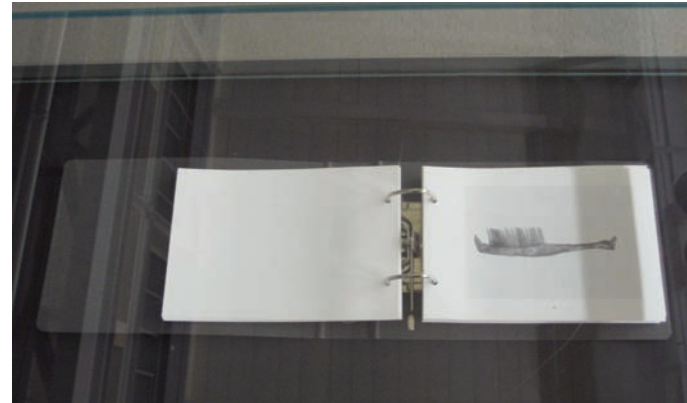


NAOMI TEREZA SALMON

ASSERVATE – EXHIBITS – AUSCHWITZ, BUCHENWALD,
YAD VASHEM
1995 | Exhibition catalogue, Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit

The book *Asservate* by Naomi Tereza Salmon contains photographic sequences of objects which are connected with the Holocaust. They are stored in Yad Vashem, the central memorial site in Israel, as well as in the Buchenwald Museum in Germany and the Auschwitz Memorial in Poland. This documentation is not concerned with the artistic interpretation of the objects, only with listing them. (F. E.)



NAOMI TEREZA SALMON

OPTIMISTIC-DISEASE-FACILITY

2003 | video | 53 min

The video *optimistic-disease-facility* followed Boris Lurie for a few days as he works and lives. It creates a radical, brusque and, at the same time, poetic cosmos. In New York, where Lurie lived inside his collages, the experience of the Nazi concentration camps permeates everything. Whether apartment, studio or laboratory, all of them reflect a very personal artistic view of a past which surrounds him in the present. The dialogue that developed between the artists covered a range of issues, mainly about the past but also about living in New York and the Palestinian issue. It also included discussions on Stalin and capitalism. The film, made as a low budget project, is a result of this encounter, laconically trying to capture the authentic situation. Because Lurie is the founder of the No!art movement, the film is inspired by its manifesto which takes an oppositional stance with regard to American mass culture and the commercialisation processes art is undergoing. It questions the mainstream and pop art “scene”, creating a genuine ideological and fundamentally aesthetic approach of its own.





NEW YORK

USA

The last station of the *On the Tectonics of History* tour opened on May 28th 2009 at the ISCP, a workspace and residency for artists and curators in New York. Because of the location we decided to create an exhibition that reflects the curatorial concept of the tour.

The idea behind this final presentation was to work only with reproductions and to put black and white reprints of artworks shown during the tour on the walls and to juxtapose them with colour-printed works by Boris Lurie, one of the founders of the NO!art movement in 1960s New York. The aim here was to enrich the European perspective resulting from previous venues with an art historical perspective on the New York art scene using works by an artist who survived the Shoah and whose uncompromising, radical confrontation with Nazi crimes and postwar consumer society have still not yet found their way into the canons of art history.

Andrea Domesle, Martin Krenn



The uncomfortable art of Boris Lurie (1924–2008)

by Matthias Reichelt

The collage is not just disturbing. It's as aggressive as a punch in the face for those who look at it. This was the effect in 1963 when Boris Lurie made it and montaged woman's body, from the back and dressed in sexy lingerie, into reminders of the dead inmates of the Buchenwald concentration camp: an image of corpses piled up on a railroad flatcar. A photo by Margaret Bourke-White. Even today this is one of the central works by Boris Lurie who was a survivor of the Shoah himself and it is an attack on tacit acquiescence of quiet commemoration and mourning in respect of the destruction of European Jewry. Lurie touched on various important questions and contexts at a time when nobody wanted to be reminded of them. The Cold War and the old anti-communist reflex had replaced the former alliance against Nazi Germany with a new Western alliance against the Soviet Union and its affiliated states. On the other hand the Jewish community in the US was still coping with anti-Semitism in a society dominated by WASPs. Jewish people wanted nothing more than to forget, especially if they themselves happened to be survivors who had escaped to the U.S. This might well have been true for Boris Lurie too except that he never felt like a victim.

Born in 1924 into a prosperous Jewish family in Leningrad, he was raised in Riga, Latvia. His father, Elja Lurje¹, worked there as a successful businessman trading with the young Soviet Union without any restrictions being imposed by the communists. After the invasion of Latvia by Nazi Germany the family was sent to a ghetto. His grandmother, mother Shaina and younger sister Josephina—Asya, his older sister happened to be in Italy and later escaped with her husband to the USA—stayed with the

majority in one ghetto while Boris and his father Elja were sent to a separate labour ghetto. Boris remembered that it was his mother who suggested they separate. “She thought we would have a better chance of survival”². Grandmother, mother and sister as well as Boris’ first love, Lyuba Treskunoff, were killed, along with 26.000 other Jews from Riga, during two big “military” operations in the Rumbula pine forest on two weekends in November and December of 1941.

In the end Elja and Boris Lurie were to survive several concentration camps such as Stutthof (Danzig) and a satellite camp of Buchenwald at Magdeburg where they were forced to work for the Polte company, a munitions factory. After being liberated by US troops Boris Lurie helped the CIC (Counter Intelligence Corps) to track down members of the SS.

Finally, in 1946, Elja and Boris Lurie followed Boris’ sister’s urgent call to leave Nazi-infected Germany for the United States. They settled in New York City. Boris Lurie began to express his traumatic experiences in figurative paintings and, in the Fifties, produced a series of large canvases, *Dismembered Women*. He started a cooperation with Sam Goodman (1919–1967) and Stanley Fisher (1926–1980) in 1959. The triumvirate took over the cooperative March Gallery on the Lower East Side and started to invite other artists to participate in collective shows.

According to Lurie³ this period of collective exhibitions with titles such as “Doom Show”, “Vulgar Show” or “Involvement Show” ended in 1964. They considered themselves “opposed to market-oriented art”⁴ and attacked “hypocritical intelligentsia, capitalist culture manipulation, consumerism, American and other molochs.”⁵ NO!art made all taboos such as Nazi atrocities, the dropping of atomic bombs in Japan, new colonialism—and not forgetting sex—the subject of group shows. At the same time they levelled charges at art, especially Pop art, for being nothing but a polished surface, apolitical and completely compatible with the

bourgeois art market. Among the contributing artists were names like Erró, Allan Kaprow, Yayoi Kusama and Jean-Jacques Lebel. Despite this Boris Lurie was the one who contributed the most radical works—the combination of collages and paintings he started in 1959. With the aggressive confrontation between atrocity photos and pornographic pictures “the artist crossed a line that placed his work outside our normal expectations of ‘victimhood’”, as Estera Milman remarked in a profound essay for the small catalogue accompanying the two major NO!art shows in the U.S.⁶

When Lurie juxtaposed a pin-up picture representing male heterosexual desires with the horrifying images of the starved and murdered corpses of concentration camp inmates, he was forcing the viewer into a position of double voyeurism, an enforced collusion with murderous terror as well as a pin-up. Both aspects of the images are exploited by the viewer for different reasons. There is the sexually desirous gaze and the sensationalist gaze which is focussed on the incredibly horrifying scene. Looking at both of these images is a kind of pornographic exploitation.⁷

Secondly, the images can be seen as the locus of a confrontation between two different politics of the body in which the first is accepted by the majority of the male population (at the very least) and the other rejected on the consensual basis of good taste. Nevertheless, the simple fact of visually exploiting the human body forms, of course, a partial parallel. The Nazis exploited the inmates of the concentration camps through forced labour right to the bitter end and a male-chauvinist society continues to exploit the female body for sexual satisfaction.

On a third level Boris Lurie is referring to mass media strategies in a capitalist system. Any news becomes a saleable commodity, serious facts and stories along with crude banality. Reports of Nazi atrocities followed by ads for cosmetics and textiles. This in fact took place when, for the first time, people in the US were confronted with pictorial material of concentration camps and the



RAILROAD COLLAGE
1963 | collage print | 64x45 cm



SHAME
1963 | painting, photography on canvas | 56x83 cm

industrialized murder of millions of people in *Life* and *Vogue*.⁸ In accord with Theodor W. Adorno's remarks on the collage system and the way of making art after Auschwitz, Lurie's work perfectly embodies the break in civilized culture making it as visible as possible.⁹

In another work entitled *Shame*, Lurie attached a rather small photo of two naked women trying to cover their vaginas to a red canvas. This is a reference to a famous photo taken by a Latvian death-squad policeman in Libau which shows naked women desperately trying to cover their breasts shortly before they were killed. For long time this photo was used in an uncritical way as proof of the Nazi atrocities but without reflecting on the fact that simply reproducing the picture, even in an antifascist context, degraded the victims once more. Boris Lurie always had several Xerox copies of this particular photo from Libau: "... in order to keep it in mind and to use it someday" as he said in a documentary.¹⁰ Boris Lurie did not accept restrictions on his use of the image because he wanted to focus on specific aspects of a civilized, but nevertheless perverted, society. Talking about the photo from Libau, he also noted that some people apparently find sexual satisfaction in torturing and watching images of torture, "this is quite common, as the pictures from Iraq have shown."¹¹

Norman L. Kleeblatt, concluding an essay dealing with Nazi imagery in recent art including Lurie's collages wrote: "... Lurie's simultaneous crossing of forbidden boundaries—ones that have to do with sexuality, voyeurism, and the Holocaust—creates an entanglement that few historians or curators have chosen to engage. Through non-engagement, however, we remain at an impasse, and serious issues proposed by this survivor are left unresolved."¹² There is nothing to add to this since there is still a refusal to deal with this difficult chapter of uncompromising art. To make compromises was not Lurie's business and it shouldn't be art's business either.

- 1 The original family name is Lurje but Boris changed it into Lurie.
- 2 Quote from *Shoah and Pin ups. The NO!-artist Boris Lurie*. A documentary by Reinhold Dettmer-Finke with the collaboration of Matthias Reichelt. 88 min., digital video, 2006. www.borislurie-derfilm.de
- 3 Boris Lurie: *SHIT NO!* (1970). In Boris Lurie, Seymour Krim. *NO!art. Pin-ups, Excrement, Protest, Jew-Art*. Köln: Edition Hundertmark, p.63
- 4 Boris Lurie: Introduction. Op. cit., p.13
- 5 Op. cit.
- 6 Estera Milman: *NO!art and the Aesthetics of Doom*. Chicago: Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University 2001, p.22. (Although Lurie and NO!art were frequently exhibited in small places in New York City like the Gertrude Stein Gallery, Clayton Patterson's "Outlaw Museum" and the Janos Gat Gallery, Lurie and the NO!art are still relatively unknown in the U.S.)
- 7 See Kathrin Hoffmann-Curtius: *Feminisierung des Faschismus*. In: Claudia Keller und literaturWERKstatt berlin (eds.): *Die Nacht hat zwölf Stunden, dann kommt der Tag. Antifaschismus. Geschichte und Neubewertung*. Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 1996. Page 63 ff.
- 8 The most famous images were taken by Margaret Bourke-White and Lee Miller.
- 9 See Inga Schwede: *NO!art – Kunst nach Auschwitz? Theodor W. Adornos Begriff der Montage und die Collagen des NO!art-Künstlers Boris Lurie*. Leipzig 2005. M.A. thesis at the Institut für Kulturwissenschaften an der Universität Leipzig
- 10 *Shoah and Pin ups. The NO!-artist Boris Lurie*. A documentary by Reinhold Dettmer-Finke with the collaboration of Matthias Reichelt. 88 min., Digital video, 2006. www.borislurie-derfilm.de
- 11 Op. cit.
- 12 Norman Kleeblatt: *Transgressive Images/Moral Ambiguity/Contemporary Art*. In: Norman Kleeblatt: *Mirroring Evil. Nazi Imagery/ Recent Art*. New York: The Jewish Museum and Rutgers University Press. p.111 (Lurie's work *Saturation Paintings, 1959–1964*, was reproduced in the catalogue as a historical reference but was not part of the show which focused on the younger generation.)