

Predella journal of visual arts, n°35, 2014 - Miscellanea / *Miscellany* ■

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Predella pubblica ogni anno due numeri online e due numeri monografici a stampa /
Predella publishes two online issues and two monographic print issues each year

Tutti gli articoli sono sottoposti alla peer-review anonima / All articles are subject to anonymous peer-review

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Predella journal of visual arts - ISSN 1827-8655

pubblicato nel mese di Ottobre 2015 / *published in the month of October 2015*

The level of our defeat: the Italian Memorial at Auschwitz and the history of art

According to an opinion officially expressed by Dario Franceschini, the Italian Ministry of Culture, the Italian Memorial in Auschwitz «is no longer suitable to Auschwitz and not accepted by Polish authorities». The article focuses on the history and the destiny of this multimedia and multiauthored art installation, realized by different Italian artists (among whom Luigi Nono, Lodovico Barbiano di Belgiojoso, and Pupino Samonà) during the 1970s on behalf of the Associazione Nazionale Ex Deportati (ANED), i.e. the Italian National Association of Former Inmates, for Block 21 of the extermination camp of Auschwitz I. More in general it deals with the role of Art History (and art historians) in the present society, and with the inability to give a loud and clear voice to its tools and objectives.

«The Italian Memorial is no longer suitable to Auschwitz and not accepted by Polish authorities». This is the statement, cold but realistic, issued on March 7, 2015 by Italy's Minister of Culture Dario Franceschini to various press agencies and immediately relaunched in a limited number of national newspapers¹.

We shall get back to this statement later. By now, it seems better to freshen up our memory. The main issue's the Italian Memorial, a work developed during 1970s on behalf of the Associazione Nazionale Ex Deportati (ANED), i.e. the Italian National Association of Former Inmates, for Block 21 of the extermination camp of Auschwitz I, sixty kilometers from Krakow, Poland². The Memorial is a spiral made of metal, wood and canvas, designed so that the public can walk in it, as in a tunnel (figs. 1-3). In the spirit of those years, it was really a collective work of art. The architectural project was designed by Lodovico Barbiano di Belgiojoso, a key member of the BBPR studio; the twenty-three strips of canvas connected to the metal frame were painted by Pupino Samonà; the music, with the song *Ricordati cosa ti hanno fatto ad Auschwitz*, i.e. *Remember what they've done to you at Auschwitz*, was selected by Luigi Nono; the overall coordination of the team fell on the shoulders of director Nelo Risi. But the very soul of the Memorial was shaped by Primo Levi. Levi was the first to be contacted by the ANED, in the early 1970s; he was also the author both of the original concept of the Memorial and of the piece read at the time of its opening, on April 1980:

The history of the deportation and extermination camps, the history of this place – Levi

states – cannot be separated from the history of fascist tyrannies in Europe. There's a clear and uninterrupted connection between the first fires of the Labour Chambers of Italy in 1921, the burning of books on the streets of Germany in 1933 and the nefarious flames of the crematoria of Birkenau³.

So, according to Primo Levi's opinion, the origins of the Holocaust must be unequivocally connected to Benito Mussolini's fascist regime. Nothing so strange, in such a perspective, that the stripes of canvas painted by Pupino Samonà in the Italian Memorial show at some point the frontispiece of *L'Ordine Nuovo* – the periodical founded in 1919 by some of the leading members of the socialist and communist movements such as Antonio Gramsci, Palmiro Togliatti, Antonio Tasca and Umberto Terracini – the hammer and sickle intertwined, i.e. the symbol of the Communism, and the portrait of the same Gramsci, the founder of the Italian Communist Party in 1921, who was obviously counted among the first martyrs of the Holocaust (figs. 4 and 5).

Thirty-five years run between the two extremes, that is, between the opening of the Memorial and the statement by Minister Franceschini. A long period, which is not possible and even useful to examine now phase by phase. Those who intend to do so may refer to the contributions of Ruffini, Scarrocchia and Arcidiacono⁴. Here one might simply say that these were thirty-five years mostly made of misunderstanding, controversies and small revenges, much less often of reasonable and constructive proposals: the restoration of Pupino Samonà's pictorial cycle and the 'Glossa' project, that is, the project of updating the original message to modern educational needs fall obviously among the latter (figs. 6 and 7). At least until July 2011. On 1 July 2011 the Director of the National Museum of Auschwitz, the Polish historian Piotr Cywiński, after having announced several times his will to let the Italian Memorial be disassembled and shipped to Italy as soon as possible, ordered its door to be locked, thereby preventing any visit⁵. The present writer tried to do so on 2012 and 2013, with no big success. Here's Cywiński explanation, according to Auschwitz's official website:

Not educational in any way, [the Italian Memorial] failed to meet the basic requirements for national exhibitions as set by the International Auschwitz Council, which have been in force since the 1990s. [...] This type of exhibition can be categorized as art for art's sake and would be referred to in a gallery of contemporary art as an installation or performance. This type of art is not presented on the grounds of the former Auschwitz camp, where the educational dimension is connected with remembrance, education, and making the younger generation aware of the tragedy of the victims of the Shoah and the concentration camps, as well as encouraging people to reflect upon their personal responsibility for the world around them and its future⁶.

On this grounds the Italian Memorial should be considered useless and to be replaced by another one.

Cywiński's opinion, to be considered very authoritative, found a good number of supporters in Italy, especially among the historians, as showed for instance by Giovanni De Luna, Michele Sarfatti and Marcello Pezzetti⁷. Albeit in a different way, they all believe that the Italian Memorial reflects an historical perspective of the Holocaust which is ideologically distorted and in any case out of time. In their opinion, this vision is the main responsible of the Memorial's substantial lack of communication: this problem becomes particularly serious with regard to young people, who do not share and even comprehend the political and ideological debate which lies behind the Memorial. So, De Luna, Sarfatti and Pezzetti've given a favorable opinion to the dismantling of the Italian Memorial and its replacement with another one, updated to modern educational standards.

It does not seem appropriate, at least here, to enter into the details of these assessments. The risk is to give birth to another sterile controversy among historians and art historians: the latter, because the evident fragility of their academic, professional and social profile, would surely play the part of the clay pot surrounded by metal pots, following Alessandro Manzoni. Given the state of the situation, it seems better to focus on three points of reflection.

The first one deals with our concept of humanity. No ifs and buts: we acknowledge that within a few weeks we could see the most important work of figurative art conceived by Primo Levi either destroyed or betrayed in its original meaning. As Italians, it follows that through our silence we judge the most important writer and witness of our country, the only one who might be compared to Anne Frank or Elie Wiesel, unable to speak to young people. Or at least to young Italians, who are the legitimate heirs of the many thousands discriminated, deported and killed in Auschwitz.

The second point brings into play some foundations of our identity as Italian and European citizens. The overall change after 1989 and the consequent opening of Europe to the former Soviet bloc countries has had and still has many consequences. Well, many of these consequences go through the process of re-interpreting the Holocaust⁸. It is certainly true that today's Europe, the same Europe awarded in 2012 of Nobel Peace Prize, still has its roots in the ashes of Auschwitz. On the other hand, during the last years Auschwitz itself has gone through a remarkable moment of museological redefinition, with a gradual shift from the extermination camp of the Jews of Europe to the place of martyrdom of the Polish people. In such a prospect – which is, again no ifs and buts, a nationalist perspective – is quite automatic to establish a logic and consequential connection

between the repeated attempts of eviction of the Italian Memorial and the appearance on the wall of the shootings of a memory dedicated to St. Maximilian Maria Kolbe.

The third and final point of reflection focuses on the history of art and even more on the Italian history of art. We've mentioned above its vocation to defeat when comes the time to confront with other disciplines. But in this case the question still seems different. When dealing with the Auschwitz Italian Memorial, Italian art history deals primarily with itself, i.e. with its own extension and limitations. In other terms, it deals with the inability to give a loud and clear voice to its tools and objectives. The topic is therefore also of a technical nature. The eviction of the Italian Memorial of Auschwitz is a defeat for all of us. Please, pay attention: we are defeated not because we lost the game, but because we did not even want to play it.

But why we behaved this way? There's no easy way out to this question. Considering that in recent years we, as Italian art historians, have been engaged in almost every front, it's quite hard to believe that we considered the attempt to evict of the Italian Memorial out of our professional expertise. One fact remains firm. A significant Italian work of art located abroad is now placed in serious jeopardy. The risk is of losing it altogether. Every art historian, as well as every museologist is well aware of the concept of site-specific. In other words, we all know that to move the Italian Memorial from the original site means to betray or to destroy its true spirit. Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (fig. 8), a masterpiece demolished because it was considered 'inconvenient' by the establishment, it is in this sense a direct precedent, even amid some undeniable diversity of background⁹.

At this point one may get back to Minister Dario Franceschini's statement. «The Italian Memorial will be brought back to Italy and will probably find an accommodation in Florence, where it will be exposed in the way it deserves»¹⁰. For intellectual honesty, it must be said that Minister Franceschini has to get through a heavy and thorny legacy. The way to Florence, in fact, was suggested by the same ANED, which commissioned the Memorial and still keeps the right of property. On this grounds as early as November 2014 Minister Franceschini discussed the whole matter with the Mayor of Florence Dario Nardella. But in the same way it must be said that some alternatives are still alive.

The first, blessed by a peaceful and reformist character, is to develop a new memorial, updated to the needs of modern teaching. A memorial that however, in respect of Primo Levi and of Italy, should be put next to the original one, not replace it. The second alternative, of higher diplomatic impact, would be to send the Memorial to Israel, the one and only state able to give it a legitimate and

morally worthy political asylum. Whatever the final destination of the Auschwitz Memorial, one point still remains: every energy, every euro spent by the Italian government for its eventual dismantling would disclose the level of our defeat.

My gratitude goes to the friends Furio Colombo, Donatella di Cesare, Sandro Scarrocchia and Adam Smulevich for their valuable comments on the text, and to Federica Piraino for having reviewed the English translation.

- 1 For the original press release see <http://www.adnkronos.com/cultura/2015/03/07/franceschini-memorale-auschwitz-italia-giusto-cosi-video_Q3pRvmdoYcQpTBXIC9vKIJ.html>. For the newspapers see for instance <<http://www.padovanews.it/news/cultura-e-societa/345300-franceschini-il-memorale-di-auschwitz-in-italia-e-giusto-cosi-video.html>>.
- 2 Here's the basic bibliography on the Italian Memorial: *Il Memoriale italiano di Auschwitz e il Cantiere Blocco 21: un patrimonio materiale da salvare*, Florence, 2009, esp. pp. 2-4; E. Ruffini, *Il Memoriale italiano di Auschwitz*, Bononia, 2010; Ruffini, *Il Memoriale degli Italiani ad Auschwitz*, in *Storia della Shoah in Italia: vicende, memorie, rappresentazioni*, 2, ed. by M. Flores, Turin, 2010, pp. 480-492; *Il Memoriale italiano di Auschwitz: l'astrattismo politico di Pupino Samonà*, ed. by G. Ingarao, Palermo, 2010; *Il Memoriale italiano ad Auschwitz. Giornata della memoria 2014: documentazione, conservazione e progetto di integrazione 2008-2012*, ed. by G. Arcidiacono and S. Scarrocchia, Bergamo, 2013; see also the essays by R.S.C. Gordon, Scarrocchia, M. Cavalleri and G. Carboni Maestri in «Images. A Journal of Jewish Art and Visual Culture», 6, 2013.
- 3 Here's the opening of Primo Levi's original text, written between 1978 and 1979 and first published on a special brochure: «La storia della Deportazione e dei campi di sterminio, la storia di questo luogo, non può essere separata dalla storia delle tirannidi fasciste in Europa: dai primi incendi delle Camere di Lavoro nell'Italia del 1921, ai roghi di libri sulle piazze della Germania del 1933, alla fiamma nefanda dei crematori di Birkenau, corre un nesso non interrotto». See the critical edition of Levi's text by P. Divizia, re-published in *Nuovo Rinascimento*: <<http://www.nuovorinascimento.org/n-rinasc/testi/pdf/levi/levi.pdf>>. For Levi's text processing see G. De Luna, *La repubblica del dolore. Le memorie di un'Italia divisa*, Milano, 2011, p. 199, notes 32 and 38.
- 4 See note 2 above.
- 5 Gregorio Carboni Maestri, one of the authors of the abovementioned Glossa project, reported the closing in an interview and through an exhibition held in the ex-church of Saint Carpoforo, Milan, from 27 January 2012; see <<http://fondazione.ordinearchitetti.mi.it/media/fondazione/files/2012-01-29-17-24-28-CS%20mostra.pdf>>.

- 6 <<http://auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/italian-exhibition-at-the-auschwitz-museum-closed,833.html>, last consultation 5 June 2015>.
- 7 The whole controversy's resumed by F. Sessi, *Museo di Auschwitz senza l'Italia: padiglione chiuso*, in «Corriere della Sera», 18 January 2012, also on the online edition. See also De Luna, *Se questo è un memorial. Auschwitz, il padiglione italiano è da rifare*, in «La Stampa», 21 January 2008. For Pezzetti's thought see <http://www.adnkronos.com/fatti/cronaca/2014/11/18/shoah-pezzetti-rimozione-memoriale-italiano-auschwitz-decisa-tempo_3V3MmulmVJUc-Dp2sALqVgN.html>.
- 8 On this subject, see P. Cywiński, *To whom does Auschwitz belong*: <<http://www.enrs.eu/hu/articles/214-to-whom-does-auschwitz-belong>>.
- 9 *Public art, public controversy. The Tilted Arc on trial*, ed. by S. Jordan et al., New York, 1987; *Richard Serra's Tilted Arc*, ed. by C. Weyergraf Serra and M. Buskirk, Eindhoven, 1988; R. Serra, *Issues and Commentary: Tilted Arc Destroyed*, in «Art in America», May 1989, pp. 34-37; *The destruction of Tilted Arc: Documents*, ed. by Weyergraf Serra, with an introduction by Serra, Cambridge-London, 1991. For the connection between *Tilted Arc* and Serra's works devoted to the Holocaust see P. Coen, *L'artista reagisce in modo artistico. Questa è la sua arma. Riflessioni di valore introduttivo sul rapporto arte-Shoah, da Alexander Bogen e Nathan Rapoport a Richard Serra*, in *Vedere l'Altro, vedere la Shoah. Auschwitz, 27 gennaio 1945, temi, riflessioni, contesti: studi sulle arti figurative, il teatro, l'archeologia e il Museo*, ed. by Coen, Soveria Mannelli, 2012, pp. 5-68 and esp. 58-60.
- 10 See note 1 above.



Fig. 1: *Block 21*. Oświęcim (Poland), Auschwitz National Museum



Fig. 2: L. BARBIANO DI BELGIOJOSO and others, *Italian Memorial*. Oświęcim (Poland), Auschwitz National Museum, Block 21



Fig. 3: L. BARBIANO DI BELGIOJOSO and others, *Italian Memorial*, detail of the metal structure. Oświęcim (Poland), Auschwitz National Museum, Block 21



Fig. 4: P. SAMONÀ, *Portrait of Antonio Gramsci and the frontispiece of L'Ordine Nuovo*, detail from the *Italian Memorial's* pictorial cycle



Fig. 5: P. SAMONÀ, *Symbols of the Communist Party*, detail from the *Italian Memorial's* pictorial cycle



Fig. 6: Students of the Academy of Brera, Milan, restoring the *Italian Memorial*



Fig. 7: Students of the Academy of Brera, Milan, restoring the *Italian Memorial*



Fig. 8: R. SERRA, *Tilted Arc*. Once New York, Federal Plaza (destroyed).