

Art in America

NOVEMBER 1999

PAT STEIR

DIEGO
RIVERA

PATRICK
CAULFIELD

GRACIELA
ITURBIDE

MIAMI REPORT



\$5.00 USA

\$7.00 CAN £3.50 UK

PHOTOGRAPHY

Between Horror and Hope

In a traveling exhibition now on view at the Miami Art Museum, eight artists respond to documentary images in the archive of a global humanitarian organization.

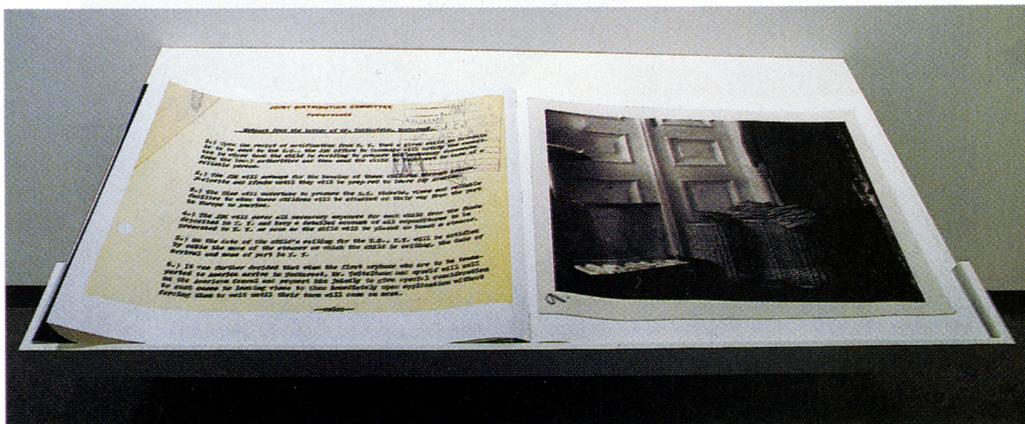
BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY

In recent years, artists have frequently put history under scrutiny—deconstructing its unstated biases, revealing its collusion with power, excavating forgotten figures and events. In these investigations they typically work from an encounter with the historical record as a finished product, unraveling it so as to reveal its flaws and loose ends.

The participants in “To the Rescue: Eight Artists in an Archive,” an exhibition at New York’s International Center of Photography organized by independent curators Marvin Heiferman and Carole Kismaric, faced a very different proposition. They were asked to conceive art projects responding to the more than 50,000 photographs in the archive of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC)—images gathered over 84 years in the course of the organization’s global relief efforts. Instead of a neatly organized narrative, they were confronted with the raw materials from which a history might be constructed. The ways in which they shaped their projects brought out very different aspects of the archive, while helping to illuminate the differences between art and history.

Founded in 1914 to send aid to starving Jews in Palestine, the JDC subsequently played an active role in saving Jews from the Holocaust, helped with post-World War II resettlement and provided relief to Jews in the Soviet Union. In the past two decades it has assisted refugees fleeing such trouble spots as Iran, Bosnia, Albania and Ethiopia.

The work of the JDC has spanned two world wars, the Cold War and the eruption of ethnic hostilities in many parts of the world, but the archive focuses less on such conflicts themselves than on documenting efforts to rescue and relocate their victims. It con-



Gilles Peress: *A Few Things My Father Never Told Me . . .* (detail), 1998-99, three albums, digital printing with archival paper and inks, each 38 by 32 inches (closed); in “To the Rescue: Eight Artists in an Archive” at the International Center of Photography, New York. Photo David J. Spear. Photos this article courtesy International Center of Photography.

tains moving, uplifting pictures of Holocaust and disaster survivors, life in resettlement camps and the distribution of food and clothing by JDC volunteers. However, the archive is short on the kinds of searing images of unfolding tragedy which might be more useful to artists searching for ways to dramatize history. The project’s participants got around this limitation by various means, in some cases by supplementing the archive with outside images, in others by manipulating the photographs to amplify their emotional power.

“To the Rescue” was an unusual undertaking for ICP, whose exhibitions usually concentrate on photography. Although in this case the artists’ projects were inspired by photographs, many of the participants worked in other mediums. Thus the show contained paintings, installations and sculptures as well as photography and video. The works were displayed throughout the lower level and ground floor of ICP’s midtown space, and were interspersed with forestlike stands of photographs showing the faces of individuals from many nations who have been aided by the JDC. Upstairs and downstairs, one could also linger by video monitors that played sequences of still photographs from the JDC archives. Meanwhile, each artist was represented in a separate space containing

three elements: a wall text introducing the artist and his or her project, a table scattered with the artist’s working materials—often individual photographs or written documents—and finally the project itself, set off in a small room.

Only Gilles Peress used the archive as a historian might, to fashion a representation of events in a way that illuminates the underlying forces which shaped them. An award-winning Magnum photojournalist, Peress in his work *A Few Things My Father Never Told Me . . .* set out to examine the portents of the tragic denouement of the Nazi campaign against the Jews. In three large albums put together like giant scrapbooks, Peress gathered reproductions of selected photographs, letters and official documents donated to the archive by families and individuals from 1914 to 1947. Often the historical material is accompanied by literary excerpts—highlighted pages from Bernard Malamud’s novel *The Fixer* are prominently featured—which shed light on the psychological and social origins of anti-Semitism.

Featured in Peress’s albums are images of the victims of pogroms in Poland and Russia, and of burned buildings in the Jewish ghettos of Eastern Europe between the wars; there are also official papers concerning the expatriation of war orphans and evidence of the anti-Semitic propaganda that proliferated throughout Germany as the Nazis consolidated their power in the 1930s. There are hopeful images as well; one page contains a blow-up of the \$1,200 check which helped to launch the JDC. In general, however, the mood is somber. Turning the album pages, the viewer experiences the historical tensions as they build toward the ultimate, offstage horror of the Final Solution. In his thought-



Still from Alan Berliner’s installation *Gathering Stones* (detail), 1999, video projection, gravel, black and white stones, 8½ by 22 feet.

Put into play in a variety of art works, the JDC archive photos take on multiple meanings. The abstract forces of history are reconfigured in ways that touch the imagination.

ful introduction, Peress notes the “curse of history”: although forgetting may lead to repetition of history’s catastrophes, remembering can equally incite survivors to unending animosities.

Departing from the elegiac tone which pervades most of the installations, Pepón Osorio dared to adopt a playful, even joyous approach. Taking as his cue the hopeful nature of the JDC’s mission, he used the metaphor of magic to celebrate the organization’s saving work. For *The Act of No Return* he inserted photographs from the archive into an elaborate theatrical tableau of Victorian tables and red velvet drapes meant to suggest a magician’s stage set. The photographs, which depict scenes of children playing in resettlement camps and refugees celebrating Rosh Hashanah, could be variously glimpsed within glass globes, on the backs of playing cards or beneath a magnifying glass. Small plastic magician dolls preside over tiny video monitors which show real prestidigitators performing tricks. These video clips generally culminate in the “magical” appearance or disappearance of visual details from the photographs. In turning away from the grim realities evoked by the other artists, Osorio’s upbeat work redirects attention to the actual fruits of the JDC’s operations.

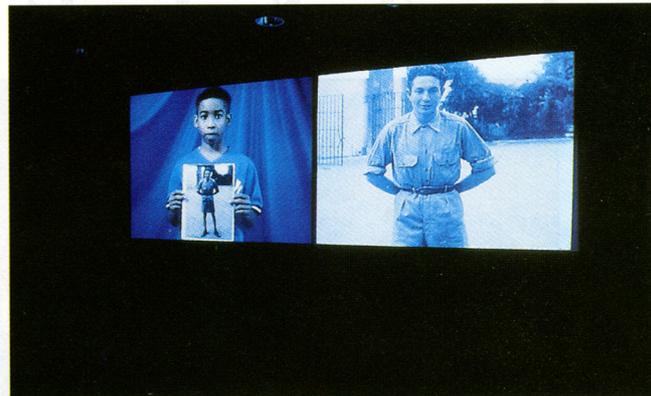
By contrast, several artists used the archive as a starting point for explorations of issues only tangentially related to the program of the JDC. Leon Golub wanted to foreground the resistance activities of Jewish partisans in Eastern Europe and France as a way to counter the idea that Jews passively accepted their fate. As this is not a story that the JDC archive tells, he turned largely to documentary photographs from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial

Museum. Golub’s installation *Partisans* consists of images of armed Jewish fighters transferred onto transparent acetate sheets and hung around his space at ICP.

Similarly, Magdalena Abakanowicz used the archive mainly as a reference point to underscore her longtime artistic concern with dehumanization and loss. She presented two sets of her signature stiffened burlap sculptural figures, *Infantes* (1992) and *Crowd IV* (1989-90), standing in mute rows, and played these works against a suggestive group of JDC archival images of crowds of people, birds and chickens on a resettlement farm. Terry Winters, meanwhile, raised the issue of abstraction’s potential for political commentary with a series of nine paintings, “Scattering Conditions,” inspired by the JDC’s elaborate network of relief operations. His delicate filigrees of grids, small circles and sweeping lines—apparently meant to suggest organizational diagrams—make for satisfying paintings but seem unlikely to convey any social content when removed from this context.

More interesting for the purposes of this exhibition were the works by artists who actively engaged the archival images. Filmmaker Alan Berliner was concerned with humanizing history, and he did so in *Gathering Stones*, a meditative installation which centers on the individual faces preserved in the archive’s photographs. In a darkened room, a bed of gravel serves as the ground for projections of the faces of men, women and children who seem to stare back at the viewer. Images succeed one another in extremely slow dissolves which suggest the painful process by which memories are dredged up from the distant past. This quality is heightened by another device. Berliner set a pile of larger stones off to the side, noting in an accompanying text the allusion to the Jewish tradition of marking graves with stones. Viewers are directed to lay these irregular stones on the gravel bed, “beneath” the projected images, in an act of commemoration. As the irregular stones pile up, the projected images became harder to read, serving as a further reminder of the difficulties that accompany efforts to maintain a connection to the past.

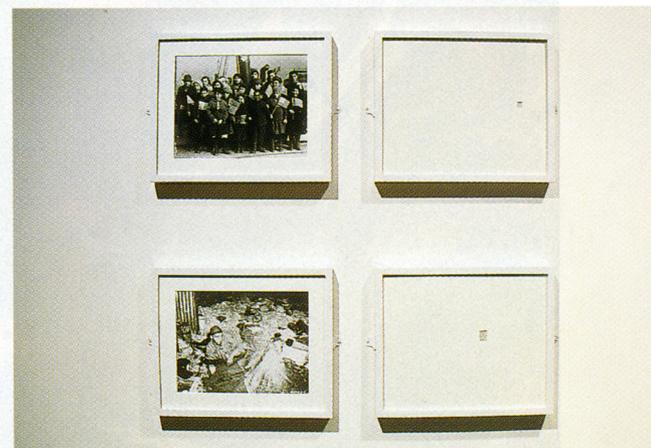
Fred Wilson was preoccupied by the idea of the necessarily incomplete story that any single photograph tells. His installation, *H R R R and H P E*, is divided into two parts. The first is both simple and visually effective. He presents two archival photographs, each with all but a small portion of the image masked off; he then shows both photos in their entirety. The masked portions frame a pair of details which appear nearly identical: a rectangle of undulating stripes.



View of Wendy Ewald’s untitled video projection, 1998-99, dimensions variable. Photo David J. Spear.



Pepón Osorio’s installation *The Act of No Return*, 1999, video, photographs, Victorian-style furniture, magnifying lenses, glass globes. Photo Adam Eidelberg.



Partial view of Fred Wilson’s *H R R R and H P E* installation, 1998-99, framed and matted photographs, each 10 by 12 inches. Photo Adam Eidelberg.



View of Leon Golub’s *Partisans* installation, 1999, Cibachrome and Duraclear panels, dimensions variable. Photo David J. Spear.

Only the complete photographs reveal how different the sources really were: one is a detail of an American flag held by a smiling refugee child, the other a piece of the striped uniform of a concentration camp prisoner. Thus Wilson elegantly demonstrates how deceptive fragmentary information can be.

The second part of his project consists of a set of photographs masked to frame tiny, enigmatic details. Employing Roland Barthes’s notion of the

punctum—that riveting but often secondary detail which lends a photograph its fascination—Wilson offers viewers unassimilable visual fragments: a hand on a rail, a few wisps of clouds. An extension of Wilson's continuing interest in the way that history is framed in the ordinary museum context, this work is less about the meaning of individual photographs than about how meaning is (or is not) imaginatively teased from the inevitably incomplete contents of an archive.

Finally, Wendy Ewald chose to explore the way that historical photographs can be used as educational tools. An artist who regularly collaborates with children and families, Ewald worked with two

Terry Winters: Scattering Conditions, 1-9, 1998, charcoal, graphite, gouache, acrylic and casein on paper, each approx. 44 by 30 1/2 inches. Photos this page David J. Spear.



classes in recently integrated grammar schools in Durham, N.C. Her initial survey of the students revealed an abysmal ignorance of the history of World War II. In written compositions which were incorporated into this piece, students reported that Nazis were Indians, that they practiced a distinctive religion and that Jews were persecuted Catholics. To spark an interest in what seemed to the children to be a distant past, she distributed case histories and photographs from the archives, asking each child to assume the identity of one of JDC's child refugees from the Second World War. She also asked the students to imagine themselves as children of Nazi sympathizers.

The resulting untitled work consists of videos of the children talking about their assumed personae. Inevitably, they draw connections between the Holocaust and America's racial strife, and one boy was even moved to write a rap lyric about the evils of the Nazis. The videotaped performances are intriguing, recalling at times Gillian Wearing's videos which put children's words into adult mouths. Ewald's work comes closest to fulfilling the JDC's hopes in commissioning this exhibition: to kindle an awareness of history among younger Americans.

In the end, the exhibition's title, "To the Rescue," describes not just the mission of the JDC but also the revitalization of the photographs themselves. Put into play in a variety of narratives and contexts, only a few of which are strictly historical, the images take on multiple meanings. Often these are probably far from the photographers' original intentions, yet they serve in different ways to make history more palpable. In



Figures from Magdalena Abakanowicz's Infantes, 1992, and Crowd IV, 1989-90, burlap and resin, each 55 1/2 inches high and 68 7/8 inches high respectively; installed with the two groups interspersed.

the most successful projects, history regains a human face, and its abstract forces are reconfigured in a way that touches the imagination. □

"To the Rescue: Eight Artists in an Archive" was curated by Marvin Heiferman and Carole Kismaric. The show opened at the International Center of Photography, New York City [Feb. 12-May 16], and is now on view at the Miami Art Museum [Sept. 15-Nov. 28]. It is slated to appear next year at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston [Oct. 7-Dec. 3, 2000]. A 96-page catalogue accompanies the exhibition.

Author: Eleanor Heartney is a freelance critic who lives in New York.