

ART AND TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE.

SITES OF RECONCILIATION IN ARTEMIS ALCALAY'S WORK¹

by Eugenia Alexaki

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*The future will be bereft of first-hand witnesses of Nazi persecution. Yet they will continue to be present through the testimonies they have given us in various forms, which we can and must keep on spreading around. We ought to come up with new approaches. Above all, we must respect the various legacies they have bequeathed to us. We don't need to come up with a specific model with regard to what these eyewitnesses wanted to tell us and what we can do with their testimonies.*²

*As long as art is the beauty parlour of civilization, neither art nor civilization is secure.*³

On 9 May 2019, the “Artivism: The Atrocity Prevention” Pavilion, an art exhibition organized by the Auschwitz Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (now changed to Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities), was launched at the 58th Venice Biennale, aiming to investigate the role of the arts as a mechanism of prevention and reaction against massive

¹ My warmest thanks go to Artemis Alcalay for the long discussions we have had on her work over the course of the last five years, the information and material she has put at my disposal, and, first and foremost, her trust and friendship. Artemis Alcalay (b. 1957) studied painting at the Athens School of Fine Arts under Yiannis Moralis and Dimitris Mytaras, and set design under Vassilis Vassiliadis. She subsequently enrolled in postgraduate courses in Venice and New York University, while also attending photography and embroidery classes. For her solo and group exhibitions and her work as a set and costume designer see <http://alcalay.com/gr>.

² Susanne Urban, «ZEUGNIS ABLEGEN. Narrative zwischen Bericht, Dokumentation und künstlerischer Gestaltung», in: Dagi Knellessen, Ralf Possekel (ed.), *ZEUGNISFORMEN, Berichte, künstlerische Werke und Erzählungen von NS-Verfolgten*, Stiftung “Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft”, Berlin 2015, p. 42.

³ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 1934.

violence and human brutality.⁴ On that very day, initially in Mainz, Germany, and three days later in Vienna, a number of exhibitions dedicated to survivors of the Nazi atrocities were launched, as part of the *Gegen das Vergessen* (Lest We Forget) project by German-Italian artist Luigi Toscano.⁵ In Vienna, oversized photographic portraits of Jewish, Sinti, and Roma people, alongside other survivors of the Nazi concentration camps, were exhibited at the Heldenplatz (Heroes' Square). By the end of the month, the exhibition had been vandalized a total of three times. On the third occasion, the vandals ripped apart the Jewish survivors' photos with knives, removing the eyes and most of the face of the persons depicted, and drawing anti-Semitic slogans and swastikas over the texts accompanying the exhibition.⁶

Contemporary art increasingly delves into contested and traumatic issues, difficult stories, social inequalities and human rights violations, genocides, and other extreme historical experiences. An ever-growing number of artists, curators, museums, activists, social institutions, and organizations have been bringing injustice, violence, and horror to the spotlight, fostering awareness among the public through artistic interventions – unfortunately, much to the discontent of “certain milieus”.

In the last few decades, artists active in either solo or collective projects refrain from a conventional depiction of horror, injustice, and evil, exploring instead alternative avenues through which artistic media can contribute to the historical and symbolic dispensation of justice, the processing of historical trauma, and the development of mature societies reconciled with their divisive, traumatic, or contested past. Consequently, there is an increased interest on interdisciplinary research that eschews essentialist and positivist perceptions regarding the omnipotence of art, lucidly and critically examining how the arts can offer a constructive commentary on the post-

⁴ The exhibition press release mentions that “[m]ore than seventy years after the Holocaust, genocide and other mass atrocities remain a constant threat to global peace and security. The violence occurring today in, for example, Syria, Sudan, Yemen, and Burma, serves as a daily reminder of the devastating consequences of the international community's failure to act. Recognizing the warning signs of mass atrocities is an essential step in preventing them and the key to taking action. With this in mind, the Auschwitz Institute worked to organize “Artivism: The Atrocity Prevention Pavilion”, the first exhibition of its kind, located at the intersection of art, human rights, and the prevention of genocide”. Curators: Luca Berta, Francesca Giubilei, Kerry Whigham. Duration: May 2019 – November 2019. Palazzo Dandolo, Venice. See more at <https://www.artivismexhibition.com/>.

⁵ <http://gegen-das-vergessen.gdv-2015.de/de/projekt>

⁶ <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/ausstellung-gegen-das-vergessen-portraits-von-ns-ueberlebenden-in-wien-zerstoert/24387324.html#>

traumatic present, raising awareness of the historical or social trauma and division as well as serving as a widely appealing medium on the quest for transitional justice and social peacebuilding.⁷

Therein lies the crux of the present essay: whether and how contemporary artistic practices can manifest and process injustice, trauma, and extremities but also offer sites of historical empathy, justice, peace, and reconciliation.

History as a subject matter and historical research as a tool have been increasingly prominent in contemporary art already by the late 1970s.⁸ Numerous artists have been conducting archival research ever since, attempting to engage audiences with mnemonic processes and critical reflections of the past, keeping them alert and enabling them to comprehend how the above is being represented in the public sphere. In addition to photography and the audio-visual means dominating this field, nowadays artists also utilize other media, e.g. collecting oral testimonies, participating in or even holding academic conferences, getting audiences involved in participatory projects, creating ephemeral installations and realizing performances at various institutions, educational and otherwise, thus promoting a socially engaged art that challenges dominant narratives of the past and the present.⁹

⁷ Lizelle Bisschoff, Stefanie Van de Peer, *Art and Trauma in Africa: Representations of Reconciliation in Music, Visual Arts, Literature and Film*, I.B. Tauris, London & New York 2013. Clara Ramírez-Barat (ed.), *Transitional Justice, Culture, and Society: Beyond Outreach*, Social Science Research Council, New York 2014. Sebastian Kim, Pauline Kollontai, Sue Yore (eds.), *Mediating Peace: Reconciliation through Visual Art, Music and Film*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge 2015. Ereshnee Naidu-Silverman, *The Contribution of Art and Culture in Peace and Reconciliation Processes in Asia – A Literature Review and Case Studies from Pakistan, Nepal, Myanmar, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh*, Danish Centre for Culture and Development, Copenhagen 2015. Olivera Simic, “Arts and Transitional Justice”, in: Olivera Simić, *An Introduction to Transitional Justice*, Routledge, London & New York 2017. Arnaud Kurze, Christopher K. Lamont, *New Critical Spaces in Transitional Justice. Gender, Art, and Memory*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2019.

⁸ Mark Godfrey, “The Artist as Historian”, *October* 120 (Spring 2007), pp. 140-172.

⁹ See, for example, Dipti Desai, Jessica Hamlin, Rachel Mattson, *History as Art, Art as History. Contemporary Art and Social Studies Education*, New York, Routledge, 2010, pp. 7-14, and also the chapter “Artists in the Realm of Historical Methods: The Sound, Smell, and Taste of History” from the same volume, pp. 47-66.

TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

According to contemporary social and political theory, transitional justice constitutes a form of historical justice.¹⁰ As per the report of the European Parliament, “Transitional Justice focuses on how societies address the legacy of past human rights abuses, mass atrocities, or other forms of severe social trauma, including genocide or civil war in order to build a more democratic, just, and peaceful future”.¹¹ Furthermore, in a report submitted by the former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan it is stressed that transitional justice refers to “the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society’s attempts to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation”.¹²

Lia Kent observes that transitional justice is increasingly linked with peacebuilding, emphasizing that from the 1990s onwards the United Nations and other international organizations have been systematically treating and promoting the tools of transitional justice as fundamental, i.e. as a prerequisite for the rebuilding and peacebuilding of post-conflict societies – an endeavour that runs parallel to discourses on human rights, civil society, good governance, and democratization. According to Kent, both transitional justice and peacebuilding have been enriched and updated with more well-coordinated and comprehensive approaches and practices thanks to the direct link

¹⁰ See the chapter “Istoriki dikaosyni: Oi treis morfes pou diakrinoun i koinoniki kai politiki theoria” [Historical Justice: The Three Forms Proposed by Social and Political Theory], in: *Katanoissi tis diaforetikotas sti Rodo: Paradosiakoi kai neoi alloi* [Understanding Diversity in Rhodes: Traditional and New Others], Panagiotis Kimourtzis (scientific associate), Rhodes 2016, pp. 20-30. See also the editors’ introduction in the present volume.

¹¹ Number of report: 20060830STO10183, as part of the public hearing held by the European Parliament’s Subcommittee on Human Rights on 28 August 2006. Retrieved at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+IM-PRESS+20060830STO10183+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

¹² Kofi Annan, *The Rule of Law in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies* (New York 2004), as quoted in: Sanja Bahun, “Transitional Justice and the Arts: Reflections on the Field”, in: Claudio Corradetti, Nir Eisikovits, Jack Volpe Rotondi (eds.), *Theorizing Transitional Justice*, London & New York, Routledge, 2016, p. 154. According to a definition provided by the International Center for Transitional Justice, the mechanisms, tools, and institutions involved in a process of transitional justice form the basis for legal, social, and historical justice and are accordingly adapted to the prevailing conditions of post-conflict and transitional societies. See Anja Mihr, “Transitional Justice and the Quality of Democracy – From Democratic Institution Building to Reconciliation”, in: Anja Mihr (ed.), *Transitional Justice: Between Criminal Justice, Atonement and Democracy*, SIM Special No. 37, Utrecht 2012, p. 11-12.

drawn between the two fields. However, she also elaborates on how these two processes, transitional justice and peacebuilding, can interact with each other only to a limited extent.¹³ On the one hand, in post-conflict and divided societies, wherein the dispensation of justice takes precedence over peacebuilding measures, this interaction can lead to a delicate set of circumstances that could potentially rekindle conflict and prevent social reconciliation. On the other hand, the prioritization of social peace may lead to an incomplete accountability and, on the long run, undermine efforts towards a solid and sustainable peace.¹⁴

The term *reconciliation* refers to the acknowledgment of past injustices, the quest for truth, contrition, forgiveness, securing individual safety as well as social co-existence and peace.¹⁵ It may take several generations for this process to be completed. Nevertheless, it is considered a prerequisite for securing social cohesion in post-conflict societies. Whereas older interpretations perceived reconciliation and transitional justice as two distinct processes, current approaches imbue the concept of reconciliation with the qualities of a more comprehensive goal, a broad and long process encompassing a set of transitional justice and democratization measures in post-conflict societies.¹⁶

¹³ Lia Kent, “Transitional Justice and Peacebuilding”, in: Olivera Simić, *An Introduction to Transitional Justice*, Routledge, London & New York 2017, p. 201.

¹⁴ Sebastian Kim, Pauline Kollontai, Sue Yore (eds.), *Mediating Peace: Reconciliation through Visual Art, Music and Film*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge 2015, pp. 4-6.

¹⁵ “*Reconciliation* could also mean the acknowledgment of guilt (always individual rather than collective) or responsibility (usually collective); a confession of the perpetrated injustice; a public apology and an actual, confessed repentance on the perpetrator’s part; putting legal mechanisms of justice into effect; holding individual people accountable rather than accentuating collective guilt; symbolic or material reparation; asking for the victim’s forgiveness; tolerance; co-existence; good neighbourliness; respecting diversity; vowing for a mutually binding framework of principles, values, and practices safeguarding peace and fostering collaboration, trust, and solidarity in the present and the past”, in: Giorgos Kokkinos, *To Olokaftoma. I diacheirisi tis travmatikis mnimis – thytes kai thymata* [*The Holocaust. Managing Traumatic Memory – Perpetrators and Victims*], Gutenberg, Athens 2015, pp. 313-314.

¹⁶ Anja Mihr, “Transitional Justice and the Quality of Democracy – From Democratic Institution Building to Reconciliation”, pp. 33-34. In her overview of the evolution of the concept of reconciliation, Mihr distinguishes between three stages of reconciliation: individual, societal, and state reconciliation, while simultaneously stressing that the concept of reconciliation has come under criticism. In connection to the theoretical framework and reconciliation practices also see Mohammed Abu-Nimer (ed.), *Reconciliation, Justice and Coexistence. Theory and Practice*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2001.

Preoccupied with the consolidation of democracy and the achievement of reconciliation – individual, social, and political – between opposing sides and historical opponents, Anja Mihr questions the omnipotence of the conventional, legal tools of transitional justice, instead calling attention to the paramount importance of civil society, i.e. a free development of transitional justice tools by citizens working towards tolerant and reconciled societies.¹⁷

ART AND JUSTICE – ART AND RECONCILIATION

Artistic works running the gamut of creative expression – theatre, painting, sculpture, photography, installations and performances, architecture, literature, cinema, dance – and tackling trauma, division, historical extremities, and injustice, as well as investigating modes of communication between historical opponents, are increasingly classified as instruments of transitional justice, becoming accepted, even hesitantly so, as alternative mechanisms of peacebuilding and reconciliation. Transitional justice scholars now consider the law and legal means as inadequate for effecting substantial change and transforming society. Necessary as though they may be, legal procedures, the accountability for human rights violations, the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions do not suffice for the achievement of sustainable peace, democracy, or reconciliation.¹⁸ That being said, despite the common assumption that the production and perception of art enable, on certain conditions, the processing of historical, social, and cultural trauma, both on an individual and on a collective level, the theorization of the intersection and interaction of art, transitional justice, and reconciliation remains quite limited.¹⁹

¹⁷ Anja Mihr, *Regime Consolidation and Transitional Justice: A Comparative Study of Germany, Spain and Turkey*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018, p. 13. Regarding the role of civil society, journalists, artists, and other actors of public life in the transitional justice processes, and also for the significance of the active presence of these processes in the public see Chrisje Brandts & Susanne Karstedt (eds.), *Transitional Justice and the Public Sphere. Engagement, Legitimacy and Contestation*, Oñati International Series in Law and Society, Hart Publishing, Portland 2017.

¹⁸ Olivera Simić, “Portraits of the Dead and the Living: Bosnia and Rwanda 20 Years on”, pp. 307-334, in: Chrisje Brandts & Susanne Karstedt (eds.), *Transitional Justice and the Public Sphere. Engagement, Legitimacy and Contestation*, Oñati International Series in Law and Society, Hart Publishing, Portland 2017, p. 311.

¹⁹ See Pablo de Greiff, “On Making the Invisible Visible: The Role of Cultural Interventions in Transitional Justice Processes”, in: Clara Ramírez-Barat (ed.), *Transitional Justice, Culture, and Society: Beyond Outreach*, Social

Pablo de Greiff argues that the insufficient theorization of the relationship between art and transitional justice, along with the emphasis on conventional “transitional” means as far as implementation is concerned and the exclusive focus on required legal changes, tend to overlook the individual and cultural preconditions involved in the transitional process, thus effectively impeding social change. According to de Greiff, the plethora of pertinent artistic projects and even the work of legal entities – museums, monuments, and memorial sites – in this field has neither been sufficiently acknowledged, nor has it been satisfactorily integrated into the process of transitional justice.²⁰

In an attempt to establish the typology of the interaction between art and transitional justice, Sanja Bahun detects three distinct types: i) the “thematic”, so to speak, relationship (for instance, representation through the art of law and injustice, i.e. works of art using, as their starting point, trials, legal procedures, legal imputations, etc.); ii) the “monument”, where art, literally and symbolically, serves as a means of memory and commemoration, and iii) the “legal” relationship, which, according to Bahun, encompasses all those cases in which support for and establishment of laws and legislative regulations in transitional societies is attempted via the arts, as well as cases in which specific rules are being instituted to protect the arts in post-conflict societies.²¹

Art obviously cannot be considered the answer to all problems. Even more so, the artist should not be perceived as a judge, jury, and executioner. Nevertheless, artistic interventions in processes aimed at the acknowledgement of crimes, transition, and reconciliation can raise visibility of the victims. More significantly, artistic interventions can focus on specific individuals and their unique life stories. According to de Greiff, therein lies the crucial difference of art in comparison to other

Science Research Council, New York 2014, pp. 13-14 and Olivera Simic, “Arts and Transitional Justice”, p. 224, 242.

²⁰ Pablo de Greiff, “On Making the Invisible Visible: The Role of Cultural Interventions in Transitional Justice Processes”, pp. 13-14, 16. Nevertheless, there have been cases in which the arts were purposely included in the transitional justice tools by the state mechanism, a chief example being the role of the arts in the transitional justice processes in South Africa. There has been a rich body of literature on transitional justice processes in South Africa. See for example Eliza Garnsey, “The Site and Sights of Transitional Justice: Art at the Constitutional Court in Johannesburg”, in: Arnaud Kurze, Christopher K. Lamont, *New Critical Spaces in Transitional Justice. Gender, Art, and Memory*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2019, pp. 44-62.

²¹ Sanja Bahun, “Transitional Justice and the Arts: Reflections on the Field”, in: Claudio Corradetti, Nir Eisikovits, Jack Volpe Rotondi (eds.), *Theorizing Transitional Justice*, London & New York, Routledge, 2016, p. 155.

means dispensing symbolic justice.²² Olivera Simić suggests that, in societies who have experienced massive human rights violations, very few people will appeal to the courts and even fewer people will have an actual legal claim on compensation and will ultimately receive it. Instead, many survivors will be the recipients of a symbolic reparation, as in the form of a general apology. Others yet may receive nothing at all. Therefore, the importance of documenting and memorializing crimes against humanity in the public eye through alternative processes such as the arts is crucial, insofar as works of art can draw the interest of a much broader audience about the dispensation of justice. Meanwhile, artists dealing with historical and social injustice in their work frequently give voice and facilitate access to all those individual experiences and stories that have been ignored or otherwise insufficiently integrated into public history.²³

*Artistic projects have the potential to break through silence and to serve as a symbolic form of public acknowledgement and recognition that crimes happened. Such acknowledgment carries, as expressed by Haldemann, an ‘idea of a “different kind of justice”, one that is less vindictive and state-centred and is more caring and responsive to human suffering’. Art can foster ‘precious sites of reflection’, either collective or solitary, which in turn can allow creative and critical distance from the artwork. Artistic installations may have a ‘commemorative function’ and represent some sort of ‘temporary monuments’; they ‘acknowledge that something has happened and have testimonial value and value of symbolic reparation’. Art can facilitate negotiation between victims, parties responsible for wrongdoings and their communities. In that sense, the audience is actively engaged in an act of moral reparation by co-creating a ‘shared understanding’, with the capacity to produce empathy, space for insight and a public discussion forum about events and themes often pushed under the carpet by state officials.*²⁴

²² Pablo de Greiff, *ibid*, p. 18.

²³ Olivera Simić, “Arts and Transitional Justice”, in: Olivera Simić, *An Introduction to Transitional Justice*, Routledge, London and New York 2017, pp. 223-248, pp. 224, 226.

²⁴ Olivera Simić, “Arts and Transitional Justice”, p. 226. Here, Simić suggests that art has the capacity to serve as an alternative form of dispensation of justice, as described by Frank Haldemann in his essay “Another Kind of Justice: Transitional Justice as Recognition” (*Cornell International Law Journal*, volume 41, issue 3 (2008), pp. 675-737, available at <https://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/cilj/vol41/iss3/3>).

As a politically defined process, transitional justice is not inherently fair and does not, by definition, work towards reconciliation. One cannot rule out the possibility of conventional, legal mechanisms and tools being ultimately utilized to serve the interests of the winner, spinning a narrative far removed from reconciliation and trauma healing. Accordingly, artistic practices may validate or question the dominant transitional narrative, contribute to a fair and just memory, or sustain a continuing division. Artists are capable of shedding light to perpetrators and survivors, victims and victimizers alike, providing opportunities for the presentation of conflicting narratives over historical or social traumas; that is, they can help people in divided societies to envisage a future of reconciliation. However, specific aesthetic and overall artistic modes may also foster and encourage division, particularly in cases of extreme historical events such as genocide or civil war.²⁵ Artistic practices, much like transitional justice, are political actions and should therefore be critically examined – in the cases presented here – as to the extent they contribute to a contemplation of memory, jointly shaping an effective social space wherein trauma can be processed and healed.²⁶

MONUMENTS AND TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

The erection of monuments in the wake of atrocities is a well-established, standard practice of dispensation of symbolic justice. However, only recently did monuments and memorial sites begin to be examined and assessed in the context of transitional justice processes, i.e. as to their positive

²⁵ Olivera Simić, “Portraits of the Dead and the Living: Bosnia and Rwanda 20 Years on”, pp. 308-310. One of the artistic projects hailed as a success and analysed in Simić’s essay is *Rwanda 20 Years: Portraits of Reconciliation*, this photographic project tackles the concept of forgiveness 20 years after the Rwandan genocide, having perpetrators and survivors in the same shot. Comprised of photographs, interviews, and videos, the project was organized by the NGO Creative Court. South African photographer Pieter Hugo and Croatian-Dutch photographer Lana Mesić were commissioned to capture on film the very nature of forgiveness. The Creative Court organization was founded in Hague in 2013, aiming to produce and support artistic works dealing with justice and peace: <https://www.creativecourt.org/index.php/intro/>.

²⁶ Olivera Simić, “Arts and Transitional Justice”, pp. 241-242. In her essay, Simić ultimately prioritizes legal procedures and all kinds of legal reforms over artistic interventions. However, she acknowledges the substantial contributions of art in the context of transitional justice, stressing its significance as a symbolic gesture against collective amnesia and historical apathy, as an important tool of symbolic justice and moral reparation. “It would be naïve”, she mentions, “to suggest that the arts alone can bring long-lasting peace, but artistic projects can provide a necessary means of reflection on past or present and ultimately hope for the future”.

or negative effect.²⁷ In their capacity as an artistic form, monuments have a rather “problematic” past, having been linked with normativity and the hegemonic discourse. On the whole, traditional monuments tend to idealize the past, representing great, heroic moments, and the sacrifices of the nation. As works of art, they typically occupy a prominent position. They are exposed to the public eye, open – at least potentially – to practically everyone and certainly not only to those who traditionally enjoy art within the narrow confines of museums and galleries. Despite being placed in public spaces, though, traditional monuments rarely create a vital public space wherein people can actually interact with each other. Their often-privileged location, their visual vocabulary and typically pompous style may inspire awe but do not automatically constitute a locus of social interaction, a dynamic public space. It is not uncommon, even in the case of monuments serving as city landmarks, for people to not be aware of what exactly they commemorate or of citizens being oblivious to them. Moreover, conventional, existing monuments that are not removed in the aftermath of armed conflicts may have a negative effect on the transition from violence to peaceful co-existence, generating and reproducing hostility between the warring factions.²⁸

As early as the 1960s contemporary artists were harshly criticizing traditional public monuments. Ever since then, public and especially state-sponsored monuments, monuments standing unaltered in time, monuments imposing on audiences a specific notion of what is worth remembering, admiring, and respecting, have been the artistic genre par excellence that experimental artists and scholars alike have been attacking or been sceptical about. In 1992, James Young was emphatically stating that “once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember. In shouldering the memory-work, monuments may relieve viewers of their memory-burden”,²⁹ introducing the concept of counter-monumentality and the term *counter-monument* in the historiography of public monuments. According to Young, the

²⁷ Susanne Buckley-Zistel, Annika Björkdahl, “Memorials and Transitional Justice”, in: Olivera Simić, *An Introduction to Transitional Justice*, p. 249. For monuments as tools of transitional justice see Susanne Buckley-Zistel, Stefanie Schafer (eds.), *Memorials in Times of Transition*, Intersentia Publishing, Cambridge, Antwerp, Portland 2014.

²⁸ Susanne Buckley-Zistel, Stefanie Schafer (eds.), *Memorials in Times of Transition*, p. 13.

²⁹ James E. Young, “The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today”, *Critical Inquiry*, volume 18, issue 2 (1992), p. 273. As mentioned by Young, the term *counter-monument* (Gegendenkmal) had already been used in 1985 by conceptual artists Jochen and Esther Gerz to describe their work *Monument Against Fascism* in Harburg-Hamburg.

counter-monument is a clearly inverted monument. It “looks” at the viewer. As Cecily Harris, commenting on Young’s notion of counter-monument, eloquently puts it: “[T]he counter-monument seeks to reverse the usual process whereby a monument ‘seal[s] memory off from awareness altogether’, relieving the spectator of the onus of painful memories and allowing her the comfort and ease of knowing the monument exists, doing the memory-work for her. Returning this burden of memory to the spectator is a crucial characteristic of a counter-monument”.³⁰

Successive generations of artists have since expanded the concept of *counter-monument*, proposing instead the absence of monuments, the immaterial monument, the unrealized or temporary and participatory monument, precisely in order to oppose the normative function of public monuments, which inhibit a reflective public memory by way of aestheticizing national myths, ideological constructs, or dominant historical narratives, conveying to the public a distorted version of mnemonic obligation,³¹ or altogether erasing this obligation by dint of their very materiality.³² As Young notes, “to the extent that we encourage monuments to do our memory work for us, we become that much more forgetful. In effect, the initial impulse to memorialize events like Holocaust may actually spring from an opposite and equal desire to forget them”.³³

Counter-monuments neither deny that artistic commentary on traumatic historical events is possible and legitimate, nor do they fall into the trap of absolute negation. Instead, they oppose the authority of the conventional monument that is variously and ideologically charged through its connection to dominant historical narratives, thus investigating anti-monumental approaches of loss and trauma. Ephemeral, disappearing, collaborative, participatory monuments, photographic monuments or other types of “digital monuments”, a case in point being the Digital Monument to the Jewish Community in the Netherlands,³⁴ interactive monuments, public events, performances,

³⁰ Cecily Harris, “German Memory of the Holocaust: The Emergence of Counter-Memorials”, *Penn History Review*, Volume 17, Issue 2 (Spring 2010), p.45, available at: <https://repository.upenn.edu/phr/vol17/iss2/3>. James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1993, σ. 28-30.

³¹ Fayen d’Evie, “Dispersed Truths and Displaced Memories: Extraterritorial Witnessing and Memorializing by Diaspora Through Public Art”, in: Peter D. Rush & Olivera Simić (eds.), *The Arts of Transitional Justice: Culture, Activism, and Memory after Atrocity*, p. 76.

³² James Young, *At Memory’s Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2000, p. 94.

³³ James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, p. 5.

³⁴ <https://www.joodsmonument.nl/en/>.

and other performative artistic practices are now systematically proposed by artists, artistic institutions and collectives, even by groups of citizens, for commemorating unprecedented historical events.³⁵ Far from denying memory, these counter-monuments de-aestheticize or at the very least attempt to de-aestheticize memory, challenging its definitive representations and the capacity of art to convey historical reality in a strictly representational and mechanistic manner.

ARTEMIS ALCALAY, “GREEK JEWS HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS”

*My only document is the number on my arm.*³⁶

*In Auschwitz there are no names, their names were their numbers.*³⁷

*So, I never met my grandfather, nor did I tell you anything about him. I only attempted to generate an immaterial Place of encounter between us and those who left us. A place of love and healing.*³⁸

I don't know if this is political art. Or is this psychotherapeutic art? Or is this an ethical proposition? I don't know who I am. Sometimes I'm thinking of myself as

³⁵ On Holocaust counter-monuments, see James E. Young, “Memory and Counter-Memory. The End of the Monument in Germany”, *Harvard Design Magazine*, Number 9 (Fall 1999), available at: <http://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/9/memory-and-counter-memory> and Cecily Harris, “German Memory of the Holocaust: The Emergence of Counter-Memorials”. In a post counter-monumental approach, so to speak, stylistically conventional sculptural monuments are also examined as potentially effective tools for creatively engaging audiences at large with the memory and legacy of the extreme historical experience known as the Holocaust. To that end, Victoria Nesfield argues that the sculpture *Freddie Gilroy and Belsen Stragglers* (2011) by artist Ray Lonsdale, situated on the beach of Scarborough, suggests an alternative way of utilizing art for involving a community with the Holocaust history, notwithstanding the conventional artistic means employed by the artist. See Victoria Nesfield, “*Freddie Gilroy and the Belsen Stragglers*: Engaging Scarborough with the Holocaust”, in: Sebastian Kim, Pauline Kollontai, Sue Yore (eds.), *Mediating Peace: Reconciliation through Visual Art, Music and Film*, pp. 37-56.

³⁶ “My only document is the number on my arm from Auschwitz – 15726” – that was the answer given by survivor Ester Landau-Rubin in 1950, in response to the International Tracing Service questionnaire with regards to the existence of written testimonies from her internment period at the Nazi concentration camp. See Susanne Urban, „*Mein einziges Dokument ist die Nummer auf der Hand...*“: *Aussagen Überlebender der NS-Verfolgung im International Tracing Service*, Metropol Verlag, Berlin 2018, pp. 16-18.

³⁷ Dragan Kujundzic, “Archigraphia. On the Future of Testimony and the Archive to Come, 2002”, in: Charles Merewether (ed.), *The Archive*, Whitechapel Gallery & MIT Press, London & Cambridge, Mass 2006, p. 174.

³⁸ Artemis Alcalay, “Synagogue Blockade 1944”, lecture at the Jewish Synagogue, Athens, 30 March 2019.

*what Donald Winnicott, the psychoanalyst, called a “good-enough mother”:
someone who protects the process in which others can develop and create
something in an atmosphere of trust – develop the ability to cope with life –
though often damaged and wounded by their experiences. Perhaps projects of the
kind I’m working on help those who are ready to take advantage of them, to make
that leap.*³⁹

Artemis Alcalay began working on the visual/research project “Greek Jews Holocaust Survivors” in 2012. Her thorough research and communication, in Greece and abroad, with survivors of the Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen concentration camps resulted in 67 photographic portraits of individuals originating from the flourishing, pre-WWII, Jewish communities in Greece.⁴⁰

Alcalay started photographing Holocaust survivors in the context of another photographic project titled “home: a wandering”.⁴¹ The house-shaped artworks she had been creating from various materials already by the late 1990s and which she presented in the exhibition “home: an installation” in 2010⁴² also served as a medium upon which the artist drew in her quest for new ways of viewing and interpreting daily life, as expressed in the “home: a wandering” series. By placing her “houses” outside the artist’s studio and the gallery space, in the city and in nature, she encounters various people and situations. Public spaces, abandoned houses, rundown neighbourhoods, gardens, the countryside, Holocaust survivors, immigrants, the people next door, places of worship, cemeteries: these are not just serving as backdrop for her “house” artworks. The

³⁹ Excerpt from an interview of Krzysztof Wodiczko at PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), see <https://art21.org/read/krzysztof-wodiczko-architecture-and-therapy/>. Born in Warsaw in 1934, the Polish-Jewish artist tackles topics such as trauma, memory, immigration, and human rights. Based in the United States from the 1980s onwards, Wodiczko’s work is a scathing critique of traditional monuments, redefining the meaning of public art via ephemeral events.

⁴⁰ More specifically, Alcalay has photographed a total of 45 Auschwitz-Birkenau survivors and 20 Bergen-Belsen survivors to date. Diamantina Vivante-Trieste, the daughter of Corfiot Jews who left the island after the brutal 1891 pogrom and were subsequently displaced in Trieste, and the Hungarian Eva Karasso, who married a Greek Jew survivor and lived in the Thessaloniki Jewish community, were included as honorary, “non-canon” entries. All data compiled from Artemis Alcalay’s archive.

⁴¹ Originally presented at the Beton 7 gallery in Athens in 2012. A publication of the same title was released that year by Kapon Editions.

⁴² Exhibition at the 7-Zalokosta gallery (25 May – 19 June 2010). Also see “Artemis Alcalay – home: an installation”, solo exhibition catalogue with texts by Elisavet Plessa.

notion of *home* and, of course, Alcalay's own works, is expanded and invested with new meaning.⁴³

For her "houses", Alcalay used wooden stretchers, one square, one triangular, and one rectangular, in order to shape a plain, archetypal form of a house. Subsequently, she "filled" those "houses" with her own hand-woven, hand-painted textiles and embroidery, ribbons, paintings, and photographs, effectively combining the various techniques she had been using up until that point. Through the processes and materials with which she has chosen to work, concepts such as *materiality*, the *everyday* and the *familiar* are inscribed in her "house"-artworks. Wandering with her "houses" through the city, already rich with collective memories, new images and stories are emerging – thus, through participatory processes, new, unpredictable visual/social narratives and new modes of perception are generated.

Throughout her artistic career, Alcalay has consistently explored the concepts of *identity*, *memory*, *past*, *trauma*, and *loss*.⁴⁴ By focusing on Greek Jews Holocaust Survivors, she denounces the role

⁴³ *I decided to abandon the safety of my studio and draw on the notion of home as a tool for exploration and communication in an attempt to understand reality, and as an occasion for delving into my personal, inner labyrinth.*

I wandered around a lot...

I breathed in the air of the country, in groves, gardens, and beaches.

I admired monuments. I came across homeless people and drug addicts in the city centre.

I climbed terraces. I went down basements and abandoned houses covered with graffiti.

I was moved by strikes, protests, and fires.

I talked with Holocaust survivors and discussed with immigrants.

I visited old cemeteries and entered churches...

I played with children.

In *Artemis Alcalay – home: A wandering*, Kapon Editions, Athens 2012, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Zanet Batinou had called the "Memory" exhibition (Fournos, Athens, 1999; Jewish Museum of Greece, Athens 2000 & Jewish Museum Frankfurt, 2001) "a tender, personal journey; a calm experience of pain, fragmentation, hope, and redemption". In her text for the exhibition catalogue, Afroditi Kouria observed that "using the language of art to make her own statement about the Holocaust today, Artemis Alcalay exorcises ghosts by invoking elements, symbols and practices from an underlying universal cultural bedrock, reaching down into the primeval depths of time. The personal and the universal, the scholarly and the folkish, the primary and the artful, the time of history, the time of memory, personal-subjective time, the fleeting and the timeless all converse and are creatively united in the purifying melting pot of art". See *Artemis Alcalay – memory*, solo exhibition catalogue, texts by Zanet Batinou, Georg Heuberger, Afroditi Kouria, Jewish Museum Frankfurt, 14 September – 11 November 2011, p. 7, 42.

of the artist as craftsman and challenges the established concept of an artwork as the *unique masterpiece*. In this case, it results in a comprehensive work in progress, creating a project at once individual and collective. The whole endeavour constitutes an artistic work, which, at the same time, is not purely artistic in nature. It may be a project that manifests itself in these specific photos, but the overall artistic action is tantamount to the place and network that are being generated in the process; to be more exact, the various *topoi*, individual and social, the ties connecting the artist, throughout her research, with the survivors, their families, their close ones, and the people taking care of them. In this endeavour, Alcalay is, first of all, a mediator, while also assuming various other roles: artist, researcher, interlocutor, and a fellow human.

In this project, the “calm experience of pain, fragmentation, hope, and redemption” and art as a “purifying melting pot” transcend the individual artwork. Alcalay employs methods of historical inquiry and social science research methods. Through her personal and artistic “take”, she composes a locus/network of people, experiences, and extreme stories, as well as stories of life and survival – a crucial parameter in order for us to interpret the survivors’ portraits. The entire network of people, the photographic and audio-visual material compiled, oral testimonies, and the secondary material produced every single time this project is publicized anew,⁴⁵ do not only constitute important documents for researchers, but also suggest an alternative way of confronting traumatic historical past and art itself.

Nowadays, the role of art as research is being systematically examined.⁴⁶ Artists and scientists from various fields (social sciences, humanities, life sciences etc.) examine specific research questions from an interdisciplinary and intersectoral perspective. How can an artist contribute to a research question? How can art as an epistemological tool offer new or divergent approaches which conventional epistemological methods are unable to provide? In this respect, Alcalay’s project is not exclusively art, in the conventional sense of the word, nor it is just research. She records

⁴⁵ A case in point is Heinz Kounio, whom Alcalay met and photographed in Thessaloniki in 2014, as part of the *Greek Jewish Holocaust Survivors* project. When Kounio visited the eponymous exhibition at Instituto Cervantes in 2016, alongside his wife and daughter, he had another discussion with the artist on camera.

⁴⁶ Regarding the theory that investigates the possibility of theorizing artistic actions as epistemological method see Graeme Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in the Visual Arts*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks/California, London & New Delhi 2005, 2nd revised edition 2010 and Estelle Barrett, Barbara Bolt (eds.), *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, I. B. Tauris, London 2007.

testimonies and immortalizes the survivors, offering invaluable material to historiography and historical memory, at the same time involving herself, the survivors, and their close ones in a network, ultimately pursuing a joint effort to process the trauma, an interactive, performative process of acknowledgment, introspection, and catharsis. The various media – research, photography, interviews, audio-visual recordings, interpersonal relations – comprise Alcalay’s visual-research project and arguably make it a mechanism of transitional and symbolic justice, offering us images/places of reflection, literal and symbolic, temporary or even permanent opportunities for co-existence, interaction, and a fruitful contemplation on the past and the present, trauma, and reconciliation.

THE PROCESS

The process of approaching and working with these traumatized individuals – people who are sharing their testimonies and are emotionally charged with painful memories – constitutes a complex, demanding endeavour. Respectful of the individual needs and current circumstances of each survivor, and fully aware of the special challenges posed by the advanced age of most of them, and, of course, their extreme experiences, Alcalay’s primary concern has been the people themselves, building a climate of trust and providing them with a sense of safety.⁴⁷

Research for the survivors’ whereabouts begins through common acquaintances or relatives, Jewish communities and organizations all over Greece, and the Hellenic embassy in Israel. Subsequently, the artist explains the project over the phone to the survivors or their children and what they will do together on the day of their appointed meeting. The time and place of the meeting is fixed depending on the survivors’ availability. Most meetings take place over the course of a single day – particularly in cases of survivors living outside Athens and abroad. “I did not mean to wear these people down again or intrude into their daily life by paying them a second visit. I

⁴⁷ The ages of Auschwitz survivors have ranged from 86 to 104 years old from 2012 to this day. In the intervening years, many of them have passed away. The Bergen-Belsen survivors are much younger. They were transferred to that concentration camp under the protection of the then Spanish consul in Athens Sebastián de Romero Radigales. The children and elderly were not instantly put to death upon their arrival there, unlike Auschwitz. Therefore, there are Bergen-Belsen survivors who were interned there as infants. Their ages at the time of the project ranged from 72 to 95 years old.

cannot know in advance how they will emotionally react when they prepare themselves for our interview or in the aftermath of our meeting. I'd rather not upset them again by taking them on a trip down memory lane, to the darkness of the concentration camps".⁴⁸

We invariably begin our conversation with small talk about their health, the weather, their family, their children and grandchildren, their spouses and whether the latter are alive or not; news from Greece, if they live abroad, their birthplace; the language or languages they speak depending on their place of residence. If they don't speak Greek, we find a common language or use several languages at once, thus creating a new, hybrid language. I introduce them to my life partner, who almost always accompanies me in these meetings – his assistance and contribution to my work are invaluable.⁴⁹ We begin chatting about them/us, about my life and work. I give them catalogues of my exhibitions, mainly the book home: a wandering, by Kapon Editions, which includes a picture of the first Auschwitz survivor I ever photographed, Sandra Matsa Cohen, my journey, the aim of this visit and research. I slowly bring up the history of my family during the Nazi occupation and our losses, our common acquaintances who perished or survived. Discreetly, I ask for whatever information they can provide. Often, members of the family who are present during the session, or caregivers, depending on the place, participate in our discussion, thus enriching our meeting with the survivor and the information regarding the survivor's environment.

When we are a bit more familiar with each other and they have begun to trust us to some extent, we have a look around the house, the rooms, every space, the lighting, the furniture, the colour on the walls, and so on. I always ask them about their favourite spot in the house, the armchair and posture they feel most comfortable with. I begin shooting them, always making sure I am not wearing them down. We take a break whenever they need something. Initially, we proceed to work without the accompanying "house"-artwork. The survivors pose on their own. Without a

⁴⁸ Interview to Eugenia Alexaki, 30 May 2019.

⁴⁹ As Alcalay has explained to me, Nikos Seferiadis' contribution is vital to all the stages and various demands of the project.

specific procedure in mind, I talk with them and keep them busy, making sure that time goes by effortlessly, answering their every question and giving them every clarification they may require.

Gradually, solely in the case of the Auschwitz survivors, I also bring the “house”-artwork into the picture, changing the details of the photoshoot.⁵⁰ We discuss the significance and symbolism of the house-shaped artwork, the home they grew up in and which they have lost, their new home post-WWII, the connotations and memories evoked by the archetypal shape of the stretcher-house to them and to all of us. We discuss the form of the work, the materials, and whatever else has caught their attention. By this time, they are already actively involved in the process and the very composition of the work. They decide how they will hold the “house”-artwork while posing, from which side and in which frame. We change perspectives, spaces, even small furniture or decoration. Occasionally, even clothes!

When it comes to Bergen-Belsen survivors, I seek archival material, letters, passports, documents proving their Spanish nationality, thanks to which they escaped deportation to Auschwitz. They are photographed with these, but I also take picture of their documents in order to include them in my exhibitions.

After the photoshoot, a short interview/video recording takes place, taking into account the survivors’ physical and emotional strength and their desire to go deeper or relive their painful past.⁵¹ Some of them cannot revisit this past. Others may be very moved while narrating their stories or ask me to turn off the camera. I do not follow a typical oral history methodology in my testimonies. I simply wish to

⁵⁰ The house-artworks are literally and symbolically incorporated into the survivors’ portraits, thus serving a dual function: as a thread of familiarization and communication of the photographed subjects with the artist and as a way for spectators to explore and immerse themselves into concepts such as *home*, *loss*, and *trauma*. Also see Zdravka Mihaylova, “Narrative without Words. A Gallery of Portraits by the Visual Artist Artemis Alcalay: The Last Greek Survivors of the Holocaust in the Context of Nazi Occupation and Slave Labour”, in: *Bet Debora Journal III-Jewish Women’s Perspectives*, Frauenpolitik für ein modernes Judentum/Engendering Jewish Politics, Spring 2016. Unpaginated.

⁵¹ A small number of survivors have not been interviewed due to health reasons or the family’s lack of consent. These audio-visual documents constitute a significant archival material which can be further utilized by scholars and artists alike.

*capture their faces and document their life stories – whatever they are willing to share with me, whether it is nostalgia about their happy lives before the deportation to the extreme experience of the Nazi concentration camps, and their lives after the war.*⁵²

At the same time, I have taken pictures of survivors with members of their family or whomever happened to be around on the day I visited them. Also, their own pre-war or post-war photos that could be seen around the house. At the end of the conversation, Nikos usually takes a couple of photos of me together with the survivors or their families.

*I daresay this is a participatory work. For both of us, me and the survivor, the initial anxiety about the “unknown”, curiosity, fear, and pain are transformed into trust, relief, joy, love. It is difficult to bid them farewell, given that a bond is created very quickly due to the limited time, but even more so due to the subject matter and everything we shared – also, perhaps, because we know we will probably never see each other again...*⁵³

The simple tone and lucid manner which Alcalay uses to narrate the process of communication, the photoshoot, and the interviews with the survivors confirm, in my opinion, my original thesis: this is at once a site/topos and a work of art. The essence of Alcalay’s work can be found inside the topos that exists between her and the survivors; a common ground, wherein a claim on justice is attempted, an homage to life – and traumas are somewhat relieved in this manner. On a secondary level, the importance of this visual/research project lies in its occasional presentations,

⁵² The *Centropa* programme (www.centropa.org) shed light to the lives of survivors before and after the Holocaust. See Edward Serotta, “Preserving Jewish Memory, Bringing Jewish Stories to Life: Combining New Technologies, Family Pictures, and the Old-fashioned Art of Storytelling”, in: Nicolas Apostolopoulos, Michele Barricelli, Gertrud Koch, (eds.), *Preserving Survivors’ Memories. Digital Testimony Collections about Nazi Persecution: History, Education and Media*, Stiftung „Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft” (EVZ), Berlin 2016, pp. 149-157, available at https://www.stiftung-evz.de/fileadmin/user_upload/EVZ_Uploads/Handlungsfelder/Auseinandersetzung_mit_der_Geschichte_01/Bildungsarbeit-mit-Zeugnissen/Testimonies_Band3_Web.pdf.

⁵³ Alcalay stays in regular contact with survivors and their families in Greece. With respect to survivors and their families living abroad, she tries to keep in touch via social media, being informed about the latest developments in their lives and keeping them up to date about her project-related activities.

every time the artist is given the opportunity to publicly share with us the faces and experiences of the survivors.⁵⁴

SITES OF RECONCILIATION

The title of the project bears the word “Holocaust”, primarily focusing on the survivors of this extreme and singular historical experience. However, in my opinion, this project, its essence and dynamic, does not adhere to conventional forms of the so-called “Holocaust art”. The horror is absent from the image; it defies description. The persons depicted are not presented as victims or martyrs. They do, however, subtly imply the atrocities perpetrated by a number of people to their fellow humans; they resist historical apathy and amnesia, constituting a monument of life in and of themselves, a site of acknowledgment, symbolic justice, and moral reparation. Alcalay refrains from passing judgment; she conducts research, aiming to raise the public visibility of the survivors – if not a comprehensive access to their life story – before they pass away.

In this specific project, she consciously opts for direct contact with survivors. She chooses to leave behind her artistic studio in order to meet with her fellow humans who survived the National-Socialist mass extermination apparatus; spend time with them; gather important information and testimonies; establish a solid relationship with them and their families so that the artist and the survivors/witnesses can jointly perform a ritual act of memorialization, and, under conditions, reconciliation with the traumatic past on a personal and collective level; create invaluable, both physical and symbolic mnemonic sites that can help us cope with traumas, the past and the present, sites that can serve as opportunities of memory work and historical empathy. I suggest that Alcalay’s artistic/research project should be interpreted in terms of a social site of commemoration, reconciliation, and historical justice, as a multi-layered social endeavour.

⁵⁴ Ann Kaplan suggests that “perhaps paradoxically”, art is a medium for creatively processing trauma insofar as it can ensure the presence of mechanisms for publicizing trauma. She goes on to remark that “[t]rauma can never be ‘healed’ in the sense of a return to how things were before a catastrophe took place, or before one witnessed a catastrophe; but if the wound of trauma remains open, its pain may be worked through in the process of its being ‘translated’ via art”. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture. The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey & London 2005, p. 19.

In this series, Alcalay does not only shift her focus in artistic terms, utilizing diverse means of expression – namely photography – in comparison to her previous work on trauma and memory. She also shifts her conceptual framework as well as her method. By virtue of drawing on first-hand research, tracking down survivors, communicating with them, photographing and interviewing them, the present study on trauma is conveyed through the uniqueness of each survivor. Hence, survivors do not form a general whole; they are not reduced to an amorphous mass. On the contrary, visibility is being asserted for everyone; each of them bears a distinct name, face, and image; each of them carries his/her own life story, evinced in the photographic snapshots and their narratives. The value of human individuality, exterminated in the Nazi death camps, savagely pursued by the inhuman National-Socialist ideological constructs, is vividly personified in the stories and contemplative images of the specific survivors captured by Alcalay's refined perspective. In the photos of the Auschwitz survivors, the numbers on their arms bear sole witness to their monstrous dehumanization.⁵⁵

For the past 20 years, I have been committed to the Holocaust as a visual artist in an attempt to heal the trauma of my grandfather's loss, along with a moral obligation towards personal and collective memory.

Initially, I struggled to represent this unspeakable experience, this extreme, traumatic event, drawing on the innocent perspective of children's art.

⁵⁵ Each individual eyewitness/survivor and their unique experiences are the main focus of a recent research by Susanne Urban that is based on the archival material of the International Tracing Service (ITS), material that had been thus far under-researched. Testimonies by individuals who survived the Nazi concentration camps and their responses to the ITS questionnaires in the early post-WWII years were instrumental in gathering survivor-related information. However, Urban primarily seeks the individual behind the piece of information, as she attempts to "give the floor" to very specific voices and personal stories. She restores the humanity and dignity of the victims as she shifts from the abstract to the specific. See Susanne Urban, „*Mein einziges Dokument ist die Nummer auf der Hand ...*“: *Aussagen Überlebender der NS-Verfolgung im International Tracing Service*, Metropol Verlag, Berlin 2018. In collaboration with Yad Vashem, since May 2019, a great part - 13 million archival exhibits on victims and survivors of the Nazi forces – of the IST archive collection (now known as Arolsen Archives) is available online <https://arolsen-archives.org/>

*[...] Always secretly hoping that one of the survivors was personally acquainted with my grandfather, someone who may have heard something about him, or could have been by his side in those last few hours or moments...*⁵⁶

Memory is an interactive, trans-generational process, as young people invariably learn about the traumatic past through their family stories,⁵⁷ their silences included. Accordingly, reconciliation is a long-term process and could take several generations before it is achieved.⁵⁸ However, time is not a prerequisite per se for “detraumatization” and for laying the “ghosts” passed down from generation to generation. Giorgos Kokkinos underlines the paramount importance of historicizing, symbolizing, and integrating trauma into clearly defined interpretative frameworks: “When historians will, ultimately, be able to lift the ‘veil of collective amnesia’, and grief will move on from a stage of exacerbation to one of assimilation, then the socio-politically and epistemologically defined processes of ‘detraumatization’ will start appearing, slowly and hesitantly at first – processes at the core of which lies the concept of ‘grief work’ (Trauerarbeit) and the multiple processes of working through trauma”.⁵⁹

In this respect, Alcalay’s could be perceived as an effort of “detraumatization”. Gradually building an environment of trust among herself, the survivors, and their families, within which individual traumatic experiences and entire life stories, tough experiences and appalling mnemonic images

⁵⁶ Artemis Alcalay, “Synagogue Blockade 1944”, lecture at the Jewish Synagogue, Athens, 30 March 2019.

⁵⁷ Nicole Immler, “Compensation Practices and the Dynamics of Memory: A Trans-generational Approach”, in: Anja Mihr (ed.) *Transitional Justice: between Criminal Justice, Atonement and Democracy*, SIM Special No. 37, Utrecht, 2012, p. 182. In this text, Immler examines the relationship between compensation practices of Holocaust victims and their descendants in post-WWII Austria and collective/family memory, arguing that pain, fear, mistrust, and traumas remain deeply buried for years and are, in fact, transformed from one generation to the next. She draws a straight line between transitional justice legal measures and the mnemonic processes developed on an individual and family level. Also see Immler’s “‘Too Little, too late’? Compensation and Family Memory: Negotiating Austria’s Holocaust Past”, *Memory Studies* 5(3) (2012), pp. 270–281.

⁵⁸ Anja Mihr, “Transitional Justice and the Quality of Democracy – From Democratic Institution Building to Reconciliation”, p. 45.

⁵⁹ Giorgos Kokkinos, *To Olokaftoma. I diacheirisi tis travmatikis mnimis – thytes kai thymata* [*The Holocaust. Managing Traumatic Memory – Perpetrators and Victims*], Athens 2015, p. 227.

can unfold, Artemis Alcalay proffers an individual, social, and, ultimately, public space for trauma healing and reconciliation with the memory of a singularly, utterly extreme experience.⁶⁰

PHOTOGRAPHIC COUNTER-MONUMENT OF LIFE

Their survival until advanced old age is an inconceivable victory.

The number on their arm is a constant reminder.

*Their gaze, a legacy for the future.*⁶¹

Commenting on the role of photographic snapshots in present era and how they are disseminated through the contemporary, broadband, participatory Internet, Okwui Enwezor mentions a “vast, shapeless empire of images” that gives “the photographic document the aura of an anthropological artifact and the authority of a social instrument”.⁶² At the same time, photography as a tool of contemporary archival artistic practices can interrogate the concept of the archive. As Charles Merewether observes, every photograph is invested with a dual quality: history becomes image and image becomes history.⁶³ It is precisely for this reason that the photographic snapshot and the photo archive occupy a prominent position among the media employed by artists seeking visibility, social and historical justice for those consistently excluded from the dominant national, social, and

⁶⁰ Kokkinos acknowledges the intermediary role of the psychoanalyst – on an individual level – and the historian and artist – on a collective level –, claiming that they can serve as “trans-generational bridges, given that, by virtue of their capacity, they assume, so to speak, the trauma transference on an imaginary level, thus emerging as sites of the multiple processing of trauma and forging functional, meaningful practices, with the expectation that the restructuring of social cohesion is feasible”. Giorgos Kokkinos, *To Olokaftoma. I diacheirisi tis travmatikis mnimis – thytes kai thymata [The Holocaust. Managing Traumatic Memory – Perpetrators and Victims]*, p. 215.

⁶¹ Odette Varon-Vassar, complementary text on Artemis Alcalay’s exhibition *Greek Jews Holocaust Survivors – A Visual Narrative*, Instituto Cervantes, Athens, January – March 2016.

⁶² Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, International Center of Photography & Steidl Publishers, New York & Göttingen, 2008, p. 13.

⁶³ Charles Merewether, “Archives of the Fallen//1997”, in: Charles Merewether (ed.), *The Archive*, London & Cambridge, Mass, Whitechapel Gallery & MIT Press., 2006, p. 160.

historical narratives, and also as a way of tackling historical events.⁶⁴ Photo archives serve as an invaluable source of information, urging us to reflect upon the notions of pain and hope. They work in a performative and didactic manner, serving as evidence as well as encouraging spectators to assume the role of eyewitnesses.⁶⁵

Examining the didactic role of photography in the context of transitional justice, Maria Elander questions the positivist perspectives regarding the evidential role of photography.⁶⁶ She posits that photography, even more so than being a piece of evidence, can forge ties with and among viewers. Photographs are capable of establishing bonds and relations across a community, while also making us contemplate these bonds. Using Susan Sontag's postulations as a framework – the latter had questioned the ability of “photographs of pain” to help us understand, arguing that “[p]hotographs do something else: they haunt us”⁶⁷ – Elander effectively acknowledges the importance of photography as an instrument of transitional justice in her attempt to establish a critical interaction and submit the spectator to a participatory state of empathic viewing.⁶⁸

Barbie Zelizer emphatically notes that “much of our ability to remember depends on images”.⁶⁹ In contrast, though, to the atrocity photos captured by reporters in the first few days after the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps, which are examined by Zelizer, Alcalay does not produce, strictly

⁶⁴ For artistic works utilizing documents, photography, and archive as methodological tools for a creative approach of the past and reflection on the present see Terry Cook, Joan M. Schwartz, *Archives, Records, and Power: From (Postmodern) Theory to (Archival) Performance, Archival Science*, 2, 2002, pp. 172-285. Monika Rieger, «Anarchie im Archiv. Vom Künstler als Sammler», in: Knut Ebeling, Stephan Günzel (eds.), *Archivologie. Theorien des Archivs in Wissenschaft, Medien und Künsten*, Kulturverlag Kadmos Berlin, Berlin 2009, pp. 253-269. Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, International Center of Photography & Steidl Publishers, New York & Göttingen, 2008. Panos Kouros, Elpidia Karampa (eds.), *Archive Public. Epiteleseis Archeion sti Dimosia Techni. Topikes Paremvaseis* [*Archive Public. Archive Performances in Public Art. Local Interventions*] University of Patras, Department of Architecture & Cube Art Editions, Patras & Athens 2012.

⁶⁵ See Olivera Simić, *Introduction to Transitional Justice*, p. 236, where Margarita Saona's views are presented (*Memory Matters in Transitional Peru*, 2014).

⁶⁶ Maria Elander, “Education and Photography at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum”, in: Peter D. Rush & Olivera Simić (eds.), *The Arts of Transitional Justice: Culture, Activism, and Memory after Atrocity*, Springer 2014, New York 2014, p. 60.

⁶⁷ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Picador, New York 2003, p. 83.

⁶⁸ With regard to the concept of *empathic vision* see Jill Bennett's approach, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art*, Stanford, University Press, Stanford 2005.

⁶⁹ Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1998, p. 5.

speaking, photographic documents. Instead of images of pain or horror, 70 years after the Holocaust and with the artist currently in her most mature creative period, she composes an archive of images and a participatory counter-monument of life, consisting of many faces, names, and unique trajectories. She claims a symbolic reparation, a symbolic and historical justice, ultimately aiming at a personal and social reconciliation. Thus, Alcalay achieves what Enwezor, through his research on archival artistic initiatives, had aptly described as the role of artists as bearers of memory, i.e. that within the critical art archive “acts of remembering and regeneration occur, where a suture between the past and present is performed, in the indeterminate zone between event and image, document and monument”.⁷⁰

That is when the strength and determination to immortalise their faces in photographs matured inside me. I wanted to preserve their figure.

I have travelled all over Greece and to many other countries to meet them in person, speak with them and their families, photograph them and record their testimonies. I visited them in familiar surroundings: their homes, synagogues, care homes, hotels, and workplaces.

[...]

Though they shared the same traumatic experiences, each personal story was a source of great emotion, vast knowledge, and sacred heritage.

For me, this journey has been a unique process. I had the opportunity to delve deeper into this period in history, to endeavour, perhaps in vain, to understand it and attempt to transform it into a visual language.

Above all, however, I was fortunate to have met these incredible people, to have made contact with these last surviving witnesses of a bygone era that still feels so close. Their inner strength and attitude towards life has been an invaluable life lesson.

⁷⁰ Okwui Enwezor, p. 47. The concept of the suture/stitch/seam is present in Alcalay’s photographs and in her house-artefacts, all of which have been created through threads and hand-woven textiles. Alcalay’s work with threads and embroidery throughout her artistic oeuvre implies the struggle for a fresh start, starting from scratch, healing traumas through threads that bind together memories, trajectories, entire lives.

I am forever grateful to them.

I never met my grandfather, nor did I tell you anything about him.

I only attempted to create an immaterial Place of encounter between us and those who left us.

A place of love and healing.⁷¹

⁷¹ Artemis Alcalay, “Synagogue Blockade 1944”, lecture at the Jewish Synagogue, Athens, 30 March 2019.