The performativity of provocation: the case of Artur Zmijewski

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Abstract. Performativity occurs in, and on behalf of the present. This can be seen with special clarity in the speech act of provocation. In this article, the performative of provocation is analysed by focusing on two works by the Polish artist Artur Zmijewski: Berek (Game of Tag) (1999) and 80064 (2005). Both works deal with the Holocaust in provocative ways and were highly controversial when they were exhibited. In their problematic nature these works substantiate Slavoj Žižek’s paradoxical statement that a coherent, truthful account of the traumatic past belies its own truthfulness. A narrative of trauma cannot be a clear narrative. This requires a different artistic, semiotic posture: not representation but performativity, so that conventional prescriptive moral rules can be replaced by an effective, affect-based ethics. Zmijewski’s videos shake up the fixed notions of Nazi victims and Holocaust survivors. And that is the first necessary step towards opening up the debate to a series of questions about the role of Polish people in the Holocaust. The importance and even necessity of these questions is demonstrated by the recent legislation in Poland that outlaws blaming Poles for the crimes of the Holocaust.

Keywords. Artur Zmijewski • Holocaust representation • performativity • provocation

For decades now, we have learned the important distinction between constative and performative speech acts; the one that informs, tells, or represents, from the one that acts; that does what it says. John Austin’s philosophy of language from 1962, revised our conception of language, undermining the predominance of information. Jacques Derrida radicalized this view in 1988 with an emphasis on reiteration. And Judith Butler made this new foregrounding of performativity socially productive by arguing for its production of sex and gender, and the reality of wounding by hate speech (see Austin, 1975[1962]; Butler, 1990, 1993, 1997; Derrida, 1988). This is by now standard in interpretive practice. Strangely, however, in Holocaust-related art, that lesson still seems to have little effect. In this article I will argue what misunderstandings occur when in that field, we stick to an old, obsolete
view of language. The primary consequence is tense; for performativity is rigorously an act in the present.

The performative speech act that often overshoots its target is the one of provocation. First of all because such a speech act is not recognized as provocative: it is misunderstood as a constative speech act. But even acknowledged as performative, it is often not clear in what kind of situation or event the provocative speech act should result. When provocation concerns the Holocaust, the risk of what speech-act theory calls ‘infelicity’ is even bigger. In the case of the Holocaust a rather limited number of performatives are considered acceptable. Acceptable, because of a strong post-Holocaust morality, which stipulates what we should and shouldn’t do in relation to the Holocaust past and victims. The two performatives that are prescribed as morally responsible and necessary are those of teaching and commemoration. The performative of provocation is not focused on the ‘teachable’ and ‘commemorable’ past, but on the present situation that is being challenged, and the present second persons who are being addressed. This displacement from the Holocaust past to the present is then seen as disrespect to the Holocaust past and its victims because the conveyance of truthful accounts of that past is no longer the most important goal.

However, the stipulation of the performatives of teaching and commemorating, of what we should and shouldn’t do, is only productive to a limited degree. It is especially a problem when accounts of the Holocaust are represented by means of literary and artistic practices. In the case of Holocaust representation, truthfulness is usually seen as an important criterion because ‘to know what happened’ is an absolute precondition for political life in the present. That fact is proven by Holocaust denial as the most nefarious political practice we can imagine. But literary texts or artworks are usually not interested in teaching and commemorating the Holocaust, truthfully or not, although those performative speech acts can be part of literary and artistic projects. Their function tends to lie elsewhere. It is not the business of art and literature to represent what already occurred, to represent the truth of the Holocaust. Historical genres and discourses are much better equipped to represent the Holocaust as a history of events. The abundance of historical accounts of the Holocaust, of history books, documentaries, testimonies, witness accounts have inured the audiences. It is not just the abundance of historical accounts that is responsible for this effect, but more specifically the framing of these accounts by the morality that prescribes the right attitude towards the Holocaust. Instead of promoting the right moral attitude, art and literature set up conditions for relating to the events.

For, how to relate to these events that for many people are unimaginable: that is the problem. This is first of all the case for the survivors. Literary attempts to reproduce the facts about the Holocaust in a documentary way neutralize
the traumatic impact of the described events. As Slavoj Žižek has argued, the truth of the Holocaust can only be accepted in the guise of fiction. This is so because its truth is too traumatic to be confronted directly. Because of this mechanism, ‘the pleasure of aesthetic fiction about the Holocaust is not a simple escape, but a mode of coping with traumatic memory: it is a survival mechanism’ (Žižek, 2009: 142). And although the fiction of art and literature does not represent documentary truth, it can be completely truthful. As Žižek explains, what makes a narrative of trauma truthful is its factual unreliability, confusion, inconsistency. He even proposes the following paradox: ‘The witness who would be able to offer a clear narrative of his camp experiences would thereby disqualify himself.’ Factual deficiencies in the report of a traumatized subject signal that the reported content has contaminated the very form of reporting on it. Žižek’s conclusion is provocatively convincing:

The aesthetic lesson of this paradox is clear. The horror of the Holocaust cannot be represented; but this excess of represented content over its aesthetic representation has to infect the aesthetic form itself. What cannot be described should be inscribed into the aesthetic form as its uncanny distortion. (pp. 145–146)

But today, most Holocaust art and literature is no longer made by the survivors themselves. Later generations have problems of a different order to relate to the unimaginable events. They have this difficulty because the events continue to be constantly framed by a fixed morality that prescribes the right attitude to them. The facts are horrible, even unimaginable, which makes the problem of how to relate to them even more acute. The prescription of the right moral attitude has a counterproductive effect. It makes the events even more unimaginable.

There is, most importantly, a significant consequence for the social behaviour of later generations to the way they relate to the Holocaust. Instead of the right attitude, we, later generations, need affective investments in the Holocaust and an understanding of our affective investments because it is due to this understanding that we can be ethical instead of moral in our thinking; that is, actively doing, or thinking, what is right instead of following conventional prescriptions. According to Jill Bennett (2005: 15) it is precisely such an understanding that distinguishes ethical from moral art:

An ethics is enabled and invigorated by the capacity for transformation; that is precisely by not assuming that there is a given outside to thinking. A morality, on the other hand, operates within the bounds of a given set of conventions, within which social and political problems must be solved.

The given set of conventions of how to adopt the right attitude towards the Holocaust stifles an effective ethics; it results in a Holocaust morality,
or in the words of Benn Michaels (2015), ‘ethical kitsch’, the ultimate goal of a sincere, effective ethics concerns our social behaviour, behaviour which might substantiate the conventional slogan ‘never again’. This requires an affective effect in the present.

Probing an authentic ethics performatively

Some art and literature on the Holocaust does not obey uncritically the Holocaust etiquette, the commandments and taboos. Bypassing those conventions, such art is able to invigorate such a new, live ethics, especially as such art and literature succeed in establishing affective investments in the events of the Holocaust by later generations. To make this more concrete, I will discuss two works by the Polish artist Artur Zmijewski as successful attempts at establishing an ethical and affective relationship to the Holocaust. He is able to do that because he refrains from the fixed morality that prescribes the right attitude towards the Holocaust. Although his works have been extremely controversial, precisely those aspects that make them controversial are, I will argue, those that activate an affective investment in the Holocaust.

Zmijewski’s work can best be characterized by one of his own remarks about himself: ‘I film situations I have provoked and set in motion’ (Zmijewski, 2005: 85). This describes what most of his films have in common. The artist sets up conditions in which individual people play out a trajectory of proceedings. The trajectories set in motion are fuelled by curiosity and the desire to learn. This curiosity is enacted in the most radical way, for morality is suspended. This operating principle is inspired by the radical pedagogy of Zmijewski’s teacher at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, Professor Grzegorz Kowalski. This influential teacher trained an entire generation of prominent artists among whom were Katarzyna Kozyra, Pawel Althamer and also Artur Zmijewski.

Zmijewski’s artistic practice is the outcome of his theory of ‘the applied social arts’. He introduced this term as the title of a manifesto he wrote in 2007 and published in the Polish journal Krytyka Polityczna. This journal is published by a group of artists, philosophers and political activists. Zmijewski is a pivotal member of this group. His theory of the applied social arts addresses the following issues:

Does contemporary art have any visible social impact? Can the effects of an artist’s work be seen and verified? Does art have any political significance – besides serving as a whipping boy for various populists? Is it possible to engage in a discussion with art – and is it worth doing so? Most of all, why are questions of this kind viewed as a blow against the very essence of art? (Zmijewski, 2007: 6)
In posing these questions, Zmijewski intends to reorient the relationship between art and politics as performative rather than constative (representational) and as ‘away from being contradictory or mutually exclusive towards being complementary and reciprocal’ (Hlavajova, 2008: 21). The impact of art on society is crucial for him. He is well aware of the fact that provocation can be the royal road to having an impact. In his own words:

When, for instance, a radical cultural postulate expressed by an artist in the form of a visual action no longer antagonizes the public, does not evoke controversy, it means the message has become mainstream, entered into wide circulation, become part of elite knowledge, or even common knowledge.6

His provocations, instead, intend to disclose ‘that which is hidden’. His practice does not intend to inform, seduce or please the public.

**Exorcizing ghosts from a haunted house**

A prime example of Zmijewski’s artistic practice of knowledge production through provocation is his video *Berek* (Game of Tag), made in 1999. In this video we see a group of men and women, of different ages, play a kid’s game, namely the game of tag. They are all naked; they run around chasing each other, laughing a lot. Sometimes they play the game fast and furiously, sometimes slowly. It takes place in an enclosed concrete space, which looks like a basement. But at the end we learn that there were two locations; one was the basement of a private home, the other was the gas chamber of a former Nazi extermination camp. Which camp it is, is not specified.

The controversies to which his video has led suggest that Zmijewski has violated the morality that prescribes the right attitude towards the Holocaust. When in 2012 the film was part of the exhibition ‘Side by Side. Poland – Germany’, curated by Anda Rottenberg, the director of the Martin-Gropius Bau, Gereon Sievernich, felt he had to remove it from the show, after protests that blamed Zmijewski for not respecting the dignity of the victims of the Holocaust. The director had taken this decision after Hermann Simon, the director of the New Synagogue Berlin and the Centrum Judaicum Foundation, had sent him a letter condemning the video. In 2015 the video was displayed in an art gallery in Estonia. Again, protests from the Jewish community led to the removal of the video from the show. When the film was included in 2015 in the show ‘Poland – Israel – Germany: The Experience of Auschwitz’ organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Krakow, several Jewish groups and officials called on the museum to remove the video installation from the show. Again, they blamed Zmijewski for a lack of respect for the victims. Although this time, there were even international
protests, especially from Israel, the director of the museum, Maria Anna Potocka, decided not to remove it, but she made changes in the display of it. Zmijewski's video was now presented with a warning and shielded with added walls. She legitimized her decision to maintain the work by claiming that the intent of the exhibition was not to disrespect the memory of the Holocaust, but rather ‘to awaken the young generation’s empathy with the tragedy of the Holocaust by stirring their imagination’. In other words, to exert an effective ethical performativity.\(^7\)

Implicitly, the protests stipulate what the right attitude toward the Holocaust is, and who is in charge of implementing this right attitude. First of all, former gas chambers should be treated as monuments; they stand symbolically for the victims who died there. Therefore, former gas chambers can only be allowed to be used as places of commemoration. Second, because of the fact that the majority of victims were Jewish, the memory of the Holocaust is owned by the Jewish people. That is why most protests came from Jewish organizations. Third, victims of the Holocaust are the people who died in the Holocaust, people who survived although they were supposed to be caught and killed in the Holocaust, and the offspring of people who were killed or who survived the Holocaust. That is the reason why these organizations feel entitled to speak in the name of the murdered. This proprietary attitude strongly impedes the desired performativity that can make art socially activating.

Zmijewski clearly does not share these implications on which the right moral attitude is based, as we can see in his description of his video project:

In it a group of people play a kid’s game. They are naked, they run around, they laugh a lot. But they are also very serious. They know where they are – in the gas chamber of a former extermination camp. Berek is about a part of history that is treated as untouchable and about overly painful memories, when the official commemorations of this history are not enough. The murdered people are victims – but we, the living, are also victims. And as such we need a kind of treatment or therapy, so we can create a symbolic alternative; instead of dead bodies we can see laughter and life. Berek is about how we can engage with this brutal history and work with imposed memory. It’s possible to have active access to history, and to attempt to emancipate ourselves from the trauma.\(^8\)

This statement answers a number of questions implied in the protests against Zmijewski’s video. First of all, the category of victims is not restricted to the people who died in the Holocaust or who were meant to die there. Also, those who are ‘living’ after the Holocaust are in one way or another, victims of the Holocaust. One could ask oneself if this applies especially to those living in Poland, the country where the most notorious concentration camps of the Holocaust were located and where most of the victims of the Holocaust died.
Later generations in Poland are much more directly and intensely confronted with the legacies of the Holocaust than people in most other European countries, such as the Netherlands.

Secondly, those who came after, the living, do not have memories of the past of the Holocaust themselves; therefore, the memories they have, have been imposed on them. The memories do not come from within, but are internalized. Thirdly, because of the fact that those who are living also have to cope with a traumatic past, the official commemorations of the past of the Holocaust are not enough because they do not focus on the living but on the dead. The past has to be worked through: ‘We need a kind of therapy’, in order ‘to attempt to emancipate ourselves from the trauma.’ The therapy for the living is performed in the video; they, the living, play tag, ‘they are naked, they run around, they laugh a lot.’ The enacted situation should not be understood in terms of commemoration or a perverse violation of it, but in terms of therapy, in the sense of the psychoanalytic term ‘working through’. Working through is the task for the younger generations; it is what the artwork’s performativity provokes them to do. Clearly, ‘representation’ is the wrong category here. And ‘respect’ for the victims is not at issue. Activating the later audiences is the goal of the provocation.

The notion of therapy is foregrounded by the playing of a game. It makes clear that it is not ‘reality’ or a representation of it; the ontological world, into which the viewer is allowed, is different. The viewer is drawn into the imaginative world of play. This crucial element of play and imagination is also suggested by the location where the game playing takes place. The credits of the video begin with the following statement:

The film was shot in two different locations: in the basement of a private home and in a gas chamber of one of the former concentration camps.

It is, however, not specified in which concentration camp this gas chamber is located. In the many protests against Zmijewski’s video, the exact gas chamber is not identified either. The provocative statement about the location is puzzling in yet another respect. If the authenticity of the location, a real former gas chamber, is of any importance to Zmijewski’s provocative therapeutic project, why then is half of the video filmed in the basement of a private home? This is especially puzzling because of the fact that the basement of the private home and the so-called gas chamber of a former concentration camp are very similar. They are so similar that I only became aware of the fact that two locations had been used after having read the credits. It is less and less plausible that Zmijewski filmed his video in an actual Nazi extermination camp; he seems to have filmed it in a space intended to resemble one.
The juxtaposition of an ordinary basement and a fictional gas chamber introduces the ontological dimension of play and imagination in yet another way. It suggests imagining your own basement to be a gas chamber. And use it for something else, not for the enactment of death, but for the enactment of life: laugh and play; and laugh and play seriously. In Zmijewski’s video this playful therapy is an effective working through of the trauma of the living. The living re-appropriate the place where they are living, a place that is haunted by the spectre of the Holocaust. It is not too far-fetched to identify this imaginary location as Poland. This re-appropriation is necessary because one of the effects of official commemorations is the continuation of this haunting spectre. This spectral effect is due to the fact that the Holocaust is more readily identified with the location of Poland than with Germany as its agent.

Something should also be said about the nakedness of the people playing tag. Victims who were sent into actual gas chambers were also naked. Does this mean that the naked people playing tag ‘represent’ those who were killed in gas chambers? I do not think so, because in all other respects the people playing tag look completely different. Their behaviour is the opposite of what we imagine the behaviour of people dying in gas chambers has been. In Zmijewski’s work, nakedness and playfulness are intimately related, not only in Berek, but also in some of his other videos in which his actors are naked – for example, Oko za Oko (An Eye for an Eye), from 1998. The meaning of nakedness in his work is suggested by Zmijewski himself in one of his theoretical texts. In ‘A Favorite Theory of Art’ he declares the following: ‘I am interested in mental space, the space of human contact, i.e., contact with another person’ (Zmijewski, 2006: 68). Later in the same text he explains how he understands mental space:

Mental space is related to a superior order of the world, somewhat different for each individual, an order whose existence allows us to live. The violation of that order requires defence and defence, in turn, reveals the spans upon which the order was built. This is our normal nakedness, and is the most authentic encounter of all, although it can have little in common with pleasure or mutual ardour or warmth. (p. 73).

Nakedness refers to authentic encounters with other persons, encounters which are mental, but can be best imagined and visualized by the contact of naked bodies. In Berek, the encounters with other persons take place within the imaginative situation of therapeutic working through the relation to a haunted house: Poland.11

Re-enacting conformism

Another kind of provocation constitutes the performative heart of the next work by Zmijewski I will briefly discuss. In his video 80064 from 2005,
Zmijewski persuaded Józef Tarnawa, a 92-year-old former prisoner of Auschwitz to ‘renew’ his prisoner number tattooed on his arm. As one can imagine, this video also triggered controversy. The film was rejected by the Fritz Bauer Institute in Frankfurt, which commissioned it for an exhibition about 40 years of trials against Nazi war criminals. The work Zmijewski had made did not meet the expectations of the Institute. This film too should be understood within a therapeutic framework. According to Zmijewski’s website it is a film experiment with memory. ‘I expected that under the effect of the tattooing, the doors of memory would open.’ In this respect, the experiment resembles Lanzmann’s Shoah. Lanzmann also tried to re-enact the trauma of survivors by interviewing them in situations similar to those in which the trauma originated. The barber in charge of shaving the new inmates arriving in Auschwitz was interviewed by Lanzmann in a barbershop. Lanzmann has been criticized for how he used traumatized survivors of Auschwitz for his own cinematic project (see, for instance, Lacapra, 1998: 141–180). His ambition to make an authentic documentary about the Holocaust was not the result of empathy for the survivors. On the contrary, according to some of his critics he exploited the survivors mercilessly to make his point about authenticity, truthfulness and the Holocaust, fiction film and documentary (see, for instance, Hansen, 1996: 292–312). The enactment of the trauma of the survivor was not pursued within a therapeutic framework, but in a documentary one. In other words, it was not performatively effective, but only representational.

This question of performative vs constative is precisely the sore point of Zmijewski’s video 80064. Is his film experiment at the same time a therapeutic experiment, or is a cinematic experiment performed under the pretext of therapy? In other words, is the therapeutic framework only mise-en-scène, or does it legitimize his cinematic experiment? In the case of Zmijewski’s art practice, this question is difficult to answer. This is so because his notion of art is thoroughly therapeutic and political as such. He radically opposes the idea that the so-called autonomy of art implies that all kind of excesses in art are by definition legitimized. In his own words:

The artist is a product of the repulsion caused by acute reality, though the way its elements affect each of us is a personal matter. The artist levitates over that reality, lowering cognitive tentacles into it. Consequently, being an artist is a secure position, a justification for all kinds of excesses, and certainly artistic ones (the work). However, if we abolish the privileges that come with the title ‘artist’, those justifications disappear. The bandage is removed, and convention no longer offers asylum. This can be quite dangerous and painful, since the encounter with life without a ‘life-proof’ suit can hurt, especially when you touch swollen sore points. (Zmijewski, 2006: 69)

But who has been hurt in the case of 80064? Is it the former prisoner of Auschwitz Józef Tarnawa, who is persuaded to renew his tattoo? Or is it
the artist Artur Zmijewski whose provocative art work was rejected by the institution that commissioned him to make the work, and whose experiment to open the doors of memory of the viewers was successful in only a modest degree?

In order to answer these questions, we should look at what exactly happens when the old man is persuaded to refresh his tattoo. The man acknowledges that he agreed beforehand to have this done. But while being filmed he is having second thoughts. He likes his tattoo the way it is and does not see the point of renewing it. He worries what other people will think of it. But Zmijewski urges him implacably, and eventually the old man surrenders. The tattooist retraces the digits and a perfectly neat fresh tattoo is the result. The old man is, however, ambivalent; it is hard to tell what he feels after he surrendered.

There are two painful moments in the video that stand out. The first one is at the beginning when the old man is telling about Auschwitz. Whereas the exact identity of the old man is so far unclear, he suggests implicitly that he was not sent to Auschwitz because of being Jewish:

I ended up over there for no reason. I hadn't done anything. I was put in Auschwitz for no reason. (see Figure 1)

His clumsy way of expressing himself implies that other inmates of Auschwitz had 'done' things which explained and legitimized their transportation to Auschwitz. He, however, 'hadn't done anything'. Immediately after making this bizarre distinction between people who have and who have not done anything before ending up in Auschwitz, he tells about his arrival in Auschwitz:

Józef Tarnawa: Holy cow, we had no idea it was Auschwitz.
Artur Zmijewski: You hadn't known anything about Auschwitz before?
Józef Tarnawa: I knew that such a place existed, but I had no idea where. I wasn't interested, no one was.

Here, the conventional idea of the typical Holocaust victim is radically undermined. This man seems not to be Jewish but ethnically Polish. Another conventional idea is activated and seems to be confirmed, namely that the Polish population was largely indifferent to what happened to the Jewish population in their country, and in many cases even complicit.

The second painful moment comes after this and consists of Zmijewski's implacable urging. He does not show any empathy with the survivor when the latter has second thoughts about his earlier agreement to have his tattoo refreshed. He wants to proceed with the original script for this filmic experiment. Probably he insists because he expects that the renewal of the tattoo will release
traumatic memories in the old man. But this never really happens. Whereas, before the refreshing of the tattoo, the man tells a few things about his experiences in Auschwitz, during the re-making of the tattoo and after it, the conversation only concerns this event in the present, nothing in the past.

The controversy about 80064 highlights only the second painful moment: the artist Zmijewski’s implacable urging. Critics and viewers identify with the man as victim and have a blind spot for his possibly more ambiguous position in the past. The old, fragile man is victimized a second time, this time for an artistic, filmic experiment. Zmijewski’s urging is, however, put in a completely different perspective when we take the remarks of the victim/survivor Józef Tarnawa into consideration. The conversation and confrontation in this video is not between a Jew and a Pole, but between two Polish people of two different generations. The younger Pole puts pressure on the older one and wants him to explain his indifference about the Holocaust. An indifference that is hard to understand since he ended up in Auschwitz.

Our listening to Józef Tarnawa is a good example of the fixed morality that came into place after the Holocaust. He survived Auschwitz and is a victim
of Nazi atrocities. This implies that our empathy with him should be total, should be without any reservation. This is the norm, because in the case of the conventional image of the Holocaust there are only two positions: victims and perpetrators. Yes, there were also bystanders, quite a number even, but because of the fact that Józef Tarnawa ended up in Auschwitz, he is just a victim. In the case of 80064, the prescription of the right moral attitude clearly has a counterproductive effect. It limits the video to a filmic experiment, intending to release traumatic memories in a survivor, very much like Lanzmann did in Shoah. Suspending this imposed morality makes it possible to look at this video differently, however. When we really listen to Józef Tarnawa the constellation in the video is very different: two Polish people, of two different generations. The younger Pole has set up this experimental situation in order to interrogate the older one about his ambiguous, conflicted role in World War II and the Holocaust. From this perspective, Zmijewski’s urging is no longer just implacable, but responsible and politically highly relevant. This relevance lies in his enactment of conformism in the Polish victim Józef Tarnawa. His indifference during World War II about the Holocaust shows its face in the video in the form of conformism. He gives in to a situation that asks for resistance. He gives in to the tyrannical artist and has his tattoo refreshed (see Figures 2 to 5).

In the context of Berek, I described Poland as a haunted house. Poland is not only a haunted house because a major part of the Holocaust took place on its soil. More importantly, it is haunted because it is far from clear what its involvement in and responsibility for the Holocaust was. The fixed morality makes it impossible to explore those questions. Zmijewski, however, who puts provocation at the heart of his artistic practice, is not afraid of this morality; he dares to explore these questions, even if the results in 80064 are disturbing. Józef Tarnawa testifies to his indifference of the Holocaust during the War, but that is all. But providing all kind of detailed information about his position and role in World War II, or re-enacting traumas contracted during his imprisonment in Auschwitz, is not the real issue. This video shakes up the fixed notions of Nazi victims and Holocaust survivors. And that is the first necessary step towards opening up the debate to a series of questions about the role of Polish people in the Holocaust.

The importance of this debate has recently become even more urgent after the Lower House of the Polish Parliament passed legislation that would make it illegal to suggest Poland bore responsibility for atrocities committed on its soil by Nazi Germany during the occupation in World War II. Although Zmijewski made his Berek and 80064 before the present conservative Polish government had imposed this legislation, these new political circumstances renew the importance of Zmijewski’s provocation to open up reflection and debate about the role of Polish people in the Holocaust. The ways these
First I had a friend of mine stencil this number for me in ink.
Figures 2 to 5. Stills from 80064: Józef Tarnawa's tattoo is refreshed.
videos stir the imagination enact effective ethical performativity, which is needed in debates about the Holocaust, at this present moment especially in Poland.

Notes

1. According to Walter Benn Michaels (2015: 163), the stipulation of the right moral attitude towards the Holocaust ‘produces the dominant form of kitsch today – ethical kitsch’. One can speak of ethical kitsch when artistic and literary representations of the Holocaust are not evaluated on the basis of their truthfulness, but on the right attitude towards the historical truth.
2. Slavoj Žižek (2009[1997]: 142). See also my book Caught By History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, literature, and Theory (Van Alphen, 1997) in which I argued the same position in a different way. For an analysis of the inscription of trauma in the work of Tony Morrison, Tadeusz Borowski and Charlotte Delbo, see the chapter ‘Caught by images’, in my book Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought (Van Alphen, 2005).
3. When Žižek writes: ‘The horror of the Holocaust cannot be represented’, he may seem to vary on Adorno’s famous, but usually misunderstood indictment that it is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz. However, Žižek is pointing at a semiotic, representational impossibility to represent the extreme horror of the Holocaust, whereas Adorno’s statement implies a moral indictment. See, for the representational impossibility to represent the Holocaust, Van Alphen (1997), especially the chapter ‘Testimonies and the limits of representation’.
4. For an example of such a fixed morality, see Schult (2015: 107–131).
5. For a discussion of sincerity, see Van Alphen et al. (2009).
6. Zmijewski, interviewed by Michal Wolinski (2007).
7. The protests this exhibition caused compelled the museum to produce a book, addressing the question of how the Holocaust can be presented today (Voices on the Holocaust/Vielstimmigkeit des Holocaust, in press).
8. Available at: http://culture.pl/en/artist/artur-zmijewski (accessed 28 July 2016).
9. In the case of children and grandchildren who do not have their own memories of the Holocaust, the term post-memory is often used to describe their imaginative efforts to relate to the past of the (grand)parents. But post-memories are not only the result of imaginative efforts of later generations. They are also imposed on later generations by means of morality. See for a critical analysis of the term postmemory, Van Alphen (2006: 473–488) and the reply by Marianne Hirsch (2008: 103–126).
10. ‘Working through’ as the alternative for a repetitive ‘acting out’ is Dominick LaCapra’s Freud-based proposal in his book Writing History, Writing Trauma (2001).
11. About Holocaust representation in Poland, see Borowicz (2015: 132–148).

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