

Resistance: Finding ways to represent Aktion T4

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Traditionally, in holocaust education and museum representations of the holocaust, there has been an emphasis on the use of 'hard' evidence, and especially on first hand testimony, to the exclusion of other approaches. Why, then, in *Resistance*, did we turn to the arts?

Availability of evidence and testimony

The particularities of Aktion T4 differ from the larger holocaust in certain key respects. Of those who died in the disabled holocaust, there is no first hand testimony. The day that people were transported to the death centres was the day they died. It is a different holocaust from that of other targeted groups: since people did not survive, there is no one to bear witness for themselves or for those who died.

At best, we can learn only second hand. Since disabled people were categorised as patients, however, rather than prisoners (as for those in concentration camps), medical confidentiality precludes their details from being made public. Information on individuals is known only where families have given permission to the memorial centres. Unlike many of the other targeted groups, impairment and disability do not necessarily carry a bond of culture or continuity within families, so disabled family members' holocaust experiences are often not passed on to future generations. Since many families remain reluctant to claim disabled relatives, or this excruciating history, as their own, they remain almost entirely unknown.

In addition, there is much more limited archival footage (newsreels, etc) from the disability holocaust compared to other targeted groups. That which does exist generally needs extensive interpretation for viewers to 'read' it effectively. For example, newsreel from concentration camps is often graphic and unambiguous; footage from Aktion T4 is more often hard to decode, particularly by an audience that might still hold ambivalent feelings about disabled people's human 'worth'.

In the early stages of preparing *Resistance*, one major museum made it clear that, without academically verified, documentary based testimony, they would not consider showing the work. With such an approach, the invisibility of the

disabled holocaust becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy in which disabled people are excluded from the historical record – unless we turn to other representations.

Art opening doors

Art can be a powerful tool in communicating the events of the holocaust and its larger lessons. In giving us glimpses into other people's lives and broadening our view of the world, it can connect audiences to experiences, ideas and emotions at the most profound level. Art can portray a human story within its broader social context and, in asking difficult questions and presenting viewpoints not seen elsewhere, it can leave us thinking and debating long after the work is officially over.

We can only make change for the things we know about; the most exciting art brings to light lives on the margins and invites the onlooker to become a part of creating change. In showing art in a range of settings, from galleries to schools, festivals to community settings, art can reach audiences who wouldn't usually touch art, and audiences who wouldn't usually touch history, and take both by surprise. When Resistance audiences articulate their reactions to the work, they typically use the language of cognition ('I never knew...') rather than emotion (though they sometimes talk about the feelings of characters/actors/voices). However, it is quickly clear that it is feeling that drives their connection to the issues raised and their realisation of personal responsibility in finding solutions.

Art does not make social and political change, but it can open doors. There is no shortage of academic work on all aspects of the holocaust. Even the 'hidden' holocaust of disabled people has been written about extensively within academia, but it is not a medium that reaches the general population, who remain largely unaware of this history. Through the Resistance project, my task has been to use the creative media to locate a starting point, a means for people to approach a difficult history and a complex present in order to find a role for themselves in creating change.

In making the work and taking it to the public, I have realised that it is this emotional investment that is at the core of an audience's commitment to making change. As Resistance has toured, I have watched it connect with 11-year olds and into old age, people a lifetime away from the events it describes and those who survived the larger holocaust, people for whom the experience

is far from their own and others who profoundly recognise their own lives in the work. In the words of one viewer:

“One of the most powerful things I have ever experienced. And I think the first thing my son has seen that helped him fully understand the Holocaust. Up to now it felt more like something that happened to other people – and to see the group around the kitchen table remembering the things they loved, I think brought it home for him. I was so amazed by it, I went back to see it twice more. Each time I saw more and took more away from the experience. “

Within holocaust education, creative representations, based in trusted research, may become imperative for future representation. As time moves on and living survivors from other targeted groups diminish, the arts may become our primary means of communicating the holocaust and may yet show itself as the most compelling way to ‘speak’ to generations to come.

The research context

The process of making of Resistance – from the historical drama to the various installation components and to the linked events that formed part of the touring schedule – was based in extensive research, including the following elements:

1. Consultation of key and supplementary texts. A small selection is listed below.

- Burleigh, M (1994) *Death and Deliverance: “Euthanasia” in Germany 1900- 1945*, Cambridge University Press
- Friedlander, H (1995) *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to Final Solution*, Chapel Hill
- Gallagher, HG (1995) *By Trust Betrayed: Patients, Physicians, and the License to Kill in the Third Reich*, Arlington, VA: Vandamere Press
- George, U (Ed) (nd) *Transferred to Hadamar: An English catalogue about the Nazi ‘euthanasia’ crimes in Hadamar*, Landeswohlfahrtsverband Hessen
- Hurlstone, N (2000) *The Relations Between Installation Art Practice and the Presentation of History with Particular Reference to the Nazi Oppression of Homosexuality 1933-1945*, Manchester Metropolitan University, PhD thesis
- Poore, C (2007) *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture*, University of Michigan Press
- Zimbardo, P (2007) *The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil*, Rider Books

The story of Elise Blick, on whom the historical drama is centred, is drawn from an account of events in one of the ‘observation institutions’ where people

were held before transportation to the death centres. Gallagher (above) tells of a woman recorded only as 'EB' who "worked as a cleaner at the institution, and never missed a day's work. Nevertheless, her name was on the list. When the bus arrived, she followed her orders seemingly without hesitation or qualm. Calmly, she walked alone, out the doors of the hospital to the waiting bus. When she got to the bus, EB just kept on going, behind and not into the bus" (129).

In the Resistance drama, Elise sweeps the institution. Since she doesn't speak and staff assume she does not comprehend, but she watches the buses leave filled with patients and return empty. When it's her turn, she knows what's in store. Incarcerated, it appears there is little she can do, but Elise, just like 'EB' makes a bid for escape.

2. Early on in the production process, a research trip to two of the Nazi death centres, Bernburg and Hadamar, was undertaken by the director of the work, the three actors from the Conversations film, and other members of the production team. As well as touring and spending time in the buildings and grounds, now open as memorials, we had detailed discussions with memorial staff, consulted archives and handled artefacts.

Visiting the primary spaces in which Aktion T4 took place had a profound influence on all elements of the project, including scripting the historical drama, the actor's depth of connection to their characters, selecting and lighting of locations, pace of editing, and so on.

Within the crematorium area of Bernburg, small portrait photographs of people who died under Aktion T4 lined the walls. It was these images that moved us above all else and took our sense of those who died beyond statistics to flesh and blood, to people like ourselves. The portraits would become a key visual theme for the installation, defining the framing of actors, in both the historical film (particularly during the selection scene) and conversation piece, as well in the portrait montage on the banners during the audio voices section of the work.

3. Transcripts from the Nuremberg Trials were a key source material. They influenced all elements, but particularly the script, which drew closely, and often quoted, oral evidence, as well as reflecting period phrasing. The words of the medical director during the staff celebrations is closely modelled on these transcripts.

Elements of the film and installation influenced by this research process include:

- Living conditions in the institution and the pattern of inmates' days
- Food rations and the importance of food for distraction and survival
- Briefing of new staff, including the ideological reasoning amongst staff
- Bureaucratic and selections processes, including language used and errors made
- Range of impairments targeted; diversity of those selected
- Staff celebrations to mark the dispatch of their 1000th inmate to the death centre (Note that one viewer felt this was the one element in the drama that went 'over the top'. In fact, what appears in the film is a considerably muted version of a staff party in Hadamar's crematorium to celebrate their 10,000th death, held in the presence of the swastika-decorated body.)
- The 'ordinariness' of people caught up in extraordinary circumstances. Staff, for the most part, are striking in their ordinariness – ignorant, afraid, self-interested but not, for the most part, intrinsically evil. Their involvement in Aktion-T4 relies upon their belief in the inmates as 'other'.
- The lie that Aktion-T4 was secret or that inmates did not understand what lay ahead. The mechanics and resistance in bus loading scenes.
- Authenticity of details in locations, props and costumes, including sourcing a period bus, as well as period medical and rehabilitation equipment.
- Musical soundtrack was influenced by German music of the period, including children's nursery rhyme Hoppe Hoppe Reite.