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HOLOCAUST MEMORY IN DIALOGUE: JENNY KAGAN'S EXPERIENTIAL EXHIBITION IN KAUNAS "OUT OF DARKNESS"

Summary. This paper examines "Out of Darkness", an immersive exhibition by Jenny Kagan, which presents the story of her parents, who survived the Holocaust in Kaunas. Through a carefully curated interplay of historical narratives, personal artefacts, and scenographic installations, Kagan constructs a space where memory is not merely recalled but actively performed and reconstructed.

The exhibition reception provoked a wide range of emotional responses from its visitors. In some cases, comparisons were made between the atrocities of the Holocaust and war crimes in Ukraine. The present article aims to explore the factors that prompted exhibition visitors to establish a connection between the memory of the Holocaust and the atrocities of the modern world. The study demonstrated that visitors exhibited a strong emotional response to the exhibition, which was precipitated by the exhibition's architecture. This emotional architecture integrated performative elements with a personal narrative, thereby evoking a profound emotional response in visitors, while fostering strong empathy and the ability to make ethical comparisons with contemporary experiences.

The article puts forward the argument that the performative nature of the exhibition, when combined with its intimate and deeply personal narrative, resulted in the activation of multidirectional memory. The article draws upon a theoretical foundation established by Michael Rothberg, Marianne Hirsch, Astrid Erll, and other scholars in the field. This theoretical framework facilitates a more profound comprehension of how the exhibition juxtaposes Holocaust narratives with contemporary geopolitical violence, particularly the war in Ukraine. This juxtaposition serves to promote an evolving dialogue between historical traumas, thereby contributing to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the interplay between history and contemporary geopolitical realities.

Keywords: Holocaust representation, trauma, postmemory, multidirectional memory, transcultural memory, Russia's war against Ukraine.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking at the German Bundestag's commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Roman Shvartsman, the chairman of the Jewish community in Odessa and a Holocaust survivor, said: *Hitler wanted to kill me because I am Jewish. Putin wants to kill me because I am Ukrainian. You swore: 'Never again'. That 'never again' has come.*¹ Shvartsman's testimony not only underlines the geopolitical context of recent events but also reinvigorates the concept of memory in dialogue. By recalling the trauma of the Holocaust, Shvartsman compares its legacy to another instance of historical violence – the war against Ukraine. This comparison

does not position these memories in competition with one another, rather, it creates a dialogue that produces broader collective awareness and intensified empathy towards different historical traumas. His testimony highlights how Holocaust trauma maintains crucial importance in shaping political discourse alongside ethical decisions during challenging times.

The memory of the Holocaust becomes a powerful reference point that influences how we perceive historical injustices in the contemporary world. Scholars have long acknowledged the importance of the Holocaust in global memory culture, yet there is

still a significant gap in understanding how this memory interacts with current geopolitical events, especially through cultural and artistic expressions.

This article² will analyse British artist Jenny Kagan's experiential exhibition "Out of Darkness", which presents the story of her parents, who survived the Holocaust in Kaunas. The exhibition serves as a medium through which the narrative of the Holocaust in Lithuania is conveyed. Concurrently, it functions as a case study, in which the memory of the Holocaust has prompted a discourse with the memory of war in the present day.

The exhibition attracted a significant number of visitors and evoked profound emotional responses. Visitors were granted the opportunity to articulate their impressions of the exhibition by the artist. Several hundred comments were collected from attendees regarding their impressions of the art show. The majority of respondents provided commentary on their emotional responses to the Holocaust. However, some of them established a correlation between the history of the Holocaust and the trauma of the present day, citing the war in Ukraine as a pertinent example. Consequently, one historical trauma became a catalyst for the survival of those affected by another historical event. Therefore, the present article aims to analyse how an art exhibition presenting the history of the Holocaust can encourage the linking of disparate memories and promote empathy and solidarity between different historical narratives. This paper analyses "Out of Darkness" as a dynamic manifestation of a dialogic memory and its ability to engage viewers in "memory work" through immersive exhibition design and personal testimonies.

The central argument of this study is that memory is not fixed or assigned to one group or community. Memory is characterised by its dialogical, flexible, and mobile nature. Consequently, "Out of Darkness" encourages visitors to engage in "memory work" and proposes the notion of memory not as a "passive legacy" but as an active engagement.

The focus of this paper is twofold: firstly, the Kagan exhibition itself; and secondly, the reception of the exhibition among visitors. Drawing on visitors' responses, the study highlights the evolving nature of collective memory and its broader societal significance.

This dual focus enables a more nuanced understanding of how dialogical memory works and the impact it has on the perception of the exhibition.

The underlying hypothesis of this research is that the design of Kagan's "Out of Darkness" exhibition created a unique *emotional architecture* that encouraged visitors to develop a personal relationship with the story, while fostering strong empathy and, most importantly, the ability to make ethical comparisons with contemporary atrocities. The "Out of Darkness", through its immersive scenography and personal narrative framework, serves as a multidirectional memory site that promotes critical reflection and increased social awareness.

The concept of multidirectional memory, as developed by Michael Rothberg in his seminal work "Multidirectional Memory",³ serves as a foundational methodological framework in this article. The multidirectionality of memory helps to explain how one memory can intersect and influence another. Rothberg's concept challenges the idea of competitive memory, emphasising the productive intersections among various historical narratives. Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory enriches the analysis by focusing on how subsequent generations engage affectively and imaginatively with inherited trauma.

The article also references the contributions of scholars such as Astrid Erll, Daniel Levy, Nathan Sznajder, and Alison Landsberg, who have collectively advanced the understanding of memory as a fluid, transcultural phenomenon shaped by circulation, mediation, and reinterpretation. Recent scholarship in memory studies emphasises the dynamic nature of remembrance, showing how memories travel, transform, and intersect across historical and cultural contexts. No longer fixed or confined

to a single group or nation, memory is shaped by dialogue, interaction, and reinterpretation. Within this discourse, the Holocaust has become a central reference point in global memory culture, not only as a historical event but also as a lens through which other traumas are understood. Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory highlights how different historical events interact in public discourse, while Hirsch's notion of postmemory examines how subsequent generations engage with inherited trauma. These perspectives challenge static representations of the Holocaust, reframing it as an evolving site of memory work.

Kagan's exhibition "Out of Darkness" serves as a compelling case study for these concepts, offering an immersive and deeply personal exploration of memory. Through a carefully curated interplay of historical narratives, personal artefacts, and scenographic installations, Kagan constructs a space where memory is not merely recalled but actively performed and reconstructed. By engaging the audience in an experiential act of remembrance, "Out of Darkness" transcends traditional modes of Holocaust commemoration, demonstrating how memory can travel, interact with contemporary geopolitical events, and provoke new ways of understanding historical trauma.

"Out of Darkness" emerged as one of the most visited projects within the Kaunas 2022 European Capital of Culture programme. The exhibition was part of a broader initiative, called "Memory Office", dedicated to addressing the city's complex history and multicultural memory. A significant portion of the program focused on Kaunas' Jewish heritage, the history of World War II, and its lasting consequences. Designed as an educational endeavour, the programme aimed to bridge historical knowledge gaps among both Lithuanian audiences and international visitors, fostering a deeper engagement with the city's multifaceted past.

In this context, an exhibition serves as a crucial intervention, providing a platform for the exploration and acknowledgment of Holocaust memories. It offers an opportunity to engage with the

complexities of historical trauma and contributes to the ongoing process of integrating these narratives into the broader social consciousness. Kagan's exhibition demonstrates the power of art in resurrecting and reinterpreting historical traumas, inviting viewers to actively participate in the reconstruction of memory. Moreover, "Out of Darkness" emphasises the dynamic and evolving nature of memory. By juxtaposing personal and collective narratives, the exhibition highlights the ongoing relevance of Holocaust memory in contemporary society, particularly concerning current geopolitical conflicts such as the war in Ukraine.

HOLOCAUST MEMORY IN DIALOGUE: ONE MEMORY AS A LENS FOR ANOTHER

Recent work in memory studies highlights how memory migrates, changes and mingles, resulting in a multitude of contradictory shared memories that are not necessarily fixed or assigned to a single group, community or nation. The ideas of a dialogic, "travelling", mingling, crossing borders, memories are currently being developed in many different quarters, albeit under different terms. Erll proposes to use "transcultural memory" as an umbrella term to encompass what in other academic contexts might be described as transnational, diasporic, hybrid, syncretic, post-colonial, translocal, global or cosmopolitan memory. For Erll, memory is first and foremost truly *transcultural*, continually moving across and beyond such territorial and social borders.⁴

In this article, one of the key concepts is Rothberg's notion of "multidirectional memory", which provides a framework for understanding how various collective memories intersect and interact in different cultural and historical contexts, especially after trauma. Introduced in his seminal work, *Multidirectional Memory*, Rothberg's theory stresses that memory does not form in isolation, but can develop through connections with other memories, resulting in a network of associations that foster solidarity between different historical narratives. The author claims that "the public articulation of collective

memory by marginalised and oppositional social groups provides resources for other groups to articulate their own claims for recognition and justice”.⁵

Rothberg argues that in the public sphere, collective memories often interact as if engaged in a zero-sum struggle for recognition, where one group’s memory is seen as threatening another’s. This competitive framing is linked to the potential for conflict and even violence.⁶ However, the recognition of the multidirectionality of memory defies this perception, demonstrating that different historical memories can coexist and engage in dynamic ways rather than erasing or weakening one another.

Focusing on the Holocaust and colonial crimes, Rothberg demonstrates how seemingly irreconcilable victimhood narratives can be productively linked, instead of remaining in opposition. He highlights a critical issue in contemporary memory practices – the tendency of national victim narratives to become increasingly competitive, hindering the development of shared and transnational memory.⁷ Particularly in contexts where several competing memories collide, Rothberg’s proposal to think of memory as multidirectional, characterised by negotiation, cross-referencing and borrowing, makes particular sense. He adds: “When the productive, intercultural dynamic of multidirectional memory is explicitly claimed [...] it has the potential to create new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice”.⁸ Embracing the multidirectionality of memory invites us to view the public sphere as a fluid and dynamic discursive space, where groups do not merely express predefined positions but actively shape their identities through dialogue and interaction with others. In this process, both the participants and the spaces of public discourse remain open to constant redefinition and transformation.⁹

Another important concept proposed in the context of transcultural memory is that of “cosmopolitan memory”, in which the Holocaust becomes part of a broader system of human rights and collective trauma. In this framework Holocaust becomes a pivotal reference point. Lévy and Sznajder argue

that the Holocaust has become a foundational element of cosmopolitan memory, shaping moral and political interdependencies across nations and influencing how other historical injustices are perceived and commemorated: “memories of the Holocaust facilitate the formation of transnational memory cultures, which in turn, have the potential to become the cultural foundation for global human rights politics”.¹⁰

Thus, the Holocaust is a universal moral touchstone, giving rise to a collective memory that demands empathy and responsibility for the pain of others. This viewpoint underlines the fact that a cosmopolitan memory is more than a mere recall of past injustice; it also involves recognising the shared nature of human experiences across cultures and epochs. The writers contend that such memories can give rise to an extended moral conversation that reaches beyond national borders, thereby fostering a sense of global solidarity. Another idea that Erll introduced is “traveling memory”, which significantly broadened the disciplinary reach of memory studies through its emphasis on the transnational and dynamic nature of memory. As Erll notes, “we are dealing not so much with the ‘places’ of memory, *lieu de mémoire*, as with the ‘journeys’ of memory, *les voyages* or *les mouvements de mémoire*”,¹¹ This perspective challenges traditional notions of memory as static and localised, highlighting how memories can be carried across borders through various mediums, including literature, film, and digital media.

The concept of “prosthetic memory” by Landsberg explains how media representations shape collective and individual memories, particularly when direct experience is absent. Defined as a form of public cultural memory, it allows individuals to “remember” events they never lived through.¹² Art projects and museums, for instance, enable younger generations to develop such memories, fostering empathy and understanding of historical repression.¹³ Rather than passive reception, Landsberg emphasises that these engagements actively shape individuals’ connections to cultural heritage, inviting audiences to relate to others’ memories

and broaden their understanding of historical suffering.¹⁴

Both Landsberg and Erll delve into the unique relationship between memory and those who inherit it. This relationship is described using terms such as "prosthetic memory", "traveling memory", or, as referred to by other authors, "inherited memory", "belated memory", "mémoire trouée", and "received history". Hirsch encapsulates this concept under the term "postmemory": "Postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right".¹⁵

Hirsch's concept of postmemory helps us to understand how generations after those who have directly experienced trauma, especially the Holocaust, engage with and internalise memories of these events.

Postmemory plots the uneasy relation that subsequent generations have with the traumatic pasts of their ancestors, which they "remember" only through mediated experience. The concept is especially significant in Holocaust literature and visual culture, where the children of survivors grapple with the long-term consequences of trauma and collective memory.

Hirsch's research stresses that postmemory constitutes not a passive legacy but an active interaction with the past generation's memories. Second and third generations often feel a strong responsibility to bear witness to the Holocaust, even though they did not experience it themselves. This commitment can take many forms, including literature, film and the visual arts, as these individuals seek to express their relationship with the past and its impact on their identity: "Postmemory, thus, offers an openness to attunement, solidarity and responsibility, in the sense in which the legal theorist Martha Minow

(1992–1993) has identified, not as blameworthiness, but as the ability to respond".¹⁶

Hirsch, like Landsberg, has been criticised on the grounds that memory cannot be transmitted because memory is the result of a specific event, Hirsch replies that this is true, however: "Postmemory is not identical to memory: it is 'post', but at the same time, it approximates memory in its affective force".¹⁷

Art and culture also play an important role in shaping postmemory. As Jackie Feldman and Norma Musih have noted, narratives about trauma in different media can have a profound impact on those who have not directly experienced traumatic events.¹⁸ The representation of traumatic memory is therefore central to collective memory-making. The theory of postmemory calls attention to the capacity of cultural artifacts to be affectively engaging and to create connections across generations. Yet, the new memory theories of scholarship discussed in this article have been criticised because some scholars find them too optimistic. A preview of some of these criticisms over a short span of time brings up a few key arguments. One, recent geopolitical circumstances have shown that post-war states have been actively remembering Holocaust memory and, simultaneously, taking part in large-scale human rights violations. Such a paradox creates doubts about the presumed ethical and political consequences of collective remembrance. Furthermore, academics warn against the risk of potential oversimplification of multifaceted historical accounts. Lévy and Sznajder's emphasis on the Holocaust as a universal moral standard risks promoting a coerced homogenisation of memory that overlooks regional specificities and histories. As Laila Amine and Caroline Beschea-Fache point out, the framing of transnational memory as cosmopolitan often positions it in opposition to national memory, which can oversimplify the complexities of memory work in a globalised world.¹⁹

Finally, as noted by Aleida Assmann, there is still no consensus in Europe on how to assess, represent, and commemorate its complex past: "European

memory is still divided by the traumatic legacy of two core events of the twentieth century: the Holocaust and the Gulag”.²⁰

THE MEMORIES OF THE SECOND GENERATION

The second generation of Holocaust survivors has played a pivotal role in shaping the artistic representation of the Holocaust. As Aarons and Berger observe, second and third-generation narratives of the Holocaust mark a significant shift in the transmission and expression of Holocaust memory, trauma, and representation.²¹ The authors refer to the “memory vacuum” and the burden of a “haunting legacy” inherited by the second and third generations. Descendants of victims and survivors of the Holocaust must confront the growing chasm of lost memories, attempting to resist forgetfulness and bear the burden of testifying. However, the narrative can never fully encapsulate the event itself; rather, it remains a mediated articulation of experience, shaped by the limitations of language and consciousness, ultimately transforming “life history into life story”. In this context, trauma does not manifest through the reenactment or refiguration of the event, but rather through the absence – both conscious and unconscious – of direct perception of the reality of the experience. It is within this profound “lack” of history that trauma is transmitted.²²

Individuals who grew up after the Holocaust frequently recognise that their identities are significantly influenced by events that took place prior to their birth. The experiences and testimonies of survivors have turned into the inherited essence given to their offspring. How they deal with their parents’ Holocaust past is a result of the shaping influence of individuals whose lives were profoundly shaped by events that essentially determined their existence.

The indirect experience of trauma, the internalisation of suffering, and the preoccupation with past horrors emerge as recurring themes especially in the literature of second-generation Holocaust writers. As psychoanalyst Judith Kestenberg notes, many children of Holocaust survivors feel

a profound sense of mission: to reverse the Holocaust’s effects, to compensate for their parents’ losses, to live the lives that were interrupted by death, and, in some sense, to alter the course of history.²³ This generation of children of Holocaust survivors inherited the trauma of their parents, a trauma they themselves did not directly experience, and at the same time they are “acutely aware of the inadequacy and challenges in appropriating and representing a trauma that they did not directly experience but which profoundly affects them”.²⁴ As Hirsch argues, indeed, the children of those directly impacted by collective trauma inherit a terrifying, unknown, and unknowable past – one their parents were never meant to endure.

Second-generation literature, art, memoirs, and testimonies are all profoundly shaped by the challenge of expressing the long-term effects of being intimately in contact with the pain, despair, and disconnection felt by those who have witnessed and survived radical historical trauma. These works are prompted by the child’s confusion and their sense of duty, as well as by their desire to repair the damage done, and by the realisation that their presence itself could serve as a form of atonement for an irreparable and unutterable loss.²⁵

JENNY KAGAN’S EXHIBITION “OUT OF DARKNESS”

*[...] the first time I told this story
I stole it from my mother*

*the first time I told this story
I felt like a fraud*

*the first time I told this story
it was not yet mine to tell*

*the first time I told this story
I reeled as I saw horror in their faces,
a horror I did not feel*

*the first time I told this story
was the first time I really heard it myself. [...] ²⁶*

Kagan's project in Kaunas is particularly intriguing as a representation of second-generation Holocaust memory. The artist shares with the viewer memories that are not her own, that is, postmemory – "borrowed" memories, which reflect the complex relationship that children of survivors have with Holocaust trauma. Like many artists in this context, Kagan inherited a past that is a frightening and difficult to comprehend, "haunting legacy" along with a sense of responsibility for a trauma she did not experience directly but which profoundly affected her. Her exhibition reflects her efforts to represent this trauma and her desire to repair the damage, acknowledging that it may serve as a form of compensation for an irreparable loss. The "work of memory" in which the artist engages while creating her exhibition is not a passive inheritance but an active engagement with the memories of her parents' past.

What the artist presents in the exhibition is a narrative constructed from authentic and fictional excerpts of her parents' diaries and letters, supplemented with descriptions of key moments from history written by the artist herself, alongside a timeline of significant national and family historical events. The "diary" constructed from her mother's narratives is a deliberately selected storytelling medium that, through its intimate style, seeks to approximate the events it evokes rather than merely recounting them. This is an intensely personal exhibition, as the narrative of memory within it is deeply individual, much like memory itself, for, as James E. Young observes, "memory belongs primarily to the individual: the unique and personal remembrance of someone deeply loved, of shared lives, of unspeakable grief and longing".²⁷

The exhibition elicited a profound emotional response from its visitors. At the end of the exhibition, the artist invited visitors to leave written reflections on their experience in the final room. As a result, she collected several hundred responses in both Lithuanian and English. The majority of the testimonials accurately reflected the affective engagement of the visitors with the exhibition. Notably, many visitors drew parallels between the Holocaust

narrative presented by the exhibition and the ongoing war in Ukraine. The exhibition's performative nature, coupled with its close and highly personal narrative, enabled the staging of multidirectional memory. The retelling of Holocaust trauma to others who did not witness the event firsthand became an important factor that had a deep impact in generating overwhelming emotional reactions. The narrative of the exhibition takes the spectator on a path through a labyrinthine experience, whereby we encounter bare rooms with old furniture, family portraits, and various artefacts. A significant aspect of this presentation is the utilisation of suitcases. The suitcase, in Holocaust memory, is a poignant and well-chosen symbol that attests to the experience of enforced exile and the agony of loss. Conceptually, the suitcase is a broader metaphor for memory as an intentional gathering of meaningful events carefully saved to build individual and collective narratives.²⁸

At the start of the exhibition, visitors are confronted with portraits of family members. This direct encounter with the individuals at the heart of the exhibition's narrative creates a deeply intimate atmosphere. As Laura Bertens argues, the impact of the *ça-à-été* – particularly in photographs of Holocaust victims – makes this medium an exceptionally powerful tool in exhibitions designed to shape and preserve cultural memory. "Yet, the feeling of closeness between the viewer and the photographed seems to imply a true individual understanding of a cultural memory – much like hand-written notes and letters."²⁹ This widely used metaphor equating memories with photographs, in turn, endows actual photographs with a mnemonic quality.

Each room features a different scenography – ranging from an office, a suspended tent where the artist's parents had their first date (Fig. 1), to a box where they hid near the Kaunas ghetto (Fig. 2). It is akin to an empty house or an empty film set, where action has just taken place, but now, silence prevails, intermittently interrupted by voices unexpectedly emerging as if from beyond: a phone recording, a voice echoing from an old armchair, the voice of a mother in a hiding box The setting is one

of phantoms, wherein the former inhabitants are represented solely through silent portraits on the walls, abandoned objects, and disembodied voices emanating from speakers. The exhibition creates a space defined by absence, marked only by minimal traces of human presence. The loss of the individual is articulated through their absence, rendering the void itself a powerful testament to their erasure. In this context, the threat of war and heinous crimes

is tangible, yet the victims of violence themselves remain unseen (Fig. 3).

The artist's constructed rooms function as a stage for the re-experiencing of traumatic memory. However, this is not merely a static setting; rather, the uninhabited space assumes the complex task of generating life – of resurrecting from oblivion that which no longer exists, surviving only in the realm



Fig. 1. Jenny Kagan Exhibition "Out of Darkness", 2022, @Kaunas2022



Fig. 2. Jenny Kagan Exhibition "Out of Darkness", 2022, @Kaunas2022

of memory. One room features tables arranged for family board games. Yet here, the stakes are vastly different – what unfolds is not a simple game, but a confrontation with fate itself, where life and death become the rules of play (Fig. 4). History gradually unfolds through an immersive

experience – moving from one exhibit to another, reading inscriptions, listening to audio recordings, touching, exploring, and reflecting. Visual and auditory stimuli, along with intuitive and historical associations, enable visitors to weave together disparate fragments into a coherent structure, a



Fig. 3. Jenny Kagan Exhibition "Out of Darkness", 2022, @Kaunas2022



Fig. 4. Jenny Kagan Exhibition "Out of Darkness", 2022, @Kaunas2022

narrative. In doing so, the visitor assumes the role of a witness to something that remains profoundly elusive – perhaps even beyond full comprehension. The quietness of the exhibition spaces and the feeling of being suspended in time create a sense of melancholy. However, this is not a static trauma. As visitors move from room to room, the reconstruction of traumatic memories becomes a process of engaging with the past, a form of introspective labour. The active engagement of the audience in the story fosters empathy beyond personal experience, as visitors are invited to engage with other people's memories, thus broadening their understanding of historical suffering.

Although Kagan's exhibition is a narrative of a family history that has experienced the Holocaust, it also serves as a dialogue with contemporary Holocaust memory in Lithuania. Upon entering the first rooms of the exhibition, visitors are greeted by an installation consisting of a neon sign from the "Pasaka" cinema theatre and a macabre mechanism of a "dancing" hose placed in a deep room below (Fig. 5). These individual elements of the installation are deeply personal and painful to the artist but may not be easily "read" by the average visitor. The installation can only be fully understood by

someone familiar with Lithuania's Holocaust history, particularly the under-discussed tragedy of the Lietūkio Garage massacre (27 June 1941), during which Lithuanian Nazi collaborators tortured and killed approximately 60 Lithuanian Jews. Crowbars, wooden planks, and water hoses were used in the executions. As the family learned after the war, the artist's grandfather, Jurgis Štromas, the owner of the "Pasaka" cinema theatre and director of the Ministry of Finance's Department of Industry and Trade, was among those killed during the massacre. The killings were witnessed by numerous bystanders. This part of the exhibition, like the exhibition as a whole, represents the artist's attempt to introduce a topic into the public discourse that is not widely discussed, one that is deeply shameful and painful. It is more a conversation not about historical memory, but about living memory, which has been relegated to the margins. The installation draws attention to a significant historical event in the city's history, while also highlighting the fact that there is no collective memory of this traumatic event. This is evidenced by the fact that many of the exhibition's visitors pass through this segment without recognising its significance. The installation focuses not on what is present, but on what is absent. It is based on non-existence, mourning.



Fig. 5. Jenny Kagan Exhibition "Out of Darkness", 2022, @Kaunas2022

Performativity and reenactment are key elements employed by Kagan in her exhibition. One of the most dramatic scenes reconstructs an episode in which three women were forced against a wall with their hands raised, threatened with execution. The viewer is confronted with a video projection of hands pressed against the wall, adorned with rings and freshly painted nails – an intrusive trace of individuality and humanity. However, the artist does not stop at mere representation. She invites the audience to actively engage with the scene by reenacting it – taking up a rifle and assuming the role of the Lithuanian collaborators who aimed their weapons at these defenceless women (Fig. 6). This reenactment becomes a body-based act in which the past is reanimated through physical and psychological experience. Thus, reenactment is employed as a means to evoke or activate traumatic memory.

Another scene in the exhibition – the ghetto photograph as the mirror installation – allows the viewer to identify with the prisoners of the ghetto. By becoming part of the historical photograph, exhibition visitors symbolically place themselves in the position of the prisoners. In this way, Kagan,

as throughout the entire exhibition, raises the question of “what if?”. What if this had been me? How do I perceive myself in relation to history? In Kagan’s exhibition, Holocaust commemoration exerts considerable psychological and intellectual pressure on audiences by provoking intense emotional responses and prompting visitors to confront difficult questions. The exhibition seeks to destabilise visitors’ perceptions of history and to challenge viewers’ understanding of the complex relationship between past and present.³⁰

As Gaynor Bagnall’s research demonstrates, the significance lies in the embodied nature of the experience – the interplay of physical and sensory stimuli that deeply engage visitors on an emotional level. It is the authenticity of these emotions, or emotional realism, that enables visitors to actively participate. “Indeed, it is this emotional engagement that promotes the process of remembering”.³¹

The artist’s exhibition is a carefully orchestrated narrative of Holocaust tragedy and familial survival. Rather than being passive observers, visitors are invited to engage actively in the process of “reading” the story. Consequently, the role of the



Fig. 6. Jenny Kagan Exhibition “Out of Darkness”, 2022, @Kaunas2022

audience is of critical importance, as it carries an inherent responsibility not only to acknowledge but also to respond to the story.

The artist creates conditions that encourage visitors to actively engage in the process of “memory work”. As Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney point out: “remembering” is better seen as an active engagement with the past, as performative rather than reproductive”.³² On a cultural level, the performative nature of memory implies that each act of representation contributes to the continuous and evolving process of shaping and reconstructing that memory.

When engaging with an artwork, the visitor assumes a performative role, interpreting the piece through the lens of their own experiences and memories. Within this personal and subjective framework, the artwork is not merely observed but actively enacted through the visitor’s engagement: “The viewer ‘plays’ the part scripted by the work, to the extent that he or she ‘acts’, responding to the perlocutionary address of the work, in the present of viewing”.³³

Each act of remembrance is also an act of construction, shaped by the needs and desires of the individual engaging with it. The existence of memory is predicated on active involvement. In this manner, a compilation of personal yet interconnected recollections are engendered among those participating in the work, thus paying homage to the individuals who were privy to the original events. Despite the presence of certain similarities between these newly constructed memories, significant distinctions are also apparent, reflecting the unique perspectives of each participant.³⁴

The impact of the “Out of Darkness” approach to “memory work” is most evident in the exhibition’s final segment. In the final room, visitors are invited to take a seat and document their impressions of their experience. Kagan has amassed a substantial corpus of responses, which collectively attest to the profound emotional responses evoked by the exhibition. These responses also illustrate the multidirectionality of memory. A significant number of

visitors expressed their distress over the horrors of the Holocaust:

A shocking experience, the exhibition brought us closest to these nightmarish events. It teaches humanity, thank you;

The most emotionally impactful exhibition I have ever attended. I was deeply moved and experienced the exhibition with my whole being;

An indescribable feeling, as if lifted into shivers of experience. The exhibition conveys an incredibly powerful emotion that simply takes your breath away.

Although many others found that the narrative of Holocaust history triggered memories of the brutality and injustice of the war in Ukraine:

Shocked and made us think. How does it differ from the current events in Ukraine? It doesn’t; Emotional, heavy ... Throughout the exhibition, I kept thinking about the present times and Ukraine! God bless!;

Very powerful. The thought that the atrocities and shattered lives captured in the exhibition are repeating today in Ukraine was especially striking;

So poignantly meaningful during the war in Ukraine;

I left without a word, affected by the terrible history that is happening in Ukraine right now. Slava Ukraine!

It is important to note that the exhibition prompted reflections on the war in Ukraine primarily among Lithuanian-speaking visitors. Foreign visitors, however, did not draw such analogies. Such a response from Lithuanian audiences can be interpreted within a broader contextual framework, as Dovilė Budrytė notes, the identification with Ukraine’s struggle in the Baltic countries is rooted in shared historical experiences of oppression and trauma.³⁵

Furthermore, since the 2013–14 crisis, both the Baltic states and Ukraine have constructed similar memory regimes centred on narratives of resistance and victimhood, framing Soviet-era crimes – particularly in Lithuania – as acts of genocide: “The similarity of the collective narratives constructed by the Baltic states and Ukraine explains why it became easier for the Baltic states to fully adopt Ukraine’s war trauma”.³⁶ On the other hand, with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, a significant number of Ukrainian refugee communities arrived in Lithuania, as well as in other neighbouring countries. As Rothberg notes, “migration transforms the conditions of social, communicative, and cultural memory; it brings disparate histories into contact with each other, reconfigures individual and collective subjects, and produces novel constellations of remembrance”.³⁷

Kagan’s exhibition became the kind of public space described by Rothberg, where “imaginative links” between different histories and social groups emerged, forming the foundation of multidirectional memory. As Rothberg argues, a practice that initially evokes the memory of Nazism can later act as a catalyst for recalling other historical events.³⁸ In this particular instance, the commemoration of the Holocaust triggered memories associated with the ongoing war in Ukraine, which had already been in progress for a period of six months at the time of the exhibition. The presentation of the Holocaust as a manifestation of universal evil in “Out of Darkness” enabled viewers to recognise expressions of atrocity and fostered empathy towards present-day victims. Furthermore, it facilitated the acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of human experiences across different historical periods.

Rothberg’s concept of multidirectional memory is predicated on the interplay of multiple traumatic histories, which engage in a dialogic process to establish connections between distinct experiences of suffering. “Out of Darkness” exemplifies this multidirectional framework by juxtaposing two traumatic narratives, thereby emphasising both their interrelation and the persistent tensions

surrounding the representation, competition, and appropriation of traumatic memories.

As Vita Fortunati and Elena Lamberti argue, “So it’s not memory as commemoration, and still less a sanctifying one, but rather a memory which wants to bring to light traumatic, repressed, and censored memories and again questions dangerous stereotypes which have been lurking over some historical events.”³⁹ Memory becomes an ‘act of survival’, of consciousness and creativity, fundamental to the formation and rewriting of identity as both an individual and a political act”.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, Kagan’s exhibition “Out of Darkness” functions as a multidirectional case of memory. By presenting the history of the Holocaust in Lithuania through the story of one family, the artist not only invites discussion about the country’s complex history, but also encourages a dialogue between different memories. Her exhibition and the visitors’ reception of it demonstrate that the memory of the Holocaust can become a means of talking about the historical traumas of our time.

The observation that visitors to the exhibition associate the history of the Holocaust with contemporary geopolitical violence, especially the war in Ukraine, demonstrates that collective memory is not confined to a single historical event, but functions as an ongoing dialogue between the traumas of the past and the present, as Rothberg’s theory illustrates. The responses collected by Kagan from visitors to the exhibition confirm that the encounter with one historical trauma and atrocity can trigger associations with other historical events, thus reinforcing the relevance of historical memory in contemporary society. Feedback from visitors to the exhibition revealed that the design of Kagan’s “Out of Darkness” exhibition created a unique *emotional architecture* that encouraged visitors to make a personal connection with history, while at the same time fostering strong empathy and, most importantly, the ability

to make ethical comparisons with contemporary atrocities. The exhibition “Out of Darkness” has become a multidirectional site of remembrance that encourages critical thinking and greater social awareness. These associations experienced by visitors demonstrate the artist’s ability to create an invisible link between the past and the present, encouraging visitors to relate the historical trauma of the Holocaust to contemporary experiences. Kagan’s exhibition is also a clear example of post-memory. By carefully selecting historical facts, personal artefacts and fictional narratives, the artist not only reconstructs the past, but also actively involves the viewer in the “work of memory”. Visitors to the exhibition are not just passive observers, but active participants who create their own relationship with history. The performative nature of the exhibition challenges traditional modes of remembrance, emphasising that memory is not static, but is constantly created and re-created through storytelling and reception. By involving visitors in the narrative and performative actions of the exhibition, Kagan forces viewers to make a personal connection with history, breaking down the boundaries between past and present. This reconstruction of traumatic memory highlights the ethical responsibilities of memory, emphasising that memory is not just commemoration, but also critical engagement and moral responsibility. In addition, by exploring aspects of the Holocaust that are less known to the general public, the exhibition reveals the limits of public memory in Lithuania. The exhibition not only reconstructs the past but also forces viewers to confront historical silence and memory loss. Finally, the “Out of Darkness” exhibition encourages visitors to engage in the work of remembering and promotes the concept of memory not as a “passive legacy” but as active participation. The artist invites viewers to reflect on their role in shaping historical consciousness. As Erll and Rigney argue, memory is not a passive recollection, but an active and performative encounter with the past. The exhibition reminds us that history is not something that simply was, but something that continues to be created and recreated through the act of remembering. In this way, it presents remembrance not as

a static duty, but as an ongoing, evolving dialogue that is necessary to understand both the atrocities of the past and their echoes in the world today.

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Notes

¹ Roman Shvartsman, "Hitler wanted to kill me because I'm Jewish. Putin wants to kill me because I'm Ukrainian," *Kyiv Independent*, 26 02 2025, access 26 02 2025, <https://kyivindependent.com/hitler-wanted-to-kill-me-because-im-jewish-putin-wants-to-kill-me-because-im-ukrainian/>

² In preparing this manuscript, the author used DeepL Write (March 2025 version), an AI-assisted writing tool developed by DeepL GmbH (<https://www.deepl.com/write>) to help edit sentences in academic language. The edited content was reviewed and incorporated into the manuscript by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the content of this article.

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Daiva PRICE (CITVARIENĖ)

Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, Menų fakultetas, Kaunas, Lietuva

DIALOGIŠKA HOLOKAUSTO ATMINTIS: JENNY KAGAN PATYRIMINĖ PARODA KAUNE „IŠ TAMSOS“

Straipsnyje nagrinėjama Jenny Kagan interaktyvi paroda „Iš tamsos“, kurioje pasakojama jos tėvų, išgyvenusių Holokaustą Kaune, istorija. Kruopščiai parinktais istoriniais pasakojimais, asmeniniais daiktais ir scenografinėmis instaliacijomis J. Kagan sukuria erdvę, kurioje ne tik viskas prisimenama, bet ir aktyviai atkuriami prisiminimai.

Parodos atidarymas sukėlė įvairių lankytojų emocijų. Kai kurie Holokausto žiaurumus lygino su karo nusikaltimais Ukrainoje. Straipsnyje siekiama ištirti veiksnius, kurie paskatino parodos lankytojus susieti Holokausto atminimą su šiuolaikinio pasaulio žiaurumais. Tyrimas parodė, kad lankytojų emocinę reakciją į parodą paskatino jos architektūra. Menininkės kuriama emocinė architektūra susieja performatyvius elementus su asmenine pasakojimo forma, taip sukelia gili emocinė lankytojų reakcija, skatinanti stiprią empatiją ir gebėjimą daryti etines paraleles su šiuolaikinėmis patirtimis.

Straipsnyje teigiama, kad performatyvus parodos pobūdis kartu su intymia ir gilia asmenine pasakojimo forma sukėlė daugiakryptę atminties aktyvumą. Čia remiamasi Michael Rothberg, Marianne Hirsch, Astrid Erll ir kitų šio srities mokslininkų teorinėmis prielaidomis. Šis teorinis pagrindas padeda giliau suprasti, kaip parodoje sugretinami Holokausto pasakojimai su šiuolaikiniu geopolitiniu smurtu, ypač karu Ukrainoje. Sugretinimas skatina besivystantį dialogą tarp istorinių traumų, taip prisidedant prie subtilesnio ir išsamesnio istorijos ir šiuolaikinių geopolitinių realiųjų sąveikos supratimo.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Holokausto vaizdavimas, trauma, postatmintis, daugiakryptė atmintis, transkultūrinė atmintis, Rusijos karas prieš Ukrainą.

Gauta 2025-03-13

Parengta spaudai 2025-05-28

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