

The aesthetics and ethics of performative Holocaust memory in Poland

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ABSTRACT • This article addresses the performative dimension of the post-1989 Polish memorial culture of the Holocaust, characterised by a collaborative and audience-participatory model of remembering the Jewish victims. In this model participants are invited to become creators and owners of public memory, rather than silent observers or witnesses to commemorations performed by others. The article offers a critical and theoretical understanding of performativity in Holocaust commemoration through the examples of educational memorial actions *Listy do Henia* ('Letters to Henio') and *Kroniki sejneńskie* ('The Sejny Chronicles') led by the Polish grassroots institutions Ośrodek Brama Grodzka ('Grodzka Gate-NN Theatre Centre') in Lublin and Ośrodek Pogranicze ('Borderland Foundation') in Sejny. Drawing mainly on Polish perspectives on memory, the article examines the aesthetic and ethical value of these actions. It further probes how a performative model of engagement can serve to expose the complex past of Polish-Jewish relations, to bring the historical past vividly into current consciousness, and to facilitate a sense of belonging to a moral community of memory among younger generations of Poles.

Introduction

Poland's public memory of its relationship with the Jews during the Nazi-Soviet occupation has been painted with an emotional brush and in the highly intense and contrasting hues of black and white. After the fall of the Soviet bloc, one can observe a recurring dynamic in Polish public dealings with Jewish pasts. On the one hand, Poles showcase a visible and genuine commitment, at both individual and communal level, to salvage the Jewish past from collective oblivion, to restore heritage sites and to resurrect musical and cultural traditions. A great emphasis is placed on the heroic gestures of the Polish rescue of their neighbours. This cultural revival and commemorative phenomenon is a Polish construction, also known as 'virtually Jewish', and adopts a celebratory practice of recognition of Jewish life in Poland, enacted and performed by Poles in the absence of Jews (e.g. Gruber 2002: 25–75). On the other hand, one can observe a

recent exclusivist commitment to remember Poles as heroic martyrs, a focus which marginalises the suffering of Jews and of other minority groups persecuted by the Nazis in Poland. These overarching narratives present us with a deeply divided vision of the past, which leaves little room for a middle and common ground of Polish memory work. This ontological approach depicts Polish society as alternating between two sets of binary opposites. At one end of the spectrum, one encounters a metanarrative of martyrdom, heroism and sacrifice, and at the other end a story of guilt, shame, complicity and crime.

Leaving aside this rather divisive portrayal of Polish collective understanding of the recent past, this article addresses what historian Joanna Beata Michlic called the 'vast grey zone' of Polish memory (Michlic 2014: 158). This vast grey zone includes uneasy co-habitations of dissonant perceptions and representations of the past. A subject of debate in this article

is whether the performative model of engagement – with its direct invitations to lay people to participate in memory work, and its underlying motivation to keep the memory alive – can also fulfil a critical and moral agenda. Can this particular model of engagement lead to a more complex understanding of history among Polish youth? Can this understanding accommodate a productive tension between feelings of solidarity and empathy towards Polish victims and criticism vis-à-vis the indifference, and in the worst case, the antisemitic and criminal behaviours of Poles towards Jews?

Remembering the Jews: morality and the impact of Jan Błoński's middle-ground approach to commemoration

The question of Polish moral responsibility towards the Jews arose in the Polish public sphere towards the end of the communist era. In the intervening forty-year period unsavoury stories of Polish indifference towards or victimisation of Jewish neighbours during the Second World War remained hidden behind closed doors, were confessed in the privacy of one's home, or, more commonly, were repressed entirely from private and public memory (Steinlauf 1997)¹. What

1 Michael C. Steinlauf's study *Bondage to the Sead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* (1997), paints a broad and complex picture of Polish relations with the Jews in the pre-, inter- and post-Second World War period, and is particularly revealing in its detail on the peculiarities of Polish–Jewish relations, since, as the closest bystanders, Poles rescued, betrayed and killed their Jewish neighbours during the German occupation of the country, and on the enslavement and murder of Poles. It is worth pointing out that there are numerous Jewish sources about Polish–Jewish relations written during the war, such as, for example, the Emanuel Ringelblum Archives and the continued work by the Polish Jewish Historical Commission in the aftermath of

prevailed was a commonly accepted and rather comfortable narrative of Polish martyrdom which did not exclude the Jews as victims of the Nazis but did not recognise them either as the main target of Nazi persecution. As the communist regime dissolved and as the civic democratic platform of the Solidarity movement gained strength, the hitherto repressed aspects of the difficult history of Polish–Jewish relations during the Second World War emerged in the public arena. A defining moment in the formation of a Polish-led moral stance vis-à-vis the Jews was the publication, on 11 January 1987, of an article entitled 'The poor Poles look at the Ghetto' in the popular Cracow-based Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*. Its author, the acclaimed literary critic Jan Błoński, endorsed an authentic patriotic position while he unequivocally voiced remorse over what he called the 'insufficient concern' of Poles towards the fate of the Jews. He asked:

So why talk of genocide? And of shared responsibility? My answer is this: participation and shared responsibility are not the same thing. One can share the responsibility for the crime without taking part in it. Our responsibility is for holding back, for insufficient effort to resist. (Błoński 1990: 46)

Błoński argued that while Poles could not be fully blamed because they were effectively 'next in line for the gas chambers' (p. 42), they needed to assume 'the responsibility for holding back, for insufficient effort to resist'. He lamented, 'if only we had behaved more humanely in the past, had been wiser, more generous, then genocide

the Holocaust. The purpose of this article, however, is to address a more recent Polish approach to remembering Jewish neighbours; hence I primarily draw on sources which evidence the changes in the Polish understanding of Polish–Jewish relations.

would perhaps have been “less imaginable” (Błoński 1990: 46).

This reprimand about the lack of humanity towards the Jews came from a position wherein Polish victimisation by the Nazis is not diminished either. Błoński attempted to bring together, under an empathetic approach, two strands of argument that had resisted and continue to resist integration. Importantly, he was a solitary figure in the Polish public sphere of the time. His article triggered intense emotional debates and disagreements, and received a large readership. Its very publication in a popular Polish newspaper announced the dawn of a new political outlook. Silence over the ambiguous Polish relationship with the Jews could no longer be withheld. His intervention validated the need for a public acknowledgment of Polish moral responsibility towards the Jews, and equally importantly, for a reintegration of the Jewish story in the Polish national narrative of the Second World War.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, Błoński's discourse on ethics became intertwined with a progressive democratic stance among the leaders of the Solidarity movement. This contributed to the formation of a more introspective attitude towards the past, and to a greater degree of willingness to reflect upon the country's multi-cultural pasts. The amnesia present in Polish memory of other victimised groups began to be challenged once a significant number of artists and intellectuals started to develop NGOs and cultural organisations with the mission to revitalise Polish cultural life after communism. It became clear that the geographical spaces where they wished to develop such cultural work were marked by a history of Jewish life and extinction that could not be pushed aside.

This is the case with the Borderland Foundation, located in the town of Sejny in north-eastern Poland, and the Grodzka Gate-NN Theatre Centre in Lublin, located in the south-eastern part of Poland. The initiators Krzysztof Czyżewski (Sejny) and Tomasz Pietrasiewicz

(Lublin) are emblematic figures of a generation of Polish artists who came of age in the early 1990s and embodied the Solidarity movement's vision of a pluralist and inclusive society. Through their adoption of performance as a mode of working through the historical legacies of their towns, they challenged the Jewish–Polish ‘clash of martyrological memories’ made manifest at both cognitive and affective levels among Jews and Poles, as Eva Hoffman, a daughter of survivors, has noted (Hoffman 2004: 141). The performative model of engagement proposed by the cultural institutions in Lublin and in Sejny emphasises a Jewish and a Polish co-ownership of violent pasts which can in turn contribute to a softening of these clashes.

Remembering through participation: performative aesthetics in a broader context

Performativity has cropped up several times in this article. Given its centrality, I will briefly explain its uses in the context of this work. It suffices to say that a cursory review of the scholarship in performance, art history, literary criticism or gender studies developed since the 1970s suggests a multitude of meanings attributed to the concept of performativity.² For the purposes of this article, the performative (as I refer to from here on) holds a twofold dimension. The performative serves firstly to describe the ‘performance-like’ dimension of the current memorial actions, and secondly, it echoes John L. Austin's understanding of the concept. As with the potential of speech acts to effect a change in the world, the performative in memorial con-

2 A comprehensive review of its evolution can be found in introductory chapters by scholars including Richard Schechner and Diana Taylor in performance studies, and Mieke Bal and Dorothea von Hantelmann in literary criticism and art history, to name but a few.

texts refers to what memorial actions can potentially do, namely to challenge or transform perceptions, beliefs and ultimately behaviours.

The performative understood as a theatre/performance-inspired approach to painful histories has emerged more clearly in the field of public history in the 1990s. This is also the period of the 'memory boom', when testimonies by first-hand witnesses entered public consciousness and led to the development of a great public interest in the history of the Holocaust (e.g. Winter 2001, Wieviorka 2006). The expansion of public awareness of the Holocaust was made possible through a growing interconnected network of memorial museums, archives, research centres and popular representations. Public institutions started to devise new strategies of presentation of the past to engage, capture and sustain the public's attention and imagination. The contemporary museum had an important role to play in spreading historical knowledge through increasingly more interactive displays and living history approaches (Magelssen 2007: 53–90). Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has argued that the museum has turned into 'a theatre, a memory palace, a stage for the enactment of other times and places, a space of transport, fantasy and dreams' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 139). An 'experiential turn' in the representation of the past is particularly present in the context of Holocaust memorial museums (Bennett 2013: 43, 50–60). Despite their difficult subject matter, Holocaust and Jewish museums have not refrained from adopting a theatrical mode, most prominently present in the choice of museum architectural design, in the staging of material artefacts within a theatre-like environment, and in the use of interactive and digital media technologies which require a more pronounced degree of physical participation. The spectacular design of Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin drew thousands of visitors before the historical collection was even installed. The museum building was transformed into a

performance site, challenging visitors to participate in a cultural performance of memory. The experiential turn extends to other forms of public commemoration including memorials and contemporary art installations, and temporary memorial interventions.

In public memorial design, too, one can notice that alongside minimalist and non-monumental designs dedicated to the memory of Holocaust victims, there is a visible turn towards community participation and civic-led memorial practices which foreground the collaboration between ordinary individuals who together bring about memorial actions. These approaches are inspired by artistic practices of the 1960s including minimalist art and artistic movements such as the Fluxus, known for their experimental, multimedia and public performance events (Widrich 2014). An increasing number of artists have adopted performance-like practices in their dealings with Holocaust memory. Esther Shalev's and Jochen Gerz's *Monument against Fascism* (Hamburg–Harburg 1986) calls for German citizens to perform roles as moral citizens of a new Germany devoted to vigilance towards neo-fascism, by inviting them to write down their names on the monument, installed in a busy public square in Hamburg. Visitors take part in a civic performance of memorialisation which not only ensures that they are on the right side of morality, but also that their guilty consciousness could be purged. In this sense these performances have a cathartic goal of working through the past, and of easing the sense of guilt. Unlike the enclosed spaces of museums, in public spaces 'performance-like' practices are more likely to elicit a broader variety of reactions from the public.

James Young notes that public memorials can create self-sustained and unregulated civic memorialisations, stating that 'once created memorials take on lives of their own, often stubbornly resistant to the state's original intentions' (Young 1993: 3). Young is right, yet it

is not that memorials have a life of their own, but, more likely, that the public's inclination to engage with a memorial has a life of its own. This understanding points to the autonomy of audience members who choose *how* to participate (i.e. behaviours) and *what* messages to draw from their acts of participation (i.e. meanings). In this interpretative context, commemorative events are performative insofar as they lead to a transformation in the participants' perceptions of and connections with what is remembered, and insofar as they make room for a level of critical reflectiveness which transcends an emotional response to convey a sense of agency and of responsibility, and to effect a change in the social reality of things. This interpretation draws from John L. Austin's understanding of the performative as a set of utterances which can alter an aspect of someone's position or status in society (Austin 1962). The transformative quality of language use has been reworked by philosopher Judith Butler (also in light of Jacques Derrida's interpretation of Austin's theory). For Butler the performative does not belong to speech alone, but can appear as behaviours or attitudes, or as a repertoire of social conventions, which, repeated long enough, lead to the construction of a gendered identity (Butler 1988).

Taking these philosophical understandings of the transformative quality of the performative in the direction of public commemorations of the Holocaust is especially important given the centrality of Holocaust ceremonies in the construction of post-war (inter)national democratic societies which endorse tolerance and respect for difference. The Polish organisations discussed here propose unmediated forms of participation as they invite young people to co-create and co-own memorial events rather than assist through their physical presence alone.

Debating the social role of participatory art practices

It is worth recalling that audience participations, as understood in the context of community arts, have been a recurring subject for debate. Critics point to both the benefits and the shortcomings of participatory art practices. For example, the influential art historian Claire Bishop has warned that

in a world where everyone can air their views to everyone we are faced not with empowerment but with an endless stream of egos levelled to banality. Far from being oppositional to spectacle, participation has now entirely merged with it. (Bishop 2012: 277)

Furthermore, Judith Butler has argued that, in fact, participatory forms may only reproduce comfortable positions rather than challenge us, as she cautioned:

more often than not, we ask of art and language to give us back a world that we already know, reconfirm our place, our position, our perspective. And this is precisely to sacrifice the critical perspective that gives us the world anew. (Butler 2000: 8)

At the other end of the argument, Matthew Flinders and Malaika Cunningham see participation as evidence of the democratisation of the arts, since participatory arts, they argue,

involve a necessarily bottom up and democratic approach to the creation of art and invite participation in the creation of the message, rather than imposing and delivering an elite message to a passive audience. Its origins lie within the community development movement of the 1960s and it is this nature and history of participatory arts which we believe may foster democratic or political engagement. (Flinders and Cunningham 2014: 5)

The art critic Jacques Rancière also points to the agency of the spectators as he argues favourably for an active role for interpreters of art, as follows:

Like researchers, artists construct the stages where the manifestation and effect of their skills are exhibited, rendered uncertain in the terms of the new idiom that conveys a new intellectual adventure. The effect of the idiom cannot be anticipated. It requires spectators who play the role of *active interpreters* who develop their own translation in order to appropriate the 'story' and make it their own story. An emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators. (Rancière 2009: 22, my italics)

Similarly, the art theorist Dorothea von Hantelmann argues that while all art is performative as it aims to impact on the viewer in some form, not all artwork invites viewers to engage in the same way. She explains:

What the notion of the performative brings into perspective is the contingent and elusive realm of impact and effect that art brings about both situationally – that is, in a given spatial and discursive context – and relationally, that is, in relation to a viewer or a public. It recognises the productive, reality-producing dimension of artworks and brings them into the discourse. Consequently we can ask: What kind of situation does an artwork produce? How does it situate its viewers? What kind of values, conventions, ideologies, and meanings are inscribed into this situation? What the notion of the performative in relation to art actually points to is a shift from what an artwork depicts and represents to the *effects and experiences that it produces* – or, to follow Austin, from what it 'says' to what it 'does'. (Von Hantelmann 2010: 17–18, my italics)

These divergent viewpoints which I have quoted at length should be taken into consideration more seriously in the context of memorial art of the Holocaust too. In this article I will take some critical steps in this direction of analysis by applying the insights mentioned above to memorial art in Poland.

Performative memorial practice in Poland

Since the 1960s Polish artists and intellectuals have started to reflect more carefully on the relational and social aspects of their work. Minimalist art practices such as the Fluxus, and Happening and Performance art of the 1960s and the 1970s, used experiment to pursue palpable social responses. An early example that announces these practices is Polish architect Oskar Hansen's 1958 Auschwitz memorial called *The Road-Monument* (inspired by the avant-garde theory of the Open Form).³ Hansen's project avoided the vertical form of the traditional monument and proposed a minimalist and horizontal monument that encouraged visitors to participate in commemorative pilgrimages, and to reflect upon what is remembered and what is forgotten (see Murwaska-Muthesius 2002). He proposed that the site of the concentration camp be crossed diagonally by a tarmac black road laid across large areas of the camp. The architecture of the camp that remained outside of this road would be allowed to be overtaken by the forces of nature. The memorial road invited the public to walk along the full length of the death camp. As visitors crossed the site, they could observe how the concrete signs of the Nazi site are gradually engulfed by nature and by time. *The Road-Monument* was rejected and never built. This mode of representation, with its reliance on visitors

3 This proposal was submitted for consideration for the international competition for the design of the Auschwitz-Birkenau monument, chaired by the British artist Henry Moore.

to keep the memory alive, was not deemed appropriate by Holocaust survivors, who felt that it was of greater importance to preserve the site as it was, as a memorial in its own right (see Pietrasik 2011).

In the sphere of theatre and of performance art of the 1960s, an experimental and socially orientated approach to art was initiated by an influential figure of the Polish theatre, Jerzy Grotowski. His theatre laboratory in the town of Opole in south-west Poland carried out empirical research approaches into the relation between artist and audience. Among Grotowski's experimental practices one counts the 'paratheatrical' approach (1973–8), which aimed to transcend the separation between performer and spectator through the organisation of simple interactive exchanges between actors and audiences.

Grotowski influenced many theatre groups of the early 1990s. The Zone of Silence from Poznan, the Grodzka Gate-NN Theatre Centre in Lublin and the Borderland Foundation from Sejny initiated urban interventions based on cooperation between actors and audiences. Agata Skorzyńska sees the 'tendency of theatre to enter the city space, but also to include large-scale participation of the audience in theatrical events' as a 'manifestation of the social need for co-presence in public space ... as an attempt to reclaim the public space under the conditions of democratisation' (Skorzyńska 2014: 140).

In particular, the civic-led institutions discussed in this article, invited the participation of younger generations of Poles in local-heritage projects. Their engagements with Jewish heritage have been sustained over a period of more than twenty-five years, a sufficient time to build a new generation of Poles. The Borderland Foundation and the Grodzka Theatre can be classified by what Karen Till called 'socially responsible place-based practice' (Till 2008: 99). These organisations have acted as catalysts for the development of a democratic public platform constructed through archival collection of

oral testimonies from local populations and the artistic performance of forgotten cultural heritages. They hold multiple functions, as archivists of local histories, as educators, and as active cultivators of memory.

Artistic performances organised by the Borderland Foundation *The Sejny Chronicles* (performed since 1999), and the programme of events of the Grodzka Gate Theatre including *Mystery of Memory* actions (from 2000 to the present), and *Letters to Henio* memorial campaigns (since 2005) address the dynamic space of public memorialisation in Poland. These performances rely on what Till further described as 'embodied encounters with the everyday to explore intra-subjective relationships and knowledges not easily captured through language' (Till 2008: 106).

Taking into account earlier outlined critical views about participatory practices in the civic space, I ask whether these participations activate a civic consciousness, and whether they encourage a critical perspective on the past and the present. From the outset, these institutions' memorial actions appear to pierce the comfortable world of everyday routine in the sense that they bring into public memory a recent past which invokes painful events from Polish history. It is argued that through the use of performative and participatory strategies both organisations aim to cultivate a common ground and a positive memory of Jewish and of multicultural pasts in Poland. They combine art with pedagogy and with action to reinstate a form of collaborative reflection upon the past. This is reached as a result of an interaction and exchange and through what Paulo Freire called 'not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement' (Freire 2005: 69). In this respect Freire's accounts of pedagogical methods based on reflection and action, and on the power of recreations and collaborative creation are meaningful for my reading of these organisations' pedagogical work.

The Sejny Chronicles at the Borderland Foundation: building bridges through performative work

Linked to the anthropological theatre practices of the Gardzienice theatre group (which was founded in 1977 by Włodzimierz Staniewski, a collaborator of Grotowski), the leaders of the Borderland Foundation pursued an ‘active culture’⁴ and an integrative existence within the community. They became a part of the city of Sejny in 1990. Similarly to the Gardzienice group, they reached out to the local people as potential practitioners of an ‘active culture’ themselves. The Borderland Foundation’s location on the site of a former Jewish synagogue aims to gather the scattered memories of the village, of different languages, cultures and religions, in order to performatively build bridges or connections among today’s current inhabitants. As with the Grodzka Gate Theatre in Lublin, the Borderland Foundation resides in the former Jewish neighbourhood, regarded by them as a powerful place for creating inter-communal bridges. The primary mission of the Foundation was to excavate the seemingly forgotten multicultural pasts of Sejny and to vividly integrate these pasts, through the participation of the locals, back into the community space. Czyżewski acknowledges that ‘to live with memory repressed makes your life unbearable’. It means to live at the ‘periphery of the centre’, with no opportunity to ‘inherit the place as a

4 The term is associated with Jerzy Grotowski’s practice (1969–76). It is used in relation to the term ‘participatory theatre’ and to the ‘paratreathrical’ theatre of social experimentation. It was later used by his followers to refer to the notion of theatre as embedded in the social fabric and as a tool for exploring social relations, but it also denotes the uses of theatre by individuals with no theatre training. Czyżewski employs this term regularly. Further engagements with this concept appear in Kolankiewicz and Taborski 1978.

whole’. Living in a ‘limbo’ means a disconnection with the past and entails that one is unable to create a future. This state of affairs was common in Poland after communism, when memories had been repressed, or tightly controlled and manipulated. The work of the Borderland Foundation is linked by Czyżewski to a national movement created in the early 1990s by artists and social activists aiming to ‘do active culture’ at local-community level (Czyżewski 2014).⁵

The performance *The Sejny Chronicles* initiated by Bożena Szroeder is an emblematic example of the practice of ‘active culture’. The main protagonists are young people whom Szroeder invited to gather oral histories from their parents and grandparents. The stories were compiled into individual mini-histories and family trees that were then used to create a multi-authored narrative, partly historically authentic and partly imagined. This narrative comprises songs, dances, oral histories and vignettes presented in the various languages of the groups living in the village. The central element of the performance is a large baked clay model representing the pre-war town, placed in the middle of the stage. Around this model, teenagers perform the stories that were transmitted to them by their grandparents and great-grandparents. This cultural heritage enacted on stage includes prayers, songs, traditional dances, and tales in Yiddish, Polish and Lithuanian.

The performance that emerges reflects a collaborative process of retrieval of Sejny’s multicultural pasts. These participations provide young people with a framework within which they can operate independently and bring their own individual voices and stories. This form of engagement encourages a bottom-up approach to narrating the past, and is a sign of

5 Paraphrased from the round-table discussion led by Saul Friedlander with Czyżewski in 2014, on the occasion of being granted the Dan David Prize in Jerusalem, for his cultural work in Sejny.



The *Sejny Chronicles*' mythical presentation of a multicultural past enacted by young people.

the democratisation of the arts noted earlier by Flinders and Cunningham. Young people become translators and interpreters of the cultural legacies they come to shape through their individual performances, an aspect of participation noted by Rancière.

Their work fulfils a perpetual memorial function; since 1999, *the Sejny Chronicles* have involved three generations of young people. Each new generation adds new stories to the performance, and each is therefore transformed into a community of storytellers. The performance leads to a creative process of community-building, as Czyżewski explains:

It became like a local community story, a small epic poem, which had been lacking before. The situation of our society here in Sejny was one of people living together without a common story. I am not talking about history, I am talking about a story that people can understand as their local epic. As a roof over their heads. They can find themselves in a common house. (Czyżewski *et al.* 2011: 23)

This project reflects the Foundation's belief that young generations have a role to play in cultivating knowledge and appreciation of multicultural pasts. It is worth noting that while this project has a celebratory dimension, the process of remembering, that young people are drawn into, does not necessarily require them to confront the difficult and violent aspects of inter-ethnic relations. Young people are engaged in activities of paying tribute to multicultural pasts in a positive rather than mournful manner. Furthermore, their enactments of lost cultural traditions seem to be motivated not by the duty to remember for the sake of remembering only, but are underpinned by a future-oriented mission. This is articulated by Joanna Michlic as a mission to construct a local community engaged in 'building a forward-looking and inclusive Polish society based on a civic concept of national belonging and a respect for multiculturalism and humanitarian values' (Michlic 2014: 147). Yet this engagement appears to lack a deeper level of self-introspection, which has to do with approaching the darker aspects



The *Sejny Chronicles*' mythical presentation of a multicultural past enacted by young people.

of the Polish response to Nazi Germany's racial extermination programme targeting Jews and other minorities. The Borderland Foundation fulfils this role in a different manner, by publishing historical work which sheds light on these 'darker pasts', such as the publication of Jan Gross's *Neighbours* (2000), which triggered a national debate about Polish complicity with Nazism, and criminal behaviours towards the Jews.

The Sejny Chronicles illustrate the reparatory function of performative strategies, to build bridges based on 'good memories'. While Czyżewski recognises that to invoke negative aspects of Polish–Jewish relations is easy, he emphasises that one of the greatest challenges is to recover 'good memories' from the past. He further mentions that, in Poland, unlike countries in Western Europe, this memory work was not sustained by institutions like museums or archives, but that it was independently led by

intellectuals, artists and social activists – many of them with a background in theatre practice and influenced by experimental practices such as Jerzy Grotowski's (Czyżewski 2014).

Among these groups the Grodzka Gate-NN Theatre Centre in Lublin occupies a prominent position. Even though the two organisations function separately, their performative-based approach to memorialisation is a significant common denominator. Like Czyżewski, the Grodzka Gate Theatre's founder Tomasz Pietrasiewicz has a background in theatre and has become a nationally acclaimed figure of social and cultural activism. An impressive programme of activities and exhibitions has been designed by Pietrasiewicz with the support of a faithful group of local educators and artists. Unlike the Borderland Foundation, this institution focuses exclusively on Jewish loss.

The Grodzka Gate: building a Polish community united through the commitment to remember the Jewish loss

The NN Theatre was founded in 1990 by a small group of theatre artists, who took over the building of the Grodzka Gate, a run-down tenement building in the city's old town. This led to the uncovering of the site's Jewish pasts. Built in 1342, this archway construction cut an open space in the medieval city walls, and marked the passageway between the Christian neighbourhood and the Jewish district of Lublin. In pre-war years, the Jewish area outside the Grodzka Gate formed a dense mosaic of Jewish shops, synagogues, religious schools and local organisations. Passing from the Christian side of the old town through this gate, one entered a vast network of small streets forming a neighbourhood where in 1939 around 43,000 Jews used to live. When the NN Theatre artists arrived on the site there were no visible traces to indicate that the empty area which lies between the gate and the old castle was once home to a large Jewish community. Only a few synagogues and cemeteries survived, but these were located in the northern part of the city.

The mission of the institution is to raise awareness of this forgotten past and to insert it into the collective consciousness of the present local community.⁶ The institution has adopted performance as a means to accomplish this task. Every year, on 16 March young people are invited to participate in the commemorative action, the *Mystery of Light and Darkness*, in remembrance of the liquidation of the Podzamcze ghetto. The public ceremony starts in the evening with a gathering near the site of the Grodzka Gate, where children, teachers and inhabitants of the city are invited to read out loud the names of the known Jewish victims of the ghetto. After they

complete the reading, they step into a space of darkness, as all the street lights on the Jewish side of the gate are shut down, in a blackout of the entire former Podzamcze area. In this space of darkness, one street lamp which survived the war period is transformed into a memorial lamp. On the Christian side of the Grodzka Gate, streets lights are still shining. The participants in the commemoration event inhabit for a moment this everyday space, transformed – as a result of the collaboration of locals and of the city council who have switched off the lights in their homes and streets – into a quasi-sacred space of memory. The community is addressed both on an individual level – as individuals are called out to read the names of the victims, and on a collective level – since without a common agreement the city lights would not be turned off. In this way, a performative memorial is constructed, which lacks a concrete shape, but which exists through individual and collective participation and action. Importantly, these actions are repeated on the same day every year, creating not only something which haunts the present, but also a local community of agents of memory rather than of passive witnesses.

On 24 March the Grodzka Gate Theatre commemorates the death of the children of the Jewish orphanage, who were deported by truck to meadows located near sand mines in the smaller Jewish ghetto in Lublin, called Majdan Tatarski. A march of memory starts from the place of the former orphanage and follows the children's path leading to the site of their imprisonment and murder. This action varies slightly every year as it incorporates new gestures. In 2015, the participants were encouraged to write down the names of the known victims on stones which they placed on the site of the former ghetto following the religious Jewish custom of remembrance. This action resonated with other artistic participatory forms of remembering such as the German artist Horst Hoheisel's *Denksteine* ('Think Stones') from Kassel, 1993. Hoheisel

6 See further information in the interview of the director in Foy 2015.



The postal box has become an iconic image of the *Letters to Henio* project. Absence, traditionally marked by a permanent monument, is here creatively made present through a series of actions: the letters follow the postal route, and are eventually returned to the senders, with the stamp 'addressee not found'.

called upon the schoolchildren of Kassel to dedicate think stones to local Jewish victims of Nazism. They were invited to choose a name from a book containing information on the names and fates of Kassel's Jews, and to carry out research into the biography of their chosen individual. The texts children wrote on the basis of their research were wrapped around stones dedicated to the victims. The stones deposited in archive boxes put on display in the Kassel railway station, a place of deportation of Jews to the camps in the east. The stones, wrapped in paper and deposited on a trolley, bore the dates and locations of deportations. This collaborative memorial project, like the Grodzka Gate's initiative, simultaneously rendered visible the individual efforts to retrieve Kassel's Jews from oblivion and exhibited the results of memory work led by the schoolchildren.

Since 2005, the annual activity called *Letters to Henio* occurs on 19 April, the Polish official

day of Holocaust remembrance. On this day, schoolchildren and teachers commemorate a Jewish boy named Henio Żytomirsk, whose biography the Grodzka Gate-NN Theatre Centre was able to reconstruct on the basis of photographs, letters and documents donated by a distant relative of Henio. Every year, at the entrance to the PKO Bank, the place where the boy's last picture was taken, a special mailbox collects paintings and personal stories from young people sent to Henio's last-known home address. Through the local postal service, the letters are returned to their senders, bearing the stamp 'addressee not found' to symbolize Henio's absence and to mark Jewish loss. This seemingly simple intervention presents several layers of participation, each supporting one another and reinforcing a sense of solidarity in remembrance. These include the approval of the city administration and the consent of the post offices, whose employees deliver the letters



unopened to the senders, the participation of young people who write letters on the spot, or bring their letters to post them in the symbolic postal box, the approval of the local bank and its employees to have the action unfolding in their work space, and the collaboration of passers-by who stop to observe or get involved. There is a sense of solidarity in memory emerging subtly through these approvals and participations.

Unlike memorial monuments that become permanent markers of memory, performative actions of memorialisation need to be re-actualised, repeated and framed anew within a changing space and time. Above all, they depend upon the individuals who take part in them. They point to the very fragile nature of memory and of remembering, which cannot be sustained other than through participation, reiteration, interaction, reflection and action. A local community of memory is thus reaffirmed and strengthened, every year, through the same or slightly different repertoire of gestures and motions. The performative, as made apparent in these participatory actions, promotes a moral stance in relation to crimes as they actualise and reinforce recognition and awareness that these events have happened there.

Yet, as with the Borderland Foundation's *Sejny Chronicles*, these actions do not make starkly visible to contemporary Poles the complex nature of the Polish–Jewish relations or the Polish responses to their Jewish neighbours of the time. Instead, a non-confrontational approach to remembering the past is preferred, which may lead members of the audience to ask themselves more difficult questions. A sense of morality is constructed through these performances of memory which position participants in morally acceptable roles as agents of remembrance themselves. In this sense, these participations reinforce a sense of being on the morally right side.

A wider participatory phenomenon

Since the mid-2000s, in other parts of Poland, too a performative model of engagement, combining performance art and the event with ritual elements, has appeared in artistic projects which stimulate local communities to rethink their relations with the local spaces they inhabit. For example, in Szczecin, a town in the northwest region of Poland, a civic-led artistic practice of memorialisation is carried out by the Kana Theatre Centre. Established in 1979 by Zygmunt Duczyński, the Centre has developed site-specific performances collectively known as *W poszukiwaniu tożsamości miejsca* ('Quest for the Identity of the Place', 2005–8). This series of projects adopts similar motifs of excavating and of connecting disparate community memories of earlier Jews, Germans, Poles, Swedes or Danes. The project intends to 'show lost and ignored areas of the city's topography and to find people who still bear memory of old events' (a full description of the project can be read on the Kana Theatre's website). A performative intervention called *Przeprowadzka* ('Moving Houses', 2009), directed by Weronika Fibich, invites Polish inhabitants to reflect on the city's Jewish and German pasts. Divided

into two groups and equipped with empty boxes and travel documents, the participants in the project are taken to various locations around the city, where they hear interviews with former inhabitants of the city, both Jewish and German, and examine archival documents (this project is discussed at length in Waligorska 2015: 90–115). Another strand of performative work can be found in collaborative projects between Israeli and Polish artists and intellectuals such as the artist Yael Bartana's and the left-wing activist Sławomir Sierakowski's *And Europe will be Stunned*, a video-art trilogy consisting of *Mary koszmary* ('Nightmares', 2007), *Mur i wieża* ('Wall and Tower', 2009) and *Zamach* ('Assassination', 2011). The trilogy presents us with an alternative history scenario which stages the Jewish return in Poland, and which points to a seemingly persistent nostalgia over the loss of Poland's Jewish interlocutors (Popescu 2013: 140–52). Performance as a way to work through a traumatic past is further invoked in more ethically controversial ways by the Polish artist Artur Żmijewski in his video work *Berek* ('Game of Tag', 1999).

These varied uses of performance or the performance art genre – alongside the performative elements of the Borderland Foundation and of the Grodzka Gate Centre's memorial actions – can be regarded as collective exercises of recovery of memory as well as exercises in identity formation for younger generations of Poles. These identities are improvised locally from various collected pasts. The Borderland Foundation's and the Grodzka Gate Theatre's approaches to the past show the wish to construct inclusive and pluralist futures, thereby closely following the vision of the Solidarity movement. These performances of memory succeed because of younger Poles' commitment to participation.⁷

7 Indeed, every year, the Grodzka Gate Centre invites all local schools to take part in the street commemorative actions, and in schools.

They also succeed insofar as they aim to disrupt the uniformity of the predominantly mono-ethnic streets of today's Polish towns and villages with the awareness of a multicultural past.

Conclusion

These grassroots institutions illustrate a 'new historical sensitivity' (Szpocinzki 2007: 35) encouraged by social theatre experiments of the 1970s and of the Solidarity movement. The wish to facilitate personal and social transformations which drove Jerzy Grotowski to devise bridges between artists and spectators has similarly motivated these theatre practitioners to work with historical legacies and bridge the gap between past and present. The cultural commemorative performances discussed in this article have a therapeutic agenda to produce a sense of connectedness with a multicultural heritage that was brutally destroyed, and in a sense, to cure younger generations of Poles of a state of overgeneralised amnesia, which contributes to their disconnectedness from the spaces they inhabit, as Czyżewski has argued concerning the situation in Sejny.

The performative model of engagement with the Jewish pasts discussed here does not challenge Polish youngsters to approach the past from a position of neutral or of critical distance,

The educators of the organisation organise workshops with groups of students of up to 100 individuals. Furthermore, the hundreds of letters written to Henio since the project started in 2005 (a number of which have been donated to the institution) attest to the high level of participation. While the question of direct impact does not fall within the scope of this particular contribution, in the forthcoming stage of the research I will analyse creative responses as well as the impact of the action by using the data gathered from street surveys and the fieldwork conducted in Lublin. The analysis of the social impact of this performative model of engagement will appear in a forthcoming publication.

but rather invites them to co-create a cohesive narration wherein Jews are their missed interlocutors/neighbours. The fundamental structure of the Polish victimisation narrative is not openly challenged by these projects. What prevails is a morality stemming from the desire to remember for the sake of diminishing amnesia, and of creating bridges between different memories of victimised groups.

While these memory actions are not self-critical in the sense encouraged by historical approaches like Jan Gross's, they aim to raise awareness of Jewish life and culture. These acts of remembering function at the level of raising public awareness of loss, and not of tackling the moral responsibility of Poles in causing this loss to happen. For these cultural initiatives moral responsibility is interpreted as a duty to raise awareness of Jewish history and to restore architectural heritage and gather and preserve Jewish culture. Instead of confronting Polish culpability head-on (as Blonski had wished), they graft the Jewish past into present consciousness and only tentatively invite locals to remember and to ask themselves critical questions. The moral dilemma of how to respond to Polish culpability is superseded by a morally correct stance wherein Poles commemorate the Jews by recovering Jewish histories, culture and tradition. Thus, it is regarded as morally wrong to persist in a state of amnesia; these performative actions are designed to awaken memory among the locals, and to put into motion a longer-term process of recognition of Jewish and other minority presence(s) in Poland. ■

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