

Silence and Forgetting (1)

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When Salomea Rahel Ochs used the terms “begreifen”, “verstehen” and “beschreiben”, in a letter she wrote to loved ones shortly before her death, they relate to something (an event) she felt neither she; nor her loved ones; nor any “one” in general could apprehend, conceive, or describe. These agonies (of emotion and thought, description and representation) did not stop her from giving testimony.

The text begins and falters, restarts and falters again repeatedly. But continues on, despite her belief that – even if she wrote pages and pages more – her loved ones could not understand. Salomea Ochs was murdered, probably in a death camp. Jean Améry, an Austrian philosopher and writer of Jewish descent, survived three camps. He met death by his own hand in 1978 after publishing his testimony, “Beyond Guilt and Atonement”, translated as *At the Mind's Limits*.¹

Salomea Ochs' letter is now here at the St Paul's Gallery, in Christine Bernd's *The Letter of the Jewish Woman*.

“Representation”, writes French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, “is a presence that is presented, exposed, or exhibited”.² The letter is exhibited, but it can remain unseen unless it is actively apprehended. Absence, here, is not about the thing (the letter) but of sense itself. A gap forms around it, in a slow and tedious presentation of facts and events that circles around the letter's relationship with present-day Germany.

But what is its relationship with us? Do we need to know all the facts to understand, to conceive? Perhaps not, but perhaps something as extraordinary as the Shoa, or Holocaust, can only be produced as truth by working around a gap in knowledge (and to describe or apprehend that gap, perhaps we need to note ‘facts’). For Alain Badiou, another French philosopher, it is precisely not the repetition of knowledge that produces truth, but an interrupting and undecidable event. Someone also needs to take a wager, recognise the event – and be faithful to it.³ Central to this idea is the notion of productivity: the event produces the subject. The subject, in its turn, produces truth through fidelity to the event. Badiou's notion of the *unnameable* resonates with Nancy's *absence*, as absence of sense.⁴ If the real produces trauma, however, we are forced to repeat. And try to give it a name. However much we are doomed to fail.

In Christine Bernd's work, which circumscribes rather than describes, signification works around the absence of the thing-itself. The letter is only a starting point, not fully necessary, which reaches up from the past into the present. The concern is with the consequences of the letter.

Could we perform a similar move, geographically and temporarily? What would happen?

Last week, here at the gallery, Christine Bernd began her talk “When does silence take over?” with researcher and scholar Paul Hilberg's assertion that “the Holocaust is a family story in Germany”. She showed beginnings of a new work, involving the life and death of a friend, who was afflicted by a silence produced by a different inability to comprehend and re-present.⁵ Christine Bernd noted that German attitudes regarding their collective Nazi past, in the 1950-60s, relied on a polarisation between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Germans, which served to attenuate and manage national and individual conscience.

Right from the beginning, I want to add, there was also denial. Hans Massaquoi, ex-editor of the Afro-American magazine *Ebony*, grew up black in Nazi Germany. In a 2000 interview about his book “Neger, Neger, Schornsteinfeger”,⁶ he recounted how he overheard a couple's conversation in Hamburg, in the early 1950s. As I recall, he heard one say to the other: “All that talk about the Holocaust is enough now. It is time for Germans to move on”.

Christine Bernd described German ‘normalization’, from the 1980s, as frequently directing attention, through contextualization, to other aspects of the Third Reich; or as elaborating mitigating circumstances. Following German ‘re-unification’, the latest phase of normalization involves, in Christine's view, the Shoah's absorption into products of the culture industries: thus Hitler is, for instance, portrayed as a mere lunatic in the 2004 German film *The Downfall*. People who knew him closely come across as kind; and those who resisted him as admirable. In another German film of the same year, *Alles auf Zucker*, a Jewish sense of humour seemed to her to be the same as jokes about Jews. And thus, Christine proposed, Germans get to know their past through empathy and without feelings of guilt. Representations of the real produce sentimental fantasies that only fleetingly disturb a widespread indifference vis à vis the trauma of the real.

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In 1982, when I left Germany for New Zealand, ‘normalization’ was only just beginning. Nazi Germany's history had indeed been a family history for me. And, at the end of the 1960s, I had watched my class mates' questions, as they tried to break their parents' silence, placing their families under enormous strain. My generation discovered that most of our fathers and mothers, grandmothers and grandfathers, had not only remained silent under the Nazis – but also afterwards. And so did some leading politicians of the day – they had been more involved, and knew more, than they were willing to admit.

Martin Niemöller, one of the leaders of the Confessing Church in the 1930s, at least admitted in 1945:

When the Nazis came for the communists,
I remained silent;
I was not a communist.

When they locked up the social democrats,
I remained silent;
I was not a social democrat.

When they came for the trade unionists,
I did not speak out;
I was not a trade unionist.

When they came for the Jews,
I did not speak out;
I was not a Jew.

When they came for me,
there was no one left to speak out.⁷

...

What had I read about New Zealand, before I arrived in 1982, suggested that it had the “best race relations in the world”.⁸ Very soon, however, I started to question this view. For a year or so, the only Māori I saw were either in the ditches on the side of the road, or at the back of the bus on my way home to Epsom. I never met any in social situations, such as dinner invitations or parties. What I observed on such occasions, whenever the colonial past came up, seemed like a guilt and denial regarding Māori, by Pākehā, that was similar to the guilt and denial I had experienced in Germany towards Jews. My questions were often met with platitudes, evasiveness and discomfort, not unlike to what I had experienced growing up in Germany.

Māori art was in museums, not in galleries, and Pākehā would either ignore it, or take connoisseur attitudes that failed to convince me. Te Reo Māori was considered a dying language. New Zealand, or at least Auckland as I first experienced it, was surprisingly segregated and often resembled an Apartheid society. Hardly anyone around me had Māori friends or even acquaintances. This was, for many reasons, to be expected in Epsom. It was more surprising in Grey Lynn, where I lived later.

I felt extremely uncomfortable about this reality and alienated from mainstream Pākehā culture, not only because I disagreed with what I observed – that I found the racism I encountered politically and emotionally hard to take. Marrying a man of Ngati Porou and German ancestry in 1984 hugely changed my life. While, until then, my objections were largely from an outsider’s position, I now became personally embroiled in the hurtful divide within New Zealand, and had to learn to deal with it. My husband’s German ancestry was ironically Jewish, and so, when we went to Germany in 1985 to live there together, we experienced a complex mixture: of anti- and philo-Semitism, of desire for the exotic paired with straightforward racism. We both had to live through a lot of turmoil before we learned to live with that, in turn.

Back in Aotearoa, in 1992, we found a changed situation. Previously blatant racism had diminished considerably, and I met more Pākehā who openly expressed their dissent with institutional and personal discrimination against Māori. When our marriage ended in 2002, I found myself in a predominantly Pākehā environment, for the first time in a long time. At first, I noted a huge relief: mainstream life was much easier. But soon, this feeling was replaced by a growing awareness that something was missing. The normality of daily interaction with Māori friends and family had felt like a living Treaty partnership, a partnership built on mutual respect and understanding – despite, and including, sometimes piercing arguments.

Without that everyday personal contact with Māori, I became more aware of how this partnership is not fully functional, recognised and appreciated by New Zealand society as a whole. There is an absence, a gap ... which is, again but in a different way, about the non-representation of the real – whether through inability, unwillingness or injunction. At my workplace, very few of the debates and negotiations I was used to take place. There aren’t many people to have those debates with. Our student population represents not even New Zealand’s demographics, let alone Auckland’s. It is far from what one would normally understand as a partnership. And yet, working in my present context at AUT is in many ways better than much of what I experienced before.

But even here, decisions are often made by Pākehā for Māori – in the belief that they know what is good for them. We still have a long way to go before institutions such as this University could represent some of the real in New Zealand. And even further to go before the general population comes to terms with some of the more difficult and painful moments in New Zealand history. Right now, the gap around the real is often prematurely closed by one party’s set of representations. Most people seem to think this is normal. Not surprisingly, perhaps, given that this has been the case for more than a hundred years.

But there is a history that would indicate it is not normal. A history that some would like to forget and move on from, like the couple Massaquoi overheard in Hamburg in the 1950s. A history that is continued, in Germany, when a young man visiting Christine Bernd’s exhibition generally liked it, but did not want to read the letter. Not, he said, because he was scared of its

content. No, he thought that he knew it all already. By growing up with this never-ending feeling of guilt. There should be an end to this now, he thought.

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In 2000, in a speech about post-colonial stress to a group of psychologists, Tariana Turia drew a parallel between the Holocaust in Germany and holocausts suffered by indigenous peoples like Māori.⁹ Turia's controversial use of language met with 'general disapproval', to say the least.¹⁰ In its extreme, a letter to the Editor (quoted in an *Insight* feature) appealed to the Prime Minister to close the gap "that sits below the nose" of Tariana Turia – to silence her.¹¹ Taranaki Māori's brutality in the Chathams, known at the time and tolerated by the Pākehā, was cited to demonstrate that Māori are no innocent victims.¹² But nothing changes the fact that, when Parihaka was invaded on 5 November 1881, there was no resistance. Te Whiti and Tohu had inspired an imaginative politics of non-violent resistance all through.

On the side of the colonial troupes, Major Atkinson was reported in the 7 June 1879 *Taranaki Herald* as hoping that, "if war did come, the natives would be exterminated".¹³ A Taranaki newspaper editor considered the situation "one of the greatest blessings New Zealand ever experienced, for without doubt it will be a war of extermination ... the death-blow to the Māori race".¹⁴ Holocaust or not, what happened in Taranaki was clearly in breach of the Treaty of Waitangi and only technically legalised by hastily fabricated laws.¹⁵ Legal matters are for tribunals and courts to deal with – responsibility and guilt, as Mark Jackson writes in the catalogue to this exhibition, "are outside of the law".

In such contexts, matters are rarely black or white, good or bad – Germans still have to come to terms with this ambiguity. Niemöller, the writer of the poem I read out before, was an anti-Semite until the end of the war. He proffered his active support, "in any capacity", to the Nazis as late as September 1939.¹⁶ On the other hand, many nameless Germans risked their lives to prevent as much as they could of the Holocaust. Similarly, there have been, from the beginning, Pākehā in New Zealand who resisted the dominant order and remained sensitive to a real other than their own, as well as its representations.

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That Māori have their own historical responsibilities to consider is also an aspect of working through New Zealand history. On the other hand, it is still an attractive – if ruinous – option for Pākehā to search in Māori history for faults. If this search for "a truth" in colonial history serves only to legitimise their own short-fallings, then it will only prolong silence about history's impact on our present. For the recent present-past, one only has to think of the months of news reporting on Tuku's underpants. Such national pastimes may serve a political purpose: to repress discussion and thought about how one participates, as a resident in New Zealand, and as a citizen and person, in the consequences of historical injustices that still remain unresolved. Most of us know at least some of these consequences, and many would prefer to forget. And thus silence aids forgetting.

We remain silent, we do not talk about 'it', or only behind closed doors with those whom we know to more or less agree with us. And when others want to talk, openly, they are frequently embarrassed or ridiculed – and so they may shut up, too.

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While there has been much change since the early eighties, New Zealand family histories today can still mean that Pākehā may discover, only after the death of a mother or aunt (for those are the ones who seem to leave behind such information in their diaries), that they have Māori ancestry. Often they search, for years and in vain, for information about their ancestors. A fate they share with many urban Māori. This is one way in which individuals and society pay for such silence, be it caused by inability, unwillingness or injunction. Failure to ask important questions about ourselves and our environment, even in our own families, is formative of our sense of self, of our consciousness – and perhaps as much for our unconscious. Social action then colludes with the symbolic Other, producing trauma, ideology, fantasy, or silence – which, in turn, produce their own conditions through repetition.

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In Christine Bernd's narration of a German family history, it is clear how the consequences of Nazi crimes play themselves out and are transmitted over generations. The story ends with the illness and death of Gunhild Korfes, in whose estate Christine found Salomea Ochs' letter. No one will ever know how much Gunhild's illness was related to her family's silent agreement to remain silent. But it demonstrates how the real of the German past, which still impacts on the present, is represented in ways that merely repeat versions of an unchanged real.

Silence is also a failed representation, and thereby prevents the possibility of a healing through changing the ways in which the real is apprehended and represented.

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Last week in New Zealand, Crown Counsellor Brendon Brown met with designers to consult about Cultural and Intellectual Property aspects of the Wai262 Waitangi Tribunal Claim. Hearings will resume in August, with a 21 - 25 August hearing in Auckland. If we were asked to offer expert advice – what would enable us to do so? What could our theories and practices, as artists, designers and educators, contribute to an informed and equitable hearing of these matters?

How often are we silent, how much do we forget?

How much do we participate in the healing of a real trauma through changing its representation?

...

To talk to you about this, like this, is still difficult. I had no idea what I got myself into when I accepted Leonhard Emmerling's invitation to give a talk that might connect the German theme with a New Zealand one. Thinking and writing this was a torture. For one does not just neutrally construct a bridge. Personal passion, hurt and disappointment, sometimes stood in the way of being able to talk to you. Not wanting to compare myself with Salomea Ochs in any other way, I still felt, after a while, that this was also about testimony. I knew I had to speak – but did not know how to. If, in the end, I can reach out to you tonight, it is only because I have friends who speak out – honestly and, at times, even mercilessly. You would not have wanted to listen to my first draft. What I can say to you tonight has been helped into a possibility of representation particularly by Lucy Holmes and Moana Nepia. I can speak also because I know that Natalie Robertson will pick up the threads in a moment.

I still live with my German history. Salomea Ochs' letter ends in defiance, with a call for action, for change. She asks for revenge.

When I first read this, I felt attacked, because of and despite myself. I was utterly confused.

That is part of the process: practically, it is often guilt that prevents the working through of painful issues.

My sense of guilt needs to be separated from her call for revenge. Then responsibility becomes possible.

References

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¹ Améry, 1986

² (Nancy, 2005: 36).

³ "Such a subject is constituted by an utterance in the form of a wager. This utterance is as follows: 'This event has taken place, it is something which I can neither evaluate, nor demonstrate, but to which I shall be faithful.' To begin with, a subject is what fixes an undecidable event, because he or she takes the chance of deciding upon it." (Badiou, 2003: 63)

For the importance of active or passive elements in the context of reception of images, see Susan Sontag (2002: 102): "People don't become inured to what they are shown. – if that is the right way to describe what happens – because of the *quantity* of images dumped on them. It is passivity that dulls feeling".

⁴ "How far does anticipating potency of generic infinity go? My answer is that there is *always*, in any situation, a real point that *resists* this potency. I call this point the *unnameable* of the situation. It is what, within the situation, never has a name in the eyes of truth. ... This term fixes the limit of the potency of a truth. The unnameable is what is excluded from having a proper name, and what is alone in such exclusion. The unnameable is then the proper of the proper, so singular in its singularity that it does not even tolerate having a proper name. The unnameable is the point where the situation in its most intimate being is submitted to thought; in the pure presence that no knowledge can circumscribe. The unnameable is something like the inexpressible *real* of everything a truth authorizes to be said" (Badiou, 2003: 66).

Similarly, for Nancy, representation can never be a pure or full presence, nor even the replacement of an original reality (2005: 33).

⁵ *Comprehend*: "1340, "to grasp with the mind," from L. *comprehendere* "to grasp, seize," from *com-* "completely" + *prehendere* "to catch hold of, seize" <http://www.etymonline.com/>.

Represent: "presentation of what does not amount to a presence, given and completed (or given completed) ... the bringing to presence of an intelligible reality (or form) by the formal mediation of a sensory reality" (Nancy, 2005: 33).

⁶ Massaquoi, 2000. The 1999 German title ("Neger, Neger, Schornsteinfeger!": meine Kindheit in Deutschland" literally translates as 'Nigger, Nigger, Chimney Sweep'. The book was also published, in 1999, as *Destined to witness: growing up black in Nazi Germany*.

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_they_came...

⁸ <http://www.teara.govt.nz/NewZealanders/NewZealandPeoples/TheNewZealanders/10/en>

⁹ <http://www.converge.org.nz/pma/tspeech.htm>. Turia stated that she did not wish not to enter the previous "our holocaust was worse than your holocaust debate", following Eddie Durie's 1996 description of the 1881 attack on Parihaka as a holocaust.

¹⁰ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taranaki>

However, "This Conference having substantial experience of the effects and processes of Imperialism and colonisation throughout Asia, Africa, the America's, Australia, Hawai'i, Greenland, Artic, Aotearoa, agree with the Waitangi Tribunal and the member of Parliament, Tariana Turia. ... The limited definition that Pākehā politicians and commentators place on the term 'holocaust' indicates a denial to face up to the injustice perpetrated on Indigenous Peoples by colonisation and therefore a reluctance to find meaningful long term solutions and remedies. Limiting definitions such as 'holocaust' is a manifestation of racism. Whether murder, slaughter and dispossession was achieved indiscriminately through a musket, cannon, sword, legislation or a gas chamber is irrelevant in defining the term 'holocaust'." Wellington 8 September 2000. Official Statement of the Indigenous Peoples Conference regarding 'holocaust' <http://www.converge.org.nz/pma/tstat.htm>

¹¹ *A Taranaki Holocaust?* Produced by Sue Ingram and presented by Chris Wikaira. [@4:07mins](http://www.radionz.co.nz/popular/treaty/events-1990s).

¹² *A Taranaki Holocaust?* The author of the letter assumed that Moriori killed by Ngati Mutunga and Ngati Tama invaders in the 1830s, an invasion that was not only tolerated but aided and abetted by Europeans (see <http://www.zealand.org.nz/history.htm>: "The Europeans did nothing."), "would not have minded the chance to have a bit of postcolonial depression".

¹³ (Scott, 1975: 56)

¹⁴ (Scott, 1975: 57) Others, more cultured, were prepared to wait for their natural extinction. (65)

¹⁵ <http://www.waitangi-tribunal.govt.nz/reports/viewchapter.asp?reportID=3FECC540-D049-4DE6-A7F0-C26BCCDAB345&chapter=11>

¹⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Niem%C3%B6ller