



Memorials have traditionally offered the visitor an imposing, inspiring and everlasting art work upon which to contemplate a historic loss. Think of the towering, pristine obelisk that stands as the Washington Monument or the proud, fixed sculpture of Abraham Lincoln that sits inside the Lincoln Memorial. Imagine walking through one of the monumental classical arches that populate cities across the globe, commemorating French soldiers who fought in the Napoleonic wars, Indian soldiers who died in the Afghan wars, and so many others bravely lost to the world's battles. Picture sitting by the two reflecting pools proposed as a tribute to those who perished in the attacks on the World Trade Center.

Ranbir Kaleka's *Consider* is not a memorial like any of these. Though commissioned by the Spertus Museum in remembrance of the Holocaust, it does not provide consolation for this most horrific of historic events. Instead of materials like marble or stone that will weather the seasons and the decades, a stable and permanent reminder of tragedy, it is a "video-painting" made of partially painted canvas panels and digitally projected light. Refusing to tell its story plainly and graciously, so that the viewer may respectfully and correctly observe it, it presents discontinuous, open-ended narratives that raise more questions than answers. Far from being prominently displayed, it is hidden around a corner and pushed to the far end of an inaccessible light well. Most startling of all, its visual content presents neither the emaciated figures that are the human record of the Holocaust nor an abstract form as symbolic stand-in; rather it pictures a multi-generational, upper-middleclass Indian family at home, focusing on the adolescent daughter of the house.

Only the intangible audio component of *Consider* bears the explicit trace of the Shoah: amid a soundtrack of secondary noises and twangy Chinese and Aegean music, a woman and a man narrate firsthand accounts of how human hair was used in place of animal fur as an industrial material during the war. The testimonies have implications that are as obvious as they are unbearable, indicating that a body part readily associated with beauty and care—long women's hair, sometimes braided or strung

with pretty coins—was transformed into a usable commodity, dehumanizing the bodies to which that hair belonged. Archived by Polish scholars and heard here in English for the first time, these two oral histories exemplify the gross uniqueness of the Jewish genocide: the exploitation of human beings beyond the grave.

How then do we make sense of Kaleka's pairing of such disparate audio and video components? Why layer the recollection of heinous crimes over the projection of boisterous family life? And what does it mean to do so in such an ephemeral medium?

To begin sorting out these questions, it is useful to note some moments of overlap between Consider's seemingly mismatched soundtrack and visuals. The links hide in the details: the Indian grandfather's transistor radio echoes the narrator's explanation of how factory workers discovered, through clandestine broadcasts from London, what was going on in the concentration camps. His granddaughter hangs clean laundry on a rooftop clothesline; the voice-over tells of wet hair hung like laundry for drying. Most saliently, the girl's long dark hair, lovingly plaited by her mother, decorated with gleaming coins, swung this way and that, soaked in a rainstorm, evokes every strand of hair brutally stolen from millions of degraded Jewish heads. These and other associations weave throughout Consider, subtly connecting the normal and the everyday with the tragic and the horrific—an appalling but not unrealistic comparison. By picturing that quotidian space as an Indian one, Kaleka abstracts the Holocaust from its Jewish-European context into a broader human language; he achieves this too through the fact of being not a Jewish artist of European descent but a Punjabi one based in New Delhi.

For all the universality that arises from this layering, so too does an incommensurability. Between these two poles pulses a potent tension worth struggling with, one that lies at the very core of vanguard memorial art today. Artists as diverse as Jochen Gerz, Shimon Attie, Art Spiegelman, and Rachel Whiteread have over the past three decades reinvented what it means to make art about the horrors of the past. As James E. Young explains in *At Memory's Edge: After Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (Yale, 2000), these post-Holocaust practitioners have used an array of non-traditional means—from conceptual art to site-specific slide projection to graphic novels—to make work about a past that they can only know vicariously, through the mediation of others' memories and research. Their projects refuse to redeem the catastrophes of the past through aesthetic pleasure or to present tidy historic visions by leaving out the messiness of dissemination and interpretation. They heed the obligation to remember while exposing the difficulty of doing so.

Kaleka's Consider expands on this contemporary mode of memorial-making, transposing its hypermediated memory work into the medium of video-painting that he pioneered in the late 1990s. It is a technique uniquely well-suited to the purposes of critical remembrance: unstable, ethereal, and time-based, it makes meaningful demands on the viewer, who must continuously labor to make sense of the disjunction between audio and video; to register the torrent of information colliding across two screens and a complex soundtrack; to negotiate the discrepancy between painted and projected image. This last tension, between paint and light, challenges the very qualities that have traditionally made large-scale painting a premier recorder of history: by literally painting with light, Kaleka transforms the medium from one of permanence to one that refuses to be still and that disappears with the flick of a switch. A dialectic is established between the animate and the inanimate, as the girl's projected image floats atop her painted one, bringing it to life while simultaneously revealing its ghostliness, which haunts the work's entirety. Painting—and its weighty, unbearable subject of the Holocaust—is thereby demythified, brought down to earth where we mortals of today must grapple with it, denied the promise of a history that stays neatly in the past and allows for transcendence in the present, refused any easy—or final—solutions. Instead Consider offers us something that works much more like memory itself, full of after-images, blurred recollections, and uncanny repetitions, graphed onto the present day, where memory truly lives.

By Lori Waxman

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Essay for brochure on **Ranbir Kaleka's Consider**, 2007, commissioned by the Spertus Museum, Chicago. With support from the Bernard and Rochelle Zell Holocaust Center.

