

Ella Falldorf

Presentation at the Séminaire des boursiers de la Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah

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Social Life in Inmates' Art: Visual Testimonies from the Buchenwald

Concentration Camp

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In my dissertation, I call for an analysis of images created by prisoners in Nazi camps – both as artwork and visual testimony. These images have a complex and ambivalent status as objects of art-historical study. As I have recently argued with Verena Krieger, in the introductory article to our edited volume:

They can neither be viewed in isolation from their extreme conditions of production marked by deficiency, persecution, and imminent threat nor can they be reduced to this context. They are both less and more than artwork: less because their creators could not develop them freely; more because they possess a testimonial value beyond their artistic one.¹

Based on this premise, I will briefly outline the three main arguments of my dissertation, before I present the merits of a *close looking* in one example and conclude with the outline of my study.

Main Arguments

1) Since their creation figurative depictions of Nazi camps were valued as self-evident illustrations of historical reality, framed as expressions of resistance or praised for their

¹ I developed this approach further in Verena Krieger and Ella Falldorf, “To Tear These Images from Time’: Images Created in Nazi Camps and Ghettos During the Holocaust from the Perspective of Art History,” in *Beyond Irrepresentability: Exploring Images from Nazi Camps, Ghettos, and the Holocaust*, ed. Verena Krieger and Ella Falldorf (Böhlau, 2026), 15.

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artistic quality. Yet, I claim that beyond this, they express manifold at times ambivalent interpretations of the social reality of the camps that preceded postwar debates.

These images cannot represent the Nazi crimes—no image can. Their examination should not be based on the question whether they are historically accurate or “appropriate”, nor should their veracity be taken for granted.

Even images with realistic visual language, are not “neutral” reproductions of reality. They are shaped by the position of their producers, as well as the place, time and reason for their creation *and* the object they depict – or which they choose not to depict.

Therefore, comparisons – thinking of the images in the plural – can unveil patterns, differences, and idiosyncratic interpretations. *Looking* closely makes us aware of diverse interpretations of the camp reality articulated through pictorial means.

2) The second argument concerns the way images create meaning: These images present early attempts to understand and communicate extreme experiences through the (often distorted) lens of familiar cultural forms. They are thus examined regarding means of depiction and adopted “encompassing themes”², which can be based on artistic or political intentions or on pre-reflexive references to visual and cultural history.³ Both trained artists and amateurs, consciously or unconsciously drew on traditional iconography, popular culture and patterns of representation from their visual memory. Beyond simply noting iconographic continuities, I ask

² Jan Białostocki, “Encompassing Themes and Archetypal Images,” *Arte Lombarda* 10 (1965): 275–84.

³ This approach is based on Ziva Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation: The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts* (Pergamon Press, 1993). As well as several articles by German art historian Detlef Hoffmann: Detlef Hoffmann, “Auschwitz im visuellen Gedächtnis: Das Chaos des Verbrechens und die symbolische Ordnung der Bilder,” in *Auschwitz: Geschichte, Rezeption und Wirkung*, ed. Fritz Bauer Institut (Campus-Verlag, 1996); Detlef Hoffmann, “Aktuelle Symbolisierungsstrategien im Umgang mit dem System Auschwitz,” in *Die Shoah im Bild*, ed. Sven Kramer and Stephan Braese (Edition Text + Kritik, 2003); Detlef Hoffmann, “Porträtzeichnungen aus Konzentrationslagern,” in *Wiederentdeckt: Zeugnisse aus dem Konzentrationslager Holzen*, ed. Jens-Christian Wagner (Wallstein, 2013).

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how they create meaning through their adaptation to the camp. To understand the artists' search for appropriate images, values, and cultural models that would account for the camp's extreme situations, these images must be considered along with the socio-historical conditions of production.

3) I examine prisoners' visual testimonies from Nazi camps within social networks that ranged from personal friendships to resistance groups and forced labor commandos. The separation of inmate groups led to drastically different camp experiences. How are these fundamentally different experiences are reflected in artworks by well-connected inmates who got into a position to create art. I analyze how belonging to the Communist underground network in Buchenwald and personal relations between artists from different countries shaped the visual representations of their experiences. Thereby, I contribute to the emerging analysis of social life in Nazi camps.⁴

For this I focus on one site: The Buchenwald concentration camp. I argue that the images are a result of the social dynamics which they depict and interpret. The images were shaped by the artwork's function, the background of artists and the prisoners who commissioned them, as well as the situations depicted. Here mostly antifascist prisoners with personal connections to the Communist resistance organization got materials and were able to hide their works.⁵

⁴ See Maja Suderland, *Inside Concentration Camps: Social Life at the Extremes* (Wiley, 2013); Anna Hájková, *The Last Ghetto: An Everyday History of Theresienstadt* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Michael Becker, Dennis Bock and Elissa Mailänder, "Konzentrationslager als Gesellschaften: Einleitende Überlegungen und interdisziplinäre Perspektiven," in *Konzentrationslager als Gesellschaften: Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven*, ed. idem (Wallstein, 2023); etc.

⁵ On art production in Buchenwald see Marie-France Reboul, *Buchenwald-Dora: L'art clandestin dans les camps nazis* (Geai Bleu Éditions, 2016); Ursula Härtl, *Überlebensmittel, Zeugnis, Kunstwerk, Bildgedächtnis: Die ständige Kunstaussstellung der Gedenkstätte Buchenwald; Denkmale auf dem Lagergelände*, 2nd ed. (Buchenwald Memorial, 2003); Sonja Staar, "The Art Collection of the Foundation Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora," in *Forbidden Art: Illegal Works by Concentration Camp Prisoners*, ed. Agnieszka Sieradzka and Gabriela Nikliborc (Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2012).

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While more than 40% of the artworks from Buchenwald were created by French political prisoners – many of them communists – there are exceptions to this rule which allow for stimulating comparisons. How did the depictions of one and the same location differ in images by a communist artist or a Jewish teenager without any prior artistic education?

The Little Camp viewed from Block 48

These four drawings show the so-called Little Camp, the fenced-in quarantine area on the northern edge of Buchenwald.⁶ Identifiable because of the characteristic front sides of the horse stable barracks. As the Wehrmacht advanced across Europe, the number of prisoners increased tenfold from the spring of 1942 to 84,505 in September 1944, leading to overcrowding, particularly in the Little Camp.⁷ Originally designed to accommodate up to 400 people each, the twelve former stable barracks were crammed with as many as 1,960 people.⁸ The hygienic conditions there were far more disastrous than in the main camp. Hunger and disease spread rapidly.⁹

Between May and December 1944, due to catastrophic overcrowding, the SS set up five military tents, which can be seen in the background of the drawings, in front of the tree line.¹⁰

Water shortages and a lack of latrines led to disastrous sanitary conditions and an outbreak of

⁶ Unfortunately, I cannot publish these images open access and online due to copyright restrictions. As an extended version of the following pages will also be part of my dissertation, I asked the interested reader to wait for my forthcoming monograph.

⁷ Gedenkstätte Buchenwald, *Konzentrationslager Buchenwald 1937–1945: Begleitband zur ständigen historischen Ausstellung* (Wallstein, [1999] 2010), 153.

⁸ Gedenkstätte Buchenwald, *Konzentrationslager Buchenwald 1937–1945*, 151.

⁹ Katrin Greiser, “,Sie starben allein und ruhig, ohne zu schreien oder jemand zu rufen‘: Das ‚Kleine Lager‘ im Konzentrationslager Buchenwald,” *Dachauer Hefte* 14 (1998).

¹⁰ Gedenkstätte Buchenwald, *Konzentrationslager Buchenwald 1937–1945*, 151.

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dysentery. In response, the SS cordoned off additional areas of the Little Camp.¹¹ At that time, the French became one of the largest groups and managed to organize politically, thus many Frenchmen gained access to paper and pens.¹²

Four of them - Pierre Mania, Boris Taslitzky, Paul Goyard, and the French born Belgian René Salme drew this place while they were sitting on the other side of the fence on the upper floor of Block No. 48 in the main camp – likely together in September 1944. Both Mania and Salme noted their position on the bottom of their drawings: *Le petit camp vu du bloc quarante-huit*.¹³ Upon their arrival, all four artists were initially interned in the Little Camp, but through luck and prior political networks, they established contacts with so-called functionary prisoners and the camp resistance, which elevated their position

All four show a bird's-eye view of a square surrounded by buildings and crisscrossed by fences. This conventional mode of representation emphasizes their own distance from what is depicted and their privileged position as observers, which gives them an overview of the area.

The choice of perspective alone is a constitutive part of the worldview conveyed by the image.

¹¹ Katrin Greiser, "Sie starben keinen Opfertod: Wie das ‚Kleine Lager‘ von Buchenwald aus der Erinnerung verschwand," in *Vielstimmiges Schweigen: Neue Studien zum DDR-Antifaschismus*, ed. Annette Leo and Peter Reif-Spirek (Metropol, 2001), 113.

¹² Olivier Lalieu, *La Résistance française à Buchenwald* (Éditions Tallandier, [2005] 2012), 153–69. Lalieu reported about the establishment of a Comité des loisirs, within the Comité des Intérêts Français (CIF), that supported inmates in the realization of their projects (ibid, 228). José Fosty, "Paul Goyard oder eine kleine Geschichte von einer großen Freundschaft," in *Paul Goyard: 100 Zeichnungen aus dem Konzentrationslager Buchenwald; 100 Dessins du camp de concentration de Buchenwald; 100 Drawings from the Buchenwald Concentration Camp*, ed. Volkhard Knigge (Wallstein, 2002), 40. See Ella Falldorf, "'Ihr Werk ist gerade aus ihrem selbst erlebten Leiden heraus entstanden': Lagerbilder französischer Kommunisten im KZ Buchenwald und der frühen Nachkriegszeit," in *Organisiertes Gedächtnis: Kollektive Aktivitäten von Überlebenden der nationalsozialistischen Verbrechen*, ed. Philipp Neumann-Thein, Daniel Schuch and Markus Wegewitz (Wallstein, 2022), 309.

¹³ Cagnet argued that Taslitzky, Fosty, Salme und Goyard had all drawn the entrance to the Little Camp from Block 58. However, since this block is located in the Little Camp, it makes more sense that he was referring to these four drawings as well, but he confused Fosty and Mania, Christophe Cagnet, "Les yeux ouverts sur la réalité," in *Boris Taslitzky: Dessins faits à Buchenwald*, ed. Christophe Cagnet and Évelyne Taslitzky (Biro éd, 2009), 240–41.

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Although the images initially appear to be “true-to-life” representations, a closer look reveals each artist's different interpretation: In Salme's drawing, the scene is dominated by the expressive hatching of the dark forest that almost completely covers the sky and appears like a wall or barrier and towers over the wide, almost empty space. By omitting the barracks in the foreground, the space in front of the two barracks appears larger. It is almost empty, with only three indistinguishable groups and a larger crowd gathered in front of the tents. Goyard depicts the architecture of the barracks in detail, while the figures of the troops marching in lockstep blur into a gray mass. He creates an almost ghostly atmosphere through an impressionistic play with light, shadow, and movement. Taslitzky focused neither on the architecture nor the trees, but on the people moving between the blocks. Alone, in pairs or small groups, they stand or sit in the square, which takes up most of the sheet. Taslitzky outlines the contours of the relaxed waiting positions of the prisoners. While Taslitzky shows the figures in conversation with each other, Mania's countless almost cartoon-like figures move more dynamically, but mostly alone across the square between the barracks. This square is visually narrowed to a strip by the barrack protruding into the foreground. On the left, two prisoners carry a heavy bucket, while another pulls up his pants—references to the famine in the Little Camp. The drawings reveal individual interpretations of the Little Camp, that are underlined by the artists' stylistic approaches and emphasize different aspects of the social relationships that shaped the prisoners' everyday lives.

In the spring of 1945, approximately 6,000 prisoners—mostly Jews—would perish here, and already in 1944, it was a place of misery and death.¹⁴ Yet these depictions do not correspond to our conception of the “irrepresentable” misery in Nazi camps; scabies, hunger, wounds,

¹⁴ Michael Löffelsender, *Das KZ Buchenwald 1937 Bis 1945* (Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2020), 105.

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vermin, and cold are absent. Only knowledge of the conditions in the tents and barracks allows us to recognize them as representations of misery. None of these images claims to represent the Little Camp, the Buchenwald concentration camp, or the Holocaust. All four are parts of larger collections, visual notes that were edited and partially published after liberation and only when viewed as a whole form a fragmentary mosaic.

Goyard had already planned while in the camp to create a diorama based on his visual notes and ultimately chose a view of the “Kleines Lager” for this purpose.¹⁵ The drawings by Mania and Taslitzky were published in 1945–46.¹⁶ The Little Camp was not only drawn particularly often during the camp period, but the images also received significant attention in the period following the liberation. It was likely the French poet Louis Aragon (1897–1982) who, in 1945, selected the view by Taslitzky discussed above to open the publication of the artist's drawings from his time in the camp and to close it with a much-discussed series of watercolors, all of which depict the Little Camp. The drawing described here is reinterpreted by its placement in the album in such a way that it supposedly provides an overview of the Buchenwald concentration camp, which is presented in greater detail in the subsequent drawings. It is worth analyzing the position of the Little Camp in postwar depictions of French Buchenwald survivors.¹⁷

¹⁵ Volkhard Knigge, “Brennpunkt der Erinnerung: Paul Goyards Buchenwaldskizzen und das Diorama von Buchenwald,” in Knigge, *Paul Goyard*, 11.

¹⁶ Boris Taslitzky, *111 Dessins faits à Buchenwald 1944-1945* (La Bibliothèque Française, 1945), présentés par Julien Cain; Auguste Favier and Pierre Mania, eds., *Buchenwald: Scènes prises sur le vif des horreurs nazies* (1946); 78 planches dessinées par A. Favier - P. Mania - Boris. Préface de Christian Pineau.

¹⁷ I have made first attempts at this in Falldorf, “Lagerbilder französischer Kommunisten”.

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Scope and Outline of my Dissertation

The very existence of over 2300 artworks created by prisoners in the Buchenwald concentration camp and its subcamps is astounding. How were camp inmates able to create clandestine art? Where did they get their materials and hide their works? The dissertation addresses these questions by examining prisoners' visual testimonies from Nazi concentration camps within social frameworks that enabled their production.

The small drawings, sculptures, and watercolors from Buchenwald have never been analyzed in depth. The scarce scholarly and public reception of the mostly figurative depictions of the camps tends to consider their message as self-evident instead of using tools of art history and visual studies. Their diverse interpretations of the camp reality articulated through pictorial means that come to the fore under close examination, are seldom acknowledged. My study presents the first extensive overview along central themes of images created by inmates in a Nazi concentration camp: Using in-depth image analysis, I explore how the inmates gave meaning to social life in Nazi camps. In order to understand their search for images and cultural models that would account for the camp's extreme situations, these artworks must be considered along with the socio-historical conditions of production in the camp. My project intertwines the conditions of production within the prisoners' society with the art-historical analysis of comparative case studies. I therefore focus on frequently recurring motifs that depict other prisoners. Based on the assumption that every visual representation of reality is distorted, the images of concentration camp prisoners must therefore be understood as an interpretation of what is depicted.

The first chapter zooms in on portraits of the artists themselves and their friends, thereby introducing the protagonists, the artists, of my study and the conditions of production. These portraits show the physical deterioration in imprisonment, but they also visually elevate the

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portrayed. In contrast, the depicted in chapter two, prisoners doing forced labor, often remain anonymous. While the main purpose of such images was to accuse the SS, especially Communist artists often visually appropriated forced labor as a form of work, reframing it in the tradition of the workers' movement. While Buchenwald is known until today as a camp of political persecution and not as a site of the Holocaust, the absolute majority of the preserved images were created in 1944 and 1945 when the death marches from the east arrived in Buchenwald. The prisoner-artists who had already been in the camp longer, were appalled by the "walking skeletons" that entered the camp and many of them depicted their suffering. Such visual characterizations of 'the others' show striking ambivalences. The third chapter examines how political prisoner-artists depicted the misery of those who were too weak to work and lowest on the prisoner hierarchy, many of them Jews; the chapter analyzes depictions of extreme misery in the Little Camp on the edge of representability. From the spatial edge of the Little Camp; I move to the temporal edge of the liberation and the epistemological question what "camp images" are, by analyzing depictions of the triumph over the SS and the dead.

Images created by inmates in the Buchenwald concentration camp reveal degradation as well as empathy, or admiration and thus paint a complex kaleidoscopic panorama of social life in Nazi concentration camps.

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