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Souvenir Photograph. Photographic tourism at Auschwitz before the selfie-era

The never-to-be-resolved debate over which kind of memory to preserve, how to do it, in whose name, and to what end. [...] One day, the only thing left standing here will be the memory-tourist, forced to rise and to remember for himself.

James E. Young, *The texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, 1993

Nowadays, in the "selfie-era", we take it for granted that people take photographs of themselves wherever they are. Equipped with a selfie-stick and a smart phone, the most important motive of holiday images are the traveling persons themselves. The quality of the image is not the most important issue, the background serves as a mere accessory, as prove to show that we have been in a specific place.

Especially elder people often complain of the habit to perceive the world through a display and remark that "young people" do not have a real, direct impact with the world anymore.

But is this such a new phenomenon?

Sure, taking photographs has become extremely easy, thanks to digital technology. But souvenir photographs as the ancestor of the selfie are not a phenomenon that has developed in the last ten, fifteen years. It started much earlier: with the availability of cameras and payable film material. And it has developed especially from the fifties of the last century onward. Since cheap instamatic cameras started to appear on the market about five decades ago souvenir photographs are part of our collective visual memory.

OK, we didn't photograph ourselves that much but each other. But is there such a big difference between a classical souvenir photograph and a "selfish"?

When I came to the memorial site of Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1994-1995 on behalf of a project I was supposed to participate in (go through all the visual material – photographs, drawings, films and art work with the aim to make an exhibition: *Representations of Auschwitz*), I made the observation that all sorts of people took their photos under the internationally known camp gate with the inscription "Arbeit macht frei".

No matter to which religion or culture the visitors of the Memorial Site and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau belong, the pattern of behaviour remains almost always the same: On entering the former concentration camp the first thing to be done is to take a photograph under the gate.

I started taking photographs of the people photographing each other. I did not seek any further contact with them. I took images in different seasons: spring, summer, fall and winter since depending on the season different groups of visitors come to Auschwitz. I wanted to know whether there is a behavioural difference between Germans, Poles or Italians, between Christians, Buddhists and Jews, young people and elder ones. Actually, there is no difference at all!

During the nine months of my stay I had time to think about this specific conduct of the visitors and how we deal with remembrance in general.

In connection with the Shoah the shortcomings, contradictions and difficulties in our attitude to remembrance, and our behaviour patterns when faced with the place and symbol of that remembrance, come to light most strikingly. In the end it boils down to taking a *souvenir-photograph*. Well-known behaviour patterns are fallen back on – in this case the photo used as a piece of evidence, as the proof *I was there*. The claim that one is facing up to history and the helplessness in the face of the monstrosity of genocide collide in these material “proofs of remembering”. In Auschwitz this pattern of behaviour takes on absurd dimensions. It crumbles in the face of the “backdrop Auschwitz”. The piece of evidence “I was at Auschwitz”, a declaration which is more than ambivalent, freezes to an unfulfillable pose.

Is it thoughtlessness or helplessness in the face of the real place stigmatized by so much terror that makes us revert to this well-known behaviour pattern as one would use an “emergency break”? Is it the need, in face of the mass murder, which annihilates the individual and only thinks in terms of numbers, to help the individual regain his relevance? Is it the attempt to bring the living evidence that there is a will to prevent Auschwitz ever happening again as Adorno demanded? Is it to demonstrate the autonomy of the individual as “the only true power against the principle of Auschwitz”? Or are we dealing with strategies to prevent us from remembering?

Thus the idea of the installation *Souvenir Photograph* was born.

What started as a more or less spontaneous “photo shooting” was now embedded in a major project where the photographs of the visitors constituted only one part of the entire work.

The second part consisted in a photo installation.

In front of a large colour print (300x250cm) depicting the gate “Arbeit macht frei”, a Polaroid camera stands at an exactly measured distance, so that visitors posing there can have their photograph taken in front of the backdrop.

I ask the visitors to write their comments around the edge of the Polaroid. Through the provocative offer, to allow yourself to be photographed in front of a backdrop that symbolizes the “solution to the Jewish question” and the wave of terror and destruction caused by Nazi-Germany that swept through Europe and has become an icon for evil, the visitors would be encouraged to reflect on their own unquestioned reflexive response to remembrance.

I hoped the verbal level would encourage a discussion about remembrance rituals. My assumption that visitors would not be inclined to be photographed in this setting had to be revised on the occasion of a first attempt during an exhibition in Cologne in 1994, Germany.

When the work was shown in the frame of the exhibition *Representations of Auschwitz – 50 Years of Photographs, Paintings and Graphics* at Pałac Sztuki in Krakow in 1995 the curators unfortunately did not have the courage to show the installation as designed with the Polaroid camera but only the backdrop and the images taken under the gate. Even in Weimar a year later the work was presented without the camera.

In the same period I put the piece on show at Bordone Gallery in Milan. There as well, we did not include the camera but for different reasons: at the time “funny” installations with cameras were quite popular in the Italian art scene. Obviously, we didn’t want the work to be labeled as “funny”. It took nearly ten years until I could present the installation in its complete form again and get the desired polaroids from the visitors. This was on occasion of the show *Auschwitz-Prozess 4 Ks 2/63 Frankfurt am Main* at Haus Gallus in Frankfurt/M. and at the Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin in 2004 and 2005. In Munich and Hannover *Souvenir Photograph* was not included in the exhibition.

This time the response to the offer was amazing and the reactions were astonishingly positive but one, where my art work was compared to the perversity of Mengele. Not only did people had their picture taken and would write on the margin of the Polaroid, but their comments were extremely sensitive and reflective. I had the impression that there was a need to express themselves on the topic and face the way we remember such horrors.

All in all, I gathered about one hundred polaroids on these occasions.

Obviously, I would have loved to see the reactions in countries other than Germany. Unfortunately, the installation did not travel abroad as I had hoped. I made an attempt to show the work in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, but at the time they lacked the courage.

Maybe it is time to retry.



Fig. 1. All this frightens me



Fig. 2. Facing the Victims



Disappeared

Fig. 3. Disappeared



VOR DEM TOR –
DAS HERZ STEHT STILL

Fig. 4. In Front of the Gate – The Heart Stands Still



Japanische Touristin in Auschwitz,
Komischerweise Japaner interessieren sich
viel mehr ^{früher} deutsche Vergangenheit als für die
eigene.

Fig. 5. Strangely Japanese are much more interested in the German past than in their own



"Mein Schrecklichstes,!!!
und das Beste, das ich je
erinnere!!!"

Fig. 6. My Most Awful!!! Most Macabre, Most Shaming Souvenir Photograph



Fig. 7. Shame On You My Mother Would Say. This Is a "Game" at the Limit To the Same Perversity That Mengele's Myrmidons Danced

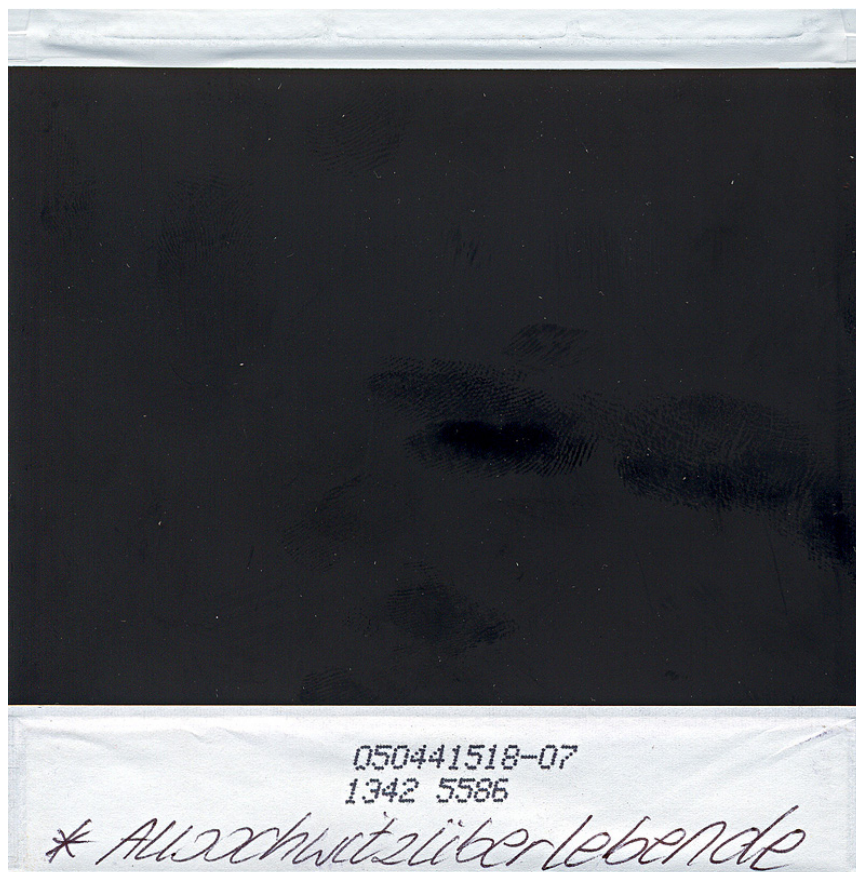


Fig. 8. Auschwitz Survivor

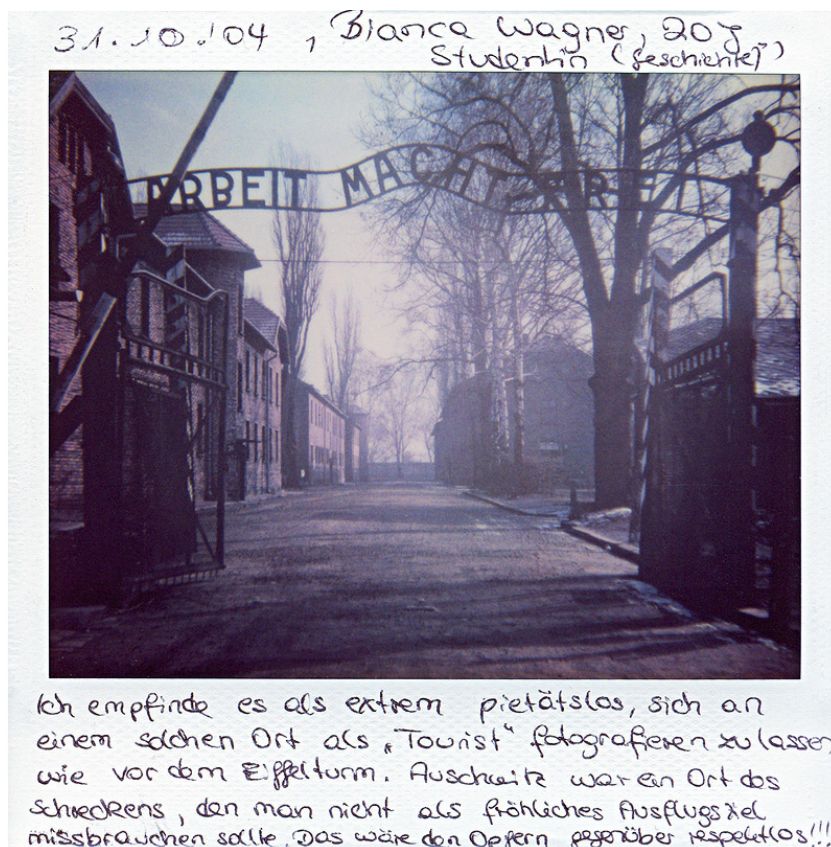


Fig. 9. I Think It Is Extremely Impious To Have One's Own Photograph Taken As a Tourist At Such a Place Like Under the Tour Eiffel. Auschwitz Was a Place of Terror Which Shouldn't Be Abused For Merry Excursions. This Would Be Respectless Towards the Victims!!! Bianca Wagner, 20 Years Old, Student of History



Fig. 10. The Gate to Hell



ON EST TOUS DES TORTIONNAIRES
POTENTIELS -

Fig. 11. We Are All Potential Torturers



Fig. 12. A Turkish boy



I've been there or not.

Fig. 13. I've Been There or Not

31.03.2004 Bülent ÖZMEN



Hat der Tod ein Gesicht?

Fig. 14. Does Death Has a Face?



Fig. 15. Greetings From Auschwitz
Drishat Shalom
Mi Auschwitz
Tamy



Fig. 16. Without me!



Fig. 17. Installation-Berlin



Fig. 18. Installation-FFM



Fig. 19. At the Gate



Fig. 20. At the Gate



Fig. 21. At the Gate



Fig. 22. At the Gate



Fig. 23. At the Gate



Fig. 24. At the Gate



Fig. 25. At the Gate



Fig. 26. At the Gate



Fig. 27. At the Gate