

Zakhor/Remember

The Civic Museums of Rome and memory through art

Boaz Arad - Centrale Montemartini | Vardi Kahana - Museo dell'Ara Pacis

Dani Karavan - Palazzo Braschi | Simcha Shirman - Museo di Roma in Trastevere

Micha Ullman - Galleria d'Arte Moderna | Maya Zack - Museo di scultura antica Giovanni Barracco

“Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past.

Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you.”

(Deuteronomy, 32:7)

The contemporary age coincides with a historic moment that is among those most haunted by obligations of remembrance. In 1955, ten years after the end of the Second World War, Primo Levi wrote a brief text on the memory of the camps, declaring his distress over noting that “in Italy at least, far from being an important part of our history, the subject of the extermination camps is in the process of being completely forgotten” (*Deportati, Anniversario* in “Torino”, 1995).

Memory is necessary today because, throughout the world, we are witnessing the growth of movements that aim to deny the extermination camps and the millions of deaths. It is even more necessary today because the survivors are disappearing.

Zakhor (Remember) is a categorical imperative woven through the whole of Jewish tradition, appearing no fewer than 222 times in the Torah in its various articulations. As Yosef Haym Yerushalmi has stated: “The Hebrew Bible seems to have no hesitations in commanding memory. Its injunctions to remember are unconditional, and even when not commanded, remembrance is always pivotal” (*Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, 1982).

This word is often linked to another admonition: do not forget. It would appear redundant, but rabbinic literature explains to us the importance, since Biblical times, of preserving memory and handing it down from one generation to the next.

Contrary to Theodor W. Adorno’s statement on the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz – a statement that expresses doubt as to whether critical thought itself can grapple with extermination –, artists have sought to set the processes of memory in motion by stimulating our perception: art as a bearer of messages, as an instrument of knowledge, as an expression of history. In this way, artists, like witnesses, survivors, and all who have been perpetuating memory for decades, do not allow time and death to cast “what’s gone” into oblivion. It is with these words that Paul Celan defined the Shoah, marking the laceration of history into its “before” and its “after” Auschwitz. Everything that happened is gone.

Zakhor/Remember is an exhibition project conceived as a reflection on the past and on its elaboration in the present. The evanescence and inconsistency of the work transmitted by the monitor, as well as the fact of finding it decontextualized from the host venue’s exhibition itinerary, aims to lead the public to reflect upon how Nazism was an absolute evil for the whole world. The medium becomes the message: the work that is presented before our eyes might not have existed had the “Final Solution” been brought to its completion.

The murderer of millions of people not only ended their lives, but also deprived humankind of what they might have been able to produce, and not only in strictly cultural terms. The viewers are thus invited to ask themselves a disturbing question: how much culture was taken from humankind? The loss cannot be quantified.

The artists and their chosen works, each displayed in a Civic Museum of Rome, deal with issues of the Shoah from different perspectives, from provocation to profound reflection, from accusation to resilience. All come from families swallowed by the trauma of the Shoah, and nearly all are second-generation, which is to say born after the Second World War to parents who lived in Europe under the Nazi regime and suffered its horrors before reaching the land of Israel. Using a variety of media ranging from photography to video, from sculpture to the environment, the artists in the exhibition have inherited a feeling of emptiness and loss that accompanies their lives and art. Thus, at Museo dell'Ara Pacis, Vardi Kahana (Tel Aviv, 1959) presents *Three Sisters* (1992), a snapshot immortalizing the artist's mother Rivka with her sisters Leah and Esther while, with a dignified gaze, they display their left forearms tattooed with three consecutive numbers: A-7760, A-7761, A-7762, tragic signs that have become a part of their identity. The photograph on display at Museo di Roma in Trastevere, *Whose Spoon Is It?* (2011) by Simcha Shirman (Germany, 1947), depicts only a spoon, rendered by the artist as a sort of still life, a testimony that becomes a free interpretation of reality. The video by Maya Zack (Tel Aviv, 1976) *Counterlight* (2016), exhibited at Museo Barracco, focuses on the individual condition of the Romanian Jewish poet Paul Celan and his family, to underscore how the Nazi-Fascist delirium struck families, interpersonal relationships, love, and affections with the aim of erasing the very concept of humanity. Dani Karavan (Tel Aviv, 1930-2021) is at Palazzo Braschi with the video *Man walking on railways* (1989), which features a man walking on railroad tracks that end at a wall where the number of the last prisoner freed at Auschwitz emerges.

As for Boaz Arad (Tel Aviv 1956-2018), Centrale Montemartini presents a slide show of the exhibition held at Tel Aviv's Center for Contemporary Art in 2007, on the occasion of which the artist presented *The Nazi Hunters Room*. Lastly, Galleria d'Arte Moderna is exhibiting the image of the environmental sculpture *Seconda Casa. Gerusalemme – Roma*, done by the artist in Rome on the occasion of International Holocaust Remembrance Day in 2004.

The six works are thus transformed from a place of representation into a vital space for action, in addition to being a cultural moment of reflection.

(Giorgia Calò)