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## **“Looking at Kamp Westerbork”**

### **Interview and introduction.**

#### **Introduction:**

This interview explores how artworks made in response to archaeological investigations at Holocaust sites can facilitate discussions and engagement with Europe’s conflicted past. In this context Art offers archaeology a medium through which to explore some of the more controversial narratives and ‘many truths’ that exist concerning the Holocaust as a whole in a way that might not be permissible in a purely historical context (Ibid; McGrattan 2012; Schofield 2007)<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, for artists, archaeology can provide underpinning research, provoke new understandings of material culture, offer access to new discourses and facilitate engagement with complex historical events. The entanglement of archaeological methods and a conceptual approach to art making combine to raise questions of primacy in relation to objects and experience.

In this interview, we discuss how artistic responses in the form of sculptures and video artworks led to the development of further discourse about the impact of *residential production* (Safaric Branthwaite has spent time onsite at Westerbork exploring the archive and exploring the site via the concept of *dérive*<sup>2</sup> to counter the conventional visitor experience) as a way to engage the public in these new theories.

Furthermore we will explain how his practice has developed to focus not solely on looking at traumatic pasts, but to how we look at memorial sites in a contemporary context. This position allows the challenge of prevailing paradigms that may omit perpetrators and leads us in a direction at variance with historical generalizations and expectations.

Through the interview, structures of new audiences and strategies are discussed that confront challenging aspects of the other lives of the camp and in particular the problematic nature of including their narrative in the history of the Nazi camp system. Through relevant discourse the approach seems to confirm Aumann's (2016: 383)<sup>3</sup> theory that 'it usually benefits us to become acquainted with reality, however harsh it may be, and we are usually glad in the end to have learned how things really are'. In discussing this innovative approach, we intend to inspire others addressing difficult histories to operate beyond established and conventional boundaries.

- (1) Ibid; Cillian McGrattan, *Memory, Politics and Identity: Haunted by History* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); John Schofield, "Intimate Engagements Art, Heritage and Experience at the 'Place-Ballet'," *International Journal of the Arts in Society* 1, no.5 (2007): 105-14.
- (2) <https://teaching.ellenmueller.com/walking/2021/10/10/guy-debord-drifting-derive-1958/#:~:text=Observational%20Walking,-EM&text=Definition%3A%20Letting%20go%20of%20the,rapid%20passage%20through%20varied%20ambiences>. Accessed 05/08/2023.
- (3) Antony Aumann, "A Moral Problem for Difficult Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74, no.4 (2016): 383, doi:10.1111/jaac.12324.

**Interview: 8/03/2023**

**"Looking at Kamp Westerbork"**

**Bold Text: Bas Kortholt, Researcher and Curator: Kamp Westerbork**

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## Questions

**\*What meaning does Westerbork have for you? What story do you want to convey with your guest curatorship?**

I think the first thing is that it is part of a much wider network of European sites connected with the Holocaust, so it's part of a puzzle that links them all together. The fact that it is part of the mechanics rather than a killing site also interests me, for some reason, it reveals more about how all the circumstances that were needed for genocide formed across Europe, here I am referring to the displacement and de-humanisation but also the local conditions that enabled the Nazis to commit their crimes. It is more prevalent at Westerbork as you are not overwhelmed by the sense of death that permeates some other sites. This also seems to allow other discourses and histories to exist, so for me, it's also a site where many acts took place, almost like in a play. Moluccan refugees and all the other uses, it's probably pragmatic that it was used for all these other reasons but that doesn't stop it being a tapestry of the conditions in Europe and the Netherlands after the war. I am also interested in the bigger narrative here as some of the more recent uses give some insight into why we need to know about the Holocaust but may also indicate that we are starting to forget or choosing to ignore some of the lessons. So the story of the curatorship is this holistic look at the entire life of the camp, with some other twists that pose some questions for the future.

**\*Theodor W. Adorno wrote in the 1950s that "no poetry was possible after Auschwitz." What could or should the role of art be in telling the story of the Shoah?**

This is mentioned a lot, for me, it's more linked to portraying atrocities than giving up on art or creativity, if you look at the Carl-Emil Strott photographs from the dunes at Skede there is no point trying or saying anything, it is just so sad. However, there is still a role for artists ( of all types) and a civic responsibility to look at things from different angles and maybe try and tackle or contribute to a more difficult conversation that other disciplines cannot tackle in the same way. For me it's creating a space where something can happen but not dictating how it should happen, that's not a get-out as if you are serious, you will be testing and exploring but also talking and working with experts, I

don't think you can start engaging with issues like this without first learning about them. My first project working on how the Holocaust impacts our lives now was directly linked to the materials culture at Treblinka, but it was only when discussing with my colleague ( Prof Sturdy Colls CoA Staffordshire University) who had led the excavation there that a simple item like a pan suddenly told a different story of plural and overlapping histories, this immediately became something I could connect with and engage with and that's where the work for that project stemmed from. So coming back to the question my view is that art should be creating the space for debates and also continually being updated with the latest views and knowledge so that it is always connecting to something relevant and timely. Soon my exhibition will become part of the history of Westerbork, and then in the future, there will be new issues that need addressing in other ways.

**\*During World War II, the Nazis built thousands of concentration camps all over Europe. Many of these places are now home to Memorial Centers. What is the message these Centers should convey? Does their raison d'être lie in providing answers to questions from the general public? Or is the question mark in a place like camp Westerbork much more important?**

Well, Westerbork and also Falstad In Norway do seem to be the camps that are most interested in keeping a continual debate going so that we can always be linking back to the events of WW11. ( but I have not visited all the camps so there could be others). Interestingly, you use the word Memorial Centre which seems to suggest it's a place where things happen, as in encounters of some sort, in contrast, a Memorial Site seems like a far more closed proposition if you just look at the language. A lot of camps are like that, but then maybe you couldn't have the sort of conversation that might arise at Westerbork at, for instance, the Operation Reinhard camps where the sole purpose was the extermination of Jews and other undesirable groups of people, maybe it links back to the Adorno quote that in some sites it's just not right to speculate on wider debates as their history is too overwhelming to allow that to occur. At the same time, we should not forget that in all camps people suffered fates and conditions they did not deserve, which makes me a little nervous as then your comparing camps as if one might have been better than another when in fact it was all a crime no matter what the differentiators are for each site or even the space between them.

**\*The British scientist Tim Cole argued that a Holocaust industry has emerged today. That a Holocaust amusement park is not far away. On the other hand, there are also academics who argue that precisely a certain form of 'historical sensation' (a sudden emotion that a person can experience when in direct contact with the past, where the time difference seems to disappear) can bring the past closer. Where is the boundary between experience and experience?**

This is something I am more and more interested in, mainly because I think as the camps pass out of living memory that primacy of experience dissipates, and so what or who is left to tackle these issues and what does the experience look or feel like without those first-hand voices there? There have already been examples of sensational use of Holocaust Imagery like 'Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art at the Jewish Museum where there were artworks like Prada Deathcams and Lego death camps, but there are also arguments that the artists were drawing attention to the trivialisation of the Holocaust not necessarily just using it for pure sensation. The point is that as the impact of the past fades society may have to look at new ways to engage an audience, that may sound sad or absurd given the subject but how else can you get someone to look at something you are proposing is interesting or important? And it also links with what's happening socially and psychologically in society, quicker and faster information and the erosion of context so you have information but not knowledge. For me, that's where the challenge lies, and the only way to do this is with Memorial Centres as sites where an encounter with memory, interpretation and of course, fact is navigated via experiences. These experiences need to evolve to meet the needs of a changing and diverse audience.

**\*How do you view the role that, for example, Social Media or digital resources such as Serious Games or Virtual Reconstructions (can) play in transmitting the history of the Holocaust?**

I think there is a role and I think there is also something outside of our control that the online social environment offers. The Holocaust isn't really curated or moderated in events like the Tik Tok Auschwitz phenomena when people were dressing up as victims. It seems initially like bad taste but they are engaged in an uninformed way, we should tap into this as they have already shown an interest of sorts if we want to educate then lambasting anyone using the Holocaust online is a bad move.

(serious games) I think for me, they could have a really interesting role in exploring decision-making and consequences, the role player narrative would be able to offer an experience of multiple scenarios from different perspectives, but as an artist, I am always going to come back to making statements and driving these points differently, at least at this moment anyway.

**\*Is the history of the Holocaust portrayed differently in a country like England (where it did not physically take place) than in countries like the Netherlands, Poland, Germany or Norway?**

Without a doubt, a lot of my motivation comes from realising that we have these events framed for us in all aspects of life. My Grandma used to tell me about hiding in a bomb shelter in Wallsend ( part of Newcastle, UK which was bombed due to the proximity of the shipyards) then Germans ( I

don't think she ever used Nazi) were alien and far away, as a youngster, I could only imagine them in bomber aircraft at night, you might say they may as well have been aliens. Then as I got older it was on TV, the Machine Gunners was a kid's TV show and then family shows like Dad's Army. As I got older satellite TV arrived in the '90s and then myself and friends binge watched The World at War ( one of the channels had whole days where they repeated a series) and then a history teacher who was also the headmaster did a sort of short version of Ron Jones Third Wave experiment and also introduced me to the Nazi movement as an actual thing that had objectives and means, not just a nasty word to describe people. I grew up in a mining town in southeast Northumberland, so this was not a highly academic area. So the point here is that it was really the World at War and the History lesson experience that gave me insight into the Holocaust in the UK outside of fictional TV and Films etc, basically the British always seemed to save the day in these films- in some cases I think they really did but it would be naïve to think it was without sacrifice or collaborations that would be questionable in future. The other countries you mention are all different but the Netherlands and Norway have similarities in that their memorial centres keep conversations going, they feel more morphic or project-based, and I would say in Germany you still get that but there is also a heavier burden, and then in Poland, it is more set out as fact with far less room for debate of alternative discussion ( not to say there isn't any just in my opinion it feels like there is less room for thought). There are comparisons with the UK though where for obvious reasons certain actions or decisions are overlooked, like how long the allies knew about the camps and the Kinder Transport numbers not being fulfilled for financial reasons, this is something I want to look at more, I think we in the UK could understand why events in Europe could take place easier if we look at some of our own decisions during this time. And this feels like the right time to do it, so much of British identity is based on WW2 and its aftermath, the nation-building and the need to justify the sacrifice, I get that, but other stories need to be told openly and not hidden.

**\*What does the future of Holocaust memory look like? How will we commemorate this part of our past in 10, 20 or, say, 50 years?**

If we can keep it like it is now that would be an achievement! (at least in the centres that are opening up to new methods of interpretations and discourse. I think it's a pivotal time with the last survivors almost gone I think the question will start to be asked that governments etc would not ask when they were alive, and there's also climate and financial crisis that will shape not only the world but also the camps and their roles. It goes back to the previous question about experiences and sensationalisation, the London Dungeon is a good example here, I know the time difference is significant but it's a place of horrendous human suffering that is now a fun family day out I still don't get it to be honest. Even so, it sets the scene that if you want visitor numbers you need some sort of attraction or experience, more so if the Holocaust drops from the school curriculum. We live in an information society now and want quick satisfying results without consequences, it's kind of

what my exhibition here is about, imagining a future where neon, a ubiquitous light connected with attracting attention in a saturated society is sitting alongside artefacts from the Westerbork Archive that link it to its entire history. So I think over this period of 10,20,50 years we are going to see more of the experiential come into these centres. Then there are the environmental concerns, some camps may be damaged in ways never seen before by flooding etc, how and what is conserved, then and how this is managed to avoid creating biased narratives will be key to preserving the memories and lessons we have learned. Most of the camps are remote for a reason but what if spending money on transport to get there is prohibitive, you might see the rise of online archives and more outreach activities if the camps cannot be visited as much. I would like to see a move toward the Falstad model in Norway where it's now a memorial site and centre for human rights, this opens up lots of debate that can be applied to the present but framed by WW2 and the Holocaust. Then lastly it is easy to see the camps as embodying 1940-45 when in fact the further west you go in Europe the more they had other lives and indeed Museums have turned into centres etc as objectives in society have changed, so we might have to start looking at the history of the camps 1945- to Now to get a handle on how WW2 shaped their use and how society has tackled and addressed these issues (or not). I am certain they will be around for a while yet but I am also expecting some changes as politics change and as the demands of society change. Being reminded of some of the events of the Holocaust and how we might be accepting certain behaviours could be very problematic for some political thinking at the moment, so we could see a pressure to adjust to different narratives or focuses- so for sure there are battles ahead.



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