyrinth 

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Abstract

The author discusses the artist’s need to create work representative of his memories of five years in concentration camps in Poland and Germany during the Second World War. Through the poetry and prose of Polish poets Zbigniew Herbert and Adam Zagajewski she explores the artist’s rehabilitative journey to create depictions of his traumatic memories, which began at age seventy-two after a major stroke. Did the artist in fact create an aesthetic in representing the violence and death of the camps? She also analyzes the artist’s late work through an ethical framework, suggesting that in this case the depiction of traumatic memories is art that issues its viewers an ethical mandate to contemplate both the detrimental and potentially rehabilitative effects of rendering violent historical events.

Keywords: trauma, testimony, memory, representations of Holocaust, Polish history after WWII.

Two Selves Remember

In the summer of 2014 I am in Poland on a fellowship to study Jewish and Polish history by visiting sites of memorialization and culture. Our guides through Poland have introduced the fellows to a rich history that includes Jewish and Catholic experiences of the Second World War. Our guide has told us relatively little about Marian Kołodziej whose work we are about to see. However, he has sent us a link to a website where we can view some of the artist’s drawings prior to our viewing. I click on the link and strange, otherworldly drawings appear. They are etched in black on white, with an emphasis on light and shadow. The lines are precise with fine detail, and at the same time they convey an urgent and frenetic energy. The lines themselves produce a structure, an insistent labyrinth that will urge me into the stories these pictures tell. I see the figures of two men together: the young prisoner and the aging man—an artist who has survived the camps. These two are entwined in memory, burdened by a private and collective historical past, a grossly traumatic past, which informs the personal present. As I read Kołodziej’s story, this layering of selves startles and compels me. What secrets did this artist harbor inside? How did he see the experience of the camps, the annihilation of those...
around him, and the Jewish genocide? He saw much and, after he escaped, did not speak of it. Some fifty years later, his memories arose.

In the small Polish town of Harmęże, just a few kilometers from what had been Auschwitz, Marian Kołodziej worked as a forced laborer under German command. He was born in 1921, just as Poland regained its independence, and grew up outside Ostrów, a place of resistance during the partition periods of Poland and through the First and Second World Wars. He became involved in resistance activities when he was seventeen. He wanted to capture and keep his naïve belief in resistance and its loss in his drawings (Labyrinth). A Polish priest had encouraged him to join the Polish resistance. After only a few weeks he was arrested, deported to Kraków, and initially imprisoned in Montelupich, an interrogation and detention facility used by the Gestapo. Later he was transferred to a prison in Tarnów.

In June 1940 he was on the first transport to Oświęcim, Poland—to [KL] Auschwitz. For over five years he was imprisoned in Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Groß–Rosen, and, for the last five months of the war, Mauthausen. While most Jewish prisoners survived only for a few weeks, or less frequently a few months, Kołodziej was imprisoned and labored in the camps for five years; the fact that he was a Catholic political Polish prisoner helped him survive. And yet, despite it all, continued to assist the resistance movement from inside the camps. When his subversive activities were discovered at the sub-camp of Blechhammer, he received the death sentence; he was transferred to Auschwitz once again and imprisoned for a time in Block 11.

After the war, he attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków to study in the faculty of painting. He graduated with a specialization in scenography and took a job as a set designer in the avant-garde “Wybrzeże” (Coast) Theatre in Gdańsk, the city where the Solidarity movement took root with shipyard strikes in the 1980s. He also collaborated with other theaters in the country and abroad, while working in thirty feature films. In the painting, drawing, and sculpture he produced, he never returned to his experiences of the camps (Auschwitz-Birkenau). Yet, he acknowledged that the camp experience remained within him, albeit repressed:

I was in Auschwitz. I was actually building Auschwitz, because I was brought there in the first transport. The truth is that I didn’t talk about Auschwitz for almost fifty years. But for all that time Auschwitz was present in everything I did. Not literally, though. My theatrical work could be regarded as a protest against what I experienced there. So Auschwitz has always been present—but as its negation. I did not trust literalism. The concentration camp cannot be told about literally. (Labyrinth)

**Entering the Labyrinth**

In the basement of the Franciscan church and monastery Saint Maximilian Kolbe Centre in Harmęże, the artist’s drawings based on memories of internment in the camps
have been arranged in a display to fit his concept of memory as a labyrinth.¹ He conceptualized the permanent installation of his work as photographic plates of memory which invite the viewer to reflect on the ways in which art relates to the act of remembering. Commenting on the exhibit, he explains: “This is not an exhibition, nor art. These are not pictures. These are words locked in drawings… . I propose a journey by way of this labyrinth marked by the experience of the fabric of death… . It is a rendering of honor to all those who have vanished in ashes” (Labyrinth). The visitor descends into a mnemonic world that depicts, with disturbing intimacy, the violence, abuse, illness, and terror of the camps. This is a world of the dead, in the midst of dying. Some of these faces are no longer human; having already left the sentient body, they are leaving again, making a further descent (in some renderings an ascent) into another dimension. The process of dying comes from all directions, at every angle: the sinking body, the rising body, the mind and spirit leaving the body.

In witnessing the artist’s interior world, I have the sense that he remains astounded by the sheer volume of bodies and souls that have been forced into the compressed violence of this space, this “concentrationary universe.” ² In one drawing, men sing in a choir with eyes of terror, hollow eyes emptied of feeling, beyond fear. In another drawing, a child: mouth open, screaming but without a sound, eyes crying but dry. In encountering these “words locked in drawings” that unfurl in the labyrinth before me, I experience shock. I have dealt in words, in texts. But here is acute visual detail, largely metaphorical but simultaneously intensely physical, exact in its anatomical depiction of emotion, pain, and terror. It is almost too much to absorb.

Drawings extend entire walls, run the length of passageways, and arch across the ceilings of the subterranean rooms. Yellow bulbs cast shadows along the passages and onto ceilings. In a central room, stacks of small rocks have been arranged at the base of several drawings. I am reminded both of Jewish memorial sites, where rocks are totems to the dead, and of the slave labor of prisoners made to carry and stack heavy objects under extreme physical and mental conditions. Rough wooden ladders run between ceiling and floor. Bunks have been designed to recall the filthy, crowded barracks of Auschwitz-Birkenau. These materials assault the viewer and pull her deeper into this underground experience.

Kołodziej spent his career as set and costume designer. He was known in Poland for avant-garde, innovative set designs. This explains why these rooms in Harmęże resemble a stage set which the artist arranges to represent a brain with its cerebral cortex and various neural passageways and inner chambers. Having entered, I realize that I’m asked to capitulate to the devouring nature of the artist’s consciousness. It is with these terrors

¹ Marian Kołodziej first exhibited his drawings of imprisonment in April 1995 at the Holy Trinity Church in Gdańsk, and then in 1996 in Essen, Germany. From January 1998, the artist’s work has been permanently installed at the Church of the St Maximilian Kolbe Centre at the Franciscan monastery in Harmęże near Oświęcim, Poland. See Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum News for 9 October 2013.
² David Rousset first used this phrase to describe the world of concentration camps in his 1946 memoir, L’ Univers concentrationnaire.
as photographic plates of memory that he has lived for fifty years. Kołodziej asserts, “Here, every room has its designation, its own emotional charge” (Oś 14). There is a creative mania on display. Sketches crowd one another. Large canvases compete for wall space. Smaller drawings of eyes follow visitors through passages between rooms. The eyes are those of the artist, and perhaps his fellow prisoners; every pair of eyes and the face it is set on appear slightly different from the next. Some eyes express fear, some wariness, some resistance coupled with surprise. The shape of each forehead, nose, and brow line differs. The methodology of the camps was designed to reduce men to skeletons, to erase each person’s humanness; yet, each prisoner in these drawings remains unique and singular. The eyes stay with the artist and he draws them into our own consciousness. We are watched, followed, asked to remember, to feel.

**Father Kolbe and Transcendence**

In his drawings of Father Maximilian Kolbe, Kołodziej focuses on an individual, a man who made the ethical choice to risk his own life in order to save fellow human beings. During the Second World War, Kolbe provided shelter to refugees from Greater Poland, including 2,000 Jews whom he hid from Nazi persecution in his friary in Niepokalanów. He was also active as a radio amateur who voiced his criticism of Nazi activities through his broadcasts. In February 1941 he was arrested by the German Gestapo and imprisoned in Pawiak Prison. In late May 1941 he was transferred to Auschwitz as prisoner 16670 (Jewish Virtual). Kolbe voluntarily chose punishment in exchange for another prisoner’s who pleaded to be spared because he had a wife and children. He was promptly imprisoned in a starvation cell. After three weeks, during which time he led his fellow prisoners in song and prayer, he was given an enforced shot of carbolic acid. His body was burned in the camp crematorium. The prisoner, in whose stead he died, lived to see liberation.
In Kołodziej’s drawings, Kolbe assumes the persona of a saint. In fact, the Catholic Church canonized Kolbe in 1982; yet, the artist’s fascination with Kolbe extends beyond religious faith. His drawings of the Polish priest and political activist depict the bodily disintegration of a man who was once healthy and robust, physically and mentally. The viewer experiences the process through which starvation, on the one hand, deprived the priest of his physical and intellectual powers, leaving him gaunt and near-death while, on the other, rendering him increasingly luminous, almost transparent. Rather than highlighting the horror of enforced starvation, Kołodziej’s depictions of Kolbe dramatize his moment of transcendence. The light surrounding the attenuated figure of Kolbe, the artist implies, is denied to the spared prisoner, who has however not been able to undergo transformation through self-sacrifice. At the same time the outline of the former man exists in the drawings, evidence that a human being may, if he survives, reemerge. Yet, if Kolbe were to have lived, he would have likely been tainted with his own survivor guilt, shame, marked by injustice and its requisite horrors, as were so many survivors. Instead, Kołodziej carries those shameful memories and he rescues himself in painting Kolbe and remembering the continued possibility for goodness in the world.
For Kołodziej, Kolbe is a Christ figure, representing hope for humanity’s potential to make an ethical choice, even when confronted by atrocity. The survivor of the camps tries to cope with the repressed horror of his experiences by focusing on examples of selflessness made possible, even against the instinct to survive. Writer Primo Levi in his memoirs of Auschwitz remembers Lorenzo, an Italian bricklayer conscripted by the Germans to work just outside the camp. In part, because he was not imprisoned within the camp, Lorenzo represented for Levi hope of an untainted humanity, an ethical world that still existed beyond the barbed wire. Lorenzo gave Levi courage to survive, not necessarily because he brought food to Levi and sent news to his mother in Torino, but more so because, “Lorenzo was a man; his humanity was pure and uncontaminated, he was outside the world of negation. Thanks to Lorenzo, I managed not to forget that I myself was a man” (Survival 122).

In the same way, Kołodziej transforms Kolbe into an ethical figure that assures the continuity of human feeling for and in response to others. There is an element of transcendence here, even in the religious sense, if one wants to translate these signs and symbols through the artist’s Catholicism, but the transcendence and wisdom attained through dying and in death is held in balance with honesty and transparency in collective
life. The artist is fully aware that he represents to his viewers specific historical events that exude complex meaning. He shows his viewers how a single human being remembers, how he wanders through the terrain of memory’s horror and the potential of its “rehabilitative line” (Oś 14).

He creates while being at the mercy of memory. His hand is responsive to those affective images that press their way to the surface of consciousness. Whereas the viewer may want to see these drawings as art, for their skill is apparent and their meanings literally and metaphorically profuse, Kołodziej frames his work otherwise. As he insists, “You cannot call this art. I thought about how to begin this; and started with my own growing up and rescuing my own humanity” (Oś 14). The drawings that began and continued as a project of rehabilitation were his salvation.

In *The Labyrinth* he suggests that his traumatic history was always present, albeit suppressed and inarticulable. But the memories found alternative outlets of expression, even during the years when he worked in film and set design. Eventually his need for beauty in his artwork changed through aging and physical disability. Those changes allowed for a direct confrontation and a reckoning with Auschwitz. Once he began the rehabilitative process, he experienced the release of a cyclone of images.

Justice takes on a special meaning to the survivor, Kołodziej believed, much different from the symbolism of the scales of liberty in a democratic society. For example, he painted the scales of justice depicting how justice in Auschwitz was grossly imbalanced and distorted. He represents the Kapo fat and heavy on one side of the scale and the emaciated prisoner, light and insubstantial, on the other. This was “justice” in the “concentrationary universe.” A narrative implies order, structure, and a measure of coherence, which derives from the imposition of form onto experience and the processes of chronology (*Kρόνος*) or plot-driven movement (a logical sequence of actions). These drawings appear to have no such normative or cohering chronology or structure. Logos (*Λόγος*) has disappeared from these canvases, devoured by the illogic of savagery. Horror displaces rational order in technologies of killing. Journalist Chris Hedges argues that “war is an enticing elixir” and that, however tragically, it gives us a resolve, a cause:

> [F]undamental questions about the meaning, or meaninglessness, of our place on the planet are laid bare when we watch those around us sink to the lowest depths. War exposes the capacity for evil that lurks not far below the surface within all of us. And this is why once it is over war is so hard to discuss. (3)

In Kołodziej’s drawings evil is shown as the ultimate ethical failure, because it implies the need to empower oneself by causing imaginable suffering onto vulnerable others. His subjects are the lice, the Kapo, the Nazis, the devoured men within the mouths

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3 The Kapo was a trustee prisoner in the concentration and labor camps who was assigned by the SS to manage fellow prisoners. Kapos served as guards, administrative functionaries, and overseers of forced labor crews. They typically received special privileges or protections for supervising, often with brutality, other prisoners.
of devouring men. The devouring man turned wrathful god parallels the wrathful deities of Tibetan (Vajrayana) Buddhism who represent the forces of destruction within and among humans. Yet, the devouring gods in the concentration camps were actual men in possession of ultimate power: to harm, to kill, to spare. The drawings portray prisoners literally consumed by the maw of the Kapo and his commandant and spewed out dead. Death surrounds the destroyer so that he becomes death itself—a conglomeration of curling corpses that, in turn, consume him. He is no longer human.

One kills his humanity in choosing (however conscious or unconscious that choice may be) violence as his primary mode of existence, so much so that he feeds like a parasite on his victims. He no longer sees the objects of his savagery as fellow humans. Certainly, prisoners in the camps suffered lice infestation, but the singularity and enormity of one terrorizing, devouring louse dominates a canvas and pronounces the parasite a source of death. It was a carrier of disease in the camps, a destroyer that cooperated with the Kapo in the work of annihilation. Thinking of the Kapo as devourer, the line between human and insect parasite blurs. Annihilation takes on an otherworldly dimension where the feast on others becomes profane ritual of destruction. Kołodziej transforms these memories into an expression that personifies the breadth and depth of human savagery. In the presence of these works each viewer confronts the degradation of humans by humans. This confrontation contributes to an expanding knowledge central to who we know ourselves to be in relationship to the history that has preceded us.4

In one of his most striking drawings, the older artist reaches with effort and desire over a field of numbers. A younger man carries an old, emaciated prisoner. The numbers on the canvas range between Kołodziej’s assigned number—432—tattooed on his left forearm and higher, six digit numbers. The field falls off at the left corner of the canvas, disintegrating from a burnt edge into a pit of corpses. The Germans replaced names with numbers in an elaborate and constantly changing classification system designed to track thousands of prisoners through the concentration camp system across Europe. The prisoners lost, among many other things, their names in the camps.

As Primo Levi writes: “My number is 174517; we have been baptized, we will carry the tattoo on our left arm until we die” (27). The tattoo was to be a mark of identification. In the original Italian, Levi writes—“Prisoner. I have learned that I am a prisoner. My name is 174 517; we have been baptized, we will carry as long as we live the tattoo on our left arm.”5 He refers to the number as his name, “My name is.” In a process intended to eliminate all identity markers, those of country, language, community, family, and home, the tattooed number was intended to enforce namelessness. One became not a measure of his qualities but a reduction to a number, one of millions, a slave to death.

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4 This knowledge is postmodern in that it is post-Auschwitz. A number of writers have eloquently addressed the subject of the state of thought after Auschwitz, including Josh Cohen in Interrupting Auschwitz: Art, Religion, and Philosophy (2003).

Kołodziej’s reference to a “rehabilitative line” might be read in two ways, one mental and one physical. First, he suffered from a serious stroke, a cerebral infarction that paralyzed the right side of his body, which mandated that Kołodziej confront his past and integrate it into his work. It was because of this event, that he opened up and his memories began to drink light and breathe air. Second, the literal lines that bisect the drawings, creating planes of life and death, were his rehabilitation. He confessed that he did not find “a line” in art school. The line coiled inside him until circumstances colluded and there was a medical mandate to rehabilitate. It was then that memories surfaced and clamored for expression. The line claimed a space. It became a visual panoply of personal historic memory shared with others.

In another painting, Kołodziej articulates his recognition of his own psychological split, of his having two selves, one self rooted in the past, and the other in the present. Yet, in his drawings the artist’s two selves appear to transcend time altogether. The selves meet and merge across binary divides—past and present, wholeness and disintegration, humanity and sainthood. The layering of this past-present self is not simply a metaphoric device. It is viscerally physical in the eyeless husk of a prisoner, incessantly marked with his identifying number, 432. In some drawings he renders himself wearing a crown of thorns, or hanging on a cross; in another, his post-Auschwitz self carries the young dying prisoner on a large metal plate. He offers this dying self to the viewer in a gesture of supplication and sadness. In another work the older man carries his prisoner self on his back, passing through barbed wire, ignoring the warning sign with skull and crossbones.
that reads: “HALT! STOJ!”

The symbiosis of the older man and his younger, terrorized self, the intimate coming together of prisoner and survivor creates the basis of psychological integration through art. Art embraces the older man and the emaciated but still young and strong prisoner. Art allows this viewing: the layering of selves; the bodies that suggest different experiences and identities through time; the way the face takes on lived experience, and, in this case, the nearness of death and one’s resistance to its proximity. The viewer recognizes the coexistence of historical and contemporary selves. Yet, it is not often that I encounter startling visual representations of the relationship between selves. Hardly is the juxtaposition of selves, their very dependence on one another—especially potent in this

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6 Stop or halt in German, and then in Polish.
vulnerable and almost tender relationship between prisoner and survivor selves—acknowledged with such immediate and assultive visual force as evinced in Kołodziej’s works.

**Poetry and Healing**

Halina Słojewska-Kołodziej, the artist’s widow, has related that a particular poem initially encouraged Kołodziej to share his camp memories. Zbigniew Herbert (1924-1998) writes in the opening lines of “The Envoy of Mr. Cogito”: “Go where those others went to the dark boundary/for the golden fleece of nothingness your last prize” (lines 1-2). The story of Jason’s quest to gain the throne in addition to the Golden Fleece is ultimately a tragic one, as Herbert’s poem suggests. This tragic narrative could be applied to Herbert’s increasingly pessimistic view of Poland, what with the Nazi invasion which brought extermination and labor camps, and with four decades of totalitarian rule after WWII. His poetry articulates his flailing hope for an ethical world of mutual respect and accountability between humans. The poet’s consideration of these lived histories accounts for the tone of despair in “the golden fleece of nothingness” (line 2). Once having attained what one thought they had set out to attain, he says, one finds it is nothing. *That* will be one’s prize for giving testimony, Herbert’s phrase implies.

Who better than the poet (Herbert), who had the experience of war and then of the tyranny of a dictatorship, to provide encouragement to the artist (Kołodziej) who finally emerges in the early nineties, after the success of Poland’s Solidarity movement, to draw the memories of his camp years. Yet, the teller should not expect to receive anything in return for giving the story to the world; in fact, for his harrowing journey to the outer boundaries, to memories of violence and death, he should expect exactly the opposite: nothing. The poet attests that we live with meaning and try to attain goodness, a degree of enlightenment, maybe even sublimity, even though we recognize we will not. Life is action, effort, and living manifests in doing and trying. Herbert through his poem reminds us of this. In Herbert’s and Kołodziej’s narrative ethics, writing/art is the journey, and the journey is an end in itself. This is the envoy of the thinking man, or woman. There is no salvation, no God or golden fleece to be attained. There will never be a utopia reached through story-telling, in literature or in art. The work *is* the ethic lived.

Jason gains the Golden Fleece, accedes to the throne but he later suffers betrayal and

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7 Halina Słojewska-Kołodziej shared her memories at a talk and presentation devoted to the life and work of Marian Kołodziej in October 2013, organized by the International Centre for Education about Auschwitz and the Holocaust and the St Maximilian Kolbe Centre in Harmęże.

8 The young Jason, raised by a centaur to whom his mother delivered him for safekeeping, emerges from hiding on the Mountain of Pelion to challenge his uncle Pelias, who had killed Jason’s father and usurped power, to his right to rule. Pelias tells Jason he may accede the throne but that he must first set out on a journey by ship to find and return with the Golden Fleece from Colchis, the then-unknown world. Jason does so, passing a series of additional tests set out for him. Yet, in the end, he is unfaithful to his wife, Medea. Abandoned, he dies grief-stricken, sitting under his decaying ship, the Argo, when a beam falls and strikes his head.

9 In fact, Herbert’s life was one of returning to Poland between periods of exile. He won few prizes during his lifetime but, as poet Adam Zagajewski relates, “Herbert chose to do odd jobs over living the life of a privileged writer so as not to compromise his artistic stance during the years of repression in Poland” (*Solidarity* 173).
loss. He subsequently endures despair, loneliness, and death by injury to his head, a symbolic fatal blow to his mind. Knocked into eternal Nothingness, he attains the actuality of Herbert’s symbolic Golden Fleece. Still, the writer and the artist make the journey; they follow through. Action becomes a sort of ethical response to the world and the suffering we unavoidably encounter in it. Action not only defines humanness; it constitutes humanness. But to make the journey, the poet and the artist need to remember, to enter the depths of experience (however suppressed), to confer language, and to give material form to psychic content. Kołodziej has witnessed the trauma of violence both as an individual and as a representative man of his time. Reward? Denied. Fleece? Nothing. Finally, one must live life for the living itself.10

Kołodziej responded to Herbert’s call that one must venture to the dark boundary when he began, however delayed, to draw his camp memories. The lines of poetry that most emboldened the artist to finally draw his experiences were these: “you were saved not in order to live/you have little time you must give testimony” (lines 5-6). The work created in his testimony becomes his raison d’être. The journey of the thinking man (Mr. Cogito in Herbert’s version) in the wake of totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century has a special diplomatic mission to fulfill. That mission is the act, often repetitive but hardly redundant, of giving testimony. The ethical charge for the audiences of such art, or, as Kołodziej references his work, “the rehabilitative line,” is to listen, look, and interact with these drawings and the visual narratives that arise of them.

However, these narratives are fragmentary pieces of memory. The viewer, like the artist himself, gets lost in a labyrinth. A maze frequently does not make sense because the one journeying lacks the distance needed for perspective. So the question arises: if a narrative structure (plot, analysis, temporal and geographic location, transition and logic in language) lends coherence and partial understanding to a situation, no matter how traumatic, are these drawings, these plates of memory, as the artist termed them, to be thought of as “narratives”? Certainly, they reveal stories (the “words locked in pictures”), but only in fragments. The drawings, and the style in which they are exhibited, suggest the artist wandering through labyrinth-like memory. We inhabit these drawings as moments contained within an architectural structure—the labyrinth as a dwelling of memory,—as the artwork encourages viewers to move through low-lit passageways and rooms, exploring corners and private walls wherein whole worlds of the artist’s brain, his memory of past traumas emerge for and through us. The very walls, floors, and objects in this structure recall the camp environs—an underground and poorly lit (though sanitized) environment. Still, there is a center to which we are directed. Here, around a central canvas, there is a pile of stones to evoke a memorial but also the stones that the workers in the camps carried and piled in hard labor. Once we reach the center, we must find our way out again. There is no map, only memory for the artist and the result of that memory

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10 Zagajewski writes his own ethical response to life in concluding his memoir, Another Beauty, “to be able not to answer the most difficult questions, and keep living anyway” (203).
in the artworks for his viewers. The exhibit reenacts memories accumulated and buried in an underground space, a circuitous structure, the subconscious mind. Above, ordinary life goes on. The light reflects in blue sky and gathering summer clouds. The air is humid, the sun hot, the breezes warm. Below, there is the smell of earth and rotting things. The visitor to the exhibit descends through a portal of broken glass, wire, and broken door or rough wood into a hidden world. Suddenly, we have entered the labyrinth.

When Kołodziej suffered a stroke in 1993, in his early seventies, the doctor suggested that as part of the rehabilitative process he draw his memories of the camp. He used his paretic right hand to draw. [He] “attached tiny pencils to his fingers and tried to draw on tiny pieces of paper” (Auschwitz-Birkenau). He had to learn to manipulate the pencils. The physical work and the mental concentration needed to learn to utilize the paretic hand again, to exercise the disciplined movements of line on canvas, became for the artist an experience that forced him inward. He drew incessantly and with acute anatomical detail: eyes, fingers, mouths, legs, naked, calorie-deprived bodies, shaved heads, and skulls. The canvases in the exhibit are crowded with figures representing those perished or those enduring suffering or dying. Some are dead, passing on, while some languish in intermediary spaces between living and dying. The artist works on two planes. There is a horizontal field wherein the eye follows the faces and bodies of men, women, and children. Faces with eyes full of horror, fear, distrust, hunger, spiritual emptiness, but also, occasionally, determination to fight. There is also the vertical field where the living float atop canvases and below them dying bodies transmogrify to skeletons. Farther down, the dead melt to nothingness. These are stages of decomposition. Gas chambers packed with ghosts. Eyes—white, blank, burned—and mouths open in horror. Dying people ascend; some sink to the ground, and lower still into layers of sorrow and dissipation. Beyond this apocalypse of pain and death, exists humanness; one the artist shows at first struggling, then utterly drained, finally lost, and much later revisited by the survivor and, thus, revived.

Researchers in neuroaesthetics have found that after suffering a stroke some artists experience a change in their artistic style and production. Those artists with left hemispheric damage, where the right side of the body experiences paralysis, have exhibited, among other traits, increased production of artwork, repetition of images, predominant themes, fluid lines, minimal color, and a preponderance of symbolism.\footnote{Quantitative systems of measurement are needed to formalize the study of neurological damage on artists’ work, as Anjan Chatterjee argues in \textit{The Neuropsychology of Art} (2015).} In Kołodziej’s case, drawing as a process of remembering, is imbued with physicality. The hand rubs against the canvas as it shapes line, space, light and shadow. Still, Kołodziej rejects the reference to his work as “art” per se. “I do not do art,” he says with a tone of impatience, “Art always goes in the direction of aestheticism, and all of this is quite brutal and quite cruel” (Oś 14). To go in the direction of aestheticism is to create a style unique to the artist, a statement that pleases audience with meaning in its representation.
or interpretation of reality. Taking a very different direction from his earlier work, which served the beauty of theatre and art, the current work insists on confronting and depicting brutality and cruelty. With the camp drawings Kołodziej created outside artistic paradigms and traditions. The aesthetics in which he found refuge in his professional work through decades of communism was inverted in the works from about 1993 to the time of his death in 2009. He was creating and exhibiting for the public scenes of extreme suffering, starvation, filth, cruelty, and death.

In the 1980s Poland moved into a period of new freedom with the expansion of an organized Solidarity movement and with democratic reforms in Eastern Europe during the period of Mikael Gorbachev’s Perestroika. By 1989, Central and Eastern European nations under communism experienced a radical opening and integration with Western Europe and the world at-large. The Berlin Wall was officially demolished in 1990. Democratic reforms began in earnest. These collective shifts influenced, in part, the creation of art within Polish society. The social and political changes in Poland also opened a new space to remember, conceptualize, and narrate history in ways that under communism had been largely prohibitive. In this new context, Kołodziej created materials markedly divergent from the set and custom designs of his professional years and even before that in his struggle to define a personal style in art school. These illustrations now created in the late years of his life are dark, strange, and foreign to his ideas of art and its aesthetic purposes.

Disintegration and the Courage of Memory

In her nonfiction work Leap, writer Terry Tempest Williams details an experience at the Museo del Prado in Madrid, where she pondered for weeks on the subject of Hieronymus Bosch’s painting, “The Garden of Earthly Delights,” painted in the early sixteenth century. She queries what each triptych tells us about who we are, what kind of world we have created, and what we want. Bosch depicts hell, a futuristic nightmare of the evils of invented technologies used to maleficent purposes that create a life of suffering on earth. These technologies emerged through the Age of Reason, the Age of Enlightenment. Yet, human developments have led us to a desperate place and, as in Herbert’s “Mr. Cogito,” nihilism and despair, induced in part by technologies and ideologies of war, have become prevalent elements of modern life.

In Bosch’s image of hell, people lose their human form. They fight and maim one another. They become unrecognizable as humans, not fully one form but a confusing multiplicity of incongruent forms that generate chaos and pain. After weeks of viewing the painting, Williams feels decomposition, desintegración, overtake her: “Yo soy la desintegración.” A contemplative and attentive viewer engaged in developing her own ethical view from what the painting communicates to her, Williams becomes the very

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12 I am disintegration. Williams’s words are suggestive of Frida Kahlo’s painting in a personal diary in which Kahlo inscribed, “Yo soy la desintegración.”
processes she observes in the painting. The ethical call to art causes us to feel the disintegration of our humanness even as we strive to shore up and strengthen that humanness. In relationship with the painting, she merges with the artist, noting that he brings the unsatisfactory, partially human, and the inhuman into conversation through visual narrative.

In Kołodziej’s work disintegration exists in his depiction of himself as an aging, frail man who carries upon his body the physical memory of the camps. He depicts violence and fear in a telling that transforms his work and its artistic arrangement into a narrative. This narrative is an ethical one that urges the viewer to remember within the context of a shared humanity, even while they witness its destruction. In narrative, the artist seeks integration of his experience. He journeys to make the shadows of suppression into a shared story brought into the world in an unburdening of self that can never truly become unburdened. This duty Kołodziej calls an “obligation of memory” (Oś 14). Horror and denigration find expression in the world; they move and affect others as a part of that story.

The artist chose to be buried among his renderings of those who have passed on and whose memory he has honored. He is interred at Saint Maximilian Kolbe Centre, his body in a crypt surrounded by his sprawling labyrinth of drawings. The years of dissociation when he corralled traumatic memories into small, forgotten spaces of the mind ended after a stroke. His drawings reveal an effort to remember as a means of reentering the world and living at the dark boundary that, not paradoxically, also enlightened his understanding of the twentieth century world in which he lived. Such is the force behind the narrative of horror and humanity that he offers us.

I begin to feel the artist’s work permeate my present as I drive home one day from work. The California foothills unfurl in autumn colors of dark green and dusty brown ahead of me. I feel the spaciousness of the land. The sky matches it, rain clouds stretching over yellow sycamores, a wind blowing leaves onto the highway, the lavender light angled. There is so much space here in this Western landscape. Suddenly, the drawings, their courage and emotional outpouring, appear before my mind’s eye. I recognize the faces and bodies that spill onto the physical space in my field of vision. Paralleling this landscape is Kołodziej’s in-scape, images peopled with memories of comrades and prisoners he did not know, whom he saw just once or perhaps daily, and whose faces he remembered through a lifetime. In the midst of these drawings, this viewer feels time populated with beings, spilling and spewing into a spatial plane that canvas and one man’s memory could barely contain. In this transport, memories fill surprising spaces. What once belonged to Poland, to a man who held his secrets for fifty years, now inhabits me as I drive. These remembered beings float into the sky, as if to people this second life here in the present without boundary of time or space, just before a cherished rain in another drought year.

Herbert writes in his thinking man’s poem: “be courageous when the mind deceives
you be courageous/in the final account only this is important” (lines 7-8). In recording the harrowing journey of the thinking man through the twentieth century, Herbert writes his own story. He had been a poet-activist from his early years. He wrote within Poland and, as borders gradually opened after the revolts and initial liberalization in 1956, he wrote from Berlin, California, Paris, and Siena. Inexorably, he was drawn back to Poland. He could not leave for good and, so, in his poems he struggles to come to terms with what history has given him, a Polish man, a poet who both loved and hated his century.

Herbert reminds the survivor to give testimony for those who have turned away and those who have been murdered. He tells himself and his listener to have courage, even when the mind believes that nothing is possible. Let anger flow, do not let it reify and become a solid core from which you exist. The natural world, those things unknown but seen, will provide respite from crazed humanness. Look to the created world around you, not to find consolation but to exist. Repeat the stories and myths. Chant the narratives as a mantra to remember and to know the good through which you will attain insight. It is a path leading to nothingness, but go anyway. Follow the ancestors because you must, because you have no choice, because you can only act in this way if you choose to live honestly in the world, given the world as it is and given your short time. Return to the act of creating, the small pencils fastened to the end of fingers on the right hand. Return to the painstaking rehabilitative journey undertaken with great courage. The Golden Fleece is elusive. Jason made his envoy and then died alone and in despair under his broken ship. Kołodziej made his envoy, his final labyrinthine opus testifying to his refusal to suppress memory. It is clear in these broken rooms that circumstances and choice brought him to confront the burden of personal and collective history.

Works Cited


Kołodziej, Marian. “I Was Rescuing My Own Humanity.” Interview with Pawel Sawicki.


