## Nazi Imagery/Recent Art

EDITED BY NORMAN L. KLEEBLATT

# Mirroring EVIL

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## DIRECTOR'S PREFACE

*Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art* focuses on thirteen contemporary, internationally recognized artists who use imagery from the Nazi era to explore the nature of evil. Their works are a radical departure from previous art about the Holocaust, which has centered on tragic images of victims. Instead, these artists dare to invite the viewer into the world of the perpetrators. The viewer, therefore, faces an unsettling moral dilemma: How is one to react to these menacing and indicting images, drawn from a history that can never be forgotten?

The artists are often two generations removed from the Nazi era and are descended from families of both victims and perpetrators. Obsessed with a history that they seem impelled to overcome, they ask us to examine what these images of Nazism might mean in our lives today. These artworks draw us into the past, leading us to question how we understand the appalling forces that produced the Holocaust. These works also keep us alert to the present, with its techniques of persuasion that are so easily taken for granted, its symbols of oppression that are too readily ignored.

*Mirroring Evil* is the most recent of many exhibitions at The Jewish Museum that have addressed the period of the Holocaust. In 1994 The Jewish Museum mounted an exhibition on the memorialization of the Holocaust and the complexities surrounding the commissioning, creation, use, and meaning of memorials. It focused on the preservation of memory and the intent and effect of physical memorials created as sites of mourning and contemplation. The works included in that exhibition referred to classical, poignant, and reverential buildings and sculptures and to events. That exhibition also showed contemporary art that challenged the very idea of the Holocaust monument. In *Mirroring Evil,* the artists dismiss classicism, edifices, and memorial rituals. They replace them with a disquieting, demanding, and jolting approach, which asks us over and over again to look deeply into human behavior.

The museum collects and exhibits art that provides visitors with many approaches that inspire thought about the period of the Holocaust. For example, in 2000 The Jewish Museum mounted the exhibition, *Charlotte Salomon: Life? Or Theatre?* Like the works in a 1985 Jewish Museum retrospective of another young artist who perished in the Holocaust—Felix Nussbaum—Salomon's paintings and drawings present the intimate chronicle of a life during the Nazi period. The cumulative effect of these works draws the viewer into the experience of living through the Nazi era.

Norman L. Kleeblatt, Susan and Elihu Rose Curator of Fine Arts, conceived of this project. As in the past, he has brought together works by a diverse group of artists to create a groundbreaking exhibition and a wonderfully informative publication. The catalogue essays provide an extensive and invaluable frame of reference for the works in the exhibition. Among other topics, this book provides a background on transgressive art, a critical analysis of the individual works in the show, and an exploration of the context of the museum as the presenter of work that may be considered taboo, in addition to a discussion of the psychological devices of Nazi oppression.

This exhibition was made with the support of devoted Jewish Museum staff, the contributions of generous donors, collectors, and museums, the advice of insightful consultants, and the loans of art by the remarkable artists whose work is the subject of this project. In addition to Norman Kleeblatt, I thank Maurice Berger, Rabbi Irwin Kula, Luisa Kreisberg, Stuart Klawans, and Reesa Greenberg for their thoughtful and sensitive work as consultants; Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi for her advocacy and thoughtful contextualization of the exhibition; and James E. Young, Ernst van Alphen, Lisa Saltzman, and Ellen Handler Spitz for their insightful essays. I am additionally grateful to those institutions that have worked in cooperation with The Jewish Museum to create and host educational and public programming. In particular, I would like to thank Peter Nelson and Facing History and Ourselves; Sondra Farganis and The Vera List Center for Art and Politics of The New School; The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership; Grace Caporino and The University Seminar in Innovation in Education at Columbia University; and Betsy Bradley and The New York Public Library. I also thank Daniel Kershaw and Allan Wexler who together created the exhibition design; Joanna Lindenbaum, assistant curator for the exhibition; Carole Zawatsky, director of education; Aviva Weintraub, director of media and public programs; Anne Scher, director of communications; and Ruth Beesch, deputy director for program.

The exhibition funders have demonstrated much appreciated support for taking on a show that is filled with difficult, challenging art. Our thanks go to The Blanche and Irving Laurie Foundation, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, The Dorsky Foundation, the Ellen Flamm Philanthropic Fund, Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro, and to many other donors to whom we are most grateful. I am additionally grateful to the lenders and artists whose work has been included in this exhibition. Both are courageous in recognizing that provocative and troubling images often yield important consideration and understanding.

Finally my appreciation to the museum's Board of Trustees, whose commitment to a complete understanding of the Jewish experience in the world makes this a museum that reaches far in its use of art for inspiration and education.

**JOAN ROSENBAUM**
Helen Goldsmith Menschel Director,
The Jewish Museum

# FOREWORD: LOOKING INTO THE MIRRORS OF EVIL

JAMES E. YOUNG

A notorious Nazi once said that when he heard the word "culture" he reached for his revolver. Now, it seems, every time we hear the word "Nazi" we reach for our culture. Thus might we protect ourselves from the terror of the Nazi Reich, even as we provide a window into it. It is almost as if the only guarantee against the return of this dreaded past lies in its constant aesthetic sublimation—in the art, literature, music, and even monuments by which the Nazi era is vicariously recalled by a generation of artists born after, but indelibly shaped by, the Holocaust.

Until recently, however, this has also been an art that concentrated unrelievedly on the victims of Nazi crimes—as a way to commemorate them, name them, extol them, and bring them back from the dead. By contrast, almost no art has dared depict the killers themselves. It is as if the ancient injunctions against writing the name of Amalek or hearing the sound of Haman's name have been automatically extended to blotting out their images as well. Of course, such blotting out was never merely about forgetting the tormentors of the Jews. It was, in fact, a way to remember them. By constantly condemning these tormentors to oblivion, we ritually repeat an unending Jewish curse that makes us remember the enemies of the Jews by enacting the attempt to forget them. A new generation of artists sees things a little differently, and the results are as unnerving as they are taboo breaking.

"You can't shock us, Damien," are the words artist Elke Krystufek has pasted over one of her collages. (The reference is to the English artist Damien Hirst, whose vivisected animals floating in glass vats of formaldehyde caused an enormous sensation in the early 1990s in London.) "That's because you haven't based an entire exhibition on pictures of Nazis." Is this to say that the point here is to shock? Or, that in a culture inured to the images of vivisected animals, only images of Nazis can still shock? Or is Krystufek after something else altogether? I think it's something else. Rather than repeat the degrad-

ing images of murdered and emaciated Jewish victims, thereby perpetuating the very images the Nazis themselves left behind, artists like Krystufek now turn their accusing gaze upon the killers themselves. For these artists, the only thing more shocking than the images of suffering victims is the depravity of the human beings who caused such suffering.

To the traditional art that creates an empathetic nexus between viewers and concentration camp victims, these artists would add an art that brings us face to face with the killers themselves. Rather than allow the easy escape from responsibility implied by the traditional identification with the victims, these artists challenge us now to confront the faces of evil—which, if truth be told, look more like us than do the wretched human remains the Nazis left behind. In the process, we are compelled to ask: Which leads to deeper knowledge of these events, to deeper understanding of the human condition? Images of suffering, or of the evildoers who caused such suffering? Which is worse? The cultural commodification of victims or the commercial fascination with killers? These artists let such questions dangle dangerously over our heads.

Victimized peoples have long appropriated their oppressors' insidious descriptions of themselves as a way to neutralize their terrible charge. But what does it mean to appropriate images of the Nazi killers into the contemporary artistic response to the terror they wrought? Is this a way to normalize such images, making us comfortable with them, bringing them back into the cultural conversation, denying to them the powerful charge that even the killers themselves hoped to spread? Or is it merely to redirect the viewers' attention away from the terror toward its causes?

These are the easy questions articulated so disturbingly by this exhibition of Nazi imagery in recent art. Tougher, more unsettling, and even more offensive questions are also raised and addressed by both the works in this exhibition and by the essays in this catalogue. To what extent, for example, are we even allowed to consider the potential erotic component in the relationship between Nazi murderers and their Jewish victims? What does it mean to "play" Nazis by building your own model concentration camp out of LEGOs? Is this different from "playing" Nazis in the movies? Were Nazis beautiful? And if not, then to what aesthetic and commercial ends have they been depicted over the years in the movie-star images of Dirk Bogarde, Clint Eastwood, Frank Sinatra, Max von Sydow, and Ralph Fiennes? What does it mean for Calvin Klein to sell contemporary perfumes and colognes in the Brekerian images of the Aryan ideal? And, if this is possible, is it also possible to imagine oneself as an artist drinking a Diet Coke amid emaciated survivors at Buchenwald? Just where are the limits of taste and irony here? And what should they be? Must a depraved crime always lead to such depraved artistic responses? Can such art mirror evil and remain free of evil's stench? Or must the banality of evil, once depicted, lead to the banalization of such images and become a banal art?

If these questions are problematically formalized in this exhibition, they are also profoundly elaborated in the unflinching catalogue essays. All of the writers are acutely aware that exhibiting and writing about works such as these may be regarded by some to be as transgressive and disturbing as the art itself. In this vein, both the curator Norman Kleeblatt and literary historian Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi have probed deeply into what Ezrahi presciently calls the "barbaric space" that tests the boundaries of a "safe" encounter with the past. Cultural critic Reesa Greenberg reminds us that "playing it safe" is no longer a viable option for museums, curators, critics, or viewers when the questions at hand are, necessarily, so dangerous. For, as art historian Lisa Saltzman shows in her reconsideration of the avant-garde, since "All the verities are [now] thrown into question," such transgressions require an art that makes excruciating demands on both critics and viewers. It

is almost as if the more strenuously we resist such art, the more deeply we find ourselves implicated in its transgressions.

In a parallel vein, child psychiatrist and art historian Ellen Handler Spitz explores the perilous border between inviolate childhood and absolutely violated children, that inner terror of children devastated by a cruelty whose name they cannot pronounce. What can children do with such trauma? Ernst van Alphen persuasively argues that to some extent the child has come to stand "for the next generations, who need to learn a trauma they have not directly lived," who instead of talking about such terror, or looking at it, will necessarily "playact" it as a way to know and work through it.

For a generation of artists and critics born after the Holocaust, the experience of Nazi genocide is necessarily vicarious and hypermediated. They haven't experienced the Holocaust itself but only the event of its being passed down to them. As faithful to their experiences as their parents and grandparents were to theirs in the camps, the artists of this media-saturated generation make their subjects the blessed distance between themselves and the camps, as well as the ubiquitous images of Nazis and the crimes they committed found in commercial mass media. These are their proper subjects, not the events themselves.

Of course, we have every right to ask whether such obsession with these media-generated images of the past is aesthetically appropriate. Or whether by including such images in their work, the artists somehow affirm and extend them, even as they intend mainly to critique them and our connection to them. Yet this ambiguity between affirmation and criticism seems to be part of the artists' aim here. As offensive as such work may seem on the surface, the artists might ask, is it the Nazi imagery itself that offends, or the artists' aesthetic manipulations of such imagery? Does such art become a victim of the imagery it depicts? Or does it actually tap into and thereby exploit the repugnant power of Nazi imagery as a way merely to shock and move its viewers? Or is it both, and if so, can these artists have it both ways?

Years ago, the German artist Gerhard Richter openly broached the question as to whether the popular dissemination of Holocaust images amounted to a new, respectable kind of pornography. In his installation *ATLAS*, Richter juxtaposed photographs of naked, tangled corpses next to sexually explicit images of naked and tangled bodies copulating.[1] His aim was not to eroticize the death camp scenes so much as it was to force viewers to ask uncomfortable questions of themselves: Where is the line between the historically inquiring and the erotically preoccupied gaze?

Where is the line between historical exhibition and sensationalist exhibitionism? In fact, here we might even step back to ask whether any exhibition, even the most rigorously framed, can ever merely show such sensationalist imagery without descending into sensationalism. Can the artists, curators, or even we, as viewers, objectively critique such sensationalist images without participating in the sensation itself? In the end, viewers of the exhibition and readers of this catalogue will have to decide for themselves—and even here the answers may depend on just how self-aware each of us is when it comes to understanding our own motives for gazing on such art, or our own need to look evil in the face even as we are repelled by what we see.

In reference to Germany's Holocaust memorial problem, I once wrote that after the Holocaust, there could be no more "final solutions" to the dilemmas its memory posed for contemporary artists; there can be only more questions.[2] For these artists, the issue was never whether or not to show such images, but rather, what to ask of them: To what extent do we always reobjectify a victim by reproducing images of the victim as victim? To what extent do we participate in the degradation of vic-

tims by reproducing and then viewing such images? To what extent do these images ironize and thereby repudiate such representations? And to what extent do these images feed on the same prurient energy they purportedly expose? To what extent does any depiction of evil somehow valorize or beautify it, even when the intent is to reveal its depravity?

For artists at home in their respective media, questions about the appropriateness of their forms seem irrelevant. These artists remain as true to their forms and chosen media as they do to their necessarily vicarious "memory" of events. But for those less at home in the languages of contemporary art, the possibility that form—especially the strange and new—might overwhelm, or even become the content of such work, will lead some to suspect the artists' motives. Historian Omer Bartov, for example, has expressed his sense of "unease" with what he describes as the "cool aesthetic pleasure" that derives from the more "highly stylized" of contemporary Holocaust representations.[3] Part of what troubles Bartov is that such work seems more preoccupied with being stimulating and interesting in and of itself than it is with exploring events and the artist's relationship to them afterward. Also implied here is an understandable leeriness of the ways such art may draw on the very power of Nazi imagery it seeks to expose, the ways such art and its own forms are energized by the Nazi imagery it purports only to explore.

Even more disturbing may be the question Saul Friedlander raised several years ago in his own profound meditations on "fascinating fascism," in which the historian wonders whether a brazen new generation of artists bent on examining their own obsession with Nazism adds to our understanding of the Third Reich or only recapitulates a fatal attraction to it. Friedlander writes:

> Nazism has disappeared, but the obsession it represents for the contemporary imagination—as well as the birth of a new discourse that ceaselessly elaborates and reinterprets it—necessarily confronts us with this ultimate question: Is such attention fixed on the past only a gratuitous reverie, the attraction of spectacle, exorcism, or the result of a need to understand; or is it, again and still, an expression of profound fears and, on the part of some, mute yearnings as well?[4]

As the artists in this exhibition suggest, these questions remain open—not because every aesthetic interrogation of Nazi imagery also contains some yearning for "fascinating fascism," but because neither artist nor historian can positively settle such issues. In fact, by leaving such questions unanswered, these artists confront us with our own role in the depiction of evildoers and their deeds and the ways we cover our eyes and peek through our fingers at the same time.

## NOTES

1. For a reproduction of this installation, see Gerhard Richter, *ATLAS* (New York and London: Marian Goodman and Anthony d'Offay, 1997), 16–23.

2. See James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust: Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), for a study of these issues as they arise in more public art and architecture.

3. Omer Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 116.

4. Saul Friedlander, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 19.

Plate 15. Alain Séchas, *Enfants Gâtés* (detail), 1997.
Installation with mixed media. Dimensions variable.

Plate 16. Alain Séchas, *Enfants Gâtés*, 1997. Installation with mixed media. Dimensions variable.

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Plate 17 (top). Zbigniew Libera, *LEGO Concentration Camp Set* (detail), 1996. Cardboard boxes. Edition of three.

Plate 18 (middle). Zbigniew Libera, *LEGO Concentration Camp Set,* 1996. Seven cardboard boxes. Edition of three.

Plate 19 (bottom). Zbigniew Libera, *LEGO Concentration Camp Set* (detail), 1996. Cardboard boxes. Edition of three.

## ALAIN SÉCHAS

### Enfants Gâtés (Spoiled Children), 1997

**PLATES 15 AND 16**

### Mirrors of Innocence and Violence

A group of five identical sculptures sits on individual white pedestals. Each sculpture uses one of Alain Séchas's signature Disney-like animals to animate the space and confront the viewer. In this case, his seemingly harmless small-scale pets are made threatening by the addition of Nazi symbols. Séchas has grafted a Hitler mustache onto each feline face. Swastika-emblazoned rattle in hand, each kitten sits perched in a playpen onto which additional swastikas are centered in each of the enclosure's sides. Attached to opposite walls on either end of the five-part enfilade, two mirrors multiply the images of these mini-sculptures ad infinitum. The homespun, kitsch, pop-culture animals appear benign; through the addition of simple symbols associated with evil, they resonate fear. The pure white animal is both imprisoned and protected in its pen. Its small size makes it appear additionally helpless and vulnerable. Yet, the gesture of its implied salute emits and heightens its danger. Given the conflicting sense of scale and the disarmingly simple accumulation of symbols, it is not easy for the viewer to distill his or her disparate reactions to the ensemble.

This work forms part of Séchas's assimilation of three-dimensional cartoon-like characters into confrontations with provocative topics. In his depictions of such themes as suicide, rape, torture, and decapitation we experience violence combined with vulnerability. Séchas inscribes transgressive experiences on composite cartoon creatures with whom we have comfortable and long-established ties. Do we feel them more deeply because of our familiarity with the types he has chosen? Do their simplicity of means and disarming expression remove us further from—or bring us closer to—their implicit danger? Devoid of irony, the suggested humor of the creatures delivers us to a paradoxical space.[1] Guy Walter has aptly observed the frustrating circularity of Séchas's sculptures and shows how the sculptor connects the most abstract with the most representa-

tional sensibilities. In particular, Walter demonstrates how the work keeps us from entering it, how it forces us to return to the surface.[2] Although we are warned not to overlay an American reading of the collision between high art and popular culture on his work,[3] Séchas pits the viewer in a space of inextricable frustration between subjectivity and objectivity, between style and surface, meaning and superficiality. The contrasting intersection of these sensations—and between the innocence and violence at the heart of his project—are precisely those that fix the outer limits of contemporary popular culture.

While artistic sources such as Georg Grosz are mentioned in discussions of Séchas's drawings, there is little speculation concerning artistic roots for his sculptures. Nevertheless, it is clear that his three-dimensional work plays off stylistic contradictions. The peculiarity of having forbears as disparate as Nikki de St. Phalle and Michaelangelo Pistoletto is part of Séchas's premeditated effect, and connects to his sculptures' play between innocence and instability. De St. Phalle serves as perceptual model while Pistoletto functions in a predominately conceptual way. The former links Séchas back to Matisse, to the luxe and joyousness that is inherent in one strain of modernism. De St. Phalle's childlike sculptures and specific environments for children make us eternally playful and juvenile in our wish to engage her exuberant figures and undulating forms. Pistoletto, virtually of the same generation as de St. Phalle—but with a totally different sensibility—forges links with other stylistic and strategic expressions of modernism, namely Surrealism, Dadaism, and photomontage. In his trajectory from the perceptual to the conceptual, the physical to the pictorial, and the represented to the real, Pistoletto is a perfect model for Séchas. The mirrored surfaces Pistoletto uses, like those real mirrors Séchas incorporates into *Spoiled Children,* insinuate the viewer into the center of the exhibition space. Reflected representations,

Fig. 1. John Heartfield, *Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the strongest of them all? The crisis.* Published in *Arbeiter-Illusstrierte Zeitung* 12, no. 33, 1933. © 2001 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bohn. Courtesy of Kent Gallery, New York.

both literally and figuratively, are central to *Spoiled Children*. Not only do the feline creatures serve as the artist's alter-ego, but Séchas explains his sculptures as "mirrors of our desires and fears" in which we are stuck "halfway between being a spectator and being a witness to violence."[4]

The symbols and imagery of Séchas's *Spoiled Children* bear startling similarities to the German artist John Heartfield's *Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the strongest of them all? The crisis* (1933; fig. 1). In Heartfield's photomontage we see the recently elected Adolf Hitler peering at himself in a traditional, framed mirror. The Nazi dictator's assumed position is one of self-admiration, yet, in Heartfield's hopeful reflection, we see Hitler's form contorted as it becomes strangled by a skeleton. Séchas takes the two-dimensional disjunctions of Heartfield's (and Pistoletto's) games of reflection and refraction and makes sculpture which is a composite of innocence and evil, vulnerability and violence. In a continued play of doubling and multiplicity, the work continues its representations and reflections ad infinitum in two real mirrors.

Certainly, Séchas was also toying farcically with the essay by French post-structural psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Lacan's famous piece on the "mirror phase" which deals with a child's identity and ego formation as he/she recognizes him/herself in the mirror for the first time, was invoked frequently in the art criticism of the 1980s and 1990s.[5] The essay was one of the cornerstones in the oft-discussed issues around the nexus of personal identity and marginality, so crucial to much art making during the last decade. Séchas subverts the usefulness of Lacan's essay as he frustrates any kind of fixed identity for the sculpture. The dizzying multiplicity and mirroring refuse any of the synthetic identities that Lacan's theory was used to underwrite. The mirrors contradict theoretically and stylistically. The creation of this ad-infinitum refraction of the five sculptures is clearly a pastiche reference to Nazi architectural models in which one architectural element is repeated excessively to create a sense of deep spatial recession. For the Nazis, such solid lapidary spaces were meant to overwhelm and to disempower the viewer. However, Séchas's recession is neither solid nor real. Rather it mocks those fascist spaces by its fugitive manaical reflection.

Without a doubt, Séchas's *Spoiled Children,* like much of his other work, is a study in contradiction. Issues of childhood and violence, style and surface, real and reflected, craft and artlessness combine to destabilize our very act of looking and our sense of engagement. When we look, these dualities, and many others, keep ricocheting in our mind's eye. The work has been said to create a figure of a "pre-Nazi" in whom fascism is more "innate than acquired."[6] This question about our personal, moral distance from history, from society and from evil itself seems remarkably similar to the question the Israeli writer David Grossman poses about the Nazi inside each one of us.[7] **NLK**

## NOTES

1. Patrick Javault, "Things Seen," trans. J. Tyler Tuttle, in *Alain Séchas,* exh. cat., Hôtel des Arts, Paris, 1992, 70.
2. Guy Walter, "One Thing and the Opposite," trans. Joan Olivar, in *Alain Séchas,* exh. cat., 1992, 83.
3. Javault, "Things Seen," 70.
4. Ibid., 98, 99.
5. Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Theory," 1949.
6. Javault, "Things Seen," 97.
7. David Grossman, *See Under: LOVE,* trans. Betsy Rosenberg (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989).

## ZBIGNIEW LIBERA

### *LEGO Concentration Camp Set*, 1996

**PLATES 17, 18, AND 19**

### Toying with Terror

Forcing this collusion of innocence and aggression, naïveté and devastation, Zbigniew Libera refashioned the internationally beloved toy, the LEGO building block set, into a concentration camp. Annually, the LEGO Corporation offers grants to artists to incorporate the popular line of toys into their work. Libera had been making art about childhood and the process of learning. In doing so, he used standard playthings in order to demonstrate how children's toys perpetuate ideals of beauty and perfection, as well as the sometimes malignant fantasies of society. Given these interests, Libera seemed the perfect candidate for a LEGO grant.

*LEGO Concentration Camp Set* is a group of seven boxes in an edition of three. On each box are pictured various three-dimensional miniatures that the artist has built. He photographed the self-constructed models and then refashioned the images into what seems to be standard, juvenile-friendly packaging. The miniatures represent nothing less than the most horrific and morally debased architectural complexes ever built. Among the structures he has made and photographed are models of barracks and crematoria. Aggregate objects, including body parts and clothing, appear on the side of one box. Such representations are derived from Libera's multiple and blurred associations. He fuses—and confuses—images from history and art history, mixing Holocaust images of death camps and human remains with references to masterpieces of postwar art, such as Arman's accumulations.

The French cultural theorist Michel Foucault's interpretations of architecture are crucial to Libera's thinking. Foucault observes that buildings are highly loaded spaces invariably manipulated to wield authority. In *Discipline and Punish,* he shows that Western society has formed a nuanced architectural vocabulary based on the structure of the prison that is manipulated symbolically and categorically to exert control. For Libera, like Foucault, benign insti-

Fig. 1. Zbigniew Libera, *Ken's Aunt*, 1995. Courtesy of the artist.

tutions such as the school, the cloister, the military barracks, or the factory are modeled on disciplinary institutions and buildings. Reaching further, Libera grasps the ultimate paradigm of disciplinary models and one overlooked by Foucault: the concentration camp.[2] Libera also perceives that the camps, with their towers and crematoria, have become, paradoxically, twentieth-century icons.[3]

*LEGO Concentration Camp Set* grew out of the artist's interest in war toys, educational programs, and self-improvement devices. Libera sees how such seemingly harmless items may pose serious psychological and philosophical questions about gender, sexuality, and childhood. This is the logical outgrowth of his earlier works that engage with Foucault's notion of moral orthopedics to question societal conventions of beauty and propriety. For example, through the disarming vulnerability of *The Doll You Love to Undress* (1998) Libera forces us to encounter our own voyeuristic streak. Our uncomfortable reaction to *Ken's Aunt* (1995; fig. 1), a doll-sized version of a middle-aged, overweight matron—an anti-Barbie—exposes the ageism that pervades contemporary society.

*LEGO Concentration Camp Set* led Libera to legal battles with the manufacturers and, ultimately, censorship of the work in a major international exhibition. After unsuccessful attempts to have the artist withdraw the piece from exhibitions in Germany, the United States, and Brazil, the LEGO Company initiated a lawsuit when it was exhibited in Copenhagen, near the company's headquarters. In the media coverage commentary that ensued, connections were inevitably made between censoring Libera's work and the official and highly circumscribed protocols for Nazi art, as well as Hitler's campaign to rid Germany of degenerate art.[4] Because European law permits artists to use products and logos in their work, LEGO's attempt to restrict Libera's use of its product ultimately failed. Further repercussions for *LEGO Concentration Camp Set* took place the next year, when

the artist was invited to represent Poland at the Venice Biennale. When Libera prepared to show the LEGO set as part of his installation, the Polish curator demanded it be removed, claiming, according to the artist, that this explosive material might offend certain circles.[5] Libera, who had been jailed in Communist Poland for subversive artistic activities and for championing free expression, withdrew his entire submission.

What created this negative reaction to Libera's work? The responses greatly exceeded the infinitely more subdued criticism that had surrounded the art of David Levinthal and Art Spiegelman, for example. Like Uklański, Libera's status as a non-Jewish Pole was at issue. In contrast to Libera's guilt by association, Levinthal admitted that because he was Jewish, he was given great latitude for his Mein Kampf series of seductive photographs of Nazi toys. Not so for Levinthal's recent work focusing on African-American stereotypes. When Levinthal, like Libera and Uklański, crossed the boundaries into representations outside his own Jewish identity, society was quick to condemn him.[6]

Issues of desire and consumption are conspicuously at play in Libera's toys and sharply magnified in *LEGO Concentration Camp Set*. These toys' three-dimensionality forces us to imagine intimate physical contact with them in ways that Levinthal's and Spiegelman's works do not. Libera's sculpture possesses an anti-monumentality that creates the illusion that the works are hyper-real. In fact, we regress to our own childhoods and become vulnerable in the toys' presence. When we regain our adult intelligence and recognize what the boxes represent, we become repelled. To encounter *LEGO Concentration Camp Set,* to select it, or to desire to play with it, suspends us at the contradictory intersection of a world of make-believe with one of horror.

**NLK**

## NOTES

1. Zbigniew Libera, "Analysis of the Historical Representations of Auschwitz in Contemporary Art in LEGO 1996," in *The Memory of Auschwitz in Contemporary Art,* unpaginated.
2. Roxana Marcoici, "The Antinomies of Censorship: The Case of Zbigniew Libera," *Index* 3-4.98, no. 23 : 58–59.
3. Libera, "Analysis," 204.
4. Marcoici, "Antinomies," 59.
5. Ibid., 60.
6. David Levinthal in conversation with author, January 1999.