

# ‘Talking about my Generation’ – *WonderYears* (2003) – An Israeli Manifesto in Berlin

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## Introduction

In the aftermath of the historical barbarism, Germany, the country of the Nazi victimisers, and Israel, the reclaimed homeland of the Jewish people, have made important steps to ‘work through’ a tense relationship and place it on the pathway towards normality. Among the dialogues built up by the German and Israeli post-war generations, the one established through visual art has been given little scholarly heed, despite the burgeoning cultural interactions.

In Israel, Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer<sup>1</sup> have attained their position as the leading German artists dealing with the theme of the coming to terms with the repercussions of the ‘earthquake’, as described by Jean Francois Lyotard, whose tremors have destroyed all the instruments capable of measuring it.<sup>2</sup> Their works have been displayed at Israel’s national art institution, the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. On the other hand, Germany demonstrates an outstanding commitment to Israeli art. The cultural contact between the two countries has been significant, particularly since the 1980s, remarks Chitra Menon.<sup>3</sup> It is, however, in the late 1990s that an increasing number of Israeli artists, dealing critically with memory and identity in the post-Holocaust era of collective commemoration, have chosen Berlin as a fitting location to display their works of art. One project which evinces this practice is the group exhibition, ‘WonderYears, New Reflections on the Shoah and Nazism in Israel’ (2003).

In this paper, I shall hint at the possibility of culture, represented here by a visual art project, to shed light upon and redefine an Israeli-German emotional bond that has been marked by both failed and fruitful attempts of historical reconciliation. The initiators of *WonderYears* – a group of young German and Israeli curators – pertain to a generation that has learnt about the Holocaust mainly in school, during visits to concentration camp memorials, by taking part in state rituals of Holocaust commemoration, and through access to Holocaust representations in mass media and popular culture. These representatives of the post-Holocaust Israeli and German generation have committed themselves to reflect together on a subject that has marked both sides with pain and guilt respectively.

In the following, I shall broadly situate the art project within Germany’s recent history of Holocaust memorialisation, discuss the core conceptual principles underpinning it, and retell the story of the German-Israeli collaboration by pointing out the elements that caused dissent, and which inform about the sensitivity towards the Holocaust present in the German space.

## The Context

There is no doubt that Germany constitutes the geographical space where the culture of Holocaust memorialisation has taken multiple and complex shapes. The signs of an obsessive concern with the scars of a traumatising past are made apparent in the country’s public space. Art projects such as German artist Günter Demnig’s *Stumbling Stone* represent only one telling national initiative of the German commitment to remember the Holocaust victims. By paving stones embedded in front of houses formerly owned by Jews, the artist creates miniature memorials to the victims of the Nazi persecution, which remind the current inhabitants not only of the history of persecution which their current homes enclose within the walls, but also of their own individual responsibility to remember.<sup>4</sup>

Since the 1980s, Germany has witnessed an intense public grappling with its historical guilt. In 1988, a survey carried out among German writers asked them what it meant ‘to be a German writer at the present’.

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<sup>1</sup> See L. Saltzman, *Anselm Kiefer and art after Auschwitz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> See J. F. Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> C. L. Menon, PhD thesis, *Holocaust Themes in Israeli art* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1999), p. 245.

<sup>4</sup> See ‘Stumbling Stone. Artist Features in Film’, retrieved from <http://www.dwworld.de/dw/article/0,,3766877,00.html> (accessed 15 March, 2010).

The participants spoke of 'shame, sorrow, and a consciousness of guilt or of responsibility' or, as the writer Günter Kunert put it, 'Inescapably, Heinrich Heine is mixed with Heinrich Himmler, Weimar with Buchenwald, grand masterpieces of art and simultaneously Death as a master from Germany.'<sup>5</sup> As part of the country's attempt to normalise its relationship with the past, one also counts the mid 1980s Historians' Debate, and the discussion about the Holocaust Memorial Project in Berlin, which occupied the German public sphere for more than a decade and concluded in 2005, with the construction of Peter Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.

In the process of dealing with guilt, Germany has attempted to establish a friendly relationship with Israel. As early as 1952, West Germany and Israel signed the restitution agreement and, by 1965, full diplomatic ties had been established. Material reparations have enabled Germany to enter into a dialogue with the official representatives of the victims, but also, at least in its own eyes, to unburden itself. It is worth remembering that Israel's founding father, David Ben Gurion, was the first to encourage a new relationship with a 'different' Germany, viewed as a friend among Europe's nations. To this day, none of Israel's state institutions give expression to a relationship of hate, or even mere resentment toward Germany. Whatever may still reverberate at the level of individual exchange, finds no expression at the level of diplomatic and political relations.

The process of building up a relationship shows its own characteristics in the cultural sphere. Germany's outstanding commitment to Israeli art (its government provides financial support for Israeli artists to study and exhibit in Germany) prompted artist Uri Tzaig to question whether this happens in light of his artistic merits or because of Germany's 'bad conscience'.<sup>6</sup> Hence, feelings of trust are invariably supplanted by doubt and suspicion. This is also recognised by the German journalist for *Die Spiegel*, Henryk M. Broder, who compares, in an editorial written on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of bilateral relations, the German-Israeli connection with a 'marriage' that consists of 'constant mini-negotiations – and occasional full-throated arguments – that take place to solve problems that invariably crop up following the formal exchanging of vows.'<sup>7</sup> Broder's insight becomes an appropriate starting point for my discussion about *WonderYears*.

## The Art Exhibition

An exhibition constitutes a space for telling stories. Curators and artists propose a multifaceted story forged as an outcome of a process of both individual reflection and group interaction. This story is embedded within the different cultural, historical and personal contexts of the individuals who tell it, hence, it informs on the background and identity of the storytellers. In the case of *WonderYears*, the group of storytellers are four independent curators – Avi Pitchon, Tsafir Cohen, Hila Peleg-Lavi and Adi Nachman – each attempting to give an account of the 'changes' taking place in the Israeli art scene. The way to evince those changes was by presenting how young Israeli artists dealt with 'the founding trauma of the Israeli psyche, history and identity',<sup>8</sup> informs Avi Pitchon. Their grappling with the Holocaust departs from the figurative art representations which traditionally focus on images of persecution and whose aim is to enable a commemorative attitude, by means of identification with the Jewish victims. Instead, the recurrent elements in the artists' works are images of Hitler, or symbols suggestive of National Socialism.

Boaz Arad, one of the exhibition's leading artist, is presented by the director of the Tel Aviv Centre for Contemporary Art, Sergio Edelstein, as 'a unique artist in the Israeli landscape . . . who has influenced the younger generations as a teacher and an artist who promoted video art in Israel in the late 1990s'. The figure of Hitler fully steps in the forefront in Arad's video works, described by Edelstein as 'exercises in editing and duplication'.<sup>9</sup> In the works, *The Hebrew Lesson* and *Marcel Marcel*, Arad invites the viewer to acknowledge his unusual attempt to break down the fear and allure conveyed by Hitler's character, by means of playful distortions of Hitler's defining traits, namely his moustache and voice. These fruitful efforts to change Hitler's appearance are the artist's 'private revenge', as he takes control of the 'image' of a controlling character, whose power over the fate of the former European Jewry continues to reverberate on the lives of the Israeli-by-birth Jews. Hence, *The Hebrew Lesson* consists of short film clips selected from Hitler's propaganda speeches. The artist joins together segments of film and sound bites to produce a

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<sup>5</sup> See M. Zuckermann's essay, 'The Israeli and German Holocaust Discourses and their Transatlantic Dimension', reproduced with the permission of the author.

<sup>6</sup> From an interview with the artist, cited by Menon, p. 298.

<sup>7</sup> H. M. Broder, 'Forty Years of German-Israeli relations, Normality in the Shadow of History' in *Die Spiegel*, retrieved from <http://www.spiegel.de/international/0,1518,348048,00.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Avi Pitchon, (London, March 2010).

<sup>9</sup> S. Edelstein, 'Israeli Art Now', retrieved from <http://boazarad.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/texts/Boaz%20Arad%20IAN%20en.pdf> (accessed 13 March, 2010).

montage in which the dictator utters in broken Hebrew an apology to the Jewish nation: 'Shalom Yerushalayim, Ani mitnatzel', which translates as 'Greetings Jerusalem, I am deeply sorry'.

In *Marcel Marcel*, a tribute to Marcel Duchamp, the father of the ready-made, Arad transforms Hitler into a ridiculous and slightly pathetic cartoon character, reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin's satirical representation in *The Great Dictator* (1940). In Arad's video, Hitler's recognisable facial trait appears as a thin line along his upper lip, which thickens slightly and curls at the sides, then, grows larger and larger until it bursts the boundaries of the face. Then, the tips of the moustache curl downward, joining over the chin and swiftly grow into a beard of large proportions.



Still image from Arad's video work, 'Marcel Marcel' (2002)

The reasons behind the emergence of Nazi iconography in the Israeli culture are, as one expects, complex, and cannot be fully discussed within the scope of this paper. However, one notable scholarly attempt to explain this phenomenon is Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi's observation about the presence of the Nazi in the writings of David Grossmann, or in the poetry of Dan Pagis.<sup>10</sup> According to Ezrahi, the presence of the Nazi victimizer in the Hebrew literary imagination constitutes a challenge to the 'rituals of consent in the official commemorative spaces', and signals the beginning of a 'new ethical rhetoric in the culture of Israel, broadly referred to as Post-Zionist' which permits 'the imagination of alternative histories in which Jews can portray themselves as both hero and aggressor'.<sup>11</sup> Art critic, Ariella Azoulay, on the other hand, views it as part of a renewed attempt of the younger generation to 'work through' the inherited trauma. Despite its presence in the Israeli public space, the figure of Hitler has not been properly dealt with, argues the critic. Azoulay compares the dictator's face with a 'mask' stating that 'correctly identifying the face is tantamount to erasing the face, or turning your back at it, looking away and turning it into a mask.' The portrayals of Nazism in recent Israeli art represent 'the return of the erased image, and the missing moment, that foreign element that cannot be controlled, assimilated, or eliminated.'<sup>12</sup>

The works of the twenty-three Israeli artists at *WonderYears* can be grouped into two main categories: those which tackle the 'foreign element' that cannot be 'eliminated' from the Israeli national consciousness, such as Arad's video-works, *Hebrew Lesson* and *Marcel Marcel*, and those which make a critical statement

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<sup>10</sup> Holocaust historian Saul Friedlander coined 'new aesthetic discourse on Nazism' in the early 1980s to refer to Nazi imagery, and acknowledged the fact that, 'Nazism represents an obsession for the contemporary imagination.' The historian admits to the morally ambiguous character of such use, which denotes 'an expression of profound fears, and mute yearnings as well', but also 'a gratuitous review, the attraction of the spectacle, exorcism' or the result of 'the need to understand' in *Reflections on Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> S. D. Ezrahi, 'Racism and Ethics, Construction Alternative Histories', in S. Hornstein, L. Levitt & L. Silberstein (eds.), *Impossible Images, Contemporary art after the Holocaust* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), p. 127.

<sup>12</sup> A. Azoulay, 'The Return of the Repressed', in *WonderYears, New reflections on the Shoah and Nazism in Israel* (Berlin: Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, 2003), p. 66.

about the tendency to monumentalise or sanctify the memory of the Holocaust, as in Zoya Cherkassky's work, *Jude*. The artist turned the sign of disgrace – the yellow Star of David worn by the Jewish victims – into a golden brooch that the Jew can wear proudly on his lapel. In this manner, Cherkassky makes a critical comment on the fetish nature of the victim status predominant in Israel's politics of memorialisation, and alludes to the ease with which the Holocaust is turned into a commodity, or a product of popular culture. These artworks, together with the remaining ones,<sup>13</sup> were presented by the Israeli curator, Avi Pitchon, as a 'manifesto of the third way generation who grew up perceiving the representation of the Holocaust to be a pornographic Chinese torture, of flickering black-and-white documentaries and, by now, the obvious camp memorial ceremonies at school'.<sup>14</sup>

## The German-Israeli Collaboration

It is no coincidence that the Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst was the first institution to host the project. Founded during the student's revolt in 1969, the NGBK deals with subjects considered taboo by more established cultural institutions. Its objective is to 'invite young international artists, independent of commercial interests, to present their positions and to support them in their experiments to break new conceptual ground'.<sup>15</sup> Even though the NGBK agreed to host *WonderYears*, the concept proposed by the Israeli artists underwent several alterations once the German curators, Stephane Bauer, Mirjam Wenzel and Antje Weitzel, joined the project. In the following, I suggest that the exchange of ideas between the curators attests to the problematic character of Holocaust memory in the German space, but also to the genuine endeavour of the younger generations to work out a relationship that has been dramatically altered.

When asked about his collaboration with the Germans, Avi Pitchon stated that the hardest part 'was to agree on how to mediate the exhibition to the German public'.<sup>16</sup> While the Israeli curators intended to convey a sense of braveness and radicalism, being eager to establish a sense of community of a generation who 'grew up on post-modernity in culture and art, and on Post-Zionism in politics',<sup>17</sup> the German curators endeavoured to present the exhibition in less radical terms, so as to take into account the sensitivities of the German audience. The disagreement regarding which subtitle would be most appropriate is suggestive in this context. While the Israeli side proposed the subtitle, *Young Holocaust Art*, the Germans strongly opposed it and argued for the more informative *New Reflections on the Shoah and Nazism in Israel*. They insisted on maintaining a 'moderate' approach, explains Avi Pitchon, in spite of the Israeli curators' argument that the only way that one can revitalise and advance the discussion on the Holocaust is by posing uncomfortable questions.

The German curators feared *WonderYears* could be used or manipulated by right-wing extremist groups or serve as a justification for anti-Semitic behaviour, feared the German curators. An exhibition which includes symbols of Nazism could be easily misinterpreted as a provocation, or even as an offence to a German nation that demonstrates a long-term commitment to fight any forms of Neo-Nazism or anti-Semitism. Since 1945, symbols, songs, pictures, slogans and greetings associated with Nazism have been banned in the German public space. A telling example of the taboo nature of Fascist iconography is the public controversy prompted by Anselm Kiefer's series of photographs titled *Occupation* (1969). The artist occupies European sites by photographing himself with the hand raised in the Nazi salute. Kiefer's reconstruction of the Nazi occupation of Europe had been criticised by the German critics who have accused him of showing sympathy towards Nazism. Kiefer explained his gesture as an attempt to come to grips with the national and personal past: 'I do not identify with Hitler, but I have to reenact what he did just a little bit in order to understand his madness. That is why I make these false attempts to be a Fascist. I need to know where I came out of'.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Among the participant artworks one counts Roe Rosen's installation, *Live and Die as Eva Braun*, which comprised a series of images and of texts displayed in the shape of a walking route with ten stations. The text presents itself as an advertisement brochure written in the second person and it claims to offer the viewer an unusual entertainment experience, to become, by means of an act of imagination, Hitler's mistress. Of interest are also Yael Bartana's *Trembling Time*, Tamy Ben-Tor's video performance, *Hitler – the Horror and the Horrah*, and Dina Shenhav's installation, *Portraits of Evil*.

<sup>14</sup> A. Pitchon in *WonderYears, New reflections on the Shoah and Nazism in Israel* (Berlin: Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, 2003), p. 24.

<sup>15</sup> NGBK webpage, retrieved from [http://ngbk.de/site/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=36&Itemid=30](http://ngbk.de/site/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=36&Itemid=30) (accessed 13 March, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Pitchon (London, March 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Pitchon, *WonderYears*, p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> Kiefer cited by Z. Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation. The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1993), p. 363.

The German curators' cautious attitude needs to be situated within the broader international context. Several months before the opening of *WonderYears*, a group exhibition titled, *Mirroring Evil. Nazi Imagery/Recent Art* (2002), at the Jewish Museum in New York triggered the public protests of Holocaust survivors who demanded that the exhibition be closed down. In order to pre-empt a similar outcome, the German curators supplied a set of explanations that would warn the public about the content of the exhibition, describing it as a 'small rebellion' which deliberately intends to remain in 'a-political and a-historical twilight zone, and test hardened traditional images and codes'.<sup>19</sup> A series of educational events were also organised; talks and guided tours were given in order to explain why the artists are dealing with these images. Discussion panels were arranged, in which art historians, scholars and journalists grounded the exhibition within the intellectual discourse of the 1990s, thus critical of Israel's politics of memorialisation. Moshe Zimmerman, for instance, explores the presence of a collective memory of victimhood, arguing that it has informed, to a large extent, Israel's current policies.<sup>20</sup>

Unlike *Mirroring Evil*, which was met with a flood of negative media reactions, *WonderYears* received little media attention. The few reviews in the German press were described by Avi Pitchon as adopting a 'strangely neutral tone neither laudatory, nor highly critical'.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, one can still identify a sense of subdued criticism in an article in *Der Tagesspiegel*, titled, 'Pastrami for all, the Israeli Third Generation, a Berlin discussion', which labels the artworks as cultural products of a consumerist Israeli society where the sense of communal identity is being replaced by daily individual preoccupations.<sup>22</sup> Another article, ironically titled, 'Let me be a Hitler', adopts a rather concerned attitude towards the light-heartedness with which the Israeli artists make use of Nazi symbolism, asking: 'Is there something more provocative than playing with the iconography of Nazism in the land of the Holocaust survivors?'<sup>23</sup> Despite the restrained criticism hinted at by these articles, the exhibition has not triggered public controversy. On the contrary, 'very little of it (controversy) happened', stated Avi Pitchon.<sup>24</sup> There are several explanations which account for the lack of public discussion, such as the location of the exhibition in Kreuzberg – a traditionally left-wing neighborhood, known for its antifascist sentiment, the tradition of public protest and its avant-gardism – or perhaps the more general reluctance of the German public to attack something that carries an Israeli label.

## Conclusion

'Normalisation' itself is a highly contested term, whose meaning lacks formal understanding and leans on the transient historical moment and the context in which it is being used. Especially in the German context, 'normalisation' has fuelled public debates such as the *Historikerstreit* (The Historian's Quarrel) in the mid-1980s which raised the question as to whether one can even employ this term in regard to Germany's construction of a post-war national identity. Despite the problematic nature of 'normalisation', I suggest that the interactions established between the German and Israeli curators can safely be understood as a cogent attempt to share the difficulties of the coming to terms with an inherited trauma, and to 'normalise' relationships in the sense of challenging inherited fears by exposing, not an open wound but a wound that is healing.

*WonderYears*, then, materialised in spite of criticism. Its existence is sufficient evidence to attest to the willingness on both sides to create a place of reflection – a place where one can deal with the repressed but nevertheless real presence of Fascist imagery which informs both societies. The agreement to host an exhibition which adopts a critical position towards Israel's politics of memorialisation shows that Germany has made significant steps to establish a normal relationship which includes both praise and criticism. As a concluding remark, I cite Henryk Broder's reflections on the German-Israeli relationship, prompted by the fortieth anniversary of diplomatic relations. The author states positively that:

Berlin in the summertime is full of Israelis either in Germany for a short visit or as part of a longer study program, while on the beach promenades in Tel Aviv you run into German tourists who have no hang-ups about ordering a beer in German, just as they do in tourist resorts across the

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<sup>19</sup> Preface of the art catalogue, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> See M. Zimmerman, 'The Collective Memory of Victimhood', in *WonderYears: New Reflections on the Shoah and Nazism in Israel* (Berlin: Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, 2003), pp. 30-43.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Pitchon (London, March 2010).

<sup>22</sup> J. Mühling, 'Wonderyears: Israels dritte Generation - eine Berliner Diskussion', retrieved from <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/art772,2246074> (accessed 13 March, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> O. Heilwagen, 'Lass mich ein Hitler sein, Wonderyears: Israels Kunst und die Shoah – eine Ausstellung', retrieved from <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/art772,2246051>, (accessed 13 March, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Pitchon (London, March 2010).

Mediterranean. Germans head to Israel for bus tours around the Sea of Galilee, Israelis head to Berlin to study German history . . . In fact, if people didn't continue harping on the 'special relationship' mantra, they might actually notice how truly abnormally normal the bond between Germany and Israel has become.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Broder, *Die Spiegel*.