

On 80064

By Allison Hewitt Ward

Fyodor Dostoevsky was so bewitched by Hans Holbein's *Dead Christ* that he summited a gallery chair in Basel's Kunstmuseum to get a better look. Holbein the Younger rendered the dead messiah in clinical profile, interred in the picture frame. A jaundiced palate of olives, yellows, white funerary linens and black black shadows push and pull from the claustrophobic panel. Christ's pink flesh turns to gray. The man's hand, seized in rigor, bares a rotting wound. "Why, a man's faith might be ruined by looking at that picture!" Dostoevsky spoke in the voice of *The Idiot's* Prince Myshkin. And later, in another voice:

Supposing that the disciples, the future apostles, the women who had followed Him and stood by the cross, all of whom believed in and worshipped Him—supposing that they saw this tortured body, this face so mangled and bleeding and bruised (and they must have so seen it)—how could they have gazed upon the dreadful sight and yet have believed that He would rise again?¹

The frankness of the corpse purchased humanity at the expense of transcendence. The wounds remain open.

Painted thirty years after Columbus sailed the ocean blue and less than five after Luther picked up a nail, the *Christ* seized a contradiction in emergent modernity: secular humane sympathy and callous cruelty are not so different. Reason emancipates and condemns. The enlightenment that shattered the *ancien régimes*, ended slavery, emancipated the second sex, invented penicillin is also the enlightenment that produced Auschwitz and the atom bomb.

One imagines there is an appropriate method of coming to terms with this past. I toured a sanitized Dachau on a highschool field trip. We shuffled through limewashed gas chambers. I reverently looped Neutral Milk Hotel's "In the Aeroplane Over The Sea" on my lime green iPod. We American teenagers shed tears, we shuddered, we took snapshots of a sign that assured "never again" in five languages. We reboarded our tour bus. An appropriate encounter with the past.

Artur Żmijewski's eleven-minute video *80064* is an inappropriate method of coming to terms with the past. The artist persuaded 92-year-old Auschwitz survivor Józef Tarnawa to have the faded number tattooed on his forearm in 1942 reinked. Taped in 2004 in Poland, the men meet in a tattoo parlor painted the color of piss or pineapple. An unnamed tattooist sporting a screen printed jackknife on his chest sits at the ready. The palette is much like Holbein's: wan flesh, bile, linens and shadows. "You must have seen a lot of people die?" the artist asks. "Yes," says the old man with a crescent of white hair and white mustache, dressed in his Sunday best for this very un-sunday

¹Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, 2001, <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2638>.

occasion: “they transported them every day, naked.” Behind him is a row of faded softcore nudes in craft store frames. Most lights in the shop are turned off. Beyond that dark void, an outside is unimaginable and the men are entombed in their corner.

Tarnawa is not Jewish. Like the artist, he’s Polish. He concedes no meaning to his abduction: “I was put in Auschwitz for no reason” (0:53). A dark inverted triangle on an identification photo he shares (1:45) suggests he was deemed *Asozialer*. He is factual and unsentimental in his recollections. Żmijewski digs for a romantic tale of revolt and is not rewarded. “One had to endure it, that’s all,” Tarnawa responds (04:23).

His account and affect are not so different from other Holocaust survivors speaking to cameras. That their stories should be gasped through tears is an aesthetic preference of the audience. The artist expected the tattoo needle to puncture that composure. It did not.²

When I undertook this filmexperiment with memory, I expected that under the effect of the tattooing the "doors of memory" would open, that there would be an eruption of remembrance of that time, a stream of images or words describing the painful past. Yet that didn't happen.

What happened was that Tarnawa, despite having ostensibly agreed prior to filming, emphatically did not want the tattoo. “Let’s give it up and I’ll be happy” he says. (05:19) For several queasy minutes the artist relentlessly punts the old man’s protests. Eventually Żmijewski breaks the old man down. The tattooist in the jackknife shirt explains aftercare before he begins, and an exasperated Tarnawa responds “why are you imposing this burden on me that I have to take care of it?” (07:09) Then the needle buzzed in a sharper 80064.

I do not like *80064*. I do not like watching it over and over again for the purpose of this essay. It’s pornographic raw tape of the unmediated real deal. Bullying an old man is a lazy stand-in for the work of art. It would be better to live in a world in which this video does not exist. But it does.

The work was commissioned, and subsequently rejected, by the Fritz Bauer Institut for an exhibition about 40 years of trials against Nazi war criminals in Frankfurt. Amsterdam’s IDFA Institut took it up in 2005. He was hardly an outcast. Throughout the aughts he adeptly toured those prestigious European exhibitions ending in a or e. In 2008 *Game of Tag* (1999)—a tape of naked adults playing tag in a gas chamber—appeared at New York’s Austrian Cultural Forum in a group show with the likes of American saint Andres Serrano of *Piss Christ* (1987) fame. The reception was tepid. *Game of Tag* fell short of the moral-didactic imperative implicit in the show’s stated topic: the death penalty.³

²<https://www.idfa.nl/en/film/e42b89be-9d61-4934-b12b-19cf72988d95/80064/>

³Ken Johnson, “Sanctioned Killings, and the Very Many That Aren’t,” *The New York Times*, February 1, 2008, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/01/arts/design/01pain.html>.

The 2009 showing of *80064* at New York's X Initiative was scalded by *New York Times* critic Ken Johnson in a review headlined "An Artist Turns People Into his Marionettes." "Was this hackneyed lesson worth the price of a vulnerable old man's mind?" Johnson asked. The artist, he wrote, pursued "a form of relational aesthetics in which ordinary people are invited to participate in artificially constructed situations as a way of revealing deep social problems. To say that he works with a heavy hand is to understate the case."⁴

Relational Aesthetics was consolidated and promoted in curator Nicolas Bourriaud's 1998 *Esthétique relationnelle* (translated to English four years later). Relational art, according to Bourriaud, is "an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context rather than its private symbolic space."⁵ It is an appointment, "no longer presented to be consumed within a 'monumental' time frame and open for a universal public; rather it elapses within a factual time, for an audience *summoned* by the artist. In a nutshell. The work prompts meetings and invites appointments."⁶ Artists, with all the perfunctory grace of a dental receptionist "propose" as artworks "moments of sociability" and "objects producing sociability"⁷ towards the end of filling "the cracks in the social bond."⁸

Like caulking a bathtub, filling the cracks in the social bond is a practical task executed well or poorly. And unlike caulking a bathtub, the success of that task is subject to ethical evaluation. Thus criticism was driven to ethical testing rather than aesthetic judgement, a trend Claire Bishop critiqued in 2006 as the "ethical turn":

is manifest in a heightened attention to *how* a given collaboration is undertaken. In other words, artists are increasingly judged by their working process—the degree to which they supply good or bad models of collaboration—and criticized for any hint of potential exploitation that fails to 'fully' represent their subjects, as if such a thing were possible.⁹

Žmijewski made bad collaborations.

It's one thing to capture human suffering and degradation in art. It's another to reproduce it in an actual living human for the production of art. Holbein did not crucify his model to paint the *Dead Christ*. Unease of morals and manners is characteristic of Žmijewski's work. *The Game of Tag* (1999) set naked people to a game of tag in a gas chamber. *Singing Lesson I* (2001) organized a concert by a choir of deaf children.

⁴Ken Johnson, "An Artist Turns People Into His Marionettes," *The New York Times*, November 30, 2009, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/30/arts/design/30zmijewski.html>.

⁵Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Collection Documents Sur l'art, Dijon 2002), p. 14.

⁶Bourriaud, p. 29.

⁷Bourriaud, p. 33.

⁸Bourriaud, p. 36.

⁹Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents," *Artforum*, February 2006, <http://www.artforum.com/inprint/id=10274>.

Žmijewski dares the viewer to storm away in a disgusted huff. But that ethical reaction—Johnson’s reaction—confesses resignation from the possibility of art.

From the *Happenings* on social artworks demanded their quality be judged by the reported (by the artist, of course) happiness of the participant-subject, by ethical adherence to something just a whisper weirder than radical chic, by hostility to the tyranny of form. Žmijewski enacted and revealed the petty tyranny of Relational Art. The abused and humiliated participants in Žmijewski’s videos were no more Hitchcockian meat puppets than the fawned upon and empowered subjects of conventional RA: Deller’s supernumeraries, the nameless vassals of Hirschorn’s Monuments, or Tiravanija’s diners.

Present audiences will be fully acclimated to reality TV and *the experience economy*. Not so when *80064* was taped in 2004. Leading scholarship on the experience economy cited Rainforest Café¹⁰ and reality tv was in its naissance. It was a Dutch television station that first put unscripted strangers in a tightly constructed and totally recorded environment. MTV picked up that model for the 1992 premier of *The Real World*. Perhaps there was something more *real*, more *authentic* to be found in the cast’s spontaneous behavior in *unreal* circumstances. *The Fear Factor* premiered in 2001 and for six seasons put contestants through repulsive stunts (sitting in a tub covered in leeches, milking a goat with their mouths) for a possible cash prize. Did the public see in the contestants a primal truth previously suppressed by cubicles and Gap khakis revealed finally by the show’s ordeals? Or was the suffering the pleasure?

Bishop is not as unsettled by the situations created by Žmijewski as Johnson. She has the muscular postmodern eye that can detach the concept of the work from the work, that recognizes Žmijewski’s “difficult—sometimes excruciating—situations”¹¹ and sets their particular difficulties aside to consider the fact of difficulty. She credits Žmijewski for refusing the “correct ethical choice” and performance of “Christian self-sacrifice.”¹² What distinguishes Žmijewski for Bishop is awfully similar to the techniques of reality TV:

Artists like Žmijewski are less interested in making a faithful documentary of the situation than in constructing a narrative, grounded in reality, that conveys a larger set of points.¹³

Conveys points. Perhaps the making of points in an art gallery is more sophisticated than *The Bachelor*. But it is not art. Against Bourriaud’s Google Calendar items we might have some well made Google Slides. The task of the viewer is not to suppress his revulsion but to endure it.

¹⁰Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, “Welcome to the Experience Economy,” *Harvard Business Review*, August 1998, pp. 97–105.

¹¹Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents.”

¹²Bishop.

¹³Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London 2012, p. 227, <http://0-hdl.handle.net.library.metmuseum.org/2027/heb.32115>.

We naturally identify with Tarnawa. The challenge is to identify with Żmijewski, the younger man needing for a cathartic spectacle of memory concluded by forgetting.

That 400 years of Enlightenment produced Auschwitz remains, like the holes in the hand of Holbein's *Christ* and the reopened tattoo on Tarnawa's arm, an open wound. It is a past that cannot be resolved. Theodor Adorno was wary of postwar efforts to "come to terms with the past." The slogan, he wrote,

...does not imply a serious working through of the past, the breaking of its spell through an act of clear consciousness. It suggests, rather, wishing to turn the page and, if possible, wiping it from memory.¹⁴

If there is success in *80064* it is in its challenge to the ethical rule over art, but more so in its failure to come to terms with the past.

The impossibility of coming to terms with the past is also the impossibility of art. Holbein's *Christ* ruptured reality. Żmijewski repeats, records and replays it. The *Christ* tasks its viewer with the transformation that its subject is denied. In *80064* neither subject of the video nor viewing subject transcends.

¹⁴Theodor W. Adorno, "What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?," in *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*, Bloomington 1986, p. 115.