TRANSGRESSING WORDS AND SILENCE:
AESTHETICS, ETHICS AND EDUCATION

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between ethics, aesthetics and education, using the limit case of art created in response to the Holocaust, and argues that art is not autonomous: The theme of the Holocaust speaks directly to the question of art’s relationship to moral, political and educational purpose. Guided by the philosophy of Maxine Greene, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Immanuel Kant, this thesis focuses on three works by artists who have addressed the Holocaust in their work: writer Primo Levi, filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, and sculptor Rachel Whiteread. Lyotard’s aesthetic and political theories, based on his reading of Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, link the practice of contemporary art to a postmodern ethics; his key concepts of the différend, the event and the sublime provide a basis for my analysis of how the each of these artworks works.

Art that attempts to explore the aporia of the Holocaust faces specific issues: the role of beauty and redemption; the relationship between art and the real; the impact of trauma on memory and representation; and the nature of testimony. Each of the artworks addresses these challenges: Whiteread's sculpture explores the reality and materiality of absence; Lyotard’s film reveals the traces and gaps in memory and history; and Levi’s memoir highlights the power and frailty of art and communication.

Understanding the nature of contemporary art provides insight into art’s value and purpose. Art’s ethical obligation lies in its relationship to the real: If art
can address the aporia of the Holocaust, then it is valuable, necessary and important in our culture. Art creates new ways of seeing and responding to the world, and has the ability to transform. At the same time, art’s distance from the real always limits its efficacy. Art educates not merely through formal means uncovered in the classroom, but because it engages its audience in reflective judgment, in making meaning while at the same time questioning the ability to do so.
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1 Silence and Testimony

The unthought hurts because we’re comfortable in what’s already thought. And thinking, which is accepting this discomfort, is also, to put it bluntly, an attempt to have done with it. That’s the hope sustaining all writing (painting, etc): that at the end, things will be better. As there is no end, hope is illusory. (Lyotard, 1991, p. 20)

For teachers and students in the humanities, the Holocaust has become a limit case, a prime site for testing aesthetic and ethical theories about mediation and representability. (Hirsch and Kacandes, 2004, p. 3)

This thesis is an exploration of the relationship between ethics, aesthetics and education, using the limit case of art created in response to the Holocaust. My exploration is guided by the philosophical writings of Maxine Greene, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Immanuel Kant, and focuses on the work of three artists: writer Primo Levi, filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, and sculptor Rachel Whiteread. Art that attempts to memorialize, document, or bear witness to the Holocaust deals with a profound challenge: the attempt itself is a political act, an act of recognition, respect and mourning. It is art that may be both a comfort and a challenge to its audience. It must work, not only in the sense of being somehow “successful,” but as an agent, activating memory, thought, and ultimately and eventually, a decision (to act, to speak or remain silent, to defend). All artists
working with Holocaust material are responding, unwittingly or not, to Adorno’s oft-quoted (and not well understood) statement (written in 1949 and modified in 1966): “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (1967, p. 34). In the essay where this quote appeared, Adorno was implicating art and cultural criticism (and critics, like himself) in barbarism. He believed at the time that art, culture and criticism were failing in their critical role. His statement, therefore, reflects his view of art and culture as complicit; poetry, he asserts, is meaningless when confronted with the horrors of Nazi Germany. Despite Adorno’s later revision of this statement, his original assertion brings focus, even today, to the difficulties encountered by artists who use Holocaust material in their work.

I began this project because of my growing awareness, over time, that I did not fully appreciate how my educational background, which began in art, writing and the humanities, shaped my worldview. I became aware that I was living according to values that were formed (at least partly) by my experiences being involved in and learning about art (performing, literary and visual), both formally and informally. Although my own artistic practices have varied in intensity over the years, affected by the demands of everyday life and career, the influence of this background is always with me. I now believe it has helped me to develop an ability to apprehend beyond the confines of language or the known; an unshakeable faith in the importance of striving for personal and social transformation; and a sense of agency. Writing and reading have led me into explorations of language and representation that have changed how I see, think about and interact with the world around me. But I have also struggled with art,
what it means personally, and what it means to be an artist or writer in the twenty-first century. When confronted with current social and political issues, I sometimes lose my perspective on art’s ability to contribute. This research began with my intention to explore that tension, to help make sense of the process and products of my own and others’ creativity, and to better understand my own struggle with its practice in relationship to my daily life. All throughout this exploration, the words of Maxine Greene have inspired me: “All depends upon a breaking free, a leap, and then a question” [my italics] (1995, p. 6). I have come to understand that there is something at the very core of the creative, imaginative experience that is vital, not only to the individual, but to the world we live in. It involves a sense of freedom, freedom to take risks, to push boundaries, and to question. It is something worth understanding, worth articulating, and worth arguing for.

My own writing, and my appreciation of others’ artworks, has been sustained by the hope, as Lyotard states in the quote that begins this thesis, that “things will be better.” Yet I have also questioned whether my belief in art, that it holds and creates purpose and value beyond the aesthetic, holds up in the “real” world. Thus, my attempts to answer the question of art’s value, its ability to do good in the world, led me to the examination of art’s relationship to the Holocaust. Influenced in my own art and thinking by postmodernist philosophy, I began to understand the pivotal role the Holocaust played in changing Western thought: it may be, as argued by Robert Eaglestone (2004), the event that precipitated a postmodern worldview. One view of the Holocaust is that
technology and efficiency, the hallmarks of progress in a modern, enlightened world, ran amok in Nazi Germany. Thus, any response to the Holocaust, including an artistic response, can never repair the breakdown of the Western faith in progress in the same way that it cannot redeem the suffering of its victims. Once the veil of progress is stripped away, we cannot return to the modern illusory narrative that things will forever be better. In Lyotardian terms, the grand narratives of modernity fail when confronted with the immensity of the Holocaust. The story of the Holocaust can never be told in full; the narrative will remain incomplete, because the scale, complexity, and horror of these events are beyond any final telling.

This research was not intended to specifically explore the pedagogy of teaching the arts, or of teaching art about the Holocaust, but is intended to explore and test the conceptual basis of both creating and experiencing art and to argue for its power to educate, and to transform and enrich our lives. My goal in this project was to bring together the work of theorists in multiple disciplines: philosophy, art theory, education, Holocaust theory and history, in order to deepen my understanding of how art helps us make meaning, in the specific case of the Holocaust, but also more broadly in our daily lives. Through the writings of Kant, Lyotard and Greene, I hoped to analyze how art works, for both the artist and the audience, and to apply this understanding to artworks that deal with a specific, critical history.

In the course of my creative explorations and education, I have been exposed to the postmodernist philosophers and to the postmodern writings of the
“Language” writers—a school whose experimental use of language in poetry and prose deconstruct the accepted confines of the medium. When I was first introduced to these philosophers and writers, I had an intuitive sense that this was in some way, for me, a natural fit; it reinforced a worldview (and an ethical perspective) that I had been unable to articulate, except in poetry. But it was not until this research, over twenty years later, that I examined my own sense of this “fit.” The philosophers that have guided my current project represent various positions along the philosophical spectrum of modernity and postmodernity: Whereas Maxine Greene powerfully argues for the role of art in the classroom, clearly articulating its value and its power to do good in the world (and thus, demonstrating the “hope” that sustains all writing and art), Jean-Francois Lyotard delves deeply into the ambiguity and unknowability at the core of the artistic question (“As there is no end, hope is illusory” [Lyotard, 1991, p. 20]). And yet, even Lyotard argues for the ethical imperative behind the work of any artist (or philosopher or educator). In his analysis of the ethical and the aesthetic, Lyotard reaches into the work of Kant and pulls forward the concept of the sublime. He uses this concept to speak to the intent of modern and postmodern art, and to try and understand how and why art works. Whereas Greene writes about the “shocks” that might awaken imagination and open a sense of freedom and the unknown, Lyotard conceptualizes the “event” that can be created by a work of art (such as Barnett Newman’s paintings). Thus, recognizing art’s ability to engage its audience (and thus, to create an obligation to respond) is one of the keys to understanding its ethical imperative.
These philosophical perspectives on art’s value and process led me to examine specific works of art, as well as my own creative process. My decision to use artworks that focus on the Holocaust came later; I had originally intended to write about the practice of art from a broader perspective. Whiteread’s Holocaust memorial in Vienna connected me to Lyotard’s writing and his concepts of the différend and the sublime. On researching and analyzing this link, I became acutely aware of the complexities of making art in relationship to the Holocaust. Thus, Whiteread’s work both opened a door for me and brought the questions of ethics and aesthetics into sharp relief. Art, like education and justice, is put to test with this history: If art has the ability to work against the darkness of the Holocaust, then my belief in and commitment to it can be justified. My research led me back to Primo Levi’s memoir (a work I was familiar with) and to Lanzmann’s monumental film. I also began to explore through my own poetry—the poems included in this document trace my own creative process in exploring the limits of representation, as an artist who has, like Whiteread, no relationship to this history except through others’ representations. Although I have no known familial connections to the events of the Holocaust, I believe we all must learn from an event of such magnitude. This project, and the poetry that is part of it, is my attempt to learn, to make meaning, however temporary, out of the unfathomable complexities of its events.

In the first decade of the 21st century, the immensity of the tragedy of the Holocaust still overwhelms: In the words of historian Raul Hilberg (1961), the Holocaust was “unprecedented…. nothing like it had every happened before…. 
The operation was over before anyone could grasp its enormity” (p. 3). Over fifty years later, we are still haunted by its significance—at the time of writing, current news stories document an elderly Nazi war criminal being brought to justice in Germany; the international politics of maintaining the ruins of Auschwitz; and the new American President’s speech at Buchenwald. The Holocaust has become a reference point for more recent genocides and war crimes. Its ubiquitousness in academic writing and popular culture today suggests its enduring significance and perhaps, now that enough time has passed, a shift in humanity’s ability to face such history.

Postmodern theory, of course, with its emphasis on the incomplete and unknown, is often accused of ethical relativism, an accusation more dangerous and critical when dealing with events of the magnitude and horror of the Holocaust. In the course of this thesis, however, I hope to indirectly examine and defend against this charge. Following Zygmunt Baumann’s lead, I want to explore “the possibility of a radically novel understanding of moral phenomena” (Baumann, 1993, p. 2) through a postmodern aesthetic perspective. My argument, therefore, connects the ineffability of art with the indeterminacy of the postmodern, but rather than seeing art and postmodernity as inadequate to the task of dealing with moral and ethical crises, I will argue that both are essential in doing so.

Throughout this thesis, I will use Jean Francois Lyotard’s aesthetic and political theories (based on his reading of Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*) to examine the work of these three artists who have attempted, in
various media, to engage with the material of the Holocaust. Lyotard himself wrote about the Holocaust extensively; it provides, indirectly, a basis for some of the major philosophical concepts he developed over his career. The extreme significance of the Holocaust as an event in modern history make it a profound “test case” for art; the theme of the Holocaust, which explicitly links the work of Whiteread, Lanzmann, and Levi, speaks directly to the questions of art’s relationship to moral, political and educational purpose: does art “prescribe and guide us” (Kieran, 1996, p. 337). Or, is art “autonomous” in the Kantian sense: not “real” art unless it can be judged on its own purely aesthetic merits, without recourse to social or political concepts?

In the course of this thesis I will examine Levi’s memoir *Survival in Auschwitz*, first published in 1958; Lanzmann’s documentary *Shoah* (1985); and Whiteread’s Holocaust memorial in Vienna (2000). The three artists I have chosen, and the works I explore, each have a different temporal, personal and artistic relationship to the Holocaust. The different proximity of each of these artists to the historical time and events of the *Shoah* means that they approach it differently, if not less meaningfully. Primo Levi’s firsthand account of his experience in Auschwitz is a very different kind of work than Whiteread’s conceptual sculpture, or Lanzmann’s powerful film, yet each contributes as a significant witness to the pain and loss of the Holocaust.

Primo Levi was imprisoned in Auschwitz for over a year before the camp was liberated and *Survival in Auschwitz* (originally entitled *If This Is a Man*) is a memoir of this period. In it, Levi frames his experiences of the life of the camps
both personally and philosophically. As a chemist and writer, his powers of observation and description are profound. Levi writes primarily about the relationships within the camp between prisoners; his recording and analyses focus more on the destruction of sense of self of the detainees than on descriptions of the overt crimes of the Nazis. In Levi’s own words, “I wrote If This Is A Man struggling to explain to others, and to myself, the events I had been involved in, but with no definite literary intention” (1986, p. 181). While I will be referring to various sections of Survival in Auschwitz, I will look most closely at one of its well-known chapters, “The Canto of Ulysses,” in which Levi describes the ability of art to provide meaning, however fleeting, in the daily horror of the camps.

Claude Lanzmann’s nine-hour documentary, Shoah, completed in 1985, consists of interviews with survivors, witnesses and perpetrators, combined with images (from the contemporary time of the film) of locations in Europe where some of the Holocaust’s horrors occurred. Thus, interviews with individuals are interspersed with images of quiet forests and the crumbling debris of Auschwitz in the 1980s. Lanzmann gives voice to individuals who were involved, and in doing so explores the Holocaust from a social perspective, portraying individual’s memories and personal stories without shaping them into a traditional narrative. Unlike many documentaries, Lanzmann is in the film—he appears, often with a translator, asking questions and encouraging the interviewees to speak. In many cases, Lanzmann shapes the context in which the questions are answered—for example, he places the survivors in geographic locations where they may be
forced to re-experience, as well as remember what happened. In another segment, he uses a hidden camera to record his interview with SS Officer Franz Suchomel, whom he has assured, on film, that he would not record. The result is a compelling documentary that both creates and questions the relationship between art, history and reality. This film is considered, even today, as one of the most important films and records of the Holocaust.

Finally, Rachel Whiteread’s Holocaust memorial, completed in 2000 in a city square in Vienna, was created in a context relatively distant from the historical events of the Holocaust. By this I mean that Whiteread, a British artist, has no direct relationship to the Holocaust in her personal history (other than living, for a brief period, in Germany); she is of the generation of artists whose only relationship to these events is through historical artifacts or survivor’s memories. Whiteread’s sculpture was designed in response to a call from the city of Vienna for a memorial to the Jews of Vienna, and a local jury selected her submission. This austere memorial (which took two years to complete due to the politics surrounding its installment) has since become a site of pilgrimage and remembrance, visited by the Pope in 2007. While Levi’s work deals with the personal and philosophical, and Lanzmann’s work with the social and historical, Whiteread approaches the Holocaust indirectly through the conceptual, alluding to, but not incorporating, personal and historical content. Thus, each of these works layers historical, ethical and aesthetic meaning; each frames and analyzes the Holocaust in a unique way; each works through different means and processes.
While the nature of art in today's modern and postmodern conversations does not have a single definition, I will use the work of these three artists to represent my argument that art cannot be autonomous in the Kantian sense. I see art (in all its media) as having the ability to speak the unspeakable. If this is so, then the value of art today exists both because of and beyond the aesthetic: it is this that creates the possibility that the creation of art is an ethical act, and that the experience of art can transform. This perspective emphasizes art's ability to help us see, think and communicate in new ways: thus, in Maxine Greene's words, “informed encounters with works of art often lead to a startling defamiliarization of the ordinary” (1997, p. 4), which may bring about “all kinds of reconceiving and revisualizing” and ultimately, a revision or renewal of “the terms of [one's] life” (p. 5). One of the themes that recurs over and over again in the writing and stories of Holocaust survivors and scholars is silence: the silence of the survivors who find that language fails them in their efforts to speak (as in Primo Levi's work); the silence of the individuals murdered and the communities and cultures lost (represented by the untitled and unidentifiable books in Whiteread's sculpture); the silence of the witnesses and the presumed witnesses who did not speak out; the silence of the perpetrators (some of whom are interviewed in Lanzmann's film); and the silence created by the Nazis' efforts to wipe out all traces of their crimes. It is my argument that, in approaching the memories and histories of the events of the Holocaust, the nature of art may, in the words of historian Dominick LaCapra (2001) “provide a more expansive space” (p. 185) to teach and learn, to transform, to remember what has been
remembered. While some silences cannot be filled, the current generation of artists and writers do not accept silence as a rule. They are attempting to bring awareness and witness the Holocaust in new media and forms, sustaining the hope, as Lyotard suggests, “that things will be better” (1991, p. 20).

It is an “ethical necessity” for Lyotard that the holocaust haunts us; that is, as he puts it, that it cannot be remembered but that it cannot be forgotten either. This event—and perhaps all events—must be *immemorial*; that is, something that cannot be fully recalled or fully obliterated. (Jenkins, 2004, p. 383)

In my research on the Holocaust I have encountered written and visual representations of its events from multiple disciplinary perspectives: literary, historical, philosophical and artistic. Each representation demonstrates an attempt to recall and understand the events of the Holocaust; each both succeeds and fails in doing so. Sometimes the relentlessness of the historical chronology or the personal narrative overwhelms; sometimes the listing of facts reduces meaning to a litany; sometimes an artistic work fails to encompass the significance of events. The key to any attempt to witness the events of the Holocaust, to educate those who were not there, is not *what* but *how* the information is represented: It is my argument that successful artistic representations may provide the best avenue to educate because they go beyond the factual to “deepen and expand” what is known (Greene, 1995, p. 104):
There have to be disciplines, yes, and a growing acquaintance with the structures of knowledge, but at the same time, there have to be the kinds of grounded interpretations possible only to those willing to abandon already constituted reason, willing to feel and to imagine, to open the windows and go in search. (p. 104)

This thesis is my own attempt to open windows and go in search, not only through the disciplinary structure of academic writing, but also through the medium of poetry. The question of art’s ethical and educational value cannot be answered solely in traditional academic form; to do so would belie the values that I am arguing for. In Lyotard’s words, artists, like philosophers, must attack “new, good forms” (Lyotard, 1984a, p. 26) of representation in order to bear witness. The poetry within this thesis, therefore, is my attempt to move beyond one form, to argue for the role of art using the language of art. The poems were written sometimes in response to the material that I worked through; sometimes in tandem with the academic arguments that I explore. What I found, as I became immersed in the history and philosophy of the Holocaust, is that traditional narrative structures no longer seemed adequate to make this argument. Thus, the form of the poems changes over the writing of this thesis (The poems are represented here more or less chronologically). The later poems, while more deliberately experimental than those that come before, also reflect a more self-conscious response to the nature of the content. For me, poetry is a natural medium in which to explore the ambiguity and incomprehensibility of the Holocaust, but like the artists whose work I examine in this thesis, I am aware of
the tenuousness of language itself, and the power and powerlessness of any artistic response. As a writer, however, I feel compelled to refute Adorno’s original dictum: To write poetry after Auschwitz is, as I hope to show, both a necessity and a responsibility.

**Directions**

The journey through this exploration of art, ethics and education begins in the next chapter with an in-depth analysis of Lyotard’s philosophical concepts: the différend, the sublime, and the event. In the following chapter I continue to explore how Lyotard’s philosophy extends the work of Kant, who was one of the first philosophers to examine aesthetics. Lyotard bases much of his philosophy on Kant’s concept of reflective judgment, and relates it not only to contemporary art, but also to ethics and politics. His expansion of Kant’s concept of the sublime explicates and defines the role and purpose of contemporary art. Thus, these two chapters provide a conceptual basis for my later analysis of the specific artworks by Levi, Lanzmann and Whiteread.

In the fourth chapter, I outline four interrelated issues that emerge when artists use Holocaust material in their work, including the role of beauty and redemption in contemporary art; the relationship between art and the real; the impact of trauma on memory and representation; and the nature of testimony. These issues continue to be debated and explored in academic theory, and have informed the work of many contemporary artists. In Chapter Five, I specifically examine the three artworks I have chosen in relationship to the themes and concepts introduced earlier: Whiteread’s sculpture, which addresses the
materiality of absence; Lanzmann’s film, which obsessively reveals the traces and gaps in memory and history; and Levi’s memoir, which highlights the power and frailty of art and communication.

Finally, Chapter Six retraces this journey and reaches beyond, returning to my own experience as an artist and to my understanding of art’s purpose. My discoveries on this journey have led me to a place of acceptance; not a closure, but a reconciliation with the unknowable and incomplete. I have gained a better understanding of the ethical questions inherent in the creation and experience of art, and of the power and failure of art’s role in the “real world.” Thus, I more clearly see my own practice and my struggle with its demands. This has given me a renewed sense of energy and agency, but has also made me more aware of the responsibility that comes with the practice of art.

Throughout this thesis, I refer to two important concepts, which I define broadly. First, when I write about art I am speaking of all the arts: written, visual and performance. My own background has encompassed all three, and, in this context, I am more interested in their similarities than their differences. To clarify, it is the nature and process of the creative experience that interests me—both from the point of view of the artist and that of the spectator. This perspective is explored most directly in Chapter Five, in examining Levi’s work in “The Canto of Ulysses,” where Levi discovers the power of art through the poetry of Dante.

Secondly, when I write about education I am writing less about formal education, or schooling, and more about how humans learn and make meaning from our experiences, and in particular through experiences creating or engaging
with art. While formal schooling may be a part of this, my own experience tells me that what I learn from art can be encouraged by, but does not require a classroom. Art is most powerful when it is in and of the world—a sculpture in a public square; a book that is read across countries, continents and decades; a film that is shown and re-shown, its voices never silenced.
Requiem

*Poetry tries not to tame the forms which form language, not to procure the inscription which retains the event of a landscape. It tries to slip by before its withdrawal.*

In the centre of much noise

*wind, laughter, machinery, cello*

a bell-like silence, the beloved’s absence

becomes the beloved. Release the missing name before the meaning slips

(blind & smart as tendrils seeking)

We rarely hear pure silence, inverted symphony of space and time, presence signifying absence

(cold spring earth first movement)

Which fills us, dark & tenuous, one note held longer than imaginable

---

1 (Lyotard, 1991, p. 188)
(warmth or water)

Still, so still
and little

dreams the shape
of empty houses

remembered rooms, remembered
family & doors
bolted against

a changed world
Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man. In a moment, with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed to us: we had reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this, nor could it conceivably be so. Nothing belongs to us any more; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand. (Levi, 1996, p. 27)

When we have been abandoned by meaning, the artist has a professional duty to bear witness that there is, to respond to the order to be. (Lyotard, 1991, p. 88)

Primo Levi, writing of his experience as a prisoner in Auschwitz (above), demonstrates his profound realization, reached in the depths of horror and confusion as he is immersed in the workings of the Nazi concentration camp, of communication’s fragility and necessity in one’s sense of humanity. In this excerpt he realizes that there were no words to subsume the experience of the detainees, no concept to explain away the conditions they endured, no language that could have somehow made it better. When the prisoners attempt to speak, there is no possibility of communication. The experience of the camps was, and
is still, outside the world that most of us find fathomable; we say *I cannot imagine* when confronted with writings such as Levi’s, descriptions of the more recent atrocities in Rwanda, or the wars waged by child soldiers in Africa. What is familiar to us, what our language creates for us, is a belief that we can and do *know*, that what belongs to us will always belong. When language is unable to encompass experience, therefore, we are left unsettled, perhaps in despair, perhaps seeking another way to return to the comfort of the known. Thus, art created in response to the Holocaust must confront the failure that Levi identifies: how does one speak of the unspeakable, how does one create thought despite and against what is impossible to think?

Presenting the unpresentable is a central theme in the philosophical and aesthetic writings of Jean-Francois Lyotard. In his concepts of the *différend* and the sublime he grapples with the idea of incommensurability, and returns over and over in his writings to a focus on aesthetics, suggesting a role for modern art that goes well beyond the Kantian notion of autonomous art. For Lyotard, modern (and postmodern) art embodies sublimity, a concept that he finds in Kant and deepens in his own work. Before examining the general question of art’s relationship to the Holocaust, and the specific inquiry related to the work of Whiteread, Lanzmann and Levi, I will examine the philosophical concepts of Kant and Lyotard in more detail. In the next section, I will begin with Lyotard’s concept of the *différend*. 
Out of Sequence (1)

I am here, inside
the wooden box, in darkness deep
in death, a voice against
the grain

I search for cracks
between worn floorboards, light
through wooden slats, the smell
of water

air, sweet air, and just beyond

a paragraph of sky, the infinity
of love and art

(my family's voices, voices left behind)

My heart lurches, drums
blood outwards, across countrysides &
landscapes

so vast the continent
no longer holds
our children

we will come to you in endless boxcars
The Différend

The différend provides a basis for Lyotard’s later explorations of the idea of judgment, the sublime, the event and ultimately, modern art and aesthetics. Williams (2000) describes the différend as the “absolute difference between two sides of a conflict “ (p. 4), and Lyotard’s role as one who “testifies” to this irresolvable conflict, or, in an alternate description, testifies to “absolute limits” (p. 92). Lyotard’s book, The Différend: Phrases in Dispute, is a philosophical exploration of the “heterogeneous genres of discourses” (Lyotard, 1988a, p. xiv) that create a différend, which he describes as: “the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be” (p. 13). In Lyotard, phrases are not grammatical parts of a sentence, but represent different systems (what he calls regimens) of making meaning:

A phrase, even the most ordinary one, is constituted according to a set of rules (its regimen). There are a number of phrase regimens: reasoning, knowing, describing, recounting, questioning, showing, ordering, etc. Phrases from heterogeneous regimens cannot be translated from one into the other. They can be linked onto the other accordance with an end fixed by a genre of discourse…. Genres of discourse supply rules for linking together heterogeneous phrases, rules that are proper for attaining certain goals: to know, to teach, to be just, to seduce, to justify, to evaluate, to rouse emotion, to oversee. (Lyotard, 1988a, p. xii)
Lyotard sees the discordance between "phrases of heterogeneous regimes" (p. 29) as irresolvable, due to the "lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments" (p. xi). While phrases can be linked, there is no "universal authority" that has the impartiality to judge or regulate between phrase regimens, or, as he asserts, "There is no non-phrase. Silence is a phrase. There is no last phrase" (p. xii). Even silence is content: it is capable of adding to, but never reconciling, the differences between the rules that govern phrases. At the core of Lyotard’s work throughout his career (and beginning in his earlier studies on postmodernity) is his acceptance of and assertion that there are differences and conflicts that cannot be smoothed over, redeemed, or made better through dialogue and discussion, despite our desire to do so. He stresses the heterogeneity of phrase regimens, and the discontinuity of histories. It is what one writer calls “his war against totality; closure” (Jenkins, 2004, p. 370). According to Williams (2000) Lyotard came to the concept of the différend through his earlier political writings on Algeria, where he began to understand that “reality is the site of irreconcilable differences or différends, including differences about matters of fact” (p. 19). In Peregrinations (1988b), Lyotard writes of the différend that developed between himself and a friend over his split from the Marxist organization with which he had been involved: “We no longer shared a common language in which we could explain ourselves or even express our disagreements” (p. 49). Thus, the différend is the site of incommensurability, a site that holds both the modernist hope for progress and universal truth, and, at the same time, the refusal of this hope. This irreconcilability is the essence of
postmodernity. Postmodern knowledge, Lyotard says, “refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable” (1984b, p. xxv).

This ever-unfulfilled desire for a unified truth, for a meta-narrative that subsumes heterogeneity, is, in Lyotard’s philosophy, an irrevocable part of the postmodern and modern condition that we live with: “Modernity is constitutionally and ceaselessly pregnant with its postmodernity” Lyotard writes (1991, p. 28), outlining his belief that the concepts of modernity and postmodernity are neither temporal nor historical. Postmodern thought reminds us that we are not moving from an era of modernity to an era of postmodernity, but that one contains the other: “A work can become modern only if it’s first postmodern. Postmodernity thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant” (Lyotard, 1984b, p. 78). Thus, if postmodernist thought exists as a reminder of the différends within human existence, this incommensurability always contains an element of the modernist hope that the différend can be eliminated.

The following passage, excerpted from Primo Levi’s memoir of his year in Auschwitz, exposes a subtle and tragic example of a “break” in meaning; the kind of impossible chasm of experience that characterizes a différend. Levi describes the detainees’ yearning for the solidity of “knowing” as the train they are imprisoned in makes its way across Europe. Levi’s sentence distills the great hope (and terror) of the modern world—that the human ability to name (our language) implies knowing: “We had learnt of our destination with relief.”
Auschwitz: a name without significance for us at that time, but it at least implied some place on this earth” (1996, p. 17). The prisoners, on a train out of Italy to an unknown destination, are relieved when they are given a place name, even if it is somewhere unfamiliar—a place name suggests an ending to their journey (and therefore a resolution, and perhaps, a beginning). The tragic irony of Levi’s description is only apparent after the fact: post-Holocaust, the name Auschwitz has come to represent the destruction of the known, the sensible, familiar world sinking into unrecognizable horror. But, before Auschwitz (before the prisoners’ arrival, and before the meaning of Auschwitz enters the consciousness of the world) the prisoners still have hope that language, the act of naming, can help place and fix what they do not know:

Like a flash of lightning in the darkness or a line on an empty surface, the Word separates, divides, institutes a difference, makes tangible because of that difference, minimal though it may be, and therefore inaugurates, a sensible world. (Lyotard, 1991, p. 82)

In this case, however, the name (the Word) fails the detainees: the “sensible world” is not made manifest, but the frailty of its conception is irretrievably exposed. In a sense, the différend that arises is the incommensurability between modern and post-modern sensibilities: Today, Auschwitz will never be a simple name, a destination promising a “place on this earth.” Auschwitz has become iconic, representing all the horrors of what is known about the Holocaust, a space and time that was, for the victims (and still appears to us today) otherworldly. According to Ezrahi (2003), Lyotard’s work,
along with Adorno’s before him, contributes to Auschwitz becoming a metonym: “a symbolic geography…that swallows up everything—all words, all life, all structures, all meaning” (p. 119). After the death-camps, something in our perception of the world shifted: the very concept of humanity was challenged by the inhuman actions of the Nazi regime. The victims’ experience, even sixty years later, is outside the norms of what can be described, or what, in many cases, the survivors can speak. Survivor Simon Srebnik says:

> It was terrible. No one can describe it. No one can recreate what happened here. Impossible? And no one can understand it. Even I, here, now…I can’t believe I’m here. No, I just can’t believe it. It was always this peaceful here. Always. When they burned two thousand people—Jews—every day, it was just as peaceful. (Lanzmann, 1985, p. 6)

In his book, *The Différend*, Lyotard approaches the concept of the unknowable, in relation to the Holocaust, from a philosophical and political perspective. One of the examples he uses to explore the idea of incommensurability is the dispute between the historians and revisionists over the events of the Holocaust. He recounts the arguments put forward by Robert Faurisson, a noted French Holocaust denier, who asks for evidence of the existence of gas chambers in the Nazi camps from “a single former deportee capable of proving that he had seen, with his own eyes, a gas chamber” (Lyotard, 1988a, p. 3). As Lyotard outlines, the only real proof, for Faurisson, can be obtained from a victim of a gas chamber, and as the victims are all dead, Faurisson denies the chamber’s existence. The différend, as Lyotard states, “is
signaled by the inability to prove. The one who lodges a complaint is heard, but the one who is a victim…is reduced to silence” (p. 10). Thus, the silence of the murdered is a phrase. Any response to this phrase is an attempt to link it to other phrases: in other words, to make sense of it, to find an ending or resolution to the différend. But there is no ending: the différend the prisoners discovered when they arrived at Auschwitz, the “place on this earth” that became a place outside the norms of human experience, cannot be resolved. “Lyotard says that to reduce the horror of the Holocaust by putting it under concepts—to make it an empirical object of cognition—would be to drown out the screams of its victims” (Jenkins, 2004, p. 383). As Carroll (2000) writes: “It is an experience of radical loss or negativity that has no positive results, that no dialectic can in turn negate, retain, and give meaning to” (p. 19). The concept of the différend, therefore, is significant because it signifies a place of irreconcilability, and, in accepting a différend, one’s hopes of understanding, reconciliation or dialogue disappear.

What then does Lyotard view as the response to such différends? He states this quite clearly: “What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to différends by finding idioms for them” (1988a, p. 13). Using Lyotard’s concepts, therefore, an artist (or scholar) attempting to deal with the memory of the Holocaust has a duty to bear witness (a concept I will explore later) to its suffering and to find a way (an idiom) to present what has been seen as unpresentable (even in the case of silence). As Carroll (2000) states, the writer, artist or thinker has an obligation to think and create despite not knowing what writing, art or knowledge is within the
postmodern context (p. 24). Thus, there is an ethical obligation on the part of the artist—not to attempt to resolve the différend—but to make it visible without resorting to determinate answers. This is where Lyotard’s concept of the sublime (and, as I explore below, the Kantian notion of reflective judgment) comes into play. The sublime is not a resolution (there is no universal judge), but is a state of ambiguity and heterogeneity:

The sublime feeling is neither moral universality nor aesthetic universalization, but is, rather, the destruction of one by the other in the violence of their différend. This différend cannot demand, even subjectively, to be communicated to all thought. (Lyotard, 1994, p. 239)

In this quote, Lyotard describes the sublime as a manifestation of a différend: the incommensurability of morality and aesthetics as continuous violence, or flux. Out of this energized, conflictual space Lyotard develops the concept of the sublime, which links his philosophical, political and aesthetic theories beyond the somewhat legalistic descriptions of the “abyss” of the différend.

Lyotard’s use of the sublime, outlined in his Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime (1994), is based on his reading of Kant’s Critique of Judgment. Before exploring contemporary approaches to the sublime, I will begin with Immanuel Kant’s writings in this Critique, the third book in his philosophical system, and the one in which issues of aesthetics, the beautiful, and the sublime are prominent. This Critique is significant in that it forms the basis for much of what is discussed about art and aesthetics today, and Kant’s aesthetic philosophy both reflects and is troubled by contemporary views on art. The sublime is one chapter of Kant’s
much broader work on aesthetic judgment, but it is from this section that Lyotard extends and develops his philosophy of postmodernity, art and politics. In the following section I will trace these various threads, beginning with Kant’s theory of reflective judgment, in order to link the sublime with postmodern theory, contemporary art, and representations of the Holocaust.

**The Power of Judgment**

Kant’s discussion of the sublime occurs as a small section in his third major work, *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*, completed in 1793. According to Crawford (2002), the third critique is Kant’s attempt to discover a priori conditions for making judgments of beauty in the way that his first and second critiques did for empirical and moral judgments (p. 56). The three critiques make up Kant’s philosophical system in which he explores the nature of human reason, morality, and aesthetic judgment. In the third Critique, Kant expresses his belief that the power of judgment is “an intermediary between the understanding and reason” (Kant, 2000, p. 64). *Understanding*, for Kant, represents the faculty of concepts, through which human beings organize observations under broader concepts, thus leading to *knowledge*. *Reason*, however, is a “higher cognitive faculty that exists outside and above the understanding ” (Wenzel, 2005, p. 253), or more simply, it is the human capacity to create “ideas and ideals” (Guyer, 2006, p. 377). Kant, therefore, explores the path between our recognition and organization of experience into concepts, and our ability to move beyond mere organization, using reason, to envision the new.
Guyer explains this connecting link as the bridge between the natural world and the rational world: “The point of the third Critique is to show nothing less than that human beings are rational beings who can nevertheless be at home in nature, indeed the nature within their own skins as well as outside them” (Guyer, 2006, p. 37). In other words, human beings experience the natural world though our senses but make sense of it through our understanding and reason. The moral judgments we make, therefore, lead to palpable experiences that give evidence of our abstract ideas and ideals in the sensible world of nature or art (Guyer, p. xi):

We must act on the commands of morality in the natural world and thereby transform the natural world into the moral world. We must make our own autonomy effective in the natural world, and both aesthetic and teleological judgment support us in our belief that we can do that. (Guyer, p. 309)

Guyer is not saying that the natural world embodies morality—but is saying that our perceptions create what we understand of the natural world, and our rational thought leads us to act in the natural world, thus influencing our experience. In this way, Guyer argues, Kant makes the connection between the beauty of nature and art and morality. By seeing order and beauty in the natural world, we are reassured of our own rational and moral thought.

In the case of an environment such as Auschwitz, the bureaucratic systems of death implemented by the Nazis are divorced from the natural world—the detainees are not at home in the world nor can their experiences be made sense of. Thus, the link between the sensible world and the rational world
is irreparably harmed; there is no reassurance of rationality or morality. As Primo Levi writes:

The arrival in the Lager was indeed a shock because of the surprise it entailed. The world into which one was precipitated was terrible, yes, but also indecipherable: it did not conform to any model; the enemy was all around but also inside; the “we” lost its limits, the contenders were not two, one could not discern a single frontier but rather many confused, perhaps innumerable frontiers, which stretched between each of us.

(1986, p. 38)
Out of Sequence (2)

(How the human form
and subject dissolve without
the human form and subject)

I held the gun beside the pit, I
locked and bolted metal doors, I
watched the naked and the fearful

I lied to ease our suffering

I counted until
I lost count, sweated
the daily march in pain and found

a small inverted god
in the shadows and the cold

(at first he did not recognize me)

I go home at night to sleep,
to eat, to hold my children

count my blessings

(We are much greater and
much less than human. I watched
the sun dissolve the spring snow)
Reflective Judgment

In Kant’s philosophical system, there are two ways in which we make sense of our experiences: determinant and reflective judgment. Determinant judgment means that one applies standards or rules to judge a particular situation or object. For example, one might determine a course of action in any given situation by comparing it against one’s preferred norms of behaviour. Reflective judgment, on the other hand, means that rules cannot be applied; judgment is made based on a “claim of agreement from others who judge” (Beiner & Nedelsky, 2001, p. x). Kant’s primary focus is the judgment of beauty: The beauty of a view in nature, for example, is not something that can be measured against a standard. Another way of stating this is that determinant judgment begins with a universal concept and subsumes particulars within it; reflective judgment begins with a particular and seeks a universal, which may or may not be forthcoming. Reflective judgment is one of the primary concepts underlying the third Critique, and its paradoxical nature captures the complexity of artistic vision, making it relevant even in the 21st century. It is the basis of Kant’s understanding of aesthetics (which, in the context of his time, is primarily concerned with natural beauty): aesthetic judgment is reflective, and when one states that something is beautiful (the view of the landscape, for example), one seeks and expects that this judgment is universal, despite the lack of determinate standards to measure this judgment against. Reflective judgment is also the basis for judgments of sublimity, a concept that Lyotard extends and builds upon when considering contemporary art (to be addressed in the next chapter).
Kant’s aesthetic theory, according to Wenzel, stands apart from previous aesthetic theories because it “is marked by a certain shift of focus, a shift from the object to the judgment about the object” (2005, p. 2). Kant is not trying to define universal standards for beauty; rather, his focus is on the subjective response to beauty, and the claims for universality that one makes with this response. Thus, Kant’s aesthetics outline that judgments of taste are neither purely subjective nor purely objective. As Lyotard (1994) puts it:

Taste at least…offers the paradox of a judgment that appears, problematically, to be doomed to particularity and contingency. However, the analytic of taste restores to judgment a universality, a finality, and a necessity—all of which are, indeed, subjective—merely by evincing its status as reflective judgment. (p. 1)

At the core of Kant’s theory of reflective aesthetic judgment, therefore, is the complex relationship between one’s own experience of something as beautiful (implying a sense of pleasure) and one’s assertion of this pleasure as universally shared, despite the lack of principles on which to prove the assertion. Kant’s justification for the somewhat paradoxical assertion of universality without universal principles is made clearer as he progresses through a detailed explication of reflective judgment. He analyzes the nature of reflective judgments through four “moments”: disinterestedness, universality, purposiveness and necessity. Kant’s use of the term “moment” refers to his earlier work in the Critique of Pure Reason, suggesting movement or force, rather than today’s common understanding of it as a period of time (Wenzel, 2005, p. 10). I will now
examine each of these moments in detail; there is both connection and
disjuncture between Kantian aesthetics and theories of contemporary art. Lyotard
has examined Kant’s theories to clarify and enhance this relationship; following
his lead, I will use examples from the three artists I am studying to explore Kant’s
ideas, and to attempt to trace and deepen understanding of the nature and work
of art today.

**Disinterest**

The first moment, *disinterest*, refers to Kant’s understanding that taste (the
judgment of beauty) is not connected to a sense of purpose, or motivated by
desire for an end: “I should be free from any kind of desire, aim or purpose, or
any social, moral, or intellectual consideration…. Only then can my
contemplation of the object be ‘pure’” (Wenzel, 2005, p. 19). What one gains from
such free contemplation is a sense of whether something is agreeable: “the
feeling of pleasure or displeasure” (Kant, 2000, p. 90). In contrast, if one is
judging whether something is moral (good) one is not free “but constrained by
definite concepts” (Crawford, 2002, p. 56), which makes this a determinant,
rather than reflective, judgment. The key to making sense of Kant’s term, “free
contemplation,” is understanding that judging something as beautiful refers back
to one’s own immediate subjective state of feeling in experiencing it, not to any
external measure of beauty. Lyotard (1991) describes reflective judgment as
follows:

> For “logically” reflection is called judgment, but “psychologically,” if we
> may be permitted the improper use of this term for a moment, it is nothing
but the feeling of pleasure and displeasure. As a faculty of knowledge, it is devoted to the *heuristic*, and in procuring “sensations,”…it fully discloses its *tautegorical* character, a term by which I designate the remarkable fact that pleasure and displeasure are at once both a “state” of the soul and the “information” collected by the soul relative to its state.” (p. 4)

The sensation of pleasure or displeasure, therefore, is not influenced by any external concepts, desire, or interest; it merely *is*. Lyotard refers to it as “a dazzling immediacy and a perfect coincidence of what feels and what is felt” (p. 11). Zangwill (2003) writes: “Pleasure is disinterested when the route from the representation of the object to the response of pleasure entirely bypasses desire” (p. 64). Thus, the concept of disinterest in making a judgment of beauty suggests an unmediated, pure response. It also, however, appears to belie the connection between aesthetic judgment and morality. Guyer (2006) addresses this issue by linking it to Kant’s view of freedom: a disinterested response is one that is not framed by a moral position; but the “freedom of imagination that we experience in our encounter with beautiful objects can give us a feeling of the reality of the freedom of will that we can only postulate within moral reasoning” (p. 311). Thus, Kant sees that natural beauty, and beauty in art, allows us to believe that our concepts (even our moral concepts) make sense in the natural world.
Out of Sequence (3)

I am the author of experiences
I have not had

I transgress words
& silence

Such is the largesse
of art, my fine art

I imagine

you, the captors
perpetrators
victims

fifty years and continents
apart

(I love
my family and my poetry
more than life itself)

I am not
authorized, and yet

I speak of crimes
as if they were my own
Disinterest is not, however, the only element that distinguishes aesthetic from other judgments: the concept of universality, Kant’s second moment, is a more complex feature of reflective judgment. The second moment is titled: “The beautiful is that which, without concepts, is represented as the object of universality satisfaction” (2000, p. 96). As mentioned earlier, the relationship between one’s own disinterested response to beauty and one’s claim to universality appears paradoxical: how does one support a claim that one’s judgment of beauty (taste) is universal, without the implication that there is some kind of empirical, non-subjective measure? Kant says: “If one then calls the object beautiful, one believes oneself to have a universal voice, and lays claim to the consent of everyone” (p. 101). But it is important to note that universality does not lie in the object, nor does it lie in the mediation of a universal concept (i.e.: as in the recognition of the good), but it lies in the expectation of a universal response from all subjects. As Lyotard (1994) states, “The pleasure of the beautiful promises, demands, gives the example of a communicated happiness” (p. 19).

There are two points I want to explore in understanding this critical piece of Kant’s theory of reflective judgment: the first is the relationship between the first and second moments; the second is the manifestation of pleasure (or displeasure) that occurs when one responds to an object. In the first moment, as discussed above, Kant outlines the necessity for disinterestedness in a pure response to beauty; as Crawford (2002) states: “If one believes the pleasure in finding something beautiful is not owing to any interest, then one naturally
concludes that the pleasure does not depend on any private conditions” (p. 58). In this view, therefore, having an interest (a desire for a purpose or concept) roots one’s response in “private conditions” (Kant, 2000, p. 97); thus one cannot claim a universal validity. Wenzel (2005) notes that being aware that one’s judgment is disinterested moves Kant’s argument into the psychological and phenomenological: through self-reflection, one is aware of one’s own interest or disinterest (p. 28). As he points out, in Kant’s “transcendental system” (p. 29), one is either speaking from an individual, subjective viewpoint (with interest), or as a “representative of humanity” (p. 29), without interest. Thus, the first moment, the state of disinterestedness, is linked directly to the second moment, the claim for universality.

The next point I want to explore in regards to the second moment is Kant’s rationale for a “universal response.” In Kant’s world, universality exists—although the beauty of nature, for example, cannot be dissected into elements that are universally regarded as “beautiful,” the response of the individual moves beyond the subjective to a universal sense of pleasure. What is claimed is not that the object in question embodies universal beauty, or that the object leads one to a universal concept of beauty, but that the response to the object is claimed to be universal. If one recalls Lyotard’s description of the “dazzling immediacy” (1991, p. 11) of pleasure or displeasure, one gains a sense of this response. Kant describes, in Section 9 of the Critique, the “state of a free play of the faculties of cognition” and asserts that cognition is the “only kind of representation that is valid for everyone” (2000, p. 103). Kant is referring here to the free play (meaning
without concept) of the faculties of imagination and understanding. As noted earlier, *understanding* implies the organization of our observations under concepts. The imagination, however, allows us to have sensible representations of objects that we have not experienced (productive imagination) or have experienced at another time and place (reproductive imagination) (Guyer, 2006, p. 375). When the two faculties of imagination and understanding are both free and harmonious, one experiences a sensation of pleasure, which we assert as beauty, a universal claim:

> The animation of both faculties (the imagination and understanding) to an activity that is indeterminate but yet, through the stimulus of the given representation, in unison, namely that which belongs to a cognition in general, is the sensation whose universal communicability is postulated by the judgment of taste. (Kant, 2000, p. 104)

The concept of “cognition in general” is important here, because this implies that the judgment is not *determined* by a concept. If the encounter with the object led to the unity of understanding and imagination in a *concept*, then the “consciousness of this relationship would be intellectual” and thus not “made in relation to pleasure and displeasure” (p. 104). Lyotard (1994) similarly argues this when he asserts that reflection is not *knowledge*: “Reflection does not produce understanding. It discovers in itself modes of synthesis that are similar to those of understanding. The latter are always there to make knowledge possible” (p. 37). In the act of encountering and thus judging beauty, imagination and understanding harmonize (or synthesize) and lead to sensations of pleasure
and a state of mind we believe is universally communicable. This is unlike an intellectual response, where the harmony of understanding and imagination are manifested in a concept, or as Lyotard outlines, in knowledge and understanding.

The first two moments, as described above, suggest a kind of unmediated response to beauty that is difficult to relate to in our contemporary lives, and even more difficult to relate to 20th and 21st century art dealing with topics such as the Holocaust. It is difficult to imagine experiencing a work such as Levi’s memoir or Lanzmann’s *Shoah* without an intellectual *concept*, or to experience the beauty inherent in each of these works (Levi’s language, for example, and Lanzmann’s images of landscape) without moral implications. This does not mean, however, that there are not elements of Kant’s arguments that make sense in today’s context. The juxtaposition of a peaceful forest, in Lanzmann’s film, with a survivor’s description of events that occurred in that very place leads to an unsettling of intellectual concepts, a “sudden shock,” as Maxine Greene (1995, p. 27) might describe it, where one moves beyond what one already “knows.” Whiteread’s memorial, as another example, pushes the viewer past an intellectual response. Its poetic complexity elicits recognition of its beauty at the same time as it negates that beauty. Whiteread’s work also plays with the concept of universality: a public monument cannot help but make a statement of universality, even if at the same time it troubles a universal response.

Thus, although Kant’s explanation of the forces of reflective judgment does not conform to a modern or postmodern view of art, at the basis of his argument are assertions that still make sense. His focus on beauty in nature and
art is narrow in a contemporary context; yet his focus on understanding the response to such beauty reveals a deep understanding of how the aesthetic works.

**Purposiveness**

Kant’s third moment focuses on the concept of purposiveness, defined by Wenzel (2005) as: “that which fits as if it were arranged according to some plan, intention or purpose” (p. 152). Kant (2000) explains it this way: “We assume as its ground a causality in accordance with ends, i.e., a will that has arranged it so in accordance with the representation of a certain rule” (p. 105). However, Kant also notes that we can “observe a purposiveness” (p. 105) even without an end. The judging of beauty has no rules and is not “cognized…through a concept” (Kant, 2000, p. 111) and therefore has what Kant calls a “formal purposiveness, i.e., a purposiveness without an end” (p. 111). Crawford (2002) contrasts this kind of purposiveness with the purposiveness of an object such as a knife: “The knife’s form makes sense because we understand what it is supposed to be” (p. 60). Janaway (2003) explains this “purposiveness without purpose” as follows:

> The determining ground of a judgment of taste is pleasure. And Kant here identifies this pleasure with the subject’s consciousness of a formal subjective purposiveness. In elucidation of this we struggle with other figurative expressions: the experience of an object of a particular occasion enters the subject’s awareness as being “unified” or as “making sense” in a certain manner not expressible as its satisfying any determinate concept. (p. 77)
Similar to Kant’s paradoxical assertions of subjective universality, the idea of “purposiveness without purpose” reveals a sense of ambiguity at the core of Kant’s explorations of reflective judgment. For example, in a Kantian judgment of beauty, one must suspend one’s desire for objective measures to substantiate universal judgments, and suspend one’s desire for a clear purpose, while still retaining belief in the possibility of both a purpose and a universal response. Kant attempts to analyze (and create a structure for) the very complex subjective feelings of pleasure that accompany an experience of beauty, without creating a conceptual determination of the structure (which would then make the judgment determinant). Lyotard (1994) describes his own work on Kant as trying to “isolate the analysis of différend of feeling in Kant’s text, which is also the analysis of a feeling of différend” (p. x). This différend is what makes Kant’s text powerful; he attempts to describe something that may not be describable: “The ‘weakness’ of reflection also constitutes its ‘strength’” (Lyotard, 1994, p. 2). In this ambiguous statement, Lyotard describes the feeling of a différend: Kant has reached the limits of language, of the ability to describe, in his analysis of purposiveness without purpose, and universality without universal concepts. One could see this as a weakness inherent in reflective judgment. On the other hand, the strength of reflective judgment lies in the recognition of its meaningfulness without reliance on the limitation of concepts. The différend reflects the messy reality we live in: the reality of irreconcilable differences and phrases where we construct structures and concepts to contain and communicate when only promises of containment and communicability are possible. As Primo Levi recalls of his train
journey to Poland—Auschwitz was a name that meant nothing to the detainees, but knowing the name of the place they were going to promised it was “some place on this earth” (1996, p. 17).

Kant’s idea of reflective judgment, and Lyotard’s concept of the différend both make sense in the analysis of contemporary art. Rachel Whiteread’s Holocaust memorial in Vienna can be seen to embody both the weakness and strength of reflective judgment. The memorial itself is a room-size concrete structure, bunker-like, built of hundreds of casts of concrete books, arranged spine-in. Despite its large concrete double doors, the bunker cannot be entered. The strength and weakness of this artwork lie in its enigmatic unreadability and its intellectual complexity; its simplicity is both beautiful and painful. Paradoxically, the stark exterior allows the piece to resonate with meaning. To reinforce Janaway’s concept (see quote on page 42), the memorial makes sense to the viewer but not in a way that can be easily conceptualized. The sculpture presents a unified whole; and in fact refers obliquely to places that are known (the names of concentration camps are engraved on its dais). Yet it more readily suggests what is unknown—the murdered Jews are not named; their fates can only be surmised; the machinery of their destruction is not represented; the books in the library cannot be read. But as Geyer (2006) outlines:

Finding unity in the materials of our sensibility and imagination is our ultimate cognitive aim, but we take an especially noticeable pleasure in this discovery of unity when it appears to be contingent…which is exactly what happens if it is not linked to any determinate concept. (p. 315)
Thus, in this memorial, a différend between the known and unknown appears. Photographs of the memorial reflect both beauty and strength (small candles, left by visitors, line its base; sunlight illuminates its bold form). But its simplicity is forbidding—constructed from concrete, its block-like presence is in sharp contrast to the ornate architecture of the buildings of the surrounding square. In Whiteread’s memorialization, ambiguity is made manifest in physical form—the memorial layers questions, answers, loss and remembrance. Jennifer Gross (2004) describes Whiteread’s oeuvre: “What the viewer sees is the negative image of a familiar form. What he or she physically encounters is an object that remains slightly out of reach of cognitive definition” (p. 46). In the Kantian sense of reflective judgment, the viewer suspends one’s desire for clarity of purpose and an objective measure of beauty. Definitions will not encompass or hold firm a singular interpretation; and yet, the memorial provides meaning.
Out of Sequence (4)

Warmth sinks into hunger
form into formlessness

children into enemies
clouds into sand

(I carry stories, memories
I’ve lost as many as the next guy

Some days I barely know
my own small history)

Our lives implacably
deteriorate

(I’ve made a lot of
bad decisions, I’ve been

bankrupt, hungry, faceless
without a hat, forgot

to speak out, truth
to power, all my ideals

well-formed, crumbling)

The facts, the laws, the documents
enforce

(and so the world escapes us)
**Necessity**

The final moment in Kant’s text is *necessity*: “The necessity of the universal assent that is thought in a judgment of taste is a subjective necessity, which is represented as objective under the presupposition of common sense” (Kant, 2000, p. 123). Kant defines “common sense” in this context as different from the “common understanding that is sometimes also called common sense…since the latter judges not by feeling but always by concepts” (p. 122). In Kant’s view, one necessarily assumes a “common sense” when one makes a claim for universality of a subjective feeling:

In all judgments by which we declare something to be beautiful, we allow no one to be of a different opinion, without, however, grounding our judgment on concepts, but only on our feeling, which we therefore make our ground not as a private feeling, but as a common one. Now this common sense cannot be grounded on experience for this purpose, for it is to justify judgments that contain a “should”: it does not say that everyone will concur with our judgment but that everyone should agree with it. (Kant, 2000, p. 123)

The claim for necessity, as Guyer (2003) points out, is not that “a pleasurable response is a necessary experience of any particular object; rather, given the fact that a particular object pleases me…it is nevertheless rational for me to expect other people to agree in this response” (p. 34). The belief in a common sense, therefore, as an ideal or norm, is what allows one to make a *claim* for universality in a judgment of beauty. As Lyotard (1994) emphasizes, “Universality and
necessity are promised but are promised singularly every time, and are only just promised. There could be no greater misunderstanding of judgments of taste than to declare them simply universal and necessary” (p. 19). In fact, when considering a contemporary artwork such as Whiteread’s memorial, a belief in such “common sense” lies behind it. Without a desire for others to experience what one experiences (and a belief that others will do so), the work of an artist could become meaningless. Thus, common sense makes sense of the ambiguity of Whiteread’s memorial.

In summary, the principles of reflective judgment, as Kant outlines them in the third Critique, focus almost entirely on the judgment of beauty, and in particular on beauty in nature. From this perspective, Kant’s analysis of aesthetic judgment is difficult to transpose to a contemporary views of art, even while it captures something of what might be called the “truth” of aesthetic response: Most notably, of course, beauty is no longer an essential element, or a necessary goal, of modern art. On the one hand, the aspect of reflective judgment that seems most relevant today is the assertion that standards and rules cannot be used to judge art; we must judge it “disinterestedly.” On the other hand, a postmodern sensibility questions the idea that any art can be judged “disinterestedly”: is there such a thing as a pure, unmediated response to anything in a world where we may question any and all claims to authenticity? Similarly, the belief in a “common sense” is disrupted and complicated by notions of heterogeneity; today, our understanding of social and cultural norms makes it difficult to accept the idea of a truly universal response. But within Kant’s
arguments, the paradoxical elements (the différend) reflect a desire to explore beyond the structural aspects of thought, even while attempting to create a structure to encompass them. Lyotard uses the *Critique of Judgment* as a basis for his own theories of contemporary art, focusing on Kant’s theory of the sublime to explore reflective judgment within the context of a postmodern framework. In the next section, I will turn to a discussion of Kant’s concept of sublimity, encompassed in the “Analytic of the Sublime,” the second book within the third Critique. This concept more accurately captures the multifaceted and multilayered response to the work of Levi, Whiteread and Lanzmann, and troubles the modern aesthetic response with a postmodern undercurrent.
On experiencing the sublime (at Coronation Mall)

1.

Here, in the aisle
of frozen peas, ice cream &
ready-made entrees
potatoes, clean, diced
& shaven

green beans resplendent
in their packaging
metal doors gleam
motors hum, a subdued
chorus sings

I am alone
weighed down
with choice, awash
in cool fluorescence

Everything I need is
here; the world’s riches barely

out of reach
2.

In the news, the last Nazi trial in Germany, a criminal

no one will recognize
he is too old, his face
and bent hands, the work of time distorts
the work of one man

*an experienced and efficient guard*

*a good colleague &
a friendly neighbour*

(we gaze at starry heavens
towering thunder
clouds & feel
the moral law within

“The situation taught us fully
what the possibility of survival meant

*For we could gauge
the infinite

*value of human life

*We were convinced
hope lingers

*in man
as long as he lives*"²

² Filip Muller, Survivor of the *Sonderkommando*
3.

The past awaits
in ruins, crumpled

(I dreamt again
of marching bands
& heavy boots

the pace of
fear, deliberate

—the day they
took your radio, the day

they took your job, the day
they took, at last, your shoes—

(we kept them)

O Canada
disgorge your plentitude

take me home, sated
with treasures

          treasured
3 The Sublime: Harmony and Destruction

*The Kantian Sublime*

For Kant, the sublime is the natural, sensible, and conceptual world exceeded; for Lyotard, it is cultural, man-made technologies and discourses gone wild, beyond rule, exceeding what is presentable.

(Engstrom, 1993, p. 197)

The concept of the sublime has a complex, 2000 year old history, according to Holmqvist and Pluciennik (2002), appearing in works by Pseudo-Longinos, Burke, Kant, and reappearing in a “contemporary postmodern renaissance” (p. 719) initiated by Lyotard. Although Kant was not the first philosopher to explore the concept of sublimity, the Kantian sublime, developed within his overall philosophical systems, is one of its most thorough and complex analyses.

According to Kant, reflective judgment is the basis of both judgments of the beautiful and of the sublime: “The beautiful coincides with the sublime in that both please for themselves” (2000, p. 128). Guyer (2003) interprets the experience of the sublime as “the experience of the search for a representation of the infinite—that is, infinite magnitude in the case of what Kant calls the ‘mathematical sublime’ and infinite might in the case of what he calls the ‘dynamical sublime’” (p. 40). In both cases, the universal that one seeks (beauty or the infinite) is a concept that is not determinate—there are no defined
standards or definitions that can be used to measure the particular experience and confirm it as “beautiful” or “sublime.”

According to Kant, however, one’s experience of sublimity has two important differences with one’s experience of beauty. First, the pleasure we experience in the sublime is very different from the pleasure created by beauty. Pleasure in the beautiful “brings with it a promotion of life, and hence is compatible with charms and an imagination at play” (Kant, 2000, p. 128) while the pleasure of the sublime “arises only indirectly” (p. 128) and is not connected to play but to “something serious in the activity of the imagination” (p. 129). Kant, therefore, defines a type of gravity in the feeling of the sublime that does not exist in feelings evoked by something we view as beautiful.

The second difference Kant notes is the seeming “purposiveness in its form” of an object of beauty that allows it to become “an object of satisfaction in itself” (p. 129) whereas the sublime experience “appears in its form to be contrapurposive for our power of judgment, unsuitable for our faculty of presentation, and as it were doing violence to our imagination” (p. 129). The concept of purposiveness, meaning that something that is beautiful appears to be designed with purpose, or in accordance with a plan, can lead the mind to “calm contemplation” (p. 141). The sublime, on the other hand, carries with it an energy and movement that “may be compared to a vibration, i.e., to a rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to one and the same object” (p. 141). The imagination fails when confronted with the sublime “as it were an abyss, in which it fears to lose itself” (p. 141). The sublime, in the Kantian sense, is an
experience in which our judgment is overwhelmed; it is “too huge (mathematically sublime) or too powerful (dynamically sublime) for our perceptual capabilities” (Wenzel, 2005, p. 144).

As Wenzel explains, Kant carefully distinguishes between two experiences of sublimity: the mathematical and the dynamical. The mathematical sublime is about size and quantity: “That is sublime in comparison with which everything else is small” (Kant, 2000, p. 134) and “which even to be able to think of demonstrates a faculty of the mind that surpasses every measure of the senses” (p. 134). The sublime, in terms of judgments of size or quantity, is immeasurable: such judgments are usually made comparatively, but in the case of the sublime, there is no standard of comparison. The particular is so vast, or so great in number, that “one immediately sees that we do not allow a suitable standard for it to be sought outside of it, but merely within it. It is a magnitude that is equal only to itself” (p. 134). Hence, when confronted by such vastness or multitudes, one is left without a concept that can encompass it in any concrete way. As Guyer (2006) notes, the mathematical sublime is about imagination and theoretical reason: “Somehow, in seeing a vast mountain range or the ‘starry skies above’ it feels to us as if we are directly grasping the infinite, even though in the cool light of understanding we know that we are not” (p. 321).

The dynamical sublime, in contrast, is about power, and our experience of it involves a relationship between the imagination and practical reason. The dynamical sublime, therefore, has the strongest link to morality. Kant believes that we are confronted with the dynamical sublime primarily in our relationship
with nature, where we are both exposed to our physical powerlessness over nature, yet at the same time “the humanity in our person remains undemeaned” (2000, p. 145). He gives the following examples of natural phenomena that might engender experiences of the sublime:

Bold, overhanging, as it were threatening cliffs, thunder clouds towering up into the heavens, bringing with them flashes of lightning and crashes of thunder, volcanoes with their all-destroying violence, hurricanes with the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean set into a rage. (p. 144)

Against the powerful forces of nature, therefore, we may see our own fears about “goods, health and life” as “trivial” (p. 145), and we come to judge ourselves as “independent” of nature, both “superior to nature within us and thus also to nature outside us” (p. 147). In this situation, therefore, one experiences fear of nature’s powerful physical forces at the same time as understanding one’s own powers in confronting that fear.

Both the mathematical and the dynamical sublime reflect one of the most important aspects of the experience of the sublime: the sense of simultaneous pleasure and displeasure in such an experience. One loses, in a sense, one’s ability to measure or to contain one’s experience within recognizable or understandable concepts, which may engender fear or other negative feelings. Thus, one of the key aspects of the sublime is a sense of tension; experiences of the sublime lead us both to a fear of power that is greater than our own (the powerful forces of nature) and to pleasure because such an experience can
“elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level” (Kant, 2000, p. 144). Kant links “the felt realization of our superiority to nature” (Budd, 2003, p. 134) to moral reasoning and principles. While we may experience the immense power of nature over our physical being, we also understand this power as “not the sort of dominion over ourselves and our authority to which we would have to bow if it came down to our highest principles and their affirmation or abandonment” (Kant, 2003, p. 145). Thus, our own strength, in the face of the immense or terrible forces of nature, comes from a belief in the power of our own principles.

Budd (2003) offers a different characterization of the feeling of pleasure created by the sublime, in contrast to Kant’s “moralizing interpretation” (p. 134). He believes that “the disruption of our ordinary sense of self, the sudden shock of a change of vision” (p. 134) leads to a pleasurable experience. Budd suggests that the pain caused by the sublime is not from our inadequacy to measure or comprehend the experience, but from a sense of our vulnerability: the sublime creates “a vivid awareness of our vanishingly small significance in the wider universe” (p. 133). Sublimity, he asserts, counteracts “our normal self-centeredness” (p. 134) which leads to the flux between positive and negative feelings characterized in Kant’s description of the sublime. The positive feelings engendered by the sublime are, in Budd’s view, felt simultaneously with the negative; and engendered by the same sense of insignificance. In summary, therefore, the sublime is consistently characterized, in both historical and current analysis, as an experience where one’s usual interactions with the stuff of daily
life falter: one is overwhelmed by unfathomable power or immeasurable size; in this moment pleasure and pain oscillate, and are inextricably linked.

**Lyotard and the Abyss**

Lyotard’s interpretation of Kant’s third critique, published in *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, focuses on and forefronts the concept of sublimity. While the section of sublimity is a small part of Kant’s much larger work, Lyotard interprets, expands and makes use of Kant’s theory of the sublime (a practice that he has been criticized for; see Drolet, 1994, p. 67) in order to explore and develop his ideas on modern art and the avant-garde. As outlined earlier, the Kantian concept of aesthetic reflective judgment (taste) entails the harmony between imagination and understanding; this “free” experience of beauty leads to feelings of pleasure, and also to a confidence in the universal communicability of this pleasurable response. Lyotard (1994) explicates the feeling of the sublime as very different from the experience of beauty:

It seems that the feeling must be the opposite of what it is in taste, for what is felt in the sublime is not the proper proportion in the free play of the two faculties that are being exercised, but their disproportion and even their incommensurability: an “abyss”…separates them. An abyss that repels and attracts and imagination…is enjoined to present the absolute.

The paradox of Kant’s analysis…is that it discerns in the cacophony a secret euphony of superior rank. (p. 24)

In instances of the sublime, therefore, Lyotard stresses the lack of harmony between imagination and understanding; instead, they embody a différend, a
state of both attraction and repulsion. In other words, although the mind is trying
to order experience under concepts, imagination can neither reproduce nor
produce fixed meaning—meaning shifts, falters, fails. In this incommensurability,
or as Lyotard terms it, “cacophony” he suggests a superior harmony exists,
although it is secret or hidden, less apparent than when one experiences beauty
and the harmony of the two faculties. The sublime, Lyotard asserts, speaks of
“another unity, much less complete, ruined in a sense, and more ‘noble’” (1994,
p. 25).

Lyotard’s concept of sublimity, therefore, suggests both unity and
incompleteness, a state of ruin, but a noble state of ruin. As quoted earlier, he
sees violence, flux, and the incommunicable in the sublime: “The sublime feeling
is neither moral universality nor aesthetic universalization, but is, rather, the
destruction of one by the other in the violence of their différend. This différend
cannot demand, even subjectively, to be communicated to all thought” (1994, p.
239). Sublimity means that there is discordance—there is neither a feeling of
moral superiority nor of the “rightness” of form experienced in beauty. Where
then, is the nobility amidst this destruction, the positive aspect that most writers
identify with sublimity? As described earlier, Kant believes the positive
experience lies in the recognition of one’s own moral strength and thus
superiority when confronted with nature’s incomprehensible power. Budd (2002),
on the other hand, believes that feelings of pleasure are created by a sudden
realization of one’s insignificance, and hence the loss of one’s banal
preoccupation with a sense of self (p. 85). Lyotard’s analysis of Kant’s text,
however, goes more deeply into explications of morality, reason, and the imagination, and links it to aesthetics and the nature of presentation in contemporary art. Simply put, the complexity and ambiguity of the sublime become an explanation for the complexity and ambiguity of aesthetic presentation in the 20th and 21st centuries, when art moves away from a reliance on beauty as a measure of its worth. I will examine Lyotard’s arguments more closely, therefore, in order to gain a clearer picture of the philosophical path that he traces. It is my goal to connect Lyotard’s interpretation of the Kantian sublime, the embodiment of a différend, with contemporary aesthetic representations of the Holocaust, and in doing so, to gain a greater understanding of the link between contemporary aesthetics and ethics.

**Form and Without-form**

Because the feeling of the beautiful results from a form, which is a limitation, its affinity lies with understanding. The affinity of sublime feeling, which is or can be provided by the without-form, lies with reason. (Lyotard, 1994, p. 58)

One of the threads in Lyotard's analysis of the Kantian sublime is an exploration of form and formlessness; these concepts lead directly to his understanding of the role of contemporary art. First, I will look at how Lyotard uses form and formlessness as a way to conceptualize the difference between beauty and sublimity; I will then follow this thread into the question of art, politics and ethics.

Lyotard asserts that the mind, by recognizing an object within a form (whether it be a visual or conceptual form) acknowledges a limit—the mind
accepts the presentation or definition, and is satisfied. Beauty, for example, is based on recognizing form; beauty (the aesthetic judgment of taste) pleases the beholder because of form. Form, therefore, links with understanding, or determinant judgment. Understanding, as noted earlier in the thesis, involves organizing observations under concepts.

The sublime experience, however, “exceeds what imaginative thought can grasp at once in a form—what it can form” (Lyotard, 1994, p. 53). As Beardsworth (1992) states: “What is crucial to judgment of taste is that the object has form. It is the feeling of the sublime that signals the loss of this form and pulls the feeling of pleasure appropriate to a judgment of taste into a tension between pleasure and pain” (p. 50). Although the experience of beauty creates pleasure, the sublime experience engenders a “violent and ambivalent emotion that thinking feels on occasion of the ‘formless’” (Lyotard, 1994, p. 97). Here, the imagination reaches the limit of form; it becomes incapable of forming form when confronted with ideas such as, for example, infinity, or experiencing the power of a great storm. There is a différend, Lyotard would argue, between the finite and the infinite; one that causes tension and signals the sublime. Although we can’t comprehend it (i.e.: place it within a form) the idea of infinity is always present. Thus, formlessness is linked to reason (or ideas and ideals, as encapsulated by Guyer) and to reflective judgment.

This limit to comprehension is what Lyotard calls negative presentation: “the sign of the presence of the absolute” (1994, p. 152). Imagination, therefore, while it cannot present the infinite, can signal the presence of the infinite. In
referring back to the Kantian sublime, Lyotard says: “In the sublime ‘situation’, something like an Absolute, either of magnitude or of power, is made quasi-perceptible…due to the very failing of the faculty of presentation. This Absolute is, in Kant’s terminology, the object of an Idea of Reason” (1991, p. 136). Lyotard relates his distinctions between the sublime and beauty back to Kant’s distinctions between reason and understanding, and between reflective and determinant judgments. To restate these distinctions: A determinant judgment occurs when the imagination and understanding are paired, and the object is placed under pre-existing rules and principles (concepts). A reflective judgment of beauty occurs where there is immediate pleasure in the harmony between the faculties of understanding and imagination (without being placed within the limitations of a concept). A reflective judgment of the sublime occurs when reason, the realm of Ideas, is paired with the imagination, which results, not in a harmonious relationship of beauty, but in an “admixture of fear and exaltation” (Lyotard, 1994, p. 127).

The sublime experience, therefore, engendered by formlessness, is the key to modern, avant-garde art. The task of contemporary art, as he sees it, is not to focus on beauty, but on the sublime: To signal the presence of the absolute. Lyotard asks the following question: “Is it possible, and how would it be possible, to testify to the absolute by means of artistic and literary presentations, which are always dependent on forms? Whatever the case may be, the beautiful ceases to be their object” (p. 153). In framing this paradoxical question (how can one use form to signal formlessness?) Lyotard frames his perspective on the role
(and, in fact, the imperative) of contemporary art. It is in his analyses and explorations of the link between art and politics (or art and judgment) that a type of ethical imperative becomes apparent: “An 'artist' is someone who presents problems of forms. The essential element, the only decisive one, is form…. There is more revolution, even if it is not much, in American Pop art than in the discourse of the Communist party” (1984a, p. 83).

Lyotard’s statement was made in an essay based on a series of talks in 1970 on the critical function of art. But this theme is explored and developed throughout his career, and his insistence on art’s role does not diminish with time. There are two questions that emerge from this statement: First, what does it mean to present “a problem of forms” in art? Secondly: how can art be seen as embodying “revolution” in any way other than within its own sphere (or how do art, politics and the ethical interrelate)?

A Problem of Forms

“What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to différends by finding idioms for them” (Lyotard, 1988a, p. 13). This statement by Lyotard relates the concept of the différend to the practice of art, philosophy and politics. “Finding idioms” becomes the challenge for the artist, and thus represents, for Lyotard, the problem of forms. The problem lies in the paradox illuminated by Lyotard’s question of using form to represent formlessness. As he states: “The function of the artist…is no longer to produce good forms, new good forms, but on the contrary to deconstruct them systematically and to accelerate their obsolescence. And this indefinitely, by
attacking these good forms on all levels” (Lyotard, 1984a, p. 26). It is this sense of continual challenging “new good forms” that illustrates Lyotard’s conception of the role of the avant-garde in art. As noted by Ross (2005, p. 34) this focus on continual experimentation separates Lyotard’s understanding of the avant-garde from the historical: The avant-garde, like the postmodern, is not connected to a specific historical period (although there are specific artists that Lyotard uses as exemplars) but to an attitude or approach to the practice of art that emerged in the 20th century and continues today. This attitude involves “constantly testing the rules of presentation which constitute ‘reality’ and with presenting negatively (through, for example, abstraction) something like the Ideas of the infinite” (Beardsworth, 1992, p. 51). Abstract painting is one of the primary examples used by Lyotard to represent this exploration. He describes the work of avant-garde painters as overturning “the supposed ‘givens’ of the visible so as to make visible the fact that the visual field hides and requires invisibilities” (1991, p. 124). From a broad perspective, one can understand this as a shift away from understanding visual art as an attempt to represent the real (as in, for example, the emergence of abstract art in the mid twentieth century). However, a more nuanced (and postmodern) perspective suggests that the creation of meaning involves the interplay of presence and absence, the real and unreal, and construction and deconstruction simultaneously. If form, as Lyotard suggests, brings about a pleasurable recognition (as in the experience of beauty) then the contemporary artist’s experiments with formal aspects of art are an attempt to move into the more complex experience of the sublime. Levi, Lanzmann, and
Whiteread each play with written and visual form in ways that disrupt and disorient expectations. I would argue that, in trying to encompass the unreal world of the Holocaust, the fragmentation and gaps in their artistic representations may be more “real” than the chronological facts and dates listed by historians.

For example, while Levi’s use of narrative is traditional (in the sense that the story of his imprisonment in Auschwitz has a beginning, middle and end), within this structure he uses fragments, short narratives, and portraits of individuals to encompass and portray his experiences. In the preface to Survival in Auschwitz he writes:

The need to tell our story to “the rest”…had taken on for us, before our liberations and after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse…. The book has been written to satisfy this need: first and foremost, therefore, as an interior liberation. Hence its fragmentary nature: the chapters have been written not in logical succession, but in order of urgency. (1996, p. 9)

Levi also writes that the coherence of his stories, as presented, is “an artifact, a rationalization a posteriori” (p. 181). Thus, in presenting his work he ensures that its form is made visible to the reader: The reconstruction of his story, like the reconstruction of his life after Auschwitz, is not seamless or absolute. This reflexive stance (post-Auschwitz and seemingly post-modern) reinforces the artifice of his narrative, critiquing the desire for order and sense making.
Similarly, Claude Lanzmann’s nine hour documentary is itself a challenge to the form of documentary: its length; its deliberate eschewal of historical footage; Lanzmann’s insertion of himself into the subject’s stories; his strategy of re-enactment—all of these factors contribute to the troubling of the form:

The fact that [Shoah] is also a work of art is acknowledged only in passing and almost with embarrassment. Purists of the documentary form came closest to acknowledging the problem, since they were struck by the fact that long stretches of the film are not “documentary” at all. (Koch, Daniel and Hansen, 1989, p. 20)

Like Levi's narrative, the film is fragmented: “The collection of the fragments does not yield, even after ten hours of the movie, any possible totality” (Felman, 2000, p. 122). On viewing Shoah, one does not come to a place of redemption, closure or the satisfaction of a narrative ending. Like Levi's writing, the questions raised by this film are larger than the form is able to contain.

Rachel Whiteread’s work is the most literal example of the incursion of formlessness into form. Her oeuvre breaks with traditional sculptural forms not because of the methods she uses, but because its non-traditional content challenges the rational idea of form. Most of Whiteread's work is created through casting, the process whereby one uses the negative of a form to create a positive. While casting itself is a traditional sculptural process, Whiteread’s earliest work focused on casting between objects: the space beneath tables and chairs; the space inside furniture, rooms and, most famously, the space inside an entire house. Cvoro (2002) argues that House, Whiteread’s famous and
controversial 1993 cast of the inside of a house in a neighbourhood of London (the house itself, slated for demolition, was dismantled around the cement casting) disrupts the “binary logic of form and content” (p. 55) and the “stable notions of absence and presence” (p. 56). *House* was bemired in controversy for a variety of reasons, but one of its most striking features was its ability to disorient both physically (how do you make sense of the embodied emptiness inside a house?) and intellectually (its concrete walls were eventually painted with political graffiti). Notably, *House* was torn down long before its scheduled demolition date—it became a touchstone for controversy that was only resolved through its disappearance.

Similar to *House*, the Holocaust memorial in Vienna reflects Whiteread’s vision of manifesting empty space, but also complicates this idea. For the first time in her career, Whiteread casts objects that do not exist: The walls of the library are built from casts of a book that she constructed out of wood. As Whiteread put it: “There’s nothing real about that piece at all, in a way. The doors were constructed; I constructed the ceiling rose. It’s all about the *idea* of a place [my italics]” (2004, p. 92). In this statement, Whiteread unwittingly links her work to the concept of the sublime: Ideas and imagination are paired in tension and pleasure. Cvoro (2002) writes that “a cast is a parody and euphemism of the original” (p. 57) and in this case, the original is once more removed—the reality of the place is entirely constructed. The constructed book (a reference to the Jewish “people of the book”) also references mythology and narrative. The original representation of a single book is cast and replicated in order to construct
an imaginary space that represents loss and the unknown. Thus, the binary
oppositions of “form and content” and “absence and presence” are even more
unstable in this memorial than in her previous works. Unlike Levi and Lanzmann,
Whiteread does not attempt to give voice to the historical reality of the Holocaust.
In their work the content overwhelms and deconstructs the form through sheer
intensity. In Whiteread’s work the physical form of the structure both represents
history and at the same time reveals its inability to represent (the nameless
books cannot be read; the inscriptions of camp names on the dais are the only
visible signposts; the place of the memorial cannot be entered).

Lyotard says, when referring to abstract painting’s disruption of the visible:
“We know that this does not happen without anguish. But painters are not
responsible to the question, ‘how can we escape anguish?’ They are responsible
and Whiteread are responsible to the question: “What is it to make art, and in
particular, what is it to make art about the Holocaust?” The anguish that Lyotard
describes is the anguish made apparent by the recognition that representations
always call into question the nature of reality; that a determinant judgment is only
a temporary reprieve from an interminable reflective search; that the modern
contains the postmodern. It is the anguish of Primo Levi recognizing that his
tempt to understand his experiences, to be a witness, will never be realizable; it
is the anguish of survivor Michael Podchlebnik in Lanzmann’s Shoah, for whom
silence is a reprieve:

What died in him in Chelmno?
Everything died. But he’s only human, and he wants to live. So he must forget. He thanks God for what remains, and that he can forget. And let’s not talk about that. (Lanzmann, 1985, p. 7)

Does this mean then, that art, if it does attempt to further a determinate goal (an ethical imperative, as in the three examples I am exploring), either succeeds in doing so and loses its power (and identity) as art, or fails to do so because of its success as art? Is art, therefore, only revolutionary in the unreal world of art? What is the connection between art, ethics and politics, according to Lyotard? In order to explore these questions, I will more closely examine the experience of art as an experience of sublimity. This will lead to another of Lyotard’s related concepts: the event.

**Politics, Aesthetics and Ethics**

The sublime is none other than the sacrificial announcement of the ethical in the aesthetic field. Sacrificial in that it requires the imaginative nature (inside and outside the mind) must be sacrificed in the interests of practical reason (which is not without some specific problems for the ethical evaluation of the sublime sentiment). This heralds the end of aesthetics, that of the beautiful, in the name of the final destination of the mind, which is freedom. (Lyotard, 1991, p. 137)

In this quotation, Lyotard suggests that sublimity sacrifices the imaginative nature for the interests of practical reason, in search of the ultimate goal of freedom. By sacrifice, Lyotard is referring to the anguish mentioned above—where something
is lost through sacrifice, there is anguish or despair, but the sacrifice implies a
purposiveness, or “final destination.” For example, the pleasure that is
experienced when imagination and understanding harmonize in an experience of
beauty is sacrificed when an ethical idea is introduced. Thus, the quiet and
peaceful landscapes in Lanzmann’s *Shoah* are rent by the traces of events that
occurred there. To clarify: once an “idea” of practical reason is considered (an
idea such as, for example, the good) the ethical emerges. This is because such
ideas involve the faculty of desire; there is a lack or need suggested when one
considers moral goodness. This is unlike the *disinterested* consideration of
beauty, which is only a judgment of pleasure or displeasure and has no
relationship to morality. Lyotard (1994) argues that Kant understood that “the
cousinship between the good and the sublime is closer than that between the
beautiful and the sublime” (p. 181). It is the sublime that muddies the clear
waters of aesthetic beauty; once an element of goodness, rightness, or interest
(in the Kantian sense) is introduced, beauty is tainted. The immediate
harmonious experience of pleasure engendered by a beautiful object becomes
more complex; the sublime tension between pleasure and displeasure creates
ambiguity. In Lyotard’s words: “There will always be a différend between ‘to taste’
and ‘to desire’” (p. 164). Thus, one can clearly see the relationship between
modern art and the sublime; once the question is asked “What is it to create art?”
the simple experience of beauty is sacrificed. The question itself implies self-
awareness such that immediacy and *dis-interest* disappear. There is hesitation, a
gap; an awareness of loss while at the same time a feeling of something new, beyond concept or form. Guyer (2006) notes, in discussing the sublime:

This feeling is not a determinate judgment that we have the freedom of will necessary to be able to choose to fulfill the demands of the moral law; a determinate judgment of that sort would not be aesthetic. It must rather be a feeling that suggests a certain interpretation that we can only spell out by means of concepts, but at the same gives a certain palpable sense of the validity of those concepts before we have even spelled them out. (p. 322)

Lyotard (1984) reflects this in his analysis of the two differing “modes” (p. 79) contained within contemporary art: “nostalgia of the whole” and “jubilation…from the invention of new rules” (p. 80). This differentiation is the core of Lyotard’s distinctions between modernism and postmodernism, a distinction that emerges out of his analysis of art. Before returning to the question of the ethical in art, I will examine this distinction more closely; it leads to another concept of Lyotard’s that underpins his philosophy: the event.

Post Modern. Post, modern

Modern aesthetics, according to Lyotard, differs from postmodern aesthetics because of nostalgia: “It allows the presentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure” (1984b, p. 81). Lyotard argues that this nostalgic sublime is not the real sublime sentiment, which moves past nostalgia into pleasure and pain, into the postmodern sublime:
The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentation, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a strong sense of the unpresentable. (1984b, p. 81)

“Good forms” provide solace to the viewer because they do not cause the anguish of the unpresentable: one is nostalgic for what is missing, but the form itself is recognizable. The postmodern, however, searches for new presentation. The examples that Lyotard uses to suggest this postmodern nuance in visual art include Picasso and Duchamp; in writing, the work of Joyce. In the postmodern, “the artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done. Hence the fact that work and text have the character of an event” (1984b, p. 81). While Lyotard clearly delineates between the postmodern and modern in art, choosing examples of artists whose work he considers experimental, I would argue that, in the same way that he argues that the postmodern always lies within the modern, each artist’s work must be considered within the context it was created. While Levi’s Survival in Auschwitz does not challenge form to the same degree that Whiteread’s memorial does, his intent in the work, to be a witness, not for himself but for those who died, means that the challenge is on a different level. Levi, too, was working without rules; compelled by his own “immediate and violent impulse” (1996, p. 9).
Levi’s analytical and reflexive stance and the fragmentary nature of the narrative allow him to present what is unpresentable, to write the gap, not to close it. He is not giving voice to the dead but is giving voice to the différend, the abyss of the unspeakable. Unlike a historical documentation of the artifacts of the Holocaust, his writing creates a sense of immediacy for the reader: one experiences the “reality” of daily life in the camps amidst its overwhelming unreality. Compared to artists such as Whiteread and Lanzmann, who work with histories they have not directly experienced, the form of Levi’s writing has less need to trouble content; the violent impulse to give form to what is outside of form already does so. In other words, the experiment with form in a work such as Whiteread’s memorial is necessary because it manifests the unknowable distance between the reality of the event and the reality of its representation. The distance Levi attempts to overcome is between his lived experience of the camps and his enunciation of it. Whereas he struggles to express against meaningfulness, Whiteread tries to embody it.

The event is an important concept in understanding Lyotard’s definition of the postmodern and the role of art. Carroll (2000) defines events as “those aspects of historical occurrences that are not strictly speaking ‘historical’ or ‘political’ in nature and thus do not conform to political expectations or strategies” (p. 16). Events are singular occurrences that cannot be encapsulated within structures or judged by universal laws; they involve reflective judgment, because there is no determinate framework that can encompass each event. Like phrase regimens, which cannot be linked because there are no impartial “non-phrases”
(see page 22), events cannot be fully represented, because there are always elements missing in any representation. According to Malpas (2003) events can be “as simple as a painting or a poem, or as complex and world changing as Auschwitz or the French Revolution.… The event is what calls for a response, a judgment, which respects its specificity” (p. 101). What is important to Lyotard is that one is “receptive or sensitive” (Carroll, 2000, p. 16) to the specificity of events:

I would like to call an event the face to face with nothingness. This sounds like death. Things are not so simple. There are many events whose occurrence doesn’t offer any matter to be confronted, many happenings inside of which nothingness remains hidden and imperceptible, events without barricades.… To become sensitive to their quality as actual events, to become competent in listening to their sound underneath silence or noise, to become open to the “It happens that” rather than to the “What happens,” requires at the very least a high degree of refinement in the perception of small differences. (Lyotard, 1988b, p. 18)

The work of the artist, therefore, is to remain open to events, to be “receptive enough” (p. 18) to see the colour, or hear the small differences in the apparent nothingness. As Malpas (2003) explicates, “the difference between ‘something happens’ and ‘what happens’ is crucial. To be able to say ‘what happens’ is already to have understood the meaning of an event” (p. 101). Maxine Greene (1995) describes the importance of “being present” in her reflections on imaginative work: “It is never enough simply to label, categorize, or recognize
certain phenomena or events. There has to be alive, aware, reflective transaction if what presents itself to consciousness is to be realized” (p. 30). Lyotard focuses on the event in art most specifically in his discussions of the painting of American artist, Barnett Newman (1905-1970). Newman was an abstract expressionist and colour field painter; his work, in Lyotard’s words, is “clear, ‘direct’, open and ‘poor’” (1991, p. 83). In Lyotard’s view, Newman’s work is an event: “The purpose of a painting by Newman is…to be the occurrence, the moment which has arrived” (p. 79). Lyotard sees Newman’s work as not expressing, but manifesting what is not known; one cannot say what happens because the time of the event is instantaneous, is *something* happening.

For Lyotard, the nature of time in an event is linked to the ethics, rather than the aesthetics of this art. To explain this, he focuses on the feeling of an “obligation” which occurs in (or, more accurately) *because* of Newman’s work. He directly links this idea of presence to obligation (“The message [the painting] is the messenger” and “the presentation” [Lyotard, 1991, p. 81]), stating that:

This “pragmatic” organization is much closer to an ethics than to any aesthetics or poetics. Newman is concerned with giving colour, line or rhythm the force of an obligation within a face-to-face relationship, in the second person, and his model cannot be Look at this (over there); it must Look at me or, to be more accurate, Listen to me. For obligation is a modality of time rather than of space and its organ is the ear rather than then eye. (p. 81)
The painting is the “sound which comes to it from out of the silence” (p. 83). It is the attempt to make sense, or to be sense, in the unknowable: To be, now, rather than to gesture towards a past meaning, or a meaning to come. It is sublime in that it alludes to the infinite and unknowable; it embodies negative presentation.

In Newman, Lyotard believes, the painting answers the question, what is it to paint? speaking in a language outside of language, manifesting an immediacy of experience in colour and line: “There is something holy about the line itself” (p. 86) writes Lyotard. The line attempts to create meaning (it divides, shadows, arranges) and thus to create presence. “Presence is the instant which interrupts the chaos of history” (p. 87). This is the obligation of the artist: “When we have been abandoned by meaning, the artist has a professional duty to bear witness that there is, to respond to the order to be” (p. 88). Being present, therefore, is the ethical imperative of the artist, and in fact, the process of making art pulls the artist closer to this state of being. As Maxine Greene believes, art does not “[centre] on depicting solely what is right and good” (1995, p. 28). Rather, its role is “to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard and unexpected” (p. 28). The following excerpt from Claude Lanzmann’s film, Shoah, describes the power and immediacy of art’s effect, even in the midst of great fear and horror. In this scene, a survivor of Treblinka, Richard Glazar, describes the first day that they began burning bodies (due to the overwhelming numbers) rather than burying them in mass graves.
Out of the Silence

Suddenly, from the part of the camp called the death camp, flames shot up. Very high. In a flash, the whole countryside, the whole camp, seemed ablaze. It was already dark. We went into our barracks and ate. And from the window, we kept on watching the fantastic backdrop of flames of every imaginable colour: red, yellow, green, purple. And suddenly one of us stood up. We knew…he’d been an opera singer in Warsaw. His name was Salve, and facing that current of fire, he began chanting a song I didn’t know:

“My God, my God,
why hast thou forsaken us?

We have been thrust into the fire before,

but we have never denied Thy Holy Law.”

(Lanzmann, 1985, p. 14)

In this quote, there are multiple layers of testimony, of bearing witness, each part of the artifice of the film. The first and most obvious layer is the spoken narrative of the survivor; and yet his story is just that: One narrative description of events that may or may not have occurred exactly as he relates them. The second layer is the response of the artist (the man named Salve) in the time of the event: the singer’s chanting against the backdrop of flames and burning bodies embodies the beauty and horror of the sublime. The third layer is the lyrics of the song
itself: a plea for meaning and understanding of the ways of God in a world where God appears to be lost (the words of an unknown artist). The fourth layer is the film—a film where Lanzmann gives voice to, selects, frames, and in some cases manipulates his subjects in an attempt to represent and make meaning from the events of the Holocaust. The final layer is that of the viewers of the film, the audience also seeking meaning, understanding, and resolution when confronted with the incomprehensible cruelty of the death camps. The complexity of these layers of representation is an example of the complexity of the relationship between art, ethics and the real. In this short scene (a few minutes out of Lanzmann’s nine hour documentary), art is both powerful and powerless: its power comes from its source in the real (the experiences of the survivors and victims); its shaping of the real into the unreal (the song that confronts horror and briefly, transcends it; the survivor’s voice attesting to a memory of fire; the filmmaker’s representation of such voices); and its desire, not to \textit{make} something good from horror and suffering, but to present horror and suffering in a way that is “faithful to that which is silent” (Ross, 2005, p. 34). In this scene, the unknowable, the doubt, and the incomprehensible are as present as the suffering of the victims. This, in Lyotard’s words, is art’s power: “What art can do is bear witness not to the sublime, but to this aporia of art and to its pain” (Lyotard, 1990, p. 47).

At the same time, art is powerless to move beyond aporia and desire—it presents only fragments, attempts to make meaning where meaning cannot be made; attempts to represent reality through unreality. It gestures towards an
unknown future and unknowable past; but in the unachievable time of the real (the now of the film, or the now of the event) it falters, seemingly ineffectual. One sings in response to the flames, but the murders continue and the bodies burn. The victim remembers aloud; the filmmaker gives shape to a silenced voice; but all that remains, finally, are pieces: the grand narrative cannot be resurrected to provide redemption. As in the lyrics of the song, we are forsaken despite our desire for the holy law. Art is, ultimately, only able “to bear negative witness to the fact that both the ‘prayer’ and the history of the prayer are impossible, and that to bear witness to this impossibility remains possible” (Lyotard, 1990, p. 47).

In the Lyotardian realm, therefore, art is a both a response to the unpresentable and a model for response in political and ethical judgment. Art presents a reflective response because of its “ability and freedom to experiment with ideas and forms, to experimentally rewrite the rules of discourse” (Malpas, 2003, p. 89). Lyotard understands politics in the same way: For Lyotard, justice is based on the same lack of determinacy—it is the role of any thinker to judge each event singularly, to read an event or différend “much in the manner that one might attempt to read a postmodern work of literature or art. There are no rules for these readings that explain meanings in advance, and no reading is ever final or determinate. Instead, readings must always be open and plural” (Malpas, 2003, p. 85).

Whenever one represents, one inscribes in memory, and this might seem a good defense against forgetting. It is, I believe, just the opposite. Only that which has been inscribed can…be forgotten, because it could be
effaced. But what is not inscribed...cannot be forgotten, does not offer a hold to forgetting, and remains present “only” as an affection that one cannot even qualify, like a state of death in the life of the spirit. One must, certainly, inscribe in words, in images. One cannot escape the necessity of representing. It would be a sin to believe oneself safe and sound. (Lyotard, 1990, p. 26)

In other words, we are compelled to participate in “making sense” in words or images, despite our awareness that we cannot inscribe fixed or determinate meanings. The obligation that Lyotard argues for (the ethical imperative) is to try to make sense, to attempt representation, to push the limits of form. This obligation is what links the role of the artist, the critic, the philosopher and the politician. We are not “safe and sound” because safety implies a resolution. A resolution (as Lyotard argues in The Différend) involves one regime silencing and oppressing other voices. “The guiding thread,” says Malpas “is always Lyotard’s ethical notion of opening up genres of discourse to find new ways to phrase what is excluded from them” (2003, p. 85). This “experimentation in judgment” (Ross, 2005, p. 43) constitutes an ethical stance: Lyotard “wants to stress the prevalence of wrongs in the postmodern world and to make the normative claim that we have to do something about these wrongs, that we cannot let them go unnoticed” (Nuyen, 1996, p. 77). Contemporary art then, through experimental (reflective) judgment, can be a model for an ethical ontology because it does not claim knowledge. It presents not a singular, prescriptive ethics, but an ethics that calls for heterogeneity and ongoing critique:
If one does not take modernity and postmodernity as norms versus absence of norms, in other words if one takes modernity as the normativity challenge and postmodernity as the taking up of this challenge, postmodernity is the continuous critique demanded by modernity…. Lyotard stresses the need for the invention and creation of new rules—how, for instance, Aristotle’s judge is a good judge precisely because he does not rely on a theory or models. This is however, not episteme: it is techne, it is art. (Steuerman, 1992, p. 113)

At the core of Lyotard’s understanding of art, therefore, is his understanding of the Kantian nature of reflective judgment. The paradox of reflective judgment, as discussed earlier, is its assertion of concurrence (one should agree) where no agreement can be determined. This is the basis for Lyotard’s philosophy, in political and ethical judgments, and in his critique of scientific and technical knowledge first outlined in *The Postmodern Condition* (1985). The importance of contemporary art is not its relationship to beauty, but its relationship to the sublime, the event, the unpresentable and unknowable. The work of artists, the avant-garde approach (versus the approach of the avant-garde), has been to question the rules of artistic discourse. This is Lyotard’s assertion of how we are to live: to question the rules of discourse in all realms—ethical, political and artistic. Lyotard’s ethics, therefore, are not an ethics of finality but of process. In other words, the ethical stance comes not in how one determines the answer, but how one approaches the question.
Lyotard’s postmodern ethics and aesthetics provide a framework for understanding how art might allow us to witness, remember and learn from the Holocaust. There is not, however, an easy or simple relationship between the aesthetic and the Holocaust—this relationship has been debated by scholars and historians for many years. It is, in fact, one aspect of the more encompassing debate over the representation of the Holocaust in general: How do we (whether our representation is artistic, historic, or testimony) represent, portray, explore or even discuss the horror, pain and loss of this event?
4 Art, History and the Holocaust

“The crisis of representation brought on by the Holocaust” (Hirsch, 2004, p. 11) has led some historians and philosophers to see the Holocaust as “the divider between modernism and postmodernism” (LaCapra, 2001, p. 179). When considering the way we recall, interpret, imagine or teach the events of the Holocaust from our current perspective in the 21st century, the question of ethics and authenticity immediately arise—who has the authority to speak? Is historical discourse more valid than imaginative discourse? Are the voices of the survivors more valid than all others? What is the role of art and literature in understanding the Holocaust, and what are the ethical implications of such work? Earlier in this thesis I referred to the silences that weave in and through the many discourses that attempt to explore the Holocaust: the silence of survivors; the silence of lost individuals and communities; of bystanders and perpetrators. Out of and beyond these empty spaces, in the sixty-some years that have passed since the end of the War, much discourse has emerged: survivor’s memoirs are recorded and written; academics research and write in the new field of Holocaust Studies; museums document and re-enact; memorials are built; artists create in multiple media. Despite the oft-noted incomprehensibility of the event, there are continued efforts to remember and witness in order that such horrors are never repeated. In the following pages I will give an overview of the themes that form much of the basis of contemporary discussions of art and the Holocaust. These include the ethical implications of beauty and redemption in art; the relationship between art and the “real”; the effect of trauma on representation; and the role of
artist as witness. Although I explore them separately, these four themes are inextricably intertwined—at the core of each is the question of art’s relationship to meaning and thus the relationship between aesthetics and ethics. What is art’s role in remembering the history of the Holocaust, or constructing an understanding of it? Lyotard’s theories, of course, directly inform this question: his conceptualization of sublimity, the différend and the event create a theoretical space where the nuances of artistic and ethical representation can be examined.

**Beauty and Redemption**

To begin, one cannot discuss the question of art and the Holocaust without returning to Adorno’s 1949 dictum, referenced at the beginning of this thesis: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (1967, p. 34). Adorno wrote this statement in a paper entitled “Cultural Criticism and Society” in which he acknowledges the complicity of art and cultural criticism (and himself, as a cultural critic) in perpetrating the status quo. Kyriakides (2005) critiques the popular use of this statement, arguing that it is taken out of context and without acknowledging the theoretical issues that were the main focus of the paper. Adorno’s phrase, she says, became a ”mere slogan” (p. 443) promoting an unexamined suspicion of the role of imaginative work in relation to the events of the Holocaust. Kyriakides also traces Adorno’s evolving views on the role of art, and his later retraction: “Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems” (as cited in Kyriakides, 2005, p. 442).
Ernest van Alphen (1997) outlines the two ethical objections behind Adorno’s statement. First, the idea of art as transfiguration: “Events and experiences like those of the Holocaust ought not to be transformed into images or artworks, so as to be read with aesthetic pleasure” (p. 19). In this view, one accepts Kant’s assumption that art’s focus is on aesthetic beauty, and that the goal of art is to impart pleasure to the viewer (not to be subverted to more determinate intentions). This perspective, as I have outlined, is challenged by Lyotard’s assertion that contemporary art is concerned with the sublime, where attraction and repulsion are simultaneously at work. Since the beginning of the 20th century, many artists have moved outside of the confines of the “beautiful and pleasurable” in their work, and thus the charges of creating “aesthetic pleasure” seem less relevant. Rachel Whiteread, as an example, describes her work on the Holocaust memorial in Vienna:

I didn’t want to give the city of Vienna a beautiful object. I wanted to give them something that they had to think about and that wasn’t ugly but that had a presence and quite a severe presence in the city…it’s not an easy thing to look at and I hope it makes people quite uncomfortable.

(Whiteread, 2006, p. 13)

Van Alphen (1997) also explicates the second objection that lies behind Adorno's dictum—the so-called redemptive function of art: “The artist or poet is, like God, able to create external objects…. From this perspective, the artist is a redeemer—a redeemer as Christ was” (p. 19). Both historians and artists have struggled with the idea that any representation of the Holocaust, by creating
meaning, significance, or aesthetic pleasure, can provide redemption or closure and thus, ultimately, forgetfulness. Lyotard’s conceptualization of the différend radically resists the idea of closure: The différend is a site of irreconcilability, where understanding and redemption are not possible. As Friedlander (1992) notes, “The striving for totality and consensus is, in Lyotard’s view, the very basis for the fascist enterprise” (p. 5). It is this belief that drives Lyotard’s assertion that the practice of art, with its inevitable push towards limits and the not-yet-formed, provides a model for resisting such dangers. An awareness of the underlying oppression of redemption underlies much contemporary representation of the Holocaust, even as historians and artists continue to write and create new material. Young (2000) argues that “art and literature after the Holocaust are pointedly anti-redemptory of both themselves and the catastrophe they represent” (p. 5). He emphasizes the difficulty that current artists face when working with “memory of the witness’s memory” (p. 1) and the dilemma of the “potential for redemption” (p. 6). From Lyotard’s perspective, of course, it is the artist’s ethical obligation to create against this oppression—to seek new methods (or idioms) to counteract closure, to witness the impossibility and possibilities of witnessing.

In today’s context, Adorno’s original assertion is perhaps best read as a challenge to artists: Art after the Holocaust is not without responsibility. I would argue that Adorno’s statement exemplifies Lyotard’s theory that the postmodern is not temporal: Adorno’s statement reveals a conscious self-reflexivity, the emergence of what today would be called a postmodern perspective. In Lyotard’s
view, an artist’s attempt to move beyond aporia, to inscribe as a defense against forgetting, will not make one “safe and sound” (1990, p. 26), but can lead to the opposite. Primo Levi, for example, writes with an acknowledgement that his survival, and thus his ability to write, is not a sign of good emerging from evil, for to see it as such posits a false, redemptive closure:

We who were favored by fate tried, with more or less wisdom, to recount not only our fate but also that of the others, indeed of the drowned, but this was a discourse “on behalf of third parties,” the story of things seen at close hand, not experienced personally…. We speak in their stead, by proxy.

I could not say whether we did or do so out of a kind of moral obligation toward those who were silenced or in order to free ourselves of their memory; certainly we do it because of a strong and durable impulse. (1986, p. 84)

If one understands artistic representation from the Kantian perspective, as a search for beauty or the good, Adorno’s statement about the barbarity of poetry after Auschwitz makes sense: There is nothing beautiful to be made from the atrocity of the Nazi’s actions. The promise of beautiful art is facile and meaningless in the face of the real horror of the camps. But Levi, Lanzmann and Whiteread all speak “by proxy”; each is a witness to the events of the Holocaust from a remove that cannot be overcome, only made visible; each understands and forefronts the unrelenting différend that exists between representation and the real. Such imaginative work, according to James Young (2000), “resists
closure, sustains uncertainty, and allows us to live without full understanding” (p. 6). Each of these artists not only creates such work, but argues vehemently through their work that it cannot be any other way. In the next section I will explore this issue further—the relationship between art and the real is brought into sharp relief by the issues of the Holocaust.

**Creating the Real**

In an earlier section of this thesis I used a scene from Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah* to exemplify the complex relationship between art, ethics and the real (see page 77). In that brief excerpt, a survivor remembers the fires on the first day that bodies were burnt at Treblinka, and tells the story of one prisoner singing in the face of the burning pyres. I commented on the multiple layers of testimony and artifice represented in this excerpt from the film, and how its complexity suggests both art’s power and powerlessness to witness such events. Contemporary discussions of art and the Holocaust often focus on this role, claiming either art’s ability as a “better” witness than historical discourse, or refuting its ability to witness at all. Historian Saul Friedlander (1992), commenting on Lanzmann’s film, analyzes the way in which the real is both present and distant in his work: “Reality is there, in its starkness, but perceived through a filter: that of memory (distance in time), that of spatial displacement, that of some sort of narrative margin which leaves the unsayable unsaid” (p. 17). Shoshana Felman (2001) identifies the tension between limits and openness in Holocaust representations in an essay contrasting Lanzmann’s film with Hannah Arendt’s 1963 article, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: 
We needed trial and trial reports to bring a conscious closure to the trauma of war, to separate ourselves from the atrocities and to restrict, to draw and demarcate a boundary around a suffering that seemed both unending and unbearable…. Law distances the Holocaust. Art brings it closer. We needed art—the language of infinity—to mourn the losses and to face up to what in traumatic memory is not closed and cannot be closed. (p. 202)

The proximity of Holocaust art to reality has become, amongst some scholars, a measure of its quality. Ezrahi (2003) describes this controversial perspective: “The closer one is to the Centre—the place, the person, or even the story itself—the more authentic the representation “ (p. 119). From this perspective, authenticity, reality and morality are conflated without examination. Thus, as Van Alphen (2003) asserts, Holocaust art may be unreflectively reduced to Holocaust education in order to represent it as “effective and morally responsible” (p. 164). Proponents of this view believe that documentary, memoir and testimony (providing evidence of the real) help us to “master” learning about the Holocaust in a way that imaginative work cannot: if we are to learn from the Holocaust, we cannot stray too far from reportage. Philosopher Berel Lang (1992) argues that “the claim…in imaginative representation that the facts do not speak for themselves” (p. 316) may not be true in the case of events such as the Holocaust, and that silence may be preferable to the risks that representation entails. As a counterpoint to this argument, however, James Young (2000) asserts that artists of the current generation see “history itself as a composite
record of both events and these events’ transmission to the next generation....

Neither history nor memory is regarded by these artists as a zero-sum game” (p. 2). Lanzmann’s documentary is a clear example of the interweaving of memory (the narratives told by the survivors) and artifice. Lanzmann’s deliberately intrudes into the film: His own desire to “know” and disseminate knowledge involves re-enactments, cajoling of witnesses, and, in some cases, obvious duplicity. Shoah does not attempt to disguise the complexity involved in representing facts; the film’s self-conscious construction is part of the narrative, and has become part of the historical record of the Holocaust.

Today, sixty years later, the “real” history of events is even less accessible. The challenge for the current generation of artists, who are too young to have direct experience of the Holocaust, is to explore the complexity of the original histories and survivor’s stories, from a temporal and generational distance that adds another curtain of unknowability. The issue of knowing the “real” can also be explored in relationship to trauma and its affect on memory and history. I turn to this issue next, for it speaks further to the complexity of witnessing and knowing.

**Trauma and Memory**

Have we—we who have returned—been able to understand and make others understand our experience? What we commonly mean by “understand” coincides with “simplify”: without a profound simplification the world around us would be an infinite, undefined tangle that would defy our
ability to orient ourselves and decide upon our actions. In short, we are compelled to reduce the knowable to a schema. (Levi, 1986, p. 36)

The psychological concept of trauma is often used to frame the difficulty inherent in representing the Holocaust, not only for survivors such as Levi, but also for historians, artists, and academics. LaCapra (2001) writes: “Trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in experience” (p. 41). Trauma has been described as “a specific type of haunting by past pain … where the pain is unassimilable, and therefore punches a hole in the temporal continuum of past and present” (Hirsch, 2004, p. 11). Thus, the effects of trauma may be seen not only on an individual level, but also on a collective and cultural level. An individual’s memory of experienced trauma may be fragmented and riddled with holes (and therefore, its narrative necessarily simplified, as Levi intimates of his own writing), but so also is the collective memory of such events. Lanzmann’s film clearly demonstrates this—consider the narratives of the villagers near Treblinka: They tell of the Jews passing locked in railway cars. In some stories, the villagers claim they gave them water; in some stories, farmers claimed they continued to work their fields, ignoring calls for help:

They waited, they wept, they asked for water, they died. Sometimes they were naked in the cars, up to 170 people. This is where they gave the Jews water, he says.

Where was that?

Here. When the trains came, they gave the Jews water.
Who gave the Jews water?

We did, the Poles. There was a tiny well, we took a bottle and…

Wasn’t it dangerous to give them water?

Very dangerous. You could be killed for giving a glass of water. But we gave them water anyway.

(Lanzmann, 1985, p. 27)

In Freudian analysis, the theory of working through outlines a model of assimilating the traumatic past without re-experiencing it. One does not attempt to re-experience events to form a seamless narrative culminating in the present, but must “work through” the past. Lyotard (1991) contrasts the process of remembering with working through: “Contrary to remembering, working through would be defined as work without end and therefore without will: without end in the sense in which it is not guided by the concept of an end—but not without finality” (p. 30). Working through, therefore, involves reflective, rather than determinant judgment. “What is in play here is not the ‘recognition’ of the given, as Kant says, but the ability to let things come as they present themselves” (p. 32). As many authors note, the process of working through is critical in moving forward:

When the past becomes accessible to recall in memory, and when language functions to provide some measure of conscious control, critical distance, and perspective, one has begun the arduous process of working over and through the trauma in a fashion…which may enable processes of
judgment and at least limited liability and ethically responsible agency.

(LeCapra, 2001, p. 90)

The psychology of trauma posits that the memory of an event, when not “worked through,” can be relived in the trauma victim’s present, sometimes “in a compulsively repetitive manner” (p. 88). To summarize, therefore, working through involves addressing the past without perfect recall; it is a model for the complex and un-systematic individual and collective witnessing of events such as the Holocaust.

The direct individual experience of trauma is represented in this thesis in the work of Primo Levi. As noted earlier, Levi (1996) states that he wrote *Survival in Auschwitz* out of “an immediate and violent impulse” for “interior liberation” (p. 9). In an interview with Ferdinando Camon in the 1980s he stated: “I wrote because I felt the need to write. If you ask me to go further and find out what produced this need, I can’t answer. I’ve had the feeling that for me the act of writing was equivalent to lying down on Freud’s couch” (Levi, 1989, p. 42).

Susan J. Brison (2002), a survivor of a more-recent experience of personal violence, writes that “the trauma survivor must find empathetic listeners in order to carry on. Piecing together a shattered self requires a process of remembering and working through” (p. x). But she also posits that: “The challenge of finding language that is true to traumatic experience is….a daunting one. How can we speak about the unspeakable without attempting to render it intelligible and sayable” (p. x). This is the same paradox that Levi relates in regards to his own experience:
This was, in fact, our daily thought [in the camps]: that if we came back home and wanted to tell, we would be missing the words. Daily language is for the description of daily experience, but here it is another world, here one would need a language “of this other world,” a language born here. (1994, p. 185)

Individually and collectively, the experiences of the Holocaust that “cannot be narrated” (Apel, 2002, p. 95) constitute ongoing trauma, not only in the lives of the survivors, but in the attempts of historians, witnesses, artists and scholars who try to confront the memories and records of its events. Levi and Brisson’s descriptions exemplify a différend: One sees in Levi’s writing his attempt to construct narratives of what cannot be narrated, to bear witness by finding an idiom of expression (Lyotard, 1988a, p. 13). Like Rachel Whiteread’s process of casting empty space, of building a form for what is not seen, Levi’s writing emerges from an impulse to create language for experiences that cannot be described.

It is not only the direct survivor who attempts to find a language or form to represent such trauma. In an earlier section I described how Whiteread and Lanzmann, in their works on the Holocaust, moved from recognized forms of visual representation towards new forms, risking meaning and representations of the “real” in order to find ways to witness what they could not have witnessed. Dora Apel (2002) writes: “Art illuminates traumatic experience through the sideways glance, allowing the viewer to apprehend what can only be shown indirectly, allusively and in sometimes surprising ways” (p. 3). Though Apel’s
argument is constructed to privilege visual art over “literature, film or theater” (p. 3), I would suggest that this statement can apply broadly to art in any medium. Contemporary artists are “secondary witnesses” to the Holocaust, witnessing from a remove that allows the artist and the audience to work through the horror of Holocaust memories. Lanzmann’s film is particularly interesting in this regard: He does not use documentary footage of the Holocaust to force the viewer to re-experience its trauma. Instead, he allows the viewer to witness the post-traumatic: the holes, fissures, and gaps inherent in the survivor’s, witnesses and perpetrator’s memories. Slowly and intensely, he presents the ruins of memory in the same way he presents the ruins of Auschwitz, through a melding and interplay of individual and collective trauma: The survivors attempt to speak of their experiences; the bystanders narrate histories that may or may not represent historical “truth”—representations emerge “as they present themselves,” without a determinate end in mind. In the following excerpt from Shoah, Walter Stier, an ex-Nazi and bureaucrat, describes his memories of work in the Reich Railways department:

But you knew that the Nazis—that Hitler didn’t like the Jews.

That we did. It was well known; it appeared in print. It was no secret. But as to their extermination, that was news to us. I mean, even today people deny it. They say there couldn’t have been so many Jews. Is it true? I don’t know. That’s what they say. Anyway, what was done was an outrage, to put it bluntly.

What?
The extermination. Everyone condemns it. Every decent person. But as for knowing about it, we didn’t.

But the Polish people, for instance, knew everything.

That’s not surprising. They lived nearby, they heard, they talked. And they didn’t have to keep quiet. (Lanzmann, 1985, p. 138)

Here, Stier admits some but not full knowledge of the deportation and murders of the Jewish people. Decent people could not have known, he suggests, or they were forced to be silent. His representation of his experiences may be real, may involve selective memory or a sanitized narrative, or may be conscious, self-protective lies. Apel (2002) posits that the post-traumatic is kin to the post-modernist approach, “eschewing the stance of objective observer who registers timeless truths. The approach instead recognizes the altered ideological contexts of the present, the fragmented and conflicted nature of experience and subjectivity, and the difficulty of retrieving knowledge from the past” (p. 7). Liss (1998) writes “postmodern perspectives consciously warn against the presumption that history can be comprehensively narrated” (p. 119). Thus, the “sideways glance” of artistic representations may provide the space in which the différend of traumatic history is held, the sublime experience whereby traumatic pain is represented at the same time as aesthetic form, pushed beyond recognition, works through limits to shape new ones. LaCapra (2001) relates the post-trauma of the Holocaust to the sublime: “Trauma and the sublime are two vanishing points of an extreme contrast that threaten to disrupt all continua and disfigure all mediation” (p. 189). Trauma can be viewed as the “negative
sublime,” where the power of horror overwhelms representation in the same way that immensity or great power overwhelms. The sublime, as Lyotard has argued, is related to the ethical in a way that beauty is not: We are ethically compelled to “make sense” despite our knowledge that we cannot make sense. Levi’s statement regarding the “profound simplification” of testimony reveals an understanding of the tenuousness of reality and of ethical truth. Recovery from trauma (where the real and the ethical are torn apart and forever altered) can only take place with the knowledge that working through will not change the past, and can only promise to change the never-to-be-realized future. As Apel (2002) writes, “There is no redemptive promise, but rather, an unsettling of the present, which, in its refusal to offer a better future, defies the very terms of remembrance as strategic practice” (p. 5). So Lyotard (1991) reminds us: “That’s the hope sustaining all writing (painting, etc): that at the end, things will be better. As there is no end, hope is illusory” (p. 20).

To Witness

*You were inside the gas chamber?*

Yes. One of them said: “So you want to die. But that’s senseless. Your death won’t give us back our lives. That’s no way. You must get out of here alive, you must bear witness to our suffering, and to the injustice done to us.”

(Survivor Filip Muller, as cited in Lanzmann, 1985, p. 165)
I must repeat: we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. This is an uncomfortable notion of which I have become conscious little by little, reading the memoirs of others and reading mine at a distance of years. We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we were those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute. (Levi, 1986, p. 83)

When we have been abandoned by meaning, the artist has a professional duty to bear witness that there is, to respond to the order to be. (Lyotard, 1991, p. 88)

Lyotard ends his book, The Inhuman, with the following statement: “I mean that in witnessing, one also exterminates. The witness is a traitor” (1988c, p. 204). At the same time that Lyotard declares that the artist (or philosopher) has an ethical responsibility to bear witness to events, he also questions the results of such witnessing: The witness, in an attempt to tell the truth, also betrays the truth. As Kent Still (2007) writes, Lyotard’s words are not a rejection of “any particular testimony, or of testimony in general. They are an alert to the plurality of ways in which the singularity of an event may be eclipsed in the very testimony to it” (p. xi). Thus, testimony’s attempt to remember leads to forgetting; the uniqueness of an event is lost in its conceptualization; one may begin to forget the very moment one defines what has happened. As Lyotard writes, it is necessary for the
witness: “To become sensitive to their quality as actual events, to become competent in listening to their sound underneath silence or noise, to become open to the ‘It happens that’ rather than to the ‘What happens’” (Lyotard, 1988b, p. 18). In the same way, Primo Levi, writing many years after Survival in Auschwitz was published (see quotation beginning this section), questions the validity of his own witnessing: It is not that he wants to or can invalidate his own testimony, it is that he now understands the “precariousness of testimony” (Still, 2007, p. xii) and the difficulty of saying what happens, by proxy, for those who are absent. As such, Levi’s testimony appears as a temporary reprieve in the “anguish” of representation. He has a profound understanding of what testimony omits, represses and hides; in other words, he is aware of the unbridgeable distance between representation and the real. As Agamben (2002) writes:

On the one hand, what happens in the camps appears to the survivors as the only true thing, and, as such, absolutely unforgettable; on the other hand, this truth is to the same degree unimaginable, that is, irreducible to the real elements that constitute it…. The aporia of Auschwitz is, indeed, the very aporia of historical knowledge: a non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension. (p. 12)

Despite this, in Levi’s memoir, as in the testimony of the survivors in Lanzmann’s Shoah, the survivors’ stories cannot help but be weighted with significance and moral authority. They may be better witnesses, and their witnessing, as Glowacka (2007) writes, imposes the obligation on others to “Remember!” (p. 55). But, as Levi’s quote reveals, the true witnesses are not and cannot be
present; the victim cannot testify to his or her own death; the question of who is speaking for whom is not resolvable:

Who bids me to never forget? One can imagine it as a voice from the gas chamber of Bergen-Belsen…or from a bunker in the Warsaw ghetto in the last days of the uprising, that is, from the place of death. (Glowacka, 2007. p. 55)

The place of death that Glowacka refers to is a place where there is no potential for speech; the “essential lacuna” that Agamben believes is at the core of testimony; the différend that is all that can be witnessed by the artist and writer. It is the unrepresentable represented: in Levi—the Gorgon’s head; in Whiteread—the unreadable books in the nameless library; in Lanzmann—the decaying ruins of Auschwitz filmed forty years after liberation.

Lyotard (1991) says that: “To say witness is to say trace, and to say trace is to say inscription” (p. 197). What is inscribed merely refers to a trace of the past, a mark indicating something lost or absent; it is the attempt, in language, to never forget. Lyotard and Levi realize that the inscription is an attempt to fix the truth of events that cannot be known, to close off the impossible anguish of working through. But language cannot contain the real, it can only gesture:

The trace of that to which no one has borne witness, which language believes itself to transcribe, is not the speech of language. The speech of language is born where language is no longer in the beginning, where language falls away from it simply to hear witness: “It was not light, but was sent to bear witness to the light.” (Agamben, 1999, p. 39)
The fact of the witness’s testimony (who is not the real witness; who is a traitor because such testimony substitutes for the real) is the fact of the unreal bearing witness to the real; of shadow illuminating the absence of light; of speech creating a space for silence. The unreal witness bears witness to this irresolvable différend, the “incommensurability between the ethical and the aesthetic phrase” (Glowacka, 2007, p. 62). In the Lyotardian realm, art and literature search for ways to express the immemorial, what cannot be remembered and what cannot be forgotten:

The artist, critic, or teacher is a guardian or memory, whose duty is to listen to the rumblings of the différend, allowing herself or himself to feel the tremors along the fault lines of memory, even if all the instruments for the measurement of their impact have been destroyed. (Glowacka, 2007, p. 66)

Art then, provides a way to recognize the singularity of an event, to be open to the nuance and timbre of the différend. With this ability, however, comes responsibility, an obligation. Thus, Adorno’s challenging words still resonate today. Agamben (1999) says: “To speak, to bear witness, is thus to enter into a vertiginous movement in which something sinks to the bottom, wholly desubjectified and silenced, and something subjectified speaks without truly having anything to say of its own” (p. 120). For Agamben, this place of desubjectification is related to poetic creation (“Poets have named this desubjectification the ‘Muse’” [p. 113]). Testimony occurs “between the potentiality of speech and its existence” (p. 145). Thus, like Lyotard, Agamben
links the potentiality of art to the possibility of testimony. Whereas Lyotard identifies art as a necessary response to the différend or the event, Agamben locates the place of creation in the non-place “between the sayable and the unsayable” (p. 145). Out of indeterminate space, Levi, the witness who recognizes the danger and inevitable frailty of his own subjective testimony, writes:

For us to speak with the young becomes even more difficult. We see it as a duty, and at the same time, as a risk: the risk of appearing anachronistic, of not being listened to. We must be listened to: above and beyond our personal experiences, we have collectively witnessed a fundamental, unexpected event, fundamental precisely because unexpected, not foreseen by anyone…. It happened, therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say.

It can happen, and it can happen everywhere. (1986, p. 199).
**Places**

**prisoner**
metal sun
the grey man
mouth a black stain
slips into cold
swallows a dark wind
stumbled

**dancing**
inconsequential
wind, twig
when a limb breaks
form, stumbles
one way
or one way
counted
like a small child

**testimony**
voice breaks
the grey man
sings language dreams
dark
through a distant
stained
in a black wind
shame

of a long life

whose place
did you take, whose

name is swallowed

dreams in a cold wind
we dance

through a grey stain

march

on the long march
grey

as a dead child, in place

of a long life, shoes
without dancing, what dark

place
did you take

this place

would you sing

a twig breaks

form swallowed
5 Whiteread, Lanzmann, Levi

The three specific artistic works I have chosen to examine in the context of this exploration of art, education and the Holocaust are strikingly different from each other in medium and form (a written memoir, a documentary film, and a public sculpture) but similar in intent: Each is part of the historical response to the Nazi’s death machinery of the Second World War. Each, therefore, can be viewed as a test case for the ethical implications of art: In my view, these artworks “prescribe and guide us” (Kieran, 1996, p. 37) in our response to the ethical crises of the Holocaust. This triad of artists and their specific and significant works are not unique: many other artists have and continue to successfully produce art responding to this history. Although these three works are aligned in a historical narrative of my own making, their relationship to each other through time, proximity to the “real,” and artistic approach, viewed through the filter of Lyotard’s philosophical theories (and buoyed by Maxine Greene’s deep understanding of the educational value of art), builds a vehement argument against the so-called autonomy of art. I believe the experience of art allows us to interact with knowledge and imagination in ways that are unique and immensely powerful: our interactions with art provide “more shocks of awareness…more explorations, more adventures into meaning, more active and uneasy participation in the human community’s unending quest” (Greene, 1995, p. 150). Thus, these artworks provide more than just transmission of information about the Holocaust; they allow us to experience and work through its implications.
The richness of Levi’s writing, for example, while not more valid than representations such as the recording of survivor’s stories, or the compilation of facts and dates compiled by historians such as Hilberg, is able to “awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected” (Greene, 1995, p. 28) in a way that builds understanding beyond the Kantian definition of knowledge. In this chapter, therefore, I will examine each artwork individually, drawing forward themes from earlier in this thesis. Kant and Lyotard’s explorations into the aesthetic inform how and why such artworks are significant, how they work, and how we learn from them. I will begin this analysis with Whiteread’s memorial to the Jews of Austria, completed in 2000 in Judenplatz in Vienna. I will then move backwards in time, and as some might argue, in closer proximity to the real, to examine Lanzmann’s Shoah and finally, Primo Levi’s memoir.
Rachel Whiteread and the Nameless Library

When I was asked to submit a plan for the Holocaust Memorial…it was clear to me from the outset that my proposal had to be simple, monumental, poetic and non-literal. I am a sculptor: Not a person of words but of images and forms. (Whiteread, quoted in Young, 2004, p. 167)

A public memorial to the victims of the Holocaust bears witness to suffering, and in doing so, gestures towards the absence of suffering. Its intent is to overcome forgetfulness—it speaks in the present time about events that reverberate outside of time, events that are known and remain unknown. It is a public and political work, and thus, beyond the challenges faced by any artist working with Holocaust material (as noted in the previous chapter), artists face issues specific to the creation of memorials in a postmodern context. As James Young (2000) outlines:

As intersection between public art and political memory, the monument has necessarily reflected the aesthetic and political revolutions, as well as the wider crises of representation, following all of the century’s major upheavals…. In every case, the monument reflects both its sociohistorical and its aesthetic content…. The result has been a metamorphosis of monument from the heroic, self-aggrandizing figurative icons of the late nineteenth century celebrating national ideas and triumphs to the antiheroic, often ironic, and self-effacing conceptual installations that mark
the national ambivalence and uncertainty of late twentieth-century postmodernism. (p. 93)

Rachel Whiteread’s memorial in Vienna, similar to other such installations of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, approaches history and memory critically and carefully. It has been described as minimalist, architectural, conceptual and austere. Unofficially known as the *Nameless Library*, James Young considers this work a counter-monument: “Monuments at the end of the twentieth century are thus born resisting the very premises of their birth. Thus, the monument has increasingly become the site of contested and competing meaning, more likely the site of cultural conflict than one of shared national values and ideals” (p. 118). Young’s description accurately reflects the story of this monument’s conception and construction—the delays and political tension that hampered the process of Vienna’s memorialization to the Jews temporarily changed Whiteread’s piece from artwork to symbol, made more prominent by its physical absence. The monument, in fact, sat in a warehouse in Austria for over four years while the political and cultural issues in the community were worked through.

In 1996, in a competition spearheaded by Simon Wiesenthal, the city of Vienna invited nine architects and artists to submit proposals for a Holocaust memorial in the Judenplatz, a city square in Vienna surrounded by baroque buildings. The jury unanimously selected Whiteread’s design, but the selection immediately led to intense controversy. As Comay (2003) notes: “Shared outrage made strange bedfellows of those from every side of the political and cultural spectrum” (p. 255). Over the next four years the debates ranged over issues
such as parking and lost revenue, to the actual aesthetics of the monument, to, most significantly, the presence of a newly-excavated archaeological site in the square (where a synagogue was burned by a group of Jews in a mass suicide in a 1421 pogrom). The archaeological dig, which began around the same time as the competition and revealed the remains of the burned-out synagogue, was the largest obstacle, becoming a focal point for conflict within the Jewish community. The issue was finally overcome by moving the memorial one metre to accommodate both Whiteread’s work and an underground museum commemorating the site of the synagogue.

I will argue, in fact, that the *Nameless Library*, from conception to completion and beyond, both embodies and has become the touchstone for multiple différends, and in so doing, is a catalyst for witnessing, in the Lyotardian sense, the history of the Holocaust from the Second World War to the present day. This memorial, the most recent of the three artworks, speaks “by proxy” from the farthest remove, both in time and because of its conceptual design. Yet the temporal and intellectual separation between the memorial and the events it speaks to have not made it less relevant. As public art, in fact, it is in some ways more accessible than memoir or film.

Whiteread’s sculpture, as noted earlier, does not attempt to create the “real”; it is, in her own words, an imaginary space. I described the monument as stark and enigmatic: simple in design, yet complex conceptually. Upon close examination, it is, as Whiteread had planned, poetic, multivalent and resonant with historical and contemporary references. While it presents a unified, finished
whole (a concrete, room-sized bunker, ensconced in a city square) it embodies the Kantian paradox of reflective judgment: It’s meaning cannot be subsumed under clear concepts. Like all of Whiteread’s work, it disorients subtly and not without discomfort to the viewer. The only clear reference to its intent lies in a discreet written statement (in German, Hebrew and English, and accompanied by a list of over forty names of the camps where the Austrian Jews were sent) inscribed in steel on the dais: “In commemoration of more than 65,000 Austrian Jews who were killed by the Nazis between 1938 and 1945.” The memorial was not created to be beautiful, but to make viewers uneasy—in Whiteread’s words, she wanted to create a “severe presence” in the city (2006, p. 13).

Although Whiteread experiments with form and formlessness throughout her oeuvre, none of her work is purely abstract. She does not shift and dismantle the representational (in the way, for instance, Barnett Newman does) but plays with the norms of representation in a way that both sharpens and disrupts perception. For example, in her 1994 work, *House*, in London, Whiteread re-visualized and re-constructed the everyday domestic space of a house, stripping away its familiar shell to reveal a concrete monolith that exposed both the private and public faces of an abandoned domicile. The house retained enough of its familiarity (and its link to the real) so that its unfamiliarity challenged individuals and the community alike and led to intense controversy. It became the centre of debates over public housing, the nature of public art, and democracy, and was torn down, prematurely, after only three months in existence.
In a similar way, the *Nameless Library* examines the boundaries between private and public space, and in doing so, forefronts the inevitable différend between representation and the real, a division made more critical by the nature of the events it was commissioned to commemorate. Created through a public process to be built in a public space, Whiteread nonetheless designed the structure to relate in scale and style to the interior of the buildings surrounding the square. It is room-size (ten by seven metres), and its double concrete doors and inverted ceiling rose (used as drainage on the roof) suggest an interior space, re-contextualized into a public exterior environment. If it could be entered, it might reveal itself to be similar to a room or library in any of the nearby buildings, full of well-used, well-loved volumes. The deliberate intrusion of the domestic into the public is a theme throughout Whiteread’s work, and this subtle suggestion speaks powerfully in the context of Holocaust memory. This room, this almost-absent library, recalls a private, perhaps domestic space and therefore recalls the individuals whose daily lives were violently interrupted through deportation and mass murder. But it also gestures to the lives of the people in past and present day Vienna. The un-enterable bunker-room is not so grand or out of the ordinary that it could not still exist today. This imagined library, therefore, is a physical manifestation of not *what* is missing, but the fact that there is so much missing (individuals, communities, synagogues, historical records) and so much still present, repressed and unsaid, about responsibility for the atrocities of the Nazi regime. This piece succeeds because it contains enough recognizable information to suggest the singular anguish of this history
but is indeterminate enough to create questions of the known: it does not answer who, how, or why, but holds the presence of the unknown in stasis, materialized in concrete, behind impenetrable doors. While it does not link directly to a “real” structure (as does House, and other of Whiteread’s cast spaces) there are enough connections to the real to create a similar, destabilizing effect. It has strong symbolic links: the historical reference to the “People of the Book”; the visual reference to a bunker implying both threat and safety; the unreadable pages suggesting the loss and presence of knowledge, reason and wisdom. The monument does not inscribe history in order to help us forget, but helps us experience a “différend of feeling” (Lyotard, 1994, p. x) in order that we might never forget. As Maxine Greene (1995) writes of the absences and silences of history:

It is true that we cannot know all the absent ones; but they must be present somehow in their absence. Absence, after all, suggests an emptiness, a void to be filled, a wound to be healed, a flaw to be repaired.

(p. 159)

The suggestion of completion, of healing and repair, does not mean that closure will occur, only that we experience the desire to believe in its possibility. The perceptual disruption in Whiteread’s work creates what Lyotard calls an event—it becomes a catalyst for “a response, a judgment, which respects [the event’s] specificity” (Malpas, 2003, p. 101). It does not describe what happens, but is what happens. The experience of the art itself, then, creates an obligation. The
viewer cannot help but react to its familiarity and its strangeness, or, to use
Freud’s term, its uncanniness.

The details of the physical structure of the monument, and an exploration
of Whiteread’s construction process help to further elaborate how this piece
unsettles perception, makes the familiar strange, and asks the viewer to respond.
A common description of the monument is an “inside-out” library; this is,
however, a simplification, and does not accurately describe the complex
relationship between the viewer and the physical structure itself. The exterior
walls of the monument are made from thousands of casts of books (imaginary
books constructed by Whiteread). Young inaccurately describes the outer
surface as “roughly textured negative space next to the edges of book leaves”
(2004, p. 168). What other theorists note, however, (Gillman, 2004, and Lane,
2007) is that the memorial is a departure from Whiteread’s earlier work, for in this
sculpture she casts positive rather than negative spaces. As Lane notes, “The
positive casts of a book means that they can be placed or manipulated in a highly
unusual fashion: the bindings are all facing ‘inside,’ away from the viewer, their
potential ‘titles’ hidden or concealed” (p. 4). What is similar to Whiteread’s other
works is that the location of the viewer in proximity to the “reality” of the physical
space is disorienting. The viewer approaches the bunker-like structure from the
outside, and sees walls made of row upon row of books, spine-in, seemingly
suspended, as if the viewer stood somewhere behind library bookshelves. In fact,
on closer examination one understands that the walls behind the library shelves
are in fact missing, as are the bookshelves. In an interview comment made by
Whiteread in reference to an earlier piece, this unusual perspective is made clear:

I think in the room pieces, especially I think with Ghost…when I first looked at it in the studio and saw it for the first time after I'd been…spending three months making it…and I was completely sort of alarmed when I realized that I was the wall…as the viewer, and I thought what have I done, you know I've actually made everybody absent from everything. (Whiteread, 2006, p. 6)

The books are, in fact, attached spine-in to unnoticeable inner walls that in reality create the form of the structure, suggesting missing walls and shelves: Just as Whiteread realized in her relationship to Ghost, the viewer is in the position of being the wall to an impenetrable library. Everyone is absent within the space; the viewer faces a solid, claustrophobic emptiness. It can only be filled in the relationship between the viewer and the structural form: The viewer’s agency and imagination are required to make sense of absence. The individual leaves of the books suggest hundreds of thousands of unreadable traces of what is lost; the traces are the only witness to what is missing. In other words, if we, the viewers, become walls and shelves, then we are what metaphorically shapes trace into narrative. We are, in fact, all that holds meaning and memory in place—we assume this responsibility, willingly or unwittingly. Thus, Whiteread’s physical structure comments on the vulnerability of memory and meaning: It is a sturdy concrete bunker seemingly held together by the desire and effort of the artist and the viewer. Desire, therefore, implies a need or lack that in turn implies
obligation. The viewer is obliged to seek meaning in the blank, seemingly empty structure, as we are obliged to seek meaning, endlessly and without respite, in the horrors of what we know of the Holocaust. To re-quote Lyotard (1991): “The sublime is none other than the sacrificial announcement of the ethical in the aesthetic field…. This heralds the end of aesthetics, that of the beautiful, in the name of the final destination of the mind, which is freedom” (p. 137). Thus, the imagination and understanding, in a violent flux of attraction and repulsion, attempt to fix meaning and fail to do so—out of this cacophony emerges the freedom of thought beyond knowledge. This is how the artist “testifies to the absolute” (Lyotard, 1994, p. 153), using form to signal formlessness, and in this case, presence to signal absence.

A related way of understanding this perspective is to see the space of missing walls and bookshelves as a border or threshold. Agamben’s analysis of the notion of “outside” is useful in its relationship to Lyotard’s concept of the sublime:

It is important here that the notion of the “outside” is expressed in many European languages by a word that means “at the door”…. The outside is not another space that resides beyond a determinate space, but rather, it is the passage, the exteriority that gives it access—in a word, it is its face, its eidos.

The threshold is not, in this sense, another thing with respect to the limit; it is, so to speak, the experience of the limit itself, the experience of being-within an outside. (Agamben, 1993, p. 68)
Agamben understands a border not as a limit, but as the “point of contact” (p. 67) with an external emptiness. This corresponds to Lyotard’s idea of formlessness and “negative presentation” (see page 61)—the duty of the artist is to present the problem of forms: Thus, one presents what is unrepresentable. Whiteread’s memorial physically and intellectually places the viewer at such a threshold: Asking the question: “What is the experience of this specific memorial?” means one is also asking Lyotard’s question: “What is it to experience art? To make art?” Being-within an outside, to use Agamben’s term, means to be in an indeterminate space, the space of reflective judgment, where the questions and answers of art occur simultaneously and continuously, the border space where one is “face to face with nothingness” (Lyotard, 1988b, p. 18).

The viewers of the Nameless Library find themselves in the critical no-man’s land between determinate meaning and the unknown: This is Kant’s concept of reflective judgment; Lyotard’s edge of the abyss, and Agamben’s threshold. As mentioned earlier, the memorial became a touchstone for controversy immediately after selection by the committee. The arguments that delayed its construction and installation were not directly based on anti-Semitic sentiments (although it was during this period in Austria that the far-right Freedom Party was elected to government) but more prominently, on a dispute over ownership of the right to represent the Holocaust. Simon Wiesenthal, in his role as spokesperson for the group wanting to commemorate the Jews in Vienna, was the main proponent of the plan to erect a memorial in Judenplatz. Once the
controversy over Whiteread’s sculpture erupted, however, Wiesenthal’s role itself became controversial in the Jewish community:

Wiesenthal was put in the position of speaking for the dead rather than the living Jews, and it was the living who sought to reclaim the Judenplatz as their space, and the synagogue ruins as their monument by opposing him. (Gillman, 2004, p. 147)

This perspective led eventually to the questioning of Wiesenthal’s “Austrian-ness” and his public defense of his role. This argument, however, was only one of many objections to Whiteread’s memorial. What is more interesting than the specifics of any one argument is the plurality of arguments that emerged—each, in fact, embedded in a singular, determinate and competing version of the real. The Jewish community argued over the ownership of representation; the businesspeople asserted pragmatic concerns over parking and access to their businesses; the Freedom Party argued that the financial cost of the memorial was too high—each argument an irresolvable, irreconcilable “phrase” (see page 22). In the end, of course, in order to complete the monument, the arguments were voiced, and unresolved, as they had to be. Ultimately, the location of the memorial moved one metre. After four years of working through the issues in the community, the imaginary space was brought into being. Thus, Whiteread’s memorial now stands, severely, painfully and beautifully, as a witness to the extant différend of the Holocaust.

A decade after its tumultuous inception, the memorial has taken on new meaning. Visitors leave flowers and candles in remembrance on the dais; in 2007
the Pope paid tribute at the site. As a marker on the threshold to “nothingness,” its powerful position as a public monument challenges viewers to create meaning outside of language; to be present in the presence of absence; to listen to the timbre of silence that shrouds the Holocaust. This is, in Lyotard’s view, the postmodern condition—where postmodernity is the nascent state of modernity, where the desire for meaning and our toleration of its absence create a constant state of tension:

Such is the effect of Whiteread’s work, the answer it proposes to the question about the role of modern art: it commands respect, but respect with affect or intention…. This then is the meaning or the charge of Whiteread’s method…it flirts with meaning and meaningfulness as its opposite, but never enters into the fray. (Stimson, 2004, p. 160)
Claude Lanzmann: Shoah

I started precisely with the impossibility of recounting this history. I placed this impossibility at the very beginning of my work. When I started the film, I had to deal with, on the one hand, the disappearance of the traces: there was nothing at all, sheer nothingness, and I had to make a film on the basis of this nothingness. And on the other hand, with the impossibility of telling this story even by the survivors themselves; the impossibility of speaking, the difficulty…of giving birth to and the impossibility of naming it: its unnamable character. (Lanzmann, 2007c, p. 39)

Silence, traces, nothingness, impossibility: Lanzmann recounts, in this interview, some of the core motifs of his nine and a half hour film, Shoah. Shoah has been lauded and critiqued since its release in the 1980’s (after twelve years of filming and editing), but despite criticisms, it was immediately recognized as an enormously significant work. In this section I will examine Shoah through differing, but interconnected perspectives: first, I will discuss Lanzmann’s intent and process—he has asserted his own views on the film through both writing and interviews, and his vision reveals much about how he works. Second, I will use some of the core motifs of the film, as listed above, as a starting point for an analysis of the film and in relationship to the themes within this thesis. I will explore the relationship of nothingness and absence to the detailed traces that are present and in the present of the film. One of the traces that Lanzmann presents is music, both through reference and in re-enactments. Music becomes, through the course of the film, both a counterpoint to silence and an experience
of sublimity for the audience, signifying the freedom of art and hence, exposing its vulnerable position on an ethical fulcrum and therefore its potential for debasement.

I will use these themes to reinforce my argument for the integral relationship between art, knowledge and ethics. Lanzmann is a ferocious advocate of art’s relationship to the ethical; *Shoah* cannot be viewed without the complex and messy issues of good and bad, real and unreal, and truth and deception emerging. As noted by Camper (2007): “Lanzmann’s knowledge of the limits of representation, his willingness to acknowledge the impossibility of full cinematic mimesis of his subject, …is at the heart of the film’s aesthetic and moral position” (p. 104).

*Shoah* appeared in the 1980’s as a unique and groundbreaking film: It is most often referred to as a documentary, but the filmmaker himself eschews this categorization, insisting on its status as a work of art. Liebman (2007) asserts that a crude history of filmmaking since the Holocaust can be divided into “a period before and after *Shoah*” (p. 4). There are a number of reasons why *Shoah* appears, even twenty years after its release, as a film like few others: its deliberately slow pace and nine-and-one-half-hour length; its obsessive attention to concrete detail; its scrupulous rejection of archival images, lack of chronological narrative, and avoidance of traditional documentary techniques such as narration and voice-over. All of these aspects of the film were deliberate decisions made by Lanzmann as he worked through the process of its construction. In an interview Lanzmann says, “It is a sort of original event, since I
filmed it in the present and I myself had to construct it with traces of traces” (Lanzmann, 2007c, p. 47). Thus, Lanzmann acknowledges his distance from the actual events of the Holocaust (he is working with traces of the traces remaining after the Nazis attempt to destroy all evidence) and his understanding that the film, like any representation, is shaped as much by the time in which it was made as by the history it attempts to represent.

In making *Shoah*, Lanzmann filmed individuals who were survivors, bystanders (primarily Poles who were witnesses to some of the events), and perpetrators (Nazis functionaries and guards who worked in the camps). He “staged” some of his interviews by returning survivors to specific locations from their past, or by asking them to re-enact scenarios that might aid in their memory. (The scene of retired barber, Abraham Bomba, cutting hair in a rented barbershop in Israel, while recalling cutting the hair of women before they entered the gas chambers, is one of the most powerful in the movie.) As noted earlier, Lanzmann filmed former Nazis secretly, deceiving them with hidden cameras and lying to them about revealing their names. He filmed locations throughout Poland where many of the atrocities occurred (Chelmno, Auschwitz, Treblinka), and in *Shoah* he reveals, with obsessive repetition, images of forests and fields, the ruins of the camps, the villages in Poland, and the interminable movement of trains. Lanzmann started with over 350 hours of film, shot over many years, which he edited to nine-and-one-half hours:

> It took five and a half years to edit. It was like being on the north face of a peak and having to invent a way up, to devise a route to the top. I had to
invent both the method and the object. I had first of all to internalize this immense amount of material…. All these attempts and mistakes were a way to learn the material: I had to go through this process. After I constructed the first half hour, the form emerged and hinted at the rest that was virtually present. (Lanzmann, 2007c, p. 46)

The artistic process that Lanzmann describes is not unique. The difficulty of absorbing and understanding both content and technique, and the care and vigilance required in making decisions to shape the final form is required in any medium, but is heightened when dealing with content as complex as the Holocaust. One of the most powerful elements of Shoah is Lanzmann’s persistence in seeking detail—the specific traces that emerge both in the visual elements and in the questions he asks of his subjects, such as survivor Michael Podchlebnik:

*What were the [gas] vans like?*

Like the ones that deliver cigarettes here. They were enclosed, with double-leaf rear doors.

*What color?*

The color the Germans used—green, ordinary.

(Lanzmann, 1985, p. 80)

Despite his relentless focus on such minutiae, Lanzmann (as in the quote that begins this section) recognizes the impossibility of telling the story of the
Holocaust. He has written about his belief in “the absolute obscenity in the project of understanding” (2007b, p. 51):

Not to understand was my ironclad rule during all the years *Shoah* was in the making: I braced myself on this refusal as on the only possible attitude, at once ethical and operative. Keeping my guard high, wearing these blinkers, and this blindness itself, were the vital conditions of creation. (p. 51)

A *refusal* of understanding implies a deliberate attempt to seek meaning without closure. To say that one understands, that one *knows*, asserts a unified narrative, and therefore implies a final truth. Like Lyotard, Lanzmann works against the idea that we can fully describe and understand the Holocaust, that we can categorize its events to create a complete picture and *know* the experience of those who lived or died. In Kantian terms, this disjuncture reflects the difference between determinant and reflective judgment—to requote Lyotard (1994): “Reflection does not produce understanding. It discovers in itself modes of synthesis that are similar to those of understanding. The latter are always there to make knowledge possible” (p. 37). In other words, knowledge is possible, but never realized. This refusal, therefore, shaped Lanzmann’s approach in how he sought out and recorded testimony: In fact, he deliberately followed the lead of historian Raoul Hilberg, who states in *Shoah*: “In all of my work I have never begun by asking the big questions, because I was always afraid that I would come up with small answers” (Lanzmann, 1985, p. 70).

Likewise, Lanzmann assembles small details (the colour of the gas vans, or the
exact distance between the gas chambers and the unloading ramp in Auschwitz) as an attempt to seek out and manifest the real while at the same time acknowledging that the collection of such detail will never succeed in recreating what happened—memory is always shaped and formed in its retelling; like a work of art or a historical narrative. In Lyotardian terms, Lanzmann is attempting to remain “open to the ‘It happens that’ rather than to the ‘What happens’” (Lyotard, 1988b, p. 18). The very moment one believes one has defined what has happened, one begins to forget.

This refusal of understanding is mirrored in another way throughout Shoah, such that the audience is forced to experience the disconnection between memory and the real through the very incommensurability of languages in the film. One of the defining features of Shoah is that it forefronts the act of translation: Lanzmann’s subjects speak in a multiplicity of languages and in many scenes the translator is present, side-by-side with Lanzmann. The imprecision of translation is apparent, as Lanzmann presses hard with his questions, sometimes querying to ensure the translations are correct. Throughout the film, the audience may be thrice removed from the original question asked by the filmmaker: The question is asked in one language, translated into another; the answer is given and re-translated, but the audience may only understand, after what feels like an unnatural gap of time, through reading the English sub-titles. As noted by Felman (2000):

The film places us in the position of the witness who sees and hears, but cannot understand the significance of what is going on until the later
intervention, the delayed processing and rendering of the significance of
the visual/acoustic information by the translator. (p. 110)

Similar to Primo Levi’s work, the frailty and inconsistency of language becomes
apparent to the audience; it is highlighted as part of the construction of
remembered events. As noted at the very beginning of this thesis: when
language appears to falter, when it is no longer transparent, we may become
uncomfortable. We may feel, as when experiencing the disorienting nature of
Rachel Whiteread’s sculptures, unease: Our desire for stability and closure is
heightened. In Shoah, the interview with Jan Karski, a former courier of the
Polish government in exile, reveals his profound alienation when he tried to give
testimony during the war. In 1942 he was asked by the Jewish leaders from
Warsaw to visit the ghetto and to take information on what was happening there
to the Allies. He did so, and his testimony in the film expresses both his
disorientation and inability to truly comprehend and communicate what he saw:

But I reported what I saw. It was not a world. It was not a part of humanity.
I was not part of it. I did not belong there. I never saw such things, I
never…nobody wrote about this kind of reality. I never saw any theatre, I
never saw any movie…this was not the world. (Lanzmann, 1985, p. 174)

As noted by Listoe (2006), when Karski says “I never saw such things” he is
referring to what he knew before and after his visit to the ghetto (p. 55). But the
audience also understands that Karski’s attempt to make sense, to translate what
he saw in the ghetto into language that would be understood, failed (It was not a
world. It was not part of humanity). The sense-making not only failed for him
personally, but the messages that he reported to the Polish government in exile were not received—the world did not understand or did not respond to his reports of the conditions of the Warsaw ghetto. Karski himself, in his life after the war, coped with his experiences through silence: “In thirty-five years after the war I do not go back. I have been a teacher for twenty-six years. I never mention the Jewish problem to my students. I understand this film is for historical record, so I will try to do it” (Lanzmann, 1985, p. 167).

The difficulty in making Shoah, therefore, is part of the content of the film itself, part of what Lanzmann tries to communicate to the audience. But Lanzmann feels strongly that it is his ethical duty as an artist is to find, in the words of Lyotard, an idiom for expression:

The Holocaust is unique because it created a circle of flame around itself, a boundary not to be crossed, since horror in the absolute degree cannot be communicated. To pretend that one has done so is to commit the gravest of transgressions. One must speak out and yet keep silent at the same time, knowing that in this case silence is the most authentic form of speech. (Lanzmann, 2007a, p. 30)

Silence becomes, throughout Shoah, as palpable as sound. Silence is one of the tools that Lanzmann uses to communicate what is impossible to communicate. It both creates and is created by absence. Survivor Simon Srebnik, standing in the middle of a forest field near Chelmno, says: “It was always this peaceful here. Always. When they burned two thousand people—Jews—every day, it was just as peaceful. No one shouted. Everyone went about his work. It was silent.
Peaceful” (Lanzmann, 1986, p. 6). Cathy Caruth, writing about Celan’s poetry in relationship to trauma, describes how silence is used “as a rhythmic breakdown and as a displacing counterpoint to sound….Through their very breakdown, the sounds testify…precisely to a knowledge they do not possess” (1995a, p. 42). Similar to Whiteread’s sculpture, which brings materiality to nothingness, the silence in Shoah becomes a force of its own. It is as present as the survivor’s voices, the mechanical rhythm of the trains, and the brief interludes of music. Listoe (2006) says that “With Shoah, absence is an object within the film” (p. 54). Likewise, within Shoah, silence has a voice. When the survivors stop speaking because they are overcome with emotion, or when the former Nazi guard, now bartender, refuses to speak, the silence sums up the impossibility of knowing, of recovering, of representing.

The heaviness of silence, therefore, surrounds and frames the individual voices as they attempt to answer Lanzmann’s questions. Similarly, it accentuates the music within the film, for music too is part of testimony in Shoah, never a background element. Sometimes singing is part of the interviewees’ re-enactments (both survivors and Nazis); sometimes a song is referred to within a remembered story (as in my earlier reference to the opera singer facing the burning of bodies at Treblinka—see page 77). In Shoah, music is never neutral—it moves between painful beauty and harsh irony, creating sublime moments where the viewer hears and does not want to hear. Felman (1992, 2000) has written extensively on the role of the song in Shoah, in particular the singing of Simon Srebnik, whose “melodious voice” (Lanzmann, 1985, p. 3) is presented in
the first part of the film as he revisits Chelmno in Poland. As a boy, Srebnik was kept alive (although he eventually escaped death only by accident) because his singing entertained the German soldiers. Felman (2000) writes:

> The place from which the song invokes us at the threshold of the film and to which it points, at the same time as the locus of the real and as the origin of singing, designates…the place of art within the film: the song becomes itself a metaphor for the whole film. (p. 139)

Felman’s argument can be extended in order to explore how music (as a metaphor for the place of art within the film) is laden with ethical implications. As Felman notes: “*Shoah* begins with the apparent innocence of singing” (p. 139). The song “embodies…what in art captures reality and enables witnessing” (p. 149). But while it does so, providing understanding beyond what language is able to capture, it also embodies a horrific différend: music, as evidenced in *Shoah*, was used by the Nazis to provide cover-up, to trick their victims and silence their accomplices. In the way that the Nazis fed alcohol to soldiers to dull their senses as they murdered innocent people, so they used music and art to silence, to create illusions, to stage narratives, and hide their crimes. Thus, Lanzmann shows that music (like other forms of art) has power to influence positively and negatively. As noted earlier, post-Auschwitz, art is not without responsibility—the decisions one makes as an artist are in response to ethical questions, because, even at the most basic level, one can never avoid the ethical question of, as Lyotard says, *what it is* to make art.
Lanzmann, interviewing historian Raoul Hilberg near the end of Shoah, refers to a section of the diaries of Jewish ghetto leader, Adam Czerniakow, written a few weeks before he committed suicide in the Warsaw ghetto:

_Czerniakow saw a film before the war where the captain of a sinking ship gives an order to the orchestra to play jazz. In the entry of July 8, 1942…he identifies himself with this captain of the sinking ship._

Yes, yes…

_of course, there is no jazz but there is a kind of children’s festival…_  

There’s theater, a children’s festival, there’s everything going on until the last moment. But more importantly, these are symbols. These outward cultural activities, these festivals, they’re not simply morale-building devices, which is what Czerniakow identifies them to be. Rather, they are symbolic of the entire posture of the ghetto, which is in the process of …trying to heal sick people who are going to be gassed, which is trying to educate youngsters who will never be growing up….They are going on as though life were continuing.

_But obviously when he compares himself to this captain of a sinking ship, he know that everything…_  

He knows, he knows. (Lanzman, 1985, p. 185)

The story of Cherniakow appears near the end of Shoah, and this minor reference to music as a metaphor for the false realities perpetrated by the Nazis (and for the desperate hopes of Jewish ghetto leaders) reframes earlier parts of
the film. This metaphor speaks back to two earlier scenes where music is a powerful force exposing the différend in Holocaust memory. In the first of these scenes, an elderly couple dance alone in a darkened dancehall. In the second scene, a daughter sings to her mother a song from their time in a Jewish ghetto during the war; the mother, overcome, loses her ability to sing.

The unidentified dancing couple appears in the first part of the film (after the testimony of survivor Richard Glazar and before Inge Deustchchron) almost without context. In this short scene, the camera fixes on a glittering chandelier in what is obviously an elaborately decorated, though outdated, nightclub. Music begins, and the elderly couple appears alone, in spotlight on the dance floor. The woman wears a floral dress with flowing skirt, pearls, and her blonde hair (or wig) is held stiffly; the man wears an innocuous suit. They dance in the graceful but controlled style of a bygone era; the couple is frail but unflagging; and the music is unnaturally cheerful, a modernized German dance tune. One recognizes, in the woman’s costume, fixed smile, and the cheerful music, garishness and forced gaiety, a subtle sense of the unreal. His face is unreadable; her glassy smile is that of an anxious performer. As the music fades and images of modern busy city streets appear, the survivor Inge Deustchchron speaks: “This is no longer home, you see. And especially it’s no longer home when they start telling me that they didn’t know, they didn’t know. They say they didn’t see” (Lanzmann, 1985, p. 50). The only link between Inge and the elderly couple is her later reference to a large “dance restaurant” in Berlin where the Germans herded the Jews before transporting them out of the city (to make it Judenrein). But the reference is not
confirmed, and the couple does not reappear once Inge’s story begins. This brief segue into music appears and disappears without comment. Like the Captain’s call for jazz on a sinking ship, the performance of the dancing couple verges on the absurd. For the viewer, questions emerge: Are the dancers some of the Germans who Inge refers to (those who said they didn’t see and didn’t know)? Or are they survivors, reliving an experience from a time before the war?

The performativity of the dance-hall scene is in sharp contrast to the second scene, featuring a mother and daughter, where the daughter’s song is presented as testimony. Here, presented without introduction, Gertude Schneider sings to her mother a Latvian song learned during their time in the ghetto. Gertrude's voice is wavering but true; she does not sing in English, and in the film, the song is not translated:

The words I write you
Are written with tears, not ink.
Years, the best years, are finished
And gone—never to be recovered.
It’s difficult to repair what has been destroyed.

(Lanzmann, 1985, p. 195)

As the daughter sings, her mother is silent, overcome with emotion. In this scene, as noted by Hirsch and Spitzer (2007): “meaning is conveyed not through words but through images or music, [structuring] the emotional texture of the film” (p. 180). The painful beauty of the daughter’s solitary voice exists side-by-side with
the mother's inability to speak; one is reminded of the peaceful voice of Simon Srebnik, singing for the Nazis in the boat on the river, or the religious songs of the Jews of Corfu, a small group of survivors who appear earlier in the film. In contrast to their haunting voices, the jarring gaiety of the dance hall music seems complicit. It feels almost as callous as the Treblinka work song (sung in the film by the former guard Franz Suchomel; who remarks triumphantly after finishing: “That's unique. No Jew knows that today!” [Lanzmann, 1985, p. 106]):

Looking bravely ahead, brave and joyous,

At the world,

The squads march to work.

All that matters to us now is Treblinka.

It is our destiny. (Lanzmann, 1985, p. 105)

Felman says that Shoah begins with “the apparent innocence of singing” (2000, p. 139). But it does not end with innocence—music is not left untainted. If the performance of song is a metaphor for the performance of the film, it becomes apparent that art's relationship to the real involves the culmination of an ethical decision; it lies on an ethical fulcrum where the artist must decide: what is it to make art? In the end, music is suspect in the way that the film may be suspect—(Lanzmann admits to the “devices” that he used to extract testimony from Nazis, and insists that the film is “art” not documentary). The filmmaker and the film itself are themselves part of the “grey zone” (a term used by Primo Levi to describe the ethical aporia of the camps). Thus, the question of art's “truthful”
portrayal of the Holocaust is fore-fronted by Lanzmann himself. And yet, despite this, *Shoah* exists as a monumental argument for art: “The great moral lesson of *Shoah* is in its rejection of the filmmaker as an autonomous artist, free to choose his imagery on emotional or aesthetic criteria alone” (Camper, 2007, p. 109). The artist, in abeyance to Adorno’s warning, must accept responsibility. Confronted with the inexplicable greyness of morality, even in the immense moral crisis perpetrated by the Holocaust, one returns to a Kantian concept of reflective judgment. The artist is free to choose, but the choice involves a moral decision without a determinate end. “And I think that if one asks…” ‘what is art,’ I would answer, too, that art for me is precisely to examine the possible and not to make hasty decisions” (Lanzmann, Larson & Rodowick, 1991, p. 83).

*Shoah*, then, examines the possibility of truth, knowledge and responsibility after Auschwitz. Lanzmann asks these questions with great care, heeding the lessons learned from Adorno, Lyotard and Levi. But he does not formulate an answer, even after nine hours of film. Instead, *Shoah* forces the viewer to participate in this questioning; to exist, for at least the duration of the film, in a place of moral ambiguity, a grey zone where the work of art becomes the work performed by the audience. Lanzmann uses both silence and music to suggest what is beyond the capacity of language—to seek out the traces of memory and the real; to embody absence and nothingness; to examine the possible by framing the impossible. Lanzmann creates and re-creates the complex ethical terrain of Holocaust memory; his desire to understand and his refusal to understand go hand in hand, creating a sublime experience for the
audience. His work lies, both chronologically and in substance, between the still, embodied absence of Whiteread’s sculpture and Levi’s compelling first-hand testimony. *Shoah* is a monumental work that over nine and a half hours raises more questions than it answers, but also attacks silence and representation and forces its audience to consider the profound questions of responsibility and complicity in the Holocaust’s events.
Twig

The dead emerge
from hidey-holes, bones
interrupted seams and hue of
frozen skin

They croak and sing
spines droughted winter saplings
fingerbones of lost hope

Chorus:

Oh we cannot feed you feed you
only hold you in our arms and say
We’ve gone too far away we have no home
no home
to warm you

Trapped in the war the world lost
all sense of up and down, a dank fog
in the rotting valley, what we knew
we sought like starving dogs

We prayed with guns and thus we hoped
our sad god might appear
and make us better cleanse us

Chorus:

Oh we cannot feed you feed you
only hold you in our arms and say
We’ve gone too far away we have no home
no home
to warm you

We had to kill we had
no choice we have so little
sacrificed so much
we chased we found you found me

In the stinking huts, on roadsides live
with frozen eyes we still
have hope some say
a little twig of green hope

Chorus:

Oh we cannot feed you feed you
only hold you in our arms and say
We’ve gone too far away we have no home
no home
to warm you

We wept the poetry of war, the dance and orchestra and love
of war the crippled songs
the dancing dead, the glorious
fires our burning souls

A coming life, the beauty of the world
in one dark pit, one withered limb
white palm outstretched a wailing forest

As if our hearts
could warm, could warn you
if our hearts
could warn could warm you

Repeat
**Primo Levi: The Canto of Ulysses**

A writer is someone like Claude Simon or Beckett. They are writers. That’s to say, they are progressing in a space, a field (but it’s not a field) in which they don’t know what they have to write. They are confronted with the unknown, and that’s to say they are really confronted with language itself. There is a sort of fight, a battle with and against words and sentences and phrases, and that’s beautiful and terrible work in a sense, and I admire it. (Lyotard, 1995, p. 394)

As often happens in the course of obliterating an attempt from a drawing, traces of it are left which bring on other ideas…you move one inch and once you have gotten as far as the inch, it gives you the courage and understanding to proceed towards the next inch. In the process, a lot gets wipe off, traces are left….You wipe it off and out of a frenzy of despair you start again and very often it is at those times that something will come that you did not really plan on. Something inherent in the process takes over and returns something to you. (Goodwin, 1989, p. 50)

When Primo Levi wrote *If This is a Man* (re-titled in North America as *Survival in Auschwitz*) soon after he returned from the death camps, he did not consider himself a writer, but as someone “haunted by a secret too cumbersome
to bear” (Signorini, 2001, p. 174). He felt compelled to write, with no literary aspirations or intention for the work:

I wrote each chapter all in one go, with no plan, no idea even that I was writing a book. What mattered was to get it written down, to record not so much the facts as the impressions linked to the facts. My memory was my only source, I had no other weapons….For If This is a Man I had no framework. I just wrote, wherever and whenever I could, without suffering over it. I felt time and space expanding as I wrote….Almost the entire chapter “The Canto of Ulysses” was written in half an hour between 12:30 and 1 pm one day. I was in a sort of trance. (Levi, 2001, p.162)

Previous to his experience in Auschwitz, Levi was not a practicing writer. He was a chemist, whose writing was limited to scientific reports. Thus, he did not recognize his memoir (which took many years to achieve recognition) as a crafted piece of literary work, and he voiced this opinion for many years of his writing career. Sodi (2001) argues, however, that Levi’s “disclaimers” were an indication of his “full, albeit still inchoate, awareness that the very act of writing inevitably infuses even the most sincere documentary with components of the imaginative enterprise” (p. 39). In fact, in an interview with Germaine Greer in 1985, Levi expresses a new understanding of If This is a Man:

Its forty years since I wrote it. And in those forty years I’ve constructed a sort of legend around that book, that I wrote it without a plan, that I wrote it on impulse, that I wrote it without reflecting at all.
The other people that I talked to about it accepted that legend. In fact, writing is never spontaneous. Now that I think about it, I can see that this book is full of literature, literature absorbed through the skin, even while I was rejecting it. (Levi, 2001a, p. 3)

Most artists acknowledge that there are occasions where the process of art feels spontaneous, where a work flows from an artist without planning or deliberation—where the structure and content of the work are revealed effortlessly as the artist creates. But these experiences of making art are rare; most often the creative act is slow, difficult and full of hesitation and reworking. The quote by Canadian artist Betty Goodwin at the beginning of this section outlines the challenges she experiences while creating a drawing, moving between despair, understanding, and satisfaction. Writing (and, I would argue, art in general) is “beautiful and terrible” work, as Lyotard asserts (see above), pushing the limits of “what imaginative thought can grasp at once in a form—what it can form” (Lyotard, 1994, p. 53). For Levi, the compulsion that drove the creation of his first book made the process seem different than his later writing. But in fact, the creative process commonly alternates between moments of insight, despair and the hard work of building and crafting.

At the beginning of the interview with Levi, Greer commends him on his achievement—his ability to create elegance and clarity from horror (Greer, 2001, p. 3). As Sodi (2001) writes, Levi has an “uncommon ability to express atrocity in exquisite prose” (p. 41). While Levi asserted for many years that the book had emerged spontaneously, his later understanding of the richness and complexity
of his own artistic process also suggests his latent awareness of the gap between representation and the real: There is always artifice in representation, no matter how natural or unplanned the process seems—language is never transparent. Levi was driven to express his experiences, discovering and creating a form as he progressed. But the artistic process involves both the creation of the form and what, as Lyotard says, exceeds it. To requote Goodwin (1989): “Something inherent in the process takes over and returns something to you” (p. 50). Art awakens the imagination, and as Maxine Greene (1995) contends, its role is “to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard and unexpected” (p. 28). Levi (2001b) reports that he wrote the Canto, the chapter that I will focus on in this section, “in a sort of trance” (p. 162). But the creative experience is neither a spontaneous outpouring nor a mechanical process; it is some of both, a process of working between craft and creative impulse. Sometimes it is an inch-by-inch or word-by-word battle with language or medium, where each step into the unknown is hard-won. Sometimes the artist’s effort to communicate is hindered by the desire to communicate, where a determinate intention cripples a reflective exploration. Sometimes memory is a weapon, as Levi says above, and sometimes memory falters, broken by trauma and distance:

The scant reliability of our memories will be satisfactorily explained only when we know in what language, in what alphabet they are written, on what surface, and with what pen….some mechanisms are known which falsify memory under particular conditions: traumas, not only cerebral
ones; interference from other “competitive” memories; abnormal conditions of consciousness; repressions, blockages. (Levi, 1986, p. 24)

“The Canto of Ulysses” has been called “the heart” of Levi’s If This is a Man (Jagendorf, 1993, p. 31). It is my argument that the narrative in this chapter, one of the fragments Levi wrote quickly and compulsively after his return to Italy, is both an attempt to understand the language of memory and, unconsciously for Levi, an exploration of the process of creating and experiencing art—hence, Levi allows the reader to be present for Lyotard’s “beautiful and terrible” battle that is the work of making art. In violent contrast to the harsh physical reality that Levi alludes to, but does not describe in this chapter, the emotional and intellectual reality he expresses powerfully reflects the nature of what constitutes and creates human dignity. The différend between the unreal reality of the camp and the poetry of Dante, quoted haltingly by Levi throughout this chapter as he tries to teach a fellow inmate Italian, exemplifies the discordance of the sublime. Thus, “The Canto of Ulysses” is an argument that supports the overriding argument of this thesis: aesthetics and ethics are not and cannot be separated, even as they exist in discordance and ambiguity. And this incommensurability is what creates spaces for new idioms, for new thought, for new ways of communicating, teaching and learning.

The scenario Levi describes in “The Canto” is of his brief encounter with another prisoner, a young man named Jean, the Pikolo of the Kommando (the messenger-clerk, a privileged position held by a younger member of the crew). Levi (1996) describes Jean as “shrewd and physically robust” as well as “gentle
and friendly” (p. 110). Jean is well-liked by the members of the Kommando, and appears to have influence with their Kapo, having taken on the work of keeping the Kommando’s register, which the Kapo has difficulty with. At the time of this scenario, Levi notes that he and Jean had been friends for a week: “We discovered each other during the unusual occasion of an air-raid alarm, but then, swept by the fierce rhythm of the Lager, we had only been able to greet each other fleetingly” (p.110). On this particular day Jean assigns Levi as his assistant to the Essenholen, the task of picking up the daily food ration for the group. This requires an easy walk to the kitchens, and then a return carrying the hundred-pound pot of soup on two wooden poles. While carrying the soup is difficult work, it is a sunny and warm day, and this task is a welcome break from the work the Kommando is doing, cleaning a cold and damp underground petrol tank. The two men have a one-hour walk to return with the day’s ration, and Jean arranges their route carefully to take full advantage of this reprieve. As they walk the two men have an opportunity to talk: “We spoke of our houses, of Strasbourg and Turin, of the books we had read, of what we had studied, of our mothers” (p. 111). Jean (who speaks French and German fluently) expresses his desire to learn Italian, and Levi eagerly embraces the opportunity: “Why not try? We can do it. Why not immediately, one thing is as good as another, the important thing is not to lose time, not to waste this hour” (p. 112).

It is at this point that the poetry of Dante becomes an essential element in the narrative, and for Levi, in the remembered time of the event, the creative process begins: “The canto of Ulysses. Who knows how or why it comes into my
mind. But we have no time to change, this hour is already less than an hour” (p. 112). The sense of urgency that Levi expresses becomes the driving force for the rest of the narrative—the urgency of his desire to teach Jean, to express in his own language the lessons of Dante’s poetry, is like his later desire to write his survivor’s story:

How many things there are to say, and the sun is already high, midday is near. I am in a hurry, a terrible hurry.

Here, listen Pikolo, open your ears and your mind, you have to understand, for my sake:

“Think of your breed; for brutish ignorance
Your mettle was not made; you were made men,
To follow after knowledge and excellence.”

(p. 113)

Open your ears and your mind—you have to understand. In the scenario in this chapter, Levi is immersed in a terrible battle with language, with memory, with shaping the unknown into the receding future of the known. He is trying to teach and communicate through art and about art: As he works through the process of remembering, questioning, reciting, and explicating the work of Dante, his mind opens as much, if not more than his student. His passion for language overtakes him, opens the memories of Dante’s poetic phrases, transports him from the Lager to his home in Italy, to the mountains and the ocean:
It is a chain which has been broken, it is throwing oneself on the other side of the barrier, we know the impulse well. The open sea: Pikolo has travelled by sea, and knows what it means: it is when the horizon closes in on itself, free, straight ahead and simple, and there is nothing but the smell of the sea; sweet things, ferociously far away. (p. 113)

In his urgent attempt to create meaning, as in his struggle for survival and humanity in the camps, Levi confronts barriers of language in an attempt to break free, temporarily, of the oppression of the Lager. On the surface, the chapter chronicles his fragmented, incomplete and urgent attempt to recite, explain and translate Dante’s canto to his fellow prisoner, as a way of teaching him Italian. But it is much more than Italian, of course, that is the object of the lesson:

“As if also I was hearing it for the first time: like the blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God. For a moment I forget who I am and where I am” (p. 113). The Canto becomes for Levi an event: the “sound which comes to it from out of the silence” (Lyotard, 1991, p. 83). Levi is reciting not what happens, but as he immerses himself in the poetry, the event happens: he loses himself and thus, briefly and dangerously, becomes himself:

I would really have given bread and soup, that is, blood, to save from nothingness those memories [of Dante] which today with the sure support of printed paper I can refresh whenever I wish….Then and there they had great value. They made it possible for me to reestablish a link with my past, saving it from oblivion and reinforcing my identity….They granted me
a respite, ephemeral but not hebetudinous, in fact liberating and differentiating: in short, a way to find myself. (1986, p. 139)

Levi cannot, of course, remember the full canto: like traumatic memory, the verses come to him in fragments, and his opportunity to share is brief: “Nothing. A hole in my memory. ‘Before Aeneas ever named it so.’ Another hole. A fragment floats into my mind, not relevant” (1996, p. 112). Levi, many years later, describes something similar in discussing his work as a scientist in the factory. In the interview with Greer, he is asked to articulate what the word “know” means:

It’s not a matter of arriving at the deepest roots of knowing, but just going down from one level to the next, understanding a little more than before. When I understand what’s going on inside a retort, I’m happier. I’ve extended my knowledge a little bit more. I haven’t understood truth or reality. I’ve just reconstructed a segment, a little segment of the world.

(Levi, 2001a, p. 28)

This simple reflection on finding and extending scientific knowledge parallels the creative experience, and parallels his exploration of the Canto. As Levi recalls Dante’s poetry phrase by phrase, he gains understanding, moving more deeply into the experience of the text, making connections with his own lived experience. Levi, as he writes, is reconstructing “a little segment of the world,” extending his and the reader’s knowledge “a little more than before” (p. 28).

The simplicity of the scene described in this chapter (it is, after all, only a description of two men walking for soup, one hour out of endless hours of
imprisonment) belies the complexity of the event. As Jagendorf (1993) describes, the “unique resonance” (p. 33) of the chapter is created by the multiple layers of reality and representation within it: the interconnections between Levi’s memory and representation of the day in the Lager; his memory of Dante learned many years earlier in school; Ulysses’ voice speaking from the fires of hell in Dante’s text; and Jean’s response and encouragement. The multiple layers of artifice and reality in this scene are similar to the scene in Lanzmann’s Shoah, described earlier in this thesis (see page 77), where I argued that the complexity of the layers of representation in a particular scene exemplifies the ambiguity of the relationship between art, ethics and the real. But my focus here is on the process of art: here, Levi explores not only his experience of the camps, but also the creative experience itself. In doing so, the ethical role and implications of art are both validated and questioned. Levi himself understood the tenuous link in the camps between what he termed “culture” and the daily existence he was facing:

Culture could be useful: not often, not everywhere, not for everyone, but sometimes, on certain rare occasions, precious as a precious stone, it was actually useful, and one felt almost lifted up from the ground—with the danger of crashing back down again, the pain being all the greater the higher and longer the exaltation lasted. (Levi, 1986, p. 138)

“The Canto of Ulysses,” for the brief period of the walk with Jean, lifts Levi from the horror of the Lager and into a space of exploration and discovery. The experience creates a sublime sense of both freedom and pain. He is both teaching and learning; listening and speaking, creating and experiencing art: “As
if I also was hearing it for the first time: like the blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God. For a moment I forget who I am and where I am” (1996, p. 113). Although Levi did not consider himself a writer when he inscribed these words, his recitation of Dante exactly describes the process of creating, of trying to communicate, that is the work of the artist: “You move one inch and once you have gotten as far as the inch, it gives you the courage and understanding to proceed towards the next inch. … Out of a frenzy of despair you start again” (Goodwin, 1989, p. 50). Likewise, Levi moves through the text, halting, repeating, remembering and forgetting:

Pikolo begs me to repeat it. How good Pikolo is, he is aware that it is doing me good. Or perhaps it is something more: perhaps, despite the wan translation and the pedestrian, rushed commentary, he has received the message, he has felt that it has to do with him, that it has to do with all men who toil, and with us in particular; and that it has to do with us two, who dare to reason of these things with the poles for the soup on our shoulders. (1996, p. 114)

The two men dare to reason, an act of impossible resistance in a place where reason is divorced from daily existence. The creative act of speaking poetry, of experiencing it and teaching it to Jean, of using art to momentarily escape the confines of the death camp, is both subversive and futile. The experience takes Levi out and beyond himself—he becomes, whether he understands it fully or not, an artist, a witness testifying to what cannot be remembered. The story he is trying to tell, in the temporal space of the walk with Jean, is a precursor to the
story that he later attempts in his memoir. Both narratives are fragmented, half-remembered and elusive, but he is compelled to communicate.

Agamben (1999) writes: “Neither the poem nor the song can intervene to save impossible testimony; on the contrary, it is testimony, if anything, that founds the possibility of the poem” (p. 36). In this quote, Agamben argues against the redemptive power of art, recognizing that it can do little more than allude to the real act of witnessing, than it cannot cross the void of representation. At the same time, he understands the reflective core of aesthetic judgment and its constant search for meaning. Testimony founds the possibility of poetry because it precedes it; the effort to witness, to create meaning from and into unimaginable meaninglessness, drives the creative act. In response to Adorno, Levi (2001c) wrote “After Auschwitz it is barbaric to write poetry except about Auschwitz” (p. 28). His statement implies two things: first, that art and ethics, post-Auschwitz, cannot be separated: “To demand the art which it prohibits is the aporia of the Holocaust” (Diken and Laustsen, 2005, p. 79). Second, it suggests Levi’s recognition that Auschwitz was an event, a dividing line in the consciousness of humanity. The event of Auschwitz is the negative sublime, its reality too vast and too significant to comprehend. In an interview with Ferdinand Camon, Levi states: “There is Auschwitz, and so there cannot be God” (Levi, 1989, p. 68). Later, he wrote on the typescript of this interview: “I don’t find a solution to this dilemma. I keep looking, but I don’t find it” (p. 68). For Levi, the aporia of Auschwitz, the ambiguity of God, the unanswerable questions
that the Holocaust created—all of these led him to understand the sublime significance of what he had been through:

[Survivors] speak because, at varied levels of consciousness, they perceive in their…imprisonment the center of their life, the event that for good or evil has marked their entire existence. They speak because they know they are witnesses in a trial of planetary and epochal dimensions. (Levi, 1986, p. 149)

“The Canto of Ulysses,” a few short pages in If This is a Man, captures the différend of life in the Lager. On one hand, much of what Levi values as a human being is crystallized in these pages: friendship; family and home; language and poetry; the ability to reason and to communicate, to see and think about the world broadly:

I must tell him, I must explain to him about the Middle Ages, about the so human and so necessary and yet unexpected anachronism, but still more, something gigantic that I myself have only just seen, in a flash of intuition, perhaps the reason for our fate, for our being here today. (1996, p. 115)

On the other hand, however, fear and a sense of threat permeate the story and drive the urgent speed of its telling. The narrative begins in an underground petrol tank, cold and damp, where “the powder of the rust” burns the prisoner’s eyelids and fills their throats “with a taste almost like blood” (p. 109). The “fierce rhythm of the Lager” (p. 110) propels the narrative forward—Primo and Jean are threatened by the Kapo’s mood, by an SS man on a bicycle, by Frenkl the spy: “Quicken our pace, one never knows, he does evil for evil’s sake” (p. 112). Then,
at the end of the chapter, they reach the soup line—cabbages and turnips, and the final remembered line from Dante: “And over our heads the hollow seas closed up” (p. 115). The communication that is so vital to Levi pours meaninglessly into the hollow seas, the abyss of the différend, the frightening ethical vacancy of Auschwitz. This différend is both the source and the ruin of Levi’s testimony, of his art: Kant’s aesthetic beauty is an eternal distance from this place; the language of art, post-Auschwitz, is forever changed.

**Aporia**

In this chapter, I have focused on three artworks and artists, each of whom has struggled with the “beautiful and terrible” work that speaks to the questions of knowing and representing the Holocaust. What is striking about each of these artists is that, though they worked in different decades and contexts, each questions the role of artistic discourse and tests the rules of presentation as they create and represent. They explore the limits of form and formlessness and thus, their work signals the presence of the infinite, pushing through and past black and white delineations of truth into the grey realm of “ideas and ideals” (Guyer, 2006, p. 377). It is my argument that as art transgresses outside the limitations of the beautiful and into the aporia of the sublime, its link with ethics is unarguable. Such art may not define fixed constructs of right and wrong, but it creates an *event* where the audience is engaged with powerful moral and ethical complexities. This is, according to Baumann (1993), the postmodern perspective that is the condition of the contemporary western world: “The moral self moves, feels and acts in the context
of ambivalence and is shot through with uncertainty” (p. 11). In the context of such aporia, therefore, the question of the role of art re-emerges: Is it possible, and how is it possible, that art can approach the deep ethical questions of our time, as exemplified by the “grey zone” of the Holocaust, and teach us a way to respond? How can and does art educate? In the final chapter, therefore, I will return to these questions; they have driven my exploration of art, ethics and education from the beginning of this project.
Stateless

oppressed becomes oppressor
when you try to learn
a warm house
entirely unprecedented art is suspect
stairs and windows open windows

because trauma invites people’s excess
cold days faces peering
from the watching zone
the context is disruptive beauty
forming limits moralizing not mine

never mine a long and guilty life
the latter is the former
guide us through these difficulties
jewels the women winter coats good doctor
you will need your shoes

never touched and never seen
transmit a passive knowledge I imagine
I am in the house and watching
children and the elderly
waving as the buses leave it does exist

every act of speech or witness shamed
by literature the flesh and blood of cold soup
have seen the monster’s eyes we lost our name
I was looking for my shoes I could not leave
until I found them
shredded galaxies so many stars
missing articulation gutter words little specks
of nothing lost in time and space and history
outside a concept

perhaps the reason for our being

if I could clear my head, she said
if I could wake and clear my head
I did not say before I left
this is all there is good mother
it does exist
6 Art, Ethics, Education

We needed art—the language of infinity to mourn the losses and to face up to what in traumatic memory is not closed, and cannot be closed….Historically, we needed art to start to apprehend and to retrieve what the totalization has left out. (Felman, 2001, p. 201)

At the heart of what I am asking for in the domains of the teaching of art and aesthetics is a sense of agency, even of power. Painting, literature, theater, film—all can open doors and move persons to transform. (Greene, 1995, p. 150)

This project focuses on the nature of contemporary art in order to understand art’s value and purpose, using the work of three artists whose art has focused on the Holocaust. The questions I seek to answer are both personal and cultural. As an artist who has struggled with the conflicting demands of everyday life and creative work, I began this exploration out of a realization that I held unexamined assumptions and values both because of my involvement in the arts and about my reasons for involvement. While in my day-to-day life I downplayed arts role and struggled with its efficacy, I began to understand that it had affected the way I saw and interacted with the world in many areas of my life. The writings of Maxine Greene were the first source of this understanding; from her work I gained a sense of the broader context of art in our culture—her commitment to
the value of art, manifested in her writings on teaching and imagination, opened my eyes (or perhaps, reopened them) to what I felt to be true about art. Thus, I began the journey to understand more about the work of creativity. This led me, eventually, to Lyotard’s (and therefore Kant’s) philosophy of aesthetics. As someone influenced by postmodernist thinking and writing, the parallel between postmodernity’s critique of the modern and the critical role of art could not be ignored. My interest in the work of Rachel Whiteread coincided with my interest in Lyotard; they both address the aporia of the Holocaust through their work, and, as such, they both understood the power of ambiguity and the unknown. If art is to be seen as valuable, necessary and important in our culture, then it must have the means to address this darkest of histories. Thus, this was the source and the compulsion behind my project of understanding.

In this final chapter I will first briefly retrace my exploration in order to clarify my arguments, and then return to explore its broader implications. I will begin with Kant’s in-depth analysis of the aesthetic, through Lyotard’s views on modern art, into the specific issues surrounding art and the Holocaust, and finally, into the actual works created by Whiteread, Lanzmann and Levi. These specific works are examples of how art can “move freely between history and memory” (Hornstein and Jacobowitz, 2003, p. 3) and approach the unrepresentability of the Holocaust through self-questioning representation. Felman, citing Adorno’s return to and modification of his original statement, writes that he believed:
It is only art that can henceforth be equal to its own historical impossibility...art alone can live up to the task of contemporary thinking and of meeting the incredible demands of suffering, of politics and of contemporary consciousness, and yet escape the subtly omnipresent and the almost unavoidable cultural betrayal both of history and of the victims. (1995, p. 40)

In this quotation, Felman re-asserts Adorno’s vision that art’s role is to work against itself, or, from a Lyotardian perspective, it must critique the desire to make things better. In this chapter I will conclude my argument for art’s ethical purpose and therefore its value in representing, remembering and educating about this most complex of subject matters. Maxine Greene, amongst others, has elegantly made the argument for art’s place in the classroom; it is an argument that must be made again and again, for too often the value of art and the humanities has been diminished and derided. This project argues precisely against this diminishment; if art, as I have shown here, has an ethical and pedagogical role working through the trauma of this violent history, then it sustains the argument that art’s non-determinate approach to knowledge enables us to “reach beyond what is established and lead those who are willing to risk transformation to the shaping of a social vision” (Greene, 1995, p. 30). If art does not give us determinate answers about our world, it gives us subtle and powerful experiences that may free us from the limits of such knowledge.

My argument begins with an in-depth analysis of Lyotard’s key concepts in relationship to his views on art, based on Kant’s writings on aesthetics and
judgment. I start with the concept of the *différend*, which provides a basis for much of Lyotard’s writing on judgment, the sublime and the event, and which underpins his understanding of the role of modern (and postmodern) art. The concept of the différend captures the incommensurability at the core of meaning: it is the failure of language to ever truly connect human beings, experiences and cultures; it is the lack of a meta-narrative to complete the stories that we tell (or artworks that we make); it is the postmodern abyss that we must learn to live with. As Dori Laub writes in regards to the testimony of Holocaust survivors: “It is the realization that the lost ones are not coming back; the realization that what life is all about is precisely living with an unfulfilled hope” (1995, p. 74). Lyotard’s writings on art, politics and education focus on this postmodern sensibility of accepting unfulfilled hope while imagining what is hopeful, an adjustment to (but not a refusal of) the modernist belief in progress, closure, and the known. Lyotard does not believe we have moved from the epoch of modernity to the epoch of postmodernity; he argues instead that one always contains the other: “A work can become modern only if it’s first postmodern. Postmodernity thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant” (Lyotard, 1984b, p. 81). In fact, to examine contemporary art, Lyotard looks backwards in history to Kant, one of the first philosophers to analyze aesthetic judgment and to differentiate it from other kinds of understanding.

Lyotard uses Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* to develop and enhance his own analysis of how we make meaning in the world, and how and when our attempts to do so may fail. Kant’s concept of reflective judgment underlies much of what I
have written here: Reflective judgment is not based on rules or standards, because rules cannot be applied to measure beauty (or, in a more contemporary framework, rules cannot be applied to measure art, whether or not its focus is beauty). Much of Kant’s analysis, which explores the aesthetic response to beauty through four moments, is still relevant to how contemporary human beings see and understand art. Lyotard acknowledges this and goes further in his attempt to capture how we know through reflective judgment: “Reflection does not produce understanding. It discovers in itself modes of synthesis that are similar to those of understanding. The latter are always there to make knowledge possible” (1994, p. 37). Thus, Lyotard encapsulates his assertion of how art (as well as other kinds of reflective judgment) works: through a mode of synthesis that makes knowledge (which in a Kantian world means organizing observations under concepts) possible. Lyotard’s arguments for art, however, go beyond an understanding of reflective judgment. Lyotard uses Kant’s analysis of the sublime to make a case for understanding the focus of contemporary art. Although the sublime was not a major focus in Kant’s Critique, it becomes so in Lyotard’s work. The sublime experience carries both the attraction of the beautiful and the repulsion when immense power or size overwhelms comprehension. It engenders a sense of tension when we are unable to create meaning or to name our experience with words or concepts; thus, we are confronted with the essence of a différend. As I wrote earlier in this thesis: in the sublime, pleasure and pain oscillate, and are inextricably linked. This, according to Lyotard’s argument, is the difference between art focused on beauty (which was art’s purpose in Kant’s
time) and art today, where the artist may deliberately challenge form and disavow beauty.

The experience of the sublime resonates throughout the art and literature that I examine in this thesis. Levi’s writing about Auschwitz (his “uncommon ability to express atrocity in exquisite prose” [Sodi, 2001, p. 41]); Whiteread’s deliberate goal to create, not a beautiful object, but a “severe presence” in the city of Vienna (Whiteread, 2006, p. 13); and Lanzmann’s refusal of understanding—each artwork engenders experiences which both attract and repel, which simultaneously create and revoke meaning; which assert a perspective (an ethics) and at the same undermine its validity. In fact, one of the key aspects of the sublime is its relationship to the ethical—Lyotard writes: “The sublime is none other than the sacrificial announcement of the ethical in the aesthetic field” (1991, p. 137). Beauty, disrupted by an ethical question, leads to the tension of the sublime. The question of ethics (Levi’s grey zone or the ethical fulcrum that I described earlier in this thesis) emerges in each of these artworks through their relationship to the “real.” The use of form (and the struggle with formlessness) becomes a vocabulary with which the artist engages in the complex questions of what it is to make art and how art is related to the real. Art’s relationship to the real events of the Holocaust is not a question that has a simple answer; a différend lies at its very core. Here, Lyotard’s concept of the event comes into play—the event links the physical and temporal experience of art to an ethical question, as he explains in reference to a painting by Barnett Newman:
This “pragmatic” organization is much closer to an ethics than to any aesthetics or poetics. Newman is concerned with giving colour, line or rhythm the force of an obligation within a face-to-face relationship, in the second person, and his model cannot be Look at this (over there); it must Look at me or, to be more accurate, Listen to me. For obligation is a modality of time rather than of space and its organ is the ear rather than then eye. (1991, p. 81)

In other words, the artist attempts to create an event where the audience engages with the artwork, catching a sideways glimpse of a reality they had never before experienced, or gaining a fleeting comprehension of a meaning they cannot articulate in language. At the same time, the artist and the audience understand that representation is not reality. In engaging with an artwork, the audience may experience the very questions that drove the artist’s creation, including the ever-present question of what it is to make art. As I wrote in an earlier section of this thesis: One may sing in response to the burning bodies at Treblinka, but the murders and the flames continue; the question of art’s efficacy always remains. As Lyotard writes: “To bear witness to this impossibility remains possible” (Lyotard, 1990, p. 47). The ethical imperative of art is to bear witness, despite the impossibility of witnessing, because art, by its very existence, always signals the possible—it breaks down old forms to form new ones: “One must, certainly, inscribe in words, in images. One cannot escape the necessity of representing. It would be a sin to believe oneself safe and sound” (Lyotard, p. 26). Art is not autonomous; its obligation lies precisely in its connection to the
real; it stimulates questions, awakens the new, and explores the unexplored, but in doing so, it always references the real. In Maxine Green’s words: “There are always vacancies: there are always roads not taken, vistas not acknowledged. The search must be ongoing; the end can never quite be known” (Greene, 1991, p. 15).

Representing the Holocaust in art, however, despite the necessity to do so, is fraught with issues for artists and audience. There are four primary questions that artists and theorists have struggled with in making art about this history. The first question is Adorno’s: How might one respond to his charge that it is barbaric to write poetry (or make art) after Auschwitz? Lyotard’s explication of the sublime directly challenges this assertion; it links the creation of art to an ethical decision and belies the perspective that art merely transfigures experience into pleasure, or redeems death through creation. But Adorno’s statement is still relevant; even today it provides a challenge of responsibility to artists, a counterbalance against art’s unfettered pursuit of the new. Primo Levi responded to Adorno by saying that: “After Auschwitz it is barbaric to write poetry except about Auschwitz” (2001, p. 28), implying his belief in art’s ethical responsibility and an awareness of the overwhelming significance of the Holocaust. There is an ethical judgment implicit in any artwork’s relationship to the “real.” But this creates a new question: How is an artist’s historical proximity to the events of the Holocaust relevant when considering his or her work?

There are theorists such as Ezrahi (2003, p. 119) who believe that survivors’ narratives are the most authentic and therefore the most valid
responses to the Holocaust. Creative work is considered suspect because it is not based in the known—implying, of course, that representations such as memoir, documentary and testimonies reflect the actual truth of events. From this point of view, Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz* would be considered the most authentic representation examined in this thesis. But Levi, Lanzmann and Whiteread all recognize the limits of representation: Even Levi questions the validity of his own witnessing. Thus, contemporary artists view their own work, despite the limitations of time, distance and memory, as part of the Holocaust’s historical record. As James Young states, contemporary artists see “history itself as a composite record of both events and these events’ transmission to the next generation….. Neither history nor memory is regarded by these artists as a zero-sum game” (2000, p. 2). In fact, memory itself may be considered suspect when examining survivors’ testimonies; the effect of trauma on memory has changed the way such narratives are viewed. Thus the third question emerges: What is the role of the trauma in relationship to Holocaust memory?

Cathy Caruth defines trauma as follows: “The trauma is the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge” (Caruth, 1995b, p. 153). Earlier, I described it as an event where the real and the ethical are torn apart and forever altered. It is an experience of the negative sublime, where language and representation are overwhelmed by horror and fear. In psychological literature, the remedy to trauma is *working-through*, a Freudian concept whereby the past is assimilated slowly without an emphasis on closure. Levi’s, Lanzmann’s and Whiteread’s
artworks can all be described as attempts to work through the history of the Holocaust, capturing fragmented memory and challenging the limits of their medium to find new ways of understanding. But the understanding is never complete: After trauma, one cannot return to the security of what was known, for it is irreparably damaged. These artworks shape fragments and traces, create forms to hold absence, and reconstruct the tenuous present with the knowledge of an eroding future. They were created as testimony to testimony, and thus represent the power and obligation of the artist as witness.

The final question asked of contemporary art is: What does it mean to witness the history of the Holocaust, both artistically and ethically? Both Levi, the witness, and Lyotard, the philosopher, respond to this question. “I mean that in witnessing, one also exterminates. The witness is a traitor” (Lyotard, 1988c, p. 204). Levi says: “We, the survivors, are not the true witnesses” (Levi, 1986, p. 83). One is a traitor, or false witness, because in witnessing, in surviving to tell the story, one does not tell the real story: It has been buried in the ruins of the gas chambers and scattered with the ashes of the murdered in rivers and fields. As Agamben says, in witnessing, “something sinks to the bottom, wholly desubjectified and silenced, and something subjectified speaks without truly having anything to say of its own” (1999, p. 120). But Agamben and Lyotard both understand that poetry and art have the ability to testify from a place of indeterminacy, to listen and to hear the nuance of the différend: “It was not light, but was sent to bear witness to the light” (Agamben, p. 39). Thus, the question asked of contemporary art is answered by its existence. Adorno suggests that
poetry is not equal to the task of witnessing; the artists and writers who have written and created work on the Holocaust have proven him wrong, encompassing the impossibility of the task into their response to its challenge: “We must be listened to: above and beyond our personal experiences, we have collectively witnessed a fundamental, unexpected event, fundamental precisely because unexpected, not foreseen by anyone….It happened, therefore it can happen again” (Levi, 1986, p. 199).

The four questions I have outlined represent issues that will always remain partially unresolved. This indeterminacy forces educators, artists, historians and philosophers to frame, reframe and seek new methods of exploration. In examining this history, one is confronted with its moral conundrums and must accept the obligation to respond, not through a determinate ethics but through a reflective process whereby seeking an ethical answer is more important than completing the search. The overwhelming lesson of the three works I have presented is a Kantian one: reflective judgment and the experience of the sublime are at its very core. The distance between the experience of the Holocaust and the human ability to communicate such an experience, or even to understand it, is vast, an unbridgeable différend. Levi, Lanzmann and Whiteread reach this limit within their own work, and, self-reflectively, their knowledge of this limit becomes part of the work itself. The harder one tries to record, measure, and fix the truth of such an experience, the farther one moves away from it. In the limit case of the Holocaust, there is no one way to define what happened, or why it happened, or to make sense of the human condition that led to its events.
There are only the traces in people’s memories, survivor’s incomplete recorded testimonies, or the representations in museums, music, books, and art. There are the words and images that are created as afterthoughts, as scholars, educators and artists grapple with the enormity of our lack of understanding, and these afterthoughts then become part of the history itself.

Whiteread, Lanzmann and Levi each wrestle with the complexities of Holocaust representation in different contexts and through different media. Rachel Whiteread’s memorial in Vienna is unique in that it was commissioned as public art to commemorate the lost lives of the Jews deported from the city. Whiteread’s conceptual and self-effacing approach makes it, in the words of James Young, a counter-monument (2000, p. 93). As public art, the intention of those who championed its creation ran directly into the competing values of the larger community, and it took four years of debate to resolve the issues surrounding its installation. As public art, it is, by definition, more accessible than the other artworks I examine. But it is also the most conceptually difficult piece, based on “the idea of a place” (Whiteread, 2004, p. 92) and created not from memory but from imagination. Whiteread’s work plays between the comfortable familiarity of the known and the disorientation created by seeing what is known in a radically new way. In doing so, perception is unsettled and the viewer must respond: the imagination is forced to make sense of an object that does not fit into comfortable categories; reflective judgment overwhelms determinate meaning.
Similarly, Lanzmann’s Shoah challenges the roles of documentary, testimony and film. Like Whiteread, Lanzmann acknowledges that we cannot stabilize the known (“I started with the impossibility of recounting this history. I placed this impossibility at the very beginning of my work” [Lanzmann, Chevrie and Le Roux]). The length of this film is one of the primary indicators of this impossibility; even after nine hours there is no encompassing narrative that finalizes meaning. Within the film, Lanzmann uses silence as a counterpoint to speech, the sound of trains, and music. Similar to the austere concrete walls of unreadable books in Whiteread’s monument, emptiness, loss and silence dominate the film. Lanzmann focuses on minute details that he mines from his subjects’ memories; knowing that the “traces of traces” (Lanzmann, 2007c, p. 47) he assembles will not manifest the real. He inserts music sparsely in the film, but it becomes, as noted by Felman (2000, p. 139), a metaphor for the ethical role of art. Music is portrayed as full of meaning (as in Gertrude Schneider’s sorrowful and loving song of the ghetto) and entirely corrupt (is in Franz Suchomel’s work song from Treblinka). Lanzmann questions the “truth” of art and its efficacy as he creates; Shoah forefronts the link between art and ethics, but represents the lack of clarity and finality in this relationship.

Primo Levi is the only artist in this selection with direct experience of the camps. Survival in Auschwitz chronicles his year in imprisonment and the slow degradation of humanity caused by the brutal conditions of Auschwitz. For many years Levi did not see this book as literature, but he came to understand it differently, in the same way he came to understand the complexities of the
relationship between his testimony and the truth of the camps. “The Canto of Ulysses,” a short chapter within the memoir, can be read as a direct exploration of the ethical paradox of art and its transformational power. In this chapter, Levi escapes from the routine of the camp with his friend Jean for one short hour, as they walk to pick up the daily ration of soup. Dante’s Canto becomes the vehicle for teaching Jean Italian (“The canto of Ulysses. Who knows how or why it comes into my mind” [1996, p. 112].) as well as a metaphor for Levi’s own creative urge to tell: “How many things there are to say, and the sun is already high, midday is near. I am in a hurry, a terrible hurry” (p. 113). Similar to the role of music in Shoah, the poetry of Dante transports Levi out of the grinding reality of the camp, reminding him of the power of art, the danger inherent in this power, and the tenuousness of its ability to affect the real. Diken and Laustsen (2005) note: “To demand the art which it prohibits is the aporia of the Holocaust” (p. 79). The ethical vacancy of Auschwitz cannot but must be translated in art. Levi, Lanzmann, Whiteread: each artist attempts to do so, each artist plunges into the grey zone, pulls from its depths, responds to the unfulfilled and impossible demand that things will be better.

Art has given me, in my life, new ways of seeing and responding to the world. By challenging the formal aspects of language through poetry, I am more inclined to see “truths” as constructs of language. By playing with the limits of communication in experimental writing, I am more comfortable with leaps of meaning, gaps in the real, and ambiguity. The power of reflective judgment, the critical experience of the sublime engendered through contact with literature,
painting, film, sculpture—art, at its very core, allows us to imagine worlds and ways of being beyond what we might ever know. When we interact with art, or when we create it, we are required to think deeply and to experience without recognizing limitations; we might glimpse or hear or understand, for an instant, a perspective, a worldview or a freedom that we had not known was possible. Thus, art has the ability to transform us—we may be guided and challenged by our interactions with it. In the Judenplatz in Vienna, the Unknown Library brings solace, memory, and warning to its viewers. The obsessive details garnered by Lanzmann in Shoah create multiple images of what cannot be imagined: the systematized horror inflicted on human beings by other human beings, and their ability to survive. Levi’s beautiful and clinical language makes it possible to see both the depths of degradation and the possibilities of survival, the fragility and limitless power of what it means to be human. This is the role of art; this is why and how it educates. Art does not answer questions, but opens up vistas to further questions, presenting brutal and beautiful possibilities.

The role of contemporary art, with its link to the ethical, does not create an easy relationship with its audience. Much of today’s art does not pacify us, or simplify the world, but attempts to trouble our perceptions, to make our experiences more complex. The balance between attraction and repulsion in contemporary art (its focus on the sublime) is not always successful. If an artist misreads an audience, the artwork can repulse, confuse or bore; the assumption of common sense may be futile. But successful artworks today (such as the examples I have highlighted here) allow the audience a glimpse of the known or
a promise of hope while at the same time questioning (sometimes brutally) that assumption. But there are other reasons why a work may be considered unsuccessful; in particular those that deal with the ethical complexities of events such as the Holocaust. One question I have not considered in this project is the relationship between art and popular culture: movies such as Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993) or Benigni’s *Life is Beautiful* (1997) are criticized for their oversimplified portrayal of the Holocaust. They are accused of smoothing over and attempting to make something good of its horrors. Adorno’s question is always present behind such criticism: Can one create something redemptive, or beautiful, after Auschwitz? Do these movies represent a betrayal because they are not self-consciously “attacking form”? Or are they attacking other preconceptions—about art, and communication—in a way that challenges our definitions of art itself?

*What is it to make art about the Holocaust? What is it to make art?* This project has led me to a place of reconciliation with this question, if not an answer. At the core of creating or experiencing art, there is a similar impulse: a curiosity, a willingness to “abandon already constituted reason” (Greene, 1995, p. 104), to open oneself to something deeper or stranger or unknown. I have come to see this as vital, a necessity—a model for being in the world. A successful work of art will lure its audience to a place where they must engage, must make a decision or respond to the aporia it presents. Art can disorient one’s perspective physically and intellectually, and through this, can challenge us to an awareness of how we make (create, cipher and represent) meaning in our lives. Kant explains that we
understand when we organize the sensible under concepts: What art can do (and has done) is allow us room to question the necessity of always doing so, to seek an answer or create a form without a determinate end. Through the play between the known and unknown in art, dissonance may be created. We may see this aporia as something to be solved, or something to be explored. My belief in art has taught me the value of exploration, and helped me to recognize the power of this perspective. It has helped me to recognize meaning as always constructed and therefore I understand that I too have an obligation to construct meaning with careful attention. It has re-opened my eyes to the freedom that art creates—intellectually and emotionally—to see the world and oneself in a different way. Art educates, transforms and enriches our lives; its power may be fleeting, the vision of the new transient and ever changing, but its traces remain.
References


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