VINCENT CAPRARO LECTURE
Yeshiva University Museum
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Tom Freudenheim Speaker
Former curator at the Smithsonian Museum

The only inaccuracy is that I didn't serve at Yeshiva while it was here; I served at Yeshiva before it moved here. I was involved in planning this wonderful place and every time I come here, I'm really thrilled. It's one of the great achievements of American Jewish life and I hope all of you appreciate it and come here often.

The library is wonderful, the institutions are wonderful and they really deserve support, so I hope that aside from visiting here now and then, you also are involved in one or another of the several institutions that are housed here. It's really a terrific place and I'm proud to have been involved with it and I'm sorry that I actually never worked in this building. I only *dreamed* of working in this building.

This talk is a tribute to Vincent Capraro whose work I have admired for some years and also to Sandy Frank whom I don't see here yet, who first brought Vincent's work to my attention.

Why, in fact, is art part of the Holocaust as we now see it? What does art have to do with the Holocaust? Why would Holocaust museums have art galleries? Or art sections?

You know a picture may be worth a thousand words but I'm not sure that showing pictures which are very emotionally laden and have all this other baggage connected to them—that come from camps, for example, are really expressive of anything about the Holocaust. In fact, I think that if you really look at most of the art, especially art that was made at Tarazan, for example and you compare it to art, especially art that comes from the Japanese-American camps during World War II (when Japanese-Americans wee interred there in the west) or from art that was done in the Soviet gulag, you would find, much to your surprise, that a lot of it looks pretty much alike.

You wouldn't be able to tell the difference. Why wouldn't you be able to tell the difference? Because barracks look like barracks, barbed wire looks like barbed wire and barren landscapes look like barren

landscapes. And bleak surroundings look like bleak surroundings and I cite that because I don't believe that so-called Holocaust art is a valid way of telling you—telling us, anything about the experience of the Holocaust. I don't think that art from the Soviet gulag can tell us about the experience of the gulag and I don't think that art from the Japanese-American concentration camps (which we're not supposed to call concentration camps) tells you anything about that. Not that those three events (and many others) have anything necessarily in common, but that's precisely my point.

The art has a kind of commonality about it, but the historical facts and the experiences *don't* and therefore I find it a little risky to take cataclysmic events and (because we all like art and culture) decide that the art dimension has to emphasized.

It does an injustice to the reality of those events and from my point of view, it's an excuse for us to not to really confront those events in the same way (and I hope this won't get you mad) but in the same way that I think Holocaust museums are a way NOT to confront the Holocaust.

Because, after all, we're all sitting here comfortably drinking our Pellegrino and people are being murdered in Darfur, and genocide is going on and the UN (not too far from here) doesn't appear to plan to do much about it. And so there will be a Darfur museum. There is already a Rwandan museum. There are already museums in the former Yugoslavia. Genocide and museums go hand-in-hand now, but genocide, and people doing anything to avoid it, really hasn't changed since the 1930's.

So I worry about the fact that our interest in art and these issues promotes our feeling of concern while obscuring our personal inaction or maybe both. So it's not a subject that I necessarily feel comfortable about. I think it's worrisome-- and that's not to suggest anything negative about the exhibitions here. As I said at the beginning, I'm a great fan of Vincent Capraro's work and I think that there is a reason to have exhibitions of this kind, but I do worry that they let us divert our attention from the things that really matter—which is that we aren't doing anything about the fact that genocide continues to go on around us.

In my childhood I actually thought the term "never again" was a meaningful mantra which we all spouted, but it turns out, you know, unfortunately, that in the Jewish community it means "never again" for Jews and in the community at large, it just means nothing. So I don't feel very comfortable talking about this particular subject right now because, especially because, of this genocide that is ongoing in Darfur.

Among American artists who have addressed the Holocaust, afterwards, in retrospect, and as subject matter—not as witnesses-- there are three that I want to cite that I find most powerful. And you can take notes, look them up. They're all in museums, on the web, etc.

One is Rico Lebrun, an Italian-American. He was born in Naples in 1900, studied in Naples, Italy, died relatively young in 1964, having taught in California, and having developed a major following which probably doesn't really exist very much anymore. Rico Lebrun's symbolic paintings of the 1940's were filled with beggars and cripples and harlequins and clowns. And they became vehicles for communicating what he saw as the tragic condition of man, as the result of war and poverty, especially the war that he had lived through.

In 1947, after moving to Los Angeles, he joined the faculty of the Jepson Art institute in Los Angeles and completed a crucifixion theme, but his crucifixion theme also came out of paintings and drawings that he did about the Holocaust which is, again, a very interesting conflation.

He was also included in the much maligned, very famous exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, "New Images of Man", which was organized and curated by Peter Sells who is another one of the art historians who has written extensively about the subject of politics and art--and actually a book recently came out on that subject, not specifically on the Holocaust, although that's included. Peter Sells is another art historian I refer you to.

Next to Rico Lebrun I want to put another American artist, Maurizio Lesinski (sp?) who was born in Buenos Aires in 1914, studied there and was brought to the United States, the University of Iowa, where, since 1945, he has been in charge of the—he's retired now—but was in charge of the graphics department of the University of Iowa and created a very important graphics department there. He executed a series of works

called "Nazi Drawings" that are quite extraordinary, expressing his expression of profound disgust and outrage after viewing U.S. military documentaries showing the victims and the aftermath of the Nazi atrocities. Lesinski said, "I tried to keep not only the vision of the Nazi drawings simple and direct, but also the materials I used in making them." And I thought of that quote when I thought of Vince Capraro's work actually because I think it applies here also. Lesinski said, "I wanted them to be done with a tool used by everyone, everywhere—from the cradle to the grave—meaning the pencil." His Nazi drawings are all pencil drawings. "I felt if I could use a tool like this, it would keep me away from virtuosity than a more sophisticated medium would demand."

Lebrun's (Teddy, I think he meant to say Lesinski's) drawings are, in fact, very sophisticated, though they are pencil drawings and very important. I'm sorry—Lesinski, like Lebrun, is an artist you don't see a whole lot of these days, although I guess he's included in various collections. But it's really a shame.

The third artist, who is in my triumvirate, is Vince Capraro. I've written a little spiel about him in the brochure that you can pick up in the gallery. But Vincent is an artist who makes art in the traditional way-- that you look at it and you say, 'I've seen this somewhere before,' you know, 'what does it remind me of?' And having gotten to know him, I realize that this is a man—there aren't a lot of people who study old masters anymore; there are certainly not. Art historians study old masters, but those who actually make art probably don't. I doubt very much—I don't really know—but I suspect if you go to the Art Students' League or one of the other art schools here, you're not really required to have any proficiency in the techniques of traditional drawing.

And one of the extraordinary things about Capraro's work is that this proficiency is so natural and it's just so evocative and it comes out of him in a kind of unstudied way that is only possible from somebody who is totally immersed in the art of his predecessors (not fighting it as a lot of modern artists are-- in conflict with their predecessors)-- not fighting his predecessors-- but giving obeisance to them and sort of moving on from them, but always with a great feeling for them. And I think this is one of the extraordinary achievements of Vincent Capraro.

And, in a day when, again, we're not—we tend to look at what people tell us we're supposed to look at, so you know, my triumvirate of Lebrun and Lesinski and Capraro, they come together in interesting ways. Artists that, unfortunately, the fashionable art world isn't real interested in looking at, but you know, it comes and goes. And so artists have to do what they have to do They don't have to do what somebody else tells them to do or what the market tells them to do. They have to do what they have to do. And so the artists that I most respect are the ones that follow that lead.

I, after having been in Vincent Capraro's studio, one of the most exciting things is to see him open up all these books of artists and you see the kind of depth of study and involvement this man has with Rembrandt, with Rubens, with Michelangelo. Not an *image* involvement, but a *technique* involvement, constantly trying to understand what it is that the artist before was doing and how to absorb that. That, in fact, is what, for generations, artists did. It's only relatively recently that artists stopped doing that. That's what Goya did, Monet, and Renoir. I mean artists did that. They worked at trying to understand the work of their predecessors and they felt themselves part of a grand tradition.

I'm not sure exactly when that break was made. It wasn't probably in a sudden way, but one of the key things about modernism is its discomfort with that whole attitude—that idea that you absorb the tradition of the past and somehow it becomes part of you and then comes out of you in another way.

I don't want (you'll excuse the metaphor) I don't want to paint with too broad a brush, because I don't think that's true across the board, but I think, in general, modernism has taught us to discard the past in a certain way and not to worry about whether an artist really knows how to draw In fact, many of the really good artists who don't really draw, in fact, CAN draw and it's interesting to check out which ones can and which ones can't.

But it's not a concern when we look at art anymore and there's something about that that's kind of unfortunate. But that's just the way it is—that's the reality. I'm not somebody who wrings his hands over realities. I'm just describing rather than bemoaning. When it comes to

the artists, these three artists that I cite—Lebrun, Lesanski, Capraro—each of them is an artist <u>first</u>. None of the three is a survivor, and yet, all of them are, in fact, survivors.

They are all of a generation that in one way or the other survived World War II, survived seeing and knowing about the Holocaust and had to deal with what it meant to live at that time when those things were happening. The way we (and our children) will have to live with the reality of what's happening right now as we speak. And that—I don't want to speak for the artists—but I do think that there is a sense of having guilt at having lived through such a time.

Whether we feel that same sense of guilt about ourselves now, I can't project, but I do think that all three of these men had a lot of that absorbed into them. Man and his history and his personal history, in a way, becomes a theme for making art. And then, depending on the context, we're going to view it differently.

For example, when you see this work upstairs, in the context of the center for Jewish history, in the context of three exhibitions that in one way or the other are dealing with the Holocaust—that will give you one sensibility about it. If you see it somewhere else, you might look at it differently. Context is not *unimportant*. What I want to ask is *how* important. Does it matter whether the artist is a direct witness? Does it change how we look at the art? Do we appreciate it more? Less? Do we think it's more authentic, less authentic if the art we are looking at is done by somebody who wasn't there? And I don't have a good answer for that, but I suggest that its things we can think about.

If you haven't seen it, there's a wonderful Rembrandt Works on Paper exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art right now. And in that exhibition are a couple of drawings—one of them in the Lehman collection called "Elise Christians Hanging on a Gibbet". It was done in 1664. Rembrandt seems to have gone to this public hanging. He was probably standing right below the gallows and he did this sketch of this woman being publicly hanged. Now this woman Elise Christians was hanged for a grisly murder. She did something terrible and so in those days, they had public hangings—well, they still do in some parts of the world. But Rembrandt—there are two of these drawings—one is in the Met's regular collection; one's in the Lehman collection at the Met.

They are really fascinating because what you see is Rembrandt the artist, the observer. They're just descriptive drawings. They're grisly if you look carefully, and you see this woman hanging in a gallows, but *they're* not very emotional. Rembrandt's just kind of showing you what's there.

They're awesome as Rembrandt drawings, as you know, Rembrandt's drawings are totally unbelievable, but we don't get whether –we don't get into whether it was "OK" to have a public hanging. Is, you know, is this a good or bad thing? Was this an evil woman? If the label didn't tell that she was a murderess, you wouldn't even necessarily know that. And it's not clear whether you'd even care because you're just looking at a drawing. We don't really—the artist isn't telling you what to feel about the subject and it really fascinated me because what happens is that you're just in awe of the artist's *draftsmanship*—you're just in awe of Rembrandt and yet this is a terrible thing that he is showing us.

More familiar, less direct, there are a lot of less direct witness paintings. (Not quite as somebody standing at the foot of the gallows) which most of you are probably familiar with.

In the category of "I wasn't there, but I want to tell you about this anyway," one of the most famous is Goya's "Third of May" painted in 1808 which was actually—sorry-- which was an event that took place in 1808, but which was part of the Napoleonic Wars. But, in fact, was painted, on commission, six years later. He wasn't an eye-witness. It's one of the extraordinary paintings of people being shot. It always congers up the (wasn't it Oliver Hazard Perry who said) "Don't shoot until you see the white's of their eyes." The war of 1812, I think it was.

The Goya has these "eye-whites," you know, which really always congers up that "don't shoot 'til you see the white's of their eyes." But Goya wasn't there. On the other hand, Goya is, in some ways, per Fred Licht, the first truly modern artist because he deals with some of these issues and the disasters of war. He deals very brutally with war events that he does see. In fact, one of them is called "I Saw This." So they're very much witness paintings---witness etchings. They're a series of etchings. I'm sure you've all seen them.

The disasters are interesting because again, it happened a long time ago, the terrible, the brutal. We no longer remember the history of what other people were tortured and murdered for—it's just something that happened and what we concentrate on is the extraordinary adeptness of one of the great artists of the last several hundred years. So the fact of the war that these disasters are showing is somewhat irrelevant, unless you're a historian or an art historian working on Goya. On the other hand, the directness and the brutality of them is one of the key things that makes some people believe that Goya was really the first truly modern artist who was willing to confront these issues.

Another artist that you all know is Delacroix who, in support of the Greek war of independence, in the early 19th century, painted (because the French were pro-Greek and anti-Turk). There was a lot of sentiment in favor of the Greeks and, as part of that sentiment, Delacroix painted massacres, a massacre kiosk, a massacre at "isa Longi (Sp?) , "A death of Sardanopalus". Some of his most famous paintings—and they are political paintings. They're meant to rouse the French people—to show them these terrible things that the Greeks (Teddy—I think he meant to say "Turks") were doing. But again, we don't really read them that way. We read those paintings, by and large, out of admiration for, you know, the lush wonders of Goya's painting—you just want to dive right into them, into the oil paint, in a way. They're just so rich. We no longer care a lot about the Greeks fighting for independence against the Turks in the 1820's. It's not terribly relevant.

In a way even less relevant historically is Monet's "Execution of Emperor Maximilian", which he, in fact, painted shortly after the actual execution in 1867. When Maximilian was put in as the emperor of Mexico and said—is alleged to have said—"I forgive everyone (before they shot him) "I forgive everyone and ask everyone to forgive me. May my blood which is about to be shed be for the good of the country! Viva Mexico! Viva La Independencia!" That's all kind of irrelevant because, at this distance we're looking at, it's one of Monet's great paintings and the historical event has become fairly meaningless. Even though we look at this—we look at somebody shooting—we look at people shooting, we look at a firing squad and we know it's a firing squad and we know that something terrible is happening.

And yet, we've risen above that for a whole lot of reasons. The main reason being that we have devoted ourselves to art, if you will, and not to history and not to events. And also we see these things in museums, and museums are not, by and large, about these events and as you all know when they are, they get in trouble because the National Endowment for the Arts doesn't like it, or the local government doesn't like it, or the trustees get mad at the museum. So, you know, there are a lot of issues there that make it difficult for museums to handle those things. So a work that you probably don't know, a series of works—George Bellows, the famous American artist of the early 20th century depicted a massacre of World War I, a massacre "Benoit". They're not often shown.

Barbara Tuckman, in her "Guns of August", describes it as one of the most brutal massacres of World War I---612 bodies were identified and buried in this place in Belgium. I don't know, 612 doesn't seem like a whole lot these days, unfortunately. And an English nurse was shot because she tried to help wounded allied soldiers. Bellows read about this and just got a sense of moral indignation when he read about this in the United States. He kept reading the eye-witness accounts—there were eye-witness accounts already at that point and he was just so upset about this that he painted these paintings. The murdered nurse as he imagined her and basically, paintings that he'd read about in the paper. And they were very upsetting to people and he said, at the time, that he had no intention of attacking a race or a people—"guilt is personal, not racial". That's what Bellows said when he was attacked for these paintings—and actually, if you look at these paintings now because they've got German soldiers (with German helmets) shooting people in boxcars and trains, you would probably think they were World War II pictures, but they were, in fact, painted in 1918 about World War I.

Maybe the most famous of all the paintings is Picasso's "Guernica" which, again, was done from an event that Picasso did not personally experience. He, as you probably know, he was commissioned to do a painting for the World's Fair, for the 1937 World's Fair, eventually painted for the Spanish pavilion. It's a long story—he was looking for inspiration for the painting and he was reading about the civil war brutalities in Spain and all the problems with Franco fighting them. And basically, what he comes up with is one of the key paintings of the 20th century as a protest to Franco! As you know, it sat in the Museum

of Modern Art until the Franco government changed. Now you've got to go to Madrid to see it. But it was done specifically as a protest of a bombing event in the Spanish Civil War that Picasso read about.

While I cite these because these are paintings that deal with real events and they have moved into art history and the real events have faded—even "Guernica"—except for people who sing, you know, Lincoln brigade songs (there probably aren't too many of those around anymore either!) The Spanish Civil War has faded from everyone's memory, especially if any of you have tried to re-read Hemingway as I have. He really doesn't wear very well—at least I don't think he does-- so you can't even get engaged via Hemingway anymore.

And it's interesting that art—when we deal with art in the Holocaust—to come back to what is meant to be my theme here—we live with an illusion that somehow there is a meaningful relationship that will do something for us in terms of the Holocaust, genocide—stopping terrible things from happening in the world. But, let's be honest, art doesn't have that impact on people—it can't and maybe it shouldn't. That's OK. I'm an art historian. I've worked in museums all my life, as you heard. I don't make any apologies for it, but I do think that we need to put it in the right perspective—and not to confuse art, wonderful art that can move us in many ways—but not to confuse it with action or inaction or with the reality of terrible events

Just parenthetically on that subject, the brutal event we have all seen most often in art—that none of the artists actually witnessed—is the Passion—after all because the Passion of Christ is the most painted (all the various steps of it) and for those of you who aren't so Jewish that you can't look at "Christological" paintings which I know some people have a problem with, but I don't. The Passion is, when well done, is extremely moving. In fact, if you look at something like the Avignon Pieta in the Louvre or the Eisenheim alter piece by Guertavald or Ian VanIkes Gent alter piece, I'm always reminded of the Haggadah where it says that everybody should experience the Passover and the Exodus from Egypt as though you were personally there. And in a way, the best art, whether it's Christian art or art about other events, in fact, should have the ability to convey that to you. But, I don't think, except for very devout Christians, most of them feel they were *really* there, either

because that major event has also been elevated more to art than to any kind of reality.

So, in conclusion, I want to say that much as I feel it's important for us to look at good art and important for us to appreciate interesting good art, which is why I'm here to talk about this in conjunction with my friend Vince's wonderful exhibition upstairs.

I do think it's important that we don't think of Holocaust art as a filter through which to view the Holocaust. I'm not sure that even museums should be a filter through which to view the Holocaust—this museum or any other museum.

You probably don't know but in the museum field there is a new concept—art museums, history museums, technology museums, science museums—all that sort of thing. There are now museums of conscience—that's a category of museum and I worry about that. Actually, I don't think they have a lot to do with either "museums" or "conscience" but I've said for a long time that murdering people is too important a subject to be left to either art or museums.

If the art that was done by Holocaust victims should stand on its own—and once in a while, it does. There was a wonderful exhibition at the Imperial War Museum a few years ago of art from concentration camps at which really good, interesting artists were traced to their sources—in German, central European and French Art from the 1920's and 30's. So you really saw how they came out of genuine traditions—or really wonderful artists, one you probably know best is Carlotta Solomon, whose work is being extensively shown and published—who grew up and lived around the corner from our apartment in Berlin where we lived in Berlin—and was murdered at Auschwitz or my favorite of Holocaust artists, Malka Shokova Novshalak, who was murdered in Auschwitz, who was a prominent artist in Prague before she was deported.

There are artists who can stand on their own and should stand on their own, but that's different from turning everything that has to do with the Holocaust into a holy relic, especially at the very moment when we ourselves are sitting here (well, I'm standing) witnesses to the unspeakable acts of genocide going on at this very moment.

The art that remains from the Holocaust is a very small part of the story of the Holocaust. I'm a saver personally, so I save everything. I certainly think that any remnant of anything that has to do with the Holocaust should be saved. So please don't misunderstand me. I'm pleased that there were people and are people who have saved art that comes from camps that are related to the Holocaust, but I don't think we should misuse or misconstrue that art as true evidence—it's only a little, tiny fraction of evidence. There were lots of other evidences which all of you know about that are a lot more important than the art. That doesn't mean that memories of people who perished or who survived shouldn't be preserved, but it does an injustice to the horror of the events themselves if we think that they are a way of really understanding the events. And it doesn't properly honor those artists who perished.

In that sense, we're probably better off, I have to admit, approaching art as art, looking at its other dimensions and that's what I commend you to do when you go upstairs and take another look at Vince Capraro's work. Thank you.