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The Imperfections of Listing the Past: Listing Names in Holocaust Commemoration

Ernst van Alphen

The archival genre of the list is often legitimized by its referential efficiency: a list does not refer generally or metaphorically, but refers to all items, all individuals, and, in the case of a holocaust memorial, to all victims, by explicitly naming them all. This quality of archival organization makes the archive as medium into an ideal, or perfect instrument for referential objectivity.

The referentiality of archives is, however, less perfect than it seems when we consider it from a performative and political point of view. This became clear during the Second World War because of the role archival organizations had in tracing Jewish inhabitants in countries like the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. Whereas in the Netherlands 75 percent of the Jewish population were deported, in Belgium and in France the percentage only added up to, respectively, 40 percent and 25 percent. This enormous difference between the three countries is usually explained by the fact that Dutch municipal archives were perfectly organized, which made it rather easy for the Nazis to find out who was Jewish and who was not. Municipal archives in Belgium and France, by contrast, were messy archives and demonstrated all kinds of systemic and organizational imperfections. In those countries the Nazis had much more difficulty in tracing their Jewish inhabitants. In this respect, the imperfection of messy archives saved the lives of millions of people. In the Second World War case, the more perfect, that is, well-organized, the archive was, the more deadly it was.

This paradoxical conclusion also seems to be relevant for some recent Holocaust memorials. In what follows I will discuss the effects of what I call

In this chapter, I revisit and extend findings that I discussed earlier in Van Alphen, "List Mania in Holocaust Commemoration," *Caught by History and Staging the Archive*.

referential imperfection as they play out in a selection of Holocaust memorials and as highlighted in artworks of French artist Christian Boltanski.

Memorials and Lists

The rise of the archival system or organization in Holocaust commemoration is a relatively recent phenomenon. Although archival lists have been used widely since the end of the Second World War, they were at first not always considered to be effective as memorials.¹ Lists were rather seen as instrumental, because they gave access to referential information. In the first few decades after the end of the war it was the narrative mode of diaries and testimonies that was viewed as the most effective means of Holocaust commemoration. The referential information provided by narratives was more extensive, comprehensive, and elaborate than the basic information offered by lists. It is only since the beginning of the twenty-first century that the archival mode has become increasingly import, especially in the form of lists.

Recent Holocaust memorials are often not made according to the conventional format of the monument, or that of the counter-monument (another important trend in the 1990s).² Many of these recent memorials consist of lists, are presented in digital form, and can be visited on the web. The most well-known example is probably the redesigned Hall of Names at Yad Vashem in Israel, reopened in 2005. This monument commemorates every Jew who perished in the Holocaust. The Hall of Names houses the extensive collection of “Pages of Testimony” —a listing of short biographies of each Holocaust victim.³ Over two million pages are stored in this collection. In close connection to the Hall of Names exists the digital “Shoah Names Database,” initiated in 1999, in which the names and biographical details of two-thirds of the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis have been collected and recorded.⁴

Another example of a digital memorial consisting of a list is *Digitaal Monument Joodse Gemeenschap* (Digital Monument Jewish Community). The Dutch historian Isaac Lipschits initiated this digital monument in the

¹ For a history and analysis of Holocaust memorials in different countries, see James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).

² For a discussion of counter-monuments—monuments whose story challenges or problematizes the premises of their own existence—see *ibid.*

³ The monument can be visited online at http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/about/hall_of_names/what_are_pot.asp, accessed September 11, 2019.

⁴ The database can be visited at <http://db.yadvashem.org/names/search.html?language=en>, accessed September 11, 2019.

year 2000 and since 2005 it can be visited and consulted on the web.⁵ The main goal of the website is to serve as a memorial. The makers want to keep alive the memory of all Dutch Jews who died in the Holocaust. This means that they commemorate around 101,800 victims by listing them with their name, date, place and country of birth, and the date and camp where they were killed. In the cases where more information about a specific person is available—about, for instance, partners, children, and other relatives—this information is added on a subsequent page. The second goal of the work is educational: to offer later generations the possibility to find out about the Jewish victims of the Holocaust in the Netherlands. What the site teaches future generations about the history of the Holocaust is who, which individuals, were victimized by the Holocaust.

In the Netherlands another impressive memorial has been established, although this memorial is not digital. It is devoted to all Jewish and Roma children in the Netherlands who were killed during the Holocaust. It is titled *In Memoriam: De gedeporteerde en vermoorde Joodse, Roma en Sinti kinderen 1942–1945* (In Memoriam: The Deported and Killed Jewish, Roma and Sinti Children 1942–1945). This memorial was first presented in 2012 in the form of an exhibition, then in book format. Its initiator is the Dutch writer and poet Guus Luijters. He was inspired by a project by Serge Klarsfeld in France, who, already in 1995, published a *Mémorial des enfants juifs déportés de France* (Memorial of Jewish Children Deported from France). What these two memorials of children have in common is that, by adding photographs of the children to the listed names and dates, they compensate the factuality and impersonality of lists.

In the case of the two Dutch Holocaust memorials the listing of names is significant in political and therapeutic ways. Listing the names of Holocaust victims also means giving back to them their names. These names were taken from them in the camps as a way of de-individualizing them. They had become anonymous. In Auschwitz their names were replaced by a tattooed number. Thus, listing names of Holocaust victims is a device that reattributes individuality to them. From this perspective, the creation of Holocaust memorials based on listing names seems to be the perfect remedy against traumas of the past. At second sight, however, monuments that list names are less precise than we might think at first, because they create unexpected problems—problems that are the result of the referential imperfections of archival organization.

⁵ The monument can be visited online at <https://www.joodsmonument.nl/>, accessed February 27, 2020.

The issue I would like to address in this chapter is what exactly these recent memorials, digital or not, perform when they are based on the genre or format of the list and the activity of listing. Within Holocaust studies and Holocaust commemoration, the format of the list is highly respected as well as highly problematic.⁶ It is respected because in lists, *all* victims can be acknowledged and represented—not by means of one symbol or allegory that is supposed to represent all victims, but through their own individual names and through information that confirms the individuality of these persons, such as their dates of birth and the dates on which their life ended. That same activity of listing is, however, also problematic because the genre of listing is potentially contaminated by its history: the Nazis particularly excelled in listing. In this context I will not deal with how the Nazis used archival organizations for their genocide. I have already done so at length in my books *Caught by History* (1997) and *Staging the Archive* (2014).⁷ Instead I will focus on the imperfect referentiality of lists. As I will argue below, the referential imperfection of lists is caused by the fact that, over time, they are subjected to decay, in the sense that their referentiality dissolves and transforms into symbolic signification.

The Referentiality of Lists

In what follows I will locate the imperfection of archival organization by focusing on the referentiality of archival lists. I will do so by focusing on artistic practices and memorial practices based on lists, because artistic practices are usually highly self-reflexive.⁸ French artist Christian Boltanski explores the referential function of lists, raising the simple act of listing into a privileged practice for art. He does so most notably in his artist's books, which he usually creates in the context of an exhibition. Boltanski's art books are not catalogues, documenting an exhibition; they demonstrate in the material form of the book the issues that are also at stake, but differently, in the framework of the museum exhibition. Boltanski's books usually consist

⁶ See about the practice of listing also my analysis "List Mania in Holocaust Commemoration."

⁷ See Ernst van Alphen, *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997); and Ernst van Alphen, *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in the Age of New Media* (London: Reaktion, 2014).

⁸ See my book *Staging the Archive*.

of lists. They list photographs, items, names, descriptions of artworks, and the like.⁹

One of Boltanski's many artist books demonstrates that the referential function of lists is to a certain extent illusionary. This book, published in 1994, consists of the real telephone directory of the Swedish town Malmö. The directory is from the year 1993. All Boltanski changed in the number of real copies that were provided to him was the cover of the original directory. A white sheet of paper was glued on top of the original cover, printed with the name of the artist, the name of the museum responsible for this publication (Malmö Konsthall), and the title of this artist's book: *Les habitants de Malmö* (The Inhabitants of Malmö).

The telephone directory as artist's book foregrounds how the referential nature of pragmatic lists is ultimately illusionary. The referentiality begins to evaporate from the moment such a listing is being performed. More and more people on the list will either move to other places or die. After some time, the list only provides the names of people who once lived in Malmö but who are now gone or dead. Boltanski foregrounds the illusionary referentiality of the directory by adding a four-page errata to the directory. A three-page list of names of people is introduced by the following statement: "You can't reach these inhabitants of Malmö on the phone anymore. They died in 1993."¹⁰

Boltanski's telephone directory creates a Holocaust effect—my term for art whose viewers directly experience a certain aspect of the Holocaust or Nazism—comparable to most other works by the artist.¹¹ This time, however, it is the listing of names that is responsible for that effect. Over time the directory becomes a memorial of all the former inhabitants of Malmö.

Similarly to what Boltanski did with the Malmö telephone directory, the referential function of lists in his other artist's books is challenged.¹² But the way he undermines the referential function is now different. These lists stand for human beings or objects in the real world. Like arrows, they point to them. But in remarks in the introductions to his artist books, Boltanski redirects their representational function.

The referential reading of the list transforms, in Boltanski's artist's books, into a metaphorical reading of it. This transformation also takes place

⁹ A more elaborate reading of Christian Boltanski's artist books can be found in *Staging the Archive*, especially in chapter Three on Listing.

¹⁰ Christian Boltanski, *Les habitants de Malmö* (Malmö: Malmö Kunsthall, 1993), n.p.

¹¹ On Holocaust effect (an effect that I also observe in literary texts), see my *Caught by History*, 10.

¹² For relevant examples, see *Archive of the Carnegie International*, *Erwerbungen Rheinischer Kunstmuseen in den Jahren 1935–1945*, *Diese Kinder suchen Ihre Eltern*, *Lost*, *Inventaire du Cabinet d'art graphique 1977–1998*.

in the presentation of his book *Les Suisses morts* (The Dead Swiss, 1990). Explaining why this book exclusively focuses on Swiss people, the artist states the following:

Previously I made works concerned with dead Jews. But “Jew” and “dead” go too well together, the combination is too illuminating. By contrast, there is nothing more normal than the Swiss. There is really no reason at all why they should die; in a certain sense they are more frightening, because they are like us.¹³

Boltanski reads the list of dead Swiss as a *memento mori*, as a warning that we should all remember our mortality. The referentiality of the list is not completely cancelled but it is overruled by the analogy with the fact that the mortality of these Swiss people is not different from “our” mortality.

What exactly enables Boltanski’s reading of lists as metaphorical instead of referential? Although each item in the list has a referent, the fact that the list as such makes the impression of being endless makes the referentiality lose its specificity. The referentiality becomes general or abstract, which creates a paradox. The gradual evaporation of referentiality is an effect produced by listing: the more endless the list, the less specific its referentiality. When the referential function loses its strength, the symbolic reading of the list imposes itself.

Considering this paradoxical effect of listing, it is not really surprising that since the opening of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, in 1982, designed by Maya Lin, so many other memorials have been modeled on this memorial consisting of a list of all names of US military who died in Vietnam. The listing of individual names seems to make these soldiers referentially present. Each name stands for a soldier who died. Their absence or death is momentarily transcended; referentially they are made present again. But the listing, seemingly endless, of all those names has an opposite effect. These memorials are so effective because the listing results in an overwhelming effect of absence. Ultimately it is the incredible, that is, uncountable, number of people who died that overwhelms us. Whereas each individual soldier can be imagined, made “present” by means of a referential name or portrait, the endlessness of the list cannot be imagined. The unimaginable number of people who died strikes us by their absence. This is the moment that the referential function transforms into a metaphorical—or symbolic—one, and the pragmatic list that can be consulted to know

¹³ Christian Boltanski, *Liste des Suisses morts dan le Canton Valais en 1991* (Lausanne: Le Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne, 1993), 86.

who died transforms into a memorial for all those who died. And perhaps also into a *memento mori* for those who still have to die. The success of such memorials in the form of a list depends entirely on the mass-induced dissolution of referentiality.

Boltanski's listing of works also foregrounds the awareness that listings are only partly the result of what they referentially refer to. They are to a great extent the result of the distinctions and categories on the basis of which the listing takes place. What is made present by means of listing is not simply the referential world of objects implied in the list but the conceptual categories used by the archivist and imposed on the referential world.

This brings us to a major controversy surrounding the Dutch National Holocaust Monument (NHM), and the methodology and categories that its architect used to construct the list of names for this monument. The construction of this memorial is at the time of writing under construction, with an expected completion date of 2020. American architect Daniel Libeskind designed a very big monument of bricks and steel for a small, narrow location at Amsterdam's Weesperstreet. The design of the monument was not commissioned: Libeskind took the initiative for designing it himself and offered his plan to the city, or perhaps we should say, he imposed it on Amsterdam. The monument is supposed to consist of a list of the names of all the victims of the Holocaust.

But this design and organization of the National Holocaust Monument creates a major political problem, because how perfect, and referential, can such a definition be? The National Holocaust Monument that at first seems to be dedicated to all the victims of the Holocaust is restricted to the Jewish, Roma, and Sinti victims of the Holocaust. Each victim's name will be placed on an individual brick stone, from which big walls will be constructed. When the chair of the Auschwitz committee Jacques Grishaver was asked why other important groups of victims, like Jehovah's Witnesses or homosexuals, were not included, his answer was that Jehovah's Witnesses could have converted to another religion: it was their own choice to be Jehovah's witness.¹⁴ Homosexuality was also seen a matter of choice. Being Jewish, Roma, or Sinti, by contrast, was, so the maker argued, not a matter of choice, but a racial category. It is striking that the Auschwitz committee legitimized the monument's imperfect restriction of Holocaust victims to Jewish, Roma, and Sinti victims, by the same racial categories that were also used by the Nazis. As a result, this Holocaust Monument is not only created for Holocaust

¹⁴ See <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/02/21/jehovas-mogen-niet-op-het-monument-6874133-a1547088>, accessed on September 15, 2019.

victims, it also creates a Holocaust effect, by adopting the most important Nazi categories.

The Addendum of Lists

Within the same year that Guus Luijters had presented his *In Memoriam* for Dutch Jewish and Roma children, a so-called *Addendum* was published with the book.¹⁵ This *Addendum* contains new lists that were not part of the original lists of the *In Memoriam*. The first was a list of addresses of pioneer camps, or of orphanages. The second list enumerated Dutch children who were not deported from Dutch transit camps, but who had been sent to other countries by their parents, had been caught, and then transported from the Belgian and French transit camps of Mechelen and Drancy. Luijters regretted that his first listing was the result of the decision to insert only children in the list who had been deported from the Netherlands, even if these children were originally German, Hungarian, Turkish, Belgian, or French. Because of this curatorial decision Dutch children deported from other countries than the Netherlands remained unmentioned and invisible in the list.

There is also a list of children who were removed from *In Memoriam*. This was done because they did not adhere perfectly to the definition of childhood as a common denominator for human beings under the age of eighteen. It turned out that some children were not yet eighteen when they were caught and deported, but had turned eighteen when they died in the gas camps. They were, in other words, removed from the memorial, which was only meant for human beings under eighteen.¹⁶

Luijters' reconsideration indicates, however, the crucial importance of the agent who makes the list. Comparable to Boltanski's responsibility for the categories used in the list of all the acquisitions of the Prints and Drawings Department of the Centre Pompidou in Paris, it is clear that Luijters is responsible for what the list looks like in crucial ways. As the *Addendum* demonstrates, the list is not referential in an unproblematic way. It builds on categories, motivated or not, that are chosen by the list maker or curator of the list.

After the two added lists, an enumeration follows with corrections to the transport lists out of which the original *In Memoriam* consisted. In the introduction to these corrected transport lists, the kind of mistakes that have been corrected are listed. As becomes clear, the list is presumably never

¹⁵ See Guus Luijters, *In Memoriam: Addendum* (Amsterdam: Nieuw Amsterdam, 2012a).

¹⁶ See *ibid.*, 7. "Wel opgenomen kinderen die buiten het bestek van het boek vallen," p. 11.

complete, but produces new lists, and lists within lists. There never seems to be an end to this process. The question that imposes itself, then, is: is this proliferation of lists the result of a listing mania or listing obsession, in this case the one of Guus Luijters, and perhaps fueled by the same obsession of the Nazis of the *Sicherheitsdienst*?¹⁷ Or is the referential function of lists by definition illusionary, and can lists be expanded endlessly?

It is not only Luijters' *In Memoriam* that raises this question. It points to a structural problem of all lists. The memorial list that served as a source of inspiration for *In Memoriam*, Serge Klarsfeld's *Mémorial des enfants juives déportés de France*—poses this question even more pertinently. Klarsfeld's memorial list does not have one but eight "errata," or "addenda," in French called *additif*.¹⁸ After the memorial had been published in 1994, eight extra lists with new information and corrections appeared from 1995 until 2007. The *additives* did not only make all kinds of corrections in the original list, but also added new categories of listing to the original one. When one begins to list, there seems to be no end to this impulse. For this reason, the planned National Holocaust Monument in Amsterdam will also have brick stones without any name on it, so that new names can be added at a later stage. This only partially solves the imperfection of listing names, however: what about names that ended up in the list of names for the wrong reason and that should be removed from the monument? Are the bricks with those names going to be removed?

Conclusion

The listing of names on memorials also happened after the First World War, especially in France and Belgium. Every small town has in the center a memorial that lists all the inhabitants of that town, usually young men, who were killed. In small communities, these names continue to refer to families that are known because they are part of these communities. The names of the individual young men will probably not refer to that individual human being anymore, but to the family to whom the men belonged—and whose name still rings a bell, at least for the people living in that community at this moment. But with big, national monuments like the Vietnam Veteran Memorial in Washington, DC, or the planned National Holocaust Museum

¹⁷ See on listing mania my "Listing Mania"; see also Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever* (1996). The *Sicherheitsdienst* was the intelligence agency of the Nazi Party.

¹⁸ The first *additif* appeared in 1995, no. 2 in 1997, no. 3 in 1998, no. 4 in 2000, no. 5 in 2003, no. 6 in 2004, no. 7 2006, and no. 8 in 2007.

in Amsterdam, the referentiality of the list of names is inevitably imperfect. The Vietnam Veteran Memorial chronologically lists the names of more than 58,000 American soldiers who were killed in the Vietnam War. In the case of this memorial, immediately after it was established in 1982 each individual soldier could be imagined, made “present” by means of a referential name. But now, thirty years later, the referentiality of the list of names is dissolving. The unimaginable number of people who died strikes us by their absence. This is the moment that the referential function transforms into a metaphorical—or symbolic—one, and the pragmatic list that once could be consulted to know who died transforms into a memorial for all those who died. And perhaps also into a *memento mori* for those who still have to die. The success of such memorials in the form of a list depends now, long after they were established, entirely on the mass-induced dissolution of referentiality.

In the case of the National Holocaust Museum in Amsterdam, the situation is rather different, because it is established more than seventy years after the Holocaust ended. Most names that will be listed have no referential function anymore for future visitors of the monument. It is only the endless number of names that still has its function—symbolically, that is. Whereas it is the referentiality of the list that motivates and legitimizes this kind of memorial, it is precisely this referentiality that has decayed and dissolved over time.

The referential imperfection of memorial listings is first of all caused by the fact that such listings cannot be perfect by default. They are usually messy, which results in addendums: people have to be removed or added to these lists. One can wonder if this messiness of archival systems should be solved in the context of memorials, or if it should be endorsed as productive because it counters a possible Holocaust effect. This kind of imperfection is not only the result of sloppy archival work, it is also the result of the employed categories; whatever the categories are, they are reductive in relation to the archived reality.

But there is a second kind of systemic imperfection that is more fundamental to memorial listings. This more fundamental imperfection is intricately linked to the passing of time. Over time, the referentiality that legitimized the productiveness of listings dissolves, and only symbolic meaning remains.¹⁹ This manifestation of archival imperfection should also be endorsed, because it gives a new function to memorials that otherwise become obsolete.

¹⁹ See on the nexus between imperfection and temporality, or the passing of time, also Yuriko Saito's chapter in this book.

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