

# Islands of Affect

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This paper considers the use of various media technologies to capture and communicate the testimonies and experiences of Holocaust survivors so that they may remain accessible and remembered after they have died. In light of the turn towards “affect”<sup>1</sup> within the humanities and curatorial theory in the last two decades, the genre of the commemorative museum building and the virtual reality (VR) film exhibit are interrogated.

This paper has been motivated by a personal interest in a now obscured and forgotten familial history, and the recent memory loss of my father. It extends from my experience of the VR film “Walk with Me” at the Melbourne Holocaust Museum (MHM), viewed within the context of a new building designed by Kerstin Thompson Architects.

The film captures a journey with Holocaust survivor John (Szaja) Chaskiel in 2017 who was recorded using a 360-degree camera and drone. The film follows Chaskiel as he revisits his birthplace in Wielun, Poland, then the camps of Lodz, Auschwitz, and Buchenwald, before returning to his home in Melbourne. The MHM promises visitors that through this exhibit, “you’ll

see Szaja share his testimony at the sites of his incarceration and walk with him through the journey of his past, as though you’re right there beside him.” As borne out in my subsequent discussions with the VR film director and former museum curator who commissioned the work, great faith has been placed in the power of this medium to accurately conjure powerful, empathetic and physical experiences of lost places and spaces. The relatively recent uptake of VR (alongside video, holograms and AI augmented reality) as a form of interactive “witnessing” of Holocaust survivor testimonies can be viewed in terms of how the spectre of Holocaust concentration camps has been depicted historically and fictionally.

The “Walk with Me” exhibit is juxtaposed with the physical setting of the new MHM, which has been described by Kerstin Thompson as intentionally welcoming and open so as to perform as a place of calm refuge, comfort and light. The building, which has absorbed and transformed the ghost of the former building on the same site, has received critical, community and professional acclaim. It has taken a very different approach to other well-known Holocaust museums and memorials, such as the Jewish Museum in Berlin

1.

Lilian Chee, *Architecture and Affect: Precarious Spaces* (London, New York: Routledge, 2023).

2.

Daniel M. Abramson, “Architectural History after Sebald’s Austerlitz: A Squirrel’s Hoard, a Curved Road,” in *Writing Architectural History: Evidence and Narrative in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Aggregate Architectural Collective (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021).

(Libeskind), and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (Pei, Cobb and Freed), which have sought to evoke feelings of anxiety and portent through the creation of dark, unsettling and often disorienting spatial experiences.

This paper will attempt then, with perhaps foolhardy personal ambition, to juxtapose these “islands of affect” surrounding unfathomable Holocaust place memory: a building that contains and controls the shadows; and a virtual experience that shows them with intense verisimilitude. And by way of confounding conclusions – against the backdrop of the profoundly affective novel *Austerlitz* by W. G. Sebald, as analysed by the architectural historian Daniel Abramson – questions will be opened about the limits of representing and remembering the unimaginable.<sup>2</sup> What are the possible intersections of personal histories and the more professional “doing” of architectural history? Can there be productive inclusion of the subjective as a simmering motivation lurking underneath the affective? And when is it necessary to forget through incomplete amnesia?