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# Abstraction and the Holocaust, by Mark Godfrey

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repressing any pluralism in the ossified communities. Kauders depicts a Central Council that was behind the times and reluctant to address the changes in the world or in German Jewry. Young Jews felt alienated and disengaged from their communities. By the end of the 1980s, affiliated Jewry in Germany was rapidly getting smaller and older.

In the 1990s the arrival of Jews from the former Soviet Union changed the landscape. With an average age in their 40s, often possessing non-transferable university credentials, knowing little about Judaism as a religion, and not sharing the cultural heritage or Holocaust memory of their German-born coreligionists, they were exceedingly difficult to integrate socially and economically. At the same time, the community underwent a process of diversification and pluralization, partially a reaction to the different Jewish experiences and non-Orthodox religious views of the Russians. This took place against a backdrop of renewed societal interest in Jewish life and culture within the context of a multicultural Germany, with both positive and problematic implications.

This book rests upon a large, often specialized, and growing literature on Jews in Germany since 1945. While neither the master narrative that the field will ultimately require nor an exhaustive study of the topic, *Unmögliche Heimat* deftly synthesizes earlier studies and effectively probes heretofore unavailable sources. Kauders has set the tone for future debate and examination of this community.

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*Abstraction and the Holocaust*. By Mark Godfrey. New Haven, CT:  
Yale University Press. 2007. Pp. 294. Cloth \$55.00. ISBN  
9780300126761.

In this handsomely produced and lavishly illustrated volume, Mark Godfrey examines a hitherto unexplored dimension of the Holocaust's impact upon postwar western culture. As its title implies, *Abstraction and the Holocaust* is devoted to exploring the ways in which artists from different disciplines have used techniques of abstraction since 1945 to come to grips with the Nazi genocide. Godfrey adopts a broad analytical focus, surveying the fields of painting, sculpture, and photography and examining the work of such major figures as Barnett Newman, Frank Stella, Louis I. Kahn, Richard Serra, and Peter Eisenman. Through his contextualized formal readings of these and other artists' works, he challenges the idea that abstraction was historically unresponsive to

the Holocaust and shows how it developed its own unique methods of signification in contending with its legacy.

Godfrey opens his analysis by devoting three chapters to the abstract expressionist paintings of Morris Louis, Barnett Newman, and Frank Stella. While none of these painters was originally interpreted by art critics in the 1950s and 1960s as having drawn inspiration from the Holocaust, Godfrey makes a convincing case that they all meditated upon its significance in their work. Louis's series of seven paintings, *Charred Journal: Firewritten* (1951) initially appeared merely to be abstract representations of white swirls upon black backgrounds, but Godfrey shows how they were inspired by the Nazi book burnings of 1933 as well as the Kabbalistic idea that the Torah originated in divine black and white fire. Godfrey surmises that Louis viewed the paintings as possessing a phoenix-like symbolism of resurrection after destruction; yet, he insists that such meaning was meant to be tenuous, its elusive abstraction itself being a comment upon the breakdown of meaning (and its representation) in the post-Holocaust world. Like Louis, Barnett Newman also drew on the Holocaust to produce his famous series of fifteen paintings, *Stations of the Cross* in the early 1960s. These abstract zip paintings—defined by vertical stripes upon otherwise blank expanses of canvas—were ostensibly devoted to a Christian theme. But Godfrey shows that Newman was chiefly interested in probing the question that served as the series's subtitle: "*Lema Sabachthani?*"—"Why Have You Forsaken Me?" (which were Jesus's last words on the cross)—as a means of inquiring into God's whereabouts in the face of the Jewish people's suffering under the Nazis. Finally, Godfrey explains how Frank Stella's series of angularly sculptural paintings, *Polish Villages*, from the early 1970s—despite being interpreted from a strictly formalistic perspective when they first appeared—were actually an expression of the artist's desire to commemorate the Polish wooden synagogues that were destroyed by the Nazis in the Second World War.

Following these chapters on the early postwar period, Godfrey proceeds to examine the ways in which abstraction responded to the Holocaust in the form of more recent public commissions. His chapter on Louis I. Kahn's uncompleted Holocaust Memorial project in New York City from 1966–1972 argues that the architect chose an arrangement of nine (later six) glass cubes as a means of distancing his memorial from the didactic monumentality of fascist architecture and simultaneously creating a contemplative space whose very abstraction would foster communal interaction and remembering. Godfrey's discussion of American artist Mel Bochner's installation at the former Nazi prison on the Via Tasso in Rome (1993) of three different Jewish Stars of David made of partly burned kitchen matches placed upon army blankets underscored the fragility of remembrance by virtue of their extremely fragile materials. And his discussion of the abstract sculptures and paintings by Joel Shapiro, Richard Serra, Ellsworth Kelly, and Sol LeWitt at the

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (1993) convincingly shows how the setting in which they were placed led them to be interpreted as having symbolism that they ordinarily would not have been seen as possessing. (To cite merely one example, the fact that LeWitt's five paintings of concentric squares, entitled "Consequence," was placed after the museum's "Tower of Faces," an installation of photographs of the murdered villagers of Eishishok, led the paintings to be interpreted as "emptied portraits" of murdered Jews).

In all of these chapters, Godfrey uses deeply contextualized readings of artists' works to arrive at something of a working theory of abstraction's relationship to the Holocaust. While he stresses that abstraction should not be seen as a specific response to the Holocaust per se (the former preceded the latter in time), he insists that it has proved itself fully capable of providing a suitable language for artists to draw upon in confronting the event. "Abstraction," he writes, "can . . . represent the Holocaust in real ways . . . distinct from other art forms" (p. 251). Abstract works of art have done so, moreover, in ways that extend beyond merely affirming the Holocaust's unrepresentability. More concretely, Godfrey notes, abstract works devoted to reflecting on the Holocaust have been defined by three basic traits: they allow multiple, rather than singular, readings and are thus inherently flexible; second, they help to create "mnemonic environments," whose resistance to specific symbolic readings is conducive to active remembrance; and third, they acknowledge the inadequacy of prior modes of commemoration and respond by creating difficult but ultimately rewarding works of art (pp. 252–56). In all of these ways, abstraction has fulfilled the calls of Theodor Adorno and Maurice Blanchot to have postwar society "learn to think with pain" (p. 254).

Godfrey's analysis is a major achievement, yet it is not without a few shortcomings. Chapters six and nine have to strain somewhat in seeking to categorize the video art and photography of Beryl Korot and Susan Hiller as works of abstraction (their respective portrayals of the Dachau concentration camp and German street signs with the word "Jew" in them are far too figurative to be considered abstract). More broadly, while art historians will appreciate Godfrey's in-depth readings of his chosen works, historians of the Nazi period and the Holocaust may find the volume somewhat lacking in historical background. To mention one example, Godfrey's discussion of Frank Stella fails to offer a convincing explanation why the same painter who displayed an interest in Jewish victims (seen in the *Polish Villages* series) also displayed what appeared to be a more unseemly fascination with their Nazi oppressors in his abstract "black paintings" from the late 1950s, "Arbeit Macht Frei" and "Die Fahne Hoch." While Godfrey suggests that Stella wanted to explore broader themes in these works, such as the conditions of labor in modernity, he leaves out the seemingly central question of the painter's personal background. Unlike his chapters on Louis and Newman, which are rich with biographical detail

about their Jewish identities, his chapter on Stella does mention the fact that he was a non-Jew from an Italian Catholic background. Should this biographical detail matter in understanding Stella work? Scholars of different methodological persuasions can haggle over this question. But in the absence of such biographical information (and in the absence of other further contextual grounding that could help his analysis, such as the possible influence of rising neo-Nazism in Germany in the late 1950s, the same time in which Stella produced his sensationalistically titled paintings), Godfrey's discussion of the artist remains incomplete.

In the end, this modest shortcoming does not detract from what is an otherwise provocative and insightful exploration of a neglected subject. Beautiful to look at (Yale University Press should be commended for including more than 150 photos in the book, many in full color), *Abstraction and the Holocaust* is a stimulating book that deserves a wide audience.

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*The Discreet Charm of the Police State: The Landpolizei and the Transformation of Bavaria 1945–1965.* By Jose Raymund Canoy. Studies in Central European Histories 41. Leiden and Boston: Brill. 2007. Pp. xii + 333. Cloth \$129.00. ISBN 978-90-04-15708-8.

Jose Raymond Canoy begins his account of Bavaria's post-1945 rural police (*Landpolizei*) at Munich's Odeonsplatz. Although we first encounter the square during a 1996 commemoration of the post-World War II Bavarian police force, Canoy proceeds to take us back to 1923 when a young police lieutenant, Baron Michael von Godin, ordered Munich police to fire on Adolf Hitler and his fellow putschists. In 1946, the American occupation tapped that same lieutenant to head the new *Landpolizei*. The iconic moment that halted Hitler's abortive attempt to overthrow the Weimar Republic served to validate Godin's credentials for Americans looking to construct an anti-Nazi police force after 1945. American occupiers naively assumed that anti-Nazi meant democratic, but Canoy sees in Godin a representative of a longer tradition of authoritarian policing in Bavaria that continued well after 1945.

For Canoy, it is not the war's end in 1945 or even the 1948 currency reform that brings an end to authoritarian efforts to manage Bavarian society. Rather, a late 1950s "sociopolitical caesura" (p. 19) rendered such control measures ineffective in a transformed, mobile, and increasingly suburbanized Bavaria.