

INSTITUTION Exploratorium

LOCATION San Francisco, California

Shedding Light on Shared Humanity

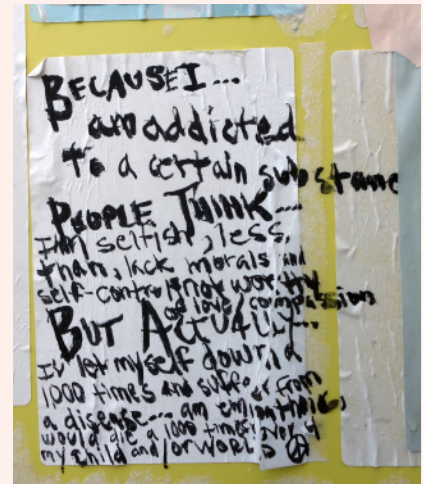


Fig.1. Bright-yellow pillars define and create spaces for *Middle Ground* exhibits.

In August 2019, a pop-up installation appeared outside San Francisco's Main Library in the city's Civic Center neighborhood. *Middle Ground: Reconsidering Ourselves and Others* consists of tall, bright-yellow pillars topped with an assortment of chairs; the pillars support an array of interactive experiences (fig. 1). Several invite or require collaboration with others. Some are playful: grasp a bronze hand, then join hands with other people, and danceable music

begins to play. Others may prompt sober reflection on how we think about and behave toward people we encounter in public spaces (figs. 2 & 3).

The installation, created by the Exploratorium, brings splashes of color and whimsy that transform a formerly austere concrete plaza. *Middle Ground* includes a small pop-up cafe and invites all passersby to linger for a few minutes, or longer. It feels generous (fig. 4).



Figs. 2 & 3. The exhibit includes a talk-back opportunity that invites passersby to share their unseen stories.

I encountered *Middle Ground* on an early summer evening after the neighborhood’s office workers had departed for the day. A handful of people, perhaps folks who live nearby, stopped to explore. A woman with two young children started the music playing, and they had an impromptu dance party for a few minutes. The kids moved on to an exhibit that looks like you’re playing tug-of-war.

The plaza is a crossroads where transit riders wait for their buses, museum- and symphony-goers hurry to and from their cultural experiences, and some of the city’s unhoused population seek services and shelter inside the library. I found myself appreciating how the exhibits brought warmth and welcome to a space where people might be confronted with hardship or feel suspicion directed toward

them. Seeing this social experiment in action gave me hope that it’s perhaps working even better than the designers and planning partners could have hoped.

Middle Ground is part of San Francisco’s Civic Center Commons initiative, described on the initiative’s website as “a collaborative effort to breathe new life into the City’s central civic spaces” where “diverse communities – from low-income Tenderloin families and unhoused adults, to technology employees and new residents, to visitors of cultural and civic institutions... may overlap in Civic Center public spaces, but they don’t necessarily connect.”

Tamara Schwarz, Director of Exhibit Development & Strategic Planning at the California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco



Fig. 4. Whimsical exhibits engage visitors in playful, social ways.

Auschwitz Unfathomable: Facing its Ideas, People, and Objects

“Our aim is to actually ask questions about ourselves. With this topic, it’s very easy to make people cry, but it’s more difficult to make people think and reflect.”

—Luis Ferreiro, Director of Musealia and Project Director

The exhibition *Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away.* is unique in its focus on one notorious concentration camp complex, unlike broader Holocaust exhibitions and museums or special exhibitions that focus on Jewish ghettos. At Auschwitz the Nazis murdered roughly one million Jews; 75,000 Poles; 21,000 Sinti and Roma; 14,000 Soviet war prisoners; and 15,000 other “undesirables” (including gay men, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the mentally ill).

This was the most horrific, organized, and systematic genocide Western humankind has ever experienced.

This exhibition stands out for its thoughtful presentation. Musealia, the for-profit Spanish exhibition firm that originated *Auschwitz*, understood the key factors that engage visitors and effectively combined compelling ideas, real people, and a mix of mundane and unique objects.

The main texts (bilingual) are thorough, well written, and amply illustrated with maps and

graphs. They avoid preaching or sweeping conclusions, and provide background on Judaism, origins of anti-Semitism, and Nazi ideology along with the chilling mechanics of the Third Reich’s “Final Solution” (fig. 1).

ANDREW J. PEKARIK

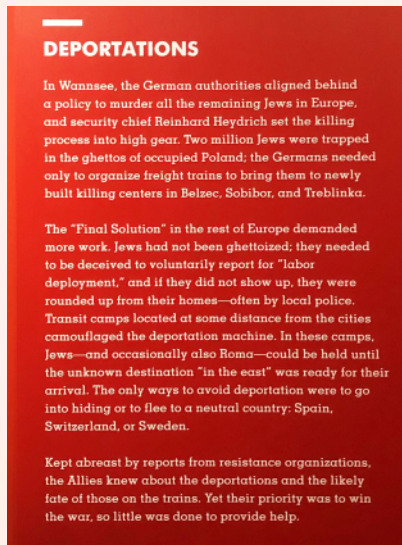


Fig. 1. Section and subsection panels are numbered and bilingual (English/Spanish). They range in length from 200 to 250 words. The panel in the figure succinctly describes the “deportations” and the implementation of the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question” planned at the Wannsee Conference, and the Allies’ knowledge of deportations and their inaction.

From the film vignettes at the exhibition entry, repeated at the end, *Auschwitz* is about people. It shows us Europe’s Jews, from secular urbanites to shtetl

Orthodox, as well as the Roma. First-person stories, diaries, letters, quotes, and video of elderly survivors accompany us throughout, as we learn the horrific fate of this diverse population (fig. 2).

With startling exceptions, its 700 objects are the stuff of everyday life – combs, dented cups, and bent forks. The exceptions, e.g., a medical experiments table, are given context. Also included are artifacts that depict the world of the perpetrators – the SS men who created and operated Auschwitz (fig. 3).

The layout, the use of color, and the large photographs and objects (e.g., fence posts, barracks) hint at surroundings. Large-screen videos, many with testimony from survivors, humanize the inhumane environments (fig. 4).

Just past the exit of *Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away.* is a window with a view over the water to Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty.

Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away. is installed on three floors of the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City. It is on view through August 30, 2020.

Zahava D. Doering, PhD, Senior Social Scientist, Thinc Design, New York City, New York

Fig. 2. Visitors enter through a hallway showing videos of life before the Holocaust. Displayed at the end of the entrance hall is a quote from Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi: “It happened, therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say. It can happen, and it can happen everywhere.”

MUSEUM OF JEWISH HERITAGE/JOHN HALPERN



Fig. 3. SS helmet owned and used by Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler (ca. 1933). Collection of the Museum of Jewish Heritage. Gift of David Dykaar in memory of (Corporal) Raymond W. Dykaar.



Fig. 4. Concrete posts that were once part of the fence of the Auschwitz camp (1940-45). These posts were covered in barbed and electrified wire, ensuring that no prisoner could escape.

COLLECTION OF THE AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU STATE MUSEUM, OŚWIĘCIM, POLAND. ©MUSEALIA



INSTITUTION Lower Ninth Ward Living Museum

LOCATION New Orleans, Louisiana

Emotionally Captivating Anti-Racist History



ANDREA JONES/@MUSEUMJONES

Fig. 1. The Lower Ninth Ward Living Museum.



Fig. 2. A painting on the museum's exterior. The dates on the foundation refer to three different devastating floods.

Hurricane Katrina, one of the most powerful Atlantic storms ever recorded, made landfall 45 miles southeast of New Orleans on August 29, 2005. It flooded 80 percent of the city in the course of 24 hours. Chaos erupted, as residents who had not evacuated sought refuge at such shelters of last resort as the Superdome, a sports stadium, where appalling conditions led to three deaths. On September 4, two unarmed African American civilians were shot by police as they fled the devastated Lower Ninth Ward – where storm surge had created the worst devastation – across the Danziger Bridge. Even knowing this history, nothing prepared me for the Lower Ninth Ward Living Museum (**fig. 1**).

The museum is a cottage in the historically Black Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans. Outside, artwork introduces stories told



Fig. 3. Gallery view of installed photographs and labels at the Lower Ninth Ward Living Museum.

inside (**fig. 2**). The physical center and the heart of the museum is a quiet, dark space. Visitors can sit and watch gripping video footage that brave neighbors gathered from the beginning of Katrina through its cataclysmic high-water mark. No sound or text punctuates the experience of long takes that allow us to think deeply about the citizen-journalists behind the lenses. We stand in their shoes.

Two rooms frame the event through the history of the Lower Ninth Ward, which has always borne the cost of producing the gleaming French Quarter and the riches of the city center. Powerful images and text (**fig. 3**) demonstrate how the community persevered through decades of discrimination and, as the final two rooms of the museum endeavor to show, it persevered in the face of the total ruin and displacement that Katrina meted out.

The exhibition ends with an exploration of the efforts to rebuild that are *still* underway these 14 years later. The exhibition asks visitors to consider: how can communities such as this survive? Why do Black communities find themselves, time and again, in mortal peril? The only answer the documentary journalism on view offers is racism. The history that this modest museum presents challenges every visitor to stop accepting racism as a fact of life, and it does so in a way that this visitor will remember forever.

Elena Gonzales, independent scholar and curator in the Chicago area, and author of *Exhibitions for Social Justice* (Routledge 2019)

Bringing Public Art into a Museum



JONATHAN DORADO

Fig. 1. Installation view, *JR: Chronicles*, Brooklyn Museum, October 4, 2019 to May 3, 2020.

“I own the largest gallery of the world – the walls of the city!” said French photographer and street artist JR. The soaring, 20,000-square-foot Great Hall at the Brooklyn Museum provides the perfect venue for his new piece, *The Chronicles of New York City* (fig. 1). Inspired by Diego Rivera’s murals, this digitally manipulated collage, installed as a decal, features photographs of more than 1,000 people integrated into a New York cityscape; an app enables visitors to hear a recording of each person in the mural.

The galleries surrounding this centerpiece show JR’s projects chronologically. The open, circular flow of the space allows visitors to explore freely, as if on a city street, as opposed to the typical “maze” of a museum exhibition.

Community engagement and conversations have been the focus and inspiration for JR’s work since 2000 when he found a camera (on display on a pedestal) in the Paris Metro. JR’s first major public project, in 2004, was called *Portrait of a Generation* in which he



Fig. 2. JR (French, born 1983). *28 Millimeters, Portrait d'une generation: Amad, Paris, Bastille*, 2004. Installation image. Wheat-pasted posters on building.

pasted close-up photographs of young people from Les Bosques, a housing project in the Paris suburbs, around the city center (fig. 2). JR addresses societal divisions head-on in works such as *Fact 2 Face* (2007) in which he pastes diptychs of Israelis and Palestinians who held the same job (teacher, athlete, etc.) on the wall that divided them, and 2017's *Kikito* (fig. 3), a monumental

photograph of a child peering over the wall dividing Mexico and the United States.

The visitor can hear JR's personal accounts through YouTube videos accessed via QR codes or URLs. Central to each of his pieces is the story behind it: the process of making it, installing it, and, perhaps most importantly, observing reactions, which are captured in

photographs and videos on display throughout the gallery. In JR's hands, these stories have the power to incite change.

Johanna Goldfeld, Principal,
Johanna Goldfeld Design



Fig 3. Installation view, *JR: Chronicles*.

Have you seen an interesting new exhibition lately - something that touched you, made you laugh, or moved you to action?

Consider writing about it for Exhibits Newsline! Entries should be brief (300 words max), breezy (tell what made it so great), and include three to four high-res images.

For more information, email: NAMENewsline@gmail.com.