

Phantasmagoria by Gary Nickard

Robert Hirsch's installation *World in a Jar: War & Trauma* is a collection of eight hundred black-&-white photographs, each "sealed safely away" in its own glass jar with a black lid and displayed in a serpentine pattern upon a fifty-foot arch-shaped pedestal. The photographs are an enormous array made largely from portions of appropriated historical images that have been re-energized to bring forward a litany of horrors from the wars and traumas of the past three centuries. Hirsch has stated that, like many members of his generation, he is haunted by such images. As a result he has assembled a phantasmagoria emblematic of a history



where, as Karl Marx observed in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852): "the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living." What does it mean to speak here of a phantasmagoria? Thomas Carlyle in his *French Revolution* (1837) used the phrase to obsessively describe the

bloody spectacle of political violence as spectral drama – a nightmarish magic-lantern show playing on without respite in the feverish ghostly confines of the historical imagination – as he put it: "the march of a red baleful phantasmagoria towards the land of phantoms." The term phantasmagoria, like one of Sigmund Freud's ambiguous neologisms, has shifted meaning over time from an external projected image to an internal phantasmal image of the mind. This metaphoric shift bespeaks of the making "ghostly" of the conscious and, in particular, the unconscious mind – the absorption of shades into the world of thought. Despite contemporary culture's disregard of the "spirit world" of our ancestors, we have come to a kind of epistemological "return of the repressed" in that we tend to regard our own thoughts in a spectral light and view imagination as a kind of haunting wherein our thoughts "materialize" like phantoms. It is in this way that historical



images gain their power to haunt. In accordance with these thoughts Hirsch's phantasmagoria functions as just such a haunting – each photographic image is deliberately crafted – selectively focused and lit in all or part of its image field – to underscore the spectral power of its ghostly nature.

Marx stated in the opening of his *Communist Manifesto* (1848) that "a specter is haunting Europe – the specter of Communism." He was on to something about Europe being haunted, however he mistook the nature of the ghost. The ideology that Marx helped to spawn was only one manifestation of this disturbance and, as the catalyst for the rise of the reactionary ideologies of Fascism and Nazism, it now appears that the ghost he saw was the same evil that lies at the core of all such totalitarian ideologies. When viewing Hirsch's phantasmagoria, one feels awestruck by the cold penumbra of the evil that dominated the events of the past two hundred years, which is why the images in his installation transfix with such chilling power. While one could trace the genealogy of any of the images sealed in Hirsch's jars and produce a similar mapping of the historical consciousness, it is useful for this argument to confine investigation to a single example. A case-in-point came instantly to mind when I recognized face of Adolf Eichmann staring back at me from inside one of the jars. Much discussion of the Holocaust, perhaps influenced in part by Hannah Arendt, invokes the phrase "radical evil." According to Immanuel Kant, what he called "radical evil" is *a priori* – a deep inherent flaw of the human species, a flaw present even in the best of men and women. Despite his judgment that it is impossible to extirpate "radical evil," Kant suggests that it can be transformed into good. But Kant's definition of evil is essentially theological and is articulated in an incomprehensible technical language, especially when he speaks of the will. The implications of Kant's abstractions blind us before his noumenal dragon's lair – for when we speak of evil, of what are we speaking, if not about will? As Arendt came to suggest, Kant was not quite up to the task of defining evil. Hirsch has stated that Kant's failure was a "betrayal of trust" and reveals a "deadly liability that would contribute to the future failure of religion and morality that occurred in the collapse of the German Ideology into the





black abyss of Nazism.” As a boy, Hirsch watched the trial of Eichmann on television with his grandfather (a man whose entire family vanished into the Holocaust) and as a result; “the experience left an indelible scar upon his psyche.”

In a 1963 letter to Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt wrote that she was distancing herself from her earlier assertions about Kant’s idea of “radical evil” and now was seeing things in light of what she famously referred to as “the banality of evil:”

“It is indeed my opinion now, that evil is never ‘radical,’ that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can grow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is ‘thought defying,’ as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is ‘banality.’ Only the good has depth and can be radical.”

In her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1964), Arendt was wrestling with the common element that she perceived in both Nazism and Communism, a specter so awful that it left



her profoundly bewildered and frightened. Like many intellectuals before her Arendt was perplexed by the concept of evil. How does one define it outside of a theological context? She had attempted to address this problem by attending the trial in Jerusalem of the fugitive Nazi, Adolf Eichmann, who had been apprehended in Argentina by the Israeli secret service. If anyone should have been able to visibly manifest evil, it ought to have been this man, the head of the Gestapo’s “Jewish Section,” who personally oversaw the systematic arrest, deportation to concentration camps, and brutal murder of millions of people. Against all expectations

Arendt, like so many others, found only profound disappointment in this encounter. Eichmann, while hardly a sympathetic figure, amounted only to a ruthlessly efficient upper level administrator in the vast and intricate scheme of industrialized genocide that was the Holocaust. This was no “small fish” and that was precisely what proved to be so disturbing. Standing there at the dock was the paramilitary equivalent of a corporate manager and systems analyst. As the embodiment of the bourgeois bureaucrat, Eichmann completely failed to measure up in any way to the monstrosity of his

genocidal actions. The consequence was an inability to adequately deploy a convincing legal and philosophical response to this totally banal embodiment of evil. Neither the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials of 1945 and 1946, the postwar international treaties on human rights nor Eichmann’s trial were able to decisively grapple with the core element of what had so threatened all of us in Nazism. In Arendt’s opinion, they had failed to grasp the nature of evil. Hirsch states that; “indirectly this made Eichmann even more terrifying” because the instrumental rationality he deployed while attempting to account for his actions “made a mockery of meaning.” There is a contemporary catchphrase to describe this failure of apprehension; we say that the crimes of Nazism “defy comprehension.” A

common assumption equates these actions with being so awful, vast, and hideous that they cannot be intellectually grasped – a kind of Kantian sublime. But this is decidedly not what Arendt meant! She actually meant the exact opposite – these crimes arose from an evil that was entirely ordinary and utterly banal.

At the same time Arendt had absolutely no patience with those who, like Martin Buber, proposed that Eichmann’s life be spared – he clearly had to pay for his actions. Arendt regarded her contemporaries who desperately clung to liberalism as fools. Yet despite her disdain for liberalism, she was not about to let totalitarianism threaten it, which required recognizing that, despite her inability to



reach a definition, there actually was such a thing as evil. Ultimately, Hannah Arendt, one of the twentieth century's most rigorous intellectuals, was reduced to saying that while she could not define evil, she knew it when she saw it and pointed her finger squarely at Eichmann.



Alain Badiou grapples with this vexing problem in *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2001), where he argues that the fundamental fault of an ethics of human rights based upon Kant's notion of

“radical evil,” is precisely its *a priori* nature. Badiou proposes a theory of evil as terror, betrayal, and disaster formulated by observational deductions based on “authentic truth events.” For example, the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States by al-Qaida quickly became an archetype for a particular kind of evil and rapidly merged in the popular imagination with the Nazi genocide as an absolute reference point for measuring all other evils. However, this tragedy is nothing like the Holocaust, which stands alone as a unique event in history. When evil is defined as archetype, then it is no longer the negation of the good (as it was for traditional Western metaphysics) but instead becomes an impossible, demonic fixation haunting our everyday reality. It is



then that evil becomes the horrifying undead paradigm of “radical evil,” plaguing the living and growing ever more powerful with the passage of time.

Why has the modern period brought forth such archetypal crimes that orient political and ethical stances against

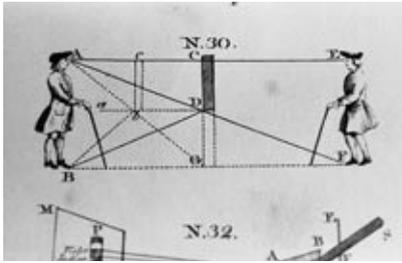
other crimes? Following Nietzsche's “God is dead” observation, Badiou maintains that theological ethics have collapsed and as a consequence “absolute good” is no longer available to our contemporary culture to do its job of combating evil. In this way the old language of “radical evil” maintains it hold on us as the absolute compass of moral wrong. The formerly inconceivable linkage of particular crimes with the horrifying

paradigms of “radical evil” has the effect of transforming all victims into the same victim; all tyrants become Hitler; all violence against the state is terrorism; and one demonic figure melds into the another along an endless “axis of evil” that obscures the real needs of individuals. In contrast, Badiou holds out for an ethics of “singular situations,” such as the Holocaust, without the confusion of either abstract rights or absolute evils. In addition, Badiou asks us to follow him down a path on which evil will be opposed by an ethic of subjective encounters with specific “authentic truth events.” Badiou's “truth events” stipulate respect for the values and lives of individuals and a diligent avoidance of predatory power relations that disregard the individualistic truth of others. Badiou's resulting definition of evil is the terror of the betrayal that occurs when “authentic truth events” are displaced by their mirror image – the simulacrum. This generates a disaster that displaces the truth with a master narrative, which is then mercilessly unleashed to impose one's determination upon others in a despicable “triumph of the will.”



Badiou's call for seeing the singularity of evil events is effectively echoed in Hirsch's phantasmagoria. While Hirsch suggests that evil is ubiquitous, he is well aware that its manifestations are particular and individuated. As a result, he locks each successive horror within its own individual jar as if to both preserve it as a reminder of the events of the past and to protect the present from their return. However, such a grand protective gesture is deliberately undermined by the obvious futility of containing such horrors in fragile glass jars that are stacked to invite toppling and breakage. As Freud shows us, the “repressed” always returns – the evil essence in the jars will inevitably leak out, just as it does in John Carpenter's horror film *The Prince of Darkness* (1987). Hirsch's installation serves instead to warn us to be on our guard against evil's vast power and its ability to appear in myriad forms where the





murderers live on in memory and their victims are long forgotten. It also serves to differentiate evil from the good as it arises in Badiou's suggested encounters with specific "authentic truth events." But there is something else going on in this work that lies beyond an artist wrestling with the

definition of evil, something that lies within what photography curator John Szarkowski called "the very bones of the photographs themselves." Photography as a medium has an uncanny relationship with death and Hirsch's installation chillingly cuts right to the heart of this matter.

According to Otto Rank's *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study* (1925), the uncanny arises from the doubling of reality in shadows, reflections, ghosts, and twins, and this eerie idea can easily be extended to include photography. In one sense, a photograph is a shadow or reflection that is captured by a lens and projected onto a light-sensitive surface. If a photograph can be identified as a category of Rank's "double," then it can also serve as an example of the "uncanny." In *The Uncanny* (1919) Freud defined this spine-tingling state of mind as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar." Rank suggests that the double originally functioned as an "energetic denial of the power of death." In addition, the concept of the "immortal soul" is thus the first "double" of the body, which Freud believed sprang from "the primary narcissism, which dominates the mind of primitive man." For Freud the "double" is symbolically inverted and becomes "the uncanny harbinger of death." Thus the "double" turns into a sinister thing of terror, just as, after the collapse of their religions, the old gods turned into the demons of the new religion. In relation to death, the conferred immortality of the photograph must be contrasted against its status as a *memento mori*. This accounts directly for the spectral power of Hirsch's phantasmagoria; each individual jar contains a disturbing double photographic ghost, a shade returning from the past – a reflection



of death and destruction that has come to haunt the present. This disconcerting effect is further heightened in Hirsch's jars as each image appears twice so that it is visible from either side of the jar – as a frightening doppelgänger.



In *Camera Lucida* (1981) Roland Barthes concluded that the relationship of the photograph to the double, its confusion with reality and time, constitute an uncanny concern with death. Barthes' point closely paralleled Susan Sontag who observed in *On Photography* (1973) that a photograph: "is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask..." Thus it is precisely due to the direct and real connection between the subject and its image – the certainty of an existence within the past – that photography becomes inextricably bound with death. In keeping with this association, the fact that the photographs "sealed safely away" into Hirsch's jars are themselves uniformly black and white (with a decided emphasis upon black), imbues this installation with a somber funereal atmosphere wherein each image – simultaneously redolent of death and embodying evil – collapses into its own individual singularity. The mournful power of Robert Hirsch's phantasmagoria is indisputable in this current historical moment of a truly fear-provoking international solipsism that is coupled with widespread historical amnesia. As Marx observed in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*: "[people] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." Thus *World in a Jar: War & Trauma* serves as an unambiguous warning that uncannily echoes the words written in response to the rise of totalitarianism by the great playwright Berthold Brecht in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941): "although the world stood up and stopped the bastard, the bitch that bore him is in heat again."

Gary Nickard is an artist and educator in the art department of The University at Buffalo. Nickard's prior experience includes Executive Director/Curator of CEPA Gallery, Buffalo, NY; Associate Curator, Alternative Museum, NYC; Director, Burden Gallery Aperture Foundation, NYC; and Director of Programs/Curator, Artists Space, NYC.