

(Im)possible Witness: Viewing PETA's "Holocaust on Your Plate"

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Those who knew
what this was all about
must make way for those
who know little.
And less than that.
And at last nothing less than nothing.
-Wisława Szymborska

A respectful postmodern approach to representing the Shoah through rethinking documentary photography and its difficult mandate to speak for others, to bear witness, to teach, and to warn is to attempt the task yet acknowledge its inevitable (im)possibilities.... It is precisely the issue that the telling of events *cannot* fit into a cohesive narrative that is at stake.

-Andrea Liss, *Trespassing
Through Shadows*

Probably not unlike a good many other people interested in animal liberation, I spend a fair amount of time being embarrassed by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). More often than not, I bristle at their tactics more than their "message," if such a separation is possible. The recent example of PETA preparing pamphlets encouraging children to ask their mothers how many animals were murdered for their coats comes to mind. I suspect that when confronted with such a question from a child, some mothers will struggle to find an answer and will have to give some amount of serious thought to why they wear fur. I suspect that the rest of the mothers will, for reasons not all that hard to imagine, become enraged and teach their children about the ridiculousness of animal rights activists.

The recent Holocaust On Your Plate exhibit (<http://www.masskilling.com>) did something else, at least for me. At first, I was just interested in it, in the sense of what Roland Barthes calls the *studium*: "which doesn't mean, at least not immediately,

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‘study,’ but application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity” (Barthes, 26). But soon it became “that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me);” it became a *punctum* (Barthes, 26). I couldn’t get the exhibit out of my mind. I still can’t.

The exhibit, it seems, rubs rather too close to a good many problems that I have been unable to think through with any satisfaction, including but not limited to: the status of modernity and postmodernity, where the latter might be thought as following a “rupture” in history (usually associated with the Shoah¹); the increasingly troubling question of whether “human rights,” in their classic liberal sense, guarantee anything with the decline of the nation states’ protections of them; the confusing use of media spectacles for progressive political purposes (playing by the rules of transnational capital in order to “critique” transnational capitalism); and, the question of what pedagogical purposes images of the Shoah are mobilized for and under what conditions. I submit, at the outset, that I do not know precisely how to make sense of any of these problems. But I also submit that in confronting the images in the PETA display, I could do nothing but try to work through these philosophical questions in order to comprehend what I was looking at.



Preliminary considerations

Before exploring some of these philosophical questions, some comments are in order about politics. First, I unequivocally condemn slaughterhouses, factory farming, and any practices that kill or harm non-animals in the interest of human living. Second, I assert that slaughterhouses and the extermination camps of the Shoah are not only analogous but, in fact, trade in exactly the same networks of confinement, execution, de-individualization, isolation from the

(possibly) concerned eyes in the metropole, and normalization under the aegis of “health” (of individuals, of the nation, etc.). Third, I am skeptical of modernist discourses of rights from a strictly pragmatic perspective, which leads me to situate my thinking-through of the PETA exhibit within “postmodernist” discourses.

It is the third claim that I anticipate many readers might object to. Anticipating this, I offer the following. First, I assert that there is no “reliable condemnation rooted in values, priorities, and a sense of right and wrong that *no one would dispute and everyone accept* . . . for the simple reason that there are no such universally accepted values, priorities, and moral convictions” (Fish 34). I would have no trouble in pointing out that any defense of factory farming is interested and biased (owing to profit, convenience, a simplistic dismissal of animals from the realm of ethics, etc.). Because of this, I cannot claim that my condemnation of factory farming is any less interested or biased. This does not stop me from asserting that the use of animals for food is unequivocally wrong, and that I expect everyone—including those who do not share my biases—to recognize it as such and demand that these practice end. I can reconcile these two positions (claiming that there is no non-biased position to speak from and making a universal and unequivocal moral claim) through recourse to one of the most basic insights of postmodernism: that “in order to assert something and mean it without qualification, I of course have to believe that it is true, but I don’t have to believe that I could demonstrate its truth to all rational persons” (Fish 34).

I will attempt to convince readers that there does exist a ground on which to reject factory farms and at the same time demand that no human-animals ever be subject to camps again (this ground will be a rejection of *zoe* as the object of biopolitics), but I am not convinced that there exists a universal epistemological ground on which I can rest my assertions. It is for this reason, unsatisfying as it may seem, that in the end I make a plea for an ethical duty toward “naked life” in all its forms that is not rooted in universals or systems of thought. Pragmatically, what I find is that whether or not I can find or articulate any ethical or epistemological system for rejecting camps in all their forms, I have to act. The faces of the animals and the humans in PETA’s exhibit demand that of me. It is for this reason that the photos of the exhibit are reproduced here.



Preliminary concerns II: Biopolitics and Naked Life

So, I am amenable to the type of analogy the PETA exhibit aims at revealing (I would argue that factory farms and extermination camps are two instances of the same principle), but I am thoroughly ambivalent about the exhibit itself. I want to explore this ambivalence by looking at a heuristic model for Shoah reception in the United States, by considering how the exhibit traffics in representation and knowledge, and by situating my response to the exhibit in relation to (bio)politics and a notion of “witness.” But first, I would like to explain briefly why I think it matters (and this necessarily already moves us into the moral and political sphere).

In his essay “What is a Camp?,” the contemporary Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes that “the camps . . . were not born out of ordinary law, and even less were they the product—as one might have believed—of a transformation and a development of prison law; rather, they were born out of the state of exception and martial law” (Agamben *MWE* 38). This is to say that, just like the United States camp at Guantanamo, Cuba today, the concentration camps began as physical manifestations of a state of emergency understood to protect the personal freedoms of citizens. Not unlike Bush’s “enemy combatants,” or the people who could be stripped of their citizenship because of vague suspicion or an appearance of hostility toward the government (see Best; Hentoff; Snaza), the Jews entering the concentration camps had been stripped of all legal rights by the Nuremberg Laws. Thus, Agamben is led to posit the following: “*Inasmuch as its inhabitants have been stripped of every political status and reduced completely to naked life, the camp is also the most absolute biopolitical space that has ever been realized—a space in which power confronts nothing other than pure biological life without any mediation*” (Agamben

MWE 41).

Two concepts from Agamben's analysis are helpful for us in thinking about what is at stake in the analogy between the Shoah and slaughterhouses. The first is "biopolitics," which Agamben takes from Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality Volume I*. In explaining the function of power in contemporary society, Foucault writes that "now it is over life, throughout its unfolding, that power establishes its dominion" and that "the power to expose a whole population to death is the underside of the power to guarantee an individual's continued existence" (Foucault 137-8). Across several of Foucault's works, we see him charting and trying to make sense of "a power whose highest function was perhaps no longer to kill, but to invest life through and through" (139), that is, a "biopolitics." We might note, by way of a quick illustration, that even though participation in electoral politics in the United States has become less and less popular, the investments in the health, productivity and definition of bodies have boomed (think, variously, of ergonomics, the explosion of diet programs, plastic surgery, the debates about when life begins [around abortion] and ends [around euthanasia], the governmental and corporate haranguing over managed health care, etc.). The end result of this explosion of investments is that global transnational capital has no need at all of electoral politics. We are so thoroughly enmeshed in technologies of health and participation in the global market that most of us never stop to think about it. As Ani Difranco says, "it's as easy as breathing for us all to participate . . . you know it's all around you but it's hard to point and say 'there'" (Difranco "Next").

The other term which is useful from Agamben's analysis is "naked life." In several of his works which deal with something he calls *homo sacer* (the sacred man, who can be killed but not sacrificed) Agamben goes back to a distinction in Greek between two words for life: *zoe* and *bios*. *Zoe* is "the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, humans, or gods)" while *bios* signifies "the form or manner of living peculiar to a single individual or group" which is unique to humans (Agamben MWE 3). Read with Foucault's notion of biopolitics, we start to glimpse that our current political apparatus functions not on us as humans with distinct ways of life (in the *polis* as it were), but rather on us directly as *zoe*. The concept of the *homo sacer* points to human life stripped of its "distinct way of life" (or, what Agamben calls "form-of-life"), which becomes only *zoe*. It should not surprise us that an entire book of Agamben's focuses on this reduction of human life to *zoe* at Auschwitz. We see this same naked life being operated upon in the factory farms:

Calves raised for veal—the male offspring of dairy cows—are among the most cruelly confined and deprived animals on factory farms. Taken from their mothers only

a few days after birth, they are chained in stalls only 22 inches wide with slatted floors that cause severe leg and joint pain. Since their mothers' milk is usurped for human consumption, they are fed a milk substitute laced with hormones but deprived of iron: Anemia keeps their flesh pale and tender but makes the calves very weak. When they are slaughtered at the age of about 16 weeks, they are often too sick or crippled to walk. One out of every 10 calves dies in confinement. (PETA, "Modern Day")

If the Shoah reveals human life "dehumanized" to naked life, and our current political situation is moving more and more toward power enacted directly on our naked lives, then is not the Shoah necessarily central in our thinking about politics? When we see this same naked life operated upon in the factory farms, shouldn't we understand these camps, and *their* naked life, as being part of the same networks of production which we are all—human and non-human—caught up in as part of globalized capital? Any question of resistance, then, must take its aim at the level of global capital (and not the State, which is everywhere becoming-impotent in the face of capital) and must be able to account for the shared situation of all *zoe* as object of politics.



Holocaust Reception in the United States; or, Modernity vs. Postmodernity (?)

If my question about the centrality of the Shoah for any thinking about politics sounds naïve now, it is only because of a drastic shift in American thinking about the Shoah. Not surprisingly, the shift from a collective silence surrounding the events to what Alan Mintz calls

“a point of moral consensus” followed, primarily, a series of popular cultural representations of the Shoah which became *punctum* for many Americans: *The Diary of Anne Frank*, an NBC mini-series called *Holocaust*, and (of course) *Schindler’s List*. In the process, as Mintz sketches it, the Shoah underwent a thorough Americanization:

While still “belonging” to the Jews, the Holocaust underwent a process of universalization in two senses. The murder of the European Jewry became the ultimate standard for speaking of victimization of peoples in the modern period in spheres that had no necessary connection to the Jews. The Holocaust had become the referent for collective suffering. In the political arena, the Holocaust became a rarity in American life: a point of moral consensus. (26)

If the Shoah has become such a universalized referent in the sense that Mintz articulates, then it makes perfect sense why PETA would look to mobilize it. In the first sense of universality which Mintz points toward, PETA attempts to articulate the suffering of animals in the always already familiar idiom of the Shoah, thereby hoping to link onto existing ethical schemata. This, of course, blurs into the second type of universalization: if the Shoah functions as a politically unquestionable space, if the first type of link works it ushers in the suffering of animals to the moral consensus. This would represent the jackpot for PETA: rather than having to argue against cosmetic testing, fur, circus acts, vivisection, meat and all the other *individual* abuses of animals, for those who accept the analogy the display offers, animals move immediately to full protection.

The stakes being as high as they are (admitting animals fully into the moral consensus, which, we should note, doesn’t extend far beyond the victims of the Shoah, as the American dis-interest in stopping wholesale slaughter of humans elsewhere suggests), it is not surprising that many viewers, including myself, are uneasy about the exhibit. In order to situate my uneasiness, it is useful at this point to set up, again following Mintz, two general frames of reception for the Shoah in the United States. These two frames more or less undergird the questions about representation, politics and discourse that follow.

In his book, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America*, Mintz outlines two models of reception of representations of the Shoah in the United States. The first is the “exceptionalist model” which “is rooted in a conviction of the Holocaust as a radical rupture in human history that goes well beyond notions of uniqueness. The Nazi will to murder all the Jews and the abyss of the abasement inflicted upon the victims place the Holocaust in a dimension of tragedy beyond comparison and analogies” (Mintz 39). It is this model that Mintz argues has held sway in the United States, thanks in part to its most prominent spokesperson, Elie Wiesel and

his role in shaping the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. The other model, which Mintz dubs “constructivist,”

stresses the cultural lens through which the Holocaust is perceived...Cultures, like individuals, can of necessity comprehend historical events only from within the set of their own issues and interests...acts of Holocaust memorialization, whether in the form of museums, monuments, or days of remembrance, will always reflect as much about the community that is doing the remembering as the event being remembered. (Mintz 39-40)

Put differently, the exceptionalist model holds that meaning inheres directly in the event of the Shoah and in the artifacts (be they the physical camps, the collections of hair or shoes, or in the photographs), while the constructivist model stresses that meaning is socially produced and contingent on time, place, and context.

These two models of reception should sound familiar to most folks with even a passing familiarity with literature, philosophy, or the social sciences: we are back in the Culture Wars.² The exceptionalist approach would seem to align neatly with a Modernist and positivist conception of the world where meaning exists in objects and empirical observation by knowing subjects can decipher that meaning. The constructivist approach would seem to align with a postmodern approach which rejects the knowing agent in favor of a socially and discursively constructed subject whose ability to know anything is circumscribed by history, culture, education, gender, race, class, etc. There is, within the discourse on the Shoah, however, a problem with this neat alignment that makes sorting through my ambivalence about PETA’s exhibit more difficult. The difficulty lies in how history is conceived of in the exceptionalist and constructivist approaches.

For the exceptionalist, “the Holocaust becomes the event that refutes and shatters the idea of man as it has been established in the liberal thought of the West. The belief in reason that was the legacy of the Enlightenment and the belief in the rapport of the human spirit with the world that was the legacy of Romanticism—all of the this was exploded by the fact of the crematoria” (Mintz 55). Thus, the exceptionalists would seem to lay claim to all of the anti-Enlightenment critiques of postmodernism as well as eschewing all belief in historicism as the progressive unfolding of Reason toward a better world. The constructivist model, on the other hand, stresses continuity with the past and the future; it demands that the Shoah not be thought as rupture, but merely as the most extreme and horrific example of tendencies that have been developing for centuries and which continue today and which Reason can address.

The Holocaust on Your Plate exhibit is, as a “vulgar” analogy, without question an emergence from the constructivist model, albeit a confused emergence (I shall have more to say about this point below). The argument that “the methods, machinery, and logic used in the concentration camps were deeply interconnected with the rise of modern factory farms” (Prescott 2) takes its power from an understanding of history as cumulative and progressive. This is the exact argument made by the historian Reivel Netz about barbed wire: “the extension of the use of barbed wire from the control of animal to the control of human movement was not a perverse but a natural development of its capacities” (Netz 20). That is, the *telos* of barbed wire, invented in 1873, was the concentration camp. As long as barbed wire, slaughterhouses, and other apparatus of the extermination camp are still with us, the risk always exists that we will slide into barbarism again. The political imperative then, as Theodor W. Adorno has said, “is that Auschwitz not happen again” (Adorno “Education” 191).

The exceptionalist mode, on the other hand, understands the Holocaust as a historical singularity, without any possible comparison. Ariella Azoulay explains the discourse this way: “at the center of the discourse concerning the Holocaust stands a deviant, unique, rare, and extraordinary event comparable to none other . . . the uniqueness of the Holocaust will not be allowed to concede ground before the uniqueness of any other event” (61-62). *As such*, the Shoah cannot happen again. In a sense, the responsibility for those of us after Auschwitz is not to a political will that it not happen again (since, as singularity, it cannot); the imperative is rather to *remember*. It is at this intersection of political demand for action and historical/ethical demand for remembrance that the Holocaust on Your Plate exhibit must be situated.

Representation and Knowledge

The exhibit itself “consists of eight 60-square-foot panels, each showing photos of factory farm and slaughterhouse scenes side-by-side with photos of earlier victims of exploitation and slaughter in Nazi concentration camps” (PETA press release). The aim of the exhibit is “stimulating contemplation of how the victimization of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and others characterized a ‘life unworthy of life’ during the Holocaust parallels the way modern society abuses and justifies the slaughter of animals” (PETA press release). How do the eight panels stimulate contemplation? The answer rests on how we understand the photographic images.

Photography was long thought to be a neutral means of presenting the world *as it really is*. “The Enlightenment valued empiricism, the belief that experience, especially of the senses, is the only source of knowledge. Photography seemed the perfect Enlightenment tool, functioning like human sight to offer empirical

knowledge mechanically, objectively, without thought or emotion” (Pultz 9). In this conception, the world exists in front of a camera lens that records events without comment, interference or bias. As Roland Barthes thinks it, this is precisely the virtue of photography:

What the photograph reproduces to infinity has only occurred once: the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially. In the Photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else: the Photograph always leads back to the body I see; it is the absolute Particular . . . (Barthes 4)

This would seem to be precisely the conception of the photographic image that the Holocaust on Your Plate exhibit trades in. In their arrangement, the photographs, as reproductions of what cannot be reproduced but which had a factual existence *in front of the camera*, function as evidence. The photograph is an unquestionable reality that demands the absolute belief of the viewer.

This unquestionable reality of the photograph, of the camps and the slaughterhouses as they are depicted, is possible only within a positivistic conception of photography. What I mean by this is that, stripped of any context detailing the circumstances of the production of the images, the photographs contain within themselves their own meaning. The fact that PETA can pick up the exhibit and drop it off in whatever city they wish without modifying it only further underscores this point. The viewer, in front of these eight panels, is to understand that what s/he is looking at is an absolute reality, or rather two absolute realities (the Shoah, the slaughterhouse) and that these realities in some way *mean the same thing*.

Such a conception of meaning situates the exhibit not within the constructivist model of reception that it seemed to operate from within but rather within the exceptionalist model, upholding the inherence of meaning within the events of the Shoah independent of context. By laying claim to a positivist use of the photographic images, however, the exhibit moves into the realm where the Shoah becomes a singularity, a non-repeatable event that is unique. The thrust of the exhibit is not to argue for a conception of the Shoah that differs from the one popularly received (which is a “moral consensus” in America), but rather to suggest that slaughterhouses are, objectively and obviously, part of this same constellation of meanings, apparatus, and political questions. What the exhibit presumes is that a viewer comes to the exhibit with an existing set of assumptions about the Shoah and it makes no attempts to problematize these assumptions, no matter what they are. In this way, the exhibit *does* move dangerously close to using the remembrance of the victims of the Shoah in the service of some other end (even if it is an end that is justifiable), if only because it makes no demands at all

on the viewer to question what s/he might think about the Shoah (which is likely a product of pop cultural representations).

The danger here is that the Shoah, through the exhibit's reliance on photography, becomes understandable and easily explained; or, what's worse, immediately intuitible through the simple act of looking. Discussing the work of filmmakers Alain Resnais and Claude Lantzmann, Ariella Azoulay writes:

Both Resnais and Lantzmann are opposed to memory as a purposeful activity whose role is to understand the past or to transmit its lessons to the future. Both of them come out against economies of memory centered on the practice of the gaze—the investigative gaze or the incisive gaze—whose aim is to present the spectator a meaningful story, which features causal development and a teleological structure, a readable story based on convictions amenable to decipherment, a story that ostensibly evokes an identification with it, a tangible story that provides visual evidence. (Azoulay 57)

The difficulty, for Azoulay and also Resnais and Lantzmann, is that such a functioning of the gaze inevitably turns the representation into a spectacle, something which I think the PETA exhibit is thoroughly guilty of. The function of this spectacle is glossed by Azoulay in the following way: “A spatial attitude toward horror stands at the basis of the ethics of the modern gaze. The body—wounded, mutilated, shot, beaten, disfigured, dying—is the very heart of the spectacle in the public sphere. It is the object of a desire to see, to see more, to blow up the body, to open it to the gaze, to penetrate into the body (corpse) and allow it to appear” (Azoulay 78). The spectacle does not confront the spectator as a call to remember or to act, it is the object of an insatiable *desire to see* which is part and parcel of the entire hegemony of modern visual communications. Here, the exhibit moves into the same space of deterritorialized yet omnipresent images of death that we know from televised broadcasts of war, the circulation of images of Saddam Hussein's sons' corpses, and the now numbingly familiar images of airplanes flying into the World Trade Center. Rather than invitations for serious consideration, these spectacles fulfill little more than scopophilic desire.

Andrea Liss, in her book on photography and the Shoah, claims that, “what is at stake in the picturing of the Shoah is precisely what idioms are presented in the name of bearing witness” (Liss 9). She situates her concern at the juncture of intelligibility and justice:

What would it mean to create a representation of the Holocaust that would render it accessible, easily understandable? Among the many dangers of such an impossible formulation would be to place the events in the framework of the normal, as if they could

be historically assimilated. If the Holocaust could be falsely assimilated through too facile explanations, it risks being explained away, covered over. The impulse may well be to do the events justice lest they remain in obscurity, but the gap between the acts of cruelty and their vindications is too vast for justice to fall into any sense of its normal place. Hence, Lyotard's notion of the *différend*, the sign, and the reminder that justice in the case of the Holocaust goes far beyond any justice that could be granted through legal procedures and either-or modes of argumentation. (Liss 118)

The risk of placing the Shoah in "the framework of the normal" is more dangerous than Liss signals here. Adorno reminds us that "the word that is designed to be understood becomes, precisely through this process of calculation, a means to degrade those to whom it is addressed to mere objects of manipulation and to harness them for purposes that are not their own" (Adorno "Words" 191). That is, the risk faced by making the Shoah intelligible is that it becomes an advertisement, something that circulates in the already existing networks of capital without any recourse to questioning or undermining the system. If the Shoah can be historically assimilated, does it risk being an aestheticized object of visual pleasure like so many others? In presenting the Shoah and slaughterhouses in this way, might PETA be doing the opposite of what they hoped? Instead of ushering in animals into the "moral consensus" of American society around questions of killing, does it not open the way for a further aestheticization of the suffering of animals?

(Bio)Politics (Revisited) and Witness

The problem gets further complicated when one considers the ultimate political aim of PETA: the expansion of liberal democratic notions of "rights" to animals. My concern, noted earlier, that such "rights" are proving inadequate to protect human lives in the current political scene, coupled with the realization that the concentration camps were possible because of the ease with which such rights can be suspended (The Nuremberg Laws), makes me quite skeptical of such a project. My skepticism is strictly pragmatic. While I support all attempts to extend legal protection to animals and to force nation states to honor the rights already granted to human and non-human animals, I do not think that either the humans across the globe already in camps or the animals suffering everywhere can wait for rights to protect them. A project which seems more promising, drawn from the work of Giorgio Agamben, but which revises a key aspect of his thought, would be to create a political situation in which *zoe* is not the direct object of political power, coupled with an ethical commitment from each of us, independent of laws and nation states, to do whatever we can to immediately halt camps wherever they

arise.³

Agamben's concern is with tracing how human life is reduced to *zoe* for political purposes, thus becoming the *homo sacer* in the realm of biopolitics. In using Agamben's thought to situate a response to the analogy offered by the PETA exhibit, I am rejecting Agamben's insistence on human life as the only life capable of politics.⁴ Agamben is concerned with how "thought" can create something he calls "form-of-life" which makes it impossible for power to function directly on *zoe*. Such a form-of-life, were we able to bring it about for both humans and non-human animals, would open the way for a world in which not only Auschwitz but also slaughterhouses would "not happen again."

Agamben writes that

Thought is form-of-life, life that cannot be segregated from its form; and everywhere the intimacy of this inseparable life appears, in the materiality of corporeal processes and of habitual ways of life no less than in theory, there and only there is there thought. And it is this thought, this form-of-life, that, abandoning naked life to "Man" and to the "Citizen," who clothe it temporarily and represent it with their "rights," must become the guiding concept and the unitary center of the coming politics. (Agamben *MWE* 11-12)

This rejection of the concept of "Man" along with "rights" would seem to echo the concern with an absolute rupture in history that the exceptionalist model of Shoah reception holds. I find Agamben's rejection compelling: abandoning the concept of rights seems to be an utterly pragmatic move in the current moment. To my thinking, this further opens a possibility for including non-human animals in whatever the "coming politics" might be. Agamben's political writings would seem to be demanding what we might call a "new idiom" for political thinking, one that is more or less incommensurable within our current discourses.⁵ It is the possibility that a new discourse might provide a means of combating and resisting the globalized terror of transnational capitalism, daily visited upon the *zoe* of human and non-human animals alike, that I am drawn to here.

When I suggested that the PETA exhibit was a confused emergence from the constructivist model of reception, what I meant is that the possibility of an analogy between the Shoah and something else only exists within a constructivist framework, and because PETA demands a political response to the Shoah as something still functioning, it participates in a certain discourse of postmodernism. However, PETA makes a political claim to a liberal democratic framework of "rights" and also makes a claim to meaning directly

inhering the photos of the victims (which is not possible within the constructivist model), thus participating in a discourse of modernity. In this case, the two models of reception outlined by Mintz do not easily equate with the positions of modernism/postmodernism. We must acknowledge that neither “modernism” nor “postmodernism,” and neither the constructivist nor the exceptionalist model can either fully account for the exhibit or help us to make complete sense out of what our response should be.

My sense is that my response to the exhibit, that is my inability to stop thinking about and deep ambivalence over its use of representations, has a lot to do with the conflicting and uncertain philosophy and epistemology underlying it. If I reject PETA’s goal of simply including non-human animals within the liberal democratic and spectacular order of human politics (with its rising body count among the supposedly “protected”), and I am unable to make sense of the claims to knowledge and history that the exhibit mobilizes, what possible “way forward” can I suggest?

I think that by reading the exhibit in a certain way, one which is perhaps not so much against what PETA was driving at, but situated within an entirely different framework, we can get something important from the act of looking. It seems to me that the images in the exhibit do, in fact, point us to a *differend*: “the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim” (Lyotard *D* 9). In this situation, neither the victims of the Shoah nor the animals in the factory farms have recourse to an accepted language in which to make their case known to us. Here, “in the differend, something ‘asks’ to be put into phrases, and suffers the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away” (Lyotard *D* 13). What form does this “asking” take?

. . . someone speaks to me; he places me under an obligation. . . . What kind of an obligation? The obligation to retell. But not necessarily to my teller. . . . I am obliged in the way of a relay that may not keep its charge but must pass it on. . . . It is clear that it is not a question of first understanding, no! First, one acts from the obligation that comes from the simple fact that I am being spoken to, that you are speaking to me, and then, and only then, can one try to understand what has been received. (Lyotard *JG* 35-42)

It is this demand from the Other, from the victim of the Shoah and the animal in the factory farm, that must be responded to. The “asking” is a demand for witness, and this is exactly the reason why the exhibit became *punctum* for me. Given that Lyotard’s concern is with how the question of witness used to deny that the Shoah happened (“in order for a place to be identified as a gas chamber, the

only eyewitness I will accept would be a victim of this gas chamber . . . there is no victim that is not dead; otherwise, the gas chamber would not be what he or she claims it to be. There is, therefore, no gas chamber” (Lyotard *D* 3-4), we must think of “witness” otherwise. We need a conception of witness such that we can speak to the differend of the victims of the Shoah and the animals in the factory farm.

Giorgio Agamben, in his book *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, provides one possible conception:

Precisely insofar as it bears witness to the taking place of a potentiality of speaking through an impotentiality alone, its authority depends not on a factual truth, a conformity between something said and a fact or between memory and what happened, but rather on the immemorial relation between the unsayable and the sayable, between the outside and the inside of language. *The authority of the witness consists in his capacity to speak solely in the name of an incapacity to speak.*” (Agamben *RA* 157-158)

Such a conception, which allows us to speak on behalf of those who suffer but who cannot speak directly for themselves (because of a differend), is what we are asked for. It matters little that we do not understand, for as Claude Lantzmann reminds us: “There is an absolute obscenity in the project of understanding . . . this refusal of understanding [is] the only possible ethical and at the same time the only possible operative attitude” (in Liss, 117). Following from this, would it not be obscene for me to “understand” what happens in the factory farms? Is not the ethical gesture to acknowledge that the suffering of the animals is beyond anything I can rationally account for and *because of this* demand that it cease immediately?



The Holocaust on Your Plate exhibit, as PETA intends it, does not ask this of me (PETA intends me to add animals into my pre-existing “understanding” of the Shoah). Rather, the faces themselves and incommensurable space between the faces of the humans and the faces of the non-human animals makes a demand of me to speak, even as I am incapable of speaking. I am incapable of speaking because what I am seeing is not possible to understand, but *for that very reason* I must speak. When I speak, I demand that *zoe* cease to be the direct object of politics and that the bodies of human and non-human animals be excluded from camps. And by my speaking the obligation to retell falls on all who hear.

End Notes:

1. I use the term “Shoah” throughout the essay instead of “Holocaust.” The reasoning I follow is sketched out by Giorgio Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz*. As he notes, “the unfortunate term ‘holocaust’ (usually with a capital ‘H’) arises from this unconscious demand to justify a death that is *sine causa*—to give meaning back to what seemed incomprehensible” (28). He traces the “unfortunate”ness of the term to two problems: a) the etymological relation of the word to sacrifice (often of animals) *for a purpose*, and b) the term, beginning in 1189, has a history of anti-Semitic use (28-30). In using Shoah as the preferred term, I still risk subsuming the events into some comprehensible realm: Andrea Liss, in *Trespassing Through Shadows*, notes that “although the term *Shoah* tends more toward implications of metaphysical doubt than toward punishment, it still resonates

with the concept of divine retribution” (Liss 4). In the end, Shoah seems to be the least overdetermined and dangerous word.

2. The so-called “culture wars,” which have been the subject of innumerable analyses since the 1970s, generally are conceptualized as fights between a theory-driven “relativistic” Left that supports identity politics, poststructuralist textual analysis, and either an expansion of the Canon of “Great Books” or doing away with such a concept altogether on the one side, and a humanistic, Great Books program-supporting Right that supports unitary-meaning hermeneutic textual analysis (think E.D. Hirsch), patriotism, and “common culture.” While this has played out largely on college campuses (so-called minority studies programs, “political correctness,” debates about curriculum [the Canon]), there are many who would read most political, cultural, and media debates as part of the wars. For the purposes of this essay, what I want to evoke is “one Truth” versus “many truths,” where the former is associated with a Modernist Right and the later is associated with a postmodernist Left. I would like to note that here, and in many places in the essay, I am not using “modernist” and “postmodernist” in precise ways or associated with specific thinkers (Hegel, Marx, Foucault, Baudrillard, etc.). I am, instead, using these terms as they get thrown around in common parlance in various manifestations of the “culture wars.”
3. This would entail, among other things, a commitment to veganism, support for those people willing to risk their lives to get lives out of camps (those who hid people from the Nazis, those who break into and remove animals from the farms, etc.), as well as a commitment to putting pressure on industries, nation states and NGOs that operate directly on naked life (protest, boycotts, letter writing campaigns, etc.).
4. Agamben’s thesis that only human life is capable of politics has to do with how he conceives of thought: “I do not mean by this the individual exercise of an organ or of a psychic faculty, but rather an experience, an *experimentum* that has as its object the potential character of life and of human intelligence. To think does not mean merely to be affected by this or that thing, by this or that content of enacted thought, but rather at once to be affected by one’s own receptiveness and experience in each and every thing that is thought a pure power of thinking” (*MWE* 9). It seems to me that this conception is due, largely, to the influence of Martin Heidegger, whose *Being and Time*, defines human being as Dasein, where “Dasein is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by

the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it” (Heidegger 32). This connection is expanded in Agamben’s thought when he discusses “the face” and “the open.”

5. Cesare Casarino, in his recent book *Modernity at Sea*, has called this project non-dialectical communism and he sees it in the work of Giorgio Agamben, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and Maurice Blanchot. He notes in these writers a concern with “rescu[ing] that desire that goes by the name of communism from political disrepute and historical oblivion” (Casarino 146).

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